

Home Is Where The Heart Is

by **Mr. Beeto**

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Rating: T

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A/N: Immediately follows the events of SR. One does not discover that they are a parent without a bit of reflection and reevaluation of their priorities. What will that reflection mean for Clark, Lois and Jason? Eventually Clois, but it won't be an easy road to get there. The motivation behind this story is to give Richard fair(er) treatment. I stick with the assumption that Richard is a good man, and he won't be trivialized, demonized, killed off, or otherwise conveniently gotten rid of (though I have enjoyed some of the stories where that has happened). I am also taking the approach that one does not suddenly learn that he is the parent of a young child without re-evaluating his priorities. Finally, it's really important to me to keep things realistic, and the material will get a bit heavier as we move forward. Hopefully, you'll like the tale my muse has come up with. Special thanks to **Htbthomas** for the beta and to **Elliania-Kat** for verifying the French translations.

Home is Where the Heart Is

Chapter 1 - Through the Eyes of a Child

Day 1, Tuesday, 8:00AM, Downtown Metropolis

It was the typical morning rush of Metropolis, with the sidewalks as crowded as the streets, while Clark made his way from the alley that he had ducked into for a quick wardrobe change. He had four blocks to walk before reaching the offices of the Daily Planet and allowed his mind to wander, as it had been doing most of the night, still enveloped by the euphoria that came from learning that he was father the day before.

As he was lying in the hospital fighting for his life, he had become aware of Lois' presence. Her scent, the recognizable rhythm of her beating heart, and finally her words, whispered so quietly that only Kryptonian ears could hear: "I wanted you to know that... that Jason is your son. And he has your strength." He hadn't asked her what she meant by that during his brief visit last night. He'd have to make a point of speaking with her about it later.

A son! His envy of Richard White grew even greater as he imagined how things might have been if not for his five year hiatus, which the press was now calling his "walkabout," appropriating the term from the Australian media. He found himself surprised at his use of the term *walkabout*, though he had to concede that the term fit.

He finally approached the front door of the Daily Planet building, noticing the headline from the paper's morning edition that announced Superman's recovery. He reluctantly pushed back the thoughts of his son, and what-might-have-been, and resumed the façade that defined Clark Kent.

This morning found Lois as ornery as it had found Clark euphoric. She'd gotten very little sleep after her unexpected guest last night. It hadn't escaped her attention that his first visit was not with her, but rather with her son... *his* son. There was no doubt about that after seeing Jason's piano toss. Superman certainly didn't seem as confused by that as she was. How was it that she had no recollection of their child's conception? All she had was a vague impression, like a dream that you've forgotten after you've woken up. She was angry with herself for not asking him about that last night. Lois broke from her reverie as it was finally their turn in the drop-off lane at Jason's school and one of the teachers opened the back door to help him out of his booster seat and seatbelt. Plastic smile firmly in place, she exchanged brief pleasantries with the teacher before Richard pulled ahead and they continued their morning commute to the office.

As Lois and Richard stepped off of the elevator, Clark was jovially speaking with Jimmy Olsen. "I feel great now, Jimmy. I guess it was just a flu bug going around." Clark silently thanked his mother again for calling into the *Planet* for him, while he was in the hospital as Superman. One advantage of having the nerdy, Golly-Gee-Whiz persona of Clark Kent was that it was not out of character for his mother to call to say that he wouldn't make it to "school" today. It helped that his fall to earth happened on a Friday, and he didn't need to account for his time over the weekend. Monday had been the only sick day. "Well, I hope none of us get that," Jimmy said cheerfully.

Clark finally glanced over at Lois and Richard, and offered them his trademark goofy smile and wave. He got a brief nod from Richard, but Lois remained oblivious to everything but the Starbucks coffee cup in her hand. Clark observed her briefly before concluding that she hadn't gotten much sleep. He doubted that she had shared Jason's true paternity with Richard, if his current demeanor was any indicator.

Jimmy also noticed Lois' demeanor. "Maybe she hasn't heard that Superman has recovered. She's been sick with worry ever since he fell from the sky." Clark nodded absently.

She knew he'd recovered, but something else had kept her up. He suspected it was Jason's display of strength, and the incontrovertible evidence that he was the son of Superman, something that she was not likely to have remembered. He again felt the twinge of regret for having left the Earth five years ago. He was forced to break from his observation at the sound of Perry White's booming voice, which fortunately was not directed at him this time.

The stories of the day were still the earthquake aftermath. In spite of Superman's efforts during the quake, nearly 100 people had died, thousands were still without power, and cleanup was an ongoing effort. Clark was impressed that the Daily Planet building had gotten its shattered glass replaced as quickly as they did afterwards. Somebody had to have had some major pull to get that done. He sneaked another glance back towards Lois' desk, before settling down to work. She still had yet to speak a word since arriving in the office.

Overall, it had been a quiet day. Perry had divvied up stories on the quake reconstruction, which were both simple to write, and included the "tragedy" that sold papers, with a dash of "Superman" here and there (which also sold papers). There were relative few emergencies that required Superman's assistance, but it was enough to keep Perry happy with the content. Clark had already completed his articles well before deadline, and was killing time before submitting them through the publishing system software when he heard Jason's voice as he got off the elevator with his mother. Her mood hadn't improved all day, but the sound of his son's voice couldn't help but lift his. He continued to listen as the pair entered Richard's office, and she pulled out some crayons and drawing paper to keep him busy.

Richard looked up at Lois and opened his mouth to say something before quickly thinking better of it. He knew something was bothering her, but she wasn't ready to talk about it. Clark also knew that something was bothering her, and wondered if he should try to approach her as Superman. As Clark surreptitiously glanced over at them, he caught the boy looking back at him, with a confused expression on his face.

"Mr. Kent!" Clark was forced to once again pull himself away as he looked up towards Jimmy, who had just parked himself at his desk. "Have you found an apartment yet?"

Clark forced himself to give Jimmy his full attention. "Not yet, Jimmy," Clark responded. "I don't recall having this much trouble finding something affordable the last time." He had been amazed at the difference in cost during his five-year absence. He resigned himself to either having to choose something in a bad neighborhood or well outside Metropolis city limits.

Jimmy smiled, "I forgot to tell you earlier -- there is an apartment opening up in my building, but they won't be out for a couple weeks yet." He pulled out a business card and handed it to Clark as he added, "Here's the number for the building manager." Clark took the business card from Jimmy, and thanked him before dialing the number.

As he was arranging to look at the apartment, Clark became aware of the sound of a familiar small beating heart approaching him, which he immediately recognized as Jason. He turned to his son and smiled, holding out his index finger to signal him to wait. "Thanks, I'll see you at 7:00, then. Bye."

Turning his full attention to his son, Clark now warmly greeted him. "Hello, Jason! Did you have a fun day at school?"

The boy was quiet for a moment, still with a confused look on his face as he looked at Clark. As Jason walked over to Clark, he reached his arms up. Expecting a hug from the affectionate youngster, Clark bent down to meet him. He was definitely not expecting the boy to reach up and pull off his glasses. The confusion left Jason's face as he looked at Clark carefully, then down at the glasses as he asked, "Why do you wear glasses at work, but not

when you wear your Superman suit?" Clark eyes grew in surprise to how quickly his little boy had figured him out.

Chapter 2 - Secrets

Clark quickly, yet gently, retrieved his glasses from his son's hands and put them back on before taking a quick glance around to see if anybody had overheard the boy's question. To his relief, the desks immediately around him were empty. There was still activity in the office, but the headcount thinned out once the afternoon edition's deadline had come and gone. Reporters were out on the street following leads, interviewing people, and such, rather than being in the office scurrying to get stories filed by deadline. He turned back to his son, and quietly whispered "Wh-What do mean, 'Superman suit?'"

"You're Superman," Jason whispered back. "Don't you need your glasses when you're Superman?"

Clark chuckled nervously, and whispered "You think I'm Superman? What makes you think that?"

"I can just tell," Jason replied, with a puppy-dog look on his face, still waiting for answer. "So why don't you wear your --"

"Jason," Clark interrupted, "we need to keep that our secret." After making the claim to Lois in their first interview that he never lied, he really didn't want to start lying to his son. He also concluded that it wouldn't likely have convinced him, anyways. He had really hoped that this conversation could have waited a number of years. Five-year-olds were not known for keeping secrets. He continued speaking to his son in a whisper, "The glasses are my disguise so people won't know I'm Superman - I don't really need them. If people knew that I was Superman, some bad people might try to cause trouble for people that I care about."

"Bad men like the ones on the boat?" Jason asked quietly, with fear in his voice.

Clark had read Lois' story on her ordeal aboard the Gertrude, and knew Jason was referring to Lex Luthor. He wondered what had happened on the boat that she had left out of the article. "Yes, bad men like the ones on the boat," Clark informed Jason. As he recognized the terror in his son's eyes, he quickly added, "Don't worry, I won't let anything bad happen to you."

That earned him a weak smile, replaced by a huge grin a moment later. "Can we go flying?" Jason asked. The idea seemed like a lot more fun than begin stuck in his daddy's office until either he or his mommy were ready to go home.

Clark loved the idea, but he couldn't just fly off with the boy. "Maybe later. We need to talk to your mother about that fir --" Clark was abruptly interrupted as Jason had spun around and started to take off for his mother, who was currently speaking with Richard in his office, trying to decide when they'd be able to head home. Clark barely got a grasp on the boy's wrist before he was out of arm's reach. Another moment and he would have needed to use super-speed to catch up with the tyke. "Whoa there, kiddo. Where are you off to so fast?"

"To ask Mommy if we can go flying." The boy's eyes pleaded with him.

Clark again looked around to make sure he and Jason were still under the radar. "Mommy and Richard don't know that I'm Superman," he whispered. "We can't ask them like this without telling them my secret, and we don't want to do that. We'll have to wait until I can come back in my Superman suit." Clark hated to disappoint the boy, as he saw his son's gaze fall to the floor. "I promise that I'll speak to your mother later, and then we can go flying."

The boy looked up at Clark with a smile on his face, as he exclaimed, "Thanks!" Jason moved towards Clark, and again reached his arms up.

This time, Clark kept one hand on his glasses as he reached down. To his relief, this time Jason's arms went around his neck in a tight hug. He returned the hug warmly, and pulled back

to again see a confused look on his son's face. "Is something wrong Jason?" Clark asked.

"How do I know when to call you 'Clark' and when to call you 'Superman?'" the boy whispered.

Clark smiled back at the boy. "When I'm wearing the Superman suit, I'm Superman. When I'm not, I'm Clark," he whispered. Clark reflected on his oversimplified answer, and hoped they wouldn't run into any situation where that would blow up in his face. He wasn't planning on spending any more time as a hospital patient, but Lex Luthor was still at large. After a moment, he added, "If other people are calling me Superman, like when I was in the hospital, then I'm still Superman, even though I'm not wearing the suit." He hoped the boy could keep it straight.

Clark looked up to see Lois heading over towards them, with a weak smile on her face, the first one that he'd seen on her face all day. "Looks like my son has found a new best friend. I hope Jimmy won't be too disappointed."

She had seen her son hug Clark from Richard's office, and took the excuse to get away from Richard's unasked questions. Things had been a bit tense between them ever since she took up her vigil during Superman's illness, the only clue to his thoughts a comment to Jimmy that she hadn't been meant to overhear. "I guess Superman was more than just a story for her..."

Clark smiled back up at her. "He's a great kid, Lois. You've done a good job with him."

Despite her mood, Lois couldn't help but to let her smile grow a bit bigger at that. "Thanks, Clark. It's good to hear things like that every so often." She thought back to the camaraderie that she had shared with Clark before he left for his "World Tour." This was the first time since he returned that she felt the warmth of that friendship return. There was also something there that she couldn't quite place her finger on. "You know, sometime soon, you're going to have to tell us all about your trip," she warned him.

"Sure thing, Lois," Clark replied. He still wasn't sure what he would say if pressed on the details of his trip. He'd been avoiding the discussion ever since he got his job back at the Daily Planet.

Lois looked down at her son for a moment before beckoning him. "Come on, munchkin. You've bothered Clark long enough." Father and son both responded immediately.

"I wasn't bothering him!" --

"Oh, he was no trouble, Lois." --

"Well, looks like I may have found a new babysitter," Lois stated as she glanced between them, noticing for the first time the identical uncommon shade of blue in their eyes. Oblivious to her observation, Clark's smile couldn't help but grow at the thought of spending time with his son, albeit as a babysitter.

Lois was distracted from her observation as Jimmy came back around. "Any luck with the apartment, Clark?"

Lois turned back to Clark. "Still apartment hunting?" she inquired. Clark nodded, before turning to Jimmy and answering "I'm taking a look at it at 7:00." Turning back to Lois, Clark clarified "Jimmy found out about an opening in his building".

"Well, good luck", Lois offered, before inquiring "Have you been living out of a hotel all this time?" Clark nodded meekly. "The Planet's reimbursing, right?"

Clark nodded again, "For up to 30 days. It'll be close. Even if I can get this apartment, it'll still be another two weeks before I can move in."

"Well, good luck, again", Lois said before returning her gaze toward her son. "Come on,

munchkin, Clark's got work to do, and it's time for us to go home". Lois noticed her son's smile fade at that. He'd really taken to Clark. Perhaps she had found a new babysitter.

Chapter 3 - Smallville

Clark owed Jimmy a huge favor. The apartment that Jimmy had referred him to, though small, fit his needs and his budget perfectly. There was brief hesitation as he considered where his son would stay if he was over, but he couldn't assume that he'd be lucky enough to have him overnight. The apartment was on the top floor, with one side facing an alley. The building across the way was a bank/office building unlikely to have a lot of prying eyes to worry about after business hours. He'd still have to go shopping for furniture, since he'd given what he had to the Salvation Army before leaving for Krypton five years ago.

As he was flying through Metropolis, he again allowed his thoughts to wander to his son. If he did get time with him, would any of it be 'normal' father/son interaction, or would it all be Superman and his biggest fan? He thought back to when he was Jason's age, and the patience his human parents had demonstrated as his unique abilities developed. Since Jason knew his secret, he could probably take him to Smallville and show him where he grew up. As he pondered that, his thoughts turned to his mother, Martha Kent. He needed to talk to her. Perhaps she could help him make heads or tails of this. That could become an uncomfortable conversation, though, given the circumstances of Jason's birth and his mother's traditional mid-western values.

He noted that the time was around eight o'clock, Jason's bedtime. He headed back over Metropolis Bay, and trained his eyes on the Lane/White household, and noticed Lois reading to their son. Richard was walking down the last few steps to their living room, apparently having just come from Jason's room. It would be a good opportunity for a visit. He dropped down to just a few inches over the water, and sped across the bay towards the house, cautiously scanning his surroundings to make sure he wasn't observed. As he approached he heard his name from a boat in the bay near the house. "Do you think Superman will visit her?"

Superman stopped cold, and trained his eyes on the boat. On the deck of the boat, he saw a camera with a long lens mounted on a tripod, along with another night-vision equipped camera, and a parabolic microphone, all targeting the house. Paparazzi? He couldn't visit them without being observed. He'd been lucky last night, since everyone thought he was still in the hospital. They hadn't staked out the house yet. He was angry at the thought that he would not be able to visit his son because of these people. If he was observed, it would put the family in danger. *His* family.

He sped offshore before zipping back up into the sky as he remembered some of the tabloid press coverage of Lois before he had left for Krypton. There had been suggestions that she was romantically involved with him. He should have realized the danger and done something about it. Now, five years later, her with a five year old son, how long would it be before one of those scoundrels put two and two together, especially after her visit with him at the hospital. He shuddered to think about that. Clark headed off towards Smallville in a cheerless mood.

Martha Kent had just walked in the door of her farmhouse after her flight home from Metropolis, and set her bags near the stairs. Her companion, Ben Hubbard, entered behind her. He had been Jonathan's best friend, and helped with the farm after he passed away. When his wife was killed by a drunk driver a few years later, Martha had returned the favor, helping Ben and the surviving children as best she could. Over time, they had grown close, and a romance had eventually blossomed.

Clark knew Ben would be there as he touched down and changed into his jeans. He still

wasn't sure how he felt about his mother with Ben, but he was glad that she hadn't been alone during his five year absence. He hated the idea of chasing Ben out to talk with his mother, but they hadn't shared the secret with him and Clark had resisted his mother's suggestions at the possibility. Now was not the time for that revelation, and he needed her perspective on the situation. He walked up to the house and knocked on the door.

"I'm not interrupting, am I?" Clark asked, as he walked into the house. "Oh, of course not! Get in here!" she commanded, as she took her son in her arms for the second time in two days, grateful to have him healthy once again. She pulled back, and looked up to see the concern etched in his face. "Clark, what's wrong?" she asked.

"It's a bit complicated," he answered quietly, before turning to his mother's guest. "Ben. Good to see you again."

Ben Hubbard stood up, and returned the greeting, but seemed slightly bewildered by Clark's presence. "Good to see you, too, Clark. Your mother didn't mention that you were coming here and we didn't hear you drive up. How long are you in town?"

"It was an impulsive visit. I hadn't called ahead," Clark answered. As he was silently standing there, he heard his mother's faint whisper, "I wish you'd trust him, Clark." He fidgeted as he glanced over to her. "I'm sorry. I should have given you some advance warning."

Ben headed towards the door, "I've got to get home and get unpacked," Ben resolved. "I'll talk to you tomorrow, Martha. Clark." He held out his hand to Clark, saying "Maybe we can catch up a little bit before you head out." Clark shook the man's hand, "I'll be heading back later tonight. Maybe I'll get to stay a bit longer next time."

Once Ben's truck was moving down the driveway, Martha again addressed her son. "Clark..." his mother commanded, "sit down and tell me what's bothering you. What's on your mind?" Clark sat down on the couch, his gaze at the floor as he took in a deep breath.

"I got a bit of a surprise when I was in the hospital." he stated simply. "And I'm not sure what to do about it."

"Are you referring to the visit from Lois?" Martha asked gently. Clark's head snapped up at that, as Martha continued. "She was the only one that they let through to see you, along with the little boy. I saw her come out of the hospital." She paused a moment before continuing, "I thought you would have seen them in the papers, as many pictures as they were taking of them." Clark's jaw clenched at the last part of his mother's statement: Paparazzi. "What did she say to you?" Martha asked.

"It's about the boy, Jason... He's my son." Clark chanced a look up at his mother's face as her eyes opened wide in shock and her hand covered her open mouth. He saw the shock morph into anger, and prepared himself for the barrage that he knew was coming.

"You mean to say that you took off gallivanting halfway across the universe, in your private little pity party, leaving that poor woman back there alone and pregnant? We raised you better than that!"

Chapter 4 - Mother Knows Best

Clark had been fourteen years old the last time he had gotten a lecture like that from his mother. For the last fifteen minutes, he had barely been able to get a word in edgewise, other than a feeble "I didn't know." At one point he tried to beg off to go save the world, but Martha quickly vetoed that, saying he wasn't going anywhere until she was done with him. Clark couldn't help but observe the irony that the most physically powerful being on the planet was powerless to escape his mother's scolding. He felt like he was about to get grounded.

Martha took a deep breath, and was silent for a moment, letting Clark know that the lecture had come to an end, and that they'd finally be able to discuss what he had come here to talk about. Finally, his mother sat down beside him on the couch, and looked up at him. "So, when am I going to get to see my grandson?"

"Soon, I hope," Clark answered. "He knows my secret, so it shouldn't be a problem bringing him here, once I get something worked out with Lois."

Martha's eyes narrowed, as she replied "You insist on keeping this secret from Ben, yet you waste no time telling a five year old son that you barely know?"

Clark couldn't help but smile at that. "He figured me out on his own. The adults in the office see me as Clark the Klutz, but he just sees me as Clark, and just knew that I was Superman." He paused for a moment before looking up at his mother, realizing how hard it must have been for her keeping that secret during his absence. "You can tell Ben. You, Ben and Jason are the only ones who'll know my secret, if you exclude that lunatic from Gotham."

"Lois doesn't know?" Martha asked. Clark shook his head. Martha pondered that quietly for a moment before continuing. "Do you want to tell me what really happened five years ago?"

Clark took a deep breath before stating simply, "It's a long story."

"Then you'd better get started," was Martha's quick response. Clark nodded, and began to retell the story of Lois' discovery at Niagara Falls, through the amnesia kiss after his battle with the Kryptonian criminals, Zod, Ursa and Non, this time telling the full story, though glossing over his night with Lois.

Martha observed, "You left out a few details the last time you spoke of this." Clark nodded, saying nothing. Five years ago, he had told an extremely abridged version, saying only that he'd fallen in love with Lois, but that the ghosts of his Kryptonian parents had forced him to choose between being Superman or being with Lois. He had chosen Lois and was stripped of his powers, but was forced to reconsider after Zod took over the world.

His mother continued, "I have a question for you. Same question that I tried to ask five years ago, but you were too emotionally exhausted to talk about it. Why the choice?"

"Despite recent opinions to the contrary, the world needed Superman," Clark answered sadly.

Tipping her head to the side as she looked at him, she explained, "That's really not what I meant, Clark. Why was the choice forced upon you? Why did you have to choose between being Superman and being with Lois?"

"I don't know," was his simply answer, "I never asked."

Martha shook her head, "You'd think that with both of you being journalists, that one of you would have thought to ask why..."

"I'm not sure that matters much now," Clark noted.

"Of course it matters!" his mother objected. "There had to be a reason for it, some problem that they were trying to solve. Maybe there are other solutions to that problem, where

you could still be Superman, and also a husband to Lois, and father to Jason."

Clark had faith in his Kryptonian parents and didn't believe the question would provide any useful information. "It's too late for that now," Clark responded. "She's with Richard, and he's the only father Jason's ever known. Besides, Lex Luthor stole every last crystal from my fortress, and I haven't had a chance to regenerate them yet. There's nothing there to ask questions of at the moment."

"What about the crystals in the ship buried under our cornfields?" Martha countered. "Isn't that Green one from your original ship in there with it? That's all you had to begin with." Clark exhaled deeply, and looked up again at his mother. He nodded his head in affirmation. "Then I think you have a duty to yourself, Lois, and Jason to answer that question," she said firmly. "As for Richard... his devotion to *your* son does not absolve you from parental responsibility. You are still his father."

Clark responded with conviction, "You are my mother. Jonathan Kent was my father. I am who I am today because of the two of you, not because of the biological parents who gave me life." He paused before adding sadly, "It'll be the same way with Jason."

Martha's anger returned as she spoke. "Clark Jerome Kent, in the years since we found you, and brought you into this family, we've been patient with you through your challenges, and proud of you as you overcame them. In all that time, I have never been ashamed of you...until now! Not so much because Jason was born out of wedlock, but because you are not doing right by him or his mother. When your biological parents sacrificed themselves to send you to us, they didn't just wash their hands of you. They went to great pains to make sure you would have guidance as things came up that your father and I would not be able to help you with. They weren't here because they *died* getting you here. You don't have that excuse. You have to do right by Jason and Lois."

"I don't know what to do," Clark admitted quietly. "That's why I came here." That simple statement diffused Martha's anger with her son. He was relieved to see the anger melt from her face and see the love and sympathy replace it in her face.

"Is there anything else I should know about this, before we figure this out together?" his mother asked. Clark smiled, and told her what he knew of Lois' ordeal aboard Lex Luthor's boat. He told her what he knew about Richard, and he told her his concerns about the Paparazzi. Martha was quiet for awhile, staring into her lap as she quietly considered that information.

"Mom?" Clark inquired tentatively.

Martha exhaled heavily, and stated simply. "You have to tell her."

"I can't..." Clark started.

"She's earned the right!" Martha shot back. "Can her memories be restored?"

"I don't know," Clark answered honestly.

"Well, you can ask about that while you're asking why you were asked to give up your powers to be with her," she responded curtly. Her features softened again as she spoke, "You also have to be prepared for the worst... If things get out of hand, you can always bring them here." She paused for a moment before continuing, "You can't just wait for something to happen, either. You'll have to be ready, and for God's sake find some way of warning yourself if there's kryptonite around! I don't want another vigil outside the hospital. My God, Clark, I was so afraid that we were going to lose you..."

Clark reached over, and gave his mother a hug. Martha broke from the hug, looked up into his face, and again insisted, "You have to tell her everything. Promise me that you'll do

that."

"But Mom..." Clark began, before noticing the glare he got from his mother, and compromised.. "I'll think about it."

"Clark..." his mother began.

"That's all I can promise," he answered tiredly. He stood up, and glanced up at the clock on the wall, observing that it was close to ten o'clock. They'd been discussing the situation for close to three hours. "Well, the world needs Superman. I should --"

"Oh, no you don't. The world can wait. Your *family* comes first. The world can get by without Superman for one night. Before saving the rest of the world, you need to do right by Jason and Lois, and you can start by digging that green crystal out of that ship. Once your family is safe, then you can check up on the rest of the world!"

Clark nodded. He had known that his mother's clarity would help him work through his concerns. "Thanks, Mom. I knew you'd help me figure this out." He paused a moment before adding, "I don't know how I could possibly tell her about all this..."

"I may have a few suggestions on that," Martha answered, with a gleam in her eye.

Chapter 5 - At Sea

Lex Luthor was not a happy man, and Kitty Kowalski wisely avoided him as he sat behind the wheel of their commandeered watercraft, the Wayward Wanderer. Though small compared to the *Gertrude*, it was a large recreational vessel that comfortably slept six, with modern GPS navigation, satellite radio, and a fully stocked and functional galley. The boat had been owned by George and Nancy Wilson, a retired couple who hadn't realized the danger when they responded to the flare. Lex Luthor had introduced himself and Kitty as Henry and Allison Thomasson, claiming that they were forced to flee their yacht when it sank the previous day. After a few hours to determine the available resources on the boat, Lex had used a borrowed knife from the galley to eliminate their hosts.

He'd kept up with the news since their rescue. Lois Lane had survived, and provided a fairly accurate story of his failed plan. He was now a wanted man. They'd have to sneak ashore after dark, and Metropolis was too hot to go back there. He had allowed himself to hope that despite his latest setback that he had at least taken down the Man of Steel, and he had become intolerable when the news came that Superman had recovered.

Tonight found Lex again listening to the latest news on the Metropolis reconstruction, with the various Superman sightings that the day's news always included. Lex switched the radio to a classical music station as he contemplated his circumstances. He wasn't done with the Superman. Next time, he'd finish the job properly, but the Man of Steel would suffer first. *Let him see his lover and son die first*, Lex thought. It would take patience. Lex was not an impulsive man, and would plan their demise to the minutest detail.

Lex looked at the fuel gage once again. There wasn't enough to make it all the way around the Florida peninsula and up the Mississippi to his safe house in Baton Rouge, which had been acquired from the laundered cash and stocks of the Vanderworth estate. The family was contesting the will, claiming Gertrude had not been of sound mind, a case that Lex believed they would have likely won. He had thus immediately liquidated her portfolio, transferring it to offshore accounts, keeping only the minimal necessary amount of operating capital. It was also why he so easily abandoned the *Gertrude* in the hope of drowning Lane and the boy. Now that the *Gertrude* was lost at sea, all they would recover would be the house in Metropolis and a few other properties.

Lex reviewed the maps to see how much distance they could put between themselves and the authorities before they went ashore. He planned to beach the boat in the middle of the night, and acquire ground transportation for the rest of the trip. Once there, he could regroup, and continue planning the end of Superman.

Chapter 6 - Surprises

Day 2, Wednesday, 6:00AM

Clark floated high above the Earth considering everything that had happened through the night: his conversation with his mother, Martha; the reconstruction of the crystal set at the Fortress from the father crystal (after which the first order of business was implementing security to prevent future thefts); and the conversations with the AI facsimiles of his Kryptonian parents preserved in the reproduced crystals. He told them about Jason, about the recent ordeal with Lex Luthor, and his concerns for protecting his family. He also asked them Martha Kent's questions. Their answers had surprised him.

Jor-El had offered his guidance, but Clark wasn't satisfied. He found it interesting that when it was only his life at stake, he blindly accepted whatever they told him, but when it was his son, he was much more diligent in exploring other options. There was too much at stake. He hadn't liked what he'd seen as he flew over Metropolis earlier, and as he scanned another city below him, he considered his situation. He hoped he wouldn't come to regret the decisions he had made during the night. He finally saw what he was waiting for, and swooped down over Gotham City.

Bruce Wayne had just finished dressing after a welcome shower and was sitting down to his breakfast when he heard an unexpected voice ask, "Am I interrupting?" Bruce glanced over to see Superman floating over the balcony.

"Yes, but since you're here, you might as well come in," Bruce answered. "Are you hungry?"

"Thanks for the offer, but I'll pass," Superman answered. "I could use your help with a little problem I have." Bruce considered him carefully before dismissing Alfred.

"What's on your mind, Kent?" Bruce asked. "Would this have anything to do with Lex Luthor?"

"Are you sure we can talk privately here?" Superman questioned, still with some doubts about the arrangement he would propose.

"Let me finish my breakfast, and we can continue this downstairs. There aren't any cameras there." Superman sat down in the chair to Bruce's left and quietly waited for him to finish his breakfast.

Wednesday was another typical morning in Metropolis. Jason had been dropped off at his school, and Richard and Lois got off the elevator and headed into the bullpen of the Daily Planet newsroom. Lois had another restless night, but had gotten a little more sleep than the previous night. Richard was a bit preoccupied, wondering when a good time would be to press Lois about whatever it was that had been bothering her. He would not broach that subject while she was sleeping so restlessly, however. Clark looked up as they entered the room, and offered them his usual goofy grin and wave. Lois smiled over her cup of coffee, and Richard nodded in acknowledgment, as the two made their way to their respective desks.

The morning went by quickly, as they were all busy with their respective stories, Clark chancing occasional glances towards Lois. He frowned as he considered how Lois would likely react to his secrets under the current circumstances. Meanwhile, Lois' brow furrowed as she scanned the news wires. Though she vehemently complained whenever Perry assigned her a Superman story, she diligently kept up on his activities over the wire, and this morning there had been *nothing*. She wasn't sure what to make of that. She closed the search window, and went back to her Earthquake reconstruction story, this one exposing the fraud, waste and

abuse in the no-bid contracts quickly given out by the city after the quake caused by Lex Luthor. She thought back to the globe which had fallen off the top of the Daily Planet building, and been spirited away by a Chinook helicopter over the weekend. It wouldn't return to its perch on the roof until after structural repairs were completed. That work wouldn't even begin until the following Monday.

Lois still didn't know what to make of Superman's lack of activity from the previous night, and wasn't as successful in putting that out of her mind as she had hoped. She put her head down in her hands, and said in a barely audible whisper, "Superman, we really need to talk." She prayed that he had heard her as she walked into the elevator lobby and pressed the up button. Clark was a few steps behind her, "L-Lois, I was wondering if I could run a little problem I have by you."

Lois had little interest in what she was certain was something trivial. A ding announced the elevator, and as she stepped into the in the empty car she turned to face him, "Maybe when I get back. I've got a busy day, so no promises."

Just as the doors were about to shut, Clark darted between them, saying "This can't wait any longer."

Lois began speaking as she turned to him, "Clark, I really don't have ti--". She gasped as she found Superman standing before her, dressed in the familiar blue tights and red cape.

"You had a right to know, and yes, we have a lot to talk about, though this might not be the right time and place for it. We've got a Paparazzi problem. They've grabbed a couple of empty suites across the street in the Hancock building and have got cameras and parabolic mikes trained on the roof. There will be no privacy there. They're also in boats on the river with cameras and mikes aimed at your house."

He placed a folded piece of paper in her hand, telling her, "Last night, I deployed Kryptonian relays to route this cell number into a signal that I'll hear anywhere in the world. I'll also be giving you and Jason new watches with a panic button built in so that you can quickly alert me in an emergency. We'll try to have them ready by the end of the week." As he noted Lois' still gaping mouth and wide eyes, he joked, "You can blink now, Lois." He couldn't help but smile at her reaction.

Lois closed her eyes and mouth, and shook her head vigorously. *Clark is Superman? That just is not possible!*

"Are you OK, Lois?" Superman asked.

She opened her eyes, and looked up at him. "Fine," she answered quickly. "Is this why you were nowhere to be found last night," she asked, holding up the folded paper.

"That's part of it. I also had a *long* talk with my mother in Smallville. She's anxious to meet her grandson, by the way." Superman paused briefly before continuing as his gaze fell to the paper in Lois' hand.

"Depending on what I'm doing at the time, I might not be able to speak immediately when you call that number --"

"Yeah, if you're out saving the world or something," Lois finished for him, still not quite get her head around the idea that she would have Superman's cell phone number.

"The world can wait. Our *family* comes first," Superman responded emphatically, paraphrasing what his mother had said to him the previous night. He added quietly, "If I'd known, I never would have left." He paused for a moment, trying to gage her reaction to that. She was still in shock. He continued, "There is a lot to talk about, and I'll tell you *everything*, but I think it might be best to let you absorb *this* bombshell before dropping any others."

They were seconds away from their arrival at the roof and as Lois looked at him, Superman moved at super-speed to don the out-of-style suite and glasses of Clark Kent, appearing to Lois briefly enveloped in a blur of colors. In literally the blink of an eye, Superman had transformed into Clark Kent. "Obviously, we'll need to keep this secret between us," he continued in Clark's higher pitched voice. "By the way, Jason knows I'm Superman - he saw right through the glasses... Well, not literally... I don't think... but he wasn't fooled." *Was that a look of pride on his face?* Clark continued, "He wanted to go flying with me. I told him that we'd have to discuss it with you."

Lois' mind was reeling at what she had just seen and heard. All she could manage was "Um, yeah..." She was broken from her thoughts as they heard the ding announcing the lift's arrival at the roof patio. The doors opened to two women coming back from their smoking break, snuffing out their cigarettes as they walked to the open elevator doors. Clark greeted the women in typical goofy Kent fashion.

"Are you guys getting out?" one of the women asked.

Clark shuddered a bit, answering, "We were going to, but it looks awfully windy out there, and with all the quake damage, I'm not so sure it's safe."

"Oh, it's fine out here," the woman informed him.

"I'll take your word for it," Clark responded. Then aside to Lois, he whispered, "We *don't* want to go out there." He trained his vision once again on the Paparazzi across the street, frowning as he did so. He slid over next to Lois, allowing the women to move into the elevator as he turned to her and again asked, "Are you sure you're OK?"

"Fine," Lois answered curtly.

Clark knew from her racing pulse that she was freaking out. She'd need time to absorb everything he had just told her. "Well, call me if you want to talk," he suggested politely while he turned and pushed the button for their office level and turned his gaze forward as the doors closed.

Jimmy Olsen was waiting in the elevator lobby when the elevator doors opened to the Daily Planet newsroom, "Hey, Mr. Kent, Ms. Lane!" he greeted. "I thought you were going up for some air."

"Hi, Jimmy! Um, it got a bit crowded up there and a bit too windy," Clark replied as he stepped off the elevator. Looking back, he inquired "Lois?" She was still in somewhat of a daze from his earlier revelations.

"What? Oh, right," she responded, following him off of the elevator, and heading back to her desk on autopilot. Clark settled back in at his desk, sneaking occasional glances over at her as she stared at her blank screen. Her pulse had slowed down slightly, but Clark knew she was still trying to get her head around what he'd revealed to her moments earlier.

As Lois sat in front of her screen, she recalled Clark's surprising revelation. *Clark is Superman? All this time, he was right under my nose?* She felt the pride swell within her as she recalled Clark's revelation that Jason had seen through him immediately. She also remembered his words in the elevator - "Our family comes first!" Family: Her, Jason and Superman. The intensity of his words had shocked her and she had seen the love in his eyes, as she recalled the hug shared by father and son the previous day and the remembered the identical rare blue eye color.

As she sat numbly at her desk, she imagined what the last five years would have been like if he hadn't left. Family trips anywhere on the globe at a moment's notice, or would he always

be running off to save the world? He had said, "The world can wait - Our family comes first." Did that mean he would have tuned out the problems of the world to be there for them? She dropped her head in her hands. *This would have been so much simpler if you hadn't left*, she thought at him. She grew angry as she recalled her heartache at his sudden and unexplained disappearance and discovering her pregnancy. He had said he that wouldn't have left, if he had known. And what would they do now? How would Jason react to learning that Clark was his real father? The boy really liked Clark, and already knew that he was Superman...

She suddenly remembered why she had wanted to talk to him in the first place - Superman, that is. She hadn't said much in the elevator, and thus still didn't have an answer to the question that she had not asked. Some journalist! Alone in the elevator with the scoop of the century, and she could barely remember her own name. Not that she'd have gone to press with it, but still...

"Why don't I remember?" she whispered, glancing towards Clark as she said the words. He looked over at her, and began standing to come over, but she whispered "Sit down. I'm not ready to talk about this yet." Clark quickly sat back down.

Richard had noticed Lois' unusual demeanor and emerged from his office. Lois jumped when he gently placed his hand on her shoulder. "Has something happened?" he asked. *Has something happened?* she echoed in her thoughts. *Has it ever.* "I've just got a lot on my mind right now," she answered. "It's nothing." *Oh my God, Richard!* She had completely forgotten about him after Clark's bombshell. She felt guilty for having not even considered him in her reflections. This complicated things. *What am I going to do now?* Once again she felt her anger rise at Clark's absence. It was obviously his fault that things were now so complicated.

She moved her mouse to wake up her computer screen. Finally looking up at Richard, she informed him, "I need to get this article done by deadline, so if you don't mind..." Richard took the hint and offered, "I'll be in my office if you need anything." She looked back to see him retreat into his office before rubbing her face with her hands and trying to overcome her shock.

Somehow, Lois managed to get her exposé strung together, and even managed to press some of her contacts over the phone without sounding like a complete idiot. She wasn't sure how she managed that, Clark's revelation being front and center in her mind. She glanced again over to Clark's now empty chair. She hadn't noticed him leave. She looked up at the television monitors, expecting to see Superman saving the day somewhere, but apparently, the press hadn't caught up with him yet.

She thought about trying to sneak up to the roof for a cigarette, before remembering Clark's warning about Paparazzi and recalling her ambushes by them five years ago. They'd never gotten anything incriminating, the only shots of her with Superman being when she was one of many at the scene of his heroics. She didn't want Jason dragged into that.

Lois was interrupted from her thoughts by Perry's booming voice, "Kent! Lane! My Office!" *Great, now I'm going to have to cover for him*, she thought, but was surprised to find him taking the seat beside her in Perry's office.

"Lois, why are you still on that city contracts story? What's going on with Superman?" he bellowed. "Kent, you take the contract story, Lois, Superman!"

Normally, Clark would meekly accept whatever commands came from Perry, but after what he had just revealed to Lois, he really didn't want to be taking her stories from her. Besides, after his analysis in the fortress last night, and later in Gotham and in the newsroom,

there was a bigger problem at hand. To everyone's surprise, Clark spoke up, "Chief, I think there is a bigger story here. We've been covering earthquake aftermath for four days now, and it looks like Superman took the night off last night. I think we should be more concerned about keeping the pressure on to reel in Public Enemy Number One."

Perry was a bit shocked to see Clark stand up to him for the first time, though Lois immediately understood his worry. She shared his fear as she thought to herself, *Lex Luthor knows that Jason is your son!* He needed to know about that. "Public Enemy Number One?" Perry questioned.

"All of this quake damage was caused by yet another insane plot by Lex Luthor to control the world, using stolen Kryptonian technology," Clark reminded him. "A quake that may end up costing billions of dollars of damage and which cost nearly three hundred people their lives. The same madman who stabbed Superman in the back with a Kryptonite shiv. He's still at large."

"That's old news. We don't even know if he survived!" Perry challenged.

Lois set her anger with Clark aside for the moment, and joined him in the argument. "We can't afford to underestimate him. We'll work the story together, maybe even get a statement from Superman, if we can." She noticed Clark grimace at her reference to Superman.

Perry was surprised at Lois volunteering to work with Clark, when she came as close to throwing a tantrum as any adult he knew every time he suggested that they work together. "What's going on here? Are you two up to something?"

Both Lois and Clark squirmed a little at that before Clark volunteered, "They found the helicopter from the *Gertude* on a small islet a few miles off the coast, out of gas. There were footprints in the sand and some animal droppings consistent with Luthor's girlfriend's Pomeranian. It looks like they got picked up by someone. Not by the coast guard, though. They'd have arrested the pair on the spot. They were likely picked up by either a private boat, or a merchant ship. We're currently working through our contacts at the Port Authority to try to identify which ships would have been in the vicinity over the past few days, and confirm if anyone came ashore from inbound ships without returning to the vessels."

"You two've been busy," Perry commented. "You could have come to me with this first, you know." Perry paused in thought for a moment. "Okay, you two work the story together. Keep me posted. And Kent..." Clark looked up as Perry called his name. "Looks like Lois is finally rubbing off on you. It's good to finally see you get some backbone." Lois smirked at that last statement, thinking to herself, *You have no idea.*

As they walked back out into the bullpen, Lois quietly whispered, "Think you could have told me about that earlier? Oh, and it was kind of a dirty trick springing that little surprise on me in the elevator like you did."

Clark noticed a trace of venom in her voice and offered a quick, "Sorry."

As they reached her desk, she looked at him, shaking her head, still not believing that Superman was behind those glasses. "Sounds like you have some pretty strong feelings about Lex Luthor," she probed.

After noting from the heartbeats around them that nobody else was within earshot, he whispered, "He's the greatest single threat to our family. He's got to be stopped."

Family. He said it again. She bowed her head, and whispered so quietly that only he could hear, "It's safe to assume that he knows about Jason. That makes him even more dangerous." She raised her head at looked up at him, seeing her own fear reflected in his face. She considered him for a moment before continuing, "We probably need to go somewhere and

compare notes... about *everything*," she hinted. "The roof's obviously off limits. Any ideas?"

Clark frowned. After again verifying that they wouldn't be overheard, he whispered, "The Paparazzi are crimping our style a bit. We'll need to get a little ways away from their stake-out before we can get away unseen. Let's take a walk." Clark headed towards the elevators, Lois close behind him.

A few blocks away, Clark found what he was looking for. They entered one of the many office buildings populating the downtown area, and Clark guided Lois into the elevator. As she turned around to face the doors, she felt his hand and the small of her back and turned to find herself enclosed in Superman's arms as he lifted her up through the hatch in the top of the car and sped up through the elevator shaft. Lois spoke up, "Wherever we're going, we'll need to be back by 3:00 to get Jason from school."

Clark smiled at that before speaking, "I don't know if you remember the routine or not, but I won't be able to talk on the way, since I'll be using my breath to keep the wind off of you."

Lois was about to ask where they were going, but it was too late, they had gone super-sonic, heading North to God-Knows-Where.

Superman slowed down as the Fortress came into view, and Lois could barely perceive a transparent bubble around it. It seemed vaguely familiar, part of the dream that her waking mind would not let her remember. "You've brought me here before, haven't you?" she asked. Clark nodded as they set down on a platform outside the bubble. When he waved his hand in front of what seemed to be a pillar of ice, a blue beam of light shot up from the platform ten feet along the surface of the bubble before separating to reveal a doorway through it. "Security upgrades," was Superman's simple explanation. "We don't want any more thieves causing problems for us." The doorway closed behind them as he flew her into the center of the fortress.

Clark stretched his hands above the recessed console, causing it to grow to its operational height. He touched the console, ejecting one of the crystals, which Lois immediately recognized from Lex Luthor's yacht. He inserted the Crystal into another location and touched a few more controls, as Lois asked, "So... why couldn't we have just zoomed up the elevator at the Planet, instead of walking a half-mile across town?"

Clark gathered from her tone that she was a bit angry. He turned to her and explained, "I could have gotten out of there too fast for the Paparazzi to get any pictures, but not fast enough to guarantee that they wouldn't have seen us." At her look of confusion, he added, "If I had gone too fast, you wouldn't be able to take the acceleration." Clark touched a few more controls on the console, before turning to her. "I've turned on a cellular relay so that your phone will work here. I wouldn't want you to miss a call from Jason's school." He flew over to her at the crystal table where she was sitting, and inquired, "Where do you want to begin, the Story or the Secrets?"

"Maybe you can start by explaining to me why I can't remember us being together, when we obviously were!" she exclaimed irritably.

Clark frowned, and sat down opposite her. "It's a bit complicated." He fidgeted under her glare for a moment and after a deep sigh, he continued. "I'll try to simplify it as best I can. Okay, here's the short version. Yes, we were together. In fact, the plan was to spend the rest of our lives together. We were forced to re-evaluate those plans after Zod took over the Earth. It was a heart-breaking decision. For both of us. You were in a lot of pain, emotionally. The only

way I knew to take away the pain was to suppress the memories causing it."

"What? You had no right --" Lois started, her anger back in full force.

"I thought I was doing the right thing. I was wrong, and I'm sorry," Clark offered.

"Sorry? You're sorry? Do you have any idea how badly I was freaking out when I found out I was pregnant?"

Clark bowed his head at that, not able to maintain eye contact any longer. "It was a mistake," he answered quietly. "It can be reversed, but you might want to wait a bit before --"

"Why would I want to wait?" Lois erupted. "I WANT MY MEMORIES BACK!"

"It could be a bit overwhelming," Clark explained, as he lifted his head to look into her eyes again. "You would not just be remembering something you had forgotten, you'd re-experience everything, which could be as emotionally draining now as it was then."

"I don't care! I want my memories back!" Lois demanded.

"Alright," Clark agreed. He'd suspected that she have little patience upon learning of her suppressed memories. "I'll need a little help from the technology here to properly restore your memories," he explained as he flew back over to the console. "It's a bit complicated isolating the suppressed memories from everything else."

As he touched the controls, a crystal chamber rose from the floor, with the side facing the console open. Lois noticed a woman's face appear in the pillars behind the chamber as it rose. "Lois, please enter the chamber, so that your memories may be restored," the woman requested, as Clark flew over to her to offer his assistance.

Lois waved him off angrily. "I can walk over there myself!" She entered the chamber and turned around to face him. Once the open side of the chamber had closed, a blue ray of light slowly descended across Lois' face. As it did so, she jolted with a start as the wave of re-experienced memories exploded through her mind: Niagara falls, The Polar Bear rug, Clark sacrificing his powers to be with her, Their night together, The trip home, Clark's encounter with the bully at the diner, General Zod, Ursa and Non taking over the Earth, Lex Luthor offering her to them as a high-value hostage, The battle in Metropolis, The battle at the Fortress, Thinking that they had stripped Clark of his powers again and his victory over the Kryptonian criminals, The heart-wrenching decision afterwards. Along with the facts came the emotions: Her love for Clark; Her despair at not being able to be with him.

In the space of less than a minute, she had relived all of her lost days. As the front panel of the chamber opened up, Lois was sobbing uncontrollably and Clark was there in an instant, gathering her in his arms. "It's different this time. It'll be alright," he consoled her. For several minutes the two just sat there. As her tears began to subside, Lois dared to open her eyes and she looked again to the woman's face in the pillar, this time immediately recognizing her as Clark's Kryptonian mother, Lara: the one who had stripped him of his powers when he asked permission to be with her. The chamber she had just exited also reminded her of that event. "Are you planning on giving up your powers again?" she asked, wide-eyed.

It was Lara who answered her question. "That won't be necessary this time. We've found a better solution."

"A better solution?" Lois echoed.

"Yes," Lara answered. "The reason Kal-El was asked to sacrifice his powers five years ago was to protect you. Consider what you experienced during the pregnancy and the subsequent birth and early childhood of your son, Jason. Movement in the womb, nursing, teething, and stubborn misbehavior during the child's early years of life. Though challenging in the best of circumstances, such things become life-threatening when that child possesses

Kryptonian strength. The process Kal-El went through effectively turned off the genes responsible for those Kryptonian abilities in the DNA passed on to your children."

"It was the cleanest solution," Clark informed her, "but not the only one."

Lara continued. "There other solution is to turn off your child's Kryptonian genes in the early stages of pregnancy. You'd have to be diligent in monitoring for pregnancy, but it is a viable solution, and the one we will use should the two of you choose to be together."

Lois quietly considered this new information, along with Clark's words on family earlier. Clark obviously wanted to a life with her. She looked at him, her anger temporarily forgotten, and asked, "Do you still love me, Clark?"

He smiled and answered simply, "Yes, I do and I always will."

Lois lowered her head, resting it against his chest, and tightened her grip on him before quietly whispering, "I still love you, too." They remained entwined for several minutes, before Lois looked up, noticing that Lara was no longer there. Lois looked up at him, and asked, "So where do we go from here?"

"That's up to you," Clark answered. He paused, grimacing for a moment before he continued. "Richard is a good man who was there when I wasn't. I won't blame you for choosing him over me. I'd rather it was me, but there are complications with me, especially while Lex Luthor is at large."

Lois nodded her head, grumbling, "Why can't anything ever be easy?" After another moment enjoying his embrace, she pulled herself away and stood up. "Well, if we can remove Lex Luthor as a problem, things get a bit simpler. Let's get to work."

Chapter 7 - Aftermath

Day 2, Wednesday, 2:00PM, Superman's Arctic Fortress

Lois was impressed at the lengths Superman had gone in such a short time to try to track down Lex Luthor. He had showed her holographic displays in the Fortress tracking the movement of commercial ships and private boats along the coast outside of Metropolis. He was also tracking kryptonite radiation fields from the debris left from Luthor's kryptonite land mass and had feeds from the Coast Guard, Port Authority, and other Law Enforcement networks, courtesy of an anonymous colleague in Gotham. He was also monitoring her house, Jason's school and the Daily Planet building for suspicious activity, with Kryptonian Artificial Intelligence (the 'ghosts' of Superman's Kryptonian parents) on constant vigil, ready to alert Superman as necessary. As Superman, he had also paid personal visits to certain officials and officers, to focus the effort, and as reporter Clark Kent, he had pounded the pavement, pushing law enforcement sources for details on the manhunt. He'd also been making anonymous calls to share information he had acquired from the fortress, again to focus the effort.

Lois glanced at her watch. They still had another hour before they had to leave to get Jason. She turned to Clark and said, "One thing about all this still doesn't add up..." She bit her lip, losing herself in the memory for a moment before looking back up at him. "Lara said that by giving up your powers, our children would inherit your DNA with the genes turned off. Yet, our son hurled a half-ton grand piano thirty feet across a room at the psychopath that was trying to kill me... That piano must have been going at least fifty miles per hour when it hit the guy... Those genes don't seem to be in the 'off' position... How...?"

Clark eyes grew large at that revelation. "I have no idea," he admitted. He gazed down for a moment, hand on his chin as he mulled that over, "I wonder if..." he began, looking back up at her as he asked, "Did Luthor have kryptonite on the boat?"

Lois nodded. "He was waving a hollow kryptonite cylinder in our faces during his little tirade." She quietly added, "He noticed Jason go limp when he pulled the Kryptonite out, too. If that hadn't convinced him who Jason's father is, the piano toss surely did."

Clark shuddered unconsciously at what the madman might try to do with that information. He schooled his expression before looking up to Lois and sharing his thoughts. "Maybe it was his immune system fighting back against the Kryptonite that somehow activated his dormant Kryptonian genes. We won't know for sure until we get him up here and get a look at him."

"So it's like a flipping a switch. He's 'super' now? What other powers will he have?" Lois inquired.

"I don't know," was his answer. After a brief pause, he added "We really need to get a look at him." Lois nodded in agreement.

"Will it be the same for any other children we have? 'Normal', until kryptonite?" she asked, pausing a moment before she quickly added, "Hypothetically speaking, of course."

"I think we'd be able to manage turning the genes on and off here," he told her, smirking at her slip of the tongue.

Lois took exception to his smirking. "Just so you know... I'm still furious with you for taking my memories," she informed him. "We're going to have some issues to work out once this is all taken care of," she said, waving her hand towards the holograms.

"I know," he acknowledged sadly. Then, in a more cheerful tone, "Jason threw a piano? Is that what you were referring to in the hospital when you said that he had my strength?"

Lois nodded. She turned her attention to the data display holograms surrounding them,

her gaze stopping at the kryptonite radiation field display. "Are we going to be able to get rid of all that kryptonite somehow?" she asked. "I don't want that stuff finding its way into the wrong hands, and you or Jason getting hurt by it."

"Neither do I," Clark answered. "It'll take some special handling, but yes, we'll get rid of it. We'll also need to implement some security updates at your house, Jason's school, and at the Planet."

"What have you got in mind?" Lois asked.

"I've worked out an... arrangement... with Wayne Enterprises," Clark revealed. "Their Reynolds Security subsidiary will offer to install the security system at the school as part of a 'community works' program, and they'll provide your home security system as well. They already have the maintenance contract for the Planet's alarm system, so the upgrades can be made under the guise of routine maintenance. Of course, there will be some undocumented upgrades to the equipment, such as Kryptonite sensors."

"How'd you talk them into all that?" Lois asked.

"I have a contact at Wayne Enterprises who arranged it," Clark informed her. "They're actually getting a bargain out of the deal." At Lois' confused expression, he explained, "In return for their assistance, I'll be lifting a number of their satellites into orbit. Considering that the average satellite launch costs about three million dollars, not to mention the delays waiting for a launch vehicle, which works out quite well for them." After a moment's delay, he added. "Of course, the arrangement is strictly off the record, and the 'launches' will be done secretly, in the middle of the night."

Lois' found that arrangement almost as shocking as learning that Clark was Superman. "Are you telling me that Superman got himself a job?" she joked.

Clark frowned at her characterization of the deal. "I wouldn't put it that way... I've asked them to devote a lot of resources to help us. They're also putting together the watches for you and Jason with the 'panic button' that I mentioned earlier. The fact of the matter is that even with all the things I can do, I can't do everything, be everywhere, at once. There's too much at stake and we need their resources. It's only fair that I offer something in return."

Lois lost herself in the displays for a moment as she considered that information. Finally, she turned to Clark and asked, "Are we going to be able to come up with something printable for Perry by the morning edition deadline? Something that won't tip your hand to Luthor?"

Clark nodded, and answered. "I've pretty much already got it put together in my head. Just need to type it up. We'll also need to work the phones and pound the pavement a bit tomorrow morning to follow up."

Lois looked at her watch again and informed Clark, "We'd better get going pretty soon. I'm still going to need to get my car from the parking garage before I pick up Jason. I hope we won't have to walk another half mile to avoid the Paparazzi seeing me fly with Superman..."

Clark touched a few controls on the crystal console, causing the holographic displays to go dark and the console to retract back into the floor. "I should be able to get us pretty close," he told her as he flew over to her, gathering her in his embrace, and flying her out of the Fortress to begin the trip back to Metropolis.

Lois wasn't sure how she had made it through the rest of the day. She made it to Jason's school on time to pick him up, afterwards reviewing the article outline with Clark, who then wrote most of it. She didn't feel that she deserved to share the byline as her mind reeled from the days revelations. '*Overwhelming*' is an understatement, she thought. It seemed more like

the recovered memories were the here and now, and that her life with Richard was the distant memory. *Richard! This isn't fair to him.* A wave of guilt rushed over her, as she looked down at her engagement ring and considered what she had been fantasizing about with Clark.

While they were putting the finishing touches on the article, or rather while Clark was putting the finishing touches on it with an occasional "uh huh" from Lois, she daydreamed about walking down the aisle to Clark, with Jason as the ring bearer. She imagined how the holidays would be with Clark and Jason, family vacations with Clark and Jason. It was all she could do to keep the smile off her face that she was sure would have looked as goofy as anything that Clark Kent usually offered.

As she noticed Richard guiding Jason back into his office, her stomach knotted. She had never had such fantasies about marrying Richard. In fact, she had only reluctantly accepted his proposal of marriage, after a delay of several days, and quickly squashed any discussion on actually planning a wedding. *I feel like a first class tramp*, she thought, wallowing in guilt for her feelings. Clark noticed the changing expressions on her face, and offered, "Try to get a good night's sleep tonight, Lois. Maybe things will be clearer in the morning."

Lois whispered, "Easy for you to say. You don't have to go home with him."

Clark glanced over to Richard's office as he insisted, "Give yourself a couple days to absorb everything that's happened."

Lois nodded in agreement. She was mentally exhausted from it all. She needed to clear her mind before she could choose between these two good men. Whatever that choice ended up being, she felt she had to come to a decision soon. She didn't want to string either of them along. *And what about Jason?* she thought to herself. She rationalized that if she did choose Clark, it would probably be least disruptive for Jason to make the change now, rather than drag things out for months or years. They could probably arrange for Richard to have plenty of time with him to minimize the emotional impact.

But Richard's been so good to both of us, Lois reminded herself. He opened both his heart and his home to Lois and her son. They had been happy together, hadn't they? But was it 'happy' happy, or just not unhappy? She tried to remember if her heart had ever raced with anticipation with Richard like it did with Clark. Could she have felt that way for him if there had never been a Superman? *Or has Richard just been a convenience*, she asked herself, not pleased with the implications. Lois despised women who took advantage of the men competing for their affection, leading them on. She now wondered if she had been unconsciously doing the same thing to Richard, as she fiddled with the engagement ring on her finger.

But Clark is Jason's real father, and the only one who can help him as his abilities develop, and *nobody* got her heart pumping like he did. He was her true love, and the one she'd dreamed of since he first caught her eye (and the rest of her, as she fell from a helicopter). *But can the reality live up to the fantasy*, she asked herself. "The world can wait," he had said. Would that mean that she wouldn't have to share him with the world, or just that he'd do his best to make sure he was there for the important things. And what would the world make of it if she chose Clark? The rest of the world? *What about the rest of the office? My God, we all work together*, Lois reminded herself. *What a soap opera this could turn out to be!* Would Richard and Perry take it out on Clark at the office?

Lois' internal debate raged on throughout the evening, which had been anything but relaxing. There had been an awkward silence between Lois and Richard during dinner, which Jason seemed to pick up on judging by the occasional look of confusion on his face as he looked between the two. She avoided conversation entirely with Richard, offering one or two

word answers to any questions he chose to ask. After putting Jason to bed, she retreated to the home office, printing photos of Jason for the albums she had picked up for Clark and his mother. She paused as she picked up each one off of the photo printer, remembering the moment, and wondering how they might have been different if Clark had been around. She didn't hear Richard walk up behind her.

"What are you doing with all those pictures," he asked politely.

"Putting a couple of albums together," was her response, offering no more than the obvious.

"Who are they for?" he inquired. He knew something was bothering her, and was trying to be patient. Something was definitely off with her, and he hoped he could start a casual conversation and get her to relax enough that he could find out what was on her mind.

"Relatives," she answered.

Richard frowned. She certainly wasn't making things easy for him. He sat on the edge of the desk, placing his hand on her shoulder as he spoke patiently. "Lois, I know that something is bothering you, and you've been avoiding me all night. Are you mad at me for something? I can't apologize for something if I don't know what I did to piss you off."

Lois dipped her head, feeling the guilt over her treatment of him that night. She remained overwhelmed by the day's events: learning that Clark was Superman; that he still loved her and wanted to be with her; that it was *possible* for them to be together. She also realized that she loved him and wanted to be with him, too. She was no closer to a decision on the matter than she had been that afternoon, but she felt the guilt over her feeling for Clark and the impact that could have on Richard and Jason. She'd compensated by taking it out on Richard.

Her features softened somewhat as she looked up at him. "If anyone should apologize, it's me. I've got a lot on my mind, I'm stressing out, and taking it out on you. I'm sorry."

"Do you want to talk about it?" he questioned.

"I don't think I can," she answered quietly. Richard nodded in resignation. Lois wasn't quick to share her thoughts, especially when something was *really* bothering her. She preferred working things through on her own, and to some extent, had always kept Richard at arm's length, emotionally. Richard knew how futile it could be to get her to open up.

"Is there *anything* you can tell me?" he asked.

Lois shook her head. "I just need some time alone to sort things out," she answered.

"Alright, but I'm here for you if you decide you want to talk about it later," Richard reminded her. As he turned and walked away, he added "I'm heading up to bed. I'll see you in a little bit." Had he still be looking back at Lois, he would have seen her head snap up with a look of horror on her face at that innocent statement.

Chapter 8 - The Day After

Day 3 Thursday 5:30AM, Atlantic Ocean, 25 Nautical Miles Due East of Metropolis

The ocean offshore was relatively calm as the sun began to peek over the horizon to the east, with the lights of Metropolis barely visible to the west. The calm was suddenly disrupted as an armor-clad figure emerged from the ocean surface and into the sky, pulling an enormous net behind him that spanned 250 feet at its widest point, and twice that length vertically. For the last few hours, Superman had been removing the kryptonite debris left from the kryptonite land mass, protected by body armor with specially tuned shielding to block the kryptonite radiation, while allowing the sun's sustaining energy to pass through.

It was tedious work. He had gathered the larger boulders and fragments first, hurling them into space from his position beneath the waves. That left the litter on the ocean floor, which included some pieces as small as a coin. Those had been collected in the net, a commercial steel alloy net provided by Wayne Enterprises, which he'd strengthened using Kryptonian technology. The debris within the net that he was currently dragging into space was the last of the remnants of Luthor's monstrous creation, as confirmed by the instruments built into his armor. He had been determined to get it all, for Jason's sake as well as his own.

Superman sped with the kryptonite burden high above the plane of the solar system, before repositioning it for its trip to a Jovian burial in several months when it finally reached the gas giant. He didn't want to risk ricochets through the asteroid belt sending something to Earth or collisions with other inhabited worlds by sending the debris outside the solar system. Thus, he soared four light-minutes above the earth before redirecting the captured material to Jupiter.

Once the netted fragments were on their way, Superman next moved to catch up with the other fragments and boulders that he had thrown into space prior to bringing up the net. It would have taken an unbearable amount of time to bring them up one at a time, especially given the need to slow his speed to avoid burning up his protective suit on entering the Earth's atmosphere. With all the debris now safely out of Earth's atmosphere, his speed was not limited as he moved to each one and redirected it to his target. His chore now complete, Superman sped back towards the Earth, slowing his speed on re-entry to that within the tolerance of his armor's heat shielding. He removed the helmet as he made his way north to his arctic fortress to shed the armor, before returning to his Metropolis hotel room and an hour's sleep.

Richard wasn't sure what to make of Lois' recent behavior as they waited for the elevator to bring them up to the newsroom. When he had woken this morning, he had noticed that she wasn't in bed with him, and found her asleep downstairs on the couch. She'd been a bit more cordial this morning than she had been last night, but still unusually quiet. As they began the work day, she was once again oblivious to everything but the coffee that she picked up from Starbucks on the way in.

Richard couldn't recall ever seeing her quite like this before and was starting to worry. He wondered if she had been more traumatized than she let on during the ordeal aboard Lex Luthor's yacht, which had nearly killed them all. She had refused to discuss it beyond what she had written in her story about it afterwards and made it clear in no uncertain terms that Jason was not to be questioned on it either. That only reinforced his impression that something had happened there. He wished she would trust him with it, but knew he couldn't force the issue. As he looked over at her, his curiosity was again triggered by the extra bag she carried with her

this morning, a plastic checkout bag holding the two photo albums of Jason that she had put together the night before for some unidentified relatives, along with the photo DVDs that she had created of the same pictures.

Richard pulled himself from his thoughts as the loud ding announced their floor, following Lois through the open doors and acknowledging the cheerful greetings from Clark and Jimmy. He was sure that they also noticed something off with Lois, judging by the quickly masked expressions of concern that flashed over their faces when they saw her. He concluded that she needed some time away and began to contemplate where he could take her to bring back the Lois he had known just a couple weeks ago. Maybe his Uncle Perry and Aunt Alice could watch Jason while they were gone...

Clark was also worried about Lois. When he had learned that there was an option to both be Superman and be with her, he had followed his heart (and his mother's wishes) and told Lois everything. However, his original plan had been to spread it out over several days in easily digestible pieces. For her to be hit with everything in the span of a few hours had to be overwhelming, and it looked like sleep had been a stranger to her last night. He doubted she was in a good mood and she had been livid over the lost memories. As he heard Lois and Richard exit the elevator, he turned to offer them his usual goofy greeting. He couldn't prevent the ear to ear grin that spread across his face when he saw what Lois had with her that morning. He'd mentioned yesterday that he and his mother wanted pictures of Jason, but hadn't imagined that Lois would put together photo albums so quickly! It looked like he'd be making a trip to Smallville later that day.

As Lois settled in at her desk, ignoring everyone around her, she grumbled almost inaudibly under her breath, too quietly for anyone other than Clark to hear. "'Get a good night's sleep,' he says. 'Things will be clearer in the morning,' he says. How was I supposed to get any sleep at all when there is absolutely *no way* that I could have shared a bed last night with my... um, 'roommate?'" She didn't bother to glance over at Clark. He was grateful for that, because he was sure he was sporting an obvious blush at her words.

Despite her claim to the contrary, Lois had actually gotten some sleep. It helped having her memories back - she was no longer confused over Jason's paternity. However, the internal struggle between her feelings for Clark and her feelings for Richard was enough to make it a fitful sleep. Despite convincing herself that they'd be able to minimize any disruption to Jason if she chose a relationship with Clark, she still worried about the effect it would have on him. She also had no idea where she would go if she were to leave Richard now. Clark didn't even *have* a place for her to move into, and even if he did, given what Lex Luthor knew about Jason, that would put the whole family in danger. *Family*. It didn't feel strange thinking of Clark as family anymore. She allowed herself a small smile at that.

She reached for the Planet's morning edition sitting on her desk, looking for the story that she and Clark had turned in the previous day, and was pleased to find it on the front page. Below the fold, but still front page, with a menacing picture of Lex Luthor's bald head. Her story on the city's dubious reconstruction contracts was on page 3. Well, today she was determined to pull her own weight, something that simply had not been possible the previous day after Clark's bombshell. *Why couldn't he have waited until **after** deadline to spring that on me?* she thought to herself. She set aside the morning paper, pulled open one of her contacts binders, and started working the phones, pressing for any new information on the hunt for Lex Luthor. Clark also appeared to be working the phones and was in and out. Lois guessed that if he got a good lead that he was checking it out as Superman.

Late that morning, Lois looked over to his desk, relieved that he was there this time, and walked over to him. "Anything promising?" she asked.

Clark frowned, "More a case of eliminating possibilities. All of the commercial vessels that were in the vicinity of the islet have checked out. Everything is accounted for. That probably means a private boat. I've been pounding the pavement at the marinas to see if there have been any reports of missing boats or people. The problem is that a lot of the folks who might have been out or would have noticed someone missing aren't there during the week. The Metropolis PD is canvassing the marina members, but they have limited manpower for that and it could take some time."

Lois couldn't avoid shuddering at that, knowing all too well the menace of Lex Luthor's company. "It's probably too much to hope for that no one will get hurt," she commented.

"Probably," Clark agreed. "The best we can hope for is that his victims will recover." Turning to her, he asked, "What have you turned up?"

"Well, it seems that Luthor has cleaned out the Vanderworth estate," she informed him.

"We already knew that he had swindled that poor widow," Clark pointed out.

Lois shook her head, "The will was almost immediately contested by the family, but some cracks in the system allowed Luthor to transfer the entire portfolio offshore. Freezing the assets here won't do any good, because all that's left is some real estate and the yacht that sank last Friday. The feds are trying to follow the money, but Luthor did a pretty thorough job of covering his tracks."

Clark dipped his head into his steepled hands for a moment to consider that before looking up from his seat and noting, "Those resources will make him even more dangerous." He turned his chair to face her. "I meant what I said to Perry yesterday about keeping Luthor in the public consciousness. I don't want him to be able to hide. Do you think that the pillaging of the Vanderworth estate can make the front page?"

"I'm writing it, aren't I?" she teased as she smiled. Dropping to a whisper, she inquired, "I assume you saw what I've got in that plastic bag?" Clark nodded, his frown growing into the typical Clark Kent goofy grin. "Richard caught me by surprise when I was putting them together last night," she revealed to him. "I told them they were for relatives, so we can't let him see you carrying them out of here. We'll have to sneak them out later." Clark acknowledged her warning with a nod.

After allowing his mind to dwell on the pictures for a moment, Clark pulled himself back to the business at hand, suggesting, "We should also get a story out there about the risk to private boating that Lex Luthor represents. Maybe someone will come forward who we wouldn't otherwise have heard from until the weekend. I'll get started on that one. Should we update Perry before or after we write the articles?" Clark asked, already knowing the answer.

"Definitely after," Lois answered, "when it's too late to reassign us to different stories." She spun around and headed back to her desk, looking forward to making Luthor's life on the run as uncomfortable as possible.

Clark and Lois had their articles fleshed out fairly well by lunchtime, when they had arranged to hand off the photo albums. Lois had waited to see Richard on the phone hunched over a notepad before making a sprint to the elevators with the photo albums. There were more people heading down than up at that time of day, so she had no problem finding an empty elevator car going up. Clark had changed out of his civilian clothes and dropped down through the top hatch of the lift and accepted the albums from Lois, afterwards accelerating up through the elevator shaft too fast to be seen by the Paparazzi nest. He sped to Smallville to

surprise his mother, while Lois rode the elevator back down to the lobby and walked out to the deli down the street for lunch.

Richard had looked up from his notepad in time to notice Lois' sprint to the elevators, plastic bag in hand. He frowned, realizing that she was intentionally ditching him. He had planned on joining her for lunch and suggesting a weekend getaway. He pulled himself back from his thoughts and returned to his conversation. "Sorry, Hank, what was that last part again?" Richard asked. He'd have to consider Lois' odd behavior later, as he immersed himself back in his conversation.

Shortly after lunch, Lois and Clark were sitting quietly in Perry White's office awaiting his judgment on their articles. Richard had been discussing another matter with Perry when they arrived at Perry's office and had remained, mostly out of curiosity. Perry leaned back in his chair, his gaze going up to the ceiling as he considered their work. "We'll save it for the morning edition," he finally announced. "It's good work. Do you have anything solid for a follow-up?"

"A lot of the boat owners at the Marina aren't there during the week," Clark informed him. "We should be able to dig for more when they're back on Saturday morning, if we can catch them before they launch into the bay."

"Sounds like you've got it all under control, Clark," Richard commented, hoping that their story would not interfere with his plans to take Lois away for the weekend.

Perry added, "Go ahead and hit the marinas Saturday morning, Kent, but if you come up empty, that's about all we can devote to it, unless Luthor pops up somewhere."

"Chief!" Lois objected, "There's more here if we dig deep enough. Luthor is a clear and present danger to every civilized human being on this planet, and we owe it to society to keep digging." Lois and Clark were back to their old selves, Lois being the one to object to Perry's judgments, and Clark timidly accepting whatever was handed to him.

"I think there's more here," Clark agreed, before being drowned out by Lois' arguments. He gladly kept quiet and let her carry the water, as Perry again was pushing her for more Superman stories. The ensuing discussion left Lois reassigned to continue her city contract story follow-up, and Clark continuing to follow the trail for Lex Luthor. Perry made it clear to Lois that he expected another Superman exclusive, however.

As they left Perry's office, Richard caught Lois by the elbow, "Can I talk to you for a minute?" he asked as he guided her into his office.

"After everything that's happened, I think we need get away for a few days, maybe fly up to the Cape for a long weekend," Richard suggested. "Perry's already agreed to the time off, and he and Alice will watch Jason while we're gone." It was never easy talking Lois into taking time off, but he wasn't expecting the look of shock that he now saw on her face.

"I can't," she said quietly. "I won't, especially not now."

Richard sighed deeply, "What's going on, Lois? I know the ordeal on the yacht was... stressful. But for the last day or so, you've been going out of your way to avoid me, both here and at home. What's happened that you don't think that you can share it with me?"

"Nothing," was her quick response, as she turned to leave his office.

"Lois, please don't shut me out," he insisted, as he gently set his hand on her shoulder. "You didn't even want to tell me who those photo albums were for, spiriting them out of here while I was on the phone. Can you even tell me about that?"

"Richard, I know I've been tough to live with the last couple of days, but please don't

push this," she told him sympathetically. "I've still got to sort through everything, and I have to do it alone. Just let it be."

Richard gently said to her, "You do remember that I love you, right? You don't have to do this alone. Trust me."

Lois was quiet for a moment, her gaze dropping to the floor. *Trust*, she thought. *I wonder how much trust you'd have in me if you knew who my thoughts have been with.* She sat back down on the couch in the office, face in her hands, silent in thought. She knew that at some point she'd have to reveal that Jason's real father was back in the picture, regardless of which man she chose for her future. She dropped her hands, her gaze towards the floor, as she blinked back unshed tears. There wasn't anything that she could tell him. Not without discussing that with Clark first.

"It's not a question of trust," she finally said. Looking up at him, she added, "Try to understand that I need to get my head around everything on my own. I know that this is upsetting for you and for that I'm sorry, but you're going to need to be patient with me a while longer. Please don't make an issue out of this."

"Lois, we --" Richard began, before being cut off by Lois.

"I'm sorry, Richard, but we can't have this conversation right now," Lois decreed. "We both have work to do. I've got to go." She stood up, and quickly left his office and returned to her desk. Once there, she dropped her head in her hands and quietly said in a barely audible whisper, "Clark, he at least needs to know that not only that he is *not* Jason's biological father, but that the man who is his real father is back in the picture, even if we don't tell him who that is. I can't string him along believing that nothing has changed. We're going to need to talk about this." Raising her head and wiping an errant tear from her cheek, Lois dove back into her work.

Clark was troubled by what he had just heard from Richard's office and was blaming himself for the turmoil. Lois had been right - Richard was a good man. He'd been there when Clark wasn't, was devoted to both Lois and Jason, and had risked his life trying to save them from Luthor's yacht. The current circumstances were hardly fair to him, and there would be no easy way to tell him of Jason's true paternity. He recalled the heartache he had felt upon his return and discovering the family picture of Lois with Richard and Jason, and wished that there was some way that Richard could be spared that same pain.

Chapter 9 - Sunshine

Day 3, 3:05PM, Thursday, Metropolis

Though the day had begun as a bright and sunny one, the clouds had moved in after lunch, casting a dreary hue over the city and a light drizzle was now coating it. Above the clouds the outlook was much more agreeable, the sunshine being thoroughly enjoyed by a figure floating high above, eyes closed, face towards the sun, and arms stretched to the side as he open and closed his fists. He was clearly oblivious to the dreariness below the clouds and all of the problems of the world. He didn't rest there long, knowing how little time he had for his indulgence. As he opened his eyes, Jason craned his head back to look into his father's eyes as he rested on his chest, basking in the sun.

After her exchange with Richard, Lois had decided it would be a good idea to grant Jason's request to go flying with Superman. She had handed the boy off in the parking garage of one of the older office buildings near Jason's school -- one which Clark had confirmed had no surveillance cameras.

"How's the sun feel, Jason?" Superman asked the boy. The smile on his face was nearly as wide as his son's. He had never imagined it possible to experience the profound joy that now infused him during this quality time alone with his son.

"Good," the tyke answered. "Mommy says that it's the sun that makes you strong."

Superman nodded, "Though it strengthens me directly, in a way, everyone gets their strength from the sun."

"Can we go somewhere now, and fly really fast?" the boy asked. He enjoyed basking in the sun, but he wanted to go flying, which to him meant moving.

"Sure we can," Superman answered, and he zoomed across the Atlantic with the boy. A few minutes later he pointed out the Eiffel Tower in the Paris night as he gave the boy a brief history of the city and its more prominent landmarks. It was a short lesson though, because of their scheduled rendezvous with Jason's mother.

Lois looked at her watch as she shut her car door and pressed the lock button on her key ring. It was 3:25PM, Clark had promised to be back with Jason by the time she got to the office, which was across the street from the parking garage. She pulled her purse straps up higher on her shoulder, and headed to the exit, wondering where and when Clark would show up. As she opened the heavy steel door to the stairwell, she recognized her son's giggling behind her, and turned to see her boy in the arms of Clark Kent, who was now in civilian dress, both father and son with huge ear-to-ear smiles on their faces. It seemed those smiles were contagious enough to spread to Lois' face as well.

"We're back," Jason announced, as Clark set him down.

"Did you have a good time, sweetheart?" Lois inquired, her son's enthusiastic smile lifting her mood.

"We went to Paris!" he announced, "And we saw the Eiffel Tower!"

"Paris?" Lois inquired, as she looked up to Clark, as he pushed the constantly slipping glasses back up the bridge of his nose.

"It was on the way," was his simple answer. "I'd better get going. I'll see you upstairs." After a quick look at the garage's surveillance cameras to verify the system's blind spots, Clark quickly walked around the corner and disappeared.

Lois returned her attention to the tyke, who had begun reciting his brief Parisian history lesson for his mother.

Paris, Lois thought to herself, her smile growing at her son's adventure. Maybe he'll take

me with him next time. As they reached street level in the stairwell, Lois knelt down so that she was at eye level with her son. "Jason, sweetheart, you remember what we talked about earlier? You can't tell anyone else about your after-school adventure today. Only Clark and I can know about that, understand." Lois regretted having to use the code-speak with him that she and Clark had agreed on, always assuming that there could be someone listening in. This time, however, the circumstances were simple enough that she wasn't worried about him understanding.

Jason nodded, "I know, Mommy. Clark told me that, too."

"Well, come on munchkin, let's get moving," she told him, as she pushed open the door of the parking garage, and headed across the street to the Daily Planet building.

Chapter 10 - Manhunt I

Day 4, Friday, 3:00AM, Rehoboth Beach, Delaware

There was no moon this night, which made the Wayward Wanderer difficult to see from the shores of Rehoboth Beach, if not impossible. Lex had cruised by Thursday afternoon, carefully noting his landmarks and GPS position for tonight's trip ashore. The lights along the beach and streets gave him some guidance, but it would still take some skill and luck to hit his marks. Beside him, Kitty quietly dreaded the odyssey ahead of them, but held her tongue. Her sarcastic comments had not been heard since witnessing Lex's grisly murder of the friendly old couple who had picked them up from the islet. She sat quietly behind him, clutching her Pomeranian, hoping to at least spare the dog from Lex's temper. He'd planned on killing it, concerned that its barking would give them away. It was the discovery of Nancy Wilson's sleeping pills that saved the pooch, which had been force-fed to it earlier, and it was now sleeping in Kitty's arms.

Lex squinted as he peered into the darkness and checked his position once more before easing the boat into the shallow water near the beach. Once the keel hit bottom, the pair scrambled over the bow, and after setting down the slumbering canine, Lex and Kitty rocked the boat free from the bottom, and let it drift offshore in the shallow water. Though it was unlikely to drift far, Lex hoped it would remain far enough away to avoid inspection until the two were well on their way and their trail sufficiently cold.

They scrambled up the beach, leaving the dog behind. Once they made sure that they hadn't been seen, they adjusted their stride, walking slowly down the road, with Kitty hanging on Lex's arm. They would appear as any other neighborhood couple out for a stroll, the only giveaway being the duffel bag that they carried with supplies from the boat and their dripping wet pants, which had been soaked below the knees from their excursion in the shallow water off the beach. As they walked, Lex surveyed their surroundings for appropriate transportation, preferably in a poorly lit area. After several blocks, he found a Saturn Ion that fit their requirements, and with the help of the tools packed in the duffel, they were on their way to Lex's safe house in Baton Rouge.

Friday, 8:30AM, Daily Planet Newsroom, Metropolis

As Lois and Richard walked off the elevator and into the newsroom, the tension between them was palpable. Richard, who consistently maintained an upbeat cheerful outlook at the office, had trouble keeping the frown off his face this morning, after discovering that Lois had spent a second consecutive night on their couch. He had trouble accepting her admonition to not read anything into it, but he couldn't accept that. He wondered if her obvious infatuation for Superman was a factor. She obviously did have a lot on her mind, as he had caught her staring off into space or at her blank computer screen a few times, before being brought out of her reverie by his voice. *What happened?* he caught himself wondering.

Lois was much better rested this morning, her disposition bordering on cheerful. Though she had spent another night on their living room couch, she had slept much better, dreaming of a family life with Clark. In her slumber, she had dreamt of giving birth to their second child, this time with him in the delivery room with her, while Jason anxiously waited outside with his grandparents. Once she awoke, she reminded herself that they hadn't made any decision on the matter. Nonetheless, the morning found a smile on Lois face, as she returned Jimmy's greeting.

Lois settled in, looking over to Clark's desk and noticing one of Jason's drawings. It was of Superman, of course. She quickly scanned the newsroom for Clark, wondering where he

was this morning. She realized that it was entirely appropriate for her to be looking for him, given their collaboration on the *Search for Lex Luthor* investigative reports and the two resulting front page articles in the morning edition. "Hey, Jimmy," Lois hollered, "Is Clark out sick again?"

Jimmy shook his head, "He's at Coyer's Marina. There've been some developments in the Lex Luthor manhunt."

Lois eyes grew large at the mention of the name. "Did they get him?" she asked hopefully.

Jimmy shook his head again, "No, he's still on the run, but they have some more clues. That's all I know. You'll have to ask Clark for details when he gets back." As Jimmy finished speaking, Lois was already heading back to the elevator lobby, pulling out her cell phone.

Friday, 8:50AM, Coyer's Marina, Metropolis

Lois found Clark at slip 113 at the Coyer's Marina on the Northern end of Metropolis Bay, talking with the boat owner. He wasn't able to go into much detail over the phone, and had instead summarized that they thought they found the boat that took Luthor off of the islet. Clark finished his conversation, shaking the man's hand, and then walked up to greet Lois, guiding her over to the tables on shore.

"So what's the full story?" she asked.

"They found a boat on Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, drifting about 30 feet offshore. Not a soul aboard. It triggered a "hit" in the electronic dragnet --" Clark began.

"Your friend in Gotham, right?" Lois inquired.

Clark nodded before continuing, "I got the alert around 6:30 this morning - some early morning joggers had called it in. A rather *close* look at the boat showed a frighteningly large amount of human blood protein on the deck, and Lex Luthor's fingerprints. Superman traced the likely route the boat would have taken from the islet Luthor had been tracked to and recovered two bodies, which he turned over to the Coast Guard. They were weighed down by the boat's anchor, their throats slit." Lois closed her eyes and took a deep breath at the news. Nobody was safe from that monster.

When she opened her eyes back up, Clark continued, "The boat's registration number led back here. The bodies most likely are those of George and Nancy Wilson, a retired couple who headed out to visit family in Georgia the day after... the day after Superman fell. The neighbors tell me that they usually take the scenic route down, stopping in a dozen or more vacation spots before finally getting to wherever they're going. They probably hadn't been missed yet."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Lois asked.

Clark smiled. "Make sure this gets on page one," he answered. "Most of what I just told you comes from an *unofficial* source. We still need to find *official* sources for the story, even if they're anonymous. And then we need to write the best story we can, and give that monster nowhere to hide."

Lois nodded her agreement, and joined him as they walked back down the pier.

Day 8, Tuesday, 10:00 AM, Northeast of Greensboro, North Carolina

Lex was listening to an AM news station as he drove down I-85 towards Greensboro. They'd jumped off the expressway before dawn, cruising through an apartment complex parking lot in Oak Hall, Virginia and 'exchanged' the Ion for a Taurus station wagon, swapping license plates while they were at it. The plate from the original Saturn that they had stolen was

now on an identical vehicle from the same parking lot. Lex had hoped that would throw the authorities off the trail. They had exchanged the wagon for a PT Cruiser an hour ago in a parking garage.

His hope of the *Wayward Wanderer* drifting offshore had not been realized. Not only had it not drifted far offshore, it was immediately linked to them, along with the stolen Saturn. Superman had been on the scene, joining the dragnet shortly after 6:30AM and had recovered the stolen Saturn a half hour later. The newswoman on the radio had taken great amusement in describing how Superman had then flagged down a local police officer, flying off with the policeman's cruiser, policeman still inside, to take him to the stolen vehicle.

Later in the morning, the news had reported Superman seen flying at extreme speeds above the roadways of Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, North Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia, for reasons unknown. Unknown until a few minutes ago, when the breaking news was that Superman had recovered the second vehicle that Lex had taken from the parking garage that morning.

Lex frowned at the news. The Man of Steel was hunting him. Lex hoped that their luck would hold and that the owner of the vehicle that Lex was now driving wouldn't report it stolen until lunch time. If they were real lucky, the owner had carried his lunch today. Lex reviewed their map, a US Road Atlas taken from the boat. He had planned to swap vehicles again in Winston-Salem after lunch, but they'd have to move up their plans. Superman was clearly working closely with the police on this, and would probably have a short list of vehicles to work from after lunch. They'd pull off in Burlington for another 'exchange.'

12:45PM, Burlington, North Carolina

Superman floated down to the top of the parking garage, gently setting the sheriff's cruiser down in front of him, first the front wheels, then shifting his position to the back of the vehicle, as he reintroduced the rear wheels to the concrete. Walking around to the driver's side door, he motioned toward the down ramp as he spoke to the deputy, "It's down on the third level, if you'll follow me." With that, Superman floated up and flew slowly down the ramp to the stolen PT Cruiser.

As the deputy exited his car, still somewhat in shock from the impromptu flight, he approached the car. "We want to preserve the crime scene," Superman told him. "I don't want Lex Luther to have any basis to appeal this time. I've already scanned the vehicle, and identified his fingerprints in the car, along with Kitty Kowalski's." The deputy nodded, as Superman continued. "This vehicle was reported stolen out of Rocky Mount about a half hour ago. He probably took another vehicle from here. Have any vehicles been reported stolen this morning? I'll need the make, model and the VIN."

"I'll call it in," the deputy offered. "You'll want the plate number, too, won't you?"

"I can't rely on it," Superman told him, "Luthor has been stealing and swapping license plates, too. I can see the VIN from the air, and that should be enough for me to track it down." The deputy nodded, and returned to his cruiser to contact the dispatcher.

As Superman was learning about a recently stolen Hyundai Azera in Burlington, Lex and Kitty were sitting in that missing car, parked in a downtown parking garage in Winston-Salem, watching for people returning from lunch. A woman had just pulled her Honda Civic into an empty spot, and walked briskly to the structure's elevator. After a quick look around, Lex and Kitty rushed over to the vehicle, as Lex quickly inserted his makeshift tools between the glass of the driver's side door and its weatherstripping and unlocked the door. Another minute and

the two resumed their journey in the hot-wired vehicle.

Chapter 11 - Manhunt II

Day 4, 1:15PM, Friday, Daily Planet Newsroom, Metropolis

Clark had been in and out of the newsroom all day, as he "followed leads." He and Lois had presented the meat of the story to Perry, with the caveat that they still needed to confirm some of the facts from reliable sources and that their sources were still reporting on the manhunt as new developments came up. Perry was thrilled by the story they'd revealed, and kept out of their hair and they continued to chase down leads. Clark kept Lois up to date on the vehicle recovery, while she tried to follow up with the appropriate law enforcement agencies, with a small delay to make it believable that she could have been tipped off by someone other than Superman. He had just informed Lois of the recovered Hyundai from Winston-Salem.

"We have no choice now but to wait for the next 'tip,'" Clark informed Lois. "Police are canvassing local businesses around that parking structure, asking everyone to check their vehicles. Hopefully we won't have to wait until the end of the day for a lead."

"I know," Lois agreed. "I just want that monster off the street." Looking down, she whispered his earlier words back to him, "He the biggest single threat to our family."

"We'll get him," Clark promised. "He can't hide forever."

By the time the afternoon edition deadline had arrived, Clark and Lois had submitted a very thoroughly researched and detailed special report on Lex's landfall, Murder on the High Seas by Lois Lane and Clark Kent. Perry was delighted with it. The pair was now developing a follow up story on the manhunt for Lex Luther for the morning edition, which they hoped would end with Luthor in custody.

5:00PM, Anderson, South Carolina

Lex was getting nervous. News reports were all about the manhunt for him, and according to reports, Superman had recovered the last vehicle 40 minutes after it was reported stolen, and *10 minutes after being told about it*. The owner of the Civic he was currently driving would discover it missing at any moment. Lex pulled off the road, and found his way to a shopping mall. Once there, he identified a suitable Ford Focus, and two minutes later, he and Kitty were back on their way. He'd have to risk more frequent swaps, to keep the Kryptonian off his trail.

Kitty was getting tired, and finally found her voice, complaining about her hunger and the infrequent bathroom breaks. Lex explained her yet again, that with their pictures all over the news channels, they could not risk stopping for food until they reached their safe house in Louisiana. Lex was beginning to regret not selecting something closer to Metropolis for the safe house.

By 6:30PM, they had reached Atlanta, Georgia, having slipped through the Man of Steel's net again. Though it hadn't been reported to the news channels, Superman had found the Civic a half hour after they had abandoned it. Lex had figured this out, reading between the lines of the news reports of Superman zooming over the highways and sightings in specific towns -- towns where they had left stolen cars. He pulled into the packed parking lot of an Olive Garden restaurant, and drove out a few minutes later in a Toyota Corolla, as they continued their journey, jumping off of I-85 again in Madras and Grantville, South Carolina and in Opelika, Alabama for additional vehicle exchanges, not knowing how far ahead of the Man of Steel he truly was.

7:35PM (Central Time), Opelika, Alabama

Superman was getting frustrated as he scanned the Chrysler Sebring in Opelika, once again identifying the fingerprints of Lex Luthor and Kitty Kowalski. Judging by the heat from the engine, he hadn't missed them by more than 10 minutes. As before, he found the nearest law enforcement officer, brought her to the scene to secure the crime scene, and inquired on recently reported stolen vehicles. He only hoped that the next time, he'd catch up with them before they switched cars.

Superman had heard the dispatcher inform the deputy that there had been no stolen vehicles reported. As the deputy stepped out of her cruiser, Superman informed her, "It probably hasn't been noticed yet. Thank you for your trouble." With that, Superman flew off, waiting and listening for the clue that would capture Lex Luthor.

9:45PM (Central Time), Greenville, Alabama

Lex and Kitty sat in the front seat of the Dodge Stratus that they had carjacked from Opelika two hours earlier. After what had to have been a few close calls, Lex concluded that the only way to shake the Man of Steel off the trail was to make sure that the vehicle didn't get reported stolen, and that meant bringing the owner with them. The unfortunate owner in this case had been a 17-year old girl that Lex had spotted walking to her car parked at the side of a convenience store - the side without glass windows. Kitty had pulled their car behind her, as Lex jumped out and forced the girl into the car with the knife to her throat. Once Kitty had parked the Sebring and joined him, they resumed their journey, arriving in Montgomery an hour ago. The girl was alive, but bound and gagged in the trunk.

Lex had decided against traveling overnight. Given the attention that Superman had devoted to the chase, it was unlikely that he was going to call it a night any time soon. It also seemed likely to Lex that it would be too easy for Superman to search through the lower overnight traffic volumes to seek them out. Thus, they were now cruising through the East side of Montgomery looking for another victim to carjack: Someone whose parents wouldn't be checking up on them. Once they had another replacement vehicle, they've find someplace in town to whole up until the morning and resume their journey.

11:25PM (Central Time), Greenville, Alabama

Superman dug his fingers into the metal below the seam on the trunk lid of the Dodge Stratus and forced it open. As he pulled the ropes loose from Samantha Harding and removed the duct tape that covered her mouth, the girl's emotions burst forth as if released with her bonds and she began crying hysterically. "It's over," Superman told her. "You're safe." He helped her from the trunk and held her gently in his arms as the girl cried.

The missing person report filed by her parents had triggered another 'hit' by the electronic dragnet that Wayne Enterprises had provided for him and had 'paged' him 20 minutes earlier. As the girl cried, she was unaware of being lifted into the air, until she happened to look away as Superman was slowly floating down to a local Sheriff's deputy, who had been questioning the intentions of a group of five teenage boys.

"Excuse me, Deputy Williams!" Superman hailed him, after reading his name badge. "This girl needs your help." The deputy and the teenagers were awestruck by the descending Man of Steel. Seeing him on television was one thing, but they were completely unprepared for the imposing presence he had in person.

"Wh-What's happened here?" the deputy asked.

"I've been on the trail of Lex Luthor all day, as he's switched from one stolen car to the next. It appears that he's now switched tactics from Grand Theft Auto to Carjacking. This girl was bound in gagged in the trunk of her car, which probably means that they've carjacked someone else from this area. We'll need to monitor both car theft and missing person reports to track them down."

Looking down at the girl still in his arms, who was still crying intensely, Superman gently spoke to her, "Samantha? Do you think you can go with Deputy Williams here?" Samantha nodded, and Superman gently set her on her feet, opening the back door of the deputy's cruiser, and helping the girl inside.

Turning to the deputy, he instructed him, "If you'll also get into the car, I'll take you to the crime scene. It's quicker this way." The deputy nodded, and climbed into his vehicle. Superman lifted the vehicle above his head and as he rose into the air, he turned his head towards the teenage boys and said, "I'll expect you boys to stay out of trouble." The boys all nodded their heads vigorously as Superman flew out of sight with his burden.

Day 5, Saturday, 7:30AM, Metropolis, 312 Riverside (Home of Lois Lane and Richard White)

Lois was sitting at the kitchen table in her pajamas, eating a simple breakfast of a bagel and coffee. Her sleep the previous night had been restless, mostly because of stress over the Luthor manhunt and the threat he represented to her family, rather than due to her third night on the couch. As the sounds of Saturday morning cartoons filtered in from the living room, Lois fished her cell phone out of her purse on the kitchen counter, and called Clark for an update. She knew he'd been up all night chasing down any lead he could find. Richard walked in as Clark was revealing Samantha Harding's ordeal to Lois.

"Oh my God, is she alright?" Lois asked him. After a pause, Richard heard her add "So where does the trail lead to now?" He correctly deduced that Lois was talking to Clark. After another short pause, he heard Lois say, "Well, everyone's up now, so call me if there are any updates." The two had been coordinating closely as the story unfolded throughout the previous day and had been working together on the update for that day's morning edition.

"What time is the press conference?" Richard heard Lois ask, pausing a moment before adding, "No, I'll be there. You're covering our field contacts, remember," she reminded him, casting a sideways glance at Richard. "OK, call me if you hear anything. Bye."

"Press conference?" asked Richard.

"FBI press conference on the Lex Luthor manhunt. It's at the Jefferson Federal Building at 10:30" she informed him. "I'll be going in for it, so you'll have Jason to yourself."

Richard frowned, "Can't Clark handle that?" Even though the weekend getaway he had hoped for had been rejected, Richard still had hopes of spending some family time together, even if it was just a trip to a park or the zoo. If nothing else, he wanted a chance to discuss the unexpected change in sleeping arrangements.

Lois shook her head, "This is the biggest story of the year, after Superman, of course, and I'm not about to drop the ball on it. Besides, Clark has his hands full pressing our law enforcement contacts, who we've still managed to get information from in spite of a media blackout on the progress of the manhunt. I've got to do this press conference."

Richard nodded his head in acquiescence. He recognized the fire in her eyes when she got her claws into a big story and there was no distracting her from it. "So where are they now?" Richard asked.

"The last confirmed link was in Greenville, Alabama," Lois told him. "About 8:30 last night, they carjacked a 17-year old girl out of Opel-something... Opelika, I think... She's alright. Superman found her bound and gagged in her trunk four hours later in Greenville, and now they're chasing down both auto theft and missing person reports out of there. If they've grabbed another car overnight, it may take awhile before it's noticed missing. Not everyone's an early riser." Gesturing towards Jason in the living room, she added, "I wasn't before I had him."

Richard briefly shifted his gaze to the boy, sprawled out on the floor, happily watching Spongebob Squarepants, before he returned his gaze to Lois and quietly addressed her. "Lois, last night was your third night in a row on the couch..."

"Richard, please," Lois interrupted in a loud whisper, as her gaze shifted to her son. "Not here, not now."

Richard was quiet for a moment before he continued in his whisper, "Then when?"

"After things quiet down," Lois told him. "I've got a job to do and I need to get showered and dressed right now." With that, she disappeared up the stairs.

As Richard looked back toward the living room at the sound of Jason's laughter, he wished he could be as oblivious to the changes in their household as the boy appeared to be. Something had changed recently, despite Lois' claims to the contrary, and they needed to talk it through. As Richard White was neither an impatient nor an insecure man, the true reason for her distraction would not occur to him. Instead, he concluded that there must have been something more traumatic to her ordeal aboard the *Gertrude* a week ago than she had let on. He considered how he could best convince her to get help for that as he walked into the living room.

"Well, kiddo," he said to Jason as the boy looked up at him, "it looks like it'll just be us guys today."

Chapter 12 - Disruption

Day 5, Saturday, 1:45PM (Central Time), Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Superman gently floated down behind a red Grand Prix parked near the far reaches of a grocery store parking lot, while the afternoon shoppers looked on in amazement. He curled his fingers underneath the seam of the trunk and forced it open, and scanned the injuries of the man bound and gagged inside. A slightly overweight man in his late 50s, Harold Gallagher had been on his way home from his local Pascagoula, Mississippi home improvement store when Lex and Kitty had cornered him. Normally his wife would have thought nothing of his delay. However, given the warnings on the news regarding Luthor's carjacking the night before, she had called authorities shortly after 1:00PM, when Harold failed to answer his cell phone.

The man was now unconscious and severely dehydrated, having baked in the trunk on a hot summer day. Superman snapped the ropes binding his limbs, removed the duct tape from his mouth, and carried the man up into the air on an express trip to the Baton Rouge General Medical Hospital.

As Superman was evacuating Harold Gallagher from his confinement, Lex Luthor and Kitty Kowalski were resting in the living room of the safe house. It was a large plantation house set on ten acres, with a six foot tall masonry fence around the perimeter and a row of tall pine trees just inside that fence. It afforded them a lot of privacy. They had arrived in town two hours earlier, Kitty dropping Lex off a couple blocks away from the house before she continued to a rendezvous point some fifteen miles away. Lex didn't want to take chances on having the car found in the vicinity, and the short walk was a necessary risk. He felt confident that his two-day beard and fishing hat would sufficiently conceal his identity. After cleaning up and donning a blonde wig, he retrieved Kitty from the grocery store parking lot using the Ford Expedition from the garage.

As Lex now lounged back in his recliner and flipped through the news channels, he reflected on their situation... Given the surprising tenacity shown by the Man of Steel during the manhunt, Lex realized that his adversary would not give up and leave when he discovered that the trail had gone cold. "We can't stay here," Lex said angrily, turning to face Kitty.

"What d'ya mean, we can't stay?" Kitty asked incredulously.

"When he finds that our trail's gone cold here, he'll turn the city upside down looking for us," Lex informed her. "And he'll find us if we stay. We have to leave."

"Where will we go?" she asked him unhappily.

"I have a place in Vegas," he revealed. "It should be safe there, since he won't have any clues to follow us there."

"So, that's, what? Another two or three days cramped in a car?" she huffed, glaring at him. "I'm tired of running! I won't do it!"

"Oh, yes, you *will* do it!" Lex declared. "But we won't be driving - we'll be flying. I have a plane about an hour's drive from here," Lex stated, returning her glare. "I'll call ahead to have it prepped and fueled and we'll be leaving as soon as it's ready."

Kitty turned her gaze away from Lex, staring blankly at the television. "How much longer will we have to live like this?" she asked quietly. Lex chose not to answer her, as he withdrew to the office to look up the number for the Acadiana Regional Airport.

5:00PM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Building

What was supposed to be a couple hours for a press conference had turned into another day-long collaboration as Clark and Lois tried to put the pieces of the puzzle together in the

Lex Luthor manhunt. Lois had been meticulously researching Lex Luthor's history and associates, while Superman had been hunting down what seemed to be every stolen car in southern Louisiana. He'd discovered a handful of chop shops, but had turned that information over to the local police rather than acting on it himself, his priority being elsewhere.

Lois had been incensed by how blind the federal authorities seemed to be to the Lex Luthor threat, offering a paltry ten thousand dollar reward. The FBI public relations agent had described that as "appropriate to the risk and current efforts to bring him into custody." In other words, they were leaving it entirely up to Superman to bring him in. Lois knew that it was a mistake to underestimate Lex Luthor and was determined to write a scathing op-ed to try to convince the authorities to raise the bounty. Her goal was to get it raised to the twenty-five million dollar maximum.

As she struggled with the piece, she noticed Clark walking off the elevator with a forlorn look on his face. "Is it that bad?" she asked as he approached her.

"The trail stopped cold in Baton Rouge," Clark informed her. "Either that's where he's hiding or he's met up with some delinquents there and is no longer traveling in a stolen car. Every auto theft in southern Louisiana has been tracked down to a dead end. I'm sorry, but it looks like he got away."

"It's a temporary setback," Lois told him confidently. Then, dropping her voice, she told him in a barely audible whisper, "And don't blame yourself. You've been absolutely amazing going after him. Besides, it's not over yet."

Clark offered a small smile at her encouragement before he asked her, "How's the op-ed coming?"

"I'm just about there," Lois told him quietly. "If you want, you can read through it and let me know if I missed anything." She then added in a whisper, "Maybe we can add some Superman quotes..." Lois slid her chair to the side to allow Clark a better look at the text on her screen.

"You've done a pretty good job summarizing his atrocities," Clark told her. Lowering his voice to a whisper, he added, "As far as Superman quotes go, I'm not sure it would add anything to the arguments. Besides, we don't want people reading too much between the lines of another Superman exclusive." Lois nodded her head, fully understanding his meaning. He didn't want too much exclusive access to Superman to leave a trail of bread crumbs back to her and Jason.

Lois lightly bit her lip and dropped her gaze to her lap for a moment, the vague reference to the family reminding her of the tension with Richard. She again whispered into her hands, "There hasn't been time for it with the manhunt over the last couple days, but we really need to talk about Richard."

Clark looked to her, and in a sympathetic voice, he asked, "Are you ready for a break? Let's take a walk."

A few minutes later, after confirming the Paparazzi were still absent from their nest across the street, the pair zoomed up the elevator shaft, accelerating north to the secure privacy of the Fortress.

Young fingers moved awkwardly across the electronic keyboard, struggling to tap out the melody of a new song. As Jason practiced his lesson, Richard was back in the kitchen, quietly speaking on the phone with his Uncle Perry, seeking the older man's advice on the confusing situation with Lois. Perry seemed to be the ideal person to hash out the problem with: he and

Richard were close and he'd known Lois for many years. "I can't believe that's the problem," Perry informed his nephew. "After all the scrapes she's gotten herself into, there's no way she'd be traumatized by that little adventure aboard that yacht."

"I'm not so sure about that," Richard countered. "For the last few days she's been a stranger, keeping to herself, staring off into space and hardly speaking to me unless its work related. Maybe almost losing Jason on the yacht pushed her over the edge."

Perry let out a deep sigh at his nephew's obvious worry before he continued speaking. "If you plan on suggesting psychiatric help to Lois, you'd better make sure that your life insurance premiums are paid up. She is not going to respond well to that!"

"I know that she'll resist, but I've got to do something," Richard insisted. "I've already tried everything else I could think of and gotten nowhere." Perry reluctantly provided Richard with the name and number of a respected psychiatrist friend and wished him luck.

7:45PM, Metropolis, 312 Riverside (Home of Lois Lane and Richard White)

Lois was rereading the op-ed on her laptop in her home office. Clark had offered a few minor suggestions on the article and she'd updated it before arriving home an hour ago. She was now using the op-ed as an excuse to avoid a confrontation with Richard. He was slowly getting more insistent that she open up about whatever was bothering her, and she realized guiltily that the current situation had to be driving him crazy. She'd talked it through with Clark at the Fortress, along with discussing how and when they would tell Jason who his real father was. Lois pulled off her glasses, and pinched the bridge of nose, trying to force the coming headache to go away. Finally, she closed the op-ed file, emailed it to Perry for review, and walked back into the living room to find Jason and put him to bed.

After tucking Jason into bed and promising him that she wouldn't be going into work Sunday, Lois retreated to the kitchen and poured herself a glass of wine. Richard moved to wrap his arms around her, but withdrew when he felt her flinch at his touch. "What's happened, Lois?" he asked gently as she turned to face him.

"Looks like Luthor got away, for now at least," Lois answered.

"That's not what I meant," Richard told her. "What's happened that put a wall up between us? Was it something that happened aboard the *Gertrude*?"

"The yacht was not a big deal," she answered. "It was a bit scary for a bit, but we all made it out of there and everyone's fine."

"Everyone's *not* fine," Richard corrected her. "For the last few days, things between us have been... tense. And you haven't wanted to talk it through with me."

"I've already explained that," Lois reminded him. "Please, Richard, I really don't want to repeat that argument."

"I'm okay with you not wanting to talk with me about your ordeal on the yacht, but something's not right, and you need to talk it through with someone." Lois clenched her jaw at that, not knowing where he was leading but uncomfortable with it nonetheless. Pulling a piece of paper from his pocket, Richard continued, "I've got the number of a good psychiatrist -".

"*What?*" Lois exclaimed. "If anybody here's lost their mind, it's you, not me!" At Richard's alarmed glance toward the stairs up to Jason's room, she continued in a loud whisper, "I told you that there was nothing to tell about that yacht. The only time it's even crossed my mind is when *you* bring it up!"

"Our family almost died there," Richard reminded her. "It's not unusual for there to be some psychological repercussions from a traumatic event like that."

"Richard, listen to me very carefully," Lois instructed him, the anger apparent in her voice. "Nothing. Happened. On. The. Boat. Now, please, forget about it! I don't need a shrink!"

"It's the only explanation I can come up with for your bizarre behavior," he started.

"Bizarre?" Lois challenged him. "I told you, I had to think through some things."

"Everything was fine before the ordeal on the yacht," he countered.

"The yacht has nothing to do with it!" she insisted. Lowering her voice again, she said quietly, "Richard, please sit down and try to be quiet for a minute while I explain something to you." She lowered her gaze to the floor as he sat at the kitchen table. After remaining quiet for a moment, pensively biting her lip, she let out a deep breath, and began her explanation, "Think back to when we first met and got together. You do realize that our first time together wasn't... wasn't the first time for me."

Richard furrowed his brow, giving her an odd look at that statement. "I had a life before we met, too," he reminded her. "What's your point?"

"Well, before we met and got together, I had been with someone else... immediately before," Lois told him nervously.

"Where are you going with this, Lois," Richard inquired.

Lois answered, "Well, this... certain someone... I bumped into him a few days ago. He'd recently accepted a position back here in Metropolis. I noticed some things about him that I'd forgotten about. Things that reminded me of Jason. I'm now convinced that this... certain someone... is Jason's biological father. And so is he."

Richard was stunned, having always believed himself to have been the boy's father. His eyes widened in shock as he stared back at Lois. He was unable to find his voice for a few minutes as he tried to grasp the ramifications of what she had just told him. After a couple minutes, Lois broke the silence, finally looking up at Richard with a nervous look on her face as she spoke. "Richard, I never meant to mislead you about Jason's paternity," she informed him. "Until a few days ago, I truly believed that he was yours. But we're all going to have to adjust to the reality that he's not."

Lois returned her gaze to the floor as she continued, "People tell us that Jason looks like me, and there's some of that there, but I think he looks more like him. They have the same rare blue eye color, the same nose, the same chin, even their smiles look the same. DNA testing at this point would just be a formality."

Lois chanced a glance up at Richard before returning her eyes to the floor as she continued, "This 'certain someone' is a good man, probably the kindest, most compassionate man I've ever met. He wants what's best for Jason. He hasn't asked for any changes in custody, but he does want to be a part of his life." She looked up at Richard with a determined look on her face as she added, "And he *will* be." After glaring at him for a moment, she dropped her head back down and quietly added, "He never would have left if he had known. I know it bothers him that he wasn't here to see his son born, or hear his first words, witness his first steps... I still haven't figured out how we're going to explain this to Jason..."

Richard finally found his voice, as he muttered, "The photo albums were for him." It was more a statement than a question.

"For him and his mother... Jason's grandmother," Lois confirmed.

"What's the guy's name?" he asked her.

"What?" Lois asked quietly.

"Jason's... biological father," Richard spat out. "What's his name?"

Lois sighed before responding, "I'm sorry, Richard, but I'm not ready to share that. If I answered that question it would raise other issues and require a long and awkward discussion that I just don't have the energy for right now."

"And *this* discussion isn't awkward at all," Richard noted sarcastically.

"I'm sorry. I know that this is upsetting for you. For what it's worth, I'm struggling to get my head around it all, too... This wasn't how I planned on telling you... I don't suppose there ever is a good way to tell someone something like this, is there?"

Richard shook his head. "Probably not," he agreed. "I assume that there will be a DNA test?"

"At some point, probably," Lois informed him, as she looked back up at him. "Though, like I said, it's just a formality at this point."

"This... 'certain someone'... Is he the reason you've insisted on sleeping on the couch the past few nights?"

Lois dropped her head again at that. *Crap!* she thought to herself, *Do we have to talk about that now?* Aloud, she said, "Things are complicated and confusing for me right now. I needed to be alone while I sorted it out."

"We have a guest room," Richard reminded her, as he struggled with the sudden recognition of a rival competing with him for Lois.

"I didn't want it to be too obvious," Lois admitted. "And I thought I'd have it all sorted out by now, but I've been a bit distracted by the Luthor story."

Though not pleased with this challenge to his relationship with her, Lois' words did offer him some hope. He considered this quietly, both of them with their gaze at the floor. Richard finally pointed out, "Well, things *are* obvious now, so there's no point in you continuing to sleep on the couch. I'll move my things to the guest room, *temporarily*. I do still expect us to get past this and spend the rest of our lives together."

Lois offered him a weak smile at that as she quietly said, "Thank you."

Richard left her in the kitchen as he headed up to their bedroom to relocate his possessions to the adjacent room. Despite his optimistic statement to Lois a moment ago, he could not shake the feeling that the life he had tried to build with her was crumbling away.

Chapter 13 - Observations

Day 7, Monday, 7:00AM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom

The reporters at the Daily Planet were considered among the best in the world, hired for their keen skills of observation, their skill with the written word articulating those observations and for the curiosity and tenacity that got them to the bottom of a story. Although the golly gee-whiz persona of Clark Kent slipped below the radar of these journalists, the same could not be said of Lois Lane or Richard White. Lois aggressively went after her stories, and was often forceful (and loud) in the news room. Richard was universally liked by his colleagues, seemed to take a sincere interest in everyone there and had an uncanny ability to put those around him at ease. Where his uncle's management style was brash, Richard's was more one of gentle encouragement.

As much as Lois and Richard were noticed individually, together the two of them were impossibly obvious. Their coworkers noticed every idiosyncrasy of the two, and many had suspected that they had become a couple before it was informally announced via a very public kiss under mistletoe at an office Christmas party. Observant eyes also noticed the pair as they entered the newsroom on this morning. Richard's usual demeanor of calm strength had been replaced by a forlorn and harried expression, and Lois entered the newsroom with a scowl on her face, though she attempted a weak smile in response to Clark's usual greeting. The unvoiced consensus among those observing them was that they were witnessing the repercussions of a lovers' quarrel, and from the look of things, it had been a doozy.

As Lois settled in at her desk, she called out to Clark, "What's the latest on the Luthor manhunt?"

Clark's goofy grin immediately dissolved into a frown as he informed her, "There's been nothing new linked to him since Saturday afternoon. The best we can hope for now is that the feds will raise the bounty high enough for some lackey of his to get greedy. Congratulations on the op-ed, by the way. I see that it got picked up nationally this morning."

Though Lois had known that the Luthor trail had gone cold, she grimaced at the confirmation as the fear for her son grew within her. "Thanks. I just hope it makes a difference," Lois told him. "And I wish we knew what Luthor was up to."

Jimmy Olsen had approached as Lois and Clark were talking. Though his role was just that of a photographer, he was as observant of the people around him as most of the veterans. He could tell that Lois was in a foul mood, but that had never intimidated him - Jimmy was used to people hollering at him. He joined the conversation, telling them, "I'm sure he'll turn up sooner or later. He always does."

"It's what he does when he turns up that worries me," Lois responded. "It'd be better to catch him before he hatches some new maniacal scheme."

Jimmy nodded in agreement, realizing that no words of encouragement would help on this topic. Turning to Clark, Jimmy asked, "So when are you moving into the new apartment?"

"Friday," Clark answered. "I'll run by and get the keys in the morning, and drop my things off later in the day."

"Will you need help moving?" Jimmy asked.

Clark's brow furrowed in thought for a moment before he answered, "There's really not much to move at this point. I gave most of my stuff away before I left a few years back, so I'll be getting new furniture. Thanks for offering, though."

"You gave away *everything*?" Lois inquired. The blank look Clark gave her reminded her why: he hadn't expected to come back from Krypton. The reminder of his disappearance didn't

help her already sour mood. She rolled her eyes, muttering, "Whatever." She shifted her glare to Jimmy briefly before returning her attention to Clark. "What about Luthor's carjacking victims?" she asked. "How are they doing?"

"Harold Gallagher's going home from the hospital today, and the two women were never admitted. Physically, they're fine. Emotionally, they've all been through a traumatic ordeal and it'll take time to heal." Clark paused a moment before adding, "Have you read Walters' article on the front page of this morning's Metro section? She did a pretty good job covering the victims' story."

Lois shook her head, informing him, "Haven't had time." She glanced over at Jimmy again, her glare still intact. She wanted to get rid of him so that she could talk privately with Clark, but without that motive becoming obvious. Fortunately, she was spared the necessity as Perry's bellowing voice sent the photographer darting off to answer the summons.

As she looked back to Clark, he gently asked her, "Is everything alright?"

"Fine," was her evasive answer as she dropped her head, raising her hand to cover her mouth and pretending to stifle a yawn. Behind her hand, Lois answered him in a barely audible whisper, "On Saturday night, I told Richard that he's not Jason's real father, and we had a huge argument after dropping Jason off this morning. He's in denial and insisting on DNA tests, saying that a 'vague resemblance' is inconclusive. I'm worried that they'll find something unexpected in Jason's DNA."

Raising her head, Lois raised her voice to its normal volume as she told Clark, "Excuse me. Guess I'm a bit tired this morning." She paused for a moment before asking, "Have you come up with any other angles on this to keep this story on the front page?"

Clark answered, "No, but let me get back to you later on that. I have to follow up with my 'friend' in Gotham on another matter." Lois nodded and returned to her desk, understanding Clark's meaning and suppressing her smile. She allowed herself to relax, confident that Clark and his anonymous friend at Wayne Enterprises would come up with a solution to the DNA problem.

While the bulk of *The Daily Planet's* circulation was delivered for the paper's morning edition, with its 11:00PM deadline, a smaller afternoon edition was also published, with a 2:00PM deadline. The commotion through the newsroom always relaxed somewhat after the afternoon edition deadline had passed and it was then that the staff in the newsroom was most likely to loosen up and engage each other in small talk. On this day, the chatter was in hushed tones to avoid the hearing of the subjects of their conversations. The conspicuous turbulence in the Lane/White relationship had hit the rumor mill, and it seemed that everyone had their theory as to the cause.

"It's a casualty of her professional ambition - She's put in a ton of extra hours lately."

"She needs to pay a little more attention to her family."

"She probably relapsed back into her Superman obsession. You saw how she was when he was in the hospital..."

"Do you think one of them got caught in an affair?"

"He probably asked her to finally pick a wedding date. I don't know what she's waiting for."

"She doesn't appreciate what she's got. She should stop looking to the skies for men in blue tights and get her feet back on the ground!"

While the tension between them over the last week might not have been noticed by a

casual observer, the turmoil now apparent among the pair was impossible to miss, especially in light of their normal habits. Not only were the casual visits to each others' desks missing, today they seemed to go out of their way to avoid each other and there were no casual kisses hello or goodbye. The mood emanating from Lois seemed outright hostile and one could find no cheer in the normally good-humored Richard White. Previous days would also have found Lois unwinding in Richard's office after deadline, until one of them left to get Jason from school. Today, Lois remained alone at her desk, while she continued to dig into her current corruption story, this time about sweetheart deals given for services at the city-owned convention center.

As he returned to the newsroom after a short meeting with Bruce Wayne in Gotham, Clark now discovered that he had some trouble maintaining his upbeat façade as he listened to the chatter. It seemed that his friend Jimmy was the only one giving Lois the benefit of the doubt, rebutting some of their colleagues' unkind comments. Clark walked over to Lois' desk as she hung up her phone.

"Will that be another front page?" Clark asked her, as he pushed his glasses back up his nose.

"Of course!" Lois answered with false cheer. "You know, you've had a few front pages yourself lately." She offered him a small smile as the double meaning of her words sunk in. "How'd things go with your 'friend' from Gotham?" she asked him quietly.

"Good," Clark informed her. "He seemed pretty confident that something could be worked out, but he needed to look into the details. I should hear back from him by the end of the day."

Lois turned back to her story notes, whispering under her breath, "You should see if your friend can get us an interview with the elusive Bruce Wayne. Now *that* would be a scoop." She glanced over to see Clark's smile become genuine as he considered her words, wondering how she'd react if she knew that the 'friend' in Gotham *was* the eccentric billionaire.

Richard White observed the interaction between Lois and Clark from his uncle's office. As with the rest of the newsroom crew, his conversation with his uncle drifted to other matters now that the afternoon edition had gone to press. "I wish I knew what to tell you," Perry admitted to the younger man. "Do you really consider this other guy a threat?"

"I don't know what else he would be. Not just because of the words she used to describe him Saturday night, but because she's insisted on separate sleeping arrangements since she 'bumped into him' last week. There's...something there. I still can't understand why she refuses to tell me who he is, though."

Perry frowned while he followed his nephew's gaze through the interior glass wall at Lois, as Clark left her desk to return to his own. "What will you do if she's right and DNA tests prove that this other guy is Jason's real father?" Perry asked him. "And what will you do if she's wrong?"

Richard let out a deep sigh as he dropped his head. "If she's wrong, I want to try to get things back the way they were -- back on track to getting married and spending the rest of our lives together. I *do* love her." He was silent for a minute, squeezing his eyes shut as the emotions of the past couple of days hit him once again. "If she's right....it gets complicated, but I still love her and want to work something out. It'd be as confusing as hell for Jason, and from the way Lois is talking, she's planning on telling him about his 'real daddy' soon."

"What did she say?" Perry inquired, as he turned his head to look at his nephew.

"It wasn't what she said directly, but the bedtime story I overheard her tell Jason last night. It was a Superman story, of course, but this time about how his real parents had sent him

to Earth when he was a little boy and human parents had adopted him and raised him. She was trying to explain the difference between biological parents and, as she put it, 'the other kind.' She says that she hasn't told him yet, but she's stubbornly insisting that it'll have to be soon."

"Do you want me to try talking to her?" Perry offered.

"I wouldn't recommend it. Then she'd be pissed off at both of us instead of just me."

"You know, it would be fascinating if it were true," Perry speculated quietly. When he noticed the horrified look from Richard, he quickly clarified, "I meant the Superman story." Perry looked back out the glass to Lois as he added, "She had the lion's share of Superman exclusives before he left. I can't help but to wonder how much off the record information she has."

"I'm sure that it was just a story to prepare for eventually telling him that this other guy's his real dad," Richard stated sadly. After a silent moment, he added, "I really wish I knew who he was."

"Would it really make a difference?" Perry asked him.

"At least I'd know what I'm up against," Richard informed him.

As Richard and Perry continued their conversation, Clark now found it impossible to maintain his smile. He blamed himself for the current turmoil between Richard and Lois, and wished he could spare the other man the pain that he was now enduring. He also shared Richard's concerns over the impact on Jason. However, he agreed with Lois that it would be even more confusing for the boy if they didn't tell him, as his abilities developed. He'd even suggested the bedtime story to her. Once Jason learned control over his abilities, he'd be better able to defend himself against someone like Lex Luthor, and the boy would need to know the truth before Clark could begin helping him with that. Clark unconsciously tuned out the hubbub of the newsroom and the world beyond as he contemplated the imminent tremor through his son's world.

The hollering from Perry White was a quality of his brash management style, and few people from the news room were spared from it when he wanted something from them. Even his nephew Richard had been on the receiving end of the tirades on rare occasion. The only person in the newsroom exempt from his verbal onslaughts was his executive assistant, Maggie Gonzales. She was an attractive woman in her early thirties who had become indispensable to Perry as his attention focused on one issue or another in the daily challenge to get the paper out. She was also as self-assured as the most hard-nosed reporter, and had boldly confronted Perry the one and only time he attempted his management style with her.

After spending the majority of day scrambling to keep up with Perry's typical daily demands, Maggie was now relaxing a bit as she chatted with Susan Walters, who was waiting to speak with Perry. As they were talking, Maggie caught sight of Jason White, who had just arrived with his mother after his day at school. The boy ran ahead of her, making his way to Clark Kent's desk. As she observed the interaction between the small bundle of energy and with the tall, bumbling man, she said to herself quietly, "Who knew."

"What was that, Maggie?" Susan asked her.

"Kent," Maggie told her quietly, motioning with her head in the man's direction. "Who knew he'd be so good with kids. For the last week, that little guy's made a beeline for the farm boy the moment Lois brings him in, and Clark always has something with him to keep him entertained. Looks like he's got a yoyo for him today."

Susan chuckled at her friend's observation, "The rest of us are just glad that he's kept the

munchkin corralled." Susan looked over at the unlikely duo, as Clark was awkwardly trying to show the boy how to work the yoyo. Lois was looking on with a warm smile on her face as she set her purse into her lower desk drawer.

Maggie looked back to her friend and whispered, "Do you know if he's seeing anyone?"

Susan's eyes grew large at the question, as did Clark's back at his desk, unnoticed by the two. "Don't tell me that you're planning on asking him out," Susan asked in surprise.

"Are you nuts?" Maggie shot back, to Clark's great relief. "You've seen Lois and Richard today, right? That's the problem with an office romance. When it's good, it's great, but when you hit bumps in the road, like they're doing now, it blows up in your face. You have to deal with it both at home *and* at work. I'd never do an office romance. Besides, Al and I are just going through a rough patch. We'll work things out."

"Then why the question?" asked Susan.

"I think he'd be good for my sister, Christine," Maggie answered. "Her little boy's just a couple years younger than Jason, and now that the jerk is history..." Maggie didn't need to elaborate. Nearly everyone in the newsroom had heard her complain about her abusive now-former brother-in-law. Looking back over at Clark and Jason, Maggie added, "You know, last Thursday he brought in some little bean-bag balls, and was trying to teach the tyke how to juggle."

Susan burst out laughing at her friend's statement. "I wish I had seen that," she declared. Then lowering her voice, she added "I just can't image Clark the Klutz juggling."

Maggie smiled at that, "Well, he wasn't very good." As the two women looked back over to the subjects of their discussion, Lois had joined them, presumably to shoo her son back into Richard's office. They were interrupted from their observation as Perry's office door opened, and Kevin Jacobsen exited, with Perry still shouting behind him.

Susan turned back to her friend, whispering to her, "Lois or Jimmy can probably tell you his status. I have no idea." Looking over to Perry's now open door, she stated, "Well, looks like it's my turn on the firing line. I'll catch you later." Maggie returned her gaze to Clark and Jason, where Lois was now quietly laughing at their antics. *Wow, he's even got Lois smiling,* Maggie thought to herself, as she imagined her sister and nephew enjoying a similar moment with him.

Chapter 14 - Recruiting

Day 7, Monday, 5:00PM (Pacific Time), Henderson, Nevada

The heat of the summer Nevada sun was showing no signs of waning as it bore down on an attractive young woman enjoying the large pool of an upscale suburban Las Vegas home. Set on two acres of property and surrounded by a high masonry wall, the occupants were afforded considerable privacy. She was observed by the man inside the house as he read that day's *Las Vegas Review Journal*, intent on keeping up with the manhunt that had recently consumed the nation. According to the reports, the trail had ended in Baton Rouge, where there had been frequent sightings of Superman flying over the area throughout the day Sunday. Though the news had been repeated continuously on the cable news channels the day before, the man preferred the depth of detail that only print media provided. The speculation was that the Man of Steel was scanning the city searching for the fugitives. *We got out of there just in time*, Lex Luthor thought to himself as he read the story.

Lex was pleased with himself for avoiding the net that the Man of Steel had cast for them. *Mind over muscle*, Lex thought to himself as he finally allowed himself to gloat. They'd arrived at the house in Henderson early Sunday evening, and had then finally allowed themselves to relax and recover from the odyssey. Lex had to delay his planning for Superman's end, however. As much as he wanted to begin the end of the Man of Steel, he knew that he first had to placate Kitty who was still jittery from both the harrowing journey and from the Lex's violence. After she dyed her hair blonde and he donned a long curly wig, the two had hit the town Sunday and Monday, shopping, seeing shows, and enjoying luxurious meals out. Under normal circumstances, he would have eliminated her rather than indulge her, but he would still need her until he rebuilt the staff for his organization, and thus had to endure the ordeal. Lex wasn't sure which had been worse: the hectic flight across the south in stolen cars, or shopping with Kitty.

Lex returned to his newspaper, searching through it for any other information on the manhunt when he encountered the op-ed piece by Lois Lane, '*No Bounty is High Enough*,' which strongly advocated a twenty-five million dollar bounty on the man that she insisted was the most dangerous man on the planet. She'd gone to great lengths to prove that as she cited his history. Lex frowned as he considered that. While there was no guarantee that they'd place the bounty that high, there would certainly be pressure to increase it, especially now that the couple he'd killed on the *Wayward Wanderer* had been identified and his prints found on the boat. He'd have to change tactics again, given the opportunistic and greedy nature of the thugs he'd recruited in the past.

"Lex?" Kitty called, as she walked through the back door, "where are you take -"

"Ah, ah, *ah!*" Lex chastised her, interrupting and waving his index finger in front of him. "What did we talk about earlier?"

"We're not supposed to use our real names," she recited back to him.

"Right, its Steve and Betty Dawson until further notice," Lex reiterated.

"But, 'Steve', there's nobody around here to hear me," she complained.

"He hears everything, and he's probably listening for my name!" Lex shouted back at her.

"Whatever," Kitty countered, rolling her eyes. "Where are you taking me for dinner?"

Lex looked at his watch. After two days of treating Kitty lavishly, he was anxious to get to work on Superman's demise. "I thought we'd have something delivered this time. I need to get back to work."

"Fine, I'll order Chinese," she huffed as she spun around and walked into the kitchen.

Confident that he once again had Kitty under control, Lex walked back to the office to begin searching profiles on his laptop for his new lieutenants: men that dared not betray him. The lackeys he recruited would report to them, never knowing that the man calling the shots was Lex Luthor.

Day 9, Wednesday, 6:00PM (Central Time), Chicago, Illinois

Roger Pruitt glared at his fellow passengers on the commuter train as he rode home from what he considered a demeaning job stocking dairy products at a grocery store. The halfway house had found him that job upon his parole, and he'd had no choice but to accept it if he wanted to remain free on parole and eventually move out of the halfway house, as he had done earlier in the week. Roger was waiting for the right opportunity to hit it big, but he couldn't risk his parole by quitting the job. *Someday soon*, he told himself as he walked the short distance from the train to the low-rent apartment he had found.

If anything, Roger's scowl grew as he approached the building, another reminder of the spectacular failure that had landed him behind bars after what had seemed to be the perfect bank robbery. They had gotten away clean, but when one of his partners-in-crime foolishly shot off his mouth, bragging at a strip club, the police hadn't been far behind. He'd served seven years of a ten year sentence before being paroled. *That fool is going to pay for this*, Roger thought to himself, as he walked towards the stairs of his apartment building. His angry demeanor frightened the young girls jumping rope in front of the building, and they scrambled out of his way. *Someday soon*, he promised himself.

As he approached his third floor apartment, he noticed the sound of the television blaring from behind the door. It was one of the cable news channels - a station that he never watched. He put his ear up to the door, attempted to detect other voices in the room. Hearing none, he cautiously tried the unlocked door, attempting to make as little noise as possible as he opened it. Peering into the ramshackle room, he noticed an attractive, well-dressed blonde sitting on his couch, her feet up and legs crossed as she stared at the television. Roger confidently stepped into his apartment, no longer concerned about intruders. "Well, Blondie, to what do I owe the pleasure?" he said to her lecherously.

As the woman stood up and turned to him, a strong arm suddenly wrapped around his neck from behind, and he felt the muzzle of a gun pressed to his temple. "Well, Rog, long time, no see," the voice behind him said bitterly. "We have some unfinished business to take care of."

Roger immediately recognized the voice. "Lex Luthor," he said quietly.

"Never say that name aloud again!" Lex commanded him, as he pushed him to the floor. "I see that you've come a long way since we last saw each other," Lex mocked.

"It's temporary," Roger replied defensively.

"Well, then, if everything is under control, then I guess we can leave and let you go back to your job at Kroger," Lex continued derisively. "Or, we can come up with a more agreeable arrangement."

"What have you got in mind?" Roger inquired, now interested in his visitors.

"Before I tell you, there something you should know," Lex told him. "I've put a contract out on you."

"*What?*" Roger exclaimed. "But I haven't done anything to you!"

"The contract is on hold," Lex explained. "But I've paid the contractor a retainer to take care of business if I should be arrested or anything else unpleasant should happen to me. We

wouldn't want you tempted by that reward, or any foolishness like that."

"I'd never rat you out!" Roger complained.

"Then you have nothing to worry about," Lex said simply. "Here's the deal: I have a little project I need to take care of in Metropolis. However, since my freedom of movement there is, shall we say, 'limited,' I need a lieutenant to run the project for me. You'll build a team, they'll report to you, you report to me. And, Roger... nobody else there can know that I'm the one calling the shots. You'll just refer to me as Mr. Big."

"Or Mr. Bald..." suggested Kitty.

"Not now!" Lex commanded. Kitty rolled her eyes and returned to her attention to the news show on the television as Lex returned his attention to Roger. Lex began, "So, what's it going to -" Lex interrupted himself as he recognized the voice from the television. "What is she up to now?" he asked rhetorically. His attention focused on the television as Lois Lane spoke, explaining to the show's host why Lex Luthor was so dangerous and warranted such a large reward. Lex frowned as he listened to Lois' well-prepared arguments. The woman was almost as tenacious as her alien lover in coming after him. After a moment's pause, Lex turned back to Roger and continued, "As I was saying, what's it going to be Rog? Kroger and this hell-hole, or work for me in Metropolis?"

"I'll need some cash up front to cover expenses," Roger told him.

"Sounds like we have a deal," Lex confirmed, as he smiled menacingly. Lex put away his gun, opened up the laptop he had brought with him, and showed Roger what he wanted the man to do.

Chapter 15 - Explanations

Day 10, Thursday, 3:05PM, Near the Fortress of Solitude

Jason wore a wide grin as Superman set him and Lois down on the platform outside the Fortress. He got to go flying with Superman again, though everything around here looked rather white and boring. Jason's eyes grew wide in wonder as the bright blue light revealed the doorway through the force field that now protected Superman's fortress. The Man of Steel had brought Lois and their son there immediately after picking him up from school. Lois had left the office early to take Jason in for a 'checkup' after school, while Clark had a 'dentist appointment' and left shortly after the two o'clock afternoon deadline.

Superman flew his guests to the center of the Fortress as he explained to Jason, "When my real parents sent me to Earth, they sent a special crystal with me to use when I was older. It brought me here, and built this place."

Superman set Lois and Jason down near the crystal table. Once on the ground, Jason turned around in a circle as he took in everything inside. It still looked rather boring to the tyke. "Is this where you live?" he asked.

"No, it's more like a library and science lab, but I can also talk to my real parents here, even though they died when I was a baby," he explained. "Before they died, they put all of their knowledge and memories into the crystal. I can interact with them, just like you interact with characters in your video games."

"Like Mickey Mouse?" Jason asked his father, remembering his favorite Disney video game.

"In a way," Superman answered. "It's like a video game in that they can only exist inside this place, and they don't exist physically." At his son's confused expression, Superman elaborated, "You can't actually touch them. If you try, your hand will go right through them because they aren't really here. Would you like to meet them?"

Jason nodded enthusiastically. After all, if Superman was so much fun, his mom and dad had to be fun, too.

Superman hands flew over the crystal console, and soon the holographic faces of Jor-El and Lara hung in the air in front of him. "Mother, Father," he addressed them. "I'd like you to meet Lois and Jason. They are the ones I told you about earlier." Turning to Lois and Jason, he told them, "Lois, Jason. These are my real parents, Jor-El and Lara."

"Welcome, Lois. Welcome, Jason," Lara greeted them. "We've been looking forward to meeting the both of you, and look forward to answering the questions that you will certainly have before you leave this place."

Jason looked up at the floating faces in wonder, "Are you really Superman's mommy and daddy?" he asked them.

"Yes, we are," Jor-El answered, "though we call our son Kal-El. That is the name we gave him when he was born."

Superman turned to Jason, and explained. "Jor-El and Lara are my real parents, but when I was just a baby, our planet was destroyed. They sent me to Earth, where I was adopted by another mom and dad, Martha and Jonathan Kent, and they gave me the name 'Clark.' I grew up calling them 'Mom' and 'Dad.' So, in a way, I have two mothers and two fathers. All four of them loved me, and all four of them tried to guide me as best they could. Do you understand that?"

Jason nodded, telling his father, "Mommy told me." He looked up at Jor-El and Lara. "Did they all get to play with you?"

Superman smiled, "Jor-El and Lara can't really play," he explained. "They don't have bodies. But they can teach things, and they taught me things that I wouldn't have otherwise learned. My Earth mother and father are the ones who played with me. My dad, Jonathan, passed away many years ago, but you'll get to meet my mother, Martha, soon."

Jason, still gawking at Jor-El and Lara, asked them, "Are you ghosts?"

"No, we are not literally what you call 'ghosts,'" Jor-El answered. "Though, in some ways we fit that description. We died many, many years ago, but because our essence is contained in these crystals, we can still speak to our son and to you, and offer our guidance."

Lois took Jason by the hand, and led him back to the crystal table, pulling him onto her lap as she sat. "Sweetheart, do understand the difference between Superman's real mommy and daddy, and the other kind who raised him here on Earth?"

"Uh huh," Jason answered. "You told me about that already."

Superman knelt down in front of his son, as he explained, "My real parents, Jor-El and Lara, gave me life. It is from them that I look the way I look and that I can do the things that I do. Their DNA, their blood, runs through my veins... But I am the person that I am, with my sense of right and wrong, because of the parents who raised me. I didn't know about my real parents when I was growing up. The only parents I knew about were Jonathan and Martha Kent. They gave me their love, taught me right from wrong, and were there for me when my real parents couldn't be."

Lois took over the explanation, telling her son, "Jason, it's what I've been talking about in your bedtime stories all week, and there's a reason that I've been telling you this. You also have a real daddy and the other kind of daddy just like Superman."

Jason's head snapped up to look at his mother's, his eyes like saucers. "What about Daddy?" he asked anxiously.

"Richard is the other kind of daddy, just like Superman's Earth father, Jonathan. He loves you, and will always be there for you, just as he always has been. He was here when your real daddy couldn't be. But you don't get your looks or your special abilities from Richard. Those come from your real daddy. Do you understand that?"

Jason nodded, the worried expression still covering his face. "Who's my real daddy?" he asked quietly.

"Superman is your real daddy," Lois answered. "And you're strong like him. That's why you were strong enough to throw the piano on the boat and save mommy. Most people aren't that strong."

Jason looked up at Superman, fear replacing his expression as he remembered the experience on the boat. He was afraid of the bad men, and the piano incident had shaken him. He didn't understand why it had happened like that.

At his son's expression, Superman reassured him, "Don't worry, Jason. I won't let the bad men hurt you."

Jason looked down at the floor, fidgeting with the zipper on his jacket as he absorbed the information. He was excited at the idea of being able to do really neat things like Superman, but worried about having two daddies. His thoughts drifted to the stories that Lois had told him earlier in the week, though not with the Superman origin story. He remembered Lois explaining the family situation of his friend Mark, whose parents had divorced and remarried. Lois had told him that Mark's stepfather was the other kind of daddy who was there to love his stepson and do things with him when his real daddy couldn't be. After a couple minutes, Jason looked up to his mother and asked her, "Are you and Superman divorced, like Mark's

parents?"

"No, things didn't quite work out that way," Lois answered, as she smiled down at her son. "It's kind of like that, though. I loved Superman before I met Richard, and if certain things had worked out differently, we might have been living with Superman instead."

Jason's eyes widened in alarm at his mother's statement. "No!" he exclaimed, "Richard is Daddy!"

Lois looked gently into her son's eyes as she reassured him, "Listen to me: you're not going to lose Richard. Clark and Richard both love you, both will be there for you, and both want you to be happy, and so do I. There's nothing to worry about. I wish things weren't so complicated for you, but we had to tell you this because of your abilities."

Superman added, "It's because you are my son that you have abilities that other little boys don't, like your strength, and you'll need to learn how to control them. I can teach you that."

Jason returned his gaze to the floor, and he asked, "What's going to happen now?"

"I don't know, sweetheart" Lois told him honestly. "But no matter what happens, remember that all of us... Clark, Richard and me... we all love you and want you to be happy."

Jason's gaze remained on the floor, as he considered his mother's answer and thought about the bedtime stories Lois had told him throughout the week. Finally, he asked his mother, "Who am I supposed to call 'Daddy?'"

Lois smiled again as she answered, "Well, you can keep calling Richard daddy if you want to. It gets more complicated with Clark, because we don't want anyone to know that Superman is your real daddy. You'll just--"

"Why not?" Jason interrupted.

Superman reminded him, "Do you remember when you figured out that I was both Clark and Superman, and I told you why we had to keep that a secret?"

"The bad men on the boat," Jason answered quietly, the fear returning to his face.

"Yes, the bad men on the boat," Superman answered. "Don't worry, you're safe, but we don't want other bad men to learn about our family, so it has to stay secret, even from your other daddy."

Lois added, "As I was saying, when he's Superman, you'll call him 'Superman,' just like you've been doing. It's a little more complicated when he's Clark." Lois reached under her son's chin, and lifted his head up to look her in the eyes before she continued. "Richard thought that *he* was your real daddy, and it bothers him that he's not. We need to give him some time to accept that. If he knew that Clark was your real dad, or heard you call him 'daddy,' it would probably hurt his feelings. So for now, you'll just call him 'Clark' when he's Clark. You can only call Clark 'Daddy'... if you want to... when it's just us, or Grandma Martha."

"Who's Grandma Martha?"

"Do you remember me telling you about my Earth parents, the ones who raised me?" Superman asked his son. "Well, my human father passed away many years ago, but my human mother is still alive. She's your Grandma Martha. She lives on a farm in Kansas."

"A farm!" Jason exclaimed excitedly as a wide grin spread across his face. That sounded like a lot of fun to the boy. "Does she have horses and cows and pigs and stuff?"

Superman smiled at his son's reaction. "Well, she doesn't have those animals, but she does have chickens, a goat, and a really friendly dog named 'Shelby.'" That seemed good enough for the tyke, who continued smiling brightly.

Superman looked over to Lois, quietly asking her, "Are we ready for the rest of this?" At

her nod, he turned to the floating faces of his Kryptonian parents, telling them, "Your grandson has now been told of his heritage."

Jor-El responded, "Lois, Jason, we welcome you both into our family. When we sent our son, Kal-El, to Earth, we feared that he would be the last son of Krypton. Now he presents us with a son of his own. This is more than we dared hope for... Jason, this is your heritage. When you are ready, we will offer you our knowledge and guidance, just as we did for your father before you. There will be time for these matters later. You must certainly have questions for us, and now is the time to ask them."

Lois bent over and whispered to Jason, "Is there anything you want to ask them?" Jason shook his head, still feeling a bit intimidated by the ghost-like images.

Lois stood up and addressed Jor-El. "Will my son have his father's abilities?"

"We will need a closer look at him before we can answer that question. We are prepared to examine him now, if you are ready." As he said this, the same crystal chamber used to restore Lois' memories rose from the floor.

"Wait," Superman interrupted. Turning to his son, he explained, "For them to look inside you, you'll need to stand inside that crystal chamber. The door will close, and you'll see a blue light move from your head to your toes, and then the door will open. It won't hurt, and it'll be over in less than a minute. There's nothing to be afraid of. Is it okay if they take a look at you?"

"Do I have to?" he complained.

Lois set him down on the floor in front of her and again lifted his face to look into hers. "Jason, listen to me," she told him gently. "I know that this is a bit scary, but you need to do this. We need to know how many of your father's powers you're going to have so that he can help you as they develop. We'll be right here with you, and nothing bad will happen to you. Now, are you ready to walk inside that chamber so that they can look at you?"

When Jason finally nodded his agreement, Lois walked him over to the chamber and gently guided her son inside. Both parents stood in front of him as the door closed and the narrow horizontal blue ray of light descended from the top of the chamber to the bottom. Once the light faded and the door of the crystal chamber opened, Lois gathered him into her arms inquiring, "Now that wasn't so bad, was it?"

"I guess not," Jason admitted.

A new holographic display popped up detailing Jason's DNA information as Jor-El spoke. "His Kryptonian genes are indeed active, as you suspected," he informed them. "Our analysis also indicates that the Kryptonian genes are dominant, and thus the medical condition you described to us earlier will no longer be a factor in his life."

Superman turned to Lois and clarified, "In other words, no more asthma."

"Does that mean what I think it does?" asked Lois, looking back at Superman, as he continued to read through the data on the new display.

It was Jor-El who answered her question. "It means that Jason's abilities and development will closely mirror that of his father," he told her. "At this age, that will be most obvious in his strength, speed and invulnerability, with other abilities developing as he gets older."

Superman looked down to his son and asked him, "Jason, do you understand all of this, what it means?"

"No more yucky medicine?" Jason asked hopefully. Though he was accustomed to the routine with inhalers and pills for his asthma, he had never liked it.

"Well, we'll have to see about that," Superman answered, suppressing a chuckle. "Jason,

it means that someday you'll be able to do all the things that I can do. Now that we've-

"Even fly!" the tyke interrupted excitedly.

"Yes, even fly - eventually," Superman answered. "I didn't start flying until I was all grown up." Jason smile dissolved into a pout at that disappointing news. Superman paused for a moment as he attempted to gauge his son's mood before he continued. "Now that we've explained why you're able to do these things, I can teach you to control it. You've already got superstrength, and you need to be careful with that because other people aren't as strong as we are. I know that all this is amazing and confusing, so we don't have to talk about all of that right now."

Superman again waited a moment to gage his son's reaction before he suggested, "Maybe it's time for all of us to get out of here and have some fun." After the astonishing disclosures at the Fortress, Superman and Lois felt that their son needed a normal kid-type distraction and took him to the zoo. It was nearly 6:30PM by the time Jason and Lois arrived back at the house to answer Richard's inquiries.

Day 11, Friday, 2:15PM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom

As was the custom after the afternoon deadline passed, most of the staff left in the Daily Planet newsroom took a break and socialized. The most popular topic of discussion on this afternoon, as it had been all week, was the unexpected chilliness in the Lane/White relationship. Though Lois managed to maintain a neutral expression and was at times almost cheerful, Richard's demeanor was cheerless. They had avoided each other throughout the day, and when they did speak to each other, it was without the tactile contact that the newsroom had become accustomed to. Most of the reporters concluded that it had been a major quarrel and not some trivial argument over squeezing the toothpaste in the middle.

The same subject was being discussed in Perry White's office, with one of the affected parties. "She sure didn't waste any time telling Jason that I'm not his real dad once those DNA results came in," Richard complained to his uncle. "Now she's talking about letting his real dad take him over the weekend, but still won't tell me who the guy is. I don't understand why she insists on all the secrecy."

"Maybe she's embarrassed," Perry offered. "And maybe having Jason with him for the weekend isn't a bad thing." As Richard's brow furrowed in confusion, Perry clarified, "You did say that you wanted to work things out, and with someone to watch Jason, it might give you and Lois a chance to reconnect."

Richard gazed out the glass wall of Perry's office at Lois as he muttered, "The tough part will be convincing her of that. She's...not been very enthusiastic about me lately."

As Perry and Richard continued their conversation, Clark once again had trouble maintaining his cheerful façade as he heard their words among the gossip on the subject. Clark took note of the heartbeats around him, and realized that the staff was giving Lois a wide berth, probably to stay out of range of her hearing as they gossiped. She was pouring over her story notes as Clark walked over to her, timidly asking, "Am I interrupting?"

"No, of course not," Lois answered him without looking up. "So, are you all moved into your new apartment?" she asked as she looked up at him. Noticing the grim expression on his face, she asked quietly, "What's wrong?"

Glancing over towards Perry's office, he whispered, "I couldn't help overhearing certain... things and certain recent... 'disclosures' have been rough on Richard, and I think that the secrecy bothers him in particular. I'm wondering if perhaps certain 'additional information'

might make things easier for him at home. And for you."

Lois' eyes grew wide in shock, as she whispered back at a barely audible volume, "You're not suggesting that I tell him your secrets, are you?"

Clark whispered back, "I'm not comfortable with the notion, but if you feel it would improve things at home if he knew, then go ahead and tell him... after swearing him to secrecy, of course." After pausing for a beat, he added, "I know the situation is tearing him up inside. I know, because it's how I felt when I first came back and saw that family picture on your desk. I don't like putting someone else through that."

Lois carefully considered Clark's expression, recognizing the pain behind the façade, before lowering her head in her hands and massaging her temples as she whispered, "I don't like hurting him, either. Look, I appreciate what you're offering to do, Clark, but I'm not convinced telling him your secrets would make things any easier, especially if I end up leaving him." She looked back up at him as she finished speaking.

Clark whispered back to her, "We knew that he'd have to be told something at some point. Maybe it's time."

"Do you really think you're ready for that?" she whispered back to him. "I don't think I am." Lois glanced over to Perry's office as she added, "I haven't got this figured out quite yet. I need a few more days." She was quiet for a moment before she casually asked him, "What do you think they're talking about in there?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know," Clark began. "Maybe Richard just needs to get a few things off his chest, and get some good advice from a trusted relative."

Lois looked back at Clark with a guilty expression on her face as she quietly urged him, "Just give me a few more days." *I'm going to have to make my choice very soon*, Lois thought to herself. *I can't continue to put them both through this.*

Chapter 16 - Grandma

Day 12, Saturday, 8:00AM (Central Time), Smallville, Kansas

Ben Hubbard wondered if Martha had lost her mind. Ten days ago, she had sworn him to secrecy, and insisted that her boy Clark was actually Superman. It boggled the mind. She'd even showed him some hollow meteorite in the barn cellar that she claimed was the ship that brought him to Earth. Ben could remember Clark as a boy, getting pushed around by the other kids. *Clark was Superman? Not a chance*, Ben thought to himself. Ben kept Martha's claim to himself, as he had promised. She hadn't broached the subject again until this morning, which found him sitting on the steps of her porch as she scanned the corn fields with binoculars, and tried to convince him of it.

"Most of his abilities didn't develop until puberty," she explained. "He had the strength and speed from the beginning and nothing of this world could hurt him. The rest didn't come until later."

"Martha, I remember that boy getting pushed around by the bullies at his school," Ben reminded her. "You're telling me that boy became Superman?"

"We taught him not to reveal his gifts," she explained. "You'll see for yourself when they get here."

"They? I thought it was just Clark?" Ben noted.

"He's bringing his son, Jason, and the boy's mother, Lois Lane," Martha told him. She had previously told Ben of her recently discovered grandson, but this was the first time she had revealed the mother's name.

"*The Lois Lane, the one who writes all the Sup-*" Ben began, before stopping himself when he realized what he was about to say. He let out an exasperated sigh before he continued, "Well, if they're flying in this morning, shouldn't we meet them at the airport?"

"Superman doesn't need airplanes to fly." Martha said, as she continued to scan the cornfields.

Ben just shook his head, and wondered again if his companion had lost her mind. After a couple more minutes. He looked up and was suddenly surprised by the presence of a suitcase on the front porch. "What the... where did this suitcase come from?" he asked.

Martha looked back to the porch at the suitcase and informed him, "He's probably making two trips, one for the luggage, and one for his family. He may be Superman, but he's still only got two arms. It shouldn't be long now."

Martha turned back to the cornfields, peering once again through the binoculars as Ben walked up to her. "Martha," he began slowly, "there's just no way that boy of yours is-

"Here they are now," Martha interrupted him, pointing across the cornfields.

Ben looked in the direction she indicated and squinted to see what was there. He made out an object above the corn, moving quickly in their direction. As the shape moved closer, Ben realized that it was Superman, flying with an attractive brunette and a small boy held tightly in his grasp... He floated down to the driveway and gently lowered his precious burden. Ben then saw a blur of color enveloping Superman before it coalesced into the familiar form of Clark Kent.

"Well, I'll be..." Ben muttered quietly.

The woman nodded her hello and the little boy started to run towards the elderly couple before being restrained by Clark. "Hold on a minute, kiddo," he told his son. "Let me introduce you, first." Clark looked up to his mother and began the introductions, "Mom, Ben, I'd like to introduce my son, Jason, and his mother, Lois Lane. Jason, Lois, this is my mother, Martha,

and her... companion, Ben Hubbard."

"Grandma!" Jason exclaimed excitedly as he ran towards the old woman, now free of Clark's grip. The old woman knelt down to be at eye-level with the boy as she spread out her arms to welcome him.

"Watch your strength, Jason," Lois admonished him. "Don't squeeze too tight." Clark held back with Lois, but kept a close eye on Jason, ready to intervene if he forgot his strength.

"Oh, such a little angel!" Martha exclaimed, her words choked with emotion as she embraced her grandson, and her closed eyes rimmed with tears momentarily before those tears escaped down her cheeks. After enjoying the boy's embrace for a moment she wiped the tears from her face, and pulled back from him, looking intently in the boy's face. "I'm so happy to finally meet you, Jason," she told him. "You remind me so much of your father when he was your age..."

Lois remained standing back by Clark until Martha finally looked up and waved her in to join them, "Forgive an old woman's foolishness, Lois," she apologized. "Welcome to the family."

"Thank you, Mrs. Kent," Lois told her as she stepped inside Martha's embrace, "And I don't see anything foolish."

"Please, it's 'Martha,'" the older woman insisted. "We're not that formal around here... Oh, where are my manners? Come inside the house. We can wet our whistles and get to know each other a bit."

Clark approached Ben Hubbard, who was still in a state of shock over what he had just seen. "Ben?" Clark inquired. "Are you alright? You look a bit shell-shocked... My mom said that she had told you..."

"I didn't believe her," the old man admitted.

"Well, you're in luck, because Jason will keep her distracted for awhile," Clark joked as the two men walked up the porch and into the house. "The I-told-you-so's won't come until later."

Inside the house, Clark noticed that his mother had gone into all-out grandma mode, setting up crafts with construction paper, popsicle sticks and glue at the kitchen table, a dry-erase board and markers were set up in the living room, and a plethora of new children's videos was stacked by the DVD player under the television. None of these things had been there during his last visit. "You've been shopping," Clark observed.

"A little boy should have fun at his grandma's house," she told him simply, smiling at her grandson.

Clark smirked at that, before his head snapped around to the television a moment later, as breaking news of a devastating earthquake in Kobe, Japan was reported. "Go ahead and go," Lois told him quietly. "Just don't forget that I'll need a lift back to Metropolis before Richard freaks out. Again."

Day 12, Saturday, 11:15AM, Metropolis, 312 Riverview (Home of Lois Lane and Richard White)

Richard had zoned out the news program that was tuned in on the living room television. His thoughts were entirely consumed with the recent changes to his home life. *How do I fix this?* he wondered. He felt helpless to stop the deterioration of his relationship with Lois, which had become cold and distant. She seemed to have no interest in salvaging their relationship, vetoing the suggestions he had made to help them reconnect: the romantic

getaway, the evening out, and she was especially opposed to counseling. Richard was broken from his reverie by the sound of the garage door opening as Lois pulled their car into the garage.

Richard looked at his watch as Lois walked into the house, "How far away does this guy live?" he inquired. Lois had insisted on going alone to hand over Jason to his biological father for the weekend, still not wanting to reveal the father's identity.

"Jason's grandma was there with him," she informed him. "Since my son will be spending a good deal of time with them, I thought it was a good idea to chat with her a little bit and get to know her. I don't think you'll find a sweeter old lady. My only worry is that she'll try to spoil Jason."

So it's 'my son,' now, Richard thought to himself, *Not 'our son', but 'my son.'*

Lois noticed Richard's pained expression as she walked into the living room. *I hate doing this to him,* she thought. She grabbed the remote off of the coffee table, and turned off the television as she sat at the opposite end of the couch. "Richard, I know that these last couple weeks have been hard on you," she told him gently. "I wish things were easier, and that you could be spared some of the pain that I know you've been enduring. I hate to sound clichéd, but you just need to give yourself some time. What's the expression, 'Time heals all wounds?' Hang in there."

"We really haven't talked much about this since you told me about it last weekend," Richard observed. "We've shouted, we've argued, but we really haven't talked. We need to do that."

"Yes, we do," Lois agreed, "though there are some things that I'm not ready to talk about yet."

"Like telling me the guy's name," Richard stated sharply.

"Believe it or not, he's suggested that I share that with you. I'm just not ready to do that. It doesn't change the circumstances, though. He'll still be Jason's biological father, still be spending time with him, still teaching him... the things that he can teach him. We have to adapt to that reality."

"I guess the big question is, what does this all mean for us, as a couple, as a family?" Richard questioned. "How do we get past this? Where do we go from here?"

"I don't know the answer to that," Lois admitted. "I have a different big question, though." She hesitated, looking out the window as she considered how best to pose her question while Richard quietly waited. "I guess what I'm most curious about is how... or if... this changes your feelings about Jason. He was a bit concerned when I told him that you weren't his real father. I told him that no matter what happened that both you and his real dad would always love him and be there for him. Was I telling him the truth?"

"Absolutely," Richard answered quickly. Gesturing towards their office in the back room, he continued, "That damned DNA report isn't going to stop me from thinking of Jason as my son, or from loving the both of you. If we'd known this from the beginning, I still would have pursued you, still would have proposed."

"That means a lot to me," Lois told him. "Everything is still confusing as hell, but that means a lot."

"Do you think...?" Richard began, before interrupting himself with a sigh and pensively staring at a spot on the floor for a moment. "I hate to ask this because I'm afraid that I know what the answer is," he admitted. "However, in light of... well, everything, I have to ask. This other guy, Jason's real dad: do you think that you're still in love with him?"

"I think I love both of you," Lois answered evasively.

"'Love', or 'are in love with?'," Richard pressed. "I think you need to know that answer as much as I do. Are you in love with him?"

Lois dropped her head into her folded hands, rubbing the bridge of her nose. After a couple of minutes of silence, Richard gently asked, "Lois?"

Lois let out a deep breath before she quietly squeaked, "Yes." She locked her gaze at the floor, and after another deep sigh, she quietly told him, "That's part of what makes this all so difficult. You're both great guys. If I had never met you, I'd have been blissfully happy with him, and if I'd never met him, I'd have been just as blissfully happy with you. It's so confusing. Things would be so much easier if one of you had been a jerk."

Richard had suspected that she was still in love with his rival, but hearing her confirm that was still difficult for him. "So, you're struggling to choose which one of us you'll spend your future with?" he inquired quietly. Lois nodded, keeping her head down as he continued, "And these last five years, they mean-"

"They mean a lot," Lois interrupted, looking up to him. "You were there for me when I needed you, I depended on you and you never let me down. I do still love you." Returning her gaze to the floor, she muttered, "It's just... there's love and history with him, too... I have no idea what I'm going to do..."

"Thank you for being honest with me about that," Richard said quietly, as they both allowed the silence to return to the house while they sat quietly on the couch considering their situation.

After several minutes, Richard broke the silence. "I hope you won't mind if I don't give you up without a fight." When Lois looked up at him, he explained, "We've got someone to watch Jason for the rest of the weekend. There's still time to fly up to the Cape overnight, or enjoy a night on the town, and remind ourselves why we fell in love with each other."

Lois' stomach knotted up at his suggestion. "I'm driving up to Long Island to visit my sister, remember?" she reminded him. "Lucy and I haven't gotten together in ages, and I really wanted to talk this all through with her." After a moment, she offered him a weak smile as she looked up at him. "Guess you were right about me needing to talk to someone about everything," she admitted. "I can do that with Lucy."

Richard pinched his lips together in a tight smile, as he told her, "Maybe we can try for next weekend, then?"

"Let me think about it," Lois offered. "No promises."

Richard nodded in acquiescence, as he again wondered, *How do I fix this?*

Chapter 17 - Learning

Day 12, Saturday, 11:00AM (Central Time), Smallville, Kansas

Clark walked out the back door of the house with Jason, sitting down on the steps as his son gently lobbed the baseball in the yard for Shelby to fetch, giggling with excitement as the old dog fetched the ball. After several tosses, Shelby was worn out, and just looked over to where Jason had thrown the ball before looking up at the tyke. "I think that you wore him out, kiddo," Clark told his son.

"I didn't mean to!" Jason exclaimed with alarm.

"It's okay," Clark reassured his son. "He's an old dog. He tires easily." Clark stood and walked over to join his son in the yard, bending over to scratch Shelby behind the ears. "We'll let him back inside to rest, while I show you a few things," he informed the tyke, as he led the dog back to the house. "Remember what I said Thursday at the Fortress about learning to control your abilities?" Clark asked.

"Uh huh," Jason recalled. "I could hurt someone if I'm not careful."

"You won't hurt me," Clark assured him. "I'm going to help you push your boundaries, to find out how strong and how fast you are. Back in Metropolis, you have to hold back. Well, today you'll be able to let loose. We'll also get some practice on being gentle, so that you don't hurt people or break things." Clark returned to the yard, and knelt in front of son, raising his palms to face his son. "Well start easy. Just put your hands up to mine and push as hard as you can."

Jason lifted his hands to his father's, "Come on, push, push, push, push, push!" Clark encouraged him while he estimated the force that his son was exerting against his palms, which peaked at nearly twenty thousand pounds. "Okay, that's enough," he finally told him. "You've definitely got super-strength, but maybe we should find an easier way to show you that." That earned him a wide grin from his son.

Superman flew with Jason below the tops of the corn, the only evidence of their presence a wave through the stalks until they surfaced as they approached their destination at an abandoned quarry a short distance from Smallville. The Man of Steel gently set his son down on the stone surface at the top of the quarry. "Wait here, I'll be right back," he instructed his son as his dove into the water that had filled the pit. He emerged a few seconds later with an old and rusted car wreck, a victim of some teenager's exuberance many years before. "We're going to see how far you can throw this," he informed his son. "Grab it by the frame, lift it up above your head, and throw it."

"But it'll be too heavy," Jason complained.

"Not for us," Superman reminded him. "The part of you that is Kryptonian like me was asleep for a long time, but it's awake now and you have the strength to do this. Just try it."

Jason walked up to the car, hooked his hands under the passenger side of the vehicle and lifted, and gasped in surprise when that side of the vehicle came off the ground. "Now move one of your hands to the frame on the other side and lift it above your head," his father instructed him.

Jason did as his father told him, and a wide grin spread across his face as he lifted the car above his head. "I did it!" the tyke exclaimed.

"Yes, I knew you could," Superman encouraged him. "Now, keep a tight grip on the frame, swing it back behind you, and throw it as hard as you can, kind of like pushing someone on a swing. Don't forget to let go when you push it forward."

The car swung back as Jason brought his arms behind him, and then lurched forward. It went lurching forward about fifty feet before dropping back down towards the quarry pool where Superman caught it and returned it to the top of the quarry. "That wasn't bad for your first time," Superman told his son. "Let's try again, and see if you can throw it even farther this time - try pushing it up a little higher in the air."

Jason approached the vehicle with much more confidence this time, quickly lifting the vehicle above his head, and launching it one hundred feet across the quarry before it Superman caught it. They played 'catch' with the vehicle for another hour before returning to Grandma Martha's for lunch.

Day 12, Saturday, 1:30PM, Long Island, New York

Lucy Lane warmly welcomed her sister into her small condo, and guided her to the living room. "Sorry, I know the place is kind of a mess," Lucy apologized humbly.

"It's fine," Lois insisted, as she sat down on the couch. Lois kept her gaze on the floor, fidgeting with her engagement ring.

"So, where's the munchkin today?" Lucy asked politely.

"He's with his father," Lois told her directly. As she looked up at her sister, Lois added, "And I wasn't referring to Richard." Lucy's eyes grew large at the declaration. After giving her sister a moment to absorb the bombshell, Lois added, "Jason's real father and I had been involved briefly before he left town for other opportunities years ago. He's back now, and I don't know what to do. I mean, choosing between him and Richard."

"Oh, my God," Lucy muttered quietly. "You got knocked up by Superman."

Lois' face froze in guilty horror at her sister's intuitive declaration, looking very much like the child caught with her hand in the cookie jar. Lois quickly recovered her wits and schooled her expression, exclaiming, "What on Earth would possess you to say something so ridiculous?" She glared at her younger sister, doing her best to intimidate her as she waited for her answer.

"He's the only one it could possibly be," Lucy answered. "Someone would have to have been completely oblivious to not see how heads over heels in love with him you were, and you clearly had more... access... to him than anyone else on the planet. And the look on your face a minute ago pretty much confirmed it."

"This... person... is a regular guy, actually grew up on a farm," Lois insisted defiantly. "Anyways, I didn't come here to argue about *who* Jason's real father is. I came here because I'm having trouble sorting out my feelings and choosing between Jason's father and Richard. I need to talk it through with someone."

"Let's see..." Lucy said, holding her arms out to her sides with her palms up, imitating a scale. "Richard..." she continued, then dropping one hand to floor, she added, "...or Superman."

"Would you knock it off?" Lois demanded angrily. "I'm serious here!"

"Okay, okay!" Lucy conceded, holding her hands up in mock surrender as a smirk crossed her face. "We'll *pretend* that the guy's not Superman." Lois glared at her sister, now doubting the wisdom of trying to talk her situation through with her. It failed to have the intended result, as Lucy started laughing.

"It's not funny," Lois insisted angrily. "I've got to choose between two great guys, one of whom has been there when I needed him for everything during the last five years and, until recently, the only father Jason has ever known, and the other who's Jason's real father and

makes me feel like nobody else on this Earth. How am I supposed to make that decision?"

"Quite a dilemma," Lucy agreed. "Though it would probably be easier for us to talk it through if you stopped pretending that we weren't talking about Sup-"

"Lucy!" Lois warned.

"Okay, fine," Lucy told her sister irritably, "We'll pretend."

The quiet of the Kansas cornfields was broken by a wave of motion flowing through the cornfields at forty miles an hour. The wave was caused by a small boy running rapidly between the rows of tall corn, and by a second figure in the adjacent row, gliding horizontally three feet about the ground as he tracked his son and monitored their surroundings. "Okay, Jason, the coast is clear," Clark informed his son.

At his father's prompting, Jason jumped, leaping thirty feet up into the air and landing fifty feet away. As with the car at the quarry, Jason hadn't believed that he'd be able to run very fast or jump very high. The small leap did wonders for building the boy's confidence. "Did you see how high I jumped?" he asked his father, a huge grin again plastered on his face.

"Yes, I did," Clark encouraged him. "That was pretty good. Let's see if you can go even faster and higher. By the time I bring your mom back tomorrow, we'll have a really big surprise for her, won't we?" Jason looked to his father, smiling widely, and increased his pace to nearly fifty miles an hour.

Day 12, Saturday, 3:00PM, Long Island, New York

"What are you afraid of?" Lucy asked her sister.

"What do you mean, 'afraid'?" Lois asked. "We've been talking about trying to make a difficult choice between two great guys."

"No, I think you've already made the decision - some time ago, in fact. But you're afraid to pull the trigger and make it happen."

"I'm not afraid of anything!" Lois insisted. "I just..." Lois dropped her head in her hands and let out a deep breath. "It's complicated."

"No kidding," Lucy agreed. "But listen to your arguments for staying with Richard, and your arguments for leaving. Your choices are 'playing it safe' or 'following your heart.' Are you afraid to follow your heart?" When Lois didn't respond, Lucy stood up, picked up Lois' empty glass off of the coffee table along with her own. "Do you need a refill?" Lucy asked.

"No, thanks," Lois answered. "I'm fine."

Lucy walked back into the kitchen and poured more iced tea into her glass, as she continued talking, "I think that you know everything you need to know to make your decision," Lucy noted. "What's stopping you?"

"No matter what I decide to do, someone is going to get hurt," Lois said quietly.

"Unavoidable," Lucy said simply. "Dragging this out will hurt him more. Make your decision, and let him start healing." Lois looked up as her sister reclaimed her seat on the couch, but remained silent.

Day 13, Sunday, 1:00PM (Central Time), Smallville

Martha cleaned up the last of the dishes from lunch, as her grandson excitedly showed his mother the Superman symbol he'd made out of construction paper and popsicle sticks, and told her how much fun he'd had that weekend. Lois and Clark both knew that after his exciting weekend, Jason would be bursting at the seams to tell someone about it. In hopes of settling

down that excitement, Clark had brought Lois back to Smallville early so that the tyke could unload his tale on her before they went back to Metropolis.

"...and I threw a car a thousand feet!" he rambled on.

"You did?" Lois answered with excitement, as she looked over to Clark.

"I showed him what he can do," Clark clarified. "If he knows his strength, he can better control it."

"Can we show her now, Daddy?" Jason asked.

Clark's expression changed to one of parental bliss as his eyes glistened with unshed tears. Lois noticed the expression, and inquired, "Clark?"

"Sorry," he apologized. "It's just the first time that..." He paused a moment before quietly telling her, "It's the first time that he's called me 'Daddy.'"

Lois smiled back at him, as she softly told him, "Feels great, doesn't it? Better get used to it..."

"Grandma said it was okay to call you that here," Jason said defensively.

"It is," Clark confirmed, as he reached over and pulled his son into his lap. "And I love hearing you call me 'Daddy.' I just wasn't expecting it."

"Can we show Mommy what you taught me?" Jason asked again. Clark nodded, and guided his family out the front door before changing into the familiar blue tights in a momentary blur of colors.

"I'll be back in second," he told Lois before zooming off with Jason, reappearing a moment later, and flying off with Lois, dipping below the top of the corn, and occasionally swatting at the vegetation to keep it off of her. Finally, they stopped and he floated up with their heads just above the corn. "So what is it that you wanted to show me?" Lois inquired.

"Do you see that grain elevator down there?" he asked, as he pointed across the field.

"The what?" Lois asked, baffled

"Grain elevator," he repeated. "That big tall round thing that holds the grain from harvest."

"Oh, that," she acknowledged. "What about it?"

"Keep your eyes on it," he instructed as he let loose a loud whistle. Lois saw an object fly off of the top of the grain elevator, reaching a height of one hundred fifty feet before falling back to earth some two hundred yards away from its original location. Lois gasped as the object came down to the ground, when she realized that it was Jason. Superman flew over the corn, and dropped back between the rows beside their son as he sprinted through the corn.

Jason looked over at his parents with an ear to ear grin, as he asked his mother, "Did you see what Daddy taught me?" Lois nodded her head, momentarily speechless at her son's feat.

Finding her voice once again, Lois asked, "How... how fast is he going?"

"He's running at about seventy miles per hour," Superman informed her. "Any faster than that, and he has trouble controlling it."

"That's my boy!" Lois stated with pride. "Yep, those Kryptonian genes are definitely in the 'on' position." Lois' smile grew to match those of her companions as they made their way back to the Kent farm.

Chapter 18 - Decision

Day 14, Monday, 8:00AM, Metropolis

The citizens of Metropolis grudgingly bid farewell to the weekend as they headed back to their jobs Monday morning, few of them pleased with that prospect. Lois was also clinging to her weekend memories, in spite of her reputation as a workaholic. Though the weekend was not without its awkward moments, she'd enjoyed the time in Long Island and in Smallville and she had begun the day on a cheerful note. Lois was powerless to stop a smile from forming on her face as she recalled the transformation of her son from the fragile little boy of a few weeks ago into the Superboy that she'd seen zooming through the Kansas cornfields.

Lois smile faded a bit as she recalled Lucy's insight from Saturday night, seeming to magically deduce that Jason's real father had to be Superman, and she would not be convinced otherwise. *At least she promised to keep that 'suspicion' to herself*, Lois thought. Clark had not been pleased with Lucy's insight, but was willing to come clean with her if Lois thought she could be trusted. However, Lois was not yet ready to admit to her sister that she'd been right all along. That would have to wait for another day.

She looked over at Richard standing beside her in the elevator. Though he had finally managed to school his expression into something neutral, she knew him well enough see through the mask and recognize the pain he was enduring. The recent changes in their home life had been tough on him. *Lucy was right*, Lois thought, *dragging this out just makes it worse*. Another crack had formed in the foundation he tried to build his family on that morning, when Jason addressed him as 'Richard,' instead of as 'Daddy.' Though her son had been tearful and apologetic as he told them that he wanted to save the name 'Daddy' for his real dad, it was another tough blow for Richard. *He deserves better than this*, Lois thought as the ding announced their floor.

She exited the elevator for the Daily Planet newsroom, and returned Clark's greeting, this time powerless to prevent his contagious smile from spreading to her own features. Her only alternative was to drop her head to hide the smile as she settled in at her desk.

Day 14, Monday, 11:15AM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom

Maggie Gonzales had spent the morning busily working the phones, passing on Perry's demands to various departments, triaging the problems reported back, and acting as gatekeeper to Perry's office. *God, how I hate Mondays*, she thought, as a calm in the storm finally materialized. Through the glass wall behind her, she heard Perry and Lois arguing, yet again. She couldn't make out the words through the glass, but had a pretty good idea what it was about. Both Lois and Clark had really been pushing the Lex Luther story from different angles. While they'd gotten some great articles out and caught the attention of national media, Perry thought the story had gone cold. Lois disagreed.

Lois stormed out of Perry's office, stopping for a moment to scan the newsroom for her partner as the door closed behind her.

"How'd it go in there, Lois?" Maggie asked her.

"Fine," Lois answered simply, as she turned to the woman. "He just doesn't like admitting it when he's wrong."

"He's not the only one," Maggie whispered to herself.

"I beg your pardon?" Lois asked, not quite hearing Maggie's remark.

"Nothing. Listen, I have a question for you," Maggie told her. "I noticed that you and Kent have been working quite closely together lately..."

Crap, Lois thought. *Did we slip up somehow?*

"... and I see how great he's been with Jason..." Maggie continued.

Double crap, Lois thought, *has she figured **that** out, too?*

"...and I was wondering..." Maggie went on.

Uh oh, here it comes, Lois thought. *Come on, Lane, get a grip. Try not to be too obvious.*

"...do you know if he's..." Maggie continued.

Try not to panic, Lois thought. *Breathe nice and easy... In and out...*

"...seeing anyone?" Maggie finally asked her.

What? Lois thought as her jaw dropped and her eyes grew wide, *You can't have him!*

Aloud, she quietly said, "You're not serious." Back at his desk, Clark was doing his best not to burst out laughing, and ended up with a peculiar smirk on his face.

"I think he'd be good for my sister, Christine..." Maggie explained.

She can't have him either! Lois thought.

Maggie explained, "The jerk is history, and her little boy's just a little bit younger than Jason. So... do you know if he's seeing anyone?"

He's mine! Lois thought. "I don't think he'd be interested in that," Lois told her.

"It'd be better than some hopeless crush," Maggie noted.

"Well," Lois stammered. "He's just... well, it's kind of complicated... he's kind of... in the middle of something. I don't think that it would be a good time for him."

"That doesn't exactly sound like a healthy situation," Maggie concluded. "You've met Christine. She'd be good for him. Maybe you could talk him into it?"

*You have **got** to be kidding*, Lois thought. "We've both kind of got our hands full right now," Lois told her, "but if the opportunity comes up, I'll... mention it. I've... got to go."

Lois returned to her desk, glancing over to Clark's desk. He was facing away from her, but she could vaguely see his shoulders shaking. "Stop laughing, that wasn't funny," she whispered almost inaudibly. "I *know* that you knew that was coming. You could have warned me." After stewing for another minute, she added, "Maybe I should have told her you were gay. It's not too late for that, you know." He turned to her, mouthing the word "Sorry," but with the smirk still firmly in place. Lois scowled at him before turning back to her computer screen

Day 14, Monday, 1:30PM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom

*Why can't anyone wait until **after** deadline to mess with my head like this?* Lois wondered as she struggled to complete her article on yet another scandal emerging from mismanaged quake reconstruction funds. Fortunately, this one was a simple one. She'd get it out by deadline, but it wouldn't be her best work.

Lois had not been able to focus on her work since Maggie's suggestion to set Clark up with her sister, Christine. The idea of Clark with anyone other than herself was inconceivable to Lois, and she had spent most of the time since then simmering over that or questioning why she felt that way. The intensity of her jealousy surprised her.

Would I have been this angry if I had left Richard, and Maggie tried setting up her sister with him? she wondered. She quickly realized that the answer to that was 'no.' She would want him to be able to move on.

And if I chose Richard over Clark, would I feel like this if he moved on after I shut him out of my life? she asked herself, as she fiddled with the engagement ring on her hand. The very thought of Clark with anyone else gave her an empty feeling inside.

If I left, where would we live? she thought. *Not in Clark's shoebox of an apartment.* The house belonged to Richard - they could not stay there. *If we split up, I'd have to be the one to leave* she concluded. *Not 'if',* she corrected herself, *but 'when.'* Lois looked down at the ring on her hand as she asked herself, *Is that why I've been avoiding the decision? Have I become too comfortable, too dependent on the White family fortune?*

She looked back up to her article. At this rate, she'd never finish it. Lois forced the internal debate out of her mind, and tried to get a passable article completed and submitted as the afternoon edition deadline loomed near. She continued to sneak glances both at Clark's occasionally empty desk and at Richard in his office, finally submitting her article just a few minutes before deadline.

With the article now completed, Lois dropped her head in her hands, massaging her temples to force her coming headache into submission. She finally lifted her head, again surreptitiously glancing to Clark and back to Richard. *I can't drag this out any longer,* Lois thought. After letting out a deep sigh, she opened the lower drawer of her desk, removed the engagement ring from her finger, and dropped it in her purse. *Next comes the really hard part,* she thought, *telling him.*

Day 14, Monday, 5:50PM, Metropolis, 312 Riverview (Home of Lois Lane and Richard White)

Richard White opened his front door to a silent house. "Hello?" he called. Lois had left the office early, and he had expected both her and Jason to be home.

"Out here," Lois answered from the back patio, where she was seated fiddling with her engagement ring in her palm while she cried quietly. As Richard joined her in back of the house, she closed her fist around the ring, dropped her head, and wiped away her tears with her free hand.

"Where's Jason?" he asked her.

"With his grandma," Lois answered without looking up. "There are some things we need to talk about that he's too young to understand."

"So we have the night to ourselves?" Richard asked cautiously.

"It's not quite like that," Lois told him. She slowly stood up to face him, and placed the engagement ring in his hand, quietly telling him, "I'm sorry. I never meant to hurt you." Richard stood there, staring at the ring in his hand, while Lois attempted unsuccessfully to blink back her unshed tears. Finally, Richard dropped into one of the patio chairs.

Lois sighed deeply, and told him, "We... Jason and I... we don't have a place to go to yet, but I'll try..." Lois paused as her voice cracked, and wiped the errant tears from her cheeks before she continued, "I'll try to find something as soon as I can. And we need to figure out how to break the news to Jason. We don't have to work that all out now, but soon."

Lois stopped in the doorway as she walked back into the house, turning to tell Richard, "I'll be staying with Lucy in Long Island for a few days, though I'm not really looking forward to the commute on that train..."

Richard finally found his voice. "So that's it?" he asked angrily. "Five plus years, trying to build a life together, and you throw it all away for some guy who left you years ago! How well do you even know the guy?"

"I'm sorry, Richard," Lois told him gently. "This hasn't been an easy decision, and I wish I could spare you the heartache. It was really tempting to stay, but I have to follow my heart and do what I believe is best both for me and for my son." After a moment's pause, Lois added,

"You're a good man, Richard. You deserve better than this."

"Somehow that doesn't mean a whole lot right now," Richard informed her. "Who is this guy that you so easily throw everything we had away?"

"We'll tell you that soon," Lois promised him. "Not now, though. After you've had some time to heal."

"Lois," Richard began.

"I'm sorry!" Lois interrupted, her tears beginning anew as she yelled. Lowering her voice, she continued, "Let's stop now before one of us ends up saying something we'll regret. We can talk about this later in the week and work out the details about who gets what... Goodbye, Richard." With that, Lois quickly turned and entered the house, stopping briefly to look back as she left through the door to the garage.

Chapter 19 - Reaction

Day 14, Monday, 7:55PM, Long Island

"Are you sure that you're okay?" Lucy asked again, for the fifth time since Lois had arrived forty minutes earlier.

Lois sighed deeply, pulled off her glasses and pinched the bridge of her nose. She was seated on Lucy's living room couch, this time with her laptop open in front of her on the coffee table. "Would you please stop asking me that," Lois pleaded, as she looked over at her sister. "No, it wasn't easy. Yes, there are still some difficult moments ahead, and, yes, I'm... as okay as I can be under the circumstances." After a moment, Lois looked back at the laptop screen in front of her, she muttered, "I can't *believe* how expensive housing is in Metropolis. No wonder Clark had so much trouble finding an affordable apartment."

"Who?" Lucy inquired.

"This... guy I work with," Lois offered. Turning her attention back to the online mortgage application on her screen, she complained, "Even with my ample salary, I can still only get approved for a little more than half what it'll cost to get a decent-sized house in a good neighborhood. Where are Jason and I going to live?"

"Maybe you can get some help from Sup-" Lucy suggested, before rethinking her choice of words at her sister's glare. "...um, from bachelor number two."

"Maybe," Lois accepted. "We haven't had a chance to discuss anything yet. I barely had a chance to tell him that I was leaving Richard... And we still need to figure out how we're going to explain things to Jason." Lois dropped her head in her hands as she pondered the situation before she was broken from her reverie by the cell phone ringing in her purse.

Lois fished out her cell phone, and quickly checked the display, which listed the caller as 'Martha.' "Speaking of which..." Lois added as she opened up the phone and brought it to her ear. "Hello?" Lois answered. Her frown changed into a small smile as she continued, "Are you having fun with Grandma? ...Be a good boy for Daddy and Grandma, and go to bed when they tell you... No, I can't come there tonight, sweetheart."

Lucy walked into the kitchen to refill her glass of iced tea while her sister continued to talk with her son. "Okay, sweetheart, I love you too. Let me talk to Daddy, now.... Hi..." Lucy noticed Lois roll her eyes, before saying into the phone, "I'm fine... Any chance you can stop by after putting him to bed? We have a lot to talk about, and I doubt I'll get much leeway from Perry tomorrow... Yeah, we can trust her... Okay, see ya soon!"

As Lois closed her phone and threw it back into her purse, Lucy asked cautiously, "So... will bachelor number two be stopping by?"

Lois nodded as her expression suddenly grew gravely serious. "Listen, Lucy, there is something you need to understand. There are... certain people out there who if they suspected... too strong a connection between me and... bachelor number two... might try to come after Jason and me to get at him... I've already been kidnapped on more than one occasion by some psychopath who thought I'd make an effective hostage. Nobody can know. Do you understand that?"

Lucy nodded as her eyes grew large at the realization. "I had no idea..." she admitted.

As Lois stood and walked over to the balcony doors, she told her sister, "We didn't want *anyone* having any idea." Lois unlocked the balcony door and returned to the couch, as she continued to browse Metropolis real estate listings.

A short while later, Superman stepped through the balcony door, closing it behind him, the noise from the door attracting the attention of the two women. Lucy watched in

amazement as he stepped through a blur of colors, before turning to address her, now wearing Converse high-tops, worn and faded jeans, a white t-shirt and a flannel shirt. "You must be Lucy," he said to her as he held out his hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you." Lucy could not find her voice as she weakly offered him her hand, her mouth agape and eyes like saucers.

"You can blink, now, Lucy," Lois teased, as Clark joined her on the couch. Lucy blinked, and a wide smile grew across her features as she anticipated finally hearing the explanation that Lois had been withholding from her since their talk two days earlier.

Day 15, Tuesday, 8:35AM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom

Lois was hunched over her desk, supporting her head with one hand, as she flipped through her notes with the other. She'd already drained her Starbucks coffee, and most of her coworkers correctly interpreted her demeanor to say 'Stay Away.' She heard someone clear his throat beside her and looked up as Clark set a fresh Starbucks coffee in front of her. "How was the drive in this morning?" he asked politely.

"Horrible," she answered testily as she raised the fresh coffee to her lips. "Just over two hours to get in here from Long Island during rush hour... Thanks for the coffee." Dropping her voice to the nearly inaudible whisper she was quickly becoming accustomed to, she asked, "Did the munchkin get to school on time?"

Clark nodded as she looked up at him, before quietly telling her, "You would have made better time on the train."

Lois rolled her eyes as she answered, "I know that, Clark, but I left too late for the train last night, and I needed my car down here..." After glancing through her notes a moment longer, she informed him, "By the way, I think I may have come up with an angle to put the Luthor story back on page one." Lois looked back up at Clark as she continued, "It looks like there has been a lot of maritime activity offshore. The ships out there are all sending down submersibles to look around where Luthor tried to grow that continent. Do you think they'll find anything down there?"

Clark shook his head, "My sources tell me that it's clean down there. You may be onto something, though, if we can track the sponsors of these expeditions. We know that Luthor wants to get his hands on kryptonite - no plan of his can work without it. Maybe we can track one of these expeditions back to him and smoke him out."

"I hadn't thought of that," Lois admitted, "How do we track that? Can your friend in Gotham help with that?"

"Maybe," Clark offered, falling silent as his gaze shifted to the lobby where Richard had just stepped off the elevator. Lois followed Clark's gaze and spotted him. Richard's expression was neutral but for a quick flash of anger that crossed his face when he looked over at Lois. She lowered her head, while Clark greeted him with a weak wave - he couldn't quite manage the usual goofy grin this time. Richard lowered his gaze to the floor and walked by them without acknowledgement. That scene did not escape the attention of their coworkers who, though unaware of their recent change in status, realized that their circumstances had taken a significant turn for the worse.

Day 15, Tuesday, 10:30AM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom

"Lane! Kent! My office, now!" Perry bellowed. As the two took the seats in front of his desk, Perry scolded, "I thought we agreed that the Luthor story was cold."

"You assumed," Lois corrected him, "Nobody agreed. Besides, we've come up with

something that I think you'll like..."

"Unless Luthor's been arrested, there's nothing there," Perry insisted.

"Whatever happened to 'A good reporter does find great stories, a good reporter...'" Lois began.

"...makes them great," Clark and Perry both finished for her.

"You two have done a good job approaching this subject from all possible angles, but what else is there?" Perry inquired.

"If you'll let us explain that," Clark offered. "First, we have a press release from the FBI that just came off the wire, increasing the reward on Lex Luthor to ten million dollars."

"That's one paragraph on page twenty-three," Perry countered.

"It's the maritime activity that's more interesting," Lois informed him. "We've been tracking the sponsors of all ships exploring that location offshore where that kryptonite land mass was. Most of it seems legitimate, but there are a couple of them that look mighty suspicious, with the true sponsor hidden behind holding companies and law firms."

"We know that Lex Luthor transferred most of the Vanderworth assets to offshore accounts," Clark added. "The dubious entities are consistent with his history, and if he was trying to get his hands on more Kryptonite, then that seems to be a good place to look."

Perry pinched his lips together in a tight smile. "Well, maybe there's something there," he conceded. "Alright, but I'm only giving you a couple days to come up with something on this."

Lois and Clark were headed out the door, when Perry called out, "Lois, wait a moment." As both stopped at the door, Perry waved off Clark, clarifying, "Just Lois."

As Clark returned to his desk and Lois sat back down, Perry quietly told her, "Lois, that scandal piece from yesterday... It wasn't your best work. There have been a couple of times in the last few weeks where the story you've turned in looks more like something from an intern than my Pulitzer Prize winner. And now ... with the chaos at home."

"I take it he told you, then," Lois stated.

"He came to the house last night," Perry confirmed. As he offered her a compassionate expression that few were privileged to see, Perry implored her, "Lois, think about what you are doing. You and Richard had a good life together... can *still* have a good life together. Is it really worth throwing that all away?"

"It's not that simple, Perry," Lois told him. "I hate hurting him, but it was unavoidable. Maybe now that the decision is finally made, everyone can start healing." Perry frowned a bit at her response, though he hadn't truly expected to change her mind. Before he had a chance to respond, Lois spoke up again, telling him, "Look, I know that Richard is... your family, and the bias there is unavoidable, but this is really for the best."

"I still think that you're making a mistake," he told her. "I won't poke my nose any further into your private life, but I can't turn a blind eye when it starts affecting your work. I don't want to see another sloppy article like the one you turned in yesterday. Do we understand each other?"

"Yessir," Lois answered contritely, as she finally escaped the reprimand and returned to her desk.

Day 15, Tuesday, 2:15PM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom

By deadline, Lois and Clark had dug up enough on the sponsors of the offshore expeditions for Perry to be satisfied with the progress, but not enough to go to press for the afternoon edition. Clark continued to research the matter, which included occasional

unauthorized peeks into corporate files. Once the afternoon edition was sent to press, Lois took the opportunity to chance a brief discussion with Richard to clear the air.

It's said that news travels fast through the office grapevine, and in the Daily Planet newsroom, even more so, if the day's events were any indication. The news of Lois and Richard's split had gotten out well before lunch, when Gil Truman overheard Richard complaining about the situation with Perry. As Lois now entered Richard's office, all eyes were on its glass walls. Lois' gaze was mostly on the floor, while Richard was somewhat hunched over, his shoulders sagging, his gaze locked on Lois. The image was clearly that of a *former* couple.

"Okay, we'll wait until Friday to explain things to him," Lois told him. That'll give him a couple days to get used to the idea before going back to school and starting After Care.

"You can still bring him in after school," Richard offered quietly.

"It would hardly be fair to expect that under the circumstances," Lois told him. "Maybe every once in a while..." As Lois looked out the glass wall towards the bullpen, she nodded her head in that direction as she added "We probably ruffled a lot of feathers bringing him in here every day like we had been, when none of them had that option."

"Where will you be staying?" Richard asked. "You're not planning on commuting down from Lucy's every day, are you?"

Lois shook her head, exclaiming, "God, no! That drive was horrible this morning, and her place is a way too small. I think we'll probably both stay with his Grandma until we can get the housing straightened out... and it's just Jason, his Grandma and me that'll be staying there."

"You could have stayed at the house," Richard pointed out. "We were already in separate rooms."

"That would have been a bit awkward," Lois commented.

"So you're gone for good now?" Richard asked. "It looked like you'd already taken everything from the house that was yours or Jason's"

"We won't be coming back to the house," Lois confirmed. "Too awkward... Look, I know that I have no right to expect anything from you where Jason is concerned, but if you still want to be a part of his life, we'll work something out."

"I'd like that," Richard said sadly.

"Well, we can talk about the other stuff later," Lois said quietly. As she motioned through the door to her desk, she added, "I should get back."

The newsroom staff continued to observe the pair as Richard nodded, then dropped his head into his hands when Lois retreated back to her desk. The fire of office gossip was already stoked, and the comments came, almost none of which was sympathetic to Lois.

"He's probably better off without her."

"Did she even consider what this will do to that little boy?"

"How could she have thrown it all away like that?"

"Do you think that she was having an affair?"

"He should have realized it wouldn't last when she refused to pick a wedding date after so many years."

"She didn't appreciate what she had!"

"How could she do that to him?"

Clark's usual smile was nowhere to be found as he heard the gossip. Once again, only Jimmy Olsen insisted on giving them both the benefit of the doubt. Clark again felt guilt for the other man's pain before his thoughts moved forward to his family's security.

Day 15, Tuesday, 7:15PM (Central Time), Smallville

Lois continued to scribble her notes at the kitchen table in the Kent house, as she looked through her glasses at the information on her laptop while Martha knitted in front of the TV. Lois heard the stairs creak, and looked up to see Clark walk down the stairs. "So, how many stories did you end up reading to him?" she asked.

"Three," Clark answered, "though he had a stack of a dozen more waiting for me."

Lois smiled, telling him, "That's one of his favorite tricks."

"How's the research coming?" Clark asked.

"I think we should be able to make deadline without any trouble," she told him. After a moment, she added, "It a huge relief that you've got WiFi out here. I thought we'd have to use dial-up."

"The population out here is so small that it's not worth it for the cable or phone companies to compete for Internet service," he told her. "So, they don't fight county-wide WiFi here like they do in the city." Taking the seat beside her, he asked, "Do you need any more information from an unauthorized source?"

"I think we have everything we need from your earlier snooping," Lois told him. "I just need to finish corroborating the information with SEC filings and other public sources."

Lois set down her pen, and turned to Clark as she pulled her glasses off. "Clark, where are we going to live?" Lois asked anxiously. "I mean, as wonderful as it is here, we can't commute via Kryptonian Express indefinitely. We need something in Metropolis, and I think an apartment in the city would be too big a disruption for Jason, and I'd worry about the security."

"I can help with that. We just need to find something that you like," Clark told her.

"But, last night you said that you were worried about a paper trail leading back to Clark Kent, especially with Lex Luthor at large," Lois reminded him. "What changed?"

"I've made some alternate arrangements with help from my contact at Wayne Enterprises," Clark told her. "We've transferred some of my savings and investments to a Wayne Financial account, and I've gotten an independent loan through them. That value will be applied to the house, but without there being any link between us in their database. It should allow us to afford something in the mid three hundreds and still be able to save for Jason's college. Most of the houses you liked in the online listings were in that range."

Lois launched herself at Clark, wrapping her arms around him in a tight hug. "I should have known you'd 'rescue' us!" she exclaimed. "You didn't have a problem talking him into that?"

"I think he thought that he owed me one after all that they've saved on the satellites I've lifted into orbit for them," Clark reminded her.

Lois pulled back from the hug and looked into Clark's eyes. "This contact of yours..." she began warily, "...how much does he know about us?"

"Everything," Clark informed her. "He has secrets, too. He can be trusted."

"I want to meet him," Lois declared.

"I'm not sure he'd be too eager to-" Clark began.

"If we're depending on him for our family's security, then I'm going to meet him," Lois insisted.

"I'll talk to him about it in the morning," Clark offered. "That's not a guarantee, however."

"You can talk him into it," she declared as she pulled herself back from Clark and

returned her attention to the laptop. "In the meantime...give me another half hour or so to put the rest of the pieces together, and then see what we've got for deadline." Clark nodded, as he wondered how Bruce Wayne would react to Lois' request.

Chapter 20 - Setback

Day 18, Friday, 8:00AM (Pacific Time), Henderson, Nevada

Lex Luthor was savoring the tranquility of the morning as he listened to Verdi's *La Traviata* on the stereo system and enjoyed his Denver omelet. At least now Kitty was earning her keep again by doing the cooking. He flipped through the morning's *Las Vegas Review Journal* as he ate, scanning for any news on the manhunt, and smiled arrogantly in his confident assumption that he had left them a cold trail. The calm of the morning was disrupted by the sounds of *The Today Show* floating across Verdi as Kitty turned on the television.

"Turn! It! Off!" Lex shouted into the living room.

"How else do you expect me to drown that crap out?" Kitty demanded.

"That, is not crap," Lex declared. "That, is Verdi, the premier composer of Italian opera. One does not drown out Verdi, now turn off the TV!"

"Fine, I'll watch it upstairs," Kitty huffed as she turned off the television and left the room. Though the music was no longer disturbed, Lex could not slip back into his earlier peaceful state. He threw down his newspaper, and headed back to his office to get an update on his special projects.

The first thing Lex noticed was an urgent email from Roger Pruitt:

Subject: Problem with Boat

Contractor refuses further work, due to D.P. article this morning. Call ASAP.

-Rog

Lex was baffled as to what might have caused the boat owner to quit, and quickly pulled up the *Daily Planet* website, where he was greeted by the headline, "Luthor Continues Search for Kryptonite" by Lois Lane and Clark Kent. *What has she done now*, Lex wondered. As he read the article, his eyes widened in near panic as they described the dummy companies and hidden financing that he had put in place to hire the salvage boat. He quickly turned on the television in his office, tuning in a cable news channel as alarm spread across his features.

"...have apparently uncovered a secret financial network tied to fugitive Lex Luthor, which had hired a salvage boat to hunt for kryptonite off the New Jersey coast..." the news anchor recited.

Damn, Lex thought, as he quickly pulled up the financial application on his laptop, and frantically tried transferring the funds from the largest of the named accounts offshore. As he hit the submit button, he got the pop-up window, "Unable to process request. Please contact your financial institution." A cold sweat broke across Lex's brow as he realized that the funds had likely been frozen. The Planet had probably delayed printing the story to give the feds time for warrants.

"No, no, no, no, no!" Lex hollered, as he moved from one account to the next, as he attempted to salvage what he could from the myriad of secret accounts he maintained. "That's *my* money!"

After about a dozen attempts, his connection broke. One of the entities that he had been proxying his traffic through to hide his Internet address had gone dark - they'd set a trap for him. Fortunately, they'd only be able to track to the upstream proxy, but it still was burning precious time while Lex scrambled to configure a new proxy. The cat and mouse game went on for the next two hours, and when the dust settled, Lex had salvaged about four hundred million dollars of the twelve billion he had spread around in domestic U.S. accounts.

While the remaining funds were adequate resources for his needs, like a dragon guarding its hoard, Lex begrudged the loss of a single cent, and this morning's loss had been substantial.

"Damn her!" Lex shouted, as he pounded his fist onto the surface of his desk. "Damn her to hell! She's going to pay for this!" Lex would no longer target Lois Lane and her son just to get at Superman. His revenge would now also be directed at her, and she would have to suffer as well.

Finally, Lex opened the Internet Phone application on his laptop, and called Roger.

"Rog," the voice answered.

"You didn't think this was important enough to contact me earlier?" Lex demanded to know.

"How could I? You only gave me the email address," Roger reminded him.

"That's not that point!" Lex bellowed. "What else is going on out there that I should know about?"

"Well, it's really all a moot point. Before everything hit the fan, the boat's captain said there wasn't anything down there. Actually, looked like the ocean bottom had been scraped clean. Been hearing similar things from the other boat captains interviewed on the local news stations."

"Moot point?" Lex asked. "*Moot Point!* Do you have any idea what the feds have been doing to the accounts I set up to finance this operation?"

"Um, no," Roger admitted. "I didn't even think-"

"That's right, you didn't think," Lex interrupted. "They've *frozen* most of the accounts!"

"Um, sorry, Boss," Rog told him. "What do you want me to do?"

"Close up shop, and lay low until we're ready for Plan B," Lex told him. "We'll have to find the stuff another way."

After hanging up the phone, Lex stewed over the loss, staring blankly at the television as the news loop repeated. His eyes widened when he recognized the Baton Rouge safe house on the screen and turned up the volume.

"...authorities suspect that this house, owned by a reclusive 'David Simpson,' may be associated with the Lex Luthor secret financial network uncovered this morning by Daily Planet reporters Lois Lane and Clark Kent..."

Oh, no, thought Lex, *if they found the Baton Rouge house, how long before they find this one?* Lex pulled up his financial application again to confirm the accounts used to buy both the Baton Rouge and Las Vegas homes. The Vegas House seemed safe, but now was not the time to risk that. Lex shutdown the computer and marched out of the office, shouting up the stairs. "We're leaving! Get packed!"

Day 18, Friday, 3:00PM (Mountain Time), Aspen, Colorado

Lex continued to review the day's setbacks from the comfortable rental cabin in the Rocky Mountains. It was the off-season, so there weren't a lot of people nosing around, and the cable television and broadband access gave Lex the tools he needed for a proper damage assessment. *Damn her!* Lex thought again, as he pondered how to recreate the financial network that had been dismantled that morning. It would take months to expand the new accounts from his overseas holdings, especially given the NSA tracking of large institution to institution transfers. The transfer amounts would have to be relatively small over a large number of accounts and a period of several months.

Kitty was sitting outside reading a supermarket tabloid, having sensed the dangerous mood that Lex was in and wisely kept her tongue and her distance. She was like a typical mobster girlfriend in that she loved the lifestyle that the illegal gains brought, but was

uncomfortable with the violence that provided it. Lex's mood today was too vivid a reminder of his murderous rage about the *Wayward Wanderer*, and thus she remained quiet, sitting outside the cabin.

With the damage finally calculated, Lex finally turned away from the laptop, spotting Kitty sitting outside. *Why is she still alive?* Lex wondered to himself. She had betrayed him by pitching the Kryptonian crystals out the door of the helicopter, and he had killed for much less than that. He had wanted to kill her after that, but hadn't. *Why not?* he wondered.

He recounted her assets versus her liabilities, reviewing his unconscious decision to let her live. Why had he done that? Was it for carnal pleasures, a cook, a maid? Those things could certainly be acquired elsewhere for a lot less trouble, though not so easily now that there was a ten million dollar price on his head.

Lex concluded that in the context of their personal lives, he could trust her. She would never turn him in. It was only in the context of his masterful plans that she freaked out and sabotaged him. *She'll still have to be punished for that*, Lex thought. She'd have to be kept in the dark from any future planning, but for now at least, she would live.

Breaking from his thoughts, Lex returned to his laptop and after briefly reviewing his list of meteorite exhibits, he pulled up the profile on Lois Lane. *You'll need to be punished, too*, he thought as he reviewed the information in her profile and plotted his revenge.

Chapter 21 - Telling

Day 18, Friday, 5:15PM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom

Lois Lane tried to stifle a yawn as she raised her hand to mouth. She was still sitting in the empty 'hotel' office to the left of Perry's office, usually used for visitors or discreet interviews with certain sources. Today, it had been set up as a makeshift television studio as Lois made appearances via satellite with the major cable news networks, the topic being Lex Luthor's financial network and his hunt for kryptonite. Most of the interviews had been prerecorded earlier in the afternoon. However, she'd agreed to a live interview with MSNBC, and was scheduled for the second and possibly third fifteen-minute segment of the show.

As the interview began, Perry looked on through the glass of his office like a proud papa while listening to the slightly delayed sound from the television in his office. She definitely had her head back in the game after her domestic distractions earlier in the week. Though he'd been sorely disappointed at her breaking off her engagement to his nephew, she was still like family to him and one of his best reporters. Perry felt no guilt for his continuing professional support of Lois Lane, confident in his belief that the story they'd run that morning would earn her a second Pulitzer, and Clark Kent his first. Richard would simply have to learn to cope with working with her in the office as he dealt with his pain.

Perry thought back to the call from Clark at 10:30 PM Tuesday night, explaining what he and Lois had uncovered, which seemed to be as big as blowing open the Watergate scandal had been in the 1970s. He thought he was going to have a stroke when Clark had insisted that they sit on the story a couple days to give law enforcement agencies a chance to act on their information. Holding the story had been the right decision, however. Not only did they have to run two special editions to keep up with demand at the newsstand, the rapidly unfolding events that the story had precipitated would keep the papers flying off the shelves for days to come. Clark and Lois had already filed three follow up articles that day, both on the money trail and on the newly discovered Baton Rouge safe house that Lex Luthor had apparently hidden in.

Perry saw Clark walking toward the 'hotel' cube, and stepped out of his office door, waving him in. "We can spy on her from here," Perry told him. "You two have done a hell of a job, by the way."

"Thanks again, Chief," Clark replied meekly. "It's a good thing that this is the last interview. I think Lois has about had it."

"Maybe we need to train you in public speaking, so you can share the burden next time," Perry suggested.

Clark shrugged his shoulders at that, quietly telling Perry, "She'd still do a much better job at it, and present a much better image for the Daily Planet. I'm... I'm better behind the scenes." Both men remained silent as they watched the interview.

As they approached the end of the segment, the news program's host began his next question, "...one more question, one that I know everyone's dying to know the answer to..." Clark noticed Lois' jaw clench as they both realized what was coming. "...what's Superman really like?"

"I'm not sure I can really answer that, Norman," Lois answered, reciting her prepared answer. "He intentionally keeps himself at arm's length."

"But you've had so many exclusives with him. Surely you have some insight into the man?" the host persisted.

"He liked what he read in the Daily Planet and felt he could trust me to give him fair coverage," Lois replied from another rehearsed answer. "I know that he hasn't liked everything

I've published, but he knows I'll be fair. I suspect that it's the same with the other reporters that he's spoken to. And as far as insight goes, I can't claim that I've got him figured out."

Once the interview concluded, Perry and Clark both approached Lois as she was getting untangled from her earplug and microphone. "Nice job," Perry praised her. "And that was a pretty slick plug for the *Planet* on that last question."

"Just once I'd like to get through one of these without the Superman questions," Lois complained.

"It's a bit much to expect when we're talking about Lex Luthor and kryptonite," Clark pointed out. "At least it's over now, and you can get some rest." Lois nodded, and she made a hasty retreat, stopping only briefly to gather her things from her desk on her way out.

Day 18, Friday, 5:30PM (Central Time), Smallville

Clark, Lois and Jason walked out the back door of the Kent house after dinner as Shelby excitedly ran ahead before circling back and dropping his ball at Jason's feet. As his parents sat on the steps and slipped their hands together, Jason happily obliged the dog and tossed the ball through the yard, which had become an after dinner habit during the past week. After several tosses the old dog had tired, and Clark let him back into the house.

"Are we going play catch at the quarry?" Jason asked his father. It had also been a habit over the last week for Clark to help his son push his abilities after dinner, and it seemed that the boy grew stronger and faster with each passing day. After Jason had thrown the wrecked car nearly a mile the previous night, Clark had decided that they'd have to find another exercise to push his strength, one that was less likely to be observed. Tonight, however, they had other plans.

Clark looked over to Lois, unsure of his role in the coming conversation. She told their son, "Not tonight, honey. I need to talk to you about something. Come here."

Once Jason walked over to his parents on the stairs, Lois pulled him onto her lap, and asked him, "Jason, honey, do you remember what we talked about last week at Superman's Fortress? When I told you that Daddy, Richard and I would always love you no matter what?"

"Uh huh," Jason answered warily.

"Well, try to remember that as I tell you this... We can't stay with Daddy like we have been this week and with Richard like we were at the same time. Things are going to have to be a bit different back in Metropolis."

"Different? How?" Jason asked, as his brow furrowed with worry.

"We can't live with Richard anymore, but-" Lois began.

"No! I don't want Richard to move out!" Jason complained.

"Richard's not moving," Lois explained. "We are: You and me. But you'll still be able to see Richard and do things with him. It's just that we have to live apart now."

"I don't want to move," Jason whined.

"We know you don't, sweetheart," Lois told him, "But our old house is just a place. It's the people that make a house a home. You and I will both be at the new house, Daddy will be there a lot, and Richard will get to visit, too."

"When are we moving?" Jason grumbled.

"I don't know," Lois admitted. "We still have to find a new house. Until then, we'll be staying here with Grandma, and flying back and forth to Metropolis."

"I miss him," Jason told her quietly.

"I know you do, and you'll get to spend most of the day with him tomorrow," Lois told

her son. "We'll work something out so you still get to see him when you want to."

"Can I see him now?" Jason asked hopefully.

Lois pinched her lips together as she considered her son's request for a moment. After briefly glancing over at Clark, she suggested, "Why don't we try calling him first?"

Richard White leaned over the masonry fence behind the patio as he took another gulp from his second beer of the evening and remembered how Lois had loved this view of the river. The evenings since she left had been difficult for him, as everything in the house reminded him of her, despite the fact that none of her belongings remained. His heart also ached for his lost son, whom he still thought of as his son despite the recent evidence to the contrary.

This night, like the others earlier in the week, had found him on the couch surfing through television stations once he got home. However, seeing her frequent presence on the cable news stations tonight had been too much for him - to see her image and hear her voice, knowing that he would not to know her presence in the house again. The few discussions he had with her during the week only drove that point home. She wanted Jason's bedroom furniture and everything from the kitchen, including the dinette set. He'd keep the living room, master bedroom and office furniture. Those were the only things that they had bought together, and the house was his.

He had turned off the television and taken refuge out on the patio with his beer, as he reflected on how good his life had been just a few weeks earlier, and how quickly it had gone to hell. The same question repeated itself in his mind: *Who did she leave me for?* It seemed to Richard that once his rival returned, Lois had never seriously entertained the possibility of staying. The writing had been on the wall for two weeks before she finally made her decision. *Why doesn't she want to tell me who he is? What's the harm now?*

His thoughts were disrupted by the phone ringing inside the house. Richard peeled himself off the wall, sauntered back inside the house, and picked up the cordless phone from the coffee table. He recognized Lois' cell phone number in the caller ID, as he brought the phone up to his ear. "Hello?" he answered.

"Hi, Richard, it's Lois. Look, we... I just broke the news to Jason. He's a little upset, and wants to talk to you. Would that be alright?"

She said 'we,' Richard thought. *So he's there with them.* "Yeah, I'd love to talk to him," he told her.

After a moment, he heard Jason fumbling with the phone. "Richard?" he said tentatively. "Can I come ov-" Richard heard Lois' voice in the background as the boy was interrupted. After a moment, Jason told him, "Mommy says I get to come over tomorrow."

"Yeah, squirt, we have a full day planned," Richard told him. "We'll be going to the aquarium and then to see the clowns at the carnival in the plaza."

"Will that funny clown that was at my birthday party be there?" Jason asked excitedly, as the smile returned to his features.

"No, I think they're a different group of clowns, but they should still be good," Richard assured him. "Have you had a fun time with your Grandma this week?"

"Uh huh," Jason answered. "We did crafts." Jason knew that he wasn't supposed to say a lot about what he did with his dad at Grandma's house, but there had still been a lot of fun with Grandma, too. "Um, what are you doing tonight?"

"I'm just staying home tonight," Richard told him. "I need to be ready for you tomorrow."

"Well, can I come ov-" Again, Jason was interrupted by Lois. Richard heard her in the background. "Um, Mommy says it's too close to my bedtime to come over tonight."

"Well, maybe it is," Richard told him. "But I'll get to see you all day tomorrow."

"Cool!" Jason exclaimed. "Um, Richard?"

"Yes, Jason," Richard answered.

"Um, I miss you," the tyke told him.

"I miss you too," Richard told him, as his eyes glossed over with unshed tears.

As the call ended, Richard hung up the phone and dropped on the couch as he dropped his head into his hands. *How did it all slip away so fast?* he wondered.

Chapter 22 - Carnival

Day 19, Saturday, 1:30PM, Metropolis

"I think you'll like this one," Nancy Dixon told Lois, as she punched in the combination on the key box on the doorknob of the front door. The realtor had been showing Lois homes since she dropped Jason off with Richard at nine o'clock that morning. Clark, who'd been at the *Daily Planet* that morning following up with their contacts on the recent Luthor stories, had just joined her. However, Lois was the only one seen by the realtor, since Clark was hovering fifty thousand feet above, scanning the home with his vision as he listened in on the conversation. This was the tenth and final house that they would look at that day before Lois went into the office.

"It's about nineteen hundred square feet, with four bedrooms, two and half baths, a huge kitchen, and on two-thirds of an acre. All the trees and bushes in the yard will give you the privacy you wanted," Nancy informed Lois. "This one also has a finished basement, so you'll have the perfect playroom for your little boy."

Lois nodded, as she put on her glasses, pulled out her notes and searched for the details on the current house. "How much were they asking for this one, again?" Lois asked.

"They just dropped their price to three fifty nine," Nancy reminded her. "That's a good deal, and you'd also have immediate occupancy." Lois began writing in her notepad as she toured the empty house. She and Clark would have to compare notes later.

Superman regretted that he couldn't join Lois on the ground as she looked through the homes. However, he couldn't risk anyone linking her back to him, either as Clark or as Superman. *I'm going to have to make this up to her*, Superman thought. *It isn't fair that she should have to do this on her own*. He was pulled from his musing when a woman screamed as a thief made off with her purse and he swooped down to intervene.

Richard escorted Jason by the hand through the plaza across from Centennial Park. The two had just arrived after a successful morning at the City Aquarium. Jason had been fascinated by all of it, but the sea rays had been his favorite. He'd been amazed at how gracefully they had glided through the water. The sea lion show in the park's Aquatheater had also been a delight for the boy. By noon, however, his interest had started to wane, as Richard knew it would. After getting themselves lunch in the park, they came over to the plaza for the carnival.

The carnival was an end of summer event sponsored each year by the Metropolis Chamber of Commerce, with many vendors setting up booths to hawk their wares in addition to the carnival booths. Many local celebrities also participated in the carnival, seamlessly joining in with the clowns, jugglers, mimes, and other performing artists. There was also an Art Fair held concurrently in the park across the street, where they had also set up children's games and face painting, which Richard knew Jason would enjoy. Richard smiled as he anticipated what the tyke's reaction would be.

The day had been bittersweet for Richard. Though the boy's laughter and excitement throughout the morning warmed his heart, Richard had to acknowledge that he wasn't Daddy anymore and would be at most a close family friend. He'd somehow managed to push those thoughts from his mind to enjoy his time with his son-that-might-have-been. Jason was now pulling Richard over to a carnival display that challenged comers to knock over a pyramid of cans with the bean bags that they provided. He pointed to a large teddy bear prize dressed in a superman t-shirt and cape. "Can we get that one?" he pleaded.

Richard smiled down at him. "We'll see what we can do," he told him as he presented one of the game tickets from the roll that he'd purchased and was handed three bean bags. He only managed to knock down eight of the ten cans, so they had to settle for a smaller bear than the one Jason had pointed at. It still had Superman attire and that was enough to satisfy Jason.

Richard contemplated Jason's admiration of the Man of Steel, which had turned into a small obsession. He couldn't blame him for it after their thrilling rescue from the *Gertrude* and the subsequent rescue of Superman after his disastrous confrontation with Lex Luthor and the kryptonite. Richard concluded that he was a good role model, and didn't mind indulging Jason in his obsession.

Meanwhile, the object of the boy's obsession was looking over him as well. Superman was thrilled with his son's delight in the carnival, and was also pleased that Richard seemed to be enjoying himself as well. He had to swoop in on the carnival on several occasions already, stopping a purse-snatcher and a couple pick-pockets. Drivers distracted by the events at the plaza had also kept him busy preventing their fender-benders. He'd been giving particularly close scrutiny to the carnival, not wanting anything to disrupt the day for Jason and Richard.

The next booth to attract Jason's attention was the dunk tank, which currently had on-air personality Cindy Simmons from WGBS News sitting in the hot seat. Recently retired Metropolis Meteors pitcher, Raul Salazar, had volunteered to work the booth and was teasing Cindy as he threatened to let loose the baseball at the target. Jason was enjoying the showmanship as much as anyone else who had gathered around.

"Don't even think about it!" Cindy warned the pitcher in friendly tone. "This is strictly for the paying customers!"

"I'm just giving back to the community," Raul teased. The banter went on for a few more minutes, before Raul turned back to the crowd, and invited them to see if they could dunk the newscaster. Jason watched as each player tried their luck, jumping and clapping excitedly each time the ball got close to the target. Richard couldn't help but chuckle at the reaction, his domestic turmoil forgotten. It warmed his heart to see the tyke so thoroughly enjoying the event.

Jason had another reason for his excitement at the dunk tank. After they had called Richard the previous night, Clark had started teaching him with a baseball, having determined that the risk of being observed had grown too great to continue throwing cars. It was tempting fate to hope that nobody would notice a two ton car wreck flying a mile through the air. They had thus switched to baseballs and had not only practiced pushing his limits, but also practiced throwing gently, like normal people did. Now, as each player made their throw, Jason was trying to figure out how much force he'd have to use to throw the ball at the same speed. Jason knew that if he got a turn, he'd have to throw gently.

After another near miss hit the target without dunking Cindy, and a chorus of "Awww" from the crowd, Jason piped up, "You've gotta hit it in the middle!" After all, that's how Daddy had taught him to throw last night.

Jason's voice caught Superman's attention, and he looked over at the dunk tank from his vantage point above the trees in Centennial Park. As he looked on, he noticed a three-year old girl chase her dropped ball between two parked cars on Centennial Boulevard and into the busy street, and he swooped in to stop the tragedy.

The slightly overweight yet muscular man who'd just thrown the ball at the dunk tank just smiled back at Jason, telling him "That's what I'm trying to do." The man's last ball also hit the edge of the target, but Cindy still remained dry. That discouraged the remaining crowd, who

were now distracted by the scene behind them, as Superman pulled the little girl out of the path of the oncoming car.

Jason knew he couldn't talk to Daddy in public when he was Superman, so he instead walked up to the booth, and told Raul, "They didn't hit it in the middle." Richard just chuckled behind him. Here was a boy who routinely got D's in gym, dishing out advice on how to throw a ball.

"No, they didn't," Raul agreed. "Would you like to try? If you hit the target, I'll make sure she goes in, even if you don't hit it in the middle."

"Hey!" Cindy complained.

"I'm not good at sports," Jason said quietly.

"It's alright, Jason," Richard encouraged him, as he handed Raul a game ticket. "Go ahead and give it a try."

Jason took the ball from Raul, and tried to remember what his daddy had taught him the night before. He had to throw gentle. But the lever on the tank wasn't pushing back like it was supposed to when the target was hit. *Maybe just give it a little extra push*, Jason thought.

Cindy Simmons eyes shot wide open in surprise as she entered the chilly water after a 102 MPH fastball hit the target dead center and released the bar holding her seat up. *How could a little boy throw a ball like that?* she wondered, as her feet hit the bottom of the tank. Both Raul and Richard stood there wondering the same thing as they stared at the boy, wide-eyed and mouths agape. Though neither knew the true velocity of the pitch, both recognized that there was considerable strength and speed behind it. Jason was completely oblivious to the adult's reaction, as he started hopping on his feet and clapping his hands with excitement, chanting, "I did it! I did it! I did it!"

Raul was the first to recover. "That was quite a throw," he commented. "Where'd you learn to throw like that?" Before Jason had a chance to answer, Raul interrupted, "Ah, never mind, that explains it." Raul was pointing to the Man of Steel standing some one hundred feet directly behind Jason and Richard. He had just handed the toddler that he rescued back to the little girl's mother and was looking in their direction with an odd expression on his face. "There must have been some super-breath on that ball."

Richard glanced behind them as Superman lifted off into the air with a crowd of children waving back at him before returning his attention to Raul. "Jason here's his number one fan," Richard explained.

Raul nodded as he smiled and turned to the wall of stuffed animals in the booth behind him. "Well, who am I to argue with Superman," Raul told them. "Okay... Jason, was it? Which one do you want?"

Jason pointed to the large grey stuffed elephant wearing a Superman T-shirt, and Raul pulled it down for him. The pair moved on through the carnival as Jason pulled Richard to another booth.

Day 19, Saturday, 6:30PM (Central Time), Smallville

Jason had been bubbling with excitement when Lois had picked him up from Richard an hour earlier. He had also been worn out from his day and fell asleep on the ride over to the parking garage near Jason's school. He remained asleep during the trip to Smallville, and his parents had immediately put him to bed. Lois was now sitting on the front steps of the Kent home looking over her real estate notes while Clark sat behind her expertly massaging out the knots from her spine. "Hmmm, that feels good," Lois purred.

"I aim to please," Clark told her.

Lois set her notes aside as she looked over her shoulder at Clark. "We're going to have to talk to him about what happened today," Lois told him. "It was pure luck that you were standing behind them when it happened."

"I know," Clark agreed. "I've been thinking about that all day. You know, it wasn't easy for me holding back when I was his age, but out here on the farm, I could cut loose without worrying about who would see me. Even if someone had seen me, they'd never say anything because nobody would have believed them. It's different for him, being in the city and after I've gone public as Superman."

"So what do we do?" Lois asked.

"Well, for one, make sure that he has an outlet to let loose," Clark offered. "I can keep bringing him out here after dinner to work with him, and I know Mom would love the chance to see him, too." After a moment's pause, he added, "It's not going to be easy for him, and that can present a challenge where Richard is involved. You're keeping him in Jason's life, which is the right thing to do, but there seems to be a good chance that sooner or later Jason will do something that leads Richard to figure some things out."

"Are you suggesting we share secrets with him?" Lois asked quietly. "Even if we were to do that, I don't think that this would be a good time. Not so soon after I left him."

"I'd just as soon that he didn't know, but let's just play that by ear for now," Clark replied. "If he does figure things out, we'll be honest with him about it." Lois nodded her agreement, as Clark added, "You keep flipping back to the house on Sullivan."

"Yeah," Lois divulged. "New Troy's a good area, Jason could stay in the same school and the house backs up to a wetland, which should help with the privacy, I think. It's been on the market for eight months, and the owners are already in their new house, which means we could move in as soon as we close."

"So is it decided?" Clark asked.

"Not yet," Lois told him. "We've got more to look through tomorrow afternoon, after our meeting with your 'friend' in Gotham." Lois smiled as shifted herself up onto Clark's lap and wrapped her arms around him. "I still have trouble believing that we're actually doing this," she told him.

"Me, too," Clark admitted before Lois captured his lips with her own.

After breaking from the kiss, Lois quietly told him, "With everything that been going on this week, we haven't had a lot of time for us. We need to fix that."

"I have an idea," Clark informed her. "We can go out to dinner tomorrow night. I know this place in exciting downtown Smallville."

"Does Smallville even have a downtown?" Lois joked, as Clark smiled back.

"It's a bit... small," Clark admitted.

"Hence the name, Smallville," Lois teased.

"We shouldn't have to worry about people seeing us here," Clark pointed out. "We can just be out there as a couple. The worst we'd have to worry about is bumping into some old high school friends of mine."

"Then it's a date," Lois agreed, as she recaptured his lips.

Chapter 23 - Benefactor

Day 20, Sunday, 11:30AM (Central Time), Smallville

Lois Lane smiled as she sat at the kitchen table of the Kent house and looked out the window at Clark and Jason playing catch beside the house. He had become more comfortable with his new role as a father, and after church he had a little talk with Jason about how fast he should be throwing baseballs in public. For the last hour they had been tossing a baseball in the yard, practicing on throwing 'gently' and keeping the speed down to something that a normal five year old was capable of.

As she sipped her coffee, Lois concluded that it had been a pleasant morning. After they had obliged Martha's request for them to join her at church, they'd met Ben's children and grandchildren along with several long time friends of the Kent and Hubbard families. Everyone had eagerly accepted both her and Jason as part of the Kent clan, though there were a few raised eyebrows at their marital status and subtle suggestions as to how that oversight could be rectified. Their warm welcome made Lois feel as if she had always belonged there.

Martha walked over to the window, smiling warmly as she looked out at her son and grandson. "It looks like he's got the hang of it now," Martha commented.

After taking another sip of her coffee, Lois looked over at Martha and quietly said, "I'm not sure that secrets and little boys mix very well. How did you handle things like that, when Clark was growing up?"

Martha sighed as she tore her gaze from her boys to look back at Lois as she told her, "It helped that there weren't neighbors to see him here..." As she joined Lois at the kitchen table, she added, "...and we drilled it in from the day we found him that he couldn't reveal his gifts. I wouldn't worry too much about Jason if I were you, Lois. He's only had a few weeks to get used to that. In time, he'll learn just as Clark did. And you have an advantage that we didn't have - you have someone with the same abilities to help him."

The two women looked up at the back door as the noise revealed Clark and Jason entering the house. Jason trotted over to Lois and she pulled him onto her lap as Clark told her, "It looks like he's got it. Let's get him some lunch, and then we can head to Gotham for our meeting."

Day 20, Sunday, 1:00PM, Gotham

After noticing that Bruce Wayne had other guests at his mansion, Clark had flown Lois into parking garage of the Gotham Hilton, and they hailed a cab to take them there. Clark had wanted to surprise her, and thus had not told her who his contact in Gotham was, though the destination of 'Wayne Manor' given to the cab driver narrowed down the possibilities. Lois knew that the mansion was the home of eccentric billionaire playboy, Bruce Wayne, and that he lived there alone with his manservant. *Or is Clark's contact a guest at the mansion?* Lois wondered. She broke from her thoughts as the cab arrived at the mansion and Clark informed her, "This is it." He paid the driver and they walked up the front steps where they were greeted by a very proper old gentleman.

"It's good to see you again, Mr. Kent," Alfred welcomed. "And this lovely lady must be Lois Lane. I'm Alfred Pennyworth, at your service. It's a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Lane. We've been expecting you."

"Thank you," Lois told Alfred politely as she stole a glance towards Clark.

Alfred turned and walked back towards the mansion as he instructed them, "If you'll both follow me." As they walked through the mansion, Lois marveled at the riches on display

inside, with souvenirs from around the globe set in glass display cases along the walls. It seemed more like a museum than someone's home. They eventually arrived in the mansion's den where a well-dressed man was standing looking out the window. Alfred introduced them, telling the man, "A Mr. Kent and Ms. Lane to see you, sir."

Lois recognized the man as Bruce Wayne, the reclusive playboy and majority stockholder of Wayne Enterprises. "Ah, yes, right on time," he greeted them. "Thank you, Alfred." Bruce walked over to Lois and Clark, holding out his hand to Clark as he asked, "So how did the house hunting go?"

"There are some possibilities, but Lois will be looking at more homes this afternoon," Clark informed Bruce as he shook his hand. Turning to Lois, Clark introduced them. "Bruce, this is Lois Lane. Lois, I'd like you to meet Bruce Wayne."

Bruce turned to greet Lois, holding out his hand as he told her, "Ah, so this is the famous Lois Lane. It's a delight to finally meet you."

Lois quickly schooled her surprise into a neutral expression as she politely replied, "Likewise."

Clark told his host, "Bruce, Lois has some questions for you."

Lois eyes shot open in panic. *Is this supposed to be an interview? I'm not prepared!*

As Bruce recognized Lois' expression of panic, he smiled and told her, "Relax, Lois. I take it Clark didn't tell you that I was your one o'clock?" As Lois shook her head, he continued, "Well, this is all off the record. In fact, before we begin, I'm going to have to insist on your word that nothing discussed here will be repeated to another living soul."

"Its okay, Lois," Clark encouraged her. "You wanted to know that you could trust him. He's agreed to answer your questions to put your mind at ease. But first, he needs to know that his secrets won't leave this room."

This confirmed Lois' earlier suspicion that Clark's mystery contact at Wayne Enterprises was indeed Bruce Wayne. "You have my word," she agreed quietly.

"Good," Bruce told her. "Oh, before I forget, I've got the signal watches for you." Bruce walked to the door of the den, and shouted down the hall, "Alfred! Could you bring up those watches?" Turning back to Lois and Clark, he told them, "Sorry for the delay, but one of the components got held up in fabrication."

Lois whispered to Clark, "Are you sure about this?"

"Yes, I am," Clark whispered back to her. As Bruce returned his attention to them, Clark informed him, "She has doubts about trusting you with our family's security... and our secrets."

"Ah, yes," Bruce responded. "Well, let's sit down and I'll see if I can put your mind at ease."

After taking their seats in the den, Bruce asked Lois, "So where would you like to begin?"

"I'm not sure," she answered honestly. "Maybe I should start with the obvious. Why should we trust you? What's in it for you?"

Bruce frowned at the question, and remained pensive for a moment before answering, "The short answer is that Clark and I have similar goals when it comes to protecting the innocent from those who prey upon them. We're comrades in arms of a sort, despite our disagreement on methods."

"I'm not sure that helps me," Lois stated.

Bruce sighed deeply before he continued, "When I was a boy, not much older than your son is now, my parents were brutally murdered before my eyes, and the police were powerless to find the killer..."

"I'm sorry," Lois told him quietly, as she bowed her head.

Bruce held up his hand to interrupt her, as he continued, "That's not necessary... In any event, it led me to dedicate my life and resources towards fighting that unsavory element that my parents' killer came from. It's an uphill battle here in Gotham, with all the corruption, but I've managed to recruit some good men, sponsoring them with my resources, done what they could not do, while letting others to do what I cannot. Clark falls into that last category. There are certain... threats... that only his unique talents can handle."

"I see," Lois said uncertainly.

"As I mentioned earlier, we don't always agree on methods," Bruce informed her. "Clark tends to be a bit of a boy scout, while it doesn't bother me in the slightest if some two-bit thug gets roughed up a bit on the way to his cell. However, we still have the same objective despite our differences, and I would have agreed to Clark's proposal even if he hadn't insisted on making up the costs... Does that put your mind more at ease?"

"So these men that you're sponsoring..." Lois started to ask.

"Some of them are the few clean cops. I provide them with intelligence on the criminal predators that their colleagues withhold from them. I support others to protect those good men from the repercussions of doing the right thing. We *are* making progress."

"That doesn't seem to fly with your reputation..." Lois began.

"...as an irresponsible playboy?" Bruce asked. "That's the cover story, much like Clark Kent's quiet and timid persona. I don't want the vermin in this town to know that I'm the one responsible for their misfortunes."

"I understand," Lois told him. "But I still get the feeling that there's something that you're not telling me."

"I'd prefer not to reveal all of my secrets if it can be avoided," Bruce admitted. "If you have a specific question, I'll answer it, but I'm not going to otherwise spill out all of my deepest, darkest secrets."

"Fair enough," Lois stated. "If I have additional questions later, would you be available to answer them?"

"Yes, under the same condition of secrecy that we have now," Bruce agreed.

"Any chance we could get you to answer some questions on the record?" Lois asked hopefully, as she smiled at the man.

"Always the reporter, eh?" Bruce observed with a friendly smile. "Sorry, but I'll have to decline."

"You'd be happy with the results, and I'm fair with my subjects," Lois appealed to him. "Clark can vouch for that."

"How many in-depth interviews have you done with him since you learned his secret?" Bruce asked. "Would you really want to publish something knowing how much of it was misleading or an outright fabrication?"

"It would make it a bit more challenging," Lois conceded. "But I'd be up to the challenge. What if we gave you final approval of what goes to press?"

Bruce frowned as he looked into Lois' face. "I'll tell you what, if I ever do decide to give an interview, I'll give it to you, but don't hold your breath."

"At least think about it," Lois implored him. "After everything you've done for our family, you know you'll get positive treatment."

Bruce looked over to Clark and joked, "You could have warned me that I'd get ambushed." Turning back to Lois, he told her, "I've got rather strong feelings on interviews. I'm

sorry to disappoint you."

Lois masked her disappointment, as she told him, "I understand."

"So, are we set here?" Bruce asked.

"Yes, I suppose that we can trust you," Lois concluded.

"I'm glad we have that settled," Bruce declared, as he looked at his watch. "Have you eaten yet? We could go over the specifics of your security arrangements over lunch. I also need to show you how the watches work and show you the secure internet applet we put together for you to monitor everything."

"We ate before we came, but don't let that stop you if you're hungry," Clark told him.

Bruce shrugged, saying "I can wait." Alfred entered the room with a 6" x 6" x 12" box in his hands, as Bruce added, "We might as well start with the watches."

Day 20, Sunday, 6:00PM (Central Time), Smallville

It had been a good day for Lois and she could not prevent the smile from growing across her face as Clark drove her to downtown Smallville in Martha's beat up old truck. Their offer on the Sullivan Lane house had been accepted, and the realtor seemed to think that they'd be able to close mid-week. She and Jason would finally be into the new house the following weekend. "We're still going to have to go shopping for furniture," Lois pointed out. "I'm only getting the kitchen and Jason's bedroom furniture from Richard."

"We can sneak out after work during the week," Clark offered. "Maybe pick it out from the store in Wichita, and then order it in Metropolis. That way I can come with you without worrying about being seen."

Lois nodded as she let her gaze wander to the countryside out the window. "It's really nice out here," she commented. "Who would have thought?"

"So is the big city girl discovering that she likes the country?" Clark teased.

"I've been to small towns before, Clark," Lois told him. "I was an army brat, and some of the places that my dad got stationed weren't exactly big. It's just that everything out there revolved around the base. Out here, everything revolves around the people. It's nice."

"I think so," Clark agreed. "I'll never get tired of it out here."

"Let me ask you something," Lois requested. "Of all the places in the world you could have taken me for our first real date, why Smallville?"

"Because I wanted you to get a better glimpse of where I came from," Clark answered. "It's like I told Jason last week: I am who I am because of being raised by Jonathan and Martha Kent and growing up in this town. This is as much a part of me as my... unique abilities. I wanted to show you all of me."

Lois smiled warmly at him, entwined her fingers with his and leaned into him as he parked the truck in front of the Blue Star Café. "Well, here we are," Clark told her. "This is about as fancy as it gets in Smallville."

As Clark and Lois walked into the café hand in hand, they were immediately greeted by Daisy as she walked over to them, "Clark! I heard you were back in town. We all read your latest article by the way! Way to go!" Daisy finally noticed Lois and introduced herself, "Oh, hello. I'm Daisy. Please forgive me. Your face looks familiar, but I can't place your name."

"Daisy, this is Lois," Clark informed her. Daisy rambled on for a few more minutes as she sat the couple in a booth along the glass front of the café. A handful of other customers also greeted Clark as they made their way to the booth.

"Daisy could go on like that forever if you let her," Clark told her. "That's another feature

of Smallville. The people aren't strangers. They don't just know each other, they're friends, family. Daisy's been working here since I was a kid, and is on a first name basis with everyone who walks through those doors."

"I like her," Lois told him. "The other people here tonight seem to know you, too."

Clark looked over at the crowd as he told her, "Well, anyone older than me probably does. There hasn't been as much opportunity for the younger folks here to get to know me, though they probably know of me."

"Hero worship?" Lois teased in a whisper.

Clark smiled widely at her as he explained, "It's more community pride along the lines of 'local boy done good' to make it in the big city as a reporter for the Daily Planet. I think my mom passes out copies of every article with my byline on it."

"You're different here," Lois observed. "Not the clumsy Clark from Metropolis. Not... the other guy, either. This must be the real you."

"It is," Clark agreed. He then leaned over the table as he whispered to her, "The façade isn't necessary here, because everybody's image of me is so ingrained as that Kent kid who made it in the big city. Remember Ben's reaction to my secret?"

Lois found herself laughing lightly at that, "Well he didn't look as shell-shocked as I probably did... or Lucy, for that matter... I wish I'd gotten a picture of that..." Clark laughed with her as they recalled the initial shell-shocked reactions and reached over to capture her hand in his.

"It still feels a bit strange sharing the secret with them," Clark confessed. "It'll take some getting used to."

"It'll be fine," Lois assured him, squeezing his hand. "They won't betray your trust."

Their conversation was interrupted by a female voice shouting across the room, "Clark? I was hoping we'd bump into you before you left." Lois looked over to see an attractive redhead heading over to them, trailed by a handsome blonde man and a little boy, who Lois guessed to be about three.

"Lana!" Clark exclaimed. "My God, it's been ages!" Turning back to Lois, Clark began the introductions, "Lois, this is an old high school friend, Lana Lang."

"It's Lana Ross, for almost five years now," Lana corrected.

The blonde man behind her added, "We had a wedding invitation for you, Clark, but we didn't know where to send it. It was like you disappeared off the face of the Earth."

"Well, sorry I missed it," Clark told them sincerely, before turned back to Lois and reattempting the introduction, "Um, Lois, these are some of my oldest, dearest friends, Pete and Lana Ross."

"As in Senator Pete Ross?" Lois asked incredulously, "As in 'short list for presidential nomination' Pete Ross?"

"Oh, you've heard of him," Clark stated in surprise. Lois looked back at him incredulously, while Lana laughed.

"It's not such a big deal to us," Lana explained. "It's still just Pete and Lana and Clark. We forget that we're all famous sometimes... You're Lois Lane, aren't you? I saw you on TV Friday night."

"Guilty as charged," Lois admitted, overcoming her surprise. "We needed a little R&R after all the extra hours last week, so here we are. Maybe we can get an interview with the Senator-

"So, what brings you back to Smallville?" Clark interrupted. "I hear that you're usually in

Washington these days."

"Summer recess," Pete answered. "Gives us a chance to reunite with family and friends back home, and reconnect with my constituents."

"Oh, we saw you two with your little boy in church this morning," Lana told her. "He's an adorable little thing. We meant to stop by and say hello then, but you got away before we got there. What's your son's name?"

Lois smiled widely with maternal pride as she answered, "Jason," she answered. "He's just barely five."

Lana smiled back as she pulled her little boy forward and introduced him as he squirmed around back behind her again, "This is our son, Clark Peter Ross. He just turned three."

"You named your son 'Clark'?" Lois asked incredulously.

Pete answered, "Clark was my best friend in high school - it was an easy choice."

"I'm... honored," Clark told him quietly, the surprise apparent on his face.

"Well, it was good seeing you," Lana told them. "Next time, give us a little warning so we can visit a bit."

As they walked away, Lois turned back to Clark and huffed, "Why'd you stop me from pressing for an interview?"

Clark sighed before leaning over the table and whispering, "How do we explain your house hunting all afternoon in Metropolis only to show up halfway across the country for an interview by early evening?"

"Oh, my God," Lois whispered back with an expression of guilty horror on her face. "I'm so sorry." Lois dropped her head in her hands for a moment before looking back up and telling him, "You were right. This is going to take some getting used to... for all of us." Clark nodded in agreement, as Daisy finally came by to take their order.

Chapter 24 - Lackeys

Day 21, Monday, 8:20AM, Metropolis

Lois said good-bye to her son as she dropped him off at his school, reminding him, "Don't forget, you get to go to AfterCare with your friends today." She kept her plastic smile in place for the woman helping him out of the car, but her frown quickly slipped back into place as she drove off. Lois was still angry with herself for her carelessness the previous night, which could not only have revealed a stronger connection between herself and Superman but could have implicated Clark as well. After pointing out her oversight, he'd been quick to forgive and they somehow overcame the awkward moment and had a pleasant evening. However, she had not been as quick to forgive herself.

The anger was still apparent on Lois' face as she entered the newsroom, offering only the smallest of smiles to Clark's usual greeting. He was already aware of the reason for her anger, having called her on it before leaving Smallville that morning. As she settled in at her desk, he walked over and politely asked, "Is everything alright?"

Lois sighed deeply before she told him, "It will be. Just give me some time."

"Well, once you get settled in, we've got something interesting from Luthor's little expedition," he told her. "We're going to be busy today."

Lois' head snapped around as she looked up at him and stated, "Consider me settled in. What have you got?"

"Well, that composite sketch of the Luthor stooge that hired the boat has yielded some fruit," Clark told her. "A neighbor who'd seen the sketch Saturday night on *America's Most Wanted* recognized him and wrote down the license number as he packed up his car and high-tailed it out of there around seven o'clock this morning. They just got the warrant to dust the room for prints a little while ago, and we should have an ID from the crime lab later this morning... That information's not public yet, by the way. They don't want to scare him off, so the police are sitting on it to give Superman a chance to track down the car. Apparently he and Commissioner Henderson have an agreement on the matter."

"I wish I had known about that," Lois commented. "So what's our plan of attack?"

"Keep track of our *unauthorized source* who's involved in the search for the car."

"Same game plan as last time?" Lois asked.

"Yep," Clark confirmed. "I've put together my notes and some supplemental information for you, which I have in a pile back at my desk. Once you're good to go with it, I'll hit the pavement to track down our *unauthorized source*."

Day 21, Monday, 8:55AM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom

Nobody accustomed to his brash management style would ever have described Perry White as jovial. However, this Monday morning found the man practically beaming due to his anticipation of yet another Daily Planet scoop based on the short briefing Lois had given him that morning. He contemplated the work that the Lois and Clark had accomplished as he observed the man walk back into the bullpen to Lois' desk. There was no doubt in Perry's mind that their best work was as a team, an opinion that had rapidly spread through the newsroom in recent weeks. As he watched the two, Clark removed several folded pages of notes from his jacket pocket, and handed them over to Lois, pointing at various points on the page as he spoke to her. After a couple of minutes, Clark was back out the door, as Lois furiously typed at her computer.

Richard also noticed the interaction and quickly recognized Lois' determined resolve that

came when she had her fingers in a big story. He had come to the same conclusion as his uncle had concerning the team of Kent and Lane, and it looked like the two were onto something big again. Though Richard had been dismissive of Clark when he'd first met the man, he'd grown to respect his journalistic talent in the short time that he'd known him. As Richard looked through the glass wall at his former lover, a war raged within him between his heart's need to keep his distance from Lois while it healed, and his mind's need to know the story details. His mind won out, and he left his office and walked over to her desk.

"Am I interrupting?" Richard asked politely.

"Oh... Richard, I'm... kind of in the middle of something," Lois answered hesitantly without looking up.

"Take it easy, this is a work question," Richard told her, as he offered her a weak smile. "What have you and Clark found?"

"Has Perry told you anything about this yet?" Lois asked tentatively, finally turning to look up at her former fiancé with a wary expression on her face.

"Only that it has something to do with the boat Luthor's goons hired," Richard replied simply.

"Well... off the record... we have a name to go with the composite sketch," Lois informed him. "I'm writing up a profile on the guy, and it looks like we have another manhunt. A neighbor saw him early this morning and Superman just found the car abandoned up in Eatontown. Police are canvassing the area looking for clues, while Superman's checking for stolen cars."

"Perry's going to love what this does to our circulation," Richard commented. "You two seem to have to magic touch when it comes to this stuff."

"Well, we pretty much have the routine down," Lois told him, as she offered him a small yet genuine smile. After a moment, she added, "Um, it looks like this may be a busy day, and I need to stay ahead on the stories..."

"I understand," Richard told her sincerely. "I'll get out of your hair. Thanks for the update."

"No problem," Lois responded quietly, as she turned back to the computer screen and resumed typing while Richard returned to his office.

Day 21, Monday, 11:00AM, Near Loganton, Pennsylvania

Roger Pruitt was starting to relax. He'd been nervous ever since the composite sketches were first shown on television Friday night and he'd holed up in his rented room through the weekend. However, an email from Lex the previous night ordered him to get out of town because he was too 'hot.' Roger had been drinking, and decided to wait until morning before making the 12 hour drive back to Chicago.

Lex also had instructed him to switch to a different car for the trip, so Roger had reserved a rental car just outside town under the alias of Todd Clemens that he'd been using. Lex had provided him with the name, along with identification and bank cards since he didn't want to risk that Roger's parole officer in Illinois might cause problems and track him to Metropolis.

Roger had made good time from Metropolis, the only traffic tie-ups occurring near the New York City area. The three hours since then had been uneventful, with the exception of a small argument a half hour earlier with a gas station cashier when he'd stopped for drinks and snacks. The kid behind the counter had been more interested in flirting with the pretty girl who was trying to buy cigarettes than in cashing him out, and Roger didn't like waiting. As he

continued west through central Pennsylvania on I-80, Roger guessed that it would take him another eight hours to get home to Chicago.

The static on the radio finally became too much to bear, and he started scanning again for something that came in clearly. He finally gave up on the FM band, and found an AM news station to keep him company on the drive. They were still milking the story on Lex Luthor's Baton Rouge safe house, and asking for leads in their search for the man that hired the boat with funds from Luthor's previously secret financial network. Roger laughed lightly to himself at that, confident that they wouldn't find him now. His laughter stopped abruptly when he felt his weight shift as his rental car lifted into the air. The color drained from his face as he realized that the gas station attendant had probably recognized him from the composite drawing and turned him in.

Superman set the rental car down in the field beside the road and as he pulled Roger from the car, he told him, "You're a long way from home, Roger."

"No crime against that," Roger declared defensively.

"In this case, it's a parole violation," Superman reminded him. "But I'm more interested in what you know about Lex Luthor."

Roger eyes shot wide as he tried to keep his fear from showing. "I don't know what you're talking about," he insisted.

"Oh, I think you do, and I'm not inclined to play games with you," Superman told him insistently.

"I have nothing to say," Roger said nervously.

"If you refuse to cooperate, you can expect to be behind bars for a very long time, given your track record," Superman pointed out.

"At least I'll be alive," Roger told him. Superman clenched his jaw at that response, realizing the level of intimidation Lex Luthor managed to maintain on those in his employ. He focused his vision once again on the rental car, looking for another way to track his nemesis.

Day 21, Monday, 12:30PM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom

"They won't officially release any information until their press conference at two o'clock, but we have the go-ahead from our sources at the FBI to run with the story," Lois informed Perry as she and Clark sat before him in his office.

"It sounds like we'll be the first to press with this," Perry noted, as the corners of his mouth starting to curl into a smile despite his best efforts to prevent it. "Have your sources gotten anything more out of Pruitt?"

"Well, off the record... he's afraid that Luthor will kill him if he talks, so he's not saying anything," Lois told him. "However, his laptop has provided some leads, especially given Pruitt's lack of computer literacy. Yahoo's mail page was one of the few entries in the browser history, and the password for the site was cached, which means that they have a record of all of the email between Pruitt and his boss, who's listed in the address book as 'Mr. Big'. It's quite clear from the emails that they really were searching for kryptonite off of the coast. They're also investigating the numbers from his cell phone's received call list. One of them comes from an Internet phone from a site off-shore that they can't get customer information on. We're guessing that one's from Luthor."

"So they think he fled the country?" Perry asked.

"Not necessarily," Lois answered. "With the Internet phone, he could originate the call from anywhere, and we know from Friday's financial dragnet that he's adept at hiding his

Internet source address. We think he's using the Internet phone to mask his originating location."

"It... It seems clear that Luthor didn't completely trust him," Clark added.

"Well, that's consistent with the personality profile that one of our contacts showed us," Lois told him. "Luthor is a micro-manager convinced that everyone around him is an idiot, and he trusts nobody," Lois informed them. "He's also never kept more than the bare minimum number of operatives around, which means that Pruitt's arrest could be more disruptive for him than it appeared at first glance."

"Well done, you two," Perry complimented them. "See what else you can find out and get this wrapped up for printing by the afternoon deadline." After a pensive moment, he added, "You two do your best work together as a team. I think that it's worth continuing that collaboration." Perry gestured to indicate he was done, and Clark and Lois retreated back to their desks.

Day 21, Monday, 8:00PM, Pittsburg, Pennsylvania

"So, do we have a deal?" Lex Luthor derisively asked the man he had knocked down to his hands and knees a few minutes earlier, as he scratched his three-day old beard.

"Yeah, but you could have just asked without going through all these theatrics," the man complained as he pulled himself up off the floor. Henry Morrison was a small-time crook who had done a number of small jobs for Lex many years before. Though not a genius of Lex Luthor's caliber, he was an intelligent man and had consistently managed to avoid law enforcement's attention. "I've never let you down," Henry reminded his uninvited guest.

As Henry stood up, he finally got a good look at his visitor, who was sporting a wig of long, slightly-curly brown hair pulled back in a pony-tail. "I can't afford to take chances," Lex told him as he put away his gun, grabbed the laptop case that had been setting against the wall, and opened it up on the kitchen table. Lex pulled out an envelope and threw it to Henry. "First, we do everything under a different identity in Metropolis. You've got new ID and bank cards in the envelope. The PIN is written on the back of the envelope. Everything associated directly with the project is done in cash, and I'll keep enough in the account for your expenses."

Henry looked inside the envelope. "Stephen Evans?" he asked. "Lex, where did you-"

"Ah," Lex interrupted. "Never, *never* say my name out loud!"

"Sorry... Mr. Big."

As the laptop booted up, Lex told him, "First we'll go over the basics, such as communications. Then, I'll explain my plan."

After hearing Lex Luthor's lecture on secure communications and the details of his plan, Henry carefully considered what had been revealed to him. He was unable to shake the questions from his mind as Lex warned him, "I don't want any surprises on this, Henry! Just stick to the plan. Don't think about it, just do it."

"Wouldn't a drive-by be better," Henry asked.

"If it was, then that would be what I told you to do," Lex pointed out. "We have to take additional measures to guarantee our success when that busy-body takes such an interest in them. Even if he's not there to interfere with our objective, if the plan's not... perfectly executed ... he could still negate the results."

"What about a hit-and-run?" Henry persisted.

"Same problem," Lex explained in annoyance. "We know that the busybody does his

round-the-world thing overnight most nights, so that's the best time to execute our plan. However, there is a high-end security system on the home so an intrusion could attract his attention. We have to lure them out and take steps to insure that they don't recover from the trap."

"Car bomb?" Henry continued.

"Too imprecise," Lex answered. "Now stop second guessing me! You're not paid to think! I've given you the perfect plan for... delivering my message, so just do it!"

"Well, we won't miss at that range if he takes the bait. Why-"

"Enough!" Lex warned.

"Okay, okay!" Henry conceded, "We'll do it your way."

"Good, now repeat it all back to me," Lex insisted.

"We grab the security guard's kid, convince the old man to take the night off, and get our contractor in there. We roll out the bait, and when they bite, BOOM!" At Lex's glare, Henry quickly added, "Oh, and the contractor delivers your personal message before dropping the hammer. Piece of cake."

"It had better be!" Lex again warned him. "You'll send me an IM once it's done."

"Sure thing, Le- um, Mr. Big," Henry agreed.

Lex felt a perverse satisfaction in the pain he was about to cause as he left Henry's home and returned to airport for the trip to his Rocky Mountain hideaway.

Chapter 25 - Payback

Day 24, Thursday, 1:15PM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom

Clark and Lois settled into the visitors' chairs in Perry's office a bit awkwardly, as this was the first time since her breakup with Richard that he had joined them on a meeting with Perry. He seemed a bit uncomfortable as well.

"Why don't you tell them what you've got," Perry suggested to Richard.

"I got a call a little while ago from someone claiming to be one of the sandhogs on the new pipeline, alleging that they're using substandard materials and practices to meet their deadlines," Richard told them. "He wants to meet with us tonight to show us his proof." The pipeline Richard referred to was the long term project to increase the fresh water supply to the city. They'd been blasting under the city for three years as they extended the pipeline, and it would be another five years before they finally tied into the source at a lake sixty miles northwest of the city.

"Um, this informant called *you*?" Clark asked incredulously.

"People do call me sometimes, Clark," Richard told him.

"Oh, I don't doubt that..." Clark stuttered. "I hope you don't think that I... Um, what I was saying is... well, you don't normally handle that kind of thing. Lois has handled most of the contractor abuse stories."

"Relax, Clark, I wasn't taking it personally," Richard assured him. "It seems our informant isn't one of Lois' fans and insisted that she not be involved. He insists on working with me. He'll allow one other person to come along, so you'll be coming with me tonight, Clark. We meet him at the dig site at midnight."

"Clark's right, it does seem a bit unusual," Lois commented.

"Lois, don't get your nose out of joint over this," Perry admonished her. "Not everyone is lining up to be interviewed by you, and if this informant is the real thing and he wants to deal with Richard, then so be it. I want you to pull out your city contractor information and help prepare Kent and Richard for their meeting with him tonight."

One hour later, Clark and Lois were still with Richard in his office, reviewing the contractors that had been involved on the dig, and cross referencing them to those who had been exposed in some of the reconstruction scandals since the quake.

"Well, all I see is a couple of sub-contractors in common and not very major players at that," Lois summarized as she checked her watch. "There's nothing concrete to corroborate this guy's claim."

"He said that he'd show us the evidence when we got there," Richard reminded her. "Besides, we've just started working on this."

"We *do* still have other sources to check," Clark pointed out.

As she looked again at her watch, Lois told the men, "Well, I'll dig into this deeper when I get back."

"Where are you going?" Richard inquired quietly, as he looked at his watch.

"I'm... I'm getting furniture delivered to the new house," she told him quietly.

"Oh, right," Richard acknowledged sadly. "I forgot that you closed on it yesterday."

Lois looked back at Richard with a compassionate expression as she quietly told him, "I've... got to get going. I'll be back as soon as I can." Lois left the two men to their research as she made her way out of the office.

"Are you alright?" Clark asked Richard.

Richard looked up from his notes as he answered, "What? Yeah, I'll be fine. It just... it takes a little getting used to."

"I'm sorry," Clark told him sincerely.

Richard waved him off, telling him, "Forget about it. What was that you were saying about other sources?"

Day 24, Thursday, 11:40PM, Metropolis

Richard knocked on the door of Clark's apartment for a second time before hearing a muffled, "Coming!" from the other side of the door and Clark opened it a moment later. "Sorry about that," Clark apologized. As he checked his pockets, he added, "I think I've got everything... Wait, let me get my notepad... Oh, and thanks for the ride."

"No problem, it was on the way," Richard told him, as he stepped in the door and took a quick glance around the spartan apartment, noting the beat up old couch and lawn chairs in the living room, a card table and chairs in the kitchen, and what appeared to be an air mattress through the door into the next room, which he assumed must be the bedroom. "You've been here, what, about a week now?" Richard asked.

"Almost two, actually," Clark told him. As Clark noticed Richard's gaze of his apartment, he added bashfully, "I... I gave away everything before my trip a few years back, so I'm... I'm a bit light on furniture. I've been shopping, though ..."

"Oh, don't worry about it, Clark," Richard told him. "We've all been there... Ready?"

"Yeah, I got everything now," Clark informed him. "Let's go."

It took ten minutes to reach the dig site at 22nd and Larson from Clark's Bakerline apartment north of downtown. It was one of three active dig sites along the tunnel. This particular site was used for moving personnel and equipment to and from the tunnel, while the other two sites were used for removing the excavated material. The site had a small footprint on the surface, roughly a fifty foot wide lot, and one hundred fifty feet deep. A few construction vehicles were parked on the site which also contained a twelve hundred square foot temporary building that sheltered the shaft leading down to the pipeline tunnels two hundred feet below the city.

As Clark and Richard walked up to the chain link gate in front of the site, a figure approached them from the other side. "Are you White?" the man asked.

"Yes," Richard told him. "This is my colleague, Clark Kent. You must be Luigi..."

The man shook his head, as he told him, "Naw, he's already gone down below. I'm Joey. Follow me."

Joey led them into the temporary building and over to the construction lift, which was a large ten by ten-foot cage with an open top to accommodate oversized equipment. Joey pulled open the door of the elevator, as he directed them inside. "Like I said, Luigi is already down there. I have to stay up top as lookout. Just press the down button once I shut the door."

Clark sensed Joey's elevated pulse and the lack of heartbeats from the tunnel below, and hesitated. "Are you sure he can't come up?" Clark asked. "That contraption doesn't look that safe..."

"Relax, Clark," Richard told him as he gave him a gentle push into the elevator. "They use this constantly sixteen hours a day without a problem. It should be completely safe."

"Shouldn't we have hard-hats or something?" Clark protested.

"Trust me, you won't need them," Joey told them as he shut the door behind them.

"Geez, Clark, don't be such a worry wart," Richard scolded, as he pushed the down

button.

After the elevator had descended about sixty-five feet down the shaft, its downward motion suddenly stopped as the winch went silent and the car's emergency brake sprang against the I-beam. Joey shouted down to them, "I almost forgot one thing... Lex Luthor sends his regards." Both men looked up in surprise as five hand grenades fell towards them. When the grenades reached them two seconds later, Clark immediately gathered them in front of him, his back to Richard, looking much like a juggler to the other man as he maneuvered the deadly devices.

When Clark heard the faint sound of the first of the grenade detonators activate, he pressed himself against the side of the elevator, arms folded vertically along his torso to contain the shrapnel as the grenades exploded through the side of the cage. Though the shrapnel was contained, the force of the blast spread around his body, shredding his civilian clothes and throwing his glasses high into the air, shattering the lenses.

"My God, Clark!" Richard shouted, as he witnessed the fireball in front of his colleague.

"Are you alright?" Clark asked in response, as he peeked over his shoulder, hiding his face.

"Me?" Richard responded incredulously, as he pulled out his cell phone. "We've got to get you to a hospital."

"Put the phone down, I'm fine," Clark commanded, his voice in a deeper timbre.

"Like hell you are, you're not Superman!" Richard told him, as he grabbed the other man by the shoulder as spun him around to face him. At the sight of the familiar red and yellow emblem on a field of blue Richard fell silent and dropped his phone to the floor of the lift.

Richard noticed that the front of Clark's suit had been almost completely burnt away with only a few stubborn threads keeping it over his shoulders. The yellow belt, red briefs and blue tights were also exposed through the tattered pants, which had burnt away from the waist down to just a few inches above his knees. His pants would have been at his ankles but for his grasp on them at the waist. Richard glanced over to the gaping hole through the aluminum side panel of the lift and to the shrapnel at their feet, before returning his gaze to Superman's face.

Realizing the futility in denying the obvious, Superman asked, "Are you sure about that?" as he floated up several inches and discarded the tattered remains of this civilian attire, quickly incinerating the material with his heat vision.

"Oh, my God," Richard muttered quietly, reeling with shock.

"This has to stay between us," Superman told him. "We'll talk about it after I finish with the hit man." With that, he zoomed up the shaft, in pursuit of their attacker.

Joey Taccone had sprinted through the temporary building the moment he'd dropped the last grenade, reaching the door of the structure as the explosion rocked it and illuminated the building around him. He hurried across the yard, out the gate and around the corner of the block to his car. Less than thirty seconds after the explosion went off, he was jumping into the driver's seat, pushing the key in the ignition, pulling the door shut, and peeling down the street. Superman followed, looking down from one thousand feet above.

Richard was futilely hitting the up button on the construction elevator. *Joey must have cut the power to the winch*, he thought. His mind was still reeling from the revelation, *My God, that clumsy, goofy dork is Superman*. Richard thought back over the month since Clark had rejoined the staff, his sudden disappearances when a crisis was announced, as another

realization suddenly hit him. *Lois knows*. Richard recalled that frequently when a crisis was announced on the newswire, his former fiancée had been providing excuses for Clark to leave the newsroom or otherwise distracting whoever was talking to him. *She's been covering for him*, Richard thought as he remembered some of the excuses.

"Clark, don't you have a meeting at the city building? You're going to be late if you don't hurry."

"Clark, on your way back from lunch, could you bring me a Frappuccino?"

"Clark, why don't you go ahead and check out that stuff out in the archives without me. I'll catch up with you later."

How could I have missed it? he chastised himself. He also recalled his first conversation with Lois after Superman's return and her vigil after his fall to Earth, and wondered if he had found his rival. He wasn't just a story - as Richard had previously believed. Superman was Lois' friend, coworker and teammate, and she **knew**. *If he's Jason's father, you'd think Jason would have inherited something*, Richard speculated as he pondered that possibility. He was shaken from thoughts when the light from the room above was blocked as Superman descended back down the shaft.

"We'll need to talk on the run," Superman told him, "I'm trying to track the hit man back to his boss." With that, Superman reached his left arm behind Richard and grabbed him around the waist and they flew up the shaft, out of the building and up into the sky. He landed a few minutes later on top of one of the nearby skyscrapers. "I doubt that the hit man is in the loop, given Luthor's history," Superman explained. "But he'll probably call in to report the job done."

"So what now?" Richard asked hesitantly.

"I wait for him to call his boss," Superman informed him. "If it's a local call, there is a good chance that I can track him by listening for the echo across town."

"Right... you hear everything," Richard replied quietly. After a moment's silence, he mumbled, "I wasn't expecting this..."

"Richard, it's important to keep this secret between us," Superman insisted. "If it got out, it would not only ruin any chance I have for a normal life, it would also put people I care about in danger. Certain enemies of mine would try to get back at me by going after them. It's happened before. Promise me that you'll keep this to yourself." Richard didn't answer right away, as he struggled with his review of Clark in light of the new information.

"Richard?" Superman inquired patiently.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Don't worry, Clark, I'll keep quiet," Richard promised. "But I have questions."

"Oh, one more thing," Superman told him. "Never assume that it's safe to discuss this. We always discuss the other identity third person." At Richard's nod, he continued, "You had questions. I'll answer them if I can."

"Yeah... Lois knows, doesn't she?" Richard inquired. At Superman's perplexed expression, Richard clarified, "While I was waiting in the elevator, it occurred to me that she's been coming up with a lot of convenient excuses for you... I mean, for Clark to skip out of the newsroom whenever a crisis hits."

Superman looked back down at the street as he answered, "Richard, the reason the cover works is that people have an ingrained first impression of Clark as a bumbling fool. They dismiss him as a nobody, which allows him to stay under the radar. However, once someone gets to know him well enough to see through the façade, or if they never form that dismissive

impression to begin with, then it doesn't work so well. Lois sees through the façade."

"Who else knows?" Richard asked tentatively.

"I'd prefer not to share that," Superman told him. "It's a small number of people, though - you can count them on your fingers - and I'd like to keep it that way."

Before Richard got a chance to ask another question, Superman's head snapped up and he disappeared in a blue blur. Richard walked over to the half-wall at the roof's edge and looked out over the town as he continued his contemplation. He found himself chuckling when he was struck by the inconsistency between the apartment he'd seen earlier in the night, and who its famous occupant actually was. His thoughts then moved to Jason's pitch at the dunk tank the previous Saturday. *That could explain why he'd help Jason with the pitch, given how close they were,* Richard thought. He recalled Jason's enthusiasm for Clark and adoration for Superman as he wondered, *Could Jason know?* He quickly dismissed the idea. *He'd have to be crazy to share a secret like that with a five year old.*

Richard hadn't realized that ten minutes had already passed when he broke from his contemplation as the Man of Steel approached. "Sorry about that," Superman apologized. "I had to move quickly to track the echo."

"I didn't mind a little time to get my head around this," Richard admitted. "Did you get what you needed?"

"Yes and no," Superman answered.

"What did you find out?" Richard probed as his brow furrowed in confusion.

"This stays off the record," Superman insisted. At Richard's nod, he continued, "I tracked it back to a middleman, who in turn sent an IM off to report their 'success' to his boss. It's going to take a little work to track that back to Luthor, but at least we have someone to watch now. I'll get the ball rolling on surveillance after I take you back to your car."

"Okay... Then we're going back now?" Richard asked hesitantly.

"Not quite yet," Superman told him pensively. "Something about this attack has been bothering me... When they contacted you, did they specifically ask for Clark to come with you, or did they just want you?"

"They just wanted me," Richard confirmed. "It was at my insistence that they allowed me to bring someone with me, as long as it wasn't Lois."

"Why would Lex Luthor target you but specifically make sure that Lois wasn't caught in the crossfire?" Superman asked him. "It's not his style to minimize collateral damage, and I can only come up with one explanation for it."

Richard remained silent a moment, waiting for Superman to continue, before he finally inquired quietly, "What's the explanation?"

"Lex Luthor is a sadistic, evil man," Superman observed. "He doesn't just want his enemies dead, he wants them to suffer first, and he likes to impose emotional as well as physical suffering. I think he targeted you as a way to impose suffering on Lois, in retaliation for his financial losses last week."

"I guess his information's out of date," Richard commented sadly.

Superman looked at Richard with a sympathetic expression on his face as he gently told him, "I don't believe that. In spite of recent events, Lois still cares deeply for you and it would upset her tremendously if you were hurt." After a moment of thought, he added, "You and Clark might want to stay dead for a couple days, so we can see what additional instructions the middleman gets. Do you think we can manage that?"

"I guess so," Richard agreed pensively. After another moment of silence, Richard eyes

shot wide as he exclaimed, "Lois' family! They could be in danger!"

"That already occurred to me, and I've already checked on the ones I know about. I'll speak with Lois once we're done here, and then see to the rest of them," Superman promised. "You should stay in a hotel tonight. Are you ready to go back?"

Richard's pushed his shock over the evening's events from his mind as another realization gave strength to his voice. "You know where she's been staying," Richard stated with certainty.

Superman nodded as he looked over the edge of the roof. "Richard, I have to respect her wishes on the matter. I can't tell you where she is or who... who she's spent time with. She'll tell you when she's ready."

Richard dropped his head in thought for a moment, again wondering if his rival stood before him before he rejected the idea and asked, "Is there anything that you *can* tell me about the guy?"

"I'm sorry," Superman told him sincerely. After a moment's pause, Superman looked back at him as he told him, "There are a lot of things I need to do tonight. We really should be going." Once Richard nodded his assent, Superman flew him back into the sky as he took him to his car before heading to Smallville to explain the situation to Lois.

Chapter 26 - Contemplation

Day 25, Friday, 3:10AM, Metropolis, Bessolo Boulevard Marriott Hotel

The clock was blinking 3:10AM in the hotel guest room when Richard White looked over at it from the bed for the fifth time in the last five minutes. He hadn't slept a wink since he had checked himself in two and a half hours earlier. The whirlwind of thoughts in his mind since the startling revelations earlier in the night precluded sleep.

First and foremost among those thoughts was a reevaluation of Clark Kent, as Richard saw his quirky behavior in a new light: Clark's insistence that he usually worked better alone, with the exception of his collaboration with Lois; his surprising disappearances whenever a crisis came up, shortly before Superman appeared on the scene; and the silly golly-gee-whiz façade. Most startling was that nobody had thought anything of these now obvious facts - that Clark had been gone for some period of time as Superman, was the same approximate height and weight and routinely disappeared just before the Man of Steel showed up. *How was I fooled by that?* Richard wondered unhappily. *How is anybody fooled by that?*

His dour mood lifted as he once again considered Clark's apartment and felt the smile form on his face. *Not exactly what I'd expect for Superman*, Richard thought as he remembered the lawn furniture in the living room. *Clark, maybe, but Superman?* He compared what he knew of the two personas. Superman was like the high school star quarterback, and Clark Kent was the geek that got locked in his own locker. Yet, they were the same man. Richard looked over at the clock again: 3:11AM.

Richard's frown returned as his thoughts turned closer to home, considering the Man of Steel's influence with Lois and Jason. It was impossible to miss the depth of feeling that Lois obviously had for Superman. She dove into the open ocean without a moment's hesitation to rescue him after he had been stabbed with the kryptonite blade and her vigil after his fall to Earth made it clear that he wasn't just a story, despite her insistence to the contrary when Richard had first asked her about him. *Was she in love with him?* Richard pondered. *Is she in love with him now?* Once again, Richard found himself wondering if Superman might be his anonymous rival.

When Lois had first informed him that he wasn't Jason biological father, Richard had eliminated the possibility that Superman was his rival due to her immediate reference to the man's mother. Everyone knew from Lois' first article on him that his entire family had been wiped out when Krypton was destroyed. *But the man is also Clark Kent, and Clark has a picture of his mother on his desk*, Richard noted. *Is that Jason's grandmother? How does Clark Kent's family background reconcile with what he told us about himself as Superman?* The clock now read 3:12AM.

Richard mulled over Superman's reappearance, and how Lois' behavior had slowly changed since then. She became quiet and introspective immediately afterwards, no longer wishing to share her thoughts with him and it was just a week later that she had shunned their shared bed. The more he considered it, the more likely it seemed that Clark *was* his rival. *But if he is Jason's real father, why is the boy so fragile?* he wondered. His thoughts moved ahead to the tyke's amazing pitch at the dunk tank the previous Saturday. *What if that was really Jason?* he wondered. As he recalled that Lois told him that she was following her heart when she left him, he wondered, *Who else could it be, if not Superman a.k.a. Clark Kent?* The clock now read 3:13AM. *This is going to be a long night...*

Day 25, Friday, 10:15AM, Metropolis, Bessolo Boulevard Marriott Hotel

After lying awake all night, Richard had finally given up on sleep at seven o'clock. Despite his exhaustion, he dragged himself out of bed, showered, and ordered breakfast to his room before calling his uncle Perry. The older man had insisted that both Richard and Clark stay out of the office and out of sight, as Superman had requested - apparently the Man of Steel had paid the editor a visit the previous night. Perry had also promised to send someone to the hotel with fresh clothes, toiletries, and a laptop so that Richard could work remotely.

It was nearly three hours later that Lois had called him from the lobby and informed him that the promised supplies had arrived. She was now on her way up to the room with Jimmy. As he waited, Richard's attention was momentarily diverted to the television by the WGBS news brief that came during a break in the local morning talk show.

"...work on the pipeline has been put on hold pending an investigation into the explosion that ripped through a construction elevator at 22nd and Larson late last night. Sources close to the police tell us that two journalists were on the elevator at the time, apparently lured there under false pretenses and attacked in retaliation for recently published articles in the *Daily Planet*. Both the police and the *Daily Planet* are remaining tight lipped about the identities of the two journalists..."

Richard turned the television off as the knock on the door announced the presence of his *Daily Planet* colleagues. After looking through the peephole to see Lois and Jimmy standing in the hallway, Richard opened the door and stood aside to let them into the room.

"Sorry it took us so long," Lois apologized as they walked through the door. "We had something... unexpected this morning."

"Unexpected?" Richard questioned, as he stepped aside to allow his guests into the room.

"Lex Luthor called to gloat over your murder," Lois clarified. "That's another thing from his personality profile. He likes to bask in his enemies' suffering, which means being there or as close to it as possible. He probably called hoping to hear the anguish in my voice when he told me that he had you killed."

"That's sick," Richard stated numbly. "Were they able to track the call?"

"It was another Internet phone number from offshore," Lois told him. "A certain anonymous friend of ours is trying to glean some more information from the call, and we copied a transcript to the laptop if you're interested in reading it later. The call came on my cell phone, so we don't have a recording of it. Don't ask me how he got the number."

"I'll take a look at it later," Richard told her.

"Here's the laptop, Mr. White," Jimmy informed him. Gesturing to the suitcase that he had set by the bed, Jimmy added, "We also packed a bag for you."

"Thanks, Jimmy," Richard acknowledged as he took the laptop bag, and proceeded to pull out the laptop and boot it up at the table.

"We've also spoken to our police contacts," Lois continued solemnly. "This part stays off the record, by the way... Superman spoke with the police and FBI after last night's rescue and they have both the hit man and middleman under close surveillance. They've already served warrants to wiretap their email and phone calls, and there's some... unofficial surveillance... where local law enforcement can't reach, such as the offshore Internet Phone site."

Lois paused a moment before continuing anxiously, "We've also confirmed that you and Clark were the only ones among our friends and family who were targeted last night, and we're taking precautions to keep everyone else safe."

"What about Jason?" Richard inquired.

"I kept him home from school today," Lois told him. "He's somewhere safe." Richard

nodded his acknowledgment.

Momentarily forgetting about Jimmy's presence, Richard suggested, "Maybe it would be a good idea if he stayed with his real dad for a while. If it's safe there, that is." Lois glanced over at Jimmy, whose eyes had snapped wide open in surprise at that unexpected information.

"Um, why don't I head back and give you two some privacy?" Jimmy suggested, as he squirmed his way out the door. "I'll see you back at the office."

Once Jimmy had left, Richard turned back to Lois and apologized, "Sorry, I didn't mean for that to slip."

"It's alright," Lois assured him. "Jimmy won't say anything."

Richard's thoughts returned to the question that had haunted him all night long, as he considered how best to broach the delicate subject. "Lois, is Clark..." Richard began uncertainly before diverting his gaze and falling silent for a moment. Lois dropped her head as she anticipated the question.

"Is Clark Jason's real father?" Richard finally asked as he looked back at Lois. She looked up at Richard with a sympathetic expression on her face and opened her mouth to speak, but couldn't find her voice. "I thought so," Richard said sadly as he sat down in a chair at the table, his gaze at the floor.

Finally finding her voice, Lois told him, "We... we had a feeling you'd figure that out pretty quickly after last night's revelation. He's been suggesting for awhile now that we tell you, but I wanted you to have more time to heal before dropping it on you... and I was worried about the impact at the office. Your uncle is Clark's boss, after all. Technically speaking, so are you."

Richard laughed without humor as he looked up at her, "You were worried about my uncle and I taking it out on Sup-"

"Don't say it!" Lois interrupted him. "This isn't a safe place for discussing such things! If we need to talk about this, we go somewhere that we know we won't be overheard." Richard nodded as he dropped his head back down.

"Maybe you could stop by the new house tomorrow?" Lois suggested gently. "I need to get that furniture from you anyways, and Clark's installing some... special equipment... that will allow us to talk there securely. I'm sure that we can get Martha to watch Jason for a little bit if we need to have an adult conversation."

"Martha?" Richard questioned.

"Clark's mom," Lois clarified. As she scrutinized Richard more closely, she asked, "Did you get any sleep at all last night?"

"Are you kidding?" Richard asked her incredulously. "How could anybody sleep after that bombshell, especially after I finally put two and two together?"

Lois looked at him compassionately as she told him, "You should try to get some rest... I've got to get back to work." Lois regarded him closely for a moment before turning and leaving the room.

Day 26, Saturday, 9: 00 AM, Metropolis, 1938 Sullivan Lane (Home of Lois Lane)

Lois opened the door to welcome Richard White into her new home. "Thanks for coming," she welcomed. "Your timing's perfect. Clark just finished unpacking everything from the other house." Lois escorted him into the living room, where a comfortable couch, loveseat and recliner sat opposite a large wall-mounted plasma television above the fireplace.

"What, no lawn furniture?" Richard joked as he sat in the recliner.

"Lawn furniture?" Lois questioned as her brow wrinkled in confusion.

"Richard, she's never been to my apartment," Clark informed the other man.

"You have lawn furniture in your apartment?" Lois asked incredulously.

"I didn't see the point in spending much there when I'm eventually going to be living, um, somewhere else," Clark told her as he punched keys on a control panel in the hallway. After a moment, he added, "There, the acoustic barrier is up. We can talk freely now."

"Acoustic barrier?" Richard inquired. "What's that?"

"It's Kryptonian technology," Lois explained. "It blocks all sound waves and any electronic communication from passing out through the exterior walls. Your cell phone won't work here when the barrier's up, by the way. Clark and I have special filters on ours for them to work through the barrier."

"That seems to be a bit extreme," Richard concluded in amazement.

"Not when you consider that I'm sometimes a favorite subject of the tabloids, and that the paparazzi have been known to stake out our house with long lenses and parabolic mikes," Lois explained. "People should be able to speak freely in their homes without worrying about that."

"Richard, do you want anything to drink?" Clark asked politely. "We have iced tea, apple or orange juice, milk, and water. Oh, and we have beer or wine we can pull out, too."

"I'll take the beer," Richard responded.

As Clark handed Richard a bottle of Budweiser and sat on the loveseat, he kindly asked the other man, "Where would you like to start?"

Richard frowned before taking a large gulp from his beer, "Where to start..." he repeated. After a moment, he commented bitterly "I assume that, since *you're not even human*, that you pulled some strings to fabricate that DNA report."

"The DNA report is authentic," Clark told him. "The only strings pulled were to make sure that certain non-human characteristics stayed under the radar. Jason *is* my biological son."

"How can you be sure of that?" Richard asked angrily.

Lois answered for Clark as she emphatically asked Richard, "Would a son of yours be able to throw a half ton grand piano across a room with enough force to instantly crush a man to death, like Jason did aboard the *Gertrude* when that psychopath tried to kill me?" Richard eyes went wide with shock at the new revelation while Lois continued, "Or throw a two ton car a mile across a quarry, like Jason does when Clark takes him there? Or run through the Smallville cornfields at seventy miles an hour-"

"He's up to about one hundred thirty miles per hour now," Clark interrupted.

"Really?" Lois asked, breaking into a wide smile as she turned to Clark. "When did he do that?"

"He always could. He just wiped out when he tried to stop if he was up above seventy... until last night," Clark explained. "He's getting used to the speed now. I don't think that he's come close to reaching his limits there yet, but I'm not pushing him on it like I am with the strength."

"Um, hello? I'm still here," Richard reminded them, raising his hand up.

"Sorry," Lois and Clark said in unison.

"Jason was always so... delicate," Richard noted seriously. "Since when has he had super strength and speed?"

"We think it was an immune system reaction to the kryptonite that Luthor was waving in his face that activated his dormant Kryptonian genes," Lois told him. "That's also why the allergies are history."

After an awkward moment of silence, Clark pointed out, "The piano toss aboard the *Gertrude* also raises a problem... Lex Luthor *knows* that Jason has super-strength, which means he *knows* that he's my son. As long as that madman remains at large, Lois and Jason are in danger. It's also why we can't publicly acknowledge a relationship between Lois Lane and Clark Kent. That could put even more people at risk."

The blood drained from Richard's face as he considered that a man as ruthless as Lex Luthor was targeting his sights on Jason. "Oh, my God." he muttered, horrified.

"Exactly," Lois agreed. "You read the transcript from the Luthor call yesterday - well, we left one line out. He said that I and the... quote, 'Superbrat', unquote... have to die because of Superman."

"We're doing everything we can to prevent him from carrying out that threat," Clark told Richard. "That's why Lois and I have been so passionate about going after Lex Luthor in the press, and using Kryptonian technology both to protect this house and to help hunt for Luthor."

Richard looked up at Clark intently as he considered that new information. He had walked into the house determined to hate him as much as he was able. However, recognizing the man's resolve to protect the boy whom he also considered his son weakened that determination, and Richard was now forced to acknowledge that there was probably nobody on Earth better able to protect Jason. *It's not fair that he's so hard to hate*, Richard thought angrily. Aloud, he calmly asked, "So it's a waiting game, now? We wait for Lex Luthor to make his move?"

"We're not just waiting," Clark told him. "We've got surveillance in place, and we're tied into every law enforcement network on the planet to alert me at the slightest suspicious activity that could lead us to him."

"Did you get anything from that Luthor call yesterday morning?" Richard asked numbly.

"I missed the first few seconds, and the quality of the call wasn't high enough for me to be precise, but I picked up a lot of animal calls in the background," Clark told him. "Based on the calls I identified, I'm guessing that it's a mountain location, probably in the Rockies, which still left a lot of ground to cover. I scanned the area yesterday as best I could, but I came up empty."

Richard looked between Lois and Clark as he recognized the similar expressions of parental anxiety, one that he was sure he shared. He looked back to Clark and told him sincerely, "I'm glad that Jason has you looking out for him." After a moment, his fear for Jason subsided as anger replaced it and he added, "But I'm still very angry with you for taking Lois from me."

"It was my choice, Richard," Lois told him gently but firmly. "Clark didn't take me away. He was just there for me to go to him."

"Don't debate the semantics!" Richard bellowed. "Don't I have a right to angry over this?"

"Yes, you do," Clark agreed. "I'm sorry, Richard. I never wanted to impose this heartache on you."

"Stop being so nice about it," Richard demanded. "Let me hate you for a least a little while." The three were silent for a few minutes as Richard emptied his beer. Finally, he broke the silence as he admitted, "I'm scared to death for that little guy. What if everything that you're doing isn't enough?" Richard looked up to see the look of terror mirrored on his hosts' faces.

Clark answered, "We can't think that way, Richard. We have to believe that we can

protect him, and we'll do everything in our power to do so. He's our priority."

"Mine, too," Richard agreed. After another awkward silence, Richard sighed heavily before looking over at Clark, pointing his finger at him and telling him solemnly, "I came over here fully planning to give you hell for ruining my life, but there's been a change of plans. I need to know what you're doing to protect Lois and Jason, and what I can do to help. I'm not going to pretend to like you - that's just not a possibility right now. However, their safety is more important. So, where do we start?"

"This has to stay between us," Clark insisted. Once Richard nodded his understanding, Clark and Lois proceeded to explain what they had put in place to protect their family and to catch Lex Luthor.

Chapter 27 - Preparation

Day 27, Sunday, 8:00AM (Central Time), Chicago, Illinois

Chicago was quiet and overcast this morning, as the windy city's residents recovered from their Saturday nights, made their way to church, or lounged away on a sleepy Sunday morning. There were two new residents enjoying the morning from the penthouse condo overlooking the Chicago River a few blocks inland from Lake Michigan. "The Flower Duet" from Delibes' *Lakmé* blared through the living room as a bald man with a ten day old grey beard read that morning's *Chicago Tribune*. Occasionally, he would look up to read the close captioning on the muted plasma television, which was tuned to a cable news channel. As he scanned the news and reflected on recent events, Lex Luthor was now at his most cheerful since his failure against the Man of Steel a month earlier. *They still haven't released their names*, Lex noticed as he searched for more details on Thursday night's assault of the two *Daily Planet* journalists.

Lex allowed himself a smile as he reflected on the despair that Lois Lane must now be experiencing from the death of her fiancé, Richard White, and her co-writer, Clark Kent. He could inflict suffering on her by killing those close to her, even though he couldn't yet target her directly - he needed her alive to bait the trap for Superman. Henry Morrison had reported Thursday night that they had succeeded in killing both Kent and White. Lex had concluded that she was made of stronger stuff than most when she'd successfully hidden her despair during Lex's called her to gloat Friday morning, though her fear and anger was obvious. He placed the call as he and Kitty left their Aspen cabin, using the broadband feature of his cell phone to access a remote Internet phone for the call and thus conceal his location.

"Thank God we're finally out of that horrible cabin," Kitty said casually as she re-entered the room. The Rocky Mountain cabin that Lex and Kitty had been staying at had left them both with a touch of cabin fever, and they were happy to abandon it. As luxurious as the cabin had claimed to be, it was a poor substitute for the sophistication of a major city, and Lex was accustomed to the good life. Kitty had also been bored out of her mind there and had become another source of irritation.

"God had nothing to do with it," Lex said calmly as he looked up from the paper. "You have me to thank for that. I explained before that it would take time to set up a new place, and we came here as soon as it was ready."

"Well, whatever," Kitty muttered. After a moment of quiet, Kitty added, "We should get a dog."

Lex glared at her in irritation. "Have you forgotten how much trouble the last one caused?" he asked her, as he remembered the messes and chewed furniture. The pooch had only slightly distracted Kitty from interrupting him.

"We can train it," Kitty assured him.

"We?" Lex inquired impatiently. "You are not actually suggesting that I lower myself and waste my genius to train a dog, are you? I have other plans that require my attention."

Kitty scrutinized Lex intently for a moment, before concluding, "That beard looks like crap."

"So you've been telling me," Lex reminded her, the agitation clear in his voice. "As I've been telling you, with all the press attention lately, we can't rely on a wig alone for a disguise. It'll look better once it's filled in a bit more, and after you've died the grey."

"It'll still look like crap," Kitty decided. "It makes you look old, too."

Lex threw the paper down and glared at her. "Deal with it!" he commanded her, as he rose from his chair and marched back to the office, the morning's calm now irreparably

damaged.

Lex's cheer returned somewhat as he pulled up his files on the kryptonite search, and saw that they were finally making progress there. Shortly after Superman's original debut, Lex had correctly deduced that debris from Krypton had been caught in the wake of his escape ship. Lex had concluded that the meteorites that rained down across upper Africa in 1978 were actually the debris from Krypton. The fragments had broken free of the ship's wake when it abruptly reduced speed upon entering the Sol system and had crashed into the Earth several years after the ship had. After finally escaping Superman's dragnet some weeks earlier, he had painstakingly located each of the remaining twenty-eight recovered samples from the 1978 meteor shower that had impacted Africa from Ethiopia to Cameroon.

The largest, basketball-sized meteorites had landed in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and on two occasions, Lex had successfully stolen one of those samples while it was on loan to the Metropolis Museum of Natural History: once shortly after Superman's initial debut and again shortly after he returned a month ago. He would not acquire a third kryptonite sample there. The previous two robberies had brought the museums security practices into question, and other major museums were now hesitant to loan rare pieces.

The remaining kryptonite samples were held overseas, by museums in Algiers and Cairo and by universities throughout Africa and Europe. Lex didn't have the same access to the criminal element there that he had at home, and thus had been maneuvering through his overseas lawyers and front companies to either purchase the samples outright or arrange their loan to collections in U.S. Museums. Those efforts had finally borne fruit as the museum in Algiers had agreed to loan its samples to the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburg. The cash-strapped Addis Ababa University was also warming to the idea of selling its samples, for the right price. Lex sent an email to his African agent authorizing a counter-offer for the fragments, and then pulled up the files on the Carnegie Museum to review his plan for the theft of their sample.

Once he was satisfied with his kryptonite acquisition plans, Lex's thoughts moved ahead to the next phase of his plot against Superman. He had already acquired a facility in northwest Metropolis for carrying out the trap, and contractors were busily lining the exterior ceiling and walls with lead. He'd also ordered equipment to form the kryptonite to his specifications. The smile returned to Lex's features as he anticipated that he would soon preside over the end of the Man of Steel.

Day 27, Sunday, 2:00PM, Metropolis

The Metropolis area was enjoying another beautiful sunny day, as its residents took full advantage of the parks and beaches on the few remaining summer days. However, some of its residents still preferred indoor activities, as indicated by the noise coming from an industrial building in the southwest suburb of Reeves. The long and narrow one story building was the source of multiple, overlapping popping sounds as its customers inside unloaded their weapons at the targets at the opposite end of the range. One of these Sunday afternoon customers set down his sidearm in the firing cage and pressed the recall button to bring the paper target back to the firing line along the overhead chain. Richard White observed that all of his shots had landed within a five inch diameter circle on the target, though concentrated above and to the right of the target's center.

He placed a fresh target on the chain and pressed the send button to carry it back to the other end of the range while he reloaded his Glock 30 pistol. *They'll have a little surprise if*

they try coming after me again, he thought irritably, as he remembered the attack from a few days earlier. During his time as a freelance reporter in Honduras after college, he had been one of several reporters kidnapped by rebels and one of only a few to have survived the three day ordeal. It had frustrated him to have to rely on others for his security, and he had afterwards acquired a sidearm and trained to use it. The skill hadn't been required in his role as an assistant editor, and Lois' dislike for firearms had kept him away from the range and his sidearm locked up. The recent attempt on his life had changed that, and he didn't like relying on Superman for his security any better.

We don't want Clark to have to save my ass again, Richard thought bitterly as he waited for his target to reach its position at the end of the range. After the police had determined that they'd been 'dead' long enough earlier that day, Richard had returned to his house, retrieved his weapon from the safe and come to the range. The fresh target was now in place at the end of the range, and with grim resolve, Richard aimed his weapon down the range and squeezed the trigger.

Richard had found the last few days as unsettling as any in recent memory. Essentially losing his family to another man was difficult enough, but to have been targeted by a hit man over a newspaper article shook him to the core. He'd believed that he had a secure, comfortable life just a few weeks ago, and he now saw that life as an illusion. Richard White on this Sunday morning was a much more cynical, wary man than the relaxed optimist of a few days earlier. He felt like he was in Honduras again and had to go to extraordinary measures just to stay alive.

Confronting the depraved wickedness of Lex Luthor had been an eye opener for Richard. It hadn't occurred to him that Luthor would try to kill him over an article or that he'd target Lois and Jason over a grudge with Superman, as had been described to him. It might have been a beautiful sunny day outside, but for Richard the world was a much darker place. He silently wished to once again be blissfully ignorant as he pressed the recall button in the shooting cage.

Chapter 28 - Survivors

Day 28, Monday, 6:00PM, Metropolis, 1938 Sullivan (Home of Lois Lane)

Monday evening brought the first dinner guests to the Lane home, as Clark and Richard joined Lois to compare notes on their battle with Lex Luthor. Lois had picked up Gai Kow and egg rolls from a local Chinese restaurant on the way home, and was now dishing it out onto four plates while Jason told them what he had done in school that day. Richard was looking forward to spending some time with Jason during the visit, which the recent attack had forced him to skip over the weekend.

"...and we had a fireman come to school today, and show us how to be safe!" Jason jabbered excitedly.

"Will you remember what he told you if there's a fire?" Richard asked him patiently.

"Uh huh," Jason answered automatically as Lois set his plate in front of him.

"I'm so glad we don't have to worry about food allergies anymore," Lois stated, to herself as much as anyone else.

"Yeah, no more yucky shakes!" Jason cheered.

"That's right, no more yucky shakes," Lois confirmed as she smiled widely at her son.

"Okay, dig in everyone,"

As the group ate their meal, Clark asked Richard, "How long do you think Perry will let us stay dead?" At Jason's worried and confused expression, Clark turned to him and clarified, "We're just pretending to fool the bad men." That satisfied the tyke, and he happily bit into an egg roll.

"Well, it's easier for me, since I don't have to worry about my name on a byline," Richard told them. "It's harder for you."

"We can publish my articles as 'Daily Planet Staff' until this is over," Clark offered. "My ego doesn't require the acknowledgment."

"Why don't we save this conversation for later," Lois suggested politely, gesturing with her eyes towards her son.

Both men nodded, and Richard shifted the conversation elsewhere a moment later.

"Jason, I hear you've been having a lot of fun with Clark after dinner. Why don't you tell me what you've been up to?"

"Running, and jumping, and playing catch and breaking rocks, and stuff," Jason began, chewing as he talked.

"Breaking rocks?" Richard questioned, looking back at Clark.

"A lot of what we've done initially has been to prove to him that he really can do these things," Clark explained. "We had a mountain exercise to show him both his strength and his invulnerability. I found a vertical face in the Andes along the border of Chile and Argentina, and had Jason hit it."

"Ah," Richard acknowledged. "It's still hard to believe this little guy can do all those things." Turning back to Jason, he inquired "So how fast are you running now?"

"Really fast," Jason answered, beaming up at Richard as he finally swallowed the food in his mouth.

"That clears that up, I guess," Richard replied, chuckling at the boy. Turning back to Lois he added in a low voice, "I guess he won't be getting D's in gym much longer."

"That could be a challenge," Clark observed. "When I was his age, hiding my abilities was hard on me, and I don't imagine it will be much different for him, especially if there's teasing from classmates. We're trying to teach him to be gentle, and only do things that someone else

his age could do. When the dust settles, we're hoping he can play at the same level as his classmates without standing out."

"I can play gentle!" Jason insisted.

"That means that you won't always be able to win," Clark reminded him.

"I know," Jason grumbled as he shoveled another spoonful of his dinner into his mouth.

"So what kind of games do you want to play with your friends?" Richard inquired patiently.

"Well, Mark plays soccer," Jason began. "Can I play soccer, too?"

"When's the deadline for signing him up?" Clark asked Lois as he turned to her.

"The summer league's just ending now," Lois told him. "We have a few weeks before we have to decide on the fall... It seems a bit risky, though, especially when we still have to worry about what Luthor'll try to spring on us."

"Maybe there's something in Smallville," Clark suggested. "We wouldn't have to worry so much about Luthor there, and it would be easier to contain the damage if there were an incident."

"He wouldn't be playing with Mark or even know anyone there," Lois pointed out. "When were your mother and Ben planning on moving to Montana?"

"Not until spring," Clark informed her simply.

Turning back to Jason, Lois told him, "We need to think about it a little more, sweetheart."

"Okay," Jason acknowledged as he chewed his dinner.

"So, tell me what else you've been doing," Richard requested pleasantly of the tyke. "I've haven't seen you for a while."

As the meal continued, Jason told Richard about all the exciting things he'd been doing at school and with his daddy, while Clark and Lois quietly observed the friendly interaction between the two.

Through the rest of the evening, Clark and Lois had held back to let Richard enjoy the time with Jason, and even let the other man put Jason to bed and read him his bedtime stories, before he rejoined the other adults downstairs. As he re-entered the living room, Richard sincerely told his hosts, "Thank you for that."

"You'll always be a father to him, despite the biology," Lois told him earnestly. "We'll never lock you out of his life."

"Would you like anything to drink?" Clark offered from the kitchen. "The beer's cold if you want one."

"I think beer would hit the spot," Richard concluded. Clark joined them in the living room carrying two beers, and handed one of them to Richard. After both men tapped their drinks, Richard began, "So, what's new in our war with Luthor?"

Clark settled down on the couch as he calmly told Richard, "Well, it's a bit of a waiting game right now... We have identified Luthor's point man as Henry Morrison, though he's using the alias of Stephan Evans. Both identities are surprisingly clean and there's no match on his prints. He's either a novice, or smart enough to get away with things."

"Given Luthor's micromanagement, a novice would fit the pattern," Lois suggested. "Roger Pruitt wasn't exactly the sharpest knife in the drawer."

"The distinction is probably not that important," Clark concluded. "The point is that the surveillance is beginning to yield fruit. We've got the bank accounts that he's been using to

cover expenses, and the feds are trying to follow the money back to Luthor. They've identified a number of accounts that have been funneling money to Morrison, and are auditing them to try to identify any other accounts that Lex has been using. They've put in a lot of extra hours trying to trace through it the last few days. They've got to be careful about tipping their hand too soon, though, because they don't want him to figure it out and slip away again."

"Then they'll freeze the accounts and dry up his money?" Richard asked.

"Eventually," Clark confirmed. "First, they want to identify what he's been using the money for and maybe get some clues on where to look for him."

"Any progress there?" Richard asked.

"There are a few properties out west and in Mexico that were purchased from these accounts, though no sign of Luthor yet," Clark informed him. "The closest we've come was a house in Las Vegas that looks like it was abandoned about a week ago, based on the contents of the refrigerator."

"We probably sent him running with our story on his finances," Lois concluded.

"Probably," Clark agreed. "There are some other discoveries from the surveillance are a bit closer to home, and somewhat unsettling," Clark informed them. "Luthor's goons have a few surveillance teams of their own out there, and they're watching Richard's house, Jason's school, and the *Daily Planet* building. The police are assuming that Luthor wants revenge for the financials story."

"Oh, my God," Lois whispered. "Do you think they followed us here?"

"No," Clark told her confidently. "We know who their spies are, and we've got a team running interference with the tail - mostly FBI and local police. I've been keeping watch whenever you drive home, too. We've been fine so far, but we're going to have to take some extra precautions there."

"Maybe you and Jason need to disappear for a little while, just the same," Richard suggested to Lois.

"We've been discussing that," Lois told him. "A week ago, we probably would have left him with his Grandma, but we're not so sure that's safe now that Luthor's attacking friends and family over the financials article. Clark's byline was on the story, too."

"Just to be on the safe side, my mother and her fiancé have taken an unscheduled fishing trip up in Montana," Clark informed Richard. "They've been talking about retiring up there after they get married, anyway, so they're not terribly put out by it."

"We probably have the best security in place here in Metropolis, with the Kryptonian-enhanced alarm systems," Lois added. "We just have to pray that it's good enough."

"How much longer do you think that this will go on?" Richard asked him.

"There's no way to know," Clark admitted. "We want to give the accountants another week to try to unravel the money trail before going to press with this. Hopefully, that will get us close enough to nail him this time."

"You're going to give Perry a stroke if you keep making him sit on these blockbusters," Richard joked, before turning somber and adding, "I've never seen him as stressed out as he's been the last few days."

"Thursday night's attack hit closer to home for him," Lois told him. "It would be bad enough for any *Planet* reporter getting targeted, but when it was his own flesh and blood... It must have really shaken him up."

"More than you realize," Richard told him. "He's been trying to talk me into transferring back to London, or at least taking an extended assignment there until the danger is over."

"What did you tell him?" Lois asked him, surprise apparent in her expression.

"I told him that I won't run," Richard told her. "I'm here for the duration."

"Well, then maybe you can talk him out of the *Profiles in Courage* story on us?" Lois asked hopefully.

"I'll try, but no promises," Richard replied somberly. "If he does insist on it, I'll make sure that Walters glosses over Clark's employment gap."

"Thank you," Clark told him sincerely. "We don't need Luthor wondering about that."

Day 31, Thursday, 8:00PM (Central Time), Chicago, Civic Opera House

Nowhere was Lex Luthor more relaxed or more content than in an opera audience, and after a month on the run, he was finally taking the opportunity to enjoy his passion. Not even Kitty's derisive comments on the art could deflate his mood. He immersed himself in the second act of *Iphigénie en Tauride*, and as the characters Orestes and Pylades languished in chains on the stage, he imagined a similar fate soon awaiting the Man of Steel and his son.

"Why does Toad have to kill them?" Kitty asked.

"It's Thoas," Lex corrected. "How else does one discourage trespassers? Things would have gone much better for him if he'd killed them sooner."

"So now you fancy yourself the king, what's-his-name, Thoas?" Kitty commented.

Lex snorted, "Don't be absurd! He's a victim of his own paranoia who foolishly trusts those around him."

"And you're not paranoid?" Kitty asked incredulously.

Before Lex could respond, he was interrupted by the vibrating PDA phone in his jacket pocket. *What could this be?* Lex wondered as he fished the phone out. The text message indicated a proximity alarm at the condo. Lex launched an Internet application on his phone and accessed the webcam closest to the tripped sensor. The blood drained from Lex's face as he saw the image of Superman floating outside their home. *How did he find us?* Lex wondered. *Did a neighbor recognize us?* After taking a moment to analyze the situation, Lex whispered to Kitty, "Wait here. I'll be back."

As Lex walked out of the opera house, he wondered, *If he's found the condo, what else does he know about?* With Superman hovering outside their condo less than a mile away, it was just as certain that he'd hear Kitty whine about their change in plans, which is why Lex had left her inside. He couldn't chance breaking into a car, even if he had the tools with him, since the Man of Steel would hear that noise as well. After a moment of thought, Lex quickly determined his course of action, and made his way to Union Station four blocks away.

Ten minutes later, Lex was ordering his Amtrak tickets from the agent. "Well, you're in luck," the woman told him. "The last train to New York was supposed to leave at seven fifty-five, but it's a half hour behind. If you hurry, you can still make it, and we have the roomette that you wanted."

"I'll take it," Lex told her, faking a slow southern accent. He paid cash for his ticket, and rushed to the train.

Chapter 29 - Regroup

Day 32, Friday, 9:10AM (Central Time), Chicago

Richard White waited quietly in the visitor area of the Cook County Jail for the guard to bring Kitty Kowalski to meet him. She had remained silent since her arrest the previous night, despite her obvious anger at being ditched at the opera house by Lex Luthor. Clark and Lois had both wanted to press her for details, but they feared what she might reveal about their son on a recorded conversation. Richard was the obvious alternative, since he already knew those secrets but was more likely to be seen as a neutral party. Superman had brought him to Chicago earlier than morning for that purpose.

Clark and Lois had prepped him for the interview the night before, and the three of them had come up with a list of questions and strategies for extracting information from her, while preventing anything revealing from coming out. As Richard waited, he reviewed his notes, looking up through the glass each time he heard the buzzer that indicated the door opening on the other side. Finally, Kitty was escorted through, and picked up the telephone handset on the other side of the glass.

"You're my visitor?" Kitty asked derisively.

"Richard White, *Daily Planet*," Richard informed her. "I have a few questions for you."

"Didn't the police tell you that I wasn't talking?" she admonished him.

"It can stay off the record, if you like," Richard assured her. "We'd just like to verify some information we got from other sources. You won't be telling us anything we don't already know, and we won't attribute anything to you."

"If you already have the answers, why waste the trip?" Kitty inquired.

"The *Planet* isn't a tabloid. We never go to press unless our facts are corroborated," Richard told her emphatically. "Your off-the-record comments are enough corroboration for us to go to press, and we'll attribute others as our primary source." After a moment, Richard casually asked her, "So what did you think of *Iphigénie en Tauride* last night? I hear that it's a good show..."

"*That crap?*" Kitty exploded. "Of all the places in the world for that son of a bitch to leave me stranded, he picks somewhere with that nauseating noise! He's the bastard that dragged me there in the first place, then a page on his PDA and he's high-tailing it out of there and leaving me behind! You'd think that after everything, he might have warned me!"

"So, given your obvious distaste for Lex Luthor, why not just tell the police what you know?" Richard asked politely. "Wouldn't you earn leniency from the court if you did?"

"Leniency won't help if I'm not alive to enjoy my freedom," Kitty told him angrily.

"I understand," Richard told her. "So Lex got a page at the opera. What time was that, around eight?"

"I guess," Kitty mumbled. "Is that one of the questions you already knew the answer to?"

"Yep," Richard told her. "Do you know how Lex got away?"

"If I did, would I be here now?" Kitty inquired disdainfully.

"Probably not," Richard agreed. After a moment, he calmly stated, "Lex was planning something, or rather, plotting revenge against someone. Do you know who he was targeting? Besides Superman, that is."

"Who else is there?" Kitty asked incredulously, "I mean, besides the ki-"

"So he is plotting revenge against Superman," Richard interrupted. "Does he have more kryptonite?"

"Huh? I thought you knew all the answers," Kitty accused, her eyes narrowing.

"I'll take that as a no," Richard stated quietly. After a moment, he set down his notepad, and casually told her, "You know, I think that it's interesting that of all of Superman's enemies, Lex Luthor is the only one who's ever managed to track the stuff down. I can't help but wonder where on earth he managed to find it the last time..."

"He stole it from some museum in Metropolis while I was distracting Superman," Kitty told him proudly.

Ten thousand feet above the prison, Superman's eyes widened as he recalled an argument between Lois and Perry as their editor pushed her for a Superman story. There had been a robbery at the Metropolis Museum of Natural History the night that he had 'rescued' Kitty from her runaway car. *So that's where it came from*, Superman observed as he continued listening in on the conversation.

Day 32, Friday, 4:55PM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom

It was another busy day at the *Daily Planet*, as yet another exclusive feature on the Luthor saga had graced its front page that morning. Lois and Clark had been busily chasing down leads, and following up on the information that Richard had gleaned from Kitty. "So, it's all accounted for then?" Lois asked into her headset. "...Uh huh. When did they ship that?" Lois looked up at the ding of the elevator to see Clark walk into the newsroom. She could tell from his expression his search for Lex Luthor had not been successful. "Thanks, Bruce... He just walked in if you want to talk to him... Okay, I'll tell him."

As Clark walked up and sat against the edge of Lois' desk, he was surprised to hear Jason's voice as he ran out from Richard's office, with his latest picture. "Clark!" the boy hollered, "See what I made for you!" It was another picture of Superman with Jason, this time in the Andes Mountains where they'd trained in recent days. Clark noticed that his son's artistic skill had been improving dramatically along with his other abilities. They'd have to address that soon, but not today.

"You really getting good at these drawings," Clark observed. "Did you make this in school today?"

"Nuh uh," Jason told him as he shook his head. "I was drawing in Richard's office."

"That's right, you get to spend the weekend with him, don't you," Clark reminded him, at which point the tyke grinned widely.

Lois couldn't help but notice how much her son's expression resembled Clark's goofy grin. *Thank God nobody else has noticed that*, she thought. Turning to her son, Lois matched his smile as she gently told him, "Sweetheart, Clark and I have some important work to do. Why don't you go back to Richard's office and make us another drawing?"

"Richard's office is boring," Jason complained.

"It's not for much longer," Lois reassured him. "I promise."

After giving his son a hug, and sending him back to Richard's office, Clark whispered to Lois, "I'm sorry, but it looks like Luthor slipped through our fingers again. If only I'd been-"

"Stop that right now!" Lois admonished in a whisper so quiet that only he could hear. "Don't you dare blame yourself. How were we supposed to know that he'd have motion sensors on a penthouse balcony?"

"I still should have been-"

"Stop it," Lois commanded. "It's not over yet." Clark clenched his jaw, and nodded meekly, as Lois informed him in a whisper, "I've got some more information on the museum robbery. The stolen rock was from a meteor shower that rained down across Africa in 1978

from Ethiopia to Cameroon. There were 28 meteorites recovered, two of which are now missing, both stolen from the Metropolis Museum of Natural History. One was taken shortly after Superman appeared on the scene the first time and the second was taken shortly after he returned from his recent trip to Krypton. I think that it's safe to say that Luthor was behind both robberies."

"What do we know about the remaining 26 samples?" Clark inquired seriously.

"All present and accounted for, though there was a close call on one of them," Lois told him. "An anonymous buyer had arranged to purchase the sample from Addis Ababa University. Our friend in Gotham pulled some strings to block the shipment. He's still trying to confirm the address that they were going to ship it to, though we've had no luck there yet. It's hidden behind lawyers and front companies, just like some other things that we've run across lately. Someone might have to pay a visit to their offices tonight."

"I think that can be arranged," Clark offered. "Anything else?"

"Yep," Lois told him. "All of the remaining samples are held overseas. There hasn't been much enthusiasm in loaning the meteorites for display in American museums, given security concerns and the past thefts from the Metropolis museum. However, some anonymous donor has been greasing palms in Algiers to encourage their museum to reconsider. The sample will be part of a meteorite exhibit on display at the Carnegie museum next week."

"How long will it be on display?" Clark asked, wide-eyed.

"Three weeks," Lois told him directly. "Then it's back to Algiers. Our Gotham friend thinks that'd be a good opportunity to set a trap for Luthor. He's suggesting a bait and switch."

Clark nodded in agreement, before dropping his head pensively into his hand as he rubbed his chin. After a moment, he quietly commented, "Lex isn't just a fugitive anymore. He's a clear and present danger, and we're going to have to take extra precautions."

"I know," Lois muttered. In a quiet whisper, she added, "Well, we can't print any of this. The last thing we want to do is advertise to other criminals where they can find kryptonite. Have you got anything that we can go to press with?"

"Yes," Clark told her as he let a small smile grace his features. "Richard was really outstanding with Kitty. We're going to have to find some way to properly thank him for that-

Clark was interrupted by Perry's booming voice, "Kent! Lane! My office."

Lois and Clark obediently reported to Perry's office, where Richard was waiting for them with their editor. As they took the visitor seats, they noticed the corners of Perry's mouth struggling to resist a smile as he cheerfully told them, "Great work again, you two."

Both thanked Perry for the compliment, as Clark stuttered out, "We... we can't take all the credit, Chief. We wouldn't have had nearly as much information to go on if Richard hadn't so expertly pulled it out of Kowalski this morning."

Perry's effort to suppress his smile now failed completely as he looked over at his nephew, though Richard's expression remained neutral. "Well, maybe I need to make the three of you a team," he suggested jovially, before pushing the emotion back down, and returning to the question at hand. Turning back to Lois and Clark, he inquired, "Where do we stand on the follow-up stories?"

"They found the plane that Luthor had been using, and we've traced the flight plans to map out his movements since he slipped away in Baton Rouge," Lois told him. "FBI forensic teams are combing over it, as well as over the condo. They've recovered a laptop, but unlike Pruitt's, everything on the disk is encrypted. Off the record... they've turned a copy of the encrypted disk over to Superman. His technology may have a better chance at breaking

through the encryption."

"What about the hunt for Luthor?" Richard inquired. "I saw the revised mug shot on the noon newscasts, with a blonde wig and beard superimposed. Have there been any hits on that?"

"Yes, unfortunately," Clark answered grimly.

"What do you mean, 'unfortunately'?" Richard asked in surprise.

"He killed a New York City cop at Penn Station about an hour and a half ago," Clark answered. "The surveillance footage showed the cop stopping Luthor, before he was shot twice in the heart. Then Luthor calmly walked out the 7th Avenue exit."

"Oh, my God," Lois muttered under her breath, as she raised her hand over her mouth.

"Any luck picking up the trail from there?" Perry asked.

"No," Clark answered grimly. "He didn't attract a lot of attention at the time because he had a silencer on the gun, and he had the pistol hidden inside his jacket. It looked like he had his hand through the jacket pocket to his sidearm hidden inside. He also had a fifteen minute head start before they reviewed the surveillance tape, and another ten before anyone identified the shooter as Lex Luthor. Superman scanned the streets and subways, but he's come up empty so far. He's been working closely with NYPD, who are taking this *very* personally and marshalling all the manpower they can to bring him in."

"Sounds like we have tomorrow's page one," Perry commented sadly.

"We'll have the story in by deadline," Clark promised. "There's a lot more work to do before then, however, and I need to get up to New York City--"

"Then I won't keep you any longer," Perry informed him. "Get going... and Kent?"

"Yes, Chief?" Clark answered.

"Be careful," Perry told him sincerely. "That lunatic has already tried to kill you once." Perry shuddered unconsciously as he recalled the grenade attack on Clark and his nephew that had happened just a week ago.

"I will be," Clark promised as he darted out the door.

Day 32, Friday, 6:30PM, The Bronx, New York

Lex Luthor ate his dinner cautiously, as he eyed his 'hosts,' both sitting cross-legged on the floor facing the wall opposite him with their hands behind them, as he had instructed them. Enrique "Ricky" Hernandez was a quiet man that Lex had briefly encountered during his incarceration. Exceptionally bright for his circumstances, he'd been one of the few inmates that Lex was able to hold an intelligent conversation with.

Ricky's criminal career as a car thief had been put to a stop at age nineteen by the reckless boasting of his partner. He had accepted that, and spent his seven years behind bars earning his GED and a college degree in computer science. Since his release from prison three years earlier, he'd become a certified Microsoft Windows Engineer, and had been making an honest life for himself. That life now included his four-months pregnant fiancée, Rosa Duvall, who now sat with him facing the wall. Ricky wasn't Lex's first choice to replace Henry Morrison, whom he had concluded had been compromised. However, he'd left Chicago in a hurry and had selected Ricky as the best choice in the New York City area. The young man's reformation had been an unexpected disappointment, but there was little he could do about that now.

Lex kept a hand on his pistol as he finished his meal and caught up on the latest news from the local television broadcast. Of course, the top story had been that afternoon's murder

of a police officer in Penn Station. Lex had been identified as the shooter, and a still from the surveillance camera had been shown along with a mug shot, revised to show his blonde beard and wig.

"It looks like I'll need a new look before we head out," Lex mentioned casually.

"We?" Ricky questioned in surprise. "I can't help you, L-"

"Don't say it!" Lex bellowed. "You mention my name aloud again, and things could get quite unpleasant for you."

"I'm making an honest life now," Ricky pleaded. "We won't say anything - we know better than that. But... I have responsibilities here."

"The sooner we finish our work, the sooner you can get back to those responsibilities," Lex told him, unmoved by his pleas. "We'll also need to make a little road trip."

"How long will this take?" Ricky asked nervously. "I don't get a lot of time off, and I need to save it for when the baby comes."

"You won't need to worry about that job," Lex told him. "You'll get paid more than enough to make up for it, as long as you don't let me down."

"I-I'd rather keep an honest job and set a good example for my kid," Ricky told him nervously. "I'll help you find someone else, but I can't-"

"I'm tired of hearing 'can't' and 'won't' out of you," Lex told him impatiently. "Unless you want something unfortunate to happen to the happy family here, you'll stop complaining, and do as I say."

Ricky glanced over at his fiancée, who was still quietly crying, her head down. He reached over and gripped her hand in his, trying to conceal the sad expression on his face with a weak smile as she looked up at him. Ricky closed his eyes for a moment, before looking over his shoulder at Lex and asking him, "Okay, what do I need to do?"

Lex smiled menacingly, as he provided his reluctant new lieutenant with his instructions.

Chapter 30 - Calm Before the Storm

Day 33, Saturday, 8:00AM (Mountain Time), Littleton, Colorado

Chatfield State Park was a popular weekend retreat for the Denver area, offering everything from hot air balloons, water sports, biking, hiking and camping. As with populations across the country, Denver-area residents jealously treasured their weekends, and the day's warm and sunny weather swelled the park's weekend population. This furlough from work week reality was also Richard White's destination. As he parked the rental car and looked out at the other visitors to the park, he swallowed down his envy of the apparently unbroken families, determined to enjoy the day with Jason.

His weekend with Jason had nearly been canceled after Luthor's violence in New York City the night before. They all agreed that it was too risky to be out in the Metropolis parks. This out-of-town venue was an acceptable alternative, since Luthor wouldn't expect them to be there and Richard had friends there. Superman had flown them and their luggage to the hotel the night before, and would take them back Sunday morning. Clark had hinted that he'd be peeking in on them, which left Richard with mixed feelings. He was grateful that Jason had someone like the Man of Steel looking after his safety, but it also reminded Richard of his shortcomings compared him. Richard struggled to push that thought from his mind as they pulled their gear from the trunk.

"What if there isn't enough wind?" Jason asked anxiously, as he eyed the kite Richard had just pulled from the trunk.

"Don't worry about it, Jason," Richard told him patiently. "We'll have enough wind." After locking up the car, Richard knelt down in front of Jason, and pulling him close, whispered to him, "Do you remember what your mom and Clark told you about playing 'normal'?"

"Uh huh," Jason answered automatically as he nodded his head.

"Repeat it back to me," Richard instructed him.

"I'm not supposed to do anything 'super' in public," Jason recited impatiently.

"That means that when we run with the kite, you're not allowed to run any faster than I'm going, even if that means we don't get the kite up in the air the first time," Richard clarified.

"Do you understand that?"

"Uh huh," Jason answered as he nodded eagerly. "Can we go now?"

Richard smiled at the tyke's reaction, as he ruffled his hair. "Yes, we can go now," he told him. The two then carried the kite along with the rest of their gear to a nearby picnic table and set up for their day.

From his vantage point nearly ten miles above, Superman smiled as the two worked their kite into the air. He was grateful that they were able to do so without his help and that both were genuinely having a good time. *It's unfortunate that they have to sneak out of town to have a day like this in safety*, Superman pondered. He felt a combination of anger and guilt for having tripped Luthor's alarm system a few days earlier. *They shouldn't have to pay the price for my blunder*, he thought as he watched his son hopping with excitement as they maneuvered their kite.

Day 33, Saturday, 4:00PM (Mountain Time), Littleton, Colorado

Richard concluded that the day at the park had been a success. Though Jason's interest in the kite had quickly waned, there were plenty of other activities at the park to keep his attention. He had been engrossed in watching the blue herons on the south side of the park,

and was particularly fascinated with the hot air balloons. By mid-afternoon, he'd had enough, and after leaving the park, the two paid a visit to an old college friend of Richard's who lived in the area.

Tom Ferguson had been a fraternity brother of Richard's and was now an FBI agent in Denver. Richard had been best man at Tom's wedding to Lily ten years earlier, and the couple now had an eight year old daughter, Tina, and five year old son, Stevie. Jason had been shy around the other children at first, but was starting to warm up to them, joining them on the jungle gym in the yard, as the adults talked at the table on the deck.

"The Marriot has to be costing you a fortune!" Tom commented to his guest. "All you had to do is call, and you could have stayed with us."

"It was a spur of the moment trip and I didn't want to impose," Richard told him defensively. "It is good to get away, though. That hasn't happened in a while. Not since before Lois..." His voice faltered as he remembered how things had been before Superman's return. He pushed the emotion back down, and after a moment he added, "Sorry, that's still kind of a new development. It'll take some getting used to."

"I can imagine," Tom told him compassionately. "If you want to talk about it, you know I'm here for you."

"I know... I'll be fine...eventually," Richard told him sadly. "So how long have you two been here? You were over in the foothills last time."

"We moved in while I was pregnant with Stevie, so it's about six years now," Lily told him. "The house in Ken Caryl Canyon was beautiful, but the mortgage was a killer, and you could forget about cell phone reception. Since I wanted to stay home with the kids, we needed something that we could afford on one salary. This place isn't that much smaller, we've got plenty of room and our cell phones actually work."

"It can't have already been six years since I've been out here, can it?" Richard asked in surprise.

"Time flies, especially once you have kids," Tom remarked cheerfully. After a moment's pause, he inquired cautiously, "Are you going to stay in that house on the river, with Lois leaving and all?"

"I really hadn't considered moving," Richard mused. "It's convenient with the seaplane docked on the pier there, and it's a nice safe place for when I have Jason."

"So you're still... doing that?" Tom asked cautiously. "Even though he's not really yours?"

Richard screwed his face up at that as he considered his answer. "The biology is really a moot point," he told them sadly. "Yeah, Jason is calling the other guy 'Daddy' now, and yeah, that hurts. But it doesn't change how I feel about the munchkin. I'd never forgive myself if something happened to him because I let my pride get in the way..."

Tom wrinkled his brow in confusion. "I'm not sure I follow..." he commented uncertainly.

Richard lowered his head as he considered his response for a moment before speaking. "Since the incident on Lex Luthor's yacht, Lois and Clark have been going after Luthor in the press with a vengeance." Richard told them soberly, his voice barely above a whisper. "It's due to their efforts more than anything else that the feds managed to freeze most of his domestic funds and even some offshore accounts. That caught Luthor's attention, and he's already tried to kill in retaliation. We're not convinced that Metropolis is safe for any of us, which is why we came here this weekend."

"Oh, dear," Lily muttered as she brought her hand to her mouth. After a brief pause, she added, "If it's that dangerous... if you need a place to stay..."

"I know, and we all appreciate that," Richard told her sincerely, as he glanced over the railing at the children in the yard.

"That goes for Jason, too," Tom clarified as he followed Richard gaze. A moment later, he vehemently added, "And don't be shy about it. You'll stay with us in the house next time, too."

Jason noticed the serious tone in the adults' voices and briefly looked over at the deck as he hung upside down from the top of the jungle gym. The hushed voices usually meant that they were going to talk about something boring. The jungle gym was much more fun, so he returned his attention to Stevie who has hanging upside down beside him.

"...and last week, we went to Kiddies Playland and got to go on all kinds of rides!" Steven told Jason excitedly. "Do you have anything like that where you live?" he asked curiously.

Jason shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know," he admitted sadly. Breaking into a wide smile, he added, "But Superman's there!"

"Really?" asked Steven excitedly. "Do you know him?"

"Uh huh," Jason answered carefully. "I like him."

"Me, too," Stevie agreed excitedly, just before both boys found themselves defending against his sister's super soaker and thoughts of Superman were forgotten.

Day 33, Saturday, 7:00PM, Metropolis, 1938 Sullivan Lane (Home of Lois Lane)

The pleasant weather on this waning day of summer had hardly been noticed by Lois Lane, who had been following up on their leads from the Lex Luthor story, and trying to anticipate his next move before something disastrous happened. It had also kept Superman busy, as he coordinated with NYPD, hunted down stolen cars and looked up Lex Luthor's known associates. Everyone had come up empty so far.

Lois threw her glasses down on her desk and rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hands. *I know you're out there somewhere, you tricky little bastard*, Lois thought. She lowered her hands, and looked back at the screen blankly for a moment before temporarily abandoning the hunt to refill her cup of coffee from the pot in the kitchen. As she set the coffee pot back down, she felt a strong arm wrap around her and the heat of its owner radiate through her back. As Clark nuzzled her neck, she purred, "I was beginning to wonder if you'd be showing up tonight."

"There hasn't been a moment when I wasn't thinking of you," he told her huskily. Lois turned around to face him, wrapping her arms around his neck as he captured her lips.

"Me, too," Lois mumbled into the kiss, wrapping her legs around his waist as he lifted her up to the countertop.

They reluctantly broke the kiss, as Clark commented, "There's so much we still have to do..."

"I think that we were getting there," Lois assured him, as she pulled his head back down to hers.

Clark smiled through the kiss, and returned the passion for a moment longer before pulling back again. "I'll need to get back to the hunt soon," he reluctantly told her. "Have you come up with anything new on your end?"

"You know, it's really not fair getting me all worked up and then pulling back like that," Lois mumbled unhappily. She lowered her head to his shoulder, and sank into his embrace as she answered. "Bruce had some ideas," she told him. "He thought it strange that there hadn't been a single call to Morrison since Lex fled Chicago. You'd think he'd have called him for a ride, unless..."

"...unless Lex thought he'd been compromised," Clark finished for her. "In which case, he'd recruit some new lackeys. NYPD put together a list of known associates, but we've come up empty."

"Bruce is expanding that list to include anyone in the New York area who was in prison with him," Lois told him. "We should have an updated list of names soon. How about you?"

"I've uncovered five car-theft rings and recovered dozens of stolen cars in New York City, Pittsburg and Metropolis, all without the slightest link back to Lex," Clark told her. "I think that he's changing his tactics in response to my pursuit. We saw that a few weeks ago, when he switched from stealing cars to carjacking. Now we know he's been using private jets and trains, too. I'm skeptical that we'll find him by tracking stolen cars and missing persons. We're going to need some additional clues."

"Any progress on decrypting his laptop?" Lois asked hopefully as she looked back up at him from his embrace.

"Not yet," he admitted. "It depends on the cipher key and algorithms he used. I'll get a page when it's done, which could be any minute, or a few more days."

"Oh, Bruce said that they've finished the security upgrades at Carnegie," Lois told him. "The utility rooms are now secured and alarmed, and they've got shatterproof, bulletproof glass on the display cases. He's also arranged for the kryptonite replica to be on display rather than the original, which they'll keep in back."

"That assumes that he'll try the same smash and grab tactics as last time," Clark pointed out. "He has to realize the scrutiny he's under by now, and he may modify tactics to try to surprise us."

"Bruce said the same thing," Lois told him as she tightened her embrace. "So, what now?"

"It's a waiting game again," Clark told her.

Lois frowned for a moment, before a wide smile overtook her features. "Then we've got time," she told him seductively, as she reached her head up for his lips and pulled him closer with her legs.

"We've got time," he agreed into her kiss, as his hands found the bare back under her sweatshirt.

Chapter 31 - Surveillance

Day 42, Monday, 3:30PM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom

For the first time in years, everything in Lois Lane's love life felt right. Though she and Clark weren't yet living under the same roof, they were no longer awkward being together at home. Unfortunately, they still had to maintain the illusion of a platonic relationship at work, which had become progressively more difficult in the last week as Lois struggled to keep a Kent-worthy grin off of her face. He had the advantage in that the goofy grins were part of his Clark Kent persona. Lois had no such excuse to hide behind. At times, her only recourse was to drop her head down and study her notes, creating the impression that she was working another front page story.

The trail for Lex Luthor had gone cold, in spite of identifying possible lackeys from Bruce Wayne's expanded list of associates and from Luthor's decrypted laptop. The PC turned out to be a dead end, apparently used as little more than a portal to where his data was really hidden, with the access history wiped clean. That left Lois to return to tracking government scandal and corruption, which she was quite unhappy about despite the reluctant praise her articles had earned from Perry. Clark had also been reassigned to some human events stories, though he was given the leeway to continue chasing Luthor leads as long as he got the other stories in on time.

Lois looked up at the elevators as the chime announced the car's arrival and she again felt the silly smile take over her features as she saw Clark walk off. It wasn't until he looked up and she noticed the grim expression on his face that she got her smile under control. "What happened?" she asked as he stopped at her desk.

"Luthor got the kryptonite from Carnegie," he told her in a whisper.

"What about all the extra security?" Lois muttered agitatedly.

"They had someone on the inside," Clark informed her grimly "We're still trying to piece it together, but we have a vague idea of what happened. According to the night guard's wife, they grabbed their eleven year old son and blackmailed the boy's father to let them through. It also looks like they knew about the security details. The replica was left untouched, while the real kryptonite was grabbed from the staging room."

"Did they find the little boy?" Lois asked anxiously.

"They found him and his dad in an alley about a half hour ago," Clark told her. "Both of them had been drugged and it will be awhile before they wake up. They'll probably be okay though... Nobody else has figured out that Lex Luthor is behind this yet."

"We'll have to keep it that way, which means that we can't print this," Lois concluded. "If other crooks wondered why Luthor wanted that rock and figured out what it was and where it came from..."

"I know," Clark told her. Both remained silent for a moment before Clark broke the silence by whispering, "I don't think that Metropolis is safe for Jason. Maybe he should go to school in Smallville for a while..."

Lois eyes opened wide in horror as she recognized the danger to their child. "I'm getting him out of AfterCare now," Lois declared as she stood up and gathered her things.

"We should let Richard know what's going on, too," Clark suggested. "Maybe we can invite him to join us at home tonight to plan strategy?" Lois nodded in agreement as she walked over to Richard's office to share the disturbing news.

Day 42, Monday, 8:20PM, Metropolis, 1938 Sullivan Lane

Lois blankly looked out through the windows into her backyard, lamenting the decisions that they would have to make that evening. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears as she reflected on the madman that was gunning for her child. Clark stood a few feet behind her, giving her space to collect her thoughts while remaining close enough to gather her into his embrace when she was ready. Richard White sat quietly on the living room couch, also waiting for Lois to gather her thoughts.

Finally, Lois turned to the two men and emotionally declared, "We're not going to turn his life upside down over this. He has to have some semblance of normal life in spite of the precautions. That means being home with us when he goes to sleep at night and wakes up in the morning, and still going to school and playing with his friends-"

"Lois, it's not safe for him here anymore," Clark explained patiently. "School and friends will have to be somewhere else... someplace where Luthor won't find him. Maybe Smallville could be that place."

"What if Luthor decides he needs to get even with Clark Kent?" Lois inquired anxiously, her voice cracking. "Your byline was on those financial stories, too."

"Mom and Ben will be moving to Montana in the spring, after they get married," Clark reminded her, his expression grim. "If we accelerated things a bit, maybe he could stay with them there."

"That sounds like wishful thinking," Richard stated grimly. "If he'd try to kill me to make Lois suffer, what's to stop him from going after your mother to get at you... and finding Jason in the process."

"Then where?" Clark asked impatiently. "Any family that either of you have will certainly be on his short list."

"What about your friend in Gotham?" Lois asked. "He's been helpful with so much else..."

Clark chuckled lightly as he imagined Gotham's Dark Knight with babysitting duty. "He's not that close a friend," he replied mirthfully. "And you're well aware of his reputation."

"Who are we talking about?" Richard inquired, frowning his brow in confusion.

"A colleague of mine who helped set up some of the security," Clark explained, as his expression became serious again. "He prefers not to advertise his involvement."

Richard nodded in acknowledgement. "We may have better luck with some friends of mine," he informed them confidently.

"What would we be asking them to do?" Lois inquired cautiously. "Remember, at the end of the day, Jason is with us, not some strangers."

"Is this house secure enough at the end of the day?" Richard asked calmly. "I know you have put a lot into the security system, but, hypothetically speaking, if Luthor had a small army surrounding the place with lots of firepower, how would you hold up?"

"When the security system is in lock-down, an invisible force field reinforces the exterior walls of the house," Clark explained seriously. "It also blocks kryptonite radiation, and can be extended to protect the entire property. You'd need a small nuke to punch through it. Jason is safe here, both inside the house and out in the yard."

"And if you were under siege?" Richard continued.

"Then I take them out through the secret tunnel that I dug in the basement that comes out on the other end near Byrne State Forest," Clark revealed simply.

"A secret tunnel?" Richard repeated incredulously.

Clark frowned for a moment, before cautiously explaining, "We don't want to risk that the

neighbors will ever see Superman here. If I can't come to the front door as Clark, then I'll use the tunnel. In any case, the short answer to your question is, 'Yes, this house is secure enough at the end of the day.' I assume that you were going somewhere with that?"

"Yeah..." Richard acknowledged, still a bit distracted by the revelation of a secret tunnel. After a momentary delay, "I guess I wanted to confirm what we're really talking about here. Are you suggesting that Jason spend his days somewhere else, and come back here in the evening?"

"That's the general idea," Lois confirmed. "He'll go to school there, maybe under an alias, make new friends there, and have a somewhat normal life while we track down Luthor."

Richard nodded, before casually telling his hosts, "I have a friend in Denver who can help... In fact, when Jason and I were there last week, he adamantly insisted that we come to him if it came to that."

"Tom and Lily?" Lois asked in surprise. "What did you tell them?"

"Only that Luthor was retaliating for your articles on his finances," Richard informed her. "Stevie's the same age as Jason, and the two of them got along wonderfully. I think it may be our best alternative."

"Who are Tom and Lily?" Clark asked curiously.

"Tom was my college roommate," Richard told him. "He's FBI in the Denver area, and his wife Lily is a stay-at-home mom. They have an eight year old daughter, Tina, and a five-year old son, Stevie." After giving Clark a moment to digest that, he added, "We should probably explain a few things to them. They'll certainly find it odd for Jason to be getting there and back by way of Superman."

"That complicates things," Clark answered quietly. "The more people who know our secrets, the riskier it becomes."

"So we don't tell them everything," Lois offered. "We tell them enough to explain Superman's involvement without revealing Jason's unique heritage."

"They can both be trusted," Richard assured him. Clark remained silent as he pensively rubbed his jaw. Finally, Richard broke the silence, asking, "Have you got someone else in mind?"

Clark shrugged his shoulders. "I have some friends who could be trusted, but they attract too much press these days, which isn't exactly ideal."

"Are you thinking about the good senator?" Lois inquired with a smirk on her face. Clark nodded, while Richard looked between the two with a confused look on his face. Lois giggled quietly before finally explaining, "The honorable Senator Pete Ross and his wife were both close childhood friends of Clark's."

"Under different circumstances, they'd gladly help, and I know we could trust them completely if we had to," Clark elaborated. "However, with the election and his status as a possible presidential candidate, they'll attract too much press." Turning to Richard, Clark inquired seriously, "Just how well do you know this college buddy of yours?"

"Like a brother," Richard answered immediately. "We can trust both of them." Richard looked between Lois and Clark before he finally asked, "So is it decided, then?"

Clark looked up at Lois for a moment, before turning back to Richard and answering, "Maybe. I think that you and I should pay them a visit first, after their kids are in bed."

Day 60, Friday, 7:00AM, Metropolis, Suicide Slum

Lex Luthor lowered his head and let the hot jets from the shower head massage his neck

and upper back as Puccini's *Tosca* blared from the boom box on top of the toilet. He tried to lose himself in the moment and forget his decline in circumstances and his nemesis' frustrating ability to apprehend nearly every surveillance team that he had sent to stake out his targets. *You should already be dead, you son of a bitch*, Lex thought.

It certainly would have been easy enough to lure Superman into a kryptonite trap, but a quick death would be too merciful. After everything Lex had been through, the Man of Steel needed to suffer, and nothing would be more painful for him than to see tragedy befall his beloved Lois Lane and their son. He had to grab them first and without the Man of Steel interfering, and thus, the need for the stakeouts. They were needed to verify and expand on the information that he had pulled from Lois Lane and Richard White's credit reports several weeks earlier.

Lex finally turned off the shower and toweled off, wrapping the towel around himself as he stepped in front of the mirror in the tiny bathroom. After wiping off the steam from the mirror with another towel, Lex took a moment to study the figure staring back at him. *I won't have to tolerate this much longer*, Lex thought to his reflection, as he rubbed his hand over the black goatee that now graced his features. After a moment Lex abandoned his ruminations and quickly finished cleaning up as he considered how best to overcome the recent delays.

In the three weeks since he'd acquired the kryptonite, Lex sent more than dozen teams into the city to track Lois Lane and her son. Some parked panel vans outside the home on the river or the boy's school. Others had shown up in stolen utility vehicles to observe their targets while they pretended to work on phone, cable or electrical lines. They also sent teams that would impersonate meter readers, postal carriers, and a variety of others who could reasonably be expected to be in the area. Nearly all of them had been quickly taken into custody. The only exception had been the team observing the house from the river, but they were spooked by a coast guard patrol and they never got close enough to provide anything useful. *How is he catching them so quickly?* Lex asked himself.

Lex angrily turned off the music and walked into the bedroom to get dressed. He considered the cramped apartment he stood in far beneath his station, but an unfortunate necessity under the circumstances. Large transfers from his remaining overseas accounts would attract too much attention and thus had forced him to accept humble living quarters, one more thing he intended to make both Superman and Lois Lane suffer for. He also needed to be close to his targets as he moved forward with his revenge plans but without attracting attention. That brought him to Metropolis' Suicide Slum, where people made a point of getting where they were going quickly without wasting a lot of time taking in the sights.

Lex retrieved his PDA from the dresser, and found a text message had arrived from Ricky Hernandez while he was in the shower. A deep frown overtook his features as he read it: "Jonas and Harry were nabbed by police last night." *And so it happens again*, Lex thought bitterly. The two had been sent impersonating an electrical line crew to verify the after-work routine of Lane and White at the home on the river listed in their credit reports. *We're going to need to re-evaluate our methods*, he concluded as he finished dressing. He launched the IP phone application on his PDA and called Ricky.

"What the hell is wrong with these people that you're sending out?" Lex demanded angrily. "Is it that hard to follow a woman and child around?"

"Well, sir, it's to be expected-," Ricky began.

"*Expected?*" Lex repeated incredulously. "How is it that you've been expecting this abysmal failure, which is your responsibility, by the way?"

Ricky nervously explained, "Sir... when a man becomes a father, everything changes and that's as true for Superman as anyone else. Nothing is more important to him than his little boy, and he's not going to ignore a threat to his family."

"That doesn't make him clairvoyant!" Lex argued bitterly.

"He doesn't have to be, sir," Ricky countered anxiously. "As a good father, he is going to pay close attention to everything that goes on around his son and the woman. He'll know the neighborhood where they live, where she works, where the kid goes to school. He'll know what's normal for the area, and what's not. When something shows up that's out of place or unexpected, like an electrical utility truck when there have been no problems, he'll take a closer look. That's what I would do if I were him."

"So where was your inspired insight before you sent them in?" Lex asked derisively.

"I didn't think of it until just now, when you asked the question," Ricky claimed nervously. "What do you want us to do now, sir?"

"We're going to have to get our information from people who *do* fit in," Lex concluded. After a tense moment of silence, Lex observed, "He didn't snag our crew on the river."

"No, sir, he didn't," Ricky agreed meekly. "A boat on the river is hardly out of place, unless they get too close. That makes it harder to get anything useful, through."

"It didn't stop the *Star* from getting those pictures of her smoking behind the house a couple months back," Lex pointed out.

"No, but those photographers have been on her tail for years," Ricky countered. "Superman probably knows who they all are, and that they're only a threat to their privacy."

Lex was silent for a moment as he considered this. "Maybe I should hire them, then," he finally suggested.

"Paparazzi?" Ricky asked incredulously. "They'd never work for you."

"Don't underestimate me!" Lex warned. "The offer will come from a British tabloid that I control."

"What do you want me to do in the meantime?" Ricky asked.

"We'll need people to act on our intelligence," Lex told him. "I'll send you a list of candidates. Make sure that they can handle themselves on a boat."

Lex hung up before Ricky had a chance to respond, and turned his attention to the laptop, shaking the wireless mouse to wake up the PC. *There is more than one way to skin a freak*, he pondered, as he reviewed the data that he'd put together on Lois Lane nearly two months earlier. *Let's see who you've been talking to*, he thought as he hacked into Lois' online accounts and began reviewing the phone calls logged in the statement details.

Chapter 32 - Paydirt

Day 67, Friday, 3:20PM (Mountain Time), Littleton, Colorado

The familiar yellow and black bus from Ralph Moody Elementary School finally made its last stop, and unloaded the remaining children as they anxiously dispersed and sought out their separate homes. Among these children were Stevie and Tina Ferguson and their family guest, Jason White. Though Jason missed his friends from his school in Metropolis, he had made some new friends, including Stevie. The other children were particularly interested in learning what Superman was really like, once Stevie told them that Jason had met him. As Jason now walked with the Ferguson children, they began arguing over whether or not Stevie's Superman action figure was in fact, a doll.

"Superman's not a doll!" Stevie whined.

"Looks like one to me," Tina teased. "It's the same size as my Barbie, and *that's* a doll."

"Nuh uh!" Stevie objected.

"Stevie's playing with do-olls! Stevie's playing with do-olls!" Tina chanted.

"Shut up!" Stevie demanded.

Jason looked up at Tina and said simply, "You're not being very nice."

She turned her venom on Jason, "Oh, are you going to cry now?"

"Superman wouldn't like you calling him a doll," Jason said simply.

"Yeah, and Jason knows Superman, and he'll tell him what you said," Stevie piped up.

"He does not!" Tina countered. "He just made that up."

"No, I didn't," Jason insisted defensively.

"Did too!" Tina shouted back.

"Did not!" Jason shot back as his eyes teared up. His friends in Metropolis weren't mean like this.

"Did too!" Tina repeated happily.

"Is there a problem here?" a male voice asked them. The three of them looked up in surprise to see Richard White in front of them. Clark had dropped him off at the house a few minutes earlier, and he'd walked up to meet the children, who'd been too distracted by their argument to notice him.

"She didn't believe that I know Superman!" Jason complained on the verge of tears as he ran to Richard.

"Of course you know Superman, Jason," Richard confirmed cheerfully. Turning to the other two children, he explained, "Jason helped us save Superman when that evil man hurt him with the kryptonite. He got to visit him in the hospital after he fell from space, too." As Jason turned and stuck his tongue out at Tina, Richard took his hand and walked with them back to the house.

After giving the kids a moment to settle down, Richard enthusiastically asked, "Are you ready for another fun weekend? We're all going to Tiny Town tomorrow!" Turning to Jason, he added, "Your mom and... and your dad will be coming, too, for at least a little while." It still pained Richard to refer to Clark as Jason's dad, but he made the effort for the boy's sake. He wasn't about to put Jason in the middle of whatever arguments he had with Lois and Clark.

As the children voiced their excitement over the next day's plans, their interaction was observed from a panel van down the street. The interior of the van had been stripped except for the two front seats. The back windows had been blacked out, except for a small circle which was now covered by the rubber lens boot of a high end digital camera mounted against the back door as a rotund man swiveled the camera in the mount to take pictures of the

Richard and the children. The photographer was observed by a slender man seated on the floor behind the driver's seat munching French fries. "How is it coming, Ralphie?" he asked between bites.

"Don't call me Ralphie!" Ralph objected angrily, as he carefully removed the camera from the door mount and walked up to sit sideways on the passenger seat.

"Sorry, Ralph," Ed apologized.

"I think that's the last of them," Ralph stated tiredly, as he reviewed the pictures in the LCD display on the back of the camera. "Do you think any of those kids is the one that they're looking for?"

"Who knows?" Ed answered indifferently, and he maneuvered around to the front of the driver's seat. "Who cares? We get paid the same either way."

"Wait until they're in the house, before starting up the engine," Ralph ordered his partner, as he tried to watch them through the driver's side rear-view mirror. As he watched, he irritably complained, "You couldn't pay me enough to make another cross-country trip in a car. You'd think they could have ponied up for some plane tickets or at least a train..."

"I'm with you on that one," Ed agreed calmly. "Let's get out of here, and get those pictures uploaded. Then, there are a couple barstools in this town with our names on them."

Day 67, Friday, 6:15PM, Metropolis, 1938 Sullivan Lane (Home of Lois Lane)

Lois eyes seem to glaze over as she picked at the Fettuccini Alfredo on her plate. Clark had brought carry-out from the local Italian restaurant on the way over. Lois leaned her forehead against her left palm while she raised her free hand to her mouth to cover her yawn. Clark looked over at her from his seat, and after swallowing the remaining food in his mouth, he asked anxiously, "Are you feeling alright, Lois?"

"Fine, just tired," Lois muttered sleepily.

"I've noticed," Clark told her compassionately. "Lately, you've really been dragging at the end of the day. Has the problem with Luthor given you trouble sleeping?"

"Surprisingly, no," Lois answered quietly as she lifted her head from her hand and looked at him. "If anything, I've been getting too much sleep..." A conspiratorial grin spread across her face as she added softly, "I do seem to recall you keeping me up a few times lately, though." She giggled when Clark blushed at the reminder of their recent closeness.

After pushing down his blush, Clark pressed on, "I'm just a little worried. You've always been bursting with energy all day long." Lois' brow furrowed as she considered that. She had been unusually tired for the past couple of weeks.

As she was pondering her lethargy, she noticed Clark's head suddenly tip up, responding to a sound that she didn't hear. Clark pulled out his cell phone and cheerfully answered, "Hi, Ma. How are things in Montana? ...He's still adjusting. Richard has him this weekend, but Lois and I will join them tomorrow morning for a day trip, for a while at least... Maybe, I'll talk to Lois about it..." As Lois listened into Clark's half of the conversation, she noticed him stiffen and heard the anxiety in his voice as he continued. "Did they say anything else? ...I'll have to give him a call, then... Okay, I will. I'll talk to you soon. Bye, Mom."

"What did she say that freaked you out?" Lois inquired anxiously as soon as Clark hung up.

"The sheriff out in Smallville called her about the thugs that they picked up on parole violations a couple days ago," Clark explained. "After cooling their heels for a couple of days, they've started talking. They were sent to take pictures of any children on my mom's farm, and

upload them for their boss back east."

"They're looking for Jason," Lois stated meekly as her eyes grew wide and the color drained from her face. "How did he figure out to look for him there?"

"I don't know," Clark answered anxiously. "Consider that from Bruce's list and other clues, we've tracked felons to your sister's place and your parents, as well as some of Richard's relatives. It's possible that he's just following a short list of friends and family."

"Or he's noticed that Clark Kent's employment gap suspiciously corresponds to Superman's absence," Lois countered fearfully.

Clark frowned at that, realizing that he couldn't rule it out. "We can't assume that, but it would be a mistake to underestimate him," Clark finally conceded. "If he has figured it out, he doesn't appear to have done anything with that knowledge."

"Yet," Lois finished for him dramatically. "Shouldn't we plan for the worst?"

"What should we do differently than what we've already done?" Clark gently asked.

"Well, for starters, your apartment isn't safe," Lois declared. "What's to stop Luthor's lackeys from sneaking in and planting kryptonite all over, and then coming in later to ambush you?"

"I never thought of that," Clark admitted timidly. "I suppose that I can install an alarm system, with kryptonite sensors."

"Or you can move in here," Lois countered. "That's the long term plan anyway, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Clark acknowledged as the wide smile spread across his face. Reigning in his smile, he added softly, "I don't want to advertise Clark Kent's love interest just yet, though."

"I won't tell if you won't," Lois offered, as she revealed a small smile to him. After a moment, she informed him, "You'll move your stuff in tonight."

Clark nodded his assent, before telling her, "We should probably warn Richard and the Ferguson's of the situation. If Luthor hasn't figured out my secret and is just searching family and friends for Jason, the trail might lead out there."

"How would he have identified our friends?" Lois asked irritably. "It's not like we have them listed in our *Planet* bios."

"I don't know," Clark admitted. "I'll run it by Bruce later. His people are much better at figuring out that kind of stuff than I am and they may be able to come up with some answers. If we can identify the list that Luthor's working from, we'll be better prepared."

"I'll tell you what..." Lois offered. "I'll call Bruce, while you fly out to Colorado to talk to Richard and Tom."

"Deal," Clark agreed, as he captured her hand in his own and they looked into each other's eyes. "I have faith that everything will work out in the end," he told her sympathetically. "We just need to be patient for a little while longer."

Day 67, Friday, 7:00PM, Metropolis, Suicide Slum

As the local evening newscast concluded, Lex punched the button on the remote to turn it off from his seat in the recliner. He then walked over to his laptop on the breakfast bar, lifted the earphones of his iPod into place and drowned out the neighbors with the sounds of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Lex was getting a late start reviewing his plan's progress after being forced to attend to mundane matters beneath his station, such as picking up groceries. He briefly debated the wisdom in abandoning Kitty in Chicago, since she had attending to such matters before they parted company. While his laptop booted up, he again concluded that she would have given away their position and he'd been right to leave her behind.

After logging into the laptop, Lex recalled how daunting the analysis of Lois Lane's phone records had been, due to the sheer volume of calls. Though not entirely unexpected given her profession, Lex was nonetheless surprised by the volume. He'd downloaded the call details for both her and Richard White into a spreadsheet, and painstakingly identified every call possible before running a number of analyses on the telephone numbers to try to narrow the scope of the surveillance targets. Lex was able to draw several conclusions from the analysis.

The first thing that stood out to Lex was the calls to and from a realtor, Nancy Dixon, which indicated that Lois had moved. When her name alone showed up on a subsequent review of bi-county real estate transfers, Lex realized that she'd left Richard White. *No mystery what happened there*, Lex thought.

The Lane and White phone records also suggested travel patterns. Lois Lane was in her local calling area nearly every night, presumably at home. There were day trips all across the country, some as far away as San Diego. The call origination areas were too far apart and the time between too short for her to have made the trips as anything other than Superman's passenger, which again explained the recently acquired real estate. Only on weekends did she appear to stay out of town overnight.

Lex's analyses of the calls also identified more than a dozen favorite out of town locations where the family might flee to if forced into hiding. Some were obvious, such as relatives of either Lane or White in Long Island, Alexandria and Chicago, but other locations were more enigmatic, such as Gotham, New York, Smallville, Kansas, Littleton, Colorado, and Cape Cod, Massachusetts.

While the call analysis had narrowed the targets for surveillance, gathering information on those targets remained problematic. No team yet had managed to elude capture for longer than three days after being sent out and most were picked up before a single report was sent back. *There have got to be some brighter recruits out there*, Lex lamented.

The analyses also identified the child's school as Schneider Elementary, which allowed Lex to drop the other local schools from his surveillance plans. It was a moot point, since all his teams were quickly apprehended before providing any information on any school. *Where did all these idiots come from?* Lex questioned. He decided that they would require more specific instructions in the future, since they clearly could not be trusted to their own devices.

Another benefit of the analyses was identifying Jason's allergist, and Lex had sent a team for his medical records. That break-in had been one of the few successes. They gotten in and out without detection, taking only Jason's file and Lex hoped that would remain unnoticed. They had also left behind a number of listening devices in the office and bugged the phones. If Lane brought the kid in for a check-up, it could be a good opportunity to grab both of them. The file from Jason's allergist had also identified his primary care pediatrician, and Lex's men had twice attempted break-ins there. However, both teams had been caught, and Lex had abandoned that effort. To continue would make it too obvious that more than a robbery was involved. He would have to make do with the file from the allergist.

Lex had been surprised at all of the acute allergies documented in Jason's file. The fragility documented there might make the boy easier to take down, but that was too great an unknown to chance it. *He's still got super-strength*, Lex noted. *That'll make him a handful even if he's inherited nothing else from the old man. We'll definitely need the kryptonite.* He pulled himself from his ruminations as his laptop applications finally started up and an alert notified him of a surveillance update.

Paydirt! Lex thought. He smiled for the first time in days as he zoomed in on the posted

photo of Jason White from the team in Littleton. He now had confirmed locations for two of his three targets, and the third was easy enough to lure into a trap. The trick now was to gather enough information on those locations for a reasonably robust plan that not even the idiots working for him could screw up. If Superman caught his team in Colorado, they'd move the boy, and he'd have to start over.

To avoid detection, he'd need local talent, which meant recruiting more high-level people. That also meant singling out more shady characters that he could either intimidate, or who could resist the temptation of the reward that had recently been increased to twenty-five million dollars. He no longer had the resources to prepay known reliable contractors to hit his lieutenants if he was betrayed. His reputation was probably ruthless enough to bluff, but if even one of them doubted him, it could spell trouble. The more intelligent his lieutenants, the more likely they were to spot his tells and see through the bluff. The challenge would be keeping himself isolated enough that his men couldn't reveal his location if tempted, and yet close enough to keep them meticulously following his plan. It was obvious to Lex that the reason for the intolerable delays was the inability of the men he recruited to follow his detailed instructions.

Lex began a new search through his recruitment database. This time, he was looking for recruits with history both in Denver and Metropolis. He'd keep the local crew clear of Lane's house, and just try to get some remote cameras in place to monitor the property before his lackeys inevitably got themselves caught. *Sooner or later, somebody has to get through*, Lex thought. *It shouldn't be long now.*

Chapter 33 - A Little Help From My Friends

Day 68, Saturday, 7:00PM (Mountain Time), Littleton, Colorado

The children in the Ferguson's family room were giggling happily at a corny movie on the Disney channel while the adults discussed more important matters at the kitchen table. Clark had been introduced to them at Tiny Town that morning as Jason's real father, and the tension between him and Tom remained palpable throughout the day. He had excused himself early in the afternoon to take care of matters back east and had just recently rejoined them. As Clark began to explain what Bruce Wayne had uncovered for them, he kept his voice low, out of range of the children's hearing.

"Our... our security contacts have some preliminary information for us," Clark began nervously. "Does 'Numar Capital' sound familiar to anyone?"

"Weren't they one of the front companies that Luthor was using to move money around?" Lois inquired uncertainly.

Clark nodded. "They pulled credit reports on you and Richard several weeks ago," Clark explained grimly. "From the dates, it was immediately after we lost Luthor's trail in Baton Rouge. Our contacts believe that was the first step in a detailed investigation."

"What does he plan on doing with that?" Lois asked anxiously.

"It's a starting point," Clark explained. "They have your social security numbers and account numbers, and if you add a little information with that, like your mother's maiden name, then they have all the tools needed for social engineering."

"I'm not familiar with that term," Lily confessed in confusion.

"Basically, it's fraud," Tom explained gravely. "The perpetrators pretend to be someone they're not, offering some personal information to establish their legitimacy: your soc. number, date of birth, mother's maiden name, all of which is available from public sources, unfortunately. If they have account numbers, even better."

"So, what's he going to do with that?" Lois asked. "Is he going to try to empty our accounts?"

"I doubt he'd be that stupid," Clark told her. "He knows by now that we'd know how to follow the money. If he tried to raid your funds, the audit trail would lead to his accounts, the feds would freeze them, and the Vanderworth's would file for more writs of replevin again those assets."

"Replevin?" Tom inquired, as his brow furrowed in confusion.

"Restitution," Clark explained nervously. "It's an order for the return of assets improperly taken by another, such as what Luthor pilfered from the Vanderworth estate." Turning back to Lois, he added, "It still wouldn't hurt to sign up for the fraud alerts on our accounts. Then only the institutions that we've explicitly authorized in writing could transfer funds."

Lois nodded, as she uneasily inquired, "So if he's not after our funds, what was he after?"

"Our contacts think that it's part of an investigation to identify behavioral patterns to develop a profile of his targets," Clark revealed. "He's looking at the accounts to determine where we're spending money and who we're talking to. That would also tell him *where* we've been."

"Do you think that's what led him to Smallville, rather than... the alternative?" Richard asked.

"I don't know," Clark admitted. "A lot of this is still conjecture. We know what he *could* have done, but we don't know what he actually *has* done."

"How do we find out if he's accessed our accounts?" Lois asked uneasily.

"By accessing them ourselves," Clark answered. "If the passwords don't work, then he's probably used social engineering methods to reset them for his use. If it's an account that's never been set up for online access, then we have to check with customer service at that institution, which usually has to be in person."

"Great," Lois grumbled. "One more thing I don't have time for."

"Aren't most of your accounts already online?" Richard inquired, more as a reminder than a question.

"Yeah, I'll check them as soon as we're done here," Lois stated calmly.

Turning to Tom Ferguson, Clark sincerely told him, "I... I need to point out the danger here. While we truly appreciate everything that you've done for us, if Luthor traces Jason here, your family could be in danger. We don't think that it's fair to ask you to take that risk--"

"You didn't ask," Tom reminded him rudely as he glared at him. "We volunteered, out of friendship with *Richard!*" Lily laid her palm on Tom's forearm to draw his attention and as a silent reminder to remain calm.

"Relax, Tom," Richard insisted. "This isn't the time or place to air our grievances." Lowering his voice, Richard added, "Jason is in *real* danger. Protecting him is all that matters to Clark, Lois and me. Other arguments can wait." After a beat of silence, Tom nodded his head. As his friend yielded, Richard added, "He's right about the potential danger to your family, Tom. You need to realize what you could be in for if Jason continues to spend his days here."

"We're talking about the same low-life that murdered that cop at Penn Station in New York last month, right?" Tom questioned gruffly. As Richard nodded, Tom asked, "I can defend my home against slime like that."

"We're not questioning that, but it's a mistake to underestimate Lex Luthor," Lois explained patiently. "That cop he killed in New York wasn't a rookie, and yet Luthor surprised him. You might not know he was here until it was too late."

"A major reason for bringing Jason here was because we didn't think that anyone would be able to trace him here," Clark added nervously. "If that's changed, then we could be needlessly endangering your family."

"The day I let some slick perp intimidate me is the day I turn in my badge!" Tom declared angrily.

The other adults darted their gaze to the children in the family room, who remained oblivious to the adults' debate. Richard implored him, "Keep it down, will you? I don't want to scare the kids."

"Look, after being here a few weeks the kid is kind of part of the family," Tom replied in a low voice. "Nobody is getting at him without a fight, and he probably has a better chance here than anywhere else you can take him. Don't worry about us."

"Tom's right, Jason is family now," Lily confirmed gently. "He can stay as long as you want him to."

"Then it's settled, so stop worrying about it," Tom declared brusquely.

Clark and Lois looked at each other and both nodded. Clark nervously stammered, "Well, now... now that that's out of the way... there are a couple of... 'perps'... in Smallville, who were certainly sent there by Luthor. I was hoping that if... if we put our heads together, we could figure out a way of getting them to spill the beans." Lois and Clark both turned their gaze to Richard as his eyes grew large with the implication.

Day 69, Sunday, 3:00PM (Central Time), Smallville, Kansas

It took about a half hour to drive into town from the Kent farm. Clark Kent and Richard White were making that trip now, after Superman brought Richard with him to interview the felons in the county jail. They'd stopped briefly at the farm, and began the trip into town as soon as Clark grabbed the keys from the empty house. After what seemed like an eternity, Clark broke the silence, stating simply, "Looks like you were right about Tom's dedication to friends and family. He doesn't seem to care much for me, though."

"Why should he?" Richard asked cynically. "As he sees it, a friend of his got a raw deal because of you."

"I... I thought we were past that," Clark muttered.

"Jesus, you don't just get over something after pouring your heart and soul into it for five years," Richard replied bitterly. "I'm trying to be sensible and mature about it and push through the pain because there are more important things, but it *does* hurt. It's better than it was, but it's still going to hurt for a while, and finding out that you've moved in with her now doesn't help."

"I'm sorry," Clark apologized meekly. "I never meant-"

"Stop apologizing," Richard demanded. "It doesn't matter what you meant to do. I was blissfully ignorant of the illusion called my life, and you came in and burst that bubble."

"Sorry," Clark mumbled, as Richard glared at him for a moment.

"Look, it's a lot easier if we don't talk about it, so let's just drop it," Richard suggested irritably. "We have other things we should be concentrating on." After a moment's pause, he added, "You do realize that we probably won't get as much out of these two as we did with Kowalski."

"They've probably had little direct contact with Luthor, if any," Clark agreed. "But if we can get the web addresses that they were going to upload the photos to, we may be able to tap into it at the ISP. Even if we can't track anything back to Luthor directly, if we can find out what his flunkies are posting, then maybe we could get advance warning of an attack."

"Luthor's pretty thorough at covering his tracks," Richard observed quietly.

"This is it," Clark told him, as he pulled his mother's truck into the parking space in front of the sheriff's station. He led the way as the two entered the building.

"Clark!" a male voice hollered across the room to greet them. The two men looked up to see a smiling young deputy who appeared to be in his early thirties. As he approached them, he continued, "Sheriff Dutcher told us we'd have a visitor from the *Daily Planet*, but I didn't realize it would be you."

"Good to see you again, Kevin," Clark greeted as he took the man's hand and pulled him into a hug. "Gosh, I haven't seen you in ages. How long have you been a deputy here? I thought you were over in Wichita?"

"It's been a couple years," Kevin told him. "You need to get home more often."

As Kevin looked over to Richard, Clark made the introduction, "Oh, Kevin, this is Richard White, an assistant editor at the *Planet*. Richard, this is Kevin Randall, an old friend of mine from high school."

After exchanging their introductions, Kevin twisted and shouted back over his shoulder, "Hey Dave, are those prisoners ready for the press yet?"

"Hold on a minute," Dave told him, as he stood up from his chair and walked down a hall at the other end of the room.

Turning back to Clark, Kevin assured him, "You don't need to worry about losers like those two getting anywhere near your mother's place. The whole town's looking out for you."

"The... what?" Clark stammered.

"It's not every day that public enemy number one tries to kill off the town hero," Kevin explained. "*Everybody* knows about that ambush in the construction elevator... I hate to think what might have happened if Superman hadn't been there... And now that people have heard about those two, everyone in town has their eyes and ears open."

"I... appreciate that," Clark answered numbly. "*Everybody*?"

"Every car that the neighbors don't recognize is getting called in," Kevin explained. "Some of the retirees have volunteered to man the phones, like Karen Travis over there." Kevin motioned over his shoulder to an elderly woman seating at a desk behind him, speaking on the phone. "Your family is safe here," the deputy assured him.

"Town hero?" Richard asked as he glanced over to Clark.

"Oh, absolutely," Kevin explained. "It not every day a small town farm boy goes toe to toe with the most dangerous man in the world, even if it is just in print." Turning to Clark, Kevin added with a chuckle, "You probably hurt him a lot worse taking his money away than anything Superman's ever done to him."

"Um, Richard was also in the elevator when they attacked," Clark told him, as a mild blush spread across his face. "And the way he pulled that information out of Luthor's girlfriend in Chicago was almost magic. He's a hero, too."

"Really?" Kevin answered as his smile grew. "Well, we're going to have to give you a proper Smallville welcome before you leave. You're staying for dinner, right?"

"We hadn't really thought that far ahead," Clark admitted. "We were kind of focused on the job ahead of us."

"Well, then, it's settled," Kevin told him. "I'll let Cindy know that you'll be joining us for dinner. The kids will be excited to see you, too."

"You have kids, now?" Clark asked cheerfully.

Kevin pulled out his wallet and flipped out the pictures. "Twins, Rebecca and Lisa," Kevin told him. "They're the same age as your boy. What was his name, Jacob, Jason, something like that?"

"Jason," Clark clarified as he glanced over at Richard. At the look of surprise on the other man's face, he explained. "It's a small town. It doesn't take a lot from a bragging grandma for everyone in town to know about any changes in the family."

"Oh," Richard responded blankly, as a young woman entered the room from the other side. "Dave's got one of them in the interview room," she hollered across the room. "He's ready when you are."

"Is it Chalmers, or McQueen?" Kevin inquired in a loud voice.

"McQueen, I think," she answered.

"Well, let's get this show on the road," Kevin instructed as he motioned for the men to follow him.

"It'll probably work better if Richard talks to him alone," Clark clarified. "Since my family was targeted, I'm not neutral." Kevin nodded his understanding as he led Richard down the hall and into the holding room, while Clark remained in the lobby of the station.

As Clark looked around the lobby, Karen Travis ended her conversation on the phone and motioned for Clark to come over. "Hello, Mrs. Travis," Clark greeted shyly. The woman had been his high school English teacher before she retired, and Clark was feeling very much like he was still one of her students.

"It's wonderful to see you again, Clark," she told him as she treated him to a wide smile.

"Did you bring that adorable little boy with you?"

"He's back in Metropolis with his mother," Clark told her regretfully. "We'll make another trip out here soon, though, and I can try to bring him by."

"I look forward to that, Clark," she told him sincerely as her smile diminished slightly. "So... when are you going to get around to marrying that girl?" Clark eyes grew large and he started fidgeting as he suddenly felt that he was back in high school, trying to explain to his teacher why his term paper was late.

Chapter 34 - Conscript

Day 69, Sunday, 8:15PM (Mountain Time), Denver, Colorado

Ricky Hernandez walked into the guest room at the Central Denver Days Inn, dropped his luggage in the closet and plopped himself down on one of the guest beds in exhaustion from the two day drive from New York. He briefly reflected on the circumstances that had brought him there before dragging himself back up, pulling out his cell phone, and calling Rosa.

"Ricky?" she answered tiredly.

Her voice brought a smile to Ricky's face. "I didn't wake you, did I?" he asked anxiously.

"Don't worry about it," she told him kindly. "It doesn't take much for me to nod off these days."

"How are you feeling?" Ricky asked her patiently. "Is everything alright with the baby?"

"Everything is about the same," she told him as she yawned. "The baby likes playing soccer inside my belly and tiring me out."

"Well, I'm safely in Denver now," he told her. "Hopefully, it will just be a few days, and then I'll be back home with you."

"What does that lunatic have you out there for, anyway?" she questioned bitterly.

"I wish I knew," Ricky told her meekly. He then assured her, "This nightmare won't go on forever. When it's over, it'll be something that we can be proud to tell our kid about someday."

"Proud?" Rosa inquired incredulously. She added in a loud whisper, "You're obediently following the orders of a madman!"

"Not completely, and I have little choice in the matter," Ricky tried to explain. "We're already doing what we can to bring this nightmare to an end. We just have to be patient a while longer."

Rosa sighed loudly, before tearfully asking him, "Why did he have to pick you? Things were going so well for us..."

"I don't know," Ricky admitted timidly. "I'm so sorry about this, Rosa. Someday, I'll find a way to make it up to you."

"I'm... I can't talk right now," Rosa choked out. "Be careful."

"I will be," Ricky promised her. "I love you."

"I love you, too," she sobbed as she hung up the phone.

Ricky walked over to the window and looked out into the night sky over Barnum Park as he considered the turmoil that Lex Luthor had brought to his relationship. Rosa hadn't known that he had served time in prison until Lex had burst into their Bronx apartment. Afterwards, she had immediately left and moved back in with her mother and wanted nothing to do with him. It had taken considerable effort to convince her that his unlawful past was long behind him, in spite of Luthor conscripting him into service. She still insisted on remaining with her mother until the ordeal with Luthor was over, which Ricky couldn't argue with. He was confident that he'd be able to salvage the relationship that Lex had nearly sabotaged.

His primary motivation where Lex was concerned was the welfare of Rosa and their baby. He hoped to survive as well, but he knew that the odds were against that. He had learned a lot about his new boss, both from his personal dealings with the man and from the extensive research that he'd done after his conscription. One conclusion quickly became obvious: Luthor's associates never benefited from the association, if they survived at all. While there was no proof that Lex was responsible for their unfortunate ends, it was the most plausible explanation. It seemed to Ricky that Lex was one of those people who perpetually failed to accept responsibility for their actions, and thus he'd made his people convenient scapegoats.

Most were likely victims of his sadistic temper when he blamed them for *his* failures. The lucky ones, like Kitty Kowalski, were merely abandoned.

Ricky reflected on what he knew of his boss. *He's definitely feeling the pressure*, Ricky thought, as he recalled Lex's rants on the neighbor's loud music, his frozen assets, and having to actually do his own grocery shopping. That was a sharp contrast to the man he'd met in prison where his wealth had greased enough palms for special treatment, even from the warden and the guards. That man had at least been able to present the façade of the lord of the manor who was above petty human weaknesses. He had even acted jovial when the occasion called for it. That façade was no longer anywhere to be seen.

Lex placed the blame for his misfortunes squarely at the feet of Superman and Lois Lane, though the incompetence of his minions was often mentioned. It was in the course of one of those diatribes that Lex had inadvertently revealed that Superman was the father of Lois Lane's son. He warned Ricky against revealing that to anyone else, more concerned that someone would usurp his right of revenge than any harm that might come to the boy because of it. Ricky assured him that he had no interest in the child, though the thought of one of Superman's enemies hurting the youngster was more than enough to keep him from sharing that with anyone except Rosa.

Ricky had been skeptical of Lex's promised rewards from the moment the man had burst into the apartment that he shared with Rosa nearly six weeks ago. For the first few days, Lex had kept either him or Rosa hostage while the other ran errands for him, and tied them both up in the evening while he slept. After those first few days, Lex found another place to live and most of his contact since then had been by phone. However, Lex still had Ricky running his errands while he remained in hiding, including rebuilding his Opera collection and purchasing new computer equipment. *He's afraid to show his face in public*, Ricky concluded. *The reward is too high, and too many people have seen the mug shots*. Even with Ricky, Lex carefully chose rendezvous locations that gave him very little time to get there and very little opportunity for betrayal.

In spite of Lex's intimidation, Ricky had still taken actions that his boss would consider disloyal. Before turning over the new laptops and PDAs that Lex demanded, he installed a customized Trojan horse in the operating system and repackaged the equipment. He found the source code for the virus on a hacker web site, and specifically stripped out the more malicious and detectable features. The rewritten spyware would no longer attempt to replicate itself and spread, instead merely forwarding emails, Internet history and recorded keystrokes from the affected equipment. Only Lex's PDA phone remained uninfected, but fortunately, it appeared that Lex preferred his new laptop.

Ricky worried that the recruit he was meeting in the morning was meant to replace him. From what Lex had told him, Ricky knew that Lou Mueller was a middle-aged man who had skirted around the edges of the law for most of his adult life. He served time for petty larceny once, and got hauled in by the police on a regular basis, but they never nailed him for anything more serious than that. Lex knew of him from others that he had worked for, and had chosen him for the next phase of his plan. *If only I knew what that plan was*, Ricky pondered. His spyware had not yet revealed Lex's plans to him.

Ricky booted up his laptop and after entering a command to disable his spyware, he checked the anonymous email account for any new information surreptitiously forwarded from Lex's laptop. Unfortunately, nothing there would explain his boss' intentions for Mueller. Ricky purged the history from his laptop and shut it down. *What are you up to?* Ricky asked

the blank screen. Ricky reasoned that if Lex had suspected him of anything, he would have already killed him. *No, there's another reason for sending me out here.* Ricky continuing trying to come up with the answer as he climbed into bed and sleep finally overtook him.

Day 70, Monday, 11:00AM (Mountain Time), Denver Colorado.

Ricky Hernandez sat numbly at the kitchen table in Lou Mueller's 14th Street apartment as the two men spoke with Lex Luthor via the PDA speakerphone. "I need some resourceful men to help bring my plans to fruition," Lex explained. "The men we've recruited so far have been... disappointing."

"Is it so bad that you need someone from the other side of the country, who really doesn't know Metropolis like the men you can find locally?" Lou asked skeptically. Ricky remained mute as he listened to the other two men.

"Some of the work is out there," Lex told him enigmatically. "It will finish here, though."

"What do you need from me?" Lou asked cautiously. "If you're going toe to toe with Superman again, then you're on your own."

"We don't need to worry about that busybody," Lex assured him. "I have resources that should keep him at bay."

"Kryptonite?" Lou questioned. He then asked curiously, "What's the job?"

"I have certain... adversaries... who've become a problem," Lex explained. "They need to be punished and we'll do that by taking their son away from them. I've recently learned that they've hidden the boy in Littleton. That's where you come in." Ricky froze at the realization that Lex must have discovered Superman's son there. He felt physically ill, and could feel his face warming. It took everything he had to keep his expression neutral.

"You want us to grab him from the house in the middle of the night?" Lou asked in surprise.

"Well, we don't know that he actually stays there overnight," Lex admitted. "His old man is... resourceful. We'll have to get him from his school bus."

"It'd be risky grabbing him as he gets off the bus," Lou observed uneasily. "Police response times are pretty good in Littleton, and they go nuts anytime something involves a child, Amber Alert and all that."

"Which is why we're grabbing him earlier," Lex revealed casually. "You'll hide on the bus as the children load up after school. Then, you'll divert it to a secure location, take the kid off, and you're on your way. You'll also be switching vehicles immediately after dumping the bus to keep the cops off of you."

"I haven't agreed to this yet," Lou pointed out shortly.

"It wasn't a request," Lex told him firmly. "You'll grab the boy. If you need more people to pull it off, then get more people, but you're going to do it."

Lou's jaw clenched and he thrust his middle finger in the air at the phone, but remained mute for a moment. "It sounds like a good way to get an extended visit as a guest of the state," Lou complained.

"If you stick to my plan, you won't need to worry about that," Lex told him condescendingly. "It's when people panic and deviate from my instructions that bad things happen."

"I'll need more information," Lou insisted.

"I'm emailing it to you now," Lex assured him. "Ricky, give him the phone and the envelope."

Ricky handed Lou a PDA phone and a FedEx overnight envelope. Lou ripped open the envelope, and dumped its contents out. A palm-sized flat green rock fell to the table. "What the hell is this?" Lou muttered as he picked up the rock.

"If you're referring to the contents of the envelope, that is insurance to keep a certain busybody out of your hair," Lex told him confidently. "Make sure that you keep it with you when you grab the boy."

"Kryptonite," Lou muttered. He then nervously asked, "Are you expecting him to show up?"

"Probably not, but he is close to the family," Lex informed him simply. "Better safe than sorry... Ricky will explain our communication protocols, and make payment arrangements for you. Let me know as soon as you're ready." After Lex hung up, Lou looked at Ricky expectantly.

"Oh, right," Ricky acknowledged as he began explaining the features of the PDA phone to Lou, along with Lex's communication rules. Once satisfied that Lou understood what he needed to, Ricky made a hasty retreat.

How did I get into this mess? Ricky contemplated as he drove back to his hotel. If someone was gunning for my kid like that... Ricky's thoughts returned to Rosa and the child that she'd deliver a few months later. He suddenly felt a kinship with Superman, as one father to another. He felt as helpless to prevent the coming tragedy as if it was his own child. I'm sorry, but I can't help you, he silently apologized to Superman. If I tipped you off, it would be too much of a coincidence for me to get away with it. Ricky silently prayed that Superman would somehow manage to thwart the kidnapping attempt. Maybe there's still time to figure something out.

Chapter 35 - Warpath

Day 70, Monday, 1:30PM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom

The pleasant fall day was lost on Lois Lane as she stormed into the *Daily Planet* bullpen. The newspaper's veterans recognized the scowl on their star reporter's face, and scurried out of her way as she marched to her desk. The majority of her day had been spent in customer service lines at banks, and utility and telephone companies securing her violated online accounts. Richard had gone through a similar ordeal, but Clark got off easy. He had opted out of online access when he opened his accounts, preferring to do everything the old fashioned way. As she threw her purse down into the bottom drawer of her desk, she risked a glance over at him. Clark offered her a sympathetic smile as he walked over to her.

"I think that our next story is going to be on social engineering," Lois complained bitterly. "I can't believe how easy it was for Luthor to steal our records, and how much trouble it is to get it straightened out!"

"Is everything straightened out now?" Clark asked kindly.

"I think so," Lois muttered irritably. "All of my passwords are updated, and I've got fraud alerts flagged on the accounts, which means I'd have to show up in person and present ID to get the password changed again. I really don't want to have to deal with those people again."

"Well, it's all behind us now," Clark reassured her. Dropping his voice to a whisper, he added, "Wayne Financial has put fraud alerts on our credit reports, too. We'll get notified immediately on any inquiries from any of the reporting bureaus."

"Can't we just block access?" Lois asked seriously.

"Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way," Clark told her regretfully. "It's the big companies like the banks and other lenders who are their main customers, not the consumers whose information they're reporting. Their priority is to efficiently provide reports to their customers, not protecting consumers from abuse."

"Sounds like we've got a few stories we can squeeze out of this ordeal," Lois told him. "Social engineering, incompetent customer service reps and the wanton disregard of consumers by the credit bureaus. How much time do we have until deadline?"

"Not enough to make the afternoon edition," Clark told her. "Not if we want it on page one. We'll need to do a little more research."

"We can do that," Lois declared with determination. "Maybe in the glare of sunlight, some of this can be fixed." Lois was silent for a moment before looking back up at Clark. "Are you sure it's a good idea to brief Perry on the rest of the Luthor story?"

"I'm still inclined to agree with Richard on that," Clark told her. "If things get out of hand, we'll need a lot of leeway from Perry, and we can trust him not to print the risky stuff, especially with Richard on our side."

"When do we brief him?" she asked nervously.

"After deadline," Clark told her simply. "In the meantime, why don't we start with the social engineering? Maybe we can even expand it to cover identity theft..."

"Sounds like a plan," Lois agreed, as the two dug in and put together a plan for gathering the necessary information to put together what they hoped would be their next front page story.

Day 70, Monday, 2:45PM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom

The *Daily Planet* newsroom was a harmony of noise and motion as the bullpen staff hit their strides and jumped back into the game after a brief reprieve after deadline. Many were

out of the office chasing new stories, as their editor would expect, but the hubbub never really died down. The din of the newsroom was always the first thing that Perry White noticed when he came into the office, and the first thing that he missed when he went home. It energized him and he found it oddly relaxing to lean back in his chair as the ruckus from the bullpen drifted across his ears. This afternoon, however, that clamor barely registered as he grasped the disturbing information that his guests had just revealed to him. Finally, he quietly asked, "Are you sure that he's going after Jason?"

"It's the only explanation," Richard told him grimly. "The authorities have painstakingly gone over a list of Luthor's known associates and his associate's associates. Many of those individuals have been arrested while staking out the homes of our family and friends: Lois' sister in Long Island, her parents' place in Alexandria, my brother's place in Chicago, *your house*... And now, some of those flunkies have admitted that their instructions were to photograph any children at those locations."

"But why Jason?" Perry asked uneasily.

"To get back at us for digging into his finances and drying up his funds," Lois told him frankly. "Remember from his physiological profile that he likes his enemies to suffer emotionally as well as physically. His means of emotional torture is to harm our loved ones, if he gets the chance."

"The sheriff in Smallville picked up some of Luthor's goons looking for my mother's place, too," Clark added sadly. "They didn't make it very far, though. That's one advantage to everyone knowing everyone else in a small town: strangers stick out like a sore thumb."

"Where's Jason now?" Perry asked apprehensively.

"He's with a trusted friend," Lois told him. "He should be safe."

"What do you want me to do?" Perry asked numbly. "Out of town assignments?"

"I don't think it's come to that point yet," Lois answered. "But you do need to be included in our contingency plans. Most of what we've dug up on Luthor over the past few weeks would have been irresponsible to print, so we haven't mentioned it. However, it's revealed that things are starting to move faster now, and we may soon reach the point where we have to do something drastic."

"What exactly have you dug up, and why didn't you feel that you could trust me with it?" Perry asked calmly.

"It-It wasn't about trust," Clark assured him nervously. "It's just that you were rather adamant that you wanted us off the Luthor story."

"Well?" Perry pressed.

"Well, the big thing is the kryptonite," Clark admitted. "Luthor got his hands on some more of it. But to print where he got it from, or that it really *was* kryptonite, would advertise where kryptonite could be found to the rest of Superman's enemies. We can't do that."

"Our sources have also been adamant that nothing they provide us find its way into print," Lois added quickly. "It's strictly background information to help us find Luthor. They've leaked details about some of their surveillance and wiretaps and the tips that been called in. Those efforts have not only interfered with Luthor's stakeouts, its helped map out his activities somewhat. Unfortunately, it hasn't revealed his location yet."

"Our security sources are unanimous in the opinion that Luthor is hiding somewhere in Metropolis," Clark added. "Prior to a few weeks ago, most of the activity seems to have been aimed at setting up shop after being forced to abandon the Vanderworth estate. Now, it looks like preparation for carrying out his plans, whatever they are. Given his micromanagement

style and his pathological need to gloat, that means he's close. If Metropolis gets too hot, he may pull back to New York City, Philadelphia or Atlantic City, but no farther than that."

"This isn't just a story anymore," Richard explained. "It's also not just that it's gotten personal. It's literally become a shooting war and Luthor won't quit until we're dead or he is. To ignore that just gives him an advantage. We need to keep the pressure on him, which means keeping Lois and Clark on the story, even if there's not much there to print at the moment."

Perry nodded before dropping his head in his hands. After a moment, he muttered into his hands, "This isn't the way things are supposed to be." Lifting his head, he continued, "The middle east is supposed to be the war zone, not here. Journalists shouldn't have to worry about their family's safety just for doing their jobs." As he considered the situation, Perry looked compassionately between Lois and Clark in the guest chairs. "I take you two are determined to take Luthor down?"

"There really not much choice in the matter," Lois told him candidly. "We get him, or he gets us. A truce isn't an option."

"Then take him down," Perry told them directly. "If you can still squeeze some good articles in when things slow down in the Luthor hunt, it will be greatly appreciated, but Luthor is your priority."

"We'll do what we can," Clark promised.

Perry responded gruffly, "You'd better, now get back to work! Get me what you can on Luthor, and I'll find somewhere to print it." Clark and Lois both offered small sympathetic smiles at Perry's weak effort to restore his public image as the gruff editor in chief. They knew the man had been greatly shaken by what they had just told him. They nodded their assent as Lois returned to her desk, and Clark headed out to resume his search for Luthor.

"I'd got work to do, too," Richard added as he also withdrew from Perry's office. "We'll let you know if anything new comes up."

As the severity of their situation sank in, Perry's tuned out the bullpen, perhaps for the first time since his career began. The din of the newsroom continued, oblivious to the mental paralysis that now affected Perry as he contemplated the danger facing his *Daily Planet* family. He sat leaning slightly forward in his chair, hands over the arm rests as he stared blankly at the top of his desk. He feared greatly for their safety and felt helpless to do anything to improve the situation. Even Superman had failed to bring Luthor in, and the Man of Steel had shown significantly more persistence in the current hunt for his nemesis than Perry had ever seen from him before.

From her vantage point outside his office, Maggie Gonzales was about to forward a call to him before she noticed his demeanor. "He's busy at the moment," she told her caller. "I'll let him know to call back as soon as he's free." Entering his office, Maggie cautiously inquired, "Perry? Is everything alright?" After getting no response, she walked up to him, and gently set her hand on his forearm, "Perry?" she inquired again.

Perry's head snapped back in surprise at her touch as she continued, "Is everything alright? You looked like you went away for a little bit."

Perry tried to shake it off, "Just being a foolish old man, I guess, worrying about the kids," he told her with embarrassment as he motioned with his head to the bullpen. "It's a more dangerous world than when I was out there."

"Are you sure that you're alright?" she persisted.

"Don't you worry about me," Perry admonished her quietly. "There are others who are in much more need of that."

"Are you worried about Richard?" Maggie asked. "He seems like he's doing much better since... Well, he's doing much better. He's doing okay, isn't he?"

"Fine, I think," Perry answered weakly. "He's doing a great job."

"That's not what I meant," Maggie clarified. "I mean, I can see that he's kind of buried himself in his work. Is he okay, though? He still needs to get out and unwind at some point."

"Still trying to fix up your sister, I see," Perry observed with a weak smile.

Maggie raised her palms in a surrender gesture. "I wasn't going to say anything...yet," she assured him. "It's still way too soon for him."

"That's an understatement," Perry muttered unconsciously. "It isn't just because Lois left him for Jason's biological father. A lunatic's tried to kill him, and now that same madman seems to be hunting for Jason. Richard will always consider Jason his son, no matter what the DNA says... It's all kind of overwhelming... It's been stressful for Lois and Kent, too... There were even a couple crooks in Smallville going after Kent's mother... It would be insane for *any* of them to consider a new relationship right now."

Jason's biological father? Maggie thought. *I thought that Richard was Jason's biological father.* Pushing that information aside, she asked as calmly as she could, "Um, they went after Clark's mom?"

"They never found the place," Perry clarified. "Police nabbed them in time." Turning to her, he added, "Luthor isn't just a story anymore. It's a war, until Luthor is caught or until he..." Perry faltered, unable to finish the sentence, and then swallowed with some difficulty. He sighed deeply before continuing, "Things have gotten a bit scary, and I'm worried about them. I'm worried about Richard, about Jason, and of course I'm worried about Lois and Kent. I wish there was some way that I could protect them."

"I'll keep them in my prayers," Maggie promised him. After a moment, she added compassionately, "If you need some time alone, I can ask Sam Foswell to call back Pete from layout for you."

"No, the last thing I need right now is to be alone with my thoughts," Perry told her. "I'll call him back... Thanks, Maggie."

"No problem," she assured him as she retreated from his office. As she settled back in at her desk, her gaze fell to Lois, pouring over something on her computer screen. *So who's the mystery man?* Maggie briefly wondered, before her ringing phone forced her to return her attention to other matters.

Chapter 36 - Countdown

Day 72, Wednesday, 6:30PM, Metropolis, 1938 Sullivan Lane

Lois leaned back into Clark's chest as she snuggled in closer to him on the living room couch. Their son busied himself with a crayon drawing from his position on the floor, apparently oblivious to the television, currently tuned to The Disney Channel. As Lois enjoyed Clark's embrace, she was amazed at how complete this simple setting made her feel. Confident in their home's security, Lois was able to forget the threats facing the family and relax in sleepy happiness. Clark feelings mirrored his partner's as he lounged back with his family, temporarily oblivious to the problems of the world. Clark tightened his grip around Lois as she snuggled into him, placing a brief kiss on the top of her head.

"I think your aim is a little off," Lois teased, as she lifted her head up to him and offered him a mischievous smile.

Clark returned the smile, and planted a chaste kiss on her lips. Before she had a chance to complain about its brevity, he glanced quickly over to Jason and back, as he whispered the reminder, "We need to keep this rated G for now."

Lois giggled lightly as whispered back, "Neither of us would let it go farther than that, but you can still do more than that under a 'G'." She pulled his head down to her as she demonstrated with a tame though affectionate kiss. "We need more nights like this."

"And we'll have them," Clark assured her, leaving the known challenges unspoken. As the two silently enjoyed their embrace, Jason jumped up and excitedly showed them his latest drawing, this one of his Grandma Martha and Ben Hubbard at the Kent Farm. The picture had clearly been inspired by his parents' revelation earlier in the evening that they would be going to Smallville that weekend. Though the crayon drawing was still awkward, the image was clearly recognizable as the elderly couple.

"See what I made?" the tyke asked excitedly. "I'm going to give it to Grandma and Poppa Ben when we see them!"

"This is amazing," Lois told their son enthusiastically. "They're going to love it! How'd you get to be such a good artist?"

Jason beamed back at her, as he shyly mumbled, "I dunno." Her son's shy grin was a facsimile of the familiar expression that she'd seen on Clark's face countless times. Lois wondered how anyone could have missed the striking resemblance to the mild-mannered man. "I'm going to make one for Grandma and Grandpa Lane, too," he promised, as he ran back over to his crayons.

As Jason sprawled back out on the floor, he looked back at his mother with a confused look on his face. "Mommy, how come Grandma and Grandpa don't come to see us anymore?"

"Oh, don't worry about that, sweetheart, it's just that everyone's been so busy lately," Lois explained guiltily. "We'll see them soon. I promise."

"How long it's been since they've seen him?" Clark inquired curiously.

"Not since before I left Richard," she admitted in a nearly inaudible whisper. "Things are bit rocky between me and my parents right now. My mom thinks I'm not thinking things through, and dad's convinced that I'm ruining my life."

"So they haven't seen their grandson," Clark confirmed sadly. "We'll need to fix that."

"Then get ready to get raked over the coals," Lois warned him. "My parents aren't understanding like your mom is."

"You should have been there when she chewed me out after I first told her about Jason," Clark told her with a smirk. "I got quite the lecture." At Lois surprised expression, he added

seriously, "She was worried that I wasn't seeing things straight. Once she was convinced that I was going to do the right thing, she relaxed and has been fully supportive ever since... It's probably similar with your folks: They're worried about you because they love you."

"I think my dad loves yelling," Lois muttered. "No wonder he joined the army."

"We'll have to face the music sooner or later," Clark pointed out. "Why not get it over with? Once they're satisfied with our explanations, they'll relax and we can put it behind us."

"If you'd met my dad, you wouldn't be so quick to say that," Lois told him anxiously. "He's hated all our beaus, at least while we were dating them. His first kind words about Richard didn't come until after I left him. You won't fare any better, even if he knew your secret... which we will *never* tell him."

Their discussion on in-laws was disrupted by Jason, as he innocently asked, "Mommy, how many stars are on Grandpa's uniform?"

"Three," Lois answered proudly, as Clark suddenly became nervous at the prospect of meeting his de-facto father-in-law. "Yeah, you'd *better* be nervous," Lois teased with a soft giggle, as she noticed him tense up.

Day 73, Thursday, 6:55AM (Mountain Time), Littleton, Colorado

The briefest blur of red and blue was all there was to suggest anything out of the ordinary over Ridgeview Park on this brisk fall morning. Even if someone had noticed the blur between heartbeats, it passed at too great a speed for anyone to determine its source or destination. A moment later, two figures emerged from behind the trees, their footsteps producing a small spattering of water from the grass, still wet from the overnight rain. Clark was wearing khakis, a blue polo shirt and a light green windbreaker as he led his son across the park, and down the road to the Fergusons' house.

The explanation given to the Tom and Lily Ferguson was that Superman blamed himself for Luthor's release from prison, and was thus providing Jason's transportation as a small penance for that failure. Despite that revelation, Clark didn't want to alert the children to the Man of Steel's presence, or reveal his dual identity to the parents. Thus, he chose to disguise himself on these encounters with business casual dress and a Metropolis Meteors baseball cap in place of his ill-fitting suit and glasses. The precaution was almost superfluous, since he had always managed to drop off Jason without being seen by the Fergusons' children.

Jason was skipping along besides his father, telling him everything that he wanted to do in Smallville that weekend with Grandma and Ben, as Clark guided him across the street. The tyke momentarily ceased his chatter, before inquisitively asking his father, "Are we going to go back to the quarry this weekend?"

"I think you're getting too strong and throwing too far for that," Clark told him reluctantly. "We can take a picnic there if you want, but we'll have to find somewhere else to play catch if that's what you want to do."

"Kay," Jason answered, satisfied. "Are there going to be any other kids there?"

"Of course, and I'm sure lots of them are dying to meet you," Clark assured him. "In fact, when Richard and I were there Sunday, we told a couple kids your age all about you." After a rare moment of silence with his son, Clark asked him, "You have a lot of fun here with Stevie, don't you?"

"Uh-huh," Jason replied automatically. "Tina can be mean sometimes though." Looking up at his father, Jason asked him curiously, "Why is Tina always mean to Stevie?"

Clark frowned for a moment, as they reached the front door of the Ferguson's house. "It's

like that a lot with brothers and sisters," he explained. "They love each other, but sometimes one of them is jealous of the attention that the other one gets, and acts up. It happens a lot."

"But, I would never do that," Jason assured him.

"I know that, son," Clark agreed as he broke into a wide smile. He squatted down in front of his son and pulled him into a hug. "Now, be a good boy at school today, and I'll see you this afternoon." Before Clark could release Jason from his grip, the front door opened suddenly, and both of them turned in surprise to see Tina grinning down at them.

"Told you he was here!" she hollered over her shoulder, as Stevie came running up behind her, still in his pajamas. Both Stevie and Jason smiled widely as they saw each other.

"Is that any way to answer the door?" Lily hollered from the other room. "Let him in and, Stevie, get upstairs and get dressed right now!"

Clark released Jason from his hug and stood, telling the children, "Well, I'd better get going now. Bye, kids."

As Clark turned to leave, he heard Tina's voice behind him, "Goodbye, Mr. Kent."

Clark looked back in surprise as Tina closed the door behind him, his eyes wide. *Why is it that kids are never fooled by the disguise?* he wondered anxiously. He shook his head in disbelief and focused his senses inside the house. Lily knew it was really Superman dropping Jason off, but she apparently hadn't heard Tina's goodbye. The kids' nonchalant demeanor could only mean that they recognized him as Jason's daddy, Clark Kent, not as Superman.

Inside, Jason was asking innocently, "How'd you know who he was?"

"Duh, he was just here last Sunday," Tina answered sarcastically. "Like we're not going to recognize him with contact lenses... Our dad wears contacts, too." Thankfully, Jason didn't correct her.

Clark kept his hearing sharply focused on the kids in the house as he slowly walked down Highland Drive back to the park. *Of course she recognized me as Jason's daddy,* Clark realized as his anxiety finally receded. *Who else would be dropping Jason off in the morning and giving him a hug good-bye?* He continued to listen in on the children's chatter as he walked back to Ridgeview Park, and disappeared behind the trees before returning to Metropolis.

Day 73, Thursday, 2:10PM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom

Despite their prior warning to Perry about their potentially declining output due to the Luthor situation, Lois and Clark's had been prolific over the past few days. The first front-page story had detailed Luthor's invasion into their personal accounts, followed up by a series on identity theft, and an exposé on the inequities of credit reporting bureaus that left consumers at a disadvantage. Perry had been pleased, and the two journalists were guilt-free as they relaxed in the post-deadline decline in newsroom stress.

"Are you sure you really want to do this?" Lois asked in a barely audible whisper, eyes wide and a bit nervous.

"No point in delaying it," Clark whispered back. "Besides, your folks are overdue for some time with their grandson. My friend Pete's offered to mediate, if we need it."

"What do you mean, 'mediate'?" Lois asked inquisitively.

"Pete's on the armed services committee and has worked quite a bit with your dad on one thing or another," Clark explained in a low whisper. "He'll invite your folks over, we'll be there, and everyone can talk peacefully, trusting that your dad won't go ballistic as a guest of the good Senator and possibly his future Commander in Chief."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that, and I'm not sure that it's a good idea for him to meet you while we're trying to keep our relationship hidden from everyone else," Lois countered in her barely audible whisper. "Knowing my dad, he'd find some way of outing us at the worst possible time."

"It's your call," Clark conceded. "I just wouldn't want you to have to face the music alone, or to keep your parents from their grandson."

Lois grimaced at that, shaking her head as she told him, "I never figured you for one to lay a guilt trip on someone, Clark."

"Sorry," Clark apologized. "I guess that there *are* extenuating circumstances here. Maybe they'll understand if you tell them that it's too dangerous for anyone to be around us right now."

Lois and Clark were not the only ones enjoying casual conversation in the post-deadline calm. As had always been the case, the idle staffers engaged in mild gossip during these quiet periods, and the nature of that gossip had transformed since Luthor's retaliation on the financial stories became known. Maggie had fueled some of that fire when she revealed that Luthor's flunkies had gone after Clark's mom, misquoting Perry and embellishing the story somewhat for effect. That resulted in comments that were much more charitable towards Lois than they'd been several weeks earlier. The subject matter still made it difficult for Clark to maintain the cheerful façade as he listened in, however:

"That's got to be horrible to have a madman go after your family like that."

"Looks like Kent finally grew a pair, going after Luthor like that. I guess Lois is a good influence on him."

"That poor little boy. I hear that Luthor is gunning for him, too."

"Clark and Lois are so brave to keep sticking it to Luthor after he tried to kill him and Richard."

"I heard that Luthor tried to kill Kent's mother over that story. I'm glad I'm not in their shoes."

"Looks like Richard got out of there just in time." "Not really. Luthor still tried to kill him."

"I can't imagine the stress they're under, with that lunatic coming after them. That son of a bitch even put Superman in the hospital."

"Can you image the invasion of privacy, to have that madman access all of your accounts?"

Lois noticed the faraway look in Clark's eyes and the neutral expression and asked him in a low voice, "So what are they talking about today, or do I want to know?"

"It's sympathetic, mostly... about Luthor and the stress we're under because of him," Clark told her. "I'm not sure if that's an improvement or not, though."

"Any day that they're not gossiping about my love life is a good day," Lois responded simply as she stifled a yawn.

Maggie Gonzales furrowed her brow pensively at her desk as she surreptitiously glanced through the glass walls of Perry's office at the editor and his nephew. Confident that they would be there for a little while, she cautiously asked Jimmy Olsen and Susan Walters, "So who do you think the man in Lois' life is now?" At the shocked expression on Jimmy and Susan's faces, she defensively added, "What?"

"A person would have to be nuts to even consider getting involved with her right now," Susan told her seriously. "It'd be a quick way for someone to get their name on Luthor's hit

list."

"What if they're not afraid of him or already on his list?" Maggie inquired seriously, as she shifted her gaze over at Lois chatting with Clark.

As Susan followed her gaze, she commented mockingly, "In his dreams! The farm-boy wouldn't last a week with her. Beside, you'd think she'd have learned her lesson about office romances."

"It was uncomfortable with her and Richard for a little bit, but it looks like they're past that now," Maggie countered as she looked back at Susan.

Susan nodded her head in agreement, telling her authoritatively, "Pure luck. I still can't believe how quickly that turned from uncomfortably cuddly to chillingly cold."

"Not that cold, Ms. Walters," Jimmy pointed out. "It looks like they've managed to kind of stay friends after it all. I don't think that I could do as well under those circumstances."

"That doesn't answer the question," Maggie persisted. "Yeah, she's obviously stressed, but every once in a while, you'll catch her trying to hide an oddly contented smile. She's being discreet, but I'm sure that there's a man in her life."

Susan looked over as Lois was smiling weakly up at something Clark was saying to her. "She could be smiling over something her kid did, too," she countered skeptically. "Besides, when would she have time, with her and Kent putting in so much time on their page ones lately?"

"Maybe they make the time," Maggie suggested as she watched Clark smile widely at something Lois had just said to him. After a moment of silence, Maggie commented quietly, "You know, those two are definitely good together professionally." Motioning to the pair with her head, she continued, "Perry thinks that they'll get next year's Pulitzer for the Luthor financial exposé."

"So does everybody else, Ms. Gonzales," Jimmy reminded her proudly. "And nobody *ever* concedes that ahead of time. It's usually, 'I can't believe they got it'. This time, it's, 'They'd *better* get it'. They're really remarkable together."

"So who do you think it is?" Maggie asked again.

"Maybe someone in blue tights?" Susan suggested jokingly.

"Oh, get real!" Maggie chastised her as she turned back to look up at her friend. "He hasn't been seen anywhere near her since he got out of the hospital. He's probably still pissed off over her Pulitzer Prize winning editorial. Whatever chance she might have had with him is long gone now."

"I wouldn't read anything into that, Ms. Gonzales," Jimmy insisted. "He's not the type to keep a grudge."

"Well, let's stick to mere mortals anyway," Maggie insisted, as she returned her gaze to Lois and Clark. "What is it she was looking for that she couldn't find in Richard?"

As Susan followed her gaze, she chuckled mirthlessly as she admitted, "You've got me there. I really thought she and Richard were going to work out."

"Interesting..." Maggie muttered, still watching Lois as she recalled asking her about Clark's availability for her sister, and the surprising reaction that had provoked. *It couldn't be*, Maggie thought to herself. *Could it?*

Day 73, Thursday, 2:15PM (Mountain Time), Denver Colorado

"Okay, let's go over this one more time," Lou Mueller impatiently told the men gathered in his apartment. "We don't want any screw-ups." As he glared at each man in the eye and the

room fell quiet he continued. "You all need to know the plan like the back of your hand, and no improvisation. Everyone sticks to the plan!"

Turning to a blonde man in his early twenties, Lou continued, "Danny, you, Sean, Tony and I will be parked in front of the school on Windermere, at the south end where the bus is. As soon as the driver climbs on the bus, you jump in behind her. Let her know you have the gun, but don't let the kids see it until the door is closed and you're on your way. If any of the kids ask, just tell them she's teaching you the route so that you can sub for her. Sean and Tony will join you on the bus as you pull out. Force her right on Calay and across Broadway to the Bethany Church parking lot. You keep the gun on the driver, and Sean and Tony tie up the kids. We want everyone tied up by the time you get to the church. We can't afford to waste time doing it there."

"What about the kryptonite?" Danny asked curiously.

"I'll give it to you when it's time," Lou answered irritably. "Now, as I was saying, I'll meet you at the church and we'll take the kid in another car. Does anybody here not have the picture of him?"

Lou looked around and seeing that everyone had the required picture, he continued, "Ian and Ricky, you'll wait for us at the bowling alley. We'll switch to your car, and hightail it out of there. Any questions?"

"Why do we need kryptonite?" Danny asked. "I don't think that Superman's ever been to Denver before. Why now?"

"Our client tells us that the Man of Steel is friendly to the family," Lou explained for the second time that afternoon. "It's just an insurance policy. In the unlikely event that he does show up, the kryptonite will drop him, and we'll bag him, too."

Lou looked at his watch before he commanded, "Okay, then, let's get moving. I want everyone in position in a half hour."

The color drained from Ricky's face as the realization struck. "You're grabbing him today?" he asked in shock. "I thought we were going to stake it out for a few more days."

"Waste of time, we already have what we need," Lou declared. "Besides, we can't run the A/C on stakeout, not if we don't want to be noticed, and we've spent enough days baking in our cars... And don't even think about trying to go over my head on this."

"The boss may have other plans to coordinate with this," Ricky pointed out as he attempted to delay the assault. "If you move too soon, he may not be pleased."

"Then you keep the kid until he's ready!" Lou told him curtly. As he guided the men out of apartment, he authoritatively instructed them, "Alright, let's move it!"

Ricky shook his head as he reluctantly headed to his car as he pondered, *How do I prevent this fiasco?*

Chapter 37 - Hijack

Day 73, Thursday, 2:35PM (Mountain Time), Denver, Colorado

The sweat pouring off of Ricky Hernandez as he sat with Ian Gregory at the bar inside the AMF Broadway Lanes bowling alley had nothing to do with the warm day outside, and everything to do with the frightening situation that Superman's family would soon face. He continued to empathize with the Man of Steel as one father to another, and did not want Luthor to succeed in nabbing the boy. He hoped he'd come up with a solution over the weekend that could be explained to Lex without him becoming another one of the madman's *late* former associates. Unfortunately, he had run out of time before coming up with a solution.

In stark contrast to Ricky, Ian was practically giddy with the prospect of the easy money. All of the risk was with the first team. If they made it to the bowling alley, they were home free. Ian described a dozen ways in which the earnings could be squandered on various pleasures. He only quieted slightly when the two entered the lounge a moment earlier, wisely avoiding discussion of *how* he came into his windfall, but still describing all the pleasures that the money could buy. After ordering two beers, Ian looked over to him noticed the layer of sweat, and commented mockingly, "You'd think a Mexican could handle the heat better than you do!"

"I'm Puerto Rican, not Mexican," Ricky informed him irritably. "And you might want to try avoiding stereotypes next time."

Ian held up his hands in mock surrender, as he replied, "Take it easy, I'm just making conversation, you know. What's got your panties tied into a knot?"

"Lou's being too impatient," Ricky answered curtly, sticking to his complaint from Lou's apartment. Lowering his voice, he whispered, "If he screws this up, the boss will take it out of our hides in blood. People who disappoint him tend to have a short life expectancy."

"Are you always this paranoid?" Ian asked derisively. "Stop worrying! Think of all the women you can get with the money."

"I'll stick with the one I've got, thank you," Ricky replied firmly.

"Just one?" Ian inquired mirthfully. "Doesn't that get boring after a while?"

Ricky glared at him as he answered, "You obviously wouldn't understand. Rosa and I are very happy together." *Or we would be if we could get Luthor out of our lives*, he thought.

"Man, she's got you wrapped around her little finger, even programmed you what to say!" Ian chided him. The man then launched into a dissertation on the benefits of polygamous short term relationships. Ricky clenched his jaw but held his tongue as the revulsion at his associate grew. "And never, *never* let them know where you really live... unless you want to get hit up for child support or something like that," Ian continued, while Ricky silently lamented his involvement and prayed for a solution that would spare the boy without him or Rosa facing Lex's wrath.

Lou Mueller swore silently to himself as he observed the solid row of cars parked in front of Moody Elementary school. He stopped his Ford Focus near the south end of the school and looked over his shoulder as he spoke to Danny. "Change of plans: Danny, you'll get on the bus now... we know from surveillance that it's not locked. Hide where the driver won't see you. I'll be parked at the church around the corner. Have her pick up Sean and Tony there."

Danny protested, "I thought I was supposed to jump on the bus *after* her, and that we weren't supposed to improvise." Danny had changed into a bus driver's uniform on the way, and was still tucking in his shirt.

"Too conspicuous, and there's nowhere to park here, now go!" Lou hollered. Lou pulled away as soon as Danny got out, in search of his elusive parking spot, while the other man meandered slowly toward the bus before darting around and sneaking in the open front door. He crouched down in the row behind the bus' stairwell, and readied his gun for the unwary driver.

Ian's lecture was finally interrupted by a beep from Ricky's PDA phone, the tone indicating an incoming Instant Message. Ricky's scowl turned into a small smile as he saw it was from Rosa. "What's that?" Ian questioned in confusion.

"A message from my fiancée," Ricky answered shortly, as he looked at his watch and noted the time of three o'clock. "She usually sends something before she leaves work for the day." He rotated the PDA ninety degrees to the side, slid out the mini keyboard from underneath, and started typing his response as he turned to conceal the message from Ian.

"Man, she has you trained good, doesn't she," Ian taunted.

"It just takes a minute or two to keep her happy on her ride home," Ricky attempted to explain and he typed in the short message. "She likes to know that she's loved."

"Nobody ever explained it to you, did they?" Ian mocked. "You treat them like that, and they start expecting it."

Ricky shook his head as he closed the IM application, put his PDA away and stood up. *Where does Luthor find these scumbags?* he thought to himself. Aloud, he curtly told the other man, "It's about to start. We should head out."

"It'll take them at least another fifteen minutes to get here," Ian countered. "Do you want to wait in air-conditioned comfort with a cold beer, and bake in the heat?"

"I thought it was comfortable outside," Ricky declared.

"Suit yourself," Ian replied. "You can wait out there if you want to, I'm staying here." Ricky reluctantly sat back down on the barstool and silently prayed for Jason's safety.

The children on the bus from Moody Elementary school began their after school journey in their typical manner with meaningless chatter on their favorite subjects. Some mocked the substitute teacher they had that day, others argued over their favorite television shows, and of course, the usual debate over which superhero was cooler: Superman or Spider-Man.

From their seats near the middle of the bus, Jason and Stevie were actively arguing that Superman was better. As the school's resident expert on the Man of Steel, it was only natural for Jason to be his advocate, and Stevie idolized him as well. Billy Meijer from the second grade class argued for Spider-Man. Jason pointed out that Spider-Man couldn't fly, while Billy argued that Spider-Man didn't have to worry about kryptonite. Tina Ferguson rolled her eyes from the back seat of the bus. "Boys are so stupid," she complained to her friend Cindy. "All they talk about is Superman."

None of the children questioned the excuse that a second bus driver was 'learning the route', nor did they notice when the bus turned east on West Caley Avenue instead of west. It wasn't until they approached the Littleton Baptist Church around the corner that Jason noticed anything unusual, and then only because his watch started vibrating against his wrist.

The watch had been styled after the popular Disney children's watches and was emblazoned with the familiar Mickey Mouse icon with his spread arms indicating the time. Though its special features were hidden under normal circumstances, they were now apparent as Jason looked at the watch. Mickey's eyes glowed green, and a green arrow projected against

the glass face pointed to the source of the problem, moving from one to three o'clock as the bus drove past the church. A horizontal bar was also projected against the glass, with the left quarter now shaded green to reflect the strength of the kryptonite. As Jason looked at the gage, he recalled his mother's instructions.

"If Mickey's eyes turn green, that means there's kryptonite nearby," she had told him. "If that happens, you get away from there. Try to get away without revealing your powers, but if it comes down to it, go ahead and go super. Just get away from the kryptonite."

Jason looked up from his watch as he tried to figure out where he had to go to get away from the kryptonite as the bus stopped at the church, and two more men boarded. The other children finally noticed that something was different, though nobody guessed what the new passengers had in mind. Jason also thought it unusual, but was more concerned with the kryptonite. As the green arrow shifted around to six o'clock and the green bar shrank to a tenth of the gauge, Jason relaxed, confident the nice lady driving the bus, Tanya Freedman, was taking him away from the kryptonite.

Day 73, Thursday, 5:05PM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom

Clark always suspected that Perry White was a softie behind the gruff exterior, though it had only been in the last week that his editor had willingly showed him the kind man behind that façade. Richard and Lois had seen that side of him in the context of family gatherings, but even for them was it surprising to see this side of him at the office. None of them were quite sure what to make of that. "Well, I never thought I'd say this, but maybe in this case, no news is good news," Perry suggested hopefully.

"I doubt that Lex Luthor has decided to take a vacation," Lois countered grimly. "Wherever he is, he's up to no good."

Perry pinched his lips together and nodded in agreement. "I wish I could do more to help you with this situation..." he started. "It's not right."

Before Perry could continue, Maggie Gonzales knocked on the office door before opening it and peeking in. "Sorry for the interruption, but there's a woman on the phone for Lois. She says it's an emergency."

"Did you get her name?" Lois asked curiously.

"She said her name was Ixchel," Maggie answered. "I'm assuming that's an alias." Clark and Lois both looked at each other wide-eyed before turning back to Maggie.

"Does that mean something more than ancient Aztec gods?" Richard asked.

"It's the alias used by a very reliable anonymous source who's been posting tips on the hotline website that they set up on Luthor," Lois explained. "It's because of her that they've picked up about a third of the Luthor stakeout teams, but she never called the press directly before. It's always been sent to the hotline website... I'd better take this."

"Go. Do what you need to do," Perry told her, as his guests quickly exited his office.

"I'll transfer it to your desk," Maggie informed Lois cordially as she returned to her desk.

"Lois Lane, Daily Planet," Lois answered into the receiver.

"You got to get an urgent message to Superman!" the woman insisted.

Lois looked over at Clark as she replied, "Well, it's not like I have a phone number for him. He usually just shows up when you need-" Lois stopped short when she saw the sudden look of panic on Clark's face. His hearing had picked up the unique signal of his son's signal watch. He quickly made his way to the elevators, leaving Lois to wonder what emergency was calling him this time.

"Well, you better figure something out in a hurry, because Lex Luthor knows that his son is in Littleton, they're trying to grab him off his bus right now, and they have kryptonite!" the woman informed her.

The color drained from Lois face and she felt herself grow faint. She blinked back the unshed tears that suddenly formed in her eyes before she opened and closed her mouth several times as she tried to get a word out.

"Hello?" the woman inquired. "Are you still there?"

Finally breaking free of her paralysis, Lois responded weakly, "Um, yeah... Can you hold a minute?" Lois placed the woman on hold before she had a chance to respond, and pulled out her cell phone.

"What is it?" Richard asked, worried by his former lover's expression.

"Jason," Lois answered quickly as she selected the number for Kal-El. When the beep indicated that she was connected, she urgently said, "I really hope that you're heading to Littleton to get Jason, because according to Ixchel, Luthor knows he's there and is going after him *right now!* He's got kryptonite, too, so be careful." Lois remembered that when his voice mail beeped, Clark was still listening in real time but was unable to answer. She trusted that he would bring their son home, but still found the lack of immediate verbal feedback unsettling. After a moment of silence, she added, "Call me when he's safe."

Lois felt the wave of panic rush over her as she considered the situation. She looked up at Richard as she heard him mutter, "Oh, my God." After what seemed like an eternity, but was in reality less than a minute, Richard pointed to Lois' desk phone and meekly asked, "Is she still on the line?"

"Yes," Lois answered meekly, finally shaking her momentary paralysis and pushing the panic to the back of her mind. "Give me a second to pull myself together." After a moment, Lois picking up the phone and tried to calmly continue the call. However, the emotion remained readily apparent in her voice. "Ma'am?" she inquired. "We've sent someone for him. Why did you wait so long to call about this?"

"We didn't know that he'd be going after him today," she responded defensively. Before Lois had a chance to respond, the woman compassionately added, "I'll be praying for the little boy." Once the line went dead, Lois dropped her head in her hands for a moment and finally wiped away the tears that had escaped from her eyes.

"I'll call Tom," Richard offered, pulling his cell phone from his pocket as Lois raised her head. "If Superman gets tripped up by the kryptonite, maybe the local authorities can help."

Lois nodded weakly as she jiggled her mouse to wake up her computer and typed in her password. "I'll find the bus," she declared as she double-clicked the Reynolds Security icon on her desktop. Richard looked over her shoulder with curiosity as he placed the call to his friend.

Day 73, Thursday, 3:05PM (Mountain Time), Littleton, Colorado

Lou Mueller smirked as he followed the school bus as a slight distance, gloating to himself over how smoothly the abduction was going so far. No sign of Superman, not that he ever really thought that was a risk. Still, he liked the idea of having kryptonite to keep the Man of Steel at bay. He had even decided to keep that rare substance with him in the chase car instead of sending it on the bus with Danny, as Luthor had instructed. Lou enjoyed his reverie, oblivious to the Kryptonian as he suddenly appeared one thousand feet above him.

Superman scanned the bus below him, as the men inside drew their weapons and ordered the children to be silent. They were starting to tie them up with plastic tie-wraps as he slowly

descended. He stopped abruptly at one hundred feet above the bus, as his vibrating belt buckle indicated the presence of kryptonite. He reached behind his buckle and pressed a switch, which immediately projected a holographic heads up display eighteen inches in front of his face. The text and graphics before him was a monochrome beyond purple, beyond the range of human vision. In the display, a small circle indicated Jason's position in the center of the bus, while a small inverted triangle revealed the location of the kryptonite in the blue Ford Focus that trailed several car lengths behind it. Text at each target confirmed relative distance and the effective exposure from the kryptonite. He determined that the driver of the Focus was part of the plot, and quickly set upon a course of action to eliminate the threat to the children.

Superman zoomed up and the sky in an imperceptible blur of motion, and circled back to the bus from the east, immediately pulling himself tight to the side of vehicle, as he forced open the doors. A heartbeat later, the three hijackers were tied up and deposited in one of the seats, and the plastic tie-wraps were broken free from the limbs of the few children that they'd managed to tie up. Superman calmly asked the driver, "Did they say where they were taking you?"

Tanya had lost her ability to speak as she recognized the man crouching down beside her, and her eyes shot wide like saucers. Her arms went numb, and Superman had to reach over and grab the steering wheel to keep her on course. Behind him, the children's voices erupted in chaos as they recognized the superhero on the bus. It wasn't an uncommon reaction, but he didn't have time for it now, and spoke firmly to try to shake Tanya out of it. "This is important. I need to know where they were taking you so that I can draw their friends into a trap. Did they tell you?"

Tanya nodded, and forcibly blinked before she found her voice. "They said to go to the Bethany Church parking lot at Caley and Broadway."

Superman nodded. "Do that then, but keep the speed *slow* and the front door open so that I can get the kids off the bus before you get there. Just try not to tip off the car following behind you by going too slow." Turning to the back of the bus, he told the kids, "There are more bad men following us. Before I can take care of that, I need to get all of you off the bus. I want everyone to get your things together, and be ready when it's your turn." In a blur of motion, he was standing beside Jason and Stevie. "You two are first."

As the Man of Steel picked up the two boys and their backpacks, he saw the flash of recognition pass across the Stevie's face as he faintly whispered, "Mister Kent."

I probably should have expected that, given their reaction this morning, Superman thought to himself. *That probably means that Tina will recognize me, too.* Aloud, he whispered to Stevie, "Keep that to yourself." A moment later, the three were gone in a blur of motion. Superman accelerated to blinding speed in front of the bus before circling around the neighborhood, and setting gently down on the deck behind the Ferguson house, as Lily looked up from the book she had been reading.

"Wh-What's going on?" she asked in surprise. She knew that Superman was bringing Jason to and from their house every day, but she rarely saw him, and certainly never with Stevie in his arms.

"There's no time to explain," he told her apologetically as he scanned the house. Spotting what he was looking for, he added, "I'll need paper and pen to write it down." Superman sped into the house, reappearing in a blink of an eye as he handed Lily one of the two folded pieces of paper he held before he again disappeared into the sky.

Officer Paul Davies had just finished wrapping up an accident report on Littleton Boulevard, and was resuming his patrol through the neighborhoods as he headed south on Windemere Street. The day had been uneventful, with only a few traffic citations and a fender bender, which he was grateful for. That calm came to an abrupt stop as he saw Superman land directly in front of him and motion for him to stop. As the Man of Steel sped around the car to the driver's door, he told him insistently, "I need you to get some unmarked units to the parking lot behind the Bethany Evangelical Church at Caley and Broadway. I don't have time to explain it, but I wrote it all down. I'll be counting on you." Paul's eyes opened even wider in shock as he read Superman's note and the Man of Steel flew off in a blur.

Day 73, Thursday, 5:10PM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom

"What do you think he's up to?" Richard asked Lois in a whisper as he looked over her shoulder. Lois had pulled up a security application which tied into Clark's Kryptonian satellites and locked on to the GPS in Jason's watch. That had originally given them a bird's eye view of the bus, but now the scene before them was Jason, Stevie and Tina drinking juice on the Ferguson's back deck.

"Now that he's got those three out of harm's way, he's probably trying to figure out how to rescue the rest of the children from the bus, and stop the men who tried to take him," Lois suggested. "That's what he does." Richard stepped back as a chirp alerted him to an incoming call.

"Hello?" Richard inquired into his phone. "Really.... Well, that explains a few things... I understand. We won't reveal anything until you give us the all clear... Thanks, again. Bye." As he put away his phone, he stepped back up behind Lois. "That was Tom," he revealed. "Apparently the Denver area police bands are buzzing with activity. The big story there, off the record, is that Superman has recruited assistance from the Littleton PD, and they've set up a trap for the bus hijackers. Superman's been sneaking the kids off the bus right under the nose of one of the thugs who is following the bus."

"Did he say anything about kryptonite?" Lois asked apprehensively.

Richard shook his head, "If they know about it, they're not saying anything."

Day 73, Thursday, 3:20PM (Mountain Time), Littleton, Colorado

Lou Mueller sang along to Bob Seger's *Old Time Rock and Roll* blaring from his radio as he followed the school bus across Broadway, and pulled into the Bethany Evangelical Free Church parking lot behind it. He sneered arrogantly as he considered how flawlessly their plan had worked. The bus turned around and stopped, and Lou pulled his car up along the right side of the vehicle, expecting his crew to jump out with the boy. It was only then that Lou noticed that the bus appeared almost empty. He could only see Danny, Tony and Sean seated behind the driver's seat, but nobody else. *What the-? he thought. Something's not adding up here.* Against his better judgment, he got out of his car and ran up the stairs into the bus. "What the hell happened?" he demanded.

"Superman happened," Danny explained simply.

Lou charged back down the stairs only to be challenged by a dozen policemen and women standing behind unmarked vehicles with their weapons drawn. "Police! Get down on the ground and spread your arms and legs!"

Ricky was sure that his head would explode if he had to listen to the more of 'The World

According to Ian.' The man's presence was almost enough to make him physically ill, due mostly to the knowledge to how twisted and unrepentant the man was. He didn't take the hint when Ricky tried to steer the conversation to the game on the television, and continued to drone on. Ricky's latest tactic was to try to tune him out, and focus on the game between the Meteors and Rockies. He normally stuck with his Mets, but he could root for the Meteors if he had to, especially if it helped him to forget about the company. It was the bottom of the fourth, two men on base, two outs and a full count. Just as the pitch came, the broadcast was interrupted by breaking news, to a chorus of jeers from the men in the bar.

"An attempted school bus hijacking in Littleton has been thwarted with help from Superman..." the newswoman reported. The scene on television was a helicopter shot over the church parking lot that showed the school bus, along with a rather familiar blue Ford Focus and a plethora of unmarked cars and police cruisers. Ricky recognized Lou Mueller in the shot, as he was led away.

Finally, something got him to shut up, Ricky thought as Ian fell mute watching the news flash. He was relieved that the news probably meant that Superman's son was safe, but worried over Lex's likely reaction. Given that the man was a news junkie, he probably wouldn't have long to consider that before facing the Lex's tirade. "Would you look at the time?" he said casually as he looked at his watch. "We really *must* be going." Ricky gave Ian a small nudge to move the very distressed man out of the bar.

Once they got outside, Ricky explained in a very insistent tone, "I wasn't joking when I said that those who fail the boss have a very short life expectancy. Lucky for us, Lou got impatient and left us out of the loop. It's *his* fault. We were just watching the game, *weren't we?*"

"Um, yeah," a suddenly nervous Ian agreed. "Just watching the game."

Chapter 38 - Loose Ends

Day 73, Thursday, 3:25PM, Littleton, Colorado

Superman floated peacefully several miles directly above Littleton's Bethany Evangelical Free Church as he observed the police investigation in the church's parking lot. Lou Mueller, Tony Vitale, Sean Williams, and Danny Devroy now sat cuffed in back of police cruisers. Their weapons had been bagged and tagged along with all other possessions from their pockets, including the kryptonite. Tanya Freedman was describing the ordeal to the officers on the scene while a forensic team processed the bus. The forensic team would process Lou's car at the impound yard later, after getting a search warrant. *We got lucky this time*, Superman thought. *If the kryptonite had been in the bus instead of the car, things could have been much dicier.*

He shifted his focus to the Fergusons' back yard, where a very nervous Jason was attempting to fend off questions from Tina and Stevie about his super-dad. *That's a problem I really didn't need right now*, Superman thought as he listened in.

"See, I told you he really knew Superman," Stevie reminded his sister. "He's Jason's daddy."

"It's *supposed* to be a secret!" Jason protested. "We're not supposed to talk about it!"

"Why not?" Stevie asked. "It's so *cool*!"

"Because of the bad men," Jason told him sadly. "They can hurt him if they have kryptonite."

"So, do you any super powers... beside super-dorkiness?" Tina asked condescendingly.

"I'm not supposed to tell anyone!" Jason complained loudly.

Superman scanned the house and saw Lily listening in at the window and realized it would also be impossible to keep the truth from her. At least she was not openly hostile to Clark Kent like her husband was. He reached behind his belt buckle and pulled out the toothpick-sized wand that held the wireless mike for his Kryptonian enhanced cell phone. Pressing the bump on the end of the stick, he issued the command, "Call Lois."

Day 73, Thursday, 5:25PM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom

A wave of relief passed through Lois, as she saw Clark's name displayed in the caller ID on her phone. She flipped it open, and requested hopefully, "Please tell me that it's over and everything's okay."

"There are a few loose ends to tie up," he told her grimly. "Where do you want me to start?"

"Start easy," Lois insisted. "The hard stuff had me on the verge of a stroke for the last half hour."

"Some of it's not easy to discuss over the phone," he warned her, giving her a moment for that to sink in before continued. "Problem number one is Tina and Stevie. Remember me telling you that they recognized Jason's daddy this morning? And guess who brought them home this afternoon?"

"Oh, crap," Lois muttered.

"Right now, Stevie and Tina are double-teaming Jason, asking what it's like to... have the daddy that he has," Superman told her. "We're going to have to do something about those little chatterboxes."

"Same thing that you did to me five years ago..." Lois muttered sarcastically.

"That was the original idea, but it's gotten more complicated," he reluctantly told her.

"Lily's been listening in on the kids, and I think the light bulb's gone off over her head, too."

"This is the easy stuff?" Lois joked nervously. "I hate to ask what the hard stuff is..."

"Well, problem number two is the kryptonite," he revealed grimly. "The Littleton P.D. has collected it as evidence from the crime scene at the church."

"What church?" Lois asked curiously.

"The hijackers took the bus to a church parking lot, where they probably planned on switching vehicles," he explained to her seriously. "Everything that they were carrying has been bagged as evidence, including the kryptonite."

"Maybe Tom can help with that," Lois suggested.

"Assuming that Lily and the kids don't share their new knowledge with him," Clark joked mirthlessly.

"I guess he was a little hostile," Lois noted sadly.

"A little," Clark agreed. "Problem number three may be an opportunity. From the looks of it, these guys are all local, since I found their fingerprints in the apartments listed on the Colorado driver's licenses in their pockets. Odds are that there is an east coast operative around somewhere as a liaison if not outright calling the shots. If I can find him, it may give us another clue back to Luthor."

"How will you find him?"

"With help from Luthor's physiological profile: When he learns that this attempt went south, he's going to want to chew somebody out. If that somebody is here, I may be able to filter out Luthor's voice from the background noise."

"Can you do that at the same time as you're dealing with the Fergusons?" Lois asked. "We really need to nip that in the bud before that chatter spreads beyond their home."

"I think so," he assured her. "I just have to concentrate a little bit harder... I'll go talk to Lily and the kids now. Maybe Richard can talk to Tom about securing the kryptonite."

"I'll ask him," Lois promised him. "Good luck."

After they said their good-byes, Lois joined Richard in his office. He'd retreated there after it became obvious that Jason was out of danger. Knocking on the door, she informed him, "The worst is over but we'll need Tom's help tying up some loose ends."

Day 73, Thursday, 3:30PM, Littleton, Colorado

Lily Ferguson felt a headache coming on as she grappled with the obvious facts revealed in the children's conversation: Jason's real father, the mild-mannered man who had spent the day with them at Tiny Town and shared dinner with them in their house... was Superman. She remembered the tabloid rumors romantically linking Lois with Superman years ago, and all the coverage of her when she and Jason visited the Man of Steel... no, visited Jason's *father*... in the hospital. The difficulty with that was that he had also replaced Richard both as Jason's daddy and as the man in Lois Lane's life. Though her heart ached for Richard, she had found Clark Kent to be a good man. Her husband hadn't seen that, however. He saw no further than the open wound on his friend's heart. Lily continued to ponder this complication while her children continued to press Jason for details on life as Superman's son.

"So can you fly like your daddy does?" Stevie asked excitedly. "Can you move at super-speed?"

"Children," a deep voice from the yard interrupted. "Surely you can find more interesting things to talk about. I hear that Spider-Man is pretty cool."

The three children looked over in surprise to see Clark in the yard. He was dressed in his

suit pants and white dress shirt, but this time missing the jacket, tie and glasses. As he walked up the stairs to the deck, he saw Lily looking at him through the window and motioned for her to join them outside. "It seems that we've all had an exciting afternoon, haven't we?" After hearing a chorus of uh-huh's from the children, Clark tried to explain, "It's very important that you understand why you need to keep what you've learned about me to yourselves. If the wrong people find out about it, it could become very dangerous for my family."

"But you're Superman!" Stevie declared. "Nothing can hurt you!"

Clark let out a deep sigh, "If only that were true. I have some very wicked enemies who know how to hurt me with kryptonite. A couple months ago, one of them nearly killed me and I spent a few days in the hospital. I think that same man may have been behind what happened on the bus today."

"We promise not to tell anyone, Mr. Kent," Tina assured him politely.

"I appreciate that, Tina," Clark told her. After a moment's pause, he continued, "You've also got to be careful where you talk about this. You never know when a bad man could be listening in. Will you promise me that you won't bother Jason with questions?" Both Ferguson children reluctantly agreed.

Turning to Lily, Clark told her, "It seems obvious that you figured some things out from what the kids were talking about." As Lily nodded her confirmation, Clark added, "I don't suppose I have to tell you how... uncomfortable things could get if Tom found out about that. He's not exactly a fan of my civilian identity."

"I won't tell him, then," Lily promised him. "I owe you that much after you rescued my children... Clark, I can see that you're a good man. I could see that last Saturday. But Tom can't see past Richard's pain, not yet. He can be a bit stubborn that way. I don't think he'd do anything vindictive if he knew, but..." Lily trailed off, not sure how to articulate that difficulty that she knew her husband would have with that revelation.

"Tom's a good man, too," Clark told her sincerely. "They both are." Lily nodded, and after a momentary pause, he added, "May I speak with you privately? I believe I may have a solution to this problem, but I'd rather have your consent before proceeding, especially after the way that you've taken Jason into your home and your hearts." Lily nodded, and motioned for him to follow her into the house.

Day 73, Thursday, 5:55PM, Metropolis, Newton Steelworks, Suicide Slum

A tall solitary figure moved about inside the abandoned Newton Steelworks plant along the border of the Highville and Metrodale boroughs of Metropolis, along the edge of the area known as Suicide Slum. The plant had been abandoned for years, but had seen a lot of renovation work in the past few months, most of which was in the office space along the west side of the building. The new construction effectively isolated three thousand square feet in that section from the larger manufacturing section of the plant. The walls and ceilings were covered with a sandwich of OSB plywood and lead, while a continuous covering of twelve-inch long stiff foam cones covered the walls, ceilings and doors, which prevented sound waves from penetrating those surfaces. The existing single doors had been replaced with double doors to accommodate the swing of the cones. The last of the renovations had just been completed, supplies delivered, and Lex Luthor was moving in.

Lex felt some of the tension roll off now that his Suicide Slum apartment could be forgotten as an unpleasant memory. No more irritating and nosy neighbors with poor taste in music. He could finally shout to his heart's content in the secure knowledge that he would not

be overheard by the flying man in tights. Since arriving in Metropolis, he'd been coordinating his outbound calls with the news channels' live sightings of Superman out of state. That would no longer be necessary. The only downside was that the lead shell surrounding his new quarters created a Faraday Cage that blocked all electromagnetic penetration, including cell phone and wireless broadband transmissions. With his PDA phone offline, he'd have to use the Internet SoftPhone on his laptop.

Lex finished hooking up the last of his electronics and turned on the television, just in time for the six o'clock WGBS news broadcast. "Welcome to the WGBS Evening News," the newscaster greeted. "In our top story tonight, Superman stopped a school bus hijacking in Littleton, Colorado earlier this evening..." Lex Luthor's head snapped around to the large plasma television at the name of the city. *They wouldn't have...* Lex thought. *They better not have...* Lex scrutinized the video shown from the news helicopter in Littleton, recognizing it as Bethany Church, the location that he'd selected for the first vehicle transfer. As the newscaster filled in the details, Luthor recognized point after point of correlation with his abduction plan. *The fools screwed it up,* Lex fumed. *They weren't supposed to do it yet, not until I had a distraction for Superman in place.*

Lex's temper was boiling over as he accessed the Internet Phone application on his laptop. When Ricky answered it, Lex shouted into the microphone, "*What part of stick explicitly to the plan did you not understand?*"

"Um, you mean Mueller's screw-up this afternoon?" Ricky asked nervously as he sat on the bed in his Days Inn guest room.

"He's not the only one out there!" Lex reminded him. "What the hell happened?"

"Well, sir, um... we've been going over the plan on a daily basis," Ricky reported anxiously. "Everyone knew what they were supposed to do, and I've repeatedly made the point that we had to coordinate with things going on back east."

"Well, it doesn't appear that you got that point across!" Lex challenged.

"You can't enlighten the unconscious, sir," Ricky countered. "Mueller's been complaining about stakeouts without being able to run the A/C, and I guess he got impatient. I think he left me out of the loop because I'd get on his case whenever he starting glossing over the details in the daily meetings."

"And you didn't feel the need to inform me of this weakness?" Lex accused. "We're going to have start over from the beginning now! He's probably already got the kid out of there."

"Sir, based on the initial reports, it doesn't sound like Mueller stuck to your plan," Ricky told him submissively. "If he had, they'd be reporting a different story tonight. It's just as well that we're rid of him."

"Damn right we're rid of him!" Lex declared. "Where do you think he screwed up, besides disregarding my timeline?"

"Well, sir, the big thing is the kryptonite," Ricky told him. "It seems clear that it wasn't on the bus. I think Mueller wanted to keep that for himself, which allowed the Man of Steel to secretly empty the bus, and see who else showed up when it reached its destination. For whatever reason, he just let the local police handle those final details. He probably didn't even realize that Mueller was carrying kryptonite."

"Anything else?" Lex pressed him, his temper abating slightly.

"Well, from the sound of it, Superman was on the bus almost immediately after it turned east on Caley," Ricky pointed out. "How did he know where the boys were supposed to take the bus? Either they spilled it when he pressed them on it, or they blabbed it to the driver,

instead of waiting until they got there like they were supposed to."

"And how do you think Superman got there so quickly?" Lex inquired irritably

"It's like I said before: he's a concerned parent keeping a close eye on his boy," Ricky told him. "He's probably familiar with the slightest details in his son's environment, and noticed the bus turn east when it should have turned west. A peek inside with X-Ray vision revealing three armed men was all he needed to jump into action."

"How do you suggest we overcome that?" Lex asked curiously.

"Sir, if I knew that, we'd already be finished," Ricky offered meekly. "I'll have to rely on your guidance for that answer."

"We're going to need new stakeout teams," Lex informed him curtly. "I'll send you a list of names, and I want you back in Metropolis immediately."

"Yes, sir, I'll head back right away," Ricky promised as Lex hung up the phone. Ricky made sure the phone was off, and flopped back on the bed in relief, confident that his explanations had placated Lex Luthor. "What a bastard," Ricky muttered under his breath.

"Yes, he is," a deep voice agreed from the balcony.

Ricky looked over at the Man of Steel hovering outside the balcony. "Get your butt in here before someone *sees* you," he commanded gently as he sat up on the bed. "We've got a lot to talk about." Surprise momentarily flashed across Superman's face before he complied with the command, and shut the balcony door behind him.

Chapter 39 - Sanctuary

Day 76, Sunday, 10:15AM (Central Time), Smallville, Kansas

The bright morning sun belied the cool fall temperatures as the steadfast Smallville population continued their unwavering Sunday morning traditions that included the service at Saint John's Methodist Church. As with any church, some of the congregation was carried through the service by habit, others feigned attentiveness as their minds wandered, and some of the faithful paid strict attention to every word. As the time came for his sermon, Reverend Joseph Swan remained silent for a few minutes as he gauged the attentiveness of his congregation. The sixty-two year old man had spent most of his professional career attending to the spiritual needs of this community, and he knew what it took to grab their attention.

After the unusually long silence, he addressed his flock, "Dear People of God, let us pray." He waited for another full minute before he continued. "My friends, I have a surprise for you this morning. You're going to get a different sermon this morning than the one I originally prepared. Recent events call on us to remind ourselves of our duty as Christians. It is our duty as Christians to fight Evil when it presents itself. I know many of you doubt Evil's presence in these days where our society blurs the line between right and wrong, but True Evil does exist. True Evil is at large and a threat to us all. True Evil has had many names throughout history, though it currently favors the name Lex Luthor.

"This Evil sought to destroy thousands if not billions of innocent lives in a blind lust for wealth and power. But for the Earth's Kryptonian guardian, he would likely have succeeded. It is tempting for us to leave such battles against True Evil to those blessed with great powers, such as the Man of Steel. We reason that it's too dangerous, our odds of success too slim, for normal men and women to shoulder that burden. However, God did not place Superman on this earth to do our duty for us.

"We are fortunate in that some members of our Smallville family remembered this lesson and did not ignore Evil before them. Though they are but ordinary people like you or me, Clark Kent and Lois Lane pursued Evil with their written words, and in so doing, they have wounded Evil to a far greater extent than even Superman has achieved, and they did so at their own peril and the peril of their family.

"Evil seeks to avenge its pain by pursuing the loved ones of these brave young people, and Evil's acolytes have pursued their family members across this country. Evil has been found looking for Lois' sister and parents on the east coast, and Evil was found here in Smallville, looking for the Kent farm. And just a few days ago, Evil sent four armed men to intercept Clark and Lois' young son, Jason.

"Although all of us may not have the means or fortitude to fight True Evil directly, as these two heroic people have, we can help shoulder the burden by helping this family as they seek sanctuary from Evil here in Smallville. It is our *Christian duty* to do so, regardless of our age! Whether it is the children befriending young Jason as he adjusts to a new town and school, the adults watching the roads for strangers, or others volunteering to man the hot-line for Sheriff Dutcher, we can all fulfill our duty to fight Evil by keeping the Kents safe in this community. I urge you all to read Sheriff Dutcher's letter in today's church bulletin and choose the means that you will use to join this fight."

Reverend Swan's call to action came as a complete surprise to Lois and Clark as they sat wide-eyed in their pew, frozen in shock. Clark had never considered his civilian self a model of bravery, but that's what his home town neighbors saw. It was evident in Kevin Randall's enthusiastic greeting a week earlier and in Reverend Swan's praise now. As he glanced over to

his left at Lois and noticed the unshed tears glistening in her eyes, he grabbed her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

When Reverend Swan called on them to stand later in his sermon, they both numbly obeyed the request as the preacher led his congregation in a thunderous round of applause. As Clark recalled Jor-El's words to him so many years ago, he couldn't help but note the irony of the current situation. His Kryptonian father had coached him to stir humanity's capacity for good and inspire them to greatness. However, the people of this community took their inspiration not from the superman, but from the *man*. In Superman, they saw a god-like being whose feats they could never dream of emulating. In Clark, however, they saw an ordinary man, one of their own who made a difference by doing things that they were also capable of, and *that* inspired them.

As Clark pondered his father's words, Lois realized to her amazement that *everyone* in the community was determined to do whatever they could to keep her family safe. She was astonished that there were still communities that would form ranks behind one of their own, as Smallville now lined up behind them. Their generosity touched her heart and she was no longer able to keep the tears from streaming down her cheeks. As Clark pulled her close, she leaned into him and faintly whispered, "You're so lucky to have grown up here."

The community hall at Saint John's Church was a simple steel and aluminum shell on a concrete slab. The building had a pair of small lavatories and a minimal kitchen along the back of the building, with the remainder of the space devoted to an open common area, which currently held long rows of tables and chairs. The hall was home to youth meetings, church fundraisers, and a variety of other events throughout the year. This Sunday, it had been set up for a fundraiser brunch immediately following the morning's service, with the Kent family as informal guests of honor. They had graciously accepted Maureen Swan's invitation before her husband gave his inspiring sermon.

Jason joined a handful other children gathered around Reverend Swan on a rug in one corner of the room. The friendly preacher introduced Jason to the other children, and then began questioning them on the lessons from that morning's Bible readings, and how they could fight Evil in their everyday lives. His parents looked on from the end of a nearby table, while they graciously greeted the swarm of well-wishers that had descended on them. Lois was surprised that not one of them had questioned her famously close connection to Superman, instead more interested in what she and *Clark* had accomplished.

So much for keeping a low profile, Lois thought as she greeted yet another enthusiastic young mother. Lois felt the room beginning to close in on her as she heard herself politely thank the woman for her kindness. She excused herself to the ladies room, and numbly stood from her seat. As she started across the room, she felt like an observer in someone else's body. The room went out of focus as she felt a wave of heat spread across her body before everything went dark.

Lois gradually became aware of the room around her once again, feeling the heat from Clark radiate through her as he carried her out the doors of the church hall, following Reverend Swan and a woman that she didn't recognize back to the church. She was only vaguely aware of Clark answering the woman's questions.

"No, she hasn't had much of an appetite in the mornings. She says the stress has given her a bit of a delicate stomach," Clark told the woman. Lois wondered why Clark was so freely sharing that information, but couldn't find her voice to object.

"Has she fainted before?" the woman asked as they entered the back door of the church, and headed through the doorway behind the altar.

"The only times I'm aware of were extreme circumstances," Clark answered. "She'd just barely cheated death at the time."

"Here we are," Reverend Swan informed them, as he pulled out his keys and unlocked the French door to his office. "You can set her on the couch there."

"Clark?" Lois inquired weakly, finally finding her voice. "What-"

"You fainted," Clark told her. "Just rest a moment."

"Are you feeling better, Lois?" the woman asked her.

Lois looked up at the woman, whom she guessed to be in her mid fifties. "Have we met?" Lois asked apologetically.

"Lois, this is Doctor Sharon Rivers," Clark informed her. "She's been our family doctor for years. She wants to get a look at you."

"It's just the stress, Clark," Lois told him defensively, though the usual fire was missing from her voice.

"I think that there may be a little more to it than that," Doctor Rivers told her with a warm smile on her face.

"So do I," Reverend Swan agreed as he set his hand on Clark's shoulder and guided him towards the door. "Clark, let's get out of their hair and chat a bit."

As the men left, Lois turned to Doctor Rivers and asked, "So what's your diagnosis, Doctor?"

"I won't know for sure without running some blood work, but I have my suspicions based on what Clark just told us," Doctor Rivers informed her. "Of course, that depends on your answer to a rather personal question... Lois, when was your last period?"

Reverend Swan gestured for Clark to take a seat in the front pew as he sat beside him. "Clark, do you love that woman?" he asked directly.

Surprise at his question flashed across Clark's face, before he schooled his expression. "More than I ever thought possible," he answered sincerely. "I can't imagine my life without her."

"Does she feel the same way for you?" Reverend Swan inquired.

"I'm certain of it," Clark answered cheerfully as the grin spread across his face.

"Then why haven't you married her?" the preacher asked sternly.

"I'm not in the habit of recording the dates," Lois informed the doctor irritably. "Besides, I'm not the most regular of women when it comes to that."

"Lois, there is a reason that I'm asking this," Doctor Rivers told her gently. "It's important. Do you remember when it was?"

"Of course I remember," Lois snapped. "It started the same day that our first article on Lex Luthor's finances hit the front page."

"I remember reading about that... *two months* ago," Doctor Rivers commented. Lois' eyes grew wide at the implication, as did Clark's from his pew in the other room.

"I do plan on marrying her, but things are a bit complicated at the moment," Clark responded weakly. He was having difficulty focusing on Reverend Swan's words after what he'd just heard from the other room. The preacher had repeated himself to regain Clark's

attention.

"Clark, whether you realize it or not, you're a role model to the young people of this community, and that was true even before you took on Lex Luthor," the preacher lectured. "Your family situation is difficult to reconcile with that, especially given Lois' likely condition."

"Likely condition?" Clark questioned numbly as he looked up at the preacher.

"The symptoms you've described on the way over here sounded somewhat familiar," Reverend Swan told him. "Do you think that she might be pregnant?"

"I didn't until a minute ago," Clark admitted humbly. He took a deep breath as he determined how best to explain their situation without revealing too much. "Our biggest obstacle right now is Lex Luthor," Clark told him grimly. "He has a vitriolic hatred for Lois. I don't want to bore you with the details, but we believe that if he knew we were together, he might target my mother. We've kept a low profile back in Metropolis because of that. In fact, there are only a few people back East who even know that we're a couple."

"I see," the preacher acknowledged as he pensively rubbed his jaw.

"It's not possible!" Lois complained as her eyes glistened with tears. "We... took precautions." She dropped her head low in her hands as she sat on the couch and reluctantly considered the possibility.

"No contraceptive is one hundred percent effective," Doctor Rivers told her as she sat down beside her and gently placed her arm around her. "We've got pregnancy tests over at the clinic, so it should be easy enough to confirm that part, though I think that we both know what that result is going to be."

"I feel like such an idiot for not realizing that I was late," Lois told her meekly. "We weren't expecting this."

"You've been under a lot of stress," Doctor Rivers told her as she offered her a friendly smile. "It's understandable that you missed it." After giving Lois a moment to absorb the revelation, she added, "Lois, do you have a history of anemia?"

Lois nodded her head as she clarified, "When I was pregnant with Jason. I had to take supplements until after he was born."

"Well, we have some of those over at the clinic, too," Doctor Rivers informed her. "I'll run over and grab some for you once we're done here."

"Well, I think that we can work around that problem," Reverend Swan informed the younger man. "You can exchange your vows privately, and renew them in a public ceremony after your problem with Luthor is resolved. I can perform the ceremony in my office with just the two of you and your witnesses."

"*N-now?*" Clark stuttered as his eyes shot impossibly wide.

Reverend Swan chuckled at the Clark's reaction as he placed his hand on his shoulder. "No, not now, Clark," he informed him, much to the younger man's relief. "There's some paperwork that the state requires, and I usually insist on a few months of premarital counseling. I think we can waive most of the counseling under the circumstances, but I'll still want to talk with the two of you before you exchange vows."

"I-I really need to discuss this with Lois," Clark countered nervously.

"Yes, you do," Reverend Swan stated firmly as Clark chanced eye contact with the older man. Reverend Swan chuckled again as he reassured him, "Relax, Clark, I'm done with the

lecture. I'm sure that you and Lois will do the right thing."

The men were interrupted as Doctor Rivers entered the room. "Gentlemen," she addressed them. "If you're done chatting, I think that Lois probably wants to talk to Clark."

"Is she alright?" Clark asked uncertainly.

"I think she'll be fine, though she should get a complete exam from her own doctor once you get back to Metropolis," Doctor Rivers told him. "I'm going run down the street to the clinic to grab some things for her, so if you'll excuse me..." With that, the woman quickly exited the church.

Lois looked up at the sound of the door creaking as Clark opened it. He offered her a loving expression as his gazed drifted down and focused on her lower abdomen. Lois noticed where his gaze was focused and realized that he'd probably overheard her discussion with Doctor Rivers. She offered him a weak smile as she meekly inquired,

"Oops?"

"Oops," he confirmed as he joined her on the couch and brought her into his embrace. "I'm not sure how I missed the baby's heartbeat..."

"You hear the heartbeat already?" Lois asked in amazement.

"Yeah, I do," he told her gently. In a more serious tone, he added, "We probably need to talk about a few things." Lois nodded in agreement as she buried her head in his chest and wrapped her arms around him.

Chapter 40 - Expecting

Day 76, Sunday, 2:30PM, Fortress of Solitude

Lois pressed her palms against the sides of the coffin-like crystal chamber and peered through the red hue at her lover near the control panel. As the genetic suppression process turned off her unborn child's Kryptonian genes, she felt a strange tingling throughout her body. Finally, the red glow dissipated, though the door remained closed. Three minutes passed as Superman reviewed a holographic screen of the results, while Lois watched him through the door to the chamber, which remained sealed. She finally ran out of patience and irritably asked, "How long do you plan on keeping me in here?"

Superman held up his index finger in an unspoken request to wait. A moment later, a sliver thin plane of glowing blue light moved slowly up her body from the floor to the top of the chamber. Once that had also dissipated, the door opened and Superman was immediately there guiding her out of the chamber. "We're all done," he told her gently. "Everything looks fine. Come take a look."

Before Lois had a chance to look at the display, she was interrupted by Lara's holographic facsimile standing behind Superman. "It was reckless to wait this long," Lara stated impassively. "If you intend to continue a relationship with each other, you will need to be more diligent in the future."

"We *were* being careful," Lois insisted defensively. "This wasn't expected."

"Obviously not," Lara commented.

"We took precautions," Lois responded irritably.

"What were these precautions?" Lara persisted.

"We used contraceptives," Lois explained, as she noticed a slight red tint on Superman's face.

"Please elaborate," Lara insisted.

"Um, we used... prophylactics," Lois clarified.

"Our language dictionary defined 'prophylactic' as 'acting to defend against or prevent something'," Lara informed her. "Is there a different definition that I should be using?"

Lois noticed an embarrassed expression on Superman's face, and tried to suppress her smile as she continued, "Um, it's a condom."

"That word is not in our dictionary," Lara stated. "Please describe it for me."

As Lois began to answer, she noticed Superman's deep blush and immediately shut her mouth and had to practically bite her tongue to keep from laughing out loud. *You can take the boy out of the farm, but you can't take the farm out of the boy*, she thought mirthfully. Lois regained control of her amusement and continued her description. By the time she had explained it to Lara's satisfaction, his face seemed as red as his cape and she again struggled to keep from laughing out loud.

"Are there not other methods of contraception available?" Lara questioned. Lois then proceeded to explain available human contraceptive options to Lara as Superman's blush subsided slightly.

"You should have consulted us on this matter," Lara scolded. "The barrier type contraceptives that you've described are ineffective on Kryptonian males. The chemical coating of Kryptonian spermatozoa easily dissolves through latex." As she said this, a deep blush again colored Superman's face.

"We kind of figured that out," Lois responded harshly.

"You did not consider the other forms of contraception available?" Lara questioned.

"I considered them, I just wasn't comfortable with them," Lois answered indifferently. "Increased side effects for smokers, and all that... We'll have to come up with something after this one's born, though."

"Agreed," Lara replied. Turning towards her son, she instructed him, "Kal-El, you will need to provide us with detailed technical information on human contraceptives. We will need to review it along with established Kryptonian methods in order to determine the best solution for you."

Superman nodded his head. "You'll have it," he promised. Lara nodded in acknowledgement as the hologram faded away.

As he turned to Lois, she smirked at him, jokingly suggesting, "We could go back and get Martha's opinion on what we should do for birth control. Do you think that *she'll* know what a condom is?" She burst into hearty laughter at the bright blush that her comment produced across her lover's face.

"Don't even joke about that," he insisted uneasily as he gathered her into his arms.

"Why not? It's so much fun," she teased as she wrapped her arms around his waist. After a moment, she admitted, "I'm not looking forward to what comes next. Certain people's reactions to finding out that I'm pregnant... My dad and Richard, to name a few... the premarital counseling that Reverend Swan wants to do..." Lois' voice faltered as she finally noticed their unborn child displayed on the holographic screen. The magnified three dimensional image gave the perception that one was peering through a glass window rather than a computer screen. Lois marveled at her child's developing limbs and budding digits as she keenly took inventory of the child's features. She noted the forming nostrils, mouth and closed eyelids as her own eyes glistened with loving tears at the sight of her unborn child.

"Are you alright?" Superman inquired, his eyes also glistening at the scene before them.

"I..." Lois began as she wiped the tears from her cheeks. She swallowed and tried again, faintly telling him, "I never saw this kind of detail with Jason. Ultrasounds don't come in HD." Lois shifted her body around as she tried to peer between the child's thighs.

"There's not much to see there yet, but I can tell you the gender if you want to know," he offered.

Lois nodded slowly before speaking, "Well, we *will* need to know how to decorate the baby's room. Is this... Is this really what it looks like after only six weeks?"

"Yes, that's what *she* looks like," he told her as he grinned widely.

"She?" Lois asked, as she turned to look at him, her face now mirroring her lover's grin.

He nodded his confirmation. "I guess we'll be painting the room pink," he suggested happily.

"Don't count on it, farm boy" Lois objected. "We don't have to paint our daughter's room pink just because she's a girl. Maybe a light yellow..."

"Our daughter..." Superman repeated emotionally as he wrapped his arms around Lois and pulled her close. "That sounds so beautiful."

They remained standing there for several minutes, silently memorizing their daughter's features. Clark gave her a chaste kiss on the top of the head as he told her, "I hate to say this, but we really should be getting back. I promised Reverend Swan that I'd give him a call after we had a chance to talk."

Lois looked up at him as she teasingly inquired, "Would this be a good time to point out that you haven't actually proposed yet?"

"Um, I haven't?" Clark asked innocently as the grin spread across his face.

"Nope," Lois told him simply. "And you'll need to come up with something romantic! Sweep me off my feet!" At this, Clark floated up in the air, lifting her with him. Lois giggled as she told him, "That's not what I meant. You need to take me out someplace special, get down on one knee and profess your undying love."

"I think that could be arranged," Clark suggested with a mischievous grin on his face as they floated back down to the floor.

"Well, if our first premarital counseling session is next weekend, you only have five days to come up with something," Lois declared mirthfully.

"I take it this means that you're not feeling pressured by the good reverend," Clark replied happily.

"Surprisingly, no," Lois answered pensively. "I'm not sure how well I can articulate it... it just feels right. I'm not going to get into clichés about 'love at first sight,' but I always felt the connection. I always believed that we'd get to this point, that it was meant to be. This wasn't quite how I imagined it would be, but I'll gladly take it."

Clark's expression turned serious as he looked down at her. "I'm sorry things aren't easier for us," he told her sincerely. "We shouldn't have to hide and sneak around like this, but with Luthor out there, knowing what he knows..."

Lois took his face in her hands as she looked deeply into his eyes. "Clark, listen to me very carefully," she commanded. "It's not your fault. Yes, it would be easier if he wasn't around, but we'll deal with it. I don't love you any less for it, so stop blaming yourself."

Clark was touched by her words and smiled widely as he told her simply, "I love you."

"I love you, too," she replied as she kissed him affectionately.

As Lois broke from the kiss and returned her attention to their daughter's image, Lois asked hopefully, "Is there any way we can get a printout of that?"

"It'd hardly do it justice, but I'll see what I can do," he promised. After a moment, Clark quietly asked, "How long do we have before you start showing?"

Lois brow furrowed as she considered the question for a moment before answering. "I looked obviously pregnant at five months the last time, but people will notice the weight gain well before that," Lois recalled. "If she's six weeks along, we can probably keep it hidden for another four to six weeks with the right wardrobe choices. Eight weeks, if we're *really* lucky."

"Hopefully, we won't need that much time," Clark told her. "We should come clean with our families and friends, though..."

"Let's wait until *after* your proposal, and then start with your side of the family," Lois suggested. "Because if you thought my dad was going to rake you over the coals *before*...." Clark grimaced as he contemplated facing Lieutenant General Sam Lane, as the man who knocked up his unmarried daughter. Twice.

Day 77, Monday, 2:00AM, Metropolis, 1938 Sullivan Lane.

Lois lay awake staring at the clock, as the minutes slowly crawled by. Even though she was exhausted from the busy afternoon in Smallville, she was kept awake with concern over the day's revelation and the struggle to keep that development hidden. She was especially concerned with their coworkers at the *Daily Planet*. People were not hired there for being oblivious, after all. She worried that somebody would catch a look on her face that would give everything away. She also worried that if they figured out that she and Clark were together, that they might take a closer look at him and figure out other things as well.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she heard Superman's deep baritone ask from the

bedroom door. She looked over at him while he changed from his Superman outfit to lounge pants and a t-shirt in a blur of color.

"I didn't hear you come in," Lois told him sleepily. "Isn't this early for you?"

"You seemed restless," he replied patiently. "Are you worried about the baby?"

"The timing sucks, but it's not that," Lois informed him. "I'm worried that everyone at the office will notice... things: That they'll notice me in 'pregnant mama' mode; that they'll notice me noticing you; that they'll take a closer look at you and notice other things that we don't want them to. And with Luthor still out there on top of everything else, it's just..." Her voice faltered as she looked away and wiped the tears from her eyes. "Damn hormones," she muttered.

Clark climbed into bed next to her, reached an arm around her, and pulled her close. "They didn't notice anything unusual Thursday, so we probably have a least a little time to prepare ourselves for when they do start noticing things," Clark reassured her. "They'll notice the pregnancy eventually, and they'll eventually figure out that Clark Kent is the man in your life. I don't think that they'll figure that out today, though."

Clark pulled her over on top of him and began to expertly work out the knots in the muscles of her shoulders and back as she whispered into his chest, "In my head, I know that, but it's not helping me sleep. And if I'm a zombie in the office tomorrow, it'll be even harder to pretend that there's nothing between us, especially now that we've been talking about the baby and about getting married..."

"I know," he told her gently. "It'll be hard for me too, now that my hearing is attuned to our daughter's heartbeat."

Lois lifted her head wide-eyed as she emotionally replied, "If I heard that, it'd be hopelessly impossible for me to keep a Kent-worthy goofy grin off my face. How are we going to do this?"

"By taking one thing at a time," he told her confidently. "If I could manage to keep it bottled in when I first got back and saw you with Richard and Jason, we can manage it together now."

"Oh, God, I didn't even think about Richard!" she told him in a loud whisper, unnerved. "He'll spot my tells for sure... and it'll probably be quite a blow for him when he finds out, too."

"Yes, it will be difficult for him and that bothers me, too," Clark admitted. "He'll survive, though, so please try to relax. We'll take it one step at a time. If you think you're about to lose control, try to tune everything else out and focus on one thing: Seek out the sound of your own heartbeat, your breathing, the hum from a clock or the fan in your PC. Mentally replay your notes from a story. Find something to distract yourself and focus your attention on so that people don't see the emotion come through."

"Does that work?" Lois asked curiously as she again lifted her head.

"It will," he assured her as she laid her head back on his chest and his fingers continued their dance across the bare back under her pajama top.

"I wish I had your confidence," she told him sleepily as she yawned. She remained there silently enjoying his ministrations. Clark also remained silent, kissing the crown of her head as his hands continued their task, and felt her slowly relax in his arms. After several minutes, her breathing became deeper and sleep finally claimed her.

Day 77, Monday, 2:10PM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom

Somehow Lois had managed to keep her mind on her work and delivered her story by the

afternoon deadline. Proximity to Clark had been a challenge, but his suggestions for dealing with it had helped. She focused on her breathing, making herself acutely aware of every breath in and out. Fortunately, her story that day had been an easy one to write and as soon she had submitted it, shortly before the afternoon deadline, she darted out of the office for her doctor's appointment.

Clark also had some difficulty maintaining a neutral mask, but had also somehow managed it and gotten his article submitted on time. Now that the afternoon deadline had passed, he wasn't quite sure what to do in Lois' absence, since he had developed the habit of chatting with her at her desk as they relaxed after the deadline. He briefly debated sneaking out and spying on her at her doctor's office before deciding it might be too suspicious if they were both AWOL together too often. He instead settled back in at his desk and mentally reviewed his current story leads and personal to-do list before pulling out his cell phone to take care of one of those tasks. He was still in the middle of the conversation when Jimmy Olsen came up behind him.

"N'y a-t-il donc rien de disponible pour vendredi¹?" Clark quietly asked into his cell phone, in perfect French. "Acceptez-vous des réservations pour jeudi²?"

Jimmy was surprised to hear Clark speaking French. He assumed that Clark must have picked up some language skills during the world travels on his long sabbatical, but couldn't image who he might be talking to.

Clark calmly continued speaking, "Oui, monsieur. Ce sera parfait... Oui, 'Clark Kent'... Un... six un neuf... cinq cinq cinq... huit neuf sept quatre... Merci beaucoup. Au revoir, monsieur."³ As Clark hung up his cell phone, he jumped back in feigned surprise at seeing Jimmy standing in front of him. "Jimmy!" Clark greeted. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Not long, Mister Kent" Jimmy answered cheerfully. "I didn't know that you spoke French. Was that someone from your trip?"

"You can call me 'Clark' if you want to, Jimmy," Clark informed him firmly. He added apprehensively, "That, um... that was the maître d' at a French restaurant. He was, um, patient enough to let me practice my French as I made my reservations."

"Cool... So, did you finally let Maggie set you up?" Jimmy asked hopefully. "About time. You need it after everything you and Ms. Lane have been through lately... So is this why you haven't been home?"

Clark's eyes grew a bit wide as he considered how best to dodge Jimmy's question and wondered if it had been careless to make the reservations from the office. "Um, no, it's not Maggie's sister," Clark mumbled. After a momentary pause, he told Jimmy sincerely, "I'm sorry I haven't been around much lately, Jimmy. I've been so busy trying to break through on the Luthor story that I just haven't spent much time with my friends. I have meant to stop by, though. I don't think I ever thanked you properly for everything you did when I first got back."

"It's alright, Mister K--, um Clark," Jimmy replied happily. "Besides, your hard work has really paid off with all your page ones. You and Ms. Lane will probably get Pulitzers for the Luthor stuff."

Clark smiled goofily at the comment as he downplayed it, "Well, I don't know about the Pulitzer, but I think that Lois gets plenty of page ones without me. You've been doing pretty well with your photos, too, I think."

"I haven't gotten enough 'iconic' pictures of Superman to keep the chief happy," Jimmy

grumbled. "The problem is that you never know where he'll show up. In the old days, I'd have asked Ms. Lane to put in a good word with him for me, but it doesn't sound like she sees much of him these days."

Though Clark sympathized with Jimmy's dilemma and wanted to help, he was also relieved that the perception of a 'special connection' between Superman and Lois Lane had finally begun to change. He considered Jimmy's comment for a moment before he suggested pensively, "He's probably maintaining professional contact with certain people... and he's working closely with NYPD and MPD on the Luthor case. Maybe one of our police contacts can get word to him for you... Inspector Henderson, Dan Turpin or Maggie Sawyer would probably be best... I could mention something to Turpin, if you'd like."

"I'd be embarrassed to have you ask," Jimmy admitted bashfully. "I'm just trying to get a good picture for the chief, and what they're working on is so much more important."

Clark nodded in acknowledgement as he quietly told him, "Yeah, the Luthor story kind of takes everything over... When it's finally all said and done, though, we'll have to plan a guys' night out." After a moment's pause, he suggested hopefully, "Maybe Superman was listening to our conversation, and will stop by for you to take pictures." Jimmy smiled hopefully at that thought as Perry's bellowing voice called him away.

English Translations of French Dialogue:

1 "Is nothing available for Friday?"

2 "Are you accepting reservations on Thursday?"

3 "Yes, sir. That will be perfect... Yes, 'Clark Kent'... 1 (609) 555-8974... Thank you very much. Goodbye, sir."

Chapter 41 - A Better Mousetrap

Day 77, Monday, 3:00PM, Metropolis, Suicide Slum

The haunting sounds of Georges Bizet's "Habañera" drifted through the confines of Lex Luthor's bunker as he fumed at the news broadcast, which was now repeating its news loop with very little new information. The big story was a suspected terrorist plot against the commuter rail lines between Metropolis and New York City. According to the newscast, a man walking his dog along the tracks saw something suspicious on the rails, which turned out to be a bomb similar to the improvised explosive devices (IED) plaguing U.S. troops in Iraq. The transit authority had shutdown all rail lines for a security inspection of the tracks and stations, right at the peak of the morning rush hour. A terrorist plot was suspected, and the news anchors made the obvious comparisons to attacks in London and Madrid.

It wasn't until ten o'clock that morning that Superman learned of the situation, and completed the inspection. He disabled the remote detonators and flagged each IED with the four inch square orange flags on two foot long wire stems that the transit workers had given him. Bomb squads and forensic teams were still in the process of collecting evidence and disposing of the explosives that Superman had disarmed. They were expected to finish in time for the evening commute, though there were likely to be delays early on.

Lex continued to analyze the blundered attempt at kidnapping Superman's son the previous Thursday, and frowned deeply as he considered those events. *Why didn't he go after Mueller himself?* Lex wondered. He'd emptied the bus, but when Mueller pulled up, presumably with kryptonite in his pocket, it was the Littleton Police Department that grabbed him. Superman was nowhere to be found. *Either he had his hands full with his kid, or he knew about the kryptonite,* Lex reasoned. *How would he have known?* When the Man of Steel landed heavily on the kryptonite land mass several weeks earlier, he'd seemed oblivious to the presence of kryptonite until Lex sucker-punched him. There was no way he would have felt anything to warn him off from the tiny amount that Mueller carried. Had he heard the men on the bus talking about it, perhaps complaining that Mueller was keeping it to himself? Or did he have another means of detecting it? *Better assume the worst next time and keep it shielded with lead until we need it,* Lex concluded.

He returned his attention to his muted television, and again grimaced angrily as he read the closed captions. His local teams had painstakingly planted the explosives on the commuter rail tracks over the weekend with the intention of detonating cascading explosions at five o'clock Monday evening, just as the boy was getting out of school in Littleton. That would have kept Superman occupied while the Colorado team grabbed his son from Littleton and another team intercepted Lois Lane on her way home. Once he had his two human targets, he would have summoned Superman using a supersonic transmission, just as he had when he first introduced the Man of Steel to kryptonite several years earlier. The Kryptonian would have had no choice but to turn himself over to Lex's men. Now, thanks to Mueller's impatience and incompetence, Lex had to start over. If Mueller had at least followed Lex's plan, then they could have bagged both father and son. The mother's capture would have been trivial after that.

But Mueller had *not* followed Lex's brilliant plan. Instead, he had greedily kept the kryptonite as a souvenir and jumped the gun. With no distraction keeping Superman busy in Metropolis, he had noticed the bus hijacking and been able to sneak the children off, like a mouse stealing the cheese from its trap. That left Lex with the burden of designing a better mouse trap. The day's news of a suspected terrorist plot in Metropolis made that more difficult.

Homeland Security had raised the threat level to high, and the National Guard was assisting local authorities in placing extremely close scrutiny on area transit, utilities, ports, and every other perceived security weakness. Implementing another distraction would be significantly more difficult.

Lex had also begun to wonder how effective a distraction would really be. If Hernandez was right, Superman was paying *very* close attention to his boy, and it was clear from the news reports that he had intervened within minutes of the men seizing the bus. If he heard the boy call for help in the middle of handling an emergency, Lex had no doubt that he'd choose to save his son over some unknown bunch of strangers. Littleton had the advantage that such a plea would have taken two hours to reach Metropolis at the speed of sound. If the child was within several sonic minutes of any planned distraction, it might be no better than proceeding with no distraction at all. Lex concluded that they would need to grab all three of his targets simultaneously next time. Of course, that would not be possible until he again located Superman's son.

Lex bristled as he recalled his frustrated attempts the previous Friday and Saturday trying to break back into his adversaries' phone records. He knew from the previous week's headlines that they'd discovered his breach, but assumed that he'd be able to break in again. He 'dialed for dummies', calling customer service numbers time after time, hoping to get a representative who be gullible enough reset the passwords for him. However, Lane's article excoriating those customer service representatives for their carelessness had put them on the defensive. They were not willing to consider the pleas of the male voice claiming to be her fiancé who'd promised to take care of it for her, especially when it was for the same woman who'd taken them to task. Her personal phone records were a dead end.

Despite these considerable failures, there had been some modest successes. He finally managed to get a team through to install surveillance cameras targeting Lois Lane's home, and now her daily arrivals and departures were well documented. However, there had been no sign of her son, who until recently had obviously been hidden away with friends in Colorado. His teams also finally succeeded in breaking into their pediatrician's office, stolen Jason's file, and bugged their phone system. With as many medical complaints as Lex found in the child's files, it was only a matter of time before he came back.

Lex allowed himself a small smile as he finally found the inspiration for his better mouse trap. He'd take advantage of Suicide Slum's notoriously slow response time for emergency services, creating an emergency that Superman would have to respond to. They'd take him down with the kryptonite and his men would take him out, disguised as paramedics. Lex turned to his laptop and pulled up his recruiting application as he searched for the men he would need. Ricky had proved his value in the technical and personnel areas as well as proving somewhat insightful at analyzing problems. However, he lacked the killer instinct needed to intimidate the recruits and bring his plans to fruition. Lex would need some new lieutenants to successfully pull this off.

Day 77, Monday, 7:45PM, Metropolis, 1938 Sullivan Lane

Jason ran down the stairs to the living room in his Looney Tunes pajamas with his hair still wet from his bath as his father slowly walked down the stairs behind him. Lois looked up from her laptop with a smile as her son plopped down beside her. "Well, you look nice and clean," she told him warmly, as she set her laptop on the end table and pulled her son in close for a hug. She released him from the hug and looked him in the eyes as she added in a more

serious tone, "Do you remember what we talked about earlier? You can't call your father 'Daddy' in front of Uncle Perry."

"I know," Jason complained. "But I don't like calling Daddy, 'Clark.'"

"We're not ready to explain things to Uncle Perry yet," Lois told him firmly as her serious expression let him know that she would tolerate no argument. "Promise me that you won't call your father 'Daddy' in front of Uncle Perry."

Jason dropped his head and as he mumbled, "Okay, I promise."

Lois pulled him close and kissed the top of his head as she told him softly, "Someday, we'll be able to tell Perry that Clark Kent is your daddy, so this won't be forever, but we'll need to be patient a little while longer."

Lois and Clark both looked over at the front door at the sound of the doorbell. "It's Richard and Perry," Clark informed her simply. "It looks like they're a little early." As he walked over to the door to the basement stairs, he added, "I'll head out the tunnel and be back by eight."

"See ya'," Lois acknowledged as she walked over to answer the door with Jason hopping in excitement behind her. After a quick glance behind her to make sure Clark was gone, she opened the front door for her guests, "Come on in, guys. Is Clark with you, too?"

Before either man could answer Jason had grabbed their hands and was pulling them in. "Richard! Uncle Perry!" he exclaimed in excitement. "Do you want to see the new truck that my Grandma and Poppa got me? It has lights that work and makes siren sounds and everything!"

"Hey, kiddo, give us a chance to get catch our breath," Richard insisted in a mock complaint. Jason smiled widely as he hopped in front of them while Lois took their coats. "Now what's this I hear about a new toy truck?"

As Jason led Richard off to the basement playroom to show him his new toy, Perry pleasantly informed Lois, "Clark didn't come with us. You told us eight o'clock and he usually shows up just barely on time... I'm sure he'll be here."

"Well, while we're waiting, I can give you a tour of the house," Lois offered cordially.

"I'd like that," Perry replied affably, as he followed Lois from the foyer and looked over her new home.

As predicted, Clark showed up at the front door precisely at eight o'clock. A few minutes after that, Richard accepted Lois' invitation to tuck Jason in, and led the boy up to his room. "They may be awhile," Lois warned Perry quietly. "Jason always needs a few stories read to him before he'll call it a night... Richard's pretty up to date on everything. Do you want to wait for him, or should we start without him?"

"I don't mind waiting," Clark offered politely. "There may be a few details he hasn't heard yet, and it's better to discuss them here."

"And why exactly is that?" Perry inquired. "You two stressed that it wasn't safe to talk about whatever this is at the office. Why is it safer here?"

"Because we've invested in a high-end security system for the house that includes countermeasures against listening devices," Lois informed him. "There are too many visitors through the editorial floor who could covertly plant a device, and we absolutely cannot risk that Luthor might find out about this."

Perry's eyes widened in surprise as he considered Lois' words. "Has there been a development?"

"Some things have happened recently," Clark admitted. "We--we'll get into that when Richard gets back downstairs."

"So, how's Alice been?" Lois cheerfully asked in an attempt to change the subject. She was successful in keeping the conversation on recent events in the White family for the next several minutes and failed to notice when Richard finally rejoined them.

Richard cleared his throat to get everyone's attention. "Am I interrupting?"

"Sorry, I didn't hear you come back down," Lois admitted quietly. "Well, everyone might as well make themselves comfortable. Does anyone need a refill?" When the men declined further refreshment, Lois sat down at the end of the couch, taking a short sip of her water before she began. "Perry, we promised to keep you informed of what happened in the Luthor case, and a lot has happened in recent days. We couldn't risk saying anything about this at the office, though."

"What happened?" Perry inquired curiously.

"We should probably start with the school bus hijacking," Lois concluded grimly.

"You mean the one in Littleton last week?" Perry asked as his brow furrowed in confusion.

Lois nodded as she admitted weakly, "It was Jason's bus. He had been staying with Richard's old college roommate, Tom Ferguson, and his family." The color drained from Perry's face as the frightening revelation sunk in. Lois gave him a minute before she gently placed her hand on his arm and told him, "Jason's fine. All of the children are. We were tipped off just before it happened, and I guess Superman was listening in and took care of the problem."

"The relevant point here is that there is now someone inside Luthor's organization who is helping us," Clark added quietly. "Superman found him as he was tying up loose ends in Littleton. He's also the one who warned us about the explosives on the rail lines."

"It still bothers me that we gave that story to Gil Truman," Perry complained as he finally found his voice. "The only words he wrote on it were in his byline, and yet he got the page one when it should have been you two. Why'd you insist on giving that to him?"

"It was to protect our source," Lois answered. "We've been so focused on tracking down Luthor that if our names had been on it, he might suspect that we'd dug it up as part of our investigation. We don't want him to think that his man had been compromised."

"Has he given you anything else?" Richard asked.

"Plenty," Clark answered excitedly. "Our source has a talent with computers and successfully planted a Trojan horse on most of Luthor's computer equipment. There is a bit of a time lag before he gets anything because of the small footprint it maintains to avoid detection. It's still enough to identify Luthor's remote storage servers, the proxy servers he using to hide his address, and we have copies of his emails. A key logger has even provided his decryption keys and passwords."

"Then he'll be arrested soon?" Perry asked hopefully.

"We can hope," Lois replied seriously. "Unfortunately, that's still not enough to identify his location. The servers that he's been using are all abroad, and he's diligently erasing the logs. We'd need to be sniffing the network traffic while he's connected to get his source address. Some... associates of ours are working on that."

"We've also identified several more of his foreign accounts, and Treasury is trying to follow the money to him," Clark added.

"So what happens next?" Perry asked.

"It's a waiting game," Lois admitted unhappily. "In the meantime, we'll need to continue our extreme measures to keep that little boy safe."

"Our security advisors have been pouring over everything that our source provided," Clark added. "They're *very* impressed... Luthor's very clever, though, and very diligent at cleaning up his tracks. Hopefully, everything that we're getting from the spyware will give us an advantage, but we can't afford to underestimate him."

"And of course, you're going to insist that we can't print anything about this, aren't you?" Perry questioned grimly.

"We can't risk tipping him off," Clark insisted firmly. "When we finally reach the tipping point and Luthor is taken down, we'll have the exclusive. However, we'll need to sit on this until then."

"We may also have to give up some more page ones to keep Luthor off the scent," Lois added.

"Well, Gil's not getting the next one!" Perry declared gruffly as he lowered his head and rubbed his chin pensively. "It seems to me that Superman has been keenly interested in the Luthor case. Have you had any contact with him about it?"

"Some," Lois admitted nervously, worried where Perry was likely to go with this.

"Then try to get an interview with him on the Luthor chase," Perry instructed her. "We should be able to at least do that much without tipping him off."

"That wouldn't be a good idea," Clark said firmly, quickly adding, "I mean, um, that is--"

"Clark's right," Lois stated decisively. "But not for the reasons you think."

Perry's brow furrowed in confusion, "Would you mind explaining it to me, then?" he asked irritably.

"Um, Chief..." Clark began. "Do you remember when General Zod burst into the Planet's editorial office some years ago? Do you remember *who* they took as their hostage?"

"Lois," Perry answered simply, still confused. "I don't understand what that has to do with getting an interv--"

"Because the *reason* that they chose her was that Lex Luthor thought that there was some kind of relationship there," Richard interrupted, as he remembered Lois and Clark's earlier explanation. "You saw it again in the recent tabloid coverage after she visited him in the hospital. For Superman to continue to give all of his exclusive interviews to Lois would perpetuate that perception and put both her and Jason in danger. I doubt that he's willing to do that." Richard let that sink in a moment before he turned to Lois and continued. "However... if you *do* see him, maybe you can suggest that he talk to a different *Daily Planet* reporter?"

"Who do you have in mind?" Lois asked curiously.

"Maybe Susan Walters?" Richard suggested. At Lois' frown, he remembered the two women's professional rivalry and smiled gently as he added, "Or we could offer him a list of names to choose from."

"I'll have a short list for him tomorrow morning," Perry declared authoritatively before he turned to Lois and added pointedly, "You make sure he gets it." Lois nodded her assent as she glared at Richard for suggesting that course of action. They were going to need to have a little chat about that tomorrow.

"Well, I th--think that's everything," Clark informed the group. "We shouldn't say a word about our source back at the office, or even reveal that we have one. This has to stay between us."

"It will," Perry assured him as he stood up. "I know how stressful the last several weeks

have been for you, and I can't wait for you to take this bastard down. I'll do whatever I can to help you. Just let me know what you need."

"Thank you, Perry," Lois told him sincerely with glistening eyes. "We really appreciate that."

Perry nodded his acknowledgement as the others in the group also stood. "Well, if there's nothing else, I should get home. Alice is a bit... uncomfortable right now... Shingles."

"Ouch," Lois said sympathetically as she escorted the group to the front door. "I hope she'll be feeling better soon."

"Me, too," Perry agreed sincerely. "Kent, do you need a ride?"

"I'm out of your way, and you're anxious to get home" Clark pointed out. "I can wait for a cab."

"Richard will drop me off first," Perry declared. "Come on, we're giving you a ride home."

Clark nodded his assent, and followed the other men out the front door, as he lamented the need to hide his relationship with Lois. *It might actually be a relief if people figure us out,* Clark thought wistfully. *Not tonight, though, but someday...*

Chapter 42 - We'll Always Have Paris

Day 80, Thursday, 7:50PM (Central European Time), Paris

The ground was still wet from an earlier autumn rain shower as the pedestrians on Paris' still crowded streets huddled in their jackets and kept their umbrellas ready. One couple among them seemed oblivious to the damp weather, as they exited the parking garage on Rue René Boulanger, leaning affectionately into each other, their fingers entwined with each other's. Their bright smiles were mirrored on each other's face at they spoke quietly, oblivious to the world around them - all their troubles momentarily forgotten as the half-kilometer walk to the brasserie quickly passed. When Clark led Lois through the doors of Chez Julien, a small gasp escaped her lips as she marveled at the Art Nouveau décor. "This place looks incredible," she said faintly. Clark nodded in agreement as they approached the maître d'.

"Bonsoir, Monsieur. Avez-vous une réservation¹?" the maître d' asked politely.

"En effet, Monsieur. J'ai fait une réservation au nom de Clark Kent²," Clark informed him cordially.

The maître d' glanced briefly at the reservation list as he told them, "Oh, oui. Veuillez me suivre, je vous prie."³

They were quickly seated and greeted by their waiter, Sébastien. Lois reviewed her menu with confusion. "Um, Clark?" Lois started bashfully as she pointed at her menu. "I don't know enough French to understand what any of this is."

Clark smiled lovingly as he took her menu and held it between them with one hand while his free hand found one of hers and squeezed affectionately. "I can translate, though their duck foie gras comes highly recommended." Lois looked up at him with a shy smile as he explained their menu choices.

After informing Sébastien that they had both chosen the duck foie gras, Clark suggested to Lois, "We'll have to come back here in the summer, and during the day, to fully appreciate the city."

"Preferably while Grandma's watching the kids," Lois commented happily. "Paris is more a romantic couple's getaway than a family vacation." Clark nodded in agreement as they continued to suggest vacation options while they waited for their dinner, both strictly observing their previously agreed upon rules barring any discussion of work or threats against the family.

When Sébastien arrived and served the main course, Clark waited anxiously as Lois tentatively sampled the duck, and only relaxed after she smiled and squeezed her eyes closed in delight as she savored the rich flavor. Lois chewed very slowly, stubbornly clinging to the essence of the culinary masterpiece. After finally swallowing that first forkful, she opened her eyes, and purred, "This is amazing! How on Earth did you find this place?"

"Pete suggested it," Clark confessed happily. "He and Lana came here on their honeymoon a few years ago." Lois nodded her acknowledgment as she enjoyed another mouthful of the duck foie gras and Clark finally tried his first taste of the meal.

After swallowing the enchanting mouthful, Lois declared jovially, "We owe him one for this. We're definitely coming back here." Clark grinned widely at their evening's brilliant start.

The delectable main course was followed with a tantalizing tiramisu, which produced a similar though diminished reaction from Lois. She smiled widely and affectionately at Clark as she finished her desert and grasped his hand. "If you're trying to get in my good graces through my stomach... it's working," she joked. "Though you should be *really* grateful that my

stomach's cooperating, which is far from certain at this stage in my pregnancy."

"We're just getting warmed up," Clark claimed mirthfully. They regarded each other silently for a moment while their dishes were cleared away. Once the table was clear, he quietly stated, "Now for the main event..."

Clark slid out of his seat, and lowered himself to one knee as he took both her hands in his own. "Lois..." he began nervously. "You are the love of my life. I've loved you since that first moment on the roof, and I'll love you the rest of my days. I've known no greater joy than what I've had with you in our short time together and as the father of your child. Nothing can make this happiness more complete than if you'd allow me the honor of becoming your husband." At this point, he pulled out a ring box from his pocket and opened it to reveal a sparkling diamond engagement ring. "Lois, will you marry me?"

Though she knew it was coming, Lois was overcome at the proposal and the tears of joy freely ran down her face. "Yes," she squeaked as she launched herself into his arms and hugged him fiercely. As she finally pulled back from the hug, Clark removed the ring from the box and slid it on her finger as the diners around them looked on approvingly. Lois finally looked at the half-carat ring that Clark had presented, noticing that it was significantly smaller than the one Richard White had offered her but not caring in the slightest. She suspected that she would have had a similar reaction from a cigar band if it had come from Clark.

Clark flagged down their waiter, and with one hand over his heart and gesturing to Lois with the other, he informed him, "Monsieur, cette magnifique jeune femme a accepté de m'épouser. On prendrait bien une bouteille de Champagne, s'il vous plait."⁴

Sébastien broke into a wide smile and promised to hurry back with the champagne, as Clark turned his attention back to Lois. "What was that all about?" she asked curiously. "Did I hear something about champagne?"

"Yep," Clark acknowledged happily. "I know we have to be careful with the baby, but I have it on good authority from two grandmothers and a family doctor that a few sips this one time won't hurt. No more than half a glass, though."

Lois smiled widely as she firmly grasped his hand and noted, "You've got everything all planned out, I see. So what else do you have planned tonight, farm boy?"

Day 81, Friday, 10:55AM (Central European Time), Paris, Hôtel Ritz

Lois woke to the rhythmic patter of raindrops against the windows of their guest room at the Paris Hôtel Ritz and the gentle prodding of Clark's voice, "Lo-is... Time to wake up, honey."

She grudgingly opened her eyes, blinking a few times to adjust to the light as she became aware of the heat from Clark's presence and his gentle grasp around her. She was still lying nude on top of him from the previous night's passion, which had possessed them until nearly two o'clock that morning. "What time is it?" she asked groggily.

"Here in *Paris*, it's just about eleven o'clock, which makes it five AM in Metropolis," he informed her quietly.

Lois groaned as she squeezed her eyes shut and buried her head in his chest. "That's too early," she complained weakly.

"We have to be checked out by noon," he reminded her. "I know you'd want time to get cleaned up."

Lois let out a deep sigh, as she muttered irritably, "Next time we come here, we're taking the next day off." She reluctantly rolled off of him, and stretched her limbs before noticing the

steady rainfall through the window. "Are you sure that we're in Paris and not Seattle?" she joked.

"Paris gets plenty of rain in the fall," Clark informed her quietly. "It's a lot dryer in the summer when most of the tourists are here."

Lois swung her legs over the edge of the bed and sat up, as Clark moved up behind her, and gently kissed her neck as he wrapped his arms around her. Lois purred contentedly in his arms as she warned him seductively, "If you're not careful with that, we're not going to get checked out on time." She twisted around to face him, and wrapped her arms around him as she captured his lips.

As he briefly broke from the kiss, Clark reminded her, "We don't have a lot of time."

"Then make it count," she insisted seductively as she aggressively deepened the kiss. Clark smiled through the kiss and leaned back onto the bed, pulling her on top of him and allowed himself to briefly forget about everything but the woman in his arms.

Day 81, Friday, 4:50PM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom.

Lois and Clark considered it nothing less than a miracle that they had managed to get cleaned up and checked out of the hotel on time, before coming back to Metropolis. They'd tried to act as if it were some routine day, but Lois felt that she was spending most of it with her head down, hiding a silly grin. Clark's suggestions for maintaining control of her expressions didn't seem as effective after the previous evening. She had moderate success when talking shop with her coworkers or sources, or digging into the day's big story, which was the murder of Lou Mueller in Littleton, coming from a sniper's bullet as he was transported from the local lockup to the courthouse for his arraignment. She and Clark had managed another page one, with details from Tom Ferguson, via Richard White. His name had also been included as a contributor on the byline at Clark's insistence.

Lois covered her mouth as she yawned loudly for the second time in a minute and again eyed the clock. *It's really not fair that I'm not allowed caffeine just when I need it the most,* she thought. Any other time, she would have called it a day, but they'd decided that they needed to come clean with Richard and give him the weekend to recover from their bombshell. She was waiting for the office to thin out before approaching him, but at this rate, she'd be asleep at her desk within a few minutes.

She snuck a glance over to Clark and got a sympathetic look from him as he looked over at her. Finally finding her resolve, she walked over to Richard's office, catching him as he was packing up his briefcase. He looked up at the knock on his door and noticing her expression, asked kindly, "Are you alright? You look like hell."

"Gee, thanks," Lois replied with weak humor, as she shut the door behind her and dropped into the visitor's chair. "Have you got a minute?"

"Just barely," he informed her. "I'm spending the weekend with my brother in Chicago, and I'll need to get going pretty soon if I'm going to make my flight."

"This won't take long, but I don't think you be very happy to hear it," Lois told him nervously.

"I promise I won't get angry," Richard assured her, recognizing her anxiety. "Come on, just spit it out." Lois took a deep breath as she stared into her lap. "Just keep it simple, and spit it out," Richard encouraged her.

Lois nodded and let out another deep sigh, as she started telling him, "It's about, um, my new housemate and me. You understood that was serious, right?"

She chanced a look up at him, and a sad expression passed over his face as his eyes sought out and found the ring on her finger. "He proposed, didn't he?" Richard asked, more as a statement than a question. "And you accepted. That probably shouldn't come as big surprise considering that he moved in with you a couple weeks ago."

"There's more," she told him weakly as she returned her gaze to her lap, fidgeting with her new ring.

"Lois?" Richard inquired gently after too long a moment of silence. "I'm not angry. Go ahead and spit it out."

She let out another deep breath, and in a quiet voice, told him, "Well, um... in, um, seven and a half months... Jason's... um, Jason's going to have a little si-sister."

Lois peeked up at Richard to see his eyes wide like saucers as the shock spread across his face. "You're pregnant?" he asked faintly. At her nod, he asked apprehensively, "Are you sure that it's... his?"

"We had to look at the DNA for other reasons, to check for certain... attributes," Lois informed him. "That's also how we knew it was a girl... It's his." Lois finally looked up into his eyes with a compassionate expression on her face. She only allowed a brief moment of silence before she added gently, "Richard, I know this still hurts you, and I'm sorry. You deserve better."

Richard waved off the apology, telling her firmly but sadly, "Don't. You've chosen your future with him. You don't need to apologize to me for embracing that future. I need to accept that and move on."

"Richard, I-" Lois began.

"It's okay," he assured her sadly as he stood up. "Look, I've... I've got a plane to catch."

"You're the only one that we've told," Lois revealed as she also stood from her chair.

"We're not ready to go public."

"I understand," Richard acknowledged as he reached for the door. "I won't say anything."

"Thank you," Lois told him faintly, as she retreated out the open door and Richard locked it behind them. As he watched her quickly retrieve her purse from her desk and march out of the room, he wistfully recalled the months since Clark's return. *Has it really been almost three months since we were the happy couple instead of her and Clark?* he wondered. He shook his head as he walked briskly out of the office. *Get over it, White,* he chastised himself. *She made her choice a long time ago.*

English Translation of French Dialogue:

¹ "Good evening, sir. Do you have a reservation?"

² "Indeed, Sir. I made a reservation in the name of Clark Kent."

³ "Oh, yes. Would you follow me, please..."

⁴ "Dear Sir, this magnificent young woman agreed to marry me. We'd like a bottle of Champagne, please."

Chapter 43 - Fabrication

Day 84, Monday, 10:00AM, Metropolis, Newton Steelworks (Lex Luthor's Lair)

Lex Luthor carefully maneuvered his tongs to grab the nearly-molten rectangular bar of glowing hot metal, lined it up in the forming machine, and pressed the button, stamping the ingot into a semicircle. He immediately removed the piece with his tongs, and immersed it in the fifty-five gallon drum of water that sat beside the machine. He returned the piece to the machine and stamped it again, repeating the cycle of stamping and dousing several times until the work was annealed into its final form, a half-collar two inches wide and three quarters of an inch thick. Lex set it aside to cool, hoping that the alloy mixture of thirty-eight percent kryptonite would prove sufficiently deadly to Kryptonians, while the remaining iron, chromium and manganese would give it sufficient strength to thwart any mere mortals determined to interfere. This was Lex's third attempt at alloying the kryptonite with iron to produce a useful restraint, the previous attempts proving too brittle.

Lex had originally planned to form the kryptonite into chains, but dismissed that design as an inefficient use of the scarce material, after reviewing the logistics required to individually form each link. A collar locked around the neck would achieve the desired result in a far simpler model. He scrutinized the steaming hot half-collar momentarily before his thoughts moved ahead to the next steps in fabrication. After several hours of cooling, he'd be able to run strength tests on the piece. If it proved strong enough, as he believed it would, he'd continue fabrication the following day.

Lex broke from his reverie as he remembered his need for a second, more malleable kryptonite alloy formula, to be used to press staples onto the special high strength nets that he'd use to capture his prey. He retreated to his living quarters and powered up his laptop, reviewing his formula for a second mixture as he prepared to run a test batch of that second alloy.

Day 86, Wednesday, 11:00AM, Metropolis, Newton Steelworks (Lex Luthor's Lair)

Lex cursed as the red-hot pin again dropped out of the hinge as he flipped the nearly completed collar over to finish the fabrication. The alloy's strength had been confirmed in testing the previous day, after which Lex had fabricated the remaining parts of the collars. Earlier that morning, the pieces had been cool enough for him to weld the hinge joints and clasps on the pieces. All that remained was slipping a pin through the hinges and flattening the opposite end to prevent its removal. That required flipping the collar and Lex had lost the pin the previous two times that he'd attempted the maneuver.

After returning the pin to the furnace to soften it, Lex angrily threw down his tongs and pulled off his long insulated gloves. He dropped onto a stool as he stared at the unfinished collars and considered solutions to his problem, periodically glancing over the tools laid out on a work bench. A few minutes later, he pulled his gloves back on, retrieved the stubborn pin with a pair of tongs, and carefully dropped it into the hinge. As he cautiously grabbed each end of the collar, he bent each side slightly upward at the end, applying pressure against the pin as he flipped it. This time, the friction held the pin in place. Lex smiled with satisfaction as he slipped the temporary spacer between the hinge and the head of pin and proceeded to flatten the opposite end with a heavy hammer. Lex pulled another softened pin from his furnace, and repeated the process for the remaining joints.

With the last pin secured, Lex again pulled off his gloves, and smirked with smug arrogance as he scrutinized the completed collars, one sized for Superman and the other sized

for his son. A hinged heavy clasp sealed the open end, with vertical slots fitting over a U-bolt welded to the opposite side. A padlock would secure the collars to the Kryptonians' necks, putting them at his mercy. Lex smiled as he anticipated the opportunity to fit father and son with their custom-made neckwear. As he wiped a hand over his dripping-wet forehead, he suddenly realized how drenched he was from the effort. *It's only a matter of time now*, Lex thought contentedly, as he retreated to his private quarters for a shower. *In the end, he'll be begging me to put him out of his misery.*

Day 86, Wednesday, 6:55PM, The Bronx, New York

Ricky Hernandez frowned pensively as he squeezed his fiancée's hand while they walked to the church rectory at Immaculate Conception Catholic Church for their scheduled pre-marital counseling session with Father Moynihan. Ricky was contemplating the misguided sins of his youth, which had come back to haunt him despite his best efforts to put them behind him. His brief incarceration for those mistakes had introduced him to the madman that now threatened their future happiness.

When Lex Luthor had initially pressed him into service, Ricky's inclination had been to do whatever it took to keep the lunatic happy and hope that he'd go away once he got what he wanted. Thanks to Rosa's patient insistence, Ricky now realized that placating the criminal mastermind would only postpone the inevitable as recently demonstrated by his dramatic attempt to replace the American continents with one of his own making. The only way for their family to have peace in their lives and the bright future they hoped for was to help the Man of Steel defeat Lex Luthor. He grieved for the risk to his family and the ominous cloud now over their wedding plans.

As they walked through the rectory office doors, Father Moynihan was casually joking with the elderly parish secretary when he noticed their arrival. "Ricky, Rosa!" the priest greeted happily. "Everything is well with you, I trust?"

Ricky forced a smile on his face and made a valiant effort to push the dark thoughts from his mind as he and Rosa returned their pastor's greeting, and tried to focus on the light at the end of the dark tunnel that Lex Luthor had trapped them in.

As Ricky walked his fiancée up the steps to her mother's apartment building, he was oblivious to the intense scrutiny she gave him. While he had been contemplating the situation with Lex Luthor, she had noticed his silence and his grave expression. She was well aware of the risk that they both faced, and she found his obvious distress unsettling. Given the subject, it wouldn't have been safe to discuss the matter on the way home from the church, but she wouldn't allow that silence for much longer.

When they entered the elevator, Rosa selected the building's top floor, rather than selecting the second floor that her mother's apartment was on. When Ricky glanced over at her, she simply told him, "It's so we can talk about it."

A look of confusion spread over Ricky's face before Rosa explained, "Something's bothering you. You've hardly said a word all the way back from the church, and if your brow furrowed any tighter, it'd pull your skin so tight that you'd give yourself a wedgie."

"I can't say much about it," he replied sadly. "If he found out..."

"Cut the crap," she insisted gently. "We're going to the roof, and we're going to talk about it." He nodded his assent and affectionately squeezed the hand entwined in his, but otherwise remained silent as they rode the elevator to the top floor and walked up the flight of stairs to

the roof.

"Are you sure that you're warm enough up here?" Ricky asked compassionately, as he nervously regarded his fiancée.

Rosa ignored his question as she asked him one of her own, "What has that madman done that's got you stressing out like this? He hasn't found the boy again, has he?"

"No, and I don't think he'll be as easy to find next time," Ricky assured her.

"How can you be sure of that?" she asked apprehensively.

"It seems fairly obvious that Lex found him the last time through their phone records," Ricky informed her quietly. "They've since taken measures to secure their accounts, and..." He paused, before he added knowingly, "And I think that before his father left Littleton that... *someone* may have explained to him how to keep their phone calls anonymous."

"I had faith in that someone," Rosa replied softly, as she offered him a proud smile. "Has anything else happened?"

"Nothing," he answered automatically. At her continued glare, he elaborated, "Lex has had me doing little things, like providing supplies for some of his other men. I'm relieved that I haven't had to deal with him directly, but I'm worried about what he's planning."

"And..." Rosa prodded insistently.

"And he's recruited a couple more deputies, and they're running their teams through drills," Ricky informed her apprehensively. "I can't press for details because I'm not supposed to know about it."

"You got it from the spyware," Rosa noted anxiously. "Are you afraid that he'll..." her voice faltered and she dropped her gaze to the ground as she swallowed with some difficulty. Finally, she tearfully asked, "Do you think he'll try to... get rid of us?"

Ricky hugged his fiancée fiercely in response to her question as he assured her, "No, we're safe for the moment. From the emails that he's sent them, he thinks that I don't have the stomach for whatever he's got planned, and these new guys are nasty, vicious men. He'll keep me around for the supply runs and computer stuff, though."

"What are they going to do?" she asked nervously.

"I'm not sure, but I think that he has them running drills right now in order to avoid the mistakes made in Littleton," Ricky told her grimly. "He's even set up a video streaming site so that he can watch them remotely. And no, I haven't seen it yet. I don't want to risk him noticing something, so I don't dare look at it until I have some code in place to hide my tracks."

"And in the meantime, you're stressing out," Rosa noted sternly.

"Rosa, the man represents a minefield on our road to the future," he reminded her emphatically. "I can't lose sight of that. We're betting everything on this."

"I know," she acknowledged meekly, as she leaned her head against his chest and pulled him into a tight hug. After allowing a moment of comfort in his embrace, she pulled back slightly, and looked up at him. "I think it would do us well to remember the Serenity Prayer," Rosa informed him. "'God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.' Ricky, you're doing everything possible to keep us safe and bring this nightmare to an end. Stressing out over the things you can't control isn't going to help us."

"But what if I miss something, and that's the something that makes all the difference?" has asked glumly.

"I have faith in you," Rosa whispered gently, and she tightened her embrace around him. "Ricky, I'm worried, too, but we can't let that take over our lives. It's bad enough that he's

ordering you all over the place with no advance warning. Don't let him take over the scarce time that we have together, too".

Ricky nodded his assent as they remained silently locked in each other's embrace for several minutes before Rosa finally broke from the hug, gently telling him, "Do you think you'll be able to say hello to my mother without letting our worries stress her out?" Ricky nodded his confirmation and offered her a weak smile as he led her by the hand to the access door back into the building.

Day 86, Wednesday, 9:00PM, Metropolis, Newton Steelworks (Lex Luthor's Lair)

The calming sounds of Delibes' *Dôme épais le jasmin* was doing very little to sooth Lex as he frowned angrily at the "Unavailable" message on his computer screen. He had instructed both of his new deputies to tape their drills, and to upload them to his offshore video streaming server at the end of the day. Both had forgotten, until Lex's scathing calls earlier, which left the server reporting the video unavailable while the new content loaded from his deputies. While he waited, Lex mentally reviewed the details of his latest vengeance plan, again concluding that the only weakness in its brilliance was the idiocy of the minions available to carry out the job. He viewed their limited intellectual capacity as an unfortunate necessity, since he arrogantly believed that he had no peer in that area. However, he could compensate for their stupidity by drilling their role in the plan into their skulls again and again until they could run through it without thought.

Reminded again of the frustrating delay at reviewing his teams' progress, Lex refreshed the page on his laptop, his expression developing a small smile as he saw that one of videos had finally loaded. The first video was from Owen Sarvis, who would lead the team against Superman. Lex had provided them with kryptonite-free facsimiles of the equipment that he'd recently fabricated for use in their drills. As he watched, he timed them while they practiced their capture and compared their practice run to his expectation of the coming event. He wrote down his observations on a notepad as he watched several encore performances of the capture. Though he believed that the Superman stand-in should use a more realistic approach and offer more resistance, Lex was pleased overall with the team's progress.

By the time Lex finished reviewing Sarvis' crew, the video from his second team, led by Phil Castle, was also available. As before, Lex closely scrutinized the video, recording the times required for the capture and putting his observations to paper. Lex frowned angrily as he observed their sloppiness, and quickly brought up his Internet phone to make his displeasure known. When his deputy answered, Lex scathingly demanded, "Was your team even sober when you recorded that crap?"

"Um, of course, Boss," Phil offered weakly. "Just took a bit to get the rhythm of things."

"Oh, there was no rhythm there!" Lex declared. "If that had been our actual target, and you'd been clumsy and slow like that, she'd have taken you down and attracted enough witnesses to bring the cops around! Don't make me regret inviting you into this opportunity!"

"Sorry, boss. We-we'll do better," Phil stuttered nervously. "What... what didn't you like on the video?"

"Where do I even begin?" Lex asked rhetorically. "First of all, our target would not be lying limp like that woman you have there. She'd be fighting back. Find someone with some fight in her."

"Um, when the time comes, we can knock her out," Phil suggested. "She'll be limp enough."

"Don't assume that!" Lex ordered angrily. "Don't underestimate her. Your stunt double has to fight back."

"Okay, we'll do that," Phil promised nervously.

"Second, you *have* to get the time down," Lex pointed out. "It took you nearly five minutes to get the two of them in the van with them lying limp. What is so damn difficult about getting them in the van and getting the collar on the kid?"

"It-it's just not what we're used to," Phil claimed defensively. "Give us some time to practice. We'll get it right."

"You'd damn well better," Lex warned him menacingly. "It's not healthy to disappoint me." As Lex terminated the connection, he angrily stalked away from the office, and considered the difficulty finding men who didn't seem predestined to screw up his ingenious plan. *They'd better have their act together by the time we get our opportunity*, he thought irritably, as he browsed through his music collection for something to take the edge off of the evening's disappointment. As his selection of Mozart's *Piano Concerto #21 in C Major* began drifting through his living quarters, Lex reviewed the recruiting files on his laptop for potential replacements for Phil Castle. *I'm not going to let his incompetence ruin my plans!* he thought angrily, as he considered the choices before him.

Chapter 44 - In-Laws

Day 87, Thursday, 9:20PM, Metropolis, 1938 Sullivan Lane (Lane/Kent home)

Clark smiled contentedly on the living room couch, as Lois snuggled into him. He relaxed to the sounds of their son's light snores from his room upstairs and to the rapid flutter of their daughter's heartbeat from within her mother's womb. With the pressures on them from Lex Luthor's pursuit and the downtrodden's frequent calls for help, he was frequently called away from the domestic tranquility he now savored. "Maybe 'Melissa,'" Lois suggested sleepily. "Or 'Caroline'... 'Barbara?' I like that one, too."

"How about 'Martha?'" Clark offered hopefully.

Lois turned her head to look up at him. "She'd get teased," she concluded after a moment. "Nothing against your mother, but... Besides, it'd be too confusing with two Marthas."

Clark was about to feign a hurt look when he heard a car door slam and footsteps approach the front door, and gazed through the walls to identify the visitor. "Lucy's here," he informed Lois, as he sprang to the front door, and opened it just as Lucy was about to press the doorbell. Remembering the constant surveillance on the house, Clark remained mostly concealed behind the door as he waved her in. He took her overnight bag as he closed the door behind them and explained, "Jason's sleeping." Clark guided her into the living room as Lois reluctantly rose from her seat.

"Okay, let's see it," Lucy demanded, prompting Lois to hold out her right hand and display her engagement ring. "Nice," Lucy commented. "So... um, how long of an engagement are we looking at?"

"Not long," Lois answered simply. "We'll probably elope in a few weeks."

Lucy eyes widened in horror, as she chastised her sister in a loud whisper, "You wouldn't dare! What's the rush?"

"The problem is that we really can't plan anything with Lex Luthor out there ready to pounce on us... and we want to be married," Clark informed her patiently, as he captured Lois' hand in his own. Lucy looked between the two, and simply nodded her head in acknowledgment.

After a moment, Lucy casually commented, "Kind of making up for lost time, I guess."

As Lucy claimed a seat on the couch beside her sister, Clark asked them, "Would you like anything to drink?"

"A glass of wine would do wonders," Lucy answered pleasantly. "I assume you have a Reisling somewhere?" Clark nodded his affirmation as he offered the woman a wide smile.

"Would you mind refilling my lemonade while you're at it?" Lois requested politely, as she scooped her empty glass off of the coffee table and handed it to her fiancé. Lois took a deep breath as she sat back on the couch with her sister and Clark retreated to the kitchen. "I am *so* not looking forward to tomorrow's visit from Mom and Dad," she admitted. "They'll never understand all of this, especially when we can't tell them everything."

"We can tell them enough for them to understand the danger," Clark assured her as he returned from the kitchen, offering Lucy her wine and handing Lois her glass of lemonade.

Lucy stared at her sister's lemonade for a moment, before looking up at Lois with a wry smile on her face. "Lemonade?" she asked suspiciously. "What? Did he knock you up again or something?"

A momentary expression of panic passed over Lois face as her eyes darted to Clark and back. He wore an expression of shocked disbelief, as Lois chastised her sister in a loud whisper, "Lucy! Must you read something into *everything*? Oh, and I *don't* want to hear talk

like that around Jason!"

A wide smile broke across Lucy face, as she squealed excitedly, "Oh, I hope this one's a girl. How far along are you?"

Lois rolled her eyes as she pointed out, "I never said I was pregnant."

"Do we *really* have go through all this pretending nonsense again?" Lucy teased.

"*Lucy!*" Lois warned.

Lucy giggled as she continued to tease, "Okay... how far along is this baby that we're pretending isn't there?"

Lois dropped her head and meekly admitted, "Almost eight weeks, and it *is* a girl." Lois glared over at her sister as she firmly added, "And don't you *dare* tell anyone."

"Wow, I guess you two really *have* been making up for lost time," Lucy joked, giggling at the horrified expressions of her sister and future brother-in-law.

Day 88, Friday, 12:00PM, Metropolis, 1938 Sullivan Lane (Lane/Kent home)

Lois savored the peace of the morning, knowing that it would come to an abrupt end once her parents arrived. Jason had been a very excited little boy when he woke up to discover that his Aunt Lucy was there, with some new *Bob the Builder* books for him. He'd barely stopped hopping long enough to get his breakfast and get dressed. Though he loved his new school and all his new friends, he made it clear that he wanted to stay home and play with his aunt that morning. It had taken some stern words from his mommy to get him to finally get ready for school, and the promise that Aunt Lucy would still be there when he got home.

Lucy observed her sister, seated with her at the kitchen table, as Lois glanced at her watch and fidgeted nervously while they awaited their parents' arrival. Lucy smirked at her as she pointed out, "You're acting like a death row inmate waiting for the march to the chair."

Lois stared back at her wide-eyed. After a moment's pause, she replied grimly, "If Dad goes nuts on us, and outs Clark, he'd be painting targets on our backs for Luthor."

"Geez, would you listen to yourself!" Lucy chastised her. "For all his bluster, Dad would never knowingly do anything to hurt us or put us in danger. We figured that out in grade school."

"The keyword there is 'knowingly'," Lois countered apprehensively. "We can't tell him Clark's secret. Can you imagine his reaction if he found out his daughter had twice been impregnated by a man from another planet?"

Lucy giggled as she imagined that revelation, before she gently assured her sister, "You can point out the dangers without telling him that Clark's Superman. Have you told Dad *anything* about the thugs he's sent after you guys?"

"Are you kidding?" Lois asked her incredulously. "He'd have a battalion here barricading us in the house, or try to whisk us away to some 'undisclosed location.' It's going to be bad enough telling him that now, and still convincing him that we're safe in this house."

Lucy nodded knowingly and offered a sympathetic look, as both women noticed the basement door gently rattling. "Clark's back," Lois informed her. At her sister's confused expression, Lois explained, "When he opens that hatch to the tunnel, the change in air pressure rattles the basement door."

Lois' explanation was proven a moment later as the door opened and Clark joined them at the kitchen table, leaning in and kissing Lois before taking his seat. "Looks like I'm here in time to face the firing squad," he joked. After a moment, he added, "They should be here in about twenty minutes. I just spotted them crossing the Mullica River on I-9."

"How did...?" Lucy started, before comprehension sunk in, and she added, "Oh, right. This takes some serious getting used to," Lucy commented as she gently shook her head. "It still seems so surreal when I think about it... that my sister is going to marry *Superman*."

"That's just one small piece of the man that I fell in love with," Lois clarified, as she looked over at him and captured one of his hands in her own. "How'd it go at the office?"

"No major breaking news," Clark informed her. "Just continuation of existing stories for the most part. Oh, I finished that puff piece Perry wanted: 'The Great Quake, Three Months Later.' If you want, you can look through it before I submit it."

"Do you really need me to proof it, or are you saving it for an excuse to escape my father's wrath when he finds out that you got me pregnant again?" Lois teased.

Clark smiled mischievously, as he squeezed her hand and reminded her, "Lois, honey... I *always* have excuses prepared."

"Well, enjoy it while you can, farm boy," Lois teased. "Dad'll have you squirming soon enough." Her expression turned serious as she reminded him, "Remember, let me explain things... and you should probably submit that article before they get here." Clark nodded his assent, as he entwined his fingers with hers and gave her hand an affectionate squeeze.

Clark was pleasantly telling Lucy about the tongue lashing that he'd gotten from his mother after he told her about Jason, when Lois noticed him tense up and shift his gaze to the front of the house. "Showtime?" she asked cautiously.

"Yep," Clark confirmed. "They're pulling into the driveway now."

Lois took a deep breath, as she lowered her head and massaged her temples. Clark heard her heart racing and pulled her into a hug as he reminded her, "They're family. They're going to be on our side."

Lois looked up at him, as she joked, "You obviously haven't met my father yet." The doorbell rang before he had a chance to reply, and Lois reluctantly broke from the hug and walked to the front door as she quietly repeated the word, "Showtime."

As Lieutenant General Sam Lane waited at the front door of his daughter's house, he reluctantly acknowledged his relief at the upscale neighborhood and the home's impressive appearance, which was solidly upper middle class. He had been concerned about his daughter's living arrangements when first informed of her split from Richard. Though he had never acknowledged it, he liked Richard White and found him to be a good man... good enough for his daughter, if she would only let him marry her. He was baffled by her decision to end that relationship.

If the breakup had surprised him, he was absolutely flabbergasted by the revelation that Richard was *not* Jason's biological father. He sympathized with Richard, and was furious with his daughter for concealing that fact, doubting her insistent claim that she hadn't realized it, and even more furious that she could have been in a position to have had any doubts. After reluctantly explaining the situation to her father two and a half months ago, his oldest daughter had barely spoken to him. Lucy had explained that her sister was facing threats from the unhappy subject of one of her stories, but didn't know all the facts and Lois hadn't been answering his calls. Her sudden invitation to visit for the weekend had been unexpected. Sam was determined to get some answers during this visit, and made no effort to hide his irritation as the door finally opened and his defiant daughter invited him and her mother in.

"About time," Sam said irritably as they entered the foyer. "Are we finally going to get an

explanation for your erratic behavior lately?"

"*Erratic?*" Lois repeated angrily. "Virtually everything I've done for the last three months has been to protect my family! Don't you *dare* come in here and start making accusations when you don't have all the facts!"

"How am I supposed to get 'all the facts' when you refuse to answer our calls?" Sam shouted.

"Um, Sir? Lois?" Clark interrupted as he gestured to the living room. "Why don't we all get comfortable in the living room and *calmly* talk this through."

"Who the hell are you?" Sam demanded gruffly.

"Dad, Mom, this is Clark Kent," Lois informed them stiffly. "Clark, these are my parents, Sam and Ella Lane."

"This is a family mat-" Sam started as he pointed an accusing finger at Clark.

"Enough!" Ella yelled as she firmly gripped her husband's raised arm. Turning to Clark, she pleasant said, "Please forgive my husband's rudeness. He's obviously forgotten his manners." Turning to her husband, she added harshly, "Again."

"It's perfectly alright, Mrs. Lane," Clark told her politely. "I understand where he's coming from."

"Well, you're one up on the rest of us, then," Ella replied teasingly, as they followed him into the living room. "It's nice to meet finally meet you. You're the one who's been writing those articles with Lois, aren't you?"

Clark nodded and he offered her a wide friendly smile, and admitted, "Guilty as charged, though she hardly needs my help for a page one. It's been an honor working with her."

"Why exactly is he here?" Sam asked Lois rudely. "We need to have a little family discussion here, and he's *not* family."

"Wait, let me get out my camcorder!" Lucy joked. "We've got to get this on tape." As she noticed the glaring expressions from her sister and parents, she meekly added, "It was a joke. Geez, lighten up, people!"

"Lois?" Sam asked insistently. "Why is he here?"

Lois took a deep breath as she dropped her gaze and pressed her hands against the bridge of her nose. She let out the breath that she was holding, raised her head and confidently informed her father, "As Jason's *biological father*, Clark *is* family." While her parents scrutinized her fiancé, Lois captured his hand in hers and added emphatically, "And that information does *not* leave this house."

"*Him!*" Sam questioned incredulously. "You left Richard for... for... *this?*"

Clark felt himself physically recoil from the harsh words. Though his Clark Kent persona had always been meek and introverted by design in order to avoid similarities with Superman, it seemed to him that it had become a liability under the current circumstances. He was surprised to find himself offended, though for Lois' sake, not his own. Deciding that it was time to show some backbone, he opened his mouth to speak, but found himself mute as Lois took the initiative.

"Dad, are you going to continue to shout and insult my fiancé, or are you going to shut up and listen to what we have to say?" Lois demanded angrily.

"*Your fiancé?* Now, listen here young lady-" Sam shouted.

"No, you listen, Dad!" Lois interrupted. "This isn't just about Clark and me. There are clear and present dangers to this family! If you don't shut up and let us explain that to you and respect the security measures we *have* to follow to keep Jason safe, then you can turn around

and march right back out that door, and you'll never see or hear from me again and you'll have no contact with your grandchildren. Is that really what you want?"

Sam pinched in lips shut, as he bitterly spit out the words, "Fine. Explain."

Sam and Ella listened quietly as Clark and Lois explained the extent of Lex Luthor's efforts to target them and their son. They described the grenade attack on Clark and Richard and Luthor's attempt to gloat afterwards. They revealed the surprisingly large number of felons who had attempted to tail them from the *Planet* or from their homes, as well as those picked up spying on the Lane's home in Alexandria, Lucy's condo in Long Island, and even Clark's mother in Smallville. They informed them of Jason's brief stay in Littleton, and the attempt there to take him from his bus. They attributed Luthor's motivation to their articles on his financial network, but otherwise provided a full accounting of their ordeal.

"I had no idea," Sam whispered, still stunned from the revelation.

"It wouldn't have been safe to reveal this over the phone," Lois explained. "We couldn't risk revealing what we knew to Luthor if the line was bugged."

"It might not be any safer here," Sam warned her.

"We have countermeasures installed to thwart listening devices," Lois told him confidently. "In fact, we invested heavily in the security system on the house. It's safe here."

"No home security system is foolproof," Sam told her. "I know some place you can go where you'll *really* be safe."

Lois shook her head. "We can't chase down Luthor if we're sequestered in some bunker."

"We've taken every reasonable security measure that will still leave us free to track down Luthor," Clark informed him.

"You're being naïve," Sam protested. "You're sitting ducks here!"

"Dad, would you pull your troops back just because the enemy had guns, too?" Lois asked irritably. "We can't back down either, because if we do, Luthor wins. That's unacceptable."

"This is different!" Sam exclaimed. "Jason's..."

"Safe," Lois finished for him.

"His safety is our number one priority," Clark clarified. "We're also not on our own here. We have a number of talented and dedicated people helping us."

"But-" Sam began.

"No more buts, Dad," Lois told him firmly. "Clark and I are Jason's parents, and *we* will make the decisions where his welfare is concerned. We have more facts about the matter than you do, many of which we can't reveal. You're going to have to trust us."

"Do you really expect me to just sit and do nothing after what you've just told us?" Sam asked her angrily.

"Yes," Lois yelled back. "That's *exactly* what we expect *and demand!* We can't have you second guessing our decisions or countermanding our security experts. You either accept that Clark and I have the last word on this, or go back to Alexandria and don't expect to hear from us."

Sam opened his mouth to protest again, but was interrupted as his wife shouted, "Sam, enough! You should know by now that it's pointless to argue with her. We are going to respect their wishes. Is that understood?"

"I can't just pretend that everything's just-"

"*Is that understood?*" Ella repeated forcefully as she glared at her husband. Sam let out a deep breath, and nodded, frowning at his forced capitulation. Ella smiled as she turned back to

Lois. "I think that takes care of bombshell number one. For now... On to bombshell number two." Ella's brow furrowed in confusion as she hesitantly asked her daughter, "Lois... Clark is Jason's biological father?"

Clark's eyes went wide as he nervously looked between Sam and Ella, his eyes darting between them. Though the tense conversation on the threats to the family hadn't been easy, it was only now that he felt his anxiety come forward as the discussion turned to his relationship with their daughter. Sam's eyes narrowed and Clark swallowed apprehensively as he anticipated the coming storm.

Chapter 45 - Hurricane Sam

Day 88, Friday, 1:35PM, Metropolis, 1938 Sullivan Lane (Lane/Kent home)

Clark recalled how often he had heard people apply the expression 'calm before the storm' to social situations and how rarely the reality of those situations lived up to the exaggerated dread. However, he was certain that he was now facing one of the exceptions. The anticipation of that storm was all the worse thanks to Clark's abilities, as he was acutely aware of every passing millisecond. The four seconds that passed between the end of Lois' confirmation of Jason's paternity and the beginning of Sam's tirade were an eternity for him. "You've got a lot of nerve showing your face here," Sam finally began, a bit too calmly. Clark knew from the man's racing heartbeat and heavy breathing that he was seething with rage and just barely controlling himself.

Lois stepped between Clark and her father. "Oh, no, you don't," she insisted angrily. "Don't you *dare* talk to him like that when you don't have a clue to what went on between us."

"Not a clue? Jason didn't get here from Immaculate Conception!" Sam countered sarcastically. "He left you alone and pregnant, for Chrissake!"

"He didn't know!" Lois shouted back. "I never told him!" She lowered her head, choosing a spot on the floor to focus her attention as she added in a low voice, "It's a bit complicated."

"You don't say," Sam commented harshly. "Do you want to try explaining it to us?"

Lois swallowed slowly, and took a deep breath. She reached behind her back and found Clark's hand, drawing strength from him as she dared to look up at her father. "Things were a bit confusing for us when what happened between us... happened. We didn't think we'd be able to... work things out... to be together. That wasn't easy... for either of us. He tried to give me room to heal... by moving away. He never knew that I was pregnant until he moved back a few months ago."

"Sir, I-I never would have left if I had known," Clark managed uneasily.

"And five years later, you just waltz back into their lives and want to pick up where you left off!" Sam hollered. "What gives you the right to tear this family apart, to tear that boy away from the only father he's ever known?"

"Stop it, Dad!" Lois screamed at her father. "It was *my* choice! Clark didn't break up the family, and Jason's adapted to the changes in his life just fine."

"But Richard-" Sam began.

"He'll always be a part of this family, given our history, but he's not Jason's father and he's not Clark," Lois told him firmly. "Clark's... he'll be the old man that I'll be an old lady with. This is the real thing, Dad. And we *are* engaged."

Clark was touched by Lois' words and stepped out from behind her, wrapping his right arm around her shoulders and squeezing her close as he looked over at her affectionately. He opened his mouth to voice that affection, but Sam continued his tirade before Clark had a chance to speak, chuckling mirthlessly as he scornfully told his daughter, "For all the good *that* does. Did you *ever* intend on marrying Richard, or did you just wear his ring for years to get me off of your back?"

"That had nothing to do with you," Lois hissed angrily. "It... just wasn't meant to be."

"And this is?" her father ridiculed. "You've *got* to be kidding me!"

"We're eloping," Lois informed him angrily as she glared at him.

"Eloping?" Ella asked, surprised. "I don't understand."

"It's because of the threat from Luthor," Lois explained. "If he knew that Clark and I were together, we're certain that he'd target his family as well, and maybe find our hiding place

for Jason. We want to be married, but we have to keep a low profile."

"We have one more session with Reverend Swan before we can exchange vows," Clark informed them nervously. "We'll fly out for that next weekend, and then we're good to go."

Sam Lane glared disapprovingly at Clark, speechless for the first time in his daughters' memories. The rage was still clearly visible in his eyes, as the frown on his face deepened. A full two minutes passed in silence, with no one daring to be the one to break the fragile peace. Finally, Sam spoke, gesturing to Clark as he quietly told his daughter, "You're out of your mind. You left Richard for *him*? This... this... this four-eyed *geek*?"

"How *dare* you come into *our* house and insult my future husband!" Lois seethed. "If you're going to continue this little tirade, you might as well leave now and go back to Alexandria. Oh, and you should probably know... Jason's wearing glasses now, too - he got them yesterday. Do you plan on calling your grandson a 'four-eyed geek,' too?"

"Hold on, now," Clark insisted authoritatively, his voice in the deeper timbre usually reserved for Superman. "I think that everyone here needs to calm down before someone ends up saying something that they'll regret. All this shouting and name calling isn't going to accomplish anything."

Lois' was surprised to hear the deeper voice and wondered if her father's tirade had bothered Clark more than he let on. She recaptured his hand, entwining her fingers with his and gently squeezed as she looked up and assured him, "It's alright, Clark. This is normal for us." Turning back to her father, she demanded, "What's it going to be, Dad? Are you going to behave, or are you going to be leaving?"

"You should show a little respect!" Sam began.

"So should you!" Lois countered. "I'm a big girl, now, Dad. I can take care of myself and make my own decisions. I have been for a long time."

"I think that Clark's right!" Ella declared, cutting off her husband's response. "We've all said enough on the matter, and I don't want *either* of you to ruin our visit here this weekend." She glanced between her husband and oldest child, her expression letting both know that she would tolerate no argument. "Is that *understood*?" she added steadfastly. Both nodded their assent, as Clark guided Lois back over to the couch.

An uneasy silence descended over the group as Clark and Lois sat down together, grateful for the apparent end of her father's inquisition. As they sat there, Ella studied the pair with an unreadable expression on her face. Finally, her brow furrowed in apparent uncertainty as she tentatively broke the silence. "Lois, dear," she began gently. "When we first came in the door, you said something about grand-*children*... Are you sure that there's not something else that you want to tell us?"

Lois' eyes shot impossibly wide as the expression of guilt crossed her features, her mouth dropping open in shock. Clark's expression mirrored his fiancée's as he cautiously chanced a glance back over to Sam Lane. Both of Lois' parents recognized the expressions on the couple's faces as an affirmation to the question, and Sam's expression changed from one of reluctant calm back to one of seething rage. Before anyone could say a word, however, Lucy burst into hysterical laughter, unable to restrain her amusement any longer.

Day 88, Friday, 3:30PM, Smallville, The Kent Farm

Clark was guiltily grateful to be sitting on his mother's couch, finally escaping the scrutiny of his future father-in-law a half hour earlier. The hurricane named Sam Lane had made landfall yet again as he harshly berated his oldest daughter and her fiancé for their 'inability to

keep their pants on.' Clark had been stunned by the coarse language the older man had used in criticizing the two of them. His ranting had lasted nearly an hour, with Lois yelling back just as loud with language just as coarse. *Thank goodness we chose to speak with him before Jason got home from school*, Clark thought, as he recalled the outburst. "I think Lois was right about her father," he commented quietly after describing the scene to his mother and her companion. "He sure did yell a lot."

"Oh, surely it wasn't *that* bad," Martha offered gently. "He's probably just worried about his daughter."

"That's the same thing I told Lois, but that was *before* he stormed into our house," Clark informed her. "He was a category-three hurricane when we talked about the threats, category-four when we talked about me being Jason's real father, and category-five when he found out that Lois was pregnant again. And Lucy laughing through it all didn't do anything to help his mood. Her sides hurt, she was laughing so hard... I really hope that he's calmed down by the time I get home with Jason."

Ben snorted at Clark's description from the kitchen table.

"It wasn't funny," Clark protested, as he looked over at this mother's companion.

Ben held up his hands in gesture of surrender, as he commented mirthfully, "Sorry, Clark." He continued to snicker quietly as imagined the scene that Clark had described.

"He wasn't still shouting when you left, was he?" Martha asked uncertainly.

"No, he was sulking out on the deck," Clark clarified. "Nobody *dared* go near him."

"Well, you two did drop some rather big bombshells in his lap," Martha pointed out. "You got some words from me, too, when I first found out."

"Not like that," Clark countered quickly. He looked through the front of the house as he heard the bus stop and Jason climbed down its front stairs. Jason was pulling his new glasses out of his backpack and putting them on as he walked up to the house. "Jason wasn't wearing his glasses," Clark noted. "I hope that we won't have a problem there."

"You weren't thrilled with glasses either when you first got them," Martha reminded him. "Just give him some time." Clark nodded his acknowledgment as Jason walked in the front door and ran into his father's arms, smiling widely in anticipation of seeing their house guests in Metropolis.

Day 88, Friday, 4:45PM, Metropolis, 1938 Sullivan Lane (Lane/Kent home)

After her father had withdrawn to the deck behind the house, Lois had been peacefully discussing the changes in her life with her mother and sister. She had assured the other women that Richard was healing, remained close with Jason, and had become a trusted ally to both her and Clark as they struggled to keep their family safe. She also revealed how close Clark and Jason had become and how natural it seemed to hear her son call him 'Daddy.' However, the preferred topic of discussion was the new baby, including speculation on how Jason would react when he learned the news.

As the women continued their speculation in the living room, Superman lifted the heavy concrete hatch as he emerged from the tunnel in the basement below them, with Jason clinging tightly to him. A few heartbeats later, the two had sneaked into the kitchen, and were standing by the door to the garage as Clark set his son down and hollered, "We're home!"

Finally free from his father's grasp, Jason ran into the living room, calling for his grandma and grandpa. Ella was ready for him, down on her knees to be at eye level with her grandson, as he ran into her arms. "My, look how much you've grown!" Ella pointed out affectionately.

After taking a moment to observe him, she kindly teased, "With those glasses, you look just like your daddy! We're going to have to put name tags on both of you so we can tell you apart." As she finished speaking, she began tickling Jason, who squirmed and giggled in response.

"Tell me about it," Lois muttered irritably as Clark joined the women in the living room. "The first time anyone from work sees him with those glasses there won't be much doubt about who his daddy is."

"Oh, good luck trying to explain *that* away," Lucy told her mirthfully. "You're going to need it."

"Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence, Luce," Lois complained.

"Why does it matter if your coworkers know?" Ella asked curiously, momentarily suspending the tickling of her grandson. "They're not-" Ella held her tongue as Lois raised her index finger to her lips and darted her eyes to her son and back.

"We get a lot of visitors at the office, and it would be real easy for someone to plant a bug... and for someone else that we *don't* trust to be listening in," Lois explained. Ella nodded her acknowledgment as she resumed tickling Jason.

"Has your dad calmed down any since I left?" Clark asked apprehensively.

"Who knows?" Lois answered indifferently. "None of us have wanted to chance another eruption by trying to find out." Lois looked over to her sister, and gently requested,

"Luce, would you mind telling Dad that Jason's here?"

"Sure, let him blow up on me," Lucy teased, before adding, "I'm not sure that I want to go out there without body armor."

"Just do it," Lois insisted irritably. "Please?"

"Oh, alright," Lucy conceded as she left to retrieve her father and the other adults apprehensively awaited his return and hoped that he'd remain calm enough to enjoy the visit with his grandson.

Clark claimed his seat next to Lois on the couch and gave her an affectionate squeeze, afterwards informing her, "He wasn't wearing his glasses when he got home from school. Some of the other kids were teasing him."

Lois sighed deeply, as she declared, "We'll have to talk to him about that later." She looked up at him as she asked, "Do you remember how things were for you when you first started wearing glasses?"

"Well, I wasn't much older that he is now," Clark revealed. "From what I recall, the teasing was only a problem for the first day or two. After that, it was old news." Lois nodded in relief as she sensed him stiffen beside her and followed his gaze to see her father re-enter the room. The older man's eyes went straight to Jason, who was still giggling from Grandma's tickling and hadn't noticed Grandpa yet.

The edges of Sam's mouth twitched as he struggled to resist the smile the scene brought to his face. Finally, he cleared his throat and Jason looked up at him as Clark looked on nervously. "Grandpa!" Jason squealed as he rolled up off the floor and ran up to the older man, and Sam gently lifted the tyke up into his arms and the little boy wrapped his arms tightly around him.

"Well, let's get a good look at my little soldier here," Sam said gently, as he scrutinized his grandson, taking note of the glasses and glaring menacingly over at Clark as he acknowledged the striking resemblance between father and son. Returning his attention to his grandson, his expression softened as he commented, "You've grown." After a moment, he added, "I think

that your grandma and I might have *accidentally* picked up something for you."

"I'll go get it," Ella offered, as she trotted up the stairs to the guest room that held their things. She returned a moment later and handed a large white plastic bag over to her husband, who pretended not to be able to find anything inside it and joked that it must be the wrong bag. Jason waited impatiently in front of him with a wide smile on his face as Sam finally revealed their gift: a radio controlled toy Army Humvee, painted in a green camouflage pattern and with a roof mounted machine gun. Jason hopped excitedly as his grandpa squatted down on the floor with him, helping him undo all of the twist ties that kept the toy in its box, and putting the batteries in.

"Does this mean we're out of the woods?" Clark whispered to Lois.

She shook her head before dropping her head into her hands and whispering inaudibly, "Don't count on it. He's always been a doting grandpa to Jason, no matter how pissed he was at me. Probably because as badly as he thinks that I screwed up, I still had enough good sense to have a boy, according to him... I can't wait to tell him that this one's a girl!"

Sam had patiently shown Jason how to control the toy Humvee, and was happily playing Army with him on the floor as the women looked on and offered their suggestions to the pair. Clark had managed to retreat to the kitchen with nobody except Lois noticing. He occasionally peeked through the wall at the scene, as he started preparing dinner. It wasn't until Ella heard the sound of running water that she noticed his absence and joined him there, finding him filling a sauce pan with water and dicing red skin potatoes. He jumped back in feigned surprise when she called his name.

"I didn't mean to startle you," she offered kindly. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Um, no, there's really not that much more to do," he informed her. "Just the potatoes here and steaming the asparagus later. I got most of it prepared this morning before you got here. Thanks, though."

"What are you making?" she asked curiously. "It smells wonderful, whatever it is."

"Turkey meatloaf," he revealed. "Healthy and satisfying, and without giving Lois' stomach fits."

"I take it you do most of the cooking around here," Ella commented, smirking as she recalled her daughter's lack of culinary aptitude.

"Our schedules aren't conducive to a lot of cooking," Clark explained. "Most of the time, it's takeout, but on the weekends, or if I have a little extra time, I can treat them to something better."

"Um, Clark..." Ella began. "Please don't take what Sam said to you earlier personally. He was out of line."

"It's not a problem," Clark assured her, as he diced up the last potato and threw the pieces into the pan. He turned the water off, moved the pan to the stove and turned on the burner. As he turned back to Ella, he told her, "I'm sure that he said what he said out of love and concern for his daughter. I can't hold that against him."

Ella offered him a small smile as she said, "Well, *I* can. Give me some time to work on him, and he'll come around."

The two regarded each other quietly for a moment, before Ella continued, "I trust Lois' judgment. Usually... I trust her judgment on you." She walked up to Clark, and wrapped one arm around him in an affectionate squeeze, as she warmly told him, "Welcome to the family."

Chapter 46 - Favors

Day 100, Wednesday, 10:00AM, Washington D.C., The Pentagon

Lieutenant General Sam Lane was again distracted from reviewing the proposed weapons system displayed on his computer screen. Despite his best efforts, he had not been able to shake his oldest daughter's misguided decision from his mind. He had been singularly unimpressed with Clark Kent, and couldn't fathom how Lois could possibly have chosen to leave Richard White for the introverted Kansas farmer's son. If that wasn't bad enough, Lois was pregnant with the man's child, for a second time, and the two were recklessly rushing towards the altar. He just couldn't wrap his head around that part.

Lois and Richard had been engaged for going on five years, and hadn't even begun to make wedding plans. And yet, within a few months of breaking things off with Richard, Lois was not only engaged to another man, but the wedding was this coming Friday afternoon. Sam Lane wondered if she was rushing into marriage just to spite him, and he did not intend to humor her stubbornness. He was firmly committed to boycotting the hasty wedding, though he didn't dare tell his wife that. Instead, he told her that he was swamped at the office, with reviews of new proposals due and unable to get leave. Also, given the short notice, Ella had trouble finding flights or a car rental to Smallville. Sam considered that obstacle as an unanticipated bonus. Perhaps if neither of them showed, Lois would come to her senses and leave the fool at the altar.

Sam was interrupted from his musings by a knock at the door, as his assistant, Lieutenant Max O'Neill, interrupted, "Excuse me, sir. Senator Ross is on the line for you."

"Tell them that I'll call the Senator back later," Sam ordered his assistant. "I need to get through this proposal first."

"Um, Sir," the man hesitated. "It's... not one of his staffers on the line, sir. The senator himself is waiting to speak to you."

Sam let loose an expletive as he lamented the unavoidable diversion from brooding over his defiant daughter's lapse in judgment. "Did he say what he wants?" Sam inquired irritably, hoping to find some excuse for putting off the conversation.

"No, sir," Lieutenant O'Neill told him simply. "He just said it was an important matter."

Sam dropped his head into his hands and massaged his temples, as he mentally listed the projects that involved the senator and tried to guess which one of them would require a direct call. After pondering this for a minute and coming up empty, Sam reluctantly instructed his assistant, "Put him through, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir," Lieutenant O'Neill acknowledged as he returned to his desk and transferred the call.

"Senator Ross," Sam greeted with false cheer. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I just did you a huge favor, General," the senator informed him. "You're going to owe me one after this."

"How's that, Senator?" Sam asked in confusion, having no idea what he could possibly need from the legislator.

"My wife, Lana, heard from your wife that you weren't able to get leave for the wedding this weekend," Senator Ross informed him. "I thought you'd like to know that I've personally spoken to General Cody, and he wouldn't dream of keeping you from your daughter's wedding. You'll officially be on leave for an extended weekend."

That's the favor? Sam thought as his already gloomy mood darkened. *He asked the Vice Chief of Staff to grant me leave?*

"Really, Senator, I appreciate the effort, but it really wasn't necessary," Sam repeated, remaining civil with some difficulty. "Besides, at this late date, there really aren't any flights to be had to Smallville."

"Well, you're in luck, then," Senator Ross assured him jovially. "Lana and I are going to the wedding, too, and we've got a private jet chartered for the trip there and back. We have plenty of room for you and Ella."

"Senator..." Sam began slowly. "That *really*. Isn't. Necessary."

"Oh, it's my pleasure!" the legislator assured him agreeably. "Besides, as Clark's best man, I can't exactly show up there without his in-laws, now can I?"

"Excuse me... *you're* the best man?" Sam asked incredulously, as his mind scrambled for an escape from the trap his future son-in-law had apparently set for him.

"Clark was my best friend in high school," the lawmaker explained. "Lana and I have known him since grade school. He's a good guy. Lois is certainly lucky to have snagged him."

"I... see," Sam said quietly, and as he sought an opportunity for a strategic withdrawal. "Well, I'll have to discuss your offer with my wife, and get back to you."

"Oh, no need, General!" the senator told him cheerfully. "My wife has already told her the good news - I guess they met at Lois' bridal shower last Sunday. Anyway, Ella assured her that she'd have you packed and ready to go by the time our plane leaves tomorrow night."

"She... did?" Sam stated in a daze, as he realized the futility of further attempts to escape the senator's offer. "I..."

"There's no need to thank me, General," Senator Ross told him gleefully. "We're going there anyway, and we have the room. I'll send a car to pick you up after your duty shift tomorrow."

"I..." Sam began again, still lamenting his capture by the undesired offer.

"Oh, sorry, General, I've got to get out on the floor for a vote," the senator informed him. "I'll see you tomorrow. Bye."

As Lieutenant O'Neill sat at his desk outside General Lane's office leafing through a study guide, he heard a loud obscenity-laced string of Army Creole burst from the inner office. He quickly glanced over at the display on his phone, and breathed a sigh of relief that General Lane wasn't using that language with the Honorable Senator from Kansas. *What on Earth could the senator have said to him to get him that upset?* Max wondered, shaking his head as he quietly got up from his desk and gently closed the outer door of the office.

Day 101, Thursday, 5:30PM (Central Time), 25,000 feet above Springfield, Illinois

Sam Lane numbly listened to the drone of the private jet's Pratt and Whitney engines as he concluded that it had been a bad day. Yesterday had been a bad day, too, particularly after the evening's altercation with Ella. She had declared, in no uncertain terms, that he absolutely *was* going to attend the wedding, and that he'd damned well keep his mouth shut when the preacher asked if anyone objected to their union. He'd also been embarrassed to have someone approach the Army Vice Chief of Staff to secure his leave, which he was sure had been arranged by his daughter and her worthless fiancé.

Today, he had made the mistake of calling Richard White, hoping that he could motivate the man to persuade Lois to go back where she belonged. Richard had known of both the engagement and the pregnancy, but was clearly shaken to learn of their hastily scheduled nuptials. Once he found his voice, he insisted that Lois had made her choice and that the sooner that they both accepted that, the better off everyone would be. Sam had received a

scathing call from Lois a few minutes later, chastising him for daring to interfere with her special day. A short time later, that unpleasant call was followed by a call from her equally livid mother, whom Lois must have called immediately afterwards. It had not been a good day for Sam Lane.

He was now stuck on a Learjet 60XR, halfway to Smallville, as the Junior Senator from Kansas and his wife now shared their childhood memories of his daughter's intended, praising the man's character. They had even named their son after him, who was finally asleep after an hour of whining. While Ella had quickly become enamored with their stories, they'd only served to make Sam nauseous. To make matters worse, given that he would need the Honorable Senator's support for some of the new Army budget proposals, he didn't dare voice his objections in his presence. Sam hated being diplomatic. Ella knew it, and hadn't managed to wipe the smirk off of her face since Lana Ross had first asked him if he was excited to finally see his daughter married, which happened shortly before takeoff an hour and a half earlier. It had indeed been a bad day. Tomorrow would be worse.

Day 101, Thursday, 5:45PM (Central Time), Smallville, Kansas, The Kent Farm

Lois closed her eyes contentedly as she concluded that it had been a good day. She was now standing on a kitchen chair in her wedding dress, while Martha made one last check of the fit. Lana Ross had lent Lois the dress from her wedding, which Martha had altered for her two weeks earlier, leaving some extra room for the anticipated expansion of her womb. Lois could scarcely believe that in less than twenty-four hours, she would be married. Her heart unconsciously raced in excitement over that thought.

When she had anticipated Friday's nuptials that morning, she had struggled to keep the serene smile off her face. Fortunately, a good part of her time had been spent offsite with interviews of the mayoral candidates for the upcoming election. When she returned late that morning, Richard's news of her father's interference had quickly flattened her smile. She had been touched by her former fiancé's gracious reaction when she confirmed their plans, and her eyes glistened as she recalled it. Richard had wished her and Clark the best of luck, and had picked up a wedding card for them during his lunch break. He even had the forethought to sneak it to her hidden in a plain manila envelope to avoid arousing the suspicions of their coworkers. Richard truly was a good man, who deserved to be happy. Perhaps she'd talk to Maggie about that when they got back to the office on Monday.

The day's only shortcoming had been, of course, her father's interference. He'd been his usual obstinate self when she confronted him on the phone afterwards. Though she'd made no leeway with him, her mother had talked to him afterwards, and assured her that he would behave himself. As angry as she had been at her father, it had only taken one look at Clark's beaming smile for her anger to melt away, as she remembered the reason for their brighter smiles that day.

As Lois shifted her weight on the chair, she looked down at her sister Lucy, who was still gushing over her first flight with Superman a half hour earlier. Lois smiled widely at her sister's reaction, remembering her flight with him during the first interview, struggling to contain her giggles as Martha pinned her dress at the waist. Lucy's reaction also had Jason giggling as he hopped excited in front of her, completely forgetting his game of checkers with Ben. After Martha finished pinning in the final adjustments and Lois marched upstairs to change, she imagined her family as it would be in coming months, with Jason joined by a sister and, hopefully, the threats to their family finally eliminated. She fondly considered what Clark

would be like as the nervous father of a newborn, holding his daughter for the first time, and smiled even wider at that thought, dabbing her shiny eyes with a tissue. It had indeed been a good day for Lois Lane. Tomorrow would be even better.

Day 101, Thursday, 7:30PM (Central Time), Smallville, Kansas, St. John's Church

As Reverend Swan briefly explained the simple ceremony at the wedding rehearsal, Ella glanced over at her husband, trying to gauge how angry the man was after being railroaded into participating in the wedding. When Sam had claimed to be swamped at the Pentagon a few days earlier, Ella had immediately realized that he was making excuses in order to skip Lois' wedding. She'd never been fooled by his excuses in the past, but given his stubbornness, she rarely chose to call him on it. However, she wasn't about to let him boycott his oldest daughter's wedding and had intended to take him to task over that. Her plans changed when she discovered who the best man was, and she had conspired with Clark and Senator Ross to not only hoodwink the obstinate general into coming to the wedding, but also to get him to participate. As long as the senator was there, she knew that Sam would behave himself.

As the preacher was explaining to Sam what would be expected of him during the ceremony, he had clenched his jaw shut, mutely obeying the preacher's instructions until his turn to speak came. Ella cringed as she waited for his words, wondering if the volcano within him would erupt in spite of the senator's presence. She breathed a sigh of relief at the unenthusiastic, though neutral tone of his responses. As Reverend Swan moved on to the happy couple, Sam dropped down in to the pew beside his wife, glaring at his daughter. "Don't embarrass me," Ella warned him in a whisper.

Though he seethed beneath the surface, Sam held his tongue. He said very little through the remainder of rehearsal or the dinner at the Blue Star Café that followed. It wasn't until the senator dropped them off at the Kent farm later that he dared speak. As Clark gently lifted his sleeping son from the booster seat in Pete Ross' Durango, Sam tapped on Lois' shoulder and commanded, "We need to talk."

Ella intervened, telling her daughter, "Go on inside, Lois. Your father and I have some things to discuss first." Lois looked back nervously as she followed Clark into the house and Ella pulled her husband to the white rail fence in front of the house. She waited for the remainder of the group to go inside before she turned to her husband and scolded, "I hope that you weren't going to say to her what I think you were."

Sam's eyes narrowed, as he accused, "You're in on this with them, aren't you?"

"In on what?" Ella inquired irritably, "Making sure that nothing ruins our daughter's special day?"

"This isn't right!" Sam insisted. "She should be marrying Richard instead of that clown!"

"Keep your voice down!" Ella commanded in a loud whisper, as her brow furrowed in anger. She paused a moment before continuing in an authoritative voice, "Sam, it's *her* choice, not ours. We don't need to understand the 'farm boy charm,' as she puts it. We only need to understand that both Lois and Jason are happy."

"They were happy with Richard!" Sam raged. "They should have left well enough alone!"

Ella glanced over at the house, hoping that nobody had heard her husband's outburst, before she turned back to him and scolded, "Have you become so blind that you haven't seen the joy radiating from our daughter? When was the last time you saw her smile so brightly?"

"But what about *Richard*?" Sam countered angrily. "He's the only father Jason's ever known."

"That's no longer true," Ella pointed out. "And you'd have to be oblivious not to see how much that little boy loves Clark... his *daddy*. It seems to me that he's adjusted to the changes in his life just fine."

"They're not thinking this through," Sam insisted desperately.

"Has it completely escaped your attention that wild horses couldn't have dragged her to the altar when she was engaged to Richard?" Ella countered quietly. "And yet with Clark, she can hardly wait to say those vows. Why do you think that is? Haven't you figured out how much she loves him?"

"What's that got to do with it?" Sam asked furiously. "This isn't right!"

"In your opinion," Ella replied shortly. In a loud whisper, she added, "Now listen to me, and you listen well: You are *not* going to be the storm clouds that darken our daughter's special day! You are *not* going to embarrass me and the girls in front of the Kents. You are *not* going to complain about our daughter's marriage. You *are* going to walk Lois down that aisle tomorrow, and graciously say your lines as you hand her over to Clark." Ella took a deep breath before she added emphatically, "If you screw this up, I'll leave you!"

"But-" Sam began

"No, Sam," Ella interrupted. "No more. We are going to trust her judgment and support her choice."

"I don't like the guy," Sam stated irritably.

"You don't have to," Ella assured him. "But you *are* going to be civil. Do you understand?" As Sam's hesitance, Ella demanded irritably, "Well?"

Sam Lane reluctantly nodded his assent and let out a deep sigh. "Good," Ella told him as she tugged on his hand. "Now let's go back inside and enjoy a peaceful evening with the Kents." As the pair returned to the house, Sam wondered how a day could possibly be worse than the one he'd just had. He was certain that he'd learn that answer tomorrow.

Chapter 47 - Called Into Union

Day 102, Friday, 8:30AM (Central Time), Near Smallville, Kansas

It was a pleasantly warm October day as a fit sexagenarian man stepped up to his golf ball on the first hole at the Wallace Oaks Golf Course outside Smallville. He stretched his torso to the right, and then to the left, before adjusting his grip on his driver and stepping up to address the ball. Sam Lane frowned in concentration as he looked down the fairway and back down to his ball before forcefully swinging the club down. He topped the ball, sending it rolling ahead ten yards before it settled at the women's tees. Sam bit his tongue to hold in the explicative in the presence of Senator Pete Ross, as Ben Hubbard kindly suggested, "Go ahead and take a mulligan, General. We're not playing by strict rules here."

As Sam marched ahead to collect his ball, he swore under his breath and concluded that this was the beginning of yet another bad day to cap off a full week of bad days. Sam was an experienced and passionate golfer who *never* topped the ball. However, his mind wasn't in the game this morning, as he contemplated his daughter's ill-advised nuptials. He felt like a prisoner of war, forced to witness the atrocity of his daughter's wedding and helpless to prevent it, in light of his wife's edict the previous night.

Ben Hubbard had stopped by the Kent farm that morning to 'rescue' the general from the women, and the two men had joined Clark and Pete Ross for their eight thirty tee time. The first hole was a dogleg left, with its elbow one hundred fifty yards down the fairway. That would normally have been an easy shot for Sam, and he was embarrassed to be repeating it when the three country bumpkins who completed his foursome had precisely dropped their balls at the fairway's elbow. The sympathetic expressions on the other men's faces only made the experience all the more humiliating. *Could this possibly get any worse?* Sam wondered, as he again teed up his ball and tried to push the disturbing thoughts from his mind in order to concentrate on the shot.

Day 102, Friday, 10:00AM (Central Time), Smallville, Kansas

Lois sat down in the beautician's chair in the back of the beauty salon run by Ben Hubbard's daughter, Sarah Hayden. The whole Hubbard family had enthusiastically joined in to help with Lois and Clark's wedding. Sarah had cleared her Friday schedule to accommodate it, while her husband Peter and her brother Matthew were helping out as well. Though Peter's principal employment was as the manager of the agricultural supply store on Main Street, he was a photography buff frequently hired for local weddings, and he'd volunteered his services for his pseudo brother-in-law's wedding while Matthew would videotape the ceremony.

The salon was actually a small addition on the back of the home that Sarah shared with her husband and their seven year old daughter, Rachel. The house was just a few blocks off of Main Street, conveniently within walking distance of Jason's school, where Lois' day had begun with parent-teacher conferences. The day off from school was part of the motivation in picking this day for the wedding, since they wouldn't have to pull Jason out of school for it. Martha and Ella were keeping him entertained while Lois and her sister got their hair and nails done.

Lois smiled a bit wider as she recalled how impressed Jason's teachers were with him. He was actually farther ahead than his classmates, in spite of getting bumped around between three different schools in as many months, and missing days as they tried to keep him safe. His progress wasn't as stellar in his gym class, but that was now for a different reason than it had been in the past. He now had to hold back to keep his abilities concealed and avoid hurting his

classmates. Still, he had enough practice playing gently with his father that he could hold his own with the other children, earning him a passing grade. His teacher had also explained that in Smallville, gym was a pass/fail subject for children his age, with failing grades usually reflecting a poor attitude more so than lack of ability.

Lois was pulled from her reverie when Sarah tipped the chair back, lowering Lois' head over the sink. "You guys have got a beautiful day for your wedding," Sarah observed, as she began washing Lois' hair. "You can't take nice sunny days like this for granted this time of year."

"Somehow, I don't think that even a frigid downpour would be able to dampen her spirits today," Lucy teased. "She hasn't been able to wipe that silly grin off her face all morning."

"Hey," Lois objected agreeably. "It's not a silly grin."

"Yeah, right," Lucy joked. "And Clark doesn't wear flannel, either."

"You'll probably be grinning just as much when your turn comes," Sarah informed her. "Every woman should be walking on cloud nine on her wedding day, if it's meant to be."

Turning her attention back to Sarah, Lois sincerely told her, "Thanks for squeezing us in at the last minute like this."

"Oh, that's not a problem," Sarah assured her. "It might not be official yet, but you guys are already family. I'm glad that you decided to get married here so that we can all be there."

Lois pensively replied, "You know, it's hard to believe what this has snowballed into. Clark and I were originally just going to exchange our vows in Reverend Swan's office. Now we've got my folks, Lucy, Clark's family..."

"So that's, what, a dozen people? *Including* you and Clark?" Lucy pointed out sarcastically as she dramatically raised her hands to her cheeks. "My God, how will we *ever* squeeze everyone into the church?"

Lois laughed briefly at her sister's joke, as she commented, "Okay, so it still kind of like eloping... I do wish that we could have included some of our friends back home, though. Like Perry and Jimmy."

"I'm sure that they'll understand, given the circumstances," Sarah assured her. Lois' smile diminished slightly as she was reminded of the reasons for the small wedding. She closed her eyes as she let out a deep sigh and pushed that unpleasant thought from her mind, reminding herself that it was her wedding day and again smiling widely as the women discussed that event.

Day 102, Friday, 11:30AM (Central Time), Smallville, Kansas, Wallace Oaks Golf Course

Sam Lane concluded that Clark Kent just had to be bad luck. It was the only explanation for having played the worst game of his adult life that morning. Wallace Oaks was not a difficult course, and yet Sam had double or triple-bogeyed every hole and that wasn't counting half a dozen mulligans. To make matters worse, Clark seemed to be intentionally tanking his game after the third hole, until Sam had taken him to task for patronizing him. Now as they approached the men's tees on the sixteenth hole, Clark was just two strokes behind Pete. Even the old farmer, Ben Hubbard, was a dozen strokes ahead of the general. With each subsequent hole, Sam's frustration grew, and his mood soured, which had already been unpleasant to be with.

He got a brief reprieve as they waited for the women ahead of them, who were stopped halfway down the fairway. The sixteenth hole was a one hundred ninety yard straight shot, and

Sam could usually cover that distance with his first shot off the tee. On a good day... when he wasn't jinxed by Clark Kent. Sam was distracted from his sulking when Pete casually asked Clark, "So, Clark... how does Jason like school here in Smallville?"

Clark glanced warily over at Sam as he answered, "He loves it here. He says that the other kids are a lot nicer than at his old school, as he doesn't have to pretend about our family. It's a lot safer here, too. All we really have to worry about is that my mom will try to spoil him."

"Jason's going to school *here*?" Sam asked in surprise. "You two just sent him away when things got tough?"

"No!" Clark replied defensively, quickly adding, "It's not like that at all... He's home with us every night."

"How can that be possible if you and Lois are in Metropolis?" Sam demanded.

Clark clenched his jaw and dropped his head, immediately regretting his careless response. *Could I hypnotize him to forget about this?* Clark pondered briefly, before dismissing the thought as he raised his head and took a quick look around before returning his gaze to his future father-in-law. "Um, we've got, um... friends in high places handling the, um... transportation."

"Don't tell me you have him on planes for hours a day!" Sam replied in dismay.

"N-No, nothing like that!" Clark insisted. After verifying that nobody else was in earshot, Clark informed them in a low voice, "Lois calls it the Kryptonian Express."

"You mean Superman?" Sam asked, shocked by the claim. "What's he got to do with any of this?"

Ben saw Clark struggling to come up with an answer for the general, and offered his explanation, "General, it's in the Man of Steel's best interest to do everything in his power to help Clark and Lois. Those two have come closer to tracking down Lex Luthor, and done more to disrupt his capacity for evil, by finding his money, than anyone else on this Earth, Superman included. Considering that Luthor is the *only* enemy of his who's ever been able to scare up kryptonite in any quantity, it's really a small sacrifice for him to take a few minutes out of his day to get Jason here and back so that his parents can keep the pressure on that madman back in Metropolis."

Clark smiled gratefully at his mother's companion, marveling at how similar his explanation was to the one that they had given the Fergusons when Jason had stayed with them in Littleton. He regretted that he had resisted telling his secret to this loyal family friend... no, family *member*. His mother had chosen wisely.

"That's incredible," Pete stated weakly, stunned by the revelation. "Who would have guessed that?"

"It's not something that we want to advertise," Clark told his friend firmly. "We don't want Superman's enemies thinking that our family has a connection to him and targeting us. We don't want to have to go through this ordeal again after Luthor's finally caught."

The other men immediately understood Clark's fear, having been told of the near misses that the family had with the madman's minions. Sam recalled Lois and Clark's description of the efforts by Luthor to seize his precious grandson and felt his stomach drop away and the blood drain from his face as he considered what the lunatic would likely do if he got a hold of him. He also recognized in Clark a determination to keep them safe, though that didn't make his daughter's choice any more palatable. As the general was pondering this, Pete nodded his head in understanding and assured his friend, "We'll keep this to ourselves, then. I won't even

tell Lana about it."

As Pete finished speaking, both he and Clark both turned their attention to General Lane. Suddenly, aware of the scrutiny, Sam irritably demanded, "You're not suggesting that I'd endanger my daughter and grandson by speaking of this, are you?"

"Of course not," Clark assured him. "I knew that we'd all be on the same page as far as that goes."

Further debate on the matter was interrupted as Ben pointed out, "Look, they're off the green now. Clark, why don't you go ahead and take your shot first." Clark nodded his assent, knowing that Pete and Sam would likely need a minute to wrap their head around the revelation before focusing back on their game. As he teed up his ball, Clark pondered yet another close call with his secrets, certain that he never wanted to experience the general's reaction to learning them.

Day 102, Friday, 1:55PM (Central Time), Smallville, Kansas, Saint John's Methodist Church

Sam Lane stood in the foyer of the church in his full Army dress uniform, observing as Peter Hayden snapped pictures of his daughter Rachel and Sam's grandson, Jason, with his high-end digital camera. Rachel was the flower girl, dressed in a floor length powder blue summer dress, and holding a basket filled with flowers. Jason was the ring bearer and was dressed in a black tuxedo identical to the one worn by his father, who was patiently waiting at the altar and chatting quietly with Pete Ross and Reverend Swan. Sam concluded that his grandson looked quite impressive in his tiny tux. He would have to make sure to get copies of those pictures.

"Let me see," Sarah Hayden requested of her husband, as she gestured towards his camera. As he tilted the camera's view screen toward her and scrolled through the pictures, she gushed, "Oh, those are just adorable! Clark and Lois are going to love them!"

As Jason fidgeted with his bowtie, Ben Hubbard gently assured him, "It won't be that much longer, Jason. We can loosen our ties after the ceremony." As he spoke, Sam checked the time on his watch, before glancing over the door to the bride's room at the left side of the foyer. Both Ella and Martha Kent were in there with his daughters, as they primped over the girls and made sure that everything looked perfect.

Under normal circumstances, Lois would loathe the fussing that her mother and Martha were doing over her while they pinned in her veil and double checked everything as they prepared to launch her down the aisle. Instead, she smiled all the more brightly as she stood in the bride's room, and reflected on what was about to happen. Lucy was also smiling widely as she stood in her powder blue bridesmaid's dress, observing her sister. "You look beautiful, Lo," she told her emotionally. "Clark won't know what hit him."

"Ah, no tears!" Ella admonished Lucy. "We just got your makeup done a few minutes ago, and I don't want to have to redo it. That goes for you too, Lois." The other women laughed at Ella's desperate command, as a knock at the door interrupted them.

Sarah Hayden entered the bride's room with Jason and Rachel. "I think the boys are ready," she told the group. "How are we doing on this end?"

"We're just about there," Martha informed her as she looked over at Lois affectionately.

Lois looked up at Sarah and asked, "Did Peter get any pictures of Jason yet?" Lois asked. "God only know how long we'll be able to keep that tux on him."

"He's already snapped a few of both him and Rachel," Sarah confirmed as a wide smile

spread across her features. "They're absolutely adorable!"

Lois' smile grew even wider as she imagined what those pictures would look like. She pulled her son close, planting a kiss on the top of his head as she asked, "Are you ready for this, Munchkin?"

"Uh-huh," Jason replied automatically. "Does that mean we can start now?"

"Soon," Ella assured him. "Just a couple more minutes, and we'll be ready." Jason nodded, as he fidgeted with his bowtie, wondering how long 'soon' would really be.

As Reverend Swan shared anecdotes of other recent weddings, Clark occasionally glanced back towards the bride's room at the front of the church. He wanted to visually confirm what he ears told him, but had promised Lois that he wouldn't peek. As he glanced up again, he saw his mother heading in his direction with Ben Hubbard and Ella Lane. Ben took his seat on the right side of the aisle in the front pew next to Lana Ross and her son. To the left of the aisle, Ella Lane sat next to Matthew Hubbard's wife, Cindy and their sixteen year old son, Scott. Cindy had decided that it just wouldn't do for the Lanes to be sitting on the left by themselves.

Clark watched his mother walk over to the organ pit to the right of the altar, and heard her inform the preacher's wife, Maureen, that they were just about ready. As she returned to her seat, Reverend Swan informed Pete, "I think that's your cue to get down to the other end." Pete nodded, and started down the steps from the altar. As Pete left Clark alone with Reverend Swan, the preacher assured him, "Relax, son. I know that you two are ready for this."

"I know," Clark replied confidently. "It's just a little hard to believe that this day is finally here, after wanting this for so long."

As his mother took her seat beside Ben, Clark looked down the aisle to see Pete give a thumbs up sign as he and Lucy stood at the opposite end. Maureen Swan spotted the signal and began playing the processional music, as Pete and Lucy slowly marched down the aisle.

Behind them, Sarah Hayden gently nudged Jason and Rachael to start down the aisle. Jason carefully held the pillow with his parent's wedding rings on it, while Rachael carried a basket with flowers, throwing rose pedals down the aisle behind her. Finally, Jason took his place beside his father and Pete Ross on the right, while Rachel joined Lucy Lane on the left.

The music changed to the wedding march as Clark nervously looked down the aisle, and saw Sam Lane emerge from the bride's room with Lois on his arm. Clark didn't think that she had ever looked as beautiful as when she smiled back at him just then, dressed in a beautiful white lace wedding gown, which dipped slightly in front to offer just a hint of cleavage.

As Lois walked down the aisle with her father, she smiled widely with shiny eyes and leaned into him, emotionally whispering "Thank you for being here for me, Dad." Sam Lane looked down at his beautiful daughter, finally seeing through the veil of his own opinion and recognizing his daughter's joy. For the first time since meeting Clark Kent two weeks earlier, Sam allowed himself to smile as he recited his lines and handed Lois over to him.

Martha Kent dabbed her eyes with a tissue as she listened to Reverend Swan's opening prayer, and looked lovingly upon her son and his bride. She recalled all the challenges Clark had faced and overcome growing up, his heartbreak several years earlier when he first contemplated a future with Lois, and her own when he had left on a search for 'home.' The home that he'd been searching for was here all along, and her heart was bursting with joy as she witnessed a day that she and her son once thought would never come. A bright smile

spread across her features while she listened to Reverend Swan's words as he began the marriage rite.

"Christ calls you into union with him and with one another...."

As he looked down at Lois, Clark found himself lost in her eyes, only vaguely aware of the preacher's words. Clark saw the most loving expression on her face that he ever remembered seeing, and her smile beamed up at him as her eyes glistened with unshed tears of joy. He was reminded of the tender look that she had graced him with after he had given up his powers for her, the night that Jason was conceived. As overwhelmed as he had been by the love in her eyes then, it seemed even more intense now. Clark found himself feeling unfathomably fortunate, that a woman as incredible as Lois Lane would choose to love *him*.

"...I ask you now in the presence of God and this congregation to declare your intent...."

As Lois looked up at Clark and saw the love reflected back at her, she found herself as awestruck as she had been the first time she saw a flying man in tights, fainting as he lifted into the air from the roof of the *Daily Planet* building after saving her life. She remembered the love she held for him when she first learned his secrets, preparing herself for a life with Clark Kent after she witnessed him sacrifice his powers for her. She had to concede that she hadn't really known him when she pledged her love to him back then. She concluded that her love was truer and stronger now that she truly knew the real man behind both the glasses and the cape. Lois found herself feeling unbelievable lucky that a man as extraordinary as Clark Kent would choose to love *her*.

Directing his attention solely at Lois, and gently setting his hand behind her elbow to ensure that he had her attention, Reverend Swan asked:

*"Lois, will you have this man to be you husband,
to live together in a holy marriage?"*

*Will you love him, comfort him,
honor and keep him
in sickness and in health,
and forsaking all others,*

be faithful to him as long as you both shall live?"

"I will," Lois answered meekly, as she gazed adoringly up at Clark. Though Ella Lane couldn't clearly see her daughter's face, she heard the emotion in her voice, which she was certain would be echoed in her own voice as well if she dared to speak. It was clear to her that Lois was marrying the man of her dreams, and as much as she liked Richard White, Ella couldn't imagine her child at the altar with anyone else. She squeezed her husband's hand as she glanced over at him, seeing his eyes glistening with the unshed tears that he would later deny had ever threatened to fall. It took a perceptive eye to see through the carefully erected barriers around his tender heart, and she smiled warmly at him as she saw it revealed to her.

Clark's smile, which was already impossible wide, grew wider. Discussing the marriage, rehearsing the vows, and all the planning couldn't come close to preparing him for the exhilarating feeling of hearing the woman he loved consent to the wedding vows. Clark squeezed her hand affectionately, as Reverend Swan turned his attention toward Clark. Reverend Swan paused, and gently nudging Clark as he had done with his bride, he continued with Clark's vows.

*"Clark, will you have this woman to be your wife,
to live together in a holy marriage?"*

Will you love her, comfort her,

*honor and keep her
in sickness and in health,
and forsaking all others,
be faithful to her as long as you both shall live?"*

"I will," Clark answered humbly. As he said those words, Lois' heartbeat raced and the reality of the moment struck her. Hearing him finally say those words here, wearing that tux, in front of the preacher and their families, broke through her barriers and breached the dam, and the tears started leaking from her eyes despite her best efforts to contain them. The tears were flowing freely as Clark retrieved her ring from the pillow that Jason held between them, while he repeated the rest of his oath as directed by Reverend Swan and placed the ring on her finger:

*"In token and pledge of the vow between us made,
with this ring, I thee wed.*

Receive this ring as a token of wedded love and faith."

Lois nervously picked up Clark's ring from the pillow, her hands shaking as she slid the ring over his finger, and her voice breaking with emotion as she repeated her part of the oath:

*"In token and pledge of the vow between us made,
with this ring, I thee wed.*

Receive this ring as a token of wedded love and faith."

As Clark held his bride's hand firmly in his, he heard the words that he'd always hoped to hear, but until recently had refused to allow himself to hope for, as Reverend Swan concluded the rite:

*"By the power vested in me by the Church and the State of Kansas,
I now pronounce you husband and wife."*

Reverend Swan turned to the groom, as he warmly invited him, "Clark, you may kiss your bride." Clark obliged, tipping his head down to capture her lips which parted under his kiss as her arms wrapped tightly around him and the tears fell freely down her face. For a moment, the rest of the world disappeared and nothing existed but each other, until reality came back in the form of strong young arms, as their son joined their hug and the couple finally heard the cheers of their family.

Chapter 48 - Afterglow

Day 105, Monday, 8:30AM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Building

Clark Kent walked through the front doors of the Daily Planet building with a serene smile on his face, in place of the innocent goofy grin that usually adorned his features. As he squeezed into the elevator, he absently thumbed his left ring finger, which felt oddly bare without the wedding band which he had securely stowed in a secret compartment behind his Superman belt buckle. It was the compromise he agreed to with his wife in order to avoid questions on his marital status: Superman would never be seen with the ring, and Clark would not wear it on the premises of the Daily Planet building until the Luthor ordeal was behind them.

As he waited for the elevator to reach the editorial floor, his thoughts barely deviated from his recent nuptials, and the newlywed's weekend at the Honeymoon Haven Motel in Niagara Falls. It was the same place where his secret had first been inadvertently revealed to Lois, and he'd chosen the same place for romantic reasons. It was a last minute impulse, and he was thus unable to get the same room that they had been in before, but it was close enough for Lois to be moved by the sentiment. His smile grew a bit larger as the euphoria of his weekend swelled within him. His joy grew even more at the thought of his future with Lois and their children. The only disappointment had been that they couldn't yet share their joy with more of their friends, since the threat of Lex Luthor had forced them to keep a low profile.

That uninvited reminder of the madman sobered Clark and he walked off the elevator with renewed determination to find Lex Luthor before the man had a chance to interfere with his family's happiness. They'd need to find a new approach to trying to track down the lunatic, which was more in line with Bruce Wayne's skills than his own. Recalling his colleague's nocturnal habits, Clark resigned himself to leaving a message and following up with the man later in the day. As he settled in at his desk, he began reviewing his files on the Lex Luthor pursuit, hunting for anything that they might have missed.

As Lois Lane maneuvered her Audi down Concord Lane towards the Daily Planet building, her gaze kept returning to the ring on her left hand as her thoughts replayed the events of the weekend and a goofy, euphoric smile graced her features. She still couldn't believe that Clark had taken her back to that same cheesy motel where she'd first learned his secret, or how wonderfully sentimental she had found the gesture. With Jason safely with his grandmother in Smallville, they had stayed in Niagara Falls until that morning, sneaking back home just in time to get ready for work.

As Lois arrived at the parking garage, it seemed that fate was still smiling on her, after granting her greatest wish the previous Friday afternoon. She arrived just as someone was pulling out of a spot on the first level near the entrance. After quickly parking her car and hurrying across the street, Lois hesitated as she reached the revolving front door of the *Daily Planet* building, suddenly nervous at the prospect of entering the building as Clark's wife for the first time.

Nobody except Richard knows that we're married now, she reminded herself. Lois felt almost naked as she stood before the building, convinced that everyone would see right through her. *How could they not notice that something is different?* Lois wondered as she chewed her lower lip apprehensively and her right hand went unconsciously to her belly. In her tenth week of pregnancy, she now hid a small baby bulge under her bulky sweater and found herself wondering how well hidden it really was. *How much longer can we keep you hidden?*

Lois asked as she looked down at her belly. Finally, she lifted her head, pinched her lips together in a determined fashion and marched through the doors.

As Lois walked through the front door of the Daily Planet building, her black and white image was displayed back on one of many video display monitors mounted along one side of a large panel van where FBI Agent Tom Nelson tracked her movements. Another monitor showed her as she moved across the lobby, and yet another revealed her as she stepped on the elevator. "Cinderella has arrived at the ball," Tom commented. "And the elevator camera is actually working this morning."

Tom's partner, Jim Reilly, was seated in the van's front seat, and called out over his shoulder, "I'll bet you one hundred bucks that the camera will burn out by the end of the day, just like all the others have... What is it about those elevators that burn up the hidden cameras like that? I've never seen anything like it."

"Neither have I," was the simple answer. "And I'd be a fool to take that bet."

After a moment of silence, Jim added, "You know, it'd be easier if she would cooperate with the security escorts. This is like working with one hand tied behind our backs."

"Tell me about it," Tom agreed as he rolled his eyes. "But General Lane was certain that she'd never agree to it. We'll have to do our best to protect her covertly."

Day 105, Monday, 11:30AM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom

Perry White looked across his desk at the uncharacteristically nervous Lois Lane as she briefed him on the latest developments in their hunt for Lex Luthor. Lois and Clark had been pressing their leads in the notorious Suicide Slum area of the city, but their efforts had come up empty. As he listened to her, Perry noted that she seemed to be picking up the jittery persona of her partner that morning. "We're not getting much on Luthor from our sources down there," Lois admitted. "Um, they either don't know anything, or are too afraid to talk. However, we've, um, got some good leads on some other stories, including what appears to be a smuggling ring."

"I know that you'd rather find Luthor, but exposing a smuggling ring might be a good front page story," Perry began.

"Can we hand that one over to Ron?" Lois asked. "We've got some new ideas on tracking Luthor."

"It's not like you to give up a potential page one, Lois," Perry observed. "Is everything alright?"

"Fine, couldn't be better," Lois replied quickly. "It's just... a matter of priorities. We're digging through real estate transfers over the past few months, looking for something that matches Luthor's pattern, with the ownership hidden behind lawyers and obscure corporations. We also have a working lunch with a consultant on the case to discuss strategy. I know it's a long shot, but ..."

"It'd be worth it if it pans out," Perry offered gently. "Are you sure you want to hand the smuggling story over to Thorpe? Wouldn't it be better to let Clark take the meeting and chase the real estate leads, and have you take on the smugglers?"

Lois considered her answer for a moment before answering. In another time, she would have dug her nails into the smuggling story for all she was worth and fought off any effort to take the story away. However, she was already targeted, and didn't want to make things any easier for Lex Luthor to grab her. She also wasn't willing to expose her unborn child to the danger. She unconsciously placed a protective hand over her abdomen as she informed Perry, "I'd rather get Luthor before he gets me. I need to be a part of that story more than chasing

some possible smugglers."

Perry nodded his assent, "Alright, I'll give it to Thorpe. Lois... you don't seem quite yourself today. Are you sure that there isn't something else going on?"

"It's just the typical Monday morning blahs!" Lois snapped. "Really, everything's just hunky dory."

Lois was interrupted from her argument as Maggie opened the door and peeked in. "Sorry to interrupt," she apologized. "Perry, Pete from layout's on the phone. They need a decision on the pictures with the deadbeat dad story in the Lifestyle section..."

"Tell him that I'll call him back in five minutes," Perry instructed her.

Maggie didn't have a chance to withdraw before Lois called her back in, anxious to change the subject that Perry had been pressing her on. "Hold on a minute, Maggie," Lois requested. "Could we get your help with something?"

"My help?" Maggie asked tentatively. "What did you have in mind?"

"Are you still trying to fix up your sister?" Lois asked politely.

"Um, kind of," Maggie told her. "She was going out with this cop I know, but the chemistry just wasn't there - I don't think he liked kids after all. Why, did Clark finally change his mind about that?"

"Ladies, I'm sure that your matchmaking can wait..." Perry began irritably.

"Oh, hush," Lois insisted as she turned to Perry. "We're going to need your help on this one, too." Turning back to Maggie, Lois smiled confidently as she informed her, "This isn't about Clark - he's definitely unavailable. I had Richard in mind. He deserves to be happy, and... well, I think he needs a little push to get back out there, which is where Perry comes in."

Definitely unavailable, is he? Maggie thought to herself, as she recalled Lois' near panic the first time that she'd approached her about setting up Clark with her sister. *You wouldn't have anything to do with that, now would you?* Maggie smiled enigmatically back at Lois as she contemplated how best to confirm her suspicions.

"Oh, don't drag me into the middle of this!" Perry protested. "Richard's a big boy. He can handle himself."

"I think that it would be best if the suggestion came from you," Lois informed her editor. "Or come up with some excuse for them to meet each other without the pressure of a blind date. I can't say a thing to him about it, for obvious reasons."

"Maybe Perry could host one of his dinner parties," Maggie suggested. "Perry can make sure Richard shows, I'll bring Christine with me..." Turning to Lois, and glancing suspiciously at her wedding ring, Maggie continued, "...and maybe Lois can join us with her new husband."

"Huh?" Lois replied meekly, as her wide eyes glanced through the glass and briefly locked on Clark. He had just returned to his desk and also seemed shocked at Maggie's insight. *Crap! I knew everyone would see right through me, but did it have to be this soon?* Lois thought. She turned back to Maggie, and nervously said, "I d-don't think I heard that right..."

"Oh, come now, Lois," Maggie chastised. "We're an observant bunch here. I noticed when you stopped wearing Richard's ring a few months ago, and when you started wearing that one a few weeks ago... which, as of this morning, is now on your *left* hand."

Lois quickly hid her left hand behind her back, as she stuttered, "Um, I don't think... It's just not ... Oh, crap!" She lowered her head and took a few deep breaths as she rubbed her brow with her right hand.

"Lois?" Perry questioned tentatively. "Did you really get married? God, I don't even want to think about how Richard's going to take this."

Finally looking up to Perry, Lois answered softly, "Richard already knows - he even got us a card... Look, I really wanted to keep a low profile about this... out of respect for Richard, among other things." Turning back to Maggie, Lois told her, "The dinner party's a good idea, but my husband and I would just cramp his style if we were there. The whole idea is for him to forget about me and move on. I'll leave it to you and Perry to work out the details."

Before Lois could make her escape, Maggie interrupted, "So who's the lucky guy?"

"Um, I think maybe it'd be best if I kept that under wraps for now," Lois told her. "If word got out, Luthor might start targeting my husband and in-laws. I can't afford to take that chance."

"I understand," Maggie conceded. "I hope that ordeal ends for you soon, because I *really* can't wait to hear all about it."

"Thank you," Lois acknowledged. "This mess can't end soon enough for my taste."

"Will we be changing your by-line at some point?" Perry asked curiously.

"I'm inclined to keep 'Lane' as my professional name," Lois informed him. "I haven't decided yet what I'll do with my married name once we no longer have to worry about Luthor.... Would you two mind keeping my change in status to yourselves for now?"

"I'll hold my tongue," Maggie promised her. "But I'm probably not the only one who's noticed which hand that ring is now on."

Once Perry also agreed to her request, Lois quickly made her exit while twisting her ring to hide the diamond inside her palm. As she retrieved her purse from the lower drawer of her desk, she whispered in a low voice, "Let's get out of here, Clark. We need to figure this out." Clark followed her to the elevators, oblivious to Maggie's gaze upon him.

As Tom Nelson scrutinized the monitor showing Lois Lane and Clark Kent entering the elevator, static suddenly filled the screen. "Not again!" Tom complained. "God, I wish I knew what was burning up those cameras."

Day 105, Monday, 12:00PM, Metropolis, Gotham

A momentary blur of color disappeared into the parking garage at the Gotham Hilton Hotel, just before Lois and Clark walked out of the garage entrance, hand in hand. Lois was upset, and complaining to her husband, "I don't understand how you can be so calm about this. Maggie saw right through us in no time flat."

"Maggie saw the ring, and figured out that your marital status had changed," Clark corrected, as he waved down a taxi. "That's not really a surprise. Face it, Lois. At the office, you're a drop dead gorgeous pit-bull. You're impossible not to notice. But that's not a problem as long as I stay under the radar."

"Are you sure that you're under Maggie's radar?" Lois asked anxiously. "She noticed you enough to want to fix her sister up with you... She can be eerily perceptive sometimes, and the look on her face when I told her that you were unavailable..."

"Maggie's not a gossip and she promised you that she wouldn't say anything," Clark reminded her. They halted their discussion as the taxi stopped and remained silent on the way to Wayne Manor. Clark entwined his fingers with hers as he gently gripped her hand and tried to reassure her with the non-verbal gesture.

Once they arrived at their destination and paid the taxi, Lois continued her complaints, "I still don't like it. Maybe I shouldn't have worn the ring to the office. I didn't think anyone would notice, because nobody's said a word about it in the three weeks that I've been wearing

it."

"That doesn't mean that they didn't notice," Clark pointed out as he rang the doorbell. "If they notice anything else, I'll hear the gossip, and we'll deal with it. Besides, we've known all along that some aspects of our relationship would get out sooner or later. And we have... maybe another month on the outside before people start wondering if you're pregnant? All things considered, Maggie's insight should not be that big a deal. Try not to worry about it."

Before Lois could respond, the door opened as Alfred greeted them, "So good to see you again Mister Kent, Ms. Lane. I'd like to congratulate you on your recent marriage and the happy news of your expected little one."

"Thank you, Alfred," Clark replied warmly. "We're very excited over it all."

Lois gaped in shock for a moment, surprised both at Alfred's reference to their marriage, and at his knowledge of her pregnancy. She quickly regained her composure as a wide smile spread across her face and she echoed her husband's gratitude, "Thank you very much, Alfred."

"You're very welcome, madam," Alfred replied as he turned around. "If you would both follow me, please." As Lois followed Alfred through the halls this time, she hardly noticed the riches on display, instead distracted by the immediate memory of his greeting. She smiled as she pondered the day when everyone would greet them as a married couple and reflected on Perry's earlier question when he learned of her change in status. *What will I choose as my married name?* Lois wondered. *Lane-Kent, maybe?* She was so lost in thought that she didn't realize that they had arrived in the mansion's dining room until she felt Clark's tug on her arm. She looked up with a bright smile as Bruce greeted her, hoping that their strategy session would help them to end the ordeal so that she and her husband could publicly reveal their relationship at long last.

Chapter 49 - Strategy

Day 105, Monday, 12:15PM, Gotham, Wayne Manor

As Bruce Wayne greeted his guests, Lois surprised him by capturing him in a tight hug. "We need to talk about that wedding gift," she warned him. "You really shouldn't have. You spent too much." Lois remembered her surprise while opening their wedding gifts Saturday morning as she opened the card from Bruce Wayne: the keys to a 2007 Honda Odyssey had dropped into her lap, which Bruce had delivered to their home while they were in Smallville.

"Forget about it," Bruce told Lois casually, smiling widely as he finally escaped her embrace. "Alfred insisted that you two needed something bigger with your growing family, and who am I to question? I'm not taking it back, so enjoy it... Now please take a seat so that Alfred can serve lunch."

"You didn't need to get us anything, but thank you," Clark added as he sat down at the table.

As Alfred set their lunch of fettuccini alfredo in front of them, Bruce began, "Clark, we've completed the real estate analysis that you suggested and have a short list of possibilities, but we need to keep our expectations there realistic. Lex Luthor is very clever and not shy about changing tactics if he thinks we've figured him out. Just because the last three safe houses were high-end residential properties doesn't mean that's where we'll find him now. Remember that subterranean hideout where you first met him? If he's picked some property off the map like that, it won't show up on the radar."

"I understand," Clark acknowledged. "We still have to do our due diligence, though."

"Um, Clark?" Lois started. "Have you checked out his old hideout?"

"I doubt Luthor would be stupid enough to go back there," Bruce commented. "He'd have to know that you'd check it out sooner or later."

"I've checked it out a few times now," Clark confirmed. "What have your people found?"

"We have a short list of fifty residential properties, all with corporate ownership, within a two hundred mile radius of Metropolis, and acquired within the last year," Bruce confirmed. "We also have a long list of commercial properties. That's harder to track because virtually all of them fit the Luthor profile of lawyers and corporate ownership that would hide individual involvement. We also won't see a real estate transfer if the property is leased, or if he finagles certain peculiar financing arrangements."

"What about the money trail?" Lois inquired somberly. "Anything new there?"

"I hope that you realize just how lucky you were finding Ricky," Bruce remarked.

"Thanks to his spyware, I think we've identified Luthor's entire portfolio, both domestic and international. He's slowly transferring funds into domestic accounts from his international holdings, building up the balances, but there's been nothing to track back to a hideout. Most of the non-institutional activity has been ATM withdrawals. We've identified a couple of career criminals from the surveillance cameras, but we haven't been able to track them down. The feds have everything in place to quickly freeze the accounts once we're ready, but for now we'll just continue to monitor the activity to see if anything shows up."

As Bruce dug into his lunch, Clark summarized, "Well, we're going to have to come up with some other ways of ferreting him out. If the real estate doesn't pan out, or if he gets spooked and slips away, we'll need something else to keep the pressure on."

After swallowing his forkful of alfredo, Bruce declared, "We need boots on the ground to take this pursuit to the next step. The criminal element isn't known for posting results on the Internet for people like us to track them. From what Ricky's told us, it sounds like Luthor's in

Suicide Slum, but he could be intentionally misleading Ricky, given his paranoia. We'll need to get information from people who are unlikely to cooperate with police or their allies. We'll have to disguise ourselves to fit in, and try to eke out the information from the riff-raff. I can help you with that - it's a bit of an art to ask questions without it sounding like we're interested in the answers."

"When can we get started on that?" Clark asked.

"It'll have to be later in the week," Bruce replied directly. "I've got a charity event in L.A. tomorrow night."

"I think that I read something about that in the paper," Clark muttered.

"When I get back, we'll need to go over methods," Bruce informed him. "We'll need to be able to ask probing questions without them seeming like questions - too many direct questions will scare off any source, no matter how well you fit in. We're also likely to have better luck focusing on changes in the neighborhoods than in directly asking them about Lex Luthor."

"So we can go over that Wednesday?" Lois asked hopefully.

"Thursday will probably work better, given flight times and time zone differences," Bruce suggested. "You're welcome to join us when we discuss passive interrogation methods, but I'd strongly recommend that you stay on the bench and let us take to the field on this one."

"I didn't realize that you had so much field experience," Lois replied sarcastically. "How is that exactly?"

"It's a long story," Bruce answered vaguely. "Maybe I can explain it when we have more time."

"I'm not inexperienced myself," Lois pointed out.

"I don't doubt that, but do you really want to expose your unborn child to the potential dangers down there?" Bruce asked.

Lois glared angrily at him for a moment, before closing her eyes and sighing deeply before she admitted, "No." Clark reached over and gave her hand a gently squeeze as Bruce took a sip from his wineglass.

"Well, I think that we've covered everything that we can for the moment," Bruce concluded. "You might as well dig into your lunch while it's still hot. Alfred's alfredo is really very good." The trio dug into their meals, as Bruce guided the conversation to the Kents' recent wedding and their plans for the future.

Day 105, Monday, 2:10PM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom

"It looks like you've already done most of the legwork," Ron Thorpe commented pensively, as he looked over the notes that Clark and Lois had been explaining to him. The three of them were in one of the conference rooms discussing their leads on a smuggling ring. "Are you sure you want to give this up?"

"We have bigger fish to fry," Lois told him firmly. As she looked over at the young African-American reporter, she saw comprehension pass over his features.

"I take it that you've got something new on Luthor?" he asked excitedly, as the corners of his lips curled up in a smile.

"It more a strategy at this point, than anything concrete," Clark admitted. "But the potential if it pans out is too much to pass up... Back to the smuggling story, you'll need to corroborate the information we got from unofficial sources. I also have a few more leads that you'll need to track down, but I'd recommend against going to that part of town alone... or dressed in a suit."

"Thanks for the tip, and good luck with Luthor," Ron told them sincerely, as he stood and gathered the notes together. As he headed towards the door, he turned back to his colleagues and added, "I think that my conscience is going to force me to share the byline on this with you two. Once I have the rest of it put together, I'll run the copy by you before we sent it to Perry."

"I appreciate that, Ron," Lois told him kindly, as she and Clark followed him out the door. As the pair made their way over to Lois' desk, Clark eavesdropped on the office gossip, which confirmed that their coworkers had indeed noticed which hand Lois was wearing her ring on. However, a different conversation caught his attention, and he focused in on the exchange between Maggie Gonzales and Jimmy Olsen.

"So does Kent finally have a love life now?" Maggie asked the young photographer. "Lois said that he was 'definitely unavailable' when I asked about him for my sister this morning."

A wide smile spread across Jimmy's face as he told her, "He's definitely seeing someone, but he hasn't said that much about her. All I know is for sure is that he took her to some fancy French restaurant a few weeks ago, and he's seemed happier than I've ever known him to be since then."

"Three weeks ago, you say?" Maggie repeated mysteriously. "Interesting... Sounds like he's finally gotten what he's been looking for."

"I hope so," Jimmy offered. "I hope she realizes how lucky she is. It's too bad more people haven't noticed what a standup guy he is."

"I think maybe he got noticed by the one that mattered," Maggie suggested tentatively as she looked up at Jimmy with a knowing smile on her face. "It could get real interesting around here once the bullpen figures out who she is..."

"Do you know something, Ms. Gonzales?" Jimmy asked hopefully.

"I have my suspicions, but it's not my place to say anything," she replied apologetically. "I'm sure that it'll all come out in time, though."

A perplexed expression passed across Clark's face as listened in while reviewing their Luthor pursuit strategy with Lois. He quickly schooled his expression but not before his wife noticed and whispered, "How bad is it?"

Clark sighed deeply before answering, "Some of the office gossips have noticed which hand your ring is on, though there's some debate over why it would be there. I'm not concerned with that. I think Maggie's got us figured out, though, based on her conversation with Jimmy just now."

"How do you suggest that we handle that?" Lois whispered apprehensively.

"She's not one to gossip, so it may not be a problem. If we had to, we could swear her to secrecy and tell her who you're married to," Clark answered in a low voice. "Maybe Jimmy, too. It might be a good dry run for when we come clean with the whole office."

Lois lowered her head as she massaged her temples. "We've got to nail Luthor before all of this nonsense drives me bonkers," she declared irritably. After a moment, she looked up at him and suggested, "Well, we have other plans tonight. There's no urgency in telling them, is there?" As Clark shook his head, Lois chanced a peek back at Maggie Gonzales' desk, briefly making eye contact before quickly spinning her head back to her desk. *Why did she have to figure it out so quickly?* Lois wondered as she lowered her head and resumed massaging her temples.

Day 105, Monday, 6:45PM, Metropolis, 1938 Sullivan Lane (the Lane/Kent Home)

Jason sat between his parents on the living room couch as they leafed through an old photo album and Lois explained the circumstances where each picture had been taken. As she pointed to the next picture, her son giggled, telling her, "You got really fat!"

"Jason!" Lois exclaimed in mock indignation. "I wasn't fat, I was pregnant. You were growing inside my belly."

"I was?" the tyke asked in surprise.

"Yes," Lois confirmed. "You weren't ready to be born immediately after your dad and I gave you life. You had to grow arms and legs and fingers and toes and everything else." Lois was tickling her son as she finished speaking, and the tyke was giggling happily.

Once Lois let up on the tickling and their son's giggling subsided, Clark explained, "Babies aren't usually born until after they have all their parts. They spend about nine months in their mother's belly before they're ready to be born."

"How'd I get inside Mommy's belly?" the astonished youngster asked.

"It's, um, complicated," Clark informed him evasively. "You'll understand when you're older."

"The point is, this is how all little boys and girls start," Lois explained. "They grow inside their mommies until they're ready to be born. And this picture here is you on the day you were born - the day the doctor took you out of Mommy's belly."

The family remained quiet as Jason looked over the pictures on the pages of the album, running his fingers over the pictures of his mother late in her pregnancy. At the time, she had very little tolerance for pictures of herself in that state, but between Richard and Jimmy Olsen, they had nonetheless managed to capture quite a collection. She was now grateful that they had stubbornly insisted on taking those pictures.

"You understand now, don't you?" Lois finally asked. "You started life inside Mommy, and nine months later, you were born and joined us in the world."

"Uh-huh," Jason replied automatically. "It's neat."

"Yes, it is," his father agreed. "And it's going to happen again."

"No!" Jason hollered in dismay. "I won't fit in there!"

Lois chuckled at her son's reaction as she tried to explain, "We know that, sweetheart. Once you're born, you can't go back. This time, it's someone else's turn. You have a little sister growing inside me now. She'll be born in the summer."

"Really?" Jason asked excitedly as his eyes grew big and a smile spread across his face. "What's her name?"

"We haven't picked one out yet, sweetie," Lois explained. "We've got some time to figure that out, though."

"Will she be mean like Tina is to Stevie?" Jason asked apprehensively.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that," Clark assured him. "Your little sister's going to love you."

"And we can play cars together and stuff, too!" Jason squealed excitedly.

"It'll be awhile before she can do that," Lois pointed out. "See how tiny and helpless you were in this picture? She's going to be like that, too. It'll take some time before she's big enough to play with you."

"Oh," Jason muttered dejectedly.

"It'll still be lots of fun having her around, though," Clark assured him. "You get to help her as she grows, and teach her new things."

That appeased the tyke, who broke into a wide smile as he pushed the photo album aside

and slid off of the couch. "I can give her my old toys!" Jason announced happily just before zooming down the basement stairs to the playroom to sort through his toys.

Clark walked slowly down the stairs behind his son as he heard Lois yell from the living room, "No super-speed in the house!" Jason was bouncing with excitement as he emptied out his toy box and separated the contents into two piles.

As Clark sat down beside his son, he inquired, "So what have you got there, kiddo?"

"This pile is for me..." Jason informed his father as he threw another matchbox car on his pile. "And that pile is for my sister."

As Lois reached the bottom stair, she looked up to see her husband reach his arm out and embrace their son. "Your little sister's going to be a lucky girl to have you for her big brother," Clark told him. "I'm proud of you son."

Lois smiled brightly as she observed the tableau, grateful that their son had taken the news so well. Lois knelt down and joined her boys in the hug as she reflected on the events that had brought them to this moment. *It took long enough to get here, she thought. Thank God we finally got our acts together.*

Chapter 50 - Anticipation

Day 106, Tuesday, 11:00AM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom

Lois Lane struggled to hear over the din of the *Daily Planet* newsroom as she held the telephone receiver tight against her ear and waited impatiently for her contact to pick up the phone. Though she and Clark would have to wait for Bruce Wayne's return to gather intelligence on Luthor with 'boots on the ground,' Lois had plenty of sources whose boots were already there. While Clark continued to check out the properties from Bruce's list, Lois had been pushing her sources for news from Suicide Slum. Finally, the ringing was replaced by the gruff voice of Sid Johnson, a reformed former gang member who now operated a youth center in the blighted Suicide Slum area. "Johnson," he greeted from his end of the line.

"Sid, it's Lois Lane," she informed him with false cheer. "Rumor has it that something big is going down in Suicide Slum. Anything you can do to help me there?"

"Huh?" he responded irritably. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, come on, Sid," Lois pleaded. "You can't let that idiot from the *Star* scoop us on this. And I know that if there's something going on down there that you're sure to know about it. Nothing gets by you."

"What did you hear?" Sid asked cautiously.

"Unfortunately, not much," Lois admitted. "Just that there had been a lot of activity going on, and something big was going to happen."

"And you think that I'd be sticking my neck out if I knew something?" Sid complained.

"Oh, of course not," Lois told him soothingly. "I just thought that you might want to keep whatever this something big is from getting too big for its britches... and possibly causing you some trouble. So, is anything new going on in the neighborhood?"

Sid let out a deep sigh before answering. He suspected that Lois was playing him, but went along anyways. "Nothing's happening but the usual short-lived urban renewal projects. And some hotshot calls himself Mr. Big was throwing money around awhile back, but nothing in the last few weeks. Sounds like you got a bum tip."

"Excuse me, did you say 'Mr. Big?'" Lois asked nervously. "What was he up to?"

"Never met him," Sid told her curtly. "Nobody has, but some of his guys were tapping the local talent."

"Any idea who these guys are, or where they are now?" Lois asked hopefully.

"They're mostly no-name muscle, and I don't *want* to know where they are," Sid told her crossly. "I'm just glad that they're not around."

"This could be important, Sid," Lois told emphatically. "Have you heard anything new about these guys at all?"

Sid let out another breath before answering, "It's like they disappeared off the face of the earth. One day, Big's boys are talking to these bullies, and after that they're nowhere to be found. I afraid you're on your own there, sweetheart."

"Well, I owe you one anyways, Sid," Lois told him kindly. "Thank you." After hanging up the phone, Lois reviewed her notes from the call, afterwards flipping through the contacts binder open on her desk. As she reached for her desk phone, the muffled sounds of her cell phone's ring tone drifted up from her purse in the bottom drawer of her desk. Lois quickly pulled the phone out and saw from the caller ID that it was her mother. *I really don't have time for this*, Lois thought, as she sent the call to voice mail. After reconfiguring the phone for vibrate mode and throwing it back in her purse, Lois lifted the receiver from her desk phone, and called her next contact.

Day 106, Tuesday, 2:00PM, Metropolis, 'Suicide Slum'

Superman hovered one thousand feet above the two story commercial building as he performed a detailed scan of the building. His vision pierced the tar, rubber and gravel roof through the aluminum sheet and concrete floors and down to the bottom of the concrete foundations. He was looking for any area of the building that he couldn't see through, but as with the previous three hundred commercial buildings that he'd inspected that day, this one held no such surprises.

He adjusted his gaze, taking inventory of the equipment inside the building and of the crews installing it - the equipment was typical for a light industrial machine shop. He scrutinized the workers inside, taking note of the contents of their wallets for later verification. Their driver's licenses, health insurance cards, union cards, and kids' pictures were all consistent with a legitimate machine shop. He'd appeared to have struck another dead end. He had been 0 for 50 on the residential properties, and now he was 0 for 301 with commercial real estate. The Crosby Machining shop was also the last from Bruce's list that was within Metropolis proper.

The Man of Steel recalled the remainder of the property list from his eidetic memory, mentally sorted the remainder by distance from Metropolis, and sped off to his next target in the city of Huntington some fifteen miles west of Metropolis. Though he would steadfastly continue through all properties from the list, he was now discouraged, believing that Lex Luthor would have been found in Metropolis. He hoped that his wife was having better luck canvassing her contacts.

Day 106, Tuesday, 4:30PM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom

Lois was struggling with exhaustion, as she discussed the results from her phone calls with Ron Troupe at his desk. Though they'd revealed some hints on Lex Luthor's activities, the most tantalizing results were related to the smuggling ring that Ron had been working on. "It sounds like InterGang, alright," Ron commented. "Is your source sure that this will all lead back to Carmen Sinclair?"

"Actually, I have corroboration from several different individuals on that," Lois informed him directly with a proud smile on her face. "However, it's all off the record. You'll need to follow the breadcrumbs that they left for us to get an official source that we can cite before we can go to press with it."

"They're not going to be happy when this goes to press," Ron declared pensively.

"No, they won't be," Lois agreed. "It can be dangerous verifying the facts, and you'll have to be careful, but things usually get back to normal rather quickly after the story breaks. People like Luthor are the exception."

"Have you made any progress there?" Ron asked sympathetically.

Lois sighed deeply as she answered, "Well, it's not looking very promising right now. Clark's still doing the real estate research, but we've come up with a big goose egg there so far, and the information I got from my contacts today mostly skirted around the question and didn't tell us anything we hadn't already guessed."

Clark had walked up while Lois was summarizing their efforts for Ron. Once she finished speaking, Clark asked, "What did your sources confirm?"

"That he's got his teams together," Lois informed him neutrally. "It also sounds like he's had his men sequestered for the last few weeks." She felt oddly thankful for her exhaustion,

which dampened her exuberance at her husband's appearance. That allowed her to control her grin and to resist the urge to wrap her arms around him and melt into his embrace. .

"That doesn't sound good," Clark concluded grimly.

"No, it's..." Lois began, before pinching her lips shut as she turned back to Ron. "Are you good to go with all this?" she asked him.

"All set," he assured her pleasantly. "I know where to find you if I have questions."

As Clark and Lois walked back over to her desk, she whispered, "It sounds like Luthor is all set to make his move. What is he waiting for?"

"He wants all of us, and he doesn't know where Jason is," Clark reminded her. "So for now, he waits. Though, we may be able to work that to our advantage..."

"You're not suggesting that we use him as bait, are you?" Lois hissed in a whisper, as she sat at her desk.

"Never," he assured her. "But if we can plant a false clue and trick him into setting his plan into action, we might have a chance of tracking it back to him."

Lois rested her chin in her hand as she looked up at him and mumbled, "I hope that works. We haven't had much luck with anything else lately."

"We'll get him," Clark assured his wife. "We've got too many lines in the water for him to avoid all of them. Sooner or later, we'll snag him." He paused as he heard the muffled vibration of Lois' cell phone from inside her purse, and scanned her bottom drawer to confirm it. "You set your phone on vibrate? It's ringing."

"Let it ring," she insisted tiredly. "I'll check the voice mail later." At his confused expression she explained, "I've been a bit busy today, and didn't need the interruptions."

"Has it been muted all day?" Clark asked incredulously, and he recalled the typical volume of incoming calls that his wife got on her cell phone. "You're going to have a ton of messages to go through."

"Thanks for reminding me," Lois complained as she reluctantly fished the phone from her purse, and began playing back her messages.

Day 106, Tuesday, 4:30PM, Metropolis, Newton Steelworks

As usual, Lex Luthor was in a foul mood as he paced through his bunker at Newton Steelworks, while the "Winter" concerto from Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons" played in the background. Lex was confident that both his teams had now been trained enough to be able to successfully complete their tasks, once the opportunity arose, but the wait had become frustrating. Lois Lane had managed to secure her records, depriving him of clues to her son's location. Lex felt that eliminating the child was almost as important as eliminating his father, and couldn't chance his disappearing into the woodwork if he moved too quickly on the parents. He had to wait until he could grab all three of them, and he couldn't do that until he found the boy. Lex felt that his sanity would be endangered if he had to wait much longer.

He was pulled from his reverie by the chirp of an Instant Message from his laptop. Lex settled in at his desk and opened the message from his operative, Bobby Santos, smiling for the first time in days as he read it. The man had been tasked with monitoring surveillance for clues on the Lane family, and had forwarded an audio clip for his boss' review. Lex began to chuckle as he played it:

Hello, Ms. Lane. This is Doctor Forester's office calling to remind you of Jason's appointment at ten o'clock tomorrow morning. If you have any questions, please call us at 555-1978.

Forester, Lex mused. *That's the kid's allergist.* Lex reviewed his files on Jason White, confirming the allergist's address as he prepared to send his teams into action. *I've got you now*, Lex thought, as he gleefully pondered the fate that would await his targets once they were finally at his mercy.

Chapter 51 - Coming Clean

Day 107, Wednesday, 8:00AM, Metropolis

Lois Lane maneuvered her new Honda Odyssey through rush hour traffic while her son giggled in the back seat at the *Monsters Inc.* DVD that was playing. As they continued the commute, Lois thought back to the previous night's discussion with her husband, once again wondering if they had made the right choice to keep Jason's allergist appointment. It was a risky proposition with his growing powers. If they tried to measure his lung capacity, he'd max out the scale on the machine. They'd concluded that it was too late notice to cancel now, and Clark had worked with Jason to practice breathing softly.

Lois thought to the challenges ahead, and wondered what they would do when the time came for her son's immunizations. Her husband had suggested bringing the Smallville town doctor into their confidence and using kryptonite-tipped hypodermic needles to get around the problem. Though Sharon Rivers seemed trustworthy, Lois felt guilty about so many people learning his secret within a few months of reentering her life. They'd discuss their options with Bruce Wayne when he returned.

Bruce had apparently known the secret for years, and had the vast resources of Wayne Enterprises behind him. *I wonder how Bruce figured it out*, Lois wondered. Bruce Wayne was indeed an enigma - publicly a reckless, carefree playboy, but privately an intelligent and dedicated servant to the greater good whose experience went well beyond the boardroom. She was certain that there was more to the story than either man was willing to reveal to her. Perhaps she'd solve that puzzle after the Luthor madness was behind them.

Jason complained briefly as his mother pulled her car into the parking spot and turned off the car, which also powered off the DVD player. "You can watch the rest later," Lois promised him as she unbuckled him from the seat. "You can take off your glasses now, too." She took her son's hand, and walked across the street to the *Daily Planet*.

Lois got her son started with some scratch paper and crayons at her desk before proceeding to brief her editor on their latest strategy for locating Lex Luthor. Clark had diligently checked out every property on the list, even running background checks on all of the people found at those sites. Though he'd found a few illicit businesses that would be good for future stories, they'd come up empty on the Luthor chase. Their only clues came from canvassing her contacts the previous day, but that still hadn't brought them any closer to Lex Luthor. Lois feared that Perry would likely reassign them.

Maggie recognized the perplexed look on Lois' face as she settled her son in at her desk, and had barely issued her warning to Perry before their star reporter marched into the editor's office. Maggie closed the door behind her as she returned to her desk, muffling their voices sufficiently to cloak their conversation in privacy. She snuck a peek over to Richard's office before reviewing her task list, and smiled as she saw Jason run into his office and climb up on his lap as he animatedly described some adventure to his mother's ex. *He knows that Jason isn't his, and he's still there for the kid, even after losing Lois*, Maggie thought. *He'd probably be good with my nephew, too*. She made a note to remind Perry that he needed to plan a dinner party, before busying herself with her usual morning tasks.

Day 107, Wednesday, 9:15AM, Metropolis, The Daily Planet

Lois had just returned to Perry's office with Ron Troupe. Maggie watched Lois and Ron sit in the visitor's chairs in Perry's office as Jimmy Olsen exited before stopping at her desk.

"Looks like today will be one of those days that Ms. Lane spends more time at Perry's desk than her own," Jimmy commented. "Sounds like she's got something big again."

"Doesn't she always?" Maggie replied pleasantly, as Susan Walters approached her desk. Turning to Susan, Maggie told her, "They just went in, and it sounds like it's another big one. I can call you when he's free, if you'd like."

"I just need Perry's feedback on the city contracts follow up," Susan told her cautiously. "Whenever he's got a minute."

Susan turned to leave, but stopped short as Jason came trotting down the aisle towards Perry's office, wearing glasses that were perilously close to slipping off the end of his tiny nose. He rounded the corner of Maggie's desk, headed towards Perry's door, as Maggie reached out her arm to stop him, "Whoa, there, partner. You're mom's busy with Perry right now."

"But I drew a new picture for her," Jason complained.

"It'll still be there when she's done with Perry, won't it?" Maggie asked him. As Jason nodded, Maggie added, "If you're not careful there, you're going to lose those glasses... You know, I don't think you had them the last time you were here."

"I got them about a month ago," Jason informed her, as he pushed his glasses up with his index finger, perfectly mimicking the gesture that the adults recognized from a certain mild-mannered co-worker of theirs. The striking resemblance that the child bore to Clark Kent was also impossible to miss. As the adults stood mute in shock at the implications of that observation, Jason added, "I don't like them, but Mommy and Daddy said I have to wear them."

Maggie was the first to recover, having already suspected Lois' involvement with Clark. "Well, you better listen to your parents," she told him, sneaking a glance over at Clark's desk as he returned from an errand. "What did you draw this time?"

Jason proudly presented his drawing, telling her proudly, "It's a new family picture." Maggie looked at the crayon drawing that was remarkable good for a five-year-old, resembling cartoons from the Sunday paper more so that the stick figures he had been drawing a few months ago. Jimmy and Susan also looked over at the drawing, recognizing a family of four with the obvious father figure in the portrait adorned in glasses. The parents sat in the middle, with a child on either side of them: On the right was a boy in jeans and sweater that Maggie guessed to be Jason, and on the left was a swaddled infant with a baby bottle.

Maggie pointed to infant in the drawing as she asked, "Who's this?"

"That's my sister," Jason said proudly, as his father's eyes grew large in surprise from his desk. "She's doesn't have a name yet. She's still inside Mommy's tummy." The adults at Maggie's desk once again fell mute in shock.

After a moment of silence, Maggie asked Jason tentatively, "Your... um, your mommy's going to have a baby?"

"Can I show her my picture now?" Jason asked impatiently, ignoring Maggie's question.

"Um, I don't think that we want to interrupt her," Maggie told him sympathetically.

"Maybe you should wait with your dad until she finishes."

"Do I have to?" Jason complained.

"I think it would be best," Maggie insisted. "You can show it to her when she's done. In the meantime, go wait with your dad, okay?"

"Okay," Jason agreed reluctantly, as he trotted off to Clark's desk.

"Lois is pregnant?" Susan asked in astonishment. "And is it just me, or do those glasses

make Jason look like the farm-boy's mini-me?"

"Susan, what in the world are you talking about?" Maggie asked dramatically. "Surely, if there was a story there all of our brilliant reporters would have figured it out by now, wouldn't they?"

Susan glanced back over to the bullpen, watching as Clark pulled Jason onto his lap and looked at his new drawing. "I didn't think that Kent had it in him," Susan murmured. "And she's wearing that ring on her left hand now... Oh, this is *good*." Turning back to Maggie, Susan asked, "So do you think the baby is Richard's or Clark's?"

"Let's respect their privacy, shall we?" Maggie chastised her. "At least give them the chance to set the record straight."

Back at his desk, Clark's typical goofy grin morphed into a frown as he listened in. *Someone, please tell me that didn't just happen*, he thought. He didn't blame Jason for inadvertently spilling the beans. His son was used to the way things were in Smallville, where everyone knew of his parents' relationship, and that morning Clark and his wife had also been more concerned about what their son would say about the baby in front of Richard. They forgot to remind him that the others from the office didn't know that Clark was Jason's daddy or that his mommy was pregnant. *Lois is **not** going to be happy about this little development. Well, do we let the gossip go wild, or try to nip this in the bud and leave them to wonder how we found out about it?*

As Clark pondered the situation, he whistled the Disney tune, "*Whistle While You Work*." He carefully listened for the telltale echo that would indicate an electronic listening device. Confident that the room was clean, he sat his son down at Lois' desk, making him promise to stay put. Finally, Clark walked over to Perry's office and peeked in as he apologetically stated, "Um, if you're about through, can I borrow Lois for a moment?"

Lois now knew her husband well enough to see the genuine anxiety beneath the façade. "What's wrong?" she asked apprehensively.

"Maybe nothing, but..." he began, before glancing up to the other men in the office. "I think that you'd rather discuss this privately. It'll just take a minute."

As Lois stepped outside the office with Clark, Ron stated curiously, "I wonder what that was all about."

"I know better than to even ask these days," Perry offered. "And with as much as those two have to worry about with Luthor, I'd really hate to add to their stress." Perry shifted his gaze outside the window where an obviously angry Lois was scanning the bullpen before marching off a moment later. "Uh-oh," Perry commented knowingly. "Something just hit the fan."

"Whatever it was, she didn't seem very happy about it," Ron agreed.

"Just be glad that Hurricane Lane is heading in the other direction," Perry joked, as he looked up in surprise to see the subject of his comment return with Susan Walters and Jimmy Olsen in tow. Lois stopped at Maggie's desk briefly and the other woman stood and followed her in.

"Alright, everyone, we're only going to go through this once," Lois declared. As she glanced over at Maggie, she continued, "First, please understand that we were already planning on sharing this information with most of you before a certain little boy forced our hands this morning." She stopped, sighing deeply, momentarily dropping her head in her hands before looking back up.

"This is a personal matter that's really nobody else's business," Lois continued. "Under

normal circumstances, we wouldn't care who knew, but with Luthor stalking us..." Lois paused and looked at the expressions of those gathered around her before she continued. "If Luthor knew of this, he'd have more targets and maybe enough clues to figure out where we've been keeping Jason safely hidden. You must promise us to keep this to yourselves before we drop these three bombshells in your laps."

Lois waited silently as everyone confirmed their understanding and promised their silence. Finally, she sank into one of the guest chairs as she began speaking. "The first bombshell, which some of you already know, is that Richard is not Jason's biological father. Clark is his real father. Please don't ask us to go into detail. Let's just say that the farm-boy charm is grossly underrated and leave it at that." Clark fidgeted nervously behind her, as she paused to let her words sink in.

"You and Kent?" Perry asked in shock. "You've got to be kidding..."

"Please, Perry, let me finish," Lois pleaded. "This is already going to be hard enough to get through." Lois took another deep breath, as her gaze dropped to the floor. "Bombshell number two, which I think at least one of you has already figured out, is that Clark and I are together again. In fact, we eloped last Friday." Lois finally looked up at the group, as Clark gently set his left hand on her shoulder. The others noticed the wedding band on his hand, as Lois reached up and gave his hand an affectionate squeeze.

After a moment of silences, Maggie gently encouraged her, "You still have something else to tell us, don't you?"

Lois nodded, as she told them in a low voice, "Bombshell number three... I'm pregnant - about eleven weeks along now." Lois lowered her head, as she pinched the bridge of her nose and let out a deep sigh.

"Um, if you've... that is, if... you have questions...." Clark began nervously. "Now's the time to ask."

"You left Richard for Kent," Perry stated incredulously. He squeezed his eyes shut as he shook his head. "I never would have imagined that."

"We need to keep this away from the rumor mill," Lois told them emphatically. "It won't matter once Luthor's taken care of, but until then... everyone keeps this to themselves."

"Well, congratulations, Mr. Kent... Mrs. Kent," Jimmy offered as he smiled widely. "I wish I could have been there at the wedding."

"So do we, Jimmy," Lois assured him. "And for now at least, the name is still *Lane*, okay?"

"Sure thing, Mrs... Ms. Lane," Jimmy assured her.

"Well, if there aren't any questions, Ron and I need to finish briefing Perry, and then I need to get my son to the allergist."

After most of the group filtered out the door, Clark escorted Jimmy back to his desk. "I'm sorry that you had to find out that way," he apologized. "We really were planning on inviting you over this weekend to come clean. Maggie, too."

"Oh, that's okay, Mr. Kent," Jimmy assured him. "I'm just happy that you two worked it all out. Too bad for Richard, though."

"I know," Clark agreed. "I hated to see him go through that. He's a good man."

"So, are you all moved in with her?" Jimmy asked. "I could help you move if you've still... got stuff to move."

"There's not much left at my old apartment," Clark confided. "At this point, it's only there to throw Luthor off the trail. Thanks, though... You know, maybe you could still come over

this weekend, and we could finally catch up. I'll need to let my wife know..."

Day 107, Wednesday, 9:30AM, Metropolis

Phil Castle pulled the white panel van into the parking garage next to the Donner Medical Building. He had five other men in the van with him. Tony sat in the passenger seat, while Jeff, Evan, Dave and Carl sat on the floor in the back of the van. "Is this the place?" Tony asked.

"Yeah, this is it..." Phil told him. "She'll park here in the garage, and head across the pedestrian skyway on level two. Keep your eyes peeled for her car. Once she pulls by, we'll follow her around, and we can nab her after she parks."

"It's about time," Dave complained from the back. "I've been climbing the walls practicing this, drill after drill."

"Tell me about it," Carl agreed. "This isn't rocket science. How hard can it be?"

"Knock it off," Phil insisted. "Just be ready when she gets here, and we do it exactly like we practiced." The order was met with grumbles as the crew impatiently waited for their unsuspecting quarry to arrive.

Chapter 52 - Ambush

Day 107, Wednesday, 9:40AM, Metropolis, Suicide Slum

The Truman Towers apartment complex was typical of the low-income subsidized housing efforts in the bleak area of Metropolis derisively called Suicide Slum. The residents apparently cared little about the appearance or livability of the property that they had no vested interest in. A majority of residents claimed some type of government assistance and among their occasional bitter arguments, a cacophony of broadcast stations could be heard blaring from the surplus of television sets found in the apartments.

The complex was the object of attention for two men waiting in an ambulance that had just parked a few blocks down the street. Though both were dressed as Emergency Medical Technicians and the ambulance was indistinguishable from any of the city's ambulances, that was not their purpose here this day. Owen Sarvis looked on with eager anticipation from the ambulance's driver's seat, while Ricky Hernandez nervously took stock of their surroundings. "Why are we here?" Ricky finally asked apprehensively.

"To toughen you up," Sarvis told him curtly. "The boss thinks that you're too squeamish, and we need to take care of that." Sarvis opened up a duffle bag sitting on the floor between them and pulled out a couple of Smith and Wesson 410 Pistols, handing one of them to Ricky. "Take this," he commanded. At Ricky's hesitation, he added, "That wasn't a request."

Ricky reluctantly accepted the pistol, unsure of where to put it. Owen pointed out the weapon's safety on his gun, he briefly pointed out the features on his own gun. "This lever here is the safety. When it's up like this, it won't fire. Move it here to shoot... This button here releases the clip. The clip holds ten rounds, plus one in the chamber. To reload, just drop the clip, and slap a new one in." After stowing the weapon in his jacket, Owen grabbed several clips from the duffle bag, and handed two of them to Ricky. "Don't let us down," Owen warned him ominously.

Ricky stared at the gun momentarily, unsure where to put it, before finally slipping it in his jacket pocket. Before he had a chance to respond, a deafening explosion rang out, and Ricky looked up to see one side of the Truman Towers Apartment Complex implode and collapse into the street. "Oh, my God," Ricky murmured.

"Right on schedule," Owen stated proudly. "Now we wait for the rest of the team to do their jobs." For some time, though he was uncertain how long, Ricky watched the scene in horror as flames licked at the debris and the residents cried out in anguish as the reality of the event finally hit them. He began a silent prayer for those caught inside. Soon he saw a familiar red and blue blur dive into the building as Superman began to pull out survivors.

A small section of the Truman Towers basement had been fortified to withstand the planned implosion, and was currently occupied by the six members of Owen Sarvis' team. The area, which was normally used for residents' supplemental storage, had been partially cleared. They had also taken pains to make sure that their exit route would remain unobstructed after the explosion. Now that the moment of truth had arrived, they took their positions. A middle aged woman named Madeline Vaughan crawled under a tipped over shelving unit, pretending to be pinned while her five male colleagues hid behind the clutter of the room.

Danny Peña took his position behind the two foot long, four inch diameter barrel of the weapon that would take down the Man of Steel. In the dim illumination of the room's emergency lighting, Danny gave Madeline a thumbs-up signal, and she began wailing, "Help me, Superman." Several minutes later, they finally heard the rumble of the Man of Steel

crashing through the far wall. When he bent down to lift the shelves off of Madeline, Danny removed the lead cap from the barrel of his weapon.

Superman suddenly stood back up, alerted by his kryptonite proximity alarm. The heads up display lit up in a frequency beyond human vision and an arrow indicated the direction of the source. He looked over at Danny as the hoodlum pulled the trigger, spreading a kryptonite net from the barrel that sped at him.

Day 107, Wednesday, 9:50AM, Metropolis

Lois Lane was still stewing over the revelations forced from her by her son's innocent comments that morning as he obliviously giggled at the *Monsters Inc.* DVD playing on the Odyssey's entertainment system. Though she didn't blame Jason for the slip any more than Clark did, she resented having control of the situation taken from them. She had hoped to invite their coworkers over in small groups, swear them to secrecy, and reveal her relationship with Clark Kent. Instead, she'd been forced to come clean in Perry's office in order to avoid a rumor mill fiasco.

Her mood was decidedly dark as she turned into the parking garage attached to the Donner Medical Building - yet another place she really didn't want to be. Since her son's Kryptonian DNA became active, his immune system had morphed to the point that he was no longer affected by allergies, or any of the other childhood illnesses that had plagued his earlier years. Yet, she was wasting her time by taking him to an appointment with an allergist because she had forgotten to cancel it, and would rather pay the 10 copay than the 125 missed appointment penalty.

Lois collected her parking stub from the machine, and pulled into the garage past Phil Castle's white van, failing to notice the van pull out behind her. Both drivers were oblivious to the Ford Fusion that pulled in behind them. The three vehicles circled the garage, each keeping a fifty foot or better following distance, as Lois hunted for a parking place, finally finding one on the third level. Phil Castle pulled the white van slowly forward, stopping approximately ten feet beyond Lois' parked minivan.

When Lois finally walked out behind the vehicle with her son, the back doors of the white panel van suddenly burst open. Lois and Jason were caught by surprise when the net spread out from the barrel of its launcher and wrapped around them, triggering the kryptonite alarms in their watches. Lois struggled with the net and momentarily gazed at her watch, where two normally invisible characters now shined brightly against the face: 'J' for Jason, and 'K' for Kal-El. Both of her boys were under attack. *The bastards must have bugged the doctor's phone*, Lois realized in horror. *Oh, God, we've got to get out of here...*

Ricky continued to watch in horror as people spilled out of the Truman Towers apartments. He was brought out of his thoughts as Owen smacked him in the arm and chastised him, "Get over it. They aren't our problem, and it's a small price to pay to get that busybody wrapped up for the boss."

Busybody? Ricky thought as his eyes widened at the realization. *That's the name that Luthor uses for Superman. Oh, my God. This is a trap!*

Owen cackled at Ricky's reaction as he asked derisively, "Man, where did he ever find a choir boy like you?"

Ricky glared at the other man, before dropping his head, covering his mouth with both hands as he began chanting in an inaudible whisper, "Superman, it's a trap. You'd better check

on Jason... Superman, it's a trap. You'd better check on Jason..."

Superman's kryptonite warning system had barely given him a full second of advance warning before the net hurtled toward him. He had just barely leapt out of the way, flattening himself against the ceiling. *This was a trap?* he wondered incredulously. *My, God, all those people that were hurt...* The net sailed underneath him, landing against the wall twenty feet behind him. Ricky's warning now reached his ears, transforming his reaction from one of surprise to one of dread for his son. *Jason! Luthor wants all three of us. If he's moving against me... Oh, my God!*

"Idiot!" Madeline yelled. "How could you miss?"

She's part of this, too, Superman lamented. *All those lives lost...* He dropped to the floor and was pulled from his thoughts by a new threat reported from his kryptonite alarm. He looked to the source to see Paul Zucker pull a collar from a metal box and charge at him. Zucker collided with the Kryptonian who was weakened by the kryptonite, and both men crashed into the shelves behind them. Superman rolled as they fell, and the other man took the brunt of the impact, which tipped over the shelving unit and knocked down the remaining six rows of shelves like dominoes. Superman struggled to his feet, slowed by the kryptonite. He was distracted by another alarm from his buckle in the telltale frequency that confirmed his fears: Jason was also under attack. He pushed himself off of Zucker, who was stunned from the fall, and crawled over the shelves to the aisle beside them. *I've got to get to Jason!*

Nicholas Yeager saw Superman struggle to pull himself up against the far wall, and quickly picked up the kryptonite net. He tossed it at Superman, but his aim was low. The net brushed against his target's abdomen and the Kryptonian remained free as he staggered backwards. Zucker was now back on his feet, awkwardly stepping toward the Man of Steel across the crumpled shelves. *Jason needs me,* Superman reminded himself. He quickly scanned the room before turning and jogging toward the door at the other end.

He crashed through the door and stumbled down the hall. Almost immediately afterwards, the ceiling collapsed behind him. The collapse startled his pursuers and threw up a cloud of dust that forced them back. His strength returned as he ran down the hall and up the stairwell, finally bursting through the ceiling and rocketing into the sky, his departure concealed by the thick smoke from the flames that now engulfed the building.

Phil Castle observed his crew through the open back doors of the van and smiled in satisfaction. The men had quickly jumped out the back of the van and descended on their quarry. *Let's see Luthor even try to complain this time,* he thought confidently. The men were struggling to get the collar on the boy while avoiding his mother's frantic kicks. The effort was challenging enough that they missed the approach of the Ford Fusion behind them until both front doors burst open with shouts of, "FBI! Freeze!" The five men standing between the vehicles hesitated momentarily before Jeff Pittiglio and Evan Shearer pulled guns from their belts and opened fire. FBI agents James Magnuson and Randy Tarantine ducked behind their open doors, and the other three would-be kidnappers abandoned their prize and sprinted back to the van, jumping in just as Phil gunned the engine and accelerated up the ramp.

Behind him, the FBI agents peeked above their car doors and returned fire, striking Pittiglio twice in the chest. Shearer's fire hit home in Agent Tarantine's right shoulder, and he sank behind the passenger door of the Fusion. The next shot from Magnuson's service revolver ended the gunfight, dropping Shearer with a shot to the center of his chest.

Agent Tarantine looked over at his partner's worried face and assured him, "It's not bad. Go get the bastards." Magnuson nodded and climbed back behind the wheel. He maneuvered around the netted pair on the ramp, and sped after the van. Tarantine slowly walked over to the fallen gunmen, his gun drawn. Only after kicking their weapons away and confirming the kills did he direct his attention to the woman and child. He paused in surprise when he noticed the greenish metallic collar padlocked around the boy's neck and muttered, "What the hell?"

Dammit! Lois swore. *Got to get the collar off!* She didn't acknowledge her rescuer. Tears ran freely down her face while she desperately struggled to get the collar off of her unconscious son. Tarantine holstered his weapon and quickly called in the attack on his cell phone before approaching them and attempting to free them from the net with his uninjured left hand. His assurances that help was on the way were of little comfort to Lois as her efforts with the collar tore at the skin of her fingers. Now free of the net, she dug through the back of her minivan for anything that might help remove the stubborn collar, hesitating briefly as her fingers wrapped around the tire iron.

"That may do more harm than good," Agent Tarantine advised her. "There's a police cruiser on the way, and they'll probably have bolt cutters for the padlock."

"I've got to get the collar off him!" Lois insisted. She struggled to slide the tire iron through the ring that secured the collar, which barely passed through. Her efforts were interrupted by the sudden presence of a figure covered in dull grey armor that vaguely resembled a spacesuit with its astronaut-style helmet. A sob choked out as Lois looked up gratefully at her armor-clad husband. He knelt down, pulled apart the padlock and removed the kryptonite collar from their son. "I got here as quickly as I could," he told her softly through the speaker in his armor. "I'll be back after I get rid of this." Superman disappeared from the garage in a gray blur, taking the net and the collar with him.

"Who the hell was that?" Agent Tarantine asked in amazement, staring off in the direction that the gray figure had flown off in. Lois remained silent, her attention focused on her son as he slowly blinked his eyes open.

"Mommy?" Jason asked tiredly, the fear still apparent in his voice.

"Shhh... It's okay, sweetheart," Lois consoled him, voice thick with emotion. "We're safe now."

I'm dead, Phil Castle thought. He was trapped behind his van with the remains of his crew. Magnuson had managed to shoot out one of the van's tires, and it had crashed into the barrier wall at the northwest corner of the platform. They couldn't make it to the stairwell on the opposite side without exposing themselves to their opponent's fire. They managed to crawl out of the van opposite Magnuson, and were firing back at him around the edges of the vehicle. Both sides of the firefight were effectively pinned down. *If that fed doesn't get me, Lex will have my head for sure,* Castle mused.

He peeked around the van and finally saw a clear shot at his adversary and lifted his gun to fire. Before he could pull the trigger, however, he heard a loud whoosh and felt the wind knocked out of him by an unseen force which had also dragged him out in front of his van. He recovered his bearings only to realize that he and his men were now several feet in front of their cover, with their wrists and ankles bound by plastic zip ties. Phil leaned his head back and groaned, finally recognizing his defeat and hoping he'd survive Lex Luthor's anger when he boss learned of his failure.

Superman floated ten thousand feet above the inferno that had once been Truman Towers and removed his helmet. He analyzed the carnage, grateful that he'd adopted the triage practice of listening for the strength of heartbeats to locate the most seriously injured parties first. In this case, it had enabled him to evacuate all of the surviving innocent victims before encountering the ambush team, who were now the only ones left alive in the building. The collapse of the ceiling during his escape had apparently blocked off their escape route, and they were attempting to climb up the hole that he'd created when he burst in to rescue them. Seeing that they were in no immediate danger, he shifted his attention to the ambulance where Ricky's whispers were coming from.

Owen Sarvis finally grew weary of seeing Ricky hunched forward with his face in his hands and swatted him. "Pay attention!" he chastised him. "We're making history here. Don't wimp out on us."

Ricky lifted his head and turned to glare at the other man. "We'll see," he told the other man skeptically. "Things don't always turn out the way we expect they will."

"Try to contain your optimism," Owen chided him sarcastically. "They'll be out any minute now." He was interrupted from further comment when the back doors of the ambulance flew open, and he was pulled from his seat into the back of the ambulance. Owen stared up in surprise at the armor-clad Man of Steel, struggling futilely in his grasp.

"Superman?" Ricky questioned uncertainly as he scrutinized the face behind the transparent faceplate. "Nobody saw you come in here, did they?"

Superman turned to Ricky and assured him, "Not if the conversations that I'm hearing right now are any indication. Why?"

"Because if we play our cards right, we can end this nightmare right now and trick Luthor into showing himself. However, for that to work, he has to believe that his ambush teams succeeded."

"Narc!" Owen hollered angrily. "Luthor'll kill you when he finds out you ratted him out."

Turning to the Man of Steel, Ricky asked hopefully, "Um, would you mind relieving him of his weapon? You may be bulletproof, but I'm not." A moment later, Owen was disarmed with his wrists and ankles zip tied.

Superman sat on the bench in the back of the ambulance and dropped his helmet to the floor. "What do you need me to do?" he asked, both hopeful and curious from the other man's statement.

Ricky offered a wide smile as he answered seriously. "We've got to move quickly before local news or police transmissions tip him off, but this is what I have in mind..."

Superman returned the smile as Ricky shared his plan and recalled Bruce Wayne's appraisal of the man opposite him two days earlier. *Yes, we're very lucky indeed to have you on our side*, he thought as he anticipated finally ending the ordeal that his family had endured over the past few months.

Chapter 53 - Turning the Tables

Day 107, Wednesday, 9:55AM, Metropolis, Donner Medical Building Parking Garage

An ambulance and two police cruisers stopped on the third level of the Donner Medical Building parking garage as Lois Lane flagged them down. Agent Randy Tarantine was sitting drowsily on the bumper of her Odyssey while a wide-eyed Jason applied pressure on the handkerchief covering the man's gunshot wound. The two gunmen who had opened fire on the FBI agents earlier were still lying dead on the ramp. The police officer in the first car rolled down his window, and Lois informed him, "Agent Tarantine's been shot. His partner chased the other kidnapers up the ramp."

Officer Gabe Madden nodded his acknowledgment, but before he could continue up the ramp, an armored figure appeared in front of the vehicle with his hands held up in a stop gesture. As he walked around to the driver's side of the car, Superman informed officer Madden, "I've left the rest of the kidnapers tied up on top with Agent Magnuson. The group responsible for the inferno at Truman Towers is up there, too. I'll explain everything in a moment, but first I need to know what's gone out over the police band about what's happened here."

Officer Madden failed to recognize Superman in the armor, and began to chastise him, "I don't know who you think you are, but we are not in the habit of taking orders from anonymous Rambo wannabes."

"Officer, that's Superman you're talking to," Lois informed him. "He's wearing lead armor because Lex Luthor is using kryptonite."

"What..." Madden began, as he scrutinized the face behind the faceplate more closely. "Oh... um, sorry. I didn't recognize you."

"No apology is necessary," Superman assured him. "Why don't you pull ahead a bit so that ambulance can get to Agent Tarantine, and I'll explain what we need to do?"

A few minutes later, four uncomfortable police officers were standing outside their cruisers talking with Superman, vacillating over his request. "We'd really be sticking our necks out if we did that," Officer Brad Schneider pointed out. "We'd have to call for approval." Lois rolled her eyes and walked back over to her minivan with her son, where the EMTs were helping Agent Tarantine onto a stretcher.

"You can't radio it in," Superman insisted. "Luthor's probably got a police scanner, and we're running out of time."

Further debate was interrupted as Lois hollered, "Gentlemen!" Lowering her voice, she waved her cell phone in the air as she informed them, "I have Inspector Henderson on the phone. Which one of you needs to talk to him?"

Day 107, Wednesday, 10:00AM, Metropolis, Newton Steelworks (Lex Luthor's Lair)

Lex Luthor impatiently twirled a pen as he sat at his desk watching the local news channel on his muted plasma television and listening to the police scanner. *There's got to be something soon!* Lex thought. *So help me, if those imbeciles screw this up...*

Lex turned up the volume on the television as the scene from Truman Towers was shown, and listened to newscaster Cindy Williams summarize the situation:

"...explosion ripped through Truman Towers apartment complex in northwestern Metropolis. Many victims were evacuated by Superman immediately afterwards, but there's been no sign of the Man of Steel for several minutes. The fire continues to rage out of control, and many victims are believed to still be trapped inside..."

They were supposed to call in, Lex noted angrily as he finally heard the beep of an incoming instant message on his PC. He pulled up the application and smiled as he read the message from Sarvis: "Success."

That's one down, Luthor thought as he accessed his Internet Phone application. *Now if only the second team can pull it off.* Luthor looked up the number for Owen Sarvis, pausing when a transmission from his police scanner caught his attention:

"All units be on the lookout for a white Ford E150 van, partial vehicle license Tango X-ray Bravo Eight. Last seen heading west on Kidder Lane near 22nd street. Suspects believed to be involved in gunfight with FBI and in the abduction of a woman and young child. Suspects are believed to be armed and dangerous. Proceed with caution."

Lex smiled menacingly. *Two for two?* he wondered. He finished dialing the number on his Internet phone and waited for Sarvis to answer.

Superman picked up Sarvis' PDA phone and answered it, perfectly mimicking the thug's gruff voice, "Yeah?"

"What took you so long?" Lex demanded angrily. "I was expecting an IM ten minutes ago!"

"We had a little trouble... loading the package," the other man answered cryptically. "Needed to tie it down real secure.... Where do you want it delivered?"

"Head east on Albert Avenue to 14th street," Lex commanded. "IM me when you get there."

"Right, Albert to 14th," the Man of Steel repeated, before finally realizing that Lex had hung up. Superman looked over to Ricky seated in the ambulance's driver's seat with a concerned expression on his face. "He hung up," he explained simply. He was still clad in armor, but had removed the helmet, which was now sitting on the floor behind the passenger seat.

"That's normal," Ricky told him. "Lex will run us around in circles for an hour or so before he dares to show his face." Superman nodded and set Owen Sarvis' PDA phone down on the floor between them, right next to phone that he'd taken from Phil Castle. Ricky glanced at his watch before adding, "Give it another five minutes before IM'ing 'success' from Castle's phone. Lex thinks that he's a bit of a screw-up, and it'd be normal for him to be a little late."

Day 107, Wednesday, 10:08AM, Metropolis, Newton Steelworks (Lex Luthor's Lair)

Lex was frustrated by the legions of fools he was forced to draw from for manpower. One of those fools was Phil Castle, who Lex decided he'd have to replace after the job was finished. Even though the man had successfully abducted Lane and the boy, he'd been in a gunfight with the FBI, losing two men in the process, and had drawn so much attention to himself that every cop in town was looking for the van. He didn't dare risk bringing that vehicle to his hideout. Castle had finally reported in, and Lex was just now getting his side of the story. "Where are you now?" Lex asked impatiently.

"Parking garage at Michigan and Trumbel," the other man answered. "Nobody saw us."

Lex sighed irritably, as he commanded, "Make sure your cargo is tied down securely, and then scatter your team. I'll send someone to collect the package from you."

"I can finish the job," the other man protested.

"Listen to me, you twit!" Lex seethed. "You're not paid to think! Your brain barely generates enough power to keep your legs moving, so shut up, and do exactly as I say!"

The line was silent for a moment before the other man answered, "Alright, I'll scatter the

men and wait."

"The pickup team will be driving an ambulance," Lex told him before hanging up.

As Superman set down the phone, he commented, "Well, he doesn't care much for Castle."

"Like I said, he's a bit of a screw-up, at least according to Lex's emails," Ricky reminded him. When Sarvis' phone rang a moment later, Ricky added, "And so it continues."

Day 107, Wednesday, 11:45AM, Metropolis, Newton Steelworks (Lex Luthor's Lair)

Lex chortled with anticipation at the anguish he would soon inflict on Superman, Lois Lane and their son. No doubt, they were already suffering from the realization that their fate was sealed, but he'd make sure that they felt that pain acutely before putting them down. Lex looked up at the Metropolis map on his desktop at Sarvis' last location. Since Sarvis had reported picking the prisoners up from Castle, Lex had sent them to twenty additional stops to obscure their route. The meandering course was also intended to confuse anyone following them and give some strategically positioned lackeys the chance to verify that they weren't being followed. He estimated two or three minutes more before they reached their destination.

While he waited, Lex scanned the news from the web and cable news channels. Nobody had figured out that Superman was missing yet, though some wondered why he had apparently abandoned rescue efforts at Truman Towers. The news sources were also not reporting the Lane abduction yet. *Amazing how smoothly a plan runs when these morons actually do what you tell them to*, Lex pondered.

A beep from his PC told Lex that the IM from Sarvis had finally arrived, reporting that they were now at Slater Street and York Avenue. Lex called Sarvis again from his Internet phone.

"Yeah?" the other man answered.

"Where are you?" Lex demanded.

"Slater and York, just like we said," the other man answered.

"Which street, what direction?" Lex reminded him irritably.

The other man sighed deeply in irritation as he answered, "We're parked on eastbound York, west of Slater."

"And if you look to the North, what do you see?" Lex asked shortly.

"North?" the other man hesitated.

"Your left," Lex clarified.

"Just some shut-down plant," the other man answered.

"Do you see the gate opening?" Lex asked condescendingly.

"Um, yeah," the other man answered.

"We'll you're going to hand your cargo over to some friends of mine inside," Lex explained. "Drive through the bay door on the right. They'll explain things to you when you get there."

Superman hung up the phone, telling Ricky, "He wants us to drive through that bay on the right and hand the cargo over to some friends of his. I don't see anyone inside, but there's a part of the plant that I can't see through... Are you ready for this?"

"Let do it," Ricky told him enthusiastically. "You should probably hide in the back when I drive in." Superman nodded his agreement and moved into the back of the ambulance as Ricky turned left into the steel mill. "Was this some kind of auto plant?" Ricky asked as they drove in.

"It's a steel mill, or rather it was," Superman informed him. "It didn't show up on our real estate analysis. Lex must have pulled some financial tricks to hide its ownership."

"He's a slippery one, alright," Ricky agreed. As he saw a large bay door opening on the building in front of him, he added, "This must be it."

Ricky drove into the plant and parked the ambulance as the bay door closed behind him. The room was cloaked in shadows, the only illumination coming through a handful of windows high up on the walls. While Superman scanned through the sides of the ambulance, Ricky got out and hollered, "Hello?"

A shrouded figure appeared through a door to the left of the parked vehicle and asked, "Where's Sarvis?"

"In back... with the cargo," Ricky answered meekly, as the figure marched towards the ambulance.

From the back of the ambulance, Superman peered through the man's hood and immediately recognized Lex Luthor. He burst through the side of the ambulance, lifting his nemesis off the floor and slamming him into the lead wall behind him. "I've been looking for you, Luthor," Superman told him.

Lex looked at his adversary in shock as he seethed, "You're not supposed to be standing!"

"Well, it's not the first time you've been wrong, now is it?" Superman reminded him. "This ends now."

Lex slipped a dagger with a greenish gray blade out of his cloak and told Superman, "On that, we agree." As he finished speaking, Lex plunged the dagger down through the left trapezius muscle at the base of Superman's neck. Superman dropped to his knees, screaming in pain. Lex loomed over him as he warned him, "When I finish here, your bitch and the brat are dead, too!"

Lex began to force the blade in deeper, but hesitated when he heard a popping sound followed by a ping to his left. He looked up to see the smoking gun in Ricky's hands pointed at him. Lex realized that the ping he heard was the bullet impacting the metal wall behind him, and he glanced up briefly to see light shine through the small hole two feet away. He released his grip and the Man of Steel collapsed to the floor. Lex seethed at Ricky. "You are *so* dead," Lex assured him angrily; He was prevented from further threats when Ricky again pulled the trigger, sending a bullet under Lex's jawbone and into the cerebellum. Lex fell to the floor like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

Almost as soon as Lex hit the floor, Ricky was at Superman's side, dialing 911 on his PDA Phone. He was in a panic when emergency services operator Sarah Douglas answered the call. "Lex Luthor's stabbed Superman with a kryptonite dagger and he's unconscious!"

"Sir, this is an emergency line," the operator chastised him. "Prank calls to emergency services are against the law."

"This isn't a prank, goddamit!" Ricky shouted urgently. "Why the hell do you think Superman disappeared from Truman Towers this morning? Luthor ambushed him! Now get an ambulance here now!"

There was silence on the line for a moment before the operator returned. "Sir, where are you?"

"The old steel mill at Slater and York," he told her. "It's Lex Luthor's hideout. He's here, too... Should I try to pull the blade out of Superman's neck?"

After another moment of silence, Sarah told him, "Don't pull out the blade. That could make the bleeding worse..."

"But it's kryptonite!" Ricky protested. "The radiation's probably hurting him as much as the cut."

"Our people are adamant about that," Sarah told him. "Help will be there soon. Make sure they have access to the building."

"Alright, but please hurry," Ricky pleaded. Ricky wiped away the blood from the wound with his handkerchief, discovering to his surprise that the bleeding was light. Convinced that Superman wasn't going to bleed to death, Ricky left his side and hunted for the controls to the doors in the dim light. A moment later, the plant's interior lights were on, and the bay doors were open. Ricky returned to Superman's side and encouraged him, "Hang in there, Superman. Your son still needs you."

The first emergency vehicle arrived seven minutes later, which seemed like an eternity to Ricky Hernandez. Police officer Tom Mankiewicz squeezed through the gate, and calmly walked up to the open bay door. Ricky was tending to a prone figure when the officer stopped in the doorway, and inquired, "What's going on here?"

"Superman's hurt," Ricky told him. At the officer's confused expression, Ricky explained, "He's wearing lead armor to protect against kryptonite, but he took his helmet off..."

Officer Mankiewicz's took a close look at the armored man's face, his eyes growing large in recognition. He immediately pressed the mike button at his shoulder and reported in, "Ten Edward Niner, Dispatch... We have confirmed Superman *down* at Newton Steelworks on Slater and York. Repeat, *Superman down!*"

"Roger that, Ten Edward Niner," the woman's voice crackled over the radio. "Superman down." After a moment's pause, he heard the call repeated from his radio: "Attention all units, confirmed Superman down at Newton Steelworks, Slater Street and York Avenue. Repeat, *Superman down...*"

Officer Mankiewicz finally looked away from Superman's wound and took notice of the other prone individual. "Who's that?" he asked, indicating the cloaked figure.

"Lex Luthor," Ricky told him numbly.

Again, Officer Mankiewicz' eyes went large as he pulled back the hood and recognized the wanted criminal. "What happened to him?" he asked as he checked for a pulse.

"I... shot him," Ricky admitted nervously. "He was trying to kill Superman."

"Well, good for you," the officer muttered. "Unfortunately," he continued, eyes hard, "He's still alive."

Chapter 54 - Superman Down

Day 107, Wednesday, 12:00PM, Metropolis, 1938 Sullivan (The Lane/Kent Home)

Lois Lane was seated at her kitchen table with Jason still clinging to her after their morning ordeal. Seated across from her was Detective William Barnes; two uniformed officers stood behind him. The detective was taking her statement there, rather than police headquarters, in order to avoid any Luthor informants revealing her rescue to their boss. Lois included slight embellishments to hide her boy's Kryptonian heritage, reporting that she'd heard one of the henchmen boast that the kryptonite would prevent Superman from rescuing her. She'd neglected to mention the kryptonite collar.

"Well, I think that takes care of the paperwork, Ma'am," Detective Barnes informed her, as he handed her his business card. "If you think of anything else, just give me a call."

"Thanks, detective," Lois told him sincerely. "We really appreciate your efforts here."

"It's all part of the job," he assured her. "These officers here will be parked out front for now - until the danger is over. Just flag them down if you need anything."

Before Lois could reiterate her thanks, her attention was interrupted by one of the officer's police radio, as an unusual message was broadcast:

"Attention all units, confirmed Superman down at Newton Steelworks, Slater Street and York Avenue. Repeat, Superman down..."

All eyes went large at the call and Lois choked out a sob, quietly squeaking, "No." Please, God, let him be okay, she prayed. *He has to be alright!* She took comfort in the responses that she heard over the police radio.

"Dispatch, Ten Edgar Four. Responding to Superman down."

"Mommy?" Jason said tentatively, the fear returning to his eyes.

"Dispatch, Ten Bravo Eight. Responding to Superman down."

"Shhh..." Lois assured him. "It's nothing that you need to worry about."

"Dispatch, Eight David Niner. Responding to Superman down."

Detective Barnes scrutinized Lois carefully. He was well aware of her rumored connection with Superman. "Ma'am?" he offered tentatively. "I can drive you to the hospital. We can wait for him there."

"Dispatch, Five Edgar Seven. Responding to Superman down."

Lois shook her head, tearfully informing him, "I can't be the center of another tabloid bonanza."

"Dispatch, Five Bravo One Two. Responding to Superman down."

"There's an underground service tunnel between the hospital and the medical building across the street," the detective informed her compassionately. "We may be able to get you in and out that way. I can make a few calls."

"Dispatch, Eight David Four. Responding to Superman down."

Lois looked down at her son as she considered the offer. "I can't take my son there, and I probably won't be able to find anyone to watch him until later..."

"Dispatch, Five Edgar Two. Responding to Superman down."

"Call me when you're ready," the detective offered.

Day 107, Wednesday, 12:10PM, Metropolis, Newton Steel Works (Lex Luthor's Lair)

Ron Troupe and Jimmy Olsen pushed against the throng of onlookers for the best vantage point. The two had been a few blocks away shooting exteriors for his smuggling story when a frantic Lois Lane called him, insisting that he drop everything and get over to Newton

Steelworks. He recognized one of the officers pushing the crowd back and flashed his press pass. "C'mon, Mike. It's just Jimmy and me."

The officer reluctantly let him through. "Alright, but you'd better not get in the way of the paramedics," Officer Mike Johnson warned him. "You do, you're cooling your heels in a cell, not just back with the crowd."

Ron nodded his understanding and jogged past the gate toward the open bay doors of the dilapidated steel mill. He gasped unconsciously when he saw two men prone on the floor. The police and paramedics were concentrating on one of them, who was wearing some sort of body armor with a dagger plunged into him at the base of his neck. "He's still too heavy," one of the paramedics complained. "We've got to get this armor off."

To his left, Ron saw Jimmy lift his camera for a shot, but a Hispanic man in a paramedic uniform quickly lifted his hand to cover the lens of the camera. Ricky Hernandez shook his head when Jimmy looked over to him. "Not like this. Not while they're working on him."

Jimmy nodded his assent and lowered the camera, as the three men looked back at the victim. The police officers finally found the latches on the armor, and four men struggled to lift the torso piece off. A moment later, the familiar red and yellow shield was revealed on the victim's chest. "Oh, my God," Ron whispered, finally recognizing the Man of Steel. "Is that really Superman?"

One of the police officers who'd been struggling with the armor looked up at Ron and panted, "It has to be... Nobody else... could handle the weight... of this armor."

Ricky finally noticed Ron's press pass, and motioned for them to step back with him. "You must be Ron Thorpe," Ricky stated. At Ron's nod, he continued, "I'm Ricky Hernandez. I just called Lois Lane a few minutes ago. She said that you were on your way here."

"You already spoke to her?" Ron asked incredulously. "She's got the whole story, then, I'd imagine."

"Actually, she said that she couldn't do the story," Ricky told him. "She asked me to brief you on what happened, though I'd prefer it if you left my name out of it." Ron nodded his agreement, and began furiously scribbling his notes as Ricky described the day's events.

Day 107, Wednesday, 2:00PM, Metropolis, Metropolis General Hospital

Nurse Betty Madison smiled pleasantly as the police officer checked her ID badge, and radioed it in for confirmation. Though the tight security protocol seemed burdensome, she couldn't blame them for being so protective of the room's occupant. Her identity confirmed, she pushed through the door and sighed adoringly at the comatose Man of Steel.

He'd been rushed into emergency surgery an hour and a half earlier, though there was little that they could do short of pulling out the kryptonite blade. As before, his uniform was folded neatly on the chair across from him, along with his boots. His armor was in police custody, and hadn't accompanied him to the hospital. After confirming his vital signs, Betty gave his hand a squeeze. "Hang in there, Superman," she told him softly, before turning and leaving the room.

The cloak of silence slowly lifted from the Superman's senses. The quiet murmurs coalesced into whispers before clarity finally returned and he comprehended the meaning behind the sounds. He struggled to pull himself from his slumber but remained unable to move, his muscles still paralyzed by kryptonite poisoning. Even his eyes failed to obey his commands, and he remained in darkness as he sought out the sounds of those most important to him.

Day 107, Wednesday, 2:00PM, Metropolis, 1938 Sullivan Lane (the Lane/Kent home)

Lois was desperate for news of her husband, but didn't dare turn on the news channels for fear of Jason's reaction. The living room television was instead tuned into the Disney Channel, which would not get preempted for breaking news. While her son watched his cartoons, Lois had frantically worked her cell phone, bugging her colleagues and contacts for any news on Superman's condition. She concluded that the situation was similar to his fall from orbit, after pushing that horrid kryptonite monstrosity into space. His illness was once again from kryptonite poisoning - the stab wound had healed immediately once the kryptonite was removed and shielded.

The good news was that Lex Luthor was out of action. He had stubbornly clung to life after Ricky's bullet smashed into his cerebellum, and was expected to be in emergency surgery for several hours. *If he's smart, he'll die on the table*, Lois thought. *Because after what he did to my boys today...* Jason's giggles brought her out of her musings, and she looked over at him from the kitchen table. *Thank God he's okay now.*

"Lois?" Lucy Lane inquired gently.

Lois looked over at her sister, who had rushed over once the news hit. Her parents were also expected to arrive at any minute, her father hearing of the attack on his daughter and grandson from his FBI contacts. Lois wiped the tears from her face and offered her sister a weak smile.

"He's going to be okay," Lucy assured her sister quietly. "Once he's had a chance to rest, he'll be as good as new."

"My head knows that," Lois whispered to her sister. "But my heart's a skeptic. And I've got those damn pregnancy hormones, too."

Lucy reached around and gave her sister a sympathetic hug. "Hang in there," she gently insisted. "And let me know if there's anything I can do to help in the meantime."

Lois was interrupted from responding by the doorbell. Both women looked towards the door as Lois stated weakly, "That's probably Mom and Dad. They left around eleven."

"I'll get it," Lucy offered as she stood up from her seat. A moment later, Lois heard Lucy greet her parents. "They're both a bit shaken up, but they'll be okay."

"Well, at least they got that bastard this time," Sam concluded. "Now maybe they can live like normal human beings." Sam saw Jason running towards him and squatted down to welcome him into his arms. "There's my little soldier!" he greeted him warmly. "We were worried that you'd be stuck in Smallville after what happened to Super-"

Sam was interrupted from continuing by Lucy's hand clamped firmly over his mouth. "Icksnay on the news, Dad," she told him firmly. "He's had a rough enough day already without giving him more to worry about." Sam looked in surprise at the uncharacteristic intensity in his daughter's eyes. He was used to Lois challenging him, but Lucy's personality was so laid back that she rarely argued with him. She just let everything he said roll off her back and ignored what she didn't want to hear. For her to act so boldly was not to be taken lightly. Something else was amiss that his older daughter hadn't shared with him. Sam obligingly nodded his head and Lucy removed her hand.

Turning her attention to Jason, Lucy suggested to him, "Why don't you go show Grandpa your new drawings?" Jason regarded her carefully for a moment, before untangling himself from his grandfather and running to grab his latest creations off of the refrigerator. Sam and Ella followed him into kitchen, and Lois rose from her seat to finally greet them.

"Thanks for coming," she told them quietly, attempting to push down her turmoil.

"Are you sure that you're alright," Ella asked, her voice full of concern.

"I will be," Lois assured her. "It's just been a lot to take in one day."

"Shouldn't Clark be helping you?" Sam asked accusingly.

"Lighten up, Dad," Lucy chastised him. "He was on assignment. He's trying to get home, but everyone's trying to get into Metropolis right now, so it might take awhile."

Sam was distracted from responding when Jason presented his artwork, and Lois took the opportunity to snatch her empty drinking glass off of the table and set it in the dishwasher. She loitered at the sink, lowering her head and letting out a deep sigh before turning around to face her family once again. *I've got to keep the subject off of the attack and Superman. Dad, please cooperate this time.*

"So, how are things in Alexandria?" Lois asked. Her parents never got a chance to answer as Lois cried out in pain, falling to her knees and clutching her stomach with one hand while the other went to the floor to stop her forward motion. A sharp pain was spreading across the lower left side of her abdomen. *What the hell was that?* Lois wondered. *It feels like I just got hit in the stomach with a sledgehammer.* She breathed heavily as she rocked back on her heels, and groped for the counter to pull herself up.

"Mommy!" Jason cried out fearfully.

"Lois!" Ella exclaimed. "What just happened?"

"I... I don't know," Lois admitted.

"We should get you into emergency," Ella insisted.

"It'll be a zoo down there right now," Lois pointed out. "I... I need to get to the bathroom." Lucy and Ella both helped Lois into the half-bath down the hall. She unbuttoned her blouse, and saw a dark bruise on her lower left side at the hem of her pants.

"What on earth caused that nasty bruise?" Ella asked, her brow furrowing in confusion.

Lois remained mute and looked down at the bulge of her belly, not having an explanation for the mark. Suddenly, a small one inch area on the lower right of her abdomen distended an inch and half and Lois again cried out and doubled over in pain. "Oh, my God!" she panted, finally realizing the source of her discomfort. "I forgot about the kryptonite."

"Kryptonite?" Lucy questioned. "I don't understand."

Lois eyed her mother warily, and debated how much to reveal. Finally, reaching a decision, Lois let out a deep breath and explained. "We were attacked with kryptonite this morning. It would have kicked the baby's immune system into high gear, and activated her dormant Kryptonian genes... She's kicking me with super-strength."

Chapter 55 - Northward Bound

Day 107, Wednesday, 2:10PM, Metropolis, 1938 Sullivan Lane (the Lane/Kent home)

Ella Lane's eyes went wide in shock at the revelations from her older daughter's self-diagnosis. *The baby's Kryptonian genes?* she pondered. *But that would mean that...* She was unable to complete the sentence, even in her thoughts. She struggled to find her voice made mute by shock. Lucy was also silenced by her sister's words. The only sound in the small bathroom was Lois' ragged breathing as she struggled with the pain.

"What can we do?" Lucy finally asked apprehensively, breaking the silence.

"I don't know," Lois panted. "Clark can't exactly help right now..."

"So we wait for him to wake up from his coma?" Lucy stated anxiously. "How long can you last?"

Clark in a coma? Ella thought, her eyes growing even more impossibly wide as she recalled the day's news of the attack on Superman. *Oh, my God. It can't be...*

"I don't know," Lois breathed, looking at her sister tearfully. "Probably not very."

"Wait..." Ella interrupted, squeezing her eyes shut as she took a deep steadying breath. She opened her eyes and asked incredulously, "Are you saying that Clark... that your husband... that he's..." She hesitated, not daring to say the word dancing on the tip of her tongue.

"Superman," Lois finished. She continued haltingly, "No one can know... or we go through this ordeal... all over again."

"This can't be the first time you've dealt with this," Lucy concluded frantically. "What did you guys do the last time?"

"Clark took me... to the Fortress," Lois informed her sister. "Suppressed... the Kryptonian genes."

"How do we get there?" Ella asked her daughter, her maternal concern pushing through her shock at last.

"It's in the Arctic," Lois told her hesitantly. "Without Kryptonian transportation... it takes forever... to get there... There are no roads... no airports."

"Do you know anyone else who could get us there quickly?" Lucy asked desperately.

"Of course," Ella stated confidently. "Once we explain things to you father, he'll..."

"We can't tell him!" Lois hissed. "He'll go apeshit if he finds out that my husband is an extraterrestrial." She held her breath against the pain as she struggled up from her knees to sit on the toilet. Finally perched on the stool, she let out the breath and added, "He'll blame Clark. He's not exactly one of Dad's favorite people, you know."

"So, we tell him enough to know that your life depends on it, without telling him that Clark's Superman," Lucy declared confidently. "Once he realizes how serious it is..."

"It'll take too long to explain it," Lois interrupted. "I know someone - he already knows. Let me try him first."

Day 107, Wednesday, 3:30PM, off the New England coast, 33,000 feet above the ocean

Sam Lane looked across the cabin of the luxurious aircraft at his daughter, Lois, who was clearly in a lot of pain and barely coherent. The physician accompanying them, Dr. Barb Colburn, had insisted that she needed to remain conscious, and Ella and Lucy were trying to keep her occupied answering inane questions. Sam had never felt as helpless as he did watching his child suffer. Her life-threatening condition was the latest in a string of unpleasant surprises that the day had brought. *What other surprises can there possibly be in store for me*

today? Sam wondered. He tore his gaze from the women, overwhelmed by his daughter's pain. He pulled Jason close to him in a hug, unsure whether it was for his grandson's comfort or his own. He had wanted to leave Jason home with Lucy, but Lois had insisted that he had to come with them. *Why put him through this?* he wondered.

Sam tried to distract himself from his worries and make sense of the string of surprises that day had brought, beginning with the attempted abduction of his daughter and grandson. Fortunately, the attempt had been thwarted by the FBI tail that he'd cajoled a high-ranking friend at the Bureau into arranging. *Thank God they were there.* When the news broke that Lex Luthor had been taken into custody, apparently with a bullet in the brain, Sam had optimistically believed that the family's ordeal would *finally* be over.

He and Ella had been in high spirits when they'd walked into their daughter's home, only to be traumatized by her unknown medical condition, which had crippled her in pain. Lois has insisted that the local doctors could do nothing for her. Ella and Lucy informed him that she was suffering from a condition that was considered terminal by human medicine, but which Kryptonian technology could easily cure. Superman had promised to provide treatment later that day, but with him incapacitated, they would need to travel to his Arctic retreat on their own and ask his parents for assistance. Sam noted that the women had been vague on details. He was pulled from his reverie by Jason's quiet crying. Sam pulled his grandson tighter, and began to rock back and forth with him. "She's going to be okay," he assured the tyke. "It won't be much longer."

He looked over his grandson's head at the luxurious cabin, noting that their transportation arrangement had been another of the day's surprises. Instead of catching a flight out of Metropolis International Airport, they had instead rushed to the private Shuster Airport south of the city. There they had boarded a Wayne Enterprises private jet, piloted by none other than the billionaire majority stockholder, Bruce Wayne. He had brought cold-weather gear, the physician who was now tending to Lois and various medical supplies. Those supplies included several pints of blood for Lois' blood type. They'd immediately started Lois on a transfusion to compensate for her blood loss.

The plane's capabilities had been another surprise. Shortly after takeoff, Sam had looked out the window and witnessed the wings shift back from their takeoff position flared 85° from the aircraft body down to a 30° flare. Once the wings locked in the swept position, the cabin occupants were thrust back into their seats as the aircraft accelerated. Sam recognized the wing configuration, G-forces and diminished engine noise as the telltale signs of super-sonic flight. To find that capability in a small, privately owned plane was nothing short of astonishing. Wayne's assistant, Alfred Pennyworth, had later informed Sam that they were cruising at Mach 2.6 and would reach the transfer point in Greenland less than two hours after takeoff.

They needed an aircraft capable of vertical takeoff and landing for the final leg of the journey. Sam had pulled strings to get an Air Force Osprey standing by, informing his Pentagon colleagues that they were traveling to Superman's Arctic home to seek medical assistance. He neglected to inform them that the medical assistance was for his daughter rather than the Man of Steel. Sam noticed movement in his peripheral vision, and glanced over as the doctor swapped out yet another bag of blood. Sam winced unconsciously as he shifted his gaze away and attempted to shield the scene from his grandson's vision.

"How would you like to come and visit Grandma and me in Alexandria, after this is all over?" Sam asked his grandson, attempting to distract him from the scene behind them. "We

haven't had you over for a while now." Jason just nodded, wide-eyed, trying to be brave for Grandpa.

Day 107, Wednesday, 4:00PM, Metropolis, Metropolis General Hospital

Superman remained in darkness, frustrated by his inability to move, and focused in on the sounds around him. His hearing had alerted him to Lois' predicament, but the Kryptonite poisoning had left him too weak to move. His anxiety was aggravated by the uncertainty. His family's supersonic journey to the North meant a time lag before any sounds from them would reach his ears. *Why can't I move?* Superman wondered. *The dagger couldn't have been in me that much longer than last time, and I got right up after Lois pulled it out.*

Superman was pulled from his pondering by the nearly inaudible sound of the cell phone embedded in his uniform's belt buckle. He listened in as his sister-in-law left her message: "Hi, it's Lucy," she began. "Lois wanted me to let you know what's going on. That *super* daughter of yours is giving her some trouble, so your buddy Bruce is rushing us to.... *Santa's Castle*. Lois' condition is stable - we've got a doctor checking on her every few minutes. We should land in Greenland... about a quarter to five, Eastern Time. Dad's got an Air Force Osprey waiting for us, so we'll get to Santa's Castle a little before six. Lois says Jason'll know what to do. I'll call again when we land in Greenland... Get well soon, Clark. Bye."

Superman again reflected on immobility wondering why he still couldn't move. *What's so different this time? I was even wearing lead armor...* The Man of Steel mentally replayed the attack in his mind, remembering the excruciating pain as the blade was driven down inside his body... inside his lead armor. Comprehension dawned as he realized that the lead armor would have prevented the kryptonite radiation from escaping his body, instead reflecting it back and amplifying the effect of the deadly substance. He mentally sighed in frustration, knowing that his recovery time would take much longer than he had hoped. He would be unable to help Lois.

Day 107, Wednesday, 5:50PM, Near Superman's Fortress

Captain Walter Tibbets looked through his aircraft's wind screen at the impressive structure one hundred yards away. Few details had been provided about the last minute flight - even the destination had been withheld until his passengers were aboard. He now knew that he was looking upon Superman's fortress. He wished he could tell his kids about it, but General Lane had informed him that the fortress was classified top secret. "I'd love to see the inside of that place," he stated quietly.

"You and me both," Lieutenant Ron Monroe agreed. "I don't quite understand how the kid's got clearance to go in but we don't." The navigator peered through the window at the majestic structure, before lowering his gaze to the unlikely group trudging across the snow.

Jason led the way to the fortress, seemingly unaffected by the weather. He was carrying a cooler with additional blood units and medical supplies. Bruce and Sam were immediately behind Jason, each on opposite ends of the stretcher that carried his unconscious mother. Dr. Colburn marched along beside them, tending to Lois as best she could. Ella and Lucy brought up the rear. "That place looks amazing," Ella marveled as they approached Superman's fortress "We weren't off by much calling it a castle, were we?"

Lucy Lane was also awestruck by the sight. "We're going to have to get the full tour once they're done." Ella looked over at her daughter and smiled. Her hope was growing now that their destination was in sight. She had feared that they wouldn't make it in time. Lucy

recognized the worry etched into her mother's face, and wrapped one arm around her mother's shoulders, telling her compassionately, "We're almost there. It won't be much longer."

Jason reached the edge of the force field, and looked back to discover the others straggling behind him. "Hurry up!" he shouted impatiently, as he waited to open the door for them. It took another five minutes for the rest of the group to join him on the entry platform. Once everyone arrived, Jason pulled off one of his mittens, and waved his bare hand in front of what appeared to be a pillar of ice to the left of the entry way. A blue line of light shot ten feet up from the platform along the surface of the force field bubble, before separating to reveal the doorway. "You got to hurry through the force field," Jason informed them.

The party stopped once they reached the cavernous main interior chamber. "Obviously designed for a man who could fly," Bruce noted, as he observed a drop of several dozen feet over the side of the pathway that they were standing on. At Dr. Colburn's prompting, Bruce and Sam set Lois down along the wall at the side of the pathway.

"Doesn't look like anybody's home," Sam muttered. "I hope we didn't come all this way for nothing."

"You hafta' use the crystals," Jason informed him, pointing to a platform on the opposite site of the cavern. "They're over there."

"You sure seem to know your way around this place," Sam observed. "How is-

"She's convulsing!" Dr. Colburn interrupted, snapping open her med kit, and began preparing a syringe.

"Jason, honey," Lucy told him urgently. "Your mommy needs Jor-El's help *now!* You know what to do."

All eyes were on Jason as he took two steps towards the edge of the pathway and launched himself through the air, landing easily on the console platform sixty feet across the chamber. He reached out his hands and the crystal console grew out from the platform. "Oh, my God," Sam breathed. "How did he do that?"

Jason hopped up on console, his feet dangling a foot above the floor. Clinging to the console with one hand, he grabbed the father crystal with the other and inserted it into the activation slot. Blue and white light danced across the chamber, coalescing into the face of Jor-El. "Hello, Jason," Jor-El greeted.

"Mommy's hurt!" Jason told him anxiously, pointing towards his mother at the other end of the cavern.

Jor-El looked over at the group, focusing his attention on Lois' prone form. "What has happened?" he asked.

Ella spoke up immediately, "She was attacked with kryptonite, which activated her baby's dormant Kryptonian genes. The baby's been kicking with super-strength... She's lost a lot of blood."

Light danced across the chamber again, this time coalescing into the body of Lara, standing on the ledge with the group. "We must get her into the molecular chamber immediately. Please follow me."

Sam was frozen in shock, staring back at his wife and attempting to process what he had just seen and heard. Ella smacked him in the shoulder to break him from his trance. "Sam!" she scolded. "You need to help with the stretcher!" He quickly recovered and grabbed the back end of the stretcher, following Lara to the molecular chamber, and helping Dr. Colburn and Bruce set Lois inside the chamber. Once the door sealed, a dull red glow filled the chamber.

"Jason, where is your father?" Jor-El asked. "Why didn't he bring you here?" Jason

merely shrugged his shoulders. Jor-El turned his attention to the group. "Where is this boy's father?" he demanded.

Lucy hesitated before answering, and quietly scrutinized the other members of the group. *Well, unless they're complete idiots, they've already figured it out*, she concluded. Finally, she informed Jor-El, "The same person responsible for the attack on Lois stabbed him with a blade of kryptonite. He's at the hospital in Metropolis, in a coma."

"Daddy?" Jason cried fearfully, tears suddenly falling from his eyes.

Daddy? Dr. Colburn thought. *Kryptonian genes? My God!* "Superman is his Daddy?" Barb whispered to herself.

The men next to her both heard her words, and Bruce whispered back to her, "Of course, that falls under the purview of doctor/patient confidentiality. Wouldn't you agree?" Barb nodded her head slowly, still unable to tear her gaze from Superman's son.

"He'll be alright, sweetie," Lucy assured her nephew, cursing herself for upsetting him with her careless choice of words. "Remember what happened the last time he was in the hospital? He just needs to sleep for awhile and regain his strength. He'll be fine... C'mere." Jason again leapt across the chamber, landing in front of his aunt and grandmother. Ella immediately knelt down and pulled the sobbing child into her arms. While Ella consoled her grandson, a small crystal star launched from the fortress, homing in on the signal from Kal-El's belt buckle as it streaked across the sky.

"No..." Sam started firmly. "Can't be...There's no way on God's green earth that my daughter's useless husband can be... *him!*"

"You can't blame them for not wanting to tell you," Ella pointed out, looking over at her husband as she continued to rock her distraught grandson. "Especially after all the grief you gave them when they announced their wedding plans."

"You knew about this?" Sam asked incredulously.

"Would you have treated Clark any better if you had known that he was Superman?" Ella demanded. "You're lucky he's such a gentleman. If you had treated me that way, I'd have smacked you."

Jor-El observed the interaction between Jason and his relatives silently for a moment before speaking. "You appear to be friends of this house," he concluded. "I am Jor-El. Would you please tell me your names?"

After another moment of hesitation, Lucy answered nervously, "Um... I'm Lucy - Lois' sister. This is our mother, Ella, and the grey haired man over there is our father, General Sam Lane. The other man down there is Bruce Wayne - a friend of... your son's. The woman with them is Dr. Barb Colburn. She's the doctor who's been helping Lois on the way here... How long is she going to be in there?"

"A few more minutes," Jor-El answered. "We've suppressed her child's Kryptonian genes once again, but we are still in the process of repairing her remaining injuries. There were tears in the uterine walls and perforations in the amniotic sac."

"You've stopped the hemorrhaging?" Dr. Colburn asked in amazement. "How does that work?"

Jor-El turned to her and calmly told her, "We can manipulate all matter within the chamber at the molecular level. It's a fairly simple matter to rearrange the molecules to stop the flow of blood, or to pull tears in the tissue closed and seal them."

The door of the molecular chamber slid open and Jor-El informed the group, "The process is now complete. Human medicine should now be able to handle her needs." Dr. Colburn

quickly checked Lois before motioning to Sam and Bruce to help move her back on the stretcher. Lois was stirring slightly and mumbling incoherently.

"Is Mommy going to be okay?" Jason asked, sniffing.

"Yes, Jason," Jor-El told him. "She'll recover."

Day 107, Wednesday, 6:15PM, Metropolis, Metropolis General Hospital

Superman was contemplating his family crisis and lamenting his helplessness. He again attempted to inventory his functional motor control, which now allowed him, with great effort, to wiggle his fingers and toes and move his eyes under his closed lids. But for his family's dire circumstances, he would have gladly surrendered to the exhaustion. He suddenly became aware of the energizing warmth of sunlight bathing his body. Outside the hospital, well-wishers holding vigil outside marveled at the bright shaft of light piercing through the night sky and into the hospital window, unaware of the orbiting Kryptonian satellite high above that was reflecting amplified sunlight down upon the Man of Steel.

Superman flexed his fingers, closed them into fists, and reopened his hands as the energy coursed through him, stirring his spent muscles. He basked in the life-giving solar energy, waiting for his cells to recover sufficiently for him to follow his family north. His attention was diverted by another call to his cell phone and he focused his attention on the call, hoping that it would be good news.

"Daddy?" he heard his son start. "Mommy's sleeping, but she's all better now. She said we'd be home tomorrow. Um, can we go visit Grandma and Grandpa after we get back? An' can we show them how we play catch? Oh, um, Grandma wants to talk."

"Clark? Ella. Hope you're feeling better. We're still at your place up North. We'll be heading back in a little bit, but we won't get back to Metropolis until about six tomorrow morning. Apparently your friend doesn't want any more people knowing how fast his plane can go. We'll land at Shuster Airport south of Metropolis. Maybe you can meet us there. Take care, Clark. See you tomorrow."

Superman smiled in relief and relaxed into the sunlight. Now that he knew his family was safe, he'd allow the solar energy to fully recharge him before rejoining them.

Chapter 56 - Reunited

Day 107, Wednesday, 6:15PM, Superman's Fortress

Sam Lane sat at the crystal table in the Fortress with his sniffling grandson on his lap clinging tightly to him, while Bruce Wayne sat on the floor leaning against one of the walls nearby. The three were waiting for the women, who had disappeared into the structure's bedroom to help Lois get cleaned up and changed into clean clothes. Sam squeezed his eyes shut and pulled Jason closer as he reflected on the evening's ordeal. *The poor boy's been through so much today*, Sam thought. *We almost lost her.*

Bruce surreptitiously scrutinized Sam Lane as the other man stared into space and absently rubbed his grandson's back. Though Sam's expression remained stoic to the casual observer, Bruce identified a myriad of emotions cross the older man's face. He was undoubtedly having difficulty with the day's stunning revelations. Bruce broke the silence, and gently asked, "Is everything alright there, General?"

"Do you really need to ask that after what just happened here?" Sam asked numbly, shifting his gaze to look at the other man.

"We got her here in time," Bruce reminded him.

"Thanks to you," Sam replied. He briefly glanced up towards the bedroom, before returning his attention to Bruce. "I don't think that we'll ever be able to thank you enough for what you did."

"I promised them that I'd help them through the ordeal with Luthor, and I'm a man of my word," Bruce told him sincerely. "I'm just glad that everything worked out alright."

"No thanks to my daughter's *alien* husband," Sam muttered.

"I'd have to take issue with that statement," Bruce informed him simply. "It is precisely because of the contingency plans that Clark put in place that we were in a position to get here this quickly."

"My daughter wouldn't have nearly..." Sam halted abruptly, not wanting to upset his grandson. He took a deep breath and continued angrily, "We wouldn't have had... this problem... if she wasn't carrying a half-alien baby!"

"That baby'll be an incredible child, just like her brother," Bruce reminded him. Sam looked away and sighed deeply, recalling his grandson's remarkable leap across the chamber earlier that evening. After granting the general a moment of silence, Bruce continued, "I think that maybe you're being a bit harsh with Clark... He came to see me a couple of days after Luthor put him in the hospital the last time, and asked for my help. He wanted to have contingency plans in place to protect Lois and Jason in case something happened to him, or if the secret got out. That included a contingency for getting them both here. Of course, we didn't anticipate that it'd be a medical emergency and that we'd be racing against time to get them here. I had a contract in place to get an amphibious aircraft out of Thule, Greenland on twelve hours notice, but that wasn't enough time in this case. Fortunately, you came through with the Osprey... I may have to get me one of those."

Sam nodded quietly before admitting, "I had no idea about any of this."

"They're both very protective of the secret, and with good reason," Bruce pointed out. "Superman has plenty of enemies vicious enough to come after his family to get at him, like Luthor did this morning."

"Luthor knew?" Sam asked incredulously.

"He didn't know Clark's secret, but he was aware of Jason's heritage," Bruce informed him. "When Luthor was holding Lois and Jason captive on his yacht during that New Krypton

fiasco, one of his goons tried to..." Bruce paused briefly, eyeing the child in Sam's arms before continuing, "Tried to hurt Lois. Jason stopped him by throwing a piano at him." Sam looked down at his grandson while contemplating the ordeal that his daughter had endured, and his son-in-law's role in both the cause and the resolution as Bruce continued, "That's a bit difficult to explain away."

Lois Lane sucked in her breath suddenly at the ice-cold stethoscope's contact with her flesh. She was sitting on the bed dressed only in her panties and brassiere while Dr. Barb Colburn checked her over. Her mother, Ella, was standing by the bed, pulling out jeans and a sweater from the hastily packed overnight bag that they'd brought with them. Lucy observed from the doorway. "Too col'," Lois slurred. She tried to offer up her typical sarcastic comment, but had trouble recalling the words to articulate the thoughts.

"This won't be long," Dr. Colburn promised, repositioning the stethoscope on Lois' abdomen.

"She seems a little out of it," Lucy noted.

"It's probably from the pain killers I gave her on the way here," Dr. Colburn explained. "It should wear off in a few hours - I wouldn't worry about it." She pulled the stethoscope from her neck and placed it back in her bag. She smiled at Lois and told her, "Well, everything seems fine. You can go ahead and get dressed now." Ella brought her daughter the clothing that she'd just removed from their bag and helped her pull the sweater over her head.

Barb Colburn jotted down her results in a notebook, before dropping that into her medical bag, and pulling out a prescription pad. "I'm not sure what medical consequences may result from that contraption out there. I think it's probably best to treat this like we would if we used conventional methods to stop the hemorrhaging. I'm giving you a prescription for a prophylactic dose of lovenox, which is for dissolving blood clots. I'm also giving you some acetaminophen for the pain, as needed. I think I have some in my bag... where is... oh, here it is. It's the same stuff you get over the counter at the drugstore. I don't want to risk anything stronger with the baby."

"I'll hold on to that," Lucy offered. She looked over at Lois, who was now standing with help from her mother and pulling up her jeans.

Doctor Colburn handed the blister pack of acetaminophen to Lucy, and informed the women, "I'm also recommending that you get plenty of rest, and try to take it easy for the next couple of days. Give your body time to heal... Well, I think we're done here. I'll see you downstairs."

"Doctor?" Ella called. Barb Colburn stopped at the doorway, and looked back at the older woman. "Thank you for everything."

"I'm just glad I could help," Dr. Colburn told her pleasantly. "Besides, I certainly wouldn't want to tell Superman that I let something happen to his wife on my watch." She turned and exited the room quickly, leaving Lois staring after her wide-eyed and frozen in shock.

Superman rocketed across the Hudson Bay and the northern province of Nunavut, concentrating intently as he traveled northward. He came to an abrupt stop just north of the Queen Elizabeth Islands, when the sound waves from the activity at the Fortress nearly thirty minutes earlier finally reached that point just over three hundred miles away. He focused his concentration on the words and again shot northward, breaking the sound barrier and straining to track the conversation as he accelerated through the words.

They know, Superman realized. He had heard Lois reveal the secret to her mother from their Metropolis home earlier, and trusted his wife's judgment there. However the critical situation at the Fortress that had revealed his secret to the others was unexpected. Sam's knowledge of the secret was most troubling, given the man's bluster and apparent disdain for Clark Kent. Colburn also knew, and she was a wildcard. The Man of Steel recalled her name from a discussion with Bruce Wayne, mentioning her as a possible candidate for Jason's immunization dilemma. They were considering entrusting her with kryptonite tipped hypodermic needles to penetrate Jason's invulnerable skin, though they hadn't planned on revealing the family secrets to her.

Superman took note of the Osprey parked at the Fortress during his approach and quickly scanned it before landing on the entry platform. He waved his hand over the access sensor and once the doorway appeared, he rushed into the Fortress at super-speed, quickly reaching the bedroom without being detected by the group downstairs. He found his wife drowsily embracing their sleeping son as she lay on the bed. Ella was seated on the side of the bed, gently rubbing her grandson's back, and Lucy was leaning against the opposite wall. His sister-in-law was the first to notice him. "Thank God you're alright," she whispered, the relief apparent in her voice. "We were starting to get worried."

The other women followed her gaze to Superman, Lois raising a finger to her lips as a wide smile spread across her face. "Missed 'ou," she slurred in a quiet whisper.

Superman looked at them with a pained look on his face. "I'm so sorry that you had to go through this," he told them softly. "I should have realized..."

"Stop," Lois commanded in a whisper.

"It's not your fault," Ella assured him. "She'll recover, and now that Luthor's out of commission, maybe you two can finally relax..." Ella paused and scrutinized the man before her. Finally, she compassionately told him, "There's something you need to know... Clark. We had a little excitement here earlier..." She looked down affectionately at her grandson and added softly, "We got to see our little hero here in action, which made certain... facts... obvious."

"Everyone knows the family secret," Superman summarized for her. He sighed deeply and looked over at his wife lovingly. "The important thing is that Lois is okay. We can deal with the rest." He joined Ella at the edge of the bed and caught one of Lois' hands in his own, squeezing it affectionately.

"Well, we'll give you some privacy," Ella promised kindly as she guided Lucy towards the door. "We'll be downstairs."

Superman leaned over and gave his wife a chaste kiss, afterwards leaning his forehead against hers. "Everybody's safe now," he whispered to her. "The nightmare's over."

Ella and Lucy cheerfully informed the group of Superman's arrival, and the group was in high spirits as they waited for him to join them. The exception was Sam Lane, whose frown remained firmly entrenched. "This isn't right," he muttered. "This never should have happened."

"Oh, hush," Ella commanded. "Everything turned out all right."

"He's an *alien*," Sam reminded her.

"He can hear you," Lucy pointed out.

Sam sighed deeply as he rubbed the bridge of his nose. "None of this would have happened if Clark had been human," Sam insisted.

"And Lois would be dead a dozen times over, along with thousands if not millions of others," Lucy pointed out. "There would be nobody to stop Luthor, nobody to answer the desperate cries for help whenever disaster strikes. It's better that he is who he is. And whatever else he may be, he's *family* to us."

"Lucy's right, Sam," Ella pointed out. "He *our* son-in-law, *our* daughter's husband, *our* grandchildren's father."

"But he's not-" Sam started weakly.

"You're not becoming a bigot, are you, Sam?" Ella accused. "Are you judging Clark on his ancestry?"

Sam sighed in frustration, and looked over at his wife silently for a moment. "Things got scary today," Sam finally admitted quietly. "What if next time-"

"We'll learn from this," Bruce declared. "We'll improve our emergency procedures to reduce the response time. We also now know to get her here *immediately* if her unborn child is exposed to kryptonite."

"Hopefully, we won't face this situation again, but we'll be prepared if it happens," Superman informed them, as he floated down. "If I can speak to you all for a moment..." The others looked up at him, watching as he gently touched down in their midst.

"Some of you discovered a very closely guarded secret today," he began. "I need to stress to you the importance of keeping that secret."

"You're worried that we'll spill the beans?" Sam asked suspiciously. "What's wrong, Clark? Don't trust the in-laws?"

"It's not simply a matter of trust," Superman told him firmly. "There's too much at stake to leave the matter unsaid. I have some ferocious enemies who wouldn't hesitate to come after my family if they knew about them. Also, if they knew that you knew, your lives could be in danger, too. Nobody else can know of this."

The group was mute for a moment, before Sam Lane broke the fragile silence, "Clark, we may not always see eye to eye, but I'd never endanger my... *our* family by revealing your secret," Sam assured him irritably. "You don't need to worry about me."

"My lips are sealed, too, Clark," Ella promised him pleasantly. "You knew that."

Superman turned his gaze to Barb Colburn. Recognizing his gaze upon her, she nervously told him, "I'm, um, I think this is a matter of doctor/patient confidentiality. Your secret's safe."

"I wasn't concerned so much that any of you would blurt something out as much as it accidentally slipping out," he clarified. "I'd ask you to also bear in mind that you usually can't assume that this is a safe subject to talk about - you never know when someone could be listening. The only two places that Lois and I discuss this secret openly are here or our house in Metropolis, both of which have Kryptonian countermeasures available. I have to ask you not to discuss this." After some grumbling from Sam, the others voiced their agreement to abide by that policy.

"So, we're all okay here?" Lucy asked patiently.

"Yes," Clark informed her quietly. "It's just... It's still a little weird for me to have so many people knowing. It doesn't seem like that long ago that my mother was the only one who knew."

"So, Clark..." Lucy began. "Lois tells me that this place takes some awesome prenatal baby pictures... Any chance we could get a peek at them?" Superman smiled widely for a moment before floating over to the crystal console and activating the holographic images of his unborn child, taken during his wife's treatment earlier that evening. He beamed proudly as his

awestruck guests gazed upon his daughter.

Day 108, Thursday, 7:30AM, 1938 Sullivan Lane (the Lane/Kent Home)

Sam Lane wearily leaned back in his chair at the kitchen table as he observed the family in his midst. From all appearances, it seemed a normal family breakfast, though it felt far from normal for Sam. Since their return to the house the previous evening, the normal family interactions seemed surreal to Sam, now knowing the head of the household was Superman. *My little girl, married to the world's greatest hero? Sam thought, who masquerades as an über-dork?*

The family gathering in the kitchen was joined by Martha Kent and her fiancé, Ben Hubbard, who had caught the first plane to Metropolis upon hearing of Superman's injuries. They were now all enjoying Martha's homemade pancakes. Sam looked over at his wife, who was leaning against the kitchen counter laughing softly as she talked to Martha. He was amazed at how easily she had adjusted to the new knowledge that their son-in-law was Superman. It was as if nothing had changed for her. Jason seemed to return to his cheerful self that morning, too, smiling widely as he chewed his pancakes.

Sam's attention shifted to Clark, who was in the living room on the phone with Perry White. He marveled at how thoroughly the timid façade had fooled him and listened in to Clark's end of the conversation: "Um, no, it's n-not just the attack. She was hemorrhaging... N-no, um, the baby's fine... He's a bit clingy right now, but fine otherwise... I... I can be in after her d-doctor's appointment... Yes, sir, thank you.... Yes, sir, s-see you tomorrow... Goodbye."

"So we've got the day off?" Lois guessed hopefully.

"Yep," Clark confirmed simply. "I think he's still basking in the afterglow of Ron's page one exclusive this morning on... yesterday's excitement." He accepted a plate of pancakes from his mother as he walked into the kitchen and joined the others at the table.

"This is going to take some getting used to..." Sam muttered. He closed his eyes and dropped his head against his palm.

"I hear ya' there," Ben joked as he chuckled at the man's reaction. "I felt the same way when they told me. In fact, I didn't believe Martha when she told me that her son - the boy I'd remembered getting pushed around at his school - was actually Superman."

"He thought I'd gone senile," Martha teased gently.

"Now, I never said that, dear," Ben told her pleasantly. "And I was proved wrong."

"It boggles the mind," Sam concluded, lifting his head again and looking over at Clark. "That this..."

"Mild-mannered, wonderful man?" Lois suggested happily

Sam paused momentarily, smiling back at his daughter. "That behind this domestic tableau is the most powerful being on this Earth."

"Try not to think of it like that," Martha suggested. "Yes, he can do things that the rest of us can't do, but underneath it all... if you take away the blue tights... he's really not that different. He's a good son, a devoted husband and father. He just occasionally saves the world in his free time."

Sam scrutinized his son-in-law for a moment before shaking his head and lowering his gaze to the empty plate in front of him. "Well, I suppose there are worse things than having a superhero in the family," he finally admitted, smirking as he looked up. "Might even come in handy from time to time..."

"Dad..." Lois warned.

Sam chuckled lightly at his daughter, and again scrutinized the family in front of him. *Maybe this isn't such a bad thing after all, Sam thought. Though it's definitely going to take some getting used to.*

Chapter 57 - Cleanup

Day 108, Thursday, 9:00AM, 10,000 feet over Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

Superman was in high spirits as he flew west across Pennsylvania. The uncertainty that had burdened him over the last four months was quickly evaporating with Lex Luthor's capture. There was still work to be done to secure the family secret, but it would be a much easier task now that he knew where everyone was. Luthor, of course, had been his biggest concern.

His first stop that morning had been to visit the hospital staff at Metropolis General, where Luthor remained under heavy guard. The gunshot wound that Ricky Hernandez had inflicted on him had decimated his cerebellum and left him in a coma. Assuming he survived, Luthor would likely spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair, his motor control destroyed by the brain injury. Even speech would be impossible at first. In time, with physical therapy, he might eventually be able to communicate through a tablet attached to his wheelchair, selecting phonetic icons from the board with a joystick. *He needs to recover enough to stand trial,* Superman thought. *His victims should be able to confront him in court and demand justice.*

Superman had mixed feelings over Luthor's prospective physical rehabilitation. Though he wanted him to be able to communicate well enough to stand trial, he was concerned over what his nemesis might reveal once that ability was recovered. *I need to purge his memory of Jason,* he concluded. *But there's no way I can sneak in there the way things are right now.* Luthor remained under heavy guard, despite his coma. The security surrounding him was almost as heavy as the detail assigned to the Man of Steel. *I should have time before he's able to communicate anything, though.*

The Man of Steel's thoughts moved ahead to Luthor's associates, who might also share the knowledge. Kitty Kowalski certainly knew, having been aboard the *Gertrude* with Luthor when Jason tossed the piano at the henchman. Lex had leaked the secret to Ricky, so there was a chance that he may have told his other lieutenants the news. They had Luthor's personnel files from Ricky's spyware, and thus he knew who the lieutenants were. Given that Lex was an unforgiving boss, some of them were already dead. They'd have to interview each and every one of Luthor's underlings to determine the scope of the leak. *Well, might as well get one of them scratched off my list,* Superman thought. He looked down over the cityscape below him, and descended to his destination.

Day 108, Thursday, 10:45AM, Cook County, Illinois, Cook County Correctional Facility

Kitty Kowalski lounged back on the bunk in her cell and tried to occupy herself with an old copy of *People*. She had already read through it twice before, but there was little else to do in the cramped room, which was one of a handful reserved for solitary confinement. She'd requested the isolation almost immediately after her arrest, fearful of Lex's reach, and suspecting that he'd no longer ignore her earlier betrayal with the Kryptonian crystals now that he was no longer sleeping with her. Her only visits had been from some reporter the day after her arrest, a court-assigned lawyer, and the detectives seeking information on Luthor.

Kitty was startled by the billy stick tapping against the bars of the small window in the steel door to her cell. She looked up to see the face of one of the prison guards, Marge Carson, glaring down at her. "On your feet, prisoner," Marge ordered. "You know the routine."

Kitty huffed irritably, and threw the magazine down. She stood up and asked, "Who is it this time?"

"Warden wants to see you," the woman answered. "Now assume the position." Kitty

rolled her eyes and walked over to the door, turned to face the opposite direction and held her hands behind her. The access panel in the middle of the door opened, and the guard snapped the cuffs over her wrists. Once the door opened, Kitty saw that Marge was flanked by four male guards dressed in riot gear. They quickly cuffed Kitty's ankles and secured everything to a chain around her waist.

Kitty noted that they were not heading in the direction of the warden's office, and that their circuitous path hadn't encountered any other prisoners. The halls seemed strangely barren. Fear gripped her and she slowed her pace. "This isn't the way to the warden's office," Kitty said fearfully.

"It is today," Marge countered brusquely.

Oh, God, Kitty thought, *Lex has finally found a way to get to me.* She dropped to the floor, screaming. "No! I don't want to die!"

"Oh, for Pete's sake, not this again," Marge complained. She motioned to the guards, and they lifted Kitty up by the shoulders and feet, struggling to carry her along as she squirmed. A few minutes later, they walked into the elevator and Marge pushed the button for the top floor. Marge turned to Kitty and asked irritably, "Why must you overreact like this?"

When the elevator reached their floor, the guards carried Kitty out, and through door to stairwell, where they dropped the still struggling Kitty on the landing. Kitty quickly glanced around her surroundings. They were at the top of the stairwell, and the normally locked roof access hatch was wide open. Warden Thomas Gilbert stepped into her field of vision, frowning down on her. "Gave you trouble, did she?" he asked the guards.

"How'd ya' guess?" Marge acknowledged. The warden made an up motion with both hands, and two of the male guards lifted Kitty to her feet.

"Why are we here?" Kitty asked fearfully. "What are you going to do to me?"

"Someone wants a word with you off the record," the warden answered calmly. "I think he's earned that right."

"Who?" Kitty asked apprehensively.

Warden Gilbert turned from her and looked up at the open roof hatch. "You'll see," he answered cryptically. Kitty followed his gaze to the hatch in time to see Superman floating down into the stairwell.

"Ms. Kowalski," Superman greeted sternly. "I think it's time we had a little chat." He turned to the warden and pleasantly asked, "How much time do I have?"

"If you can keep it under an hour, it'll make things easier for us," the warden told him.

"Then I'll make it forty-five minutes, just to be safe," Superman told him. At the warden's nod, the Man of Steel lifted Kitty Kowalski off her feet, and took her up through the roof hatch with him and into the night sky.

Day 108, Thursday, 12:00PM, Metropolis, 1938 Sullivan Lane (The Lane/Kent Home)

Lois Lane curled her feet up underneath herself at the end of the couch as she looked over her husband's notes. She sighed in frustration and pinched the bridge of her nose before looking over at him. "So, Kitty wasn't any help at all?"

"I wouldn't say that," Clark answered gently. "She was genuinely cooperative. It's just that Luthor kept her out of the loop. He didn't trust her with operational details... and she did agree to the memory purge when we were done, too."

"Same thing you did to me?" Lois asked in a barely audible whisper, nervously eying her father who was napping in the recliner.

"It's a little different," Clark explained. "We want her to be able to testify against Luthor, which she conditionally agreed to. I couldn't just wipe everything since she saw you on the *Gertrude*. Instead, I used the molecular chamber to sequentially scan her memories and remove anything about Jason, but leave the rest intact."

"And the same thing'll happen to Luthor, right?" Lois inquired seriously.

"It'll probably be more pervasive, since he's certainly been obsessing over our family for most of the last four months," Clark elaborated. "I won't be able to do anything while he's being so closely monitored in ICU, though, so it won't be for awhile, given his injuries."

"So we have... eighteen, nineteen, twenty...twenty-one thugs we have to interview to find out if they know about Jason?" Lois asked irritably.

"We have to be sure," Clark told her adamantly. "Hopefully, none of them know. Ricky told us weeks ago that Luthor didn't trust his lieutenants with the secret. He was paranoid that some two-bit hood would find out and do something to ruin his plans for vengeance. Yet, he slipped and told Ricky during one of his tirades." Clark rubbed his chin pensively for a moment, his eyes locked on the floor. Finally, he softly added, "I really couldn't discuss the matter with Ricky this morning, given the circumstances."

Lois' eyes narrowed in anger. She lowered the notes down in her lap and swore under her breath, shaking her head and rolling her eyes. Finally, she turned back to Clark told him, "I have a few words for that rock-for-brains Neanderthal that ran him in."

"We're working on it," Clark assured her. "He won't be there long."

"Lois?" Ella called from the kitchen, where she and Martha had been eavesdropping. "Is something wrong?"

"Yes, something is wrong!" Lois exploded. "Remember that brave man who's been providing us intel on Luthor all these months and who put a bullet in Luthor's brain to save Clark's life yesterday? Well, some bonehead cop ran him in on a parole violation for using a firearm!" Lois' shouting woke her sleeping father and he sleepily looked over at his furious daughter.

"Oh, dear," Ella muttered.

"We're doing everything we can for him," Clark assured the women. "Bruce is using his contacts to pressure the governor to intervene, and Pete Ross is trying to set up a meeting with the White House on the matter. We're also trying to at least furlough him or get him out on bail in the meantime."

"After they see my editorial in tomorrow's paper, they'll *have* to do something," Lois declared confidently.

"That should help," Clark concluded. He paused pensively for a moment, his expression unreadable. "Maybe we could recruit Richard's help with the interviews. I'll try to get together as much background as I can on them this afternoon, and afterwards we come up with a plan of attack." Lois nodded her agreement before returning her attention to their list of suspects.

Day 108, Thursday, 2:10PM, Metropolis, The Daily Planet

Richard White sat alone in his office, looking through the glass wall into the bullpen as the staff there enjoyed the lull in the chaos that always immediately followed the afternoon edition deadline. He felt almost like an outsider observing the tableau, reflecting on how different things were likely to be. It was something that he'd been considering since the previous afternoon, when he caught wind of the latest gossip churning through the rumor mill. Once the afternoon edition had been put to bed, Richard had noticed the surreptitious glances

in his direction and the sudden quiet as he walked by. Apparently the gossip concerned him, or more likely, his failed relationship with Lois. He had tried to ignore it, but was soon fed up enough to corner one of the proof-readers for details. Though he had already known what she had told him, he was surprised that it had gotten out so quickly.

He knew from Lois' email the previous morning that Jason had inadvertently spilled the beans about his parents' marriage and his mother's pregnancy. Those who knew had been sworn to secrecy for as long as Luthor remained at large. However, Luthor was in custody as of the previous afternoon, which Susan Walters had taken as explicit permission to provide her commentary on her co-workers domestic situation. The details had spread through the rumor mill like wildfire. *Those two are in for a surprise when they get back*, Richard thought. *No way to put **this** genie back in the bottle.*

Richard also contemplated that with Luthor out of commission, a huge weight had been lifted from their shoulders. Jason was safe, and his parents were moving forward with their relationship, the gossip notwithstanding. The point was further driven home by Lois' call earlier that afternoon, asking if he be interesting in helping interview Luthor's known associates to determine if he passed on any *sensitive information* to them. *In other words, do they know about Jason?* Richard translated. Of course, he would help them.

Richard was pulled from his reverie when his uncle peeked through his door. "What are you hiding in here for?" Perry barked. He paused at the contemplative expression on his nephew's face, and added gently, "Is something on your mind?"

"Just thinking about how much things have changed over the past months," Richard replied quietly. "It's going to be a bit... interesting... when the Kents get back to the office. We should probably warn them about the gossip."

"Well, it sure didn't take that long to-" Perry began. He stopped abruptly as the rest of his nephew's statement sunk in. After a moment, he added, "So they're the Kents now?"

"Huh?" Richard said in surprise. "What was that?"

"You said 'when the Kents get back'," Perry reminded him. He closely scrutinized his nephew as he waited for a response.

"I did?" Richard muttered. "I guess they *are* the Kents now. They're married, with a son and another child on the way."

"Does this mean that you're finally ready to move on with your life?" Perry asked meaningfully. "You haven't gotten out much since Lois left."

"I needed time," Richard explained. "It's still sad to think about it, but I can't dwell on the past."

"Good, because your Aunt Alice has done it to me again," Perry told him irritably. "She's having another one of her blasted dinner parties and you *are* going to be there. I'll expect you to bring a date."

Chapter 58 - House Guests

Day 108, Thursday, 5:15PM, Metropolis, 1938 Sullivan Lane (The Lane/Kent Home)

Ricky Hernandez' mind was reeling from the events of recent days that made him feel like an outside observer to his own life. It seemed more like a bizarre and twisted soap opera than the reality that he knew it to be. He shivered and pulled his jacket tighter against the cold on the deck behind the house where he and Rosa would be staying for the next week. His surprise furlough and the invitation from his hosts was another event that would take some effort to wrap his mind around.

He was stunned by the overwhelming public support he received since his arrest on parole violations, including the intervention of influential public figures that secured the conditional furlough for him. He was required to wear an electronic tether and forbidden to leave the county, but was otherwise free until his court hearing the following Thursday. When he'd mentioned in a prison interview that neither he nor Rosa knew anyone in the area, he'd again been surprised by the generosity of unknown supporters, offering to open their homes to them. They'd even been offered a luxury suite at the Bessolo Boulevard Marriott Hotel. In the end, they had accepted the invitation from Lois Lane, which had been hand delivered by the Man of Steel himself.

After passing through a press gauntlet outside the Ocean County Jail, Superman had whisked him away from the chaos, delivering him to the roof of a suburban mall parking garage a few minutes later, where Rosa and their hostess, Lois Lane, were waiting for him. When he arrived at the home several minutes later, they had been greeted warmly by Lois' family. Ricky marveled at how genuinely friendly they were, wondering if even his own family would have welcomed him so eagerly.

Only Lois' father, Lieutenant General Sam Lane, seemed immune from the affection afflicting everyone else. He approached Ricky and Rosa in his full Army dress regalia, addressing them as he would his troops. He was very formal as he thanked them for their brave efforts in the battle. Though he welcomed them as comrades-in-arms, it was clear from the general's remarks that he was in charge. He'd even started laying out ground rules for their stay before Lois and her mother intervened. Ella Lane assured them that the general's bark was worse than his bite, and ordered him to change out of his uniform before they sat down to their six o'clock dinner.

Lois had afterwards given her guests a tour of the home, with her son Jason clinging tightly to her side. The tour ended at the guest room where he and Rosa would be staying. He took the opportunity to shower, and dressed in khakis, a dress shirt and sweater before joining Rosa and their hosts in the living room. Lois had artfully steered the conversation away from recent events, and had been excitedly discussing wedding plans, pregnancy and childbirth with Rosa. He and Rosa had both been stunned when Ella mentioned in passing that Lois was nearly three months pregnant with her second child. *I guess Superman didn't waste a lot of time when he got back*, he had pondered.

The real shocker came shortly before dinner, when Clark Kent arrived. Ricky recognized his name as Lois' co-writer from the Daily Planet. Shortly after Lois had introduced him as her husband, Jason burst from his basement playroom, where Ben Hubbard and Sam Lane had been keeping him occupied. Ricky's eyes went wide in shock to hear the boy shout "Daddy!" as he leaped into the man's arms. *Oh. My. God*, Ricky thought. *If he's 'Daddy,' then that would mean...* Ricky scrutinized the other man, noting the similar height and build and trying to imagine the face without the thick glasses. *Could he really be Superman?*

The man seemed to sense Ricky's sudden nervousness. He had turned to him with a wide smile, and advised him, "Please try to relax. We'll have some matters to discuss after dinner, and I expect that you'll certainly have questions for us as well. We'll do our best to answer them. In the meantime, you're in for a treat. I've yet to find *anyone* who can top my mother's cooking." Martha had downplayed the compliment, insisting that it was just standard country fare.

Martha is his mother, Ricky had noted. *How is that possible, if he's who I think he is?* Given the enormity of what he suspected of his host, Ricky wasn't expecting to be so pleasantly distracted from it by Martha's delectable pot roast. It had more than lived up to her son's praise, especially after the prison fare that he had choked down. He had, however, occasionally snuck glances at the other man during dinner as he analyzed his suspicions.

As the seconds crawled by during the meal, Ricky noted how normal the dinnertime conversations were. The subject matter bounced around considerably, from Jason's school to Lois' and Rosa's pregnancies; From Martha and Ben's upcoming wedding and retirement in Montana, to getting time off work for a proper honeymoon for Clark and Lois. *This is dinnertime at Superman's house?* Ricky wondered. *This isn't that much different than mealtime with my family. Except the food would be spicier... and there'd be more yelling.*

Finally, after an inconceivably long time, they had finished the meal, and most of the family retired to the living room, lethargic from the heavy meal. However, Clark had guided Ricky and Rosa to his office in the back of the house. He and Rosa sat on the well-worn couch, while Lois sat in her office chair and Clark remained standing. Clark gently prodded him, "I sense that there is a question that you've wanted to ask me since I walked in the door. Why don't we get that out of the way before we start?"

Rosa wrinkled her brow in confusion as she looked between the two men. "Ricky?" she asked softly. Though she also knew that Jason was the son of Superman, she had not yet connected the dots back to Clark as her fiancé had.

Ricky rubbed his palms nervously, and found a spot on the floor to stare at as he posed his question. "Well, um, we... we already knew about Jason... Jason's ancestry. And when I heard him call you 'Daddy,' it... it made me wonder." Ricky paused as his mouth went dry. Rosa grabbed his hand firmly, and he looked up into her eyes, widened in shock at the implication of what he was saying. He swallowed with some difficulty, and returned his focus to the floor. Rosa also diverted her eyes from the object of her Ricky's question. He exhaled deeply, and squeezed his eyes shut as he continued, "I was, um, wondering if... I mean, if you are..."

"Yes, I am," Clark answered in the deep timbre that Ricky immediately recognized as Superman's voice. Ricky and Rosa both looked up to discover their host dressed in Superman's famous blue tights and cape. "We knew it wouldn't take you long to put it all together, given what you already knew about our son." The Man of Steel paused briefly and observed his guests' reaction to the confirmation of their suspicions.

Finally, he continued sincerely, "To say that I'm uncomfortable sharing this secret would be a gross understatement. It's only recently that I even shared this with my in-laws. However, if there was ever anyone outside the family who'd earned the right to this knowledge, it's you. Your bravery ended the nightmare for us. You took great risks to help us. It was your plan that flushed out Luthor, and your quick response that saved my life after he stabbed me. You're *our* hero. We owe you a debt that we can never fully repay."

Ricky and Rosa were both left speechless by the revelation and unexpected praise. They

stared at the heroic figure before them, uncertain how to respond. After a silence that seemed to last an eternity, Lois informed them of their ground rules for protecting the secret. It was not to be discussed openly anywhere other than the Kents' home.

Ricky's mind went numb as his hosts then described the efforts that were underway on his behalf. They'd been calling in favors to secure his continued freedom, found an anonymous donor to pay their bills, and even found him a potential employment opportunity. The Kents would also protect their privacy for the duration of their stay, filtering through requests for interviews and the like.

It was after that discussion that Ricky sought some fresh air and escaped to the deck behind the house where he grappled with the truths revealed to him that night. He was unsure how long he was out there when he felt Rosa's arms wrap around him and she silently leaned into his embrace in affectionate understanding.

"It seems a bit cold to be standing out there this long," Martha commented pensively. "How long has it been now?"

"A little over an hour," Ben informed her. "They've got a lot on their minds, and probably want a little privacy."

"Well, they don't have to freeze their rears off in the process," Martha declared. She turned on her heel, and marched towards the back of the house to retrieve their guests.

Day 108, Thursday, 8:00PM, Metropolis, 312 Riverview (Home of Richard White)

Richard White leaned forward from his seat on the living room couch, spreading out the papers before him on the coffee table. He was reviewing the background information on Lex Luthor's hired help in preparation for the interviews over the next several days. He quickly skimmed through the records and let out a deep sigh. He looked up at his spectacled guest and asked tiredly, "We have twenty-one of these to go through?"

"Twenty-one, but it's mainly his lieutenants that I'm worried about," Clark told him. "There are no secrets revealed in his emails or IMs, but it would be more likely to slip out in verbal conversation. Given Luthor's paranoia, I think it's safe to say that he didn't want to risk anyone beating him to the, um, 'kill'." Clark swallowed and squeezed his eyes shut as he contemplated just how close his nemesis had come to achieving his objective.

Richard recognized the raw emotion on his colleague's face and remained silent for a moment before responding. "Nobody made the 'kill', Clark, and they're not going to. Everyone's recovered, right?"

Clark nodded. "It was scary for awhile there, though. I never felt so helpless... knowing that I couldn't help Lois when she needed me. Thank God they got her there in time."

"I take it that there was more to it than the 'hemorrhaging' that you told Perry about," Richard prodded.

"The baby reacted to the kryptonite that Lois' attackers had brought with them," Clark explained in a low voice. "Her heritage asserted itself, and her kicks became life threatening. They had to get to ... my place up North to take care of that."

"My, God," Richard muttered. "But she's okay now?"

Clark smiled and nodded, "She fine, and so is the baby. Lois' parents know the family secret now, which we hadn't planned on sharing. Sam wasn't pleased..."

Richard snorted at that. "God, I would have paid good money to see the look on his face."

Clark chuckled before replying seriously, "It's amusing to think about now, but there

wasn't much humor in it at the time." Both men were silent for a moment as they contemplated Sam's reaction to the revelation. Finally, Clark broke the silence and pointed to one of the photos on the coffee table. "We should probably start with Phil Castle. Ricky says he's a bit of a screw-up, which means Luthor's more likely to lose his temper with him and let loose a diatribe that revealed more than he planned on."

Richard nodded in agreement and pulled out the notes on the felon while the two men planned their interview strategy.

Day 108, Thursday, 11:30PM, Metropolis, 1938 Sullivan Lane (The Lane/Kent Home)

Ricky and Rosa were seated at the kitchen table chuckling at the anecdotes that Martha was telling them about her son. The old woman's gentle kindness and patience in answering their questions had put them at ease. The overwhelming tide of emotions surging from the earlier revelations had finally subsided and the pair was thoroughly enjoying Martha's company. Ricky looked up at her and admitted mirthfully, "All of that sounds so... normal. You make it sound like Superman was a typical kid from America's heartland."

"Well, he was, for the most part," Martha clarified pleasantly. "There was just a little extra mixed in. Mind you, he didn't find out about his heritage until after he left home. That farm boy from Kansas is who he really is. Not the idealized hero that everyone idolizes, and not the clumsy mild-mannered reporter I hear about."

Before Ricky or Rosa had a chance to reply, the basement door opened and Clark stepped through. "I see that I'm not the only night owl around here," he commented quietly. He pulled a glass from the cupboard, and poured himself some lemonade before joining the others at the table. Turning to Ricky and Rosa, he asked them, "How are you two doing? You seemed a bit overwhelmed earlier."

"We're doing much better, Mr. Kent," Rosa assured him. "It's just been... a lot to take in... God, I still can't believe that we're Superman's house guests. I never imagined..."

"I think I owe you at least that much," Clark insisted. "And, please, call me 'Clark', unless I'm wearing tights."

"Sorry," Rosa replied bashfully. After a brief pause, she added, "Clark."

"Are you in for the night, now?" Martha asked her son.

Clark shook his head. "I promised Lois an update on our interview strategy once I finished going over everything with Richard, but after that I have some... errands."

"She went to bed about an hour ago," Martha told him.

"She's sitting up in bed, pecking away on her laptop," Clark informed her. "Everyone else is asleep. Though I'm surprised that Ben's snoring isn't keeping everyone else up. Looks like Jason wrapped his pillow around his ears to try to block the noise."

"That's why he's on the air mattress in the basement, instead of the hide-a-bed in your office," Martha answered mirthfully. "And why I packed earplugs." After a moment, she added seriously, "Clark, Lois really needs to get more rest, especially after everything that's happened lately."

"I know, Ma," Clark replied. "She's still a bit wound up, though... I'll see what I can do." Clark put his empty glass in the dishwasher and headed up the stairs to brief his wife on their interview strategy.

Chapter 59 - New Beginnings

Day 131, Saturday, 9:30PM, Metropolis, 1313 Mockingbird Lane (Home of Perry White)

Richard White silently swept his gaze across his uncle's living room, taking note of the other guests and trying to guess their connection to Perry. Some were family, such as his cousin Barb and her husband Todd, who were visiting from Ohio. They were also joined by a handful of their colleagues from the *Daily Planet*. Jimmy Olsen, Ron Thorpe, Gil Truman and Maggie Gonzales had all made their appearances with their dates. Richard also recognized a number of Metropolis' socialites and movers and shakers in the crowd, Alice White hadn't lost her touch when it came to throwing a party.

Richard was pulled from his musing by a light touch on his arm when his date, Christine Thomas, nodded towards the newly arrived guests that Alice was greeting at the door. "Is that who I think it is?" she asked.

"Ricky Hernandez and his fiancée, Rosa Dawson," Richard explained. "Clark and Lois put them up in their home before Ricky's presidential pardon came through. Perry really put the pressure on them to get Ricky to accept his party invitation. I think that he's angling for another exclusive interview."

"I'm still amazed at what he did with that reward he got for popping Luthor," Christine observed in admiration. "Setting up a fund to put all the kids from his old neighborhood in the Bronx through college."

"I think he got some help from his new boss at Wayne Enterprises," Richard commented. "They do a lot of stuff like that. He did keep enough of it to provide for his family, though."

"Speaking of which, she looks like she's just about ready to pop," Christine concluded.

Richard nodded, "I heard that she's due at the end of next month. She could probably go into labor at any time. They're actually hoping it'll come early so they have more time to recuperate before their wedding two months from now." Richard turned to look at the beautiful blonde standing beside him. He'd buckled under pressure from Perry, and let Maggie introduce him to her sister, Christine. They'd gone out for dinner with Maggie and her husband the previous Saturday night for the introduction. He found her to be an attractive, witty and undemanding woman, though a bit shy. Her son, Eric, was also on the shy side and was an introverted three-year-old. Strangely enough, the two times he'd been out with Christine, Lois and Clark had volunteered to babysit her son.

"Sorry if I zoned out there a moment ago," Richard apologized. "I was just taking a quick inventory of who's here."

"Looking for anyone in particular?" Christine asked tentatively.

Richard shook his head. "Not tonight," he assured her. "I'm much better off with the present company." He took a sip of his wine before continuing. "It is kind of fun to people watch at these shindigs, though. Not many places where you'll find such an eclectic group of minor celebrities. Shall we go meet some of them?" Christine smiled, and slipped her arm around Richard's and he escorted her across the room.

Day 132, Sunday, 3:00AM, Metropolis, Metropolis General Hospital

In the three weeks since his confrontation with Lex Luthor, Superman had been covertly monitoring his condition, waiting for his opportunity to remove his family from the villain's memories. That had been impossible to accomplish without attracting attention while he'd been in the Intensive Care Unit, sharing a ward with other patients and under heavy police guard.

His condition had finally been upgraded from critical to serious, and he was moved to a private room Saturday afternoon. Arrangements had been made to airlift him to Arkham Asylum in Gotham Monday morning, which seemed to offer the best combination of security and medical facilities to address the mutual needs of the fallen felon and law enforcement. Once there, it would be impossible for Superman to secretly purge the man's memories. He would only have a short window of opportunity to secure his family's secrets.

Superman observed Luthor's room from his hiding place above the clouds while Nurse Ellen Bradley displayed her badge to the officer guarding the room before entering. He waved her by, and she entered the room, wrinkling her nose as she looked at the rogue with disgust, and made quick work of her routine check. She made a beeline for the nurses' station afterwards, her flat heels echoing through the empty halls of the wing. She quickly found the sink in the prep area hidden behind the counter and scrubbed her hands, desperately trying to wash off the perceived slime that came from touching the scoundrel.

Superman was clad entirely in black as he hovered outside the room and pushed the windowpane up to allow his access. He floated into the room, carrying a crystal staff, and drifted down to the floor beside the bed. He carefully scrutinized his nemesis' injuries with his extraordinary vision before turning his attention to the staff he'd brought with him. He focused his concentration on the staff and the end of it lit up with a bright blue light. A moment later, a one-foot diameter crystalline star floated through the window and came to a stop hovering three feet above Luthor's head. After linking up with the Fortress of Solitude via Kryptonian satellite, the crystal accessed Luthor's memories and uploaded them to the Fortress for analysis.

It took fifteen minutes to complete the analysis, after which a thin blue line of light passed up and down across Luthor's face while the molecules and synapses constructing the memories of Superman's family were systematically dissipated. The knowledge gleaned from his invasion of Superman's Fortress was also eliminated. Finally, nearly forty-five minutes after the process began, the small crystal star went dark, and floated out the window, returning on autopilot to the Fortress. Superman slipped back out through the window and pulled the pane closed before disappearing into the night.

Day 132, Sunday, 7:20AM, Metropolis, 312 Riverside (Home of Richard White)

Richard's eyes opened drowsily and his gaze automatically drifted over to the clock on the nightstand. However, when he moved to sit up, his eyes shot wide in shock at the sudden recognition of the unexpected weight and body heat draped across his body. He looked down at the blonde head of Christine Thomas, still sound asleep on top of him. Richard squeezed his eyes shut and dropped his head back as the memories of the previous night flooded back. *Oh, boy*, he pondered, *this wasn't supposed to happen.*

Both of them were still on the rebound from their previous relationships, and had taken a cautious approach to Maggie's matchmaking. Last night was supposed to be a casual night out for them, more of a continuing introduction than a romantic event. He hadn't even expected a good night kiss, much less what had actually happened. His eyes grew wide again as his memories of the previous night's escapades pierced the sleepiness clouding his mind. He reached his hand over the side of the bed, groping around for the wastebasket. He lifted it up and tilted it enough to view its contents, breathing a sigh of relief at the sight of the discarded condoms inside. *At least we weren't completely reckless*, he thought. He set the wastebasket back down and returned his attention to the naked woman lying on top of him, struggling to

push away the cloud of sleep still lingering over his mind.

He remembered that the Kents were keeping Christine's three-year-old son, Eric, overnight, and weren't expecting her to pick him up until nine o'clock. However, they couldn't show up with Christine wearing the same clothes from last night - they'd have to swing by her place so she could change. Richard knew that he'd have to wake her up and didn't know what to expect when he did, which left him uncharacteristically nervous.

"Christine?" Richard called tentatively. "It's time to wake up."

"Hmm..." Christine mumbled. She shifted on top of him and Richard arms automatically wrapped around her as she rubbed against him. He found himself aroused in spite of his best intentions.

"Christine," he gently repeated. "Do you know where you are?"

Her eyes snapped open suddenly, and she craned her neck to look up at Richard in horror. "Oh, God," she muttered as she took in her surroundings. She rolled off of him, and pulled the sheets to cover herself. "Oh, God," she repeated. "What have I done?"

"I was also a bit... surprised... when I woke up," Richard admitted. "I guess we got a bit carried away. With Jimmy or Maggie topping off our drinks every time we turned around, I lost count. Good thing we took a cab."

"Oh, God," Christine muttered again. "What you must think of me..."

Richard wrinkled his brow in confusion. "I don't understand. Why would I think poorly of you?"

"It was only our second date!" Christine exclaimed. "I don't sleep with guys after only two dates!" She buried her face in the pillow. "God, how much did I drink?"

Richard turned on his side and tentatively placed his hand on her shoulder. "Christine?" he inquired kindly. "I don't think any less of you for what happened."

"Of course you're going to say that," Christine retorted. "When has a guy ever been upset that he got laid?"

"Christine," Richard told her firmly. "That's *not* how I look at things... Look, neither of us was expecting anything to happen last night. This morning we're both surprised. Why don't just wipe the slate clean and start over?"

"Start over?" Christine asked suspiciously. "What, you mean you want another round in the sack... *now*?"

Richard sighed and closed his eyes briefly before looking back up at her. "That's not what I meant... Listen, if we had just met and weren't both still recovering from our last relationships, you'd be the type of woman that I am interested in. You're beautiful, intelligent, with a great sense of humor and a pleasant disposition. But the baggage from the sudden ending of our last relationships kind of got in the way - we were both gun shy. Maybe the wine last night just helped us lose the baggage." Richard paused and tried to gauge her reaction before he continued, "So maybe, we can start over - take it slow, get to know each other. Try to lose our baggage without losing our sobriety and see what we have."

Richard looked over at her hopefully as she mulled over what he'd said and looked up at him in quiet contemplation. After a moment, her brow furrowed and she asked tentatively, "You're okay with it if I make you wait before we sleep together again?"

"Some things are worth waiting for," Richard answered confidently. "I'm not looking for a fling, Christine. I want something with potential. If that means waiting, then I'll wait."

"Alright," she agreed. "We *are* going to be taking it slow, though. *Understand*?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Richard replied mirthfully, smirking as he saluted.

Christine tried unsuccessfully to suppress her smile as she leaned over and pecked him on the cheek. "Okay, then," she told him. "Now, be a gentleman and close your eyes while I hunt down my clothes."

Richard was surprised at how easily the small talk came with Christine after their awkward beginning that morning. He succeeded in convincing her to let him cook her breakfast before darting out the door and had impressed her with his Indian omelets. They had enjoyed a leisurely breakfast. After a five minute shower and change of clothes, he was driving her home in his Lexus, comfortably talking about the trouble a three year old can get into. Christine was worried that her son had withdrawn into himself as a reaction to her abusive ex-husband, but hoped he wouldn't remember much of it, as he got older.

Once they arrived at her apartment, Richard patiently waited while she showered and changed, occupying himself with the WGBS news broadcast. The top story was Luthor's improved condition and his pending move to Arkham Asylum. The *Planet* had covered that story as well, and in much more depth. In fact, Clark had done a detailed analysis of the costs involved not just for Luthor's care, but the overtime being pulled by the officers from the Metropolis Police Department who were guarding him twenty-four hours a day. *You just can't get the same level of detail from television news*, Richard concluded proudly. *Not when they try to squeeze everything into a five-minute segment, including sound bites.*

When Christine finally emerged in jeans and a sweater, Richard couldn't help but smile at the image. "You clean up nice," he teased, standing and reaching for her hand.

Christine blushed as she took his hand. She lowered her head, peeking up at him shyly and returning the compliment, "So do you."

Richard gave her a chaste kiss on the top of the head before pulling back and reminding her, "We'd better get going if we're going to get there by nine." Christine nodded her head, and following him out the door, breaking from his grip only long enough to lock her door before recapturing his hand.

Day 132, Sunday, 9:10AM, Metropolis, 1938 Sullivan Lane (Home of the Kents)

Clark Kent sat on the beat up basement couch as he encouraged the two young boys building their Lincoln Log masterpiece. Lois sat on a rocking chair on the other side of the room quietly observing the boys with her husband. She smiled contentedly at the tableau before her, grateful that Jason's father was a part of their lives and imagining their future daughter also benefiting from his gentle nature.

Her attention drifted to the three-year-old currently in their care and she recalled Maggie's description of the ordeal he'd been through. His abusive father had beaten his wife, and had even broken his son's arm, offenses which had made him a guest of the state's correctional facilities. When Christine and Richard had dropped him off the previous night, he had just sat back quietly and observed everyone wide-eyed. However, the constant attention from Clark and Jason had enticed him out of his shell, and he opened up. He'd actively joined in the games with Jason, and as the two played with the Lincoln Logs and Lego blocks in the basement playroom, Eric was chattering as much as her son. Lois hoped that the little darling would find some stability in his life to overcome the earlier misfortunes of his young life.

Clark's head snapped up and he looked over at Lois, briefly shifting his gaze up the stairs before returning his attention to her. "Are they here?" Lois asked quietly. At Clark's nod, Lois pulled herself from her seat, and headed up the stairs.

Lois opened the front door just as Christine's finger was poised to ring the doorbell, with Richard standing behind her. "Come on in," Lois invited them. "The boys are playing downstairs - all three of them."

"Three?" Christine questioned.

Lois chuckled, and added, "Some men I know are still little boys at heart, and that includes the one I married." She led her guests downstairs, where Christine stopped and stared in disbelief at the scene before her. She couldn't remember ever hearing so many words from her little Eric, or seen him so happily playing with another child.

Christine turned to Lois, her eyes glistening with tears, and asked quietly, "How you get him out of his shell like that?"

"It took a little work, but my husband's very patient with children," Lois informed her. "So is Richard, by the way." Lois motioned to the chairs along the wall, inviting her guests to sit. "You're welcome to visit with us for awhile if you like," Lois invited them warmly. Christine nodded, sitting down in one of the chairs and observing her child with amazement. Any other time, her son would have run over to her, crying and clinging tightly when she picked him up from a sitter. This time, he was having too much fun to even notice her. When he did finally notice his mother ten minutes later, he ran over and pulled her back over to his masterpiece to show his mother what they built, chattering up a storm in the process.

Christine Thomas sipped her iced tea as she sat at the kitchen table with Lois and Richard, temporarily leaving the boys to their play in the basement. After Lois recapped the boys' activities the previous night and that morning, Christine summarized her son's extreme shyness. One of their doctors had even believed him to be mildly autistic. Yet the little boy she saw playing downstairs had demonstrated none of that.

"I can't even begin to imagine what you went through," Lois admitted softly. "I'm fortunate that my son and I have only known kind and gentle men in our home. Jason has his shy moments, but the men in his life have always encouraged him to believe in himself. Maybe that makes a bigger difference than anyone realizes."

"After what I just saw downstairs, that'd be hard to dispute," Christine agreed. She looked up at Lois tentatively, "Do you think that we could... maybe arrange some occasional play-dates with the boys?"

Lois smiled widely at the suggestion, "I think that we could arrange that. Maybe even send both boys over to Richard's one of these times. I think he'll be just as good with them."

Christine peeked over at Richard and smiled shyly. "I can't wait to find out about that," she concluded. Lois smiled knowingly at her guests, hopeful that her former fiancé could eventually be the one to provide the stable home environment that Eric and his mother both needed.

Chapter 60 - Home Is Where the Heart Is

Day 276, Thursday, 4:30PM, Metropolis, Daily Planet Newsroom

Perry White smiled proudly as he reviewed the mockup for the following morning's front page under Clark Kent's byline, yet more fruit produced by his and Lois' tireless pursuit of the Luthor story. The madman had regained his 'voice' two months ago, via an electronic tablet attached to his wheelchair, and orchestrated his lawyers brilliantly to unfreeze enough assets to fund a formidable defense team. They were challenging everything, attempting to either bar evidence or set the stage for an appeal.

Luthor's legal team had boldly protested their client's innocence, offering ludicrous alternate explanations for his crimes, proffered conspiracy theories that others were attempting to frame him, and attempted to shift blame to his subordinates. They even went so far as to claim that the New Krypton crystalline monstrosity grew from Superman's crashed spaceship, which must have landed in the ocean off of the New Jersey coast.

Perry pondered that Luthor's legal team never anticipated that Superman would react to that accusation as he had. The Man of Steel had presented his ship for inspection by law enforcement, and then used it to carry a team of forensic investigators on an expedition to New Krypton. He remained safely aboard with the *Planet's* Jimmy Olsen and Ron Thorpe while the forensic teams combed over the plateau where Luthor had attacked Superman. They recovered suitcases full of cash, blood evidence presumably from Superman, weapons, videotape of Luthor boasting of his plans, and even found Luthor's yacht, the *Gertrude*, in a valley several miles from the plateau, with revised maps in its ballroom charting out a new continent replacing the Americas. The evidence was remarkably well preserved for spending several months in space, though there was an unexplained gap in the video of Luthor's tirade against Superman in his 'interview' with Lois. The recording ended with Luthor waving a kryptonite cylinder in the air as he railed against Superman.

Tomorrow's front page story would be the indictment of Judge Peter Gregory on bribery charges. Lois and Clark had dug through his finances and identified a secret account held by the judge, which had two seven-figure deposits immediately before and after he overturned Luthor's conviction. The deposits were tracked back to accounts now known to be controlled by Luthor, thanks to the earlier exposé on the scoundrel's finances. They were even able to establish mob ties to the judge.

The editor peered through the glass wall into the newsroom, observing Clark Kent as he spoke casually with Jimmy Olsen, Ron Thorpe and Richard White. Richard had worked closely with Lois and Clark on many of the Luthor stories, and appeared to have made peace with the personal changes in their relationships. Even after losing Lois to Clark, the two men seemed to have bonded and become close friends. Perry had been worried initially, and was relieved that his newsroom wouldn't be reenacting *The Jerry Springer Show* any time soon.

The newsroom staff had been stunned upon learning of Lois' romantic history with Clark and that she'd left Richard for the shy man. Those revelations came while the couple was off work after Luthor's attack on Lois. Their first day back had been awkward and distracting. However, it had quickly become old news and the staff was now getting used to the idea that Lois was married to Clark Kent, rather than perpetually engaged to Richard.

Perry's expression turned serious as his thoughts focused on his nephew. He was grateful that Richard had been able to move on, and seemed to be genuinely happy in his new relationship. He'd been dating Maggie's sister, Christine, for several months now, and bonded with her son, Eric. Perry worried that Richard was moving too fast to replace Lois and Jason

with Christine and Eric. Finally coming to a decision, Perry walked out into the bullpen and waved Richard into his office for a frank talk.

Day 279, Sunday, 3:30PM, Metropolis, 1978 Donner Ct. (Home of Al and Maggie Gonzalez)

Richard White allowed a smile as he witnessed the excitement of the child before him. Al and Maggie Gonzalez' eight-year old son, Joey, was gleefully holding up a pair of ten dollar bills that had fallen from the birthday card he'd just ripped open. The boy had made out, with a variety of video games, clothing and other assorted gifts from his family, most of whom seemed to be present. Apparently, the Gonzalez family took little boys' birthdays seriously. They had made a similar spectacle at Eric Thomas' fourth birthday a couple months earlier, which he'd happily attended as his mother Christine's new beau.

Richard glanced down at Eric who, along with his cousins, was inspecting some of the presents that Joey had set aside while he went through the birthday cards. Eric had come a long way from the shy and withdrawn child still reeling from his incarcerated father's abuse. He saw no evidence of that now, as Eric happily chattered with his cousins as they debated which gift was the best one. Eric was still a bit wary of his male relatives, and got clingy in big crowds, but Richard was confident that he'd be able to put his ordeal behind him, much as Jason had all but forgotten Luthor's attack.

Richard's smile faded slightly as his thoughts turned to Jason. Lois and Clark had kept their word and allowed Richard to be a part of their son's life, which included weekend sleepovers and out-of-town vacations. Richard reflected on that change, noting that Christine and Eric were part of those visits now as well, which provided a warm sense of family that almost compensated for the loss he felt for the son that was no longer his. *Are we really becoming a family already?* Richard pondered. *I've only known these two for five and half months.*

Though both Richard and Christine had sworn to each other that they were going to take it slow, they quickly got to the point where virtually all of their free time was spent together, and Eric probably got tucked into bed in Jason's old room as often as he did in his own. Eric had already bonded with Richard, telling his mother that he wanted Richard for his new daddy. In fact, on nights that weren't spent at Richard's, the tyke insisted on calling him to say goodnight. Eric also found a best friend in Jason and was never as animated and talkative as when the two boys were together.

The drive home was unusually quiet, as Richard continued to reflect on his change in circumstances. Christine finally broke the silence, gently asking him, "Is everything all right? You've been a bit quiet today."

Richard sighed deeply as he glanced over to her. "I guess I kind of got lost in my thoughts," he admitted. "I couldn't help but reflect on everything that's happened over the last year... and how quickly things seemed to change."

Christine was silent for a moment, as she recalled what Richard had been through. Finally, she offered tentatively, "You kind of got the rug pulled out from under you, didn't you?"

Richard reached over and grabbed her hand, squeezing it affectionately as he looked over at her. "I just had this same conversation with my Uncle Perry a couple days ago," he informed her. "It turned out okay. It's just that a year ago, I never would have imagined that things would have turned out like they did. Sure, some of it was painful, but I think this is probably a

better place to be than where I was a year ago."

Christine grinned at him and inquired, "How so?"

Richard ventured tentatively, "A year ago, I was blissfully ignorant. I think when Jason came along, Lois and I took the easy way out. We were together because it was comfortable, because we thought it was the right thing to do. Yes, I loved her, but it wasn't the same for her. I think that she tried to convince herself that it was love, but could never fully commit. She was still in love with her ex. And I was so blinded by love that I ignored some big warning flags, like her refusal to make wedding plans for years after accepting my proposal."

"It's different with us," Richard continued. "We have a... an 'informed' happiness. We are where we are because it's what we both knowingly want, not because we feel obligated or lonely. I think this is a more honest love than what I had with Lois."

"Are you trying to say that you love me?" Christine teased, smiling widely back at him.

Surprise briefly spread across Richard's features. He looked over at Christine with a broad smile. "I suppose I do," he admitted. "Though that kind of slipped out. I really hoped for a much more romantic way of expressing it when I finally said it."

"Well, it's not too late," Christine informed him softly.

Richard opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted by his cell phone. He pulled the phone off his belt and looked at the caller ID. "I wonder what Clark wants..." he muttered.

"Lois' baby could come any day now, remember?" Christine reminded him.

Richard's eyes grew large as he flipped open the phone. "This is Richard," he answered. "When...? Clark, relax... We'll meet you at the hospital and take Jason home with us... Well, you're not planning on taking him into the delivery room with you, are you...? No problem... I'll see you in a few. Bye."

"Let me guess, her water broke?" Christine suggested.

"Yep," Richard confirmed. "Which means I'll have Jason overnight, though he doesn't want to leave until the baby comes."

Day 282, Wednesday, 1:30AM, 1938 Sullivan Lane (The Kent Home)

Sam Lane couldn't sleep despite his exhaustion. He and Ella had driven in earlier in the day to see their new granddaughter and to help Lois with the baby. Rosa Eleanor Kent arrived late Sunday night, weighing in at seven pounds twelve ounces (3.5 Kg). Jason adored his little sister and marveled at her tiny features. Sam was equally smitten, though he'd never admit it. Jason was the first to call her "Rosie", and the name stuck.

The thoughts of his granddaughter were sufficient motivation for Sam to ease out of bed and quietly cross the hall to the nursery and observe Rosie in her sleep in the dim light of her night light. *Such a little angel*, Sam thought. Though he was sure he was the only one awake, he didn't want to risk being discovered staring adoringly at his granddaughter. Sam snuck downstairs, prepared himself a nightcap, and opened up the morning's *Planet*, which he hadn't read yet.

As Sam read the day's stories, he was surprised by noise from the kitchen, and spun around to see his son-in-law, still in his Superman garb, with a cloth diaper over his shoulder and a whimpering Rosie in his arms, tending to a pan of steaming water with a baby bottle in it.

"Wouldn't it be easier to use your heat vision on the bottle?" Sam whispered.

Superman looked over his shoulder at Sam, and quietly informed him, "The plastic bottles don't react well to direct heat." After retrieving the bottle from the pan, Clark walked into the living room and joined his father-in-law on the couch as he adjusted Rosie in his arms and

offered her the bottle.

"I didn't think you were in yet," Sam commented. "Didn't hear her start to fuss either."

"Kryptonian baby monitor," was Clark's simple answer. "The receiver's in my belt. I heard her start to fuss, and rushed home to get her before she woke Lois up."

"When Lois and Lucy were little, Ella did all the midnight feedings," Sam confided. "It was a matter of anatomy."

"Well, as long as Lois gets enough pumped during the day, I can handle the midnight feedings," Clark declared. "Besides, Lois is grumpy enough in the morning when she gets her sleep. Would you want to face a sleep-deprived Lois in the morning?"

Sam snorted. "You have a point," he conceded. "You know, this is so surreal - sitting here watching Superman feeding his daughter."

Clark smiled at the statement. "I missed this the first time around," he stated quietly. "I missed so much with Jason. I never should have left."

"Why did you leave?" Sam asked gently. "Lois explained the thing with Jor-El's rules, but I never really understood why you went back to Krypton."

Clark was quiet for a minute as he considered his answer. Finally, he stated, "I suppose I was looking for home." At Sam's confused expression, Clark elaborated, "I've spent my entire life knowing that I was different, believing that this domestic tranquility just wasn't a possibility. After coming so close, and mistakenly believing that it couldn't be, I just... I was tired of being different, of being alone, and so I left on a fool's errand to search for my home."

"You found it," Sam noted.

"My mistake was in not understanding what 'home' really is," Clark declared. "Krypton was never home, not even for the brief time that I lived there. Neither was Smallville." He gestured to the room around them as he continued, "Even this isn't home, because 'home' isn't a place. It's a state of being. For me, home is wherever Lois and the kids are."

Sam was unable to suppress his smile as he gazed over at his granddaughter as Clark lifted her to his shoulder and gently began patting her back. "Home is where the heart is," Sam summarized.

Clark nodded in agreement, repeating quietly, "Home is where the heart is."

THE END