

# Family Reunion

by Mr Beeto

© 6-Jun-08

Rating: T

Superman and the original characters presented in the feature films, comic books, and novelization are all copyright and trademark by DC Comics, Warner Brothers, et al. I own no part of those rights, and make no money off this effort. This is strictly for fun.

---



Banners by bistyboo1974

## Author's Notes

Welcome to my insanity. This is an AU twist on the Superman Movie-verse that refused to leave me in peace. The only way to restore my sanity is to write it down. It'll stay mostly true to *Superman: The Movie* (1978), *Superman II: The Donner Cut* (2006), and *Superman Returns* (2006), though there will be some variations for continuity, realism and to bring the story from the earlier films into the twenty-first century. I'm also introducing my AU twist on *Superman Returns*, to be revealed in a later chapter. Note that as far as I'm concerned, Richard Lester's version of *Superman II* (1980) and the other Salkin productions (corruptions) of theatrical releases of Superman/Supergirl do not exist in this universe and are not part of the canon. Also note that my previous work, *Home is Where the Heart Is*, is not part of this story. That one's set in a different universe.

To get from Richard Donner's *Superman II* to Bryan Singer's *Superman Returns* required inventing some physics, which I know may give some of you difficulty. From my perspective, it's a necessary evil if I'm to stay true to the characters and the mythos. I hope you'll simply be able to understand and accept it, and move on with the story. Also note my typographical conventions: *Italics* for the characters' thoughts, and alien languages will be enclosed in double chevrons (« and ») instead of quotes. Think of it as my version of subtitles.

Please note that in this universe, Metropolis is not in Kansas, nor is it a replacement for New York City. Instead, it's on the Eastern Seaboard, in Sussex County, Delaware, just north of where Slaughter Beach is in the real universe. Imagine it larger than Los Angeles, but smaller than New York City, in terms of population.

Also, I want to thank my friends who encouraged a reluctant author to write this down, and special thanks to **htbthomas** and **dandello** (a.k.a. **Shado Librarian**) who volunteered to beta the raw text. Those additional pairs of eyes on the work are priceless, and in many cases the collaboration truly made this work better than it could possibly have been otherwise.

Now, we begin my story immediately after Zod's defeat at the end of Richard Donner's *Superman II*...

## Act I

## Chapter 1 - The Future That Was

*Saturday, August 26, 2000 10:00PM EDT*

It was a quiet flight back to Metropolis from Superman's arctic Fortress. Though relieved by Zod's defeat, both the Man of Steel and Lois Lane were still too much aware of the life together that almost was - the life together that had to be sacrificed to stop the Kryptonian criminals. As much as they would both have preferred to believe otherwise, the fact of the matter was that the world still needed Superman, and he could not abandon his duty to be with Lois. The recent ordeal had also revealed just how strongly the world associated Lois Lane with the hero. Even though the tabloid stories were based on little more than the writers' imaginations, that had still been strong enough evidence for Lex Luthor to identify Lois to Zod as a high-value hostage that would be useful against Jor-El's son.

"So," Superman began sadly as he set Lois down on her terrace. "Here we are."

"Home, sweet home," Lois acknowledged numbly.

"Well, see you at work in the morning, I guess," he continued awkwardly.

"Bright and early," Lois stated simply. "Same old Clark. Same old Lois. Except..."

"Except that nothing can ever be the same in this world again," he finished somberly.

"Not after what Zod did..."

"The nukes..."

"I hear their cries - so much anguish, so much suffering," he admitted, dropping his gaze to the floor. "And the news channels are now reporting that Zod 'punished' twenty-eight cities for protesting his rule - more than one hundred million dead. It'll probably be four or five times that when you consider the radiation."

"They don't know it's over if they're still using euphemisms like 'punished'," Lois concluded. She looked over at him, and upon seeing the anguished look on his face, added compassionately, "Hey! They rebuilt Hiroshima and Nagasaki, didn't they?"

"Those were much smaller devices, and not nearly so many of them," he pointed out.

"There is nowhere on this Earth that people will be able to escape the radioactive fallout." He looked back up at her and continued, "The cries are more anguished that I can ever remember hearing. If only..."

"If only you hadn't been with me," Lois finished for him.

"Lois, don't say that!" Superman insisted. "If it were possible, I'd stay with you forever. But, I... I can't turn my back on my duty now. Not when so many are suffering. So many need me... I have to... you know..."

Lois nodded knowingly, offering him a weak smile as she authoritatively told him, "Go. Help them."

He flew up high above the city, watching Lois as she decisively marched off the terrace, then collapsed in tears just inside the door to her apartment. *I'm so sorry, Lois*, he thought. *You never should have had to go through that.* He turned away from the scene and began a flight around the globe to survey the damage caused by Zod. He was horrified at the carnage he saw, smoldering hell-holes now where there had once been some of the Earth's most vibrant cities. He hardly knew where to begin to help the survivors and most of the damage simply couldn't be undone. *I should have been able to stop this sooner*, he lamented. *Jor-El was right - it was selfish of me to abandon my mission for love.*

As he floated at the upper reaches of the Earth's atmosphere, Superman was so overwhelmed by the sheer volume of cries he heard that he had to look away, but he found no solace in so doing. His vision fell upon the moon, where the first victims had been lost. He

recalled the international effort to return humans there after a seventeen-year absence, where they were to lay the foundation for a future colony. He had been caught up in the excitement himself and had even lifted some of the heavier equipment up there for them. Now observing the crushed lunar lander and the lifeless bodies littering the lunar surface, he was forced again to look away, this time shifting his vision towards the outer planets. *How long had they been free*, he wondered, *and how did they end up here?* He had begun to lose himself in his thoughts, when he noticed the reflection from deep in the solar system, where there shouldn't have been anything.

The Man of Steel concentrated his vision into the outer solar system and found the scattered debris. His eyes widened in shock when he noticed Kryptonian hieroglyphics on some of the edge pieces and recognized the debris for what it was: The remains of the Phantom Zone containment shell, which had once been prison to Zod and his accomplices. *The Zone made it here intact?* He wondered. *How did it get here, so far from Krypton, and what breached the seal?*

He mentally replayed the news from the past week and recalled a near disaster with a nuclear missile launch eight days earlier. The Pentagon's Mil-Net had been hacked and one of their nuclear sites had been compromised, resulting in an unauthorized launch of a nuclear missile. Superman had intercepted it and sent it flying towards the outer planets, towards the vicinity of where the Phantom Zone debris now was. The shockwave from that nuclear detonation would have been sufficient to breach the seal, releasing the vicious criminals. *Oh, my God!*, Superman thought in horror. *They were free because of me! All those people... so many millions dead because of my carelessness.*

He squeezed his eyes shut, feeling the weight of Zod's victims fall upon his shoulders, as his mind analyzed the new information and sought to escape the guilt. *I need to fix this*, he thought, opening his eyes and shooting like a canon around the globe in ever faster orbits, translating into the inter-dimensional reality outside the fabric of space-time as he did so. As he approached, then surpassed, the speed of light, his incredible senses detected the warp in space-time that his faster than light acceleration created. Brief glances towards the earth and the planets revealed the double vision indicative of a temporal divergence, reflecting the difference in the planets' position in their orbits over time. He exerted himself even more, pushing himself faster, in order to extend the space-time warp bubble even further out into the solar system. He was gratified to see the Phantom Zone debris blur into double images, as it also diverged into two separate realities in space-time.

He continued ever faster, expanding his orbits to include both of the diverging Earths, which were no longer a blurred double image, but now separated by the hundreds of millions of miles along the orbit that the Earth had traveled over the previous eight days. Finally reaching his desired point of divergence, he reversed his orbits, this time only encompassing the space-time reality of eight days prior, roughly an hour before the rogue launch of the missile that breached the phantom zone.

He again accelerated in ever faster orbits, and the warped space-time bubble began to collapse and fold into the past, coalescing around the Earth's former self, and the alternate future reality began to lose cohesion and fold into the past. In the process, the broken became whole and those who had died during Zod's reign lived once more, though the consequences of the future that was could not be completely escaped.

Time cannot be rolled back without taking space with it, since space and time are inexorably linked, two parts of the same whole. Inanimate objects that had been damaged or

destroyed in the future that was remained weakened where they had been broken; the background radiation was higher in the cities that had been nuked, though greatly diminished; and the former selves of those who had died had contusions from their future injuries, and some cases, traces of formaldehyde in their blood, though most would recover from those injuries without notice.

Once the space-time warp had collapsed, Superman ceased his orbits and allowed himself to fold into his former self. He experienced a brief moment of disorientation before his incredible mind processed the out-of-phase memories of his future self. When the memories of the future that was flooded his consciousness, Clark Kent opened his eyes and found himself dressed in his business suit, sitting at his desk on the Editorial floor of *The Daily Planet*.

Beside him, Lois Lane grimaced in response to a sudden cramp, provoked by the sudden and unexpected presence of a Kryptonian-Human hybrid embryo in her uterine wall. Unbeknownst to its parents, the child had been conceived in the future that was and dragged along with its mother's future self as she folded into the past. Unlike her colleague, however, she remained oblivious to the future that was, as the human mind is incapable of accessing the out-of-phase memories from that reality.

"Where was I?" Lois asked herself irritably. "Oh, yeah, I'm sick of this Luthor story! I still can't believe that he dragged that trial out for three years before they finally convicted and sentenced him, but now it's done. Over. Time for the next story, right?"

Clark allowed a small smile as he looked over at her. *Same old Lois*, he thought dreamily.

"Clark?"

"Huh? Oh, right. Time for the next story," he agreed distractedly, pausing for a moment as he accessed his memories of that morning. "Um, Perry is still insisting on that background piece to go with this afternoon's sentencing headline, so... If you want, I'll head down the archives and do the research, and we can compare notes later. Okay?"

"Sure, knock yourself out," Lois muttered, and Clark headed towards the elevators. Once the elevator doors closed, he flew up the shaft and out the roof, accelerating to the North.

*Friday, August 18, 2000 10:30AM EDT*

In the reconstituted Phantom Zone, Zod, Ursa and Non experienced a wave of disorientation when their future and former selves collided. Like their enemy, Kal-El, their minds were able to assimilate the out of phase memories of the future that was. The flood of memories struck Ursa and she reached out to steady herself. However, given her incorporeal state within the zone there was no firm surface to press back against her hand. She opened her eyes with a start. "I'm back in the Phantom Zone," she muttered.

"How?" Zod asked. Ursa was surprised by his presence. After their defeat and capture, the three had been segregated and kept in solitary confinement. She looked around and confirmed that she'd also been reunited with Non.

"It should not be possible," Ursa informed him. "The containment shell was shattered. From what we observed, Kal-El should not have had the facilities to reproduce it, especially not so quickly." She looked through the portal into the corporeal world, recognizing the small dot in the sky that was the Earth as it spun around them.

"We are here, nonetheless," Zod argued. "Is there a way out of this reproduction?"

"There's no way to know," Ursa admitted. She again looked through the portal and exclaimed in surprise, "We're moving!" Her colleagues joined her in observing the Sol system shrink away before them.

"Kal-El's accessed the Zone's navigational controls," Zod concluded angrily. "He still fears us and he's sending us away from his precious Earth."

Superman stood before the console in the Fortress of Solitude, observing the Phantom Zone containment shell as it moved away from the Earth at nearly one third the speed of light. "How long will it take it to return to Krypton?" he asked.

"The journey will take approximately nineteen million years," Jor-El answered. "Remember, the Phantom Zone was never intended for interstellar travel and was built solely for housing the handful of law-breakers, like Zod, who could not be rehabilitated back into our society."

"Then how did it get here in the first place, if its top speed is only one-third C?" Superman asked. "Krypton's six and half million light years from Earth and it hasn't been *that* long since I left!"

"The most likely explanation is that it was caught in the warp field from the wake of your ship," Jor-El concluded. "We know from your escape ship's logs that you barely made it out in time. Our Sun, Rao, was exploding as your ship translated into hyperspace. In fact, you escaped the shock wave by mere seconds. You also passed within ninety kilometers of the Phantom Zone when you made the translation, which could have been close enough to catch it in your wake. The Zone would have been released when you translated back to normal space near the Kuiper belt at the edge of this star system."

"Of course," Superman acknowledged. "Now for the other matter - I have a nuclear weapon to dispose of without poisoning the Earth, or allowing the shock-wave to breach the Phantom Zone. We know that the containment shell will be weaker now than it was in the original reality."

"I am disappointed that you chose that solution, Kal-El," Jor-El chastised. "You cannot simply fold space-time to avoid unpleasant situations. It is forbidden to interfere with human history."

"I was undoing the interference, Father!" Superman replied defensively. "Up to half a billion human beings dead, not by their own doing, but by *Kryptonian* hands. *That* was the interference and it would have thrown this world into another dark age. What's done is done, and I'm asking for your help now to prevent that future from repeating itself. How do I best dispose of the nuke without poisoning the Earth or freeing Zod? Is it sufficient to just send it in the opposite direction in space, or are additional precautions necessary? We only have a few minutes before that missile launches."

"If there is sufficient time, the ideal disposal site is Earth's sun," Jor-El concluded. "Failing that, the thick atmosphere of the planet Venus would also be sufficient to contain the blast. Kal-El, I hope you realize that we'll have to monitor the Zone and have contingency plans in place for a breach. It's still close enough to be compromised by unusually high solar activity, given its weakened state."

"I know," Kal-El answered. "I have time to get the nuke to the sun. I must go now, Father." After powering down the Fortress, Superman launched himself across North America and took position fifty thousand feet directly above the missile silo that would launch the fateful rogue missile moments later.

## Chapter 2 - Reliving the Past

*Sunday, August 20, 2000 - 5:30PM EDT*

It was harder than Clark thought it would be, though logistically he was successful in making the minor adjustments to his behavior to avoid Lois' suspicions. While in his Clark Kent persona, he consciously made his stature even more slouched and fastidiously avoided the cross-armed Superman stance that had provoked her suspicions in the original reality. The second time round, she hadn't drawn Clark Kent over Superman's picture in the paper, or been inspired to throw herself out a thirtieth floor window to prove her theory. He was also satisfied to discover that she hadn't thought to pack her revolver, loaded with blanks, as she had done the first time around. He recalled his surprise when she had confronted him with it originally, tricking him into admitting he was Superman by discharging the weapon at him. His plan for continuing to keep his identity under wraps had been working so far.

His current problem was an emotional one - being in such close proximity with her, posing as newlyweds, and knowing what he had lost and what he likely could never have. His ever-cheerful golly-gee-whiz façade had been difficult to maintain, and more often than not, he'd just tried to keep his distance, and repeatedly changed the subject of discussion back to the assignment. Lois had picked up on it and had asked him what was bothering him more than once. Her obvious concern only reinforced his sense of loss and he'd begged her not to push him on it. *I couldn't possibly tell her about this*, he reasoned. *She's blissfully ignorant of what we lost and free from the pain that I'm enduring. She's nothing like the inconsolable, broken woman I left sobbing on her balcony after defeating Zod. It's better this way.*

Lois' voice broke into his ruminations and he remembered that they were supposed to be having a strategy session on the assignment, though that was not her current train of thought. "Why, with thousands of children falling off something lethal somewhere else in the world, why would Superman appear here - at Niagara Falls -today?" Lois demanded. "Why not the Grand Canyon?"

He'd done a better job of covering for his absence the second time around, gesturing towards the rest rooms and informing her that he needed to "wash up" before getting the hot dogs. Thus, his absence was already explained during Superman's rescue of the boy and she hadn't thought to throw herself over the rail to try to out him. However, her insatiable curiosity had her wondering at Superman's appearance. Fortunately, Clark had time to prepare better answers to her queries than the first time around. He had trouble coming up with a reasonable explanation back then.

"Maybe he was checking up on *you*," Clark offered. "You do have a knack for getting into tight spots."

"Just what is it you're trying to say, Kent?" Lois demanded defensively.

"N-nothing, Lois," Clark explained nervously, holding up his hands in a surrender gesture. "Just... Well, he seems to care about you and probably doesn't want anything bad to happen. So, maybe he checks up on you... from time to time."

"Cares about me, does he?" Lois remarked sarcastically. "You'd never know it by the way he ignored me out there."

"Did you expect him to blow your cover?" Clark probed.

"I-" Lois began before snapping her mouth shut. She opened her mouth again to say something, but though better of it. There was no way she'd admit to Clark that she'd forgotten about the cover and had outed herself trying to get his attention. She instead chose to glare at

her partner.

"Seriously, though, have either of you considered how dangerous a relationship would be?" Clark asked, again changing the subject.

"What the hell are you talking about, Kent?" Lois demanded, crossing her arms to add intensity to her glare.

Clark looked down to avoid making eye contact. "You know... all those tabloid stories," he began.

"Clark, those are *tabloids*," Lois explained irritably. "Those stories are pure fiction with no facts to back them up! *Everybody* knows that!"

"That's beside the point," Clark countered. "You and I and Superman may know they're all made up, but some people out there consider them the gospel truth, and that includes people with a grudge against Superman. What if one of those hoodlums should target you to get back at him?"

"Clark-" Lois began irritably.

"One of you should really go on record stating that those stories are blatantly false," Clark insisted. "Maybe even file a lawsuit. God, Lois, if anything should happen -"

"Clark, enough!" Lois insisted. "I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself."

"But, still-"

"What's going on with you lately, Clark?" Lois asked, suddenly sympathetic. "You haven't seemed yourself the last few days, and don't tell me you're fine, or say you don't want to talk about it."

"There's nothing to talk about, Lois," Clark informed her sadly.

"Don't give me that crap," Lois demanded. "We're partners, and whatever is affecting you, is affecting me, too, so spill. What's the story here?"

Clark turned away, lowering his head into his steepled hands as he considered his possible responses. He couldn't tell her about the other reality. Finally, he sat down in the chair opposite her and offered, "This strikes too close to home for me."

"What do you mean," Lois inquired patiently.

"*This*," he repeated, gesturing to the room around him. "Pretending to be a newlywed. I've no reason to believe that is something I'll ever experience. It doesn't seem to be in the cards for me."

"Oh, for the love of-" Lois began irritably. "Stand up, Clark."

"Stand up?"

"Just for fun," Lois clarified. Once Clark had finally stood up, Lois continued, "Look at yourself. Potentially, this handsome, aggressive, dynamite guy capable of anything he wants to do. You run yourself down."

"Lois, I know where you're going with this and it's not that simple," Clark replied sadly. "It's not just my clothes, or the way I stand. Nobody is ever going to go weak in the knees for Clark Kent the way everyone seems to for Superman. Please, just - just drop it."

"You're jealous of him," Lois announced cheerfully.

"*What?*" Clark asked incredulously. "Lois, I really don't have time for this," he snapped, and he turned and walked to the door. "And we're not going to get this story finished by analyzing my lack of a love life. Let's get something to eat, and then plot out how we're going to get this silly assignment finished so we can get out of here."

*Sunday, August 26, 2000 4:00PM CDT*



Clark Kent sat down to an early dinner at his mother's table, as he had done nearly every Sunday evening, and he made his best effort to be good company. "I hear that your old friend, Pete, is engaged now," Martha mentioned casually. "To Lana, of all people."

"Oh?" Clark acknowledged quietly. "I wonder if that's why he called."

"Didn't you call him back?" his mother inquired.

"We've been playing phone tag," Clark clarified. "He's been pretty busy, with running for Congress and all."

"Well, I didn't mean to spoil the surprise," Martha informed him, embarrassed at the slip. "You're going to have to act surprised when you talk to him."

"I will, Ma," Clark assured her.

"Clark, is everything all right?" Martha inquired compassionately. "You're a bit quiet tonight, and since last Wednesday, Superman's been busy like there's no tomorrow. You're not making time for yourself."

His mother's observation provoked Clark to think back over everything that had happened in the past week. After his outburst with Lois in the hotel room, they had been able to complete their assignment and wrapped up the story relatively quickly. It appeared above the fold in Thursday's Metro section: "Heartbreak Hotel - Honeymoon Resort Fleeces Newlyweds." It had been an uncomfortable few days, and upon their return from Niagara Wednesday afternoon, he had tried to forget his broken heart by burying himself in his other job. Superman's activities had gone into overdrive, with everything from rescues, foiled assaults and robberies, a hurricane intervention and he had even broken up a drug ring in Los Angeles. It'd also given him a number of tips for his day job.

Perry also noticed his increased activity and immediately sent Lois to the roof on Superman detail. However, he couldn't bring himself to answer her calls from the roof. She knew him too well, and if she noticed the same sadness in Superman as she called Clark on, it would be troublesome. He wasn't ready to face her as Superman, and prayed she wouldn't need rescuing in the near future.

"They needed me, Mom," Clark said simply.

"I'm sure that they did, but you need to balance that out with a personal life, too," Martha counseled. "As much as you can do, you can't be everywhere, do everything, or save everyone. You'll drive yourself crazy if you try."

"Mom, it isn't easy... being me," Clark told her quietly. "The secrets I have to keep. I'm different than other people."

"That doesn't mean you should stop trying," Martha soothed. "You do have friends, Clark. Friends like Pete, or that boy Jimmy back in Metropolis. What about your writing partner, Lois? She sure seems to like you, from what I can tell."

Clark's expression at Lois' name informed Martha that she'd hit the nail on the head, but she chose not to challenge him on his silence. "Well, they're planning quite the festival for Labor Day, and I'm sure everyone would be glad to see you here. Pete and Lana should be here, too. I won't pressure you to come, but I hope you'll at least think about it."

Clark nodded his acknowledgement and dug into his dinner.

*Friday, September 1, 2000 9:00AM EDT*

Superman sped north across the Eastern seaboard and dropped down into one of the elevator cars in the *Daily Planet* building moments after it had disgorged its passengers and closed its doors. He had continued to bury himself in work with his other job for the past week,

which also provided the tips to have given him his second independent Page One that morning, this time on an InterGang smuggling ring discovered operating out of the docks. His thoughts on the matter were interrupted the moment he stepped off of the elevator. "Hold it right there, Smallville!" Lois bellowed across the bullpen. She intercepted him halfway to his desk.

"M-Morning, Lois," Clark responded nervously. "Are you looking forward to the Holiday weekend?"

"Don't give me that crap, Clark," Lois demanded, flipping the morning's paper over in front of him. "That's the second time this week that you've scooped me. I thought we were supposed to be partners."

"Gosh, we *are* partners, Lois," Clark insisted. "But with Perry wanting you to get that Superman exclusive, you seemed busy-"

"Oh, don't you even-" she hissed. "Since Superman is *far* too busy lately to waste his time talking to me, I'm not going to waste *my* time waiting for him and let you take all the credit for the real stories. You're not leaving this office without me! Understand? I don't care if you forgot to feed your fish... again. I'm coming with you."

"Um, sure Lois," Clark assured her meekly as he finally sat down at his desk. "But what about the Superm-"

"Don't even go there," Lois warned angrily. "If he wants to talk to me, he knows where to find me. In the meantime, we'll bust open the next big story, *together!*"

"Um, actually, Lois, I'm, um, leaving early today," Clark mumbled. "I'm going home to Smallville for the holiday weekend. My, um, my Mom doesn't see as much of me as she likes, and I figured that after, um, this week's work that I could talk Perry into giving me the time off."

"Fine," Lois grumbled, teeth clenched. "But you're giving me everything you've got before you go."

As Lois marched back to her desk, Clark allowed a small smile. *I can do this*, he thought. *She's a live wire, and an angry, determined, remarkable woman. But it's easier to be same old Clark in front of an angry Lois than the compassionate Lois. Better not get her too upset, though. I may be Superman, but even I know better than to tempt fate.*

### Chapter 3 - Distress Call

*Thursday, September 7, 2008 10:30AM*

The interaction between Lois Lane and Clark Kent seemed to be back to normal, though Clark wasn't quite as cheerful as before. Their joint byline graced the front page of the *Daily Planet* that morning, which pacified Perry somewhat. He had been pushing for an exclusive interview that would explain Superman's dramatic increase in activity, and Lois was his best shot at that. However, the Man of Steel wasn't answering her calls from the roof. Perry had asked about it again at that morning's staff meeting.

In the meantime, Lois and Clark were pursuing the gang leads that Clark's alter ego had turned up. "Your source doesn't think this one is local?" Lois questioned.

Clark shook his head. "It's an opportunistic crime. InterGang's taking the heat, and a lot of their crews are being watched, so this competitor from L.A. thinks he can move in."

"Any idea who the competitor is?" Lois asked thoughtfully.

"Not with certainty," Clark admitted. "The L.A. detective who knows the gangs from that area the best isn't known for a good relationship with the press. He thinks the press has given his department a raw deal, glorifying alleged police abuses and ignoring all that they've done to bring the gangs under control. He won't return my calls."

"Give me the number," Lois answered. "I'll try."

After Clark handed Lois a post-it note with the phone number, he was distracted by a hypersonic sound similar to what Lex Luthor had used to lure Superman into his kryptonite trap three years earlier. However, this time it was the voice of Jor-El that he heard, rather than Lex Luthor. "Kal-El, we have an emergency. Please return to the Fortress at once... Kal-El, we have an emergency. Please return to the Fortress at once..."

After a quick glance to make sure that Lois was preoccupied with her phone call, Clark slipped out of the bullpen, and exited through the roof of an empty elevator, leaving a sonic boom in his wake as he sped North.

Kal-El scanned the Fortress with his hearing and vision before entering, and though empty, he detected crystal growth activity from the rear of the fortress. He entered and cautiously called out, "Father?"

"You're finally here," Jor-El noted. "Good, we have much to do."

"What's the emergency?" Superman asked, "And why are those crystals growing over there?"

"We've received a distress call from my brother, Zor-El," Jor-El informed him. "His ship's departure was delayed, and they were caught in the shockwave from the nova. Though they survived, the ship was disabled, and power reserves depleted by the energy required to shield them from the blast."

"Where are they now?" Kal-El asked eyes wide in disbelief.

"If my calculations are correct, they are approximately two and one-half light years from where Krypton once was," Jor-El informed him. "You'll need to go on a rescue mission."

"What are our odds?" Kal-El asked. "You told me that it took my ship nearly thirty-eight hundred years to reach Earth. Can they survive that long?"

"No," Jor-El answered simply. "In fact, power reserves were so low that the adults sacrificed themselves so that there would be sufficient power to keep your cousin, Kara, alive..."

"Sacrificed?" Kal-El interrupted, stunned. "They survived the nova just to take their own

lives?"

"The alternative would have been worse," Jor-El explained. "Either Zor-El and Allura sacrificed themselves so that Kara would live, or none of them would have survived. It was a simple mathematical calculation. No other Faster Than Light civilization in the twenty-eight galaxies explored by Kryptonians could have arrived in time. You were the only alternative, despite the distance and the knowledge that you wouldn't be able to respond for several thousand years. However, the energy required to maintain life support for that period was only sufficient to sustain one of them. They chose life for their daughter."

"How did they choose life for her if the reserves won't last long enough to get there?" Kal-El asked forlornly.

"We'll grow a faster ship for your trip back."

"I don't understand," Kal-El admitted.

"Kal-El, as you know, the council refused to consider my evidence of our sun's instability," Jor-El explained. "They accused me of trying to provoke panic and insurrection by warning others of my results. I was under virtual house arrest and the best that I could manage to save you without arousing their attention was an escape pod, which is a much slower vehicle than a proper Kryptonian ship. That's also why your mother and I could not accompany you here. A proper ship, like the one now growing behind me, will make the same trip in approximately three years."

"Three years each way?" Clark inquired.

"That is correct," Jor-El confirmed. "Get your affairs in order. You'll depart in thirty hours, when the ship's growth is complete."

*Six years!*, Kal-El thought. "Can't we send an unmanned ship to get her?" he wondered.

"Not enough is known about their circumstances," Jor-El clarified patiently. "We know what their condition was when the message was recorded and what the expected conditions would be. However, circumstances could have changed over the millennia and would require us to actively search them out or make ad hoc adjustments to the rescue plan. If you do not go, our odds of successfully retrieving Kara are greatly diminished."

He lowered his head, nodding his acquiescence and his thoughts turned to Lois. Despite the current prohibition on their relationship, he had clung to the slim hope that they might someday find a way to be together. *I don't want to leave you again*, he lamented. *But I can't ask you to wait six years for me. I've lost you all over again.*

*Thursday, September 7, 2008 12:30PM*

Perry White surprised Clark by insisting on taking him to lunch after he'd tendered his resignation. He now found himself sitting across from his editor at *Adrian's Ristorante*, an upscale Italian restaurant near the *Planet*. "Think about what you're doing, son," Perry implored him sympathetically. "I understand that you're going through some things personally, but I don't think packing it in and exploring the world is the right answer."

"I'm sorry, Perry, but this is something I have to do," Clark explained somberly. "I will miss this... and the people."

"How long do you expect to be gone on this world tour, 'finding yourself'?" Perry inquired.

"I'll have enough to get me by for up to six years," Clark revealed.

"That's a long time to be away from the business," Perry pointed out. "Are you sure you don't want to at least take some time to consider the pros and cons of this?"

"I already have," Clark informed him. "I have to go. I'm sorry for the short notice, but..."

Perry acknowledged the younger man's statement with a nod. "Well, normally quitting on such short notice would make you ineligible for rehire, but I'll take care of that. That doesn't mean you'll get your old job back when you get sick of seeing the world, but we'll at least be able to consider the option."

"Thank you, Perry," Clark told him sincerely. "I really do appreciate that."

"Have you told Lois, yet?" Perry asked. He chuckled at Clark's wide-eyed expression and commented, "Well, you can tell her that she won't have to worry about you scooping her in the near future."

"Thanks for the tip," Clark answered quietly.

*Friday, September 8, 2000 - 3:00PM CDT*

Martha Kent stood embracing her son in their west field. Finally finding her voice, Martha asked, "So, Kara's seven?"

"Yes," Clark confirmed. "She was seven when Krypton's sun went nova."

"And she'll still be seven when you get back?" Martha inquired. "Six years from now."

"She'll still be seven," Clark acknowledged. "She's in deep stasis - basically frozen in time. I won't revive her until we get back here."

Martha again pulled the picture of Kara from her pocket. "She's a pretty little girl," she commented. "Thank you for bringing her pictures to me." She pondered the picture silently for a moment before she continued, "Well, I've got her size now, too, so I'll have some clothes waiting for her. Oh, and I'll order home-schooling materials for K through 2 so she can catch up to the other kids in school."

"Mom..." Clark started. "There'll be time for that when we get back."

"Do you have to leave so soon?" Martha asked tearfully.

"The timing is going to be close enough as it is," Clark informed her sadly. "We don't have more than a few hours margin of error before her ship runs out of power for life support... You have all of my power of attorney forms now and... and Ben Hubbard said he'd help out if you need it. I expect he'll check in from time to time."

"Have you told your friends about your plans?" Martha probed.

Clark sighed deeply before answering. "I got a hold of Pete and told him I'd be traveling abroad for awhile, and I explained things to Jimmy, too, before I left. Lois was out of the office. I left a letter with Jimmy for her. From Clark."

"Is Superman going to talk to her before he leaves?" Martha inquired.

"I wasn't sure what I'd say and I put it off a bit too long," Clark admitted. "I went looking for her and found her boarding a plane for L.A., probably to corner the detective on that gang story we were working on. Superman couldn't exactly pull her out of line for a good-bye - not without validating all of the tabloid stories and putting her face back on the front page of all of those rags. I'm just going to have to hope for the best when I get back."

"I understand," Martha revealed sadly. She hugged him tightly, and said emotionally, "I'm going to miss you!"

"Me, too, Ma," Clark told her as he returned the hug. "Me, too."

As the new ship approached completion, Superman reviewed the ship's AI programming with Jor-El. "I'm not comfortable leaving the Phantom Zone in such close proximity to Earth while I'm away," Kal-El stressed. "How much of a drag on our speed would it be to trap the

Zone in the ship's wake?"

"You intend to tow it back to Krypton with you?" Jor-El inquired. "It shouldn't slow you significantly, but with Kara's power reserves so low, it would be best to avoid delays as much as possible. However, we should be able to tow it a short distance from Earth. There's an uninhabited red giant approximate twenty thousand light years away that could be a suitable home for the Phantom Zone. You can drop out of hyperspace just long enough to eject the Zone from your wake and continue on your journey."

"Let's plan on that, then," Kal-El instructed his father. "I won't leave it here unguarded."

"Very well," Jor-El acquiesced. "I've coded in the programming change. I've also programmed the sensors to scan for anything caught in your ship's wake and eject it before translating back into normal space, as you requested. I believe that everything is in order for your launch. It is time, Kal-El."

Kal-El nodded his acknowledgement, pulled the father crystal from the console and stepped back as the crystal console retracted into the floor. Finally heading over to the new ship, he inspected it briefly before he climbed aboard, inserted the father crystal into the ship's console, sealed the hatch, and secured himself in the pilot's seat. He finally reluctantly said, "I'm ready, Father. Let's go."

Jor-El's voice responded, "I am initiating the launch sequence." The ship floated up in the chamber, crashed through the roof and accelerated through the atmosphere, quickly escaping the Earth's gravitational pull. Kal-El looked back through the viewport at the rapidly shrinking Earth, and thought to himself, *Good-bye, Lois. Please stay safe.*

## Chapter 4 - Six Years Ago

*Friday, September 1, 2006 9:00PM EDT*

Lois Lane angrily paced the dock behind their house and took a deep drag from her cigarette. *Why, now, so close to that day, did he have to pester me on wedding plans?* she complained to herself. It was the just a week shy of the six-year anniversary of the last time Superman was seen, and the last thing she was going to tolerate when commemorating the loss of her personal Prince Charming was for the runner up to pressure her into marrying him. It was an old argument.

She met Richard a couple of weeks after Superman's disappearance, which was a dark time in her life. The man she loved had disappeared without a trace, and the one person she could have confided in about that had decided to pack it in, explore the world and 'find himself.' She was as distraught as she'd ever been, a shadow of her former self. Richard had been a stabilizing influence at the time, and before she knew what was happening, they were sleeping together. When she discovered herself unexpectedly pregnant some time later, he'd assumed responsibility without hesitation. A few weeks after she'd told him of her condition, he'd surprised her with a house that he'd already closed on, including a nursery that he'd already decorated, and he topped it off with a marriage proposal.

She'd never intended a shotgun wedding and she wasn't enthusiastic about Richard's proposal. After a couple of weeks of arguing about how unnecessary it was, she reluctantly accepted his ring and moved in with him, but steadfastly avoided even the simplest beginnings of wedding plans. She refused any offers of assistance and made sure that she was always too busy to consider guest lists or possible venues. Richard had gone so far as to suggest eloping to get around the wedding planning obstacle, but she refused to consider that. Her heart wasn't in it, and she had hoped he'd give up on it eventually. However, he periodically dredged the subject back up. If that wasn't bad enough, he was also pressuring her to merge their finances. Such arguments predictably resulted in her angrily stalking off, as she had done tonight.

From her perspective, the marriage Richard wanted threatened her independence. She had vivid memories of high school and college classmates who'd gotten knocked up, rushed to the altar before the baby came, had three kids inside of five years, ended up divorced more often than not, and had zero career choices. That was not for Lois Lane. She wasn't going to surrender her financial independence, or be tied down by putting her name on the house's title. She wasn't little Susie Homemaker, and they were *not* going to have that argument so close to the unhappy anniversary of *his* disappearance.

*What happened to you?* Lois wondered. Some terrorist organizations had taken credit for killing Superman, but she never truly believed those stories. They didn't have a body, for one thing. Second, the Man of Steel had really been putting in overtime the last couple of weeks before he disappeared. It seemed as though he knew he wouldn't be around and was putting in the extra work ahead of time. *Why didn't you tell me?* Six years later, Lois didn't know whether to be pissed off or heart-broken, but anger came easier. *He's going to have a lot of explaining to do if he ever makes it back. He's not going to have it easy like he did six years ago.*

Richard stared out the family room window in frustration while Lois took another drag on her cigarette. *This time, she's smoking simply to irritate me,* he concluded. Once again, Lois sidestepped any discussion of setting the date, or any discussion of the matter *at all*. When he proposed five and half years ago, he expected it to be a short engagement. He'd hoped to

exchange vows before the baby was born, and maybe have had a couple more kids by now. Something was holding her back and he wished to God that he knew what it was. Every time he tried to close the deal, it turned into a fight.

He couldn't understand her reluctance. They had a good relationship. Maybe not a syrupy chick-flick romance kind of a relationship, but a strong bond built on mutual friendship and respect. It was comfortable, even if certain topics were off-limits and she occasionally holed up inside herself, as she had done tonight. Actually she'd been a bit subdued all day and he'd simply been trying to get her to open up on whatever was bothering her. He hadn't planned on pushing her on wedding plans and merging their finances - it just turned out that way.

Richard was certain that they'd have a strong and lasting marriage, given how stable their relationship was. She'd get pissed at him occasionally and never completely let her guard down, but they were good together. They were so close... why did she continually have to put off planning the wedding? Even after all this time, the woman could still be a complete mystery to him. Sometimes he wondered if he knew her any better than he did when he met her six years ago.

Perry relaxed in his recliner and enjoyed the *History Channel* special on Superman, one of a number of television specials airing in remembrance of the sixth anniversary of his disappearance. It wasn't quite the extravaganza that they'd had the previous year, but nonetheless, the *Daily Planet* was getting a lot of good exposure. *Nothing like a Superman story to send the papers flying off the news stand*, he thought. *I miss those days.*

They were currently playing back the video of Superman's debut, as he caught Lois and the helicopter she fell from in mid-air and flew them gently back up to the roof. The video brought Lois forward in his thoughts. *This is a tough time for her*, Perry concluded. *And Richard has no idea just how close she was to that story. I hope he doesn't do something stupid tonight.* Perry was actually surprised that they were still a couple, and it had become clear to him that Richard was not only wearing blinders, he was wearing a blindfold. He was seeing what he wanted to see and had no clue what he had gotten himself into. If anyone offered advice, it fell on deaf ears.

When Lois informed Richard of her pregnancy, he'd tried to make an instantaneous switch from active bachelor to family man, buying the house and engagement ring before bothering to make sure the kid was his. Jason was born barely seven and half months after Richard returned to the states, and at six pounds twelve ounces, the boy was full term. It didn't matter that Lois' sister delivered a ten-pound baby - Jason wasn't a preemie. He wouldn't have gone home after two days if he had been *that* early. But Richard would hear none of it. He adamantly declared that the kid was premature and was *his*. Lucy's bouncing baby boy may have convinced some people that Jason was a preemie, but Perry wasn't buying it. Neither was most of the bullpen.

Lois and Richard did eventually fall into a comfortable routine with Jason and there was no denying now that Richard was Jason's daddy. He was a devoted father and always there to watch Jason while Lois ran off after a story. Perry knew that Richard was disappointed by Jason's severe allergies and profound lack of anything resembling athletic ability. However, he never let Jason see that - he was a very happy little boy. Richard seemed happy, too. Lois was the only one with a hidden sadness behind her smile, though there was no hiding the joy that Jason brought into her life. However, her smile wasn't as wide and there wasn't the spring in her step that there had been six years ago.



*Just a little while longer, Martha thought. Another week or so, and my boy will be home.* She'd missed Clark terribly and was anxiously preparing for his return. Kara's, too, of course, and she'd been busy preparing her house for the little girl. She'd redecorated one of her guest rooms with something fitting a little girl, and stocked the room with age appropriate toys and stuffed animals. The closets and dresser were full of clothes in her size and the shelves full of children's books for her age. Downstairs, pictures of Kara now joined other family photos on the piano and a stack of children's videos were now on the shelves under the television. She was ready for the family reunion.

A lot had changed while Clark was gone, even in Smallville, most notably her courtship with Ben Hubbard. She still loved and missed her late husband, Jonathan, but the years since his loss had been terribly lonely. Clark had visited regularly before leaving to rescue Kara, but even then, he still had his own life to live. And with him now out among the stars... Ben's companionship had breathed life back into her - instead of being an old woman waiting for death, she was alive again. His gentle prodding had encouraged her to discover the joys of fly-fishing in Montana and inspired her to make other vacation plans with him, too. *Clark's always liked Ben, Martha reflected. This may come as a shock to him, but hopefully, he'll be happy for us.*

The changes beyond Smallville would be much more troubling for Clark: The 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington, war in the Middle East, and unimaginably deadly natural disasters. Martha knew that it would bother her son that he hadn't been available to help, but Kara needed him, too, and nobody else *but* Clark could help her. *Kara will still need him when they get home, Martha reminded herself. I wonder how much thought he's given to what he'll do about that once they get here.*

Martha reflected that Kara would have an advantage that Clark hadn't had - someone just like her, who'd gone through what she would go through, who could help her to understand her gifts. *She won't be alone, Martha concluded. And maybe Clark won't feel so alone anymore, either. Maybe things will be different than they were six years ago.*

*Finally free of that old hag, Lex Luthor thought as he boarded his yacht, formerly owned by his late wife, Gertrude. Took her long enough to die.* He smiled as he considered his good fortune. After a few months of having Kitty slip arsenic in the old crone's meals, his aged bride had finally kicked the bucket. It was almost too soon, though. He barely got her signature on the revised will before she breathed her last. Now, while he was embarking on a relaxing journey north, his lawyer was evicting her family and eliminating the evidence of foul play by filing papers to have the corpse cremated. Luthor was certain that he'd greased enough palms to avoid any legal problems over her death, and even if the family won their legal case for her burial plans and discovered the arsenic, the trail would lead them to Kitty, who obviously acted on her own out of jealousy.

Lex considered his good fortune in learning of Kitty's previous employer from her visiting nurse days. It was almost too easy for him to turn on the charm, poison the old broad against her family, and convince her to leave everything to him. Regrettably, it had taken longer than anticipated to get the hag to change the will, but his brilliance prevailed. That inheritance would fund his genius and this time there would be no meddling alien freaks to ruin everything. In fact, the alien might actually end up helping this time - if Lex could find whatever it was he'd been heading to in the arctic.

Before the alien's disappearance, he'd found a way to track Superman, as he repeatedly flew North towards the arctic. The Man of Steel had captured him and returned him to prison before he was able to pinpoint the location, but he was able to extrapolate from the data he had to get a general idea of the location. There had to be some kind of base there - something with technology that could serve Lex's purposes. It could provide him with the wealth and *power* that a man of his stature truly deserved. It was already shaping up to be a better world than it had once been. It was a world without Superman, unlike the unfortunate circumstances of just six years ago.

## Chapter 5 - Homecoming

*Wednesday, September 13, 2006 8:15PM EDT*

When Kal-El became aware of the high-pitched buzzing around him, his first sensation was one of pain. It felt as if every cell in his body was on fire. His eyes fluttered open and after a moment of disorientation, he finally recognized the cabin of his rescue ship. "Alarm off," he croaked weakly. The buzzing immediately ceased and he groggily looked over to the cot on his left. Kara had a painful grimace on her face, and he struggled to reach over to her and grip her shoulder. "Kara," he called to her gently. "You must wake up. We're home."

Her forehead wrinkled and she slowly turned to him, her eyes widening in shock when she saw the stranger wearing her family's crest. «Who are you?» she exclaimed fearfully. «Where are my parents?»

"I'm your cousin, Kal-El," he told her calmly. Finally recognizing the confusion on her face, he repeated himself in Kryptonian. «I'm Kal-El, your cousin. I answered your father's call for help and brought you back to Earth with me. We'll be landing, soon.»

«Kal-El's just a baby, » Kara pointed out defiantly.

«You were suspended for a long time, » Kal-El told her sadly. «You were too close when the sun exploded and stranded in space. I made it safely to Earth and grew up here. Then, one day, I heard your father's call for help, and went back for you.»

«Where are my parents, and why does everything hurt so much?» Kara persisted.

Kal-El looked away and sighed deeply. He was really too tired to go through this right now. «We're recovering from radiation poisoning, » he explained. «The sun's explosion transformed the crystals of Krypton into radioactive poison. We got too close.» He paused and rolled over to face the ceiling as he recalled the nearly botched rescue.

Zor-El's ship had been badly battered, it's internal atmosphere evacuated into space, and Zor-El and Allura's mummified remains floating in the lifeless cabin. He'd scrapped his initial plans to fuse the two ships together, and bring them both back to Earth, and instead transferred all of the data crystals and Kara's stasis cot to his rescue ship. He then ejected the mortally wounded ship and sent it on a trajectory that would incinerate it in the neutron star that had once been Krypton's red sun.

Rather than immediately begin the voyage home, he had decided to survey what was left of Krypton. Most of the planet's surface had been decimated and its citizens vaporized in the sun's corona as it expanded to scorch the planet before the sun went nova. He'd surveyed what he assumed was the city of his birth, in the shadow of Mount Argo, it's once majestic crystal towers now charred and broken shards. He circumnavigated the home of his earliest days and was surprised to find monuments in the Valley of Elders which seemed miraculously unscathed among the ruins.

The monuments commemorated Krypton's greatest heroes, Kol-Ar, Pon-Us and his ancestor, Sor-El. The three of them had ended the last war among the Kryptonian people nearly half a million years ago. The emotion as he looked upon his ancestor's monument had been overwhelming, recognizing the same coat of arms that he proudly wore on his chest. He felt himself become nauseous before the knot of pain cramped his stomach. He'd stared out the viewport in confusion in response to the pain for several minutes before he finally recognized the green vein snaking through his family crest on Sor-El's monument. *Kryptonite!* The nova had transformed the crystals into the deadly substance! He barely managed to squeak out the command, "Home," before he fell back on his cot and lost consciousness.

His cousin's prodding interrupted his rumination. «Kal-El», she interrupted

apprehensively. «Where are my parents?»

He turned to her and told her compassionately, «I'm sorry, Kara, but they didn't survive.»

«No!» Kara wailed, her lip quivering. «It's got to be a mistake. They can't be... can't...»

The child was overcome and sank back into her cot, sobbing uncontrollably. Kal-El pushed through his lethargy and sat up, pulling her onto his lap. Her arms automatically wrapped around him as he reconfigured his cot into a seated position.

Martha Kent smiled victoriously as she laid her tiles down on the scrabble board. "*Alienation*," she announced. "That makes my total, *ahem*, four hundred and nine."

"I'm just about to make my comeback," Ben promised happily.

"I can hardly wait," Martha chuckled. She was interrupted from further comment by a vibration resonating through the house and shaking the scrabble tiles off of the board. The vibration was followed by a rumbling that turned into a deafening roar. *Something's wrong*, Martha thought. *He was supposed to land at the Fortress.*

"What in the world?" Ben wondered as he jogged quickly to the back door and looked out in the direction of the noise. Martha joined him and saw the sky turn red as a shiny meteorite streaked directly above the farmhouse, quickly losing altitude. It disappeared over the peak of the barn moments before a flash lit the sky like daylight and a thunderous blast assaulted their hearing. "We'd better call the sheriff," Ben advised.

"We're not going to bother the sheriff for a simple meteorite," Martha insisted.

"But..." Ben protested.

"Oh, would you look at the time," Martha interrupted. "I hadn't realized it had gotten so late. Thank you for joining me for dinner," she told him quickly. "I'll call you tomorrow."

"Martha, what's going on?" Ben pleaded.

"We'll talk tomorrow," Martha assured him. "Good night, Ben." He reluctantly accepted her dismissal, kissed her on the cheek, and walked out to his truck.

Martha followed the smoking trench and looked up in awe at the huge alien ship, its spikes stretching more than fifty feet into the air. *I don't think we're going to be able to hide that in the cellar*, she reflected. She moved as close to the ship as the heat still rolling off it would allow. "Clark!" she called out worriedly.

"Ma," he squeaked from her right. He was on his knees, one hand on the ground in front of him, the other struggling to maintain his grip on the semi-conscious little girl in his arms.

"Oh, Clark," Martha sighed, quickly running over to the pair. "What happened?"

"Kryptonite," he answered lethargically. "So weak..."

"Her, too?" she inquired caringly. Her son simply nodded, as he again struggled to stand. "Give her to me," Martha commanded. "I'll get her strapped into the truck and come back for you." Clark nodded his agreement and surrendered his burden, collapsing and rolling to his side as soon as he was relieved.

It seemed to take an eternity for Martha to get her charges stowed safely in the truck and back to the house. She wasn't as young or as strong as she used to be and she'd stumbled more than once. It was also an exhausting struggle to get the pair inside. Kara was much easier to handle, though still cumbersome as she carried the little girl up to her room and changed her into pajamas. She lingered a moment in the doorway observing her guest, before heading back downstairs to help her son from the truck.

*Thursday, September 14, 2006 3:35AM EDT*

Clark woke with a start, hearing the blood-curdling scream coming from the upstairs bedrooms. When the scream was followed by a loud thump, he pulled himself from his slumber and raced up the stairs to the source of the noise. He grabbed Kara's thrashing arms, and pulled her to him. «Shhh... Shhhh, » he comforted the sobbing girl. «It's all right. You're safe.»

He was so focused on his cousin that he seemed not to notice when his mother turned on the light behind him. Martha noticed that her inconsolable guest had opened her eyes and was struggling to get out the alien words between her sobs. Clark was rocking her gently, speaking soothing words to her in the same alien language. He was still dressed in the skin-tight grey body suit she'd found him in the previous evening. It had taken almost everything Martha had just to get him inside to the sofa and his boots off.

Slowly, Kara's sobs diminished, and Martha heard Clark's deep baritone as he began to sing in a slow, soothing tempo, «*Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens, Bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens, Brown paper packages tied up with string, These are a few of my favorite things*<sup>(1)</sup>...» Confident in her son's ability to handle the crisis, she retreated from the scene and returned to her bed, still exhausted from the previous night's ordeal.

Martha rose from her bed and got dressed shortly before dawn, as was her custom. She paused to check on Kara, but was surprised to find her room empty. She continued walking down the stairs and smiled widely at the sight that greeted her. Clark was lying back in the recliner with Kara in the protective circle of his arms as she cuddled up against him in peaceful slumber. She also believed Clark to be asleep, until he opened his eyes and looked over at her. "How is she," Martha mouthed.

"Sleeping peacefully," Clark whispered. "Took a while."

"You handled that well," Martha whispered back. "You'll make her a fine father."

Clark's eyes went wide at his mother's implication. "Ma, I..." he started quietly. "I wouldn't know what to do."

"Do you think that your father and I did when we first brought you home?" Martha asked in a low whisper. "It's no different with *any* first-time parent. And you're not in this alone." She approached the pair, placing a hand affectionately on his shoulder. "I'll do what I can to help," she assured him. "That's what *grandmothers* do." She chuckled quietly at her son's dumbfounded look.

"The idea's a bit overwhelming," Clark confessed. He looked down at his cousin, who was starting to stir.

"You'll do fine if last night was any indication," Martha declared. "I don't know anyone who could have handled that better, which had nothing to do with your gifts." She observed her guests for a moment and continued somberly, "It won't be as easy to document her identity as it was for us to document yours," Martha pointed out. "You'll also need to figure out a way to forge a DNA test. Since you're a single man, CPS will never let you keep her unless you can prove that she's biologically yours. As for her human bio... I've worked out a couple alternatives, though we'll need some of your special attention to make it work."

"Just how long have you been expecting that I'd adopt her?" Clark asked suspiciously.

"Not long," his mother answered mirthfully. "Only for the past six years."

Kara opened her eyes and jumped back with a start, though failing to escape the security of her cousin's arms. After a moment of disorientation, she settled back down on Clark's chest as she warily regarded Martha. The old woman bent down and greeted Kara with a friendly

smile. "Are you hungry, sweetheart? Would you like me to get you some breakfast?"

Clark whispered to Kara in the alien language Martha had heard early that morning. Turning to his mother, Clark explained, "She doesn't speak English."

"Well, we'll have to fix that," Martha declared. "In the meantime, I'll get her breakfast, while you hide that spaceship you left in the West field. Looks like she could use a bath, too, after crawling in the dirt last night." She held out her hand to Kara, and after some encouragement from her cousin, the girl took her hand and let the kind old woman lead her into the kitchen.

## Chapter 6 - Strange New World

*Thursday, September 14, 2006 7:45AM CDT*

Clark stretched and faced the sun to recharge after burying his ship a hundred feet below the Kansas corn. It had taken a lot more out of him than it should have, but at least he had his powers back, if not his stamina. He only allowed himself a moment for the indulgence, before peeking inside the house with his X-ray vision to check on Kara. She was still in the kitchen, but sitting on the floor, fascinated with his mother's golden retriever, Shelby. Martha was calling her back to table to finish her breakfast, gesturing to her half-finished pancakes. Satisfied with the tableau he observed inside the house, he turned and walked into the barn.

He directed his attention to the loose straw that covered the floor and concealed the trap door to the cellar. A whoosh of superbreath cleared the floor and a moment later he was slowly descending the stairs. The small space was even more crowded than he remembered with stacks of newspapers from the past six years now also cluttering the space. Clark squeezed by the rows of bundled papers, opened a cabinet door, and set the crystals he'd retrieved from the ship inside a plastic storage container that also held the blue and red uniforms of his alter-ego.

He surveyed the bundled newspapers around him and discovered that alongside old issues of *The Daily Planet*, his mother had also bundled old issues of *The Torch*, the community's weekly local paper. *Well, I guess The Torch is the best way to keep up to date on Smallville*, he concluded. *I might as well start there*. Clark scanned the bundles with his X-Ray vision, mentally reassembling them in date order, and began perusing the headlines.

"Smallville Says Goodbye to Mildred Hubbard, 1938-2000" - *Ben's wife passed away? Oh, a heart attack, just like Dad, and only a couple weeks after I left. Poor Ben. Mildred was a nice lady.*

"Smallville Hosts Pot-Luck for Congressman-Elect Ross" - *Glad Pete won that election...*

"Crows Competitive in Quarter-Final Heartbreaker" - *That's farther than the basketball team ever made it when I went to school there. Maybe if Dad had let me play...*

"County-wide Wi-Max Rolled Out" - *Whoa! Wireless broadband for the whole county? When did that become a priority? Oh, Pete sponsored the bill in Congress for that...*

"Blood Drive Held for 9/11 Victims" - *What on Earth? I guess I'll find out the details when I get to the Planet bundles.*

Clark made quick work of the *Torch's* back issues, reflecting on the community's highs and lows and its population's ebbs and flows. He then turned his attention to *The Daily Planet* bundles and repeated the process. He immediately noticed a stark contrast in the tone between the *Torch* and the *Planet's* reporting - there didn't seem to be much hope reflected in his former colleagues' writing. Lois' writing in particular had taken on a pessimistic tone. Of course, the stories covered were also more discouraging: Lives lost in a rough year for natural disasters; The September 11 Attacks; War in the Middle East; Crime on the rise in areas that could least tolerate it...

Clark quickly and steadfastly continued scanning each issue, memorizing the articles, occasionally pausing over a particularly troubling story. He imagined the missing years as he read, moving through the remainder of 2000, then on to 2001.... 2002... 2003... 2004. Finally, an article from September 8, 2005 stopped him cold, and he fished the issue out from the middle of stack, spreading it open on top of the bundles and he slowly read it.

"Why the World Doesn't Need Superman" - *Lois wrote that? I should have talked to her before I left. ...Oh, boy... "We realize it would have been better if he had never come at all..."*

*I really should have talked to her.* After re-reading the editorial for a third time, he realized how tired he was and he abandoned the cellar to head back to the house.

Clark entered the kitchen just as Kara was finishing her pancakes. Martha had apparently coaxed her charge away from Shelby long enough to finish her breakfast. His mother detected his disheartened demeanor and gently probed, "Did everything go all right?"

Clark masked his expression and answered simply, "The ship's taken care of. Any problems with Kara?"

"She's been a little angel," Martha beamed. "We're getting to know each other in spite of the language barrier, though Shelby seems to be managing even better at that than me. Oh, I think it may be a good idea for you to explain that she's getting a bath after breakfast. I remember how you use to fight us at bath time, and I'm too old to go into combat."

«What are you two talking about?» Kara asked curiously.

«I'm sorry, Kara, » Clark apologized. «I keep forgetting that we haven't taught you 'English' yet.»

«What's 'English'?»

«It's the human language that my mother and I have been speaking, » he explained, gesturing to Martha.

Kara narrowed her eyes and cross her arms across her chest. «I though you said you were Kal-El!» she complained defiantly. «His mother is Aunt Lara!»

"I take it she doesn't like baths," Martha commented mirthfully.

"I didn't get to that part yet," Clark muttered. He returned his attention to his cousin and kindly explained, «It's not that simple, Kara. Jor-El and Lara died when I was just a baby and I was too little to take care of myself when I got to Earth. But I was found by two of the most wonderful human beings you could ever hope to meet. They brought me into their home and their hearts. They adopted me and became my parents, and it's because of their love and guidance that I became the man that I am. It doesn't make Jor-El and Lara any less my father and mother, but the humans who raised me are my father and mother, too. Do you understand that?»

Kara's rage dissipated slightly at that. She glanced briefly over at Martha before locking eyes with her cousin and sadly asking, «Aunt Lara's still your mother?»

«Yes.»

«And this lady is your mother, too, because she adopted you when you were little, after... after Aunt Lara and Uncle Jor-El died?» she continued.

«Yes. Her name is 'Martha'.»

«Are your human mother and father going to adopt me, too?» Kara asked anxiously, looking back at Martha.

Clark smiled sadly, and informed her, «Well, my human father died when I was seventeen years old. It's just my mother, now, and she'd rather be your grandmother.»

Kara was silent for a moment, and looked down in contemplation. When she finally looked up, she asked quietly, «Does that mean that *you're* going to adopt me?»

Clark sighed deeply and scrutinized his cousin for a moment. «Possibly, » he answered after a moment. «There wasn't a lot of time to plan things out before I left to get you, so we're still trying to figure things out. And I don't have a wife who could be a mother for you.» He started cutting into his pancakes before chancing a glance back at Kara. Her tear-glistened eyes and the quivering lower lip, sent him quickly around the table, and he pulled her into his



embrace. He told her sincerely, «Kara, no matter what happens, remember this: We'll always be family, and as long as there's life in me, I will always be there for you. I promise.» Kara wrapped her arms around him and began quietly crying in his arms.

Martha's thoughts were of her houseguests during the drive back from town with her groceries. The poor little girl seemed to be having a tough first day on Earth, with the nightmare last night and her breakdown after breakfast. Clark had managed those episodes remarkably well and she had no doubt he'd make a wonderful father, despite his apprehension. They still had some work to do to get everything in place for that, though they had some time before that had to be done.

She was also relieved that the pair had overcome their incapacitation from the previous night, when they'd both been so weak that they could hardly stand. She'd been worried about that and Clark had clearly lost some weight. Kara was terribly thin as well and Martha assumed that must have been a side effect of being frozen in stasis for so long.

Fortunately, Clark had recovered enough to bury their spaceship and Kara's heritage was starting to assert itself as well. When they'd been outside after her bath, tossing a tennis ball around for Shelby, it had gotten away from Kara, disappearing into the sky over the horizon. The child didn't know her own strength. *Well, Clark should be able to help her with that,* Martha thought. *He knows better than anybody what she's going through.*

Martha turned into the drive of the Kent farm and immediately spotted the pair sitting in the sun on the steps, with Shelby lying on the porch behind them. They walked out to greet her as she parked her truck beside the house. Clark opened the passenger door and informed his mother, "We'll carry the groceries in for you." He handed some of the bags off to Kara and took the remainder himself.

"So, what have you two been up to while I was gone," she asked pleasantly as she followed them into the house.

Clark whispered something to Kara, provoking a smile from her and she excitedly answered in English, "We do flash cards!"

"Oh, you're learning English!" Martha responded in delight. "How wonderful!"

"She has a rather limited vocabulary right now," Clark explained. "Our focus this morning was on the alphabet and phonetics - the flash cards you bought came in handy for that. I've also been teaching her a few English words here and there while we were at it."

"It'll be a lot for her to remember," Martha commented.

"Well, she has an eidetic memory like me, so I don't think that'll be too much of a problem," Clark suggested. "After lunch she'll get reading lessons and work on controlling her strength - I wanted to give her a little more time in the sun to recover before getting into the powers."

"Are you still feeling the effects from the kryptonite?" Martha asked, the concern apparent in her voice.

"My powers are back, but earlier this morning I was tiring a bit quicker than usual," he admitted. "Give us enough time in the sun, though, and we'll both be back to a hundred percent before too long."

"Good," Martha answered simply. She began putting away the groceries and casually added, "It's got to be difficult for her but she's incredibly lucky to have you here to help her. You're doing a remarkable job, you know."

"Thanks, Mom," Clark answered sincerely. "Though I still don't quite feel that I know

what I'm doing."

"That gets better with time," Martha assured him. "Just don't work her too hard. Remember that she's a little girl, and she'll need play time, too."

Clark nodded his agreement, and helped his mother put away the rest of the groceries.

*Thursday, September 14, 2006 3:15PM CDT*

Kara still couldn't believe all of the incredible things that she and Kal-El could do on this strange world. She never imagined that anyone could possibly throw a ball as far as she had thrown Shelby's ball that morning, or run as fast as she now knew she could run. Even now, running through the fields at two hundred miles an hour with her cousin, she could hardly comprehend that she was able to do such incredible things, so easily.

Kal-El had demonstrated all the things that he could do and explained how he was able to do them, and Kara found that she was also able to do those things. She could hear conversations from miles away, see through walls, blow out her breath with hurricane force, and burn things by concentrating her vision upon it. She'd even been able to float up into the air. Kal-El had been surprised that she'd been able to do that.

«Turn to your left here, » Kal-El commanded, pointing in the indicated direction. She obeyed, and made a wide turn to her left, nearly stumbling. Kal-El caught her arm, and kept her on her feet, and she continued at speed through the rows of plants. *Corn*, Kara reminded herself. *He said the English word for these plants is 'corn.'* Kal-El had explained that Earth didn't have the technology for replicators, and actually had to grow their food instead. These plants would eventually be harvested and served as food. This was a weird planet. *Father said it would be different here*, Kara remembered. *Father...* As thoughts of her lost parents overtook her again, she slowed her pace and came to a stop.

Clark noticed the tears glistening in his cousin's eyes and squatted down in front of her. «Kara, are you okay?» he asked compassionately.

«I miss them, » she said softly.

«I know, and I wish I could make things easier for you,» he told her. «I know it doesn't help much now, but it will get better with time.»

«It's my fault, » she confessed.

«Kara, you mustn't blame yourself, » Kal-El insisted. «It's natural to feel guilty when you survive and others don't, but-»

«No, you don't understand, » Kara insisted, «It's my fault that they're dead.»

«You can't mean that, » Kal-El consoled her.

Kara looked back at her cousin with tears now dripping down her face. «I wasn't where I was supposed to be, » she admitted. «They told me to stay close by, but I got bored...»

Clark listened intently as Kara described her last moments on Krypton, when her mother finally tracked her down at the playground with her friends near their home. «We've been looking all over for you!» Allura had scolded her. She activated her wrist comm, muttering the words, «Found her. We'll meet you at home.»

Their home was falling down around them when they finally got there and boarded the ship, and they just barely made it clear before the south wall of Kandor fell into the Chasm, taking millions of homes carved into the crystal with it, including theirs. They'd just escaped Krypton's gravity when their red sun began to shrink behind the planet.

«Translate to hyperspace!» Allura had screamed hysterically.

«We're still too close to the sun, » Zor-El insisted. Allura knew as well as he did that

attempting translation too close to a stellar mass would disintegrate the ship and she nodded her understanding. «Five more minutes... it's going to be close, » he informed her.

Kara had been glued to the window and witnessed the sun disappear behind Krypton, and then light up in a fireball brighter than anything she'd ever seen. Only the automatic filters on the viewscreen had prevented her from being blinded by the intensity. «Ten seconds, » she heard her father call out.

Two seconds before they would have been clear, the ship's safety systems automatically transferred all power to shields to protect them from the shock wave it detected, preventing their translation to hyperspace. The wave hit them five seconds later, and even with the shielding fully powered, they'd been violently thrown about the cabin and knocked unconscious. When Kara woke, her parents had very worried expressions on their faces, and her father's brow was wrinkled in concentration over the console. «There has to be someone, somewhere...» he had muttered.

«We made it this far, » Allura had consoled her husband and daughter. «We'll figure something out.» Kara had been bored out of her mind while her parents reviewed the information on the console, and it seemed like hours before they finally pulled themselves from their analysis and tucked her into the stasis chamber cot. They'd both been extremely attentive, telling her how much they loved her, that she'd be at her new home on Earth before she knew it, and how wonderful a place it would be. When they activated the stasis unit, Kara had quickly succumbed to the darkness.

Thousands of years later, in a Kansas cornfield on a strange distant planet called Earth, Kara looked at her cousin with a distraught expression on her face. «If I had listened -», she began.

«Shhh...» Kal-El commanded, pulling her into a hug, holding her tight for a moment as her shoulders began to shake with sobs. When her crying subsided, he gently told her, «I know it's difficult, but you must not blame yourself for their deaths. You didn't mean for anything bad to happen and nobody knew how much time we really had left. I was probably only a few seconds ahead of you and my mother never let me out of her arms until it was time to go. There's no way to know how things would have gone if you'd been home with your parents.»

«But -» she protested.

«No 'buts, '» Kal-El interrupted authoritatively. «I don't blame you and I don't think that your parents did, either. They wanted you to live, and the best way to honor their memory is to look forward, instead of to the past, and live the life that they wanted for you, one that would make them proud.» Kara clung tightly to her cousin, wishing for a way to believe those words as he apparently did.

## Chapter 7 - Intruders

The sole occupant of the ship's magnificent glass-bottomed ballroom was unable to relax to the soothing sounds of Léo Delibes' *The Flower Duet* flowing from the *Gertrude's* sound system. Though Lex Luthor hardly noticed the irregular motion that the rough arctic seas forced upon the 271-foot yacht, his preoccupation with the delays locating the alien treasure made it impossible to enjoy the music. Not only had he spent months waiting for Gertrude Vanderworth to die, they were also spending an unbearably long time searching for the bounty, despite having prepped the ship while the old crone was on her deathbed and embarking on the journey within moments of her heart's last beat.

Their sprint north along the eastern seaboard to the arctic's Queen Elizabeth Islands had taken an excruciating ten days, given the ship's top speed of a mere seventeen knots and the mandatory ports of call for fuel and provisions. The riches Lex sought remained hidden even now, after three days of scanning the damned frozen wasteland with the best precision sensory equipment that the Vanderworth fortune could buy. *If those buffoons would just pay a little closer attention to what they're doing and less time complaining about the cold, maybe we'd have found the damn place by now*, Lex fumed.

Lex turned his attention to the numerous scientific texts and journals that he'd brought with him on the journey, each offering a hint of a lucrative opportunity, if only the technology of realizing that vision was available. He was just the visionary genius to deliver it, if only the imbeciles up top could find Superman's secret base. If the Kryptonians had safely delivered a man to a world galaxies away, as the alien had boasted in that debut interview, then surely they had the means of bringing such dreams to fruition. Superman certainly would not have allowed that wondrous knowledge to die with his doomed world. Yes, the Rosetta Stone to that advanced alien technology was somewhere nearby and his for the taking, opening up countless opportunities for wealth and power. Of course, he'd gladly deliver those dreams to his eager customers, for the right price, and he'd be sure to include back doors in the products to protect and extend his interests.

Lex looked over the books and magazines opened up on the desk in front of him, and recalled the potential revealed in these scientists' infantile efforts to unlock the secrets in their various disciplines. The life-like Japanese robot described in the issue of *Live Science* was little better than Disney's animatronics, yet the writers were giddy over the allegedly advanced technologies behind its primitive features. *Simple-minded amateurs!* Lex scoffed. *Once I find the Boy Scout's base, I'll give them something to write about.* He'd produce domestic robotic servants that would become an essential status symbol in every mansion and boardroom. Of course, they'd surreptitiously record everything and transmit it back to LuthorCorp, allowing him to ensure his customers' continued support. True robotics had so much more potential than the amusement park gimmick the Japanese had boasted of.

Another intriguing area with great promise was nanotechnology - machines only several dozen nanometers in size. The results so far had achieved little more than a few motors or switches that lecture audiences swooned over, but had little practical application. With the alien's database, Lex would show them what a true visionary creates. For the right price, his nanites would be injected into the body to clear clogged arteries, destroy cancerous tumors and repair spinal cord injuries. They would also expertly perform cosmetic procedures, dissolving fat cells, tightening wrinkled skin, and restoring one's youthful appearance. Of course, they'd also be able to take over the patient's nervous system, allowing Lex to press them into service without it ever being traced back to him. *That probably never occurred to those simple-*

*minded fools*, Lex sneered.

Stable fusion power was another puzzle that Krypton must have deciphered, and which Lex was eager to exploit in this energy-hungry world. *That fool alien never realized what he had*, Lex concluded. *The world will be much better served with me as the guardian of that knowledge*. Once he delivered the new clean power plants and shut down the old fossil fuel ones, he'd set the prices for the energy monopoly at his whim. Of course, his ventures in domestic robotics and nanotechnology would keep the public utility commissions in line.

Among all the possibilities, Lex was most enamored with all the new *land* just waiting to be claimed elsewhere in the solar system. Lesser minds ignored that possibility, given that the current state of space technology that was still so young that humans could barely reach out to the moon. However, if Krypton could send a man across several galaxies, they certainly had vehicle designs that could bring the planets within easy reach. Lex glanced over the *National Geographic* issue in front of him, opened to the article titled, " ."

He nearly drooled over the artist's conception of a Mars with an atmosphere and oceans similar to what the Earth now had. *So much beach-front property*, Lex thought dreamily. *If it was like that once, it could be again. Certainly, the freak's ancestors knew how to terraform a planet*. Lex dreamed of a Mars transformed by Kryptonian technology into LuthorWorld, and opened to tourism and immigration, if you were wealthy enough. Of course, there would be no tired, poor or huddled masses crowding *his* world. And with a monopoly on transportation and all public services, he would certainly get his cut.

These were but a few examples of the seemingly infinite opportunities waiting for him when he assimilated the alien's technology. However, his hired help first needed to find the damned alien base. He knew it was there, abandoned when the flying freak had died, and Lex had no doubt that he was dead. If he had simply left the planet as suggested, he'd have released a statement through his favorite member of the press. *Whoever killed him was a fool not to have recorded his death or paraded the dead body through the streets*, Lex thought casually. *They could have gotten so much mileage out of that...* Finally noticing the time, he pulled himself from his ruminations and irritably pushed himself away from the desk. *This is the treatment I get*, he complained to himself. *The boldest criminal genius of our time, and I'm surrounded by fools and slackers*. "Kitty!" he bellowed, "Where's my martini?"

The three men in the wheelhouse were all leaning forward in their seats, hovering over their coffee as they silently scrutinized the equipment that had been installed in the countertops. That quiet was abruptly ended when Grant stalked menacingly into the room; almost unrecognizable bundled under his parka's heavy protection against the cold. "What the hell are we doing up here freezing our asses off?" he asked irritably. "All that's out there is ice and snow!"

"And icebergs," Brutus added helpfully.

"Why did you rob banks?" Reilly countered. "Because that's where the money was."

"There's no money up here," Grant hissed.

"But whatever Lex is looking for *is* up here," Reilly clarified. "He hasn't led us wrong yet."

"Yet," Grant emphasized.

Reilly resisted the impulse to roll his eyes, sighing deeply instead. "His lawyers got us all out of prison, just like he promised, and it's been easy money ever since."

"I'm still freezing my ass off," Grant grumbled.

"We all are," Brutus pointed out unsympathetically.

*Blip!* Any response was prevented by the warning tone from one of the monitors. Stanford adjusted the controls to zoom in on the targeted area and attempted to decipher what the sensor had briefly detected.

"Got anything?" Reilly asked, focusing his ever-present video camera on the equipment.

"I'm not sure," Stanford muttered. "Whatever was there is gone now."

"It's probably interference from the storm," Brutus suggested. "Make sure you steer around that. I definitely do *not* want to ride out another storm in this tub."

"Next time, take the Dramamine like the rest of us," Stanford suggested as he maneuvered the ship closer to the menacing storm hovering over the island.

*Blip!* Stanford looked again, and then spoke into the intercom. "Boss, I think we might have something."

"This is what you interrupted my afternoon martini for?" Lex inquired irritably, staring at the indicated screen. "A phantom blip?"

"Boss, it's not like the other false positives we've seen," Stanford answered defensively. "The density's all wrong. It's too heavy to be snow and ice from the storm, but too light to be the rock or glaciers of the island. It only lasts a second, and it's gone again."

"How long before the storm moves off?" Lex asked sternly.

"It's kind of stalled over the island right now," Stanford informed him nervously. "I looked at the weather satellite and it hasn't budged in the last couple days."

"Show me," Lex demanded, his curiosity piqued. Stanford quickly brought up the images on the screen, showing the weather pattern loop over the past forty-eight hours. The storm clouds swirled from Northeast to Southwest, except for the storm over the island they were now circling, which remained mysteriously anchored to the spot. *Clever*, Lex thought. *Not clever enough, though*. Aloud, he informed his mean, "That's it. Download the GPS coordinates for the center of that storm into the handhelds and get geared up. The helicopter leaves in ten minutes."

"We can't fly into that," Stanford protested.

"We'll land on shore and hike the rest of the way," Lex explained irritably. "Now, get moving!"

The group trudged slowly through the shrieking wind and endless snow, protected against the storm by their heavy parkas, snow pants, skier's goggles and face masks. Stanford led the way, constantly checking the GPS, with Lex and Kitty right behind him. Brutus, Reilly and Grant brought up the rear, laden down by their heavy packs. The snow swirled fiercely against them and Lex had to continue urging them on. "Keep moving!" he commanded harshly.

"There's nothing here!" Kitty complained. "We're going to freeze to death in this!"

"The storm is merely the stupid blue Boy Scout's 'No Trespassing' sign," Lex assured her, impatiently. "We'll be fine once we get there."

"Yeah, right," Kitty muttered disbelievingly.

"It's his security and early warning system rolled into one," Lex explained harshly. "He naively assumed that no one in their right mind would press forward through this storm."

"And he was right about that," Kitty deadpanned. Lex glared at her, unkindly pulling her along the path, and the group plodded forward in defiance of the unrelenting storm.

An hour later, the storm suddenly dissipated into light snow, though visibility was still low

through the thick white fog that surrounded them and they could barely see Stanford twenty feet in front of them. Lex verified their position on his GPS handheld and they continued their slog forward into the fog. When it finally cleared to reveal the alien structure, Stanford came to a sudden stop. "My God," he muttered. "It's bigger than the Meteor-Dome back home."

"The scale can be deceiving at this distance, though it *is* big," Lex concurred, stopping alongside Stanford with the others. He only allowed himself a moment before marching forward. "Now, let's get on with it," he commanded. Twenty minutes later, they finally crossed the threshold of the secret base.

Once inside the Fortress, the group pulled off their ski goggles and face masks, and gazed around the cavernous main room. Though not quite as large as Stanford has first speculated, the place was immense. Kitty pulled off a glove and put her hand on one of the columns. "This ice is warm," she declared in astonishment.

"That's not ice. It's crystal," Lex informed her. He frowned when realized that there was nothing remotely resembling technology around them. The place was huge and majestic, but the alien technology still remained hidden. "We need to search this place, top to bottom," he declared. "Everybody spread out. If you find something important, don't touch it. Just call it in."

"I guess he forgot to get the roof fixed before he left," Kitty muttered, her gaze fixed on the gaping eighty-foot wide hole in the ceiling and the huge crystals shards littering the floor beneath.

Lex glared at her. "Don't just stand there!" he chastised her. "Get out there and search with the others." After Kitty left in a huff, Lex made his way down to the crystal debris beneath the breached roof. *Well, it's the right size for a hanger, but where is the ship and why the hell didn't he think to put in a retractable roof?* Lex pondered. There still was no video screen, no control panel, nothing to indicate that this was anything more than a random oddity of crystal growth.

"Found it!" Kitty's voice echoed throughout the Fortress. When the others finally joined her, she was in the upper level, leaning against one of the walls with a smug look on her face.

"Well?" Lex demanded. "Where is it?"

Kitty brushed her hand against the wall behind her and a three by seven foot section of the wall slid to the side. Lex eagerly followed Kitty through the door, only to be disappointed by the contents of the room. Though its construction was alien and crystalline, the features inside included a clearly recognizable shower, sink and commode. "You called us up here to show us the bathroom?" Lex asked incredulously. "I said to call it in if it was something important!"

"It's important to me," Kitty insisted, pushing Lex out of the room and brushing the panel on the inside wall to shut the door.

Then men silently stared at the closed door for a moment, before Grant declared, "I'm next."

"Just how much coffee did you have before we left?" Reilly muttered mirthfully.

"Quiet!" Lex commanded, and he bent over to take a closer look at the spot Kitty had touched to operate the door. There was nothing more than a razor-thin line around the area to reveal it as anything other than part of the wall. "Well, there's obviously a power source for the door," he concluded. "Keep looking, and keep your eyes open for these geometric patterns in the walls."

An hour of searching had revealed a bedroom and a sitting room of sorts, but no control

panels, no computers, no books, no Rosetta Stone to decipher the still elusive alien technology. At one point, Stanford was inspired to shout the command, "Computer, acknowledge." But that was also only answered with silence.

The group now gathered with Lex Luthor near the roof debris in the center of the Fortress, waiting for further directions from their leader. "Is this my reward?" Lex groused quietly. "The boldest criminal mind of our time, wasting two weeks in this frozen wasteland on a wild goose chase?"

"Well, this was stupid-" Kitty began.

"You weren't supposed to answer the question!" Lex screamed.

"I meant the floor tile," Kitty clarified, pointing to a roughly two by four foot oblong pattern of faint contiguous hexagons. "Why'd he just tile this one spot? Why not the entire floor?"

Luthor moved closer, squatting down to inspect the area. "This isn't floor tile," he explained. "There was something here - something important." He stood, and reaching his hand out towards the pattern, he added, "Maybe some kind of control panel." His supposition was supported by a screeching sound as the Fortress crystal console grew from the hexagon pattern towards his outstretched hands. Lex stretched his hands out even further, his spirits lifted in anticipation of finally unlocking the alien treasure. He smiled at Kitty, telling her kindly, "Well, I guess you're good for something after all."

"It's the least I could do for the *oldest* criminal mind of our time," Kitty muttered sarcastically.

Lex walked up to the console, brushing his hands against it, as Kitty had done at the bathroom door. His smile faded when he realized that his actions had no effect. He rubbed his hands over another spot, then another. Still, nothing. "Oh, come on!" Lex complained. "Do something!"

Unbeknownst to Lex, when his outstretched hands had activated the console, the missing father crystal caused the console's logic circuits to initiate a countdown while it waited for the crystal's reinsertion. The countdown continued during Luthor's tirade and was unmoved by his kicks to the console's base. When the timeout period finally expired, the logic circuits followed the decision tree, concluding that the father crystal had been lost. That invoked its disaster recovery procedure, growing a new father crystal and populating it with the data distributed among the remaining crystals. However, the years of recorded conversations between Kal-El and Jor-El were lost with the original crystal, and thus the procedure had the effect of resetting the new crystal to its state as it was immediately after the Fortress' creation, when the then teenage Kal-El first approached the console.

"It's not fair!" Luthor ranted. "This was supposed to be my *destiny!* I'm the-"

"My son," Jor-El's voice reverberated through the Fortress. Luthor and his companions looked in the direction of the voice and witnessed the dancing blue light coalesce into an unfamiliar face. "You do not remember me. I am Jor-El... I am your father..."

*He thinks I'm his son...*

"By now you will have reached your eighteenth year, as it is measured on Earth. By that same reckoning I will have been dead for many thousands of your years..."

*I'll be damned. The freak grew up here. He's been masquerading as one of us.*

"Embedded in the crystals before you is the total accumulation of literature and scientific facts of other worlds spanning the twenty-eight known galaxies..."

*At last! The Kryptonian Database! And it's mine now...*



"These are important matters to be sure, but still matters of mere fact. There are questions to be asked and now is time for you to do so. Speak."

"Tell me everything, starting with these crystals," Lex commanded.

The alien database had exceeded Lex's wildest dreams. After Jor-El had explained the basis of the crystal technology to Lex, the criminal had systematically queried the Kryptonian elder on each of the technologies he had researched on his journey north. Finally, they reached the subject of terraforming, and Lex was surprised to learn that Krypton had itself been terraformed, after the world of their origin was destroyed in a nuclear holocaust eons ago during Krypton's last war.

The Kryptonian survivors of that war had transformed an airless, desert planet into a life-giving world of air and water in just a few months, using their crystal technology. They'd grown new continents to cover the oceans, and even grew new cities from the crystals. Jor-El's detailed descriptions of those growing continents provided Lex with his epiphany. *I don't need to go to Mars to claim my land, he realized. I'll grow a new continent here, on Earth... and I can punish all those who stood in my way while I'm at it.*

Lex spent the entire night with the Ghost of Krypton Past, designing his new continent. When the first rays of the morning sun finally broke through the open roof, all of the details had been set, all conflicts ironed out, and a special crystal grown with the design uploaded into it. All Lex had to do was drop it in the ocean at the predetermined location to begin the continental growth process. Lex greedily stuffed the new crystal into the inside pocket of his parka and then stowed the rest of the crystals into a separate bag. *We certainly wouldn't want these falling into the wrong hands, now would we?*

## Chapter 8 - Adoption

*Friday, September 15, 2006 6:30AM CDT*

As usual, Martha Kent was out of bed and dressed before dawn. She walked quietly down the hall to check on her young guest, carefully avoiding the squeaky boards in the floor. When she reached the guest room, the open door revealed it to again be empty and Martha walked in to inspect the room. Kara had another bad dream during the night, but this time the room hadn't fared so well against her thrashing. Her flailing arms had smashed the headboard to splinters and put a hole through the wall before Clark had gotten in there to chase the nightmares away. *She's probably sleeping in his lap again*, Martha guessed. She scrutinized the damage, noting that the debris was still scattered on the floor. *Well, this can wait until after breakfast*, she decided, and she busied herself setting out clothes for Kara to wear that day.

To Martha's surprise, Kara was awake to greet her when she got downstairs, though the girl was still in the protective circle of Clark's arms, cuddled against him as he stretched out in the recliner. "Good Morning," she greeted them. "You two are up early."

Clark shrugged. "It's close enough to sunrise anyway, and you know we won't be able to sleep once the sun's up."

"Well, I guess I'd better get started on breakfast," Martha resolved. "All right, you two. On your feet." The pair obliged and Martha led Kara into the kitchen while Clark headed up the stairs.

Kara listened to the conversation between Kal-El and his human mother from her room as she dressed. She couldn't understand what they were saying, though she could pick up a few words, thanks to the English lessons from the previous day. Kal-El had explained what the sounds each of the symbols in their written language represented, how to sound out the words, and how to look up the words she didn't know in Martha's dictionary - she was going to have a lot of words to look up. After she dressed, Kara quietly came back downstairs and grabbed the dictionary from the end table. She settled herself into the recliner, opened the book to the beginning and began studying its pages while Clark and Martha continued their conversation.

"The poor dear," Martha said sympathetically. "I was so excited about having her in the family that I never stopped to think how difficult this would be for her. I guess I thought it would be like it was with you."

"I was considerably younger, Ma," Clark pointed out.

"Too young to realize what was lost," Martha acknowledged. "Not like Kara... Clark, what she really needs right now is stability, and I think that changing her orphaned status would be very helpful in that regard. I really don't mean to pressure you on it, but..."

"I know," Clark assured her. "And, you're right. And it needs to be me - last night made that rather clear. And we'll need to make that bio you came up with official."

Martha nodded, smiling at her son. After a moment of silence, she asked curiously, "How's she coming along with her lessons?"

"We're going to have to spend more time on English," Clark answered thoughtfully. "As for powers, I think she's got a handle on the strength and speed..."

"Well, that should be good enough for now," Martha concluded. "We didn't see the other stuff with you until puberty."

"That's another thing, Ma," Clark told her quietly. "She can already do all of that other stuff."

"Even fly?" Martha asked in astonishment.

Clark chuckled, "Well, I'd hardly call it flying. She has the skill, though. I don't quite understand how she's able to do all of that already."

"Well, we never knew what to expect with you, so you never had anyone to show you what was possible," Martha pointed out. "Maybe that's the difference, or maybe it's simply different with girls." Clark shrugged at the suggestions and the two were quiet for a moment before Martha broke the silence. "What's your plan for today?"

"Well, I need to patch that hole in the wall and fix Kara's bed," he informed her. "If you could watch her for a little while, I'll run into town for supplies."

"I go with you," Kara declared from the living room doorway, carrying the dictionary under one arm. "I help fix."

"You can understand us now?" Martha asked in amazement, her lips turning up into a smile.

"I look up words," Kara explained, holding up the dictionary.

"Oh, how wonderful!" Martha exclaimed, and she pulled Kara into a hug, kissing the top of her head. "I'm so happy that we can understand each other now! How many words did you look up?"

"All of them," Kara answered simply. Martha's eyes grew wide at the revelation, and she tightened her hug on her special guest.

"It would probably do her some good to get off the farm and interact with people," Clark pondered. "We'll have to work on the grammar first, though."

"You'll also need to explain that bio to her," Martha pointed out. "You'll get questions when people see her."

Clark nodded and answered confidently, "We can handle it." He turned to Kara and told her seriously, "Kara, please come here and sit down. We need to talk to you about something important."

Kara climbed into the empty seat at the kitchen table, and Shelby sauntered over to sit on the floor beside her. The young girl looked up at her cousin apprehensively and began to absently scratch Shelby behind the ears.

"Kara, do you remember what we talked about yesterday morning, when you asked if I was going to adopt you?" Clark began. At Kara's nod, he continued, "Well, I'd like to do that - to adopt you, if it's okay with you."

"Because my parents died," Kara stated sadly, her lip beginning to tremble. "It's my fault."

Clark pulled her onto his lap, and Shelby whimpered a complaint at the sudden loss of attention. "You mustn't think that," Clark insisted compassionately. "Nobody else blames you and you shouldn't either. It's just... well, sometimes bad things happen to good people. But even when bad things like that happen, we can't dwell on them. We have to keep moving forward, towards the future. In your case, that means that you'll need someone to love and support and guide you, just like I had when my parents - my human parents - adopted me. I'd like to be that someone for you."

"You be my human father?" Kara sniffled into his shirt.

"I'd be your *adoptive* father," Clark clarified. "It gets a bit complicated because we can't tell anyone that we're from Krypton, or about your real parents. We're going to have to use a made-up biography for you."

Kara looked up at him in confusion. "Why not tell the truth?"

Clark kindly explained, "I wish we could, but it's not that simple. While most of the

human beings you'll meet will be kind, wonderful people, there are also people in this world who are not so kind, not so wonderful. If some of those people found out that we were from another world, it could become dangerous for the people we care about, like my mother here. We best way to keep them safe is by keeping our heritage a secret."

"That why you change name?" Kara asked sadly. "Now 'Clark', not 'Kal-El'?"

Martha touched Kara's shoulder to get her attention, "Kara, dear, we didn't know Kal-El's birth name when we found him," she revealed. "He was just a toddler and he couldn't tell us. Even if we *had* known, 'Kal-El' wasn't a name that people on Earth used. We had to give him a name, and we named him 'Clark,' after my family. But, in your case, Kara is a common girl's name that means 'beloved,' so you can keep that name."

"You'll have a different last name, though" Clark explained. "Your full name will be Kara Annika Kent." Kara looked up at her cousin, and he quickly added, "If that's okay with you."

"What about ?" Kara asked unhappily, looking down into her lap.

"I didn't catch all of that," Martha muttered.

"It was Kryptonian for 'mother' and 'father'," Clark explained. He turned to his cousin and continued, "Kara, honey, it's just that your name needs to follow human traditions. I'm not trying to forget about your parents, or replace them. I could never do that. But, I *will* be a father to you."

"It was the same when my late husband and I adopted Clark," Martha explained. "We loved him just as much as if he had been born to us, and tried our best to help him with his gifts and bring him up right. I think that he turned out all right and now he can do the same for you - by becoming your dad... And I'll be your grandma."

"But you take my parents names away," Kara complained sullenly. "We no honor them."

"I don't understand," Martha stated quietly.

"It was Kryptonian custom to include the parents' names in their daughters' full names," Clark informed his mother. "Her Kryptonian name is Kara Allura Zor-El because Allura and Zor-El were her parents." He gently brought his hand up under Kara's chin and lifted her head so that she was looking at him. "Kara, listen to me. We honor our parents and loved ones by what's in our hearts, not just by what in our names. We have to try to fit in, and that will mean using human names. It's not our intention to dishonor your parents."

"Actually, your parents' names do exist in the human population," Martha told Kara helpfully. "The name Allura is a very rare French girl's name, and Zorel is a very rare Scandinavian surname. It's pronounced a bit differently - the accent is on the first syllable - but comes pretty close. We can use that name on your birth certificate, if it's that important to you. However, we really wanted to make you a Kent and let everyone know that you were part of this family now."

Clark looked over at his mother with an astonished look on his face. "Mom?"

"I've had six years to look up things like this, dear," she told him simply.

Kara looked sadly over at Martha and quietly declared, "I use real name."

"How about if we made it 'Kara Allura Zorel' on your birth certificate, but make your legal name here 'Kara Allura Zorel Kent'?" Clark suggested. "Would that be okay with you?"

"Okay," Kara agreed quietly.

"Good," Clark breathed in relief. "Just remember that you'll also have to stick to that new biography..."

"It silly to pretend," Kara declared. "Better to tell truth."

"I wish we didn't have to pretend, but you're just going to have to trust me on that, okay?"

Clark insisted seriously. "Someday, you'll understand."

Martha chuckled. "You sound just like your father." She turned to Kara and revealed mirthfully. "Clark didn't like the secrets any more that you do when he was your age, but he's glad he listened to us now."

"So, will you let me adopt you?" Clark gently prodded.

"You can adopt," Kara answered softly. "We go to store now?"

"You're going to need a grammar lesson, first," Clark informed her. "And you need to learn your new biography."

*Friday, September 15, 2006 9:20AM CDT*

Clark parked in front of the *Williams' General Merchandise* store and helped Kara out of the truck. "Can we get some new balls for Shelby?" she asked hopefully.

"I don't see why not," Clark agreed. "I'm sure they have some here."

They entered the store and were immediately greeted by the owners, Harold and Gladys Williams, both in their early sixties. "Clark!" Harold hollered. "I heard you were back in town! How long are you staying?"

"I'm not sure," Clark confessed as he shook the older man's hand. "I'm kind of playing it by ear right now, but I'll at least stick around long enough to fix up a few things at my mother's house."

"I assume you have a shopping list," Harold inquired helpfully. Clark pulled a folded paper from his shirt pocket and handed it over. "Hmmm," Harold muttered. "Well, I can get you the drywall and mud now, and I should have a straight two-by-four around here somewhere. We've got the paint here, too. I'm going to have to place an order for the rest of the lumber on your list, though. Let me make a call. I've got a truck coming this afternoon, and if I catch them before they leave, I might be able to get your things on it. Be right back."

While Harold called his supplier, Gladys bent down in front of Kara. "Can this little one be yours? Oh, of course she is. She's definitely got your baby blues, Clark."

"Um, this is Kara," Clark replied cheerfully. "Kara, this is Mrs. Williams."

"Hi," Kara greeted shyly, partially hiding behind Clark.

Gladys chuckled. "You were just as shy at that age. So when do we get to meet her mother?"

"She died," Kara answered sadly.

Clark's eyes grew wide in alarm and he looked down at Kara in time to see the sheen of unshed tears. He quickly squatted down beside her and pulled her close. "Are you going to be okay, honey?" he asked gently.

"I'm sorry," she answered tearfully.

"There's nothing to be sorry for," Clark told her sympathetically. "I know you're going through a rough time." Kara responded by clinging tightly to her new father.

"I'm so sorry," Gladys apologized. "I didn't mean to upset her."

"It's okay," Clark replied quietly. "You didn't know... She just found out the sad news a couple days ago and it hasn't been easy on her."

Gladys nodded in acknowledgement and excused herself to join her husband behind the counter, giving the pair some privacy. When Harold hung up the phone, Clark heard Gladys whisper the news about Kara's mother to her husband.

Clark brushed Kara's tears away and happily suggested, "Hey, didn't you want to pick up some more tennis balls for Shelby? I think they have some over there." Kara offered a small

smile, nodding her head, and Clark led her over towards the store's small sporting goods section.

As they passed the front counter, Gladys gently interrupted them. "Clark, don't worry about the supplies. We have your list and we'll have our son drop them off at your mother's place this afternoon, after the truck comes in with the rest of your order."

"You don't need to do that," Clark protested.

Gladys held up her hand to silence him. "You see to your little one. We have your list, Fred will deliver your supplies, and we'll settle up later. It's the least we can do after upsetting her like that."

"I appreciate that," Clark told her sincerely. "Though I'd still like to get what I can now, so we can at least get started on our home projects." He smiled over at Kara and said cheerfully, "Kara's insisting on helping me."

"Fair enough," Gladys conceded, smiling back at the pair. "But please let us know if there's anything we can do to help."

"I will," Clark assured her. "Thank you."

Clark knelt down on the tarp in front of the damaged wall in Kara's room, and gently lifted up on the top half of the severed stud. He looked over at Kara kneeling beside him, and explained, "I'm just putting enough tension on the stud so that it'll carry the load on top after we fix it... Hand me that two-by-four."

Kara grabbed one of the two eighteen-inch long pieces of lumber that they had cut earlier, and handed it to Clark. He tilted it through the hole in the wall, and slid the piece up against the broken stud, holding the two pieces together. "Now the nails..." he told her. Kara handed him the framing nails, one at a time, and he pushed six of them through the two studs above the break.

"Can I try?" Kara asked hopefully.

"Sure, just push the nails through the two pieces at the bottom, like I did on the top," Clark offered happily.

Kara scooted closer, and effortlessly pushed the framing nails through the two boards below the break. "Just remember... Other people aren't strong enough to push nails into wood like this. If there are other people around, you'd have to use a hammer and tap it lightly. We'll practice that later."

"Okay."

"Good, now hand me the other two-by-four," Clark instructed her. Kara handed him the other eighteen-inch stud, which Clark aligned on the other side of the break, sandwiching the damaged original between the two splints, and repeating the process. "That should hold it... Please hand me that gyp-board..." Kara gave Clark the sixteen by twenty inch wallboard that they had cut earlier, and he precisely fit it into place. Kara already had the drywall screws ready for him when he turned his head to ask for them. He accepted the screws, and secured the patch in place.

"How's it going?" Martha asked from the doorway.

"We fixed it, Grandma!" Kara informed her excitedly.

"I can see that," Martha replied happily, smiling down on her.

"We should have it all patched in both rooms in another half hour," Clark elaborated. He noticed his mother's elevated heartbeat and voiced his concern, "Is everything all right?"

"Well, the phone might not be ringing off the hook, but while you two have been up here,

I got thirty emails from the ladies in town, all wanting to know about my granddaughter, and that's in addition to a half-dozen IMs I got as soon as I logged in. I had to set my Yahoo to invisible just to have some peace."

"IMs?" Clark asked disbelievingly.

"The Internet came to Smallville while you were away, son," Martha explained. "Pete pushed through the county-wide Wi-Max and they added an Internet lab to the library. They even offered adult-Ed classes to teach us old-timers how to use it all. And the Rodgers' boy has been helping folks find cheap, refurbished PCs to get on-line. I got mine from eBay, though."

"You've been shopping on eBay?" Clark asked incredulously.

Martha nodded, smiling at her son's reaction as she continued, "Point is, people are only just finding out about you two and the town's already in a tizzy over it. They mean well and want to help - some of them too much so. Now that they know you're a single dad, the old ladies are probably already trying to find you a bride. I wouldn't be surprised if they ambushed us after church Sunday."

"Uh, oh," Clark muttered quietly.

Martha waved off his concern, "Don't worry about it. We can handle them - we always have. Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned it... Anyway, that's not what I came up here for. Since we don't have a language barrier anymore, I was going to suggest that I go over Kara's school lessons with her after you're done here while you take care of those other things we talked about."

"School?" Kara asked unhappily.

"Yes, school," Martha explained firmly. "You're going to have to catch up to the other kids your age before you start going to school with them. Don't worry. You'll still have plenty of time to play. We just can't neglect your education indefinitely."

"Your grandma's usually right about such things," Clark gently informed his little helper. "The lessons won't be that bad - you might even enjoy them - and I won't be gone long."

"I'll have everything ready downstairs once you're done here," Martha informed them quietly, leaving them to the repairs as she turned on her heel and exited the room.

*Saturday, September 16, 2006 2:00AM UTC*

Superman grew pensive during his second flight over the Atlantic in the past day. His first trip that morning had turned into a reconnaissance mission to identify what documents would need to be forged, and where those forgeries would need to be planted. *Mom really did her homework*, he had thought, *These are perfect places for this - towns whose records aren't computerized yet, but still big enough that they would not remember a stranger passing through town, even if she gave birth while she was there*. He had finished the surveillance in time for a casual visit with Doc Rivers back in Smallville to inquire about DNA tests, before rejoining his newly adopted daughter at the farm.

Kara was learning quickly. After a slow start trying it the traditional human way, Martha had instead decided to have Kara speed-read the school materials first, and then go over it with her to fill in the blanks. It looked like it wouldn't take more than a few more days before Kara caught up to the other second-graders. She was making progress with the powers, too, though the past afternoon's emphasis had been on learning how to keep her actions within the norm for a child her age. A couple more days, and she would have that down as well. Learning to use her powers *with control* would take more time, but she was certainly farther along than he had been at that age.

When Fred Williams dropped off the rest of lumber late that afternoon, Kara had insisted on joining Clark in the barn to help him and he taught her how to turn the wood on the lathe, perfectly reproducing the parts from the destroyed headboard. They'd still have to get by with the old headboard that night, while the glue set on its replacement in the barn. They'd paint it in the morning, along with the drywall patches in the bedrooms, and all evidence of the previous night's damage would be erased.

*Well, all things considered, the day went pretty well,* Superman reflected. *Kara's come a long way in a couple days, learning English, accepting the adoption and her cover story, albeit reluctantly. Though she's still having a hard time with her parents' deaths, blaming herself, and she's been a bit clingy.* Kara hadn't been pleased that he was flying off to run some errands alone for a second time that day, just as they were sitting down to watch the *Toy Story* DVD that Martha had rented from Netflix. It had taken several minutes to settle her down before she let him leave, and in the end he had to promise a trip to the Sedgwick County Zoo in Wichita that weekend. *I hope I won't have to bribe her every time I have to go.*

Superman pulled himself from his contemplation as he approached the Scandinavian town, and silently lowered himself to the roof of the city hall. He sneaked inside undetected and slipped the forged birth certificate in their files, just where it would have been if Kara had really been born there. He remained unseen when he left the building, flying quickly above the clouds. *One down,* he thought. *Just a few more stops, and we'll be all set.*



## Chapter 9 - Welcoming Kara

*Saturday, September 16, 2006 11:30 AM CDT*

Martha set the laundry basket on the dining room table and began pulling out the clothing and folding it. *Those two have certainly been generating a lot of laundry during their training sessions*, Martha thought to herself. After each session, the pair seemed to come back to the house covered in dust from the fields and both in desperate need of baths and change of clothes. *Well, maybe once she finds her wings they'll come back a little cleaner.*

Martha's thoughts were interrupted by a male voice from the back door. "Hello, hello, hello!" he called out cheerfully. "Mind a visit from a strange old man?"

"Come on in, Ben," Martha greeted pleasantly. "I'm in the dining room."

Ben strolled comfortably through the kitchen and greeted Martha with a chaste kiss. "I've missed you the past few days," he confided. "I've also heard a few things about the company you've been keeping," he teased. He pulled out a chair and sat at the table, his gaze locking on the little jeans Martha had in her hands. "I don't think those will fit Clark," he commented.

"No," Martha said simply. "They're Kara's."

"Your granddaughter who I had to find out about from the town gossips," Ben finished. "Do I get to meet her?"

"Clark took her to the Sedgwick County Zoo this morning," Martha informed him. "I don't expect them back until late this afternoon... Ben, I'm sorry I didn't tell you about all this. I didn't mean to keep you in the dark, it's just... Well, it's complicated and these are Clark's private matters. It really wasn't my place to speak of it."

"I'd have respected his privacy," Ben assured her. "Are you sure that your silence wasn't because Clark never married Kara's mother?" Martha looked over at Ben with a surprised expression on her face and he elaborated. "Like I said, 'town gossips.' I got a call from Gladys yesterday morning right after she talked to you. She was trying to find out what I knew about Kara."

"What else did she tell you?" Martha inquired.

"That Clark and, what was her name, Annika? That they were only together briefly before she left him and went back to Europe and that he never knew about Kara. At least, not until after the poor kid's mother died in that tsunami a couple weeks back, along with the rest of her family. Gladys didn't seem to have too many details beyond that."

"Well, she's lucky she got that much," Martha snapped. "Our focus these past few days has been on *Kara*, not putting out a press release for those old gossips."

"Martha, I'm not the enemy here," Ben replied gently. "And I know this has to be rough on the girl - she's had the carpet pulled out from under her when she should still be blissfully ignorant of the harsh realities of this world."

Martha set down the unfolded jeans and dropped into the chair beside Ben. "You have no idea," she admitted. "The poor dear's been breaking down in tears over her loss when you least expect it, and wakes up in the middle of the night, screaming from terrible nightmares. Clark spent the entire night in the chair by her bed last night so he'd be there to chase away the bad dreams before they had her busting through the walls."

"I can imagine," Ben replied compassionately. "Has she gotten any professional help?"

"What?" Martha began uneasily. "She's only had a few days to adjust. Give her some time."

"Martha, you do remember how the Holland kids were after their folks were killed by that drunk on fifty-three, don't you?" Ben reminded her. "They practically gave their poor

grandparents strokes from their antics until that doctor from Kansas City turned them around."

"Kara's nothing like those little devils," Martha retorted. "She's a very well-behaved little darling."

"I think that she'd still benefit from the help," Ben countered. At Martha's aggravated expression, he quickly added, "Please, at least think about it. There, I've said my piece. I won't pester you on it any further."

Martha gaze lost focus as she considered Ben's advice. "Things aren't as simple as they were with the Holland boys," she sadly confided. "This is so much more complicated and these aren't matters that are easy to talk about."

"What's the real story here, Martha?" Ben prodded gently.

"I..." she began. *No, I can't lie to him*, she decided. "As much as I'd like to, I simply can't say anything yet," she explained. "Not without talking to Clark first... And I haven't yet had a chance to tell him about you."

Ben nodded his understanding. "Fair enough," he stated sympathetically. "I suppose you've had more than enough to keep your mind occupied the past few days."

"Thank you, Ben," Martha told him sincerely. "I promise I'll talk to Clark about this when I get a chance." Ben reached for her hand and smiled warmly at his companion.

*Saturday, September 16, 2006 5:00 PM CDT*

Martha allowed her mind to wander as she peeled the potatoes for dinner and she realized just how fortunate she was to have found such an understanding beau. Ben hadn't pushed for details on Kara's background, but had instead simply offered her his unconditional support. Even with certain specifics off-limits, Martha had still been able to describe Kara's circumstances with surprising detail. He absorbed as much as she would tell him, gently encouraging her to share her worry without pressuring her to speak. Martha hadn't realized how much the situation had been weighing her down until Ben had lightened the load for her.

*I'm going to have to talk to Clark about him, and soon*, she reminded herself and her stomach knotted at the thought. *He's going to be surprised and it will probably bother him at first. He and Jonathan were so close...* She threw the last of the potatoes in the pot and turned on the burner, shifting her attention to the ears of corn.

Her preparations were disrupted when her tardy dinner guests breezed through the back door. "Grandma!" Kara exclaimed. "We saw the penguins dive off the ice and swim deep down through the ocean! It's like they were flying through the water! And on land, they walk real funny, like this..." Kara entertained her grandmother with a playful imitation of the bird's waddle.

Martha smiled delightfully at the presentation. "Well, it sounds like someone had fun... But somehow I don't think you saw that at the zoo." Martha teased her son with a suspicious expression.

"We went to Antarctica," Kara explained. "And before that, we went to Australia and saw kangaroos and wallabies, and even a Tasmanian devil." She wrinkled her nose and informed her grandmother in a loud whisper, "They smell really bad..."

Martha laughed lightly at the child's description. "Yes, I imagine they do," she agreed, stooping over to pull Kara into a hug and kissing her forehead.

"We were at the zoo and I was trying to explain the difference in the animals' wild behavior. It just seemed easier to show her," Clark explained. "We'll have a lot more places to see, don't we?"

"Uh-huh," Kara confirmed. "Yellowstone, and Alaska, and Africa..."

"Don't be in too big of a hurry," Martha advised pleasantly. "There's plenty of time to see the wonders of the world. Besides, you haven't finished telling me what you saw today." Kara smiled widely and launched into a detailed description of all the wonders she saw that day to her attentive audience.

Kara's tale continued well past dinner, with Martha's conscientious questions drawing out more details of the story and keeping the child in a state of excited glee, until her eyelids grew heavy shortly after nine o'clock. She stubbornly insisted that she wasn't tired, but was sound asleep on the couch next to her grandmother a half hour later, despite her best efforts to avoid that outcome.

After Kara was put to bed, Martha motioned for Clark to follow her outside. She stopped at the rail fence in front of the house and turned to face her son. "Did she have as much fun today as it seemed?" she whispered quietly.

Clark smiled widely. "I think so," he whispered back to her. "She was in such awe of the animals."

"Good, she needed this - to just be a little girl." Clark nodded and the two were silent for a moment before Martha continued. "You do realize that there isn't an easy fix here, don't you? She had a good day today, but not all of the days ahead will be good days."

"I know."

"If it weren't for her... special circumstances... I'd probably be suggesting a psychologist for her," Martha said quietly. "Actually, Ben made a quite convincing argument for it when he stopped by this morning."

"It'd be too risky," Clark reminded her. "They couldn't really help her without knowing what she's been through and we can't reveal that to anyone." He turned back to the house, focusing his eyes at an unseen point.

"Did we wake her up?" Martha asked anxiously.

"No, it was just Shelby," Clark assured her. "It looks like she's planning to watch over Kara tonight."

"Those two certainly hit it off," Martha commented happily. Her tone turned serious as she continued. "Clark, I know we can't reveal her history to a stranger, but without psychiatric help, it's going to be tougher for her to get through this."

"Maybe I have some studying to do," Clark decided.

"That's better than nothing, I suppose," Martha muttered. "I just wish we could do more." Martha looked back at the house with her son and again worried for the child that she was quickly growing to love as much as if the little girl had been born her granddaughter. *Please, Lord, help this child.*

*Sunday, September 17, 2006 6:30 AM CDT*

When Martha inspected Kara's room on her way down the hall, she was surprised to find the child in peaceful slumber this time, with one arm slung around Shelby who was also sleeping on the bed. She also noticed that the chair that Clark had occupied the night before was vacant. *Well, I guess she had some better things to dream about last night,* Martha thought. She smiled at the tableau and pulled the door shut behind her before heading downstairs. She found Clark sitting on the living room couch in his pajamas, watching the news on the muted television and reading the closed captioning. She walked up to him, affectionately placing her hand on his shoulder. "Looks like she had a good night," Martha

whispered.

"Almost," Clark whispered back. "I heard her around four o'clock, but Shelby had it all under control. She was licking Kara's face and settling her down almost as soon as it started."

"Could that be dangerous for Shelby?" Martha asked, remembering the smashed bed and wall of a couple days earlier.

"I'd have intervened in time," Clark answered confidently. "Besides, Shelby seemed to sense the trouble before it started - she should be fine."

Martha glanced over at the television and quietly asked, "How long have you been sitting here watching the news?"

"Too long," Clark answered, picking up the remote and shutting off the television. "The world is a much darker place than it used to be."

"Well, we certainly hear about it more," Martha opined. "But I really don't think that people have changed all that much. Especially not around here."

"Smallville's special." Clark stated simply.

"That it is," Martha agreed. *The perfect place for Kara to ease into this world*, she thought.

He turned and briefly flicked his vision up to Kara's room. "Looks like she's waking up."

"I'll start breakfast."

*Sunday, September 17, 2006 9:30 AM CDT*

"But I don't want to go to church!" Kara whined bitterly. She stood defiantly in her jeans and Kansas State T-shirt with her arms crossed, glaring at Clark. "You said we could go see the bears!"

"After church," Clark corrected her. "After *all* of us go."

"Kara, honey, it's what good Christian people do -" Martha began gently.

"But it's not my church!" Kara declared.

"Kara, it wasn't polite to interrupt you grandmother like that," Clark scolded. "Now listen to me: You don't have to embrace every tenet of the religion to accept its universal truths and like most modern faiths of this world, the values it teaches are no different than what you would have been taught on Krypton. You can take the opportunity to reflect on what it means to be a good person and a member of this community."

"But, Yellowstone!" Kara complained.

"We won't be going if you don't behave yourself," Clark informed her sternly. "Kara, this isn't just about religion. Saint John's Church is the heart of this community and our friends and neighbors will be there *expecting* us. They want to meet you and extend their welcome to you, and we're not going to disappoint them." He paused a moment and softened his tone before continuing, "It really won't be that bad, honey, and we can still go to Yellowstone afterwards."

"I still don't want to go," she muttered.

"I know, sweetheart," Clark said kindly. "But it's one of those things that you simply have to do. Now, please, go up and put on that dress that Grandma set out for you."

Kara continued her glare for a moment and then dropped her gaze to the floor, her shoulders sagging. She slowly turned around and trudged up the stairs, Martha following closely behind her. Before turning the corner at the landing, Martha looked back at her son with a small smile on her face. She gave him a quick nod of approval, before turning back up the stairs to help Kara get changed. *I really hope this gets easier*, Clark reflected.

Kara was sullen on the drive to church, refusing to talk with them or to sing along with

the old tunes Clark had suggested on the drive and she was restless and fidgeting once the service began. Martha had whispered into her ear a few times, explaining the service to her and offering gentle encouragements for her to sit still. Clark left that task to his mother and allowed himself to relax into the comforting sound of the congregations' singing.

"♪..."

Rather than the peaceful meditation he sought, Clark's thoughts instead turned the tasks remaining to establish Kara's Identity. Her identity was now recognized in Smallville, based on the conversations he'd overheard before the service. However, to stand up to legal scrutiny and keep CPS off his back, he'd need more than just the European documents he'd planted. As his mother had pointed out, he would need to produce DNA results proving that Kara was his. However, there didn't seem to be an acceptable solution for collecting the cells from the inner cheeks of their neighbors without the subjects noticing, and no false explanation he could think of would convince his neighbors to collaborate on the deception. *How do we manage that without burdening them with our secrets?*

"♪All is safely gathered in, ere the winter storms begin...."

Even once they solved the DNA problem, they would still face challenges ahead. School authorities would eventually demand booster shots for her, but no needle would penetrate her skin. *Tom Evans took care of all of that for me, without ever asking Mom and Dad why. But he passed away years ago and I can't imagine Doc Rivers going out on a limb like that.*

"♪God our Maker doth provide, for our wants to be supplied..."

A loud sigh from Kara brought his attention back to the subject of his contemplations and she glared back at him when she caught him looking. *Mom never would have let me get away with that attitude when I was her age, he noted. Though, it looks like she's expecting me to handle it this time around.* He bent over and whispered in Kara's ear, "If you really want to go to Yellowstone after church, you had better drop that attitude and start behaving," he warned. Kara immediately looked away from him and slid closer to Martha.

"♪Come to God's own temple, come, raise the song of harvest home..."

Clark joined in singing the rest of the hymn, cautiously eyeing Kara beside him, who studiously avoided looking back at him. *Well, at least she's finally sitting still.*

After the service, Clark was genuinely touched when Ben Hubbard's extended family unexpectedly fanned out to create a protective circle around them. They politely intercepted the well-wishers and kept the crowd of neighbors around them to a manageable level. They maintained that perimeter when the two families entered the meeting hall next door for the church-sponsored brunch and took their seats at one of the tables.

"Ben, I don't know how to thank you for this," Clark sincerely told the elderly gentleman seated beside him. "I'm not sure how to thank you for *everything* you've done for our family over the years."

"No need for that," Ben assured him. "Besides, I know how overwhelming our well-meaning community can be. They tend to overdose on compassion when tragedy strikes. That's the last thing this little one needs." He gestured across the table to Kara, who was sitting between Martha and Ben's eight-year-old granddaughter, Becky Hayden. Kara was listening with great interest to Becky's description of the filly that their mare had foaled the previous spring. Clark and Ben silently eavesdropped on the two girls for a moment. Finally, Ben confidently whispered, "I think Kara's made a new friend."

"Daddy let me name her," Becky happily informed Kara. "And I named her Lily. She's

Lily the filly. Would you like to see her sometime?"

Martha was also listening in on the girls and smiled peacefully at conversation. She'd already noticed Kara's love for animals, as demonstrated with the animals on the farm, especially Shelby. She now seemed equally enamored with Becky's foal. *Kara's going to need friends her age, too*, Martha pondered. *Friends like Becky.*

"Grandma?" Kara interrupted politely.

Martha pulled herself from her contemplations and turned her full attention to the little girl. "Yes, dear?"

"Can I please go see Becky's baby horse?" Kara asked sweetly.

Martha laughed lightly at how quickly her granddaughter's mood had changed, "Don't you think you should ask your dad?"

Kara looked across the table to Clark. "Can I, please?"

Clark smiled at her, answering in mock surprise, "Are you sure you really want to spend the afternoon with *horses*?" Kara nodded excitedly and Clark chuckled. "If it's okay with Becky's parents, then I suppose so."

Becky's mother, Sarah, sealed the deal. "It'll be no trouble, Clark. We'd be happy to show her around the stables."

"Okay, after we're done here and you've changed back into your jeans, we'll take you over to the Hayden's stables to meet Lily," Clark informed Kara seriously.

Both girls smiled widely, gleefully continuing their chatter, and Martha chuckled at the girls' reaction. She looked fondly over at her son and thought happily, *He's really getting the hang of this*. Her gaze shifted to Ben sitting beside him and her smile faded as she recognized the potential threat to the comfortable rapport between the two men. *Things are going to get a bit awkward between those two once Clark hears our news*, she thought. *It's going to take them a while to get back to this point.*

## Chapter 10 - Shifting Priorities

*Sunday, September 17, 2006 1:00 PM CDT*

Tom Hayden led his guests to the south pen closest to the house where their mare and foal were frolicking. He left Clark and Kara outside the fence with his daughter, Becky, and instructed them, "Wait here while I take Hera to the other pen. She gets nervous when strangers get too close to her foal."

"Why does she get nervous?" Kara asked. "We won't hurt her."

"She doesn't know that, honey," Clark explained. "She'd rather be wrong about us than risk someone hurting her foal."

Tom led the foal over to the group at the fence a moment later. "She should be okay now," Tom assured them. He gave some small carrot pieces to Kara and explained, "Just hold your hand out flat with the carrots on top, and slowly lift your hand to her mouth... Don't look her in the eyes yet - you might scare her."

Kara slowly approached the foal and giggled gleefully when the filly grabbed the carrots with her lips. They continued the exercise to introduce the foal to Kara and eventually Lily was tolerating Kara's light petting, with Becky joining in.

Martha Kent observed the scene from the Hayden's porch, where she sat with Ben and Sarah. "It looks like Kara's made another friend," Ben commented.

Martha nodded and cheerfully informed her hosts, "She really seems to love the animals. She and Shelby have been inseparable since they got to town."

"How's she doing?" Sarah asked sympathetically.

Martha shook her head. "It's hard to say, given the circumstances, and I-" Remembering the girl's hearing, Martha immediately fell silent. She sighed deeply, looked up at Sarah and stated simply, "I'd really rather not spoil the moment. Kara's having a good time and that's all that matters right now."

Back at the fence, Clark couldn't help but smile at Kara's excitement over the foal. Her new friend, Becky, was chattering away, telling her all about their other horses.

"You have more horses?" Kara asked incredulously, her eyes wide.

"That's right," Tom confirmed for them. "Besides Hera and Lily, we have three more mares: Clotho, Lachesis and Atrophos. They're gentle riding horses."

"I'm not sure I'd want to ride the whims of fate," Clark joked.

"You *ride* horses, too?" Kara asked in amazement, momentarily forgetting the foal. "Can I try?" Clark looked over at Tom, who nodded cheerfully at the suggestion. Ten minutes later, Hera was reunited with Lily and Tom was leading his guests on horseback, trotting down the back trails of Smallville. Kara had been disappointed to learn that she'd have to share the saddle with Clark, but forgot her displeasure as soon as they were underway. *Looks like we're going to have another good day*, Clark thought. *I wonder how long we'll be able to keep that up...*

The ninety minute ride had passed too quickly for Kara's tastes, and it was only after they explained that the horses were tired and needed to rest that she reluctantly allowed Clark to lift her off the horse and went with the others back into the house. Her discontent didn't last long, with Becky leading her new friend to her room to show off her collection of Barbie dolls. Clark eavesdropped on the girls from the Hayden's living room, where he socialized with the other adults. He determined that Kara was enjoying herself, but still found himself unable to relax.

Martha noticed his distraction and decided it was his turn to be rescued. She turned to their hosts, telling them, "I hope you don't think us rude, but we've been putting in long days the past few days and it's starting to catch up with me."

"Oh, we understand completely," Sarah assured them. She eyed the stairs up to Becky's room and added, "The girls seem to be having such fun... I hate to interrupt them."

"I think you both probably need a break," Ben suggested. "Why not let Kara stay and play with Becky and I'll bring her home after supper?"

"What a wonderful idea," Martha answered quickly.

"Ma, I'd really hate to trouble them," Clark started anxiously.

"It's no bother," Sarah insisted. "Becky's having fun, too."

Clark reluctantly consented to the decision and they called the girls down to say their good-byes before heading out the door. On the way home, he sat silently in the passenger seat, focusing his hearing on the two little girls playing in the east bedroom of the Hayden homestead. "She needs normal things like this," Martha reminded him. "She'll be fine." Clark simply nodded his response and continued his vigil.

Martha glanced over at her son as she drove, again noticing the worry in his eyes. Martha guessed that there was more to it than Kara's control. *He's been a bit distracted and withdrawn all day*, she noted. *Something's bothering him*. She broke the silence, gently asking, "Is everything all right?"

"As well as can be expected, I suppose," he replied unexcitedly.

"You haven't been yourself today," she pointed out. "What's bothering you?" Clark sighed deeply, but remained silent. After a moment's pause, Martha prodded, "Clark?"

"How are we going to pull this off?" he whispered.

"If you talking about Kara, I think you've got a good start on it."

"Even with the documents I planted in Europe, there are so many loose ends and I'm just not sure how to tie them off," he admitted. "We need DNA tests to prove she's mine, booster shots for her school, she has psychological issues and our hands are tied because of the secrets we keep. I just don't know what we're going to do."

"Well, let's take these things one at a time," Martha suggested quietly. "Let's start with the DNA. What are your options?"

"Theoretically, I should be able to use the Fortress, but I'm not sure we'd have the power for it," Clark answered, turning to look at his mother as he spoke. "We depleted most of it for the new ship. Even after recharging these past six years, it still won't have enough juice for remote genetic manipulation."

"Why remote?" Martha asked simply. "Can't you manipulate your DNA samples at the Fortress beforehand and swap them out with what Sue takes from you at the clinic?" At Clark's stubborn expression, Martha pressed further. "You're avoiding the Fortress, aren't you?"

Clark sighed deeply and returned his gaze out the passenger window. "I worry that it would do more harm than good to bring Kara there - that it would remind her too much of what was lost."

"What's stopping you from going up there alone?" Martha asked pointedly.

Clark was silent for a beat before quietly answering, "Jor-El has some rather strong opinions on how I should live my life here on Earth, and by extension, Kara - to him, it's just duty and the mission. He never considers the emotional aspect of things, he wouldn't understand what we're doing and I doubt he'd approve. It's best not to involve him."

"Even if it meant that you could hide the non-human attributes of your DNA and make it



look like Kara really was biologically yours?" Martha countered. "Is your problem that you can't find a solution or that you don't like the solutions you see?"

Clark didn't answer and Martha gave him a moment to consider her words. Finally, she offered, "Well, if you don't want to face Jor-El, there is another solution." Clark turned to look at her as she spoke, "You could share the truth with some of our friends and ask for their help. I'm sure Ben and Sarah would be happy to provide their DNA to swap for yours and Kara's, if you explained the situation to them."

"You can't be serious," Clark stated incredulously.

"Why not?" Martha asked simply. "Do you really think that your father and I managed all of your documentation ourselves? We had help from trusted friends, like Tom Evans. Granted, we didn't tell him everything, but we did tell him enough to get his help. Maybe you need to do the same. Clark, we both know that Ben and Sarah could be trusted, if it came to it... And if you don't like the other option."

"I think I'd rather talk to Jor-El," Clark stated quietly.

"Then *talk* to him," Martha insisted. "The next problem was immunizations?"

"Yes."

Martha returned her gaze to the road ahead of her as she pondered the problem. "Tom Evans took care of that with you," Martha reminded him. "When we asked him to, he signed off on the immunizations without giving you the shots. He never questioned us on the matter. Of course, it didn't hurt that he was a staunch libertarian who didn't think the government should involve itself in family medical decisions."

"Doc Rivers is no libertarian," Clark commented.

"No, but she *is* good people and she takes that doctor/patient confidentiality very seriously," Martha replied. "If we explained things to her..."

"Ma, I can't ask people to take that risk for us," Clark insisted.

"Well, that complicates things, because I've been assuming all along that we'd have Susan Rivers in our corner," Martha commented. "If you don't want to involve her, then we're going to have to find someone else we can trust enough to get Kara exempted from the immunizations."

"Maybe 'Charlie King' can talk to a school nurse in another district?" Clark suggested.

"That's not a solution, but I suppose we can come back to that one," Martha decided.

"Now, about getting Kara psychological help..."

"Ma, we *can't* trust a stranger with this secret," Clark said emphatically. "And without knowing that, how can someone help her? Besides, I've already promised that I'd read up on it."

"Reading all those books may help you understand what she's going through, but it doesn't make you a psychologist," Martha pointed out. "The Hollands went through half a dozen of them before they found the one in Kansas City that was actually able to help, and *all* of them were highly trained and experienced professionals. Clark, maybe you don't have to tell them everything. Maybe but you can tell them just enough to be helpful."

"What are you suggesting?" Clark probed.

"You don't make the appointment for Kara Kent," she explained. "You make the appointment for Kara Zor-El, Superman's cousin. We'll keep our name and town secret, but anything else is fair game."

"That's still too risky," Clark insisted. "Especially if the Hollands had to go through a half dozen of them."

Martha sighed and held her tongue as she considered the matter. A few minutes later, she quietly noted, "I suppose your reticence shouldn't be surprising, given how emphatically your father and I drilled it into your skull that nobody could ever know. However, I think it's distorted your priorities where Kara is concerned. You've made it your priority to keep the secret to yourself - to do *everything* yourself - rather than to do what is in the best interest of your child. You can't do this alone, Clark. Your father and I didn't, not completely... Son, you're going to need to trust other people to help *you* help *her*. Now, as far as Sue Rivers and Ben and Sarah go, we've known these people for decades. You know that they can be trusted and you know that they'd gladly share the burden of these secrets. You probably have friends in Metropolis that you could trust to help, too."

"Ma, if anyone ever found out that they knew -" Clark began.

"You're rationalizing," Martha interrupted sternly. "*Nobody* is going to associate Smallville with Superman." They finally reached the farm and Martha pulled in the drive, parking her truck into its usual spot beside the house. Clark got out and walked slowly towards the rail fence in front, but stopped when Martha called out to him. "Clark? ...You need to think about this. Please try to remember that there *are* solutions to these problems. They may be complicated and they may not be the ones that you'd like, but there *are* things we can do." Clark simply nodded and his mother went into the house, leaving him to continue his contemplation.

*Sunday, September 17, 2006 5:30 PM CDT*

"Clark?" Martha called. She stepped out the front door, and her son turned around to face her from his vigil at the fence. "Are you getting hungry?"

"I'm fine, Ma."

"Well, you're not going to gain back the weight you lost in space by fasting," Martha countered. "I'm warming up the stew from last night. Please get cleaned up for dinner."

Clark took one last look across the fence in the direction of the Hayden place, before turning back towards the house and following his mother inside. Martha already had a bowl of stew set out for him when he arrived at the table and he took his seat across from her. "Did you spend the entire time out there spying on Kara?" Martha asked.

"If she should forget herself, I have to be able to respond in a hurry," he explained. He paused for a beat and asked quietly, "Did you and Dad worry like this with me?"

"We sure did," Martha confirmed. "It got easier as you got older, but, yes, we worried. I still do."

"I can handle myself, Ma," Clark answered defensively.

"I know, but I'm your mother and I'll worry about you," she explained. "It's what mothers do - what *parents* do."

Clark nodded as he took a bite from the bread and silently continued his meal. A short while later, he quietly stated, "I thought about what you said earlier and you're right: We'll need help pulling this off. But if we're going to risk trusting others with this, we have to limit the number of people who know."

"Well, I wasn't planning on running an ad in *The Torch*," Martha joked. "We only need to share this with a few trusted friends."

"Maybe just Doc Rivers," Clark suggested. "I won't ask her to lie for us or to forge documents, but she can advise us on how to deal with some of these issues."

"Well, that's a start," Martha muttered. "Though, sooner or later, we're going to have to

tell Ben, too."

"Why?"

"Ben and I have... grown close," Martha admitted, dropping her gaze to her meal. "He spends a lot of time over here."

Clark took note of his mother's suddenly elevated heartbeat and nervous demeanor and his eyes flew wide open. "How close?" he asked suspiciously. "Mom? ...Are you two *dating*?"

"Clark, nobody will ever replace your father," she assured him. "But Ben and I... well, it's really no different than what you've been telling Kara: that we mustn't dwell on our loss, but instead continue with our lives. Ben has become an important part of my life..."

"How important?" Clark probed warily.

Martha sighed deeply and looked her son in the eyes. "He's proposed," she revealed. "We'll exchange our vows November fourth."

"*What*?" Clark exclaimed.

"Keep your voice down," Martha admonished. "Kara has your hearing and I don't want you upsetting her."

"But, Mom..." Clark began insistently.

"Would you rather I spend the time I have left sitting around and waiting to join your father in death?" Martha interrupted.

"Wha-" Clark asked, abashed. "No, of course not."

"That's not what your father would have wanted, either," Martha explained. "We talked about it. He knew he had a bad heart. He wanted me... and you... to be happy and live our lives to the fullest. That's what I've tried to do, Clark, and Ben's become an important part of that. I'd have gone out of my mind these past few years without him."

Clark stared at his lap and muttered, "I guess a lot changed while I was gone."

"Clark, not even you can stop the world from spinning," Martha counseled him. She reached over to him and firmly gripped his hand. "Clark?" she called gently. When he looked up at her, she continued, "Ben will have to be told. If you tell Sarah, too, I think you'll have a couple volunteers for those DNA samples you need."

"Are you sure about this, Mom?" Clark asked seriously. "I know you must have been lonely..."

"Well, yes, but this isn't about loneliness," Martha told him emphatically. "I have plenty of friends in this town and plenty to do if I choose to. Ben's a good man and he'd been good to us for years before either of us ever considered this possibility. Neither of us was looking for a romance. We fell in love quite unexpectedly... Will we have your blessing?"

"Of course," he sincerely assured her. "Congratulations, I guess... This is *really* going to take some getting used to."

"I know," Martha told him gently. "But I think in time you'll agree that this is a good thing."

"Where will you be living?" Clark asked numbly.

"Ben's suggested retiring up to Montana," Martha informed him.

"Montana?"

"We like the fly fishing up there," she explained. "Though, I don't think Ben has stopped to consider what Montana winters would be like. Besides, he'd never really be able to leave Smallville. His roots run too deep with all his kids and grandkids here. It's different for me. I could be living anywhere in the world and you could still show up for dinner at a moment's notice."

"Do you have it figured out yet?" Clark wondered.

"I have an idea, but I haven't run it by Ben, yet," Martha revealed. "His son, Matt, needs a bigger place with the three kids, and the baby on the way, and Ben's place is way too big for just him. Matt can have Ben's place, and Ben and I can take Matt's old place. It'll be more than big enough for the two of us."

"What about our house?"

"It'll be here for you and Kara," Martha assured him.

"It won't be the same without you," Clark muttered. His eyes wandered the room, as the memories poured over him. He was just a little bit older than Kara, sitting in the same chair, when Jonathan Kent had explained how they'd found him, a premature necessity after he'd found the ship in the barn cellar. It was here that he had first experienced controlled flight, after jumping a quarter-mile over the corn fields and crashing through the barn roof, falling to hover a foot above the barn floor - and then patching the roof with his father later that day. It was here that his father had him practicing carrying eggs to control his strength. As he grew and the new powers emerged, Jonathan had always come up with an exercise to help Clark control it. Kara was now using many of those same exercises to learn control over her gifts. *God, I miss him*, Clark thought. *He always seemed to know what to do, no matter what came up.*

Martha interrupted Clark's ruminations, telling him gently, "It's not the lumber that makes a house a home, it's the people, and you'll be creating childhood memories for Kara to reminisce about someday." Martha took her dishes to the sink, and left Clark alone with his thoughts as he replayed all the memories from the only place he'd ever truly called home.

## Chapter 11 - Sharing the Burden

*Monday, September 18, 2006 12:10 PM CDT*

Sarah Hayden drove the short distance over to the Kent farm with her father, Ben Hubbard. Martha had invited the two of them over for lunch, promising a surprise for them but swearing them to secrecy. Both had accepted the invitation and agreed to the unusual condition without hesitation. "What do you think this surprise is?" Sarah asked her father casually.

"My guess is something about Kara," Ben suggested. "There were certain things that Martha just didn't want to get into without Clark there. I have a pretty good idea what's going on, so I doubt it will be much of a surprise. At least, nothing like the one Clark got last night."

"About time she told him," Sarah said with a chuckle.

"I imagine he was fairly overwhelmed, suddenly discovering himself a father of a seven-year-old like that," Ben pointed out. "He probably needed a few days before she dropped our bombshell in his lap."

"Well, I'm glad it's finally out," Sarah replied happily. She turned into the drive at the Kent farm and pulled back beside the house, where they spotted a Ford Fusion parked next to Martha's truck. "Say, isn't that Doc Rivers' car?" Sarah asked. "I hope everything's all right."

"They probably invited her over for this, too," Ben speculated.

Ben and Sarah climbed out of the car and walked around the back of the house just as Clark stepped out of the door to greet them. "Thanks for coming," he told them sincerely. "Everyone else is in the dining room."

The group walked through the kitchen and joined the others in the dining room. Susan Rivers was seated at the table with Martha, listening to Kara animatedly describe the grizzly cubs she'd seen at Yellowstone National Park. "Was that on the Discovery Channel?" Susan asked.

Kara shook her head. "My dad took me there," she stated matter-of-factly. "Next time, he's taking me to see the gorillas in the Congo."

"Really?" Susan replied skeptically. "Is that one of the places your dad told you about from his trip?"

Clark held back at the doorway as the others settled in. *I can't believe I'm about to do this*, he thought. After a pointed look from his mother, Clark sighed, summoned his courage and interrupted the casual conversation. "Folks?" he called nervously. "Now that everyone's here, there are some things that we need to explain to you."

"What's going on, Clark?" Sarah asked. "You mom seemed a bit secretive when she called."

"Well, there are certain... family secrets... that we usually prefer to keep to ourselves," Clark began. "However, we need your help to help Kara, and in order to do that, we're going to need to trust you with those secrets. The truth of the matter is that Kara and I are... well, different."

Susan Rivers snorted and wryly pointed out, "*Everybody's* different, Clark. You really haven't told us much."

"Not different like this," Clark insisted.

"Clark, I've seen all kinds of things in the twenty-five years I've worked in this community," Susan informed him. "I doubt there's anything you could tell me that I haven't heard before."

"I'm fairly certain that you haven't heard this before," Clark told her seriously. "Kara and

I am Kryptonian."

"Krypt-*what*?" Ben replied, not making the connection.

"We're from the planet Krypton," Kara explained shyly.

"Krypton? You mean... like *Superman*?" Sarah asked skeptically.

Clark blurred towards them in a swirl of color, which quickly coalesced into the famous red and blue uniform of the last son of Krypton. "I *am* Superman," he informed them. He carefully monitored his guests' racing hearts and wide-eyed expressions as the enormity of the revelation struck them.

"Dad, what's 'Superman'?" Kara asked, tugging on his cape to get his attention.

Superman knelt down beside her and gently explained, "It's another name I use when I help people so that the bad guys don't find out about our family."

"It isn't possible," Sarah muttered. "You can't be. That terrorist group claimed that they'd killed Superman six years ago. Besides, he only showed up nine, ten years ago, and we've known Clark Kent his entire life."

"As the saying goes, 'Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated'," Superman answered. "I've been here all along. I just stayed below the radar until nine years ago, and six years ago, I went back to Krypton to get Kara... Sarah, please try to relax. Your heart's practically beating out of your chest."

"Clark, change back into your civvies," Martha ordered. She turned to their guests and sympathetically told them, "Well, we promised you lunch, so why don't we get started on the soup and sandwiches... and we'll tell you the whole story from the beginning." Once the meal was served, Martha proceeded to tell them the tale of the small space ship that crashed in the west field of the Kent farm three decades previously and the remarkable little boy they found inside.

Clark took over the narration once his mother finished the tale of his childhood years. He described his journey of discovery from his late teen years through his debut as Superman. By the time he finished the story, his guests had begun to relax, though Sarah was still jittery, tightly holding her hands together to keep them from shaking. Clark somberly told them, "I thought that I was the last. It wasn't until six years ago, when the Fortress picked up my uncle's distress signal from deep space that I found out about Kara. I built a new ship and went after her. It took three years in stasis to get there and three more years to get back home."

"Then she's not really yours?" Sarah asked quietly. "What happened to her parents?"

"They died," Kara answered, her bottom lip beginning to quiver.

"It's okay, honey," Clark consoled her, pulling her onto his lap and hugging her tightly as she fought the tears. He looked over at his guests apologetically and explained to them, "This is still hard for her."

"Clark, why don't you get her out of earshot and I'll explain the rest," Martha suggested. "Give us a few minutes."

Clark nodded his agreement and moved quickly towards the back door with Kara. A faint sonic boom followed their departure, provoking a gasp from Sarah. "Was that what I thought it was?" she asked meekly.

"Sounded like a sonic boom," Ben confirmed. He turned to Martha and asked, "Where do you suppose they're going? You don't suppose they went to the Congo, like Kara was saying, do you?"

Martha shrugged her shoulders. "They could have gone anywhere," she answered simply.

"I doubt they went to the Congo, though. That was going to be an early morning trip because of the time difference. It's probably already dark there by now."

Ben just shook his head, "Amazing. All these years, right under our noses..."

"We didn't want anyone to know," Martha informed them. "At first, we were afraid someone would try to take him away, if they found out how we found him and what he could do. We worried about what they would do to him. If you look past his origins and those incredible gifts, he was really no different than any other boy. It's the same with Kara: She's really just a little girl."

"What happened to her parents?" Sarah gently asked again.

"Before they left Krypton, Kara had been across the way from her home, playing with her friends," Martha replied somberly. "Her parents had to track her down before leaving and she blames herself for delaying their departure. They barely launched their ship in time to get away before Krypton's sun exploded in a nova and they got caught in the shockwave. The ship was disabled and there was only enough power to keep one of them alive. Her parents made the same choice that any parent would have made - they chose life for their child. She fell asleep with her parents gently tucking her in and woke up to discover that they had passed away."

"The poor child," Ben commented sympathetically. "Losing her folks like that..."

"Ben, she didn't just lose her folks, she survived a holocaust," Martha corrected.

"Everything and everyone she's ever known is gone and she's literally been transplanted to an alien world. Clark's her only connection back to Krypton and even he's different. She remembers him as a newborn."

"How can that be?" Sara asked, her brow wrinkling in confusion.

"She was frozen in deep stasis," Martha explained. "Kara was actually born almost seven years *before* Clark... This is all very difficult on her."

"What can we do to help?" Ben asked compassionately.

"Well, there are a few things we've been struggling with," Martha answered seriously.

"You may have gathered that Clark's assumed parental responsibility for Kara..."

"But she's not really his daughter," Sarah pointed out. "Are you looking for someone to take her in?"

"And what would they do when Kara has another bad nightmare and thrashes so violently that she smashes her headboard into splinters and puts her arms through the walls?" Martha asked emphatically. "That happened just a few days ago..." She sighed and fell silent for a moment before softening her tone and continuing, "I don't think I appreciated just how lucky Jonathan and I were that Clark was too young to know what had happened, what had been lost. But that's not the case with Kara and she's having a tough time. Fortunately, Clark's strong enough to stop her thrashing and he's done a pretty good job of chasing the nightmares away even without his gifts."

"I had no idea," Sarah responded sheepishly.

"It surprised us, too," Martha replied. "Anyway, she's not just some stranger. She's family - Clark's biological *cousin*. He's not giving her up without a fight and as far as I'm concerned, she really *is* my granddaughter. I already love her that much. Our problem is that we're trying to document her identity so that he can keep her. He's planted documents overseas to match our cover story, but we're still going to need a DNA test to prove she's his, which presents a problem."

"Because she's not biologically his," Ben guessed.

"Well, that's part of it," Martha elaborated. "The bigger problem is that their DNA isn't

human and the labs are bound to pick up on that. But if we could swap out the DNA samples taken from Clark and Kara with samples from you and Sarah..."

"Say no more," Ben quickly consented. "We'd be honored to help, wouldn't we?"

"Of course," Sarah agreed quietly. "Anything we can do."

"Thank you," Martha told them sincerely. She paused to sip her tea and then turned her gaze to Susan Rivers. "The other problem is the childhood immunizations that she'll need for school, since no needle can penetrate her skin." she continued. "When Clark was little, Doctor Evans over in Chanute took care of that for us. He was an old friend of Jonathan's and he just filled out the immunization card for us."

"I suppose we could do that," Susan concluded. She smiled up at Martha, and told her, "Though, if you want my professional opinion, I think it would be easier in the long run if we established that your granddaughter was allergic to eggs."

"Eggs?" Martha repeated. "Why would that matter?"

"Martha, do you remember that form you have to fill out every fall for your flu shot?" Susan asked. "It always asks about egg allergies because the vaccine is grown in egg cultures. If you're allergic, the egg protein in the vaccine could cause a dangerous, potentially fatal reaction. The same thing holds true for many of the childhood vaccinations."

"So if we say Kara's allergic to eggs, she doesn't need to get the shot?" Martha inquired.

Susan nodded, "When I get back to the clinic, I'll start a file for her," Susan decided. "When Clark and Kara move back to Metropolis, we'll send that file to her pediatrician and I think that should be enough to get the medical exemption paperwork through for her."

"Thank you so much," Martha acknowledged emotionally. "I really don't know what to say."

"Martha, what about getting Kara professional help?" Ben asked gently. "I know I said I wouldn't pester you about that, but based on what I just heard, she needs it even more than I thought when we talked about it before."

"Clark and I have discussed it," Martha informed him. "The problem is the family secret. In order to be of any help, a psychologist is going to need to know what she's been through and he's uneasy about revealing their origins. Telling you folks was hard enough for him, even though we've known all of you for decades and knew we could trust you. How do we decide if someone we know nothing about can carry the burden of this secret?"

"I wish I had a good answer for that, but the people I know in the field, I know mostly by reputation," Susan commented. "Though, I guess you could say I know people who know people... I can make some calls and maybe get a few candidates for you to take a closer look at. I expect that someone will pass muster and will be able to help Kara."

"I suppose that's about the best we can hope for," Martha said quietly, her eyes moist. "I don't think we're ever going to be able to repay you for your kindness."

"Well, if you can just cut each of us a small slice of that cherry pie we spotted on our way through the kitchen, I'd call it even," Ben suggested mirthfully. "That'd be a small slice of heaven, there."

Martha laughed lightly at the suggestion. "I was saving that for after dinner, but I think you've all earned a piece."

Clark focused his vision and hearing on the Kent house fifty miles ahead as they approached low above the cornfields. Martha was chatting casually with Ben and Sarah, sharing some tales of his childhood with them. A quick glance up the road confirmed that



Susan was on the way back to her clinic.

He looked over to his right at Kara and instructed her, "All right, honey, we need to slow down before we get to the house. Try to match your speed with mine." He dramatically slowed his speed and Kara zoomed ahead of him, unable to slow her speed so quickly. When she came within a one hundred yards of the house, he accelerated at super-speed to catch her, and held tightly onto her as he slowed to a stop ten feet away from the back door.

"I couldn't stop in time," Kara told him apologetically.

"You just need a little more practice," Clark encouraged her. "Look at how much you've improved in the past few days... Just to be safe, though, I don't want you using powers unless I'm around, okay?"

"Okay."

Clark guided her through the back door and called out with false worry, "Is it safe to come in?" A beat later, he cheerfully announced, "Oh, you cut into the pie!"

"Hold on, I'll get you a piece," Martha offered, rising from her chair.

"You don't have to get up, Ma," Clark insisted. "I can get it. Kara, would you please get the forks?"

"Just don't take the whole thing," Martha admonished. "So, where'd you two go?"

"The Canadian Rockies," Clark answered from the kitchen. "It's relatively quiet there." Clark stepped into the room carrying two plates of pie and set one of them in front of Kara, who eagerly dug in. He turned to his mother and asked, "How did everything go here?"

"I think we've got a handle on everything," Martha answered happily. "Ben and Sarah will help with the DNA, and Sue will take care of the immunization records. Sue also might be able to come up with a list of names for us on the psychological matter, though we're still going to have to do a little homework on them."

"That's probably the best we could hope for," Clark commented humbly. He sat down and looked over at their guests. "I really can't say enough to thank you for your help."

"Really, Clark, there's no need," Ben insisted, waving him off. "You're practically family."

Sarah's head snapped up at her father's statement, her eyes growing wide. "Oh, my God," she muttered. She looked over at Clark in astonishment and explained, "I just realized that in a couple months, I'm going to get Superman for a brother." Ben and Martha both chuckled at her reaction.

"Sarah," Clark said gently. "When my mom marries your dad, you'll get *Clark Kent* for a step-brother. What you see here is the real me. Superman is just my *nom de guerre*, a celebrity persona I created to protect the family from the vultures."

"Grandma's getting married?" Kara asked inquisitively.

"Yes, sweetheart, Ben and I are getting married," Martha told her gently, as she wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "That means he can be a grandfather of sorts to you, if you want him to be. And Becky can be like a cousin."

"Oh," Kara replied neutrally, returning her attention to the pie.

After a moment's pause, Ben casually said, "Speaking of Superman... I was wondering when the world will see him back up in the sky. I can't imagine that it will be too long before you're back in action."

Clark leaned back in his chair and sighed. "To be honest, I really haven't thought much about it since I got back," he said thoughtfully. Looking over at Kara, he added quietly, "I've had other things on my mind."

"Yes, I imagine you have," Ben stated knowingly.

"Well, you *are* eventually going to have to get back to a regular routine," Martha insisted. "Kara should be ready to join the other kids in school soon, I think."

"We're not quite ready for that yet," Clark countered.

"It's not going to take much longer before she's caught up enough in her lessons to keep up at school," Martha pointed out. "And you said that she's really done well with the powers training. Sounds to me like she's almost ready and once she's back in school, you'll be able to go back to work. Didn't your old boss say that you'd be able to come back?"

"Where are you going to go?" Kara asked anxiously.

"Nowhere yet, Kara," Clark assured her. "But I used to work writing stories for a newspaper out East."

"Like my bedtime stories?" Kara asked innocently.

"It's a little different, honey," Clark explained gently. "I wrote what was happening in the world so that people would know about it." Turning to his mother, he informed her seriously, "Perry said I'd be 'eligible for rehire'. There were no guarantees."

"Well, you've got nothing to lose by calling him," Martha suggested gently.

"I suppose you're right..." Clark stated noncommittally. "But I'm not going back to work until I'm sure Kara's ready for it."

"It doesn't have to be that dramatic a change, Clark," Martha offered. "You could continue to live here and commute to Metropolis, if that makes it easier."

Clark nodded in acknowledgement, and promised, "I'll give Perry a call later this afternoon and find out what my options are. If there's nothing available there, maybe I can find something closer to home."

"I'm sure things will work out, either way," Ben suggested optimistically. "And even if it doesn't, you have family here to help out and that includes us now."

"I appreciate that, Ben, I really do," Clark told him sincerely. He sighed deeply and candidly admitted, "To be perfectly honest, all of this still seems a little weird to me."

"Excuse me," Sarah replied mirthfully. "You think this seems weird to *you*?"

Clark smirked at the implication and conceded, "Well, I guess it's weird for you, too. But from my perspective, I'm just not used to being the one needing help. I'm usually the one flying in for the rescue."

"You'll be back to that soon enough," Ben assured him. "I imagine the public is in for a rather pleasant surprise when Superman returns."

Clark frowned as he considered Ben's rhetorical question. *I wonder how Lois is going to react, he thought. She seemed pretty angry, if that editorial was any indication. I might be in a little trouble...*

## **Act II**

## Chapter 12 - Back in Action

*Monday, September 25, 2006 8:30AM EDT*

Superman chose a circuitous route to Metropolis, circling far to the North and approaching the city from the Atlantic, in order to avoid the telltale sonic booms over the city that had indicated his presence in years past. He focused his vision at the shoreline over Hobbs Bay and zoomed low and fast over the water before coming to a stop inside a parking garage near the docks, leaving only a faint offshore sonic boom to betray his approach. He blurred into his tweed suit, walked down the stairs to the street and joined the crowd on the sidewalk.

Clark's thoughts during the four block walk to the subway station were with Kara, as had been the case every morning for the past two weeks. She was still having nightmares - Friday night's had been another bad one - and she still shed frequent tears for her late parents. However, she seemed to like school since starting the previous Wednesday. He had monitored her from the farmhouse and she seemed to be fitting in and making friends. However, he wouldn't be able to monitor her this morning, given that it would take the sound waves from Smallville over an hour and a half to reach Metropolis. *Maybe I should have asked for another week before starting back*, he pondered. *How'd I let Mom talk me into coming back so soon?*

He recalled that the whole town of Smallville was abuzz over his mother's wedding plans, now that the news was out, and it seemed to have a positive effect on Kara. Though she wasn't showing any overt signs of excitement, she was now calling Ben "Grandpa," and was calling Ben's children and their spouses "Aunt" and "Uncle." She had quickly accepted them as family. He was the only one she had trouble with. She'd accepted him as her dad, but that was not the same thing to her as her father. If anyone made the mistake of referring to him as her father, she immediately corrected them. Her father was dead - Clark was her dad. *Well, all things considered, that's probably rather minor*, Clark concluded. *Still, the sooner she sees the doctor, the better.*

Doc Rivers had come through on the psychological front, which Clark was extremely grateful for. Her friends in the field had provided enough recommendations and background information to lead them to Dr. Praveena Gupta in San Jose, California. After some additional research and covert eavesdropping, he'd been satisfied enough to set up an appointment. Kara would finally begin her counseling after school that afternoon. *I hope that she gets over the shock of having Superman in her office quickly*, Clark thought. *That time needs to be spent helping Kara.* Clark was so distracted by his thoughts that he'd almost missed the subway station, coming to an abrupt stop to the perturbation of the pedestrians behind him. He muttered his apologies and descended the stairs to continue his commute.

The yacht *Gertrude* finally made the turn between the barrier islands that marked the entrance to Hobbs Bay, and Stanford reduced the ship's speed to five knots to navigate through the narrow seaway. After spending the better part of the last month at sea, the Metropolis skyline was a sight for sore eyes, though it would still take another half hour to reach the Vanderworth pier on the south end of the city and finally get their legs on dry land. Fortunately, the seas had been considerably calmer than even a few days ago, though everyone on board was anxious for the end of their journey.

Just about all of them had been going out of their minds with boredom, with the sole exception of Lex Luthor, who had sequestered himself in the ballroom shortly after leaving Superman's fortress and spent virtually every waking moment reading through the books and magazine articles that he'd downloaded over the satellite link. He had been making plans for

extracting his well-deserved wealth and power from the crystal treasure. Luthor's first project would be reclaiming land from the sea and the most natural model to emulate would be that of the Palm Islands project in Dubai, which he was reviewing to extrapolate their lucrative financial model to fit his project. He foresaw a similarly exclusive clientele, with the exception being that he'd be able to demand far higher rates, since his clients' only alternative was oblivion.

Lex detected the change in motion and checked his watch. *Once I finish this project, I'm simply going to have to develop more effective transportation,* Lex pondered. *I'll make that a priority once I've grown Luthorland and have a new console to interrogate Jor-El.* Lex returned to his research notes and reviewed his plan for verifying the effectiveness of Kryptonian crystal growth.

Clark could only conclude that there was some evil influence behind all of the paperwork he had to fill out before starting anything resembling work. Tax forms, non-compete agreements, insurance forms and a plethora of other forms to confirm that he read and understood one corporate policy or another. It had taken nearly an hour to get through all of the forms before human resources sent him to the IT department for his laptop and then finally up to the bullpen. He had been surprised to learn that he was to report to assistant editor Sam Foswell, instead of Perry. Apparently, there had been a reorganization of the department a few years ago and only the assistant editors now reported to Perry. Everyone else reported up through one of the AEs. *One more thing that changed while I was away,* Clark contemplated.

Clark was pulled from his ruminations by the sharp ding of the elevator bell announcing his floor. He nervously stepped into the lobby and scanned the bullpen. The old metal desks had been replaced with modern cubicles, but it was otherwise just as he remembered it. He took in the loud din and near pandemonium of movement and allowed himself a smile. *Well, at least some things never change,* he thought as he maneuvered his way through the aisle, exaggerating his movements almost instinctively. He bumped into a few things, nearly but never quite knocking them over, apologizing profusely as he passed.

"Hey, be careful," a familiar voice complained. Jimmy Olsen's expression turned to one of surprise when he turned around and recognized his old friend. "Mister Clark!" he exclaimed excitedly. "I mean, Kent, Mister Kent. Clark. You're back. I don't believe it. Wow."

"Thanks, Jimmy," Clark replied sincerely. "It's good to b-"

"Welcome back. Hey, wait here."

*Well, that was strange,* Clark thought. Jimmy definitely looked older, now in his mid-twenties, not so much a kid anymore, even if his reaction to seeing an old friend belied that impression. *Same old Jimmy,* Clark concluded happily.

"Clark," Jimmy called. He held out a greeting card to Clark. "Go ahead, take it. It's from all of us," Jimmy encouraged him.

Clark looked down at the briefcase he held in his right hand and the laptop case in the left, before looking back up to Jimmy. "Maybe I should find my desk first," Clark suggested.

"Oh, right," Jimmy acknowledged sheepishly. "It's over h-"

"*Olsen!*" Perry voiced bellowed as he approached them. *"Where are those photos? Composing needs them now!"*

"Right away, Chief," Jimmy promised. "Hey, look who's back."

Perry looked at him, stifling a smile. "Kent," he barked.

Clark switched the briefcase to his left arm and held out his hand. "Thanks, Chief," he

said sincerely. "Thanks for giving me my old job back..."

"Thank Norm Palmer for dying," Perry responded gruffly, turning on his heel and heading back to his office without accepting the proffered hand.

Jimmy nodded and told Clark solemnly, "It was his time."

"Well, I do appreciate it, Ch-"

"And don't call me *Chief!*" Perry hollered as he continued marching back to his office.

"Your desk is right over here," Jimmy informed him, leading him to a cluttered cube. On the cube wall, there was a piece of paper pinned to it with his name on it. "They took away Norm's personal belongings, but we never got a chance to go through the rest of it," he explained.

"*Olsen!*" Perry's voice bellowed again.

"Coming!"

Clark cleared a space on the desktop and booted his laptop before walking over to the coat closet to hang up his overcoat. Turning back to the bullpen, he searched the name plates on the cubes around him, identifying where his old colleagues sat and making note of the new names. Finally, he spotted Lois' cube and was irresistibly drawn to it, scanning it before he consciously realized it. He spotted the expected things: story notes, contacts lists, and even a Pulitzer award letter. Then, he noticed the unexpected: A family photo that included a man and child with Lois. He picked it up and scrutinized the unfamiliar faces in the picture.

"He looks a lot older now," Jimmy informed him, appearing out of nowhere. "Kids grow up so fast."

"His mother?"

"Oh, gee. That's right, you've been gone. Well, Clark, you better sit down because you're not going to believe this. Fearless reporter Lois Lane is a mommy." Clark felt every muscle in his body stiffen, his hands subtly twisting, cracking the glass in the process. He finally registered the crayon drawings on the cubicle walls.

Jimmy gently pulled the picture frame from Clark's hands. "Maybe I'd better take that," Jimmy suggested, adding casually, "I'm surprised she never told you."

"I haven't been reachable," he stated simply, making his best effort at a genuine smile before another thought intruded. "Wait, she's married?"

"Yep. Well, no. Not really. More like a prolonged engagement." Jimmy tried to explain. "But don't ask Miss Lane when they're tying the knot." Jimmy looked around and leaned in towards Clark, his voice falling to a conspiratorial whisper. "She hates that question."

Clark looked again at the picture Jimmy had taken from him. *I really have lost her*, he concluded. *She has a family now*. Aloud, he numbly asked, "Where is she, by the way?"

"Florida," Jimmy replied simply. "She's covering the Genesis launch at Cape Canaveral. They actually get to ride on the 777 that's carrying the shuttle to launch altitude." Jimmy turned and regarded his friend more carefully. "You all right?" he asked, suddenly concerned. "You look like you could use a drink. C'mon. Ace O'Clubs should be open by the time we get there."

"Huh?" Clark responded, dumbfounded. He complained in a loud whisper, "You can't be serious. It's not even ten o'clock in the morning." *Who are you, and what have you done with the real Jimmy Olsen?*

"Nobody will notice that we're gone," Jimmy assured him, waving him off. "Let's go."

"*Jimmy!*" Clark called in a loud whisper. "There's no way! It's my first day back and I haven't even reported in with Sam, yet."

"You're sure?" Jimmy asked doubtfully.

"Positive," Clark informed him decisively. "I need to earn my stripes all over again."

"Well, okay, but I'm treating you to lunch," Jimmy insisted.

"Deal," Clark promised. "Now, I really need to check in with Sam."

Lex Luthor marched into the Vanderworth mansion with an expression of smug satisfaction on his face as Kitty and the men tiredly followed behind him. Though relieved to have their feet on solid ground, they were not at all thrilled with the state of the mansion. The previously pristine residence was now coated with dust and cobwebs, with the distinct odor of the abandoned Pomeranians' urine permeating the air. "This place sure got creepy," Kitty complained.

"Would you rather wait on the yacht?" Lex asked shortly. He didn't give her a chance to answer before continuing, "We have what we need here. Downstairs, everyone. To the workshop."

Lex was grateful that Gertrude's late husband fancied himself a craftsman and had a well equipped workshop in the mansion's basement. He handed the special growth crystal to Stanford, who carefully clamped it in a padded vice, bringing a small rotary cutting tool to one end. His approach was halted by Lex's hand on his shoulder. "Careful," Lex warned. "These aren't easy to come by. If you break it..." Stanford nodded at the implied threat and returned to his task. He brought the spinning blade to the end of the crystal at an acute angle and carefully sliced off a small sliver about the size of a grain of rice.

"It isn't very big, Lex," Kitty noted.

"It isn't the size that matters, Kitty," Lex replied arrogantly.

"Keep telling yourself that, Lex," Kitty commented sarcastically. "The rest of us know better."

Lex glared angrily at her. "Careful, Kitty, or you might learn what really *does* matter," he warned. He returned his attention to the crystal sliver, which Stanford had picked up with a pair of tweezers and carefully set in a plastic dish. "This is the seed that will grow my empire," Lex muttered as he examined the sliver. "Let's not keep destiny waiting..."

Clark's morning at *The Planet* had turned out to be a series of surprises and disappointments, rather than the comfortable routine he had hoped for. If the knowledge of Lois' family situation wasn't enough to ruin his day, his meeting with Sam Foswell certainly was. The assistant editor made it clear that had it been his decision, he would not have hired Clark back. It was nothing personal, but the paper came first and it wasn't in the paper's best interest to hire back someone who'd been away from the business for six years.

Then, to add insult to injury, he'd assigned Clark to obituaries, the perennial punishment assignment. He'd been given a list of dozens of the living that they maintained obituaries for, just in case. After returning to his desk, Clark had stared at a blank computer screen for half an hour before finally shaking himself out of it. *Might as well get this over with*, he thought. He launched a Nexis search on his laptop, entered the first name from the list, "Morgan Edge", and scanned through the information needed to update the obituary.

It was almost one o'clock when Jimmy finally interrupted him. "Sorry I'm late," he said as he walked up. "I was stuck at City Hall for that news conference. You hungry?"

"Sure, where're we going?" Clark replied. Jimmy didn't answer, instead just shaking his head and waving for Clark to join him. Clark followed him out and ten minutes later, the two

were seated at the bar in the Ace O'Clubs, eating quesadillas, and washing it down with something from the bar - a Coke for Clark and whiskey for Jimmy.

"So Lois is getting married," Clark commented morosely.

"Where'd you hear that?" Jimmy asked with the amusement apparent in his voice. At Clark's befuddled look, Jimmy whispered confidentially, "They've been engaged for five and half years, and she's refused to even think about wedding plans. They're *not* getting married. If you ask me, she's still in love with you-know-who."

"She is?" Clark asked hopefully.

"Probably. So, tell me more about this llama rodeo from your trip..."

*Llama rodeo?* Clark wondered. *I'm really going to have to ask Mom what she put in those letters.* "Um, there's really not much to tell," Clark said evasively. "To be honest, I've been kind of preoccupied with some personal matters lately."

"Everything okay?" Jimmy asked sincerely.

"Fine, Jimmy," Clark assured him. "It's just that my daughter's going through a tough time-"

"*Daughter?*" Jimmy exclaimed. "You didn't tell us you got married!"

"I, um... didn't," Clark explained nervously. "I didn't even know Kara was alive until after her mother passed away - I missed the first seven years. She's only been with me a couple weeks now and it's been a difficult transition for her."

"Oh," Jimmy replied sheepishly. The two friends sat together in silence, watching the Metropolis Monarchs/Florida Marlins game on one of the televisions above the bar.

"So, her mom's entire side died in that tsunami?" Jimmy asked sympathetically. "The poor kid." After briefly watching the game in comfortable silence, Jimmy's curiosity and his third whiskey got the better of him and he had starting asking questions about Clark's daughter. Clark was surprised to discover that he could share quite a bit without the family secret getting in the way.

"She's had some bad nightmares over her loss," Clark informed him. "We've been trying to end the day with something fun, to give her something else to think about, and I think Shelby - that's my mom's dog - she's really helped calm Kara, too, but... I'm not really sure how best to help her. Maybe the psychologist will have some answers. I've made an appointment for her after school today."

"Well, if there's anything I can do to help, let me know," Jimmy insisted. "Bibbo! Another round-"

Jimmy's request was interrupted when the lights in the bar went dark. Clark quickly scanned the area and noticed that not only was the power out, all of the cars in the area had gone dead, too. *An electromagnetic pulse?* Clark wondered. *No shockwave, so hopefully not from a nuke. But what else could cause it? I'd better check this out.* He was about to sneak out to investigate when the power came back on, though three of the four televisions in the bar remained dark and the sole functional set had a screen full of static.

"Hey, my cell phone's dead!" a woman across the bar complained.

"Mine, too!"

"Does anybody's phone work?"

Clark checked his own cell phone, looking through it with his vision and identifying the pock-marked scarring on its circuitry that was indicative of EMP damage. "This doesn't look good," Clark concluded.

"Let me stop in the men's room and then we'll head back," Jimmy suggested. Clark nodded and extended his senses across the city to determine the scope of the problem while his pal moved slowly to the restrooms.

*It seems to be mostly a nuisance problem so far*, Clark concluded. He'd discovered quite a few traffic lights out, disabled cars, and heard countless complaints about non-functional cell phones. The bullpen at *The Planet* was also struggling to determine what was going on, though their efforts were hampered by a dead phone system, a down computer network, some fried laptops, and apparently all of the televisions in the bullpen had also been fried by the EMP. Perry had the only functional television in his office, which was tuned into GNN. The breaking news that anchor Alicia Myers was presenting wasn't good.

"This just in," she announced. "The inaugural flight of the Genesis shuttle appears to be experiencing extremely serious technical difficulties. Reports are just coming in, but it appears the shuttle's boosters have fired before detaching from the Boeing 777 jet, veering both craft dramatically off course and out of control. It is feared that when the secondary boosters fire, both craft will be endangered."

*Lois is on that plane*, Clark remembered. He briefly looked back towards the restrooms, then threw a few twenties on the table and ran out the door. A moment later, a thunderous sonic boom shook the windows of downtown Metropolis, marking Superman's departure as he zoomed south in pursuit of the wayward shuttle.

*He's back. Oh, dear God, he's really back*, Lois thought. The blue blur past the window and footsteps on the roof weren't just her wishful thinking. The other passengers had seen him, too: On the right wing, before it broke off, and zooming past the windows ahead of the plane afterwards. It was also the only explanation for their somewhat controlled, albeit turbulent, descent despite having lost both wings. The plane's sharp yawing spin had stopped, its roll was slowing and they seemed to be on a relatively steady downward pitch. There was also the increasing weight she felt against her as the plane decelerated, and there was only one explanation for a plane in such a state to be decelerating. *He's back. He's really back. Boy, does he ever have some explaining to do!*

The passengers suddenly lurched forward as a final opposing force pushed back against the plane, before they were suddenly relieved of the extra burden. The plane seemed to have stopped nearly vertically on its nose - yet more evidence of *his* return. They stayed suspended like that for only a moment before the plane slowly tipped back down on its belly and slammed into the ground. *Hey, take it easy there!* Lois complained to herself. *Not all of us are invulnerable.*

Everyone seemed to have been stunned motionless by their unexpected survival and the only sound penetrating the cabin was that of the front left door's emergency handle turning to the side. The door opened and released the inflatable emergency slide as *he* floated across the threshold. "Is everyone all right?" he asked gently, methodically moving his gaze from one side of the fuselage to the other as he scanned for injuries. Everyone nodded in unison and Lois unconsciously rose to her feet.

"I suggest you all stay in your seats until the authorities arrive," he advised them. He again looked over the passengers, and finally noticed Lois standing at her seat. "Are you okay?" he asked tenderly. The other passengers turned and looked over at her.

*Okay?* Lois thought. *Sure, I was only tossed around the plane like a rag doll. And by the way, where the hell have you been these past six years?* She opened her mouth to voice those



thoughts, but all that came out was a tiny squeak.

For a moment, it looked like he was going to come down the aisle to her, but he caught himself, smirking as he turned to the rest of the passengers and advised them mirthfully, "Well, I hope this little incident hasn't put any of you off flying. Statistically speaking, it's still the safest way to travel."

*So he remembered*, Lois thought. *Not so hard when you've got total recall. What, was that supposed to be some kind of stupid inside joke to put me at ease? Jerk.* In the front of the plane, Superman turned towards the door and the other journalists suddenly found their voices, calling to him, "Superman! Superman!"

He simply nodded to the passengers and walked over to the open door. The moment he stepped into the doorway, a raucous cheer erupted from outside the door, followed by the chants: "Su - per - man! Su - per - man! Su - per - man! ..."

*What, did he bring his own freaking cheering section along?* Lois thought. She finally remembered herself and bolted down the aisle after him, pushing some of her colleagues aside to squeeze by. *Wait*, she silently commanded. *You're not getting away that easily.* She finally came up behind him, reaching out to him just as he lifted up into the air. She craned her neck up and mutely watched him rise into the sky. *Wait*, she thought to him again as he finally zoomed out of sight, leaving only a sonic boom behind. Finally, she lowered her head, briefly registering that he'd set the plane down in a crowded baseball stadium. Then the lights went out, as fearless reporter Lois Lane fainted and fell down the emergency slide.

Lex Luthor inspected the giant crystals that now filled the mansion's basement. They had left no trace of Vanderworth's precious train set or much of anything else. They had also penetrated the ceiling near the center of the growth, though not by more than a few feet, if Lex had guessed correctly, which he usually did. He carefully stepped over the fissures in the floor, mentally recalling the rudimentary formulas that Superman's old man had provided to estimate the growth that the full crystal would produce. *Perfect*, Lex concluded. *There's no sign of Vanderworth's mini-Metropolis. All of it swallowed up by my mini-Lutherland. No survivors. No bodies. No mess. Simply perfection.*

"Is that what it was supposed to do?" Kitty asked in amazement. "Grow a crystal mountain and destroy a toy train set?"

"It's not just a mountain," Lex explained enigmatically. "It's a taste of things to come."

"What things?"

"It's advanced alien technology and vast amounts of prime new beachfront property."

"I don't understand," Kitty complained.

"Of course not," Lex replied condescendingly. "A small mind like yours is not going to grasp the genius of my plans."

"Then explain it to us," Kitty insisted irritably.

"Small doses for small minds," Lex commented. Turning to Reilly, he asked, "Did you get it all?"

"Yep, and still rolling," Reilly confirmed.

He turned to Stanford and ordered, "I want precise measurements of the volume of the crystal growth. Get started." Lex then turned on his heel and began walking up the stairs, pausing only momentarily to shout over his shoulder, "Kitty! Where's my martini?"

## Chapter 13 - A Long Day

*Monday, September 25, 2006 1:30PM EDT*

Superman soaked in the sun high above the Florida peninsula and concluded that seeing Lois on the plane had nearly been his undoing. *She was so beautiful*, he thought. He had wanted nothing more than to race down the aisle of the plane and take her into his arms and had just barely been able to restrain himself. Hopefully, the reporters on the plane wouldn't read too much into his hesitation after talking to her. He realized that it would have been terribly inappropriate to embrace her. She now wore another man's ring and had a child with him. *I'll always love her, but her life no longer includes me*, he lamented. *She has a family now*. He recalled the family photo that he had seen on her desk a few hours earlier and the crayon drawings pinned to the cubicle walls. She had apparently found happiness and he wasn't about to disrupt that.

*I've got a family now, too*, he reminded himself. *Kara's my flesh and blood*. He shifted his vision across the country to Smallville and found Kara out on the school playground for recess, smiling as she talked with Becky Hayden and a couple other kids. He couldn't hear the conversation, given that the sound waves from Smallville would take ninety minutes to reach him. However, he could read lips, though he didn't entirely understand what they were talking about. *'We Bowling'?* he wondered. *What kind of grammar is that? Is it some new slang? I'm going to have to ask Sarah about that...* He indulged in another moment of covert observation, smiling at the tableau, before turning his attention back to more important matters.

The Man of Steel swept his vision across the continent below, searching for the most obvious cause of an EMP, which unavoidably brought back visions of the nuclear holocaust he had folded space-time to avoid. *I can't let that history ever repeat itself*, he reminded himself. Satisfied that there were no nuclear horrors requiring his attention, he again swept his vision across the land, this time searching for the effects of the EMP. He was surprised to discover that Metropolis was the hardest hit and seemed to be the point of origin for the destructive pulse. *But the shuttle was nearly twelve hundred miles away*, he contemplated. *What could have generated the power to cause such damage at that range?*

He pushed the questions from his mind and extended his senses across Metropolis, revealing the full extent of the mess. There were now numerous injuries across the city, some of them serious, and given the current state of the city, the response from emergency services was slow at best. Thousands of citizens were also trapped in disabled subway trains or in elevators, the city's mass transit was crippled with inoperable busses and trains, and the main arteries through the city were clogged with disabled vehicles, many of which had now been abandoned by their owners. *Clearing this mess will be tedious*, he speculated. *This is going to be a long day...*

Ballpark security quickly mobilized after Superman's departure, sprinting to the plane and intercepting the excited fans streaming onto the field. However, it was the Marlins' trainer, Larry Starr, who was first to reach Lois. She started coming around as he called to her and he helped her to her feet and escorted her to the dugout. By the time Lois had cleared her head, emergency services had arrived and the fire department was evacuating the plane while the police pushed the throng of fans off the field. Few were interested in leaving the stadium, however, and they remained watching the scene from the stands. Eventually, someone in the control booth thought to send the GNN feed to the Jumbotron and the crowd was treated to a replay of the Boeing 777's dramatic rescue.

Though Lois was relieved that the authorities now seemed to have the situation under control, to her chagrin, the fire department wasn't allowing anyone back on the plane. That meant that she couldn't get her purse, laptop, or her phone, making it impossible to file the story. She was also thwarted when she tried to call from the stadium pay phones. All the *Planet* numbers were going straight to voice mail and no calls were getting through to anyone's cell phones: "All circuits were currently busy." It seemed her only option for getting her story in was to get her laptop from the plane, but the police and ballpark security weren't cooperating.

"Look, I just need to get my laptop and purse," Lois complained. "It will only take me a minute."

"Sorry, ma'am," the officer apologized. "Not until the fire department gives the all clear."

"Then can someone go get it for me? I was sitting in 11D."

The officer smiled sympathetically at her and told her, "I understand you're anxious to recovery your property, ma'am, but the plane might not be safe. Let the firemen do their jobs."

Lois fumed at the situation and looked briefly over at the wingless carcass of the plane before noticing the Jumbotron, which was now replaying her fall down the slide. *Oh, just wonderful!* Lois complained. *And as if it wasn't bad enough that the jerk made me faint on national TV, now I can't even report the story!* A quick look around the field verified that almost everyone from the plane was sitting on the grass, pecking away at their laptops with their cell phones balanced on one shoulder, no doubt filing their stories. Everyone, that is, except Pulitzer Prize winner, Lois Lane. The obvious puff piece covering the shuttle had morphed into the hottest story of the day and she was stuck with no way to call in it.

*This isn't how I thought it would be when he came back, she told herself. It should have been something a little more private, without the eyes of the world watching our every move.* The first time they'd met had also been on a disabled aircraft. She had been on her way to meet Air Force One for an exclusive interview with the President of the United States. This time, however, she was little more than a passenger, one of many on a strictly managed P.R. event for NASA, with the scope of discussion strictly limited.

It was the latest in a long line of puff pieces forced upon her, undoubtedly due to her fiancé's influence. Richard didn't like the sometime necessary risks she'd take digging up the information on some of her investigations and it never failed that when he felt she was taking too many risks, she'd have a mandatory puff piece thrown in her lap. She'd complain, but she rarely put up much of a fight. *I guess I've been playing it safe in a world without Superman, since he wasn't around to help if I got in over my head,* she admitted.

She was still as good a reporter as ever, but with fewer exclusives or accolades than there once were, the Pulitzer Prize winning editorial notwithstanding. Her investigative reporting these days was relatively safe, avoiding the crime beat and instead targeting politicians and city programs. That wasn't the Lois Lane that Superman once knew.

*He's probably in for a disappointment when he realizes what's become of me. I was supposed to have a Pulitzer for investigative reporting by now, not for some stupid editorial... which he's probably not going to like, either... Well, too bad.* Her thoughts turned to the past and she recalled the weeks leading up to his disappearance six years earlier: The spike in his activities and his absence from the *Planet's* rooftop. *What happened to take you away from me? she wondered. And what brought you back?*

She shook the thoughts from her mind, turned back to the police officer and grouched, "Do they even know I'm waiting for them?"

The officer sighed irritably. "Please try to be patient," he advised her.

Lois rolled her eyes and looked longingly over at the mutilated plane that held her possessions captive. *This is going to be a long day...*

Perry leaned back in his chair and watched in mute astonishment as the incredible scene from Dolphin Stadium replayed on his office television. *He's back!* Perry summarized. *And Lois is right in the middle of it, just like the good old days. Oh, what this will do for circulation! ...I hope she's okay...*

His joyful contemplation was interrupted by his nephew, Richard, knocking on the door. "Perry?" he called gently. "We've got a problem."

Perry frowned, sitting upright as he turned his attention Richard. "What is it?" he asked gruffly.

"We lost the presses in this power snafu," Richard explained. "Tim just sent up a runner and he says that the circuit boards are fried. He only got about a quarter of the afternoon edition run when they blew."

"*What?*" Perry bellowed. "We've got the biggest story of the year going on right now and you're telling me I have no way to print it? When will we be back online?"

"They're still trying to find a working phone to call service," Richard explained, as another assistant editor, Sam Foswell, joined him in the doorway. "This power spike's blown everything in the building."

"It's not just our building," Sam added. "Jimmy just got back and he says the entire district is out and it's not just the power grid. Cell phones are fried, too. There are also a lot of disabled cars and traffic lights, so its gridlock times a thousand out there right now. We don't really have a handle on the scope of the problem with everything down."

Richard pulled the cell phone from his belt and quickly confirmed its inoperative state. "This is starting to sound more like an EMP, if it's taking out cell phones and cars, too," Richard muttered. "But I've only ever heard that scenario discussed in the context of a nuke."

"We need to pull out our disaster plan," Perry declared somberly. "Come hell or high water, we *are* getting a paper out tomorrow morning! We'll call it no later than three o'clock. In the meantime, tell Tim to find a working phone and get those presses fixed!"

"Everything's still out," Sam reminded him.

"Well, there's got to be a working phone *somewhere*," Perry insisted. "Send someone down to IT or look for a pay phone. And when you find a working phone, call the *Gazette* - let them know that we might be printing our morning edition in Gotham."

"We'll do our best," Richard promised.

"And get *everyone* out there pounding the pavement to get us some answers!" Perry continued. "They're not going to find anything out sitting around here with everything down! Now, *move!*"

"Yes, sir," Sam and Richard responded in unison as they retreated from the office to carry out the orders.

Perry sank back in his chair and glanced through the glass wall into the bullpen, where Richard and Sam were ushering their teams to the elevators. *Hell of a time for all these system failures*, he thought. *We could be in for a long day...*

*Monday, September 25, 2006 4:30PM EDT*

Lois had finally recovered her belongings from the plane and secured a Miami hotel

room. Once inside the room, she stretched out on the couch, opened her laptop and reviewed her draft of the afternoon's top story. She wasn't happy with it. Most of it was old news, already reported by her fellow passengers. After her earlier reflection on her reporting in recent years, she was determined to recover her old glory and that meant putting in a superior article, not just a reproduction of what everyone else was writing. She'd need to swallow her pride and pull in sources that her peers didn't have access to. She pulled out her phone and dialed the number. "General Lane's office," a youthful man's voice answered. A moment later, Lois began the uncomfortable conversation.

Though crotchety as ever, Sam Lane had broken with precedent and was marginally cooperative with his daughter. Lois was able to read between the lines: Her near-miss with death had scared him. It was still a frustrating conversation, given Sam's reticence over sharing anything useful with her about the EMP. "Dad, I'm not asking you to leak anything classified about it," Lois insisted irritably. "I just... I need something to distinguish my story from what everyone else is writing."

"What exactly are you asking me for?" her father responded gruffly.

"I don't know - a source, maybe?" she began irritably. She softened her tone, and admitted softly, "I'm just trying to pull myself out of a career rut and to do that I need details that nobody else has. Details that some of your tight-lipped friends might have."

"Problems at the office?"

"Yes. No. I don't know," Lois stammered. "I've just realized that I haven't done a real meaty story in awhile and not just because of certain over-protective personalities at the office. I'm off my game and I need to fix that, somehow."

There was silence on the line for a full two minutes before Sam Lane declared, "There may be some people who are authorized to discuss the matter. I'll call you back with names and numbers... Is your cell phone working?"

"Yeah, Dad, the cell number should be fine. Thanks."

"Don't mention it," Sam replied dismissively. He softened his tone, and told her sincerely, "I'm glad you're okay, Lois. Goodbye." Her father hung up before she had a chance to respond to his statement.

It only took a moment for Lois to confirm that there was still no answer from her contacts in Metropolis, where GNN had reported that the EMP damage was the worst. However, she was able to log into the *Planet's* web portal and she took the opportunity to check her email. The biggest surprise was the Corporate Notification, informing all employees that the paper's disaster plan had been invoked and summarizing what that meant. *That explains why nobody's answering the phones there... Hey, they moved up deadline to eight o'clock? That won't leave me much time to get this story together.*

The next email was from Richard. He had flown Perry and the other AEs to Gotham on the seaplane and took Jason with him. *Why couldn't he have just left him with Lucy or Alice? Jason's going to be bored out of his mind... He always does that, always thinks Jason's better off with him... We're going to need to have a long talk about that. Again.*

Lois quickly scanned through her other unread emails. There were messages from her mother and sister, who had witnessed her fall on television and were understandably concerned, messages from her sources on the city contracts scandal, and a message from NASA spokesperson, Bobbie-Faye Roberts, thanking her for her assistance on the plane earlier and informing her of a press conference in Cape Canaveral at ten o'clock the following morning. She flagged the emails she'd need to respond to and set the laptop aside as her

thoughts returned to her professional situation.

Before Superman's disappearance, her investigative reporting articles had garnered a dozen award nominations over a five year period, though half of them were jointly with her former partner, Clark Kent. She had been at the top of her game, the envy of her peers, and the worst nightmare of the targets of those investigations. However, in the six years since, only her infamous Superman editorial had caught the attention of any awards panels, and although that had won her a Pulitzer, she was dissatisfied. Though pleased with the quality of her writing, Lois didn't believe that it deserved a Pulitzer and suspected that its selection was due more to nostalgia for the days of Superman and the novelty of his once most-trusted press contact excoriating him so thoroughly.

Lois held investigative reporting in much higher regard than editorials, but her stories in that area were undistinguished in recent years. She had been playing it safe and while her reporting remained solid, it was no longer the outstanding result she had once produced. Lois was determined to change that. *I'm getting my game back*, she told herself. *No more puff pieces - just the real stories. Richard and Perry are simply going to have to accept that the old Lois is back...*

*Monday, September 25, 2006 6:15PM CDT*

When Clark arrived at the farm house, Martha, Ben and Kara were seated at the dining room table playing Parcheesi. Martha looked up at the sound of the back door and smiled pleasantly as her son walked through the door. "We missed you at dinner," she told him. "I'll warm something up for you."

"There's no need to bother, Ma," Clark protested. "I'm not that hungry."

"Nonsense," Martha insisted, rising from her seat and walking into the kitchen. "You still need to get some meat back on those bones, especially considering what a busy afternoon you've had."

"You heard about that?" Clark asked casually as he set his laptop on the dining room table and booted it up.

"Superman's return is all over the news," Ben informed him. "They also said that Metropolis was hit pretty hard by that EMP."

"That's an understatement," Clark declared. "Every car that was on the road at the time was disabled - took me three hours to get the streets cleared and I spent most of the time after that trying to help the police keep some semblance of control and to get enough interviews scraped together for my stories. The *Planet's* declared a disaster, by the way. They're printing the morning edition at the *Gotham Gazette* and trucking the papers the one hundred thirty miles to Metropolis."

"That's nice of them to help out," Martha commented.

"Well, the *Gazette* is owned by the same corporate parent as the *Planet*," Clark explained. "There had always been talk that the two papers could be each other's disaster sites, but that was mostly lip service before 9/11. Afterwards, they put their money where their mouths were and beefed up the infrastructure for true redundancy. That investment's paying off now, after what happened at the *Planet* this afternoon."

"How bad was it?" Martha inquired.

"The electronics in the presses were fried by the EMP, along with the comm equipment fanning out to all the floors," Clark explained. "Miraculously, the computer room was shielded well enough that we didn't lose anything there and the network link to Gotham is still up."

They've set up an emergency computer café downstairs next to the computer room for filing stories locally. It's a bit of a zoo down there right now, but the web portal is still up, so I can file my stories from here. Lucky for me that my laptop was powered off when the EMP hit and didn't get fried."

"Quite an interesting first day back, wasn't it?" Ben noted.

"That's one way of putting it," Clark muttered. He turned to Kara and cheerfully asked her, "And how have you been today, Kara?"

"Okay," she answered quietly. "We're playing Parcheesi."

"Well, it sounds like you had more fun than I did," he told her, reaching over and affectionately putting an arm around her. He kissed the top of her head and said seriously, "We've got about a half hour before we have to go see that lady I told you about." Kara nodded and returned her attention to the board game.

*Monday, September 25, 2006 7:45PM EDT*

The *Gotham Gazette* had transformed one of their conference rooms into an emergency command center for the visiting *Planet* editors, with a half dozen PCs set up on the table. Perry White scrambled to make the final changes before the paper went to press at eight o'clock, along with his three assistant editors, Sam Foswell, George Taylor and his nephew, Richard, who was currently in the men's lavatory with his sick five year old. The poor tyke had a bad reaction to the food that was brought in earlier. Perry again reviewed the layout of the morning edition, displeased that the bulk of the issue was coming from the AP wire service. Unfortunately, they had little choice in the matter. Only a few of the reporters in the city had been able to track down sources, much less file a story, and most of the stories that were filed were lacking in detail.

A pop-up alert appeared on Perry's screen and he looked through the approval queue in the paper's publishing system for the new story submission, a broad smile spreading across his face once he read it. "Halleluia!" he exclaimed. "I knew she'd come through."

"What've you got?" George asked curiously.

"Lois finally filed her story on Superman's shuttle rescue - just in the nick of time," Perry revealed. "We'll pull the AP shuttle article off the front page and use Lois' version instead, above the fold. Keep the AP picture, front and center under the title 'The Man of Steel Is Back', and put Kent's local impact story below the fold."

"You sure you want to give Kent page one his first day back?" Sam inquired. "He was AWOL all afternoon and we've got a half dozen other local impact stories that were submitted from our veterans."

"Be grateful he was AWOL and went after the story," Perry replied adamantly. "All of our other reporters' stories combined don't have the detail that Kent's has, his is better written, and he submitted two other stories today that are just as good. I didn't hire him back out of the goodness of my heart. I hired him back because he's one of the best I've ever seen."

"That's a well-kept secret," Sam commented.

"And don't you dare reveal it," Perry commanded. "That's probably how Kent wants it, too. Everybody underestimates him, so he flies under the radar and people who turn and run for the hills when they see Lois coming will open up to him."

"I remember how he used to scoop her occasionally," George stated, chuckling at the memory. "She'd get so mad at him that I'd worry she was literally going to kill him."

"The claws didn't come out unless someone else went after Kent and then they weren't

directed at him," Perry informed him. "He was her partner and nobody else was allowed to take him on. I never imagined how well partnering those two up would turn out to be."

"Why did you partner them together?" Sam asked.

Perry sighed, trying to find a way to explain what had happened so long ago, even though he knew he didn't have the entire story. "I hired Kent on the strength of his portfolio and recommendations of his previous editors. But the man who came in and filled out the paperwork was an enigma. He didn't match his writing style. So I assigned him to work with Lois. If he was a fraud, she would have rooted it out on their first story. But she didn't.

"They complemented each other's style and they were even finishing each other's sentences when they were deep into something big... They *always* got the story and usually an exclusive at that. And even though he was practically tongue tied in the newsroom, he was one of the few people able to argue with her and hold his own."

Perry leaned forward in his chair and briefly glanced over at the door as he whispered conspiratorially, "If Kent hadn't taken off like he did, I bet Lois would be with *him* now, instead of Richard. They were that good together."

The group was quiet for a moment before Sam broke the silence. "I can pull him out of obits tomorrow, if you want me to," he offered.

"Nah, let him sweat it another day," Perry insisted. "He's more productive when he's nervous - having him work with Lois did wonders on that count, too... Now, let's get this paper to bed and call it a night."



## Chapter 14 - Starting Over

*Monday, September 25, 2006 9:30PM CDT*

Kara was tucked into her bed, tightly clinging to the plush toy penguin that had become her favorite night-time accessory as her mind drifted in that nebulous place between sleep and consciousness. She was comforted by Shelby's breathing and heartbeat at the foot of the bed and was vaguely aware of voices niggling at the back of her mind. The voices became an increasing distraction and she unconsciously extended her hearing, as her adoptive father had taught her, and recognized his voice along with her grandmother's.

They were talking about Praveena, the lady that they had seen earlier that night. She got really excited when Kal-El told her who they really were, and then she asked a whole lot of questions about what had happened on Krypton and how they felt about it. After they finished talking and her dad brought her home, he went back to talk to Praveena alone.

"I think we'll do okay with this psychologist," Clark whispered. "As overwhelmed as she was by the revelation, she still had the presence of mind to tell me to be quiet... She didn't want me influencing Kara's responses."

"That sounds like a good sign," Martha whispered back. "What did she say about the nightmares?"

"That there's no quick fix. It can take children a long time to heal from a traumatic loss and we'll need to be patient. It could also get worse before it gets better and there could be 'incidents' if sensory cues remind her of the loss."

"I thought she was improving," Martha commented quietly.

"Doctor Gupta thinks it's possible that she hasn't even begun to process the trauma yet," Clark explained. "She might be spending all her mental energy right now on assimilation: learning the language and culture or trying to fit in at school. There might not be enough left over to deal with her loss."

"What can we do?"

"Keep making it clear to her that she has our unconditional love and support - she seems to think she's a burden. Doctor Gupta said that her best ally in her recovery is the family, which includes the Hubbards now. And things Kara can't articulate well may come out in her play or creativity, so we should allow plenty of time for that and keep her supplied with paper and crayons. Doctor Gupta wants us to watch for anything unusual."

Martha sighed and the two were quiet for a moment. "I wish this was easier for her," she lamented.

Kara recalled the conversation with Praveena and all the questions about what had happened before they left Krypton. She hadn't been able to answer them all and the nice lady wouldn't let Kal-El answer for her. Her parents had been upset with her for wandering off, but she had wanted to play with her friends. Her parents were now dead because of the delay. Her playmates were dead now, too. Kara felt the tears come and tried to stay quiet while her body shook from the sobs.

She soon felt Shelby's rough tongue licking away the tears and shortly after that her dad lifted her from her bed, pulled her onto his lap and held her. She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tightly as the sobs wracked her body. Eventually, her crying subsided and Kara muttered, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?" he asked sympathetically. "You haven't done anything wrong."

"I heard one of the teachers at school say that I was a lot of work for you," she whimpered.

Clark shifted her in his lap so he could look her in the eyes. "Kara, listen to me. You're *not* a lot of work and even if you were, you'd be worth it. You may not have been born my daughter, but you *are* my daughter now, and there is nothing more important to me. Finding you and bringing you home was one of the best things that's happened to me. So don't worry about what other people say. They don't always know what they're talking about." Kara snuggled into her dad's chest while he patiently rocked her. She eventually relaxed in his arms and fell asleep.

*Tuesday, September 26, 2006 8:25AM EDT*

Jimmy Olsen woke with a start from the pounding on his front door. He sleepily looked over at his nonfunctional alarm clock, which had been damaged in the EMP. Finally registering that the clock display was blank, he felt around on top of the night stand for his watch and pulled it into view. *Oh, no*, he thought, *I'm so late!* Jimmy scrambled out of bed, quickly pulling on pants and a shirt, and ran into the other room to answer the door. He was surprised to see Clark standing there. His friend had the morning paper tucked under one arm, with the opposite arm behind his back. "No time to talk. I overslept," Jimmy sputtered. He left the door open for Clark and sprinted back into the bedroom.

"Jimmy, relax," Clark called out. "The office is closed today. We just have to dial into the conference call at nine."

Jimmy poked his head out of the bedroom. "Closed?" he asked.

"There was a message on the info line," Clark explained. "Everybody's supposed to call in for status."

"My phone was fried in the EMP."

"Well, you're in luck," Clark declared. He displayed the box he'd been hiding behind his back, which was a new cordless phone. "I figured you'd need this and it's also my way of saying thanks for letting me pour out my heart about Kara yesterday."

"Gee, Clark, you didn't need to do that," Jimmy replied quietly. "That's what friends are for... Thanks, though... Oh, it even has two handsets?" Jimmy tore the box open like a kid at Christmastime, and quickly went to work plugging in the base and installing batteries in the handsets before the moment of truth came. He pressed the talk button and lifted the handset to his ear. "*Yes!* We have dial-tone!" Jimmy exclaimed.

"I was thinking... I could pick up coffee and bagels while you get cleaned up and dressed and we can dial into the conference call from here," Clark suggested.

"Deal," Jimmy agreed happily. He disappeared back into the bedroom while Clark let himself out of the apartment.

*Tuesday, September 26, 2006 9:05AM EDT*

Jimmy set his new phone to speakerphone mode and called into the conference call while he and Clark finished off the bagels and coffee. There were numerous beeps as others joined the call bridge before George Taylor's voice finally broke in. "Well, we might as well get started. Everyone, please put your phones on mute. The background noise could get a bit too distracting otherwise... Okay... First, the *Planet* is still in disaster mode. We won't be putting out an afternoon edition today and tomorrow's morning edition will be printed here in Gotham again. That means we go to press at eight o'clock tonight.

"If we get all the parts delivered here in Gotham this afternoon like we're hoping, we'll be back up and operational in Metropolis tomorrow morning. However, it will probably take a

couple days to get replacement phones and PCs on everyone's desk. It'll still be enough to run the business, though. We're still in business today, too, but you'll either have to use the emergency computer café and phone bank next to the computer room, or if you can find a functional PC and Internet access, dial in remotely. The company will be posting status updates on our return to normal operations to the web portal and updating the message on the info line, so check before heading into work tomorrow. Perry?"

Perry White's gruff voice barked out his instructions. "All right, everyone. Listen up! Despite the disaster, we still have a paper to put out and I don't want to print another thin edition like we had this morning. Everyone needs to get their acts together and get their stories in and the story is Superman. I want to know it all. *Everything*. Olsen, I want photos. *Iconic* photos of Superman under stadium lights. *Sports!* How are they going to get that plane out of the stadium? *Travel!* Where's he been? *Fashion!* Is that a new suit? *Health!* Has he lost weight? What's he been eating? *Business!* How will his return affect the market? *Lifestyle...* 'Superman Returns'."

There was a momentary pause, before Perry added, "Well, what's everyone sitting around for? Hang up those phones and get out there! We have a paper to publish!" Clark and Jimmy heard a series of beeps as everyone hung up their phones before they also disconnected from the call.

"How am I going to get iconic photos?" Jimmy complained. "He never stands still long enough to get a good shot."

"Well, there are a few spots around town where he'll probably show up," Clark suggested. "The FEMA command center, for instance. They're set up in the Meteor Dome. "

"FEMA's here?"

"They rolled in last night. National Guard's here now, too. In fact, Met Transit is using Guard buses for their routes this morning. Good thing, because they don't have many of their own buses working and they only had two of the trains fixed in time for the morning commute. The only lines running are Glenmorgan and Bakerline."

"Good thing I have my scooter," Jimmy commented. "There's enough room on the back to give you a ride down there with me. You're covering the FEMA stuff, right? You've got to be out of obits now with that front page story this morning."

"Actually, I had an email from Sam this morning that said he's still expecting me to do the obits," Clark muttered. He looked up at Jimmy and continued, "I'll pass on the ride. I'm heading in the other direction, but thanks for the offer. Maybe I'll catch up with you later, though."

"Well, if you're sure you don't need a ride," Jimmy replied. "I guess we'd better get going." Clark nodded his agreement and the two men left the apartment and headed out to their respective destinations.

*Tuesday, September 26, 2006 9:30AM EDT*

Lex Luthor found himself in an extraordinarily good mood as he relaxed to the sounds of Vivaldi's *Spring* in the study of the Vanderworth mansion. Everything was going precisely according to his plan. The crystal sliver had produced a cross sectional area of nearly seven hundred square feet. Given its logarithmic growth curve, the remainder of his crystal seed would produce a continent of nearly twenty-five million square miles. It would consume most of North and Central America, over the course of a week, which would be plenty of time for those with means to transfer their fortunes to LuthorCorp in exchange for a small ocean-front

apartment on Luthorland. It was coming just in the nick of time, too. Most of the Vanderworth fortune was still tied up in probate and he'd nearly depleted the allowance Gertrude had provided for him.

Lex meticulously calculated the growth of his continent over each twenty-four hour period, entering the information into the mapping application on his PC and generating the corresponding maps. *We'll need to get these maps printed before we plant the 'seed',* Lex thought. *There won't be anyone left to do it afterwards.* A sinister smile graced his face at the thought of his vision finally coming to fruition. *The Luthor hegemony will soon begin.*

Lex had just finished with the new maps when Grant entered the study and interrupted him. "Here's the paper you wanted, Mister Luthor," Grant informed him.

"Thank you, Grant," Lex answered, the rare words of appreciation indicating his unusually upbeat disposition. He came out from behind the desk, took the folded paper, and continued walking through the French doors to join Kitty on the balcony. His smile and good humor evaporated when he unfolded the paper and caught sight of the front page headline and full color picture of Superman. He turned on Grant, holding the paper up to him. "*What the hell is this? Some kind of joke?*" he demanded to know. "*The alien is dead!*"

Kitty walked up behind the pair and peered around Lex to get a look at the front page. "He's cute," she commented. Lex glared menacingly at her before returning his attention to Grant.

"It's, um... it's all over the news," Grant stammered. "He rescued the Genesis shuttle and was busy all over Metropolis after the EMP yesterday afternoon. It's been running on GNN all last night and this morning."

"And you didn't think that was important enough to tell me?" Luther shouted. "What do you think he's going to do when he realizes that he's been *robbed?*" The color drained from Grant's face as he considered that possibility.

Lex marched back into the study, turned on the television, and flipped the station to GNN. They were running the plane rescue again, just as Grant had described. "*No!*" Lex screamed. "*Not now! Not when I'm so close!*" He sank into the chair behind the desk, opened the paper and quickly read through the story. He afterwards dropped his head into his hands, rubbing the bridge of his nose while he analyzed the new information.

*When I tracked him years ago, he was constantly heading north to the Fortress,* Lex thought. *He's probably already been back there, which means he knows the crystals have been taken and he may even have linked it to the EMP. If he tracks that back here, we'd be powerless to stop him from taking my crystals. I can't let that happen.*

*I suppose I could accelerate my plans to seed Luthorland, but I'd have to bring Jor-El online to access those advanced alien weapons and I can't even do that until it grows a new console,* Lex contemplated. *And if the A.I. recognizes the House of El family crest on the freak's chest, it might try to identify him before shooting him down, and if it identifies him as Kal-El...*

*No, it's time for a strategic withdrawal,* Lex decided. *I need to level the playing field first and take the alien out before bringing Jor-El online.* "Everybody back to the yacht," Lex commanded. "We're getting out of here."

"I'm sick of that boat," Kitty complained. "Why can't we stay here?"

"Once again... what do you think the alien is going to do when he realizes he's been robbed?" Lex asked condescendingly. "And do you really want to be here when he figures out *who* it was that robbed him?" Kitty rolled her eyes and hurried out of the room behind Grant

while Lex quickly gathered the crystals into a black cloth and followed them out.

*Tuesday, September 26, 2006 10:00AM EDT*

Lois settled back in her seat in the front row of Cape Canaveral's conference hall and waited for Bobbie-Faye Roberts to step up to the podium. "Welcome ladies and gentlemen," she began. "It's good to see everyone safe and sound after yesterday's adventure. As you know, the Genesis shuttle successfully launched into orbit despite yesterday's technical difficulties during the launch, and the initial performance tests have confirmed our assertions on the shuttle's design..."

After spending the next fifteen minutes spewing NASA's public relations spin on the nearly disastrous launch, the time finally came for questions. Lois immediately shouted out to Bobbie-Faye and was awarded with the first question. "Miss Lane," Bobbie Faye acknowledged.

"Two questions," Lois began. "One, is NASA now willing to acknowledge what a foolishly reckless publicity stunt it was to host yesterday's press conference on an unproven, experimental airframe, instead of holding it in this room, where press conferences are usually held? And two, given the magnitude of the EMP that disabled the shuttle's clamp release mechanism yesterday, how can NASA be confident that no other shuttle systems were compromised and that you'll be able to bring the astronauts safely home Saturday? Could we be looking at another Challenger?"

Bobbie-Faye frowned as she nervously delivered the scripted response. "Nobody could have anticipated yesterday's events. Metropolis hospitals are full of people this morning who thought they were safe on the ground yesterday afternoon-"

"We wouldn't all have nearly died yesterday if we'd been sitting in this room," Lois interrupted. "And we wouldn't be alive this morning to debate it but for the unexpected intervention of an external party."

"Then you'll be happy to know that the NASA administrator has strictly forbidden airborne press conferences moving forward, citing safety concerns," Bobbie-Faye informed her. "Future press conferences will continue to be held here in this room... Next question?"

"What about my second question?" Lois protested.

"I'm sorry, could you repeat it?" Bobbie-Faye asked politely.

"Given the magnitude of the EMP that disabled the shuttle's clamp release mechanism yesterday, how can NASA be confident that no other shuttle systems were compromised and that you'll be able to bring the astronauts safely home? Could we be looking at another Challenger?"

"The new shuttle was designed for a far more hostile environment than what the EMP presented yesterday. In fact, the metal skin surrounding the shuttle body would act as a Faraday cage to insulate the internal systems from the effects of an EMP-"

"Then why did the clamps fail to release yesterday?" Lois inquired insistently.

"The clamps extended beneath the belly of the shuttle, outside the protective skin," Bobbie-Faye answered. "But rest assured that all systems will be put through a rigorous testing and inspection process before the Genesis returns this weekend..."

Lois walked into her hotel room, smugly satisfied that she'd thoroughly raked NASA over the coals at the press conference. It was nothing like the condescending dismissal her questions had provoked the previous day. *Yes, the old Lois Lane is definitely back*, she concluded. The

other journalists at the press conference had followed her lead, challenging the obvious spin on the previous day's events and pressing for details on NASA's plans for verifying the shuttle's systems. Science and technology wasn't her forte, but the controversy over NASA's disregard of obvious safety hazards until after an event occurred was right up her alley. It might even make the front page.

Lois pulled out that morning's *Daily Planet*, which she had purchased at a book store on the way to the NASA news conference. Though gratified that her story was above the fold, she was more interested in the other front page article: "EMP Causes Chaos Across City" by Clark Kent. *The EMP is the real story here, Lois concluded. And it's happening in Metropolis while I'm stuck here in Florida.* Both of Metropolis' major airports were still closed and other airports in the region were clogged up with travelers seeking alternate arrangements. The earliest commercial flight she could get was Wednesday morning, flying into Philadelphia and driving to Metropolis in a one-way rental. She was forced to accept that flight because with the *Planet* in disaster mode, she couldn't ask Richard to fly down and get her.

*Well, I can still try to ping my contacts in Metropolis,* Lois thought. *If their phones are working, that is. It's probably safe to assume that the cell phones are still out.* Lois booted up her laptop, accessed her contacts list, and punched in a number on her cell phone. "Ninth precinct, Sergeant Jimenez," a woman answered.

"Lois Lane, *Daily Planet*," Lois introduced herself. "I'm trying to reach Bill Henderson."

"The *Planet*, you say? One of your people is already with the inspector. I forget the name. Big guy, black hair, glasses. Tripping over his own feet."

"Kent," Lois hissed.

"Yeah, that's it."

"Can you put the call through?" Lois requested with false cheer.

"He's not available."

"Just tell him it's me," Lois insisted. "He'll take the call."

"Ma'am, I'm not a secretary," the sergeant answered shortly. "We have much more important things to worry about right now than coddling the press, especially when someone else from your paper already got through to the inspector. Good-bye."

*I'm going to kill him,* Lois seethed. *His second day back and he's already trying to steal my story and scoop me.* She set down her cell phone and looked up another name from her contact list. *Two can play at that game, farm boy.*

*Tuesday, September 26, 2006 5:30PM CDT*

Superman extended his X-ray vision through his mother's house as he approached over the corn. Ben was there, as expected, but he was surprised to see Becky Hayden also sitting down at the dinner table. *I guess Kara had a playmate over this afternoon,* he concluded. He slipped in through the back door a moment later and joined the family in the dining room. "Hello, everyone," he greeted them. He pulled Kara into a quick hug, and kissed the top of her head. "Have you girls been having fun?"

"I don't know," Kara mumbled noncommittally.

Clark turned to his mother and asked, "Is everything all right?"

"There was an accident over at the stables this afternoon," Martha informed him quietly. "Some of the floor boards gave way and Tom fell through. He broke his leg pretty bad and they flew him to Wichita to operate on it. Sarah's with him and Ben's watching Becky overnight."

"I wish you'd told me that earlier," Clark complained. "Maybe I could have helped."

"He was in good hands and he'll be fine," Ben assured him. "He'll be climbing the walls laid up in the hospital for a couple days, but he'll be okay. If you'd like to help, though, I could probably use a hand inspecting their place for any more rotted floorboards."

"We can take a look at it after dinner."

When Clark and Ben returned from the Hayden's place, they found both girls doing their homework at the dining room table, with Martha supervising. Clark smiled at them as he walked into the room and asked, "How's the homework coming?"

"I'm almost done," Becky replied cheerfully.

"I'm not," Kara muttered.

"I'll help you go through it after I make a few phone calls."

"I can make the calls," Ben offered.

"What did you find?" Martha asked.

"Termites," Clark answered. "The stables are infested and it's not something that I can easily take care of. We'll need to get someone down from Wichita to handle it and find someplace else for the animals to stay while they're working on it. Once that's done, I can replace the boards."

"The Robertson's had a termite problem on their house a few years back," Ben recalled. "I'll give Chris a call and find out who they used. They seemed pretty happy with them. I'll also call Frank Long and see if he has room for the horses for a few nights." Ben excused himself and withdrew to the kitchen to make his calls.

Clark sat down beside Kara, peeked over her shoulder and scanned her work. It looked like math came easily to her and her eidetic memory made answering the social studies questions effortless. However, the creative writing assignment was a struggle for her. She was supposed to write about something important that had happened to her, why it was important, and what lesson she learned from it. The page was still blank. "Are you having trouble coming up with something?" Clark whispered.

"You said we couldn't tell anyone about Krypton," Kara whispered back sadly, almost inaudibly.

"I have an idea," Clark whispered to her. "You can write one about Krypton for Doctor Gupta, and maybe another one about coming to Smallville for your teacher here. Do you think that would work?" Kara nodded, and her brow wrinkled in concentration as she tried to figure out what to write. "Let's get the Smallville one done first," Clark suggested.

When Ben returned from making his calls, he found Becky on the living room floor watching television and Clark huddled with Kara at the dining room table, working on whatever assignment she was struggling with. Martha walked over when she noticed him. "Did you get everything arranged?" she asked.

"I left a message with the exterminator and Frank said he had room for the animals," Ben informed her. He looked over at the tableau in the dining room and commented, "He seems to be adjusting to fatherhood rather well."

"He had a good role model," Martha whispered. "Kara's in good hands." She indulged in a brief glance over at her son and granddaughter as she guided Ben into the living room and reclaimed her seat on the couch. *Kara couldn't have asked for a better adoptive father,* Martha contemplated. *Perhaps he'll realize that someday.*

## Chapter 15 - Interrupted Plans

*Wednesday, September 27, 2006 1:30PM EDT*

Lois Lane stormed into the *Daily Planet* bullpen looking for a fight, but the target of her wrath was nowhere to be found. She shouldn't have been surprised, considering his talent for pulling a Houdini on her before he left on his trip six years earlier. The forced delay in the confrontation only served to stoke her anger at his interference - he'd already spoken to every last one of the Metropolis sources she'd tried to corner over the phone the previous evening, and to add insult to injury, he even managed a front page story from it, below the fold. Lois needed to vent her rage and scanned the bullpen for an outlet, spotting Jimmy at his desk, fiddling with his camera.

"Jimmy!" Lois hollered as she marched over to his desk. "Where the hell is Clark?"

"Oh, hi, Miss Lane," Jimmy greeted. "Are you okay? How was Florida?"

"Fine, fine. Where's Clark?" Lois pressed.

"He was here a minute ago," Jimmy informed her. "He said something earlier about needing to talk to a lawyer about his daughter. Maybe that's where he went."

"*Daughter?*" Lois echoed incredulously. "I must not have heard you right."

"Didn't he tell you?" Jimmy asked. Lois shook her head and Jimmy continued, "Oh, um, her mom never told Clark. He didn't find out about her until a few weeks ago, after her mother died in that tsunami. Actually that entire side of the family got wiped out. She's seven and Clark just met her for the first time a few weeks ago. The kid's had a tough adjustment - nightmares and lots of tears."

"Jesus," Lois whispered.

"Yeah," Jimmy agreed. "Should I warn Clark that you're looking for him?"

"I need to talk to him about his story this morning."

"Wasn't that a great story?" Jimmy asked cheerfully. "It's his second front page in two days. Sam will *have* to pull him off obits now!"

"Obits?" Lois asked. "What's he doing in obits?"

"Oh, didn't he tell you about that?" Jimmy asked innocently.

"I haven't spoken to the man in six years!" Lois shouted. "What's he doing in obits?"

"Sam assigned him there the moment he finished processing in," Jimmy explained. "He even told Clark that he wouldn't have hired him back, if it had been up to him. He still made him do obits yesterday, after that great front page story he turned in. Clark's been desperate to prove he still has what it takes. You'd think that two front page stories in two days would be proof enough."

"He's still stuck in obits?" Lois asked incredulously.

"Yes. No. I'm not really sure," Jimmy stammered. "I think he would have said something if he'd been pulled off... Sam should really cut him some slack. Between telling him he doesn't belong here, his daughter's problems, and his mom getting remarried, Clark's more stressed out than I've ever seen him, though he's putting up a brave front."

Lois was silent for a moment as she considered the information. *I'd be a first class bitch if I chewed him a new one now*, she thought. *But we're still going to have to have a little talk about this*. Aloud, she said, "I'll talk to Perry about that. But when you see Clark, let me know. I really need to talk to him about that story."

"Does that mean you two are going to be partners again?" Jimmy asked hopefully. "It'd be great, if you were. Just like old times!"

Lois frowned and her brow wrinkled in contemplation as she considered the possibility.



"You know, I really hadn't thought about it," she finally admitted. "I haven't had a partner in ages... I guess we'll just have to play that by ear."

Superman was powerless to prevent the smile that graced his features at the sound of Lois' voice as he approached the *Daily Planet* building. Not only was she back, she was taking Perry to task for burying her 'partner' in obituaries. Even better, Perry had conceded that it was time to let him out of obits, though he wasn't backing down either, arguing that he had both the right and obligation to make sure that Clark Kent took the job seriously. *Well, at least she doesn't seem to be upset with her old partner, like she seems to be with Superman*, he thought. *Though, my super-self is going to have to explain himself to her sooner or later.*

A moment later, Clark Kent sat at his desk and logged back into his laptop, turning slightly to catch the tableau in Perry's office as he continued eavesdropping. Lois and Perry were soon joined by another man, who greeted Lois with a quick kiss on the lips. Clark recognized him from the family photo on Lois' desk. *I'm not sure that kiss was entirely appropriate for the office*, he thought. Clark was surprised when the greeting quickly degenerated into bickering over Richard's bringing Jason into the office and at his suggestion that they take the afternoon off.

Clark was interrupted from his eavesdropping by the small voice beside him. "Hello," Jason greeted him. "Who are you?"

"Hi. I'm Clark, an old friend of your mom's from before you were born."

"Really? She's never mentioned you."

"Never?" Clark asked, disappointed.

"Jason," Lois called sternly. The little boy turned at his mother's voice and ran into her arms. "I missed you, too," Lois told him, hugging him tightly and kissing the top of his head. "Did you remember to take your medicine?" Lois asked, releasing her grip only slightly to look him in the eye as she went down the list of medicines.

She turned to Clark and commented, "I see you've met the munchkin. He's a bit fragile, but he'll grow up to be big and strong just like his dad, won't you?" Jason absently nodded as he squirmed to escape his mother's hug.

"Yeah, we were just talking. He seems like a great kid."

"And I hear you have a munchkin at home now, too," Lois commented pleasantly.

"Oh, um, right. Kara. It's a long story," Clark stammered.

"Jimmy gave me the short version, but you'll have to tell me everything once we get a chance to catch up," Lois insisted.

"There's the little guy," Richard called as he approached them. He picked up the escaping child and lifted him to his hip. He turned to Clark, and extended his hand. "You must be Clark. I'm Richard White."

"Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise," Richard replied cheerfully. "Nice job on those blackout stories."

"Should have been my story," Lois commented irritably.

"You weren't here," Richard reminded her sternly.

"I am now," Lois replied icily.

"Oh, well I think my sources on it are drying up," Clark muttered. His brow wrinkled in concentration for a moment, he turned back to Lois and asked enigmatically, "Say, does your dad still work at the Pentagon?" He noticed Lois bite her lower lip and tuck her chin, and he probed her pulse and breathing with his senses. *Ah, so you have talked to him about the EMP,*

Clark concluded.

Before Lois had a chance to respond, Richard chuckled and told Clark, "I know where you're going with this, but you're barking up the wrong tree, Clark. Lois and her dad don't talk. We've practically got to send them to separate rooms at holiday gatherings just to keep the peace."

Clark looked at Richard with a stunned expression, then back to Lois. After another brief glance back to Richard, he turned to Lois and asked, "So what did your dad have to say about this?"

"As little as possible," Lois answered stiffly. "He did identify some officials who *would* talk about it, but most of what they gave me was off the record. Suffice it to say, they're freaking out."

"They don't have any idea what caused the EMP..." Clark concluded.

"...and they've got so much equipment along the coast looking for an explanation that you can't spit without hitting some of it," Lois finished for him. "It's producing more questions than answers, though, and there were some very disturbing and surprising measurements from some major U.S. cities."

Clark's eyes went wide as comprehension dawned on him. "The background radiation..." he whispered.

"...which is *much*, much higher than it could possibly be naturally. In places like Boston and Pittsburgh..." Lois continued.

"...but not in Metropolis, where the EMP appears to have originated..."

"...and they haven't been able to narrow down what part of the city it came from."

"But if we can track down which grid went down first..."

"...we'd be able to narrow the search," Lois concluded. "You've done your homework on this, but it's my story now."

While Lois and Clark had been talking, Richard's had looked from one to the other, like a spectator at a tennis match. Finally sensing an opening, he interrupted. "Whoa, hold on a minute. You talked to your father about this? You didn't tell me that."

"Well, maybe next time you'll know enough not to answer when someone asks *me* a question!" Lois snapped. "Take Jason *home*. I have work to do."

"Where are you going?" Richard asked, the annoyance clear in his voice.

"Power plant," Lois answered. "Maybe they can give us a clue where this mess started."

"Um, Lois, that's not really necessary," Clark began.

"Forget it, Smallville," Lois shouted over her shoulder. "My story now, remember?"

"But, I've-"

"Stop arguing with me, farm boy," Lois called out to him as the elevator doors began closing behind her. "I'm already gone."

"Well, there she goes," Clark commented. "Same old Lois."

"Yeah," Richard agreed. "It doesn't matter how close we get, that woman will always be a mystery to me." Clark briefly had an incredulous look on his face before masking his expression. Richard turned to him and asked, "So, what was it you were trying to tell Lois as she ran out of here?"

"Oh, um, I... Well, um, I just... I just got *back* from the power plant," Clark admitted, and his lips turned up into a smirk as he looked out into the elevator lobby where Lois had gone, following the car down with his X-ray vision. "They're not saying much, but I have enough for tomorrow's story."

Richard nodded neutrally as he followed Clark's gaze into the elevator lobby. "Well, she'll probably stop trying to steal your story once she realizes that you're that far ahead of her," Richard suggested hopefully. "I might even be able to talk her into taking some well-deserved time off once she gets back."

Clark was barely able to mask his shocked expression at Richard's grossly inaccurate prediction of the woman he knew and loved. *Are we talking about the same Lois Lane?* Clark wondered to himself. *Either I've fallen into a parallel universe, or you don't really know the woman you're engaged to.*

Richard had been sorely mistaken about Lois' reaction to learning that Clark had already been to the power plant. Rather than quietly abandoning her quest, she returned to the *Planet* in a rage. "Hold it right there, Smallville," she screamed across the bullpen the moment she spotted him, and attracting everyone's attention in the process. Perry and Sam stepped out of their offices to see what the commotion was about as Lois continued her tirade. "You probably thought that was pretty funny, didn't you? Letting me waste the past two hours when you'd already tapped the source."

"Lois, I tried to tell you," Clark reminded her patiently.

"This shit stops now!" she shouted. "I was willing to cut you some slack, because I know what you've been going through, but I'm not going to stand back and let you steal all of my sources."

"Lois, what are you talking about?" Clark asked in genuine confusion. "I've just been pounding the pavement-"

"*Bullshit!*" Lois hollered. "All week, every single source I've managed to track down here in the city had already talked to you!"

Perry viewed the scene from his position near his office and allowed a small smile to grace his features. "Music to my ears," he muttered quietly.

"You *like* having her pissed off like that?" Sam asked incredulously.

"It's the professional rivalry between those two," Perry explained in a low voice. "They'll keep trying to outdo each other and end up pushing each other to be the best of the best, and *that* puts the Midas touch on their stories. It also means that we've got our old Lois back - about damn time."

"Just like old times," George agreed.

Perry nodded and noticed that the pair had the rapt attention of the entire bullpen. *We can't have that.* "Hey!" Perry hollered. "This is a newspaper, not a circus! It isn't like it's the first time we've ever heard her yell, so everyone get back to work!"

Lois and Clark both looked over at Perry briefly before returning to their argument. "I suppose you already have the story written, too." Lois angrily accused him in a loud whisper.

"Lois, I didn't know you were interested in it or when you'd get back," Clark reasoned. "I couldn't just sit and let the story get stale, or worse, let the competition scoop us."

"You should have let me know," Lois insisted. "We could have worked it together."

"I would have liked that," Clark confessed. He softened his tone and said, "If it's any consolation, they weren't telling me much at the power plant, and the story is not that great at this point. I'll be lucky if Perry prints it at all... Did you have any better luck with them?"

"No. Clark, the EMP is *my* story now," Lois insisted. "You can do the FEMA coverage." She turned on her heel, and marched back to her desk, dropping her head in her hands the moment she sat down. After a couple minutes, she finally raised her head and logged into her

laptop. *There's got to be another way to break this story open and find sources that Clark hasn't already explored.* She launched an online search, looking for anything on the EMP that might have been overlooked.

*Wednesday, September 27, 2006 6:15PM EDT*

Superman floated unseen above the clouds, silently observing the family tableau in the riverfront home two miles below him. After Lois' surprising comment to Clark Kent as they left the office, he hadn't been able to stop thinking about her. "Have you ever been in love?" she had asked. "Ever feel that connection so strongly with a person that you just *knew* you were meant to be together? And then, they suddenly disappear on you without a word?" *Maybe Jimmy was right, he thought. She is still in love with me, at least this part of me. Maybe that's why she's so furious with me.*

His senses had been precisely tuned to her while he patrolled Metropolis, until he could resist the temptation no longer and settled into his airborne hiding place to covertly observe them. They had just finished cleaning up after dinner, Jason was practicing *Heart and Soul* on the piano, and Lois was leaning against the kitchen counter, sipping from a glass of wine. "I did a little research while I was home with Jason this afternoon," Richard began. "I read your Superman article." Superman was surprised to detect a nervous edge in his voice.

"Why the World Doesn't Need Superman'."

"No, not that one," Richard corrected her. "The first one. 'I Spent the Night With Superman'."

Lois rolled her eyes. "Richard," she complained, "Your uncle chose that title to sell more papers. It was a *story*."

"I know," Richard conceded. "I told myself that I'd never ask this, but I need to know... Were you in love with him?"

"He's Superman!" Lois countered. "Everyone was in love with him."

"But were *you*?" Richard pressed.

Lois sighed irritably and stared at the floor for a moment, as she pensively rubbed the bridge of her nose. Finally, she lifted her head, looked Richard in the eyes and quietly answered, "No."

Her answer produced starkly different responses from the two men who heard her. Two miles above, a hero's heart broke and he quickly pulled himself away from the tableau, speeding across the continent to the family that was waiting for him. The man before her, however, felt his spirits lift and his confidence grow as an unseen weight fell from his shoulders. Richard smiled widely and told her, "Well, it's still a good thing he came back when he did." His tone turned somber as he emotionally told her, "I came so close to losing you on that plane."

"Well, I survived, so you can stop stressing out over it."

"But if anything *had* happened... I wouldn't even have been able to bring you home," Richard lamented.

"There wouldn't have been anything left. We'd all have been smashed to smithereens and incinerated in the fireball," Lois countered.

"That's not what I meant," Richard explained. "If there had been... remains." Richard paused and took a sip of his wine. He sighed tiredly and then continued, "Husbands can bring their wives home, but not fiancés."

"Jesus, Richard," Lois complained. "You're saying we need to make it official so you can

claim my dead body? How romantic."

"You *know* what I'm trying to say, Lois. I had a lot of time to think about things after the close call on that plane. I assumed that you had, too."

"Oh, I had quite the epiphany," Lois said dramatically. "By all means, let's talk about that *plane*. What the *hell* was I doing there, anyway? Seems to me that just a few days ago, I had this really interesting story on the city sludge contracts. But, lo and behold, the moment *you* find out about a potential *InterGang* link, I get mysteriously taken *off* that story, and have some Genesis shuttle puff piece *forced* on me."

"That wasn't a puff piece," Richard argued.

"But it was *supposed* to be!" Lois shouted. "It was a strictly managed NASA P.R. event, and if that wasn't bad enough, it was a Science and Technology piece, which isn't my forte, as you know *damn* well. Did you watch that press conference Monday? I was out of my element and it showed. I looked like a damned *fool*!"

"You more than made up for it yesterday," Richard offered.

"It was a different story yesterday, but that's beside the point!" Lois hollered. "The point is that every time I get into an interesting story and there's even a hint of danger, you pull strings to get me off the story and shove something nice and safe down my throat! Guess you screwed up with the shuttle, huh?"

"Lois, it's-"

"Don't insult my intelligence by denying it!"

Richard's shoulders sagged and he quietly said, "No story is worth getting killed over."

"I'm not a God damned porcelain doll!" Lois protested. "I don't need to be kept up on a shelf, nice and safe!"

"If anything were to happen to you-"

"I can take care of myself!" Lois insisted. "Richard, you don't get anywhere in this business by being risk adverse. But you've been imposing *your* risk aversion onto me and damaging my career in the process."

"What are you talking about? You just won a Pulitzer!"

"For an *editorial*, which was probably *only* chosen because of nostalgia for Superman and the novelty of his most vocal former advocate ripping him to shreds. It shouldn't have won. My award should have been for investigative reporting, but those stories have garnered absolutely no attention for me in recent years."

"Not everybody can win, no matter how good they are," Richard explained sympathetically.

"Then how do you explain my first five years at the *Planet*?" Lois told him angrily. "I had over a dozen nominations for investigative reporting, and I *won* two Kerths and a Merriweather. I wasn't playing it safe back then and my writing was noticed. But in the last six years, *nothing*."

"You didn't have a family back then," Richard pointed out.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Lois snapped. "That I can't do my job now, because I'm a mother?"

"Lois-"

"I'm through playing it safe, White, so you had damn well better get used to it!" she interrupted. She then turned on her heel and marched out the patio doors, grabbing her cigarettes and lighter from her purse on the way.

*What the hell just happened here?* Richard wondered. *This wasn't at all how things were*

*supposed to go.* Richard had planned a quiet afternoon at the park, reconnecting as a family, and afterwards leaving Jason with Perry and Alice, so that he and Lois could have a romantic evening out and *finally* nail down a wedding date. However, his fiancée hadn't cooperated. She flat out refused to take the afternoon off, saying that she wasn't going to get caught on the sidelines while the story of the year was going on. She'd also vetoed the evening out, since she had hardly seen their son over the past few days and wasn't about to abandon him with a sitter. It was almost like he'd been dealing with a stranger, rather than the woman he'd lived and worked with the past five and half years. *Sometimes, I wonder if I know her at all,* he lamented.

"Daddy?" a small voice interrupted uncertainly. Richard turned and saw Jason standing at the edge of the room with a sad expression on his face. "Why's Mommy so mad?"

Richard walked over to him and lifted the boy to his hip. "It's okay, kiddo," Richard consoled him. "She just had a bad day. Things will be better tomorrow... How's your piano practice coming?"

Lois heard their voices through the glass door, and turned to see Richard pick up their son and carry him into the other room. *Great, now I've upset Jason, too,* she told herself. *I really hadn't meant to be that harsh when I brought this up, but why did he have to go and use this as an excuse to nag me about wedding plans?*

She again reflected on the state of her career and was forced to concede that her professional malaise hadn't entirely been his fault. She could have dug in her heels and insisted on sticking with the stories. As she had reminded herself over the past couple of days, she'd been playing it safe, too. *Well, I can apologize to him later,* she determined. *If he brings it up.* She exhaled the tobacco smoke and turned her gaze skyward, searching the clouds for the hero's movements. *Will you be there to pull my ass out of the fire if I get in over my head?* she wondered. *Or will you keep your distance, like you did just before you left?*

*Wednesday, September 27, 2006 10:45PM EDT*

*I'm getting tired of these delays,* Lex Luthor thought, as the *Gertrude* pulled into Boston Harbor. Most of the previous two days were a total loss, spent on a heading south to Cuba, before discovering that the essential ingredient to leveling the playing field was in the New England city and turning the ship around. It was a sample in a meteorite display at the Harvard Museum of Natural History, on loan from the Cairo Museum for an exhibit that ran through Sunday. Lex reflected on his brilliance in identifying the substance and lamented that the media never credited him with its discovery when discussing kryptonite.

After Superman had provided that revealing first interview, Lex had poured over it studiously, looking for weaknesses, when he recalled an article about a meteorite exhibiting unusual radiation. Though he hadn't realized it originated from the same planet as the alien, he had instinctively theorized that it would affect him. The meteorite was one of twenty-eight samples that had rained down across Africa from Ethiopia to Cameroon in a 1978 meteor shower.

He had stolen the largest sample shortly after Superman's original appearance, making the leap of faith that it would bring the alien to his knees. He had been right, and his grandiose plan for wealth and power would have succeeded but for his late lover's betrayal. He wouldn't repeat that mistake with his current lover, or with his men for that matter. He wouldn't share his true intentions with them until it was too late for them to ruin his plans.

The original meteorite had been lost, but it wasn't difficult to track the remaining samples.

Most of them were in museums in Northern Africa, which would have been more difficult to acquire, given the unfamiliar criminal environment there. It was a stroke of luck that there had been a sample on loan to an American museum, though Lex would have preferred the Metropolis Museum of Natural History. He'd robbed it before and knew its security flaws.

With the Harvard Museum, he'd have to start from scratch on planning the robbery and the maps he found on-line lacked the necessary detail. He needed to know their security system, both in terms of equipment and people, which would likely require a couple days of reconnaissance. That provided a very small window of opportunity before the exhibit moved on to the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh.

For his ultimate plan to succeed, he'd also need to track Superman's movements, which meant recreating his ingenious alpha scanner. He was the only one who'd ever been able to successfully track Superman. Everyone else had tried using conventional mechanics to track him, which failed miserably, of course. That discipline couldn't even explain how the freak could fly, and thus, it should have come as no surprise that it couldn't track a phenomenon it couldn't explain. Lex had hypothesized that the Kryptonian's physiology worked by influencing the fabric of space, warping it to pull himself forward, though without any visible effect in normal space.

Lex reflected that his invention of a scanner capable of measuring those alpha distortions was a quantum leap forward in physics, detecting the imperceptible spacial distortions up to several hours after the alien flew by. Lex proudly recalled that he had built his prototype from a shoebox and stolen prison equipment during his incarceration. That invention should have earned him the Nobel Prize! *Let's see any of those so-called physicists even come close to building something like that*, Lex challenged. With his current resources, he should be able to improve on the design, tying it into the yacht's advanced sensors for increased range and transmitting the data to a small handheld unit. Unfortunately, he wouldn't be able to devote his full attention to the updated design until after they acquired the kryptonite, given the short window of opportunity at the Harvard Museum.

All his plans would be for naught if the alien tracked him here, so the first order of business would be establish false identities and rechristen the ship. Some of the required changes would necessitate hiring contractors with the unfortunate character flaw of being law-abiding citizens, but such people were easily disposed of once their tasks were complete. He'd just have to make sure that the men were diligent in purging all records of their presence. Lex pushed himself away from his desk and marched up the spiral staircase to join the men on bridge and issue his instructions while they waited to dock the ship.

## Chapter 16 - New Discoveries

*Thursday, September 28, 2006 2:30AM EDT*

After putting out an arson fire that threatened a family in Detroit, Superman flew high into the stratosphere. He trained his vision southwest to the Kent homestead in Smallville, and when the walls peeled away to reveal Kara in her bed, he closely scrutinized his sleeping daughter to visually measure her heart rate and breathing. *Still sleeping peacefully*, he concluded. *Let's hope it stays that way.*

He was relieved that the nightmares hadn't found her yet that night. He knew full well that she still had a long road to go psychologically and there would be more tears and nightmares in the days and months ahead. Had the shuttle malfunction not forced his return to duty, he would probably still be spending his nights at home watching over her. However, as his mother correctly pointed out, if Superman continued to spend his evenings at home, there would be a frenzy of media speculation over it, which was something he didn't care to explain.

Their solution had been for him to remotely monitor her with his vision every few minutes. The first couple of nights had been nerve-racking for him, but he was now confident that he would be able to spot her agitation in plenty of time to race home before she knocked the walls down. He was back to his normal routine, as far as the world knew.

Superman pulled his vision away from his slumbering child, closed his eyes, and extended his hearing across the region. His eyes flew open at the sounds of a M134 Gatling gun discharging and the concussion impacts from depleted uranium rounds. He opened his eyes, located the source of the disturbing noise on the roof of a Cleveland bank, and zoomed down across the landscape to intercede.

When the gunner turned his weapon on the hapless bank guards behind him, Superman accelerated to near light speed to intercept the shells before they reached their intended targets. The situation was resolved and the perpetrators subdued a half a minute later, and Superman was back in the stratosphere, briefly focusing his vision homeward before moving on to his next rescue.

*Thursday, September 28, 2006 6:30AM CDT*

Clark stole quietly through the predawn darkness to Kara's room and turned on the light as he entered. She was sleeping on her side, tightly clutching her plush toy penguin, with Shelby at the foot of the bed. He had noticed her agitation shortly before four o'clock and had arrived in time to calm her before the screaming started. It had taken her a while to fall back asleep and he hated waking her from her peaceful slumber. However, it was a school day and they had less than an hour before the bus arrived for her.

He gently rubbed her back as he called to her. "Kara... Time to get up and get ready for school." She grunted and rolled over onto her stomach. "C'mon, honey, time to wake up." Shelby walked up to the head of the bed and started licking the exposed skin of her face, provoking her to roll over onto her back as she gently pushed the dog away. Finally, she opened her eyes and sat up, her hair a rat's nest from her tossing and turning during the night.

"The sun's not up yet," she complained groggily.

"If we wait for the sun, there won't be time to get ready for school before your bus gets here," he explained. "C'mon. Let's get a move on." Kara reluctantly got out of bed, followed her dad out of the room, and they both headed downstairs for breakfast.

Martha already had plates ready for both of them when they got to the kitchen. "Eat up, both of you," she ordered. "You need to get some meat on those bones." She turned to Clark



and reminded him, "Don't forget that Ben and I are having dinner with the Swans tonight, so you'll need to be home on time."

"I remember," he informed her. "Tom's out of the hospital tomorrow?"

"Yes, but Sarah's still up in Wichita with him until then, which means she can't watch Kara tonight, either." Clark nodded his acknowledgement and dug into his breakfast.

Clark found himself amazed that someone with superspeed could move as slowly as Kara did getting ready for school in the morning. He had to keep reminding her how little time remained until her bus arrived. Somehow, against all odds, they were still on schedule, though Clark wasn't sure how much longer that would continue. He looked through the ceiling into her room and discovered she was re-reading one of her books, rather than packing it into her book bag. "There's not time to read that right now," he hollered up the stairs. "The bus will be here in two minutes!"

"I'm coming!" Kara hollered down. She shoved her book into the open backpack on her bed and quickly X-rayed it to make sure she had everything. Finally, she threw the pack over her shoulder and slowly walked downstairs.

"Are you sure you've got everything?" Clark asked seriously.

"Uh-huh."

Clark X-rayed her backpack to make sure everything was in order, before guiding her to the front door, where his mother was waiting. "Looks like we'll make it on time after all," he commented cheerfully. He gave her a quick hug before letting her out the front door. "Have a good day at school," he told her kindly. "I'll see you tonight." Martha took Kara's hand and walked her to the road just as the bus was pulling up. Clark watched as she climbed onto her bus and once it pulled away, he let himself out the back door and disappeared in a blur through the cornfields.

*Thursday, September 28, 2006 8:45AM EDT*

The Man of Steel dove through the stratosphere in a wide circular route to Metropolis and approached the city low over the ocean, as had become his habit. Though no longer concerned with revealing Superman's presence, it still seemed prudent to avoid leaving a pattern of telltale sonic booms that someone might associate with a work shift. As he neared the waterfront, he flew up above the city at high subsonic speed and disappeared down the elevator shaft at the *Daily Planet* building. Moments later, Clark Kent stepped out of an empty elevator and clumsily made his way down the aisle to his desk, worrying his coworkers with several near misses.

Clark heard Lois' heartbeat quickly approaching behind him, most likely for another confrontation over the EMP story, which Perry had run on the front page below the fold. It had turned out to be a good story, especially after fine-tuning it the previous evening and adding in some late-coming exclusive information. His contacts at Star Labs had revealed that the feds were extrapolating from their analysis to focus on an affluent borough along the northern bank of the Hob's River. Clark had filed his story late, changing the title to "EMP Probe Focuses on Donner Heights." He hadn't expected it to make the front page.

He sat down and was about to boot up when Lois sat on his desk and threw the front section open across his laptop. "What the hell do you call that?" she demanded.

Clark visibly focused his attention on the story above the fold, which was accompanied by a photo of Superman lifting the disabled plane from the Genesis shuttle above his head as he relocated it from Dolphin Stadium to Homestead Air Force Base. "Oh, um, it looks like

Superman finally got that plane out of the stadium-"

"Below the fold!" she bellowed.

Clark's gaze drifted down to the other headline. "Oh. Perry put that on the front page?"

"Why, yes, he certainly did," Lois replied sarcastically. "The story that 'wasn't very good' and that he probably wouldn't even print. Right there. On the front page."

"I, um, refined it a bit after... after a source came through with some new information last night," Clark explained calmly. "I didn't think it would make the front page, though. Slow news day, maybe?"

"You told me that you didn't get any information from the power plant yesterday," Lois huffed angrily.

"I didn't," Clark insisted. "It came from the Star Labs forensic analysis on fried components collected from all over the city - the damage seemed most severe in the Donner Heights area of West Oaktown. But the sample size is too small to be statistically significant and their analysis too subjective. Of course, that didn't stop the feds from extrapolating from it and shifting their manpower there. They're desperate to show progress."

"Did your source give you any other new information that you've neglected to tell me about?" Lois demanded.

"Um, no, I don't think so. Not really."

"There better *not* be, because I'm tired of having this conversation with you!" Lois hollered. "And don't even think of hiding it from me if you find out anything else about the EMP!"

"Lois, I wasn't intentionally keeping anything from you," Clark insisted defensively. "Just when the new information came in... well, it was after you'd already gone home and I still had a job to do."

Lois rolled her eyes and irritably told him in a loud whisper, "Clark, I *know* you've been trying to prove yourself to Foswell, but I think you've made your point. It's my turn now, so back off the EMP story. Besides, I have some exclusive sources that you don't, so it's best that I take it from here. Weren't you going to cover the FEMA story?"

"Not much is new there and Gil's been covering it," Clark informed her. "I really wouldn't want to steal it from him. I think it's all he's got."

"Then find something else!" Lois hissed. Her point made, Lois turned and marched back to her desk, with her angry glare sending colleagues jumping out of her way.

Clark watched as she walked away. *Same old Lois*, he concluded happily. *My, that was fun! I probably shouldn't push my luck, though, so I'd better let her take the EMP story now...*

*Thursday, September 28, 2006 3:15PM EDT*

Richard gazed out at Lois through the window of Perry's office, only vaguely aware of the discussion going on in the editors' meeting. *What is going on with Lois?* he wondered. She had calmed down in a surprisingly short time after their argument the previous night, but she had remained aloof and sequestered herself in their first floor office immediately after putting Jason to bed. His brief attempt to interrupt her to clear the air had been met with an angry glare and he'd wisely backed off.

Any hope he had of talking through the matter in the morning disappeared once she saw the paper with Kent's story on the front page. She had been livid and rushed out the door in record time to confront him at the office. *Why did that bother her so much? She wasn't even in town to cover the story until yesterday afternoon.*

Kent was another mystery that was bothering him. Lois had never mentioned the man, even though they'd been partners for the three years prior to his hiatus. She also seemed more threatened by the competition from him than he had ever known her to be with any of their other colleagues, and he'd never known her arguments to be as heated as they had been with him the previous day. *Of course, I can't remember the last time anyone else got the upper hand with her like that.*

The other curiosity was how well the man was able to read her. One look and he *knew* that she had talked to her father. They were even finishing each other's sentences, something that he would never dare try. *How is it that someone who's been gone for six years seems to know her better than I do when I've spent most of that time under the same roof with her?*

Richard was brought out of his reverie by Perry's gruff shout. "*Richard!*" Perry barked. "Are we boring you?"

"What? Oh, sorry, Uncle Perry," Richard apologized. "Just a lot going on, I guess."

Perry glanced through the inside window where Richard had been staring and spotted Lois at her desk. He turned back to Richard and sternly demanded, "Keep the personal bullshit at home."

"Easier said than done when she's right there," Sam muttered.

"Yet another reason why *nobody* should *ever* fish from the office pond," Perry concluded. "Present company *included*. Actually, that goes double for all of you, because you're management."

"Everything's worked out just fine for Lois and me," Richard declared.

"That remains to be seen," Perry countered. "Now, what's the problem that has you zoning out at staff meetings?"

"It's personal."

"Not when it has you zoning out at staff meetings," Perry insisted. "Out with it."

"Lois seems... I don't know, different?" Richard answered pensively. "She accused me of holding her back professionally last night and she's gone after that EMP story with a passion I've never seen from her before."

"You might not have seen it, but the rest of us have," Perry informed him. "That passion is the fire she had when she started working here, the fire that earned her all those award nominations years ago... and the fire we all thought she'd lost after *he* left."

"She said that Superman was just a story," Richard protested.

"Did she now?" Perry asked enigmatically. "Well, then, I guess you have a mystery on your hands." Perry paused and glanced out at Lois in the bullpen as she rose from her desk and walked briskly towards the elevators. He considered the situation for a moment and said compassionately, "Whatever the reason, her fire is re-ignited and I'd wager that it won't get extinguished anytime soon. You're going to have to adapt to it.... Now, if you don't mind, get your head back on the job so we can continue with this meeting."

Perry turned his attention to Sam and asked brusquely, "Now, what the *hell* is Lois doing chasing the EMP story? I was expecting a Superman exclusive from her..."

*Thursday, September 28, 2006 4:30PM EDT*

Superman concluded that though things were still fairly messy in Metropolis, it was certainly an improvement over Monday afternoon's chaos. Police, fire and ambulance communications were restored and their fleets replenished with loaner vehicles from across the county while theirs were being repaired. All of the trains were running again and National

Guard buses were supplementing the Met Transit fleet well enough to keep all lines running.

However, there were still many traffic lights out, with the inevitable tie-ups and short tempers, even with police and National Guard directing traffic. Also, while the public sector was recovering rather quickly, things were not going so well for the private sector, with a few notable exceptions, such as the *Daily Planet*. Most stores were still shuttered, with their cash registers and alarm systems still off-line from the EMP, and that had attracted a number of opportunistic criminals. The situation had kept the Man of Steel busy.

Despite the demands of his heroic alter ego, Clark Kent had still managed to file a story by the afternoon deadline. He submitted a public interest article on the effects of the business closures on the local community. Such articles had always been a staple of his portfolio and had the advantage of being solid stories that pleased the editors without generating much notice otherwise.

That would be a welcome change from his recent front page articles, which had brought more attention than he was comfortable with. After submitting that article, he had spent most of the afternoon apprehending petty criminals, and was only now rushing back to the *Planet* to prepare his second story of the day, this time on the economic impact of the EMP, which the Metropolis Chamber of Commerce claimed had a price tag in the billions.

His plans for the economic impact story were disrupted within moments of walking into the bullpen, when Clark found himself pulled into Perry White's office along with a nervous Jimmy Olsen and an aggravated Lois Lane, where they were confronted with their Editor-In-Chief's monologue. "Superman and the *Daily Planet* used to go together like bacon and eggs, Siegfried and Roy, death and taxes. Now I want that bond back." He turned to Lois and said, "Lois, I know you've been sneaking around working on that blackout story-"

"EMP," Lois corrected. "It wasn't just a blackout. It was everything. Cell phones, pagers, cars, planes, traffic lights. Everything."

"-but every other paper has its best-looking female reporters on every rooftop, waiting to interview Superman, and none of them have the history that you two do." Perry continued.

"*What?* No! Chief," Lois complained angrily. "I've done Superman." At Jimmy's snickering, she quickly corrected, "*Covered* Superman. You know what I mean."

"Exactly, which makes you the expert," Perry concluded.

"But there are dozens of other stories out there!"

"Name one," Perry challenged.

"What about that city hall sludge contract controversy that you pulled me off of last week? With potential InterGang ties?"

"Boring. Gil can handle it," Perry concluded.

"Why don't you guys track down Lex Luthor?" Jimmy suggested. "I mean, no one has seen him since he won his fifth appeal and he's got more bad history with Superman than anyone."

"Luthor's yesterday's news," Perry declared.

"No, I like that idea, Perry," Lois decided. "Lex Luthor is a career criminal that nearly killed him, for Pete's sake. Just because he doesn't fly-"

Clark leaned over to Jimmy and whispered conspiratorially, "How'd Luthor get out of prison?"

"The court of appeals called Superman as a witness and he was a no-show," Jimmy whispered back. "How much do you think that pisses off Superman now?"

"A lot," Clark told him, matter-of-factly.

"Kent? Blackout," Perry declared.

"Chief!" Lois protested.

"It was his story to begin with and he's already had a couple days head start on you," Perry pointed out. "You have been reading our own paper, haven't you?"

"He doesn't have the ton of material I got from my sources," Lois insisted desperately.

"Then give it to him... Lois, you'll do Superman. And Olsen, if you don't get me some iconic pictures of him like I asked for, I swear you'll be back down to copy boy!"

"I just gave you pictures of him at the Meteor Dome on Tuesday!" Jimmy protested. "That was 'under stadium lights'."

"*That* was a photo-op for FEMA. Superman was just shaking the guy's hand. Now *this*..." Perry threw down a copy of that morning's *Daily Planet*, with the front page photo of Superman lifting the Boeing 777 out of Dolphin Stadium. He poked his finger down on the picture and declared, "...*that's* iconic, but we had to buy the shot from AP. Now get out of here, all three of you, and don't come back without something special!"

Jason was in a grumpy mood. He'd gotten in trouble at school and his Daddy had to come and talk to the teacher. Now he had to come back to the office, instead of playing with his friends in AfterCare. Once the elevators opened to the editorial floor, he'd run out, looking for his mother. He spotted her leaving Uncle Perry's office with Jimmy and that nice man he'd met the day before, Mister Kent. He ran up to them while they continued talking.

"Gee, Lois, I'm so sorry about that," Clark said. "I really thought I was done with the EMP story."

"I'll bet," Lois muttered skeptically.

"I'd really hate it if this little thing damaged our relationship--"

"*Relationship?*" she asked incredulously. She opened her mouth to say more, but hesitated when she detected the motion from the corner of her eye, and turned towards Jason just as he ran up to her.

"Mommy!"

Lois knelt down, and pulled him into her arms. "What is my little troublemaker doing here?" she asked teasingly.

"I had a little meeting with his teacher after school," Richard explained. "He's getting restless and disrupting class."

"He was probably still a little stir crazy from spending so much time cooped up in the newspaper offices this week," Lois suggested impatiently.

"Missus Myers thinks he's not challenged enough," Richard informed her. "The other kids are just now learning the alphabet, and he's already reading at a second grade level. She had to give him some books borrowed from the other class just to keep him occupied. She thinks we should test him for Talented and Gifted and transfer him to a TAG magnet school."

"Absolutely not," Lois said angrily. "The nearest TAG school is too far away from our neighborhood."

"I already told her we'd try the TAG school."

"Then you can call her back and tell her that we're not," Lois hissed. "It's on the other side of town."

"It's not that bad of a trip from the *Planet*."

"Contrary to what you seem to believe, the bullpen is not an afterschool playground and that TAG school is *still* too far from our house. If they can't handle him without shipping him

to the other side of town, then maybe we should think about the Montessori school instead. It's a better school and a lot closer to home... How could you make a decision like that without discussing it with me first?"

"All right, I'm sorry. I'll call her back," Richard promised with his hands up in a surrender gesture. After a beat, he cautiously probed, "Is everything all right, Lois? Did something happen that I should know about?"

"Are you suggesting that you didn't know your uncle was taking my EMP story away and shoving Superman back into my life?" Lois asked skeptically.

"I had nothing to do with that," Richard insisted quickly. "Perry's got a one-track mind where Superman's involved - you've heard his 'three things sell newspapers' spiel. Look, I'm sure you can find a way to do the story without bringing Superman back into your life."

At the moment, the loud volume from one of the replacement televisions overhead interrupted them, as the hostess of the infotainment program announced, "There's really no way around it, folks! Superman is back in our lives!" Her face was replaced with a still image of Superman, which was one of the rare shots showing him with a smirk on his face, rather than the usual stern expression. Jason smiled up at the picture. Like most boys his age, he'd been absolutely fascinated by the Superman stories over the past few days, especially since he learned that Superman had saved his mother and that they were friends.

Jason heard Clark chuckle lightly and craned his head back, looking up at Clark as he looked back down at him with the same Superman smirk on his face as the picture on the television. He looked between the television and Clark a couple of times, before his eyes grew wide and he started hyperventilating from the sudden revelation. *Mister Kent is Superman!* Jason thought. *And he works with Mommy! How cool!* As Jason was about to announce his wonderful discovery about his mother's new co-worker, he started wheezing.

Lois heard Jason's labored breathing and quickly checked his inhaler, replacing it with a fresh one from her purse and making him breathe in from it. Once satisfied he was okay, she turned to Richard and sighed irritably. "Well, you might as well take him home. Looks like I'm going to be here late to brief Clark on everything I dug up on the EMP and to start putting together the Superman story."

"Actually... my sitter, um, has plans," Clark informed them. "She really made a point of reminding me that I had to be on-time tonight."

"Fine. Give me a few minutes to get my things together, we'll pick her up from your sitter's, and work on the story from your place," Lois decided.

"Um, my... my place?" Clark stammered, visibly nervous. "I, um... I'm not so sure..."

"Clark, why don't you bring her back here," Richard suggested. "We'll all stay late, bring dinner in, I'll help with the Superman story, and you two can work on the EMP. How's that sound?"

"Swell!" Clark answered cheerfully, obviously relieved at the suggestion, while Lois and Richard both gave him odd looks at his choice of words.

*Thursday, September 28, 2006 5:10PM EDT*

Superman slowed to a stop high above the Atlantic two hundred miles east of Metropolis and reached out to bring Kara to a stop with him. He turned to face her and told her patiently, "Remember what we talked about earlier. We can't let anyone know that you're related to Superman or that we still live in Smallville. It would raise too many questions."

Kara rolled her eyes and told him, "I remember, but it's *stupid*. Keeping secrets makes

things so complicated."

"It would be worse if we *didn't* keep secrets," he insisted sternly. "Kara, we've already discussed this and I don't want to repeat that argument. Promise you'll follow the rules?"

"Okay, I promise," she replied irritably. "Can we go now?"

Superman nodded, pulled Kara into his arms, and zoomed west to Metropolis, briefly coming to a stop on the roof of the *Daily Planet* before the pair stepped through the roof access door and Clark blurred into his civilian clothes. A moment later, they stepped out of the stairwell onto the editorial floor and walked into the bullpen where they were quickly intercepted by a curious Jimmy Olsen.

While Kara and Jimmy exchanged greetings, Clark scanned the bullpen for Lois. He briefly locked eyes with her through the glass wall of Richard's office and offered her his usual goofy smile and wave. He listened in as Lois turned to Richard and announced, "Clark's back."

"He's certainly taller than I expected," Richard muttered.

"Who? Clark?"

"Superman," Richard corrected, spinning his monitor around to show the search results on his screen.

"Six-four," Lois confirmed.

"I love that he can see through anything. I'd have fun with that."

"Anything but lead," Lois corrected.

Richard took a closer look at the picture on his screen, one of the first taken after his arrival. "I bet he's-

"-two hundred and twenty-five pounds, faster than a speeding bullet, invulnerable to anything but kryptonite, and he never lies."

"Kryptonite?"

"Radioactive fragments from his home world, Krypton. It's deadly. To him. Why?"

"I don't know. Sounds like the perfect guy," Richard commented. He looked through the window and spotted Clark with Jimmy and Kara. Jason had just walked up to them, lifting the garbage can off his head enough to see who he was talking to. Richard scrutinized Clark more closely and asked, "How tall would you say Clark is?"

"I don't know. Six-three, Six-four."

"About what? Two, two-fifteen, maybe?"

"Sure, why?" She followed Richard's gaze and found Clark grinning goofily and waving back to them. She rolled her eyes when she realized what Richard had been suggesting. "Jesus, you've got to be kidding!"

"What?"

"Clark's a geeky farm-boy, single dad from Smallville, Kansas," Lois explained crossly. "The only thing 'super' about him is his stress level. Between Foswell questioning his abilities, his mom getting married again to the farmer down the road, and his daughter's issues, he's pretty overwhelmed. Not exactly what you'd find on a superhero's résumé."

Richard chuckled lightly and turned his attention back to Lois. "Lois, I wasn't seriously suggesting that Clark was-

"Sure you weren't," Lois replied sarcastically.

Relieved that Lois had unknowingly thrown Richard off his scent, Clark turned his attention back to the children in front of him. Jason appeared delighted to discover a playmate close to his size and had run up to Kara as soon as he had spotted her and invited her to join in his game, pretending to be Godzilla. He suggested that Kara could be Gamera.

"What's Godzilla?" Kara asked. "And what's Gamera?"

"You've never heard of Godzilla?" Jason asked incredulously. "He's the coolest! He's a hundred-foot-tall Japanese monster! He destroys Tokyo in all the movies."

"Why do you want to pretend to be a monster?" Kara asked innocently. "Grandma says we're supposed to help people."

"You mean like Superman?" Jason asked, as he peeked up at Clark.

"I guess," Kara replied, shrugging her shoulders. "But Grandma says everyone should try to do their part to help others, and nobody's more important than anybody else--"

"But Godzilla is more fun!" Jason insisted.

"Hey there, you little monster!" Richard teased as he and Lois approached the group. "How about we go get some dinner?"

"Yeah, burritos!" Jason cheered. He looked over at his new playmate and asked, "Do you like burritos?"

"I don't know," Kara replied. "I've never tasted one."

"We can pick up some other things, too, in case she doesn't like them," Lois suggested. She then turned to Clark and asked, "Does she have any food allergies we need to watch for?"

"No, she can eat pretty much anything."

"Can Kara come with us?" Jason asked.

"Can I please, Dad?" Kara echoed.

"Daddy and Jimmy are just going to pick up dinner and bring it back," Lois explained. "You sure you wouldn't rather stay here?" She squatted down in front of the two children as they confirmed their wishes and she closely observed them, letting her gaze drift between the two.

Clark smiled down at the tableau, but frowned at Lois' sudden gasp and the spike in her pulse. Lois quickly caught herself, masking her expression as she turned to Richard and declared, "You okay with the extra munchkin?"

Richard nodded. "We're good to go, as long as Clark's fine with it. Is everything all right?"

"Fine," Lois answered sharply.

"Well, I guess Kara can go with you," Clark decided. Turning to Kara, he said, "Stay close to Richard and Jimmy and do what they tell you. Okay?"

"Okay."

Clark turned his attention back to Lois, anxious over what had excited her. Her heartbeat was still racing. "Lois?" he called. "Are you sure everything's okay?"

"Shh." Lois held out her index finger, signaling him to wait until the elevator doors closed behind Richard, Jimmy, and the children. Finally, she turned to him, grabbed his tie, and pulled him into an empty conference room behind her. She then released his tie, slammed the door shut, and turned to him, arms crossed. "You remember the Niagara Falls assignment, don't you Clark?" she asked sternly.

"Um, sure, like it just happened," he answered uncertainly. "What's this about?"

"Do you think it's about time you told me what really happened there?" Lois pressed.

"Um, you were there with me," Clark reminded her. "You pretty much know everything that happened there."

"I'm not so sure about that," Lois insisted mysteriously. "Seems pretty obvious to me now that something *did* happen there that I *didn't* know about."

"Lois, I have no idea where you're going with this," Clark confessed. "Can you give me a clue, please?"



"Oh, it just occurred to me that you probably know about something that had to have happened there," Lois began sarcastically. "Something that, oh, I don't know, might explain why I *gave birth to Jason* nine months later!"

## Chapter 17 - The Horrible Truth

*Thursday, September 28, 2006 5:20PM EDT*

The blood drained from Clark's face and his eyes grew impossibly large as he weakly answered, "I thought... I thought Jason was Richard's."

"I was *almost* convinced of that myself, even though the math never quite worked there," Lois declared. "But the *striking* resemblance between Jason and Kara is kind of hard to overlook."

*My God, they do look alike!* Clark realized. *How did I miss that?* Aloud, he nervously asked, "You, um... you think they look alike?" He awkwardly looked away and covertly focused his vision through the floors and walls to the children in the descending elevator where he found Kara staring back at him, wide-eyed. *Oh, boy, I really didn't want to have to explain things like this to her,* he thought. He shook the concern from his mind and shifted his focus to Jason for a closer look at the boy's cellular structure.

"Clark, if they were the same age and gender, those two would pass for twins!" Lois angrily replied in a loud whisper. "Sure looks like those two are brother and sister, which would mean that Jason is *your* son. Now, how the *hell* could that even be possible? Did you decide to get yourself laid after I fell asleep?"

Clark's eyes, already impossibly wide, grew even wider as his head snapped back to Lois. She was glaring at him, angrier than he'd ever seen her, and he couldn't really blame her - the circumstantial evidence suggested date rape. He'd been shocked mute by both the accusation and her stated conclusion that Jason was *his son!* It only took Clark a moment to find his voice. "H-How can you even suggest..." he stammered. "I would never - it wasn't like that *at all.*"

"Then what *was* it like, Clark, because I certainly don't remember going to bed with you."

"I... I'm still trying to figure this out," he admitted. "It *shouldn't* be possible." *How can this be?* Clark wondered. *Jor-El said that the genomes weren't compatible.* Clark was forced to acknowledge that his father had been wrong. Not only did Jason bear a striking resemblance to Kara, a super-close look at him a moment earlier revealed uniquely *Kryptonian* attributes in his cellular structure. Somehow, Jason had been conceived while he and Lois were together during the alternate timeline and had miraculously survived the space-time fold.

"What part of this isn't possible, Clark?" Lois demanded. "That you got into my panties? That you knocked me up? Or that I figured out *who* it was that knocked me up?"

Clark suddenly became aware of the chatter from the bullpen. Though the office had thinned out considerably, the bullpen was still lightly staffed for the swing shift. They'd noticed Lois dragging him into the conference room by the tie, which was something she something reserved for people who had seriously pissed her off. Fortunately, the glass barrier between them still offered their conversation some privacy, but Clark became suddenly uncomfortable at the attention. "We're... We're attracting a bit of a crowd," he pointed out. "How about a change of venue? The roof, maybe?"

"You're not getting out of here until I get an explanation," Lois insisted.

Clark sighed tiredly, lowered his head, and pinched the bridge of his nose. *I have to tell her,* he concluded. *She's earned that right... But, not here. Not like this.* He raised his head with a determined expression on his face and firmly told her, "Lois, I think I know what happened and I promise, it's not what you think-"

"Frankly, your promises don't mean a lot right now, and you *really* don't want to know what I think."

"In order to explain what happened with us, I have to tell you about something that affected the entire globe," Clark informed her, reaching around her for the doorknob. "It's a horrible truth that the rest of humanity has been blissfully ignorant of, but you'll need to know the full truth of it - you deserve nothing less. But we're *not* having that conversation here. Give me ten minutes to check my facts, then I'll meet you on the roof and explain *everything*."

"Get away from that door!" she commanded. "You're *not* running from this." She tried to push him back, and was surprised when he didn't budge. It was like pushing against a wall.

"I'll never run from you, Lois," he told her sincerely. "But I *do* have to go right now." He easily opened the door against her resistance, again surprising her. "Ten minutes, and you'll have my undivided attention and the explanation you're looking for." Clark then turned from her and walked briskly through the door, heading towards the elevator lobby.

Lois was only a few steps behind him. "Stop right there, Smallville," she called after him. "We're not even close to being done here."

"Ten minutes," Clark repeated over his shoulder as he quickened his pace and ducked through the door to the stairs.

When Lois opened the door to the stairs five seconds later, she was astonished to discover the space deserted. "Get back here, damn you!" she hollered, her voice shrilly echoing through the empty and silent stairwell. She waited a moment and then sighed irritably before shouting up the stairs, "Fine. You've got ten minutes! And you had damn well better not be late!"

She then finally abandoned her quarry, marched to her desk, retrieved her purse from the bottom drawer, and returned to the elevator lobby. She angrily pressed the up button while a handful of her colleagues in the bullpen looked on in amusement.

Lois set her purse on the half-wall at the edge of the roof, fished out her cigarettes and lighter and attempted to light a cigarette. The lighter's flame went out just as she was about to touch it to the end of her cigarette. Lois grumbled and repeated the attempt, and again the flame extinguished itself almost immediately. To her left, a deep baritone greeted her, "You know, you really shouldn't be smoking, Miss Lane."

Lois yelped in surprise at the voice. *Oh, my God, he's here*, she thought. *Does his timing ever suck...*

"I'm sorry," he told her sincerely as he floated down to the roof and stepped forward. "I didn't mean to-"

"I'm fine," Lois protested. "Really. I just wasn't expecting... *you*." She practically spat the last word and Superman winced.

"I'm-" Superman began.

"So, where-" Lois said at the same time. After a short awkward silence, she decided, "You first. I can wait." *Okay, Lane, take a minute and figure out what you're going to say*, she instructed herself. *Try to be articulate this time.*

"I'm sorry," he began. "For leaving like that. And with all the press on the plane, it really wasn't a good time to talk."

*Press?* Lois wondered, her brow momentarily wrinkling in confusion. "Oh, right. The plane. We'll there's no press around now. Except *me*."

"Well, um, I know that people are asking a lot of questions, um, now that I'm back, and I think it's only fair that I answer *those people*."

*Those people?* Lois thought. "So you're here for an interview?" Lois turned and searched

her purse for her tape recorder. "Where did I put that thing?" she mumbled.

"Your right pocket, Lois," Superman informed her and she fished it out of her pocket. "But you won't need it. This visit is strictly off the record."

"Off the record?" Lois asked incredulously. "Do you have any idea the kind of pressure my editor is putting on me to get this interview? I can't do the *real* stories until I get *this* damn thing done."

Superman frowned and said, "The explanation that I owe you and the horrible truth I must share with you is not for public consumption. It's for your ears only."

*Horrible Truth?* Lois thought. *Those are the same words that Clark used.* She turned off the recorder and threw it in her purse. "Were you eavesdropping on us earlier?" she demanded to know.

"You know I hear everything, but we'll come back to that later," he evaded.

"Fine," she snapped. "You say you owe me an explanation, so explain, starting with where the *hell* you were these past six years."

"I went back to Krypton."

Lois' brow again wrinkled in confusion. "But you told me it was destroyed," she recalled quietly.

"It was," he confirmed sadly. "And quite thoroughly so. Big chunks of the planet were blown away and almost nothing is recognizable from the days when I lived there. The little that is still standing was transformed into kryptonite by the nova - something I hadn't noticed until it was almost too late. But I had to go back."

"Why?"

"Six years ago, a distress call from my father's brother reached Earth," Superman explained. "He'd been trying to escape with his family and while they launched from Krypton in time to avoid getting incinerated in the nova, they got caught in the shockwave. Their ship was disabled and power nearly depleted... Lois, this was a call for help from my *family*. I had to respond to that call."

"So you've brought them back with you?" Lois asked in amazement. "How come nobody's seen them yet?"

Superman offered her a sad look before lowering his gaze to the tile beneath his feet. "They didn't all survive," he said quietly. "There was only enough power to sustain one of them, frozen in stasis. My aunt and uncle chose life for their daughter - I brought her back with me and I'm taking care of her now."

He lifted his head with a serious expression on his face and stressed, "Lois, *nobody* can know about this... Maybe that will change someday, when she's grown up and out of school - *if* she chooses to join me in this mission. But until that day, I want her to enjoy what remains of her childhood and to at least have the *option* of a normal life."

*Jesus, the poor kid,* Lois thought. "How old is she?"

"I'd rather not go into details," Superman told her firmly. "Not yet."

"You should have told me about this before you left," Lois scolded him.

"Lois, I... I meant to. But when I went looking for you, you were on a plane heading to L.A.," he explained. "I couldn't pull you off the plane without validating everything that the tabloids were suggesting."

"Who cares about the *tabloids*?" she shouted.

"Lois, not everyone realizes that they're fiction and that includes some of my most vicious enemies," he reminded her. "There was no way that I was going to unnecessarily endanger

your life, especially when I wasn't going to be around in case something happened."

"Then you could have found me that night in L.A.," she argued.

"There wasn't time," he insisted. "As it was, I barely got to my uncle's ship before power ran out. I'm sorry."

"What about during those two weeks before you left when you were flying around like the end of the world was coming?" Lois argued. "You couldn't take a few minutes to drop down to the roof at the *Planet*, where I was *waiting* for you, and explain what was going on?"

"Lois, I left thirty hours after my uncle's distress call reached Earth," Superman informed her.

"Then what was up with your hyperactivity?" Lois pressed. "It sure seemed to me that like you were putting in the extra effort because you knew you wouldn't be here. And you were avoiding me like the plague."

"I'm sorry about that, Lois," he told her sincerely. "It's just... Well, you know me well enough that if I'd dropped by, you'd have known something was wrong, and I didn't want to burden you with that."

"Does this have something to do with that 'horrible truth' that you were mentioning?"

Superman nodded. "On August twenty-sixth, two thousand, I folded space-time back on itself eight days to mitigate the effects of a global nuclear holocaust."

"Whoa, slow down a minute," Lois asked in disbelief. "Did you say, 'nuclear holocaust'?"

Superman sadly informed her, "Three vicious *Kryptonian* criminals escaped their prison and discovered Earth."

"Kryptonian?"

"Yes," he confirmed. "They were terrorists, for lack of a better word, led by an egomaniacal sociopath named General Zod, who had once been in charge of Krypton's security. They were the only three criminals that the Kryptonian justice system had been unable to rehabilitate and had been banished to a space-borne prison called the 'Phantom Zone'. Ironically, their punishment gave them a chance for survival that wasn't available to Krypton's law-abiding citizens..."

"I hadn't realized it at the time, but apparently the Zone got caught in my ship's wake and dragged to Earth with me when I first came here, and they had been orbiting out near the Kuiper belt. I had no idea they were there..."

"Jesus..."

"Anyway, in the original timeline, when that runaway nuke got loose the morning of August eighteenth, I intercepted it and threw it into space towards the outer planets. Its trajectory took it close enough to the Phantom Zone that the shockwave from the detonation breeched the seal and they escaped. When they arrived on Earth a short time later, I was distracted with some personal matters and didn't realize what was happening. By the time I learned that they were here, they'd already taken over the Earth and nuked twenty-eight major cities around the world... I did manage to defeat them - just barely - but the damage was done. There was nowhere on Earth to escape the fallout..."

"But you were able to undo it..."

Superman shrugged and continued, "Afterwards, when I pieced together what had happened, I realized that my carelessness had freed them. I had to share responsibility for the hundred million people who perished in those nukes and the hundreds of millions more who'd die from the radiation. However, it occurred to me that I could mitigate the damage by folding space-time back on itself eight days - prior to Zod's escape from the phantom zone. The second

time around I made sure that they stayed sealed in their cage. I got to that runaway nuke sooner and the nuke detonated within the sun's corona, safely isolated from the Phantom Zone."

"Where is this 'Phantom Zone' now?" Lois asked anxiously. *Oh, Dear God. The damage they could do if they got free again...*

"They're in a distant orbit around a red giant twenty thousand light years from Earth," he said simply. "I left a probe to monitor it, just in case, but they won't be going anywhere anytime soon."

"That's a relief," Lois commented. "Now, about that other thing you mentioned... You rolled back time? You never told me that you could do that."

"That not *quite* how it works, but your description is close enough," he replied. "It's not an easy thing to do, and not something to be taken lightly."

"Okay, fine," Lois replied sharply. "You rolled back time and stopped Armageddon from happening... So what exactly does this 'horrible truth' have to do with the leper treatment I got from you before you left?" *Clark's not the only one who has some explaining to do*, she thought.

"Lois, I hadn't intended that as a rebuke," he told her sincerely. "I had a lot going through my mind, mostly a combination of guilt over the acute harm that my carelessness and dereliction of duty had caused, and some personal disappointments."

"*What* harm?" Lois asked incredulously. "You rolled back time! You prevented it from happening!"

"Those eight days still *happened*, Lois - you can't rewind time like a video," Superman explained. "There's no separate time stream - its *space-time*. H. G. Wells got it wrong. It's impossible to completely undo events by folding space-time."

Lois shook her head. "Okay, now you're making my head hurt," she complained. "You *know* I'm not a science geek."

"Okay, try to think of like this," Superman offered. "Imagine that you can fit the entire universe on a single sheet of paper - all the planets, all the stars, all the galaxies. Okay?"

"Okay."

"But that sheet of paper is just a snapshot of the universe at that particular moment. For every second that passes, there's another sheet of paper that gets glued on top of the previous page. As time passes, you end up with a *stack* of paper, rather than a single sheet. That's space-time. Understand?"

"Sure, but what's it have to do with rolling back time?"

"Well, you can't just pull the pages off of the top of the stack and start over to retroactively prevent a horrible event," he explained. "The pages are *glued together*. But..." Superman poked his index finger down on top of his open palm and continued, "...if you exert enough force at a particular point, you can compress the top pages down into the lower layers. You'll end up with something the thickness of a single page, but with the mass of all the upper pages merged into it, at that one point."

"That's kind of what happens when folding space-time - there's a localized effect contained within the sun's gravity well and the future *folds* into the past. In this case, I folded space-time back on itself eight days. Everyone here repeated the eighteenth through the twenty-sixth of August, two thousand, though no human being remembers the first time around. Those memories are out-of-phase and lost forever."

"So how's that different that rolling back time, if it's like those eight days never

happened."

"The future *merges* with the past and that leaves residual traces of the original timeline - the top pages on our stack of paper. When I folded space-time after the nuclear holocaust, the nuked cities were whole again, but the poisonous radiation wasn't completely dissipated. There's still much higher background radiation in those cities even now, which some of your sources have noticed. That's resulted in an elevated cancer rate in those cities, according to a CDC report I read recently. Also, the construction in those cities is much weaker and has a greater potential for structural failure than before the nukes. That probably accounts for multiple bridge and building collapses over the past six years. Lois, people have *died* from these things."

"Okay, I get the point," she told him.

Superman nodded and after a moment's pause, he told her apologetically, "There's another affect of the fold that you need to know about - how certain *people* were directly affected by it. People whose actions and experiences were starkly different in those lost eight days than they were the second time around."

"Why would that be a big deal?" Lois asked. "Seems like it would be a good thing, if the first time around was as bad as you say."

"For some people, it *was* a good thing," Superman conceded. "They'd been killed or seriously hurt the first time around, and after the fold, they were alive again with little evidence of their original ordeal. However, there could be some symptoms of the original injuries, which I suspect were sometimes fatal."

"So it's basically a what-if scenario?" Lois asked skeptically. "What if so-and-so's unexplained death was from the nukes that nobody remembers?"

"It's statistically unlikely that none of the deaths in the last six years could be traced back to injuries from those original eight days," Superman insisted. "However, that wasn't why I brought it up. There's a different scenario I want to discuss - one that affects *you* directly."

Lois' eyes went wide. "How bad is it?" she asked anxiously.

"That depends on your perspective," Superman answered. "I'll get right to the point. I'm absolutely certain that Jason was conceived during the original timeline - *nothing* happened in Niagara Falls the second time around. The circumstances were different."

"You're saying that Clark and I... That we...", she began nervously. Suddenly, her nervousness morphed into irritation and her eyes narrowed into a glare. "Wait a minute," she said irritably. "Were you spying on us?"

"What? *No!*" he protested. "It's not like that. It's just... well, the circumstances were different the first time through those eight days and you saw your partner in a different light. Your situation was somewhat different than that of the other affected women-"

"What do you mean, 'other affected women'?" Lois demanded.

"There was a report of an unusually high spike in the birth rate in the spring of two thousand one, with an unusually high percentage of single women giving birth," Superman explained. "At first, I didn't think anything of it, but after taking a closer look at the data earlier tonight, I couldn't help but notice that the birthrates were flat in the nuked cities that were included in the study. That suggests that something happened in those original eight days, in the cities that *weren't* nuked."

"What does this time fold have to do with that?"

"Think about it for a minute, Lois," Superman suggested. "Three vicious aliens with the same powers as I have take over the world and promptly 'punish' twenty-eight cities by nuking

them. There's nowhere to escape the fallout and no sign of Superman. It really looked like the end of civilization as we knew it."

"So you're saying the survivors decided to get laid while they still had the chance?"

"I... I wouldn't have put it *that* way," Superman protested as a slight blush rose up his cheeks. "But it shouldn't come as a surprise that some people sought comfort in each others' arms, perhaps with partners that they wouldn't otherwise consider or without the precautions that they might otherwise have exercised. Those pairings wouldn't necessarily have been repeated in the revised timeline."

"Okay, I'll buy that," Lois agreed. "But you said my situation was different," Lois pressed. "How so?"

"You weren't aware of Zod's invasion when... you know..."

"You *were* spying on us," Lois accused irritably. "So you're some kind of super-stalker now?" *Is that why you ignored me after rescuing that kid in Niagara Falls? Couldn't face me after what you saw me doing with Clark?*

"Lois, that's *not* how it was," Superman stated sternly. "I'll explain it all to you in a little while... I think that there are some things about Clark Kent that may surprise you."

"What about him?" Lois asked. "And how is it that he seemed to know about this 'horrible truth'?"

The Man of Steel looked away, walked to the edge of the roof and stared out at the cityscape as he let out a frustrated sigh. After a moment, he quietly said, "I get the feeling that I'm not doing a very good job explaining things. Every question I answer seems to spawn two more and we've seriously digressed from the original topic..."

"Occupational hazard."

"You asked why I seemed to be avoiding you before I left," he reminded her. "Part of the answer was guilt over what happened in that alternate timeline, the affects of which are still being felt. But there was also some personal baggage that I was preoccupied with. You remember the disappointment I mentioned?"

"The truth is that while Zod and his cohorts were invading Earth, I was daring to hope that I could have a normal life. In fact, I was trying to *live* that normal life, rather than attending to my duty, which was why I hadn't noticed their invasion until it was almost too late. Afterwards, I was forced to face the fact that a normal life might not be part of my future, and that was not an easy thing to accept... I could hide my sorrow over that from the rest of the world, but I knew that if you saw me, I wouldn't be able to hide it from you. I didn't want to burden you with my problems."

"You still should have explained things to me," Lois insisted.

"I know," he conceded. "And I'm sorry." The two settled into an uncomfortable silence, both seeming to study the patterns in the roof tile at their feet. It had only lasted a couple minutes when Superman declared, "It's *good* to be back."

"Yeah, well everyone seems to be happy about it."

"Not everyone," he said quietly. They both raised their heads and he looked her intently in the eyes. "I read the article, Lois. 'Why the World Doesn't Need Superman'."

*Way to ruin the moment, you jerk,* Lois thought. Aloud, she sternly told him, "So did a lot of people. Next week, they'll give me a Pulitzer for it."

"Why did you write it?"

"How can you ask that after *leaving me* like that?" she hissed. "Was it that hard to say 'goodbye'?"



"I'm sorry if I hurt you."

"No. The time to say sorry was six years ago," Lois snapped. She turned her back to him and stared into space, fighting the tears that were glistening in her eyes. She blinked away the tears and spoke slowly as she kept her back to him, "I moved on. I had to. So did the rest of us. That's why I wrote it. The world doesn't need a savior."

"I never wanted to be a savior. I just wanted to help."

"Well, I guess you sure screwed that up, didn't you."

The two stood silently for a few minutes in an awkward silence. Finally, Superman looked tenderly at her and asked, "Lois, will you come with me?"

"What? Why?"

"There's something I want to show you... Please."

Lois turned back to him and looked at the hopeful expression on his face. *This is a really bad idea*, she thought. *I should refuse*. She hesitated a moment, but then stepped towards him. "I can't be long," she said. "Clark should be here any minute." She toed off her shoes and stepped up on his feet.

Superman smiled sweetly at her and assured her, "That won't be a problem."

It had been a long time since Lois had seen the city from this vantage point. Though she'd flown often enough in Richard's seaplane, it wasn't the same with the droning engine noise and the speed required to maintain lift. Nothing compared to standing on Superman's feet, in the protective circle of his arm and basking in his unusual warmth as they looked down on the city from a stationary point high above. It felt like they were standing on top of the world. *I don't think that I'll ever get tired of this*, she thought. *Though, he doesn't need to know that*. She was enjoying the flight despite her best efforts to cling to her anger.

As they slowed to a stop, Lois turned her head back to face him and asked, "What was that you were saying earlier about Clark, about needing to explain a few things?"

"It's a long story. I'll tell you all about it later," he promised. He paused a moment and then asked her, "Lois, what do you hear?"

"Nothing. It's quiet."

Superman smiled. "Do you know what I hear? I hear everything." His smile faded as he continued, "You wrote that the world doesn't need a savior, but every day I hear people crying for one and I can't ignore their call." He paused a moment and told her tenderly, "I'm sorry I left you like that, Lois. Please believe that I never meant to hurt you."

Before Lois had a chance to respond, a small voice to her left unhappily informed them, "I'm sorry, too. It was my fault."

Lois' head spun to her left at the child's voice and her eyes flew wide open in shock when she recognized the small blonde girl floating ten feet away. Lois heard herself quietly voice the girl's name: "Kara."

## Chapter 18 - Revealed

*Thursday, September 28, 2006 5:40PM EDT*

Lois stared in amazement at the little girl floating in front of her as the clues to the enigma known as Clark Kent assembled themselves in her mind, completing a puzzle that she hadn't realized was there. *Kara Kent, Lois thought. Superman's orphaned cousin... the one he's taking care of... the one Clark introduced as his daughter... Oh. My. God. Clark is Superman. That lying son of a... If he thought he had some explaining to do before...*

Lois' head cleared enough for her to finally notice Kara's agonized expression and the sheen of unshed tears in her eyes. *Uh-oh. Someone's not happy...* She chanced a glance over at Superman, who had an irritated expression on his face, with his head cocked to the side and his eyes squeezed shut. *Oh, and Daddy's not happy either. Well, deal with it, you lunkhead.* Aloud, she icily said, "Clark."

"Hold on," he replied firmly.

*Hold on, like hell!* Lois thought. However, she silently fumed for a moment. By the time she finally opened her mouth to speak, Superman had opened his eyes and focused on Kara, sternly telling her, "Well, it doesn't sound like anyone saw you fly up here, thank goodness." He shifted Lois to his right side and floated over to his daughter, descending slightly so that he was at eye level with her. "Kara-"

"It's my fault you left them," she declared sadly.

*Okay, Lois thought, I'll let you take care of your Daddy duty before ripping you a new one.*

"Sweetheart, you're not responsible for every complication in my life," Superman explained patiently. "And Lois isn't mad at me because of anything to do with you. She's mad at me because I didn't explain the situation before I left - like I *should* have done. I have nobody but myself to blame for that."

"You've got that right," Lois hissed under her breath.

"But if you hadn't had to come back to Krypton to get me-" Kara protested unhappily and her lower lip began to tremble.

*So I was right - she is his orphaned cousin,* Lois thought as her heart broke for the little girl. *The poor kid, losing everyone like that... No wonder she looks like she's about to cry.*

"That was *my* choice, Kara, and one that I'll *never* regret," Superman told her insistently. "And I'm pretty sure that if I had explained the situation to Lois, she would have supported that decision."

"I would have insisted on it," Lois confirmed emphatically. *I'm mad at him, not you.*

"But you had to leave your son," Kara pointed out. "You shouldn't have come back for me." Then the tears came and her whole body began to shake from the sobs.

Lois tightened her grip around Superman as he closed the remaining distance to Kara, wrapped his free arm around her and pulled her close. Once Kara was securely in his arms, Lois noticed the city blur beneath them, giving her a feeling of vertigo and prompting her to tightly close her eyes. When she felt Superman release his grip on her a moment later, she opened her eyes and was surprised to find herself back on the roof of the *Daily Planet* building. She stepped back shakily from Superman and Kara and leaned against the perimeter wall. *A little warning would have been nice,* Lois complained to herself.

"Kara, listen to me. As much as I would have liked to have been here with Lois and Jason, I could *never* have left you stranded out there," Superman said sincerely. "Do you remember what we talked about the other night? It doesn't *matter* that you weren't born my

daughter, you *are* my daughter *now*. Honey, I love you, and you're just as important to me as Lois and Jason are. How could I ever choose one of you over the other?" Kara threw her arms around his neck and buried her head in his chest. He gently swayed back and forth to sooth her as she continued to cry.

*Not bad for a newbie dad*, Lois thought. *Can't assume the he knows what he's doing, though. This is Clark, after all... Geez, she looks even more like Jason when she's upset.* She walked over to the pair and gently brushed Kara's hair back with her fingers. "It's okay, Kara," Lois assured her compassionately as she stroked her hair. "I'm glad he brought you home."

Superman turned to Lois and quietly told her, "This usually takes a while. And Richard and Jimmy are freaking out over her disappearance."

"Oh, right... I'll call Richard and let him know she's here," Lois decided as she grabbed her purse from the edge of the roof and fished out her cell phone.

"He's already replaced his cell phone?" Superman asked. "I thought everyone was on a waiting list."

"He picked his new one up in Gotham on Tuesday," Lois explained. "So did Perry, George and Sam."

"What are you going to-?"

"Shhh."

Richard answered the third ring. *"Lois? Um, we got a bit of a problem here. You see-"*

"Kara's here," Lois interrupted. "Superman heard her crying after she got lost and brought her to the *Planet*, once he realized who her dad was."

"*Oh, thank God,*" Richard replied, the relief heavy in his voice. He muffled the mouthpiece of his phone and shouted, "*Jimmy! Superman found Kara. She's at the Planet...*" After a moment's pause, Richard asked, "*Lois, I don't know how we lost her like that-*"

"Don't worry about it. Look, I've got to go," Lois insisted. "Bye."

"*Bye. Love you.*"

Lois ended the call and looked over at Superman. "We've still got that interview to do," she reminded him.

"That's really not a good idea," he replied decisively.

Lois rolled her eyes and complained, "Jesus... *Clark!* You heard what Perry said."

"*Language!* Little pitchers with *really* big ears," Superman admonished her. He sighed heavily and after a momentary pause, he quietly explained, "Lois, we *can't* leave a trail of breadcrumbs from Superman back to you and Jason. If any of those tabloid writers should be clever enough to do the math and question his paternity-"

"What *is* this preoccupation of yours with the *tabloids?*" Lois demanded to know. "Everyone knows they're pure bull- um, nonsense."

"Not everyone," Superman told her sadly. "I left a little bit out of my earlier explanation-"

"You left *a lot* out," Lois corrected him.

Superman sighed heavily and then quietly continued, "In the original timeline, Lex Luthor had escaped from prison about the same time as Zod and his cohorts. He bargained with them for rule of Australia in exchange for delivering me to them, and his means of delivering me was to kidnap you. There was too strong a public association between Lois Lane and Superman and I almost lost you because of it. I don't want to re-establish that problem."

"I can take care of myself," Lois hissed.

"But can Jason?" Superman pressed. "I couldn't bear it if anything happened to either of you."

Lois opened her mouth to object and then snapped it shut, dropping her gaze to the roof. A moment later, she looked back up at him and quietly inquired, "So... he's *really* yours?"

"It certainly looks that way," Superman confirmed quietly. "But I had no idea until you pointed out the resemblance earlier tonight. Now that I think about it, they both look like my paternal grandfather, Jor-El, Senior... Anyway, while we were in the conference room earlier, I peeked through the walls at Jason's cellular structure and there are some uniquely Kryptonian attributes there."

"But he doesn't have any of your abilities," Lois pointed out. "If anything, he's a bit fragile."

"I can't explain that, Lois. Not without a detailed examination, which we'll probably want to do. I have no idea what to expect developmentally with a half-human, half-Kryptonian child."

"Let's talk about that later," Lois muttered pensively. "In the meantime, maybe you can explain why you wouldn't come clean in the conference room. Would I ever have learned the truth if your hand hadn't been forced?"

"Lois, I - I was going to tell you," he said sincerely. "I just hadn't got to that part yet."

"You had a perfect opportunity to 'get to that part' before you bolted out of there earlier!"

"I'm sorry, Lois, but I - I couldn't," he explained weakly. "Not there. Not like that..." He flicked his eyes down to the crying child in his arms. "Um, can we talk about this later? I've kind of got my hands full right now."

"Oh," Lois said quickly and her face betrayed a guilty expression. "Is she going to be okay?" she asked softly.

"In time, hopefully."

*Shit, how could I have been so callous,* Lois scolded herself. *The last thing that child needs right now is a shouting match between her dad and me.* Aloud, she quietly muttered, "Well, you've got yourself a *temporary* reprieve." She turned away from the pair and stared out over the city as she considered the situation. After a brief pause, she said, "I can still hardly believe that Jason's actually a Kent... I guess that makes Kara his big sister."

The little girl looked up at Lois from her father's chest and asked hopefully through her tears, "Really?"

Lois turned back to them and kindly answered, "Yeah, really." She walked over to the pair and hugged Kara, telling her, "Jason's going to *love* having you for a sister." Kara smiled widely and that expression was quickly reflected on Lois' face. She turned to Superman and told him curtly, "I can take her." Lois wrapped her arms around Kara and lifted her from her dad's embrace.

"Kara, honey, float up a bit so you're not so heavy for her," Superman suggested as he surrendered his burden. He then turned to Lois and sincerely said, "Thank you, Lois."

"I'm doing this for *her!*" Lois snapped, and she turned away from him, focusing her attention on Kara and softly telling her, "Things are a bit complicated, so you're going to need to give me a little time to explain everything to your brother, okay? Let's not say anything about this just yet." *My God, 'complicated' is such an understatement.*

"Okay," Kara agreed, smiling widely as her tears quickly subsided.

"How do you *do* that?" Superman asked quietly. "I've never been able to get her calmed down so quickly."

"I've had a lot of practice while *raising your son,*" Lois replied icily. She turned slightly and did a double take when she saw her companion dressed in his civilian clothing. "*Jesus-*"

"Language!"

"-Clark, where the h-, um, heck were you hiding the change of clothes?"

"Um, I have a pocket in my cape."

"A pocket?" Lois asked incredulously. "Clark, how can you possibly hide anything that bulky in your cape?" Lois asked incredulously. "Your shoes alone would be impossibly obvious. *Everyone* would have noticed that."

"It's a special application of some inter-dimensional Kryptonian physics called a ''," Clark explained. "In lay terms, it's bigger on the inside -an interior volume equivalent to a medium-sized airport locker is contained in a pocket only a couple of millimeters thick in normal space. But on the inside, it's about a foot and half deep, and has plenty of room for my suits, overcoat and shoes, with enough space left over to stow my briefcase and laptop, all hermetically sealed off from normal space."

"It's kind of like Mary Poppins' magic bag," Kara explained. "He put my backpack in it when we flew here from Smallville."

"You don't say," Lois replied pleasantly as she returned her attention in Kara. She glanced back at Clark for a moment and then looked away while shaking her head. "Don't you have a magic pocket like that, too?" she asked Kara.

"Uh-uh."

"No? Well, that hardly seems fair," Lois commented pleasantly, leaning forward and planting a kiss on Kara's forehead. "You're at least as special as Mary Poppins - practically perfect in every way."

Lois silently smiled down at Kara and tightened her embrace as the little girl giggled. After a moment of silent peace, she turned back to Clark and quietly asked, "Clark, what happened in Niagara Falls the *first* time around - besides the obvious?"

Clark flicked his eyes over to Kara and back, before quietly answering, "I don't think it's a good idea to discuss that in range of her hearing."

Lois rolled her eyes and told him irritably, "Awfully convenient excuse there, Kent..." She was momentarily silent again before setting Kara down on her feet and taking her hand, as she told her, "It's getting cold up here. Let's go back inside." She glared over her shoulder at Clark and added, "And *you*... there's *plenty* you can tell me about all this without violating a 'G' rating, and you're going to start those explanations."

Once the trio stepped out of the elevators onto the editorial floor, the adults wasted no time collecting their laptops and sequestering themselves in the conference room. After a quick call to Polly regarding the Superman interview, Lois hooked both laptops to the video equipment and displayed her map of the EMP wave on the screen at one end of the room. Clark, meanwhile, got Kara started on her homework. Once he began narrating a short version of his life story, Lois quickly forgot her map. She surprised Clark by remaining silent for the several minutes it took for his story to unfold, and for him to finally describe his current domestic arrangement.

Lois gave him a hard look as she silently considered his story. Finally, she coldly said, "All these years... *lying* to me like that..."

"Lois, everything I've ever said to you was technically true," Clark protested.

"I forgot to feed my goldfish', 'I forgot my wallet', 'I have to get my dry-cleaning'", Lois quoted sarcastically.

"I intentionally left those things undone so I'd have an excuse *without* lying."

"You're parsing hairs," Lois said curtly. "The fact is that you weren't honest with me, which is the same as lying."

"Keepin' secrets is stupid," Kara said quietly.

"Ohhh, I'm *really* going to like her," Lois said dramatically.

Clark stared at Lois for a moment and then turned to Kara and said seriously, "Honey, we can't risk having Superman's enemies find out about our friends and family. We've talked about this."

"Did you really think I'd tell Superman's enemies?" Lois asked accusingly.

"*What?* No, of course not," Clark answered defensively as he returned his attention to Lois. "And I was planning on telling you. It's just... we can't get careless with the secret. It's got to be a strictly 'need-to-know' thing."

Lois nodded and looked away briefly. When she turned back to Clark, she asked "So tell me something. Who's been watching Kara while you've been doing your Superman thing overnight?"

"Oh, um, my mom. We're living with her in Smallville," Clark admitted. He quickly added, "But I still check on her frequently. After every rescue I-"

"You're living with your mom and commuting from *Smallville*?" Lois interrupted. "You've got to be kidding me."

"What's so surprising?" Clark objected. "It's a great place for a super kid to grow up and there's plenty of room to stretch her wings without worrying about what the neighbors might see. Besides, Smallville has a sense of community that you just can't find in the city. Everyone knows everybody else and we all look out for each other. Not like here, where some people hardly even know their neighbors' names."

"Geez, that's got to be, what? *Fifteen hundred* miles away?"

"Oh, no, it's not *that* far," Clark clarified with a smirk. "Actually, it's, um, just under twelve hundred miles."

Lois glared at him and said irritably, "Like that really makes a difference. You're not even in the same time zone."

"It only takes a few minutes to get here," Clark protested. "I get Kara on her bus at seven thirty - if she's on-time. That's eight thirty Eastern Time and I'm usually walking off the elevator into the bullpen by a quarter to nine... You wouldn't believe how *slow* a child with superspeed can be in the morning..."

Lois suppressed a smile at the familiar expression of parental frustration reflected from Clark's face. *Don't you dare try to make me smile when I'm angry with you*, she thought. She took a moment to school her expression and then asked, "Doesn't the school think it strange that your contact number is a Metropolis exchange? Or are you making your mom handle that, too?"

"Actually, my Metropolis number is an Internet phone number that forwards to my cell phone and that has a Kansas area code," Clark explained. "The school has the local number." Lois rolled her eyes and stared off into space away from him, her eyes unfocused as she absorbed the evening's revelations. "Lois?" he said softly.

Lois held up her hand in a stop gesture and shook her head. She was quiet for a moment. She sighed, and quietly said, "I really thought I knew you."

"You *do* know me."

"Do I? And which you would that be? The dork who's tripping over his own feet in the bullpen, or the hero who bench presses jumbo jets?" she asked icily.

"Both, kind of..." he began weakly.

"Who's the real you?" Lois demanded.

"Um, this is the real me," Clark insisted. "I really am a shy farm boy from Smallville, Kansas... I'm not clumsy or meek, though. I, um, kind of exaggerate the hayseed stereotype to stay under the radar here."

"I can't believe I was fooled by a pair of glasses..."

"I don't even bother with the glasses in Smallville and nobody there's ever figured it out," Clark commented.

"Are they that stupid?"

"It's not stupidity, Lois," Clark explained. "People see what they want to see and first impressions are hard to shake. Back home, everyone has a long standing impression of Clark Kent as Jonathan and Martha Kent's awkward son - which wasn't an act, by the way. Around here, everyone has an ingrained impression of Clark Kent as a clumsy dork. In both cases, that's what they continue to see and it never occurs to them that I could be anything other than that. The same thing can be applied in reverse to my Superman persona."

Lois huffed and again looked away. "That doesn't exactly make me feel better. I'm supposed to be this great journalist. I'm supposed to notice things like that."

"You are a great journalist, Lois," Clark informed her happily.

"Stop," Lois insisted. "Just stop. I'm getting information overload here. I need a couple minutes to absorb it all." Lois set her elbows on the table and dropped her head into her open palms, covering her face.

"S-Sorry," Clark offered.

"Hush."

The room was silent for a moment before Clark turned his attention to his daughter.

"How's your homework coming, sweetheart?"

"Okay."

"Are you still having trouble with your English assignments?" he asked.

"Mrs. Thomas didn't assign any English homework today," Kara protested.

"Well, then show me what you did in class," Clark prodded. Kara proceeded to pull out her notebook from her backpack and show it to her dad.

Lois splayed her fingers and spied on the pair through the opening. *This is so surreal, Lois concluded. Superman going over his daughter's school work with her... She's really going to need him, after all she's been through. He better not screw it up.* She continued to watch while Clark reviewed Kara's work.

Several minutes later, Clark glanced over at Lois, briefly locking eyes with her before she turned away. "They're back," he informed her. "I hear them in the lobby."

Lois raised her head and nodded, shifting her head to rest her chin in her right hand as she continued to watch them.

"Kara, honey, before the others get up here, there's something that I want to talk to you about, okay?" Clark said patiently. "I need you to promise me that you won't use your powers in the city unless I say it's okay first, okay?"

"But I can control it now," Kara whined.

"You're certainly doing better than I was at your age, but you still have a long way to go," Clark told her insistently. "But that's not the point. We can't take a chance on anyone finding out about us and we don't want to worry our friends like Richard and Jimmy."

"But, Dad-"

"Kara," Clark said sternly. "This is important."

"All right, I promise," Kara complied grumpily and her shoulders slumped in resignation.

"That's my girl," Clark said happily, reaching his arm around her to pull her into a hug, which she shrugged off. "Now let's see how you're doing with the rest of your homework..."

A couple minutes after Clark and Kara resumed work on her homework, Lois interrupted them. "Clark, we'd better get to work on *our* homework, too. We haven't done anything on the EMP story since the others left and they'll be back any second."

"Okay," Clark replied tentatively. "But since we've agreed that Polly's getting the Superman interview, am I still doing the EMP story? I mean, you can *take* the story. I can find something else."

"I know that look," Lois replied excitedly. "You've got something. What is it?"

"Nothing yet - I haven't had time to look into it," Clark explained. "But I have a *big* problem with Lex Luthor being free after what he did and getting out of prison the way he did. Something corrupt had to be going on there. For one thing, to overturn a conviction because a witness wasn't available to be called at the appeal? That's a very dangerous precedent - all a felon would have to do to get out of prison would be to kill the witnesses and file an appeal..."

"Second, Luthor is *incapable* of going straight. I'm sure he's up to something and it's not good, whatever it is. He thought nothing of attempting to murder *millions* in a maniacal scheme for wealth and power nine years ago and I saw that same obsession during the original time loop."

"We'll *both* work *both* stories," Lois decided. She shook her mouse to wake up her laptop and redisplay her map of Metropolis, which had colored circular bands radiating out from the ocean. Lois then turned to him and said seriously, "Let me show you what I was able to dig up today. This is a map of the EMP wave moving across the city. It's color coded according to the timestamps from when the power went out in that section," Lois informed him triumphantly. "The red zone is where power went out first. Unfortunately, there's not enough there to be definitive, yet, but I should have more from my source tomorrow."

"Lois, I hate to rain on your parade, but I don't think this is going to help us," Clark said apologetically.

"And why not?" Lois huffed.

"Well, that EMP wave was moving at the speed of light and would have crossed the city in about one ten-thousandth of a second," he explained. "I seriously doubt that there are *any* clocks in the city accurate enough to have measured its propagation over such a small area, even if they were synced to an atomic clock."

"But... this came from a source at the power plant," Lois protested. "He *swore* that it was accurate and even broke the rules to give it to me. And *you* went to the power plant for this stuff, too!"

"I was looking at it in terms of the severity of damage to their equipment," Clark explained. "That's the same angle that Star Labs is working on, by the way. In fact, I had a discussion with Doctor Faulkner on the matter late this afternoon, but they still have some work to do before we have anything to act on."

Lois sighed irritably and lowered her gaze to the table top. She was quiet for a moment and then added angrily, "Well, we've got no joy from the Washington idiots, either. They still think it was some kind of nuclear device and are chasing their tails looking for radiation. They've diverted half of the teams to Boston and Philadelphia because of the high background



radiation they found there..." She softened her tone and asked quietly, "Those were two of the nuked cities you were talking about earlier, weren't they?"

"Yes," Clark confirmed grimly. He paused a moment and then said thoughtfully, "Star Labs is our best bet, but we're going to have to wait for Faulkner's team to reprogram their equip-"

"We're back!" Jimmy interrupted as he swung the conference room door open. He walked through with Richard and Jason right behind him, all of them laden with takeout bags. "Who's hungry?"

"Me!" Jason chimed in.

"Me, too!" Kara echoed.

"*There's* our girl," Richard commented cheerfully. He turned to Clark and apologetically told him, "Clark, I really don't know what happened. One second she was right there with Jason-"

"I'm sorry," Kara said meekly.

"It's okay, *she's* okay. Please, don't worry about it," Clark assured Richard. He looked over at Kara and pointedly added, "I'm *sure* it won't happen again."

"Next time I'll have to tie myself to her," Richard joked. He set the takeout bags on the table and started pulling the items out.

"So didya' get to go flyin' with Superman?" Jason asked Kara excitedly.

"Uh-huh," Kara replied quietly.

"What was it like?" Jason asked eagerly.

"What was what like?"

"Flyin' with *Superman!*" Jason clarified impatiently as he lifted his arms above his head in an imitation simple imitation of the hero's flying pose. "I wanna' go flyin' with him, too. What was it like?"

*You'll probably find out soon enough*, Lois thought. "*Jason!*" she yelled. "Don't pester Kara about Superman. Find something else to talk about."

"But, Mommy-" Jason complained.

"I mean it!"

Richard smiled at Jason's overacted disappointment, while the little boy pouted and spun back and forth in his chair. "It's not the end of the world, kiddo," he told him firmly. "Besides... we've got *burritos!*" Jason looked up with a smile, and as Richard turned to get him some food, he finally noticed the display at the end of the room and pointed at it. "What have we got here?"

"A useless map from an unreliable source," Lois informed him. "Let's get the munchkins fed and we'll fill everyone in later." Richard nodded and he continued emptying the takeout bags while the rest of the group anxiously waited for the meal to begin. Lois covertly watched Richard as he split up the food. *He's a good man*, Lois thought somberly. *And still blissfully ignorant of how complicated our lives just got. How do I tell the only father that Jason's ever known that his son has another father? And who will I tell him it is?*

## Chapter 19 - An Evening at the Office

*Thursday, September 28, 2006 6:00PM EDT*

Clark tucked a napkin in the collar of Kara's yellow turtleneck and set a burrito on a paper plate in front of her as she eyed the meal skeptically. "Just try a bite," he encouraged her. She struggled with it and some of the filling dropped out the back end as she bit into it. Her eyes lit up as she chewed and she eagerly took a much larger second bite. "I think it's safe to say that she likes burritos," Clark commented mirthfully.

"Me, too!" Jason declared eagerly as he took another bite of his own half-eaten burrito.

As the group ate their meal, they were entertained by Clark's recollection of some of the culinary options offered in the places he'd traveled, provoking reactions of disbelief from his audience over such exotic menu choices such as fried scorpions. Lois was still attempting to reconcile the tableau before her with what she now knew and she was grateful that his animated tale gave her an excuse to closely observe him and Kara without seeming too obvious. However, Richard had noticed her rapt attention by the time the anecdotes and the meal ended.

As the group finished their dinner, Lois shifted her attention to Jason, who was picking at the tidbits on his plate that had dropped from his burritos. It was clear that Clark's tales of other cultures menus hadn't affected the children's appetites. They'd both finished two burritos and split a third, and afterwards meticulously gathered all the dropped morsels with their forks. "All done!" Jason declared as he slid out of his seat.

"Me, too," Kara echoed. She also slid out of her chair and followed Jason to the door.

"It amazes me how much some kids can pack away and still be thin as a rod," Richard observed. "Does she always eat like that?"

"Um, usually, I guess," Clark replied awkwardly. "She, um, she seems to have a healthy appetite."

"Jason ate just as much," Lois pointed out. She finally noticed the children's attempted escape and hollered, "*Hey!* Where do you two think you're going?"

"It's okay, Miss Lane. I can keep an eye on them," Jimmy offered. "I want to get some pictures of them anyway." Once Lois nodded her assent, Jimmy led Jason and Kara into the bullpen.

Richard turned and looked at the map still projected on the screen at the end of the room. "So back to what you were saying earlier..." Richard ventured cautiously. "This map is garbage? Did any of your sources pan out?"

"We still have Star Labs," Lois answered tentatively.

"What do they have?"

"Let me show you," Clark offered. He reached for the projector remote and his brow wrinkled in concentration. "How do you switch this to my laptop?"

*So Clark is the one with the good sources, Richard thought. Lois didn't really need to stay late after all. She just doesn't want to let go of the story. Why is she so competitive with him?*

"Here, give it to me," Lois commanded. She pressed a couple icons on the remote's touch screen and the screen across the room switched its display to Clark's laptop.

"Thanks," Clark told her. "Anyway, these two pictures are of microchips taken from some of the cell towers around town, at a million times magnification. See the pitting on the surface?"

"The EMP damage," Lois commented. "It looks like a lunar landscape..."

"...which isn't good," Clark added. "Each 'crater' is from a micro-explosion on the surface of the chip..."

"...which Star Labs is trying to measure to quantify the damage..."

"...but they were initially only grading these pictures on a scale of one to ten for severity. It did isolate it to Donner Heights in West Oaktown, but it's too subjective to really be meaningful..."

"...but that didn't stop the feds from trying to read between the lines..." Lois said irritably.

"...despite it being a *huge* leap of faith. If you look at these two pictures, both chips rated a nine on the initial scale-" Clark explained.

"They look pretty much the same to me," Richard interrupted. *Geez, how do they finish each others' sentences like that?*

"Well, um, they're not," Clark stated tentatively. "N-not really. If you, um, measure the area of damage against the total surface area of the chip, you get, um, ninety-four point seven six two zero percent for the one on the left, and, um, eighty-nine point five two one one percent on the right..."

"...and *that* kind of accuracy could lead us to the source of the EMP." Lois added triumphantly.

"Doctor Faulkner's team is pulling an all-nighter to do just that," Clark added. "They're reprogramming their optical scanning equipment to use the revised algorithms and if all goes well, they'll start rescanning the microchip images tomorrow morning..."

"So we're going to have to wait until they finish processing the data," Lois concluded. She turned to Clark and asked, "When do we follow up with Faulkner?"

"We?" Richard asked in surprise. "Perry gave the story to Clark, remember?" *He has a handle on everything*, Richard thought. *It's his story. Let it go so we can go home.*

"There's been a change of plans," Lois declared. "Polly will cover Superman. In fact, she should be here any minute for me to brief her... And Clark and I will work together on the EMP. Clark, when-"

"Lois, Perry was rather insistent that you cover the Superman story when I talked to him earlier," Richard interrupted. *Please drop it, Lois*, Richard thought. *Let Clark handle this.*

"Your uncle should be *delighted* that I was able to arrange for Polly to do it!" Lois hollered. "Superman was not *at all* happy about my editorial and he flat out refused to go on the record with me."

"Um, th-that sounds a bit harsh," Clark observed quietly. "I can't, um, believe that he m-meant it like that. It really doesn't sound like him."

Lois glared at Clark and said icily, "Well, I guess he was just *full* of surprises tonight then, wasn't he? Now for the third time, *when* do we follow up with Faulkner?"

"T-Tomorrow afternoon at two o'clock," Clark answered timidly.

"So in the meantime... Luthor?"

"Luthor," Clark confirmed as he nodded his head.

"You don't really think Lex Luthor had something to do with the EMP, do you?" Richard asked curiously. *Please say 'no'!*

Lois' eyes briefly widened in surprise at Richard's question and her eyes darted over to Clark, whose face also expressed surprise. After a moment's consideration, she returned her attention to Richard and quietly stated, "I wouldn't rule it out. But even if he wasn't involved in that, you can be sure that he's been up to nothing good."

*Thursday, September 28, 2006 7:00PM EDT*

Clark looked up from his laptop and through the glass wall into the bullpen, where Jason and Kara were playing under Jimmy's watchful supervision. Kara had talked Jason out of playing Godzilla. He was now playing Superman, with his arms out in front of him and running around making whooshing sound while Kara gave him tips on the proper form for arm movements while flying. Jason swooped in to rescue an unsuspecting Kara from an imaginary building on fire. Rescue complete, Kara wanted her turn to be the superhero, which sparked a little argument over gender, since Superman was obviously not a girl.

Clark suppressed a chuckle while he continued to watch the tableau and barely registered Lois' complaining. "How did he manage to keep such a low profile since he got out?" she demanded to know as she slammed down the phone. "None of my sources have *anything*."

"Well, did you ever consider that Superman might have been wrong about him?" Richard suggested. "Maybe it really *was* that other guy who did everything. Otis something, I think."

"Otis Fortney was a buffoon," Lois said harshly. "He was a high school dropout who could barely find his ass with both hands - strictly small-time, mostly doing B and E's until he hooked up with Luthor. After that he was probably little more than an errand boy and eventually a scapegoat for Luthor when his mad plan failed so miserably."

"Whoa, easy there, Lois," Richard backpedaled. "I'm just playing devil's advocate here."

"Well, next time, try doing some homework on the topic first," she snapped. "Anybody who spent two minutes researching Fortney would realize what an idiot the man was."

"Okay, okay, I get the point," Richard protested and he held up his hands in a surrender gesture. Lois just glared at him momentarily before returning to her laptop.

"Um, Richard?" Clark said tentatively. "Luthor, um, already had a long history with the courts years before Otis ever showed up. He'd... He'd swindled tens of thousands of people out of their life savings and made off with about a hundred million dollars. There was, um, a judgment against him for restitution, but the money was gone. He tried to blame it all on his accountant, Milton Meier, who, um, ended up dead before he could defend himself against the slander. I suspect that, um... that Luthor hid the money in some other accounts, which was probably what he used to buy up all that desert land before he tried to drop the west coast into the sea.

"If... if you closely scrutinize that attempted genocide with his pyramid scheme from years earlier, you'll find a lot of similarities. For instance, some poor scapegoat ending up dead before he could defend himself. Milton Meier after his first scheme went south and Otis Fortney the last time."

"Have you found anything a little more recent?" Lois asked. "My sources have come up dry."

"Well, Luthor's name popped up in some unexpected places in the legal records," Clark explained. "Unfortunately, the court records are sealed. All I've got are the docket entries. There's really not much more I can do here."

"There are ways to find out what's in those court records," Lois reminded him. "Once we're done here-"

"Polly's finally here," Richard interrupted.

Lois spun around and looked out into the bullpen where she spotted the slender older woman talking with Jimmy and the children before finally making her way to the conference room, pulling her wheeled laptop case behind her. As she walked through the door, Lois irritably pointed out, "I called you over an hour ago."

"I had to make myself beautiful," Polly said dramatically.

"This is a serious interview with a major public figure. *Not* a blind date," Lois argued.

"I think that you've mistaken me for Cat Grant," Polly said sharply. "I don't *do* blind dates... or my interview subjects, no matter how much my grandson adores him."

Lois glared at her while Richard suggested, "Well... Let's get started. We printed out his basic background information. The bio's there, too."

"Thank you, Richard," Polly told him sincerely. She put on her reading glasses and began to peruse the printouts.

Lois sighed and added, "You should be aware of some of the interview idiosyncrasies, too," Lois added irritably. "Don't be surprised if he's late - rescues come first. He's also been known to fly off without warning in the middle of an interview to answer a call for help. He's usually not gone long, though."

"I'll keep that in mind," Polly answered without looking up from her printouts.

Lois suddenly realized that the subject of their strategy session was sitting across from her. *How many times was he right there, as Clark, while I went on and on about Superman?* she thought. *While I went on and on about him! Oh, God, the things I said, right in front of him...* She felt her cheeks grow warm and lowered her head to hide the blush. She glanced over at Clark and said icily, "Clark, didn't you say that you were about done for the night?"

"Um, well, I probably won't make much more headway from the office," he admitted. "But the kids seem to be having such a good time together... I'd really hate to spoil their fun."

Lois rolled her eyes and sighed. *You would throw that back at me. Jerk.* "Well, then maybe you should check on them," Lois said irritably.

"Oh, um, okay."

Lois waited for Clark to join Jimmy and the children in the bullpen before finally returning her attention to Polly. "Oh, and he'll try to control the interview," Lois warned. "Don't let him get away with that."

Richard could only conclude that Lois was furious with Kent. They may have agreed to work together on the EMP and were still finishing each other's sentences, but he recognized the tinge of anger that accented her words when she talked to him. *What on Earth is going on there?* he wondered. *This can't still be about the EMP. She's never been that upset over a story before.* While Lois ran down her lists of do's and don'ts with Polly, he glanced into the bullpen at her old partner. Clark was squatting down in front of Jason and Kara, exaggerating his facial expressions as he spoke to them and both of the kids were giggling at whatever it was he was saying. *He sure knows how to keep those two entertained,* Richard observed. *If only it were that easy with Lois.*

He returned his attention to the women in the room as Lois continued with her rules of engagement for the Superman interview. "...And you can forget about the surprise questions," Lois declared. "One, you won't surprise him. In fact, not only is he probably eavesdropping on us, he's probably also scanned our research and knows *exactly* what you're going to ask. But, you can still ask the hard questions. You just won't surprise him, so don't make an ambush part of your interview strategy... And don't let him weasel out of the tough questions, either. He's really good at changing the subject when he doesn't want to answer the question."

*She's mad at Superman, too,* Richard thought. *Is there anyone she isn't mad at lately?*

"Lois, I'm no cub reporter and this is hardly my first celebrity interview," Polly reminded her. "I think we can skip the interview tactics and get right to the background material."

"I don't think you understand," Lois insisted. "You *have* to be tough with him."

"Don't worry about it, Lois. He's *not* going to walk all over me. But I'm not going to let him have it with both barrels either... Now, you wrote in your first article that he was the last of his kind?"

"Yeah, his world was destroyed when their sun went nova - the entire population was wiped out," Lois answered somberly. "He believed that he was the only survivor..."

Richard listened intently as Lois answered Polly's questions and continued to offer suggestions for the interview. *Well, it looks like Lois will get her wish, Richard thought. With Polly doing the interview, Superman won't be coming back into her life. Now, if only we could get our life together back on track - nothing's gone right between us all week.* Richard again looked out in the bullpen, where Clark was now seated with a child perched on each leg as he entertained them and Jimmy took pictures of the trio. *Where does Clark fit into all this and why is Lois so obsessed with him?* Richard wondered.

Clark was enjoying his time with the two children, entertaining them with children's tales from cultures from around the globe and beyond while he eavesdropped on Lois and Polly. He had a moment of concern when he heard Lois describe Krypton's end, but Kara simply snuggled into his embrace and he continued his storytelling. By the time he reached the story's end, Kara's sadness had been forgotten.

"Tell us another story, Mister Kent," Jason pleaded with him.

"Yeah, another story, Dad."

"Sounds like you have a fan club, Clark," Jimmy said mirthfully.

"This time, make it a story with monsters in it," Jason added. "Do you know any Godzilla stories?"

Clark chuckled at the two of them. "Monsters? Are you sure you want a scary story?" he teased.

"Uh-huh," Jason assured him.

Clark could hear that Lois and Polly were nearing the end of the briefing and knew that this stolen moment would have to come to an end. He looked over at the conference room and reluctantly told them, "It looks like they're almost done in the conference room, so we'll have to save the story for next time."

"Awww!" the children both complained.

Clark lifted them off his lap as he stood up, setting them both gently on the floor and suggesting, "Let's see what the others are up to, okay? I think they might be getting ready to go home."

"Before you go, let me get you a copy of these pictures," Jimmy insisted. "I have some good ones."

"Sure," Clark agreed as he continued guiding the kids to the conference room.

Richard looked up as Jason entered the room and ran over to him and began telling him about the amazing story that Mister Kent told them. Kara ran up behind him, quietly nodding in agreement to the description. Richard laughed lightly at his son's enthusiasm. *Well, I know who we're calling to babysit if I can ever talk Lois into an evening out,* he thought mirthfully.

While Richard listened attentively to Jason, Clark reclaimed his seat across from Lois and asked, "How's it coming along?"

"Just about done," Polly informed him. She turned back to Lois and asked, "One last thing

- kryptonite. Where did it come from, and how much of it is floating around?"

"The meteorites are radioactive pieces of his home world, so-" Lois began.

"Here they are," Jimmy said loudly as he entered the room waving a thumb drive in the air. "You can copy them all down to your laptop."

"Jimmy, what have you got there?" Richard asked curiously.

"Oh, it's some pictures of the kids that I took earlier," Jimmy answered cheerfully. "I got some great shots." He looked up and noticed that Clark's laptop was still displayed on the projector and suggested, "Since you're already hooked up, we can do a slide show."

"Jimmy..." Lois said irritably. "We're trying to finish up a briefing here, so we can all go home."

"I'd barely have time to get there before I'd have to turn around and come back," Polly commented. "I don't mind the distraction."

"Lois, you don't have to sit through the whole thing," Richard said cautiously. "Jimmy can start his slide show, and once you and Polly are done, we can leave if you want to." *Maybe there are some good ones of Jason for our family album*, Richard thought.

"Just give me a second," Jimmy said while he took the seat beside Clark and copied his pictures down to the laptop. A couple minutes later, he was ready to begin and asked eagerly, "Do you kids want to see this? Hey, guys? Jason. Kara. The slide show's starting!" The youngsters showed little enthusiasm in the slide show, but climbed into the seats to Richard's right and looked over at the screen. Richard chuckled at their reaction as he settled in to enjoy Jimmy's slide show.

Lois finally pulled herself away from the distraction and returned her attention to Polly. "Kryptonite comes from meteorites from Superman's home world, Krypton. It's radioactive and deadly to him. I have no idea how it ended up on Earth or how much of it is here," she explained.

"How deadly is it?" Polly asked. "Like cigarettes are deadly or like mustard gas?"

"Probably more like mustard gas, but you'll have to ask him," Lois answered thoughtfully. "I'd advise against putting those details in a story, however. Too many bad guys have a grudge to settle with him for us to be providing a detailed exposé on his Achilles heel."

"Point taken," Polly replied.

"Hey!" Jason interrupted. "Kara looks just like me!"

Richard's eyes shot wide as he scrutinized the two nearly identical smiling faces staring back from the screen. He couldn't dispute Jason's assessment as he compared the matching pairs of cerulean blue eyes, along with matching noses, mouths, and chins. They also both had a dimple in their left cheek as they smiled back at the camera. Richard softly moaned, "No." *It can't be!* he thought.

Jason hadn't caught the despair in Richard's voice and argued, "She does, too! Even our eyes match, and Grandma says that *nobody* has eyes the same kinda' blue as mine. But Kara's are the same."

"So are Dad's," Kara added quietly.

Richard turned from the screen and looked at Clark, who was staring over the glasses that had slipped down his nose with a guilty expression on his face. He quickly pushed his glasses back in place and looked down at his hands, suddenly nervous at the attention. Richard was forced to concede that not only was Clark's eye color an exact match with Jason and Kara's, both children also had the same cleft chin. *No, there's got to be another explanation*, Richard thought.

"Mommy, why does Kara look like me?" Jason asked insistently.

"Jason, don't worry about it," Lois replied sternly. Richard looked over at her and noticed that she also had a guilty expression on her face.

Jason was quiet for a moment then turned to Kara and asked in a loud whisper, "Why do you look like me?"

"We're related," Kara answered simply.

"We are?" Jason asked incredulously.

"Uh-huh," Kara answered. A wide smile spread across her face and she told him excitedly, "Um, your mom said that you're actually a Kent and I'm your big sister. Isn't that swell?"



## Chapter 20 - Secrets and Lies

*Thursday, September 28, 2006 7:45PM EDT*

A stunned silence fell over the room at Kara's declaration, with the adults all staring wide-eyed at the picture on the screen. As Richard scrutinized the picture, he unconsciously shook his head and thought, *No! She did not say that. Jason was premature. He's not Clark's. Kara must have misunderstood.*

"How can you be my sister?" Jason asked in confusion. "We don't have the same Mommy and Daddy."

"Because my dad is your real fath-"

"Kara," Clark interrupted sternly. "We shouldn't talk about that here." He rose from his seat and began walking around the table towards Kara.

"Why not?" Kara asked innocently. A guilty expression suddenly crossed her face and she asked quietly, "Was it supposed to be a secret?"

Clark sighed and awkwardly said, "Well, it's, um, it's kind of complicated." He came to a stop beside her chair, and lifted her up to his hip. "Let's you and I have a private chat and I'll try to explain it," he said pleasantly and he began walking toward the door.

"Am I in trouble?" Kara asked contritely.

"Oh, no, sweetheart," Clark assured her. "You didn't do anything wrong. I just didn't do a very good job explaining things."

"You can say that again," Lois muttered under her breath. Her words broke the others free of their stupor and they turned their gaze from the picture to her, except for Clark who ignored the comment and quickly walked out of the conference room. When Lois noticed everyone looking at her, her eyes grew wide and a nervous expression appeared on her face before she quietly said, "Oh, shit."

*That was practically an admission,* Richard realized. *She lied to me!* Aloud, he angrily hissed, "Lois! I think you owe me an explanation."

"Shut up, White!" Lois commanded angrily. "We're not discussing it here, and especially not in front of the kids."

*What difference will that make now?* Richard thought. He opened his mouth to voice his argument but was interrupted by Jason's distressful cry.

"Mommy! What did she mean?"

Lois sighed in frustration and momentarily glanced into the bullpen where Clark had Kara seated on top of his desk as he sat in front her, speaking quietly. She only allowed the briefest indulgence in the tableau before returning her attention to her son. "It's okay, Jason," she assured him. "There's nothing to worry about."

"But what did she mean?" he persisted. His eyes now shined with unshed tears.

Lois quickly walked over to him and took his hand. "C'mon. I think that maybe we need to have a private talk, too."

"Lois!" Richard shouted after her.

"Not now!" she snapped. She led Jason out of the room and over to Richard's office, leaving her fiancé and stunned colleagues silent in the room. All three of them returned their gaze to the screen and sat riveted to the picture that had sparked the revelation.

A few minutes later, Polly broke the silence as she said quietly, "Out of the mouths of babes..." She turned from the display and walked over to Clark's laptop and pulled out the video cable. Jimmy and Richard both spun around to look at her. "I think you've seen enough, Richard," Polly explained. "No need to upset you any further."

"It'll hardly make a difference now," Richard commented miserably.

"Jimmy, would you please take Clark's laptop back to him?" Polly suggested.

"Sure," Jimmy agreed quickly. He gathered up the laptop and cables, and quickly fled the discomfited atmosphere that had engulfed the room.

Polly turned back to Richard and asked sympathetically, "Are you all right?"

"You really need to ask?" Richard asked bitterly. At Polly's pointed look, he sighed heavily and said in a softer tone, "She lied to me."

"I know," Polly replied. "I've known that for a long time."

"You knew about this?" Richard snapped.

"Well, I didn't have signed confessions, but I had a pretty good idea," Polly answered patiently. "All of us old timers knew something *had* to have happened in Niagara Falls-

"Niagara Falls?" Richard questioned.

"Perry sent the two of them there under cover, posing as newlyweds. Things were off between them when they got back and it was only a few weeks later that Clark left to 'find himself'. None of us knew *what* had happened, but *something* clearly had. Then when Jason was born... Well, *nobody* believed for a second that he was premature-

"But Lois' sister had a ten pound baby," Richard protested.

"Doesn't matter. If Jason had really been *that* early, he'd have been wired up to a machine in NICU and you wouldn't even have been able to hold him for the first few weeks. But he was *fine*... Anyway, some of us did the math and noticed that it was about eight and a half months earlier that Lois had been in Niagara Falls with Clark, posing as his bride... Most of us came to the conclusion that Jason had to be Clark's, though there were a few with a more outlandish theory. It may seem kind of silly thinking back on it now, but some people actually thought he was Superman's love child. Fortunately, that theory died a well-deserved death once Jason's health issues became known."

"Someone should have told me," Richard insisted angrily.

"Norm Palmer tried," Polly reminded him. "So did Gil. And I don't believe for a second that Perry would have held his tongue. But you refused to hear it."

"I believed her," Richard admitted sadly. "Pretty stupid, huh?"

"No, Richard, you weren't stupid," Polly assured him. "You were in love and seeing what you wanted to see. I made the same mistake with my ex-husband, refusing to acknowledge any evidence that he was anything other than completely faithful. Until his mistress filed her paternity suit. That, I couldn't ignore. Once I'd finally opened my eyes, all the clues were right there for me to see, if I had only chosen to look. I suspect you'll discover that it's a similar situation for you."

"I... I don't even know what to think right now," Richard admitted.

"I know the feeling," Polly replied somberly. "If you want my advice... don't say or do *anything* about this for a couple days. Give the shock a chance to wear off and then take a long, hard look at your relationship. Try to separate fantasy from reality and figure out what you have left and if it's enough. In my case, it wasn't - I divorced the S.O.B." She quickly gathered her remaining notes and printouts and stuffed them into her bag. On her way out of the room, she paused in the doorway and turned back to face him. "Richard, please think about what I said," she counseled him. "And good luck, no matter what you decide to do about this." Richard nodded his acknowledgement and Polly continued back to her desk.

"It's really no different for you than it is for your friend, Mark," Lois told Jason patiently.

"He has two daddies - one who lives with him and his mother, and another daddy that lives somewhere else - Baltimore, I think... You've also got two daddies - Richard and Clark. Your Daddy Clark and I were together like mommies and daddies are before I met Richard. He's your *biological* father, like Mark's dad, Mister Evans, is his biological father."

"Are you and Daddy Clark divorced?" Jason asked sadly.

"Daddy Clark and I were never married, but it's kind of like that. And it's because Clark is your daddy that you look the way you do. You were created from a little piece of me and a little piece of him. But he had to go away to do something really, really important before you were born. We didn't know that you were on the way before he left, and I didn't have any way to get a hold of him to tell him until he got back a few days ago."

"But what about Daddy?" Jason whined.

"Your Daddy Richard is kind of like a step-father, like Mark's step-dad, Mister Doyle. After Daddy Clark left, I was all alone and then I met Richard. He didn't know about Daddy Clark, and when we found out that you were going to be born, he wanted to be your daddy, so we became a family. He's still your daddy. It's just that Clark is your daddy, too, and that means that Kara is your sister, and Clark's mom in Smallville is your grandma... Just think of all the extra presents you'll get at Christmas this year with our family that much bigger."

"Really?" Jason replied enthusiastically with a wide smile spreading across his face. "Are they gonna' come and live with us?"

"That's not quite how things work," Lois explained. "Mommies are only supposed to live with one daddy at a time. We can't all live under the same roof with both Daddy Clark and Daddy Richard. And Clark is Kara's only daddy, so she has to stay with him. But you'll still get to see a lot of your Daddy Clark and your sister, Kara, and your Grandma Kent, too, eventually."

"Oh," Jason said quietly. He was silent for a minute and his brow wrinkled in confusion. He looked up at his mother and asked quietly, "Am I gonna' grow up to be like Daddy Clark?"

"What do you mean?" Lois asked patiently.

"He's Superman," Jason elaborated. "Am I gonna' be strong like him someday?"

Lois' eyes grew wide and she asked apprehensively, "Where'd you hear that he was Superman?" She paused momentarily and then sternly added, "Did Kara say something to you?" She looked out into the bullpen and saw Kara shaking her head vigorously as she and Clark looked back at them. *Jesus, this is quickly spiraling out of control*, Lois thought.

"No, I just knew," Jason answered. "They were talking 'bout Superman on TV and showed his picture, and Daddy Clark was standing right there, and he looked the same."

"Superman doesn't wear glasses," Lois pointed out.

"He does when he's Daddy Clark," Jason argued emphatically.

Before Lois could respond, there was a knock at the door and Clark stepped through with Kara behind him. "Sounds like we have a very clever little boy here," Clark said cheerfully in a low voice.

"He figures it out in a day, but I was oblivious for years," Lois murmured irritably.

"Remember what I said about perceptions?" Clark reminded her. "He never saw me as the office dork, so the glasses and the ugly tweed suit didn't make a difference." He turned to Jason and squatted down in front of him, and said seriously in a voice pitched low, "Jason, most people don't know I'm Superman and you *must not* tell them. There are naughty people that Superman stopped from doing bad things who would cause a lot of problems for people I care about if they knew I was Superman. It has to stay a secret. Will you promise me not to tell

anyone?"

"I promise," Jason complied quickly.

"That means you can't tell anyone that Superman is your daddy, either," Lois added sternly. "And no exceptions. You don't tell your friends. You don't tell Uncle Ron or Aunt Lucy or your cousins. And you especially don't tell Daddy Richard. Do you understand?"

"I *know*," Jason whined irritably. "I already promised."

"Son, we don't mean to be cross," Clark said patiently. "It's just really important. People could get hurt if the wrong people found out about it."

"I said I wouldn't tell!" Jason complained.

"All right, good enough," Clark said. "I'm sorry if I upset you and I know this is all a bit of shock, but you know what? I'm very proud of you, Jason, and I'm glad you're my son."

Jason's expression turned apprehensive, and he asked quietly, "Is... is Daddy Richard gonna' go away now that you're back?"

"Jason, I'm not trying to take you away from your Daddy Richard," Clark assured him. "He seems to be a good man."

"But why's he so mad?" Jason pressed.

Lois smiled reassuringly at Jason and explained, "He's just surprised. I never told him about Daddy Clark. You know, he's going to want to talk to you about this, too. Would you like me to go get him?"

After his conversation with Polly, Richard sat quietly at the conference room table and reflected on his current situation, and the more he thought about it, the angrier he became. Not only was he shaken by the sudden recognition of a rival, but Lois' recent behavior now struck him as suspicious. He replayed his interactions with her since Clark's return and noted how distinctly different her behavior was now than it had been before. She'd been more distant, more confrontational, and completely unresponsive to his romantic overtures. *And to think that I was worried about her history with Superman*, Richard thought.

He also angrily recalled that Lois had originally planned on 'briefing' Clark at his place - it had only been his insistence that led them to work late at the office instead. But Lois clearly didn't have any material worth briefing him on - Clark had been a step ahead of her. *What exactly was she planning to do? Richard wondered. Would she really be so quick to cheat with Clark after he came back?*

His thoughts were interrupted by Lois' knock on the conference room door, which he answered with a cold stare. She ignored his attempted intimidation and harshly said, "You need to talk to Jason about all this."

"What, Clark couldn't handle him?" Richard replied sarcastically.

"Clark may be his biological father, but you're still his daddy and he needs a little reassurance that Daddy still loves him," Lois said angrily. "Or should I tell him I was wrong about that?"

Richard's expression immediately changed to one of embarrassment. *Jason is a victim here, too*, Richard thought. He sighed and irritably informed Lois, "Fine, I'll talk to him."

Lois stepped aside to let him pass through the door and as he walked by, she warned him, "And don't you *dare* fight with Clark over this in front of Jason."

He looked back at her, narrowing his eyes, and retorted sarcastically, "It's reassuring to know how highly you think of me, Lois... Were you expecting me to take a swing at him or something like that?"

"Better safe than sorry," Lois replied irritably as the two walked over to Richard's office, where Clark was silently standing outside the door and proudly looking in at the children.

As they approached his office, Richard heard Kara's excited voice through the open door as she spoke to Jason. "...and Uncle Tom and Aunt Sarah have a stable with horses, and we even get to ride them sometimes!" she told him.

"Do you think they'd let me ride, too?" Jason asked eagerly.

"Grandpa said we'd have to wait before we go riding again," Kara said disappointedly. "They've got termites, and Uncle Tom fell through the floor and broke his leg."

"Oh," Jason said unhappily.

"But he'll get better real soon!"

Clark suddenly seemed to notice Richard and Lois, and his proud disposition immediately transformed into an awkward demeanor as he quietly said to his daughter, "Um, Kara, honey, Richard needs to talk to Jason. Let's give them some privacy." Kara quickly joined Clark in the doorway and he led her back to his desk.

Richard finally walked into his office, where Jason was sitting on the couch kicking his legs and looking up at him nervously. "Hey, kiddo," Richard greeted him seriously. "You okay?"

"Uh-huh," Jason replied quietly.

Richard sat down beside him and commented, "I guess all this stuff is kind of confusing, huh?"

"I dunno."

"Well, this doesn't change *anything* between us," Richard assured him. "I still love you and your mom and we're all going to be all right. Okay?" Richard wrapped an arm around Jason and pulled him tight. *I really hope we'll be all right*, Richard thought.

Polly looked up from her notes when she noticed Clark and Kara rush past her to join Lois and Jason in Richard's office. She smiled thoughtfully at the pair and walked over to Jimmy's desk, where he was engrossed in organizing the collections of pictures on his PC. She leaned against his desk and asked with a chuckle, "So what do you think of that little soap opera over there?"

"What? Oh, that. Quite a surprise," Jimmy stated pensively. He looked over at the Richard's office as Lois jogged to the conference room and reemerged a moment later, following Richard back. "Richard doesn't look very happy."

"Of course not," Polly agreed. "He's just realized that he's been lied to, led on and used."

"Oh, um, we don't know the full story there," Jimmy protested. He looked over at Richard's office and spotted Clark leading his daughter back to his desk.

"You don't think she ever really intended to marry him, do you?" Polly asked harshly.

"Well, um, maybe not, but-"

"But nothing," Polly interrupted. "She led him on."

"I'd give her the benefit of the doubt," Jimmy objected.

"I wouldn't," Polly answered. "Look, it's not that I dislike her. I just think that Richard's really gotten a raw deal here."

"I'd rather not speculate on any of that," Jimmy insisted.

"Fair enough," Polly conceded, dropping the topic and falling silent as she turned to observe the group in Richard's office. A moment later, she urgently told Jimmy, "Listen... when Superman shows up later, try to get a good picture of me with him, okay? My grandson's

a huge fan and it would just make his day if I could give him a picture of his Nana with Superman... Let's see my ex try to top that."

"I'll do my best," Jimmy promised, smiling at the thought.

The discussion was interrupted by Lois shouting across the bullpen. "Clark!" she shouted. "Get your butt over here." She had just emerged from Richard's office and was pulling her coat on. Richard appeared behind her with a pained expression on his face as he guided Jason out of the office in front of him.

"Looks like they're getting ready to get out of here," Polly commented.

Clark had an anxious expression on his face as he and Kara walked over to the family group. Clark squatted down and gave Jason a friendly hug before turning him over to Kara. The little girl also gave her brother a hug, and snuck in a kiss on the cheek, which Jason quickly wiped off. The adults spoke briefly and then the Lane/White family marched off to the elevators. Clark had a sad expression on his face as he watched them go.

"It's going to be tough on Richard for awhile," Polly noted as she observed the tableau with Jimmy. "And I'm not sure it's much better for Clark."

Jimmy replied hopefully, "I'm sure everything will work out for the best." As they watched, Kara ran into the conference room and retrieved her book bag while Clark retrieved their coats from the closet.

"What's best isn't necessarily easy, and sometimes, it can hurt like hell," Polly whispered conspiratorially. She looked back up at Clark and Kara and smiled politely as the pair came over to them to say their good-byes.

*Thursday, September 28, 2006 9:20PM EDT*

Things were uncharacteristically awkward in the Lane/White household, while Richard read a bedtime story to Jason, and Lois sipped a glass of wine downstairs in the kitchen. The couple had hardly spoken since leaving the *Daily Planet*, the exception being Lois' insistent declaration that Richard should put Jason to bed, to help reassure him that Daddy was still Daddy. It was taking longer than usual this time, which Lois was grateful for. It gave her more time to prepare for the confrontation that she knew was coming. *This isn't how he was supposed to find out*, Lois thought. *And since I can't tell him the truth about Clark, I have no choice but to let him believe that I'd intentionally deceived him.*

The reprieve had also given her a chance to find out about Polly's Superman interview from Jimmy. She'd texted him with instructions to call her when it was over and he'd just called in his report: Superman left to return to Krypton in response to a distress call from his uncle, who was stranded there. However, he'd perished long before his signal ever reached Earth. The ship's hull had been breached and its atmosphere vented to space.

Most of the interview had focused on Superman's survey of Krypton after the unsuccessful rescue. He had described the beauty and majesty of Krypton and its people prior to the holocaust in great detail - virtually all of it wiped out in a few terrible moments so long ago. He then described the devastation of the planet, with nearly half of it blown away in huge chunks. He'd managed to identify the city of his birth on the hemisphere that remained, but it was an unrecognizable pile of scorched and shattered crystals.

The only structure left standing was a monument to a trio of Krypton's founding fathers, but that had been transformed into kryptonite during the disaster. He'd barely escaped the poison when he finally detected it and had returned to Earth with a severe case of kryptonite poisoning. *Clever*, Lois thought. *All of it technically true, but with so many details left out*

*that it puts it in a completely different context than what he described to me.*

"Did he say anything about me?" Lois asked.

"Polly asked why he didn't want you to do the interview," Jimmy revealed. "He said that you were working on something far more important and that he didn't want to distract you from it... He also said that he wants to go with a reporting pool from now on, instead of selecting a single reporter for his press contact. We're supposed to ask Perry if he can set that up for him."

"A pool?" Lois asked in disbelief. *He didn't say anything about that to me earlier.*

"Yeah, that's what he said," Jimmy confirmed. "I got some good shots of him, too, including a couple with the *Daily Planet* globe in the background. I hope Perry likes those."

"I'm sure they'll be great, Jimmy," Lois assured him. "Thanks for the update."

"No problem," Jimmy said cheerfully. "Let me know if you need anything else."

"I will. Bye."

Lois tossed her cell phone back in her purse and drained the rest of her wine. *Well, Perry has his Superman exclusive, Lois thought, as she reflected on the abridged explanation of Superman's absence. Though knowing Polly, she'll turn it into a sob story about him losing his uncle and being some kind of refugee... Perry's not going to be happy about the pool coverage, though.*

Her thoughts returned to her domestic situation and she looked up the stairs where Richard would soon reappear, demanding an explanation. *Clark's no longer the last son of Krypton, she reminded herself. Jesus, did my life ever get complicated all of a sudden.* Lois retrieved the bottle of Riesling from the refrigerator and poured herself another glass of wine, bringing both her glass and the bottle with her into the living room where she sat to wait for the inevitable confrontation.

Richard easily slipped into his familiar routine as he tucked Jason into bed. This time, he was barraged with a surprising number of questions about Superman before they finally began reading the bedtime stories. As they read the story together, Richard was almost able to forget that his life had been turned upside down just a couple hours earlier. He observed Jason's eyes grow heavy against the coming slumber, and when he finally fell asleep, Richard quietly let himself out of the room and went downstairs for the long overdue discussion with Lois.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs he discovered Lois curled up in a living room chair sipping wine. He noticed the half-empty bottle of Riesling on the coffee table and as he sat down on the couch next to her chair, he harshly asked, "Trying to get drunk?"

"Did you really expect me to have this conversation sober?" Lois answered irritably.

"You wouldn't need the wine if you had come clean about this six years ago," Richard retorted. "If you hadn't *lied* to me about Jason's paternity."

"I didn't realize he was Clark's when I found out I was pregnant, and afterwards... well, we were already together and it didn't seem that important," Lois said irritably. "The last six years haven't been about *him*. In fact, I hardly even thought about Clark until he got back this week."

"And just what *have* you been thinking about him?" Richard asked accusingly. "You were originally planning to 'brief' him at his place, though he obviously didn't need the briefing."

"I didn't know my material was junk," Lois protested.

"He's been a step ahead of you on that story all week," Richard reminded her. "What were you really planning with him?"

Lois sighed and said quietly, "He had a right to know about Jason-

"And I didn't?" Richard countered.

"Richard, it's not that simple-" she began.

"You should have told me," Richard interrupted angrily. "Instead, you tricked me into assuming responsibility."

"Now, hold it right there, White!" Lois snapped angrily, speaking in a loud whisper. "I never asked for the house or the ring! In fact, I specifically remember telling you that it *wasn't* necessary. *You're* the one who insisted on pressuring me into that arrangement."

"I never pressured you!"

"Oh, no? You bought this house, moved in, *and* decorated the nursery without my knowledge. And then you *ambush* me with it, begging me to accept your proposal and move in with you. You don't call that pressure?"

"I... I was just trying to do the right thing," Richard protested.

"You were trying to coerce me into *your version* of 'the right thing'," Lois corrected. She gestured to the room around them and added, "The point is, that *you're* the one who wanted all this, and you got what you wanted."

"You still should have told me the truth!" Richard insisted furiously.

"I already explained that I wasn't sure it was his when I was pregnant and what would it have mattered anyway?" Lois countered angrily. "Besides, you wouldn't have believed me if even I *had* told you. You'd come up with some rationalization for why I would say such a thing without ever considering that I might have really meant it. Just like you dismissed what I said when it came to naming Jason."

Richard flinched at the reference, which had been a persistent annoyance for him. Before Jason was born, they hadn't been able to agree on a name, with Lois completely unenthusiastic over his stated preference for naming the baby Richard Junior. He hadn't worried about it at the time, since he believed he'd have plenty of time to convince her before the baby came. However, she went into early labor before he got that chance. After she gave birth and caught up on some well-earned rest, Richard had filled out the paperwork for the baby, putting down the child's name as Richard Randolph White, Junior.

Unfortunately for him, it was hospital policy to confirm the information provided by boyfriends of unwed mothers before officially registering the paperwork with the Department of Health. When Lois saw the name he had put down, she went ballistic, ripping the form to shreds and kicking him out of the room. By the time he was allowed back in to see her, the baby's name had officially been registered as Jason Samuel Lane.

The incident had grated on Richard, who had always hoped to share his full name with a son when he began his family, and it infuriated him even further that Lois wouldn't even allow him to share his last name with their child. In the years since, he'd pestered her repeatedly to legally change their son's name and to at least make him a White, but she had stubbornly refused. Richard sighed as he recalled the matter and muttered unhappily, "Is this the *real* reason you didn't want him to be a junior?"

"That had nothing to do with Clark!" Lois shouted. "How many times had I told you that no child of mine would have a name that could be shortened to a synonym for part of the male anatomy? Did you remember that *at all* when you tried to sneak that name in after I gave birth? No. You didn't take me seriously, just like you don't take *anything* I say seriously if it doesn't fit nicely into your little fantasy vision of how you think things should be."

"Lois, I don't dismiss what you say like that," Richard protested irritably.



"Like hell you don't!" Lois yelled. "Just look at all the things we end up arguing about again and again and again. Because you keep nagging away at the same old things that I've said 'hell no' to dozens of times."

"Lois, I don't nag!"

"Do you have selective amnesia there?" Lois asked dramatically. She began ticking items off on her fingers, "Here's a little reminder, which I hope will be for the *last* time... I am *not* merging my finances with yours, giving you my power of attorney, or anything else that sacrifices my independence. We're *not* legally changing Jason's name, which Clark would *also* have to consent to, by the way. I'm *not* getting rid of the penthouse, which I've been subletting at a *profit*, and I'm *not* putting my name on the mortgage for this house, which I didn't get a say in choosing... And I'm *also not* giving up my career to become a stay-home mom, and I'm *not* having any more kids."

"You suddenly sound very determined to keep our lives segregated," Richard said bitterly.

"Suddenly?" Lois asked incredulously. "*Jesus*, did you not listen to what I just told you? I've been saying the same goddamn thing about all of this shit for the past five, six years, but it never occurred to you that I might actually have *meant* it. You assume that I said what I said because something's pissed me off or, as ludicrous as it sounds, that I'm 'afraid of change' and then you try to give me that stupid lecture on embracing it. Do you have any idea how aggravating that can be?"

"Well, I'm sorry I've made your life so miserable," Richard replied dramatically.

"Don't go putting words in my mouth, White," Lois scolded. "If we were really miserable, Jason and I would have left a long time ago. The good's outweighed the bad so far... But it's really a major drag when you go into control freak mode, or try imposing your fantasy on my reality. And by the way, that reality could very well include joint custody with Clark in the not too distant future."

"*What?*" Richard asked in outrage as the blood drained from his face. "He... he can't take Jason from us."

"Who said anything about taking? I said *'joint custody'*," Lois reminded him. "That's a pretty standard arrangement for parents that aren't together anymore - he'd get him every other weekend, alternate major holidays, and maybe a night during the week every once in a while... I don't really know for sure. I haven't actually discussed it with him yet."

"Perry never should have hired him back," Richard commented quietly.

"Careful there, White. You're coming awfully close to violating your uncle's first law of journalism: 'The paper comes first', which is closely followed by 'leave the personal bullshit at home'. Besides, Perry's known all along that Jason was Clark's and it didn't make the slightest difference in his hiring decision."

"Perry *knew*?" Richard asked incredulously.

"He confronted me about it right after Jason was born, before I even got out of the hospital," Lois explained. "The point is, that given how often Clark's been on the front page since he's been back, nobody could reasonably argue that hiring him back wasn't in the best interest of the paper. So don't even *think* about trying to push him out."

"I wasn't suggesting that!" Richard objected.

"Better keep it that way," Lois warned.

"How come I'm suddenly the villain here?" Richard complained. "*I'm* the one who's been lied to for the past six years."

"I already explained that and I'm *done* talking about it!" Lois snapped. She turned on her heel, and marched out the patio doors, grabbing her purse from the coffee table on the way and pulling out her cigarettes and lighter.

Richard stared after her. *Well, that went well*, Richard thought sarcastically. *How does she always end up turning these things around on me and making them my fault?*

Richard was distracted from his ruminations by Jason's distressed voice behind him.

"Daddy?" he said tearfully. "Why are you and Mommy yelling again? Is it because of me?"

"Oh, no, Jason, it's not because of you," Richard assured him soothingly, wrapping him in a tight hug and picking him up. "Mommy and I didn't mean to upset you and we're all done yelling." He began carrying the tyke back upstairs and suggested, "How about another story before you go back to sleep?"

As Richard carried Jason up the stairs, he noticed Lois out on the patio, looking in with a guilty expression on her face. She exhaled a thick cloud of smoke and turned away from the house. Richard rolled his eyes and wondered, *Is she really that complicated, or have I really been that oblivious? Clark seems to have figured her out. Why can't I?*

## Chapter 21 - An Unnatural Death

*Friday, September 29, 2006 8:30AM EDT*

Richard did his best to mask his displeasure as he walked into the *Daily Planet* building with his fiancée. They'd had an uneasy truce since the previous night's argument and an awkward silence had settled in between them. She was suddenly unfamiliar to him as he struggled to separate which of his perceptions of her were real and which were merely projections of his desires. It had consumed his thoughts through the sleepless night, spent alone in their bed while Lois slept on the living room couch.

He was having similar difficulty reconciling the newly revealed truth about Jason, though the little boy wasn't nearly as complicated as his mother. Richard still considered him his son and Jason had simply accepted that he now had two daddies: Daddy and Daddy Clark - Richard was still Daddy. *But for how long?* Richard wondered. *The way things have been going with Lois...* She had effectively vetoed nearly every aspiration he had for their relationship, stubbornly keeping their lives segregated for the most part. He was particularly bothered by her insistence that she wasn't having any more kids. It didn't reconcile well with his dreams of having a large family. *Doesn't look like very much will end up the way I thought it would be*, he thought.

The ding of the elevator announced their floor and the couple walked to their respective desks. Richard noticed the din of the bullpen suddenly diminished and felt his colleagues' eyes upon him. *So the gossip has already started*, he concluded. He kept his head down as he walked to his office, looking up only briefly as he passed Kent's desk, which was conveniently empty.

He was barely through the door of his office when Perry entered the room behind him. "Rough night?" his uncle asked gruffly.

"Whatever gives you that idea?" Richard asked sarcastically.

"Despite what people around here may think, I haven't lost my reporter's instincts," Perry answered. He sat down in Richard's guest chair, propping one foot against the desk as he continued, "We're going to need to put some new ground rules in place to keep your little situation here from getting out of hand."

"What situation would that be?" Richard inquired irritably.

"The one where you're living with Kent's ex-girlfriend and son," Perry explained. "Everyone needs to play nice in the office and we can't have any undue influence from management." At Richard's shocked expression, Perry explained, "Polly told me all about last night's shocker after she sent in the Superman interview - the one that *your girlfriend* was supposed to do."

"You already knew," Richard accused. "You knew, and you *still* hired him."

"Contrary to what you're suggesting, my first responsibility is to this paper, *not* your ego," Perry said harshly. "You've read our own paper this week, haven't you? Kent's one of the best in the business. I had a fiduciary responsibility to the *Planet* to make sure his byline didn't end up in the *Star*."

"But you *knew*," Richard persisted angrily.

"Richard, *how many times* did I ask you to get Jason's DNA tested? I even offered to pay for it myself," Perry reminded him. "If you had proof that he wasn't yours, you might actually have listened if someone told you he was Kent's. It's all ancient history now, though, and we still have a paper to run and for now at least, that'll mean Lois working with Kent."

"*What?*" Richard complained. "You can't! *Uncle Perry!*"

"Don't get your nose out of joint over it. The paper comes first," Perry said emphatically. "I *strongly* suggest you take a look in the archives at some of the stories those two wrote together before he left six years ago. It was some of the best work we've ever published... Richard, I am *not* going to be hamstrung by splitting up our best team just to pacify your insecurities, especially not when the *Planet* is facing such stiff competition. In fact, they'll probably end up assigned together permanently."

Richard angrily sank back in his chair. "Whose side are you on?" he demanded.

"The paper's... Richard, we leave the personal bullshit at home," Perry told him firmly. He softened his tone and gently said, "Son, I know this is rough on you, but there's simply no way around it. We'll talk about the situation over lunch, if you like. In the meantime, we still have jobs to do, so I'll explain the new ground rules and let you get to work."

Richard conceded his uncle's point and after a brief look out into the bullpen where Lois was studying her laptop screen, he reluctantly nodded his acquiescence, signaling his uncle to begin explaining the new rules.

*Friday, September 29, 2006 9:10AM EDT*

Lois absently scrolled through the results of her Nexus search on Lex Luthor. She already knew there was nothing recent there, but it hid her inactivity while she waited for Clark to show up. *Clark Kent*, she thought. *Farm boy, extraordinaire*. Her night had been as sleepless as Richard's, while she attempted to reconcile the previous evening's revelations with what she thought she knew of her mild-mannered colleague. The office dork that tripped over his own feet was also the superhero that bench pressed jumbo jets. *And he's the father of my child*, Lois reminded herself. *Why couldn't he have explained everything to me after he rolled back time? And if I had known that Jason was his...*

*Jason*. She'd spent much of the sleepless night wondering if her son would develop his father's abilities. *Clark told me that most of his powers didn't come until after puberty*, Lois recalled. *What if that happens with Jason? It won't take much for Richard to put two and two together after that... And what if the neighbors notice something? If Clark thought the tabloids were bad before...*

She pulled herself from her ruminations and looked over to the lobby just as the ding announced the elevator and the doors opened to reveal Clark standing there. He stepped off the elevator with his laptop in one hand and briefcase in the other, offering his usual goofy grin, and nodding his head in acknowledgment, his encumbered hands preventing him from waving. Lois observed him as he awkwardly made his way down the aisle, panicking some of their coworkers by his near misses as he stumbled by. Lois rolled her eyes and shook her head. *I can't believe that I was I fooled by that.*

He had just booted up his laptop when Lois finally approached and leaned against his desk, with her arms crossed over her chest. "You're late," she said sternly.

"Oh, I was, um, talking to Henderson about the Luthor case," he answered nervously.

"Did you get anything from him?" she demanded.

"Maybe," he answered enigmatically. "I won't know for a little while yet if it'll pan out, but I, um, have another 'source' that was able to peruse those sealed court records and that provided some interesting clues."

"Such as?"

"Well, Luthor was represented at his appeal by Forrester and Morrison, out of New York. Really high-priced criminal defense attorneys..."

"They've represented some of the InterGang big wigs, too. Not much of a surprise there..." Lois commented.

"...except who paid their fees," Clark informed her. "It was all billed to Gertrude Vanderworth."

"Vanderworth? The ship builders?"

"The same. Harold's eighty-seven year old widow, actually. Two weeks after Luthor got out of prison, he married her, and three months after that, she was conveniently dead and he had a new will that left him *everything*. The will was signed the day she died, with a couple of convicted felons as witnesses."

"And nobody thought that was suspicious?"

"The family might have, but the M.E.'s investigator declared it a natural death," Clark suggested. "The family's fighting the will in probate court. Their original is notarized and witnessed by a couple paralegals from their lawyer's office... There's also a bitter fight over her remains. Luthor wants her cremated..."

"...to destroy the evidence."

"Probably, but he hasn't succeeded yet," Clark told her. "The family lawyers have been throwing in every delaying tactic in the book to give them time to discredit the new will and win the right to bury her. In the meantime, she's been on ice in the morgue, by court order, until the dispute is resolved. The family's not thrilled with that either. They would have preferred burying her within twenty-four hours of her death."

"Something's fishy there," Lois concluded.

"No doubt. I spoke to Bill Henderson this morning and he's calling in the cops that were at the scene of death for me to talk to and after that, I'm going to try to talk to someone with the medical examiner's office downtown."

"I'm going with you," Lois declared. "And we'll also need to talk to the Vanderworths and maybe the D.A."

"We should probably add the warden of Stryker's Island to the list, too," Clark suggested. "Maybe there are some clues in the visitor lists. And don't forget, we still have the meeting with Faulkner at two o'clock."

"Hold on," Lois told him. She walked briskly back to her desk and returned with a notepad and pen, pulling her chair behind her. Once back at Clark's desk, she sat down and starting writing on her notepad. "Let's get our strategy mapped out here."

"Um, before we get started, I have a request from Henderson," Clark informed her.

"What does he want?"

"One, he wants us to be careful. Luthor is dangerous, even to Superman."

"No argument there."

"Second, we also need to be careful with any evidence we come across so that we don't give Luthor's lawyers an excuse to throw it out. Bill was adamant that everything had to be by the book. Luthor was slippery enough without the high-priced lawyers."

"Got it. Now let's get star-"

"Kent! Lane! My office, now!" Perry bellowed.

"What now?" Lois mumbled irritably. She reluctantly rose from her seat and headed to Perry office with Clark following closely behind her.

Perry had mixed feelings on the tableau he observed in the bullpen. Seeing Lois huddled over on a story with Kent probably meant that he'd soon have a blockbuster from them, just

like the old days. However, he knew the same scene caused his nephew heartache and although he hadn't articulated it, he knew that Richard feared losing his fiancée to her old partner. *The paper comes first*, Perry reminded himself. *And if their relationship isn't strong enough to weather the return of an ex after all these years, then it really was never meant to be.* After another moment's hesitation, he stepped in the doorway of his office and called for them.

He leaned back in his chair while he waited for Lois and Clark to join him in his office. As expected, the complaint was off Lois' lips nearly as soon as she passed through the door. "Perry, we were in the middle of a something huge!" she told him irritably.

Perry threw the morning paper down in front of her and asked, "As huge as this story?" The headline read "Superman Explains Disappearance" by Polly Harper and included a quarter-page picture of Superman centered underneath it, standing with his arms akimbo on the roof of the *Daily Planet* with their signature art deco globe in the background. "That was supposed to be your story!" *Though I have to admit, Harper did a pretty good job*, he thought. *And she took Olsen with her for the pictures, something that Lois would never even consider.*

"He wouldn't talk to me!" Lois complained. "We're lucky he'd talk to Polly."

"What the *hell* did you say to him Lois?" Perry asked harshly. "Polly tells me he wants to set up a reporting pool for coverage."

"Polly's the one who interviewed him. Ask her about the pool coverage," Lois replied irritably.

Perry harrumphed and leaned back in his chair. After a moment, he continued, "Richard said that you two are investigating Lex Luthor. Didn't I tell you just yesterday that he was yesterday's news?"

"Not anymore he's not," Lois protested. "He married and murdered a wealthy widow, and nearly got away with it..."

"...but he, um, he left some clues behind," Clark added. "T-The woman's body is still on ice at the morgue, and, um, the Vanderworth family's fighting the new will-"

"Vanderworth?" Perry asked, his interest piqued. "As in shipping magnate Vanderworth?"

"Those are the guys," Lois confirmed. "Luthor's trying to swindle them out of their inheritance..."

"...and the estate's worth about twelve billion," Clark revealed.

"Later this morning, we're meeting with the cops who were present at the scene after Gertrude's death was called in, and then with the M.E. after that," Lois added.

"And we'll, um, try to speak with the Vanderworth family and the D.A. this afternoon," Clark continued.

*Oh, this is good*, Perry thought... *Tragedy, sex and Superman, all rolled up into the same story.* He was silent for a moment, struggling to suppress a smile from appearing on his face. Finally, he told them, "You've got two days to come up with something I can print..."

"Thanks, Chief," Lois replied.

"Just one more thing..."

"Yeah?" Lois asked.

Perry's voice turned serious and he sternly told them, "I don't want you two and Richard turning my bullpen into a facsimile of the Jerry Springer show with your little love triangle-"

"Chief!" Lois protested. "That's not what's-"

"Leave the personal bullshit at home!" Perry shouted.

"-happening," Lois continued.

"I don't care what you say is or isn't happening, just keep it out of my bullpen! Now, get out there, and get me that story!" Perry commanded. Lois rolled her eyes and huffed, storming out of the office.

"It won't be a problem, Chief," Clark assured him before he also left Perry's office and rejoined Lois for their investigation.

*Friday, September 29, 2006 10:45AM EDT*

Tom Wallace had been the director of investigations for the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner for four years, brought in with the new CME, Doctor Wilbur Fontaine, to help reform the institution. He was rightly proud of the improvements they'd introduced in a relatively short period of time. M.E. response to a reported death had dropped from an average of fourteen hours to less than an hour, and the expertise and credibility of their medico-legal investigator corps had been sustained in the courts and, even more incredibly, they had won the respect of Metropolis' finest, which wasn't readily given.

However, on this morning, he was disconcerted by an enigmatic call from a reporter, suggesting an investigator's collaboration with the decedent's new husband to conceal a homicide. Normally, he would have dismissed the call and sworn to the integrity of his investigator. However, Kent had pointed out a couple of oddities with the case that raised some red flags and Bill Henderson had vouched for him. After a discussion with Doctor Fontaine, he'd called the reporter back and agreed to meet with him and his partner. His phone rang, interrupting his ruminations, and he quickly answered it. "Wallace," he said. It was the receptionist, informing him of the reporters' arrival. "Okay, I'll be right down."

A few minutes later, both reporters were seated in his office. "So, you had questions on the Vanderworth case," Tom began. He turned to the side and pulled up the case on his PC.

"That's right, Doctor Wallace," Lois replied.

"It's *Tom*. I'm not an M.D.," Tom explained. "I'm a physician's assistant, like the rest of our investigator corps. Now, the Vanderworth case?"

"Well, um, a few things seemed a little strange when we looked into it," Clark told him.

"And you're challenging the conclusions of our investigator," Tom finished for him.

"Well, some things seemed a little off, not the least of which is your investigator's sudden disappearance shortly after Gertrude's death certificate was filed," Lois answered as she reviewed her notes. "Heidi Fineman, was it?"

"Yes, that was her," Tom confirmed.

"We spoke to the police officers who were at the scene and they said that she was extremely jittery, which was unusual since it was an almost pristine scene of death," Lois informed him. "She had barely walked in the room before declaring it a natural death and couldn't get out of there fast enough."

"They also said that they'd seen her a few days before at a gruesome death in Suicide Slum and she was steady as a rock," Clark added.

"Well, yes, the circumstances are unusual," Tom agreed. "Though, aside from concerns for Heidi's welfare, that's not a big consideration. However, the cause of death raises a huge red flag. It's recorded as CPA - that's cardiopulmonary arrest. Heidi would never have written that down for *any* death. It's not a cause, but rather a *result* of the cause. It's a novice mistake that an intern from one of the hospitals might make, but not one that we'd make. Not even from a trainee. And when the hospitals do it, we send the death certificate right back to them for correction."

"I don't understand. What's the problem with... 'CPA' was it?" Lois asked.

"What stopped her heart?" Tom asked rhetorically. "Stroke? Heart attack? Epileptic seizure? Those things are *causes* of death and cardiopulmonary arrest is just a consequence of that. It's not the cause. In any case, the fact that CPA was recorded as the C.O.D. by an experienced investigator like Heidi is odd, to say the least."

"Maybe she knew of something that she couldn't talk about and was trying to leave us a clue, in case something happened," Clark suggested.

"Maybe," Tom conceded.

"Well, that's not the only thing about this case that's suspicious," Lois stated passionately. "Did you know that after Gertrude's death, her new husband filed a will that left him everything, allegedly signed the day of her death? He married this woman, *thirty-eight years* his senior, at the beginning of summer, right after he got out of prison. Three months later, she's dead and he inherits *everything*. Oh, and he was the only witness to her death. Quite convenient."

"He was the only witness?" Tom asked with interest. "An unattended death is *automatically* suspicious. We usually have a better safe than sorry policy under such circumstances and send the body in for an autopsy."

"Unattended death?" Lois inquired, her brow wrinkling in confusion.

"There wasn't a physician in attendance at the time of death," Tom explained. "As you said, her husband was the only witness."

"Something else the police told us stinks to high heaven," Lois added. "Apparently, he dropped his wedding ring in a whiskey glass next to her bed and high-tailed it out of there with his mistress immediately after his beloved wife passed away," Lois added. "Does that still sound like a natural death to you?"

"Technically, Kowalski was the maid," Clark clarified. "But Officer Muncie said family members thought they were spending suspicious amounts of time together."

Tom wrote a couple lines of text on a notepad and asked, "Am I correct in assuming that Patrick Muncie was the officer at the scene?"

"Um, yes, along with Vince Reynolds," Clark confirmed.

"I'm going to need to talk to them. All of this is highly unusual," Tom commented. "Unfortunately, Heidi isn't around to answer any questions." He sighed tiredly, pulling off his glasses and pinching the bridge of his nose. A moment later, he declared, "I'm going to re-open this case for a complete reassessment. The C.O.D. alone warrants that and if the other things you've told me are true-

"You don't trust us?" Lois asked dramatically.

"It's not a question of trust," Tom assured them. "We try to base our work on verifiable methods, rather than subjective opinions, though some of that is unavoidable. As I said, there is already enough that's verifiably unusual to merit reopening the case, specifically, the C.O.D. If I'm unable to resolve the matter to my satisfaction, I'll recommend an autopsy."

"Better do it soon, before her grieving husband wins his court case to have the body cremated," Lois commented.

"The body's already here, by court order while they fight it out, and it's not going *anywhere* until our review is done," Tom assured him. "I'll send a note to the judge to let her know what's going on."

"Do things like this happen often around here?" Lois asked.

"No, this is an aberration," Tom answered. "I'm not going to pretend that we don't make



the occasional mistake, but our goal here isn't perfection. It's perfect honesty. When we do make a mistake, we own up to it, try to fix it, and we try not to make the same mistake twice. And if we find that there are flaws in our methods that allowed a mistake to happen, then we'll make procedural changes to prevent it from happening again in the future."

"We appreciate your candor," Clark told him. "Sounds like you have a very conscientious organization here."

"We do, but if you really want to understand how the process is supposed to work around here, you should spend a few hours with one of our investigators," Tom suggested.

"I'll take a rain check on that," Lois said quickly.

"Maybe after we've finished with the Vanderworth matter," Clark added. "It sounds like it could be an interesting experience."

"Oh, it is," Tom assured him enthusiastically. "However, it can be unsettling for some people to see human remains in the states that we find them in." He was silent for a moment and then asked seriously, "Are you going to give me time to reassess this case before you go to press?"

"Depends on how long it takes, but we probably won't publish this before Sunday," Lois told him. "Given Luthor's legal resources and our legal department's paranoia, we're going to have to work a little harder to make sure that all of our information is rock solid before we go to press."

"We should have the review finished by then, if all goes well," Tom told them. "Now, if there aren't any more questions, it looks like I have quite a bit of work ahead of me."

"Thank you for your time," Clark told him, rising from his chair and extending his hand.

"Thank you," Lois echoed politely and their host escorted them back out to the first floor lobby.

Once they left the medical examiner's building, Lois turned to Clark and asked, "So how do you think he killed Gertrude? Some kind of poison? Arsenic, maybe?"

"That's not very original for someone with such a superiority complex," Clark commented. "However he killed her, it's clear that he and his men blackmailed or extorted Heidi Fineman into recording it as a natural death. Perhaps they kidnapped her daughter, since she's missing, too. And once they had the death certificate they needed, they got rid of them both."

Lois felt her body unconsciously shudder at the idea. "The kid was just nine," Lois reminded him.

"Not much older than Kara and Jason," Clark confirmed. "Luthor's a monster."

"That's an understatement," Lois agreed. She looked at her watch and said, "Well, our next appointment is with Harold Junior at one, which gives us almost two hours to kill. If you want, I can pull Jason out of school and you can take that closer look you wanted. Believe me, I want to know what to expect there as much as you do. But, we'll still need to get him lunch and have him back to school before our one o'clock."

"That shouldn't be a problem, but I'll have to swing by the farm for the father crystal first," Clark told her.

"Father crystal?"

"It's kind of the brain of the crystal computer at the Fortress," Clark explained. "I took it with me when I went to get Kara and never got around to returning it to the Fortress when we got back."

"Whatever," Lois muttered. "How long will that take?"

"Just a few minutes, usually," he told her. "But if Mom spots me, she'll want to chat for a little bit... She also wants to meet her grandson, by the way."

"So... did *you* tell her about Jason or did Kara blurt it out?" Lois teased.

"Lois, Kara really felt bad about spilling the beans like that last night," Clark told her.

"Anyway, um, I'm the one who broke the news to her. Once Kara was asleep, I got quite the lecture about putting the cart before the horse."

Lois snorted and repeated mirthfully, "Putting the cart before the horse?"

"Well, *yeah*. And it's not funny," Clark protested. "She was very upset with me."

"Oh, the big hero, cowed by a silvered-haired old lady's tongue lashing," Lois teased, giggling at his discomfort as they walked to her car. A few minutes later, she reigned in her laughter and told him, "Do you know where Donner Elementary is?"

"Corner of Reeves Avenue and Kidder Lane in North Bridge," Clark answered.

"Superman put out a fire there in May of ninety-eight."

"Do you always talk about yourself in third person?" Lois asked.

"Easier to keep track of things that way and less risky if somebody's listening in," Clark explained.

Lois rolled her eyes. "Fine, whatever. Anyway, go get your crystal thingy, or whatever it is, meet me at the school, and we'll take Jason to your Fortress for his examination." Clark rewarded her with a wide, goofy grin and disappeared in a flash on his way to Smallville, leaving Lois rolling her eyes. *What a dork*, Lois thought. *Make that 'Super-dork' - I almost forget he was Superman for a moment there... Geez, working with him all morning seemed so... so normal*. She chuckled quietly to herself and climbed in her Audi for the short trip to Jason's school.

## Chapter 22 - Lunchtime Reality

*Friday, September 29, 2006 11:15AM EDT*

Richard grew continually more irritable all morning as the lingering memory of the previous night's shocking revelation and the argument with Lois that followed took over his thoughts. The knowledge that his fiancée was currently out with her former lover, supposedly working on a story, worsened his mood even more. He was also aggravated by Perry's new rules, which prevented him from talking to anyone about Lois or Clark's assignments. He'd been short tempered with his staff all morning and his lingering personal worries made it impossible for him to fully concentrate on the breaking news from the Middle East.

His distraction had not escaped Perry's attention and after a couple of choice comments from the veteran newsman failed to jar him from his preoccupation, he decided that a longer discussion would be required to get his nephew straightened out. Once Perry was confident that the day's stories were on track under George Taylor's direction, he dragged Richard out of the office for an early lunch.

A short time later, the two men were seated at a comfortable table in the back corner at *Adrian's Ristorante*, perusing the menu. They finally gave the waiter their order and once he had departed, Perry gruffly told his nephew, "Well, you've obviously been thinking about it all morning, so out with it. You're getting this off your chest."

"There's not much to say," Richard protested. He kept his head down, studying the pattern in the tablecloth as he added, "I believed her. I *trusted* her. I was wrong and now she's running around town with her ex."

"With her *partner*," Perry corrected. "You know they're working a story."

"There was no story there!" Richard protested. "Lois even complained about it last night."

"Richard, you of all people should know that it takes more than a Nexus search to research a story," Perry admonished him. "They've sniffed out something astounding that will probably have the papers flying off the shelves in a day or two."

"Am I supposed to be happy that she's out there with *him*?" Richard complained.

Perry harrumphed and asked sarcastically, "Are you just going to pout about that all day? Give a solid twenty, thirty percent at the office?"

Richard looked up in surprise at his uncle's comment. "Uncle Perry, I'm not-" he began to argue.

"Yes, you are," Perry interrupted authoritatively. "Now, talk. What's the problem here, other than the obvious?"

Richard sighed and was silent for a moment before he quietly said, "I don't even recognize her these past few days. She's different. Angry. Argumentative. Aggressive. Competitive. She's-"

"She's Mad Dog Lane," Perry finished for him. "*That's* our old Lois - the *real* Lois that we thought we'd lost."

"Well, it's not someone that *I've* ever seen before," Richard complained.

Perry took a sip from his water glass and was silent in thought for a moment while he reflected on Lois' transformation. Finally, he quietly said, "Richard, she wasn't herself when you first met her. I don't know if it was because Superman was missing and presumed dead, or because Kent took off like he did, or if it was the hormones, but she was a shadow of her former self. She was as distraught as I've ever known her to be and the fire that drove her was gone. She was... I don't know, lost?"

"Then you came along and I think you helped her pull herself together enough to be

functional again. But she was still on autopilot most of the time - she didn't have the fight in her any more. Oh, she was still one of our best reporters, but not the 'Mad Dog Lane' that we remembered. At least, not until a few days ago."

"When Kent came back," Richard spat.

"Superman's back now, too," Perry reminded him.

"Well, she doesn't seem very interested in that," Richard observed irritably. "I suspect it was probably more her doing than his that Polly got that story. Probably so she could work with Kent."

"Well, *I* might have a problem with that because I told her to do the Superman story, but why's that a problem for *you*?" Perry inquired. "Richard, some of her best work was in collaboration with Kent back in the day and teaming up with him again is a good career move for her. Besides, what happened between them happened a long time ago - before you even met her. And her behavior since he's been back has hardly been suspicious - she's been an absolute *bitch* to him, almost enough to merit a reprimand. As for Kent, he's one of the biggest prudes I've ever met. No way anything untoward is going to happen, even if Lois was willing, which she clearly *isn't*... So, do you want to tell me why this *really* has you so shook up?"

Richard was silent, his brow wrinkled pensively and he opened and closed his mouth several times as he gathered his thoughts. Finally, he admitted, "It's like I don't even know her, Uncle Perry. Almost six years together and I don't know her any better than the day we met. Actually, I wonder if I know her *at all*... And although she's always been a mystery to me, *Clark* can read her like a book." Richard fell silent again and looked away, eyes unfocused as he considered the situation.

"Keep going," Perry encouraged him gently.

Richard sighed in frustration and added, "Well, for one thing, I thought that Lois and her dad would never voluntarily start a conversation with each other, no matter what. But Clark knew better. Just one look at her and he *knew* that she'd talked to her father about the EMP. And once they started talking, they were finishing each other's sentences! They were doing that again last night before Kara let the cat out of the bag about Jason. Clark had no contact with her for six years, but the moment he gets back, he seems to know her better than I do."

"He was her best friend and knew her better than anyone," Perry revealed. "From his perspective, she hasn't changed."

"Well, she sure as hell has changed from *my* perspective!" Richard hissed. "And then to find out that Jason is *his*! If that wasn't bad enough, last night she summarily rejected just about *everything* I've been trying to make happen in our relationship. She said that she's been saying 'hell no' to all of it for years, but I wasn't listening."

"You weren't," Perry declared.

"Jesus, have I really been that oblivious?" Richard complained.

"Do you really want me to answer that?" Perry replied.

Richard rolled his eyes, but held his tongue when the server returned with their salads, grateful for the reprieve. Richard bit into a forkful of salad and after swallowing, he muttered sadly, "None of this seems very fair."

"C'est la vie," Perry said simply, and he also dug into his salad.

The two men continued their discussion as they ate their salads and Richard eventually shared the details of his argument with Lois the previous night and their perpetual disagreements. Perry ended up shaking his head in disbelief. "Richard, Lois is one of the most driven career women I've ever known, even when she seemed to be running on auto-pilot," he

declared authoritatively. "You didn't *really* think she was going to give it all up and stay home with the kiddies, did you?" Richard's checks flushed red and he looked away to hide the blush. Perry added incredulously, "Jesus, you really *have* had your head buried in the sand."

"Apparently," Richard said grumpily. "Oh, and by the way, there aren't going to be any more 'kiddies'. She made it perfectly clear last night that she had no intention of *ever* having any more kids. Jason will be her only one."

"And that bothers you."

Richard sighed irritably and said, "I wanted a bigger family. It's just one more thing that's not going to be the way I thought it would be."

"Well, have you got your head out of the sand now?" Perry asked.

"I think it would impossible not to, given recent events," Richard said quietly.

"Really?" Perry replied skeptically. "Then prove it. Look at everything you've just described to me. You're allegedly a journalist... Read the clues. Tell me what it reveals about Lois' frame of mind."

Richard looked over at his uncle with an irritated expression and glared at him for a moment. He then relaxed his expression and declared, "She doesn't like changing the status quo."

Perry snorted and said, "Try again."

"She's resistant to change?"

Perry just shook his head and muttered, "So much for having pulled your head out of the sand."

"*What?*" Richard complained.

Perry was silent for a moment and then gently told him, "Polly was right... You've been seeing what you wanted to see, and what you saw was 'happily ever after'. You never allowed yourself to notice that Lois saw things differently. Richard, the truth of the matter is that she never believed that your relationship would last and she's planned for things accordingly."

"That's bullshit, Uncle Perry," Richard argued. "We've been happy."

"Ignorant bliss on your part," Perry countered. "Look at what you just told me. She insists on keeping her finances and property strictly segregated and not only does she insist on keeping the penthouse, she won't sublet it for more than a monthly term. That's not maintaining the status quo or being resistant to change - that's an *escape plan*. When she decides it's time to go, all she has to do is to pack up Jason and their things and move back into the penthouse. You don't even get to fight with her over Jason, because you're not his legal father."

"Now I *know* you're wrong!" Richard declared triumphantly. "I *am* Jason's legal father. I filled out the paperwork myself after he was born."

"Was that the same paperwork Lois ripped to shreds when she saw that you'd tried to name the kid Ricky Junior?"

The blood drained from Richard face. "Uncle Perry, she... she wouldn't. She'd never take him from me like that."

"Well, no, not like that," Perry conceded. "She's not that cold-hearted, even at her worst. But I know for a fact that when she redid Jason's paperwork, she left the father's name *blank*... I don't know if things are bad enough between the two of you for her to leave yet, but no matter what happens, she holds all the cards."

"You know, if you're trying to cheer me up, you're doing a lousy job," Richard commented sadly.

"Who said anything about cheering you up?" Perry asked dramatically. "I'm just trying to

help you pull your head out of your ass so I can get some work out of you."

"Oh, thanks for that clarification," Richard replied sarcastically. "It makes me feel *so* much better."

"Hey, that's what family's for," Perry replied mirthfully.

Richard was stopped from replying to Perry's statement by their server returning with their entrées. He gestured to the server and said, "Looks like the food's here." Perry granted him the reprieve and an awkward silence descended around them as they dug into their meals.

Richard picked at his meal as he considered what Perry had said to him and again replayed his interactions with Lois over the past week, along with those he had observed between her and Clark. Finally, Richard broke the silence with a sigh and morosely commented, "It sure didn't take Clark long to ruin my life."

"He had nothing to do with this," Perry said curtly. "Oh, I'll concede that he's the catalyst that's forced you to face the truth *now*. But the problems between you and Lois have been there all along and would have eventually come to the surface whether Kent came back or not. You just never saw it - you didn't want to."

"I don't want to lose her," Richard said quietly.

"Well, you'll have a better chance at keeping her if you can pull your head out of the sand and face reality," Perry declared. "Think about it, Richard... You may have been oblivious, but she *wasn't*. She knew that you'd created a fantasy version of your relationship which would eventually disintegrate and there was no way she going to commit to *that*. Maybe that was part of the reason she refused to set a date... Maybe if she sees that you're finally seeing the *reality* of your relationship, you'll have a slim chance to find something solid to build a relationship on."

"Do you think that Lois and I can work this out?" Richard asked hopefully.

"Son, this is one of those rare times where my opinion doesn't count," Perry told him. "It's entirely up to you and Lois. You have a chance - just be careful not to set yourself up with unrealistic expectations again, because there are no guarantees. In fact, once you take an objective look at the *real* Lois Lane, *you* might be the one who wants out."

"I find that hard to believe," Richard said somberly. After a moment, he asked quietly, "What if we can't find any common ground?"

"Then you move on," Perry declared. "Live and learn. And next time, try to keep your eyes open."

"Easy for you to say," Richard commented.

"Richard, you're obviously still in shock over all this and you're going to need time to absorb it all and to think things through - time without Lois around, preferably," Perry informed him. "Get out of the house. Maybe visit your folks in Chicago for the weekend. The time away might help put everything in perspective."

"I think I'd worry that she'd be gone when I got back," Richard admitted.

"Well, if that's a real possibility, then it's already too late and you might as well just throw in the towel and be done with it," Perry told him. "Besides, you're not going to accomplish anything by hovering over her. You'll just end up pissing her off. It'd be far better for you to get out of each others' hair for a few days. Maybe then you'd both manage to clear your heads and be able to think clearly about the situation."

Richard sighed and said irritably, "I'll think about it."

"Well, whatever you do, you had better have it out of your system by the time you show up for work Monday morning," Perry declared. "I can't have you shouting at the staff like you

were this morning." Perry smiled mischievously and whispered conspiratorially, "That's *my* job."

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry, just figure out how to pull your head out of your ass and leave the personal bullshit at home," Perry demanded. He paused for a moment and added gently, "Well, since I'm obviously not going to get any work out of you this afternoon, go ahead and get an early start on the weekend. Just be sure you're ready to get to work when you show up Monday morning."

"I'll try. Thanks, Uncle Perry." Richard told him sincerely. "And I'm sorry for the trouble."

Perry waived off the apology as he signaled for the waiter. "Don't worry about it," he said casually. "Well, I've got to get back to the office and *you* have some serious soul searching to do. Please try to make good use of the time."

After lunch, Richard took a walk through Centennial Park to try to clear his mind. It was a warm fall day and he shared the park with many other denizens of Metropolis that afternoon. The crowd included mothers with young children, retirees strolling or lounging on the park benches, and a handful of college age couples engaged in amorous displays, oblivious to the attention that they were generating. Richard ignored them all and continued down the path with his head down. *Who is the real Lois Lane?* he wondered. *Is it the woman I thought I knew, or this person that Uncle Perry raves about and who seems so angry at everyone? Or is there something else here that I don't see?*

Lois' declarations from the night before were also troubling for him and stymied the plans he had for their life together. *No more kids*, he recalled. Jason was his son in every way that mattered and he adored the little boy, but something primal inside of him wanted a child that was biologically his - something that didn't seem to be in the cards with Lois. *Could she still be talked into another baby?* Richard wondered. *Or would I just be proving her point that I don't listen when she says 'Hell no'?*

He imagined how their future would be, with no children except Jason and living a life together that was mostly segregated. *We'd be more like roommates than a married couple, assuming that we ever actually make it to the altar...* He had to acknowledge his uncle's point that Lois didn't seem to consider their relationship as her 'happily ever after', which made her assertion that she'd been pressured into accepting the house and ring all the more disturbing. *Sometimes I hate it when he's right*, Richard thought. *Is he right about Clark, too?*

By all accounts, Lois had made no attempt to contact the shy man after he left and her anger with him was unmistakable. However, there was still chemistry between the two of them that was impossible to miss. They were completely in sync with each other to the point that they were able to complete each others' sentences. He also recalled that despite her obvious anger with Clark, she hadn't been able to take her eyes off him during their dinner in the conference room the previous night. *Was their previous romantic involvement really just a fling, or was there more to it than that?* Richard wondered. *Had she been in love with him? Was she still in love with him, but too stubborn to admit it?*

Richard sat down on an empty park bench and dropped his head into his palms as he continued his contemplation. *Lois and I really need to talk*, he decided. *No arguing this time, but a good, honest talk to find out what each of us really wants from our relationship and where we stand with each other. Hopefully, this hasn't completely been an illusion and there*

*will still be enough there for a future together.*



## Chapter 23 - Burglarized

*Friday, September 29, 2006 11:15AM EDT*

Lois was in an unusually contemplative mood as Superman brought them north to his Fortress. It was their first real flight together since the truth came out - she wasn't counting the return trip the previous evening. She'd barely been able to think straight after Kara showed up, floating in front of them like that. As she observed the man now, she didn't see the other-worldly hero. She saw Clark Kent and clearly recognized the distinct mannerisms that defined him. She thought back on all her previous interactions with the hero and realized that the clues had always been there for her to see if she had bothered to look. *Who else but Clark would have quoted travel safety statistics at the first rescue like that*, Lois thought. *That should have tipped me off right there...*

She struggled to reconcile the contradictions in the man as they zoomed through the sky. The god-like being in a cape who was the Earth's guardian and greatest hero was also a farm boy from Kansas, holding down an ordinary job, paying his taxes and living an ordinary life that now included the new responsibilities as a single father to a young girl. *And he's also the father of my child*, Lois thought. Her gaze fell to their son, held tightly against his father's chest, facing away from him and holding out his arms as he pretended that he was the one doing the flying.

Lois was pulled from her ruminations by the sound of Superman's voice as he spoke to their son. "We need to bank to the right now. Are you ready, Jason?" he asked enthusiastically.

"Uh-huh!" Jason answered eagerly. He shifted his weight, leaning to the right and Superman made the gradual turn in sync with his son's movements. Jason was smiling widely and declared eagerly, "This is *so* cool!"

Lois couldn't suppress her smile at Jason's contagious excitement and she ducked her head against her former lover to hide it. *We'll, looks like Clark's winning Jason over*, she thought.

She felt the vibration of Superman's laugh tickle her cheek and peeked up to observe him looking down at Jason. "You really think so?" he teased. "Are you sure you're not bored by all this flying nonsense?" Jason shook his head vigorously while trying to keep his arms stretched out in good flying form. Superman laughed again and said mirthfully, "Well, if you're sure."

*He's good with kids*, Lois observed. *And I bet he'll turn out to be a pretty good father. Maybe even as good as Richard's been. Oh, God... Richard.* She felt the guilt wash over her as she recalled their argument from the previous evening and how they'd carefully avoided each other that morning. *This is tearing him apart and he deserves so much better*, she thought. *But what can I do about it now?*

She was so wrapped up in her thoughts that she hadn't noticed their approach to the Fortress until they began the descent through the roof. She looked up at their surroundings and was startled when Superman suddenly tensed up and his jovial demeanor transformed into a grim countenance. She was also surprised to discover that the chamber was cold, dark and lifeless, rather than warm palatial manor that she had expected. Superman gently set them down and walked stiffly over to a console of some sort that was twenty feet in front of them. *Something's wrong*, Lois realized. "Clark?" she said tentatively.

"We've had some uninvited guests," he informed her gravely. "They've taken all of the crystals."

"It's cold here," Jason complained.

Superman's head snapped up and he turned to his guests, gently bathing them in his heat

vision. A moment later, he turned his vision to the crystal walls, roasting them with his gaze and endued them with enough heat to radiate the room with warmth and chase away the cold. "Sorry about that," he apologized. "That should keep the place warm until I can get everything back on-line."

"Thanks. What's this about crystals?" Lois asked.

"They held the sum knowledge of Krypton, including that of every major civilization spanning twenty-eight galaxies."

Lois silently nodded her head and grasped her son's hand a little tighter, keeping him close to her as she followed Superman to the console. She watched him remove the father crystal from his cape's secret pocket and insert it in the slot at the top of the console. Jor-El's image immediately appeared in the face of the crystal wall opposite him. "Kal-El, my son. Why have the crystals been removed from the matrix?" he asked.

"They were taken by an unknown party while I was away," Superman explained. "Can they be regenerated?"

"Of course," Jor-El assured him. "However it will take approximately ninety minutes to complete, given that current power reserves are at a dangerously low level. We do not even have sufficient power to maintain the usual hologram right now."

"Any idea who might have taken your crystals?" Lois asked apprehensively.

"So you've brought the woman back with you," Jor-El observed. "Shall I expect the old quarrel again as well?"

"What quarrel? Clark?"

"It's a long story - I'll tell you about it later," Superman replied. "As for the robbery - whoever it was left their fingerprints behind. Henderson should be able to help me positively identify them, though I have a pretty short list of likely suspects. There's only been one person who's ever found the Fortress, though it was during those lost eight days before the space-time fold. The second time around, I intercepted him near Ottawa, the day after he escaped from prison."

"Lex Luthor," Lois declared. Superman nodded to confirm her guess. *Jesus, the damage that monster could do with Kryptonian technology*, Lois thought.

"Is this the same Lex Luthor who collaborated with General Zod?" Jor-El asked.

"Yes, that's the one," Clark told him.

"He broke in here before and you didn't do anything about the lax security?" Lois asked incredulously.

"I, um, thought I did," Superman admitted sheepishly. "We programmed the Fortress to control the local weather after that, and there was a perpetual blizzard around the place to discourage visitors. Besides, Luthor was in prison."

"But he had already escaped once before, remember?" Lois reminded him. "And that blizzard wouldn't stop him if he figured out it was here and was determined to raid the place, which is apparently what happened. Which leads to my next question: How, exactly, did he figure out that this place was here? It's in the middle of nowhere. Not exactly someplace that you'd stumble across accidentally."

"I haven't a clue," Superman confessed. "I thought this was too remote for anyone to stumble across."

Lois rolled her eyes and declared, "You're going to need some *serious* upgrades to the security here... Clark, this isn't Smallville - you can't just leave everything wide open."

"The woman has a valid point," Jor-El agreed. "Unfortunately, we lack sufficient energy

to seal the openings. Kal-El, perhaps the personal affects this criminal had with him when you intercepted him would reveal his methods. Please describe what you found."

Jason watched wide-eyed at the magic man in the wall who was talking to his parents. He understood that somebody had taken Superman's stuff and they were really upset about that. After a few minutes of hearing the adults argue, he was bored and wanted to explore the castle. However, his mother wouldn't release her grip on his hand. "Jason, sit still," she scolded him. He reluctantly complied and sat cross-legged on the floor in front of his mother and listened to his mommy and Daddy Clark talk with the magic man.

"Well, he was traveling with his girlfriend, Eve Teschmacher," Superman told Jor-El.

"*Late* girlfriend," Lois corrected. "She died in prison under suspicious circumstances. It wouldn't surprise me if Luthor arranged for that."

"Oh... Well, anyway, the balloon that they were traveling in came down just outside Ottawa. I had scanned their possessions when I approached and besides basic provisions such as food and clothing, all they had was a short wave radio, a propane heater, and some home-made electronic device that was built from a shoebox and some rather worn parts. He smashed the box once I made my presence known."

"And that didn't strike you as suspicious?" Lois asked incredulously.

"I thought it was out of anger or frustration. He was throwing quite the tantrum," Superman clarified. "Besides, it clearly wasn't explosive and there was no sign of kryptonite. I assumed it was some sort of navigational equipment."

"Did you get a close enough look at the device to recreate its design?" Jor-El inquired.

"I think so," Kal-El confirmed. He turned back to the console as a flat rectangular panel rose and tipped back to a slight incline. Superman squeezed his eyes closed and his brow momentarily wrinkled in concentration. Once he opened his eyes, he pulled a stylus from the side of the panel and quickly began writing on the surface.

While Superman documented the device he remembered, Jason was growing tired of sitting still on the floor. He stood up, eyeing the doorways for possible exploration routes. Lois noticed his movement and grabbed his arm just as he was about to run off to the nearest walkway. "I asked you to sit still," she reminded him.

"But, it's *boring*," Jason whined.

"Well, you're just going to have to be patient for a little while longer," Lois insisted. "A bad man robbed your Daddy Clark, and we need to figure out a few things about that."

Lois' words immediately provoked a surprised reaction from Jor-El and his gaze turned sharply to Jason. A blue light suddenly flickered through the Fortress, coalescing into an aura around the tyke as a razor-thin line of bright light quickly descended from head to toe.

"Hey!" Lois complained. "What the hell are you doing?"

"There's no need for concern, madam. The scan was harmless," Jor-El told her gently. "What is this boy's name?"

"Jason," Lois told him apprehensively. "He's our son."

"Yes, I can see that now," Jor-El told her. He then turned to the little boy and replied majestically, "Welcome, Jason. I am Jor-El... I am your *grandfather*... This... Fortress of Solitude... is all that remains of your Kryptonian heritage - the once great civilization of the planet, Krypton. You are heir to a proud legacy and it is my hope that in the coming years we'll have the opportunity to get to know each other as I teach you our culture and heritage, just as I did with your father before you."

"You're my grandpa?" Jason asked incredulously. "Do you live in the wall?"

Jor-El smiled kindly at Jason and said, "Yes, I am your grandfather. That surprises me as well. I never believed that this would be possible... As for the image you see before you - this isn't really me and I don't live in the wall. I died thousands of years ago when our planet, Krypton, was destroyed. What you see before you is a recreation of who I was, based on my memories and personality, which were copied into the crystals moments before I died."

"You're a ghost?" Jason said excitedly. "Cool!"

"Jason, he's not really a ghost," Superman tried to explain. "It's like a computer program."

"Oh," Jason replied unhappily.

"We can try to explain it to him later," Lois suggested.

Jor-El turned his gaze to Superman and said quietly, "Kal-El, my son... I tried to anticipate every possible circumstance when I prepared the crystals for your journey to Earth. But you've now presented me with the one scenario that I did *not* anticipate - you've brought me a grandson... Please understand that when I was researching Earth as a potential home for you, I relied on the work of our xenobiologists, all of whom had concluded that the human genome was not compatible with our own. They declared that the physical resemblance was a merely a coincidental result of convergent evolution. My faith in their judgment influenced the guidance I offered you and your intended bride when you first brought her here. Given the obvious inaccuracy of their genetic analysis, that guidance was ill-advised. I believe I owe you both an apology."

Jor-El's words had pushed Lois beyond the limits of her patience and curiosity, and she had demanded an immediate explanation of what had truly happened during their previous visit. Superman reluctantly complied, editing his narration to accommodate their young son's presence, though Lois was easily able to fill in the blanks. She was astonished by Jor-El's ultimatum, and that Superman would have so quickly agreed to it. As the truth sank in, she simply stared at Superman wide-eyed, with her mouth agape.

"Lois?" Superman gently prodded.

She shook herself from her stupor and turned to Jor-El, furiously asking him, "*You stripped him of his powers?* What was that, some kind of punishment for deigning to be with a lowly human?"

"Lois, I volunteered," Superman assured her calmly. "I chose you over the powers. It wasn't a difficult decision."

"By why did you have to choose?" Lois demanded to know. "Couldn't you have found some way to balance a life together with the powers?"

"It would have been a moot point," Clark replied sadly. "I still would have had to leave to get Kara a couple weeks later."

"Was your mission successful?" Jor-El interrupted. "She is obviously not with you."

"She's in school," Lois informed him curtly before returning her attention to Superman. "Clark, it's the principle of the thing. Cops balance duty with family. So do fireman, ambulance drivers, doctors, soldiers... Well, with the possible exception of my father... Why couldn't you have done the same?"

"The requirement was necessary for his psychological well-being," Jor-El declared.

"What the hell do you mean by that?" Lois complained angrily.

"To understand the necessity, you need to understand the nature of the Kryptonian marriage bond," Jor-El explained. "It's not just emotional, as it is with humans. There is also a

psychic dependency involved."

"Psychic? You mean like reading each other's minds?" Lois asked incredulously.

"No, the bond is empathic, not telepathic," Jor-El clarified. "The love the two individuals feel for each other is amplified through that empathic bond. They sense each other's emotions - even each other's presence in many cases - and they become dependent on their shared bond. It is incorruptible in life and if it is severed by the death of one of the parties, the grief is inconsolable."

"That doesn't explain why you wanted to strip him of his powers," Lois insisted, and she asked sarcastically, "Was a lowly human too unworthy to be bound so closely with a Kryptonian?"

"My concern was the difference in life expectancies," Jor-El informed her. "Humans rarely live even a single century, but Kal-El doesn't age as you do. Barring some unforeseen tragedy, he could expect a lifespan measured in millennia. However, the medical technology contained within the crystals would only have extended your lifespan by several centuries, which means he would have spent most of his long life in agony, mourning your death.

"On Krypton, the anguish of such a loss was tempered by the somewhat weaker bonds that the surviving party had established with other family members, most notably, with their children. Since I did not believe that it was possible for the two of you to have children, I addressed the problem by matching his life expectancy to yours. Stripping him of his powers meant that the two of you would grow old *together*. In all probability, you would also have died together. He would not have been forced to endure countless millennia of inconsolable grief."

"But Jason proves that children *are* possible," Lois reminded him. "And Clark is now also a father to Kara."

"The possibility of children means that Kal-El will have someone to help him overcome his grief when death finally claims you," Jor-El explained. "I will thus no longer require that Kal-El sacrifice his powers to grant my approval for your union. However, that permission is only granted on the condition that you produce more children. I'd recommend at least two more."

"Excuse me?" Lois asked in disbelief. "You think we need your permission and that you can dictate terms for our reproduction choices? Who the hell do you think you are?"

"I am a parent looking after the best interest of my family, just as I assume you look after the best interest of yours," Jor-El retorted.

"Jason's still a child," Lois snapped. "Clark and I are adults fully capable of making our own decisions."

"Would you not insist on offering your child counsel, even after he is grown, in order to prevent him from making a terrible mistake that could cause him great misery?"

"Oh, so I'm a 'terrible mistake' now?" Lois seethed.

"Lois! Father! Please, stop this," Superman interrupted. "We don't have time for this argument right now." He paused for a moment before turning to Jor-El and sadly telling him, "Father, things are complicated between us right now. I was gone a long time."

"Few worthwhile relationships are ever simple, Kal-El" Jor-El said knowingly. "However, you are quite right. We have more important matters to discuss and we can begin with my analysis of the criminal's device. It appears to be a crude sensor for tracking the alpha shift in the N-S boundary that is created in the wake of your flight."

"The N-S boundary?" Lois questioned. *Please, no more techno-babble*, she thought. *My*

*head still hurts from all the stuff you threw at me last night.*

"That's the normal space-subspace boundary," Superman explained. At her confused look, he elaborated, "Normal space is the three-dimensional universe that you've always known. Subspace is another dimension that runs parallel to normal space, but everything is kind of squished together - kind of like a mirror in a carnival funhouse."

"And that is relevant *because?*" Lois asked impatiently.

"Kal-El's aura influences subspace during flight, leaving a ripple through the fabric of space," Jor-El informed her. "It's imperceptible in normal space, but this criminal, Lex Luthor, has apparently devised a method to track Kal-El's flight from the distortion in the subspace layer."

"How badly are we exposed?" Lois pressed. "Does this leave a trail behind for Luthor to track you wherever you go? You know - the breadcrumb thing? And if Luthor could track you here six years ago, what's to stop him from being able to track you *now* - all the way back to Smallville?"

Superman's eyes grew wide in shock and the color drained from his face. "Oh, my God."

"The alpha shift in the N-S boundary only occurs during flight," Jor-El informed them. "However, the ripple persists for several hours afterwards."

"I guess it'd be kind of like the contrails from a jet that passes overhead," Superman concluded after a moment of thought. "You can still see them long after the jet's passed by and it gives you a rough idea where it went, but not the precise coordinates... Father, can anything be done to conceal my wake?"

"There are some alternatives available that would nullify the disruption wave," Jor-El informed them. "However, we lack sufficient energy to implement any of the available designs."

"Can Luthor track him if he's running on the ground?" Lois inquired.

"No, not with this design," Jor-El assured her. "However, his movements could be detected by other readily available technologies, such as radar."

"I wouldn't be able to move as fast on the ground, either," Superman added. "If I ran at full speed without flight assist, I'd bust up the pavement or leave a trench in the fields."

"So there's no way for you to get home undetected," Lois concluded.

"I think the risk would be low if I ran," Superman declared. "I'd be below the radar from any of the major installations, and if a County Mouny was pointing his radar gun in my direction, he probably wouldn't believe the results."

"We're still going to have to find a better way to keep you and Kara hidden from Luthor's prying eyes," Lois insisted. "You do realize that we wouldn't have to worry about this if you were living in Metropolis instead of commuting from Smallville."

"Smallville's a better environment for Kara," Superman protested. "She has room to exercise her abilities without worrying about shocking the neighbors. She wouldn't have that in Metropolis and if one of the neighbors noticed something unusual, we'd be on every tabloid cover on the planet in no time."

"This argument is non-productive," Jor-El declared. "There still are more important things to discuss than your living arrangements."

"You're right," Superman acknowledged. "While we're talking about the kids, how thorough was your scan of my son?"

"It provided all the information necessary for a complete analysis of his genetics and physiology," Jor-El answered.

"What did you find?" Lois asked with sudden interest. "Can we do anything about his allergies? What about powers? We haven't seen any evidence that he's inherited any of his father's abilities. What can we expect as he gets older?"

"Slow down, Lois," Superman suggested. "Give him a chance to answer."

"The allergies you speak of are caused by mismatches between the human and Kryptonian genomes," Jor-El informed her calmly. "We do not have sufficient power to correct those flaws, given our current situation. Fortunately, the problem will resolve itself in time. Once his dormant Kryptonian genes become active at puberty, they will become dominant and the problems you speak of will no longer be of consequence."

"If his Kryptonian genes will be dominant, does that mean he will inherit my powers?" Superman asked.

"Yes, it does," Jor-El confirmed. "It will be no different for him than if he were fully Kryptonian, once the dormant genes become active. The analysis suggests that his powers will begin to manifest when he enters puberty."

"That's still years away," Lois pointed out. "Can't anything be done about his allergies before that?"

"It would be a simple matter to correct if our power reserves were not so thoroughly drained. However, there simply isn't enough energy to power the process and it will be many months before we've absorbed enough energy from the sun to even consider performing the procedure."

"From the sun? You mean this place is solar-powered?" Lois asked incredulously.

"The exterior walls of the Fortress have photo-electric properties," Jor-El informed her. "Nearly ninety-eight percent of the solar energy striking the outer surfaces is converted directly into usable power for our operations and we're able to store the surplus for later use. However, those reserves were drained by our intruders."

Lois turned to Superman and said seriously, "Please tell me that what Luthor took is useless without the father crystal."

Superman looked to Jor-El and asked, "Father?"

Jor-El somberly declared, "Unfortunately, the theft is serious. If the father crystal was not inserted within a short period of time after the console was activated, it would have initiated a disaster recovery process. A new father crystal would have been created from the data on the remaining crystals."

"Then he'd have everything," Superman said angrily.

"It would exclude our private conversations," Jor-El clarified. "Those were not redundantly stored on the storage crystals. The new father crystal would be as the original was immediately after this structure was first built, and whoever was present would likely have been mistaken for you."

"Is there any way to track the missing crystals?" Superman asked.

"They'd be difficult to locate in their inert state," Jor-El informed him. "However, if this criminal attempts crystal construction without proper dampening protocols, it may be possible to track the energy release, provided that the necessary equipment is in place beforehand. Unfortunately, we are impeded by our severely drained power reserves."

"Well, can't you hook up an emergency generator or something to recharge?" Lois demanded to know.

"I'm afraid the fuel for our 'emergency generator', as you put it, is also depleted," Jor-El explained. "Under normal circumstances, we could supplement the solar power with the output

of the fusion power plant in the lower levels. However, we only had three point five kilograms of the helium-three fuel trapped in the crystals to begin with, which I collected on Krypton before sending Kal-El here. It would only have maintained the power plant at full power output for several hours and was reserved for emergencies, such as the force field erected during Zod's attack and the construction of the ship built for my niece's rescue. That fuel was nearly depleted prior to the break-in."

"So fill the tank back up" Lois insisted. "It's just helium, right?"

"No, actually it's helium-three," Superman corrected. "It's a non-radioactive, stable helium isotope created during the sun's fusion, which is extremely rare on Earth. The little that's here was either trapped in the mantle during the Earth's formation, or was produced by tritium decay."

"But you said it came from the sun," Lois reminded him.

"Yes, but whatever helium-three is present in the solar wind never gets past the Earth's electromagnetic field."

"Well, if it's up there, then go there and bring some back," Lois said irritably. "You *have* a ship, if you need it - you just used it for that six-year round trip to Krypton. Geez, do I have to think of everything?"

"That is a quite clever suggestion," Jor-El commented. "Kal-El, your ship *could* be reconfigured for that purpose. If we program it for a tight orbit of the sun, perhaps at a distance twenty million kilometers, we could collect several kilograms of helium-three in a matter of hours. That would be adequate to satisfy our immediate needs."

"Um, father? I didn't exactly make a graceful landing when we got back," Superman admitted. "The ship's in pretty rough shape."

"Did the escape vessel that originally brought you to Earth fare any better?" Jor-El inquired.

"I'm not sure - I hardly remember that landing," Superman informed him. "The spires had all melted away, but it seems relatively intact otherwise."

"I would like to examine both ships, though I suspect that it will be easier to repair and reconfigure the smaller craft," Jor-El informed him.

Further discussion of the matter was interrupted by a small voice beside them as Jason whispered to his mother, "Mommy, I'm hungry."

Superman turned to them and said, "I'm so sorry. I completely forgot about lunch. We still have about forty minutes... Smallville's obviously out of the question, but I know I know this nice little brasserie just outside Paris..."

"Did you forget about Luthor?" Lois asked sharply. "We need to secure this place before we go anywhere. We can't risk losing any more of those crystals."

"I must concur with the woman," Jor-El declared. "Until we replenish our reserves and implement more effective security measures, you should keep the father crystal with you. We cannot risk another theft, and your earlier statements suggest that the criminal's whereabouts remain unknown."

"Here's what we're going to do," Lois declared. "Clark, you'll take Jason and me back to Metropolis so I can get him some lunch and get him back to school. Then go get both of your ships from Smallville."

"I think that the big one would be a bit too conspicuous during the day," Superman commented. "I should be able to get the little one now, though."

"Whatever. Maybe you can land in Kansas City or someplace like that and run the rest of



the way - on the ground, where he can't track you."

"It's going to take awhile, if I'm to avoid detection," Superman pointed out.

"Doesn't matter - it needs to be done. We can't lock this place down or cure Jason's asthma until you fill 'er up," Lois insisted. "I can cover for you in the meantime. Do what you need to do and meet me back in Metropolis when you're done."

"I'll try not to keep you waiting too long," Superman promised. He turned to Jor-El and said, "Father, we need to shut down so that I can take the crystals."

"Of course," Jor-El acknowledged. "However, you need only concern yourself with the father crystal. The new storage crystals are still blank and immature and I would prefer not to disrupt the growth process. The risk if they are taken is minimal." The image in the crystal walls then faded and Kal-El pulled the crystal from its slot. A moment later, the three of them were airborne and heading southeast back to Metropolis.

## Chapter 24 - Connecting the Dots

*Friday, September 29, 2006 1:30PM EDT*

Superman soared high into the sky, reaching towards the mesosphere above Canada's Nunavut province and pushing his old escape ship in front of him. He'd retrieved it from the barn cellar in Smallville and reprogrammed it at the Fortress for a fuel collection mission. However, there hadn't been enough energy to perform the modifications there, so it would use the energy in the solar wind to implement the programmed design revisions during the first six hours of its mission.

At the upper reaches of the mesosphere, Superman adjusted his grip on his burden and hurled it beyond Earth's reach towards its insertion point into solar orbit, ninety-three million miles ahead and slightly off-center from the sun. He indulged in a relaxing sun bath as he monitored the ship's progress and reflected on the day's surprising events. He quickly found himself preoccupied with Jor-El's explanation of the ultimatum from six years earlier and his recent assurances that he would have explained the reasoning, had he been asked. *I wish I'd known*, Superman thought.

From his perspective, sacrificing his powers hadn't been a sacrifice. Though grateful that he had been able to help as many people as he had, the powers had always been a barrier, separating him from humanity and forcing him into lonely isolation. In fact, if he'd known it was possible to shed those abilities even before he met Lois, he'd have been sorely tempted. Thus, when Jor-El had insisted on that as a condition for his planned marriage to Lois, he'd gladly accepted it without debate. He never asked why or even allowed further discussion of the matter - it hadn't seemed important. Trading the powers for a life with Lois had seemed to be a win-win scenario, as far as he was concerned.

*How much different would things have been if I'd thought to ask? he wondered. Or if I'd included Lois on that discussion - she definitely would have asked. Would we have thought to ask for confirmation of our alleged infertility and nullified the need to be stripped of my powers? Or would I instead have left a pregnant wife behind for six years, instead of a lover? And would anything really be that much different now?*

He shook himself from his contemplation and ended his sun bath, dropping from the sky and zooming across the hemisphere to Metropolis. *Well, there's no point dwelling on the past, especially when there is so much work to do in the present*, he admonished himself as he recalled the work waiting for him in Metropolis. It was too late to join Lois at the Vanderworth interview, so he pushed his vision ahead through the walls of Metropolis police headquarters, quickly finding Bill Henderson at his desk. *Hope Bill doesn't mind doing a favor for Superman*, he thought, and he allowed a sad smile as he accelerated towards his destination and anticipated the confirmation of his intruders' identities.

Lois was in a coffee shop located a half mile from Star Labs, where she sat staring blankly into space and reflecting on the day's events while waiting for her two o'clock appointment. *If only I'd known*, she thought. *The lunkhead really should have told me, damn it! I wouldn't have gone through hell wondering what had happened to him and my head wouldn't have been so badly messed up... How would that have changed things, I wonder?*

"Am I interrupting?" Clark asked quietly.

Lois yelped at the sound of his voice. "*Jesus*," she complained. "Stop sneaking up on me like that!"

"Sorry, I didn't meant to startle you," he apologized.

Lois rolled her eyes with a irritated sigh and asked, "Well, did you get your 'errands' taken care of?"

"For now," he informed her. "We're expecting power to be restored up north by this time tomorrow."

"Any news on the break-in?" she inquired.

"Well, Henderson reluctantly agreed to scrounge up a fingerprint kit from forensics," Clark informed her.

"Reluctantly? I thought he was on our side."

"He is, but he wanted to send a forensic team in for a full investigation of the burglary."

"What's wrong with that? Sounds like a good idea to me."

"Why bother? Given our suspect's legal resources, there's no way a burglary charge would stick, especially when nobody had been to the place in years. They'd easily be able to argue that the place seemed abandoned. Besides, it's well outside of Henderson's jurisdiction."

"And what if some of the prints they'd collect turn out to belong to convicted felons, like the ones who 'witnessed' Gertrude's new will? Wouldn't it be a parole violation if you could prove they were up there in Canada?" Lois asked pointedly. "Parolees aren't usually allowed to leave the state without prior permission, not to mention the country. That might at least disrupt that lunatic temporarily and give us time to figure out what he's up to..."

"...Assuming we can find him..."

"...and maybe even establish culpability if Luthor causes any harm with those crystals," Lois added insistently.

"I'm still not convinced it would help..."

"...because you don't want your other self to be seen as a victim," Lois finished for him. "It doesn't fit with the carefully crafted image. God forbid people think you're like the rest of us."

"Not so loud," Clark complained in a loud whisper. He sighed and was quiet for a moment before he told her quietly, "Lois, it's not just about the image. A lot of people have pinned their hopes on him and he'd hate to disappoint them by revealing that he is as susceptible as they are to certain mundane crimes like this."

"That's a load of crap," Lois whispered back. "*He's* letting his ego get in the way of our investigation."

"It's not getting in the way," Clark protested. "When the forensic team finishes processing those fingerprints, we'll have all we need, since we can't prosecute them for the intrusion. Besides, we can't arrest them for parole violations while they're still AWOL."

"Fine, but if it *becomes* an obstacle, you *will* let the forensic team do the full workup. And don't tamper with the crime scene in the meantime."

"I'm really not comfortable with the idea, but I'll think about it," he said quietly. After a moment's pause, he asked curiously, "So, how'd the interview with Vanderworth go?"

"It was a waste of time."

"I thought they'd want to help us," Clark replied in disbelief.

"They do, but there's a gag order on the case, courtesy of Luthor's legal eagles," Lois informed him. "Harold Junior's lawyer stopped him from answering most of the questions I asked. I got the impression that they were more interested in learning what we'd uncovered than helping with our investigation. I almost forgot who was interviewing whom..."

"Anyway, the best I got out of him was that he 'would not dispute' the statements from the cops at the scene, and he was 'encouraged' by the M.E. reopening the case. In fact, they're

going to file an emergency motion with the court this afternoon for an exemption to the gag order so that they can fully cooperate with the investigation. They'll even be including an affidavit from our favorite M.E. director, Tom Wallace."

"That's interesting... I guess it shouldn't be a surprise that Luthor doesn't want publicity about this," Clark concluded.

"It's not, but it's damned annoying," Lois said irritably. She looked at her watch and added, "Well, we'd better get going if we're going to make it on time. I can't wait to hear what Faulkner has to say."

"Clark. Lois. Thanks for coming," Doctor Faulkner greeted the reporters cheerfully. She guided them back to her office and added, "We've been scanning all morning and we've just finished the last of them. Come on back. Let me show you what we've got. Just keep it off the record until I give the okay."

"Does this mean that you've got all of the electron microscope images fully processed for damage ratios now?" Clark inquired.

"Not all of them - just the chips from the Verizon cell towers," Doctor Faulkner explained. "They have the highest density across the city and each installation is virtually identical. The only apparent variable is the distance from the EMP ground zero. Unfortunately, that still leaves us with a big search area."

"I'm anxious to see what you've got," Clark stated politely. The group finally reached Doctor Faulkner's office and the reporters followed her in.

Doctor Faulkner typed in a query at her desktop and brought up a report with the analysis results. "We've categorized all the chips and sorted them by the damage ratio in descending order and identified which towers the most damaged chips came from. If you map it out..." She pulled a freshly-printed map from the top of a pile on the credenza behind her and set it on the desk between her and the reporters. The map showed a red semicircle drawn against the waterfront near the top of the map. Faulkner continued, "...the most damaged towers are inside this arc."

"I thought they said it came from the northeast part of the city," Lois commented.

"Actually, this area is just a bit farther south than we originally thought, in the exclusive eastern end of Oaktown instead of the Donner Heights area," Doctor Faulkner explained.

"I'd like to try something," Clark said eagerly. "Do you mind if I mark this up?"

"Uh, sure. I can always print another copy," Doctor Faulkner replied. "I should have a sharpie around here somewhere..."

"You noticed something," Lois stated certainly. "What is it?"

"I'll show you in a moment," Clark promised.

Doctor Faulkner located a sharpie behind her keyboard and handed it over to Clark. "Here you go," she told him. "What have you got up your sleeve?"

Clark drew a short line tangent to the curve at each end of the arc, and then drew perpendicular lines to the center of the arc at the edge of the water. Lois pointed at the intersection of the two lines and asked, "Is that ground zero?"

"It's not likely," Doctor Faulkner answered. "Clark, we don't have uniform density on the cell towers and that curve is an approximation, at best. The data doesn't support graphically identifying ground zero by locating the center of the arc."

"That location is suspicious in its own right," Clark countered.

"What is it?" Lois inquired.

"It's One Vanderworth Boulevard," Clark answered.

"The Vanderworth estate? Oh, my God. *Luthor*," Lois said grimly. Clark simply nodded.

"Luthor? As in Lex Luthor?" Doctor Faulkner asked incredulously. "Is there something you want to tell me about that?"

Clark and Lois looked at each other briefly before returning their attention to the physicist. Clark sighed and said quietly, "Off the record, we've learned from a reliable source that Luthor may be in possession of some rather advanced..."

"...and stolen..." Lois added

"...technology that could have caused the EMP," Clark informed her. "However, the evidence is not conclusive."

"It will be if a certain someone agrees to cooperate with the forensic team," Lois stated coolly. She didn't notice Clark briefly glance over at her with an annoyed expression.

"Well, the staff here's already seen a good deal of the most advanced technologies and we're at a loss to explain what could have caused that EMP without a radiation signature," Doctor Faulkner declared. "I'd be a little skeptical of your source's claims."

"The source has been vetted," Lois insisted.

"I'll need a little more than that if I'm to consider it in my report," Faulkner responded.

"Could you excuse us a minute?" Lois dragged Clark into the hall. After a short conversation of heated whispers, the two reporters returned. "We need your word that you won't repeat what we're about to tell you," Lois informed her. "It's for your ears only."

Faulkner nodded her head. "You have my word. We've worked together often enough over the years that I think we can trust each other... So, what's this advanced technology your source thinks Luthor stole?"

"It's Kryptonian," Clark told her seriously.

"Just like our source," Lois added.

"I didn't think he was talking to you," Faulkner muttered.

Lois huffed and said irritably, "Let's not go there."

"This is disturbing," Faulkner concluded. "But I *can't* pinpoint that address as ground zero from our data set and I *won't* skew the data to force it to fit. The best I can do is run some statistical analyses to try to narrow down the 'probable' zone to that neighborhood - if the data supports it. Maybe that will be enough for the authorities to take a look there, considering how they tore through Donner Heights yesterday."

Clark patiently asked, "Shall I assume that you haven't released your results to anyone yet?"

"We've just barely finished mapping the data as you two walked in. I haven't even begun trying to write up the report yet. Why?"

"I wouldn't trust the feds with this yet," Clark advised her. "If they go trampling over everything like they have everywhere else, Luthor's legal team will have a field day with it. To put that lunatic away, we need for the charges to stick, which means the authorities need to go by the book and carefully preserve the evidence. If you can, I'd like you to hold off sending your report to DHS but advance a copy to Maggie Sawyer at the Special Crimes Unit so that she can work the scene. Oh, and send a courtesy copy to Bill Henderson, too. He already knows about the Kryptonian technology theft."

"That shouldn't be a problem," Faulkner agreed and her gaze fell to Clark's markings on the map. After a moment's pause, she asked quietly, "What in the world is that madman up to?"

*Friday, September 29, 2006 3:00PM EDT*

Superman hovered ten thousand feet above the Vanderworth mansion and focused his vision on the building below, exploring every nook and cranny and methodically searching the structure from top to bottom. He let out a startled gasp when his vision penetrated to the ground level and revealed the mammoth crystals penetrating the floor. He pushed his vision through to the basement and took in a wide view of the crystalline creation, recognizing the Kryptonian design behind it. He stared in disbelief for several minutes before finally resuming his search of the premises. Every fingerprint was recorded to memory, along with every substance on the site, which he identified by its molecular structure.

Outside the front door of the estate, Lois leaned impatiently against her car, looking up into the sky and trying unsuccessfully to discern Superman where she knew he would be. "How much longer is this going to take?" she muttered under her breath.

A few minutes later, she was distracted by the flashing lights from a MPD patrol car pulling through the gate, which came to a stop beside her. Lois recognized officers Patrick Muncie and Vince Reynolds as they climbed out of their vehicle and offered them a smile as she greeted them, "Hello, gentlemen. Long time, no see... Do you know if Maggie Sawyer will be here any time soon?"

"I wouldn't know, ma'am," Officer Muncie told her. "We're just here to make sure that *nobody* goes into the property."

Lois rolled her eyes and reached through her car's open window for her cell phone. She punched in the number, and lifted the phone to her ear. After two rings, an aggravated voice answered, "Sawyer."

"Maggie, what's going on?" Lois said pointedly. "Why have you got a black-and-white keeping everyone out and where are your guys with the forensics team?"

"Well, hello to you, too, Lois," Sawyer said sarcastically. She paused for a beat and added, "Are we off the record?"

"Sure."

"Judge Jacobsen doesn't think we have sufficient probable cause for a warrant. She's not taking chances with Luthor's lawyers," Sawyer explained.

"Whose side is she on?" Lois complained.

"Believe me, she'd like nothing better than to see that son of a bitch go down," Sawyer informed her. "She's just not willing to take a chance that any evidence gets thrown out for an 'improper search'. All we have to go on right now is Faulkner's report, which can't pinpoint the mansion as ground zero, though it *is* in the probable zone. It's not enough yet. Make sure the big blue Boy Scout understands that, too, if you see him. We can't have him compromising evidence, either."

"Just what are you suggesting he'd do that's improper?"

"When they overturned Luthor's conviction, the appellate court ruled that Superman is subject to the same probable cause standard as us law enforcement officials and the circuit court is bound by that precedent. If the court finds out he's been peeking into things, it could constitute an illegal search and invalidate the evidence found there."

"You've got to be kidding. He's not a cop," Lois complained. "What's he supposed to do? Wear a lead blindfold?"

"No, but he can't share the unauthorized intel with anyone in an official capacity. I don't want to hear a word from him about what's inside that house until we have our search

warrant," Maggie explained.

"You've got to be kidding me!" Lois exclaimed. "That S.O.B.'s really perverted the system if it lets him hide from justice like this."

"Calm down, Lane. It hasn't gotten that bad yet," Sawyer assured her. "We're exploring a number of options that could satisfy Jacobsen and we *will* nail him - just not this afternoon. So please make sure that you don't go polluting my crime scene and don't go tipping off our suspect with an over-sensationalized story, either."

"The *Planet* is more responsible than that and so are Clark and I," Lois reminded her. "If anybody's going to over-sensationalize things, it'd be your significant other at the *Star*."

"You know me better than that, Lane! I don't talk shop at home," Sawyer complained. "Now, *please* stay clear of the property and give us a chance to do our jobs."

"You wouldn't even be looking at Luthor right now if Clark and I hadn't started the investigation," Lois snapped.

"And we truly appreciate your efforts, but we have to do things our way if there's going to be any chance of putting him away and keeping him there this time," Maggie replied tersely.

"What do you think we're trying to do?" Lois protested.

"You're a reporter, not a cop. Now please, don't interfere and stay away from Luthor's place. Good-bye, Lois," Maggie told her as she ended the call.

Lois sighed in frustration and lowered the phone from her ear. "Ma'am?" Officer Muncie addressed her. "We're going to have to ask you to leave the premises. This drive is technically part of the property - all the way to that gate back there. You shouldn't be on this side of it."

Before Lois had a chance to respond, she heard the chirp that announced an incoming text message. She looked at the display and read the short message from Clark: "Regroup at Office. Meet you at the corner."

"Ma'am?" Officer Muncie persisted.

"I'm going," Lois answered reluctantly and she climbed back into her car and pulled away from the mansion. Clark was waiting for her at the corner just outside the main gate to the estate and she stopped to let him in.

"So what did you see," Lois immediately asked.

"I didn't go in past the gate with you, remember?" Clark gently reminded her. "And if *Superman* had peeked inside, it would have been an illegal search, according to Maggie."

"You're saying Superman didn't look inside?" Lois asked incredulously.

"Well, if he *had* looked inside, he probably would have noticed that there was nobody home and that the missing crystals weren't there," Clark suggested.

"Uh-huh."

"He also might have noticed a twelve thousand cubic foot mass of crystal growth in the basement," Clark added.

"Crystals? Like at the Fortress?"

"Similar, though it seems a bit... distorted, maybe?" Clark surmised. "Obviously, Superman would have noticed fingerprints matching the ones that the intruders left at the Fortress."

"Obviously," Lois concurred.

"He might also have discovered a cornucopia of toxins in packaging with much more benign labels and a plethora of other unexpected substances in similarly misleading containers. Nearly all of that found inside a huge pile of trash in the garage."

"How huge?"

"Judging by the contents, I'd say that they haven't taken the garbage to the street since Luthor moved in," Clark concluded. "He probably fired Gertrude's domestic staff..."

"...because they'd notice him poisoning her..." Lois interjected.

"... and he forgot to tell his flunkies to take out the trash on pickup day. They just piled the garbage bags in the garage."

"It'd be quite a find, if only the cops could get their search warrant," Lois noted harshly. "Maybe they'd have enough 'probably cause' if you let them investigate your break-in."

"I suspect that the M.E. review of Gertrude's death will conclude that it was homicide, which should give the police all the probable cause they'll need for a warrant."

"Nobody's going to be able to explain that crystal mass, though - not without a statement from Superman," Lois insisted. "And if he's giving them the statement, he might as well allow the forensics."

"He already discussed that with Henderson and they've reached a compromise," Clark informed her. "He'll allow the forensics at the Fortress but it's only to be used if it's needed to prosecute Luthor for crimes involving the crystals. If his other activities are enough to put him away for life, then the Fortress evidence never sees the light of day. Same for his statement, which he really can't offer to them until *after* they get their search warrant and discover that monstrosity."

"When's all this going to happen?" Lois inquired seriously.

"Superman's taking a team up to the Fortress at four-thirty," Clark told her.

"Why wait? Why not now?"

"Jurisdictional issues," Clark explained. "It'll actually be a Canadian national police lab processing the scene. Henderson knows someone up there who he swears can be trusted with this. Anyway, they'll expedite the lab analysis afterward, so we should have the thugs ID'd no later than six, probably. Though, I think we already know who some of them are going to be - Luthor and the felons that witnessed Gertrude's new will."

"We'll continue the deep dive with Luthor's goon squad as soon as we get back and do the others after the lab results come in," Lois decided.

Clark nodded absently and quietly commented, "You know, we're just seeing the tip of the iceberg so far. The deeper down we look, the more disturbing this will probably end up being."

"Yeah, I know and we'll try to trace it all back to Luthor somehow... Still, it kind of feels like he won this round," Lois complained.

"It's a temporary victory," Clark assured her. "We'll get him in the end."

*Friday, September 29, 2006 5:45PM EDT*

Luthor allowed a satisfied smile as he considered the plans that were coming to fruition. After careful consideration of the Harvard Museum and it's personal, he devised a brilliant plan to collect the kryptonite that he needed to take out the alien. He'd also revised his alpha scanner design ahead of schedule and expected to have it on-line in two days time. *Excellent!* he thought. *Just a little while longer and the historic Luthor reign will finally begin.* He was disrupted from his thoughts by the sound of Kitty Kowalski's heels stalking across the ballroom floor. "The caterers have dinner set up now," she informed him.

"Are they still on board?" Luthor asked casually.

"No, Stanford sent them away as soon as they finished putting out the food," Kitty informed her.



"Good. Please tell Riley to escort our 'guest' to the dining room for dinner," he commanded. He pulled a shoulder length red wig onto his head and inspected it in a small mirror.

"What are you going to do with her?" Kitty demanded.

"Once her husband delivers our merchandise, we'll let her go," Luthor lied. Kitty didn't need to know of his plans to dispose of the security guard and his wife after he acquired the kryptonite.

"Why did you have to grab her?" Kitty asked irritably.

"Efficiency," Luthor answered condescendingly. "I don't expect a small mind like yours to understand." *You wouldn't understand the necessity of controlling a reluctant recruit*, he thought. *The only way to truly control someone like that is to find out what they love and take it from them. They'll do nearly anything you ask of them to get it back, especially if they're foolish enough to invest all of their hopes on a completely replaceable woman.*

"What do you want with that stupid rock anyway?" Kitty persisted.

"You're still here?" Luthor asked in mock confusion. "Did I forget to tell you to have Riley escort our guest to the dining room? No? Then why am I forced to repeat myself?"

"To hear yourself talk?" Kitty suggested.

"Kitty!" Luthor warned.

"I'm going!" she shouted, turning on her heel and stalking back out of the ballroom.

Luthor rose from his desk to follow her out, but stopped when the cell phone vibrated on the desk. He picked up the phone and viewed the display. After identifying the caller as his lawyer, Albert Morrison, he switched the phone on and irritably stated, "I hope this means that you've finally done what I asked."

"Unfortunately, we've made no new progress on that front," Albert informed him. "We've also had some surprises to contend with this afternoon."

"What kind of surprises?" Luthor asked slowly with barely contained anger.

"The medical examiner's reopened the investigation into your late wife's death, citing irregularities with the original investigator's work."

"What are you talking about? They already issued the death certificate." Luthor inquired impatiently.

"Apparently, the cause of death listed by the original investigator wasn't legitimate," Albert explained.

*That bitch!* Luthor thought. *If she wasn't already dead, I'd strangle her!*

"The medical examiner's office has declared the original death certificate invalid and they're starting the investigation over from scratch," Albert continued.

"And you never cremated the old hag, like I asked you to," Luthor stated furiously.

"The body's still on ice at the morgue," Albert confirmed. "Nothing has changed since we last spoke. The Vanderworths' have very talented representation."

"The will leaves everything up to me. *Cremate the damn body!*" Luthor hollered.

"We can't do that, especially not now. Her children's lawyers filed two motions this afternoon, one of which the court had already granted before we even saw it."

"*What!*" Luthor complained. "That bitch judge can't do that!"

"Actually, she *can* and she *did*. Motions that enable cooperation with authorities and their investigations are considered routine and are practically rubber-stamped," Albert explained.

"It's extremely difficult to block in the best of circumstances and since opposing counsel didn't deliver a copy of the motion to our offices until four fifty-nine, there wasn't time to file an

objection before the court shut down for the weekend at five."

"What's the damage?" Luthor demanded to know.

"The first motion, which the court granted, modifies the gag order to allow the Vanderworths to freely discuss the case with the authorities investigating Gertrude's death. The second motion asks to suspend the probate case until after the medical examiner's finished their investigation *and* after any potential police investigation that would follow, should it not be ruled a natural death. Fortunately, that motion will follow the usual process and won't be considered until after we file our response... I suspect that it's a ploy to delay consideration of our motion to transfer the estate's assets to the far more stable international markets and instead keep those assets locked in escrow within the court's jurisdiction."

"Why are we still talking about the asset transfer?" Luthor hollered. "That should have been settled a month ago!"

"Mister Luthor, as I explained when we started this case, probate cases can sometimes take a *very* long time to settle. The Anna Nicole Smith case, which appears to closely parallel yours, took more than eleven years, though I don't expect this to take nearly that long-" Albert reminded him.

"It had *better* not! *You* won't have that much time," Luthor angrily interrupted.

"We're doing our best to speed things up and we have the precedents from the Smith case on our side," Albert assured him. "We're already working on our response motions, including a demand for sanctions against opposing counsel, which we'll file with the court first thing Monday morning."

"Sue the coroner, too," Luthor insisted. "It's too 'emotionally distressing' to re-experience Gertrude's death with them digging everything back up like this."

"I'll try to find case law that supports that, but I wouldn't hold out too much hope," Albert informed him. "The courts grant tremendous leeway to the M.E. when they call a cause of death into question."

"*Find a way!*" Luthor screamed and he immediately ended the call, hanging up on his lawyer. He lowered his head and rubbed the bridge of his nose as he considered the unfortunate developments. *That's my money! I won't allow them to keep it from me like this!* Luthor thought.

After a moment of thought, he walked around his desk and punched the intercom button. "Stanford!" he hollered. "Get down here and bring Grant and Brutus with you. I have an errand for you after our trip to the museum tonight."

## Chapter 25 - Miscalculation

*Friday, September 29, 2006 11:00PM EDT*

Rain was falling lightly over Metropolis when Lois finally drove out of the *Planet's* underground parking garage and turned left onto Fifth Avenue. Her late hours had been productive and the pieces of the puzzle on Luthor's henchmen were coming together nicely. However, as she began the drive to her home in the southern suburbs, her thoughts turned to something of a more personal nature - the new knowledge of the events that had transpired between her and Clark before he left six years earlier. She had been his intended bride, he'd taken her to the Fortress for Jor-El's approval and hadn't been deterred by his father's disapproval or the harsh penalty for continuing their relationship. However, three super-powered Kryptonian criminals had managed to throw a monkey wrench into their plans, with help from a demented human accomplice.

*I wish I could remember that, instead of having to take it all on faith, she thought. He's lucky I believe him with a story like that... I wonder how things would have gone down if Clark had thought to include me on that discussion with Jor-El. What is it with the guys I pick that they always think they can make such important, life-altering decisions about our future without consulting me on it? I'm pretty sure that I would have at least asked 'why'. I might even have insisted on a second opinion about not being able to have kids.*

*But Jor-El approves now - not only that, he actually seems excited about the idea, Lois reminded herself. Even had the nerve to demand more grandkids. And Clark... Clark would be delighted to oblige - he's obviously still in love with me, even if he doesn't dare come right out and say it. I can read between the lines from what he said to Kara about us and I can practically feel it emanating from him whenever he's in the room... It's almost too much to imagine, that I could actually go home to that every night. God, even at my most obsessed fangirl worst, I never thought domestic bliss was an option with Superman. But he's Clark, which is about as domesticated as they come. And he's already a responsible dad to a young child, responsibly employed, and paying his taxes. I really could have it all if I wanted to.*

*But it's not quite that easy. We don't even agree on living arrangements. Sounds like he'd be perfectly happy to spend the next fifty plus years commuting from Smallville and I'm a born and bred city girl - though I have to concede his point that Smallville's probably a better place for the super-kids ... And how do you have a love life when the kids have super hearing and X-ray vision? At least I still have a few years before I have to worry about that with Jason... Geez, this would be hopelessly complicated even if he had explained things to me before he left... He really should have said something - I might have waited for him... But he hadn't explained and Lois had been devastated by both Superman's disappearance and Clark's apparent abandonment, just when she needed him most.*

*I lost my best friend when Clark left - God, I missed that goofball, she realized. She reflected on the camaraderie that she'd shared with Clark Kent and how they had always been so completely in sync with each other - something she'd never come close to with anyone else. It was like old times today, Lois thought, even with the Superman mind job thrown in there. How on Earth did we manage that when I should still be furious with him? It was almost like he had never left - except at the end of the day, he's going home to take care of a young daughter, and I'm going home to our son...*

Lois turned onto the entrance ramp for the southbound Clinton Expressway and her thoughts turned to speculation on how different her life might have been if Clark had explained things to her. *I wouldn't have been so freaked out wondering if Superman had been*

*killed, or felt so abandoned by my best friend, and my head wouldn't have been so messed up that Perry felt I needed his nephew's close supervision to keep me on track... Oh, God.*

**Richard.** *I forgot all about him... He makes this even more complicated...*

*He's a good man and he was there when I needed him. And he's Jason's daddy, the biology notwithstanding. But lately every conversation with him turns into a fight and he's still trying to impose that damn Stepford Wives fantasy on me. Where does that leave us, especially now that everyone knows that Jason's a Kent? Even if Richard does finally give up on that fantasy, will that be something he'll be happy with, considering how much he's pestered me for all that stuff over the years? And how badly would he freak if Jason's Kryptonian heritage ever slipped out? Geez, why did things have to get so complicated?*

*Lois looked at her watch and swore under her breath. Richard won't be happy with me getting home this late. And the chances of him letting that go without a word are probably somewhere between zilch and none... Great. Just what I need after such a long day. Another fight to look forward to.*

Richard sat on the living room couch, watching a political program on GNN with the volume turned low. Normally, he would listen with interest to the debate, especially since the Washington Bureau reported up through him. However, he once again found himself consumed with his personal matters and unable to focus his attention on anything else. He was growing increasingly frustrated by Lois' tardiness and struggling to suppress his anger over it. He had hoped for an honest discussion on recent developments after putting Jason to bed, but her late hours had precluded that and she hadn't offered much in the way of explanations during her short call late that afternoon. It was more time spent with her ex and Jason's biological father - a man who apparently knew Lois better after a six year absence than he did after living with her for almost as long.

Richard glanced up at the clock in the kitchen and frowned at the time. *What the hell is she up to?* he wondered. After stewing over the situation for what seemed an eternity, he finally heard the garage door opening, signaling her arrival. He got up from the couch and marched into the kitchen to confront her. Lois jumped with a start when she walked through the door and found him glaring back at her. "I was beginning to wonder if you planned on coming home at all tonight," he said testily.

"Don't start," Lois warned. "It's been a long day."

"For *both* of us," Richard retorted. "I was expecting you home hours ago."

Lois rolled her eyes and irritably informed him, "I told you that I'd be working late and not to wait up. Things happened kind of fast once our source came through and I was working the phones and buried in the story."

Richard hollered in a loud whisper, "Lois, we have some important personal matters to work out, which is a bit difficult to do when you're *not* here to talk it through."

"Richard. Stop it," Lois commanded. "It's been a long day, I'm tired, and I really don't have the energy for this right now."

"Is that so?" Richard asked skeptically. "Was it because of your alleged long day at the office with your ex, or are you just trying to avoid discussing this with me?"

Lois hardened her expression and glared at him. "You disappoint me, White," she said angrily. "I'm not a frightened little girl who runs and hides from an argument and I'd think that we'd have had a little more trust here after five and a half years."

"So would I, but that was before I found out you've been lying to me all this time," he

rebutted harshly. "And now, you insist on making your ex your new partner and running around with him at all hours of the day and night."

"Is that an accusation? Because it sure sounded like one!" Lois snapped. She didn't give him a chance to respond before she continued. "Dammit, Richard. We potentially have the biggest story of the year by the tail here - bigger than Superman's return! But blowing it wide open means researching court documents, some of which are sealed, talking to witnesses, some of whom are bound by gag orders, as well as talking to the police, the M.E., the D.A., the warden at Stryker's prison, along with the usual sources that have an ear to that element. You don't find that by running a Nexus search and calling it a day at five. You have to be dedicated to the story, put in the extra hours, and pound the pavement. That's how I won those investigative reporting awards back in the day, and that's what I'll need to do if I'm ever going to win again."

"You can't just spend all night at the office on a whim," Richard complained. "There are other people's needs to consider, too."

"Needs?" Lois replied in disbelief. "If you think you're getting any tonight, you are *sorely* mistaken."

"I wasn't talking about *that*," Richard snapped. "I'm talking about Jason wondering why Mommy's not home yet when I tucked him in, for one thing. And what if *I* had to suddenly put in overtime or make an out of town trip? Perry *was* strongly encouraging me to visit my folks in Chicago this weekend, you know. He thought some time away would give us both some perspective. Of course, it's a bit hard to coordinate things like that when you *don't return my calls!*"

"Well, you didn't mention anything about a trip when we talked this afternoon, so don't you blame that on me!" Lois countered. "Besides, Lucy and your Aunt Alice have already volunteered countless times to help out if something like that ever came up."

"Lois, I..." Richard began, before snapping his mouth shut. He dropped his gaze and silently rubbed his brow. After a moment, he calmly said, "Lois, I didn't want to fight with you tonight. I just want to talk and try to figure everything out between us. It's all kind of gotten turned upside down."

Lois sighed and impatiently replied, "Do we really have to do that now? It's been a really long day and I'm exhausted."

Richard said insistently, "Lois, we *both* have to be willing to try if we're going to put these problems behind us."

"Could you please skip the guilt trip?" Lois asked irritably. "I *can't* do this now." She then turned, marched past him and up the stairs up to their bedroom.

He stared after her momentarily as she climbed the stairs before slowly following her. *Well, we're really battling a thousand lately*, he lamented. *Why is it so impossible to have a civil conversation with her these past few days?* He came to an abrupt stop at the foot of the stairs and looked pensively towards the upper floor for a moment, listening to Lois' footsteps retreating down the hall and to the sound of Jason's bedroom door opening as she checked on him. *Who am I kidding?* he finally asked himself. *There's no way I will be sleeping any time soon and with my luck, we'll just end up starting another fight.*

He reluctantly turned away from the stairs and returned to the living room to reclaim his seat on the couch. After briefly considering the political show still playing on the television, he fished the remote out from under the pile of newspapers on the coffee table and began flipping channels. *There's got to be something on that can distract me from this mess for a little while,*

he told himself. Finally, he recognized the opening scene of *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* and set down the remote. *This looks like a possibility*, he thought. *A couple of hours of zombies and popcorn might be just what I need right now.*

*Saturday, September 30, 2006 6:45AM EDT*

Lois was sprawled across her bed sleeping alone in a deep and peaceful slumber that belied the recent unpleasant arguments with her fiancé. She remained oblivious to the imminent dawn as the first tendrils of the coming sunrise threatened to invade the darkness from across the horizon. She only grudgingly bore witness to the dawn in the best of times, usually at the tail end of a long night. As a rule, she stubbornly refused to spend her weekend mornings conscious, if it could be avoided, which was a tradition that few dared to disrupt. However, this morning's tranquility was rudely interrupted by the shrill ring tone from her cell phone on the night stand.

Lois blindly groped for the cell phone while the noise continued before finally finding the device, pulling it under the blankets with her and groggily answering, "Hello?"

"Good morning, Sunshine," Clark replied melodiously. After a beat, he added mirthfully, "I didn't wake you did I? *It is* almost dawn there."

"Do you have a *death wish*, Smallville?" Lois growled at him.

"Lois, I know better than to risk life and limb by interrupting your beauty sleep without good reason," Clark teased. His tone turned serious and he grimly informed her, "Gertrude's body was stolen from the morgue early this morning. They snuck in around one o'clock but were surprised by one of the night crew, who they shot dead."

Lois sprang up into a seated position, immediately alert and she muttered, "Holy shit... What have you got on it so far?" While waiting for Clark's reply, she turned on the light on the nightstand and immediately squinted against the sudden illumination.

"Well, it's mostly off the record, but here's what we have: They were able to match fingerprints to a couple of the convicted felons we've recently become acquainted with - Brutus Martin and Grant Hunter..."

"...they raided the Fortress with Luthor..." Lois recalled.

"...and they've got them on surveillance video, too, though it's a bit grainy and hard to tell who's who," Clark added. "Also, the M.E. thinks that they found what's left of Gertrude's body in a dumpster in Suicide Slum, which was discovered an hour after the incident at the morgue."

"What do you mean, 'what's left' of her?" Lois demanded.

"The body was liberally soaked with some kind of accelerant and set ablaze in a dumpster behind the Pleasant Acres housing project," Clark explained. "By the time the fire was discovered and put out, her extremities had already been completely consumed in the blaze and the head and torso were also in pretty bad shape - there's not much left. Another hour and the body would have been completely cremated and nobody would be the wiser."

"They were probably counting on emergency services' delayed response time to that part of town, especially at that time of night." Lois suggested.

"And that would normally be a safe assumption, but Superman noticed the fire and put it out before the evidence was completely lost. The good news is that despite the damage to the body, the M.E. investigator is fairly certain that they'll be able to identify it as Gertrude."

"But there's not much left for an autopsy. Luthor wins another round," Lois stated unhappily.

"Actually, he's made a gross miscalculation - Gertrude was autopsied yesterday afternoon

and his panicked reaction this morning will speed up the search warrant..."

"They autopsied her already?"

"They started the autopsy about the same time we were sitting down with Faulkner. I guess the odd circumstances in this case were suspicious enough that the investigator ordered an autopsy almost immediately. However, they still need to wait for toxicology to come back before they write up their final report. By the way, that's also why they're so sure the body in the dumpster is Gertrude - it had already been autopsied."

"How can they tell if it was practically incinerated?"

"There's enough left of the skeleton to identify post-mortem damage consistent with an autopsy - the top of the skull had been sawed off and the rib cage had been cut through at the perimeter of the chest cavity. They still have to confirm the identification through her dental records, though. We might even get it today, now that they're giving the case their highest priority. They have skin in the game on this one - Luthor may be responsible for the deaths of two of their people in the last month."

"So we've finally got him," Lois said triumphantly.

"There's still work to do," Clark cautioned her. "MPD's already talked to Harold Junior this morning about his mother and he's on his way in to look through a photo line-up. If he can identify the suspects and tie them to Luthor, they'll have probable cause for a search warrant. In the meantime, police have cordoned off the mansion to preserve potential evidence. I also have it from a reliable source that the case has attracted Superman's attention, and he'll probably show up during the search. One of us also needs to be there to cover the story for the *Planet*."

Lois read between the lines and caught his meaning: Clark Kent couldn't be on the scene while Superman was there, which meant that she'd have to cover for him. "Fine. I'll be there in half an hour," Lois told him grumpily. "Should I expect to see my partner there at all?"

"Um, it's hard to say," Clark answered enigmatically. "My usual sitter has a lot going on today and Kara's been clingy ever since we got back from our trip. It'll be hard enough sneaking out solo for my morning 'appointment'. That and we still have the transportation issue we discussed yesterday."

"You're going to have to do something about that and soon," Lois said sternly.

"I know. I'll take care of it as soon as I can... I've got to get going. Please call me when they get there with the warrant."

"I will. Bye."

Lois marched into the bathroom and turned on the shower. It was only as she moved to shut the door that she finally noticed her now empty bed. *Richard never came up last night*, she realized. *I didn't think that he was that pissed off... God, I really don't need that drama right now*. She took one last look into the bedroom, then shut the door and began her shower.

*Saturday, September 30, 2006 3:25PM EDT*

Richard found himself in an uneasy mood once again as he drove over to his uncle's house and reflected on his recent interactions with Lois. After falling asleep on the couch the previous night watching the zombie movie, he had been rudely awoken by Lois at dawn and informed that she had to leave to cover a story. After a short but heated argument, she had bolted out the door. *Lois up at dawn?* Richard thought. *On a Saturday? We're usually lucky if we can roll her out of bed by ten o'clock on the weekends. What on Earth is going on here?* Lois stopped answering the phone after the third time he called complaining about her

absence. He had no idea when he'd hear from her, until she called fifteen minutes earlier and asked him to bring Jason over to Perry's.

He finally arrived at his uncle's house, pulled into the drive and parked behind his fiancée's car. After helping Jason out of his Lexus and letting him into the house, Richard was surprised to find Kara running up to them and coming to a sudden stop two feet in front of Jason. He looked into the room behind her and saw Lois and Clark with his Aunt Alice, as they all rose from their seats. *What the hell is he doing here?* Richard thought.

"Hi," Kara said cheerfully to Jason. "I've got some games in my backpack. Do you want to play something?"

Kara's invitation was ignored when Jason spotted Lois and ran past Kara into his mother's arms. "Mommy!" he greeted her.

"I missed you, too, munchkin," Lois told him, wrapping her arms around him in a tight hug while Kara looked on with a stricken expression. Lois noticed the little girl's appearance, waved her over and told Jason, "I think your sister missed you, too." Kara came running over and Lois pulled her into the hug with Jason. After a moment, she relaxed her hug and told them, "Listen. I've got to talk work with Perry. Why don't you two set up your games in the kitchen?"

"Come on, kids. This way," Alice instructed them and she guided them out of the room.

"Oh, this just keeps on getting better and better," Richard said sarcastically. "Now, what the *hell* is going on here?"

"Um, little pitchers with big ears?" Clark reminded him tentatively. "There are certain words I'd rather the kids didn't add to their vocabularies."

"I wasn't expecting to see you here today, Richard," Perry interrupted, surprising the group when he walked into the room from the back hall.

"What's going on here, Uncle Perry?" Richard asked insistently.

"Besides your bad timing?" Perry asked seriously. "I need to talk to these two about the bombshell they've dug up and find out why I've got the Secretary of Homeland Security asking me to kill their story. Frankly, I'm surprised to see you here. I thought I made it perfectly clear that you were *not* to be involved in their assignments."

"It's okay, Perry," Lois interrupted. "I asked him to come."

"Lois, you didn't need to do that," Perry insisted. "If there's a problem -"

"The only problem is that my credibility is apparently shot," Lois interrupted sarcastically. "Richard doesn't think I really have a story here. He thinks I'm just using that as an excuse to avoid being around him. Maybe this briefing will enlighten him."

Perry sighed in frustration. He was silent for a beat and then asked brusquely, "What part of 'leave the personal bullshit at home' did you two not understand?"

"Perry, he needs to hear this," Lois insisted.

"All right, but consider this a one-time only event," he told them sternly. "I do *not* want your personal arguments spilling over into the job again. Understood?"

Richard and Lois both verbalized their assent and Perry led his three journalists to his office in the back of the house, which was only slightly smaller than his office at the *Planet*. The group took their seats and Perry gruffly said, "All right. What have you got?"

"Well, um, it looks like... like Luthor's up to his old tricks," Clark said hesitantly. "And the deeper we dig, the more disturbing it gets..." Clark then launched into a thorough summary of their investigation into Gertrude's death and Luthor's suspicious behavior, including the theft of Gertrude's corpse and the make-shift cremation apparently attempted by Luthor's hired



help.

*My God, Richard thought. They really do have something big. Maybe I've been letting my imagination get away from me...*

Perry silently considered Clark's tale for a moment and then commented gruffly, "Well, all that has the makings of a great *city* story. Why is DHS crawling up my ass over it?"

"That part is strictly off the record," Lois answered. "We need everyone's word that it doesn't leave this room before we continue."

"That won't be a problem," Richard assured them sincerely. *There's more? God, what else have they uncovered?*

"All right, then. It doesn't leave the room," Perry assured them gruffly. "Now, what's the rest of the story?"

"Well, in a nutshell, it looks like Luthor caused the EMP - using stolen *Kryptonian* technology," Lois answered.

*Oh, God, Richard thought. Luthor with Kryptonian tech is like... like Attila the Hun with nukes.*

"You're not serious," Perry said in disbelief.

"We're as serious as a heart attack," Lois told him. "Superman told Bill Henderson that he had built a retreat of sorts in the arctic several years ago. He calls it his Fortress of Solitude."

"Actually, he grew it from a pre-programmed crystal," Clark clarified.

"Well, while he was away, the place was burglarized and a set of crystals containing the Kryptonian database was taken," Lois continued. "A Canadian forensic team processed the scene and identified fingerprints belonging to Luthor, his mistress, and four of his convicted felon henchmen... By the way, Superman's not anxious to advertise the existence of his Fortress or the burglary. In fact, he put strict confidentiality conditions on allowing the forensic search. Fortunately, he included us on his approved list...."

"Well, it's a relief to hear that you haven't *completely* pissed the man off," Perry commented.

"Um, anyway, when they searched the Vanderworth mansion this morning, they found a twelve thousand cubic foot crystal mass protruding from the basement that resembled the crystal construction at the Fortress," Clark quickly added. "Luthor caused the EMP when he initiated that crystal growth."

After a beat, Perry asked, "How sure are you that this caused the EMP?"

"Um, we're absolutely positive," Clark told him.

"After they found the crystal mass, they got *another* search warrant to allow Superman to scan it with his technology," Lois continued. "He's turned over the raw data and his analysis results to Faulkner at Star Labs."

"Among other things, he concluded that the aggressive electromagnetic dampening protocols usually incorporated in Kryptonian crystal growth had been intentionally disabled, presumably so that the extra energy could be used to feed the transformation," Clark clarified.

"How could he tell?" Richard asked.

"His scan was able to decipher the original programming from the seed crystal buried deep inside the mass," Clark explained.

The group was silent for a few minutes as Clark and Lois' testimony sunk in. Finally, Richard quietly asked, "This is the story that DHS wants killed?"

"They don't want to tip their hand to Luthor and let him know that they're on to him," Lois explained.

"And neither do we," Clark said emphatically. "It, um, won't be easy keeping him in the dark, though. As soon as the lawyers get a hold of the autopsy report, he'll... he'll know that something's up and could very well run to ground. He won't be easy to find if that happens."

"We want to keep him in the dark as long as possible," Lois added. "As long as he still thinks he'll be able to steal the Vanderworth fortune and that he's literally gotten away with murder, there's a chance that he'll show up sooner or later. It's part of his psychological profile - he's the Lord of the Manor, far superior to us mere peasants, and he'll need to show up to validate that superiority complex."

"Fortunately, the Vanderworth's are willing to work with MPD on this, and, um, delay filing new motions a week or so. They won't hold off indefinitely, however," Clark added. "And as soon as they file, Luthor's lawyer automatically gets a copy and Luthor gets tipped off."

"So what's next?" Perry asked.

"Well, the authorities need time to finish their investigations..." Clark started.

"And the U.S. Attorney's just started a corruption investigation into the hired help's parole," Lois continued.

"You found something fishy there?" Perry pressed.

"Luthor's men should not have even been *eligible* for parole for several more years," Lois explained. "But not only did they get paroled, they all got released within two weeks of Luthor winning his appeal and then went right to work for the madman."

"They suspect bribery or blackmail..." Clark explained.

"...which is consistent with Luthor's apparent M.O.," Lois supplied.

"...and they'll need time to look into their finances in order to trace it back to Luthor." Clark clarified.

*Jesus, how can one man corrupt so much of the system? Richard wondered. The appellate court, the probate court, the parole board, and kidnapping an innocent child to force an investigator to forge a death certificate? How far has this spread?*

Perry leaned back in his chair and sighed deeply as he considered the information. After remaining silent for a moment, he asked seriously, "What can we print without tipping off Luthor?"

"The incident at the morgue last night has already been picked up by the TV news stations..." Lois pointed out.

"...and we can tie that to Luthor in our story..." Clark added.

"...along with the suspicious circumstances of Gertrude's death and the fight for the family fortune..." Lois told them.

"...but we'll leave out the fact that the body was already autopsied..." Clark suggested.

"...and that they searched the house," Lois supplemented.

"We could probably tie in the judgment against Luthor from that pyramid scheme in ninety-one and his mad land scheme in ninety-seven - there's a pattern there. That should be more than enough to put something good together by deadline," Clark suggested. "We'll have to be careful how we write it up, so that Luthor won't think that the other shoe's about to drop."

"You'll need to be quick about it so we can run it by legal in time for the morning edition. I'll call Frank at home to let him know it's coming," Perry stated authoritatively. "I also want the full story written up and ready to go to press as soon as Luthor's in custody... Good work, you two."

*Perry was right, Richard realized. They really are that good. But what is their partnership going to do to my relationship with Lois, especially given their history?*

Clark hesitated a moment and awkwardly stated, "Um, Kara's not going to want to leave Jason this soon. She's really been latching on tightly to her newly discovered relatives ever since I brought her back to the States and she hasn't stopped talking about her little brother since she found out about him. I think we might have a fight on our hands if we try leave right now."

"Both kids can stay here while you write it up," Perry suggested. "I doubt Alice will mind watching them."

"Are you sure? I wouldn't want to impose," Clark said tentatively.

"It's a done deal," Perry declared.

Lois turned to Clark and said quietly, "We'd better get going."

"Lois, Clark, hold on a sec," Richard interrupted. "Guys, this stuff is incredible. I had no idea."

"Oh, um, thanks," Clark stammered.

Richard turned to Clark and somberly told him, "Just to be clear - this doesn't mean that I'm okay with your intrusion into my life, or that I like seeing Lois spending so much time around you, or putting in all the extra hours she's has on this. But I'm also not so blind that I can't see what you've got with this story, or what the *Planet's* got with you two collaborating on it. Fortunately, I don't have to like it in order to be an adult about it."

"The paper comes first," Perry reminded them. "Glad that finally sunk in. Now, let them get to work so we can print this thing."

## Chapter 26 - The Best Laid Schemes

*Saturday, September 30, 2006 7:50PM EDT*

The audience at the New York Metropolitan Opera was eager with anticipation in the few minutes before the critically acclaimed performance of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* was scheduled to begin. Among them was Lex Luthor, sitting comfortably next to Kitty Kowalski in one of the Performance Tier boxes. For Lex, it was even more anxiously anticipated, after being forced to forgo the first three operas of the Wagner's tetralogy presented earlier that week in order to get his stalled crystal exploitation project back on track. After finally acquiring the kryptonite essential to his plans from the Harvard Museum of Natural History, they'd cruised to New York City, depositing their Boston 'recruits' in Davy Jones' Locker on the way. Not even Kitty's grumbling could ruin his good mood as he awaited the performance.

His companion was still complaining about the distraction he'd scheduled for the Man of Steel in Boston, a contingency for the slim chance that the freak was close enough to interfere with the museum heist. However, the alien was a no-show, as Lex had expected, and Kitty had slammed her sabotaged car into a crowded Boston restaurant, killing two of its patrons and wounding a half dozen more. She'd also been injured in the crash, suffering two cracked ribs when the vehicle's air bag failed to deploy. After she returned to the yacht a few hours later, she had been furious with him for cutting the brake line and her disposition had improved very little since then. He heard her swear under her breath and glanced over at her, sitting stiffly in her chair.

She caught his stare and complained, "Why'd you have to drag me here? I should be home recuperating."

"Stop complaining, Kitty," Luthor told her condescending. "You're plenty doped up enough to tolerate your mild discomfort. Besides, you should consider yourself quite fortunate for this privilege. You've about to enjoy a rare performance of *Götterdämmerung*, the 'Twilight of the Gods' - one of the best operas ever written, and you'd be hard pressed to find a production more expertly performed, if the critics can be trusted. And, of course, the hero *dies*, which is my favorite part!"

"Your favorite part?" Kitty asked edgily.

"Of course!" Lex informed her pompously. "He's a naïve fool, undeserving of his power - the Ring of Nebelung, in this case."

"The *what*?"

"It's a ring made from a magical substance called *Rheingold* that enables the bearer to rule the world," Lex explained. "But the hero, Siegfried, doesn't appreciate its power and gives it up for a woman. He's also so blind to the enemies around him that he is easily manipulated by them, tricked or drugged into fighting their battles, and he's stupid enough to turn his back to them. He deserves to die."

"It's just an opera, Lex" she replied impatiently.

"*Just* an opera?" Lex echoed in disbelief. "Is the Mona Lisa just a painting? Is the Queen Mary II just a boat? Is the Tizona just a sword?"

"Tizona?"

"The sword used by El Cid Campeador, a brilliant Castilian military strategist and warrior who lived a thousand years ago... Anyway, Wagner's Ring series might just be the *best* opera of all time. It's both the music and the *story*, which culminates in the death of the hero and the gods, followed shortly thereafter by the end of their world! Don't you see the correlation to our current circumstances?"

"You're sick, you know that?"

"It's one of my most endearing traits," Lex declared.

"It doesn't seem so special to me," Kitty commented impatiently.

"You have no appreciation for the masters," Lex declared condescending. "As I said, this masterpiece is one of the greatest operas of all time and one of the few things that I couldn't have improved upon. My talents are many, but they don't include composing opera. You might say that's my only fault."

"I might, but I won't." Kitty deadpanned.

"Pay close attention to this Kitty," Lex instructed her. "It will foreshadow the dawn of enlightenment that will come when my greatness rains down upon us."

"You're still not convincing me," Kitty replied irritably, unimpressed.

"Gods are going to die here, Kitty. Worlds, too. Nothing's ever going to be the same."

"Whatever," Kitty said dismissively.

Lex fumed at his companion. *Some fools refuse to believe without seeing, but she'll soon see*, Lex thought. *They'll all see and they'll be forced to recognize my greatness*. Lex turned from Kitty and contemplated his brilliant plan and the late adjustments he'd been forced to make. He'd originally intended for the theatrical conclusion of Wagner's masterpiece to be the harbinger of his ascension to power. He'd create his version of *Götterdämmerung* immediately after the final curtain of the production.

What could be more fitting than to follow Wagner's superb opera depicting the end of the gods and the world with the death of the alien superhero/would-be god and the destruction of the world that had embraced him? Just as Wagner's hero, Siegfried, only learned fear when he felt Hagen's spear pierce his back, the freak would finally learn to fear Lex Luthor when he plunged the kryptonite into his back. He deserved it for his folly. Hiding the Kryptonian equivalent to *Rheingold* under the floor of his Fortress was nearly as foolish as Wotan entrusting something so powerful to the safekeeping of the naïve Rheinmaidens. Lex now had Krypton's crystalline Rheingold, but unlike Alberich, the villain who stole the Rheingold in Wagner's tetralogy, Lex would not be tricked out of his power.

Unfortunately, despite the genius of his plan, it had been intolerably delayed by its dependency on fools who were anything but dependable. Most notably among these was his exorbitant lawyer, who should have already wrestled control of the Vanderworth's twelve billion dollar estate away from them and transferred the assets to the European market. The fool had instead been outmaneuvered by the family's lawyers and thus Lex's inheritance languished in the endangered domestic markets that that would be destroyed when he rose to power.

Morrison hadn't even been able to force the old hag's cremation in a month's time. That failure was further exacerbated by the betrayal of the coroner's investigator that he had 'recruited', leading the Chief Medical Examiner to reopen the inquiry into Gertrude's death. Those cascading failures had forced Lex to assume control of the situation and send the men on a helicopter flight to Metropolis to destroy the old crone's corpse. Perhaps now that the cadaver was 'misplaced', they could *finally* free his money from her greedy relatives.

The time table for his grand plan had also been disrupted by unexpected delays acquiring the remaining equipment he needed. The parts had been back-ordered, a casualty of the spike in demand that occurred when those affected by the EMP sought to replace their fried equipment. While Lex had been detained in Boston, the shaping tools he'd ordered and paid for in advance had been picked up by an unnamed customer from Metropolis, and the

replacements would not arrive until Tuesday. The electronic components required for his improved alpha scanner were similarly back-ordered, and not expected until Wednesday morning. *What a pathetic waste*, Lex thought. *The places that they sent my parts to won't even exist a week from now...*

Even his black-market order for a Russian R-73 missile system had been stalled in the chaos left by the EMP. The missile system was required to deploy his continental 'seed' at a safe stand-off distance and had been ordered shortly after formulating his continental growth plan. However, his spineless supplier had temporarily suspended his sales due to the increased law enforcement pressure in the wake of the EMP. Unfortunately, he was also the only supplier who also had a surface based launcher for the air-to-air missile, which meant they'd either have to take it by force, or endure another delay while Lex designed and built one himself. He would not tolerate another delay - he'd send the men to confiscate his property early the following morning.

"How long before this crap is over?" Kitty asked derisively, interrupting Luthor from his ruminations.

Lex glared at his companion and barked, "Quiet!" He was distracted from voicing the reprimand he intended by the dimming of the theater lights and the orchestra halting their tuning exercises. He pushed the squabbling from his mind and turned his attention to the stage in anxious anticipation of the performance of the critically acclaimed production.

*Sunday, October 1, 2006 6:30AM EDT*

Lex yawned dramatically as he sat in front of his PC reviewing his designs. It had been a short night. The previous evening's epic five-hour performance of *Götterdämmerung* hadn't ended until well past midnight, and he'd been up at four o'clock to make sure the men got out on their assignment on time. Since sleep was certain to have eluded him until the mission was complete, Lex had taken the opportunity to review his plans and financial projections, making subtle adjustments to reflect the timeline's current dependencies. Despite the delays, things were at last coming together for the inevitable conclusion in a few days time. He wearily reread the formulas on the screen in front him, blinking rapidly as he sought to shake off his fatigue. He finally suspended his review and pushed himself away from the computer as he glanced at his watch. *Six thirty*, he thought. *The caterers should be here with breakfast.*

Lex arrived in the dining room just as the caterer's finished setting the last of the covered plates on the main table. After the briefest of greetings, he dismissed them and walked to the head of the table, briefly lifting the silver cover over his plate to reveal the delectable vegetable frittata that he'd ordered from their menu the previous day. He replaced the cover with care and walked over to a control panel near the door. A moment later, the soothing sounds of Vivaldi's *Spring* filled the room, and Lex sat down at the table and dug into his breakfast. He savored the flavor of the first bite and reflected that it had been a wise decision to have his meals catered whenever possible. Although Kitty's cooking could get by in a crunch, she simply hadn't the skill to satisfy his palate as the caterer could.

As Lex continued his meal, his thoughts turned to the morning's mission. If all went according to his masterful plan, they would return with the missile launcher and six R-73 air-to-air missiles. One of the missiles would need to be modified for the crystal deployment, welding its variable wings in a fixed position, disabling the infra-red guidance system and reconfiguring the interior chamber for his crystal payload. It would be an enjoyable afternoon's distraction. He'd also have the last missing components that he needed in three days time, and

would *finally* launch into action the master plan so rudely disrupted by the freak's return. *Just a few more days*, Lex pondered gleefully.

He was barely halfway through his meal when he heard the thrumming of the helicopter's rotors intruding on the concerto. Lex looked at his watch and thought, *They're back right on time*. He put the silver plate cover back over his meal and left the room to meet the men on the helipad. He reached the top of the stairs just as Stanford was shutting down the engine and quickly jogged over to the aircraft. Reilly exited the passenger door facing him, and Lex immediately noticed the man's black eye and swollen nose. "Run into trouble?" he asked.

"You should see the other guy," Reilly replied proudly. "We did just like you asked, no problem. Grant and Brutus are ditching the van, and they should be back in an hour or so."

Luthor nodded, and then demanded, "Let's see it."

Reilly opened the back door of the helicopter and with Stanford's help pulled out the ten foot long aluminum crate from the back seat and set in on the deck. Lex unlatched it and inspected the bounty. All missiles were accounted for, along with the launcher and control system. Satisfied with their prize, he instructed Reilly, "Get the launcher mounted on the stern. I don't care if the instructions are in *Russian*."

When Lex returned to the dining room, Kitty was slowly walking to the table with her arms wrapped around herself and a grimace on her face. "Why does everyone have to make so much noise so early," she complained. "I'm still supposed to be recuperating from your attempt to kill me."

"Kitty, my dear, if I really wanted you dead, you'd be much quieter right now," Lex replied dismissively. Kitty ignored Lex's implied threat and took the seat beside him, flipping her coffee cup right side up, filling it from the carafe, and uncovering the frittata on the plate in front of her. As she started in on her breakfast, Lex sat back down at the table and resumed his meal, skimming the headlines of the complimentary paper that the caterer had left as he ate. The *New York Times* definitely had more of a political inclination to it than the *Planet* did, choosing as its top story the coming mid-term elections and the influence of a recent scandal involving underage congressional pages. *Meaningless*, Lex declared to himself. *They won't have a country left to rule in a few more days*.

He flipped the page and quickly moved on to the other stories, searching for news that was more relevant to his plans. He found nothing new on the government's EMP investigation - only human interest stories on the recovery efforts, mostly in Metropolis, which was the hardest hit. He also noted that the paper was severely lacking in its coverage of Superman's activities. *That alone might merit a subscription, if the paper was still going to be around after I remake this world*, he thought.

Lex finished his meal and continued to browse through the paper. Several minutes later, a short article in the national section caught his attention, with the headline, 'One Dead in Metropolis Morgue Break-In'. His eyes went wide and he thought, *They better not have screwed that up*. The *Times* article was frustratingly short - only a single paragraph. However, its brief description correlated with the timetable that he had laid out for the men's errand. Their instructions were to *secretly* remove Gertrude's body from morgue and incinerate it in the basement of a Suicide Slum tenement. They had obviously bungled the mission but lied to cover themselves when they had reported in.

"*Those idiots!*" Lex bellowed. He fumed at his hired help's idiocy and the brevity of the *Times* article before it occurred to him that the *Planet* would likely have covered the Metropolis story in far greater detail.

"What's the problem *this* time, Lex?" Kitty asked impatiently.

"Don't start with me," he warned, glaring at Kitty before rising from his seat and marching out of the room, and heading towards the ballroom where he'd set up his office.

After he logged into his computer and pulled up the *Planet's* web page, Lex was horrified to discover that the morgue break-in was their top story. Displayed in bold letters across the top of the page was the headline, 'Murder at the Morgue'. Even more disturbing was the subtitle: 'Missing Body Involved in Fight with Lex Luthor over \$12B Estate'. Worst of all were the side by side photos underneath the head-line: A glamour shot of Gertrude on the left, taken the year before, and Lex's prison mug shot on the right, which showed him snarling back at the camera.

*No, no, no, no, no!* Lex raged. *They can't do that!* He angrily read through the article, which revealed just how badly the men had bungled their assignment. Gertrude's skeletal remains had been recovered from a dumpster, which meant that the men hadn't bothered to drag her into the basement before lighting her up as he had ordered. The story had also laid out all the suspicious circumstances surrounding Gertrude's death and compared Luthor's efforts to seize her estate with his previous failed financial schemes. Although they stopped short of accusing him of murdering the old crone, they certainly made it easy for the reader to connect the dots.

He scrolled back up to the top of the page and noted the byline of Lois Lane and Clark Kent. *Lois Lane. Figures. Why couldn't she stick to Superman editorials?* he grumbled. He turned away from the computer and rubbed his chin pensively as he assessed the damage. *Knowing Lane, she probably went for the glory, printing everything they had, and they couldn't have had anything conclusive,* Lex determined. *But what about her sources? How much do they know about my plans?*

He concluded that there were two possible scenarios: Either all they had were theories and the *Planet* story was an act of frustration to get in whatever licks they could, probably with help from the Vanderworths, in violation of the gag order; or somebody had an ace in their hand that they hadn't played yet. *But what could they have?* he wondered. *We destroyed all of the evidence. It would be circumstantial at best... I have to find out what they know,* Lex decided, and he picked up the phone and dialed the number for his overpaid lawyer. *That deadbeat lawyer better start earning his fee...*

Lex had forced himself to wait for Grant and Brutus to return before unleashing his temper, and while he waited, he grew even more enraged at the abysmal failure. *Why is my genius continually thwarted by idiocy?* He complained. *The perfect plan, sabotaged by an egregious failure in carrying out simple directions.* He continued to silently rail over the morgue fiasco and the difficulty in recruiting good help. After an intolerable wait, his internal ranting was interrupted by his wayward cohorts' return. "You wanted to see us, boss?" Grant asked.

"Yes," Lex said neutrally, masking his anger with some difficulty. "I wanted to talk to you about that assignment at the morgue yesterday morning. I believe you said that 'everything was taken care of', if I remember correctly."

"Sure. Piece of cake."

"'Piece of cake', was it? Then how do you explain this?" he demanded, spinning his monitor around with the *Daily Planet* headline displayed. "Does that look to you like 'everything was taken care of'?"



"The guy surprised us," Brutus protested. "What were we supposed to do?"

"It was supposed to be a *stealth* operation!" Luthor bellowed. "Get in and out without anyone knowing that you were there. Didn't it occur to you that someone might notice a fresh kill?"

"But we got rid of the old lady's body, just like you wanted." Grant protested.

"Actually, no, you didn't," Luthor corrected. "You were supposed to ignite the body in the apartment building's *basement* where there would have been nothing left of it by the time Metropolis' bravest rescued the residents and doused the fire. Instead, you set her ablaze in a dumpster, where the fire was easily contained, easily extinguished, and leaving enough of the body for a positive identification."

"They cops were closing in on us," Grant complained. "We had to improvise and get out of there."

"You *improvised*?" Luthor seethed. "You might just have *improvised* us out of this meal ticket. Did you forget that the hag's children have been fighting me in probate court? If you had followed my instructions, then everyone would have assumed that the morgue 'misplaced' Gertrude. It'd be completely unremarkable, especially when they're still swamped with bodies from all those pacemaker failures during the EMP. There would be no body, no coroner's inquiry, no front page story, and no leg for the Vanderworths to stand on in court."

"But, what did you do? You left a warm body for them to worry over and in the process, made the theft of the corpse obvious. Instead of a simple matter of morgue mismanagement that nobody cares about, there is a stolen body and a murder investigation, which is all over the front page of the *Planet*! That gives the Vanderworths all the justification that they need to continue delaying the case and depriving me of my inheritance! The next time I ask you to do something discretely, *don't leave a trail of bodies behind!*"

"But they can't track it back to us!" Reilly insisted.

"Are you sure of that?" Lex asked skeptically. "Do you even have the slightest idea what they can or can't do?" Lex glared silently at his men and let the severity of their error sink in. He let the discomforting silence linger in the room for a couple of minutes, before he sternly declared, "Nobody leaves the yacht until we know what the damage is. Now get back up top and get that launcher mounted on the stern... *Get moving!*"

The men quickly filed out of the room while Lex glared after them. Once they had departed the room, he leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and his brow wrinkled in concentration as he considered how much effort had gone into stripping the Vanderworths of their fortune, how certain his success had been prior to the massive snafu, which now made the odds of achieving that goal so tenuous. *Oh, if only I didn't still require their services*, he fumed. *But I'm too close to imposing Götterdämmerung on this world to endure yet another delay to recruit replacement staff. Their punishment will have to be postponed.*

Lex opened his eyes and surveyed the room pensively, and he again reflected on the *Planet* story. *They can't possibly have anything on me*, he concluded. *It would be circumstantial evidence at best... However, it's probably still a good idea to keep a low profile. How fortunate that I had the foresight to prepare for such contingencies and stripped Gertrude's name from the ship. They won't be looking for a yacht called Alexander the Great...*

## Chapter 27 - Family Games

*Sunday, October 1, 2006 1:00PM EDT*

Richard sat comfortably in the patio chair behind the house for the stated purpose of watching the boys - Jason and his best friend, Mark. The two were playing some sort of spy game, wearing green tinted 'light vision' goggles, with toy LED 'laser' weapons strapped to their wrists and carrying walkie-talkies. Richard pretended to be dozing as the boys snuck up on him and he suddenly 'woke up' just before their attack, leaping up and tickling both boys, which sent them running around the corner of the house, squealing with laughter. *That should give me a few minutes peace while they plot their next attack*, Richard thought.

Richard sipped coffee from his mug and allowed his thoughts to again drift back to the dramatic deterioration of his relationship with Lois. His current discontent was a stark contrast to the optimism he had enjoyed when they'd returned from his uncle's house the previous evening. He believed that his suspicions about Lois and Clark had been unfounded, they had shed the tension of the past week and he had apologized for his suspicions. He even agreed to postpone the serious talk that he'd been insisting on and made a concerted effort to put the recent days' arguments behind them. Richard had been in a great mood and they enjoyed a pleasant evening together as a family.

After putting Jason to bed, he believed he'd have a perfect opportunity to reconnect physically with Lois. After all, much less favorable circumstances in the past had led to passionate lovemaking, with Lois usually as eager for the intimacy as he was. However, when he'd turned amorous the previous evening, she had balked and he'd noticed a horrified look on her face when she realized his intentions. She had quickly schooled her expression and made her excuses, complaining of fatigue and a headache, but he found it impossible to accept her explanation. Richard had angrily challenged her excuses, accusing her of refusing him in favor of Clark.

The accusation had enraged Lois, leading to another heated argument, and she had stormed out of their bedroom, preferring the solitude of the guest room to his company. The anger persisted that morning and only Jason's presence had prevented them from repeating their argument. They had said very little to each other that morning, both of them careful to avoid aggravating the already palpable tension. Jason's request to invite Mark over and then drafting Richard into their game had been a welcome respite.

He turned in his seat and observed Lois through the patio doors as she sat on the couch pecking away at her laptop with her cell phone precariously balanced on her shoulder. *Still working the story*, Richard noted. He had to concede that the morning's article on the morgue murder and its possible connection to Lex Luthor had been nothing short of spectacular. The story had even been picked up by the cable news stations, a fact which had surprised him when he tuned into Linda King's Sunday morning program on GNN. *You can't buy exposure like that*, Richard pondered. *Uncle Perry's got to be thrilled with what that'll do for the Planet's circulation. Unfortunately, it also means that he's more likely to make those two permanent partners, which is about the last thing we need right now.*

Richard's thoughts turned to the abrupt change he'd observed in Lois. The woman he endured over the past week was difficult to reconcile with the woman he thought he'd known for most of the past six years. However, his uncle's description of her from back in the day was a close fit to the strong-willed, uncompromising spitfire that he had been dealing with recently. *Is this 'Mad Dog Lane' that Uncle Perry raves about truly the real Lois Lane?* Richard wondered.

This other Lois was unquestionably a boon to the *Planet's* circulation and the transformation that he'd witnessed in her professionally could not have been more dramatic. Although he'd always known Lois as a talented and reliable reporter, her output in the past week had been among the best he'd read in years. If that morning's story was any indication of what to expect from now on, Lois wouldn't be waiting long for the accolades that she coveted. However, that incarnation of Lois Lane seemed to be as disastrous to their domestic relationship as she was advantageous to the *Planet*.

*What about my Lois - the one who'd actually listen to reason after presenting her arguments?* Richard lamented. *Is she gone forever, or did she never really exist at all, except in my imagination?* He reluctantly admitted that Lois' position on their matters of contention had been consistent over the years, though never voiced as vehemently as they had been in the past week. It also wasn't Clark's return that kept their finances and property separated - she'd stubbornly refused to merge them together to begin with. *It seems that Uncle Perry was right about that*, Richard conceded. *Our issues really have been there all along - I just didn't see it, and I didn't take Lois' objections seriously. I thought her position was negotiable when it obviously wasn't.*

*What have I really had all these years?* Richard wondered. *She wasn't willing to set a date even before Clark got back... She was never going to have more kids with me... Frankly, she's never been willing to fully commit... Have I had a fiancée or a roommate? And what will I have if we get through this? Will it be someone who's fiercely committed to her career, but unwilling to make any time for home and family? And what is going to happen to my relationship with Jason once joint custody starts up and he gets to know Clark as a father?*

Richard pulled his gaze away from Lois and stared absently out over the river while he mulled over the realities of his relationship. He found himself recalling countless memories of Lois over their years together and as he recalled each moment, he recognized the warning signs that he'd missed before: her perpetual refusal to ever discuss her feelings; her surprisingly strong opposition to his marriage proposal and reluctant albeit incomplete acquiescence; her refusal to discuss a wedding date or wedding plans of any sort; her consistent opposition to the things he wanted most in their relationship; and the marked change in her personality after Clark came back and her near obsession with him. He also recalled how closely in sync the two of them seemed to be, to the point of finishing each other's sentences, even when she was obviously angry with him. *I've never come close to being able to do that*, Richard acknowledged. *How do I compete with that and salvage this relationship?*

He was pulled from his contemplation by the boys' return, which caught him completely off-guard. The two climbed on top of him and attempted to complete their capture of the enemy when Richard recovered, growling dramatically and tickling them to again send the five-year-olds into fits of hearty laughter. Richard valiantly pushed his personal troubles from his mind and joined the boys in their game, chasing them around the yard.

Lois ended her latest call and set down her cell phone, unexpectedly grateful that it had been ringing off the hook that morning. Most of the calls were from other news outlets wanting more information behind her front page story, including some invitations to participate in on-air discussion of Luthor's apparent scheme. However, she'd been unable to accommodate them - she didn't dare risk tipping their hand yet.

Lois considered that the numerous calls had also provided a convenient excuse to avoid Richard and the open hostility that had developed between them recently. The thought led her

gaze out the back windows where she found Richard playing with Jason and his friend, with the muted sounds of their laughter filtering into the living room. *He really is a good man, Lois thought. Even with us bickering as badly as we have been lately, he hasn't let it get in the way with Jason... Jesus, what the hell happened last night?*

Lois had been nearly as stunned by her reaction to Richard's advances the previous evening as he was. The circumstances had practically been the perfect setup for make-up sex and Richard's overtures should not have been surprising. In fact, she *should* have been just as anxious to reconnect. However, she hadn't been thinking along those lines and Richard's advances *had* surprised her. *Geez, it's not like it was something that we hadn't done a hundred times before and under far less favorable circumstances, Lois thought. Why did it suddenly seem so... so unthinkable? I care just as much for him now as I ever have and my libido is as strong as ever, if recent dreams are any indication.*

However, Lois had not been dreaming of Richard. *That doesn't count, she told herself insistently. Clark is Superman. Everyone fantasizes about Superman. That had nothing to do with what happened last night... Maybe I'm just too wound up over everything that's happened the past few days. Everything will work itself out in a few days...*

The sound of the patio door opening disrupted Lois' ruminations and she looked up to see the two little boys tearing through the house to the kitchen with Richard walking slowly behind them. He had a sad expression on his face and avoided her gaze. As Richard walked past her, Lois was again interrupted by her ringing cell phone. She checked the caller ID, answered the phone and irritably complained, "It's about time you called back, Smallville." When she uttered the familiar nickname for Clark, she noticed that Richard suddenly stopped walking and looked back at her with an angry glare.

"Um, we don't have great cell coverage out here," Clark explained. "It took a while for me to get the message."

"Well, you're going to need to do something about that," Lois insisted. "I need to be able to get a hold of you. What if there had been an emergency with Jason?"

"Is he all right?" Clark asked anxiously. "I can be right there, if you need me."

"Relax, Clark. Jason's fine," Lois informed him in a softer tone. "But still... I need to be able to get a hold of you if something comes up."

"Okay, I'll try to figure something out," Clark promised. "Um, your message said that there had been a development?"

"Oh, right. Luthor's girlfriend showed up in Boston Friday night," Lois informed him. "She was using an assumed name, or rather, a stolen identity. But her fingerprints were on the steering wheel. Anyway, someone cut the brake line and disabled the airbag on her rental car and she slammed into a crowded restaurant in downtown Boston."

"I read about that," Clark muttered. "Two dead, six injured. The driver suffered two cracked ribs, but disappeared from the hospital a couple hours after the accident."

"Surveillance cameras caught her walking out with a couple of Luthor's prison buddies."

"Sounds like he's getting sloppy," Clark commented.

"Sawyer doesn't think he was really trying to kill her," Lois informed him. "She survived the crash, for one thing. Second, if he really wanted her dead, he probably would have tried to make it look like an accident. However, in this case the sabotage was fairly obvious. And third, she complained to the officers on the scene that Superman was supposed to save her."

"Does Maggie think Luthor staged it as a distraction?" Clark wondered.

"She's not sure. He may have just been sending her a warning," Lois informed him. "I've

been looking for something that he might have wanted to distract Superman for, but I'm coming up empty. There's really no way to know if any of Friday night's criminal activity was attributable to Luthor, assuming it would even have showed up on radar. Boston's a pretty big city with plenty of crime even without Luthor visiting... The biggest event from Friday night besides the restaurant crash was an explosion at a shipyard maintenance shop that killed a guy, but that was a couple hours later."

"*Was the Vanderworth's yacht there?*" Clark asked.

"I haven't been able to verify that. I can't find anyone at the Boston Port Authority willing to answer questions," Lois complained.

"*I may know a source who would have better luck,*" Clark suggested. "*If they have the AIS records, too, it might even provide a bearing for us to follow.*"

"AIS?"

"*Oh, that's Automatic Identification System,*" Clark explained. "*It allows the Coast Guard and Port Authorities to track ships electronically. Any ship over three hundred gross tons is required by law to have the system installed, and the Gertrude is probably around five hundred tons.*"

"Do you think your contact can shake that information loose?" Lois asked knowingly.

"*Maybe, if he can get away for a couple hours,*" Clark replied simply.

"Does that mean you'll need me to babysit Kara?"

"*Oh, I couldn't possibly impose,*" Clark insisted. "*Besides, by mom usually doesn't mind watching her. The problem is that Kara's been clingy and doesn't like me leaving her behind.*"

"Well, she's also latched on to Jason, who's *here*, and that might compensate," Lois reminded him.

Before Clark had a chance to respond, Lois heard Kara in the background excitedly exclaim, "*I want to go visit Jason!*"

"She heard me, didn't she?" Lois asked quietly.

"*Um, yeah. I may have a fight on my hands now if I don't bring her over.*"

"Well, then I guess you'd better bring her over," Lois decided. "It's not a big deal, Clark."

"*Well, if you're sure...*"

"Clark, I just said it was okay," Lois reminded him irritably,

"*Oh, um, sorry,*" Clark stammered. "*Um, well, we'll probably need about a half hour or so before we get there.*"

"Does this mean that you still have your transportation issue?" Lois prodded.

"*Um, yeah,*" Clark admitted. "*I've got something in the works, but it won't be ready until tomorrow. I'll explain it to you later.*"

"Okay. Well, you'd better get going. See you in half an hour," Lois said pleasantly.

"*Good-bye, Lois.*"

"Bye."

Lois had barely ended the call when Richard bitterly complained, "You don't have time for us, but you volunteer to babysit Clark's daughter?"

"Knock it off, White," Lois snapped. "I'm getting tired of explaining myself to you, which is absolutely *not* going to happen in front of the kids."

"Lois, we *really* need to talk about this," Richard insisted angrily.

To Lois' great relief, her cell phone rang yet again before she had an opportunity to respond to Richard. She quickly picked up the phone and checked the display, frowning when

she recognized the caller as her sister, Lucy. She had called nearly a dozen times in the past two days and Lois dreaded the likely reason. With her husband, Ron Troupe, also working as a *Daily Planet* reporter, Lucy seemed to be even more plugged into the office gossip than Lois was.

Lois knew that Kara's proud declaration Thursday night was undoubtedly burning up the grapevine with Polly as a witness and suspected that as the reason behind the spike in calls from her sister. Lois hadn't been enthusiastic to discuss the matter and had thus been screening her calls. However, given the choice between another imminent argument with Richard and an awkward conversation with Lucy, Lois immediately chose the latter and answered the call. "Lucy? Hi. What's up with all the voice mails?" Lois asked pleasantly.

*"Well, trying to make sure you're still alive, for one thing,"* Lucy answered sarcastically. *"I was beginning to wonder."*

Lois sighed heavily and wearily replied, "It's been a bit hectic lately." She snuck a glance back at Richard and was relieved to see him roll his eyes and turn away as he continued walking into the kitchen.

*"So I've heard,"* Lucy replied pleasantly. *"Nice story this morning, by the way. So... you're partners with Clark again?"*

"Um, yeah, looks that way."

*"Well, I've heard some very interesting things about him recently,"* Lucy replied teasingly.

*Oh-uh, here it comes,* Lois thought, and she asked impatiently, "Tapping into the *Planet* rumor mill again? Don't you have anything better to do with your time?"

*"Well, it was certainly worth it in this case,"* Lucy declared cheerfully. *"This rumor came with pictures, including an adorable one of Jason in the bullpen, standing next to a little blonde girl who looked just like him!"*

"Oh. That," Lois answered neutrally.

*"Yes, that,"* Lucy confirmed triumphantly. *"Apparently, the little girl is the long lost daughter of your old partner. The same old partner who skipped town about eight months before Jason was born."*

"He didn't know," Lois blurted out defensively. "And you don't know a damn thing about what happened back then, so cut him some slack."

*"Relax, Lois. I like Clark,"* Lucy replied calmly. *"In fact, before he left I was really hoping that the two of you would hit it off. But things didn't quite work out the way I hoped they would, did they?"*

"No, they didn't," Lois admitted.

*"I also heard how that little secret came out... How's Richard taking it?"* Lucy asked sympathetically.

"How do you think?" Lois answered curtly.

*"That bad, huh?"*

"Worse."

*"Well, it's to be expected,"* Lucy said understandingly. *"You let him believe the little rascal was his for all these years and now he finds out that someone else got in there first. That can't be easy for him and he has every right to be angry."*

"I suppose," Lois irritably conceded. "But whatever happened six years ago doesn't give him the right to make wild accusations about the present."

*"Oh,"* Lucy replied simply. After a moment, she added, *"Well, you should still cut him*

*some slack. You did drop a pretty nasty surprise in his lap."*

"Lucy, I really can't talk about this right now," Lois said quietly. "Richard's here, Jason has a friend over, and Clark will be over here with Kara soon."

"Clark's bringing Kara over? Oh, Richard must love that," Lucy replied sarcastically.

"He's the only one some of our sources will talk to and he can't take Kara with him," Lois explained defensively. "Besides, the little darling is anxious to see her brother again."

"So you're **babysitting**?" Lucy asked incredulously. "What did he have to do to talk you into that?"

"There are extenuating circumstances here and it's more for Kara than it is for Clark," Lois insisted.

"Sure it is," Lucy answered skeptically. "Tell you what - why don't you bring the kids over here after he drops her off. The girls are close to Kara's age and Ron can keep them all entertained while we talk."

"You don't fool me for a moment there, little Miss Innocent," Lois declared. "You just can't wait to grill me over all this."

"Lois, I am shocked, shocked, that you'd even suggest such a thing," Lucy replied melodramatically. "Is it so surprising that I might just want to catch up with my big sister, especially after you almost died Monday?"

"Don't overdo it, Luce."

"Seriously, Lois, it would probably do you good to get out of the house for a little bit and socialize," Lucy argued pleasantly. "From the sound of things, you've been working non-stop since you came to after fainting on that plane Monday, and if things really are as stressful with Richard right now as it sounds like they are, it's got to be driving you nuts."

Lois shifted her gaze to the kitchen, where Richard was pouring juice for the two boys. The prospect of spending the rest of the afternoon trying to avoid another argument with him gave Lucy's invitation sudden appeal. Lois was silent a moment and then said grumpily, "Fine. We'll come over, but you'd better explain Jason's sister to your kids before we get there. I don't want them pestering Jason or Kara about it."

*Sunday, October 1, 2006 2:00PM EDT*

Lois opened the front door of her sister's house and poked her head in. "Hello? Anybody home?" she hollered.

Lucy quickly came into the hallway and pulled her sister into a tight hug. "Lois! God, it's good to see you," Lucy said sincerely.

"It hasn't been *that* long," Lois complained.

"Long enough," Lucy counted. She released Lois from the hug and smiled warmly at the two children standing beside her. "Hey there, Jason. So this must be your sister, Kara."

"Uh-huh."

Lucy knelt down in front of Kara and said, "Well, let me get a look at you - such a pretty little girl. I'm glad I finally got to meet you, Kara. I'm Jason's Aunt Lucy. You can call me Aunt Lucy, too, if you want to, okay?"

"Okay," Kara said politely.

Lucy heard her husband's footsteps and after a quick glance behind her, she added, "And this is Uncle Ron."

"Hi, Uncle Ron," Kara replied graciously.

"Well, hello to you, too," Ron answered cheerfully. He turned to Lois and added, "Good

to see you out of the office for once, Lois."

"Same here."

"With it being such a nice day, we were thinking that we'd take the kids down to the park, if it's all right with you," Ron suggested. "We won't have too many more days like this before Mother Nature remembers that it's supposed to be fall."

"I've got a pitcher full of ice tea for us to enjoy while we watch them play," Lucy added. "It'll be fun."

"Fine, whatever," Lois muttered noncommittally. "Where are the kids?"

"Packing up everything for the park," Ron answered. "Go ahead and make yourselves comfortable and I'll round them up." Ron bounded up the stairs hollering for his kids, while Lois and her charges followed Lucy into the living room.

Ten minutes later, Kara had been introduced to ten-year-old Sam and his nine-year-old twin sisters, Michelle and Susie, and the group had migrated to the park at the end of the block for their activities. When Ron pulled out the Frisbees, Lois quickly walked over to Kara and under the pretense of putting sunscreen on her face, reminded her to be careful not to throw the Frisbees any farther than the other kids did.

A few minutes later, Ron had the kids all playing Frisbee catch while Lois and Lucy sat back and watched them. Lois finally began to relax after she'd seen Kara toss the Frisbee a couple times and was confident that the little girl wasn't about to out herself. After watching the tableau for another moment, Lucy cautiously commented, "So... Richard's having a hard time with Jason's paternity."

"If only it were that simple," Lois muttered.

"There's more to it than that?" Lucy inquired politely.

Lois was silent for a moment, chewing her lip as she gathered her thoughts. Finally, she quietly said, "I really don't know what's the problem is lately, but we're fighting over *everything*. Even when we're not fighting, nothing seems to click between us. This morning we were mostly just avoiding each other."

"And you're sure that has nothing to do with Jason's paternity?"

"I think that just forced us to stop ignoring the eight hundred pound gorilla in the room," Lois replied.

"The gorilla being your refusal to set a wedding date? ...Oh, did I say that out loud?"

"Yes, you did, and that's the *last* thing on my mind right now," Lois replied irritably. "The problem we've been ignoring is the incompatibility of his fantasy with my reality. Apparently, he had me confused with June Cleaver."

"Uh-oh."

"And now he's all upset that I'm not going to cede control of my life to him, stay home with Jason, and squeeze out more babies."

"Are you sure you're not exaggerating a little bit? You two always seemed to get along pretty well," Lucy said.

"No, I'm not exaggerating - he's been clinging to that fantasy from the beginning. But in the past week or so the arguments over it have really gotten out of hand," Lois informed her.

"I've heard a few things that might explain some of that," Lucy commented.

"What is it this time?" Lois demanded.

"They say that Mad Dog Lane is back with a vengeance," Lucy informed her. "But everybody thought she'd disappeared years ago and was replaced by a pod person."

"They don't know what they're talking about," Lois snapped. "Besides, what's that got to



do with Richard?"

"He's not used to Mad Dog Lane," Lucy pointed out gently. "Lois, you haven't pursued a story as aggressively as you have this past week, or had stories that were this good since before Clark left. The old Lois has been AWOL for most of the past six years. But she's clearly back now, though the folks in the bullpen haven't figured out if it's because Superman is back, or because Clark is."

"I didn't experience some sudden transformation just because a guy from my past showed up," Lois countered angrily. "*Nobody* controls me like that."

"Then what happened?" Lucy asked pleasantly.

Lois was silent for a moment, dropping her gaze to her beverage and wrinkling her brow in thought. Finally, she confided, "I... I don't really know. It's just... after coming to on that ball field, everything seemed different. Kind of like waking from a dream you didn't realize was a dream. I saw my life from a different perspective and I realized that I had become a lemming - I was just following the crowd."

"You mean a pod person."

"Whatever," Lois grumbled. "But that's not who I am and not someone I ever wanted to be. Once I saw that, I couldn't bear the thought of going back to that... I have to be the person that I was meant to be and I wasn't meant to be a lemming or a pod person."

"No, you were meant to be Mad Dog Lane," Lucy pointed out. "That probably came as quite a surprise to Richard, though. I don't think he ever saw that side of you before."

"Well, he'd better get used to it, because I'm not becoming a Stepford wife any time soon," Lois snapped.

"I know, but Mad Dog Lane is a pretty drastic change from his perspective," Lucy informed her. "That has to be confusing for him, and then to find out that Jason is Clark's and to see you spending so much time with him... His world's really been turned upside down."

"I never meant to hurt him," Lois said sincerely and she shifted her gaze back to the children playing in the park. Jason was frustrated by his bad throw and sat down on the grass. Ron quickly came up to him to encourage him.

Lucy followed her gaze and patiently said, "Don't worry, Ron will help him." The two sisters were silent for a moment and then Lucy added, "Deep down, I'm sure Richard knows that you didn't mean for things to happen like this, but I'm not sure that helps much right now."

"So what am I supposed to do about it?" Lois asked quietly.

"Are you sure that's the right question to ask?" Lucy asked patiently. "You've never been one to do things just because you were *supposed* to, especially if your heart wasn't in it. Shouldn't the question be, 'what's in your heart'?"

"I don't feel any differently about Richard than I ever did. What's your point?" Lois asked defensively.

"Are you in love with him?" Lucy asked.

"I wouldn't be wearing this ring if I didn't care about him." Lois snapped.

"There's a difference between caring about someone and being in love with them," Lucy pointed out.

"*Lucy*," Lois warned.

"Okay, we won't use the 'L' word," Lucy promised, holding her hands up in a surrender gesture. "Think of it this way... if you look at Ron and me, it's as magical now, after eleven years of marriage, as it was when we started, and I don't just mean physically. The magic's still there when we're just hanging out together and he's never far from my thoughts, even when

he's not in the room. I can just feel the connection - that we were *meant* to be together. He's my best friend and my soul mate and if I live to be a hundred, I'll still want him right there next to me."

"I'm happy for you Lucy, I really am," Lois muttered irritably.

"Lois, this isn't about me," Lucy insisted. "Compare that to how you feel about Richard. If you can feel that way about him, then you'll get past this - you just have to work your way through it."

"Not everyone gets the fairy tale," Lois commented cynically.

"Oh, the 'fairy tale'... This fairy tale wouldn't be wearing blue tights and flying through the sky, would he?" Lucy asked seriously. "The scuttlebutt is that the two of you aren't even on speaking terms anymore."

"Why does everyone keep throwing that back in my face?" Lois snapped angrily.

"Maybe because we *know* you," Lucy responded gently. "I know how crazy you were about him and how hurt you were when he left and it's certainly not difficult to read between the lines of that editorial."

"Luce..." Lois warned.

"I'm just trying to make a point," Lucy assured her. "Look, Superman is powerful and heroic and every teenage girl's fantasy. By all accounts, he's a wonderful guy, but can you really expect domestic bliss there? Can you see him hanging around the house on a lazy Sunday morning, or helping with the cooking and cleaning, or picking up Jason from school or out in the yard playing with him?"

Lois answered huffily, "I don't need the lecture on Superman. I know who he is and what he does."

"Enough said, then. Now, as for Richard..." Lucy continued. "He's a great guy who's already invested nearly six years in you and Jason, and not just because he thought the munchkin was his, which brings us back to what's in your heart... If you can love him back, then put in the effort and hold up your end of the bargain - by finally *marrying* him. Otherwise, stop pretending, give the man back his ring and let him move on to someone who *will* love him back."

"You're not seriously suggesting that I break up with him, are you?" Lois asked incredulously.

"I said *if* you don't love him back - it all depends on what's in your heart," Lucy objected politely. "Lois, I like Richard. I want him to be happy and I've been hoping that you two could get past this little shocker and be happy together. But if you *can't*, then don't drag it out. You *really* need to be honest with yourself about how you feel, and you need to be honest with Richard about it, too."

Lois noticed Ron approaching and held her tongue, grateful for the interruption. When he finally reached them, he stowed the Frisbees in their duffle bag and retrieved a football. "Jason's getting frustrated with the Frisbee," he explained. "I'm going to try touch football instead."

"Touch football?" Lois asked.

"Sure. It's more of a team thing and he can still run even if he has trouble catching. It'll be Kara, Jason and me against Sam and the girls. They'll have a blast."

"I don't think Kara knows the game," Lois commented. She stood up and called out, "Kara! Would you come here please, sweetheart?" Kara immediately came jogging over to her.

"Don't worry, Lois. I'll explain the game to her," Ron assured her.

Lois looked at him skeptically and boasted, "Ha! I've been kicking butt at this game since I was her age."

"Oh, really? Care to get out there with us and prove it?" Ron teased.

"Give me a minute with Kara," Lois replied quietly. Kara finally reached them and Lois pulled her aside. She knelt down in front of the child and asked in a low voice, "Kara, do you understand this game that they're talking about?" Kara shook her head and Lois added, "But you still want to play?"

"Uh-huh."

"Okay, but you really, *really* have to be careful. Watch how the other kids play. You're not allowed to run any faster than they do, jump higher or throw the ball farther. And you have to be *really* gentle tagging them. Do you think you can do that?"

"Uh-huh. I've been practicing gentle with Dad every night after dinner."

"Okay, then. Stick close to me and listen to what I whisper. Now, are you ready to some fun?" Kara smiled widely and nodded her head enthusiastically. Lois smiled back at her and the two walked back to Ron and Lucy. Lois looked up at her brother-in-law and declared, "Kara and Jason are on my team. We'll take Sam to even things out, and you and Lucy are with the girls."

"You're on!" Ron replied enthusiastically and he turned and trotted back over to the other kids.

"You're actually playing this time?" Lucy asked incredulously.

"Why not? Let's have some fun," Lois replied. She turned and led Kara back to the others, leaving her flabbergasted sister staring after them.

After a moment, Lucy finally shook the surprise off and jogged to catch up, smiling widely and shouting, "Well, it's about time!"

## Chapter 28 - Closing In

*Sunday, October 1, 2006 4:30PM EDT*

Lois leaned back in her chair at the kitchen table, sipping iced tea and spying on the kids through the window as they sat at the patio table behind the house. They were still excited from the touch football game at the park and were retelling each other the highlights as they drank their juice. Lois' team had won, of course, but it had been remarkably close and everyone had enjoyed the game. It had also helped bring Kara out of her shell and she had been as thoroughly immersed in the game as the others, though still keeping her actions within the norm for a child her age.

As Lois observed her now, Kara was chattering excitedly with the other kids. A small smile spread across Lois' face and she thought, *Someone had fun today. She needed that, after everything she's been through.* Jason was also caught up in the post-game chatter, bouncing in his seat excitedly as he told his favorite parts. He'd had a blast running and chasing the others around and the other adults had even let him tag them a couple of times. *Everyone had fun today,* Lois corrected herself.

Lois jumped slightly at the sound of her sister's voice beside her. "Glad you came?" Lucy asked cheerfully. Lois rolled her eyes and Lucy added, "It certainly looks like the kids had fun."

"You think?" Lois asked sarcastically. "Looks like Kara is fitting right in, too."

"So what's up with that?" Lucy prodded.

"What's up with what?"

"Well, as attentive as you've been with Kara all afternoon, it was almost like she was yours," Lucy pointed out. "Lois, let's face it. You just *don't* connect well with other people's kids. Yet, you seem to have bonded with Kara."

"She's special," Lois answered simply. She shifted her gaze out the back windows at the children and added, "She's also my son's sister."

"That doesn't make you her mother."

"Well, I'm the closest thing she's got to one," Lois snapped. She briefly locked eyes with Kara and didn't notice her sister's wide-eyed reaction to the words. After a beat, Lois smiled at the little girl, broke away from her stare, and quietly told her sister, "Besides, Clark could use the help."

Any response that Lucy may have considered was interrupted by Lois' cell phone, which the reporter reluctantly fished from her purse on the counter. After a quick check of the caller ID, she hit the 'Talk' button and said, "Clark? Did they find the ship? ...Sneaky bastard... Okay, you can fill me in when you get here... We're at Ron and Lucy's... No, they moved a few years ago. They're at 1978 Shuster now. Do you need directions? ...Okay, then. See you in a few." Lois pressed the 'End' button on her phone and frowned at the display.

"Everything all right?" Lucy asked cautiously.

"Just everybody and their brother's been trying to call me today, including Richard. Twice."

Clark had barely knocked on the door before it swung open and Lucy Troupe pulled him into a tight hug. "Clark!" she greeted him. She released him from the hug and said teasingly, "We've been hearing *a lot* about you lately."

"Uh-oh," Clark muttered.

"Relax, it's not that bad," Lucy assured him. She guided him through the house as she

continued, "Ron and the kids are out back and Lois is in the kitchen listening to about ten million voicemails. Sounds like some people noticed that story in the paper this morning."

"Um, yeah. I've been getting calls, too."

Lucy stepped through the patio door to the back deck and announced, "Hey, everybody! Look who's here!"

"Clark!" Ron greeted enthusiastically, rushing over and offering the other man a firm handshake. "Here, pull up a chair."

"Oh, um, we can't stay long," Clark said reluctantly.

"But we're still having fun!" Kara whined.

"Clark, we'll have plenty of food if you want to stay for dinner," Ron suggested. "Besides, we'd all love to hear about your world travels."

"Well, with things so, um, complicated right now..."

"Clark, you're our friend," Lucy said insistently. "We're not going to shun you just because Lois' life is so complicated. You're staying for dinner."

"Take it from me, it's best not to argue with the Lane women once their minds are made up," Ron said mirthfully.

Clark smirked and commented, "Actually, I think that it can be kind of fun."

"Then you're a glutton for punishment, my friend," Ron said with a chuckle. "You *are* staying for dinner, right?"

"I, um, suppose we can stay," Clark said pleasantly. "I'll need to, um, cancel our dinner plans first, and update Lois on the story..."

"Well, do what you need to do, and I'll fire up the barbeque."

After letting his mother know of their change in plans, Clark found Lois in the kitchen. Once she spotted him, she held up her index finger, signaling him to wait. A moment later, she ended the call and snapped her phone shut. "So... no sign of the *Gertrude*?" she said.

"No. In fact, it looks like he faked the AIS signal to hide his tracks," Clark confirmed. "They left Boston late Friday, purportedly in route to Palermo, Sicily, and the Port Authority tracked their signal east out of port. However, they slowed to a stop fifty miles out and drifted around that position until the signal was lost shortly before dawn Saturday morning. When Superman searched for the ship, he found a deflated rubber raft on the ocean floor, with a transmitter tied down to it. We assume it was sending the AIS signal, while Luthor snuck away."

"It sounds like he's run to ground and before we printed a word about any of this," Lois concluded.

"Maybe Superman's return spooked him. Whatever the case, he apparently doesn't want to be found," Clark added. "Superman found something else on the ocean floor, suspiciously close to their presumed course." He paused and shifted his gaze through the kitchen window at the children and added, "We need to be mindful of young children's hearing."

Lois followed his gaze and added, "That bad?"

"No need to chance nightmares," Clark replied. He scanned the room and pulled a paper pad and pen from a drawer, his hands moving in a blur as he wrote. A moment later, he handed the note to Lois and she quickly read it.

*Superman found two bodies weighed down on the ocean floor, recently deceased. The victims were an adult man and woman, both of them stripped, tied up in a heavy plastic tarp and anchored to the ocean floor by several eighty-pound bags of concrete. X-Ray vision revealed broken hyoid bones in both victims, which leads us to believe that they were*

*strangled or garroted.*

*Superman worked with Coast Guard and a forensic team to recover the bodies, which will be taken to the Boston M.E., although they're not expected to begin work on them until tomorrow. We're also not expecting a quick ID on the bodies, either. They might not even have been reported missing yet. We'll have to follow up with the Boston M.E. tomorrow or Tuesday.*

"We're assuming Luthor was behind this, right?" Lois asked.

"There's nothing definitive to tie the crime to him, but he seems to be the most likely suspect," Clark confirmed.

"There something about this..." Lois began.

"We've already established that he's a monster," Clark reminded her.

"I know, but it's not that. I just can't shake the feeling that we're missing something big staring us back in the face," Lois explained. She folded the note, stuffed it in her purse and added quietly, "I need to think this all through a bit more."

"Maybe Henderson or Sawyer will notice something we've missed," Clark suggested.

"They both know about this now and we can follow up with them tomorrow. In the meantime, your sister is demanding that Kara and I stay for dinner, so we should probably join the others out on the deck and enjoy their company."

*Sunday, October 1, 2006 7:15PM EDT*

As Lois drove home from her sister's townhouse, she concluded that the afternoon had an unexpectedly cathartic effect on her. The stress of recent days was gone and she felt reinvigorated. The afternoon's events had also been an undeniable delight for the children. All five of them had clearly enjoyed the long visit, the last two and half hours of which had also included Clark's delightful descriptions of tales from around the globe. All of the children had been enraptured by the stories, skillfully told and animated by Clark's exaggerated expressions. The last of the stories had evolved into a game that had Clark and Ron chasing the children around the back yard.

They had lost track of time, but the setting sun had made the hour obvious and eventually everyone had to acknowledge that it was time to end the visit, much to the disappointment of the children, Kara especially. Lois had managed to settle her down rather quickly, however, with assurances that the others were now her family and that she'd be seeing a lot of them. Kara had politely said her goodbyes and thank-you's and left with Clark.

Jason had also protested their departure, but fortunately, there wasn't much fight in him and his exhaustion was impossible to hide. He'd fallen asleep almost as soon as they pulled out of the Troupes' driveway. By the looks of things, he was down for the night and he'd have to be carried up to his room when they got home. She'd have to manage it alone, given Richard's impromptu trip to Chicago.

Lois recalled the two messages that he had left for her, both apparently missed while they were playing touch football in the park. The first message had been somewhat restrained, wanting to know when they'd be home so they could make dinner plans. The second, recorded forty-five minutes later, had tersely announced his plans to fly to Chicago that afternoon, returning late Monday or Tuesday. Lois had felt oddly relieved at the news and was looking forward to the solitude, eventually pulling into the drive of their home with a contented smile on her face.

*Monday, October 2, 2006 8:30AM EDT*

Lois felt wonderfully refreshed and unusually content as she stepped onto the elevator from the parking deck. She even caught herself humming along with the Muzak before she caught herself and forcefully focused her thoughts back on the Luthor story. It seemed that there were a quite a number of threads just out of reach, and there were quite a number of unknowns that would require a lot of legwork to tie them all together. Lois mentally compiled the list of hot items they'd need to jump on that morning and completed her transition to work mode.

A few moments later, she stepped off the elevator and marched to her desk, pausing only long enough to drop off her coat and purse and power up her laptop before circling back to the break room with her coffee mug. She surprised Ron and Jimmy at the coffee pot, where they were whispering conspiratorially. "Am I interrupting?" Lois asked suspiciously.

"Just discussing touch football strategy for our rematch," Ron joked.

"Good morning, Lois," Jimmy greeted her. "Everything okay?"

"Fine, considering the hour," Lois answered neutrally. "Is that sludge drinkable?"

"No more so than usual, but no worse either," Ron informed her, retrieving the pot and offering to fill her mug. Lois accepted the offer and held out her empty mug. "Say when," Ron advised her.

"That's good," Lois replied after a moment. She took a sip of her coffee and mirthfully inquired, "So, I take it you've filled Jimmy in on your humiliating loss yesterday?"

"You got lucky and you had *my son* on your team," Ron insisted pleasantly. "He put you over the top."

"*He* got lucky by ending up on my team," Lois insisted cheerfully. "Be prepared for even more humiliation next time... Well, I got tons of work waiting for me. Catch you boys later." She promptly turned on her heel, and marched back to her desk, leaving Ron and Jimmy staring after her as they followed her out into the bullpen.

As soon as Lois returned to her desk, she logged into her laptop and performed a new Nexus search on the weekend's Boston crime stories. She was more convinced than ever that Kowalski's auto accident had been staged as a distraction, though the main event wasn't readily apparent and she didn't dare eliminate anything from her results list. She had been deeply immersed in her research several minutes later when she looked up to discover Clark walking down the aisle to his desk. She saved her results and quickly intercepted him at his desk.

"M-morning, Lois," he greeted her cheerfully. He set down his briefcase and laptop and turned his full attention to her.

"We need to figure out what Luthor was after in Boston," Lois reminded him.

"I've been thinking the same thing," he agreed. "Considering that he hightailed it out of there Friday night, whatever it was probably happened that night."

"Probably about the same time Kowalski crashed into that restaurant-" she began.

"Lane! Kent! My Office! Now!" Perry bellowed.

Lois sighed irritably and muttered, "I swear, lately Perry's timing is getting even worse than Jimmy's."

Perry was lounging back in his office chair when Lois and Clark entered. "Close the door," Perry instructed them. Once the door was shut and the reporters had settled into the guest chairs, Perry leaned forward attentively and informed them, "I have a few announcements from the suits upstairs. First, from this point forward, legal needs to review any Luthor stories before we go to press. Apparently, his lawyers have already faxed over a letter

this morning to make their displeasure known. They're demanding both a retraction and that we identify the sources for the story."

"That story's solid," Lois announced defiantly. "We can't-"

"Relax, Lois. We'll never capitulate," Perry assured her. "We just need to make sure everything is rock-solid before going to press, so you need to allow time for the legal review. Second, the *Planet's* filing motions with the court this morning requesting to unseal the documents in the Vanderworth case and to lift the gag order. "

"We have a pretty good idea what's in the legal record, but if the motion carries, it could help get Harold Junior on the record," Lois commented.

"I thought as much," Perry replied. "Now, what's this I've been hearing about Luthor in Boston?"

"Well, you remember hearing about that car crashing into a crowded Boston restaurant Friday night..." Lois began. The two reporters then proceeded to summarize what they'd learned of the madman's actions over the weekend, with Perry listening keenly to their description.

Once they had finished, Perry leaned back in his chair with a pensive expression on his face. Finally, he turned back to them and said, "You realize that even as suspicious as it looks, there's no way to tie those bodies from the Atlantic back to Luthor, especially not without any ID on the victims."

"We know," Lois admitted.

"They may have an artist's sketch of the victims out tomorrow," Clark offered. "If that yields an ID, it should tell us what Luthor was after in Boston and maybe tie the murders back to him."

Perry was silent a moment and then stated, "Well, sounds like we'll need to wait on that," Perry declared. "What can you give me for a follow up to Sunday's story?"

"What about Homeland Security's concerns?" Clark asked cautiously.

"We won't publish a word about the arctic burglary or the EMP tie-in, but from the sound of things, the man's already run to ground," Perry declared. "I see no reason to sit on the murder story, but we won't put everything out there at once, either. We'll carry it over several days. So what have we got that we can print?"

"There's a lot of action going on at once on the case, but it hasn't yielded any fruit yet..." Lois started.

"...although we'll probably have an indictment later today against Hunter and Martin for the morgue murders," Clark reminded them.

"We should track down their parole officers," Lois added.

"Make that the parole *board*," Perry corrected.

"The M.E. should also have their results in today, but only the police and family get copies without a subpoena," Clark commented.

"We may have a way around that," Lois suggested.

"Let's go with the indictment story for tomorrow morning," Perry declared. "And if you should see Superman, send him to talk to Harper and Evans."

"What have they got?" Lois asked.

"Harper's handing off Superman to Sue Evans for the 'pool coverage' and I want his reaction to Luthor," Perry informed them. "It'd be the perfect companion piece to Luthor's cronies' indictment."

"If we see him, we'll pass it on," Lois promised.



"See to it," Perry insisted, and he waved them off as he turned to his PC display.

*Monday, October 2, 2006 11:30PM EDT*

It had been a hectic and only partially productive morning chasing down leads on the Luthor story, when Lois received the unexpected call from Harold Vanderworth Junior, requesting a discrete meeting at an upscale downtown restaurant. Clark had been nowhere to be found and wasn't answering his calls, which left Lois rushing down there on her own. It wasn't until she approached the entrance of *TJ's Bistro* that she noticed him fall in step beside her. "You really need to do something about your cell coverage," she grumbled.

"I'll have that resolved soon," he assured her.

They walked up to the maître d' and Lois announced, "We're here with the Mister V. party."

The slender older gentleman smiled at them and said, "Of course. Right this way."

He led them to an upstairs banquet room, which was empty except for a slender man in his early sixties sitting at one of the tables enjoying a glass of wine. He waved them over and the maître d' retreated from the room, closing the door behind him.

"Mister Vanderworth," Lois greeted him warmly.

"Please, it's Harold. So wonderful to see you again, Lois," Harold greeted her. "I assume this is your partner?"

"Clark Kent," Clark introduced himself, extending his hand, which Harold eagerly shook.

"Wonderful story yesterday," Harold commented cheerfully. "Absolutely wonderful."

"No lawyer this time?" Lois began cautiously.

"He'll be able to honestly say that he's only aware of a single meeting with you, that he was present and that we strictly abided by the terms of the gag order," Harold informed her. "Let's get something straight - I'm *still* constrained by the gag order. If we're to continue this conversation, I need your assurances that it stays off the record. This is strictly background material, unless you can corroborate with someone who *can* go on the record."

"You have our word," Clark assured him.

"What can you tell us about Luthor?" Lois asked quietly.

"Here's how it's going to work," Harold declared. "I'll scratch your back if you'll scratch mine. I need to know what you've dug up as much as you need what I've got." He patted an envelope on the table and added, "If what you have to tell me is distracting enough, I might even forget to take this copy of the coroner's report with me when I leave. Now, you go first. What have you got on Luthor that wasn't in yesterday morning's story?"

Lois stared longingly at the envelope for a moment before turning her gaze back to Clark. He nodded and then somberly told Harold, "He seems to be leaving a trail of death behind him."

"That's fairly obvious," Harold replied.

"Well, in addition to your mother, we suspect that he's behind the murder of... at least five other people in the last month," Lois informed him. "Three related to the M.E. investigation of your mother's death - the victim from Saturday morning and the missing investigator who did the original death certificate, along with her daughter. He's also a person of interest connected with two unidentified bodies fished out of the ocean near Boston yesterday."

"He was in Boston?" Harold asked.

"You heard about that car that crashed into a crowded Boston restaurant Friday night, didn't you?" Lois asked. At Harold's nod, Lois added, "Well, the driver was Luthor's mistress,

Katherine Kowalski. When we checked with the Boston Port Authority, we discovered that the yacht arrived in port Wednesday and left late Friday. And there was a transmitter tied down to a rubber raft broadcasting the ship's AIS signal to hide his true departure course."

"He's gone into hiding," Harold concluded.

"Superman's return may have spooked him," Clark suggested. "We're also certain he has something bigger in mind than just swindling you out of your inheritance."

"Similar to what he tried in ninety-seven?" Harold asked.

"Could be," Lois confirmed. "We really don't know what he has in mind, but whatever it is, it can't be good. Your turn, now. What have you got for us?"

"Luthor poisoned my mother, both in body and mind," Harold said sadly. "In addition to the arsenic that took her life, the medical examiner found a plethora of psychotropic drugs in her system. It would explain the odd behavior we noticed in her shortly after Luthor moved in. We thought it was Alzheimer's or some other form of dementia, but Luthor blocked our efforts to get her proper care. Her behavior turned erratic. She was paranoid and suspicious of everyone except him. He took our mother from us long before he killed her."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Clark told him sincerely.

Harold nodded his acknowledgment and added, "We have medical experts reviewing the coroner's report, and once their analysis is in, we'll file a motion to throw out the new will and recover what he took from the estate. There's no way my mother could have been anything close to approaching sound mind when she died, even if she really signed that thing... As for the body count - how likely is it that these murders you mentioned are going to stick?"

"It's mostly circumstantial, though your mother's case seems to be the most compelling," Lois revealed. "Of course, Luthor has a history of finding convenient scapegoats for his crimes. It'll be all that much harder with the high priced legal talent he has working for him."

"Maybe I can do something about that," Harold suggested. "We're planning to file a wrongful death suit against him, alleging that he conspired from the beginning to murder our mother for the money. We'll demand restitution of all the funds he took along with and we'll ask for a constructive trust on his accounts while the case is being argued. He won't have two cents to rub together."

"People have tried to recover money from him in the past but without much luck," Clark pointed out. "He finds ways to hide his assets."

"This is different than the class action suit from the early nineties," Harold pointed out. "They probably did a cost-benefit analysis, determined that it would cost more to pursue than they'd recover and thus they didn't aggressively go after the accounts he was paying his bills from. We don't care about the cost - it's the principle of the matter that counts. This man took our mother from us and we will not stand down."

"Neither will we," Lois assured him. "We're taking the bastard down."

"Then I think we understand each other," Harold declared seriously. "Lunch is on me. Let's eat while we figure out how else we can help each other."

## Chapter 29 - Dinner Guests

*Monday, October 2, 2006 4:35PM EDT*

Lois had pulled her chair over to Clark's desk for a final review of their top story before submitting it into the approval queue. The District Attorney had announced the indictments, as expected, but had offered little more information than the men's names. Lois and Clark had tied them back to Luthor in their story, relying heavily on anonymous police sources and the willing cooperation of the parole officers involved, who objected vociferously to the early parole. Clark patiently waited for Lois to re-read the text and to prompt him to page down.

After several minor edits to the story, both reporters were finally satisfied and Clark concluded, "I think that's about as good as it's going to get."

"I would be nice if we could have tied it into the suspected parole board corruption," Lois complained.

"We don't have enough for that yet," Clark reminded her. "For now, we'll have to make do with pointing out their early release. Hopefully, we'll have enough to go after the parole board after we get their response to our Freedom of Information Act request. That'll probably be a few days, though. Legal just filed the paperwork this morning."

"That's going to be a lot to pour through," Lois complained.

"I should be able to pull out the important stuff quickly enough," Clark insisted. "We already have a pretty good idea what we're going to find, so we should be able to start on the story outline in the morning."

"In the morning? Are you leaving already?"

"Kara has a doctor's appointment," Clark informed. At Lois' pointed look, he quickly clarified, "Psychologist. Every Monday at two o'clock."

"It's already past four thirty," Lois pointed out.

Clark lowered his voice to a whisper and informed her, "Pacific time. I have another twenty minutes." He paused for a moment and cautiously asked, "Jason's in day care this afternoon?"

"Yeah," Lois answered quietly. "I have until six to get him and then we'll need to figure out something for dinner. With Richard still in Chicago, it'll probably end up just being take-out and we have a limited selection with his food allergies."

"We'll be done with the psychologist by six and we're planning lasagna tonight, if you want to join us," Clark informed her hopefully. "It's gluten-free so Jason shouldn't have a problem - my mom's trying out a recipe she found online from the Celiac Foundation web site."

Lois gave Clark a skeptical look and said sarcastically, "Oh, really? And it just happens to be gluten-free. Exactly what have you been planning, Smallville?"

Clark immediately flushed red and stammered, "Um, it's, um, more for Kara's sake -"

"For Kara?" Lois echoed skeptically.

"We're about to spend an hour talking about the things that give her nightmares," Clark told her seriously. "I don't want that to be the last thing she thinks about tonight. Having you and Jason visit could be a very helpful distraction."

Lois offered up a sad smile and told him, "Then we'll be there... I assume this means your transportation issue is resolved?"

"Um, yeah. I'll tell you all about it later," Clark confirmed. "I need to get going. Let's plan on meeting back here at the *Planet* around a quarter after six and then to Mom's for dinner."

"Got it," Lois said. "Now one of us needs to get back to work." Clark nodded and offered

her a goofy smile before quickly collecting his things and marching out to the elevator lobby while Lois returned to her desk.

*Monday, October 2, 2006 6:15PM EDT*

Lois opened the access door to the roof of the *Daily Planet* roof and guided Jason through with her. She shifted the shoulder strap on her laptop bag and scanned the sky for Superman. "He should be here soon, Munchkin," Lois said with certainty.

"What's Grandma Kent like?" Jason asked quietly.

"She's a very nice lady and she can't wait to meet you," Lois assured him.

"Do you think she'll let me play with the animals?"

"Animals?"

"Kara said they have a goat and chickens and a dog..."

"Oh. Let's wait until we get there. Okay, kiddo?" Lois said gently as she continued to scan the sky.

Lois heard footsteps rushing up behind her and turned her gaze to find Kara trotting up to them. Clark was right behind her, still dressed in his ill-fitting tweed suit. Lois knelt down as Kara reached them and pulled her into a hug.

"Well, hello there," Lois greeted her cheerfully. She released her from the hug and looked up at Clark, her brow wrinkling in confusion. "Don't you need to change?"

"Um, not really, no. Our transportation is, um, downstairs," he stammered.

Lois rolled her eyes and quietly muttered, "You could have explained that earlier." She stood and guided both children back towards the door. "C'mon, kids. Everyone back inside."

Clark pressed the button for the lowest level of the underground parking deck while Lois observed Kara and Jason chattering away, exchanging stories from their day in school. She smiled at the tableau briefly before shifting her attention to Clark. "So... you got some kind of souped up hot-rod parked downstairs?" she asked hopefully.

Clark smiled mischievously and asked mirthfully, "You wouldn't want me to spoil the surprise, would you?"

"At least give me a hint," Lois insisted.

"It's really out of this world."

"Oh, that helps a lot," Lois replied sarcastically. "And nobody's going to be able to track us?"

"Not likely." Clark assured her, his grin growing wider. "Just wait. I think you'll like it." He turned his attention to the children, leaving Lois to wonder what he had waiting for them downstairs. Finally, a sharp ding announced their arrival and Clark led them out of the elevator and through the door into the stairwell. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs and knelt down in front of Jason, asking seriously, "You remember our talk about keeping secrets?"

"Uh-huh," Jason assured him.

"Well, this is *so* secret, that you need to use a magic word. Do you know any magic words?"

"Um, Abra Kadabra?" Jason suggested.

"Nuh-uh, it's 'Open Sesame'," Kara chimed in.

"Open Sesame?" Jason parroted.

"Yep," Clark confirmed. "Now, look over there and tell me what you see," Clark instructed him as he pointed to the concrete slab at the bottom of the stairwell.

"Clark, there's nothing there," Lois insisted.

Clark smiled mischievously and told his son, "Jason, put your hand on that wall and say the magic word."

Jason obediently put his hand on the wall and dramatically said, "Open Sesame!" Lois gasped as the concrete floor dematerialized to reveal a crystal staircase leading down another flight. "Cool!" Jason squealed and he ran down the stairs with Kara right behind him.

Clark stood up and held his arm out towards the crystal staircase, inviting Lois to join them. After a moment's hesitation, she followed the children down the steps. As she passed Clark, she turned to him and asked insistently, "Clark, what *is* this?"

"It's a Kryptonian transportation portal," he whispered.

"Transportation portal as in 'beam me up, Scotty'?"

Clark chuckled and replied, "Not exactly. If you're talking *Star Trek*, it's more akin to a turbolift than a transporter, though a better analogy would be the pneumatic tubes at the bank's drive through windows or in the big warehouse stores. Except this is much faster."

"How much faster?"

"Mach twenty. That means it's a six minute ride to Smallville, fourteen minutes to the Fortress, and about eleven minutes to San Jose, all thanks to a network of crystal transportation tunnels that we've grown a mile and half below the surface, with a handful of portals like this one topside to provide us with covert access."

As Clark and Lois joined the children at the bottom of the stairs, Lois noticed a shadow over them and looked up in time to see the stairwell's concrete floor rematerialize. Immediately afterwards, a razor-thin wall of blue light passed from one wall to the other.

"What was that?" Lois asked, wide-eyed.

"Final security sweep," Clark informed her. "We've implemented some rather aggressive measures to prevent unauthorized access to the crystal transportation network and prevent a repeat of what happened at the Fortress. It's practically foolproof."

"That remains to be seen," Lois insisted.

Clark reached out and swiped his hand across a pattern on the wall in front of them and previously invisible doors spread open in front of them to reveal a small square chamber with a low padded bench along three of the walls. Clark guided the others into the chamber and followed them in. The doors slid shut behind him and as he sat down on the bench, he said, "Smallville, please."

Lois heard an unexpectedly familiar male voice reply, "We will reach the destination in five minutes, fifty seconds."

"That sounded like Jor-El," Lois stated quietly.

"That is correct, Miss Lane," Jor-El replied. "I am actively monitoring the transportation portals. In fact, I performed a preliminary identification on the four of you well before you arrived at the portal entrance."

"How?"

"Visual recognition, thermal imaging, body mass and density measures, among other biometric identifiers," Jor-El explained.

"And you think that'll keep the riff-raff out?" Lois asked skeptically.

"The identification must be confirmed by the palm scan and verbal password before the stairs are exposed, and that identification is verified during the final scan, which also subdues any intruders and neutralizes any weapons or hazardous materials."

"Well, I suppose that'll have to do for now," Lois grudgingly conceded. "But I still want to review the security setup in detail."

"We can do that, but maybe we should have dinner first," Clark suggested. "We'll be in Smallville in a few minutes."

"It doesn't even feel like we're moving," Lois commented.

"There some specialized dampening technology installed in the chamber to insulate the interior from the inertial forces," Clark explained. "By the way, you have full access to all of the portals whether I'm with you or not, so Mom's available if you need a sitter in a crunch."

"You don't say?" Lois teased. "You really *do* have this all planned out, don't you, Smallville?"

"What kind of Boy Scout would I be if I wasn't prepared?" Clark replied cheerfully. Lois rolled her eyes and fought to suppress the smile that threatened to emerge on her expression.

*Monday, October 3, 2006 5:20PM CDT*

Martha Kent sliced up a cucumber for a salad to go with their meal, while Ben Hubbard pulled dinner plates out of the cupboard. "Kind of ironic when you think about it," Martha commented. "The cover story we came up with for Kara ends up being mostly true for Jason, just without the tragedy... He really should have explained things to her before he left."

"Well, that's all water under the bridge now," Ben concluded. "Though, they'll certainly have some work ahead of them."

"She's engaged," Martha reminded him.

"Is that so?" Ben asked pleasantly. "Well, they're still coming out here tonight. Doesn't sound like she's going let that get in the way with Jason." He walked into the dining room and set out the dishes and silverware for their expected guests while Martha continued preparing the salad. A few minutes later, they were interrupted by Shelby's sudden bark and turned to observe the animal rise from the floor and run over to the front door, tail wagging.

"They're here," Martha declared eagerly. She wiped her hands on her apron and walked briskly to the front door, opening it for Shelby and following the golden retriever out of the house. As she reached the barn door, she spotted Clark holding up the cellar's trapdoor as Kara and a little boy climbed out with a dark-haired woman close behind them.

They had barely emerged from the cellar when Shelby was upon them, excitedly greeting Kara and licking her face. "Down, Shelby," Clark commanded. The dog whined, but complied, sitting back on her haunches as Kara hugged her.

"Mommy, can we play with the dog?" Jason asked eagerly and he cautiously reached out to pet Shelby.

"We're going to be eating soon, Munchkin," Lois reminded him.

Martha chuckled at the tableau, catching the attention of her visitors. "Welcome to Smallville," Martha greeted them. "How was the ride in?"

"Unusual," Lois replied apprehensively. "It's nice to see you again, Mrs. Kent... Oh, this is Jason. Jason, come here. Say 'hello' to your grandma." Lois pulled Jason away from the dog and he looked up at Martha with wide eyes.

"Hi," he said quietly.

"Oh, my word," Martha said emotionally, her eyes shiny with unshed tears. *He's so much like Clark was at that age.*

She watched mutely as Lois leaned over and whispered something in Jason's ear, prompting the little boy to come trotting over to Martha. She knelt down and pulled her grandson into a tight hug. "I'm so happy to finally meet you," she told him sincerely.

"I'm here, too, Grandma," Kara declared. Martha chuckled and smiled over at her,

holding out her arm to invite Kara into the hug and the little girl quickly ran over.

Martha squeezed her grandchildren tight and then pulled back and looked at them. She smiled and said, "You two are the answers to an old woman's prayers. For the longest time, I didn't think I'd ever have grandchildren - and now I have two of the most special grandkids anyone could ever hope for." She kissed each of them on the forehead and then stood up, turning to face Lois. "Thank you for this," she said.

"It's no problem, Mrs. Kent," Lois assured her. Lois walked over to the old woman, offering her hand but Martha surprised her by pulling her into a hug.

"You're family now," Martha informed her. She released the younger woman from the hug and added, "And it's 'Martha' from now on, okay?"

"Okay, *Martha*," Lois consented.

Their conversation was abruptly interrupted by Jason's excited shout, "Mommy, look! See, I told you they had a goat!" He was pointing at the brown Nubian goat that was looking over at them indifferently over the gate of his stall as it chewed.

"Oh, that's just Dottie," Kara said casually and she walked over the stall, climbed up the gate and gently petted the animal. "Hi, Dottie. Did you miss us?" The animal brayed contentedly and Jason ran over, coming to a stop right in front of the gate and looking up at the animal in amazement. Clark walked over, picked Jason up and carried him the remaining distance to the goat. After a little encouragement from his father, Jason was also gently petting the animal.

Martha chuckled at the scene and then she turned to Lois, asking mirthfully, "First time he's been on a farm?" Lois smiled back and the older woman and nodded. Martha's contented expression suddenly took on a look of panic and she exclaimed, "The lasagna!"

"Mom, relax. Ben already pulled it out of the oven. He was right there when the buzzer went off."

"Oh, thank goodness," Martha said with relief. "I still had better get back inside and finish getting dinner ready."

"Okay, come on, you two... you three," Lois said sternly. "You can play with the animals later." Kara reluctantly climbed down from the gate and Clark guided the kids to the door. Lois fell in step behind them, with Shelby at their heels.

Once the group walked through barn door, Jason came to a sudden stop and looked around with wonder at the tall corn that spread across the land as far as the eye could see. "Wow!" he said excitedly. "You didn't tell me that Grandma's farm was so big!"

Clark laughed and informed Jason, "Well, I'm glad you approve." He picked Jason up and set up on his shoulders for a better view and continued towards the house. "How does it look from up here?"

"Me, too, Dad! Me, too!" Kara complained, lifting up her arms to her father. Clark shifted Jason to his left shoulder and lifted Kara up on his right, keeping his hands behind the children's backs for support. At the front steps, he set the children on their feet and ushered them into the house.

After dinner, Clark led Shelby and the kids outside and Lois watched them from a bench on the porch as they played fetch with a tennis ball under the dim porch light. She reflected that the evening in Smallville had seemed oddly normal. *This is like a scene from a Normal Rockwell painting*, Lois thought. The farm had been warm and homey, with virtually every wall and horizontal surface covered with candid family photos, documenting the Kent family

history and Clark's development from an adorable toddler to the strapping man now playing with the kids.

Jason and Kara were also now included in those family photos, some of which Lois recognized from Jimmy's recent slide show. However, her personal favorite had been taken by Ben's daughter, Sarah, and caught Kara with bright eyes and a wide smile on top of a horse, sharing the saddle with her father, who was also smiling proudly back at the camera. *Sarah's got almost as good an eye as Jimmy*, Lois thought. She'd insistently told Clark that the picture belonged on his desk at the *Planet*, though they'd have to superimpose a pair of glasses on it.

Jason's squeals of delight caught Lois' attention and she returned her attention to him as Shelby came running up to him with her tennis ball and dropped it at his feet. Clark took the ball, handed it to Jason and after a moment's hesitation, the little boy threw the ball over to the fence, sending the dog scampering after it.

A few minutes later, Lois looked over at the sound of the screen door opening to find Martha and Ben walking out to join them on the porch. Ben sat on the steps while Martha joined Lois on the bench. The old woman asked pleasantly, "How are they doing?"

"Looks like the kids are having fun - all three of them," Lois commented mirthfully.

"I can see that," Martha replied with a chuckle. "Lois, thanks again for coming out here tonight with Jason."

"With food like that, I should be thanking you," Lois protested mildly. "It still can hardly believe that lasagna was gluten-free."

"It really doesn't taste that much different, as far as I can tell, though I'll probably still go back to the old recipe once Jor-El cures Jason's allergies," Martha said casually. "By the way, have you scheduled his treatment yet?"

"Um, not yet," Lois replied apprehensively. "We were waiting to resolve the transportation issue first and we didn't get around to discussing that today... I still need to find out from Clark how long it's going to take. I forgot to ask Jor-El about that when we were there Friday."

"Clark told me the procedure would take about half an hour."

"Oh. Well, if that's all it is, then maybe we can swing by and take care of it on the way home tonight," Lois suggested. "I'll talk to Clark about it later."

The two women turned their attention back to Clark and the kids and silently observed their play for a few minutes before Martha interrupted the silence. "We're truly blessed with this family," she said emotionally. "There was a time when I thought I'd never have moments like this."

"It kind of surprised me, too."

Martha paused momentarily and then quietly said, "When my late husband and I were first married, we'd planned a large family, but after six miscarriages, we were advised to stop trying. We didn't fare much better with the adoption agencies, which weren't impressed by Jonathan's cardiac health or our farmer's income. We'd all but given up hope and were on our way home from church one day when the Lord saw fit to give us a child, delivering him to us in a fireball from the heavens."

Lois looked over at the older woman with rapt attention, remaining patiently silent as Martha continued, "It nearly hit our truck and we ended up in the ditch with a flat. When we looked out, there was a fiery trench cutting across the cornfields as long as football field. You can't imagine how surprised we were to walk to the end of that trench only to find a toddler crawling out of a small ship, naked as the day he was born."



"Mother!" Clark protested vehemently, blushing furiously at the description. "Don't tell her that!" Kara looked back with a wide smile, but Shelby's sharp bark brought her attention back to the game of fetch.

"Go back to your game and stop eavesdropping," Martha chastised him gently, chuckling slightly at his reaction. Lois was also giggling, both at the mental image that Martha had provoked and at Clark's embarrassment. Martha turned back to Lois as whispered, "We didn't let him run around naked very long. There were blankets in the ship, and we wrapped one of them around him."

"When did you realize he was different?" Lois asked curiously.

"A few minutes later, when Jonathan was changing the tire and the truck slipped off the jack," Martha informed her. "Clark caught it by the bumper, lifted it above his head and looked over at us with a sweet smile. We'd never seen anything so astonishing in all our lives, and once the shock wore off, we knew that little boy was ours and that we'd have a special responsibility with him. It was well worth the effort and not a day goes by that I don't thank the Lord for this wonderful family. I've truly been fortunate."

"The way he tells it, he was the lucky one," Lois told her sincerely.

Martha smiled warmly at Lois and said, "He always was such a sweet boy." The pair was distracted by squeals of laughter from the children. Shelby was tuckered out and sauntering slowly over to the porch, while the kids were 'tackling' Clark and getting tickled by him. Martha looked at the tableau and commented, "Fatherhood suits him."

"I noticed."

Martha's tone turned serious and she said emphatically, "Lois, it's been my experience that it's not the biology that makes a person a parent. It's the parental love and commitment that defines it. That's what made Jonathan and me parents to Clark, and what makes him a parent to *both* of those little ones... It's also what makes your fiancé Jason's daddy."

Lois eyes widened and Martha continued, "Nobody here will ever ask Jason to choose which daddy to love - his heart is big enough to love them both. And none of us would dream of standing between you and your betrothed - he's family now, too, and he's welcome if you choose to bring him here with you."

"I, um... thanks, Martha," Lois said awkwardly. "I wouldn't count on seeing Richard here anytime soon, though. Things are kind of tense."

"Well, I expect everything will work itself out in time," Martha told her confidently. "You just need to have faith."

"I hope you're right." Lois said quietly. She looked sadly back out at Clark and the kids and wondered, *How is this possibly going to work itself out?*

## Chapter 30 - Setbacks

*Tuesday, October 3, 2006 1:00PM EDT*

Richard expertly guided his de Havilland DHC-3 Otter floatplane along the Hob's River towards the pier behind his house, cutting the engines and slowly coasting the final twenty feet to the dock. He casually stepped through the plane's door onto the dock and tied down the mooring lines to secure the aircraft in place. He then reentered the plane and emerged a moment later with a duffle bag and after locking up the plane, he marched briskly up to the house.

Though the two days in Chicago had been a welcome escape from the tension that had recently permeated his relationship with Lois, it hadn't been the relaxing diversion he had hoped for. His parents had been walking on egg shells around him and the few comments they offered on his relationship were all in the past tense.

*"Well, it's probably all for the best," his mother had said. "She was never right for you."*

*"Mom, we haven't broken up," Richard had protested.*

*"Oh... Well, I guess you've still got a lot to think about, then."*

Richard recalled that the friends he'd gathered with the previous evening had likewise referenced the relationship in the past tense, offering words of encouragement for "next time" and giving him disbelieving looks when he insisted it wasn't over. *Do they really think it's that hopeless?* Richard thought. *Well, the fat lady's not singing yet. If I can just get Lois to slow down for a few minutes and actually talk about things, we can get past this. We'll have to practically start over from the beginning, though, given how drastically things have changed.*

After entering the house, Richard dumped his duffle by the couch and raided the refrigerator, pulling out some week-old left-over Chinese takeout and a can of Diet Coke. He transferred the Chinese food from the takeout cartons to a dinner plate and reheated it in the microwave. After walking over to the kitchen table and sitting down, he pulled over the scattered sections of that morning's *Daily Planet* in front of him. He took a sip of his beverage, pulled out the front section of the paper and spread it open in front of him. He eyes widened in surprise at the headlines and he thought, *Perry's got to be walking on cloud nine with this on the front page.*

The top story that morning had been Polly and Susan's interview with the Man of Steel, under the headline "Superman Finds Luthor Release 'Disturbing'". Though the hero had offered some anecdotal testimony on Luthor's crimes, the article had primarily been a comprehensive legal analysis of the evidence presented against the madman during his original trial and the flaws in the appellate ruling that overturned the conviction. Superman had even predicted that the ruling was so flawed that the Supreme Court would eventually be obligated to rule on the issues caused by the lower court's decision and the untenable precedents it established.

Below the fold was Lois' story with Clark, "Luthor's Hired Help Indicted in Morgue Murder", which included mug shots of Brutus Martin and Grant Hunter below the headline. As with the Sunday story, they connected the dots back to Luthor's fight for the Vanderworth fortune, this time in the context of the medical examiner's recent announcement that they had reclassified Gertrude's death as a homicide. They'd presented strong circumstantial evidence implicating Luthor in her death and the subsequent cover-up, albeit without explicitly accusing the madman of her murder.

The microwave beeped and Richard pulled out his lunch, skimming through the paper as he ate, eventually discovering the *coup de grâce* of the Luthor coverage in the editorial calling for a Supreme Court review of the appellate decision. It pointed out that though it had been

more than the ninety days required for a 'timely' filing of petition for review, a Justice of the Supreme Court could extend that deadline for good cause. The editorial made the case for good cause and laid out a cohesive strategy by which the District Attorney could still achieve a high court review of the case, even at this late date. *They could really be stirring up a hornet's nest here, going after Luthor so aggressively,* Richard thought. *He's just the kind of S.O.B. that'd come after us for the bad press. Of course, to point that out to Lois would be 'risk aversion', and we can't have that, can we?*

After finishing his lunch and cleaning up the dishes, Richard retrieved his duffel bag and trotted up the stairs. He dumped the bag on his bed and looked off into space pensively for a moment. *No point lounging around here - I've had enough of that the past couple days,* Richard thought. *Besides, it's better to get a head start catching up on the backlog at the office this afternoon rather than to be swamped in the morning.* He opened up the closet, and picked through it briefly before pulling out a grey suit and fresh white shirt and changing out of his jeans and sweatshirt.

Lois and Clark strolled out of Perry's office following an impromptu afternoon briefing and as they made their way back to their desks, Lois reflected that Perry had a hard time maintaining his curmudgeonly façade. Lois turned to Clark and commented, "Looks like Perry is pretty happy with today's stories."

"Looks that way. Harold Junior is probably happy about it, too, especially with this morning's editorial so closely following his recommendations," Clark agreed. He glanced around them and pitched his voice low as he added, "You missed a couple calls on your cell while we were in Perry's office."

Lois nodded her acknowledgment and once they reached her desk, she fished the phone out of the purse hidden in her bottom drawer and played back the messages. Clark continued towards his own desk, but stopped suddenly and returned to Lois, waiting patiently as she listened to her messages. She finally shut the phone off and looked over at him.

"Eavesdropping?" she teased in a low whisper.

"Not intentionally, but..." he whispered back.

"But you heard the message from Jason's teacher," Lois finished. She leaned back in her chair and muttered. "They want us to consider the T.A.G. school, because Jason's too far ahead of the other kindergartners."

"I remember your discussion with Richard..."

"Argument, you mean," Lois corrected. "Well, you're Jason's father - you need to be part of that decision, too. I think we're going to have to send him to the Montessori school. You might want to consider sending Kara there, too."

"She's doing fine where she is," Clark insisted.

Lois lowered her voice to a whisper and asked almost inaudibly, "Didn't you tell me she learned English in a day? No country school is going to be able to keep up with her."

"I did fine there when I was her age," Clark whispered insistently. "Besides, the Montessori school would probably find a Kansas home address a little strange, assuming I could even afford it."

"That will be a problem soon or later no matter what we decide about the kids' school," Lois pointed out. "You really need a place here in town."

Clark leaned against Lois desk, sighed deeply and said seriously, "I'm not sure I could afford anything here that's suitable for Kara. Everything out here is so expensive."

"I could sublet the penthouse to you," Lois suggested.

"I thought you had a tenant."

"It's month to month."

"I - I couldn't ask you to evict someone," Clark insisted. "Besides, that's probably still out of my price range and things are working out pretty well for us the way things are, with Mom there to help."

"Yeah, she a great lady," Lois commented, struggling to keep the smirk off her face and failing completely to suppress a brief giggle.

"What's so funny?" Clark asked as he echoed Lois' smile.

"Oh, nothing. I just..." Lois began causally. She then looked up at him with a mischievous expression and whispered teasingly, "I just can't shake that image of naked-boy climbing out of that trench thirty years ago."

"Lois!" Clark complained loudly, blushing furiously as Lois laughed heartily at his reaction. "I was barely three," he protested in a loud whisper. He glanced around and noticed their amused coworkers smirking back at him and became suddenly self-conscious at the attention, exaggerating his slouch even more than usual and lowering his head to hide his blush.

Lois smiled widely back up at him and said with a barely contained giggle, "Clark, sometime you make this *too* easy."

Richard walked into the empty elevator from the underground parking garage and pressed the button for the editorial floor. As the car climbed up to his destination, his thoughts again drifted to his personal life and the recent days' soul searching. *I'm starting from scratch*, he reminded himself. *The woman I thought I knew never existed - that was just a fantasy. I have to start from the beginning, but will she meet me halfway and will I ever get to know her as well as Clark apparently does? Or Perry, for that matter?*

*Clark's a bit of an enigma there, too*, Richard reflected. *A nerdy rube whose reputation belies his writing skill and whom you'd never guess to be the unwed father of two children from two different women - especially given that one of those women is Lois. You'd think that this 'Mad Dog Lane' persona of hers would chew him up and spit him out. How is it that he not only got past that brash exterior, but managed to get into her bed? ...It would be easier if I was competing against Superman - at least that I could understand. After all, he's Superman. But how can I possibly be coming in second to Clark... Why would she even be considering him over me?*

*Well, at least Jason's affections haven't changed*, Richard reminded himself. *I'm still 'Daddy'. I think I'd go mad if I were losing Jason, too.* The sharp ding of the elevator bell announced the editorial floor and broke Richard from his ruminations. He took a deep breath and marched out of the elevator, automatically shifting his gaze to Lois' desk, where she was talking to Clark. He couldn't help but notice Lois' bright eyes and mischievous smile as she whispered something to her partner. Richard was surprised to see Clark's sudden deep blush and hear Lois' hearty laughter.

"Lois!" Clark complained. He then whispered something that Richard couldn't hear, provoking his curiosity.

*I can't ever remember Lois laughing like that before*, Richard thought. *Jason would have her giggling on occasion, but never the deep, joyful laugh like this.* He quietly approached the pair, straining to hear whatever they were saying.

"Clark, sometimes you make this *too* easy," Lois said mirthfully, still struggling to contain her laughter.

Clark suddenly looked up at him nervously and Richard said irritably, "Am I interrupting something?"

Lois visibly stiffened at his words, her laughter forgotten. "Inside joke," she said curtly. "I didn't think you were due back until this evening."

"I left early," Richard said simply. "Sorry if that makes me a killjoy."

"Um, actually, your timing's perfect," Clark said nervously. "We were, um, discussing Jason's school options."

Lois rolled her eyes, and said, "There's nothing to discuss. We need to put him in the Montessori school. Kara, too."

Clark ignored her protest and asked pleasantly, "Say, Richard, didn't you say his teacher was recommending the T.A.G. school?"

"Yeah, she was."

"Well, I've done a little research and those schools are really getting high marks," Clark informed him.

"Clark, you heard what we said about that last week," Lois pointed out huffily. "It's too far. He won't know anyone from our neighborhood."

"That'd be a problem with the Montessori school, too - parents bring their kids from all over," Clark countered. "There's no guarantee that the friends he'd make there would be from your neighborhood."

"The T.A.G. school's just up the street from here," Richard reminded her.

"The bullpen's not a day-care center," Lois snapped.

"I'm sure we could come up with some after school arrangements that don't have Jason running through the bullpen," Clark said cheerfully. "Lois, all any of us want is what's best for Jason. Why arbitrarily eliminate options for him without at least getting complete information on the choices first? At least talk to the teachers at the T.A.G. school - find out what they have to offer."

Lois opened her mouth to object then snapped it shut without speaking. After a moment, she sighed deeply and said testily, "Fine, but *you* make the appointment. And it's just to *talk* with them - I'm not committing to send him there."

"Swell," Clark replied happily. "Um, Richard, what does your calendar look like this week?"

"My calendar?"

"Well, you're as much Jason's father as I am, if not more so," Clark said seriously. "You'll need to talk to them, too."

Richard stared at Clark for a moment and thought, *Why's he throwing me a bone, and how the hell did he get Lois to actually listen to him?* Aloud, he finally said quietly, "I'll probably still be swamped catching up on everything tomorrow - first day back, you know. Thursday or Friday should be good."

"*After* deadline," Lois interjected.

"That'll mean Friday," Richard told them. "Jason has a dentist appointment Thursday afternoon."

"That's *this* Thursday?" Lois asked incredulously.

"Yes, that's this Thursday."

Lois rolled her eyes and grumbled something that Richard didn't catch.

"Okay, I'll try to set something up for Friday," Clark declared.

"Well, if you two are done ganging up on me, I got a lot of work to do, so *shoo*," Lois said insistently.

Clark backed away and returned to his own desk, nearly tripping over a wrinkle in the carpet. Richard also withdrew and continued to his office, where Perry was waiting for him. Richard unlocked his office door and walked in with Perry right behind him. Perry closed the door and asked gruffly, "Are we going to have to have another little talk?"

"What? No, of course not. We were just discussing some school arrangements for Jason," Richard replied defensively.

"Really," Perry commented skeptically.

Richard sighed and said irritably, "We're talking about transferring him to either the T.A.G. school or the Montessori. Oddest thing... Clark actually argued my position with Lois about that... and she conceded the point."

Perry snorted and said mirthfully, "He always had a gift for that."

"He's a tough one to figure out," Richard confided. "As meek as he seems, you wouldn't expect him to last ten minutes with this 'Mad Dog Lane' you rave about. But not only does he survive, he's one of the few people she lets through that tough outer shell."

"Tell me about it," Perry agreed. "Richard, I've stopped trying to figure out why that works - it just does. And it certainly puts the Midas touch on their writing."

"So I noticed - this morning's paper was pretty impressive. It looks like you've got a full court press going on against Luthor," Richard observed. "Is something new breaking loose there?"

"Richard," Perry began impatiently.

"I'm not trying to interfere," Richard insisted with his hands up in a surrender gesture. "It's hottest story in the press right now. Can you blame me for being curious?"

Perry carefully scrutinized his nephew for a moment, then walked over to the guest chair and sat down. He looked up at Richard and said seriously, "There's a lot happening on that story right now and all hell will probably break loose soon. The big thing is the coroner's report, which Lois managed to get a copy of - Bernie Klein over at Star Labs reviewed it for us. Not only did Gertrude Vanderworth die of arsenic poisoning, but Luthor pumped a ton of mind-controlling narcotics into her - looks like he brainwashed her into signing that will."

"That should help the Vanderworths' case," Richard commented.

"It should. They'll try to throw out the new will as soon as they get the report back from their expert witnesses," Perry confirmed. "The police have reviewed Luthor's psychological profile and they're worried he'll try something desperate once the shit hits the fan. Kind of the 'if I can't have it, nobody can' kind of desperate."

"That part's got me a bit worried, especially considering what appears to have happened with the Finemans," Richard admitted. "Luthor's going to be plenty pissed off when it all comes crashing down and if the cops are right about that psych profile, he'll probably be looking for payback."

"I haven't said anything to Lois or Kent yet, but I've already discussed that problem with our publisher," Perry revealed. "When the shit hits the fan, those two are getting temporarily relocated, along with Jason and Kara. There should be room for you there, too, if you can tolerate each other. Officially, it'll be an out of town assignment."

"For how long?"

"A couple weeks. After that... well, we'll just have to play it by ear, though Wayne

indicated that we'd have his full support, whether that means providing a safe house or installing top of the line home security systems. That should help."

"I hope it's enough," Richard replied apprehensively.

"Me, too," Perry said simply. "Now... We both need to get back to work and I want a hundred percent from you this afternoon."

"You'll get it," Richard assured him.

"Good," Perry replied gruffly. He then rose from the seat and strolled back over to his office.

*Tuesday, October 3, 2006 2:30PM EDT*

Lex Luthor pulled the banded earplugs over his head and carefully seated them inside his ears before opening the door to the shop next to the yacht's engine room. As he opened the door, the sharp whine burst through the door and Lex looked over at the source of the noise, where Stanford was slowly boring a hole through the center of the kryptonite sample. They'd finally acquired the shaping equipment that morning from a Metropolis supplier, and their prize would soon have the proper form for launching Gotterdammerung in the nose of the Russian missiles.

The kryptonite had already been turned and was now a perfect cylinder, though the evidence of its former incarnation were scattered across the watery trough on the work surface under the power tools. Lex walked over to the table, picked up one of the shards and held it up to the light. It was about an eighth of an inch thick, ten inches long and tapered from nearly two inches wide at one end to a fine point at the other. *The perfect head for Hagen's spear*, Luthor thought. He dried off the fragment with a towel from the counter, stowed it in his jacket pocket and exited the room, pulling off his hearing protection as soon as the door closed behind him.

Though pleased with the progress forming the kryptonite, Luthor was enraged by the setbacks caused by the imbeciles on his payroll and the *Daily Planet's* nosy reporters. Grant and Brutus had been indicted in the morgue murder, and the *Planet* had identified them both as Luthor employees, again linking the break-in to his fight over the Vanderworth fortune and chipping away at the credibility he needed to persevere in his legal battles - battles where his overpriced attorney was proving woefully impotent. Not only had he failed to get the old hag cremated, he'd been equally inept against the *Planet's* lawyers. They'd been unimpressed by the legal threats and not only had refused their demands, they had practically dared Luthor to sue, citing case law where the courts had imposed onerous penalties on entities attempting to suppress the Freedom of the Press through legal intimidation.

*Intimidation?* Luthor thought. *They don't know the meaning of the word. Neither, apparently, does my lawyer, if this morning's paper is any indication.* The *Planet* actually seemed emboldened by their complaint, and had aggressively published the case against Luthor. *Well, we'll put a stop to that rather quickly*, Lex mused. *Why is good help so hard to find? Is it too much to ask that the people I hire to take care of such mundane details actually do the job?*

Luthor walked into the *Alexander the Great's* ballroom and marched over to his desk, relaxing in his chair and glancing over at a pile of several file folders sitting in front of him. They were full of background material on his primary adversaries at the *Daily Planet*, gleaned from illegally obtained credit reports, tax returns, online bank and credit card statements as well as from a variety of legitimate sources. He'd spent most of the morning gathering the

materials and performing the preliminary analysis and he was confident that he'd be able to find a way to silence the journalists. His preference would have been eliminating them, but given the high profile of the recent stories and the scrutiny he was under, he'd have to find less obvious means of controlling them.

The hardest nut to crack would be the Editor-In-Chief, Perry White. Luthor reviewed the information on White and found very little that could be used to influence him. *I could target the wife*, Luthor pondered. *If that would shut White down, it'd be the end of my press problems*. Unfortunately, easily intimidated men did not often get the top jobs at major newspapers like the *Planet*, and Luthor concluded that Perry White was the type that would call in the cavalry rather than capitulate, regardless of the consequences. Luthor closed the folder and set it aside as he sorted through the remaining folders.

On the other extreme from Perry was Polly Harper, the Man of Steel's most recent press contact. He was singularly unimpressed with the samples of her writing and concluded that the woman's career must be unremarkable. The *Planet* bio seemed to confirm that assertion, with no mention of anything out of the ordinary in the four decades of the woman's career. *Definitely a little fish*, Lex concluded. *The freak probably wanted someone he could control after the way Lane turned on him... Harper would be easy for me to manipulate, but there'd be no point. She's just there for his press releases*.

The next folder on the file summarized the background for Clark Kent. He had been surprised to discover that Kent had only recently rejoined the *Planet* after an absence of several years. The information gathered on Kent's hiatus had been even more surprising - he'd spent the past six years working as a farmer in Kansas, according to his tax returns, and with a pitifully small adjusted gross income. Further research showed that the homestead listed as his primary residence had only recently transferred into his name, apparently passing to him from his mother.

*The record doesn't match his Planet bio*, Luthor observed. *The moron lied... Probably didn't want anyone to know of his stupidity, going home to help on the farm. Well, he should be embarrassed, taking a pay cut like that. He should have just kicked the old lady out and sold the place - he'd have gotten a good penny for all that land*. Lex looked over the summary page in the folder and frowned. Though there was plenty to be found on Kent's Kansas life, Luthor was frustrated by the lack of information on his life in Metropolis. He couldn't even find a local address. There should have at least been a credit report entry from the apartment manager or credit card charges if he was in a hotel. But there was nothing. *He's found somebody to pay his bills*, Lex concluded. *Maybe a relative or an old girlfriend. No matter, I'll find out where's he's hiding sooner or later*.

Luthor flipped the page over to the summaries of Kent's work and quickly skimmed the articles, most of which were published prior to his hiatus. It seemed to be a fairly even mix of public interest stories and investigative reporting. According to the *Planet* bio, Kent had half a dozen nominations for various journalism awards over the years and had won the Kerth for investigative reporting in ninety-nine. *Well, he may be highly regarded by his peers, but there's no way that country hick is in the driver's seat with Lane*, Lex concluded. *She's the one with the vendetta against me. Kent's just her errand boy, though he seems to be a good one and that makes him a problem. But I can shut him down if I can figure out what he's hiding and he has to be hiding something - nobody's that clean*.

*Unfortunately, stopping Kent doesn't help unless I can also stop Lane*, Lex pondered. He set the folder on Clark Kent aside and opened the thick file on Lois Lane. He reacquainted



himself with her work as he skimmed through the samples. Luthor observed that her investigative reporting hadn't been very hard hitting during Superman's absence, but she'd come back strong after his return. *What's she trying to do, impress that big dumb alien?* Luthor wondered.

He turned his attention to her *Planet* bio, which like Kent's, had boasted of a plethora of award nominations and a handful of wins. However, with the exception of the Pulitzer for her wonderful editorial, "Why the World Doesn't Need Superman", all of the accolades had been prior to the Superman's disappearance. Luthor found an obvious explanation for her reduced activity - the additional dependent currently listed on her recent tax returns. *Mothers are so remarkably pliant when they fear for their children, Lex mused. Unfortunately, they're also remarkable unpredictable when that fear turns desperate, as it did with that Fineman bitch.*

Luthor closed the folder and set it aside, afterwards leaning back in his chair with his eyes closed and his brow wrinkled as he considered his options. *The challenge is to push hard enough to get them to back down without pushing so hard that they strike back desperately or set off something to blow up in my face, he pondered. Lane's the key here - if I can shut her down, Kent and the others will fall in line... Actually, there may be a way kill two birds with one stone and rid myself of both of those pests.* Luthor opened his eyes, spun back around to the desk and pressed the intercom button. "Reilly!" Luthor barked. "Get down here. We have work to do."

## Chapter 31 - The Trap

*Tuesday, October 3, 2006 5:30PM EDT*

Richard had successfully buried himself in his work, though he had to close the blinds in his office to avoid the distraction of seeing Lois huddled over her notes at Clark's desk. By the end of the day, the international breaking news was thoroughly broken down for the morning edition and the Washington Bureau's election stories had dovetailed quite nicely as well. The results at the end of the day left Richard satisfied that he'd earned his keep. However, he now faced a far greater challenge - convincing Lois to call it a day and leave with him.

As he feared, Lois had not been anxious to end her workday. "Richard, you don't bring down an elusive mad genius like Luthor by calling it a day at five," she lectured him. "This is arguably the most important story of the year. No, of the *decade!*"

"We still have to pick up Jason by six," Richard pointed out impatiently.

"Then pick him up," Lois snapped. "Oh, and take home the lasagna that Clark brought in from Kara's babysitter. Wait, let me find the instructions they wrote down for warming it up..."

"Lasagna?"

"It's gluten-free," Lois explained. "When Clark told her about Jason, she looked up some recipes online, and experimented with one of them last night. She sent us the leftovers... Ah, here it is."

Richard frowned at the reminder of Jason's paternity and thought, *We've managed to feed Jason just fine all these years without Clark's help.*

"Um, Lois?" Clark interrupted. Lois looked over at him and the shy man nervously stammered, "Um, we're actually at kind of a - a holding pattern until our, um, source comes through, and Jason's going to, um, need some Mommy-time with you just as much as Kara will need Daddy-time with me. We're - we're at a good point to call it a day."

"But the information from Boston..." Lois objected.

"...Isn't likely to show up for awhile," Clark finished for her. "Lois, if I hear anything, I'll call you - I promise."

Lois rolled her eyes and grumbled, "Fine, but you better be here bright and early tomorrow morning." She turned to Richard and said irritably, "Go pick up Jason. I'll meet you at home."

Richard stared at Clark incredulously for a moment and thought, *He says it and she listens, but I say it and it's a fight... Why is she so unwilling to listen to me?* Finally, he shook his head and marched off to the elevators.

Richard's irritation with Lois' stubbornness and the unwanted assistance from Clark had almost been forgotten by the time he reached the AfterCare facility and he offered Jason a genuine smile as the little boy eagerly ran into his arms. "Daddy!" Jason exclaimed enthusiastically. "You're back!"

"Yeah, kiddo, I'm back," Richard said with a chuckle. "Do you have fun today?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, you can tell me about it on the way home," Richard told him pleasantly. "Mommy's even making lasagna."

"Like Grandma Kent's?" Jason asked innocently. "She makes really good lasagna."

"Really? And how do you know that?" Richard asked with false cheer.

"Because," Jason replied happily as he started giggling and shyly looking away. That was the only answer that Richard was able to get on the matter.

Lois checked the oven timer and reread the simple reheating instructions that Clark had written down for her, smiling as the lasagna's aroma filtered through the kitchen and recalling the source of the meal. Martha had insisted on sending the leftovers with her, but everyone had forgotten about it when it was time to say goodbye. She'd been sorely disappointed when she remembered about it afterwards and delighted when Clark had shown up with the leftovers that morning. Unfortunately, the explanation for the meal had visibly annoyed Richard, most likely from the reminder of Clark's relationship to Jason. *How long is Richard going to sulk over Jason's paternity?* Lois wondered in frustration. *It's not as if it will change if he ignores it and it's not the first time a relative has sent leftovers home with us.*

She was interrupted from her thoughts when the door to the garage opened behind her and Jason came bounding through with Richard strolling in behind him. "Mommy!" Jason said enthusiastically, running into his mother's arms for an affectionate hug and excitedly showing her the toy spaceship that Richard had bought for him in Chicago while he eagerly described its features.

After sending Jason off to take care of his things, she stood up, noticed Richard's stern expression and rolled her eyes. "What is it *this* time?" she asked irritably.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Richard said curtly.

"Richard, I know you well enough to tell when you're about to bitch about something," Lois declared. "Now what's your beef this time?"

"Nothing... it's just a bit surprising to come back and find that Clark was planning out your meals."

"He was just trying to help," Lois snapped. "He knows that cooking isn't my strong point and we weren't sure when you were getting back."

"You'd have known if you had bothered to answer even once when I called to check in these past couple days," he replied sharply.

"I never heard the phone ring - must have had a weak signal," Lois replied.

Richard sighed heavily and pointed out, "Lois, we get four bars in the house. Where exactly were you that there would have been a weak signal?"

"All over," Lois replied angrily. "Damn it, Richard, do we *have* to do this now? I'd really like to have at least some peace tonight."

"All right, but we *are* going to talk about this later," he replied sternly. He began walking out of the kitchen, but paused at the doorway, turning back to her and saying irritably, "By the way - Jason's hoping that the lasagna will be as good as *Grandma Kent's*. I *can't wait* to hear the story behind that." He then marched out of the kitchen, leaving Lois staring after him in surprise.

There was an awkward silence between the adults when they finally settled down at dinner, both determined to maintain their cheerful façade for Jason's sake. The little boy seemed oblivious to the tension at first, eagerly digging into his lasagna. However, he picked up on their uncomfortable demeanor a short time later, looking nervously from one parent to the other. Richard noticed his expression and finally broke the silence as he asked, "So... what have you two been up to while I was gone?"

"Jason, why don't you tell Daddy Richard about all the fun you had playing touch football Sunday afternoon," Lois suggested.

Jason smiled widely and immediately launched into a detailed account of the game they'd played and his part in their victory. The little boy's enthusiasm provoked wide smiles from both adults, though Richard expressed some surprise upon learning that Lois had also participated in

the game. Both adults encouraged the little boy's tale and temporarily forgot their recent troubles.

The tenuous peace came to an abrupt end when the tale moved past the game and Jason excitedly proclaimed, "...and after the game, Daddy Clark told us all kinds of neat stories! There was one about a Thuseloh from Midgard-"

Richard interrupted Jason's narration, turning to Lois and angrily asking, "*Clark* was there?"

"Ron and Lucy invited him to stay for dinner when he stopped by to get Kara," Lois answered testily. At Richard's disbelieving glare, she added, "He's their *friend*. Don't get your nose out of joint just because they don't pick sides."

"And just what else have you been doing with Clark while I was away?" Richard furiously demanded.

"Richard, I'm getting tired of all your insinuations," Lois declared angrily.

"Why is it such a crime to wonder what roles the man's taken over with my family?" Richard demanded touchily. "This *is* still my family, isn't it?"

"Richard, *stop it!*" Lois hissed. She nodded her head towards Jason and added, "We're *not* discussing this now." Further comment was prevented by the sharp ring of Lois' cell phone and she quickly got up from the table and fished the device from her purse. Her brow wrinkled in confusion when she read the caller ID and she answered the phone, casually asking, "Does this mean that 'Daddy-time' is over already?"

"*Daddy-time's been postponed, thanks to a phone call from Katherine Kowalski,*" Clark told her seriously.

Behind her, Richard irritably muttered, "God forbid you answer a call from me, but you'll interrupt dinner to answer him on the second ring."

Lois ignored Richard, her attention focused exclusively on Clark's surprising news. She began marching briskly down the hall to the office for privacy as she incredulously replied, "Kowalski called? What did she want?"

"*She wants to lure me into a trap, but she said she's got incriminating information for us on Lex Luthor,*" Clark informed her.

"Are you sure it's a trap?"

"*Well, it sure looks that way. For one thing, she insists that I come alone to an abandoned plant in Suicide Slum tonight at midnight,*" Clark revealed. "*It's at forty-ninth and Independence - it used to be the old Baxter Metal Stamping plant years ago, before the area went downhill.*"

"Same place we found that InterGang Chop Shop back in the day?" Lois asked curiously.

"*That's the one.*"

"No way is someone like Kowalski going *there*, alone, at that time of night."

"*Not likely,*" Clark agreed. "*Another thing - when I suggested an alternate location and recommended involving friends from Witness Protection for her, she muted the phone.*"

"How could you tell?"

"*There's always background noise if you know to listen for it, which suddenly disappears when someone hits the mute button,*" Clark told her.

"And there's only one reason for her to hit mute..." Lois began.

"*...so that I wouldn't hear Luthor telling her what to say,*" Clark finished. "*There are some other minor inconsistencies in what she was saying, too and it all points to the same thing - it's a trap... However, it could still be a good way to find out where Luthor's hiding, if*

*his flunkies take me there, and might be our best shot at recovering the stolen crystals before he does something crazy with them."*

"Clark, have you lost your mind?" Lois asked incredulously. She pitched her voice lower and asked emphatically, "What if... Wait, is it safe to talk about this on the phone?"

*"As safe as being there. After the upgrades on our phones, not even somebody with stolen Kryptonian technology could break the encryption,"* Clark assured her. *"Unless your house is bugged, it's safe to talk."*

"Well, what if Luthor has kryptonite? And what if he's figured out the, um, 'family secret'?"

*"I'm fairly certain that he's after Clark Kent this time, not Superman,"* Clark countered. *"Last time he lured Superman into a trap, he sent a bomb threat over an ultra-sonic carrier wave that only Kryptonians can hear."*

"Clark, Luthor *does* have the resources for a thorough background check on Clark Kent," Lois reminded him.

*"And he'd find a continuous record over the past several years,"* Clark explained. *"My mom put down most of the farm income as mine on the tax returns and used my checks and credit cards to pay the bills. As far as any official agencies are concerned, Mom's retired and I've spent the last six years working as a farmer in Smallville... Lois, Clark Kent's name is on those stories, same as yours. That's who he's after, but you could be in danger, too. Your name is on those stories, same as mine."*

"He's insane, not suicidal," Lois countered. "He knows that if he came after me that he'd have a very pissed off Superman on his ass and he can't go toe-to-toe with him."

*"He may have linked you to Superman back in the day, but I don't think anyone's thinking along those lines now - at least I hope not,"* Clark argued. *"Besides, Luthor has to realize that he's already angered Superman. He'd have little doubt that the burglary would be discovered by now and this morning's paper left little doubt about what Superman thinks of him."*

"Well, if he's not worried about Superman, then why'd Kowalski call you instead of me? I've got top billing on those stories."

*"Divide and conquer, maybe?"* Clark suggested. *"Or maybe he needs to lure me into a trap because he doesn't have a local address to target his rage against. He wouldn't have that problem with you. Remember, he has the resources for a thorough background check on Lois Lane."*

"Luthor's not chasing me out of my house!" Lois objected adamantly.

*"Lois, at least lay low long enough for us to install some advanced security upgrades at the house,"* Clark suggested. *"And we're keeping Jason home from school tomorrow - Mom's already volunteered to watch him."*

Lois was silent for a moment and then quietly asked, "How long will we need to lay low?"

*"At least for tonight - maybe a few days to a week while we wait for the dust to settle,"* Clark said gently. *"We'll know more after we see what Luthor tries tonight."*

Lois rolled her eyes and said irritably, "Fine, but it still sucks... you do realize that Richard will go ballistic over this shit, right?"

*"Sorry about that,"* Clark said sincerely. After a brief pause, he added, *"You know you're welcome to stay out here. It gets complicated with Richard back in town, though. I can't imagine a convincing way of explaining the portal system to him without giving him enough clues to figure out the family secret."*

"I don't think we need to worry about that quite yet - it's the *other* unconvincing explanations that are the problem," Lois replied unhappily. She sighed and then added, "I'll let Richard know we're evacuating and make the arrangements. I'll call you back once everything is set."

*"Holler if you need anything. I'll be around,"* Clark told her.

After ending the call, Lois looked down the hall towards the kitchen apprehensively. *He'd better not give me the 'nothing's worth getting killed over' lecture,* Lois thought. *Well, I might as well get this over with.* As she walked down the hall, the sounds of Jason's piano practice informed her that he and Richard had finished their dinner. A glance in the kitchen confirmed that the dishes had been cleaned up, with the exception of her plate. She found Richard in the living room, staring blankly at the GNN newscast. She called his name and when he looked up at her, she somberly told him, "Clark thinks that Luthor may try to come after us tonight - we need to get out of the house."

*Tuesday, October 3, 2006 11:45PM EDT*

Clark leaned heavily against the fender of the Audi with Lois and Jimmy while they waited for the evening's events to unfold. He found himself exceptionally uncomfortable with the drastic alterations to his plan for handling Luthor's trap. However, his concern over Lois, Jason and Richard's safety had morphed his plan for a quick and easy solo infiltration into an elaborate collaboration. Once Richard reported the situation to his uncle, Perry had called in the cavalry. Clark had found both Bill Henderson and Maggie Sawyer waiting with Perry and Lois in the penthouse suite at the Metropolis Paradise Hotel. Together, they had hashed out the details of 'Plan B', which did *not* include Clark walking blindly into Luthor's trap and hoping for the best. Lois had been particularly adamant about that.

Clark sighed in frustration and nervously ran his hand through his hair.

"You okay, Clark?" Jimmy inquired sincerely.

"Clark, relax," Lois added authoritatively. "Everything is going to be fine."

"It's just a little nerve-racking," Clark complained quietly. "They're taking a huge risk."

"We've been through this," Lois reminded him. "There's no way that Maggie is going to put a civilian in harm's way and since Robertson kind of resembles you and Luthor's never met Clark Kent..."

"I know, I know," Clark conceded. "It's just - well, I'm not really comfortable with other people risking their lives on my account."

"Well, Superman will probably be looking out for him," Lois pointed out. "He's already disabled the booby traps, remember?"

Clark nodded his head absently. Prior to showing up with Lois at the S.C.U. staging area at the closed strip mall, he'd stepped away and inspected the facility that Kowalski had directed him to and identified two armed bandits waiting inside. He also discovered a portable generator behind the facility providing power for the lights and an array of cameras, speakers and microphones. They'd all been wired through a cell phone - apparently Luthor planned to call it in, which didn't bode well for his intentions.

Even more disturbing were the numerous incendiary devices throughout the building, which were wired into a remote detonator. He had disabled the detonators with his heat vision, but it had required an extremely tight focus to avoid tipping off Luthor to his presence, leaving only the smallest of pinholes through the building's sheet metal shell. The effort had had left him with a mild headache.

"Clark?" Lois prodded, interrupting his ruminations.

He sighed in frustration and said, "It's a mistake to underestimate Luthor. We can't know that we spotted all of the traps - and for Detective Robertson to be taking this risk..."

"It's his job," Lois said sternly. She pitched her voice to a low whisper and added, "Not even Superman works alone these days. Don't forget that."

Clark halted his reply when Detective Warren Robertson approached him. The MPD undercover unit had done a remarkable job of disguising him to look like Clark Kent and both reporters found him to be a convincing double. "Mister Kent?" he inquired. "We're going to need you on a headset so you can cue me over my earpiece when I talk to the bad guys."

"I'll be prompting you," Lois interrupted. "Clark's too likely to freeze up or lose his dinner if things get dicey."

Robertson regarded the pair skeptically for a moment before nodding his head and saying, "All right, then, but we still need Clark with us for the final briefing. If you'll follow me..."

The journalists obliged and fell in step with the officer as he guided them over to the S.C.U. Mobile Command Center van.

Detective Robertson drove through the gate of the abandoned industrial plant and parked his car next to the side door. Just before opening the door of his car, he whispered, "Here we go." He exited the vehicle and walked up to the door of the building.

"*Don't forget you're Clark Kent right now,*" Lois whispered in her mike from the Mobile Command Center van. "*That means you need to act nervous and scared. Now, repeat after me: Hello? Miss Kowalski?*"

"Hello? Miss Kowalski?" Robertson repeated as he opened the door.

A stocky man promptly pulled Robertson through the door by his coat. "Get in here," he commanded.

Robertson recognized the man as Ralph Simpson, thanks to the intel Superman had provided. The crook had a long rap sheet and was suspected of being hired muscle for various Metropolis criminal figures. Robertson stumbled and fell to his knees, afterward looking up at Ralph.

"*You - you're not Katherine,*" Lois whispered, imitating her partner as best she could.

"You - you're not Katherine," Robertson said apprehensively. He slowly stood up, grimacing as he did so.

"She couldn't make it," another voice replied. Robertson looked over and identified the muscle-bound accomplice, Shawn Timmons, who was also aiming a pistol at him.

"*Wh-What do you want?*" Lois whispered, again imitating Clark. In her normal tone she added. "*Act scared.*"

"Wh-What do you want?" Robertson asked meekly, again parroting the words in his earpiece.

"You've pissed off the wrong guy," Ralph answered. "He'd like a few words with you."

A moment later, a sinister voice echoed through the empty plant. "*Mister Kent,*" Luthor greeted with false cheer. "*You simply **must** forgive the staff for their impolite greeting - good help is **so** hard to find these days.*"

"*It's Luthor.*" Lois whispered. "*Ask him what he wants.*"

Robertson nervously said, "Who are you? What do you want?"

Luthor ignored the question and continued, "*You see, Mister Kent, I have a bit of a P.R. problem - and you're a big part of that problem.*"

*"Keep acting like you're scared out of your wits,"* Lois instructed, and then added in her 'Clark' voice, *"You - you're Lex Luthor, aren't you? Well we just report the truth. If you think we were wrong, why don't you tell me your side of the story?"*

Robertson wrinkled his brow in confusion and then said nervously, *"You - you're Lex Luthor, aren't you? Well, we just report the truth. If you think it's wrong, tell me your side."*

*"My brilliant plan is beyond your capacity to understand, Mister Kent, and your pitiful paper has made a grave error in questioning my intentions,"* Luthor said condescendingly.

*"Are you sure you don't want to set the record straight?"* Lois whispered.

*"You sure you don't want to set the record straight?"* Robertson repeated.

*"There's little time for that, Mister Kent - we're at the dawn of a new era. Unfortunately, you won't be around to witness the Twilight of the Gods... Awfully careless of you to wander alone through this part of town after dark..."*

*"Get out of there!"* Sawyer barked into her mike from the van. *"It's a hit, not a kidnapping!"*

*"You're making a mistake,"* Robertson replied quietly, slowly slipping his hands inside his coat.

*"You're the one who's made the mistake, Kent, in your vicious attacks on my character,"* Luthor countered sternly.

*"Well if he thinks our coverage has been inaccurate, he can call our complaint department,"* Lois replied.

*"Oh... well if you think our coverage has been inaccurate, I could give you the number for our complaint department-"*

*"It's too late for that, Mister Kent,"* Luthor interrupted. *"Fortunately, my P.R. problem is about to become history."*

*"Oh, shit,"* Lois whispered.

*"Really? Well, if everything's already taken care of, then I'll be on my way,"* Robertson said pleasantly. He turned towards the door, but Ralph pushed him backwards.

*"I don't think so, Mister Kent,"* Luthor responded. *"Pity, really. As foolish as it was for you to have moved back to the farm years ago, you probably would have lived longer had you stayed there. Good bye, Mister Kent. I'll be sure to offer my condolences to your lovely partner."* Once Luthor finished speaking, Ralph stepped towards Robertson with his weapon pointed squarely at his chest.

Robertson grabbed Ralph's gun hand, forcing it off target as his own service revolver came up under the felon's chin. He confidently stated, *"I think you've made a mistake."*

*"You're the one who's made the mistake,"* Shawn said menacing, but just as he squeezed the trigger, the side door blew open and a blue blur coalesced into the form of Superman, standing between Shawn and the other men. A moment later, the hit men were disarmed and on the floor with their wrists bound in plastic police handcuffs.

*"Stay in character!"* Lois commanded into her mike. *"Luthor's still online and we don't want to tip our hand."*

*"Actually, Luthor's offline now,"* Superman informed Detective Robertson. *"I fried the line with my heat vision when I flew in here - I don't want him to know of my involvement quite yet. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to be elsewhere right now. Goodbye."*

A short time later, the police and fire units had converged on the derelict Baxter Metal Stamping plant, establishing a cordon that they stubbornly refused to allow the *Daily Planet*



journalists to cross. They were also burdened with a police escort, which Henderson had assigned for their protection. Jimmy wasn't so encumbered and was determined to get some good pictures for Perry as he moved along the police line, searching for better camera angles.

Finally, after an intolerable wait, Maggie Sawyer approached, ducking under the police tape and walking over to them. "It's about time," Lois complained. "Maggie, what's the word on this."

"Looks like a waste of time to me," Maggie answered in an annoyed tone. "We'll be leaving tonight practically empty-handed."

"Well, this didn't lead us to Luthor, but we've got a couple hoodlums off the streets and new evidence against Luthor for conspiracy to commit murder," Clark corrected.

"He never really confirmed his identity and the recording from the wire won't prove beyond a reasonable doubt that it was him - not without proof that he was here," Maggie countered. "I also seriously doubt we'll be able to tie these flunkies back to him - he's not that careless."

"Luthor's words tonight are still valuable clues, even if it ends up being inadmissible," Clark pointed out. "Remember his delusions of grandeur from the psychological profile? Nothing he said back there was arbitrary. I suspect that we'll find some darker meaning behind 'Twilight of the Gods' if we look deep enough."

"Sounds like he's going after Superman," Lois speculated.

"Superman's not a god," Clark said adamantly.

"Well, no, but that doesn't mean Luthor wasn't referring to him," Maggie countered. "Imagine his ego-trip at the thought of bringing down a god."

"That's encouraging," Clark said gloomily.

"We won't let that happen," Lois declared emphatically. "Now, if *somebody* will let us though and maybe give us a statement, we can get our story in some time tonight."

"It's still too dangerous in there," Maggie warned. "Luthor had the place wired to blow and even though Superman disabled the detonators, there's still a ton of explosive material in there. *Nobody* goes in until we get the all clear."

"Is that on the record?" Lois prodded.

"Superman doesn't want his involvement known," Maggie reminded her sternly. After a momentary pause, she irritably asked, "Lane, I *know* you guys already know as much as we do about all of this, if not more so. Why are you pestering me?"

"We need official sources," Lois insisted. "Come on, Maggie. You *owe* me."

"Oh, don't go pulling that shit on me," Maggie replied harshly.

"Um, Captain Sawyer?" Clark interrupted. "We, um, we don't need much - just enough official corroboration to convince our legal department that we're not exposing the paper to a lawsuit."

Maggie sighed in frustration and then said, "Well, since you asked so nicely... but don't attribute any of it directly to me."

*Wednesday, October 4, 2006 12:15AM EDT*

"No!" Luthor hollered into his cell phone, exhibiting a fit of temper after the failure of yet another brilliant plan. Just as his independent contractor was about to plug Kent, the reporter pulled a gun and he'd lost the video signal before he could see the result. He had immediately sent the self-destruct signal to the plant as a precaution, but Reilly had just reported that the building remained undamaged and was now surrounded by police and fire department vehicles.

The authorities had arrived within minutes of Kent entering the building and had cordoned off the area. Luthor realized that they would only have responded that quickly if they'd already been staged and ready to go, which meant that Kent was working with them.

The plan had been brilliant: Lure Kent in and take him out, dump the body in an alley in Suicide Slum, making it look like a mugging gone bad, and torch the old plant to destroy any evidence left behind. He'd then send Lane a hyperlink to a non-recordable, single-play video of Kent's death in order to force her to back off, or better yet, publish a retraction. But somehow the country rube had been unmoved by Kitty's siren song and shown up with reinforcements. *How'd he see the trap?* Luther wondered. *Kitty did her best damsel in distress on the call to Kent and the script was perfect, with just enough easily corroborated half-truths to be convincing.*

He needed more information on the situation and ordered Reilly to get as much video as he could of the scene without attracting attention. However, it would take time before the men returned with the video for his analysis. The madman leaned back in his chair, his eyes squeezed shut and his brow furrowed as he analyzed the scant information. *The cops would never have allowed a civilian to enter the lion's den unprotected,* Luthor concluded. *He had to be wearing a vest - unless Simpson and Timmons really got lucky, it's safe to assume that Kent is still walking around.* A moment later, Luthor frowned and thought, *If he was wearing a vest, he was also wearing a wire, so the cops probably have a recording of our little chat, which could prove inconvenient...*

Luthor open his eyes and reached over his desk for the file folder labeled 'Clark Kent' and again perused it. *He should have been an easy mark,* Luthor thought. *How'd he see the trap?* Luthor could only come up with two solutions: Either Lane had learned of Kent's pending 'exclusive' and had become suspicious; or the reporters were covertly collaborating with the alien and the freak had discovered the trap. Whatever the cause, the reporter hadn't backed down. He'd instead blazed forward, carrying a gun and bringing police backup as he tried to turn the trap around on *him*.

*I still need to shut down these stubborn pests,* Luthor pondered. *No point in trying to be discreet after tonight's debacle, but what to do? Lane would be too unpredictable if I grabbed her kid and that'd be too risky anyway, with the freak flying around. I bet if the bitch calls out for help, he'd break speed records flying in to the rescue, despite recent rumors to the contrary. No, if I want to shut her down, I'll have to eliminate her before she has a chance to call for help. Same with Kent.*

He set the file aside and lowered his head to his folded hands as he continued to analyze his predicament. *The alien busybody is still too great an unknown,* Luthor concluded. *If I send my direct hires to take out Lane and Kent, he could fly in for the rescue. Arming the men with kryptonite isn't an option - it wouldn't be nearly as poetic a death as Hagan's spear, and I will **not** deprive myself of such richly deserved vengeance. We might still have a high risk even without the freak, given how closely they seem to be working with the cops, and I don't dare risk that my direct hires will lead the cops back here to me...*

*I'll need new independent contractors to carry out the hit,* Luthor decided. *We'll get them at home, in the middle of the night. Lane's house will be easy to get at from the river, but I'll need a tail on Kent to find out where he's living... They'll never know what hit them. Pity. It simply won't be the same without hearing them beg...*

## Chapter 32 - Contingency Plan

*Wednesday, October 4, 2006 1:30AM EDT*

Lois pulled her Audi into an open parking spot in the Paradise Hotel's parking structure and shifted the vehicle into park, afterwards closing her eyes and lowering her head to the steering wheel with an aggravated sigh. From the seat next to her, Clark worriedly called her name, "Lois?"

"Things have really gotten complicated," she complained quietly. "I don't suppose I have to tell you that Richard and I have been having problems."

"I - I know," he said unhappily.

Lois lifted her head and looked intently at her partner, somberly asking him, "Did you also know that he thinks we're having an affair?"

"*What?*" Clark replied in horrified disbelief. "Whatever gave him that idea?"

"Well, nothing's clicked between us romantically since you got back, I'm spending most of my time with you, and some innocent little comments that Jason's made have set off some alarm bells with him," Lois explained.

"What kind of comments?"

"He was hoping that our dinner tonight would be 'as good as Grandma Kent's', and when he told Richard about Sunday's fun in the park, it slipped out that you had joined us at Ron and Lucy's. Needless to say, he didn't find my explanations convincing."

Clark was silent for a moment and then muttered, "Lois, I'm so sorry. I never meant to disrupt your life like this... It isn't fair to either of them - Jason or Richard."

"Life's not fair, but I'm not blaming you," Lois assured him.

"It's not right to burden a little boy with such big secrets, or to ask him to keep those secrets from the only father he's ever known," Clark declared adamantly. "It's also not right to spirit away the son of a man who's been his father in every way that counts."

"Well, Jason's still going to Smallville tomorrow," Lois insisted. "We're just going to have to deal with the fallout afterwards... It won't be pretty - I still haven't been able to come up with any explanation that's likely to satisfy Richard."

"Could he be trusted with the family secret?" Clark asked seriously.

"You don't seriously want to tell him, do you?" Lois asked incredulously.

"*Want* to? No, not really. But if it's the right thing to do - to do right by Richard *and* Jason... Well, then maybe it's what we have to do. Could he be trusted?"

"I... I'm not sure that it would help," Lois began pensively. She paused momentarily and then quietly said, "Richard would never do anything to hurt Jason or me - I'm just not convinced that things would be any better if he knew. It might just be one more thing to argue about or he might think he had to try to compete with you-know-who and do something incredibly stupid... I really need to think things through a bit more before we consider doing anything that drastic."

"It's your call," Clark said somberly. "If you think he can be trusted and that it would help to tell him, then go ahead."

"As if I don't have enough on my mind right now," Lois complained, shaking her head as she looked away from Clark.

The two journalists sat silently in the car for a few minutes before Clark informed her, "Um, we should probably head up to the suite."

"Probably," Lois agreed. After a momentary pause, the partners exited the vehicle and walked across the parking deck to the elevators.

Richard lay awake staring at the ceiling as he rested on the king mattress in one of the hotel penthouse's four bedrooms. Perry had advised him to try to get some sleep while Lois and Clark were walking into Luthor's trap, though Richard had found it impossible. He had also found himself distracted with the disturbing developments in his personal life and doubted the wisdom behind his short visit to Chicago. His rival seemed to have taken advantage of the opportunity to expand his encroachment into his life. Richard also reflected that even though Perry had characterized the man as a prude that was difficult to reconcile with the fact that he had fathered two children out of wedlock, with two different women. Richard doubted that Clark would voluntarily observe any boundaries were Lois was concerned.

His insecurities were reinforced by Jason's innocent comments earlier that evening. Kent had obviously spent the afternoon with Lois and Jason on Sunday and Richard suspected that they spent Monday evening together as well. It was the only explanation for Jason's reference to 'Grandma Kent'. Richard deduced that she must have flown in to meet her grandson and Lois had happily obliged. It also seemed a much more reasonable explanation for Clark's mother to have looked up gluten-free recipes and cooked the lasagna dinner than for a stranger to have done so, even if she was Kara's babysitter. Even worse, it seemed that Lois and Clark now had Jason keeping secrets from him, too.

Richard was also unsettled by their rush out of the house after dinner to avoid a likely attack from the madman that Lois and Clark were provoking in their articles. Such risks were precisely why he'd tried to steer her to safer content over the years. The stories she'd produced with Clark *had* been spectacular, but no story was worth getting killed over. From what he now knew about Lex Luthor, the madman would have no scruples over killing a couple pesky reporters and Richard feared that was precisely what he had planned.

Apparently, Perry feared the same thing and had quickly convinced Bruce Wayne to reserve the penthouse suite for them at the Metropolis Paradise Hotel. Richard turned and checked the clock, noting that it had now been over an hour since Lois had called Perry to report in. *What's taking them so long?* he wondered. *What are they doing?*

Richard thoughts were interrupted by the sound of voices from the suite's living room and he immediately rushed out to investigate. He found Perry sitting down with Lois and Clark and quietly reminding them, "Try to keep your voices down - there *are* some people sleeping around here."

Richard knew full well that he'd have to wait until Perry was finished before he'd have a chance to speak with Lois privately and thus he silently claimed a seat in an armchair as Perry began his informal briefing. "Well, I think it's safe to say that we have Luthor's full attention," Perry declared somberly. "Now, what's your take on what happened tonight?"

"It was a professional hit or at least an attempted one - they got a shot off, but Superman intervened," Lois informed him. After a beat, she added, "The building was also wired to blow up, but Superman stopped that, too. His involvement is strictly off the record, by the way. He doesn't want to tip his hand yet... As for Luthor, he phoned it in from wherever he's hiding. He did his gloating Lord of the Manor thing, saying that Clark had to die because of the P.R. problem he'd caused."

"He's probably worried he'll get indicted for Gertrude's murder," Richard speculated.

Clark shook his head and said seriously, "I, um, think that's the least of his worries. An indictment won't matter much if... if the police can't find him. He's demonstrated in the past that he can, um, live quite comfortably on the lam..."

"...and that subterranean hideout of his from '97 was practically a palace," Lois added. "Anyway, he's probably more worried about the impact of the bad press on his probate case. That's twelve billion dollars at stake there, remember?"

"Our work has introduced more than a little reasonable doubt over Gertrude's death and the validity of the new will," Clark continued. "He's suffered some setbacks recently and he probably doesn't want us making things worse..."

"Isn't the hearing on the gag order tomorrow?" Perry asked.

"Actually, it's *today* at ten," Clark corrected.

"What hearing?" Richard asked uncertainly.

"The *Planet* filed a motion asking the court to drop the gag order," Lois explained. "Vanderworth filed a concurring motion and Luthor objected. The Judge will decide at ten... That could be a factor in the timing here - Luthor may suspect that the court will lift the gag order and is trying to keep it effectively in place by intimidating - or eliminating - his enemies in the press."

"That won't help him with the coroner's report, which seems pretty damning," Perry speculated. "He should have that by now, shouldn't he? Vanderworth had his copy Monday morning."

"Harold Junior presented himself at the O.C.M.E. with proof of kinship, but Luthor hasn't dared show his face since Superman returned," Lois pointed out. "His lawyer subpoenaed the report instead. I don't think he has it yet, or he'd have complained about more than just bad P.R. this evening."

"He's not likely to have seen it yet," Clark concurred. "The O.C.M.E. has ten business days to respond to the subpoena. Our sources there tell us that they normally turn around subpoenas within two days, but in this case, the chief medical examiner has personally held it up to give authorities more time to bring in Luthor before the report scares him off."

"They have skin in the game," Lois explained. "There's little doubt that Luthor was behind the deaths of two of their people."

"So you're saying that the shit won't really hit the fan for a couple more weeks? This was just a warm-up?" Richard asked worriedly.

"Oh, um, it won't take *that* long," Clark informed him. "The Vanderworths' attorneys are sure to include a copy of the report as an exhibit on their motion to, um, throw out the new will, which could be filed at any time..."

"They see no reason to delay filing now - not since it looks like Luthor has *already* run to ground," Lois explained. "They'll file their motion as soon as they get the report back from their expert witnesses..."

"...and they're obligated to deliver a copy of the motion to opposing counsel," Clark added. "They'll delay that as long as they possibly can under the state's rules of civil procedures, but Luthor's lawyers will still get it within three business days of the Vanderworths filing their motion with the court. However, if the court grants them an emergency hearing, it'll be less than that. Their lawyers will deliver a copy of the motion to Forrester and Morrison at least a couple hours before the hearing."

"Forrester and Morrison?" Richard inquired.

"The law firm representing Luthor," Lois explained.

"Well, when Luthor sees that he'll *really* become unhinged and lash out in vengeance instead of just swatting at a nuisance," Perry opined. "Maybe it'd be a good idea for you to take on an out-of-town assignment while this blows over."

"No way, Perry," Lois replied insistently. "We need boots on the ground here to keep the pressure up."

"Lois, it's not worth getting killed over!" Richard objected emphatically.

"And we don't plan on getting killed," Lois retorted. "But we're also not backing down from this story."

"We can still be cautious, though," Clark interjected. "We'll stay out of sight for a few days - the kids, too. The Fineman case demonstrates Luthor's willingness to target an innocent child and we don't need to take any chances there."

"We *won't*," Lois declared.

"How do you expect to keep Jason safe?" Richard demanded. "Are you planning to keep him holed up here?"

"No, we have something else in mind. We're... let's talk about that later," Lois suggested apprehensively.

"Let's talk about it now," Richard demanded. "You've recklessly put Jason in jeopardy and I want to know how you plan to fix that."

"Nothing's going to happen to Jason," Lois hissed. "We've already made arrangements for him, but it gets a bit complicated. We can't explain everything right now," Lois explained irritably.

"Why not?" Richard asked angrily.

"Because it's not just about us," Lois snapped. "There are... people... helping us. People who don't want their involvement known or their secrets revealed - to do so could endanger other innocent lives."

"*Endanger other innocent lives*? Oh, don't be so melodramatic... Your dad's arranged it, hasn't he?" Richard retorted. "I would have thought I'd earned his trust by now."

"Knock it off, both of you!" Perry barked. He lowered his voice to a loud whisper and added, "You're on my time right now and I don't want to hear the personal bullshit! I *especially* don't want you waking up Alice or Jason."

After a moment of awkward silence, Clark tentatively said, "Um, Chief? You - you could be also be a target, after that editorial..."

"I know and it wouldn't be the first time I've faced a threat like this. I've toughed it out before and I'll tough it out this time," Perry said sadly. "At least now we have a publisher concerned enough to foot the bill for a place like this and I suspect we'll be safe here with the bodyguards Wayne hired outside the door... I'll still send my wife to visit relatives out West in the morning, just to be safe... Now, is there anything else I need to know about this mess?"

"Just one thing," Clark answered nervously. "Luthor's, um, done his homework on us... Well, he certainly did his homework on me, at least. He - he mentioned something about me 'moving back to the farm', which he shouldn't have known about."

"You told everyone you were traveling the world," Richard muttered suspiciously.

"I, um, wasn't in one spot long enough to - to justify sending my mail there," Clark stammered. "It all went to my mom's farm in Smallville. That - that's been my official mailing address."

"He probably pulled your credit reports," Perry speculated.

"He probably did a lot more than that - I'll bet he's run thorough background checks on all of us," Lois interjected. "He's a bit anal that way."

"That was in the psych profile. He plans things out in excruciating detail, researching every possible angle on whatever it is," Clark added. "In this case, it may mean that he's

figured out where our safe havens are - family, friends, and other associates. None of us will necessarily be safe in such places."

"Duly noted," Perry replied seriously. "Now that *that's* settled... Tonight's attempted hit is *still* breaking news. The morning edition may already be running on the presses, but I need the story written up so we can at least post it to the web site before another outfit scoops us on it."

"We'll have it for you in an hour - half that if a certain farm boy will stop complaining about *being* the story," Lois replied confidently.

"Lois, we need to talk privately first," Richard said insistently.

"It'll have to wait," Lois answered impatiently. "Duty calls."

"That's an awfully convenient excuse," Richard retorted.

"Richard, drop it!" Perry barked. "Let them get the story in. You lovebirds can bicker later." He turned to Clark and said, "As for you... Lois is right - this time you *are* the story. You can't share the byline under these circumstances, but I still need you to work with Lois to get the story in. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," Clark replied meekly.

"I'll get my laptop," Lois added as she strolled over to the bedroom next to Richard's and slipped through the door.

"And don't forget Frank's legal guidelines for the Luthor stories," Perry called after her. He afterwards returned his attention to his nephew, telling him authoritatively, "Richard, I don't want you hovering over them while they work. Give them some space."

Richard hesitated a moment before reluctantly returning to his bedroom and closing the door behind him as Lois reemerged from the bedroom next to his.

*Wednesday, October 4, 2006 8:00AM EDT*

Superman floated just above Metropolis' clouds and found himself extraordinarily uneasy as he observed Lois' car below and reflected on the decisions made the night before. After they had finished the story, they had debated Smallville's security and what to tell Richard. It had taken them until well after three o'clock in the morning to agree on bringing Richard to Smallville through the portal, but to explain it as a favor from Superman rather than revealing the family secret. Lois was now driving a circuitous route to the *Daily Planet*, with an irritated Richard in the passenger seat and Jason seated behind them. Superman lifted his cell phone to his ear and quietly said, "Left on Madison, three hundred feet. You're clear right after the Randazzo food service truck."

As he watched below, Lois made a sudden left onto Madison, the latest in a series of abrupt turns designed to identify and lose anyone following them. The sudden turn prompted Richard to angrily declare, "Luthor won't get the chance to kill us if you keep driving like this!"

"How else do you expect me to lose a tail?" Lois snapped. She softened her tone as she spoke into her cell phone headset and asked, "Clark? Do you see anything from the chopper? Are we clear?"

"Still clear. Watch for the cop up ahead turning towards you off of Thirteenth Avenue," Superman answered.

"What? Oh, right. I see him." Lois slowed her speed just as a police cruiser turned onto Madison and headed towards her from the opposite direction. Once the cruiser was past her and out of sight, she made an abrupt right turn and sped down an alley, prompting Richard to tighten his grip on the handle above the door.

"Jesus, Lois, will you slow down!" Richard complained.

"Stop complaining! We're almost there," Lois chastised him.

"I'd like to get there in one piece!"

"We will, unless you keep making cracks like that," Lois retorted.

Richard held his tongue and a few hair-raising turns later, Lois was racing down the ramp of the *Planet's* underground garage before she finally slowed to twice the posted speed at the first turn. "We're here, Lois - you can slow down now," Richard pointed out insistently.

"I did slow down."

"You're still going too fast... Hold it, there's a good spot right there," Richard told her, pointing to a pair of open spots along the wall next to the elevator alcove.

"Wrong level," Lois declared and she continued to speed the car into the lower decks of the underground garage. She finally pulled her car into a space on the very bottom deck, about fifty feet from the elevator.

"That was *so* cool! Can we do it again?" Jason said enthusiastically.

"Not right now, Munchkin," Lois replied happily. She then muttered just loud enough for Richard to hear, "Glad one of males around here has some guts." The comment prompted a scowl from Richard as he exited the car. He moved around to the rear of the vehicle and pulled out their luggage while Lois helped Jason out of his seat.

"So where's this 'alternate transportation' you said would be waiting for us?" Richard asked testily.

"You'll see," Lois answered enigmatically. "Please take the bags over to the stairwell." Richard rolled his eyes, but complied, carrying the bags into the elevator alcove.

Lois caught up to him and leaned against the door to the stairs, looking at him intently as she demanded, "Before we go any further, I need your word that you keep what I'm about to show you to yourself. It's more than off the record - you take *this* to the *grave*."

"Lois, I already gave you my word, now what's going on here?" Richard complained.

"You'll see," Lois replied simply. She leaned back against the horizontal door release and pushed the door open, gesturing for Richard and Jason to join her. "Come on, and bring the bags in here."

"Lois," Richard began impatiently.

"Just do it, Richard. Please," Lois snapped. Richard and Jason squeezed past her with the bags, setting them at the bottom of the stairs as she closed the door behind them. She then walked around them, placed her hand on the opposite wall and said, "Open Sesame."

Richard eyes flew wide as the concrete floor dematerialized to reveal a crystal staircase beneath them and he quietly muttered, "Holy sh-crap... Lois, what *is* this?"

"I'll explain at the bottom. Now, everyone down the stairs, *Pronto!*" Lois commanded. She grabbed one of the bags and guided Jason down the stairs ahead of her.

Richard followed behind her with the remaining bags and as he reached the bottom step, the changing shadows prompted him to look up and he witnessed the concrete floor rematerialize above them. A razor thin sheet of blue light then passed from one wall to the other and a male voice declared, "Intruder Alert!" Richard immediately found himself surrounded by a cocoon of white light. He was unable to move a muscle - not even his vocal chords to complain about the situation.

"Override. Identify visitor as Richard White," he heard Lois inform the voice.

"Visitor recognized," the voice replied and Richard found himself released from the cocoon, stumbling with the bags once his motor control returned.



"What the hell was that?" Richard demanded angrily.

"Final security checkpoint," Lois explained. "Your DNA wasn't recognized. It is now, so next time you shouldn't have any trouble."

"Next time? Lois, what's going on here?"

Lois gestured around and said dramatically, "*This* is a Kryptonian transportation portal."

"Kryptonian? I thought Superman *flew* everywhere," Richard asked skeptically.

"That's his preference, but when he discovered the burglary at the Fortress, he realized that Luthor had found a way to track him in flight," Lois explained. "He doesn't necessarily want Luthor to know *everywhere* he goes, so his solution was to build a Kryptonian transportation network. He grew a series of underground transportation tubes - a mile and half underground. They stretch from his fortress in the Arctic, down along the Eastern Seaboard, across the continent to California and then back up to the Arctic. Along that loop there are a number of branches up to hidden portals on the surface, like this one, that allow for covert travel."

"And he's letting us use it? Why?" Richard asked doubtfully.

"Well, the big secret is that Clark and I have been collaborating with him on the Luthor story from the beginning," Lois informed him. She waved her hand over a pattern on the far wall, opening the doors to the transportation chamber. "Let's get the bags in the turbolift," she suggested.

"Turbolift?" Richard asked skeptically. He set the bags in the chamber and gave her a dubious look.

"That's what I call it," Lois replied. "Anyway, Superman has a vested interest in seeing Luthor go down - the man not only robbed him, he nearly killed him some years back. And Clark and I have made more progress on the Luthor case in the last several days than the authorities have in the last several months."

"So you're saying he owes you one?"

"I'm saying he wants us to succeed, which would be hard to do if we're running for our lives," Lois retorted. "We knew that Luthor was likely to lash out once the pressure was on and that we'd need a safe place to hide out when that happened."

"Thanks *so* much for the advance warning," Richard replied sarcastically.

"We thought we'd have more time!" Lois said insistently. "We didn't think he'd lose it until he saw the coroner's report! Well, Superman volunteered to provide us with untraceable transportation to the safe house." Lois then sat on the bench along the chamber's wall and smiled enigmatically up at Richard.

"Where's this safe house?" Richard pressed, sitting down opposite her.

Lois looked up towards the ceiling of the chamber and said loudly, "Smallville, please."

Jor-El responded, "We will reach the destination in five minutes, fifty seconds."

"Smallville?" Richard asked in disbelief. "As in Clark's home town in Kansas? What about Luthor possibly knowing about our safe havens?"

"Apparently, Clark convinced Superman that in a small town like *Smallville*, where everyone knows everyone else, a stranger sticks out like a sore thumb," Lois informed him. "His mother's place is also hard to find. Even if they found it, if Superman had Kryptonian technology deployed to protect the farmhouse, the bad guys would be stopped cold... Well, Superman added a portal in Smallville late Monday afternoon and extended the sensors and security to protect the house and barn."

"Lois, you're *not* seriously telling me that we're moving in with Clark's mom, are you?"

Richard asked incredulously.

Lois smiled mischievously and said saccharinely, "Oh, *of course not*... We'll be staying with her fiancé down the road." Her tone turned stern and she added, "Remember, not a word of any of this to anyone, understand?"

"How many times are you going to ask me to give you my word on this?" Richard asked irritably. "I already promised I wouldn't say anything, which means *I won't say anything!*"

Lois remained silent for a moment and then her tone turned serious as she told him, "Superman has granted us unrestricted access to use the transportation network between the portals in Metropolis, Smallville and San Jose, California. All other stops are off limits. He won't even tell us where they are."

"What's in San Jose?" Richard asked curiously.

"He wouldn't say, but if, God forbid, we have to flee Smallville, that's where we'd go," Lois said simply. After a momentary pause, she continued, "There's not enough room at the Kent Farm for everyone, so we're staying with Ben Hubbard, Martha's fiancé. He lives about a half mile down the road. However, Jason is staying with the rest of the Kents-

"*What?*" Richard shouted angrily.

"He's *safer* there!" Lois explained. "The house and barn are protected by a force field from the portal and monitored twenty-four seven by the A.I. Ben's place isn't that far and we can still be at Martha's place with Jason when he wakes up and when he goes to bed."

"Mommy?" Jason asked apprehensively.

"It's okay, kiddo," Lois assured him. "We'll be at Grandma's farm soon and you'll have all kinds of fun." She pulled him into a brief hug, before turning to look over at Richard.

Richard squeezed his eyes closed for a moment and then testily said, "Fine. Anything else?"

"We'll also be sending Jason and Kara to school in Smallville, for the time being," Lois informed him. "As for work... Well, they have county-wide WiMax there, so no problem with broadband access into the *Planet*. However, cell coverage is another story - the place is something of a cellular dead zone. You'd need some classified modifications for your phone to work there. Just leave it with Martha when we get there and someone will stop by to get it. They'll probably have the modifications done by lunch-time."

After a moment of silence, Richard admitted quietly, "This is a lot to take in."

"Tell me about it," Lois agreed.

Further comment was interrupted when the door of the chamber opened to another crystal staircase and Jor-El declared, "We have arrived at the Smallville Portal."

"Well, here we are," Lois said casually. "Welcome to Smallville."

## Chapter 33 - Hiding Out

*Wednesday, October 4, 2006 7:25AM CDT*

Richard followed Lois and Jason up the crystal stairs through a cinder block wall into an old cellar. It was illuminated by a single overhead light bulb and revealed an open tread wooden staircase on the opposite end of the room that led up to a trapdoor. Lois climbed the stairs and pushed the trapdoor open, motioning for Jason to go through ahead of her. Richard paused at the foot of the stairs and looked behind him, his eyes widening in surprise when he discovered a solid cinder-block wall with no sign of the doorway they had just walked through. "Whoa," he muttered in amazement.

"What was that?" Lois asked.

"The door to the other staircase is gone," Richard replied. He walked over to the wall and pressed his hand against the area where they'd just walked through. "You'd never know there was just a doorway here. It's solid as a rock."

"Yeah, it does that," Lois confirmed. "Superman said it's kind of like the transporters from *Star Trek*, dematerializing the wall when it authenticates our palm and voice prints, and rematerializing it again once we've gone through. It's a security feature - nobody is going to stumble across the portal accidentally."

"If he has that technology, why not just beam us over?" Richard asked curiously.

"It was some B.S. about it being 'unsuitable for live transport'," Lois explained, wrinkling her brow in confusion as she attempted to recall the conversation. "Inanimate things like walls and floors are fine, but not anything living, like people... I really didn't press for the technical details - the technobabble was making my brain hurt enough as it was."

Richard shook his head in disbelief and followed Lois up the stairs with their bags. When he climbed out of the trapdoor, he was surprised to find that they were inside a barn and had apparently been discovered. A golden retriever was licking Jason's face as he petted the dog, prompting happy giggles from the little boy. Kara was also there, happily chattering to Jason. Richard also saw an old woman outside the barn, carrying a child's jacket and back pack as she rushed towards them. He concluded that the woman had to be Clark's mother, Martha Kent.

"Kara!" Martha called. "Your bus is going to be here any minute. You need to get ready for school."

"But Jason's going to need someone to play with," Kara protested.

Lois knelt down in front of the little girl and gently said, "He's going to school today, too, honey. Once your dad gets back, we're going to bring Jason up there to the very same school that you're enrolled in and we're signing him up. You'll *both* be getting on that bus tomorrow."

"I can still wait with Jason until Dad gets back," Kara suggested hopefully.

Lois smiled at her and said, "Sweetheart, you've already missed too much school this year to take time off just because we're here. You'll get to play with Jason after school... Now let's get your jacket on and get you on your bus." Martha handed the jacket to Lois and the younger woman helped Kara into it. She had just zipped up Kara's jacket when the loud and low timbre of the bus horn permeated the air.

"There's the bus!" Martha said anxiously. "Kara, let's go!"

"Go on," Lois encouraged her. "We'll still be here when you get home."

Martha took Kara's hand and led the reluctant little girl out of the barn and to her bus. Jason started following her, but Lois' arm on his shoulder stopped him. "Wait here until the bus is gone," she instructed him.

The three of them watched silently as Martha led Kara to the bus and eventually out of

sight from their hiding spot. Once they passed from view, Richard commented, "So... Kara's *already* signed up for school here?"

"Um, it's one of the advantages of a small town, where everyone know everyone else," Lois explained apprehensively. "The principal's a family friend and they were able to call her last night to make the arrangements for Kara. We could have done the same for Jason, if we'd known we'd be coming here, but we didn't make that decision until later... I think the kids will like it here - and there's no place safer for them."

"Because the hi-tech security from portal will keep Luthor out?"

"Something like that," Lois answered.

"Just like it kept him out of Superman's fortress?" Richard pressed skeptically.

Lois sighed in frustration and complained, "The security wasn't in place then and Luthor waltzed right in. It was 'security through obscurity', to quote the lead investigator that processed the crime scene there. Well, Superman's made some major improvements in the security since then, with guidance from that same Canadian investigator - nobody will ever get in that easily again... It's kind of a long story and you *really* don't want to get me started on it."

Richard opened his mouth to speak but halted his reply when he noticed Martha returning to the barn. "I'm so sorry about that - it's not how I normally greet my guests," Martha said apologetically. She held out her hand to Richard and said, "You must be Richard. I'm so glad to finally meet you. Welcome to our family."

"Family?" Richard repeated in confusion as he automatically reached his hand out towards Martha.

"You're my grandson's other daddy, which makes you family in my book," Martha explained. She squeezed his hand tightly and smiled warmly at him. After a moment, she shifted her attention to her other guests, looking down at Jason and cheerfully said to him, "Well, how's my special grandson doing this morning?"

"Okay," Jason replied happily. "Grandma, can I go play with Shelby?"

"After breakfast, if it's all right with your mom," Martha told him, pleasantly. She then turned to Lois and explained, "Clark thought you probably skipped breakfast in your hurry out the door this morning. Come on inside and we'll take care of that."

Superman floated high in the mesosphere, focusing his vision across the globe as he watched his mother lead her guests into the house. *Well, they should be safe and sound*, he thought. *Time to check on the others*. He shifted his position in the sky, floating down as he swept his vision across Metropolis. He located Perry White climbing into a Lincoln Town Car at Berkowitz International Airport with the two armed bodyguards that Bruce Wayne had provided. Bruce had also provided the heavily fortified vehicle, which would protect its occupants from all but the heaviest munitions. The speed with which the billionaire was able to deploy a bulletproof car had surprised the Man of Steel. *I'll have to ask Bruce about that later*, Superman thought.

He then focused his vision through the roof of the airport terminal, quickly locating Alice White as she boarded a plane for Seattle, where her son and grandchildren lived. *That should keep her out of harm's way for now at least*, Superman thought. *Perry's the only one still exposed, though the car and bodyguards certainly help*, he thought. He returned his attention to the Town Car, watching as the engine turned over and the bodyguard/driver left the airport.

Superman next shifted his concentration to Planet Plaza, extending his senses in an ever expanding perimeter around the *Daily Planet* building and scanning the crowd for anyone

taking an unusual interest in the building. He also scanned for weapons and the telltale electromagnetic signature of covert electronics, which was well within the range of his visual acuity. He identified a pickpocket and a group of three armed teenagers within several blocks of the building, who he quickly apprehended and turned over to the police.

After returning to his observation point in the sky, Superman resumed his watch over the plaza and its normal morning traffic while he mulled the situation over. He recalled the F.B.I. psychologist's theory that Luthor wasn't good at thinking on his feet when something unexpected came up, despite his tendency to overdo the planning and analysis for his schemes. *Maybe Luthor didn't anticipate that we'd defeat his trap and hasn't had time to get his 'Plan B' worked out yet,* Superman thought. *Well, Luthor certainly won't give up - that's just not his style,* Superman thought. *He'll strike back. It's just a question of when and where and who.*

He continued to vigilantly monitor the plaza beneath him, noting Jimmy Olsen's entrance into the *Planet's* underground garage on his scooter and tracking Perry's Town Car. It was only after Perry and his entourage arrived on the editorial floor that Superman finally dropped from his hiding place and zoomed North across the globe to the Fortress.

"Richard, it's *not* a problem," Lois said insistently. "We took Jason to a specialist late Monday afternoon and when the test results came in, it turned out he doesn't have those food allergies after all. I never got the chance to tell you about that with everything that happened."

"But Doctor Solomon said-" Richard protested.

"Doctor Solomon was wrong," Lois interrupted irritably. "We don't need to worry about dairy and gluten in his diet, so there's no reason he can't have pancakes."

"Lois, if it helps, I still have that gluten-free pancake recipe that I downloaded the other day and we had already picked up the special ingredients it called for," Martha informed them. "I never got around to testing out the recipe, but we could give it a try if you're worried about Jason's diet."

"I really hate to put you through the trouble, especially when we shouldn't have to worry about that anymore," Lois replied apologetically.

"Oh, it's no trouble, dear," Martha assured her. "Just give me a few minutes and I'll have a batch whipped up. If Jason doesn't like them, we still have Rice Krispies in the cupboard."

"Thank you, Martha," Lois told her sincerely.

"Yes, thank you," Richard echoed sincerely. He returned his attention to Lois and said, "It's better safe than sorry, Lois. Let's at least get a second opinion before taking any risks with his diet."

"Richard, I..." Lois began impatiently. She was silent for a moment, and then declared, "No more arguing over breakfast. We'll talk about it later."

Several minutes later, the family was finally sitting down to breakfast. Martha had presented Jason with a short stack of pancakes, topped with fresh fruit and maple syrup. After a tentative bite, the little boy's face lit up and he eagerly dug into his breakfast. Martha offered Richard a spicy Spanish omelet and breakfast potatoes and provided Lois with her usual morning fare of coffee and bagel. Richard eyed Jason's pancakes and inquired apprehensively, "Are you sure that there's no gluten in those pancakes? They look like the real thing."

"Yes, they're gluten-free," Martha assured him. "I made them with rice flour and tapioca flour instead of the wheat flour. Most of the recipes I looked up made similar substitutions. Rice noodles instead of wheat noodles for things like lasagna and spaghetti and certain casseroles, and corn starch instead of flour for gravy thickening. Those are really quite minor

substitutions, for the most part. Unfortunately, it doesn't work with everything. They really have no good substitute figured out for breads and rolls."

Richard seemed satisfied with the explanation and finally sampled a tentative forkful of his omelet. He raised his brow and commented, "This is remarkably good. Thank you for the breakfast, Martha."

"Oh, it's just simple country fare," Martha replied modestly. "It's really no bother."

Richard nodded in acknowledgement and continued to eat in silence for a moment before he stated purposefully, "Last night's lasagna was also very good - I think it's Jason's new favorite."

Martha chuckled, and replied, "Well, I'm glad everyone liked it... The only change I had to make from my usual recipe to make it gluten-free was to substitute rice noodles and I really didn't notice a difference in the taste."

"Richard..." Lois began warningly.

"I'm just complimenting the cook," Richard insisted crossly.

Lois gave him a disbelieving look and sternly warned him, "Don't drag her into our arguments." She turned to Martha and softened her expression, telling her sincerely, "Sorry about that, Martha. Things have been a bit tense lately."

"Oh, no need for apologies," Martha replied politely. "I understand."

Richard sighed and told her contritely, "I'm sorry, too, Martha, and I meant what I said about the food. If my mom cooked like this, I might never have left home."

"Well, that didn't stop Clark when he finished school - though I suppose everyone has to leave the nest sooner or later," Martha commented wistfully. "Of course, I'll be the one leaving this time around."

"What do you mean?" Lois asked worriedly.

"When Ben and I get married next month, I'll be moving in with him, though not in the same house that you'll be staying in," Martha explained. "We're trading houses with Ben's son, Matt. He's got three kids and a fourth on the way, all shoehorned into a small house six miles east of here while Ben has more space that he knows what to do with. Matt's place is just the right size for a couple retirees."

"Oh," Lois replied quietly. "I guess I hadn't thought about that."

Martha chuckled lightly and said, "Neither had Clark. You should have seen the expression on his face when I told him our plans ... Anyway, I won't be that far away and Ben and I will still be around to help, if need be... he'll have to work out alternate arrangements while we're on our honeymoon, though... Maybe Ben's daughter, Sarah, can help if Clark needs anything while we're gone."

"Where are you going?" Lois asked curiously.

"We've booked a Caribbean cruise," Martha replied cheerfully. "We'll fly out of Wichita to catch the ship in Miami and then we'll spend the next ten days island hopping."

"Wouldn't it be easier to fly out of Metropolis?" Lois inquired sleepily. She yawned widely and added, "I mean, with the portal and all..."

"Our package included the airfare out of Wichita and everything was arranged long before Superman came back and built a portal here," Martha explained. After a moment, her expression turned serious and she asked with concern, "Lois, did you get any sleep at *all* last night? You look like you're going to fall asleep in your breakfast."

"I didn't get much, but I'll be fine," Lois assured her. "I just need more coffee."

"Nonsense," Martha declared authoritatively. "You need your rest. I'll have Ben come get

you after breakfast so you can lie down and get some sleep."

"I'm used to long nights, Martha. There's no need to worry," Lois insisted politely.

"You're fighting a battle of wits with this Luthor madman and your mind will be much sharper if you get your rest," Martha pressed gently. "I'll worry less if you at least try to get a little more sleep this morning."

"I'll be fi-" Lois began, before interrupting herself with another wide yawn. She then smiled guiltily back at Martha and after a momentary pause, she added, "Well, I suppose it can't hurt - but just for a little while."

Ben Hubbard parked his Ford F-150 behind the house and cheerfully informed his guests, "Well, here we are. Come on inside and we'll get you settled in." Ben led Richard and Lois in through the back door and stopped in the kitchen. He turned to them and kindly told them, "There's plenty of food in the fridge. Go ahead and make yourselves at home and don't worry about eating whatever food you find. If it was something I planned on and you find it first, I obviously didn't hide it well enough."

Lois chuckled and replied mirthfully, "You should be careful who to tell that to. I know some guys with bottomless pits for stomachs."

"I haven't regretted it yet," Ben replied cheerfully. "Bedrooms are upstairs. This way." He then led them through the living room and up the stairs, stopping once his guests had joined him on the second floor. He pointed down the hall and informed them, "The bathroom is that first door on the left and the door next to it is a linen closet. There are plenty of clean towels in there, so go ahead and help yourself to whatever you need."

Ben turned and pushed open the door to his right and informed them, "And this was my daughter Sarah's old room. Nobody's slept here in ages, but the mattress is still firm and you've got fresh sheets on the bed... I hope you don't mind pink, Lois."

Lois set her suitcase at the foot of the bed and said drowsily, "It'll be fine."

Richard gaze locked on the twin bed and he muttered, "Looks like tight quarters with just a twin bed."

"It's plenty big enough for Lois," Ben insisted.

"Just Lois?" Richard said in surprise.

Ben's tone turned serious and he sternly said, "I don't know how things are done where you come from, Richard, but around here people don't share a bed until *after* they're married. I have you in the room down the hall."

Richard eyes widened briefly at the comment and his lips tightened into a frown as he noticed Lois' relieved expression. After a moment, he relaxed his features and covered his displeasure as best he could. He nodded his assent and neutrally told the older man, "Of course. That won't be a problem."

"Good," Ben replied pleasantly. "Come on, now. Let's get out of here and let the lady get her rest." He led Richard down the hall to the last room on the left and motioned for Richard to precede him into the room. Richard entered the room and Ben informed him, "This was my son Matt's old room. Sorry I can't offer you a bigger bed. We used to have a guest room with a double bed, but I gave that away some years back and my kids are redecorating the room as a nursery in advance of my son moving his family in."

Richard nodded absently and looked around the room, noting the single bed against the opposite wall and the room's pale green walls, decorated with copious posters of old sports heroes. "I suppose this will work out fine," he said quietly. "When's your son moving in?"

"They tell me they'll move everything while Martha and I are on our honeymoon," Ben informed him. "They're still trying to do as much as they can in advance - Lisa's not tolerating the smell of paint very well right now. They've got more work planned on the house this weekend."

"I hope we're not interfering with their plans," Richard replied politely.

Ben waved him off and cheerfully replied, "Oh, don't worry, you're not interfering. We may have to shuffle you around between bedrooms temporarily, but it'll all work out." The old farmer was quiet for a moment and then said seriously, "Richard, I know things must have thrown you for a loop lately, but there is something that I hope you'll come to realize during your stay here..."

"And what's that?" Richard asked suspiciously.

"That you're *not* in enemy territory," Ben insisted compassionately. "You're among friends. And as far as any of the Kents or Hubbards are concerned, you're *family*."

"Family?" Richard repeated doubtfully. "You'd really consider Clark's rival to be family?"

"We don't see it as a rivalry and neither does Clark," Ben explained patiently. "You're Jason's other daddy and nobody here is going to ask that boy to choose between you and Clark. And nobody here will try to get in the way between you and your fiancée. Clark and Martha are particularly adamant on that point."

"So I should relax because everything's going to be just fine?" Richard asked skeptically.

"I'd have no way of knowing that, one way or the other," Ben replied seriously. "You and Lois may have your problems to deal with, but I don't know either of you well enough to be able to advise you on it... Nobody here is going to be piling on, though."

"Is it that obvious that we have problems?" Richard asked sadly.

"It's obvious that you're under stress," Ben explained patiently. "Who wouldn't be with that madman gunning after them? Anyway, I know this isn't really home for you, but we'll still do our best to make you *feel* at home for however long you're here."

"Thank you," Richard told him sincerely.

"My pleasure, son... Now, I have some chores to take care of and then I'll be heading back over to Martha's. Her number's pinned to the corkboard next to the fridge, if you need anything. Try to get some rest."

"Actually, I won't be resting for awhile - I've got quite a bit of work to do this morning," Richard replied. He picked up his laptop bag and pulled out his cell phone, frowning as he viewed the display.

"Those don't work too well out here," Ben said. After a moment he added, "I thought you were supposed to leave it with Martha for somebody to pick up. There's some kind of special modification they can do to make it work out here... If you like, I can take it back over there with me when I go."

Richard folded up his phone and handed it over to the older man. "I suppose it can't hurt, though I'd be interested in knowing what kind of modification they think will do the trick."

"I wouldn't know, but I'll be sure to ask for you," Ben promised. He then he strolled down the hall and back down the stairs.

Richard set himself up at Ben's kitchen table and as Lois had promised, there was a strong Wi-Fi signal available for his encrypted session into the *Daily Planet*. He was quickly able to direct his staff on the breaking news in his area and found himself only slightly inconvenienced by his missing cell phone. The I.M. group chats proved to be an effective substitute and he was



satisfied enough with the morning's production to take a lunch break shortly after twelve o'clock, Metropolis time. He raided Ben's refrigerator and made himself a ham sandwich.

Richard ate his lunch slowly, his thoughts again returning to his relationship, as had so often been the case in recent days. He concluded that he'd been mostly right about Lois and Jason spending Monday evening with the Kents, erring only on the venue. *Lois still sneaked out with Jason behind my back for a visit with the Kents and then lied to me about it afterwards*, he thought.

As upset as he was over the covert family gathering, he found it impossible to be angry with Clark's mother or her elderly beau. *Ben and Martha really do seem to be sincere about welcoming me here and not wanting to cause trouble for us*, Richard concluded. *Too bad I can't say the same for Lois and Clark - she seemed especially uneasy bringing me out here and a bit too relieved about the separate sleeping arrangements. I know they're hiding something.*

Richard's thought's then turned to the unexpected flight from their home and their Smallville sanctuary. *How long are we going to be holed up here?* he wondered. *Lois and Clark knew that Luthor was likely to lash out at them - and still they provoked him. Why were they so determined to be the ones to take him down?* Richard reflected on the recent articles written on Luthor and the single briefing he'd been permitted to attend. Lois and Clark had an undeniable passion for the story and a steely determination to bring the felon to justice. *But at what cost?* Richard wondered. *Is it really worth it?*

The rough idling of a heavy truck behind the house interrupted Richard's ruminations and he walked over to the back window and peeked out. He saw an old pickup truck pull up that was probably older than he was, with Clark behind the wheel. Clark climbed out of the truck and walked up to the back door. Richard pondered that he almost seemed like a different man dressed in jeans and tee-shirt rather than the ill-fitting suits that Richard was accustomed to seeing him in. Richard met him at the back door and let him in. "I wasn't expecting to see you over here," he commented curtly.

Clark held up Richard's cell phone in front of him and said quietly, "I thought you'd want this back. You've got four bars now."

Richard took the phone and flipped it open to verify Clark's assertion. "What did they do to it?" Richard asked curiously.

"It's sending its signal across an alternate carrier wave, bouncing off a satellite and getting converted back to the cellular network through a relay in Metropolis," Clark explained.

"This is a satellite phone now?"

"Um, yes and no," Clark answered. "Yes, it's accessing an unidentified satellite but it still looks like a normal cell phone to the phone company - except that they'll think you're using it from Metropolis instead of Smallville... That's off the record, by the way."

Richard nodded his head and quietly said, "Thanks."

Clark fidgeted nervously and said, "I'm, um, going to need to bring Lois up to date on our story once she's up."

"I'm up," Lois said from the other room. She had a robe wrapped tightly around her and her hair was a mess, giving the impression of someone who'd just gotten out of bed.

"We didn't wake you, did we?" Clark asked nervously. As he spoke, he pulled a mug from the cupboard and poured a cup of coffee.

"No, but your truck did," Lois declared. "Should it really be that loud?"

"Oh... sorry," Clark apologized. He handed the mug to Lois and added, "It probably just

needs a tune-up - I'll check it out later."

"Thanks... Did you take care of everything for Jason?" Lois asked tiredly. She took a seat at the kitchen table and greedily sipped her coffee as she looked up at Clark.

Clark sat down across from her and said, "Um, yeah, we're all set. Julie Neville introduced him to her kindergarten class this morning and I hear he's already fast friends with little Tommy Walton. Tommy will be with him at Saint John's kinder-care this afternoon, too."

"What time do we need to pick him up?" Richard inquired seriously.

"The bus will bring them home," Clark replied happily. "It should show up in front of the house around twenty after three... That's central time - we're an hour behind Metropolis here."

"Speaking of Metropolis, what was that I heard you say about updates on our story?" Lois demanded.

"Oh. Well, the judge dropped the gag order. He also gave both parties ten business days to file redacted versions of their previous motions. Vanderworth's lawyers already had theirs ready and immediately filed them electronically. Of course, there's nothing from Luthor's side yet. That's not surprising when you consider that his lawyer's already threatened to file an

Perry has Susan scrambling to pull copies of all the Vanderworth's redacted filings before Luthor has a chance to reseal them. She'll be reviewing and analyzing them, too."

"But it's *our* story," Lois protested.

"Well, Susan *is* the legal correspondent," Clark pointed out. "We can still look through the filings later, if you want - see if we notice anything Susan missed. But right now, Perry has us on Harold Junior. He wants an exclusive Vanderworth interview in the can before Luthor's favorite appellate judge can shut it all down again."

"I'll give Harold Junior a call in a little while. What else did I miss?"

Clark flicked his eyes over to Richard and back and somberly replied, "Um, this might not be a good place to talk."

Richard rolled his eyes and irritably complained, "How many times am I going to have to promise my silence to you two? I've already said a dozen times that I won't say anything, okay?"

Clark looked at Richard and back to Lois with a worried expression in his eyes and awkwardly began, "It's, um, not that simple."

"Why not?" Richard demanded.

"Richard, this isn't about *you*," Lois snapped. "We've got some sources in sensitive positions that are very insistent about us not sharing what they tell us and we have to respect their wishes if we want the background information from them to keep on flowing... My dad never shared classified shit with us when *he* came home at the end of day and none of *us* ever took it personally..."

"You're not in the army, Lois," Richard reminded her.

"I'm also not going to alienate our sources. Neither is Clark," Lois replied angrily. "Besides, didn't Perry tell you to keep your nose out of our stories?"

"That was before we had to run for our lives because of your story," Richard argued.

"That doesn't change anything," Lois insisted.

"Um, maybe I should head back to my mom's house," Clark mumbled.

"Clark, just ignore him," Lois said irritably, earning a glare from Richard. After another quick sip from her coffee, Lois asked, "How much time did Perry give us on Vanderworth?"

"Well, it's too late for the afternoon edition, considering that it's already twelve thirty in Metropolis," Clark pointed out.

Lois rolled her eyes and complained, "You really shouldn't have let me sleep so long!" She drained her coffee and stood up, telling him, "All right, I'll call Harold Junior right now, take a quick shower, and we can be on our way."

"Wait, you're not seriously thinking of going back to Metropolis right now, are you?" Richard asked incredulously. "What happened to laying low out here in Smallville?"

"We *are* laying low but we've got to keep the pressure on Luthor," Lois snapped. "Did you forget what we said last night about 'boots on the ground'?"

"And risk getting yourself killed?" Richard complained.

"Um, actually, the risk in this case is fairly low," Clark replied quietly. "The security's pretty strong at the *Planet*, especially given that the portal is extending its sensors over the entire building. If anybody tries bringing a weapon in there, Superman gets alerted. We also have something figured out so that nobody will see us leaving the *Planet*. Vanderworth has also beefed up his security, after Luthor's attack on us last night. We should be fine."

"What if you're wrong?" Richard demanded to know.

"Richard, we're not a couple of amateurs here," Lois answered huffily. "We know the drill, we're *not* taking unnecessary risks and we have some very capable people helping us. And we're not going to let Luthor intimidate us."

"Lois-" Richard began impatiently.

"Are you planning on *nagging* me like this every time I go to work?" Lois interrupted heatedly.

Richard glared at her and snapped, "Since when is it such a crime to worry about *my fiancée*?"

"It's not, if you can do it *quietly*," Lois countered impatiently. "Now, I've got work to do." She then turned on her heel and marched out of the kitchen.

## Chapter 34 - Under Pressure

*Wednesday, October 4, 2006 12:00PM CDT*

Lois walked out the back door of Ben Hubbard's house with Clark following close behind her. Lois turned to him and declared, "I'm driving. Hand over the keys."

"They're in the ignition."

Lois stopped and stared at him with an incredulous look on her face. After a moment of silence, she rolled her eyes, climbed in the driver's seat and muttered, "Farm boy." Clark climbed in the passenger seat while she adjusted the seat and started the engine.

"It's different out here in the country, Lois," Clark explained defensively while Lois backed the truck away from the house. "Nobody out here would even consider trying to steal it."

"We're still going to need to break you of these bad habits," Lois warned him mirthfully. She pulled forward into the gravel driveway and once she turned on the road, her tone turned serious as she asked. "Now... what was it you didn't want to say back there in front of Richard?"

"Well... we have an ID from Boston on our John and Jane Doe now," Clark began somberly. "The victims were a married couple - Dan and Nancy Austin. She was a waitress at a local family restaurant and a part-time nursing student at Boston Community College. He was a security guard at the Harvard Museum of Natural History."

"Didn't something go missing there last weekend?"

"Besides the guard, they lost a meteorite from a 1978 meteor shower that rained down across Africa," Clark confirmed. "Technically, the meteorite is a radioactive isotope of unbiexium."

"Un-be-what?" Lois asked, her brow furrowing in confusion.

"Unbiexium," Clark repeated. "Atomic number one hundred twenty six, or element one twenty six, if you prefer. Specifically, this meteorite was composed of the isotope unbiexium three ten."

"Three ten?" Lois asked.

"That's the atomic mass number, like the two thirty-eight in uranium two thirty-eight," Clark explained. "That's really not that important, though. The relevant points are, one, that it's a radioactive isotope and, two, it's not supposed to exist naturally. It's from a theoretical period of elements called superactinides, which usually aren't even printed on the periodic table. Those elements are thought to only exist synthetically."

"In other words, it's man-made *and* from outer space?" Lois summarized. "So what's Luthor want with it?"

"I think I've figured that out and it's not good. The scientific journals report that once you chip away the crusty burnt outer layer, the meteorites are emerald green in appearance and emit a faint glow in the visible light spectrum."

Lois' eyes flew wide open and she quietly murmured, "Kryptonite."

"It looks that way," Clark confirmed. "Another unbiexium three ten sample from that same meteor shower was stolen from the Metropolis Museum of Natural History in June of '97. That was shortly *after* Superman's debut and shortly *before* Luthor tried to kill him with the stuff. I'm trying to track down the other meteorites so that I can borrow a sample to confirm its effects."

"*What?*" Lois exclaimed. "Clark, you *can't* be serious-"

"It'll be in a strictly controlled laboratory environment. We'll test against cell cultures

taken from me first and I'll only risk exposure if the initial results are inconclusive," Clark interrupted. "Lois, I *have* to know if this is the source of that poison. If it is, then the remaining meteorites can be neutralized and we won't have to worry about it hurting the kids someday."

"I..." Lois began and then snapped her mouth shut. She sighed in frustration, and then said, "Fine, but I want to be there. When's this test going to happen?"

"Depends how long it takes to discreetly acquire a sample," Clark informed her.

"Acquire as in stealing?" Lois asked teasingly.

Clark sighed and said, "No, there's no need to steal it. I have a trusted friend who's confident that he can arrange a private examination of one of the unbiexium three ten meteorites up in Toronto. We should be able to get our results discretely without tipping anyone off to our true purpose. He's trying to arrange it for sometime this weekend."

"And if it *is* kryptonite?"

"Then we use the technology in the Fortress to neutralize the radiation in the remaining meteorites, rendering them inert," Clark explained.

Lois was quiet for a moment and then quietly muttered, "Well, I guess this definitely ties Luthor to those murders, then."

"But we can't use it - not without revealing the source of Earth's kryptonite to Superman's enemies..." Clark pointed out.

"...which we definitely do *not* want to do," Lois added. After a momentary pause, Lois asked quietly, "How likely do you think it is that this stuff is really kryptonite?"

"It's *very* likely," Clark declared. "I ran some radioactive decay calculations at the Fortress this morning. The crystals that comprised the bulk of Krypton's technology and virtually all of its construction would have been converted into unbiexium when the radioactive stellar mass from the nova hit it. The overwhelming majority of that would have been unbiexium three ten, the green stuff, with only fractional percentages of other elements mixed in there."

"Was everything that got dragged here with your ship the green stuff?"

"Not entirely," Clark replied seriously. "There were other varieties recovered from that '78 meteor shower as well. There's a chalky white variety that appears to be deadly, at least to plant life, which scientists have identified as 'sodium lithium boron silicate hydroxide'. Actually, the sample from the Harvard museum was mislabeled with that name, but the curator from the Algiers museum that the piece was loaned from insists that it was the unbiexium three ten."

"So, Luthor attacked you with green kryptonite last time, and this other stuff is what, white kryptonite?" Lois inquired quietly.

"Could be, though I have no idea how it would affect me. There were also ruby red and charcoal black varieties recovered in small quantities and identified as other unbiexium isotopes - three twenty-two and three forty-six, respectively. There is also still the possibility that there were other varieties in that meteor shower that haven't been recovered yet, given the terrain and populations across the region where they came down. In any case, the overwhelming majority of meteorites recovered to date have been the unbiexium three ten variety... Those materials were all predicted in this morning's analysis at the Fortress, by the way."

"So Luthor has kryptonite," Lois declared grimly. She pulled into the drive at the Kent farm and complained, "And he's gotten away with murder again."

"It's a temporary setback," Clark assured her. "We'll get him..."

"...but we'll have to find him first," Lois added. She parked the car beside the house and turned off the engine, turning her head and looking intently at Clark.

"Luthor *will* show up eventually - I have no doubt about that," Clark assured her.

"It's what he'll do when he shows up that worries me," Lois confessed.

"Me, too," Clark concurred. "But he's more prone to make mistakes if we keep the pressure on him, which Harold is more than happy to help us with. And he's expecting us."

"Then we better not keep him waiting," Lois replied authoritatively. "Come on, let's go."

*Wednesday, October 4, 2006 3:30PM EDT*

Perry covertly observed the intimidating behemoth of a man whose build belied his business suit and who was seated in the chair just outside the editor's office door, attentively observing the newsroom and challenging anyone approaching. He was one of two bodyguards that Bruce Wayne had provided. His equally large partner had just as grave a demeanor as he looked over the room from his post in the elevator lobby at the opposite end of the floor. Perry shook his head and thought, *I'll be glad when this is over and we don't need these killjoys around anymore. They really scare the bejesus out of everyone and I'm the only one the staff should be afraid of.*

While the aggressive coverage of the Luthor story had created a dangerous situation warranting the bodyguards, Perry reflected that it was also the gift that kept on giving, as far as circulation was concerned. The popular Superman headlines certainly sold far more papers, but they still had to run a second printing to keep up with newsstand demand for the Luthor story on more than one occasion since beginning their crusade against the madman.

He had been their lead story that morning as well, with the bold headline, "Luthor's Prison Pals Paroled Early," and mug shots of Luthor's lackeys splashed across the front page. In the story below, Clark and Lois had thoroughly documented the outrageous early parole of the madman's hired help, excoriating the parole board for their folly. They summarized the violent crimes the criminals had been convicted of and pointed out that all four felons were now in violation of their parole with two of them indicted for the recent morgue murder. Local television news had picked up the *Planet* story, which had certainly helped to drive up their daily circulation numbers and web site traffic.

The *Planet's* afternoon edition had also hammered Luthor in its lead story, "Planet Reporter Evades Armed Attack." Lois had provided a detailed accounting of the previous evening's attempted hit on her partner and had also reported that Luthor was believed to be behind the attack, quoting an unnamed police source. She had tied it back to the battle for the Vanderworth fortune and added new details that hadn't been included in the previous coverage. *I think that this afternoon's story was even harder hitting than our previous coverage,* Perry reflected. *I wonder if Luthor's figured out that he tried to intimidate the wrong paper...*

Perry looked past his bodyguard into the bullpen, vaguely registering the din of the newsroom as he scrutinized his staff, finally hard at work again after the distraction of the bodyguards imposing presence. As his gaze moved across the room, he was surprised to see one of the elevator cars in the lobby open to reveal his missing star reporters, who strolled purposefully out into the bullpen towards their desks. Perry marched out his door and hollered across the bullpen, "Lane! Kent! What the hell are you doing here?"

"You mean besides writing up that exclusive Vanderworth interview you wanted?" Lois shouted back smugly.

"Well, you missed the afternoon deadline," Perry grumbled brusque while fighting to keep the corners of his mouth from turning up.

"Oh, you'll want to save this for the morning edition," Lois insisted. "You'll sell more papers that way."

"I'll be the judge of that," Perry declared. "Well, what are you waiting for? Write it up! And try not to miss the morning deadline, too... When you're done, I want to see both of you in my office." Perry then returned to the solitude of his office, turning his chair towards the outside windows in order to hide his broad smile. *Yes, Luthor's definitely trying to intimidate the wrong paper*, Perry observed. *And the wrong reporters*.

Twenty minutes later, a knock on the door interrupted Perry and he looked up to find Lois and Clark standing there. "Here's it is - hot off the press," Lois declared and she handed him the freshly printed stack of papers, still warm and smelling of toner.

Perry looked at the printout, his eyes widening as he read the headline, "Vanderworths Accuse Luthor of Murder." He quickly read the first few paragraphs before looking back at his star reporters seated across from him. "Is this for real?" he asked.

"Harold Junior didn't pull any punches," Lois stated simply. "They also filed several motions in court around two o'clock this afternoon- one was to throw out the new will, another was a wrongful death countersuit, another demanded a constructive trust on Luthor's assets..."

"All of it was filed under seal..." Clark added.

"But we've got copies..." Lois interjected.

"The Vanderworths don't want to risk having the motions reported by a less ethical news outlets and tipping off Luthor," Clark explained.

Perry waved the printouts in his hand and asked skeptically, "And this won't tip him off?"

"This afternoon's motions are off the record and weren't mentioned in the story. And we barely mentioned the coroner's report..." Lois informed him.

"So as far as Luthor knows, it's just the Vanderworths venting steam," Clark stated.

Perry nodded and continued to read the story. Finally, he looked up at them and said, "This is pretty bold stuff, even without mentioning the new legal developments - Frank's going to have a stroke... Now, remind me what you left out."

"Well, Harold Junior is confident that the court will grant their request for an emergency hearing, maybe even as early as tomorrow," Lois answered. "His lawyers will immediately deliver the motions to Luthor's legal team when the court schedules the hearing."

"And then the shit *really* hits the fan," Perry concluded.

"Oh, that's just the beginning of Luthor's problems," Lois replied dramatically. "We paid a visit to A.D.A. Drake after seeing Harold Junior, and off the record, she says that they'll probably indict Luthor for Gertrude's murder tomorrow - they don't want to delay it any longer after last night's attempted hit. There'll probably be additional changes added later."

"Tomorrow the D.A. is also filing a petition with Chief Justice Roberts for permission to appeal the Luthor appellate ruling, despite the late date," Clark added. "Apparently, they're following the detailed recommendations from a recent *Planet* editorial in the hope of achieving a belated on the case."

"Luthor's world is going to quickly unravel," Lois declared. "Though, the D.A. *really* should have appealed the case earlier."

"Drake and Clemens wanted to, but some bigwig from the county made a financial decision and pressured them to back off," Clark reminded her. "Fighting the Luthor appeal was enormously expensive and they didn't want them making their budget deficit worse by

continuing the fight. Fortunately, they don't have to worry about that this time with the non-profit Harold set up to cover all of those incremental costs."

"Too bad we won't get to see the expression on Luthor's face when he finds out about that," Lois replied smugly.

"He'll come unglued," Perry stated. "It's all the more reason for you two to stay out of sight tomorrow." He gestured to the bodyguard outside his office and suggested, "Maybe you need those guys more than I do."

"Thanks, but we're already covered there," Lois replied quickly. "Besides, we really don't need those Neanderthals slowing us down and our security's probably more comprehensive anyway."

"Do you think you can get back to the safe house without being followed?"

Clark smirked and commented mirthfully, "Anyone following us would have to drive like Lois does-"

Perry snorted and said, "Not even a hardened criminal would have the stomach for *that*."

"Hey!" Lois protested.

"If they try, it makes them easy for our security escort to spot," Clark added. "We'll be okay."

"Well, then what are you hanging around here for?" Perry grouched. "Get going, but get a copy of those Vanderworth motions to Frank and Susan first!"

"Susan?" Lois repeated in annoyance. "Chief, it's *our* story. We've practically got it written already."

"Relax, Lois, you'll still get top billing," Perry explained gruffly. "But Susan *is* the legal correspondent and I want someone with that background pouring over all that stuff. She'll get a 'special contributor' credit on the story."

"Um, we'll run copies before we leave," Clark promised, which prompted Lois to roll her eyes in irritation.

"And I want the indictment story and Supreme Court story written up and ready to publish as soon as its official," Perry added.

His star reporters nodded their assent and marched back to their desks, oblivious to the expression of pride on Perry's face as he stared after them. *And there they go again, putting the Midas touch on yet another story and taking down another major criminal in the process*, Perry thought. *Luthor doesn't stand a chance...*

*Wednesday, October 4, 2006 4:30PM EDT*

Lex Luthor carefully soldered the last lead from the special-ordered chip onto his custom-etched daughterboard. It was the last component of his enhanced alpha detector required to track Superman and he was looking forward to bringing it on-line. It was also one of the few areas of labor that he didn't dare delegate - it was precision work that he couldn't take a chance on the men screwing up, given the now abundant examples of their carelessness. He'd even insisted on installing the other components of the system into the shipboard electronics himself, which Stanford was easily qualified to do.

He set the soldering iron in its holder and inspected his work, nodding his head in satisfaction and packing the new circuit board into a large anti-static bag before marching out of the room. *Just a few more minutes, and we'll be able to track that son of a bitch*, Luthor thought. *At least something around here will go according to plan...*

Luthor was still fuming over the previous evening's appallingly incompetent attempted hit,



followed by yet another disruptive salvo from the *Daily Planet*, with the morning paper's front page identifying his staff as wanted men who were to be considered 'armed and dangerous'. To his chagrin, it had also been picked up on the morning news programs, which seemed to display the mug shots in a continuous loop for the public's consumption. The television stations had also picked up the story of the previous night's botched hit from the *Planet's* web site, which attributed the attack directly to him.

His lawyer's protests over that would certainly be ineffective given his track record and would do little to prevent the men from being recognized by the city's overeager inhabitants and reported to the police, who might try to follow them back to the yacht. Metropolis' Finest might even be bold enough to try to arrest *him* and he didn't dare risk that - not with his *Götterdämmerung* so close at hand. The situation had forced him to again alter his plans, ordering the ship back out to sea and flying in on the helicopter to take care of business in the city.

He'd disguised himself in a long gray wig that partially hid his features when he picked up his electronics order - a task that he should have been able to delegate but for the troublesome publicity. While that task had been simple enough to complete, his other errands required the risk of sending Grant and Brutus into the northwestern boroughs despite the news coverage. He needed them to recruit new independent contractors, which was an unfortunate necessity after the parole story. The current crew would be too easily recognized nearly anywhere but Suicide Slum, where the residents quickly learn to keep their heads down and their mouths shut.

It had taken longer than he cared for, but the men had eventually arranged for the new talent by late afternoon and called for the helicopter to collect them. The contractors would start immediately on the pest control project they needed to silence the press, starting by staking out the *Planet* and following Kent home. Once the man's home was identified, he could schedule simultaneous hits on Kent and Lane in the wee hours of the night and end his P.R. problem once and for all.

Luthor finally reached the ship's bridge and walked in, prompting Reilly to immediately back away, wisely remaining silent and giving his employer plenty of room to work. Luthor immediately started connecting the new daughterboard into the bridge electronics. A few minutes later, the installation was finished and Luthor powered up the new module.

When the monitor came on, it showed a local map of their current GPS position fifty miles east of the Metropolis shore. Luthor manipulated the controls, scrolling the image west to Metropolis, where he saw a series of curved red lines of varying thickness superimposed over the map. He repeated the process on his handheld, confirming that it was receiving the signal from the ship's transmitter and also revealing the alpha traces across Metropolis. Satisfied with the result, he sat down in the captain's chair, smiling grimly as he thought, *Finally! Now to find out where that damn freak's really been lately.*

## Chapter 35 - Gang Aft Agley<sup>(9)</sup>

Wednesday, October 4, 2006 6:15PM CDT

Ben Hubbard led the family in the dinner prayer as they sat around Martha's dining room table and eagerly anticipated her goulash. It was another gluten-free variation, for Jason's sake, now unnecessary but for Richard's ignorance of the Kryptonian therapy that had cured his allergies. The awkward tension that had defined Richard's recent interactions with Lois and Clark persisted, though tempered by their hosts' cheerful hospitality. Richard had found that the conversation with the elderly couple came easily and to his great surprise, he was quickly growing fond of them.

With the prayer complete, the family dug into their meal and resumed their conversation, though Richard held his tongue, choosing instead to listen keenly to the others as he tried to decipher the enigma that was Clark Kent. He ignored the children's chattering and instead focused on the conversation amongst the other adults, as Lois lightheartedly commented, "You keep cooking us meals like this and Jason's never going to want to leave."

"Well, I'd like my grandkids to have *something* to look forward to when they visit," Martha replied pleasantly.

"Oh, they've got that in spades," Lois replied mirthfully. "How do you make these gluten-free recipes taste so wonderful?"

"It's all in the spices," Martha answered happily. "I can give you the recipe, if you'd like. It's isn't that difficult to make."

"And tarnish my reputation for having the rare talent of being able to burn water?"

"Um, Lois, was that just the one time, or did something else happen while I was away?" Clark teased.

"*Hey!* That doesn't count," Lois protested. "And it wasn't the water that was burning."

"What on Earth happened?" Martha asked curiously.

Lois and Clark shared a look, and then Lois calmly explained, "Clark was trying to teach me how to make spaghetti. He was doing the sauce and I was going to cook the noodles. Well, someone had told me that if I added olive oil to the water it would keep the spaghetti from sticking together - only I didn't have any olive oil..."

"...so she substituted rum instead," Clark added. "Some of it dribbled down the side of the pan to the burner and..."

"Flambé," Lois added irritably.

"Oh, dear," Martha replied, laughing lightly at the story.

"It certainly *looked* like the water was on fire," Clark teased.

"Mommy, you *really* burned water?" Jason asked excitedly.

"No, munchkin, the water was *not* burning," Lois explained. She turned to Clark and added sarcastically, "Thanks *so much* for sharing that."

"Any time," Clark replied cheerfully. Before Lois had a chance to reply, he held up his hand and said, "Hold on..." He pulled out his cell phone and inspected the display before pushing himself away from the table and answering, "Hello? ...Oh, hi, Bill." He quickly walked out of the room as he continued the conversation.

"Wonder what that was about," Ben muttered.

"It was probably Bill Henderson," Lois explained. "He's a Metropolis Police Inspector and a friend of Clark's and mine."

A moment later, Clark returned to the room. He turned to Lois and said, "Bill says that

they caught a couple guys breaking into your car at the *Planet*-"

"*What?*" Lois replied incredulously. "When did that happen and why is he calling you instead of me?"

"About an hour ago and Bill said your number's going straight to voice mail," Clark answered politely. "You turned your phone off again, didn't you?"

Lois rolled her eyes and complained, "It was ringing off the hook." She got up from the table and walked into the living room, fishing her phone out of her purse and turning it on. She returned to the dining room and asked, "Did Bill say anything else about what happened?"

"Well, it didn't look like they were trying to steal it," Clark informed her. "They rifled through the glove box and trunk, like they were looking for something, and they were starting to install a LoJack transmitter when they got nabbed."

"Luthor's looking for us," Lois concluded. "Well, he's not likely to find us here... Oh, *crap.*"

"What?"

"*Forty-seven* new messages," Lois replied impatiently. "It's going to take *forever* to get through them all."

After finishing their meal and cleaning up, it was homework time, and Clark and Richard had the two children seated at the dining room table going over their schoolwork. While the children spent the time working through their assignments, Lois went through her voice mails, deleting most of them within the first ten seconds of the message playback before finally catching up. She finally closed her phone and returned it to her purse before joining the others in the dining room.

Clark was the first to notice her presence, looking up at her with a worried look. "Is everything okay?" he asked.

"Depends," Lois replied irritably. She turned to Richard and requested desperately, "Please tell me that you rescheduled Jason's dentist appointment."

"I offered to, but you said you'd take care of it," Richard replied impatiently. "You forgot, didn't you?"

"If it's serious, we could probably get Tom McClendon to squeeze him in," Ben suggested. "He's the dentist up in Wichita that my family uses. I can get the number for you, if you like."

"Actually, Doctor Gallagher is an oral pathologist, not just a dentist," Lois informed them. "Jason's had this weird thing going on in his mouth, called oral lichen planus. It's under control, but he's had a recent flare-up and I don't want to take chances with it." She sighed and looked away and was silent for a moment and then she quietly muttered, "We've also... we've missed the last two appointments... They said they'd drop us if we missed another one and I really don't want to change horses midstream."

"Well, what choice do we have?" Richard said testily. "Luthor's hunting for us and it sounds like they've got the *Planet* garage staked out. And if they spot you on your way out..."

"It does sound a bit risky," Clark agreed.

Lois was quiet for a minute and then suggested, "What if we used a portal north of Metropolis and drove in?"

"I thought we were only allowed access to the three stops..." Richard interjected.

"I think we can get him to make an exception," Lois declared.

"If Luthor's people spotted your car, we'd have a problem," Clark pointed out.

"Then we get a rental," Lois countered.

"I'd still prefer to run it by Bill and our security experts," Clark insisted. "If they think it's

risky, then maybe you could try explaining the situation to your doctor. If it came to it, I'm sure Doctor McClendon could give us a referral and there's also someone up north who could probably handle it..."

"Juvenile oral lichen planus is rather uncommon, as are doctors experienced treating children with it, and Doctor Gallagher has such a good rapport with Jason... Besides, I don't plan on hiding out in Smallville indefinitely," Lois argued. "We *will* be going back to our lives in Metropolis eventually and I don't want to burn bridges with our doctors there."

"All right, we'll run it by the experts," Clark stated somberly. He gestured to the children and added, "Let's wait until later, though, when there aren't any distractions."

Lois nodded her agreement and walked out of the room, leaving Clark and Richard to continue their review of the children's homework.

*Thursday, October 5, 2006 7:15AM CDT*

Lois yawned widely as she walked into Ben Hubbard's kitchen, dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, and her hair still damp from her shower. She made a beeline for the coffee pot, barely noticing Richard and Ben seated at the table, until the older man greeted her. "Good morning, Lois," Ben greeted her cheerfully. "How did you sleep?"

"Fine," Lois replied sleepily. "Clark left already?"

"He'll be back later," Ben informed her. "He just wanted to drop this morning's *Planet* off for you. He left a note, too. It's under that Coca-Cola magnet on the fridge."

"He needs to put a muffler on that truck," Lois complained. "The alarm hadn't even gone off once when he pulled up." She read the note on the fridge, which informed her of the district attorney's press conference scheduled at ten o'clock that morning, Metropolis time. She stuffed the note in the back pocket of her jeans and asked casually, "Do you think he got the kids off to school yet?"

"Oh, they'd normally still have another quarter hour before the bus got there," Ben replied pleasantly. "But school's canceled today - too much fog."

"Excuse me, did you say *fog*?" Lois asked incredulously. "You cancel school out here for *fog*?" She peeked out the kitchen window, where there was indeed a thick blanket of fog over the fields.

"Lois, it would just take one careless fool driving too fast down the highway and hitting a bus to visit tragedy to a dozen families," Ben explained. "These aren't limited access expressways out here. The side roads cross the highway and the only traffic light is that blinker on Main Street in front of the school. It can truly be dangerous on country roads when the fog's thick like this."

"You've got to be kidding me," Lois muttered in disbelief, and she again peered out of the window. "Does this happen often?"

"I think the kids get maybe a half dozen fog days a year," Ben answered politely. "Clark said the kids seemed pretty excited about it."

"I'll bet," Lois commented. "This'll make things interesting with Kara when it's time for Jason's dentist appointment..."

"So, you've decided to go ahead with that?" Ben asked politely.

"Yeah, we reached an agreement with our security experts," Lois commented and she recalled the private discussion she and Clark had with the experts late the previous evening. Their allies with MPD and the FBI were staunchly opposed to keeping the appointment and had strongly encouraged them to at least temporarily find another oral pathologist outside

Metropolis. However, Lois objected, citing the rarity of Jason's condition among children and doctors experienced treating it in juveniles, as well as the apparent effectiveness of his current treatment regimen. Their allies had only reluctantly conceded that the risk was manageable *if* they drove into the city from the north, directly to the doctor's office and immediately left the city afterwards.

She and Clark had made a minor revision to the plan they'd discussed. Instead of driving down from the north, they'd instead ride to the Fortress portal and fly from the Fortress into Metropolis with Superman. A rental car would be waiting for them at the Meadowland Mall parking garage, and they'd drive the final two miles to the doctor's office. Even if Luthor tracked Superman to the mall, the madman would never be able to get anyone there in time to intercept them. As a precaution, they'd chosen a different transfer point on the way back, and would leave the rental car at the North Bridge Municipal parking garage before flying back up to the Fortress.

Lois' ruminations were abruptly ended by Richard's complaint. "I still don't like it," he said impatiently. "It's too risky with Luthor out there."

Ben stood up and politely told them, "Well, I need to stretch my legs a bit. I'll be out back if you need anything."

After the back door closed behind Ben, Lois turned to the kitchen table and finally noticed Richard sitting there, smartly dressed in one of his suits. She irritably told him, "Richard, we still have jobs to do and lives to live - in Metropolis. And from the look of things, you're planning to go into Metropolis today, too."

"That's completely different," Richard argued. "The *Planet* is being monitored from the portal, which is about as close as you can get to having Superman on staff as a security guard. You and Jason will be out in the open."

"That doesn't mean Superman won't be looking out for us, too," Lois pointed out.

"But he can't be watching you twenty-four seven," Richard argued. He pulled the front section of the paper out of the pile on the table, which boasted the headline "Vanderworths Accuse Luthor of Murder". He waved it in front of Lois and added somberly, "With *this* headline, Luthor is going to be out for blood."

Lois briefly scanned the headline and muttered, "Well, if he thinks today's headline is bad, just wait until he sees *tomorrow's*."

"Are you intentionally provoking the man?" Richard asked in exasperation.

"And what would you have us do, Richard? Drop the coverage and wait for him to do something crazy with Superman's crystals? Have you forgotten what he tried to do the last time he was out?" Lois countered sharply. "We're keeping the pressure on him - he's more prone to make mistakes that way, and when he screws up, we'll take him down."

"Why do you need to be the one doing it?" Richard asked pointedly. "Why not let this come from the D.A. or the feds?"

Lois sternly countered, "Richard, we've already been through this and I really don't want to repeat that argument... Look, I know you're worried. I get that, I really do. But you're just going to have to learn to trust that I know what I'm doing instead of second-guessing every decision I make and arguing it to death... I've already made my decision here, which is *non-negotiable*... So, *please* drop it."

"I can't when you're putting Jason at risk, too."

"We've already reviewed the plan with police and FBI experts, they're okay with it, and they're there to back us up if there's a problem... So if you're done nagging me, I need to get

changed to cover the D.A.'s press conference."

"Clark said he'd arranged for a remote feed," Richard informed her.

"I can't ask questions with a remote feed," Lois protested.

"Lois, just once, would you try not to give me a stroke and play it safe?" Richard pleaded.

"This is how I work, Richard. Get used to it," Lois snapped. She sighed in frustration and in a calmer tone, she added, "We're not taking unnecessary risks, but we're not going to let Luthor manipulate our coverage, either, which means I'm going to that press conference and no amount of nagging is going to change my mind. Are we clear on that?"

"Crystal," Richard replied harshly. "At least call me when it's over and you're safe."

"I'll consider it. Now, if we're done here, I need to get changed," she replied and she then marched out of the kitchen and back up the stairs.

*Thursday, October 5, 2006 10:50AM EDT*

Clark Kent was seated on a hallway bench at the Metropolis courthouse, closely observing the light crowd in the hallway as he typed in the final changes to the indictment story on his laptop, with Lois peeking over at the screen from her seat beside him. As expected, the district attorney had announced the indictment of Lex Luthor for murder in the first degree, for the death of Gertrude Vanderworth, and conspiracy to commit murder for the attempted hit on Clark Kent. D.A. Clements had also declared that Luthor was under investigation for a number of other crimes and that additional charges would likely be added. When Clements opened the floor for questions, Lois had not held back.

*"Why did it take the district attorney's office so long to act against Luthor?"* she had asked.

*"It's taken this long to build the case against him that is strong enough to win in court,"* Clements had answered.

*"And his attempted genocide in '97 wasn't compelling enough reason to challenge his appellate victory, which used a rational for overturning the conviction that legal scholars universally consider to be untenable?"*

*"Our battle with Mister Luthor on that front isn't over yet. We've petitioned Chief Justice Roberts for leave to pursue an appeal of that decision, despite the late date. We expect the request will be granted,"* Clements had told her.

The questions from Lois and the other journalists present at the press conference continued for nearly thirty-five minutes before Clements excused himself. Lois and Clark had then dashed across the street to the courthouse, where they proceeded to make the necessary updates to their pending story from a bench in the hallway while they waited for the eleven o'clock emergency hearing the probate court had scheduled for the Vanderworth case.

"I think that should do it," Clark said quietly.

"Not quite," Lois objected in a quiet whisper. "You didn't mention that Luthor's a fugitive from justice. Let's squeeze that in near the top."

"How about at the end of the first paragraph?" Clark suggested. "I can add, 'The alleged murderer, whose 2000 conviction was overturned last spring on questionable grounds, remains at large and is now considered a fugitive from justice'."

"That'll work," Lois declared. "Make the change and send it in... And just in time. Look who's coming."

Clark looked up and recognized Harold Vanderworth as he walked towards them with his entourage. He quickly typed in their changes and submitted the story, closing his laptop just as

Harold stopped in front of him.

"Fancy meeting you two here," Harold greeted them cheerfully. "You remember my lawyer, Alex Sanchez. These two work with him - Nancy Johnson and Curt Nicholas. These two big guys here are Paul Norris and Bruce Rodgers from our security detail."

"It's a pleasure to meet all of you," Clark replied pleasantly. He turned to Harold and said, "I assume you heard the news from the D.A. this morning?"

"Yes, *wonderful* news," Harold replied enthusiastically. "I know that it is mostly thanks to your efforts that the bastard was *finally* indicted and I cannot thank you enough for that."

"Luthor's a threat to *everyone* and it'll be thanks enough once he's locked up again," Clark replied sincerely.

"That goes for me, too," Lois added. "So... do you think they'll throw out the will this morning?"

Harold turned to Alex and after a moment's hesitation, the attorney quietly explained, "The court is certain to give Luthor's side more time to respond to our complaints. This morning's hearing will mostly be about our constructive trust and property inspection motions. That should go pretty quick, I think. I doubt Judge Harrison will keep us for more than twenty minutes."

"The constructive trust is the one to freeze his assets, right?" Lois asked curiously.

"Well, no, not exactly frozen. He can still spend from the accounts, but expenditures need to be approved by the court, and we get to argue over whether they're legitimate expenses and how much is appropriate. Assuming that our motion carries - and I believe it will - there will probably be a fight over Morrison's fees in the not too distant future."

"And what about the property inspection?" Clark asked. "Is that about the damage to the house we told you about?"

"The new will has never officially been recognized and Luthor never received title to the estate property in his possession," Alex whispered. "The court declared it a *custodial* possession, meaning he's responsible for maintaining it properly while the matter is decided. If we can show that he's been a negligent custodian - say, by documenting extensive damage to the house - the court could be obliged to order Luthor to immediately relinquish *all* estate property."

"Luthor's run to ground," Lois reminded him. "They're no way you'll get anything from him that's not bolted down, and maybe not even then."

"Doesn't matter. It's psychological warfare," Harold told her quietly. "We're rubbing his nose in the fact that his plan to swindle us is falling apart. For someone as narcissistic as Luthor to be outsmarted like this will be infuriating, which is what we're counting on. We're expecting him to go ballistic and do something stupid, which could get him caught."

"That could be incredibly dangerous," Lois muttered. "You heard what he tried to do to Clark."

"We know and we've beefed up security for the entire family, just to be safe," Harold informed her. "Well, looks like the excitement's about to begin... Enjoy the fireworks."

As Harold filed into the courtroom with his entourage, Clark stuffed his laptop back into his bag and then followed Lois into the courtroom. They took their seats in the back just as Judge Cheryl Harrison began the hearing.

*Thursday, October 5, 2006 12:15PM EDT*

Luthor puzzled over the alpha scanner results that he was analyzing on his desktop

computer. The five-hundred mile range achieved by tying into the yacht's onboard systems gave him plenty of data to study, but after analyzing it for several hours, the results were not at all what he was expecting. His first surprise was the realization that the alpha trail dissipated completely within eighteen hours of Superman's movements, according to the decay rate calculated from live data. Though Luthor quickly modified his scanner to preserve the data to disk, he still had no way of gathering historical data on the alien's flights. The data barely went back far enough to confirm that the hero had indeed interfered with the hit on Kent Tuesday night.

The second surprise was the manner of the hero's movements. Luthor had expected long swooping flights, from one meddling intervention to the next, but the data instead showed numerous isolated hops. In most cases, Luthor was able to match one endpoint of the hops to reported Superman sightings, but the other endpoint tended to be obscure - alleys, subway stations, parking garages, or the roofs of tall buildings. *He really is masquerading as one of us*, Luthor concluded. *He's jumping into action when a situation arises and hiding among us after it's been handled.*

*But not all the time*, Luthor corrected himself. The scanner had also shown Superman hovering two miles above the city the past couple mornings, spying on the city prior to either swooping down to the Metropolis Police Department Headquarters, or descending on selected targets around Planet Plaza. *No wonder our subcontractors keep getting nabbed*, Luthor speculated. *The freak's scanning the crowd and protecting the Planet... Well, that answers one of my questions - the freak is definitely working with those pests from the paper, which could make taking them out more challenging...*

Luthor's thoughtful analysis of the data was interrupted by the sharp clank of Kitty's heels marching across the glass floor of the ballroom. Luthor glared over at her and harshly said, "I thought I made it clear that I was not to be disturbed."

"Fine. Then I won't tell you what they're saying about you on TV," Kitty replied casually. She turned and started marching back out when Luthor's voice stopped her.

"TV?" he barked. "You've been wasting my satellite bandwidth on *television*."

Kitty turned back to him, rolling her eyes as she said, "Well, maybe we'd have other things to do if we were hiding out on land, instead of bobbing up and down in the middle of the ocean."

"And how many houses would have the luxury that I've provided for you here?" Luthor countered arrogantly.

"Luxuries like television?"

Luthor glared at her for a moment and then sternly asked, "What were they saying about me?"

"They say that you killed Gertrude and that you had a bad day in court today," Kitty informed him. "Doesn't make sense to me - you've been *here* all day..."

Luthor's brow wrinkled in confusion for a moment, and he then turned to his computer, quickly bringing up the *Daily Planet* web site, which boasted the headline, "Luthor Indicted for Vanderworth Murder", and prominently displayed Luthor's snarling prison mug shot. The other headline on the page was almost as bad, "Vanderworths Win Constructive Trust". Luthor was barely able to contain his rage as he read through the two stories.

Luthor plucked his cell phone out of the top drawer and inspected the display, his rage growing even fiercer when he realized there was no signal. He chucked the cell phone across the room, which sent Kitty scurrying out the door. Luthor then launched the Internet phone



application on his desktop and placed his call. After a few rings, it was picked up, with the other party courteously answering, "Morrison."

"What the hell happened this morning?" Luthor demanded angrily.

"Mister Luthor," Morrison replied. "We've been trying to get a hold of you. Your phone's going straight to voice mail-"

"Never mind that. Tell me what the hell happened?" Luthor insisted emphatically.

"Vanderworth ambushed us with a half dozen motions filed yesterday afternoon and the court scheduled an emergency hearing on them this morning. We just saw them for the first time a little after nine and barely had an hour to review them before we had to be in court." Morrison explained.

"Spare me the explanations and get to the point," Luthor commanded.

"Well, there's a lot to go through, between the probate and criminal matters," Morrison told him. "I'll start with probate. The Vanderworths filed a motion demanding that the court declare your late wife's deathbed will invalid on the grounds that she was not of sound mind at the time. They are supporting their argument with the coroner's report, which identifies high levels of psychotropic compounds in her system, along with a fatal level of arsenic. They also presented affidavits from a half dozen highly respected experts on the effects those compounds would have had on your late wife."

"Impossible," Luthor declared. "Whatever they found was clearly cross-contamination from the dumpster they found her in."

Morrison somberly replied, "Mister Luthor... They autopsied her Friday *afternoon*, almost ten hours *before* her body was stolen from the morgue."

Luthor eyes flew wide and he fell silent for a full minute as his mind absorbed the scope of the astonishing failure. Finally, he casually declared, "I've clearly underestimated Miss Kowalski's obsession with me. However, we mustn't allow that to interfere with Gertrude's clear wishes to leave the estate in my hands."

"That's going to be a tough sell, but we can try," Morrison responded. "We'll probably have better luck using that in the criminal case."

"They haven't *got* a case!"

"You were indicted this morning for Gertrude's murder and for the attempt on Kent," Morrison reminded him.

"They *can't* have anything on me," Luthor insisted. "It's got to be a ploy by Vanderworth and Lane and the freak to discredit me."

"Be that as it may, the coroner's report is going to be hard to impeach," Morrison commented. "In any case, we have until the nineteenth to respond to the motion. Moving right along... The Vanderworths also filed a wrongful death complaint against you, explicitly accusing you of marrying and murdering Gertrude for her money. They're asking for treble damages and one hundred million in punitive damages."

"*What!*" Luthor exclaimed.

"We don't need to worry about that quite yet," Morrison assured him. "We have until the nineteenth to respond and it won't be difficult to suspend that complaint until after the criminal case is resolved. By the time the court gets back to it, we'll be ready for it."

"Ready for it?" Luthor echoed. "And have you been ready for *anything* they've thrown at you yet?"

Morrison ignored the comment and continued, "They also filed a motion to compel discovery, demanding all of your financial records. We have until the nineteenth to respond to

that as well."

"I'm not giving them my financial records!" Luthor declared.

"I'll attempt to quash it," Morrison promised. "Judge Harrison ruled from the bench on the last two motions with almost no discussion. She claimed that the court was obliged to do so, given recent developments in the matter, such as the O.C.M.E. reclassifying your late wife's death as a homicide, your indictment for her murder, and your current status as a fugitive from justice--"

"Get to the point!" Luthor demanded.

Morrison sighed and then said, "The first of the two motions is a property audit. Remember, when we first started down this road, we got the court to recognize your custodial possession of the house and yacht, among other things. The Vanderworths are demanding an inspection of the property, to make sure you've been a good custodian. The court concurs, giving the, quote, 'likelihood that plaintiffs will prevail in the matter before the court'..."

"*Likelihood that they'll prevail?*" Luthor repeated incredulously. "Just what have I been paying you for?"

"The court also issued an order demanding that you immediately return the yacht to its berth in front of the house for inspection."

"I'll do no such thing!"

"If that's your decision, I'll file an interlocutory appeal with Judge Gregory this afternoon," Morrison promised. "Of course, it won't be as easy as it was last time, when there were two vacancies on the bench. This time, we'll have to convince one of the other judges to go along with Gregory, and we've not yet found the skeletons in their closets."

"Well, look harder!" Luthor demanded.

"There was one more motion before the court this morning," Morrison continued. "The court has imposed a constructive trust on all of your known assets. Furthermore, you are enjoined from making any expenditure from those named accounts until a trustee is appointed."

"*How* could you have failed me like this, Albert?" Luthor demanded angrily. "If you had cremated the old hag when I asked you to, we wouldn't have any of these problems right now!"

"Sir, that's simply the way things go sometimes, which brings me to our final topic," Morrison replied. "Given the constraints on your domestic funds, we're going to require a retainer drawn from your offshore holdings to cover our fees."

"*What!*" Luthor screamed. "You incompetently allow both Vanderworth and the *Planet* to run rings around you, slandering my reputation and blocking my richly deserved inheritance, and now you have the gall to try to shake me down?"

"They have very talented representation," Morrison countered.

"And I, apparently, do *not!*"

"Sir, I doubt you'd find anyone better qualified to represent you and we did get you out of prison."

"Only because we had Gregory in our pocket!" Luthor argued.

"I understand your disappointment, but I'm still going to have to insist on the retainer," Morrison replied calmly. "It is a common arrangement when the client's future ability to pay the fees is in doubt..."

"How dare you!"

"Given what we know so far of the cases against you, it is going to be difficult and

expensive to defeat," Morrison explained. "Our initial estimate on the cost for your defense in both the probate and criminal cases is between eight and ten million dollars. However, I'll only ask for a retainer of eight million."

"You've got a lot of nerve," Luthor stated in barely restrained anger.

"Sir, if we're to continue to represent you, we'll need to guarantee that we will be compensated for our services."

"Your *services*... are no longer required!" Luthor shouted and he abruptly ended the call. He stared at the screen and angrily added, "You'll die with the rest of them." He then lowered his head to his hands while he considered the new developments, which would clearly force him to alter his plans again. He was growing weary of the forced changes and the incompetence that continually threatened his plans.

A few minutes later, he punched the intercom and shouted, "Reilly! Get down here and bring everyone else with you. We have work to do. And I've got new orders for our contractors - tell them to get into position for Plan G."

## Chapter 36 - Calm Before the Storm

*Thursday, October 5, 2006 12:30PM EDT*

Lois usually found flights with Superman to be incredibly exhilarating and cathartic experiences, with an almost surreal calm surrounding them as they hovered over the world. However, their current flight south from the Fortress was an exception, due to a last minute change in plans that had Jason flying with Kara. Lois reluctantly agreed to the request, unable to resist three hopeful sets of puppy-dog eyes.

Clark had promised to closely monitor the children, but Lois was still nervous watching them fly beside them, twenty feet to her left. The children were flying side by side, with their inner arms wrapped tightly around each other and the outer arms extended, making it hard to tell who was doing the flying and who was the passenger. Both of them had wide smiles radiating their joy as they flew and Lois couldn't help but return the smile.

"Okay, let's bank about three degrees to the right," Clark gently instructed the children. Kara obliged, with Jason exaggerating his arm movements to the right as he pretended to be the one flying. However, Kara quickly pointed out his error, instructing him in the proper motions for a three degree right bank.

Lois felt Superman tighten his grip, and she looked over at him to find a mischievous smirk on his face and gesturing for silence with a finger over his lips. He motioned towards the children with his head and moved directly behind them as he rolled over into an inverted position. He then quietly inched forward underneath them, reached up and tickled them - first Jason, then Kara. The kids immediately started giggling and pulled their legs up before Kara banked off to the right and out of range of their father's tickles.

"Clark, don't do that while they're flying!" Lois complained anxiously. "You're going to make her drop him."

"They're okay, Lois," Superman assured her cheerfully. "It's all done under strict adult supervision."

"Clark," Lois warned.

"All right, no more in-flight tickling," Superman promised. He rolled back over and called out to the children, "Come on, kids. Back into formation."

Kara and Jason banked back over and pulled up alongside the adults, maintaining a constant distance of about twenty feet between them. Kara looked over at her dad and asked hopefully, "Um, Dad? Can we do corkscrews?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Honey, but that would hurt Lois and Jason. They can't take the forces like we can," Superman informed her patiently. "We'll have to save that for another day, okay?"

"Corkscrews?" Lois asked.

"Aerial acrobatics, of a sort," Superman informed her. "It started out as an exercise to help her control her flight and turned into a game. We fly circles around each other, closer and closer and faster and faster and then try to come to a sudden stop. We've got similar games to help her learn control over her other abilities."

"What kind of games?"

"We play Pressure, and Hot 'n Cold, and Speed-Eggs..." Kara began.

"Excuse me, 'Speed-Eggs'?" Lois repeated.

"Oh, you got to move all the eggs from one crate to the other as fast as you can without breaking any of them," Kara explained.

"She's getting pretty good at it," Superman added.

"At packing eggs?"

"The eggs are fragile and she has to handle them gently to avoid breaking them," Superman pointed out. "The faster you go the harder that is to do, but if she can handle the eggs, she'll be able to handle people."

"I guess I never really thought about the challenge of controlling all that power," Lois admitted. "You make it look so effortless."

"It took awhile to get to that point," Superman informed her. He then turned to Kara and said authoritatively, "Honey, move in a little bit closer now. In a couple minutes, I want you to transfer Jason back to me, and then stay really close as we fly into Metropolis, just like we talked about. Okay?"

"Okay."

A few minutes later, Superman flew Lois and Jason across Metropolis with Kara flying a foot above him. Superman disappeared down the ramp from the roof of the Meadowland Mall parking garage and pulled himself upright, with Kara immediately pressing against his back as he slowed to a stop. Finally, he released his burden and disappeared in a blur.

"Clark?" Lois called out, turning her head to the left and right looking for him.

"Over here," he answered from halfway down the row of parked cars.

Lois looked over towards the sounds of his voice and found him dressed in his business suit, standing behind a silver Chrysler Town & Country minivan.

"You rented a minivan?" Lois asked incredulously.

"Well, once we decided to let Kara go with Jason today, it seemed like an obvious choice," Clark replied cheerfully. "Come on, kids, climb in."

As the kids climbed into the minivan, Clark handed the keys over to Lois. "I'll be around. If something serious happens that looks like it'll keep Superman busy, I'll text you, and Plan B..."

"Plan B is to park the car at the *Planet* and take the portal back from there," Lois finished. "Clark, relax. We'll be okay."

Clark nodded and turned his attention back to the kids. "I'll see you kids in a little while. Be good and listen to Lois." He gave them each a quick hug and then quickly jogged over to the stairwell door, before disappearing through it and returning to the sky.

Richard returned to the bullpen after a quick lunch at the first floor snack shop and stopped abruptly in the aisle after spotting the mug shot of Lex Luthor displayed on the overhead televisions as GNN reported the news of the felon's misfortunes that morning. Richard was so absorbed by the report that he hadn't noticed Perry walk up to him until the older man spoke. "Our coverage is much better," Perry commented proudly.

Richard turned to him and replied anxiously, "It sounds like the shit just hit the fan."

"That it did," Perry commented and he gestured to Richard to follow him as he walked back to his office. Once Richard claimed a seat in one of Perry's guest chairs, the older man added somberly. "Lois and Kent will be going on an out of town assignment for a couple weeks. I haven't decided on the assignment yet, but I'm seriously considering sending them to Saint Thomas to investigate that vacation scam. At least that way I can still get some work out of them while they're sequestered."

"You're sending them alone to Saint Thomas?" Richard questioned incredulously.

Perry sighed, and said, "If you're *that* bent out of shape over it, you can go with them, but it's on your dime and you'll be burning vacation time. There's simply no business justification for sending you there at the paper's expense, too."

"Fine, I'll pay for it," Richard consented irritably. "When do we leave?"

"After the Pulitzer ceremony tomorrow night," Perry informed him. "Everybody stays out of sight until the ceremony, we'll all sneak in and out through a back entrance, and then put the three of you on the plane."

"Uncle Perry, it'd be nuts to even *think* about going to the Pulitzers right now," Richard protested. "It'd be the perfect opportunity for Luthor to strike back at us."

"They're beefing up security at Ford Hall and the police will be there in force," Perry assured him. "In fact, it's going to be a pain in the ass for anyone else to get through the security perimeter with the ID checks."

"You can't be serious," Richard said dramatically. "After what Luthor tried Tuesday night, you still expect us to go? Uncle Perry, we *can't*. Especially not Lois."

Perry harrumphed and gave Richard a skeptical look. "Richard, ignoring for the moment all the free publicity the *Planet* will get from her Pulitzer, do you honestly believe for even a second that Lois would consider sacrificing her glory after finally winning for the first time?"

Richard's shoulders sagged in resignation and he sadly replied, "No, especially not if I'm the one asking."

"Well, I won't be asking, either," Perry declared. "I can make my recommendations, but at the end of the day, it'll be her decision whether to attend or not."

Both men were quiet for a moment, when Richard seemed about to speak and then thought better of it, snapping his mouth shut. He was silent for another moment and then sighed heavily. Finally, he sadly said, "I can't believe I'm about to suggest this... but maybe... maybe Clark could talk Lois into skipping the ceremony. He seems to be the only one she listens to these days..."

Perry offered him a small smile and said, "He always did have a knack for that, though I suspect that even he might have trouble making headway when it comes to the Pulitzers. Feel free to talk to him about it if you want to, though. And Richard?"

"Yes."

"It looks you may finally have your head out of the sand. Try to keep it that way this time."

After escorting Lois and the kids to the Meadowland Mall, Superman settled into a wide patrol pattern ten thousand feet above them while he closely monitored their short drive to the doctor's office. The trip was uneventful, as expected. Even if Luthor had been tracking him, he wouldn't have had time to get anyone to the mall in time to intercept Lois and the kids. They'd be fine as long as they stuck to the plan.

Once Lois signed in at the doctor's office, Superman diverted his attention to Planet Plaza and he again scanned the crowd, looking for anyone suspicious or who displayed an unusual interest in the *Daily Planet* building. He identified a half dozen young men armed with concealed pistols. After taking a moment to assess the treat, he swooped down over the plaza, quickly disarming the potential bandits and turning them over to the beat cops in the area.

After confirming that the perimeter around the *Planet* was secure, Superman allowed himself to relax and he indulged in a peek into the *Planet* bullpen. Jimmy was reviewing his pictures from the D.A. press conference that morning; Gil and Ralph were debating whether the new female GNN news anchor's 'credentials' were real or silicon; and Perry and Richard were discussing the Pulitzers. *That's tomorrow?* Superman wondered. *I forgot all about that. I think Lois forgot, too... Richard's right, it's not a good idea for her to go, but how do I*

*suggest that to her after the way I complained about her editorial?*

His contemplation was rudely interrupted by a thunderous explosion to the southeast and he focused his senses on the source of the blast. To his horror, he found an exploded tanker trailer in the Roosevelt Tunnel that connected New Troy Island to Bakerline. The truck driver was killed instantly, as were some of those in adjacent vehicles, and the explosion had effectively blocked off the tunnel, with the fire threatening the surviving motorists. Superman immediately formulated a rescue plan for the event and dropped from his patrol altitude and sped into the Roosevelt Tunnel.

Lois sat in the guest chair in the examination room with Kara on her lap as the hygienist prepped Jason for Doctor Gallagher and did the initial check on him. Kara found the process fascinating and asked a continuous stream of questions about it, which the hygienist patiently answered. Finally, the initial check was completed and Doctor Gallagher entered the room, wearing scrubs and with a surgical mask pulled down and bunched up under his chin. "Hello, Miss Lane," he said politely. "Looks like we have an extra guest today."

"Oh, this is Jason's sister, Kara," Lois replied casually. "Her school was canceled today and she wanted to come along."

"I see," Doctor Gallagher replied cheerfully. "Well, it's very nice to meet you, Kara."

"Pleased to meet you," Kara said shyly.

He then turned his attention to Jason, who looked at him anxiously from the reclined examination chair. "And how have you been Jason? I guess we had a little problem with your tongue a few months ago?"

"It's all better now," Jason said nervously.

"The flare-up calmed down pretty quickly after you started him on that prescription," Lois explained.

"The PEDIAPRED?" Doctor Gallagher asked.

"Yeah, that was it."

Doctor Gallagher pulled fresh latex gloves out of a box on the counter and put them on. He then pulled his surgical mask over his nose and slid his stool over next to the examination chair. "Okay, let's have a look... Open wide for me, please, Jason."

While Doctor Gallagher was inspecting Jason's mouth, Lois heard the chirp from her cell phone, indicating an incoming text message. She discretely pulled her phone from her purse and looked at the display, which revealed an incoming message from Clark. Her eyes shot wide when she read the surprising message from him: "Explosion in Roosevelt Tunnel. Superman on the scene. Could be awhile."

*Holy shit*, Lois thought. *Was that an accident or some kind of terrorist attack?* She mentally rolled through a list of likely suspects if the explosion had been intentional and the contacts she'd need to corner to confirm it. However, her story preplanning was interrupted by the doctor's voice as he spoke to Jason and Lois tried valiantly to shift her attention to her son's examination.

"Stick out your tongue for me, please," Doctor Gallagher gently instructed his patient. Jason complied and the doctor grabbed the little boy's tongue with a gauze square as he examined it. Finally, he muttered, "This is odd..."

"Is something wrong?" Lois asked anxiously, and she quickly closed her phone and dropped it back in her purse.

"Oh, he's fine," the doctor replied pleasantly. "There's no sign of the lesions he had a few

weeks ago." He continued to examine Jason's mouth and added, "In fact, I'd be hard pressed to find any evidence at all of the O.L.P."

"That's a good thing, right?" Lois asked.

"Of course, but it's highly unusual," Doctor Gallagher said. He released Jason's tongue and turned to Lois as he explained, "Oral lichen planus is a chronic condition and I haven't seen *anything* in the literature that would explain the sudden disappearance of all traces of the disease."

*Jor-El said he fixed Jason's 'ailments' Monday night, Lois thought. Was it just the allergies, or did he cure the O.L.P., too?*

"Have there been any changes in his medications recently?"

"His allergy treatment was scaled back," Lois answered nervously.

"Scaled back?"

"We saw a specialist who thought he'd been misdiagnosed," Lois explained. "He discontinued the theophylline, but Jason's still carrying an albuterol inhaler, just in case."

"That wouldn't explain the spontaneous recovery. Perhaps the O.L.P. was misdiagnosed, too," Doctor Gallagher commented. "Well, whatever the case, it looks like it's cleared up, so I'm going to take him off the vancericil."

"So, it's really gone? No more O.L.P.? He's cured?" Lois asked hopefully.

"I'd be hesitant to use the word 'cured' when he's been asymptomatic for no more than a few weeks," Doctor Gallagher stated pleasantly. He scooted his stool over to the counter, opened Jason's chart and began writing in it as he added, "Everything looks good, but I'd still like to see him again in six months and see how he's doing. And that should do it for us today."

Lois had her phone to her ear before they even made it out of the office, trying to track down someone who knew something about the explosion. She'd already made half a dozen calls by the time they reached the car, with her contacts either not answering or claiming ignorance. She unlocked the doors to let the kids in the car and finally called Jimmy Olsen as she climbed into the driver's seat.

"Miss Lane?" Jimmy answered politely.

"Jimmy, I got a tip about an explosion in the Roosevelt Tunnel," Lois said seriously. "Have they heard anything around the bullpen on that?"

"There was something about it on GNN," Jimmy informed her. "Nobody knows what happened, but it sounds like Superman's on top of it. Gil and I are heading there now, so we should know more soon."

"Perry put Gil on it?" Lois asked incredulously.

"Yeah," Jimmy replied apologetically. After a beat, he added, "Do you want us to call you once we find something out?"

Lois hesitated for a moment and then caught the sight of the curious faces looking back at her from the rear view mirror. She sighed in resignation and said, "Thanks, Jimmy, but as much as I hate to say it, I'm going to have to sit this one out. I've got Jason and Kara with me this afternoon. I'll talk to you later."

"Okay, then... Bye."

Lois looked over her shoulder at the children and said, "Well, it looks like it's going to be Plan B. We'll go back home through the *Planet* portal."

"What about the explosion in the tunnels?" Kara asked worriedly.

"That was a different tunnel," Lois explained. "The Kryptonian tunnels connected to the



portal are fine."

"Oh. Okay," Kara replied happily.

Lois was about to pull out of the parking lot when her cell phone rang. She quickly checked the display and answered it, "Harold?"

"*I have some good news for you, Lois,*" Harold Vanderworth informed her. "*We've arranged to inspect the house today at two o'clock. As I recall, you and Clark both wanted a close look at that crystal mass that the police found. Well, here's your chance.*"

"You said two o'clock?" Lois asked anxiously, suddenly regretting her decision to change into jeans after lunch. She looked at her watch and quickly worked out the math. *Twenty-five to,* she thought. *It'd take twenty minutes to get back to the Planet from here on a good day, and another fifteen to get to the Vanderworth estate... but that explosion in the Roosevelt Tunnel will probably have traffic backed up in that part of town, which could easily double that...*

"Yes, two o'clock," Harold confirmed. "*Is that a problem?*"

"Well, Clark's tied up covering that Roosevelt Tunnel mess and I have our kids with me this afternoon," Lois explained. "We're just now leaving the doctor's office."

"*Oh, how old are they?*" Harold asked eagerly.

"Five and seven."

"*They're a lot of fun at that age,*" Harold declared. "*You're welcome to bring them with you, if you like. We'll keep them safe.*"

"All right, if you're sure it's not a problem," Lois replied pleasantly. "We'll see you there at two."

"*See you then,*" Harold said cheerfully. "*Goodbye, Lois.*"

"Bye."

Lois ended the call and scrolled through her contact list, momentary stopping over Richard's name. *No,* she decided, *he'll have a meltdown over me going there.* She instead scrolled up to Perry's number and as she began typing in the text message, she heard Kara's worried voice behind her. "Dad said we were supposed to go right back to Grandma's after the doctor," she reminded her.

"We'll be there soon, sweetheart. This shouldn't take long," Lois assured her. She sent the text message, threw her phone back in her purse and finally pulled out onto eastbound Jefferson, heading towards the Vanderworth estate and calling to mind the shortcuts she'd need to use to take them around the traffic logjams that had certainly developed.

*Thursday, October 5, 2006 1:50PM EDT*

Lois made amazingly good time around the expected traffic problems, arriving at the Vanderworth estate barely twenty minutes after leaving the doctor's office. As she pulled through the front gate, she immediately noticed the helicopter parked on the dock. *I guess Harold beat us here,* she thought. *I wonder where he is.* She brought the car to a stop in front of the mansion, looked over at the helicopter and then back at the house. There was nobody in sight. "Kara, do you see anybody here?" she asked calmly.

"There are a couple people in the house and someone else is coming around the side," Kara replied simply.

*They must have started the inspection early,* Lois thought. She climbed out of the driver's seat and opened the sliding side door to help the kids out. However, as she leaned in the door, she suddenly felt the muzzle of a gun against her temple.

"Not a word," a strange male voice ordered. "Now stand back. Same goes for you two. Out of the car and keep quiet or your mom gets a bullet in the brain. Now move."

Lois obeyed and the children followed suit, quickly grabbing onto Lois in their fear as they exited the vehicle. Lois opened her mouth to speak and the man repeated, "I said, not a word!"

They'd been standing there for a couple minutes when Lois heard another voice say, "Aw, shit." Lois shifted her eyes in the direction of the voice and recognized Grant Hunter from the mug shot that the *Planet* had run. "The boss isn't going to like this."

*Luthor's flunkies are here? Lois wondered. What are they up to?*

"It's an easy problem to solve," the first voice declared.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa!" A third voice interjected. "You remember the boss' conniption fit the last time you 'improvised'... and he's been in an especially bad mood today."

Lois looked towards the new voice and saw a dark-skinned man whom she also recognized from recent *Planet* stories. *Stanford Harris*, Lois thought. *Which would make bozo number three either Reilly Dixon or Brutus Martin. This is **not** good.*

"So what do we do with them?" Grant asked.

"Take them back to the boss. Let him decide what to do," Stanford suggested.

"We'll still need to get rid of the car," the first man pointed out.

"We'll hide it in the garage," Stanford declared. "There'll be nothing in sight to spoil the surprise."

*Spoil the surprise? Lois wondered. What have they done?*

"All right, everyone over to the helicopter and keep your mouths shut," the first man ordered. He ushered them over to the helicopter and into the back seat. Lois pulled the two children close to her and whispered almost inaudibly, "We're going to be okay. We just need to figure out how to let your dad know where we are."

When their captor climbed in the helicopter and sat beside them, Lois was finally able to see him clearly enough to identify him as Brutus Martin. Lois quickly grew uncomfortable with the lecherous look he was giving her, and she shifted her gaze to the window beyond him, where she saw the minivan in the garage, with the door closing behind it as Grant and Stanford ran over to the helicopter. As they lifted off and headed out to sea a moment later, Lois squeezed the children a little bit tighter and thought, *Please find us soon, Clark.*

## Chapter 37 - Pandemonium

*Thursday, October 5, 2006 2:00PM EDT*

Harold Vanderworth Junior climbed out of his limousine, joining his bodyguards as a silver Acura TSX pulled in ahead of them. A moment later, Nancy Johnson stepped out of the car. She was one of the junior lawyers working with them on the probate case against Luthor. Harold walked over to her and casually said, "I hear Morrison won't be joining us this afternoon."

"Nope," Nancy replied. "Sounds like Luthor fired him."

"Well, we were expecting that he'd do something foolish - looks like your job just got a lot easier," Harold replied. He heard another car approaching and looked back as a Chevy Malibu pulled up behind the limousine. Harold commented quietly, "I wonder who we have here."

A middle-aged balding man climbed out of the Malibu and rushed over to greet them. "Hi, I'm Tom McKenzie, the city inspector."

"Harold Vanderworth," Harold told him. "And this is Nancy Johnson from my attorney's office, and these two are Paul Norris and Bruce Rodgers from my security team. We're expecting one more, but it looks like she's running late."

"Well, we can wait a couple minutes, but that's all," Tom told him. "We're kind of on a tight schedule. I assume one of you has a key?"

"Yes, but I'm assuming Luthor changed the locks," Harold replied scornfully. "We have a locksmith on the way. He should be here any minute."

Tom nodded and said, "Just to summarize what we're doing here - this is a court-ordered inspection, which you're permitted to witness as a party to the case. And when I say 'witness', that means you stay with me - nobody wanders through the house unescorted."

"We understand," Harold answered.

After a few minutes of small talk, Nancy noticed a flicker of light inside the mansion's windows and asked curiously, "Is someone already inside? I think I just saw a light come on."

"Mister Luthor still has custodial possession," Tom reminded her as he strained to see movement through the windows. An asymmetric flicker through the windows widened his eyes in alarm and he added urgently, "That looks like a fire. Wait here. I'm going to take a closer look."

Tom trotted up to the porch and cupped his hands around his eyes as he peered through a side window. After a moment, he turned from the window and pulled out his cell phone as he called to his companions, "I'm calling 911. We've got a fire!" No sooner had he dialed the number on his cell phone than a white hot flame violently exploded through the doors and windows of the mansion, engulfing the building inspector in its embrace. The intense heat instantly burned through his clothing, leaving the remaining fabric and skin melded as one in an unfamiliar wrap around his body. However, before the unimaginable pain could provoke his screams, the concussive force of the blast mercifully robbed him of consciousness as it threw him across the lawn and to the far side of the driveway, where he landed hard in a limp and smoldering pile.

It hadn't taken Superman long to confirm that there had been a bomb underneath the tanker trailer in Roosevelt Tunnel and he found the resulting carnage sickening. He initially counted thirty dead, dozens more with severe burns, and hundreds more trapped. There were also dozens of mangled vehicles littering the tunnel and a steady stream of water seeping in from the damaged walls. The only saving grace was the light early afternoon traffic, which

helped limit the death toll from what it could have been.

*Why would anyone do this?* Superman wondered. *What could they possibly have to gain?* He pushed back the nausea the scene provoked and attacked the blaze, using his freezing breath to insulate the survivors from the extreme heat while simultaneously attempting to contain and extinguish the blaze. Several excruciatingly minutes later, the fire was finally doused and he went to work triaging the surviving victims and began their evacuation.

The first victims evacuated were the most time consuming. They were the most critically injured, required the most careful handling, and had to be immediately evacuated to the area hospitals one at a time, if they were to have a chance at survival. By the time the first ambulances showed up, the injury level of the remaining victims was sufficient to allow him to deposit the victims with the paramedics for interim treatment. It was still a laborious process, evacuating survivors one at a time, but the turnaround was quicker. Finally, the last survivor was evacuated from the tunnel, after a nearly intolerable forty-five minutes since the tanker detonated.

Unfortunately, the disaster was also one of the rare events where he felt compelled to handle evacuation of the deceased. Under normal circumstances, he left that dreadful duty to the medico-legal investigators from the Metropolis O.C.M.E., which left testimony regarding the scene to the professionals and avoided any inadvertent forensic contamination. However, the imminent flooding of the Roosevelt Tunnel and the clear cause of death from the disaster called for different handling.

After a brief stop at the O.C.M.E. to coordinate with a MLI supervisor and collect body bags, he began removing the deceased and transferring them to a city maintenance garage near the morgue. Not only did the deceased have to be removed one at a time and handled with nearly as much care as the critically injured, he also needed to fill out paperwork for each of them, documenting the scene of death in as much detail as possible for later analysis and identification of the deceased. That process had taken him another twenty minutes.

Once the unhappy duty was finally done, Superman found the fire marshal near the west end of the Roosevelt Tunnel. He immediately recognized the man as Warren Brown, a fireman he'd rescued from a bad arson fire prior to his hiatus, though he wasn't a marshal the last time he saw him. "Marshal Brown," Superman greeted the man somberly.

"Superman," the fire marshal replied politely. "Man, it's good to have you back! Thanks for the assist. Any idea what happened here?"

"The blaze appears to have been started by a bomb on a diesel tanker trailer," Superman informed him.

"Those tankers aren't supposed to be in the tunnels," Marshall Brown stated angrily.

"I don't think that whoever was behind this was concerned with traffic rules," Superman replied grimly. "The tanker was down there and its explosion has caused extensive damage. There are dozens of incinerated and mangled vehicles still down there and there's a lot of water coming in. I expect that the tunnel will be completely flooded in another hour."

"Anything else you can tell us?"

"I haven't had time for a thorough-" Superman began, then his head snapped up and he quickly said, "I'm sorry, but I've got to go. Another explosion just went off north of here." He then launched into the air and disappeared over the rooftops, zooming across the city to the source of troubling sound.

*Thursday, October 5, 2006 2:10PM EDT*

By the time Superman arrived at the Vanderworth mansion, the heat of the blaze had already burnt through most of the internal structural support, collapsing what was left of the upper floors into the basement, which continued to burn amazingly hot. Superman immediately scanned through the wreckage, breathing a sigh of relief once he'd confirmed that there were no victims inside the building.

However, the fire had still claimed a victim, severely burnt and barely clinging to life as his companions surrounded him, helpless to do more than offer words of comfort to the unconscious man while they waited for an ambulance. The extreme heat had burned through his clothes, melting what remained to his skin, which was charred black and stained with unhealthy streaks of pink. Superman doubted he'd survive.

As always, the first priority was with the survivors, despite the odds against them. After confirming that the blaze wasn't an immediate threat to the other survivors, he landed next to the unidentified man, gently cooling the victim's still smoldering skin before lifting him up, mindful of his injuries. As the others looked over at him, Superman informed them. "I need to get this man to Met General immediately. I'll be back."

After turning over the victim to the care of Metropolis General Hospital's emergency room staff, he turned his attention to the fire, which was still blazing at an incredible three thousand degrees, nearly twice the temperature of the average fire. *High temperature accelerants*, Superman concluded and he began a tight orbit around the burning structure, blowing his freezing breath on the flames in a desperate effort to extinguish the blaze. Fires that hot couldn't simply be blown out like a candle. Even water would feed the flames at that temperature, with the oxygen atoms immediately separating and fueling the combustion.

It took the Man of Steel nearly ten minutes to cool the blaze to normal fire temperatures and finally extinguish it, with assistance from the water hoses of Engine Company Eighty-Seven of the Metropolis Fire Department. There was little more than a shell left of the once impressive mansion, with the exception of the Kryptonian crystal mass. It had been transformed into a smoky black appearance and seemed brittle, but it had otherwise survived the inferno.

Superman scanned the firefighters on the scene, searching out the fire marshal, who was one of the rare women in the Metropolis Fire Department. Superman didn't recognize her from the old days, but that was hardly a surprise, given that nearly half of the marshals returned to the ranks of the firefighters they were recruited from after a couple years. Superman landed gently and politely greeted her, "Marshal. I don't believe we've met before."

"Georgia Marenko," she introduced herself. "Thanks for the assist. Can you tell us anything about this fire?"

"It was a hot one - over three thousand degrees," Superman informed them. "I'm afraid it's consumed most of your arson evidence."

"Another HTA fire?" Georgia replied unhappily. "I was really hoping we'd seen the last of those."

Superman's eyes widened in surprise and he asked, "*Another* one? I thought HTA fires were a rarity."

"They are - only about twenty-five of them nationwide in the last decade. However, a disgruntled wannabe firefighter with a grudge against the department set a number of HTA fires to try to embarrass us a couple of years back," Marenko explained. "We caught the guy and he got a multiple life sentence at Stryker's. He was a slippery bastard - I hope he hasn't gotten out..."

"I think Lex Luthor is your prime suspect behind this one," Superman declared. "He was ordered by the court this morning to open the place up for inspection and this seems a bit too coincidental for my taste. Besides, the unexploded firebombs from the Baxter Stamping Plant Tuesday night were HTA and were also tied to Luthor. Marshal Pete Daniels was onsite from your department, though I think that S.C.U. is handling that case. You might want to talk to Captain Maggie Sawyer."

"I'll do that - thanks for the tip," Georgia replied grimly. "I just hope we can keep the interdepartmental politics out of it this time."

"I thought everyone was supposed to be on the same side," Superman began sternly, but before he could continue the discussion, he suddenly cocked his head to the side and his eyes grew wide in alarm. "I have to go," he said quickly and he launched himself into the air, disappearing in a blur to the west.

Luthor allowed a small smile as observed the live events in Metropolis with grim satisfaction and reflected how easy it had been to keep Superman preoccupied. After his conversation with Morrison, a check of the alpha scanner had shown Superman again hovering high above the city, flying in lazy orbits and probably looking down on Metropolis like a god on Mount Olympus, seeking out opportunities to meddle in the affairs of mortals. Despite Luthor's meticulous planning, there was still the possibility that the freak could find a way to interfere with his grand designs and he needed to keep Superman busy until he was ready for him.

Fortunately, he had planned for that and as the yacht cruised to the predetermined launch coordinates, Luthor had unleashed his fury on Metropolis, the effects of which was now apparent on the screen before him. The planned distractions had exceeded his wildest expectations. One of the new contractors had guided a tanker trailer into Roosevelt Tunnel shortly after one, believing his assignment to be to tie up traffic as a distraction for a daring robbery. The fool never noticed the explosives on the trailer and probably never had time to realize the truth when the devices detonated. The wonderful results of that blast kept the Man of Steel occupied for over an hour. Luthor watched with glee as the red swirls on his display showed Superman's panicked efforts to save the victims, while another window showed GNN's live coverage of the disaster.

When Superman was finally wrapping up his efforts at the tunnel, Luthor was thrilled to see him zoom away to the Vanderworth mansion. The GNN helicopters had quickly converged on the smoke trail and Luthor delighted in the extent of the damage showed on the screen along with the alpha scanner results showing the Man of Steel's circuit between the estate and the hospital. *I couldn't have timed the second distraction better*, Luthor thought gleefully. *Let's see Junior and his lawyers try to inspect the place now.*

The only down side of the mansion fire was the relatively short time that Superman required to address the situation, given the lack of victims. When Superman had the fire wrapped up fifteen minutes later, Luthor sent the signal to send him to his next distraction, simultaneously igniting multiple explosive firebombs hidden in the Hancock Building in Glenmorgan Square. One of the devices had been planted in the janitor's closet near his former lawyer's Metropolis satellite office. *Hopefully, the fool is still there*, Luthor thought as he continued to monitor the feed from the alpha scanner. Predictably, it showed Superman immediately flying across town to fight the blaze and rescue the thousands of mindless pencil pushers in that building. The GNN helicopter again quickly closed in on the fire, and Luthor

delighted in the scenes of chaos.

Luthor's amusement was interrupted by the footfalls across the ballroom's glass floor. He looked up and his eyes widened in surprise when he recognized Lois Lane with two young children as Brutus nudged them forward with his Glock. Kitty had also chosen to join them, cuddling the cursed Pomeranian in her arms as she followed the group into the ballroom. "We found them snooping around the mansion and since you don't like us improvising..." Brutus began.

*Two children?* Luthor wondered. *There's only one extra dependent listed on her tax returns. I guess that means one of the fathers won custody.* Luthor stood and walked out from behind his desk, stating with false cheer, "Ah, if it isn't Lois Lane. Didn't you just win a Pulitzer Prize for my favorite article of all time, 'Why the World *Doesn't* Need Superman'? You had *such* great potential. I can't tell you how disappointed I am in the direction your writing's gone lately."

"Not as disappointed as I am in our criminal justice system," Lois retorted. "Didn't you have a few years to go on your double life sentence?"

"Well, we can thank the Man of Steel for that. He's really good at swooping in and stopping the bad guys. But he's not so hot on the little things. Like Miranda Rights, due process... making your *court date*."

"And how many people did you have pay off to carry that argument?" Lois countered. "Just Judge Gregory, or were there others?"

Luthor narrowed his eyes at her and said menacingly, "Someone in your position should show a little more respect." Luthor gestured towards his recently vacated seat and said, "Please take a seat."

"We'll stand."

"That wasn't a request," Luthor warned her. She felt Brutus' gun in her back and reluctantly led the children to Luthor's chair, pulling them on her lap after she sat.

"So what's your grand plan this time?" Lois asked anxiously.

"Fishing for an interview?"

"Well, the public hasn't heard your side yet - you haven't exactly been available for comment," Lois answered. "Here's your chance to set the record straight and show the public the real Lex Luthor - and I'm sure they'd love to hear it... So how about we take my kids back to town, put them in a cab, and then you can do whatever you want with me."

"Nobody's going anywhere... and I can *already* do whatever I want with you," Luthor reminded her.

Lois' shoulders sagged in resignation and she nodded her head. "All right, then. How about the interview? You can explain to the masses what Lex Luthor is all about. So... What is your grand plan?"

Luthor pulled the construction crystal out of the inside pocket of his suit coat, displaying it tantalizingly in front of his guests as asked, "Tell me, my dear. What do you know about crystals?"

Perry White stood outside Sam Foswell's office and asked seriously, "Have we got anything on that Roosevelt Tunnel fire yet?"

"Gil phoned in his preliminary report a few minutes ago and we'll have it up on the web site as soon as Roberta adds in the information from D.O.T.," Sam explained. "Lucky for us, Gil was close enough to hear what Superman told the firemen. Apparently, a bomb blew up a

tanker trailer down there and it was bad enough to flood the tunnel."

"Do we have confirmation?" Perry pressed.

"We're working on it. Gil's trying to get an official statement from the police or fire crews and he'll stick around until everything's wrapped up. Olsen's on his way back in with pictures."

Perry nodded and turned to the bullpen, briefly locking his gaze on the overhead televisions as GNN's helicopter broadcast the chaos at the tunnel's west entrance. After a moment, he broke his gaze from the television and looked out into the bullpen, where nearly everyone was staring at the shocking images on the overhead televisions. Perry frowned at the scene and then shouted out across the bullpen. "All right, everyone! That's enough! There's too much watching and not enough writing going on here! This is a hot story and we're a newspaper, not a studio audience, so get to work! The story is the bomb in the Roosevelt Tunnel!"

"Evans, Anderson! Get up to roof and flag down Superman for his perspective. International! Who are the most likely suspects among the terrorists groups? Is anyone claiming responsibility? Washington! What's the White House and DHS reaction? City! What's the mayor going to do about this? What about MPD? How bad's the damage to the tunnel? Business! What's this economic impact of the attack? Lifestyle! How will everyone cope with the attack and with the tunnel closure? Now let's get moving, people! We have pages to fill!"

The bullpen exploded into action and Perry returned to his office with mixed emotions, both pleased at the certain spike in their circulation figures and dismayed by the reason for it. *Tragedy certainly sells papers but why did it have to be something like this?* he wondered. He settled into his chair and turned up the volume of the GNN broadcast on the television on the opposite wall before turning his attention to his desktop computer and looking through the story review queue.

A few minutes later, Richard walked into his uncle's office and informed him, "We have Gus on top of DHS and Helen at the White House, though they expect it could be awhile before we get a statement. It's going to take them a little while to get all the facts together."

"What about international?" Perry pressed.

"Same thing, basically. There are a couple terrorists groups in particular who'd love to pull off something like this, but it's going to take a while to confirm. I have Ron working on it, but I can't guarantee that we'll have anything usable by deadline."

The discussion was joined by Sam Foswell as he entered Perry's office. "Gil's got confirmation on the bomb from the fire marshal," Sam informed them somberly. "He's saying that tankers like the one that blew up aren't supposed to be allowed in the tunnels, so there's a question as to how it got past the toll gate - Roger is looking into that... We've got thirty-one dead, over one hundred fifty injured, many of them seriously, and the tunnel's expected to be completely flooded within the hour. Needless to say, the Roosevelt Tunnel is closed until further notice."

"Geez," Richard commented.

"The mayor's already scheduled a press conference at four o'clock to discuss the attack," Sam added. "Polly will cover it."

"Send Olsen with her for pictures," Perry commanded.

Further discussion of the matter was interrupted by the GNN Anchor Alicia Myers's loud announcement from Perry's television. "This just in. There's been a *second* explosion in Metropolis this afternoon, this time in an exclusive oceanfront neighborhood..."



"Another one?" Sam muttered incredulously. "What on Earth is going on here?"

The scene on the television switched to the helicopter feed, showing the blazing ruins of a large building with a red and blue blur swirling around it while Alicia Myers continued to describe the scene. "We're being told that this destroyed building was the home of the late Gertrude Vanderworth and subject of a bitter dispute between her children and her new husband, Lex Luthor, who was indicted for her murder just this morning..."

"Oh, shit," Perry murmured worriedly. A concerned expression appeared on his face as he pulled out his cell phone and started scrolling through his contact list.

"What is it?" Richard asked.

"Lois was supposed to be at the Vanderworth mansion at two," Perry explained.

"No, there's got to be a mistake," Richard replied insistently. "She was heading right back to the safe house after Jason's appointment."

"There was a court ordered property inspection this afternoon and she was planning on being there," Perry informed him.

"And you didn't tell me?" Richard protested angrily.

"Richard, please tell me we aren't going to have to have *another* talk about the office rules," Perry grumbled. He held up his index finger, signaling the other to wait as he spoke into the cell phone. "Lois, it's Perry. We just heard about the Vanderworth place blowing up. Please call us and let us know that you weren't there."

"You shouldn't have let her go," Richard said angrily.

"Well, considering all I got from her on the matter was a text message as she was heading over to the place, there wasn't much opportunity for discussion," Perry countered. "Son, I know this is hard on you, but Lois is a remarkably clever and resilient woman. Let's not make the mistake of underestimating her... Besides, for all we know she got tied up in traffic - it's got to be a mess with that tunnel explosion, after all." Perry turned to Sam and added authoritatively, "Get a hold of Kent. Find out if Lois made that appointment... And get someone down there to cover the fire."

Sam nodded and quickly trotted out of Perry's office, pulling out his cell phone and scrolling through his contact list as he left the two men to their silent worry.

Lois stared at Luthor's revised continental map over the fireplace, her eyes widening in horror. The madman had just described in cheerful detail a murderous plan to destroy and replace North America with a new continent of his own making - one equipped with "advanced alien technology" to keep the surviving countries in line. And his invited 'guests' would pay dearly for the privilege of their survival. It seemed to be the worst possible corruption of the stolen Kryptonian technology, degraded by Luthor's mad scheme for 'high-tech beachfront property'. *It's worse than we imagined*, Lois thought.

She seemed to finally notice Luthor grinning maniacally back at her and she quietly said, "You can't be serious. Millions of people would die."

"*Billions!*" Luthor corrected enthusiastically. "Once again the press underestimates me. This is front page news." Lois stared back at him in disbelief and he smiled jovially as he baited her, "Come on. Say it."

"You're insane," Lois replied breathlessly.

Luthor snorted and shook his head. "No, not that - the other thing," he said a little too cheerfully. "Come on, it's dangling on the tip of your tongue. Say it."

"Superman will never-" Lois began.

"*Wrong!*" Luthor bellowed. He returned the crystal to his jacket pocket and walked over to the mantel, opening a metal box, bathing his face in a green glow as he removed a hollow emerald green cylinder from the container. "The freak won't have a chance."

Lois immediately heard the sharp intake of breath from both of the children in her arms and felt them tense up. She squeezed them tightly to her and discreetly quieted them as the madman continued his ranting.

"Mind over muscle, Miss Lane," Luthor declared flatly, finally returning his gaze to his guests. "Mind over-" He suddenly fell silent as he noticed the two children limp in Lois' arms. He approached them, pointing the cylinder at them while he insistently asked, "Who is their father?"

*What do I tell him?* Lois wondered. *I don't dare say Richard or Clark, just in case Luthor isn't convinced their father's human and goes after him.* After a moment's hesitation, she settled on Clark's middle name and anxiously said, "Joseph." Lois reflected that the only silver lining to the children's kryptonite exposure was that they were too weak to question her answer. She knew they would have corrected her otherwise.

"So is that the name he's using?" Luthor asked knowingly. "Or is that just the latest fool you've tricked into believing that the half-breeds were his? It's really quite fascinating how easily small minds are fooled by the duplicity of women. First White, then Kent. Now 'Joseph'?" He bent in front of them, waving the kryptonite cylinder before the children's faces and closely observing their reaction. The children remained motionless as they wheezed heavily, their reactions otherwise bordering on catatonic.

Lois miraculously kept her expression neutral as her heart raced in panic. *Come on, Lane - be convincing,* Lois commanded herself. She wrinkled her brow in false confusion and muttered, "Huh? What are you talking about?"

"They seem a little *green* around the gills," Luthor commented. "Guess they don't care for this *miraculous* material any more than that meddling Boy Scout does..."

"*What?* You don't really think that... Oh, for crying out loud," Lois replied in disbelief, dramatically rolling her eyes. "They're *asthmatic!* They're having an allergic reaction to the dog!" She patted Jason's pockets, searching for his inhaler.

"Boss, we're approaching the coordinates," Stanford's voice announced over the intercom.

Luthor ignored his employee and insistently asked Lois, "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," Stanford replied defensively. "Thirty-eight degrees fifty-six minutes north by seventy-three degrees thirty-five minutes west, and the ship's turned around with the bow to the west."

As Luthor continued to scrutinize the children, Lois finally found the albuteral inhaler, pulled it from Jason's front pocket and pulled the cap off. Jason automatically inhaled as Lois put the end in his mouth and sent the medicine into his lungs. Lois then repeated the process for Kara, instructing her to breathe in deeply as she squeezed down on the inhaler.

Luthor appeared to finally be convinced of Lois' explanation, withdrawing from his guests and speaking authoritatively into the intercom, "I'm on my way up." He afterwards turned to Brutus and commanded, "Don't let them leave this room." Luthor then marched briskly towards the doorway at the opposite end of the ballroom and called over his shoulder, "Come, Kitty. The Twilight of the Gods awaits."

## Chapter 38 - Launching the Apocalypse

*Thursday, October 5, 2006 2:45PM EDT*

Luthor sat at the table on the yacht's stern deck and admired the narrow green cylinder in his hands while pondering the events that would soon unfold. His ruminations were interrupted by a mournful sigh from Kitty who sat across from him, uncharacteristically silent and with a distraught expression on her face as she clutched the cursed Pomeranian tightly to her chest. Luthor glared at her momentarily before he impatiently checked his watch. He picked up the walkie-talkie that was sitting on the table in front of him and pressed the transmit button. "I'm still waiting, gentlemen," he said irritably.

"Just a couple more minutes," Stanford's voice replied quickly from the walkie-talkie.

"What's the holdup?" Luthor demanded. "I gave you very simple instructions."

"Almost there, boss," Stanford said appeasingly. A moment later he added, "There. Everything's shut down."

"Then shut off your radios and get up here. On the double," Luthor commanded. After turning off the walkie-talkie and setting it back down on the table, he rose from his seat and walked over to the ship's stern railing, looking out at the horizon with eager anticipation. Another aggrieved sigh caused him to look back at his miserable companion. He frowned and warned her, "Don't forget which team you're on."

"Lex, why do so many people have to die?" Kitty whined.

"Natural selection - it's the way of nature," Luthor said simply. "Now get over here. You'll want a front row seat for this."

Kitty reluctantly joined him at the railing, still tightly clutching her dog. Just as she reached the rail, Grant, Reilly and Stanford showed up on the deck behind them. Grant was pulling out a video camera from a bag and turning it on as they approached.

"Make sure you get everything on tape," Luthor told him authoritatively.

"Sure thing, boss," Grant said compliantly. "And we're rolling."

Luthor removed the seed crystal from his inside jacket pocket and inserted it through the hollow center of the kryptonite cylinder, afterwards handing over the combined crystals to Stanford. The younger man inserted the combination into the exposed interior of the R-73 missile. With Reilly's assistance, he then reassembled the missile, screwing the retaining bolts through the sides with a power drill. Once the assembly was complete, Stanford unlatched a small metal case beside it and opened the lid to reveal the control panel. He flipped a toggle switch and several buttons labeled with Cyrillic characters lit up.

"Wait," Luthor commanded. "I need to make a very important phone call first." Luthor walked back over to the deck table behind them and retrieved a portable satellite phone, punching in the number as he rejoined the others at the railing. The number rang once and immediately disconnected with a loud click. Luthor turned off the phone and smiled evilly as he turned to Stanford and issued the command, "Fire."

Stanford pressed a lit green button which launched the rocket into the sky at a forty-five degree inclination angle while the rocket's backwash unexpectedly ignited the deck furniture behind them. Stanford ignored the disturbed furniture and removed a handheld magnetometer from his pocket, pointing its probe towards the missile as it raced towards the apex of its parabolic path. Luthor simultaneously followed the projectile's progress through a pair of high-powered binoculars. It took a few minutes for the missile to reach its apex and turn earthward, eventually striking the surface of the ocean eighteen miles away, at the extreme limits of visual range.

"Camera off now!" Luthor commanded. "Hurry, before the EMP fries it."

Grant had barely shut down the camera when a green flash spread across the horizon from the missile's impact point and the clouds above quickly gathered together, darkening the sky. Kitty heard a loud rumble of thunder in the distance, and her eyes widened in fear as she nervously commented, "This isn't like the train set, Lex."

"No, it's not," Luthor replied indifferently.

"Um, boss?" Stanford interrupted. "It just fried the meter."

Luthor looked over at him and condescendingly said, "Now that would be our EMP, wouldn't it?" He looked back out at the darkening sky and added, "Grant, I want you and Reilly to start the engines back up. You can resume filming after you've restored power."

Lois looked nervously over at Brutus and Jason, who were playing a duet at the grand piano. She'd truly been fearful when the killer followed her son as he walked over to the piano and stunned when he began playing the song with him. She hadn't expected a brutal killer of his reputation to demonstrate any musical talent, not even something as simple as *Heart and Soul*.

It turned out to be a lucky break, distracting their minder from the sound of the fax machine. After confirming the coordinates with Kara, Lois had hastily written out an S.O.S. on some loose paper she found on Luthor's desk, loaded it into the fax machine and dialed the *Planet's* fax number. The page fed through the scanner, and Lois quickly retrieved it, folding it up and stuffing it in the back pocket of her jeans.

When the telltale beeps sounded from the machine a moment later, she looked nervously over at Brutus, praying he wouldn't notice the noise. The killer abruptly stopped playing, peering suspiciously around the open lid of the piano in response to the faint and thankfully unrecognized sounds from the machine. Lois avoided his gaze pulling Kara closer to her as she surreptitiously checked the fax status display: "Dialing"... "Connecting"... "Sending Page 1"...

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon," Lois urged the machine in a quiet whisper. However, before the fax could complete, the power suddenly went out and the room went dark, illuminated only by the sunlight filtering through the far doorway and the fire burning in the hearth behind her. Jason and Brutus immediately stopped playing the piano.

"Mommy?" Jason called out anxiously.

"It's okay, honey. We just lost power," Lois told him confidently. "You should still be able to play the piano, though. You don't need power for that."

After a beat, Jason resumed his part of the duet and a moment later, Brutus joined in. Lois breathed a sigh of relief and then turned to Kara, asking in a whisper, "Do you know what happened to the power?"

Kara whispered back, "Mister Luthor told them to shut everything off."

Lois nodded absently and she recalled that Luthor's crystal experiment in the Vanderworth's basement had unleashed the recent EMP. *He's about to plant the seed crystal and set off another EMP*, Lois thought. *I guess he doesn't want to take a chance on damaging his precious yacht.*

Lois suddenly noticed the light from the fireplace reflecting off of the crystals on Luthor's desk. She had immediately recognized the missing crystals from the Fortress the moment they entered the ballroom. Luthor had carefully laid them out on a black felt cloth at the edge of the desk, displayed like precious jewelry. However, Lois knew that they were far more valuable. More importantly, by her count, *all* of the missing crystals were now sitting in front of her,

with the exception of the seed crystal Luthor had taken with him.

Lois turned to Kara and in a low voice, she solemnly told the child, "Kara, in a little while, I'm going to ask you to do something really, really important. Maybe the most important thing you'll *ever* do. And you're simply going to have to do it without any argument or hesitation. Do you think you can do that for me?"

Kara nodded nervously, her eyes wide as saucers, and she quietly asked, "What do I have to do?"

It seemed to take a small eternity before Superman finally felt that he was getting the upper hand against the inferno at the Hancock building. It was another HTA blaze and he had arrived to find white hot flames engulfing six floors near the midpoint of the forty story tower, leaving two hundred ninety-one lifeless bodies in its wake. It had been quickly racing up the tower, threatening the panicked survivors who were trampling each other in their struggle to get up the stairs. He had barely arrived in time to crash through the stairwell firewall and lay down an insulating layer of freezing superbreath to protect the people above from the extreme heat.

The Man of Steel reflected that the Vanderworth blaze had been a far simpler situation. Not only was it a smaller fire volume, there were no civilians inside endangered by the fire and only one injured victim, who he had been able to quickly deliver to Met General's emergency room. In contrast, the Hancock tower presented multiple and seemingly mutually exclusive objectives: Extinguishing a fire hot enough to melt the structural steel and preventing the building's collapse; protecting the survivors above and below the inferno from the extreme heat; and evacuating the injured to the care of emergency services.

If the steel failed and the building collapsed, he would be powerless to prevent the loss of thousands of lives, and thus Superman's priority had been on containing the blaze and using his freezing superbreath to counteract the effects of the three thousand degree Fahrenheit temperature on the steel. That left no time to help those injured in the blaze or trapped on the upper floors. They would have to wait, and he agonized over the tormented cries he heard from those literally being burnt alive who he was powerless to help. Unfortunately, an HTA fire could not be blown out like a candle or rushed through its life cycle and it demanded his constant attention to be restrained from consuming the entire structure. If he was to save the thousand trapped above or lingering in the building below, he had no choice but to leave a small number of suffering victims to their fate.

When the high temperature accelerant was finally consumed, the temperature of the blaze quickly dropped, lacking the necessary fuel to push back against the freezing gale from Superman's lungs. With the flames finally subdued, he turned his attention to the burn victims, many of whom had perished while he was fighting the inferno. He sought out the survivors and began evacuating them to the area hospitals.

Only when all the injured survivors were evacuated did he turn his attention to those remaining, all of whom had sought refuge either on the roof or by hanging out the windows of the upper floors. There were far too many for him to carry down, but he could clear the way for them. He cleared the smoke and heat from the stairwells, and then searched through the ranks of the firefighters at the scene, gently landing in front of two of Metropolis' Bravest a moment later.

"Captain O'Neill, Marshal Carter," Superman greeted as he landed.

"I hope this means everything's finally under control," Carter commented hopefully.

"The fire's out and I've evacuated the surviving burn victims," Superman informed him. "However, there are still nearly three thousand people trapped on the upper floors - the elevators are out and the fire melted the steel frame holding up the stairs at the eighteenth floor. You'll need ladders to bridge the gap."

Captain O'Neill waved down a subordinate and gave him instructions to carry ladders up the stairwells. He afterwards returned his attention to Superman and asking hopefully, "Any chance you could give us a hand with the evacuation?"

"Given enough time, certainly, but considering how my afternoon's gone so far, I'm not sure how much time I'll have before another emergency comes up," Superman replied grimly.

"It probably won't be much," a familiar female voice responded.

Superman looked over to discover Captain Maggie Sawyer approaching them, wearing her police badge on a chain around her neck.

"Isn't this a bit out of your territory?" Carter asked irritably.

"This is the third fatal firebomb this afternoon, which qualifies as a major terrorist attack against the city, and terrorism *is* my territory," Maggie replied adamantly.

"I don't understand why those Islamic terrorists hate us so much," O'Neill commented. "What did we ever do to them?"

"This wasn't Islamic terrorists," Maggie declared. "They would have detonated all their bombs at once to maximize the chaos. This is different. It looks like it's intentionally designed to keep our friend in tights here occupied. Islamic terrorists also aren't likely to have been interested in the Vanderworth house - the property listed as *Lex Luthor's* primary residence, which the court just this morning ordered him to open up for inspection. We also have a direct link tying Luthor to *this* building and I'd bet my paycheck that he's behind all of this afternoon's firebombs, *including* the one in the Roosevelt Tunnel."

"You've tied Luthor to this fire?" Carter asked.

"His lawyer's office was on the eighteenth floor and I'm fairly certain that the point of origin for this blaze was on that floor," Superman informed them. "I'd be surprised if anyone from that floor survived, judging by what I saw up there... It's also another HTA firebomb, just like the Vanderworth estate, and just like the Baxter plant was meant to be."

"Anyone here still think it's a coincidence that Luthor's lawyer's office got nuked just a few hours after that madman got handed his lunch in court this morning?" Maggie asked sarcastically.

"It doesn't seem likely," Carter commented.

"No, it doesn't," Maggie agreed. She turned to Superman and informed him, "Oh, by the way... Lois Lane is missing."

Superman struggled to keep his voice level as he stated, "My understanding was that she was hiding out at a safe house for the time being."

"I just got a call from her editor," Maggie explained. "Apparently, there was supposed to be a court-ordered inspection of the Vanderworth house at two and she was invited along. Now the place has gone up in smoke and she's not answering her phone."

"I hear that she turns it off on occasion, if she doesn't want to be disturbed," Superman pointed out. "In any case, I got to the Vanderworth estate about eight after two, just after the firebomb went off. I saw Harold Vanderworth Junior there, along with his bodyguards and one of his lawyers. However, Miss Lane was not with them."

"She could have been... inside," Maggie suggested hesitantly. "It wouldn't be the first time she snuck past security for an exclusive."

Superman shook his head and said, "I checked the house as soon as I arrived and I didn't see anyone inside. As hot as the fire was, I still got there soon enough that I'd have seen something." As he spoke, he opened up his hearing, searching out three familiar and very special heartbeats.

"Well, she's still been reported missing and Luthor had targeted her partner," Maggie reminded him. "I'm certain that Lane is on his shit list, too."

"I'll try to find her," Superman promised sincerely. His hearing locked on to the heartbeats from Lois and the children, noting that they came from an unexpected bearing and distance. He then added seriously, "I have some ideas on where she might have gotten off to."

"Well, I'd like a word with her once you find her," Maggie declared irritably. "This afternoon's security plan did *not* include swinging by Luthor's place with her kid in tow."

Superman's head suddenly snapped to the side, his eyes momentarily widening in surprise before he squeezed them shut in frustration. He opened his eyes and declared, "It's happened again. Suicide Slum, I think." He then rocketed into sky, zooming northwest across the city, disappearing over the rooftops and leaving a sonic boom in his wake.

Jimmy regretted his decision to share a cab with Gil on the way down to the Roosevelt Tunnel fire. Though getting down there had been uneventful, the return trip had been agonizingly slow, with the alternate routes around the Roosevelt tunnel filled with commuters trying to avoid that bottleneck and traffic again bottling up around Glenmorgan Square. He would certainly have made better time on his scooter, which he could have maneuvered around and between the stopped cars. A trip that should have only taken ten minutes had instead taken him a half hour.

He practically sprinted off the elevator when the doors finally opened up to the bullpen and once at his desk, he rushed to upload the pictures from his camera and send them to the color printer next to his desk. Once the last of them came off the photo printer, he ran down the aisle towards Perry's office. However, his path was suddenly blocked when Ralph stepped away from the floor's high performance Xerox printer/copier, engrossed in the contents of his printouts. Jimmy wasn't able to stop in time and slammed into the older man, knocking him off his feet and causing both of them to drop their printouts and scatter the pages in the aisle.

"Watch where you're going, Olsen!" Ralph shouted angrily. He knelt down, trying to locate his materials from the mixed litter on the floor while the young photographer also scrambled to collect his photos.

Jack Wilde approached the two, telling Ralph, "Lay off the guy! You weren't looking where you were going either."

Jimmy suddenly stopped, his face going pale and his eyes shooting wide as he recognized a large and familiar script on one of the pages. It was a fax rather than a regular printout, which was hardly surprising considering that the Xerox printer/copier doubled as their fax machine. However, the contents on the page were another matter, even with the bottom quarter of the page blank and obscuring the last printed line. The fax had apparently been interrupted, but not before the most crucial part of the message had come through:

*Help!*

*Lex Luthor kidnapped us*

*We're on boat called "Alexander the Great"*

*Send Coast Guard ASAP*

*38°56m N x 73°35m W*

"Oh, my God," Jimmy quietly mumbled.

"Hey! Give that back," Ralph commanded. He grabbed the page from Jimmy, his brow wrinkling in confusion as he read it. "What the - how'd this get mixed up with my stuff?"

"I think that came from Lois," Jimmy said breathlessly.

"More likely, it came from some kids playing a joke," Ralph argued skeptically.

"No, it's Lois' handwriting," Jimmy said insistently. "I'd recognize it anywhere."

Jack pulled the page from Ralph's fingers and read it, his wide-eyed expression betraying his concern. He immediately turned and sprinted down the aisle to Perry's office and Jimmy rushed after him, his photo printouts suddenly unimportant. Some of their colleagues jumped out of their way in a panic as the two men came barreling down the aisle. After a brief discussion with the bodyguard outside Perry's office a moment later, the two men burst into their editor's office, interrupting the conference with the three assistant editors.

"This better be important," Perry warned them.

"It is," Jack assured him, handing the page over to Perry. "This fax just came in - Jimmy thinks that's Lois' handwriting."

"I'd recognize it anywhere," Jimmy declared. "I'm not sure what those numbers mean, though."

"They're global coordinates," Richard explained. He had rushed around Perry's desk as soon as Lois' name was mentioned and read the message over his uncle's shoulder. "I think that's a little ways off the coast. I can take the seaplane there-" Richard fell silent when the floor suddenly lost power, silencing all of the televisions, telephones, printers, and desktop computers, which was then followed by a chorus of complaints from the bullpen.

Sam Foswell checked his cell phone and somberly stated, "My phone's fried. It looks like we've got another EMP. That probably means that you won't be going anywhere anytime soon, Richard."

"I've still got to try," Richard replied adamantly.

"Hold on a moment - I have an idea," Perry muttered. He walked through his office door, beckoning for his nephew to follow him. Perry then turned to the bodyguard stationed outside his office and when the man looked over at him, Perry asked, "Say, Mike... do you think you guys are up to a rescue mission?"

"Rescue mission?" the man asked skeptically.

Perry showed him the fax and said, "It looks like Lois Lane has got herself in something of a pickle, and Richard here's determined to take his plane out and fly in to the rescue. I think some backup would be helpful."

"That sounds like a good way for someone to get himself killed," Mike replied seriously. "One, it's an unfamiliar environment. You don't know how many hostiles you've got or how they're equipped, and you don't know where on the ship the woman is. You probably don't even know the layout of the ship. This isn't a job for amateurs - it's a job for the Coast Guard. They can get a helicopter out there and send in a well-trained and armored team to extract Lane."

"Second, considering that we just got hit with another EMP, we're probably going to have gridlock on the streets and a regional communications breakdown. Resources that you might otherwise have been able to bring to bear will simply not be unavailable. You can't even be sure that the equipment you *do* have wasn't somehow damaged by the EMP. I'd *strongly* advise that you accept the recommendation on that fax and call the Coast Guard."

"Some bodyguard you turned out to be," Richard complained critically.



"Our job is to keep our clients safe, which means restricting movement to known environments that we can control and protect, and avoiding unnecessary risks like your proposed rescue mission," Mike replied curtly. "I can't commit my team to a probable *suicide* mission and rush blindly into a lion's den. That's an unacceptable risk."

"For you maybe, but I *have* to go," Richard countered. "That's my fiancée out there and there's a good chance our son is there with her... He's not at the safe house."

"I'm sorry to hear that, sir, but it doesn't change my recommendation," Mike told him sympathetically. "The risk is simply too great for you to pursue this yourself and even if we were inclined to support it - which we're *not* - we wouldn't be able to guarantee your safety. The best I can do for you is to contact our superiors in Gotham and have them try to expedite matters with the Coast Guard."

"That's not good enough," Richard insisted. "I'm going after her."

"That'd be suicide, considering the enemy's known background," Mike replied. "We were assigned here for a reason, remember? And no offense, but you're a desk jockey with a plane. You don't have the training or experience to pull this off."

"Richard, please be reasonable about this," Perry pleaded.

"Uncle Perry, I *can't* just sit around here and do nothing," Richard insisted.

"You may have no choice. Mike's right about the gridlock - you'd be lucky to make it across town by nightfall," Sam pointed out.

"It didn't take us that long to get to the house last time," Richard argued.

"You mean, *after* Superman had already spent a couple hours clearing the dead cars off the roads," Perry asked pointedly. "From what we've seen so far this afternoon, it could be a while before he bothers with something as trivial as *traffic* when he's had all those other things to deal with."

"My scooter can get around the traffic," Jimmy declared confidently as he dug into his pocket for his keys. "You can borrow it."

Jack snorted and said, "A scooter? You've got to be kidding... No offense Jimmy, but I'll get him there a lot faster on my Harley."

"You two *aren't* helping," Perry declared irritably, glaring at Jack and Jimmy.

"Actually, I think they're *very* helpful," Richard stated seriously. He turned to Jack and added, "You're on, Jack. Let's go."

"Richard, hold on a minute," Perry insisted. "You *were* listening to what Mike just said, weren't you? Luthor's thugs are armed and dangerous and they don't mind killing people."

"Uncle Perry, I can't just sit here and hope that the Coast Guard will get there in time," Richard said adamantly. "I *have* to go after her. And I'm not asking for permission." At Perry's pointed look, he quickly added, "I'll grab the Beretta from the closet safe and I'll try to radio the Coast Guard as soon as I'm in the air."

"Let's think about this for a minute," Perry demanded. "Mike said his people can help with the Coast Guard. Copy down that information from the fax so he can pass it on."

"Okay. Anything else?"

"I've got a box full of satellite phones in my office that Bruce Wayne sent down for emergencies after the last EMP," Perry added. "You're taking one of them with you."

"Are you sure none of those phones got fried?" Sam asked.

"There in a special metal box that's supposed to shield them from an EMP - I think Wayne called it a Faraday Cage," Perry explained. He turned back to Richard and added, "When you find the boat, you'll call it in - all the numbers you need should already be

programmed in the contact list. Mike's people will expedite things with the Coast Guard, and you'll *wait* for them."

"Uncle Perry," Richard began.

"Damn it, Richard, I don't want to be planning another funeral," Perry snapped angrily. "Our family's lost too many of your generation already. You'll *wait*. And you will *not* pull some macho bullshit stunt out there and get yourself killed. I want you coming back alive and kicking. Understood?"

"Understood," Richard replied quietly.

Perry sighed deeply and said, "Okay, let's get you that satellite phone. While I'm digging it out, copy down that information for Mike." Perry walked back into his office and turned his attention to a metal box under the window, unlatching the container and quickly searching through it. He retrieved a small box and tossed it over to Richard.

"Remember, let the Coast Guard do the heavy lifting here," Perry said authoritatively. "Don't get impatient and go rushing in where angels fear to tread."

"I'll be careful," Richard promised. He then turned and left with Jack, quickly running down the aisle towards the elevator lobby.

Superman traced the sound of the explosion back to the Pleasant Acres housing complex in Suicide Slum, a subsidized low-income housing project that included eight ten story towers spread across four square city blocks with a dilapidated playground in the center. The explosion had come from the tower in the southeast corner of the complex and the white hot flames engulfing the first three floors made it readily apparent that it was another HTA firebomb. A quick scan of the affected floors confirmed that the blaze had already claimed forty-seven lives and was threatening another one hundred forty-eight on the upper floors, including nearly thirty preschoolers and half a dozen teenagers. The parents were desperate to get their children to safety as they scrambled through the halls, out the fire escapes or up the stairs to the roof.

The extreme heat of the blaze blocked their path to safety, even along the fire escape outside the building and Superman quickly went to work on the fire to shield the survivors from its unforgiving heat, using his freezing superbreath to create a barrier to the waves of heat. His actions gave the survivors more time to put some distance between themselves and the fire. Superman reflected that it could have been much worse had the fire come after the buses brought the rest of the children home from school, and though silently grateful that they had been spared, he lamented the attack that senselessly put *families* in jeopardy. He resolved to do everything possible to protect the survivors from the blaze and prevent the deadly assault from claiming any more lives than it already had.

As he continued his tight orbits around the flames, Superman was startled to hear the hypersonic message from Jor-El coming through the transceiver that he'd recently added to his belt buckle. "Kal-El, my son," Jor-El began. "Our probes have detected an electromagnetic pulse originating approximately one hundred fifty kilometers east of Metropolis, at coordinates 38°56'1.68" North latitude by 73°35'14.14" West longitude. The crystal seed appears to have been delivered as a projectile launched from a sea vessel located thirty kilometers west of that position. I will continue to monitor the vessel... Kal-El, I have just detected two Kryptonian biosigns aboard the vessel, which appear to be Kara and Jason. The missing crystals are also there. You will need to retrieve them immediately."

*No kidding*, Superman thought. *But I can't abandon these people. These families face*

*certain death if I leave now.* Superman again focused his hearing out to sea, locking in on the sounds of the three familiar heartbeats. However, his comfort in their steady rhythms was diminished by the knowledge of their precarious location and that it would have taken six minutes for the sounds to reach him from Luthor's yacht offshore. *Hang on,* he urged them silently. *I'll be there as soon as I can.*

Lois and Kara continued to whisper conspiratorially while Jason and their minder played their piano duet. However, when the lights came back on and reilluminated the darkened room, it proved to be too great a distraction for those present, silencing both the piano and the chatter. That silence was shattered a moment later by the distinctive telephone touch tones from the fax machine, as it attempted to resend the incomplete fax that was interrupted by the power shutdown. Lois frantically reached around the back of the machine, groping for the power switch to silence the machine's betrayal.

The device fell suddenly silent and Lois looked up to discover Brutus standing there with the end of the power cord in his hand. He reached over, grabbed her by her hair and an arm, and pulled her over the desk, throwing her to the floor. Lois crawled away from him, using the credenza to drag herself back to her feet, and desperately grabbing at the objects mounted on top for something to hit her attacker with. However, her efforts were in vain - everything was screwed down.

The felon slammed Lois' head into the credenza and again threw her to the floor. Lois pushed herself backwards along the floor in front of him as he menacingly approached her. Brutus paused as he walked in front of Luthor's desk to inspect the loose objects sitting at the front. After briefly toying with the letter opener, he picked up a heavy paperweight, which looked to have been cut from a large rock, with its cut edges polished to reveal a remarkable gradient of color through the rock's interior. Brutus tossed it threateningly between his hands as he loomed over Lois and she continued to back away from him, until she finally found herself cornered against one of the couches.

Kara suddenly interrupted Brutus' advance, running around the desk and placing herself defiantly between the convict and Lois. She had her arms crossed over her chest and a stern expression on her face as she demanded, "Leave her alone!"

Brutus snorted and said, "The little protector." He swung his right arm back with the paperweight, looking much like a baseball pitcher winding up before releasing the ball. However, Brutus never got the chance to complete his deadly delivery. His throw was interrupted when the grand piano flew into him at sixty miles an hour, crushing him against the desk and leaving the piano in a mangled mess on top of him.

Kara and Lois both stared wide-eyed at the carnage in front of them, then looked over at Jason, who was standing on the glass floor with a wide-eyed and frightened expression on his face and with his arms still extended from pushing the piano. Kara looked back over at the piano and then made the mistake of looking through the wreckage. She immediately regretted her folly, squeezing her eyes shut and looking away as she complained, "Ewww! You *squished* him!"

"I didn't mean to!" Jason replied tearfully.

"It's okay, honey. You didn't know your own strength," Lois assured him. "And you saved my life. You both did. Come here." She motioned for Jason to join them and he came running over. Lois pulled both children into a tight hug, and added, "I'm so proud of both of you."

Kara lifted her head up and squinted towards the ceiling. "Somebody's coming," she said

quietly.

Lois jumped up to her feet and ran over to the desk, quickly folding the black felt over the crystals and pulling it into a tight bundle as she rushed back over to the children. She gave the crystals to Kara, and said, "Remember what we talked about earlier? I need you to take your brother and these crystals back to your dad in Metropolis, and you need to do it now."

"But what about you?" Kara asked worriedly.

"I'll be okay. Just go find your dad and give him my note to let him know what happened here," Lois said insistently. "You have to go right now, Kara. *Now, go!*"

Kara nodded and wrapped one arm around Jason, pulling him to her tightly as she floated off the floor, and then flew across the room and out the door at the opposite end of the ballroom. Lois looked after them wistfully for a moment, and then called after them, "Try not to let anyone see you using powers!" She then pulled herself from her stupor, remembering the dangerous crew aboard the yacht, and she jogged towards the doorway at the far end of the room that the children had just disappeared through.

Her departure was abruptly interrupted by a male voice from above. "Hey! Where do you think you're going?" the voice demanded.

Lois looked up and spotted Grant and Reilly at the top of the spiral staircase. After a moment's hesitation, Lois turned and sprinted through the doorway, suddenly grateful that she had thought to change into jeans and sneakers after her appointments that morning. She raced down the hall and around the corner before finally slowing down to inspect her surroundings and seek out a hiding place.

## Chapter 39 - Birthright

*Thursday, October 5, 2006 2:55PM EDT*

Kara rocketed up from the yacht and through the clouds, slowing to a stop high above while her vision sought out the coastal cities, searching for the "tall building with a big globe on top", as Lois had instructed her. Jason fidgeted in her arms, his body tingling with energy as the Kryptonian organelles in his cells, now active for the first time, hungrily lapped up the sun's solar energy. They had been roused from their slumber by a combination of Jason's severe immune system reaction to Luthor's kryptonite and the adrenaline surge provoked by his fear for his mother's life.

The adrenaline that had provided the necessary power boost allowing Jason to throw the piano had also stimulated his Kryptonian organelles as thoroughly as pubescent hormones would have done. While that adrenaline energy had quickly dissipated, the organelles remained active and now recharged in the unfiltered sunlight several thousand feet above the sea. The cellular changes surging through his body left him invigorated and he was beginning to realize that something was different. After a minute in the sun, he turned to Kara and said, "The sunlight feels funny."

"What do you mean?" Kara asked curiously, momentarily forgetting her search for the *Daily Planet*.

"I dunno. It kind of tingles."

"That's how's it's supposed to feel," Kara declared assuredly. "Dad says it's because we get our power from the sun and that's what it feels like when it charges us up."

"But it never felt that way before," Jason insisted.

"It didn't?"

Jason shook his head and added, "Not even when we were really high up, like when we flew down from the Fortress with Mommy and Daddy Clark earlier."

"Oh," Kara replied thoughtfully. After a moment, she asked, "But it's tingling now?"

"Uh-huh."

Kara smiled widely and excitedly suggested, "Maybe it means the sun is finally charging you up and you'll be able to do powers!"

"Really?" Jason asked eagerly.

Kara shrugged her shoulders and said quietly, "I don't know, but maybe..."

"Do you think this means I'll be able to fly if I find my happy thought?" Jason asked happily.

"Happy thought?"

"Like Peter Pan," Jason said plainly. "He just needs fairy dust and a happy thought and then he can fly."

"Oh. It works different for us," Kara explained. She stretched out as much as her burden would allow and added, "We just lie back, and let the sunlight soak in and feel the energy run through us and lift us up... Try it. Lie back, and stretch out your arms and let the sun charge you up."

Jason stretched out his arms and closed his eyes and as he felt the tingle of the sunlight coursing through him, he imagined himself flying. He recalled their flight from the North earlier that afternoon and the flying games Kara and his Daddy Clark had described and he fantasized that he could play those games, too.

A couple minutes later, Kara interrupted Jason's daydream as she excitedly told him, "You're doing it, Jason."

Jason opened his eyes to find his sister floating several feet in front of him. His brow wrinkled in confusion and he asked, "Doing what?"

"Flying! You're *flying*, Jason!" Kara told him excitedly.

Jason looked down past his feet and realized he was floating alone high above the clouds, confirming Kara's declaration that he was indeed flying. His face broke into a wide grin, but only for a moment. He then panicked and began to fall towards the clouds. "It stopped working!" Jason exclaimed tearfully.

Kara was immediately beside him and as soon as she pulled him to her, Jason wrapped his arms tightly around her. Kara eased him back up above the clouds and informed him. "You forgot to concentrate. You've got to keep concentrating on flying or you'll fall... It takes a little practice. I fell a few times, too, when Dad was teaching me to fly."

"What do you mean, 'concentrate'?" Jason asked.

"Imagine how you want to move through the air, then *feel* the energy move you there," Kara explained. "You've got to concentrate on the energy moving through your body. Go ahead, try it - this time keep your eyes open... I won't let you fall."

Jason hesitated for a moment before finally trying to imagine himself flying again, though he kept a firm grip around his sister. Gradually, he relaxed and found himself floating slowly away from her.

"Keep concentrating," Kara instructed him. She tipped forward in a horizontal position, with one arm extended, and the other at her waist, tightly gripping the recovered crystals. "Now lean forward into a flying position like this," she added.

Jason slowly tipped forward and imitated his sister's posture, his confidence growing and fear receding with every passing second. "I'm doing it!" he exclaimed.

"Told 'ya," Kara said smugly. "Now try moving forward."

Jason slowly drifted forward, though moving more like a balloon caught in a light wind than controlled flight.

"Faster than *that*," Kara instructed him, and she slowly pulled ahead of him.

"I'm trying!" Jason complained, as he increased his forward advancement at an intolerably slow rate.

"Faster!" Kara commanded. "Don't worry about how to stop - I'll help you with that when we get to Metropolis. Just try to go faster."

After a moment, Jason was finally able to propel himself beyond a walking pace and he flew ahead of Kara at a moderate speed of thirty miles an hour.

"That's better, but the *Planet* office is this way," Kara informed her brother as she caught up with him. She banked to the left, urging Jason to follow her and continuing to encourage him to fly faster.

"Perry, we can't get a hold of anyone at the Gazette," Sam Foswell complained as he walked into his editor's office. "We're getting an 'All circuits are busy' message on every number we try."

"I know," Perry acknowledged. "Fortunately, Bruce Wayne left us with a satellite number and I was able to get through to him just now. He says that the EMP seems to be just as devastating to Gotham this time around as it was here last time. He's still trying to get a handle on the scope of the problem." Perry turned to the other assistant editor in his office, George Taylor, and asked, "George, is your brother still working at that paper in Detroit?"

"Yeah, he's at the *Detroit News*. Why?"

"Call him," Perry commanded. "Find out if they're getting any more information on this blackout that we are. Sam, check if Mike was able to get a hold of his superiors and get the Coast Guard out there to help Lois."

"Oh, crap. I almost forgot about that," Sam admitted.

"Well, we *can't* forget about that. Lois and Richard are depending on us," Perry scolded.

"I'll check. We'll get help out there somehow," Sam promised.

As the two assistant editors headed to the door, Perry called after them, "Have someone check Lois' desk and see if she has her dad's number at the Pentagon written down somewhere. If we can't send the Coast Guard, maybe we can send in the Marines!"

No sooner had the George and Sam left than Jimmy Olsen burst into Perry office, breathlessly informing the older man, "I just spoke... to Tim downstairs... He has onsite spares... this time... and he thinks... he can have... the fried boards swapped out... in a couple hours... Plenty of time... for the morning edition."

"Geez, Olsen, did you run all the way up here from the print room?"

"The elevator's... out," Jimmy replied.

"Well, sit down and catch your breath - I don't need you passing out on me," Perry commanded. After a moment, he added, "At least we have *some* good news this afternoon. Who knows, with Gotham hit, too, this time, we might be printing their morning edition here tonight."

Superman finally felt the temperature drop at the Pleasant Acres inferno, indicating that the last of the high temperature accelerant had finally been consumed and he abruptly changed his tactic. Instead of using his freezing superbreath to insulate the structural steel and human survivors from the intense heat, he now directed the gale on the flames, quickly smothering them. A final pass through the stairwells cleared the heat and smoke to make them passable, and he then rocketed into the sky, skipping his usual custom of briefing the firefighters at the scene.

He closed in on the three heartbeats he'd been monitoring, shifting his gaze upward towards the recent change in position of two of those heartbeats. His eyes shot wide in shock when his quarry came into view and he found the children flying in his direction - with Jason flying independently. *That wasn't supposed to happen until puberty*, he recalled. He accelerated towards them and extended his hearing in their direction, smiling when their conversation reached his ears.

"Here, let me help you," Kara insisted.

"I can do it myself!" Jason protested.

"But you're going too slow," Kara complained. "It's going to take *forever* to get back to Metropolis."

Superman suppressed a chuckle as he approached them, looping around behind them and flying inverted as he pulled beneath them. "So this is where you two have been hiding," he said in false sternness.

His presence surprised both children and brought them all to an abrupt stop. Kara quickly recovered from the shock and launched herself into her father's arms. She wrapped her free arm tightly around him as she squealed, "Dad!"

Superman turned to Jason and commented proudly, "So you're *flying* now?"

Jason's face lit up and he smiled widely, eagerly informing Superman, "Kara taught me. Isn't this *cool*?"

"It sure is," Superman agreed. After a beat, he added seriously, "Are you two okay?"

"Uh-huh, but a mean old bald man tried to take us away," Jason said sadly. "An' Mommy's still stuck there."

Superman focused his vision towards Lois' heartbeat, looking through the ship's hull to find her sneaking around in the lower levels of the ship while two of Luthor's men searched for her. "I see her," he informed his children. "She's still okay. Now, what happened?"

"We stopped at a *huge* house to meet a friend of Mommy's, but three mean men were there and made us go with them," Jason said tearfully. "They said they'd shoot Mommy if we didn't keep quiet and do what they said."

"The bald man had your crystals," Kara informed him, holding up the bundle wrapped in black fabric. "Miss Lois said to give them back to you. She gave me a note to give you, too."

Superman focused his vision through the felt, immediately inventorying the stolen crystals and confirming that all were accounted for. He took the bundle from Kara, and carefully stowed it in his cape pocket. He then returned his attention to his daughter and asked, "You said she gave you a note, too?"

"Oh, yeah," Kara replied and she pulled the note from the back pocket of her jeans, handing it over to her father.

Superman quickly read the note and his eyes widened in alarm. He focused his vision beyond the yacht, towards the coordinates that Jor-El had provided, and he found the crystal mass rooted in the ocean floor where it was rapidly expanding, splitting the seabed and sending the aquatic fauna in desperate flight ahead of it.

*It looks like I'm going to have my hands full here -I don't have time to take them back to Smallville, so I'm going to need to find a local babysitter,* Superman thought, and he shifted his vision back to Metropolis. He first scanned the *Daily Planet* building, frowning at Richard's absence. He then sought out the Troupe home where Lucy was putting away groceries. After the briefest hesitation, he rejected that alternative. *Lucy would freak out if Superman dropped off the kids, especially if she finds out that Luthor kidnapped her sister.* He reluctantly shifted his gaze back to the *Planet*, *I hate to do this, but it looks like it's going to have to be Perry.*

Superman returned his attention to the two children, handing the note back to Kara as he told them both seriously, "I'm going to take you two back to the *Planet* to stay with Perry for a while."

"I want to stay and help you," Kara whined.

"Not this time," Superman said firmly. "I need you two to stay with Perry where I'll know that you're safe, at least until one of us can come get you. And no using superpowers while I'm away, okay?"

"But I need to practice!" Jason complained.

"There will be time for that later, son," Superman assured him. "For now, please be patient."

After Jason reluctantly agreed, Superman pulled both children tightly to him and zoomed across the sky towards Metropolis, leaving a faint sonic boom behind him. A moment later, he descended gently to the roof of the *Daily Planet* building, where reporters Susan Evans and Cindy Anderson were still waiting to flag him down for an interview.

"Good afternoon, ladies," Superman greeted them formally as he set the children on their feet. "Would you be kind enough to escort these two downstairs to Perry White? He'll know what to do."

"What happened?" Susan asked in surprise.



"Lex Luthor kidnapped Lois Lane," Superman explained. "The children were with her, but they got away. I found them a few minutes ago."

"Oh, dear God," Cindy said breathlessly.

"Please don't worry. I know where Lois is and I'm going after her now," Superman said seriously. He then launched himself into the sky, zooming over the rooftops on an intercept course with Luthor's yacht.

Superman was nearly halfway to the ship when the ungodly cracking sound from the ocean floor reached his ears. He stopped abruptly and stared through the water in horror at the expanding fissure in the ocean floor. A quick visual check confirmed that it had been caused by the rapidly growing crystal continent and had unleashed a powerful shockwave. He looked behind him and focused his vision on the city just as the shockwave hit, shaking the residents and buildings with the force of a major earthquake. *The construction here wasn't designed for seismic stress*, Superman thought. *But Lois is still trapped out there...*

He turned back towards the open sea, again focusing his vision through the sides of Luthor's yacht. He located Lois just in time to witness her swinging a fire extinguisher into the face of Reilly Dixon. The felon went down hard, dropping his gun, which Lois quickly recovered before scampering off. *Ouch!* Superman thought. *Remind me never to get on her bad side. But she's still outnumbered and outgunned, and Luthor will be out for blood once he discovers the crystals are gone. She's not safe there, but I can't assume that I can just swoop in and out - not when he has kryptonite and has had time to set a trap.* He indulged in his covert observation a moment longer, before again turning his scrutiny back to the city. He discovered that many of the skyscraper windows had shaken loose and were raining down over the crowded sidewalks below as lethal glass shards and that decided him. He immediately reversed course and sped back towards the city.

Perry White was interrupted by a knock on the door and looked up in surprise at the sight of Cindy Anderson and Susan Evans standing there with Jason and Kara corralled in front of them. "Chief, we just got a special delivery from Superman," Susan informed him. "He says Luthor kidnapped Lois, but the kids got away. He asked us to bring them down to you."

"To me?" Perry asked incredulously. He looked over at the fearful expressions on the children's faces and he softened his tone, gently asking, "Are you two all right?"

"A bad man tried to take us away," Jason said sadly and he ran over to Perry, with Kara following him after a moment's hesitation.

Perry wrapped his arms around them and kindly reminded them, "Well, you're safe now. And Superman will have your mother back here before you know it."

Susan couldn't resist a snicker at Perry's transformation from the irascible old curmudgeon into the kindhearted, kid-friendly Uncle Perry. It earned her a glare from the old man and the two women quickly retreated from his office.

Perry relaxed the hug around the children, pulled back slightly, and asked them seriously, "Do you think you can tell me what happened?"

"We went to this big house to meet a friend of Miss Lois' but there were three mean men there," Kara said quietly.

"They said they'd shoot Mommy if we didn't stay quiet and go with them," Jason added.

"Superman went back to get her," Kara reminded him.

"That means not to worry," Perry clarified. "This type of thing used to happen all the time and Superman *always* brought her back safe and sound." After a moment's pause, he noticed

that Kara had something clenched in her hand and asked, "Kara, what's that in your hand?"

"Um, it's the note that Miss Lois wrote for Superman," Kara told him meekly.

"Let me see it."

"But it's for Superman," Kara protested.

"I know, but I need to see it, too." Perry insisted gently.

Kara meekly handed him the note and Perry unfolded it, his face paling and his eyes shooting wide as he read it. Finally, he set the note down and quietly muttered, "Great Caesar's Ghost."

He picked the note back up and was about to reread it when Polly Harper rushed into his office waving a business card triumphantly and announcing, "Found it!"

"Found what?" Perry inquired.

"General Lane's Pentagon number," Polly explained, handing him the card. "His card was loose in one of her desk drawers."

Perry took the card and briefly inspected it, afterwards looking through the glass wall into the bullpen to quickly identify who was left in the office when he spotted Ron Troupe pulling his coat on. He gently pulled away from the children and rushed to the door, sending Polly scrambling out of his way. "Troupe!" he hollered. "My office, now!"

As Perry turned back towards his desk, he felt the floor rock beneath him. He reached out and grabbed the door frame to steady himself and thought, *An earthquake? In Metropolis? Has Luthor already unleashed his horror on us?*

His thoughts were interrupted by Kara's screams. She was hysterical and urgently saying something in a language he didn't recognize. Her episode was also frightening Jason and his lip had started to quiver.

Perry rushed over them, crawling on his hands and knees as the tremor continued to shake the building and knocked him off balance. He wrapped his arms around the children and told them both, "It's all right. Just wait for it to pass."

"!" Kara told him frantically.

"In English, Kara," Perry pleaded. "I can't understand you."

"Etek ki' zaprah na' hali! Las'hark Rao dungau thorshau!" Kara repeated urgently.

The shaking finally stopped and Perry pulled back from the children. "It's okay now," he assured them. "It was just an earthquake."

The words failed to console the little girl and she continued to cry, her shoulders shaking from the strength of the sobs. Perry wrapped his arms around her and picked her up. As he attempted to calm her, he noticed Ron Troupe entering his office.

"Is she okay?" Ron asked.

"This earthquake absolutely terrified her," Perry informed him.

"Maybe it reminded her of the tsunami," Ron suggested. "Here, I'll take her."

Perry nodded absently as he remembered hearing that the little girl had lost her mother in a tsunami a month or so earlier. He then reluctantly transferred his burden to the younger man and informed him, "You're on munchkin detail. Use Richard's office if you need to. He should have something there that can keep them occupied."

"We'll figure something out," Ron told him confidently. "Come on, Jason. Let's get out of your Uncle Perry's way."

As Ron and the children left his office, Perry heard Sam Foswell shouting out over the bullpen, "It was just an earthquake, people! It's over and guess what? The building's still standing. Folks, this is news and we're a newspaper. So let's everybody relax and try to get the

story in."

Perry hardly noticed the staff in the bullpen returning to action as he surveyed the damage in his office. Everything had been knocked off the desk and credenza, the plaques had fallen off the wall, and one of the windows was cracked, but everything seemed intact otherwise. He dug through the pile on the floor and retrieved General Lane's business card and Lois' note, setting them on top of his desk. He then picked up the satellite phone from the floor and climbed to his feet, settling in his office chair and punching in the number. He prayed it would go through.

After three rings, a male voice answered, "General Lane's office."

Perry released a breath he hadn't realized he was holding and adamantly said, "This is Perry White from the *Daily Planet*. I need to talk to General Lane immediately."

"I'm sorry, sir, but all press inquiries need to go through the Public Information Office," the man insisted.

"This isn't a press inquiry!" Perry yelled. He paused a moment and then calmly explained, "The general's daughter works for me and some things have happened here that he needs to know about. It's *urgent*."

"Please hold," the man told him.

A moment later, a gruff voice announced, "This is Lieutenant General Lane. Now what's all this you were saying about something happening to Lois?"

Luthor stared intently at the sonar display tracking the growth of his magnificent new continent, which had already located the first plateau emerging from the depths before he had even reached the bridge. Luthor was giddy as he watched the new plateaus rise from the sea and expand around the crystal seed's immersion point just over eighteen miles away.

Luthor was suddenly distracted by a faint pop and he tried to identify the source of the sound. *Sonic boom?* he wondered. *But not from the freak. He'd have set off the proximity alarm...* Luthor's gaze drifted over to the opposite side of the bridge, his brow furrowing in concern at the sight of the still-blank display attached to the alpha detector. It had not yet occurred to him that the battery backup he'd recently installed to insure continuous data on the alien had also guaranteed its failure during the EMP. He rushed across the bridge, tapping the screen in a futile effort to reactivate the sensor. He then pulled out his handheld unit, fuming at the words ridiculing him from the small display: "No Signal."

"*No, Damn it!*" Luthor bellowed, pounding his fist on the console. "Not now!"

Kitty wisely remained silent while Stanford tentatively asked, "Boss?"

Luthor glared back at him momentarily and then commanded, "Bring me the tool box from that cabinet."

Stanford obliged and when the tool kit was brought over, Luthor extracted a power screwdriver, removing the mounting screws that held in the alpha scanner display and lifting the flat panel to expose his custom circuitry. The coppery smell of burnt electronics immediately struck his nostrils and Luthor spun around towards Stanford, angrily glaring at him. "You *idiot!*" Luthor screamed. "I gave you detailed instructions for shutting everything down before the EMP hit."

"And we shut everything down," Stanford insisted defensively.

"Then how do you explain this?" Luthor demanded as he pointed accusingly at the fried electronics. "How'd my masterpiece get fried?"

"I don't know. Maybe they shipped us some defective parts," Stanford suggested. "After

all, none of the other systems were damaged."

"This shouldn't have been damaged either!" Luthor insisted. "*Somebody* screwed up!"

"It wasn't me," Stanford declared.

Luthor glared at the other man for moment before turning his attention back to the electronics. *The idiots have sabotaged me again*, Luthor thought. *This is not good. If the freak finds me here, he might still be able to manage a surprise, despite the kryptonite. We have to get to the plateau.* He pulled the walkie-talkie from his pocket and hollered into it, "Grant, Reilly. Get up here now, and bring my things... And let Brutus know it's time for our guests to leave."

After a short delay, Grant's nervous voice came across the speaker. "Um, Boss?" he stammered. "We, um... we have a few complications down here."

"I don't want to hear any of your excuses!" Luthor replied impatiently. "Just get up here."

"But, boss," Grant said insistently.

"I said, get up here!" Luthor shouted. "Now!" He returned the walkie-talkie to his pocket and again stared at his defunct alpha detector. After fuming over it for another minute, he grabbed the power screwdriver from the counter and tossed it over to Stanford. "Close it back up and make it quick," he commanded. Luthor then walked over to the radar station and resumed his observations, though without his previous delight.

A few minutes later, his studious observation was interrupted by Kitty's chortle. "Looks like someone got their ass kicked again," she commented mirthfully.

"Shut up," Reilly demanded angrily.

Luthor looked up from his screen, his expression betraying his surprise at the sight of Reilly's black eyes, freshly broken and bloodied nose, swollen lips and bruised cheek. "What the devil happened to you?" he inquired incredulously.

"That *bitch* hit me with a fire extinguisher," Reilly explained, irate. "When I find her, she is *so* dead..."

Luthor's eyes widened even further at the startling information. "*Lois Lane* beat you up?" he asked derisively. "And you're *just now* telling me that our prisoners are *loose*? How'd they get away from Brutus?"

"Um, Brutus is dead," Grant informed him somberly. "They, um... they killed him."

"They killed him?" Luthor repeated incredulously. "The incompetent imbecile." He looked back over at Grant, finally registering the fact that his minion had brought the spear with him. It was his variation of Hagan's spear from Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* - a six foot wooden staff with an eight inch kryptonite shiv fixed to the end. He grabbed the spear from Grant, angrily telling him, "Give me that!" After a moment's pause he asked critically, "Now, where are my crystals?"

"Um, sorry, boss. We forget to grab them from the desk," Grant replied apologetically.

"You forgot?" Luthor said mockingly. He sighed irritably and added tersely, "Let's go." He angrily marched off the bridge, with his minions quickly falling into step behind him.

Superman pondered that the shockwave that hit Metropolis had been even more destructive than the firebombs set off earlier in the afternoon. It was effectively no different than a major natural earthquake, though its strength was hard to estimate based on the damage, given that local construction codes didn't consider seismic forces. However, he'd remembered a six point two tremor in San Jose, California that had done far less damage. The loss of life would be unavoidable, though he'd do his best to keep the number low.

The most pressing danger came from the falling glass, liberated from the skyscrapers when they exceeded the sway of the designer's wildest expectations, shattering the windows and sending the shards down towards the pedestrians below, who now packed the sidewalks as they tried to get home after the EMP. He was barely able to keep ahead of the threat, flying low above the streets at nearly supersonic speeds as he vaporized the shards into harmless particulates. The towers' sway had also liberated a number of externally fixed objects from the structures, dropping signs, toppling roof-mounted equipment, and even throwing a crane operator from the ladder of his construction crane. All of these falling objects threatened the crowds and required his vigilant attention.

The other grave threat competing for his attention occurred below the streets, where the movement of the Earth had stressed the pipes beyond their limits, sending a stream of invisible high pressure natural gas through the tunnels, search for an ignition source. When the gas was finally ignited, the resulting fireball went shooting back through the tunnels towards the utility's plant, and Superman had to move quickly to outrace it before blowing out the flames throughout the access tunnels and shutting off the gas.

The glass and gas dangers had passed quickly after the shockwave, leaving Superman with the more time consuming problem of rescuing victims from the most seriously damaged structures - the older, shorter buildings which were least likely to survive the quake. Such buildings accounted for most of the multi-family residential properties catering to the lower and lower-middle income levels. He observed that a slight majority of the victims he pulled from the rubble were senior citizens, not so unlike his mother in Kansas. He empathized greatly with them, mentally cringing at their injuries and mourning the loss of those he couldn't save.

Despite his hectic pace throughout the disaster, he still vigilantly maintained his audio lock on Lois' heartbeat from Luthor's yacht and managed frequent visual inspections to confirm her continuing safety. However, the ongoing calamity in Metropolis continued to demand his constant attention and forced him to delay the rescue of the one he held most dear. *Hold on, Lois*, he silently pleaded to her. *Just a little bit longer...*

Luthor entered the ballroom with his minions behind him and his eyes again shot wide when he was suddenly struck by how thoroughly incomplete Grant's description had been. They didn't just kill Brutus - they *launched* the piano into him, violently breaking it free of the bolts holding it in place on the glass, scraping up the wood floor in front of the desk, before it came to rest in a shattered heap on top of the henchmen. Only Brutus' legs remained visible underneath the mess, in the middle of a slowly expanding pool of blood.

"All you could manage to say about this was 'they killed him'?" Luthor asked condescendingly. "Are you so blind that you couldn't see what really happened here?" Grant chose not to answer as Luthor approached the ruined piano with his eyes wide and scrutinized the mess.

"Holy shit," Kitty mumbled.

"It's time for us to go," Luthor declared, but when he turned to the desk to collect the crystals, his eyes flew impossibly wider at the conspicuous bare spot where the crystals had recently been. He spun back towards his men and bellowed, "*Where are my crystals?*" When they failed to answer after a moment, he angrily demanded, "*Answer me!*"

"Um, the woman must have taken them," Grant offered. He quickly added, "Brutus was supposed to be guarding them."

"I don't care about Brutus! I want my crystals back!" Luthor screamed. "Find the bitch and the brats! Find my crystals!" The men quickly moved towards the door, but before they could leave the room, Luthor quickly added, "Wait! We can't be late for our 'appointment' with that meddling alien. Grant, Reilly. You're with me. Kitty, Stanford. Grab some guns and kryptonite from the armory and search the ship for our guests."

"Kryptonite?" Kitty asked doubtfully. "What do we need that for?"

"Just how do you think they managed to *hurl* a half ton concert grand piano across the room with enough force to crush poor Brutus to death?" Luthor asked pointedly. When the others still remained silent after a minute, he added, "The brats are *his*, you idiot! So unless you want them throwing *you* across the room like they did that piano, you'd damn well better be packing kryptonite. It'll also come in handy if their old man shows up."

"Oh, my God," Kitty muttered fearfully.

"Stop whining and start earning your keep!" Luthor demanded heartlessly. "And I need them *alive*. Is that clear?"

"Yeah, Boss," Stanford replied.

"I want them found and locked up by the time I get back, and don't forget to leave some of the kryptonite with them," Luthor said insistently. "Now, let's move! We're out of time." He then stormed out of the room, with Grant and Reilly rushing to catch up with him.

## Chapter 40 - Search Party

*Thursday, October 5, 2006 3:20PM EDT*

Lieutenant General Sam Lane marched in step with Lieutenant General Michael Maples, his counterpart from the Defense Intelligence Agency, as the two reported to a large secure conference room. They were there for an emergency briefing called after reviewing the intelligence gathered by his daughter, Lois, and forwarded to the Pentagon by her editor. Sam had never been prouder of his willful firstborn.

Unfortunately, Lois had put herself in grave danger collecting the information and his responsibilities didn't allow him to personally assume charge of her rescue. He had reluctantly deferred the task of expediting her rescue to his long time friend, General George Matthews, the commander of , who also had a well-deserved reputation for achieving the impossible. It was a skill he'd need, given the EMP damage all branches in the region had suffered. Sam had confidence in his friend, but still worried and prayed for his daughter.

Sam struggled to push his worries aside as they walked into the conference room, which was used exclusively for secure video conferences. Under normal circumstances, they would have traveled to the White House to brief the President there, but the timeline was too short to allow for transit time. The video conference had been quickly arranged and the split screen at the far end of the room already showed the Vice President, the Secretary of Homeland Security, and the Commander of the Northern Command. The presidential seal was displayed in the remaining box, a placeholder for the president who had not yet joined the conference.

Opposite the screen, there was a large U-shaped conference table and the Secretary of Defense, Dan Ross, was conspicuously seated in the center of the "U", intently studying the screen on his laptop and chatting quietly to the NSA director seated beside him. General Maples claimed the empty seat on the opposite side of Secretary Ross and Sam chose a seat further down the table. Secretary Ross glanced over and offered a brief greeting to the two generals before returning his attention to his laptop.

Shortly after their arrival, the President's chief of staff appeared in place of the presidential seal and called for everyone's attention. "People, if I could have your attention," he stated authoritatively. "We're ready to begin... Here's the President of the United States."

After the President was introduced, he immediately got to the point. "All right, people. I've reviewed the messages from this *Daily Planet* reporter. Since you've insisted on this briefing, I assume we're taking it seriously."

"We believe that the intelligence is credible and represents a clear and present danger to the United States," Secretary Ross stated confidently.

"Are you sure it's not just some gimmick by the *Planet* to jump their reporter to the front of the line to be rescued?" the President pressed.

"Mister President, we have additional facts that support the conclusions provided by Lois Lane," General Maples replied insistently. "In fact, the evidence convincingly supports her assertions."

"What are these additional facts?" the President asked somberly.

"At two fifty this afternoon, the radar from the Harry S. Truman Carrier Battle Group recorded what we believe to be a missile launch from the coordinates that Miss Lane identified for Lex Luthor's yacht, approximately seventy-five miles offshore from Metropolis. The Truman was two hundred miles from Norfolk at the time, and two hundred seventy miles from Luthor's apparent location."

"He fired a missile at us?" the President asked incredulously.

"No, sir, not at us," General Maples informed him. "It was fired in the other direction and splashed down approximately eighteen miles east of the firing point. The Eastern Seaboard was hit by a high energy EMP approximately one minute after the missile splashed down, and we do not believe that to be a coincidence. I'm sure everyone here recalls that the EMP from twenty-five September was also linked to Lex Luthor and the robbery of Superman's Arctic Fortress.

"also finding something disturbing at the missile's ground zero. Radar satellite imaging had detected a large landmass below the Atlantic Ocean with multiple plateaus rising through the surface. The plateaus are penetrating the ocean surface at approximately quarter-mile intervals, centered around ground zero."

"There's a big difference between finding an undiscovered archipelago and a growing a new continent," the president pointed out.

"We've compared the new images with those from NASA's ocean mapping project, sir," General Maples replied seriously. "This land mass isn't 'undiscovered' - it's new. As for the dispersion... consider the analogy of reforestation. When they replant a clear-cut forest, they don't put all the seeds in the same hole. They spread them out, and as the trees grow and expand, they fill in the gaps. That may be what we're seeing here. The peaks are appearing at regularly spread intervals around ground zero and expanding. The land mass already covers an area fifteen miles across. If we extrapolate from the splashdown time, it would mean that Luthor's continent would crash into the East coast in just over two and a half hours."

"Dear God," the President muttered quietly.

"We also think this growing landmass is responsible for the earthquake that's struck Metropolis," General Maples added. "The city's not in a seismic zone and it seems unlikely that some natural geological process would have caused a five point seven quake so soon after Luthor planted his seed crystal offshore."

"We believe these events confirm the intelligence Lois Lane provided - that Luthor is using stolen Kryptonian technology to create a new continent, which he hopes will destroy North America," Secretary Ross asserted. "It's the only explanation that fits the data."

"How do we stop it?" the President asked.

"We could hope for Superman to pull off a miracle," Secretary Ross replied seriously. "However, given that the intelligence from Miss Lane also warned of kryptonite, we can't rely on that. We'll need to take control of the situation ourselves, and General Matthews from NORTHCOM is implementing our response."

"Sir, we believe the solution is at sea," General Matthews replied somberly. "It's either aboard Luthor's ship or on the new land mass. He has to be controlling it somehow and we need to take that control away from him. That means we'll need to take him alive and we already have teams en route to do precisely that, once they get the go-ahead. E.T.A. to Luthor's ship is approximately thirty minutes."

"They have the go-ahead," the President declared. "I want all of the necessary resources deployed to stop that bastard, and that means everything. I also want worst case contingencies prepared to take the threat out if we can't capture the control center.... Well, Gentlemen, it sounds like we have a lot of work ahead of us, so let's get to it. And keep me apprised of our progress."

Lois inched forward along the corridor, hugging the wall and holding the gun in front of her, pointed up, with both hands firmly on the grip, as she strained her hearing for any sound



from Luthor's men. The path brought her across a closed door along the side of the hallway and she nudged it open, carefully listening for any sounds of life as she snuck through the doorway. She quietly pushed the door shut behind her and inspected her surroundings, finding herself in a small lounge with circular couches centered around a small round table and with a large plasma television at the far end of the room. She also noticed another door adjacent to the one she'd entered through and she cautiously pulled it open. She discovered a large walk-in closet with another door in the opposite wall. Along the counter between the doors, she found a dozen Styrofoam heads with wigs of various colors and lengths - all of them *men's* wigs.

*Luthor's stateroom*, Lois thought. *The absolute last place I ever wanted to be.* She crossed the closet to the opposite door and pushed it open just enough to reveal the bedroom on the opposite side. As she was pulling the door shut, she suddenly heard voices from the room behind her and quickly reversed direction, quietly rushing through the door into the bedroom and pushing it nearly shut behind her, leaving only the slightest crack to spy through.

"Why do you have to hover over me?" Kitty complained. "I *told* you I'd start at this end after putting Tala away."

"*Somebody* has to make sure you pull your weight instead of hiding in here with that damn dog," Stanford snapped. "Now get a move on it. The boss said he wanted the prisoners locked up before they get back."

"Wouldn't it be quicker to split up and work together from opposite ends?" Kitty asked irritably. "You know, divide and conquer?"

"That's precisely why we *have* to stick together," Stanford insistent impatiently. "If we split up, it'll be too easy for them to pick us off."

"Lex said the kids couldn't hurt us if we had the kryptonite with us," Kitty countered.

"And what about the mother? You saw what she did to Reilly and I'm pretty sure she has his gun now."

"*What?* He never said anything about that," Kitty argued petulantly.

"But he didn't have his gun with him when they left," Stanford pointed out. "When was the last time you saw him go *anywhere* unarmed? He probably sleeps with the damn thing."

"Oh, shit."

"Come on, get your ass in gear!" Stanford demanded. "You wanted to drop the dog off here, so put the dog down and let's go!"

Lois heard a canine whine a moment later, followed by the slam of a door and muffled voices as the Stanford and Kitty continued their arguing. Lois cautiously emerged from her hiding spot, reentering the closet and crossing to the opposite door, where she was met by the anxious Pomeranian. The dog yipped and Lois grabbed the nearest thing she could get her hands on, throwing a long curly wig in front of the animal to distract her. The Pomeranian sniffed at the wig and after catching Luthor's scent, she growled angrily and attacked it, shaking it back and forth ferociously.

Lois suppressed a chuckle and thought, *So you don't like that madman either? Good girl.* Lois grabbed the rest of the wigs and threw them to the floor, afterwards stepping over the distracted dog and quietly pushing the door shut behind her. She pulled the outer door open slightly and caught the continuing argument from her pursuers as they walked down the hall. She strained her hearing to catch their words.

"Do you ever *shut up?*" Stanford complained.

"I speak my mind," Kitty replied defiantly.

"Well, you're going to give us away," Stanford complained. "Try, just for once, to keep

your mouth shut and follow the plan."

"Oh, and what *is* the plan, genius?"

"We'll start at the top deck and systematically work our way down," Stanford declared. After a moment, he adamantly added, "*Quietly...* Why on Earth has the boss put up with you this long?"

Lois chanced a peek out the hallway and saw the pair turn the corner at the end of the hall. Kitty's heels continued to clack against the deck, growing fainter as they moved farther away. Lois smiled and thought, *So the two stooges went that-a-way... And from the sound of it, Luthor and the other losers made a side trip, leaving just those two aboard.*

She stepped into the hall, pulling the door shut behind her, and began walking in the opposite direction. However, she came to an abrupt stop after only a few steps. She looked back down the hallway in the direction Stanford and Kitty had gone and thought, *Better the devil you know...* She reversed course and walked briskly after the pair, taking care to keep her footsteps silent and stay out of sight while listening for them.

*Thursday, October 5, 2006 3:40PM EDT*

Richard checked his instruments as he piloted his plane towards the coordinates Lois had provided and he reflected that Jack Wilde could give her a run for the money in the 'Scariest Driver' category. As promised, Jack had maneuvered his Harley around the stopped cars, at times sending pedestrians on the sidewalk scurrying out his way, and once reaching the on ramp to the Clinton Expressway, he sped along the shoulder at ninety miles an hour.

Richard counted at least two instances of Metropolis' Finest shouting after them, but Jack never slowed down. For a time, Richard had seriously doubted their survival. However, the frightening trip had delivered him to his front door in an unbelievable twelve minutes. It had only taken an additional two minutes to collect his Beretta pistol from the closet safe and ferry the plane out into the river for takeoff. Once in the air, he'd immediately contacted the Coast Guard, but received only a vague promise from the skeptical radio operator that they'd send a search party 'as soon as possible.' Richard's protests had produced an equally vague explanation that they had received numerous calls since the EMP.

Perry had better news when Richard called him to report in and he was relieved to learn that the kids were safe and that his uncle had gotten through to Lois' father. However, the message Lois had sent with the kids was horrifying and Richard prayed that Superman would be able to stop the sociopath. If he failed, his family's rescue would be for naught.

Richard noticed he was getting close to the target area, though the coordinate resolution still left a large search area. He dove to a low altitude of one thousand feet and banked his plane in a wide turn to the left, leaving the side window facing the ocean, and he scanned the surface for a large yacht. Finally, after ten minutes of searching, he found a likely match, and lowered his altitude for a closer look. He scrutinized the stern of the ship through a pair of binoculars and made out a blurry "Alexander." *That's got to be it,* Richard thought.

He again circled the ship and came in for a landing in the rough seas directly behind it, shutting off the engines and coasting to a stop approximately five hundred yards behind the yacht. He again focused the binoculars on the stern and confirmed the name: "Alexander the Great."

Richard pulled the satellite phone from his seat's side pouch and dialed his uncle. Perry answered on the second ring. "Richard?" Perry answered.

"I found the ship," Richard reported. "Any news from Lois' dad?"

"I tried calling a little while ago and was told that 'the general is unavailable'," Perry informed him. "When I pressed the operator for information on their rescue plan, I was told that he couldn't comment on ongoing military operations."

"You would have thought that Sam would try a little harder to get someone out here for his daughter," Richard complained.

"Richard, for all we know he *has*, and *that's* the military operation Lieutenant Dumbass was referring to," Perry countered.

"We don't know that, Uncle Perry," Richard argued.

"Richard, remember what we talked about earlier," Perry said insistently. "Don't get yourself killed. Just sit tight and wait for the cavalry."

Richard sighed irritably and said, "That's what I *am* doing."

"Make sure you keep on doing that," Perry replied. "Richard, they have the coordinates. I'm sure they'll be there soon."

"The *coordinates!* I almost forgot," Richard said urgently. "Hold on, I can get you something a little more precise that what Lois gave us." He quickly turned the plane's navigational instruments back on.

"What was wrong with those coordinates? They were good enough for you to find the ship."

"The resolution was only down to the nearest minute and when you account for rounding, that can still mean a search area of several square miles," Richard explained. "Including the seconds drastically narrows that down... Have you got a pen?"

"Yeah, go ahead."

"It's 38°56'02" North by 73°35'14" West," Richard declared.

"Got it. I'll call it in to the Pentagon," Perry declared. "You sit tight and *wait* for them."

"I know, you've made your point," Richard complained. "Repeatedly."

"Good. I'll call you back when I hear something."

After ending the call, Richard continued to scan Luthor's ship through his binoculars. However, after a few minutes, his attention was interrupted by several loud sonic booms, followed by the roar of jet engines. He opened the side door of the plane and peeked up under the wing in time to see a group of fighters circling overhead. *Oh, please God, tell me that they're not going to try to sink the ship*, Richard thought anxiously. *Not yet. Not when Lois is still aboard.*

Richard ducked back inside the plane, reemerging a moment later and tying a rope around the wing strut. He then retreated back inside, leaving the door open as he climbed back into the pilot's seat. He started the engine and the plane sped forward towards the yacht. When the plane was fifty feet from the stern, Richard made an abrupt ninety degree turn and killed the engine, sending the plane coasting sideways towards the ship.

The starboard wing just missed colliding with the back of the vessel and passed harmlessly along the port side of the ship as Richard grabbed the rope and leapt out the door of the plane, landing awkwardly on one of the two permanent swim ladders off the rear deck. He climbed up onto the ship and tied the rope to the swim ladder. With the aircraft securely moored, Richard pulled out his pistol and quietly slipped inside the ship as he began the search for his fiancée.

Lois flattened herself against the outside port wall of the ship's cabin and strained her hearing to try to hear the chatter between Stanford and Kitty. The pair had taken one of the

exterior stairways on either side of the ship to the wheel house on the top deck to begin their search for their escaped prisoner, with Lois covertly following them. She was certain that she'd hear Kitty's spiked heels on the steps in time to slip out of sight, sneak through the cabin to the opposite side of the ship and circle around them. Of course, that assumed that they remained fearful or dimwitted enough to both take the same stairway back down, rather than split up. She could also be in trouble if they chose to take the opposite stairway back down and spotted her through the cabin's continuous windows. *Damn, there's not much cover here*, Lois thought.

She nervously looked around and her gaze locked on a pair of large fiberglass cylinders on a cradle outside the rail about of third of the distance from the ship's stern. *Maybe a little misdirection could work to my advantage*, Lois thought. She slipped back inside the cabin, moving swiftly towards the rear of the ship and down a flight of stairs to the outside deck below. She cautiously peeked around the corner of the wall and then slipped over to the canisters. She pulled the release cord for one of the canisters and darted back to her hiding place as it splashed into the sea.

Moments later, Lois heard Kitty's voice from the opposite end of the ship as she exclaimed, "I think they jumped overboard!"

Lois rushed aft to a stairwell on the opposite side of the ship and rushed down to the level below. *Maybe that will keep them occupied for a while*, she thought. At the bottom of the stairs, she circled back inside the yacht, running through a large formal dining room in search of an alternate path back up along the starboard side of the ship.

Stanford considered himself a very patient and tolerant man, but Kitty's constant complaining was quickly exhausting his patience. Not only did he find her dumb broad act supremely annoying - and it was clearly an act - her constant chatter was telegraphing their position to the escaped prisoners. Stanford knew Kitty was no dummy, despite the act, and couldn't for the life of him figure out why she refused to shut her mouth. As much as he knew she enjoyed getting under his skin, she had to realize she was warning the escapees of their approach. Kitty didn't seem to care, which was baffling. Even if she was the dimwit she pretended to be, she'd have been smart enough not to disappoint Lex Luthor.

As they climbed the stairs to the wheel house, Stanford found himself reconsidering his earlier insistence that they stick together. Kitty's idea of helping was to watch him do the work and question everything he did, her every syllable becoming more shrill than the last. He wished wholeheartedly that he had the forethought to gag her before dragging her along. After finally confirming that the observation deck and wheel house were clear, his search was interrupted by a loud splash off the port side of the ship. He rushed to get out the door to investigate the noise, but found himself tripping into Kitty, who'd stumbled in the doorway and was inspecting the bottom of one of her shoes.

"Get out of my way, you worthless whore!" he shouted, roughly shoving her out the door in front of him.

Kitty caught herself on the rail at the top of the stairs outside the door, still planted in his way and she shouted innocently, "I think they jumped overboard!"

Stanford pushed past her and looked over the side, spotting the twelve man life raft, now fully inflated and drifting slowly away from the ship. Unfortunately, the canopy equipped on the oceangoing life raft made it impossible to see if anyone was inside or not. He shoved Kitty out of the way, causing her to swing to the side of the stairway as she stumbled, and he rushed past her, sprinting down the stairs towards the back of the ship where the life raft had been

released. When he reached the empty life raft canister cradle, he leaned over the rail, straining to see through the raft's open canopy flap. After failing to discern any movement inside the raft after a few minutes, he concluded that it was *probably* empty. They *could* be hiding behind the canopy, but kids weren't easy to keep still.

"Aren't you going to jump in after them?" Kitty asked, startling him with her sudden appearance at his left. "Please say 'yes!'"

"Maybe I'll throw you overboard instead," Stanford threatened.

"And ruin these *expensive* clothes that *Lex* bought for me?" Kitty asked sarcastically.

"You know, your act's starting to wear thin with the boss. If you're not careful, you'll end up washing up in the surf," Stanford replied irritably. He again leaned over the rail as he continued his scrutiny of the life raft.

"You'll get there first, so save me a spot," Kitty replied with false sweetness.

Stanford turned to say something to her when a reflection from the rear of the ship caught his attention. "What the hell is that?" he asked curiously.

"That's your best comeback?"

"No, *that!*" Stanford replied, and he pointed towards the rear of the ship, where he could see the wings and forward fuselage of a seaplane.

Kitty followed his gaze and said innocently, "It's probably something *Lex* brought along. He doesn't tell any of us everything, you know. Especially not you."

"That plane wasn't there earlier," Stanford insisted.

"How would you know? You can barely see from it from here. You'd have to be practically on top of it before you'd notice anything. Besides, how else would it get here if *Lex* didn't bring here?"

"We would have seen it when we flew in on the chopper," Stanford explained impatiently. He marched to the rear stairwell, pulling Kitty along roughly by the arm. "They got a message out somehow... Come on. And if you don't keep your mouth shut *this* time, I swear, I'll break your jaw."

Lois looked apprehensively between the doors of the wheel house as she pressed the transmit button on the microphone and repeated her hail on channel sixteen. "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday. This is Lois Lane of the *Daily Planet*. I've been kidnapped by *Lex Luthor* and require assistance. Is anyone out there? Over." It was the third and final time she'd transmit her plea. The bridge was simply too exposed if anyone chose to come up there and she couldn't guarantee she'd hear them coming while she was talking on the radio.

After a few agonizingly long seconds, she heard the reply over the speaker. "Lois Lane, this is the U.S.S. *Harry Truman*. Over."

"*Truman*, this is Lois Lane. How soon can you get me off this boat? Over," Lois replied.

"Lois Lane, *Truman*. Please confirm your position and status. Over."

"*Truman*, Lois Lane," Lois responded. "I'm on a yacht called *Alexander the Great*, and I'm at... 38°56'02" North by 73°35'14" West. Status is that *Lex Luthor* took a little helicopter side trip with some of his flunkies, and I *think* there are just two bad guys left on the boat. They're both armed and dangerous and looking for me. Over."

"Lois Lane, *Truman*. Roger that. Over."

"*Truman*, Lois Lane. How soon can you be here? Over," Lois said insistently.

"Lois Lane, *Truman*. We're not at liberty to discuss that. Find someplace to hide until someone can get there. Over."

"What the hell do think I've been doing?" Lois asked irritably. After a moment, she hastily added, "Over."

"Lois Lane, Truman. Good Luck. Truman Out."

*Well that was helpful*, Lois thought sarcastically. She put down the microphone and walked over to the starboard door, carefully peeking down the outside stairs. She slipped through the door and rushed down the stairs, with her gun out in front her and clinging to the wall as she scanned ahead of her for her pursuers. She ducked into the cabin and jogged towards the bow end of the room and snuck down the interior stairwell to the lower decks, concluding that the luxurious and spacious upper decks offered far too little cover.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs, a movement of shadow alerted her, and she pressed herself against the side wall, her senses heightened. *How close is he?* Lois wondered. *Probably too close for me to chance running up the stairs.* She waited patiently, straining her hearing and searching the walls for shadows to confirm her suspicions. Finally, she saw a man's shadow on the opposite wall, apparently holding a gun in front of him. *Did Luthor have a bigger crew onboard than I thought?* she wondered.

The seconds crawled by as the barrel of a pistol poked out from around the corner. The man stopped and Lois held her breath. After a brief delay, he resumed his forward movement and Lois made her move, grabbing the gun hand and swinging it up as she brought the barrel of her own weapon under the man's chin. She was so focused on subduing the potential attacker that she didn't notice her opponent's face until after he was at her mercy. When she finally looked up at him, her eyes then widened in shock. She quickly recovered and hissed, "Richard? What the hell are you doing here?"

"We got your fax," Richard answered quietly. "Um, I think you can put the gun down now."

"What? Oh," Lois replied and she released Richard's gun hand and pulled her gun away, pointing the barrel up in a safety position. She glanced briefly up the stairs behind her and irritably added in a loud whisper, "I was expecting the Coast Guard."

"Well, it looks like they have their hands full right now and I didn't want to take a chance on those fighters trying to sink the ship while you were still aboard," Richard whispered back defensively.

"Why would they be targeting this ship?"

"Perry called your dad after he got the note from Kara," Richard explained.

"You mean the note I gave her to give to *Superman*?" Lois asked insistently.

"I guess so. I assume Superman read it, since he's the one who brought the kids back to the *Planet*," Richard told her.

"Oh, thank *God* they're safe," Lois said with obvious relief, looking away to hide her emotion. Her head suddenly spun back around to Richard and she urgently asked, "Wait, how'd you get here?"

"The seaplane. I tied it up behind the ship," Richard informed her, smiling proudly as he delivered the news.

"Then what are we standing around here for? Let's go!" Lois insisted in a loud whisper. "Just be careful of tweedledum and tweedledummer."

"Who?"

"Stanford Harris and Katherine Kowalski. I think they're the only ones still on the boat. Everyone else left on the helicopter."

The two cautiously made their way back to the stern, checking every corner as they

passed, finally emerging from the cabin at the Jacuzzi deck, and rushing down the port stairway to the stern swimming platform. However, as soon as Lois stepped out onto the deck, the butt of Stanford's gun made painful contact with her face and she fell backwards, just barely managing to find the handrail along the stairs and preventing herself from tumbling into the water.

"That's far enough," Stanford declared. "Now, drop your guns and put your hands up. Both of you."

## Chapter 41 - Threat Response

*Thursday, October 5, 2006 3:45PM EDT*

General George Matthews pensively observed the Command Center at the Cheyenne Mountain Operations Center through the window of his office on the level above it. There was a bank of large plasma screens mounted high on the far wall, with banks of workstations lining the center of the room. Each workstation gave the worker access to an array of data and communications to feed up to the decision makers. The facility had been emptied barely two months earlier and everything transferred to Peterson Air Force Base - the government simply couldn't justify the cost in the post cold war era. However, the site had been quickly reactivated after the EMP attack just ten days earlier, given its superior EM shielding. Matthews had been surprised at just how quickly they'd been able to transfer everything back.

General Matthews reflected that the individuals below who had been recruited from all five branches of the United States military were the best of the best. They'd need to be to survive the current threat, which was unlike any he'd known of in his lifetime. Not even 9/11 could compare to the burden he felt on his shoulders for this crisis, and not even the cold war had ever presented the existential threat they now faced. With few notable exceptions, Fortress America simply wasn't breached.

The assault from Lex Luthor had begun with an EMP that was far more powerful than the initial one from ten days earlier and it had darkened cities along the coast from Raleigh, North Carolina north to Boston, Massachusetts and as far inland as Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The EMP had destroyed virtually all powered electronics in the area, disabling running vehicles and silencing civilian communications. The coastal cities had been further rocked by a five point seven earthquake originating ninety-three miles offshore from Metropolis, which was certain to have been caused by the stolen Kryptonian technology. The Eastern Seaboard was simply not a seismic zone.

NORTHCOM was already providing logistical support to those areas, sending C-130 cargo planes from the First Air Force to airlift National Guard personnel and equipment into affected cities - the roads were simply impassible with all the disabled vehicles. General Matthews was grateful that military communications tended to be redundant and EM shielded - the necessary coordination would otherwise have proved impossible.

Of course, the relief delivered to the cities would be a moot point if they failed in their primary objective of stopping Lex Luthor and seizing control of the alien technology. Towards that end, they had a pair of the Navy's V-22 Ospreys on the way there from Little Creek, Virginia to deploy SEAL squads against the madman. The first squad's mission was to seize control of the yacht, with a secondary mission to liberate Lois Lane, the daughter of Lieutenant General Sam Lane, who was one of George Matthews' closest friends. He remembered Lois as a bold teenager, whose antics provoked frustration and grey hair for his friend. *We'll get her back, Sam*, Matthews silently promised.

The second Osprey carried a standby team, which would circle the engagement zone waiting for additional targets to be identified. Though both the Navy and Air Force had plenty of firepower ready in the air, it was a mission requirement to capture Luthor alive and preserve whatever control systems were directing the assault against U.S. soil. If they destroyed it, they could very well destroy their only chance of stopping the threat, short of resorting to the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Failure was not an option.

General Matthews diverted his attention to the center screens across from him, which revealed live radar and infrared images from the surveillance satellites now trained on the



yacht, and he noticed something that was likely to generate a lot of excitement among the analysts below - a small seaplane had just ferried up and docked behind the yacht. Matthews ran out of the office and down the stairs, and found his Chief of Staff, Air Force Colonel Mike Johnson. "What have we got on that plane?" Matthews asked insistently.

"Sir, we hope to have clear video from the Predators in a few minutes," Colonel Johnson told him. "We'll have to wait until then to get the tail numbers."

Matthews nodded his understanding. While the infrared and radar sensors aboard the satellites easily penetrated the now-heavy cloud cover over the target and provided precise information on the movements of people and equipment, they didn't easily lend themselves to capture the plane's markings. "How far out are our boys right now?"

"They should be there in another twenty minutes, sir," Johnson informed him.

"Sirs!" a voice called out urgently. Matthews and Johnson looked over to find Navy Petty Officer First Class Hannah Daggett standing in front of them, the cord from her headset stretching tightly back to her desk. "Sirs, the Truman has new information on the target."

"How did they come by this information?" General Matthews asked.

"Apparently, the enemy's prisoner got loose, sir," Daggett explained. "Lois Lane just radioed in from the yacht and reported that Lex Luthor and some of his men had left the vessel on a helicopter. She believes that only two hostiles remain aboard."

"Do we have the audio from Lane's call?" General Matthews asked.

"The Truman's sending it now, sir," Daggett answered. "Give me a moment and I'll queue it up for you."

"Thank you, Petty Officer," Matthews replied.

"You're welcome, sir."

General Matthews and Colonel Johnson followed Daggett back to her station and plugged in spare headsets and listened to the message. Afterwards, the General turned to his chief of staff and asked, "So what do you think?"

Johnson turned towards the overhead screens displaying the yacht images and commented, "It could be legit, sir. That *does* look like a helipad behind the wheel house - and an *empty* one at that."

Matthews followed his gaze in time to notice another screen light up with clear video showing a side view of the yacht from a Predator UAV flying below the clouds. Matthews heard another officer holler, "Have them circle behind the ship! We need the tail numbers from the plane tied up behind it." The image on the screen slowly panned aft, finally circling behind where the tail numbers were clear to see: N-7241H.

"I'm on it sir," one of the other analysts said. "Tail number November seven two four one Hotel." Matthews marched over to the analyst, who was an Air Force Tech Sergeant named Reynolds. He held a hand over his earpiece as he concentrated on the conversation with the other party. Finally, he looked up and said, "Sirs, it's a private aircraft registered to a Richard White from Queensland Park, Delaware. FBI is running a background check."

"You said it's White's plane?" Matthews asked urgently. *Didn't Sam call his daughter's perpetual fiancé 'White'?* he wondered.

"Yes, sir," Sergeant Reynolds answered.

"Do you know him, General?" Johnson asked.

"No, but I think I've heard the name 'White' associated with Lois Lane before," Matthews informed them. "If he's who I think he is, he's a civilian would-be rescuer, which is the last thing we need right now. We don't need some amateur wannabe hero getting himself killed."

"Lane did say they were only two hostiles aboard," Johnson reminded him.

"Sirs, you'd better take a look at this," Reynolds interrupted, pointed to one of the overhead screens.

The Predator video had zoomed in on the stern, where a dark-skinned man had just untied the seaplane and pushed it adrift. He was hiding beside the stairs down to the stern swimming platform and was carrying a handgun. There was an armed woman behind him, though she seemed uncertain what to do with the firearm and was constantly switching it from one hand to the other.

"That's got to be Harris and Kowalski, sir," Johnson speculated. "It looks like you were right about White trying to be a hero. With all due respect, sir, I hope you're wrong about the other part."

"Captain Archer!" Matthews shouted to a naval officer across the room. "That hostile is *not* Lex Luthor. Get a fighter down there and take them out! Gatling gun only and don't sink the ship."

"Sending the order now, sir," Archer replied.

Matthews returned his attention to the screen and a minute later witnessed an armed man and women running across the deck past the Jacuzzi. The woman was in front as they raced down the stairs towards the swimming platform, and the moment she cleared the bottom step, Harris punched her in the face with his gun hand, sending her flying back and nearly into the sea. A moment later Harris and Kowalski led their two prisoners up the stairs at gunpoint.

"Call off the air strike!" Matthews ordered.

"Yes, sir."

Matthews turned to his chief of staff and said authoritatively, "Keep on their communications. If they call that into their boss, I want the target location. And let the SEAL squads know about this development."

"Yes, sir," Johnson replied deferentially.

"I think it's safe to assume that Lane *was* loose on the ship and the new intelligence really did come from her," Matthews declared. "That means we have a helicopter to find and a S.O.B. to take out of action. Let's get to it!"

Luthor set the helicopter down at the extreme edge of the plateau, not wanting it to be in the way of the video they'd soon be shooting. He shut off the helicopter's engine, stepped out and carefully extracted his kryptonite spear from the back seat, before turning to scrutinize the new land mass. Its peak rose another seventy feet at the other end of the surface, with stairs at either side leading up to the command chamber, where there would be a replica of the crystal console from Superman's Fortress. Unfortunately, this console would at least temporarily remain devoid of data crystals, just like the one at the Fortress. Luthor cursed his luck and hoped that the idiots he left behind on the yacht would find his missing crystals quickly.

He walked away from the edge and motioned for Grant to join him, commanding his subordinate, "Set the tripod at the bottom of the stairs on the right. Make sure you get a clear picture of me. Once I come down to greet our guest, move it to the center of the plateau and join us."

"Tripod? I can get everything with the steady-cam," Grant protested.

"Well if *Brutus* was here to join Reilly and me on the welcoming committee, I could leave you behind the camera," Luthor replied condescending. "However, since that fool got himself killed, I'll need you to join us, which means you'll need to leave the camera unattended after

we get started. And I don't want to miss a second of this. You *do* have the tripod in that bag, don't you?"

"Yeah, boss. I'll get it set up."

"Reilly, wait for the freak over there at the bottom of the stairs, just like we planned," Luthor commanded.

Reilly nodded and staked out a spot near the left stairway, while Luthor jogged up the stairs towards the command chamber. He was halfway up when he heard the sonic booms and the roar of jet engines. He paused and looked towards the sky, spotting the fighters in the distance.

"Boss?" Grant questioned nervously.

"I've been expecting them," Luthor replied casually. "They're no match for the advanced weapons systems of this place." He hurried up the stairs, again cursing his luck. He wasn't about to let the men know how defenseless they were without the crystals taken by Lane and her brats. As he rushed up the stairs, he deviously plotted how he would punish them for the trouble they'd caused.

Luthor reached the top of the stairs and entered the chamber through a doorway centered between the two staircases. The chamber inside was lit with an eerie green glow and Luthor spotted the console at on an elevated platform in the center, three steps up from rest of the room. He walked up to the console and examined it, his eyes widening in surprise when his gaze locked onto the single crystal located in a holding slot near the lower edge of the top panel. *The construction crystal? Luthor wondered. It wasn't consumed? Or was this regrown as part of the program?* He pulled the crystal from its cell and inserted it into the reader slot at the top, which immediately lit up with a bright green-white illumination.

Luthor smiled evilly and commanded, "Target the fighters flying outside and destroy them."

", " an unfamiliar male voice replied.

"Shoot down the fighters!" Luthor screamed.

"Khartau ri s'frei," the voice repeated.

"Raise shields!" Luthor demanded desperately.

"Khartau ri s'frei," the voice again stated.

"Damn it!" Luthor swore.

"Khartau ri s'frei."

Luthor stared at the console briefly and thought, *That wasn't Jor-El's voice - it sounded almost mechanical, empty and emotionless. It must be some kind of rudimentary operating system, with only the default language installed... It's probably telling me the Kryptonian equivalent of 'Syntax Error'... All this advanced alien technology, all useless without the other crystals.*

Luthor reached to pull the crystal from the reader slot, but suddenly pulled his hand back. *No, maybe not completely useless,* he corrected himself. *Maybe it'll at least have some automated defenses to protect me from the fighters.* He left the crystal in the reader slot and walked over to the doorway, taking a standing position just inside. Luthor wasn't a patient man and cursed the wait that the loss of the crystals would impose on him.

The original plan had been to use the Kryptonian technology to send out the ultrasonic beacon to lure the freak in. Now, he'd have to wait for the alien to figure it out, which could be a long time. Luthor parked the butt of his spear between his feet and leaned against the door

frame while he waited for his adversary to show up. *Where are you, you meddling freak?* Luthor wondered. *Let's get this over with.*

Richard followed Kitty Kowalski through the yacht's dining room with his hands parked on top of his head. He didn't dare try anything with Stanford Harris holding a gun to Lois' head behind him. As they walked, Richard reflecting on the words exchanged between Harris and Lois. The rogue thought the kids were on the ship and was asking where they were, as well as demanding the return of Superman's crystals.

The argument about the kids confused him, since Perry swore they were with him. He didn't know what to think of Lois' assertion that Superman had rescued the kids and recovered the crystals. It was also a bit baffling that Lois' insistent declaration that Superman would be back to rescue them would have provoked a chuckle from Harris. The felon was apparently unconvinced that the Man of Steel would show up.

They walked into the galley and Kitty opened the door to a large walk-in pantry cooler, gesturing for Richard to enter. He reluctantly complied, turning around inside to face the others just as Stanford shoved Lois in after him and slammed the door behind her.

"Hey!" Lois shouted, pushing futilely against the door, which had been locked from the outside. She pounded her fist against the porthole in the door, but to no avail. She sighed and finally turned around to face Richard.

Richard involuntarily cringed at the sight of the angry bruise along her jaw. "Your jaw..." he began.

"I'll be fine, assuming we can find a way out of here," Lois replied quickly. She opened one of the drawers in the cabinet along the wall and started rifling through it.

"I'm so sorry," Richard said quietly. "I wanted to rescue you, but instead I've pulled you out of the frying pan and into the fire."

Lois looked over at him and said firmly, "Don't blame yourself. We *almost* made it and if we'd been as careful around that last corner as we were earlier, it'd been a different result. I'd have surprised him just like I did you."

Richard chuckled at the memory and said, "Well, you *certainly* surprised me." His tone turned serious and he added, "I guess we were in too big a hurry to get off the boat. We got careless."

"Well, it ain't over 'til the fat lady sings and I don't hear her singing yet," Lois insisted. "At least the kids are safe with Perry, right?"

"Actually, I think he handed them off to Ron pretty quickly after the earthquake," Richard informed her.

"Earthquake?"

"Yeah, it hit about a half hour, forty-five minutes ago, I think. It was after I was in the air. Perry said the building got rocked pretty thoroughly, toppling things over and cracking some of the walls and windows. It's hard to really get a handle on the magnitude of it with everything down after the EMP, however. We've got people out there trying, though."

"Metropolis doesn't get earthquakes," Lois pointed out.

"We got one today. Anyway, Perry said that Kara freaked out when the quake hit and was crying hysterically and speaking some strange language. Perry may have a secret soft spot for kids, but that kind of thing gets delegated and quickly, especially at the office. Ron's looking after them now."

"Oh, God," Lois replied, her expression betraying her worry as she looked back over at

him. "I hope he can calm her down."

"He's had plenty of practice with the twins," Richard assured her. He hesitated a moment and then asked, "Why does Harris think the kids are here?"

"He's out of the loop," Lois insisted. "He saw them earlier but he didn't see them get away."

"So... what really happened this afternoon?"

"It's a long story," Lois answered wearily.

"Looks like we have some time," Richard countered.

"Actually, no, we don't," Lois snapped. "I'll be *damned* if I'm going sit on my ass like some defenseless damsel in distress and let that lunatic use us as bait to lure Superman into a kryptonite trap. We have to find a way out of this."

"They have kryptonite? No wonder they're not worried about Superman showing up," Richard commented.

"No kidding," Lois retorted.

"What are you looking for?"

"Something to get that door open," Lois replied. She pulled out a rolling pen, eyeing it carefully as she added, "Or something we can use to surprise them. Anything to give us the upper hand and turn the tables."

"Do you really expect us to MacGyver our way out of this?"

"If we don't, we're *dead*," Lois said simply. "You *know* Luthor's not just going to let us go if we ask nicely. And he's probably livid over the loss of Superman's crystals."

Richard nodded, frowning as he considered her words and he said somberly, "Then we'd better figure something out." He turned his attention to the cabinets and began looking through them as he joined Lois in her search for something they could improvise into tools or weapons.

Ron Troupe had tried every trick he knew to try to calm Kara down as he sat on the couch in Richard's office with the little girl on his lap. Everything that worked like magic with his daughters was wasted on Kara. He sang happy songs, but she remained inconsolable. He'd rock her in his lap, with no effect. He rubbed her back and gently asked what was bothering her, to no avail. She was crying so hard, he couldn't make out the words.

He was grateful that Jason was calm, at least. The little boy was seated at Richard's desk, coloring with the crayons that were always in the top drawer. Or at least, he was trying to. The first few crayons had inexplicably shattered before he found one that would stay in one piece for more than a few seconds. Jason looked over worriedly several times, but ultimately returned to his drawing.

Ron reflected that his daughters had never been this upset, or been upset for as long as Kara had. Of course, his daughters hadn't lost a parent in a natural disaster, as Kara had. Nor had they been reminded of that loss in *another* natural disaster, as he suspected was the case currently. Ron patiently continued his ministrations and after twenty minutes that seemed an eternity, her cries began to lose strength. He again prodded her to tell him what was bothering her and although her words were clearer, he found he still couldn't understand her. She wasn't speaking English. In fact, it didn't sound remotely like any language he had ever heard.

"Kara, can you try that in English?" he asked gently. "I can't understand you otherwise."

"I'm sorry," Kara replied tearfully.

"Was it the earthquake that scared you?" Ron prodded.

Kara nodded her head and mumbled, "The sun's making the world shake 'cause it's going

to explode."

"What?" Ron replied incredulously. "What would ever give you that idea, sweetheart? The sun's not going to explode. It's just an earthquake. Yeah, they can be scary sometimes, but it doesn't mean the world's going to end. It's just one of those things that happen from time to time."

"That's what they said on Krypton, but then the sun exploded and everybody died," Kara told him through her tears.

Her reply caught Ron off guard and he wasn't sure what to make of her statement. *Maybe it's not such a good idea for Clark to be telling her stories about Superman and Krypton's end*, Ron thought. *I'd better have a word with him about that.* He resumed rubbing Kara's back and gently told her, "This isn't Krypton and things are different here."

"How can you be sure?" Kara insisted.

Ron considered his answer for a moment, and then confidently told her, "Because of Superman. He's always out there helping people. You trust him, don't you?"

"Uh-huh," Kara confirmed sadly.

"Well, he's not about to let the world end after all the effort he puts in. If the world were ending, don't you think he'd tell us, or try to stop it from happening?"

"I guess so," Kara admitted.

"And has he told us the world is ending?" Ron pressed.

"No," Kara conceded.

"Then there's nothing to worry about," Ron declared. He wiped the tears from her face, grateful that she was finally calming. She remained sitting quietly on his lap, clinging tightly to him as he rubbed her back. They remained seated like that for several minutes, while a few more crayons were sacrificed to Jason's drawing.

Kara was sitting so still on his lap that Ron was beginning to wonder if she had fallen asleep when the aftershock hit. Though he'd been expecting it, its strength surprised him. Aftershocks were supposed to be smaller magnitude quakes than the main shock, yet this one seemed to be of equal strength or stronger. He pulled Kara tightly to him with one arm, reassuring her that it was just an earthquake while gesturing for Jason to join him with his free hand. The little boy quickly ran over and the three huddled closely together for the duration of the quake, which shattered the remaining glass windows and walls.

Finally, it was over and they heard Perry's booming voice as he declared, "Time to evacuate, people! Everyone stay calm, but keep moving. Everyone down the stairs. Let's go! ...That means you too, Troupe."

Ron nodded and checked the children on his lap. He looked at Kara's terrified expression and told her, "It's going to be okay, Kara. I know it's scary and dangerous, but it's *not* the end of the world. Do you think you'll be okay to walk downstairs with us?"

Kara nodded silently and Ron lifted both children to their feet. He firmly grasped their hands and led the two frightened children out into the bullpen and joined the exodus.

Superman had finally cleared the last victim from the collapsed buildings and felt he could finally fly out to sea and rescue Lois. He paused in the sky above Metropolis and sought out the ship, his vision again extending through the hull, where he found Lois locked in a pantry cooler with Richard. *What on Earth is Richard doing out there?* he wondered. He pulled back his vision and found Richard's seaplane adrift behind the yacht, along with an empty life raft.

He was about to head out to free them when the powerful aftershock hit the city. By the

look of things, it was every bit as powerful as the original quake, and as before, the city's older construction wasn't faring well against it. He indulged in a longing look out to sea and was surprised to discover a Navy Osprey lining up behind the ship, rotating its prop nacelles upwards as it slowed. A peek inside the aircraft revealed a squad of Navy SEALs who were preparing to rappel out the back. Superman exhaled in relief and as he again turned towards the city and answered his call of duty, he thought, *Looks like Lois got a hold of her dad. Well, if I can't get to them, maybe those SEALs can.* The Man of Steel then launched himself into action, once again providing relief to the victims of Luthor's madness.

"Damn it, Kitty, you really *are* going to wash up with the surf if you don't start helping," Stanford hollered. Kitty had abandoned the search immediately after locking up Lane and the pilot, insisting that the mother would never have made a run for the plane if her kids were still onboard. However, he couldn't afford to take a chance on making that assumption and being proven wrong in front of his unforgiving boss. For all they knew, the kids could have been behind them, but scared off after their mother got hit. They had to complete the search. Or rather, he did. Kitty wasn't interested in helping and was probably planning on using her biological assets to keep Luthor's wrath at bay.

He was searching through the lower decks when he heard the thrum of rotors. *That sure didn't take long,* Stanford thought. *I'd better get up there - he's going to want a progress report, though he won't be happy with it. At least we caught the mother.* Stanford trotted over to the interior stairway up to the 'Sky Lounge' and out the port door to the exterior stairs up to the wheel house. However, his eyes widened in panic when he looked up the stairs and saw four men in military garb pointing submachine guns at him.

"US Navy!" the one in front shouted as Stanford darted back inside the door. However, his escape was blocked when another group of men in the same uniforms burst through the starboard door across from him. With nowhere to run or hide, Stanford raised his arms in a surrender gesture. The SEALs descended on him, knocking him to the ground. A moment later he was laying face down on the floor, spread-eagled and stripped to his underwear, while they searched his clothes and the contents of his pockets.

Navy SEAL Lieutenant Alex Daniels was disgusted by the man on the floor at their feet. This was not some soldier or misguided believer fighting for a cause. Instead, he was a petty criminal whose cause and loyalties were likely simply side effects of greed and fear. Greed for whatever undeserved compensation he'd get, and fear for the wrath of his partners in crime if he betrayed them. Daniels concluded that the felon was also a cowardly criminal, judging by the smell of the clothes they were examining, which suggested that the man had wet himself at the sight of them.

"Lieutenant," Petty Officer Second Class Kevin Ramsey called out. Daniels looked over at the irregular shaped piece of glowing green crystal slightly smaller than a baseball that Ramsey was holding up. "Sir, do you think it's kryptonite?"

"Intelligence said they had some," Daniels reminded him.

"They say it's radioactive," Ramsey pointed out.

"Which is why we have the rad bags, so let's get it bagged. Better safe than sorry," Daniels decided.

One of the other men turned his back to Ramsey and the petty officer unzipped the pack on the man's back, extracting what looked like a metallic letter size envelope, albeit with a

yellow and black radiation trefoil warning symbol on it. Ramsey spread it open, dropped the kryptonite inside, and folded the thin metal over on the end to seal it inside. The packet was then zipped back inside the other man's pack.

"Find anything else?" Daniels inquired.

"The Glock, pocket knife, a wallet and pocket change. It's all bagged," Ramsey told him.

"Get him on his feet," Daniels ordered.

Two of the men roughly pulled Stanford up and turned him to face their Lieutenant. Stanford wasn't doing a very good job of hiding his fear, assuming he was even trying.

"Where's Lois Lane?" Daniels asked sternly.

"I... I don't know who that is," Stanford stammered.

"Sir!" Ramsey interrupted. He poked his MP5 submachine gun in Stanford's chest and added threateningly. "I believe the enemy is shooting at us. I recommend that we return fire."

"*What!* No, you can't!" Stanford protested fearfully.

Daniels didn't normally tolerate harassment of prisoners, but in circumstances where they needed to quickly recover a hostage, he'd allow the men to bluff. The current situation certainly fell into that category and Daniels replied, "Better get him dressed first. There'd be too many questions otherwise."

"Whoa! Wait!" Stanford said urgently. "I remember now - she's locked in the pantry on the deck below us. I can take you there."

Daniels turned to Ramsey and neutrally said, "Give him his pants and let's check it out. Ramsey, Peterson, Michaels - you're with me. We'll take the prisoner to the pantry. Everyone else continue clearing the ship." He turned back to Stanford and warned, "And this better not be a wild goose chase."

One of the men threw the pants to Stanford and immediately after the criminal pulled them up, Ramsey pulled his arms behind his back and cuffed them. Stanford turned back to him and complained, "What about the rest of my clothes?"

"No time," Ramsey said simply, prodding the criminal ahead at the point of his gun. "Get moving and keep your mouth shut."

A couple minutes later they were in the galley and Stanford nodded towards a heavy insulated door with a small porthole at the top. "They're in there," he said enthusiastically. "Just pull the handle to open the door to let them out."

"Sir, he seems a bit eager for us to open that door, don't you think?" Ramsey commented. "Luthor's just the type to set a few booby-traps."

"Maybe we'll let him open the door," Daniels suggested. He nodded to his men, and Peterson and Michaels took cover around doorways at either end of the room, with their weapons trained on Stanford. Daniels took position five feet to the left of the door.

Ramsey removed the plastic cuffs from Stanford's wrists and backed away from him, taking cover behind one of the stoves before he commanded the prisoner, "Open the door and no tricks, or we really will 'return fire' this time."

Stanford nervously walked ahead, unlocked the door and opened it. He immediately ducked to avoid the wine bottle that was hurled out, but as he did so, a woman swung a rolling pin into his face. The felon screamed and stepped back and looked up to see another wine bottle hurled his way, but when dodged it, he found himself stepping on one of several olive jars that the man inside the pantry had sent rolling out. Stanford lost his balance and fell backwards, landing hard on the floor.

The woman was menacingly wielding the rolling pin and looked like she was about to



launch herself at the fallen criminal when Ramsey's voice stopped her. "Easy, ma'am! I think you got him!" he hollered mirthfully.

The woman looked up and seemed to suddenly notice the men taking cover around the galley.

"Who the hell are you?" she demanded to know.

Lieutenant Daniels quickly answered, "US Navy SEALs." He emerged from his hiding place and walked up to the woman as the unidentified man in a business suit emerged behind her. He had a bottle of wine in each hand, holding them by the neck like weapons, presumably ready to launch them at whomever else they found on the other side of the door. "Lois Lane, I presume?" Daniels asked.

The woman nodded and said irritably, "You from the Truman? It's about time you got here."

"Actually, we flew out of Little Creek, Virginia, and we got here as quickly as we could," Daniels said apologetically. He looked down at the groaning man on the floor and then turned to the man behind him, telling him sternly, "Ramsey, get this garbage out of here."

"Yes, sir. Good thing we had him open the door, isn't it, sir?"

"Damn straight," Daniels agreed. As Ramsey and Peterson dragged Stanford Harris way, the lieutenant turned to the gentleman behind Lois and said, "You must be the cowboy who flew in here on that seaplane."

"Richard White," the man introduced himself, holding out his hand.

Daniels shook his hand and said, "Lieutenant Alex Daniels. That was a valiant effort, Mister White, but next time leave the rescues to the professionals."

"This coming from a man who jumps out of perfectly good aircraft," Richard replied pleasantly. "By the way, I actually have *some* experience taking out the bad guys - during the first Desert Storm, behind the stick of an AC-130."

Daniels quietly mumbled, "Flyboy..."

Before Richard could reply, there was a horrendous sound of groaning metal and a crystal spike burst through the floor of the galley, shaking the ship and knocking everyone off their feet. Stanford seized the opportunity to dart out the door of the galley. However, just as the SEALs started after him, the yacht ripped near its center line along the weaker seams of the upper decks. The tear caused the stern half of the yacht that included the pantry to fall back, rotating down nearly ninety degrees and sending Lois, Richard and Lieutenant Daniels falling towards the opposite wall of the pantry twelve feet beyond the door.

Lois and Richard caught themselves on the cabinets along the wall, but Daniels hit the back wall hard and was momentarily stunned. Lois and Richard climbed down to check on him.

"You okay, Lieutenant? Sir, ma'am?" Ramsey called down.

"We're okay," Lois shouted up. "We're checking on your lieutenant."

Daniels blinked a couple of times and looked up in alarm at the sky beyond the door above them. He immediately pressed the push to talk button on his throat mike and said urgently. "Wolf pack, Wolf leader. Abandon ship. Repeat, abandon ship." Richard helped Daniels to his feet, but before beginning the climb up to the door, the lieutenant again pressed the talk button at his throat and said, "Wolf den, Wolf leader. Request emergency evac. Repeat, request emergency evac. Over."

The trio began climbing up the cabinets secured to the wall, and Daniels hand again went to his throat, as he irritably replied, "A spike from the land mass just impaled the ship and split

it in two. It's going to sink and we need evac." He resumed his climb behind Richard and Lois, but just as they reached the door, the steel of the hull finally gave way, dropping each half of the yacht into the sea on opposite sides of the new peak and sending Richard, Lois and Daniels again falling to the back wall of the pantry.

## Chapter 42 - Rescues and Surprises

*Thursday, October 5, 2006 4:15PM EDT*

Perry pushed his way out onto the sidewalk in front of the *Daily Planet* and immediately started directing the evacuees to clear the area in front of the doors so the others could get out. He quickly looked around Planet Plaza, confirming his suspicion that the other buildings in the area were also evacuating, which accounted for the crush of people on the sidewalks and spilling onto the street. Even though it should have already been early into the evening rush hour, the road traffic was non-existent, with the streets still clogged with cars and trucks disabled by the EMP. *Last time, Superman had this mess cleared already by the time we walked outside*, Perry thought pensively.

Perry gaze fell upon Jimmy Olsen, who was climbing up on top of one of the disabled vehicles and taking pictures of the crowd. Perry reflected that Jimmy had come a long way since starting with the paper as a part-time teenage gofer, and unlike some of the others, he still didn't consider any of the mundane assignments around the office to be beneath him. Once the EMP hit, he gladly helped out as a Runner/Gofer without complaint and Perry had been grateful for his presence. He was equally grateful for his photographer's eye, which was certain to give the *Planet* some wonderful shots of the day's extraordinary events - assuming they could find a way to publish it.

The Editor-In-Chief continued his observations of the tableau in the street, oblivious to the danger high overhead, where the exaggerated sway of the *Planet* building had wobbled the globe on top beyond the failure point of the column that supported it. The street side of the column finally buckled and it snapped when the mass of the globe tipped it towards the front of the building. The globe crushed the rooftop water tanks, spilling their contents in a waterfall over the edge of the roof. The globe came to a rest when it hit the half-wall at the building's perimeter, although the reprieve was short-lived. It only took a minute for the normal sway of the skyscraper to dislodge the globe from its perch, rolling it over the edge and sending it plummeting towards the crowded street below.

The first indication of a problem came when the cold deluge from the crushed water tanks drenched the crowd. Perry's breath hitched when it hit him and he reflected that he'd probably never been so wet while fully clothed before. He then looked up for the source of the drenching and his eyes widened in horror when his eyes locked onto the falling globe. "Great Caesar's Ghost," he muttered quietly.

The shrill calls of "Help, Superman!" coming from the people around him broke Perry from his stupor and he tore his gaze from the globe. With the crush of panicked people on the sidewalk, there was nowhere to run - nowhere to escape what barring some miracle would certainly be a deadly, crushing impact. *How ironic if it ends like this*, Perry thought. *The Planet's EIC, killed by the Daily Planet... What a headline that would be...*

He returned his gaze to the deadly sphere in time to see a blue blur rush up beneath it and witnessed Superman catch the globe barely fifty feet above the street. Its downward acceleration was abruptly slowed and the Man of Steel gently floated down, holding the globe above his head like Atlas holding up the world. The crowd remained completely silent during his descent and Perry noted that it was the first time in his memory that Concord Street had been so quiet, with the only sound that of the shutter click from Jimmy's camera.

Superman's feet touched the ground and he looked at the crowd, still holding the globe above him. After a moment, he looked to his left and said authoritatively, "I need to set this down. Please move out of the way." The people scrambled away as he tilted the globe,

eventually laying it in the street and crushing a couple of the disabled cars in the process.

The Man of Steel rose back up to his full height, but his departure was interrupted by Jason Lane pulling on his hand, with his sister, Kara, standing right behind him. Superman looked down and the little boy quietly said something that Perry wasn't able to make out. The Man of Steel then knelt down in front of the children, blocking them from view as he whispered his response.

Perry walked over to the trio with the intended pretense of rounding up the children and strained his hearing to try to catch the conversation. As he walked over, he was struck by how casual their interaction seemed to be. He'd seen children around the Man of Steel before and they were always so excited and awestruck around the hero that they were barely articulate. However, neither of these two kids was so mesmerized - it was more like a chance encounter with a trusted family friend.

Perry finally closed the distance to the trio and tentatively interrupted, "Excuse me, Superman."

Superman and Jason immediately looked up at him and the hero asked somberly, "Is everything all right, Mister White?"

Perry caught the smirk that briefly passed over the hero's features before he masked his expression, most likely an amused reaction at the thoroughly drenched Editor-In-Chief. Perry pushed back his annoyance and opened his mouth to speak, but as Kara squeezed past her brother and looked up at him, the old newsman noticed something astonishing: three identical pairs of cerulean blue eyes staring back at him and three matching cleft chins. Perry's eyes darted back at Superman and he finally saw Clark Kent through the façade. Suddenly, everything made sense. *Oh, my God*, Perry thought. A moment later he worried, *I hope nobody else noticed that...*

"Mister White?" Superman prodded in a concerned tone.

Perry quickly recovered and set his hand on the younger man's shoulder, pitching his voice low as he insistently told him, "You need to get going. We'll look after the kids."

Superman regarded him warily for a moment before nodding his agreement, standing up and shooting up into the sky.

Perry corralled the two children in front of him, searched the crowd for Ron Troupe and found the reporter briskly walking over to him. He had apparently held back when the kids ran up to Superman. "Looks like the munchkins got away from you," Perry commented as Ron joined them.

"I didn't want to spoil their moment," Ron countered pleasantly. He looked down at the kids and asked gently, "So what was that all about?"

"He didn't save Mommy yet," Jason complained sadly.

"He's been really busy this afternoon, Jason," Perry explained. "I'm sure he'll get there as soon as he can." Perry turned to Ron and said with false sternness, "Try to keep them out of trouble."

"It won't be easy to overcome Lois' influence on them, but I'll try," Ron joked. "Come on, kids."

As Ron led the kids away, Perry's gaze returned to the sky and he thought, *Kent, you should get an Academy Award to go along with that Pulitzer you'll probably get some day... Jesus, just what the hell am I supposed to do now? The story of the millennium just fell into my lap, but I can never tell a soul about it...*

Jason's eyes widened in fear when he saw the big globe from the top of the *Planet* falling towards them, but that fear turned to joy when his Daddy Clark flew up in his Superman suit to stop it. However, as soon as his father's feet touched the ground, the little boy began to wonder about his mother. His Daddy Clark hadn't brought her back with him. Was she still on the boat with the mean men?

Jason rushed over to Superman and his sister ran after him, reminding him that they weren't supposed to bother their dad when he was busy as Superman. Jason ignored her and tugged on Superman's hand. When the Man of Steel looked down at him, Jason whispered apprehensively, "Did you save Mommy yet?"

Superman knelt down in front of him and pitched his voice low as he told him, "She's still on the boat, but she's okay. I just checked on her a few minutes ago and it looks like your Grandpa Lane sent some people to help her."

"But you said you'd bring her back," Jason complained.

"Son, I'll go get her as soon as I can, but there are a lot of people here who need my help, too, and some of them are in a lot more trouble than your mom. I need to help them. You're going to need to be patient a little while longer."

"Excuse me, Superman," someone interrupted. Jason looked up and saw that it was his Uncle Perry.

"Is everything all right, Mister White," Jason heard his Daddy Clark ask in his Superman voice.

Jason felt himself pushed against his father as Kara squeezed around behind him to see who it was. Uncle Perry suddenly got a funny expression on his face, just like when the water fell on him.

"Mister White?" Superman said anxiously.

"You need to get going. We'll look after the kids."

Daddy Clark flew back up into the sky a moment later, leaving Jason to worry about his mother.

"Looks like the munchkins got away from you," he heard Uncle Perry say.

"I didn't want to spoil their moment," Uncle Ron told him. He stepped in front of Jason and kindly asked, "So what was that all about?"

"He didn't save Mommy yet," Jason answered sadly.

His Uncle Perry tried to explain that Superman was busy, but Jason wasn't listening. He was remembering how mean the scary the men on the boat were. They said they would shoot Mommy - and she was still there. And Daddy Clark was taking too long to save her.

When Uncle Perry and Uncle Ron stopped to talk with Jimmy, Jason decided that he'd save his mother himself. He lifted his right arm just like Kara had shown him and prepared to fly back to the boat, but he'd only ascended a couple inches before Kara pulled him back down to the ground.

"You can't fly off in front of everybody!" Kara hissed in an agitated whisper. "Remember what Dad said? Nobody's supposed to see us using powers!"

"But we have to save Mommy!" Jason said adamantly.

"Not in front of everybody!" Kara insisted.

"Then how will we save her?" Jason whined.

Kara shrugged and said, "I don't know. Dad always takes me somewhere where there aren't any people around to do powers."

"So where are we supposed to go?"

"I don't know," Kara admitted.

Jason pouted and looked back up to sky. Where could they go so that nobody would see them? He then remembered the dark and scary alley they walked by on the way to get burritos when his parents worked late. It was only a few blocks away. Jason smiled and declared, "I know somewhere!" He then turned and darted through the crowd towards the alley. Kara quickly caught up to him and grabbed his hand as she ran behind him.

A moment later, Jason heard his Uncle Ron hollering after them, "Jason! Kara! Get back here!"

Jason didn't stop. Instead, he ran faster - faster than most adults could run, which went miraculously unnoticed by the crowd. It helped that Kara's grip on his hand kept him from exceeding the range of human speed. The two children weaved through the crowd and in just a few minutes, they ran into the dark alley behind Restaurant Row. Jason came to a stop, pulling his hand from his sister's grip and suddenly turned fearful of the things he'd always imagined were hiding in the alley.

"Is this it?" Kara asked, as she intruded on her brother's imagination.

"Uh-huh," Jason said anxiously. "Do you think it's good enough?"

"I guess so," Kara replied, shrugging her shoulders. She walked over to him, reaching out her arm as she said, "Here, I'll help you."

"I can do it!" Jason insisted.

"But you're so *slow* - it will take too long to get there," Kara complained. "At least let me get you get moving fast this time."

Jason was about to object, before he remembered his fear for his mother and reluctantly agreed. "Okay, but once we're going fast, let me do it," he insisted.

Kara smiled sweetly, wrapping her arms securely around her brother and rocketing into the air, oblivious to the presence of Ron Troupe, who had just run into the alley after them and was now staring up at them in slack jawed amazement.

Lieutenant J.G. Peter "Bones" Hawkins piloted the Osprey on a speed descent towards the last known coordinates of Luthor's yacht and his eyes widened in astonishment at the scene before him. The bow of the yacht was poking out from its perch two hundred feet above the sea, on top of a newly grown crystal peak that had emerged from the Kryptonian landmass spreading beneath the sea. The yacht was only there for a moment before it split into two, sending the bow section diving into the sea in front of him, with several people falling or diving away from it as it fell. "Jesus Christ!" Hawkins exclaimed.

"I don't think he had anything to do with that, Bones," muttered his baby-faced co-pilot, Ensign Antonio "Razor" Reyes.

Bones quickly lowered the aircraft towards the men in the sea, completing the transition to helicopter mode just as they reached the men. Meanwhile, Razor ran towards the back of the aircraft, securing himself to a safety line and reconnecting his headphones before leaning over the edge of the rear ramp. He looked out over the water and provided Hawkins with navigation instructions to guide the aircraft to the cluster of Navy SEALs waiting for them. Finally, they reached their target, and Razor began helping the men aboard the Osprey.

"What the hell happened?" Razor asked the first man to come aboard.

"Hell happened, sir," Seaman Peterson answered him. Once on his feet, the SEAL turned around and began helping to pull his comrades aboard.

"We're going to need a head count," Bones shouted back.

"We need a head count," Razor demanded of the boarding men.

"I'm on it, sir," Ramsey replied as he climbed aboard. He pressed the mike button at his throat and said, "Wolf pack, wolf four. If you're *in the sea* on the side of the mountain where the Osprey is, sound off." Ramsey listened for the responses and a minute later, he activated his throat mike and asked, "Wolf five and Wolf twelve, Wolf four. What's your position relative to the Osprey?"

"Where are the rest of your men?" Razor asked.

"Sir, we have two of them about a hundred yards to starboard and eight more on the other side of the mountain... hopefully," Ramsey replied. "Let's get these two pulled in and then on to the other side."

A minute later, two more Navy SEALs were pulled out the water and the Osprey began its arc to the other side of peak, while two figures covertly observed them as they clung to a small ledge near the water line. "Okay, they're gone," Kitty declared between shattering teeth. "Can we get out of the water now, or are you afraid that Lois Lane will find us and beat you up again?"

Stanford shoved Kitty away from the ledge and hissed, "It wasn't Lane. It was those damn Navy SEALs."

"And they just *happened* to break your nose just like she broke Reilly's," Kitty retorted skeptically as she swam back to the ledge and helped her Pomeranian out of the water.

"You know, it's not too late for you to go down with the ship," Stanford warned. He pulled himself up onto the ledge and slid back against the crystal crag.

"Lex wouldn't like that," Kitty replied confidently.

"But *I* would and I'd be doing him a favor."

Kitty pulled herself up onto the ledge and pulled Tala onto her lap, wisely choosing to hold her tongue rather than tempt fate while the pair waited for Luthor and the others to return.

The stern half of the yacht *Alexander the Great* ripped free from the ship's forward section and plummeted into the sea, slowing significantly on impact, but still continuing its descent as the sea quickly filled its internal passages and pulled it down. Three life rafts popped to the surface almost immediately after impact, once the hydrostatic bindings holding the canisters to their cradles fifty feet behind the break were forced open by the water pressure. Several of the Navy SEALs also appeared shortly after impact, having released their gear and raced to the surface, just as they'd been trained.

Inside the yacht, the sudden drop had caught all three of the pantry's occupants by surprise, shaking them from their handholds and footholds. Lieutenant Daniels lost his grip and fell from the doorway, colliding with Lois and Richard, dislodging them from their precarious positions on the pantry cabinets and sending all three of them to the far wall. The impact with the sea had forced the door to swing shut from its momentum, but had also dampened the impact with the rear wall for the occupants.

"Oh, this day just keeps getting better," Lois mumbled sarcastically.

Daniels was immediately aware of the cold assault on his back from the water that was already seeping in. He leapt to his feet, turned to the others and asked, "You two all right?"

"We're okay," Richard assured him. "We just need to get out of here."

"No argument there, flyboy," Daniels agreed and he scrambled up the pantry cabinets with Lois and Richard right behind him, desperately outracing the rising water inside the

compartment. Daniels finally reached the top and opened the door, pushing up through the doorway and surveying the rough seas around them. He was grateful to see some of his men climbing into life rafts. However, his observation was cut short when a rogue wave caught the open door and violently shoved it closed against him and sent him splashing back into the water at the opposite end just as the yacht's aft section slipped beneath the waves.

"Daniels!" Richard hollered after him.

The SEAL's head popped up above the water and he declared, "I'm fine."

"So tell me... do you special ops guys *really* jump out of perfectly good aircraft, or do you actually *fall* out?" Richard teased.

"Knock it off you two," Lois chastised. "I need some help with the door. I can't get it open."

"It's the difference in pressure," Daniels declared. "We need to equalize it before we'll get the door open." He climbed up to the door and lifted his sidearm up above the water. "Move back and take a deep breath. I'm going to shoot out the window."

After Lois and Richard moved away from the door towards the ceiling end of the pantry, Daniels braced his feet on the cabinets lining either wall, pulled out his sidearm and squeezed off four shots at window. A moment later his eyes widened in alarm at the sight of the four shells imbedded in the glass. "Son of a bitch!" Daniels shouted. "What kind of lunatic puts ballistic glass in a pantry door?"

"This probably wasn't the first time Luthor used this room as a makeshift prison cell," Lois noted quietly. "He probably wasn't going to take a chance on anyone getting out."

Daniels put his sidearm away and started pounding furiously on the glass with the butt of his submachine gun, while the water above grew dark.

"We're not going to make it," Richard commented sadly.

After a moment's hesitation, Lois took a deep breath and screamed, "Kal-EI!"

Bones brought the Osprey around the growing crystal peak and almost immediately saw the signal flare fired from one of the life rafts. Closer scrutiny revealed one of the SEALs standing in the tent opening of one of the life rafts, waving his arms. This would make it easier than it had been on the bow end. The only life raft on that side had been five hundred yards from the men and floated empty near an apparently abandoned sea plane. Bones scrutinized the rescue zone in time to see the yacht's stern section disappear under the sea before returning his attention on the life rafts. He rotated the craft around to expose the open ramp to the life boats and lowered into position to extract the men.

The rescue was interrupted when Bones noticed a warning on his heads up display. He quickly manipulated his instruments to confirm the report, and then turned to the back of the aircraft, shouting, "We've got incoming! Everybody strap in!" The aircraft lurched forward as Bones began evasive maneuvers, banking towards the crystal cliffs, and rotating the prop nacelles forward as he climbed. They'd have no choice but to leave the SEALs in the life rafts a little while longer.

Razor raced back to the cockpit, grabbing the seats along the sides of the fuselage to pull himself forward as they climbed. He finally reclaimed the co-pilot's seat just as an object whizzed by the aircraft, narrowly missing it and splashing into the sea near where the yacht's stern section had been. "What the hell?" Razor commented.

"We've still got another bogey, heading right for us," Bones said urgently. They were too low for chaff or decoy flares to be effective, which left his only option a bank to the left



around the crystal peaks, hoping they would provide them with some cover. A moment later, Razor noticed another unidentified object race by the window and shouted, "That was too close!"

"What was it?"

"I'm not sure," Razor answered. "Something just raced by the starboard window, but I didn't get a good look at it. It didn't splash, though. It looks like it's circling around and climbing."

"I'm calling it in," Bones declared. "Maybe those Hornets can take out whatever's targeting us."

Superman heard the twang of the snapping cables and raced to the Queensland Bridge just in time to catch a bus full of screaming school children as it slid over the rail. Returning the bus to the rolling roadway was not an option, and he scanned the banks for a safe spot to set down his precious cargo. However, his attention was interrupted by a sonic boom - one devoid of engine noise and suspiciously close to the two young heartbeats that he'd been tracking all afternoon. He rolled his eyes in frustration and focused his vision out to sea, finding his children on a speed course back out to the yacht. *Those two are in so much trouble...*, Superman thought.

Suddenly, Kara separated from Jason and accelerated down in a steep dive. Superman looked ahead of her and his eyes widened in horror as his gaze locked on the crippled aft section of the yacht sinking beneath the sea, where Lois, Richard and an unidentified naval officer were trapped inside. *No, it's too soon!* Superman lamented. *She's never done anything like this before... and the Predators! My God, if she gets spotted by military surveillance...*

Superman focused his heat vision out to sea, blinding the cameras on the UAVs and continuing to watch his daughter who barely missed colliding with a Navy Osprey as she dove under the sea to grab the yacht. He set the bus down and turned his attention back to sky over the sea where he found Jason as the little boy also dove after the yacht. A fearful expression suddenly appeared on Jason's face as he neared the water and he pulled up from the dive, narrowly missing hitting the same Osprey as he climbed back towards the clouds.

*I should never have left Lois out there this long,* Superman chastised himself. *I should have learned my lesson after nearly losing her after Luthor's nuke in '97.* He looked at the bridge behind him, noting that the roadway wouldn't endure its oscillation much longer and most of the people caught on top were too petrified to move. He couldn't abandon them to their fates. He allowed a brief glance out over the sea, where Kara was pulling the yacht into the sky, and then returned to the bridge to clear the roadway of trapped commuters.

Richard's brow wrinkled in confusion as he tried to make sense of the unfamiliar word that Lois was desperately shouting. "Kal-El!" she screamed again.

He sighed and observed that the water inside the pantry was now within a few inches of the ceiling, still seeping in quickly from below and also dribbling down from above around the bullets imbedded in the porthole's bulletproof glass. The sea outside the porthole had already grown too dark to see anything. They didn't have much time left. "Lois," he said tenderly.

"Not now, Richard," Lois snapped. She took another deep breath and again shouted, "Kal-El!"

He suddenly heard what sounded like a squeak across the glass and struggled to see what could have made the noise. Within seconds, the water outside grew impossibly brighter and the

air pocket expanded, likely due to the diminished water pressure against the hull. Finally, he noticed what appeared to be the sole of a rather small sneaker. *Where on Earth did that come from?* Richard wondered.

The murky sea gave way to bright waters which gave way to air and sunshine, and the air pocket had simultaneously grown from a few inches deep to over a foot and a half. The room's occupants visibly relaxed now that their deaths were no longer certain. Daniels tried pushing against the door but found he was still unable to budge it. The SEAL pounded on the door with his fist and hollered, "Hey! Whoever's out there! Open the door!"

Richard heard muffled voices outside, followed the surprising sound of crunching metal, and suddenly the door was gone. He looked up to discover Kara and Jason's cherubic faces staring down at them. "Are you okay, Mommy?" Jason asked, with his voice full of concern.

"Jason, what are you two doing here?" Richard asked in surprise. "Uncle Ron was supposed to be watching you."

"We came to save Mommy," Jason answered proudly.

"Don't worry, we'll save you, too," Kara assured him. She reached her arms out, grabbed Lois and Richard by the wrists and added, "I'll help you out."

"I want to save Mommy," Jason complained.

"I've already got her," Kara replied sweetly. "You can get the other guy. He needs help, too."

"Oh. Okay," Jason answered, apparently satisfied that he'd at least get to help someone. He reached for Lieutenant Daniels' wrist, copying Kara's actions.

"Whoa, hold it there, kids," Daniels replied adamantly. "You're going to fall in. You're not strong enough to pull us out."

"Yes, we are," Kara insisted, and proved her point a moment later when she easily pulled Lois and Richard through the door frame while Jason simultaneously pulled out Daniels.

Richard suddenly heard the sound of groaning metal and looked towards the source in time to see a steel beam rip away around Kara's feet, pulling off one of her sneakers in the process and releasing the yacht to fall through the clouds beneath them. His eyes shot wide in astonishment when he realized just how high up they were.

He heard Daniels to his left as the man exclaimed, "Holy shit!" Richard glanced in his direction and was astounded at the sight of the once fragile child he called 'son' *floating* in the sky, effortlessly holding up a two hundred pound Navy SEAL by the wrist like one of his action figures. Richard imagined that he probably mirrored the stunned and open-mouthed expression on Daniels' face.

"You dropped the boat," Jason complained to his sister, and Richard's gaze returned to Kara, who had a contrite and guilty expression on her face.

"The beam broke," she replied defensively.

Richard felt his heart drop into his stomach as the realization finally hit him. It was *Kara's* shoe he had seen on the porthole window when the yacht stopped sinking. Clark Kent's little girl had pulled the yacht from the sea and lifted it thousands of feet up into the air, holding it up on the heels of her feet while she pulled them out. That was nearly as herculean a feat as Superman landing the jumbo jet at Dolphin Stadium the previous week. There was only one possible explanation for that remarkable act and their impossible resting place *above* the clouds. Richard looked over at Lois, barely noticing her apprehensive expression as he breathlessly murmured, "Oh, my God... The *kids*... They're *Superman's*."

Lois glared at Richard. "Tell me about it."

## Chapter 43 - Damage Control

*Thursday, October 5, 2006 4:25PM EDT*

Lois looked worriedly between Richard and Lieutenant Daniels as the yacht's stern half fell towards the clouds beneath them. *This is so out of control*, she thought apprehensively. *Bad enough for Richard to know, but if the military gets wind of this...*

"Oh, my God," Richard murmured breathlessly. "The kids... They're *Superman's*."

Los glared at him and irritably replied, "Tell me about it."

"Um, why'd they bring us so high up?" Daniels asked tentatively.

"So the men in the water wouldn't see us," Kara answered sweetly. "Our Dad said not to let anyone see us using powers."

"That means you don't breathe *one word* about these kids to a living soul!" Lois added adamantly.

"Ma'am?" Daniels began. However, his question was suddenly interrupted by a thunderous explosion and bright orange fireball lighting up the clouds beneath them. A moment later, they heard the roar of jet engines nearby.

"They blew up the boat!" Jason exclaimed in wonder.

Lois looked over at her son, her eyes widening in amazement at the sight and she thought, *My God, Jason's flying! This wasn't supposed to happen until puberty*. Aloud, she excitedly demanded, "Someone, please tell me they're not shooting at us."

"You're probably showing up on radar, but I doubt you were the target," a deep baritone answered from beneath her.

Lois hadn't heard Superman's approach, and she glowered at him as he held up Kara's missing shoe and slipped it on the little girl's foot. "Might have been nice if you'd been here five minutes ago," Lois said harshly.

"Sorry I didn't get her sooner, but I kind of had my hands full," he informed her simply. He finished tying Kara's shoe and floated up to eye level with Lois and Richard. His eyes locked onto the bruise on her jaw and he tenderly asked, "Are you okay?"

"Fine."

"Oh, this is unbelievable," Richard mumbled crossly as he stared at Superman.

"Richard, please! Not now!" Lois snapped. She turned back to Superman and said, "So what just happened down there?"

"Some Navy F-18s put a few missiles into what was left of the yacht," Superman answered. He reached his arm around Lois' back, pulling her to him as he told his daughter, "I've got her, Kara. You can let go of her now."

"Why are they shooting down a yacht?" Lois asked irritably.

"I don't think they ever got a good enough look at it to realize what it was," Superman replied. He floated over to Richard and grabbed him around the waist. "I've got him," Superman said somberly. Kara released her grip and floated down to them.

"Clark," Richard began quietly.

"*Richard!*" Lois hissed, glaring at him angrily. *I don't believe he just used Clark's name in front of Daniels. What is he thinking? God, how are we ever going to reel this back under control?*

"This isn't the place for a private discussion," Superman told Richard firmly. The other man nodded his acquiescence and Superman turned back to Lois, telling her, "From the sound of it, they spotted the kids on radar - in fact they *both* nearly collided with an Osprey that was pulling some men from the water."

"But we didn't run into it," Jason protested.

"I know that, son. But you *did* scare the pilots and they called some of their friends for help," Superman told him gently. He turned back to Lois and added, "They thought the kids were incoming missiles. When the F-18s flew in for air support, they wouldn't have recognized the radar signature from half of a three-hundred foot yacht turned on its end and a mile up in the air. They probably thought it was a weapons platform associated with that monstrosity below us-

"So they blew it up," Lois finished for him.

"Lucky for us that the little girl dropped the ship," Daniels commented. His expression suddenly grew worried, and he added urgently, "Wait. My men are still down there beneath that thing."

"They're fine," Superman assured him. "I nudged the yacht a bit before the missiles hit, so it won't come anywhere near them." He focused his deep vision on the man's dog tags and asked tentatively, "Lieutenant Daniels, is it?"

"Yes, sir," Daniels answered. "Lieutenant Alex Daniels, United States Navy."

"Well, we're going to need to talk about this-" Superman began seriously.

"*No one* can know about the kids," Lois interrupted insistently.

"How about a change of venue before we get started on that?" Superman suggested calmly. "There's a lot of air traffic out here and I don't want to chance anyone else seeing the kids like this."

"Let's go, then," Lois consented.

Superman turned to his daughter and told her, "Kara, I want you to take Lieutenant Daniels from Jason."

"I won't drop him," Jason protested.

"I'm sure the lieutenant is *delighted* to hear that, but I still want your sister to take over now," Superman said seriously. "It's not comfortable for people to be held up by their wrists like that for very long."

"Oh. All right," Jason said agreeably.

"Kara, hold on to Lieutenant Daniels just like I'm holding Lois and Richard," Superman explained patiently. "Keep one of his arms over your shoulders and hold him firmly around the waist... But not too tightly. Be very careful."

"Dad, *I know*," Kara complained, rolling her eyes. "We've been practicing, like, *every* day."

Superman frowned at her response and said sternly, "We can do without that attitude, young lady."

The scolding was interrupted by Daniels, who couldn't resist chuckling at their interaction. "If you think it's bad now, just image what it will be like when she's a teenager," he said mirthfully, which provoked a snort from Lois.

"I can hardly wait," Superman deadpanned. "Kara, are you all set?"

"Got him," she assured her father.

"Good. Now, Jason, come over here and grab onto me."

"But I can fly now," Jason whined.

"Oh, and you're doing a *wonderful* job," Superman assured him patiently. "But flying takes lots of practice, just like playing the piano. And while you're still learning, you need someone around to help in case you run into trouble. Son, your sister and I both have our hands full right now, so you need to let me do the flying this time. I'll take you up for practice

after this is all over."

"But I wanna do it!" Jason insisted.

"Jason, we don't have time for this!" Lois replied harshly. "Now, do as your father says and get over here!"

Jason's shoulders dropped and he pouted as he reluctantly floated over to his parents.

"Wrap your arms around my neck and hang on really tight," Superman told him. Jason complied, and both Lois and Richard wrapped their free arms firmly behind the little boy's back.

Superman turned to his daughter and said, "Kara, stay close. We're going to fly down to Richard's sea plane, but there are a couple bad people on a ledge fifteen hundred feet on the other side of it and I don't want them seeing us."

"Who's down there?" Lois wanted to know.

"Katherine Kowalski and Stanford Harris," Superman replied somberly. "Looks like Harris has a broken nose."

Daniels chuckled and said, "He underestimated Miss Lane."

"Well, that's *always* a mistake," Superman commented mirthfully. "All right, let's go. And Kara, if you need to brake against my back, make sure Lieutenant Daniels doesn't get caught between us."

"Okay."

Superman dropped through the clouds and banked into a wide diving turn, firmly holding his passengers close to him and frequently glancing over his shoulder to check on Kara, who maintained a distance of just a few feet behind him. A moment later, they were hovering beside Richard's seaplane and Lois opened the door, stepping inside as Superman released her. The rest of the group quickly filed in behind her.

"Jason, Kara... Sit down and get your seatbelts on," Lois insisted.

"Do they really need those?" Daniels asked curiously.

"Would you want them accidentally flying into you if you hit turbulence?" Lois asked sharply. She turned to Daniels and insistently demanded, "Lieutenant, you're going to give us your word that you will never tell *anyone* about our kids."

"Why is that a problem? They're *remarkable*," Daniels replied inquisitively.

"Because they're *just kids* and I want them to stay *just kids* for a few more years," Lois declared adamantly. "They shouldn't have to face a gauntlet of paparazzi at the front door of their school. They should be enjoying their childhood, enjoying the same things as other kids their age - things like Sponge Bob and Barbie, dressing up for Halloween, or rushing downstairs on Christmas morning to see what Santa left under the tree. Or maybe just playing with their friends."

"Of course," Daniels said.

"And that's before even considering the *grave* danger that those of us in the family who *don't* have superpowers would be exposed to if people knew about us - if Superman's *enemies* knew about us," Lois added somberly. *Oh, God. Luthor knows about the kids*, she remembered.

She paused for a moment and added, "Our family also happens to include a three-star Army General."

"Your father - Lieutenant General Sam Lane, with the Pentagon," Daniels replied. At Lois' surprised expression Daniels added, "That information was included in our pre-mission briefing to emphasize the importance of your successful extraction."

*Was it, now*, Lois thought. *That might be useful*. She decided to bluff and pointedly said, "Well, my father won't be happy to find out that you know about his grandkids. They're officially Top Secret - more secret than the Manhattan Project was during World War II. And I seriously doubt any of your commanders are on the 'need to know' list... Lieutenant, *no one* can find out about my kids."

"Then, no one will, ma'am," Daniels replied sincerely. "Not for any military reason, but because a person's family is sacred, off limits. I wouldn't want my enemies coming after my family, and as one parent to another, I promise you that no one will find out about yours from me. You've earned your privacy."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Lois stated quietly.

"You're welcome, ma'am."

Lois then turned to Richard and declared insistently, "The same goes for you, Richard. You take this to the grave."

"Did you really think you needed to tell me that?" Richard asked sadly. "Lois, I'd never say or do *anything* to put you guys in jeopardy. You should have known that by now."

Lois looked back at Richard with a guilty expression and said quietly. "I know. And I'm sorry. I... I just can't take chances with this."

"Lieutenant?" Superman gently interrupted. "I can take you back to your men now."

"Kal-El, wait," Lois said urgently. "Luthor knows about the kids."

"*What?*" Superman squeaked. "Are you sure?"

"Unfortunately, yes. Something... *happened* on the yacht," Lois said quietly.

"What happened?" Superman prodded.

Lois sighed and then said, "One of Luthor's goons attacked me and the kids stopped him. Kara shielded me with her body and Jason... Jason threw a piano at him."

"A piano?" Richard asked doubtfully. "You don't mean-"

"I mean a full size concert grand that was *bolted* to the floor," Lois explained irritably. "He picked it up and *threw* it."

"He *squished* him," Kara added, involuntarily shuddering at the memory.

"I'm sorry," Jason said tearfully.

"Jason, it's okay," Lois reassured him, kneeling down in front of him and squeezing his hands. "You haven't mastered your powers yet and you didn't know your own strength. Your dad will help you with that."

"We need to get you and the kids out of here," Superman declared urgently. "Richard, can you get them back to the safe house?"

"If I can get in the air, but it won't be easy to take off with it this choppy," Richard pointed out.

"I'll take care of that," Superman promised. "Start up the plane."

Richard felt numb as he went through the preflight check and it had nothing to do with the cool air against his soaked skin. It came from the realization that he'd been trying to compete with a superhero for Lois' affections - a superhero who was also the father of her child. It was mind-boggling and would take some time to sort through - time he didn't have at the moment. Despite the revelation, they were still his family and still in danger. He had to get them to safety first. There'd be time to try to wrap his head around the startling discoveries later.

He pushed the thoughts aside and completed the startup procedure, bringing the Pratt &

Whitney Wasp engine to life. He throttled forward and gasped in surprise when he felt the plane lifted above the waves and pushed forward with enough acceleration to force him back into his seat. When the acceleration let up, Richard set course for home and began a slow climb to a cruising altitude.

"Maybe it'd be a good idea to stay below the clouds, with all those trigger happy fighter jocks flying around," Lois suggested.

Richard nodded absently and leveled out his ascent before chancing a glance over a Lois, who was regarding him very warily. "Lois?" Richard prodded.

She sighed and looked away. "This situation is rapidly spiraling out of control," she complained. "We were supposed to have more time. And no one else was supposed to find out about the kids. Not some naval officer we just met and *certainly* not Lex Luthor."

"Maybe you'd better give your dad a call, see if he can help clamp the lid down on this," Richard suggested.

Lois eyes flew wide as she looked back at him and muttered, "You can't be serious."

"He doesn't really know about the kids, does he?"

"No," Lois said simply.

"Daniels seems sincere, but it might still be a good idea for your dad to line up some big guns in case one of Daniels's superiors thinks his report's a little too vague in areas and turn the screws," Richard pointed out.

"*What?* I can't tell my dad about this. He'd freak."

"I know you two don't always get along, but he's still family, he still loves you, and he adores Jason," Richard argued. "Lois, he'll be on our side."

"Even if I wanted to, I don't have his number with me," Lois countered. "I left my cell phone in the rental, which was parked in the Vanderworth's garage when the place went up in smoke."

Richard reached into the side pocket of his seat and pulled out the satellite phone. He handed it to Lois and said, "Perry should have the number. He called your dad earlier."

Lois sighed irritably and said insistently, "It's not my secret to tell."

"So we have to discuss this with Clark first?"

They were both suddenly surprised by the typewriter ring tone coming from the cell phone still attached to Richard's belt. "Sounds like you just got a text message," Lois observed.

"That's... impossible," Richard muttered incredulously. "My cell phone was hit by the EMP *and* soaked in the Atlantic and even if that *hadn't* happened, we're still too far out for any hope of a cell signal."

"Did you forget about that 'upgrade' Clark did for you?" Lois asked harshly. "That may look like your old cell phone but it's not. It's a very well camouflaged Kryptonian communicator."

Richard eyes were wide as he flipped open the phone and he snorted mirthlessly at the message from Clark: "We need to tell Lois' dad, but not over the phone. She should still call, see what he can do. We'll explain to him later. "

He handed the phone to Lois, and she immediately rolled her eyes and huffed, before irritably muttering, "Thanks a lot, farm boy."

The phone chirped with another incoming text message from Clark: "You're welcome."

Perry pushed his way through the Concord Street crowd, escorted by Jimmy and his two bodyguards. They were heading in the general direction he'd seen Ron Troupe go when the

younger man ran after Kent's kids. Perry had been surprised at just how quickly the children had moved through the crowd and sincerely hoped that Troupe could catch up with them. After promising their father that they'd look out for them, the last thing he needed was for them to turn up missing.

They were nearly up to Restaurant Row when Jimmy spotted Ron, pointing him out in the alley where he was leaning against one of the stoops and staring up at the sky with a wide-eyed, flabbergasted expression on his face. "Troupe," Perry called out brusquely. "What the hell's going on?"

Ron's head snapped around towards the others and his demeanor immediately turned nervous. "Um, nothing," he replied anxiously. "Just catching my breath."

"No sign of the kids?" Perry pressed worriedly.

"Oh, um, the kids... They're... um, they're not here," Ron stammered, and his gaze unconsciously returned to the sky.

*Why's he staring up at the sky? Perry wondered. Troupe wouldn't be this shell-shocked if Superman collected the kids, would he? Or are they more like their father than I imagined?* He turned to Jimmy and his bodyguards and instructed them, "Give us some privacy." As the others retreated out of the alley, Perry walked over and stood immediately in front of Ron. "Look at me, Troupe," Perry demanded. "Tell me what you see."

"Um, the EIC of the *Daily Planet*," Ron answered apprehensively.

"And you also see an old man drenched to the skin and freezing his *ass* off on a mild October day," Perry corrected. "The reason said old man has *not* changed into the dry clothes he has at the *Planet* is because he promised a certain someone that he'd look after his young children - two children who are no longer anywhere in sight. The same kids I thought *you* were chasing after. And now I find you taking a breather in an alley, mysteriously unconcerned with their disappearance."

"I'm sure they're around somewhere, Perry," Ron muttered.

"The question is *where*?" Perry replied insistently. "Troupe, you're a good man... but not a very good liar. Especially not when I've seen you at some of Lois' and Richard's family reunions when you thought one of the kids was too close to the river. You're a bit of a worry wart. I saw that upstairs when Kara had her little meltdown earlier and again when the kids ran off. But I don't see that now. What's going on?"

"Um, nothing, Perry," Ron answered defensively.

"Troupe," Perry said impatiently.

"It's difficult to put into words," Ron muttered evasively.

"Especially when you don't want to tell me what really happened," Perry added knowingly.

"Perry, I'm not sure what you're trying to imply," Ron said apprehensively.

Perry looked intently at the younger man and reminded himself, *I have to be careful with this. I don't want to spill the beans if he hasn't already figured this out.* Aloud, he said, "Let's at least be honest with each other here, Troupe. Something happened that you don't think I should know about - something that also makes you think you don't need to worry about the kids."

"You're reading an awful lot between the lines," Ron objected.

"We're journalists! That what we're *supposed* to do!" Perry pointed out gruffly. He let out a deep sigh and paused for a moment before turning and leaning against the stoop beside Ron. He then somberly told him, "Under normal circumstances, we could beat around this bush all



night and pretend that we don't know what we know. But things *aren't* normal right now. For one thing, there are two young children loose somewhere and I don't want to tell either of their parents that they went missing on my watch."

"I'm sure they'll be fine, Perry," Ron interjected.

"Care to share why you're so sure about that?"

"Um," Ron began cautiously. He opened his mouth to speak several times, but snapped it shut each time without saying a word.

"Can't bring yourself to say it," Perry stated irritably. He pitched his voice low and said, "All right, let me tell you what *I* think. I think we're both protecting a secret. Maybe even the *same* secret. But neither of us knows that for sure, and neither of us wants to be the one to spill the beans if that's not the case. And I have a better poker face that you do - you're not sure if I really know the secret, or if I'm bluffing to try to trick you into spilling it."

"Something like that," Ron admitted.

"Well, if we're going to track down these kids, one of us is going to need to make a leap of faith," Perry declared sternly.

"Perry, I'm not sure what you want me to say," Ron protested.

"And you're too loyal to Kent to give up his secret," Perry whispered. Ron eyes grew impossibly wide and Perry thought, *Bingo. He saw the kids do something 'super'. Based on the way he's been staring up at the sky, I have a hunch on what that was.* The older man was silent for a moment, before pitching his voice low and asking, "Were they *both* flying or was Kara doing all the lifting?"

"Perry!" Ron exclaimed. "You *know* about-"

"Keep your voice down!" Perry interrupted in a loud whisper. After a brief pause, he added, "That was it, wasn't it? You saw a couple flying munchkins and finally figured out what Kent *really* does when he pulls that disappearing act on us."

Ron nodded and whispered, "How long have you known?"

Perry wasn't about to admit he'd just figured it out himself. Instead, he harrumphed and said, "I'm a lot more observant than some of you give me credit for. You really think I couldn't see past a pair of glasses?"

"I didn't and I've spent a lot more time around him," Ron pointed out.

"I've got a newsroom full of journalists who are supposed to be the finest in the world, and with one possible exception, *nobody* saw past a simple pair of glasses," Perry complained dramatically. "I should fire the whole lot and start over."

"You can't mean that, Perry."

Perry was quiet for a moment and then admitted, "Actually, it's probably for the best that they *haven't* figured it out." He looked at Ron intently and adamantly added, "We're protecting this secret. That means you don't discuss this with *anyone*. Especially not at the office - assume the place is bugged. And we cover for Kent, if he needs us to."

"You've got it, Chief" Ron agreed eagerly. "Does anyone else know? Besides Lois, I mean."

"Not that I know of," Perry replied pensively. "Oh, and don't you dare tell either of them that I know about this."

"Chief?" Ron replied curiously. "What's the harm in letting them know that you know?"

"It's easier this way," Perry replied enigmatically. Further discussion on the topic was interrupted by the ringing of his satellite phone. He fished it out of his inside jacket pocket and checked the display before answering, "Richard? I hope you have some good news."

*"Actually, it's not Richard. It's Lois."*

"Well, it's about time, Lane! Sawyer's none too pleased about your impromptu trip over to the Vanderworth place this afternoon, by the way. Neither am I. We've got the biggest news day of the millennium and my two most productive reporters have been AWOL all afternoon. When can I expect you to get the story in on whatever it was that happened out there?"

*"I'll get it in as soon as I can... Perry, Richard said you called my dad earlier. Do you still have the number with you? I need to get a hold of him."*

"Hold on. I'll check the redial list," Perry replied. He fiddled with the menus on his phone for a moment, and then said, "Got it. You ready?"

*"Go ahead."*

*"703 555-1207."*

*"Thanks, Perry. By the way, if you see Ron, would you let him know that Clark's got the kids?"*

"So what am I now, an answering service?" Perry complained brusquely.

*"Sorry, Perry, but there aren't many working numbers right now," Lois reminded him. "Clark's is working, and so is Richard's, so he was able to call through just now. He thinks that maybe Ron thought he was supposed to be watching the kids, but he couldn't find him to verify that. If I know Ron, he'll be worried sick if he thinks the munchkins disappeared on him."*

"Well, Troupe's around here somewhere. If I see him, I'll let him know," Perry answered gruffly.

*"Thanks, Perry. Gotta go."*

"Good bye, Lois."

"That was Lois? She's okay?" Ron asked hopefully.

"Yes, and so are the kids," Perry confirmed. "She said that they're with Kent."

"What a relief," Ron said cheerfully. He lowered his voice to a whisper and added, "Did she say how Clark managed to tell her that, given that all the phones are out?"

"I knew there was a reason I kept you around, Troupe," Perry commented. "She said that Clark and Richard's phones were both still working. Don't know how much of that is true and we *know* Kent's got way too much on his plate this afternoon to take time out to watch the kids. He probably left them with Lois, but how did they explain that to Richard, after I told him they were here? I suspect that there's more to the story there than we'll ever find out from Lois."

"Oh, Geez. I almost forgot about Richard," Ron observed. "Things haven't been easy for him lately."

"No, they haven't, but the writing's been on the wall for a long time. There's nothing we can do about it except hope it doesn't get ugly when Lois finally leaves him."

"You really think their problems are that serious?" Ron asked skeptically. "I know Jason's paternity threw them for a loop, but they've always seemed so good together."

"Maybe as 'friends with benefits', but 'happily ever after' was never in the cards for them," Perry explained somberly. "Lois' heart was never in it and you had to be blind not to see that she really wasn't interested in marrying Richard. But he never saw that. His head was buried in the sand these past six years, seeing what he wanted to see and thinking it was meant to be. Well, the feeling wasn't mutual. Lois never thought it would last and planned for it accordingly. And now Kent's back, which I think is the catalyst that's forcing Lois and Richard to confront the problems that have been there all along. I serious doubt that they'll still be

together come Thanksgiving. Hell, they'll be lucky to make it to Halloween."

"That's not quite how I saw things between those two," Ron objected.

"Just because they didn't seem to be fighting before Kent got back doesn't mean there wasn't trouble," Perry pointed out. "Troupe, can we discuss this some other time? I'm freezing my *ass* off out here."

"Oh. Sorry, Perry," Ron replied quietly.

"Now, let's get our story straight... If anyone asks, Kent picked up the kids..."

"Why, yes he did. In fact, I just ran into him a few minutes ago," Ron added. "He's probably still around here somewhere if you're looking for him, but you'd better hurry if you want to catch him. I think they were about to head home."

"Troupe, you're still a lousy liar, but that's a start... Now that that's settled, I'm getting the hell out of here and finding something dry to put on."

## Chapter 44 - Twilight of the Gods

*Thursday, October 5, 2006 4:30PM EDT*

Superman soared high above the new land mass and scanned the area for Luthor, finding him with Grant Hunter and Reilly Dixon on a peak in the center of the new continent. The plateau was familiar, but resembled nothing the earth had ever seen before. It looked like Krypton - Luthor's hiding place was a replica of Krypton's Valley of Elders, with the towers memorializing Sor-El, Kol-Ar and Pol-Us lining the east rim and leading to a chamber that was very much like the interior of his Arctic Fortress. However, unlike the Fortress' radiant white, Luthor's creation was a dingy gray and looked polluted. It was as if its appearance reflected the sorrow of Krypton's forefathers over the perversion of their technology.

Superman returned his attention to the task at hand and closely scrutinized the area, his gaze eventually locking on the kryptonite tipped spear that Luthor held in his hands. *Oh, you've got to be kidding me*, Superman thought. *He doesn't really think he's going to take me out with a spear, does he?* He turned his gaze to the two other men, carefully examining their possessions and confirming that the only apparent kryptonite was the tip of Luthor's spear. *He's either getting sloppy or grossly overconfident... Or maybe a little of both.*

Superman focused a searing beam of heat vision across the sky that cut the head off the shaft of Luthor's spear, dropping it to the floor, and then sent it sliding to the back of the chamber with a gust of superbreath. Luthor swore loudly and went scurrying after the blade as Superman flew in for his landing. He came down harder than he intended, pounding the center of the plateau with so much force that he sent spider web fractures radiating across the surface from the point of impact.

The force of the impact surprised the Man of Steel and he took a deep breath to calm himself before proceeding. The last thing he needed was for accidentally excessive force to give Luthor another excuse to escape justice. *I can't let him get off so easily this time*, Superman promised himself. *I need to stay calm while I do this.*

His brief meditation was interrupted by Luthor's maniacal laugh. "See anything familiar?" the madman asked.

"I see an old man's sick joke," Superman replied sternly. He sensed Reilly walking around behind him, but kept his attention on Luthor.

"Really, just an old man's sick joke?" Luthor retorted. He gestured to the towers behind him and said, "Well, I see my new apartment, and a space for Kitty and my friends, and that one there, I'll rent out." Luthor turned and looked at the towers, as if seeing it for the first time, grimacing as he sarcastically added, "No, you're right. It's a little cold. A little... *alien*. It needs that human touch."

Superman walked over towards the left staircase and said, "I don't have time for this, Luthor. This ends now."

Luthor replied eagerly, "Oh, I couldn't agree more." The criminal nodded to Reilly and the man swung a billy club hard at Superman, striking him behind the knees and sending a surprising jolt of pain through the hero's legs. Superman staggered forward, stumbling to his hands and knees, scraping his palms in the process. In was only then that he noticed the familiar and deadly green glow emanating from the new cracks in the surface of the plateau. He focused his vision on it, but the effort made his head feel as if it was about to explode. A few seconds later, his x-ray vision finally penetrated the crystal and confirmed his fears.

Luthor was chuckling as he ran down the stairs. "*Kryptonite*," he said melodiously. He planted a vicious kick in Superman's ribs and continued kicking him as he said, "Didn't your

father ever teach you to *look* before you *leap*?"

Superman rolled on his back, struggling to catch Luthor's foot and prevent another painful blow when Grant and Reilly grabbed him by the head and dragged him away. "Oh, you're wondering *how* I did it," Luthor gloated. "Crystals are amazing aren't they? They inherit the traits of the minerals around them. Sort of like the *children* inheriting the traits of their father."

Superman looked over at Luthor in alarm and the madman said seriously, "Oh, yes, I know about the brats... Trust me, they're next."

General Matthews was beginning to get impatient with the afternoon's progress. First, they lost the yacht to the sea, and then a squad of F/A-18s from the Truman shot down an unidentified flying platform before they got a good look at it. Matthews felt their captain had approved the attack a little too hastily. If it really was a Kryptonian weapons platform, it was unlikely to have missed the Osprey and someone like Luthor was unlikely to demonstrate mercy with warning shots, if he was controlling it.

To make matters worse, the Osprey carrying the second SEAL squad had hit a flock of seagulls and was forced to ditch in the sea. Although he was grateful that all men had reportedly evacuated safely to the life rafts, they'd be out of commission until the other Osprey collected them. The mishap had taken an important asset against their target off the board temporarily. He swore quietly as he looked up at the infrared image of the debris field from the supposed weapons platform, which was quickly disappearing under the sea.

Across the command center floor, Colonel Johnson was cajoling the troops to keep their focus on the mission. "Forget about the wreckage for now! We need to find that helicopter!" he reminded them. Matthews was pleased that his second in command continued to reflect his commander's priorities on their mission. The man had never disappointed him.

A few minutes later, Tech Sergeant Reynolds shouted across the room, "Sir, I think we may have something."

"Where?" Johnson pressed.

"Ground Zero, sir," Reynolds answered.

"Resnick, let's get a close-up of ground zero up overhead," Colonel Johnson commanded.

Matthews walked over towards Johnson and Reynolds while glancing up at the new satellite infrared image on the overhead screens. The picture seemed to be looking down at the precipice at a thirty degree angle and clearly showed a helicopter at its edge, with two men milling about at either side of the plateau behind it, and a third man standing in the opening of a cavern in the peaks at the far end, about thirty feet above the main elevation. He assumed the man up top was Luthor, though the infrared images didn't offer sufficient clarity to be sure.

"Gentlemen, I think we have our target," Matthews declared. "Get our teams in there and remind them that Luthor is a live capture."

"Yes, sir," Johnson replied, and he rushed over to another workstation to get the orders out.

Matthews continued to observe the overhead display and he witnessed a sudden thin line of heat across the screen, targeting something that the Luthor was holding. The man scrambled back inside the cavern and a moment later a new figure appeared in the middle of the plateau.

"It's Superman, sir!" Reynolds said excitedly.

"We still have a job to do, Tech Sergeant," Matthews replied sternly. He shouted over to Johnson, "It looks like Superman's getting first crack at Luthor, but our teams are still a go."

"They're on their way, General," Johnson assured him. "ETA fifteen minutes."

"There's not a lot of time on the clock, Johnson," Matthews reminded him. "We're cutting this awfully close."

"That's the best we can do if we want a live capture," Johnson pointed out. "Whether we send in the Blackhawks, or have the SEALs abort their rescue and move against the target, it's still fifteen minutes."

"Point taken."

"Sirs, Superman is down!" Reynolds interrupted excitedly.

Matthews looked up and saw one of the figures sprawled out on the ground as the other men descended on him. "Oh, shit!" he muttered. "I was really hoping they were wrong about the kryptonite, but it looks like they've lured him into a trap."

"Orders sir?" Johnson inquired.

"Add Superman's safe extraction to the mission parameters," Matthews told him seriously. "Tell the teams to haul ass and pray they get there in time."

*How could I have missed this?* Superman berated himself. A kick to his ribs from Luthor sent another jolt of pain through him. Every cell in his body felt as if it were on fire from the kryptonite poisoning even before the assault from Luthor and his men. Every breath sent a jolt of pain through him, due to the ribs left broken by the assault. Weakened and robbed of his invulnerability by the massive kryptonite radiation, he felt defenseless against them. *I have to get away from here - have to find a way to stop this perversion of Krypton from killing everyone.* He desperately tried to crawl away from his tormentors against the agonizing pain.

Reilly stepped in front of Superman, blocking his path of escape, and pushed his face down into one of the puddles. Superman barely had the strength to push his assailant's hands aside and pull his face from the water. Somehow he managed to push himself back up on his hands and knees, greedily gulping the air as he pushed himself forward and prayed he'd make it over the edge of the plateau before the next blows came. His prayer went unheeded, as Grant dropped heavily on his back, forcing him back to the ground and knocking the wind out of him.

"You took nine years of my life from me," Luthor was ranting angrily from somewhere behind him. He pulled the kryptonite spearhead from his pocket and continued, "Nine years stuck in that disgusting cage, wasting away with my brilliance intolerably restricted. Time to return the favor."

Luthor grabbed Superman's hair and pulled his head back, forcing the Man of Steel to arch his back as he drove the kryptonite spearhead into it, which provoked a loud and anguished scream from Superman. Luthor laughed maniacally as he pulled the blade out and then stabbed him again, this time breaking the shiv off inside his back. Once Luthor released his grip on his hair, Superman fell heavily to the ground and Luthor sneered, "You don't look so super now."

Grant and Reilly descended on him again and this time Superman only had the energy for the feeblest attempt at defending himself. He could do little more than protect his head with his arms. *Oh, God. I'm not going to make it. And the Earth will pay the price for my failure.*

Lois sighed in frustration and irritably said into the phone, "Dad, I can't talk about it on an unsecured line - you're just going to have to trust me on this. We'll explain everything after this is over."

"What do you expect me to do?" Sam Lane complained.

"I don't know - find a way to keep Daniels' superiors from giving him the fifth degree if his report's a little vague on our rescue," Lois suggested. "Run interference for him until we can explain everything. Dad, if this gets out we may *all* have to go into hiding."

"*What have you gotten yourself into?*" Sam pressed.

"It's not like that," Lois protested. "It's just that if certain people knew about it - including some of your friends in the military - they could get some bad ideas in their heads and cause a lot of trouble for us."

The discussion was abruptly interrupted by Kara's tearful cry, "They're hurting Dad!" She lunged towards the door, but remained held in her seat by the seatbelt and instead pulled the whole plane to the right.

"Hey! You're pulling us off course!" Richard complained.

Kara suddenly remembered her seatbelt and unbuckled it, and a moment later, she had opened the door and flown out.

"Kara!" Lois hollered.

"*Who was that? What's going on there?*" Sam demanded.

Lois switched off the phone and shouted, "Kara Allura Zor-El Kent! You get your rear end back here this instant!" Lois unbuckled her seatbelt and stood facing backwards between the two front seats. A beat later, she added, "Your feet better be back on the floor of this plane by the time I count to three! One... Two... Thr-"

"But they're hurting Dad," Kara complained tearfully, suddenly standing in front of Lois.

Lois knelt down in front of the little girl and asked sternly, "If they can hurt him, what do you think they'd do to you?" Kara's sobs grew stronger and Lois pulled her into her arms, rubbing her back as she gently told her, "Kryptonite is as deadly to you and Jason as it is to your dad and I don't want you getting hurt... But it doesn't affect Richard and me the same way. We can try to help. You just need to show us where he is. Do you think you can do that?"

Kara nodded against Lois' shoulder and said, "But we gotta hurry!"

"Okay," Lois promised her. "Shut that door and then come up front with me." Lois returned to her seat and looked over at Richard, who was staring back at her with a wide-eyed expression. Lois told him, "We need to turn around."

Alex Daniels sat in one of the side seats near the rear of the Navy Osprey, frustrated by their failure to locate the two fugitives from yacht, Stanford Harris and Katherine Kowalski. Superman had identified their location on a ledge relative to the float plane's location. However, he'd never provided coordinates for the place and their search had located neither the missing criminals nor the ledge they were supposedly sheltering on. It didn't help that new peaks were continually emerging from the sea, many of them at odd angles. They'd been forced to abandon the search when the distress call came in from the other Osprey.

They were finally approaching the site where the other aircraft went down and Daniels reflected on the afternoon's most spectacular event while he observed his men standing ready to pull the other SEAL team from the water. He was determined to keep his report accurate while still keeping his word to Superman's family and protecting the two very special young children who had saved his life. His thoughts turned to his own family and he was sure that if the roles had been reversed, he and his wife would protect their two-year-old son every bit as fiercely as Lois Lane was trying to protect hers. *What the hell am I going to put in my report?* he wondered.

Daniels was distracted from his thoughts when one of the men hollered, "Here we go!"

Ramsey was at the top of the ramp with Peterson, waiting to help their comrades in arms aboard once the aircraft was in position. Razor had just strapped on a safety line and plugged his headset into a jack in the rear. As Daniels heard the muffled navigation instructions that were guiding the Osprey to the life rafts in the water, he rose from his seat, clipping on a safety line as he joined the men at the ramp. Just as he stopped at the top of the ramp, Razor turned to him and informed him, "We've got a priority message for you up front, Lieutenant."

Daniels quickly marched to the front of the craft, leaving the other men to their duty. There was a comm station just behind the cockpit wall, and the man assigned there handed him a printout with the new orders. "It's flagged urgent, sir," the seaman told him.

Daniels paled when he read the startling message. They had identified Luthor's location, but not before the maniac had taken down Superman. Army Blackhawks were deploying a platoon of rangers against Luthor, while the combined SEAL squads were charged with Superman's safe extraction. They were to join the effort as soon as the rest of the SEALs were aboard.

Daniels sprinted to the back of the Osprey, forgetting his safety line in his haste. At the rear, he found Peterson and Ramsey venturing down the ramp to help pull the first life raft onto the ramp. The two men grabbed the straps around the perimeter of the raft, and pulled it firmly against the ramp. "Got it!" Ramsey declared.

The occupants began slowly pouring out of the raft's tent opening and Daniels harshly demanded, "Come on, everyone out! Let's get a move on it!"

"What's got you so wound up, Daniels?" someone asked.

Daniels looked over and recognized the commander of the other SEAL squad, his friend, Lieutenant Henry Marufo, who was just stepping out of the raft and onto the ramp. Daniels somberly informed him, "It just came over the wire - they found Luthor and he's taken down the Man of Steel. Command wants Luthor captured and Superman safely extracted, if possible. So are you just going to stand there and let those Army helo crews have all the fun, or are your men going to get a move on?"

Marufo pressed the button on his throat mike and said urgently, "Grizzly team, Grizzly leader. We have new orders and we leave in two minutes, so get these rafts unloaded!" The men from the Grizzly squad immediately responded to the command and practically jumped out onto the aircraft's rear ramp as they emptied the first raft.

Richard was overwhelmed by the afternoon's events. Not only had he discovered that his mild-mannered romantic rival was actually *Superman*, and not only had Jason inherited the hero's abilities, but he was also now racing to the man's rescue. It was really never in question that he'd go back for him. Richard wasn't about to stand by and let the little girl get orphaned a second time - she needed her father. The world needed him, too. Richard couldn't ignore that, no matter what it meant for his relationship with Lois. *How does an ordinary man compete with Superman?* he pondered. He wondered if it was even possible.

Richard returned his attention to the plane, where he was coaxing every last bit of the six hundred horsepower rating from the engine, pushing it forward at one hundred fifty-eight knots. He briefly glanced over to the co-pilot's seat where Kara had cuddled up against Lois after pointing out their heading. She'd stopped crying but still had a very worried expression on her face as she sat quietly on her lap. Jason, not wanting to be left out, was standing in the aisle beside his mother and sister, tightly gripping the back of their seat.

"We're not going fast enough!" Kara suddenly said urgently.



Richard glanced over at her and told her sympathetically, "Kara, we're already flying as fast as this plane can go."

"I could get out and push," Kara said innocently.

Richard stared back at her in surprise and thought, *Did she just say what I thought she said?* Then he realized that Kara's statement had been serious.

Lois had also recognized the sincerity of the little girl's words and there was no trace of humor on her face as she firmly said, "Kara, you're staying inside this plane. If your dad's hurt, that means there's kryptonite around, and I don't want to take a chance on you getting hurt too and falling from the sky." Lois softened her tone and added, "It was sweet of you to offer, though."

"What if I push from inside the plane?" Kara asked insistently.

Lois and looked back at Richard wide-eyed, mirroring his expression. After a moment of thought, Richard broke the silence and said, "Just how fast does she fly?"

"Hypersonic," Lois answered simply.

Richard blinked and returned his gaze forward. "Amazing," he said quietly. He sighed and looked back at Lois, telling her, "Well, it'd rip the plane apart if she tried to push us that fast... but we can handle a *little* push. The seat brackets are probably strong enough, *if* she speeds up gradually *and* keeps it subsonic."

"Okay," Kara agreed quickly. She climbed off Lois' lap, inspecting the seats for a place to grab them.

"Grab the front brackets at the floor - and wait until I say so before you start pushing," Richard directed her.

Jason scooted around his sister and claimed her seat on his mother's lap while Kara grabbed the seat brackets as Richard had instructed her, flattening herself on the floor of the plane. "I'm ready," she said eagerly.

"Okay, let's start *slowly*," Richard said anxiously. He was suddenly pushed back into his seat as Kara accelerated the plane forward.

Luthor chortled with glee as he observed his prone nemesis. Superman's strength had eroded precipitously after planting the blade of Hagan's spear in his back. It wasn't quite as spectacular as he had planned, without the shiv still attached to the shaft, but that hadn't impaired Luthor's delight in the results. He and his men had continued working him over afterwards and the cursed alien was no longer moving.

"Hold on a minute," Luthor commanded. Grant and Reilly obediently backed off and Luthor squatted down beside the fallen Man of Steel. "You haven't died on us already, have you?" Luthor asked sarcastically. "The fun was just getting started." He reached over and pressed against the broken shiv still in Superman's back, provoking a sharp scream.

"Ah, good, you *are* still alive," Luthor said with false delight. "We wouldn't want you to die before the grand finale." Superman's only reply was a moan and Luthor added, "But you *will* die. And you'll die knowing that everything and everyone you care about is about to be destroyed, too. And you'll know it's your fault. It never would have happened if you hadn't come to this world."

Superman weakly flailed his arms in front of him, clawing at the ground in a futile attempt to pull himself away from the madman.

Luthor looked up at Grant and Reilly and said, "I think we're ready. Get him on his feet."

The two men each grabbed an arm and roughly pulled him up, dragging him to the edge

before turning him around to face Luthor. Superman remained limp between them, his head slumped against his chest. "Oh, we can't have that," Luthor declared. He lifted Superman's head up by the hair and brutally slapped him. "Try to stay awake a little while longer. Your big moment's almost here."

Superman looked up at him with dull eyes and feebly asked, "What else do you want?"

"Just this," Luthor replied and he violently swung his fist into Superman's face, knocking him back and freeing him from Grant and Reilly's grasp before he plummeted over the edge of the precipice. Luthor raised his hands above his head in victory and shouted, "The Twilight of the Gods has arrived!"

He lowered his arms and watched in joyful excitement as his enemy fell into the sea. However, after watching Superman struggle in the waves for a moment, the victory celebration was cut short by the sound of jets flying nearby. Luthor looked up, searching for the planes unsuccessfully and concluding that he would be a sitting duck if the military showed up before he recovered the missing crystals. He abruptly cut short his observations and marched to the helicopter, harshly commanding, "Grant, pack up the camera and make it quick. We have unfinished business on the yacht."

## Chapter 45 - Respite

*Thursday, October 5, 2006 4:45PM EDT*

Richard found himself grateful that he'd invested in the GPS-based instrumentation upgrade package a few years earlier. Otherwise, their speed would have maxed out the analog dials and he'd have no clue to their true velocity as Kara pushed the plane far beyond anything the de Havilland engineers had ever dreamed of. At six hundred forty knots, it was more than *four times* the maximum speed the manufacturer had listed for the aircraft. Richard turned to the little girl on the floor and told her, "Remember, we're going to need to slow down before I can land, so let me know when we're getting close."

"Okay," Kara mumbled.

"Richard!" Lois shouted, pointing to plane ahead of them that they were quickly overtaking.

Richard calmly banked the plane to the right, leaving a wide five hundred yard margin as they passed the other aircraft at twice its speed. "We had plenty of room," Richard pointed out.

Lois glared at him briefly and then relaxed her expression, asking him, "What kind of plane was that?"

"Based on the size of the props, I'd say it was an Osprey - maybe the one Clark was talking about earlier," Richard offered. "It still seems kind of strange, though. I didn't think they were supposed to officially be in service yet."

"They probably called up anything in the area they could get their hands on when they found out about this," Lois speculated. "And Superman *did* say that there was a lot of air traffic out here."

"You mean *Clark* said that," Richard corrected.

"We always keep the two personas separate - it avoids problems if we don't notice that someone's eavesdropping," Lois explained. "Clark's even talking about himself in third person half the time these days... It takes a little getting used to."

"No doubt. When this is over, I'd like to hear the whole-"

"I see him!" Jason exclaimed excitedly from his mother's lap, pointing his finger ahead of them. "He's in the water!"

"Where?" Richard asked urgently, squinting his eyes to try to spot the hero. "I can't see him."

"There!" Jason replied, frantically pointing his finger at something ahead of the plane.

"Kara, you can stop pushing now," Richard said authoritatively. "I need full control of the plane back before we go down for a closer look."

Kara complied with the request and stood up, taking position next to Lois and leaning against her seat. Once the plane was free of Kara's propulsion, Richard guided it down towards the plateaus, leveling it out at five hundred feet above the sea. "Are we getting close?" Richard pressed.

Kara pointed her finger ahead and to the right, telling him, "He's over there."

Richard strained his eyesight, and finally spotted a red splotch in the water - Superman's cape. "I see him now," Richard declared. "Keep your eyes on him so we don't forget where he is. I have to loop around to drain off some of our speed before we can land on the water-" He abruptly stopped talking as he noticed the soldiers swarming the plateau below him, with Blackhawk helicopters hovering around the perimeter. He muttered, "Oh, wow. There's sure a lot of activity down there."

Lois followed his gaze and said, "They're probably looking for Luthor, but we have more important things to worry about right now. Just get us down to Clark so I can pull him in."

Richard nodded and said seriously, "Hang on. It's not going to be an easy landing with it so choppy down there."

Lois turned to the kids and sternly told them, "I want you two back in your seats and buckled up right now. And *stay* there until one of us tells you it's safe to get out."

After verifying that the kids were safely buckled in, Lois began stripping down to her underwear and the T-shirt she was wearing under the sweatshirt.

Richard caught what she was doing in his peripheral vision, and asked cautiously, "Um, Lois?"

"In case I have to dive in after him," she explained. "I won't get very far if I'm weighed down by waterlogged clothing."

Richard nodded and brought the plane around in a wide circle, dropping down to the sea beneath the plateaus as he leveled out and aiming the plane at the approximate area where thought he'd seen Superman's cape. Their speed was still too high for his comfort and at their first contact with the waves he pulled back on the yoke, bouncing back up above the sea rather than risk catching the tips of the pontoons under the waves and flipping over. He repeated the process, which made the plane seem more like a stone skipping across a lake than an aircraft making a water landing. However, it did succeed in bleeding off more speed to the point that Richard felt it safe to finally plant the pontoons in the sea and keep them there. As soon as he did, Lois was out of her seat and opening the side door.

"Hey!" Richard complained.

"Just get me to him!" Lois hollered back.

Richard rolled his eyes and then turned to the little girl in the back seat, asking her, "Kara, can you point him out to me again?"

The child unbuckled her seat belt, trotted back up front and pointed out the direction, and Richard piloted the plane through the choppy waves towards Superman. However, as he approached the red of Superman's cape, he realized that it was quickly disappearing, pulled under water as the hero sank. There were still going too fast for Richard to be able to stop the plane, but as they taxied by, Lois dove out the door after him.

Daniels heard the loud chatter from the cockpit and strode over to the cockpit door, somberly asking, "What's all the excitement?"

"Some strange bogey just blew past us at six forty knots, making a beeline for ground zero," Bones informed him. "Damn if it didn't look like a seaplane."

"Since when does a seaplane go six forty knots?" Razor asked skeptically. "It's got to be bandito incognito."

*Not necessarily. I can think of a couple explanations for that and they're probably both worried about their daddy,* Daniels thought. Aloud, he advised them, "Let's not jump to conclusions, but it's probably a good idea to keep track of it. If it *is* going after Superman, it could make it easier for us to find him if we follow. How far are we from the target?"

"Twelve miles. Just a couple more minutes," Bones informed him.

Daniels pulled his head out of the cockpit and pressed the button on his throat mike. "Wolf pack, Grizzly pack, Wolf Leader. Two minutes to ground zero." Most of the men had already been busy preparing, so there was only subtle acknowledgment to his announcement.

The separation of duty had had been quickly arranged after Marufo's squad had been

pulled aboard. Grizzly Squad would be charged with security while Wolf Squad handled the rescue. Ramsey and Peterson had already changed into immersion suits, just in case they had to dive in after the wounded VIP, and Michaels was in position at the ramp controls, all of them strapped to safety lines.

Behind him he heard Razor call out, "Lieutenant Daniels, looks like our bogey found something. They're circling back and bleeding off speed."

"Let's get down there pronto and see what they've got," Daniels replied authoritatively. He turned and shouted back to his crew, "Drop the ramp!" While Michaels dropped the rear ramp, Daniels took position in the cockpit door, scanning the ocean through the windshield through a pair of field glasses. He found the familiar seaplane just as it landed in the rough seas. The drag of the ocean had barely slowed it down when he saw Lois Lane dive out of the plane and into the water.

Daniels lowered the field glasses and shouted, "They're friendlies! Get us down there!"

"I saw her. We'll be on top of them in thirty seconds," Bones assured him.

Razor abandoned the co-pilot's seat and ran to the back in anticipation of guiding the pilot backwards to the swimmers. Daniels followed him to the back of the aircraft, just as it settled about five feet above the sea and fifty yards behind the surfacing diver. Miraculously, Lois had managed to bring Superman to the surface with her, though she was now struggling to keep his head above water. A couple hundred yards behind her, the seaplane had turned around and was taxiing back to them. Daniels noticed that Razor was mesmerized by the scene of the 'Damsel in Distress' rescuing the hero and he shoved him in shoulder, shouting, "Hey! Get us over there!"

Razor snapped out of his stupor and hastily gave the navigation instructions to Bones, who backed the aircraft towards the struggling swimmers. Their motion stopped about five yards from the pair and Daniels shouted, "Ramsey! Peterson!"

The men immediately jumped into the sea and swam out for the rescue, with their safety lines spooling out behind them.

Luthor piloted his Bell JetRanger helicopter just over the top of the waves as he searched for the yacht. While he was counting on his low altitude and the numerous crystal peaks protruding from the sea to keep him concealed from military radar, it also made it difficult to find something that was clearly not where he had left it. "Damn it, where are they?" Luthor demanded. "Try them again."

Grant nodded from the co-pilot seat on the right and repeated the radio call, "Stanford, this is Grant. Pick up! The boss is getting royally pissed!"

"Maybe these new mountains are blocking the signal," Reilly suggested.

*Mountains*, Luthor fumed. *Would've been nice if the Jor-El had mentioned this interim phase.* In the end, the surface would be mostly flat, with the exception of the command center, which would become his new palace, but instead of expanding across the seabed as a continuous solid, it was shooting up peaks at odd angles in a regular distribution out from the impact site. Luthor assumed that they'd eventually fill in to produce the flat surface he'd designed and it *was* providing them with cover in the meantime.

"Hey, Boss! Look over there! That opening in the cliff," Grant hollered suddenly.

Luthor looked over in the direction Grant was pointing and about two hundred feet to their left, he saw someone standing between crossed columns that resembled Stanford. A moment later, his identity was confirmed when Kitty also appeared in the opening, still

clutching the damned Pomeranian.

"What the hell happened?" Reilly wondered. "Did the bitch throw them overboard and take off with the boat?"

"If she did, she won't get far!" Luthor replied angrily. "Imbeciles! What does it take to get someone to follow directions around here? It wasn't a difficult assignment!"

Luthor maneuvered the helicopter over towards the cliff, carefully minding the distance to his main rotor, and finally stopped thirty feet away. "Get them in here!" he ordered.

Reilly opened the rear door and Stanford immediately dove in the water and awkwardly swam towards them. Kitty hesitated at the water's edge and Reilly motioned for her to come to them. She was clearly not happy to learn that she'd have to swim to the helicopter. She slowly slid into the chilly water, still clutching the dog. After a momentary delay, Kitty began swimming towards them in a sluggish side stroke, carefully keeping the Pomeranian grasped in her arms with its head above water.

Stanford reached the helicopter first and as soon as he climbed in, Luthor turned to him. His eyes widened slightly in surprise at the sight of Stanford's bruised and broken nose, but he quickly recovered and demanded, "What the hell happened? Did Lane kick your ass, too?"

"It wasn't her," Stanford lied defensively. "We *caught* them - or rather *I* did. Kitty was useless. Anyway, they were all locked up. But then we got boarded."

"Boarded?" Luthor echoed in astonishment.

"Navy SEALs. There had to be at least twenty of them," Stanford explained nervously. "We were lucky to get away and find that hiding spot. Those damn SEALs were circling around in some weird looking helicopter, hunting for us. It was only a little while ago that they finally gave up."

"So, what, you jumped overboard the moment you saw them?" Luthor asked derisively.

"No, it wasn't like that, Boss," Stanford stammered defensively. "I was getting ready to fight them."

"Then where's my yacht and where are my crystals?" Luthor demanded. "Where are the rest of your clothes, for that matter?"

"It, um, the yacht sank," Stanford informed him anxiously.

"*Sank?* Everything we had was on that ship and you let it *sink?*" Luthor shouted in a rage.

"No, I did everything just like you asked!" Stanford replied apprehensively. "But the mountain came up underneath it. It grew right through the ship and split it in two."

"Grew *through* it?" Luthor echoed incredulously.

"Yeah. Came up right through the middle of the galley."

"And what about my crystals?" Luthor pressed insistently.

"She wouldn't tell us where she hid them. They, um... they probably went down with the ship."

Luthor looked away from the fool in his fury, no longer able to tolerate the sight of him. His gaze wandered back towards the sea and he finally noticing Kitty about ten feet from the helicopter, struggling to swim the remaining distance.

Luthor turned to Reilly and ordered, "Get her in here!"

"Sure thing, boss," Reilly assured him and he then climbed over Stanford, opened the door, and climbed out on the skid where he shouted at Kitty to hurry up.

Luthor turned his gaze forward and frantically considered his options for getting the crystals back in light of yet *another* colossal failure delivered to him by his incompetent crew. Luthor recalled the continental design and reminded himself, *All of this will eventually be*

*above sea level when the dust settles. We just have to wait until my new continent fills in and lifts the ship up above the water, and then we can resume the search.*

*But we can't just hover out here while we wait for that to happen. Not when we're running low on fuel and with the land growing like this - growing through ships! It's unwise to linger. The only safe place is back at the plateau... I can wait it out there - hopefully, those military morons won't notice us... And when this is over, these inept buffoons will be a worm feast.*

Luthor musings were interrupted when Kitty had finally reached the helicopter and Reilly roughly pulled her in. "Got her, boss," Reilly informed him. Luthor then turned the aircraft around and headed back to the plateau eighteen miles away, where they would wait for the continental growth to complete.

When Lois saw Superman's red cape being pulled underneath the sea, a wave of panic passed through her. *No! You're not leaving me again!* she thought. Her panic quickly morphed into action and as the plane sped past her, she took a deep breath and dove after him. The cold water sent a shock through her system, but she somehow kept her breath and her wits, kicking downward and desperately swimming after the vague shape that seemed to be just a little out of reach. She dove deeper as he sank and frantically grabbed for him, her fingers miraculously closing around the material of the cape. She pulled herself along it until she finally reached *him*. She was nearly out of breath when she looped an arm around him and kicked back up to the surface.

Her lungs felt like they were about to burst when they finally reached the surface and she greedily gulped the air while struggling to keep Superman's face above the water. They'd only been bobbing on the surface for a moment when she heard the engine noise. At first she hoped it was Richard circling back for them, but the engines didn't sound quite right. She turned and looked worriedly in the direction of the sound and was shocked to discover a plane similar to the one they had passed earlier hovering a short distance away, with its props now spinning horizontally. She looked around in a panic for the seaplane, finding it two hundred yards away as it finally turned around. *Damn, this wasn't part of the plan,* Lois thought. *We need to keep this in the family.*

She looked back at the Navy plane, which was quickly closing in on them and was only slightly relieved when she recognized Lieutenant Daniels on the rear ramp, along with a number of other men. Two of those men were dressed in some type of yellow protective suits. She heard Daniels' muffled shout and the two men jumped in and swam over to her. The more muscular of the two reached her first and Lois recognized him as one of the men that had been with Daniels when they freed her from the pantry. Lois vaguely recalled that his name was Ramsey. He grabbed one of Superman's arms and told Lois, "I can take him. Let's get him inside."

"No," Lois muttered weakly. *You can't take him. He needs me.*

"We're here to help, Ma'am - to help both of you," Ramsey gently assured her. "We also have a medic waiting inside. Let's get him some help."

Lois reluctantly consented, though refusing to surrender her burden completely to the SEALs. After a little maneuvering, Ramsey lifted his free hand out of the water in a thumbs up signal and the slack went out of the lines attached their harnesses as they were pulled back to the aircraft. Once they got there, Lois was finally forced to surrender Superman to the SEALs. They looped a padded belt under his arms and once Ramsey gave the signal, he was hoisted up

into the aircraft. They repeated the process for Lois a moment later.

Once her feet hit the ramp, she quickly slipped out of the life belt and scrambled towards Superman, but was intercepted by Daniels, who offered her a dry blanket. Lois eagerly accepted it and wrapped it around herself for warmth and cover, while still trying to get to the Man of Steel. Several of the men had carried him further inside the airframe and were gently setting him down on the deck. However, when the floor made contact with the protruding kryptonite shiv and pushed against it, Superman's back suddenly arched and he weakly cried out in pain.

"Give us some room!" a man called out, and he immediately rushed over to Superman and rolled him onto his side while he inspected the bloody protrusion in his back. "Jesus! This looks like shrapnel," the man said.

"It's *kryptonite*! We need to get it out and get it away from him!" Lois said urgently.

The medic nodded and Lois watched as he struggled to grip the shiv with his hemostats. The instrument kept slipping off, causing Superman to cry out in pain each time. After the third failed attempt, Lois exclaimed, "You're hurting him! Why don't you try using a pair of regular pliers? You *do* have a tool kit around here, don't you?"

"Guenther!" Daniels ordered.

"On it, sir," a man responded before disappearing through the swarm of sailors. He reappeared a moment later, and handed the pliers to the man at Superman's side.

The medic carefully gripped the protruding object with the pliers and this time he was able to slowly pull it out. He held the remains of the bloody blade up in front of his face, entranced as he stared at it wide-eyed.

"Get that poison out of here!" Lois shouted. She dropped the blanket and lunged for the blade, grabbing it from the startled man and pushing her way through the crowd of sailors as she ran back to the ramp, where she hurled it out of the aircraft. As she watched it drop in the water, she noticed the seaplane bobbing in the waves about fifty feet behind the Osprey. Richard was clearly visible in the cockpit, watching and waiting, but the children weren't visible from her vantage point. Hopefully, they were still buckled in the back seats and would stay out of sight. Lois held up her index finger towards Richard in a wait gesture and retreated back inside the Osprey.

When she returned up front, Superman was sitting up and thanking the men around him for their help. Daniels seemed to be the only one to notice her return and he rushed over with the dropped blanket. She gratefully accepted it and again wrapped it around herself before turning to Superman and asking assertively, "Feeling better now?"

"Yes, thanks to you, Miss Lane," Superman replied sincerely. He stood up, wincing slightly as he did so, and his hand went immediately to the wound in his back. After a moment, he lowered his hand and walked over to Lois, telling her gratefully, "You saved me."

"Just returning the favor," Lois replied casually. "Now that we've got that out of the way... maybe you can explain just what the *hell* you were thinking, going in there like that?"

"Excuse me?" Superman said in surprise.

"What part of 'Luthor has kryptonite' did you not understand? Was this your idea of being careful?" Lois demanded to know.

"I thought it was just the spear," Superman explained modestly. "It never occurred to me that the entire land mass was made of kryptonite."

"What?" Lois said weakly. "All of that out there? It's *all* kryptonite? How the *hell* did Luthor manage that?"



"The crystals take on the characteristics of the material surrounding them and Luthor must have surrounded the seed crystal with kryptonite when he started the reaction."

"Sir?" Daniels interrupted worriedly. "How dangerous are the rest of the crystals that he took from you?"

"Considering that a trusted ally of mine already recovered the stolen crystals and returned them to me, I'd say they're not a serious threat," Superman told him pleasantly. "However, Luthor should *not* be underestimated. I learned that the hard way this afternoon."

"If you have the crystals, does that mean you can shut that thing down?" Daniels asked urgently. "Or if you can't go back to the control center on that plateau because of the kryptonite, can you at least step us through it?"

"Shut it down?" Superman asked in confusion.

"To stop this land mass from colliding with the Eastern Seaboard," Daniels explained.

"Lieutenant, there is no way to shut it down," Superman informed him grimly. "Once the reaction starts, it's unstoppable... The only way to remove the threat is to remove this monstrosity from the face of the Earth, which is precisely what I intend to do."

"How do you plan to do that?" Lois countered. "Didn't you just say it was made of kryptonite?"

"I'll keep a thick slab of bedrock between the kryptonite and me," he assured her. "It should offer enough protection for me to get it clear of Earth's gravitational influence."

"But you're hurt," Lois argued. "I saw that grimace when you stood up just now."

"I know and I'll need to fly up high up into the thermosphere and supercharge in the sun for several minutes before beginning the lift," Superman replied somberly. "But it has to be done and I'm the only one who can do it."

"But it could *kill* you," Lois objected.

"*Miss Lane...* it's the only way and I have to do this. You *know* what's at stake here, perhaps better than anyone."

The formal salutation reminded Lois of their audience and she held her tongue. She instead simply nodded her head in resignation. They'd have a little more privacy on the seaplane.

Superman turned to Daniels and said, "Lieutenant, you need to get everyone to clear the airspace above this thing. Once I start the lift, there will be no stopping, no slowing down. Not if I'm going to succeed. And I'd like to avoid having any of your people caught on top when I hurl it into space."

"How much time have we got?" Daniels asked.

"I can give you maybe ten minutes before I start the lift and there'll still be another ten minutes or so after that before your aircraft hit their operational ceilings. Unfortunately, I can't promise you any more time than that. Not with this thing growing so fast - it was already over a hundred twenty miles across when I landed in Luthor's trap. The longer we wait, the harder this is going to be, and it'll already be tough enough as it is."

"Understood. Good luck, sir," Daniels replied, and he rushed over to the comm station to pass on the report, with Lieutenant Marufo quickly falling into step behind him.

"Miss Lane, I'll take you back to the seaplane now," Superman said gently. "Gentlemen, if you'll excuse us..."

Richard leaned forward in the pilot's seat as he observed the Osprey, anxiously waiting for whatever was happening inside the other aircraft to run its course and for Lois to return to

the plane. It wasn't proving to be much of a distraction to keep the kids out of trouble - to keep *Superman's* kids out of trouble. *Oh, Jesus, is that going to take some time to get my head around,* Richard thought. And just when he thought nothing else could surprise him, Lois dove out of the speeding plane to rescue the hero.

The plane's speed and roughening seas hadn't allowed him to turn around immediately and he'd honestly feared the both Clark *and* Lois might be lost. He'd been both relieved and worried when he turned around and discovered the Osprey hovering nearby as it pulled Lois and Clark out of the water. Richard taxied in and took up position fifty feet behind the other aircraft to wait it out.

He really wished that he could see what was going on inside the Osprey, as well as shielding the children from whatever it was that *they* were seeing. He glanced over at the two youngsters as they sat in their seats, staring through the window ahead - and right through the walls of the other aircraft. Jason hadn't known how to use his x-ray vision at first, but after a little instruction from Kara, he was also able to peek into the other aircraft and watch the Navy men try to help his Daddy Clark.

Richard knew that Lieutenant Daniels was there with Lois and Clark, thanks to a brief declaration from Kara. However, the kids' comments were few and far between - nothing close to a play-by-play of the action. In fact, both kids had seemed unusually quiet and subdued while they watched and listened. Considering what they were likely witnessing, he wasn't about to press them for details. He'd have to get the full story from Lois later on. She also owed him the full story on Clark.

His rival was an enigma that he still couldn't quite figure out. Clark Kent was obviously Superman, but the biographies for the two personas didn't quite mesh. Richard had been to Clark Kent's boyhood home, met his mother, and heard stories of his childhood - a childhood spent in *Smallville, Kansas*. Yet, Superman had supposedly shown up just nine years earlier, after a long voyage from Krypton, where a holocaust had destroyed his people. He was last of his kind - the 'Last Son of Krypton', as the story went. The two back stories seemed to be utterly incompatible. Yet, they described the same man.

Richard noticed some commotion around the rear of the ramp and finally saw Lois throw something out the back. She held up her index finger to him and ran back inside. *What's going on in there?* Richard wondered. He returned to pondering the mystery of Clark Kent, but only had a few minutes for that indulgence before Superman walked out on the ramp with Lois, who now had a Navy blanket wrapped around her. The Man of Steel wrapped his arms around her and floated off the ramp just before the Osprey climbed back into the sky. A moment later, Lois and Clark stepped through the door of the seaplane and the kids were instantly upon them.

"Dad!" Kara squealed excitedly.

"Daddy!" Jason echoed. "Are you all better now?"

Superman knelt down and hugged them both tightly. "I feel much better," he told them.

"But this isn't over yet and I still have something very important to do."

"What's going on?" Richard asked.

Lois turned to him and said irritably, "He's going to throw the whole freaking thing into outer space."

"Huh? He's what?" Richard replied numbly.

"The land mass. He's going to throw it into space," Lois explained. "And this *despite* the fact that the entire thing's made of kryptonite."

"How in the world did Luthor manage that?" Richard wondered.

"Long story. But we'll need to get the he-heck out of Dodge before he starts lifting it."

"Are you going to get hurt again?" Kara asked her father worriedly.

"I certainly hope not," Superman answered seriously. "But even if it hurts me, I still have to do this because I'm the only one who can. It's part of the responsibility that comes with our gifts - we use them to help others, even if it's dangerous and we get hurt sometimes."

"I want to help," Kara pleaded.

"Me, too!" Jason echoed.

"Not this time," Superman said firmly. "If I'm going to be able to do this, I *need* to know that you two are safe, which means that you two *need* to stay here, with Richard and Lois. And no matter what happens, never forget how much I love you two." He kissed each of them on top of the head and stood up, turning to Richard and Lois.

"You can really throw this whole thing into space?" Richard asked incredulously.

"It's the only way and failure is not an option," Superman insisted. "Start up your plane. I'll get you started back to Metropolis."

Richard rushed to the pilot's seat and began his preflight check, but glanced back at Lois, who was lingering near the side door talking to Superman. He returned his gaze to the instruments in front of him, but strained his hearing to try to pick up the conversation behind him. He wasn't catching everything and had to fill in some of the gaps from context.

"You *have* to come back," Lois was whispering frantically. "The kids need you... I need you. I *can't* lose you again."

Richard wasn't able to make out Clark's reply until the end, when he heard him say, "Goodbye." The hero then stepped through the door and closed it behind him.

Richard felt his heart drop into his stomach at the implications of Lois' words: He'd already lost her, in heart if not in deed. It was simply a matter of time before she left, assuming Clark survived. His thoughts were interrupted when Lois came up front and sat down in the co-pilot's seat, and Richard struggled to push the disturbing epiphany from his mind and focus on the task at hand.

He started up the engine and a moment later and he felt the aircraft lifted above the waves and accelerated forward, pushing him back in his seat. A quick glance at the airspeed indicator showed them already at two hundred knots and climbing, which surprised Richard. The last time Clark had helped him take off, he'd released the plane as soon as they had sufficient lift to stay airborne. This time, he seemed determined to make sure they reached their destination.

Richard watched the instruments while their speed continued to climb and finally settled around six hundred knots. At that speed, it only took a few minutes to clear the dangerous landmass. Once they passed the final evidence of Luthor's horror protruding from the Atlantic, their airspeed abruptly dropped, indicating Superman's departure to face his formidable challenge.

With the ordeal mostly behind them and Metropolis in sight, Richard's thoughts returned to his personal difficulties, and he asked himself rhetorically, *How does an ordinary man compete with Superman? Answer: He doesn't. Especially not when Jason is his, too.* Richard was heartbroken as he looked over at Lois and noticed her anguished expression and shiny eyes. He understood her sorrow and he silently declared, *This isn't how I wanted it, but I still love you, Lois. And I'll always be here for you and Jason - as a friend, if nothing else.*

## Chapter 46 - Battle of Wits

*Thursday, October 5, 2006 4:55PM EDT*

General George Matthews tried to sort through the information he was bombarded with and felt a headache coming on. It seemed that for every step forward they took two steps back. They found Sam's daughter, but lost the yacht. They found Luthor's helicopter, but the slippery felon gave the local forces the slip, though they never really lost him on satellite. Now they found what appeared to be the Kryptonian control center, but had no way of controlling it - the local commander was reporting that the interface was verbal and was talking to them in an alien language that was probably known to only one man on the planet. Unfortunately, that man had fallen into the sea after getting poisoned by kryptonite and beaten half to death. It was not a good afternoon.

Matthews looked up at the clock and confirmed that they had only fifty-five minutes remaining before Luthor's horror crashed into the East Coast, and just under half an hour before the president's imposed deadline for exercising the nuclear option. As catastrophic as that would be to the coastal cities, it would be better than losing the whole continent - if it worked. Matthews prayed it wouldn't come to that, but couldn't imagine how they would avoid it with so little time left.

"General Matthews!" a voice called out. He looked over towards the voice and found a very excited Hannah Daggett flagging him down.

"Yes, Petty Officer?" Matthews replied impatiently.

"Sir, the SEAL commanders at ground zero are reporting that they have urgent new information from Superman and are insisting on speaking with you directly," Daggett informed him.

Matthews motioned to Colonel Johnson for him to join him and then jogged over the Hannah's station. The two men plugged headsets into spare jacks on the comm set.

"Lieutenants Daniels and Marufo are on the line now," Hannah informed them.

Matthews activated his headset and spoke into the mouthpiece, "This is General Matthews. Report."

"Lieutenant Alex Daniels, sir. General, Superman is requesting that we clear the airspace over the land mass. He's planning to throw it into space," Daniels informed him.

"You're not serious," Matthews said incredulously. "I thought Luthor took him down."

"He did, sir, but Superman recovered rather quickly after we pulled the kryptonite blade out of his back," Daniels told him. "He said there's no way to stop this thing from expanding once it's started. The only solution is to send the entire thing into space. He needs to spend a few minutes in the sun before he does that, but that still only gives us about twenty minutes max to get everything clear before it gets trapped on top."

"What about the missing crystals and the command center we found?" Matthews prodded.

"Superman reports that he's recovered the crystals. With all due respect, sir, we need to get the evacuation order out while there's still time," Daniels said insistently. "The helos in particular could have trouble making the deadline if we don't get them moving now. I can wait."

Matthews covered his mouthpiece and turned to Johnson. "What do you think, Mike?"

"I recommend that we issue the order, sir," Johnson replied adamantly. "At the very least, we should recall our subsonic assets. The way things are going, we'll probably end up nuking that thing in another half hour anyway."

"Don't remind me. All right, recall everything subsonic. But blow that command center before pulling the men out - I don't want to leave anything useful there if Luthor somehow finds his way back."

"Yes, sir," Johnson replied. "And what shall we do with Luthor?"

"Don't worry about him, just get the evac order out," Matthews replied urgently. Johnson nodded and rushed over to the adjacent station.

Matthews took his hand away from his mouthpiece and said, "Daniels, roger that. Matthews out." He then unplugged his headset and joined Johnson at the other workstation.

"Bring all the Blackhawks in now! We'll get the rangers out on the Osprey once they've set the charges," Johnson was telling a young soldier.

"Yes, sir," the soldier told him.

Johnson turned his attention back to Matthews and said, "Sir, the order is out... General, may I have a word?"

"Follow me," Matthews replied. He led the way to an empty situation room at the periphery of the command center, and turned to face Johnson after entering the room.

"Permission to speak freely, sir?" Johnson asked tentatively.

"Go ahead, Johnson."

"Given that the Kryptonian command center is a bust and Luthor no longer has the crystals, we should take the bastard out." Johnson looked through the room's window at the overhead display showing the infrared image of Luthor's helicopter and added, "It'll be an easy kill."

Matthews sighed and said, "There is nothing I'd like better, but you know the rules of engagement as well as I do and that's still an unarmed civilian aircraft carrying American citizens."

"They're unlawful combatants, sir," Johnson said adamantly. "I'd also point out that this is the same man who *nuked* Southern California a decade ago."

"And he still found a loophole to get out of jail through," Matthews added in disgust. He softened his tone and added, "I'd gladly take one for the team and give the kill order, *if* I thought it was necessary and *if* I knew the witch hunt would end with me. But you know as well as I do that we've got some bozos in Congress that would absolutely love an excuse to rake us over the coals."

"Surely they understand the threat Luthor represents," Johnson objected.

"Most of them probably do - maybe they all do. But some of them never understood the need for us. Others aren't about to let inconvenient things like facts stop them from playing politics and using some arbitrary incident as an hammer to try to force our supporters in Congress to capitulate on their arguments. They'd probably even try to raid our budget and divert it to their pet projects. And the biggest problem I have with all that is that it would prematurely end the promising careers of some of the brightest men and women in this organization... Besides, we don't *need* to shoot Luthor down. All we have to do is let him go back to his rat hole and keep him there, and this little problem will go away on its own."

"Metropolis Tower, this is seaplane November seven two four one Hotel. Do you copy?" Richard said urgently into the microphone. After a momentary pause, he repeated the call, "Metropolis Tower, this is seaplane November seven two four one Hotel. Please respond... Damn it! They're still not answering."

"The EMP probably knocked out their comm systems," Lois commented numbly.

"I hate flying in there without air traffic control, but it probably won't be as bad over the river," Richard replied worriedly. "We should be back at the house in another ten or fifteen minutes and we'll finally be able to change into something dry."

"We can't go back to the house!" Lois said insistently. "Luthor could still have men out there, waiting to ambush us. We were targets even before he found out about the kids."

"Well, I'm open to ideas, but it'll have to be somewhere close," Richard replied sternly. "I never got the chance to refuel after the Chicago trip."

Lois' brow furrowed while she worked out the math in her head: Chicago was a little over seven hundred miles away, and the plane had a range of just over nine hundred fifty miles, leaving two hundred fifty miles to work with to get to Luthor's horrors and back, which was almost a hundred miles out to sea. "So that gives us what? Maybe fifty miles before we're out of gas?" she wondered.

Richard checked his instruments and said pensively, "Sounds about right. Maybe a little more if you factor in the reduced load while Clark and Kara were giving us a push. But anything in range would still have been caught in the EMP and I *really* don't like flying in blind. I still think that the river's our best bet."

Lois frowned and after a moment's thought, she looked over her shoulder at the kids and said, "Not necessarily. If you can get us to the *Planet*, I think I know a way for us to land on the roof."

Richard followed her gaze back to Kara and muttered incredulously, "Oh, you've got to kidding. How do you expect to pull that off without anyone seeing her?"

"She'll lift from inside," Lois declared.

Richard made the course correction and quietly mumbled, "I don't believe I'm doing this."

It was quiet in the plane for few minutes before Richard broke the silence and cautiously asked, "So... Jason's got superpowers now? When did that happen? He was so fragile for the longest time..."

"I thought he still was, until he threw that piano earlier today," Lois admitted. "His powers weren't *supposed* to come in until puberty. Looks like Jor-El was wrong about that."

"Jor-El?"

"Superman's father," Lois explained. "He examined Jason last Friday."

"But Martha said that Clark's dad passed away when he was a teenager," Richard pointed out.

"Wrong father," Lois explained. "Jonathan and Martha adopted Clark when he was three, shortly after his escape ship crashed in their corn field. Jor-El is his birth father."

"If Jor-El's here, how come we've never seen him? Why isn't he out there helping?" Richard asked irritably.

"Our Jor-El is a holographic A.I. facsimile of the man who died when Clark was a baby," Lois explained. "Superman's parents weren't allowed to make the trip with him because of the political situation there, so they did the next best thing - they downloaded their memories and personalities into the crystals they sent to Earth with him. Clark can still interact with them but they're not really alive."

"Oh," Richard said quietly. After a momentary pause, he added, "So I guess that means he can't help us."

Lois shook her head absently, but after a moment, her eyes grew large and she exclaimed, "Maybe he can! Quick, give me your phone!"

"What? Oh, here," Richard replied uncertainly, handing her the satellite phone.

"No, the other one - you know, the *Kryptonian communicator*," Lois said irritably. She reached over, pulled the cell phone from Richard's belt, and punched in the four digits of Jason's birthday, which was the code Clark had set up to provide her with access to Jor-El - Clark assumed that even she'd be able to remember that number. A moment later, a short tone signaled acceptance of the code, but it still required voiceprint identification to complete the connection. She calmly said into the mouthpiece, "Lois Lane."

Lois pulled the phone away from her ear and set it to speakerphone mode as the image of a white-haired man appeared on the phone's small display screen. "How may I help you, Lois?" Jor-El asked her.

"Luthor finally used the crystals to launch an attack and it's unleashed something horrible," Lois informed him.

"Yes, I know. I have been monitoring the situation ever since detecting the electromagnetic pulse. I was able to trace it back to his sea vessel and the computer systems there revealed the astonishing depths of his depravity."

"No surprise there," Lois commented. "But we still have a problem to solve."

"Unfortunately, the growth reaction cannot be stopped once it has started. The only solution is to remove that... abomination... from your world."

"That's what Kal-El said and he's getting ready to do that," Lois informed him. "The problem is that Luthor's already hurt him and may have something else up his sleeve that could sabotage Kal-El's plan. And we can't let that madman get away - he knows about the kids. None of us are safe while he's loose."

"It seems likely that the criminal is aboard the small aircraft heading back to his recreation of the Council Chamber at the center of the abomination," Jor-El informed her. "The same craft left the Council Plaza after Kal-El was injured there and picked up two passengers near the original location of the sea vessel. It now appears to be on its way back. Assuming they hold their course, they shall arrive in approximately three minutes."

"Is that the same place where all those soldiers were?" Richard asked.

"That is correct, Mister White," Jor-El answered. "The soldiers have now departed and remotely detonated the explosives they had placed around the control console."

"They blew it up?" Lois asked incredulously.

"The damage was limited to the console. I was able to erect force fields to protect everything else."

"Why bother?" Lois asked curiously.

"I require the control systems in order to maintain a structural integrity field throughout the crystal lattice and enforce cohesion while Kal-El lifts that abomination into space," Jor-El explained. "Otherwise, the structure would break apart from the stresses."

"Does that mean you now control the 'abomination'?" Lois asked pensively.

"Yes, to the extent that it can be controlled," Jor-El answered. "I cannot halt the expansion of the mass, but I control the automated systems and can make adjustments to its configuration."

"Then that means you can broadcast into that command center," Lois stated enigmatically. "We can talk to Luthor."

"You want to talk to Luthor?" Richard asked in disbelief.

"Oh, *hell* no - not me," Lois replied distastefully. "I have something *much* better in mind - something guaranteed to keep him out of Clark's hair until it's too late."

Luthor was in a sour mood when they finally landed back at the plateau. He climbed out of the helicopter and stalked up the stairs to the crystal chamber, with the others in step behind him. However, he stopped abruptly at the entrance when the sooty smell hit his nostrils. He scanned the smoky interior and his eyes locked onto the charred and scattered remains of the control console. "No," he said hoarsely as he hurried over to the carnage. He sifted through the shards, looking for the crystal that he had unintentionally left behind in his haste to return to the yacht.

The others walked into the chamber behind him and Grant muttered, "Jesus, what happened here?"

"The soldiers who were here detonated explosives around the console," a disembodied voice answered.

Luthor looked up and witnessed the greenish glow in the center of the column opposite the console as it coalesced into the familiar face of Jor-El. Luthor smiled evilly and thought, *Well, things are finally going my way. That data must have already been in the system - it just wasn't active yet. It probably wasn't supposed to come online until after the continent was completed, but came up early when the army's assault triggered the defense systems.*

Luthor spread his arms in a welcoming gesture towards Jor-El and said dramatically, "Father, our enemies are upon us. They've stolen the crystals and seek to impose their will on us. We must destroy them!"

"You are no child of mine, Lex Luthor," Jor-El replied sternly.

"Impossible," Luthor mumbled in surprise.

"Did you really think that we would fail to anticipate this abomination, after discovering the burglary at the Fortress and your deformed prototype in the city?" Jor-El asked condescendingly. "We expected this and we were well prepared for it."

"Your preparation didn't help Kal-El much," Luthor replied angrily. "He's *dead* now, you know. So are his bastards."

"The facts of the matter do not support your claim," Jor-El stated calmly. "Not only did Kal-El survive your brutal attack, but you've defeated yourself by your obsessive hatred and your lust for wealth and power. Perhaps we overestimated you. But then again, one would not expect that someone so boastful of his own intelligence would engage in a battle of wits *unarmed*."

"How dare you!" Luthor raged. "I'm the most brilliant criminal mind this world has ever known."

"Lex," Kitty whined fearfully.

"Shut up!" Luthor snapped.

"I'm afraid your declaration is inconsistent with the available evidence," Jor-El told him. "I must say, it was quite foolish of you to disable the safety protocols in the seed crystal..."

"*Foolish?*" Luthor echoed angrily.

"...It enabled us to quickly assume control of this place, once we were alerted by the electromagnetic pulse," Jor-El continued, ignoring the interruption. "Though it is hardly surprising, given your consistent pattern of failure."

"Lex Luthor *never* fails!" Luthor screamed. "I am betrayed by the fools around me!"

"Apparently, you never assume responsibility for your mistakes, either," Jor-El commented. "I have now had the opportunity to examine both the programming from the seed crystal as well as the computer systems aboard your sea vessel and I must say I found no shortage of errors in your design. In fact, it is quite short-sighted."



"Short-sighted!" Luthor fumed. "It was brilliant! If not for the idiots around me incapable of following simple instructions-

"The most egregious errors were the flawed assumptions the design was based on, which demonstrate both an ignorance of..."

"Ignorance! You dare!" Luthor interrupted indignantly.

"...the most fundamental basics of Kryptonian construction and a profound lack of understanding of human nature," Jor-El continued, again ignoring Luthor's interruption. "Did you really believe that *anyone* would pay you for the privilege of living on this poison?"

"Poison to your kind, not mine!" Luthor yelled defiantly.

"Again, you are mistaken," Jor-El told him dispassionately. "While the radiation may not be as immediately debilitating to humans as it is to Kryptonians, it is just as deadly in the end. Under constant exposure to the radiation, the first cancerous tumors would appear in a matter of weeks, and it's unlikely that any human could survive here for even a single year."

"You never told us this place was radioactive," Grant hissed.

"Shut up! He's bluffing," Luthor yelled.

"And what possible motivation would I have for that?" Jor-El asked. "I do not need to trick you into leaving. You will do that of your own accord once you get hungry enough. You see, the same radiation that causes cancer in humans inhibits the growth of vegetation. No crops will grow here."

"We don't need crops, we have replicators," Luthor pointed out.

"Replicators require power and the contaminants that you introduced into the matrix interfere with the collection of solar energy," Jor-El explained patiently. "The collectors are barely generating enough power for me to sustain this image."

"But the fusion reactors-" Lex began.

"The reactors require fuel and there was less than two kilograms of that fuel at the Fortress when you stole it from us," Jor-El explained. "Much of that original mass was consumed initiating the growth reaction. That only leaves enough to sustain this facility under full load for approximately ninety minutes. Even with the most stringent energy conservation protocols, you would exhaust the fuel in just a few weeks, leaving you without food or fresh water."

"Boss?" Stanford ventured cautiously.

"Quiet!" Luthor snapped.

"Your assumptions on human nature also demonstrate a gross misunderstanding of the subject," Jor-El added.

"I misunderstand humans? You're not even from this planet and you've been dead for, what, almost four thousand years?" Luthor shouted.

"My point precisely. One would think that you would have a better understanding."

"Meaningless words spoken by a dead man from a dead people," Luthor retorted furiously.

"You would do well to listen, but that is not one of your strengths, now is it?" Jor-El asked neutrally. "You fail to understand that modern humans fiercely resist tyrants. They would fiercely resist *you*. The surviving nations of this world would embargo this place and you would starve to death before they ever paid you the tribute you seek."

"The advanced weapons here would bring them to their knees!" Luthor argued.

"Had Kal-El not yet returned from his mission or if we had remained unaware of this horror, the safety protocols encoded in the security systems would still not have permitted an

offensive strike," Jor-El informed him. "Perhaps if you had spent more than the single day studying the crystals that your ship's log indicates, you would have realized that."

"Why, you!"

"Even without our intervention, you still would have failed and the surviving people of this world would never have bowed to your demands," Jor-El declared.

"You'd be surprised what people are willing to do when they fear for their lives," Luthor countered.

"And you would be surprised how quickly they band together when faced with an existential threat," Jor-El countered. "The genocide that you intended would mobilize them against you."

"There won't be anyone left to mobilize. Once the mightiest of them falls, the rest will fall in line," Luthor insisted.

"Again, your overconfidence defeats you," Jor-El noted. "As I informed you, we have been expecting this. We planned for it. And this abomination will not threaten the people of this world for much longer." Jor-El paused and glared at Luthor before he added coldly, "Predictably, your latest criminal endeavor has now ended in failure and you shall be forced to answer for your crimes."

Jor-El's last comment sent a wave of terror through Luthor and he bolted for the door. The other men made it out the door ahead of him, and Kitty had apparently already snuck out while he was arguing with Jor-El. She was down on the plateau, clutching the Pomeranian to her chest and staring out over the edge.

Luthor ran down the stairs and discovered that he was quickly out of breath. He realized with a start that the air was thin. They were at a *much* higher elevation than they were supposed to be at. He looked back down at the plateau and was horrified to recognize the Eastern Seaboard through a break in the clouds, miles below them.

He continued his sprint down the stairs and when he finally reached the helicopter, Kitty turned to him and asked fearfully, "Why are we so high up?"

"Shut up... and get in!" Luthor wheezed. He climbed into the helicopter and tried starting it up. The engine sputtered, barely turning the rotors a dozen times before it died out. He tried starting it again and again the engine failed to turn over.

"The old man... must have sabotaged it!" Stanford declared nervously from the seat behind him.

"What have you done to us, Luthor?" Reilly demanded angrily.

Luthor recognized the murderous rage in Reilly's eyes and jumped out the door just as the felon lunged for him. He sluggishly ran back up the stairs, feeling surprisingly heavy as he struggled up the path. *What's going on?* he wondered. He glanced behind him and was relieved to see that the men were struggling just as much as he was. Kitty was faring better, having not just exerted herself on the way down.

Luthor pushed forward, slowly making his way up the remaining stairs and into the chamber. He fought for his breath, leaning forward with his hands on his knees, wheezing as he demanded, "What... have you... done?"

"We cannot allow this abomination to threaten the people of this world," Jor-El stated calmly.

Luthor glanced nervously behind him as Kitty and the men filtered in through the door. They all collapsed on the stools a short distance behind him, with the exception of Reilly, who hovered menacingly near the doorway. Luthor kept his gaze on the impudent employee as he

angrily reminded Jor-El, "You didn't... answer... the question."

"Kal-El is ejecting this abomination from the Earth and sending it out among the outer planets where it can do no harm," Jor-El explained.

"No!" Kitty cried out fearfully. "That'll kill us!"

"So much... for Kryptonian... passivism," Luthor taunted. "The first time... you face someone... you fear... your first instinct... is murder."

"Once again, you are mistaken, though that seems to be quite a pattern with you." Jor-El replied condescendingly. "I have, in fact, made arrangements for your survival." As he finished speaking, six opaque blue white crystal cylinders rose from the floor along the wall to the left of the console. Five of them were eight feet tall and three feet across, while the sixth was two feet high and sitting on a raised pedestal. In front of each cylinder was an oval opening, which revealed the empty interior.

"What... the hell?" Luthor asked in confusion.

"There is enough energy from the fusion reactors to sustain you in stasis until Kal-El can retrieve you. The small chamber is obviously for the animal."

"You don't honestly... believe that... we'll just... walk in... those things?" Luthor asked incredulously.

"If you choose to instead confront the deadly environment of space, then I will respect your decision," Jor-El declared neutrally. "However, I suggest you choose quickly. There is little time remaining."

Luthor stared furiously at Jor-El. But before he could put voice to his rage, he heard Kitty sadly declare, "We're ready."

Luthor looked over and saw that Kitty had already placed the dog in the small chamber and had climbed into the full size cylinder next to it.

"Et tu, Kitty?" Luthor asked disappointedly.

Kitty looked back at him silently as the openings of the two chambers sealed shut, obscuring their contents behind the opaque shell.

Stanford was the next to approach the row of stasis chambers and Luthor angrily hissed, "It's a trick, you idiot!"

"Is it?" Stanford asked skeptically. "Like the thin air... and seeing the... East Coast... through the clouds? I don't think so... and I'm not... dying up here." Stanford then stepped into the chamber next to Kitty, turned around to face the opening, and calmly said, "Go ahead." The chamber opening immediately closed and he was also obscured from view.

Grant and Reilly only hesitated a moment before they also sought refuge in the stasis chambers, leaving Luthor alone before Jor-El. "Cowards," Luthor hissed.

"You need not insult them. They can no longer hear you," Jor-El pointed out.

"Do I look... like I care?" Luthor asked weakly.

"Mister Luthor, it is unwise to remain out here," Jor-El pointed out dispassionately. "Are you certain of your choice?"

"I won't... submit... to you!" Luthor declared defiantly.

"As you wish," Jor-El replied and the crystal displaying his image went dark.

Luthor smiled triumphantly and opened his mouth to declare his victory, but his words died as he found himself gasping for breath. *Can't breathe*, he thought and a wave a terror went through him when he finally acknowledged the danger. He staggered towards the remaining open stasis chamber, but only made it half way across when he tripped and fell to his hands and knees.

Lacking the energy to stand and still fighting for the remaining air, Luthor crawled desperately towards the chamber. He felt himself grow heavier with every movement and by the time he reached the threshold of the stasis chamber, he could barely hold himself above the floor. It seemed to take a small eternity for him to pull his head and arms over the threshold and awkwardly roll over before pushing himself up into a sitting position against the back wall. Finally, he pulled his leaden legs through the opening and the door closed to seal him in. *It's not over* he thought, as consciousness fled him. *I'll still find a way to destroy you...*

The occupants of the seaplane parked on the roof of the *Daily Planet* building refused to budge from the aircraft while they watched the scene between Jor-El and Luthor unfold on the small two-inch wide cell phone screen. Lois had been feeding Jor-El insults to hurl at Luthor as they watched the scene and it looked like things were finally drawing to a conclusion. "There is enough energy from the fusion reactors to sustain you in stasis until Kal-El can retrieve you," Jor-El was saying. "The small chamber is obviously for the animal."

"Stasis?" Lois questioned irritably. "Why do that for them after what they did to Kal-El?"

"Because that is our way," Jor-El's voice answered softly. "As undeniable as their guilt may be, we cannot arbitrarily condemn them. Under Kryptonian law, they have the right of due process but we lack the time for a tribunal. I am obliged to offer them an option for survival, but I cannot force it upon them. They must freely make that choice."

"How long can you keep them there?" Richard asked. "You said there wasn't enough to keep things running."

"Once we clear Earth's atmosphere, there will be plenty of energy from the solar wind to sustain them in stasis and to power the transformation."

"Transformation?" Lois wondered.

"It is my intention to purge the radioactive poison from the matrix," Jor-El explained. "It is a time consuming and energy intensive process, but it must be done."

"How time consuming?" Lois asked.

"It will take several decades," Jor-El declared.

"And then this starts all over again? With Luthor knowing about our family?" Lois objected vociferously.

"They will not emerge from stasis with that knowledge intact," Jor-El assured her. "We also need not leave them there long - we can use the starships to remotely extract them, without risk to Kal-El."

Lois nodded absently and the group resumed their silent observation of the scene on Richard's cell phone, as Luthor's crew abandoned him, choosing stasis over the path to oblivion that he had led them on. Finally, Luthor realized his folly and also abandoned that path, struggling to make his way to the remaining stasis chamber. Eventually, he made it inside, sitting on the bottom and pulling his legs in before being sealed within.

"It's finally over," Lois declared quietly.

"Not quite yet," Jor-El corrected. "It will still take several more minutes for Kal-El to eject that abomination from this world."

"Understood," Lois acknowledged. "Thank you, Jor-El." Lois switched off the phone, turned to the others and wearily said, "Are you guys ready to go back to Grandma's?"

Superman continued to drive the land mass upwards into the mesosphere while his muscles protested with a sharp burning pain. The wound in his back was particularly

excruciating, feeling as though the kryptonite shiv were still there with Luthor still turning it. He tried to block out the pain and pushed against the impossible load, which weighed down heavily on the one hundred foot thick layer of bedrock above his shoulders that provided a buffer against the lethal radiation from the mass above. However, its cover was incomplete, as he knew it would be. There was too much of Luthor's abomination radiating its poison, the anchoring spikes still growing downward, penetrating his shield and bathing him in their radiation.

He realized that he no longer felt the empowering tingle of the sun and he should have felt something - even if it was just energy reflected off the clouds. That could only mean that the kryptonite was already interfering with his organelles' ability to process the solar power, leaving him with only his residual energy to complete the task. He was certain that his strength would have already failed him had he not supercharged under an unfiltered sun prior to beginning the lift. He prayed it would be enough. *I can't give up now*, he told himself. *Just need to keep pushing... for a little while longer...*

As Superman continued his ascent, his head soon felt as if it were about to split in two from the pounding headache and every cell in his body felt as though it were on fire. Yet, he continued to push against the burden on his shoulders, to move it higher and faster - he couldn't let it fall back to Earth. Fortunately, his supercharged cells had stored up enough power to still answer his call. However, that also made it difficult for him to measure his progress.

Supercharged strength and speed was difficult to judge on the best of days. With the added complications of kryptonite exposure and the throbbing headache it caused, he found himself unable to determine if he was yet going fast enough to eject the monstrosity. It was taking all his concentration to just keep it moving and stay on course. He thus kept pushing himself to fly higher and faster, and for the moment at least, he was still up to the task. However, his strength was quickly waning.

It wasn't until he noticed the International Space Station whiz by as he passed it that he realized he had achieved his objective and was now traveling well past escape velocity. Superman summoned all of his remaining strength and heaved against his burden, letting out a silent scream as he did so and throwing himself away from the abomination. He drifted back and found himself staring at the massive object as it sped away from him, amazed that he had successfully launched it. *It's done*, he thought. *Thank God it's finally over.*

Prior to the lift, he had calculated the object's mass to be an incredible four billion tons and though he had faith he'd be able to lift it, he hadn't been entirely convinced that he'd be able to push it to the required escape velocity of twenty-five thousand miles per hour. However, he had to try - there was too much at stake to prematurely surrender to the fates. His determination paid off, simultaneously eliminating the threat from the lethal abomination along with its creator. Luthor would eventually need to be extracted from stasis to stand trial, but that detail seemed suddenly unimportant.

Superman realized with a start that he was cold - colder than he could ever remembered being. His shivering could only mean that he was still too affected by the massive dose of kryptonite radiation for his organelles to properly absorb the solar energy that now washed over him. He was also exhausted and fought desperately to keep his eyes open as he drifted back towards Earth. Consciousness quickly abandoned him, leaving him in a dreamless sleep and oblivious to the scorching heat of atmospheric reentry as gravity finally reasserted itself over him.

## **Act III**

## Chapter 47 - Impact

*Thursday, October 5, 2006 5:15PM EDT*

Lois clutched the Navy blanket tightly around herself to fight off the chill as she walked down the stairs from the roof of the *Daily Planet*. She'd been shivering ever since the first dip in the Atlantic earlier that afternoon and redressing in her drenched clothing hadn't helped matters. Kara had offered to dry her off with heat vision, but Lois had politely declined. She remembered Clark explaining that heat vision had been one of the harder powers to control and she wasn't about to become Kara's guinea pig. Not when the little darling only had a few weeks of practice.

The group continued their descent down the steps, entertained by Jason and Kara's amused description of the globe's fall from its perch. The 'waterfall' the kids had described could only have meant that the globe had crushed the rooftop water tanks when it rolled off. *No water tanks means no running water*, Lois concluded. *Well, looks like the bathroom breaks will have to wait a little while longer.*

The children's chatter dissipated into background noise as Lois' thoughts turned to Clark, who was still miles above them, launching a massive, radioactive protocontinent into space. She also knew him well enough to read between the lines of what he had said on the seaplane. He wasn't sure he'd survive. Even Jor-El seemed to hint that their success was far from certain. *You had better come back alive*, Lois thought desperately. *I can't lose you again.*

Her thoughts were interrupted by Richard's voice when they reached the landing at the thirtieth floor where their offices were. "Lois, I need to stop here and grab my things," Richard said softly.

Lois nodded absently and ushered the kids through the door in front of her, her eyes widening in surprise at the mess they found. The wind was blowing briskly across the bullpen, sending the papers from the reporters' desks all over the place. There were also piles of broken glass where there had previously been doors and walls and windows. "Geez..." Lois muttered breathlessly.

"The earthquake broke all the glass," Kara said quietly.

"Stay close to me," Lois commanded. "I don't want you two getting too close to the edge."

"We're not gonna fall," Jason told her confidently.

"Well, I don't want anyone to see you not falling. Stay here with me," Lois countered sternly. She led the children over to her desk and quickly inventoried her desk top contents. A stack of printouts that had been growing on her desk had blown into the aisle along with a Kleenex box and a small notepad. She scrambled to collect her wind-thrown belongings, with help from the kids.

Richard walked over to them just as she piled the last of the recovered papers into one of her desk drawers. "I think I've got everything I need," he informed her. "The laptop was fried in the EMP, so there not much point in lugging it along with us."

"You should bring it anyway," Lois suggested. "Clark might be able to fix it when he gets home."

A wounded look momentarily crossed Richard before he schooled his expression, nodded his assent and returned to his office to pack up the laptop.

Lois felt a stab of guilt over Richard's obvious pain and her thoughts turned to the impact of the afternoon's revelation. Richard had maintained a somber countenance since leaving the plane on the roof, with his brow slightly wrinkled and his lips turned slightly down. She

guessed he had been trying to wrap his head around the secret double life of his rival and what it meant for their relationship. Things clearly could never go back to the way they were before Clark returned and their façade of happiness had already begun to crumble. They would have to finally confront the problems that they'd ignored for years and Lois loathed the pain that would cause him. *He really is a good man and he deserves so much better than this*, she thought.

"All set," Richard hollered across the room.

A moment later the group had resumed their slow descent to the bottom of the stairwell and Lois reflected that time seemed to slow down with each step they took. The afternoon's ordeal had left her cold and tired, and she felt that they had certainly walked down enough steps by now to already be at the bottom. To make matters worse, the others seemed to be oblivious to the obvious temporal distortion. Richard was easily keeping pace with her and the kids were practically bouncing with energy. *Geez, looks like that sunlight high is even worse than a sugar high*, Lois lamented. *How in the world are we going to manage that?*

After a small eternity, they finally reached bottom of the stairwell, but just as they were about to open the portal, a shrill ring came from Richard's satellite phone. He pulled the phone out of the inner pocket of his suit coat and politely answered, "Richard White... Hold on." He held the mouthpiece against his shoulder and informed Lois, "It's your dad."

"Oh, sh-oot. I forgot all about him," Lois admitted wearily.

"Should I tell him you'll call him back?"

"No, I'll take it," Lois told him unenthusiastically. Richard handed her the phone and she answered calmly, "Dad?"

*"You hung up on me earlier,"* Sam reminded her.

"I did? Oh, sorry about that. Kara was a little upset and I needed to help her," Lois explained.

*"Kara?"*

"Yes, Kara. You know, Jason's sister?" Lois replied irritably.

*"Since when does he have a sister?"* Sam asked incredulously.

"Oh, crap. I forget we hadn't told you about her," Lois muttered. "Hold on a minute."

Lois looked over at Richard apologetically and said, "I doubt anything my dad's about to say will be appropriate for them to hear."

Richard nodded and said, "I'll take them ahead to Smallville. Try not to be too long." He then opened the portal and guided the children down the stairs. "All right, guys. Let's go," he said authoritatively.

Lois waited for the floor to rematerialize before returning her attention to the phone.

"Okay, I'm back," she said.

*"What the hell is this about Jason having a sister? Has White been running around on you?"*

"What? Dad, no, nothing like that!" Lois replied angrily. "Richard's not..." She sighed and added quietly, "Jason's not biologically his."

*"What?"* Sam bellowed. *"Then who is the father?"*

"I don't want to get into that over the phone, but he's a good man," Lois explained. "He had some important matters to take care of years ago and had moved away from Metropolis before Jason was born. Before I even knew I was pregnant. Well, he's back now, along with his seven year old daughter."

*"So how's this deadbeat suddenly got you babysitting his daughter?"*



"He's *not* a deadbeat - he never knew!" Lois shouted angrily. "He wasn't exactly reachable while he was away, so I never got the chance to tell him until he moved back to Metropolis a couple weeks ago. He'd just assumed custody of Kara, after the poor kid's mother passed way. She's emotionally traumatized, he's overwhelmed, and we've been helping."

"*White must be thrilled with that,*" Sam muttered.

"Not really. Dad, do we really have to get into this now? It's been a rough afternoon."

"*So I've gathered.*"

"Dad..." Lois began impatiently.

Sam sighed and said, "*Lois, I've been authorized to let you know that Luthor's monstrous creation is in outer space now, and it looks like that lunatic was trapped on top when Superman launched it. It's finally over.*"

"Not completely. Luthor and his thugs were preserved in stasis before the air ran out."

"***What? How?***"

"Apparently, they have the right to due process under Kryptonian law and they couldn't be left to die without a tribunal," Lois explained. "Superman was 'obliged' to keep them alive, so we're going to have to continue the fight in court once he brings them back to Earth."

"*Well, Superman won't be doing that anytime soon,*" Sam said somberly. "*After throwing that monstrosity out into space, he fell back to Earth. We tracked him all the way down and we've sent a rescue team to the impact site.*"

"No," Lois moaned miserably. "Tell me he's going to be okay. He's *got* to be okay."

"*Lois, that's all we know about it right now, and all I'm authorized to tell you,*" Sam said simply.

"I... I've gotta go," Lois said emotionally and she ended the call. She then quickly opened the portal, rushed down the stairs, and shouted, "Jor-El!"

"Is there a problem, Lois? You appear agitated," the disembodied voice answered.

"I just heard that Kal-El was hurt. That he fell from orbit."

"That is correct. He lost consciousness shortly after successfully propelling the abomination beyond Earth's gravity well and he fell back to Earth."

"He can't be... he's not... he wasn't supposed to die..." Lois sputtered tearfully.

"Life signs are weak, but he *is* alive," Jor-El informed her. "I am closely monitoring the situation."

"You... are?"

"The orbiting probes we deployed to track the EMP also permit detailed scans of Kal-El. I am also able to listen in on the rescue workers at the scene through the microphone in his belt buckle."

"I need to know what's going on," Lois declared. She opened the transportation chamber and charged into it, demanding, "Bring me to the Fortress."

Doctor Julio Gonzalez stood with his trauma team just inside the doors adjacent to the helipad at Philadelphia's Hahnemann University Hospital, waiting for a National Guard helicopter to bring in an injured VIP the nearly seventy miles from Metropolis. That city's hospitals had been overwhelmed from the events earlier in the afternoon and couldn't accommodate him. Philadelphia had also been affected by the EMP and earthquake, but they'd been able to manually switch over their standby generator and had enough equipment between their portable units and those delivered by the Army Reserve to keep up with the trauma center's spike in demand. It really came as no surprise that they'd medevac a Metropolis victim

to Hahnemann.

The big surprise was the victim's identity, which he had been asked to keep quiet. Not even the heavily armed National Guard security squad that had just recently been deployed by a Blackhawk helicopter seemed to realize just who it was they were sent to protect. However, their assignment clearly spoke to his stature and they took the mission seriously, stoically standing guard at the door and searching the sky for the helicopter. Gonzalez only hoped he'd be able to help the fallen hero.

Finally, he heard the thrum of helicopter rotors and he peered out the glass doors for its source. Within moments, the Army National Guard medevac chopper came in for a landing and he led his team out the doors to meet them, with the soldiers in step behind them.

Once the aircraft touched down, the side door slid open and six of Metropolis' Finest jumped out along with the paramedics. The honor guard of police officers gently lifted out a basket stretcher and brought it over to the gurney, afterwards purposefully positioning themselves between the hero and the soldiers. "He's one of ours!" a brawny police officer pointedly shouted over the rotor noise.

"Understood, sir!" an anxious young staff sergeant conceded. "Consider us your backup."

Gonzalez ignored the interaction between the protective forces and focused his attention on the hero. Though he'd been warned what to expect, he was still taken aback by the sight of the heroic victim with his famous costume peeking out from under the blanket. Gonzalez only gawked a moment before recovering and asking the paramedics, "What's his condition?"

"Breathing became shallow in transit, heart rate's less than thirty. Can't get a reading on blood pressure," one of the paramedics answered.

"Let's get him inside, quickly," Gonzalez ordered.

A few minutes later, they transferred him to the trauma ward and went to work. "Let's get this off him," Gonzalez instructed his team, gesturing to the skin tight uniform.

Nurse Betty Hudson grabbed a pair of scissors from the instrument tray and attempted to cut the shirt off at his collar. However, her efforts were in vain and after a moment of effort, she declared, "No good. I can't cut through this."

"We'll just have to take it off in one piece," Lily Thompson suggested, and the older nurse quickly managed to remove his shirt and pull off the cape. She then immediately went to work attaching EKG electrodes while Betty loosened his belt to free the remaining clothing and discovered the deep stab wounds in the process. "Doctor?" she said anxiously.

"Two penetrating stab wounds, no hemorrhage," Gonzalez muttered. He focused the overhead halogen light on the wounds and grabbed a lacrimal probe from the instrument tray to inspect them. For the most part, the tissue within yielded just as it would have with a human patient. In the second wound, he encountered something rigid that seemed out of place. He traded the probe for a pair of hemostatic forceps and searched the wound for the foreign object. After maneuvering in the wound for a moment, he extracted a half-inch long fragment of a glowing green crystalline material.

"Is that what I think it is?" Betty asked.

"If it is, we need to get it away from him and shielded under lead," Gonzalez declared. He dropped the object into a pan and added, "Betty, get that out of here. And remember that the police will probably want it for evidence, so let's make sure it doesn't disappear."

"Got it."

Just as Betty left the room with the deadly material, Lily shouted, "Code Blue! Flatline!"

"Get him started on epinephrine. One milligram, IV push!" Gonzalez ordered.

The nurse attempted to comply, but almost immediately reported, "Can't. Needle won't penetrate. It just bends."

"Okay, let's try something else. Shock at two hundred."

"Will that work on him, considering?" Lily asked worriedly. "He's not... human."

Gonzalez nodded and after a moment of thought, he added, "All right. Charge to three sixty."

"Ready."

Gonzalez placed the paddles on Superman's chest and declared, "Clear!"

The paddles crackled with electricity, the lights flickered, and the defibrillator sparked and smoked. Yet, there was no discernible reaction from Superman.

"Still flatline, and the defibrillator's fried," Lily reported.

"Then we switch to CPR," Gonzalez decided. The nurse immediately moved a respiration mask into place over his face while Gonzalez attempted to begin chest compressions. However, the hero's chest didn't yield to the force. "Damn it, his chest won't compress! How the hell do you administer emergency medicine to someone who's still invulnerable when he's practically dead?"

From the moment she stepped through the security doors at the Fortress, Lois had stood numbly in front of the giant floating display screens, watching the medical teams fussing over Clark. Though she'd been grateful for the audio feed that Jor-El had piped in during the trip to the Fortress, the three-dimensional reproduction of the probe's data that was now before her seemed so real that she almost felt she was in the room with him. *Hang in there, Clark*, she thought desperately.

"*Code Blue! Flatline!*" one of the nurses shouted.

"No!" Lois wailed. "Don't you dare die on me, Clark!" Her legs went limp beneath her and she dropped to her knees and sat on her heels. "Don't you dare die on me," she repeated weakly. The scene blurred through her tears, and her sobs grew stronger as the trauma team desperately tried to save him.

"*Damn it, his chest won't compress! How the hell do you administer emergency medicine to someone who's still invulnerable when he's practically dead?*" the doctor complained.

"*What do we do?*" the nurse asked him.

"*There's nothing we can do,*" the doctor declared sadly. "*Let's call it. Time of death... five fifty-three.*"

"**No!**" Lois hollered. "You can't give up yet! He's not dead!"

"Lois," Jor-El prodded gently. The holographic floating head looked over at her with a concerned expression.

"I can still feel him, like he's in the next room... he *can't* be dead," Lois protested frantically.

*Beep.*

"*Doctor?*" the nurse inquired.

"*We did all we could, Lily,*" the doctor said compassionately.

"*Doctor, we've got a pulse. He's not gone yet.*"

*Beep.*

"His life signs are stabilizing," Jor-El informed her.

"Told you," Lois muttered irritably. She wiped her eyes and returned her attention to the scene on the floating screens, oblivious to the blue aura that had formed around her or the thin

blue line of light that passed from head to foot.

*Beep.*

"Pulse is slow, but steady," the nurse named Lily declared. "Only about forty beats a minute."

"I wonder what's normal for him," the doctor commented. "All right, let's get those wounds dressed and then get him down to x-ray. I want to make sure there aren't any more kryptonite fragments floating around inside those wounds."

*Beep.*

"Extraordinary," Jor-El commented.

"Huh?"

"I did not anticipate that your mate bond with Kal-El would be so completely formed," Jor-El explained.

"Mate bond? You mean that psychic thing?" Lois wondered. She finally wiped away her tears, still watching the screen as the medical workers roll Kal-El out of the trauma room.

"Precisely. Your mate bond is remarkably strong."

"I don't understand," Lois complained.

"A moment ago, you indicated that you knew Kal-El was alive because you could feel him," Jor-El reminded her. "A diagnostic scan confirms that you have a high energy state in the normally dormant area of the human brain that would be required for the mate bond."

"You scanned me?" Lois questioned irritably.

"It was necessary to confirm whether or not the bond was present," Jor-El stated neutrally. "The existence of the bond means that your distress could distress Kal-El, even in his unconscious state and separated by this distance. To help him now, you must first help yourself."

"I'm fine," Lois insisted.

"You are emotionally drained and slightly hypothermic," Jor-El corrected. "You need to tend to your health and rest your body and mind."

"But Kal-El's still hurt," Lois protested.

"He is no longer in immediate danger," Jor-El pointed out. "I will alert you if there is a change in his condition."

Lois opened her mouth to object, but snapped it shut as she realized just how exhausted she really was. "I don't suppose you have a hot shower somewhere around here? Or towels and some dry clothes I could borrow?"

"The items you have requested are available," Jor-El stated simply.

Lois' reply was interrupted by the bright blue lights that danced through the Fortress and coalesced into a female figure of human proportions. She was dressed in a shimmering white jumpsuit and had long auburn hair the exact same shade as Jason's. "Greetings, Lois. I am Lara, Kal-El's mother," the woman announced. "Please follow me and I'll show you where to find the items you requested." She turned and walked casually towards a staircase to the left of the console, and after a moment's hesitation, Lois rose to her feet and followed her.

Richard let the hot torrent of water massage him and chase away the chills while he stood under the shower in Ben Hubbard's house and reflected on the afternoon's incredible ordeal and the astonishing secret it had unveiled. Clark Kent, clumsy farm boy from Kansas and Jason's biological father, was also *Superman*, the amazing visitor from the planet Krypton. Though Lois had offered some clues to explain the seeming contradiction between the two

biographies, there we're still some large pieces of the puzzle missing and he'd have to wait a little longer for the explanations. Lois had refused further comment on it after leaving the plane, insisting that it was too risky to discuss the 'family secret' in the city.

Surprisingly, he wasn't entirely disappointed by the delay. He was grateful for the additional time to try to make sense of the amazing revelation. His thoughts turned to his Lois and Jason, and he tried to see his relationship with them through the prism of the truth. The truth was that Lois was in love with Clark. That fact was driven home by what he witnessed from Lois and the hero that afternoon, made clear as much from her actions as from the parting words he'd overheard between the two.

It was her determination not to let Luthor bait Superman into a trap when they were themselves trapped. It was the way she boldly dove off a speeding airplane into a cold Atlantic ocean to save him. It was the tender expression she offered him before he flew off to dispose of Luthor's horror - a loving look that he had *never* seen directed at him. It was how, as Perry put it, she'd been a shadow of herself while Clark was gone, and came back to life once he returned. It was also the worry he saw etched in her expression during their descent down the stairs at the *Planet* - worry for Clark Kent, the man she loved. He concluded that Lois' heart had probably always belonged to the hero and that undeniable truth left Richard wondering if he had been the interloper, rather than Clark.

Another undeniable truth was that Jason was the son of Superman and possessed the same superpowers - powers that he had not yet mastered and which Clark was clearly best suited to help him with. Richard was also forced to acknowledge that Jason was quickly bonding with his long lost father and had even called him 'Daddy' on the plane earlier. *Will I come in second to Clark with Jason too?* Richard wondered. *After all, what kid wouldn't want Superman for his daddy?*

He pondered the situation for a few minutes and then decided, *Well, there's not much point in standing here feeling sorry for myself.* He then abruptly shut off the water, grabbed the towel from the hook outside the shower, and toweled himself off.

A short time later, he pulled Martha's truck into the drive at the Kent farm. When he walked into the house, he found the kids helping Ben and Martha set the table for dinner.

Richard was curious just how much the kids had told the old couple while he was in the shower. Of course, there hadn't been time for much discussion when they finally returned from Metropolis. Martha took one look at her untidy visitors and quickly shepherded Kara up the stairs to change into dry clothes and urged Richard to go over to Ben's place to do the same. Richard had been eager to do so and had gladly accepted her car keys.

"Hi, Daddy," Jason greeted him, interrupting his thoughts.

"Hey there, Kiddo," Richard replied with false cheer. *Maybe I won't lose him completely.*

Martha peeked in from the kitchen and warmly greeted him. "Well, you're certainly looking much better now, Richard."

"A hot shower does wonders," Richard commented wearily. "So, have the munchkins filled you in?"

"I think we got the gist of it. My goodness, what a horrible ordeal you've all been through," Martha replied. After a beat, she apprehensively added, "It sounds like you've probably figured out a few things about our family, too."

Richard sighed and said, "Yeah, you've got a *super* family here. And don't worry about the family secret - it *stays* a secret." He paused a moment and added, "This is going to take some getting used to... And here I thought that *nothing* could ever top last week's bombshell..."

Ben chuckled and said cheerfully, "It threw me for a loop too, when I found out. But it really didn't take very long to realize that what they can do doesn't change who they are. Clark's the same person now as he always was and the kids aren't really all that different from any other kids their age."

*Except for the flying part*, Richard thought. Aloud, he numbly replied "I'll try to keep that in mind."

"Thank you for protecting our family, Richard," Martha told him sincerely. "And don't forget, you're part of this family, too."

"I never considered *not* protecting them and thanks," Richard declared. After a beat, he asked, "Where's Lois?"

"She hasn't come back yet," Martha informed him. "Jason said she had a call from her father and wanted to speak to him privately just before you came through the portal earlier."

"She still should have been here by now," Richard commented anxiously. "I really hope she isn't trying to chase down another story lead."

"You might want to check with Jor-El, see if he knows where she is," Martha suggested. "You can talk to him downstairs."

"I'll do that. Thanks for the suggestion."

"I'll come with you," Ben decided. "I need to stretch my legs a bit."

"I want to come, too!" Jason declared.

"Me, too," Kara echoed.

"I think it'd be better if you two stayed here and helped your grandma," Ben suggested gently. "We won't be long."

After the children reluctantly returned to setting the table, Ben and Richard walked out the front door. Once the two men got inside the barn, Ben gently asked, "Is everything all right, Richard? You've been looking like you just lost your best friend?"

"Maybe I have," Richard replied quietly. "I think I finally realized what I'm up against." He opened the trap door in the barn floor and held it open for Ben.

Ben stopped at the top of the stairs and turned to face Richard, insistently telling him, "Richard, nobody here is going to try to come between you and Lois, least of all Clark. He's been especially adamant on that point and that hasn't changed just because you know about his super self. Once you look past those extraordinary abilities and the exotic heritage, he's really no different than any other man."

"But he's still the man that Lois is in love with," Richard stated sadly.

"Son, you've had a couple huge bombshells dropped into your lap in the past week or so," Ben reminded him. "It's barely a week since you learned about Jason's paternity. You need to give it some time before jumping to conclusions like that." The old man turned and headed down the stairs, and the cellar light came on automatically as he descended.

Richard followed Ben down the stairs and quietly asked, "Five and half years isn't enough?"

"How's that?" Ben asked.

"That's how long Lois and I have been engaged," Richard explained. "I could never get Lois to even begin to think about planning a wedding because she never really wanted to marry me. If I hadn't guilt-tripped her into it, she never would have accepted my ring. She'd have gladly gone it alone and waited for Clark to get back. And now he's back and I'm in the way."

Ben walked over to the opposite wall and placed his hand on the cinder block as he said,

"Open Sesame." The wall dematerialized to reveal the second staircase and Ben started down the steps, while gently telling Richard, "Son, I don't know the facts here well enough to speculate on your relationship, but you *still* need to give yourself some time to think things through before throwing in the towel. And once you've thought it through, *talk* to her about your concerns. Who knows, maybe you can still work your way through it."

"Easier said than done, and it may be too little too late," Richard muttered unhappily.

"Well, you certainly won't get far with that attitude," Ben commented.

Richard sighed and said, "All right, I'll mull it over for a couple days before I broach the subject."

"That's better," Ben replied cheerfully. He reached the bottom of the staircase and a thin blue wall of light swept across the room. Once the light faded, Ben inquired, "Are you there, Jor-El?"

"Yes, I am here, Mister Hubbard," a disembodied voice answered. "How may I be of assistance?"

"We were expecting Lois to follow us through the portal to Smallville, but she never arrived," Richard informed him. "We're getting a little worried and were hoping you might have an idea where she went."

"She is here at the Fortress, Mister White," Jor-El answered simply.

"The Fortress?" Richard muttered in surprise. "What's she doing there?"

"We've been monitoring Kal-El's condition since he fell from orbit."

"He fell?" Ben echoed worriedly. "What happened?"

"Shortly after propelling that abominable protocontinent beyond Earth's gravity well, he lost consciousness due to the severe exposure to the umbiexium three-ten radiation emanating from the monstrosity," Jor-El explained.

"What's umbiexium?" Richard wondered.

"The common name for the material is kryptonite."

"Oh, my," Ben muttered worriedly. "Is he all right?"

"Rescue workers transferred him to Hahnemann University Hospital in Philadelphia, where they extracted a fifty gram fragment of the umbiexium three ten from a wound in his back," Jor-El informed him. "His life signs have since stabilized, but he remains unconscious."

"But he'll be all right, won't he?" Ben pressed.

"His recovery is progressing as expected," Jor-El answered enigmatically.

"Lois is probably still worried sick about him," Richard concluded. "Jor-El, can you patch us through to Lois?"

"Lois Lane is currently unavailable," Jor-El replied neutrally.

"Unavailable?" Richard questioned incredulously.

"Richard, around these parts, that can mean that the lady's powdering her nose and a gentleman knows better than to interrupt," Ben said gently. "The important thing is that she's okay, and though Clark might not be out of the woods yet, he *survived* the encounter with that monstrosity." Ben turned his attention back to Jor-El and added, "Thank you, Jor-El. Please let us know if there is any change in his condition. Use email or IM. I don't want the kids overhearing this and getting upset."

"As you wish."

"How can you be sure that they're not listening in on us now?" Richard asked. "I *know* Kara's got superhearing, and Jason's hearing could be just as sharp for all we know."

"When the outer door is sealed, as it is now, it forms a unidirectional acoustic barrier,"

Jor-El informed them. "The children cannot hear us."

Richard's brow wrinkled in confusion and he commented, "That seems... odd. Why an acoustic barrier? And why unidirectional?"

"Because Clark and Martha need to be able to talk privately about things without disturbing Kara, but he still needs to be able to hear her if she starts having another nightmare or a panic attack," Ben explained. "Once he decided to install a portal in here, the barrier was an obvious design feature." He paused for a moment and then added, "Come on, Richard. Let's get back upstairs and make sure those kids stay happily distracted until we have some better news on Clark."

Richard nodded his acquiescence and said, "I'll do my best." The two men then left the chamber and climbed the stairs back up to the barn cellar. *You better pull through, Kent,* Richard thought. *From what I've seen and heard this afternoon, the world desperately needs Superman, despite certain editorials to the contrary. And so do Lois and the kids.*



## Chapter 48 - Out of Action

*Thursday, October 5, 2006 7:45PM EDT*

Lois leaned forward in her seat at the crystal table in Superman's Fortress, pensively studying the myriad display screens floating in the air before her. Off to the right of the table was a life-size holographic projection which revealed Superman in his hospital room where he laid unconscious and also prominently displayed his vital signs in a floating window. Also around the table were a number of smaller screens presenting the cable news broadcasts from the handful of North American stations that were still on the air or showing maps of the EMP-affected area on the East coast. Another screen displayed the *Planet's* web portal, and a small screen hovering directly over the table in front of her showed the text from one of the stories on the afternoon's events that she had been dictating.

When the narrative reached the point of Superman's injuries, her gaze unconsciously shifted from the text document back to Clark and she reflected on her actions since the ordeal earlier. Once Clark's brush with death in the trauma ward was behind them, she had taken a hot shower and changed into the warm dry clothes that Lara provided - a shimmering white, long-sleeve, high-collared jumpsuit similar to the one Lara had appeared in. Though initially annoyed with the choice, her disappointment quickly faded when she learned of the outfit's environmental controls and felt its warmth radiate through her.

The thought of peaceful slumber in the Fortress' comfortable guest quarters, as Lara had suggested, was inviting and Lois couldn't deny her exhaustion. However, she also couldn't bear the thought of suspending her vigil and instead chose to return to Clark's holographic image in the main chamber. Her only concession to Jor-El and Lara's demand that she rest was to sit at the table in front of the console platform rather than standing, once the hologram of Clark was relocated there.

Her vigil had been interrupted when Perry called on Richard's satellite phone, insistently demanding the story on the EMP. He pointed out that she was clearly the only person who seemed to have all the facts of the matter, which would normally mean a *Planet* exclusive. Though they might not be able to actually print it this time, they could still license the story to other news outlets to make up for the lost print revenue. Perry had also insisted that since she was part of the story, someone else would need to write up those details - preferably Clark, but Richard would do if her partner wasn't available.

Lois had reluctantly conceded his point and called Richard to join her at the Fortress. Returning to Smallville to write up the story simply wasn't an option. She refused to leave Clark's virtual bedside and didn't need to worry about what the kids might overhear. After summoning Richard to join her at the Fortress, she went to work pulling up all the available information on the afternoon's events.

Since they were still operating under the special rules for Luthor coverage, she needed collaborating evidence to support the allegations against Luthor. Fortunately, Jor-El had been able to reproduce video from his earlier scans of Luthor's camcorder tapes and also produced composite images from the memories scanned from the minds of the criminals as they slumbered in stasis aboard the spaceborne protocontinent. After editing the kids out of the recordings, she uploaded video of Luthor's incriminating 'interview' aboard the *Gertrude*, along with video of the missile launch from the ship's stern. She buried herself in the story and it quickly became a welcome distraction from her worry for Clark, though she did look over at his virtual bedside whenever one of the nurses showed up to check on him.

Her rumination was interrupted by Jor-El's voice as he announced, "The transportation

chamber will arrive at the portal in approximately one minute."

"That didn't take long," Lois commented.

"The journey began approximately thirteen minutes ago," Jor-El reminded her.

Lois rolled her eyes, rose from her seat, and headed towards the transportation portal in the front of the Fortress. She walked through the imposing twenty-foot tall doors out into the newly added entrance hall just as the hidden door in the side wall opened up, revealing Richard burdened with a pair of laptop bags over one shoulder and an old fashioned picnic basket in the opposite hand. "Hey," Lois greeted him wearily.

Richard looked over at her and commented, "Nice threads."

Lois looked down at her jumpsuit and grumbled, "Jor-El and Lara insisted I wear this because of my *alleged* hypothermia. I'll change back into normal clothes later... but I'm *keeping* the boots."

"That good, huh?" Richard replied casually. He gestured towards the picnic basket and added, "Martha insisted on packing a dinner for you. There's a thermos full of coffee, too."

"Oh, thank God for Martha!" Lois exclaimed enthusiastically. "You'd think that in the most advanced place on the face of the Earth that they'd know what coffee is ... Some advanced civilization, huh?"

"Guess they don't have much need for it," Richard offered. "I assume there's some way to warm the food up?"

"There's a kitchen in the East wing," Lois answered casually. "Follow me."

"What's through those doors behind us?" Richard asked, indicating the massive doors at the other end of the corridor.

"The arctic," Lois explained. "Jor-El says that the temperature's around two below outside, down from today's unseasonably warm five degrees Fahrenheit."

"Oh," Richard replied. "Maybe I should have brought a jacket."

"You'll be fine inside," Lois assured him. "Just be grateful that there *is* an inside now. A couple of weeks ago, this was still mostly an open-air structure."

"When did Clark find the time for home improvements?" Richard wondered.

"He really didn't need to. The modifications were grown automatically."

"Kind of like Luthor's nightmare continent?" Richard inquired.

"Yeah, but without the nightmare... or the kryptonite, or the EMP," Lois answered somberly. "Well, at least Clark was able to get rid of that monstrosity, though it damn near killed him to do it."

"I heard. Jor-El explained that to Ben and me before I came up. He said that Clark fell from orbit, but that he's 'recovering'. He didn't go into very much detail beyond that."

Lois sighed and then grouched, "Sometimes it's like pulling teeth to get anything useful out of that big floating head."

"Big floating head?"

"You'll see. Anyway, Jor-El said that Clark's cells are showing early signs of regeneration, but it's going *very* slowly. The process requires more energy than he's getting now that the sun's down. And the idiots in charge at the hospital put him in an interior room without any windows for 'security reasons'. We're going to have to do something about that."

"What do you have in mind?" Richard asked.

"Let's get inside and settled in before we get started on long explanations," Lois suggested, and she turned back towards the door and waved her hand over a protrusion beside it.

"Authentication required," Jor-El stated neutrally.

"Oh, come on! I just came through!" Lois complained.

"That is the new security protocol that *you* insisted on," Jor-El reminded her.

Lois huffed and then irritably replied, "Fine. Identify Lois Lane, pass phrase, 'Reap the Wind'. And grant Richard guest access to the Fortress on my authority."

A thin line of blue light swept across the entrance hall and the interior doors then opened as Jor-El declared, "Identity confirmed and guest authorization granted. You may proceed."

Richard inspected the Fortress' majestic architecture in amazement while following Lois inside. He remained astonished that he was an *invited guest* at Superman's Fortress and briefly overlooked the fact that the hero was also the shy son of Kansas farmers and Lois' true love. He recognized some architectural features from Luthor's protocontinent and concluded that the Fortress was every bit as intimidating though far less ominous. The pristine blue-white also struck him as far more majestic than the dingy green-grey of Luthor's nightmarish creation. *It's as much a Crystal Palace as it is a Fortress*, he thought.

His thoughts were interrupted by Lois' voice as she asked, "Were the kids any trouble?"

"Oh, they're fine," Richard assured her. "Martha and Ben were going to run them both through some exercises after dinner."

"Exercises?"

"Jason has to learn to control his strength," Richard clarified. "Martha thinks we should keep him home from school tomorrow and give him the weekend to work on that."

"He didn't break anything, did he?" Lois asked worriedly.

"Martha said not to worry about it. The serving bowl he broke had seen its better day and Kara was able to bend the silverware back into shape. Sounds like Martha was prepared for it. She's been using junk she picked up from rummage sales since Clark got back from Krypton with Kara, just in case. I guess Clark was rough on dishes and furniture when he was that age..."

Richard stopped and fell mute as they passed into the interior chamber and saw Jor-El's floating head scrutinizing the hologram of Clark's unconscious form. After a moment, Richard broke from his stupor and quietly commented, "Ah, so *that's* the big floating head. And Clark's *here* now?"

"Yes and no. Yes, that big floating head is Jor-El, and no, that's not really Clark. It's just a holographic image generated from the probes that are monitoring him," Lois said somberly. "He's still at Hahnemann, though they really don't know what to do for him now that they've got the kryptonite fragments out of his wounds. None of those idiots have figured out that he needs sunlight."

"He gets his power from the sun," Richard quoted. "How do we fix that?"

"Jor-El's working on it," Lois replied enigmatically. She resumed walking towards the holographic displays and added, "Come on. Let's drop the laptops at that table and then head to the kitchen to heat up the food."

Richard had just set the laptop bags on the table when Jor-El shifted his gaze to Lois and announced, "The starship is now in range."

"Then energize already," Lois commanded irritably.

"The term 'energize' is ambiguous," Jor-El replied neutrally. "Please clarify your meaning."

Lois huffed and said insistently, "Beam down the sun lamps."

"That was my intention," Jor-El informed her. Two bright balls of light then appeared on either side of Clark's hospital bed. Razor thin vertical rays of blue light appeared in the middle of the light balls and spread horizontally along the length of the bed as narrow rectangular objects materialized between them. A moment later, the light faded away to reveal two floating objects resembling stretched florescent light fixtures. The fixtures lit up, bathing Clark in a bright white light.

"Wow," Richard murmured breathlessly.

"Voilà! *Sunlight*," Lois declared. "And next time they check on him, Jor-El will *enlighten* them on the proper treatment regimen."

Richard wearily, "That'll keep the tabloids buzzing for awhile if it gets out. 'Superman's Father Arrives at Son's Bedside'."

"We'll contain it," Lois insisted. "Just one more thing we'll have to work on tonight... Bet you never thought the biggest story of the century would show up under your byline."

Richard shook his head and added, "Not necessarily. I was thinking about something Ben said to me before I came up - about not leaving too many clues back to the family or having people wonder where Clark's been through all this... I think it would be helpful if we used Clark's byline on this."

Lois nodded and sincerely said, "Thank you, Richard. You don't have to do that, you know."

"It's not a big deal. I really don't fight for bylines these days," Richard told her. He checked the tags on the laptop bags, picked one of them up and displayed it to Lois as he said hopefully, "Martha thought we might be able to get my laptop fixed here."

"Oh, right. Jor-El, Richard's laptop was damaged in Luthor's EMP. Can it be fixed?"

Jor-El turned towards Richard and a blue aura briefly enveloped the laptop case before Jor-El informed him. "The damage to the internal components is irreparable. However, that appears to be the same machine that you carried through the transportation portal this morning. If that is indeed the case, I can restore the machine to its state as it was when you passed through portal security this morning."

"Yeah, it's the same device. But how can you restore it?" Richard wondered.

"A full molecular scan is performed every time you pass through portal security and the logs from those scans are sufficient to reproduce the object," Jor-El explained.

"Would have been nice if you had mentioned you could do that earlier," Lois grumbled. "You could have 'restored' my purse and I'd have had my cell phone, instead of trying to work with that satellite phone which has almost no useful numbers programmed into it."

"Which item are you referring to?" Jor-El inquired.

"It's the white leather handbag I had with me when I brought the kids up to the Fortress this afternoon."

"I have reproduced both items," Jor-El informed her. "You'll find them in the dispenser on the second level."

"Same place I got the towels and the clothes from earlier?" Lois asked.

"That is correct."

"Thanks," Lois replied. She turned to Richard and said, "Tell you what, I'll get our things if you'll heat up the food. Jor-El or Lara can show you where the kitchen is and how to use it."

"Deal."

*Thursday, October 5, 2006 9:15PM EDT*

Perry looked out the window of the helicopter and noted the scant few lights in Gotham City beneath them, yet more evidence of the severity of the second EMP. The extent of the blackout surprised him, even though he'd been told what to expect. After all, it was serious enough for them to cannibalize parts from the *Planet's* presses and fly them to Gotham to fix the *Gazette's* EMP-damaged equipment. Perry had reluctantly conceded that it was the best option for both papers to get their print editions out in the morning, given the poor state the earthquake had left the *Planet* building in. They were planning a combined edition, under the dual banners of *The Daily Planet* and *The Gotham Gazette*, and focusing primarily on the EMP and its effects. Perry reflected that it would bear closer resemblance to a special edition than the morning paper, but at least they'd get a paper out, once Lois got the story in.

The profound lack of information they'd managed to gather before boarding the helicopter for Gotham had left Perry unsettled. With most communications and transit systems disabled by the event, it had been hard to determine the true extent of the damage. It was only through one of the assistant editor's relatives at the *Detroit News* that they learned it had darkened half the Eastern Seaboard. That was enough information to whet his appetite for the 'Big Story', but not enough to really know what was going on and far from adequate to go to press with - it was little more than a teaser. Perry desperately hoped that Lois would be able to fill in the blanks when she finally filed her story.

Thoughts of Lois immediately reminded him of his startling discovery about her partner, Clark Kent. *All these years, and a simple pair of glasses hid the Earth's greatest secret*, Perry thought. *Who would ever have thought that Superman was actually a mild-mannered, award-winning Daily Planet reporter and father of two... And those two kids could provide another generation of Superman exclusives for the Planet in a couple decades. God, I hope I live to see that.* Perry chuckled and pondered, *I wonder how he'll explain them...*

The pilot's voice cut into Perry's ruminations as he announced, "Gentlemen, we're coming up on the *Gazette* and should be on the ground in a couple minutes."

Perry turned to the *Planet's* senior press engineer, Tim Sullivan, and reminded him, "Looks like you and the *Gazette* crew will have a little more than an hour and a half to get all of the fried electronics swapped before we need to start printing. I can't stress enough how important it is to be able to start running the presses by eleven."

"We'll make that deadline somehow, but it's not a lot of time when you consider how much we may have to swap out. We won't really know what we're dealing with until we get it all opened up," Tim replied. He gestured towards the window and added, "Looks like we're here."

Once the helicopter's skids touched the roof, two men rush over, rolling a cart in front of them. Perry opened the door and heard one of them shout, "Let's get the parts first!"

Perry squeezed out of the way so that Tim could load his boxes up on the cart and waited until the younger man and the two *Gazette* press operators were trotting away before he retrieved his overnight bag from under the seat. Sam Foswell and George Taylor exited behind him and the three men marched over to the access door where the *Gazette's* Editor-In-Chief, Nancy Garrett, was waiting for him. She was a slender woman just over 5'6" tall who looked years younger than the sixty-one years that Perry knew her to be.

Nancy ushered them inside the door and amiably teased, "It's about time you got here."

"Oh, give me a break. The helicopter didn't get to Metropolis until almost eight," Perry protested.

"And the *Planet's* EIC still can't tell when a woman is joking," Nancy replied. She pushed

the elevator call button and added, "By the way, if Lane and Kent ever get tired of putting up with an old curmudgeon like you, I'll take them in a heartbeat. Just wait until you see what they have in the story queue. And that *video*-"

"What video?" Perry pressed gruffly.

"Looks like Lois made it off the boat with some of Luthor's home movies - very incriminating stuff," Nancy explained. "We'll more than make up for tomorrow's lost print circulation by licensing that footage to the television news channels."

"That material came from a *Planet* reporter which makes it *Planet* revenue," Perry reminded her adamantly.

"It all goes into the same pot, but don't worry - the income will go on your books," Nancy assured him.

Perry's reply was interrupted by the ding of the elevator bell, announcing the car's arrival. A moment later the doors opened, and the group walked into the elevator. "Did their story explain what's going on with the blackout right now?" Perry pressed.

"And then some," Nancy replied excitedly as she pushed the button for the editorial floor. "And it wasn't just one story, either. They've submitted a *half dozen* of them and every last one of them had more detail on this national event than all the other news media combined. Of course, the big story is Luthor's terrorist attack against North America."

"What else did they say?" Sam asked curiously.

"Gentlemen, I am *not* going to recite the stories from memory. They're in the review queue. You can read them yourselves when you get time, but try to remember that we've got less than two hours until deadline and still have a ton of work ahead of us."

"Amen," Perry stated seriously. "Will we have the same setup as last time?"

"It'll be a little different," Nancy explained. "You'll be sharing a guest office, instead of a conference room, so it'll be a bit more cramped. We're using the conference rooms for computer labs until we get the fried desktops replaced."

"Sounds like you got burned pretty badly this time, too," Perry commented.

"Yeah, but we caught a lucky break," Nancy replied. "Our IT department was in the middle of an equipment refresh - we lease our computer assets on a three-year cycle to keep with the latest technology, same as you do."

"I think they did our lease refresh before Labor Day," Perry noted.

"Well, ours was this week. They had just finished boxing up all the old stuff for the truck to pick up tomorrow, but when the EMP hit, they dug it all back out. That's still only enough for about a third of our headcount, and it's taking forever to image the old desktops."

"Image the desktops?" George inquired.

"The terminology threw me too, when I asked about it," Nancy admitted. "Our IT operations manager said that they zero out the hard drives before sending equipment back, so there was no operating system or applications or anything on them. They needed to reinstall all that from a master copy or 'image' and they call that process 'imaging'. Anyway, IT gave priority to setting up the computer labs before working on getting the rest of the available desktops ready for deployment."

Their conversation was interrupted by the elevator bell announcing their floor and the group stepped out into the newsroom. Nancy led them to a small office next to the break room, which had four desktop computers spread across a wooden desk and a folding table. "Sorry for the accommodations but this was the best we could do under the circumstances."

"Speaking of accommodations..." Perry began.

"The local hotels have rooms but no way to get into them - the EMP fried the card readers on the doors," Nancy informed him apologetically. "You'll be Lucius Fox's house guests for the night."

"I suppose that's a small sacrifice to make, for us at least," Perry joked. He turned to the others and his tone turned serious as he said, "Time to get to work, gentlemen."

"Don't forget we're doing a combined edition," Nancy reminded him. "Once you've got the Metropolis section done, join me in my office to finish things up."

Perry nodded absently and sat in front of one of the PCs and logged in while Nancy retreated to her office. He quickly found the Lane and Kent stories and his eyes gravitated to the last of the six entries: "Superman Overcome by Kryptonite, Falls From Orbit" by Clark Kent. His eyes widened in amazement as he read of Superman's fall and his evacuation to an "undisclosed medical facility", where knowledgeable sources reported that the Man of Steel "remained unconscious".

*Well, Kent obviously didn't write this if Superman's unconscious, Perry concluded. But it doesn't read like Lois' work either.* It was only after reading through it a second time that Perry recognized a certain journalist's overused expressions and bad habit of throwing an occasional extra 'u' into words like favorite, still following the British spelling six years after moving back from London. *Son of a... This is Richard's work. He's covering for Kent,* Perry realized. *I wonder when they told him...*

Ron Troupe lounged back in his recliner, nursing a beer as he halfheartedly attempted to entertain his friend, Jimmy Olsen. The energetic photographer had been kind enough to offer him a ride home on the back of his scooter and had managed to steer around the immobilized vehicles in the road. It had still been slow going with all the pedestrian traffic and easily added two hours to his usual commute. Of course, Lucy had insisted that Jimmy stay the night rather than face that traffic again on his way home, especially given some of the bad neighborhoods he'd have to ride through.

Jimmy's infectious excitement had also helped the kids forget their fears. Lucy had been frantic, too, but visibly relaxed when they'd finally made it to the house. Ron had been quick to remind everyone that they had fared the disaster rather well: Their friends and family were unharmed; Although the walls of their house had countless new cracks, the house was still standing and wasn't about to fall down; Power and gas were out, but their refrigerator was full and they still had a working grill and camping stove, which meant a hot dinner and hot chocolate later; They had no heat, but the temperatures were mild enough that they'd make it through the night comfortably with sweats and extra blankets.

They'd turned the apparent hardship into an adventure for the kids, camping out inside the house with a fire in the hearth and a camping lantern to provide additional illumination. Board games like Clue and Pictionary Junior kept the kids happily occupied, with the competition crowding out the fright from the events earlier that afternoon. Once the games were over, the visibly fatigued children were ushered up to bed by their mother, leaving the two men to talk shop.

The men's conversation was subdued with long gaps of silence, due in part to Ron's thoughts again returning to the startling revelation that had left him preoccupied most of the evening. *Clark, my friend, when this is over, you and I are going to need to sit down for a long talk,* Ron thought. *Geez, I still can't believe one of my best friends has turned out to actually be Superman...*

"Some day, huh?" Jimmy commented casually, interrupting Ron's musings.

"That's an understatement," Ron muttered. "I still can hardly believe everything that happened this afternoon."

"Well, Superman'll probably have it all straightened out in no time at all," Jimmy assured him cheerfully. "I just hope I'll be able to upload the rest of my pictures in the morning."

"I still think it will be your picture on the front page," Ron opined. "That memory card you gave Perry had the shot you took of Superman lifting the globe, right?"

"Oh, yeah!" Jimmy replied enthusiastically. "Perry's *got* to be happy with that one. If that's not 'iconic', I don't know what is."

"I think Perry was delighted with it, even if he didn't say it."

Ron heard a creak from one of the stairs and looked over as Lucy walked down, burdened with a bundle of bedding and carrying a lit flashlight in one hand. She met her husband's gaze and said, "I thought Jimmy might want a pillow and blankets."

"Thanks, Lucy, but you didn't need to bother," Jimmy told her politely. "It wouldn't be the first time I'd sacked out on your couch with just the afghan."

"This is a little different - it could get chilly in here overnight with the heat out," Lucy pointed out. She set the bundle on the end of the couch and added, "There's an old pair of Ron's sweats for you to sleep in, too."

"I don't usually bother with that stuff," Jimmy began.

"Just make sure that my kids don't come down in the morning and find you passed out in your underwear," Ron interjected mirthfully, provoking giggles from Lucy. "They'd need therapy after that..."

Jimmy blushed brightly at the comment and protested, "I'm not going to pass out."

Lucy swallowed down her laughter and told the men, "Well, I don't know how late you two are planning on staying up, but I'm about to turn in."

"I think I'm ready to call it a night, too," Ron decided. He turned to Jimmy and said, "I can take that beer bottle if you're done with it."

"Oh, don't worry about it. I'll clean up," Jimmy said insistently. "It's the least I can do after all your hospitality." He reached for Ron's nearly empty bottle as he stood up and the other man surrendered it before grabbing the camping lantern and following his wife up the stairs.

Once in their bedroom, Ron began emptying his pockets while Lucy closely scrutinized him. Finally, she broke the silence, gently asking, "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Talk about what?"

"Whatever it is that's had you distracted all evening," Lucy clarified. "Something's bothering you."

"I'm not sure 'bothering' is the right word," Ron mused. "The afternoon was full of unexpected surprises, though."

"No kidding. Which one were you obsessing over?"

Ron opened his mouth to reply, but then suddenly snapped it shut. He sighed, and finally said, "If I told you, you either wouldn't believe it, or if you did, you wouldn't get a wink of sleep. Maybe it would be best to save this conversation for another time."

"So my choices are being kept up all night because whatever's on your mind is so shocking, or being kept up all night by your tossing and turning because you're overanalyzing it," Lucy concluded. "Was it really that bad?"

"Not 'bad', per se," Ron explained quietly. "Just unexpected and some pieces of the



puzzle don't quite fit. I really haven't had a chance to talk it through with any of the precious few people who have all the facts."

"What do you know about whatever this is?" Lucy asked patiently.

"I'd really rather not get into it."

"Didn't we just establish that this is probably going to keep us both up anyway?" Lucy pressed. "Come on, Ron. Spit it out. We've never kept secrets from each other before. Why should this be any different?"

"Because it's the probably the world's most important secret with very serious consequences if it ever got out," Ron replied enigmatically.

"There's no way you're keeping it from me *now*, after a teaser like that," Lucy replied with a chuckle. "Don't worry, my lips are sealed. Now spill."

Ron turned to his wife and recognized the Lane determination in her eyes. He sighed and after a moment of contemplation, he admitted in a whisper, "I just found out something... about Clark and his kids that I never would have imagined."

Lucy snorted and insisted, "Well, it can't be that bad. This is *Clark* we're talking about."

"And *Kara*, and *Jason*," Ron clarified. "Their... heritage... is *very* different than what you think."

"Different? You mean interracial? Ron, *our* kids are interracial."

"No, this is different. The Kents are... *Kryptonian*," Ron finally confessed in a quiet voice.

"Kryptonian? You mean like Superman?" Lucy asked incredulously.

"Actually, Clark *is* Superman," Ron corrected.

Lucy giggled and replied, "Clark? *Superman*? That's simply not possible."

"Keep your voice down!" Ron chastised her in a loud whisper. After a moment he added, "I didn't think that was possible either, at least not until I saw Kara and Jason *fly*. And Perry confirmed it."

"The kids *flew*?"

"After Superman caught the globe, Jason was a little upset that he hadn't rescued Lois yet," Ron explained. "The kids took off into the crowd and I ran after them. I followed them into the alley behind Restaurant Row just in time to see those two munchkins rocket up into the air and disappear into the clouds so fast that they left a sonic boom behind them. Our good friend, *Clark Kent*, is Superman. And his kids... Oh, sweet Jesus..."

Lucy sat heavily on their bed. "But Jason's been so fragile," she protested. "There's no way he's got superpowers."

"I don't know if he has *all* of Clark abilities or how much Kara was helping him, but they were definitely flying," Ron clarified. "Lucy, this can't leave this room. Nobody can ever know their secret."

"You've got that right," an angry disembodied voice interjected. Ron and Lucy looked in the direction of the voice and saw a dull glow at the foot of their bed grow bright and coalesce into a translucent vision of Lois Lane. "You don't breathe a word about Clark or the kids. Understand? Nobody can know about this."

"Lois?" Lucy muttered hysterically. "What - what happened to you?"

"Calm down, Luce, this is just a hologram," Lois assured her. "What, did you think I was a ghost or something?"

"Um, I-" Lucy sputtered.

"I'm broadcasting from Superman's Fortress. With half the Eastern Seaboard knocked out,

I thought I'd check and make sure you guys were okay. Good thing I did."

"Lois, we weren't planning on going public with this," Ron replied apprehensively. "But you *know* I can't keep secrets from your sister."

"This isn't our secret to tell," Lois said adamantly. "And if Superman's enemies ever found out, it'd put *all* of us in danger."

"Lois, we're *not* going to tell anyone else about this," Ron assured her. "Not even the kids."

"So Clark really *is* Superman?" Lucy murmured. "And Jason's *flying*?"

"Surprised me, too. We weren't expecting Jason to go 'super' until puberty," Lois admitted. She turned to Ron and asked, "Did anyone else see those two fly off?"

Ron shook his head and said, "I don't think so. They were hidden in an alley. I barely spotted them myself before they disappeared into the clouds and I didn't notice a reaction from any of the pedestrians on Concord. No way would anyone have stayed silent if they'd seen that."

"And you said that *Perry* knows, too?" Lois asked anxiously. "God, this is so out of control."

"Perry said that he's *always* known, that he was never fooled by the glasses," Ron informed her. "He was also adamant that he didn't want you or Clark to know that he knew. He said it was easier that way. I'm not sure what he meant by that."

"What an odd thing to say," Lucy muttered.

"He probably realizes that Clark would freak out if he found out that Perry knew," Lois declared. "Beneath that spandex, he's still just a shy farm-boy from a small town in Kansas."

"Speaking of which... How can he be both from Kansas *and* from Krypton?" Ron inquired curiously.

Lois sighed and said, "It's a long story, but the short version is that he was just a baby when Krypton exploded. His escape ship crashed in a Kansas cornfield, where the Kents found him and adopted him. Clark had a fairly normal childhood and didn't find out about his heritage until he was eighteen."

"But what about-" Lucy began.

"Luce, please, I'm really not up for the Q and A session right now," Lois interrupted. "The rest of the explanations will have to wait."

"Sorry."

"It's okay," Lois told her. She was silent for a moment and then asked, "So, how are you guys holding up?"

"Well, this is a lot to wrap our heads around," Lucy replied.

"No, I meant with the earthquake and blackout," Lois explained.

"Power and gas are out, which means no heat, landlines and cell phones are out and the water looks and smells a little funky. And the roads are parking lots," Ron informed her. "But we have plenty of bottled water in the garage, the grill and camping stove work fine, and the fridge is full, though stuff will start spoiling if we don't get power back soon. We're okay for now... Think you can give us a rundown on what happened?"

"Geez, I really don't have the energy to go through that again," Lois complained. "Let me check and see if we can beam down a hardcopy of the stories we submitted earlier."

"Beam down? You mean like *Star Trek*? 'Beam me up, Scotty' kind of beam down?" Lucy asked in amazement.

"That's the general idea," Lois confirmed. "It doesn't work for people, but *things* are

fine... Okay, the star ship is already in position for us to relay a transporter beam. Hold on..."

Lois' apparition faded and disappeared, and a few minutes later, a bright ball of light suddenly appeared over the top of the dresser with a razor-thin line of blue light appearing vertically in the middle. The blue light split and spread horizontally as a stack of papers and a pair of cell phones materialized. The lights faded a moment later.

Lois' hologram rematerialized and she told them, "Okay, those are the *Planet* stories, which should explain everything. I also replaced your cell phones. Your old ones were thoroughly fried and we couldn't recover the contact lists, but I copied the important numbers for work and family from my phone... Oh, you should know that you're roaming right now, too."

"But this is our home area," Ron pointed out.

"The Metropolis grid is down, so we have to handle the calls through a Kryptonian comm network and route it back to cellular in San Jose."

"Oh."

"Now, if there's nothing else, I need to get some sleep," Lois said wearily. "It's been an exhausting day." Her apparition then disappeared again.

Ron reached over and pulled the stack of papers out from under the cell phones, his eyes shooting wide in surprise at some of the story titles. "Good God," he muttered.

"That bad?" Lucy asked tentatively.

"See for yourself," Ron replied and he handed over roughly half of the pages to his wife. The two then eagerly read through the amazing stories that Lois had left for them.

## Chapter 49 - Top Secrets

*Friday, October 6, 2006 7:30AM EDT*

Lieutenant General Sam Lane yawned widely as he reviewed the latest Pentagon status updates in his office. His role in their current effort had kept him at the Pentagon past one in the morning and he was back behind his desk by six. Fortunately, the army had cleared enough of the surrounding roads that his trip home only took an extra half hour at that time of night, sparing him from complete exhaustion.

His mind drifted from the reports and he reflected that the nation had suffered an unparalleled attack, with a greater geographical impact than any single attack or natural disaster in the country's history. Everyone at the Pentagon had accordingly pulled long hours dealing with the aftermath. Their primary mission was to protect the United States and they needed to make sure that those hostile to America didn't attempt to exploit the disaster.

Another of their priorities was to provide whatever assistance they could in the recovery effort and they found themselves assisting the overwhelmed Department of Homeland Security. They were also providing logistical support to local authorities and manpower to the extent that the law allowed. Most of that burden fell to the United States Northern Command, which had deployed mobile hospitals, set up temporary housing and food distribution centers, and reequipped local police. Their role was certain to expand if Congress authorized an exception to the Posse Comitatus Act to allow them to assist with domestic law enforcement, as Congressional leaders had promised. The law as it currently stood prohibited all but the Coast Guard from assuming that duty.

The Pentagon was also coordinating with the numerous allies who'd pledged people and equipment to help the country through the disaster. Though he gave them credit for offering their assistance, Sam concluded that when it came down to it, they were looking after their own interests, which were primarily economic. The United States remained the world's largest economy and such a massive economic disruption was certain to have ripples throughout the rest of the world. The disaster had shut down Wall Street, a half dozen of America's busiest seaports were at a standstill, and hundreds of cargo ships were either anchored offshore, waiting for instructions, or diverting to other ports outside the affected region.

Sam suddenly noticed his difficulty keeping the text before him in focus and pushed himself back from his desk. He drained his coffee cup and marched into the outer room to get more coffee. He'd just finished refilling his cup when he heard his aide, Lieutenant Wayne Dumas, greet an unexpected guest. "Good Morning, General Maples, sir," the man said deferentially.

Sam looked over to find Lieutenant General Michael Maples just inside the outer door. "Good Morning, Lieutenant. Morning, Sam," Maples replied courteously.

"Morning, Mike," Sam greeted him.

Mike Maples seemed to suddenly notice the paper sitting on table between the guest chairs and exclaimed in surprise, "You've got this morning's *Planet*? I didn't think they'd get a printed paper out today. Metropolis is practically shut down."

Sam observed his colleague as he picked up the paper and scanned the headlines, where he'd certainly notice Lois Lane's byline marked up with a yellow highlighter. It was a habit Sam had begun years ago, after his daughter got her first job as a reporter. The simple gesture spoke volumes for his pride in her work and reminded him of simpler days, when a preteen Lois would proudly show her father what she'd accomplished.

When the other man looked up, Sam pointed out, "That's the outstate edition. They print

locally about twenty miles south of here in the same plant that puts out local copies of *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times* and *USA Today*."

"Is that so?"

"One of our neighbors is a manager there," Sam explained. After a brief pause, he added, "Something on your mind?"

"A couple things," Maples confirmed. "I won't take much of your time."

Sam nodded towards his office and said, "Come on in. Make yourself comfortable." Sam walked backed into his office and added over his shoulder, "Judging by that paper, it looks like my Lois is still a few steps ahead of your people."

"She might have made a decent intelligence officer," Maples suggested as he entered behind Sam and closed the door behind him.

"She'd have made a *great* intelligence officer," Sam corrected adamantly. "Need I remind you that the best actionable intelligence we got yesterday came from Lois? She's also the one who tracked the first EMP back to Luthor and it was her investigation that dug up the evidence that practically nailed that bastard's hide to the wall before all hell broke loose. And she did all that without *any* of our resources."

Mike Maples smiled at Sam's response and amiably said, "I hear she also rescued Superman yesterday - dove right into the Atlantic after him. You have every right to be proud of her." He sat down in the guest chair and added, "Anyway, I wanted to talk to you about that debriefing we scheduled here with the SEAL squad commanders this morning. You got the meeting notice, didn't you?"

"Oh eighty-thirty, room two bravo three one five."

"Yeah. Well, the chopper will arrive early enough to give you a half hour or so for that private meeting you wanted with Daniels. Just don't make him late for the debriefing."

"I won't. Thanks, Mike. I owe you one."

Mike waved the morning paper in front of him and said, "Get that daughter of yours in here for a debriefing and I'll call it even."

Sam groaned and sarcastically replied, "You should have asked for the moon. It would have been easier to deliver..."

Richard groggily trudged down the stairs of Ben Hubbard's house and towards the kitchen, still exhausted from a sleepless night but also tired of lying awake in bed. Martha had revealed the incredible tale behind the Earth's guardian and his biological cousin/adopted daughter, but Richard was still left wondering about the history between Lois and Clark before he left to rescue Kara six years earlier. He'd replayed his interactions with Clark and Lois since the hero's return from Krypton, now cast in a different light given his knowledge of his true identity.

Richard had also been overanalyzing his relationship with Lois, hunting for some scenario where he didn't lose her to the hero and hoping that Ben had been right that he needn't throw in the towel. Though he acknowledged that Clark *seemed* to be going out of his way to avoid interfering with their relationship, Richard concluded that *that* effort was as futile as his own. Lois' heart had revealed itself through countless hints and the inescapable conclusion was that her heart belonged to Clark.

Richard walked into the kitchen where he found Ben sitting at the table, reading the morning paper and sipping from a coffee mug. The old man looked up at him sympathetically and said amiably, "Morning, Richard. Looks like it's a good thing we have a fresh pot of

coffee."

Richard sighed and asked, "Do I look that bad?" He pulled a mug out of the cupboard and walked over to the percolator to fill it up.

"Folks tend to get a bit more perceptive when they get older," Ben replied softly. "I also know you're juggling a lot of new information and trying to figure out how it affects you."

"I have a pretty good idea how this affects me," Richard muttered. He sat down in the chair opposite Ben and then added, "I still can't help but wonder about Lois' history with Clark in light of these revelations, though. She talked about some of it last night, after we submitted our stories... Did they ever explain to you about Clark folding space-time?"

"Clark tried, but that super-science mumble jumble goes right over my head," Ben admitted.

"I think I get the concept - that we repeated eight days six years ago and only Clark remembers what happened the first time through," Richard commented. "It certainly puts a different spin on things, like my assumptions on Jason's paternity. Lois also shared a few anecdotes about Clark's first days with the *Planet*, but it still barely scratches the surface. There was so much more that I wanted to ask about, but it just didn't seem right to press the matter last night. Not when she was so distraught over Clark's injuries. So I just sat there and let her talk, for as much or as little as she cared to."

"That may have been more helpful to her than anything else you could have done," Ben concluded. "I'm sure she appreciates that, just like I'm sure there will be time for deeper conversation later."

The wall phone interrupted their conversation, and Ben rose from his seat to answer it. "Hello?" he said into the handset. "Of course, Martha. I'll be right over... Oh, you don't have to do that... All right then. We'll tackle the repairs after breakfast. See you in a bit... Good bye."

"Repairs?" Richard questioned.

"Kara had a bad nightmare last night," Ben explained. "Clark usually keeps a close eye on her through the night, zooming his vision in on the house every few minutes from halfway across the globe. If he sees her starting to get agitated, he rushes home to calm her before it gets too bad. He obviously wasn't able to do that last night, so we need to patch some holes in the wall. Martha's decided to bribe me with a big breakfast before we get started. You're invited, too."

"You can count me in, for both the breakfast and the home repairs," Richard informed him.

Sam Lane analyzed the personnel file on his computer, searching for a strategy that would give him the advantage when Navy Lieutenant Alex Daniels walked through his office door. Daniels was a promising young naval officer and Sam concluded that it was unlikely that he'd be able to browbeat the missing details out of him. *What are they hiding?* Sam wondered. Whatever it was, Lois had admitted that she'd implied to Daniels that it was a classified military secret. In other words, Daniels believed that Sam Lane already knew the secret. *Lois isn't the only one who can bluff*, Sam thought confidently.

Sam reflected that he wouldn't have even known that something was missing from the report but for his daughter's anxious call. Lois had confided that the events she was concerned about had occurred around the time of her initial extraction from Luthor's sinking yacht. Judging from Daniels' report, both Lois and her rescuers would have met their end without Superman's intervention, which the SEAL officer had described as 'Kryptonian assistance'. His

description of the event was concise and to the point, with no hint of omission or subterfuge: They'd been trapped in the pantry, but Superman had pulled the yacht out of the sea, freed them from the pantry and had transported them to White's seaplane before returning Daniels to the Navy Osprey. *Whatever this is has to be huge, if Lois is asking for my help*, Sam concluded.

He was interrupted from his analysis by the sharp ring of his desk phone, and he jumped back with a start. He recognized his aide's extension in the caller ID display and picked up the phone. "Yes, Lieutenant Dumas?"

"Lieutenant Daniels has arrived, sir."

"I'll be right out," Sam replied. He locked his screen and marched out into the other room.

"General Lane. Lieutenant Alex Daniels, sir," Daniels greeted as he saluted.

Sam returned the salute and said, "At ease, Lieutenant." He offered the younger man his hand in a warm handshake and added mirthfully, "I understand my daughter gave you nearly as much grief yesterday as she usually gives me."

"It was my honor, sir."

"Let's take this into my office," Sam replied. The pair withdrew to the private office, closing the door behind them. As they settled into their seats, Sam got right to the point. "I had a rather unusual phone call from my daughter last night that I was hoping you could help explain."

"Sir?" Daniels replied uncertainly.

"She asked me to *help* you if there were problems with your report and to make certain something that you witnessed yesterday stays contained," Sam explained somberly. "Now my daughter knows better that to discuss certain... details... over an unsecured line. Unfortunately, that leaves me in the dark as to what really happened. And your report doesn't really shed much light on that, which is why I asked to see you."

"Sir, everything in my report is accurate," Daniels replied defensively.

"Of course. But we both know that something's *missing*, don't we?" Sam countered. After a brief pause, he added, "Relax, Daniels, I'm on your side. But if I'm going to be of any help to you during the debriefing at the bottom of the hour, I need to know what really happened. I have my suspicions, naturally, but I'm really hoping it's not what I think it is."

"What do you think it is, sir?"

"If you don't already know, I can't tell you," Sam replied simply. He picked up a folder from his desk and perused the pages inside and continued, "Now in your report, you mentioned that you'd been trapped in the ship's pantry when it went under."

"Yes, sir. I thought we were goners."

"But Superman saved you," Sam stated seriously.

"Not exactly, sir," Daniels admitted.

"I thought you said your report was accurate?" Sam questioned sternly.

"It is, though it's possible that one might draw a different conclusion that what actually occurred."

"And what actually occurred?" Sam asked insistently.

"Well, sir, I said in my report that the yacht was pulled out of the sea with 'Kryptonian assistance'," Daniels reminded him. "However, the Kryptonian who assisted us was *not* Superman and there wasn't just one... The Kryptonians, plural, who rescued us, were your *grandchildren*: Kara and Jason."

"Jason?" Sam echoed in surprise. Only years of training kept his poker face from

completely failing him after the astonishing revelation. *That would make Superman Jason's biological father... That can't be, can it?*

"Your daughter seemed a bit surprised by that, too. Apparently the little guy just started flying recently. He also saved his mother *before* we even got to the boat - by throwing a full-size, concert grand piano at the thug who attacked her."

Sam quickly recovered and somberly commanded, "Lieutenant, you are not to repeat what you learned about my family outside this room. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir. In fact, I've already given your daughter my word on that. Families are off-limits."

"Damn right they are. Now, as for the yacht... you're going to tell me *everything* that happened out there. And then you're going to *forget* that it ever happened."

*Friday, October 6, 2006 10:05AM EDT*

The shrill sound of a cell phone penetrated the darkness and Lois reached a hand out from under the blankets, groping for it futilely but instead only grasping handfuls of air over the edge of the bed. The ringing stopped without Lois' intervention, but instead of resuming her rest, she found the unexpected details of the past few minutes nagging at her consciousness. She reflected that although it was her habit to recharge her phone overnight on the night stand, it seemed to have rung from the other room. There also didn't appear to be a nightstand. The mattress she was on was also far firmer than the soft foam one that she was accustomed to and it seemed to be round instead of rectangular.

Unable to ignore the puzzle any longer, Lois pulled back the covers and cautiously peeked out at her surroundings. Even in the dim light, she immediately recognized the majestic crystal of the Fortress and recalled the previous day's ordeal. She had stubbornly refused to leave Clark's virtual bedside and was nodding off at the table before Lara's gentle encouragement finally convinced her to take advantage of the private quarters.

Lois threw the blankets off and sat up with her feet over the edge of the bed, yawning widely as she tried to blink away the last of her sleep. She stared unfocused at her lap for a moment before finally reaching for her boots and then marching decisively out of the room. Once down in the main chamber, her first priority was to check on Clark. The hologram still showed him sleeping and his vital signs appeared little different that they were the night before.

She looked up at Jor-El's floating head and asked, "How's he doing?"

"His recovery is progressing as expected," Jor-El answered simply.

"Care to elaborate on that?" Lois pressed irritably.

"My analysis indicates that his cells are regenerating at a rapidly increasing rate, as expected," Jor-El clarified.

"And that means what, exactly?" Lois demanded. "How long is it going to take? When's he going to wake up?"

Jor-El paused momentarily and then told her, "There is little to add to last night's explanation. The cellular regeneration process has progressed from zero point seven percent complete to three percent, as expected, and it remains on track with initial estimates. There are now approximately fifty-four hours remaining before the regeneration process completes and he is unlikely to awaken before then without substantial effort. He may also remain sleeping for a short time afterwards while his regenerated cells recharge under the sun lamps."

"You could have told me that the first time," Lois complained. She then fished her cell



phone out of her purse and browsed the list of missed calls. She skimmed past a surprising mass of unfamiliar callers and paused over the most recent call. *I wonder what Lucy wants,* Lois thought and she dialed the voicemail number.

"*You have... twenty-nine... unheard messages. First message...*" the automated voice informed her.

Lois groaned, and canceled out of her voicemail, this time dialing her sister directly.

"*Lois!*" Lucy answered excitedly. "*I take it you got my message.*"

"Actually, no. I've got too many voicemails queued up ahead of you and don't have the patience to go through them all right now," Lois complained. "What's up?"

"*Hold on a minute,*" Lucy said. Lois could hear the noise from the kids in the background diminish and a moment later, Lucy added, "*Sorry about that. Ron's out with Jimmy, so I'm here alone with the kids. Just needed a little privacy... Well, back to why I called. The power's still out here and according to the CNN mobile page, it could be out for a while. Well, the milk's already starting to sour and the few stores that were still open have been picked clean. So, we were wondering... Do you think you might be able to beam down some supplies for us?*"

"Lucy, we don't discuss those kinds of things over the phone," Lois replied anxiously. "We can't risk being overheard."

"*Oh, sorry,*" Lucy replied meekly.

"The communications link remains isolated to the encrypted Kryptonian carrier wave," Jor-El interrupted. "You are unlikely to be overheard."

"Except by you, so stop eavesdropping," Lois snapped. She returned her attention to Lucy and said, "Well, it appears that since we're both using Kryptonian phones, the call is isolated to an encrypted Kryptonian comm network, so no harm this time. Still, as a rule, we don't discuss this stuff over the phone. I still need to explain the rules to you and Ron about that stuff. I knew I was forgetting something last night."

"*We're really going to need to get the full story on all that tech stuff,*" Lucy declared. "*Maybe you can pop in later, like you did last night?*"

"Maybe. Anyway, you said something about needing groceries?"

"*Right. Well, for now, it's just the milk, but that list is going to start getting longer without the refrigerator running, which brings us to our wish list...*"

Lois sighed and said irritably, "All right, let's have it. What have you got?"

"*First on the list is an emergency generator.*"

"Okay. What else?" Lois prodded.

"*Well since both the work laptop and home PC are probably fried, we'll need something for Ron to file his stories. Ron said he'd help cover for Clark while he's, um, you know.*"

"I might take him up on that. Anything else?"

"*Add a fresh tank of propane for the grill - ours is getting pretty low. And the milk. Two percent. That's really all we need right now,*" Lucy informed her. After a beat, she asked, "*Oh, do you think a generator could power the whole house, or will we need to run extension cords from one of those little ones? If it's the whole house, some electric space heaters would be lovely - it got pretty chilly last night. And the gas is still out.*"

"I think you usually need extension cords, but that would still work for the refrigerator and a couple space heaters," Lois told her. "Okay. I'll give you a call once I've got everything scrounged up."

"*Lois, wait. One more thing,*" Lucy added urgently.

"What did you forget?"

"Um, Ron and I were talking last night after your visit and we got to thinking a little about Superman's technology..."

"I assume you're going somewhere with this," Lois commented impatiently.

"Well, considering what we've seen of its capabilities, it just seems that it could really speed up the repairs to the cities. And you clearly have access to it."

"Hold on," Lois replied, and she then lowered the phone and called out, "Jor-El, were you listening in on my sister's question? Can we use this technology to help rebuild the devastated cities?"

"Kryptonian law strictly prohibits the use of our technology on less advanced societies," Jor-El declared. "In fact, it is only through a family exemption that I have been able to comply with your requests thus far."

"That didn't stop Luthor from using that same Kryptonian tech to try to destroy half the planet," Lois pointed out.

"That was also a violation of Kryptonian law."

"So can't you do anything to undo the damage from that abuse of Kryptonian technology?" Lois asked incredulously.

Jor-El paused a moment and then explained, "The law accommodates some exemptions under such circumstances but they are extremely narrow in scope, strictly limiting what can be done and also require the consent of indigenous authorities."

"But there *is* a loophole."

"There are exemptions allowed under similar circumstances to what has occurred," Jor-El confirmed. "However, any action taken *must* fully comply with both local and Kryptonian law and we cannot overburden our energy reserves while Kal-El requires that power for the sun lamps."

Lois heard Lucy's muffled voice and brought the phone back up to her ear. "Sorry about that," she said. "Looks like we might be able to do something, but there are strings attached. It's going to take a little bit before we're ready to do anything."

"Well, it's got to be better than the months or years that the so-called experts on CNN are saying," Lucy concluded.

The conversation was interrupted by another ring on Lois' cell phone. "Hold on, Luce, I've got another call coming in... Never mind. It's just Dad again."

"He probably just wanted to know that you're okay," Lucy speculated. "Mom called us this morning, you know."

"He already knows we're safe. This is something else. I can't do that conversation over the phone and he'd freak out if I transmitted a hologram, especially given what I have to tell him. I need to go there and talk to him in person."

*Saturday, October 7, 2006 9:15AM EDT*

Sam Lane felt his anger growing as he drove to his 'offsite meeting' with his daughter. The anger surfaced whenever he thought about the previous day's revelation, though his heavy workload at the Pentagon had helped him avoid the troubling subject and kept his anger at bay. However, now that he was on his way to meet Lois at the Sheraton National Hotel, as she had requested, his anger came back with a passion. The Earth's Guardian apparently had a thing for human women and had knocked up his eldest daughter six years earlier, along with God only knows how many other women. There had to be at least one other, if Lois was caring for the

man's seven-year-old daughter, and if there was one, there were certain to be more.

Even more aggravating was Lois' steadfast defense of the man, though Sam hadn't told her that he had figured out who Jason's biological father really was. It wasn't something that could be discussed over an unsecured line. A public hotel wasn't much better and they couldn't risk anyone finding out about Jason. Sam was determined to cajole Lois into returning to the Pentagon with him for their private talk, using General Maples' request to debrief her as an excuse. Sam knew his daughter well enough not to worry about her inadvertently revealing Jason's paternity during the session.

Sam was pulled from his thoughts when he was forced to hit his brakes in the heavy traffic on West I-395, which caused him to reflect on the enormous reconstruction task ahead of them on the East coast. Though the army had cleared the major highways, the secondary and tertiary roads remained littered with cars, some of which were barely passable. The natural consequence of that situation was that the highways were swollen with traffic. Fortunately, the hotel Lois had chosen was less than a mile from the Pentagon, but the congestion still did little for his mood.

*That deadbeat should be out here cleaning up this mess,* Sam complained to himself. Instead, the Man of Steel lay unconscious in a Philadelphia hospital, with Sam's repeated recommendations to send someone in to wake the bastard falling on deaf ears. They'd been too busy singing the man's praises for nearly making the ultimate sacrifice to spare the nation from certain doom. None of them understood Sam's newly found contempt for the hero and he didn't dare explain his sudden change in attitude.

After spending an intolerable twenty minutes on the one mile journey, Sam finally pulled up in front of the hotel where Lois was waiting. He stopped the car, lowered the passenger window and barked, "Get in the car! We'll do this back at the Pentagon."

"Like hell we will!" she shouted back. She turned on her heel and shouted over her shoulder, "I told you, I've made arrangements, so park the car already. I'll meet you by the parking garage stairs."

"Lois!" Sam hollered.

"Are you coming or not?" she shouted over her shoulder while continuing to march into the hotel.

Sam swore as his daughter disappeared into the hotel, and he abruptly gunned the engine and pulled around to the parking garage entrance. He pulled into the first available spot he found, which put him on the third level. Lois was again waiting for him when he trotted over to the stairwell.

Sam turned to his daughter and angrily told her in a loud whisper, "Damn it, Lois, would you *please* be reasonable for once. If this thing is too sensitive to talk about over the phone, we certainly shouldn't be discussing it in a public hotel. It'll be better back at the Pentagon."

"Who said we were staying here?" Lois countered. "Besides, I don't want some of your Pentagon pals getting wind of this. It's better where we're going. I'll *know* that nobody will be listening in. However, before we go anywhere I need your word that nothing said here gets repeated, and by nothing, I mean *nothing*. It doesn't get shared with your Pentagon pals, or anyone else, ever, no matter what."

"Lois, I already have a pretty good idea what you're going to tell me."

"I doubt that... Your word, Dad."

Sam sighed in frustration and said, "All right, you have my word. I won't repeat anything. Now can we get this show on the road?"

"Follow me," Lois told him and she then turned and began walking down the stairs.

"You know, I haven't got all day for this," Sam grouched. "I only scheduled an hour and I've already burned twenty minutes on a one mile trip."

"I think we can still have you back on time, so stop worrying about it," Lois said insistently. "Besides, doesn't rank have its privileges?"

"Why do you always have to make a simple conversation so difficult?" Sam complained as he followed her. "And how much of this urgent discussion would even be necessary if you'd been willing to tell me things before it became a crisis?"

"Dad, can this wait until passersby can't hear you shouting? Just a few minutes of silence! That's *all* I'm asking."

"Oh, you're asking for more than that," Sam argued. "*Much* more."

"Dad," Lois said impatiently.

"All right, but you better come clean about *everything* once we get started," Sam grumbled. He followed his daughter to the bottom of the stairwell and was about to walk out the door back into the parking garage when Lois' hand on his arm stopped him. He turned to her and discovered she had a softly glowing marble-sized crystal sphere in her free hand.

"What that hell is that?"

"Just something to keep us off the surveillance cameras," Lois explained.

"They're probably not working anyway, after the EMP," Sam commented impatiently.

"Better safe than sorry," Lois declared. She placed her hand on the wall and said commandingly, "Open Sesame."

Sam's eyes flew wide open in astonishment when the floor in front of them disappeared to reveal a crystal staircase. "What on God's green earth?"

"I'll explain at the bottom, when nobody can hear us," Lois replied tersely. She started down the stairs and added, "Coming?"

Sam quickly caught up with his daughter and as they reached the bottom, he looked up to see the concrete floor rematerialize above them. "Jesus," he muttered.

Before another word could be spoken, Sam noticed a razor thin wall of blue light pass from one side of the passage to the other and he suddenly found himself enveloped in a cocoon of light, unable to move as a male voice declared, "Intruder Alert."

"Override. Identify guest as Sam Lane, my father," Lois commanded.

Sam was suddenly free of the cocoon and stumbled as his mobility returned. He caught himself and demanded, "What the hell is this place? And what the hell was that?"

"It's a Kryptonian transportation portal, which is protected by some rather aggressive biometric security," Lois explained. She wiped her hand over some markings on the wall and a hidden door opened into a small chamber with a bench along three sides. Lois walked into the chamber and added, "You can't blame them for being anal about security after what happened. Anyway, you weren't recognized. You are now and with that portal entrance closed, nobody can hear us. We can talk freely now."

Sam followed her into the chamber and complained, "You mean to tell me that goddamn alien installed one of these things right under our noses? There are some people in this town who wouldn't be the least bit pleased to hear about that."

Lois sat down as the chamber door closed and stated authoritatively, "Smallville."

A disembodied voice announced, "We will reach the destination in seven minutes forty seconds."

"Smallville?" Sam inquired.

"Smallville, Kansas. It's where our safe house is," Lois explained. "Oh, and the portal under the Sheraton is *my* doing. I needed a way to get here quickly despite all the airports in the region being closed. Superman doesn't know about it yet. And nobody else in this town is going to find out about it because you gave your word not to reveal our secrets."

"Oh, you mean secrets like Superman fathering your child?" Sam retorted. At Lois surprised expression he added, "Yeah, I know about that, and about my *grandson* saving your ass at sea when his deadbeat dad was too busy to be bothered with it."

"Too busy? That's *not* how it was at all," Lois snapped angrily. "Have you even *bothered* to read the reports on what he was dealing with in Metropolis Thursday?"

"I read them all," Sam answered brusquely. "I also spoke with a Navy SEAL commander who had some *very* interesting things to say about the rescue from Luthor's yacht."

"He promised us he wouldn't out the kids," Lois complained.

"He didn't," Sam declared impatiently. "There's not a word about them in his report and nothing to suggest that anything's missing. The report actually implies that Superman rescued you. And before you go blaming Daniels for anything, try to remember that it's your own damn fault for *lying* to him, telling him that Jason was a classified military secret and that I'd nail his hide to the wall if he spilled the beans. He assumed I already knew."

"Well, I had to do something to keep him quiet and keep the kids safe," Lois replied angrily. "If people ever found out about them..."

"And exactly how many of 'them' are there?" Sam pressed. "Jason's obviously not the only one, if the alien dumped his bastard daughter on you. And what if one of *them* isn't as well behaved as Jason is? They could become public menaces, for Christ sakes!"

"Dad, it's *not* like that at all!"

"And what makes you so sure?" Sam demanded. "I simply cannot understand how you can continue to defend this cad after he left you alone and pregnant like that, along with God only knows how many other victimized women."

"And I can't understand how you can so quickly condemn someone without having all the facts, especially when we're talking about someone who has continuously put himself out there to protect the innocent," Lois shouted angrily. "Damn it, Dad, will you *please* shut up for two minutes and let me explain the facts to you!"

"What's to explain? The so-called hero is seducing innocent women," Sam insisted.

"Like hell! I know for a fact that I'm the only one he's *ever* been intimate with and he was *far* more innocent than I was," Lois countered fiercely.

Sam visibly recoiled at his daughter's bald statement and after a moment's pause, he asked pointedly, "Then how does he have a daughter? I know that *you* didn't give birth to her."

"He *adopted* her, after bringing her back from that disabled Kryptonian ship," Lois informed him. "Remember the story about why he left six years ago? He left to answer the distress call from his *uncle's* ship. It was too late for his aunt and uncle, but they managed to keep their daughter alive in stasis. Superman's *adopted* daughter is actually his biological *cousin*."

"His cousin?"

"Yes, his *cousin*. A seven-year-old who survived a holocaust, but lost everyone she's ever known. She's literally been transplanted onto an alien world and almost lost another father a couple days ago. She's had a tough time of it, including some horrible nightmares that have had her practically knocking the walls down. And he couldn't abandon her. Not in space, and not here on Earth. He did what he always does and tried to help her the only way he knew how -

by adopting her. He also doesn't make the distinction between 'adopted' and 'biological'. As far as he's concerned, Kara *is* his child on equal standing with Jason."

After a momentary pause, Sam said grouchy, "He still knocked you up and left you alone and pregnant."

"We didn't know I was pregnant when he left. We didn't even think it was possible," Lois explained. "And even if we *had* known, he still would have had to go. Kara would have died otherwise."

Sam stared at his daughter for a minute and then asked curiously, "Why are you so protective of him, when the public perception is that you're not even on speaking terms?"

"And what would you have us do, Dad? Publicly acknowledge Jason's paternity?" Lois countered. She paused for effect, and then explained, "We cannot leave a trail of breadcrumbs leading from Superman back to me or the kids, so no, there's no public interaction between Lois Lane and Superman and there's not going to be. Privately, we've been working together rather closely, which brings us to a rather confidential subject."

"And the rest of this isn't?"

"It all is, but this may be the biggest secret of all, which you can *never* tell anyone," Lois explained.

"Lois, I already gave you my word. What more do you want?"

"It's too important to take chances with. I wouldn't even consider telling you this if Superman hadn't insisted on it before... before he fell," Lois continued. "But after the incident with Daniels, he thought that we needed to tell you the full truth."

"What else is there to tell?" Sam wondered.

"Well, for starters, he's been here on Earth quite a bit longer than anyone realizes."

"How much longer?"

"He was barely three when he got here," Lois informed him. "He grew up here, went to college here, got himself a day job, paid his taxes. He's had a very normal, boring life outside of being Superman. Oh, and not that it's any of your business, but he's even offered to pay five years back child support for Jason. I refused to accept it. He really can't afford it, and he needs what little he has for Kara."

"What does he do for a living?" Sam asked curiously.

"He's a reporter," Lois admitted nervously. "Um, actually... actually, he's my partner at the *Planet*, Clark Kent."

"*Kent*?" Sam echoed incredulously. "That clumsy milquetoast?"

"You're sworn to secrecy, remember," Lois said adamantly.

"I know, I know," Sam complained. "You sure he's really *Kent*?"

"Positive," Lois assured him. "The clumsy and timid thing is an exaggeration to cement people's first impression of him as some country rube. Even if they notice the resemblance to Superman, which almost nobody does, they'd never imagine that he really *is* Superman under that ugly suit."

The conversation was interrupted by Jor-El's voice as he announced, "We have arrived at the Smallville portal."

The door opened a moment later and Lois stepped through. "Come on. Let me introduce you to Superman's family. And after that we'd like to get your opinion on a proposal of ours."

"A proposal?"

"On how we might be able to use Kryptonian technology to reverse the damage Luthor caused," Lois explained. "There are a few conditions we'll have to work around, but I think we

can pull it off..."

Sam looked at his watch and muttered, "Let me see if I can clear my calendar for the rest of the morning..."

"Here, you can use my phone," Lois offered.

Sam nodded his acknowledgment as he accepted his daughter's phone and called his Pentagon office.

## Chapter 50 - Awake

*Sunday, October 8, 2006 6:15PM EDT*

The shroud of silence slowly lifted from Superman's senses. Quiet murmurs coalesced into incomprehensible whispers and he began to again perceive the tingle of solar energy throughout his body. The brilliance of the sun lamps slipped past his eyelids and pushed against the darkness while comprehension assaulted his slumber and gave meaning to the sounds around him from his caretakers and guardians voicing their hopes and worries for him. He opened his eyes and blinked a few times, cautiously taking in his surroundings.

His scan of the room revealed his uniform neatly folded on the chair beside the bed, and he looked down in surprise at the hospital gown that covered him. After a momentary pause, he resumed his survey, pushing his vision through the walls where he observed the hospital staff busily attending to their duties along with a handful of soldiers and Metropolis police officers dutifully stationed outside his room. He pushed his vision out even further and the hospital walls faded away to reveal the city beyond. *Philadelphia?* he wondered in surprise. *How did I end up here?*

His visual exploration was interrupted by Jor-El's voice, transmitted in the hypersonic spectrum outside the range of human hearing. "Kal-El, my son. Please report to the Fortress as soon as you are able. You must be briefed on everything that has transpired since you lost consciousness seventy-three hours ago and on the work that lies ahead of us... Kal-El, my son. Please report to the Fortress as soon as you are able. You must be briefed on everything that has transpired since you lost consciousness seventy-three hours ago and on the work that lies ahead of us..."

The solar tingle in his cells combined with Jor-El's repeating message and his own discomfort with the unfamiliar surroundings was more than enough motivation for Superman to push away the last lingering vestiges of sleep and rise into a seated position. The sun lamps immediately shut off as he did so and he finally noticed them, looking up as they were briefly enveloped in a blue aura before dematerializing. *Those didn't come from around here,* Superman noted. *Was that Jor-El's doing?*

Superman was desperate to learn what had transpired over the past three days and thus quickly changed back into his uniform, taking care to switch off the monitoring equipment prior to peeling the leads from his skin to avoid any alarms. Once dressed, he looked around the windowless room, frowning at the realization that he'd have to face his minders in the hall before returning to the sky. Though it was tempting to rush past them at superspeed, he doubted it would escape their notice and concluded it would seem inexcusably rude. He needed to at least express his gratitude before taking his leave. He took a moment to steel himself for the gauntlet before he opened the door and marched out to meet his supporters.

Superman arrived at the Fortress to find the table in the middle of the main chamber cluttered with Lois' laptop, empty coffee mugs and plastic containers with the remnants of a meal, along with a stack of the past few days' newspapers. In addition to *The Daily Planet*, which was printed under a joint banner with *The Gotham Gazette*, the stack also included editions of the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *Alexandria Times*. At Jor-El's suggestion, he read through the papers at superspeed, and was dismayed at the horrific aftereffects of Luthor's attack that was documented in dozens of stories, some of which appeared under his byline. He had also been surprised to learn how far the disaster zone extended. He'd been so focused on the devastating damage in Metropolis at the time that it had never occurred to him



to check for damage beyond the city.

"So much devastation," Kal-El murmured.

"It would have been much worse had you not acted as you did," Jor-El pointed out. "You should also recognize that this world's international community has responded admirably to the crisis. Though there have been some minor territorial squabbles, they are mostly united in their efforts to assist the survivors and rebuild the cities."

"I need to help them."

"You must prepare yourself first," Jor-El insisted. Suddenly, several floating displays materialized behind the console, and Jor-El presented a briefing on the minute details of the damage, far beyond anything appearing in the newspapers, though reinforcing the accuracy of those stories. Superman listened and studied the screens attentively until his review of events was interrupted by a pair of young voices erupting from the back of the room, calling for him. He turned in time to see Jason and Kara zoom across the room towards him at superspeed. He just barely crouched down in time to catch the kids as they rushed into his arms.

As the children began chattering, he looked across to room to see Lois and his mother stroll through the door. "Clark," Lois muttered emotionally. She hesitated for just a moment before running across the room towards him.

Superman stood up, lifting the children with him as Lois reached them and wrapped her arms around him in a fierce embrace.

"Don't ever scare me like that again," Lois told him dramatically.

"I'll try not to," he assured her.

"Are you feeling better now, Dad?" Kara asked worriedly. "The people on TV said you might die."

"I'm getting really good at powers now," Jason informed him excitedly, speaking at the same time as Kara. "Can we go flying? Mommy said we had to wait until you got better."

"Whoa, there. One at a time and give me a chance to answer," Superman replied warmly. Once they quieted down, he told them, "Yes, I'm all better now. No, I'm not going to die. And I think we're going to need to wait a little while before we can go flying. I could be busy for a while."

"Can we help?" Kara asked hopefully.

"Kara, we talked about that. Remember?" Lois reminded her firmly as Martha finally approached the family group.

Kara pouted and grumbled, "It's not fair."

"I know it doesn't seem that way now, sweetheart, but it's really for the best," Martha told her gently. She joined the group hug, pulling her son close as she sadly told him, "We were so worried about you."

Superman nodded and somberly said, "I'm sorry to scare you like that... Mom, I can't stay long. There's so much work to do..."

"And that includes reassuring *your children* that their daddy's okay," Martha pointed out. She withdrew from the hug and added seriously, "Kara has had a particularly rough time the past few days."

"Nightmares?"

Martha nodded and said, "They were bad enough for emergency sessions with Doctor Gupta. Jason's been shaken by all this, too, and we sent him with Kara to talk to the doctor."

Lois added, "You guys really found a really good psychologist there. Not only was she great with the kids, she had already cleared her calendar before we even called. I guess she

was expecting the call once she heard the news. Anyway, she even invited us into her home yesterday and today for the kids' private sessions."

"How bad was the damage?" Superman wondered seriously.

"She refused to let us pay this time. Said it was her contribution to reconstruction."

"We can't take advantage of her kindness like that, but that's not what I meant... Kara's nightmares can be kind of rough on the house."

"I'm sorry," Kara said contritely.

"It's okay, honey," Lois replied. She turned to Superman and explained, "Thursday night was a tough one which meant that Kara was helping Ben with some repairs Friday morning. That's mostly done, though. All that's left is fixing her headboard and some painting. That should be the last we need to worry about that kind of thing, though. Jor-El's protecting the bed and walls with a force field now - at night at least."

"Wish I had thought of that," Superman muttered. "What else did I miss during my 'nap'?"

Before Lois had a chance to respond, Martha interjected, "While Lois explains things, I'll warm up dinner."

"Oh, you don't need to do that, Mom," Superman protested. He finally noticed the picnic basket she'd been carrying, and peeked inside with his x-ray vision to find generous portions from a lasagna dinner and an apple pie dessert.

"Clark, you just got out of the hospital and probably haven't had a thing to eat since lunch Thursday, *three days ago*," Martha pointed out sternly. "I'm going to warm this up, and then you're going to *eat*."

"But there's so much to do after the devastation left by Luthor's mad plan, which is partially my fault."

"Clark, don't you dare blame yourself for this," Lois told him insistently.

"But I *am* to blame," Clark counted sadly. "If I hadn't been so careless with the security here, Luthor never could have threatened the world with Kryptonian technology."

"Instead, he would have found another way to threaten the world, and we might not have been as well prepared to deal with it as we were with this," Lois declared authoritatively. "Remember what he did that landed him in jail after your first encounter with him? He fired a couple of hijacked nukes at California and tried to destroy the West Coast. Clark, you're no more to blame for that sociopath's evil this time."

"But he should never have been able to access the Kryptonian database so easily."

"Well, no, he shouldn't have. But that doesn't mean you should shoulder the blame for everything he did," Lois argued. "The *better* response would be to use that same Krypto-tech that Luthor misused to help undo the damage."

"I think Jor-El would be quick to point out that there are strict Kryptonian laws restricting the use of our technology with less advanced civilizations," Superman stated seriously.

"That is correct," Jor-El declared. "Although, the law does allow for exceptions under certain narrowly defined circumstances."

"We found a loophole," Lois clarified with a laugh. "Oh, we got the speech when we first broached the subject with Jor-El, and it took a little discussion before he conceded the legal loophole. Apparently, Krypto-tech *is* allowed to undo the results of misused Krypto-tech, which is certainly the case here. Jor-El's still not entirely pleased with our solution, but he's not fighting us on it either, other than to insist that we couldn't begin while so much energy was dedicated to powering those sun lamps over your bed."

"I thought those might have come from Jor-El," Superman commented. "So... care to

share this reconstruction plan of yours?"

"How about I tell you all about it while you eat your dinner," Lois declared. "Deal?"

Clark was silent for a moment before nodding his head in acquiescence. "Deal."

"I'll be right back," Martha said cordially. "Children, would you please clear that mess off the table so there's room for your dad to eat? Bring it into the kitchen."

"Leave my laptop there," Lois instructed them.

Superman relaxed his grip around the children and set them on their feet, allowing them to walk over to the table and do as their grandmother had asked while the old woman left the room through a side door. "Okay, so what's the plan?" Clark prodded.

"Ah! I said over dinner and you haven't started eating yet," Lois said firmly. She walked over and sat at the table before looking back over at him. When she spotted his frown, she told him, "You know, you've really got to stop torturing yourself over this. Yes, it's a mess. Yes, it's a lot of work to do. But you're not in this alone..." Lois paused as the children cleared off the table in front of her and rushed after their grandmother with the papers and dishes. She nodded her head towards them and added quietly, "And it's not your only responsibility. Richard, Ron and I can cover for you at the *Planet*, but *nobody* can cover for you with the munchkins. This hasn't been easy for them either, you know. It hasn't been easy for any of us."

"I know, but I still have to clean up the mess Luthor left," he replied sadly as he walked over and joined Lois at the table.

"And you will, but you'll be smart about it, which means letting the others out there do their part and sticking with the plan."

"I can't wait to hear this plan... Wait, *Ron's* been covering for me?"

"Yep, and that local perspective piece from Saturday's lifestyle section that was printed under your byline was his work," Lois informed him. "You'll owe him some Superman exclusives to keep Perry off his back once this is over. By the way, he and Lucy know the family secret now."

"What?" Clark asked numbly.

"Ron saw the munchkins fly off to rescue me Thursday and he's never been able to keep anything from Lucy for very long."

"Did anyone else see them?" Superman asked worriedly.

"We don't think so," Lois assured him. "They ran into the alley behind Restaurant Row before flying up into the sky and Ron's certain that he's the only one who saw them. Anyway, I had a talk with him and Lucy about it Thursday night... and again on Friday. We're all set there, but you should still plan on talking to them about it when you get a chance."

Superman nodded his head and said unenthusiastically, "I'll make a point of it. Any other surprises?"

"Well, while we're speaking of the family secret... my dad was able to put together most of the pieces of the puzzle before I got a chance to talk to him," Lois revealed. "They brought Daniels into the Pentagon Friday morning for debriefing and my dad was able to pull him aside for a private meeting before it began. Daniels kept the kids out of the report, just like he promised, but he told my dad *everything* that happened out there."

Superman sighed and said, "Well, we were planning on telling him anyway, and you *did* lead Daniels to believe that your dad already knew, along with nameless other Pentagon brass."

"I was trying to insure his silence," Lois protested irritably. "We didn't know him from Adam, and we couldn't risk the secret getting out. Anyway, Dad thinks it's contained, though I

really got an earful when I showed up to talk to him yesterday morning."

"You were in Alexandria? I read in those newspapers that commercial air traffic on the Eastern Seaboard was still shut down."

"Actually, I was in Arlington," Lois corrected. "And yes, air travel's at a standstill, which is why we added a portal stop there. It comes up under the Sheraton National Hotel's parking garage, a little less than a mile west of the Pentagon. Anyway, back to Daniels... Dad pulled his file and spoke with his C.O., and it looks like he's a highly principled young officer who's not likely to cause any problems for us."

"As for Dad... Well, he knows the *full* truth now, including the part about the Kryptonian farm boy and his adopted daughter... He already had nearly enough to figure most of that out and probably would have put it all together the first time Lucy's kids mentioned Kara's dad. At least this way, I could swear him to secrecy first."

"Makes sense and we *were* going to tell him," Superman acknowledged. "Given the circumstances, there really wasn't any alternative, though I'm not looking forward to my next encounter with him."

"Expect to get raked over the coals," Lois replied mirthfully. "I think that about covers the family secret, and just in time. Here comes your mother and the kids with your dinner. Once you get started on it, I'll explain our reconstruction plan."

Perry peeked over Nancy Garrett's shoulder at the mock-up of the combined edition that the *Planet* and *Gazette* would be putting out the following morning. *The Planet* was still running in disaster mode three days after the EMP, though the *Gazette* was running close to business as usual. It was taking them longer to file their stories with the traffic tie-ups and phone problems, but they were getting the local stories in.

Perry reflected that the *Planet* staff faced far greater obstacles and yet were producing superior results. That was due not only to the cache of satellite phones that Wayne had shipped them after the first EMP, but to the extraordinary efforts put in by staff. The editors still had some coordination to do with those still in the city, but the best stories were getting filed without explicit assignments.

There were some setbacks, but on the whole the *Planet's* output had been extraordinary. That accomplishment was especially valuable in the current news environment, with people desperate to learn as much as they could about the disaster. Perry hoped that the sales driven by that high public anxiety could lead to new subscriptions.

"Well, I think it looks pretty good," Nancy commented, interrupting Perry's thoughts. "I believe we'll have another sell-out."

"That's not really a challenge with this national disaster and all the local cable outages," Perry opined. "This is the only show in town if they want to find out what's happening. Enjoy it while it lasts."

"Spoilsport."

"Nancy, you know I'm right," Perry countered. "Cable news, the Internet and public apathy have been eating away at our print circulation for years. Under normal circumstances, you need a really meaty story on tragedy, sex or Superman to move the product off the newsstand." Perry's speech was interrupted by a ringing phone. Perry checked his suit jacket pockets as he added, "Was that yours or mine?"

"Yours. I changed my ring tone."

Perry fished the phone out of his pocket and checked the caller ID, which identified Ron

Troupe as the caller. He switched the phone on and answered gruffly, "I hope you've got something good for me, Troupe."

"Yes, sir. One of our sources came through for us and I thought you'd want to hear the news right away," Ron replied excitedly.

"Well, don't keep me in suspense. What is it?" Perry pressed.

"Our sources tell us that the Man of Steel is back in the sky," Ron announced cheerfully.

"Troupe, you just got the front page," Perry declared enthusiastically. "How soon can you get the story in?"

"I'll write it up as soon as we're done here," Ron promised him. "Perry, I'm also told Superman's adopting the reconstruction plan that we speculated about earlier. The details will be released in a White House press conference at nine. I don't believe that Superman's expected to be there, however."

"Understood. Now, stop wasting your time talking to me and get that story in," Perry replied seriously, and he recalled their recent conversations on the matter. Lois had made Troupe one of her proxies to hide her involvement in the negotiations over Superman's role in reconstruction. Ron had shared the details of Lois' plan with Perry, and the old newsman had passed the proposal on to Bruce Wayne and Lucius Fox, citing an anonymous source. The executives had in turn exerted their influence to get government and other businesses to sign on for the tentative plan. Ron's message meant that Superman was on-board with the proposal as well.

"Yes, sir. Good-bye, sir," Ron replied differentially, and he ended the call.

"What's he got?" Nancy asked eagerly.

"Something that just changed our front page," Perry declared. "Above the fold, 'Superman Wakes from Coma'. And below the fold, 'Washington Approves Kryptonian Reconstruction Plan'. By the way, the second headline isn't official yet. There's a White House press conference at nine. Figures that they'd try to take credit for it."

"We're not going to have much time to get the story in after that press conference," Nancy muttered. "Damn, I hate it when they schedule things like this so late."

"We'll have to get as much of it prepped beforehand as we can," Perry declared. "I think I know someone with access to the details on the reconstruction plan."

"Think we can get an advance copy?"

"I'm counting on it," Perry said confidently. "I suggest we use the *Planet's* Washington Bureau to cover it from that end, and use your local *Gazette* staff to cover it for Business, City and Features. My people in Metropolis may have a hard time finding a TV or webcast."

"That works for me," Nancy agreed. "I'll round up my guys for the briefing. Looks like we'll be working late again."

Perry nodded his acknowledgement and dialed one of the numbers from his contact list. Once the call went through, he said into the phone, "It's Perry. We need to get our hands on a copy of that reconstruction plan..."

Ron Troupe was drumming his fingers on the kitchen table as he intently studied the open document in front of him, displayed on the loaner laptop Lois had provided for him. She had also provided all the pertinent details on Superman's recovery to flesh out a good story, but he remained nervous over what would be his first front page, and probably above the fold at that, if he knew Perry. Ron reread the story again, before he finally attached a cable from his cell phone to the laptop and established an Internet connection. He submitted the story to the

*Planet's* web portal and hoped Perry wouldn't find too many problems with it.

As the document uploaded, Ron silently thanked his sister-in-law for her efforts. The laptop had been just one of several items Lois had provided in a care package, beamed into their garage when nobody was looking. She'd also provided an emergency generator, space heaters, and a collection of books and games to keep the kids occupied. They had everything they needed to ride out the crisis in comfort.

Ron noticed that the document upload was complete and he triumphantly declared, "All done. That should do it until the president's news conference."

He reached for the cable to disconnect the cell phone from his laptop but was interrupted by Jimmy's hand on his arm. "Before you shut down, do you mind if I check my email?" he asked politely. "I want to see if Perry said anything about the pictures I uploaded earlier."

"Go right ahead," Ron consented, turning the laptop to face his friend. Ron reflected that it hadn't taken much convincing to talk the young photographer into staying with them until the crisis was over. Of course, Jimmy's apartment didn't have the advantage of alternate power or covert grocery deliveries, beamed over from Superman's Fortress.

Ron turned his attention to his family in the living room and called out, "Is anyone up for a game of Uno?"

Ron's son, Sam, walked into the kitchen flanked by his sisters, Susie and Michelle. He looked up anxiously at his father, and quietly asked, "Dad? Is Superman going to fix everything now that he's awake?"

"I'm sure he'll do everything he can," Ron assured him. "He's even going to use Kryptonian technology to speed things up this time, though it might still take a little while."

"He's doing what?" Jimmy interjected incredulously. "I don't think we've ever seen him use his technology before."

"And it will probably never happen again," Ron declared. "Superman's still bound by Kryptonian law, which prohibits it under normal circumstances - I guess it's kind of like their version of *Star Trek's* 'Prime Directive'. He's not supposed to use their technology on a less advanced society."

"But he's using it this time," Lucy added.

"Yes, because there's an exception that allows its use to mitigate damage from an *abuse* of their technology," Ron continued, directing his explanation mostly to his kids. "Oh, he'll be doing the same heavy lifting and personal rescues that you'd expect, but while he's doing that, his *space ship* will be flying overhead beaming down replacement parts for the fried electronics." He turned to Jimmy and added, "There are also some big companies like Wayne Enterprises offering Superman unrestricted free license agreements to accommodate that."

"What does he need a license for?" Sam asked in confusion.

"Because Superman *always* obeys the law, and our laws say that when someone invents something, nobody else is allowed to make that thing without permission," Ron told him. "The licenses give Superman permission to replicate their products and beam them down to fix the broken stuff."

"It sure didn't take long for Superman to get that worked out," Jimmy commented.

"I think some bigwigs at Wayne Enterprises have been trying to put something together ever since the dust settled after the EMP," Ron explained. "Actually, it's a clever business strategy. One, they get *great* free publicity for their philanthropy. Two, since Superman's *only* replicating products he's been licensed for, Wayne grows their market share without spending a dime, and three, given the nature of most of that hardware, I don't imagine they'll have much

trouble selling support contracts to a lot of those new customers. Oh, there's some overlap with the other companies that have signed up for the program, but it still looks to me like Wayne's got a win-win scenario there."

"So in other words, Superman should have everything back to normal in no time!" Jimmy concluded cheerfully.

"It's not going to happen overnight," Ron corrected.

His nine-year-old daughter Susie looked up at him anxiously and asked, "How long's it going to take?"

"A couple weeks. Maybe longer," Ron guessed. "You see, it takes a lot of juice to beam things in and out, and Superman's ship will run low on power after just a few hours. But it can make new fuel from the Sun's energy, so when it gets low, it flies back out into space and does laps around the sun until it has enough power to start over. That means that he can't fix everything at once. He'll get the most important things first and save the little things for later."

"I hope he gets the roads first," Jimmy commented. "It's still a parking lot out there and murder to get across town, especially with the Roosevelt Tunnel flooded and the Hobbs Bridge collapse."

"Emergency services come first: Police, Fire, Ambulance. Hospitals," Ron informed him. "Once their equipment is all working again, then I think maybe the communications infrastructure is next."

"No, the water's more important," Lucy said insistently. "We may have enough bottled water for drinking and cooking, but it doesn't help with baths or showers."

"I'm sure that water's got to be up near the top of the list, but I don't know the exact order," Ron admitted. "Hopefully, we'll get some of those details during the press conference later."

"Hopefully, but we can worry about that later," Lucy replied. She turned to her kids and asked them seriously, "You guys aren't worried about this, are you? You know we're all going to be just fine for as however long this lasts, right?"

"Uh-huh," the kids echoed neutrally.

"Good," Lucy said happily. "Now, I seem to recall that *someone* was challenging us to a game of Uno..."

## Chapter 51 - Not in the Cards

*Thursday, October 12, 2006 8:05AM EDT*

Richard pulled his car into the driveway of his house, automatically pressing the button on the garage door opener before he remembered that the electronics were certain to still be fried from Luthor's EMP. The 'Krypto-Tech', as Lois called it, had made great strides in speeding up repairs, but there was no magic undo button to automatically put things back the way they were. It took time and an incredible amount of energy. Lois had informed him that it took only a little more than two and half hours to deplete the energy reserves on those starships and in that time they consumed more energy than the entire Earth produced in a month. They were fortunate that it only took twenty hours for the ships to recharge before resuming their task.

Despite the progress, there was still a public perception that repairs were going slowly. After all, it had only taken a few milliseconds for Luthor's EMP to blow through an eighty thousand square mile disaster area and burn out all powered electronics, including virtually every electrical transformer on the power grid. In the five days since the starships began their assignment, they just recently finished restoring the essential infrastructure of power, water and sewer, and natural gas, with repairs to landline communications scheduled to finally be completed later that morning. It would be well into the next week before work on the commercial centers began and probably close to another month before the last of the consumer electronics was repaired. Still, Metropolis had been cleaned up enough for the drive home from the *Planet's* parking garage to be tolerable and Richard was anxious to check out the house.

He sighed wearily and shifted the car into park, staring blankly at the closed garage door in front of him for a moment before grabbing his laptop bag and marching up to the front door to let himself in. Once inside, he set down his laptop and surveyed the interior almost nostalgically. He reflected that it didn't really feel like home. It reminded him more of a childhood visit to his grandmother's house after she passed away, numbly walking through the lifeless house while the adults packed up the late matriarch's possessions. *What a difference a week makes*, Richard thought.

He shook himself from his ruminations and gave the house closer scrutiny. The lights worked, but not the television, stereo or cable broadband modem. The refrigerator was dead, too, and he'd been forced to turn his head when he opened the door and confronted the stench of rotting leftovers, abandoned when they fled to Smallville after Luthor's attempted hit on Clark. Richard quickly got to work cleaning out the refrigerator and tossed the spoiled food.

After he finished with the refrigerator, he quickly inspected the rest of the house before heading out the back door to check out his plane, which Clark had brought back to the house earlier in the week. Once satisfied that everything was in order, he returned to the house and settled in at his desk in the back room. He powered up his laptop, connected it to a cable from his cell phone, logged into the *Planet's* portal, and began reviewing the morning's international news.

The politicians overseas had apparently gotten over their initial shock at recent events and had resurrected their complaints of favoritism by the Man of Steel, calling the Kryptonian rules governing his technology 'arbitrary', given that Superman's home world had been destroyed. They grouched that the rules of a dead society should not prevent its technology from helping with their construction projects. *Those complaints are only going to get worse*, Richard pondered. *Clark's going to need to put out a statement to clarify things.*

Richard had already heard the explanation, of course. Superman had sworn to abide by



Kryptonian law when he began his training, which made it a matter of honor. Those rules were also now enforced by Jor-El's A.I. as one of the security upgrades implemented following Luthor's break-in. Even if someone like Luthor managed to get past the perimeter security *and* fool the biometric sensors *and* reach the console, they still wouldn't be able to walk out of the place with its technology. The crystals were now permanently locked in an underground vault and the security protocols in the A.I. strictly governed access to the technology.

It also meant that Superman couldn't make arbitrary exceptions to the rules either. Not only would Jor-El need to be convinced that the request was permissible under Kryptonian law, he'd also attempt to independently confirm any claim of urgency through an array of orbiting probes and interfaces into the Earth's information networks. *I'm not sure that those foreign politicians will be much happier to learn that HAL<sup>(13)</sup> is running things at the Fortress*, Richard thought. *Hell, it might freak out a lot of people here. Maybe Lois has some ideas on that...*

Thoughts of Lois inevitably provoked reminders of his crumbling relationship and Richard turned wistful. Once she got Jason and Kara on their school bus, Lois would be heading back up to the Fortress. She claimed that with all of the communications and transportation obstacles around the city, it was the best place for gathering the necessary information she needed for her stories. He couldn't dispute the point and had to concede that her story production over the past few days had been spectacular. However, the choice of venue was also a painful reminder of her heart's apparent choice.

*Get a grip, White*, Richard scolded himself. *You've already analyzed that to death and there isn't time to go through that again now. There's work to do.* He pushed the unpleasant thoughts from his mind and dove into his work, quickly writing up and sending off a summary of the international sentiment to Perry. He then retrieved the satellite phone from his pocket and began calling up the *Planet's* overseas staff to ensure that his department's stories were on track.

*Thursday, October 12, 2006 10:35AM EDT*

Perry had surprised Richard with a sudden summons. He had asked Richard to meet him at Berkowitz airport, and bring Ron Troupe and Jimmy Olsen with him. Apparently, Richard hadn't been the only one interested in inspecting the damage that morning, and Perry had finagled a ride back to the city on Bruce Wayne's private plane. Richard had barely finished putting together the International and Washington story budgets for the day before attempting the cross town trip, stopping in Midtown to pick up Ron and Jimmy from the Troupe house.

They'd been forced to take a circuitous route of countless detours on the trip from Pelham to Berkowitz, but Richard was surprised to find he didn't mind the traffic, thanks to the friendly conversation from his colleagues. Ron was clearly steering the conversations to safe topics like their competition's follies or the latest news from the Troupe family. Richard found it refreshing to be able to have a conversation about kids that didn't end with them being compared to Superman at that age. Richard was relaxed and in high spirits by the time they finally arrived at Berkowitz.

When they reached the private gate, they were quickly ushered through and handed off to their escort, Claire Warner. "Good morning, gentlemen," she greeted them. "I've got a cart to take us the rest of the way to Mister Wayne's hanger. If you follow me..." She led them to an electric cart on the tarmac and they were soon speeding through the rows of hangers.

When they reached Bruce Wayne's hanger, they found Perry pacing outside the large

open doors. "You're late," he complained brusquely.

"Half the bridges across the river either collapsed in the quake or have been declared unsound and closed by the Army Corp of Engineers," Richard reminded him. "There was no easy way to get here."

"Then I guess it's a good thing we won't be going back that way," a male voice interjected.

Richard looked towards the source of the voice and discovered Bruce Wayne walking towards him, with his Learjet 85 parked in the hanger behind him. Also inside the hanger was a Bell 407 helicopter, sitting on a wheeled platform that was being towed out of the hanger.

"Mister Wayne," Richard addressed the other man, while offering him his hand.

Bruce shook Richard's hand warmly and then nodded his head at the helicopter, declaring, "I think we'll get around the city easier on that." After a moment's pause, he added, "As a fellow pilot, I'm sure you appreciate the liberating mobility of aircraft."

"Yes, sir," Richard answered, smiling widely. "Unfortunately, I'm not yet qualified on helicopters. Yet. I keep meaning to go back for the training, but just never got around to it."

"There's still time and it's well worth it," Bruce assured him.

"I'll have to look into it, then" Richard replied cordially. "Oh, this is Ron Troupe, one of our reporters, and Jimmy Olsen, our photographer."

"Gentlemen," Bruce said cordially as he offered them his hand.

"Now that we have the introductions out of the way, let's get in the air and get a good look at the city," Perry grumbled. "And this is work, not a sight-seeing tour. Olsen, we'll need good pictures, and Troupe, you're writing up the aftermath story."

"Got it, Chief," Jimmy said cheerfully.

"Yes, sir," Ron replied simultaneously.

The men boarded the helicopter and as Bruce Wayne's pilot climbed into the right front seat, Richard asked his uncle, "How was the trip in?"

"Better than yours, from the sound of it," Perry replied. He paused as the helicopter lifted off and peered out his window before he finally added, "It probably took longer in queue to take off and land than it did to get here. How was your 'scenic route', by the way?"

"After picking up Ron and Jimmy, we had to go through New Troy Island and all the way East through the business district, across the Mortimer Bridge, then circle back through the northern boroughs, and finally across the Racine Bridge and through Park Ridge."

"It's murder trying to get around with all the bridges out," Jimmy complained.

"Well, I hear that the bridges are on the Kryptonian starship's reconstruction schedule for Monday afternoon," Bruce informed them. "If you're lucky, at least some of them will be opened up for the evening rush hour."

"They're rebuilding *all* of them in a day?" Jimmy replied incredulously. "Didn't they all take something like a year or two to build the first time around?"

"They don't have to be completely rebuilt," Bruce pointed out. "The towers are still standing and with only relatively minor damage, or so I'm told. Same for the main cables and anchorages. All Superman's ship really needs to do is replace the road deck and cables."

"Will they get Roosevelt Tunnel fixed Monday, too?" Jimmy wondered.

"That's out of scope," Richard explained. "Remember what they were saying about the Kryptonian legal restrictions? Since the tunnel wasn't damaged as a result of abused Kryptonian technology, they can't use Krypto-Tech to repair it. They're going to have to do it the old fashioned way. Same thing for the Hancock Building, the Vanderworth Mansion and the Pleasant Acres apartment towers that Luthor firebombed."

"Oh," Jimmy said quietly, his voice full of disappointment.

"By the way... any word on when our building's scheduled for repair?" Ron asked tentatively.

"I'm hearing Wednesday," Perry answered. "They're getting the grocery stores, restaurants and the associated supply chains back up before they do office buildings."

"Even if repairs are completed Wednesday, it might still be another week or two before we're allowed back inside," Bruce added. "Apparently, Superman's sworn statement isn't good enough for the mayor, who's insisting that the city needs to inspect all the high-rises before reissuing occupancy permits. Even with out-of-state volunteers helping, it's still going to take quite some time to test fire alarm and suppression systems, and verify the integrity of the structural steel with their ultrasonic equipment."

"Things *will* get back to normal eventually. In the meantime, we'll keep shipping the paper in from Gotham," Perry declared, before returning his attention to the view out his window. After a moment, he added brusquely, "Now, this isn't a social club, there's work to do. Pay attention to what's going on down there."

"We're on it, Chief," Jimmy assured him and the men redirected their attention out the windows as the helicopter began its sweep over the city's Northwest boroughs.

Lois let out an aggravated sigh and leaned her head against her left palm. Though the Fortress certainly provided the most current information on reconstruction, she'd grown weary of that story and was anxious to move on to her next target: Judge Walter Gregory of the United States Court of Appeals for the Third District in Wilmington. Lois was certain that he'd been suborned by Luthor into overturning his conviction with the flimsiest of legal excuses. However, her efforts were frustrated by the ongoing drama in the EMP disaster zone and her would-be allies' near total obsession with it.

She'd also been stymied by Jor-El, who after having been so helpful recently, had resumed his obstructionist role. He outright refused to scan Luthor's memories for the events leading up to his acquittal, citing privacy doctrine. Jor-El insisted that he'd need evidence of a violation of Kryptonian law in order to access those memories and accusations that Luthor had corrupted the American criminal justice system simply didn't qualify. The big floating head had not yet been convinced that it was part of a conspiracy to rob the Fortress, which should have been a qualifying violation. The argument was giving her a headache.

Lois looked up at Jor-El and grouched, "I *know* you want to know how Luthor pulled that off as much as I do."

"What I may want is not relevant," Jor-El pointed out. "I am responsible for enforcing compliance with Kryptonian law and I must faithfully fulfill that duty."

"The evidence we need is right there, in Luthor's mind, and you have him trapped up there making it a simple matter to 'interrogate' him," Lois complained.

"However, we require *evidence* of his wrongdoing under *Kryptonian* law before we may consider memory extraction."

"We *know* what he did! That's probable cause!"

"We *suspect* him of additional crimes. However, that is just supposition. We lack sufficient evidence to warrant further investigation for additional crimes against Krypton."

"It was good enough probable cause to record his confession from his memories. Why can't we record his illegal corruption of Judge Gregory, too?"

"Our probes provided overwhelming evidence of his theft of the crystals and subsequent

illegal abuse of Kryptonian technology, which was sufficient justification to scan his mind for the details over that time period. We do not have similar supporting evidence for his activities prior to the acquittal and cannot justify the intrusion."

"Some help you are," Lois grumbled.

"If we disregard our laws when they become inconvenient, then we would be no better than the criminals we seek to bring to justice," Jor-El declared sternly.

"Whatever," Lois replied irritably.

After glaring at Jor-El for a moment, Lois shifted her attention to her laptop and opened her email client. Though there was no shortage of messages, most of the incoming email was now filtered through a whitelist of trusted senders, with email from those not on the list automatically filed to an archive folder. Of the mail that had made it past the filters, the recent messages were mostly from family members or her *Planet* colleagues, though she discovered a surprising exception. She navigated her mouse down to Harold Vanderworth's email titled, "Possible Luthor Legal Defense" and double-clicked on it, her eyes widening in surprise at the content. She quickly pulled out her phone and dialed the Kennebunkport number he had listed in his email.

Harold answered on the second ring, "*Hello, Lois,*" he greeted amiably. "*I'm glad you got my message so quickly.*"

"You don't *really* think Luthor could skate over this, do you?" Lois asked insistently. "Sounds to me like some blowhard defense attorney's trying to validate his existence on the morning show by making outrageous statements about Luthor's situation. That was *not* false imprisonment."

"*Certainly not, but if some smalltime player like Velasco's thought of that angle, you can be sure that Luthor will, too,*" Harold replied seriously. "*My legal team thinks that the defenses Velasco suggested are thin as ice, especially given that most of the events in question happened outside U.S. territorial waters. But then again, the premise that you could overturn a conviction if a witness from the original trial wasn't available several years later was equally thin, and look what happened.*"

"He must have gotten to the judge, somehow," Lois insisted.

"*That's the most likely explanation. And Gregory is still on the bench.*"

Lois sighed irritably and angrily declared, "We *can't* let some corrupt judge open up another loophole for that monster to crawl through."

"*No, of course not. But it's going to take a cooperative effort to prevent that, which will also require cooperation from Superman. Do you think that that somebody from the Planet can get a hold of him?*"

"I think it's a given that you'll have his cooperation, given what that madman did to him," Lois assured him. "What do we need to tell him?"

"*That we need time,*" Harold explained. "*It's going to take time for legal research, time to prod our Washington representatives into action, if necessary, and time to bulletproof the prosecution's case. We need Superman to... delay... bringing Luthor back to Earth until after we've completed all of the legal legwork.*"

"I doubt he was in much of a hurry, especially when he's still pulling triple shifts in the disaster zone," Lois commented. "I'm sure he'll recognize the wisdom of postponing any plans to retrieve Luthor from that monstrosity for the time being."

"*We may also need to discuss our strategy with him at some point, but that's not critical right now,*" Harold replied. "*Can we count on you to get our message to Superman?*"

"I'm sure someone from the *Planet* can get the message to him," Lois promised. *In fact, I'll call him as soon as I hang up.*

*Thursday, October 12, 2006 9:15PM CDT*

Richard noticed the rhythmic breathing from the bed beside him and set down the book on wolves that he'd been quietly reading to Jason. A quick check confirmed his suspicion that the little boy had fallen asleep and Richard tip-toed out of Clark's childhood bedroom, shutting the door carefully behind him. He immediately noticed Lois in the hallway, standing in front of the open door to Kara's room. Inside, Clark was attempting to guide his daughter into dreamland, providing softly spoken direction that was barely audible from the open doorway a few feet away. In the dim illumination from the downstairs lamps, Richard noticed an oddly contented look on Lois' face as she observed the tableau.

Lois seemed to suddenly notice his presence and quickly lifted a finger to her lips in a gesture for silence, and Richard nodded his assent. He then joined her outside the open door, silently watching his rival attend to his parental duties. *She goes down so much easier when Clark is here to tuck her in,* Richard observed. *Good thing he's been able to schedule a break for Superman right around bedtime.*

Finally, the murmurs from the room ceased and Clark stood up and silently crept out of the room, closing the door behind him. After spending a full week at the Kent farm with full knowledge of the family secret, Richard was familiar with the routine to avoid Kara's sensitive hearing. He quietly followed Clark and Lois down the stairs, where they paused only long enough to wave goodbye to Martha and for Lois to grab her laptop before walking out the front door.

Once outside, Lois turned back to face Clark, pointing a finger to her wrist and then holding up her palm to him with her fingers splayed as she mouthed the words, 'About Luthor'.

*Five minutes to talk about Luthor,* Richard summarized.

Clark shook his head and made a flying gesture with his hand. Richard didn't catch the words he mimed, but he understood the general idea. *Superman is needed elsewhere,* Richard translated.

Lois' shoulders sagged slightly and she nodded her acquiescence and then mouthed the words, 'Be careful'. After a quick nod of his head, Clark disappeared in a blur and Lois resumed her march to the barn. Richard quickly fell in step behind her, following her down into the cellar and past the portal entrance.

Once the portal entry sealed behind them, Richard said sympathetically, "Relax, Lois. Luthor's not going *anywhere*. There'll be plenty of time for the lawyers to prepare for him."

"Luthor's not the only one we have to worry about," Lois explained. "We need a peek inside Judge Gregory's records to look for evidence that Luthor bribed or blackmailed him. Before he has a chance to destroy it. We can't risk him setting Luthor loose again." She wiped her hand over the sensor and opened the door to the transportation chamber.

Richard followed her into the chamber and sat down opposite her. "I assume you suggested that in the voice mail you left for Clark when you phoned him earlier," he commented.

"Of course, but he's a bit preoccupied with the disaster zone. Luthor tries to take over the world and Clark thinks it's his fault, and feels guilty if he takes a five minute break from cleaning up the mess," Lois complained. She looked up toward the ceiling of the chamber and stated authoritatively, "Take us to the Fortress."

After a brief pause, Richard added, "It's obviously not his fault, but you can't blame him for being preoccupied with the disaster zone. It's still... well, a *disaster zone*. There are probably still a lot of calls for help. It's getting better, though."

"I suppose," Lois agreed reluctantly.

They avoided each other's eyes and fell into an awkward silence. Richard recalled the new marching orders Perry had issued that afternoon, insisting that he needed to join the other editors in Gotham the following day. *We're out of time*, Richard concluded and he broke the silence, sadly declaring, "Lois, I can't do this anymore."

"What?"

Richard snorted mirthlessly and commented, "Five years with my head in the sand living in a fantasy world, and I suddenly discover that I can't pretend anymore." He looked intently into her eyes and added, "I can't pretend that nothing's wrong, that we still have a future. I know that things can never be like they were before Clark came back."

"Richard, I haven't been fooling around with Clark," Lois insisted defensively.

"I know," Richard acknowledged unhappily. "You've both been trying to do the right thing and you've tried to pretend that nothing's changed. But *it has*. Our relationship's suddenly become platonic, among other things... You're not in love with me, Lois. You never were."

"Richard, stop," Lois pleaded. "I really *do* care about you."

"I know. But you're not *in love* with me. You're in love with *Clark*," Richard declared. He finally tore his eyes away from her and added, "I can't stand in the way of that. Even if by some miracle, I were able to cajole you into actually marrying me, you'd end up resenting me for it. You'd always be wondering what could have been with him."

Lois wiped an errant tear from her cheek and murmured, "I'm so sorry, Richard." She pulled the engagement ring from her finger and held it out to him as she added, "Please believe that I never meant to hurt you."

"I know," he replied somberly as he accepted the ring. "Doesn't help a lot right now, but I know." After a brief pause, he added, "Just do me a couple favors..."

"You know I will if I can."

"I don't want to lose Jason, too," Richard stated sorrowfully. "Promise me that I can continue to be a part of his life."

"Richard, you're *still* his daddy and Clark and Martha both have made it clear that they'd never stand in the way of that," Lois said adamantly. "Of course, you'll always be a part of his life. You needn't have doubted that."

"Thank you," Richard told her sincerely. "That means a lot to me... One more favor?"

"Sure."

"Don't announce another engagement in the bullpen - that'd be a bit too much to endure," Richard said sadly. "Just elope and get it over with."

"You want me to elope with Clark?" Lois asked incredulously.

"Actually, I *want* you to marry *me*," Richard replied. "But we both know that's not in the cards. Even if Clark had never come home, it was never going to be. And since your future clearly lies with him... just get it over with. Besides, you'll have an easier time adopting Kara if you're married to her father."

"Adopt her?" Lois echoed in surprise. "The thought never even entered my mind..."

"Whether you've been aware of it or not, you've already assumed a maternal role with her and she's accepted you in that capacity," Richard told her seriously. "If she hadn't, she never would have flown back to the plane last week when you all-named her and counted to three..."

Lois, she needs a mother and you've unconsciously volunteered."

"Richard," Lois began hoarsely. "I... I don't know what to say."

"Me either. It's going to be awkward for a little while," Richard observed. He paused for a moment and then added, "I won't be coming into the Fortress with you. I think I'll just head back to Smallville and start packing."

"You don't have to do that so soon," Lois pleaded. "There's no hurry."

Richard shook his head and then said, "It's not because of this. Perry's indulged me as much as he's able, but tomorrow I'm to head up to Gotham and hunker down at the *Gazette* with the other Planet editors. I'll be there until we're ready to move back into our building. Sounds like it could be a couple weeks. Once we get back, we'll work out the logistics... and how we explain this to Jason."

Lois nodded her head and quietly said, "You'll call if you need anything, right?"

"Of course," Richard confirmed and then another awkward silence settled over them while they both reflected on five years of memories from the life they had tried to build together before its predictable collapse.

## Chapter 52 - A Day in the Life

*Friday, February 9, 2007 4:50PM EDT*

Perry focused intently on his PC screen, putting together the layout for the next day's morning edition. Above the fold, the paper would boast the headline, "Superman Delivers Luthor to Prison" and feature a rather unflattering prison mug shot of Lex Luthor. The top story was complemented by another exclusive Superman interview below the fold. Given the public's continuing fascination with the details of Luthor's failed attempt at world domination, Perry was sure that it would be another top seller, both in print and in their web edition.

Just as Perry was beginning a preliminary review of the paper's major sections, he was distracted by Richard's knock on his office door. "Washington and International sections are ready to go," Richard announced. "I assume you're close to running the ?"

Perry nodded and muttered, "Never thought I'd be running a Superman interview *below* the fold..."

"Technically speaking, the Luthor story is still a Superman story and it's a bigger story," Richard noted.

"That and the Superman interview wasn't the best," Perry complained. "Archer and Buchanan did a passable job, but it doesn't have that special touch that Lois' interviews always had. I can't say that I care for the pool coverage. It was so much easier when Lois was covering him."

"That wasn't without its problems, such as the out of control tabloid rumors and the thugs who believed them," Richard replied seriously. "By the way, did Lois and Clark fill you in on some of the details that didn't make it into their story?"

"Which details are you referring to?"

"Well, for one thing, Luthor's none too pleased with his new accommodations," Richard explained. "Must be quite a shock going from the opulent luxury of yachts and mansions to an eighty-four square foot poured concrete Supermax cell. He's also restricted from accessing electronics of any kind - not even a TV or radio... I just can't manage to feel sorry for him, though."

"It's better than he deserves," Perry replied seriously. "Still, I wish I could have seen the look on his face when he realized that the feds had removed some of the cards from the lawyers' hands, at least where Superman is concerned." The old newsman couldn't suppress the smile that came to lips when he remembered Lois' initial briefing on the legal strategy that would prevent Luthor from using slick legal maneuvers to disallow the evidence against him.

"We can thank the Vanderworths and their legal think tank for most of that," Richard commented. "Although, Superman isn't exactly thrilled with how they pulled that off, either."

"Would he rather see that lunatic go free?" Perry asked brusquely. "Recognizing Kryptonian sovereignty and giving him diplomatic immunity was the best way to keep those wild cards out of Luthor's hands."

"I think that Superman would argue that the risk is minimal, with Judge Gregory indicted and the Supreme Court overturning the decision that set Luthor free," Richard pointed out. "His consecutive life sentences were reinstated."

"Only because of the case they were able to build when Superman was legally considered to be a representative of a foreign power," Perry countered. "That allowed them to *extradite* Luthor's cohorts from that monstrosity well in advance of bringing Luthor back and they all turned state's evidence against their boss rather than risk the death penalty. That also provided



the clues they needed to take Gregory down and put the final nails in the coffin of Luthor's legal defense. He can't use outrageous claims of false imprisonment or due process rights violations to get freed on a technicality because what happened out there happened on foreign soil."

"I don't disagree," Richard assured him. "And since Superman went along with it, it's safe to assume that he understands that. But he also kind of sees the diplomatic recognition as being rewarded for his own stupidity - his words, not mine. He's not comfortable with the solution."

"Well, that's tough, because he's going to have to live with it," Perry barked. He looked through his office's inner glass wall into the bullpen, briefly locking his gaze on Clark Kent as the younger man walked in from the stairwell and made his way to Lois' desk. Clark looked back at him with a somber expression before continuing to his destination, while Perry returned his attention to his nephew.

"I know and I'm sure he knows, too," Richard replied. "By the way, I also hear that Luthor had quite the meltdown when prison officials brought him up to date on the legal and diplomatic landscape. He was furious over Superman's diplomatic immunity. Apparently he'd come up with some wild story about the Man of Steel causing gaps in his memory and now he can't pursue that outrageous claim. However, what *really* set him off is that they're calling that thing out in the asteroid belt 'New Krypton' now. Luthor went on a tirade, insisting that he created it, that it belonged to him and that it should be named *after* him."

Perry commented seriously, "Well, it's only appropriate to call it 'New Krypton', considering that it's now been recognized as Kryptonian territory... Please tell me that his tantrum was on the record."

"It's now part of the state's body of evidence against him, but we only know about it from off the record comments by a trusted source. We'll need official corroboration before we can print anything about it," Richard informed him. "Lois and Clark are trying to get confirmation from official sources, as is our Washington Bureau. But don't hold your breath. They're running this one by the book and *nobody* wants to take the risk of giving Luthor *anything* that could be used as grounds for an appeal."

"Neither do we, but we still need corroboration so we're ready to go to press once the concerns have passed," Perry insisted. "We'll sit on it as long as we have to, but let's get that confirmation."

"We're working on it, but it's clearly a story for another day," Richard replied. "Barring any late-breaking news, I think we're close to done for the day."

"You sound like you're anxious to get out of here," Perry commented knowingly.

"I wouldn't say that," Richard protested. At Perry's pointed look he sighed and admitted, "I've got Kara and Jason for the weekend and I'm picking them up after work tonight."

"You've got *both* of them again?"

"Jason's still like a son to me, even if Clark's the one tucking him in at night," Richard explained. "And Kara would be heartbroken if I took Jason and left her behind. So..."

Richard's explanation led Perry to recall the changes that recent months had brought to his nephew's life. He scrutinized the younger man for a moment and then told him, "I have to give you credit, Richard. I didn't think you'd be able to make the switch to a platonic friendship with Lois after the breakup. And I especially didn't think that you'd become friends with Kent. But I can't help wondering if that's been holding you back."

"What do you mean, 'holding me back'?" Richard asked cautiously.

"Have you been out on a date since the breakup?"

"I... I really haven't been looking," Richard told him defensively. "Besides, there hasn't been time."

"Bull," Perry countered. "You haven't allowed yourself the time, even when the opportunity's been right under your nose."

"Uncle Perry..." Richard began impatiently.

"I heard Loueen was trying to set you up with her sister, but you declined," Perry interrupted.

"I've never really cared much for blind dates."

"Are you sure that's the reason?" Perry pressed. Before Richard could answer, Perry added, "Richard, it's been *four months*. Are you sure keeping such a close friendship with your ex isn't getting in the way of moving on?"

"I would have needed time even if I were a continent away," Richard argued. "And, I'm *not* moving back to London."

"I'm not asking you to," Perry replied. "I *am* asking you to accept Loueen's suggestion and take her sister out."

"You can't be serious," Richard said in disbelief.

"Richard, it's just a date, not a shotgun wedding," Perry pressed. "Besides, you really need to get back out there and get on with your life. Even if this ends up being a total bust, it's just one night."

"I'm busy with the kids this weekend."

"I wasn't implying that you needed to squeeze it in this weekend," Perry clarified.

"Richard, you can't just keep hanging around your ex and her husband like some kind of groupie. You need to jump back in the water sooner or later and this is as good a time as any."

Richard sighed and then said irritably, "I'll *think* about it, okay?"

"Good. I'll have Loueen make the arrangements," Perry decided.

"Uncle Perry!" Richard protested.

"You're welcome," Perry replied with satisfaction. "Now, please make sure that our people get that corroboration for Luthor's meltdown."

Richard's shoulders sagged in defeat and he said, "You know, you can really be a ruthless bastard sometimes."

"That's what family's for," Perry declared. "Now, that follow up?"

"As I said, we're already working on it, but I'll get an updated status," Richard assured him and he then retreated to his own office.

Perry watched Richard leave and thought, *He needed a little push. Hopefully, once he dives back into the dating game, he can start living again. Who knows, maybe he and what's-her-name will hit it off.*

The old newsman returned his attention to his desktop and quickly ran through the preliminary review of the remaining sections of the paper and ordered up the dummy. He then pushed himself back from his desk, walked over to the inner glass wall and stared out over the bullpen. He spotted Clark's head poking over the cubicle wall looking towards Richard's office with a sympathetic look on his face.

Perry concluded that younger man must have been eavesdropping on the conversation with Richard. *Kind of a mixed blessing having Superman on the staff*, Perry lamented. *Yeah, we get the exclusives, but it's kind of hard to have a private conversation around here.* After a moment of thought, Perry noted that knowing the Man of Steel was in his bullpen, working for the *Planet*, hadn't been nearly as awkward as he feared it would be.

The potential conflict of interest was avoided for the most part because Kent still reported up through Foswell, who didn't know the secret. Perry also found a way around pressuring him directly for Superman content. If he needed new Superman photos, he just made sure that Kent was in the bullpen when he yelled at Olsen for them. Likewise, when he needed a new Superman interview, he'd make sure that Kent was in attendance at the morning staff meeting when he demanded it from whoever's turn it was. The hero got the message and he got his Superman content in short order.

Perry reflected that Kent seemed to be more comfortable with things that way and neither man had acknowledged that the Editor-In-Chief knew the astonishing secret. However, Perry was certain that his star reporter had figured it out. He never would have dropped his guard around him otherwise and revealed glimpses of the real Clark Kent. Not the timid office klutz or the regal hero, but a confident yet humble man comfortable in his own skin. He also produced some spectacular front-page stories which appeared to have nothing to do with his superhuman abilities. *Perhaps the real win here isn't the Superman exclusives, but Clark Kent's writing*, Perry pondered. *If he and Lois don't get a Pulitzer for the Luthor stories, it'll be highway robbery.*

Richard knew that the request for updates on Luthor's tirade was simply Perry's way of kicking him out of his office, but he still sent off emails requesting status. With that little bit of work completed, he then stared blankly at his screen, dreading what Perry was forcing on him. *I don't need their sympathy or their help*, he lamented. *I'm doing okay, all things considered.*

Richard reflected that he'd come a long way in the past four months. It no longer hurt like it had at first, though he still felt a profound sense of loss when he thought of his failed romance. They'd also managed to get through the awkward transition from being affianced to being exes and from being exes to again becoming friends who were comfortable around each other. It hadn't been easy getting there, however.

The first obstacle they had to overcome was the office gossip. Their coworkers had been keenly interested in their crumbling romance once Jason was revealed to be a Kent. There were betting pools on how long they'd last after that revelation and nobody was betting that it would be very long. Not when they had immediately noticed the distance between the previously happy couple, who were no longer coming and going together or sharing casual kisses hello and goodbye.

After returning to the office following Luthor's attack, the gossips had immediately noticed Richard's forlorn expression and Lois' bare ring finger. Bets were paid off and Richard had been confronted by sympathetic looks for weeks afterwards. Most really didn't know what to say to him but some, like Ralph, didn't know enough to keep their opinion on the matter to themselves.

The bullpen had been far slower to pick up on the change between Lois and Clark. Admittedly, the two had made a determined effort to stay under the radar, with no distinguishable change in behavior after Richard stepped aside. They didn't come or go together any more frequently than they had before, which Richard attributed mostly to Superman's duties. There were also no public displays of affection beyond the same cheerful, teasing banter that they'd always had. Richard suspected that they kept such a low profile both out of respect for him and due to Clark Kent's aversion to drawing attention to himself. Whatever the reason, he was grateful for it. Some days would have been impossible to get through otherwise.

The toughest days came the week after Thanksgiving - after his former fiancée had secretly eloped with Clark. The newlyweds showed up that Monday like it was any other day and their colleagues were none the wiser. However, Richard had been one of the select few who were aware of the nuptials over Thanksgiving weekend. It only made the situation marginally more bearable by sparing him the looks and comments that he would have otherwise been forced to endure. Fortunately, time had taken the edge off the pain and things had gotten about as normal between them as they could have hoped for by the time the bullpen finally figured out that Lois had become a Kent.

Richard pondered that they probably still wouldn't have figured it out if one of Lois' stories hadn't dovetailed with something Polly Harper was working on a few weeks earlier, resulting in Perry assigning the two women to work together. They were working late one night when Polly finally noticed the simple diamond ring on Lois' left hand. When Lois declined to elaborate on it, Polly sought out the resident expert on all things Lois.

Polly had ambushed Clark the following morning, but had barely gotten two words out of her mouth when she noticed the pictures in the hinged frame that by then had been sitting in the back corner of his desk for nearly seven weeks. One side displayed a new family picture from the farm that included all of the Kents and Hubbards, while the other displayed a very dapper Clark Kent in a gray tuxedo embracing a radiant Lois Lane, dressed in her sister's borrowed wedding dress.

It was only then that Polly finally noticed the wedding band that Clark Kent had worn on his finger ever since the Thanksgiving holiday - a ring that matched the one Lois had been wearing. The observation provided her with the astonishing explanation she sought and sent the rumor mill into overdrive. Their colleagues had been stunned and productivity plummeted as the gossip exploded. Perry had to tongue-lash the bullpen back into action, reminding them of their deadlines and suggesting that they not embarrass themselves by pointing out their lack of observation skills. After all, both the wedding picture and the newlyweds' wedding bands had been on display in the bullpen for nearly two months.

It was shortly after the revelation of the Kents' nuptials that Loueen had first approached him about going out with her recently divorced sister. It had undoubtedly been motivated out of sympathy after the news of his former fiancée's marriage and he couldn't fault Loueen for her intentions. However, he'd been flatly uninterested in the blind date and politely declined. Or rather, he had tried to decline. Every couple of days, Loueen had shared pictures or some trivia about her sister, while casually mentioning that she wasn't seeing anyone.

Loueen had apparently decided to bring in the heavy guns and recruited Perry to her mission. Richard found he wasn't any more enthusiastic about it when it came from Perry than he'd been with Loueen. The only difference was that Perry hadn't been as nice about it and was harder to refuse. In fact, Richard saw no way out of the blind date. He sighed in frustration and thought, *Maybe it won't be so bad and it is just one night. It might take a little effort to get my head in the game, however. Well, I don't need to worry about that right now, and I'm not likely to be pestered about it during my weekend in Munchkinland.*

Lois pulled out of the *Planet's* parking garage and turned left on Fifth Avenue, eager to head home after a tiring day. With Luthor's formal extradition and arrest, it had been a busy news day, but she was looking forward to putting their ordeal with the sociopath behind them. However, she knew it would be a while longer before it was formally over. If Luthor chose to aggressively fight the charges, it could delay the start of the trial for as long as a year and drag

out the proceedings for months or years beyond that.

She'd also have to face him down in court at some point, given that she was one of the government's witnesses. She had little doubt that the madman would somehow manage to put up a formidable defense, despite losing his claim on the Vanderworth fortune and having most of the nation's top criminal lawyers declare themselves 'uninterested' in the Luthor case. *Uninterested, my ass*, Lois thought. *They're interested all right, but mad as hell at Luthor for murdering his previous lawyer and they aren't about to offer him any help. Guess even mob lawyers have some scruples.*

Even if the top defense lawyers had offered Luthor their services, Lois doubted it would make much difference in the end. They had damning forensic and video evidence, some of which was recovered with the yacht from New Krypton. His mistress and all surviving members of his gang had also agreed to testify against him, and with Luthor's own incriminating words on record, his conviction was practically guaranteed. The U.S. attorney's office wasn't about to underestimate their adversary, however, and refused to leave anything to chance. They'd imposed a media blackout on any new Luthor details and made sure to have a public defender present when Luthor was taken into custody, read his rights and during his initial meeting with prosecutors afterwards.

That didn't appear to have helped Luthor much. When the prosecutors shared some of their evidence against him and extended him the 'courtesy' of bringing him up to date on certain diplomatic and political developments, it had provoked some rather incriminating outbursts, in spite of his court-appointed attorney's best efforts to silence him. In fact, Luthor had gone on a tirade over it, claiming ownership of New Krypton in addition to threatening both his traitorous gang and Superman. *Looks like Team Vanderworth was dead on the money with that psychological strategy*, Lois concluded. *Point out his failures and question his intelligence. Then stand back and make sure the camcorder's on.*

Despite the incriminating testimony provided by the outburst, the Justice Department was still offering a deal not to pursue the death penalty if Luthor pled guilty to all charges. Lois knew from Clark that opinion at the department was divided on the merits of the deal. While those in charge favored it to quickly end the saga, many others felt that Luthor deserved to pay the ultimate price for his crimes.

Lois was inclined to agree with the latter opinion and would have strongly advocated that position but for Kara and Jason. Though it wasn't happening as frequently, they were still having nightmares. Lois worried that the constant media coverage from a high profile trial would make it virtually impossible to keep the kids from hearing about it on somebody's television or radio. The coverage from his transfer to U.S. custody alone would probably be enough to provoke nightmares. Fortunately, they'd provided Richard with a portable force field generator to protect his place from Kryptonian nightmares and Clark would be checking up on them. *Maybe we'll get lucky this time*, Lois pondered. *Richard never has a problem keeping those two distracted. Hopefully, it'll be a nightmare-free weekend for the Munchkins.*

Lois finally arrived at the Riverside house and pulled into the garage. She parked the car and thought, *Home sweet home - for a few more weeks at least.* She and Clark had been leasing the house from Richard since the breakup, though they'd originally tried to decline his offer to let them stay. Lois had adamantly insisted that they weren't about to force Richard from his own house. Richard persisted, however, and when he argued that they'd be doing him a favor by covering the mortgage, they couldn't refuse. Expensive riverfront property didn't move as quickly as more modest homes, and they didn't want to leave Richard stuck with a big

mortgage on top of everything else. They finally agreed to let Richard take over her old penthouse apartment and she and Clark would lease the house from him until it sold.

In hindsight, that had clearly been the right decision. The house had been on the market since the end of October, with nothing but a few lowball offers over the winter. Richard hadn't seen a reasonable offer until the past weekend, though it was still a bit lower than what he was hoping for. It was a fair offer worth consideration, however, and the prospective buyer was planning another walk-through with a home inspector over the weekend. In the meantime, she and Clark would be doing some house-hunting of their own. Clark had spotted a few possibilities in Lafayette that they'd planned on looking through together.

Lois got out of the car and walked into the house through the kitchen, where she was immediately ambushed by Kara and Jason.

"Mommy!" Jason squealed.

"Mom!" Kara greeted her excitedly. "Can we help carry your things for you?"

"You don't have to do that, you know," Lois pointed out. She knelt down and pulled the kids into a tight hug.

"But Daddy said you need to take it easy," Jason reminded her.

Lois sighed and explained, "This *is* taking it easy. I'm perfectly all right, you two. But if you *really* want to help... Kara, you can take my laptop and set it on my desk. And Jason, would you like to put my coat in the front closet? On a hanger, this time." A moment later, the children were running off to take care of her things and Lois leaned against the kitchen counter, shaking her head and chuckling at their enthusiasm.

Lois was joined in the kitchen by her mother, Ella. She and Martha had been taking turns watching their grandchildren after school. It was one of the benefits of having let her mother in on the secret before they eloped, along with the new Kryptonian portals under the Riverside house and her parents' home in Alexandria. It put both grandmothers within minutes of the house and her mother had been thrilled with the arrangement. Though Alexandria wasn't far, Ella had often complained that she didn't get to see as much of her grandchildren as she would have liked. She'd already been planning to move to Metropolis after Sam retired, since that's where all of her family was.

"Looks like those two are going to give you plenty of help around here," Ella commented.

"If they don't drive me to the loony bin first," Lois muttered.

"You really can't blame them for being so excited about the baby," Ella pointed out.

"Well, I'm not due until the end of September, so they're going to have to be patient," Lois countered. Her unexpected pregnancy had just been the latest in a series of surprising changes in her life over the past several months. *Looks like I did it all*, Lois pondered sarcastically. *Broke an engagement with one man, married another, adopted his daughter, let him adopt his own son. And, oh yeah, got knocked up again, too.*

She hadn't yet gotten used to the idea that she was pregnant again, given that she'd just realized her condition the previous evening. Though she'd been experiencing symptoms of morning sickness for the past few weeks, she had attributed the nausea to stress over Luthor's pending transfer to U.S. custody. She hadn't realized that there was more to it than that until Jason's innocent question, asking what the fluttering sound from her tummy was. Clark and Ella had both heard the question, and Lois had immediately realized the truth after spotting Clark's tender expression.

Clark had patiently explained to both kids that the fluttering noise they heard was the heartbeat from their new baby brother or sister growing inside Mommy's tummy. Jason had

promptly asked how it got there and Lois had been unable to contain her laughter at Clark's baffled expression as he struggled with an age appropriate answer. Ella was also amused, but came to his rescue, simply telling her grandchildren, "That's just the way it works."

They made a trip to the Fortress that evening and Jor-El had also been keenly interested when informed of the pregnancy. Lois hadn't appreciated his comment about her 'finally listening to reason' by having more children, but she was grateful for the Kryptonian prenatal care. Jor-El had detected and corrected the same genetic flaw in the baby that had given Jason his allergies and all indications were that she would deliver a perfectly healthy baby in another seven and half months.

Lois' ruminations were interrupted by the children running back into the kitchen and she called them over to her. "Listen to me, you two," she said authoritatively. "Richard's going to be over here any minute to pick you guys up for the weekend and I don't want you telling him that I'm going to have a baby. Understand?"

"More secrets?" Kara complained.

"Why can't we tell him?" Jason asked in confusion.

"It's not something he should hear from you," Lois explained. "I need to be the one to tell him, but I can't do that yet. If I do, it might make it harder for him to do something that Uncle Perry wants him to do, because he'll be thinking about the baby."

"What's he gotta do?" Jason wondered.

"Perry just wants him to meet someone," Lois said simply. "Trust me on this, okay? Promise me you won't say anything to Richard yet."

"Okay, Mommy," Jason replied.

Kara rolled her eyes and asked, "Why does everything have to be a secret?"

"Kara," Lois began sternly.

"All right, I promise," Kara told her reluctantly. "But why do we have to keep secrets from Uncle Richard? He's *family*."

"You'll understand when you're older," Lois declared. "Now get your things ready so we don't have to hunt for everything after Richard gets here."

"We're already ready," Kara protested. "Grandma helped us pack."

"Then go get your suitcases and set them in the front hall," Lois instructed. "And no superspeed in the house."

After the children trudged out of the room, Ella softly asked her daughter, "Who's this person Richard's supposed to meet?"

"Perry's administrative assistant has a sister who's a currently available divorced single mother. I've met her before, years ago. She's a nice lady. Attractive, too."

"A blind date," Ella summarized. After a brief pause, she asked somberly, "How's Richard feel about that?"

Lois sighed and muttered, "I hear he's not very excited about it, but I haven't dared broach the subject. His love life isn't one of those things that we can comfortably discuss. Not yet. Not after... everything."

"Of course," Ella agreed. "Well, I think I need to head home. Your father's taking me out to some formal Pentagon dinner tonight and I need to get ready."

"My husband's taking me out tonight, too - to this nice little restaurant in San Francisco called The Stinking Rose," Lois replied.

"The *Stinking* Rose?" Ella echoed with a chuckle.

"Think 'garlic', and lots of it. It's actually quite good," Lois explained. "Oh, before you

go... don't forget that Kara's birthday party is next weekend."

"We wouldn't dream of missing it. Your father and I will both be here," Ella assured her. "Well, I'd better say goodbye to the kids before I go. Wish Richard good luck on his date for me."

*Saturday, February 10, 2007 10:00AM CDT*

Clark adjusted the heat under the pan on the stove in his mother's house while continuing to stir the concoction within it. He reflected that it was still his mother's house, even though she hadn't lived there since marrying Ben Hubbard three months earlier. Though he'd initially found her plans unsettling, he had made his peace with it rather quickly, much to his surprise.

For the moment at least, everything seemed right in the world. He had even been able to enjoy an evening out with Lois with only a couple of short interruptions required to attend to Superman's duties. Afterwards, Lois had insisted that they spend the night in Smallville, safely out of range of their children's hearing. Clark pondered that it still felt a bit naughty being intimate in his mother's house, despite the fact that they were now married. However, it wasn't nearly as disconcerting as it had been immediately after they eloped.

He turned off the burner, removed the pan from the stove, and poured it into a couple of mugs through a strainer before topping off the beverages with whipped cream and grated chocolate. He set both mugs on a bed tray along with the rest of the carefully prepared breakfast and proceeded to carry the tray up to the guest room where they had spent the night. He knew from the change in her heartbeat that Lois was beginning to stir, though she wasn't fully awake yet.

Clark entered the room and shouted out melodiously, "Good morning, Sunshine!"

"Huh? What time is it?" Lois mumbled, without bothering to look up.

"Just a little after eleven, Metropolis time," Clark informed her. "That gives us almost two hours before we meet with the realtor. C'mon, honey, wake up. I've brought you your breakfast."

Lois peeked out from under the covers and eyed the tray. "Breakfast in bed?" she asked suspiciously.

"Yep," Clark answered cheerfully. "We've got a cinnamon raisin bagel with a honey hazelnut spread, orange juice, and since your morning coffee has way too much caffeine for the baby, we've got spicy Aztec hot chocolate."

"You did remember that chocolate's got caffeine and theobromine in it, didn't you?" Lois pointed out sleepily. She threw the pillows against the headboard and crawled up in a seated position against the repositioned pillows.

"I made the chocolate from cacao seeds that I processed at the Fortress while you were sleeping. There's only trace amounts of caffeine and theobromine left in it," Clark assured her. He set the tray over her lap and sat on the edge of the bed. "Go ahead, try it."

Lois picked up one of the mugs and brought it to her lips. Her eyes shot wide open a moment later. "Wow," she commented. "That's... wow. What kind of chocolate did you say this was?"

"Spicy Aztec hot chocolate," Clark told her. He retrieved the second mug from the tray and added, "There's more than just cocoa and milk in there. There's also cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, cayenne pepper, vanilla, chili peppers and a dash of jalapeño."

"It's good," Lois replied simply. She then took another sip of the beverage before starting on her bagel.



As Clark watched his wife eat, he reflected on all the obstacles they had overcome for the two of them to finally reunite as a family - a family that was still growing. He had never been happier.

Lois noticed his tender expression and did a double-take. "What?" she demanded to know.

"Huh? Oh, just... thinking," Clark answered. "I never thought I'd have a life like this. And I can still hardly believe that we're going to have a baby."

"It's not the first time, Clark," Lois corrected mirthfully. "This one's number three, remember? Well, second one I'll be giving birth to..."

"I know, and not a day goes by that I don't thank my lucky stars for the other two," Clark told her. "But this is the first time I'll be around from the beginning. I'll be here with you throughout the pregnancy. I'll get to see our child born and I'll be there for those early milestones: The first steps, first words..."

"First temper tantrum?" Lois suggested.

Clark chuckled and said, "Yeah, that too." He tone turned serious as he added, "I missed that the last time."

Lois' expression softened and she told him compassionately, "Clark, nobody's blaming you for doing what had to be done. Everything worked out in the end and you're *here* this time."

"I know, and I don't intend to take any of this for granted," he told her somberly.

"What's on your mind, Clark?" Lois asked gently.

Clark paused a moment and then stated pensively, "Until recently, I'd lived a very solitary life. I was always alone and acutely aware of how different I was - even before I learned of my heritage. Some of the taglines after Superman appeared on the scene just reinforced that: 'The Last Son of Krypton', or 'Strange Visitor from Another Planet', for instance.

"I never felt more alone than when I first got back from Krypton, even though I had Kara with me. It seemed like the world had moved on without me. Or rather, everyone I loved had moved on without me. My mom. You. But everything is different now. I'm not alone anymore and I've become a part of something truly wonderful."

"Would that something wonderful have anything to do with a couple of special little munchkins that can't wait to help their dad save the world?" Lois asked mirthfully.

Clark chuckled and said, "That's certainly part of it. But we also have a special group of friends and family who have formed ranks behind us. They've got our backs. And to think I was a little freaked out over all of them learning the family secret last fall."

"Just a little?" Lois teased.

"Okay, a *lot*," Clark admitted. "But my point is that it's turned out to be a wonderful blessing."

"How so?"

"It's a lot of little things. Ben will never replace my dad, but in him I now have a step-father whose sage advice is a good complement to my mother's. Ben's daughter was already a close friend, as were Ron and Lucy. But in them I now have a step-sister and a brother and sister-in-law who've become like true siblings. It's so surreal hanging out with them and casually discussing my alter ego."

"Tell me about it," Lois muttered.

"Considering where I came from, that means the world to me," Clark continued. "I now have this wonderful close family relationship with all of these people who know me for who I

truly am and don't care about where I came from or what I can do. The same thing goes for your parents..."

"Well, maybe with my mother," Lois muttered. "Did you forget that my dad accused you of ruining my life last fall?"

"Well, I really can't fault him for that," Clark countered. "It was the first time we'd had a chance to talk since he learned the truth and you'd just recently split up with Richard. He was rightfully concerned... You have noticed how cordial he's been since I made an honest woman out of you, haven't you?"

"Don't count on it lasting," Lois warned him. "I'm sure he'll be back to his ornery old self in no time."

"Whether he's cordial or ornery, he's still family, still protective, and still supportive," Clark insisted. "That's kind of the point. Even those who aren't related are like part of the family now and dedicated guardians of the secret. What's really weird about all this is that it feels like this is the way things were meant to be. It feels like everyone was *always* meant to be family. I was just blind to that undeniable fact for all those years and it's taken this long to open my eyes and be reunited with the family of my heart."

"I think I know what you mean," Lois answered quietly. "Deep down, I always knew you'd come back and that we belonged together. That this was meant to be."

Clark smiled and looked intently into his wife's eyes as added sincerely, "Lois, I think that I'm the luckiest man in the universe. Not just because I escaped Krypton's destruction or because of the superpowers. I'm lucky because of the extraordinary children we have. I'm lucky because I have the support of such an extraordinary group of people who I now call family. And I'm especially lucky because I have the unique privilege of being married to the most extraordinary one of them all."

Lois grabbed the collar of Clark's flannel shirt and pulled him down into a searing kiss. When they broke from the kiss a moment later, she smiled up at him and said seductively, "Well, if you *really* want to get lucky, maybe you'd better get rid of this tray so we can continue this part of the family reunion unencumbered."

As Clark set the tray aside, he again reflected on his fortune. He'd overcome virtually impossible odds, barely escaping a dying world and then finding the other half of his soul in another galaxy. She was ever present in his mind, his heart and his soul. *Whether it's luck or fate, this simply feels right*, he concluded. *This is where I was meant to be*. He then allowed the rest of the universe to disappear from his senses for a short time, as he lost himself in the cocoon of his wife's embrace.

- The End -

## End Notes:

The words are from "My Favorite Things", by Richard Rodgers, from the 1959 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, *The Sound of Music*.

"Mars Once Had Oceans, New Evidence Suggests", *National Geographic News*, June 13, 2007. For a rendering of Mars with oceans and an Earth-like atmosphere, refer the Lunar and Planetary Institute: <http://www.lpi.usra.edu/education/timeline/gallery/images/019.jpg>.

"ko-mekh" and "sa-mekh" are my substitutions for the Kryptonian words for "Mother"

and "Father". We're substituting Federation Standard Vulcan for Kryptonian, given the relative completeness of that lexicon. Translations came from <http://www.starbase-10.de/vld/>.

"Come, Ye Thankful People, Come", by George J. Elvey and Henry Alford, from the United Methodist Hymnal.

My inspiration for the "pocket dimension" comes from the Phantom Zone in the *Superman* movies, from the Star Trek television series, *Enterprise*, in the "Future Tense" episode ("bigger on the inside"), and from **Shado Librarian's** Superman Movieverse Fan Fiction work, *Setup*. This differs from the old comic canon, where everything is super-compressed in a normal pocket. Some things simply don't compress well.

**Treble damages** are defined as the tripling of damages allowed by state statute in certain types of cases, such as not making good on a bad check or intentionally refusing to pay rent.

Federal anti-trust violations also carry treble damage penalties. (Definition from [thefreedictionary.com](http://thefreedictionary.com)).

An **interlocutory appeal**, in the law of civil procedure, is an appeal of a ruling by a trial court that is made before the trial itself has concluded.

A **Writ of Certiorari** is an order from a higher court to a lower court requesting the transcript of proceedings of a case for review.

"Gang Aft Agley" can be translated as "often go awry", though for the title of this chapter, we'll stick with the original line from the 1785 Robert Burns poem, *To a Mouse*: "The best-laid schemes o' mice an 'men/Gang aft apley."

Kara's words translate to "We have to get to the ship! The sun is going to explode!" I wanted to use the Kryptonian lexicon at <http://kryptonian.info> but it's not complete enough for the translation. I've thus substituted Federation Standard Vulcan, as documented at <http://www.starbase-10.de/vld/>.

"NORTHCOM" is the acronym for "United States Northern Command", which is a unified combatant command of the United States military whose area of responsibility encompasses the United States and its territories, Canada, Mexico, and the surrounding waters out to five hundred nautical miles.

Kryptonian for "Command not understood." Again, substituting Federation Standard Vulcan for Kryptonian. Refer to <http://www.starbase-10.de/vld/>.

The HAL 9000 was the artificially intelligent computer that ran amuck in Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

The 'suspender' cable is the cable that holds the road deck to the main cable on a suspension bridge. Refer to [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suspension\\_bridge](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suspension_bridge) for details.

A "dummy" in newspaper printing is a test layout of the paper, including all advertisements and editorial content. (See [http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What\\_is\\_a\\_dummy\\_in\\_newspaper\\_printing](http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_is_a_dummy_in_newspaper_printing)).