

Little Secrets, Interim

by **Kala Lane Kent**

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Rating: T

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Interim Cycle One: The "Boys"

Interim: Perry White

Things have finally settled down around here. The last big blow-up was when Lois found out I'd transferred Kent to International. I let her yell for a while, then told her very calmly that I had no intention of letting one of my best reporters quit, and I figured sending him to work for her fiancé might remind him that she was taken. I didn't know people could actually turn green.

Somebody once said, "Love is the best way I know to jump-start a vomit." It sure applies to Lois; every time you mention Kent or Superman, she looks distinctly nauseous. I've given up meddling in it. With Kent in another department and Polly covering the Superman stories, Lois doesn't have to be around either one unless she wants to. But she can't forget about them, either. Every week or so Superman's on the front page, and of course Kent's byline is in the paper every day. Wish I knew how he learned how to type that fast.

Speaking of which, I was a little nervous about sending him to Richard's department. Kent looked a bit anxious, too, but it was the only senior reporter's job available at the time he tried to resign. It worked out pretty well, though. Better than I thought. Kent makes a hell of a globetrotting reporter; he speaks several languages and gets along well in foreign cultures. Either he's very adaptable or very centered, or both.

What's really creepy is how well he and Richard get along. Traveling the world knocked some of the nerdiness off Kent, and it's easier than ever to see how much alike the two men are. Richard practically raves over him - the guy never misses a deadline, he's got great style, and he's got connections like you wouldn't believe. And Kent seems to like working for him. They've both been in Mexico the last two weeks, covering the new illegal immigration laws. The coyotes down there - that's what they call the smugglers who bring in the illegal immigrants - are already finding ways around them, and people in Texas are starting to patrol their ranches at night, armed to the teeth. Recipe for disaster. And headlines. If I know those two boys, they'll bring me back a whole series of articles.

Near as I know, Richard doesn't suspect a thing. Kent hasn't said anything to him about his past with Lois, and I know damn well Lois won't. The others who've been here long enough to remember them before probably thought he just had a puppy crush on her, like half of them have. No one knows Lois well enough to realize she felt something for him - still feels it. No one but me, and I'm keeping my mouth shut. I love Lois, but I know her well enough to know she's got to figure this out herself. And much as I love my nephew, too, Richard will have to lose or keep her on his own.

Richard's worried about Lois, says she's been aloof and tense. Luthor really got to her, and the stress is making her snappish. Doesn't help that he's pitching a fit over every new thing he learns about her, saying she kept secrets from him. Poor kid. Lois went along to get along the last six years, following the current, making decisions mostly based on convenience. Now she's charting her own course again, and my nephew's just realizing he was never the captain of that ship.

I told him to calm down, that you can't know someone completely in three years, or thirty. If you could, they'd be damn boring, and whatever else you say about her, Lois has never been boring. I also reminded Richard that the two things about her that interested him the most when they first met were her independence and her mysteriousness. She didn't suddenly tame down and get all domestic when she started wearing his ring.

Still, it didn't make me happy to learn Lois is wearing that damn gun around the office all the time. I keep waiting for Olsen to walk up behind her at the wrong moment and get shot. She did train with the Special Crimes Unit for a while, so I guess she's got better sense than to blow away the photographer. It's just that, even though she's been on a much more even keel the last two months, I feel like Lois is subtly off balance and waiting for something to make her tip over. And I'm not exactly looking forward to a return of the sharp-tongued short-tempered hellion she was for those few weeks that Kent worked in City.

Let's see, what else is new? We had a couple of really big stories. Some firebug is working the city. The arsonist has money and time and intelligence; he hasn't been caught yet, and Sawyer told me off the record that unless the guy makes a mistake or burns himself to a crisp, he never will be. He's too good. Just last week the bastard lit up four floors of the Bank of America building downtown. The four floors in the exact middle of the building. Every fireman in the city was down there, and Superman helped rescue the trapped workers and put out the flames, but there were still seventeen casualties. Over three thousand got out alive, though, so I'll count it a win for the good guys.

There's tension in the Middle East, but when isn't there? I've got two embedded reporters with our troops, and a two-bottle-a-week Mylanta habit because of it. Still, this is the job. Nobody ever said it was easy or safe. Lois would be over there, too, except for the twins, and I can't help breathing a sigh of relief that she has them. She's one of the best, but those fanatics like to kill journalists.

And that's another thing. Polly's a good writer, but she's no Lois. I can't help but feel that our Superman coverage is below par. Lois knows him like no one else; they have history together. She ought to be writing the stories, and it feels damn weird to see anyone else's byline under a Superman headline. I won't suggest it to Lois, though. I've heard enough jokes around the office about Nuclear Warhead Lane to last me a lifetime.

The usual bedlam around the office - when I said things settled down, I meant they've settled down to a dull roar. Gossip, rivalries, feuding, the whole nine yards. The girls in Fashion have asked me again to put one of those fancy cappuccino-dispensing machines in the break room. I asked them what was wrong with my coffee, and they dropped the issue again. Newsman's coffee - thick, black, and strong enough to make your eyes water - is one of the best parts of the job. Nowhere else can you get coffee that bad. Just don't tell anyone my cardiologist is making me drink decaf these days.

Halloween was two weeks ago, and the twins finally talked Lois into dressing up when she took them trick or treating. Would've been fine if they hadn't had to run back to the office and show off as soon as she picked them up from school. Kala was a scurvy pirate, complete with sword and eyepatch, and Jason was Godzilla, of course. The killer was Lois, dressed as a gypsy. There should be a law against walking into your office wearing an off-the-shoulder peasant blouse when your coworkers are used to seeing you in suits.

Oh, and I hired Grizzly Lombard back. He just moved back from Star City, and we've got a new CEO, one without attractive daughters. Sports section loves him, though, and his column sells papers. At least if he's here, he has Lane to remind him why he shouldn't harass women. I'll have to play absent-minded boss and ask him if his hand still hurts when it rains.

We've got a new artist in the graphics department who's causing a stir. It isn't enough that Sophie Noux is pretty and French, she's also damn talented and fast. One of the old stuffed shirts over there quit when she drew up a layout in fifteen minutes that would've taken him two hours. I suppose the time she's saving me taking over his work makes up for the time lost

when all the single and single-at-heart guys find excuses to drift through her department.

Sophie's charmed the hell out of Lois, too, which no other female on this job ever did their first day. The twins were up here when she was hired, and while we were waiting on her W-4 to go through the fax, she drew Jason and Kala. Lois has that little sketch framed, and Sophie's got a fan for life.

Speaking of the twins, I'm officially the Best Uncle on Earth, In Perpetuity. I admit, it wasn't very nice to Lois and Richard to give the kids live birthday presents, but children should have pets. Kids and critters go together like politics and corruption. And even though it was funny at the time, it was kinda sad to hear Kala telling Jimmy that Mom would get her a goldfish, "an' if we can manage not to kill it, maybe we can have a puppy!"

A goldfish? Please. Lois wants to strangle me, but the kids love their gifts. At least I didn't get them puppies that she and Richard would wind up having to walk, or kittens that shred the furniture.

Although I wish I'd known how damn big iguanas get before I bought that one for Jason...

Interim: Richard White

When I was in flight school, I thought I was the absolute hottest flyboy on earth. Untouchable, immortal, the next great flying ace, a born jet jockey whose natural aptitude would completely blow away my classmates and even my instructors. I was talented, true, but also arrogant, impatient, insufferable, and reckless, probably the guy voted "Most Likely to Kill Somebody in a Stupid and Completely Preventable Way - We Can Only Hope It's Himself."

Then this one morning, I'd rushed through the preflight because it was just beautiful out, and I wanted to be up there. I liked to do things fast to show off, and as we were getting ready for takeoff, I flipped all the switches and goosed the throttle. Only, I *didn't* switch them all, or I switched something off that should've been on, or I missed something in the preflight. Maybe I somehow caused a short in the electrical system. My instructor and I never quite figured out how the hell I did it, but I got the jet into the air and then lost power completely.

There is nothing more unnerving than sitting in several million dollars' worth of Uncle Sam's property, and realizing you are now operating this finely-tuned fighter jet as a glider. With only about a hundred feet of air beneath you. In the Armed Forces, there's something called the Pucker Factor. That experience showed me how apt the term is.

I got the jet landed somehow, without wrecking it. I was too shaken to try putting it up again, so I just parked it and stared at my flight instructor. I'm not sure if any cadet has ever scared an Air Force sergeant right out of his repertoire of profanity before, but the man just sat there staring at me for a good five minutes.

It knocked all the cockiness out of me, though. And I'm grateful that it did. What bothers me is that feeling of floating along almost peacefully, the roar of engines abruptly and unnaturally silenced, knowing that unless you do something quick, there's gonna be one hell of a wreck soon. I've never forgotten that feeling, and I'm having it again with Lois. This relationship has stalled like that jet's turbines, and now we're coasting along, gradually but surely heading for a very rough landing.

We haven't really been fighting that much - we argue a little now and then, but both of us are avoiding the big one. There are so many things we don't say to each other now, so much we don't talk about.

Thing is, we aren't doing anything else, either. We hardly even see each other - Lois is

always working on a story or staying late at the office. And sex is pretty much out of the question. Lois can't sleep lately, so she says coming to bed is pointless and stays on the computer. Damned if I know how she can work on just two or three hours of sleep. When the insomnia gets bad enough, she takes one of the sleeping pills Dr. Saavikam prescribed for her, and fifteen minutes later she's out like a light. Either way, our love life is basically nonexistent.

Those are just two symptoms, though. Lois is so distant, often lost in thought and staring at nothing. She worries incessantly about the twins, in spite of the gun she carries everywhere and the off-duty cops who cruise around our neighborhood as a favor. Sometimes she gets so distracted, so wrapped up in trying to run down the Vanderworth yacht and find Luthor before he finds her, she even forgets to eat. Between that and not sleeping and working all hours, I swear she's dropped five or six pounds in the last two months. I like my women on the lean side, but not model-skinny; that just looks unhealthy. Lois was petite to start with, and the weight she's lost has made her seem almost frail.

All of that taken together makes me wonder if we shouldn't start seeing a couples' therapist. Fat chance of getting Lois to go, though. Dr. Saavikam told her that insomnia as a symptom of stress is best treated by counseling and lifestyle change, but Lois talked her into getting the pills instead.

To top everything off, my insane uncle decided to buy a ferret and an iguana for Kala and Jason. He didn't even warn us; showed up the day before the party and snuck the animals in before Lois and I knew what was happening. Of course, once the kids saw them, there went our chance to stop Perry's plan. I'm just glad the twins aren't allergic to either of their pets.

There is one good thing going on, though. Clark Kent transferred over to International. We all knew Lois had a problem with him, but nobody knew what it was. I still can't see why any department in their right mind would let him leave - he's fast, his style is distinct and very readable, and he seems to know a source for everything. He's been practically indispensable in Mexico - his Spanish is better than mine, and he blends in with people in spite of himself.

In fact, I quite like the guy on a personal basis. Lois hates that - she's quite nasty any time I say something nice about Clark. But hell, he's polite, intelligent, well-spoken, and he's got that old-fashioned integrity that so few people still have. This is a man who would drive forty miles back to a store that gave him three cents too much in his change. You have to admire anyone who can maintain those kind of values in this society.

Since it can't be professional reasons, there must be something personal between Lois and Clark (doesn't *that* sound like a daytime drama). Eventually I'd like to know what it is, but I know better than to outright ask either of them. Lois will explode if I mention his name, and Clark gets visibly ill if I mention hers. It's crossed my mind that they might've been involved somehow, but if they were, no one here knows about it. Her opinion of office romance - before I came along anyway - was very well known and often quoted to me. I guess there are a lot of frustrated suitors around here.

Speaking of which, I knew Lois was going to dress up for Halloween with the kids, but hot damn! The hair down and curly, the eyeliner, the blouse, the boots ... for a second I almost didn't recognize her, and then I was speechless with awe. The woman is a knockout.

Yeah, she may be difficult to live with, and she might be having a nervous breakdown as we speak, but I do love Lois so much. Now if only I could figure her out...

Interim: Clark Kent

I needed this two-week break, although trying to dodge drug smugglers and coyotes and

Texas militia isn't much of a break, especially when I have to hide my alter ego from Richard, too. Thankfully, this *is* Mexico, so all I had to do was 'accidentally' drink the water and I gave myself plenty of excuses to rush off without explanation. In spite of the stress, it beats the office. I don't know how much more of *that* I can take.

I see Lois every day, but she doesn't see me - if she happens to glance my way, she averts her eyes, always with that angry, wounded look. And after two months, I still haven't been able to talk to her. She avoids me like I'm a leper or something, cuts me off mid-word if I say so much as 'Good morning' to her.

Doesn't help that I'm tormented by memories. Not just the physical, although those flashbacks are haunting me. I remember when Lois was happy, when she'd flash that thousand-watt grin at everyone, particularly me. I remember hearing her laugh without that sardonic edge to it. She's always had a hint of darkness in her soul, remembered pain that turned to anger, but the sheer joy of hunting down a story used to overshadow the past. Now there's a fraught quality to her, Luthor's threat gnawing in her mind, and I'm sure knowing that I'm over here in International isn't helping. Sooner or later, something's got to give. We can't go on like this.

In the meantime, at least I can see her kids. Richard likes to bring the twins over to our department, and they really seem to like me. They are all of Lois that I can have right now, and I adore them both, even when they bring their new weird pets to school and thus to work afterward. Put this on your resume, Kent - you can make conversation with a black ferret named Captain Jack and an iguana known as Ignatius. Oh, yeah, and if they ever need an experienced mediator in the Middle East, let them send their trainees here to deal with Jason when Kala calls the lizard 'Gazeera' instead.

The twins just turned six. I thought they were younger - if I'm doing the math right, Lois didn't even wait a whole month after I left, and that's something I'd *really* like an explanation for. Turns out the kids just look younger than they are, being a little fragile. Just like their mother, they might be small, but they make up for it in willpower. That's not the only way they take after their Mom - Kala even has her occasionally smart mouth, which Richard laments, even if he's also amused by the comparison.

Richard. God, what am I going to do? I don't want to like the guy - he's engaged to Lois, whom I keep thinking of at random moments as *my* Lois, and he has the life I wish I could lead. But I can't help becoming friends with him. It just isn't in me to stay jealous and angry in the face of someone who genuinely likes me and is happy to see me every day. I've even heard him tell Lois she's crazy to have let me leave City. Why couldn't he be a jerk? Why couldn't he just be wrong for her? I feel so guilty for being friends with him and at the same time wishing his fiancée was with me. This is hell on earth.

Nevermind. Thinking on that does nothing but ruin my day. What I'd rather think about is the potential lead in the Vanderworth case. I do have to turn it over to Lois when I get back - it's her story again now that I transferred, but the message from Karla Smith-Bennett went to my voicemail. She's an attorney formerly with the firm that represents Lex Luthor and used to represent Gertrude Vanderworth. Ms. Smith-Bennett left the firm while they were working to get Luthor released from prison, for ethical reasons I believe. Perhaps she'll talk off the record about his plans, if she knows them.

I can't help thinking Luthor's somehow connected to this arsonist in Metropolis. He ruins my day, too, but I'd rather think of him than Lois. I will catch this man, whoever he is. One day he's going to make a mistake, and I'll have him. What makes a person want to do these

things? There is so much in this world to love, to rejoice in, why must some people find their happiness in destruction? I will never understand such a desire - everything I want so much seems so simple compared to these twisted people and their dark hearts.

Give me one thing with no darkness in it, one pure example of innocence and joy ... or better yet, give me two: Jason and Kala. The two of them never fail to make me smile, even when they bicker. Especially when they bicker, because I know them well enough now to know that, much as they fight, if an outsider tried to start anything with either one, they'd back each other up unhesitatingly. They're so protective of each other. I suppose they need to be.

I only wish they were mine. I suppose I wouldn't be so bitter about that if Richard was their father. Oh, yes, that was a shock. Someone finally enlightened me as the fact that Richard and Lois only got together three years ago. It was Ron, as a matter of fact. He and I have gotten quite close again - it's amazing how much I missed simply having friends. Anyway, Ron happened to mention in passing that he admires Richard for treating the twins as if they were his. That's when I found out that Lois had an affair - more of a one-weekend stand - while she was in Paris.

While she was looking for me.

Ron called it revenge sex; I can imagine the terminology Lois would use, and it makes me cringe. God, I have no words for how that makes me feel. The twins ought to be a slap in my face, a constant reminder of how angry Lois was with me, but every time I look at them I simply see her. Lois' eyes in Kala's, Lois' smile in Jason's, her laugh, her mannerisms, her stubbornness, and her character in both them.

One major difference between the twins and their mom: the kids like me. I don't know if it's the fact that I'm a misfit, just like them, or if I'm just one of about five grownups in the place who talk to them like they're adults. Every time Richard brings them to the office, they wind up at my desk. And I don't even have candy! Ron thinks that's hysterical.

At least I finally have a place to stay. The new apartment's on the corner of Siegel Street and Shuster Avenue. It has a nice view and reasonable price. Not too far from the office, either. Best of all, I can come and go pretty much undetected thanks to super-speed and a balcony. I got it through Vgerland Real Estate, so everything's aboveboard. My realtor was a wonderful lady from California, probably one of the ones whose life I saved back when Luthor and I first crossed paths.

I haven't bothered to hook up the phone service; I've got the cell phone, and it's not as if I'm going to be getting many calls that aren't Ma or business-related. Speaking of Mom, she's my main source of support these days, encouraging me to take things one day at a time. She says to think of all of those people out there, the ones wearing t-shirts with my symbol on them, and let their love and belief keep me focused.

I still can't help but worry for the future. Will I ever be able to make things right with Lois? And will I be able to stop this latest plot of Luthor's, his newest level of depravity?

Interim Cycle Two: The "Girls"

Interim: Martha Kent

I love my son. From the moment he came toddling up to me out of that scar in the fields, naked as the day he was born with a smoking spaceship behind him and a questionable future ahead, I loved Clark with all my heart. You hear people say things like, "I couldn't have loved him more if he was my own." Well, as far as I'm concerned, Clark is my own.

The first arms that held him on this planet were mine. His first meal was my famous corn chowder. His first word of English was "Ma." I was the one who wanted him, who pleaded with Jonathan to keep him, though Jonathan grew to love his son so much. And no one else will ever quite love him as much as I do, or understand that love, unless they too had the one thing they wanted most in the world literally fall from the sky and land right beside them. He is my very own miracle, my son from another star.

But as much as I love him, there are times when I could just swat him!

Like right now. Clark really can't comprehend why Lois is *still* so mad at him. He still loves her, he thinks she still loves him, she remembers everything, they should be able to come to an understanding, right? Wrong! Typical man, looking for the way to fix their relationship as if it's a leaky faucet. Some things take time, and nothing but time, to heal. And no matter what I tell him he just will not leave well enough alone. Bad enough she isn't speaking to him - if he keeps pushing her, she might turn that razor tongue on him again, and my boy's heart has always been tender.

Clark doesn't really understand women - could I expect anything else of him? He didn't get to have the same experiences as other boys, too afraid of revealing himself or accidentally harming a girl. His strength has always been a liability in itself, and he's been nervous about it since his powers began to show. And what a show that was...

When Clark was six or seven, we had one particularly vicious rooster. I kept meaning to make soup out of him, but he protected the hens so well that I forgave him. Well, Clark went out to feed the chickens, and that rooster attacked him. He was so surprised and so angry, and being pecked still hurt at that age, that he kicked that rooster.

Through the side of the henhouse.

He screamed so loud I thought he'd stepped on a nail or something. We found him in the chicken yard bawling, and the rooster was no more than a bloody pile of feathers against the opposite wall. Clark had never hurt a living thing before that - he knew where chicken soup came from, but he didn't want any part of killing. He was so horrified by what happened that he got himself all knotted up about it, worried God was going to send him to Hell for killing a mean old rooster I meant to behead anyway. It wasn't as if he meant to hurt the thing. He'd seen me shove the rooster around with my foot - not quite kick it, you know, but push it away - and there was no reason for him to think his little foot could do that.

That incident, and a few others while he was growing up, traumatized my poor son, and he was leery of girls, terrified of hurting them. If he could pick up a tractor, how easy would it be to break a girl's ribs just by hugging her? And he had a farm boy's education about death, life, and birth. If a normally well-behaved stallion could savage a mare, then what might my son - who could juggle horses if he wanted to - do to a girl if he lost control of himself?

Jor-El only reinforced that with his legacy and his mission to benefit us poor, weak, primitive Earthlings. "Yours is a higher calling" my fanny! We all have feet of clay - no one can be a perfect savior except the one who already was, and my son is not Him. Clark was

raised to be a man, but he always believed he could never have what a man wants: a wife, a family. He's not even the same species as us, there's no reason to believe he could ever father children. Though I wonder sometimes...

So Clark held himself apart from the whole world, as if his motto was "Look, but don't touch," and he made himself the gentlest man he could be. My heart bled, but I didn't know how to reassure him. What most people consider his blessing is really his curse - it really might be possible for him to hurt or even kill someone purely by accident. The one time he put aside his powers and his mission to try having an ordinary life, the world fell down around his ears. And he wound up having to resume his burdens *and* lose the girl.

I can't help but feel sorry for Clark. With all his great powers, all the amazing things he can do, the thing he wants above all else is the only one he can't have. And what makes it worse is that every day he has to work with someone who does have Lois Lane, and her children; this Richard White possesses precisely what my son yearns for. I don't know how he stands it.

And how much Clark loves those twins of hers! I hear about them every time he calls home or comes by for dinner. He adores them both, and he's very good with them. I know it makes him wish they were his. Makes me wish they were my grandchildren, too - I think I'd make a pretty good grandma. I know a dozen cookie recipes by heart, after all. But Clark is absolutely sure that the Lane kids can't be his. Not only are Kryptonians and humans probably incompatible, the dates are off by over a month.

Sometimes I wonder, though I won't mention it to him - it would only make him more determined to fix things with Lois. I wish I could meet the children, see if they remind me of Clark when he was their age. I wish above all I could meet Lois and talk to her. Maybe then I could learn the truth, one way or another, and silence that little voice whispering, "But what if they *are* his?"

Interim: Ella Lane

My God, these kids! What on earth am I going to do with them both?

Lucy is pregnant. Again. Another girl; that makes three girls and one boy, all in fairly quick succession. Someone's going to be spending a fortune on prom dresses as they all hit high school. Fortunately the Troupe siblings seem to get along, or at least they do when they're at my house. And even though I've gotten some funny looks walking to the ice cream shop with them, the kids are always welcome. If my snobby neighbors have a problem with my beautiful grandchildren, well, that's their problem. Sam would've said, "Take a long walk off a short pier."

Ron wants to name the new baby Michelle, after his cousin. Or as he says, "The one everybody calls Devil because she's always making mischief." What a precedent to establish for their youngest, but I suppose it's a Lane family tradition, too. I gave my daughters matching names and now they're giving me matching gray hairs.

Lois still hasn't told Superman the truth, and red-hot pincers couldn't make her do it. I've toyed with the thought of threatening to jump off something famous downtown until I get his attention and telling him myself, but that's just not something a man should hear from the grandmother of the kids he doesn't know he has. But I have to talk - or knock - some sense into my oldest. As near as we know, Superman is utterly alone on this earth except for those twins. And as near as *he* knows, he is alone. He doesn't even have Lois anymore.

And with Luthor knowing the twins exist, threatening them, that's reason enough in itself

to tell Superman about them. But Lois flatly refuses to do it. She's convinced he'll see the twins as a mistake, as living reminders of the one time he failed in his mission. Or worse, that he'll decide only he can properly raise them to their half-Kryptonian heritage, and take them from her. Somehow I doubt he could be that cruel, but Lois' nerves are so frayed right now she can't even listen to anything on that subject. It isn't fair to him. But it isn't fair to Lois either. And it *really* isn't fair to Richard.

I like Richard. He's a wonderful man, but I was always surprised that Lois chose him. She *hates* military guys. And Richard's just so ... nice. Lois has been fairly mellow the last few years - mellow for her anyway - and I can't help but cringe at the thought of him seeing her go nuclear. There are parts of Lois he's never seen, and some of those are her worst traits. A very few are her best. The poor boy doesn't really know her, but I've bitten my tongue and kept a smile on my face. Neither one will take advice from me, so why bother to give it? I just hope Lois hasn't taken the wrong lesson from my life and decided to stay with someone just because he loves her and she's comfortable. That wasn't how it was between me and Sam. I loved him just as much as he loved me, even if he did make me crazy sometimes. I don't think Lois can say that about Richard, but I know enough not to ask.

At least Lois now has someone to confide in, though I was horrified by some of what she told me. She didn't know if the twins would have their father's powers, or when they'd get them. It wasn't beyond the realm of possibility for them to be born with his strength, which might've killed her during the birth. That was why she wanted me there in Paris. Not just because this was her first pregnancy, but also because she really thought she might die bringing the twins into the world.

My brave girl. She knew that, and she still kept the secret she'd promised. Lois had it set up to where if anything ever happened to her, I'd get a letter telling me who the twins' father was. Always prepared. I wonder if anyone else realizes just how often she forges ahead in spite of herself, in spite of being afraid or angry or nervous. Probably not. She's too damn good at hiding how she feels.

Even from herself...

Interim: Lois Lane

*No matter what I will be there
I'll be gentle, I'll be light
These are the words you
Whispered In the night*

Here I Am

Here I Am

*Now I'm standing in the cold
(Everything is said and done)
Atomic winter in my soul
(From the absence of the sun)
The only remedy I know
Is I gotta let you go so
Here I Am...*

And this is what I woke up to yesterday, playing via the radio station set up on my alarm. What a way to jumpstart your morning, never mind a guilt complex, huh? I can't even fathom

when I programmed that in. Doesn't really matter. At least I had managed to make it to my bed this time and wasn't asleep on the couch. But with the way things have been of late...

The last thing I want to do is start this out by using one of history's greatest clichés, one phrase hated by authors and journalists universally. Yet it doesn't make it any less valid. Here it is, anyway: If you had told me six years ago where I would be standing - hell, if you had told me three years ago - I would have had you committed. As it is... I'm honestly considering it in my case. Then again, you think a lot of things at 4:38 in the morning.

Three and a half months. Almost three and a half months to the day. Once again I'm snatched from the arms of Death, this time by an angel who's fallen from grace in my eyes and flung face-first into a Hell of my own making. Why is it that I could never leave well enough alone, especially where he was concerned? And why is it that my mind always tries to make this idiocy between us into something more poetic than it is?

The fact that he creeps into my thoughts even now infuriates me to no end. He has no right to even exist for me, let alone expect anything of me, not after what happened between us. Or wasn't supposed to have happened. That one simple act made his choice before he disappeared loud and patently obvious. He never even asked me! Sure, I was hurting, but who wouldn't have? I had the one thing I wanted more than anything else torn away from me by sheer guilt; there was no discussion of a way to salvage things, no compromise. It was just over, as if it were an unfortunate event best forgotten. And then, even those moments I had left to cling to were gone. As if they had never been.

Unfortunately, as 'merciful' and 'powerful' as this 'amnesia kiss' was supposed to have been, it seems it wasn't capable of magically erasing fertilized eggs in a human woman. Part of me is just vicious enough to wish he had seen the hell I went through when I went for a checkup for my 'Flu' symptoms and had Dr. Samuelle tell me with an almost paternal happiness that I was three months along. *Congratulations*. Sure. I remember even now the shock and horror that crashed down on me. It was impossible, I had thought. As much as I felt like a love-struck junior high kid, I had gone without a lover from the week after I met ... *him*. There hadn't been anyone else; despite the fact that he and I had had been flirting with the possibility of something happening, nothing had been plainly said.

I had been having somewhat vague daydreams around that time, but they had been growing more distinct as time went on. Not all of it was physical, although what I was dreaming was surpassing anything I had experienced before it. There was more, details of the battle with the Kryptonian villains that had been impossible to recall. Being at Niagara Falls, covering the Sunday supplement for Perry. But nothing had clicked. It came back, trickle by trickle, like melting snow. First, small and almost insignificant bits and pieces. Snatches of discussions. Some understanding of what had happened over those foggy three days. Then it moved faster, a stream, a river. Finding out his secret, my confession to him about my feelings, the flight north. His Fortress, all white and gleaming, the same place where the last of my childish fantasies ended. His father's vehement disapproval, his defiant decision. Watching him walk out of that crystal chamber, stripped of everything but that handsome face and his desire to be with me. And what came after...

All that came after...

Like the entire world falling down. And it being entirely my fault. If it hadn't been for me...

Can you even begin to imagine what it's like to discover that the near-destruction of your planet and race has occurred because you allowed yourself to be swept away, finally falling in

love for the first time in your life... with its defender? Especially once you're aware that that defender made things right again, only to disappear? I thought I was going to go crazy, to have the weight of that knowledge almost more than I could bear a second time. To have never asked for a child, especially a child of mixed species. To look down at your growing belly, knowing that, in his mind, it never should have been. And the last thing you want is a reminder of this 'mistake' that he made with you. To know that he would be horrified to know that this had occurred, the memory of his father's words probably still echoing in his mind? To have never wanted any of this?

And loving him too much even then to do anything to prevent it in any way. Protecting his image, hiding the pregnancy for as long as I could. Standing on the roof in the snow, looking up into the sky with tears running down my face the night they kicked for the first time. Wanting him so desperately, but ashamed to admit it. Ashamed to even have this small part of him that I had stolen away from the world.

Enough of that. God, why can't I just drop it? That's over.

Because I can't get him the hell out of my thoughts, no matter what I do. Damn him. Much to my own disgust, I'm realizing I'm missing him as much as I miss Richard. I'm such an idiot.

I wish I had an excuse for what happened the night of the Pulitzers. Not my finest hour, that much I'll flatly admit. It was an intense flickering instant of complete and total insanity on my part, to be bluntly honest. I have a wonderful relationship with Richard, a life most women can only dream of. It's comfortable, reliable, he adores the twins and loves me. Yes, loves me and I know that full well. He's never even looked at another woman since he first asked me out. He braved office gossip and my own opposition to get to this point. He wore me down and won me beyond any shadow of a doubt. He tells me every morning how beautiful I am, how lucky he is, and wants me every night before we go to bed as much as he did when we began.

But why isn't that enough?

And it's something I just don't want to think about. Kal-El is my past, over and done. A chapter that should have been firmly closed a long time ago. It doesn't help matters that Perry pulled a fast one. Resigned, huh? Well, that explains perfectly well why he turned up in Richard's department a few days later. Which is just perfect, seeing as how I wanted him out of my life and now a bullpen and two panes of glass separate us. Perfect. Some day I'm going to sneak some cyanide into that old man's coffee. Really, when he least expects it.

Besides, if that little cuteness wasn't enough, I owe him an automatic death sentence for the fact that the two latest occupants of my house are a lizard and a weasel. Neither of which is an appropriate gift for a six-year-old. I said 'maybe a goldfish'; Perry says, 'Sure, I'll get two of the most evil creatures on earth for you two, even if you are in kindergarten. Teach you some responsibility.' More like teach Mommy to get Aunt Loueen to leash her husband. All in all, the twins' sixth was an utter success. And it's a good thing that the looks of delight of their faces made my heart ache to the point that I forgot to attempt to flush that iguana when no one was looking. I have the feeling that dinosaur means trouble.

I hope he gets the flu at the first sign of a cold wave. Would serve him right, underhanded bugger.

Of course Richard's over the moon where Clark's concerned, thinks of him as the brother he never had. I can't even avoid hearing about him at home, within earshot of the twins. It does nothing for my nerves that they're both coming home in a day or two from Mexico, where they were working on a piece about the 'coyotes' there. Just the thought of the two of them talking,

especially Mr. Morality, makes me uneasy in the extreme. There are too many things both of them know, and don't know, and the last thing I need is for them to play Twenty Questions: The Lane Edition. I fought their going, with no luck. Richard and Clark both seemed baffled by it. Clark shouldn't have been.

And Perry really did put Polly Mattheson on the Superman beat. She's writing puff-pieces, to be politically correct. Could she be any less objective, asking the most random questions? She doesn't question his motives, doesn't try to pry with thought-provoking statements. The tone of the articles is so worshipful, I feel like I should edit them in the Cloisters. And damn Perry, he hired back that bloody former quarterback. I've already announced that Lombard had better keep himself busy in Sports and stay the hell out of my newsroom. He's a stress I just can't take at the moment. I also try to forget the sick feeling in my stomach that this latest rash of arsonist attacks gives me. Thank God it's died down the last little while that Kal-El's been gone. It's like this firebug knows it, too. And that's a thought I don't like at all.

With all that's going on, I'm so tired, yet it seems impossible to close my eyes for more than a moment or two without hearing a random scratching outside near a window or a high sound that might not be the wind. Goddamn that madman. Luthor's done exactly what I suspect he wanted. After all this time, I'm hair-trigger and attacking shadows. I've been on hyper-alert since our confrontation in August. The sound of winter in his voice when he spoke the twins' names scared me more than I'll ever tell a living soul. Even myself. It horrified me the same way that night on the dock haunts me still. There's an inescapable feeling of inevitability. This isn't over. Something's beginning, something's building even as I fight it. Sometimes I wonder if this will ever be over. Me, Luthor, Kal-El. It tears me apart to think that the sins of my past, of the 'mistake' that created the twins, a foolish night of selfish lust, could destroy us all. 'For want of a nail.'

But if Luthor thinks that he'll have even the possibility of taking them from me, he'll have underestimated me for the last time.

Interim Cycle Three: The Villians

Kitty Kowalski

I used to think that with Lex, I'd be going places. Well, it's true, except I'm only going one place lately: mad. I'm either wandering around this huge underground complex filled with science nerds and ex-cons, or I'm trapped on the yacht. It's amazing how fast even a boat that big can begin to feel really, really small. The only company I have most of the time is Tala. She's a sweet little dog, to everyone but Lex. I think she knows he's responsible for leaving her locked up in the Vanderworth house while he dragged me to the North Pole. Poor baby, she had to eat LJ just to survive.

If I was stranded somewhere with Lex, I wish I could say I'd do the same. But he'd probably kill me first. I think I really made a mistake with him. The man's crazy. Dangerous crazy. Thinks he's a god among us lowly mortals crazy. Nothing proves that more than his obsession with Lois Lane. His whole thing about her revolves around the fact that she hates him more than any other woman on earth. So that makes her about the most desirable woman in creation to him. Perverse, I know. But then, all his girlfriends hate him - present company included. He *kicked* Tala the other day, just booted her across the hall for no reason other than she was in his way. No wonder she tries to bite him.

So there's no one here for me to talk to. The scientists are all absorbed in the work on the crystals, and that includes Stanford. At least he used to be able to hold a decent conversation. The rest of the staff - the hired muscle Lex keeps for security - are cavemen. I wouldn't trust any of them alone in a room with me - the only reason they keep their hands to themselves is Lex. The one time Grant tried something, Lex threatened to castrate him with a bullet. At point blank range. The rest are scared enough of Lex's mood swings to avoid me. I just wish that Lex was so jealous because he actually cared about me. The truth is, he just hates for anyone else to touch what's his.

Of all the assorted thugs we have roaming around the place, the one that creeps me out the most is Brutus. Big, ugly, shaven, tattooed freak, who smiles a lot and likes cracking walnuts in his bare hands. That *does* describe half a dozen other people, but Brutus is just weird. I can't explain it, but I don't like him. It's like, if Grant ever got me alone, he'd rape me. And Riley would tape himself raping me. But Brutus - I have no idea what he'd do. Maybe sit down next to me, talk quietly to me, hold my hand ... and break each of my fingers while still smiling gently. That kind of weird.

Brrrr ... he gives me the chills! It's almost as bad as when Lex decides to stare at those birth certificates he got from Paris. The way he smiles then makes me want to go take a long shower. How the hell did I get mixed up with these people? I just wanted some excitement, someone to buy me diamonds and furs. I got that - fearing for your life is damn exciting, but what's the point of wearing a mink coat if there's no one to *see* you in it?

Lex Luthor

Things are going nicely according to plan, for once. The research progresses - Stanford is perhaps overly cautious, but since my theft has not yet been discovered, we have the luxury of taking our time. I'll have plenty of warning when that caped buffoon finally realizes he's been robbed - all of my old haunts are being very quietly surveyed by remote camera. Lane has been sneaking around the Vanderworth property, but no sign of *him* yet. The first glimpse of

him looking for me, and I'll implement my second plan of distraction.

The first is going very well. Most arsonists deserve the name firebug - they're scuttling creatures with little brains full of fire, liable to burn themselves to a crisp or to get caught videotaping a blaze of their own making. Easy to squash, and deserving of it. But with my help, Carl is making himself very useful. I choose his targets, I plan his methods, he just does what he does best, and loves it. He might even manage to keep the alien busy long enough for me to find out the optimum salinity for crystal replication.

It's not nearly as fast as I'd hoped. I had visions of my own continent, but no matter what we do, the crystals just aren't going to expand that much. There seems to be a built-in limit to how much growth we can get from a given sample. A tiny fragment will produce enough crystal to wreck a basement; a single complete crystal could have created his icy palace up north. Different crystals also seem to produce different structures, and we're not entirely sure how that works yet. Top priority is reproducing the console I stole the crystals from. Then I can access the information stored on them again.

The actual expansion is quite fast once it reaches a certain threshold, unless we happen to get a fragment that codes for something intricate, like the three-quarters spaceship that Stanford is fawning over right now. Too bad we don't have the whole thing. Still, there's a lot to be learned from this technology. I've chosen my research team very carefully; all of them are discredited for some reason or another, unable to continue in their own fields and willing to work underground for me. I mean that literally and figuratively - the lab is underground. Lining the outer walls with lead was obscenely expensive, but now that I'm free I've been able to tap into some of the assets the feds couldn't find and didn't seize.

I've had to revise my long-term plans, but I believe the payoff will be more than worth the wait. In the meantime, I have plenty to amuse me. Carl, of course - he positively capered when I told him how to do the bank. The next one will be even better. Although I must warn him about the fumes. He's using model airplane fuel - clear, odorless, and it even burns with a clear flame. But if he breathes enough of it he's liable not to make it back out of the building in time. That will be fine for when he's no longer useful, but at the moment I prefer my pet firebug alive.

Another guaranteed source of entertainment is Kitty. We're staying on the yacht or in the lab, and she's beginning to go a little stir-crazy. She talks to that damn powder puff of a dog now, wants to buy it fancy diamond collars and cute little sweaters. What is it about a fluffy little dog that makes woman want to dress it up? It's a *dog*; given the choice it would rather roll in something dead than wear a puppy parka. Besides, this yappy bitch has enough fur to keep it warm without buying it clothes. I know I've found its shed hair in my coffee more than once. The stuff *floats*.

But Kitty is so damned *funny* when she sulks. The exaggerated pout, the flouncing around, the intent stares, the melodramatic sighs - it's all I can do not to laugh out loud. She's smart enough to know that her continued health and safety depend on me, and I've been more interested in taking pages of laboratory data to bed lately than in having her there. What can I say? Even the most neurotic and treacherous woman eventually becomes boring. Kitty hasn't quite reached that point yet, luckily for her, but my plans come first. I never let myself get distracted from a goal.

If there's a secret to my success, that's it. I don't clutter my life with lovers and friends, and I'll *never* have children. Business before pleasure, avoid attachments, and always keep someone around to take the fall for you. Dear Otis, such a moron and yet so very useful, even

after I had him killed. This bunch, however ... Stanford's reasonably bright, and Riley at least has an interesting obsession, but Grant and Brutus are nothing more than hired muscle, men willing to lie, steal, maim, kill and rape for money. I worry about Brutus, though. He's the only one who hasn't started sniveling about the lack of women around here. Must keep an eye on him - I can't imagine Kitty lowering her standards that much, but it's not beyond the realm of possibility.

I'll have to consider bringing some female company down here. Restless men are rebellious men, and I'd hate to have to shoot a couple of them to keep order. It's messy and wasteful, and it would disturb the scientists. For the most part that group stays absorbed in their work and don't need women around, but the security staff needs some outlet for their collective testosterone. I can easily procure a few women whose affections can be purchased. Of course, then I have to worry about rivalry and possessiveness, not to mention that Grant isn't the only man I employ who was imprisoned for rape and murder. It could get expensive if the boys keep breaking their toys.

I must keep my mind active while I'm down in the lab. Fantasizing about what I'll do if my plans come to fruition in exactly the right way isn't enough, though it *is* quite entertaining. Fortunately, I have at least one mystery to ponder. On days when the scientists don't have anything interesting for me, I can always open the lockbox in my desk and look at my latest prize. It wasn't easy to get these two simple sheets of paper, but they provide me with no end of joy and speculation. It's amazing how the absence of one little thing can mean so much - particularly when it's a name, any name at all, on the line marked 'Father' of a child's birth certificate. I suppose she didn't know his real name - not that anyone does.

I wonder if Lois even knows who the father is? She did have partial amnesia. I'm not completely certain myself. The timing is about right - they behaved like lovers when I saw them last, and the children were born ten months later. They could've been conceived just before he vanished, or the gestation period for half-alien spawn could be longer than a normal human pregnancy. I doubt anyone else would guess at the latter possibility. People forget what he is - simply because he *looks* human doesn't mean he is human. If the twins really are ... *his*, Lois is lucky the brats didn't have his powers in the womb. Though that would've made for wonderful welcome home - "Hello, Superman, one of your kids kicked a little too hard and your woman hemorrhaged to death. And you didn't even know she was pregnant."

That's almost as bad as what I have planned for him...

The Russians say revenge is a dish best served cold, and though it may be very cold indeed by the time it reaches my plate, I'll be completely content. I may never have so delicious a meal again, but if everything falls into place just right, I'll never need to, either.

Sweet satisfaction, thy name is vengeance. *Complete* vengeance.