

Taking Down a God — The Rest of the Story

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Rated: PG

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Summary: Lois is the one tapped to help take down a killer — Superman. But is everything as it seems?

“You’re mine!” Superman was yelling at her. “You’re mine and no one else can have you!”

Lois backed away but she knew there was no escape. There was no way she could outrun him — how does a mere human outrun a man who can fly, who can burn things with his eyes? Her heart was thumping so loud in her chest that she was sure he could hear it even without super-hearing.

He didn’t seem to care. He stalked toward her, his face a mask of fury. “I saw you with him!” he shouted.

She tried to speak but her mouth was too dry — her vocal cords didn’t want to work. Finally she managed to loosen her tongue. “I don’t know what ... ”

“You lie!” His face was red with rage and his eyes — his eyes were glowing.

Lois tried to remember what the government agent had ordered her to do ... the box ... the silver box ... She needed to open the silver box on the coffee table.

“I don’t know what you think you saw,” Lois said, trying to keep the tremor out of her voice. “But I haven’t been with anyone.”

He grabbed her arm and for a terrified moment she was afraid he intended to break it.

“Superman, please. You’re hurting me,” she said. She didn’t need to pretend to be frightened. She’d never seen him so angry, so out of control.

It was terrible to behold.

He seemed to realize that he was hurting her and dropped his hand. “I’m sorry,” he said. “But when I think of you with anyone else ... I go crazy. You understand that, don’t you? You know I love you, don’t you?”

“I know you think you do,” she said, edging her way to the sofa to sit down. “But if you really loved me, you wouldn’t hurt me or scare me like this.”

“But everything I’ve done, I’ve done for you,” he said. “Luthor ... he didn’t deserve to even look at you, walk on the same streets as you.”

“He didn’t deserve to die,” Lois said.

“He was a criminal,” Superman said with a shrug.

“Whether he was or not, he deserved a fair trial,” Lois said. She shuddered as she remembered the repeated airings of the videos of Lex Luthor’s murder. Luthor was holding a press conference at the construction site of one of his buildings. Then Superman dropped from the sky,

“Luthor, I told you to stay away from her,” Superman announced, floating above the billionaire.

Luthor seemed surprised, annoyed, and a bit confused at Superman’s statement. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said after a moment. “But whatever it is, you’re mistaken.”

“Am I mistaken about you being the crime lord known as the ‘Boss’? Am I mistaken that you ordered the murders of Doctor Samuel Platt and Doctor Toni Baines? That you knew that your nuclear plant was faulty and threatened all

of Metropolis? The list goes on.”

“I’d be careful about what I say if I were you, Superman,” Luthor said. “I have very good lawyers and what you’re saying is positively slanderous.”

“The truth is never slander,” Superman said. “Stay away from her.”

“And if I don’t?”

Superman’s eyes glowed red and suddenly Lex Luthor wasn’t standing on the podium.

Luthor had only been the first ‘execution’, or at least the first public ‘execution’. Others followed. First it was thugs in the act of committing a violent crime, then drug dealers and suppliers. Then people simply started disappearing, common ordinary people who had simply objected to Superman’s vigilante-ism.

Metropolis became a shadow of itself as people fled the city to escape Superman’s reign of terror.

Lois stayed.

“Get him into position and open the silver box,” she had been instructed.

It was Henderson who had approached her, taken her into an underground sound-proofed bunker to meet with federal agents.

“He has to be stopped,” she was told. “We know he’s killed at least a hundred people but we can’t even convene a grand jury against him for fear of what he’d do.” The agent handed her the silver box. It was heavier than it looked. She lifted the top and saw a green glowing crystal nestled in black velvet.

“Element 126. Colonel Trask believed it was capable of immobilizing him, maybe even killing him. Luthor’s research notes seem to confirm it.”

“But you don’t know, do you?”

The agent shook his head. “It will be dangerous for you, especially if it doesn’t work.”

“Tell me what I need to do ... ”

The box was on the table in front of her. She reached out to open it. He grabbed her hand and she screamed as the bones shattered. But the box fell open.

Superman’s eyes widened as he realized what she had done. He doubled over with pain — Kryptonite.

“I loved you,” he managed to gasp as the window behind him shattered and high powered slugs entered his body.

“I know,” Lois said through her tears. “That’s why I had to be the one to stop you.”

The rest of the story

“How’s the hand?” Henderson asked Lois when the ER doctors were finished with her. Her hand was swathed in bandages and she was in a wheelchair.

“They’re bringing in an expert to see if they can save any function,” Lois said. “I figure I’m lucky he didn’t break every bone in my body.” She paused. The pain medication was starting to kick in. Soon she wouldn’t be in any shape to talk. Luckily she had already given her official statement, as meager as it was. There wasn’t a lot to say — she’d been set out as the tethered goat to lure a predator to his death. The ploy had succeeded. Losing a hand was a small price to pay if the world was safe from a super-powered mad man.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been so scared in my life,” she continued. “He kept saying he saw me with someone else.”

“The federal agent who was helping us ... ”

“Scardino?”

Henderson nodded. “He’s missing. We think he may have been spotted handing you the package.”

“Where is the package?” she asked. An hour ago kryptonite was the most valuable mineral on the planet — the only thing capable of hurting Superman. And she’d been the one entrusted with it. Now she wasn’t sure where it was.

“Doctor Klein recommended it stay with the body until after the autopsy. The last thing we want is to find out that he had super cell-regeneration. I’m told that Doctor Leek’s notes indicated it was a possibility.”

“Do we have any idea what Luthor was thinking when he commissioned Leek to create a new and ‘improved’ Superman?” Lois asked. She hadn’t been able to ask before. She hadn’t dared admit publically that she knew the man in the Superman suit wasn’t the real thing.

If Henderson was surprised that she knew, he didn’t show it. “Given that we really haven’t been able to investigate as thoroughly as we needed to for fear of what he would do ...” he began. “Apparently Luthor wanted a Superman who was more amenable to his way of thinking than the real one. I guess he should have been more careful about what he wished for.”

“Are you certain there aren’t any more like him hiding somewhere?” Lois asked.

“Fairly certain. We found Leek’s lab. Superman, or whatever his name was, got there before us. There were a couple dozen vats. All occupied, all the occupants dead. They never had a chance.”

“How bad was it?” she asked. Injured or not, she was still a reporter with a reporter’s overwhelming curiosity.

“Let’s just say that the ones he simply ‘disappeared’ were probably the lucky ones,” Henderson said. He shuddered and Lois could only imagine what he’d seen in that lab. And knowing what a super-powered villain could do, Lois suspected her imagination was probably not up to the challenge of imagining how bad it really was.

Henderson took a moment before he went on. “Lois, we don’t know what happened to the real Superman. We assume the imposter killed him the first chance he got. We also don’t dare let the public know that the man who was killed today wasn’t the only one out there.”

“So the government’s not going to rescind the termination order on Superman, even though the imposter is dead?” Lois asked.

“Knowing what the imposter did to this city in the few short weeks he was here, would you take the risk if another one showed up?”

Lois sighed. “I guess not.”

A nurse was waiting impatiently and finally stepped forward. “Miss Lane, we need to get you up to your room. Doctor Prescott will be here in the morning for your surgery.”

“So soon?” she asked.

“Nothing’s too good for the hero of Metropolis,” the nurse said.

Lois stared at the nurse in surprise.

Henderson chuckled. “Yeah, that’s what they’re calling you.”

“I don’t feel much like a hero,” Lois said. “I only did what I had to.”

“That’s what makes a hero,” Henderson said. “Doing what has to be done despite the personal cost.”

The nurse made an impatient noise and started to wheel Lois toward the elevator.

“I’ll check in on you tomorrow,” Henderson promised. “Your sister should be here sometime this evening with any

luck. Haven’t been able to reach your parents yet.”

“Thanks, Inspector ... for everything.”

“Not a problem,” he said. He started to turn then looked back at her. “Lane, if by some miracle ‘he’ gets in touch with you ... make sure he understands about the termination order.”

“I thought you said he was dead,” Lois reminded him.

“I could be wrong.”

Elevator ride was quiet. The nurse didn’t seem inclined to start a conversation and Lois was too exhausted to talk any more.

But despite her exhaustion, her thoughts wouldn’t settle down. They skittered around like flies on rotten fruit.

It had all started so innocuously. A plane in trouble at Paris International Airport.

Lois and the other staffers were watching LNN’s coverage on the news monitors.

“We are now getting a report that the Seven-Ninety-Seven is making its last circle before it attempts a landing at the Paris International Airport ...” the newscaster was saying. “I’m reminded of the vigil for Charles Lindbergh not so far from this spot. Only now, it’s a giant airliner with its landing gear and wing flaps inoperative ...”

The worry in the newsroom was palpable. It wasn’t simply that it was an American airliner that was in trouble. This particular one was from Metropolis and had two Daily Planet reporters on it on their way to cover a nuclear arms summit.

The newscaster droned on, “... and instead of a lone American pilot, there are 120 passengers and a crew of ten living this last hour in the cold fear of a possible violent death ... They’re only three minutes from touchdown ... In his last circle, the pilot used up all but enough fuel to complete the landing, so this is it ...”

“What’s going on?” Clark asked from beside her. Lois hadn’t noticed him come onto the bullpen floor.

“Serious situation at Orly,” Perry explained without taking his attention from the screen. “Plane’s got no landing gear, about to attempt a landing.”

“Uh ... I just remembered, I left my story notes in my car,” Clark stammered out as he headed toward the elevator.

Lois stared at him. “Clark, you don’t have a car.”

He paused for a moment. “... in the taxi. My ... taxi. I’ll just ...”

Lois shrugged and turned back to the events on the screen. Clark was in one of his ‘weird’ modes again and she already knew better than to pay him much attention when that happened. She still hadn’t figured out what went on that made him act so odd before he disappeared for minutes, even hours. But she knew it only a matter of time before she uncovered the reason.

“Look!” Jimmy called out.

“I don’t believe it ...” Perry said. Others in the group echoed his sentiments.

A telephoto lens zoomed in on Superman as he flew alongside the plane.

“This just in. Superman, the famed Man of Steel from Metropolis, is flying alongside the stricken airliner,” the LNN newsmen stated. “Superman is setting the big aircraft down, gently as a feather. It’s almost on the ground ... and now ... he’s done it! The plane is safe! Superman has saved the day!”

A cheer went up from the newsroom crowd. Perry turned down the monitor sound as the others headed back to

their desks.

Then Lois noticed that Clark was still there. “I thought you left your notes in a taxi,” she said.

He gave her a momentary blank look. “Oh, I had them in my pocket.”

“Uh huh ... Clark, some days I swear you’d lose your head if it wasn’t tied on tight.”

Clark had the courtesy to look embarrassed by her observation.

By the next day Clark’s weird mode had almost slipped Lois’s mind. She had more important things to worry about.

“It’s been three days since Superman has even been seen in Metropolis,” she told him. “Don’t you find that just the tiniest bit odd?” She showed him one of the European newspapers from the newsstand. “In the last twenty-four hours Superman’s saved an airplane in Paris, righted a sinking ship in Rio, rescued a busload of school children in Surinam, and on and on. Never once talking to the press or even sticking around to see how things came out.”

“What’s the point?” Clark asked.

“The point is ... why isn’t he here? Why isn’t he saving sinking ships or rescuing school children in Metropolis like he’s always done?”

“You know, Lois, Metropolis doesn’t own Superman,” Clark said. “Maybe he’s on vacation, maybe he’s ...”

Lois gave him an expectant look. There were times when Clark almost seemed like he had an inside track with Superman and she hoped this was one of those times.

Clark shook his head. “The truth is, I don’t understand it either,” he admitted as they entered the elevator to take them to the newsroom.

“Why is he gallivanting all over the world?” Lois continued. “I left messages for him to call me with every correspondent and news bureau of ours worldwide. Nothing.”

“Don’t worry. I have a real strong feeling he’ll be back. Soon,” Clark said.

“Reporter’s intuition?” Lois teased.

“You don’t hold the patent on it, you know,” Clark responded a little too seriously.

“No, but intuition is not something you can just ‘pick up.’ You’re born with it.”

“And?”

“I was,” Lois teased.

“Congratulations,” Clark said. “Now, what does your intuition tell you about this situation with Superman?”

“Only that there’s something seriously weird going on.”

Lois tried to put her worry about Superman out of her mind. Superman’s escapades across the planet weren’t the only stories out there. But oddly, Metropolis was quiet. No hold ups or robberies — even drug crime was down. It was almost as though someone had told Metropolis’s criminal element to take a vacation.

She finished her assigned stories, as dull as they were, then checked on Clark. He was examining photos of the previous day’s near-disaster at Orly. His expression was troubled.

“And I thought I was the biggest Superman fan in Metropolis” Lois joked. “Maybe you should join his fan club. You’ll get a button.”

Clark shook his head.

“What do you think you’re going to find in those photos?” Lois asked.

“I don’t know,” Clark said. “Some clue as to what’s been going on?”

“There’s no doubt it has to be Superman,” Lois said.

“Who else can fly like that?”

“But what if it isn’t him?” Clark asked.

“Clark, just because he didn’t bother to tell either of us what’s going on with him doesn’t mean there’s something that weird going on. I mean, it’s not like he has a twin brother or anything.”

Clark just looked at her.

“He would have told one of us if he had a twin brother, right?” Lois said.

“I guess so.”

“You know so. So it has to be him. Okay, I admit that I had the gall to believe that Superman was mine ... uh ... Metropolis’s,” Lois admitted. “I mean, unselfishly speaking, I suppose he should belong to the world. But then again, selfishly speaking ... I thought this was his home.”

“It is,” Clark said. “He’s as much as said so.”

“Maybe. But the fact remains: I have no hold on him at all.”

Clark smiled. “Lois, you’d be surprised. You ... Metropolis ... has a stronger hold on Superman than you may think.”

“In that case, why haven’t we seen him in Metropolis? And why hasn’t he gotten in touch with me?”

“Lois!” Perry called out, interrupting her plaint. “Robbery and hostage situation at the Metropolis Merchant’s Bank. Shake a leg.”

Clark started to follow her when Perry yelled once more. “Clark, aren’t you supposed to be on the mayor’s town hall meeting in Brookline?”

“On it, chief,” Clark said as the elevator doors closed behind Lois.

Lois’s cab deposited her a short distance from the bank. Cop cars were blocking the street in front of the bank but no one seemed concerned or tense.

Lois spotted one of her police contacts and hurried over to him. “Joe, what happened?”

“Tense stand-off until Superman got here,” Joe said.

“He’s here? In Metropolis?”

Joe nodded. “He flew in the top floor window, apprehended the perp, freed the hostages. He’s over there,” Joe added, pointing to a police van with his chin. Two officers were loading a handcuffed man into the back of the van while Superman looked on.

“Superman! Superman! You’re back!” Lois called out. Superman didn’t seem to hear her.

Suddenly the handcuffed man broke free from the two officers and began to run.

Then, almost too fast to see, Superman grabbed the escapee and tossed him into the back of the van. He crumpled to the floor.

“Superman?” Lois said as she walked toward the red caped man.

“Yes?” He didn’t seem to recognize her.

“It’s me. Lois.”

He looked her up and down and gave her a look that was more than a little leering. Then he flew off.

“Clark, we have to talk. There’s something wrong with Superman!” Lois announced as soon as she caught sight of Clark in the newsroom. “I watched him toss this robbery suspect into a police van from twenty feet away. Knocked the guy out cold. Superman wouldn’t do that.”

“Are you saying you saw Superman? He’s in

Metropolis?” Clark asked. He seemed both worried and excited.

“Earth to Clark. Yes. I saw him this morning,” Lois stated. “Merchant’s Bank, hostage situation. Don’t you listen to the news?”

“Brookline, the mayor’s town hall meeting. Remember?”

Lois shrugged. “Well anyway ... when I looked at him, it was almost as if he didn’t recognize me. In fact, he smirked at me. Superman doesn’t smirk. It’s like ...”

“What?” Clark prompted.

“I don’t know,” Lois said, suddenly at a loss. “He’s just ... bizarre, that’s all. I wish I could talk to him in private.”

Clark nodded in agreement.

The afternoon was quiet again — no other violent crimes, no other Superman sightings. The armed man from the bank was in the hospital with a fractured skull and severe concussion but would probably survive. There were murmurs from the officers on the scene that while they appreciated Superman’s assistance, his use of excessive force was ... excessive.

It was nearly time to leave for home when a messenger showed up with a letter. “Lois Lane?”

“Yes?” She reached for the letter but the messenger pulled back.

“I’m supposed to wait for a response,” he said, holding out a clip board to her.

Lois signed for the letter and the messenger waited as she tore open the envelope. It was very good, very elegant, stationery. It was almost a shame to tear it.

She smiled as she read the letter. Dear Lois: Please forgive me my behavior today. I have so much to tell you. May I see you tonight? I could be at your place at nine. Please say yes. Yours, Superman.

“The answer is a definite yes,” she told the messenger. The messenger hurried away.

Clark took the letter from Lois’s hand and peered at it. Then he held it up to the light to see through the paper. “I’ve seen this paper before.”

“Stationery is sold all over the city, Clark. This just means he has elegant taste.”

“Did you notice the watermark?”

“Watermark?”

He pointed it out. The LexCorp logo — LL inside a circle. “Why would Superman be using LexCorp stationery?”

“I’ll ask him when I see him,” she said.

“Are you sure that’s wise?” Clark asked. “I mean, you said it yourself. He’s acting bizarre. It might be dangerous.”

“Superman would never hurt me,” Lois assured him.

Clark didn’t look convinced.

It was nearly nine. The table was perfect, the salad was ready as was the pasta Primavera — luckily the cans had very easy to follow instructions.

She had just finished lighting the tapers when she heard a familiar whoosh. Superman was standing there. But there was something off about him. He seemed nervous. Superman had never seemed nervous around her before.

“Oh. Hello. You’re a little early,” she said.

“Is that okay?” He seemed eager to please.

“Sure. Everything’s ready ... Would you like something to drink?”

“Drink? I guess so. I mean, I don’t really need to,” he

said.

“Well, nobody needs champagne, but that’s what makes life interesting, n’est pas?” she told him, holding up a chilled champagne bottle.

“Life is interesting,” he said, moving close to her.

Superman had never been so forward before. She popped the cork on the champagne and a small amount of the bubbly liquid ran down the side of the cold bottle.

“You spilled,” he observed. Again she was struck with a sense of the bizarre. She was certain Superman knew about champagne, and although he had mentioned not needing to eat or drink in their first interview, it wasn’t something he had ever commented on after that — he usually accepted tea or coffee or soda when she offered it.

Lois poured them each a glass.

“You look really hot,” he said.

“Oh. Thanks.” Alarm bells were ringing even more loudly in her head. Superman had always maintained a courteous, ever professional, demeanor. It was Lois whose behavior had been less than platonic.

“Can we sit on the sofa?” he asked, taking her hand and leading her to the sofa. She sipped her champagne. The pasta and salad would be okay for a few minutes.

He edged closer to her, faked a yawn and stretch, then put his arm around her like a callow teen in a dark theater.

“Do you like me?” he asked abruptly.

“Of course. You know I do,” she said, moving away just a little. “Although, I am a little concerned about your behavior lately.”

“I haven’t done anything wrong.” There was an ugly tone in his voice.

“It’s just that I saw you throw that man and ...” she began.

“Might is right, he said, cutting her off. “How about a kiss?”

She just looked at him. There was something seriously wrong. He grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her into a hard kiss. She tried to push him away but he was too strong.

“Am I interrupting?” Clark said from somewhere close. Superman was distracted and Lois was able to break free.

“Clark!” She rushed over to him and he put a protective arm around her shoulder. It felt safe to be there. Clark wasn’t super but she knew he would do everything in his power to protect her.

Superman stood and faced him. Lois had never seen Clark and Superman together. Abruptly she realized they were exactly the same height and coloring. And Clark’s expression was far more akin to Superman’s normal persona than this person in the Superman costume.

“Go away,” Superman ordered.

“I think Lois wants me to stay,” Clark said.

“Yes! I do! Please,” Lois said.

Superman stepped up to Clark. Clark dropped his arm from Lois’s shoulder and gently pushed her away. Superman raised a hand to grab Clark but Clark grabbed his wrist instead. There was a momentary flicker of surprise in Superman’s face. Then he struck Clark’s left arm with both fists, sending him flying across the room.

To Lois’s astonishment, Clark got back on his feet although his arm seemed to be just hanging.

“Don’t you get it?” Superman sneered. “You can’t fight a god. And I’m a god.”

“No, you’re not,” Clark managed to say. “And I’ll do everything I can to stop you.”

“Are you stupid or what?” Superman asked. “I’m the new, improved, version. No one can stand against me. Not you, not anyone.”

“I can try.”

Superman’s expression turned even uglier. He struck Clark across the face. Clark actually stayed standing, swinging at Superman with his good arm. Suddenly they were both moving too fast for Lois to keep track except in terms of broken furniture and walls. Then, as suddenly as it began, it was over. Clark was on the floor in a heap and Superman was stalking towards him, open hatred on his face.

Without even thinking about it, Lois threw herself across Clark’s unconscious form. “Leave him alone!” she shouted at the man in the costume. “Superman is supposed to stand for truth and justice. He’s supposed to make the world a better place, not attack people who disagree with him.”

Superman, or whoever he was, stopped. “Might makes right,” he repeated.

“That’s what tyrants always say,” Lois spat. “And they always come to a bad end. Remember your history?”

“History is written by the winners.”

“History is written by the survivors,” Lois corrected. “And the truth always comes out.”

Superman disappeared with a whoosh and a sonic boom.

Exhausted, Lois got to her knees, taking her weight off of Clark’s broken body. Incredibly, his eyes were open and he was watching her.

“You kept him from killing me,” he managed to say.

“Save your strength,” she ordered as she got to her feet to find her phone. Miraculously, it was intact and working. She punched in 9-1-1.

“Lois,” he continued. “You have to stop him.”

“And how am I supposed to do that?” she asked.

“I don’t know. But you have to try.” With that he closed his eyes and went still.

“Clark?”

Lois watched as the nurse set up the IV drip and injected medication into it. The pain meds the ER doctor had given her earlier had only taken the edge off. Her mind still wouldn’t settle down enough for her to sleep. She imagined she could still feel the shattered ends of bones rubbing against one another inside her immobilized hand.

Lucy would be here soon, she hoped.

The nurse tucked the covers in around her and dimmed the lights. Lois was thirsty but she knew that if she was scheduled for surgery in the morning no one was going to give her anything to drink — besides, what she wanted was something a lot stronger than water or soda.

Her thoughts went back to Clark. It was like a broken tooth her tongue couldn’t stay away from.

The EMT’s took Clark away. He wasn’t dead but he hadn’t regained consciousness either.

The crime scene unit was going over her apartment with a fine tooth comb to determine what ‘really’ happened. She knew they didn’t believe her story about Superman attacking Clark Kent but they couldn’t figure out how she, or any other mere human, could have done so much damage to her apartment — at least not without getting hurt themselves.

“Lois, want to tell me what happened?” MPD Inspector Henderson asked. He was a late arrival but she was sure he

had been briefed on the situation. She had seen him in deep conversation with Lundy, the detective in charge.

“I’ve told Detective Lundy everything that happened.”

“Humor me.”

“You know what happened at the Merchant’s Bank,” she began.

He nodded and she went on. “Well, I tried to talk to Superman and it was like he didn’t know me. But later in the afternoon, a messenger gave me letter supposedly from Superman saying he’d be here about nine.”

Unlike Lundy, Henderson didn’t interrupt.

She described Superman’s arrival, his childish behavior, and Clark coming to her rescue.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Henderson asked. “Did Superman hurt you?”

Lois shook her head. “Not exactly. He kissed me.”

Henderson’s eyebrows threatened to climb into his hairline. “Superman kissed you?”

Lois was on the defensive again. “Listen Henderson, I’ve kissed Superman before. I know what it feels like. I don’t know who hurt Clark and flew out that window, but I’ll tell you one thing: that was definitely not Superman.”

Henderson nodded solemnly.

“You don’t believe me,” she said.

He sighed. “I do believe you. But what I’m going to ask you to do now goes against every professional and personal instinct you have. I want you to forget what you just told me about there being a second Superman.”

“I’m a reporter,” Lois reminded him. “It’s my job to let the public know about this.”

“And what do you think the public’s reaction will be to finding out there’s a rogue super-being out there who has no compunction about hurting innocent people?” Henderson asked, keeping his voice low.

“The public has a right to know what’s going on,” Lois responded.

“I’m not asking you to cover it up forever,” Henderson said. “I’m asking you to be discrete until we get a handle on this situation. If you won’t do it for me, do it for Clark?”

“Clark would agree with me,” Lois stated. It hit her ...

“Oh my god, Clark challenged Superman. He must have been out of his mind.”

Henderson didn’t say anything.

Then it clicked — almost audibly. Clark had challenged Superman. Clark had been surprised when he got hurt. Clark had fought Superman and lived ...

She sat down hard on one of the chairs at the dining table. It all fit. All the weird excuses and disappearances ... All the inside knowledge on Superman ... All the little things that Superman knew about her and the Daily Planet ... ‘My mom made it ...’

“Omigod,” Lois murmured. It all fit. And the rat hadn’t told her.

“Lois, did you hear what I said?” Henderson asked.

Lois looked up at him. “I’m sorry ...”

“The report we’re going to release is that you and Clark were having a late dinner. He answered the door for you and was clubbed down by a man wearing a Superman costume,” Henderson said patiently. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t make a liar out of me.”

“I’m still going to look into who it really was that attacked Clark,” Lois told him.

“I can’t stop you as much as I’d like to,” Henderson said. “Just keep me apprised of what you find, okay? And don’t go after him yourself. That’s what the police are for.”

“And do you honestly think you could handle a rogue Superman?”

“Do you think you can?”

Lois spent a fitful night at the Lexor Hotel. Between the fight and the police, her apartment was in shambles. It was going to take days, if not weeks, to get all the damage taken care of. She wasn't sure what her insurance company was going to say — was having your partner attacked and almost killed an act of terrorism or an accident covered under her renter's policy?

And Clark ... It was obvious now that she looked at the facts. It really had been Clark who had saved the utility worker from the explosion on Clark's first day at the Planet. It was Clark who had saved her and Jimmy when EPRAD's warehouse exploded. It was Clark who had lifted an entire spaceship into orbit wearing a silly costume his mother made for him.

Lois couldn't begin to count how many times in the past few months that she'd been saved from certain death by what seemed like remarkable coincidences when it had been Clark all along. Had Trask known that Clark was Superman back in Smallville? He certainly hadn't known when he barged into the Daily Planet newsroom demanding information they didn't have, but maybe toward the end when Trask was beating Clark and then pulled a gun on him. Maybe Trask had known then — before Rachel Harris put a bullet in him ...

Wait ... Trask had actually beaten Clark bloody that day. And Clark had gotten a paper cut just the day before. That didn't make sense unless Trask was right about there being a substance capable of neutralizing Superman. Unless kryptonite was real ...

Morning came too soon. Lois felt like she hadn't slept a wink.

She called Metropolis General Hospital to check on Clark's condition but claimed they didn't have a patient by that name. She was certain that was where Clark would have been taken — Met Gen housed the regional trauma center and was where injured police officers and fire-fighters were taken.

She didn't have time to call the other hospitals in case he was taken elsewhere. Did his superpowers include super healing? Lois didn't know. Maybe he was already out of the hospital, resting at home.

She called Clark's apartment. His answering machine picked up. No joy there.

Clark, please be okay ...

Lois barely made into the newsroom on time. She looked like hell and she knew it but there was no helping it. Perry was sitting at Clark's desk. He was pale, staring out into the distance.

“Perry?”

Her words seemed to bring him back into the here and now. “Hon', are you okay?”

Lois shrugged. “Considering everything that happened last night, yeah. I don't know where they took Clark though. I thought I'd check on that, see how ...”

Perry's eyes widen and he took on a stricken look. “You don't know?”

“Know what?” she asked, afraid of the answer.

“Clark didn't make it,” Perry said.

Lois sat down at her own desk as he continued. “I tried to call his parents this morning but there was no answer. I'm guessing that someone contacted them last night and

they're already on their way to ...” His voice faltered and he looked like he might be ready to cry. “That's the call no parent ever wants to get.”

“It's not fair, you know,” Jimmy said. He had a banker's box in his hands. Obviously Jimmy had been tapped to clear out Clark's desk. “It's not right for somebody to check out before he's thirty,” he added.

“He was one of the best journalists I've ever had the privilege to work with,” Perry said. He smiled sadly. “I remember the first time he walked in here looking for a job, full of that confidence you get when you don't know any better. I remember thinking ... this kid is me. And now ...” He blinked the tears away and looked over at Lois, his expression hardening. “So, what have we got on the monster that did this?”

“He was wearing a Superman costume,” Lois said. “He was fast and very strong and he looked exactly like Superman.”

“Are you saying Superman did it?” Perry asked.

Lois shook her head. “Whoever, whatever he was, he wasn't Superman.”

“If it wasn't Superman, then where was Superman?” Jimmy asked.

“I don't know, Jimmy,” Lois lied.

“A clone?” Lois repeated Jimmy's suggestion in disbelief. Perry assigned him to help her on research. Jimmy was great with computers but sometimes he let his imagination get away from him.

He didn't seem fazed by her disbelief. “There's no technology in the world that could produce a robot like that. I mean, your dad's research came close, but there was still a human underneath the prosthetics, right?”

“Right,” Lois agreed.

“All the known Superman impersonators have alibis, plus you'd know the difference and we know Superman doesn't have a twin,” Jimmy went on.

“Also right,” Lois said.

“So there's only one possibility,” Jimmy stated triumphantly. “Someone has cloned Superman. Made an exact genetic copy.”

Lois stared at him. “How? They can't do that yet. We're not that advanced.”

“We may be more advanced than you think,” Jimmy said. He opened one of the magazines that he'd piled on Clark's desk and handed it to Lois.

She skimmed the article then picked up her phone and dialed. “Yes. I'd like the number for a Doctor Fabian Leek.”

“Lois!” a familiar voice called out as Lois noted down the number and hung up her phone. Lex Luthor.

He walked up to her and took her hands into his own. “I came as soon as I heard about what happened to you last night. It must have been horrible for you ...”

“It was worse for Clark,” she said. Before, she'd been flattered by Luthor's attention but now there seemed to be a ‘wrongness’ to it, as though he had no idea as to what her feelings might be and was simply mouthing platitudes.

A flicker of confusion crossed his face at her comment, then his expression smoothed back into its normal urbane suaveness. “Yes, quite so. But still, if there's anything I can do. Anything at all.”

“Can you bring Clark back?” she asked.

“I'm powerful,” Lex said. “But not that powerful. I meant, if there was anything you needed, a shoulder to cry on ...”

“You can tell me why I received a letter yesterday, supposedly from Superman, written on your personal stationery?” Lois asked.

He actually seemed surprised. “On my ... May I see the letter?”

“The police have it,” Lois told him. “They’re hoping they may be able to get some clues from it. Like who actually wrote it.”

Lex looked troubled. “You don’t believe Superman wrote it?”

“Do you honestly believe that Superman would write me a letter on your stationery?”

Lex had no answer, but the troubled look didn’t leave his face.

‘He knows something,’ Lois realized. “But if Superman didn’t write it, do you have any idea who might have done it?” she asked.

“My dear Lois, there are dozens of people who could have had access to my office stationery. But I’ll check with my staff in the event one of them had the bad taste to send you a letter purporting to be from our local ... super-hero.”

“Thanks, Lex.”

He began to reach for her hand again but thought better of it. “I’ll call you. Perhaps we can have dinner.”

“Perhaps,” Lois said. She watched as he walked away, making sure the elevator doors had closed behind him before turning back to Jimmy. “Get me everything you can on Fabian Leek. I want to be prepared when we go to see him at the University.”

The interview with Leek hadn’t brought forth any new information. The man had lived down to his reputation as a skirt-chasing sleazeball. He had spent his time ogling her and doing his best to peer down her blouse. Answering her questions on his research was, at best, a tertiary consideration.

“That guy is a piece of work. A lying sleazy piece of work,” Lois fumed as she and Jimmy headed back to her jeep.

“Yeah,” Jimmy agreed. “He completely reversed himself on all of his recent published work. Only last year he announced he had successfully cloned a cat and the only things standing in the way of human cloning were legal issues, not technical ones.”

“Still ... in order to even begin to make a clone, they would have to have used cells from Superman’s body,” Lois said. “The man’s invulnerable so ... How?”

“I don’t know, Lois,” Jimmy said. “But somebody figured it out.”

A few hours later, Jimmy hurried over to Lois’s desk. “I found it!” he announced. “Actually, I found two. Superman donated a lock of hair for a charity auction a couple months ago.”

“Yeah ... Who bought it?”

“A Mrs. Doyle Alexander,” Jimmy told her. “I called her and she said that there was a break-in at her house the day after the auction. The lock of hair was stolen. Nothing else. Never found out who took it. Never got it back. But get this. Superman also donated some cells to StarLabs for their research. It took some doing but I finally got someone who admitted those cultures had also disappeared. And guess who was working as a consultant at StarLabs at the time?”

“Doctor Leek?”

Jimmy nodded. “And guess who’s funding his latest

research, and not in that lab at the University?”

“I give up,” Lois said. She wasn’t in the mood for games. Keeping busy tracking down Clark’s killer kept her from falling apart but she was fraying around the edges.

Jimmy seemed to sense her mood and continued more seriously. “Leek is being funded by LexCorp. According to the department secretary, Leek started spending a lot of time off-campus about two months ago. The contact number she had for him goes to a LexCorp exchange. Also, normally a man in Leek’s position at the University has grad students working for him, doing the actual scut work? Well, Leek cut them off cold. For all intents and purposes he unilaterally cancelled the doctoral program in genetics six weeks ago and the University was threatening to take legal action, until Lex offered to build them a new, state of the art, genetics lab.”

“Which implies that Lex is up to his neck in whatever Leek is up to,” Lois said.

“That’s how I see it.”

“It’s a good start. Thanks, Jimmy.”

Jimmy smiled then his expression turned forlorn again. “Lois, if you need someone to talk to ... or if you just want some company ... Clark was my friend too.”

“Thanks, Jimmy. I appreciate the offer, but I think it really hasn’t sunk in for me, yet,” she said. “Mean, he died and I never got a chance ...” She let her voice fade as she realized what she was saying. ‘I never got a chance to tell him ... I wanted him to be more than just a friend.’

The next three days were little more than a blur to Lois as she and Jimmy ran through every lead they had to identify Clark Kent’s killer. Every hint, every trail, led back to either Leek or Luthor — but never anything direct. The money trails that ended with Leek began with LexLab managers who were not available to talk, or were not available period — they had been transferred overseas. One of them was dead. Their supervisors denied knowing Leek even worked for them, even though Leek was being paid hundreds of thousands of dollars and his lab cost even more.

Lois was finally appreciating why Clark had mistrusted Lex so much and why he couldn’t say why: Clark hadn’t been able to pin anything on Luthor even though there were massive indications that the billionaire was into things no honest businessman would have been.

Finally, she admitted she was at an impasse. She was going to have to talk to Luthor.

“Lois, you’re going to Perry’s tonight for Clark’s wake, aren’t you?” Jimmy asked, interrupting her unsavory train of thought.

Lois nodded. She still hadn’t been able to reach Clark’s parents and her calls to the ME’s office to see about claiming Clark’s body for burial had led nowhere. The OCME hadn’t issued a death certificate yet and the autopsy report wasn’t being released until the police investigation was complete.

Without a death certificate there could be no funeral or burial either in Metropolis or Kansas.

Perry’s solution was a wake, a celebration of Clark’s life. Lois just hoped she wouldn’t call completely to pieces in front of everyone. She was better in the daytime, when she could keep busy. The nighttimes were bad — she kept remembering that night.

“Lois,” Clark said. “You have to stop him.”

“And how am I supposed to do that?” she asked.

“I don’t know. But you have to try.”

Clark’s wake was in full swing when Lois arrived at Perry’s house. Ralph was already three sheets to the wind and leering down Cat Grant’s front. Cat didn’t seem to notice or if she did, she didn’t mind.

Perry handed Lois a beer then beckoned her to follow him. “Lois, have I ever shown you my bomb shelter?” he asked. From anyone else the invitation would have sounded creepy. From Perry it just sounded ... creepy.

She followed him down the back stairs to the basement, past the laundry room to another door and down another, shorter flight of stairs to yet another door. This one was heavy and sheathed in metal. “The guy we bought the house from was a little paranoid,” Perry explained. “You know. Red menace, alien invasions. Alice usually uses it for storage.”

The stairwell was lined with sound-proofing material. Perry opened the door with a flourish.

In the room beyond stood Clark’s parents.

“Martha, Jonathan ... I’m so sorry ...” Lois said.

“About what ...” Martha began. She sounded puzzled.

Perry cleared his throat and shook his head. “It hasn’t been safe,” he said to Martha.

Lois looked from Perry to Martha in confusion before it finally clicked. “Clark’s alive but you haven’t had a chance to tell me,” she reasoned aloud. “You knew and you didn’t tell me.” She wasn’t sure if she should be angry at Perry’s deception or not.

“Lois, the guy who hurt Clark has all of Superman’s abilities,” Perry said. “The last thing we wanted was for him to find Clark and finish the job. Or for him to find Clark’s parents. This room is lead-lined and sound-proof. Like I told you, the previous owner was a little paranoid.”

“Is Clark okay?” Lois asked, only half paying attention to Perry’s explanation.

A flicker of pain crossed Martha’s face. “He hasn’t regained consciousness.”

“I’d like to see him,” Lois began.

“It wouldn’t be safe,” Jonathan said. “That ... imposter ...”

Martha stepped in. “We have it on good authority that the ‘person’ who hurt Clark is keeping an eye on you.”

“I haven’t seen him,” Lois said.

“But other people have, darlin’,” Perry said. “And we’ve had reports of him threatening people who were less than polite to you.”

“But, that’s nonsense,” Lois protested. “This is Metropolis. Everybody’s rude and in a hurry.”

Perry simply shrugged. “I’m just telling you what I know.”

Martha and Perry shared a worried look then Martha turned her attention back to Lois. “Mister White says you’ve got some ideas on who this imposter is.”

Lois tried not to look surprised that Perry would share what he knew with Clark’s parents.

After a moment, she filled them in on what she and Jimmy had found.

“I’m having lunch with Luthor tomorrow,” she added when she was finished. “Everything points back to him and I know Clark had issues with him even though he never filled me in on why.”

“Lois, Lex Luthor didn’t get to be a man in his position by playing by the Marquis of Queensbury rules,” Perry warned.

“I know that,” Lois admitted. “I’m just hoping that his apparent infatuation with me might persuade him to give over more information that he otherwise would.”

‘At least Clark is alive,’ Lois comforted herself. But she knew she didn’t dare let on to anyone that she knew that Clark had survived. She couldn’t even talk to Perry about it unless it was in his bomb shelter. And she wasn’t as confident as Perry seemed to be about its security.

But the thought of Clark’s survival buoyed her as she went through her closet the next morning. Something professional yet a little sexy for her lunch with Luthor. Afterwards, she would cover his press conference at the site of the Hobs Bay Tower. It was the first step in his proposed renovation of Suicide Slum — a proposal Clark had voiced concerns about before ...

Clark had wondered, rather loudly, about how convenient it had been that the string of arson fires a few months before had allowed Luthor to get his hands on exactly the property he needed to put together this ‘renovation’ project in the poorest part of Metropolis. Lois, in turn, had pointed out that there was absolutely no evidence that Luthor was involved with Toni Taylor or the Toaster gang — aside from knowing Taylor as a nightclub manager — and that a major housing/commercial development was exactly what the area needed.

Clark’s response was to start looking into what had happened to the people and businesses the arsons and other violence in the area had displaced. Now Lois wondered what had happened to his notes. Probably Perry had them. Lois made a mental note to ask Perry about it. Knowing how thorough Clark’s research was — and how much time he’d already spent on it — it shouldn’t take too much to shape Clark’s notes into a story to accompany her coverage of the press conference.

“Lois, LexCorp and its subsidiaries fund hundreds, if not thousands, of researchers in hundreds of fields all over the world,” Luthor protested mildly when Lois asked him about Fabian Leek’s connection to LexCorp. “I can’t be expected to know each one of them.”

“Not even as renowned a researcher as Fabian Leek?” Lois pressed.

Luthor gave her a benign smile that in the past would have put her at ease. This time she recognized how good an actor he really was. She wasn’t going to be mollified.

“I mean a getting a scientist of Leek’s stature into LexCorp’s stable has to be a feather in somebody’s cap,” Lois added. “And we do have reason to believe he’s gotten the funding to take his research to the next level — cloning humans.”

“My dear Lois, that is research that has serious ethical repercussions. I hope you’re not accusing LexCorp of ignoring federal regulations and conducting unethical experiments on humans.”

“Oh, no,” Lois protested. “I’m just thinking that when I interviewed Leek, he practically denied everything he’s ever published. It sounded a lot like a guilty conscience to me. Or a cover-up. So I’m wondering if he might not be taking advantage of having access to a private lab and private money to do things an ethics board, or you, might not approve of.”

Luthor gazed at her though narrowed eyes. Lois had to fight to keep from fidgeting.

“Lois, this isn’t just background research on LexCorp’s

giving grants for scientific research, is it?”

Lois shook her head, weighing how much to tell him. She took a deep breath, blowing it out her nose as her tai kwon do instructors taught her — clear your lungs and clear your mind. “You know about Clark’s murder.”

“Only what I’ve read in the papers,” Luthor said. “He was attacked in your apartment by a man in a Superman suit.”

“There are things about it that never made it into the papers. The authorities don’t want to start a panic,” Lois said. Luthor frowned and Lois continued. “The man who attacked Clark wasn’t just wearing a Superman suit. He had Superman’s powers.”

Luthor’s eyes widened. “You’re saying that Superman killed your partner?”

“No,” Lois said. “Superman was Clark’s friend. He would never have hurt Clark, much less kill him.”

“So either Superman has lost his mind, a terrifying thought you must admit,” Luthor began.

“Or it wasn’t Superman at all,” Lois suggested.

“You think Leek was involved in creating an imposter?” Luthor pressed.

“You said yourself that it was unethical to do experiments on humans,” Lois said softly. “But Superman wasn’t human, was he?”

Luthor sat back in his chair, his expression unreadable. “I’ll look into Doctor Leek’s association with LexCorp. Assuming what you say is true, well, we can’t have people going around cloning their own Superman, can we?”

The doors to Luthor’s dining room whispered open on well-oiled hinges. Nigel St. John walked in, murmuring something to Luthor that Lois didn’t catch. Luthor nodded and turned back to her. “If I don’t hurry, I’ll miss my own press conference,” Luthor said. “If you don’t mind waiting a moment, I can certainly give you a ride to the conference site.”

It was longer than just ‘a moment’. Lois tried her best to keep from fuming as Luthor sent her downstairs to wait with the limousine while he handled a ‘last minute issue’ Nigel had brought to his attention. Did the ‘issue’ have to do with Lois’s revelation that she suspected that Clark’s attacker hadn’t been Superman but a super-powered imposter?

Luthor had used the word ‘clone’ when describing the imposter. Lois hadn’t used the word. It wasn’t exactly a smoking gun, but it certainly lent credence to the idea that Luthor knew far more about the imposter, and Leek’s work, than he had admitted.

Finally Luthor joined her and they sped away to the press conference. Oddly, Luthor seemed fidgety, looking out the side window as if he expected to see something.

“Is everything okay?” Lois asked. She’d never seen him this antsy.

He seemed surprised at her question and settled back in his seat. “I received some disturbing information, but Nigel is handling it,” Luthor said. “I’ve also asked him to look into the relationship, if any, between LexCorp and Doctor Leek. I pray that you’re mistaken and Doctor Leek hasn’t done anything ... ‘stupid’ with whatever funds we may have given him.”

“And if he has?”

Luthor seemed surprised by the question. After a moment he responded. “Then I expect we will have to remedy the problem he has created for us. Luckily, I’m quite good at dealing with problems such as this.”

A podium had been set up just in front of the building site. Camera crews and reporters were waiting for Luthor’s arrival. Lois just hoped no one noticed that she had arrived with him. She should have had the driver drop her off a block away — but that would have made it seem that she was ashamed to be seen with Luthor and that was hardly the impression she wanted to leave with the billionaire.

Lois joined the rest of the journalists covering the press conference. None of Luthor’s announcements covering the plans he had for the re-development of Suicide Slum were surprises. The entire thing was little more than public relations. Nearly every media outlet in the city already had a copy of the prepared speech. The only new material would come from the question-answer session and Lois knew that Luthor wasn’t going to deviate from what he’d already publically announced. He never did.

Then ‘Superman’ dropped from the sky.

“Luthor, I told you to stay away from her,” he announced.

Luthor seemed surprised and more than a little annoyed by Superman’s statement. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said after a moment, craning his neck to look at Superman floating above him. “But whatever it is, you’re mistaken.”

“Am I mistaken about you being the crime lord known as the ‘Boss’? Am I mistaken that you ordered the murders of Doctor Samuel Platt and Doctor Toni Baines? That you knew that your nuclear plant was faulty and threatened all of Metropolis? The list goes on.”

All around Lois, pens were scratching away on notepads. What had promised to be a dull news day had turned into anything but. Superman was facing down the third richest man in the world, a man who could make or break entire countries on a whim or a word.

Lois had her own notepad out, noting people’s reactions to the drama unfolding before them.

Luthor snorted, eyes narrowed as he regarded his adversary. “I’d be careful about what I say if I were you, Superman. I have very good lawyers and what you’re saying is positively slanderous.”

“The truth is never slander,” Superman said. “Stay away from her.” There was something very familiar and very ugly in Superman’s tone.

“And if I don’t?” Luthor challenged. He seemed oblivious to the danger he was in. He didn’t seem to realize that this was the person who had attacked Clark. Or if he did, he thought he had some immunity.

Lois screamed out Superman’s name, trying to catch his attention. He paid no attention to her. Superman’s eyes glowed red and suddenly Lex Luthor wasn’t standing on the podium.

The air stank of burnt pork.

Lois barely remembered getting back to the Planet to file her story on Luthor’s death. The events at the news conference were already on the radio and TV.

Commentators all over the world were speculating on what could possibly have made Superman commit such a public and heinous act. No one had any idea who Superman had been warning Luthor to stay away from but Lois knew it was only a matter of time before someone pointed a finger in her direction — she was the first one to interview him.

“Lois, what the devil happened?” Perry demanded.

“What was Superman going on about before he killed Luthor?”

"I'm not sure, exactly," Lois admitted. "Lex and I had lunch. We talked about Doctor Leek and Lex all but admitted to funding him and knowing about his research. Then one of his people came in and gave him a message. It seemed to upset him. He sent me ahead to the limo to wait for him. When he finally came down, he was nervous, antsy. He kept looking out the window like he was looking for something overhead."

"You think he knew that Superman was after him?" Perry asked.

"I doubt we'll ever know," Lois said.

"And Superman's statement that Luthor was also the 'Boss'?"

"Clark thought so," Lois told him. "But he couldn't prove anything. Luthor was too good at covering his tracks."

Lois turned to her desk to begin writing her story. She felt Perry's hand on her shoulder. "Lois, the world saw Superman commit a murder. And as much as it pains me to say it, if we even try to suggest that it wasn't Superman ... "

"I know, Perry. Believe me, I know."

'Superman' was waiting in her apartment when she got there.

Lois tried to slow her racing heart. If he noticed how frightened she was, he didn't show it.

"The people on the TV aren't being very nice to me," he began conversationally.

"They're afraid of you," Lois managed to say.

"They don't need to be," he said. "Only bad people need to be afraid of me ... and people who aren't nice to you."

"Superman, this is Metropolis. It's a big city and big city people aren't always polite to one another. It's nothing personal." She tried to keep her voice steady.

He finally seemed to notice her nervousness. "You're not afraid of me, are you? You don't need to be. I would never hurt you. I love you."

He reached out to caress her cheek. She had to fight to keep from flinching away from him.

He gave her a hurt puppy dog look as he pulled his hand back. At that moment he looked so much like Clark that it was actually painful.

She held her hand out to him and he took it. "Promise me you won't hurt anyone else?" Lois asked. "Superman is supposed to stand for what is good and right. People shouldn't need to be afraid of him."

"Like I said, only bad people need to be afraid of me," he said.

"And who decides who is bad?" Lois asked.

"I do."

The violent crime rate in Metropolis went down after the first few 'executions' of muggers and rapists. It was actually safe for a woman to walk into Suicide Slum at night, although any intelligent person still avoided the area after dark.

The police were refusing to comment on the drop in violent crime. Those few detectives willing to talk to Lois for deep background admitted that white collar crime was as high as ever and the drug traffickers that had survived Superman's 'house-cleaning' had simply found better places to hide while they peddled their wares. The same held for gambling and prostitution.

The one interesting note in the whole mess was that

following Luthor's murder many of his high ranking subordinates had run for cover — many of them into the hands of the FBI. They had brought with them damning evidence of Lex Luthor's complicity in the Messenger disaster and the flaws in the LexCorp nuclear power plant. There were even links to Bureau 39 and Jason Trask's threats against Superman, as well as the early 'tests' of Superman's speed and strength that had endangered innocent bystanders.

"So, Superman was right when he accused Luthor of being 'the Boss'?" Lois asked Henderson over coffee at her uncle's bistro.

"That's what it looks like," Henderson admitted. "Of course, it would have been helpful if he'd just brought us his evidence instead of publically 'executing' the man." It had become a Metropolis euphemism — Superman didn't murder people, he executed them.

Henderson sighed. "Lois, did Clark have any suspicions concerning Luthor?"

"He didn't like him, I know that," Lois told the officer. "But it was more of a gut reaction, I think. Luthor just didn't ring true to him. Why?"

"Some of us were wondering if that was why Clark was the first one he took out. Clark knew too much about Luthor's darker side and Luthor wanted him out of the way."

"If he was under Luthor's control, then why did he execute him?" Lois asked.

"Superman found out about Luthor's criminal inclinations?" Henderson suggested. He didn't sound enthusiastic about his theory.

Lois shook her head. "I think it was more personal than that. I know it sounds self-centered of me, but Clark was my partner and my friend and Luthor was a suitor, for lack of a better term. Somewhere in that mess Superman decided he didn't want any rivals for my attention."

"If it was anyone else saying that, I'd think they were delusional," Henderson said. "But it makes a sort of weird sense."

A hush fell over the restaurant. Lois looked over to the entrance and saw Superman standing there, arms crossed over his chest.

Lois sighed. "I'll take care of the check," she told Henderson as she slipped out of the booth.

"Superman," she said, trying to make her voice cheerful. "What brings you to this neck of the woods?"

He seemed a little puzzled by her question. Then his eyes flickered toward Henderson. Lois looked back at the officer and put on a bright smile. "Inspector, you will let me know the moment I can print this, right?"

"Naturally."

She kept the smile on as she turned to face Superman. "You remember Inspector Henderson, don't you Superman? One of Metropolis's finest?"

Superman forehead creased in a frown. "A flatfoot?"

"That's not a very polite thing to call someone who works to keep Metropolis safe, is it?" Lois chided.

"Metropolis doesn't need cops," Superman said. "It has me."

"Well, someone has to direct traffic and take out the garbage, don't they?" Henderson said with a sardonic shrug. "Lane, I'd tell you to stay out of trouble but I know you'd have no idea what I was talking about."

Lois managed a chuckle. "I do know what you mean. It's just that our definitions don't quite match."

Henderson bobbed his head once and left the restaurant. Lois turned her attention back to Superman.

“What were you talking about?” Superman demanded.

Lois considered her words before speaking. “If you must know, he was filling me in on what’s been uncovered about Luthor.”

“Luthor’s dead. What more is there to know?”

“Well, there is the matter of him having been ‘the Boss,’” Lois said as the cashier handed her card back. Lois headed for the door and was relieved when Superman followed her out.

“I told you he was,” Superman reminded her.

“And you must appreciate that people want to understand how it happened. They want to know what he did and how it affected them. They want closure,” she explained.

“If you say so,” he said. He didn’t seem convinced.

“How did you know he was the Boss?” she asked. “I mean, he was so good at covering his tracks. Nobody knew he was also head of Metropolis’s most dangerous criminal gang except for his closest associates.”

“I heard him talking about it,” Superman said simply.

“When was this?” Lois asked.

He shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. Anyway, I don’t want to talk about Luthor. I want to talk about us.”

“Us?”

“I can give you anything you want, gold, jewels, the riches of this planet,” he said. “We can go anywhere, do anything. I can give you the world.”

“Maybe I don’t want the world,” Lois said. “Maybe I just want to do my job without worrying whether you or some other boss approves.”

“I would never hurt you,” he said. “You believe me, don’t you?”

“Of course I believe you,” Lois lied. “Is there any reason I shouldn’t?”

“It’s just ... I don’t like it when you talk to other men,” he said.

“I’m a reporter,” she said. “It’s my job to talk to people, including men.”

“But I see them looking at you.”

She sighed. “I don’t know what you think you see. But you’re wrong. I have no interest in them, at least not that way, and they have no interest in me that way.”

“Luthor did. I told him to stay away from you. He didn’t listen. He thought he could tell me what to do.”

“And what would make him think that?” she asked.

Superman glowered at her then vanished in a clap of air.

Days turned into weeks. The trickle of people and companies fleeing Metropolis turned to a flood. Even at the Daily Planet many people had left to seek safety in other cities, at other papers. Cat Grant and Ralph Gunderson had left for Gotham City. Jimmy had gone to stay with his father in Washington DC.

Perry had sent Alice to stay with their younger son in Los Angeles. Lois didn’t know where Clark’s parents had gone — Perry hadn’t said a word about them since the meeting in his fallout shelter. She assumed that Clark was still alive somewhere since she hadn’t been told otherwise.

Lois buried herself in her work. At least when she was busy she didn’t have to think too much about Clark. But he was still in her dreams.

“Lois,” Clark said. “You have to stop him.”

“And how am I supposed to do that?” she asked.

“I don’t know. But you have to try.”

“Miss Lane?”

She looked up from the article she was working on. A uniformed messenger was standing by her desk. He handed her a white business envelope then waited as she opened it.

Parking Level LL Wannamaker Building, 7 pm tonight. Be discrete. WH

WH? Lois tried to match a name to the initials. William Henderson?

“I need a reply,” the messenger said.

“Yes,” she told him simply. Then she fed the message into the shredder.

Lois was familiar with the parking garage at the Wannamaker Building. She had often parked her Cherokee there while on search missions for various public records. LL was the lowest level of the parking garage.

Henderson was waiting by the elevators. He put a finger to his lips when she opened her mouth to ask him what was going on. The elevator doors opened and wordlessly he ushered her inside. Once inside he put a key into a slot at the top of the control panel. Lois expected the elevator to go up — they were on the lowest level after all. Instead she was surprised to find the car heading downwards.

The doors finally opened onto a concrete corridor lined with pipes and dimly lit with utility lamps. Henderson beckoned her to follow him down the corridor to a metal door. He knocked on the door and after a moment it swung open to reveal a small room with several men inside.

Henderson closed the door behind them.

“We’re clear,” a man wearing headphones said. Henderson seemed to relax and Lois let go of the breath she hadn’t been aware she’d been holding.

“Lois Lane, Colonel David Foster, US Army,” Henderson began to introduce the men beginning with the one wearing the headset and watching mysterious blips on what looked like a radar screen.

“Dan Scardino NIA. I think you know Andy Brown with the local FBI office.”

The men greeted her solemnly.

“You’re sure this place is safe?” Lois asked.

Foster answered. “This room is lead-lined and as soundproof as we can make it. We’re also beneath a very busy subway line and we have a way to track him. He’s moving away from us.”

“You have a way to track him?” Lois repeated.

“One of LexCorp’s little gadgets,” Scardino explained. He was younger than the others, about her age, and had an infectious smile that reminded her a little of Clark.

“LexCorp claimed it detected his brain waves,” Scardino said. “The guys at STAR Labs think it actually detects a shift or a warp in the normal space-subspace boundary. It shows up when Superman flies, kind of like a contrail. We can detect where he is and where he’s been, so long as he’s flying.”

“And right now he’s flying?” Henderson asked.

Foster nodded.

“We have a little time then,” Brown said. “Ms. Lane, Henderson suggested we bring you in on this. I don’t like involving civilians in matters like this, but unfortunately I agree with him that you’re the one best suited for what we’re suggesting.”

“Superman has to be stopped,” Henderson said. “We know he’s killed at least a hundred people but we can’t even convene a grand jury against him for fear of what he’d

do. Luckily he doesn't seem interested in setting himself as a dictator. Yet."

"I don't think it's occurred to him," Lois said. "Something happened to him ..." She glanced at Henderson who nodded his head. She assumed he was giving her permission to tell them her theory. "It's almost as if he was a different person, more like an early teen than a grownup."

"You think he isn't really Superman?" Brown pressed.

"I think that if he is, then something awful happened to him to make him this way, and if he isn't ..." She let her voice trail off meaningfully.

"In either case, can we count on you to help us?"

"Tell me what I need to do."

Scardino handed her a silver box. It was far heavier than it looked. She lifted the top and saw a green glowing crystal nestled in black velvet.

"Element 126. Colonel Trask believed it was capable of immobilizing Superman, maybe even killing him. Luthor's research notes seem to confirm it," Scardino said.

"But you don't know, do you?"

Scardino shook his head. "It will be dangerous for you, especially if it doesn't work."

"More dangerous than living in Metropolis right now?" she asked. "Just tell me when and where and what I have to do." She reached for the box. Henderson pulled it out of reach.

"We need the crystal for another day or so," Brown said. "Scardino will give you the package and your instructions once we have everything ready."

"Lois, you know we wouldn't ask you to do this if we thought there was any other way, right?" Henderson asked.

"I know that," she said. "I wouldn't have agreed if I thought there was another way. But just to assuage a reporter's curiosity, who authorized this operation?"

"The president himself," Brown said. "Superman has been declared an enemy of the United States. He is presumed to be armed and dangerous at all times and our orders are to terminate with extreme prejudice — assuming it's possible to terminate someone who is invulnerable to anything we can throw at him."

"Then we'd better pray that pretty green rock does the trick," Lois said.

Two days passed, then three. Superman flew into Lois's apartment each night to give her chocolate from Belgium and France. He brought her exotic cheeses and wines. She didn't dare tell him she didn't want them. She just hoped that the places he was taking them from could afford losing their wares.

In the late afternoon on fourth day after the meeting Lois spotted Scardino in the coffee shop across the street from the Planet. She ordered herself a latte then slid into the seat opposite him.

"We're set. We know he comes to see you after you get home from work," Scardino said. "Just get him into position in front of your living room windows and open the box." As he spoke he handed her a brown-paper package.

"That's all I need to do?"

"We'll handle the rest," he assured her.

"You make it sound so easy," she said.

"I wish it was going to be easy," Scardino said. "Everything hinges on you." He reached over and patted her hand. "Look, when this is over ..."

"Look, Dan," she interrupted, pulling her hand back. "Assuming this ever gets over, it'll be a while before I'm

ready for ... whatever it is you're suggesting."

"Hey, you're an attractive woman," Scardino said with a grin. "You can't blame a guy for trying." His expression abruptly turned worried and he tapped the almost invisible earpiece he was wearing. "You need to leave."

Lois grabbed the package and shoved it into her purse. Then she hurried across the street to the Planet.

Lois barely had time to get the package unwrapped before Superman flew into her apartment.

He seemed nervous and upset, pacing across the floor.

He finally turned to face her. "Who was he?"

"Who are you talking about?" Lois asked.

"I saw you with him! Who was he?"

"Who was who?" She didn't know if he had seen her with Scardino or if some other poor soul had caught his attention. She was afraid to ask what he had done.

Superman was waving his arms, shouting at her.

"You're mine! You're mine and no one else can have you!"

Lois backed away from him, hoping he would recognize how badly he was scaring her. Her heart was pounding as though it wanted to escape from her chest.

He didn't seem to care. His face was a mask of fury. "I saw you with him!" he shouted.

"I don't know what ..."

"You lie!" His face was red and his eyes were glowing.

Lois couldn't remember a time she'd been so frightened. She felt like she should run and hide but she knew she couldn't. She tried to remember what she needed to do. She needed to open the silver box.

"I don't know what you think you saw," Lois said. She hoped she sounded calmer than she felt. "But I haven't been with anyone."

He grabbed her arm.

"Superman, please. You're hurting me," she said. She'd never seen him so angry, so out of control.

After a moment he seemed to realize that he was hurting her and dropped his hand. "I'm sorry," he said. "But when I think of you with anyone else ... I go crazy. You understand that, don't you? You know I love you, don't you?"

"I know you think you do," she said, edging her way to the sofa to sit down. "But if you really loved me, you wouldn't hurt me or scare me like this."

"But everything I've done, I've done for you," he said. "Luthor ... he didn't deserve to even look at you, walk on the same streets as you."

"He didn't deserve to die," Lois said.

"He was a criminal," he said with a shrug as though that was enough to excuse his actions.

"Whether he was or not, he deserved a fair trial," Lois told him.

The box was on the table in front of her. He grabbed her hand as she lifted the lid. She screamed as she felt the bones shatter. The box fell open.

His eyes widened in horror as he felt the pain of the kryptonite.

"I loved you," he managed to say. The window shattered. He gave her a look of betrayed astonishment as he fell to the floor.

Lois woke up screaming.

"Miss Lane?" a soft woman's voice called out from the doorway.

Lois blinked against the bright light as she tried to get

her bearings — she was in the hospital. The imposter was dead.

“It was just a bad dream,” Lois assured the nurse.

The nurse came in and turned up the lights in Lois’s room. Behind her Lois could see a uniformed officer standing guard in the hallway. With him was ...

“Lucy!”

Lucy Lane hurried into the room and gave her sister a gentle hug. “I got here as soon as I could,” she explained. “Daddy’s here too. He’s in consultation with Doctor Prescott, the guy who’s going to take care of your hand.”

“But how ... ?” Lois asked. The last she’d heard Doctor Sam Lane had been in Nairobi.

“The military located him at his clinic and flew him back here,” Lucy explained. “He wanted me to tell you that even if ... you know ... the new prosthetics are almost as good as the real thing.”

“Miss Lane, it’s time,” the nurse said.

“Lucy, you’ll be there when I wake up?” Lois asked.

“Sure thing, sis.”

Lois wasn’t sure if she was dreaming. She was in a place of bright lights and annoying beeps and hisses. She saw her father leaning over her, worry written across his broad face.

“It’s going to be fine,” he assured her before fading away.

When Lois finally opened her eyes and actually looked around she was back in her hospital room. Lucy was dozing in the chair and her father was inspecting the wrappings on her hand. They extended up past her elbow, completely immobilizing her arm below the shoulder. Except the wrappings were too short — her hand was gone.

“Hi Daddy,” Lois managed to croak out. “I guess you couldn’t ...”

“The ER doctor was overly optimistic when he said he thought it could be saved,” Sam said. “Sorry, Princess. The bones were completely pulverized. It should have been taken off last night. You were lucky none of it made it into your bloodstream.”

“Is there any good news?” Lois asked.

“Prescott installed the fittings for a prosthetic so you won’t have to go through more surgery. The new hand won’t be as good as the old one, but you’ll get used to it.”

“Any thing else?”

“The news is full of reports of your heroism,” Lucy said. “I’m getting calls from publishers and producers wanting your story.”

“What are you telling them?” Lois asked.

“To wait until you’ve recovered,” Lucy said. “Then you can decide what you want to do.”

“Has anyone heard from Perry?”

“He called this morning. He wanted you to know you could take as much time as you needed, but the Daily Planet has first dibs on the story. He’d like you to call it in as soon as you’re up to it,” Lucy said. “I have the feeling he means yesterday.”

“Did he say anything about Clark?” Lois asked.

“I thought Clark was dead,” Sam said.

“That’s what was announced to keep Superman from going after him and finishing the job,” Lois explained.

Lucy shook her head. “Perry didn’t say anything about Clark.”

Lois turned her head away from them. She didn’t want them to see her grief — she had hoped to hear that Clark

had just been hiding out, staying out of harm’s way. But if Perry hadn’t said anything about him ... Maybe Clark really was dead and Perry and Bill Henderson hadn’t wanted to burden her with the knowledge until the imposter was dealt with.

Lois seemed to understand. “You need to rest but I’ll be back later.”

Lois simply nodded. She heard the door close behind them. Then she cried herself to sleep.

Lois was alone when she woke up. Despite working one-handed she managed to climb out of bed and got to the adjoining rest room to relieve herself. When she came out the nurse was waiting.

“Doctor Lane warned us you’d be up and about as soon as you could manage it,” she said with a chuckle. She threw a robe over Lois’s shoulders. “The sooner we get you moving the sooner you can get out of here. Are you up for a walk down to the patients’ lounge?”

Lois nodded and the nurse guided her past the guard and down the hallway. The police officer fell into step behind them and the people in the corridor nodded and smiled at her. A few reached out to touch her sleeve, pulling back when the officer glowered at them for coming too close. “Thank you,” they murmured to her before moving on.

At the double door to the lounge Lois stopped. “Do you know if there’s a patient here named Clark Kent?”

“No, I don’t think so, but I could check,” the nurse said.

“Would you?” Lois said.

The nurse nodded and pushed the door open for her.

The room beyond was bright and cheerful, with large windows overlooking West River. Along one wall was a counter with coffee urns, pastries and a bowl of fruit. Lois grabbed a cup and managed to fix herself a cup of coffee. It was harder than she’d thought it would be with just one hand but she figured she needed to learn.

She looked around the room. A woman with graying hair was seated by the windows. With her was a dark-haired man in a wheelchair. Their backs were to Lois.

Then the woman moved and Lois felt an almost electric shock go through her.

“Martha?”

The woman’s face lit up with recognition. “Lois ...” Then her eyes filled with tears. “We heard what that monster did to you ... I’m so sorry.”

Lois swallowed hard. If Clark’s mother was here then the dark haired man ...

“Clark?” she murmured.

The wheelchair moved and the man’s face came into view.

Clark.

He was thinner than she remembered. The brown eyes behind the glasses had a haunted look — a look she was sure she would see if she looked into a mirror. She stepped closer and sank into a chair to face him.

“Nobody would tell me anything,” she said simply. “I didn’t know if you were alive or ...” To her horror her eyes filled with tears.

Clark cupped her cheek with one hand and brushed away the tears with his thumb. “I’m so sorry you had to go through that alone. I should have ...”

“Clark, there’s nothing you could have done,” she said.

“How can you expect to win a fight with Superman, even if he wasn’t the real thing?”

"I just ... If I had just realized what he was, if I'd fought a little harder maybe none of this would have happened. You wouldn't have lost a hand and I ... I wouldn't be just half a ..."

"Clark," Martha warned. "We've been over this. Just because he put you in a wheelchair doesn't mean he made you less of a person."

"Mom, what good am I? I can't help out on the farm. How am I supposed to work like this, see sources, run down leads, when I can barely take care of myself?"

"I thought a writer was supposed to work with his mind instead of his feet?" Martha said. It sounded to Lois like it was an old argument.

"The way I see it, we're both lucky to be alive," Lois said. "How bad was it?"

"Bad enough," Clark said. "He shattered two vertebrae in my lower back. The spinal cord was crushed. I'm paralyzed from the waist down and without a major medical breakthrough on regenerating nerve tissue, I'll never walk again." There was a bitterness in his voice that didn't go with the upbeat Clark that she knew from before.

"What about the other stuff?" she asked softly.

"What other stuff?"

"Clark, you faced down Superman," she reminded him. "You fought back and you lived. No ordinary Kansas farm boy could do that."

He looked away from her, staring out the wide window at the glistening river. "Considering everything, would it be so bad if I stayed an ordinary guy?"

"Clark Kent," she intoned solemnly, "since when have you ever been an ordinary guy?"

The Daily Planet ran the exclusive on the death of Superman. The by-line read 'by Lois Lane and Clark Kent'. Daily Planet sales broke records — everyone wanted to read about how the reporter helped take down a god.

But the stress of the previous weeks didn't vanish with the waving of a magic wand. Lois still had nightmares and they became worse after Clark moved back to Smallville — the stress of Metropolis wasn't making his own recovery any easier and although he hadn't said anything, Lois suspected he was hurting from the fact that he couldn't help people the way he'd been able to before.

Superman was dead. He could never return to Metropolis.

A week after the story broke Lois got up the courage to walk into Perry's office to tell him what was going on with her. "I need to take some time off," she finally said. "I don't know how long."

"Hon, you know you'll have a place at the Planet so long as I'm here," he assured her.

"Thanks, Perry."

"Just let me know where you end up," Perry told her. "And let Clark know we're all still thinking about him."

She just stared at him for a moment. "How did you know ...?"

"That you were heading for Kansas?" Perry asked. "I didn't become editor here because I can yodel." His expression turned solemn. "Have a good life, Lois. You deserve it. You both do."

Epilogue

Lois watched the holovid with rapt attention. 'Superman Returns' the ticker across the bottom read. The news outlets were gushing with excitement — even the first

baby born on Mars hadn't created quite as much furor. On the vid Superman smiled and waved to the people of the world.

"Looks like he's off to a good start," Clark Kent said from his place beside her on the sofa.

"Not quite as spectacular a first day as the original had," Lois Lane reminded her husband of twenty-five years. "Not much can beat lifting an entire space habitat into orbit."

"But admit it, it's nice to have Superman in the skies again," he said with a grin.

"Okay, I'll admit it. But invulnerable or not, I'm still going to worry about him. Especially since there may still be people around who didn't get the memo that he's not one of the bad guys," she said.

"I think that's a mother's prerogative," Clark told her.

It had taken years for Lois Lane and Clark Kent to convince the world that the homicidal creature that Lois had helped take down hadn't been Superman at all but a copy created by a megalomaniacal mobster whose creation had turned on him. The police and military had been easy to convince compared to the general public.

It had taken years for Metropolis to recover from the events of those few weeks and return to her former glory.

Clark Kent and Lois Lane never did fully recover. While prosthetics had improved to the point that her artificial hand was almost like a natural one, it was still artificial. And while neural regeneration had given Clark back the use of his legs, the scarring interfered with his bio-electric field — his invulnerability was gone, as was his ability to fly.

It had taken a long time for him to forgive himself for all the people who had died because Superman was gone. There were still times, even after all these years, that Lois would find his side of their bed cold. He would be watching the disasters on the news or staring out the Kent farmhouse window into the distance. Sometimes she would watch him unbeknownst as he tried to will himself into the air only to fail time after time. She hid her own tears at his pain.

Having children helped. They had been told they probably couldn't have any but Christopher arrived in time for their third anniversary. Laura appeared just after her father's thirty-second birthday.

"The uniform looks good on him," Lois said. "I think it's going to be okay." She chuckled. "And I can't wait until they see his kid sister."

THE END

A/N: Vatman was written by H.B. Cobb & Deborah Joy Levine