

Luthor's Revenge, Take 2

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Summary: Lex is back — again — and determined to make his ex-fiancee and her annoying Boy Scout of a husband pay for everything they've done to him.

Lex Luthor winced in pain as he shifted his position in the wheelchair that had been his prison ever since his last encounter with Lois Lane and that infernal Boy Scout, Superman. He should be dead, and there were many days when Lex wished he had perished under the rubble of that underground subway station hideout.

But he hadn't. A loyal underling, one he hadn't ever paid much attention to, had found him and rescued him from the stony tomb. With his body wracked and broken, Lex had spent many agonizing months just getting healed to the point where he could sit up and feed himself. It had been more than two years and Lex was reasonably self-sufficient now, but he was forever consigned to spend his waking hours in a wheelchair. His legs had been crushed beyond any hope of repair. He would never walk again.

Someone was going to pay for the pain he'd gone through and the pain he continued to live with, and it was time to put into motion the method of that payment.

Lex adjusted the blond wig and smoothed the fake moustache before his appointment arrived. It had been years since Lex Luthor had been in any front page stories or his image plastered across newspapers, but it didn't hurt to be a bit cautious. It was too early in the process to make a mistake now.

Just then there was a quiet knock on the door and a young woman poked her head through. "Mr. Thorul, your appointment is here."

Lex nodded. "Thank you. Send him in."

She pushed the door open and stepped aside to let a young man enter the office. He was moderately tall, around six foot or six one. He had dark hair that looked as if it hadn't seen a regular barber in a while. He was a handsome man, but currently presented a somewhat scruffy appearance. Lex had done the research, and this fellow would be perfect.

"Come, sit down, Mr. ... ?"

"Carstairs, Barry Carstairs, Mr. Thorul." The young man nodded meekly and sat down.

"I understand that you used to be a Superman impersonator."

"Yes, sir. I was the best, if I do say so myself."

"So, what happened, Barry?" Lex waved in his direction, indicating the young man's current appearance.

Barry frowned. "Things were great for that first year after Superman went public. I had more offers than I could handle. The money came flowing in. Everyone wanted Superman at their event, whether it was a big public gala or just a very special private affair. There was even talk of a feature motion picture. They couldn't be enough of me — er — him."

"But?"

"But after a while things began to cool down. Everyone was used to seeing the Man of Steel flying around. The offers tailed off. He just wasn't that special anymore."

Lex nodded in what he assumed looked like an understanding manner. "I see. The old familiarity thing again."

Barry shrugged. "I guess. The last Superman gig I did was over six months ago, and that was for a little girl's tenth birthday. I didn't have my old costume anymore, so I had to use a cheap Halloween style one. It was actually pretty embarrassing."

"I see. So, Barry, what are you doing now for employment?"

"Up until about two weeks ago I was employed at Fred's Garage. I'm pretty handy with tools, and he needed the extra help."

Lex folded his hands on the small desk he sat behind. "What happened two weeks ago?"

The young man shrugged again. "I don't really know. One day we're busy as all get out, the next Fred calls me in and says that he doesn't need me anymore and that I'm being let go."

"Ah, the continued unpredictability of business." Lex had to hide his smile behind his hand. "I suppose it's been pretty hard on your family."

"I have no close relatives. My parents both died years ago, and any other family is in California. I haven't had any contact with them for years."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Family can be important in times of struggle. What about a girlfriend?"

Barry's snort of laughter was hardly amusing. "No one for quite a while now."

"Really? I'd think a big, handsome lad like you would have to beat the girls off with a stick."

"That was true when things were going good. When I had the money and a little bit of celebrity I had all the women I could handle. But once a guy falls on a little tough luck, suddenly, as far as they're concerned, you've ceased to exist."

"I'm afraid I understand where you're coming from, Barry, only too well, but I think I have a proposition that will help us both out. You need a job, and I just happen to have a need for a Superman impersonator. But not just any stand-in; I need the best."

"That would be me." Lex could see a little arrogance slip back into Barry's demeanor. "So, what are we talking about here? I don't have a costume anymore."

"Not to worry. I'll provide the costume as well as professional hair and make-up people to get you back to the proper look." Lex saw that he had the young man hooked. "Now I can't provide you with a steady income, but what would you say to five thousand dollars for a couple of days' work?"

"I'd say, 'Where do I sign up?'" Suddenly Barry got a bit of a wary look on his face. "This doesn't involve anything illegal, does it? Even for that money I won't do anything crooked."

Lex chuckled. "No, nothing illegal. I just have a ... short film project in mind. One that needs to star the Man of Steel, and that's were you come in. Still interested?"

Barry nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah, yeah I am. The money will help pay a few bills until I can find another job." He rose and shook Lex's hand. "Thanks."

"You're welcome, Barry. Make sure you leave your contact information with my receptionist when you leave. We'll be in touch within a couple of days."

Once Barry closed the door behind him, Lex picked up the phone on the desk. He pushed a single button. When someone picked up on the other end, he didn't wait for a response. "It's time to make the crucial acquisition. Put the plan into motion."

Lex leaned back, a large smile growing on his face. He glanced down at the desktop as if looking for the humidifier that used to always grace his office desk. There wasn't one there. He really would have liked to smoke an expensive Cuban just then, but he wasn't quite back to that kind of reality. Still, he had a lot to look forward to. The fun was just about to start.

Lois woke up to the feeling that something was wrong. She reached over and felt the emptiness in the other side of the bed.

The sheets on Clark's side of their bed were cold. He hadn't come home at all last night. She frowned as she rolled over and sat up, knowing that she'd have to get going if she was going to make it to work on time. It didn't look like there was going to be any quick trip to the Planet via the Superman Express this morning.

You'd think that she'd be used to it by now. It's not like they were still newlyweds or anything. She couldn't begin to count the number of times that she'd woken up alone, but it still made her crabby. She missed the way he would wake her up.

Of course, even though she'd had to wake up alone many times with Superman having been needed in the middle of the night, it was unusual for her to have to go to bed alone and wake up alone. She wondered what could be keeping Clark so long.

She threw on her robe and quickly moved down the stairs to the living room. Grabbing the remote, she turned on the television and flipped to LNN news. She watched it for several minutes trying to find something that might be occupying Superman's time. She couldn't think of anything less than a major disaster that would keep Clark all night like this. There was nothing out of the ordinary. She was beginning to worry.

There still hadn't been any word on where Clark was an hour later when Lois arrived at the Planet. She quickly booted up her computer, hoping that maybe he had emailed her with some message telling her what he was up to, but her mailbox yielded only the typical clutter and spam that she usually had to deal with every morning. Her frown deepened and her anxiety level rose.

"Lois, where's Clark?"

Lois looked up from her screen to see her Editor-in-Chief standing next to her desk. Perry had a sour look on his face. Great, he'd probably just come back from fighting with the suits upstairs, and that always put him in a bad mood. What was she supposed to say?

"I ... I don't know, Chief."

His eyebrows rose. "You don't know? Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't you two living together?"

She rolled her eyes at Perry's sarcasm. "Yes, we're living together. And yes, we're still happily married." Her worried frown broke through. "It's just that Superman contacted Clark last night about some bank robbery or something. Clark went out to meet with him, but he hasn't come home yet. I've checked the newscasts, but haven't heard anything about what Superman might have been doing last night. There hasn't been a word on him."

Perry's brow furrowed in a concerned frown of his own. He reached down and gave Lois' shoulder a squeeze. "Well, I wouldn't get too worried just yet. Clark's a big boy and can take care of himself. There are any number of reasons why he'd be late coming back home." Perry plastered a fake smile on his face. "Why, I wouldn't be surprised if he came off that elevator anytime now with a big story that will scoop everyone."

Lois realized that her boss was just trying to make her feel better. "I guess you're right."

"Of course I am." He patted her shoulder. "Until he does, why don't you get together what you've got on that Melville Construction story you're working on and bring it into my office? Maybe a fresh perspective will help you find the angle you need."

"Sure." Lois knew that he was just trying to take her mind off Clark. There was nothing going on with the Melville story because there was nothing there. It was small time graft that wouldn't even rate more than a page three filler.

Lois spent the next three hours in meaningless tasks. Her "brainstorming" session with Perry had been exactly what she had assumed it was going to be — pointless. There just wasn't enough going on with it to make it anything more than a filler piece. Finally Perry told her to write it up and they'd find some place to put it in the Metro Section.

Lois had it finished and sent to Perry before lunch. She had

taken a walk during her lunch hour hoping the exercise would help her keep her mind off wondering where Clark was. Normally she would spend the time window shopping. Nothing could take her mind off her worry.

When she got back to the Planet she noticed a small package on her desk. A brief flare of hope surged through her. Maybe it was from Clark. When she picked it up it just confused her more. It was a small box, plainly wrapped, with no tag or card. The only way she knew that the package was meant for her was that her name was scrawled in pencil on the plain wrapping.

"Jimmy?" He came over to her. "Did you see who left this on my desk?"

Jimmy shrugged and shook his head. "No. I didn't see anyone."

Frowning, Lois tore off the wrapping. The box was as plain as the wrapping had been. She pulled the cover off the box, and a gasp escaped from her lips. Inside the box was a pair of glasses. The lenses had been smashed, but she recognized them anyway. They were Clark's glasses.

She fell into her chair and stared at the spectacles. The nagging worry that she'd been feeling all day blossomed into a full blown fear. A few tears began to spill from the corners of her eyes. Where was Clark? What had happened? Was he hurt? She wouldn't allow herself to think of the alternative. She chewed on her lower lip as she frantically tried to figure out what to do.

Jimmy stepped up behind her. "What'd you get, Lois?" She didn't answer, but he could see the tears starting to fall and the object in the small box that she held in her shaking hands.

"Omigod, are those ... Clark's?" She just nodded. "Chief!"

Jimmy's cry brought the esteemed editor out of his office. "What in Sam Hill is going on here?" He strode down the ramp toward them. "Jimmy, what are you hollerin' about?" He suddenly noticed the state Lois was in. "Lois? What is it? What do you have there?"

She turned her head to look at him, holding the small box out as she did so. "These are Clark's glasses."

Perry stared at the broken spectacles for a moment and then put his hand on Lois' shoulder. "Are you sure of that, honey? They could just look like Clark's."

"Then why send them to me ... like this?" She tried to sniff back some tears. "Someone is sending me a message."

"Are you sure, Lois? It could just be a prank."

Lois glared at Perry. "Clark has been gone since yesterday. He didn't come home last night, and I haven't heard from him. Nobody knew that except me." She set the box down on her desk. "I come back from lunch to find this box mysteriously sitting on my desk. There is no delivery boy waiting for a tip, no card, no note, nothing. Just the broken glasses of my husband. What am I supposed to think?"

Perry frowned. "Jimmy, call Inspector Henderson."

Jimmy was just about to pick up the phone on the next desk when a shout came from across the room. "Chief, there's a call for you on line one. The guy says it's important."

Muttering a few soft curses under his breath, Perry grabbed the phone Jimmy was standing by and punched the appropriate button. "White."

He didn't say anything. He just listened for a few seconds, his expression getting darker, and then he hung up. "That was a friend of mine over at LNN. He said they received a tape earlier that they are going to show in a couple of minutes. He wasn't sure what was on it, but the producers over there are pretty spooked. He says they're going to run it anyway." Perry stepped over to the large television screen that hung from the ceiling of the newsroom and turned it on. It was always tuned to LNN.

The screen came to life just in time for everyone to see a middle-aged man come into camera behind the normal anchorwoman and whisper something in her ear. She seemed

confused by what he said but simply nodded, got up, and left her desk. The man sat down in the chair and, after getting direction as to which camera to look at, stared straight ahead. His expression was grim.

"My name is Richard Daimler, and I'm a producer here at LNN. Approximately thirty minutes ago we came into possession of the tape which you are about to see. While we cannot vouch for its authenticity, we felt that the public had a right to see it, and decide for themselves. We have contacted the police, and immediately after airing this tape we will be co-operating with them in every way we can." He paused to take a deep breath, his expression getting grimmer. "I must warn everyone of the graphic nature of the contents of this tape and strongly advise the young and those with weak hearts to turn away."

Lois had a sick feeling in her stomach as the scene shifted from Daimler to a static-filled screen. The static stopped to reveal a scenario that instantly filled her with dread. A man in a wheelchair filled the screen, facing the camera. She recognized him immediately.

"Metropolis, I bid you greetings. I have been out of circulation for a while, so for those of you who don't remember me, allow me to reintroduce myself. My name is Lex Luthor."

"Doesn't that man ever stay dead?" Perry growled.

Lois could feel the bile rising in her throat. This couldn't be happening. Not now, not after all this time. Lex couldn't have come back into her life. It just wasn't possible. She glanced over her shoulder and caught sight of the broken glasses still sitting there. It felt like a huge hand was squeezing her heart. It couldn't be. Please, don't let Lex have Clark. The image on the screen continued talking.

"As you can see, I'm not quite the same man I used to be. I am now, literally, a broken man. The condition I find myself in is a direct result of my last encounter with two specific individuals. One was my own former fiancée, Lois Lane, and the other was that ever annoying do-gooder, Superman." His smile for the camera held no humor, no warmth. "Now, as we all know, I'm no saint. Never have been. But what kind of hero allows a man to be buried under a fall of brick and stone and then leaves him for dead? Nobody deserves that sort of fate, but that's what your precious Superman and Lois Lane did to me."

The camera panned back, revealing a scene out of one of Lois' nightmares. Her hands flew to her mouth as a fear-filled sob caught in her throat.

"No." It was all she could articulate as she fought to breathe.

Superman was on his knees, being held upright but some nondescript man that Lois had never scene before. Crisscrossing his chest were a pair of chains which appeared to be green. Lois could only think of one thing — kryptonite.

The hero seemed barely conscious. His eyes were closed and perspiration beaded up on his forehead. If she hadn't known what was actually affecting him, she'd have thought he was drugged. But she knew that wasn't the case. It was worse.

Luthor continued. "I'm sure all of you recognize my guest. Oh, and Lois—" he grinned evilly "—I hope you received that little package I sent." Her hands were clenched so hard that her knuckles were turning white. Lex pointed at the chains. "I know what many of you are thinking. How is our vaunted hero, Superman, being held by mere chains? The answer is quite simple. These particular chains are coated with kryptonite. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the substance, in its natural state it is a crystal form of Superman's old home planet. Somehow these crystals are radioactive. But don't fear for me and my assistant. Kryptonite has little or no effect on humans. Unfortunately the same can't be said for natives of the planet Krypton. If exposed long enough, the kryptonite can and will kill the Man of Steel."

By now, everyone in the newsroom was clustered around the

large television screen. There were muted whispers and mutterings of shock and disgust. Lois had one hand knotted into Perry's shirt sleeve. It was as if she needed his support to keep standing. Tears were rolling down her cheeks.

Lex wheeled himself over next to the slumping hero.

"Kryptonite has one other added benefit." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a slim, sharp letter opener. He used it to trace an angry line across Superman's cheek. A thin trail of blood seeped from the wound. "Long before Superman succumbs to the effects of the kryptonite, it renders him powerless. No more 'super' man. He's no more powerful than you or I. No more demigod flying above the clouds looking down on mere mortals like you and me."

Perry had placed his arm around Lois. Her legs were like rubber as she watched her most hated enemy toy with her helpless husband. She could barely see the screen through her tears, and all she could do was hang onto Perry and keep reciting no, no, no, over and over again. Her mind kept screaming at her to turn away. Not to watch what she knew was going to happen. But she couldn't turn away.

"Now, I thought about how this was all going to play out.

I've had years to think about how I was going to get my revenge. I considered the melodramatic. I could've erected my own gallows and enjoyed watching Superman swing from the end of a thick knotted rope. Or I could have brought back the French Revolution and had a guillotine built. It might have been fun seeing the Man of Steel's head rolling across the concrete floor." He paused and gave the camera a smile any predator would've been proud of. "Instead I decided on keeping it simple and foolproof."

Lex pulled a large caliber handgun from inside his jacket. Lois felt her breath leave her body. Her heart pounded hard against her breast. She thought she was going to have a heart attack — and part of her would have welcomed it.

"Vengeance is mine." Lex placed the pistol to Superman's temple.

A scream ripped through the stillness of the newsroom, but it wasn't enough to drown out the horrific boom of the handgun. Lois fell to her knees, still clutching Perry's shirt. Her throat felt inexplicably raw as fresh sobs wracked her body. Perry knelt to the floor and put his arms around her. He crushed her to his chest as her unquenchable tears soaked the front of his shirt. He held her until the hyperventilating caused by her crying finally brought about the blessed oblivion of unconsciousness.

Luthor wheeled himself into the small storeroom located in the far corner of his current hideout. The room was bare except for a lone prisoner chained against the far wall. Luthor approached, a wide smile upon his face.

"Well, Clark, old man, your execution is the hit of the airwaves. I dare say it's virtually the only thing that LNN has been running since the tape was delivered to them this afternoon. It's caused quite a stir among the populace. I think my reputation has received quite a boost."

Clark raised his head and tried to focus on his tormentor. "Why? Why kill that poor man instead of me?"

Lex chuckled. "Oh, don't be in such a hurry to die, Clark. I can call you Clark, can't I? I would think after all we've been through together that we'd be on a first name basis." Lex reached out and slapped Clark across the face as he looked like he was drifting off. "Don't pass out on me yet, hero. Today was just the beginning of a much bigger plan. Don't believe that my vengeance is going to be that easy on you ... or Lois."

Clark, with great effort, lifted his arms, allowing the kryptonite-coated chains to hang loosely from the cuffs at his wrists. "I don't think you'll have too much say in when I finally die."

Lex snorted in contempt. "Oh, don't wimp out on me now, *Superman*. I've had enough research done on the properties of kryptonite to have a pretty good idea of how long you'll be able to survive. I figure you'll last at least a couple of more days, which should fit into my plans nicely."

Clark shook his head slowly. "Again, why? Why drag it out?"

"Because this isn't just about you, Clarkie boy. Lois rejected me at the altar, and again, she escaped with you when the two of you left me for dead. I cannot let such actions go unpunished. She must suffer also." His smile grew wider and colder. "And she has started to. My sources at the Daily Planet have informed me that the indomitable Ms. Lois Lane fell to her knees and sobbed like a little girl after witnessing your execution."

Clark glared at Luthor. "She's my wife, what would you expect her to do?" The words were forced out from his clenched jaw.

Lex returned the glare. "Exactly that." He spun his chair and faced away from Clark. "You know, I think I'll let Lois stew for a couple of days. Let her really embrace her grief. Then I'll have her brought here. She'll find out that her beloved husband is still alive, which will give her a burst of hope. Then I'll crush that tiny spark by showing her how hopeless the situation is for you and her. Her despair will come crashing back once again."

Lex grabbed the wheels of his chair and savagely spun it back to face Clark. "Then I will kill her right in front of you."

His laughter echoed off the hard, bare walls as he turned once again and headed for the single door in the small room. Clark's head hung down as tears splashed to the floor.

Lois sat at her kitchen table in the dark. She hadn't bothered to turn on any lights when she'd gotten home from her most recent useless day at the Planet. The last two days had been pretty much the same. She'd sit at her desk for a while, staring at the blank screen. Then she'd answer whatever questions Henderson would have for her. She'd return to staring at her screen for a time more until she would have to get up and run to the restroom to throw up when the memories of Clark's murder became too intense to ignore any longer.

She would come out of the restroom only to be confronted by a worried Perry White. Not being able to deal with his pity, she would mumble that she wasn't feeling well and go home where she would spend the rest of the day either crying or sitting in the dark waiting for the crying to start again.

But it was time for the crying to stop. She couldn't afford to waste any more time wallowing in her grief. She couldn't deny the pain; she didn't want to. It would never go away; it would always be a part of her life going forward. A life that was now bereft of the best part of it. She would never forget Clark, would never stop loving him. His memory would stay with her until the end of her days.

But she needed to pull it together. Clark needed avenging, and for that to happen, Mad Dog Lane would need to come back. If she was going to make Luthor pay for the evil that he'd done to her, and to the world, she would need to focus on that task, and that task only.

She had spoken to Martha and Jonathan again yesterday, and they had all agreed that, for the time being, they should do nothing. The Kents would stay in Kansas for now. The problem was, the world had seen Superman being foully murdered by Lex Luthor, but only a very few people knew that Clark Kent had also lost his life that day. Officially, Clark was still only missing.

Henderson had given Lois the typical lip service about keeping a positive attitude and hoping that they would be able to find Clark unharmed. But given the circumstantial evidence — the fact that Lois had told everyone that Clark had gone out with Superman and the broken glasses she had received — she knew that Henderson assumed that Clark had been killed also.

But where was the body? Why hadn't Clark's body been found? Why was Lex keeping it? She would have thought that he'd want the extra notoriety from the public display of his handiwork. It was one thing for the people to be shocked and dismayed by a horrific scenario seen on television, but it would be quite another for him to be able to revel in watching the grieving throngs pass by the body at a public memorial.

He had something else up his sleeve, and knowing Lex the way she did, there was no doubt that it would involve her in some manner.

She got up off her chair and searched out her purse. Grabbing it from its resting spot on the table, she headed for the front door. She needed to see Henderson ... tonight.

The silent man pushed Lois ahead of him as they entered the abandoned warehouse down near Hobbs Bay. The place was old, and the area had been neglected for many years. She doubted that there were any actual legitimate businesses within a several block radius.

She had spent most of the morning walking around the downtown area near the Daily Planet until the stereotypical dark sedan had pulled up beside her and a gruff voice had ordered her to get in. She would have gotten in the car even if there hadn't been a gun gesturing her to do so. She had been waiting for them all morning. She had almost been ready to give up on them.

But just before noon they had come for her, and now, if her assumptions had been correct, she was where she wanted to be. She was at Lex Luthor's hideout.

She was ushered into a small room, probably some sort of storeroom. There was nothing currently in it except for a single substantial metal chair. The silent man indicated that she should sit down. She did.

She didn't fight the ropes that were tied around her waist, securing her to the chair, nor did she object to the zip ties used to secure her wrists to the unpadded arms. If Clark was ever going to have justice, she needed answers, and to get those answers she needed to see Luthor himself. It was still his game ... for now.

The silent man left the room. She sat there by herself for several minutes. She allowed her rage to focus her will. Her grief was pushed aside to allow her anger for the man she hated most in the world to prepare her for her confrontation. He would not find her a weepy, broken woman who had lost her world, even though that's what she had been for the last two days. She had to steel her resolve if she was to get justice for what had been done to her and the world and grant Clark his peace.

So it was with hate burning in her soul that Lois confronted Lex Luthor when he finally deigned to make his entrance.

The door was pushed open and Lex wheeled himself into the room. "Why, Lois, it's so nice to see you again. You're looking well. As well as can be expected, I guess. I've missed you."

"Give me a gun. I guarantee I won't miss you ... several times."

Lex chuckled. "Still the feisty one, I see. Is that any way to talk to your former fiancé?"

"Why can't you stay dead?"

With a violent shove against his hand rails, Lex rolled quickly up next to the chair Lois was sitting in. He leaned in close. His voice was a menacing whisper. "No, I'm not dead. I survived in spite of your and that muscle bound consort of yours' efforts."

"Our efforts? It was your doing that brought the roof of that old tunnel down on us."

"Yes," he hissed. "And you and the cape blithely sped away, leaving me to die."

"You were buried under tons of stone and concrete. There was no way you could have survived."

"Really? Well, it looks like you were wrong again, Lois." Lex

backed his chair a few feet away. “You could say that fortune smiled on me that day because, by chance, my head lay between a couple of larger stones which protected it from any direct impact. So when my loyal retainer showed up to pull me out, I was still alive. Though not without serious injury, as you see.” He waved at his chair.

Lois held onto her anger. She felt no pity for the man or his condition. This was the man who had destroyed her happiness. The only feelings she had for him were disgust and hatred. “You should have stayed dead. There is nothing left for you. Your empire is gone. The carefully crafted facade of respectability that you had constructed was destroyed, and everyone knows you for who you really are. All that power that was once at your fingertips is no more. There is no more reason for you to exist.”

A cold smile turned up the corners of his lips. “There is one reason, Lois. It was the one thing that was uppermost in my thoughts every day during my long and painful rehabilitation. It kept me fighting to stay alive. It kept me pushing until I was as well as I could be. It drove me; it became my whole purpose for being.” Lex’s eyes burned with an intensity that showed his fragile grip on sanity. “Do you know what that was, Lois?”

“I can guess.”

“Of course you can. It was my need for revenge that kept me going. The revenge that I was going to have on you and that muscle headed partner of yours.” His smile turned barracuda-like. “And now I am going to have it.” Lex leaned his head toward the door. “Could you please bring in our other guest?”

Lois gasped as the silent man dragged a limp form into the room and dumped him a few feet in front of her. Chains, which glowed a sickly green in color, were wrapped around his body.

“Clark!”

A part of her mind admonished her for crying out Clark’s name when he was dressed in the spandex suit. Another part told her that it didn’t matter since Lex had known Clark’s dual identity prior to the cave-in which they had both thought had finished Luthor once and for all. Neither of those small parts of her mind was paid any attention to. Lois’ foremost thoughts were for the obvious pain and suffering her husband was experiencing.

He was barely conscious. He didn’t have the strength to stand. He was on his knees, teetering on the edge of falling over. It was obvious from the tautness of his facial muscles that he was in a great deal of pain. Tears sprang to Lois’ eyes. His agony sliced through her like a cold knife blade.

She turned back toward Luthor. Her eyes blazed. If she’d been the one blessed with heat vision at that moment, the intensity of her gaze would have turned her tears to steam and reduced Luthor to a cinder in an instant. More’s the pity.

“I don’t understand.” Her words came out almost as a growl. “Why the fake production? Who was the poor fool you sacrificed in your twisted madness?”

Lex made a dismissive gesture with his hand. “He was a nobody, a former *celebrity* impersonator. But as to the why, I would think that would have been obvious, my dear. It was part of my revenge.”

“You needed revenge against a Superman impersonator?”

Luthor gave her the kind of look a teacher would give a particularly difficult student. “Now you’re just being contrary. But if you want me to explain it to you, I will.”

“Lois?”

The sound was so soft she nearly didn’t hear it. She quickly turned her head toward Clark. His breathing was labored, and the whites of his eyes were definitely turning green. Lois knew that he wouldn’t survive much longer under these conditions. Fresh tears began to fall.

“Lois, you have to get out of here.”

Luthor’s laughter cut through the emotion in the room like a winter’s blast. “I’m afraid it’s a little late for that.”

“Don’t worry, Clark, we’re going to get out of this.”

“Hah! Always the defiant one, aren’t you, Lois? If I may be so bold as to ask, just how do you plan on getting out?”

Lois gritted her teeth. “You first; why am I here?”

Lex’s grin sent a shiver up her spine. “Simple, my dear; it’s all part of the plan. In order for my revenge to be truly fulfilled I had to not only end your miserable lives, but punish each of you as well. What better way to punish a *loving* couple, than to force each of them to watch helplessly as the other perishes.”

“But Clark isn’t dead. I saw a fiction perpetrated in a video.”

“Ah, but you didn’t know that at the time, did you? I had my man there at the Daily Planet when you viewed the tape on LNN. He even took a home movie of your reaction for me to watch at my leisure. It was quite entertaining. I confess that I watch it before going to bed every night.”

“You sick, twisted ...”

“I am what you made me. Never forget that, Lois.”

“But your revenge has been blunted now that I know that it wasn’t Clark who was killed.”

“Is it? I think not. You’re not a fool, Lois. Look at him. Look at your *hero*. You know as well as I do that he can’t last much longer. Superman will be dead before the day is out, and so will your darling husband, Clark Kent.” Luthor spun his wheelchair around. “But I think he will live long enough to see his beloved die by my hand.”

Lois glared at her tormentor. “So what now, you’re going to shoot me in the head while tied to a chair?”

“Oh, nothing so easy.” Luthor actually licked his lips in anticipation. “You deserve an extra measure of punishment, my dear. I would have made you my wife, but you rejected me.” Lex held out his hand, and the silent man, who Lois hadn’t noticed come in, handed him a baseball bat. “I’m going to take extreme pleasure in beating you to death in front of that pathetic creature you married.” Lex began to roll toward Lois.

Lois began to laugh, which caused Lex to stop and stare at her as if she’d lost her mind. Shaking her head, Lois gradually regained control of herself.

“How can anyone so stupid ever have been able to gain the position and power that you held? You must have had some pretty competent lieutenants because you obviously don’t have the smarts to have done it yourself.”

Lex narrowed his eyes and glared at her. “What are you playing at, Lois?”

“Overconfident to the end, aren’t you Lex? Why do you think that Clark and I were always able to defeat you, even when you had all the cards stacked in your favor ... like now?” Luthor just frowned at her. “It’s your arrogance. You are so smug from your own arrogance that you can’t see the failings of your plans.”

Luthor’s predator smile returned. “Suppose you enlighten me as to the failings of my present plan ... before I beat you to death.”

Lois glanced over at Clark. He was watching her, a slight smile on his face. “See, Clark knows what I’m talking about.” She turned her attention back to Lex. “Weren’t you the least bit surprised at my reaction to seeing your man bring Clark into the room?”

Lex seemed confused. “What do you mean? You were obviously distraught over his suffering.”

“Yes, clearly, I was terribly distressed and upset to see him in such pain. But I wasn’t surprised to see him alive. I expected it. Why else do you think I allowed your man to take me so easily?”

“Sorry, Lois, I saw the tapes of your reaction. You thought that your husband had been killed.”

Lois shrugged. At least as well as she could, being tied to the chair. “I admit it took me a couple of days until I figured it out. I allowed my grief to shut down my brain and just let my loss control my emotional state. But I knew that I’d have to snap out

of it if I were to bring you to justice for what you'd done. It was then that I began to put it together."

"Oh, please continue. I'm riveted by your narrative."

Lois rolled her eyes. "First, why no body? Why hadn't you dumped the body someplace where it would be found and your victory over your arch-nemesis could be displayed for all to see? I could just imagine how much delight you'd get out of watching thousands of mourners filing by their fallen hero, a testament to your victory."

Lex nodded. "That would have been enjoyable, yes."

"But you couldn't risk a close examination of the body, could you?" Lois paused, watching Luthor as she did. He merely inclined his head, acknowledging her point. "But that wasn't the only thing. You're using kryptonite chains to hold Clark, but I seriously doubt that you'd be able to come up with two sets of such chains. Nor would you risk taking them off Clark, even for just the short time you needed for your little movie."

Lex snorted his disbelief. "Are you going to tell me that you knew the chains I used on what's-his-name were actually just painted green and not the real thing? Come on, Lois, you may be good, but you're not that good."

"Really," was her frosty reply. "Okay, I'll admit that I was too worried for Clark at first to pay any close attention to that. I assumed, like everyone else, that the chains were coated with kryptonite because they had rendered Superman powerless. But once I began to suspect something wasn't quite right with the whole scenario, I forced myself to watch the video again ... and again."

"I'll bet that was fun."

Lois ignored Lex's crack. "You forgot that I have had experience with kryptonite before. I've had the misfortune to have been exposed to it several times. I've seen it, I've handled it, and I know what it looks like. After reviewing your little video, those chains just looked wrong to me. That might not have been enough in itself to convince me of your hoax, but it was more ammunition for my suspicions. So I watched the video again."

"Bully for you."

"It was hard to watch your casual murder of an innocent actor over and over again, but the more I watched, the more I realized that the poor man didn't look like Clark usually does when exposed to kryptonite. He looked drugged. Taken individually, or if I hadn't been determined to bring you to justice, I might not have come to the conclusion that Clark was still alive."

Lex rolled up a little closer to Lois. "Well, congratulations, Lois, you uncovered my little charade. I guess you really are the best investigative reporter around. Unfortunately, this is going to be your last investigation. You're still here, alone, tied to a chair. Your beloved husband is still going to die, and I'm still going to beat you to death with this Louisville Slugger. So, I guess I still win."

A smile slowly spread across Lois' face. "Who said I came alone?"

Lex slammed the bat against the side of his chair. "What in the devil's name are you playing at now, Lane!"

"Once again you're so in love with your imagined brilliance that it doesn't occur to you that things might not just follow according to your plan."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, I expected you to kidnap me. In fact, I nearly walked the heels off my shoes waiting for you to make your move. But I never planned to step meekly into your clutches. I wasn't the distraught, grieving zombie you expected me to be. Last night I paid a visit to our esteemed Metropolis Police Department and had an interesting conversation with Inspector Henderson. We decided that it might be a good idea if I wore a tracer — a small, inconspicuous tracking device taped to the

small of my back that will lead Metropolis' finest right to your doorstep. You were so confident in your own expectations that it never even occurred to you to have me searched when I arrived. After all, I would just be the grieving widow, not yet recovered from my horrific loss."

Lex screamed incoherently in his rage as he propelled himself toward Lois. "I'll kill you!"

He viciously swung the bat at Lois' head. She leaned away as best she could while still being tied to the heavy metal chair. The bat missed her skull but managed to just clip the end of her nose. Lois yelped in pain as she felt the cartilage snap. Blood began to trickle from her nose.

"Put the bat down, Lex." Henderson stepped into the room.

An animalistic growl escaped from Luthor's lips as he hurled the bat toward the Inspector. Henderson flung his arm up to protect himself. The bat rebounded off his forearm, causing him to have to step back.

"I will have my vengeance!" Lex pulled a gun from his pocket and aimed it at Lois.

"Lex, no!" Clark's anguished cry was ripped from his throat.

A loud boom reverberated through the small room. Lex was thrown from his chair. Lois' shocked gaze shifted from Lex's prone form to that of Inspector Henderson striding over toward the body. A curl of smoke still drifted from the barrel of his gun.

Henderson reached down and felt Luthor's neck for a pulse.

"Is he dead?" Henderson nodded. Lois frowned. "Maybe he'll stay dead this time."

Lois fingered the large white Band-Aid on her nose as she looked at herself in the mirror. The door to the bathroom was open. "Clark, will you still love me when I look like the Wicked Witch of the West with my bent and crooked nose?"

Clark entered the room from the adjoining bedroom. He came up behind her, placed his arms around her shoulders, and laid his chin on the top of her head. He looked at her reflection. "Lo-is, the doctor said it was a clean break and should heal straight without any noticeable bump."

She ignored him. "Maybe I should sue Henderson."

"Henderson?"

She turned in his arms and looked up at him. "It's his fault for being late."

"It wasn't his fault that Luthor's man resisted so forcefully that it took a few minutes for them to subdue him." Clark shrugged. "There were a lot of small rooms he had to check out before he found the right one."

Lois frowned. "Why are you defending him? Any later and one or both of us might have died in that dismal place."

"But we didn't. We're both safe and sound at home, in each other's arms." He gave her a squeeze for emphasis. "Only Lex died."

Her look was pensive. "Yeah. Do you think we can count on him staying dead this time?"

He placed a quick kiss on her inviting lips. "Well, we saw the coroner take away the body, and by now they will have performed an autopsy. I don't think Luthor will be coming back this time."

"Promise?"

"Cross my heart and hope to ..."

She placed her finger over his lips. "Don't say it!" She crushed her lips to his in order to ensure his silence. He lifted Lois up and held her close to his chest as he carried her out of the bathroom and into the bedroom. With a smile that bespoke his love for her, he deposited her onto the bed. Her answering smile mirrored his.

The best friends, partners, and lovers had been through a terrible ordeal over that last few days, and they knew that they would have to take some time to talk it out. Their anguish and the

fears they experienced would have to be brought to light before they could truly heal and eventually put the trauma behind them.

But not tonight. Tonight no words would be spoken. There would be no need. The only communication necessary would be expressed through their eyes ... and their love.

Fin.

THE END