

THE METROPOLITAN MAN

BY

ALEXANDER WALES

Find the original text at:

<http://fanfiction.net/s/10360716/1/The-Metropolitan-Man>

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How to generate and print this PDF yourself

I can't resist showing you how to create the PDF for *The Metropolitan Man* yourself. The following two pages show the code that produced this PDF¹. By running it in your terminal, the code will download the *The Metropolitan Man* from `fanfiction.net` and typeset it into a PDF with LaTeX (a typesetting program common in academia). I tried to use only common programs like `curl`, `sed`, and `python3`, and if you're not familiar with `pandoc` (an excellent document conversion tool), I hope this project will show you how easy and powerful it is.

The code lives at this GitHub repository:

<https://github.com/justinpearson/The-Metropolitan-Man-Book>

Armed with the PDF and some cover art, you can then order a physical copy to be printed by an online book-printer like <http://lulu.com>.

I hope you can tweak this code and use it to download, typeset, and print your own books!

— Justin Pearson, Apr 2019

¹Actually the code to produce this PDF is slightly more complicated because it fixes some minor typesetting bugs in hyphenation and quotation marks.

```

#!/bin/bash
#
# build.sh

# This bash script downloads The Metropolitan Man from fanfiction.net
# and typesets it to PDF. Run it by typing "./build.sh" at your terminal.
# It uses these programs:
#
# curl: download the raw HTML from fanfiction.net.
# prune_html.py: a python3 program that parses the HTML with BeautifulSoup.
# pandoc: convert from html to tex.
#
#     --top-level-division: converts <h1> HTML tags
#     to \chapter latex commands.
#
#     --smart: use smart-quotes ‘‘like this.’’
#
#     Also, re-pandoc it to get smart-quotes everywhere,
#     fixing a parsing bug where <em> tags in quotes cause
#     pandoc to not smart-quote the quotes.
#
# pdflatex: convert the .tex file to a PDF using the TeX document-
#     typesetting program created by Donald Knuth.
#
#     You have to run it twice: once to gather page information
#     for the table of contents, and again to build the final
#     doc with a correct table of contents.

function chapter() {
    local i=$1
    curl --silent \
        "https://www.fanfiction.net/s/10360716/${i}/The-Metropolitan-Man" \
    | python3 prune_html.py \
    | pandoc -f html -t latex --top-level-division=chapter --smart \
    | pandoc -f latex -t latex --top-level-division=chapter --smart
}

echo "Starting to download The Metropolitan Man from fanfiction.net..."
for i in {1..13} ; do
    echo "Downloading and processing Chapter ${i}..."
    chapter $i > "files/${i}.tex"
done
cat header.tex 'ls -tr files/*.tex' footer.tex > mm.tex

echo "Building final PDF..."
pdflatex -interaction=batchmode mm.tex
pdflatex -interaction=batchmode mm.tex

echo "Done. Final PDF: mm.pdf."
ls -l mm.pdf

```

The shell script on the previous page uses the following Python script to parse the HTML from fanfiction.net. This script uses the BeautifulSoup package to select both the chapter title and the HTML `<div>` tag containing the story. It prepends the chapter title to the story's `<div>` as an `<h1>` header tag, because pandoc — used later in the pipeline — converts header tags to \LaTeX chapters. The script reads from stdin and prints the pruned HTML to stdout, making this script suitable for use in Unix pipelines.

```
#!/usr/bin/env python3
#
# prune_html.py

import sys, bs4, re

soup = bs4.BeautifulSoup(sys.stdin.read(), features='html.parser')
story = soup.find(id='storytext')
story.attrs = None
chapter_name = re.search(
    r'Chapter \d+: (.*)', a superman fanfic',
    soup.title.text
).group(1)

h = soup.new_tag('h1')
h.string = chapter_name
story.insert(0, h)

print(story)
```


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Chapter 1

Literally Incredible

Author's Note: This story is rated M for adult language and themes, including discussion of sexual violence.

Lex Luthor had been lounging in the Skylight Club when he'd first heard of Superman.

"He's a fellow that flies through the sky!" declared one of the patrons, whose name Lex couldn't recall, a good sign that the man was someone unimportant.

"Impossible," said Lex with a mild tone that nevertheless carried across the room. The conversation at the table stopped, and Lex unfolded himself from his customary chair and walked over to join the three men, holding a martini in one hand. Lex wore a suit, one of his more casual ones that had only cost what a dockworker made in a month. His head was completely free of hair, save for his thick, expressive eyebrows. He was a dashing figure, he knew, muscular and well-proportioned, the result of the delicate care he gave to his body. The man who had been speaking, the one who had said that a man flew through the sky,

was wearing a charcoal grey suit that was three months out of fashion.

“Alexander Luthor,” he said, holding out his hand. “But everyone calls me Lex. Now, tell me about this flying man, and I’ll see what to think of the matter.”

“Dimitri Vladkov,” said the man. He seemed shaken, but it was difficult to tell whether that was from the personal attention of Lex Luthor or from whatever delusions he was apparently suffering. “There was this car crash down near 1st Ave and 30th Street, you could see it comin’, but all of a sudden this guy swoops down from the sky. He was wearing a funny costume, blue tights and a red cape, with a big ‘S’ on his chest, and he stops these two cars from hittin’ each other, moving fast as lightnin’.”

“I see,” said Lex with an arched eyebrow. “And how did he fly? Did he flap his wings, like a bird? Did he use engines, like a plane?”

“Well, I didn’t see him come down Mr. Luthor, but I saw when he left, and he just stuck his hands up in the air and lifted off, like he was being pulled up by strings.” He looked at Lex’s face. “Only there weren’t no strings, not that I could see, and I looked for ‘em.”

“And when he stopped this car crash from happening,” said Lex in a calm and steady voice, “He did so with only his hands? How would he even have known that there was going to be a car crash?”

“I don’t know how he knew it was gonna happen,” said Dimitri. “But he landed right between ‘em and put out his hands, like he wasn’t afraid of gettin’ squished, and sure enough he touched ‘em like they were barely there, slowed ‘em right down, an put a dent in each of ‘em.”

“So not only can this man fly, he has incredible speed and

strength as well, if what you're saying is true?" asked Lex. His smile was so sharp it could have cut glass.

"Well, yeah Mr. Luthor," said Dimitri. "He didn't say nothin' afterwards, just looked to make sure that the drivers were alright and then flew away, fast as a racehorse but straight up into the sky. We had all sorts of questions, but he didn't answer none of 'em."

"Thank you," said Lex. He signaled for the barman to get Dimitri a drink, then went back to sit in his customary chair and think.

Heavier than air flight had been given its first practical demonstration almost two decades ago, but to do it without the assistance of a machine was physically impossible. It was highly probable that Dimitri Vladkov had hallucinated, or that he was simply lying for attention. Lex also entertained the notion that the trick of flight had been accomplished by smoke and mirrors, and that Dimitri had merely been fooled, but he couldn't see what the point of that would be.

Lex frowned, and returned to other thoughts. Yet even as he tried to decide what to do about Nikola Tesla, who was staying in the Hotel Metropolis on LexCorp's dime, his thoughts returned to the improbable story about a man who could fly. With a twitch of his fingers, he signaled for Mercy Graves, his indispensable secretary and the only woman allowed in the Skylight Club before the sun went down.

"A pencil and paper," said Lex. Mercy nodded, and from a large purse she kept at her side produced both for him, nearly before he had asked for them. He'd won Mercy's service in a poker game three years before, and often wondered how he had managed without her.

It was a simple physics problem, with a high number of variables involved, but Lex was nothing if not quick to attack a

problem. He had always liked numbers. After a few minutes of working at it, he had an upper and lower bound estimate on the amount of force that would be required to stop two cars from hitting each other, and another estimate for what it would take to raise a man into the air “as fast as a racehorse”. He frowned at the answers.

“Mercy darling, there was very nearly a car accident near 1st Avenue and 30th Street. Be a dear and see if you can’t find me some eyewitnesses to speak with.” He knew it was foolish, but if money and power didn’t allow you to chase down the things that piqued your curiosity, Lex didn’t know what they were good for.

Three hours later, Lex stood at the intersection himself, looking around. Mercy had gotten corroboration from eight witnesses, which only raised further questions. Talking to more people would be useless, especially since their stories had begun to contradict one another fairly quickly. Lex took this as evidence that this wasn’t some elaborate ruse, or at least that if it was a ruse it had been constructed by someone sufficiently intelligent. Eyewitness accounts were notoriously unreliable, but most people didn’t know this, and so someone running a confidence scheme of some sort would likely have had the confederates agree on a story. Lex looked down at the street, which showed some patches of rubber where the cars had skidded, then up at the sky. It might have been possible to do it with ropes and wires, though nearly impossible to hide.

There was a type of elastic rope known as a bungee, and if you could time it absolutely perfectly, you might be able to drop down and appear right between two cars, touching the ground just as you reached zero velocity. From there, you could use a harness and carabiners to clip on to something while everyone was distracted by an elaborate costume. That would make “fly-

ing” as simple as unclipping again and allowing the elastic to propel you skywards. It would be delicate work, and incredibly dangerous, but Lex had seen enough Charlie Chaplin films to know that sometimes people did delicate and dangerous things simply for the benefit of an audience and a small amount of money. That left the question of hiding the ropes themselves, which would be no easy task, even if the ropes were quite small, and you would also need a large number of people to be complicit, which would further complicate things, and all to accomplish what? It reminded Lex of a magic trick, and Lex hated magic tricks, at least until he figured out how they were done. After ten minutes of looking around, Lex grit his teeth. Mercy, standing just behind him, politely coughed.

“You’re right,” said Lex. “Enough time wasted on this distraction.” He forced a smile. “Put out the proper feelers. If someone tries this stunt again, I want to know about it.”

“He came outta nowhere,” said Little Tony.

Lex gave the man a sympathetic nod. “Tell me about him.”

“We was robbin’ the jewelry store,” said Little Tony. “An he came outta nowhere, left the door spinnin’ behind him.” Little Tony was a giant of a man, ironically named by his fellow thugs who considered that the height of wit.

Lex Luthor had gone legitimate five years ago. Oh, he hired goons from time to time for various bits of dirty work and still maintained contacts in the criminal underworld, as well as receiving cash into a slush fund from enterprises that he’d set in motion long ago — whorehouses, fighting rings, smuggling operations, and things of that nature — but the fund was never touched by him, and existed only in case there was an emergency. But for the most part, the crimes that Lex Luthor was

guilty of were white collar crimes, the kind that it would take a forensic accountant or highly trained lawyer to unravel, and even those he didn't do too often. Lex didn't see the need to run underground gambling dens when he could get a special piece of legislation passed that would allow an exclusive permit for a casino on the outskirts of Metropolis. There was no need to be a criminal when you could get the law to work for you.

Little Tony worked for Willie Calhoun, one of the largest crime bosses in Metropolis and a former mentor to Lex Luthor. Lex and Willie had parted ways amicably around the time that Lex was picking up his first doctorate, but they'd always kept in touch, and occasionally they would call in favors. Lex was talking to Little Tony in a small room lit by a bare bulb as the result of one of these favors, as well as a promise to pay for Little Tony's legal expenses. The large man was currently out on bail.

"Leroy spun around and shot at him," said Little Tony. "But the guy moved as fast as lightning, and had his hand around tha barrel of tha shotgun before it even went off."

"Was there a thunderclap?" asked Lex.

Little Tony scratched his head.

"Was there a loud sound that accompanied his movements?" Lex asked. He was out of practice in dealing with people like Little Tony. That had once been his whole life.

"Nah," said Little Tony. "Just like a little breeze, you know?" Not nearly as fast as lightning then, just a turn of phrase that people seemed to like using.

"Leroy missed then?" asked Lex.

"No," said Little Tony, shaking his head. "Hit him square inna chest with the full load."

Lex frowned.

"I'm tellin' a truth," said Little Tony. "Buckshot bounced offa him like it were nothin'."

“Did it tear the costume?” asked Lex.

“The suit?” asked Little Tony. Lex nodded. “Yeah, tore it right up, ripped it good. How’d you know?” Lex hadn’t known, he’d just been asking, but it wouldn’t do to tell Little Tony that.

“Continue on,” said Lex.

“Well, this guy takes Leroy’s shotgun right outta his hands, bends it in two, and drops it to the floor. Guy just got shot in the chest an acts like he didn’t even notice. He looks at me and says that we’re under arrest, an’ I tell him he ain’t no cop, an’ he says somethin’ about a citizen’s arrest. An’ as he’s goin’ on ’bout how he’s got a legal power or whatever, I rush him. That weren’t too smart, because before I know it I’m on my back.” Little Tony rubbed the back of his head and let out a sigh.

“Could you see him move?” asked Lex. “When he fought back?”

“Sure,” said Little Tony. “An’ he didn’t hurt me none. It was like I was a little kid to him. All of a sudden I was flipped around and laid out on the ground, gentle like he was worried about hurtin’ me. Then we just waited for the police to come, since Leroy and I didn’t wanna try our luck again. This guy, he gives the police a salute, didn’t talk about nothin’ but the robbery even though they had all sorts of questions for him, and then flew off.”

Lex frowned. “One final question. How did he know about the robbery?”

“He musta seen us go in,” said Little Tony, scratching his head.

“Do you know how rare crime is in Metropolis, all things considered? The idea that he would just happen to be in the neighborhood and spot you go into the jewelry store is — well, not inconceivable, but significantly unlikely enough that I’m not willing to credit it as plausible.” Especially not given the other reports that were coming in. Lex stood up from the table. “Thank

you for your time. A lawyer will be in touch.”

Willie Calhoun was waiting outside the room. “If it isn’t my favorite egghead,” he said with a smile. Willie was in his late fifties now, and had grown fat and soft. He was no longer the terrifyingly muscular man that had trained Lex to fight, cheat, and steal.

“Willie,” said Lex. They spoke as equals now, which both considered a mark of respect for the other.

“What are we dealing with here?” Willie asked. “Some guy shows up in tights and starts hassling my boys?”

“This is bigger than you,” said Lex. “Bigger than Metropolis even. Lay low for the time being. Call off any jobs you have planned.”

“I’ve got mouths to feed,” said Willie. “I can’t just slam on the brakes.”

“He’s stronger and faster than anything the world has seen before,” said Lex. “He can fly. And unless you’ve been unusually sloppy, he has some way to learn about crimes as they’re happening. Stop everything until you know more. I’ve tracked five separate instances today, and you can be damned sure there will be more.”

“You’re with us on this one?” asked Willie. “We need your brains.”

“No,” said Lex. “Like I said, this is big. Bigger than the city. Maybe the biggest thing that’s ever happened in the history of the human race. I may call in a few favors trying to get a handle on it, but rest assured even if I’m not with you, we’re working towards the same goal for the time being.”

The interview came out the next week.

“It makes no sense,” said Lex Luthor, setting down the paper.

“Why not?” asked Mercy from her desk.

Lex pointed directly at the offending line. ““Superman told me that he was an alien from the planet Krypton, the last of his kind.”” read Lex. “He’s an alien, or so he claims, yet he looks just like a human.” Lex lifted the paper to show to Mercy. On the front of The Daily Planet was a picture, with Superman standing right next to Lois Lane. The headline read “Exclusive Interview With The Man of Steel”.

“Now then,” said Lex, “I will admit that a degree of convergence is implied by Darwin’s theory of evolution, but not to such an extent. These features, a strong jaw and brown hair, blue eyes and his ridiculous musculature, well, I can accept that the marsupials of Australia bear more than a passing resemblance to the more traditional mammals of North America despite being separated by millions of years, but this beggars belief. And why does he even need legs if he can fly? What evolutionary reason would there even be for that? And not only does he look human, but he looks like an attractive human at that!”

“Do you think he’s lying?” asked Mercy. Boredom was apparent in her voice. She was possessed of a disinterested character, one that Lex found quite pleasing. He never had to worry about what Mercy thought, and never had to engage her in unwanted conversation. She was there for him to bounce his thoughts off of, and she knew it, which was what made the whole arrangement work. Before she’d come under his employ, Lex had muttered to himself, which didn’t feel nearly so good as speaking aloud to someone. It helped that Mercy was one of the few people that Lex could treat as trusted.

“I don’t know,” Lex answered. “I need more data. Certainly there are things he says that are inconsistent with reality as I knew it, yet if you had asked me a year ago whether I would see a man like Superman who can bend steel with his hands

and fly through the air, I would have been tempted to fire you for expressing such sheer stupidity. Obviously something that I thought was true about the universe is not.” He looked back down at the newspaper.

“And here!” he practically shouted, pointing at another offending sentence. “Here he claims that he can hear a gunshot from across the city. It’s ludicrous, sound doesn’t travel that far, and even if his ears were as sensitive as his muscles are powerful, a gunshot would fade in with the background noise. He’s not only claiming that he can hear things from two dozen miles away, but that he can further distinguish those sounds from all the other sounds happening in the city at any given moment. And yet how else can we explain what’s been observed? He really does dart across the city at just below the speed of sound, flying through the air at these incredible velocities, going right where he thinks he’s needed. And it’s not just that he can hear things he shouldn’t be able to, it says here that he can see through walls and watch for criminal activities from miles away. It should be literally incredible — not worthy of credit. And yet based on what we can observe of him, he seems to be telling the truth, at least about his abilities if not his origin.” He turned to look at Mercy. “How do you feel about him?” asked Lex.

“Feel, sir?” asked Mercy, stirring slightly in her seat but by no means looking uncomfortable. Lex had never seen Mercy look uncomfortable.

“If he’s telling the truth, he can hear everything that we’re saying right now. He can watch us as we speak. When you change your clothes or take a bath, he can look in on you.” Mercy was nearly as beautiful as she was competent, though she kept up a rather severe look most of the time, with her hair tied back in a neat bun and her skirts with perfect pleats that fell well below the knee.

“He’s doing good,” said Mercy. She always gave her honest opinion when he asked it of her, without hesitation, which was another reason she was so valuable to him. “I imagine that he’s too much of a hero to watch me.”

“He’s a hero,” said Lex. “For now.” He looked down at a pad of paper, where he’d been making revisions to his estimates. “I’ve run the numbers. Even using the lower bounds for his strength and speed, if he ever decided that he wasn’t a hero anymore, he could demolish this city in the space of three hours, down to the last man, woman and child. If we’re just talking about the central business district, he could do it in three minutes. He—” Lex stopped. “He can hear everything that we say. He can watch us. He can read the files that are sitting in my drawers. Before anything else, I think it’s time to clean house.”

Chapter 2

Dissemination of Information

Lois Lane was undeniably at the top of her game.

There had been grumbling from some of the other reporters that it had been dumb luck, but obviously Superman had chosen her for a reason, and obviously that reason had been her reporting. That's what she kept telling herself, anyway. Lois worked twice as hard as any other reporter at *The Daily Planet*, and put out three times as many stories. She'd started there at the age of sixteen, after she'd sent in an anonymous letter to the editor that had so impressed Perry White that he'd put out an advert asking for her to identify herself. From there it had been a quick climb to the top of the heap, with no real challengers until Clark Kent had come along.

"Listen to this one," Lois said to him. "'Superman is not Christ Reborn but the Herald of the Apocalypse, a False Prophet that Presages the End Times'." She set down the paper with a laugh and looked at Clark, who was hammering away at his typewriter. "Where on earth do people come up with this stuff?"

Clark paused and looked at her through his thick glasses,

apparently not seeing the humor. “It’s from the book of Revelation,” he said. “‘And he doeth great wonders, so that he maketh fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men, And deceiveth them that dwell on the earth by the means of those miracles which he had power to do in the sight of the beast.’ They’re thinking that Superman is capable of these wonders and must be an agent of the Antichrist. Some others are arguing that he’s the reincarnation of Christ.”

Lois laughed, and Clark frowned, just as she knew he would.

“It’s not right to make fun of people’s legitimately held beliefs,” said Clark. Lois was a Roman Catholic, in that she attended mass twice a year on Christmas and Easter. Clark was a Lutheran and a bit more serious about his faith. She enjoyed needling him about it, more to annoy him than because she had any strong theological opinions. More often than not, Clark would bring forth some bit of folksy wisdom from his father — his “pa”. By all rights Clark should have been chewed up and spit out by Metropolis two weeks after he’d arrived, but he’d clung on for a solid five months. Still, Lois didn’t think he’d last too much longer. He didn’t have that core of steel a reporter needed in the big city.

“Do you know how much ad space costs in the paper right now?” asked Lois. “People know that Superman reads *The Daily Planet*, and that’s their only way of communicating with him short of calling out for him and hoping that he stops by, which we know doesn’t work and probably just pisses him off.”

“Superman doesn’t get upset,” said Clark with a sigh.

“Maybe he does, maybe he doesn’t,” said Lois. “He doesn’t show it, sure, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t feel it. You think that he’s just got a heart of stone when he interrupts a rape in progress?” Clark flinched at that. “I met the man, and talked with him more than anyone else since he got here, and I don’t

buy it. He may not be human, but he still feels. Anyway, my point is that the paper is the only way that they have any hope of getting across a message, and so ad prices have skyrocketed since the interview came out. Don't you have any interest in the kinds of crazy crap that people are putting in our pages? It's all the more crazy knowing that they're paying top dollar for it." She looked down at the paper. "This ad only makes sense to people who already buy into what it's selling, so what's the point of it?"

"I don't know," said Clark.

"You okay Smallville?" asked Lois. That was the name of the town that Clark was from, no joke. When Lois had found out she'd laughed for five solid minutes. She'd looked it up on a map later, and hadn't been surprised to see that it was almost precisely in the middle of nowhere. "Usually you at least pretend to be enchanted by my wit."

"I've got a lot on my mind, sorry," said Clark. He looked genuinely apologetic, and turned to engage her in proper conversation. "Did you know Superman is being sued?"

"Had to happen eventually," said Lois. "No surprise it's sooner rather than later. What's the complaint?"

"One of the alleged perpetrators of a jewelry store robbery is claiming that Superman broke his wrist," said Clark.

"Obvious bullshit or legitimate claim?" asked Lois. "That'll make the difference between the front page and the back page."

"It's obviously untrue," said Clark. He didn't swear, which Lois found unaccountably annoying, like many things about him. "Superman will still have to go to court to have his say though."

"If he wants to get involved in the police business, he'll need to get used to courtroom appearances," said Lois. "God those are boring. It's too bad Superman sells. I don't look forward to being asked to cover those."

“Me either,” said Clark. He looked uncharacteristically glum. “Perry wants to see you, by the way.”

“You couldn’t have mentioned that twenty minutes ago?” asked Lois. She walked off to their editor’s office without waiting for an answer. Clark Kent was notoriously unreliable, and if it hadn’t been for his uncanny ability to get stories, Lois was certain that he would have been sacked a few times over. The newspaper was supposed to be a meritocracy, and Clark seemed to skate by on something like luck.

“I’ve got a story for you,” Perry White said with a grimace. He was a thick man, with white at his temples and an invariably neat crew cut. Lois could usually tell what kind of day it had been by how far down Perry had unbuttoned his shirt. Today was a two-button day.

“That bad?” she asked.

“A special request from upstairs,” said Perry. “There’s a man by the name of Lex Luthor that very much wants you to write a story about the orphanage he’s building in Suicide Slums.”

“Me specifically?” she asked.

“In person,” replied Perry with a nod.

“I could do it over the phone with no problem,” said Lois. “So my guess is that this Luthor character has some ulterior motive?”

“One might be tempted to assume that,” said Perry. “But this is an order from high above, and so I want you to play it straight. You’re going to his house to get an interview about the orphanage. Don’t assume anything more. If something else comes up, play it by ear, but he’s got the attention of the boss and that means he’s probably a bad man to piss off.”

“I’ll be on my best behavior,” said Lois as she rolled her eyes. “Scout’s honor.”

Perry gave her a warning look, but Lois merely smiled. She’d known Perry for a full decade now, and could read him better

than anyone else. He was just as annoyed with the request as she was. She went off to do some prep work for the interview. Orphanages were soft news, the kind you kept in your back pocket to fill in some space on a slow news day. Lois could only hope that whatever Luthor was really after would make for a good article.

Lex Luthor had become a different man. The key to maintaining a long-term deception was to find a lie as close as possible to the truth, so that it would be more difficult to get caught out. There were perfectly benevolent reasons for a multimillionaire to seek out every scrap of information he could get about Superman. He could only hope that the gathering of information wouldn't attract much notice from Superman, though he could hardly be the only one trying to get answers. So far he'd done nothing illegal, simply paid people for their accounts of meeting with Superman. The most important witness was still ahead.

"Welcome, Miss Lane," said Lex with a pleasant, practiced smile. He led her into the smoking room of his mansion, walking with a light and graceful step. Lois wore a blue skirt and a white blouse, showing some of her figure. She was pretty enough, but Lex had other concerns.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Luthor," said Lois.

"My father was Mr. Luthor," said Lex with a smile. "You can call me Lex."

"I'm sure you're a busy man, so I'll try to keep this brief," said Lois. "I just need a few quotes for the newspaper about the orphanage you're building in, ah, Southside."

"Suicide Slums," said Lex. "No need to stand on formality, I grew up there. Southside is what the city planners called it. It's

how the area is talked about by the politicians. But to those who live there, it's always called Suicide Slums."

"You grew up there?" asked Lois with a raised eyebrow. He watched her take a quick glance around the smoking room. It was about as far away from Suicide Slums as you could get.

"I did," said Lex. "If you're thinking that I'm building an orphanage because I was an orphan myself, I can assure you that wasn't the case. My mother and father were poor, but they were at least present. The orphanage is for those children who aren't quite so fortunate. My adolescence was decidedly unfortunate, and it was only through sheer luck that I was able to get out."

"Luck," said Lois Lane. "I did some research Mr. Luthor. You have three PhDs and run the largest private corporation in Metropolis. There are half a hundred patents to your name, and you're the discoverer of something called Luthorian bonding that I couldn't make heads or tails of."

"It allows for a more efficient form of industrial lubrication," said Lex.

"What I'm saying is that your success seems to go a bit beyond luck." She stuck the end of her pencil in her mouth and bit it. "Yet prior to a week ago, you stayed in the shadows. On paper, LexCorp is enormous, but I'd wager that most people in Metropolis have never heard of it, even if they work for one of its subsidiaries. So far as I can tell, *The Daily Planet* hasn't filed a single story about you. And now here you are, stepping out from behind the curtain to set up an orphanage in Suicide Slums — one of a few grand charitable gestures you've been making. I have to wonder why."

"I don't suppose that a person ever really wakes up one day and decides to be a better person," said Lex with a laugh. "That certainly wasn't the case for me. No, it was the influence of a man that I believe you're well familiar with. Superman."

"You know Superman?" asked Lois. He could hear the skepticism in her voice.

"No, of course not," said Lex. "I merely said that I was influenced by him. There's something quite heroic about seeing an alien with such marvelous powers using them exclusively for the greater good. In fact, I had a few questions that I'd like to ask you about him, if you don't mind."

Lois raised an eyebrow. "So that's your game," she said. She sat back in her chair and smiled. "I should let you know that as a matter of journalistic ethics I don't divulge information about the people that I interview. For high profile subjects who aren't the subject of controversy, I let them look over what I've written in case I've gotten something wrong or let slip something that wasn't supposed to be on the record. Superman is about as high profile as it gets. I suspect you know all that, and I'm guessing that's why you asked me here under false pretenses, thinking you could convince me otherwise. I should also let you know that as a matter of personal taste, I hate deception."

"It's only a minor deception," said Lex with a friendly smile. "I really am building an orphanage in Suicide Slums, and I really do think that there's a story in it. I have my own burning curiosities about Superman, and would like more information than can be found in the paper, but strictly speaking I haven't lied to you. Building an orphanage to get a chance to talk with you is hardly the worst thing in the world."

"All the same, I see no reason to continue this line of conversation," said Lois. "A journalist is only as good as their reputation, even without the watchful eyes of the big guy." She looked towards the ceiling, where Lex could easily imagine Superman was looking down on them.

"I'm not asking for you to reveal any implicit or explicit secrets that Superman might have shared with you. Nothing that

was off the record.” Lex waved his hand. “All I want are the small details that you might not have considered interesting enough to print.”

“No,” said Lois with a sharp smile. “I can’t be bought.” All the same, she hadn’t moved.

“Miss Lane, it’s been my experience that people who say that underestimate what money can buy,” said Lex. He watched her carefully, as though measuring her, but he’d done some research of his own, and already knew what to offer her. “I can get the Equal Rights Amendment passed.”

Lois showed not even the slightest reaction, which in itself was telling. “It’s been dead for a decade.”

“Introduced every session and bottled up in committee,” said Lex with a nod. “I can get it to the floor, and I can help to ensure it has the votes. I have the ear of powerful men.”

“You’re talking about bribes,” said Lois. She glanced towards the ceiling, and Lex couldn’t help but smile. Finally, here was another person who saw what Superman’s abilities really meant. No conversation could be presumed private.

“Not bribes Miss Lane, influence. If I were to mention to the right men that my companies would be preferentially hiring women, and that I would make election day a paid holiday throughout my workforce, do you think they could ignore that? Do you imagine that a man who won his seat with a margin of half a percent could afford not to change his stance in response?” Lex smiled. “No bribes. No money changing hands. When you’re responsible for the employment of a quarter of a million people, politicians listen.”

“All that for what amounts to scraps of information from me?” asked Lois.

“I won’t pretend that our political interests are unaligned,” said Lex. “I’ve often considered myself something of a feminist.

The world is set to undergo a transition away from manual labor, and everything I've read indicates that women are just as capable as men in the intellectual fields, limited only by a lack of education imposed by the existing social structures." That language could have been lifted straight from one of Lois Lane's inflammatory articles on equal rights. Lex watched her carefully to make sure that he hadn't said things too perfectly. She was trying hard not to respond, but a faint trace of quirk of her lips betrayed her excitement.

"I'm supposed to just take your word for it?" she asked with excessive nonchalance.

"As you said, reputation is worth its weight in gold," said Lex. "If you've done your homework, you should know that you can trust me. I pride myself in my fair dealings." Lex had managed to avoid any messy lawsuits that would be a matter of public record, and many of the more unsavory aspects of his life had been scrubbed away in the past week. There were perhaps a dozen people who could connect him to any ongoing criminal acts, and he had a long story of redemption if any of his adolescent crimes surfaced. He had no criminal record to speak of. He also knew that Lois Lane couldn't possibly have done enough investigation to unearth anything in the twelve hours since he'd called in the favor, but she would be swayed by the mere appearance of openness. Lex was a comfortable liar.

"And what about Superman?" asked Lois. "You know I can't risk losing the next interview, if there is one."

"Do you think this arrangement would upset him?" asked Lex. "He acts very much like a man with nothing to hide, and I somewhat doubt that he exposed you to anything that he didn't want known to the world, even if he does have secrets. There's no personal gain for you, it's purely an altruistic act, and if Superman has a problem with equal rights for women I doubt he

would have chosen you in the first place. You win, I win, and Superman at the least loses nothing.”

Lois sat and thought it over. Lex was in no rush. “Alright. I have one condition,” she said slowly.

“Go on,” Lex replied.

“Tell me why,” said Lois. “Superman seems to be the only story in town these days, but everyone’s got some angle on it, some reason that they’re curious. Some people think he’s got something to do with religion, that he’s Christ or Antichrist, some people are envious of his power, and more than a few women are rather keen on him.”

“Including yourself?” asked Lex.

“My interests are more professional,” said Lois. “But go on, tell me what you’re in it for.”

“You’ve heard of humanism?” he asked. Lois nodded. “I read the manifesto, and I’m sure that if the Humanist Society of Metropolis had known of my inclinations that they would have asked me to sign. I would have declined, for a number of reasons, not least of which is their rejection of profit-seeking, which is perhaps the most efficient method of incentivizing useful work yet known to man. In many ways I’m in agreement with them though. The Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a boon for the human race. I can think of no better path forward for humanity than a pursuit of further revolutions through applied reason. When I look to Superman, I can only imagine the eons of dead ends our scientists could skip, and the advancements that could be had if he could be convinced to give us his knowledge. It would be an end to disease, and an end to death.” Lex poured himself a glass of whiskey. “I’m doing my best to investigate Superman, because I want to persuade him to do the most good.”

“Alright,” said Lois, seemingly satisfied with his answer. She

started talking.

It began with a note on her desk. She'd come back from the break room holding half a sandwich in one hand, a bottle of soda water in the other, and a cigarette between her lips. Sitting on top of her typewriter was a small envelope which simply said "Miss Lane".

Here Luthor stopped her, and asked her about the specifics, and Lois tried her best to remember. The envelope was delicate and white, the kind you could get from any corner drugstore. The words on the envelope and in the note itself were typewritten. Lois had saved it, and it was somewhere in her desk drawer. When Luthor had said that she should leave nothing out, she hadn't realized how literal he was being about it. Being a reporter was about being concise. You had to pay attention to the details, but only say those things that were actually important. Luthor just wanted a raw stream of consciousness. Luthor then asked whether she would part with the note, and she'd said that she would let him take a look at it if she could find it.

The note had said to meet him on the roof of The Daily Planet Building, and it was signed "Superman" in swirling cursive. She'd asked around, and no one had seen who had left it, so Lois had taken the elevator to the top floor, and then taken another flight of stairs up beyond where any offices were to reach the roof. She'd thought it was going to be a prank of some sort, but when she'd opened the door she'd seen Superman standing on the very edge of the roof, looking out over the city. His cape flowed behind him in the wind.

"Hello Lois," he said as he turned around.

He had a body like a strongman. The material of his suit clung to his skin, exposing every muscle to the world, each of

them perfectly defined. He was undeniably handsome, with a curl of hair hanging down that made him look almost roguish.

Luthor stopped her again, and asked questions about the costume, and about Superman's hair. The suit was red and blue, but had no visible seams, not even any that were hidden. Lois wouldn't have expected any either, not with the way that the material clung to his body. It was obviously made of some fabric unknown to the scientists of Earth. The costume could be damaged, but Lois had scattered reports about it repairing itself over time, knitting back together. Luthor had made special note of that. Superman's hair was styled with some kind of gel, though from what Lois could remember it always looked like that, even when he was flying. She was about to bring up the possibility that he used a gel from the planet Krypton when Luthor waved his hand for her to continue on.

"I'm afraid my etiquette classes didn't prepare me for this," Lois had said. "What do I call you? Superman was just the name I made up, I hope —"

"Superman is fine. It's fitting," said Superman with a smile.

"Perry was worried people would connect it to German, to Nietzsche's *Übermensch*," said Lois, "And I told him to remember who our audience was."

"It's fine," said Superman again. He had a certain gentleness to him, a patient understanding that was so palpable that Lois could instantly understand how people compared him to Christ. "I thought that perhaps some people had questions that they'd like answered."

"Sure," said Lois. She cursed herself for not taking the note seriously and fumbled for her pencil and paper. "Alright, let's start with where you came from."

"I'm an alien," said Superman. "From the planet Krypton."

Lois wrote this down as though it weren't utterly insane. She

could decide whether it should be spelled Krypton or Crypton and decided to go with a K because it looked more foreign. "And does everyone from your planet have your abilities?" she asked.

"No," said Superman. His turned somber. "Just me. Krypton was a dying planet, and my parents were able to fashion a spaceship that could hold only one. They sent me here just as the planet imploded. It wasn't until I got to this planet that my abilities began to manifest. I'm the last of my kind."

Lois didn't know how to respond to that. "Why did you choose Earth?" she eventually managed.

"I didn't," said Superman. "The coordinates were locked before I knew what was happening. If I could speak with my father, I would ask him that same question. I suspect he chose this planet because he thought I would be able to blend in."

"There are other aliens then?" asked Lois. "Other planets with intelligent life?"

"Yes," said Superman. "But it's not my place to spoil the secrets that await humanity when they reach for the stars."

Lois had frowned at that, but continued on all the same. "You're out saving people and stopping crimes every day, and many of us are wondering why."

"I think it says something profoundly sad about your species that you have to ask that question," said Superman. "Helping people is its own reward. If you were given the same power, wouldn't you do the same? Wouldn't you put out fires and stop muggings?"

"But you do it for free," said Lois. "You don't ask for anything in return, and half the time don't even stick around long enough for people to thank you. Most of us might stop crimes, but we might ask for a little money from it, or at least get official police sanction. They're calling you a vigilante."

"I've looked over your law books," said Superman. "I'm act-

ing within my rights as a resident alien. It's important for me to have my independence from human society. I don't want to disturb things too much."

She'd let that go, and afterwards had hated herself for it. Couldn't he see that he was throwing a wrench into human society just by being there? Everyone from Washington to the Vatican was clamoring for a sit-down conversation with him, and he was already a celebrity whether he liked it or not. He'd be in the movies, on television, and spread all through the culture of the world. Just the news of extraterrestrial life would have caused an immense, irreversible change in how humans saw the world. Superman was so much more than that.

But she hadn't properly prepared, because she'd thought that it was a joke, and so she was too out of sorts to press him on it.

"We know you can fly, and there are reports that you can stop bullets with your chest, but what else can you do?" she'd asked.

"Would you like a demonstration?" he'd asked with a grin.

She'd nodded, and he'd swept towards her in a rush. Before she knew it, he'd hooked an arm under her legs and swept her off her feet. Seconds later they were flying to the air, and she had her arms around his neck.

"This wasn't in the paper," said Luthor.

"It wasn't important to the story," said Lois with a dismissive wave of her hand.

In truth, her heart still raced when she thought about it, and not in the good way. Superman had been presumptuous in touching her, and reminded her of one too many boyfriends who had tried to take their own liberties. Superman had scooped her up like he had known her, like it was some grand flirtatious lark that they were both enjoying. When they were past the roof of The Daily Planet Building she had looked down for only a moment before burying her head in his shoulder and closing her

eyes tight. Lois wasn't afraid of heights, and had even flown as a passenger with Amelia Earhart once, but this was different. Her life was entirely in Superman's hands. If he'd stopped and turned her head towards his own, had tried to kiss her, what choice would she have but to kiss him back?

She hadn't put it in the article, both because it was a sour note and because she didn't need people implying that she and Superman were an item. She'd already caught Clark using the phrase "Superman's girlfriend Lois Lane" in a different article and she'd pitched a fit to Perry until he'd taken it out. She didn't want to live in someone else's shadow. None of her inner thoughts could be revealed to Luthor of course, especially since Superman might be listening in. Lois wanted that second interview, even if she didn't have any particular fondness for Superman.

She skipped ahead to when they'd landed on a beach north of Metropolis. The flight had seemed to take an eternity, but Lois had kept her eyes closed the whole time so it was tough to say. Superman had begun a demonstration of his powers, and Luthor quizzed her on each of these, though she'd already included all of that in the article. Superman could crush a rock to dust with his bare hands. He was faster than a speeding bullet and more powerful than a locomotive. He could see straight through walls and read newsprint from miles away. He could hear the faintest whisper while the ocean roared around them. Luthor asked for details about all of these.

"He called it x-ray vision?" asked Luthor. "Or was that an invention of your own to describe the phenomenon that you observed?"

"That's what he said," Lois replied. "I know it's probably not how it works."

"No," said Luthor with a frown. "It's not."

After the demonstration, Superman had asked her if she wanted to return or if she had further questions. She had almost said that she would get a taxi, but she wasn't sure where she was and didn't want to offend him. She had already been thinking about the next interview, even then. He'd scooped her up and flown her back to the top of the building, and she'd tucked her face into the crook of his shoulder to protect herself from the wind and so that she wouldn't have to be sick from the view below. She felt him lean his head towards her, pressing his cheek against her hair, but he hadn't tried to kiss her.

She'd thought about that often afterwards. Superman was untouchable. If he'd wanted to act against her, there was nothing that would stop him, and no retribution that could be enacted against him. Lois had been trained by her father in hand-to-hand combat and carried a pistol nearly everywhere she went, but both would be useless against the Man of Steel. It was frightening simply on the face of it, to know that you were completely at the mercy of another person. It was worse knowing that he could watch everything that you did and hear everything that you said. The whole thing was hopelessly complicated of course. Superman was attractive, there was no questioning that, and he was the most perfectly good and selfless man in the whole damned city, but there was an extreme imbalance of power between the two of them and questions of what it would mean for her career. She didn't even know whether she liked him, though she suspected that she didn't.

Luthor was staring at her, and she realized she hadn't said anything for a while.

"Wait right here," she'd said when they got back. Her legs were shaky on the roof, but if Superman noticed he didn't seem to take it as anything more than the effects of the flight. "I need a picture or no one will ever believe me." She'd rushed downstairs

and grabbed Jimmy Olsen, the first photographer she'd seen. She'd half expected Superman to be gone when she came back up to the roof, but he was still standing there, looking out over the city. It had taken Jimmy three tries to get the photograph that ran on the front page and in all the extra editions, since he was nearly as out of sorts as she was. And after that, Superman had shook their hands and flown away. Lois had typed the story up right away, not wanting to risk someone else getting the jump on her since she stupidly hadn't confirmed that the interview was an exclusive. She'd left the article on her desk for three hours along with a note to Superman asking his blessing on the article even though that wasn't strictly necessary and she had no idea whether he would even spare her a glance. He hadn't stopped by to make any comments, and she hadn't spoken to him since.

"And that was it?" asked Luthor. His eyes were cold and piercing, the earlier warmth forgotten. He had listened intently the entire time, drilling down into the details of the interview, the minutiae that surely didn't have any bearing on anything. He seemed to remember himself, and the veil of friendly concern lifted back into place.

"That was it," said Lois. "You'll keep your end of the bargain?"

"Of course," said Luthor. "I'm a man of my word. And if you do get that second interview, I'd be very interested in talking to you about it. In fact, I have a few questions I'd like to suggest, if you don't mind..."

Lex wrote down his findings in a notebook. The language he used was of his own devising, one that he'd invented a decade ago specifically so that he could write down what he was thinking without the risk of anyone reading it. The book that de-

fined the grammar and vocabulary had been burned in a fireplace shortly after he'd felt confident that he knew it all. Lex was reasonably certain that Superman didn't have a universal translator of some sort — he'd heard a few reports from the immigrant neighborhoods of Superman having difficulty communicating. It could be a feigned weakness, but Lex thought the odds were that it wasn't.

Superman had access to a typewriter. He either had money to buy a card or he stole one. If Lex could get his hands on the card itself, he might be able to divine something about the typewriter that had been used to make the letters, some pattern of offset keys that would give some clue to its origins. Most likely it was a dead end, and the typewriter would prove to be Miss Lane's own, but it was something to look into. Furthermore, it might be possible to lift fingerprints from the note itself. If not, Lex would look into getting some from the crime scenes. He wasn't sure what use that would be, but it never hurt to get more data.

There were a number of points of curiosity in the story as it had been relayed to him. The first was the distance. Superman had said that Krypton was millions of miles away, but it had to be trillions at the least. A hundred million miles would get you to the Sun but not much further. It was either a revealing mistake or a simplification that the alien had used for a non-technical audience. Second, he had called his vision x-ray vision, which was plainly false. X-ray photography worked by placing an object between the source of the x-rays and the x-ray film. If Superman could actually see on the x-ray spectrum, everything would be too dim, and wouldn't have much of an advantage over visible light. If his eyes were emitting x-rays, they'd have to output an enormous amount that would have to be reflected back mostly by chance, and if that were the case he'd likely be killing people simply by looking at them. It was possible that the

term “x-ray” was another colloquialism, but to Lex it suggested that Superman didn’t know how his powers worked.

There was no easy way to know how much if any of Superman’s story was true. A civilization capable of interstellar travel being destroyed so utterly that there was only a lone, ignorant survivor, who somehow made it across unimaginably vast distances to land on a planet filled with people who looked exactly identical to him? Some part of it had to be a lie. Lex could think of a hundred ways in which the story would start to make sense. If Superman’s race had the technology to travel between stars, then perhaps they had the ability to alter their form at will, and the perfectly chiseled features of Superman were merely a mask laid over something tentacled and many-limbed. Superman could be an exile or a narcissist who had chosen to leave of his own volition or been forced out by his peers or elders. Lex could think of a thousand variations on the story that would make it more plausible, but it was an exercise in futility. None of it could be trusted in the first place. Lex was reasonably certain that Superman was an extraterrestrial, because for him to be a product of human ingenuity would require a vast network of scientists and engineers operating in secret and working toward some unfathomable goal. It was even less plausible than the entire Krypton race being at once capable of sending a ship to Earth and being utterly wiped out in a single planetary event.

In the face of such uncertainty, lesser men might have simply given up. Lex Luthor believed that very few problems were unsolvable if you put your mind to it. Examinations of the evidence that Superman left behind could only go so far though. It was time to escalate.

Author’s Note: This is a “bonus” chapter — I’m still planning

to update on Sunday, I just didn't want to have too long a chapter and this stuff was relatively easy to finish up and post now. As always, I appreciate corrections / feedback / reviews.

Lois Lane getting hired as a teenager because of an anonymous letter to the editor is a detail pulled from the life of Nellie Bly, a female reporter of roughly the same era (who Golden Age Lois was based on).

Chapter 3

The All-Seeing Eye

Lex Luthor wasn't the only one gathering information. As the days passed, people began to make their observations, and a few things began to become known.

Superman would show up at misdemeanors in downtown Metropolis, felonies in the greater metropolitan area, and large disasters in the continental United States. Those who had done the math would point out that Superman could reach any point on the planet within an hour, but he only rarely seemed to use this ability; he went to a mine collapse in Peru, a landslide in Bangladesh, and an earthquake in China, but he seemed inconsistent in his ranging.

He prioritized crimes against people above crimes against property. Murder and forcible rape were almost sure to bring a response, while burglaries often went unstopped. He avoided controversy and grey areas, and tended to stay away from incidents where both parties were at fault. He tended to avoid crimes committed by people in the immigrant neighborhoods, and there was some question about whether this was the result of a language barrier or because Superman harbored some ideas about class or racial purity. There were some members of the

Eugenics Society of Metropolis that pointed out that Superman was white.

Superman didn't participate in any foreign wars, despite repeated requests. There was a civil war in China, and a war between Bolivia and Paraguay in South America. Thousands died, and Superman did nothing, presumably because of his claimed neutrality. It was unknown whether Superman would side with the United States if they once again went to war. In Germany, the National Socialists had risen to power and repudiated the Treaty of Versailles, which was generally agreed to be a worrying development. When the Nazis killed eighty-three people in a political purge, there was much discussion about whether Superman's absence from Germany had been a calculated effort to avoid becoming embroiled in global politics, a tacit endorsement of their politics, or whether he simply hadn't known about it until it was too late.

Certainly Superman wasn't active all the time, and he'd proved to be far from omniscient. Even with him going on patrol and being visible high above the city, murders still happened with some frequency. The United States was slowly creeping its way out of the Great Depression, with Metropolis as the vanguard. Where there had been three murders per day before his arrival, there was now an average of one. Some people grumbled that he should do more.

Superman was in the news on a regular basis. He pulled Pretty Boy Floyd out of a rathole hotel in Gotham City, and requested that the reward be donated to charity. When the SS Morro Castle caught fire and burned on the way up from Havana, Superman swooped in and saved the lives of hundreds. He stopped a tornado in Kansas, and a hurricane moving towards Florida. He was undeniably a hero.

Through it all, the lawsuits began to pile up. A good num-

ber of criminals came forward with complaints of brutality, and some had the injuries to prove that they'd at least taken a hit to make their story plausible. There were accusations of rape that no one believed. Not every legal issue was so spurious. Superman was sued for theft after taking steel girders off the back of a truck to shore up a collapsing factory. He was subpoenaed as a witness to all manner of man-made disasters. The case of *Shoe v. New York* was working its way towards the Supreme Court. At issue was whether Superman's x-ray vision could be used to obtain a warrant for arrest or whether that unreasonably infringed upon the right to liberty guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. Most of the court watchers predicted that a half dozen cases would end up going to the Supreme Court in the coming year. It was a wonderful time for those with an interest in jurisprudence.

Lex Luthor existed in the background. In public, he was a champion for Superman, arguing in favor of the stances he believed Superman to favor and heading the first Conference on Extraterrestrial Science which of course had Superman as its sole focus. In private, he was the world's most cautious puppet-master.

"You sure we should be doing this?" asked Ted. "It's not exactly acting."

"It's acting," said Claire defensively. "We're pretending at being different people for an audience."

That Ted had landed a bit part in a doomed production of *The Stationary Man* wouldn't have been worthy of note if not for the fact that this made him more successful than Claire. It was a constant source of tension between them, and the subtext of nearly all of their conversations.

“Easy for you to say,” Ted replied. “You’re not the one who’s going to go to jail.”

“Oh hush,” said Claire. “The pay is good enough.”

“We probably shouldn’t be talking about this where he can hear,” said Ted. He fidgeted with the gun tucked into the waistband of his pants. It wasn’t loaded, and he was thankful for that. Guns made him nervous.

“There’s nowhere Superman can’t hear, the papers said so,” said Claire. “Now come on, I’m ready to go.”

“You’ll drop the charges?” he asked.

“Who on earth do you think I am?” asked Claire. “Of course I’ll drop the charges. This whole thing is going to last a single night, tops. Maybe he won’t even show up and we can get paid to do this again.”

“Fine,” said Ted. He pulled the ski mask down over his head and whipped out the gun. “Gimme your goddamned money and you don’t get hurt.”

Claire glanced nervously from side to side. “Please, I need that money to feed my baby sister.”

“Hand over the dough,” said Ted. “Just hand over the goddamned dough or I swear to God I will shoot you right in your pretty little mouth and steal the money off your warm corpse.”

“Superman!” screamed Claire at the top of her lungs. “Superman, save me!”

“Shut your mouth, bitch,” said Ted with what he hoped was a convincing sneer. But then he saw Claire’s face when he said the b-word, and instantly regretted it. He was about to break character and tell her he was sorry when Superman appeared between them. Neither had seen him arrive. He was simply there with a rush of air.

“What seems to be the problem?” asked Superman with half a grin on his face. He plucked the gun from Ted’s hand.

“This bastard was trying to mug me,” said Claire.

“I wasn’t,” said Ted. He didn’t have to feign the fear in his voice. He’d never realized how tall Superman was before. Odd that it would have such an effect, when that was the least impressive thing about him.

“Ted and I will be going to the police station,” said Superman. Ted felt his stomach tie into a nervous knot at Superman saying his name before realizing that Superman had probably just read it off of one of the cards in his wallet. “If you’d make a statement it would help to put this man behind bars.”

As Claire looked at him, Ted felt another jolt of honest fear run through him. She looked like she was going to agree to it. But at the last second, her face softened, and she shook her head.

“I need to get home to my baby sister,” said Claire. “I’ll file something with the police in the morning.”

“Very well,” said Superman. “Have a good day.” Then he flew up into the air, carrying Ted with him.

A homeless man watched from a distance, and wrote something in his notebook in an extremely neat script. The next day, a curious personal ad appeared in *The Daily Planet*. Lex Luthor made a point of reading through both of Metropolis’s daily newspapers each morning, and so even if Superman had been watching, there would be nothing suspicious about the way that Luthor’s eyes flickered over the page. There was no copy of the key to be found anywhere on Lex’s person — it had been committed entirely to memory. The actors had been hired by an intermediary who had no knowledge of Lex Luthor, and the man who’d watched them received payment from a slush fund that Luthor had cut his connection to years ago.

Leroy Barnes pulled his mask down over his face and hefted his tommy gun, then charged straight in through the revolving doors of the Commerce Bank of Metropolis. He used the butt of his gun to smack the security guard hard in the nose as Sean “Moustache” Murphy and Big Paul Castellano followed closely behind him. Leroy fired off five rounds into the ceiling, bringing plaster down on the customers. They scrambled to the floor without having to be told, men in fine suits and women in glitzy dresses pressing themselves up against the immaculate marble of the Big Apricot’s most prestigious bank.

“God dammit Leroy,” said Murphy, “We were supposed to do this clean.” Murphy picked up the guard’s gun and stuffed it into the burlap sack they’d be using to carry the money.

“This is a robbery!” yelled Big Paul, a short man who had once worked as a jockey down at the Apricot City Racetrack before he’d broken his leg. He limped, but it didn’t slow him down much. “Get down on the floor! We don’t wanna bump off nobody, so no funny business and we’ll be through this caper in a flash!”

The three of them walked towards the cash registers, guns held out in front of them, trying their best to cover the whole room. The idea was to get in and out before the cops had a chance to show up. There was the question of the Big Blue rearing his ugly head, but that was what contingencies were for.

“Empty the cash register sweetheart,” Big Paul said to one of the cashiers. He was careful not to point his gun straight at her, just in her general direction. He’d found that people panicked with a gun to their head. It was better to hold the gun like you didn’t want to use it, instead of like you were seconds away from killing them. “Throw it all in this sack and we won’t have any trouble.”

“There’s no need for that,” said a voice from the front of the

room. Everyone turned to look at Superman. He'd entered the bank silently, and stood with his cape hanging down behind him. The revolving door spun around behind him. Superman looked the same as he ever did, a god striding among men.

"Stop right there," said Murphy. "We planned for this, ya see? There's hostages, planted all around the city, and you can stop us or save them, but not both."

"I can do both," said Superman. "And I don't negotiate."

Superman glanced rapidly between the three robbers and closed the distance to Murphy in the space of a heartbeat. He bent the barrel of the tommy gun with one hand, and reached into Murphy's jacket with the other. Murphy dropped the gun and tried to beat against Superman, but it was like slamming his fists into granite. Superman pulled out a thin metal case from Murphy's pocket and stared at it with a frown. It was locked shut, but Superman pried it open with ease and pulled out a slip of paper. He let the note flutter to the ground after reading it, then moved forward and tied up both of Murphy's hands with the sleeves of the man's own jacket.

Leroy and Big Paul had started running away as soon as Superman had grabbed Murphy, the promise of money forgotten. Big Paul, with his limp, was falling behind. Superman came at them from behind as they ran, ripping the guns from their hands and setting both men on the ground.

"You gonna kill us?" Leroy spat at him. "Or are you some kind of pussy?" Superman turned his implacable gaze towards the criminal, and Leroy lost his bravado at once, like a balloon being popped.

"No," said Superman. He seemed about to say more, but tied them up and dashed through the revolving door of the bank, leaving it spinning behind him. On the floor of the bank, huddled among the other customers, Lex Luthor smiled.

Watching the robbery had been a risk, but Lex Luthor had wanted to see the Man of Steel at least once in person, just in case it would stir something loose within his mind. Lex stopped by the Commerce Bank three times a week at the same time of day, and so there was little unusual about him being there when the robbers arrived. There was nothing that Superman could use to trace the robbery back to Lex, unless Superman had been watching as Lex planned it. Even then it was unlikely given the precautions that Lex had taken.

In his home, Lex Luthor had built a keyboard which connected to the phone lines. Many nights he could be seen pressing the keys while staring at his coded notebook, with no apparent output. When he hammered down the keys to, they didn't produce the normal solid clack of metal levers pressing up against a ribbon of ink. Though it looked much like a typewriter, the keys were attached to an electrical mechanism which translated each press of a key into a tone, which was in turn sent down the phone lines.

Someone watching Lex Luthor's hands from above might try to observe what he was typing, but that would be a useless exercise since Lex Luthor was typing in a crude code on keys that were completely unmarked. Someone with absurdly superior hearing might find the terminus to the phone connection at an office building in downtown Metropolis, where the tones were magnetically recorded on a steel wire and later translated into a still-encrypted paper copy by a somewhat bewildered secretary. The paper copies were filed away, and from time to time Lex Luthor could be seen stopping by to leaf through them, seemingly able to decode them without need for a cipher.

The line was split of course, and the terminus in LexCorp offices was a decoy. The coded messages that filled the cab-

inets were nonsense, the letters randomized past the point of recovery, not that Superman had shown himself to be much of a code-breaker. The real coded message was received by a small office out in Star City, California, where it was decoded into a set of instructions, with a header in English and the rest in some other language. The people who worked at the office knew little about who they worked for or what purpose their work served. The English portion of the message was for them, and told them who to send mail to, or occasionally who to call, while the second part was for their recipient, and invariably in a language that the people at this small office didn't speak — an additional protection against Superman, though it was really more of a minor inconvenience than good security. The people at the office assumed that their secret master was the United States government.

This circuitous route was a bit paranoid, even given Superman's demonstrated surveillance capabilities. Superman had repeatedly been shown to need to focus on stimulus, and it was Lex's working theory that Superman's brain filtered out the vast majority of the input that it received from his ears and eyes. Superman could prime himself to listen for a gunshot, or the sounds of shouting, but he didn't have total information processing. For this very reason, most murders in Metropolis were now surprise attacks using melee weapons that would eliminate the victim's ability to produce sound. A gunshot was distinctive, while the sound of a knife slicing flesh was not. In a way, Superman's arrival had made the underworld a more brutal place.

It was likely that Lex could have skated by on lesser security precautions than he took, but he'd woken up to nightmares of having his skull crushed between Superman's hands too many times. In the dream he was just one in a long line of people that stretched out on either side of him, an endless number of people

waiting to be killed by Superman. The alien did the work calmly and cleanly, and Lex was the only one who was trying to fight back. Precautions were the order of the day.

“Mustache” Murphy hadn’t known why he’d been asked to rob the bank. The jeweler on 4th St and 16th Ave hadn’t known why he’d been asked to make a small case lined with lead. Leroy Barnes hadn’t known why he’d been asked to fire off his gun towards the ceiling. All these men knew was that they were being paid. Strings had been pulled and messages had been sent.

The end result had been that Lex Luthor discovered that Superman couldn’t see through lead. More than anything, he was upset that something so stupid had worked.

It was what you would try if you knew a little bit about x-rays. Lead was used to block x-ray radiation, even people who didn’t have a clue what x-rays were knew that, so it made sense that Superman’s vision could be blocked by it. Yet Superman’s x-ray vision fairly conclusively did not use x-rays. That was obvious just from thinking about it, and of course Lex had tested it by having patsies carry around sealed strips of x-ray film and subject themselves to his gaze. Furthermore, Superman was able to distinguish colors using his x-ray vision, and in all respects treated it simply as “the ability to see through objects” instead of something that made any sense. Yet lead blocked it all the same. It was a victory to learn that, but utterly infuriating. Lead was used to block x-rays because it was dense, and yet it was apparent that any amount of lead stopped Superman’s vision, even a few centimeters. If lead blocked Superman’s vision in the same way that it blocked x-rays, Superman shouldn’t have been able to see through a solid foot of steel or three feet of concrete either. Thinking of new physical laws which would explain this behavior made Lex Luthor frustrated, though this wasn’t terribly

unusual where Superman's powers were concerned.

Lex had to wonder whether Superman realized he'd given something away by reaching to grab the case instead of getting the information through some other means. Lex had other plans in place — when Superman eventually followed the trail of clues that started with the piece of paper in the case, he would be confronted with a number of challenges to his x-ray vision, and he would be forced to give up a bit of information at each one. The clues would lead to three locations; a diving bell beneath a hundred feet of water, a large Faraday cage, and a steel vault in a closed down bank. There were no hostages to speak of, and either Superman would use his so-called x-ray vision to confirm this or be seen by spotters engaging in a rescue for someone that wasn't there. Either would give information.

As the day passed, the reports came back from the spotters. Superman wasn't seen at any of the locations he should have been led to. If lead was the only thing that would stop Superman's vision, then it would have to be lead that Lex would use.

Simply lining a room with lead would be of limited use, since it would give Superman the incentive to pry in precisely the places that his attention was least wanted. It would be like erecting a sign that said "Don't look here". The only way around that was to make lead shielding so common that Superman wouldn't be able to keep track of them all, and for that Lex developed a plan.

A scientific paper was mailed out to a number of universities and businessmen with the cryptic title "Non-Röntgenian Vision; An Exploration from Inference". The paper used complicated words where simple ones would do, and meandered over twenty pages when its findings could properly be summed up in two.

There were numerous digressions and spelling errors, and the author identified himself as a former professor of physics living in a cabin in the Adirondacks who had been exiled from Harvard some decades earlier due to indiscretions which the author implied were fabricated by his jealous colleagues. It was for the most part scientifically sound, but so mired in authorial problems that it had no hopes of being properly published in any journal of note. You would have to read it three times before understanding that it was talking about Superman.

The disgraced professor had died some years earlier in a Prohibition speakeasy that had been owned by Lex Luthor. The professor's body had been dumped in the river and never identified, and his death was known by very few. The paper's true author was Lex Luthor, who had crafted it carefully using information made available to members of the public through the police and the newspapers. The original incidents which demonstrated Superman's inability to see through lead had been engineered by Lex himself, both the first one at the bank and a host of others used to confirm the finding. Taken on its own, the conclusions were tenuous, but it was enough to get the ball rolling.

The paper was mailed to the office of Thomas Nivas, a Dutch businessman with no obvious connection to Lex Luthor, and he made a show of reading it carefully. Where others would dismiss the professor as a crank, Nivas would take a gamble and begin immediately buying up shares in the handful of companies that mined or traded in lead. Within two weeks, Nivas would announce to the world that lead conclusively stopped Superman's vision, and publicly challenged the Man of Steel to demonstrate otherwise. Superman never showed up, and though that proved little, Nivas began to see a trickle of customers. One of the first of these was Lex Luthor.

It was a happy bit of serendipity when Lois Lane scheduled a

second interview.

“Well, of course I trust Superman,” said Lex. Lois Lane sat across from him in one of his leather chairs. Across the hallway, the sounds of construction could be heard, as his study was ripped apart in anticipation of lead lining on all the walls, the floor, and the ceiling. When the sheets of lead were in place, the fine woodwork would be replaced and the room would look exactly like it was before.

Lois Lane had apparently asked Nivas for the name of one of his clients, and Nivas had mentioned Lex Luthor. It was a minor betrayal of confidence, but Lex guessed that Nivas had given up Lex’s name because of the conversation they’d had wherein Lex had put forth what he believed was the most cogent possible argument in favor of a perfectly innocent man obtaining protection from the eyes of a watchful and seemingly benevolent god. Nivas didn’t know that Lex was the one behind the funding, nor the author of the paper he’d been mailed.

“I trust Superman,” said Lex, “But do you believe that Superman is perfectly good?”

“Perfectly?” asked Lois. “That’s a high standard. But he’s as damned close as we’re going to get. He’s been here four months now, and he’s saved hundreds if not thousands of lives. He doesn’t act as a law unto himself, he just flies through the air and helps people like it was the most natural thing in the world. He hasn’t killed anyone, and despite what people might allege, I don’t believe that he’s ever seriously injured anyone either.”

“All true,” said Lex with a smile. “But given that he isn’t perfect, do you think that it’s unreasonable to take precautions against the possibility that he one day acts in some unconscionable way?”

“Is it really worth however many hundreds or thousands of dollars this renovation is costing you?” she asked.

“There are a number of factors that go into determining that,” said Lex. “I have enough money that the expense is somewhat trivial to me, and I have enough intellectual property that having it stolen would be quite damaging to me — patents, ideas, formulas, processes, and half a hundred other things. Beyond that, there is a value to me in not being watched, even when I’m not doing anything of note. It brings me peace of mind, which is worth something even when the actual risk is low. I suspect much of the sales of this shielding will go to husbands who want to know that their wives aren’t being spied on in the bath.”

“‘Humans have an intrinsic right to privacy’,” said Lois. “Navis told me that, and I suspect that he heard it from you.”

“I believe I said something like that, yes,” said Lex. “It’s one of the great flaws of our Constitution that a right to privacy is not among those enumerated. It’s funny, isn’t it? No one would begrudge you from having frosted windows in the bathroom or drawing your curtains when company is over, but as soon as Superman enters the picture many people think that such measures are somehow indicative of criminality, or morally wrong in and of themselves.”

“I didn’t bring up crime,” said Lois.

“But you will, in the article?” asked Lex.

“Of course,” Lois nodded.

“Then I have a further argument for you,” said Lex. “Perhaps you perfectly trust Superman not to look at you while you change, or perhaps you have no secrets you’d rather he not be privy to, but do you believe that Superman will always be the only one with his abilities? We can infer that there are other aliens out there, and here on Earth there are plenty of scientists — myself included — who are working to reverse-engineer

the things they see him do. If tomorrow my rivals in business can see through my walls, they'll find my defenses already in place, which is only prudent."

"I suppose," said Lois. She looked down at her notebook. "I think I have everything I need. More than I need, actually. The article isn't going to be particularly long."

"You can admit that you enjoy talking to me," said Lex.

"It's stimulating, I'll give it that," said Lois. "But I also came here to thank you. The ERA passed the Senate and moved onto the House, and even if it fails there I'll consider you to have held up your end of the bargain."

"I'm a man of my word Miss Lane," said Lex. "Though I have to warn you that prospects are bleak. The Eighteenth Amendment has made people shy of modifying our founding document."

"All the same," said Lois.

There was a moment where perhaps Lex could have asked her to dinner, but he let it pass by. Lois was tenacious and decisive, intelligent and principled, and in another time he might have tried to see whether she could sustain his interest in the long-term. Now was a time of action, and the threat of Superman was too great to permit for such idle distractions. Later perhaps, when Superman lay dead in the street, Lex would go on the pursuit.

After they'd said their goodbyes, Lex sat in his smoking room and thought about explosives. The actual designs would have to wait until his study had been coated in lead, but until that time he could refine his plans within his head. He would need to find someone to carry out his will, someone without a strong moral compass, but he thought that he had just the right person in mind.

Chapter 4

Like Clockwork

Harry Kramer loved explosives. He loved the danger of working with them and the thrill of watching them go off. A properly made bomb was an amazing piece of engineering, a compact device of wires, springs, and explosives all set up in a very precisely and ordered way. When the bomb went off, all that hard work evaporated in a single transformative moment. It was like taking a piece of fine crystal and hurling it against the side of a brick wall, and how could someone not feel joy at that? How could someone not see that there was something magical that only existed in that single solitary moment when the product of labor and a thoughtful mind became nothing more than garbage? Though there wasn't anything sexual about it, the best word that Harry had found for it was orgasmic.

A thick letter came in the mail for him. He ran a few simple tests to see whether it might contain a bomb, sniffing at it and hefting it carefully. Letter bombs were tricky to do, because you couldn't reliably set them on a timer unless you knew for certain when they'd be opened. The letter also had to make it through the postal service without detonating or being discovered, which was a challenge in and of itself. The most common way to make

a letter bomb was to fill an envelope with two chemicals that were explosive when mixed, separating them with layers of paper. Another chemical trigger was placed along the top where the paper was going to be ripped. The chemicals would mix when the letter was opened, and the bomb would explode, but that was often messy because people didn't always open their own mail. It was easier to make a larger package that would explode, because then you didn't need to worry about the bomb being bent or squeezed, but there was a very clear distinction between a "letter bomb" and a "mail bomb" owing to the restrictions on construction.

Harry had a recurring fantasy about being sent a letter bomb. In the fantasy he would smell the metallic powders and carefully disarm the bomb in his workshop, pulling it apart to expose its secrets. Written inside the letter bomb would be words of congratulations for showing caution, and a coy invitation to begin using his skills in earnest. In the fantasy he and the other bomber would engage in a conversation written across the city in explosive force, needing nothing more than concussive blasts to speak to each other. There was something raw and primal about destroying the ordered world of the city. Eventually Harry would prove himself the superior of the two, and she would reveal herself to him, and declare her undying love for him. It was always a woman, of course. They would exchange hot, hungry kisses on the rooftop of his apartment as Harry's bombs leveled the city.

The letter he'd received wasn't a bomb. Instead, there was an offer of employment. Beneath that, the bulk of the envelope containing crisp twenty-dollar bills, enough to pay for his apartment for two full years. The letter was concerning, because it meant that someone knew about him, but it was exciting, because it meant that he was going to get to do something that he loved. It wasn't some simple job that required only a simple

demolition or death, it was finally a chance to be unchained and fully funded. No longer would he have to cobble something together from bits and pieces. He was going to make something beautiful.

“What makes a person do a thing like this?” asked Clark.

Lois rolled her eyes.

Clark was a heavy man, thick without really seeming muscular, though you could tell from a glance that he'd never learned to buy clothes that fit. He had terrible posture, his hair was messy, and he wore glasses so thick you could hardly see his eyes through them. He seemed to get sick constantly, and he was so out of shape that whenever they had to move quickly he could be seen gasping for air afterwards. He had the desk right next to Lois's, and so she'd had time to examine each and every one of his faults — that was just a small sampling of the physical problems with Clark. Much to her consternation, he was somehow the second best reporter at *The Daily Planet*. They were often paired together for the big stories, since it allowed Perry to run a companion story to a front-pager. More often than not, Lois found that being around Clark tried her patience. It was made worse by the fact that he'd quite obviously developed an infatuation with her from nearly the day that he started working at the Planet. He'd asked her out during his second week, and she'd politely but firmly told him no, but he was still hung up on her. One of the only good things about Clark was that he was as transparent as glass. His crush was more sad than annoying, most days anyway.

Lois and Clark were standing outside the remains of an apartment building. It had exploded earlier in the day at around noon, sending bricks, wood, and personal belongings in every

direction and shattering a number of windows all around the block. Two people had died, and a lot more had been seriously injured. The apartment was still standing, but three of the upper floors were now just a gaping hole, and it was likely that there was enough structural damage that the building was a total loss. Everyone talked about how much worse it could have been. It was front page material for sure.

“Some people are just evil,” said Lois.

“I don’t think a person is born a certain way,” said Clark. “People make choices, for good or evil. Free will is part of God’s design. I just can’t understand why someone would make this choice.”

Lois tried to stop herself from rolling her eyes again. “Some design,” she said, as she spotted a severed arm in the rubble that no one seemed to have picked up yet.

Lois and Clark had done their interviews, talking to the victims, police, firefighters, and neighbors. There was little question that the explosion had been deliberate. The police were already chasing down some promising leads, though Lois knew that half the time they only said that to keep people reassured.

They’d been back at the Daily Planet Building working late when the second bomb had gone off, exactly six hours after the first. This one was at a sales office downtown. Most of the staff had gone home, but the rescue workers had pulled a few corpses from the wreckage. She overheard one of the onlookers say that it was a tragedy that people had died because they’d stayed late to work. She made sure to put that in her article.

The third bomb exploded in Superman’s face. He’d found it in the freezer of a grocery store, and got people out of the way before he’d tried moving it, which was when it had blown up. Lots of people reported seeing a gaping hole torn right in the center of his costume. Superman had spoken directly with the

chief of police, giving him as much information as possible. Lois had come back into the office late at night in order to write about it, and found that Clark was already there in a wrinkled shirt, looking for all the world like he'd never stopped working when she'd left at eight. Though he finished his article before her, she came up with the better moniker — the Clockwork Bomber. Perry groused about them being too competitive and wasting effort writing the same story, then decided to run Lois's article in the morning edition with the headline "Clockwork Bomber Strikes Midnight!". The long hours were worth it just for the forlorn look on Clark's face.

Lois set her alarm for five in the morning. The first bomb had been at noon, the second at six, and the third Superman had detonated just before midnight. The pattern was obvious to anyone with half a brain. Ten minutes before six o'clock in the morning she heard a distant rumble from across the city, and she was ready to trek off towards it in her most sensible shoes. Clark was nowhere to be seen, and despite being tired as hell, Lois felt a warm glow of satisfaction that she'd beat him to the punch.

The mayor and the chief of police held a press conference, where they promised that they would find the man or men responsible. No one made any demands, and no one claimed credit. Everyone braced themselves for another bomb at noon, but it didn't come. Four bombs had claimed the lives of six people, and there didn't seem to be a point to it. The casualties had been much lower than they could have been, given the time of day that the bombs had gone off and the locations that they'd been placed, but it was anyone's guess what that said about the bomber.

A few days passed, and eventually things began to settle down again.

Lois was surprised when she found a second letter on her

desk, addressed to Miss Lane and requesting to meet her in the same place as before. She was ready this time, and grabbed a sheet of paper with a series of questions from inside her desk. She stopped by Perry's desk to tell him where she'd be going, just in case something happened. Perry looked ecstatic, but Lois felt her nerves getting the best of her.

She prided herself on being utterly fearless. She'd stood on the spire of the Emperor Building as the first airship came in, strapped in with what amounted to a thick belt. She'd hunted big game with Hemingway over a memorable summer in Kenya. She'd braved storms while sailing the North Atlantic in a yacht, the closest she'd ever come to actually dying. She found these adventures exhilarating instead of terrifying. Yet there was something about Superman that tickled some animal part of her brain. She did her best to ignore it, and made the trek up to the rooftop where the Man of Steel was waiting.

"Hello Lois," he said as he turned around. His smile was gentle, but it didn't help her nerves. Luthor had said that Superman moved faster than muscles alone would dictate, but that didn't make the muscles look any less impressive. It was impossible for her to look at him and not think about the fact that he could cross the distance between them faster than she could blink.

"Hello Superman," she replied. "I've got some questions for you."

"I know," he said.

Lois immediately imagined him staring through the walls, looking over the questions she'd prepared for him and composing answers. It felt utterly invasive — she would never allow an interview subject to look over the questions like that, not at this stage in her career. She really should have gotten one of those

lead-lined drawers. Of course, maybe he'd just meant that he knew she had questions because everyone had questions. She found herself unwilling to give him the benefit of the doubt.

"Go on," said Superman. "But I can't answer everything."

"Where is your ship?" she asked.

"It burnt up over the Atlantic on my way in," Superman replied.

"Could you find the wreckage?" she asked.

"There wouldn't be anything left," said Superman. "Even if there were, I wouldn't hand it over. If humanity were able to work backwards and figure out how it was made, I fear the results would be disastrous. It would be like giving a gun to a baby."

Lois frowned. "And you're the final arbiter of what's good for humanity, what we can and can't handle?"

"I am the arbiter of myself," said Superman. "I can only do what I think is best, and hope that humanity gives the same consideration to their own actions."

"Okay," said Lois. "But are you really doing the most good? I mean, I've seen proposals for what other people would be doing with your powers, digging canals or generating power, searching out veins of ore, the amount of money—"

"I don't need money," said Superman. He interrupted her so delicately that she momentarily lost her train of thought.

"You don't," she replied slowly. "But the rest of us do. These are lucrative jobs that could bring in millions, and with that you could fund orphanages, women's shelters, homeless shelters, or whatever charitable organizations you wanted. We could set up a trust. It wouldn't matter that you were using your powers for a profit, because that profit would be directly translated into good works that would overwhelm positive effects of the crime fighting and general heroism you do now." Lex Luthor's

words were coming out of her mouth. “And if you embraced the celebrity that you already have you could charge enormous amounts of money for the use of your image. People are already making lunchboxes and trading cards with your emblem, and I’ve heard that they’re making two different movies about you. These things are going to happen whether you’re involved with them or not, and you could at least make some money that you could use for good causes.”

“Saving people from violent crime is an unambiguous good,” said Superman. “Bringing money into it isn’t, and I don’t know that I should be supplying humanity with a brawn that it doesn’t and shouldn’t have yet. I’ve tried my best to confine myself to acting only when there is a clear good to be done. I’m trying not to bend the course of human history, or force my morality on anyone else. I do that by operating within the laws of the country and avoiding controversy as much as possible. I have as few points of interference with a citizen’s daily life as possible.”

“You think that an avoidance of controversy is part of the greater good?” asked Lois. “Do you think that the laws of this country are anywhere close to just?” She pointed across the city to the docks, and the channel where ships were streaming in and out of the harbor. “A hundred years ago there were slaves being sold here. If you’d shown up then would you have stopped slave-masters from beating their slaves? Do the laws of men mean that much to you that you’d actually let such an injustice stand?”

“You’re losing your cool,” said Superman.

Lois looked down at her notebook. She hadn’t asked him a question from it for quite some time. “You’re right,” she said. “I’m sorry. It’s just that sometimes I think about what I would do if I had your powers, and in comparison you seem so...”

“Reluctant?” asked Superman.

“Yes,” Lois replied.

“During Prohibition, as part of an effort to stop people from drinking industrial alcohol, it was denatured and methyl alcohol was added, making it toxic. They thought that people would change their behavior. The end result was that the United States government killed ten thousand of its own citizens.”

“I wrote an article about that,” said Lois. “It never made it to print.”

“I know,” said Superman. He looked out towards the city in quiet contemplation. “I believe that the people who poured their poisons into the vats truly believed that they were doing good. They just couldn’t see what the end result would be. Even with the work I’ve been doing, there have been unwanted side effects.” He pursed his lips. “I get the distinct impression that people are less cautious with their lives now that they have me around. People shout for me to save them instead of taking action. There was a fire in an apartment building three days ago, and half the occupants ran up to the roof and screamed for me to come pick them up. If I’d been dealing with some other more serious disaster at the time, those people would have died. These are the things that happen on even a small scale when humanity is saved from their own mistakes and steered away from forging their own path. I’m sure you could think of half a dozen other examples of the unintended consequences.”

She could. The budgets for the police and fire department in Metropolis were up for review, and both looked like they were going to be cut by a large percent, because the city saw no point in paying the same amount for services when Superman had taken up much of their duties. Those elements of the underworld with sufficient mobility were moving to Gotham City, causing a crime wave there the likes of which hadn’t been seen in a decade. The ones that stayed in Metropolis were more organized than before, with a higher propensity towards sub-

terfuge, trickery, and crimes which didn't make a sound. Superman didn't speak anything but English, and so there had been an explosion in language learning. That was above and beyond the general insanity that came from having a man that flew through the air, and the world's first extraterrestrial.

There were many things that Lois wanted to say, but she was worried she'd get too wrapped up in argument again. A good reporter pressed their subject, but didn't get heated. If she were speaking to him outside of her role as a professional, she might have called a policy of non-intervention the definition of moral laziness. She might have told him that he had the most inconsistent moral system she'd ever had the displeasure of encountering. The truth was, she didn't like Superman. They'd both read the various proposals and the pleas for aid. There were so many things that he could do, and he simply refused to do them. It might have been one thing if he'd engaged in reasoned debate, but Superman had acted unilaterally, thinking that he knew what was best for humanity. Her thoughts returned again to when he'd scooped her up like a child. Superman was a man — an alien — of presumptions.

But Lois Lane was a good reporter, and so resisted the urge to berate him.

"How long were you on the planet before you began intervening?" asked Lois.

"Two weeks," said Superman. "I learned English on the way over from your radio signals and spent a good deal of time watching from above and getting a more in-depth understanding of your culture and the ways of your people, as well as the relevant laws."

"And did you anticipate what followed?" asked Lois.

"For the most part," said Superman. "Celebrity, shock, awe, analysis — that was predictable. What I hadn't counted on was

the cruelty or organization of the attempts to kill me.”

Lois furrowed her brow. “You’re talking about the people trying to shoot you?”

“No,” replied Superman. “That I expected. The criminal element was bound to try. I let them sometimes, just to prove how useless it is to stand against me, but most of them attack me like it’s going to do some good. I stopped a mugging three weeks ago, and the man kept stabbing my eyes. It didn’t do anything more than dull his knife, and eventually he ran out of steam. Sometimes they shoot me and look at their guns like they’re shocked that it didn’t work. Maybe some people don’t really believe the stories until they see it for themselves. No, all that I expected. I’m talking about the bombs. That’s why I came to speak with you today.”

“The Clockwork Bomber,” said Lois.

“Yes,” said Superman. “All the bombs were meant for me. They were encased in lead and had mechanisms inside to prevent me from doing anything with them. I think someone was making an effort to kill me.”

“It seems obvious that wouldn’t work,” said Lois. “Even on the face of it.”

“The bombs were special,” said Superman. “They used focused blasts and a variety of different materials. I think one was an attempt to blind me. They’re probing for a weakness.”

“But it didn’t work,” said Lois.

“No,” said Superman. “I’ve been looking over the city and trying to connect the dots. Whoever set the bombs up is going to try again. I need you to warn the people of Metropolis. If I’m right, next time it’s going to be worse.”

Ninety-nine percent of the time, ripping a handful of wires out of a bomb will safely defuse it, either by removing the fuse from the detonator or the detonator from the explosive material. Most people who made bombs were unsophisticated, and most bombs were designed not to be found until after they had detonated. There wasn't much point in making them particularly hard to defuse or move, and there weren't many people with the technical skill to do it.

The bombs that Harry designed were complex, above and beyond the complexity designed into them by his benefactor. They had to be, because their target was Superman.

Many things could be made fail-safe. The railways used air brakes, in which a piston was held up by compressed air. To apply the brake, some air was let out of the system, causing the piston to lower and the brake to be applied. If any of the components of the system failed, the brake would be engaged by the loss of pressure, stopping the railcar and preventing it from going out of control. Fail-safe design was becoming more and more important as a method of stopping machines from self-destruction.

The bombs Harry made were fail-deadly. The detonator was connected to a timer, but the timer didn't cause the bomb to explode — it prevented the explosion from happening. Removal of the timer would collapse a circuit and cause the bomb to explode. Removal of the detonator would cause a circuit to collapse and trigger a secondary hidden detonator. Several small glass tubes were filled with beads of mercury which were part of the circuit, and if the bomb was tilted too far in any direction a circuit would complete and cause the bomb to explode. No one would ever be able to see this hard work, not even Superman, because the whole thing was encased in lead shielding. Wires were affixed to the interior of the casing, and if the lead

shielding was removed the bomb would detonate.

Most bomb makers didn't make their bombs this complex. It was more work, and with the work came a higher risk of accidental detonation. With the amount of explosives that Harry was using, it wasn't really a concern for him. What he feared was a small explosion that left him limbless and bleeding out, but given the number of pounds of cyclonite he was working with, an accident would leave him vaporized. It didn't seem like such a bad way to go. In truth, Harry liked the heightened sense of reality that came from being one mistake away from utter destruction. The benefactor had designed the bombs to be dangerous things, and Harry had modified them to be nearly reckless.

"Be careful with that," said Harry as the workmen took the first bomb out of the workshop that had been rented for him. "It's fragile."

They hadn't smiled at his joke, but then they didn't know what was in the crate they were carrying out. The circuit with the mercury switches was on a separate timer to ensure that the bomb wouldn't blow up in transit, but there was still more risk than most people would want to take. Harry had no idea where the workmen had come from. Like many things, the benefactor took care of it.

He also had no idea where the bomb was headed, but he couldn't help smiling as his bomb ventured off into the world. He'd headed back into his shop to make some variations on the theme.

Lex had tried doing things cleanly. The Conference on Extraterrestrial Science had put out a plea to Superman, asking him to attend a meeting of minds so that they might make a cul-

tural bridge between human and Kryptonian science. Superman could have come forward and simply spoken to them about what the true limits of his powers were, but he hadn't even responded to them. The invitation carried nearly every important name among the scientific elite, and the lack of response couldn't be seen as anything but an insult. Lex had put forward a mountain of plans and proposals that would allow him to get close to Superman, and almost all of them would allow for an advancement in what most people would consider to be the common good. Superman hadn't responded to any of it.

The bombing campaign served multiple goals, as any good plan did.

Superman was an extinction level event waiting to happen, and where those were concerned there were no second chances. If Superman ever decided to kill everyone, there would be no stopping him, and so it stood to reason that humanity should take every possible precaution to prevent that from happening. The most direct path would be through killing Superman. Lex had written multiple letters to the editor under various pseudonyms, but none had ever been published, and his point of view seemed entirely unpopular. It was always one that he voiced from a position of anonymity, because in public he was playing the role of Superman's champion.

People were bad at estimating the risk that an extinction posed, because no one had ever lived through one. People were also quite bad at imagining a catastrophe so large. A woman might weep when you mentioned the possibility of her child dying from consumption, but the total obliteration of Earth-originating life would produce only a shrug. It was too vast for people to think about rationally. Worse, they assumed that "Superman is the greatest threat to humanity" was a shorthand for some decision on Superman's part, when in truth that was

only a part of it.

Many people accepted Superman's story at face value; the last son of a dying planet, the only one of his kind to exhibit such incredible powers, with little aid from technology save for the ship that had provided him with a trip through the stars. There were many parts of the story that Lex was skeptical of, but he found it most terrifying to think that the story was true, namely because of what it suggested about Kryptonian science.

Huntington's disease was a hereditary degenerative disease with cognitive and psychiatric symptoms, one of which was psychosis. Huntington's was seen in perhaps one in eight thousand people, and psychosis was seen in perhaps one in ten of those. If a randomly selected human of Superman's apparent age were to obtain Superman's powers, there would be a one in eighty thousand chance that they would both have Huntington's disease and symptoms of psychosis, the result of which would probably be casualties that would dwarf the Great War by a large margin. If Superman was telling the truth about the culture that he came from, his society wasn't much further advanced than humanity, and so likely hadn't grown past degenerative diseases and hereditary defects. Even if Superman were perfectly good in some abstract sense, the onset of a mental disease might be just around the corner.

Worse, if Superman's powers weren't the result of engineering and carefully controlled science (a hard pill to swallow) then no one had made sure that they were safe, and perhaps some day something internal to him would simply unravel, unleashing enough energy to destroy an entire hemisphere. If Superman was to be believed, his powers had come from seemingly nowhere, and yet everyone simply trusted them as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

Estimates were difficult to make, given Superman's silence.

His second interview with Lois Lane had provided little illumination. Nevertheless, numbers could be pulled from thin air in order to get a sense of things. There was the possibility that something would happen that was completely outside of Superman's control which would result in Superman destroying the Earth. There was the possibility that Superman could simply have a bad day and decide to kill a large number of people, which many people seemed to think was absurd. There were also failure modes which didn't involve the destruction of humanity but would nevertheless result in an effective end to humanity as Lex Luthor knew it, the most probable of which seemed to be that Superman would turn into a tyrant. When these probabilities were multiplied together, the final very rough estimate was that Superman had a one in ten chance of bringing about a global scale human catastrophe of some kind in the next thirty years. Even if the odds had been one in a hundred, Lex would have taken a similarly extreme course of action.

The collateral damage caused by the bombs was negligible in comparison to the threat of Superman.

But of course the bombs were unlikely to kill Superman. The first four had been for calibration, built with a small device which gave a series of loud chirps prior to detonation to allow Superman time to get to it before it exploded. The next series of bombs would introduce more exotic methods of harm which hadn't yet been conclusively ruled out, but the prospects looked grim.

The secondary goal was to probe for a weakness. Lex had it on good authority that Superman had taken the equivalent of a direct hit from navy artillery to his chest when the third bomb exploded. He'd simply looked surprised that he'd set it off. The magnesium and phosphorus compounds had done nothing to blind him, and he'd been talking with the police soon after-

wards with no ill effects. Lex had suspected as much, but perhaps something would be found that could harm him but not kill him, or otherwise give Lex an advantage. Lead had been a boon, and allowed Lex a level of freedom that was gratifying until he remembered how free he'd been before Superman's arrival.

The third objective was testing Superman's limits. Lex kept a detailed log of Superman's movements in his study, as well as a large map of Metropolis which was covered in small color-coded labels that corresponded to Superman sightings or activities. Superman's patterns had been mapped against the general patterns of crime and emergency in Metropolis, and Lex had not been all that surprised to find that the patterns didn't quite match one another, even taking into account Superman's preferences for certain crimes and emergencies over others. There were two lulls, one during the daytime that seemed to start around eight in the morning and end around five in the afternoon, and one in the dead of night from three in the morning to five in the morning. Lex had no idea what to make of it, but kept the information safely locked away behind lead walls. Perhaps Superman needed to sleep, or needed to recharge in some other way, but sustained and consistent bombings would allow for information to be gathered.

The fourth objective was to identify the place that Superman retired to when he wasn't flying around the city, since Superman demonstrably didn't spend all of his time on heroics. Lex strongly suspected that the ship hadn't broken up over the Atlantic, and was in fact located somewhere in or near Metropolis. Depending on the size it would be difficult to hide, but Superman could surely lift the craft up and move it at will, which meant that it could be nearly anywhere. All that was under the assumption that Superman was an alien — there was still an outside possibility that there was some other explanation. If the

spaceship existed, finding it was of utmost importance. Lex had already hired a team of private investigators to see if they could find some trace of a ruined ship in the Atlantic, though without eyewitness accounts of where the spaceship had burned up it would be impossible. With them it would merely be very, very difficult. Still, it was worth trying.

The next wave of bombs would be planted in two weeks time. Perhaps Lex would get lucky and Superman would prove to have a weakness.

Author's Note: This chapter was getting too long, so I split it in half. The next half will come at the regularly scheduled time on Sunday night.

Any numbers that Lex or anyone else gives is their own best guess based on what might have been knowable in the 1930s before the age of the internet. I don't guarantee that these are at all period accurate, and obviously we're dealing with an alternate universe where a city named Metropolis exists.

A note on geography: I'm writing on the assumption that Metropolis replaces New York City and Gotham City replaces Chicago, though with different city layouts and some changes to small scale geography of the region.

Two historical notes: First, the American eugenics movement was still alive and well at this time, so if you see references to it pop up here and there, just remember that this was an opinion you could voice without anyone really raising an eyebrow. Second, the United States really did denature alcohol, which wound up killing more people than Superman probably saves in a decade. The more you know!

As always, I appreciate any corrections, comments, or general feedback, and thanks for reading.

Chapter 5

A Stopped Clock

Lois Lane had been walking down 15th Avenue looking for a place to eat breakfast when she'd heard the bang from the next block over. She'd started running towards it seconds after she'd heard it, while everyone else on the street was looking around like they'd missed something. If they'd read the paper, they'd know that Superman had predicted that the Clockwork Bomber would be back. Two weeks had passed and whatever leads Superman had been following, they hadn't led anywhere, since no arrests had been made. Lois looked down at her wristwatch as she ran — it was almost exactly nine in the morning.

Lois hadn't been close enough to the other bombs to get there in time; when she or Clark showed up, the whole thing was already over, and the mad panic and confusion that followed a bombing had given way to shock and grief. This one was different, a chance to be close enough that she would be one of the first on the scene. As she turned the corner and ran past an appliance store, she could see the debris strewn out over the street and the broken windows. People were still picking themselves up, and a few were bleeding, but it didn't look nearly as bad as the other bombs had. She was fishing a pencil and paper out

of her purse when the second bomb went off. It was small and subdued, much softer than the first, and there were shouts of surprise but few of pain.

Lois started forward, just as Superman arrived on the scene.

He moved at speed, darting into the damaged storefront so fast he was little more than a blur, and leaving minutes later. He was carrying what looked like a box, and trailing yellow-brown smoke behind him. Lois tried to follow his movements, but after only a few seconds she'd lost him. He was back half a minute later, and landed right in front of Lois.

"Can you smell anything?" he asked.

"Horseradish," said Lois. The pieces clicked into place. "It's mustard gas."

Superman nodded, and was back in the fray in moments. Lois sprang into action, calling out to people to get away from the site of the explosion. If she could smell the mustard gas, that meant that she was too close. She tried to remember what the medics used on people who'd been exposed mustard gas. Her father was a general in the army, and had fought in the Great War, but it was too far before Lois's time. The most she could do was to get people away from the gas, so that they wouldn't suffer from exposure. Mustard gas was an insidious poison mostly because it took a while to take effect, and if you didn't know what the odor meant you wouldn't think to take action until long after it was too late. Lois concentrated on getting people to safety, and yelling out instructions. It caused blisters, not just where it touched exposed skin but in the nose and throat as well. It could damage the eyes so badly that you'd go blind. If you weren't killed by the swelling of the throat, you could still be made mute. She ripped at her blouse and fashioned a crude mask for herself, and helped others to do the same.

After everyone was clear of the gas, or at least in an area

where they could no longer smell it, Superman landed next to her.

“Call the radio stations, tell people to stay inside and keep their windows closed. If I’m right, the next one will come in six hours.” She nodded, but didn’t really need to be told what to do. She could keep a cool head under pressure. Superman was crouched down and ready to launch into the air when a buried thought surfaced.

“Wait!” she called, worried that he would be a mile away by the time the words left her lips. But he stood up and looked at her, puzzlement on his face. She took a deep breath. “You said that the bomber was trying to get to you,” she said. “Why not let him have you? We could send a message out over the radio, and make a deal. Even if we can’t disarm the bombs it’ll let us evacuate people.”

Superman hesitated. She could swear she saw his eyes blur as they moved around to take in the crowd in a fraction of a second. “Lois, I don’t know whether or not these things will kill me. I don’t even know if the mustard gas is going to have an effect on me. I breathed in more than anyone else before I realized what it was. He wants to kill me, that’s the only kind of deal I think he’d listen to.”

“But you’d rush in to save people anyway,” said Lois. “We’re just cutting out the possibility of collateral damage. You’ll be fine.”

Superman stared at her, and she was sure they were both painfully aware that everyone around them was listening in on their conversation. Some were outright staring.

“No,” said Superman. “I don’t negotiate. And if the bomber wants me at the site of these bombs, I’m not going to play into his hands.”

He hurled himself into the sky and flew away before she

could figure out how to respond to that. Had Superman just said that he was handing Metropolis over to the bomber?

“An officer Kennedy for you, sir,” said Mercy.

“Thank you dear, I’ll take it now if you please,” replied Lex. He calmed himself, and got into character, becoming a man who knew nothing about what was happening across town. “Officer Kennedy?” he asked with a pleasant voice. “What is this regarding?”

“Ah, Mr. Luthor we really appreciated your donation to the Policeman’s Ball this year,” said the policeman, “And the chief was saying how you wanted updates on anything real important having to do with Superman, so he just thought I should give you a call to keep you up to date.” It wasn’t a bribe per se, just a mutually beneficial friendship.

“Has something happened?” asked Lex. He allowed some genuine-sounding concern creep into his voice.

“Well sir, it seems like the Clockwork Bomber is back, and he’s working with some nasty stuff. The boys say that it’s mustard gas, like from the trenches of the Great War?”

“I’m familiar, yes,” said Lex. “Superman came in to save the day?”

“Well, here’s the thing,” said Kennedy. “He came down and pulled people out of the gas, and said it was the Bomber come back, but then that lady reporter told him that he should try to make some kind of deal with the Bomber, because she seemed to think that the Bomber was trying to kill him and that maybe Supes could save everyone a lot of trouble by letting him try, for all the good it would do because he’s invincible right?”

“I see,” Lex replied. “And his response?”

“He said he wouldn’t negotiate,” said Kennedy. “And then he just flew off like he didn’t want to hear any more about any bombs. Like he was done helping out with them.”

“He’s abandoning us?” asked Lex.

“I don’t know sir,” said Kennedy. “But it sort of sounded like it.”

“Thank you for the update, officer,” said Lex. “Tell the captain that the police of this city continually reaffirm my faith in them.” Lex set down the phone without waiting to hear a response. He steepled his fingers for a moment before remembering that he needed to keep up with the role he was playing. Someone might notice if Lex responded to news of an attack on Metropolis with only a look of quiet contemplation.

“Mercy, it appears that the Clockwork Bomber is back, and using different tactics. I believe chemical agents were mentioned,” he said. Radioactive and biological too, though the person he was pretending to be didn’t know that. “We should be safe in this building, but I want you to start on calling the managers and telling them to follow the drills and keep tuned to the radio. If it’s like last time, the next bomb will be in six hours.”

“Yes sir,” said Mercy, picking up the phone before he was even done speaking. She was invaluable, and likely could have handled the entire crisis on her own without his instruction. She didn’t know the full extent of Lex’s plans, but she knew enough to implicate him in a vast number of crimes, and that was a mark of the extreme faith he placed in her. Lex turned on the radio in his office. It was there more as camouflage than to provide any information. Superman’s movements and actions were the most important thing right now, and he was skeptical of the radio’s ability to provide that information. Lex’s other channels were slower but more reliable, and there were enough of them that

any unreliability in one could be compensated for in the others.

Lex had a contingency plan in place. There were two couriers waiting by phones in separate locations within the city. A message could quickly be relayed to them which would send them to the nearest police station. One courier had an encoded message, while the other had the one-time pad needed to decode it. Both pieces were in envelopes lined with lead. Once decoded, the message would give the locations of all of the bombs, and the buildings could be evacuated, saving lives and likely preventing property damage. The only question was whether this was the proper time to deploy that plan.

Lex had killed for the first time when he'd been fifteen. Willie Calhoun had entered him in a bare knuckle boxing fight, and Lex had landed a lucky punch that burst an artery in his opponent's neck. He'd been rewarded with a twenty dollar bill and a slap on the back. He'd committed his first actual murder later that year, when a shop owner had gotten wind of the plan for a nighttime robbery and decided that the best course of action was to lay in wait with a revolver and the lights turned off. That shootout was the closest that Lex had ever come to dying. His hands had been trembling when he shot the shopkeeper in the face. He'd been less hardened then.

Lex took no special pleasure in murder. It stirred no passion in him to see the life leave a man's eyes. It gave him no glee to hear about the people who died or were injured by the bombs, just a certain sense of sadness that he imagined other people might feel more keenly. He certainly didn't feel any guilt. Lex sat back and looked at his watch. The next bomb would be going off soon. He tried to make a careful consideration of the possibilities.

It was possible that Superman had a weakness to biological, chemical, or radiological attacks, as it was one of the only vec-

tors of attack that hadn't yet been tried. Numerous witnesses had reported seeing Superman breathing, and none had specifically noted that he wasn't drawing breath. Though Superman had never been seen coughing or sneezing, and had surely endured smoke inhalation on an absurd level while engaging in fire rescue, it was still reasonable to assume that he had a biology of sorts, and that this biology could be disrupted in some way. He had not yet been observed eating, drinking, or sleeping, but that might have been something done during what Lex thought of as the quiet periods when Superman was less active.

Superman might be afraid of dying to the bombs. If true, this would be incredibly valuable information, and assuming that Superman didn't radically alter his *modus operandi* in response to these attempts, it would be fairly simple (in the scheme of plans that had to work around Superman's powers) to stage some event to attract his attention and deliver the poison while Superman suspected nothing. The reason that Lex hadn't done it this way in the first place was the enormous amount of planning, expense, and exposure that would have to go into doing that for each of the thirty candidate attacks that he had planned. Mustard gas, phosgene, chlorine, contact poisons, pesticides, polonium; it saved an enormous amount of time to simply allow Superman to know that someone was trying to kill him and put him in a position where he would either expose himself or expose an unwillingness to intervene.

The second possibility was that Superman was thinking of the future. Superman had routinely refused to make deals with criminals who had taken hostages, presumably because he knew that if he did, more criminals would begin taking hostages in order to put themselves in a position to strike a bargain. Similarly, if the bombs were only being placed because the bomb-maker expected Superman to show up, then Superman's best course of

action to prevent bombs from being placed was to stop showing up. Of course, that would only lead to a change in tactics, and not one that would likely result in better outcomes from Superman's perspective. Lex had dozens of ideas on how to administer the poisons if Superman refused to touch the bombs. But perhaps Superman was under the delusion that his unseen enemy would stop trying over a little thing like changing strategies.

Ultimately, Lex decided against using the contingency plan, at least in the short term. The message from the police officer had been too vague, and even if Superman had directly stated his intent to leave the rest of the bombs untouched, it was possible that the alien was bluffing. Lex didn't particularly like the prospect of martial law being declared, nor the unfortunate economic impacts of a sustained series of bombs in the largest city in America, but the dice were already cast. If Superman had anticipated the bombings and outright stated his refusal, perhaps Lex would never have spent the time and money going down that path, but with everything set up the majority of the costs had already been sunk.

"Where the hell have you been?" asked Lois. She'd been seen by a doctor, gone home to shower, changed clothes, and then gone back to work. It turned out that there wasn't all that much you could do about mustard gas, and while the doctor had wanted her to wait it out to see whether she would develop any symptoms, she was pretty confident that she'd had a low enough dose, so she'd slipped out the door when he was seeing to someone else. No way was Lois Lane sitting on her ass when there was news being made. From what the doctor had said, people didn't get worse all at once, so if it got bad she'd go in.

She'd called Perry to let him know she was alright, and then kept calling Clark because she wanted updates.

Clark sat at his desk, typing up an article. He typed with both his index fingers, punching the keys down one at a time. As she watched he took a glance at the keyboard to see which key was which. Lois could type so fast she very nearly hit the mechanical limits on her Underwood. Speed didn't matter all that much for a reporter, but it was still grating to watch him do such a poor job of something so basic.

"Clark?" she asked. "Where have you been?"

"Sorry," he said. He pointed to the typewriter in front of him. "I got a call in from the Midwest, apparently there was a Superman sighting." He hadn't answered her question, but then again, Clark was hopeless. "You're taking point on the return of the bomber?" He always said "bomber", not "Clockwork Bomber", which Lois felt was a bit petty. He was sore that he hadn't been the one to name him.

"I am," said Lois. "Superman's flown the coop. He's said he's not going to help out with the Clockwork Bomber."

Clark turned to look at her. "Why not?"

Lois shrugged. "I don't know. I guess Superman wasn't sure whether it would affect him or not."

"Makes sense," said Clark.

Lois raised an eyebrow.

"I mean, let's say that you walked down a dark alley and got shot, only to find out that the bullet didn't do much more than tear up your blouse," said Clark. "You might try shooting yourself again to see whether you really were bulletproof, but maybe you'd be too scared that you'd just end up with a gunshot wound. And you certainly wouldn't go drink some poison, because maybe it would kill you."

"I understand that," said Lois. "Even if I buy that maybe

Superman doesn't know the full extent of how he's protected, he's still supposed to be a hero. It doesn't take a whole lot of courage to walk up to a guy with a gun when you know that his gun can't hurt you. Superman says he wants to be a symbol and then runs away the first time he might get hurt? That's what I don't get."

"I guess," said Clark. He frowned. "With Superman's powers, isn't it better for him to stay alive and saving people instead of risking death? I mean, how many people does he save in a week?"

Lois shook her head, and pulled a cigarette out. "Clark, you're not thinking in the long term. Superman might think that there's some risk of dying, right? And he's got a general stance that he doesn't negotiate with criminals, for the obvious reasons. But let's assume that this bomber's got huge amounts of money, no morals, and an honest desire to kill Superman, all of which I think are probably true. If Superman's going to stay away from the chemical end of things out of a sense of self-preservation, then assuming Superman still intends to operate within Metropolis that means that the bomber is just going to resort to tricks. He's going to. . . I don't know, cause a train derailment and vent pesticides over the area. Superman shows up thinking it's a legitimate threat, and then bam — poison right in his face."

"Because Superman can't figure out whether or not there's going to be a trap," said Clark slowly.

Clark Kent wasn't as dumb as he looked. It had taken Lois a long time to figure him out, but she was pretty sure that she knew what games he played. Clark Kent wanted to be underestimated, because it would make it easier for him to exceed expectations. People clapped with delight when Clever Hans had done math, not because the math was impressive, but because it

was impressive for a horse. It was the same way with Clark. You saw this four-eyed Midwestern guy in the middle of Metropolis, looking for all the world like he'd taken a wrong turn leaving the farm, and then when he actually put out a competent story you couldn't help but feel like he'd done something amazing — like he was a horse that could do math. But the thing was, if you were actually good at math you wouldn't need anyone to think that you were a horse. There was more to Clark than met the eye, but once you'd lived and worked with him for long enough and recalibrated your expectations of him, Clark was simply below average in every way that really mattered to Lois. He typed with two fingers for Christ's sake.

"Superman's got a problem either way," said Lois. "That problem is that someone with means, motive, and intellect is trying to kill him. If he doesn't deal with the bombs, it's going to be something else, something that he won't see coming, I'm pretty sure of that. Making a deal isn't ideal, but it would at least help for him to actually be the symbol he talks about being."

Clark looked to the ceiling, which was quickly becoming a universal sign that powerful ears might be listening. "Are we having this conversation for his benefit?" asked Clark.

Lois shrugged, which meant yes. She knew that Superman could hear her. It would be better for Metropolis to not have a war between Superman and whoever was behind the bombings — and she had a few ideas of who that might be. She was about to add to her argument when Perry's door slammed open.

"There's been another bombing," he shouted.

"But it's too early," said Lois. "Last time there was six hours between bombs."

"Either the Clockwork Bomber screwed the pooch, or the schedule's been stepped up," said Perry.

"Let's go," said Lois as she turned towards Clark, but Clark

was already gone.

Sal Maroni was a Superman spotter, which really just meant that he sat on a rooftop with a notebook and drank beers while looking out over the skyline. He listened to the radio, usually some kind of music, and smoked like a chimney. Spotting didn't pay all that well, but there wasn't an easier job in the entire city. Sal had worked as a security guard once, and this was just like that except there wasn't ever the slightest amount of danger. In addition to the radio, the smokes, and the beer, he had a comfortable chair he'd pulled up from his apartment on the fifth floor and a parasol he'd bought at a flea market to block out the worst of the sun. On an average day he'd see Superman half a dozen times, and he would faithfully write down his best guess of Superman's location, speed, and direction of travel. On a few occasions Sal had been tempted to just take a nap and then make things up, but he'd been told that his observations would be checked against what the other spotters put down. He could see a few of them on other rooftops.

He'd heard the sirens earlier, and WGBS has switched from *The Adventures of Lolly Lemon* to reporting on the return of the Clockwork Bomber. It was about two hours after that when Superman rose up from near The Daily Planet Building, moving so fast that Sal might have missed it if he hadn't been paying attention. In his notebook, Sal wrote down the details, making some best guesses. There was a man named Lonnie who sat at Grecco's Cafe. He took in the notes from the spotters once night fell, and had taught them how to make the most accurate estimations of speed, distance, and direction.

Sal enjoyed being a spotter. It was boring, most of the time, but boring was the same as relaxing if you looked at it the right

way. Another perk of the job was getting to see the news in the making. Sal had seen Superman go in for a slow landing on top of Daily Planet Building, and then the next day he'd read the interview in the paper. It was nice, to be able to see Superman flying and connect the dots later on. Sal would read the newspaper and be able to make sense of what his notes actually meant. More often than not, the crimes he stopped were small or private, but sometimes something big would happen in Metropolis, and Sal would get a glimpse of it.

When the radio started talking about bombs, Sal cracked open another beer and settled in. Today would be a busy day for spotting.

Superman responded to the second bomb, and Lex felt a sense of relief. There was no way to know whether it had been a bluff or simple indecision, or maybe even poor information, but for whatever reason Superman had decided to stick his neck out. Lex would have to arrange another interview with Lois Lane in order to find out what Superman had really said to her, but it would have to wait. That Superman hadn't tried to make a deal with the bomber was not wholly surprising.

The selection of attacks to try had taken careful consideration. Anything that caused a death throes had to be avoided, and Lex put a preference towards those agents which would cause weakness or paralysis in humans. There was no way of knowing whether Kryptonian biology was similar, of course. Lex had considered the possibility that in attempting to destroy Superman he might unintentionally cause the disaster he wished to avert, but Lex was certainly not the only player in this game, and their plots were far more dangerous than his. All the more reason to take minor risks to kill Superman, when the other players

sometimes seemed to be doing nothing more than trying to piss him off.

There were forty-eight bombs, spread out over four days, one every two hours.

After the third bomb had gone off, he'd sent all his employees besides Mercy home for the day and sequestered himself in his office. He had adequate food and water, a set of fresh suits hanging in his closet, and a private bathroom. It was more or less everything that he needed. During this time of crisis, Lex would play things safely, and do nothing too terribly out of character. He would offer a reward for information leading to the bomber, he would offer to help the police in any way that he could, and he would listen to the reports as they came in. The facts could be collected afterwards, when the whole ordeal was over, but Lex didn't think that the man he was pretending at being would apply harsh scrutiny during a time of crisis.

There would be immense scrutiny. If the bombs simply stopped, the police would go on the hunt. Lex made the call that would tie up the loose ends and divert attention away from him. He was extremely skeptical that a path could be drawn back to him, but Lex Luthor was cautious, and so a false trail had been laid instead.

Officers Milheiser and Kennedy walked up the stairs, sweating in the summer heat. They'd been working back to back shifts ever since the day before when the bombings had started up again, as had most of the police and firefighters in the greater Metropolis area. The mayor had briefly talked about instituting martial law, but no one was keen on that. The compromise was double shifts. The elevator in the building was out, and it was

just their luck that the apartment was on the tenth floor. It was more or less how the last few days had been going for them.

"Any reason the captain wants us chasing this down?" asked Milheiser.

"He said an anonymous tip is more trustworthy," said Kennedy. Milheiser nearly stopped. "How does that figure?"

"Well, there's a big reward out for information, right?" asked Kennedy. "More tips have been flooding in than we could ever take a look at, because there's no penalty for making stuff up and maybe if you get lucky you get a little piece of the pie. So we got people sending us all sorts of crap, gossip about their neighbors, reports about people that they just don't like, paranoid fantasies and all that. Ten thousand dollars is in the pot right now thanks to Luthor, and that's enough to attract all kinds of crazies."

"So the captain thinks that an anonymous tip is more trustworthy, because no one stands to gain from it?" asked Milheiser.

"You got it," said Kennedy with a strained smile. The heat was getting to him.

"And the captain didn't stop to think maybe someone else would figure that and send the pair of us to a building with no working elevator so we'd have to sweat our asses off climbing to the top?" asked Milheiser.

Kennedy had no response to that. He might have said that no one would do that in a time of crisis, but he knew Metropolis well enough to know that wasn't the case. He'd seen enough rioting and looting to come to the conclusion that people were bastards.

When they got to the tenth floor, they knocked on the door, and found that it swung in to the touch. Kennedy and Milheiser shared a glance and drew their revolvers. It occurred to both of them that perhaps the Clockwork Bomber had lured them there, just to make a point, but they entered anyway.

In the center of the apartment, a young man was hanging from the rafters by his belt. He'd been dead for hours, and the smell was utterly offensive. Milheiser rushed to the bathroom to throw up, while Kennedy made sure the place was cleared. It was a pretty cut and dry suicide, with a kicked out chair beneath the young man, but Kennedy went through the motions anyway. He stood the chair up and made sure that the hanged man would actually have been able to stand on it, since he'd heard that sometimes people would stage a murder to look like a suicide but forget the details. He was vaguely disappointed when the chair was the right height.

Kennedy had moved on to a small workshop area by the time Milheiser walked out of the bathroom, wiping his mouth with the back of his sleeve.

"Looks like our guy was a tinker, at least," said Kennedy. He leafed through a set of schematics, pulling some out from the bits of electrical wire and springs, trying to make heads or tails of it. There were copious notes and detailed drawings, but it didn't snap into focus until Milheiser unearthed a book titled "The Manufacture of Explosives".

"It's really him," said Milheiser with a shake of his head as Kennedy began laying out the papers. The body was in the other room, and would have to be dealt with, but neither of them relished the thought of going up and down the stairs again, which they'd surely have to do a few times before the day was out.

"Let's call it in," said Kennedy. "Looks like there's an address here, might be the place where the bombs were made."

Lex Luthor was a people person. People told him their problems, and he found solutions. It had been that way ever since his childhood on the streets of Suicide Slums, the worst neigh-

borhood that Metropolis had to offer. So far as anyone besides Mercy knew, Lex had gone legitimate. The vast majority of his criminal enterprises were run through various intermediaries, who knew him only by codewords over the phone. Since Superman's arrival, Lex had let much of that go to rot. It was easy enough to make money in perfectly legitimate ways if you had a mind as keen as Lex's. Instead, he used his network of slush funds and discreet contacts in order to facilitate his private war against Superman.

Harry Kramer had been a piece of serendipity. He'd been an expert in explosives by the age of sixteen, thanks in part to a father who had done demolition work at a mine upstate before losing his life to a faulty detonator. Kramer liked to blow things up, and got involved in professional fireworks before he was discharged after an incident that lost his boss the use of two fingers. It was when Kramer got hired on to do a bank job that he came to the attention of Lex. The job had been an abject failure, though it was through no fault of the explosives, which had worked perfectly. Kramer had been willing to hire himself out again, but he was difficult to work with, and there wasn't much call for an explosives expert in the criminal underworld of Metropolis. Harry had been working as a grocery bagger until Lex needed his expertise. Lex could design the bombs easily enough, but wasn't willing to put himself in a position where he could be seen making or delivering them. He'd given Harry a new apartment and a workshop, along with a large amount of freedom.

A careful examination of the evidence would reveal a hidden hand behind the Clockwork Bomber. Harry Kramer had received a large amount of money from an uncle down in Georgia, and if that thread were tracked down the sham would be revealed, and point back to Metropolis. This was part of Lex's design.

There were forty-eight bombs in total. Thirteen were found by Superman prior to detonation, and he managed the evacuation and the removal or controlled detonation of the bomb. Any hesitance he'd displayed in front of Lois was completely gone, and over the course of the extended bombing, the enactment of martial law, and everything else, he'd proven himself to be a complete hero in every way. When he wasn't helping with rescue efforts or stopping the bombs, he could regularly be seen watching over the city.

"You look like shit, Clark," said Lois when they got back to work. Most of the businesses had temporarily closed after the second day; *The Daily Planet* had closed on the fourth, when some people were saying that the bombs would keep going off forever.

"I didn't get much sleep," he replied with a yawn. "I kept worrying that my apartment was going to explode out from under me and I'd die choking."

Lois had escaped the mustard gas with only a small blister on her left hand and a light cough. She considered herself lucky. No one had died from the mustard gas, but it was one of the tamest things that had come out of the bombs. She'd spent the days off from work pacing back and forth, sleeping heavily, and using her home phone to try to get a break in the story, though the phones were nearly as useless as the radio.

"Who do you think did it?" asked Lois.

"They caught him Lois," said Clark.

"One man, working alone, and you believe that?" she asked.

"He came into a lot of money," said Clark. "He was smart and deranged. Everyone who knew him thought that it made sense after the fact, and some of them had even reported him to the police. If he hadn't switched apartments they'd have got him."

“Sure,” said Lois. “And if you buy that I’ve got a bridge to sell you. The police are investigating it all. They’ve found a few of the guys that planted the bombs, and a couple of places that delivered the materials used for construction. I don’t know anything about making bombs, but I can believe that a single person might be able to make as many as he did, if given enough time. But add on all the logistics on top of that, all the scoping out of locations and arrangements for delivery? No, no way he was acting alone. I’m not saying that we can solve it from our desks, but think about it Clark.” She looked at him. “Someone intelligent, resourceful, wealthy, with deep criminal connections and a strong desire to see Superman dead. There’s one guy head and shoulders above everyone else on that list.”

“William Calhoun,” said Clark.

“The last crime boss of Metropolis,” said Lois with a nod. “If you could follow the trails well enough, I have no doubt that they’d lead back to him.”

William Calhoun was fifty-eight years old, which was ancient for a crime boss. When Superman had come along, organized crime had to either toughen up or flee the city, and Willie seemed to be one of the only ones willing to toughen up. Boss Moxie had continued on like nothing was different, and now he was sitting in Sing-Sing. Johnny Stitches and Toby Whale had left for Gotham City, while Angelo Baretti simply evaporated like mist. And that left Willie as a big fish in the biggest pond in the world, with the only problem being that the pond was being shot full of holes by a nut with a tommy gun. Willie had been working on the metaphor for a while, and it still wasn’t quite right.

Willie was looking over the books in his lead-lined office, and trying to figure out a way to get people to pay their bookies when

there was a commotion downstairs in the bar. Not really having any enthusiasm for the drudgery of what he'd been looking at, Calhoun wandered down the stairs. His two guards followed.

Superman stood in the middle of the Elephant Club, with everyone around him giving him a wide berth. Superman was staring at Willie from the moment he started walking down the stairs, and maybe even before that. He could see through walls, the prick.

"Hello William," said Superman. His voice was calm and gentle as a breeze.

Willie put on his most casual demeanor. He kept telling the boys that they had nothing to be worried about when it came to Superman. Sure, Superman would foil crimes and get them locked up, but he never hurt anyone, not even in the process of arresting them. Micky Fingers had stabbed Superman in the eyes and Superman had just stood there like a statue. But it was hard not to think about what the man could do.

"You're trespassing," said Willie. He tried to keep his voice light.

"This establishment is open to the public," said Superman.

"Well you're blacklisted then," said Willie. "I'll have to put up a sign that says 'No Supermen'." This brought a round of nervous chuckles from the crowd.

"I'll be leaving soon," said Superman. "I just wanted to let you know that I'm watching you. You've been careful, but not careful enough. There's nowhere that you can hide from me. There's nothing that I won't do to bring you to justice."

"Oh really?" asked Willie, striding towards the Superman with a confidence that he almost felt. "Anything? Then I've got a deal for you. Tear off one of my arms, and I'd be in so much pain I'd give you a full confession for whatever it is you think I did. Go on, do it."

Supeman didn't move. "I'm not a monster," he said evenly.

"No, you're a monster alright, you just don't want people thinking that you are. You don't want to get your hands dirty," said Willie. "I've heard from a bunch of guys that you're nothing but a big fat pussy, and standing here looking at you I can see it's ab-so-lutely true." Willie could feel his blood pumping in his ears. Months of frustrations at the hands of Superman were coming to a head. Willie had tried to stay low, but his organization could only stay starved of cashflow for so long. Willie'd been funding lawsuits against Superman, false accusations and red tape, along with whatever else he could think of. Some of the guys talked about killing Superman, but that was a fool's errand — the bombs had proven that. Willie just wanted him to leave, to go bother Gotham City or Blüdhaven.

"No one likes you," said Willie. "No one wants you here. Get that through your thick alien skull. You think the government doesn't have plans to kill you? Hell, you think that they haven't tried?" That was Willie's best guess as to who was behind the bombings after talking it out with Luthor. "You do whatever the fuck you feel like doing and expect us to praise you. Well I got news for you, it's not going to happen. Eventually someone is going to find a way to kill you, and I'll be first in line to piss on your grave." Willie spat at Superman, and watched as the glob of phlegm hit him in the cheek. Superman could have dodged it, probably could have reached across the room and grabbed a mug to catch it in, but he'd just let it hit him.

"I just wanted to let you know that I know," said Superman. "In everything that you do, be aware that I'm watching you. When you're arrested, it will be completely by the books. When you're convicted to life in prison, I hope that they're able to rehabilitate you." Superman didn't touch the spit on his cheek. He just turned and walked out the door. The bar exploded into

conversation, and Willie went back upstairs to think about what it was that Superman had actually known.

Forty-eight bombs, and not so much as a cough or a sneeze from Superman.

In his lead-lined study was a large map of Metropolis, five feet to a side, which took up a place of prominence on one wall. Stuck into this map were pins with small flags on them, each of them a recorded Superman sighting. The information had been collected from various sources, from newspaper reports to eyewitnesses. Lex had dozens of people around the city who worked as Superman watchers, and they would sit atop tall buildings and make notes of the lone figure flying through the sky whenever they could.

Lex was looking for patterns. Which directions did Superman come from? Which directions did he go? What crimes did he tend to respond to, and which did he ignore? What were his hours of activity? Lex had long hypothesized that Superman had a base of operations somewhere, likely the same place that his spaceship was stashed. Finding it would be a godsend. The arrival of the Clockwork Bomber had provided a wealth of data. Lex sat down to do some math.

Each arrival and departure could be defined by a vector, and these were represented on the map by small lines drawn moving away from the pins in different colors. Lex compared the times and directions, and began by throwing out all of those vectors with known destinations. When he was done, he was left with one-thousand eight-hundred sixty-one vectors to manipulate. He began mapping them in different ways, to see whether Superman favored one side of the city over the other, or whether he consistently came into the city from one direction. He found

a slight eastward inclination to arrivals and westward inclination to departures, though given that the entire United States was to the west of Metropolis, that might have just been because Superman often responded to large-scale crises outside of the city. Following that middling success, Lex did some complicated math to make another map that showed where vectors converged. He eventually circled ten square blocks in the center of Metropolis. It was there that Superman kept going towards, though that might have simply been because Superman spent his time waiting in the center of the city.

It was close to a futile exercise. The data was bad. It was cobbled together from too many sources, and too many of those sources were unreliable. There were certainly data points that were lies told by people who wished they had more interesting lives. Lex couldn't properly trust the data, and so couldn't properly trust the conclusions that he drew from the data. Worse, Superman was aware that people were watching him. Still, it was better to grasp at straws than to simply give up.

Lex began segmenting the vectors into blocks of time. Even with unreliable data, it was well-established that Superman was less active during working hours, and so perhaps it might be that paring down the data would help to reveal something more. The big problem there was that there was that the data became thinner, and even less reliable. Nevertheless, Lex continued on. There were other plates spinning that wouldn't need to be touched for a while, and in the meantime Lex could pretend that he was getting somewhere. The math was somewhere between difficult and tedious, and not at all pleasant.

When he was done, Lex frowned at the result. He circled four city blocks on the map, slightly away from the direct center of downtown. He turned to look at Mercy, who sat in a padded chair drinking tea and reading a book.

“Mercy darling, my brain is failing me,” said Lex.

“Sorry to hear that sir,” replied Mercy, not bothering to look up.

“I’ve been staring too closely at this for far too long,” said Lex. “Eight o’clock in the morning to five o’clock at night. I can feel something refusing to spring to mind there, something that’s not quite clicking.”

“It’s standard working hours for most of downtown,” said Mercy.

Lex turned back to the map. He stared at it. There was something he was missing, some piece of the puzzle. Nine to five, but not on weekends. It was fuzzy, painfully fuzzy, but the data was clear and the correlations were real. Lex was on the verge of a breakthrough, if only he could —

“Son of a bitch,” said Lex softly.

Author’s Note: As always, thanks for the reviews / favorites / follows, which are always a pleasure to see. Thanks to those people who’ve pointed out typos; you’re making the story better for people who read it after you.

Chapter 6

Private Wars

Superman has a day job.

It was just a joke, the kind of thing that the brain coughs up when it's trying to match a pattern. Kant said that humor was expectation strained until it suddenly dissolved into nothingness. Lex had been making maps and doing complex math for weeks on end, and if that was a joke, it made sense that the punchline was simply that Superman walked the streets of Metropolis as a human. The very thought of the most powerful entity in the world choosing to work a nine to five job in downtown Metropolis should have caused any right thinking person to burst into laughter. But as Lex turned the idea over in his head, the humor faded. And once the idea had presented itself, it refused to leave.

“Son of a bitch.”

People liked to believe that brilliance was a matter of sudden insight. Isaac Newton was sitting beneath an apple tree and just happened to be struck on the head with an apple, which led to him developing the theory of universal gravitation. Archimedes sat in the bathtub and realized that an object displaces its equal volume of water. Friedrich August Kekule realized the structure

of the benzene molecule after having a dream of a snake eating its own tail. These were the stories that people liked to tell, because it made thinking seem like magic, and no matter that the stories weren't true. Even where there was a grain of truth behind the story of the insight, there were hundreds of hours of thought and study before it, and another hundred hours of proving it afterward. Another thing that was never mentioned was how often a startling insight proved to be rubbish.

Some years ago, he'd spent days trying to make what he called a battlesuit a practical reality. It was going to be a callback to the knights in shining armor, creating a solitary soldier encased in impenetrable armor and capable of advancing on enemy lines with impunity, mounted machine guns firing away the whole time while a diesel engine belched smoke. He'd drawn up schematics and eventually began stripping parts away, replacing those things that thrilled the imagination with those that would work practically and reliably. The steel legs were replaced with treads. The arms were removed in favor of a larger cockpit with buttons and levers. The center of gravity was lowered, until the cockpit sat between or just on top of the treads. He still remembered the feeling of looking down at his design and realizing he'd done nothing more than make a better tank. LexCorp now owned two factories that made them, building up a stockpile to sell to the European powers when the next inevitable war broke out. Still, the whole project had been borne out of a vision he'd had, of diesel powered mechanized armor striding across the battlefields of the next war. The fact that he'd spent so much time pursuing that vision was a source of embarrassment. It had been a valuable lesson in critically examining those ideas that came to him suddenly and struck him on some emotional level.

What Lex needed was someone who would ask some pointed questions and act as a foil to his enthusiasm, a devil's advocate.

He made a quick calculation of the risks of speaking out loud, and found them acceptable. If he was right, Superman engaged in surveillance far less than he had supposed, and if he was wrong, there was no harm in it. There was only one person that he trusted enough to discuss the idea with, and conveniently she was sitting in the same room as him, drinking tea and reading a book.

“Mercy, your attention for a moment?” asked Lex. He used French, a language that they both shared, as a weak form of security.

“Of course sir,” she said as she put down her book with a finger resting between the pages.

“Convince me that Superman doesn’t have a secret identity,” he said.

“A secret identity?” she asked, as though she had never heard of the concept. On the long list of wonderful things about Mercy Graves was her ability to effortlessly take the role of the ignorant in their dialogues when it was required of her. Lex found being forced to define himself quite helpful.

“Like a spy,” said Lex. “Or a philanderer, I suppose. Superman leads a double life, and in the second one he doesn’t wear the costume.”

Mercy took a sip from her tea. “And what does he do in this second life?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” said Lex. “I’d have to guess at motivations, and if he has an alter ego I know less of his psychology than I had thought.” Lex ran a hand across his hairless head. “What does a man need? Food, water, sleep, shelter. Superman has never displayed any need for those. Perhaps he eats and drinks in secret, but playing at being human would be the least efficient way to go about satisfying those needs. Sex or family... it’s possible. He’d have no trouble convincing women to sleep with him

or bear his children as his costumed self though. So it must be something more ethereal, something that he can't get as Superman. True, honest friendship untainted by his brute strength and speed, not to mention his celebrity? Or perhaps just the thrill of deception? There's some historical precedent for it. Tsar Peter of Russia used to dress up like a workman and go among his people."

"Peter the Great was six foot eight in a time when the people of Russia were starving," said Mercy. "It was because he was tsar that no one dared broach the subject, but surely they knew the man by his height alone. It's the same with Superman. They'd recognize him."

"Perhaps," said Lex. "But when people look at Superman, what are they really seeing? They see the emblem on his chest, the bright colors of his costume, and brilliant smile and the curl of hair that hangs down just so. If you saw Superman in the street wearing a suit and tie, would you recognize him in that new context?"

"Most likely," replied Mercy.

"Photographs of him are surprisingly rare," said Lex. "When people think of Superman, they don't think of him as he really exists, they think of Norman Rockwell's painting of him on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*. Superman has posed for a single photograph, the one that showed him and Miss Lane, and all the rest are of the man doing some impossible thing, lifting cars above his head or flying through the air, and the focus is seldom on his face. He keeps his interactions with people short. The photographs from the courthouse, at least the ones I've seen published, are always from a distance, the better to take in his full appearance. They emphasize the muscles and the costume, not the face. And they're published by the newspapers in terrible quality. Perhaps putting him in a suit and tie

wouldn't be enough, but if you added a hat, an overcoat to hide his bulk. . ." Lex scratched his chin. "A change of mannerisms, a slouch, makeup, prosthetics, wigs, a false moustache or beard, glasses, speaking in a low or high voice, or a false accent, well, there are a large number of ways he could disguise himself and go unnoticed. Charlie Chaplin once lost a look-alike-contest, or at least that's what he told me. Very rarely do people distinguish faces by their component parts, they look at demeanor, gait, gestures, that sort of thing. They think in caricatures."

"You're getting dangerously close to pure ex post facto rationalization for something you want to believe is true," said Mercy.

"I am," said Lex after a moment. Mercy could cut straight to the heart of matters like few other people. "I find it attractive because it would reveal something hitherto unknown about the man. I've run into failure after failure in trying to understand Superman, and this is the first theory that might actually lead somewhere. Even if the probability is low, we have to pursue it. Can we at least agree that Superman might stand to gain something from having an alter ego and that he might be able to pull off a long running disguise?"

"I can accept that perhaps he would be able to walk into a deli and purchase something to eat without arousing any suspicion," said Mercy. "But you're suggesting a sustained deception."

Lex nodded. "The quiet period, when he's less active, lines up too nicely with working hours, and not just because there are fewer crimes around that time. His movements point to a specific location that he keeps going to or coming from. That data is fuzzy enough that it suggests to me an inexperienced attempt to hide the pattern, or perhaps just an attempt by someone who wasn't clear on what methods could be used to reveal the truth. Superman doesn't strike me as a mathematician."

"They would still know," said Mercy. "If they ever saw Super-

man in the flesh, they would see his alter ego for what it is.”

“Perhaps not,” replied Lex. “No one is looking around for Superman in disguise, because the concept is nearly unthinkable to them. No one believes that they would work a day job if they had his powers. They would become filthy rich and live a life of celebrity and hedonism. Perhaps it occurs to his coworkers that the man they work with looks like Superman, but they wouldn’t immediately make the leap to thinking that he actually *was* Superman. Maybe they would make jokes, but he would deflect them, or play along. Maybe he even has a few people in his confidence. Think about it. Superman doesn’t wear a mask. If he wore one, people would wonder what was behind it. Many people have thought that Superman was hiding something, but they think it’s his spaceship, or invasion plans, when all along it’s just so . . . mundane.”

“You’ve made up your mind,” said Mercy. It wasn’t a question, and wasn’t said with any trace of disapproval. She was simply informing him of what she had observed, and as usual, she was right.

“Thank you Mercy,” said Lex. In French this was rendered as “*Merci Mercy*”, a minor bit of wordplay that nevertheless brought a rare smile to Mercy’s lips. “I believe that this lead is worth the resources required to pursue it. Even if the odds of it being true are somewhat low. The only question is the methodology.” He smiled. “Perhaps an investment in the arts.”

“If you find him, will you expose him?” asked Mercy. She asked without any real curiosity or concern, and Lex was certain it was only intended him to get him thinking about the answer before he walked too far down the path. Mercy could convey quite a bit of information with a flat affect.

“Lord no,” Lex replied.

Lex Luthor saw antagonizing Superman in and of itself as

having no value, or more likely negative value. If Lex Luthor and Superman were the only actors on the stage, Lex might even have refrained from using the bombs, and instead relied solely on those methods that revealed no foul play at all. It would have been more difficult, but on balance probably worth it. Unfortunately, the stage was crowded with actors, and some of them seemed to find great sport in trying to take Superman down a peg. In Lex Luthor's public role as Superman's champion, he'd done everything from funding legal efforts to defend Superman to penning articles in favor of Superman's ridiculous moral stances. In the context of the other actors, antagonism became a more acceptable risk only because it would blend into the background.

Superman's presumed secret identity was a vector of attack, but not one that Lex had any intention of using against him. The people who thought they had something to gain from disrupting Superman's emotional state were fools.

"The judge is dropping the case," said Clark as he laid his phone in its cradle. He was visibly upset, which was rare for him. He pouted in a way that might have looked adorable on a small child but just didn't fit a grown man.

"There wasn't enough evidence," said Lois. "It shouldn't have even made it to the judge in the first place."

"Calhoun is guilty," said Clark. "I know he is."

"You think he is," corrected Lois. "And even if he's got to be guilty of something, there's no guarantee that he's actually guilty of manipulating Kramer. I know this story is near and dear to your heart, but maybe it's time to let it go."

"It's an injustice," Clark insisted.

“I should introduce you to my friend Vicki Vale,” said Lois. “She works for The Gotham Gazette and I’m sure she could regale you with some stories about real injustice. Actually, you might like her, I think she’s your type.”

After she’d said it she realized that it sounded like a bit of a low blow instead of an olive branch. Lois knew Clark still had a crush on her, and to him it might have sounded like she was making fun of him and saying that he had a thing for female reporters. But Vicki Vale really would be his type, and she really could set them up the next time that Vicki came to town. Lois was never actively cruel to Clark, she just liked to push his buttons. She liked to see him get all uncomfortable when she swore around him. She would watch his face while she sucked back a cigarette or took a glass of whiskey at her desk, neither of which Clark approved of. These were small, harmless pleasures. Clark was like a puppy dog in a lot of ways. She didn’t want to hurt him.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” said Lois.

“Mean it like what?” asked Clark. Clark had always seemed like the kind of guy who would blush at the drop of a hat, but Lois hadn’t seen it once. He would get visibly embarrassed, but even after all this time she kept looking for a hint of red in his cheeks or ears. Disappointingly, it was never there.

“Nothing,” said Lois. “I was just thinking that she would like you.”

Clark gave her one of his familiar grins. Lois worried she’d gone too far in rolling back what she’d said, but turned back to her typewriter. She wasn’t in charge of Clark Kent. And if Clark got his feelings hurt because he misinterpreted something she said, well, it wasn’t the end of the world.

William Calhoun should have felt relieved that the judge had dropped the case, but instead he just felt angry. He'd been accused of being in cahoots with that bomber on charges so paper thin it would almost be laughable. Willie had spent five of his fifty-eight years in prison though, and he never laughed about time in the clink. He'd sat down with his lawyer and looked through the evidence himself, and could admit that there was an implication there, but it wasn't even firm enough that he could say he'd been framed. Even if it was just coincidence, it pissed Willie off to get called out on something he'd had no part in, especially considering all the things that he was actually guilty of.

It was Superman's fault. Superman had barged into Willie's bar and announced as much, and it must have been Superman who whispered in the right ears to get the case moving forward. Superman was a prick of the highest order. Worse, people listened to him.

Luckily, Willie's schemes were paying off. The barrage of lawsuits had mostly been a nuisance to keep Superman tied up in court, but some of them had been taken further than he'd expected. Three decisions were due to come down from the Supreme Court, and if *Preethi v. New York* went the right way, Superman would be bound by all sorts of rules. Superman had already agreed to abide by the rulings no matter what they were, and so far the man had never broken his word. It made him predictable, and Willie hoped he could use that against him.

One of Willie's early tactics had been to have people accuse Superman of everything under the sun, to try to smear the alien's name if not actually get him in trouble with the police. Willie had paid a young girl to claim rape, and a few other people as witnesses. No one had believed it though, and the girl had crumbled after a confrontation with Superman on the steps of

the courthouse where he'd been kind, courteous, and forgiving. After that it was tough to find people to make false allegations, and though Willie had searched, he'd never found someone with a real criminal complaint. It occurred to him that Superman was becoming so universally loved that even if Superman did do something truly evil most people wouldn't believe it.

Slander and libel weren't working, and Willie was being bled dry. Business had been brought to a near halt. There had to be a way to turn the tide against Superman, and Willie was willing to do anything to figure out what.

Hershel Whitman had become governor of New York when Franklin Delano Roosevelt had won the Presidency in '32, and he was in it for the long haul. The state of New York was most famous for Metropolis, its crown jewel, and nearly half of the people in the state hailed from that city or the surrounding greater metropolitan area. Ever since Superman had shown up from out of deep space, politicians had been clamoring to be seen as associating with Superman, and Whitman was certainly no exception.

From a politician's perspective, Superman was perfect. He didn't upset the apple cart, he didn't hold public opinions, he'd had nothing but positive effects on the rate of crime in Metropolis. As the incumbent, it would be nearly impossible for Whitman to lose his next election if the people were happy, nevermind that he hadn't had all that much to do with Superman. Most of the hard work of governance was in building roads and bridges, passing funding measures, and wrestling with the other parts of state government to hammer out laws. The vast majority of people didn't place their votes because of anything sensible like the actual work that was done, they would see Superman fly-

ing through the air and think “governor Whitman must be doing something right”. The bombings had been a black mark, but the city was recovering better than anyone could have hoped for, and thankfully the bomber had hung himself and spared everyone the ordeal of a lengthy trial. Whitman hated the inevitable appeal for clemency from death row inmates.

Whitman would have taken a meeting with Lex Luthor no matter what it was about. The man was a billionaire after all. When Luthor had asked to discuss a public-private partnership of the arts, Whitman couldn’t help but feel that someone up there was looking out for him. Whitman was a strong supporter of the New Deal policies, and there could be no downside to adding in a billionaire’s funds.

“There’s much discussion about you, you know,” said Whitman with a smile. Prohibition had been brought to an end, thankfully, which meant that a man could enjoy a martini on his veranda without having to worry about scandal. A hot summer had made way for a cool autumn, and Whitman’s two children played in the yard.

Luthor shared the smile. “I’m sure that tongues will wag. What do they say, I wonder? That I came up from nowhere?”

“Things of that nature,” said Whitman. “I dare say there’s a risk you’ll be named Metropolis’s most eligible bachelor. There’s a mystery about you people quite like. You were born in Southside, if I recall correctly, and the charitable work you’ve been doing there has been admirable. Yet prior to Superman’s arrival, you were known only inside the world of business, and then more as a name than a man.”

Luthor shrugged, and looked out at the yard at the children. They’d invented some game that involved ever more elaborate cartwheels. “I’ve never wanted fame,” said Luthor. “For a time I wanted money, but I think I have enough of it to last me for a

good long while. No, now is the time for giving back. Superman has shown me that. And that's precisely what I'm here to talk to you about."

"You have my full attention," said Whitman.

"Simply put, I would like to fund the arts. I'm not an artist myself, I can acknowledge that, but I have certain ideas that I think would help towards increasing the beauty of our beloved city and showing off its character. Now I'm aware that the Public Works of Art Program has run its course, but I was just speaking with Harry Hopkins over the phone, and he suggested that a pilot program might be just the thing. They're getting close to putting together a second New Deal, which they hope to include some arts in, and I think we might be finished with what I had in mind before the bill goes through Congress. It might help grease some votes, as it were." Luthor sipped at his martini. "I would put in a good deal of the funding of course, but I was thinking that perhaps working jointly with the state could be mutually beneficial. That sort of partnership isn't unheard of."

"Of course," said Whitman quickly. Lex Luthor was becoming known as quite the philanthropist, and the photo opportunities would help in an election year. There were vague rumors about something criminal in Luthor's past, but the man had been born in Suicide Slums and if anything he was stronger for the narrative of reform.

"I have three in mind," said Luthor. "The first is a statue, that I think would look nice in Fort Hob's Park, though of course that's negotiable. Not one of Superman, but something close I think, clearly inspired by him. The idealized man, cast in bronze and standing tall, a reminder for each of us to be the best person that we can possibly be. I believe this is the lesson that Superman intends for us to take. It would capture the zeitgeist, don't you think?"

“I do like the sound of that,” replied Whitman. There would be an unveiling ceremony, and Whitman would be standing in front of the statue holding a pair of oversized scissors. He rather enjoyed the mental image.

“The second is a large mural that will grace the length of Gerald Ordway Drive, along a length of the West River between the Queensland Bridge and Dockside,” said Luthor. “I have no specific vision there beyond it showing a progression of the city from its humble origins to the future we’re striving for, perhaps something in mosaic. Metropolis is the City of Tomorrow after all, and I think it would be nice to pay some tribute to our roots as well as our aspirations.”

“Very doable,” said Whitman. “I’ll need to speak to the mayor and the city council about it, but very doable indeed.”

“Of course,” replied Luthor. “I’ll be sure to put in a few words as well.”

“And the third?” asked Whitman.

“For the third, I want a photography exhibit,” said Luthor. “Sharp, candid photographs of the people of the city. As I picture it, we’d hire some photographers and park them downtown, to get a full sampling of the lifeblood of Metropolis and the rhythm of workers coming and going. When we’re finished, we’ll gather these photographs together and display them in a gallery — I have just the one in mind — packed from wall to wall in order to show the full breadth of humanity from the immigrant populations to the high financiers. I believe it would be a marvelous demonstration of both our similarities and our differences. More than that, people who aren’t normally interested in the arts might stop by to try to find their own photo, or the photos of their friends. My provisional title is ‘Faces of Metropolis’. I’d like some creative control over that one, since the artistry will be in how we compare and contrast the people we capture

rather than the photographs themselves.”

Whitman nodded, still thinking about the political opportunities. He was up for re-election in November, and while there was little chance that the projects could be completed by then, he'd be able to use this deal with Luthor in his stump speech. He could spin it to sound like his own idea, a melding of business and government for the improvement of the lives of the citizens of the state. The project would surely create jobs, but more importantly it would be a highly visible way of creating jobs.

His children ran towards the house and poured themselves tall glasses of lemonade before dashing back off into the yard again. June was eleven and Robert was nine, and a father couldn't ask for better.

“I enjoy children,” said Luthor. “I've thought about having a few from time to time. But more and more I find myself thinking of Metropolis as my child. I want nothing more than to help her grow, to protect her from harm, and to make her into the best city she can possibly be.”

Whitman nodded. He found himself quite liking Lex Luthor.

“Calhoun just got arrested again,” said Clark with a smile.

“What are the charges?” asked Lois. “Something solid this time?”

“Racketeering, murder, conspiracy to commit murder, loan-sharking, illegal gambling, obstruction of justice, bribery, and tax evasion,” said Clark.

Lois let out a low whistle. “That's a long list. Any of them that will stick?”

“All of them,” said Clark with confidence.

“You're too close to the story, Clark,” said Lois. “And it's back page material anyway. If Superman's involved it might be one

of the first cases that hinges on the outcome of whatever the Supreme Court is doing, but that only bumps it up to page four or five.” She looked him up and down. Usually Clark wasn’t so happy. The bombings had begun to fade into the background, but Lois had found that it affected people in different ways. She’d gone drinking in one of the clubs, and the conversation had dropped into awkward silence when someone mentioned that they’d had a friend who died in one of the blasts. Clark seemed certain Calhoun was behind it, and Lois didn’t think he’d get his closure until Calhoun was in jail or dead. “Look Clark, take your mind off this. Justice takes time. Write up the story and then just forget about it until the verdict comes in. Perry’s not going to want to devote too much space to it.”

“Alright,” said Clark, but Lois didn’t miss the pleased look on his face as he pecked away at his typewriter.

A dozen photographers were sent downtown, where they snapped picture after picture of people going to or leaving from work. They had cards to hand out, and by and large most people were game. Pictures were taken even of the ones that didn’t seem too keen on the idea. The shots ranged from candid to posed, with some being simple headshots and others taken from a balcony or second story to capture everyone on the streets. Ideally, Superman would be hiding somewhere among them. Of course, it was possible that Superman would see the photographers and simply turn the other way to avoid them, but Lex had been trying to work out the alien’s psychology for a while now, and felt that it was unlikely. If Superman really did have a secret identity, it was probable that he enjoyed being a normal human, and what could appeal to the alien more than being simply one of many, a face in a sea of faces? Besides that, Su-

perman wouldn't want to be seen avoiding the cameras, because that would be just as conspicuous.

There were too many people to photograph them all. The Emperor Building and the Daily Planet Building were each within the four block area, and the Emperor Building alone had 10,000 workers. Still, a good number of people could be photographed, and if Lex was right, Superman himself would be attracted to the photographers, no matter how ill-advised that would be. If the plan failed to work, there were other, more risky plans. Private investigators could be set to work, company payrolls could be combed through, and hard data could be examined. The trick was to find out who Superman's secret identity was — if he had one — without tipping him off.

It was late November by the time Lex and Mercy sat together in his lead-lined cabin some distance from Metropolis and sorted through the photographs.

"Dark haired white male, likely above six feet tall," Lex had said when they'd first begun. "Superman is six feet and four inches tall, when he's actually got his feet on the ground. We can't rule out that the identity we're looking for has a slouch, or an affected limp, but there'd be no changing his physical size, not unless there's some power we haven't seen yet. We can't rule out that he wears a wig in his daily life either, so set aside all those photographs with tall blonde men as well."

"Yes sir," said Mercy. She worked with quiet efficiency, sorting photographs into various piles with Lex. It was boring work, and quite slow, especially as the faces and people all began to meld together. It was in the second day of this that Mercy found a picture of Lois Lane. When she slid it across for him to look at, Lex saw Superman standing next to her.

"It's him," said Lex, and Mercy moved around to look over his shoulder.

“Are you sure?” asked Mercy. “I would have put it in the pile for later review, but I’m less immediately convinced than you are.”

“He’s the perfect mockery of humanity,” said Lex.

The man clearly didn’t want to be there. Lois Lane was as feral and energetic as ever, staring directly into the camera with a winsome smile, but the man was looking slightly off to the side. He was tall and large, and looked slightly disheveled. Your eyes were attracted to the notepad he tucked into his jacket pocket, then to the glasses that were so thick you could barely see his eyes through them. Almost immediately you’d peg the man as an oaf. He was so unlike Superman that it had to be him.

“Superman always holds his head high, with his jaw thrust out,” said Lex. “This man spends most of his time looking down, with his chin tucked in. It disrupts the lines of his face, makes him less noticeable. But the nose, you can tell from the nose it’s the same man. It’s him. It’s Superman.” Lex flipped over the photograph. The idea had been for the photographers to capture essential information from their subjects wherever possible, but from the sampling so far it was clear that not all of them had been so diligent. In this particular case, Lex Luthor got lucky, and a number of nascent schemes for manipulating Lois Lane into giving up information were quickly put to rest.

Lois Lane and Clark Kent, reporters, outside Daily Planet bldg.

Author’s Note: This chapter once again grew too long, so again I’m splitting it up into what I think works best for the story breakdown. Ten thousand words seems a little bit long for a chapter, and that’s what I was approaching. Chapter 7 will be posted on Sunday.

Chapter 7

Choices

From *Preethi v New York* 293 U.S. 367 (1934):

The State of New York has provided such significant encouragement, both overt and covert, that the actions of Superman must be judged to be that of the State. [...] It is this Court's considered opinion that there would not be much use to Constitutional protections if the State could do an end run around those protections through the use of private parties. By engaging in the same type of work as the Metropolis police department, and with their cooperation and approval, Superman may fairly be described as a state actor.

From *Shoe v New York* 293 U.S. 377 (1934):

Obtaining by enhanced senses any information regarding the interior of the home that could not otherwise have been obtained without physical intrusion into a constitutionally protected area constitutes a search. [...] In permitting the use of this evidence upon trial, we believe prejudicial error was committed.

From *The Daily Planet*, anonymous letter to the editor, December 19th, 1934:

Taken together, there can be no question that these rulings severely curtail Superman's ability to effectively conduct law enforcement within the United States. In the coming months, dozens if not hundreds of appeals will be filed on the premise that Superman has engaged in procedural error, in which the Metropolis police department and others were complicit. The Fourth Amendment of the Constitution has been incorporated against the states, which many see as a worrying expansion of federal power. Yet while people argue over what the right legal structure for dealing with Superman is, what they seem to miss is that Superman only obeys the laws because he chooses to. He has already graciously said that he will abide by these rulings, yet one has to wonder what the Man of Steel actually thinks of them. All too often, we forget the enormity of his powers and treat him like a constant, but what man can exist without change?

Lois and Clark stood outside the Metropolis Courthouse with the other reporters, waiting for the verdict. Calhoun's trial had been sped through, and there was little doubt that Superman had used pressure of some sort to make that happen. The early portion of the trial had been marked by an enormous amount of evidence being thrown out, with the judge citing the new Supreme Court rulings. A number of the charges had been dropped after that, though it was still enough to put Calhoun away for the rest of his life. Bail had eventually been set at one hundred thousand dollars, which Calhoun had happily paid as though it were chump change to him. Clark no longer smiled when the topic of the case came up. He'd submitted an article to Perry about

corruption in the case. It alleged witness intimidation, jury tampering, and juror misconduct, but his sources were shaky and couldn't be verified to Perry's satisfaction.

"Not guilty!" came a shout from within the courthouse. The reporters began to crowd around, to get a picture of Calhoun or shout a question out to him as he walked out. Lois went with the pack, but Clark stayed behind. He had a defeated look on his face, like he'd known that it was coming but hoped he was wrong. Lois got her comment, and Clark wrote up an article about how Superman was nearly useless in the face of organized crime with the laws the way they were.

A week later, someone began setting fire to the homes of known or suspected abortionists. Superman stopped them, which caused a significant controversy. So far as Lois could tell, that was the whole point.

"Why do you think Superman doesn't stop abortions from happening?" asked Lois. It was a question that many of her fellow Catholics had asked for a long time. She'd been practically mobbed by the other churchgoers when she'd gone to Christmas Mass, since people seemed to think that she and Superman were as close as two peas in a pod. In their defense, *The Daily Planet* hadn't been quick to correct that view.

"He used the term unambiguous good, didn't he?" asked Clark. Lois had predicted that Metropolis would eventually break him, but she hadn't thought it would be such a long, slow decline.

"Well that's the whole idea," said Lois. "If Superman isn't stopping the abortions, then that means he doesn't seem to think stopping them is an unambiguous good."

"He wants to avoid the controversy," said Clark. It was clear that his heart wasn't in the conversation.

"Avoiding controversy outweighs unambiguous goods?" asked

Lois.

"I don't know," said Clark. "The world is complicated. I'd really rather not talk about this."

Early on, Clark had been eager to engage her. He'd liked having her attention of course, but he'd also been more sure about himself then, more convinced that he could get her to come around to his way of thinking. It wasn't just that she'd worn him down though, everything about him had started to become so... mechanical. It hadn't affected his work, and if anything he had been increasing his output. But the spark that was Clark Kent was dimming, and Lois wondered if there was anything she could do about that. She and Clark were more colleagues than friends, but she spent more of her time with him than anyone else, at least when they weren't out in the city chasing down stories.

"Do you want to go see the mural after work?" asked Lois.

"Sullivan already covered that," said Clark without looking up from his typewriter.

"I said after work. I meant more as something to look at," said Lois. "For entertainment. Which I think is the point of it." Clark looked at her. "Not a date or anything like that, just friends. And maybe afterwards we'll get a bite to eat somewhere?"

A slow, cautious smile crept onto Clark's face. "Sure, I'd like that."

When the mural was finished it would stretch for three city blocks, but so far only two blocks of it had been completed. It was a mosaic made up of small tiles, each about the size of a fingertip, visible as a coherent image only from a few steps back. They started walking it from the end that was supposed to represent the past, when the island that Metropolis was built on was home to the Lenape Indians.

“It’s white-washed,” said Clark. “But I don’t suppose anyone expected anything else. None of the subjugation or slavery that marks the actual history of the city. There should be men in collars somewhere around. . . there.”

“Clark, I know you’re still a bit raw about Calhoun getting off,” said Lois. “But you’ve got to snap out of it eventually.”

“It’s not just him,” said Clark. “It’s all the rest that are just like him. Do you know how many guilty men go free?”

“Better for ten guilty men to go free than one innocent man rot in jail,” said Lois.

“Why that number?” asked Clark. “Why ten and not five?”

“It’s not meant to be literal,” said Lois.

“I’m just curious,” said Clark. “It’s in the Bible, did you know that? Genesis 18:23, ‘And Abraham drew near, and said, Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked?’ The numbers were different though. God said that if he could find ten innocent men in the whole of Sodom and Gomorrah he would refrain from raining down brimstone and fire.”

“That’s kind of gruesome,” said Lois. They walked past a colonial scene of men planting crops and raising cattle. It was unimaginable that land in Metropolis had once been cheap enough that you could farm it.

“In the end, God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah,” said Clark. “Because it was a place of evil. But he saved the only innocents in it first, because God is perfect, and that was within his power.”

“Unfortunately,” said Lois. “The justice system is run by men. There’s a distinct lack of perfection. Are you just figuring this out now?”

“No,” said Clark. “Believe me, I know how imperfect people can be.” He bit at his lip. “I don’t know, maybe I just never studied history as closely as I should have. It’s easy to forget that slavery ever happened, you know? And there are crimes

against humanity that are just swept under the rug, forgotten by everyone, though you could still find the mass graves if you looked hard enough.”

“Jesus Clark,” said Lois. “You really know how to show a girl a good time.”

Clark was silent after that, but she could tell he was still thinking along the same lines as before and just not saying anything out loud. She wished that the final part of the mural had been finished, so that they could talk about something more pleasant. She’d heard that it was going to be like something out of science fiction, with spaceships going to the moon and robots serving people dinner. Lex Luthor was the man behind the project, and he’d proven himself an optimist. It was somewhat comforting that the future history of the world was going to be written by men like him.

“Do you think that Superman should have just killed Calhoun?” asked Clark.

“No,” said Lois. “Can you imagine the panic that would have caused?”

“No one would have to know,” said Clark. “Superman could just abduct him and drop him in the middle of the Pacific to drown.”

“Superman wouldn’t be that cruel,” said Lois. “Even the state tries to keep their executions as clean and painless as possible. And that’s all a moot point. Superman doesn’t kill, everyone knows that. Your average criminal would rather be arrested by Superman than the cops, because Superman is gentle.”

“You’re right,” sighed Clark. “They take him for granted. The whole trial with Calhoun proved that. No one feared what Superman would do when the verdict came down. They didn’t think it was suicidal to challenge Superman’s will. And they were right.”

It was time for a change of tactics. "Clark, can you talk to me about life in Smallville?" asked Lois.

"You hate Smallville," said Clark.

"I was a military brat, and I grew up all over the country," said Lois. "I lived in a couple places like Smallville, and I was always bored. But I think maybe I've been projecting my own experiences onto what I've been imagining. So come on, I promise not to make fun. You never talk about it anymore."

Lois had been right. Smallville seemed to be just the trick. There was no more talk about mass graves or killing the innocent along with the guilty. Maybe it was just because she'd spent so long around Clark, but where she'd rolled her eyes at his stories about small town Kansas before, now she was almost interested. As he talked, he grew more animated, until his mood had visibly improved. From there it wasn't that difficult to keep him upbeat, and after a long talk about the possibilities of the future in front of the unfinished section of the mural, they'd gone out for dinner and then drinks, though Clark only had soda water. Lois wasn't sure whether he wasn't so bad as she'd thought he was, or whether she'd just been worn down by his constant presence. Either way, Operation Cheer Up Clark had been a rousing success, and when he came into work the next day he was nearly back to his old self.

Everything started to fall apart two weeks later when the governor's children were kidnapped.

Lex Luthor was slow and careful.

He never said the name "Clark Kent" out loud. There were hundreds of Clarks in Metropolis, and hundreds of Kents, but so far as Lex could find, there was only a single Clark Kent. It wasn't inconceivable that every time he heard his full name his

super hearing kicked. Everyone chattered about Superman all day, but surely very few people talked about Clark Kent. He was a reporter, and his name appeared in nearly every issue of *The Daily Planet*, so perhaps there was some cover there, but Lex wasn't about to risk it. He had Superman's secret, and it was the most precious thing in the world.

Getting records was difficult. Lex had set himself up as one of Superman's champions, a man inspired by a zeal for the alien that few others had. He was the chair of the Conference on Extraterrestrial Science and two other organizations, and somewhat noted as a collector of information. Now this was working against him, because any connection he formed with Clark Kent would be immediately suspect. If Lex had simply remained an anonymous businessman, there would be nothing too surprising about him purchasing *The Daily Planet* and looking through its files. But for Lex Luthor the Superman scholar to do it — well, there was no way that Superman wouldn't suspect something.

Lex was moving slowly, and the other players in the game were getting creative. He was certain that Willie Calhoun was one of them, but didn't know what intent would explain the actions. There were smear campaigns and contrived moral quandaries — attempts to put Superman in a position where his values would be challenged. Thankfully, none of it seemed to affect the alien. Lex would have killed Calhoun if he could have seen a way to do it. It would have been worth it just to stop the plots. There were so many contacts and lines of communication that had been burned in the last few months though, and so few ways of getting dirty work done. Worse, a failure might alert Calhoun. Lex could only hope that he would figure something out about Clark Kent before Calhoun or someone else made Superman angry.

Willie Calhoun was losing.

He'd won in court, but everything else was in a shambles. Crime was dropping in Metropolis all over the place, and loyalty seemed to be a thing of the past as more and more people moved away. The ones that were left were animals, idiots without the proper restraints. Willie had once had money, and a nice house, but he was in debt to the banks now with no way he could see of getting out. He had no real skills he could use in the real world, and no real nose for legitimate business like Luthor. He was getting old, and this was the end of the road.

"Fuck Superman," said Willie to his empty office. He hoped the alien would hear. There was hardly a day that went by without some new fantasy of what he'd do to Superman if the alien weren't invulnerable. It was comforting, thinking of ripping into that impenetrable flesh.

Superman had cast a spell over the city, one that grew with every passing day. The last time that people had really doubted him was during the bombings, when they'd wondered why it was that he wasn't doing more. What Willie needed to do was to replicate that feeling. If the people stopped believing in Superman, maybe he'd finally fuck off and fly away. All the worst psychopaths of Metropolis had been left in Willie's employ, and it was time to use them.

The governor's two children were abducted on their way home from private school. The abductors had used chloroform on both the driver and the children. The operation must have been carried out in nearly complete silence to prevent Superman from hearing, but this was par for the course in Metropolis. The driver was found laid down in the front seat with his throat slit. By the time Superman had arrived at the governor's mansion,

an hour had passed and the kidnappers were long gone. No ransom note ever came. The radio and newspapers latched on to the story, and someone from somewhere had dug up a picture of June and Robert Whitman waving at Superman as he flew through the air, which only added fuel to the fire.

It was five days later that Lois found another letter perched on her desk, again requesting that she come up to the rooftop. She grabbed her pencil and notepad, then made the trek up.

“Hello Lois,” said Superman. He stood with his back to her, looking out over the city. His cape flowed out behind him. Even after all this time, Lois couldn’t help but see him as anything but a god.

“Superman,” she replied. “What brings you to my neck of the woods?”

“I found the governor’s children,” said Superman. He didn’t turn around to face her.

“And are they alright?” she asked.

“No,” replied Superman.

Lois was quiet for a moment. She’d been covering the story double time, since Clark was out with the flu. She’d been hoping it wasn’t the Lindbergh baby all over again. “Were they—”

“Off the record?” asked Superman.

Lois hesitated for a moment, then tucked her pencil behind her ear. “Sure.”

“I found them in a farmhouse forty miles outside of Metropolis. They had June in the kitchen on a table,” said Superman. “Laid out on her back. Only eleven years old and they were—” Superman stopped. “I barely recognized her. They were taking turns with her.”

Lois felt her stomach churn. She didn’t want to be hearing this.

“Robert had been put into the refrigerator,” Superman con-

tinued. "Nine years old, and they'd used a hatchet to get him into small enough pieces that he'd fit on the shelves."

Superman kept clenching and unclenching his fists, and Lois could only think about how much power he was exerting when his knuckles went white. Enough to turn coal into diamonds, probably.

"There were three men there," said Superman. "Three men, and they were — animals. Monsters. June had a gag in her mouth, and she was screaming around it." He took a breath. "I flew in as fast as I could. I pulled her out of there and flew her to the nearest hospital. She beat against my chest the whole time, crying and shouting. Either she didn't realize who I was or — or she realized, and she hated me for being too late." He swallowed hard. "And then I went back for the men."

Lois wanted to say something, but the words were stuck in her throat.

"Do you know what I did to them?" asked Superman.

Lois took an involuntary step back. She couldn't help herself. She could see the anger radiating off of him now, barely kept in check. It had been there the whole time, as plain as day, she just hadn't thought to look for it. The muscles on his neck were strained and his teeth were clenched. "What did you do?" she asked in a soft, small voice.

"I arrested them," said Superman.

"You... what?" asked Lois.

"It would have been so easy to kill them," said Superman. "No one's seen the upper limits of my strength. I could have just snapped my fingers and —" He did just that, and there was a thunderclap. It left Lois's ears ringing. "— like that. Dead. I could have pushed my fingers straight into their brains, faster than a speeding bullet. It would have been better than they deserved. They deserved to be chained up in the deepest, darkest

cell I could make for them and slowly starved to death.”

“Superman,” said Lois, but there wasn’t any set of words that could come after that to make everything okay.

“I can’t keep doing this,” he said. He finally turned around, and she could see tears in his eyes. “I can’t keep pretending that I’m someone that I’m not — some paragon of truth and justice. I’m just—” he seemed to start to say something but changed his mind. “Just an alien from the planet Krypton. I’m not perfect.”

“No one is asking you to be,” said Lois, but she knew that wasn’t true. Millions of people were clamoring for Superman to be a million different things. They assumed he was perfect, they just thought he was perfect in the wrong way. “They just want you to try your best.”

“My best? I can hear everything going on in the world right now,” said Superman. “No one thinks about what that means.” He pointed to the north. “Just there, six miles away, a house is on fire. The family has evacuated, but their possessions are burning. A little girl is crying because she left her doll behind, and I can see it melting. She’s calling out for me to do something. Over there, two miles down the road, a man just punched his wife in the mouth, and shouldn’t I be going to stop him from doing it again?” He pointed east. “There was a flash flood in China a handful of minutes ago. I can hear three women choking to death. If I left now, I might be able to save them.” He pointed to the south. “There was a car accident near Atlanta, eight seconds ago. When the windshield shattered it sliced a man across his neck. If I left now, I might be able to get him to the hospital before he bleeds out.” He shook his head. “But I’m not doing anything to help anyone. I’m standing here on this rooftop, talking to you.”

Superman stared out over the city, unmoving. Lois watched him.

“It’s not selfish to take time for yourself,” said Lois. She tried to keep her hands from shaking. She was scared of him, and she wondered whether he could tell. “If that’s what keeps you sane, there’s no shame stopping to take a breath.”

“Of course there is,” said Superman. “Do you know why I wanted to kill those men? It wasn’t just because of what they’d done. It’s because I didn’t do enough. I was busy taking time for myself. Those men were monsters, but I’m a monster for not doing more. I’m a fraud.”

He was silent for a long moment, staring out into space while he listened to people die. “I really should be going.” Lois tried to think of something to say, but Superman stepped backwards off the roof and plummeted downwards. The last thing she saw was his cape fluttering behind him.

Her heart was hammering away in her chest. Her palms were sweaty. There was no force in the world that could stop Superman. He was being pushed harder than he could handle, and she was the only one that knew. He’d revealed himself to her in confidence, but what she now knew was bigger than any promise. Superman was unstable. She had no idea what to do about that.

Lex Luthor had done some quick, sloppy math.

Superman spent a minimum of four hours a day as Clark Kent. He didn’t spend the entire day in the office, and was often out in the field reporting on something or another, which gave him some time to be Superman. Lex Luthor had read every article written by Clark Kent over the past year, and there were some trends that suggested to him that much of the information was gathered through the use of x-ray vision and super-hearing. Clark Kent rarely used direct quotes, and rarely claimed that he’d asked someone a question. He also had a tendency towards

unnamed sources. So call it four out of every eight hours of every workday as Clark Kent. Forget for a moment that Superman went about his do-goodery in an incredibly inefficient way and just crunch the numbers with best guesses about the variables and probabilities.

The existence of Clark Kent cost four people their lives in the average day. A human life was worth less to Superman than the ability to sit at a desk for an hour. And that was just actual death. If you included rape, assault, property damage, and theft, it became even more atrocious. Lex immediately revised his estimate of the existential risk posed by Superman upwards by a substantial amount.

Lex had investigated the Clark Kent issue as much as he could from as remote a distance as possible. There were a number of troubling aspects to it, aside from what it implied about Superman's psychology and the value that Superman placed on human life.

Clark Kent's first byline for The Daily Planet had preceded Superman's arrival by three months. Superman had claimed to study the world for two weeks before intervening in human affairs, but that was clearly a lie. And where had Clark Kent come from? You couldn't just get hired without paperwork and references. It was admittedly possible that a number of people were in on the deception, but Lex thought it unlikely. He'd spoken to Lois Lane in person on a number of occasions, and she hadn't let even the smallest false note slip. Even if she were a masterful liar, now that Lex knew the truth he should have been able to spot something in retrospect. He would speak to her again to make sure, but if Superman's interviewer weren't in on the secret, Lex couldn't imagine anyone else would be either.

No, the signs pointed to Clark Kent existing in some respect prior to his arrival in Metropolis, and this buried past was where

Lex needed to be looking. He hired out a private investigator to strike up a conversation with a photographer at The Daily Planet named Jimmy Olsen, and when the topic of a recent article came up, Jimmy was all too ready to spill the beans on Clark Kent. He'd been obliging enough to provide a location: Smallville, Kansas.

Chapter 8

Peeling Back the Veil

Jimmy Olsen sat at the bar, gulping back his fourth beer. It was possible to forget, for brief moments.

Lois Lane had come over to him, shaking slightly, and said that they needed to take a trip out into the country. He'd grabbed his camera and plenty of film, then raced downstairs where he'd had to wait in the car for nearly ten minutes while Lois made some calls and tried to figure out where exactly they were going.

Lois drove. Her knuckles were nearly white on the steering wheel.

"Where are we headed?" asked Jimmy.

"A farmhouse near Bott's Pond," said Lois. "Superman found the kids."

"Thank God that's over," said Jimmy, and Lois had shot him a look that shut him up for the rest of the trip.

There were two cop cars outside the place when they arrived. The kidnappers had been taken away an hour ago, but he and Lois were the first reporters on the scene. Jimmy would have been fine just getting a shot of the farmhouse with the cop cars in front of it, but Lois had loudly insisted to the police that Superman himself had sent them to get pictures of the interior so

they could document the actual crime scene. Jimmy had no idea whether that was true or not, but the police seemed to believe her. He'd nearly thrown up when he'd seen the body parts stacked like cordwood. Lois had just frowned and stared at the scene with an intensity that scared him.

Jimmy looked up from his beer the second time he was tapped on the shoulder.

"Hi," said a cute redhead in a willowy dress. She held out her hand towards him. "I'm Eleanor."

"Jimmy," he replied. Her handshake was firm.

"Our hair matches," she said with a laugh.

"I guess so," he said.

"Rough day at the office?" she asked. She raised her eyebrows and bit her lip, like she couldn't wait for his answer.

"I'm a photographer," said Jimmy. He'd wanted to continue, to explain the things he'd seen, but couldn't find the words. And on second thought, maybe it was better not to inflict that on anyone. The worst of the photographs wouldn't make it to print. Perry would pick out something that was suggestive of horror but didn't actually show anything. To Jimmy, it was almost worse to only catch a glimpse. He was sure that he would be a better photographer if he could understand why the small puddle of blood on the edge of the kitchen table was somehow worse than directly seeing the dismembered corpse.

"What kind of photographer?" asked Eleanor.

"I work for the newspaper," said Jimmy. "For *The Daily Planet*." He paused. There had to be something that he could say that wouldn't ruin her evening. "You know that picture of Lois Lane standing next to Superman? I took that."

Eleanor placed a hand on his arm. "Oh, I read *The Daily Planet* every day. I wonder how many of your pictures I've seen?" She had an easy, pleasant smile, and Jimmy slowly began to take

notice of her.

"Lots, probably," said Jimmy. "People look at the bylines, not the photo credit. Most of them probably don't even look at the bylines."

"I look at the bylines," said Eleanor happily. "Clark Kent and Lois Lane, right? Do you work with them?"

"Yeah," said Jimmy.

"Say, what does Clark Kent look like? I've seen photos of Lois, obviously, but I've sometimes read the name of Clark Kent and wondered what he was like."

"Clark?" asked Jimmy. He swallowed down the last of his beer and signaled for another. "He's a big guy. Sort of a hunched over gorilla."

Eleanor laughed. She was still touching his arm. Jimmy felt his cheeks warming, and it wasn't just the alcohol. "That's not how I pictured him at all. In my head he was tall and upright, very dapper. Like Clark Gable."

"No," said Jimmy. "Not like that at all." Between Eleanor's questions, the beer, and the images from the farmhouse swimming around his brain, Jimmy was beginning to feel out of sorts.

"Where's he from?" asked Eleanor.

"What?" asked Jimmy. He'd been distracted by her eyes.

"Clark Kent, is he from the city or somewhere else? I pictured somewhere on the East Coast, but the city itself," said Eleanor.

"Kansas," said Jimmy.

"Really?" asked Eleanor. Her eyes lit up. "I'm from Kansas too! Which part?"

"Smallville," said Jimmy.

"Yes, I think I've heard of it," said Eleanor. She looked over at the clock above the bar. "Well I have to go, but it was nice talking to you."

“You’re not staying?” asked Jimmy. He tried to keep the hurt from his voice.

“You didn’t seem all that interested in talking to me,” said Eleanor with a frown. She gestured towards his beer. “And I don’t know how many of those you’ve had, but I think it’s probably been too many.”

“Today’s the worst day of my life,” said Jimmy. “Worst so far anyway. There might be other days that are even worse than this one. I’ve got a feeling that’s the case. I just need someone to be by me. Please?”

She seemed about to brush him off, to offer some excuse and leave, but she must have seen something in his face because she just nodded and stayed with him.

They got to talking, actually talking, and eventually Jimmy felt like the world wasn’t about to come crashing down on him. Eleanor had a certain brightness to her that made the world seem less grim. She’d come to the bar alone, and after an hour had passed, he’d offered to walk her home. When they got to her place, she must have sensed how desperately he wanted not to go back to his cold, cramped apartment. She invited him up.

Her apartment was just as small as his was. He sat on her bed while she put on a kettle of tea, and that was when he started crying. He felt embarrassed and ashamed, but she sat down next to him, ran her fingers through his hair, and made comforting noises. They laid down side by side on her bed. She didn’t seem surprised or upset. It must have been around two in the morning that she started telling him about her father. He’d come home from the Great War with shell shock, and killed himself with a shotgun when she was six. Jimmy didn’t know how to respond to that. He hoped it was enough that he had listened. Eventually she fell asleep, and he followed suit soon after.

In the morning he’d thought that there would be sheepish

looks and awkward goodbyes, but she'd made them breakfast in her tiny kitchen and didn't show an ounce of shame.

"I need to change out of these clothes and get dressed for work," said Eleanor. Her voice was soft and gentle. "But if you ever need someone to talk to, you know where I live. There's a communal telephone on this floor, I can give you the number."

"I'd like that," said Jimmy. "I never even asked what you do. We talked about me too much. I feel like a lout."

Eleanor looked at him for a moment before answering. "I work for a private detective agency. And I really do need to get going, I'm sorry."

Jimmy said his goodbyes and left for *The Daily Planet*. He felt better, more at peace with what he'd seen the day before. He couldn't imagine spending that night alone.

"Are you okay?" asked Clark. Of course he got better right after the biggest news story since the bombings was already on the page. It was typical of him.

"Peachy," replied Lois. She'd barely slept the night before. She would have gotten drunk, but she'd done some thinking about alcohol on the ride out to the farmhouse. She'd become too entangled with Superman for loose lips. So far, she'd been making up for it by smoking more, but that didn't seem to be helping her nerves at all.

"Sorry I wasn't here," said Clark. "Sorry you had to see that."

"See what?" she asked.

"The body," said Clark. "The blood. I read your article and looked at Jimmy's photos, the ones that didn't make it to print. It was gruesome."

Lois waved her hand. "That was nothing," she said. "I mean, not nothing, but there are hundreds of millions of children in the

world, and you've got to figure that hundreds of them die every day, right? Maybe thousands? Lots of little girls get raped. Lots of little boys get chopped up. The only reason this is front-page news is that they were rich and white with a famous father, and because Superman didn't quite get there in time." Clark watched her. She tried to concentrate on her typewriter, but she couldn't even remember what she was supposed to be typing up.

"Perry told me that Superman talked to you. What exactly did he say?" asked Clark.

"That's between me and Superman," said Lois. She was being too harsh with Clark, she could tell, but it would have taken more effort than she was willing to spend to make her words come out nice.

"Lois, if you need someone to talk to, I'm here for you," said Clark. "And I don't mean any offense, but it seems like you've got something you need to get out."

"Possibly," said Lois. She stopped for a moment to think through her wording. Superman had come to her of all the people in the whole world to get things off his chest, and that meant that she was important to him. She had to assume that he was listening and watching, so talking about Superman became a matter of framing him in the best possible light. "In general terms, he explained to me that being Superman can be difficult sometimes." There, that didn't sound so bad as it really was. "He said that he can't do everything."

"And that upset you?" asked Clark. He had a look of serious and heartfelt concern, like she were some delicate doll that he was worried would break under stress. She hated that. She'd had more adventures in her life so far than Clark Kent could ever dream of, and to him it was like she was made of glass.

"It made me think about how right he is," said Lois.

"Lois, look, I don't know what it was he said, but I'm sure he

didn't mean to upset you," said Clark.

Lois nodded. "I agree, it wasn't his intent. But he opened my eyes up, and if my reaction to that is to be upset with the world, then so be it."

Clark kept staring at her, and she kept avoiding his eyes. "Do you know what I think?"

Lois didn't answer, because she wasn't confident that she could speak without snapping at him.

"My pa was in prison for a while, I told you that," said Clark. "And for a long time he never really talked about it, but I knew it was bad. And I think that maybe talking about it would have made it less bad for him, you know?"

"You're saying I should talk to you," said Lois.

"No," said Clark. "I'm saying that maybe whatever Superman said to you, he just said because he was having a bad day. Maybe he just... needed someone to talk to, and talking to you made whatever difficulties he was having easier to bear."

Lois found this far from comforting.

Superman was holding back, in nearly everything that he did. He didn't hurt people, and certainly didn't kill people. He could fly at twenty times the speed of sound, maybe even more, but he almost never did. He worked quickly and efficiently towards his objectives, and most of the time if you showed up after he'd gone there'd hardly be any evidence that he was there at all. Everyone thought that was just who Superman was. He was so totally and completely in control of himself that he would never do anything truly wrong. He firmly followed the doctrine of unambiguous goods.

It wasn't true though. People thought that Superman did everything effortlessly, and maybe as far as the physical realm went that was true. Inside his head though, he wasn't much more than a man. She'd heard that Superman had walked into

Calhoun's bar and let himself be hit in the face with a gob of spit. She'd believed that Superman had been unbothered by that, but now it was clear that Superman was human enough to have felt something there. Superman's ideals weren't innate to him, they took conscious effort on his part. And what would happen when Superman had a day so bad that he decided that his ideals weren't worth keeping?

Picture a circle. Next, picture a point outside that circle, call it O . Draw a line from the point such that it pierces the circle in two places — a secant — and call those two points A and B . Draw another line originating from that O such that it intersects the edge of the circle in only one place — a tangent — and call that point C . The secant-tangent theorem states that OA times OB is equal to OC squared.

If the circle is Earth and the point outside it is Superman, then that tangent defines how far Superman can see before his vision starts to clip the crust of the Earth. To find that distance, take the diameter of the Earth (roughly eight thousand miles) plus Superman's distance from the Earth (rarely seen to be more than ten miles), then multiply that by Superman's distance from the Earth, then take the square root of that. The result was 280 miles, the distance that Superman could see to the geometric horizon from the height that he stayed within ninety-nine percent of the time.

There were 1,127 miles between Smallville, Kansas and Metropolis, New York.

Of course, Superman had x-ray vision, but that was stopped by lead. Lex Luthor had consulted a book of geological science and found that the estimated abundance of lead in the Earth's crust was one thousandth of one percent, which meant that for

every mile of earth that Superman looked through, he was looking through sixteen millimeters of lead. Based on Lex's calculations, it was safe to assume that it only took a centimeter of lead to stop Superman's x-ray vision. The upshot was that Superman could not see what went on in Smallville unless he specifically moved himself into a position to do so.

It allowed for a comparatively enormous amount of breathing room.

It was imperative that he get someone there as quickly as possible. What records he could pull showed that Clark Kent at least existed on paper, and a quick call done through layers of intermediaries confirmed that the *Smallville Ledger* had once employed him, or at least claimed to have employed him. Lex was starting to once again doubt that Superman was an alien, since it very much seemed that Clark Kent's backstory was solid, but he kept digging all the same. Learning about the existence of Clark Kent had produced numerous threads to pull on.

He needed someone in Smallville, but the constraints on hiring were immense. He needed someone intelligent, prone to following orders, trained in espionage, and willing to go into deep cover for an extended period of time. He would need to instruct them to take precautions above and beyond what any covert operation had required in the history of spycraft, a constant cover that remained unbroken for weeks or even months at a time. The list of people that fit the bill was very, very short. Lex was in the middle of trying to figure out whether it would be possible to put someone in deep cover and still keep them in the dark about the connection between Clark Kent and Superman when the doorbell rang.

A few minutes later, Mercy stood in the doorway of the study. "Miss Lane is here, requesting a moment of your time," she said.

"Send her in," said Lex.

She looked different, though Lex couldn't say exactly how. Did she know that Superman was Clark Kent? If so, it wasn't obvious from her face. Lex was wearing the outermost layer of his personas, the one where he was a simple enthusiast and advocate for Superman with no knowledge of the alien he wouldn't willingly share with the world. He mentally prepared himself for Lois Lane to peel back the personas one at a time. He'd been careful, but part of being careful was preparing for your carefulness to fail you. He had stories prepared that would justify his actions.

"Miss Lane," Lex said with a smile.

"Mister Luthor," replied Lois. He pinpointed what was different about her; she was tense. "I called your office and they said you were here."

"The businesses mostly run themselves," said Lex. "I have a knack for hiring competent people, and that's left me with the free time to pursue my passions."

"Superman," she said. She began to dig a pencil and notepad from her purse.

"Just so," replied Lex.

"I've read your proposals," said Lois. "What would you do, if you were Superman?" She began writing in the notepad.

"A common question," said Lex. He was about to continue on when Lois turned her notepad around to face him. It said *Can Superman be stopped?* Lex's eyes moved to the door, to make sure it was closed. They were encased in a hidden layer of lead. Lois had been over when the shielding was being installed, and knew they were behind it. She was being cautious.

"A common enough question," repeated Lex. "For many it's the perfect fantasy. People talk about setting foot on the surface of the Moon, or going to the Olympics and dominating in every sport. They talk about standing up to their various oppressors.

My companies have been picking up quite a few Jewish immigrants from Germany of late, and I feel that many of them would like nothing better than to fly down and put a hole in Hitler's face." He turned to look at her. "Superman can't be stopped. It's frightening to think what might happen if his power fell into the hands of someone without such a strong moral compass. For myself, I'm not sure that I would want the power. I'd use it for good as best I could, I suppose. No flashy displays, no material wealth, just the betterment of mankind."

"I was wondering whether you could help me," said Lois, pointing to her notepad, where the words were still written.

Lex watched her carefully. Lois Lane could easily be working for Superman. Even if she didn't know that he was Clark Kent, she could have been sent in to get some admission of guilt. He couldn't trust her. But perhaps he didn't have to. "Help you with what?" he asked, not missing a beat.

"I've written two books," said Lois Lane, "One on the radium girls and another on the role of women in the World War."

"I know," said Lex. He pointed to his bookshelf. "I've read them."

Lois seemed momentarily taken aback by this, but of course he had read them. He'd read *The Daily Planet* every single day for the past year, and after he'd learned that Clark Kent was Superman he'd gone and read every issue again. Earlier that morning, when he'd learned that Clark Kent had once written for the *Smallville Ledger*, he'd immediately started thinking up possible methods of getting back issues of it to his home or office without immediately allowing Superman to connect the dots.

"My new book will be about Superman," said Lois as she wrote in her notebook. "And as you and I have something of a working relationship, I was wondering whether you would be willing to contribute." She flipped the notebook towards him

again. *S is losing faith in us.*

“What sort of contribution?” asked Lex.

“You’re the preeminent scholar of him, and one of the greatest examples that his efforts to be a symbol actually work,” said Lois. She pointed at the notepad and raised her eyebrows.

All Lex could think was that it was a trap. She would have to be a masterful liar for that to be true, but that was certainly possible. If he’d been willing to admit that Superman was using the disguise of Clark Kent and lying through his teeth to everyone he interacted with on any given day, then surely he had to admit that the same might be true of the woman that sat next to him every day. The idea of Lois Lane turned to his side was seductive though. And though he was well aware that the best traps didn’t look like traps until they’d been sprung, it truly didn’t look like a trap.

“I’m afraid I’m a busy man,” said Lex. “Though I admit that sharing my thoughts on Superman with a wider audience appeals to me. What precisely would be the nature of this arrangement?”

Lois wrote in the notebook. Superman could surely hear that, if he were listening. Lex couldn’t decide whether he was being too paranoid in thinking that Superman would find it suspicious. “I’d like you to write two chapters,” she said. “They can be short. There will be a chapter on the science that I’d like you for contribute to, and another chapter on how he’s changed the people of the city.” She held up the notepad again. *S is more human than he lets on, might turn on us.* “Does that sound reasonable?”

“Let me think on it for a moment,” replied Lex. “In the meantime, feel free to peruse my library, I’d be happy to give you any book that you have an interest in. Give me five minutes, by the clock?”

Lois looked unhappy, but she nodded all the same.

Lex closed his eyes, relaxed his body, and thought.

There was too much unknown information. He could make all sorts of educated guesses about what Lois Lane and Superman knew, but there was so little information available that these guesses were barely worth anything. There were dozens of configurations of truth which fit the data as he saw it, and in some of those possible worlds it would be correct to allow himself a partnership with Lois Lane, and in others it would throw not just his operations but the fate of the entire planet into jeopardy. Lex Luthor had set himself up as a follower of Superman, highly visible and shining like a beacon. If Superman really was losing his faith in humanity, what would happen if he learned that Lex Luthor was responsible for the deaths of dozens, nevermind that it had been the correct decision given the information he'd had available at the time?

He looked to Lois. If she were telling the truth, why had she chosen to confide in him? Well, he was a billionaire with an active interest in the betterment of humanity, the premiere scholar on everything related to Superman, and likely one of the few people she knew who had a room lined with lead and the sense not to immediately blurt out a strangled "What?" when shown a secret message. On top of that, they had an established relationship. It made a certain sort of sense. The more he thought about it, the more he thought it plausible that she really had come to him in good faith.

He walked over to her and took the notepad and pencil from her hands. She had a hopeful look.

"I've decided that I'll do my best to help," said Lex. He pointed to where she'd written *might turn on us*, then began to write something of his own. "I'm a busy man, but a partnership could benefit us both." He turned the notepad towards her. *Tell me everything you think you know about Superman.* "I have

a number of things coming up in the near future, so it would be good to get this done quickly.”

“Agreed,” replied Lois. She grabbed the notepad from him. “I should warn you that I don’t have a publisher lined up just yet, but it shouldn’t be a particularly hard sell.” *He can’t know I’m telling you.*

“A problem to be dealt with in due time,” said Lex. “If you’re free tomorrow, we could meet here? There are a few things that I’d like to think over first. I’ll try to have some initial thoughts ready.”

Lois watched him for a moment, then nodded.

The next day, Lois Lane picked up the piece of paper from Lex Luthor’s desk as he said unimportant things for the benefit of Superman.

I’m not saying that I believe you, Miss Lane. But if you think that Superman is losing his faith in us, then that’s something that needs to be discussed, and I can only hope that if he finds out, he’ll understand that the discussion couldn’t happen in front of him, as it were. You have more exposure to the man than anyone on the planet, so far as I know. You’re the only one he’s really talked to. If you have concerns, I need to hear them, no matter how outlandish.

“There much to the science of Superman,” said Lex. “His x-ray vision, for example, doesn’t use actual x-rays. The current best theory is that there’s an exotic type of particle which is as yet undetectable to us. It permeates the planet, with lead atoms being the only thing that can stop it for reasons that possibly relate to its atomic weight, electron density, or some other property. But there’s so much unknown, as with much about Superman. I’ve been working on it for a year, and I still don’t have the faintest understanding of how his hearing works. I want to make

it clear that much of what I say about the science of Superman is on the cutting edge, and not to be taken as gospel.

"I've done the liberty of typing up a very rough draft, and would be pleased if you could take a look," he said. He handed her a blank sheet of paper and a pencil. She was about to object that if they really wanted to be secretive she'd need to leave his study with some actual papers, but he pulled out a number of typewritten pages, already marked up with a few corrections and notes, and set it beside her. She began to give her account.

From time to time, she would ask Lex an inane question to keep up appearances, and he would respond with inane answers. To Superman it would sound like they were simply working on a book together. She wasn't sure whether she could trust Luthor, but he was by far the most capable man in the city, and she hoped that the worst he would do would be to burn her notes and refuse to see her without letting Superman know what she thought. She tried to use the strongest, most persuasive language she could, and hoped that Superman would never learn what she really thought of him.

Still, she left some things out. She didn't mention the possessive way that Superman had touched her when he'd picked her up and flown her through the air. She'd interacted with Superman on a number of occasions, and he always seemed so familiar with her. So far as she knew, she was his only friend, but she was also something more to him. She could feel his eyes on her while she undressed sometimes. She could feel him staring at her while she tried to sleep. With every conversation she had, she imagined Superman listening in. This feeling had grown in intensity since their last meeting. She hoped it was just paranoia on her part. But either way, Lex Luthor didn't need to know.

The picture Lois Lane printed was a grim one.

He was now reasonably confident that she knew nothing of Superman's alter ego. Her account of Superman was vivid and unflinching.

He can hear everything that's happening in the world, and it's driving him to despair. I think he can shut down his hearing and tune it all out, but that's almost worse in a way, because he still knows all of the pain and suffering that's happening, and turning away from it doesn't make it disappear. He sounded like a martyr to me, forcing himself to bear witness not just to the evils but to the vast but simple indifference of the world.

Yet that was very different from the picture that Lex had been forming. Superman spent time as Clark Kent, which implied a certain apathy towards suffering. What did Superman get from maintaining the Clark Kent persona? From what Lex's various sources could tell him, Clark Kent didn't seem to take very many pleasures from life. He didn't drink or smoke, and he had no romantic relationships to speak of. It seemed unbearably dull to Lex. Even in his work life, Clark Kent was only second best, and he didn't seem to leverage the full force of his powers.

The first possibility was that everything Superman had said to Lois was a ruse. Superman was an abject liar, he'd already proven as much by spending an entire year pretending at being someone he was not. It was possible that he was manipulating Lois Lane towards some end, though Lex could only make the vaguest guesses as to what end. Superman should have no need for a reporter, since he already was one. If it was manipulation, Lex suspected that it was in pursuit of inflicting some mental or emotional harm, but it was also possible that he had some delusions about Lois. Lois hadn't mentioned Clark at all, and Lex hadn't thought it prudent to bring him up.

The second possibility had taken some time to see. Lex had

been under the assumption that the persona of Clark Kent had been invented as a cover for Superman, but it was distinctly possible that Superman was a cover for Clark Kent. The solidity of his background information suggested as much. Lex had told Mercy that Clark was a mockery of humanity, but perhaps the outward appearance of Clark Kent matched his inner feelings. Lex Luthor could almost imagine Clark Kent as a simple man who wanted nothing from life but to be left alone, burdened by powers that he didn't understand or desire, donning a costume and flying through the air because the guilt of sitting at his desk simply became too much sometimes. It was almost sad, until you remembered that he was the most dangerous man on the planet.

If there were answers, they would be found in Smallville.

Joseph and Loretta Greene bought one of the town's two general stores. They moved into a small house on Cherry Street, and quickly made friends throughout the community. Joseph was always ready to ask about the history of Smallville, a town which he seemed to have adopted as his own, and Loretta was relentlessly social. They attended church every Sunday at the Zion Lutheran Church. Though they didn't have any children, they often spoke of it as an eventuality. If you could see straight through Loretta's clothes, you would see a scar running at a diagonal from the side of her left breast to just above her navel. If you could see straight through Joseph's dress shirt, you would find three puckered marks that were unmistakably bullet wounds. Joseph and Loretta had stories ready in case anyone ever saw and asked. Those were the only marks of their former lives.

As it turned out, Clark Kent was somewhat famous in Smallville. His name had come up on the very first day that Loretta

and Joseph had come to town, when the previous owner of the general store had told them that they should carry *The Daily Planet*, even though it would be at least two days old by the time it arrived. Though he hadn't been especially popular or well-known growing up, Clark Kent had become the nearest thing that Smallville had to a celebrity, and the people of Smallville often talked about what Clark was up to in the big city.

Every few days, Loretta would write a letter to her family back in Gotham City. She wrote an enormous amount, even when there wasn't much to say, and often included some of Joseph's historical research about the town and its residents. Joseph took to Smallville like a fish to water, and some days could be seen two doors down talking to the small group of men that worked at the Smallville Ledger, a once weekly newspaper that served as the main source of news for the county. Anything and everything of interest he learned there went into the letters to Gotham.

From time to time, a letter would come back.

The player piano had effectively died out in 1929 with the stock market crash, and few of the things were produced anymore, since radio had effectively taken its place. Player pianos worked through pneumatic action to play music, and the different songs were recorded on sheets of perforated paper. Joseph and Loretta had brought a player piano with them when they moved in, and a very careful observer might note that it routinely seemed to break down just after one of these letters from Gotham City came in. Joseph would take the perforated sheet of paper with the music out of the machine and go to work repairing whatever was wrong, and Loretta would lay the sheet on top of the letter. The typewritten letter would perfectly line up with perforated sheet music, revealing a scattering of letters that formed a message. Those brief seconds were the only

time that someone watching through the walls from hundreds of miles away would know that they were something more than just rural shopkeepers.

“Do you think we’ll ever know?” asked Loretta one night over dinner.

“No,” said Joseph.

“How much longer, do you think?” she asked.

“No idea,” said Joseph. He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. “Let’s not talk about these things.”

Five thousand dollars were deposited into a Kansas City bank account every week for each of them, courtesy of a trust that had been set up according to the will of Joseph’s fictitious uncle. They had no idea who their employer was, only that he was fanatically paranoid. Joseph and Loretta weren’t their real names, but all the proper records were in place if anyone went looking. If asked about the money, they would confess that they simply liked the small and quiet life of a small town and didn’t want to complicate things.

Hershel Whitman sat on the veranda of the governor’s mansion. It was early in March, and too cold for the veranda, but he didn’t like to be inside the house anymore. He’d have never thought that so soon after winning an election he would feel like leaving his office. People had offered their condolences and paid their respects, but it had been more than a month now, and mostly all that was left were awkward glances and sad looks. June was shut up in her room, and Robert was buried in the Oakwood Cemetery.

Superman landed in the yard and started walking towards the house. Hershel tried not to react. Early on he’d wanted to yell at Superman for failing to save his children. He had yelled,

in fact. Late at night, after June had been brought back and Robert hadn't, when Hershel couldn't sleep, he would walk a mile or so from the mansion and scream at the sky. He didn't know if Superman had listened, or if Superman cared. He felt somewhat guilty about that now. If it hadn't been for Superman, June might not have come back at all.

"Superman," said Hershel. His voice caught.

"Governor Whitman," Superman replied. "I never said how sorry I was."

"No," replied Hershel. "You didn't."

"I came here to ask a favor," said Superman. "Thirteen minutes ago Francis Pasqua spoke with his lawyer about getting immunity. He named William Calhoun as the man who gave the orders."

"Immunity," said Hershel. "You want me to give him immunity in exchange for testimony."

"No," said Superman. "I need to know what June heard them talk about, and if it's enough, I need her to testify."

"Just kill him," said Hershel. His voice was barely a whisper. "Just fly in and kill him. No one would stop you, no one could stop you. Hell, use a gun and no one would even think of you. There are a dozen people with cause to kill Willie Calhoun. You want my daughter to take the stand against him, to say that his name was thrown around by those men? Calhoun would have the right to face his accuser, and that means cross examination. No. I won't put her through that."

"He needs to be brought to justice," said Superman.

"Do you know why it didn't happen in the last trial?" asked Hershel. He'd had two whiskeys before Superman had shown up, and swayed slightly as he stood. "It's because you let him. The criminals don't care about you. They know you won't hurt them. They know how to hide from you. Ronald Oakes. That

was the name of the man driving my children, and everyone forgets about him. They slit his throat because they knew that if they didn't he would call for you. You're not making them stop, you're just making them adapt."

"Crime has dropped ninety percent since I've come to Metropolis," said Superman. "You can ask the chief of police. I know you're angry, but if we don't have the rule of law, we don't have anything."

Hershel crumpled into his chair. Arguing was no use. "If June agrees," said Hershel. "If June agrees to talk, and she knows enough to convince the district attorney, and the jury listens to her and then they say he's not guilty, if all that happens... you'll just let him go?"

"No," said Superman.

"No?" asked Hershel.

"No," replied Superman.

In 1911, a baby boy was left in the hallway of a tenement in Metropolis. He was taken to the Metropolis Foundling Hospital and from there became part of the Orphan Train program. In Metropolis the abandonment of children was a continual problem, while in the Midwest there was a continual shortage of labor. The inventive solution to these twin problems was for the children and babies to be delivered to the heartland of America by railway. At every stop the children would be taken out and displayed before the gathered crowd, sometimes having their muscles felt and teeth checked. Some would be selected for indentured servitude and possibly adoption, while others would be put back on the train and sent to the next stop. When the orphan train stopped in Oskaloosa, the foundling, Clark, was se-

lected by Martha and Jonathan Kent. They adopted him a few years later.

So far as Lex could tell, that was the official story that was believed by the residents of Smallville. Though the orphan trains had fallen out of favor, the Metropolis Foundling Hospital was still standing. As Lex Luthor was funding five different orphanages in Metropolis, it wasn't terribly hard for him to get the records from the Foundling Hospital, and more importantly, it wouldn't look too terribly suspicious, especially when it was known that Lex Luthor was looking to expand his charitable giving. It had taken only a day of looking through the records to see that they contained no mention of a boy named Clark leaving the train at Oskaloosa, and no record of the Kents as sponsors for a child.

This in itself was nothing too out of the ordinary. Lex had found that few people took record keeping seriously. Ownership of the records changed, people developed new formats, and sometimes entire years worth of data were destroyed by insects, acids in the paper, or an excess of humidity. Yet it still felt suspicious to Lex. If you were trying to hide someone's parentage, you couldn't do much better than the orphan trains. Clark Kent had the perfect excuse for not having a birth certificate.

According to the reports he received from his two agents, Martha Kent owned a farmhouse outside of town, which she shared with a live-in farmhand named Elias Clayton. His agents had spoken to her, and remarked only that she was a nice woman who went to church every Sunday and spent most of her time on the farm. Jonathan Kent had died a year before Clark had come to Metropolis, and if that was a deception, someone had at least given him a gravestone.

Clark Kent had grown up in Smallville. There were dozens of people who could recall him as a boy. His worn and faded

initials were carved into desktops and trees. The evidence of his existence was so utterly convincing that it couldn't be denied. There were aberrant incidents in and around Smallville that suggested the powers characteristic of Superman extending back to the time that Clark Kent was eleven years old. Superman had not actually arrived in a spaceship, he had grown up on a farm in the middle of Kansas. Even if Lex believed this, it didn't help to clear up anything. The power had to have come from somewhere.

The solution had to be on the Kent farm.

Floyd Lawton had come into Smallville as a drifter looking for room and board with barely a dime in his pocket. He'd walked down the dusty dirt roads, going door to door looking for work, until finally he'd happened upon a small house that belonged to a greying old lady. He'd gone down the path and up the steps to the front porch, then knocked with a ready smile on his face.

"Missus Kent?" Floyd had asked as she came to the door.

"Yes? Do I know you?" she'd asked. She was in her sixties, maybe even older, with white hair tied up in a loose bun. Her dress was simple and blue.

"No ma'am, sorry, the name was on the mailbox. Name's Floyd Lawton." He took off his hat and clutched it to his chest. "Sorry to trouble you on this fine day, but I've been on the road a long while and I'm looking to settle down for a spell of work. If you have something that needs doing, or if you know some neighbors that need some work, I'd do it just for room and board, whatever's asked of me."

Martha Kent gave him a warm smile. "Why you know, I had a live-in farmhand up until just two days ago, Elias Clayton. He

was a strong and able man, helped with the few animals I still keep, the garden, and the maintenance on the old barn. We made enough to keep ourselves afloat, along with the money brought in by leasing out the land to the Parkers, and I paid him a good wage. Well Elias had aspirations, you see, but he was a black and so work didn't come too easy, especially not the kind of work that he was keen on doing, which was acting. Then just a week ago a director of movies came out to Smallville, right out of the blue. He said that he was going to make the great American movie, and said that Smallville would make the perfect location for it. Well now, Elias took the day off to go speak with that director. I thought nothing of it of course, until Elias came back and told me that he'd been discovered. He said it happens all the time, if you can believe that, so I said to him that he wasn't to leave until he'd finished putting up new chicken wire around the coop. I was thinking it might be I'd try taking this year by myself for a change, but if you're looking for work, then boy do I have some."

Floyd nodded through all this, a slightly desperate grin on his face like he thought a real drifter would have. Martha mostly seemed happy to have someone to talk to though, and they'd moved the conversation inside. They'd come to an agreement over homemade lemonade that had too much pulp in it for Floyd's liking.

Later that day, Floyd had picked up his meager belongings from the Greene house in Smallville, where he'd rented out a room for the night. He had a rifle slung over his shoulder, and two pistols in a wooden box that draw Martha's attention.

"There's not much use for pistols out here," said Martha with a frown. "We have a shotgun, and a few rifles for dealing with the coyotes and wolves, or for bringing in more meat."

"They were my father's," said Floyd with a smile. "Hand-

crafted and fine quality pieces, and I'm only thankful that I've never had to sell them."

"My husband Jonathan, may he rest in peace, he abhorred pistols," said Martha. "He was pacifist and an absolutist, and thought every war was a crime against God's own will."

"He's lucky he didn't get drafted then," said Floyd with a smile.

Martha's face became very serious. "Oh, my Jonathan was drafted alright. He'd applied to be a conscientious objector. When I say he was a pacifist, I don't mean that he thought it was better not to kill, I mean he believed with every fiber of his being that it was simply something a good person doesn't do, no matter the circumstances. He went to prison for his beliefs."

"Ma'am, if you don't want me bringing pistols into your home—" Floyd began.

"No, no," said Martha. "There were more than a few things that Jonathan and I didn't see eye to eye on. You don't use those pistols lightly though. If someone tries to steal from our farm, I'd rather just let them take what they came for. It's not worth killing a man over a pair of chickens."

Floyd breathed a silent sigh of relief. He loved his pistols. He liked to use both at once, feeling them kick in tandem. He'd once cleared out an entire poker den with those two pistols, killing thirteen men with twelve bullets and earning him the nickname "Deadshot". He was handy with a rifle too, and had been briefly trained in sharpshooting by the military before a dishonorable discharge that had left him perfectly positioned to become an assassin. He was very explicit on that term, and had maimed more than one thug who called him a mere hitman.

He'd met men who didn't want to kill before. Hell, most men didn't want to kill. But he'd never met a man who'd prefer jail over being in the army, except perhaps those cowards that only

wanted to stay out of the fighting because they were afraid for their own safety. In his opinion, Jonathan Kent was probably just a slacker, but he held his tongue.

He settled into a routine at the Kent house. He would listen to Martha Kent yap away during an early morning breakfast, go out and do whatever work needed to be done until lunchtime, take a break during which he'd work on composing a letter to his completely fictitious sister, and then keep working on the farm until nearly sunset, when he'd go into town, grab a copy of the Smallville Ledger, and on occasion mail off his letter for the week.

"Why is there a lock on the storm cellar?" asked Floyd.

"Oh, that old thing," said Martha. "It kept blowing open, so I put a lock on it a while back and somehow forgot the key."

"I could cut the lock," said Floyd. "I wouldn't want to get caught in a tornado without a storm cellar."

"It's rusted shut anyway, I think," said Martha. "And there's a small basement room we can go to if the storms ever get too bad. I wouldn't worry about it dear."

Floyd had gone back and looked at the doors to the storm cellar more closely. They were made of metal, and when he looked closely at the seams, he could see that the whole thing had been welded shut. It was hard to make out with all the rust, but the storm cellar had been sealed shut as tightly as possible.

So far as he could guess, whatever was down there was the entire reason for his being on the Kent farm. He made sure to mention the storm cellar in his letters to his fictitious sister, cloaking the information in long paragraphs about how he was afraid of tornadoes. Hopefully his employer was smart enough to read between the lines.

Author's Note: Orphan trains were a real thing. Whether this was slavery by another name or an ingenious solution to the societal problems of abandoned children and a lack of cheap labor is left as an exercise to the reader.

If you have an interest in reading more about the treatment of conscientious objectors in WWI, search out "Armed with Prayer in an Alcatraz Dungeon", which does a lot more justice to the topic than I can do here. It's interesting reading even if you disagree with the moral philosophy of it. My grandfather was a conscientious objector in WWII. One of my strongest memories of him was when he told me about how he was routinely spit on while building bridges and roads around the Midwest by people who thought that sticking to his beliefs was somehow the height of cowardice.

As always, I appreciate the favorites / follows / reviews / recommendations. A special thanks to my wife Alyssa for being my beta reader.

Chapter 9

Dust to Dust

Lex needed to know what was in the storm cellar. It was a matter of practical necessity, but there was an emotional component as well. He'd spent nearly a year of his life in pursuit of what lay there, slowly working his way backwards from Superman to Clark Kent and Clark Kent to Smallville. He had three agents in Smallville, one of whom was living on the farm itself, so close that it ached. In Lex Luthor's fantasy, he stood in a clean, pressed suit and watched over a workman using an oxy-fuel cutting torch. When the doors were opened, he would stride down into the cellar and find whatever was hidden there.

It couldn't be a secret laboratory. If it were, there was no way that Lex would have been able to insert his agent onto the farm so easily. It was possible that the storm cellar was a decoy of some kind, but Lex found that doubtful. The game wouldn't be at this stage if Superman were such a supremely paranoid person. More likely, the storm cellar was booby-trapped, or simply impassible by human means. Those metal doors could hide explosive devices or three solid feet of steel. And contained within the cellar could be anything. All of that made planning a mission difficult.

Lex Luthor had involved himself in a number of thefts, especially in his youth. Stealing an unknown object from behind unknown defenses with a guard that had a nearly unlimited surveillance ability would be challenging but not, strictly speaking, impossible. Removing Martha Kent from the farm for the day would be easiest part. Superman could be distracted by a disaster of some sort, or more likely a series of them. Getting the proper equipment into place would be trivial, and the thieves themselves already had their cover identities. It might even be possible to break into the storm cellar, retrieve whatever was in there, and then weld it back shut without Superman even knowing a theft had taken place until he flew over Kansas and used his x-ray vision to check. Whether Superman ever checked at all was an open question, but Lex found it unlikely. Neither Clark Kent nor Superman had been seen in or around Smallville in the time that his agents had been there. Superman could watch from high up in outer space, but from what Lex knew of his psychology, this too was unlikely — though not so unlikely that the theft could be done without precautions.

Judging how Superman might react to the theft was more difficult. Superman would find out that someone knew his secret identity, and he would know that someone had whatever was in the storm cellar. Obviously that was far from ideal, but it might be worth it if the cellar contained the means to defeat, depower, or contain him. Lex Luthor laid his plans.

The letter arrived on April 7th. The date was written at the top of it was “4/3/35” rather than “April 3rd, 1935”, which was a prearranged indication that it contained a coded message. The code was fairly simple, as these things went, and it was solvable without the use of pencil and paper so long as you knew that the

variety of salutation defined which of the six codes was being used. In this case, "Dearest Floyd," meant to take the last letter of every word and put it into a four by four grid which was then read from bottom to top and right to left. Floyd deciphered it quickly. *Go to Greene shop and get tickets. April 14th leave from church and take Martha with you. Keep her away until after the show. Top priority.*

Floyd went down to the grocery store owned by Joseph and Loretta Greene. He had no idea what their level of involvement in this scheme was, just as he had no idea what the goal of the scheme itself was. So far as he could tell, they were either patsies with no real knowledge of what they were doing, or very skilled deep cover agents. Sometimes Floyd thought he could see something hard and dangerous behind Joseph Greene's smiles, but he might have just been imagining things. If they were something more than store owners, their employer wanted to keep them compartmentalized, since he'd never been told much about them. When he'd stayed with them, they'd acted as nothing more than shopkeepers looking to help out a traveler.

"Floyd!" called Loretta. "Good to see you. Would you like to buy a raffle ticket?"

Floyd smiled at her. She had pretty, blue-grey eyes. He could imagine her as a killer, if he tried, but it wasn't clear on her face. "Well that depends now, what's the raffle for?"

"Two tickets to see *Anything Goes* in Wichita," said Loretta. She smiled with her eyes. "A nickel to enter, though a few folks around here have bought a few entries to increase their chances."

"Well that sounds lovely," said Floyd. "I think I have a nickel on me, as a matter of fact."

It was no surprise to hear that he'd won a week later.

"All the way in Wichita?" asked Martha when he'd asked her

to come with him.

“We can leave from the church, have lunch in the city, and then see the show,” said Floyd. “I have some money saved up, and I wouldn’t mind spending some of it to show you a nice time. It’ll be good to see the big city.”

“I suppose you’re right,” said Martha. “I haven’t been outside of Smallville since Jonathan passed.”

In truth, the two of them didn’t get along that well. Martha was clearly lonely. Her husband was dead and her only son was two days away in Metropolis. In the first week she’d shown him everything that was required of him, but even after that, she would sit down on a tree stump with a glass of lemonade and talk at length while he worked on mucking out the chicken coop or tended to the small garden. Floyd tried to smile and encourage her. Listening to her stories was half of the reason he had been hired, but she had a way of rambling on that irked him. She quite proudly held opinions that might have made her outspoken among the people of rural Kansas, but were practically pedestrian by the standards of the people Floyd had met throughout his life. Martha talked about the exodusters coming to town when she was a little girl, her involvement in the radical temperance movement, and working the farm with Jonathan through tornadoes, blizzards, hail, floods, grasshoppers, and droughts. Floyd tried his best to pretend to be interested, and most of what she said went into the letters.

Her distaste for pistols aside, the first time they’d really locked horns was when he brought home a small jar of moonshine. While the rest of the nation might have recognized Prohibition for the folly that it was, Kansas had laws against alcohol long before the amendment was passed, and had kept them in place after it was repealed. The ban was mostly thanks to little old ladies like Martha Kent. She’d shamed him for bringing moon-

shine into the house, told him it was against the law as if he didn't already know that, and then made him dump it out on the ground just beside the front steps. The only reason he hadn't gotten his pistols and shot her three times in the head was the enormous and ever-growing amount of money waiting for him once his work was done.

Floyd Lawton was a professional, but the job was getting to him. In the normal course of his work he would get a job and then spend some time doing the homework and employing a wide range of skills in things like lockpicking, disguise, forgery, and so on. The actual murder itself took a day at the most, and then he'd make his getaway and spend his newfound wealth on women and booze. His life consisted of long periods of debauchery punctuated by razor-sharp focus on a task that had been set before him. This particular job upset that natural rhythm. For the last few weeks, he'd been working as a farmhand with no clear end in sight.

When he'd initially arranged for the job, he'd been told that the term of employment was indefinite, but he hadn't really thought that it would be so long, especially with the amount that was being put into his account on a daily basis. Sitting in the woods with a rifle trained on a cabin for three days was easy for Floyd; this required a different kind of patience that he wasn't sure he had.

The SS *Excelsior* caught fire at nine in the morning. It was a cruise ship which had taken a recent turn as a ritzy floating restaurant in order to drum up business for its next voyage. Three times a day it would pull into the harbor and exchange passengers, giving a large number of people the chance to experience what a life of luxury on the seas was like. Sunday was

Lois's day off, but her work as a journalist was never far from her mind, and she didn't have a real affection for personal time. There was a story somewhere on the *Excelsior*, something that went beyond just the glitz and glamour of it. If there wasn't a story, then a day of eating fine foods on a fancy ship was a small price to pay. Luthor was a part owner of the ship, and had paid her way.

Lois was first alerted to the fire when a crewman hurried across the dining room. She'd set her fork down and rushed after him, and it was when she heard the panic in their voices that she began to smile. It wasn't many days that she got to be so close to a story as it developed. She was an excellent swimmer, and in the worst case scenario could tread water for long enough to get rescued, if not outright swim to shore. The water wasn't too cold, and hypothermia wouldn't be an issue. All in all, it was a pleasant enough time and place to be on a sinking boat.

It took a full fifteen minutes for Superman to show up, by which point the electrical cables and hydraulic lines had both been burned through, leaving the ship adrift and without radio. The *Excelsior* had been at its furthest distance from Metropolis when the fire started, and just making the turn back towards the city. If it weren't a Sunday, the ports would have been busier, but as it was the effort to provide them a rescue was looking pitiful.

Superman moved low to the water as he came in, splashing up waves behind him, and entered straight through the side of the burning ship. The fire was out within half a minute, though smoke and steam still rose around the ship. The ship was listing to one side, and Lois held firm to the railing. A number of the lifeboats had been lowered into the water, and the women and children were being put onto them. Someone had tried to grab Lois's arm and lead her away, but of course she was having none of it. She felt a lurch from the keel of the ship, followed by a

loud snapping sound.

“The ship is too damaged for me to move,” said Superman from just beyond the side of the ship. He’d moved there so quickly she couldn’t be sure he hadn’t been there all along. He stood in mid-air with his feet pointed down, and talked clearly and loudly with a rich baritone. Lois doubted that there was a person on the ship who couldn’t hear him. “Everyone stay calm, the fire has been put out and you’re in no danger.”

The evacuation was neat and orderly, and done with a minimum of fuss. A small boy laughed and jumped into the water, and Superman pulled him out and put him on a lifeboat with a stern admonition not to engage in foolishness. With Superman there, no one really feared for their lives. Lois heard a man say that it was impossible to die when Superman was standing next to you.

He landed on the deck next to Lois. “Do you need assistance Miss Lane?” he asked with a half grin, as though nothing had ever passed between the two of them. Worse, he said it like there weren’t hundreds of people dying all over the world with every passing minute. His mask was so complete that she almost believed it.

“I can make it to the lifeboat by myself,” said Lois. She’d been thinking what about she and Luthor had been talking about of late, and forced the next words out. “But if you’re heading back into Metropolis anyway, I wouldn’t mind a direct flight.” She smiled, and could feel herself showing too much teeth, but Superman smiled back and returned to helping people into their life boats. When everyone had been evacuated from the ship and the Coast Guard were on their way, Superman once again landed beside her and held out an arm towards her. Trying not to think about it too much, she stepped towards him and allowed herself to be swept up in his arms.

She'd been sitting in Lex's study two weeks prior ago he'd brought up the idea.

You're one of the anchors holding Superman in place, wrote Lex. You need to bind yourself tighter to him, so that he'll listen to you. He's attracted to you. Use that.

She made the hand signal for *No*. She and Lex had some two dozen signals that they used for messages that were too short for paper, a sign of how long they'd kept up their charade. The book was nearing completion, with Lex as a full co-author, and there was nothing close to a solution for the Superman problem. He'd suggested that they begin work together on a new book after the one on Superman was done, but Lois wasn't sure that there was a point in continuing.

Why? he signed back.

Lois sighed and started writing a message. *He would know that I was lying. His senses are too sharp for me to fool him. And I could only keep it up for so long before he would figure it out. She paused with her pencil poised over the page. It would increase the scrutiny on me. And I don't like him. He's too powerful.*

You've criticized me for not doing enough, Lex wrote back. This is a good plan. Scrutiny we can deal with. I understand that you don't like him, but if you're truly worried about him going rogue, this is one of the best ways to stop it from happening.

She and Luthor had gotten to know each other well over the course of their two person conspiracy, but she still wasn't entirely sure that he took what she'd told him seriously. He'd expanded his charitable efforts and began contributing to various legal efforts on Superman's behalf, but it never felt quite as concrete as she might have hoped. Luthor wanted to deal with Superman on an ideological or psychological level, and when she'd told him that wouldn't be enough, he'd quirked an eyebrow and asked what more they could possibly do. Superman was invincible,

everyone knew that.

She couldn't argue with the logic of providing an anchor for Superman, but the thought of courting him made her skin crawl. He was strong, handsome, popular, and powerful, but she hadn't been able to shake the sense of danger she felt on their first meeting, and after his breakdown she'd stopped trying to see him in a more favorable light. He was an alien pretending at being a moral exemplar when really he was much closer to an ordinary man. Who knew what personality lay in wait behind the mask he wore? Lois had never had anything resembling a lasting relationship, but she'd gone on dozens if not hundreds of dates. Some of the men were creeps right off the bat. With others it didn't become clear until the third drink, when she'd already begun thinking about the next date. And just once, the guy she'd been dating was arrested for beating a woman to death. She'd been dating him for two weeks at that point, and wouldn't have believed he was actually guilty except for the fact that she had contacts within the police department who'd shared the evidence with her. It had taken a long time for her to actually want to spend time in the company of a man after that.

It's fine if you don't want to do it, wrote Lex. But it's important to make the distinction between you having a personal distaste for your involvement and the plan actually being a poor one.

Lois thought about her objections. Superman could use his incredible senses to watch a person's breathing and listen to their pulse, but so far he hadn't shown any real ability to translate that into an ability to see whether someone was lying. She didn't want to be his girlfriend or anything else, but it was difficult to argue that humanity as a whole would be in a better position if Superman had someone that he actually listened to. Superman already cared about her in some way, and she already had to assume that he was watching her. There was a risk that Super-

man would discover that she was trying to play him, but that came down to whether Lois was good enough to keep it up. She would just have to become a better liar.

She didn't give Lex an answer, but had started preparing for the next time her path crossed with Superman's all the same. And that was how she ended up in his arms, flying over the Lower Metropolis Bay.

It wasn't so bad as before. He kept the speed gentle and stayed close to the water, so that if he dropped her it would only be unpleasant and not instantly fatal. Lois had her arms wrapped around his neck, and pressed her face against his chest to keep it out of the wind. So far as she could tell, it was exactly what he wanted. Her fear was still present, but if any of it showed perhaps he would mistake it for something else.

He set her down gently, near the stretch of river where Luthor's long mural stood.

"Thank you," said Lois. She placed a hand against his chest, and stood close to him. "For everything." She tried to ignore the people watching them.

Superman seemed about to say something, then cocked his head to the side. "There's a chemical spill down in Dockside," he said. "If you're ever in need, just call my name."

And with that he was off, flying through the air towards some new disaster. Lois's hands were trembling slightly, but it had gone better than she'd thought it would.

"Why doesn't Superman do something about this drought?" asked Bill Parker.

Martha Kent always made it a point to go to church early, and Floyd sat with her. Attending the Zion Lutheran Church was more about community than religious fulfillment, and Martha

never missed a chance to chime in, no matter the topic of conversation.

“And how would he do that Bill?” asked Martha. “He can fly, not control the weather.”

“Well,” said Bill. “Well he could spin around a bunch and pull some water to us.” He spun his finger around in front of him to demonstrate.

“He’d be liable to flood our farms if he tried that, and where on Earth would he get the water to do it?” asked Martha.

“Lake Superior,” replied Bill. “Fresh water, more than we’d ever need, and he could just funnel it up like that. Five hundred miles or so ain’t nothing to him. And there are waterspouts, ain’t there? Same thing.”

“It wouldn’t work,” said Martha with her arms crossed in front of her.

“Then a canal, say,” replied Bill. “We can’t take much more of these dust storms.”

“Sit back and enjoy the clear day,” said Martha.

“Superman doesn’t do hard labor,” said Pete Ross, who ran the auto repair place.

“Well we could use a canal,” said Bill. “I don’t care how we get it.”

Floyd tried to resist rolling his eyes, and settled in for another sermon. The pastor was young, and his lessons were obvious by the time he was three sentences in. Floyd was far from being a religious man, but he’d always thought that the true meaning of what was said shouldn’t be revealed until near the end, when it all came together and made itself clear.

After the sermon was over, Floyd waited next to the truck for Martha. The musical was showing at two in the afternoon, which left them just enough time to have some lunch in the city. The skies were clear and blue. Martha liked to talk to the other

church goes for a good long while, and if Floyd owned a watch he would have been looking at it every few seconds. There was no real hurry though. The whole point of the operation was for him to keep Martha away from the farm for as long as possible, and it didn't matter whether she was talking to friends or on the road.

"The barometer's dropping fast," said Martha as she walked towards the truck. "There's going to be a dust storm."

"Skies look clear and blue to me," said Floyd with a ready smile. There wasn't a cloud in sight. "I'm sure if there's a storm we can take cover in Wichita better than on the farm."

Martha shook her head. "No, the radio says it's going to be bad, and we can't be out on the open road. Besides that, we need to prepare the farm to weather it as best we can."

Floyd thought on that. The Greenes hadn't been in church, which probably meant that they were already on the farm — probably cracking open the storm cellar. He couldn't very well go back to the farmhouse with Martha and come across them in some incriminating position.

"Please Missus Kent, I'm sure we'll be fine. Worse comes to worst we pull over and take shelter in someone's cellar. Folk in Kansas are nice, I can't imagine that anyone would turn us away." Floyd smiled, and hoped he didn't seem to desperate. "I've never seen a musical before, and if we miss this one I think I might never."

"I know you had your heart set on it," said Martha. "But we have to go home. If we don't seal those windows the house will be full of dirt, to say nothing of what's going to happen to the chickens."

"Alright," said Floyd. "Maybe someday I'll save up enough to go see a musical all on my own."

"If it's as bad as I think it is, the theater would be closed

anyway,” said Martha. “Now let’s get going.”

The next step was sabotage. Floyd could choke the engine and then disconnect some vital part when he popped the hood of the truck to see what was wrong. He was just about to do this when Martha spoke.

“I’ve heard some unpleasant rumors, Floyd,” said Martha. Floyd spared a glance at her and saw a frown on her face.

“Rumors?” he asked, though he could guess right away what they were.

“You and that Betty Graber,” said Martha. “There’s some talk that the two of you are an item, and I can’t say that I could tolerate you living with me if that’s true.”

Betty Graber had made eyes at him from nearly the moment he’d set foot into town. She was nearly sixteen, and naive enough to think that there was something romantic about a drifter. More likely than not she thought she could change him, but better women had tried and failed at that. She would chat with him whenever their paths crossed, and pretend to be going in the same direction as he was so they could walk the two blocks that made up Smallville’s downtown together. If he’d been smart, he would have avoided her, but Smallville had little to offer in the way of entertainment and booze was prohibited. He’d taken her virginity in a grassy field, and she’d cried the whole time. Afterwards, she followed him around like a puppy that was particularly desperate for affection. It was the very definition of trouble, and it was only after he’d been with her that he could see that with any clarity.

“There’s no truth to it,” said Floyd. “She’s keen on me, I can tell, but I would never take advantage.”

Martha said nothing, and Floyd risked a glance over at her. She looked upset. He couldn’t be sure how much she had heard from the gossipmongers at church, but there was a serious risk

that his room, board, and dollar a week were about to disappear, and that meant in turn that his enormous salary was going to disappear too. Depending on what Betty had let slip, there might be some way to salvage things. He was mulling this over when he realized that he could see the Kent farm ahead of him. He choked the engine, and popped out of the car.

"I'll see what's wrong," he said quickly.

"I'll just walk the rest of the way," said Martha. She pointed back behind her. "I can see the dust storm on the horizon already." And in fact she was right, to the north the horizon was muddled and blackish brown. The storm was moving fast.

Floyd could see a large truck on the farm from where they were, and it was just a matter of time until Martha noticed it too. The mission was blown, and now it was a question of what his employer would want. The problem was, he just hadn't been given enough information, because he wasn't supposed to be anywhere near the operation. The storm cellar had to be the target. It was a question of whether it would be better to let the operation be discovered by Martha or better for Floyd to lose his cover. The fact that Martha was threatening to kick him out made the decision easy.

Floyd Lawton pulled out his gun. He caught up with Martha in a few short strides, and smacked her in the head with the butt of the pistol as she turned to look at him. From there it was just a matter of half a minute to pick up her light and frail body and set it in the back of the truck. With some quick work with ropes and a handkerchief he had her bounded and gagged. He restarted the truck and drove towards the house. Hopefully his employer would understand.

"What the hell are you doing here?" asked Joseph Greene as Floyd pulled up.

"Change of plans," said Floyd. "I'm here to help you two out.

There's a dust storm coming and we need to get out ahead of it if we can." That was when he spotted Loretta beside the large delivery truck they had, aiming a rifle at his chest. Either he was getting rusty or she was well-trained.

Joseph stared at him. "Where's Missus Kent?"

"Knocked out," said Floyd. "In the back of the truck."

Joseph swore. "Alright, we need to move then, quickly. Come this way."

The moving truck was backed up towards the storm cellar, which had its doors cast wide open. Beside it was an array of cutting tools. Joseph stepped down into cellar, and Floyd walked behind him. A small lantern cast light on the object.

"What in the hell is that?" asked Floyd.

It looked like a kite had swallowed an enormous egg. There was hardly a straight angle on it, save for the tips of the wings which were set two thirds of the way back, and it was easily six feet wide. The metal was gleaming a dull gold where the dust had been wiped away. There were no openings or protrusions of any kind, just pleasantly sweeping curves. When Floyd looked closely at the area that had been cleaned of dust, he could see that it was tiled in an intricate pattern.

"No idea," said Joseph. "Now come on, no talking, we need to get moving. Now."

The three of them heaved at it, and eventually the two men got their shoulders beneath the two stubby wings and managed to lift it up enough to start moving it up the wooden steps. They stopped to rest once it was outside, then with another burst of effort got it up into the back of the truck. Floyd collapsed against the side of the truck. He'd initially thought that the object would be unmovable without wrapping ropes around it and using the truck to pull it, but instead it was just obscenely heavy.

"Storm's coming," said Loretta. A black cloud stretched from

one end of the horizon to the other, hanging low. She walked over to Floyd's truck and turned to look at him with a frown. "Take that truck and drive as far away from here as you can. Keep Martha with you." The Greenes moved swiftly, and were already on the move by the time that Floyd had gotten the truck started up again. In his rear view mirror he could see Martha Kent, folded up like a doll. After a moment of looking at her, he realized that she didn't seem to be breathing. Floyd swore and hopped out of the truck, but as he reached down to check for a pulse he could see that he was far too late. Blood had trickled out from her nostrils and dried in place, and her eyes had gone milky. He swore again, and got back in the truck.

The storm was a godsend, so far as Floyd was concerned. It would cover up both the death of Martha Kent and his disappearance from Smallville. Dust storms didn't usually kill unless they caught you by surprise and choked you out, but if this one was bad, maybe that's what people would assume happened. He and Martha would both be missing, along with the truck, and surely the police would draw their own conclusions. The empty storm cellar with its doors blown open would only contribute to that. Floyd's money was held in a bank in Kansas City, and he'd make a withdrawal before anyone knew what had happened.

Floyd was a dozen miles away from Kansas City when the storm front caught up with him. Visibility dropped down to nothing, and he kept going more through the feel of the road than because he could see what was in front of him. A strong gust of wind hit the truck, nearly sending it sliding sideways. When Floyd looked back, Martha's body was gone.

The driver's side door flew away in a tumble of twisted metal and broken glass, and Floyd was wrenched from his seat and flung into the dirt. He closed his eyes tight and spat out a mouthful of blackened soil. Half a second later the wind whipped him

hard, pulling him up into the air. He fell, twisting in the wind, for what seemed like a long time. He was stopped when his shirt snagged on something, suspending him off the ground. He wiped at his eyes, trying to clear the dirt away. It was only slowly that he realized he was being held by a man. The dirt wasn't blowing anymore, because the clouds were now below them, sweeping over the Midwest like a horde of black demons. He had been thrown up into the sky and caught by a god.

Superman — for it could only be Superman — was covered in the same fine soil that Floyd was. His hair was a mess and his face was caked with dirt, save for just below his eyes where there were twin streaks of pink flesh. He was crying. Floyd didn't move, and didn't say anything. His employer had been taking precautions against the arrival of Superman, and now Superman was here. The only thing to strive for was getting out of this alive, and the only way to do that was to convince Superman to bring him back down to the ground. Superman didn't kill people, but he wasn't supposed to cry either. Floyd was being held up by the cheap, dirty fabric of his shirt, which was pressing uncomfortably against his armpits.

"You killed her," said Superman in a voice filled with cold fury.

"It was an accident," said Floyd. His voice was hoarse. He must have swallowed quite a bit of dirt on his way up. "I meant to knock her out, not kill her. I just hit her too hard."

"An accident," spat Superman. "I spend my every waking second treading lightly, trying not to go too fast, trying not to break your fragile little bodies. Do you understand how careful I was in bringing you up out of the storm? How easily I could have broken your bones, or liquified your muscles? Do you think I have one single *ounce* of sympathy for you?" Superman let out a raw and primal scream that left Floyd momentarily deaf. It

was so loud his very bones had vibrated. And even then, he could tell that Superman had been holding back.

"I'm sorry," said Floyd, barely able to hear his own words.

"She was my mother," replied Superman.

Floyd had a sudden moment of clarity. He'd had a dozen conversations with Martha Kent about her son, and all of them had been given their context. His employer's paranoia now seemed reasonable. There were pictures of Clark throughout the house, and as he stared at the dirty and distraught face in front of him, he realized the truth.

"Listen Clark," said Floyd quickly.

One of Superman's hands flickered forward and wrapped around Floyd's throat, stopping the attempt at persuasion before it could even begin. The pressure was firm but gentle. If not for the other hand still twisted around and grabbing Floyd's shirt, he'd be choking to death.

"Don't call me that," said Superman. He stared at Floyd with hatred in his eyes for a long moment. Floyd wondered whether this was the end. Surely Superman wouldn't let him live with the knowledge of his second identity.

"Is there a point to your life?" asked Superman. "Did God have any purpose behind your creation other than to test me?"

Floyd tried his best to nod. Slowly, Superman released his throat.

"My employer," said Floyd. "I can help you get to him. He never showed his face, but we have ways of communicating, and there's a bank account he puts money into."

Superman nodded. "Talk."

We were able to remove the foreign contaminant from the lab's water supply. The source of it was a large, singular deposit be-

neath the surface, which has now been safely separated out. The origin of the contaminant is unknown, but initial tests have shown it to be somewhat exotic. In other news, our biological research is going well, but unfortunately our prized test subject has been injured, perhaps mortally. We suspect mishandling by one of the other workers in the lab. While that experiment was originally going to be a double-blind, we now believe that some bias may have crept in. With that said, we're proud to report that our total cycle time is down to just an hour and a half.

Lex stared at the after-action report. The storm cellar had contained a spaceship — or something similar enough to it — and was now housed three hundred feet below the ground in a lead mine near Pleasanton, Kansas. In the next part of the plan it would be encased in a quantity of refined lead, and from there shipped out to an atomic research laboratory in Hub City which had been set up far in advance. The man and woman posing as Joseph and Loretta Greene were long gone, and their usefulness was at an end, given that Superman might have seen their faces.

There had been no word from Floyd Lawton.

That Martha Kent was injured and probably dead was troubling. Superman had tethers to the world, and she was one of them. From what Lex had been able to find out, Clark Kent had few friends, and none that extended beyond his employment at *The Daily Planet*. In all likelihood, Superman now knew that his secret identity was compromised, which was another point of worry. Events were not yet spiraling out of control, but if the plan had followed the happy path, managing Superman would have been much easier.

With the spaceship in Lex's possession, hopefully a solution could be found before Superman broke free of his moral constraints.

Author's Note: "Black Sunday" was the worst dust storm of the era, and shortly afterwards the term "Dust Bowl" was coined.

Chapter 10

A Vast and Terrifying Enemy

William Calhoun sat in the jail cell, staring blankly at the wall. Ten years ago, or even five, he might have been trying to plot his escape. Now he was simply old, fat, and broke. What was left of his money was going to pay for the lawyers for this current case, but even if he won, there would be nothing to go home to. His empire had crumbled, and the last crime boss of Metropolis was soon going to be finished. It had taken Superman a year.

“I did it,” said Willie softly. “I told those men to kidnap the children, gave them instructions on how to get away without you finding out, and found a place for them to lay low.” Superman could hear everything. Willie found himself talking to Superman often, sometimes just trying to goad him, but other times confessing his sins. The Whitman thing turned out worse than he’d thought. He’d picked ruthless, violent men, and though he hadn’t told them what to do, he’d had a vague idea of what would happen. It didn’t sit right with him, now that it was over. Willie had been responsible for a number of kidnappings, and had never had any real problems with coercing a man by using his family against him. This was different. The children were picked because they would make the news, not because of

anything that their father had done beyond the usual political dickery about being tough on crime.

Willie didn't exactly live by a code, but he had a notion that people were responsible for their own actions. If a shopkeeper didn't pay protection money, he got a brick through his window. If a boxer didn't take the fall when he was supposed to, he got his legs broken. If people made him angry, they got hurt. Maybe he would have felt differently if Superman had actually done as he was supposed to and shown his true colors by killing the kidnappers. As Willie sat in his cell and stared at the wall, he couldn't help but think that he'd simply done an evil for no purpose at all. He'd never really thought of himself as a monster before.

"I did it," Willie repeated. "I ordered those men to do what they did. People say that you weren't fast enough, but we both know that's not true. The reason the whole thing happened was that you didn't kill me when you should have. You're a chicken-shit, and people are dying because of it."

There was no response, but Willie hadn't expected any. If Superman was listening, he didn't show it.

The atomic research facility in Hub City had been built shortly after Lex had discovered that Superman's x-ray vision couldn't penetrate lead. Lead was heavily used for radioactive shielding, and so it made sense for thick plates of the stuff to be nearly everywhere in the facility. Of late, Lex had put together a team of scientists to work on creating an atomic super weapon, though the room in the basement was off-limits even to them. The culture of paranoia, suspicion, and obedience to the rules had been deliberately cultivated.

Lex often considered what it would have been like if Superman had shown up twenty or thirty years later. This entire operation would have been done through television, ideally with robotic arms of some kind. It would have allowed for a degree of anonymity that strongly appealed to Lex. Unfortunately, the technologies had not progressed to such an extent that it was feasible, and so Lex was left with two choices; he could hire a scientist or group of scientists to conduct research which would be overseen by Lex at a great distance through the usual means, or he could investigate in person. Given the baffling death of Martha Kent, the choice was clear. Lex had lost much of his confidence in the ability of outside parties to carry out their assigned tasks.

He locked the door behind him after he entered the secret room, and looked carefully at the large crate in front of him. It sat at the bottom of the lead mine for nearly two days, and spent another two on the road. If Superman had a way to track it beyond his usual methods, he had made no effort to steal it back. Lex half suspected that Superman would come crashing down through the roof to kill him at any moment, but he was nearly certain that he was just being overly paranoid. He steeled his resolve and took a crowbar to the crate, opening it up and revealing what looked to be thick sheets of lead. A small catch at the bottom was enough to start unfolding the leaden container and reveal the spaceship inside.

Lex deliberately avoided looking at the spaceship, and instead grabbed the notes that were strapped to the interior of one of the lead walls. The agents posing as John and Loretta Greene had been instructed to leave a more detailed report, one not constrained by the need for codes and limited in length. He read through it carefully, frowning as he went. Floyd Lawton was clearly the problem, but it still wasn't clear what specifically

had gone wrong. Floyd had seemingly disobeyed his orders for some reason that would likely remain unknown. Four days had passed, and there had still been no word from Floyd, though if he was using the system Lex had set up the expected time for a message to reach Metropolis would be nearly that long. Floyd was immaterial either way. The only thing that a letter might do was illuminate the root of the problem, but Lex had half a dozen ideas about what he might have done differently already. He'd picked agents with reputations for being cold, calm, and meticulous, but apparently that hadn't been enough.

Lex turned his attention to the spaceship. It still wasn't entirely clear that the term "spaceship" accurately described it, given that it was missing the vents and exhaust ports that Lex would expect to see, but it certainly made some pretensions towards being aerodynamic, and it very clearly had stubby wings. The ship was curiously aesthetic in design, and hewed to the golden ratio wherever possible, which surely said something profound about the people who had made it. He was eager to open the ship up, but it would be at least a few days before he felt satisfied that it was safe to touch, no matter that it had been physically carried by three people with no special equipment.

The ship emitted nothing that Lex could detect. There was no radiation, no radio waves, no light, no sound, and nothing else that Lex was capable of sensing with his various tools. He took a large number of photographs of the spaceship, and thanks to equipment that had been ordered long ago, more than half of them were x-ray photographs that would allow him to look inside the ship before he did anything all that dangerous with it. Lex had learned much when drawing up the plans for Harry Kramer, and the safest way to approach the ship was no doubt to treat it as a live bomb, despite the fact that it had probably been sitting in a Kansas storm cellar for twenty years.

The x-rays weren't powerful enough to pierce through the ship entirely, but they gave some idea of how its internals were arranged. The skin of the craft looked utterly seamless, but there were latches and hatches that had been crafted with ridiculously advanced engineering that left them invisible from the surface and completely flush with the rest of the ship. In the center, where the spaceship had a bulge, was a pocket of complicated engineering surrounding empty space. Presumably this was where the baby had been pulled from, though it wasn't obvious how the Kents would have known what they were looking at. Towards the back of the ship, where an engine would traditionally sit, the x-ray came back completely white, blocked by what had to be some absorptive material.

It was only after two full days of looking at it from every angle that Lex Luthor decided he could get no further without actually touching the thing. He put on some gloves and began opening up the machine.

The hole was easily three hundred feet deep, and even if he could escape, he'd be hundreds of miles away from civilization. It widened out at the bottom, which made getting a handhold difficult, but it could be accomplished by standing on top of the tin cans that held his food and jumping up to scramble at the rock. Worse, even if he got out, Superman would simply find him again. He'd get dumped right back in the hole, with the walls smoothed down more than they already were. Superman had dug the hole in a handful of minutes, and it would be little trouble for him to change it.

Floyd opened a can of baked beans and settled in for what he assumed was either breakfast or lunch. They were far enough north that the small amount of light coming in through the top of

the hole was a constant twilight, making it nearly impossible to track the time. He was halfway through his meal when the light dimmed briefly. Superman stood in front of Floyd, as though he'd been there all along.

"You can't keep me here forever," said Floyd.

"Why?" asked Superman.

Floyd had spent the long hours with nothing to do trying to calculate the best thing to say. So far as he could figure, Superman really could keep him there forever. Still, it was worth a shot. "It's illegal," said Floyd. "You care about laws, right?"

"Less and less every day," said Superman. "I went to visit your sister in Florida."

"Look, I told you everything I know," said Floyd.

"I'd thought that I'd done my due diligence when you first came to the farm," said Superman. "There's a real woman living at the address you sent your letters to, living a mundane life. When she got your most recent letter, she read it carefully and put it in a pile with other papers. And that's as far as I watched when you first came to the farm, because I wasn't paranoid enough."

"I didn't set any of that up," said Floyd, "I was just given instructions."

"My mother was trusting," said Superman. "She had a kind heart. I told her that I could help her with anything that needed doing on the farm, but she always liked taking in strays. I watched you, Floyd. In the first week you were on the farm, I read every letter you sent or recieved. I watched all of your movements. And you didn't act like anything other than a drifter. I thought I'd been sufficiently careful, and eventually you just became a fixture of the farm. I turned my eyes back towards the city, and very nearly forgot about you."

Floyd was silent.

“Your sister dropped the letter off at the law office she works for,” said Superman. “From there it was translated into a code of random letters and numbers through the use of a one-time pad behind lead walls. Even if I’d been watching closely before I might not have caught it. They copied it and sent it out to the seven largest cities in the United States, and from there was transmitted out into the open by radio.” Superman stared off into the distance past Floyd, but it wasn’t clear whether he was looking through the rocks or just thinking about something.

“Are you gonna keep me here forever?” asked Floyd.

“Maybe,” said Superman.

“You can’t be my jailer,” said Floyd. “I need food, water, showers, some actual damned light, and something other than a bucket to relieve myself in. I swear to god, hand me over to the police and I won’t say a single thing about the other guy.” Superman had nearly throttled Floyd the last time the name of Clark Kent came up, but it was difficult to talk around. Floyd had information that Superman didn’t want made public, and it didn’t seem to matter to Superman that Floyd’s employer already knew.

“Do you know why I came here?” asked Superman.

Floyd shook his head.

“I want to kill you,” said Superman. “I want it with every fiber of my being. I came here because I thought it was important to test myself, to prove to myself that I wouldn’t ever do it because I let my emotions overwhelm me. And if I slipped up here, no one would have to know. You’d just be a red smear across the wall in an anonymous hole in the middle of the Alaskan wilderness. To take a life is evil, but maybe, if it’s necessary, I think it might also be good.”

Floyd watched him closely. “Are you going to kill me then?”

“I’m still not sure,” replied Superman. “I’ll let you know when

I figure it out.”

There was a blast of air as Superman launched himself up and away. Floyd looked up at the rough rock walls that Superman had carved out by hand, and decided that even if escape was useless, it was better than waiting for death.

The city was unexpectedly quiet, but for once that suited Lois. She sat on her balcony in one of the wooden chairs, sipping at a glass of wine and waiting. She was wearing her most alluring dress, a blue one that clung to her hips. Hopefully it would draw his attention away from how nervous she was, if he even showed up.

Clark Kent had gotten word that his mother died on Monday, and broke down crying at his desk. He'd be gone for five days as he went to Kansas to settle his parents affairs and go to the funeral. At the same time, Lex Luthor was off at some scientific conference in Hub City. A year ago, she would have thrown herself into her work, but she was a changed woman now, and being the star reporter of the world's largest newspaper just wasn't enough. So she'd done her best to arrange a date with Superman, because at least that was something.

Superman,

I've been wondering whether you would like to join me for dinner on Thursday. I live in an apartment building on the corner of 13th St. and 33rd Ave. E. You should be able to land on my balcony, where I'll have everything set up. I'll be eating at seven whether you're there or not, but I'd be pleased if you would join me.

Lois

She'd gone over the letter a half dozen times trying to get the wording right, and was never quite happy with it. She wasn't

terribly good at turning on the charm, at least not with someone she wasn't actually attracted to. She'd had any number of brief relationships over the years, but she didn't fully understand what it was that attracted men to her. She knew those qualities that she found attractive in herself, but had no real idea which of them were cause for attraction in others. She'd tried her best to play up what she thought that Superman would like. If he didn't show up, at least she would have made an effort.

He made a deft landing on her balcony ten minutes before seven.

"Miss Lane," he said with a gentle smile.

"Please, call me Lois," she said with what she hoped was a flirtatious smile. "I hope you don't think I was too forward inviting you over, but you don't exactly have a mailing address."

"I've been meaning to set something up with the post office," said Superman. "Though of course I think there's some benefit in keeping out of reach, and I don't think I'd have the patience to keep up with the flood of mail. You're only lucky that I've been keeping a special watch over people close to me."

Lois couldn't help but feel a pang of discomfort at that. She and Superman were far from close. "I'm making spaghetti for dinner," said Lois. "I have no idea whether you eat or not, but I can make enough for two."

"I eat," said Superman with a smile.

Lois walked into her apartment. It was small, which was the price she'd paid for having a balcony on the top floor. The place was littered with souvenirs and photographs, along with a number of framed headlines that she was particularly proud of. She'd been a reporter for eight years, and that was enough time to do a great many things and see a great many places. She had cleaned the night before, for the first time in a very long time, and was almost proud of how neat the apartment looked.

If Superman had been spying on her he would know how she lived from day-to-day, but she hoped he would take the effort as a compliment all the same.

She didn't mention the fact that Superman was taking time off from saving the world to spend time with her, and he didn't bring it up. She desperately hoped that he had some way to turn his super hearing off, because the thought of him listening to every single death in the world with a grin on his face was almost enough to make her physically ill. Shutting off his hearing wasn't really a solution either though. On days when she was in a particularly bad mood, she could imagine that she could hear all of the pain and suffering happening at any given time. Superman had opened her mind to it, and now it was hard to ignore, even if she'd never actually heard what it was like firsthand.

"Spaghetti is the only thing I know how to cook," said Lois. She had a pot of sauce and noodles in boiling water, all ready to go. She'd had more than one man tease her about her lack of domestic skill, and she'd let them think that she was simply an independent woman of the new mold rather than let them know she had an actual, unintentional deficit of skill.

"That's fine," said Superman.

Lois served up two plates, and took them back out to the balcony, where they sat down together. She didn't think she was in any actual danger, but felt an uneasy tension all the same.

"So when you say that you eat," said Lois. "It's voluntary for you?"

"No," said Superman. "I get hungry, just the same as anyone else. I can just go longer." He dug into his spaghetti and Lois couldn't help but think that he looked ridiculous in that costume. It was all well and good to wear a skintight red and blue outfit with a long flowing cape while you were saving lives, but it just looked silly while he was doing something so mundane.

He looked too human.

"Where do you eat?" asked Lois. "You could eat for free at any restaurant in the city, but so far as I know you never have. And you disdain money."

"Just to be clear, this isn't an interview?" asked Superman with a raised eyebrow.

"No, just — just a date," said Lois. She could hear how strained her voice sounded, but either Superman didn't notice, or he didn't care. Maybe he just thought she was nervous, which was at least true. At the same time, she was worried that he would contradict her and gently tell her that he had no interest in her, which would have been humiliating given that she was actually trying to use her femininity for once in her life.

"Distance isn't really a factor for me," said Superman. "I've shared stew with Mongolian nomads and African tribesmen, and I can hunt and forage with ease. But I don't really get any weaker from not having food, it's just a nagging irritation. I once went three weeks without food just to see if I could, and it didn't seem to make any difference in terms of strength. The same goes with sleep. I sleep for two hours most nights, but I could stay up for a month without any real trouble if I had to."

Lois took a small bite of her spaghetti, but wasn't really hungry. "Tell me about your life."

"My life?" asked Superman. "What about it?"

"You're a mystery," said Lois. "Deliberately so, it seems. I just want to know what it's like to be you."

"I'm surprisingly boring," said Superman with a laugh. "I wake up at five in the morning, circle the planet once to make sure that there's not anything major happening that needs my attention, and then patrol Metropolis looking for places that I can do good."

"The city's gotten a lot better with you patrolling," said Lois.

“For the most part,” replied Superman. His face darkened slightly.

“How’s the spaghetti?” asked Lois.

“Good,” replied Superman. A smile returned to his face. “It’s very good. Thank you for making it.”

“If you eat. . . I can understand why you have a non-interventionist policy, but I don’t really understand why you wouldn’t take in a free meal at a nice restaurant,” said Lois. “You’re basically the patron saint of the city, but you’ve never eaten at all of the best places. I could show you around.” This was one of Lex’s ideas, a way to get Superman more invested in the city.

“I look ridiculous in the costume,” said Superman. He laughed as he watched her expression. “Come on, you know you were thinking it.”

“A little bit,” admitted Lois. “And that’s the only reason?”

“I can’t go anywhere without people looking at me,” said Superman. “I wouldn’t be able to eat in peace. People would come up to me and thank me for what I’ve done, or tell me what I should be doing differently, or try to touch me just so they could tell their friends that they had. And I’d have to grin and bear it, or calmly explain how I just want to be left alone. That’s not all. It would drive business to the restaurant, and might have an impact on the other restaurants across the street, so I’d have to figure out some way of dividing up my meals between the restaurants that’s equitable. And if there was a scandal of some sort, like the owner of Paulucci’s getting arrested for dealing drugs, it might tarnish my public image and stir up all sorts of controversy that detracts from the message I’m trying to send. On top of all that, not everyone would be as understanding as you’ve been about the fact that I need some time to myself. They’d draw up charts to show that while I was eating hundreds of people were dying. You can imagine the headlines.”

Lois nodded, though of course she didn't really understand. She would have run herself ragged trying to improve the world if she had Superman's powers. Hell, she had no special powers at all and still spent nearly all her time working, or thinking about work. But of course this whole exercise wasn't about what Lois thought, it was about keeping Superman happy.

"I could arrange something discreet for you," said Lois. "We could take lunch together on top of the Daily Planet Building. I eat at my desk or out in the street anyway."

"I'd like that," smiled Superman. He moved his hand across the table to cup hers, and it was only because she'd been expecting it that she was able to smile back at him.

The trial went quickly.

The last crime boss of Metropolis took on a serious, concerned look in the courtroom. Of course it was a terrible thing that happened to June Whitman and her tragically deceased brother, but she was a confused young girl coerced into testimony by Superman, the alien god who had a personal vendetta against Calhoun. On the third day of the trial, June took the stand. She broke down under cross-examination, and was ushered out of the courthouse by her father, who shot a withering look at both Calhoun and Superman himself. Willie didn't figure that he had much of a shot of winning the trial, but hell if he wasn't going to go down fighting. If he lost, he had a revolver ready to shove into his mouth. At his age, with all the enemies he'd made over the years and hardly a dime to his name, it seemed like a better option than ten years in Sing Sing.

At night, he said his prayers to Superman. Willie confessed to every single crime he'd ever committed, and a number of them he hadn't. He described in vivid detail the things he'd do to

Superman if only he could, and when that got old he moved on to anything else he could think of. There had to be some way of provoking the alien, something that Willie could say that would get some reaction. There had to be something, some set of words that would get the alien's calm stoicism to crack. His prayers were greeted only by silence.

Someone knocked on the window when Clarence had just gotten himself ready for bed. He nearly jumped out of his skin when he turned to the side and saw Superman standing on the fire escape. He slowly padded over and opened the window. He'd seen Superman in court, but up close he was much more impressive, and more threatening.

"Two days ago you received three hundred dollars to help sway your position," said Superman.

Clarence didn't trust himself to speak. The woman had walked beside him, and told him to help deliver a guilty verdict. The money had been in his hands shortly afterwards, without him even agreeing to anything. It was more than he made in a month.

"I was going to tell the judge," said Clarence. "I was going to explain to him."

"No, you weren't," said Superman. "I don't care. You need the money, I can accept that. But when you go into deliberation, don't let it sway you. Think about what you've heard in court, and make up your own mind. Decide the case on its merits."

"You... you're helping Calhoun?" asked Clarence. "You hate him."

"I do," said Superman, not even trying to deny it. "But when he's convicted, it needs to be by the books. I promised him that. There are forces working against him, powerful people

with their own agendas, and if he goes to jail because people with money and influence wanted him there, that's just as bad as if he stayed out of jail because he intimidated witnesses and tampered with the jury."

Clarence nodded along. He would have nodded along to anything that Superman said at that moment.

"I'm not saying whether you should find him guilty or not guilty," repeated Superman. "I'm saying that your verdict needs to be true to the laws as they stand."

Clarence nodded once more, and Superman stepped back from the window.

"Clarence?" asked Superman.

Clarence choked on his words, and simply nodded once.

"I was never here," said Superman. He flew away, a quiet as a whisper.

It was clear now that Clarence should have ducked out on jury duty. Tomorrow he'd have to go into a room with all the other jurors and deliberate, knowing full well that Superman was listening to every word they said. He wondered how many of them were getting visits from Superman in the middle of the night. It was a long time before he got to sleep.

"The standard of proof that we're hewing to is 'reasonable doubt'," said Clarence.

"If it's reasonable doubt, then we have to return a verdict of not guilty, simple as that," said Louis.

"He's gotta be guilty of *something*," said Frank with a drawn out sigh. "I feel like before today, we were in agreement here. Calhoun is guilty as sin, it's written on his face. Superman's been cleaning up town, and Calhoun just wanted to hurt him however he could."

“It didn’t come up in the courtroom,” said Clarence. “And we’re not supposed to be reading the papers.”

“Sure,” said Frank. “But I don’t understand why we have to throw out things that we know. Sure as shit Superman knows things that he’s not allowed to say, but you can’t look at him sitting opposite Calhoun and possibly think that Superman is making a mistake.”

“We have to do this by the books,” said Stewart. “Could a reasonable person doubt that Willie Calhoun was guilty of these specific crimes relating to what happened to June and Robert Whitman? Seems to me that the answer is yes. The whole case rests on June, and I think it’s damned reasonable to question her testimony.”

“She’s eleven,” said Frank in disgust. “You’re calling her a liar after what she’s been through?”

Arlo coughed into his fist. “Not a liar,” he said. “We’re spinning in circles here. The question isn’t about the crime, it’s about who ordered the crime, and the evidence doesn’t seem to go past the point of reasonable doubt. I’m not saying the girl is a liar, I’m saying that maybe she misheard something, or maybe she got confused, both well possible.”

Frank sat back in his seat and sighed. “Alright, you fellas want to take another vote and see whether we’re coming to an agreement?”

He descended from the heavens like a golden god. There were no strings or wires to hold him aloft, no jets or boosters, only a simple power of flight that seemed to defy the laws of physics. The reporters cleared a space around him as he touched down with perfect grace. His brown hair was perfectly styled

with a curl at the front, as always. Instead of the trademark half-grin, Superman wore a scowl.

“Not guilty,” he murmured only seconds before the doors to the courthouse opened wide and people began to spill out. The crowd of reporters around him shoved their bulky microphones in his face as they heard the news. Lois stood towards the back, not bothering to hide the worry she felt on hearing the news. Luthor was supposed to take care of this kind of thing, dammit.

“Superman! How do you feel about Calhoun getting off again?”

“Are you going to catch him again, Superman?”

“What’s the point in putting bad guys away if you can’t make it stick?”

William Calhoun strolled out of the courthouse, surrounded by a flock of reporters all of his own. He wore a brown suit with a bright red tie, and smiled for the cameras as the flashbulbs went off around him. It would be headline news. Calhoun spotted Superman only moments after he stepped outside, and casually walked over.

“Pleasure to be out for a stroll on this fine day, ain’t it Supes?” said Calhoun with a grin. He was only a handful of feet away from the alien, and the reporters had backed off enough to get a good photo of the two standing together. The wind picked up, causing Superman’s cape to billow out behind him, and the flashbulbs started going off in earnest.

“You’ll pay for your crimes,” said Superman. If you ignored the cape, the skintight suit, and the oversized muscles, you could almost imagine him as a teacher ready to haul a student out of the classroom by his ear.

“I’m sure you’ve heard with those marvelous ears of yours,” said Calhoun, his shit-eating grin never leaving his face. “I’m innocent.”

“The justice system isn’t perfect,” said Superman. “I think

that's been made clear today."

"I bet it just eats you up," said Calhoun. "To know that you got it wrong, once again. Three times you hauled me in, and three times I walked free. What is it you got against me? Is it 'cause I'm Irish?" He was posing for the cameras in subtle ways. Calhoun, with a smile and a strut, and Superman, with his hands folded across his chest.

"You're a murderer," said Superman. "A rapist, a pimp, a liar, and a crook. You are everything wrong with humanity, and they let you go."

Calhoun put on his widest smile and leaned in close, close enough that Superman surely could have smelled the man's breath. "I'm not guilty in the eyes of the law," he declared. "Chalk one up for truth, justice, and the American way."

It happened faster than anyone could see. They said that Superman could react to lightning before seeing the flash. They said that he could catch the bullets from a dozen guns at once. He was, by any fair accounting, the single fastest thing to have ever been on Earth. The time between when he decided to do it and the time it was already done could have been measured in milliseconds. Later in the day, one lucky photographer would develop a picture of the exact moment that Superman landed his punch, so fast that it was a blur.

One moment Calhoun was taunting Superman, and the next Superman stood with a single fist held straight out in front of him. It was covered in blood. Calhoun's head was spread out over the crowd, covering the reporters with bone and gore, and Calhoun's body fell to the ground with a soft thud. Superman lowered his fist and then rose up into the sky, flying away from the shouted questions and the flashes of cameras.

Lex worked carefully to pull the large tube from inside the spaceship. He'd first thought that it must be some special alloy, like the skin of the ship seemed to be, but the reason that it so effectively blocked the x-rays was that it was nothing more than simple lead.

When he was finished, a tube of lead sat on the floor of the workshop. So far as he could guess, this was a power source of some sort. He'd already identified the engine analog, though he had no idea how it worked. The thick cables internal to the ship all seemed to terminate at the leaden tube, and in another portion of the ship that Lex had only vaguely guessed the purpose of. The tube of lead was attractive though, above and beyond anything else. There were few reasons to use a material like lead, and one of them was shielding.

Lex set up a containment area for the tube, which consisted of little more than layers of lead to surround it and a Geiger counter that was wired through to where Lex could read it. The mechanical apparatus took some time to make, but eventually he was able to rig the whole thing up so that he would be able to see whether there was any lethal radiation once the tube had been opened without having to expose himself to it. Lex worked slowly and carefully, and was eventually satisfied that he wouldn't get a lethal dose of radiation poisoning. He took away the layers of lead, and peered closely at what he had uncovered.

The immense promise of this particular part of the ship was that whoever had built the thing saw fit to include shielding in the first place. If it was a threat to the infant alien, then perhaps it would be a threat to the adult alien as well. When Lex looked down at the green glow of the central core, he could only smile. There was an immense amount of work still left to do in order to determine the precise nature of the threat it might pose to

Superman and how best to capitalize on that, but it held definite hope for the future.

It would need a name, of course. Kryptonite had a nice ring to it.

Chapter 11

Actions and Consequences

“He what?” asked Lex. He gripped the phone closer to his ear, though that wouldn’t help with the poor connection. It was moments like this that made him want to revolutionize the entire telecommunications industry. An investment of a million dollars would surely be enough to get clear audio between Metropolis and Hub City. Of course, the world was filled with such problems waiting for the right solutions, and pushing things along too quickly was a waste of money more often than not.

“He killed William Calhoun, sir,” repeated Mercy.

“Who knows?” asked Lex.

“Everyone, sir,” replied Mercy. “It happened just outside the courthouse after the not guilty verdict was handed down.”

“I had hoped they would find him guilty,” said Lex. His voice was tight. Mercy was supposed to take care of things in Metropolis while he was in Hub City. This was the very first time in their long association that she had failed him, and either that meant she was slipping or someone powerful was working against her. Both were worrying.

“I know sir,” replied Mercy. “I’m still trying to find out what happened.”

Lex thought for a moment. "I'll fly home later today," said Lex. "Whatever is happening there needs my attention."

He hung up without waiting for a response. Early on he'd made a classification scheme for the most probable scenarios involving Superman, and so far as he could tell, this was somewhere between class C and class E. Superman had killed in a public way, which might signal any number of things: a simple rash decision, a campaign of lethality against the criminal element, or the opening moves of tyranny. Superman had given no indication that he knew what Lex was doing, and Lex was highly unlikely to get caught in the cross-fire, which was the important thing for now.

The estimated deaths from a class E scenario were in the thousands, and while there would be severe economic effects, it was nothing that couldn't be weathered in the short term. Hopefully the short term would be all that Lex would need. In fact, a class C scenario might be of some benefit. If Superman had only killed because he had momentarily snapped, it was possible it would make the other scenarios less likely, depending on which model of his psychology was correct. People were hard to predict though, especially those with alien psychologies and a penchant for lies. Scenarios of class J and higher involved the effective obliteration of the human race in some way, but so long as Lex Luthor, his stores of knowledge, and the spaceship were all safe, it was still possible that Superman might yet be killed, which meant that anything up to the murder of hundreds of millions might still allow humanity to survive.

He still didn't know how kryptonite worked, or what, precisely, it did. The use of lead as a shield implied radiation of some kind, in addition to the radiation of green light that gave it the distinct glow. He'd taken copious notes and photographs as he'd taken apart the ship, and while the kryptonite definitely

seemed to be a power source, it wasn't clear how that power was generated or harnessed. Lex had made no attempt to activate the ship, and had no real plans to do so until after attempts at using kryptonite as a weapon had failed, and then only after careful consideration of the risks and dangers. The piece of the ship that seemed to be an engine would be left alone for the foreseeable future; anything with the power to exceed the speed of light or even achieve a reasonable fraction thereof was a de facto weapon of unconscionable power.

The kryptonite was in a solid block that must have weighed nearly twenty kilograms, which was wholly inconvenient. Lex was hesitant to split it up into smaller pieces, in the event that doing so would interfere with its use as a power source for the ship, though at least the lack of internal padding and shock absorbers suggested that this wouldn't be dangerous. It was possible that kryptonite by itself held no harm at all for Superman, and that kryptonite was only dangerous when the ship was powered on and using the no-doubt immense amounts of power that interstellar travel required. Lex had settled for doing experiments on the exposed surface of the core of kryptonite.

The lead tube that contained the kryptonite was itself surrounded by a box of lead that Lex had constructed to provide for shielding. He carefully lifted a cage out from the box, and peered at the rat that had been living on top of the kryptonite for the past three days. A quick dissection confirmed what a physical examination had suggested; the rat was no worse for the extended exposure. When Lex was finished, he tossed the corpse into a wastebasket with a frown.

Whatever kryptonite was emitting besides light was essentially invisible to every tool that Lex possessed, but Superman's amazing powers suggested that there were many aspects of physics that humanity had not yet discovered. Lex made a snap decision.

He put on a pair of thick gloves and pulled the leaden tube from the box he'd built, and then carefully pulled the block of kryptonite out of the tube. It came free on the first attempt with a slight click. The spaceship had proven remarkably easy to take apart once Lex had gotten to know the tricks to its design, and he was confident in his ability to put it back together again. Whoever had built it was an engineer of the highest caliber who had designed it with serviceability in mind. He was being more risky than he would normally have been, but time was not on his side.

It cleaved cleanly when he tapped at it with a hammer and chisel.

Floyd had a bedroll, a pillow, a bucket filled with his excrement, a can opener, a large amount of tinned food, and a rain barrel that Superman refilled every few days. It wasn't much to fashion an escape with. The hole was three hundred feet down, and curved slightly at the top to keep rain or snow from getting in. The rock had been smashed through by Superman, leaving what looked like easy handholds, but a single slip even halfway up the hole would surely result in death. It was, unfortunately, wide enough that Floyd couldn't brace himself against both sides without stretching, which meant it would be difficult to get a real rest. He looked up the hole for the third time in as many minutes, trying to plot out a route and not think about how dangerous and futile the climb was going to be. After he escaped out the hole, a jaunt through the wilderness and certain recapture would be waiting for him. He'd just about worked up the nerve to make the first jump up when Superman came down through the hole, moving at speed.

The blast of wind flung everything into the air, including Floyd. Before he even had time to react to his meager pos-

sessions being slammed against the walls of the room, a solid hand was against his throat, pinning him in place. Superman's eyes blazed with anger, and he pulled back a fist. Floyd flinched back, which under Superman's hand amounted to little more than turning his head a half inch to the side. When no impact came, he opened his eyes back up. Superman was breathing hard. His face was still a mask of fury, and his fist still poised for the punch. A long moment passed.

"Ykr frkr," Floyd tried to say.

A single tear rolled down Superman's cheek. Superman flung Floyd to the side, and he landed in a heap with what felt like a number of broken ribs. He coughed, not just because of the hit against the wall, but because the bucket had been knocked over and suffused the air with a foul smell. When Floyd looked up, Superman was gone again. Floyd had been trying to say *Your father*, a last ditch effort at saving his own life. He had no clue whether it had made the difference. Superman had wanted to kill him, but hadn't been able to bring himself to throw the punch.

Strangely enough, Lois felt better about Superman now that he was off the reservation. The anticipation had been the worst part of it all, and now that he had finally snapped, she found herself calm and focused. The time for subtle manipulation and walking on eggshells had passed, and that came as a relief. Actually dealing with a disaster was something she could handle; it was worrying about the possibility of disaster that had been destroying her. Or perhaps she was simply too numb to properly feel dread anymore.

"You're telling me that Superman killed the last crime boss of Metropolis in the middle of broad daylight, and you didn't get

a picture of it?” asked Perry White. He leaned over his desk and laid his hands down on either side of it, looking for all the world like he was about to vault over the mess of paperwork and personally throw Jimmy Olsen out of the building.

“I couldn’t!” said Jimmy. “He was — he did it too fast! I took a picture just before, and the cops started movin’ people away just after that, I swear!”

“Feh,” said Perry. “We’ll have to send a runner to one of the other papers and pay out the nose for a picture if we can, because I’m sure as hell not going to be the only guy printing off extras without the blood and guts, obscenity laws be damned.” He turned to Lois. “You’re getting this story written, right?”

Lois wore a skirt that hung down just past her knees and a white blouse. Both were splattered with blood on the left side, marking a perfect silhouette where she’d been standing behind another reporter. She’d cleaned most of the blood and gore off her face with the sleeve of her blouse during the taxi ride over, and she’d had to tip the guy extra for the mess she’d left behind in his backseat, but that was so far down the list of things to worry about that it might as well not have happened.

“Just tell me how many words,” said Lois. “I got the opening portion of it written on the way over. ‘Local businessman William Calhoun was murdered shortly after his not guilty verdict by none other than —’”

“Change that to ‘Alien vigilante Superman murdered local businessman’. Maybe add ‘allegedly’ though I don’t know how he’d contest that,” said Perry.

“We don’t need to say alien, everyone knows he’s an alien,” replied Lois. “And vigilante is true but harsh, even given what happened. I don’t want to give people whiplash by shifting our position too quickly.”

“You write it, I’ll mark it up and get it to print,” said Perry.

“You’re both dismissed, this is a steaming pile of shit that’s not going to wrap itself up anytime soon. Clark is supposed to come back today, and he should be able to take some of this off your hands whenever his train gets in.”

Lois practically ran back to her desk and started typing away, getting all of her thoughts out before doing a second pass to reduce it down to something that people would actually want to read. The headline was the most important part, and the picture after that, but Perry would be in charge of both of those, so they didn’t bear thinking about. Her typewriter was her steadfast friend, and it clattered loudly as she jammed down the keys. Lois often felt like she belonged behind a typewriter. She would take what she’d heard and seen and turn it into a narrative that people would consume, and eventually that would become the version of events that people told themselves.

“You okay?” asked Jimmy. He stood next to her desk, shifting side to side uncomfortably.

“I’m fine kid,” said Lois, her fingers never leaving the keys. She paused a moment and looked down at her clothes. “My favorite blouse got ruined.” She chose her words carefully, not implying any agency. She’d been training herself to be a better liar and a more careful speaker, and she could tell that today was going to be a test of that. “If you want to help me, and Perry’s got nothing better for you, go grab me a change of clothing from Hudson’s. I’ve gotta be back out on the street as soon as this is done.” Lex was in Hub City, and though it wasn’t safe to speak on the phone, she at least needed to touch base with his valkyrie of an assistant.

She went back to typing, just as fast as before. The big story was Superman, not Calhoun, but she’d spent the whole day preparing to write about the outcome of the trial and couldn’t help but sprinkle in more about the man who’d died. Calhoun

had no doubt deserved it, especially if he was the mastermind behind the bombings, but Lois wasn't going to position herself as Superman's cheerleader. Luthor seemed to want her as something of a sycophant, but he hadn't yet been able to bring her around to his way of thinking. Instead, she planned to tell Superman he was wrong in as persuasive and gentle a way as possible. Luthor could have words with her later.

"Okay," said Jimmy. "But —"

"Jesus Christ kid, are you still here? Go!" said Lois. She shook her head as he scurried away. Some people just didn't have what it took to make it in the news business. The Daily Planet needed a photographer that could stare down mutilated children and burned out homes. Jimmy Olsen was a few months away from dropping out, by her estimation, though she'd thought the same of Clark almost from the time he'd signed on.

She turned back to her article, and tried to focus on the facts. The verdict of the trial had been a big surprise, and the article she'd been expecting to write was about Calhoun's slow decline, peppered with his personal history and an overview of the utter destruction of organized crime in Metropolis. Calhoun's death — his murder — changed all that. Now the story was about Superman, and his failure to live up to the impossible ideals he had set for himself. It was a story that she'd been wanting to write for a long time, but she tempered her language. Superman wasn't going to get a free pass from her, but she would imply disappointment rather than outrage. Hopefully she'd be able to have some influence on what the people of Metropolis were talking about tomorrow (and thus what Superman was hearing), though no doubt the radio was already having its say.

She dashed off her second draft as quickly as she'd ever done in her life, and ran it back to Perry's office. Most of the blood on her clothes had dried from a bright red to a dark brown. She'd

felt parts of Calhoun's skull hitting her face, and thought that she might have a cut, but the story was done, and that was what mattered. The bone that hit her had stung, like when a car kicks up gravel that hits your shins, only in this case the gravel was bone that had been crushed into tiny pieces. A brief image came to her mind of Superman killing every criminal in Metropolis, littering the streets with their bones, no piece left larger than a key on her typewriter. The momentary imagery was unwelcome. She turned her thoughts back to the matter at hand and slapped the article down on Perry's desk.

"It's no use," he said with a frown. "We got a gag order."

Lois grimaced. "From who?"

"'From whom', darling," said Perry. "It came down from on high, in fucking triplicate. First a call from the chief of police, then a call from the President of the United States himself, then the only man I really give a fuck about, our employer."

"Who the hell do they think they're kidding?" asked Lois. "There were a hundred witnesses, there were cameras all over the place, it must have gone out over the radio almost the instant after it happened. They think they're going to keep this quiet?"

"The radio stations went to dead air in about two seconds flat," said Perry. "Someone had a plan in place for this, or something like it. I don't think they're trying to contain this thing, just to manage it in the short term. I've got no idea what they're going to say to make it better, but for now they're just trying to keep a small bit of control on the situation. I don't really blame them."

"This is bullshit," said Lois. "Complete and utter bullshit." In the back of her mind, she wondered whether Lex was behind it. So far as she could tell, he enjoyed his grand gestures. Giant statues in the park, vast murals along the side of the road — shutting down mass media in Metropolis would be just his style.

It was almost reasonable too, if it would prevent panic in the streets of Metropolis.

“No argument there,” said Perry. He leaned back in his chair and lit up a cigar. “I’ll edit for you, and if they lift the embargo we’ll run the story quick as can be, but until then, maybe you better get yourself home and cleaned up.”

Lois again looked down at her clothes. “I already asked Jimmy to go run and get some for me,” she replied. “I’ll keep on writing in preparation for when we’re allowed to talk about it.”

When she got back to her desk, there was a note waiting for her, one that she’d been expecting for the last half hour. She read it twice, then steeled herself and headed on up.

“Why’d you do it?” asked Lois the moment she stepped onto the roof. Of course Superman could hear her coming, and she could have asked the question at any point during the walk up. No doubt if Superman was coming to speak with her, he’d been watching and listening to her from the moment that he laid the letter on her desk, and probably from the moment Calhoun’s body slumped to the ground.

Superman didn’t respond to her immediately. He stood at the very edge of the roof, and his cape twirled and billowed in the wind behind him. She wondered whether he had planned it that way, to look more impressive. He had a flair for the dramatic, and an eye for looking impressive.

“I was angry,” said Superman.

Lois watched him. He kept his back to her, so that all she could do was listen to his voice. “You’ve been angry before,” she said. The image of Superman standing in a room with the three men who had taken the Whitman children, waiting for the

police to arrive, was so real to her that she could almost believe she had been there. "What made this time different?"

"I've been thinking too much," said Superman. "I've been angry too often. He was saying all those hateful things, I just... it wasn't that I snapped, really. I didn't lose control. If I'd actually punched him as hard as I could have, Metropolis would be a smoking crater. I was standing there, hating him, and thinking about how much better the world would be if he were dead. Not by my hand, necessarily, but if he'd had a stroke right on the steps of the courthouse the world would instantly have been a better place. And to be honest, I was thinking about how satisfying it would be to kill him."

Superman kept staring out over the city. Lois waited him out. "I can slow down time," he said finally. "Not that, exactly, but my perception of time can change when I need it to. I wouldn't be able to catch bullets otherwise. Moving fast isn't enough, you have to think fast and see fast in order to really make use of the power. When I really push it, the world dims down and sounds are happening so slowly that it's nothing more than a persistent drone. I can live out a day in the pause between words when someone is talking. The world goes so black I can't even see my nose in front of me. First the sounds become too long and stretched out to make sense of, and then they stop altogether."

His cape flapped behind him. "I must have spent three days thinking about Calhoun while we stood there. 'Truth, justice, and the American way', those were his last words. I meditated on them. The State of New York executed seventeen men last year, and I had a hand in catching eleven of them. I had vowed not to kill, you understand. The first one was William Vogel, who was convicted of murder. I watched him spasm in the electric chair, and I felt like a coward. I could have killed him faster and more humanely. When I killed Calhoun, he probably didn't even

have enough time to register that I was moving before his brain was a thick paste.

“I once believed in redemption. I believed in the justice of the legal system, and when it failed, as it often did, I would tell myself that it wasn’t my place to rush in headlong. I didn’t want to be a shepherd of sheep, I wanted humanity to stand on its own two feet. But when law and morality contradicted each other, as they often did, I was left with the cruel alternative of losing just a bit of my moral center or losing just a bit of my respect for the law. It’s like you said; if I had come to America when slaves were being sold on those very docks, would I have respected the law then?”

“I didn’t mean—” Lois began.

“No, I know,” said Superman. “I read the article you just finished writing. I deserve worse than what you said. I’m just trying to explain... to explain how I got to where I am now.” He took a breath. “I used to think that good was something that was defined by actions. Don’t lie, don’t steal, don’t murder... I thought that if you worked at it hard enough, you could make up a set of rules to follow, and that would make you a good person. I think that’s what my father thought. But eventually I moved away from thinking like he did, and tried to live my life by his values instead. Maybe it was okay to lie, if it was for the greater good. Maybe it was okay to break the law, if breaking the law resulted in the greatest good for the greatest number of people. The change was so slow I barely even noticed it, and I don’t think I was fully aware that I was thinking any differently until a few days ago. But it didn’t really matter, because for the most part I was living my life the same way. Even if I no longer believed in an absolute prohibition against killing — and how could I when I was sending men to their death at the hands of the state — I still wouldn’t kill because of what it would say to

people. I wanted to be a symbol for them.

“But as I was sitting in the pitch black of slowed down time, I kept thinking about truth and justice. I’d ensured that Calhoun would have a fair trial, because I’d promised him he would. What would it say though, to have him walk free? Not just from that trial, but from the botched trial in December? He couldn’t simply be immune to consequences. He had to pay for his crimes. That was justice. I kept weighing these things until I came to my decision, and it was only when my fist was halfway through his skull that I realized my emotions had their thumb on the scale.”

“What now?” asked Lois after a long stretch of silence.

“I need to take time off,” said Superman. He turned to face her. “I know you’ll think I’m a monster for it—”

“I don’t—”

“Lois, I know you better than you think I do,” said Superman. “I’m going to take some time off from listening to the vast suffering that I can only make a small dent in. I’ll take time for myself and think on what I really want to be. I fully expect that you’ll hate me for it, but I can’t rush things and make mistakes, not when I have the power to level mountains.”

Lois stared at him, then nodded. “I won’t hate you for it, but I can’t claim that I understand. If you think that taking some time off from being Superman is what’s best...” She sighed. “I’ll be here for you when you come back. We all will.”

Superman stepped forward and kissed her on the cheek. He was off in the air before she could formulate a response to that. He’d said he knew her better than she thought, but she didn’t know what the hell that was supposed to mean.

He didn’t want to be a shepherd to the sheep. There was something about that phrase that bothered her. It sounded familiar. She’d retained enough knowledge of the Bible to rec-

ognize it as an allusion. It was another way in which Superman showed a solid grasp of the culture he'd married himself to, not just idiomatically correct English far beyond what any foreigner learned, but cultural allegory. Certainly Superman had been compared to Christ on enough occasions for him to recognize it, but there was something else that made it stick out. It was like something Clark would say.

She was halfway down the utilitarian stairwell that led down into the building proper when it struck her. It wasn't just the turn of phrase, it was the entire conversation. Clark's father was a pacifist, she remembered him saying that over drinks one time. In fact, save for the fact that Superman hadn't once brought up religion, all those words could have come from Clark's mouth instead. A long, slow turn from faith in the goodness of humanity — that was the story of Clark's time in Metropolis.

She remarked on the physical similarities a few times. It was almost always a joke at Clark's expense. "Hey Clark, you spend some time on athletics and you might rival Superman." But you couldn't look at Clark and actually think that he was much more than an oaf. He had hidden depths, but those depths weren't nearly so deep that he could actually be — that he could have —

Lois sat down in the stairwell and put her hands on her knees. She was trembling slightly. "Some time off from being Superman," she'd said. They had the same eye color, the same hair color, and close to the same height. They had a similar infatuation with her, and Superman treated her as familiar because... because she was familiar to him. They'd sat side by side for months before Superman had shown up. They'd talked about almost everything under the sun while putting together their stories, and they'd certainly read almost everything the other had written.

She needed to make notes, but Superman could watch her.

Even now, sitting in the stairwell, he was probably watching her and wondering what she was thinking. Some distant part of her brain was telling her to think up a cover, so she ran her hands through her hair and muttered “He really did deserve it.” Calhoun would provide a cover while she tried to work through every conversation she’d ever had with Clark Kent.

She remembered Clark flinching when she’d said something. . . something about Superman not being totally emotionless when he came across a scene of brutal violence. Clark hadn’t been flinching because he was a naive Midwestern farm boy, he’d been flinching because he’d been *remembering*. He was unreliable because he had other obligations. He wasn’t lucky, he was able to see through walls and listen in on conversations that happened on the other side of the city. He used a lot of unnamed sources. He covered Superman’s trials. The span of the deception that it would have required was breathtaking, shocking enough that Lois had to remind herself to breathe. But it was true.

Clark Kent was Superman.

A thousand small details came sliding into context, and a hundred questions followed in their wake. Lois clenched her hands into tight fists. She could feel tears in her eyes. The biggest argument against the theory was that she was *smarter than that*, dammit, and if you refused to believe something because it would mean that you were the biggest idiot in the world, well, that alone said something about how smart you really were. She’d been played. Clark Kent had lied to her face for a year and a half, over and over. And Superman had done the same.

“Calhoun deserved it,” some small part of Lois remembered to say. Superman was watching, always watching. And if he really was Clark, if she hadn’t simply gone insane. . .

A few weeks after Clark Kent had first shown up in Metropo-

lis, Lois had taken a rare break from twelve hour days and gone out drinking. She'd met a sailor at one of the dockside bars, and taken him back to her place to do a few things that good Catholic women weren't supposed to do outside of marriage. In the morning, she'd shoved him out the door and gone into work. It would have been very hard to miss the fact that Clark was in a bad mood, and that this bad mood was directed towards her. She'd thought perhaps he'd seen her in the club while she was hanging off the sailor's arm, and had simply pretended that she couldn't tell what was bothering Clark. Now she had to wonder whether Clark was watching her the entire time, or listening to that particular night of passion. She'd imagined Superman's eyes on her frequently, and it was never a pleasant thought, but if it was Clark watching her undress, watching her with other men... she could feel tears streaming down her face.

There remained the question of why he would do it — why, if he had the power to fly through the air and could crush coal into diamonds, he would ever want to spend a single solitary second as Clark Kent. The answer had to be that he was a monster. She flitted through her memories of Clark Kent the reporter, and found one of him hunched over the paperwork for his taxes. People had been dying, and he'd been *filing his fucking taxes*. He'd sat in on boring meetings about style standards while people literally burned to death. And he'd lied to her, over and over, every single day that they'd worked together. He'd cheated his way to the top without any remorse. A cold fury ran through her veins.

She stood up, wiped away her tears, and looked at herself in her compact to assess the damage. Her hair still had blood in it, and that did nothing for the effect. Lois did her best to fix what she could, then smoothed out her skirt, took a deep breath, and walked out into the newsroom.

Clark Kent was standing there, speaking with Perry. If she'd been less angry, she might have run across the room to start beating him with her fists, but she was far beyond that now. Instead, she gave him a weak smile and sat down at her desk. There was no hiding that she had been crying, but she could keep up a front for now.

"Are you okay?" asked Clark as he sat down at his desk.

"Fine," said Lois. "There's been a lot going on around here while you were away. How was Smallville?"

"Small," replied Clark. "I'd forgotten how small. My mother will be missed. Listen, are you okay? I heard what happened, and I know you were in the thick of it."

"No, I'm not okay," said Lois. "Are you back to work now? Because I think I need to lay down for a while."

"Sure," said Clark. He gave her a gentle smile that made her want to stab him through the throat. He was Clark the deceiver, with a sympathetic smile like he hadn't been the one to ruin her blouse with Calhoun's blood.

Later, when she was safely at home, she took a shower and tried to keep from imagining Clark staring at her with an infatuation that had once been merely annoying. Clark Kent and Superman were both lies, and put together they were an abomination of a person that pretended at humanity. Lois could almost understand the anger that Calhoun must have felt, and the desire to hurt the creature's feelings in lieu of being able to damage his physical form. Lois wouldn't be so stupid as to give into that temptation.

Instead, she would have to persuade Lex that something needed to be done.

Lex sat in his study, trying to keep himself as current as possible with the newest developments in atomic research. His cover story for working with kryptonite was that he was doing experimental work on a potential weapon, and the best way to ensure that a deception was believable was to make it real. Atomic weapons were certainly coming, and a worrying prospect in their own right depending on how much power they would prove capable of harnessing and how easy it would be to refine the necessary materials. Lex had been quietly buying up uranium mines for a few years now, but if the technology developed he had no doubt that he would end up having to lock horns with the various governments that might lay claim to them.

“Lois Lane to see you, sir,” said Mercy.

“Wonderful,” said Lex. “Send her in, if you please.” The study had been cleaned of anything remotely incriminating before he left for Hub City, and the atomic research was nothing that Lois would be able to make sense of.

“It looks like we may have to cancel the book,” said Lex as Lois walked in. There was an actual book, with actual chapters, but it mostly served as a plausible cover for passing notes to each other. Lex’s supposed role in the authoring of the book had grown as the months dragged on, and now he was a full co-author. Half of the time when they spoke of the book out loud, it was in code. In this case ‘cancel the book’ had an equivalent meaning to ‘stop our covert attempts to manipulate Superman’s mental states’.

“Or at least write a new chapter,” said Lois with a nod. “Did you read the paper this morning?”

“You spoke with Superman following his . . . unfortunate decision,” said Lex. “And he’ll be leaving us for a while.” He wasn’t sure how much he believed it. Superman was a meddler by nature.

“Yes,” replied Lois. She pulled a notebook from her purse, and began writing on it. “The book was always intended as a living book, but of course we won’t be able to release it with things as they are now, and we don’t want it to be obsolete the moment it hits shelves. I do have some thoughts for what we’ll need to change in light of this new information though.” She turned the notebook towards him. *Is there still no way to stop him?*

He watched her carefully. He had not, as yet, given her any rope to hang him with. So far as she knew, she was the one in the lead, and Lex had only used his immense resources in ways that conformed to the moral standards of society.

“The science of Superman hasn’t changed one bit,” said Lex. “Those chapters will need the smallest amount of work, I should think. Public reaction will need to be rewritten entirely.” He made the hand signal for *No* in order to underscore his point, then the hand signal for *Why*?

“True,” said Lois. She began to write again. “I’d still like your help, if you have the time. Even if Superman stumbles from time to time, we can still use him as an example to live our lives by. Do you agree?” She turned the pad towards him again, not missing a beat. *Superman has a secret identity that I am in close contact with. I need your help in figuring out a way to stop him before he kills again.*

Lex very nearly froze. It wasn’t what he had been expecting. He had long thought that Superman or Clark Kent would eventually reveal the truth to her, perhaps after she had taken the courtship with Superman far enough. Lex had almost told her himself in order to prepare her, but it would have opened up too many questions about how much he had known and for how long.

“Certainly,” said Lex. “Though I’m not entirely sure that it’s

within my area of expertise.” He gave the hand signal for *Tell me more*. It was still too early to take any concrete actions, especially when events were in flux, but he was already planning how he’d use Lois to slip Superman the kryptonite.

Author’s Note: Sorry about the delay. The next chapter should land on July 19th, and will be the final chapter of this story.

It usually goes without saying, but these characters have their own views and biases which are distinct from my own.

As always, I appreciate the favorites / follows / reviews.

Chapter 12

Finale, Part 1

“And he’s just gone forever?” asked Jimmy. His girlfriend Eleanor sat beside him, opposite Lois and Clark. It was somewhat emphatically not a double date. Lois was trying her best to shift her position on Clark in a way that he would actually believe. Eventually she would pretend to see the light, or give him a chance, and they would presumably have a relationship built on a foundation of lies. It left a sour taste in her mouth, but since Superman was impervious to physical damage, he needed to be anchored to the mortal world.

“It won’t be forever,” said Lois. “He’ll probably come back, once he’s figured some things out.”

“It’s been a week,” said Clark. “Maybe what he’ll figure out is that he just doesn’t want to help people anymore.”

Lois looked at him. A full week had passed, and it was still hard not to marvel at how completely she’d been duped by him. Her pride was only slightly salved by how much effort Clark seemed to put into it. He’d changed everything about himself to put on the Clark Kent persona, and there were a thousand subtleties to the performance that she hadn’t been consciously aware of seeing. Everything about Clark was a lie, only there to

fool people.

“He still cares,” said Lois. “He still considers himself an American, I think. And there’s been a lot less backlash than there could have been.” That had been thanks in part to the media embargo that had let Lois get a head start on influencing public opinion. Superman had powerful friends too, not least of which was the governor himself. There had been no attempt to put out a warrant for Superman’s arrest, and so far as Lois could tell, no one was seriously considering trying to stop him aside from her and Lex. A fair number of people even seemed to think that Superman had done the right thing.

“You’re the expert,” said Clark. He shot her a smile, reveling in a joke that he thought only he could understand. When she thought back through all their conversations, she could see that he peppered in these winks and nods to the truth, though he never said anything that Clark-the-ordinary-reporter-with-no-secrets wouldn’t say. It reminded her of playing the game of double meanings with Lex. That was different, because at least they were both in on it, and there was a point to it other than gloating.

It did cross her mind that she was being uncharitable to Clark. Of course she couldn’t actually tell what his smiles meant, and it was just as likely that he felt a fondness towards her extensive reporting on him. But since Superman thankfully couldn’t read minds, and since Lois had to keep up a front at all times, thinking mean thoughts about Clark was a form of private rebellion, and helped her to keep her sanity.

After dinner had wrapped up, the couples went their separate ways. Jimmy had been dating the same girl for a while now, and things were getting serious between the two of them. It made her unexpectedly sad, since all the future seemed to hold for her was a sham of a relationship with Clark, and abstinence from

any meaningful — or even meaningless — romances for fear of how he'd react.

"Can I ask a delicate question?" asked Clark. They walked together down the city streets. Even after being worn down by the city and losing some of his innocence, he was still a gentleman, and had insisted on walking her back to her apartment. It was questionable how real the transformation had been in the first place, since he had been Superman all along, and how could he have had any innocence left when he could see how big of bastards people were to each other?

"Out with it," said Lois.

"When I asked you out, why did you say no?" asked Clark.

"A delicate question indeed," said Lois. She let silence settle on them while she thought about it. To his credit, he made no attempt to rush her. "You'd been working at the paper for two weeks," she finally said. "I'd been working at *The Daily Planet* for eight years, since I was a teenager, and you were far from the first of our coworkers to ask me out. I care about my job, Clark. Dating someone from the office — it doesn't matter who — would be a recipe for professional disaster. Even outside the office I have to think about whether my relationships are going to be kosher. If I went on a date with a politician, people would start saying that I was sleeping with him to get a story. I can handle the rumors that crop up just from being in the public eye, and the way people talk when they see a woman in a position of power or authority, but I'm not going to invite more of it on myself, and I think I would always have a small voice in the back of my head that said they were right if I stepped over some abstract line."

She took a breath. All that had been true, but it wasn't all that needed to be said to Clark. She'd been preparing for this conversation in one way or another for the last week, and she

was grateful that she hadn't been the one to start it. "And I didn't like you, not when you first came on. You're different now. You've changed. I'd thought that the city would chew you up and spit you out, but you didn't end up going back to Smallville, you stuck with it and persevered. You're a better reporter now too, someone who doesn't just rely on —" *being able to see through walls and listen in on private conversations* "— luck." The pause had been barely perceptible. "You'd better not hold this over me, but I respect you now."

She'd expected Clark to grin, but he only nodded. "You've changed too," he said. "Especially after Superman showed up. You said that you didn't want to invite rumors, but with him you just set that rule aside."

Lois stared at him. "Clark, you can't possibly be jealous that Superman and I — no, it's ridiculous." Nothing had ever happened between her and Superman, they'd gone on a single date together, and Clark *knew* all that. It was true that her attempts at playing the role of Superman's girlfriend had been painful from a professional standpoint, but Clark had no reason to be upset with her. They were the same person. Unless the problem lay somewhere else, in which case Lois thought she knew what to say. "Clark, do you know what I liked about Superman?"

"Past tense?" asked Clark. "You do know he might be listening in, right?"

The gall it must have taken for Clark Kent to say that almost left Lois impressed. She knew if she tried to have a conversation about Superman's eavesdropping she'd be liable to go incandescent with rage, so she skipped right past it.

"What I liked about Superman is that he was kind and gentle," said Lois. "He was good. And he liked me, even though I'm not very likable."

"You're likable," said Clark quickly.

“No, I’m really not,” said Lois. “I’m opinionated and hot-headed, and I like to push people’s buttons. I work more than anyone really asks me to, I stick my nose where it doesn’t belong, and I turn every tragedy or triumph into a story for consumption by the masses without really even thinking about it anymore. People die and I think about what the headline is going to be, and part of me knows that’s just a way of shielding myself. I know my good qualities, but likeability just isn’t one of them.”

“You’re intelligent, driven, principled—”

“Clark, I said I know my good qualities,” said Lois. She had to wonder whether any of that was what had attracted him, or if he’d simply caught a glimpse of her legs and worked backward from there. And with Clark it was always possible that it was another lie. “We’ve gotten off on a tangent, but what I was trying to say is that he liked me, and I liked him, and the rules I’d set down for myself seemed really arbitrary. If Superman had picked me out of all the reporters in the world — hell, all the women in the world — then maybe I was just being obstinate about how I wanted to be seen by the people around me.” The lies spilled out easily, but the next part would be harder. “It wasn’t that I broke the rule for Superman, it was that Superman made me see that it was a rule worth breaking.”

They had reached her apartment building. Lois turned to look at Clark. “Look, I don’t know whether you still feel the same way about me, but I do like you Clark. And if you asked me out again, maybe my answer would be different.”

Creating more kryptonite proved to be a challenge.

Lex took a minor risk and shipped portions of the kryptonite to two different facilities which both operated as part of the Scientific and Technological Advanced Research Labs. Robert

Meersman had wanted to create a series of research laboratories which were disconnected from any corporate or governmental interests. Lex had quickly seen that the end result of such a philosophy would surely result in either collapse at worst or organizational drift towards the very same set of problems which it was trying to escape at best. A combination of money and mild coercion had put S.T.A.R. Labs in his pocket, though few people knew the source of their funding, and fewer still knew the primary beneficiary of their research.

The kryptonite was given the name PU-356. It had supposedly been found in the core of a meteorite, and transferred for analysis shortly afterward, all of which was backed up by a trail of falsified documentation. It was the work of the labs to analyze the PU-356 into its component pieces, generate a full list of its properties, and then attempt to make more of it. It was semi-crystalline in nature, and after only a few days of work it was suggested that more might be made by introducing a shard of it into a super-saturated solution which contained the composite elements. It wasn't entirely clear how the structure of the PU-356 produced the properties that it did, but the elements which made it up were eventually sorted out, and a multitude of experiments were run to achieve synthesis.

This was part of the reason that Lex had taken the risk of shipping the kryptonite outside of his immediate control; it would have taken him an enormous amount of time to arrive at the proper solution to creating more kryptonite, which involved enormous amounts of energy, a small shard as a catalyst, and a wide variety of purified elements in very precise quantities. The process was slow and costly, but more of the kryptonite was produced with every passing day.

On those nights when he knew that Clark Kent would be occupied with Lois Lane, Lex began a slow renovation of his house.

Before she'd known that he was Superman, Lois had imagined Clark Kent's apartment as being relatively bare, with little more than a picture of his mother and father and a large cross. After she'd seen the truth, she'd imagined only a more extreme kind of minimalism; no toiletries, no toothbrush, no food in the cupboards or any other sign that a real person lived there, because no real person *did* live there. The world was Superman's playground, and he had no real needs beyond those he decided to indulge in.

She had been wrong. Clark's apartment was slightly smaller than her own, but just as packed with mementos, curios, and pictures. Where Lois had accumulated souvenirs over a lifetime of travel, Clark had instead pulled in pieces of Metropolis. It wasn't just the photographs that lined the walls, there was a collection of bric-a-brac on top of one of the short bookshelves; a model of the Emperor building, three-dimensional map of the city made with pressed tin, and a signed baseball among others.

"Jimmy took most of the pictures," said Clark. He seemed nervous, though there was no way of knowing whether that was his usual act or whether he was actually tentative about letting her see how he lived.

Her anger was starting to fade, which was a problem. It had been five weeks, and though she still felt hot sparks of rage, it was hard to stay as angry as she'd been in the beginning, especially when she was wearing a layer of deception over her feelings. Lying to Clark day in and day out meant building up an image of how she would feel about him if she didn't know, and almost by definition that meant some level of empathy.

She'd dealt with a number of battered women in her time, either as part of covering a story or through one of the social programs she was part of, and she had always found it puzzling

that they would sit there with a black eye and say that their husband or lover had done nothing wrong, or that it wouldn't happen again. It was a lie, but it was one that they were able to convince themselves of. She'd never thought that she would be a woman like that, but now that she and Clark were courting, she could see it happening to her. She would tell the lies so much that she would start to believe them, because the alternative was making Superman upset. And if she tried to get help, she would be laughed off and alienated, and of course it would only make him angry. There would be no escape.

She could imagine Clark hitting her. She could imagine his fist going straight through her skull, pushing aside bone and flesh like it wasn't even there, just like he'd done with Calhoun. She kept more than enough secrets from Clark, and a few of them might set him off. She could have stopped meeting with Lex, but that would mean giving up hope that Superman could be brought down to mortal levels. She was willing to give up her personal happiness if it meant keeping Clark pacified, but she had to know for sure that there was no other way — some more permanent solution. Lex had not yet declared that it was hopeless, but when he did, Lois would focus all of her efforts on being a good girlfriend, and eventually a good wife.

"Do you like it?" asked Clark.

"It's not what I expected," said Lois. A glint of metal in the corner caught her eye, and she walked over to stare at it. "You can't possibly expect me to believe that you play the saxophone."

"No," said Clark with a bashful smile. "I bought it thinking that I would learn, but it turns out that I don't really have an ear for music."

She had to wonder whether that was another bluff. Once you knew that Clark Kent was a disguise, it called into question everything he said. His appearance was a lie, the thick glasses

most of all. His apartment was clean, in a way that suggested that it wasn't always so pristine, and she wondered whether that was another piece of the elaborate deception he'd woven for her. She felt a flash of anger coming on, and did her best to divert it.

"My father made me take harp lessons," she said. "He must have thought that it would make me more ladylike, but I hated the harp and never practiced. After I gave up, he kept the harp in the living room, and it was like an albatross around my neck. And we moved a lot, you remember, so for years my father just carried the harp with us from place to place."

"I'd be interested to meet him," said Clark with a frown.

"It probably won't happen, at least for a while," said Lois. "He got pulled out of an early retirement to work on some secret military project. He wasn't the best father, but he trained my sister and I well, and I think we're tougher for it. He wanted boys, and didn't get them, and on top of that he raised us alone."

"We have that in common," said Clark. "Not being raised alone, but unconventional childhoods." He tapped a photo of Martha and Jonathan, which held a place of privilege on his wall — the only piece of his life in Kansas that was visible. "They were too old to be raising a child, by most people's estimations. Sometimes I think everyone has their own story that's just as unique and interesting as your own, if you could only get to know them."

Clark made a dinner of stuffed chicken and mashed potatoes. It wasn't really a surprise that he was a better cook than she was, since he would almost have to be, but it still irked her just a bit. The thing was, there wasn't really anything wrong with Clark if you could subtract out the Superman business. If he were truly, honestly Clark, he wouldn't be so bad, especially given the ways that he'd changed over the past year. He had actual stories to tell now. He was kind and courteous, and he'd left the naiveté

behind him. Most of all, he treated her like an equal, despite his infatuation. There had never been a moment in their time working together when she felt like he was dismissive of what she was saying, which was more than she could say for any other man that she worked with, except perhaps for Perry. Lois could practically feel the part of her that wanted to believe that she'd been wrong about him being Superman. If it was all just a bad case of paranoia, and Superman was a separate person that just looked like Clark despite all the other evidence, it wasn't like she and Clark would live some idyllic life of marital bliss, but at least she could see how she would find him compelling, and possibly even attractive.

But no, Clark was an unrepentant liar. She wasn't sure whether he was an alien that had forged a human identity for himself or a farm boy who had developed astonishing powers, but it didn't really matter much either way. He was cold and callous, and sat by while bad things happened in favor of reporting on the news in the least efficient possible way. Lois wasn't terribly religious, and much of it had to do with a conversation she'd had with a priest when she was eleven years old about why God let bad things happen. Most of the same arguments applied to Superman, even if he wasn't perfectly omniscient and omnipotent. When seen through the new lens of Clark Kent, it was possible to imagine that he'd never cared about doing the most good at all. Being a symbol for the people coincided with getting the highest amount of public acknowledgement, and that seemed a little too convenient. It was easy to look at Clark as Superman and think that it had all been about his ego all along.

After dinner they sat down on his couch together and listened to the radio. After debating it for a few minutes, Lois yawned and then curled up against him. It was a momentary shock to remember that he had the same hard, defined muscles that Su-

perman did, but she tried her best to play the oblivious girlfriend that Clark wanted. The show that Clark had picked out was a fanciful bit of science fiction about a man meeting aliens on the surface of Mars, which didn't really hold her interest. Lois slowly fell asleep against the Man of Steel.

The radio show ended and the commercials started up, which was when Lois began to wake up. Clark leaned forward and shut it off. He turned towards her, cupped her chin in his hand, and kissed her. His lips were soft, and if it weren't for the thought that his hand could crush her jawbone in a heartbeat, she might have actually enjoyed herself. He wasn't awkward and fumbling like she had thought he would be, just calm and tender.

When Clark backed away, he looked sad. "How long have you known?" he asked.

Lois swallowed. She was still sleepy, but she knew this wasn't good. "What are you talking about?"

"I kept waiting for you to slap me across the face," said Clark. "From practically the moment I put on the suit, I was waiting for you to figure everything out and. . . I don't know what I thought that your reaction would be. I guess I thought you'd be angry with me, but I'd hoped that you would help to keep my secret." He sighed. "Lois, how long have you known?"

She wanted to deny it, but it was clear that wouldn't do any good. A surge of fear was working its way through her brain, clearing up her thoughts. "Since just after you retired Superman," said Lois.

"Ah," replied Clark. He took off his glasses and set them on an end table, then laid back against the couch. Some of the Clark Kent posturing faded away. "And that's why we're dating now." It wasn't a question. Lois kept herself very still. "I feel like I've made a mess of everything."

"You haven't—"

“Stop,” said Clark, and so she did. “I love you Lois. One of the things that I always loved about you, right from the start, is that you never held back. You said the things that other people kept to themselves. In Smallville people talk in circles and hide barbs in their words. My mother — ” His voice caught. “My mother always disliked it. You’d ask to borrow a cup of sugar, and they’d happily give it to you, and then afterward they’d complain about the inconvenience. It was worse for me, since I could hear all of the words said in private. But you were never like that. You talked to artists, urchins, and politicians all the same. There was an honesty to you, I guess. And then Superman showed up, and you were different. It took me so long to see. Here was someone that you were actually scared of, someone that you had to watch your words around. You lied to him — to me. Even your affection was a lie, because you were scared. So please, no more lies. We need to have it out, one way or another. If you hate me, I need to know.”

Lois watched him carefully. She took a few moments to consider. Clark already knew that she had been lying to him, and nothing short of the truth — or at least *a* truth — would convince him. “Do you really want that?”

Clark nodded.

“You’re squandering your power,” said Lois. “You’re invincible, and people are *dying*, and you’re just. . . sitting here. If I had your powers, I wouldn’t stop for a single instant. Lying to everyone around you is one thing, and killing a man in cold blood was another, but what I can’t stand is that you’re so indifferent to the suffering of the world.” Perhaps it was more than he wanted to hear, but he had asked for the truth, and she hoped that he could hear it in her voice.

“You don’t see the hypocrisy there?” asked Clark. He was perfectly calm, and it was hard to see whether that was another

mask. "People say that all the time. They claim that if they had infinite power they would protect the weak and heal the sick. And then they eat out at fancy restaurants and buy expensive cigars. It's easy to say that someone else should do something, but it's hard to do it yourself. I've been in your apartment. I've seen how many things you could do without, if you were really serious about doing the most good to the detriment of your own personal satisfaction."

"I work twelve hour days," said Lois. "I work for and head up social programs in my free time." She could feel her face flush. "When I waste an hour on something small and petty, the cost isn't measured in terms of lives."

Clark didn't seem the least bit hurt by this. "The rich have a duty to the poor. But they also have a right to do as they please with their money, don't they? Lex Luthor engages in philanthropy, but you don't begrudge him his mansion, or the excessive amounts of money he's spent on lead shielding, among other things. I'm not talking about what should be legally required of us, and I don't think you are either. I have a moral obligation to the people of the world, as do you, but that obligation isn't all-encompassing. I'm not a slave."

Lois frowned. "I didn't say you were a slave."

"You just think you're better than me?" asked Clark.

"Clark, you lied to me, over and over. But even before that, you were so powerful and so strange. You crushed rocks into dust in your hands and you thought I would be impressed, and it seemed so hopelessly naive to me." She spoke slowly, trying to find the right words. "You lifted me up into the air like it was nothing, and flew me out a half mile above the city like it was second nature for my life to be in your hands. What you can do is objectively terrifying, and anyone who doesn't see that is just engaging in wishful thinking. I'm sorry that I tried to pretend at

being the woman you wanted me to be, the one who you could settle into a life with, but Clark, it wasn't all an act. If things had been different — hell, things *are* different now, if we can be open and honest with each other, and tear down the lies. . . I'm not promising anything, you understand, but I think we'd both like to start over." There. Just the right notes of contrition, and something that was close enough to the truth that it could pass the sniff test.

"Starting over," said Clark. He looked out the window at the city. "Alright then." He held out his hand. "My name is Clark Kent. I masquerade as Superman. I can bend steel with my bare hands and move so fast that bullets look like they're frozen in the air, among other things."

She shook his hand. Relief flowed through her; she'd been worried that his outward calm was only for show. "Lois Lane," she replied. "Professional snoop. You're really from Smallville then? That wasn't all made up when you came to Earth?"

"I was raised in Kansas," said Clark. "Everything I've ever told you about my childhood is true, but I left out all the interesting bits. My parents found a spaceship in their field one day, and they took it as a sign from god. I was just an unremarkable baby back then. They adopted me without much discussion, and hid the spaceship beneath a tarp until my father could hook a tractor up to it and stick it in the storm cellar. I was raised like any other boy, until I started to get my powers." He paused. "How much of this do you want to know?"

"All of it," replied Lois. There wasn't much reason to believe it was anything but another deception beyond her gut feeling, but he was painting a picture for her, and either way he seemed to want to share.

"The hearing came first," said Clark. "I was six years old, and I thought I was going crazy. You can imagine my relief when I re-

alized that I was just hearing conversations from the next county over. It got more powerful as the months went on, and I learned to shut it down, so that I didn't have to listen to everything that people said or did. I didn't tell my parents, but I thought that the hearing was what made me special — what God had put me on the earth for. And then I got the vision when I was eight. I could see straight through things. I could count the feathers on a hawk from ten miles away. That was when I looked inside the cellar that my parents had kept shut and saw the spaceship."

"The spaceship that didn't burn up over the Atlantic," said Lois.

"It was one of the lies I told you," said Clark. "Sorry."

"Wait, this doesn't make sense," said Lois. "You said that you were baby when the spaceship came down. But the story you told me was that you learned English from our radio waves on the way over. Was everything about Krypton a lie then? Because if you didn't know you were an alien until you were eight years old, I don't see how you would know anything about the planet you came from."

"I'm getting to that," said Clark. "And I know that you're skeptical, but you're going to have to bear with me. I asked my parents about the spaceship, and showed them what I could see and hear. They told me everything, and we went down into the cellar. Almost as soon as I touched the spaceship it grabbed a hold of my mind and showed me a vision of Krypton as it had been. The ghost of my real father was there, and he told me about the planet as it had been."

Lois stared at him. "A ghost," she said flatly.

"Not really a ghost," said Clark. "A simulacrum. A shard of my father's personality. Krypton was a sprawling place of crystalline spires and flying cars, and my father sat me down to explain everything to me. He told me how my powers would

grow, and tried to instruct me on how to help avoid the fate of his planet.”

“And he said all of this in English?” asked Lois. If Clark wanted her as she truly was, that was what he was going to get. Skepticism as practically second nature to her.

“I only thought to ask that later, when I was a teenager,” said Clark. “I’d read enough history books by that point to see that Jor-El was wearing a modified toga. All of the buildings and plants were inspired by Greece, mixed with a few more artistic flourishes, but it seemed too much like what I knew of Earth. I asked him about that, and he told me that what I was being shown was just a representation that would make sense to me. The real Krypton was a dark planet covered in black water, and the real Kryptonians were something like a cross between a spider and an eel. Before the ship landed, it mapped out human civilization and drew in samples of humanity to examine. I’m not really a Kryptonian, I’m something that the ship built. I actually think I was born on American soil. Jor-El showed me an analog of their world that I could understand, but I think they were even further beyond us than I could imagine.”

The conversation continued on, and Clark talked about the defining moments of his childhood. Lois listened closely, and made mental notes for later, occasionally sharing her own anecdotes that kept him in rapt attention even though they didn’t involve godly powers and alien ghosts. The important thing was that Clark was being honest with her now, and his secrets were spilling out into the open. She had told him off, and he’d called her a hypocrite, but somehow that didn’t mean they couldn’t still be friends. She debated telling him about her arrangement with Lex, but decided that was one secret to keep to herself. Nothing had ever really come of that partnership anyway. And besides that, all the talk with Clark hadn’t really changed that much

about how she felt. He was more human to her now, but still as negligent as he'd ever been, for all his protests. Some of the fear had left her, but not enough that she was about to let Clark know she'd actively tried to work against him.

The first attempt involved the drinking water at the Daily Planet Building. The kryptonite was ground into a fine powder and put into both the water cooler and the water main connecting to the building. Lex had run tests on it before using it on people, more because he was worried about overplaying his hand than because he was concerned about what effect it would have on the people. A week passed with no indication that there had been any change, though his channels of information from within the building were rather incomplete, especially since Lois had cut back her visits to practically nothing. She hadn't told him Superman's secret identity, despite his best efforts to pry it out of her. He was working on a way to have plausibly ferreted it out without exposing himself, but that was doubly difficult now that Superman was no longer active.

The second attempt involved aerosolizing the kryptonite powder. Lex thought it unlikely to work, given that the concentration would be measured in parts per million. The kryptonite seemed to lose the signature glow when reduced to pieces smaller than a gram, and Lex suspected that the still-mysterious source of the radiation required sufficient mass in close proximity in order to continue emitting its waves or particles. At any rate, this too seemed to have no noticeable effect on Clark Kent or anyone else in the building.

The third attempt involved exposure to the kryptonite. A small, thumb-sized piece was given to a man who had only the simplest of instructions: to walk past Clark Kent. Two spotters

were put into position to watch. Their report was typed up and broadcast in code, which eventually made its way back to Lex. He hadn't been able to give them full instructions for fear that they would discover too much, but they hadn't noticed any real change in Clark's behavior, not even when the patsy came within arm's length of him.

Brief exposure likely wasn't going to do the trick, especially not at a distance. The fullest test of the kryptonite would be to place it directly next to Superman for as long as possible. The spaceship's creche had a large piece of kryptonite directly next to it, and a relatively thin layer of lead was apparently sufficient shielding, which said quite a bit about the danger that it posed. The kryptonite would have to be close, nearly in range of skin contact. That meant using Lois Lane. Unfortunately, Lois could lead Superman right back to Lex, but that was what contingency plans were for.

Superman waited, and watched.

Author's Note: Some post-publication edits have been made — if some of the reviews don't make sense anymore, that's why.

Chapter 13

Finale, Part 2

Dear Lois,

I've been a longtime reader of your articles, and I have to say that I'm quite the fan. I've been happy to note from the few photographs I've seen of you that we seem to share a similar taste in fashion, and I just wanted to share a tip with you. There's a jewelry store up on 18th and 22nd called Marxhausen's, and they have just the most fantastic pieces that would perfectly complement your outfits. Their necklaces are so delicate and understated, just the thing for a woman like you. I don't know if you have a special man in your life, but if you do I'm sure he'd love to see you in it — and if you don't, I'm sure that it would help attract one!

Your loyal fan,

Lucille Lindt

Lois got a number of letters from the citizens of Metropolis on any given day. Lex had arranged for this to also be a private channel of communication. The opening sentence was one she'd memorized, and if that weren't enough, the initials at the bottom were L.L., initials that she and Lex shared — his idea of a joke, she supposed.

She went down to Marxhausen's over her lunch break, not

really knowing what to expect. She'd kept her distance from Lex ever since she and Clark had hit the reset button on their friendship. If Clark had asked her a direct question, she might have given up her last remaining secret to him, but so far he hadn't shown any curiosity. That made her a bit nervous. It was well possible that he'd already made his own deductions on that score, especially if he'd been watching her. He knew that she had a less than glowing opinion of him, and the book she'd written with Luthor was damn near a hagiography, with none of the complexity that she'd brought to her recent talks with Clark. But he hadn't asked, and she hadn't felt like offering it up on her own.

The jewelry store was a small slice of glamour that didn't quite fit with the rest of the block. It wasn't uncommon for the borders of the neighborhoods to shift slightly over the years, and from what Lois could tell, Marxhausen's had been the victim of one of these shifts. It was a small, narrow store, staffed by a fetching woman with obscenely blonde hair who perked up at the sound of the door opening. Lois looked around slowly. There was nothing obvious to mark this as part of some plot.

"Can I help you?" asked the blonde woman.

Lois took a breath, and dove right in. "My name is Lois Lane, and I'm a reporter for *The Daily Planet*. My editor keeps asking me to write a women's piece that's not about equal rights or social issues, and I decided that I'd finally indulge him. So I was thinking that I would write about jewelry. It should help pacify him, I think." Hopefully Clark wouldn't think that was too suspicious. Lex had only gotten her to the store, and she didn't have the barest outline of a script. Of course, it would mean that she would have to actually write the article, on top of her other work.

A sudden change came over the woman's face, her eyebrows

falling and then rising again, and when she spoke, her voice was slightly higher than before. “Oh, oh yes, there’s so much that I could tell you about. More and more women are buying their own jewelry these days, working women who want to attract a husband.” She reached beneath the counter. “In fact, if you’d be willing to mention Marxhausen’s in the article, there’s a piece I think you might like. It comes with a matching watch, for that special man in your life.” She had a nervous giggle.

She set two items down on the counter. One was a small golden locket, shaped like an oval. The other was a watch, which glowed green behind the clock face. Lois made no move to touch it.

“Is it radium?” asked Lois.

“What?” asked the woman with a puzzled look.

“Radium,” Lois repeated. “It’s a metal that glows green, just like that. Twenty years ago there was a group of factory workers — women — who painted the faces of watches with radium so they’d glow in the dark. They licked the tip of their paint brushes to get a fine point, and they suffered from radiation poisoning — anemia and bone fractures, and then their jaws started to fall apart, disintegrating.” She had literally written the book on it.

“I’ve, ah, been assured that it’s safe,” said the blonde woman.

“So were the girls who worked in the factory,” said Lois. She wondered how far she was deviating from what Lex had planned. Obviously she was intended to walk out of the store with watch and the necklace. “I’m only curious about what makes it glow, I don’t mean to be so... adversarial. The locket has a similar component?”

“Oh yes,” said the saleswomen, who seemed grateful to be back on familiar ground. She cracked the locket open, and showed a multi-faceted gem.

“Alright,” said Lois. “I’ll take them. Now for this story, I have a few questions. . .”

What does it do? wrote Lois.

Lex frowned at the notebook. He had thought that the next course of action would be obvious to her: give Clark Kent the watch and see what happens. He’d done his best to keep her out of the loop specifically so that if Superman asked her, she would be able to tell the truth. Superman had to know that there was someone plotting against him by now, especially given the theft of the spaceship and the death of his mother, but it was important that it appear as though Lois had been used as a pawn, rather than the more valuable bishop or knight that she really was. And then she’d had to go and ruin it by visiting him and asking for answers, which would seem unacceptably suspicious.

I don’t know, Lex wrote back. *I have reason to believe that it will hurt him.*

Lois read the note and frowned at him. She tapped her pencil against the paper for a few moments.

I’m not sure we should.

Lex stifled a groan. He was losing Lois, that much was clear now. It was at least gratifying to know that she hadn’t taken leave of her senses in coming to him; it was only a problem of a different sort. He could deal with a question of loyalties, at least in the near term.

I figured out his identity, wrote Lex. *It wasn’t difficult once I started looking at the people around you.* He watched her face as she read that, then took the notebook from her again before she had a chance to respond. *You’re starting to feel sympathy towards him. You think that you understand where he’s coming from.*

Lois shrugged, then nodded. *He's not perfect, she wrote back. But I think that I know where he's coming from now. We've been talking a lot lately.*

He murdered a man in cold blood, wrote Lex, but Lois was already shaking her head.

He regrets it, she wrote back.

What else will he come to regret? asked Lex. *We're talking about the fate of the world. You know that there's no stopping him if he goes rogue. Even if the chance is slim, it's a chance weighed against the total destruction of humanity. If the odds are a thousand to one that he'll kill us all, that's an average of two million dead. My own estimates are higher, but you know him better than I do.*

Lois frowned. *Will it depower him, or kill him?*

I don't know, wrote Lex. He was halfway certain that she was testing him. He would have pivoted, and claimed that he knew what the effect was, but he'd already said that he didn't know, and couldn't take the chance of getting caught in the lie. *There is some element of risk here, but I think it's low. The mineral in the watch emits a radiation that I suspect will cause some interference with his power. I need you to observe him carefully when you put the watch on him.* Lex had done his own probability estimates, based on what he knew of Kryptonian engineering from taking apart the ship. He strongly believed that Superman's powers were of technological rather than biological origin, simply given their raw power, and if kryptonite had any negative effect at all, the engineering of the ship suggested to him that it would have been designed to fail safely. Telling Lois that he'd weighed the odds of catastrophe and found them acceptable would probably not endear her to the plan though.

Lois slowly read what he'd written. She considered for a moment and wrote back. *You would be exposing yourself. Clark*

would know that someone was aware of his secret identity — someone besides me, if he believed I was an innocent victim of your machinations.

A risk I'm willing to take, wrote Lex. Superman almost certainly already knew. That ship had sailed after the Smallville operation. But there wasn't a convincing lie that he could tell Lois to explain to her how he had come by that information. If she were trustworthy, this whole conversation would have gone a lot smoother.

Lois absentmindedly bit the end of the pencil and paced around the room. Lex didn't know how she weighed the arguments, but if she refused him, everything got much more complicated.

You still don't actually trust him, wrote Lex. *You would have told him about our arrangement if you did.* He handed the pad of paper to her, and she stared at it mutely.

Some time passed, but eventually she nodded.

Clark wasn't at his desk when Lois came into the office. She put the necklace and the watch into the lead-lined drawer of her desk, and tried to get some work done. She'd been put in an awkward position by Lex. Simply talking to Clark about how she felt had done wonders, and melted away a good deal of her stress. He was still in love with her, and that would have to be dealt with at some point in the future, but she'd confessed her fears and frustrations and he had been understanding. They had their disagreements — deep disagreements that weren't going to go away anytime soon — but they were at least talking to each other like reasonable adults.

Clark came in, hung his coat up on a hook on the wall, and took a seat at his desk. He smiled pleasantly at her.

"I got you a gift," said Lois. Her voice nearly caught. "Not that much of one, really, since it was free, but I thought you might appreciate it." She opened the desk drawer, and heard a noise from Clark's desk. He was standing far away from her, with a serious expression on his face. She hadn't even seen him move.

"There's a small box in my briefcase," said Clark. His voice was calm. "I want you to take it out and put both the watch and the necklace in it."

"Clark," Lois began. Something had gone horribly wrong.

"Now, please," said Clark. "Be careful, the box is heavy."

Lois did as she was instructed. The box was a crude thing. It felt heavier than it should have been. She put both the pieces into it, and closed it tight. When she did, Clark strode forward and picked the box up, then sat down in his chair. No one else around them seemed to have noticed any of this.

"It seems that we were less than perfectly honest with each other," said Clark. "Old habits, I guess."

"Clark," said Lois. She folded her hands into her lap, to keep them from shaking. "Fuck, I don't know what to say."

"Language," said Clark with a mild tone. "I'm not angry, just disappointed. We'll have to talk this out later." He drummed his fingers on top of the box. "Just for my own personal confirmation before I confront him, who gave you these?"

There was no way to deny it. Clark already knew. "Lex Luthor," said Lois. Her mouth felt dry.

Clark stood up from his chair, and tucked the box under one arm as though it were weightless. "Well, I'm off to have a talk with him." He began to leave, as though nothing at all were wrong.

"Clark," said Lois. He stopped, and turned towards her. "I'm sorry."

“Well, that’s a start,” he replied. He gave her a heartbroken smile.

“Superman to see you, sir,” said Mercy.

Lex simply stared at her. Just once he would have liked to see some trace of emotion from her, but Mercy could announce that the world was ending and still seem like she was bored.

“Did he say what it was regarding?” asked Lex.

“The fate of humanity,” said Mercy, without so much as a raised eyebrow or a polite cough to acknowledge the absurdity of it all.

“Ah, well, send him in,” said Lex. He looked towards the lead-lined drawer of his desk, where a pistol with specially prepared bullets lay waiting. Inside each lead bullet was a small sliver of kryptonite. It was a terrible plan, so far as they went, but at least it was there.

Superman strode into the study, looking around as he went. He was graceful, for someone so big. The bright colors of his costume clashed with the rich mahogany and leather upholstery of the room, but he didn’t seem to notice or care.

“I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure of being introduced,” said Lex. “I was an innocent bystander at a bank robbery that you stopped, though I’m sure you don’t remember my face. I’m Lex Luthor. I suppose you already know that.” He extended a hand, and when Superman shook it, he tried not to think about his fingers being mashed into pulp.

Superman sat down in one of the chairs, and offered Lex a pleasant smile. “Well, I’m not sure quite where to begin.” He looked around the room for a moment, perhaps contemplating the fact that he was surrounded by lead. Then he turned and

pointed to bound proof on Lex's desk, a copy of the book he and Lois had put together about Superman. "May I?"

"Certainly," said Lex. "If there's anything that you think needs changing, we'd be happy to—"

Superman waved him off, and opened the sheaf of papers to somewhere in the middle, finding what he wanted immediately. "Ah, here we go. 'The currently accepted explanation for Superman's so-called x-ray vision has nothing to do with x-rays. Though one can be forgiven for thinking that they have something to do with that particular form of radiation given that both are used to peer through otherwise solid objects, as well as the use of lead for shielding, the similarities end there.'" Superman looked up at Lex for a moment, then back down at the book. "And so on and so forth, and then here, this is what I wanted to point out. 'Superman's penetrative vision is thought by leading scientists to utilize some hitherto unknown aspect of particle physics. The hypothesized krypto particles permeate the universe and can pass cleanly through every known element aside from lead.' And then it goes on to talk about the difference between lead as it applies to x-rays and lead as it applies to krypto particles."

Lex stared at Superman. He tried to keep calm and slow his heart rate down. "Are you telling me that you can see through lead?"

"No," said Superman. "However, let me offer up a hypothetical. Let's say that there's a mineral that was found in the core of a meteorite. Two separate research facilities were sent samples of the meteorite — not by me, but by a third party — and they could find no form of radiation using any of the instruments at their disposal. I know for a fact that it does emit radiation, because as you seem to have guessed, that radiation has an unsettling effect on me. As an additional piece of information, the

radiation from this mineral is blocked by lead, but seemingly by nothing else. What do you suppose it would look like to my x-ray vision?"

"Bright," said Lex. "Because if it emits anything, Occam's Razor would dictate that it's krypto particles rather than some distinct particle which shares many of the same properties. And if they're the same, it's a matter of degree — the mineral emits far, far more than you use to see by." He should have seen that possibility far, far sooner. The only question remaining was how many layers of deception it would allow Superman to peel back.

"It's as bright as a blazing sun, difficult to look at directly when I'm using my x-ray vision," said Superman. He shrugged. "I probably would have been able to piece it together all the same. A man walked by me with a piece of glowing green rock in his breast pocket, and I felt myself grow weaker. It got worse the closer he got. I have extensive practice at faking reactions, or faking a lack of reaction, and just when I was beginning to feel mortal, and worried that I was going to be killed in some ignoble way, he kept on moving by. So I held myself in check, and as soon as I got to a safe place, I looked through the walls and watched him. I saw a piece of rock that was so bright it nearly blinded me."

Lex kept very still. The research facilities he'd sent the kryptonite to hadn't had lead shielding, and he hadn't thought that they would need it. The story he'd given for the appearance of kryptonite had been solid, and the forged paperwork had been airtight. Experimentation and synthesis of an unknown mineral shouldn't have been suspicious — except that Superman would only have had to go to space and look down at the planet. If they shone as brightly as he claimed they did, they'd stick out like a sore thumb.

"So," said Superman. "I stole a piece of the PU-356 from one

of the labs. I won't bore you with the details, but it would suffice to say that I can see through walls and move as fast as I want to, which makes me an excellent thief. I confirmed that it could hurt me, and after that it was just a matter of being careful until I could confirm your involvement to my satisfaction. I'm not in any real danger from the PU-356, though it is inconvenient. I can see it clearly from miles away without having to try all that hard, and my superior speed means that a bullet made of it could never hit me." Superman sighed. "Of course, we can drop the pretense of there ever being a meteorite. That would be too big of a coincidence to swallow, if a meteorite capable of harming me was found and put into mass synthesis just a short while after my spaceship was stolen from me."

Lex's mouth felt dry. "I was blackmailed," he began. "I was told that unless I tried—"

Superman waved his hand. "I don't believe you," he said with a half smile. "You made a good faith attempt to kill me, and you used Lois to do it."

"The military—" said Lex.

"There were a few reasons that I came here," said Superman. "Things we need to discuss. First, I want you to admit to what you've done. All of it."

Lex's face fell. "I don't know what it is you think you know," he said. "Or how you think you know it. I did arrange for Lois to deliver a piece of the mineral to you, and it was an attempt to see whether you could be disrupted in some way, but I don't know anything about a spaceship. So far as I'm aware, it burned up on re-entry. I felt it prudent to have a method of dealing with you in case the worst were to happen, and I can only hope that—"

"Towards the end of his life, William Calhoun talked a lot," said Superman. "He sat in a jail cell, and if prayer is an expres-

sion of love, then he did whatever the opposite of praying is. Some of what he said was nonsense, credit taken for crimes that he didn't commit, but I could usually tell by how he spoke. He wasn't the guiding hand behind Harry Kramer's bombing campaigns. If he had been, he would have brought it up more often, instead of just in those moments that he really wanted to twist the knife as hard as possible."

"You think that I could possibly be behind that act of terrorism?" asked Lex.

"It wasn't terrorism," said Superman. "It was a series of attempts on my life. Terror was only a byproduct. Given that I know you tried earlier today, it's not unreasonable to think that you had tried before." He held up a hand to forestall any objections. "I'm less certain about that one, and obviously I have no hard proof. Certainly nothing that would hold up in a court of law. Still, it became clear fairly early on that I was looking for someone who was intelligent and possessed an enormous amount of resources. That you have lead-lined rooms in both your home and office, speak in languages other than English for no good reason, and have a penchant for codes — well, that helped to paint a picture. I want a confession from you, one that covers everything you're guilty of."

"And then you'll kill me?" asked Lex.

"No," said Superman. "I'm willing to accept your unconditional surrender."

"Ah," said Lex. "And what does that entail?"

"Part of an unconditional surrender is that you don't get to ask that question," said Superman. "I beat you. It's over. You have exactly one thing that can give me the slightest injury, and I can see it coming from a mile away. I'm fairly certain I know how you think now. It's been a learning experience, watching all of the machinations of an enemy with nearly infinite resources

and a steadfast refusal to be identified.”

“Fine,” said Lex. It was time to change tactics, and concede some ground in the hopes of arranging a more advantageous battlefield. “I confess. I was the one who figured out your inability to see through lead, and allowed that fact to be known around the world. I arranged for the bombs to be made and placed, knowing that innocent people would die. I figured out your identity as Clark Kent, and inserted agents into Smallville. Your mother’s death was unintentional. I stole your spaceship. I found a single small chink in your armor and tried my best to use it against you. I believe that’s an accurate list of my crimes.” Almost all of the layers of deception had slid off now, with only a few secrets still held back in reserve, more out of a faint sense of hope than any coherent strategy. Lex felt naked.

“Why?” asked Superman. He showed no shock or surprise.

“You are too dangerous to be allowed to live,” said Lex. “You cannot be stopped after the fact, which means you must be stopped prior to it.”

“Do you know why I killed Calhoun?” asked Superman.

“According to Miss Lane, you were angry with him,” said Lex. He tried not to be bothered by the seeming non sequitur. Superman was at an advantage in not only strength and speed, but information as well. Lois had said he had the ability to think for long moments in the space between blinks, and perhaps that accounted for the disjointed conversation. Or maybe Superman had just prepared a script for himself to follow, and was sticking to the points he wanted to hit before he brought Lex to a messy end.

“You’re close,” said Superman. “I was angry with him, but anger alone wasn’t enough. Instead it was a chain of thought, with each step colored in anger. I convinced myself that it was the correct thing to do, and that wouldn’t have been possible

without the anger. I decided to kill Calhoun, and then I worked backwards to figure out all the ways that I could make that into the single best choice.” He paused, and stared Lex in the eyes. “I’ve been looking over what I actually believe lately, and trying to figure out why I believe it. And do you know, I think more than anger, my thinking has been tainted by fear. As has your own.”

“Fear is a natural response to the chance of obliteration,” said Lex. “It’s what saved our ancestors — my ancestors, anyway — from death. When a new predator arrives in the woods, the appropriate reaction is to run away or fight. There was no way to run away from you. So yes, I was and am afraid of you, but that fear had a grounding in reality. I would have acted the same even if I didn’t feel an instinctive terror at your presence on this planet.”

“I was good,” said Superman. “I was a paragon of virtue. I never hurt anyone. I never acted in a way that was contrary to humanity. I never interfered with politics or warfare. You feared me all the same, and made it your mission to kill me. You got this idea in your head that I was a threat — ”

“You were,” said Lex softly.

“And you never stopped to reconsider whether that continued to be true as time went on,” finished Superman. “I’m not a bad person. I can understand if you had misgivings when I showed up, but as the months passed, you never changed your mind, did you? Maybe you just didn’t want to admit that you killed all those people for nothing. You couldn’t admit you were wrong about me, because then you would be forced to think of yourself as evil. Lex, I’m not going to destroy this planet, or anyone on it. That’s more true now than ever.”

Lex was silent. The issue wasn’t whether Superman was planning to destroy the planet, it was that he was capable of it at

all. “Knowing what I know now, I would have done things differently,” said Lex. “But up until an hour ago I thought it would be for the best if you were dealt with, and you haven’t said anything to change my mind. Regardless, you have managed to convince me that it’s not going to be possible to accomplish that goal, so if you want my unconditional surrender, you have it.”

“Good,” said Superman. “I said earlier that I had been ruled by my own fears. They weren’t fears of death or injury, for the most part. They were fears of failing in other ways. I acted like I thought a hero should act, and tried to be a symbol for people. I read your proposals as they came out, and the proposals of others. Some of the ideas I’d already thought of myself, while others were novel, but I had convinced myself that part of being a shining symbol of hope, truth, and justice was being static. Part of it was my father, I’m sure. He had his very particular views about the world, and I was following his example. It felt like I would have been turning my back on him if I’d decided that I wanted to do things differently. And even when the evidence began to grow that I’d been wrong — or at least not completely right — I refused to change. I was afraid I would do something bad by trying to do something good. I was worried that I would ruin our society, or mar human history. I thought I would end up leading us down the same path Krypton had traveled, letting too much happen too soon. It was logic, tainted with the fear of failure. I had decided that I was going to keep the world as it was, so that my responsibilities would stay small. Then I rationalized my way towards that conclusion.”

“You’re speaking in the past tense,” said Lex.

“How much of what you’ve said over the past year was true?” asked Superman. “How much do you want to make the world a better place?”

“I meant all of it,” said Lex. “I could have done much less

than I did, if I only wanted the appearance of philanthropy. I want to make the world a better place.”

“That’s what your surrender means,” said Superman. “You’re going to help me do the most good.”

“What’s the catch?” asked Lex. The important question of *How?* would come later.

Superman waved his hand around the room. “No more lead. No more codes. No more speaking in other languages. No more secrets from me. You’ll have to return my spaceship to me, and stop all of the current research into a means of killing me. LexCorp will be turned into a machine for generating good in the world instead of pure profit. I’ll be doing large scale labor, and you’ll be managing the profits from that as well, channeling them towards the areas where the money can do the most good. I’ll need a thorough debriefing on all of your methods of deception. It probably goes without saying that I’ll be watching you like a hawk. I want your help in allowing me to keep my identity as Clark Kent secret, which will likely involve buying *The Daily Planet* and giving me a list of everyone who you’ve told, for starters. And you’re never to speak with Lois again.”

“And if I don’t want to take that option?” asked Lex. He was already thinking of ways to get around the restrictions that Superman was talking about, but if the kryptonite was unworkable as a solution, it was almost certain that the attempts on Superman’s life would have to stop for good.

“I’m going to build a prison,” said Superman. “You would be the second inmate, if you refused. There would be absolutely no hope of escape.”

“Then I’ll help you, of course I will, but I’m afraid I still don’t understand,” said Lex.

“I believe there’s a goodness in you, Luthor,” said Superman. “I’m still a Christian, and the story of the Bible is one of redemp-

tion. I have nothing to fear from you, and you're in a unique position to effect positive change. While I admit it would feel good to lock you away forever, rehabilitation is more important than retribution. More practically, no one knows of your crimes but me, and while I can prove enough of it to my own satisfaction, I don't have any illusions that it would hold up in any court of law. Making you disappear would raise questions, and I don't know who might have the answers. I also know your methods well enough to know that you probably have a dead man's switch somewhere, and of course I worry about what might be in it. My existence as Clark Kent is important to me, and I don't want to give it up unless I have to. You're a smart man. You know I'm offering you a good deal."

"You are," said Lex. He swallowed. "It makes more sense to keep me alive and work towards our mutual goals. You hadn't struck me as being so level-headed."

"People change," said Superman. He blurred forward. The chair he'd been sitting in slid backward three feet and fell over. He stood right before the desk, towering over it. His expression was deathly serious. "I feel like it goes without saying, but I could kill you in a heartbeat. I don't like using the threat of force, but if you step out of the very clearly defined lines we're going to set, I will throw you right into a specially made cell in my jail. If you give me reason to suspect that you're still a threat to me or anyone else around me, you will simply vanish from the face of the Earth and never be heard from again."

"Understood," said Lex. He noted what Superman had said, and the very specific wording the alien had used. He had not actually said that he would commit murder, only that he could. And the threat of consequences had been vague. Superman was back to being a pacifist, it seemed, after a dalliance with murder. Lex could use that against him.

But then, perhaps it made the most sense to simply accept the reality of Superman. If kryptonite shined brightly and Superman knew to look for it, it would be nearly impossible to kill him with it. A kryptonite bomb surrounded by lead would only work if Superman could be maneuvered directly next to it, and as soon as he saw the casing of the bomb bowing outwards he would be on the move. The other clear option was to get Superman as he slept, but given what they both knew about each other, there was a decent chance that Superman would simply stop sleeping, or rotate through different anonymous locations — and that was assuming that Superman could even be snuck up on while he slept. If Superman knew about kryptonite, and was willing to work outside of or in opposition to the law, the problem seemed nearly unworkable.

“Which of the proposals did you want to pursue?” asked Lex.

Superman stood back, and brushed off his costume. “I’m looking for pure efficiency, which is your area of expertise. You’re going to spend the next few days tearing the lead from these walls and complying with my demands, and then I want you to start writing a proposal for how I can do the most good. I won’t kill anyone, and I want to try to keep my interference with governmental bodies to a minimum, but I am willing to reshape the world in any other way.”

“I’ll think on it,” said Lex.

“Don’t cross me,” said Superman. “I’m hoping that you can see that this is good for both of us.”

Lex nodded stiffly. All his preparations and all his caution had been for nothing. This wasn’t the end that he wanted, but it was the best that he could have hoped for after his masks had been taken away from him.

“This will be the last time we see each other in person,” said Superman. “Or rather, the last time that you see me. I’ll be

watching you.” He turned to leave, then stopped and stared at the door. He glanced back at Lex with a frown on his face, then looked at the door again. It was lead of course, just like the walls of the room, but something had given Superman pause. “Miss Graves, please move away from the door.”

Instead, the door to the study began to open, and it had shifted only the smallest fraction of an inch in the time it took for Superman to stand behind Lex’s desk. He moved quickly and efficiently, being quite delicate with his power. By the time the door swung open, Superman had Lex’s head in his hands, one of which was gripping his jaw. Lex felt no sensation of pain or even discomfort, only firm hands. Mercy stood at the doorway, with a solid block of kryptonite the size of a baseball held straight out in front of her.

“Mercy, was it?” asked Superman. His vice grip didn’t let up for a moment.

Mercy nodded.

“You have to know that this is utterly futile,” said Superman. “I shouldn’t have expected you to sit idly by while Lex and I had our chat, but we’ve come to an agreement of sorts. I want to leave here peacefully and with a minimum amount of destruction or loss of life.”

Lex’s jaw was held firmly in place, preventing him from speaking. He could only hope that Mercy would understand from the look in his eyes. She took a half step closer.

“Stop,” said Superman. She stopped. “I’m going to let Lex speak to you, to try to convince you that you should leave. Lex, consider this your first test.”

Lex’s jaw was gently released. He took a breath. “Mercy, I want you to listen to me very carefully. Throw the kryptonite toward—”

The grip on Lex's head vanished just as the wall behind him shattered outwards with a rush of air. Mercy had started winding up for a throw before Lex was halfway through his sentence, and the block of kryptonite landed on the desk, where it slid across and fell to the floor at Lex's feet. Lex ignored it and opened the lead-lined drawer to pull out the pistol.

He stepped out the hole in the side of his mansion, where it was a nice and pleasant summer day. Superman was laying on the ground a hundred feet away, covered by his red cape, and Lex took off towards him at a dead sprint, trying his best to avoid the glowing green shards and bits of lead that Superman had taken with him when he went through the wall.

When Lex was five feet away, he fired three bullets into Superman's head. The sight of blood sent a wave of relief through him, and he crouched down next to the body to catch his breath.

"I studded the walls with kryptonite," Lex said to the corpse. He kept his eyes on the body, just in case it started moving. It as far from the first dead person he'd seen, but the sight of it still sent a surge of adrenaline through him. He wouldn't have been terribly surprised if he had passed out or threw up.

After a half a minute had passed, Mercy came walking across the lawn to join him. Her hair was in the same tight bun as always, and she certainly didn't look like she'd just played an instrumental part in killing a god. She carried the chunk of kryptonite in one hand.

"He had a great many options for dealing with that situation," said Mercy. "How lucky did we just get?"

"I haven't had enough time to work out the odds," said Lex. "But he didn't want to hurt either of us, even after everything I'd confessed to. Leaving through the side of the room was probably what I would have done. He must have scoped out the mansion before he came — watched me in my study whenever

you opened the door, observed our patterns. I think it would be safe to say that we won because we were lucky. Putting kryptonite in with the lead was at the far edge of my most paranoid preparations, and after the brush-by I had thought that it wasn't strong enough. I was actually angry about wasting the money." He ran his hand across his bare scalp. "He was too dangerous to let live."

"I know, sir," said Mercy. She looked across the yard. They were separated from their neighbors by a massive expanse of lawn and thick shrubs, but the noise wouldn't go unnoticed. "We should figure out what sort of story is appropriate to this situation." She looked at where Superman lay. "We should also dispose of the body."

She was right, but Lex was having trouble focusing. He had won. It had been damned sloppy. He should have arranged for Mercy to do what she'd done on her own anyway. It should have been a masterstroke. If he had lured Superman into the room and sprung a trap, he would have felt more of a thrill of victory. But as his thoughts moved back towards the conversation he'd had with Superman, he could tell there was another reason that he only felt hollow. There was a small seed of doubt. Lex had made his choice, and made that choice for all of humanity. It wasn't unreasonable to wonder whether that choice had been the right one. Still, the seed of doubt couldn't be allowed to grow, not after the choice had already been made.

"I don't know how much of our conversation you overheard," said Lex. "But it didn't change anything. He was just too powerful to be allowed to exist."

Mercy only nodded.

"Any word from Clark?" asked Jimmy.

“No,” said Lois. “I wouldn’t expect any letters from him.”

“He just left without saying goodbye though?” asked Jimmy. “I mean, he was never very dependable, but I just didn’t expect it of him.”

“He’d had too much of the city,” said Lois. “You read his letter of resignation. He’s back in Kansas, taking care of the farm. It wasn’t impossible to predict. You know how much he talked about Smallville.” Lex had called her to let her know that Superman had been dealt with, and the letter of resignation had come in the very next day. She’d been feeling an awful pit in her stomach ever since, even as she tried to keep Perry and Jimmy from asking too many questions. She had no idea how Lex had done it, but she was certain that Clark was dead.

Jimmy moved closer and lowered his voice. “The thing is, I was talking to Eleanor. Did I ever tell you how we met?”

“At a bar?” asked Lois.

“Right,” said Jimmy. “It was just after we’d gotten back from the Whitman thing, and... she asked me some questions about Clark. I didn’t think anything of it at the time, I was halfway to drunk and she was — is — pretty much a goddess. Anyway, I was talking to her about Clark’s sudden retirement from the reporting business, and she broke down and told me that it wasn’t an accident that we had met each other. I was part of a case she was working, to try to dig up some dirt on local reporters. She works for a detective agency, and she thought that maybe it was so that someone would be able to put pressure on him if the wrong sort of story broke, but now... now it seems a little fishy.”

Luthor, thought Lois. She should have known that after she told him about Superman’s secret identity he would try to find out more. Maybe it had been one of the things that had tipped Clark off and let him know that someone was on his trail. “Wait

a second, you started dating after we covered the Whitman kidnapping?”

“Yeah, why?” asked Jimmy.

The timeline didn’t match up. She’d come to Lex months later, which meant that either someone else was snooping into Clark’s past, or Lex had known the truth far before she had. One of those options seemed far more likely than the other.

“Nothing,” said Lois. “You’ve just given me something to think about.”

Just because Superman was gone didn’t mean that Lex could rest easy. There was a possibility that more aliens would arrive at some point in the future, and if they had capabilities anything like what Superman had, humanity needed to undergo a rapid technological advancement as swiftly as possible. Superman’s spaceship still held a wealth of information, and there was a piece of it that Lex thought of as its brain — a central component that was connected to all of the others and likely carried signals of some sort. On top of that, there was the brewing war in Europe to consider, along with the Sino-Japanese conflict. It was unfortunate that governments were more willing to spend extreme amounts of money when there was an immediate danger to their existence, but war — or at least the threat of it — would prove useful.

“Miss Lane to see you,” said Mercy. She had helped to drag Superman’s body from the wreckage and hide it in the trunk of one of his cars before the police arrived, and as he might have predicted, the whole experience didn’t seem to have changed her at all. He was doing his best to follow that example.

“Send her in,” said Lex with a smile.

Lois looked different. She'd cut her hair aggressively short since the last time they saw each other, and if she had always been a little bit ferocious, now she seemed positively bristling.

"How much of it were you responsible for?" asked Lois.

"I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about," said Lex.

"You killed his mother, that much I'm nearly certain of," said Lois. She sat down in what had been her customary chair, and stared at him with intense eyes. "I went out there, did you know that? I went to Smallville, trying to find out who he had been. I'm surprised you left so many loose ends. There was an autopsy report for Martha Kent that didn't look right, and the day she died, when there was that big storm, three people went missing from Smallville and never came back. They didn't find bodies either."

"Again, I have to insist that I don't know what you're talking about," said Lex. "And if you're thinking of putting any of these thoughts to print, I would suggest that you either have a substantial amount of proof or a very, very good lawyer."

"I kept thinking about the bombings," said Lois. "Clark thought that Calhoun was the man behind them, but he was wrong, wasn't he? While you were putting out a reward for Kramer's capture in public, you were sending him schematics and instructions in private. It wasn't possible for a single man to have done it all, that much was obvious, so you framed Calhoun and bombed your own properties to turn watchful eyes in another direction. You were trying to kill Clark from the start."

"Miss Lane, I generally make it a point to not bother refuting spurious rumors about myself," said Lex. "But given the gravity of what you're suggesting and the fact that we were friends, once upon a time, I will tell you completely and unequivocally that I had nothing to do with any of that. I was a steadfast supporter of Superman—"

“Because you needed a cover,” said Lois.

“I was a steadfast supporter of Superman, and I was as disheartened as anyone when he became a murderer and fled the planet,” said Lex.

“You killed hundreds, didn’t you, without even a thought for the value of their lives?” asked Lois.

“I am curious about what evidence drove you towards such a wild and unfounded conclusion,” said Lex. There was no way that she would be able to prove anything.

In the worst case scenario, she had found the laboratory where the spaceship was being kept and broken through all the layers of security, but that still wouldn’t be enough to implicate him in the public eye, let alone the court of law. After the autopsy and a collection of samples, Superman’s body had been reduced to pulp, mixed with a healthy amount of kryptonite, encased in lead, and lowered deep into an unmarked grave on a vast, private nature preserve in Alaska which Lex had exclusive control of. He had used hundreds of agents in the course of tracking down and positioning Superman, but only a very few knew enough to implicate an unknown master in wrongdoing, and only Mercy had the ability to implicate Lex as that mastermind. It was well possible that Lois could or would reveal to the world that Clark Kent had been Superman, but it would have raised all kinds of questions he was sure she would want to avoid, and either way wasn’t something that could really be proven after the fact — nor would it substantially change his plans.

“I don’t have any evidence,” said Lois. “Believe me, if I did I would be shouting it from the rooftops instead of coming here. You won, Luthor. I just want to know what the hell you were thinking.”

“Well, of course I can’t comment on things that I haven’t

done,” said Lex. “If, hypothetically, I had engineered a series of heinous crimes in pursuit of some foolish feud with Superman, I certainly would have nothing to gain by telling you about my reasoning, especially not when it would give more fuel to your paranoia.”

“I hated Clark for lying to me,” said Lois. “I hated him for living this double life and pulling the wool over my eyes. But at least at their core, Clark and Superman were the same person. There was a real goodness there, even if it was clumsy and imperfect. Is there a core to you, Lex?”

“Lois, I have a franchise of orphanages set up throughout the United States now, headed by caring, competent people,” said Lex. “I am personally spearheading a number of advancements in the sciences that will revolutionize the world ten times over. If the United States goes to war in the coming years, one of the reasons we will emerge victorious is because of the vast resources that I control and the overwhelming technological superiority that we will enjoy. I have done more to end the Great Depression than any single other person on the planet. That is my core.”

Lois only glared at him. She stood slowly, seeming years older than when they’d first met. “I wish I’d never met you,” she said. She left without another word.

He’d waited too long.

Superman had been stopping by with food every three days like clockwork. The hole in the ground had been expanded, and he’d brought in more supplies. It was gratifying to have his pitiful existence made slightly more bearable, but at the same time every new possession in his miserable little hole meant that his captivity became more and more permanent.

The plan had been to wait for Superman to make his next visit (canned foods, refill the barrel of water, empty the waste bucket) and then make the trip up after that so that there was less of a chance of starving to death in the woods once he made it out of the hole, not to mention that he needed as much time to scurry away before the big blue warden came back to tend to his only prisoner.

It was difficult to mark time, given how close to the Arctic Circle he was. The sun dipped down to the horizon and then stayed there. But when three days had come and gone, Floyd had waited another two days after that, worried that Superman was simply late. He'd let his food get too low, and was going to have to make the climb on an empty stomach.

He was thirty feet up when he slipped. He'd been trying to lunge up to a higher handhold, and when he missed and sank back down to let his weight rest on his feet, one of them slipped. Then he was falling.

He lay on the cold, hard floor with a broken leg. There was no chance that he would be able to make the climb now, let alone hike through the wilderness. He made a quick tourniquet and a splint, and hoped that Superman would come back.

Author's Note: Thanks for reading.

