

Lois and Cl - Kal-El

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© November 18, 2006

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Prologue

The cell was cold, bitterly cold. Clark had started shivering again, and she tried to prop him up against her chest, to get his bare back away from the cold, damp stones. His back was bleeding again and Lois wondered once more how much of the torture he could take. *How could they have possibly mistaken him for this Kal-El person? Why were they doing this?*

"Lois," he murmured. She had to bend closer to hear him. "The next time they come, they're going to cut me open. Please, please don't let them dissect me like a frog."

"What do you want me to do?" she asked. She knew she couldn't stop them, but his pain, his terror, was breaking her heart. The cold was seeping through the scrubs she was wearing - her uniform for the past twenty-four hours.

"Make sure I'm dead... please, don't let me be alive when they come," he said. He couldn't keep his voice from shaking. "I'm begging you..."

He wanted to die? He wanted her to kill him? "Cl - Kal-El, I don't know if I can."

"Please, Lois, if you ever cared, please do this for me, please," He laid his head back on her shoulder and closed his eyes, too exhausted to even speak any more.

She looked around for a weapon, but the cell was bare - not even a cot, not even a blanket to protect them from the cold. She looked down at the bloodied shirt she was wearing and began tearing a strip off the bottom, using her teeth to start the rip.

She twisted the strip in her hands and placed the strip around his throat, above the poisoned torque their captors had placed around his neck. She knew from his breathing he was conscious again, but he made no move to stop her. She twisted the fabric tighter around his throat and he went limp.

"I'm so sorry," she murmured through her tears.

72 Hours Earlier

Lois Lane was already hard at work putting the finishing touches on her most recent installment about on the impending garbage strike when her partner, Clark Kent, walked into the bull pen.

"You're late again," she complained. It was her most common complaint about the partner Perry White, the Daily Planet's editor, had forced on her five months ago. Clark was always late, or missing, or just plain not there. It was a wonder he was still employed, even though he always got his stories turned in in the nick of time.

"I had an appointment with the assistant public works coordinator and the governor's mediator, remember?" Clark said, taking a seat at his own desk and booting up his computer.

"Is there a chance Maynard will pull it off? Get the union to call off the strike?"

Clark shrugged. "Maybe. It's a little early to tell, but definitely maybe." He opened the word processor and started typing in his notes.

The phone on his desk rang and he picked it up: "Clark Kent, Daily Planet."

Lois listened to her partner's end of the conversation, watched as he took down an address.

"Yeah, tell him I'll be there. Thanks," Clark said finally, hanging up the phone.

"You'll be where?" Lois asked. Clark looked over at her as if surprised she was still sitting at the desk next to his.

"With a source, tomorrow," Clark said, going back to his typing.

"What source?" she insisted.

He grinned at her. "None of your business. It's not your story."

"We're supposed to be partners," she reminded him archly.

"That doesn't mean I can't do something on my own, does it?" he asked.

She frowned. He had a point. Just because they were partners didn't mean they couldn't also work separately and she had frequently turned in stories the past five months he'd had no input on.

"Just tell me this, does it have anything to do with Superman?"

"If I tell you 'no', will you drop it?"

"That depends on if I believe you."

"Lo-is," he said, drawing her name out into two long syllables. She just looked at him, daring him to continue.

He was a reasonably competent reporter, although she would never say it out loud. He was not hard to look at either, with that black wavy hair, soft brown eyes and a body that all the straight women and most of the gay men in the newsroom would love to get close to. After a long moment, he caved, just as she knew he would. Even Superman couldn't stand up to Mad Dog Lane when she smelled a story.

"Remember that Kryptonite sample that Wayne Irig sent to the Kansas state lab, the one that disappeared?" Clark asked quietly.

Lois nodded. "The stuff that's supposed to be able to hurt Superman."

"Yeah, that stuff," Clark said. "Well, there's a rumor that Bureau 39 found more Kryptonite around Irig's farm while they were tearing things up."

"I thought the government disbanded Bureau 39 after Trask got himself killed in Smallville?" Lois reminded her partner.

"Just because somebody signed an order to do it doesn't mean it got done," Clark said. He

sounded annoyed and a little worried.

Lois knew that Trask and his men had tried to kill Clark and his parents only six weeks before, claiming they had aided Superman on his arrival on Earth. They claimed, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that Superman was just the first in a conquering invasion.

Lois had been furious at their claims that Superman might be a menace, more furious at how Trask had hurt her partner.

"So, what've you got?" Lois demanded. Clark was so cute when he was flustered.

"Joe the Nose called me, said a friend of a friend wanted to talk to me about Bureau 39."

"When and where?"

"Lois, this is *my* story. I don't need you to baby-sit me. Really, I can do this on my own," he insisted. Then his head came up in that annoying way of his, as if he could hear something no one else could. "Lois, I forgot I was meeting someone," he muttered, running out of the bullpen toward the stairwell as if the devil himself were after him.

"Clark!" she yelled after him.

* * *

It was Superman who launched off the roof of the Daily Planet toward the alarm he'd heard from his desk at the Planet.

He homed in on the shrill sound, landing outside the Fale's Jewelry store on Grant.

A police car was already parked in front of the store, and two officers were waiting outside the entrance door. The alarm turned off.

"They went down the alley, Superman," one of the officers said as he landed. The two men looked familiar, but he'd met so many of Metropolis's finest in the past five months.

Superman gave the two uniformed men a puzzled look. Why were they just standing there? He was familiar with most of the alleys in the city, and the one behind Fale's was no exception. He knew it was a dead end. Suddenly curious, he walked into the alley, mindful that the two officers were following him at a short distance.

He stepped closer to the dumpsters at the end of the alley, intending to check them and suddenly felt the stabbing pain and nausea of Kryptonite. He felt a hand on his arm and thought for a moment he was being helped. Then another hand put a cloth over his nose and mouth and he smelled chloroform.

The world went dark.

Day Two

"Lois," Perry White yelled from his office door. "Where is Clark?"

"Am I his keeper?" Lois shot back, then promptly felt ashamed. "I haven't seen him since yesterday when he left to meet someone, I'm guessing a source. But I went by his apartment this morning to give him a ride in and I don't think he came home at all last night. His bed hadn't been slept in and he hadn't gotten his phone messages."

"Do you know what he was working on?" Perry insisted. Perry's annoyance at Clark not checking in had turned to worry. Clark was a bit of a flake, disappearing at odd times, sometimes for hours, but he'd always come back or checked in with a story, often a Superman exclusive.

"He said something about Bureau 39," Lois said.

"I thought the Feds disbanded that bunch of loonies." Alarms were going off in Perry's head.

"That's what I told Clark, but I don't think he was buying it," Lois said. She brushed a dark lock of hair away from her face.

"Look, Lois, see if any of your sources might know something," Perry instructed. "I'm gonna' call Bill Henderson, let him know Clark left yesterday and we haven't heard from him since."

"Aren't we supposed to wait forty-eight hours before declaring somebody missing?" Jimmy Olsen asked. He'd come up behind Perry as they'd been speaking.

"Clark's a reporter, Jimmy," Perry said. "Henderson won't mind us giving the police a heads up that we've got one that's AWOL and possibly in over his head in something."

* * *

Clark woke up, finally, shaking his head to clear away the fuzziness he still felt. It only made things worse as his head started pounding. He hurt, every joint, every muscle protesting as he tried to get up off the cold, damp floor. He felt the aching cold against his skin and realized his suit was gone. He was bare foot, wearing only a loose pair of cotton pants with an elastic waistband and a sleeveless cotton shirt that was actually too big for him. He struggled to his feet and looked around.

He tried to remember how he got to where he was, a small stone-lined, windowless cell with a single light fixture set into the ceiling. He couldn't remember and the last thing he did recall was going into the alley behind Fale's Jewelers, followed by two policemen. He remembered feeling the pain of Kryptonite exposure, falling to his knees, then nothing except nightmares. He had no idea how long he'd been there. No idea if anyone even knew he was missing.

He felt a sharp pain on the inside of his left arm at the elbow when he flexed his arm. There was white gauze taped to his arm, and under it - he loosened the gauze to look - he saw that a plastic tube had been sutured to a vein. The tube was sealed at the 'open' end with rubber or vinyl and was filled with some sort of fluid.

Something felt warm and metallic against his neck and he reached up to find out what it was. His fingers touched a smooth cylinder of metal that went all the way around his neck. It wasn't tight, luckily, but he couldn't feel a clasp or even a seam.

He sat down on the cold floor, pulling his knees to his chest. The nightmares came back to him, unbidden. Rough hands on his body, removing the suit, examining him. Questions. Questions he couldn't answer, wouldn't answer. Needles. He remembered the pain of needles.

Had they given him drugs? He wasn't sure what affect drugs would have on him while he was powerless. Everything was disjointed, disconnected, but he thought he'd struggled against the hands. The bruises he felt on his body leant credence to this theory.

He realized he was hungry and thirsty. He hoped someone would figure out he was missing. Perry or Lois. They were smart. They had sources. If he was lucky, they'd find him before it was too late. He put his head down and prayed.

* * *

Inspector William Henderson was a twenty-year veteran of the Metropolis Police Department. He'd come up through the ranks and was now considered one of the top criminal investigators in the department, if not the country.

He also considered Clark Kent a friend, ditto Superman, even though he was only a few years older than Henderson's eldest son. The boy had promise, Henderson had to give him that. Not many kids his age would have had the guts to berate a uniformed cop for being insensitive. Of course, twenty-six was only a kid from the point of view of someone closer to Henderson's 'advanced' age of forty-three.

He had personally taken Perry White's call that Kent had gone missing. If it had been anyone else placing the call, if it had been about any other reporter aside from Kent or Lane, he would have reminded the caller that the official waiting period was forty-eight hours. In fact, would have been unlikely he would have even seen the missing person's report.

Henderson stepped out of the elevator into the lobby that looked over the newsroom of the Daily Planet. It was, he realized, the first time he'd been on this floor. He scanned the half-empty room, realizing most of the staff was out doing their job and would most likely be back later. He stepped down onto the lower level, crossing the room to Perry White's office.

"Henderson," Perry called out, beckoning the police officer into his office. "I know I'm probably over-reacting, but when Lois told me Clark was still looking into Bureau 39, and he hadn't been home at all last night, alarms started goin' off. Especially since it's only been a week since he got his memories back after that amnesia episode. I'd hate to think he was wandering around again without a clue."

"Hopefully, he just got involved in what he was doing and it just slipped his mind to call in," Henderson said. It was funny that Perry had mentioned Kent's amnesia. That was one of the things that clued Henderson into the real relationship between Clark Kent and Superman.

Kent had been found buck-naked in a smoldering crater by Henry O, one of the winos who lived on the streets in Suicide Slum. The homeless man had taken pity on the younger man, giving him a pair of pants and a shirt, and taking him to a homeless shelter where one of Henderson's men recognized him. It was the opinion of the police psychiatrist that Kent's memory loss was due to a combination of a blow to the head and a need to distance himself from the disaster facing the planet in the form of the Nightfall asteroid. They speculated that Kent had also been mugged, explaining why he'd been found without clothes or ID.

It was only afterwards, after Superman reappeared and took care of the surviving chunks of asteroid that Henderson put things together. He had gone to the alley where Henry had told officers he'd rescued Kent to see if there was any evidence of what had really happened to the young man. What he'd found was evidence that Superman had fallen there after he'd lost radio contact with EPRAD. But it was Kent who'd been found in the crater - dazed and clueless, without a mark on him.

Perry stuck his head out of his office. "Lois, honey, when did Clark leave yesterday?"

"About ten after ten. He was working on something on his computer just before he left. In

fact, he didn't bother to turn it off. And you know how careful Clark's is about his computer, always does backups, does all that techie stuff," Lois told them. "So I'm positive he was planning on coming back to finish the story we were working on."

"Lois, exactly what did he say about Bureau 39?" Henderson asked.

"He'd heard they may have found more kryptonite in Smallville, and then Joe the Nose had a friend of a friend who may have had some information on Trask and his people," Lois said. "He was supposed to meet them sometime today."

"But you don't know where or when?"

Lois shook her head. "He said he wanted to do the story on his own."

Henderson shook his head. His job wasn't getting any easier. "Look, give me a call if you remember anything else. I'm going back to headquarters, see if anything's come in on him."

Henderson headed for the elevators, and then stopped. "Just out of curiosity, has Superman been seen in the last 24 hours or so?"

"Come to think of it, I haven't seen anything on him since that report about the false alarm at Fale's Jewelers," Perry said. "Why?"

"Just an idea," Henderson admitted. "I know Superman's a friend of Kent's, so he might have an idea where he is. If you do hear from him, have him get in touch with me."

* * *

As soon as Henderson was back in his office, he requested all the available information the MPD had on the previous day's incident at Fale's. Henderson was familiar with the area and knew there was an ATM directly across the street from Fale's. He called the bank and requested the recordings from the ATM surveillance cameras as well. If he were lucky, the recordings would give some clue as to what really happened yesterday at 10:10, when Clark Kent disappeared.

The daily reports were on his desk within an hour. The reports by the two officers who responded to the original alarm were disappointing at best, and deliberately incomplete at worst. They wrote that Superman had arrived, was informed it was a false alarm, and simply flew off.

The ATM record arrived from the bank less than two hours later. The video made a lie of the official report. Superman had walked into the alley behind the jewelers. When he came out, he was accompanied by the two officers, and although it was hard to tell from the video, he looked ill. The video showed him being helped into the back of the squad car.

Checking the names on the false report, he sent a request to the day watch officer of the fifth precinct for those two officers be called in and sent to his office. He got a call back from their superior. The two men had failed to call in and their squad car had been reported abandoned near Suicide Slum.

Henderson placed a phone call to a number he had been given five months before, the day after the Daily Planet broke the story about the alien who saved the Prometheus space shuttle.

"This is William Henderson, Metropolis PD," he announced to a voicemail box. "We have a problem. I have reason to believe Superman has been taken."

* * *

The door to the cell opened, and three men wearing military style uniforms walked in. Clark didn't see any rank markings or name tags. He tried to keep the fear out of his face. Superman shouldn't show fear.

Two of the men grabbed his arms, pulling him to his feet, forcing his hands behind his

back. He felt shackles round his wrists. He felt the hands of the third man hooking a chain to the collar around his neck. Chained like an animal. He struggled against them and managed to kick one of them. The third man cuffed him on the side of his head for his trouble.

The vertigo and nausea came back and the room started spinning. He began retching. One of them grabbed his hair, forcing his head down as he started heaving. He hadn't had anything to eat or drink in more than twenty-four hours, so his gut was empty, but that didn't keep his body from trying as he went to his knees, doubled over.

After a few minutes, he stopped retching and the men on either side of him pulled him upright. They half carried him out of the cell, into the dimly lit corridor beyond. He remembered the corridor from his nightmares and started shivering. The 'examination' room was just beyond the next corner.

Fear put strength into his struggling, but it was no use. The men holding him were well trained in subduing unruly prisoners. The third man punched him in the gut and he doubled over once again.

"It will go so much easier for you if you just cooperate, Kal-El."

"And why should I believe you?" he gasped. The two men holding him pulled him upright once again.

"No reason at all," the third man told him. "But we will get what we want out of you. Don't even think about doubting that. One way or another, we will get your secrets."

The man stepped closer, running one finger along the line of Clark's jaw.

"Before I'm done, you'll be begging me to listen to you."

Clark shivered again. He'd been scared before, but this man terrified him. His mouth was dry but he managed to produce just enough saliva to spit in his tormentor's face. *He would not go down without a fight.*

The man didn't bother to wipe it off. He backhanded Clark across the face. "I think it's time we stopped being so gentle," he told his subordinates as they hauled Clark into the 'examination' room. They didn't bother unshackling him as they forced him to sit down on a metal stool set in the middle of the room.

Clark screamed as the man on his left began breaking his fingers.

* * *

Lois waited until Henderson was gone and Perry was back at his desk before going to Clark's desk and taking the note pad he'd used the day before to take down the address where he was to meet his contact.

She grabbed a pencil and rubbed the graphite over the indentations on the paper. Luckily, Clark had a firm, clear hand. The time and address came through clearly. She checked her watch. She had half-an-hour to make it to the corner of Martin and Westover to meet Clark's contact.

She opened the door to Perry's office and stuck her head in. "Perry, I'm heading out to check on a source."

"Lois, you be careful now," Perry yelled. "You know Clark is still missing."

"I'll be careful, Perry, I promise."

* * *

Lois waited on the corner and finally, Joe Petrosian, AKA Joe the Nose, showed up. He was a tall, gawky man with a liking for baggy, mismatched clothes. "Where's Kent? I was supposed to be meeting Kent."

"Well, he's not here, Joe," Lois pointed out. "And I am, so give. What were you going to

tell him?"

Joe licked his lips in nervousness, eyes darting about. "Um, I had word that somebody from that Bureau 39 wanted to have a talk with Clarkie boy about Superman."

"We were told that bunch was disbanded," Lois told the snitch. "Were we told wrong?"

Joe shrugged. "I was supposed to set up a meeting. I'm supposed to tell Clarkie boy to meet my contact here, this time tomorrow. He needs to be alone, and no funny stuff. These guys are a little squirrely. Now, make sure you tell him. I promised them he'd be here."

"I'll let him know as soon as I see him," Lois promised. *But if he doesn't show up, I can't tell him.*

* * *

"Come in," Henderson responded to the knock on his office door. He looked up as the door opened and two smartly dressed older men walked in, closing the door behind them.

"Inspector Henderson?" the man with white hair asked. "You made a call to my office concerning Superman." He was average height with finely chiseled features and bright blue eyes. The other man was taller, brown hair going to gray, leathery skin. He looked tough.

"I made a call to *someone*," Henderson said. "And you are?"

The shorter man smiled and shrugged. "I'm General Straker and this is Colonel Freeman. We're part of a group whose mission it is to keep track of, how should I put it, non-terrestrials on Earth." He pulled out his identification and showed it to the police officer: **General Edward Straker, USAF**. The second man proffered his identification as well: **Colonel Alec Freeman**.

"Non-terrestrials as in Superman?" Henderson asked.

"Superman is one we try to keep a 'fatherly' eye on," Straker admitted. Freeman chuckled.

"Like Bureau 39 was doing?"

Straker sighed. "What do you know about them?"

"They're alleged to have been collecting evidence of non-humans on Earth. Their methods were questionable at best," Henderson said. "Their leader was shot and killed by a local sheriff when he took hostages and tried to kill a Daily Planet reporter."

Straker gave Henderson a grim smile. "For a covert operation, an awful lot of people know about them." He paused a moment, considering his next statement. "Bureau 39 was an offshoot of Project Blue Book. Their mandate was to identify and collect evidence concerning possible extra-terrestrial threats against the planet."

"I thought Blue Book proved there were no threats," Henderson said.

"The Blue Book conclusion was that the U.F.O.s being studied presented no danger to the U.S.," Straker said. "That wasn't strictly true and a task force *was* put together to deal with the problem. Trask's group had a specific function and they overstepped their bounds. When attempts were made to rein them in, they went rogue."

"And your people are better?" Henderson wondered aloud.

"I like to think so, yes," Straker admitted. "Our organization was the key agency in trying to disband Trask's group. They were never authorized to take action against alleged threats, only collect evidence, which, as it turns out, they failed to turn over to the proper authorities."

"And your interest in Superman?" Henderson asked. As interesting as the history of Trask and Bureau 39 was, he had a more immediate concern about one particular alien.

"His birth name is Kal-El," Freeman said. He had a touch of an Australian accent. "If he's fallen into the hands of Russell Myerson, Trask's second in command, he could very well be dead already."

"I thought he was invulnerable to anything on Earth," Henderson commented.

"Anything native to Earth, yes," Straker nodded. "But certain individuals have discovered a specific vulnerability and have attempted to use it against him. We have reason to believe Myerson is among them."

"So, what do you want of me?" Henderson asked. "I'm just a cop."

"You misunderstand, Inspector," Straker said. "We're offering our assistance in finding and freeing him, if necessary. As an officer of the law, there are certain things you cannot do. We, on the other hand..." Straker let his voice fade meaningfully. "Besides, he's a good kid, even if he doesn't always act as bright as his IQ would indicate. I would hate for anything to happen to him. And I definitely don't want to have to explain it to his parents."

Day 2 Evening

Clark's left hand and arm throbbed. Larry, Moe, and Curly, for that was what he had mentally dubbed his tormentors, had done a number on him. He was sure they'd broken every bone in his hand. They'd also cracked the bones in his arm as well, but he was pretty sure those bones were mostly together. At least he could still move his arm.

They'd finally given him some water, but still no food. He was getting weaker and wasn't sure how long he could last under these conditions, although with water he knew he would last longer. Considering the circumstances, he wasn't sure he liked that idea either. They hadn't drugged him today, yet. He didn't know what that meant, except that he was conscious during the torture this time. They made sure he stayed conscious.

He was shivering again, and not just from the cold. He'd heard about monsters like these three, read about them, even reported on them. He figured it was only a matter of time before he betrayed himself and the people he cared for. He prayed he would be dead before that happened. He prayed that they would get impatient and simply kill him.

He crawled to the far corner of the cell, as far from the door as he could manage. He curled up into as tight a ball as he could, considering his injuries, and tried to sleep. He hoped he wouldn't have nightmares.

* * *

Lois went back to the Planet and placed a call to Bobby Bigmouth, her favorite informant. Despite his odd habits and perpetual hunger, he was a good source and hadn't let her down yet.

"Bobby, Lois Lane," she started. "Is there anything out on the street about Bureau 39, or Joe the Nose, or my partner?"

"You're gonna' owe me, Lois," Bobby warned her. "The word I got is that Joe's got himself in some sort serious of trouble. And it may involve Superman. There's also word that the big guy's out of the way. Witnesses saw him being taken away in a cop car yesterday and he wasn't lookin' so good. Got no word on where he was taken, except I don't think they've taken him out of the city."

"Superman was taken away in a police car?" Lois repeated. That didn't make any sense at all. *He didn't look well?* "There's nothing on where Superman is now?"

"Wish there was," Bobby admitted. "I kinda' like the guy. How about a gift certificate for Big Belly Burgers?"

"You're kidding, right? Just a Big Belly gift certificate? For how much?"

"Twenty?" Bobby responded. "Just do me a favor and find Clark and Superman."

"I'll do my best, Bobby," Lois promised. She hung up the phone and sat back in her chair. Bobby's information had come dirt-cheap. *He's worried, really really worried.*

"Lois, hon'," Perry said, coming out of his office. "I know that look. Whatcha' got goin'?"

"Bobby Bigmouth says the word on the street is that Superman's out of the way," Lois told her boss. "He was taken away in a police car yesterday. No word on where they took him. Or how they managed it."

"You don't think those Bureau 39 characters are involved, are you?"

"I don't know, Perry," Lois admitted. "I'm just worried that Clark got word that Superman was in trouble and is in over his head."

"Look darlin', Henderson's already lookin' into Clark's bein' missin'," Perry reminded her. Lois knew his southern accent got thicker the more worried he was. He was very worried right

now, even if he didn't want to admit it.

"He'll let us know if he finds out anything," Perry continued. "Why don't you go home, hon', get some sleep. Start out fresh in the mornin'. Things always look better in the mornin'."

"Sure, Perry," Lois promised as she headed towards the elevators, to her car and then home.

* * *

Perry watched Lois leave for the night, then picked up the phone in his office, placing a call to Bill Henderson's personal phone.

"Henderson, Perry White," White said into the phone. "If you haven't heard, word's out on the street that Superman was taken away in a squad car yesterday and he's out of the way."

"I've heard," Henderson admitted. "And I've got all available resources working on it. I promise, I'll let you know as soon as I know anything."

* * *

Lois made her way home to her apartment. She considered trying to call him, but no, he would have called her or Perry if he had been able to. He was too good a reporter to allow a story like Superman being kidnapped to escape him. If he was able to call, he would - *which meant he wasn't able to call.*

Clark, what have you gotten yourself into? If I find you've gotten yourself killed, I swear I'll never speak to you again.

Day 3

Lois tossed and turned all night. When she finally climbed out of bed, she felt like she hadn't slept a wink. Her eyes were puffy, her face splotchy, and makeup wasn't doing anything to cover it up.

She grabbed a quick cup of coffee at the kiosk outside the entrance to the Planet. Joe the coffee guy looked at her quizzically.

"Haven't seen Clark for a couple days, is he all right?"

"Oh, he's fine," she told him cheerily. "Working on a story. Should be back in a day or so." *I hope.*

"Glad to hear it," Joe told her as he turned to tend another caffeine deprived customer.

Arriving on the newsroom floor, Lois noticed the worried expressions on the faces of her co-workers.

"What's happened?" Lois asked Jimmy Olsen as he hurried towards Perry's office.

Jimmy paused. "The FBI's made it official. Superman is missing and presumed kidnapped. Some kids found his cape and boots in a dumpster by Hobs Bay. The two officers they were looking for, the ones the ATM camera caught putting him in the squad car? They were found dead, not too far from the where the boots were found. Single shots to the back of the head, execution style."

"Oh dear God," Lois murmured. "What about Clark? Have they said anything about Clark?"

Jimmy shook his head and sighed. "Henderson told Perry they're pretty sure whoever grabbed Superman grabbed Clark too, so they'd have some leverage over him. I also overheard him tell Perry that chances are, Superman's already dead and time's running out for Clark. The lab reported there was blood on the cape and they're pretty sure it's Superman's blood, as impossible as that sounds."

Jimmy nodded to the closed office door. "Henderson's in there with Perry and a couple of government intelligence types. I guess they're trying to figure out what the Planet can do. Perry's already authorized a reward for any information leading to Clark's recovery. So far, no joy."

"Jimmy, we can't lose hope," Lois told him, even though she couldn't keep the tremor out of her voice. She headed for Perry's office and walked in without knocking. Henderson and two older men were standing

"Lois, darlin', don't you know how to knock?" Perry complained. "I've got company here."

"Perry, I'm meeting one of Clark's sources in half an hour. The one Joe the Nose was setting up for him."

"And who is this source?" Perry asked.

"I don't have a name," Lois admitted. "I don't think Clark did either. But, according to Joe, the source had information on Bureau 39." She didn't tell him that Joe was scared half to death.

"Lois, this is General Straker and Colonel Freeman," Perry introduced the older two men. "They're here helping the MPD to find Clark, and Superman."

"Jimmy said the FBI was involved."

"They are, Miss Lane," Freeman said. "But this situation needs a 'special' touch. One that we are uniquely suited to give."

General Straker nodded. "Miss Lane. Can I assume since you came in here to tell Mister White about your meeting, you're willing to help us?"

"Why is the military interested in Clark Kent?" she asked.

"Because Jason Trask and his hoodlums were interested in him, Miss Lane," Straker replied. "And even dead, Trask is a bad enemy to have."

* * *

Between the beatings, the weakness and the pain, Clark had lost all sense of time. He thought they might have resorted to drugs again, but he couldn't be sure. The heparin-lock sutured into his arm kept intravenous injections from leaving marks.

He knew he was running a fever from the kryptonite exposure, and was now alternating between chills and sweats. The cold dampness of the cell wasn't helping any.

He heard a key turn in the lock. *No, no more, please God, no more.*

* * *

Despite the warning to come alone, Lois agreed to have Straker's people put a microphone on her and to follow her at a discrete distance. Under normal circumstances, Lois wouldn't have even told Perry who she was meeting with, much less where. But these were not normal circumstances. *Clark, I'm not stealing your story. I just need to find out what you've gotten yourself into.*

She parked her jeep in the parking garage adjacent to Dacy's department store. She was still a few minutes early, so spent a few minutes looking at the summer displays in the large windows. Finally it was time and she crossed the street to the north-east corner of Martin and Westover.

A tall man in dark glasses, a dark suit, and unfashionably narrow black tie was standing beside the newspaper vending machines, reading the Inquisitor. He folded over his paper as Lois approached.

"Were you waiting for Mister Kent?" Lois asked quietly.

The man turned his head to look at her. The glasses made it difficult to read his expression. "And if I was?"

"Mister Kent is home with the flu. I'm his partner, Lois Lane. He sent me in his place." She held out her hand to be shaken. The man ignored the gesture.

"I have nothing for you, Miss Lane," the man said, beginning to turn away from her.

"Not even Bureau 39? Wasn't that what you were meeting Clark about?"

The man stopped and turned back to her. As he turned, she saw the wire and ear-piece to a miniature headset. A muscle in his cheek twitched as he seemed to listen to instructions.

"And what do you know about Bureau 39?" he said after a moment.

"I was there when Trask was shot while trying to kill my partner. I know as much as Clark does about those people."

Another moment while he listened to distant voices. She wished she could see through the glasses, see his eyes, his expression. Somehow, she knew she wouldn't like what she'd see.

"Come with me," he ordered, taking her arm.

"And go where?"

"No questions," he ordered, pulling her along with him.

* * *

"They're moving," S'vram announced from his post in the back of the white van with a floral delivery service sign on the side. He watched a small dot that was superimposed over a map of Metropolis on the monitor screen. Another screen showed an outside view of the

street.

"Got an ID on the man?" Paul Foster asked a second technician.

"Tentative," James Ford answered. "Looks like Lyndon Smith, one of Trask's personal recruits. Nickname: the Enforcer. If I'm right, she may be in trouble already. He's a cold-blooded killer. I don't know how he could have even passed the background check."

"Trask was doing his own," Foster told him grimly. "We weren't involved. And we're paying the price now for not taking care of him sooner. Our negligence may cost Superman his life. Not to mention those two reporters."

* * *

The black-suited man pulled her into a nearby coffee shop. He looked around and proceeded past the serving counter, into the back area.

"Hey, you can't come go back there!" the cashier protested.

The man pulled out a badge, showing it momentarily before putting it back in his pocket. The cashier stepped aside and let them through to the kitchen and the backdoor to the alley.

A dark sedan was parked in the alley. The man forced her into the back seat. "Down on the floor," he ordered.

She opened her mouth to protest. Then she realized that there were two men already seated in the front of the car and one of them held a gun. She went down on the floor and the man who'd brought her here covered her with a blanket.

The car started and she felt the roughness of the pavement as they drove away.

* * *

"I've got a good trace on them," S'vram told Foster. "I've got a good reading on the tracker."

"Now, with any luck, they'll lead us to where they're holding Superman and Kent," Foster said. The man knocked on the partition that separated the technicians from the driver. "Follow them, but stay well back. We don't want to be noticed," he ordered the driver.

The van pulled into traffic, following a dark sedan as it turned the corner and headed south.

* * *

Lois felt the sedan drive up several ramps. The car finally stopped and the man who was supposed to have been meeting Clark pulled off the blanket and forced Lois out of the car. He ordered her to leave her shoes and purse in the car. Once she and the 'contact' were standing in the parking garage, the sedan pulled away.

The man took Lois by the elbow, holding a pistol in his free hand, and led her to a locked storeroom, near the elevators. He unlocked the door, handed her a paper bag with something soft in it. "Inside, strip down and put these on," he ordered.

She stepped inside the closet and attempted to shut the door. He blocked it with his foot. "You have two minutes, or else you'll never see your boy friend alive again."

"My boy friend?" she asked as she pulled a set of green surgical scrubs from the sack and started to put them on.

"Your panties and bra, too," he ordered. She stripped down to the skin, kicking her discarded clothes out to him. Somebody was going to pay for this, she swore to herself. That was a silk shirt and a brand new skirt, one she'd bought because Clark had mentioned he liked the color on her.

"I don't have a boy friend," she told him, coming through the door dressed in the scrubs.

"Our intelligence says otherwise. Or didn't he tell you his real name is Kal-El?"

"Well, I certainly would remember if I had a boy friend named Kal-El," she told him.

"In that case, you have nothing to worry about. But it won't go as well for him, I'm afraid," the man said. He grabbed her arm again, leading her to another car, a black SUV with blacked-out windows. The passenger side door was already unlocked and another man was seated on the driver's side.

"People know I was meeting you," Lois told them. "They'll come looking."

"We already know that Commander Straker has been in contact with you. Do you really think that SHADO cares about you? They want the same thing my people do. The information Kal-El has in his head. Information about the threat Superman and his people pose to the U.S. and the rest of this planet."

"Superman? You have Superman? Where?"

"In the car, Miss Lane, and I'm sure you'll get more answers than you want." He stuck the muzzle of the gun in her ribs. She climbed into the passenger seat and buckled herself in. He pulled a small spray bottle from his pocket and sprayed her in the face. "Sleep well, alien lover," he said as she fell back, unconscious.

* * *

"Colonel," Ford said quietly. "We have a problem. The tracer in her shoe and the one in her skirt pocket are in different places. I have to assume we've lost her."

"Give Inspector Henderson the details," Foster ordered. "I'll let General Straker know."

* * *

A nondescript white six-wheeled trailer was parked beside the Daily Planet building. The trailer was lead-lined and the interior walls were covered with computer monitors and electronic equipment. There were no windows except in the back doors and those were covered by opaque curtains.

Straker, Freeman and two young operatives were seated inside the trailer, the MCC. The Mobile Command and Control was a portable control center that any military on Earth would give its eyeteeth to inspect, much less own. DOD experts wouldn't recognize most of the equipment that lines the trailer's walls. It was SHADO's home away from home, allowing them to detect and deal with hostile alien threats as well as more domestic ones.

"It's okay, Paul," Straker assured his subordinate. "We'll just have to do this the old fashioned way. We're working on getting a list of Bureau 39's current operatives and any property in the city associated with them."

"What about abandoned warehouses, or sympathetic civilians?" Foster asked.

"By sympathetic civilians, I assume you mean Lex Luthor?" Straker asked.

"It is pretty well known he doesn't like Superman," Foster reminded him.

"I doubt Luthor would be so foolish as to associate himself with Myerson. But I'll get someone on that angle as well. Thank you, Paul. I'll see you back at the mobile." Straker said, taking off the headset. He turned to his second in command. "Well, is Luthor involved?"

"It's hard to say," Freeman admitted. "But I doubt it. Nigel St. John would be the one in charge of the operation, and there's nothing to indicate he has anything like that going on. But they are both under surveillance."

Freeman saw the worry in Straker's eyes. "Ed, we'll find him and the girl."

"I hope you're right, Alec. I hope to God you're right."

* * *

Lois woke up in a cold, stone cell. The single fixture in the ceiling gave just enough light to see the cell was devoid of furnishings and there were dark stains on the floor in the corner.

Whose blood?

That answer came too soon.

Lois heard a key turn in the door lock and got to her feet, prepared to rush the door. Nobody was going lock Lois Lane in an empty cell and get away with it. The door opened and a man wearing soiled scrubs was pushed into the room. He fell to the floor with a gasp of pain, facing away from her.

"We brought you company, Kal-El," a deep voice said. "Enjoy it while you can." The door shut and the key turned, locking the door.

Lois ran over to the man. He seemed familiar. Dark haired, broad-shouldered. *Kal-El?* She touched his shoulder and he shuddered as she moved to look at his face - it was Clark. He'd lost his glasses, there was a strange necklace around his neck, his face was bruised and swollen, and there was blood on his face, but he was definitely her missing partner, Clark Kent.

"Oh, my God, what have they done to you?" she gasped. "They said they had someone named Kal-El."

"Shh," Clark croaked out. "They're listening." She bent closer to listen. "They think I'm him."

"Why are they doing this? Who are they?"

Clark shook his head and tried to sit up. He had fallen on his good arm and now it hurt as well. "I don't know. They keep asking about aliens, about an invasion. They don't believe I don't know anything."

"Do they expect *him* to come?" she asked, keeping her voice low. "He may already be dead."

Clark gave her a blank look, eyes hazed with pain.

"You've been missing about forty-eight hours," she explained quietly. "And the FBI believes Superman was kidnapped or captured. They're afraid he may be dead. We figure you went looking for him and got into trouble."

"Yeah," he murmured. "I was looking for evidence behind Fale's and they grabbed me. I woke up here, and they..." A horrified look came into his face. "They grabbed you. They're going to use you to make me talk, only I don't know anything."

"Look Cl..."

"Kal-El," he interrupted, keeping his voice low. "That's who they think I am."

"Kal-El," she continued. "Perry and the police know you're missing and they know I am too. They'll find us. I promise."

Clark shook his head. "You don't know what sort of monsters they are, Lois. You don't know what they're capable of."

"Hey, we've been in tough jams before. We'll get out of this one," she assured him.

He didn't say anything, lying back on the cold floor, eyes closed. Lois looked more closely at him. His left hand was bruised and badly swollen and he was favoring his left arm, which was discolored with bruises. She put her arm under his shoulders to help him sit up and he gasped in pain.

"What have they done to you?" she asked again. He started shaking again and she realized he was crying.

* * *

It took several hours, but SHADO finally had a list of locations for the MPD to search. Foster just hoped the actual location was on their list, and if it was, they'd be in time. He

assigned a SHADO operative to each of the four pairs of officers Henderson could spare for the search. The FBI had sent four people from the local office to help out.

The MCC was too small for a briefing of this size, so he commandeered the conference room of the Daily Planet.

Straker and Freeman didn't appear concerned about their sudden close association with the press, an attitude completely at odds with their prior opinions of the Fourth Estate. But that was a long time ago. Things had changed a lot in the fourteen years since SHADO became fully operational.

In 1980, SHADO was most sophisticated intelligence gathering/fighting machine ever assembled. It had only one purpose, to prevent an invasion by technologically advanced extra-terrestrials whose modus operandi included organ stealing, kidnapping, and murder. By early 1984, SHADO discovered it had won the conflict and they'd been actually dealing with two warring parties from the same dying world.

One of the factions sued for peace, which, as unlikely as it appeared at the onset, was granted after many long hours, days, months, of top-secret negotiations. Fifty thousand Rokan-shou were allowed to emigrate to Earth, to North America, with the understanding that any high technology or advanced knowledge be parceled out slowly with SHADO being the first beneficiary.

They were still at war with the other faction, the Rokan-shui, but those attacks were now few and far between. SHADO had evolved into an anti-terrorist group whose mandate included more than just homegrown fanatics. Pundits within the organization joked that Tom Clancy had it almost right - he just had the names wrong.

Foster looked over the law enforcement officers assembled for the briefing, judging how much he could tell them of what he already knew. Sophisticated satellite scans of Metropolis, in fact the entire Eastern seaboard, had failed to show a Kryptonian bio-signature. That meant the boy was either dead, in a radiation-shielded area or under at least ten feet of dense material such as concrete or stone.

He took a deep breath as the conference room door opened and one of the Planet reporters slunk in. Olsen, Jimmy Olsen, Foster recalled the name. His briefing notes on the Daily Planet staff said the kid's father was NIA and he was a computer wiz.

"I hope you guys don't mind," Jimmy stammered. "But I'd really like to help out. Lois and CK are... They're like family." He looked forlorn, almost ready to cry.

"Have you cleared this with Mister White?" Foster asked.

The boy nodded, face clearing. "It's my day off, actually. I really want to help find them."

Foster nodded and Jimmy found a seat next to one of the MPD officers. Foster picked up the remote control for the video machine beneath the wall mounted television monitor and turned on both units. "I'm sure you've all seen this," Foster began. On the screen was a video of Superman walking into the alley followed by the two police officers and moments later, being 'helped' out of the alley by the same two officers. "Those two officers were found dead. We are dealing with a paramilitary cell that has no qualms about killing police, civilians, or their own people, to achieve their goals."

"And that is?" one of the FBI men asked.

"Bureau 39's function *was* to collect evidence concerning *hostile* extra-terrestrial activity on this planet. And before you ask, yes, Superman is not the only extra-terrestrial living on Earth. He is, however the most obvious, thanks to a certain penchant for theatrics," Foster gave them a humorless smile. "Bureau 39 has overstepped its mandate and is now targeting

Earth-born under the mistaken belief they are party to an impending alien invasion. An alien invasion, I must add, this planet has more than adequate resources to handle, should it occur."

"Do you really think Superman is still alive? If they have the capacity to render him helpless, what are his chances?" Betty Reed, one of the MPD officers, asked.

"Frankly, we'll be lucky to find his body." He paused, gauging his audience. "Of more immediate concern is the kidnapping of the two reporters who have had the most contact with him, Clark Kent and Lois Lane." He handed out the maps his people had prepared for the briefing. "We've come up with a list of about thirty locations in the city that fit both the Bureau's profile and the criteria our people have come up with as to where they might be being held. I shouldn't have to remind you that our primary goal is the safe retrieval of Kent and Lane. We don't want any dead heroes. Should you locate the Bureau's hideout, call for backup immediately. Do not attempt a rescue yourself."

Foster stood back as the officers and SHADO operatives divided up the search areas based on local knowledge and location. He saw Betty take Jimmy's arm, bringing him into her group.

Good, somebody's taking charge of the kid. An extra pair of feet and eyes won't hurt.

Day 3 Evening

Clark had finally fallen into a fitful sleep, propped against Lois's chest. Her legs and buttocks were nearly numb from the cold, but she tried not to move. The times she had tried to get more comfortable he had cried out in pain, even though she knew he was trying not to. He was hot to the touch, almost burning, despite the damp coldness of the cell.

"Why are they doing this?" she murmured mostly to herself. There was no answer from Clark. She couldn't tell what time it was. She'd missed lunch and the emptiness in her belly indicated it might be time for dinner, but she couldn't really tell.

The cell door opened and a man in military fatigues walked in. She felt Clark tense beneath her arm and his breathing became ragged with fear.

"Miss Lane, if you will come with me?" the man said.

"He needs medical attention," Lois told him, trying to keep the fear out of her voice. "He's burning up with fever."

"It will go easier if you cooperate," the man said.

"Why should I, since you're going to kill us both anyway?"

"It might make it a little easier on you," he said. There was something cold and reptilian about him.

"And what about him?"

"He had his chance to cooperate," he told her. He nodded to someone in the hallway beyond.

A second man in fatigues strode in and grabbed her arm, dragging her to her feet. Clark gasped as the movement forced him upright. He made it to his feet, trying to push Moe away from her. The man backhanded him across the face, knocking him to the floor. Moe then landed a vicious kick to his side and Lois thought she heard a rib crack. She struggled against the hand holding her arm, but he simply dragged her along, out of the cell.

The door clanged shut behind them, leaving Clark alone. *No, no, please God no, not Lois. Please don't let them hurt Lois.*

Larry and Moe dragged a kicking and fuming Lois to another room down the hallway. Inside was a table with a polygraph and two chairs, one with arms. They forced her into armed chair, securing her arms and ankles to the chair with cable ties. Moe set up the lie detector, securing the strap around her chest, placing the various sensors on her hands and body.

"These aren't reliable, you know," she told them through clenched teeth.

"Oh, and you're an expert on polygraphs, are you?" Larry asked. Lois glared at him.

"We'll start with the baseline measurements," he told Moe. Turning to Lois: "Please answer each question with a 'yes'."

Lois pulled against the ties holding her to the chair.

"You'll just hurt yourself," he warned. "Is your name Lois Lane?"

No answer. Lois glared at him, lips pursed tight.

"Is your name Lois Lane?" Harsher.

"Yes." No change from the polygraph

"Are you an employee of the Daily Planet?"

"Yes." No change.

"Are you in love with Clark Kent?"

"Yes." No change. "I told you these things don't work," she said, glaring at the machine.

"On the contrary, it seems to be working just fine. Have you ever been to China?"

"Yes." The needle went all over the paper.

"Now, let's just tell the truth, yes or no. If I'm satisfied, you get water and food."

"And Kal-El? How about water and food for him?" The needle zigged all over the paper once again.

"I'll think about it."

Lois's heart sank. Even though she was the one hooked up to the polygraph, she knew he was lying. He had no intention of giving Clark any help.

The questioning began in earnest. Questions about aliens, Superman, his powers, his weaknesses, an invasion. He bombarded her with questions, rephrasing and repeating, over and over. She lost track of how many times he asked if she knew when Krypton was planning to invade Earth.

She was ready to drop from exhaustion, throat parched, lips dry and beginning to crack. She had no idea how long they'd been at it.

The interrogator motioned to the other man, who pressed a button beside the polygraph. A few minutes later the door opened and two men, also in military-style fatigues, half-carried half-dragged, a stumbling, shackled, nearly unconscious Clark into the room. He managed to raise his head and look at her, worry in his dark eyes. She tried to give him a reassuring smile and discovered she couldn't. He looked nearly dead.

"Miss Lane," the interrogator said. "I'm rather disappointed with you. I thought you understood me. I will have answers, if not from you, then him."

"But I don't know anything!" Lois protested. Her voice was shrill, a tone she hated hearing in herself, but exhaustion and terror had robbed her of control.

"Pity," the man said coldly. "Because you might want to rethink that. But do it quickly, because, quite frankly, in a few minutes, I may not be able to hear you."

She watched in horror as they dragged Clark to the center of the room. The two men holding him removed the shackles from his wrists, replacing them with another set. The new ones had a three-foot bar welded to them, with a ring set midpoint on the bar. Lois had seen, without really comprehending, a pulley and cable assembly attached to the ceiling of the interrogation room. To her dismay, she now realized what it was intended for.

The men hooked the cable to the center ring of the shackles and hoisted Clark to his feet, suspending him by his wrists so his toes barely touched the floor. Lois had thought he was pale before, but now his skin was deathly white. He didn't even have the strength to lift his head. His lips moved and she struggled to make out the words. *Lois, tell them anything, save yourself, please.*

"I don't know anything," she repeated. "I can't tell what I don't know."

Clark closed his eyes as a shudder ran through his body. Lois saw muscles bunch as he clenched his teeth against what he knew was coming. One of the men walked behind him and tore the cotton shirt up the middle, exposing Clark's bare back. Lois couldn't see his back from where she was sitting, but she already knew he was hurt from his reaction when she tried to help him earlier.

The leader went over to a tall cabinet set against the wall near the door and opened it. Lois couldn't see what was inside but watched in growing dismay as the man pulled out what looked like a short whip with a heavy handle.

He showed it to her. The handle had several small buttons on it. "This, Miss Lane, is a neuronc whip. It directly accesses the pain neural pathways, and when one pathway is overwhelmed, it finds another. Quite a clever device actually, even before I made my own

special modifications." He looked dispassionately at her. "Are you sure you won't reconsider telling me what I want to know?"

She turned her head so she wouldn't have to see his eyes. "Krypton is a dead planet with only one survivor, so unless you think we're going to be invaded by ghosts, I can't help you and neither can he. You can't prove a negative. And somehow I don't think you'd stop, even if I did tell you what you wanted to hear."

"You're probably right," he said. He moved behind Clark, reaching out with his free hand to caress the line of Clark's jaw, his unprotected throat. Clark shuddered again, trying to pull away, even though it was impossible. "Such a pretty boy. Are you sure you don't want to tell what I want to know? Because if you don't, I'll start looking for answers to other questions. I think you know what I mean," a silkily menacing voice murmured just loud enough for Lois to hear.

"Go to hell," Clark managed to choke out. His tormentor stepped back, raised the whip and brought it down hard against his naked back.

* * *

The search was going slow, Foster fumed, slower than he and Straker wanted. The teams had gone through nearly half the list, finding locked fall-out shelters, storage basements, cellars housing vagrants who scurried away from the uniformed members of the search teams.

"We're running out of time, aren't we?" Perry White asked, coming into the conference room where the three senior SHADO officers sat, waiting. Foster nodded, noting the deepening worry in the eyes of his commanding officer.

"Jason Trask was a fanatic. So is Russell Myerson, and the men with him," Straker said, cupping a mug of coffee in his hands. "It's a fanaticism that borders on the religious. They are so fixated on this unknown and unknowable enemy that they can't see anything else. They *refuse* to see anything else."

"Cold war mentality?" Perry asked.

Straker nodded. "But instead of communists, they see aliens from outer space. The problem is, just like the communists, most of these so-called 'aliens' are peaceable, home loving people who want nothing more than a safe place to live, a decent place to work, a good place to raise their children. They are as much a threat to Earth as, say, the Vietnamese are."

"Do you really think Superman's already dead?" Perry asked.

Straker sighed. "Mister White, my people have access to technology that goes well beyond cutting edge. We can't locate the only Kryptonian bio-signature on this planet. Either he is dead, or he is being held someplace designed to keep us from finding him. If Myerson took him in order to find out what gave him his extraordinary abilities, then he is dead and was killed in the most..." Straker paused, looking for the word he wanted, "sadistic, agonizing, method possible. If they were after information, he has a minute chance of still being alive, but probably not for long."

"And Clark?" Perry asked.

"You already know the answer to that, I think," Straker said quietly.

Day 4

Jimmy checked off the last location on the map they'd been assigned. He was tired and so were his two companions, S'vram, one of the military people and Betty Reed, MPD. It had taken all night to go through the list of locations Colonel Foster had given them. The only breaks they'd taken were for coffee and deli sandwiches.

It was now morning. Jimmy knew he should check in at work, but he also knew that Perry knew he was helping in the search for Lois and Clark. Clark had been missing seventy-two hours now and Lois had been taken nearly twenty-four hours ago.

"Nothing," Betty Reed complained, brushing red curly hair away from her face. "Any suggestions?"

Jimmy looked at the map and the list of addresses one more time. "You know, considering the type of location we're look for, there's a couple places right near here he missed."

"Where?" Betty demanded sharply.

"The Wincote building over there has sub-basement and a bomb-shelter that doesn't show on the regular floor plans and so does the Wanamaker building." Jimmy saw the dubious look in Betty's face. "Remember who I work with? Bomb-shelters are lead-lined, so anytime we're looking for something someone doesn't want Superman to find, we start with the old bomb-shelters. There're bomb-shelters under both those buildings that weren't on the Colonel's list."

"Which one first, Wincote or Wanamaker?" Betty asked, peering at both of her companions.

"Flip a coin?" Jimmy suggested, pulling a quarter out of his pocket. "Heads Wincote, tails Wanamaker." He tossed the coin and caught it, placing it on the back of his free hand.

"Wincote," Betty said, looking at the coin.

* * *

The cell was even colder than she remembered. Clark had passed out from the pain, to his tormentor's fury. When even being doused with ice water failed to rouse him, their captors threw them both back into the cell.

Clark had started shivering again, and she tried to prop him up against her chest, to get his bare back away from the cold, damp stones. His back was bleeding again and Lois wondered once more how much of the torture he could take. *How could they have possibly mistaken him for this Kal-El person? Why were they doing this? Why did they think Clark would know anything about Superman's people? Why did they think she knew anything?*

"Lois," he murmured. *He was finally conscious after how many hours?* She had to bend closer to hear him. "The next time they come, they're going to cut me open. Please, please don't let them dissect me like a frog."

"What do you want me to do?" she asked. She knew she couldn't stop them, but his pain, his terror, was killing her. The cold was seeping through the scrubs. Her legs were nearly numb again.

"Make sure I'm dead... please, don't let me be alive when they come," he said. He couldn't keep his voice from shaking. "I'm begging you..."

"Cl - Kal-El, I don't know if I can."

"Please, Lois, if you ever cared, please do this for me, please. They're going to cut me open, alive and conscious, if they can. I don't want to die like that." He laid his head back on her shoulder and closed his eyes again. He couldn't stop shaking.

She looked around for a weapon, but nothing had changed from the last time she'd looked around. She looked down at the bloodied shirt she was wearing and began tearing a strip off the bottom, using her teeth to start the rip.

She twisted the strip in her hands and placed the strip around his throat, above the torque around his neck. She knew from his breathing he was conscious, but he made no move to stop her. She twisted the fabric tighter around his throat and he went limp.

"I'm so sorry," she murmured through her tears. He wasn't breathing as she laid his body on the floor, the fabric strip still tight around his throat.

* * *

An alarm went off in the sub-basement Russell Myerson had commandeered for his temporary command post. He peered at the security camera monitor and swore to himself. No one should have been able to find them. All references to this location had been deleted from the city planner's office database. No one else should have been interested.

He turned to Anton Braxton, the interrogator he'd put in charge of Lane and the alien. Braxton was not the man's real name. Myerson didn't know his real name, only that he'd come over from somewhere in the Eastern Bloc soon after the KGB was put on notice by the Russian government to clean up their act. Braxton was obviously one of those 'acts' that had needed to be cleaned up.

"Take care of the alien and his girl friend, then evacuate the base. I'll send word when it's time to regroup," Myerson said, heading out the door.

Braxton watched after his superior for a long moment, then pulled his automatic pistol from its holster, double checking the ammunition clip.

He stepped out into the hallway.

"Police! Drop it!" A female voice yelled. He turned to see a woman with wild red hair holding an automatic pistol in both hands. He fired off a shot and she returned fire. He felt a burning in his chest and looked down to see blood on his blouse. He was dead before he hit the floor.

Betty swore to herself as she went over to the body, checking for a pulse at his throat. Nothing.

"Okay, let's check this place out," she ordered, getting to her feet. There were several corridors to check out, all with doors on each side. She directed S'vram to take the middle one, while she took the furthest one, the one the dead man's companions most likely took off down.

She assigned Jimmy the corridor nearest where they'd come in.

Jimmy was nearly running down the corridor, checking each door. All but two were unlocked, store rooms, hurriedly abandoned sleep areas, an eating area with still steaming coffee in the mugs. The first locked door he was able to make quick work of, glad the police detective he'd been assigned to was not around to see how fast he could pick a door lock.

He opened the door and peered inside. There was a table and two chairs. A pulley and cable arrangement hung from the ceiling and there was blood splattered on the concrete beneath the cable. Jimmy started to feel sick to his stomach.

The second locked door was different than the others. It was reinforced steel and the lock was harder to pick than the first one. He opened the door, suddenly fearful about what he might find inside.

"Lois? LOIS!"

She was kneeling beside a bloodied, dark-haired man. She was holding tightly to a strip of cloth around the man's neck. He wasn't moving, he wasn't breathing.

"Dear God, Lois, that isn't CK?"

Lois looked up at Jimmy, tears running down her face.

"Jimmy?" she murmured, and as if waking up from a nightmare, she loosened the strip around Clark's neck, finally tearing it away with a sob. "Breath, please breath," she said, gently patting his face. After a moment, she bent closer and began mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. A minute later, Clark managed a shuddery breath on his own.

"Jimmy, help me get him out of here," Lois ordered. Jimmy was still standing in the doorway. He hurried over to her.

"Lois, he needs to get to a hospital," Jimmy protested.

"No hospital," Clark managed to choke out. The terror was still in his eyes.

"No hospital," Lois agreed. "Help me get him up."

Jimmy came around to Clark's other side and between the two of them, they managed to get Clark to his feet and through the door to the hallway. Clark was shivering from pain, cold, and fever. At the door to the sleep area, Jimmy stopped and pushed open that door.

"Hold on right here," he instructed. He helped Lois prop Clark against the wall, then went into the sleep area and grabbed a blanket. He wrapped the blanket around Clark's shoulders.

"Lois, he's burning up."

"No hospital," Clark repeated.

"How about some water?" Lois asked. Clark nodded weakly.

"Come on," Jimmy urged. "There's a kitchen sort of thing in here." He led them into the dining area, helping Clark to a chair. Lois grabbed a clean glass, filled it at the sink and brought it to Clark. His hands were shaking uncontrollably. She held the glass for him and more water went down his chin than in his mouth as he tried to gulp it down.

Jimmy refilled the glass for him. "Take it easy, CK," Jimmy admonished. "Drink it slow, okay? You're safe now. The police are here, and the FBI's been looking for you, and some other government people are here to help..." He let his voice trail off as Lois dropped the glass, utter terror in her face.

Clark was trying to pull himself into a ball, eyes shut tight, shaking his head in denial.

"No, no more, please God, no more," he moaned softly, voice trembling.

"Jimmy, we have to get him away from here *now*!" Lois hissed.

"Lois, he needs help. They're here to help," Jimmy protested.

"Jimmy, you don't understand," Lois spat. "The bastards that did this to him were *with* the government! The Bureau wasn't shut down, just relocated. We have to get him out of here before they grab him again!"

"Okay, okay," Jimmy agreed, helping her get Clark to his feet again. "Where should we go?"

"I don't know yet," Lois admitted. "First things first, out of here, then someplace safe."

* * *

Ford was handling communications when word came through that Bureau 39's hideout had been found in a sub-basement of the building that hadn't even been on the list SHADO had put together.

"General Straker?" the operative said over the com-unit that had been set up in the Planet conference room. "Detective Reed and S'vram have checked in with a report that they believe they've found the Bureau's hide-out. One casualty. One of the men refused to disarm when ordered and was killed."

"Any sign of Lane and Kent?" Straker asked.

There was a long pause before Ford responded: "Reed reported they had reason to believe Lane and Kent had been held there, and at least one of them had to have been seriously injured. There was a lot of blood. But they weren't in the complex when Reed and S'vram got there. Reed also reports that Mister Olsen didn't stay with them. It appears that he may have taken off on his own."

"Thank you, Ford," Straker said before turning to Perry, Freeman, and Foster still waiting with him in the conference room. "Damn. If those bastards have gone to ground taking those kids with them... We'll be lucky to find their bodies."

* * *

Jimmy and Lois managed to get a nearly unconscious Clark out of the underground complex, into a service elevator and onto the main floor of the Wincote Building. Luckily, the service elevator opened into a side hallway, away from the main traffic. Jimmy worriedly looked his companions over. Lois was haggard and disheveled, the surgical style scrub shirt and pants covered in blood. Her feet were bare.

Clark was in far worse shape. He was feverish, sweating, eyes glazed in pain and his skin had a sickly green pallor. His face was bruised and the swelling indicated a possible broken jaw. He was naked to the waist except for the blanket around his shoulders and he was barefoot. His back was raw and still bleeding and his side was badly bruised. In the elevator he'd started coughing up blood.

Jimmy knew better than to suggest a hospital again, even if he didn't quite understand why Lois and Clark were both so set against it. He looked around the hallway, spotting a door labeled 'supplies'. He made quick work of the simple lock. "You two wait here for me and stay out of sight. I'll bring the car around and be right back for you, okay?"

"Jimmy, you don't own a car," Lois pointed out quietly.

He held up a familiar set of keys. "But you do. The cops located your car over at Dacy's and I went and picked it up for you. I'll be right back."

He left them alone in the supply room. Lois closed the door, taking care that it didn't lock on them. Clark was huddled on the floor, knees to his chest, shivering. She went and sat beside him. She wanted to take his hands in hers, but knew she didn't dare touch his injured hand. She tucked the blanket around him more closely.

"You could have left me," Clark mumbled through his shivering. "They might have let you go."

"I wasn't going to leave my partner," she told him. "Clark, who did they think you were? Who is this Kal-El?"

Clark shut his eyes and laid his head on his knees.

For a moment she thought he'd lapsed into unconsciousness again. She touched his hair, combing it with her fingers. It was damp and smelled of stale sweat and fear. She suddenly noticed that the ring around his neck had left red marks, almost like burns, where it rested against the base of his neck. "Clark, who is Kal-El?"

"When they grabbed me, they started calling me that name," His voice was so soft she had to strain to hear it. "I don't think they even checked my I.D. I think they mistook me for him."

"Mistook you for whom, Clark?"

"I think Superman managed to escape, maybe."

"And they mistook you for him? They mistook you for Superman?"

"Trask did," he reminded her. "Before."

"Trask was crazy," she stated. *How could they possibly confuse her mild, shy partner with the Man of Steel? It didn't make sense. There was a physical resemblance, yes, but there were lots of guys in Metropolis who resembled Superman. Why pick on her partner?*

There was a quiet knock on the door and Lois got to her feet as the door slowly opened.

"Lois? CK?" Jimmy called out softly, peeking around the door. "I've got the car right outside the door here."

She went back to Clark and helped him to his feet. Again, Jimmy came around to his other side to assist. They got Clark out the door and down a short flight of stairs to Lois's Cherokee. Jimmy helped get Clark into the back seat while Lois grabbed her car keys and climbed into the driver's seat. Jimmy was opening the front passenger side door to climb in when Lois put out her hand. "No, Jimmy."

He looked at her in confusion. "Lois, you guys need help here."

"No. Tell Perry I'll get in touch with him once I have Clark someplace safe."

"Lois..." Jimmy protested again. She leaned over and grabbed the door from his hand, slamming it shut and locking it. She turned the key over in the ignition and sped off, leaving Jimmy standing in the service alley behind the Wincote building staring after them.

* * *

It was a disgruntled Jimmy Olsen who took a cab back to the Daily Planet, walked into the main lobby and took an elevator to the newsroom floor.

"I had them," he announced to Perry as he walked into the conference room. "I found Lois and CK in a cell under the Wincote Building and got them out. Then they took off. Lois told me to tell you she'd be in touch once she got CK someplace safe." He flopped into one of the chairs in the conference room. "Chief, I don't think I've ever seen anybody as scared as the two of them are."

"Jimmy, the police report said one or both of them might be hurt," Perry told him.

Jimmy nodded. "Lois looked okay, aside from being scared out of her wits. But CK's hurt bad. I tried to get him to a hospital, but he absolutely refused. They're both terrified that Trask's people are still out there and'll grab them again to finish the job."

"That's just great," Straker murmured to himself. He rubbed the bridge of his nose as if getting a headache.

"Mister Olsen, was there any sign that Superman had been there with them?" Foster asked.

"No, but I was a little more worried about getting Lois and CK out of there," Jimmy told them.

"Mister Olsen," Freeman began. "You said Kent was hurt. How and how badly?"

Jimmy took a deep breath. "Lot of bruises, his back looked like he'd been flayed. I think he may have a broken arm, and one of his hands was all swollen, like maybe somebody'd done a number on it. There were marks on his chest and neck that kinda' looked like burns. I couldn't see what shape his legs were in, but since he could barely walk..."

Straker had his elbows on the table, hands clasped in front of his lowered head. "Aside from whatever clothes they gave him, was there anything else on him? Jewelry, bands, anything?"

Jimmy frowned. "Yeah, there was this metal ring around his neck. I looked to see if there was a clasp or anything, but I didn't see one."

Straker sighed. "Alec, get onto S'vram, tell him to search that hole with a fine tooth comb. He's looking for the controller for the prisoner's torque they put on him. Also have them set the

satellite search to detect element 126. I'm betting it's contaminated with it."

Freeman keyed the com-unit and spoke instructions into the headset.

"Okay, I'll bite," Perry said. "What in the name of Sam Hill is a *prisoner's torque*, and what's element 126?"

"A prisoner's torque is a banned piece of alien technology," Straker explained. "It was designed to help control unruly prisoners by giving them electric shocks, up to and including fatal shocks. It can't be removed without the controller and any attempt to remove it triggers it. The controller also has a locator function. There's no safe place on this planet for them if Myerson has the controller."

"And this element 126?" Perry asked.

"I know that one, Chief," Jimmy said. "That's the element number for kryptonite. Myerson must have been planning on using it on Superman."

Straker nodded "Yeah, that's about right."

Jimmy looked downcast. "And if that torque thing is contaminated, then even if we find Superman okay, he can't do anything to help CK."

"Got it in one," Foster said quietly.

Straker sat back in his chair, a thoughtful look on his face. "Mister White, could you do us a favor? Call Mister Kent's parents. There's an old airstrip just outside of Smallville. I'm going to have a jet waiting there to bring them here." He glanced at Freeman. "We're going to need their help when, and if, we find those kids."

Perry gave him a puzzled look. "You people are putting out a lot of effort to find two reporters, not that I'm ungrateful, mind you. They are two of the best in the business..."

"Let's just say we have good reasons to do what ever it takes to find them and keep them alive and well," Straker said. "Besides, I happen to know the Kents. They're good people and Trask had no right to do what he did in Smallville."

* * *

Lois stuck to back streets as she drove, frantically trying to think of a safe place to go, a safe place to hide. She knew her parents would be of no help. Her mother would panic, and she was still barely speaking to her father. She didn't dare drive over any of the bridges to leave the island. There was no way the bridges weren't being watched. She was covered in dried blood and Clark was unconscious in the back seat. *Try to explain that to an overzealous cop.*

He'd started wheezing a little, almost like asthma, and Lois had to fight down the panic that was threatening to overwhelm her.

There was one person she trusted and she headed to the south side of New Troy Island, to her Uncle Mike's apartment. It took only a few minutes until she parked the Cherokee behind the American Bistro, her uncle's restaurant in midtown. Her uncle lived above the restaurant.

She climbed out of the car and knocked on the back door to the restaurant. She prayed it would be Mike who opened the door.

The door opened.

"What the...Lois? What's happened? Are you okay?" Mike Lane exclaimed, eyes wide at the sight standing inside the back screen door.

She threw her arms around his neck. "Uncle Mike, we need your help. Clark and I need your help."

"Clark? Your partner, Clark?" He looked around for the young man.

"He's in the back of my car, Uncle Mike." She nodded to the Cherokee. "He's hurt. I don't

know how bad."

"Lois, honey," Mike said, suddenly worried. "If he's hurt, you need to get him to the emergency room, or a doctor."

She shook her head. "No, they'll just turn him back over to be people who did this. Please Uncle Mike, please help until I can figure a way of getting him out of the city, someplace where they can't find him."

"Where who can't find him?" Mike asked, following Lois to the car. She pulled open the back door to the Cherokee. Mike gasped at seeing Clark's bruised and bloodied body. "Oh dear God in heaven. Who did this to him, honey?"

"Some crazy people. Government crazy people," Lois answered.

Mike put his hands under Clark's arms and around his chest to pull the younger man out of the back car seat. Lois grabbed Clark's legs as they hefted him free of the car. "He weighs more than he looks," Mike complained mildly.

Clark roused enough to walk a little as Mike and Lois helped him up the flight of stairs behind the restaurant to Mike's second floor apartment.

Mike led them to his bedroom, pulling down the blankets and top sheet, then lowering Clark onto the mattress. Clark moaned, protesting feebly as Mike started to pull the bloody, filthy scrub pants down over his hips.

"Lois, honey," Mike said, throwing the sheet over Clark to protect at least some modicum of the young man's modesty. "There're some fresh towels and wash clothes in the linen cupboard by the bathroom. Could you bring me a towel and a damp cloth so I can clean him up a little? And I'm sure I must have something around here you can put on until we get some clothes for you." He paused, thinking. "I assume none of that blood is yours?"

"I'm okay, Uncle Mike, really. They didn't hurt me."

Lois disappeared into the adjoining bathroom for a minute as Mike looked over Clark's injuries. That he'd been beaten repeatedly was obvious, as was the fact he'd been flogged, even though Mike was sure it hadn't been with anything he was familiar with and he was familiar with a lot of weapons. There were other injuries the retired Marine recognized on the young man's chest, legs and other places, injuries Mike had seen on other men, including himself, when he was a POW in Viet Nam - chemical and electrical burns. The tube sutured to his left arm indicated they'd used drugs as well and hadn't wanted to repeatedly hunt for veins.

"Lois, why were they doing this? Why were they torturing him?"

"They said they wanted information about some invasion they were afraid of," Lois explained, returning with the damp cloth and towel. "But what would Clark know about an invasion?"

"Honey, I know a little something about interrogation," Mike said, taking the cloth from her and gently wiping away some of the blood on Clark's face. "This sort of damage doesn't get you answers. This sort of damage is done to punish and to break. Why would someone want to break him?"

"I don't know, Uncle Mike," Lois said. "But we think they mistook him for someone else, some named Kal-El." She paused a long moment and added softly: "I think Kal-El may be Superman's real name. I think they mistook Clark for him."

Mike gave her a deeper puzzled look as he continued daubing the blood and sweat from Clark's face. "But Superman's invulnerable. How could anybody mistake Clark for Superman?"

As he spoke, Clark began to moan, trying to move away from the hands touching him. Lois moved closer. "It's okay, Clark, it's okay. We're at my Uncle Mike's place. It's okay." He

started to calm, eyes half open although Lois was pretty sure he wasn't registering anything he was seeing. She took the cloth from Mike's hand and continued wiping Clark's face and neck. He was burning up.

"I think they may had a way to make Superman vulnerable. Six weeks ago, there was this guy who claimed he had something that could hurt Superman. There was no proof and the guy's dead now, but maybe his confederates found it. Plus..." She let her voice trail off. "Plus, Superman was seen four days ago with two cops who put him in their car. And three days ago, his cape was found with blood on it. But Clark was pretty sure Superman got away from them, and that's why they grabbed him instead."

Mike nodded, not sure he believed her explanation. But he wasn't ready to explore the most likely scenario with her - that the monsters who had tortured her partner knew exactly who they were hurting and they'd been hurting *Superman*.

"Honey, Clark needs medical attention, and since you won't go to the hospital with him, I'm calling your dad."

"I don't know if he'll come," Lois said.

"He'll come," Mike assured her gently. "He'll help."

* * *

"General," Ford said quietly to the man standing behind him in the MCC. "We can't tune the sensors to pick up the specific radiation of element 126."

"We have the most sophisticated, most advanced detection system on the planet, we can spot a license plate from orbit, and we can't pick up an alien element signature?" Straker grated.

"We can't get the detectors to pick it up, sir. Either it's too subtle or too high a frequency. We're also still not finding a Kryptonian bio-signature," Ford said.

Straker shook his head. "Let me know when the Kents get in and have a car sent to pick them up."

"They should land in about ninety minutes," Ford reported. "Should we have them brought here?"

"Yeah," Straker said. "Now all I have to do is figure out how to explain to Martha Kent, and my cousin Jonny, what happened to their little boy, without her tearing out my liver."

"I wasn't aware you were related to them, sir," Ford said quietly.

Straker nodded. "My mom's younger sister married a Kansas farmer. We weren't all that close, but I remember spending a few Christmases in Smallville while my dad was overseas. They were nice folks, honest, hard-working farmers. I lost track of them after my mom died, caught up with them again after I was assigned to SHADO.

"It was my report on a possible Ufo incident that led Trask to Smallville in the first place. The incident didn't fit our regular pattern, there was nothing to indicate the Rokan-shui were involved, no deaths, no disappearances. I filed the report, didn't think anything of it, until Trask got hold it and decided to investigate for himself, even though the incident was closed. He found an alleged landing craft, recovered it, but didn't turn it over the way he was supposed to. We found there was a lot of stuff he retrieved and didn't turn over."

"He found a landing craft in Smallville?"

"So he said. I never saw it. After I got wind of what he was doing, I went out to see what he'd been up to, checked in on my cousin and his family, found out Trask had scared them half to death more than once asking questions about their son. Hell, he scared most of the town. Took us ages to undo even some of the damage he did, telling them he was working for the

government hunting down illegals. Then when Jonny and Martha found out I knew the bastard, she was beyond furious. And I don't blame her one bit. I don't know what they'll do once they find out what Trask's people did to their son. But I guarantee those bastards are going to pay."

* * *

Mike placed his call to his brother Sam, Lois's father, then went down to the restaurant. As reliable as his employees were, he liked to make sure everything was ready for the dinner rush well before it started.

Clark's temperature wasn't coming down. She'd forced him to take some aspirin and tried to get him to drink more water, even though much of it ended up on his chin and the bedding. She kept a cold compress on his forehead and on his neck. She kept wiping the rest of his face with a cold towel, replacing it as it grew warm. She tried to stay close to him as possible. He became agitated when she left to change out the towels, thrashing and mumbling incoherently.

Mike had made some sandwiches for her and left a pitcher of lemonade on the dresser with two glasses. She tried to eat, tried to get Clark to eat something, but he didn't have the strength. "I should have had Uncle Mike get some Twinkies," Lois murmured to herself.

Clark opened his eyes, almost focusing on her. "Lois?"

"I'm right here, Clark," Lois said softly. "It's going to be okay, you're safe here."

"I hurt," he mumbled, closing his eyes once more. Sweat had started beading on his forehead. He opened his eyes again, confused and worried. "Mom and Dad, do they know we're away from...? I don't..."

"I'll call them and let them know we got away, okay? I'll do that right now, okay? You just rest," she told him. She waited until he closed his eyes and was breathing more evenly before she grabbed the phone off the nightstand and called information for Jonathan and Martha Kent in Smallville, Kansas.

There was no answer at the number information gave her. She left a short message on their answering machine: "This is Lois. Clark and I are safe for the time being and I'll try to get back to you later."

After a moment she dialed information and called the Smallville sheriff's office. Rachel Harris answered on the second ring.

"Rachel, this is Lois Lane, Clark's partner?"

"Lois, are you okay? Clark's mom and dad called and said you'd both been kidnapped," the woman on the other end said.

"We managed to get away. I tried calling Clark's parents, but they're not answering," Lois explained.

"Last I heard they were on their way to Metropolis. Jonathan said he had a cousin involved in looking for you guys and he sent a private jet to pick them up," Rachel told her.

"Did either of them mention the cousin's name?" Lois asked.

"Striker? Straker, Ed Straker. Jonathan said he was with Interpol or something like that."

"Thanks, Rachel," Lois said, heart in her throat as she rung off. *Ed Straker knew Clark's parents? That didn't make sense, unless he planned to use them to get to Clark. And that didn't make much sense either. The man she met had been genuinely concerned about both Superman and Clark and Clark's parents would never cooperate in anything that would hurt their son.*

She realized she was too exhausted to think straight as she went back to wiping down his brow.

* * *

"General, we may have found them," S'vram announced. "Calls were made to both the Kent home and the Smallville sheriff's office from a number in Metropolis."

"And?" Straker urged.

"The number belongs to Colonel Michael Lane, USMC retired, Lois Lane's uncle. I have the address here," he handed the slip of paper to his superior. "Do you want a team sent to extract them?"

"Negative," Straker ordered. "I want three teams sent to keep a covert eye on them. Make one of them a sniper team. I don't want an unidentified fly to get within range of those two. And warn the teams whatever they do, don't let them find out they've been found. I don't want them running again."

"And if Myerson comes after them?" Foster wondered aloud.

"I'm counting on Myerson going after them," Straker said. "This is the best chance we have for neutralizing that sick bastard's gang once and for all."

"You're taking a big chance," Foster warned him.

"Tell me about it. "

* * *

"Lois, honey, wake up," Sam Lane said quietly, touching Lois's arm. She opened her eyes and slowly sat up, taking care not to jostle the man beside her.

Mike had let his brother into the apartment a few minutes earlier and he'd found Lois asleep on the bed on top of the bed covers. Clark was under the covers, and the sheet beneath him was soaked in sweat. Clark's breathing was shallow and labored, and he was very pale.

"Dad?" Lois said. "Thank God you've come."

"Lois, what happened?" Sam asked. He had already pulled the sheet down to expose Clark's chest and had his stethoscope out, checking Clark's vital signs. He had also pulled out a small oxygen bottle and placed the face mask over Clark's nose and mouth. "All Mike said was that Clark was hurt and he refused to go to the hospital."

"Clark was kidnapped by some sickos a couple days ago," Lois said. She didn't want to go into details with him. She probably had already told Uncle Mike too much. "They grabbed me yesterday." She saw the sudden concern in her father's face. "I'm fine Dad, they didn't touch me."

Sam nodded, but was obviously unconvinced as he continued to examine his patient. His face visibly paled when he rolled Clark onto his side to look at his raw and weeping back. "Lois, honey, Clark really needs to be in a hospital. You know I haven't practiced general medicine in twelve years. And he's going to need more than I can give him here. He's in shock, and as high as his temperature is, I'm surprised he's still alive at all."

"Daddy, you have to do something," Lois pleaded.

Sam sighed. "I can give him something for the pain, we'll pack him in ice to bring down his temperature and the oxygen will help him breathe easier. But that's about all I can do. But I do want to get that thing off from around his neck. It almost looks like radiation burns where it's touched his skin. But I don't see any way of removing it."

He reached into his medical bag and pulled out a wrapped syringe and a dark bottle with a rubber top. He prepared the injection and gave it to Clark. Clark whimpered at the additional pain.

"It's just something for the pain," Sam assured him. "You'll start to feel better pretty soon." He turned to Lois. "Honey, go in and start filling the bathtub with cold water, then call Uncle Mike downstairs and have him bring up as much ice as he can. Buckets of it."

* * *

"General, we're in position," the lead sniper said quietly into his headset. He was on his belly, peering over a short parapet on the building just across the alley from Mike Lane's apartment and the back door of his restaurant. "Ms. Lane, Kent, and Doctor Lane are inside. Colonel Lane is inside the restaurant."

The leader watched through binoculars with non-reflective lenses. "The colonel's coming out and going up to the apartment. Looks like he's carrying a bucket of ice."

"You have your instructions," Straker's voice came over the headset of everyone assigned. "No one goes in or out without my express permission. In the event a known member of Bureau 39 attempts to make contact with any of the subjects, you have permission to act with extreme prejudice. The subjects must be protected at all costs."

"Understood," the leader told him.

Day 4 Evening

"Nigel, I assume you've discovered where the intrepid Ms. Lane and her sidekick have gone to ground?" Lex Luthor asked his security advisor.

Nigel St. John smiled. "Indeed I have, sir. My people followed Doctor Lane to his brother's flat on the south side. We also found Miss Lane's car parked several blocks away. There was blood in the interior."

"Mister Kent's blood, no doubt," Lex commented with a sly smile.

"No doubt. I am surprised Myerson's people let him survive. Apparently the Bureau's reputation for ruthlessness was a bit exaggerated," Nigel said. "My sources also tell me that Mister Kent's parents are being brought in by private jet to facilitate his recovery."

"Is this an opportunity we somehow missed?"

"I'm sure we can redeem something from the situation," Nigel responded. "One warning, however. General Straker's people do not take kindly to being interfered with. It will not go well should they discover our dealings with the Bureau and our acquisition of advanced alien technology."

"Are you saying this Straker could be a threat?"

"I am saying that SHADO is a dangerous enemy to have. Their reputation for ruthlessness is *not* exaggerated."

Lex considered Nigel's statement for a long moment, weighing his options. "Pity," he said finally. "I was so looking forward to meeting the senior Kents and rescuing the damsel in distress." He paused, eyeing Nigel thoughtfully. "Make sure there's nothing linking us to the Bureau. And should you locate any of Myerson's people, be sure to let the General know. We do want to cooperate with the authorities."

"Naturally, sir," Nigel agreed.

* * *

"Eddie, what the devil's going on?" Jonathan Kent demanded as he walked into the Daily Planet newsroom, his wife holding on to his arm. "First we get a call that Clark's been kidnapped, then we hear Lois was taken too, then we get word they both escaped and you fly us out on a private jet?"

"Nice to see you too, Jonny, Martha," Straker responded with a faint smile. He beckoned them to enter the conference room.

"Eddie, what's going on?" Martha asked.

Straker ignored her question for the moment. "I'm not sure who you've met here. Perry White, Jimmy Olsen, the Planet; Detectives Henderson and Reed, MPD and I'm pretty sure you've met Alec Freeman over there," Straker said, indicating each person in turn.

"Mister Olsen is the one who got Clark and Lois away Myerson's base. Then, like the resourceful and completely terrified kids they are, they dumped him, ran and went to ground." Straker paused, gauging their reactions.

Martha looked at him in wide-eyed confusion. "But they're safe now?" she asked.

"We believe so," Henderson answered. "At least for the time being. But Clark is very badly hurt and we believe Myerson may have the ability to kill him, even from a distance."

"But how... *why* would anyone want to hurt Clark?" Jonathan asked.

"For the same reasons they went after him in Smallville," Freeman answered. "They think he has information on Superman. Plus, Clark made them look like fools, twice."

"Ed, if you know where they are, and you know these bastards are after them, why

haven't you done something?" Jonathan asked. "I assume you can do something."

"The circumstances demand this situation be handled more delicately than normal for us," Straker said. "Not simply because family is involved, but because we can't use our usual tactics when dealing with someone as severely injured as we believe Clark to be, not to mention the paranoia Myerson's techniques will have instilled in them. If we could, this would have all be over two hours ago, and the two of them would be in protective custody, probably in Smallville. That old barn of yours would make a real good sniper platform."

Jonathan looked over at Martha, worried playing over both their faces. Jonathan was about five years older than Straker but looked much older thanks to worry and lack of sleep. Martha's usual vivaciousness was dimmed for the same reason, her blue-gray eyes washed to almost colorlessness behind her glasses.

"What do you need us to do?" Martha asked.

* * *

Sam bandaged Clark's back as best he could with what Mike had available. The two Lane men then wrestled the unconscious Clark into the bathtub, pouring ice into the already cold water as Lois stood by, watching.

Sam had already explained the process to her. The ice bath was the fastest method of getting Clark's body temperature into the normal range before there was irreparable damage to his brain and internal organs. Sam didn't need to tell her that chances were, the damage was already done, that whatever poison had sent Clark's temperature into the stratosphere had most likely done it's dirty work already. Chances were Clark would never come out of the coma he'd slipped into.

Lois sat on the edge of the tub to keep an eye on him. Unconscious, there was a good chance his head could slip under the water. He looked like he was simply asleep, but normal people didn't sleep in bathtubs full of ice.

"Clark, I don't know if you can hear me, but please wake up. I don't know what I'd do if you died, if you left me like that. I know I didn't want a partner. I know I was mad at Perry for making me take on a partner, but I've gotten used to you being around, being the voice of reason even if I want to..." She was babbling and she hated it when she started to babble.

"Please wake up."

* * *

"General," S'vram announced over the com-unit. "I think they've taken the bait. Someone's tapped into the DOD satellite surveillance system and is focusing of the south side of Metropolis. They're using Lexcorp protocols, by the way."

"That doesn't surprise me," Freeman commented to himself.

"Is everything else in place?"

"Yes, sir," S'vram affirmed. "The false data stream is being fed to them and we have a ship in low orbit feeding us the real thing in real time."

Straker turned to Martha and Jonathan. "It's nearly show time. We need to get over there."

Traffic was surprising light for the mid-afternoon, so the journey from the Daily Planet to the American Bistro didn't take long. Straker found a parking place in a day lot not too far from the cafe and parked the rental car.

"Miss Lane's uncle owns the restaurant. They're both upstairs with her father," Straker explained as they crossed the street to the front entrance.

"And we're just going to go in and get them?" Martha asked with more than a touch of

sarcasm. Straker had given them a tactical briefing on the situation in the car. Martha had not been well pleased with his plans.

"I really wish it could be that easy," Straker told them, leading them into the restaurant. A burly, graying man met them and led them to a table near the back and handed them menus. He seemed distracted, hyper-alert, watching the door and the customers as if expecting something to happen.

"Colonel Lane, I presume?" Straker said softly, holding the menu up to hide the I.D. he had out from prying eyes. The man's surprise was only evident in a slight widening of his eyes. "I'm General Ed Straker, and this is Mister and Missus Kent, Clark's parents."

"We're told you know where our boy is," Jonathan said with a soft rumble.

Mike nodded almost imperceptibly. "My niece brought him here. He's in real rough shape. Plus, I have reason to believe the building's being watched."

"I'm sure it is," Straker murmured.

Mike considered the implications of the other man's statement. "What do you need me to do, sir?" he asked.

Straker's eyes went distant as he listened to voices coming through the nearly invisible ear bud he was wearing. "They're here." He turned to his companions. "Go upstairs with him. And whatever you do, don't try to remove that torque from his neck. It's designed to kill if you try. We have people working on a safe method to neutralize it."

Martha paled, placing a hand on her husband's arm for reassurance.

* * *

"How's he doing?" Lois asked once again, as Sam checked on his patient. Clark's fever had broken about the time the ice melted. She and her father manhandled Clark back into Mike's bed. They'd given up on any pretense of protecting Clark's modesty. With any luck, assuming he recovered, he wouldn't remember any of this.

"Breathing's better, pulse is stronger. Temperature's a lot closer to normal. Now he just has to wake up," Sam reported. "I still wish we could take him to a hospital. If his temperature spikes again, we could well lose him. As it is..."

"No hospital," Clark muttered, eyes still closed.

Sam's eyebrows went up in surprise. His last check had produced a Glasgow score of seven - severe neurological impairment. Normal people simply didn't recover that fast unless the depressed consciousness was drug induced. And drugs normally didn't leave the system that quickly.

"Clark, how are you feeling?" Lois asked gently. "We've been worried."

"Hurts," Clark mumbled. "Cold." He managed to open his eyes. "Why?"

"Dad put you in an ice bath to bring down your fever," Lois explained. "Looks like it worked."

"I'd still like to what could cause a fever that high and not kill you." Sam said. Clark's eyes widened, and he started trembling. "Relax, son. You're safe here," Sam assured him, placing a hand on his shoulder, forcing the young man back onto the pillows. "Can you tell me what year it is?"

"'93?"

Sam breathed a sigh of relief. Despite the obvious question mark in Clark's voice, he wasn't too disoriented and that was a very good indication he'd avoided any serious brain damage.

Clark managed to pull his good hand out from under the covers and found the torque that

was still around his neck. "Poison, hurts..."

"I knew we should have gotten that off him," Sam muttered. "Lois, see if you can find Mike's tool kit. Bring me a pair of nippers and a hacksaw blade."

"No, Sam, don't touch it," Mike's voice rang out as Lois turned to head out of the bedroom. "It's designed to put out a killing shock if the internal circuits are broken."

Mike stepped out of the doorway allowing Martha and Jonathan to get past him. Martha ran to her son. "Oh, baby, what did those monsters do to you?" She caressed his face, afraid to touch anywhere else for fear of hurting him. He had several day's growth of beard, and it scratched a little, but she didn't care.

Clark threw his good arm around her, pulling her close. "Mom?"

"It's okay, honey," she assured him. "Your dad and I are here and we're not going to let anything else happen to you."

* * *

"Targets are in sight," the sniper leader announced softly into the headset. His associates called him Kras and he was among the best, hand picked by Straker for this operation. He recognized four of the men in the alley below. Two more were unknowns, but in an operation such as this one, the only non-targets were the people he was assigned to protect - the six people currently in the apartment, the three members of the Kent family, especially the boy, and the three Lanes.

He sensed rather than saw a shadow falling over him. He rolled over, pulling a throwing knife out of its sheath and throwing it in a single seamless motion. The other man was down, a knife through his throat. The man gurgled as he tried to pull the knife out. Kras was on his feet, finishing the job before his target hit the tarred roof. He cleaned the bloody knife on his victim's clothes and went back to his station.

"One down," he murmured into his head set. From his vantage point, he could see Jerry Tauben call out to the Bureau 39 men, demanding their surrender. Both ends of the alley were blocked by MPD panda cars and armed police. There could be no escape for Myerson's men.

A shot rang out, followed by a fusillade of fire.

* * *

Inside the apartment, they heard the shots. Lois started toward the kitchen, to one of the windows overlooking the alley. Mike knocked her to the floor.

In the bedroom, Martha and Jonathan pulled Clark, and the bedcovers, off the bed, holding him down and bundling him up as he struggled to get off the floor. "Clark, honey, stay down," Martha insisted.

"Mom, I have to..."

"You don't have to do anything right now, honey. Except stay quiet," Martha ordered. The kitchen window exploded.

* * *

In the American Bistro, the shots were also heard. Straker stood as the patrons began to worry, then panic. The several of the kitchen staff ran out of the back area, away from the gunfire.

"Everyone stay calm. Stay inside the building, away from the windows, please," he announced. "This is a police matter and it's being handled." He didn't stop to see if his orders were obeyed, heading toward the kitchen and the back door. Out of sight of the restaurant patrons, he pulled out his gun, an ASP 9mm, and headed toward the back door.

A man in military fatigues was standing just inside the back door, holding a gun on two of

the kitchen staff. *Myerson*.

"It's over, Myerson," Straker announced. "Put down the gun."

"It's not over until we know what that damned alien has planned for us," Myerson said. "It's not over until that alien bastard is dead. Until we have him laid out on a slab for study."

"And how do you plan to do that?" Straker asked softly. The longer he could keep Myerson talking, the greater the chances the other man would make a mistake. Straker noted the confused expressions on the two cooks. That was something to be dealt with later, if necessary.

Myerson's expression turned sly and he put a hand into his pocket. "You people make me sick. You have access to all this tech, stuff my people found for you, and you won't use it. You won't do what needs to be done. You're all so in love with the pretty boy who can fly that you can't see how dangerous he is. You're soft, Straker."

In his peripheral vision, Straker saw the two cooks exchange a look and slowly move apart.

Myerson noticed. "Hold it right there!" he ordered the two white-coated men.

"You can't take out all three of us," the taller cook said. "Shoot one and the other two will take you out."

"And you can't get to me before I do this," Myerson said, pulling a small box from his pocket and pressing a blue button with his thumb.

* * *

The shooting in the alley had stopped. Mike peeked out the shattered window to see Metropolis police officers wearing flak jackets coming out from behind their cars to check on the five men who were on the ground.

Lois pulled herself to her feet. "Is it over?" she asked.

"I think so, maybe," Mike told her.

In the bedroom, Martha's thoughts were racing. "I need something to act as an insulator. Rubber, glass, wood, anything that won't carry a current."

"Latex?" Sam asked. He pulled a bag of latex gloves from his medical bag and handed it to her.

"I also need some insulated wire, an extension cord, anything," Martha added, tearing open the bag and started stuffing the gloves between the metal band and Clark's neck. Clark whimpered at the pain of the torque touching his neck, hands pressing, even temporarily, against his throat. "I'm sorry, honey, I'm so sorry," Martha kept repeating to her son. Pain was the last thing she wanted to cause him, but it couldn't be helped.

Jonathan disappeared a moment, then returned with a white extension cord. He already had a pocketknife out and had cut both ends off the cord. He stripped the insulation off both ends and handed the wire and the knife to his wife. She scraped at the surface of the torque then wrapped the raw wire around the scraped off area of the metal band. Jonathan took the other end of the wire, taking it into the bathroom. Sparks flew as he wrapped it around the nearest cold water pipe he could find.

Martha screamed. "Clark!"

Jonathan came running to see Clark's body arching off the floor, then collapse. Sam ran over to them, checking for a pulse at Clark's throat. He didn't find one.

Martha tilted her son's head back, recalling her CPR lessons, and began breathing for him. She'd taken CPR and kept her certificate current for Jonathan. His family had a history of heart disease and when they'd started getting older, she'd been afraid for him, afraid that an

ambulance would never make it to the farm in time if there was a problem. She never dreamed she'd end up using her training to keep her son alive. *This wasn't supposed to happen this way. Children weren't supposed to die before their parents. Please God, don't let my baby die like this.*

Sam started chest compressions.

Puff puff, thirty compressions, puff puff, thirty compressions. It was hard to inflate his lungs properly. It seemed like an impossibly long time, Lois weeping on her uncle's shoulder in the background. Then, finally, Clark took a weak breath on his own.

Sam sat back on his heels and listened to Clark's heart through his stethoscope. It was irregular, but getting stronger, more even. "He's back," he announced. "But, for the life of me, I don't know how."

"Clark's a strong boy," Jonathan said quietly, but the gray worry in his expression told another story.

"Clark, honey, wake up," Martha said, peering into her son's face. He was very pale. His eyes fluttered open as he tried to orient himself. His right hand went to the torque and found the wire that was wound around it. He shuddered and tried to pull away from Sam and Martha. He found Jonathan kneeling behind him, stopping him from getting away. Clark pulled himself into a ball, shaking.

"Oh, son, what did those bastards do to you?" Jonathan murmured.

* * *

As Myerson pressed the button on the controller, the two cooks moved. The taller one kicked the controller out of his hand while the shorter one simply tackled him, knocking the gun out of his hand, sending him slamming into the aluminum canned goods rack behind him. To Straker's surprise, the heavy food cans didn't fall, but when Myerson slumped to the floor, there was blood on several of the rack ends.

The taller cook grabbed the controller and tossed it to Straker. "Superman may be an alien from outer space, but by God, he's *our* alien from outer space and no f**k *ss jerk is going to change that."

Straker put his gun back into its shoulder holster, under his jacket. "He'll be glad to know he has friends. And I'll make sure he knows as soon as I find him and undo the damage this f**k *ss jerk has already done." He nodded to Myerson, moaning in pain. "See to it that Colonels Freeman or Foster are the ones to take him away. Tell the police officers you're under orders of General Straker. And don't let him get away."

"Sergeant Warren, sir," the tall man introduced himself. "This is Corporal Singer. And yes, sir, we'll see to it." Both men glared at Myerson. Singer picked up the fallen gun and held it on Myerson.

Straker gave them a nod, headed into the alley and up the stairs to the apartment above. Myerson had triggered the torque. Straker just hoped it hadn't been set on the highest setting, that the young man he'd been trying to save wasn't dead.

Jonathan was seated on the bedroom floor, holding his grown son in his arms, rocking him as one would a small child. Martha was beside them, murmuring reassurances.

Lois was on the floor beside the bed. "It's okay, Clark, it's over," she was saying.

Clark was shivering. "He's still out there... I can feel him... He's going to come after me..."

"Myerson isn't coming after anyone ever again," Straker announced. "Most, if not all, of the rest of his team is dead. We'll pick up any stragglers after we've interrogated him."

"Like he interrogated Clark?" Lois asked.

"Hardly, Miss Lane," Straker said. "Myerson wasn't interested in answers. He was interested in destroying, mentally and physically one of the few people who'd ever stood up to Trask, who'd ever cried foul against him and his madness."

"I wrote the article," Lois reminded him.

"Clark was the one who physically faced him down, but you would have been next," Straker said. "My people will have Myerson's secrets and we'll track down the rest of his people, although it may take some time. And no, we don't use torture. There are much more effective ways of getting what we want."

Straker looked at the controller in his hand, frowned, made an adjustment on the dial and pressed a red button. The torque came undone. Martha pulled it open and away from her son's neck. She handed it to Straker.

"It should have killed him, you know," Straker told them.

"It almost did," Sam said. "Mrs. Kent managed to ground it, probably kept the full force of the shock away from him. It was touch and go for a while. His heart stopped."

"Electricity always takes the easiest path to ground," Martha explained. "We just had to make sure the easiest path wasn't straight through Clark."

Straker grinned. "Cousin, I hope you know how lucky you are to have her."

"I know how lucky I am to have both of them," Jonathan admitted. "So, what happens now?"

"An ambulance should be here in about five minutes..."

"No hospital," Clark managed to say.

"How about a private clinic for a couple days, get you checked out? Then we'll probably ship you off home with your folks until you're well enough to go back to work," Straker said.

"Private clinic?" Clark's color had improved almost immediately on the removal of the torque, but the fear hadn't left his eyes.

"Clark, you have broken bones that need to be set," Straker reminded him. "Believe me, you need a few days under observation."

"Clark, we'll be with you," Martha said. "And we'll make sure Mister White knows where you are."

"And I'll be there, too," Lois promised.

Later

The clinic was just outside of Metropolis, in an old mansion set on several manicured acres overlooking the Hobs River. The anonymously efficient staff set Clark's arm and hand, cleaned and properly bandaged his back. He'd been mercifully unconscious during most of the procedures, and woke to find his parents and Lois waiting for him to regain consciousness in his assigned room.

"How are you feeling?" Straker asked, coming into the room after knocking on the open door.

"Better, thanks," Clark responded. He was feeling much stronger and hoped it was only a matter of time before his powers came back. He would heal, eventually. He was only a little annoyed by the new pain above his hip joint, on the crest of his pelvic bone- he didn't remember being hurt there. And the spot on his arm where they'd had to lay open the skin and muscles to set one of the bones itched badly under wrappings.

"Nightmares?"

Clark shrugged. He'd woken up more than once the previous two nights screaming. "Yeah, I guess it'll be a while before they go away."

"Not as long as you think," Straker assured him. "Get some rest. You're flying home this afternoon, and we've already told Mister White you'll be gone for at least a couple weeks." The military man turned to leave and beckoned Jonathan and Martha to follow him out.

Lois studied his face. It was odd now to see him wearing his glasses. She'd never realized how different he looked with them on, younger maybe, innocent. But the innocence was gone, drowned in the dark pain that scarred his mind, just as it scarred his body. And he'd had such a beautiful body. She felt her cheeks grow warm at the memory of seeing him clothed in just a towel.

She settled herself on the edge of the hospital bed, facing him. "How are you feeling, really?"

"Pretty rocky still, but better than two days ago," Clark replied. "I thought I was going to die. I honestly believe they intended to start cutting me open." The images refused to leave his mind's eye. The terror, the pain, the rough hands on his body. He shivered in spite of the comfortable temperature in the room.

"Clark, you did die. Your heart stopped when Myerson pressed that button," Lois told him. "You were dead and your mom and my dad brought you back. And I never, ever want to go through that again. You're my partner and my best friend. I don't have so many friends that I can afford to lose one. When I first saw you in that cell, when I realized what they were doing, and you told me they thought you were this Kal-El person, I ... I've never felt so helpless in my life. And when they started to hurt you to make me talk, I would have died to make them stop." Tears were running down her face.

"It's okay, Lois," he tried reassuring her, reaching out to wipe the tears away. "It's okay now."

"Clark, I nearly killed you," she continued. "If Jimmy hadn't walked in just then, I would have killed you to make them stop hurting you."

"I asked you to, remember?" Clark reminded her gently. "I couldn't take any more. And you were strong when I couldn't be, when I needed you to be. You're my best friend and I don't want to lose you either. When they took you out of that cell, I was terrified I would never see you again, and if I did, you wouldn't be Lois anymore. That they'd..." He'd promised

himself he wouldn't break into tears again, but he found himself crying once more.

He made only a feeble protest when Lois pulled his glasses off to wipe away the tears. *I'm surprised we have any tears left.* There was a sharp intake of breath as she brushed his hair away from his face and a frisson of fear went down Clark's back.

She stared at his face a long moment. "They didn't take you by mistake, did they?" It was a statement, not a question. "They knew exactly who they were hurting. They just didn't know it was really Clark Kent."

He ducked his head, unable to look into her face. "How mad are you?" he asked in a tiny voice.

"I'm not mad," she said softly. "A little hurt maybe, that you didn't trust me enough to let me know. No, that's not right. I think I know why you didn't trust me. I wouldn't trust me either, not on something this big. Your secret's safe. I just have to get used to the idea my partner is an alien from outer space." She gave him a faint smile. "Just promise me you won't disappear or die on me again. I don't think I could take it."

His lips twitched into a crooked little smile. "I'll do my best," he promised. He cupped the side of her face in his hand, letting her hair tangle in his fingers. "I love you, you know."

"I know," she said. "I warned you not to."

"I know."

There was a knock on the door and the white uniformed woman walked in, carrying a tray with coffee, juice and Clark's breakfast. "Coffee, Miss Lane. Juice and breakfast for Mister Kent." She set the tray on the bed table and rolled it into place.

Lois picked up one of the coffee cups and took a sip. "I wish we could get coffee this good at the office."

"We have our own special blend," the woman said with a smile. "Enjoy."

* * *

"Ed," Jonathan began as soon as they were in the sunroom at the end of the wide corridor outside Clark's room. "Martha and I have been talking and we think Lois's uncle and father may have figured out about Clark."

"Don't worry about it," Straker assured them with a smile, motioning them to sit at one of the tables. There was a simple coffee service on the counter and he poured two cups, bringing them over to the older couple. "It's already handled."

The two Kents gave him a surprised look that turned to dismay.

"Don't worry," Straker said with a tiny chuckle. "All they'll remember about what happened is being worried about Clark and Lois, and helping out. They won't recall anything in detail, and they won't have any particular urge to explore the parts they're missing."

"And how do you know that?" Jonathan asked, sipping his coffee.

"The same way I know that you two, and Lois will not develop PTSD, despite what happened," Straker said. "We're about ninety percent sure Clark won't develop it. He was in their hands for some time and his physiology makes it a little more difficult to predict his reactions with perfect accuracy, but we're extremely hopeful he'll walk away with mildly painful memories rather than debilitating nightmares."

"How can you do that?" Martha demanded.

"My people have had more than twenty years of uncovering things that are buried and burying things we don't want found," Straker explained. "We can completely erase the memory of the previous twelve to forty-eight hours, or we can 'adjust' memories, take the horror away while leaving the rest of the memory intact. And we can do it without leaving any

trace. The drugs are generally tasteless and odorless."

"And you're going to do that to us?" Martha asked, worry coloring her voice.

"We've already started," Straker said, clearing away their empty coffee cups. "By the time you reach Smallville, all this will be little more than a bad dream."

Epilogue

Superman returned to the skies of Metropolis less than two weeks after he'd gone missing. The fact that Bureau 39 had gone after Superman had made it into the papers, as had the kidnapping of Clark Kent and Lois Lane, but there were no details in any of the reports on their rescue. Speculation was that Superman had simply laid low at the request of the authorities until Lane and Kent were rescued by the FBI and MPD, then spent time overseas, taking care of emergencies there.

Clark Kent came back to work two weeks after Superman's return. His injuries were completely healed without scars. He had expected questions on how he recovered so quickly, but none came, except from Perry, who accepted his excuse that he didn't really remember much of his captivity, or being in the clinic. That was, in fact, the truth. He didn't remember much of what happened, and what he did recall felt like it had happened to someone else, which was more than a little odd since he had an eidetic memory.

Lois was the cheerful workaholic as always, coffee cup in one hand, phone in the other. She gave him a quick hug of greeting. "How are you doing?"

"Fine, better than I was expecting," Clark told her.

"No nightmares?"

Clark shook his head. "Nope. Sleeping fine, ready to get back to work."

She gave him a puzzled look. "Did you figure out who that Kal-El person was they thought you were?"

"No, I have no idea," he told her. There was something missing in her reaction, something he couldn't quite put his finger on. He mentally shrugged. *I'll figure it out later. It's probably nothing important.*

"Lane, Kent! In my office!" Perry yelled from his open door.

Clark grinned. He was back and things were fine.

* * *

"All's well that ends well?" Alec Freeman commented to his superior.

"We were lucky," Straker said. "He's a good kid."

"Are you afraid Trask might have been right? That there could be an invasion?"

Straker shrugged. "We know from the Rokan-shou that at least one Kryptonian colony survived. Hopefully, when they come for him, they won't decide to stay."

"Can we stop them if they do?"

"I don't know, Alec," Straker said. "I honestly don't know. I do know we only have about two years until he comes of age according to their law and they come for him. I hope we'll be ready."