

It Ends Tonight

by Kala Lane Kent

© 12-Sep-08

Rating: K+

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. The author is in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended.

The battle raged right up to the very windows of the *Daily Planet*. That was the moment when Superman finally turned tail and fled. None of the newspaper staff - most of them pressed against the windows, watching in awe and horror - realized that he'd left to draw the battle away from them. It was *him* Zod wanted, and he raced to the Fortress to keep the terrible three from harming any more innocent civilians.

"He's running away?" someone in the newsroom cried out. Other voices rose in dismay, and Lois bit her lip, lurking at the back of the crowd. The room filled with angry muttering, some of the reporters accusing Superman of cowardice, most of them furious at the three interlopers.

No one had noticed Lois yet, except Perry's secretary Loueen. Her eyes widened; the reporter was obviously dressed for dinner in high heels and a lovely dress, looking both shocked and determined. Then again, her appearance here shouldn't have been a surprise at all. Loueen couldn't help feeling a moment of pity for the normally fearless reporter. Superman was *her* story, and it must be killing her to watch him come up against these foes.

General Zod and his two companions were infuriated by Superman's abrupt departure. Momentarily taken aback by his sheer speed - Superman had seemed to vanish - they were set to follow, when Ursa happened to glance around at the noise from inside the *Daily Planet*. She saw all of the reporters and interns staring out at her, heard their angry voices, and saw one man make a gesture the meaning of which she could not guess, but it was clearly intended to be derogatory.

That a *man* should show her such disrespect was an insult that could not be borne. Ursa darted toward the glass, intending to find and throttle the fool. Zod turned to reprimand her, but saw the throng of humans staring at them. "Let this be a lesson to you, son of Jor-El," he growled, and followed Ursa to wreak a little destruction before going after his adversary.

Steve Lombard was always one of the first reporters to turn up when it looked like something interesting was happening at the *Planet*. And when the three super-powered criminals busted into the place, he had to get himself a front-row seat for the show. Maybe that hardnosed editor would finally get his comeuppance.

What he saw immediately distracted him, though. The three had knocked down walls to get to Perry's office, and were now facing the editor threateningly. Steve's eye was immediately drawn to the woman in the group. She wore essentially the same outfit as the two men, but when she moved, flashes of pale skin showed along her arms and legs. Very

interesting; Steve sidled out of the crowd of reporters to get a better look. Not bad, not bad at all - nice body, although she had a cold and distant expression, and he wasn't so sure about that short hair.

She turned at that moment, and those eyes fixed on his. Steve grinned; he couldn't help it. He smiled at everything female that glanced his way. While her companion demanded information of Perry - and was defied - the woman turned and walked toward Steve. For the first time, he saw a flicker of something besides ice in those eyes.

Well hell. I knew I was good, but damn, even the alien babes can't resist me, he thought, puffing his chest out slightly. *'City Saved by Sportswriter - Irresistible Charm Spares Metropolis.'* And Lane thinks she's the star reporter around here. *Have I got news for - hey!*

His self-aggrandizing line of thought was interrupted by the woman grabbing his shirt collar and picking him up. "Impertinent human," she growled. Steve grabbed the woman's hands, trying in vain to pry them off.

General Zod turned to look at them, seeming slightly amused. "Ursa, my dear?" he asked.

"This one offends me," she replied. "I shall kill him."

"Carry on," Zod replied indifferently. "Perhaps the obstinate one will tell us how to locate this Superman when he sees how easily his cohort is destroyed. Or perhaps the son of Jor-El will arrive to save the human - he does seem to care overmuch for their safety."

"Wait! Let me go! I know how you can get Superman here!" Steve gasped, struggling to breathe.

He had spied a certain dark-haired head in the crowd, and saw perhaps his only chance to escape the situation alive. "Shut the hell up, Lombard!" Perry snarled, having spotted Lois as well, but the three were no longer interested in the editor.

"Is this so?" Zod asked, while Ursa held Steve aloft as if he weighed no more than a feather.

The former quarterback wheezed, nodding rapidly. "Yeah. Lemme down..." The woman simply opened her hand and stepped back, allowing Steve to drop to his knees. He clutched his throat and sucked in huge grateful gasps of air, trying to get enough breath to speak.

Apparently he was taking too long, because Zod said with a contemptuous sneer, "He lies to spare his life. Ursa..."

"No!" Steve yelled, scuttling backwards on his hands and knees. He had spots in his vision from being nearly throttled, but he could still see the looks of revulsion on his fellow reporters' faces. To hell with them; these lunatics would kill him if he didn't give them what they wanted.

Pointing right at Lois, he said, "Take her. Superman will come and save her. He always does. She's pretty much his girlfriend." A pang of something like guilt stabbed him, but at least his own hide was safe. Besides, with Lois' luck, she'd manage to not only get out of this alive but turn it into a Pulitzer-prize-winning story. The thought salved his conscience.

Lois had snuck into the office, watching the battle rage outside. Only she knew that when Kal-El turned and fled the scene, it wasn't cowardice; he was trying to draw the three villains away from the city, trying to keep down the number of casualties. But that plan had backfired; they were still angry enough to come looking for trouble, and the only group of people *not* panicking in the streets were the newspaper staff. The spectacle of humans who weren't utterly terrified - who were, in fact, jeering and cursing them - had drawn the Kryptonians' attention. Lois had thought she'd be able to regroup and plan her next move here, but it seemed that fate and Lombard's cowardice had other ideas. Thank God she had managed to slip the lead-lined

ring box out of her skirt pocket and into her purse before she had left the elevator.

The three villains turned to look where Steve was pointing, and some of the reporters around Lois leaned slightly away. Jimmy Olsen, however, jumped in front of her and looked up at the biggest alien bravely. "He's lying," the photographer said. "He just doesn't wanna get killed. You guys had better leave Ms. Lane alone unless you want Superman to kick all of you right back to where you came from!"

"No, Jimmy, it's fine." Lois' voice was deadly calm as she came forward out of the crowd, putting a comforting hand on Jimmy's shoulder as she moved to face the three. She didn't like the way the big brute, Non, was looking at her photographer. All of them were far more sinister in person than in the images she'd seen in the Fortress, but this guy was even bigger than Kal-El. It was only the knowledge of the kryptonite ring she had hidden that kept her so cool. "If they think it'll make a difference, I'll go."

"Lois, don't," Perry warned, looking like he was readying himself for some heroics of his own. She couldn't let her editor risk his life.

The reporter ignored him, defiantly staring right at Zod. "You have no idea how much you're going to regret this," she told him. Non reached out, took hold of Lois' shoulder, and dragged her forward; the casual strength of that gesture gave her a chill, but she refused to show fear in front of them. *They're just crooks, that's all, who gives a damn what powers they have*, Lois told herself, shrugging out from under Non's hand. *They'll never be anything but crooks, and the minute we get somewhere I can safely open my purse, they're gonna get a little taste of kryptonite.*

Zod nodded slightly to the other two, and turned to leave. Lois had to follow or be carried, and she didn't want either of them mauling her. Ursa was already giving her a vicious look.

As she left, she heard Perry White say behind her, his voice choked with rage and sorrow, "Lombard, you're fired. Get the hell out of my sight."

Kal-El landed at the Fortress, not quite panicked yet, but certainly feeling the urgency. "Father, quickly," he called. "They will be following me closely. We must hurry." He looked over his shoulder, expecting Zod to land mere steps away...

...but the trio didn't arrive. Kal-El frowned, but Jor-El's disembodied voice distracted him. "All is ready, my son," he said. "Merely make a show of standing against them, and let them think they have conquered you. The crystal chamber awaits." Kal-El turned to see it, off to one side, having been grown from the surrounding crystal. "General Zod will know what it is - do not be eager to answer his questions. Only when he presses you should you tell him what it is for, and then he will seal his own fate by ordering you into it."

Kal-El sighed, leaning against the crystalline wall. "Father, I am frightened."

"My son, you face a threat that frightened all of Krypton," Jor-El told him gently. "Be of good courage. General Zod is blinded by his rage and his desire for revenge - so long as *your* mind is clear, the advantage lies with you."

The hero chuckled wryly. It hadn't *felt* like much of an advantage as the three beat him around the streets of Metropolis. "They must be nearing us," he said at last. "Father..."

"Take heart, my son. I have faith in you," Jor-El said earnestly. He would have to remain silent and keep his image un-projected while the villains were in the Fortress; one glimpse of his old adversary might drive Zod into unpredictable excesses, and they did not want him damaging the very crystal chamber that would shield Kal-El from the red sun's stored rays.

Still the dreaded trio had not arrived, and Kal-El scowled as he straightened up, readying himself to face them. Wondering where they were, he listened for their presence...

Clinging to Non's broad back, Lois thought ironically that this was the perfect moment to bring the kryptonite out of her purse. Kal-El was far away, and so were any civilians the three could potentially harm. There was only one downside: they were flying miles above the ground, and if she hit them with kryptonite now, she would probably die. It was too much to expect Kal-El to be listening at the exact moment and for him to reach her - without suffering k-poisoning himself - before she hit the ground. And no matter how brave Lois was, she didn't particularly want to die today. Not when there was still a chance of springing the stuff on them after they landed.

Non did not fly steadily, like Kal-El. He tended to dip and waver, and every time the other two corrected course, he banked himself in the air exaggeratedly to make even the slightest turn. The first time that had happened, Lois had nearly fallen off -shrieking in surprise and scrambling for a better hold.

Zod never glanced around, but Ursa had looked back with a sneer. "It appears this Superman could have chosen better," she remarked venomously. "His pet human fails to impress me."

Lois felt her lip curl, and only the yawning drop beneath them kept her from launching herself at Ursa. *Just you wait*, she thought. *You'll get yours, you bitch.*

The waiting was worse than the fight he'd just been through, but before Kal-El could consider going out to see where what was keeping the villains, he heard them land at the entrance to the Fortress. *Finally*, he thought with a sigh, turning to face them, hands on his hips. Wanting to make sure one of them wasn't hanging back to surprise him, Kal-El quickly checked the number of heartbeats presently hesitating outside...

...and felt his heart turn to ice. *No. It's not possible. No.* There were *four* heartbeats, four sets of footsteps making their way inside - and one rhythm of pulse and gait was very familiar to him.

General Zod strolled insolently between the pillars of crystal, surveying the central room with an air of condescension. He didn't spare the red sun chamber a second glance, entirely too certain of himself to worry about it. Behind him came Non and Ursa, and shepherded between them was the *last* person he expected to see here at this moment: Lois. For once in her life, his wife looked sheepish as she stood there clutching her purse, and Kal-El stared at her in mingled disbelief and horror.

Ursa saw his wide-eyed, thunderstruck look, and gave him a cruel smile as she grabbed Lois' elbow, jerking her off-balance. Zod looked around when the reporter stumbled and cursed under her breath, his cold expression causing Ursa to subside for the moment. The General came to a halt one level above Kal-El, crossing his arms as he looked around contemptuously. Kal-El watched him, afraid to speak - afraid that the first words out of his mouth would be something like *I'll do anything you want, just let Lois go*. He *knew* that wouldn't work, knew these three would betray any promise they made, but it didn't stop his heart from racing in terror.

"I sense Jor-El's hand in this," Zod finally said, his voice echoing in the large space. "Perhaps my old adversary found some way to cheat his fate? A hollow victory, at best. The end of all his works is nigh."

"What do you want, Zod?" Kal-El growled. Fear for Lois would never disappear, but he had noticed that she stood brave and unbowed between two Kryptonians, either of whom could have crushed her like an insect in a single careless gesture, and he took courage from her defiance. Now his panic was being overridden by another emotion entirely: outrage. How dare these outlaws come *here*, to *his* planet, to his *Fortress*, and how *dare* they take his *wife* prisoner?

"This planet, to rule," Zod answered him, as if he were asking for nothing important. "And your life." Lois gasped at that, her knuckles going white as she raised the purse to chest height. Kal-El caught her gaze then, and he read more than desperation in her hazel eyes. Even while Zod droned about making the son of his enemy into his slave, to serve in ignominy *forever*, Kal-El was trying to read his wife's expression. She looked intently at him, glanced at the chamber, and then looked down at her purse before glaring at Zod. What on earth was she trying to tell him...?

"Absolute dominion." Satisfaction clear in his tone, he turned slowly to look at Lois. "Do not attempt to resist, son of Jor-El," the General warned. "Or we shall destroy these humans you so care for, beginning with *this* one whom you seem to favor above all others."

Lois sneered at him angrily as Non and Ursa each grabbed one of her elbows, Ursa smirking triumphantly. They tugged at her threateningly, but Lois locked her arms, keeping hold of her purse, and they weren't interested in yanking her in half - yet. Kal-El loved her for the savage glare she directed at Zod; if pure wrath could work like heat vision, the General would have been vaporized. But it was weird that she was going to so much trouble to hold onto two credit cards, lipstick, and a hairbrush...

A flash of intuition hit him. Lois *wasn't* one to clutch her purse like that when she could've been trying to dart away from the villains. He had expected her to either run or try to distract them, either way giving him an opening to use his powers. Instead she was waiting and clinging to that purse for dear life. A quick look inside it gave him the answer, and chilled his blood further. *She stole the kryptonite! Lois, you crazy brilliant woman - I love you and I want to shake you for getting yourself involved in this!*

"All right, Zod," Kal-El said, catching Lois' eye and bowing his head. The others saw only resignation, but he glanced back up at her and winked. Her lips thinned to a determined line, and Lois dropped her head in seeming defeat.

Kal-El approached Zod slowly, but the General stepped back warily. Lois' breath caught, and one hand plunged into her purse. Only Kal-El was paying any attention to her; the other three were ignoring the weak, helpless human in their midst. "Halt," Zod commanded while his adversary was still several feet away. "Now, *kneel*," he hissed, eyes gleaming.

Sinking slowly to one knee, Kal-El glanced up at Lois again. The crystal chamber he and Jor-El had prepared would shield him from kryptonite as well as red sun radiation, but his timing had to be *perfect*. The moment she opened the lead box, he would have to bolt for it, and trust inertia to carry him to safety as the kryptonite radiation stole his strength. He was poised to leap even as he bowed his head again, hearing Zod's measured steps toward him. Kal-El was listening for a much quieter sound...

Lois had closed her eyes, holding her breath. It was do or die time; Kal-El seemed to understand what she intended, but she wouldn't be able to keep from exposing *him* to the dangerous kryptonite radiation as well. All she could hope was that he was ready to move in a split second.

Now. The time is now. The thought echoed in both of their minds, Lois and Kal-El woven

so close in heart and mind and soul that they acted near-simultaneously. Lois flicked the latch on the lead box, and hearing it, Kal-El dove for the safety of the crystal chamber. The three villains were momentarily taken by surprise, time enough for Lois to raise the naked kryptonite shard toward Non. Spluttering in confusion, he let go of her arm to swat at her, and Lois ducked the blow. The big Kryptonian had swung too hard and overbalanced, stumbling as the kryptonite weakened him, and with a wordless bellow he tumbled from the ledge.

Ursa grabbed her arm even tighter, spinning Lois around. The reporter didn't have much choice. She slid the ring with its deadly stone onto her finger, and used the momentum from Ursa wheeling her around to add force to a wicked right hook straight to Ursa's jaw. Her hand stung as the blow echoed around the room, and Ursa fell flat on her back.

Zod was the least affected by the kryptonite; he'd had a moment to deal with the pain and debilitating weakness, and he advanced on Lois, his gait unsteady but his eyes furious. Lois hadn't even noticed that the entire room had gone red; she glanced away from Zod just long enough to see Kal-El collapsed on the floor of the crystal chamber. *Safe*, thank God, and she turned back just in time to avoid Zod grabbing at her wrist.

"Impudent human," he snarled as Lois dodged away. She felt a vicious cramp rip through her abdomen, briefly thinking that this was one hell of a time for her pernicious stomach flu to resurface. Ignoring the pain, Lois thrust her fist toward him, willing the green kryptonite to knock him down. Zod staggered, but he wasn't going to let it stop him.

"General Zod," Jor-El's voice boomed. His disembodied head loomed over them, scowling, and Zod whipped around in shock to confront him. "You speak of vengeance, and you are defeated by a human wielding nothing more than a chip of crystal? I see your stay in the Phantom Zone has weakened you in body as well as mind."

Lois' jaw dropped; what the hell was the freakin' hologram trying to do, infuriate Zod enough that the psycho would rip her arm off instead of just trying to take the ring? She drew back, grimacing as another wave of leaden pain rolled through her belly, and saw Zod go tense. Lois stumbled slightly, and glanced down to see Ursa lying where she'd been felled, out cold from the punch.

That was a tiny drop of satisfaction in a sea of dread. Jor-El had not stopped taunting Zod, and Lois looked up in time to hear him say, "You would have vengeance upon me and my heirs? You *have* no heirs - the House of Zod is an honorless ruin, its last son a corrupt and venial weakling..."

The insult drove Zod to act, and he strode forward, drawing breath to shout a furious denial. But what he thought was solid ground was actually an illusion, cast by the same holographic projector that broadcast Jor-El's image. He fell, too surprised to even shout, and the red lights in the room finally dimmed and vanished.

Relief flooded through Lois... followed by the worst cramp of all. She doubled over, clutching her stomach, and a distant voice in her mind whispered *No side effects to humans, huh?* She forced that thought away, straightening up in spite of the pain. Lois' tear-dimmed eyes sought the crystal chamber, needing to know... and then she smiled. Kal-El was on his feet, hands pressed against the translucent crystal, beaming proudly at her.

She swayed a little as she looked at him, wondering why he didn't walk out of there and come to her. The room seemed to be spinning slightly, the edges of her vision were shadowed, and that nauseous cramp in her gut simply wouldn't go away. After a moment, Jor-El spoke. "Please, Lois of the House of Lane, you must shield the kryptonite."

Oh. Right. Duh. Shaking her head slightly at her own fogginess - some kind of side effect

from the kryptonite radiation - she reached into her purse for the little lead box that would shield the ring. She caught a glimpse of black fabric out of the corner of her eye, and realized that only Ursa remained on the ledge. Lois paused, holding the ring out like a talisman, and clenched her teeth grimly as she stalked toward the Kryptonian woman.

Behind her, Kal-El called out, "Lois, what are you doing?" She couldn't hear him, though, and in spite of the pain still growling in her stomach she kept walking. Ursa didn't move, and after regarding her for a few seconds, Lois drew back and kicked her in the side. The unconscious villain rolled off the ledge and fell to wherever her two companions had landed.

Only then, with the last of the combatants safely dispatched, did Lois put the ring back in its case. The lightheadedness and queasiness finally started to dissipate, and she managed to grin weakly at Kal-El when he rushed up to her. He swept her into his arms triumphantly, but Lois grabbed his hands. "No, no, no," she said quickly, and he froze. "Not right now - I'm a little sick to my stomach," Lois explained, and at his worried look she forced a smile. "It's okay. They don't fly as level as you do."

"You shouldn't still be sick from that," he murmured, stroking her hair. "But kryptonite doesn't affect humans..."

"I was a little sick before all this started, if you remember right."

"I *told* you you shouldn't have gotten involved."

"I'm not letting a little stomachache keep me from saving the world," Lois protested with a weak grin. "Besides, I feel better already."

"Forgive me," Jor-El interrupted. "My son, General Zod and his followers are weakened by the kryptonite and stripped off their powers, but they are merely confined in the cells on the lower level. We should see to them now, and give them no chance to recover."

Lois looked puzzled. Had she completely misunderstood the discussion earlier? "Kryptonite doesn't permanently remove the powers, does it?"

"Kryptonite doesn't affect the powers at all," Kal-El told her. "It just causes such weakness and disorientation that it's next to impossible to use them. That red light was the concentrated rays of Krypton's red sun, Rao. *That* removes the powers."

She nodded, remembering the earlier conversation between Kal-El and his father - and remembering that she'd had her suspicions about Jor-El's real purpose in including such a device. Lois glanced over at the hologram suspiciously, and to her surprise she caught him giving her an admiring look. Jor-El seemed almost impressed by her valor.

"Father is right," Kal-El told her, kissing her forehead tenderly. "I need to take care of the three in the cells. Stay right here, Lois."

"We're in the middle of the arctic," she said drolly, arching an eyebrow. "Where do you expect me to go?"

Laughing, he kissed her again and called over his shoulder as he walked away, "Knowing you, Lois, you'd go catch a couple of polar bears and teach them to pull a sled. I'll be right back."

Lois and Jor-El both listened to his departure, and the reporter sighed heavily. Now she was stuck alone in the arctic Fortress with the giant floating head of her disapproving father-in-law. Just lovely.

"Lois of the House of Lane," Jor-El addressed her, his voice making Lois startle slightly.

"Yeah?" She couldn't help the defensive edge to her tone as she whirled around. Disembodied voice of a dead alien speaking to her? *Not* likely to put her at ease.

"My son is not... familiar with deception," Jor-El said slowly.

"Excuse me?" Lois arched her eyebrow, crossing her arms.

"You told him you were well," Jor-El said. "Kal-El may believe you, but I do not. What ails you?"

As much as it was starting to worry her, she made herself give a nonchalant shrug. "I dunno. I'm just feeling a little sick to my stomach, same as when we came here earlier. It's just a little worse at the moment. Nothing that's that big a deal; I'll take some Pepto when we get home. It's not like the kryptonite could do anything to me, right? It doesn't affect humans."

"There are no cases on record," Jor-El said. "However, kryptonite is extremely rare. Relatively few humans have ever been in contact with it. Your symptoms seem discomforting enough that they would have been noted by anyone who experienced them. Perhaps your case is unique, or perhaps there are extenuating circumstances."

"So?" Lois said. "What are the odds I'll ever have to touch the stuff again? And if it's something else, I'll be checking with my doctor when we get home. I don't want to worry Kal-El. He's got way too much to worry about anyway."

"Another option exists," Jor-El replied. "The Fortress computers have an extensive array of diagnostic tools - obviously we do not wish Kal-El to be treated by a human physician. His identity would be compromised, and many ordinary medical procedures would be defeated by his invulnerability. Therefore I have designed a microscopic scanner capable of seeing through the skin."

Lois paused thoughtfully. "Hmm. Definite advantage, but if it's set to Kryptonian physiology, how much use could it be to a human?"

"I researched your species extensively," Jor-El told her. "All of that knowledge is still contained in this program. The diagnostic scanner will not hurt you, and I can interpret the results. You need only approach the main console and place your hand against the glowing crystal."

Even as he spoke, one crystal rose from the structure of its fellows, glowing warmly. Lois bit her lip and walked toward it warily. The light seemed to pulsate, and she wondered if it would burn. It was calibrated to Kryptonian tolerances...

"I will not allow harm to come to you, Lois of the House of Lane," Jor-El said. "My son cherishes you, and you have saved his life."

"Nice trick, huh?" she muttered, though it could be that she only imagined a hint of condescension in his voice. Lois took a deep breath and placed her hand gingerly on the crystal's flat upper surface. It was slightly warm, and the light shone from it even more brightly, until Lois had to squint against the radiance seeping out between her fingers.

Various crystals flickered, and Lois watched Jor-El's image warily. In spite of his apparent approval based on her recent actions, she still didn't entirely trust the hologram ... or the massive computing power stored within the crystals. But if something was wrong - and those sudden painful cramps in her gut had felt *very* wrong indeed - she wanted to know before Clark did.

The echo of his voice through the open space still startled her when he spoke. "Strange," Jor-El said thoughtfully. "I am not familiar with this oligosaccharide glycoprotein. Two hundred forty-four amino acids..."

He felt silent for a moment, and Lois started to get nervous. That didn't sound good. As the hush continued, her resentment of jargon and lack of explanation made her sound slightly snappish when she asked, "Well? Can you tell what it is? Any clues?"

"Some sort of peptide hormone," Jor-El replied. "Most likely, it is perfectly natural to

your species... There is no analog for our race. Wait..."

"Well?"

"I have identified it as human chorionic gonadotropin," Jor-El said, sounding astonished.

"Which means what, exactly?" Lois asked worriedly. "I'm lost here. Do I have some weird growth caused by your freakin' radioactive rock or what?"

"It means you have become ... I believe this means that you are with child," Jor-El said, staring at her in amazement. "How could you let such a thing happen?"

Lois' jaw dropped. It took a full minute for his words to register, the astonishment was so great, and then she drew herself up haughtily. Better to deal with the devil you know than the surprise package you don't. "Now you wait just a minute! What do you mean, how could *I* let this happen? I'm pretty damn sure that we didn't mean for this to happen. Besides, it takes two to tango, and your son's just as responsible for this as I am."

His previous facial expressions registering shock and dismay were nothing compared to the look on Jor-El's face at that statement. "Surely you are not suggesting that Kal-El..."

"How else do you think it got there?" Lois retorted, arched one eyebrow.

"But such things simply are not done on Krypton," Jor-El said with great dignity. "A simple surgical procedure and the use of a birthing matrix completely prevents all such unpleasantness..."

"I don't care how things were done on Krypton!" Lois interrupted. "Guess what? Look around, Jor-El! We're not *on* Krypton, as we *just* proved. Lay off the racist attitude and get over it. You were fine with me when I was willing to waltz around carrying the only irradiated substance on earth that *your* three enemies are vulnerable to when the plan you two made didn't pan out quite so well."

The more she thought about it, the angrier she got. Her delicate jaw tightened and those hazel eyes flared then, one hand going to her hip as she continued, "Speaking of which, currently your son is hauling those fine specimens of *your* Kryptonian race off to prison for trying to kill him and take over the world! So excuse me if I happen to prefer the way we do things around here." Under her breath, she added with annoyance, "Now that I know this, half Ursa's problems suddenly freakin' make sense."

Jor-El had no reply to that, and Kal-El's return to the Fortress thankfully interrupted the conversation. Her heart stilled in her chest at the sight of him, partly from a fierce wave of love and partly with the news she had to deliver. What would he think? What would he say? For an instant, the thought of Jor-El making the announcement chilled her blood. "Don't even think about breathing a word. Let me tell him. God only knows how wound up you'd get him," Lois hissed to the hologram, never having felt this unsure in her life.

Ferrying the three criminals separately turned out to be a good idea. Non and Zod gave no trouble, beyond the General's quiet threat of, "This is not finished, son of Jor-El." Ursa, however, decided to try turning on him again in midair, in spite of not having powers. She'd almost forced him to drop her, and he hated to think what might've happened if he'd been carrying someone else as well. Turning your prisoners into pancakes just wasn't good for public relations.

It had been a very long, very bad day, and that last thought proved it. Seeing Lois nearly killed, in spite of all their plans, in spite of his own last-minute attempt to shield her from the violence ... Clark felt a creeping dread in the pit of his stomach. Surely by now the price of being together had been brought home to both of them. Lois had complained about him

missing meals with her, but now she had to have seen that being his wife had far more dangerous consequences. He couldn't blame her for wanting to walk away...

For a moment, he lost altitude, feeling as if his entire body had been frozen, while a hot coal burned in his stomach. Not that, anything but that... No, not anything. He'd rather have her leave him than lose her completely. As long as Lois was alive somewhere in the world, Clark would find the strength to carry on. Not at the *Daily Planet*, but somewhere. Anything to protect her...

With such thoughts in mind, he landed at the Fortress. Lois turned away from the hologram of Jor-El when she heard him enter, her expression making it clear that they had been deep in conversation. Her frightened, exhausted mien was another dagger in his heart. "Are you all right?" Clark asked gently.

The small smile that curved her lips, so loving, made his heart seize. "Mm-hmm, I am now," Lois said, nodding as she hurried over to him, slipping into his embrace gladly. She held on far tighter and far longer than normal, both of which seemed to indicate that the ordeal had taken more out of her than she would admit. That was his Lois, brave and defiant to the last. *No, it might be better if she walks away. She wouldn't be my Lois anymore...*

"Listen, Lois," Clark murmured as he made himself pull away, and she looked up at him wide-eyed, a little frown creasing her brow. "This is very hard for me to say, but I have to. I love you, Lois, I love you so much. And I was so afraid for you today - I tried keeping you out of harm's way, but I couldn't. Not even all of my powers were enough to protect you this time. And I know ... I know that this ... wasn't exactly what you signed up for. I mean, any human criminal you can handle, you're just about fearless, but this... Three people with *my* powers using you as bait? Threatening to kill you? I was terrified for you. I can't imagine what you felt."

His voice had dropped to a whisper, and he sighed heavily. "I don't want you to be afraid, Lois. I don't want you to worry that as long as you're with me, you'll always be a target. That's not the kind of life I wanted for us together. I just love you and I want to be with you - there's no other woman in all the galaxies quite like you."

Lois stroked his cheek, waiting for him to finish. Clark took another deep breath, savoring the faint scent of her perfume, and continued, "I guess what I'm trying to say is, if you want to leave, I ... I'd understand." Those were the hardest words he'd ever spoken, and he was conscious of her eyes on him. "I never wanted you to be in harm's way because of me. And I know things haven't always been perfect. I don't ... I don't want to let you go ... but I can understand why you'd want to..." Clark finally met her gaze, but Lois' expression wasn't what he'd been expecting. His wife looked utterly disbelieving.

And more than a little bit *pissed off*. Hazel eyes that only moments before had looked at him with such warmth and affection were as narrow and sharp as a razor, her jaw tight. He knew from experience that that control wouldn't last very long when she had gotten to that point. He didn't have long to wait. "Are you completely *out of your mind*?! Did you think I went through all of that just to save my own ass? I've been in danger from the moment I *met* you, you idiot, and I'm not gonna let *that* stand in my way!" In fact, though she was certainly dressing him down, Lois sounded shocked. Hurt. And far from finished. "Do you really think I'm that much of a *coward*? **Clark!** God, I can't believe you could be so dense... I think I just proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that *nothing* will keep me from you! I didn't face down *three super-powered criminals* just because I *felt* like it! I was protecting *your* ass! Because I happen to love you, you big dumb alien! What, you thought I just considered every day since

Asheville a fluke? A way to pass the time? Get real; I said those vows and I *meant* them. And I have no intentions of bailing at the first sign of serious trouble!"

Torn between being chastised and being inordinately proud, Clark started to say, "Lois..."

"You, don't you *dare* say a freakin' word," Lois snapped in a glorious fury, pointing at him. "At this point, I might just be furious enough to walk right back into that vault and hit *you* with that kryptonite. You listen to me, mister, and you listen good. I have had a long goddamn day filled with death threats and dangerous radiation; I do *not* need this bullshit from you. And I just heard another freakin' lecture from your father on disgustingly primitive human mating habits. Absolutely the *last* thing I need to hear out of my *husband* after finding out I'm *pregnant* is that he's gonna be noble and 'let me go'. *God!* How the hell is that supposed to make me feel?"

It was Clark's turn to feel his jaw drop. "You're ... pregnant?"

Not even that reaction, or the realization that she had just blurted that out without preamble, could stop her now. With an irritated toss of her hair over her shoulder, she crossed her arms and stared an insolent, obviously stung hole in him. "Yes! You know, we've been having unprotected sex since December on the basis that, I dunno, you're from *another goddamn planet*. But guess what, Kal-El? The joke is on me. It turns out you *can* breed with Earthlings! *Surprise!* I'm pregnant!"

Silence reigned between them, as if that news had momentarily stolen their powers of speech. When Lois had begun her tirade, Kal-El had half expected to hear that the kryptonite radiation had somehow harmed her. But as she yelled at him, he'd realized that the pair of them were for once completely out of sync. All of the hundreds of little nagging worries that had fluttered around him had disappeared when she said that one word. *Pregnant*. The *last* thing he'd ever expected to hear.

Hope dawned on his features. "We're having a baby," he whispered, and all of the fear and doubt that had been in his eyes vanished. "Lois, I..." He trailed off, too overcome by surprise and unexpected joy to speak.

In the face of his continued amazement, Lois' furious mood seemed to blow away like a swift storm, and she laughed softly. Kal-El's reaction was too extreme to not lighten her spirits. Her smile finally appeared when she nodded, letting out a deep breath. There were still a million little complications, not the least of which was the fact that motherhood had never been something she had planned for, or particularly wanted for that matter, but for now the joy and wonder she saw on his face brushed that all aside. "Yeah, I'm pregnant. Could have been at any point since Christmas, especially since we haven't exactly been careful." Her grin deepened to that, arching that one dark. And Jor-El didn't see any effects of the kryptonite to the baby." Just saying that completely threw her for a loop. *Pregnant. Baby. Parents*. How could those words be more terrifying to her than the events of only an hour ago?

After standing there shell-shocked for several more seconds, Kal-El managed to gather his scattered wits enough to go to her. "Oh, Lois, this is good news," he whispered. "Better news than I ever dreamed I'd hear... We're having a baby. We're going to be parents." He drew her into a swift hug and kissed her hair, murmuring softly, "I don't know how it was possible, but thank you. Thank you so much."

"Stop with the thanking me, Kal-El. You make it sound like I just handed you the newspaper. I didn't even know I had done it." She stood there quietly in his arms, both of them trying to get all of this new information right in their heads. How could she be thrilled and scared to death at the same time? Finally Lois nuzzled against his jaw, still torn by emotion. "I

love you," she whispered softly.

"I love you, too," Kal-El murmured back.

For a long moment, they stood together, savoring each other's embrace and letting the reality of this miracle sink in, while Jor-El watched over them bemusedly. At last Kal-El kissed Lois' cheek and murmured, "So what do we need to do now?"

In light of the extreme stress of the day, the question was laughable. She couldn't resist a snicker, swatted his shoulder even as she broke into full-fledged laughter. "Well, first off, we need to go get the dog and let my mom know we're both okay. She's probably frantic. After that, *you* owe me *dinner*, hero. Coming up here was *supposed* to be just a brief stop on the way to dinner, and that was *four hours ago*. I think I've more than earned a big fat Porterhouse with all the trimmings. I was hungry when we got here. And now, after carrying around a chunk of radioactive meteorite, playing your champion against alien psychos with your powers, and saving you and the planet, I'm absolutely starving - and if *I'm* this hungry, I'm pretty sure so's the kid, by the way. Lead us to it, hero."

"All right, we're going," Kal-El chuckled, and kissed her again.

He scooped her up with a bit more care than usual. Noticing the change, Lois smiled and caught his chin. The reality of what was happening finally settled in as she looked into his eyes. Even as she leaned in for a heartfelt kiss of her own, her mind marveled. A child. *Their* child. Currently growing inside her. There would be complications, potentially huge ones, due to the fact that there had never been a child between the two species. How would they know what to expect? But those worries could wait for now. They had been given a miracle after facing impossible odds. Did it get any better than that?

It was only after she pulled back that he saw the gleam of devilry in her eyes. "Yeah, and you can also get us dessert, too, for making us work for our meal," Lois added mischievously. "I think fresh crème brulee might begin to make up for it."