

When Changes Gather

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Rated: PG-13

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Summary: Lois and Clark have to deal with an assassination attempt, and make a discovery that Dr. Klein isn't always right. Their favorite time traveler, H. G. Wells, also show up for a chat. Part 2 of the "When ..." Series

(Violence and the death of a bad guy who has always annoyed me.)

"When Changes Gather" is the second of a series. "When Butterflies Gather" is the first, but isn't necessary to understand this one. Any discrepancies between the stories and the TV series are because this is a parallel universe. Maybe.

The Encyclopedia Galactica was invented by the late Isaac Asimov. I make no profit from this and I'm just writing it for fun. I lay no claim to any of the situations or characters, except those I invented to annoy Lois and Clark. DC Comics, Warner Brothers, December 3rd Productions and all the companies associated with them own the rest.

It seemed that in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, there was an explosion of scientific knowledge and exceptional researchers. Perhaps this is tied to the appearance of Kal-el/Superman/Clark Kent, but no rational theory has ever linked the two occurrences. Though the seeming proliferation of "evil" geniuses who targeted the Lois and Clark team is extraordinary.

One of the more exceptional, non-evil, geniuses of the 21st century was Dr. Bernard Klein (see K-on warp drive, Alpha Centauri) who, in addition to his revolutionary advances in physics and particle theory, used his extensive biological expertise as physician to Lois Lane and Clark Kent, and later the entire Kent family. He held this position for many years and even in retirement consulted with his successor, his daughter Dr. Renee Klein, until his death late in the 21st century. Some have speculated that his long life was due to his close association with the Kent family and the protective aura generated in their presence, but the theory remains conjecture.

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There are, of course, some who point to what they consider to be Dr. Klein's greatest failure and call into question the many discoveries and contributions to science and society that have been attributed to him. How, they ask, could he have been capable of such innovative genius when he was so wrong about Kal-el's biological compatibility with Lois Lane? Those who ask such questions show that they have not taken the time and effort to properly research the question. Instead, they accept popular hearsay and rumor and base their observations on innuendo and false interpretations. Dr. Klein's original assertion was that Kal-el was incapable of having children with an Earth human female. Given the circumstances and information that he had at the time, this was an entirely correct and valid assumption. As it turned out, his theory and conclusions were and continue to be completely true. That was the case.

However, it is also true that Lois and Clark did, indeed, have children. By some standards, many children, and some would say that each one was a black mark on Dr. Klein's credibility. The answer to this seeming paradox was as surprising as it was inevitably obvious.

—Encyclopedia Galactica

—Special 40 Volume Supplement:

Earth and Galaxy, 20th and 21st Centuries

A building was going to collapse in Metropolis, and Lois Lane was stuck in the bathroom at home, her head over the toilet, with Clark at her side holding her hair back from her face. His hand rubbed her back in slow circles, the warmth of his touch sending calming waves of sensation through her tense muscles and settling somewhere deep inside.

"Lois," Clark began.

"Don't say it, Clark," she warned. "I know I shouldn't have ordered from that place. Again. But I thought the health department said they were cleared."

"Maybe," he said. She could tell from his voice that he did not completely agree with the health department. To put it mildly. "But that sushi looked a little strange —"

"And you told me so," she said. Lois took a deep breath, hoping the spasms in her stomach had finally subsided. She leaned back against him, still sitting on the bathroom floor. "But it tasted so good. I can't believe it was bad. Did your vision gizmo see anything in it?"

"No," Clark admitted. "But the color —"

"They said it was because the salmon was a type of farm raised Canadian salmon," Lois said. She sighed and drank from the glass of water Clark held. "Maybe we need to do an expose on dangerous imported Canadian fish."

"Maybe we need to stick to pizza," Clark said. Lois smiled, but it was a lopsided, forced smile. Her sense of humor had not yet recovered. "Maybe it wasn't the salmon," he continued.

"Clark." Lois knew what he was going to say. What he always said when she felt even the least bit ill.

He ignored the warning tone in her voice. "Lois, you never know."

"No, Clark," she warned again. "Dr. Klein hasn't changed his opinion, and you haven't changed your planet of birth."

He pulled her hair back and touched her cheek. Lois leaned her head against his hand. "But we still have enough love between us to overcome any obstacle."

"That, sweetheart, is something I can't argue with."

Clark kissed her slowly and held his forehead against hers. "You still miss little JJ, don't you?" he said.

"Yes," she said, her voice almost a whisper. "He was with us less than 24 hours and it still hurts."

"He's with his new foster family," Clark said. "You know that's where he belongs."

"I suppose."

"Besides, we may get to see him again someday."

"Yeah, right," Lois said. "We'll be in our nineties and probably be lucky to recognize ourselves in the mirror."

"Al-Vee took him — all of the children — to the future for a reason. The earth is not ready to handle an influx of Kryptonian babies in this time period. With New Krypton destroyed —" Clark stopped and took a deep breath. All those people gone. Even Zara and Ching. Were Krypton and its people cursed?

"Are you still okay with your decision?" he asked her.

"Of course," she said, taking a deep breath. "I just put myself in the parents' place. Saving all those children had to take precedence, even if ..." Her voice trailed off.

"Even if it hurt the parents?" Clark asked. "You did the right thing, sweetheart. For them and for us." Lois nodded slowly in reluctant agreement.

"Lois, think about it," Clark said. He helped her to her feet and wrapped his arms around her. She leaned into him and relaxed. "Our life has been ... interesting, to say the least. You and I have seen things that other people will never see. We've been places that most people will never see or even dream of seeing. Both of us have experienced the most extraordinary

events and been to the brink of death more times than I can remember. But look at that we have. We've beaten the odds and come back from that break every time. I sincerely believe there is nothing we — and our love — can not accomplish." Clark paused and brushed her hair back.

"Now, we've been given a tiny glimpse of the future, and that is much, much more than most people ever have. It's like a sacred promise that's been made, and I don't think those people who sent Al-Vee have anything but goodwill towards us. He was an android, but still more human than a lot of people we've met. Remember his promise."

"I know," Lois said. "But even H. G. has admitted that the future is not fixed. Things are constantly changing."

"Not this," Clark said and there was no doubt in his voice. "Not us." He held her at arm's length and smiled at her. "That means that one day you'll be in here not because of bad salmon, but because you're suffering from a terrible case of morning sickness."

"Well, gee, **that** makes me feel so much better," she said, slapping his chest.

"Okay, we'll suffer through it together."

"Yeah, but you won't be the one with your head in the toilet," she reminded him.

"Feel like breakfast?" Clark asked hesitantly. He looked ready to remove himself from between her and the toilet.

"You've got to be kidding, right?" Clark raised his eyebrows. "Not quite yet," Lois said. "Maybe a few crackers for now. We'll see how things go later. We have a busy morning, you know."

"Are you sure you don't want to stay home today? I can handle the Church interview. It's not like she's going to give us any useful information, anyway."

"It's not what she's going to say that interests me," Lois told him. She rinsed her mouth and grabbed her toothbrush. "It's how she says it. She gets this vacuous blond face and uses that little girl voice, but there's always something a little extra in her eyes. Like she's almost daring us to see through the act." She paused and pointed at Clark with the toothbrush. "Luthor and her hubby Bill had nothing on her. I'm beginning to believe she's the worst of the lot." She began scrubbing her teeth, trying to get the taste out of her mouth.

"Proof, Lois," Clark said. "You know we need proof."

"Veal ge poof," she said.

"What?" Clark said, laughing.

Lois spit. "We'll get proof," she repeated. She gestured with the toothbrush again. "You'll see. I'm right."

"Lois," Clark said, moving up behind her and kissing her on the back of the neck. "If there's one thing I've learned in the past few years, it's to never — ever— doubt Lois Lane. And say 'Yes, dear' a lot."

"Smart man," she said. "You've learned well. Now, kiss me again."

"Yes, dear," Clark said and obeyed his wife.

A couple of hours later, sitting in their Jeep in front of the Cost Mart corporate headquarters, Clark noticed that the world had stopped.

They had just spent a frustrating thirty minutes trying to wrangle some sort of coherency from the musings of Mrs. Bill Church, Mindy to her friends. Evidently, she had no enemies. Or at least none among the living.

"That had to be the biggest pile of bull -"

"Lois," Clark interrupted.

"-crap," she continued, glaring at him from the driver's seat, "that I have ever heard."

"Definitely in the top ten," Clark agreed.

"Well, gee," Lois quoted. Her voice became squeaky and she almost sang her words. "I don't know all about that

construction stuff, Ms. Lane. It's so complicated and all. Didn't you get married? Why is your name still Ms. Lane?' Did you see her eyes?'"

"I know, Lois. She was laughing at us, and she knew that we knew she was laughing at us and we couldn't do a thing about it."

"Bald-faced lying, blond bimbo. That high rise downtown is going to collapse before it's even finished and she doesn't care."

"Of course not," Clark said. "She has it insured for four times what it's worth. She would be better off if it did fall so she—"

Then the world stopped.

All sound ceased. Cars that had been speeding by them were as stationary as if they had been carved from granite. A bird hovered in front of their windshield, its wings motionless. Clark found himself in a world with no sound and no movement; where even the air around him had taken on a light red tint.

An eerie silence, deeper than he had ever experienced, enveloped him. Even when he'd lost his powers after exposure to Kryptonite, there had never been such an absolute absence of sound. It was almost like the silence of death, he thought with a shiver.

Then he realized what had happened. The world had not stopped. He, for some reason, was moving so fast that even light seemed to have shifted toward the red end of the spectrum.

Theoretically, it could happen. He and Bernie had even discussed the possibility on a couple of occasions, but decided no matter how efficiently he utilized solar radiation, he could not absorb enough energy to maintain the hyper-speed for more than a second or two of subjective time, mere microseconds of real time.

Recently, he had been emphasizing and practicing his super-speed abilities because of an observation by Lois. She said he tended to use his strength to muscle his way out of situations where his super-speed would have been a more efficient and "gentler" solution. Why wait for bullets to bounce all over the room when he could move fast enough to take the gun before the bad guy's finger had put enough pressure on the trigger to fire it. His "vision gizmo" could see when the finger started to move and in the fraction of a second that it took to pull the trigger, Clark could get the gun, crush it into a metal ball, and still have enough time to use a bit of nylon cord to tie up the gunman. The nylon was another suggestion by Lois. Just carry a length of it in one of those pouches he had, pinch off what he needed, and use a little heat vision to weld the knots in place once he had the bad guys secured. The police could always use a pocket knife to cut the cord.

Super-speed was one thing. This was another. He had moved beyond super-speed into the realm of hyper-speed. His brain and body and reflexes were moving so fast that the world was virtually frozen. But what had triggered it? And where was he getting the power to sustain the speed now? Why had he entered this frozen world?

He'd been distracted during the conversation with Lois, but now he could remember an annoying clamor for his attention that he had been deliberately ignoring. First there had been a distant, muted impact sound, like someone had dropped a beanbag onto a wood floor. Then a sharper crackle much closer.

And suddenly he knew.

He looked past Lois and saw the tiny hole in the side glass, a halo of glass particles still suspended in the air. Focusing on the outside and into the building across the street, he saw the barrel of a rifle in a second story window. Between the car and the window, there was a succession of unmoving bullets frozen in flight, but all pointed toward the Jeep.

And Lois.

Even the air seemed to resist as Clark forced himself to move even faster. He was going to need some serious sun time when this was over, he knew, but he did not have time to worry about that now. Careful not to touch Lois at this speed, he leaned

around her and what he saw there chilled every Kryptonian cell in his body. A single slim, golden projectile had parted Lois's dark hair, just barely touching the skin underneath. He could see that the bullet had not even depressed the upper epidermis yet. Clark plucked it from the air and ground it into metallic dust that hung in the air above the Jeep's dash. There was another bullet just outside the window that had not penetrated yet. Whoever was shooting must be using a full automatic rifle and judging from the 5.56 mm projectile he had just crushed, it was probably a military M16.

The other clues were not enough for his distracted consciousness. Something else had triggered the sudden acceleration and supplied the energy he needed to maintain it. Like a freezing man holding his hands up to a roaring fire, he raised his palms and felt the blazing power that poured from Lois.

Stronger together than either alone.

But there was one final realization. There was another energy source, another presence, another . . . life. Not all the power came from Lois herself. In the nanosecond that the bullet touched her skin, something else inside her had somehow recognized the danger and reached out to establish and maintain the hyper-speed state.

Something wondrous.

Subjective seconds stretched into subjective minutes, and the prodigious outpouring of energy continued. But would it last? He wasn't sure how long he could stay in hyper-speed and could only hope he had enough time. He glanced at the bullet outside and decided to change to his working clothes. Clark didn't bother with any fancy spinning or tucking away his civies. He left the clothing suspended in mid-air above the Jeep's seat, as unmoving as the rest of the world. He left a mini-sonic boom in his wake as he appeared as if teleported outside Lois's window, but that was something else to worry about when the flow of time resumed. He took another bullet from midair, crushing it between his thumb and index finger.

Clark followed the line of bullets back to the rifle. He could not really say he was catching the projectiles, it was more like he was picking cherries from an invisible tree. Okay, shiny metal, funny shaped cherries that were growing single file up to that window. He sighed a hyper-speed sigh. So it wasn't like picking cherries. But it was.

He was careful to preserve a representative sample of the bullets so they could be linked with the rifle. When he reached the shooter, he felt that his most amazing super power was the restraint he showed in merely bundling the man in nylon cord like a fly caught in a spider's web. It was going to take a while to cut him out of that.

Clark streaked back to the Jeep and back into his civilian clothing. Metal dust still hung in the air. Fragments of glass sprayed from the window, but he brushed the debris aside, deflecting it away from Lois. He forced himself to examine and evaluate his surroundings. Everything seemed okay. Normal. Safe again.

The energy pouring from Lois' body began to ease as the danger disappeared. Clark knew they had to talk. He had to tell her of his discovery. If he was right, it would change their lives forever.

Clark took a deep breath and the world came to life.

Though all the danger was over, Clark pulled Lois down so she was out of the line of fire. He held her in his arms and kissed the top of her head.

"What the hell was that?" she said as glass clattered to the Jeep's floor and metal dust settled on the dash.

"Are you okay?" Clark asked. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine, Clark," she told him. "What happened?"

"Someone tried to kill us," he answered. "Tried to kill you." His voice cracked and he pulled her to him again. "Oh, god, that

was so close."

"Close?" Lois said. "How close?"

Clark pushed her hair back and touched her cheek. "Believe me, sweetheart, you don't want to know how close. Let's call the police."

"No Big Blue appearance?"

"Been here and gone," Clark said. "Let it go at that until later because I'm not leaving you for an instant."

She studied him for a few seconds. "Something happened that you're not telling me."

Clark smiled slightly. There was no way he would ever be able to hide anything from her.

"I'll explain a little later," he said. "Give me a chance to calm down and lower my heart rate back to triple digits."

Lois looked into his eyes again. "You're not kidding, are you?" she asked.

"No, Lois," he said, his voice low. "I'm not kidding."

"Police now," she said. "Explaining later."

As he helped Lois out of the Jeep, Clark thought he heard a high pitched female voice say "Oh, darn" from a window in the Church headquarters. He was not surprised.

The interview with Mindy Church had been a bust, but the sniper incident afterward put Lois and Clark's story on the front page. The shooter was a known assassin and had no idea who had hired him. Clark could have told him, but figured the knowledge would drastically lower the shooter's life expectancy. At that thought, he was tempted to tell the gunman the name of his employer.

Though a patrol car and a detective had been there to take their statements, Bill Henderson stopped by the Planet to follow up the report. Lois and Clark took him into a conference room so they could talk privately.

"So, Lane and Kent back in the line of fire again," he told them.

"Nice to see you, too, Henderson," Lois said.

The Inspector grinned at her.

"Who's trying to kill you this week, Lois?" he asked. "Or is that a multiple choice question?"

"We have a good idea, Bill," Clark said.

"Mindy Church," Lois finished.

Bill nodded, then peered at Clark. "How close was it?" he asked.

They looked at each other.

"That seems to be the question of the day," Clark said. He looked away from the other man and stared at the ceiling for a few seconds.

Bill Henderson had come to know Clark Kent very well over the years, and recognized the telltale signs of a "Kent Necessary Lie" on the way. He didn't begrudge Clark his discretion and given the same circumstances, he would have done the same. Hell, he had done worse than a harmless deception or two in the name of justice. Bill was not sure Clark knew that he had guessed, but he didn't spend a lot of time worrying about it. After all, he hadn't become a Police Inspector because he could sing an aria. He just acted as though he knew and that Clark knew that he knew.

More than once he had wondered how that boy ever managed to keep his head straight.

"Superman said that it was way too close," Clark told him, with a faint emphasis on "Superman." He looked at Lois. "You don't know this part, sweetheart. I was going to tell you later." He reached up and touched her temple gently. "The bullet was here, just starting to touch the skin when Superman stopped it." Bill's eyes went wide and Lois took an involuntary breath. "Another fraction of an inch. Another microsecond and—" Clark stopped and pulled her to him. Bill could see his eyes were glassy

with tears on the verge of escaping. He laid his hand on Clark's shoulder and squeezed it reassuringly.

Bill put his hands in his pockets and turned away from the two so they couldn't see his own eyes.

"Do you have anything that ties Mindy Church to the attack?" he asked them.

"Not yet," Lois admitted.

"Superman heard her say 'Oh, darn' after the shooting," Clark said.

"Not much to go on," Bill said, turning back to them. "Maybe she dropped her knitting." He grinned at them again and they couldn't help smiling back.

"Or broke a fingernail," Lois said.

"Maybe she had gas," Clark offered.

"Nah," Lois said. "Superman would have heard that."

"Or detected with some other super sense," Clark said.

Lois stared at him for a second and punched his shoulder. "You goof," she said.

"Ow," Clark said. "Just saying."

Bill smiled. These two were okay. It made everything he did worthwhile to see how much they cared for each other. And everyone else.

"Okay, I have to get going," he told them. His eyes twinkled. "Let me know if you two sniff up any more leads."

"Bill!" Lois said.

"Later," he said, waving as he left.

They watched him make his way through the bullpen to the elevator.

"What do you think?" Clark asked.

"He knows."

"Of course he does."

"That doesn't bother you?"

"No. I don't know. Maybe a little. But if we can't trust Bill..."

"Who can we trust?"

"Whom can we trust?"

"Don't start with me, Kent," Lois said. She blinked, and the playfulness was gone. "How did you stop it, Clark? How could the bullet get that close and still leave you time to save me?"

"I almost didn't," he said. "I couldn't have, without help."

Clark hugged her and led her to the conference table. They sat and he held her hand in his for a few seconds. Her touch was so soft and gentle. He looked into her eyes and began talking.

"Have I ever told you about hyper-speed?" he asked. Lois shook her head.

As he began to explain, her eyes grew wider and her grip on his hands tighter. When she finally realized how close she had come being separated from Clark forever, a gnawing tension in the pit of her stomach became a churning mass of fear. It was not just because she would never see him again — she would have been dead, after all. But she knew Clark and how they felt about each other well enough to realize that he would have been devastated. And even more than that, it would have **hurt** him and there would have been nothing she could have done to help him deal with the hurt. The thought of Clark Kent's gentle soul trying to deal with her death, the pain clouding his deep brown eyes, sickened her. She could feel the nausea swelling her stomach, and knew she had to move. Lois covered her mouth and turned a few colors before Clark realized what was happening. A little extraordinary speed and she found herself throwing up for the second time that day, this time into the trash can Clark had retrieved. He handed her several tissues and she wiped her mouth.

"How could even you do that, Clark? That kind of thing would make you almost invincible." For the first time in a long time, her voice held just the hint of awe as she talked about her husband. "If you can do that, no one could ever surprise or

ambush you. No matter what, you could switch to hyper-speed and they wouldn't have a chance."

"I don't think it works that way, Lois," he said. "It takes so much energy, for one thing, and I've never been able to do it before when we've been in trouble. I don't even know how long I was in it before I noticed, either. I was talking away when I noticed you weren't responding."

"Then how?" Lois asked.

"Like I said, I had help. It was you," he told her, reaching up to touch her hair again.

"What do you mean, me? Because I was in danger? That happens all the time."

"Tell me about it," Clark said. It was nice to see his smile, even if it was a bit pained. "There was something extraordinary about this time, Lois. In some strange, wonderful way you saved yourself."

"Clark, for a writer, you're not doing a very good job of explaining this," Lois told him. "What is it that you're not telling me? Again?"

"That's because it's not easy to explain," he said. "The power was coming from you. Lois, you were like a miniature yellow sun. No, more than that. You were like a miniature yellow supernova, radiating more energy in a few seconds than I normally absorb in a week from the sun."

"How is that possible?" she asked. "I'm not your personal yellow solar radiation lamp."

"Maybe it was some kind of one time synergy between us or something. Maybe it has something to do with what's happening to you. To us. If it hadn't -" He stopped and shuddered like a man in an arctic blast of air.

They wrapped their arms around each other, slightly swaying in a shared comfort.

"It's okay," Lois said. "I'm okay."

"Except for the throwing up part," Clark said, looking at the wastebasket. At least it had a liner for easy disposal. "About that..."

"Not again," she murmured.

"Twice in one day," he reminded her. "Listen, you know that I loved you from the first time I saw you in Perry's office."

"Well, that's what you keep saying."

"I keep saying it because it's true. But you know yourself about the Kryptonian telepathy, and the bond between us."

"Like when you were leaving for New Krypton."

"Exactly. Both of us felt it. I could hear you in my head."

"I know," Lois said quietly. "I could hear you, too."

"Listen to me now." Clark was almost pleading with her.

"When I felt the power you were giving to me, it was coming not just from you, but from something inside you." She looked confused again. "When you somehow triggered the hyper-speed state, you not only saved your own life, but the life growing inside you." He stopped and put on his most earnest "I'm Clark Kent and I'm telling the truth" face.

"Lois, you saved our baby. Or maybe our baby saved you. I'm not sure which."

"So you think that we, that I am—"

"Yes, I do. I have no logical reason to believe it. I just know."

"Now that sounds like something I'd say."

"You're rubbing off on me."

"I like the sound of that," Lois said, reaching over to touch his chest.

"Lois."

"Okay, you win." Could she even dare hope it was true?

"We'll try a pregnancy test."

"Want me to get one on the way home?"

Lois looked a little uncomfortable. "That's not actually necessary," she said. Clark raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "I bought a couple last week. You know, just in case."

“Just in case,” he repeated. “Beautiful, smart, stubborn, and psychic.” Lois just hugged him a little closer while he rubbed her back.

Three minutes can be an eternity, even without hyper-speed.

Lois was in the bathroom, performing whatever arcane rituals were demanded by the pregnancy test. She was awfully quiet in there.

Clark paced around the living room, taking care to stay on the floor. It annoyed Lois when he walked on the walls or ceiling, especially in shoes that tended to leave scuff marks. He drank a glass of water. He tried to read the sports page of the Planet, but gave up when he realized that he'd read the same paragraph three times without understanding a single word of it. He tapped his foot. He hummed - off key. He crossed and uncrossed his arms. He started to lower his glasses and look towards the bathroom, but he had promised not to look. He stared at the ceiling instead and watched a pigeon fly over the apartment building. Finally he flopped down on the couch and leaned his head back.

The bathroom door opened immediately and Lois asked him, “Enjoying your nap?”

Clark was on his feet so quickly that he had to have used his powers. Lois just looked at him.

“Well?” he pleaded. Would she never quit torturing him?

Lois held up a plastic stick slightly larger and thicker than an ice cream stick with a bright blue plus on it.

“Dr. Bernard Klein has some explaining to do,” she said, then grinned before throwing **herself** into Clark's arms and wrapping her legs around his waist. Her sudden lunge caught him off guard and he fell back onto the couch with Lois on top of him. A wonderfully pleasurable sensation that he never tired of enjoying. When Lois finally came up for air, she slowly unbuttoned his shirt. His skin twitched with every warm touch of her fingers. She looked into his eyes and spoke with deadly seriousness.

“We'll talk to him later.”

Eventually, much later, they did.

Clark called Perry the next morning and told him that he and Lois were taking a personal day. Perry had sighed and wondered out loud why Ralph never took personal days. After all, he wouldn't have been missed, unlike some others he knew.

“Nice guilt trip, Perry,” Clark told him. “You know we'll make it up to you.”

“I know, Clark. But my job description calls for a certain minimum amount of complaining and protest when my two best reporters take off unexpectedly.”

“Protest noted, Chief,” Clark said. “Tell you what, if we finish early, we'll swing by the Planet. And this is really important.”

“Sure, son. Maybe we can get a big story out of whatever you're doing?” he asked hopefully.

“Believe me, Perry, it will be big news, but maybe not the kind you mean.”

“Well, I had to ask. See you two later.”

“Sure thing, Chief.”

Clark clicked off the cordless phone and returned it to the cradle.

“How did he take it?” Lois asked.

“Same as usual.”

“Gripping and crabby?”

“You got it.” Clark pulled her to him. “You look beautiful, but a little nervous.”

“Well,” Lois said. “We are going to tell one of the world's most renowned scientists that he is full of bull... Okay,” she said when she saw the look he was giving her. “That he is full of bull crap and he's made one of his crappiest mistakes ever.”

“Yeah, that should make him happy,” Clark said.

“Ecstatic,” Lois said, leaning towards his lips.

“Rapturous,” Clark murmured.

“Blissful,” Lois whispered.

Their lips touched —

— and there was a knock at the door.

“Frustrated,” they said together.

Clark lowered his glasses and peered at the door.

“Uh, oh,” he said. Lois had heard that tone before, from Clark and from her own lips.

“Don't tell me,” she said.

“Yep,” Clark said as he opened the door. “At least he's not an android.”

“Mr. Kent. Ms. Lane,” the man at the door said. “How delightful to see you again. May I come in?”

“Why not?” Lois asked. “We probably should have expected you.”

H. G. Wells smiled and removed his hat.

“Why, yes, I suppose you should, given the import of this particular day.”

“You mean the day we found out Lois is pregnant?” Clark asked.

H. G. looked a little uncomfortable. “That's part of it, of course, my boy. But I'd rather not say any more until later, if you don't mind.”

“If we said we did mind, would that make any difference?” Lois asked.

“Actually, no, Ms. Lane. You will understand what I mean in time.”

“I've heard that line before,” Lois said. “So I guess you know where we are going now?”

“Of course, my dear,” he said.

“Just tell me this, Mr. H. G. Wells, omniscient writer from the past and future and parallel dimensions,” Lois said. “Will Dr. Klein have a heart attack when we tell him that Clark is Superman and I am his wife and I am pregnant which he said was impossible and he screwed up big time and as a scientist he makes a good brush salesman and that he doesn't know his -” Lois glanced at Clark. “He doesn't know a quark from a gluon and he's an incompetent ass?”

H. G. stood for a second, as though seriously considering the question. “I don't think so. I mean, I don't remember that possibility.”

“Forget it,” Lois said. “It was a rhetorical question.”

“A very long and babbling rhetorical question,” Clark added. He looked at Wells. “Just so you know, here's the plan. First, Superman zips over to S.T.A.R. Labs and asks Dr. Klein, as a personal favor, to speak with Lois and Clark,” then nodding toward the older man, added, “and friend, as soon as possible. Immediately would be better. If Dr. Klein agrees, then I'll make sure he understands that he has Superman's full authorization to talk to us about anything related to Superman. Anything. Superman will zip back here, and we will take the Jeep back to the lab.”

The writer looked thoughtful. “Why not go to him as Lois and Clark and reveal your other self at the appropriate time?”

They exchanged glances and, so it seemed, thoughts.

“Of course, the main reason is to get in to see Dr. Klein as soon as possible, and Superman has the influence to arrange that,” Clark said.

“And since the three of us can't all show up at the same time,” Lois reminded him, “the big blue boy scout has to go solo.”

“Despite what some people may think,” Clark said, looking at Lois, “we don't want to send him into shock and have him faint or something.”

“Yeah,” Lois said. “That cantankerous cranium of his might break a chair or dent the concrete or something.”

“Lois,” Clark said. She stuck her tongue out at him.

“And we can’t go as Superman and Lois.” Clark said.

“To avoid having to explain why Mrs. Clark Kent is visiting S.T.A.R. Labs with her old crush, Superman.” Lois blushed.

“Besides, Bernie needs time to get his material organized.”

“And even though he probably deserves a serious shock to his system and world view for what we’ve gone through the past few weeks -” Lois said.

“We want to avoid any real coronary events if possible,” Clark finished.

H. G. nodded. “Under those circumstances, an excellent plan, I think,” he said.

Clark kissed Lois, backed away and stepped into his high speed spin. A second later he was wearing the suit.

“Oh, my,” H. G. said. “Quite exciting.”

“I agree,” Lois said. “Wow, in other words.”

“Yes, indeed.”

“I’ll be back as soon as I can, but who knows what Bernie is up to? You two may as well get comfortable.” Lois glanced at the writer and forced a smile.

“Hurry home, Clark,” she said. He kissed her once more and disappeared in a red and blue blur. “Come on, H. G., have a seat. Would you like tea? Clark has deemed me competent to make that, at least.”

“Quite, my dear,” he said. “That would be nice.” He watched her move around the kitchen for a moment or two. “Ms. Lane, I sometimes get the feeling that you are not entirely glad to see me when I visit.”

A pan clattered and bounced around the floor for a second or two before Lois retrieved it.

“Sorry,” she said. “You caught me off guard. It’s not that we don’t like you or anything, but you have to admit that your previous visits had us pin balling through time and space and alternate universes and other lives and it’s like that Chinese curse — except it’s not really a Chinese curse but people think it is — about living in interesting times and it seems like we’ve been living in interesting times for so long that it’s getting hard to tell the difference between the interesting times and everyday life.”

“Remarkable,” Wells said, his eyes wide with wonder. “Not a single breath.”

“It’s a gift,” Lois said. She carried a tray into the living room and set it on the table. There was cream soda on it for her.

“There’s sugar and milk there if you want it.”

“Thank you so much for your kindness,” Wells said. “Let me assure you that I am not here to lead you and your husband traipsing through time or space. I have no urgent purpose, except perhaps to offer reassurances and my congratulations.”

“That’s all?” she asked.

“Well, I have to admit that I also have selfish reasons for visiting. I’ve spent many years in my endeavors, primarily — as you said — arriving on your doorstep with a life and death mission to fulfill. You know from experience that there are other Lois and Clark teams out there in the multiverse, almost endless variations on a theme, and I have visited a number of them, too.” He paused and sipped his tea. “For once, I wanted to enjoy your company while not in the middle of a utopia destroying crises. I thought perhaps I could experience some of the joys of your life, though somewhat second hand, of course.”

“All you have to do is visit,” Lois told him. “We are actually very happy, calm, and safe most of the time. Though it doesn’t seem like it sometimes, the whirlwind adventures are the exception, not the rule.”

“I understand completely, my dear. I have no one to blame but myself for the state of affairs. I will endeavor to change them.”

Lois sipped the cream soda and decided to indulge in a little curiosity herself.

“H. G., I have a theory, or maybe it’s just my imagination running wild,” she said. “In all these trips across time and dimensions, we always seem to run into versions of Clark and me, and the people we know. Even Tempus incarnations are around to bug the hell out of us. But through all of this, there’s only one H. G. Wells.” The writer looked very interested, but offered no reply. “I just wonder if there is an army of H. G.’s jumping willy nilly through parallel worlds, correcting history, trying to establish Utopia in the multiverse.”

“If that were the case, it would require a remarkable amount of cooperation between all the H. G. Wells of the universes, you know.”

“I understand that. Where exactly do you go between adventures?”

Wells smiled at her. “Here and there, my dear,” he said. “Here and there. Perhaps you and Mr. Kent will have an opportunity to visit my home someday.” Lois knew that look. She was not going to get any useful information out of the evasive Mr. Wells. She wasn’t surprised when he changed the subject.

He stopped and looked just a bit uncomfortable. “I don’t mean to pry into personal affairs, but are you excited about the impending - umm -”

“Pregnancy?” Lois finished for him. “You better believe it. For myself, of course, and a little scared about what kind of parent I will be. But I’m more excited for Clark. He wants so badly to be a dad and he will be terrific one, I know.”

“Quite. I have the utmost confidence in *both* of you.” He put a special emphasis on “both.”

“In some ways, I’m reassured by your presence here,” she told him. “If this was a false alarm or there was going to be serious problems with the pregnancy and birth, would you have shown up here and now?”

“Ms. Lane, it would not be prudent to give you knowledge of events to come. Inappropriate foresight could lead to carelessness and a disdain for danger. There is always free will, my dear, and free will has a habit of disrupting even the best of plans.”

“So you won’t tell me anything about the baby? Boy? Girl? Twins or triplets? Flying or non-flying? Strange Kryptonian traits manifesting?”

H. G. smiled at her. “No tentacles or antennae. All your children are healthy and beautiful.”

Lois went pale. “All my children? This isn’t a soap opera. Just how many are there, anyway?”

The writer covered his mouth and said, “Whoops.”

Lois rubbed her temples and muttered, “Interesting times.”

Clark chose that moment to return and looked at the two for a moment before he said, “Aren’t you missing the see no evil monkey?” Wells tried to suppress a laugh, but Lois didn’t bother. She went to Clark’s warm embrace, still laughing.

“Just having an enlightening conversation with Mr. Wells,” she said. “What’s the verdict from Bernie?”

“Well, he was working on some sort of space ship design,” Clark told her. “But he had reached a stopping point because one of the engine tests hadn’t gone as planned. He said he’d be glad to take a break and talk to us. It took longer than I thought to convince him that I truly wanted him to share Superman’s data and test results with the three of us. He still looked a little puzzled but agreed, and was getting the material together when I left. I also stopped to see Bill Henderson and he gave me this.” He held up a cellophane package with a stoppered test tube and cotton swab.

“A genetic retrieval kit,” Lois said. “But I bet it won’t be enough for him. He will want blood. Lots and lots of blood.”

“A what?” H. G. asked, peering at the glass vial.

“The police use it when they want a sample of a suspect’s DNA for testing,” Clark said. “Before we leave, we’ll take a sample from inside Lois’ cheek.”

“And then?” Lois asked.

Clark spun back to his civilian clothes. “And then, we take the slow land route to S.T.A.R. Labs,” he said.

“Let me drive,” Lois said, “and it won’t be so slow.”

“Oh, dear,” H. G. Wells said.

Dr. Bernard Klein rummaged through the back of a filing cabinet, searching for a couple of folders that he knew had to be there. The cabinet was deceptively plain looking, but that was one of the reasons he got it in the first place. When the local CIA office moved into a new office near the center of town, they had a rummage sale of sorts, offering obsolete and used equipment to other government bureaus and even certain approved private facilities at bargain basement prices. The battered filing cabinet turned out to be a high security document storage locker, with steel reinforced, lead lined walls and concrete around all of that. Just opening it required special one of a kind keys hand made for that particular cabinet. It was so heavy that to avoid having to bring in special equipment to move it, he asked Superman to pick it up and deliver it to his office at S.T.A.R. Labs. Superman had been glad to do it, especially since that was where Dr. Klein was going to keep most of the sensitive research on the superhero.

Dr. Klein finally found the folders, then had to lean into it and push with his shoulder to close the heavy drawer. He examined the material on the table, selected a CD and loaded it into his computer. A genetic diagram scrolled down the screen. To anyone else, it would have been indistinguishable from a standard human genetic map. Well, most people wouldn’t have been able to even understand what it was in the first place, he realized, but of those who did, only a small percentage could recognize the tiny discrepancy between the map and the standard human genome. Only one person could know that the map was of a Kryptonian.

Now that he had prepared all the material that Superman had requested, he took a few minutes to wonder what the big guy had in mind. Bernie liked to think he and Superman had more than just a professional relationship, but the same thing applied to the Kents, too. They had worked together closely on a number of projects and criminal cases.

There had been a time when he thought his life was going to be an endless series of classes and lectures and research papers. He was not only a good student, but he absolutely loved being a student. Learning from some of the greatest minds on the planet. Being challenged every day to push himself to his limits. Listening, discussing, and arguing with his colleagues on the largest and the smallest scientific questions of the day. Eventually, though, it had all come to an end. One day, though what he knew was just a tiny fraction of what he did not, there were no more classes to take. No more lectures to attend. No more thesis to defend. No days in peer discussion groups. No night before cramming sessions.

It was time to go out into the world and work. Bernard Klein was a student no more.

Then an amazing thing happened — or at least an amazing person. Superman appeared, and it turned out that Dr. Klein’s unique combination of skills and specializations were perfectly suited to helping Superman on a number of occasions. Along with Superman, it was inevitable that he meet and work with the Kents, starting from when they were not the Kents, and forge a close working relationship, and friendship, too, he hoped. Lois and Clark made sure that he knew that information he had given them had saved their lives or Superman’s life a number of times. Amazingly, it turned out that his research and insight had saved hundreds, if not thousands, of lives.

It felt good.

Somewhere along the line, he realized that although he was no longer a student, he would never stop learning. It had been an

exciting and exhilarating revelation. Each day, he knew just a tiny fraction more of what he did not know. Most of his new found exuberance was a direct result of working with Lois, Clark, and Superman. He owed so much to all three of them.

Bernie had been honored and a little proud when Superman asked him about his - personal problem. As the tests and research proceeded, though, he became more and more dismayed at not being to help his friend. It wasn’t supposed to be that way. He had always found the answers before. It was just a matter of diligence or work or research. Every problem had a solution. You just had to know where to look.

Except, this time there didn’t seem to be an answer. Rhesus monkeys, chimpanzees and humans shared about ninety-three percent of the same genetic material. Some of the Great Apes shared ninety-eight percent with humans. That was not close enough. Though Kryptonian and human DNA was a match to over ninety-nine percent, it was not enough.

Bernie’s pride had turned to frustration. No matter how much he tried or how hard he worked, he could not help his friend. Phrases like “cytogenic differences” and “variations in repetitive genomic DNA” and “allelic polymorphisms” all added up to one thing.

Superman could not make a human earth female pregnant.

No matter how he wanted to change the facts, he could not. The conclusion was as certain as the laws of gravity.

Bernie smiled. Maybe he should reconsider that analogy since he was dealing with a man who broke the laws of gravity on a regular basis. Thinking back, trying again to discern why Superman was so insistent that he share all his research with Lois and Clark, Bernie also wondered why the hero had been so excited that he could barely contain himself. As if he knew something that Bernie did not. While he was sure that was the case in a lot of areas, this time it seemed to be directed so personally at him. What could it be? He did not think Superman was going to allow Lois and Clark to publish the research information. There was so much in there that could be dangerous to him and his friends if it became common knowledge. In general terms, Bernie was all for the unlimited distribution of scientific knowledge, but so much of this was specific personal information about Superman. No, there was something else going on, and Lois and Clark were involved.

Then again, they were always involved when it came to Superman.

The buzz from the intercom and the receptionist’s voice interrupted his thoughts.

“Dr. Klein, Lois Lane and Clark Kent and -” The receptionist hesitated for a second. “And a friend are here to see you, sir,” she said.

“Thanks, Susan. Please send them back.”

“Yes, sir.”

He straightened a few of the folders and watched through the glass as a guard escorted the couple and an oddly dressed man holding a bowler hat in his hands. He seemed fascinated by the building. Dr. Klein’s neck was sore just from watching the man’s head whip back and forth. He nodded to the guard, and he went back to his post.

“Clark. Lois,” he said. “Great to see you again, even if the circumstances seem a little strange.” He looked at the man accompanying them. For some strange reason, he looked almost familiar. Bernie was sure he’d seen the man’s picture somewhere. He looked back at Lois and Clark and noticed that the couple looked very nervous, which surprised him. Both Lois and Clark had always been so confident and sure of themselves.

“Nice to see you again, too,” Clark said, reaching out to shake his hand. “This is -”

“H. G. Wells,” Bernie interrupted suddenly. “He’s a dead ringer for a picture of H. G. Wells standing in the door of his

home I once saw. Are you a relative of his or something?" he asked.

"Or something," Lois said. "Dr. Bernard Klein, meet H. G. Wells, author and sometimes inventor." Bernie looked at her, wondering if she was working up to some kind of practical joke. "He built a time machine," she explained.

"Call me Bernie," he said automatically before he had fully absorbed what Lois said. "Wait a second. The dead writer?"

The strangely dressed man sighed deeply and said, "Unfortunately, sometimes that is the case. However, in the here and now, I am alive and well."

"Okay," Bernie said. "Is this what Superman was so intense about earlier? A dead writer slash inventor showing up?"

"Nah," Lois said. "He does that all the time. Shows up and drags us off through space and time, destroying and rebuilding Utopia. That's nothing to get excited about."

Wells gave a pained cough.

"In any case," Clark said, "thanks for seeing us on such short notice."

"Two things about that. If I'd known that you were bringing one of my all time idols, I would have hired a limo to get you." The writer looked very pleased with himself. "Secondly, well, you know when the world's strongest man asks for a favor, it's always a good idea to help if you can."

"Tell me about it," Lois muttered. "Let's pretend we don't know a whole lot about what you've been doing, and you can explain it to us. Superman told us you've decided that he is infertile with Earth females."

"It was not my decision to make," Bernie said regretfully. "It's a matter of the facts at hand that determined that."

"Well, what facts are those?" Clark asked. "If it's possible to give a short, not too technical explanation."

"Maybe," Bernie said, thinking. "First, Kryptonian DNA is 99.6 percent identical to human DNA, generally speaking. There are genetic variations to a lesser extent among humanity, of course. Some of the Great Apes are a 98 percent match, but not close enough to interbreed."

"So, is that .4 percent difference enough to account for the infertility between humans and Kryptonians?" Lois asked.

Bernie was a little disturbed by her expression and tone. It reminded him of Superman's whole demeanor earlier. If he had been in grade school, it would be like a girl coming up to him, sticking her tongue out at him and saying, "I know something you don't." It was a little unsettling. H. G. Wells seemed to be carefully maintaining a neutral expression.

"Unfortunately, that seems to be the case," Bernie said. "Just another fraction of a percent more, and the genetics might be a close enough match. Some of the differences may lie in the areas that enable Superman to absorb the solar energy that makes him super, but that's just conjecture."

Lois looked at him straight in the eyes. Bernie wasn't sure he liked the fire burning in those dark eyes and the way the muscles in her jaw twitched.

"You're wrong," she said quietly but firmly. "Absolutely wrong."

"I'm, uh, what?" Bernie spluttered.

"Wrong," Lois said. "Incorrect. Misguided. As full of -"

"Lo-is," Clark interrupted.

"As full of hot air as one of those big balloons," she finished, glaring at her husband.

"Lois, I'm not sure I know what you mean," Bernie said.

She pulled a vial out of her purse. "Here," she said. "This is a DNA sample from the woman who is carrying Superman's child."

"What?" he said. Bernie felt behind him and located his chair, then sat down heavily. "Superman's child? That can't be."

"It can be and it is," Clark said, reaching over to pat Dr.

Klein's shoulder reassuringly. "Superman's ... friend is pregnant."

Bernie took the vial from Lois and muttered, "It won't work."

"What won't work, Bernie?" Lois asked, her voice low and gentle.

"This," he said, holding up the vial. "I need a DNA sample. No, I require a DNA sample, but while this is good enough for a crime lab, it's not good enough for my test equipment." He looked at them desperately. "You don't know how many times I've gone over these tests. How many times I hoped I would find something I did wrong. I always came to the same conclusions.

"Now, it seems that there is a solution, but for the life of me, I don't know what it could be." He ran his hands over the top of his smooth head. "The obvious place to start is with the mother's DNA, but I need a blood sample. My specialized equipment can do a standard analysis in just a few minutes, but I have to have at least a couple of cubic centimeters of blood." He looked at them apologetically. "Can you get that sample?"

"I was afraid of this," Clark said.

"I told you so," Lois said. She held out her arm. "Go ahead, Doc. Take all you want."

"You don't mean -" Bernie said. He looked at them, a thousand clues and observations coming together in a mind that often worked at levels that even exceptional humans could not begin to understand.

Lois nodded. Bernie turned to Clark.

"That would mean that you -"

Clark nodded.

"Oh, my stars," Bernie said, just before his brain did a complete shut down and reboot.

Lois peered into his temporarily blank gaze and said, "I told you that would happen, too."

H. G. Wells just smiled like a little boy given chocolate ice cream on a hot summer's day.

Considering that he had just met a dead science fiction writer, been told he was wrong about a research project that had been a major part of his life for the past couple of months, and learned that a Kryptonian superhero's day job was investigative reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper, Dr. Klein recovered fairly quickly. He called in a nurse to take a blood sample and rushed to a lab, talking to himself as he almost ran down the hall.

Lois pressed the edges of the plastic bandage the nurse placed over the spot where she withdrew the blood. A tiny red dot in the center drew her attention and she wondered what Dr. Klein would learn from the sample. She sat and took a deep breath.

"Everything okay, Lois?" Clark asked, moving closer.

"Sure, I'm fine." She looked up and down the hall through the glass windows. "Does it worry anyone else that they have a nurse on staff to take blood samples? Don't they focus more on physics research here?"

"I think they do all kinds," Clark answered. "Including biomedical. Actually, I think the nurse is — ahem — involved with the primate care facility."

"Primate care?" Lois asked. "I let a monkey doctor take my blood?"

"Technically, that would be a monkey nurse," Clark said, smiling. "She's an RN, not a vet's assistant, by the way. Some of the research involves human volunteers, too."

"Well, it didn't hurt much," she admitted. "But for future reference, I'd like to know things like that ahead of time."

"Noted," Clark said, and kissed her forehead.

"Dr. Klein left rather abruptly," H. G. said. "Do either of you have any idea how long the tests will take?"

"Don't you have that written down in one of your notebooks, or something?" Lois asked.

The writer pulled out a pad and began turning pages. "I don't believe so," he said. "I don't remember making a note of that

detail.”

“H. G., I think Lois was being a bit facetious,” Clark said.
“Oh, yes. Of course.”

“If anyone needs anything, I can run out and pick up something,” Clark said. “Or we can get something out of the machines down the hall.”

Lois shook her head. “They have their own vending machines?”

“Complete with double fudge crunch bars,” Clark said. Lois’ eyes brightened, then she sighed and leaned back.

“I think I may have to lay off the double fudge bars for a while,” she said. “I’m going to look like a whale soon enough, and I should be eating healthy foods for the baby, anyway.”

“Good idea,” Clark said. “Based on past experience, though, we wouldn’t have time to go out for something. Since he built this new machine he is always bragging about, he has never been gone for more than ten or fifteen minutes. He seemed very, very excited when he left so I don’t think he’s going to waste any time.”

“Think he will be okay?” Lois asked.

Clark lowered his glasses. “Well, he looks okay. He’s grinning like a hyena and humming.” He pushed his glasses back into place. “Actually, he looks happy.”

“Happy?” Lois asked.

“Of course, he’s happy,” Wells said. “He is engaged in the passion of his life, learning, and perhaps helping good friends at the same time.”

“Even if it means he’s made a mistake somewhere?” Lois asked.

“Indeed,” H. G. answered. “Mistakes are an annoyance only because they stand in the way of truth. If he ultimately arrives at the truth, then the little bumps along the way are inconsequential.”

“Think he remembers about Clark and Superman?” Lois asked.

“Somewhere inside he is aware of the revelation,” Wells said. “But at the moment, that is a minor point. He is currently engaged in a higher purpose.”

Clark’s head jerked up, as though hearing something in the distance.

“Not now,” Lois muttered. “An emergency?”

“I hope not,” Clark answered. “Dr. Klein dropped a clipboard and said, ‘Oh, no.’ It wasn’t a good ‘oh, no’ either.”

They were not surprised when he appeared a few minutes later, studying the printout on the clipboard and shaking his head. All three stood when he entered the office.

“I don’t understand,” he said quietly as he entered.

“What is it, Bernie?” Lois said. “Is there something wrong with the baby?”

“No, I don’t think so,” he said. He looked up sharply. “I hope not. But these test results...”

“What is it, Bernie?” Clark asked. “Talk to us, Doc.”

“I was right,” he said. “Superman can not father a child with an Earth human woman.”

“That’s obviously not the case,” Lois said, some of the steel coming back into her voice. “Let me assure you that I have never -”

“No, Lois,” Bernie interrupted. “I am not implying that you have been unfaithful to Clark... to Superman... to both or either of them.” He looked at them. “That’s so confusing. How do you keep that straight?”

“Let’s stay focused, Doc,” Clark said. “The test results.”

Dr. Klein looked confused for a second, then glanced at the clipboard.

“It turns out that I’m right,” he said. “Clark can’t get a human woman pregnant. But...”

“But what, Bernie?” Lois said.

“Well, it seems that, in your case that there’s a -”

“Bernie, just spit it out,” Clark said.

“Okay,” he said, taking a deep breath. “Here it is. There’s a reason she is pregnant. It turns out that Lois is not completely human.”

Lois and Clark both might have collapsed if they had not leaned into each other.

“What?” Bernie said. “Too blunt?”

Lois sat back down in the chair and took the glass of water Wells retrieved from somewhere. He held it ready as though expecting her to need it. Clark stood at her side and looked like he had just been slapped with a Kryptonite bat. Lois thanked H. G. and sipped the water. While the writer looked mildly concerned, he mostly retained that kid-at-Christmas grin he had been wearing since he had arrived earlier.

“You knew this was coming, didn’t you?” Lois said. “That’s a stupid question. Of course he knew this was coming. He is a time traveling, socialist, dead science fiction writer from the first part of the twentieth century who has been to the future utopia and seen more worlds than were in all the Star Trek television shows and movies combined. Why wouldn’t he know...,” **She** shifted her stare to Wells and raised her voice... “that I’m not human!”

“Ms. Lane,” he said, undeterred by her mini-babble. “You and Mr. Kent are two of the most human people I have ever had the pleasure to meet. But perhaps we should allow Dr. Klein to explain what he means by his rather startling statement.”

Lois felt Clark’s warm hand on her shoulder and she reached up to cover it with hers. He leaned over and brought his face close.

“You know it’s going to be okay, Lois,” he said. Then he kissed her with an intensity that had her toes tingling and her breathing a bit labored. The warm feeling throughout her body told her he was right. He was always right, darn him. She touched his cheek as he pulled away, then held his hand again.

“Without giving you a crash course in advance genetics, you still have to understand that although almost all aspects of living organisms are controlled by their genetic make up, the reality is not that simple,” Dr. Klein began. “Combinations of genes control characteristics. Multiple genes seem to control the same trait. When genes turn on and off during the development, affect how the organism reacts to the genetic control. Do you know that a particular genetic defect causes two completely different disorders depending on whether the defective gene is from the mother or the father? How does the gene know which parent contributed the damaged gene? Then there’s the mitochondria DNA, gene inactivation events, single nucleotide polymorphisms, messenger RNA splicing variations, and -”

“Okay, Bernie,” Clark interrupted. “We know the subject is complicated and that we don’t understand most of what you just said. Why don’t you start over and pretend you have a man who was born in the nineteenth century and two newspaper reporters here with no background in genetics.”

“Okay,” Dr. Klein said and took a deep breath. “Do you know that one of the tests we ran tested the mobility of Kryptonian, uh, swimmers in the presence of the specific chemical marker that triggers, umm, their interest? We didn’t use actual human egg cells, of course, just regular cells modified by a technique I developed to release the chemical. The little buggers just were not interested. They swam around in circles and eventually died. Another reason why we thought conception was not viable. For Lois, things were a little different. I used some of the stored samples and ran the same test with a few of her blood cells stimulated to release the chemical marker, and observed an almost opposite result. The swimmers battered themselves into oblivion against the barrier between them and the cells. They seemed driven to achieve fertilization by any means.” He stopped

and looked thoughtful.

“Unless you want to stay constantly pregnant, I suggest multiple methods of birth control,” he said. “Or abstention.”

“Birth control,” they both said quickly, then turned a few interesting shades of red.

“What about the ‘not human’ part?” Clark asked.

“Not that we’re not enjoying being completely embarrassed by a public discussion of the most intimate details of our lives,” Lois said.

“Let’s use a simple scenario,” Dr. Klein said, ignoring Lois’ last remark. “These are not the actual facts and figures, and as I said, there are more factors to consider than just gene similarity.” They nodded.

“Though it’s not generally known outside scientific circles, genetic archeologists have noted that for the past few thousand years, the human genome has been undergoing a rapid change, relatively speaking. Random mutations and variations were beginning to become permanent parts of the genetic map. Okay, so far?” Dr. Klein asked them.

“Sounds like what we learned in basic science classes,” Clark said.

“To some extent, it is,” Bernie said. H. G. looked for a second as though he wanted to make a comment, but shook his head and Dr. Klein continued. “That’s always happened through the history of life on the planet, but the process seems to be intensifying and moving toward some specific goal. We have no idea what the eventual outcome could be, but the results lead me to believe that the human and Kryptonian genomes are converging.

“Let’s say, for example,” he continued, “that there were a thousand intrinsic differences between the Kryptonian gene map and a human one. Because of the historically recent genetic changes, you could expect a randomly selected individual to match one or two of those markers.”

“So they would be .1 or .2 percent Kryptonian?” Lois asked.

“They would be zero percent Kryptonian,” Bernie said. “It’s just that a couple of indicators would match instead of being different. In very rare instances, we could find 3 or 4 matches. Until we tested Lois,” he said, watching her face. “In your case, there were over 600 matches.”

“So I’m not human?” Lois said, squeezing Clark’s hand in an iron grip.

“Not completely,” Bernie said. “But neither is Clark, as it turns out. It’s as though that on this entire planet, there was only one woman born who could be a mate to Superman. And that woman is you, Lois.”

“Does this mean that if I had never met Clark, I would never have been able to have children?” Lois asked.

“No, oddly enough,” Bernie said. “The results are just preliminary, of course, but it looks as though you are almost halfway between the human and Kryptonian genetic maps. You would have no trouble conceiving with either.”

“Don’t get any ideas,” Clark warned, smiling at her.

“Well, I have plenty of ideas, but they all involve you,” she said.

“Good.”

“You have a sister, don’t you, Lois?” Bernie asked.

“Yes, Lucy. She’s a little younger than I am.”

“If you can talk her into it, I’d be interested in her genetic map, too,” Bernie said. “I suspect that she may be at the high end of the match, too, though probably nowhere near you. Maybe as many as ten. It wouldn’t hurt to test your mother and father, too.”

“Do you think that’s necessary, Bernie?” Lois asked. “If you knew my family as I do, you might not be so anxious to have them visit.”

“Well, we’ve been tracking the changes for a while,” he said. “Anyone related to you would be a great help to this project. You have to understand that we were working on this years before

Superman showed up. We didn’t understand what the changes meant, of course, but we did know that if they continued, a few thousand years from now although humanity’s appearance would not change to any extent, there would be a fundamental genetic revolution. If there are more people like you, Lois, that would mean the world could be changing not in thousands of years, but in hundreds.”

“So you’re saying that although I’m not an alien, I am a mutant,” Lois said.

“We’re all mutants,” Bernie said. “If not, our ancestors would never have crawled out of the ocean. Or we’d still be wearing fur and leather and living in caves. Sort of like my cousin, come to think of it.” He smiled at her. “I’d like to think that this is a wonderful miracle that will enable two of the best people I know to bring a new life into the world.”

H. G. Wells, who had been watching quietly through Bernie’s explanation and the subsequent conversation, clapped his hands and said, “Here, here.” He pulled his watch from his vest pocket and looked at them regretfully.

“It’s time that I take my leave as I have pressing business elsewhere,” he told them. “Dr. Klein, I am delighted to have made your acquaintance, sir.” The writer’s eyes twinkled. “I believe you may have interesting times ahead.”

“Where have I heard that before?” Lois said.

“Quite,” H. G. said. “And as for you two,” he said to Lois and Clark. “There is so much of your life to come, my friends. Trials and tribulations, and triumphs most of all. Though it seems that I have told you so much about your future lives and Utopia, be assured that it is only a tiny part of the whole truth. You’ve seen but a brief flash of light in a brilliantly bright world.” He pulled out a small device from another pocket and pressed a few buttons.

“Mr. Kent, Ms. Lane, please remember that there is a reason and purpose to all things, even if they are not readily apparent. But some day, my friends, I promise. Some day the reasons will be known.”

He touched a final button and a time windows opened. H. G. Wells stepped through and was gone.

“Wow,” Dr. Klein said. “Do you think he’d let me borrow that for a while?” They shook their heads. “No? Well, could you at least ask if he pops up again?” They shook their heads again. Dr. Klein looked disappointed, but said nothing.

Clark glanced at his wife’s thoughtful, beautiful face as he drove them to the Daily Planet building.

“Welcome to my world,” he said.

She looked over at him and said, “Alien.”

“Mutant,” he answered, taking her hand.

“Ain’t that a kick in the head?” Lois said. “Bernie kept talking about humanity’s genetics changing. I wonder if that’s not part of why those Kryptonian babies were sent to the future?”

Clark shrugged. “That’s as good a reason as any.”

Lois leaned back against the seat and momentarily closed her eyes. “Why is it that no matter how much H. G. tells us, we’re always left with more questions than answers when he leaves?”

“Yeah, I noticed that. He seems to enjoy throwing out these little teasers about ‘Things to Come.’”

“Okay, clever H. G. Wells movie reference,” Lois said.

“Well, I thought so,” he said, lifting her hand and kissing it tenderly.

“Eyes on the road, flyboy,” she said. “You have a wife and baby to protect.”

“I can do that,” he said. “I will always do that.”

“Speaking of which,” Lois said. “What are we going to do about Mindy Church?”

“Do you have any suggestions?”

“Handcuff her hands and feet, stuff her in a trunk wrapped

with chains, and drop her in the middle of the Atlantic?” she offered.

“Don’t tempt me,” Clark said. “After what she did yesterday...” Lois saw that his jaw was clenched together. He literally could have bitten through steel at that moment.

“I think we need something a little more creative,” Lois said, looking into the distance. “If, as we suspect, Mindy inherited the Church criminal empire, then she has plenty of reason to want us dead.”

“Even without the story on the shoddy construction at the Church high rise.”

“Right. So Ms. Church has a problem — us — and she just can’t seem to solve.”

“If we could find proof that she’s the one who hired the assassin,” Clark said, “then maybe Bill Henderson could get a warrant to raid the Costmart ‘secret’ headquarters we think is underground, and find enough there to implicate her in other crimes.”

“I wonder,” Lois said. Her voice trailed off and Clark looked over. He recognized that distant stare.

“Uh, oh,” he said. “What’s going through that devious brain of yours?”

“Just wondering,” Lois said, “if Mindy Church believes in that old saying, ‘If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again?’”

“Probably,” Clark said. “And this helps how?”

“You’ll see, farm boy,” Lois said, grabbing the phone from her purse. “First, I’m calling Perry and let him know we have to make another detour, then we’re going to see Bill.”

“Why do I just know, down in the very depths of my soul, that I’m not going to like this?” Clark asked no one in particular. “I’m not going to like this, am I?” he said, directing that question at Lois.

“Maybe,” she replied, punching the Planet’s number. “We’ll see.”

Clark took a deep breath. “We’ll see,” he muttered. “I’ve heard this tune before, usually just before things blow up in our faces.”

“Good thing you have a tough face, then,” Lois said, and grinned at him. “Did you know that Tokyo’s official name is Tokyo-to, which means ‘Tokyo Metropolitan?’”

Two weeks after that incompetent boob failed to kill Lois Lane and Clark Kent, Mindy Church twirled a lit cigar in her fingers, slammed the latest edition of the Daily Planet down on her desk and wondered if she should have Winston killed. After all, he was the idiot who hired the boob who could not do the job. So that made it all his fault. The only reason she hesitated was because Winston had been a faithful - if not overly bright — employee for over five years. It might be easier to let him live than to train someone else to fawn appropriately. She pulled the top drawer of her desk open and toyed with the bright red button there. It controlled a series of heavy duty electrical relays that, when tripped, sent several thousand volts surging through the chair on the other side of the desk. Enough to fry to a golden crispness anyone who happened to be sitting in the chair.

Mindy sighed. Sometimes it was tough being her. To kill or not to kill? She would wait to hear what he had to say. When he called earlier, he had claimed to have a foolproof solution to the Lane-Kent problem. If so, maybe he would live.

Maybe not.

Darn them, Lane and Kent were at it again. Accusing Church Industries of using inferior building materials and shoddy workmanship to save money on the new high rise. Even worse, they accused her of not caring because she had it insured for several times what it cost. So what if it fell down? they asked. It would just make her richer.

The whole thing was just so infuriating. True, but still

infuriating.

But the attorneys said she couldn’t even sue them for libel. They hadn’t offered any proof, but the article had been an opinion piece about a “hypothetical” organization and what would happen if such a situation existed. They thought they were so smart. It was obvious what “hypothetical” company they were talking about. Surely those overpaid lawyers could think of something to stop them. No, mostly they told her what she could not do. Well, she’d show them a thing or two that she *could* do. Mindy had not given up yet.

The sub-sub basement of the Cost Mart corporate headquarters, in a hidden office lined with lead and sound proofed against prying ears, was one of the few places where Mindy felt safe. A similar arrangement had worked for Bill Church and now it worked for her. Except that she was smarter and more careful than her husband. That was why she was sitting at a mahogany desk, and he was eating beans off a plastic plate behind bars. If that Super Guy ever found this place and tried to break in, alarms would sound, and the security system would automatically destroy any inconvenient evidence that might disrupt her life. Replacing the information would be a major pain, but at least she would be free to go shopping in the meantime.

“Mr. Winston is here,” her male secretary said. Mindy smiled. Now him, she would let live.

“Send him in,” she said.

“Boss, I’ve found him!” Winston said as he walked through the door.

“Winston, you know I don’t like riddles,” she said in her little girl voice. “Who have you been looking for?”

“The guy,” he said. “The one that can get rid of Lane and Kent.” He sat in the chair.

Mindy’s eyes narrowed. She knew the room was free of bugs since it had just been checked that afternoon, and being a few hundred feet underground and in a sound proofed room made the place safe. She sighed. Winston was just so careless sometimes, and she was so tired of maintaining this facade.

“Whatever are you talking about, Winston?” she said. “I don’t have a problem with Ms. Lane and Mr. Kent.” She stared at him intently. “I do have a problem with a few bothersome pests, however.” She ran her finger around the rim of the button.

“That’s what I was talking about, Ms. Church,” he said. “I got the guy to take care of the pests.”

“And where did you find this amazing exterminator, Winston?” she asked, puffing on the cigar. A cloud of smoke drifted toward the man and he coughed a couple of times.

“Well, you sent me to Tokyo to check on a few of our ‘manufacturing sites’ there,” he said. “A Japanese guy who knows other guys set up a meeting with him.”

“Does this ‘him’ have a name?” Mindy asked, laying her finger on the red button.

“They call him the Silver Katana. His real name is Chow-something.” Winston’s voice rose in excitement. “It doesn’t matter. The guy is phenomenal. Deadly accurate with that blade he carries and so fast I swear he could dodge bullets. According to my sources, he’s been around for years in the Far East, working as an assassin for hire, and he never fails.”

“You mean he is an exterminator who gets rid of pests,” Mindy corrected. She removed her finger from the button and started to close the drawer. Maybe there was something to this.

“I saw him put a knife in a circle the size of a penny from twenty feet away.” He paused and shook his head as though he could not believe it. “I threw a quarter at him and he cut it in half with that fancy blade of his. There’s only one problem.” Mindy paused and reopened the drawer.

“A problem?” she asked. “You know I don’t like problems, Mr. Winston.” She touched the trigger again.

“I know, Ms. Church,” he said quickly. “I tried to explain

that, but it didn't help. He has some sort of ancient Japanese code that says he has to meet the person who hires him. Something about the spirit of the warrior."

"So, what did this pest control guy say when you told him he couldn't meet me?" she asked. Her voice was deceptively calm.

"Well," he began. "I mean that, well, he's here. In one of the conference rooms."

"You brought him here?" Mindy screamed, forgetting to use the voice. "Are you completely insane?" Her finger stabbed at the button, but Winston had already stood, and backed away from her desk. Tiny beads of sweat dotted his forehead, and he licked his lips. He had seen her reach into the drawer, and he knew what was in there. A faint buzz sounded from the chair, and the air seemed to crackle.

"Give me a chance to explain," Winston said. "We took precautions. He's locked in the conference room, and we blindfolded him, so he doesn't know where he is."

"That's not completely accurate," a voice came from near the door. Mindy watched as a man clad in tight black spandex stepped from the shadows, his head covered with a black hood, with a silver Japanese sword emblazoned across his chest. "I was tired of waiting."

Somehow, that muscled chest and arms looked familiar. "What did you say this guy's real name was?" she screamed at Winston.

"I - I don't know. Chow-, Cho-, Choo-something, I think," he said.

"Actually, it's Choujin," the dark figure corrected.

Mindy lunged at Winston, no trace of the little girl left. "You are a total freaking idiot," she yelled. "In Japanese, Choujin means —"

"Superman," the figure said, removing the hood.

Mindy looked at the chair, where a tiny red light glowed. It was still powered up. She would figure out a way to deal with that super pest later. Right now, Winston's employment was about to be terminated. She raised both palms to push him backward into the chair that still crackled with electricity.

And he wasn't there.

Winston was a street fighter before Mindy Church stole her first car. He stepped to the side, grabbed a wrist and pulled, and Mindy stumbled forward.

She screamed as she fell into the chair, sparks shooting through her body, a glowing aura of bright energy surrounded her form. She shook as though caught in the jaws of a rabid dog.

Superman's dark figure blurred and he had her out of the chair and on the floor in an instant. Her clothing hung on her in tatters and dark patches of charred skin covered her body.

"I didn't mean to — I'm sorry — is she dead?" Winston said. His expression of remorse lasted only a second until he decided that maybe now was a good time to leave. He almost made it to the door before a quick blast of breath slammed him into the wall, knocking him unconscious.

"Hold on," Superman said. "I'll get help." But he knew it was too late for Mindy Church, and that no one could help her. Too much internal damage.

She looked up at him through eyes that lost their focus.

"Oh, darn," she said, and died.

Lois sat beside Clark at the conference table at the Planet, and held his hand.

"Clark," she said. "It wasn't your fault. There's nothing you could have done."

"I should have been faster," he said, his voice low and pained. "I should have saved her."

Lois stroked his hand and shook her head. "Leaving aside the fact that Mindy Church was a psychopathic murderer who tried to kill both of us and our unborn child, it was electricity, Clark. I

don't think even Superman is faster than light."

"Maybe not," he said quietly. "I still don't have to like it."

Lois sighed. "I know," she said. "I wanted her locked up, not dead, but I still can't muster much sympathy for her."

They both looked up at the knock on the door.

"You two doing okay?" Perry asked as he walked in. They looked at each other and knitted their fingers together, then nodded. "Good. Now, I know that everything went a little crazy there at the end, but it looks like your basic plan was pretty solid. So, how'd you develop all this?"

"Well, I realized that Mindy wouldn't give up, especially if we pushed here with a few more articles," Lois began.

"So, we asked Superman to establish an identity as a far east assassin, using his powers to convince everyone that he was an expert swordsman and martial artist," Clark continued.

"Authorities in Tokyo helped by announcing that the 'Silver Katana' was responsible for most of the unsolved murders in the area for the past ten years," Lois said. "It was easy enough to fool Mindy's hired goons. They weren't all that bright to begin with."

"The plan was to get Superman inside Mindy's secret headquarters without triggering any alarms or failsafe systems. Then he could record anything incriminating he heard and look for other kinds of evidence." Clark tried to keep his expression neutral. Perry didn't need to know how personally he was involved with events.

"That part worked," Lois said. "Superman saw enough to put Mindy away for a few decades even without any recordings. He triggered the signal that alerted Inspector Henderson, then the rest of us crashed the party."

"But it was too late," Clark said almost too quietly to hear.

"Mindy tried to fry the goon that brought Superman in, but he didn't seem to want to cooperate in his own demise." Lois gripped Clark's hand reassuringly. "Somehow, she managed to fall into the electric chair instead of the goon."

"She didn't make it," Clark said.

Perry stared at Clark and put a hand on his shoulder. "Son, you've got to know that Superman can not save everyone. He is an extraordinarily good man, but he is not a god."

Clark nodded. "I know, Perry."

Perry stepped back and clapped his hands. "Now, you two get that story finished and in my computer, ASAP, so I don't have to spend the night here." He took a deep breath and shook his head as he left the conference room, muttering, "Alice will have my hide if I'm late..."

Lois and Clark looked at each other and smiled.

Clark kissed her and said, "Does *everybody* know?"

"I wonder sometimes," she said. She glanced down at her hand in his.

"You know, I'm going to be freaked out about this 'you're not really human' thing for awhile," she said. "But when I think of what is ahead of us. How our lives will change. How the world will change." She stopped.

"You know what this means, don't you?" she asked touching her abdomen.

"You tell me."

"Everything we've done in our lives, all the adventure and pain and joy and happiness, was just the beginning," she told him, cradling his face in her hands. "Today is when we start to really make a difference in the here and now and for the future." Lois kissed him gently.

"We've lived our own lives for ourselves up to now," she said. "Maybe a little bit selfishly at times, even if our intentions were always good. We wanted to make the world a better place to live, to help people, and tried our best to accomplish those things.

"Now, we have no choice. We can't just 'try.' This can't be something we just 'want' any more. We must make it a reality. From now on, we are living our lives for someone else." She

touched her abdomen again.

“Now, we begin to make the world we want our children to grow and live in.”

As they held each other and shared the first kiss of the rest of their lives, they thought they heard the echo of a British voice in the background saying, “Here, here.”

THE END

of Part 2 — but to be continued in “When Clouds Gather”