

A Plot Thwarted

By AnnieB (anneblair1976@yahoo.com)

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Summary: Jefferson Cole can't stop talking.

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Clark walked down the street, trying to ignore the strange looks people were giving him.

Okay, so Superman didn't usually walk down the street with the rest of the population of Metropolis. Usually, he soared above them. *Clark* could walk down the street without anyone batting an eye, but he'd left his street clothes at the Daily Planet when he'd gone to answer a call for help. The only parts of his regular clothing he had with him were his glasses and his wedding ring, zipped into a pocket under his cape — and if he put those on, the strange looks he was getting now would look like nothing.

That call for help, as it turned out, had been nothing more than an excuse for a prankster to expose him to Kryptonite, then run off, giggling. Clark had chased him for half a block (after the mischief-maker had closed the box), but the effects of the Kryptonite had slowed him down so much that the teenage punk had quickly disappeared.

He'd expected his powers to come back quickly, but the day was overcast, so they were taking their sweet time in returning. As such, he was stuck walking back to the Daily Planet, while people pointed, stared, and speculated on whether he was really Superman, or just some weirdo who didn't know when Halloween was.

As he reached the final intersection before the Daily Planet and waited for it to be safe to cross, the stares and whispers turned to exclamations and pointing at something other than him. Clark pushed his way out of the crowd waiting to cross the street.

To his shock, Superman hovered about three stories up, surveying the crowd indifferently. Ignoring the *Don't Walk* sign, Clark stepped into the street.

A chorus of horns and angry shouting followed him as he raced across the street to find out what was going on. Giving the annoyed drivers an apologetic look, Clark kept going, determined to find out who this impostor was.

Had he been cloned again? Was this a New Kryptonian who had been left behind, looking to help him — or perhaps with his own, less benevolent agenda?

The other Superman landed silently on the sidewalk as Clark approached. "Who are you?" Clark demanded. "And why are you dressed like me?"

The impostor grinned. "I'm you, Superman. Don't you recognize me?"

Clark reeled in shock. The other Superman looked exactly like him, sounded exactly like him — but he knew it wasn't him. "What's going on here?"

The other Superman shook his head. "Pitiful. Did that Kryptonite make you lose your memory?" He came closer, stopping two feet from Clark, his expression mocking.

Kryptonite? Now Clark knew there was nothing benign about this impostor's intentions. "Now, listen here," he said, "I don't know what your game is, but it needs to stop. *Now.*"

"Stop? Why would I stop? Stopping is for inferior people, not me."

"There are rules about impersonating someone!"

"Those don't apply to me. They're only for little people like you."

At that moment, Clark's powers kicked back in. Ignoring the sudden deafening babble of voices and other city sounds, he lunged at his opponent — and went right through him.

"What the —?"

At that moment, Clark's ears picked out the sound of someone laughing in satisfaction, followed by a familiar voice.

"Memo to self: It worked, of course. Brilliant minds like mine never fail. Superman fell for it — both with his powers and without. Now for step two of my plan — to bring down that irksome reporter, Lois Lane. She'll never guess who succeeded in finishing her — and I'll let the law deal with her. It's a brilliant move that only I —"

In a flash, Clark was in the nearby alley. He grabbed Jefferson Cole by the shirt, hoisting him into the air. "*What were you saying about Lois Lane!?*" he shouted.

Cole dropped his tape recorder. "Memo to self," he squeaked. "Never make plans when Superman is around."

Clark set him down, tearing an arm off the man's shirt and using it to bind his hands behind his back. "What were you saying about Lois Lane?!" he asked again, in a more normal voice this time.

"You should be on my side, Superman," Cole informed him arrogantly. "She threw you over for Clark Kent — and believe me, he'll be nothing without her. My plan will kill two birds with one stone."

Clark picked up the tape recorder and slipped it into another pocket in his cape. "The police will be interested in this." He picked up a machine that sat on the ground near Cole. "What's this?"

"Your little mind could never comprehend it — not with the way you fell for it."

Clark switched it on. A perfect replica of Superman appeared in the alley.

"A hologram machine? *That's* your brilliant design?" Clark switched it off. "That's not even a new design. Hollywood's been using it for years."

Incensed, Cole shouted, "It's not a hologram machine, you cretin! It's a hallucination machine. How do you think I got everyone to see it out on the street when I was back here?!"

Clark switched it on again. Pushing a button with an arrow on it, he looked through the different images that the machine had stored — besides Superman, there was Lois, Perry, Cole himself, Clark in his civilian clothes, and even Mindy Church without any clothes. Clark raised an eyebrow at how disrespectful that was.

Cole saw his expression and frowned. "Those idiots in prison wouldn't help without some incentive. She wouldn't mind, anyway, with the way she dresses."

Finding a tiny microphone, Clark spoke into it, surprised when the hallucination sounded like the person it was impersonating.

"Impressive, of course," Cole said as Clark switched the machine off. "Far more valuable than your little mind could ever comprehend."

"I'm sure the scientists at S.T.A.R. Labs will find it fascinating," Clark said dryly.

"It's mine!" Cole snapped angrily. "*I* designed it! *I* am the only one who can understand it! *I* —"

"— am going back to jail," his hallucination said as Clark switched the machine back on and spoke into it. Switching the machine back off, Clark said, "It seems pretty straightforward." He pulled out a thin keyboard that was attached to the underside of the machine. "And this must be how you make the holograms move."

"*They're not holograms!*" Cole shouted.

A passing police officer heard the shout and looked into the

alley to investigate. “Is there a problem — Superman!”

“Jefferson Cole needs a ride back to prison,” Clark told him. Reaching into his cape’s pocket, he pulled out the tape recorder and handed it to the officer. “This contains details of his plan to harm one of the Daily Planet reporters, Lois Lane. I believe he was planning to murder her.”

“What about that?” the officer nodded at the machine in Clark’s hands.

“It’s a hologram machine. Cole —”

“It’s a *hallucination machine!*” Cole shouted, his face turning red with fury. “You’ll never be able to hold me! I’ll be out in a week!”

“Brave words for someone who’s been locked up for three years,” Clark said. “And I’m sure you’ll be in a higher security facility this time.”

“Especially since we caught you after only six hours,” the officer added.

“You didn’t catch me! *Superman* caught me! He’s like me — a higher level of humanity.”

“Really?” Clark asked. “And here I thought I was a cretin. At least, that’s what you said a few minutes ago.”

“Imbecile!”

“Not a higher level of humanity after all.” Clark gave Cole a look of mock disappointment.

“C’mon, buddy.” The officer went to handcuff Cole. “Uh ... Superman ... what happened to his shirt?”

“I used his sleeve to tie his hands. It was the only way to keep him from going anywhere.”

“You couldn’t have just brought him to us?”

“I needed to confirm what I thought — that the parts that make up this hologram —”

“*Hallucination!*” Cole interrupted.

“— machine were actually the parts that had gone missing from S.T.A.R. Labs.” Clark turned the hallucination machine over, showing the S.T.A.R. Labs ownership tag.

“This just keeps getting better and better.” The officer snapped the handcuffs on Cole and started to read him his rights.

“S.T.A.R. Labs owes me those parts! They fired me without cause!”

“Attempting to sell weapons technology to unfriendly nations ... that sounds like a good reason to be fired to me,” Clark said.

“Rules don’t apply to me.”

“Tell that to the judge,” the officer said, then started reading Cole his rights again.

“It’s Lois Lane’s fault anyway,” Cole interrupted again. “It would have worked if not for her.”

“Is she a higher level of humanity?” Clark asked.

“No! She’s nothing! Just a cocky little reporter who ruined my life! I should have killed her then.”

Clark turned to the officer. “I’ll be more than happy to give my statement.” He glared at Cole. “I’ll also be more than happy to testify in court.”

“Thanks, Superman.” The officer turned back to Cole. “That bit about the right to remain silent — I really, *really* suggest you follow it. Don’t interrupt me again.”

Finally, Jefferson Cole allowed the police officer to read him his rights. As he was led to the police car, Superman following close behind to make sure he didn’t try to escape, Cole hissed, “You’re dead, Superman! When I get out ...”

“You mean that piece of Kryptonite?” the officer asked. “The one you gave to that kid to take away Superman’s powers?”

For once, Cole was shocked into silence. Finally, he said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“He tried to trade it for cocaine, claiming that it was a valuable gem. The ‘dealer’ was an undercover police officer. The kid ratted you out immediately, telling the cop all about the plot to see if Superman would see the images from the Halloween machine ...”

“*Hallucination!*” Cole shouted.

A passing woman pulled her young son closer to her. “You see, Toby?” she said. “That’s why smart people don’t do drugs.”

Cole gave her a furious look, but she had already walked past him and didn’t see it. “Memo to self,” Cole muttered. “Never trust a pothead.”

“That’s ‘cokehead,’” Clark corrected him.

“What?”

“Cokehead,” Clark and the police officer told Cole in unison.

“For someone who claims to be so smart,” Clark added, “your vocabulary needs some improvement.”

“Pedantic details,” Cole said, dismissing Clark. As the officer pushed him into a police car, he added, “When I get out, Superman, you’re dead, and so is that pesky Lois Lane ... and that kid.”

“You really need to learn to remain silent,” the officer told him, shaking his head as he slammed the door of the police car. “Thanks, Superman. I don’t see Professor Jefferson Cole getting out anytime soon, especially after making so many threats, but if he does, you know where to find me.”

Clark nodded, handing the hallucination machine to the officer. The man got into the car, merging into traffic.

Cole looked out the window at Clark, his face murderous. Ignoring him, Clark flew in the direction of the roof of the Daily Planet, already planning the article he and Lois would write after their exclusive interview with Superman.

THE END