

A World Without Superman

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Rated PG13

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Summary: As Clark struggles to recover his memories, the world mourns the loss of Superman. But life goes on for the reporting team of Lane and Kent.

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Part 1

Superman approached the asteroid as fast as he could, faster than he'd ever flown before. He was still in radio communication with EPRAD and they were keeping him apprised of his progress. He also knew they were watching the asteroid on radar. The world was watching, waiting, praying.

He'd been given several options on how to deal with the approaching mass of rock. Suggestions had been made for a frontal assault — smash it out of the sky — but he wasn't sure if even his strength would be enough to smash it into dust. And it needed to be smashed into dust. Another suggestion had been to try to deflect it — to shove it aside enough that the asteroid, the size of New Troy Island, would miss the Earth. He had studied EPRAD's computer simulations, but it came down to a need to assess the problem 'on site'. Finally, the scientists had simply told him to use his own judgment.

The asteroid grew larger and larger as he approached it until it was the only thing he could see in the sky. He flew still closer. Sections of the asteroid seemed to be glowing with an eerie light. It was getting harder for him to keep going, but he kept on.

Failure was not an option.

He hit the asteroid at full speed and shoved. The rock felt burning hot against the palms of his hands. Still he kept shoving. He needed to move it aside enough that the Moon's gravity could catch it, even a little, and divert it from the planet below.

The burning extended up his arms, his shoulders, into his chest. He was getting light-headed and he realized he had gone through all the oxygen in his air tank. He summoned what remained of his strength and gave the asteroid one last heave. The radio receiver he'd been given was spitting static into his ear and even if he'd still had radio contact with EPRAD, he didn't have enough air in his lungs to talk to them.

Dear God, let it be enough...

Except for the static on the radio, the Daily Planet newsroom was silent. Every broadcast station on the planet was covering Superman's attempt to avert the upcoming disaster.

"This is EPRAD control. We have lost transmission with Superman," a professional voice announced after what felt like an eternity. The wall clock said only a few minutes had passed.

"His microphone went out," Lois announced to no one in particular. "He's fine. He's got to be."

No one else said anything.

Finally Perry clapped his hands to get every one's attention. "We're professionals. We have a job to do. Let's get back to doing it." He turned to head back to his office then stopped at Lois's desk. He gestured to Clark's empty desk.

"Any idea where Clark's disappeared to?" Perry asked.

"He mentioned something about getting some 'man on the street' reactions," Lois told him. "I've tried paging him, but he hasn't called back. Frankly, I don't know if I should be annoyed or worried."

"Well, right now we have bigger things to worry about,"

Perry reminded her. "EPRAD won't know for a while if Superman was able to divert the asteroid. Either way, we have a paper to get out."

"Sure, Perry," Lois said.

EPRAD finally announced that all indications were that Superman had been successful. He had succeeded in diverting the asteroid, and although it might skirt close to the planet, all measurements indicated the asteroid would miss by several hundred miles. The planet was safe — this time.

NORAD released their radar readings of the asteroid at the time of Superman's impact. A small piece had broken off and had been caught in Earth's gravity well. It had burned up in the atmosphere, but their projections showed that had it not vaporized, it would have landed on Metropolis.

It was past midnight when Perry finally forced Lois to head home. Clark still hadn't called in and EPRAD's initial hopefulness about Superman's survival was fading fast. The air tank he'd been given was good for six hours if used by a human. Superman had left Earth more than twelve hours ago. It was unlikely even he could survive six hours without oxygen.

When she left, Perry was looking over front-page dummies for the next day. He had two of them. One had blazoned across the top 'Superman Still Missing', the other 'Superman Alive.' Lois knew what the first headline had beneath it. She wrote it — a brief story covering Superman's attempt to save the planet followed by an equally brief story about Superman's arrival in Metropolis and the good he'd done — for all intents and purposes it was his obituary. Superman was Metropolis's greatest hero and yet no one knew anything about him — when he arrived on Earth, if he had family that was worried about him.

It took her a long time to fall asleep and when she did, her dreams were filled with burning and falling and terror.

"Henderson, this better be good," Lois warned. She wasn't in a good mood. She hadn't slept well and Clark was still not answering his home phone or his pager. Inspector Henderson had called her before she'd had a chance go get her second cup of coffee and all but ordered her to get to MDP Headquarters ASAP. He had refused to tell her anything more on the phone.

"Superman's missing," she continued. "I'm working the asteroid story with my partner AWOL and..." She paused as she looked through the glass into the room beyond. Two people were seated at the table inside — a man in clothes that obviously didn't belong to him and a professionally dressed woman. She recognized the man. Her missing partner, Clark Kent. "What's he doing here?"

Henderson shrugged. "He doesn't know. He was picked up at the Fifth Street Mission. I got a call telling me he was over in the Combat Zone. I brought him over here and I gave you a call." He reached out and pressed a button on the intercom beside the door. "Doctor?"

The woman looked up at the summons and made a quiet comment to Clark. Beside Henderson, Lois waved at the glass. "Clark!" Clark didn't look up.

"Can't see you, Lois," Henderson explained. "It's a one-way.

Wouldn't matter, though. He doesn't remember a thing. His name, where he works, me, you."

The door opened and the woman emerged from the interrogation room. "Doctor Jerri McCorkle. Lois Lane," Henderson introduced the two women. "Doc's one of our department shrinks."

"What could have caused this?" Lois demanded.

McCorkle shrugged, glancing at her notes. "Several possibilities. I'd guess anxiety caused by the asteroid could be a factor. On the other hand, these cases are often triggered by some kind of physical trauma."

"He got knocked down by a car and hit his head. But that was the day before yesterday..." Lois told them.

"It could be a delayed reaction."

"Is he going to be okay?" Lois asked.

"Physically, he's fine. A few contusions and abrasions. Nothing serious. Whether he's going to regain his memory immediately, I don't know. In most cases, global psychogenic amnesia resolves itself in a few hours or days," McCorkle explained. "But based on the battery of questions we ask, it seems Clark suffers from what we call the 'Superman Complex'."

Lois gave her a wry smile. "Don't we all?"

McCorkle shook her head. "What I mean is that he's a chronic do-gooder who thinks he can handle anything. This kind of setback can be very frustrating."

"Tell me what to do," Lois demanded.

"Clark needs to be surrounded by familiar people, and do familiar things. It will come back to him in time. Be patient with him," McCorkle told her.

Henderson chuckled. "That's asking a lot, Doc."

Lois glared at him. "I can be patient," she said. "I can be. I can be patient."

McCorkle opened the door to the room and stuck her head in. "Clark, could you come out here, please?"

Clark came to the door, curiosity written across his face as he emerged. There was no recognition in his face as he regarded Lois.

"Clark, this is Lois Lane, your partner at the Daily Planet," Henderson said.

Clark looked at her more closely. "My partner?"

"We're a reporting team," Lois explained.

"Oh."

"I'm releasing him to you," McCorkle told Lois before turning back to Clark. "If you have any physical symptoms — blurring of vision, headache, anything like that — get over to the emergency room. I know you check out okay physically, but Miss Lane said you hit your head and it's better to be safe than sorry with a possible head injury."

"I feel fine," Clark assured her.

Lois took his arm and led him away. "Let's get to work."

Clark didn't say much on the drive to the Daily Planet. Lois noticed he kept sneaking peeks at her when he thought she wasn't looking.

"So, how long have I worked at the Daily Planet?" he asked finally.

"Almost eight months," she answered.

"And before that?"

"You traveled the world," she told him. As she said it she realized she didn't really know much about his travels except what was in his writing portfolio. He'd been to Borneo, Bhutan, Jamaica, Ecuador, England, Hong Kong, Nigeria. He'd worked his way around the world for four years as a freelance journalist but he never really talked about it.

She took a deep breath as they entered the elevator that would take them to the sixth floor and the newsroom. "Your name is

Clark Jerome Kent. You were raised on a farm outside a little town called Smallville. That's in Kansas. You attended Kansas State University, graduated magna cum laude with a degree in journalism. Your parents are named Jonathan and Martha and they are absolutely the greatest."

The elevator doors opened onto the controlled chaos of the newsroom. He seemed a little overwhelmed. She took his arm and walked him to his desk.

"This is your desk. Look familiar?"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry. No."

She sighed. She had hoped it wouldn't take long for him to be back to normal, whatever normal was for him. "You always come in and grab a donut from the coffee area. You usually like the cake things with the frosting," she told him. She picked up one of the frosted cake donuts then put it back. "They're a little stale now. Are you hungry?"

Clark looked around the desk. His shoulders were slumped in disappointment. "I can't remember anything. I'm not starving. I'm fine."

Lois looked Clark over critically. He looked anything but fine. His shirt was too small, jeans too large. It was a wonder he could walk in the tennis shoes he was wearing. The glasses on his nose were broken and far too small for his face. She opened a drawer in Clark's desk, fished around a moment and found a pair of Clark's glasses. She handed them to him.

"You keep a second pair," she explained as he put them on. He frowned as if something was wrong. But at least now he looked more like the Clark she knew.

"Now look at me, Clark," she ordered. He looked at her, blinking like an owl behind the lenses. "You mean you really don't remember anything?"

"We're a reporting team, isn't that what you said?"

"I'm more like the 'senior partner.'"

"So you call the shots?"

"You could say that."

Clark nodded. "Okay. What should I do?"

Lois still couldn't decide if he was pulling her leg or not. But he looked so lost and out of place, like a puppy. He hadn't looked that lost or puppy-like on his first day in the newsroom. She sighed.

"We're full partners. Nobody works for anybody. Although, for the immediate future, you may want to follow my lead."

"Probably a good idea."

The rest of the afternoon was a blur. Clark found his locker and a change of clothes, so he looked more like the professional he was, should be. But nothing seemed to trigger any memories.

EPRAD announced a news conference and Perry ordered Lois and Clark to cover it. Speculation was that the agency had news about Superman.

"This Superman... sounds like he means a lot to you," Clark observed.

"He means a lot to everybody, Clark," she told him.

The three men who had conducted EPRAD's news conference two days before announcing the Nightfall asteroid's threat to Earth were once again standing on the steps in front of EPRAD headquarters. Professor Daitch, Secretary Cosgrove and General Zeitlin approached a microphone that has been set up on the steps.

"We have just completed a briefing with the Federal Emergency Management Team," Cosgrove began. "This meeting was called to discuss the scientific assessment from EPRAD about yesterday's mission."

He turned the microphone over to Daitch, EPRAD's director of research. "Superman's impact on the 'Nightfall' asteroid was decisive. The asteroid has passed beyond Earth and appears to be well on its way to a stable solar orbit. The current risk to the planet is minor and we are tracking the small debris that was

traveling with it.”

“And Superman?” Lois asked, pushing herself to the front of the group of reporters.

Daitch looked startled and more than a little guilty. “We have not yet heard from Superman, and frankly I doubt we will,” he told his audience. “Analysis of the object that came off the asteroid immediately following Superman’s attack on the asteroid indicated it had a mass of approximately one hundred kilograms. That is close to the same mass as Superman. There is no evidence, seismic or otherwise, that an object that size hit the planet.”

There was an audible gasp of horrified surprise from the assembled journalists.

To Lois’s surprise, it was Clark who asked the next question. “Are you even bothering to look for Superman?”

Cosgrove took the microphone. “We have parties searching the area the object would have hit the planet, had it survived entry into Earth’s atmosphere. So far, all we have found are small pieces of some unusual crystals that we believe came from the asteroid. However given the circumstances, unless we hear from Superman within the next forty-eight hours, we are going to assume he perished in space after completing his mission.”

General Zeitlin looked uncomfortable. Professor Daitch looked like he wanted to either run away or start crying. Lois knew without looking that most of her peers in the audience would have much the same expressions on their faces.

The news conference was over and Lois was ready to head back to her car when she realized Clark wasn’t with her. He had managed to pull Daitch to one side.

“These unusual crystals, can you tell us about them? Are you sure they’re from the asteroid? What makes them unusual?” he was asking.

“Well, Clark may have lost his memory, but he hasn’t lost his reporter’s instincts,” Lois thought. She stopped to listen to Daitch’s answers.

“The crystals we’ve found are composed of an extremely rare element. Element 126,” Daitch said. “In fact the only other known sample of it was stolen from the University of Kansas only a few months ago. It is mildly radioactive and is distinguishable from quartz or beryl mostly by its weight to volume ratio. It’s very heavy, and it glows. Quite pretty, really. The crystals have a slight resemblance to emeralds and rubies.”

“Kryptonite...” Lois murmured. Louder she said. “Professor Daitch... if it’s what I think it is, it’s called kryptonite. It’s pieces of Superman’s home planet and there is reason to believe it can hurt him, maybe even kill him.”

“In that case, Miss Lane,” Daitch said sadly, “I think there may be no hope for him at all. Spectro-analysis indicates the asteroid was laced with these crystals.”

“You think he’s dead, don’t you?” Clark asked as Lois drove them back to the Daily Planet.

“I don’t know what to think,” Lois admitted. She gave him a searching look. “Are you sure you don’t remember anything?”

He shrugged. “It’s like... I don’t know... like I can see them out of the corner of my eye, but when I look right at them, they move away. It’s very frustrating. I know the memories are there, but I can’t grab them.”

“Doctor McCorkle said not to worry too much, that everything should fall back into place with time,” Lois reminded him. “We just have to be patient.”

Clark seemed content with her assurances and she tried not to let her own worry show.

It didn’t seem possible that Superman was dead, but he’d been missing twenty-four hours. She knew that if he had been able to, he would have made contact with someone — the Daily Planet, some other newspaper, the police, somebody, anybody.

But he hadn’t and she felt a lead weight settle in her chest.

Superman is dead.

Lois turned in her story on EPRAD’s announcement. Clark had proofed her work as he frequently did.

It was odd. He had automatically fixed her coffee the way she liked it, had commented on her article, adding observations and quotes. His skill as a writer, as a journalist, was intact but there seemed to be a wall, a barrier, between what he could do and who he was. But Clark was looking more comfortable around Jimmy and the other newsroom staffers.

Finally, it was time to call it a day. Clark was beginning to look tired and she knew she didn’t look much better. Odd, but this was the first time she ever remembered Clark actually looking tired.

“I’ll drive you home,” she offered.

The street celebrations marking the not-the-end-of-the-world were still going on, although Lois noted they seemed oddly subdued as compared to when the Monarchs won the World Series in ‘88. That time the party devolved into near riots. This time, although the reason for celebration was even greater, people were being considerate of one another and there were hand painted signs all over the city: ‘Superman we love you’, and ‘God Bless you, Superman’.

Lois’s throat hurt from holding back the sobs she felt welling up in her chest.

Clark’s block was relatively quiet and she was able to find a parking space close by. He followed her into the building and up the steps to his apartment door. She flipped back the mat in front of the door and retrieved his door key.

“I keep telling you not to leave your key out like that, but you don’t listen,” she chided as she unlocked the door. She stepped aside for him to enter his apartment but he hesitated.

“Go ahead. It’s your place,” she urged.

Finally, he stepped past her to enter. She followed him, watching his reaction as he looked around.

“Does this look familiar?”

Clark shrugged. “Maybe... I don’t know... Not yet.”

He wandered around the apartment, looking at the small collection of art and sculptures on the walls and shelves — of him and his parents, mostly. He checked the heavily laden bookshelves, scanning the titles. Lois noted that he didn’t seem surprised that so many of them weren’t in English. In fact, Lois wasn’t altogether certain of how many languages Clark actually spoke or read.

He moved away from the books and picked up an old football from the shelf beside the collection of sports trophies. Lois watched as he smelled the leather then set it aside.

“You played in high school and college,” Lois said. “I’m told you were really good.”

Clark picked up a framed photo from the end table — Jonathan and Martha, Clark’s parents. He gave her a curious look. “My parents?”

She nodded.

“They have blue eyes,” he pointed out.

“You’re adopted,” Lois explained.

“And my real parents? What about them?”

“The Kents adopted you when you were a baby,” Lois told him. “I don’t think they know anything about your biological parents.” She looked around the room. “Anything?”

Clark shook his head and started looking through the rest of the house. Lois followed him into his bedroom. He stopped and picked his wallet and keys off the top of the dresser. “I left my wallet and keys here?”

All Lois could do was shrug. “I guess you left in a hurry.” Why he had left his wallet and keys at home when he headed out the day before was a mystery. But then she realized that much of

Clark was a mystery — certainly more than she had realized.

“Perry got hold of your parents before we left the office. They’re flying in tomorrow,” She told him.

“I don’t want to be a bother,” Clark protested.

“It’s not a bother,” Lois assured him. “They’re your parents and they love you.” She turned to leave. “I guess I should get home.”

“Do you have to? I could fix supper.”

Lois stopped to consider his offer. As much as she wanted to look for Superman, she knew that the odds were against him having survived. If he had survived, the best bet for him being found was if he contacted the authorities on his own. And Clark needed a familiar and friendly face around, at least a little while.

“That sounds good,” she agreed, dropping her purse on the floor by the sofa. She watched as he started toward the kitchen and then followed him into the other room. “I know you must be scared.”

“Sort of,” Clark admitted. “I know I’ve done all sorts of fantastic things, but I’m drawing a blank as to what they were. I recognize the languages in the books, I know I can read them, but I don’t remember learning them. It’s so frustrating.”

“You’ve been around the world. You have a family who loves you. Maybe that’s enough for right now,” Lois suggested.

“And we are friends, right?”

“Sure we’re friends.”

“Are we... more than friends?” he asked. His expression was both worried and hopeful.

“More than ...? I told you. We’re partners. We work closely together.”

“How close?”

“Close. Not close, close, but close,” she told him. His face fell and she felt awful for him. “Clark, we’re best friends and we haven’t let it go further than that.”

“Miss Grant tried to tell me that she and I... Well, that we were an ‘item’. Somehow I don’t believe her. I don’t think she was very happy with me.”

“See? Your memory’s already starting to come back...” Lois joked.

That got a smile out of him. He rummaged through his cabinets and refrigerator to come up with something to serve the two of them. Finally, he pulled out a carton of eggs and a package of pre-sliced ham. “How does ham and eggs with onion and salad grab you?”

Lois had to stifle a laugh. It was so practical, simple, ‘Clark-like’. He may not remember who he was, but he was still the same Clark.

“I’ll set the table,” she said, finding the dishes and flatware in their usual places. She set the table for the two of them then prepared the salad. Clark chopped the ham and onion and started frying them with the eggs in the cast iron skillet she knew his mother had given him when he moved to Metropolis.

Lois was taking the salad to the table when she heard Clark gasp in pain and the skillet clatter onto the stovetop.

“Clark?” She ran to see what had happened.

He was holding his reddened right hand in his left, staring at it as if he hadn’t a clue.

“Put it under cold water,” Lois ordered as she turned off the heat under the skillet and looked around for a potholder. She didn’t see one so grabbed a dishtowel and folded it over to use as she pulled the skillet off the stove and onto the counter. Then she checked on Clark. “Why did you grab the handle like that?” she demanded.

“I don’t know...” he admitted, pulling his burnt hand out of the running water and inspecting the damage.

Lois could see the blisters already forming.

“I guess I forgot the handle was hot...”

Part 2

It was late by the time Lois managed to get to her own apartment. She had found Clark’s first aid kit and bandaged his hand after trying to talk him into going to the emergency room. He had adamantly refused but hadn’t been able to tell her why he felt so strongly about it.

Another mystery in the shape of Clark Kent. It was getting to be a long list.

She had felt guilty about leaving him alone, so she had chosen a movie from his small collection of videotapes — ‘To Kill A Mockingbird’. She remembered him once saying it was one of his favorite films. Maybe something about it would jog his memory.

They watched the movie in companionable silence, sharing the bowl of popcorn with easy familiarity. Near the end of the film, she looked over to see Clark staring at her.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she wondered aloud.

“I was just wondering how we met.”

“You were in Perry’s office trying to peddle some article from the Borneo Gazette to get him to hire you.”

She watched as he mulled her statement over in his mind.

“Did we like each other right away? You and me, I mean,” he asked.

She shrugged. “We didn’t not like each other.”

She was too embarrassed to tell him her real reaction at finding out that Perry had not only hired the hard-body hack from Nowheresville, but the editor had insisted they work together.

It was the day the Messenger transport shuttle had blown up. Lois had gotten a tip that the space program was in danger, but like everyone else, she had disregarded it until it was too late. She had marched into Perry’s office, determined to make up for lost time.

“I’ll need a task force. I can’t cover this story alone,” she announced after telling him of Doctor Platt’s warning.

“You can have Jimmy,” Perry told her.

“Chief, we’re talking about the space program...” she protested. Jimmy was little more than a gofer.

“All right. Take Kent,” Perry offered.

She was appalled. “Kent?”

“Kent.”

“What about Myerson?”

“Busy.”

“Burns?”

“Budapest.” It was obvious that Perry was enjoying this.

“Forget Kent,” she stated, glowering at her editor.

“He’s a good man.”

“He’s a hick. From ‘Smallville.’ I couldn’t make that name up,” she protested.

“Kent or nobody,” Perry told her.

“Nobody,” she told him. He just looked at her and she knew he wasn’t going to back down. She could have the new guy or nobody at all. “Why don’t you just hang an albatross around my neck?” she groused. Perry just raised his eyebrows at her and she knew he knew he’d won. “Okay. But don’t ever tell me I’m not a team player.”

She strode over to Clark’s desk, not bothering to hide the fact that she was less than pleased with Perry’s orders.

“Let’s hit it,” she ordered the new guy. Then she walked away, not bothering to make sure he was following as she headed for the elevators.

“Mind if I ask where’re we going?” Clark asked.

“To interview Samuel Platt. I’ll brief you on the way,” she told him, then stopped to face him. She needed to set the ground rules. “And let’s get something straight. I didn’t work my buns off to become an investigative reporter for the Daily Planet just to baby-sit some hack from Nowheresville.”

He didn’t seem overly surprised by her tirade. He simply

studied her, eyes bright and curious behind his glasses, a smile quirking in the corners of his mouth. If it hadn't been that she knew she needed an extra pair of eyes, ears, and hands in the investigation she would have left him in the bullpen.

"And another thing. You're not working with me, you're working for me. I call the shots. I ask the questions. You're low man. I'm top banana. That's the way I like it. Comprehend?"

"You like to be on top. Got it," he told her with a bemused smile.

"Don't push me, Kent," she warned. "You are way out of your league."

He just gave her another of his infuriatingly amused smiles that told her that he thought her bark was worse than her bite and that made her even angrier.

He'd had her pegged from day one.

"I remember you telling me you lived by three rules," Clark said softly.

"Never get involved in your stories, never let anyone else get there first, and never sleep with anyone you work with," Lois quoted. "Do you also remember that I told you I've broken every one of those rules?"

His expression turned thoughtful and she could tell he was trying to put things together. "You told me we hadn't let things get serious," he said. "But I have kissed you, right?"

"It was in the line of duty," she assured him, wondering which one of them she was trying to convince. The movie was over and it was late.

"I'd better get home," she told him. "I'll pick you up in the morning for work."

He nodded and walked her to the door. "Good night, Lois, and thank you."

"For what?"

"For whatever it is you've done for me that makes me feel as good about you as I do."

"Clark, whether or not your memory comes back, I just want you to know, I think you're terrific, too."

"You do?"

She smiled at him. "I'll see you in the morning," she promised, making her escape before things went too far.

Spending the evening with him had almost made her forget that Superman was missing and probably dead.

There was a message on her answering machine when she walked in the door. She dropped her purse and briefcase on the sofa and played the message.

"Miss Lane, Lois, this is Lex Luthor," the machine said. "I just wanted to let you know that my people are doing everything in their power to locate Superman. I'm sure you agree that his loss will be a serious blow to the city, and the world... And I would be honored if you would join me at dinner tomorrow so I could share my plans for helping Metropolis deal with this tragedy. As they say, 'Shared joy is a double joy; shared sorrow is half a sorrow.'"

Superman wasn't even declared dead and Luthor was planning to capitalize on it.

She kicked off her shoes and hurried into her bedroom to get ready for bed as she contemplated her next move in regards to Lex Luthor. Yes, he was the third wealthiest man in the world, a brilliant businessman as well as a philanthropist. But the threat of the Nightfall asteroid had brought out the worst in many people — and Luthor had been one of them.

In the days between the announcement of Nightfall's imminent threat and Superman's attack on the giant rock, Luthor had invited Lois to lunch. He then took her into one of the deep sub-basements under his tower.

"You are standing precisely five hundred meters below Metropolis street level, surrounded by sixteen inch reinforced

concrete walls originally designed to survive a nuclear attack," he had told her, proudly showing her the sterile white tiled corridors beneath the LexCorp tower.

"A bunker," she translated.

"I prefer to think of it as an... 'Ark'," he demurred. "We have room for two hundred people. Supplies to last three years. Tools and implements for farming and manufacture when we re-emerge."

"So, even if the world dies, you live?" Lois asked.

"The survival of a species does not depend on the survival of all its members. Indeed, were the dinosaurs possessed of a somewhat larger brain, they, too, might have escaped their fate. Fortunately for us, they did not, and now, the next chance is ours," Lex told her. He seemed pleased with his assessment of the situation, the prospects of a new world run by men such as himself.

She was puzzled. "Do you want me to... write about this?"

"No, no. I seek no publicity," he assured her. "In fact, considering the circumstances, advertising the existence of this would seem to be rather cruel."

"Then why am I here?"

They had been walking through the maze of corridors and paused beside a white door. One of many white doors set into the walls of the corridors. Luthor pushed open the door and gestured for Lois to step inside — into her own apartment.

"This is my apartment." Lois tried to keep the shock out of her voice.

"Well, at least a reasonable facsimile thereof," Luthor admitted. "I hope you like it."

"What's not to like? I decorated it," she said. "But I am a little confused."

"I'm offering you a chance, Lois, to be a passenger on this ark. To be my special guest on Mankind's next great adventure," he said. He moved to one of the draped front windows and threw it open to reveal a bright sunny day. "It's an illusion, of course, but, nonetheless, better than a wall. To help you remember the way things were. How they might be again."

"Why me, Lex?" she asked. She suspected that Luthor had been sprayed by Miranda Miller's pheromone poison several weeks earlier and had a suspicion that Luthor had an unhealthy fixation on her. This facsimile of her apartment created in this maze supported that idea.

Then she realized that Luthor's people had to have had access to her apartment, and that thought sent a chill down her spine. He'd been spying on her.

Luthor smiled at her but the smile seemed forced, as though he was trying not to be openly condescending. "Because I care," he said. "And, I must admit, because three years will be a long time without... 'companionship'."

"And who else will be sailing in this ark?" Lois asked.

Luthor shrugged. "I've had my most trusted advisors put together a list of the best and brightest young men and women in their fields. The emphasis was placed on fit and genetically strong women, naturally. The male of the species is more or less superfluous once the job of procreation is handled."

"I think Doctor Strangelove suggested a ten to one ratio," Lois commented. Luthor looked momentarily confused before chuckling. "Well, Hollywood doesn't get everything wrong."

She studied him. He was debonair and intelligent, physically fit and he'd been spying on her, stalking her using his empire. It was a frightening thought.

"You don't think EPRAD and Superman can handle Nightfall, do you?" It was a statement.

"My credo has always been 'Hope for the best and plan for the worst'," he said with a shrug. "I think it's a mistake to trust the fate of the planet to an alien we know nothing about. And if this is something we can't handle, then maybe this is God's way

of separating the wheat from the chaff, of selecting those capable of building a new, glorious world.”

“Lex, I don’t know...” she said. All of her instincts screamed to her that there was something wrong with what he was proposing to her. The invitation was a silken trap.

“Think about it. I’ll await your decision,” he said. Then he turned on his heel and walked out of the ‘apartment’. Lois took a moment to look around the living room again — everything was in its place, even her magazine subscriptions, and the books on the shelves. The books included two she had purchased just three days before. ‘Does he think I’m so stupid that I wouldn’t realize how he got his information about me? Or does he think his money has me so infatuated with him that I wouldn’t care?’

“Lex,” she called.

He stopped and turned to look back at her. “May I send someone to pack your personal belongings?”

“No. The Daily Planet needs me. I’ve got friends there that are like family to me. I can’t stay here. I won’t abandon them.”

“Lois, mob rule is not a pretty sight. You don’t have to see it.”

“Yes, I do. If that asteroid does destroy the world as we know it,” she told him, “I have to be there to see what takes its place. It may be the best comeback in history.”

“Or the fastest knock-out.”

“Either way, I have to see for myself. I’m a journalist,” she told him. “Besides, I have faith that Superman will be able to save us. But thanks for the invitation.”

With that she had walked out on him, but not before she caught the open mouthed astonishment on his face which turned into a dark glower.

“I can’t keep this offer open for long,” he yelled after her. “You’ll be begging me to save you after that blue freak fails!”

She kept walking.

A quick call to a friend of a friend brought a surveillance expert to her apartment. He scanned the rooms electronically and visually, finding several listening devices as well as miniature cameras that had been situated so that there was no place in her apartment that was not under observation — including the bathroom.

“These are very sophisticated, very expensive devices,” the man told her.

“Can you find out who bought them?” she asked.

“They’re made by Luthor Electronics and the U.S. government holds the exclusive contract,” he said. “I can see if I can find out which agency is keeping close tabs on you.”

“Don’t bother,” she told him. “I’ve had run-ins with the Feds before. This is too subtle for them. They would just confiscate my computer and notes, try to scare me. This is more personal.”

“Look, Miss,” he said. “Whoever arranged this has a lot of clout. Dangerous clout.”

“I know,” Lois admitted. “How much do I owe you?”

He shook his head. “For a friend of Louie’s, it’s on the house. Besides, have you any idea what these are worth on the open market?”

Lois decided not to return Lex’s call until morning. She needed to be fresh and alert when she talked to him. She also hoped Clark would be better in the morning. She wanted back-up when she went to meet with Luthor, and even with his memory on the fritz, Lois trusted Clark’s reporter instincts — mostly.

Lois woke to her phone ringing. She opened one eye to check the time on her alarm clock. Six AM. Groaning, she picked up the receiver.

“This had better be good,” she warned whoever was on the other end.

“Uh, Lois, I’m so sorry to call you this early but my parents are at the airport,” Clark blurted out. “Could you find it in your

heart to pick me up and we go get them? I’ll buy breakfast...”

She was silent for a long moment.

“Lois...?” He sounded like he was near panic.

“You had better have coffee ready for me when I get there,” she told him, letting him off the hook. “I’ll see you in a couple minutes.”

She threw on the clothes she’d worn the day before, promising herself to come back later to shower and change clothes. She made it to Clark’s apartment less than five minutes later.

Clark was waiting for her on the front stoop of his building. He looked like he was in worse shape than she was. His clothes were wrinkled and he needed a shave. But he was holding two commuter cups as he made his way into the passenger seat of her car. He handed her one and she took a sip. It was hot, strong, and doctored just the way she liked it.

“That’s good,” she proclaimed as she pulled into the early morning traffic. “Did you get any sleep at all?”

“A little,” he told her. “I kept having weird dreams, and then I remembered keeping a journal so I decided to look for it.”

“Most writers do keep a journal,” Lois said.

He nodded. “I figured that would jog my memory a little more, but I couldn’t find it. And then I couldn’t find my shaver, or a razor, and that makes no sense...”

“Clark, not having potholders in your kitchen makes no sense, either,” Lois reminded him. “How’s your hand?”

“Still hurts like the dickens,” he told her.

The traffic was getting heavier as they approached the airport and Lois had to concentrate on what she was doing. She turned into the passenger pick-up area and spotted Martha and Jonathan waiting beside the curb. The pair waved at her and hurried to the car as she slowed to a stop. Clark hopped out and helped them with their bag, placing it in the back of the jeep as they climbed into the back seat.

Then he slid into the front, next to Lois, and they drove off.

“Clark, what did you do to your hand?” Martha asked.

“I burnt it last night,” Clark told her. “A stupid accident. But it should be fine in a couple days.”

In the rearview mirror, Lois caught the worried looks Clark’s parents gave each other.

“Son, how are you, really?” Jonathan asked gently.

“Lois told you about the memory problems, right?” Clark asked. He had twisted in his seat so that he could look back at them.

“She mentioned something about that, yes,” Martha admitted.

“Well, things are starting to come back,” Clark told them.

“But there are still a lot of holes. Like where I put my shaver and my journal, and why, when I left to do whatever it was I was doing before I lost my memory, I left my keys and wallet at home...”

Again Lois caught the odd look that passed between the older couple.

“Don’t worry, son. We’ll get it all sorted out,” Jonathan promised.

Lois dropped Clark and his parents off at his apartment and headed back to her own place to get ready for work. She called Perry to let him know that she and Clark were running late.

There was a second message waiting on her answering machine when she got out of the shower. “Lois, I’m disappointed you didn’t get back to me last night,” Lex Luthor’s voice said. “Dinner will be at seven, at the penthouse. I would very much like to share my plans for the Superman memorial with you.”

After a moment of thought, Lois picked up the phone and dialed Luthor’s personal number. A woman answered — Mrs. Cox, one of Luthor’s personal assistants.

“Mrs. Cox,” Lois began. “I wanted to let Mister Luthor know

that I accept his kind offer of dinner this evening, and if it isn't too much of an imposition, I'd like to bring my partner, Mister Kent, with me."

There was a long pause before Mrs. Cox spoke again. The other woman's voice, while never friendly, was positively chilly. "I'll let Mister Luthor know to expect an additional guest at dinner this evening."

Clark was shaved and looking presentable when Lois picked him up.

"You found your shaver?" she asked as he slid into the passenger seat.

"I used my dad's," he told her. "Mom re-banded my hand, put some ointment on it. It doesn't hurt quite so much."

"So, anything else come back?"

He sighed. "Kind of. I remember bits and pieces. Lots of bits and pieces. Mom said there was a theory of memory that said we sort things, memories, using a narrative. That's how we index things and that's why memories can change over time. We've edited the narrative, like editing a film or a book."

"And for you, the scenes are all messed up because you've mislaid the index?" Lois asked.

"That might be stretching the analogy, but yeah," Clark said. "Mom brought a bunch of photo albums for me to go through. She wasn't real happy that Perry wasn't giving me time off to get things sorted though."

"We didn't ask," Lois reminded him. "Besides, Doctor McCorkle said you needed to be around familiar places and people, so that would be the newsroom."

"I guess so," Clark said.

Lois pulled her jeep into her parking space in the Daily Planet parking garage.

"So what's the plan for today?" he asked.

"Finishing up our stories about the asteroid and about the search for Superman," she told him. "I was trying to get an interview with Vincent Winner before all this happened. But I'm sure Perry will have some things for us to work on in the meantime."

Perry was waiting as they arrived in the newsroom. "Well, son, how're we doing this morning? And what did you do to yourself?" He nodded to Clark's bandaged hand.

"We are doing okay. Aside from pulling a bonehead stunt and burning my hand last night," Clark said. "My parents flew in this morning. And things are starting to fit together, sort of. Mom suggested I read through everything I've had run in the Planet."

"I'll have Jimmy get copies for you," Perry promised. "In the meantime, I've got an appointment for you with Doctor Maxwell Deter over at the Neuroscience Center. He's one of the foremost experts in memory loss."

"And then tonight," Lois said, addressing both Clark and Perry, "Clark and I are having dinner with Lex Luthor. He wants to tell us about his plans to help the city cope with the loss of Superman. And his plans for a memorial."

"Luthor?" There was something odd in Clark's voice. For a moment Lois thought he had actually gone a little pale.

"You remember something, son?" Perry asked.

"I've met Luthor, right?" Clark asked. "About my height, slender, dark hair, hooded eyes, arrogant."

"That's him," Lois confirmed. "You've met him a number of times, at the White Orchid ball, news conferences, other places. You don't like him much, but you've never told me why, exactly." She studied his face. He looked worried. "Clark, what is it? Do you remember something about Luthor?"

"I don't know if it's a memory or not," he admitted. "But he kept showing up in my dreams last night. Nightmares, really. He was wearing a tuxedo and pointing a Macedonian sword at my heart saying it belonged to Alexander the Great... then he was

screaming at me like he'd lost his mind, screaming 'You are a dead man'." He swallowed hard.

"Luthor did hold a sword on you," Lois told him.

Perry's eyes went wide in surprise. Obviously Clark had never told him about what happened to them during the White Orchid Ball.

"He found us in his office during the White Orchid Ball," Lois continued. "Not too long after you had the gall to cut in on his dance with me. He said you surprised him and not many people were capable of that."

"He showed us the view from the balcony," Clark said softly. "It was the tallest building in Metropolis. He said, 'I must confess a certain pleasure in knowing that everyone in the city has to look up in order to see me'."

"That's exactly what he said," Lois confirmed. Clark didn't seem relieved to know it had been real.

"And him threatening me?" Clark asked.

"That doesn't sound like Lex," Lois said. "He's always so well controlled, but it's possible you got his back up on something. Like I said, I know you don't like him. Maybe it's mutual."

"I wish I knew what it was," Clark told them. "He's a dangerous man to have mad at me, especially when I don't know why."

"We'll figure it out, Clark," Lois promised.

"Look, kids," Perry said. "EPRAD's not going to make their official announcement until later this afternoon, but we already know what they're going to say."

"They'll be calling off the search for Superman," Lois said. She knew that was their plan. Superman was still missing and there was still no evidence he had returned to Earth.

"They'll still be looking at the crank calls for a few days, I'm sure. But so far not a single one has panned out. I've been fielding the calls that have come here," Perry said. "So you get over to the Neuroscience Center and talk to this Deter fellow. Who knows? He might be able to help."

Part 3

The Metropolis Neuroscience Center was housed in what appeared to be a formerly upscale resort hotel overlooking the Hob's River in the borough of Hamstead, across the river from Metropolis CBD. The multi-story brick building was surrounded by a tall iron fence, manicured lawns, and gardens. Casually dressed men and women of all ages were out enjoying the good weather under the watchful eyes of white uniformed employees.

At least it didn't look too much like a hospital from the outside. The inside looked a little more institutional with note boards covered with notices and white uniformed nurses and orderlies.

"Worried?" Lois asked as she and Clark followed one of the orderlies to one of the examination rooms.

"A little," Clark said. His hands were in his pockets and he looked for all the world as if he would bolt at the slightest startle. "I've never liked doctors much. I'm not sure if it's due to some hidden childhood trauma, or something else."

"It'll be okay," Lois assured him. "I promise. Besides, you did get knocked down by a car a couple days ago. Dr. McCorkle said that might have had something to do with this."

"Maybe."

Doctor Coundar was an efficient older woman with an Indian accent. Lois waited outside as Coundar checked Clark over, although Lois did manage to get a peek at Clark in the little paper gown doctors' offices seemed to favor. She wished she'd brought a camera.

Finally the door to the examination room opened and Clark came out, fixing his tie. He looked worried and a little embarrassed. "I knew there was a reason I didn't like doctors," he

grouched.

“Everything okay?” Lois asked. He nodded.

“She said I’m healthy as a horse, aside from my hand and some bruises,” he said. “But there are some tests she’s going to run.”

“What sort of tests?”

“Urinalysis, blood tests. I guess they need to rule out drugs and other things as a cause for my memory issues since there’s no evidence of head trauma, despite the fact that I supposedly hit my head...”

Deter’s office was poshly functional with bookshelves lining one wall and wide windows looking out over the grounds and the river beyond. A heavy mahogany desk dominated the room. Maxwell Deter himself was a thirty-something man with Paul Newman good looks.

“Your employer gave me a brief overview of the situation when he arranged for this appointment,” Deter began.

“Apparently the police found you in a bad part of town not long after Superman saved the world, and you had total retrograde amnesia?”

“Things are coming back,” Clark said. “It’s frustrating, that’s all.”

Deter nodded, but Lois wasn’t sure he believed Clark’s story. There was something a little ‘off’ in Deter’s reaction. “I’m going to ask Miss Lane to leave while we talk,” he told Clark.

“I don’t mind if she stays,” Clark told him.

“I think it would be better if the first interview were private, that’s all,” Deter said. He smiled at Lois but there was something a little predatory in the smile — something that reminded her of Luthor.

“Sometimes having a third party present inhibits the interview process,” he added.

“It’s okay, Clark,” Lois assured her partner. “I’ll go grab a cup of coffee and check back in a bit.”

She felt Clark watching her as she left him in the office and she repeated to herself that he would be fine. Memory issues or not, Clark was a big boy.

Lois found the cafeteria and got a cup of coffee. Then she checked into the office. Jimmy answered.

“Hey, how’s CK doing?” he asked almost before she identified herself.

“He’s taking to Doctor Deter right now,” she told him. “What did you find out about this place?” It wasn’t that she didn’t trust Perry’s judgment, but one of the hallmarks of a journalist was overwhelming curiosity — besides, she could well get a story out of it, assuming Clark cooperated.

“It’s one of the top rated facilities in the country for treating memory issues,” Jimmy said. “It was founded ten years ago by Doctor Elias Mendenhall. His specialty is traumatic brain injury and he’s made some major breakthroughs in the field of brain repatterning and memory.”

“Doctor Amunati Coundar?”

“Neurologist. Works closely with Mendenhall. Not much else. Graduated top in her class at Harvard. Married, two kids.”

“And what about this Deter?” Lois asked.

“Mendenhall has a reputation for only hiring the best. Maxwell Deter is considered one of the best around concerning memory loss and recovery. Some of his theories and treatments are a little controversial, but he’s known for getting results.”

“Any thing else?”

“He’s been married twice,” Jimmy related. “First one ended in divorce. The second one, his wife died in an accident and left him with enough money so that he doesn’t have to work if he doesn’t want to... but there were suspicions. It seems his wife was a former patient of his and her family claimed he brainwashed her into marrying him and then killed her for the money but nothing could be proven. Then he moved to

Metropolis. His patient list is confidential.”

“And since when has that ever stopped us?” Lois asked with a chuckle.

“Uh, yeah... Mendenhall takes older patients with neurological issues, dementia, that sort of thing,” Jimmy told her. “Deter seems to prefer them young, female, and connected. He has a reputation as a ladies man, but so far no one’s been able to prove he’s overstepped the boundaries with his patients. Although a couple of patients’ wives have made complaints that he seemed a little too interested in them.”

“Interesting,” Lois commented, mostly to herself. “Has Vincent Winninger returned my call?”

“The mad scientist?”

“He’s not ‘mad’. He’s eccentric,” Lois corrected. “Only poor people are crazy. Rich people are eccentric. Remember that.”

“Gotcha,” Jimmy said with a laugh. “Haven’t heard from him. I’ll let the chief know you checked in.”

“Thanks, Jimmy.” She hung up the phone she had borrowed and looked around the cafeteria. It was nicer than most hospital cafeterias and smelled much better. There were tablecloths on the tables, fresh flowers. It really did feel more like a resort hotel than a medical institution.

She got a refill on her coffee and strolled outside to the back gardens. From here she didn’t see a fence, but a walk toward the river confirmed it was there, hidden in a dip in the landscaping, almost like the cage walls in the Metropolis zoo. Look straight across and you only saw a glass partition, but look down and there was a dry moat and a steep wall. Here, the glass partition was missing.

On the sides of the property the fence was hidden by tall boxwood hedges interspersed with a plant with red flowers and seed pods. The pods stuck to Lois’s jacket and she had to pick them off. She noted security cameras overlooking the perimeter and the grounds. Were they there to keep the inmates in or everyone else out?

Lois had an idea and reached into her purse with her left hand, into an inner pocket. She slipped on one of the rings she kept hidden there — a simple engagement ring she had picked up for a song at a pawnshop for disguise when she and Clark went undercover as newlyweds. The matching wedding band was in the pocket as well, but it was probably better for Clark’s peace of mind if she didn’t wear the wedding band.

Besides, a fiancée had certain privileges that a mere partner didn’t have. And Lois had the feeling that Clark needed all the help he could get right now. The thought crossed her mind that maybe leaving him alone with Deter hadn’t been such a good idea.

She checked the time. Assuming Clark wasn’t wandering the grounds looking for her, he’d been with Deter for more than an hour. At the rates the Center charged, this visit was going to cost the Planet a fortune.

Moments later she knocked on the door to Deter’s office. A man’s voice said “Come in.”

Lois walked in. Clark was hunched over in his chair, looking for all the world like a frightened puppy. Deter didn’t look much happier, although in his case there seemed to be a touch of anger as well.

“That will be all, Clark,” Deter said, dismissing him. “I’d like to speak with Miss Lane now.”

Clark stood and headed for the door. She saw a flicker of confusion cross his face as he noticed the ring on her finger. “We’ll talk later,” she promised, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek before he closed the door behind him.

She turned to Deter. “I have a feeling that didn’t go as well as hoped.”

“Mister Kent is promising to be a difficult case,” Deter told her. “He refused the normal treatment for cases such as his.”

“And the normal treatment is?”

“Drug therapy to unblock the psychological barriers he has put up to keep himself from facing whatever it is that has literally scared him out of his mind,” Deter told her. “He has what we call disassociative amnesia. It’s purely psychological.”

“You mean, it’s not related to a bump on the head?” Lois asked.

“That’s where writers always get it wrong,” Deter said.

“Brain damage can lead to memory loss because the places where the memories are stored have been damaged, but the brain is pliable, and sometimes, when the injured area recovers — if it does — so does past memory. One of the key symptoms, however, is anterograde amnesia. The patient can’t lay down new memories.”

“But Clark doesn’t have that.”

“No, Clark has what’s called global retrograde amnesia. He’s wiped out his past, but his brain is fully intact. It’s a weak personality’s defense against something that did, or maybe will, happen that was so traumatic to him that he’d rather lock away his own identity than deal with it outright. The one interesting aspect in his case is that most people who choose this escape usually take off, literally. They get in their car, or board a bus or plane and go as far away as they can from the place the trauma occurred. They frequently adopt an entirely new personality to help them cope.”

“And Clark hasn’t done those things?”

“Oddly enough, no,” Deter admitted. “That in itself is enough to make me want to admit him here for treatment.”

“Did you suggest this to him?” Lois asked.

“He said he wanted to discuss it with you and his parents,” Deter said. “If you have any influence on him at all, it would be a good idea if he were admitted here, even if only for a short time.” Deter smiled charmingly at her. “He needs support, and a calm, non-threatening environment. I don’t think he’ll get that where he works. I understand he’s been involved in several life-threatening incidents while working at the Daily Planet.”

“Being an investigative journalist sometimes leads to visiting unsavory places,” Lois admitted. “And Clark and I are among the best. But I’ll talk to him.”

“Miss Lane, Lois, he needs to be away from stress, from threats. He has chosen to lock away himself to avoid facing something he considers too terrifying to deal with. We’ve had a lot of success with cases similar to his.”

“So, you think he’ll recover fully?”

Deter shrugged. “You have to understand it’s not an exact science. Mister Kent’s memory could pop back in tomorrow, or it could be lost forever.”

“But there’s a good chance that Clark will fully recover?” Lois insisted.

“There are no guarantees,” Deter said. “But I think his best chance for complete recovery is here with us in a strictly controlled environment.”

“I said I’d talk to him,” Lois told him. “Doctor McCorkle mentioned that Clark has something she called ‘Superman Complex’. She said a setback like this could be very frustrating for him.”

“McCorkle works with the police, right?” Deter gave her a condescending smile. “‘Superman Complex’ isn’t exactly a DSM diagnosis. Although Clark does seem to be type for it. Optimistic, naive...”

“Clark’s a real boy scout,” Lois said.

Deter chuckled. “Lois, I see that you’re wearing an engagement ring. He said you were very close, but he didn’t mention anything about that. Is he your fiance?”

She nodded. It was a white lie and she was sure Clark would understand once she had a chance to explain it to him.

“You might want to consider that you may be what he’s

running away from.”

Clark was waiting for her just outside the office door. He seemed a little less miserable.

“Well?” he asked.

“Doctor Deter would like you to be admitted here as a patient,” Lois told him, taking his arm as they headed for the entrance.

Clark shook his head. “No,” he said with a firmness she hadn’t heard in his voice since before this all started. “I know he’s supposed to be one of the best, but I don’t trust him. And I don’t like him. He...” Clark’s lips pressed thin, almost as though by locking his lips he could keep from talking.

“What is it, Clark? What did he do?”

“My blood tests and everything else came back clean,” Clark told her. “Well, the blood test wasn’t quite normal. Apparently I’m seriously anemic, even though I don’t look it and I don’t feel it. But he kept asking about drugs...”

“Clark, of all the people I know, you are the least likely person to get into drugs,” Lois told him. “You don’t smoke, the aspirin in your desk is mine — in case I run out and forget to buy more — and you don’t drink all that much. Wine with dinner is about your limit. In fact, I’ve never seen you drunk. Ever. And we’ve been to some pretty serious after-office parties over at Dooley’s... So if drugs are involved in this problem, it wasn’t self-inflicted.”

“You’re positive?”

“Absolutely,” she assured him. They had arrived at her car and she unlocked the door for him. He didn’t move for a long moment and she realized he was studying the ring on her left hand. “It’s not... I figured it would be easier to get information out of Deter if he thought we were engaged.”

“But we’re...?”

“No, we’re not engaged, even though we have gone undercover as newlyweds and half the newsroom thinks we’re more than just partners,” she told him. “Cat and Ralph, especially.” She tried to gauge his reaction to her statement. He seemed to roll it over in his mind. Then he smiled.

“I’m glad I have you as a friend,” Clark said. “And I bet you’re already smelling a story here.”

“See, things are coming back.” Lois grinned at him and climbed into the driver’s seat. Clark slid in beside her. “So, what did Deter tell you was wrong?”

“‘Atypical disassociative global retrograde amnesia unaccompanied by fugue’,” Clark quoted. “Once he decided I wasn’t going to tell him about some new designer drug out on the street, and I wasn’t faking the whole thing for sympathy, he started asking me about you. Whether I recalled if we’d been intimate, that sort of thing. He seemed more interested in finding out more about you than helping me.”

“That jives with what Jimmy came up with on him,” Lois said. “Deter is a ladies man and doesn’t seem to care if the lady in question is the wife of a patient.”

“And you want to expose this little foible of his?”

“I think Lane and Kent are on the story,” Lois said. “Where there’s smoke, there’s usually a fire.”

“Is there a ‘Lane and Kent’ right now?” he asked. He watched her, expression solemn, worried.

“Clark, you’ve lost your memory, not your mind,” Lois told him. “Although I wonder how much of what Deter told me about your condition was right.”

“And what did he tell you?”

She took a deep breath and blew it out her nose. “I know you are sometimes a little flaky, running off for no apparent reason on some of the flimsiest excuses I’ve ever heard and only you and God know why. And there have been times you’ve run off to get help and let people think it was because you were afraid. But I

know better. I know you were doing whatever it was you did to contact Superman.”

“I don’t remember that,” he said. “I don’t remember Superman and I figure a man who flies should be easy to remember. I know I was supposed to be friends with him, but I’m still drawing a blank there.”

“I understand,” Lois said. “But, what I’m trying to say is, I know you’re not a coward. I was there when Antoinette Baines had us tied up in that warehouse. I was there when Jason Trask threatened to kill you and your parents, when he shot at you and Sheriff Barnes took him out. According to Deter, memory loss like you have is a result of a ‘weak personality’ that runs into something it can’t cope with. But I don’t believe that either, not in your case.”

“So, if I’m not a coward running away from the end of the world, what happened?”

“I don’t know, but I have an idea,” Lois admitted. “Your nightmare, the one with Luthor and the sword? That was a memory. What if the other part was also a memory? Maybe a recent one?”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“Hear me out, Clark,” Lois said. “I know I’ve poo-pooed your concerns about Luthor. But until recently I hadn’t seen anything that indicated you weren’t reacting to him out of some weird anti-rich-man bias.”

“And now?”

“The day before Nightfall was expected to hit the Earth, I had lunch with Lex and he showed me his ‘ark,’” she said. Telling Clark about Luthor was harder than she had anticipated. It was unnerving to admit how wrong she had been about the multi-billionaire. How she had been blinded by wealth and good manners. Or that Clark had been right all along.

She continued, “He has an underground bunker fully supplied to keep two hundred hand-picked vassals alive until it’s safe to come out again. He had an exact replica of my apartment built down there, including some books I’d just bought. That was a little scary. So I had my apartment checked for bugs. And guess what?”

“You found some?”

“Made by Luthor Electronics,” she told him. “I haven’t told Perry and I’ve been trying very hard not to go ballistic because I can’t prove anything. And we both know how Perry is about things like proof. But if you are right, then Luthor’s been involved in a lot more questionable things than just stalking me and he’s gotten away with them because he has money and power.”

“You don’t do things by half measure, do you?” Clark observed. “You want to take on Luthor and the Neuroscience Center?”

“I’m not going to get that Pulitzer by avoiding the hard stuff or hiding from the powerful,” Lois said. “Clark, there isn’t anything in this city that Luthor doesn’t have his hands in. If he doesn’t own it, he’s on the board. If he isn’t on the board, he controls their suppliers or he employs their kids.”

“You’re a cynic,” Clark said.

“I’m a realist,” Lois corrected.

“EPRAD made it official,” Perry announced as soon as they walked into the newsroom. “They’ve called off the search for Superman and the assumption is that he’s dead.”

Lois was a little surprised to find she wasn’t grief stricken, although she knew Perry and some of the others in the newsroom were waiting for her reaction. She knew the reality would hit her later. That everyone had given up on Superman, and he was gone. But for now everyone seemed to be waiting for her to say something.

“It’s not like it’s a surprise, is it?” she asked. “If he could

have checked in, he would have.” She looked around at the faces watching her. She wasn’t going to give them a show. She wasn’t going to let them know how much she had hoped Superman would be found, safe and alive. It’s official. They say he’s dead. So why don’t I believe it?

“In the meantime, we have a newspaper to put out, don’t we?” Lois watched as surprised co-workers headed back to their desks.

“Lois, hon, you were the one closest to him...” Perry began. “Are you up to...?”

“Writing his obituary?” Lois asked, guessing that was what he was asking. “I think so. In fact, I think Clark was working on one before all this started.”

Perry gave Clark a surprised look. Obviously Clark hadn’t told Perry about it.

“You know, be prepared,” Clark said with a faint smile. He turned on his computer and found the document in question. Perry looked the article over.

“When did you finish this?” Perry asked.

“The file date says just before Superman took off to take care of Nightfall,” Clark told him. “I remember writing it, actually.”

Perry gave him an inquiring look. “How did your appointment with Doctor Deter go?”

Clark shrugged. “He wants me to check into the clinic. I’m not sure I want to do that. Lois is thinking we may get a story out of it, though.”

“And what do you think?”

“I think she may be right,” Clark said. “She told Deter we were engaged.”

“And when I told Doctor Deter that, he told me that I could be the reason Clark chose to lose his memory,” Lois told Perry and Clark. Perry eyebrows went up at her statement and her tone.

“‘Atypical disassociative global retrograde amnesia unaccompanied by fugue’ is the official diagnosis,” Clark said. “According to Deter, I ran into something that literally scared me out of my right mind. His recommended treatment was drug therapy and a total isolation from stressors.”

“But Doctor McCorkle recommended being around familiar places and people,” Lois said. “She didn’t say anything about him staying away from stress. She just recommended patience.”

“You don’t agree with Deter?” Perry asked.

Lois looked to Clark. He answered Perry’s question. “I don’t trust him. And I didn’t like the questions he was asking me about Lois.”

Perry nodded. “That’s good enough for me. You two finish up that obituary. Then Clark, you take the rest of the afternoon off. I know your parents are in town. Spend some time with them.”

“Thanks, Perry.”

Martha and Jonathan were waiting at Clark’s apartment when Lois and Clark arrived. Perry had been feeling magnanimous and gave Lois the afternoon off as well, considering both of them would be working well into the evening with the Luthor interview.

“Honey, how was your appointment with the doctor?” Martha asked as soon as they walked in.

“Deter wants me to check into the center,” Clark told her. Martha and Jonathan shared a worried look.

“I don’t think that would be a good idea, son,” Jonathan said. His tone was very solemn.

“I told him I’d run it past you first,” Clark told them. “But Lois thinks there’s a story there, and I think she’s right. Deter... well it’s hard to explain but I don’t think he was listening to me. And his reaction to Lois kind of confirmed his less than sterling reputation.”

“But, was he able to help?” Martha asked.

Clark sighed. “I have a diagnosis for what it’s worth. But

things are coming back, little by little. I went through everything I've written for the Planet and I actually remember writing them and the earlier ones in my portfolio. But I'm still drawing a blank on this Superman person. Lois and Perry both tell me I was a friend of his, but I can't... I can't see his face, I can't remember his voice. But I interviewed him. I wrote about him. He gave me exclusives. It's just so frustrating," Clark told them. "Some things are right there and other things just aren't."

Another undecipherable look was shared between Martha and Jonathan. Jonathan sighed again.

"Don't fret about it, Clark," Jonathan told him. "You'll remember when you're ready."

"I'll come by about six and pick you up for dinner," Lois told Clark. She turned to Martha and Jonathan. "We're having dinner with Lex Luthor. He wants to brief us on his plans for a Superman memorial, things like that."

"Is that a good idea, with Clark the way he is?" Martha asked. "I mean, I know Superman wasn't fond of Luthor, and I can't imagine he'd approve of that man putting together a memorial for him." Lois noted that Martha's statement concerning Superman and Luthor seemed to be aimed at Clark, not her.

Lois ignored the puzzled look Clark gave his mother. "Clark, why didn't you tell me what Superman told you about Luthor?" she asked him.

"I honestly don't remember anything about that," Clark said. There was a tremor in his voice.

"Patient, I can be patient..." Lois muttered to herself. "What do you remember about Luthor?" she asked him.

"What I told you this morning," he said. "I remember him threatening me, and I have this feeling that he's far more dangerous than anyone realizes. But I don't remember Superman saying anything to me about Luthor. I don't remember Superman at all. It's like I run into a wall."

"Maybe it was something about Superman that made you need to walk away," Lois suggested.

"But what?" Clark asked. His frustration was evident in his face, his slumped posture.

One horrifying possibility came to her. "You were found in Suicide Slum and radar tracked something that would have hit there if it had hit at all — what if it was Superman, and he was dead, and you witnessed it."

"Lois, people have been scouring the city for signs that he came back to Earth," Clark reminded her. "There's been no sign that happened. No burned up body, no uniform, nothing."

"Maybe somebody took the body away and you witnessed that?" she suggested.

He shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Clark, you look tired," Martha said, effectively ending their speculations. "It sounds like you and Lois are planning a pretty intense night and I bet you haven't had lunch. How about eating a little something, then taking a nap. Things look much better when you're well fed and rested." She turned to Lois. "You're welcome to join us for lunch. We have plenty."

Lois was ready to say no, to leave Clark alone with his parents so they could talk when her stomach overrode her good intentions by growling.

"That settles it," Martha declared with a chuckle. "Jonathan, put on another place setting."

Clark picked up his jacket from where he'd dropped it on the back of the sofa and headed to his bedroom area to hang it up. "Mom, Dad, where's the globe?" Lois heard him ask his parents moments after he disappeared around the corner. There was a note of near panic in his voice.

Another glance between Martha and Jonathan. "Considering the circumstances, your mom and I felt it should be put away for safe-keeping."

Clark came around the corner to look at them. Lois watched as an odd mixture of confusion, fear, and comprehension crossed his face.

"It's Superman's, isn't it?" he asked.

Jonathan nodded.

"I picked it up at the Bureau 39 warehouse," Clark added.

"Bureau 39? My Bureau 39? I was right there, and you didn't tell me?" Lois was too surprised to temper her reaction. "You just picked it up, put it in your pocket, took it home, and kept it?"

"Yes," Clark replied. "At least I think that's what happened. I remember the warehouse. The globe was with a weird capsule with that 'S' logo on it."

"Superman's symbol," Lois concluded. "You took it, knowing full well that it probably had some connection to Superman, and that I, your partner, would kill to know about it."

"We weren't partners then," he reminded her.

"Then, Clark? Try 'never again'." She started ticking items off on her fingers. "You lied. You stole. You..."

"Betrayed?" Clark chimed in a little too cheerfully.

"Don't edit my tantrums, Clark," she warned. "I won't be responsible."

"And you've never lied to me?" Clark asked her.

"You grew up on a farm in Kansas," Lois stated. She was actively ignoring the fact that his parents were standing watching them. "I grew up in Metropolis."

"So?"

"So... there are different standards," she insisted.

"That's ridiculous and you know it, Lois," Martha said.

"You're just upset that Clark didn't tell you something he was asked to keep in confidence."

"So this globe of Superman's..." Lois said. "Your parents knew, but not me?"

"Who would suspect a couple of middle-aged Kansas farmers of knowing anything about Superman?" Jonathan asked.

"So, where is this globe?" Lois asked.

Martha smiled. "Somewhere Superman can find it when he needs to."

"You don't think Superman's dead, do you," Lois told the older woman.

It was several moments before Martha answered. "No, I don't think he's dead. I do think he's hurt and confused and scared. And as soon as he's recovered from whatever it was that happened to him, I think you and Clark will be the first to know."

"You really think so?" Lois asked. It was too much to hope that Martha was right, that Superman was out there somewhere, recovering from his ordeal.

"I hope so," Martha said. "I certainly hope so."

Part 4

Lois went through her closet trying to find an appropriate dress to wear to dinner. One that was not too business-like, but not so sexy as to give Luthor ideas beyond what he already had. And she had an idea that he thought he owned her like he did so many others. And nobody owned Lois Lane.

She had scanned her apartment using the bug finder Louie's friend had given her and she had checked the places she had been told were the most likely spots a camera would be hidden to have coverage of the room. She didn't find anything, but she still didn't feel secure. To say she was outraged about her apartment being bugged by someone with access to Luthor's technologies was a profound understatement. There were times she found herself shaking with fury. But she had done her best to keep it under control. She didn't want Clark, or Perry, to know how shaken she was by the thought of someone spying on her in her own home. Clark had his own problems right now and she knew Perry would overreact.

It was an effort, but she managed to put her rage and

insecurities out of her mind for the time being at least. She had to be sharp for her meeting with Luthor. If she was lucky, he didn't know she had found the bugs. She still hadn't decided what to do about them.

She almost chose the red satin dress — Luthor had told her he liked it on her — but decided that mourning black would send the message that she wasn't going to blindly cater to his tastes. It was also more appropriate, considering. As far as the world and Luthor knew, she was one of those who would mourn Superman the most. As far as the world was concerned, she was the one who knew him best. Little did they know that Superman had trusted Clark Kent and his parent's with secrets he hadn't shared with her. Pity Clark didn't remember any of them.

She still wasn't sure how she felt about that. She had thought Superman was her friend, and maybe he was. He had saved her life more than once. As far as she knew she was the only one he had taken flying simply for the fun of it. And she was the one he had declared his love to, even if it was under the influence of Miranda's pheromone poison.

Superman had saved the city once again. Miranda had been turned over to the police. Luthor had actually come forward with the information to stop the mad woman, personally coming to the Planet to let Clark know that Superman was needed.

"Superman," Lois gushed like a star-struck schoolgirl when Superman approached her at the airstrip after turning Miranda over to the police. "It's lucky that stuff doesn't have any effect on you... or does it?"

He was watching her, eyes bright and full of love. It was what she had always wanted. She was the best and she deserved the best, didn't she? And there was no doubt in her mind that Superman was the best. A god that walked the Earth. And he was standing in front of her ignoring Luthor, ignoring the police, eyes only on her.

"Lois Lane. I love you," Superman told her.

"Oh, no. Lois, don't..." Luthor said from somewhere nearby. She ignored him. Luthor's uncharacteristic behavior the night before had bothered her. And even though she had hoped for a closer relationship with the third-wealthiest man in the world, the reality was that she wasn't ready for Luthor's effusive, even poetic praise of her. That wasn't the Lex Luthor she knew, the Lex Luthor she considered an equal, the one she thought considered her an equal, just as Superman seemed to do.

It was Superman who was standing in front of her right now and he was watching her as though she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. There was no poetry, no effusive praise, just an appreciation of her as a woman.

"Oh, Superman. You don't know how long I've waited to hear you say those words," she told him. "But you're not yourself, and so I couldn't take advantage of this situation and..."

She caught a flicker of disappointment, and something else, in his eyes.

"Oh, what the..." she muttered to herself as she threw caution to the wind. She knew she wasn't likely to get a second chance. She threw herself into his arms and kissed him. He returned her kiss with equal passion and shivers ran down her spine. His kiss was everything she had dreamed, everything she had wanted. He was a god and he made her feel like a goddess.

It was a cheat. And although the drug's effect had confirmed that Superman was attracted to her, she had known that by the next day he would barely remember having done it. Love Potion Number Nine was nice to imagine, but it didn't work very well in the real world.

She had wondered about the fact that it had been Clark she had pursued while under the influence of the poison. She had been willing to dance the Dance of the Seven Veils for him. Had gone to his apartment with the firm intent of seducing him. A lesser man would have taken advantage of the situation. He

hadn't, although she did vaguely recalling him saying that he 'surrendered', but by that time the drug's effects had worn off her and she was in no mood to deal with an amorous Clark Kent.

"...There has to be some animal magnetism there to begin with," Clark explained later, when she had recovered a little from both the poison and her humiliation. "All this substance does is inhibit that part of your brain that acts as an intellectual defense mechanism, leaving the person helpless to control themselves."

"But that would mean I found you..." she reasoned aloud. "Clark, you got sprayed. How come you didn't fall for me?"

She watched him squirm. "Uh... I guess I just wasn't... attracted to you, Lois."

"Liar. You are so attracted to me."

"Guess not," he told her, teasing.

"Guess so."

"Okay," she had told Clark when it was all over. "Maybe somewhere, buried incredibly deep inside me, is some eensy weensy, microcosmic although highly unlikely possibility that I could feel some sort of unmotivated and completely unrealistic attraction to you."

"As long as you're being honest with yourself, Lois," Clark had responded with a bemused smile.

"I even figured out why I was blind enough to think you looked like Superman," she said.

"Oh, really? And why was that?"

"Simple. Every woman in love thinks her man looks like Superman."

He never did tell her why he hadn't been affected by the poison. Maybe he'd had a cold or something. Or maybe he had unnaturally good self-control. Or maybe he'd had a delayed reaction.

In the quiet late at night, she sometimes thought about what it was about the Kansas farmboy that had actually attracted her more than Superman. Maybe on some subconscious level, she knew that Superman was perfect, unobtainable, and while he had been invariably friendly, he was also almost unapproachable. In contrast, while Clark was hardly perfect, he was present in her life — almost a fixture. He was good and sweet and understanding and eminently approachable. And of all the people at the Daily Planet, he was the one able to keep her on her toes. She wasn't sure if Superman could do that. He was too perfect.

Lois knew people were going to be expecting her to mourn Superman. But as she looked in the mirror doing her make-up, she realized that while she was sad and worried that Superman was missing and presumed dead — despite Martha Kent's assurances to the contrary — it was Clark she was more worried about.

What had happened to him that was so traumatic that he had blocked out all his knowledge of the superhero? And how was Luthor involved, assuming he was?

At six PM Lois was in her jeep, in front of Clark's apartment. Clark was waiting for her and hurried down the front steps as soon as she pulled up. Like her, he had chosen dark colors — charcoal suit, black shirt, a black tie with a subtle woven pattern. She had never seen that particular tie before. Clark's ties tended to be garish, even humorous. Lois hadn't realized he even owned a tie that wasn't an eyesore.

Clark slid into the passenger seat and took a moment to look her over. "You look... Wow."

"Not too sexy?"

"There's a lot to be said for subtlety," Clark told her. "I like the pearls. Very understated."

"Thanks." She had originally thought to wear the diamond solitaire necklace her father had given her when she graduated from college, but opted for the pearls instead. She had no doubt Luthor would recognize them for what they were — inexpensive

cultured pearls, almost costume jewelry — but they were nice and she was wearing the matching earrings. She had also gone with simple pumps rather than the little strappy sandals she might have chosen before she knew what Luthor was like. Before she knew that Luthor, or someone in his employ, was watching her.

“So, what’s our plan?” Clark asked.

“Let me do the talking, okay?” Lois told him. “This isn’t my first interview with him, and I don’t doubt he’ll have figured out that I brought you along so I wouldn’t have to be alone with him.”

“I’ll follow your lead,” Clark promised.

The next few minutes were spent in silence as Lois maneuvered the jeep through evening traffic.

Finally: “Clark, I want to apologize for jumping on you the way I did over that globe thing,” Lois said. “I should have known you wouldn’t have kept something like that to yourself unless you’d been asked to.”

“Actually, you getting upset was kind of... nice,” Clark told her. “You were treating me like normal.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ever since yesterday, everyone’s been treating me like they’re afraid I’ll break,” Clark said. “You and Perry, even my parents. It’s like you’re all afraid I’ll bolt if you say a cross word. I’m not made of glass. I won’t shatter if you yell at me or get mad.”

“I promised Henderson and Doctor McCorkle that I would be patient with you. Yelling at you for something you had no idea about isn’t exactly patient.”

“Things are coming back more and more,” Clark told her. “Mom and Dad and I went through the photo albums and scrapbooks they brought with them and things started fitting together. Mom saved all the letters I sent home when I was traveling. That helped too.”

“So, you won’t need to see Deter again?” she asked.

“I will if we’re going to investigate him,” Clark said. “I had Mom call him and set up another appointment. He’s agreed to take me on an outpatient basis. Against his ‘better judgment’, but Mom can be very persuasive.”

“I know that,” Lois commented with a chuckle.

“She also thinks you might be able to jog my memory concerning Superman,” Clark said. “You know more about him than anyone.”

“You don’t think he’s dead either?”

“I don’t know what to think,” Clark admitted. “Mom thinks he’s out there.”

“I think she’s right,” Lois said. “I hope she’s right.”

“You cared a lot for him,” Clark said. Clark’s tone was quiet, resigned, almost a sigh.

“You remember that?”

“Yeah,” Clark said. “He must have been quite a guy.”

“He was... is,” Lois said. “But so are you.”

“I wish I could remember him,” he continued almost as if he hadn’t heard her.

She glanced over to see Clark looking out the car window at the darkened streets.

Lois knew that the night before the city had been celebrating its miraculous survival, hoping for Superman’s safe return. Tonight, the city was mourning its savior. Extra police patrols had been added to dissuade the criminal element from trying to take advantage of Superman’s absence. Ordinary people were sitting on their stoops, spending time with neighbors. The editorial that ran with Superman’s obituary in the Planet had called for people to live up to the example Superman had given the world — self-less unbiased consideration of others. So far, it seemed they were.

LexCorp Tower was up ahead, bright and shiny as ever, a beacon towering over the city. Lois drove into the underground parking garage, past the parking attendant who waved her

through. She had no doubt a call was being made to the penthouse to announce her arrival. She wondered why she hadn’t noticed it before. Or why she hadn’t noticed that the penthouse elevator was always waiting for her when she got to the garage elevator lobby.

“He doesn’t like to keep guests waiting,” Clark commented as he followed her into the elevator. “And he doesn’t like surprises.”

Lois gave Clark a sharp look at his comment and then followed his gaze to the tiny security camera mounted in the upper corner of the cab.

“Mister Luthor’s a very important man, and he can’t be too careful, considering everything that he has going on here,” Lois said.

“Howard Hughes thought the same thing,” Clark murmured. “And look what happened to him.”

The elevator doors opened onto the penthouse lobby. Straight ahead were the doors to the grand ballroom where Luthor hosted the White Orchid Ball each year. At the far end of the elegantly decorated hallway was another set of frosted glass doors.

A tall man with swarthy skin was standing beside that set of doors. He was wearing the Hollywood idea of traditional Indian dress — an off-white sherwani suit and a white turban.

“Hello, Asabi,” Lois greeted the man.

He smiled and gave her a tiny bow. “Miss Lane, Mister Kent. Mister Luthor is waiting for you in the dining room.” He opened the doors and ushered them into another hallway. This one was a little less ornate, lined with matted and mounted black and white photographs. Lois knew the display was changed fairly frequently. It was Ansel Adams landscapes this month.

Asabi led them to the penthouse’s private dining room. Luthor was waiting for them, standing behind the bar, apparently mixing drinks. A tall black woman wearing a white dinner dress and heavy gold necklace with an Egyptian motif was standing at the bar, a martini glass in her hand. The woman eyed them haughtily while Luthor’s face lit up in a smile.

“Lois, I’m so glad you were able to make time in your busy schedule for dinner,” he said.

Lois wasn’t sure if he was being sarcastic or not. “Things have been absolutely crazy since the asteroid,” she told him, choosing to take his statement at face value.

“I’ll let Andre know your guests have arrived,” Asabi said, excusing himself and closing the dining room doors behind him.

Luthor watched Asabi leave then turned his attention back to Lois. “Lois, my dear, I don’t remember if you’ve met Missus Cox,” he said, indicating his companion.

“We’ve met in passing,” Mrs. Cox said silkily.

“Missus Cox is my personal assistant dealing with ‘special matters,’ Luthor told them. “And three at dinner is a trifle awkward, don’t you think?” He handed Lois a glass of white wine. “I know it’s one of your favorites,” he said before turning to Clark. “Clark, may I offer you a drink before dinner?”

“Whatever you’re having will be fine,” Clark responded.

“I drink very little, and never on an empty stomach,” Luthor said.

“In that case, a glass of whatever Lois is having would be fine.”

“The ‘71 Domaine de Chevalier Medoc blanc,” Luthor announced, handing him a glass. “I think you’ll like it. It’s one of their best.”

Lois watched Clark take a sip from his glass and smile. Luthor was right about one thing. The white Bordeaux was one of her favorites, although her personal taste in wine tended to whatever she could find cheap in the grocery store when she was planning to have company. Clark had the better trained palate and had even made a half-hearted attempt to teach her a little bit about wine. It hadn’t done much good. Lois had been raised in an

alcoholic home and had a love-hate relationship with alcohol. As a result she placed strict limits on her alcohol intake.

“It’s very good,” Clark said.

“I’m glad you like it,” Luthor said. “Andre should have dinner ready shortly. And although I know that Lois likes to work through dinner — apparently I’m not sufficiently fascinating to keep her interested in my dinner conversation — I would prefer to postpone discussing business until after we’ve eaten.”

Again Lois wasn’t sure if Luthor was being sarcastic or not and again chose to take his statement at face value. She did tend to interrogate people over meals instead of simply enjoying their company. The one exception happened to be Clark. Over the past few months they had fallen into the habit of lunch at least twice a week and dinner at least once every other week — usually pizza and a movie at his place.

The dining room doors opened and Asabi stepped in, followed by two petite oriental women in gray uniform dresses and white aprons. The women were carrying trays with plates of salad.

“Dinner is served,” Asabi announced. Luthor ushered his guests to the linen covered dining table. The billionaire held her chair for her as Lois sat down. Clark held Mrs. Cox’s chair for her, following Luthor’s lead.

The two women placed salad plates in front of the four diners. “Arigato,” Clark murmured to the woman who was serving him. She ducked her head shyly and giggled. He asked her a question — Lois understood a single word ‘Metropolis’ — and after a glance at Luthor, the woman answered in the same language.

After a moment Luthor gave a sharp command and the two servants scurried away. He turned to Clark. “Again you surprise me, Clark.”

“I spent nearly a year after college in the Far East — Tokyo, Hong Kong, Beijing,” Clark explained. “I managed to learn enough Japanese, Cantonese, and Mandarin to order lunch without embarrassing myself too badly.”

“Quite the citizen of the world,” Mrs. Cox commented. “You must tell us about your adventures.”

“Oh, I’m sure you have more interesting stories than I have,” Clark told her. “It must have been fascinating, working the West End theaters, working with Olivier, O’Toole, Redgrave. Why did you leave the stage?”

Mrs. Cox stared at him.

“Clark,” Lois interrupted. “No business over dinner?”

“It’s quite all right, Miss Lane,” Mrs. Cox said. She gave a deep chuckle. “I wasn’t aware anyone remembered me.”

“I saw you play Mary Magdalene at the Lyceum,” Clark told her. “I was very impressed. And I was sorry to hear about your husband. His death was a great loss to the theater.”

“It may have been a loss to the theater,” Mrs. Cox said. “But it wasn’t much of a loss to me. The woman he was found with was his mistress. He was a . . . he wasn’t a nice person.”

“Scotland Yard never did find their killer, did they Missus Cox?” Luthor asked. There was something off in his tone, almost a warning.

“No, they didn’t,” Mrs. Cox confirmed. “And it’s unlikely they ever will.”

Dinner was another one of Chef Andre’s spectacular successes. It was well known that Luthor rarely ate out while in Metropolis and one of the reasons was Andre LeCler, a Cordon Bleu trained chef Luthor recruited from a five-star Parisian restaurant many years before. Little else was known about Chef Andre, except that he was reported to be irascible and demanding — but then working for Luthor, he could afford to be difficult.

After the salad, they’d been served a creamy soup, then a chicken dish with fresh herbs and asparagus and a delicate rice

pilaf. Dessert was a chocolate confection — Luthor knew Lois liked chocolate and made a point of making sure there was some sort of chocolate as part of dessert every time Lois was invited to dinner.

Luthor had steered the conversation away from Mrs. Cox’s past career, regaling them with tales of his exploits as a young man in aviation. Lois had heard the stories before and she was certain Mrs. Cox had as well, but she was equally certain Clark hadn’t. She could see Clark taking mental notes on the times and places Luthor had been mentioning. She was also sure he would run up against the same brick wall she had when checking out the billionaire — the stories were fascinating, but there were few facts that could be substantiated. LexCorp employees weren’t in the habit of talking to outsiders.

Soon, but not soon enough for Lois’s taste, dinner was over. “Asabi, we’ll have our coffee in the study,” Luthor instructed as he ushered his guests into the next room.

Luthor’s private study looked much as it always did. Dark paneling and thick carpet, museum style glass cases containing a collection of ceremonial and ancient weapons, dark leather chairs and mahogany tables. The one difference she noticed from her previous visits was a table set up in the middle of the room with something hidden under a white cloth. The mysterious object was about two feet tall and far taller than it was wide.

Asabi brought in the coffee service with four porcelain cups and set it on the mahogany desk. Mrs. Cox took charge of the coffee, pouring cups for Lois and Clark before pouring one for Luthor. Lois sipped her coffee and watched Luthor watching Clark as he ignored the mystery under the cloth, instead examining the collection of weapons.

“That’s a very nice copy of Tizona,” Clark said after a moment. “El Cid’s sword.”

“Again, you surprise me, Clark,” Luthor said with a faint smile. “You should know I would never own a copy.”

“Does the Museo del Ejercito know you have it?” Clark asked. He managed to disarm his question with a smile of his own.

Luthor dipped his head. “After a very sizable donation, they agreed to allow me to ‘borrow’ it.”

“I won’t ask how sizable,” Clark promised. “But it is a beautiful piece.”

“So, Lex, you wanted to let us know about your proposal to help the city recover from Superman’s loss,” Lois began. “You said something about a memorial.”

“Ah, yes,” Luthor said, stepping over to the table with the mysterious object on it. He pulled the cloth off with a flourish, revealing a small statue of Superman, one hand holding a glowing green crystal up to the sky.

“This is merely an artist’s concept,” Luthor explained. “I was thinking it could be placed over the entrance to a museum, but then it came to my attention how little we really knew about him. About his world, his people, what brought him to our planet and our fair city?”

“Maybe, someday, we’ll find out,” Lois said, inspecting the statue.

“You’re still holding out hope that he made it back to Earth?” Luthor asked. There was an uncharacteristic gentleness in his tone that made the fine hairs on the back of her neck rise.

“It’s a big planet,” Lois stated. “There’s a chance he made it back.”

“But not likely,” Luthor reminded her. “EPRAD extended their resources far beyond what was reasonable, considering the circumstances. My own people have scoured the planet, looking for anything that entered the atmosphere during that time frame. And even Superman can’t hold his breath that long.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Lois agreed.

Clark had been staying back from the table, although Lois

couldn't begin to guess why. Now Luthor noticed.

"And what do you think about the memorial, Clark?" Luthor asked, waving his hand in the direction of the miniature statue. It was an implied order to move closer to inspect it. Clark didn't move.

"Given what we know of him, I suspect he'd rather have a hospital wing named after him, or maybe a hospital ship. Something that would help people who need a hand up," Clark said. He nodded to the sculpture. "That crystal the statue's holding is from the asteroid, isn't it?"

"Yes," Luthor said simply. "My people found an especially fine specimen that would look wonderful on display."

"Haven't EPRAD and STAR Labs both announced that many of the crystals were radioactive and warned the public to stay away from them?" Lois asked.

"My experts have assured me that there's no risk to humans," Luthor said. "However, there is some speculation that the mineral may be related to the mysterious 'kryptonite' you mentioned in one of your articles several months ago. The one concerning the death of Colonel Trask and Trask's attempt to 'cleanse' the world of Superman's alien influence."

"Trask was a mad man," Clark stated.

"I'm sure he was," Luthor agreed a little too amiably.

"Luckily for all of us, he failed in his endeavor, thus allowing Superman to save the world as we know it."

"I'm curious though, Lex." Lois said. "If Superman hadn't been here... if he hadn't been willing to risk his life to save the Earth, would anyone have come forward to help stop it?"

"I did offer the services of my best engineers and planners," Luthor said. "I'm sure if Superman had been unable to offer his services, we would have figured something out. In any case, as I know you are well aware, we did have contingency plans in place in the event of failure."

Clark watched him. "And which were you hoping for, success or failure?"

Luthor didn't seem perturbed at the question. "As a businessman, I hold to the credo 'Prepare for the worst and hope for the best.' I think that best explains what I did and why... Mayor Berkowitz has agreed that the day after tomorrow would be a good time to hold a memorial service. The president has sent his regrets, but the vice-president has agreed to come. There is, of course, the matter of which religious leader will lead the prayer, conduct the service."

"I don't recall that Superman ever said that he had any sort of religious affiliation," Lois said. "He never mentioned anything like that to me. I assume he believed in God. He certainly believed that it was our duty to assist those in need."

"The archbishop will be holding a funeral mass for Superman," Luthor said. "But you think an ecumenical approach would be more appropriate?"

"Yes, I think that would be appropriate," Lois told him.

Luthor gave Lois a speculative look that sent unpleasant shivers down her spine. Then he smiled and turned to his assistant. "Missus Cox, would you see to the changes in the arrangements?"

"Of course, Mister Luthor."

"Why are you doing this, Luthor?" Clark asked. "It's well known that you and Superman didn't see eye to eye on a number of issues. He all but accused you outright of being behind the LexCorp power plant failure and of trying to frame him for the winter heat wave the plant created. So, why are you going out of your way to honor him in death?"

"You're absolutely correct that Superman and I had numerous philosophical differences," Luthor said. His voice was calm but Lois detected a touch of anger in his eyes. "He tended to take the short view of things, needing to have everything taken care of immediately instead of thoughtfully and in their own time. An

impatience frequently found in the young and those who don't have to work very hard for what they have. But be that as it may, as a survivor in the game of life, it behooves me to honor a worthy opponent who lost that game."

"I thought I told you to let me do the talking," Lois complained after they were well away from the parking garage.

"You did," Clark confirmed. "It's just that Luthor annoys me. He runs roughshod over people, stealing their heritages because they appeal to him on some obscure level. And he gets away with it because he has the money to bribe the people who should be looking after those treasures, looking after history. And he thinks he can simply waltz in and take over everything that Superman stood for, just because he was the one left standing. Did LexCorp offer a single piece of technology, a single suggestion even, of how to divert the asteroid without risking Superman's life?"

"No," Lois admitted. "In fact, I think it was someone from LexCorp who suggested that Superman would be able to pull it off." She glanced over at Clark. He looked a little wan, but then it had been a long day for him, considering everything. "Did you really see Missus Cox at the Lyceum?"

"Her name was Josephine Leslie-Cox then. And yes, I really did see her. I was sixteen. The Smallville High French Club managed to raise enough money for a group of us to visit Paris and London for two weeks that summer. That's when I decided I wanted to see the world."

"I assume that means your memory is okay now?" Lois asked.

"Yeah, pretty much," Clark told her. "Except for Superman. I just can't seem to get a handle on those memories. I know they have to be there."

"Maybe Deter can help," Lois suggested.

"Maybe," Clark said. "It would be nice." He turned and studied her for a long moment. "Do you think Superman considered Luthor an opponent in a game?" he said finally.

"I think Superman knew a lot more about Luthor than he ever told me, probably because I didn't really want to listen," Lois said. "I know you tried to warn me about Luthor, and I assume your information came from Superman, whether you remember it or not. But no, I don't think he saw life as a game. I think he saw life as something to be cherished and nurtured. He didn't care where a person came from or what color they were. If they were in need, he was there to help. He was a good man."

"Maybe that's the best epitaph of all."

Part 5

Lois stopped the jeep in front of Clark's apartment house. She could see lights peeking through the front curtains and assumed that meant his parents were waiting up for him.

"Want to come up?" Clark asked.

Lois shook her head. "It's late and you look tired."

"It's not that late," he pointed out. The dash board clock showed that it was just a little past ten. "And it's just a headache."

"Clark, Doctor McCorkle said if you had any physical symptoms, like a headache, you were to go to the emergency room," Lois reminded him.

"It's not bad. Probably just stress from being around him. In fact, it started right after I walked into the study. It was almost like I sensed something evil in there. It got worse when he unveiled that statue."

"Any idea what it was?"

Clark shook his head. "Something to do with that statue, I'd guess."

"Or maybe that piece of asteroid isn't as harmless as Luthor claims?"

"EPRAD is warning people to stay away from them and call

the proper authorities to collect the pieces,” Clark reminded her. “But nobody else seemed to notice a problem with the statue. I mean, you were close to it and you didn’t sense anything.”

“But you did...”

“And it could be psychosomatic, too.” Clark told her. “That was the room where he pulled that sword on me the first time we met. I could well be over-reacting. It’s just a headache.”

“And maybe it isn’t.”

“I promise if it gets any worse, I’ll get myself to the emergency room, okay?”

Lois nodded her acquiescence. He didn’t seem quite as pale as he had looked before. And she was certain Martha would step in and force the issue if Clark started showing any other symptoms.

Clark sighed and continued. “I do have to wonder how big the asteroid piece is that Luthor’s planning on putting on the statue and why he isn’t worried about the effects of the radiation. And EPRAD did announce it was radioactive.”

“With Luthor, who knows?” Lois said. “What time is your appointment with Deter?”

“Eight.”

“I’ll pick you up at seven, then.”

Again Lois’s dreams were filled with falling and darkness, pain and fire — but this time it was Superman crying out in agony — a bright spot in the darkness — falling to the earth, burning up. Through the flames she heard him cry out her name before disappearing into nothingness. She screamed his name: “Superman!” But there was no one to hear her. There was no one anywhere. She was alone and he was gone. He was gone.

She woke up in a cold sweat. She tried to tell herself it was only a dream, that it was still possible he was alive. That he was hurt and scared like Martha Kent had said. But in her heart she knew Martha was wrong — Superman hadn’t survived his ordeal. He had died alone in the cold of space.

She let her thoughts go back to the last time she saw him, outside EPRAD’s command center.

He had pulled her aside for some privacy as they talked. Other reporters were glaring at her in jealousy from behind the barricade. She ignored them, concentrating on the brave man in front of her.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“This will work,” he told her.

“That’s a relief.”

He seemed confident and that gave her hope.

“Why are you so sure?” she asked.

“Because it has to,” he said simply.

“Power of positive thinking, huh?” She tried to chuckle but failed miserably.

“Lois, how are you feeling?”

Even now he was looking out after everyone else.

“Scared enough for both of us,” she admitted.

He touched her cheek then cupped the side of her face in his hand, looking deeply in her eyes. She saw the concern in his eyes. But it was concern for her, not for himself.

“I’ll be back,” he promised. “We’ll go flying together.”

“I hope so.” She wished she could feel as sure as he seemed to feel.

“Count on it,” he said with a smile. “I’ve got to go.”

“Good luck.”

He began to turn away but she grabbed him, impulsively kissing him on the mouth. After a heartbeat, he returned the kiss. It was sweet and filled with longing. She wasn’t sure if it was his longing or hers she was sensing. She didn’t want to let him go. He lingered with her a moment then stepped away from her, watching her. She knew then she hadn’t imagined the longing she felt in his kiss. Then he turned and walked away, toward the

waiting EPRAD technicians who were to fit him with communications equipment and breathing apparatus.

Lois hadn’t watched him take off. She hadn’t wanted her last memory of him to be of him flying away from her.

“He’s gone... he’s really gone,” she murmured to herself through her tears. “He promised he’d come back and we’d go flying... but he’s gone.”

She cried herself back to sleep.

It was a struggle for Lois to get out of bed the next morning. She felt like she hadn’t slept at all and wanted nothing more than to roll over and forget the world existed. ‘He’s gone...’ kept rolling through her mind.

She managed to heave herself out from under the covers and into the bathroom. She was showered and dressed in time to pick up Clark and get him to his appointment with Deter. But she couldn’t do much about the dark circles under her eyes or the puffiness in her eyelids. Dark sunglasses would look suspicious.

“Lois, are you okay?” Clark asked when he got into the jeep. He handed her a cup of coffee in a travel mug and she took a sip. It was just the way she liked it.

“I had a bad night,” she admitted after they were on their way. “It finally hit me that he’s gone. He sacrificed everything to save us and he died all alone out there. Do you think he even knew that he succeeded?”

“I don’t know,” Clark told her. “But I’m sure that even though he was alone out there, he knew he was in everyone’s thoughts and prayers. He knew he was loved and he went out there, knowing he was risking his life for those he loved. And I’m pretty sure he included you as one of them.”

She managed a smile. “You’re sure you don’t remember him?”

Clark sighed. “I’m sure. And it’s driving Mom crazy. It’s like I’m not remembering a member of the family. She’s been reading psychology books and that’s always a bad sign.” He flexed his bandaged hand. “She also can’t figure out how I burned my hand, even though I told her how it happened.”

“How’s your hand doing, by the way?”

“Healing up okay,” he said. “Hurts some, but Mom says there’s no sign of infection.”

“That’s good.”

“And she almost had a melt-down when I told her about my headache and that green crystal,” Clark went on. “She was sure I’d been poisoned by Luthor. This whole amnesia thing has her seriously weirded out. Dad too.”

“You’re their only child, Clark,” Lois reminded him. “Of course they’re going to worry about you.” Privately, Lois wished her own parents cared as much. Sam and Ellen Lane weren’t even speaking to one another. Lois couldn’t even imagine the circumstances that would bring them together — her funeral, maybe. Certainly not her living.

Lois pulled the jeep into the same spot she had parked in the day before. The same attendant as before showed Lois and Clark to Deter’s office. Deter was waiting for them. Lois double-checked that her recorder was in her pocket.

“Miss Lane, Mister Kent — Lois, Clark — right on time. Punctuality is a good thing,” Deter said. He looked at Lois and she noticed he was looking at her hands. She double-checked that she had put on the engagement ring. Deter continued, “But as I told you yesterday, these sessions are better one on one.”

“It’s okay,” Clark said. “I want her to stay.”

“I don’t agree.”

“Look Doctor Deter, my memories have mostly come back, except for about Superman,” Clark told Deter. “It’s like... I don’t know... I know I should be able to remember him. I wrote about him. I had to have interviewed him. I had to have known him. But I don’t remember him. I don’t remember anything about him

other than what I've read and I wrote some of it. It's a little weird."

"Then that's what we'll work on," Deter agreed. "Have you ever been hypnotized?"

"No," Clark told him.

"There's nothing to worry about. It's not what you see in the movies. You are in control. I can't make you do anything you wouldn't normally be willing to do. Just relax, let your mind float..."

Lois sat back in her chair and watched as Clark focused his attention on a crystal pendulum that swung gently from Deter's hand. Deter instructed Clark to relax and breathe deeply, concentrating on the crystal. Deter's voice was soft, cajoling and Lois had to fight to not fall under the spell he seemed to be casting.

"Clark, can you hear me?" Deter asked. Clark had closed his eyes and Lois almost thought he had fallen asleep.

"Yes..." Clark murmured.

"Clark, I want you to go back to Monday, to when you hit your head. Can you tell me what happened?"

"Lois and I were heading into work and the sun was blocked by something. Everything went dark. There was a car, the driver couldn't see in the dark. He... I... I fell into some garbage cans. I hit my head."

Deter looked worried and glanced at Lois. She nodded her head.

"Then what happened?" Deter asked.

Clark described the next two days. Being at work, covering the EPRAD news conference where it was revealed that the total eclipse of the sun had been caused by an asteroid that had crossed Earth's orbit and that its much larger companion, dubbed 'Nightfall', was on a collision course with the planet.

But Lois noticed there were odd omissions in Clark's narrative. He accurately described the activities in the newsroom surrounding EPRAD's announcement, the work he and Lois had been assigned. He described his own feelings of concern over the asteroid. But there were things missing — he couldn't, or wouldn't, say where he was while the world waited for Superman to fly out to divert the asteroid. And when asked how he ended up at the Fifth Street Mission where the police had found him, his response was simply 'I fell'.

Deter tried several different approaches to get Clark to say how he got to the mission. It was like hitting a wall. Clark simply didn't remember, or if he did remember, he was refusing to tell Lois and Deter about it.

"Clark, when I count to three, you will awaken rested and refreshed. You will remember everything that happened here, everything we talked about... One... Two... Three."

Clark took a deep breath and opened his eyes. Then his shoulders slumped in disappointment. "Nothing... There's nothing there." He looked over at Deter. "Why did you focus on the past few days?"

"I wanted to help you uncover the triggering event. I was hoping that might give some insight into the reasons you suppressed your memory overall and are still suppressing your memory of the asteroid and Superman," Deter explained. "But, for whatever reasons, you have buried those memories so deeply that it's going to take a more aggressive approach to access them."

"What do you mean by more aggressive?" Lois asked.

"Drugs," Deter said. Clark straightened in his chair as if to protest and Deter raised his hand, palm out. "It's nothing like the movies," Deter explained. "All we do is use the drugs to induce a dream-like state where your defenses are lowered further than you can normally do under simple hypnosis. It's a common technique in cases like this."

"You're sure there's no physical reason why he can't

remember?" Lois asked.

"Doctor Coundar found no evidence of brain trauma or drugs," Deter said. "Unless there's something new out there that doesn't show up in the usual toxicology screenings and if that's the case... Well, that's a very scary thought."

Deter watched Clark for a long moment as if assessing Clark's reaction. Clark's head was down and he seemed lost in his own misery and he didn't seem to notice Deter's scrutiny. Lois hadn't realized how much her partner had been counting on this session to solve his problem.

"Clark, I would like to talk to Lois alone," Deter said.

"You want me to wait outside?" Clark asked. His voice was low, expression bleak.

"I was going to suggest you stay here and review what we did uncover," Deter said. "Maybe there's something there we didn't recognize at the time. Something small, insignificant even."

"A key?"

"Exactly," Deter said with a smile. He opened the office door and ushered Lois through, closing the door behind them.

"Lois, I didn't want to cause Clark anymore worry, but I'm afraid the psychological issues we're facing here are more severe than I previously thought," Deter told her. "He's not only blocked his memories of knowing Superman, but there are major gaps in his memory that he doesn't even seem to be aware of."

"And those gaps appear to coincide with when Superman was out saving the Earth," Lois realized.

"Yes. I'm afraid that part of Clark's problem is that he hates and fears Superman, and with Superman dying to save everyone, his feelings of guilt about those feelings have become unbearable. He's had to block them out, all the times when his negative feelings about Superman were strongest... especially those times when you were involved."

"You got all that from this session?" Lois asked. Alarms were going off in her head — she didn't believe for one moment that Clark's problem was caused by a hatred of Superman. If anything, Clark probably understood the superhero best of all. It was Clark's article that expressed Superman's grief at being forced to leave Metropolis after he was accused of causing last December's heat wave. Someone who hated Superman could never have written that story — or chosen to leave the city that had rejected Superman.

She reached into her pocket and turned on the recorder. If Deter was planning on going where she thought he was, she was going to have it on tape.

"From this session and yesterday's," Deter was saying. "It's more what he doesn't admit to than what he does. And if I'm right, you may well be in danger. At some point he may, and probably will, transfer his hatred of Superman to you. I really think he should be admitted here so we can help him through this."

"Why?" Lois asked. "I know Clark. He would never hurt me. He's the gentlest man I know."

"Lois, who was it that kissed Superman goodbye?" Deter asked. "Clark denies any recollection of that... his own fiancée sending Superman off like a lover. He will realize soon enough that he's not man enough for you, and he will lash out in anger... at you, at himself. You must be prepared for that. It's going to be very hard on you but I promise I will be here for you."

As he spoke, he had put his hand on her shoulder as though to comfort her. "We can discuss more over dinner," he suggested.

"Doctor Deter, I don't have money or position," Lois said, keeping her tone cordial. "I'm a journalist and I'm a damned good one. So please tell me what attraction I have for you? Access to my father's research, maybe? Or something else?"

Deter jerked his hand away as if burnt. "I don't know what you mean," he stammered. "I would never..."

"Yeah, right," Lois drawled, pulling the recorder from her

pocket and showing it to him. He actually paled and she was momentarily concerned he might actually faint on her.

"This is a hoax," Deter stated after a moment. "He doesn't have a memory problem at all and you're probably not even engaged to him. Who set you on me? That bitch Coundra? Mendenhall?"

His tone had turned ugly and Lois found herself backing away from him, from the open anger and hatred in his face. She shielded the recorder against her chest. "I'm a reporter, Doctor Deter. And your reputation precedes you."

"Give me that..." Deter demanded, lunging toward her and reaching for the recorder.

"I don't think so, Doctor," Clark said from beside Deter, grabbing the man's arm and forcing his hand away from Lois. Deter backed off and Clark let him go.

"Get out, both of you," Deter commanded. "Get out!"

"We're leaving," Clark promised. He took Lois's arm and she let him do it. "Are you okay?" Clark asked as they hurried away from Deter.

She nodded. She didn't want to admit to Clark how shaky she was feeling, or how glad she was that Clark had chosen to come out of the office at that moment.

By the time they got to the jeep she was feeling calmer and her curiosity took over. She stopped and faced Clark. "What were you doing, anyway? Listening at the door?"

"Not really," Clark told her. "But I heard him raise his voice. It didn't exactly sound like good bedside manners."

"Oh, he tried his 'bedside manner' on me," she told him as she climbed into the car and put the key in the ignition. "He tried to tell me your memory problem was caused by you hating Superman and feeling guilty that he was dead. He was trying to convince me you'd turn on me because I was Superman's friend."

"That's ridiculous," Clark told her. "I admit I may well have been jealous of him. I mean, he was 'super', almost perfect. And he had you."

"Clark, I was his friend. And yes, he was almost perfect, bigger than life, bigger than any musician or actor. And yes, I wanted it to be more. Heck, I wanted to fly off with him to the ends of the earth," Lois said. "He was Superman."

"Did you... I mean were you ever...?" Clark's voice faltered and he ducked his head in embarrassment.

"Was I ever intimate with him?" Lois asked, guessing that was the question he wanted to ask. It was a logical question and Clark was one of the few people she felt had any right to ask. He was her partner, despite his little peccadilloes. "No. But I would have, if he'd asked," she answered her own question. She studied Clark's face for a long moment. He seemed to be mulling her statement over. Then his expression brightened a little.

"Lois, I may not remember knowing Superman, but I do remember what I wrote about him and what you told me about him. I remember a night on my terrace, and you asked which I'd rather be able to do, fly or be invisible. You said you would like to be able to become invisible and I told you I'd rather fly, and then you told me we had something in common. Superman."

"You wanted to fly like him and I wanted to fly with him," Lois said. She remembered the conversation clearly. Alan Morris, the Invisible Man, had been asleep on Clark's sofa, hiding from the police. Clark had brewed Lapsang Souchang tea while they waited for Morris to wake up. It seemed so very long ago.

"I may have been a little jealous, but I didn't hate him," Clark told her.

"I know that Clark," Lois assured him. "He was your friend, too."

Perry was waiting for them when they got out of the elevators to the newsroom. "Lois, Clark, my office, now!" he yelled.

They both hurried into his office. Lois had a suspicion it was

about Maxwell Deter. Perry's next words confirmed her suspicion.

"Doctor Deter called here, claiming the two of you cooked up a story about Clark's amnesia to get him into a compromising position," Perry began.

To answer, Lois pulled out her recorder and rewound the tape.

"I was there while Deter hypnotized Clark so he could try to get to his memories about Superman," Lois explained. "It didn't work. Then Deter asked to talk to me privately about Clark's condition and he started to make wild claims about Clark hating Superman and possibly being dangerous to himself and to me. Now, during the session, Clark said nothing about hating Superman. In fact, Superman didn't even come up in the conversation."

"Deter claims Clark's amnesia was a hoax," Perry told them.

"Perry, you saw what shape he was in," Lois reminded the older man. "We're talking about Clark here. Going undercover as a bartender is about the limit of his acting ability. And he's about as dangerous as a... a... gerbil."

"I'm standing here, you know," Clark remarked. "And gerbils bite."

Lois turned and glared at him. "Clark, help me out here... don't help." She set the recorder on the desk and turned the switch to play. Perry leaned forward to hear the tinny recording.

Deter: "From this session and yesterday's. It's more what he doesn't admit to than what he does. And if I'm right, you may well be in danger. At some point he may, and probably will, transfer his hatred of Superman to you. I really think he should be admitted here so we can help him through this."

Lois: "Why? I know Clark. He would never hurt me. He's the gentlest man I know."

Deter: "Lois, who was it that kissed Superman goodbye? Clark denies any recollection of that... his own fiancée sending Superman off like a lover. He will realize soon enough that he's not man enough for you, and he will lash out in anger... at you, at himself. You must be prepared for that. It's going to be very hard on you but I promise I will be here for you... We can discuss more over dinner."

Lois: "Doctor Deter, I don't have money or position. I'm a journalist and I'm a damned good one. So please tell me what attraction I have for you? Access to my father's research, maybe? Or something else?"

Deter (sounding nervous): "I don't know what you mean... I would never..."

Lois: "Yeah, right."

There was a sound as if the recorder was being moved. Then:

Deter: "This is a hoax. He doesn't have a memory problem at all and you're probably not even engaged to him. Who set you on me? That bitch Coundra? Mendenhall?"

Deter's voice sounded angry, even vicious.

Lois: "I'm a reporter, Doctor Deter. And your reputation precedes you."

Deter: "Give me that..."

Clark: "I don't think so, Doctor."

Deter (shouting): "Get out, both of you. Get out!"

"That's when we left," Lois said.

Perry sat back. "Shades of Elvis," he murmured. "It's interesting, provocative even, but he can turn around and claim you set him up. Have you got any corroborating evidence that he's been taking advantage of his position?"

"There've been complaints against him by at least a few patients' wives, but nothing substantial as far as I know," Lois admitted.

"Get on it, and get a second opinion on Clark's memory problem," Perry ordered. "If you're going after Deter and the Neuroscience Center, you'd better have all your ducks in a row."

“Jimmy, get me the names of the wives who had complaints against Deter,” Lois ordered as soon as she got to her desk. “If you can find patients with complaints, even better.”

“On it,” Jimmy said, turning to his own computer.

“And me?” Clark asked.

“Well, we need a second opinion,” Lois reminded him. She pulled a phone book from his desk drawer and dropped it onto his desk. “My sister’s been seeing a Doctor Friskin. Not that I put any credence into that sort of thing... You know that, don’t you? But Lucy likes her and thinks she’s been helpful.”

“Maybe this Doctor Friskin has an open slot sometime in the next week,” Clark said, opening the phone book to the proper page.

Lois went back to her own desk and tried not to listen in as Clark made the phone call. She opened a new file for the Deter article and began typing.

After a few minutes, Lois heard Clark say ‘Thank you,’ and he hung up the phone. He was grinning when he turned to her. “Doctor Friskin had a cancellation. I have a five o’clock appointment with her today. And I have a feeling her receptionist doesn’t like Doctor Deter.”

“Good,” Lois said, returning his grin. “Now you can help Jimmy track down the unhappy wives.”

Her phone rang and she picked it up, hoping it wasn’t Luthor, even though she was a little surprised he hadn’t called her.

“Miss Lane,” a man’s voice said over the phone. “Miss Lois Lane?”

“This is Lois Lane,” she responded. It wasn’t Luthor at least. “Who is this?”

“Vincent Winninger,” the voice said. “I hear you’ve been trying to get in touch with me?”

“Yes, I have,” Lois admitted. She had to remind herself to keep breathing. Vincent Winninger, the mad recluse, was on the phone — her phone, talking to her. “You’re a hard man to track down,” she managed to get out. She had almost given up on getting an interview out of him, despite that fact that his controversial book on his theories on the ozone layer had hit the bookstores with a less than an overwhelming response over a month before. Most authors would have been begging for an interview. Winninger wasn’t one of them, until now.

“Comes with the territory, I’m afraid,” Winninger said. “How about we meet at my office Monday morning, say tennish?”

“Your office, Monday at ten,” Lois repeated. Winninger gave her an address near Metropolis University. “See you on Monday,” she said, hanging up. She had to restrain herself from crowing in delight. She had an appointment to interview Vincent Winninger.

“You’re looking chipper,” Jimmy commented. “Who was that on the phone?”

“Nobody important,” she said, trying to hide her grin.

Winninger was harder to get hold of than Superman... Superman’s gone. Suddenly getting an interview with Winninger didn’t seem so important.

“I have those names you wanted,” Jimmy said, handing her a print out. “I also went ahead and checked patient deaths. The Neuroscience Center is kind of a dangerous place. Did you know that psychiatrists have a higher patient mortality rate than any other medical profession? Anyway the Center’s mortality rate is on the high side, even for a psychiatric hospital. And Deter’s patients have a habit of being the ones to end up on a slab. The official word is that the Center gets the most difficult cases and Deter’s patients are the ones with the most issues.”

“And the patient families with complaints?” Clark asked.

“I found ten in the past two years and five were death related,” Jimmy explained. “In each case, the wife filed a complaint with the Center and with the Board of Health that her husband’s condition began to deteriorate within days after she

turned down Deter’s advances. Of the deaths, three of the deaths were suicide, even though the families all said that it was completely out of character.”

“And the other two deaths?” Lois asked.

“One had a bad reaction to an experimental medication and the other... well I guess you could call it suicide by cop,” Jimmy said. “Guy went berserk in the dining room, went after a nurse with a piece of broken glass and took hostages. The police report said he was screaming he had a gun, and it sounded like he was having a flashback to a war. Only, it turned out he’d never been in the military and his wife said he hated guns and was one of the gentlest people any one knew.”

“But the police had no way of knowing that at the time and so...?” Clark said.

“And so the cops ended up shooting a man armed with a piece of broken glass,” Jimmy finished.

“What about complaints where the patient didn’t end up dead?” Lois asked.

“The family took the patient out of the Center against doctor’s orders,” Jimmy reported. “There were a couple suits against the Center, but they were dismissed — lack of evidence of wrong-doing on the part of the Center.”

“Clark, let’s see if any of the wives and widows are willing to talk about it.” She handed Clark the second sheet of the printout. He picked up his phone and dialed the first number on his list.

Part 6

Lois heard Clark’s chair creak and she looked over to see him stretching. His face was pulled into a grimace.

“Any luck?” Lois asked. Her own calls had gotten nowhere. Not one of the spouses or former patients had been willing to talk to her, not even off the record. The last woman had been positively rude, claiming Lois was out to get a ‘good man’ — and this was the woman who had filed a multi-million dollar suit against the Center, naming Deter’s advances as the reason behind the complaint.

“Two are willing to talk, but off the record,” Clark told her. “Missus Smith wants to meet us at a coffee shop near her house in an hour. Missus Maier promised to call me back Monday morning.”

“And the others?” Lois asked.

“How dare I intrude on their grief. Doctor Deter is a ‘good man’ and the whole thing was just a huge misunderstanding,” Clark told her. There was more than a touch of snarkiness in his voice. Then his shoulders slumped and she realized he was as at least as discouraged as she was.

“Do you think they got paid off?” Lois wondered aloud.

“Well, some of the suits against Deter and the Center were dismissed for lack of evidence,” Clark reminded her. “But the others were simply dropped. It’s possible they reached an out-of-court settlement that included a gag order.”

“So, where are we meeting Missus Smith?”

Clark gave her the address — a coffee shop in the Lafayette neighborhood. With the afternoon traffic, it would take most of the hour to get there.

“Let’s get going, otherwise we’ll never make it,” Lois said.

The coffee shop was on the corner of a quaint building in a part of town undergoing a renaissance. There were few customers inside but an attractive woman with dark hair was sitting in the far corner. She was dressed in black and looked up as they entered.

Lois led the way across the room. Clark stopped and ordered two coffees then joined Lois at the table.

“Missus Smith?” Clark asked.

“Mister Kent?” the woman responded.

“Thank you for meeting with us,” Clark said. Mrs. Smith

smiled sadly at him.

"I'm not sure what good it will do," she said. "You said you wanted to know about Roger."

"Yes," Clark said simply but his expression was full of sympathy.

Mrs. Smith sighed. "There's not a lot to tell. My husband killed himself. We had hopes that Doctor Deter's treatment would help bring him back to normal, but when Roger realized he wasn't going to get better he found a way to end his life."

"You filed a complaint against Doctor Deter," Lois reminded her. "You stated that Doctor Deter had made improper advances toward you and when you refused, your husband's condition deteriorated."

Mrs. Smith was looking around the shop, nervously twisting her wedding band around her finger. "That was a mistake. Doctor Mendenhall explained everything. Doctor Deter was simply trying to break the bad news to me gently, that Roger wasn't going to get better, and in his frustration he was going to become a danger to me and the children. After Roger died, Doctor Mendenhall convinced the insurance company to pay on Roger's life insurance policy. He's been so very helpful. The man's a saint. He's even been paying for my own therapy."

"Missus Smith, if you don't mind, what was Roger's initial diagnosis?" Clark asked.

"Disassociative retrograde amnesia," Mrs. Smith said. "Roger had been having trouble at work, and it wasn't helping things at home... one day he simply disappeared. I filed a missing person's report, and he was eventually found in San Diego, after he maxed out our credit cards. When I flew out to bring him home, he didn't know me or the kids."

"And Doctor Deter promised to help bring his memory back?" Lois asked.

Mrs. Smith nodded. "At first it looked like Roger would be fine, then he got worse. A lot worse. Doctor Deter tried, but there was little he could do."

Lois tried to keep the disappointment out of her face. Mrs. Smith's information wasn't going to help their investigation. She wasn't going to support their claims of Deter's malpractice.

"I'm so sorry, Missus Smith," Clark said. He sounded sincere. Clark always made people feel like they could talk to him, that he cared. And Lois knew he did care. That was why he could do the touchy-feely stories, the human interest pieces that Lois found so difficult to get into.

"But thank you for talking to us," Clark continued.

"You were hoping I could help you prove something against Doctor Deter and the Center, weren't you?" Mrs. Smith asked.

"Frankly, yes," Clark told her. "If you're worried that what you tell us could get back to Deter, we don't have to use your name. We can keep this strictly confidential. And you should know you're not the first person to accuse Deter of impropriety."

"When I made those accusations, I was blaming everyone else for Roger's death. I couldn't see the pain he was in. I couldn't see how much pain I'd brought him by demanding he return to being the man he was before when it wasn't possible. I blamed Deter because I refused to blame myself. Doctor Mendenhall made me see that, made me see that I had misunderstood Doctor Deter's actions, his concern."

Lois heard the words, but the whole tone of Mrs. Smith's statement rang false.

"I'm sorry I can't help you," Mrs. Smith said as she stood to leave. Lois watched as she crossed the floor and went out the door.

"She's scared to death," Clark commented.

"What makes you say that?" Lois asked. She knew what her own instincts told her but she was curious as to Clark's reasoning.

"The way she was sweating and twisting her ring," Clark went on. "Her whole body language. I don't know if she really

believes she caused her husband's suicide, but she's scared."

"Maybe I bailed on Deter too soon," Lois said. "Maybe I should have taken him up on his offer of dinner."

"Why didn't you?" Clark asked. He was watching her over the rim of his coffee cup.

"He was giving me the creeps," Lois admitted. "Starting out with crazy claims about why you blocked your memories of Superman. I just... I'm not a trained psychologist but I really did pay attention to my psych classes back in college. And I know you a damn sight better than Deter. What he was saying was complete bull. And I'm betting what he told Roger's wife was complete bull, too."

"But how do we prove it? Assuming we can," Clark asked. "I doubt Deter would have kept real records about what was going on with Roger Smith, or the other suicides." Clark's expression turned thoughtful. "On the other hand, he may be arrogant enough to keep some sort of records on how well his brainwashing was going."

Lois felt her eyebrows climbing to her hairline. "Are you suggesting what I think you are?" She put a hand to his forehead in mock disbelief. "No fever... So, who are you and what did you do with my Boy Scout partner?"

"Very funny, Lois," Clark responded, brushing her hand away. "Don't tell me you weren't thinking the same thing."

"I think there's a lot more going on at the Center than they want people to know about," Lois admitted. Then she grinned. "And I know a way onto the grounds." She checked her watch. "Friskin's office is down by the OCME. And I'm sure we'll need to be there early to fill out the paperwork... again."

The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) was a six story brick building tucked in between Metropolis General Hospital and University of Metropolis Medical Center. Friskin's office was on the tenth floor of the very modern steel and glass New Troy Medical Arts Building, directly across the street.

Lois caught Clark chuckling as they entered the elevator.

"What?" she demanded.

"I'm just wondering how many people in Metropolis use the central morgue as a landmark over either of the hospitals," Clark said.

"I visit the morgue a lot more than I visit the hospitals," Lois retorted. The elevator doors opened onto a carpeted hallway. Arrows on the wall in front of them pointed both ways — 1001-1020 to the left, 1021-1040 to the right. Friskin's office was in 1039. Lois led the way.

The reception area was business-like — all noncommittal beige, a few landscapes. The young woman at the reception desk smiled brightly as Lois and Clark walked up to her.

"You must be Miss Lane and Mister Kent," she said cheerily. "We'll need you to fill out these forms." She handed Clark a clipboard with papers to be filled out. Lois sat and watched as he filled out the forms.

"At least now I remember enough that I can fill these out," Clark commented, although Lois thought he was more speaking to himself than to her. After a few minutes, he took the clipboard back to the receptionist.

She looked over the paperwork.

"You don't have a regular doctor in Metropolis?" she asked him.

"I've never needed one, till now," Clark replied.

"No clinic visits, no urgent care facilities?"

Clark shook his head. "I've been real healthy all my life."

The receptionist gave him another bright smile and Lois found herself resenting the other woman's attention on him.

"I am not jealous," Lois repeated to herself under her breath. She watched as the receptionist handed Clark one more piece of paper to sign.

“This gives us permission to have access to whatever records the Neuroscience Center has on you,” the receptionist explained. Clark nodded and went back to the sofa to sit down.

“Nervous?” Lois asked. He was picking at the gauze on his hand.

“A little,” Clark admitted.

A door beside the reception desk opened and a tall middle-aged woman with light brown hair stepped out. She smiled at them. “Miss Lane and Mister Kent, I presume? I’m Barbara Friskin.” She held her hand out to be shaken and Clark hurried to his feet to oblige.

“Clark Kent and Lois Lane,” he said, indicating Lois. Lois got to her feet as the receptionist handed Friskin the file containing Clark’s forms. Friskin glanced over the papers then tucked the file under her arm. She turned to the receptionist. “Sandy, tell the Neuroscience Center I want those records faxed to me stat, and buzz me when they come in.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

Friskin gestured for Lois and Clark to enter the inner office.

The inner office was a sharp contrast to the blandness of the reception area. The walls were paneled in maple and flowered drapes framed the sheer-covered floor-to-ceiling windows. One wall was covered in built-in bookshelves. There were plants in heavy ceramic pots and flowers in Oriental looking vases. The desk and tables looked antique. A black leather analytic couch stood at one end of the room. A flowered wing chair was situated near the head of the couch. Except for the chair at the desk, the rest of the chairs didn’t look nearly as comfortable.

Friskin closed the office door behind them and indicated they should sit in the chairs in front of her desk. She settled in behind the desk.

“So, Clark, according to our phone conversation,” Friskin began conversationally, “you are recovering from global retrograde amnesia that apparently began sometime last Wednesday. You’ve had two sessions with Max Deter over at the Neurosciences Center, and I gather those didn’t go very well.”

“Yeah, that’s about it,” Clark said.

“So, if your memory has come back — and from what you told me, it has — what’s the problem?”

“Not all of it’s come back,” Clark explained. “I seem to have blocked out everything about Superman.”

Friskin made a note on the pad in front of her then looked up at him. “Is it important that you remember him?”

“I’m a reporter. I wrote about him. Apparently I knew as much, if not more, about him as anyone but it’s gone... he’s gone.”

“So, why do you think you’ve blocked those memories?” Friskin asked.

“Doctor Deter said it was because I hated Superman and then felt guilty when he died,” Clark told her.

Lois tried to keep from squirming in her seat. She wasn’t used to simply sitting and listening. And hearing Clark relate Deter’s statements about him simply made her annoyed.

Friskin smiled at her discomfort then turned her attention back to Clark. “I asked you what you thought about it, not what Max Deter said.”

Clark sat back in his chair, a sadly thoughtful look coming into his face. “I think... I know it sounds crazy, but I think I felt him die.” There was a tremor in Clark’s voice.

“Where were you when this happened?”

“I was someplace dark and cold, and I heard him scream... he was falling, burning up and then... nothing. He was gone. Everything was gone,” Clark said softly. “The next thing I remember is this old homeless guy standing over me, telling me I was going to catch my death if I didn’t get some clothes on.”

“Do you remember where you were when he found you?”

“In an alley about a block from the Fifth Street Mission,”

Clark said.

“Do you know why you were in that alley?”

Clark shook his head. “The last thing I clearly remember before that was telling Lois that I was planning to do some man-on-the-street interviews while Superman was out taking care of the asteroid.”

“And if I asked you to guess why you were there?”

“If I had to guess, I’d say I’d gotten mugged. I certainly felt like I’d been through the wringer,” Clark told her. “I don’t remember ever feeling that beat up in my life. And I played football in high school and college.”

“But you’re feeling okay now?” Friskin asked.

“Except for my hand, yeah,” Clark said. “I grabbed a hot skillet without grabbing a potholder first,” he explained.

“What were you thinking when you grabbed the handle?”

“I wasn’t thinking,” Clark admitted. “Then it was a few choice four letter words that my Mom wouldn’t approve of. Damn but that hurt.” There was an embarrassed chuckle in Clark’s voice.

Friskin smiled and took down more notes.

“Clark, if I were to ask Superman how it felt to be out in space trying to deal with that asteroid, what would he tell me?” Friskin asked.

Lois watched Clark swallow hard. “You want me to answer for him?” he asked.

Friskin nodded.

“He would tell you that space was cold. Even with his invulnerability, it was bitterly cold. And the asteroid was big, bigger than anything he’d had to move before. He felt like an ant trying to move a boulder. But if he didn’t do it, didn’t divert it, everyone would die. Everyone. So he tried to shove it aside. He had to. Failure was not an option. But he ran out of time, ran out of oxygen, ran out of strength.”

Lois found herself shaking at his description. Even Friskin seemed stunned at the anguish in his words. After a moment the psychiatrist nodded and made a few more notations on her pad. The intercom on Friskin’s desk buzzed and she pressed the key to turn on the speaker.

“The records from the Center just came over the fax,” Sandy said. “And Doctor Max Deter is on the line demanding to speak to you.”

“Tell Doctor Deter I’m with a patient and I’ll get back to him. Then bring me the records, please.”

After a moment, the office door opened and Sandy walked in carrying a sheaf of papers. She placed them on Friskin’s desk then hurried out. Friskin took a moment to read through the papers. She took out a fresh pad of paper from her desk and took a few notes. Then she looked up at Clark. “Doctor Deter didn’t like you very much,” Friskin said. “He indicates you were a ‘difficult’ patient.”

“I’m afraid Doctor Deter seemed more interested in taking Lois to dinner than in helping me recover my memory,” Clark told her.

She turned to Lois. “Did you agree to go to dinner with him?”

“No,” Lois told her. “And when I confronted him about that, and the things he was saying about Clark, he decided Clark’s condition was a hoax and we were out to get him.”

“Are you out to get him?” Friskin asked. Lois couldn’t read her expression behind her large glasses.

“We would need a lot more evidence that just the fact that he thought I was difficult and he wanted to take Lois out to dinner,” Clark told her. “Although I’m sure there’s some sort of ethical issue there.”

“He indicated you refused the treatment he recommended,” Friskin said.

“I did agree to be hypnotized,” Clark told her. “But I wasn’t comfortable with the idea of using drugs.”

“Deter’s published work indicates he’s gotten good results with that technique,” Friskin said. “But I agree it may be a bit aggressive in your case.” She looked at another page. “He noted that you two are engaged?”

Lois hung her head. “I told him that so he’d be more open with me about Clark’s condition.”

“He did tell you that, legally, a fiancée has no more rights than a stranger?” Friskin asked.

“Actually, he didn’t,” Lois told her.

“It’s a popular misconception since hospitals will generally allow fiancées and very close friends to have access to a patient. But that’s for the patient’s peace of mind, not any legal requirement. Only legal next-of-kin has any rights when it comes to medical records and treatment decisions, and that’s only in the event the patient is so incapacitated he can’t make those decisions himself. A fiancée doesn’t even have a legal say in the disposition of the remains in the event of death.”

She turned another page and skimmed through it. “How’s your back?” she asked without looking up.

“Fine, why?” Clark said. He sounded surprised at the change in subject.

“Did Doctor Coundar ask you about the bruising and the burns on your back?”

“She asked me about the bruising,” Clark said. “I figure it must have happened when I landed in that alley. I don’t recall that she asked about burns. I don’t feel anything... well maybe a little itching.”

“Like sunburn?” Friskin asked.

“I guess so,” Clark said. “I haven’t had a sunburn since I was real little.”

“Lucky you.” Friskin took a deep breath as she closed the file folder on her desk. “I don’t know how much Doctor Deter told you about psychogenic amnesia...”

“Deter said it was a weak personality’s defense against something that did, or maybe will, happen that is so traumatic they’d rather lock away their own identity than deal with it outright,” Lois said.

“Some people would describe it that way,” Friskin said. “But the term ‘weak personality’ is highly misleading and not at all helpful. Anyone can suffer from a trauma so overwhelming, so devastating, that they can’t process it immediately or in any outwardly rational manner. That’s what’s called post-traumatic stress disorder.”

“Is that what happened to him?” Lois asked.

“Possibly,” Friskin said. “In your case, Clark, I wouldn’t even rule out the possibility that there is some physical reason for your memory loss. And if it is psychogenic, I don’t know if we’ll ever find out what exactly happened that was so traumatic for you. Superman was an alien. It could well be that you did feel his last moments and that was a severe enough shock for you to block everything out until you were somewhere safe and you could process what happened. It could even have caused physical damage that didn’t show up on any of the tests Coundar did. You told me everything has come back to you, except for your memories of Superman?”

“That’s right,” Clark agreed.

“Tell me truthfully, does it bother you that you can’t remember details about him?” Friskin asked.

“It’s a little annoying,” Clark said. “But I think it bothers my parents a lot more. I mean, I would like to remember but it won’t affect my work or my life much if I don’t. But my mom and dad are really worried, even though they say they aren’t.”

“May I have your permission to contact your parents about this?”

“Sure,” Clark said. “But why?”

“I have a theory I would like to run past them,” Friskin said. “In the meantime, I want you to stop trying so hard to remember

Superman. I don’t mean for you to avoid the subject, but I want you to stop worrying about the fact that you don’t remember. I’m fairly certain the information is there and you’ll be able to access it if it becomes necessary.”

“You’re sure?” Clark asked.

“There are no guarantees,” Friskin said. “But I’m fairly certain. I’d like to arrange another appointment with you early next week, to see how everything’s coming together for you. Say five o’clock next Monday?”

“Sure,” Clark agreed.

“At least she didn’t make a pass at either of us,” Lois quipped when they were well away from Friskin’s office.

“I like her,” Clark said. “I think she actually wants to help. I didn’t get that feeling with Deter.”

“So, what theory do you think she wants to run past your parents?” Lois asked.

“I have no idea,” Clark told her. “But we can ask them when we get to my place. I’m sure Mom has fixed enough to feed an army, so you’re welcome to stay for supper.”

“You’re on.”

Traffic had cleared out early so it didn’t take long until Lois was able to pull the jeep up to Clark’s apartment building. The door to Clark’s apartment was open almost before they were to the door.

“Lois, Perry’s been trying to get hold of you,” Martha announced.

“Did he say why?” Lois asked.

“Something about Luthor trying to get in touch with you,” Martha answered.

“You know where the phone is,” Clark told her.

Clark’s apartment smelled of wonderful food and her stomach had started growling in response. At the moment Lois didn’t really care why Perry was trying to get in touch with her. Besides, she had a pager. Why hadn’t he called that? Then she remembered turning it off when they went to the coffee shop to meet with Mrs. Smith.

She dialed Perry’s direct number from memory. With any luck Perry was still in his office. His relationship with his wife was rocky at best and Lois didn’t want to make things more difficult for him by calling him at home. The phone on the other end picked up.

“Lois? Where in the Sam Hill have you been?” Perry nearly bellowed when she identified herself.

“Clark and I met with a possible source and then he had an appointment with another doctor,” Lois explained. She wasn’t about to tell him she had turned her pager off and forgotten to turn it back on.

“Did the source pan out?” Perry asked.

“No,” Lois admitted.

She heard a loud sigh on the other end of the line. Then, “Deter and the Center are threatening to sue if we so much as print a word against him.”

Lois’s gut clenched. She wasn’t surprised that Deter would make threats, only that he’d gotten to it so quickly. “Perry, relax,” she said, trying to get her own body to follow her advice. “Clark and I don’t have anything but a bad feeling about him personally and some hunches. Certainly nothing worth printing right now.”

“Are you planning to drop it?” he asked.

“I think it needs to cook a while,” Lois told him. She knew he wasn’t likely to order her to drop the investigation for now, but he was warning her to be extra careful of the legalities. She knew she had a tendency to leap into situations before looking.

“Okay, we’ll let it simmer for a bit,” Perry agreed. “I figure you two must have come up with something big otherwise he wouldn’t be so nervous.”

“Maybe so... Mrs. Kent said Luthor was looking for me?”

“He’s called half a dozen times, or I should say his people have called four times and he’s called personally twice.”

“What about?”

“Superman’s memorial is tomorrow at ten. I guess he’s been having some trouble putting together a list of speakers for the shindig. Nobody wants to talk to him. I think he was hoping you could change their minds.”

“He wants me to put together the speakers for tomorrow?” Lois asked. “Do you know what time it is?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Perry told her with a chuckle. “I handled it myself, but I guarantee Luthor’s not going to like my choices. I know he didn’t like that the Police Guild and the Firemen’s Guild took over the arrangements for the service. They’re both claiming him as one of theirs.”

“I think he would have liked that,” Lois remarked. Then she realized what she had said. ‘He would have liked that...’ He’s gone. He’s really gone.

“Do I need to call Luthor?” Lois asked. She didn’t want to talk to him. She had managed to put aside her anger at his cavalier attitude toward her and her privacy for a while, but now it threatened to bubble over into rage again.

“He’s not your boss, hon’, and he’s not your father,” Perry said. “How about we all meet here at nine and we all go to the service together?”

“Sounds good. I’ll let Clark know,” Lois promised, hanging up the phone. She momentarily considered giving Luthor a call then decided against it. Perry was right, Luthor may have been the third wealthiest man in the world, but he wasn’t her employer, nor was he her father. He was a story, nothing more, and she had no intention for him to become more.

“Lois, what did Perry want?” Martha asked.

“Superman’s memorial is tomorrow morning at ten. Perry wants Clark and me at the Planet at nine and we’ll go down to the ceremony together,” Lois said. “Unless you want to come with us?”

Martha and Jonathan exchanged one of their glances. “No, that’s okay. Neither of us do crowds very well any more,” Jonathan told her.

“We’ll catch it on TV,” Martha added. Clark and his parents were already seated at the table and a place setting had been set for her. Martha had fixed spaghetti and crusty bread and it smelled marvelous. Her stomach growled again and she joined them at the table.

“Doctor Friskin called just before you got here,” Martha said. “She sounds like a nice woman.”

“I liked her, and I think she wants to help,” Clark said. “But what was the theory she wanted to run past you? She wouldn’t tell me or Lois.”

“Nothing, really,” Jonathan said. “She was just worried that we might be pressing you too hard to remember things.”

“She thinks that the pieces that are still missing will come back when you’re ready,” Martha said. “And if they don’t... well, maybe it’s for the best.”

“But it’s Superman he’s not remembering,” Lois protested.

“We know, Lois,” Martha assured her. “We know.”

Lois and Clark quietly filled his parents in on the rest of their day, only briefly mentioning the issues with Deter and the Neuroscience Center. She didn’t want to worry them more than they already were.

“By the way, Deter and his lawyers were threatening Perry if we say anything,” Lois told them.

“You must have hit a raw nerve,” Jonathan commented, taking more salad.

“We must have,” Clark agreed. “So, when do we break into his office?” He seemed positively cheery about the prospect.

“Clark!” Martha sounded astonished.

“I figure they’ll be watching for something like that,” Lois

told them. “And they do say that discretion is the better part of valor. So we should probably let them cool off a little before we go after them again.”

Clark’s eyes widened and he reached over to press a hand against her forehead. “No fever... Who are you and where is my knows-no-fear partner, Lois Lane?”

As Clark had done earlier, she smiled and brushed away the hand on her forehead. Then she let her expression turn more solemn. “I don’t know about you, but I know I’ve gotten a little reckless, knowing Superman was around to save the day. But he’s gone... He’s gone. “And we’re on our own.”

Part 7

Once again, morning came too soon for Lois’s taste. She opened one eye and then the other, recognizing she wasn’t in her own bed — she was wrapped in a blanket on Clark’s sofa. Clark was on the floor nearby, snoring softly, a pillow under his head. He looked so peaceful, laying there, a handmade quilt pulled up to his chin.

She let her thoughts go to the previous night. Dinner with Clark and his parents had been comforting. Her own parents hadn’t even called to let her know they were okay after Nightfall. Lucy had been distracted with boy troubles when she called to check on Lois. Clark’s parents had flown half-way across the country to be with their son while he recovered.

Clark’s parents had gone to bed early, leaving her and Clark alone in the living room.

“Want to watch a movie?” Clark asked.

“Won’t that keep your parents awake?” Lois asked.

Clark shook his head. “We can keep the sound down. WLEX is running Ghost tonight. It starts in a few minutes... or maybe that’s just a little morbid considering everything.”

“No, it’s fine,” Lois assured him. “It’s one of my guilty pleasure movies. Patrick Swayze was sooo hot. And I loved the whole ‘a love stronger than death’ thing. It was so romantic...” He’s gone. Superman’s gone. “Oh, Clark... Superman’s dead and...”

She tried to hold back her tears but couldn’t. She found herself in Clark’s arms and he held her close as she let the grief roll over her. His breathing was slow and even, as was his heartbeat. His hand was on her back, rubbing gently in circles as she sobbed. She felt dampness on her ear and in her hair and realized that Clark was crying with her.

Lois didn’t remember when she stopped sobbing, or when Clark left to get her a blanket. She didn’t remember deciding to spend the night on his sofa.

Coffee was brewing and she knew either Martha or Jonathan, or both, were up and puttering around in Clark’s kitchen. She slipped out from under the blanket and realized she had fallen asleep in her clothes. It wasn’t the first time that had happened and it probably wouldn’t be the last. She hunted around for her shoes, found them and headed into the kitchen.

Jonathan was the one in the kitchen. Martha was sitting out on the terrace, enjoying her coffee. The sky was bright and clear, glowing in an almost ethereal blue. Lois nodded ‘good morning’ to Jonathan, poured herself a mug of coffee and then joined Martha outside.

“It’s going to be a beautiful day,” Martha commented.

“It’s almost a shame,” Lois said. “You’d think Mother Earth would have the courtesy to cry along with everyone else.”

“Maybe Mother Earth decided to celebrate his life instead,” Martha said. “Sometimes that’s the hardest part. Remembering the good that came with them. Remembering their life and how much we loved them instead of their passing and how much we will miss them.”

Lois looked over to see Martha watching her thoughtfully.

“Is wisdom a ‘mom’ thing you grow into, or were you born

that way?" Lois asked. Her own mother would never have given her such an introspective answer.

"I've had the privilege to raise a very special child who has grown into a very special man," Martha said. "Doctor Friskin thinks it's possible he may never remember Superman. He may never need to remember. But that doesn't mean Clark isn't special in his own right. I want you to remember that he has a very tender heart. Please be careful with it." With that, Martha stood and went back inside.

"Don't mind Mom." Lois looked up to see Clark standing in the doorway. He was dressed in sweats and holding a mug of coffee in one hand and swabbing out an ear with the little finger of his other hand. "She's feeling a little over protective," he added then he grimaced. "Mrs. Cutler's up and she's got her TV on." He looked like he was in pain.

"I don't hear anything," Lois said. She heard the traffic on the street beyond, some animal foraging for food in the alley below, but nothing that sounded like a television set.

"It's the whistle from the flyback transformer. It's about sixteen thousand Hertz and hers is really loud. I can also tell when Perry turns on the TV in his office. Sometimes it feels like an ice pick going through my head," Clark told her.

"You never told me you could do that," Lois complained. "What whistle?"

"You mean you've never heard that whistle coming off a TV set?" Clark asked. He sounded like he didn't quite believe her. She shook her head.

From the door, Jonathan chuckled. "Used to make buying a TV a real challenge." He turned to Martha, just inside the door. "Martha, you remember that poor salesman at the Kansas City Sears back when Clark was ten?"

Martha laughed and shook her head. "Poor man had to turn every single set off in the TV department so Clark and I could listen for the quietest model they had. The salesman thought we were both crazy. He couldn't hear it and neither could Jonathan. I was never so glad for hearing loss as when I stopped hearing that damned whine."

"But, what about the computer monitors at work?" Lois asked, focusing back on Clark.

"Those transformers whine at more than thirty-thousand cycles. Closer to fifty-thousand probably," Clark told her. "Superman might have heard them, and any dogs in the neighborhood, but not a normal human."

Lois stared at him for a long moment. "I knew you were weird, Clark. I just didn't know how weird."

"I love you too, Lois," Clark said with a chuckle. His expression turned more serious. "How about I get cleaned up and then we can run over to your place so you can get showered and changed. LNN says that traffic around Centennial Park is already bad and it's just going to get worse."

"Clark, I'm not sure I even want to be there," Lois said. "A funeral without a body. People who never even met him making overblown statements on how good and noble and self-sacrificing he was and how much he'll be missed. They have no idea how much he'll be missed. They didn't know him."

"Perry's expecting us," Clark said simply.

Lois nodded agreement. Perry was expecting them to accompany him to the memorial service, to give him moral support to face down those who would try to subvert the meaning behind such an outpouring of emotion for the loss of Metropolis's superhero.

The memorial service — the speeches, the prayers — that was for the living. The dead had no need of them.

Clark was dressed and ready as soon as he had promised. Black sweater and black suit. The dark colors suited him, accenting his dark hair and eyes.

The traffic was already heavy when they got to Lois's apartment. Luckily her building had parking along the back alley. The light on her answering machine was blinking when they walked in.

"Let me check these before I get cleaned up," Lois said. She pressed the play button on the machine and Luthor's voice came over the speaker: "I wanted to discuss the plans for the memorial tomorrow. Please call me back."

The next message was from Perry: "Lois hon', give me a call back. It's important."

Luthor again: "I'm quite peeved that you haven't returned my calls. Please get back me as soon as you get in."

"Are you going to bother to call him back?" Clark asked.

"No," Lois told him. "I'm going to take a shower then we're going to meet Perry."

She headed into her bedroom and opened the top drawer of her dresser. She searched the drawer for the electric bug-finder Louie's friend had given her. It was gone. Which meant that someone had been in her apartment — again.

"Clark?"

"Yes?" he answered from the living room.

"Never mind..." Lois searched the rest of her dresser. It wasn't there. She steeled herself to the idea that Luthor, or someone, was watching her, even while she was taking a shower. She hurriedly pulled her black pantsuit and a silk blouse out of her closet and grabbed a bra, panties, and stockings. She showered quickly, keeping her bath towel close at hand. She dressed in record time.

"That was fast," Clark commented.

She grabbed her makeup kit and stuffed it into her purse then grabbed his arm.

"What's going on?" he asked as she led him out of her apartment and into the hallway.

"I'll explain later."

"Luthor called while you were in the shower," Clark said. That brought her up short. She turned around to face him.

"Did you let the answering machine take it?"

"I wish I had," Clark told her. "He wasn't happy about me answering your phone. He wanted to know if you'd spent the night with me."

"And what did you tell him?" She couldn't quite keep down the cold fear that clenched her gut.

"That where you spent the night, and with whom, was no concern of his," Clark said. "He didn't like my answer." He held out his fist, palm down and she put out her hand. He dropped a small electronic device into her palm. "That was in your phone."

She stared at it, then up at him.

"I heard it buzzing while talking to Luthor," Clark explained. "I looked over your living room and I didn't find any others. But I'm not an expert. I could have missed something."

She dropped the bug into her pocket and grabbed his arm, leading him down the back steps to where her jeep was parked. "My bug finder is missing," she told him after they had left the building.

"You're sure you didn't misplace it?" Clark asked.

"I'm sure I put it in my dresser. And I searched my dresser," she said.

"After the memorial, how about we go through your apartment," Clark suggested. "Maybe the finder will show up."

"Maybe," Lois said, but privately she thought it was unlikely she had simply misplaced it. She distinctly remembered hiding the device underneath her slippers. And she had searched her dresser thoroughly.

Perry was waiting for them in his office. Jimmy was there, too, dressed in a dark suit and tie, a sharp contrast to his usual jeans and garish shirts. It made him look more grown-up. He had

a camera in his hands.

“Luthor has reserved seats for us,” Perry told them. “He’s even sending over his limo to pick us up. Polly and Gil are covering the police and fire department responses, the procession. Joel is with them. He should be able to get us some good shots. Jimmy here is coming with us to get pictures of the ceremony.”

“And what do you want us to be doing?” Clark asked.

“You two are known to have been friends of his. I want you two to concentrate on the ceremony and the reactions of those he considered friends,” Perry instructed.

The phone on Perry’s desk rang. He picked it up and listened for a moment before saying ‘thank you’ and hanging up. “The limo is downstairs.”

Luthor’s limousine deposited the small group outside the area in Centennial Park set up for the service. Luthor hadn’t joined them and the liveried driver had refused to answer any questions as to why. Chances were he didn’t know anything.

Two MFD ladder trucks were sitting to either side of the main road into the park. The ladders were extended, nearly touching at the top, and an American flag was suspended between them. The rest of the flags in the city were at half-staff. The governor to New Troy had declared a month long state of mourning for the superhero.

A dais had been set up at the west end of the park, sitting next to a small white windowless building that Lois didn’t recall ever seeing before. On the far side of the white building a small orchestra had been arranged. It was currently playing Copeland’s Fanfare for the Common Man. On the dais itself, a bier had been set up and there were a number of folding chairs at the back of the platform. A simple podium decorated only with a metal plaque depicting Superman’s shield had been set up to one side of the bier. All this, and there’s no body to inter.

The park was already crowded with on-lookers. Lois wondered how many of them were because Superman had touched their lives, saved them, helped them. Or were they there for the spectacle? She realized she wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

Perry led the way to their reserved seats in the front row. The audience fell silent and Lois heard a slow rumbling rhythm. She realized after a moment that she was hearing drums. The funeral procession had entered the park. After a few moments four drummers appeared, representing the military services. Lois wondered who had arranged that. Superman had saved the space program, but to her knowledge he hadn’t been a favorite of the U.S. military establishment. He was a wild card and they didn’t like wild cards.

The drummers were followed by two black horses in black harness pulling a cart with a simple coffin. Their hooves beat a dis-synchronous rhythm on the pavement. The empty coffin had an American flag draped over it as a pall.

The carriage was followed by a rider-less horse, a pair of boots turned backwards in the stirrups, an honor guard with rifles, and a formation of uniformed police and fire fighters. Each had a black band across their badge. Lois recalled reading somewhere that the bands were traditionally made from the black lining of old uniform hats. She didn’t know if that was true, but it was a nice story.

The official procession was followed by a mixed group of ‘civilians’, people who had simply fallen in with the procession as it moved through the city to the park. People who wanted to pay their last respects, people who didn’t want to let Superman go — even though his body wasn’t even there.

Jimmy was taking photos, catching the arrival of the procession.

Four uniformed officers — two police and two fire, all wearing white gloves — picked up the coffin and made their way

to the dais. Lois recognized the police officers — one of them was Bill Henderson. She had never seen him in uniform. The pall bearers passed close to where she was sitting and she could see the strain, the grief, in Henderson’s face even though he was obviously trying to maintain a stoic demeanor.

The officers placed the coffin on its bier and stood at attention as a group of clergymen and women gathered on the dais. Lois had never seen, never even imagined, a group as ecumenical as this one. Ministers, priests, rabbis, mullahs, lamas, and monks — Metropolis was well known for its racial and religious tolerance and it had myriad and diverse religious groups. And it seemed that every one of them had sent someone to invoke the deity on Superman’s behalf.

After a minute or so, Henderson stepped over to the podium, tucking his uniform hat under his arm. He looked solemnly over the assembly. “I am Inspector William Henderson of the Metropolis Police Department. I have been asked by my fellows in uniform to say our piece since I was the one of us who had the most contact with him.” He paused a moment as if deciding what to say.

“Superman appeared in our fair city only eight months ago and he proved his worth by saving hundreds of lives that first day,” he began. “He proved his worth every day since, never asking for anything in return except that we put aside our differences and care for each other.

“My first impression of him was that he was young, very young. Not much older than my own kids. My second impression was that he was far wiser than his years. He cherished life and he believed in the rule of law. He never took an oath to uphold our laws, to serve our people, but he did just that. He put his own body between gunmen and innocents. He walked into fire. He swallowed bombs. He didn’t have to. He wasn’t paid to. It wasn’t his job. But every time he did, that meant someone lived who might not have otherwise. Every time he did, a police officer or fire fighter or a civilian was able to go home to their loved ones.

“He once told me he didn’t consider himself courageous because it was easy to stand in front of a bullet or walk into an inferno if you knew it couldn’t hurt you. I asked him what it was that he was afraid of and his answer was ‘failure’. I was able to tell him that that was what the rest of us were afraid of too. Those of us in uniform don’t consider ourselves courageous. We go out everyday and we do our jobs. Sometimes we don’t get there fast enough, or we find we’re not strong enough or smart enough and we fail in doing our job protecting the public. Sometimes that failure means one of us doesn’t make it home. But we don’t call it courage.

“He didn’t consider himself courageous. But when it was discovered that Earth was in danger from the Nightfall asteroid, he volunteered his services, knowing he might not come back, knowing the odds were against him. He freely, willingly, walked into that inferno, knowing that failure would mean the end of everything. He didn’t have to do it. He could have saved himself by walking away, letting us fend for ourselves. I have no doubt he would have survived. But he did go and he succeeded in saving all of us and he paid the ultimate price.

“Superman did not carry a badge or a gun, nor did he carry a Halligan or wear a fire helmet, but my brothers and sisters in uniform and I are proud to call him one of our own. He was one of Metropolis’s finest, one of her bravest and I was privileged to call him my friend. We will miss him.”

Lois thought she saw tears in the older man’s eyes as he left the podium and put his hat back on. He saluted the coffin and then joined the other officers standing on the dais, guarding the empty coffin.

More prayers and invocations, poems and hymns. A baritone from the New Troy Opera Company sang a familiar spiritual. Lois had heard it at other funerals but hadn’t paid attention to the

lyrics. The orchestra struck up the accompaniment.

Going home, going home,
I'm a going home.
Quiet-like, some still day,
I'm just going home.
It's not far, just close by,
Through an open door.
Work all done, care laid by,
Going to fear no more.
Mother's there, expecting me,
Father's waiting too.
Lots of folk gathered there,
All the friends I knew.
Nothing's lost, all's gain,
No more fear or pain,
No more stumbling by the way,
No more longing for the day,
Going to roam no more.
Morning star lights the way,
Restless dreams all done.
Shadows gone, break of day,
Real life has begun.
There's no break, there's no end,
Just a living on.
Wide awake with a smile,
going on and on...
Going home, going home,
I'm just going home.
It's not far, just close by,
Through an open door.
I am going home....
I'm just going home...
Going home, going home,
Going home, going home,
Going home...

Lois realized she didn't even know if Superman believed in God or an afterlife. Somehow she thought he did, but it wasn't anything he had ever discussed with her. She wondered if he had ever spoken to Clark about it. Not that it mattered now — Clark didn't remember.

One of the fire-fighters took the podium.
Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings.
Sunward I've climbed and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun split clouds — and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of; wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hovering there
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air;
Up, up the long delirious burning blue
I've topped the windswept heights with easy grace,
Where never lark nor even eagle flew;
And while, with silent lifting mind I've trod
The high, untraversed sanctity of space
Put out my hand and touched the face of God. (1)

Lois remembered that poem from high school lit. It had been written by a young pilot and it seemed even more fitting for a man who flew without those silver wings.

Finally, a husky black man approached the podium and the microphone. Lois recognized him as Reverend Leroy from the Fifth Street Mission. It was one of the places the Superman Foundation funded to provide help for the down-and-out.

"Brothers and sisters," he began. His voice was deep and musical. "We, the family of humankind, have gathered here to celebrate the life and mourn the passing of a great and kind man. We do not know his name. We knew him only as Superman.

"He was different from us, possessing powers and abilities

almost beyond imagining, but he did not use those powers to set himself above us.

"No, Superman used his powers to bring comfort to those in need and hope to those mired in the depths of despair.

"And he could fly. Oh, how he could fly! He soared through our skies — some say like a great bird, but I say like an angel.

"I once saw him tear apart the walls of a burning building — rip them apart with his bare hands — and pluck a young baby from certain death, cradling that child in his mighty arms as gently and as tenderly as would that child's own mother.

"It is said that Superman had enemies. Well, there were among us men who made of him their enemy; that cannot be denied. But his real enemies were the enemies that bedevil us all: greed... fear... hate... ignorance. He fought those enemies and inspired others to fight them as well.

"Superman came to us, a stranger from another planet. He was many things to many people. Some saw him as a champion of life, others as a protector of the oppressed, and still others as a mighty warrior in the battle for truth and justice. And, yes, he was all those things and more. But mainly, he was our friend.

"He did not care about our religious beliefs or our politics. He did not care about our nationalities or our gender or the color of our skins. He cared about people. He cared about us. We are, all of us, richer for having known him, and poorer for having lost him.

"Superman was, as I said, from another planet — and I do not know what God, if any, he worshiped. But I pray to my God to comfort and protect him, as he comforted and protected us all." (2)

There were so many prayers. But none had been as personal, or as direct, as Reverend Leroy's, except perhaps Inspector Henderson's. The image of Superman as an angel was oddly comforting. He had flown like an angel. And she had flown with him. He's gone.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
Then took the other, as just as fair
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,
And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.
I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference. (3)

Lois felt a warm hand reach over and cover hers. She felt a gentle squeeze and glanced down. Clark had taken her hand. She looked up at him. He gave her a tremulous smile, looking like he was ready to cry. She looked over at Perry seated on her other side. He was wiping tears away from his eyes.

Overhead Lois heard the thrum of helicopters. She looked up to see a formation of four police helicopters approaching from the south. When they were overhead, one of the copters veered off to the west, leaving the other three aircraft in formation — the missing man.

On the dais, the uniformed men stood at attention. When the helicopters passed, Henderson and one of the other pall bearers folded up the flag into a neat triangle. He held the flag against his

chest and walked down the steps of the dais to the audience. He stopped in front of Lois and Clark.

“Based on what we know, he considered you two as close to family as he had,” Henderson said softly. “I should have warned you.” He handed the flag to Lois. She accepted it, laying the triangle with its exposed star-spangled blue on her lap. She had no idea what she would do with it. It hadn’t occurred to her that other people thought that she and Superman had been close, closer that they actually had been, although it should have. ‘Of course they thought that... he declared he loved you in front of witnesses. You were the one who kissed him good-bye,’ her inner voice chided. ‘You named him.’

Henderson gave her a reassuring smile before going back to the dais. At Clark’s silent urging, they followed the police officer up the short flight of stairs to the coffin. Clark’s hand was on her arm, supporting her. The pall bearers lifted the coffin and somewhere a bagpiper started a mournful rendition of Amazing Grace.

Lois and Clark followed the coffin down the side steps to the small white building. The bronze-covered door was open and a concrete vault was set in the center of the floor. The pall bearers set the coffin on a frame on top of the vault. Later, the coffin would be lowered into the vault and the top would be sealed. But now, the officers turned as one and left the chamber, closing the door behind them.

The bagpiper finished the dirge and the honor guard fired off three volleys. A twenty-one gun salute. A bugler sounded out Taps. After a while the spectators began to disburse.

“Hon’, how about we head back to the office?” Perry asked. She managed a nod, clutching the flag against her chest.

The limo was waiting for them where they’d left it and the driver but they had to wait for the police to clear the roadway of mourners and sightseers before Luthor’s driver could whisk them back to the Daily Planet.

“I figure the Planet should build a display stand for it, put it in the lobby with a collection of Superman front pages...” Perry was saying.

Lois heard him, but she wasn’t really paying him any attention. Clark had taken her hand again and was gently rubbing his thumb over the back of it. He hadn’t said a word almost from the time they’d entered the park and Lois suspected he was at least as choked up as she was.

“I think that would be a nice idea,” Clark said, finally. “I think Superman would have been surprised at how many people showed up, how many people cared.”

“I’m not sure he ever realized how many lives he touched,” Perry said, “even before Nightfall.”

“I think he would have appreciated the choice of music,” Clark said. “Somehow I don’t think Luthor picked out Copeland for the opening fanfare.”

“Nope,” Perry told them. “His choice was Mozart’s Requiem. He also wanted Cardinal Riley to run the service and have it at the cathedral even though Riley didn’t really want to. Somehow I don’t think Superman was a member of Riley’s parish.”

“I don’t think he was either,” Clark said. “I don’t think he wanted to choose one faith over another. It wouldn’t have been right.”

The limo stopped in front of the Daily Planet and the small group got out and made their way up to the newsroom.

“Perry, do you know why the Police and Fire Guilds decided to do a coffin ceremony with all the bells and whistles instead of a just a memorial service?” Lois asked. She’d been too wrapped up in Clark’s problems to pay attention to the nonsense LNN had been spewing out but she did remember hearing that the guilds had planned a memorial service, not a full blown funeral with procession.

Perry and Jimmy both gave her surprised looks. Jimmy answered. “They found a couple of asteroid chunks over by Hob’s Bay. STAR Labs said there was organic residue and polymers on one of them. They also found what they think was a piece of his uniform, maybe part of his cape. It was all charred, like it had been through re-entry. STAR Labs thinks that pretty well proves he died up there and some of the pieces came back to Earth with the loose asteroid chunks. And that’s what they put in the coffin.”

Lois sat down hard in her chair. “He really is dead...”

Perry sighed. “Are you two up to putting together something on the funeral?”

“Give us a few minutes to pull ourselves together,” Clark said. “Then we’ll get right on it.”

“Look,” Perry said. “I’ll understand if you feel you can’t do it. I can write it, if you’d rather.”

Clark shook his head. “I’ll do it.”

A/N:

- (1) Fl. Officer John Gillespie McGee (1922-1941)
- (2) Reverend Leroy’s eulogy comes from the novel: *The Death and Life of Superman* by Roger Stern. (c) 1993
- (3) Robert Frost, *A Road Not Taken*

Part 8

Other staffers started straggling in to the newsroom to do their write ups. Lois had managed to rouse herself enough to look over Clark’s shoulder to make suggestions and add observations.

Today the City of Metropolis is in mourning. Today she laid to rest a hero who gave his life to save the city, indeed to save the world, from destruction. We do not know his name. We knew him only as ‘Superman’...

“It’s harder than I thought it would be,” Clark admitted, sitting back in his chair.

“None of us ever expected we’d be doing this,” Lois commented. “We all thought... we all thought nothing could hurt him...”

“Miss Lane?”

Lois looked over to see an oddly familiar looking, middle-aged balding man in a somber suit standing beside her desk. After a moment she placed the face: Murray Brown, formerly of the ‘Galactic Talent Agency’ and currently in charge of merchandise licensing for the Superman Foundation. Over the past months he had managed to shed his sleazy agent persona in favor of that of a respectable businessman. Superman had demanded a certain level of professionalism in the organization, and it seemed that Brown had managed to oblige.

“Mister Brown...?”

“I’m sorry to intrude, Miss Lane,” he said. “But, um, you know I work for the Superman Foundation, and well, before he left, he left us some final instructions in case, well you know...”

“And those instructions were...?” Lois asked, curiosity piqued.

Brown handed her a sealed envelope. There was more than just paper in it — it felt like there was a mini-floppy disk as well.

“I had two letters to deliver personally,” he explained. “One was to you.”

“And the other?” she prompted.

“I’m not at liberty to say,” Brown told her. “But just so you know, the Superman Foundation has approved the city’s plan for his memorial. A playground and a daycare center across from the mausoleum. I think he would have liked that.”

“I think you’re right,” Lois agreed. “He would have liked that.”

“Well, I need to get going,” Brown said. “You know where to reach me, if you need anything.”

“Yes, thank you.”

Brown turned to head for the elevators. He stopped and

looked back at her. “You know, it’s going to be tough without the big guy. But he told me himself he wanted the Foundation to continue as long as it could.”

Lois watched the little man’s back as he headed for the elevators.

“He’s right, you know,” Jimmy said. “It’s going to be tough keeping the Foundation going without the big guy.”

“Murray’s a smart guy,” Clark commented. “He’ll figure something out.” He turned to Lois. “So, what’s in the envelope?”

“I don’t know...”

“Why don’t you open it?”

She tore it open and unfolded the single sheet of paper. It was handwritten on Superman Foundation letterhead and dated the previous Wednesday. She also pulled out the mini-floppy and set it aside while she read the letter.

Dearest Lois, If you’re reading this, then I didn’t make it back from Nightfall, but I did manage to divert the asteroid and the Earth is safe.

I wanted you to know how much I appreciated knowing you and having you as a friend. Your beauty, both inside and outside, made being in Metropolis a pleasure. I couldn’t have become Superman without your support and guidance.

I don’t know if there’s an afterlife. But if there is, I’m sure we will meet again and you can tell me about all your adventures. In the meantime, don’t grieve that I am gone, but celebrate my life by living yours to the fullest. Do not waste your time with regrets of what might have been, but go boldly forward, cherishing each day as it comes for none of us knows what tomorrow will bring. But I hope that each tomorrow will bring you joy and accomplishment, and even that Pulitzer you want so badly. I know you can do it, just as I know you will continue to investigate and expose corruption and misdoings in Metropolis.

I know you’ve wondered why I don’t trust Lex Luthor. Enclosed is a floppy with copies of my notes. Unfortunately, I was never able to get hard evidence against him — even Superman has his limits. Perhaps you will have better luck.

Take care Lois, and know that I do love you. I did from the moment I met you.

The signature was smudged and scratched out as though he hadn’t been able to decide how to sign it. Below the scratch-out was a simple S. Superman.

“Lois?” she heard Clark ask. She looked up to see him watching her worriedly and she realized that tears were running down her face again. She handed him the letter.

He read it quickly and handed it back to her. “He did love you,” Clark said softly.

Lois found she didn’t have anything to say to that. Anything she did say would sound trite or self-centered so she simply nodded and found herself once again in Clark’s arms, crying on his shoulder.

“He promised me we’d go flying together...” she finally managed to choke out. As she spoke she realized the noise level in the bull pen had gone down.

“Okay people...show’s over,” Perry bellowed. There was the sound of creaking chairs and scurrying footsteps. “Lois?” Perry said more gently from somewhere close. “Are you okay?”

She managed a nod, lifting her head from Clark’s shoulder. She handed Perry the letter and watched him scan it. The older man sighed and picked up the disk from her desk. “Is this the disk he sent you?”

She nodded.

“Let’s look at it in my office,” Perry suggested. He led the way into his office and shut the door behind them. He slipped the disk into his computer and they waited for the machine to open the disk. Finally, the first document appeared on the screen.

Lois read the document over Perry’s shoulder. The notes listed dates and times, people and places, bank account numbers

from all over the world and notes on transactions. If true, the information screamed of Luthor’s direct involvement in criminal activities — Luthor was the mysterious ‘Boss’. Lois didn’t doubt the notes were accurate. She also understood Superman’s reticence in handing over the information. The document was, in effect, a journal but without photos or other corroborating evidence it was worthless except to suggest avenues of investigation, people and places to look into, connections that weren’t obvious but might yield results.

She wondered a little that Superman hadn’t asked for her or Clark’s help on it and then realized he probably had asked Clark. Which begged the question as to why she hadn’t been asked as well. Her previous association with Luthor? Her refusal to accept Clark’s previous warnings? Now it was too late. Superman’s gone...

“Great shades of Elvis,” Perry murmured. “It’ll take a whole task force just to be checking this out.”

“And we don’t dare do anything as obvious as that,” Clark commented. “If Luthor really is the Boss, then he’s got fingers in every pie on the East Coast. And eyes in even more places.”

“Are you saying we shouldn’t bother confirming this?” Lois asked.

Clark shook his head. “I’m just saying we should handle this very carefully, and as covertly as possible. No task force. And we’re going to have to put together a case airtight enough the D.A. could take it to court.”

“We work for a newspaper, not the D.A.’s office,” Perry reminded them.

“But more often than not, our investigations clue the D.A.’s office into things they should be looking into,” Clark said.

Lois knew that Clark was right. Their investigations had frequently come up with evidence that led the Metropolis District Attorney’s office into making inquiries. Quite a number of those inquiries had led to criminal investigations and convictions. Lois had an impressive track record of her own. She and Clark together were promising to have an even more impressive one.

“If Luthor is the Boss, then he’s one of the most dangerous men in the world,” Perry pointed out. “We don’t dare let anyone else in on this until we’re ready to run with it.”

“So we’re looking at a task force of three?” Lois asked.

“Better make it four,” Perry said. “We’re going to need a computer person to track down these account numbers and that’ll be Jimmy.”

Lois leaned against her boss’s desk. The problem at hand was a good distraction, and maybe Superman’s finest legacy wouldn’t end up being a playground in Centennial Park, but the demolition of Luthor’s empire. And she had an in.

“Lois, what are you thinking?” Perry demanded. “I know that look.”

“I was thinking that Luthor claims he’s in love with me, even though he has a bizarre way of showing it,” Lois said. “But it might give me an in into his inner circle.”

“Lois, it’s too dangerous,” Clark protested. “He knows you’re a reporter.”

“It’s at least a shot. If I can convince him that with Superman gone, he might have a chance...”

“We both know the only reason Luthor was going after you was because of your relationship to Superman,” Clark told her.

“Granted, the pheromone poison might have had something to do with it initially, but we both know that wore off within forty-eight hours.”

“You’re saying Luthor couldn’t have fallen for me just for me?” Lois asked. The rational part of her brain knew full well that Clark was right, but it hurt to have it pointed out so baldly.

Clark waved his hands in frustration. “Lois, you’re beautiful and brilliant and there’s nothing you can’t do once you put your mind to it. But beautiful and brilliant women are a dime a dozen

in his world and we both know it. Look at Miranda Miller, look at Antoinette Baines... He's a user, Lois. And he's not above murder. You know that."

"I'll be careful," Lois promised.

"Now, just hold on you two," Perry said. "Let's not jump into this... Let's see what we can dig up before we go to the extreme of sending you into the devil's den."

"I can do this, Perry," she protested.

"Yeah, and the King could do a strip-tease. That didn't make it a good idea," Perry said. "Besides, you playing hard-to-get might make it easier for you to get in if it comes to that."

"I'd rather she be hard for him to get," Clark commented to Perry. The older man chuckled and shook his head. Lois was not amused.

"I was doing undercover work a long time before you showed up, farmboy," Lois stated.

"I know that, Lois. I just wish..." Clark stuffed his hands in his pockets and pressed his lips into a thin line.

"Lois," Perry said. "Promise me you won't do anything like going after Luthor on your own, at least not without clearing it with me first?"

Lois sighed. She didn't want to admit that Perry was right, that she shouldn't take Luthor on by herself. He was dangerous.

"Okay," Lois conceded. "I won't make any moves on this without letting you know first. But still I think it's our best bet on getting the proof we need to expose him."

"You could well be right," Perry said. "But I'd rather exhaust our other options first. Okay?"

Perry agreed to let Lois and Clark leave as soon as their story on the funeral was handed in. Lois was just grabbing her jacket when the elevator doors opened, disgorging the one person she really didn't want to see at the moment: Lex Luthor.

"Lois, I was expecting you for lunch. Didn't you get my invitation?" As Luthor spoke he gave Clark a hard look. Clark said nothing as he shrugged into his own jacket.

"I haven't been home long enough to get my messages," Lois responded. "And today wasn't a good day, in any case."

"Ah, yes, the funeral," Luthor said. "A truly touching display by the city's public servants. But then, the only input they wanted from me was my checkbook."

"I didn't see you there," Lois told him.

Luthor shrugged. "It felt... inappropriate to intrude on everyone's grief," Luthor said. "I know how much you cared for him."

There was a long pause as Luthor waited for a response from her. She noticed that Perry was standing in the door to his office and Clark was waiting beside his desk, watching, listening.

"I'm sorry I forgot about lunch," she said. "It's been a hard day, and I'm afraid I wouldn't be very good company in any case. Maybe I can take a rain check on it? Maybe later next week?"

"If that's what you want," Luthor said. "But I thought you might like to see *Pelleas et Melisande* at Teatro alla Scala tomorrow. I'm told it's an excellent production..."

"I'm sorry, Lex, but I can't," Lois told him.

Luthor gave her a dark look. She knew he didn't like having his will thwarted and she was one of the few who dared. She had flown with Superman. After that a mere billionaire had nothing to offer her, not really. Besides, Superman had reason to believe that Luthor was the mysterious crime lord, 'the Boss'. But there was also something about the way Luthor was looking at her that made her wonder if he knew about Superman's notes on him, made her wonder if he suspected she had suspicions about him. Then he smiled.

"I quite understand. I'll have Mrs. Cox make the arrangements for lunch later next week," he promised. Then he turned on his heel and walked out, but not before giving Clark

another foul look.

"Lex invited me to lunch and I didn't get the message?" she asked as soon as he was gone. She kept her tone even, making it sound like a rhetorical question even though it wasn't.

"He didn't mention anything about it when I answered your phone," Clark responded. "I would have told you, you know that."

"So, either he was lying or he called here and someone 'mislaidd' the message," she said. "Somehow I doubt he called here."

"I doubt it too," Clark agreed.

"What do you think he's up to?"

"I'm afraid to even guess," Clark told her. "Pelleas and Melisande at La Scala?"

"Lex has season tickets and a private box. I'm just not up to facing a six hour plane flight to see a tragedy sung in a language I can't follow even when I'm trying."

"I'm sure they have an English libretto."

"Are you trying to tell me I should go with him to Italy tomorrow?"

"No," he said in a small voice. "I'm just afraid that by turning him down, he's going to be even more interested in you."

"It's too late now," she responded. "The only way I'm going to turn him off now is by letting him get his way and going to bed with him. Like you said, he's a user and the only way out is to become 'used'... something he can boast about and throw away. Besides, I thought you wanted me to play hard-to-get with him."

"No, I want you to be hard for him to get."

"Not much difference right now... So, you said you'd help me look for that thing I lost?" Lois asked him, deliberately changing the subject. It was actually touching, and more than a little flattering, how Clark seemed to be jealous of Luthor's attention to her. But it wasn't something she wanted to dwell on. They were just friends, right?

"How about after lunch?" he suggested. "I'm sure Mom's expecting us. She'll want to ask us about the funeral and everything."

"Sounds like a plan," she agreed.

Just as Clark had predicted, Martha had lunch ready at his apartment and had fixed enough potato soup and turkey sandwiches to feed a small army. But Clark hadn't predicted that both Jonathan and Martha would look as wrung out as Lois felt — almost as if they'd buried someone close to them. Lois was still coming to terms with the fact that Clark's parents knew Superman almost as well as their son had. But it was still a little disconcerting to see such open evidence.

Martha had been watching her across the table. Abruptly, Lois realized that Martha was watching her shred her sandwich instead of eating it. She stopped and started eating. The soup was hearty and the sandwich wasn't dry or tasteless like the ones from the vending machine.

"Jonathan and I watched the funeral on TV," Martha finally said.

"Neither of us had realized how much good Superman had managed to do while he was here," Jonathan added. "Or how many people cared. He must have had quite an impact for both the fire and police departments to bury him as one of their own."

"He had a lot of friends there," Lois told them. "Like Henderson said, a lot of officers and civilians survived things they shouldn't have because of Superman."

"It was a lovely ceremony," Martha said quietly. "I was a little surprised to see a coffin, but I guess they needed something to focus on, make it more real, even if it was empty."

"Apparently, the coffin wasn't entirely empty," Clark told them. "Some of the asteroid remnants that fell to earth had organic residue on them, and they think they found part of his

cape. That's what they put in the coffin."

"Organic residue?" Jonathan asked.

"Like something burned up coming into the atmosphere. Like a body maybe," Lois said.

"But that's..." Martha began to say. Then she stopped and shared another one of those odd looks with her husband.

"But that's what, Mom?" Clark asked.

"We all thought Superman was invulnerable to things like that, that's all," Martha said.

Lois had nothing to say to that and she noticed that neither did Clark. He was studying his bowl of soup as if he could read the future there, like tea leaves.

"But it was a very nice ceremony," Jonathan said after a moment.

"Yeah, it was," Clark agreed. "I just..."

"Clark, Doctor Friskin said not to worry about not remembering him," Martha reminded him. "It'll come back in its own time."

"So, Lois, what are planning to do with the flag?" Jonathan asked.

"Perry suggested the Daily Planet build a case and set up a display in the lobby with the flag and the Planet's front pages about him," Lois answered.

"I think that's something Superman would have liked," Martha said quietly.

"By the way, the cable guy was here and replaced your cable box," Jonathan said to Clark. "Funny fellow, though. He kept trying to get Martha and me out of the room while he was working..." Jonathan said after a long moment. "And then he wanted to check the rest of the place for other cable connections."

"I'm pretty sure there's only the one, and my TV is cable ready," Clark said. "I don't have a cable box."

"That's what your mom kept telling him," Jonathan told them.

"Which is why I called the cable company as soon as he was gone," Martha said. "I figured their records would show that."

"And?" Lois prompted.

"And, according to their records, the cable company never sent anyone out," Martha said.

"So, somebody was trying to get access to your apartment to search it?" Lois asked. It was rhetorical question.

"Or to plant bugs like they did in yours," Clark suggested. "In fact, I bet if we ask your building super, he'll tell us he let a cable guy into your apartment a while back, and maybe even again a day or so ago."

"One of us was with him the entire time, so I doubt he was able to do too much," Martha told them. "I did check the phone and it was clean. Plus, I disconnected the cable box he left and put it the fridge."

"The fridge?" Lois asked.

Jonathan chuckled. "One nice thing about refrigerators is they're air tight and pretty well sound-proof." He gave Martha a mischievous look before turning to Clark. "That's where the smoke detector goes when your mom is soldering in the craft room."

"I was getting tired of taking the battery out all the time," Martha told them in self-defense. "And the wires to the battery connector are way too fragile to be messing around with them all that often."

Jonathan just shrugged and smiled indulgently at his wife.

Lois and Clark spent the rest of the afternoon and early evening searching through her apartment, looking for bugs and cameras. They didn't find any, but they didn't find her bug finder either.

"Either the place is clean, or they've found a way of hiding the devices so even Superman couldn't find them," Clark told her

after they'd checked everything a second time.

"That doesn't make me feel any better," Lois replied. Clark had talked with Mr. Tracewski, the building supervisor and confirmed that someone claiming to be from the cable company, and carrying cable company ID, had been in Lois's apartment twice in the past month. The last time was two days ago.

"Look, whether or not there are any surveillance devices here, or at my place, who ever planted them knows we know about them," Clark said. "They know we're going to be looking and we're going to be careful."

"It's just so infuriating, Clark. I mean, I can't even relax in my own home. And there were cameras in my bathroom... my bathroom! And just because they came from... You know what I mean."

"You can spend the night at my place again," Clark offered.

"Thanks, but no," Lois said. "As comfortable as your sofa is, I think I'll stay home tonight and sleep in my own bed."

"If you're sure..."

"I'm sure, Clark. I need some time to myself, but thanks. And if I don't see your parents before they head back home, tell them thanks for me," she said.

Clark nodded and headed for the door. "Good night, Lois."

"Good night, Clark."

Lois's VCR was set to record her favorite soap opera every day. She had become addicted to the show, Ivory Tower, during college. She hadn't been home in the past week long enough to watch TV at all, not to mention her recorded programs. She wasn't even sure the producers of Ivory Tower had even made and aired any new episodes considering the threat Nightfall held for the world.

She snuggled down into her bed with a cup of cocoa and the remote and turned on her TV and VCR, rewinding the tape.

The end of the world had just been announced. Lois grimaced. This was supposed to be escapist entertainment, but the writers insisted on bring in real world problems. She shrugged and leaned back into her stack of pillows. Brad and Melanie, the current focus characters, had just heard the news and were deciding whether or not they should throw caution to the winds and finally consummate their relationship.

At least Melanie wasn't going to face losing Brad because he was the one tapped to fly off and save the world. Superman did that... He flew off knowing he might not come back... He's gone.

Apparently Ivory Tower skipped filming on the day the real world was scheduled to end — instead the VCR had recorded some of the news coverage of waiting for Superman's return from space, waiting for EPRAD to determine if he had succeeded. She let the talking head drone on. She knew what had happened — Superman hadn't come back.

Ivory Tower came back with the fictional news commentator announcing that some unknown government agency had saved the world from the looming threat. Brad and Melanie had apparently gone to bed together and were now beginning to realize what they'd done. They had families with expectations, duties, and responsibilities to face now.

Lois fell asleep sometime during Friday's episode. Once again her dreams were filled with fire and pain, but this time there was a difference. She saw Superman fall and die, but this time Clark was there with her, holding her hand, grieving with her.

'He did love you,' Clark repeated in her dream.

'I know,' she replied. 'I know.'

Lois spent the next day doing laundry and reading the books she'd bought that had tipped her to Luthor's overly intimate knowledge of her apartment and property. It was the first time

she'd spent any time at home since before the announcement of the asteroid.

Clark called once to let her know his parents were heading back home to Kansas.

Then, finally bored to tears, she started outlining the questions she wanted to ask Vincent Winninger and deciding what to wear when she went to see him in the morning. Winninger was known to be a ladies' man and she was going to have to keep his attention, at least for a little while.

She might be in mourning for Metropolis's fallen hero, her hero from another world, but she still had a job to do.

"But I hope that each tomorrow will bring you joy and accomplishment, and even that Pulitzer you want so badly. I know you can do it, just as I know you will continue to investigate and expose corruption and misdoings in Metropolis," Superman had written.

He had such high expectations of her, she knew. But no higher than those she held for herself. She was the best. She intended to stay the best and staying the best meant doing whatever she needed to, to get the story.

Part 9

Lois had finally chosen a silk blouse and a black skirt for her meeting with Winninger. The skirt was shorter than what she normally wore — Lois knew, even if Cat Grant didn't, that it was hard for a woman to be taken seriously in a man's world if she looked like a slut. And as much as Lois didn't really want to admit it, investigative journalism was still a man's world. As a woman she had to be twice as good as a male reporter.

Ralph and Gil noticed her attire when she walked into the newsroom. Even Perry raised his eye brows at her. But Clark didn't seem to notice. And somehow, she was disappointed in his lack of reaction.

"So, who are you interviewing?" Clark asked, not looking up from whatever he was working on.

"Vincent Winninger," Lois admitted. "He wants to talk to me."

"What a coup." Clark said. There was admiration in his voice. She knew that he'd also been trying to get hold of Winninger, but she was the one who succeeded, and in this case, it was the early bird that got the worm — or interview as the case may be.

Cat Grant had sauntered over to Clark's desk, probably to borrow a stapler or something equally transparent to get Clark's attention. She was leaning against the corner of his desk but straightened up when she heard Winninger's name.

"You're going to interview Vincent Winninger?" Cat asked. Disbelief was written all over her.

"Yes."

"That explains the vain attempt to look sexy," Cat announced to everyone and no one. Ralph chuckled only to get a glare from Clark.

"You do know he's a notorious womanizer," Cat added coyly. "Maybe I should go with you."

"Or maybe you shouldn't," Lois suggested.

Clark finally looked over at her and frowned as if just noticing what she was wearing. Not that she actually cared that he hadn't noticed before.

"Wait a minute. Are you planning to exploit your femininity...?" He seemed surprised at the thought.

"...to get the story of one of the strangest and most reclusive scientists of our time? Hell, yes," she came back.

The city was getting back to normal, so traffic was its usual mess as she headed over to Winninger's office near Metropolis University. The address he'd given her belonged to an older brick building that had obviously been an apartment building at some

time in its recent past.

The suite number indicated the office was on the third floor. The door was open when she got there and she walked in. The former apartment living room was set up as a sitting room/library — sofa, coffee table, chairs, shelves stuffed to overflowing with books, papers, monographs. There was a pitcher of iced tea and two glasses set out on the coffee table.

The room's walls were covered with framed photographs and citations — various presidents, from Eisenhower to Reagan, standing with Winninger who was mugging for the camera. Several photos of Winninger with the Mercury astronauts. One of Winninger looking down Marilyn Monroe's front.

"Scientists, philosophers, historians, hippies," a man said. Lois turned to see a tall, slender, once handsome, older man looking at her, gesturing toward the photos. Vincent Winninger. "You must be Lois Lane."

"Doctor Winninger," Lois responded. "Impressive collection." She indicated the photographs.

"People love to be seen with the famous and influential," he said. Lois had the feeling he wasn't referring to the presidents and actors as the 'famous and influential'.

He laughed and pointed out a group photo surrounded by shots of members of the same group working, playing, attending conferences.

"Elimont Center," he explained. "The 'intellectual' commune. Named after... I don't remember who we named it after, do you? Whoever he was, you can bet he was obscure." Winninger seemed amused by his own comments.

There were several shots of theater productions. A Streetcar Named Desire, Look Back in Anger, Marat/Sade, others Lois couldn't identify.

"And these theatrical photos?" she asked. It seemed like a good way to get him talking.

"The commune had a theater group."

Lois gave the photos a closer look. There was something odd about them — actors she was certain had never worked in or near Metropolis seemed to be prominent in the photos.

"Isn't that...?" she asked, pointing out an actor who looked remarkably like a very young Marlon Brando.

"Uh, no. That's Sebastian Finn. Mr. Make-up, we called him. He could make himself look like just about anyone," Winninger said. "His Bette Davis was remarkable."

The likeness to Brando was positively uncanny. "What happened to him?" she asked.

"I don't know, he sort of disappeared," Winninger said. He didn't seem to care. "His make-up was a whole lot better than his acting."

Lois spotted another familiar face, one that had been in the Daily Planet only a few days before. "Isn't this...?"

"Yes, Barbara Trevino. She's come a long way. From radical hippie to..."

"To chairperson of the Rain Forest Consortium," Lois completed for him. The Rain Forest Consortium was an international organization famous for its efforts to preserve the tropical rain forests and the endangered species of both plants and animals that lived there. They had just recently announced the purchase of major tracts of land in Amazonia with the intention of disallowing any exploitation on the region.

"Well, not until Thursday," Winninger reminded her. "But we're going to change all that."

"We?" Alarms started going off in Lois's head. She had come here to interview Winninger on his theories, not to get involved in some corporate game.

"Yes. You and me. That's why you're here, Ms. Lane," Winninger explained. "Did you know that I spent several years living with an Amazonian tribe?" He didn't wait for an answer, beckoning Lois to sit on the worn sofa. There was a file box on

the coffee table. Winner lifted the lid and pulled out some bound journals and notebooks.

"The Life and Times of Vincent Winner. In this play, Barbara Trevino has a leading role. She's the femme fatale," he said musingly.

Lois slid forward in her seat to look at the notebooks on the table. Her skirt rode up just a little, exposing more leg. Winner eyed the expanse of thigh.

"You're a very good looking woman," Winner told her, leaning a little too close.

Lois backed away. "Thank you."

"How do you feel about increased male potency?" he asked

"What?" Lois responded. The question had taken her completely by surprise. She pulled her skirt down to a more decorous height. "Look, Dr. Winner. I know your reputation with women is only exceeded by your scientific one, but I think it's best if we keep this meeting professional."

"Precisely," he cheerfully agreed.

Lois was confused. The interview wasn't going in the direction she had planned. And Winner seemed totally disinterested in plugging his book. "What am I missing here?" she murmured to herself.

He heard her. "Barbara Trevino is going to sell all of us and the Ozone Layer straight down the river, and destroy our chances for increased male potency."

Lois stared at him a long moment. "I guess the sixties were pretty good to you."

"Hear me out," he asked, his expression earnest, almost pleading. "It will all become clear." He handed her one of the notebooks, which she opened up.

"Some iced tea?" he asked, reaching for the pitcher in front of him. She shook her head but he poured a glass anyway and held it out to her. Absently, she tried to wave it away. Instead, the glass tipped from his hand and cold liquid spilled down her good silk blouse.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Winner said, but Lois wasn't sure exactly how sorry he was as he made a half hearted attempt to dab at the wet stain with a napkin.

"That's okay. I'll get it," she told him, pushing his hand away. She headed for the bathroom to get cleaned up, still holding the notebook in her hand. As she opened the door to the bathroom, there was a knock on the front door and she heard Winner go to answer it.

"You're back early," she heard him say. He sounded surprised. She couldn't make out what the other person was saying. She grabbed a hand towel and began blotting the tea off her blouse. Then she heard Winner yell out "No!" She froze, trying to hear what was happening in the main room. Winner yelled again and then there was a 'pop' like a gun, only fainter.

Lois unfroze and went to the bathroom door, opening it just enough for her to see through the crack. It was hard to make anything out, but it looked like Winner was face-down on the floor, one hand thrown over his head. Then she saw the enlarging blood stain on the carpet.

She held her breath as she watched. A small, plain man came into view, crouching down to take Winner's pulse. Then the small man stood and turned toward her, heading for the bathroom.

She closed the door as quietly as she could, hoping the killer didn't notice the movement of the door. She backed against the wall, holding Winner's notebook against her chest.

The bathroom door didn't open. Instead, after what felt like an eternity, Lois heard the front door open and close. She waited, but there was no other sound. Heart in her mouth, she opened the bathroom door and peered out. Winner was face down on the carpeted floor in a pool of blood. The journals and notebooks were gone. She quickly checked for a pulse at Winner's throat

— nothing. His body was already cooling.

She crossed the room to the phone on the desk and dialed 9-1-1 "This is Lois Lane. I want to report a murder..."

Lois had her phone to her ear while Clark, Jimmy and Perry stood behind her, reading her story on her monitor.

'Only minutes before his death,' Perry read aloud. 'Dr Winner produced diaries which, he claimed, contained evidence that would abort the impending induction of Barbara Trevino into the Rain Forest Consortium.'

"I see. Okay," Lois said into the phone, trying to ignore Perry's commentary. "I'll try to reach her when she arrives. Where did you say she was staying? Oh, I thought you did..."

"She doesn't want to write this," Perry was saying to Clark and Jimmy.

"Well... thank you for your help," Lois told the person on the other end of the line. She hung up her phone and returned to her keyboard and monitor.

"Barbara Trevino is en route to Metropolis now," Lois announced. "Has a meeting at the Trade Center tomorrow."

"Why doesn't she want to write it, Chief?" Jimmy asked quietly.

"Because I can't print it," Perry said.

"You can't?" Jimmy asked.

Perry shook his head. "No. She doesn't have the diaries."

"Well, she may not have the diaries but he told her what's in the diaries. And I do have the one notebook..." She pulled the notebook out of her desk drawer. "But it looks like Greek to me."

Perry took the notebook and peered at the pages. "That's because it is Greek," he announced, handing the notebook to Jimmy.

Clark took it from him and looked through it. "I can read most of this..."

"You can?" Lois asked. One more thing to add to her list of 'Clark quirks.'

Clark nodded. "He's writing about this rare plant the tribe he was living with used to... well, he documents how the plant was harvested and processed for maximum potency. He also describes some personal experiments with the drug the tribe produced. It's pretty graphic."

"Don't tell me, increased male potency?"

Clark nodded, a sheepish look on his face. "There's also a map of a section of the Brazilian rain forest. I think it's the area he was describing in the diary."

"Jimmy, check it out," Perry ordered. He turned back to Lois. "Now, look Lois, a verbal statement ain't worth the paper it's printed on... See what I'm saying? Without the diaries, you've got nothing to check out."

"But I have the notebook," Lois protested.

"Which still needs to be properly translated and checked out," Perry reminded her. Lois frowned and began cutting out some of the material on the screen. She knew Perry was right, but she didn't have to like it.

"I hope one of the parts you trim back is this," Clark said, touching the screen to point out what he was referring to. "Where it says the killer took the diaries."

"He did take them," Lois protested.

"How would you know that unless you were there?" Clark asked.

"I was there."

"But the killer doesn't know that," Clark told her. "...unless you tell him."

"I'm not telling him. Not exactly," Lois stated.

It was Perry's turn to leave fingerprints on her monitor screen "And here... Change 'minutes before his death' to 'earlier that day.' Just to be safe."

She deleted another line. "How about the part that says the

man is dead? Can I leave that? Is that okay?" She looked up at Perry who simply shrugged.

With a sigh, she typed up the last lines and sent the story to the printer for Perry to look over one more time. Then she stood up.

"Where are you going?" Perry demanded.

Lois ignored him for the moment, taking a small spray bottle from her desk drawer and meticulously cleaning the fingerprints off her monitor screen.

"Back to Dr Winner's office," she said when she was satisfied. "If I stay here any longer, I'll have no story left."

"I'll go with you," Clark offered.

"This is my story, Clark," she reminded him. "Besides, you have an appointment with Doctor Friskin in an hour."

"Forget the story and forget Doctor Friskin," Clark said. "I want to make sure you're going to be all right."

"Clark, I just spent five hours with the police. They never mentioned my needing a bodyguard. And if I did need one, and I mean this in the nicest way, you wouldn't be my first choice," Lois told him. "Go see Doctor Friskin. I can take care of myself... really."

She turned on her heel and left.

She already had her key out to open the door of her jeep when she realized there was someone behind her. She turned to find Clark standing there, waiting.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"Going with you," he replied, his expression all innocence.

She wanted to slap him silly, but settled for rolling her eyes. "Dear Lord, save me from my friends, my enemies I can handle myself," she muttered, unlocking the door for him.

"First, I'm dropping you off at Doctor Friskin's," she stated as she pulled the jeep out of the parking garage. "Then I am going back to Winner's office."

"Lo-is," Clark protested.

"Clark, I've told you this already, but you obviously weren't listening. I don't need a bodyguard."

"And you wouldn't choose me even if you did need one," Clark added. There was a little boy petulance about him that might be endearing if he wasn't being so pig-headed.

"Clark you're a journalist, not a bodyguard. The killer doesn't even know there was a witness, so it shouldn't matter."

"It's just that I have a bad feeling about it," Clark said. "And I would feel a lot better if somebody was with you."

Lois pulled the jeep up to the front of Friskin's building. "If I think I need protection, I'll let the police know, okay?"

He frowned, obviously not happy with her decision.

"I'll see you at work tomorrow, okay?" she said.

"Okay," he agreed and climbed out of the car. But as she drove away, she could see him in the rearview mirror, watching.

The Crime Scene Investigation team was just finishing up their work as Lois arrived at Winner's office. Inspector Henderson spotted her standing in the door and he beckoned her inside the front room. She was surprised to find him still there. Henderson was a high ranking police supervisor and he was rarely involved directly in anything but the most high-profile cases any more. Winner was being given the V.I.P treatment — no limit to manpower or expense.

"I did mention not to touch anything, Lois?" Henderson said, giving her a sardonic grin.

She gave him a cheeky grin back. "Moi?" Henderson was one of the good guys — he didn't consider the press an outright enemy and Lois had worked hard to keep on his good side. It paid off at times like this. No other journalist had even been let into the building. Of course the fact that she was an eye witness didn't hurt either.

She crouched down to study the stains on the carpet, looking

up as a uniformed officer murmured something to Henderson. That was when she saw him — the killer.

"That's him!"

"Who? What?" Henderson asked, giving her a confused look.

Lois hurried over to the door. "This is the killer, Inspector! Don't let him go!"

The man in the doorway looked over at her in wide-eyed astonishment. "What?"

"The man who killed Dr Winner!" Lois nearly shouted. "I saw you! I was in the powder room."

"This is Dr Hubert, Dr Winner's, associate," Henderson introduced him.

"I don't care who he is. I saw him kill Dr Winner this morning," Lois told Henderson.

"I was in Washington, D.C. this morning," the man said.

"Anybody see you there?" Henderson asked.

"The thirty or forty men and women who attended the National Science Council meeting and heard my presentation," Hubert stated. "Including the Vice President of the United States."

"I'd call that an alibi, wouldn't you, Lois?" Henderson asked. His expression was sympathetic. But that didn't make Lois feel any better.

Lois was still fuming when she pulled her jeep into a parking space in front of her apartment building. Her space in back of the building was being used by the visitors of one of her neighbors and so far the building supervisor, Mister Tracewski, hadn't managed to get them to move.

Clark was sitting on the front stoop, waiting for her.

"I thought you were going home after your appointment?" Lois asked.

"You assumed I would," Clark corrected. "I never told you I would... So, what did you find out at Winner's?"

"The killer was there, Winner's assistant, Victor Hubert. Only he had an alibi," Lois said, climbing the steps to the front door of the building. "Made me look like a first class fool."

"So, you made a mistake. It happens," Clark said.

"I didn't make a mistake. He looked just like him," Lois protested. "I asked Jimmy to track Dr. Hubert down, but he's disappeared without a trace. I don't get it." She fumbled for her keys and finally found the one she wanted. She had her hand on the door handle when Clark grabbed her and pushed her down to the concrete landing. She heard two pops, like a car backfiring.

"Clark?" She wasn't sure what just happened, but she was going to have bruises. Clark's over protectiveness was getting annoying.

"Stay down!" Clark ordered as he climbed to his feet.

"That hurt!" Lois complained, getting to her own feet. Clark appeared to be scanning the street. She touched his arm and he jumped.

"Lois! You don't sneak up on somebody at a time like this," he said. His voice was shaking.

"A time like what?" Lois demanded.

"Somebody tried to kill you!"

"Yes, you," she said. That was when she noticed the blood on his jacket sleeve. "Oh my God... you're bleeding."

He looked down at his sleeve, surprise written across his face. "I guess I didn't move fast enough."

Lois pulled him inside the building, noting a new chip in the brick and a bullet hole in the wooden front door. Once inside, she pushed his jacket aside to see if he'd been hit anywhere else. She didn't see any blood on his shirt, aside from what was on his sleeve. It appeared as though the slug had simply grazed his upper arm before chipping the brick.

"Come upstairs, and I'll see how bad it is," Lois said. "I assume I can't talk you into going to the emergency room?"

“No doctors.”

Lois sighed as they made their way up to her apartment. Clark could be so stubborn when he set his mind on something. She still had no idea why he hated doctors.

She unlocked the locks on her door.

“Why would anyone want to kill me?” she asked.

“Obviously the killer thinks you can identify him,” Clark said. He took off his shirt and inspected the graze on his arm.

“But, I barely got a glimpse of him. And the man I thought did it, didn’t,” Lois protested.

“The killer doesn’t know that.” He winced as Lois applied antiseptic to the wound. “Lois, you’re in danger. The killer wants you dead. And Superman’s not around anymore to swoop down to the rescue.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Lois asked him. It was finally sinking in — Clark had saved her life by knocking her out of the way of the gunman’s bullets. And someone wanted her dead.

“Look, you need to let Henderson know what’s happened,” Clark said. “Maybe he can assign a police guard.”

“Clark, how am I supposed to do my work while under police guard?” Lois protested.

“How are you going to do your work if you’re dead?” Clark shot back.

Lois sighed. She hated it when Clark was right, especially at times like this. She picked up the phone and dialed Henderson’s private number. To her surprise, he picked up after only two rings.

“Henderson, Lois Lane... somebody just took two shots at me. They wounded Clark.”

“How is he?” Henderson asked.

“He was grazed by one of the shots. But he’s okay,” she told him.

“I’ll have a patrol car come by your place and I’ll arrange for protection,” he promised. “In the meantime, get out of there. Go to Clark’s place or check into a hotel. Call me back when you get there... Oh, and Lois, the man you identified as the killer?”

“Yeah, what about him?”

“The real Doctor Hubert flew in from D.C. about an hour ago.”

“So the man at Winner’s office?”

“May well have been the killer,” Henderson admitted.

At Clark’s urging, Lois agreed to spend the night at his place, again. At the rate things were going, she may as well leave a toothbrush and a change of clothes at his apartment. Of course, that would give the bullpen gossipmongers something to really talk about.

Although Clark had offered her his bed, she chose to sleep on the sofa. At least he had a comfortable sofa, considering how often she’d slept on it in the past week.

The sun was shining when she woke up. Lois wrapped her robe around herself and padded to the kitchen to look for coffee. Clark always had coffee ready, but not this morning. Instead there was a note next to the coffee machine: The water’s out in the building. I’ll be right back with coffee and breakfast. CK. PS. Don’t let anyone in.

“Blast,” she muttered to herself. There was no indication from the note as to how long ago he had left, or when he was planning to be back. And she desperately wanted a shower. Her hair felt positively gummy. She tried the kitchen sink — nothing.

There was a knock on the door and she went to check it, peering through the sheer curtains that covered the double front doors. She recognized the heavy-set man standing on the outside landing — Floyd Hanson, Clark’s building manager. He was wearing stained coveralls and had a toolbox in his hand.

She opened the door. “Mister Hanson, Clark’s just stepped out, but I guess you’re here to fix the water...?”

He shut the door behind him, dropping the toolbox. It clattered onto the floor as he stepped closer to her. She ran down the several steps to Clark’s living room.

“Mr. Hanson, are you all right?” she asked. He didn’t say anything, but kept coming closer. She tried running to the bedroom, but the open plan of Clark’s apartment meant there was nowhere to run to except the bathroom and Hanson managed to beat her there. Lois was surprised at how spry the heavy man was.

He grabbed her and she fought back, slamming her elbow into his ample belly. It didn’t seem to faze him. He managed to get his hands around her throat and began choking her. She struggled to free herself but he was simply too strong. Soon, too soon, the world turned black.

When she opened her eyes again, Clark was kneeling on the floor beside her. “Lois?”

She could hear the panic in his voice. She coughed and sputtered and finally was able to fill her lungs. Her throat felt like it was on fire. “Oh, Clark... Clark...” she managed to say before dissolving into tears.

“It’s all right, you’re okay...” Clark was murmuring.

“I couldn’t breathe. It was... Floyd... Mister Hanson.”

“No, it wasn’t, Lois,” Clark told her. “It must have been someone else. I saw the real Floyd leave the same time I did.”

“He tried to kill me...” she managed to say.

“I’ll find him...” Clark promised. He started to stand, but she grabbed his arm, ignoring the wince of pain in his face as she clung to his injured arm.

“No!” she managed to get out. “Please. Don’t leave me.”

“I won’t. I’m here. I’m right here,” he said, holding her close. It felt good to be in his arms. Safe. Almost like being in Superman’s arms.

Part 10

Lois was feeling a little calmer by the time she and Clark got to the Daily Planet. Inspector Henderson insisted they ride in a patrol car — he didn’t say it out loud, but she suspected he was afraid the killer may have tampered with her jeep.

Henderson had been extremely solicitous as Lois related Mr. Hanson’s attack on her — the second murder attempt in eight hours. She suspected he was getting tired of listening to her — an hour last night covering what had happened at her apartment building and another spate of questions this morning. She knew he had to be tired. Murders were usually solved within forty-eight hours and the team assigned to the case would work round the clock for the first few days. After that, leads would dry up, witnesses and evidence would be harder to find. People would start misremembering things.

“Lois, are you all right?” Perry asked almost before she and Clark got out of the elevator.

“I’m fine,” she lied. There were bruises on her throat and she was wearing a scarf to hide them. The police medic had assured her they would fade in a few days.

“What are you doing here?” Perry demanded.

“This is where I work,” Lois stated very reasonably. “I have a job to do.”

“Your job isn’t going to be worth the sweat off an Elvis imitator if you’re dead,” Perry responded. “Kent, can’t you talk any sense into her?”

“I’m hoarse from trying,” Clark told him. “So is Inspector Henderson. He threatened to put her in protective custody.”

“Why didn’t he?” Perry asked Clark.

Lois glowered at him. “Look, this killer can apparently find me anywhere and can look like anyone. It’s probably safer around a lot of people I know,” she said, settling in at her desk.

“I don’t think you’re going to be safe until we find Mister Can Make Himself Up To Look Like Anyone Else,” Clark

commented sourly.

Mister Can Make Himself Up To Look Like Anyone Else? Lois felt the pieces fall into place — it fit. It all fit.

“Mr. Make-up,” she murmured to herself. Then she looked around the newsroom, spotting the one person she needed at this moment. “Jimmy!”

The young man trotted over to her desk.

“Try to find everything you can, especially the whereabouts of an... uh...” Suddenly the name escaped her. It was an unusual name — Winn? Dinn? “What was his name...?” Finally, it came to her. “Sebastian Finn.”

“Who?” The question came from Clark, Perry, and Jimmy. All three were staring at her as if she’d lost her mind.

“Sebastian Finn,” Lois repeated. “At the Elimont Commune he was called Mister Make-up. And I saw a photo in Winner’s office with Winner, Finn, and Barbara Trevino. They worked together on stage productions. Winner said Finn could make himself up to look like absolutely anybody.”

“Fine, but why would Finn kill Winner and what’s any of this got to do with Barbara Trevino, aside from the fact they were in the commune together years ago?” Clark asked.

“I don’t know,” Lois admitted. “Winner called her a ‘femme fatale’. Obviously he knew something we don’t.” She turned to look for Jimmy again. He was at his desk, typing furiously on his keyboard. “Any luck on that notebook?”

Jimmy’s head came up. “Uh, yes. Aside from the parts about his stay with that tribe — Clark’s translation was right on, by the way — there were some chemical formulas. STAR Labs was able to break them down, but they have no clue yet as to what their purpose is.”

“Enhanced male potency?”

The three men were staring at her again.

“That’s what Winner was going on about, remember?” she reminded them. “Now, Trevino is having a press conference. Maybe she’ll tell us what it means.”

“This is very creepy,” Lois complained as she and Clark tried to find a cab. She knew it was her imagination, but everyone seemed to be staring at her. Everyone seemed to be making suspicious movements. The bicycle messenger was riding too close to her, the florist was watching her with beady eyes. And, oddly enough, there were no cabs parked just outside the Daily Planet building as there usually were, their drivers sipping coffee as they waited for fares.

“Taxi!” Clark yelled, spotting a cab coming around the corner.

“Don’t you think it’s creepy?” Lois said as Clark held the cab door for her. “Finn could be anybody. Anybody you see could be somebody else.”

“Lois, it’s okay,” Clark assured her. “I’m right here.”

Somehow, his presence did make her feel better. She took his arm and held it tightly, this time avoiding the gauze bandage that covered the bullet graze. Luckily for Clark, he seemed to heal fast — the blisters on his hand were almost gone and, when she changed the bandage on his arm earlier, the wound wasn’t nearly as bad as it had looked the night before.

The cab stopped at the Trade Center. The courtyard had been set up for a press conference. LNN and the other broadcast media had cameras and crews covering the event. Lois spotted Carmen Alvarado with the LNN crew. Linda King with the Star was up front somewhere.

Someone pressed a sheet of paper into Lois’s hand and she glanced at it — it was a brief biography of Barbara Trevino, listing her accomplishments and the corporate boards she was on. Lois stuffed the sheet into her purse.

Lois pushed her way through the crowd. She knew Perry had assigned Polly Harper to the press conference, but then Lois

wasn’t there for Trevino’s statements about the Rain Forest Consortium — she had different fish to fry.

Trevino was standing on the dais with several other members of the Rain Forest Consortium — various corporate leaders known to be deeply interested in ecology. Lois recognized Trevino from her pictures. She was a handsome woman and the photos in Winner’s office had proved she had been beautiful in her college days.

As Lois got to the front, she could hear the end of Trevino’s answer to someone’s question.

“... it’s a global village now,” Trevino was saying. “We of the Rain Forest Consortium have to act accordingly.”

“How does it feel to be the first woman to hold this post?” someone asked.

“Well, I don’t officially hold it for two days, but at the risk of being premature...” Trevino smiled for the cameras. “It feels great.”

It seemed the audience appreciated Trevino’s charm as they laughed along with her.

Lois wasn’t laughing. “Ms. Trevino, concerning the death of Dr. Vincent Winner...”

“Dr. Winner was a brilliant scientist,” Trevino said smoothly, “...and a dear friend of mine for many years. I was shocked and saddened by his death.”

“How do you feel about the ozone layer?” Lois asked.

Trevino looked confused and more than a little annoyed.

“What about increased male potency?” Lois added.

“Lois!” Clark hissed at her. “Have you...?”

“Who are you?” Trevino demanded. She glared at Lois, but there was something in her expression that said Lois had hit her target.

“Lois Lane, Daily Planet,” Lois responded.

“Well, Ms. Lane, I find your sense of humor odd, to say the least, and totally inappropriate. I suggest this would be a good time to close this press conference.” With that, Trevino walked off the platform.

There were murmurs of confusion and annoyance as the camera crews began to stow their gear. The print reporters wandered off.

“Bold, Lois,” Clark commented wryly. “Not too bright, but bold.”

“Did you see the look on her face? She knew exactly what I was talking about,” Lois told him. “Even if I didn’t.”

“Well, now we’ll never get to her.” Clark stuffed his hands in his pockets and gave her a glare of annoyed frustration. It was one sign of how upset Clark really was — he rarely showed annoyance when he was frustrated with her, more like an amused tolerance.

“Ms. Lane?” a man said from close-by. She turned to see a small dapper man standing next to her and Clark. He spoke with a Latino accent. Lois couldn’t place which nationality, not that she expected to — Clark was the one with the talents in that area.

“I am Dr. Trevino’s administrative assistant. She wishes me to tell you that she will discuss whatever you like, privately,” the man continued.

Lois glanced over at Clark, who was watching the man warily.

“I’m... here with Mister Kent...” Lois started.

“I’m sorry. Just you, she said. You understand...”

Lois shrugged and gave Clark an apologetic look. “She wants to talk woman-to-woman. It’s a sisterhood thing,” she explained.

“Sure, I understand completely,” Clark assured her. But his expression indicated something else. “I’m coming with you.”

The aide shrugged and started for the nearest building. Lois just rolled her eyes and followed him, Clark right beside her.

The aide led the way to the elevators and pressed the button for the top floor. Clark tried to start a conversation with the man,

in English and in Spanish — at least Lois thought it was Spanish — but the aide refused to rise to the bait. After several minutes, the elevator arrived at its destination and the aide ushered them out into a bland corridor. He led them through a maze of featureless hallways to a steel door marked ‘Roof Access’.

“This way, please,” the aide said, opening the door and allowing Lois to pass.

“Lois, wait...” Clark said from behind her. Then the door slammed, leaving Clark on the other side. She turned to open the door for him and saw the pistol in the aide’s hand and it was pointing at her. He was out of arm’s reach, and she knew from her self-defense classes that even trying to grab the gun was a phenomenally bad idea. She kicked instead, catching his hand and was gratified to see the pistol fly landing some distance away.

The aide ran for the gun and Lois saw her chance. She ran, only to find there was no where to run to. The pebbled roof offered little cover and the shoes she was wearing weren’t designed for running.

She hid behind one of the air-conditioner housings and headed back to the access door. She heard pounding from the inside — someone trying to break through. She opened the door and Clark nearly fell on his face. She pushed him back and followed him through, the aide right behind her. Clark grabbed the door handle and tried to pull the door shut on the aide, catching the hand with the gun in the doorframe.

A shot rang out. Clark slammed the door on the aide’s wrist one more time. The man on the other side of the door screamed and the gun dropped to the floor.

“Lois?” Clark said. His voice was shaking.

“I’m okay,” she assured him, even though her knees were weak and her own voice was shaking.

“Why don’t you call the cops?” he suggested. Lois thought she heard a touch of hysteria in his voice as he held the door shut on the ‘aide’s’ hand. Without another word Lois ran to find a phone.

Lois watched as Henderson gazed at the man in handcuffs sitting in the chair in the interrogation room. After a good deal of cajoling — Clark could be surprisingly persuasive — Henderson agreed to let Lois and Clark sit in on the interrogation. The man had been read his rights and his wrist had been checked. It was bruised, although she was sure Clark would have cheerfully broken it given the circumstances.

The ‘aide’ looked calm as he regarded the detectives and two reporters.

Lois peered more closely at the man and spotted a seam at his neck. She pointed it out to Henderson. Henderson reached out and pulled off a very thin mask and make-up.

“Sebastian Finn, I presume,” Henderson said.

“So... why’d you kill Dr. Winninger?” Lois asked.

“His Rosencrantz was atrocious,” Finn stated.

“But why come after me?” Lois asked.

“You could identify me,” Finn said. He sounded surprised that she would need to ask his motives.

“No, I couldn’t,” Lois said.

Finn shrugged. “Well, that’s the way it goes sometimes.”

“How does Barbara Trevino fit into this?” Lois asked.

Finn shook his head. “You can’t make me talk... Superman may have been the Man of Steel, but I have a will of iron.”

“I hate actors,” Lois groused. Henderson just chuckled.

With Finn behind bars, Lois was feeling a little safer. After giving their statements to Henderson, she and Clark went back to the newsroom. Jimmy was still researching Finn. Lois assigned herself to dig deeper into Vincent Winninger’s background. Clark took on the task of locating the elusive Doctor Hubert.

Jimmy hung up his phone at the same time Clark and Lois did.

“You first,” Lois told Jimmy.

“According to the police,” Jimmy began. “Sebastian Finn wasn’t just moonlighting when he killed Winninger. The police think he’s been a successful hitman for years. I guess he finally made his ability to disguise himself as anyone pay off.”

“I can top that,” Lois announced. “I just talked to the dean of the Philosophy department at Metropolis University. He used to be a member of the Elimont Commune. He knew Winninger, Finn and Trevino way back when. Apparently it was a regular Peyton Place. Winninger and Trevino used to be together, but then he dumped her.”

“Why?” Clark asked.

“Because Winninger felt she was selling out,” Lois related. “Abandoning the ideals they all believed in. Then, she took up with Finn. They eventually split, but stayed in contact.”

“I can top that,” Clark said with a grin. “Dr. Hubert, the man no one can find. Henderson finally admitted the police had him in protective custody. With Finn behind bars, he’s willing to talk to us tomorrow.”

“That’s great but, we still don’t know the connection between increased male potency, the rain forest, and Barbara Trevino,” Lois reminded them. “The police questioned her and she’s got an airtight alibi, of course. She was getting in her limo. She claims she has no knowledge of any attempt on my life. It would be real nice if I could talk to her myself.”

“Yeah, good luck on that one,” Jimmy said, going back to his computer. LNN had been running Lois’s question and Trevino’s non-answer on every newsbreak, making Lois look like a first class idiot. To say it was annoying was an understatement, even though LNN did follow the clip with the attempted murder story. Journalists were supposed to report the news, not be the news. Hopefully the bruhaha would die down in a few days.

It had been a long day. Lois still ached from Clark pushing her to the ground the night before. He was willing to take a bullet for me. She glanced over to where he sat at his desk. She knew he had finished his own work some time ago and was now tracking down leads from what Perry had dubbed the ‘Superman disk’.

Jimmy had finally gone home as had Perry and much of the rest of the staff. Luthor had called twice, first to offer to take her to dinner then an offer of lunch the next day, but Lois had put him off.

Clark finished his work and stepped over to Lois’s desk.

“Ready to call it a day?” Clark asked.

“Not quite. I’ve got a little more work,” Lois said.

“I’ll wait.”

“Clark, there’s no need,” Lois said. “Finn’s in jail. I’ll be fine.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes! And don’t be hanging around outside waiting for me,” Lois warned him. “I don’t plan to see you till tomorrow.”

“Okay, goodnight,” Clark said, but Lois knew he wasn’t happy leaving her alone. He could be so sweet, sometimes.

“Goodnight.”

Clark left, leaving Lois alone in the bullpen. She went back to her computer to finish her article. After a few moments her phone rang and she picked it up.

“Lois Lane.”

“Hi, Lois. Barbara Trevino here,” a woman’s voice said over the phone.

“I missed you the other day after the press conference,” Lois said, wondering what Trevino wanted. Lois didn’t for a minute believe that Trevino didn’t know that Finn had tried to kill her.

“No, I believe it was I who missed you,” Trevino said.

“Would you like to tell me what this is all about?” Lois

asked.

“I think I’ll tell you when I see you,” Trevino said. “And that should be soon. Very soon.”

The phone went dead. Lois wasn’t sure what Trevino meant, but she was sure it wasn’t good. Finn was in jail, but Lois had the feeling her life was still in danger. And Clark wasn’t around.

She made her way to Clark’s apartment. She didn’t want to seem needy, especially after a week like this one, but Clark’s place felt safer than her own apartment.

The lights were on in his apartment. She knocked on the door and he opened it. He was dressed in shorts and a t-shirt, obviously relaxing, maybe even getting ready for bed. The bandage on his arm was stark against his olive skin and she was reminded again how he had saved her life. Just like Superman.

“Hi, Clark,” she said.

“This is a surprise,” he said, moving aside to let her in. He closed the door behind her, but not before checking to see what was outside. He led the way down the steps to the living room, crossing to the kitchen. Lois saw a blender filled with something pink and frothy on the counter and watched as Clark poured the contents into a glass. “How ‘bout a smoothie?” he asked. “It’ll only take a second.”

“I’m not thirsty,” Lois said. She was trying not to show how upset and scared she was, but she knew she wasn’t doing a very good job of it. Clark noticed.

“Lois, what’s wrong?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way…” she began.

“What?”

“I guess I’d just feel better if I could…” She looked over at the sofa.

“Stay here tonight?” Clark said, guessing her meaning.

She nodded and he pulled her into a hug. His heartbeat was slow and even and comforting and her head fit perfectly in the hollow of his shoulder.

“I live by three rules,” she had told Clark soon after they’d met. “Never get involved in your stories, never let anyone else get there first, and never sleep with anyone you work with.” Granted, she later confessed to him she had, at one time or another, broken each of those self-imposed rules. And now it looked like she might just be breaking them again. The story had gotten her involved. And it felt very warm and safe in Clark’s arms right now.

She knew he had feelings for her — a simple friend or co-worker wouldn’t have shielded her body with his own as he had. But she was afraid of what would happen if she raised her head and kissed him. They had a comfortable relationship at the moment. They were friends — best friends. And she could destroy that in a moment if she had misread his feelings. Especially when she wasn’t really sure of hers.

She had thought that Superman was the love of her life. But Superman was dead and gone. Clark was alive and here.

“Want to watch a movie?” Clark asked.

“What did you have in mind?”

“I think HBO is running Princess Bride.”

“With the R.U.S.es?”

“Rodents of Unusual Size? Yeah.”

“The hero saves the day?”

“Naturally.”

“Smoothies and popcorn?”

“Of course.”

Everything looks better in the morning, especially when there’s fresh coffee brewing and croissants with strawberry jam — although Lois noticed that the croissants weren’t quite as good as the ones Clark used to get. Again she wondered where the little restaurants were that he bought take-away for them. He had

always refused to tell her although she had, occasionally, harbored the suspicion that some of those shops where in places only Superman could get to.

Superman is dead. . . She had taken his letter home and put it in her scrapbook — the one she had been putting together about Superman. But she also remembered that Murray had told her that Superman had written two letters — one to her and one to someone else. She knew it wasn’t to Clark. He would have shared it with her, just as she had shared her letter with him. But if Clark was as close to Superman as she thought he’d been, why hadn’t Superman left him a letter?

Clark was in the shower when she spotted the torn envelope in the recycling bin. It was the same Superman Foundation stationary envelope that her own letter had come in. There was no letter inside — she hadn’t expected to find one — but the envelope was addressed, not to Clark Kent, but to Jonathan and Martha Kent. Superman hadn’t left a letter for Clark, but had written one to his parents?

“Clark?” she asked when he came out of the bathroom fully dressed. She held up the torn envelope.

“Oh, yeah. In all the confusion, I forgot to tell you about that,” he muttered. He seemed a little embarrassed that she’d found it.

“Superman left a letter for your parents?”

He nodded. “And don’t ask me what it said, because they wouldn’t let me see it and they wouldn’t tell me what was in it. Mom just said that she’ll show it to me when I remember him.”

“And Doctor Friskin says that chances are you’ll remember when you need to?”

“Yeah, that’s about it,” he told her. “But there’re no guarantees that’ll ever happen. It’s so damned frustrating.”

“Clark. . . I just want you to know, I appreciate how hard this has been for you,” she said. “First you lose your memory, and Superman ends up dead, then you end up worrying about somebody trying to kill me.”

“I like worrying about you, Lois,” he said. “And with Superman gone. . . Well, somebody’s got to watch your back.”

They took a bus downtown. Clark explained it was difficult, if not impossible, for a car to follow a bus without being noticed — a city bus stopped nearly every other block and it would be nearly impossible to predict when a passenger was going to get on or off.

She accepted his word for it, choosing not to remind him that all bets would be off if a killer simply boarded the bus after them and opened fire.

They made it to the Daily Planet without incident, aside from a drunk making a pass at her.

“Now you know why I don’t ride busses,” Lois muttered to Clark. He chuckled.

“Your elitism is showing,” he told her as the bus stopped next to the Daily Planet building.

There were noticeably more people in uniforms in the lobby, including MPD uniforms. They both had to show their identification before being allowed on the elevator to get to the newsroom.

Lois noticed Clark eying everyone they passed, glowering if they got too close.

“Clark, drop the Kevin-Costner-protecting-Whitney-Houston bit,” she told him as the elevator doors opened on their floor. “We’re inside the Planet. I think we’re safe here.”

Perry spotted them coming down the steps to the bullpen floor. “I’ve put on extra security in the lobby. Nobody gets in or out without proper I.D.,” he announced.

Lois gave Clark an ‘I told you so’ look and a shrug.

“Excuse me for caring,” he muttered.

Lois relented, squeezing his hand. “I love it that you care.”

She felt Clark relax a little. He had been taking his self-imposed assignment so seriously. She didn't really mind Clark's actions. It was comforting, actually, but she wasn't about to let him know that.

"Hubert's waiting for you at Winninger's office," Jimmy told them.

"Won't he meet us here?" Clark asked.

Jimmy shook his head. "Uh uh. He's afraid to come out, with what happened to Winninger and all."

It made sense. Hubert didn't believe Finn was the only threat out there any more than she did.

"I assume you're with me," Lois asked Clark.

"I assumed I would go alone."

"It's still my story," she reminded him.

He stared at her a long moment. "You are really high maintenance, you know that?" he said, a bemused smile flickering around his mouth.

"But I'm worth it."

Hubert was waiting inside Winninger's office. He checked their identification before letting them in — of course, if they had been assassins, he would have already been dead. Lois was a little surprised to see how good Finn's make-up had been — he could have been Hubert's identical twin.

"I'm so glad you were able to come," Hubert told them. "I know you're the ones looking into Vincent's murder."

"We're just trying to figure out why anyone would have wanted him dead," Clark explained.

"I think I know," Hubert told them. "During the time Vincent spent in the Amazon, one of the discoveries he made was a rare plant which, when correctly harvested and processed, increased male potency."

"So his prowess with the ladies wasn't all God-given?" Lois asked.

"Correct."

"Better sex through science," Clark observed with a shrug. "Why not?"

"He also discovered vast mineral deposits beneath areas of the rain forest that are currently protected by law," Hubert added.

"How does Barbara Trevino fit into all this?" Clark asked.

"Barbara knew of Vincent's discoveries and research, and tried to convince him they should be exploited for their commercial value. He turned her down cold," Hubert told them.

"Wait a minute!" Lois told them and started fishing around in her purse for the sheet of paper she knew had to be there. She finally found it and unfolded it.

"This is the background sheet on Trevino they handed out at the press conference," she explained, scanning the sheet. "Here we go... Barbara Trevino is, among other things, on the board of directors of Hobbs Mining." She looked at both men. "Extensive mining operations in protected areas of the rain forest would constitute an ecological disaster."

"Winninger knew that," Hubert said quietly. "The world saw him as a hedonist, but he was really a humanist. The plant he discovered was just one of the many potential treasures hidden deep in the rain forest, waiting to be discovered for the eventual good of all mankind. He devoted his life to preserving that resource."

Another late night at the Daily Planet. Lois, Clark, Cat Grant and Perry were the only ones left working in the newsroom. Perry had volunteered to use his own contacts to get through to Hobbs Mining.

"Anything?" Lois asked when he passed her desk on the way to the elevators. He paused and shook his head.

"No, they're being very closed mouthed. Ben Bradlee used to call it 'non-denial' denials," Perry told her. Perry looked as

discouraged as Lois felt. "You going to be all right?"

"Sure, I've got my protector over there." Lois nodded in Clark's direction just as he walked straight into the corner of a desk. She watched as he winced, rubbing his thigh. He was going to have a nasty bruise.

"Oh, brother," Perry muttered. "Well, you be careful."

He started toward the elevator again. "Good night," he said as he stepped inside the elevator.

Lois nodded and went back to her work. She wondered a little at Clark's clumsiness. He had won awards as a high school and college quarterback. Clumsy people didn't do that. After a few moments, she sensed someone standing by her desk. She looked up to see Cat Grant, dressed in her usual skin-tight, eye-wateringly garish sheath dress.

"Big story, huh," the other woman commented, leaning against Lois's desk.

Lois didn't answer.

"You must have been terrified."

"It was a little scary," Lois admitted.

Cat chuckled. "You want to talk scary? I covered the governor's wife's speech at the museum volunteers' luncheon today. Her dress... that was scary."

Lois gave her a polite smile, hoping Cat would get the hint, and went back to her work.

Cat didn't seem to get the hint. "You can tell me. You were scared, right?"

"Like I said, a little."

"A lot," Cat contradicted.

"Little."

"Lot..."

Lois looked up at her. "Why is it so important to you that I admit how scared I was?" she wondered aloud.

"It just makes you more human," Cat explained.

Lois gave her a blank look. She honestly had no idea what Cat was referring to. Lois was a good investigative reporter as well as crime beat reporter — one of the best in Metropolis. She had always been curious, stubborn with an overwhelming need to be right as well as needing to know the truth. All good reporters had those qualities. It simply never occurred to her that other people thought she was 'odd', or other than human.

"Okay, I write as well as you do. I'm more fun at parties. But you're the star here..." Cat said. "The chief's favorite. In on all the action. And when you get in trouble, look who's hanging around to come to the rescue..." she gestured vaguely in Clark's direction. "Not only a cute guy, but until he... you know... you had a god with a cape looking after you..."

Lois had never heard Cat talk like this. It almost sounded like she was jealous of Lois. "But..." Lois began to protest.

"Excuse me. You asked, I am answering," Cat said. "You've got something the rest of us don't have, Lois. So it would be nice if for once, just once, you could admit that you have bad days, problems, and fears just like the rest of us."

Cat straightened up and stalked off. Lois had to admit that it had never occurred to her that someone like Cat Grant might envy someone like her. She took a deep breath.

"Cat!" Lois called. The other woman paused and looked back at her. "I was scared... a lot," Lois admitted.

Cat gave her a long look, then nodded and walked away.

Clark walked up to Lois's desk. Lois knew he had finished his own work some time before and was simply waiting for her. "I guess it would be foolish to ask if you're ready to go," he said.

"I've just got..." Lois began.

"...a little more work to do," Clark completed for her. He sighed. "I want you to promise me you won't leave before I get back."

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"I've been trying to get hold of this old acquaintance of mine

ever since we talked to Doctor Hubert,” Clark told her. “He’s finally got time to talk to me, but I figure I’d better do it in person.”

“An old source?” Lois asked. She knew Clark had sources she didn’t know, just as she had sources she hadn’t shared with Clark.

“Something like that,” Clark said. “Do you promise you won’t leave?”

“You want it in blood?” she asked.

“Great,” Clark conceded. “But I also don’t want you here alone.”

Lois looked around. Except for a cleaning woman, there was no one left in the newsroom besides her, Clark, and Jimmy.

“I’ll stick around,” Jimmy volunteered. “I don’t mind. Really.”

“Okay,” Clark agreed. He started to go, but turned back to look at Lois.

“What?” Lois demanded.

“I’ll be back to pick you up in a little while,” Clark told her. Then he was gone and room felt cold.

Jimmy settled back at his own desk. Lois wasn’t sure what he was doing. Doing research for Clark, probably. She picked up her coffee cup and realized it was empty.

“How about a cup of coffee?” she asked loudly enough for Jimmy to hear.

“Sure, I’d love one,” Jimmy said. Then it occurred to him what she meant. “Oh. I’ll be right back.” He disappeared around the corner of the coffee area.

Lois went back to checking her notes, checking off the items she’d covered in her article. Then the point broke off her pencil. She checked her desk for a pencil sharpener or another pencil but didn’t find either. With a sigh of resignation, Lois headed for the storage room for a pencil sharpener and a box of pencils. She saw the cleaning woman dumping the desk trashcans into the large can on her service cart. The woman didn’t seem to be paying any attention to her as she crossed the floor.

Lois found an open case of pencils and grabbed one package. Then she started to look for a sharpener. Someone had ‘straightened up’ the storage room a few weeks before and Lois was still getting used to the new organization. Then she heard the door open and close. She turned to see the cleaning woman standing in front of the door.

“Oh, you scared me,” Lois said. “Are you looking for something?”

The cleaning woman locked the door.

“I found it,” the cleaning woman said — she sounded exactly like Barbara Trevino. And she had a gun in her hand. “Now, tell me where that notebook is.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Lois said, her heart in her throat.

“I knew Winner was about to expose my true motivation in wanting to be appointed chairperson of the Rain Forest Consortium,” the cleaning woman said. As she spoke, she removed her gray wig and peeled off layers of prosthetic make-up. Trevino.

“From there it would have been easy to grant Hobbs the exclusive strip mining licenses they needed to exploit the area,” Trevino said. “So, I called on our old friend Finn to eliminate him. But, Finn left a loose end.”

“Me.”

“And the notebook. Where is it?”

“There’s nothing in the notebook except Winner’s processing formula for the male potency plant,” Lois told her.

Trevino shrugged. “Then I guess I went to a lot of trouble for nothing. But, with the strip mining proceeding as we speak and you eliminated...”

“Eliminated?” Lois repeated. That sounded so not good.

Clark, where are you?

“I guess that’s the way it goes sometimes,” Trevino said. She seemed utterly nonchalant about committing cold blooded murder. She tightened her finger on the trigger, but there was a sound outside the door. When Trevino turned to look, Lois lashed out. There wasn’t enough clear space in the storage room for a kick, but Lois managed to grab Trevino’s gun hand, forcing the muzzle up. The gun went off, showering them with plaster. Then Lois banged Trevino’s wrist against one of the filing cabinets, keeping the gun pointed away from her.

“Help!” Lois screamed. The distraction gave Trevino an opening and she took it, pushing her free hand against Lois’s neck, forcing her head back. Then, the door opened and an arm snaked around Trevino’s neck, pulling her back from Lois. Lois managed to give Trevino’s gun hand one last crack against the file cabinet and the gun dropped to the floor.

Lois looked up to see Jimmy with his arm around Trevino’s neck. Jimmy began to back out of the storage room, still holding onto Trevino, but the older woman dropped almost to her knees, throwing Jimmy off balance. The woman started to run. Jimmy grabbed at her, but he wasn’t quite fast enough.

“Grab her!” Lois yelled, following Jimmy out the door after Trevino.

Lois stopped short at the sight just outside the door — Clark had Trevino face down on the floor, one knee in the middle of her back.

“Are you all right?” he asked, looking up at Lois.

She nodded. “I am, but the rain forest isn’t.”

“The rain forest is okay too,” Clark said. “The local area tribes weren’t well pleased to find that the Rain Forest Consortium had sold them out and had authorized strip mining in their highly sensitive and protected tribal lands. All mining operations have been suspended pending a full international investigation.”

“How do you know that?” Lois asked.

Clark grinned. “Vincent Winner wasn’t the only American to spend time in the rain forest. And the deputy-consul happens to be an old friend of mine.”

The police arrived and placed Trevino under arrest. It was finally over. The conspirators were in jail and Lane and Kent had the exclusive.

“So, the deputy-consul of Amazonia happens to be an old friend of yours?”

Clark grinned. “He got through to the locals, let them know what we suspected. Apparently it got a little nasty for a bit, but everything’s under control now.”

“And you couldn’t tell me this before you left?” Lois demanded.

“Considering what was at risk, Paolo didn’t want to tell me how it was going down until it was all handled, even though I was the one who warned him there was a problem,” Clark told her. “By the way, he gave me the names of the board of directors of Hobbs Mining. Guess who else is on the list?”

Lois didn’t have to guess. “Luthor.”

It made a bizarre sort of sense. What Luthor didn’t own outright, he was on the boards of directors. She also knew that Luthor was too smart not to know what Trevino had been up to and too slick to get caught — this time.

Lois grabbed Clark’s arm and smiled at him. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“I thought you might take me home,” she said, giving him a cheeky grin.

“I thought you didn’t need a bodyguard?”

“Who said anything about a bodyguard?” she asked, grabbing her coat.

The next several weeks had fallen into an oddly comfortable pattern — Clark saw Friskin on Mondays and Thursdays after work, then he and Lois would go to burgers or pizza afterwards. Crime was up a little in Metropolis without Superman's restraining presence, but the police were taking it stride. One oddity, Clark was no longer disappearing at odd times with bizarre excuses. Lois hadn't asked him about the change — she was afraid his earlier disappearances had been related to Superman. And Clark's memories of Superman were still missing.

Lois looked around the conference room. Gil, Polly, Ralph, others of the newsroom staff were waiting for Perry to get off the phone. Cat Grant hadn't arrived yet, but she rarely showed up on time for the morning conference. Cat was a 'night person'.

Lois could see Jimmy waiting at the newswire station outside, waiting for a story to come off the wire. He was grinning as he ripped it off and hurried into the conference room just before Perry walked in to begin the morning's briefing.

"Chief! I got a good one." Jimmy began, waving the sheet in the air.

"Now son, I told you you'd get an assignment when the time was right," Perry told him.

Jimmy didn't seem to hear him. "The Queen of England, in the middle of a state dinner, walks out into the garden and starts dancing in a fountain with one of her Beefeaters. My angle: 'A Royal Cry for Help'."

"Come on, Olsen. This is a newspaper, not a check-out rag," Perry told him. "The Queen's peccadilloes after a few too many port sheries is not my idea of a 'good one'." Perry turned to the others in the room. "Now, how're the real stories coming?"

Lois sighed as Perry looked directly at her and Clark. "Still no leads on those kidnappings. Seven wealthy children were taken in the last three months. All of them were returned safely after huge ransoms were paid in either cash or rare art objects, but none of the kids remember anything about what happened to them. It's all very weird."

"So we're looking at the kidnappers using drugs or some other kind of mind-wiping technique. We've tried to interview the parents," Clark added. "But we're talking very high profile here. CEOs, rock stars, politicians. No one wants the publicity because their kids are involved."

"I can understand that," Perry commiserated. "But we need a good story. How many more times can we say there's no new information?"

Everyone looked up as Cat finally hurried in. Cat hurrying into a conference was unusual in itself. Cat wearing a very conservative navy blue suit buttoned all the way to her chin with her auburn hair pulled into a stylish bun was astonishing, if not earth-shattering.

"Sorry I'm late," Cat murmured as she slid into a seat.

"Yeah. Halloween was a few months ago," Lois commented sourly. A few of her co-workers chuckled. Everyone knew that there was little love lost between the two women.

"Did someone... pass on?" Perry asked gently.

"Can't a girl get dressed up without sending out a press release?" Cat asked.

"I think you look very nice," Clark said.

"Thank you, Clark," Cat replied, giving him a smile.

"Kinda like a librarian fantasy I had once..." Jimmy added.

Lois wasn't buying it. "Okay. Who is he? You never do anything this drastic unless there's a man involved."

Cat grinned at her. The cat that caught the canary had nothing on Catherine Grant. "As a matter of fact, I happen to be having lunch with Arthur Chow this afternoon."

"Whoa. He's even richer than Lex Luthor, isn't he?" Jimmy asked. He sounded impressed.

"Second richest man in the world," Cat confirmed. "We're on

the same charity committee together and we're going over some last minute details for tomorrow night's 'Magic of the Night' ball which I hope you're all planning to attend."

"Arthur Chow. Isn't he a little... conservative for you?" Clark asked.

"He and I have a lot in common," Cat told him.

"You mean those little green pieces of paper with dead presidents on them?" Lois asked.

"Exactly," Cat confirmed with a laugh.

Perry's eyebrows reached for his hairline. "Now wait a second. You're going to bamboozle this guy into thinking you're a straight arrow?"

"That's my plan."

Perry grinned, shaking his head. "Heaven help him. Now, who's up next? Biederman, how about that piece you were doing on Attention Deficit Disorder? Sounds like a real nineties disease. Biederman? You listening?"

Biederman shook himself out of his apparent trance, giving Perry a sheepish grin as he began to tell Perry about what he was working on. Lois tuned him out, instead watching Clark as he quietly made his way out of the conference room. A woman Lois didn't recognize was sitting at his desk. She was wearing a sweater and a gray uniform-like dress. Curious, Lois followed him out.

"Can I help you?" Clark asked.

The woman looked up at him. It was obvious she'd been crying. "Clark Kent?"

"Yes."

"My name is Rose Collins. I need you to write a story," the woman said. Clark offered her a tissue from the box on Lois's desk.

"Is there something wrong?" Clark asked, sitting on the corner of the desk.

"It's Nicky, my little boy," Rose said. She looked like she was ready to start crying again. "Someone's made a terrible mistake."

"What kind of mistake?" Lois asked.

"This is Lois Lane," Clark said, apparently just noticing her presence. "My partner."

"You've both been writing about the kidnappings, haven't you?" Rose asked.

"Well, I've really done most..." Lois began. Then she noticed Clark's look in her direction. "Yes, we have," she amended.

"Has your son been kidnapped, Mrs. Collins?" Clark asked gently.

Rose nodded and tears started flowing again.

"Shouldn't you be talking to the police?" Clark continued.

"I'm not supposed to tell them or Nicky will be..."

"It's okay, it's okay." Clark's voice was low and soothing.

Lois had noticed that when he was around people in trouble Clark seemed to be able to exude a calm sympathy that helped the other person to relax and trust him. It was a trick Lois had never quite mastered.

"How can we help you?" Lois asked.

"I work for Mr. and Mrs. Mark Moskal," Rose explained.

"Mark Moskal the developer?" Lois clarified. Rose nodded.

Lois looked at Clark and explained. "He's practically built every other building in Metropolis."

"I take care of their house," Rose went on. "Nicky and I live on the estate. He and their son Chris are both six and they always play together and..."

"And the kidnapper took the wrong kid," Clark completed for her.

"The note asks for five million dollars by tomorrow night.

The Moskals are en route from their safari but... all that money... how can I ask them? Could you write something? Tell the kidnapper he's made a mistake. Please. Help me."

Lois and Clark just looked at each other. Lois knew that the chances of the kidnapper simply letting the boy go free without the ransom was slim to none. Publically admitting the kidnapper had grabbed the wrong victim would put both boys at risk.

Lois drove Rose back to the Moskal's estate west of the borough of Park Ridge. The house was something straight out of a Hollywood movie about the rich and famous — a large brick mansion set amidst manicured lawns and gardens.

"So... this is the other half that I've heard so much about," Lois commented as she and Clark walked through the grounds in back of the house. Tennis courts, flower gardens, even a 'wilderness area'. Lois spotted a small bronze statue of a horse and rider sitting on a pedestal on one of the many stone patios. "I'll bet this could pay my rent for a few months."

"More like a small home in the suburbs," Clark commented. "It's a Remington bronze."

Lois put the statue back on its stand and backed away. If it was that valuable, she probably set alarms off halfway around the world. She looked around for the security patrol that was no doubt on its way.

Rose came out of the house, holding a piece of paper. A young boy was staying close to her. Clark crouched down to look him in the eye.

"Hey, you must be Chris," Clark said. Again Lois marveled at Clark's ability to set people at ease. The boy was obviously scared, but he nodded to Clark.

"It's okay," Rose assured the boy. "They're going to help us find Nicky."

"My daddy is coming home and he'll take care of it," Chris stated firmly.

"I know he will," Clark told him. "But until he comes back we're going to see what we can do."

Rose handed the note to Lois who began to read it aloud: "I have the boy. If you want to see him alive again, bring five million dollars to Hobs River Carnival at midnight tomorrow. Come alone. No authorities or the boy will be..." She stopped and handed the note to Clark who finished reading it for himself. "...or the boy will be killed." The paper was standard cheap copy paper, impossible to trace. The note had been printed on a computer printer as well and there were thousands of those in the city. Fingerprints would have been the only remaining clue, only the paper had been handled so much it was unlikely the kidnapper's prints would be readable.

Lois stepped over to Chris and crouched down as Clark had done earlier "You were with Nick when this happened." The boy nodded. "Tell us what you saw."

"A magic box, with a moon and stars."

Puzzled, Lois looked up at Rose who smiled nervously. "He has a pretty active imagination."

"What did it look like?" Lois asked Chris.

"Shiny. Nick got in then he disappeared. That's all," Chris told her.

Clark beckoned Lois over to him. "He might be blocking out something traumatic," he suggested, but his expression indicated he wasn't entirely convinced of his own explanation. Lois wasn't sure either. She'd been talking to people in shock for years, certainly longer than Clark had, and although Chris was scared and worried, he didn't seem to be in shock.

"What's going on here?" a man's voice demanded. Lois turned to see a tall forty-something man walking out of the house accompanied by a well-dressed woman of about the same age. Mr. and Mrs. Mark Moskal. Both looked tired and worried and not at all happy to see strangers on their property.

"Christopher!" the woman called and Chris ran into her arms. The father joined them, giving his son a quick hug before returning to the matter at hand.

"Rose, are you all right? Mary Frances and I were so worried," Moskal asked his employee. His wife came over and gave the woman a hug. Moskal eyed the intruders.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"We're from the Daily Planet. Rose asked us..." Clark began.

"The note said no authorities," Moskal interrupted.

"We haven't told the police," Lois told them.

"Although I think we should. They can only help and..."

Clark began again.

"No, absolutely not," Moskal interrupted again.

"Please, you promised," Rose reminded Lois and Clark.

"I intend to pay the ransom in full and get the boy back and if the two of you do anything to jeopardize the safety of..." Moskal threatened.

"Believe me, Mr. Moskal, we want to see Nick back safe and sound," Lois stated.

"But we also want to make sure this doesn't keep happening to children all over Metropolis," Clark added.

"That's not my problem right now," Moskal spat out. Lois saw Clark's expression darken and she was sure he was going to argue. She laid a hand on Clark's sleeve and he stepped back.

"I think we could use some time alone right now," Mrs. Moskal suggested. "We'll take care of Rose and Nick, but thank you for your concern."

Lois looked to Rose. The other woman seemed resigned to whatever her employers decided, whether it was reasonable or not. There was nothing left for her or Clark to do but leave and hope for the best — but in cases of kidnapping, the best procedure was to let the police handle it. It was something they were trained to do and their success rate was very good. Trusting someone who had no remorse over abducting an innocent child and extorting money to keep to their word was stupid at best and criminally negligent at worst.

But telling the Moskals that wasn't going to help — Moskal was obviously one of those men who felt he could handle anything due to his influence and wealth. The fact that paying the ransom was no guarantee of Nick's safety was something he was refusing to consider. Lois just hoped Rose and Nick wouldn't be the ones to pay if Moskal was wrong.

Lois was getting more and more frustrated as she wrapped up her calls. "Yes. I understand. Thank you," she told the person on the other end of the line.

Clark looked over at her from his own desk. He looked as frustrated as she felt.

"Anything?" Lois asked.

"Stymied."

"I hate that word and I hate that feeling," Lois stated.

"The police won't discuss any of the other kidnappings and the other victim's parents want to help but won't go on the record," Clark told her. "And of course, the kids don't remember anything. But two of the parents confirmed that their family doctors thought drugs may have been involved in blocking the kids' memories."

"It's like knowing there's an answer behind a door but not being able to unlock it," Lois said with a sigh. She hated the feeling of not being able to find the answers.

"Being out of the loop?" Clark suggested.

"Drives me crazy," she admitted. She hated being on the outside looking in. She hated not knowing what was going on.

"I think this calls for a little magic," Clark told her with a smile. He held up the blue and gold invitation for Cat's party.

"I am not going to Cat's party," Lois insisted.

"It's for charity," he reminded. "Besides, it could be our only lead."

"We don't have a lead," Lois groused.

"Sure we do. Don't you remember what Chris Moskal said?"

He saw a magic box. Maybe a magician's involved."

"That's not a lead," Lois protested. "According to you, Chris was suppressing a traumatic event. That makes it a desperate cry for help, not a lead."

"Don't you want to help Rose?" he challenged.

"Yes, of course, but..."

"But, what?"

Lois glared at him, but she knew he was right. The only lead they had was a little kid's description of a shiny box with a moon and stars painted on it. She resigned herself to an evening of sheer torture.

Clark had picked her up in a taxi to take her to the charity ball. She had to admit, he looked good in a tux, even if it was a rental. She made a mental note to remind him it would probably be cheaper in the long run if he just went ahead and bought himself a tuxedo.

For herself, she had chosen her burgundy dress. If she was going to have to endure a night of misery, she at least was going to look good. All the city's elite were going to be there. Possibly even Luthor.

The taxi pulled up in front of the Metropolis Magic Club and a parking attendant opened the door for them. The Magic Club was a private, almost secret, club that catered to professional and semi-professional stage magicians and illusionists. It was open to the public only for evening performances and the occasional fete like this one. The banner over the wide oak doors read: 'The Magic of the Night Ball'.

"I hate magic, that's all," Lois stated. Clark had been pestering her on the ride over to tell him why she hadn't wanted to attend the charity event.

"How can you hate magic?" Clark asked. He seemed bemused by her lack of enthusiasm about it. One of the evening's entertainers, a mime in white-face, came up to them and ran through several magic tricks, finally ending his act with a live dove which flapped its wings in Lois's face as it tried to escape. Lois glared at her partner.

"This is beyond the call of duty," she intoned putting as much menace behind her words as she could. Clark simply shrugged.

Cat had been acting as a greeter, standing beside the entrance door in a conservatively cut black evening gown. "Abracadabra," she said cheerily when she spotted Lois and Clark.

"Well, you're a regular girl next door," Lois commented.

"Arthur's going to introduce me to his mother," Cat told them. She was practically bouncing with glee. "Perry and Jimmy are already inside. Enjoy."

With that, Cat disappeared inside the building. Clark offered Lois his arm and she took it.

"You ready?" he asked.

"Do I have a choice?" she wondered aloud. She knew he knew the answer. He gave her a commiserating look as they entered the club. His sympathy made her feel a little better. But not much. Clark just didn't seem to understand.

They walked into the main ballroom which also doubled as the auditorium. Lois looked around the room at the other guests. She saw the mayor, several city councilmember, prominent business people. She didn't spot Perry or Jimmy, but there were other rooms with acts going on — a hypnotist, a seance complete with 'ghosts', a card trick master.

Lois and Clark chose to stay in the back of the main room to watch the action on the stage. A handsome man was on the stage, bantering with the people closest to him. He seemed to have his audience in the palm of his hand.

"Look, it's Darren Romick, the greatest illusionist alive," Clark told her.

"Now, how did you know that?" Lois demanded.

He shrugged and pointed to the program in his hand. "It says

so right here."

"Well, I'm not buying it. Illusion, Clark, as in trick... as in phony."

"Lois, he made the Eiffel Tower disappear on live television. That does require some kind of talent."

"Big deal," Lois told him. "Wires, mirrors, trap doors, audience collusion. They all have their little secrets."

"Oh. Now I get it," Clark said with a chuckle.

"Get what?"

"Why you don't like magic. Or masquerades."

"Oh, do tell," she challenged.

"It drives you crazy not to be in on the secret," Clark said. "You always have to know everything about everything."

"That's not true, I love to be surprised," she told him. "As long as I know about it in advance."

"Classic control freak behavior," Clark told her.

"Well, thank you Dr. Freud. If that's all that four weeks with Doctor Friskin has got you, you're wasting the Planet's money."

"She's a Jungian, not a Freudian," Clark corrected. He grinned more broadly at her. "Full disclosure, no stone left unturned. That's what makes you a good reporter, I guess."

"You guess?"

"Life doesn't always have to go according to plan, Lois," he said. "That would be boring."

"Are you saying my life is boring?"

"I'm saying it could use a little mystery every once in a while, that's all."

"And what about you?" Lois asked. "Aren't you upset when people keep secrets from you?"

"I think it depends on why they feel they need to keep those secrets," Clark answered. "But uh, yeah, I get a little peeved when I don't get answers. But it's still nice to have a few mysteries, isn't it?"

"If you say so," Lois replied.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen," Romick was saying from the stage. "And now, for my final illusion I shall be calling, once again, on assistance from the lovely Constance."

A young blonde woman wearing traditional magician's assistant sequined garb came on stage. She smiled at the audience.

Romick went through his patter, taking objects from the audience, including a full-length mink coat. Constance brought out several animals from back stage, including an orangutan and a cow.

"What do you know..." Romick announced, feigning surprise. "Telepathy folks. Now, clearly I have no control over these items. There has been no prearrangement and surely no trap door can possibly accommodate all of them at once, so what I'm about to do is... truly impossible. Unless, of course, you believe in magic."

A giant shiny blue box with a moon and stars on it floated down from the ceiling. Romick guided it over the objects on the stage. "All it takes is a little imagination," he continued.

As Lois watched, Romick and Constance spun the box around on the stage.

"Clark, look at that box," Lois whispered. "Isn't that what Chris Moskalev described to us?"

"Sure looks like it," Clark agreed.

From the stage: "Now you're thinking, he's using this time to get them out." Romick opened one side of the box to show the orangutan still inside. "If he were really good, they'd be gone in an instant!"

Suddenly, there was a flash of bright light and a cloud of smoke. Romick grabbed the top of the box and sent it flying back to reveal that the animals and the objects from the audience had vanished. The audience oohed and aaahed and broke into applause.

“And that, my friends, is the mystery of the magic box,” Romick said. He took his bows as the audience went wild.

“Well, you were right about one thing,” Lois said to Clark, keeping her voice low.

“What’s that?”

“We’ve got a lead.”

“A lead on what?” a familiar voice asked. Lois turned to see Inspector Henderson standing beside her. He gave her an amused smile.

“A lead on a story we’re working on,” Lois told him airily hoping he would simply leave. Henderson was the last person she expected to see at a charity ball. And the last person she wanted to see.

Henderson leaned close to her ear. “It wouldn’t have anything to do with the Moskals kidnapping, would it?”

“How...?”

“We need to talk...”

He led them to an office toward the rear of the club where a tall woman was waiting. She was in her mid-forties, auburn hair, green eyes, wearing a dark green bespoke suit. In fact, there was more than a passing resemblance to Cat Grant, except where Cat exuded sensuality, this woman exuded a calm confidence.

Henderson closed the door behind them and locked it. “Lois Lane, Clark Kent... Kate Komack. She occasionally helps us out with ‘special’ problems. Like this one.”

“Who told you about the Moskals?” Clark asked. “The ransom note told them not to bring in the authorities. Heck, they refused to talk to us...”

“Even though it was their housekeeper who let you know what had happened?” Henderson completed for him. The older man shrugged. “Large cash transactions have to be reported. It’s usually an indication that something less than kosher is going down. Moskals always been a pretty straight arrow, so him pulling out a lot of cash sent up alarms. His little boy’s gone missing, hasn’t he?”

“Actually, it’s the housekeeper’s son who was taken,” Clark told him. “Nick, Nick Collins. He’s the same age as Chris Moskals.”

Henderson nodded slowly and gave the woman a meaningful look. She stepped forward.

“You were able to get something from the Moskals boy?” Komack asked.

Clark answered, despite the warning look Lois gave him. “There was a magician’s box, blue with a moon and stars on it. Nick climbed in, Chris closed the lid. Then Nick was gone, vanished.”

“Chris got scared, ran for help and by the time he got back, the box was gone too?” Komack asked. Lois suspected she knew that was exactly what had happened.

Clark nodded.

“So, when and where is the ransom supposed to be paid?” Henderson asked.

Lois jumped in to answer before Clark could. “We promised we wouldn’t go to the authorities.”

Henderson chuckled. “Lois, what’s the statute of limitations on breaking and entering?”

Lois felt her face grow hot. She folded her arms across her chest and glared at the older man. “You wouldn’t...”

“Interfering with an active police investigation? Try me.”

“We get the exclusive when it breaks?” Lois bargained. She wasn’t about to give up her investigation, or her lead, just because she was being threatened by the police.

Both Komack and Henderson seemed inordinately amused by her question.

“I don’t think there will be a problem, do you?” Henderson asked, looking to his companion. The woman shook her head, smiling.

“It’s five million dollars to be delivered to the Hobs River Carnival at midnight tomorrow,” Clark answered. “The note instructed Moskals to come alone and not to notify the authorities or else the boy would be... you know...”

“Did the boy mention any writing on the box, or a note with it?” Komack asked.

“No, but we might be able to get in and talk to him tomorrow, assuming the Moskals have calmed down a little,” Lois told them.

“And you’re sure the note said ‘the boy’ rather than ‘your son’?” Henderson asked.

Clark seemed to be staring off into space. “I have the boy. If you want to see him alive again, bring five million dollars to Hobs River Carnival at midnight tomorrow. Come alone. No authorities or the boy will be killed,” he quoted.

Henderson and Komack exchanged another look. “The note’s different,” Komack said. “In the others the kidnapper specifically stated they had the son or daughter, even mentioned the child by name.”

“But not this time?” Lois asked.

“So, what does it mean?” Clark asked. “The kidnapper knew there were two boys at the Moskals and didn’t care which one he grabbed?”

“Maybe,” Henderson said slowly. “Or maybe the kidnapper knew exactly which one he or she was after, but didn’t want Moskals to know.” He turned to Lois. “You have my private number if you find out anything else, right?”

“Of course,” Lois said. “But what’s this all...”

“Call me if you find out anything,” Henderson ordered, unlocking the door and opening it. He ushered both reporters through and shut the door behind them.

“If he thinks...” Lois began to sputter.

“Lo-is,” Clark said. There was something in his voice that made her stop. “This is neither the time nor the place to discuss this,” he added, nodding to indicate their surroundings.

She glowered at him and led the way out into the main room. If she and Clark were right and someone in the Magic Club was involved in the kidnappings, the culprit might already know the police were involved. Nick Collins might already be marked for death.

“What I wouldn’t give for Superman to be alive to help right now...” she murmured.

“Tell me about it.”

Lois and Clark headed out early to catch Moskals before he went into the city to his office. Hopefully Chris would be there as well.

Moskals was not pleased to see them on his front porch. He did not invite them into the house, making it clear that the only reason he was speaking to them was to avoid a scene.

“I’ve sent him away for safekeeping,” Moskals told them when they asked to speak to Chris. “If the kidnapper finds out he’s made a mistake I don’t want Christopher in danger.”

“We can understand that, Mr. Moskals,” Lois assured him. “But we need to know more about that box he saw. It’s very important to the investigation.”

Moskals glared at them “I thought I made myself clear. There is to be no investigation either by the police or the Daily Planet.”

“The police already know there’s been an eighth kidnapping,” Clark said. “The moment you started to raise the cash, they were involved. Now, you can choose not to help them get Nick back, but you can’t stop them from doing their job.”

“Good day, Mister Kent, Ms. Lane,” Moskals said. He started to close the door when Rose walked up to him.

“Phone, Mr. Moskals,” she said quietly.

Moskals turned from the door. “Thank you,” he told her. “Please show them out.”

He left her standing at the door as he disappeared inside the house. She waited until he was out of earshot.

"He's meeting the kidnapper with the money tonight," she told them. "Everything's going to be okay."

"I hope so," Lois said. "But, Rose, we have to ask this. Is there any reason at all to think the kidnapper might have wanted to grab Nick instead of Chris?"

Rose paled visibly. "No," she stammered. "It was a mistake. It was a horrible mistake that's all. They grabbed the wrong one. Mister Moskalski's going to pay the ransom and everything's going to be okay."

"Of course it will," Clark assured her. "Nick'll be home in no time."

"She's scared out of her mind," Clark told Lois as soon as they were back in Lois's jeep, heading for the Daily Planet.

"But why would anyone kidnap a housekeeper's kid?" Lois asked. "If she wasn't working for Moskalski, she wouldn't have been able to raise the ransom."

"Maybe we need to look at Rose Collins," Clark suggested.

Part 12

When Lois and Clark got back to the newsroom Cat was there, still dressed as a school marm — a high collared jacket and matching pencil skirt in navy blue. Her make-up was subtle and she looked the picture of a conservative, yet fashion conscious business woman. Lois hated her. No matter what she wore, Cat exuded 'elegant'. The best Lois could hope for was 'pretty'. She wouldn't dare try to pull off the look Cat was managing. Lois knew she'd end up landing on her face if she even tried to wear a pencil skirt — it didn't give enough room to run.

The newswire printer was spitting out paper, which was collecting in a basket on the floor. Jimmy was reading a story off the printer with Cat peering over his shoulder.

"Herbert Ralston, owner of the four-star Fitz-Ralston Hotel chain has announced he will convert all his facilities into shelters for the homeless," Jimmy read aloud. "Something weird is going on. All these famous people doing crazy things."

"Sounds like good gossip to me," Cat said, tearing off the section she needed. She headed for her own desk, Jimmy trailing behind her like a puppy.

"Another date with Chow?" Jimmy asked. "This is getting pretty serious."

"Seriously stifling," Cat grouched. She shrugged out of her jacket and slipped out of her skirt to reveal one of her slinky, brightly colored sheaths.

"What happened to the new you?" Lois asked.

"The old me wanted out for awhile," Cat explained. "I don't know how you regular girls do it. Those clothes are like straitjackets. How can you even breathe?"

Lois just looked at the other woman for a long moment. The 'dress' Cat was wearing was so tight that Lois doubted she could take a deep breath. On a lark, Lois gazed at a point behind Cat for just a moment. "What's Arthur Chow doing here?"

Cat dropped to her hands and knees behind Lois's desk, her face a mask of wide-eyed horror. "Where? Did he see me?"

Lois laughed. "That was almost too easy."

Cat glared at her as she realized what had happened. "And that was low. Even for you." She stalked away, leaving Lois grinning behind her.

Lois turned to Clark, who'd been watching the interchange. "That was mean," Clark said, barely stifling his own grin.

"Hey, if she's that afraid of what Chow will do if he sees the real Cat Grant, what chance does she really have with him?" Lois asked. "You can't build a relationship on a lie."

"A lot of people do," Clark told her.

"And it always bites them in the end," Lois said. "Anything

on Rose Collins?"

Clark leaned back in his chair. "Rose Collins doesn't exist." "I beg your pardon?"

"The Moskalski's housekeeper, Rose Collins, mother of Nicolas Collins, does not exist. She has no social security number, no birth certificate, no marriage certificate, nothing..."

"Witness Protection Program?" Lois asked.

Clark shook his head. "There'd be something to find. They're very good at creating false identities."

"So, who is she?"

"According to my sources, her real name is Rosalyn Thompkins," Clark said. "She's the widow of Andrew Thompkins."

"And who was Andrew Thompkins?" Lois prompted.

"An art gallery owner who was murdered four years ago," Clark said. "The official police account said he was stabbed to death when he surprised a burglar in the gallery. An odd thing about the burglary though, Thompkins was killed, but apparently nothing was taken. The wife took their little boy and dropped out of sight."

"But, how does that link to the kidnappings?" Lois wondered aloud.

"I did a little more digging. Except for this last one, each of the previous ransom demands included one or more pieces of jewelry or sculpture as part of the ransom. Guess where every one of those art pieces came from?"

"Thompkins's gallery?"

Clark nodded. "And here's another weird thing. Thompkins's gallery was named 'Here Be Magick', with a 'k'. The gallery specialized in art related to ceremonial magick and the occult. At the time of his death there were even rumors that Thompkins was involved in some esoteric occult group, but if he was, the group never came forward to help in the investigation."

"So, more magic stuff?"

"We're not talking stage magic this time, Lois," Clark said. "This is something else entirely."

"Magic is magic is fakery," Lois stated firmly. "Is there any reason to believe any of the other victims' families had anything to do with this alleged magic group?"

Clark shook his head. "As far as anyone knows, they were just customers. But what if the tie-in is the fact that they were customers?"

"Thompkins had something of value, the burglar wanted it and killed Thompkins for it?" Lois mused.

"Only the burglar didn't get whatever it was that night. Maybe it had been sold..."

"To one of the people who've had their kid kidnapped," Lois completed the thought. "But why wait four years to go after whatever it was again?"

"That's a very good question, and hopefully we'll find the answer," Clark said. "Anything on Ms. Komack?"

Lois frowned. What she'd found out didn't explain the woman's association with Henderson and Lois's instincts had told her that the woman was deeply involved in the whole situation. "Elizabeth Kathryn Komack-Straker. Yeah, she's hyphenated. Old Boston money family, married to a retired U.S. Air Force general who ran a film studio and production company in England for fifteen years and is now a consultant for EPRAD."

"Kind of a weird set of careers there," Clark commented. "Air Force to movie producer to space exploration?"

"Hers is just as weird. She has an MBA from MIT of all places, ran a think-tank in San Francisco until she got married and moved to England to run the studio for her husband. She was, and is, on the governing board of STAR Labs and currently acts as a business consultant for some of the high tech firms in town. Two kids, a daughter about sixteen and a boy about ten."

"Which absolutely does not explain why Henderson said she

helped out the MPD on ‘little problems’ like these kidnappings,” Clark reminded her. “Of course, none of this rules out there being a link to the Magic Club, either.”

“Let’s check it out.”

The Magic Club didn’t look quite so mysterious in the daytime. It was still an imposing structure, but what had looked stone the night before, was dressed concrete. The heavy arch-topped main doors were photo-wood on metal, the ‘stained glass’ windows were painted, not pieced, and even the leading on the windows was an affectation.

Romick’s assistant, Constance, was waiting for them when Lois and Clark arrived.

“This place was built over forty years ago. A group of magicians wanted a club for themselves. My father was a charter member,” Constance told them. She sounded proud. “It was a very secret society. Even now it’s only open to members and their guests.”

“We’re here because of the kidnappings,” Clark said. “One of the intended victims said something about a magic box. When we saw your trick last night, it made us think a magician may be involved.”

“Someone from here?” Constance sounded surprised.

“We’re not sure yet,” Lois admitted guardedly. “So, this box thing, tell us how it works.”

“Well, it’s a combination of distraction...” Constance began.

“And genius,” a man said. Lois turned to see the hypnotist from the previous night’s charity event standing in the doorway. Lois recalled that his name was Novak.

“Darren Romick is the greatest that ever lived,” Novak continued. “And I don’t think he’d appreciate having his secrets revealed. Wouldn’t you agree, Constance?”

“Yes, Doctor,” Constance agreed, a little too meekly for Lois’s taste. Romick’s assistant hurried away, leaving them alone with Novak.

“Doctor Novak, we’re with the Daily Planet and we’re looking into a series of kidnappings. A box very similar to the one Romick uses in his act was seen in the vicinity of one of the incidents,” Clark explained. “Now we’re not implying anyone here is involved, but we do have questions.”

“There was a witness?” Novak asked.

“We didn’t say that,” Lois stated.

“But you’re reasonably certain there’s a link,” Novak said.

“Based on what we’ve seen, it’s a not unreasonable assumption,” Clark responded.

Romick appeared in the doorway. He looked annoyed, eyebrows drawn together as he surveyed the scene before him. “I believe guests are only welcome after six, Doctor Novak.”

“We’re from the Daily Planet,” Clark explained.

“We think your box trick is linked to a series of kidnappings,” Lois blurted out.

Romick glared at her. “Dogs do tricks. I create illusions. Would you like to see one?”

“No, I...” she began to protest.

Romick ignored her as he took a pack of cards from his pocket. He started shuffling the deck in front of her nose.

“When you see a black card, say ‘coal.’” Romick ordered.

“When you see a red one, say ‘fire’. Ready?”

“Coal... Coal... Fire...”

The deck sprayed into her face and she found herself batting away the cards.

“Sorry we can’t help you,” she heard Romick say. There was a blinding flash of light and Lois smelled sulfur smoke.

“You don’t care that the kidnappings may be related to a magician’s murder?” Clark said loudly.

Lois looked up to see Romick and Novak staring at Clark.

“What murder?” Romick demanded from the doorway.

“Andrew Thompkins,” Clark answered. “He ran a gallery that specialized in ceremonial magic items and art.”

“And what has that to do with me?” Romick asked. Novak was watching Romick with narrowed eyes.

“Well, you’re a magician...” Lois began.

“I am an illusionist,” Romick stated. “I create effects using psychology and science. There’s nothing supernatural about what I do.”

“But you did know Thompkins,” Clark insisted.

“What happened to him was a tragedy,” Romick told them.

“But it had nothing to do with me.” With that, Romick disappeared through the doorway. Novak’s eyes followed him.

With a sigh, Novak turned back to Lois and Clark, his forehead creased with worry. “Andrew was a friend of mine, not Darren’s. Darren doesn’t hold with the more spiritual side of what we do. His death... Andrew’s death was hard, especially for Constance. You said his death may be related to the kidnappings?”

Lois gave Clark a dark look, which he didn’t seem to notice.

“One of the links between the victims’ families was Thompkins’ gallery. They were customers,” Clark said.

Novak visibly paled. “This isn’t for publication, but Andrew was a member of a ceremonial magick group called the Azure Brotherhood. He had a gift for making tools. Ceremonial swords, athames, wands, that sort of thing.” Novak walked over to a dark display case and turned on a light. There were several ornate swords and knives in the case. He indicated a long-bladed cross handled sword with a blue gem embedded in the hilt. “That’s a piece of Andrew’s work. Beautiful, isn’t it? Arthur Pendragon would have been proud to carry this.”

Lois didn’t see it — to her it simply looked like one of the swords worn in costume romance movies, but Clark apparently saw something she didn’t.

“It looks like it has a Tsurugi blade,” he commented.

Novak nodded. “Andrew studied in Japan. He was very good. He also made the trick blades and the throwing knives Darren uses in his act.”

“You said Thompkins was part of the Azure Brotherhood,” Lois said. “What is that?”

“As I said, it’s a ceremonial magick group,” Novak said. “They study the old forms, the hidden ways.”

“Could they be involved in the kidnappings?” Lois asked.

Novak’s answer was surprising in its firmness. “Absolutely not.”

“Do you know how we can contact them?” Lois asked.

Novak smiled. “If the Brotherhood wants to talk to you, they’ll contact you.”

It was late and the newsroom was nearly empty, except for Lois, Clark and Perry. Jimmy was somewhere, working on a project of his own.

“So, what’ve you got?” Perry demanded, standing by Lois’s desk.

“Only a theory and some peculiar links,” Lois admitted.

“After we left the Magic Club I called the box trick manufacturer. There were only two made with that specific moon and stars design and they both belong to Darren Romick,” Clark told him. “I also did some looking into the Azure Brotherhood Novak told us about.”

“And?” Lois prompted.

“Like Novak said, it’s a very, very old, very, very secretive fraternal organization that has as its primary goal the study and application of other worldly forces, also known as magick with a ‘k,’” Clark said. “The known members include members of Scotland Yard, some highly regarded psychiatrists, British nobility, clergy, you name it. Andrew Thompkins was one of the few known U.S. members, along with Kathryn Komack. In

Britain, the members are all well respected, highly regarded members of their professions and are sometimes called in to consult in criminal investigations that have taken on a 'supernatural' aspect."

"So if this Komack woman's working with Henderson that means the MPD thinks there's more going on than just kidnappings," Lois reasoned.

"That would be my guess," Clark said.

"Well kids, this is all very interesting, but it's still just speculation," Perry told them. "But until you find something concrete..." He turned to head off to his office.

"Well, so much for that," Lois commented mostly to herself.

As Perry got to his office door, Jimmy ran up to him and handed him the photo that had just come off the wire service.

"Look at this," Jimmy said. He was bouncing like an excited kid.

"It's the Pope," Perry observed.

"Yeah. At a Madonna concert. Famous people are acting really strange lately. I think there's a story here. Whaddya say I write it, Chief?"

Lois heard the odd emphasis Jimmy had placed on the word 'chief'. As if programmed, Perry smiled at Jimmy and said: "That's brilliant, Jimmy." Then he shook his head and walked into his office as if he couldn't quite believe what he'd just said.

"Putty in my hands," Jimmy said with a grin, watching Perry close the door to his office.

"Jimmy, what just happened?" Clark asked.

Jimmy grinned. "At the show at the Magic Club, I had Doctor Novak give Perry a post hypnotic suggestion. Every time I say the word 'chief', Perry says I'm brilliant."

"Don't you think that's a little... unethical?"

"Hey, it's not like I'm asking him to send me to Tahiti or anything," Jimmy protested. "This is strictly business, although a weekend in Florida would be nice..."

"Jimmy..." Lois warned.

"Forget I mentioned it," Jimmy said.

"So, who's hungry?" Lois asked. "We've only got two hours."

"Until what?" Jimmy asked.

"Moskal meets the kidnapper at midnight. I plan to be there."

"I don't think that's such a good idea," Clark said.

"Why not?" Lois wanted to know.

"It's dangerous, for one thing."

"When has that ever stopped us?"

"I don't think we should get in the way," Clark said. "The best thing to do is wait it out and talk to Moskal afterwards."

"Assuming we can get near him afterwards," Lois reminded him. "Clark, we both know there's more to this kidnapping than just a case of mistaken identity. We need to be there."

It was dark, damp and chilly by the Hob's River. The Hob's River Carnival was closed for the season and had taken on an abandoned, Stephen King look in the fog. Lois almost expected killer clowns to be lurking behind the corners of the various small buildings as she, Clark, and Jimmy crept past the booths and rides toward the carousel.

"I'm beginning to appreciate the office," Jimmy stated. "It's freezing out here."

"Stop whining," Lois ordered. "Shhhh..." Headlights were approaching from the distance, lighting up the fog. The car stopped by the carousel.

Lois grabbed Jimmy and pulled him out of sight behind the carousel ticket booth. "Just take the pictures, will you?" she ordered, keeping her voice low.

"I saw something over there," Clark murmured, almost too low for Lois to hear. He nodded toward one of the other buildings. Lois nodded and Clark was gone, his dark clothes

making him almost invisible.

In front of her, Moskal stepped out of the car, carrying a briefcase. The headlights were still on and Lois watched as he checked his watch. It was a few minutes to midnight.

"I'm here. Alone," Moskal called out. "Where's the boy?"

Suddenly, the carousel came to life. The lights cast eerie shadows in the fog and the music seemed to echo around them. The ornate wooden horses began their repetitive trip around the circle. Lois spotted a young dark-haired boy riding one of the horses. But there was something wrong. The figure on the white horse seemed oblivious to his surroundings.

"Nicky!" Moskal yelled, dropping the briefcase and running to the carousel.

"Moskal, no!" someone yelled. Lois looked over to see Henderson and several uniformed MPD officers running toward the carousel. Moskal skidded to a stop. The carousel stopped, everything stopped — the lights, the music, the motion. The carnival was dark and nearly silent again. The boy had disappeared.

Jimmy lowered his camera.

"Keep shooting!" Lois ordered.

"There's no light," Jimmy explained. But he kept clicking away.

"What have you done?" Moskal was yelling at Henderson. "Where's the boy?"

"He was never here," Henderson said. His voice was rough with frustration. "It was an illusion, a trick."

"Where's Clark?" Lois wondered aloud, coming out of the shadows.

"He's not with you?" Henderson asked. He didn't seem to be surprised to see Lois standing there.

"He saw something and went to check it out just as Moskal drove in," Lois explained. Henderson signaled for two of the uniformed officers, one male and one female, to check where Lois was pointing.

After a few moments, there was the sound of an engine revving up and a crash of metal.

Then the female officer yelled, "Inspector, we've got them!" The two officers appeared out of the darkness. The man was carrying a dark-haired boy on one arm — the same boy that had appeared to be on the carousel. The other officer seemed to be helping Clark. Lois could hear Clark wheezing, almost like asthma.

"Clark?" Lois asked. He nodded acknowledgement but didn't speak.

"Kent, what happened?" Henderson demanded.

Clark shook his head and started coughing, spitting up green phlegm. After a few moments he caught his breath. "I saw someone hiding in one of the booths as Moskal drove up. There was a car parked back there and I spotted Nick sitting in the car. I got him out and then I'm not quite sure what happened, except I that I had him and I ran."

"Did you see anyone else around there?" Henderson asked.

"I think so... yes," Clark said. His voice was sounding more normal, but it was still weak. "They were wearing a cape with a hood and gloves, long gloves. Um... I had Nick and they came out of the shadows and blew something in my face. I couldn't see and I couldn't breathe. They tried to grab Nick away and that's when I ran."

"We found him with the boy hunkered down behind the booths," the female officer told Henderson. Lois could just make out the name on her nametag — Clancy. "I also heard a car start up. I was getting ready to call the guys at the gate when I heard it go through the fence."

"And, of course, nobody got a good look at the car?" Henderson said.

"Dark blue late model sedan," Clark said. "A Lincoln,

maybe.”

“Is there anything else you remember?” Henderson asked. Lois saw one of the other officers taking notes.

Moskal was getting angry. “Why don’t you just ask them who the kidnapper is since they’re obviously in on it!”

“Mister Moskal, Lane and Kent are among the best crime beat reporters in Metropolis,” Henderson stated.

“Among the best?” Lois asked, glaring at Henderson in the darkness.

“Well, Jenkins has won the Pulitzer. You haven’t yet,” Henderson replied. He turned to Moskal. “Unlike you, Mister Moskal, Lane and Kent have been cooperating in this investigation. And I do trust them. Now, the boy needs to be checked out by a physician as soon as possible.”

In trying to hear what had happened Lois had almost forgotten about the boy. He seemed dazed, out of it. He didn’t even seem to recognize Mr. Moskal.

“Clark, do you remember anything else about the person in the hood. Height, voice...?” Henderson urged.

“The moon and the stars...” Clark murmured. “They were disguising their voice. I think they were trying to say something, but I was too busy choking. But I remember the phrase ‘the moon and the stars’ and there was a light...”

“A flashlight?” Lois suggested.

Clark shook his head. “A pendulum... light reflecting on a pendulum... almost like... almost like what a hypnotist would use.”

Clark wasn’t watching Henderson, so he missed the officer’s reaction. But Lois saw Henderson stiffen and a flicker of alarm cross his face.

“Lois, I want him checked out,” Henderson ordered.

“I’m fine now,” Clark protested. “Really.”

“No arguments,” Henderson stated. “Full toxicology work up.” Henderson turned to Clancy. “Escort Ms. Lane, Mister Kent, and the boy to STAR Labs. I’ll call ahead and let them know you’re coming.”

“STAR Labs?” Lois asked.

“Lois, humor me, okay?” Henderson asked.

There was something in Henderson’s expression, illuminated by the headlights of Moskal’s car, that worried Lois. Something akin to worry with traces of fear. Henderson was a good cop, a good detective. He was one of the best in the city and he didn’t scare easily. He rarely showed it even if he was. Right now, Henderson was scared and it was showing.

“Clark, you’re going to get checked out,” Lois told her partner.

The headlights reflecting off the lenses of his glasses made Clark’s eyes invisible to her but she knew from the shift in his posture, the squaring of his shoulders that he was preparing to protest her decision on his behalf. Whatever had been sprayed into his face had nearly choked him. Henderson obviously thought it was some sort of poison or drug. Lois felt a spasm of fear run through her. She had lost Superman. She wasn’t going to lose Clark if she could help it.

“No arguments, okay?” Lois told him, trying to keep her own fear out of her voice. “Do it for me?”

Clark had huddled in the corner of the car seat all the way to STAR Labs. Lois tried to talk to him, but he turned away, staring out the window at the passing city scenery.

“Clark, please talk to me...”

“Here we are,” the officer announced as they pulled to a stop in front of the STAR Labs building. Despite the early hour, the building was fully lit. A STAR Labs security officer met them at the entrance and escorted the little group deeper into the building, to a featureless hallway lined with doors with electronic locks and marked only with numbers. The security man opened one

door with a key-card and allowed Clancy and Nick to enter. Lois couldn’t see what was inside the room.

The guard opened a second door for Lois and Clark and they went through. The door closed behind them and Lois heard bolts clicking into place. She tried the handle. Just as she suspected, the door was locked.

She turned to look the room over. It looked like a typical medical examination and treatment room — an examination table with overhead spot light and a privacy curtain, a light box for x-rays, cabinets, a stainless steel sink, a chair and two stools.

Clark was pacing the room almost as though it was a cage. His back was stiff, hands clenched at his sides.

“Clark, relax,” she told him. “It’s going to be okay.”

“You don’t know that,” he said after a long moment, but he did stop his pacing.

“They just want to make sure you’re okay after being exposed to whatever it was,” Lois explained. “You’re still not looking well.” She was telling the truth. He was still wheezing a little, he was pale and there was a haunted, pinched look to his face. She hadn’t noticed it in the car. Clark had kept his face turned away from her.

They both jumped when the door opened. Two men walked in. One Lois recognized from previous visits to STAR Labs — Bernard Klein. He was what STAR Labs called a ‘facilitator’. Klein was a medical researcher whose interests seemed to cover everything under the sun and he had a knack for seeing how one group’s research meshed with another’s. Klein had also expressed an interest in examining Superman, Earth’s first known extra-terrestrial visitor. Superman had died before Klein had gotten his wish.

Lois didn’t recognize the other man. He was much older than Klein, slender, with gray hair and dark eyes. There was a ‘foreign’ look to him, Eastern European, maybe. That impression was confirmed when he spoke. “Ah, Mister Kent and Miss Lane,” he said with a heavy Slavic accent. Lois couldn’t tell if it was Russian or Polish. “I’m Doctor Jackson. Inspector Henderson has asked me to look into the events of this evening.”

Jackson? The name certainly didn’t sound Russian or Polish. It had to be an alias.

He had turned to Clark, handing him a pair of green scrubs and a packet of towelettes. “If you would wipe down your face and other exposed skin, then completely disrobe and put these on,” he told Clark. He nodded to a plastic bag hung on a frame. “Put your clothes and the towelettes in the bag, if you would.” With that, Jackson closed the privacy curtain and turned to Lois. Lois could hear the rustle of fabric on the other side of the curtains.

“Were you present when he was exposed to the substance?” Jackson asked.

“No,” Lois admitted. “Clark had gone to check something out... Jackson’s kind of an odd name for somebody with an accent like yours. Polish?”

Jackson smiled. “Hungarian. And to answer your other questions, my father was English. I’m a licensed psychiatrist who specializes in the effects of mind-altering drugs on the human brain.”

“You think Clark was exposed to a mind-altering drug?”

“That’s what we’re here to find out,” Klein explained.

The privacy curtain was shoved aside to reveal a barefoot Clark wearing the scrubs. Lois hadn’t forgotten how good Clark looked in t-shirts and jeans. The scrubs didn’t look too bad on him either.

“Now what?” Clark asked.

“We’re just going to check your vitals and take some blood samples,” Klein told him. Klein patted the examination table and Clark hopped up to take a seat. Lois stood by the door and watched as the two doctors worked, murmuring to one another

quietly. Clark's face was a stoic mask as he watched them and Lois was convinced that if the door hadn't been locked, he would have bolted.

The mask cracked just a little when Klein started to take the blood samples. Clark seemed almost mesmerized as he watched the blood, his blood, fill the vial and Lois was reminded of another incident, when he had gotten a simple paper cut while they were on assignment in Smallville.

"I'm bleeding," Clark had said in astonishment.

"Haven't you ever had a paper cut before?" Lois asked. She hadn't bothered to raise her head to look at him.

"Not that I remember," Clark answered.

"Put it in your mouth, Clark," Lois ordered. "Suck on it."

She had looked up to see him staring at the bead of blood on his finger. He saw her watching him and put his cut finger in his mouth. He grimaced at the taste of his own blood.

"You do not like doctors, do you Mister Kent?" Jackson observed.

Clark shook his head.

"Not to worry," Jackson assured him. "You appear to be in excellent health."

Klein took the bag of clothes and the blood samples and left the room. As the door closed behind him, Lois realized there was an armed guard outside.

Jackson seemed to be able to read her mind. "A precaution, nothing more," he said quietly.

"To keep us in, or the bad guys out?" Lois asked.

Jackson gave a Gallic shrug and didn't answer. Instead he turned back to Clark. "Inspector Henderson told us the toxin had been blown into your face and you had a negative reaction?"

"I started to choke," Clark told him. "And it was in my eyes, so it was hard to see."

"But you did see your attacker?"

"It was more of a shape in the darkness, but I could see they were wearing a hooded cloak and long gloves," Clark said.

"And they had something reflective on a chain or string?"

Jackson prompted.

Clark nodded. "And there was a voice and the phrase 'the moon and the stars'."

"Have you ever been hypnotized?" Jackson asked.

"Yes."

"Do you mind if I try to hypnotize you now?" Jackson asked. "It is possible you heard more, sensed more, than you realize."

Clark nodded again. Lois was suddenly reminded of Deter. Deter had a crystal he had used to swing before Clark's eyes, had kept his voice low and calm and then accused Clark of hating Superman.

Jackson had a crystal on a silver chain and he gently swung it before Clark's eyes.

"Clark..." Jackson was saying in his accented voice. "Tell me what happened when you were attacked. I want you to listen and tell me what was said. The voice will have no effect on you but you will hear it clearly..."

"I have the boy in my arms. Someone comes out of the darkness. I can't see their face. They blow something in my face. 'See the watch, only the watch. Hear my voice, only my voice. Your mind is clear, your will is gone. You will obey my commands any time you hear this phrase: 'The moon and the stars.' Wrong will seem right to you. And you will not remember. The moon and the stars command you to give me the boy,'" Clark intoned.

"But, Clark didn't give them the boy," Lois whispered to Jackson.

"I know," Jackson whispered back. "Interesting, no?"

Part 13

"The police still aren't saying anything and Moskal won't

even admit he was out there last night," Perry grouched to Lois and Clark the next morning. "Has STAR Labs come back with an analysis of whatever it was they sprayed on Clark?"

"No," Lois told him.

"They ran all sorts of tests but wouldn't tell either of us the results," Clark added. "All we know is whatever it was, it affected my breathing and my attacker thought I was more suggestible than I was. But that still doesn't get us any closer to knowing who the kidnapper is or what they're really after."

Jimmy grimaced. "Great. Maybe we can just get a signed confession from them and hand it over to the police chief." As he said it, his eyes widened and Lois knew Jimmy realized what he had just said.

Perry answered right on cue, patting Jimmy on the back. "That's brilliant, Jimmy."

"This is really starting to bug me," Jimmy whispered to Lois as soon as Perry had shut the door on his office.

"Maybe you should have thought of that before you did it," Clark suggested.

Lois's phone rang and she answered it, missing the rest of the conversation between Clark and Jimmy. "...Great, we'll be right there." She turned to Clark. "That was Constance. She wants to talk to us about the Magnificent Romick. Come on, let's go."

Clark looked worried. "You go ahead. I've got someone else I want to talk to," he said.

"You can understand, can't you? He can be very... difficult sometimes," Constance was saying. The woman seemed nervous, twisting the rings on her fingers as she spoke to Lois in one of the side rooms in the Magic Club.

"Completely off the record," Lois assured her. "You're an anonymous source." Lois didn't really want to do it. Making Constance an anonymous source would make her job a little more difficult. It wasn't easy to write a credible story when your sources refused to be accountable for their statements. But Constance seemed sincere in both her wish to help and her fear of what was happening around her.

"Darren went through a real bad period about a year ago," Constance said. "He had run up a lot of debt and at the same time he lost his big contract in Vegas."

"Gambling problem?"

Constance nodded. "Big one. The casino owner found out Darren disguised himself and used his skills to cheat at the tables for years. Anyway, after that Darren was wiped out financially and no one would hire him. At least he didn't go to jail."

"But he's back on top now," Lois pointed out.

"About three months ago things started to change," Constance said. "He was rich again. I thought he might be back to gambling but he told me it was all from an anonymous benefactor."

"Or a series of kidnappings," Lois murmured mostly to herself.

Constance seemed horrified. "You don't think Darren...?"

"That's exactly what I think," Lois said. "What about hypnosis? Does Darren know how to do it?"

"Yes, we've used it in our act. Look, you don't know anything for sure. I mean, you have no proof, do you?"

Constance said. She seemed more worried than ever.

"Not yet," Lois admitted. "But if it's him, I'll find some sooner or later."

A quick check of Romick's history in the Daily Planet archives confirmed much of Constance's story about Romick. He had been a top headliner in Vegas for years until he was caught cheating at cards, forced to make restitution, and black-listed from gambling in Nevada. With that background, he had found it difficult, if not impossible, to find work until he moved back to

his hometown of Metropolis and to the Magic Club.

One interesting point caught Lois's attention — Romick hadn't been caught cheating by the casinos' security although Constance had implied that had been the case. He had been betrayed by someone whose name wasn't mentioned in any of the documentation Lois could find. Another point — Constance Blackthorn had been his assistant when Romick was arrested. She had tried to go it alone while he was under investigation then black-listed, but the reviews on her version of Romick's illusion act were mixed at best. She was technically competent but she had no flare. She was an assistant, not a headliner. Even having a good-looking hunk for an assistant hadn't helped.

Romick's current financial status also confirmed Constance's story. The entertainer had been doing merely okay until three months before when he started having large influxes of cash. The dates of the deposits followed each ransom payment by about three days. Each deposit had been made through an off-shore bank making it difficult, if not impossible to trace its source. But it was an interesting 'coincidence'. Lois didn't believe in coincidences — at least not when they were so obvious.

Lois left a note for Clark to meet her at the Magic Club for the six P.M. show. Constance had given her two tickets and had promised to look around the club for anything that might show Romick's involvement with the kidnappings. Lois had a feeling they were getting close to a resolution.

Romick was performing on stage, Constance in attendance. The woman looked nervous, although Romick showed no signs of concern as he continued his cheerful patter for the audience.

Lois looked up as someone joined her at her stage-side table. "Did your source come through?" she asked as Clark sat down.

Clark nodded. "Klein called me with the preliminary results on the drug analysis."

"And?"

"It was a strong hypnotic, kind of like a date rape drug. Makes the victim extremely suggestible, and most victims have no recollection of what happened while they were under the influence," Clark told her keeping his voice low. "It was also laced with kryptonite."

"But Superman's been dead for more than a month," Lois reminded him. Five weeks, two days, ten hours...

Clark shrugged. "They think the drug was made up before the first kidnapping and whoever it was wanted a weapon against Superman as well," he told her.

"Or maybe whoever it is doesn't believe Superman's not around any more," Lois suggested.

"Maybe," Clark conceded. "In any case, Klein thinks I had an allergic reaction to the drug and so my attacker wasn't able to hypnotize me. I couldn't get hold of Jackson, so I asked Doctor Novak to talk to Brittany Sparrows, the first victim. He confirmed she'd been hypnotized, probably while under drugs, but the suggestions were so deeply rooted in her subconscious he couldn't access them without using more drugs."

"Constance told me that Romick's had a heavy infusion of cash in the last three months," Lois told her partner. "He's also well-versed in hypnosis."

"What about Dr. Novak? Or any other hypnotist, for that matter?" Clark asked. "The drug used isn't exactly common but a smart person could certainly get hold of some."

"And kryptonite? That's not exactly common, is it?" Lois asked.

"Not really," Clark admitted. "But it wouldn't have taken much."

"I know it's Romick," Lois stated. "I just have to prove it." She stood. "I'm going backstage to see what I can find. He'll be out here for at least another twenty minutes."

"Lois, wait..." Clark began, but she was already heading

away from the stage.

"For my next amazement, I'm going to need an assistant from our audience," Romick announced. "You! The pretty lady on her way out."

Lois turned around to see Romick beckoning to her as the stagehand on the spotlight swung the light around to shine on her.

"Ladies and gentlemen please welcome on stage Lois Lane from the Daily Planet," Romick announced. "Now, don't be shy, Miss Lane. I believe we can put all your doubts about illusion to rest this evening."

Constance was wheeling out a tall box with small slits on all sides. Romick opened the box to reveal a satin lined interior. "All you have to do is step inside," Romick instructed.

"Lois, I don't think you..." Clark whispered loudly. Privately, she agreed with him. She paused, mentally weighing her options.

"Come now, Miss Lane. You're not afraid, are you?" Romick challenged.

Lois whispered back to Clark, "What can he do to me in front of all these people?"

"It's only a trick. After all, isn't that what you said before?" Romick continued. Lois had little choice but to climb onto the stage. She wasn't about to be made a laughing stock in front of the elite of Metropolis. She climbed into the open box as the crowd applauded. Romick closed the lid and latched it, trapping her inside the box with only her head sticking out. The bright stage lights kept her from seeing Clark and for some reason that worried her.

"This is one of the most dangerous illusions in all of magic," Romick was saying. As he spoke, Constance wheeled out a rack covered with black fabric. Romick theatrically pulled the cover off to reveal a stand filled with glittering double-edged swords. Lois tried not to show her nervousness. With the latches thrown she was trapped.

Constance handed Romick a sword. He tapped it on the ground to prove it was real.

"I hope you have faith in me, my dear," Romick said just before he thrust the sword through the box. No pain, no feeling of pressure — she was okay.

"Feeling lucky?" Romick said with a grin as Constance handed him another sword. Again he thrust the sword through the box and again there was no pain.

"Now, I know what you're thinking," Romick told the audience. "Any amateur could do this trick as long as he lined the holes up right. So, if I were to, say, blindfold myself..." As he spoke, he pulled a black satin blindfold from his pocket and tied it over his eyes. "...then I couldn't see where I was placing the sword. Especially if I were going after a moving target."

Constance began to spin the box around and Lois tried to keep her growing fear under control. Constance handed another sword to Romick who began to wave it around as though dueling an imaginary opponent. Constance led him to the box and Romick tapped the sword on the ground, just as he had the previous swords. It sounded different this time, more metallic.

"Three's a charm," Romick said, raising the sword high, preparing to plunge it into the box.

"No!" Clark's voice rang out. He was on the stage, his hand on the blade. "It's not one of your trick swords," he hissed at Romick. Romick pulled the blindfold off and glared at Clark, then his eyes widened. Lois followed his gaze to see a sheen of blood on the sword blade. Romick stepped back and put the sword back in the rack. Clark put his hand in his pocket.

"Well, I guess I'm more convincing than I thought," Romick told the audience, hurriedly pulling the other swords out of the box. "How about a hand for the lovely Miss Lane and her gallant rescuer, Mister Kent?"

Lois smiled nervously as the audience applauded. She waited for Romick to undo the latches to release her. Instead, he threw

the black sheet of fabric that had covered the swords over her head. There was a bang and she felt herself falling.

She landed on an air mattress in a small dingy room. She scrambled to her feet and ran to the door only to find it locked. Lois raised her hand to pound on the door then decided against it for the moment. She could hear applause somewhere above her. Chances were every one was still occupied with Romick's stage performance. Lois hoped Clark had enough sense to realize her disappearance wasn't her idea and he would come looking for her soon.

She took a moment to look around the room. It was nearly cubical and without furnishings except for the air mattress. A television was set into the wall and a program was running on it. Lois looked more closely — it wasn't a regular television program. The screen was showing a kaleidoscope and there was something hypnotically soothing about it. She sat down on the mattress and started watching, unable to pull her eyes away.

She wasn't sure how long she had been sitting staring at the screen, when the door opened. Clark walked in, worry written across his face but she couldn't bring herself to care. He stepped in front of the screen, facing her and she tried to move around him. Something was telling her to keep watching the screen.

"Have you been drugged?" Clark asked. He sounded worried but the screen wouldn't let her go. She tried to answer his questions but they just didn't seem very important. He kept moving into her field of view and she kept trying to get around him. Finally Clark turned to look at the screen. A frisson of fear ran down her spine. She didn't dare let Clark watch the screen otherwise he'd be sucked in just as she had been. But she just didn't have the energy to stop him.

He seemed to read her mind, turning away from the screen. He grabbed her shoulders and forced her out of the room. Her head began to clear. She tried to move away from him but he hugged her close. It was warm and comforting to be in his arms.

"Lois, what happened?"

"I... I don't remember. There's something about the TV. I couldn't stop watching..."

"I think the TV is sending out subliminal messages," he said, looking at someone or something behind her. "I see a little faster than most people and I think I caught it when I looked at the screen."

"Mind control?" Henderson's voice asked. Henderson was here? Lois managed to turn to see Henderson standing there with several uniformed officers. One was taking pictures of something inside of a large shiny blue box with a moon and stars painted on it.

"That looks like the box Chris told us about," Lois said. She stepped closer and saw that the box wasn't empty — Doctor Novak was curled up inside, his eyes staring at nothing.

"He must have figured out who it was and confronted them," Henderson said. "We're taking Romick and his assistant downtown for questioning." Lois caught the speculative look Henderson gave her partner. "Good thing Kent interrupted Romick's performance or we'd have two murders on our hands."

Lois looked Clark over. His right hand was bandaged. "You grabbed the sword," she said remembering the sheen of blood on the blade. Clark's blood. He'd gotten himself hurt again because of her.

"When I came into the building, I noticed the ceremonial sword was missing from the display case," Clark explained. "Then I saw it in with the trick swords he used for his act."

Lois turned back to Henderson. "Now what?"

"You know the drill, Lois," Henderson said. "Give Officer Masters your statement and then you can go home."

"Clark, you... You could have just yelled for Constance to stop him," Lois told Clark as he accompanied her home.

Clark shook his head as he waited for her to undo the locks on her door. "I don't think Romick recognized that he had the wrong sword, at least not until he saw the blood on my hand. And Constance was the one who handed him the sword, remember? You didn't see the look on her face when I ran on the stage. She was... I don't know... It wasn't surprise."

"You think Constance was in on Romick's plot?"

"I'm wondering if Romick was involved in Romick's plot."

"You don't think this is over, do you?" Lois stated. She knew Clark well enough to recognize he was worried.

"I read your notes, and I did some digging on my own,"

Clark told her. "Constance Blackthorn is at least as accomplished an illusionist as Romick and is at least as knowledgeable about hypnosis as he is. They used it in their act in Vegas. The real question is what does either of them have to do with the kidnappings?"

"And does it relate to Thompkins' death and if so, how?"

"And does it relate to the Azure Brotherhood?"

"Or are there other players?"

Lois sighed in frustration. Her instincts were normally pretty good, but nothing about this case was making much sense. She turned on her television to catch the night's news. LNN was still running clips of the Pope attending a Madonna concert in Rome. They were speculating that this was just one more sign that the pontiff's mental health was failing.

"Which one do you think killed Novak?" she asked Clark.

The antics of the powerful elderly of Europe were hardly as important as a murder in Metropolis, at least in her opinion.

"Which one did the deed or which one is responsible?" Clark asked in response. "I asked Novak a lot of questions about hypnotism, what it can and can't do. In fact, there are some experts who claim there's no such thing as 'hypnotism', that it's a self-induced state of consciousness. The Amazing Kreskin has even offered a reward for anyone who can scientifically prove it exists. No one's collected."

"So, hypnotism doesn't really work?"

"That's the funny thing," Clark said. "It does work, but not like they show in the old movies. A person can't be forced to do anything against their basic beliefs or morals except, and here's the catch, a really good hypnotist or hypnotherapist, given enough time, can warp those beliefs, making wrong seem right."

"Wrong will seem right to you. And you will not remember," Lois quoted.

"Exactly," Clark agreed. "And with drugs, all bets are off."

The drugs over-ride all the normal mental safeguards. Under a hypnotic drug, you could easily convince somebody they can fly like Superman could and they'll go right out the window."

"And except for the drug in their system, it would look like suicide."

"Right... Or they could be programmed to commit murder,"

Clark suggested.

"Or attend a Madonna concert?"

"Or dance in a fountain with a Beefeater?"

"Or launch missiles... Oh my God, Clark. We're talking about a major international conspiracy," Lois realized. Clark nodded solemnly.

"But... how are they, whoever they are, getting to the pope and the queen and whoever else?" Lois asked.

"I have an idea," Clark said.

"Okay, spill it," Lois ordered. She ignored the wary expression on his face.

He took a deep breath. "Okay, but you have to promise not to kill me if I'm right."

"Clark!"

"The moon and the stars command you to... kiss me and remember."

It was as if someone, or something, else had command of her

body. She moved closer to Clark and kissed him hard. He backed away and she moved forward, entwining her hands in his hair. It felt so right and she didn't want to stop. He slipped off the sofa, away from her. She pouted and reached for him again. She wanted to kiss him. She wanted to do more than just kiss him.

"Lois..."

As before when Clark had pulled her away from the kaleidoscope, Lois felt a veil of fog fall away from her mind. "Oh my God..." Lois breathed. "I'm under some sort of... spell!"

"I told you and Henderson I suspected there was subliminal programming in that video you were watching," Clark said. "There may even have been drugs in the air of that room you were in."

"So now anytime someone uses that phrase, I'll do whatever I'm told?" She was shrieking but she didn't care that Clark was wincing in pain.

"The moon and the stars command you to stop shrieking," Clark said half-heartedly.

Lois didn't care. "How dare you!" she continued screaming at him. "You... you...!" Then she realized his second order had no effect on her. Her mouth snapped shut and she flopped onto the sofa beside him. "It didn't work."

"Once you know what's going on, it stops being as effective," Clark explained. "And I'm pretty sure no one had a chance to do any real programming on you. Neither Romick nor Constance were out of my sight between the time you disappeared and the time Henderson showed up with his people."

"You're 'pretty sure' nobody had a chance?" she spat out, running her hand through her hair.

"Lo-is."

"Okay, okay," she conceded. "So, someone sends these powerful or famous people a videotape with these subliminal messages..."

"The tape or the package could be contaminated with a drug to make them susceptible," Clark suggested.

"They play the tape, get programmed..."

"But the actual orders come later, by phone or maybe a co-conspirator."

"Who in their right mind would order a base commander to launch missiles at an innocent city?" Lois asked.

"To prove they could," Clark answered.

"So the world will be getting a ransom demand any day now," Lois reasoned. It was logical. Show the world you can control generals, celebrities, world leaders and make them do anything you wish. Then demand a payoff to not do it.

"Well, they could be more subtle than that," Clark said.

"Instead of demanding a ransom, they could simply order government and corporate leaders to give orders in their favor. Hand over bonds, reveal corporate and government secrets, overturn laws."

"And the rest of us wouldn't even know until it was too late." At some point in their conversation they had returned to the sofa. She turned to look him in the eyes. "Why did you order me to kiss you?"

His expression became more solemn. "You told Deter we were engaged."

It was an odd deflection but Lois let it ride. "That was so he'd agree to let me stay," Lois explained. "You know that."

He nodded and Lois could almost see him come to a decision. "When Romick threw that cloth over you and you disappeared..." he began, "It was like... I was afraid I'd never see you alive again. I've lost Superman, if that makes any sense, and I was afraid I'd lost you too... I just..."

"Clark, you're my best friend," Lois said. "And you know that somewhere deep inside me there was something that made me attracted to you while I was under that pheromone poison, although I still haven't figured out why you weren't affected."

"I don't know," Clark told her. "Maybe some people were simply immune. It's not like it went through FDA testing. We don't know the long term effects or side effects of being exposed to Miranda's poison."

She still wasn't sure she believed his explanations but chose to shelve it for the moment. She sighed again. "Clark, I admit I'm attracted to you. But you're also my partner and my friend. I'm just worried that if we start something, if we go to the next level, we may not be able to go back if it doesn't work out. I've watched the mess my parents made and Lucy, all her boy friends... I'm afraid we won't be friends any more."

"Lois, I can't imagine not being your friend."

"You say that now," Lois said. "But afterwards...? You know what sort of federal disasters I've had. And I'm no good for you. This is the second time in six weeks you've gotten hurt because of me. Because someone was out to get me. If anything happened to you because of me, I couldn't live with myself."

"Lois, I'll be more careful," Clark promised.

"Clark, bullets bounced off Superman and he's dead," Lois said.

"I understand what you're saying," Clark said. "And I know you've been hurt in the past. But hear me out, okay?"

She nodded. His expression, his entire posture, was so earnest. "I'm sorry I did that to you, to test if you'd been programmed. But at the same time... was it so bad?"

She had to admit, it hadn't been bad at all. His kiss had been as electric as the one she remembered at the honeymoon suite of the Lexor. A soul searing, toe curling kiss that she wished could last forever. But forever wasn't going to last very long if he ended up doing something stupidly macho and wound up dead.

"It wasn't bad at all," Lois admitted aloud. "But I'm not sure I'm good for you. I know I occasionally run into situations before looking..."

This brought a smile to Clark's face. "Occasionally?"

"Okay, more than just occasionally. But so do you," Lois said in her own defense. "Clark, Superman isn't swooping down to the rescue any more. We both need to be more careful. Now, I do know how to defend myself. I have a first gup red belt in taekwondo and I really am working on my first dan black belt."

"A black belt won't stop a bullet," Clark reminded her.

"And you stepping in front of one and ending up dead won't help either."

"So, what do we do?"

"I don't know," Lois admitted. "Try to be more careful?"

Clark snorted. "Like that's going to happen..."

"And maybe you should take a self-defense course. I could take you to my dojang and have you meet master Hong."

"Actually, I have a friend over in Chinatown whose grandfather runs a dojang. Chen and his sister've been trying to talk me into taking lessons. Maybe I should take them up on their offer." He was watching her but she couldn't tell what he was thinking.

Her phone rang and Clark almost looked relieved by the interruption. Lois grabbed the phone. "Hello?"

"Lois?" Bill Henderson asked over the phone. "Is Clark with you?"

"Yes... Why?"

She heard a sigh.

"Nick and Rose Collins have gone missing."

"What? When?"

"About the time we were picking up Romick and Blackthorn."

"Oh my God," she murmured. She looked over at Clark.

He was watching her, worry creasing his forehead. "I was right... This isn't over."

“Eduardo, what’s going on with that body the police pulled out of the West River this morning?” Perry called out over the hubbub of the newsroom. Eduardo had been on the phone to homicide and had missed the morning’s conference.

Eduardo looked up from his monitor and shrugged. “Male Caucasian, early to mid twenties, no ID except for some tattoos. Autopsy’s this afternoon, but nobody thinks it’s natural causes.”

“Could it be gang related?” Perry asked.

“Doesn’t match the M.O. of any of the usual suspects,” Eduardo said. “But the MPD isn’t saying it’s not gang related. If it is... it’s too early to claim there’s a new player in town.”

“Perry,” Polly yelled. “Two more homeless men have been reported missing from the Hob’s Bay shelter. This makes six since Christmas. Still no bodies, nothing to link them together that we know of.”

“Sounds like a serial killer to me. Get on it... And a sidebar on serial killers in Metropolis,” Perry ordered before moving on. “Lois, Clark, what have we got on those two latest abductions?”

“Nada,” Lois told him. “The police aren’t even admitting, officially at least, that Rose and Nick’s disappearance has anything to do with Nick’s earlier kidnapping.”

“According to Henderson,” Clark added. “Constance Blackthorn’s been singing like a bird about how she was the one behind Romick, how she programmed him to act as her accomplice in the kidnappings.”

“And Novak’s murder?” Perry asked.

Lois shook her head. “The physical evidence points to Romick so far, but since she confessed to brainwashing Romick, who knows? All we really know is that the D.A.’s going to have a tough time with it. If Romick did pull the trigger on Novak, was he legally culpable?”

“And where do Rose and Nick fit into the puzzle?” Clark added.

Lois heard the click of heels behind her and turned in her chair to see who it was. Cat was back in her ‘normal’ dress — bright and almost painted on. Her expression was dark and sulky. Lois almost expected to see her ears folded back and her tail twitching as she contemplated feline mayhem on some unsuspecting male soul.

“What happened?” Lois asked. “Salvation Army turn you away?”

Perry stifled a chuckle, then obviously seeing the expression on Cat’s face, started to look around his newsroom. He spotted Jimmy coming out of the elevators.

“He married an exotic dancer,” Cat grouched as Perry headed for safety.

“Arthur Chow?” Clark asked.

“All that itchy, high-necked wool and he marries a woman who can wave hello with her navel,” Cat spat.

“That’s too bad,” Lois responded. She was trying hard to sound sympathetic. It came out saccharine instead. “I had your wedding present all picked out.”

“You did?”

Cat’s hopeful expression almost made Lois feel bad about what she was going to say next. Almost. “Yeah. A set of personalized stationery. ‘From the desk of Cat Chow.’”

Cat glared at her and stalked away, looking for new prey no doubt.

Perry and Jimmy were walking together toward Jimmy’s desk.

“...so that’s it,” Jimmy was saying. “All this strange behavior exhibited by famous people all over the world was linked to Constance Blackthorn. My angle: ‘Great Minds Sink Alike.’”

Perry clapped the younger man on the back. “That’s brilliant, Jimmy.”

Jimmy’s hopefully expression dissolved into frustration. “All right, that’s it. I can’t take it any more. I get it now. I’ve learned

my lesson. False praise means nothing. If you don’t think it’s a good idea just say so.”

Perry gave him a blank look then turned to Lois and Clark. “What the Sam Hill is he talking about?” he demanded.

Clark beckoned Jimmy aside. “He means it.”

“You’re just saying that,” Jimmy protested but Lois suspected he was hoping Clark was right.

“You didn’t even say ‘chief,’” Clark pointed out. He was right. Jimmy hadn’t used the programming word.”

Jimmy turned back to Perry. “You mean it?”

Perry glowered at him. “Perry White never says anything he doesn’t mean. I want it on my desk tomorrow. Get Jeff to do a sidebar on hypnosis and brainwashing techniques.”

With that, Perry disappeared into his office.

“When Dr. Novak was here talking to Brittany Sparrows, I had him ‘de-program’ Perry,” Clark said just loudly enough for Jimmy and Lois to hear.

“Way to go, C.K.,” Jimmy said gratefully. Then he straightened up, eyes wide in wonder. “Wait... I have a story to write!”

Lois suppressed a chuckle as the younger man ran to his desk. “Were you ever that green?” she asked Clark.

“Were you?”

“I’ll never admit to it,” Lois told him. She turned more solemn. “Constance has confessed to the kidnappings and of brainwashing, or at least trying to brainwash, influential people. But there are still questions... like where she got that drug cocktail she was using.”

“One laced with kryptonite,” Clark added. “Which Jason Trask believed could be potentially fatal to Superman and is extremely rare.”

“And like who was really behind the plot,” Lois continued.

“You don’t think Constance was the mastermind?”

“You read her background,” Lois reminded him. “She’s the daughter of Anthony Blackthorn, the famous magician. She’s an illusionist with some training in hypnosis and mentalism. She paired up with Romick because she couldn’t make it solo, even with the Blackthorn name. There’s nothing to indicate she was an expert in psychological manipulation, aside from the mentalism thing. According to my sources, she barely made it out of high school.”

“So, obviously someone else was calling the shots,” Clark said.

“And we have no idea who,” Lois said. “Unless Constance told Henderson who she was working for.”

“Do you think he’d tell us if she did?”

Lois picked up her phone. “We can ask.”

“I still don’t believe Henderson agreed to talk to us about Constance’s confession,” Clark said as he and Lois walked up the stone walkway to the large house in Racine that Henderson told them to meet him at. “Even if it is only for background.”

“What can I say?” Lois asked. “I’m remarkably persuasive.”

“Or Henderson has an ulterior motive?” Clark suggested.

“Bill Henderson is as uncomplicated as you are, Clark,” Lois retorted. She stabbed at the doorbell button beside a heavy wooden front door and distant chimes sounded. “You’re just being paranoid.”

Overhead, the sky was darkening even though the weatherman had predicted clear and cold for the next week.

“What makes you think I’m not complicated?”

“You were raised on a farm in Kansas,” Lois pointed out. “You can’t get any less complicated than that.”

“Oh and being from Metropolis...”

He was interrupted by the opening of the door. Henderson grinned at them and Lois wondered if he’d been listening to them. She had spotted the security cameras that had tracked their

walk up the path to the house, even if she hadn't pointed them out to Clark.

"Glad you decided to come," Henderson said, moving aside so they could enter the house. Lois took a moment to look around the high entrance hall. Slate and what looked to be an antique carpet graced the floor. The walls were white linen which made for an effective background for several small pieces of brightly colored art. French doors on either side of the entrance hall opened onto to the rest of the house. A thickly carpeted stairway led to the upper floor.

"Nice place," Lois commented. "Must have put you back some." She eyed him speculatively, waiting for his answers. She was baiting him and she was certain he knew she had done her homework. The property's owner was listed on the tax rolls as 'The Maddox Foundation'. She and Clark hadn't been able find out anything concerning them. And that was suspicious in itself.

Henderson shrugged, still smiling. "Not me. I live in Queensland Park. It's the people who do own it you're here to talk to."

"The Maddox Foundation?" Clark asked.

"No. Me, Mister Kent," Kathryn Komack said, opening the French doors to Lois's right. Lois could see Doctor Jackson standing behind Komack. "Thank you for coming. Bill assures me that despite your choice of profession, you are both discrete and more or less trustworthy."

"More or less?" Lois challenged.

"Don't push it, Lane," Henderson warned. "You're here because the two of you are probably the best ones I know for this job."

"And what job is that?" Clark asked.

"Running down Constance Blackthorn's associates," Komack said. She led them into the next room, a parlor with comfortable, and expensive, leather chairs and sofas, and indicated they should sit. Jackson poured coffee and handed Lois a cup. She took a sip — it was fixed exactly the way she liked it. She saw Clark's look of worried surprise as he took a sip of his own cup. Jackson knew how they liked their coffee. What else did he know about them? And what did it mean?

"Isn't this a matter for the police or the FBI?" Lois suggested.

"Or the NIA?" Clark added.

"If I thought they could handle this matter, I would have asked Bill to ask them for their assistance," Komack said. "I'm told you have skills and traits uniquely suited to this 'mission'. Plus, you are not a known member of the police or of the Azure Brotherhood. We don't know exactly what resources they have, but it's better to assume they have more than less."

"The Azure Brotherhood?" Clark asked. "Doctor Novak mentioned it in regards to Andrew Thompkins. He wouldn't say anything more about it except that he was positive they weren't involved in the kidnappings."

"We weren't," Henderson stated. "But we have reason to believe an esoteric group that calls itself 'The Order' was, and is, involved in what Blackthorn was doing, including the kidnappings."

"We?" Lois wondered. What was Henderson involved in? And what was he getting them into?

"I've never heard of any group called the 'The Order'," Lois commented. "But then, I never heard of the Azure Brotherhood until Novak mentioned it."

"Neither group feels comfortable in the limelight," Jackson said. "Although for differing reasons," he added.

"And your reasons are?" Clark asked. He sounded as suspicious as Lois felt.

"There are forces for light and dark in this world. The forces of darkness tend to scurry like rats when the light of truth and justice, even human justice, is shined on them," Komack said. "The forces of light are simply trying to do what needs to be done

for the good of the many, if not all. It is frequently a thankless job, but it is a job we are called to do. And our gifts make it possible for us to do it."

"Like Superman," Clark said. "Never asking for compensation or even recognition."

"Yes," Komack said.

"So, how do we know you're really on the side of light?" Lois demanded.

"You know him," she said, nodding toward Henderson.

"Which side is he on?"

Lois considered the woman's statement for a long moment. Bill Henderson had been one of the first MPD officers she'd had contact with, even before she'd started at the Daily Planet. She had always considered him honest and upright, a good cop with an appreciation of what a good reporter, and a good newspaper, could do for the city. Bill, what are you involved in?

"What do we need to do?" Lois asked.

"If Constance was involved in the matters we think she was, the group she was working with will be both dangerous and talented in matters few people understand," Komack said, not answering Lois's question.

"Like you're not?" Lois pointed out.

Henderson chuckled. "I told you she was feisty."

"They'll both need every bit of it before this is over," Jackson said solemnly.

Lois felt a black chill wash over her. What the hell's going on here?

Komack led them deeper into the house, to a small room with two large windows on the wall opposite the door. There was a simple square wooden table in the center of the room, several wooden chairs set against the walls and a tall cabinet with shallow drawers. There was a phone hanging on the wall beside the door. Wall sconces held large candles which were lit.

A young woman, little more than a girl really, was waiting in the room. She was tall, with pale blonde hair and blue eyes that seemed to change color with the light.

"My daughter, Esther," Komack introduced the girl. She was quietly watching Lois and Lois found herself feeling nervous under her unwavering blue gaze.

After a long moment the girl said, "They are both old souls. They've trod this path many, many times. Almost always together." She nodded to Lois. "She's a very pretty green. I bet she's a Gemini, too. Early June?"

Lois opened her mouth to comment then snapped it shut. She wasn't about to confirm her birth date for them. Not that would make any difference — Henderson could give them that anytime he wanted.

Esther eyed her another moment then turned to study Clark. She frowned. "Pisces. A very powerful crystal with serious damage."

"I've gotten hurt a couple times in the last few months," Clark admitted. He showed her his hand still wrapped in gauze, the one he'd grabbed the sword with. "I seem to be a little accident prone."

She shook her head. "This isn't physical. You've lost part of yourself and you don't know if you'll ever find that part again..."

"What sort of games are you people playing at?" Lois demanded. She glared at Henderson. "You know perfectly well what's been going on with Clark ever since..."

"I didn't tell her anything," Henderson interrupted. "I didn't need to. But she did just confirm my own observations."

"And those are?" Clark asked. There was the slightest tremor in his voice. Lois didn't take the time to wonder about it.

"There's more to everyone than meets the eye," Henderson said. "But there's more to the two of you than even that. Now, do you want to help us find Roslyn and Nick Thompkins or not?"

"What makes you think we won't help?" Lois demanded.

“Your natural pig-headedness,” Henderson told her with a sly grin. “Believe me I know what you’re going through,” he added more seriously. “I had a hard time of it when I first got involved too. But we don’t have the luxury of time to hand hold you through this.”

“Do you know what the Order is planning?” Clark asked.

“Constance Blackthorn told us about a communications satellite program she’d been working on with someone from LexTel,” Henderson said. “But we don’t think that’s what they were really about. The technology is too fragile, too dependant on a reliable drug delivery system. And if you have that, then you don’t need the complication of a satellite or subliminal programming.”

“So all that stuff with programming the queen and the pope was just a smoke screen, a ruse?” Clark asked.

“Possibly,” Jackson said. “We can’t be sure. It could have been a test, or another means of extortion.”

“You two figured out the link between Andrew Thompkins and the ransom demands,” Henderson said. “What you don’t know, what was never put into any police reports was that the pieces that were demanded were ceremonial items Thompkins had made for the Brotherhood. Nothing exceptionally valuable, except for their sentimental value.”

“But, if they’d been used in ceremonies, wouldn’t they have some accumulated power attached to them?” Clark asked. Lois gave him a surprised look. That wasn’t a question that would have occurred to her. She wasn’t even sure exactly what he was asking.

“Each piece was cleansed and rendered inert before being handed over,” Komack explained. The answer seemed to satisfy Clark but Lois felt she had missed something in the exchange.

“Do you know who killed Thompkins?” Clark asked.

“We’re reasonably certain it was Constance,” Henderson said. “We know she . . . Her father was a long-standing member of the Brotherhood, although stage magicians, illusionists, are rarely interested in the more ‘esoteric’ aspects of the art. We know he taught her his stage magic and introduced her to ‘other’ things.”

“When he died, Constance tried to coerce the Brotherhood into allowing her to take his place,” Komack continued the story. “We don’t take well to threats. Her petition was refused. She disappeared for a time. When she resurfaced, she was the Magnificent Romick’s assistant and they had a very successful Vegas act. We all thought that was the end of it. Then four years ago she and Romick were doing a charity performance in Metropolis. Andrew told me Constance had tried to coerce him into doing things he wouldn’t do. Two days later he was dead and his wife and child went into hiding on his orders. Constance and Romick were back in Vegas. The police weren’t able to link either one of them to Andrew’s murder.”

“But how does the Order fit into this?” Clark asked.

“We’re getting to that,” Henderson said. “Despite Blackthorn’s efforts to obscure her finances, we can account for all the cash used to pay the ransoms. But we couldn’t trace the tools until yesterday, when one of the pieces was found in a pawnshop in Midtown.”

“And?” Lois prompted.

“The pawnshop owner positively identified the man who sold him the piece as Hans Kimmel. He worked for LexTel and was found floating in the West River this morning,” Henderson told them.

That was the murder Eduardo was covering, Lois realized.

“It sound’s like we’re back to square one,” Clark observed.

“Not quite,” Henderson said. “There were indications that Kimmel was killed in a ritualistic manner. We’re guessing it was punishment for his failure. We’re currently tracking down his known associates. We’re hoping one of them will lead us to where Rose and Nick are being held. By our best estimates, if we

don’t find them by midnight tonight, we won’t find Rose alive and we may never find Nick at all.”

“That’s assuming Rose and Nick were abducted by this ‘Order,’” Lois pointed out.

“They were,” Jackson assured her. “Constance Blackthorn believes that Nicolas Thompkins is the current incarnation of her father, one of the finest illusionists and ceremonial magicians of his generation. From what Constance has said, she realized who Nicolas was after Mister Kent rescued him. We believe the Order may be following her plan to bring back her father’s knowledge, only your interference has forced them to adjust their timetable.”

“So, what makes you think midnight tonight’s their deadline?” Lois asked.

Clark answered. “Midnight is the witching hour and tonight the Moon will be dark.”

“A time for endings and beginnings,” Henderson added.

“Why don’t we just get a willow rod and dowse for them?” Lois asked, voice dripping with sarcasm. Henderson had left to go back to his office so he could keep tabs on the search for Rose and Nick’s abductors, leaving Lois and Clark alone with Komack and Jackson.

Jackson had spread out a map of Greater Metropolis on the table and had started to explain the procedure he intended they use to pinpoint Rose and Nick’s location. Lois hadn’t been able to contain her disbelief — the Hungarian psychiatrist planned to use a pendulum of all things, to locate Rose and Nick. And Clark seemed fine with the idea.

“Lois, dowsing really does work,” Clark told her. She glared at him. “My parent’s neighbor, Mister Hubbard, dowses for water for everyone in the county,” Clark continued. “He’s good at it, too. He found the spot for my parent’s new well, even knew how deep they’d have to go.”

“You’re not serious,” Lois stated.

“Lois, you have no magic in your soul,” Clark said. “That’s very sad.” Clark turned to Jackson. “She believes a man could fly without wings or an airplane, but she doesn’t believe in magic.”

“Most modern people don’t,” Komack said. “But this may be the only way to get the information we need to find them.”

“You don’t think the police will be able to find them in time?” Lois asked.

“Bill knows we’ll be doing what we can here, in addition to the methods he has officially at his disposal,” Komack said.

“What are the risks?” Clark asked.

“Larger than I care to think about,” Jackson said. “I suspect that the Order has devolved into conducting Satanic rituals. If so, they may have unleashed dangerous energies probably without realizing what they were doing. Energies waiting for a focus, for an opportunity,” the psychiatrist explained. “We’ve seen such things. It’s not pretty.”

Jackson threw the deadbolt on the door. “We must not be disturbed for at least half an hour,” he explained. He nodded to Komack.

Lois turned to watch the woman and was surprised to see a small silver handled dagger with a blue-black blade in the woman’s hand. She pointed the dagger at the door, motioning in the air, up and down, side to side. For a moment, Lois thought she saw, just at the edge of her vision, a faintly glowing blue pentagram floating over the door.

Komack repeated the signing over the two floor-to-ceiling windows on the far side of the room, then placed the knife back in its black leather scabbard and put it in her pocket.

“What did you just do?” Lois asked.

“I sealed the room against unwanted visitors. Now we go hunting,” Komack said. She pulled a piece of silk from her pocket and unfolded it to expose a silver ring with a blue stone. “This is one of Roslyn’s rings,” she said, unwinding a length of

silk thread from a small spool and tying one end to the ring. “Andrew made it for her before they were married,” she added. She closed her eyes a moment and took a deep breath holding the free end of the thread between the thumb and forefinger of her right hand. She stood next to the table, dangling the ring over the map. Slowly, Komack began to move her hand above the map, crisscrossing it, as Jackson kept his eyes fixed on the ring.

When the ring’s path across the map was complete, Jackson turned the map sideways and Komack repeated the procedure. This time, Lois caught the faint displacement as the ring passed over a section of the map area in north Metropolis.

As before, when the ring had passed over the entire map, Jackson turned the paper to repeat the procedure. Although the physical placement of the map had altered, the ring shifted ever so slightly as it passed over the map section by the Hob’s River on the north east part of New Troy Island, south of Suicide Slum. Jackson nodded solemnly, went over to the cabinet and after a moment, pulled out a smaller scale map, replacing the one on the table.

Again, the entire process was repeated, ending with a survey map of the selected area. This time, Jackson jotted down in his notebook the precise area the ring indicated before folding up the map and clearing off the table. Komack took a deep breath, almost as though she’d been holding it. Lois abruptly realized she had been holding her breath as well.

Komack sagged against the table. “It takes a lot out of you,” she explained as Clark helped her to one of the chairs.

Jackson picked up the phone and gave the map location to whoever was on the other end, probably Henderson. Somewhere near Pier fifty-five. Lois was familiar with the area. It was a maze of warehouses, rundown office buildings. It would take a miracle to find Rose and Nick in that warren.

“Are you okay?” Clark asked Komack. She looked pale and exhausted.

Komack nodded. She looked over at Jackson. “There’s a lot of interference around them. Our search may have been detected.”

“Hopefully not,” Jackson said. “But if they move them, Bill’s people should be able to detect them.”

“Hopefully,” Komack said. Her color was better and she seemed less exhausted.

Outside the room, wind began to howl and hail began to pelt the windows, only it didn’t quite sound like hail. The windows rattled beneath the onslaught and Lois thought she saw the warding pentagrams over them begin to shimmer blue. Then the lights went out.

“Just a storm,” Lois said aloud, although she wasn’t sure if she was trying to reassure herself or her companions. The candles in the wall sconces flickered fitfully, casting bizarre and monstrous shadows.

There was a knock on the door. Komack handed Jackson her knife and he made a sign at the door before opening it. Esther hurried into the room. She didn’t pay any attention to Jackson signing the door after he’d closed it. Again, Lois though she saw a shimmer of blue at the corner of her eye.

“All you-know-what’s broken loose outside,” Esther explained. “I’ve never seen a storm come up so fast.”

“I have,” Jackson said. “Ireland, Midsummer’s Eve eleven years ago.”

Esther shrugged with the practiced nonchalance of a teen. “Well, power’s out on the estate and so are the phones. Murph’s trying to figure out why the back-up generator hasn’t come on-line yet. He also figures power’s out for a good portion of the city, too. They just haven’t announced it yet.”

“That is not good,” Jackson commented. The psychiatrist went to one of the windows and peered out at the storm. “It reminds me of Ireland. The wind keeps shifting direction, almost

as if it were looking for something.”

“Just like it did then,” Komack said.

“What happened eleven years ago?” Clark asked. He had joined Jackson at the window, watching the storm.

“Some fools claiming to be druids opened a gate to the netherworld,” Komack said. “They’d kidnapped a pregnant woman and planned to use her as a human sacrifice in their perverted scheme to capture the power of the gods.” She smiled humorlessly. “It didn’t go well for them. The gods are perfectly willing to share, but only on their terms. And there were other complications.”

As she spoke, the sky flashed an eerie sickly green. The light echoed back and forth through the low clouds.

“This is Metropolis. We don’t have lightning storms in the middle of winter,” Lois said.

“I’ve never seen lightning that color either,” Clark commented. “It’s not natural.”

“It makes my skin crawl,” Lois added.

“Someone is playing with unimaginable power. And I don’t think they have a clue as to what they’re doing,” Komack remarked.

The rain and sleet let up for just long enough for Lois and Clark to dash to her jeep with Komack and Jackson on their heels. Then the rain began slashing sideways again.

“The last time I saw weather like this, it was hurricane Dean,” Lois complained.

“The last time I checked, hurricanes don’t show up out of nowhere,” Clark reminded her. “A storm this bad could generate tornadoes, maybe. But this weather is just plain weird.”

“You know, the weather report for this week was clear and cold,” Lois said. “Shows you how much they know.”

“I don’t think the weatherman took into account the possibility of black magicians affecting weather fronts,” Komack said from the rear seat. The trees that lined the boulevard to the North Bridge thrashed back and forth, lashing at the jeep as it passed. Cars were slowed to a near standstill on the bridge, but Lois whipped past them, barely reducing speed despite the near gale force winds. She ignored the fact that Clark seemed to be holding onto the door handle for dear life.

The wind skirled with an eerie whistling note, like the keening of inhuman voices. Lois fought the steering wheel as the road conditions worsened. The rain and sleet had made the road as slick as oil. Visibility was down to two car lengths as they left the bridge and entered the city streets.

“Bill’s people are up ahead, maybe half a mile,” Komack said. Lois didn’t dare take her eyes from the road, but the other woman’s voice sounded strained and distracted. Lois wanted to ask how Komack knew the police were up ahead but she had to concentrate on her driving.

Lois spotted the MPD panda cars and Henderson’s unmarked sedan in front of one of the warehouses. One of the officers recognized her car and waved her to park next to the building. The wind wasn’t as strong in the shadow of the building. After a few minutes, Henderson appeared out of an open doorway. He ran to the jeep, his black rain slicker hood pulled over his head. “Rose is on her way to the hospital,” he announced as soon as Lois rolled down the window. “She’s in real bad shape.”

“What about Nick?” Lois demanded.

Henderson shook his head. Lois could see the worry in his face, his posture. He looked into the back, to Komack. “It’s worse than we thought. A lot worse.” He looked up to the sky as the wind worsened, shrilling so loudly that conversation became impossible without shouting. “We found the bodies of the six missing homeless men, at least what was left of them.”

In the rearview mirror, Lois saw Komack and Jackson exchange a horrified look.

"It's Ireland all over again," Jackson said.

"Not Ireland," Komack corrected. "There we knew where the O'Grady's had taken her, and we knew what they were after."

"And what was that?" Lois demanded. She was tired of their cryptic references to something horrific that she knew never made it into the papers, either in the U.S. or in Ireland.

"I'll tell you about it when, and if, we get Nick back safely," Komack promised.

"She'll hold you to that, you know," Henderson remarked. The wind had started to die down just a bit.

"Inspector, were all the ransom payments made at the Hob's River Carnival grounds?" Clark asked. Lois looked over to see an odd, undecipherable expression on Clark's face. Almost as if he was trying to figure out how he had figured it out.

Henderson nodded in answer. "That's one of the pieces of information we decided not to share with the press."

"Bill, how fast can you get me and Jackson over there?" Komack asked opening the rear door of the jeep.

"Fast."

"Wait a minute," Lois protested. "You're not leaving us out just when it's getting interesting."

Lois caught the concerned look that passed between Komack and Henderson. Then Komack nodded. "You can come. But once we're there, you will do exactly what I tell you."

"Agreed," Clark said firmly. Lois turned to glare at him for answering for her and saw the implacable expression on his face. It was an expression she'd never seen on Clark and although all her inclinations were to bring him to heel, something told her that now wasn't the time to argue. She threw the jeep into gear and sped out, heading for the Hob's River Carnival. She found herself praying they would be in time to rescue Nick from whatever it was that had Henderson and Komack so worried.

Illusions of Grandeur was written by Thania St. John

Part 15

It was a good thing the police patrols in the neighborhood of the Hob's Bay Carnival were hunkered down due to the unnatural weather. Explaining why Lois and her companions were racing through the streets of Metropolis at the speed they were going would have wasted time Lois knew they didn't have. Green lightning was slashing through the darkened sky again. The streetlamps with photoelectric sensors had kicked on, making eerie spots of white mist out of the rain and sleet.

Lois threw the wheel over hard as they reached the driveway that led to the carnival. The jeep skidded through the corner, stopping inches from the chained and padlocked gate. A short distance from the gate, a section of the chain link fence was down — the spot the kidnapper's car had driven through to escape the police blockade only two days before. Lois didn't see any other vehicles in the area, but the Carnival covered several acres. Nick's abductors could be anywhere.

"How the devil are we going to find them in here?" Lois asked, finally realizing the futility of their mission.

"If they were druids, they'd head for a hill," Komack said.

Lois frowned. She didn't remember seeing a hill anywhere near the carnival site. In fact, all of New Troy Island was flat.

"But this bunch...?" Komack continued. "As I recall, there's a stone circle not far from here. Some sort of memorial, I think."

"That would make sense," Jackson agreed.

"Then what are we waiting for?" Lois asked, opening her car door.

"Not yet!" Komack hissed, grabbing Lois's shoulder. Lois looked back at her in annoyed confusion. Clark may have agreed they both would take direction from Komack, but that didn't mean that Lois had agreed. She wasn't called 'Mad Dog' for nothing.

"He has a measure of resistance." Komack nodded toward

Clark as she kept a surprisingly strong grip on Lois. "You don't!" the older woman added. She handed Lois an ornate sapphire ring similar to the ones she and Jackson were wearing. "Put this on. It has some power. It may be enough."

Lois slipped the ring on her finger. The metal felt cold and warm all at the same time.

"I call forth the ancient and sacred spirits of the elements, air and fire, water and earth," Komack intoned, keeping hold of Lois's shoulder. "Protect us this day from all evil forces and unfriendly entities. So mote it be."

Jackson repeated the last phrase with her. Clark murmured 'amen' and the sleet and wind seemed to abate just a little. Komack nodded and all four of them took advantage of the lull in the weather to get out of the jeep and run to the protection of the nearest building.

Lois looked over to see Jackson holding a pistol. "Do either of you know how to handle a gun?" Jackson asked. Lois shook her head once and saw that Clark was shaking his head as well. Jackson frowned then handed Lois an automatic pistol. "You've seen how police shoot, haven't you?"

Lois nodded. "Both hands, at eye level. Feet spread for balance."

Jackson nodded. "The safety is off. Do not fire at anything that you do not want dead and aim for the middle of the torso."

"Not for the heart?" Clark asked.

Komack chuckled dryly. "Let's just say that Inspector Henderson would not be well pleased if he knew what sort of ammo we were carrying. A mid-body shot is good enough."

The older woman beckoned them to follow her as she led the way through the maze of cracked asphalt toward the stone circle. Lois found herself shivering despite her wool coat and knit hat. But it wasn't as much the cold, or even the damp, as it was a sense of wrongness, a stench she could just barely sense that made her want to gag. A quick glance at Clark showed that he was feeling it too.

"What's over there?" Clark asked as they passed by one of the storage buildings. He was nodding to another building that seemed to have black or dark brown paint smeared on the doorframe.

Komack led the way across the open space between the buildings. On closer inspection, Lois realized what she had thought were smears were actually symbols crudely painted on the doorframe. She hoped the 'paint' wasn't what she thought it was.

"Black wards," Komack explained. "I really do wish these fools would take the time to learn their craft."

Jackson chuckled. "If they weren't so impatient and prone to taking short cuts, they wouldn't be so prone to becoming black magicians."

"And they wouldn't be so easy to take out?" Clark added.

"Easy' is relative, Mister Kent," Komack said softly as she reached into her pocket and pulled out a small vial filled with white crystals. She popped open the top and sprinkled some of the crystals around the door clockwise. She hummed to herself as she did so. The air in front of the door became palpably lighter and easier to breath. She put the top back on the vial and returned it to her pocket. Then she tried the door.

It swung open on well oiled hinges. Jackson moved ahead of her, holding a flashlight. The room beyond appeared empty except for a small pile of fabric heaped against one wall and a wooden chest.

Clark moved ahead of Lois and went over to the pile to inspect it. "These are kid's clothes. About Nick's size."

Komack touched the pile, fingering the small plaid shirt that was on the top of the pile. "He's close. Very, very close."

Jackson cautiously opened the chest. "I believe all the ransom items are here, except maybe..."

A wail could be heard outside, a child or hurt animal.

“Nick!” Clark ran out the door, Komack and Lois right behind him, into the still raging storm. Lois’s heart was in her mouth as the wail hung on the wind. She knew without seeing him that Jackson was right behind her.

They ran around the corner of the building across the alley then stopped short. Ahead, a shimmering green wall surrounded a circle bounded by stones. Discernable within the shimmer was a stone altar with a small figure laying on it. Four black robed figures stood between Clark and Komack and the altar.

Lois moved forward, toward the wall.

“Lois, No!” she heard Clark yell.

She touched the wall anyway and jumped back with a curse, holding her hand. “It’s hot!”

One of the standing figures turned at the sound of her voice. The man gave her a vicious smile and turned back to what he was doing, arms outstretched over the altar, an ornate knife in one hand. The wind whipped around the wall as if furious it couldn’t get in. There was something familiar about the man who had smiled at her but Lois couldn’t place the face.

“How do we get in?” Lois demanded, shouting over the wind. Clark had moved to the far side, as if anticipating his next move.

“We ground it,” Komack said, shouting back. She had pulled out her dagger. “The blade is meteoric iron,” she explained. She touched the end of the blade to the wall in a downward motion, slicing it open. The wall disappeared with an unholy wail. Clark ran toward the altar and the figure on top of it.

The four black robed figures reacted but Clark was fast and strong. He took out the nearest figure with a shoulder and arm, ignoring the knife he/she had in their hand and knocking them aside. The other three pulled out pistols. Clark’s momentum took him to the altar. He scooped the small robed figure into his arms and kept moving, diving to the muddy ground with the boy under him once they were clear of the circle.

Lois had the pistol Jackson had given her. One of the figures started after Clark, gun in hand. Lois aimed with both hands and pulled the trigger. She was startled by the loud report and the power of the recoil and more startled to see the figure drop as if pole-axed. Two more shots rang out and the last two black robed figures dropped.

The wind grew fiercer and rain began to slash at them once more, viciously pleased to have access to the interior of the circle.

“We have to ground the energy!” Jackson shouted.

“And how do we do that?” Lois shouted back.

Jackson gestured to the blue-bladed sword in his hand. Lois didn’t remember him bringing it with him in the car. She realized he must have taken it from the chest.

“I’ll do it,” Clark announced. His clothes were muddy and his glasses were missing. He handed Nick to Komack and grabbed the hilt of the sword.

“Clark, don’t be crazy!” Lois screamed at him.

He seemed to ignore her as he stepped away from them, raising the sword above his head. The wind seemed to pause, waiting. The sky glowed eerily, as though the energies that had been unleashed had a life of their own and were preparing a final assault.

“I call forth the ancient and sacred spirits of the elements, air and fire, water and earth to defend us. I call forth the rulers of the North, the South, the East, the West to defend us,” Kathryn Komack shouted to the wind, arms outstretched. Her dagger was in her right hand. “I call forth the archangels Michael, Uriel, Gabriel, Raphael to defend us. Ancient creatures of Earth and Sky and Sea, heed your children from the West and CEASE!”

As she shouted the final word of her litany, Clark plunged the sword into the rain soaked earth at his feet. A green-white aurora coalesced with a shrill scream of rage, drawn to the grounded

sword. The air grew thick and Lois felt the foul energy sparking around them. A green aura danced around Clark. His eyes were closed and his lips were moving.

Then Jackson threw something at the sword. Liquid splashed against the metal and the ground. The ground hissed and the sword itself gleamed as if from an inner light. Clark opened his eyes as he took his hands from the sword hilt. There was a look of worried surprise on his face as he walked toward Lois and the others.

The wind dropped to a breeze and the rain slackened, turning into a gentle snow.

“Is Nick okay?” Clark asked. “Were we in time?”

Jackson answered. “Yes, I believe so.”

Nick was snuffing against Komack’s neck. “Where’s Mommy?”

Komack began making comforting noises to the boy.

“Clark, are you okay?” Lois asked. He was looking a little pale and the lack of glasses made his face look both naked and uncannily familiar.

Clark answered her spoken question with a nod.

“Where’s the fourth one?” she asked, looking around.

“I don’t know,” Clark said. “He should have been down for the count. I hit him pretty good.”

“We’ll find him,” Komack promised. “If not now, then when he makes his next move.”

Jackson had been looking around the ground and found Clark’s glasses in the mud. He wiped the worst of the dirt off before handing them back to Clark. Suddenly Clark looked ‘normal’, although Lois couldn’t quite shake the feeling that Clark looked like someone else, too.

Police sirens wailed and halted somewhere close. After a few moments Henderson and several uniformed officers ran up, guns drawn. They skidded to a halt when they saw the black robed bodies on the ground and Nick Thompkins in Komack’s arms.

“Is everyone okay?” Henderson asked. As he approached them, other officers ran and checked the bodies on the muddy ground.

“We’re fine, and we’re pretty sure Nick will be,” Komack told him. “They were trying to raise and bind the spirit of Anthony Blackthorn. We interrupted their ceremony. One of them got away while we were ‘defusing’ the situation. It was rapidly getting out of hand.”

Henderson sighed. “Gee, and I missed all the fun.” Lois wasn’t sure if he was being sarcastic or not. She assumed he was. Then she noticed the glitter of a sapphire ring on his right hand, much like the one Komack had given her. Henderson really was one of them.

“Come down to headquarters and we’ll get your statements,” he continued, apparently not seeing her reaction to his ring. “My people can handle the rest of this.”

Given the circumstances, the statement Henderson asked Lois to sign was astonishingly perfunctory and brief. It said simply that she and Clark had been accompanying two law enforcement agents when Nick Collin’s kidnapers were located. They arrived at the scene before backup could get there and Nick was in imminent danger. A firefight ensued, leaving three of the four alleged perpetrators dead. There was no mention of Lois firing a gun, nor was there any mention of the green energy barrier.

“Henderson, why did you leave out the part about the magic circle?” Lois asked. “I did see it, you know, and so did Clark. It zapped me when I touched it.”

“I know you and Clark both saw it,” Henderson said. “I also know you’d be a damned fool if you tell anyone about it, outside of those who already know. And I know you’re no fool.

Ambitious, headstrong, infernally curious, yes. But not stupid.”

“But the world, the public, has the right to know that magic is

real and it can kill..." Lois protested.

"Lois, trust me on this one. The public doesn't want to know," Henderson said. "I guarantee you, if you try to put that in your story, it'll never see print."

"You're talking censorship?"

He raised his hands in self defense. "Not me," he protested mildly. "I think the public should know the truth. But I also know there's truth and there's Truth. And the common, everyday people of Metropolis don't want to hear the truth that there's more to reality than the daily grind and misbehaving celebrities. Superman was stretching the envelope."

"I never took you for such a cynic," Lois commented.

"I'm just passing along the advice I got from my sergeant the first time I ran across something as bizarre as this," Henderson told her. "Don't admit to being able to see auras, or ghosts, or to hearing things other people can't. At best, you'll be considered a weirdo and at worst, a certifiable nut case. Neither works well as a career move. Like I said, Superman was pushing the envelope big time. And he was an alien."

Lois sat back and considered his advice for a long moment. "How long have you been involved with these people?"

"The Brotherhood? From the first week I made detective," Henderson told her. "That was more than twenty years ago. My first real case involved an energy vampire. Not like the ones the psychologists talk about, but a real one. She was draining college students, leaving them in comas, and worse. There wasn't a mark on them. But the energy production in their cells had been so badly disrupted there was nothing left to keep them alive. We all thought it was some new recreational drug with really bad side effects. I went undercover to smoke out the dealer. Instead, I found her."

"What happened?" Lois asked. She was having a hard time imagining Henderson as a young man going undercover on a college campus in the seventies.

"I see things other people normally don't," Henderson said. "I noticed a woman with an unusually strong, unusually configured, energy field around her. She came after me. It got ugly. Sergeant Gaines shot her before she could kill me. The official report was that she was coming at me with a drug injector filled with whatever it was she'd been using to kill the kids. Unofficially, she came at me with her hands, trying to touch me, like in that one Star Trek episode. Then he introduced me to the Brotherhood."

"Gaines was a member of this 'club'?"

Henderson nodded. "As far as the rest of the department is concerned, the Azure Brotherhood is an international fraternal organization, kind of like the Emerald Society, only most of our members are people who have experienced the more bizarre aspects of law enforcement and aberrant psychology. My co-workers know that if I'm wearing my sapphire ring something weird's afoot. Something they don't really want to get in the middle of. If you and Clark were officers under my command, I would probably have already approached you to join."

"I'm not one of your people," Lois reminded him.

"I know." He seemed deep in thought for a few moments then handed her a sheet of folded over paper. "Kathryn and Doug let you go along with them because Esther did 'readings' on you and Clark and determined you two could probably handle it. They told me to use my own judgment before passing along her other findings to you."

Lois unfolded the sheet and skimmed it. It was a list of four names. Loiset de Lynmoran; Sir Charles Beaufort — Abbot, Acre Abbey; Lucinda Lyons; Calvin Kearney.

"Who are they?"

"Supposedly, two of the previous incarnations of you and Clark," Henderson told her. "You might want to look them up. Esther thought it was important."

"You really believe in this stuff?"

He shrugged. "You're the one who saw the power circle. And it was Clark who knew how to ground the energies without being told how."

"It'll take a while, but Rose is going to recover," Clark told Lois as he settled at his desk. Lois was already well started on the story. As per Henderson's prediction, Perry hadn't wanted to hear the facts as she knew them about the black magicians, the green shimmer of energy, or the Azure Brotherhood.

"Now Lois honey, I know you think you saw it, and maybe you really did," Perry had said. "But this isn't the Whisper or the X-Beat. We don't cover vampires, or werewolves, or demons from hell unless you have scientific evidence of it. And Lois, you don't."

"You believed in Superman without scientific evidence," Lois reminded him. He was being obstructive and she knew he knew it.

"That was different. He lifted the module into space in front of hundreds of witnesses and dozens of cameras and then he flew in the window here with you in his arms in front of the entire newsroom staff," Perry had said. "This is different and we both know it." With that, Perry headed to his office as she tried to think of a different angle she could use on the story, one that didn't mention magic working in the real world. She was still working on it when Clark appeared.

"What took you so long?" Lois asked. She'd head back to the newsroom as she as she was done with Henderson.

"Komack, Jackson, and Henderson wanted to debrief me on what happened," Clark explained. "You'd already left."

"Sorry, but I wanted to get started writing this up," Lois said. She felt a pang of guilt at having left him at police headquarters, but he hadn't been waiting for her by the car the way they had agreed. "Perry doesn't believe I saw what I saw," she added.

"Well, it is pretty unbelievable," Clark told her.

"More unbelievable than Superman?"

Clark shrugged. "Yes. He was an alien. That's actually more believable for most people than the 'other' stuff."

"So, you're okay with Perry refusing to let us tell the whole story?" Lois challenged.

"I didn't say that," Clark said. "But I think the whole 'black magicians in the real world' thing needs to be handled very carefully. Luckily there aren't very many of them. At least not many that can actually do much besides give magick a bad name."

"So that's the tack you think we need to take? That Nick and Rose were abducted by nut cases?" She was having a hard time believing that Clark would cave to the status quo so easily.

"Lois, they were nut cases, even if we don't have an official diagnosis," Clark said seriously. "They were a cabal of serial killers. They thought they could bring back a dead person by committing murder. Normal people don't do things like that."

Lois breathed slowly, forcing air in and out of her nose as Master Hong had taught her. Getting angry at Clark for being another voice of reason wasn't going to do either of them any good even though she wanted to yell at him for assuming she would follow Komack and Jackson blindly even if it was to get the exclusive. She also wanted to yell at him for risking his life, again.

"So, what did happen there?" Lois asked, trying to keep her voice level. "Not the version Perry's going to get, but the real thing?"

"I honestly don't know," Clark admitted. "They raised some seriously dangerous energies. When Jackson said it needed to be grounded, it was like I knew exactly what he meant and what I needed to do. I knew it. And I knew that Komack was going to invoke the elements and angels and I knew the strike to ground

had to coordinate with her spell.”

“And did you know that it wouldn’t kill you?” Lois hissed. “People get killed by lightning, you know.”

“I know that,” Clark said. “But I also knew I had the strength to do it.”

He made it sound so simple, so obvious. He was so stupidly brave he was going to end up dead. Superman had been the same way and he was dead.

“I’m going to finish this up,” she told him. “We’ll do a follow up as soon as the police release more information.” When she left MPD headquarters, the identities of the dead, two men and one woman, hadn’t yet been established. The three dead had been naked beneath the black robes. They had no identification on them. No cars had been found, although there had been tire tracks.

Henderson had predicted it would take at least twenty-four hours to positively identify the three, assuming there was a previous record of them in the U.S. The tire tracks were too common to trace in the city the size of Metropolis. Her description of the one that got away had been too vague to be helpful although she couldn’t shake the feeling she had seen him before.

Perry had been very pleased with the story she and Clark had finally turned in, even turning a blind eye to Lois’s description of Rose and Nick’s abductors as ‘black-robed sorcerers’. A minor victory, considering everything.

“Henderson gave me a list of names to look up,” Lois told Clark as they were leaving the newsroom for the day.

“Loisette de Lynmoran; Sir Charles Beaufort, Abbot of Acre Abbey; Lucinda Lyons; Calvin Kearney,” Clark quoted.

“Henderson gave me the same list,” he explained. “Apparently we’re part of the same soul group. We tend to get reincarnated together. At least that’s how Jackson explained it.”

“So, who are these people?”

“Legend has it that Sir Charles was one of the founders of the Azure Brotherhood,” Clark said. “The story is that he was a Robin Hood type character called ‘the Fox’. He went into exile with his people to keep them from being massacred by Baron Bayard Tempos who had designs on Beaufort’s lands and Beaufort’s betrothed, Loisette de Lynmoran. Beaufort fought in the first crusade, became a Templar when Payns founded the order. Later he took up a more contemplative life and the study of things the Church would have deemed heretical had it known about them.”

“Sounds like my kind of guy,” Lois joked. “What happened to Loisette?”

“Her history isn’t quite as well documented. Apparently she married Baron Tempos as part of the deal to save Beaufort’s life and those of his people after the Fox fell into one of Tempos’s traps. But when she failed to provide Tempos with a male heir, he sent her away to a convent. Supposedly she ended up running the place.”

Against her will she found herself interested in the tale he was telling. “And Charles and Loisette were never together again?” Lois asked.

“It doesn’t seem likely,” Clark said.

“How very sad,” Lois said. “What about the other two? Lucinda and Calvin?”

“I haven’t had the chance to look them up,” Clark told her. “I’m not even sure what time period they are.”

“Clark, do you believe we were those people?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “A lot of cultures believe in the transmigration of souls, past lives. I’ve read that even the early Christians didn’t discount it until about the time of the first Council of Nicaea.”

Lois sighed as she maneuvered the jeep through the Thursday

afternoon traffic. They weren’t too far from the New Troy Medical Arts Building where Clark had his standing appointment with Doctor Friskin.

“What are you planning on telling Doctor Friskin about today?” Lois asked.

“I don’t know, yet,” Clark admitted. “Probably nothing.”

Lois nodded. “Has anything...?”

“...Come back? Not really, except in dreams and those are just confusing,” Clark said.

“Dreams usually are,” Lois said. “Superman shows up in mine. Sometimes it’s so real it’s almost like I can grab him and drag him back with me and other times...” She let her voice fade away. Sometimes she dreamed of making love to Superman only to wake up panting and needing release. Other times she woke up with her pillow soaked with tears. She wasn’t sure which dream was worse.

“In my dreams, I’m flying like I’ve done it all my life,” Clark said. “Flying like Superman. Sometimes you’re with me and other times I hear you calling, but I can’t get back to you; I can’t find you.”

“And what does Friskin say about your dreams?”

“That I need to find my own meaning.”

“And what do you think they mean?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe that I’m not as worried about losing Superman as I am about not being able to be there for you if you need me?” His mood was somber and she saw him studying her reaction out of the corner of her eye.

“Clark, you’re my friend and my partner. You’ll be there,” she told him. “So, what are you doing after your session with Friskin?”

“Heading over to the Chows for self-defense lessons,” Clark reminded her. “Plus Chen mentioned something about an investigation he was working on.”

“What sort of investigation?”

Clark chuckled. “Like I’m going to tell you so you can grab it and run with it?”

“Would I...?” Lois began then she caught the bemused grin on Clark’s face. “Don’t answer that, Clark,” she warned.

“Besides, I’m going to be too busy tomorrow with the Laderman trial to worry about some investigation into the local fortune cookie factory for the Chinatown Weekly.”

“Chen is the editor of the Chinatown Daily, Lois,” Clark corrected.

“Whatever.”

Lois pulled the jeep into the loading zone in front of Friskin’s building. Clark opened the car door to get out.

“Clark? If it’s not too late when you’re all done, maybe you can stop by and we can talk about this penchant of yours for running into dangerous situations...”

Clark gave her an incredulous look. “My penchant?”

“Superman isn’t with us anymore. You don’t have to try to take up his cape.”

“I wasn’t planning to,” Clark told her, closing the door behind him. “But I’ll come over...if it’s not too late.”

Lois settled down to watch *An Affair to Remember* playing on AMC. It was getting near to the time that Clark should be getting done with his class at Master Chow’s dojang. Lois had spent the evening thinking about what had happened, about Clark and the sword and the black magicians who had taken Nick and Rose. About Henderson and the Azure Brotherhood and how comfortable Clark seemed with the whole idea that there were people out there who had mysterious powers.

Superman had mysterious powers, but he had been an alien and above human frailties — jealousy, hate, vengeance, greed. He was the epitome of goodness. Reverend Leroy had described him as an angel. Maybe Leroy had been right — maybe Superman

had been an angel sent to Earth.

She knew that line of thought wasn't going to get her anywhere. It was a path she had traced and retraced ever since his funeral, ever since she had come to some degree of acceptance that Superman wasn't coming back, that his last promise to her had been one he couldn't keep.

On the screen Cary Grant was chatting up Deborah Kerr. Was it possible to have a love develop so quickly but was also so deep it seemed to transcend time and space? She had thought she loved Superman that way. He was an alien but she had loved him anyway.

"They are both old souls. They've trod this path many, many times. Almost always together," Esther had said, referring to her and Clark.

"We're part of the same soul group. We tend to get reincarnated together," Clark had explained. Lois opened the book on reincarnation she had bought on her way home and looked up what it said about soul groups and soul mates.

Part 16

"Lois Lane, I love you," Clark said. He was looking at her with eyes full of passion.

"Oh, Clark, you don't know how long I've waited to hear you say those words," she told him. She wanted him so badly, to have his lips on hers, to have his hands on her body, caressing her skin and hair, exploring her innermost secrets.

"But you're not yourself, and so I couldn't take advantage of this situation and... Oh, what the..." she muttered to herself as she threw caution to the wind. She knew she wasn't likely to get a second chance. She threw herself into his arms and kissed him. He returned her kiss with equal passion and shivers ran down her spine. His kiss was everything she had dreamed, everything she had wanted. And she wanted. She took his hand and led him to her bedroom. The room was ablaze with candlelight.

Without quite knowing how, she found her self naked on the bed, waiting. She studied his bare chiseled chest, broad shoulders, strong legs. She beckoned for him to shed his silk boxers and join her. He turned his back to her as he pulled off the boxers, giving her a view of his perfectly formed back and buttocks.

"Come here, Superman..."

She woke with a start to discover it was dark in her room and she was alone. 'Come here, Superman...?' If dreams were a reflection of the subconscious, then hers had a very active imagination.

Come here, Superman...

It had been Clark who had been in her dream. Mister Greenjeans, the hack from Podunk, her partner who she was afraid to go to the next level with.

Come here, Superman...

Clark's face without his glasses had seemed so un-Clark-like and yet so familiar. Black hair, brown eyes, Mister Hard-body, a bit more than six-feet tall...

"You've lost part of yourself and you don't know if you'll ever find that part again..." Esther had said to Clark.

It made a bizarre sort of sense. Superman had appeared in Metropolis only days after Clark was hired at the Daily Planet. Clark had seemed to have the ability to locate Superman, even though no one knew where the superhero hung out when he wasn't out on rescues or answering alarms.

Clark lost his memory the day Superman went out to deal with Nightfall and, apparently, failed to return. It was Superman that was missing from Clark's memories. Superman.

In Smallville, Clark had fallen ill, and gotten hurt — a paper cut. His reaction had been one of astonishment. Then the late unlamented Jason Trask beat Clark bloody, claiming there was a green glowing crystal that could kill Superman. Lois had dubbed

the mystery substance 'kryptonite' and had believed at the time it was a fiction created by a mad man. But Clark had felt ill when Luthor unveiled the statue with the piece of green glowing asteroid on it. And Clark had reacted badly when Constance blew kryptonite laced drugs into his face.

It was a puzzle and she finally had enough of the pieces to make out the picture. Clark Kent was Superman?

She felt her ire rise. Clark was Superman and he hadn't told her? The biggest story of her life and he hadn't shared it? I'll kill him!

Eugene Laderman's trial was set to resume at nine AM. The case was expected to go to the jury sometime today.

Lois left a message for Perry to remind him that despite the events of the past week, she was still on the story and would be in to write it up as soon as she could. She'd been covering the story every since it broke. Eugene Laderman, meek, mousy computer programmer, had confessed to having an affair with his boss's wife and murdering the aforesaid husband. It was a cut and dried case, except that Laderman had recanted his confession.

One good point about the trial — it was keeping her out of the newsroom so she wouldn't have to face Clark until she had calmed down a bit. Clark was Superman and he didn't tell me.

There weren't many people in the courtroom. Interest had died down after the initial sensationalism and it wasn't an important case except to the principals.

Laderman was sitting next to his lawyer looking for all the world like a dog who couldn't understand why he was in a cage at the pound. All that was missing was the heart-rending whimper.

Judge Green looked grim, but then Green always looked dour. He looked over to the jury foreman. "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, have you reached a verdict?"

"We have, your honor."

Green read the verdict note then had it handed back to the foreman. "To the charge of murder in the first degree: guilty as charged," the foreman read. "To the charge of murder in the second degree: guilty as charged. To the charge of arson in the first degree: guilty as charged."

Lois noticed Detective Betty Reed sitting behind the District Attorney. She was smiling, nodding to her partner. Lois knew that this was the first homicide Reed had taken to court. The woman was justifiably proud of herself.

Judge Green finally looked over at Laderman. "Mister Laderman, before this court imposes sentence, do you have anything to say?"

Laderman's voice was shaking when he answered. "I'm innocent."

If Green felt any sympathy for the man standing at the defendant's table, it didn't show. The sentence was a foregone conclusion. New Troy law sentencing guidelines gave judges and juries little leeway in first degree murder sentences — life with or without parole or the death penalty. And the death penalty was currently suspended until another Supreme Court ruling.

"It is the decision of this court that Eugene Laderman be immediately transported to the Metropolis Maximum Security Prison to begin serving a term of life without the possibility of parole."

Laderman had been pale before the sentence was handed down. Now he was positively ashen. He looked back at Lois as two bailiffs appeared to take him away. Laderman's lawyer just shook his head.

Lois hurried out of the courtroom and headed to where she knew Laderman would be held until the prison van could be brought around. She knew the bailiff standing in front of the door — Ben Wilkey. They'd gone to high school together and he'd

proven to be a reliable source on matters within the courthouse.

"It's against the rules," Ben stated when she asked him to open the keypad locked door so she could talk to Laderman.

"Don't tell me what the rules are, Ben," Lois reminded him. "I've broken every one of them before."

"I can't let you in there, Lois."

"But you know me. I've been covering this trial for months. I just want to get a statement," Lois said, trying to reassure him.

"It's against the..."

He was being stubborn but she knew his weakness. Even in high school she'd known what it took to get his cooperation on anything. "You still a football fan?"

He eyed her speculatively. Ben obviously remembered.

"Depends on where I'm sitting."

Lois reached into her purse and pulled out two tickets for the Metropolis Tigers' game in two days time. She'd gotten them from her friend Louie and had been planning to offer them to Clark and Jimmy. But she was mad at Clark at the moment and what Jimmy didn't know wouldn't hurt him. "How about the fifty yard line?"

"Ten minutes." He keyed in the combination to the door and it clicked open. They stepped inside to the small room beyond. It was empty.

Within minutes Reed and her partner and a whole contingent of uniformed officers were searching the building for the escape prisoner.

Reed glowered at Ben as she asked him and Lois details of what they observed. "And when the door opened...?"

"He was gone," Lois answered simply.

A technician walked up to Reed, notepad in hand. "He accessed the code number from the central courtroom computer. And the evidence room was broken into. A gun is missing."

"Detective Reed, I don't think that..." Ben began.

"You don't think, period," Reed spat. "I'll be mentioning the fact that you opened the door for Ms. Lane in my report."

"It wasn't his fault. I... made him do it," Lois protested. Ben was a good guy and she really didn't want him to get into trouble, besides he was a source and good sources needed to be taken care of.

"He wasn't following procedure," Reed told her sternly. "You're free to go. For now."

"Thank you," Lois said. She looked to Ben, shrugging her apology.

She had parked her jeep in front of the courthouse, and there was a ticket on her windshield for her trouble. She grabbed the ticket, stuffed it in her purse, opened the door of the jeep and climbed in.

Lois started up the car then looked into the rear view mirror. There was a shape in the back seat. It shifted and she whirled around in her seat to see Eugene Laderman sitting in the back seat. The gun he was holding was quite visible.

"Drive," Laderman ordered.

"Eugene! What are you doing?" Lois demanded.

"Just... drive..."

Lois pulled the jeep from the curb and pulled into a near-by alley, out of sight.

"Eugene, this isn't going to work. Everyone's looking for you," Lois said.

"I said drive." He waved the gun for emphasis but Lois noticed his hand was shaking.

"I know what you said, Eugene. Now give me that gun before you get into even more trouble."

He handed Lois the gun and she locked it in the glove compartment.

"I never would have..." Laderman said meekly.

"I know you wouldn't," Lois assured him. Her first interview with Laderman had been early in the trial. Her first impression

was that he was a very mild, gentle man, incapable of the crime he had been accused of.

"Ms. Lane. You're the only one I can turn to," he said. There was desperation in his voice. "You know all the evidence against me was circumstantial. You know I didn't kill Henry Harrison."

"Eugene, I believe you're innocent. But you're also an escaped felon now, 'armed and dangerous'. What are you going to do?" Lois asked.

"I don't know except..." he paused. "I have to see Lena. Something's wrong. She didn't look at me during the trial. She never visited me in jail."

"Eugene, you were convicted of killing her husband," Lois reminded him.

"But she loves me! And I love her. Please. I have to talk to her. Help me," he pleaded.

"I'll do what I can," Lois promised. Then she promptly wondered what she was getting herself into this time — and what Clark would do.

"Convicted Killer Escapes" the Daily Planet's headline said. Lois had called the story in as soon as she'd been able to and Clark had put the finishing touches on it. So far, she'd been able to avoid explaining what it took so long for her to get to the office. The last thing she wanted was for Perry or Clark to find out what she'd done — aiding and abetting an escaped felon.

"Lois, you doing a follow-up on Eugene Laderman's escape?" Perry asked her. She was staring at the paper on the conference table. There were head shots of Eugene Laderman, Henry Harrison, and Lena Harrison below the headline. It was shameless exploitation of a miserable situation.

"Lois?" Perry said more loudly. "You with us?"

She shook herself. "On it, Chief."

"Bummed out over the verdict?" Clark asked gently, leaning close to her.

"The man is innocent," she stated firmly. "He's no more a cold-blooded killer than I am."

"Man signed a confession, didn't he?" Perry asked.

"He was under duress when he signed it, didn't even have his attorney present."

"Lois, the guy shot his boss, then set fire to the room to try and hide the evidence," Clark reminded her.

"Fingerprints on the gun," Jimmy added. "His clothes had Harrison's blood on them. Not to mention that he and Harrison's wife were 'doing the deed'."

"Jimmy, it's okay to have an affair when your husband is a brutal sociopath," Lois said, even though her argument sounded bizarre as soon as she said it.

"No, it's not. It's not okay," Clark said but Lois noticed he seemed as distracted as she was. "Assuming it's true," he added.

"What's true?" Perry asked him.

"That they're having an affair," Clark answered. There was something odd with the way he said it and Lois knew Perry had picked up on it too. Lois had the feeling Clark wasn't referring to Laderman and Mrs. Harrison.

"Well, you know, when Priscilla left Elvis, February '72, she went straight into the arms of her karate instructor, Mike Stone, also married at the time. The King was devastated — he was the one who introduced Priscilla to Mike a year before," Perry said.

Lois tried to head him off. "Chief, forgive me, but I am not in the mood for another Elvis yarn. Besides, what does Elvis Presley have to do with an innocent man fighting for his life?"

Perry gave her a hurt look. "You're not in the mood for an Elvis yarn?"

Lois forced herself to remain patient. "Chief, Eugene and Lena...?"

"Speak of the devil..." Jimmy murmured, nodding toward the newsroom.

Lois looked out the conference room windows to see a well dressed forty-something woman coming down the ramp from the elevators — Lena Harrison.

Perry hurried everyone out of the conference room then ushered Mrs. Harrison inside to Lois. Clark moved to leave as well but Lois caught his sleeve. Instead of leaving, he closed the door and helped Mrs. Harrison to a chair at the end of the table. The woman appeared distraught.

Lois and Clark settled in on opposite sides of the table.

“I’m very worried. I haven’t heard from him,” Lena began. She took Lois’s hand and Lois had to fight the urge to take it back.

“Eugene wrote to me, told me how much he trusted you,” Lena continued. “You were the only one who believed in him.”

Lois glanced at Clark to check his reaction. His face was carefully bland and she suspected he felt the same odd vibes that she did.

“What can we do for you?” Lois asked carefully.

“They’ll find him,” Lena said. “They’ll track him down and kill him. Please write something in the paper. I know he’ll read it. Tell him that if he really loves me he’ll turn himself in. There’s the appeal... there’s always hope.” The older woman broke down in tears, daubing her eyes with a monogrammed handkerchief.

“Mrs. Harrison, I know this must be very difficult for you...” Clark began. His voice was calm and soothing, almost professionally so, and Lois wondered why she had never noticed it before. It was exactly the same tone she had heard Superman use to calm accident and violence victims. ‘It’s going to be okay.’

“My husband was a violent and cruel man,” Lena was saying. “There were nights, so many nights, that I thought... God forgive me... if only he were dead, then Eugene and I... He did it for me. And when I think about him, out there, alone, hunted... I hope he’s all right.”

The conference room door opened and Perry stuck his head in. “Uh Lois? Can I see you outside for a moment?”

Lois finally disengaged her hand from Lena’s and stood up. Lena stood as well, whipping away her tears.

“I have to be going anyway,” Lena said.

“We’ll write the story,” Lois promised.

“Thank you.”

Lois watched her head for the elevators before heading out into the newsroom. Clark headed to the coffee corner, leaving Lois alone with Perry. The older man jerked his head to indicate the woman sitting at Lois’s desk. The woman was watching Mrs. Harrison leave the newsroom. Then she stood and turned around.

“Detective Reed,” Lois gulped. Reed was the last person she wanted to see at the moment.

“Ms. Lane,” Reed greeted her. She nodded toward the elevators. “Lena Harrison have anything interesting to say?”

“She’s worried about Eugene,” Lois told. “She wants us to write an article telling him to turn himself in.”

“Good idea,” Reed agreed but Lois could tell the officer wasn’t enthusiastic about the idea. “We’ve been tailing her since last night.”

“No sign of Eugene?”

Reed glowered. “The fugitive is still at large.”

Perry stepped in. “Is there something specific we can help you with, Detective?”

“Well, no, not really. It just seemed to me that during the trial, Ms. Lane and the escaped felon became, well... friendly-like,” Reed told him.

“I’m a journalist. I covered the trial,” Lois reminded her.

“Yes. And, of course, I’m not a journalist, but it did seem to me that your articles seemed slanted toward proclaiming his innocence,” Reed pointed out. “I was wondering if you might have any information as to the whereabouts of Mr. Laderman.” She gave Lois a pointed look. “He hasn’t called you, has he?”

“No. He hasn’t called me,” Lois said. It wasn’t a lie.

Laderman hadn’t called her. He had stowed away in her jeep.

“Well, just in case, if you do hear from him, give me a call, will you?” Reed asked. She handed Lois her business card and turned to leave. She turned back, almost as an afterthought.

“Don’t worry, Ms. Lane. I brought him in once, I’ll do it again. Dead or alive.”

Lois stared after her. She hoped against all hope that Laderman wouldn’t do anything stupid — aside from the stupid things he’d already done. Reed was a good cop and a good detective. If given time, she would certainly find Laderman and chances where that he would end up dead.

She spotted Clark heading back to his desk with a fresh cup of coffee. He looked so innocent, even though he had lied to her every day since the first time they met. At the moment that didn’t matter. She grabbed him by the sleeve and pulled him into a quiet spot in the newsroom.

“Tell me the biggest secret you have,” she ordered.

“What?” Clark’s eyes were wide in confusion.

“Tell me the biggest secret you have. Something you’d never reveal to a living soul.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m about to tell you the biggest one I have, and I need blackmail material,” she told him.

“I can’t,” Clark protested. He was looking at her as if she’d lost her mind.

“Spill it!” she ordered.

“Okay,” Clark conceded slowly. “The truth is... my mother might be having an affair with a younger man.”

“Not big enough,” Lois came back.

“What?” Clark nearly squeaked. “My Mom and Dad have been married for thirty years.” He seemed incensed that she didn’t consider his ‘secret’ to be important enough. She had almost hoped he would confess to having been Superman. Not that he was likely to. Clark didn’t remember being Superman.

“Okay, okay,” Lois said. “What I’m about to tell you cannot be repeated. Swear it.”

“I swear...”

“On the lives of your future grandchildren,” Lois added.

Clark looked annoyed. “Hit me.”

“And no matter what I tell you, you can’t do anything about it.”

“Got it.”

Lois took a deep breath. “Eugene Laderman is hiding out in my apartment.”

Clark stared at her a long moment then went to his desk, picked up the phone handset and handed it to her.

“What are you doing?” Lois asked. Handing her the phone certainly wasn’t the reaction she had expected from him.

“You are calling the police. Or I will,” he told her firmly.

She grabbed the handset from him and slammed it down. “You swore!”

“Lois...”

“On your future grandchildren!”

“Lois, you can’t make me swear to something that’s illegal. You’re harboring a fugitive... A murderer. The man is dangerous. He killed Harrison. He could kill you.”

“He’s innocent,” Lois protested.

“He was tried and convicted by a jury of his peers.”

“Truth and justice was Superman’s gig, okay?” Lois shot back. “I shouldn’t have told you in the first place, but... I’m your partner, right?”

“When it’s convenient for you, yes,” Clark told her.

“Come to my apartment. Talk to him. If you still feel that he’s a murderer... then you can call the police,” she offered. “Deal?” She desperately wanted Clark in on this. As independent as she considered herself, there was something comfortable and

reassuring about having back-up.

She watched as Clark considered her offer. She could tell he was on the verge of acquiescing. Finally, he nodded and she gave a silent sigh of relief.

Laderman was right where Lois had left him — sitting on her sofa, looking like a kicked puppy.

Clark was obviously not impressed with Laderman's demeanor. Sympathy was out of the question at the moment. He had begun by asking the same pointed questions the D.A. had asked or, in some cases, should have asked.

"You were heard having an argument the day before he was killed," Clark said.

"That's true, but..." Laderman began.

"And you admit that you hated him?"

"It was the way he treated Lena," Laderman said. He was wringing his hands and Lois wanted to stop Clark's line of questioning except she also knew he needed to satisfy himself as to Laderman's sincerity.

"You were having an affair with his wife," Clark pointed out. There was a surprising amount of asperity in her voice.

"It wasn't an affair," Laderman said. "We were in love, but Lena didn't want to consummate it until..."

"You killed him?" Clark interrupted.

"No. Until she left him," Laderman corrected. "You didn't know him. Lena would come to work with bruises on her."

Lois could tell that Clark still wasn't convinced. The idea that Laderman had been 'seeing' a married woman seemed to bother him. 'My mother might be having an affair with a younger man,' Clark had told her as his secret. Martha having an affair? No wonder Clark was acting so wound up.

"Tell Clark about Henry," Lois ordered Laderman. She needed to get the questioning away from Laderman's relationship with Lena Harrison.

"He developed his own software and started his own company after he got fired from LexCorp," Laderman told them.

That piqued Clark's curiosity. "He worked for Lex Luthor?"

Laderman nodded. "For twenty years. He was fired a month before he was eligible to retire with a full pension," he said. "His company wasn't making it. That's what I think drove Henry crazy."

"What do you mean, crazy?" Lois asked.

"He was difficult at best. That's probably why the company wasn't doing well. He was a genius but... One day I found a program he was working on... the Ides Of Metropolis. When he discovered that I'd seen it he went berserk, threatening me, threatening Lena. I was really afraid he'd gone off the deep end."

"Why did Lena testify as a witness for the prosecution?" Clark asked.

"She was subpoenaed. She had to tell the truth. And the truth was there was no way she could prove I didn't kill her husband," Laderman explained.

"She thinks you did it. She said so today," Clark told him.

Laderman looked shocked. "You saw Lena?"

Lois nodded. "She came to the Planet. It's a good thing you didn't go to her house last night — she's being tailed by the police."

Laderman went pale. Obviously he had planned on seeing Mrs. Harrison sometime soon. Lois wasn't convinced that was a good idea. Something about Lena Harrison had simply seemed wrong and Lois recalled having the same intuition about the woman the first time they met after Lena gave her testimony at Laderman's trial.

Lois stood and stretched. "I'll make some more coffee." Clark followed her into the kitchen. He moved to her phone and handed it to her.

"Make the call," Clark ordered.

"Clark, I can't do that!"

Clark glared at her. "Lois! We had a deal. I haven't heard a single thing that makes me feel he's less guilty or less of a threat to you."

"Clark. Please," Lois pleaded. "I'm sure about this."

"You're always sure," Clark reminded her.

"Two days. Give me forty-eight hours," Lois bargained. "The man's going to prison for life."

He was obviously torn between his wish for Lois to wash her hands of Laderman and his dedication to the truth. Lois wondered why she hadn't noticed it before. Even as plain old Clark Kent, he was dedicated to truth and justice. After a long moment, Clark's shoulders slumped just a little. Another round to Lois Lane. She heard the shuffle of feet behind Clark and looked over to see Laderman standing in the doorway, a pained, even guilty expression on his face.

"Eugene... what is it?" Lois asked.

"Lena told you that I killed Henry?" Laderman asked. He sounded like he didn't quite believe what he'd been told, or that he was asking the question.

"She said you did it for her," Lois told him.

Laderman turned away, his rounded shoulders slumped even further. Lois glanced at Clark and saw his expression turn curious. There was something very odd happening here. She walked around Laderman to look him in the face.

"Eugene, I think you better tell us the truth," Lois said.

"Lena was right about one thing. I did do it for her."

"You killed Harrison?" Lois asked.

"No. I originally confessed, then later refused to take the stand to protect her."

"Lena?" Clark asked.

"Yes. She's the one who did it," Laderman said. "She killed her husband."

The Ides of Metropolis was written by Deborah Joy LeVine

Part 17

Lois studied Clark as she sipped her morning's cup of coffee. He was looking through the information that Lois had already collected on the Harrison murder case — forensics reports, police reports, depositions. It was obvious that he wasn't happy at agreeing to give her forty-eight hours to make her case, but at least he had granted her that much of a concession.

On the drive back to the Planet the evening before, he had told her why he hadn't come by after his self-defense class. His father had shown up unannounced, claiming that his wife of thirty years was having an affair with a younger man. As proof, Jonathan had brought along a painting he'd found hidden in the barn — a painting of Martha in the nude. Clark had actually blushed when he told Lois about it.

"That's not exactly proof, you know," Lois had pointed out.

"Tell that to my father," he had said with a snort.

Jimmy dropped a pile of paper on the table. "Transcripts from the trial," he announced. "I'd have more but the network's on the blink."

"Thanks, Jimmy. Nice work," Lois told the younger man as she started to skim over the document. "Stay on Lena today, all right?"

Jimmy nodded and looked over at Clark. He was glowering at the world in general and Lois in particular as he picked up his own coffee.

She glared back. It was a game two could play. He lied to her.

"I'm sorry. I can't help the way I feel. Just because Eugene said Lena killed her husband, doesn't mean she did," Clark said after a moment.

"Clark Kent... since when did you become such a cynic?" Lois asked, only half-joking. "I'm usually the one saying 'hogwash'. What happened to that bright-eyed bushy-tailed

Kansas boy I once knew?”

Jimmy chuckled. “Maybe he’s been hanging around ‘Mad Dog’ Lane too much.”

Lois turned her glare on him. He gulped and tip-toed away to safety.

“Or, maybe... he found out that his perfect little world isn’t so perfect?” she commented, turning her attention back to Clark. “How’s your Dad?”

“Okay. I hope.”

“You know my Mom and Dad got divorced when I was a teenager,” she told him. It wasn’t something she talked much about. It really wasn’t anybody else’s business.

“How’d you take it?”

She shrugged. “I pretended that it didn’t bother me. A lot of the girls I went to school with came from broken homes,” she said. “But, it did. Bother me. Affected me. More than I thought.”

They fell into silence, each one with their own thoughts. When her own parents split up, it hadn’t happened overnight. There had been arguments, hateful remarks, reconciliations, promises made and broken. Then her mother fell into a bottle and her father had an affair. She was never sure which one was the final straw — her father’s distaste at coming home to a drunkard or her mother’s anger at being abandoned when her husband chose the bed of another woman. She had never forgiven Mrs. DiMarco for breaking up an already shaky marriage.

“Lois, I’m worried about you,” Clark said, breaking into her unsavory thoughts. “I’m uncomfortable with Eugene staying in your apartment.”

“I’m not going to turn him in. Not now,” Lois said firmly. “Lena Harrison is guilty and I intend to prove it.”

“I’m with you,” Clark told her. He made a show of checking his watch. “For the next 34 hours.”

Harritech Computers occupied a large converted warehouse on the outskirts of the city. The large parking lot was virtually empty as Lois drove past the empty security kiosk.

The inside of the building was also nearly empty. Light rectangles on the walls showed where pictures and awards once hung. The dark interior hallways were stacked with file boxes and computer hardware. There was one office with the lights still on — Harrison’s own office.

Seated inside was a middle aged woman in a dark suit, Henry Harrison’s personal assistant, Patricia Bird.

“No one knew Mr. Harrison better than I did. I was his personal secretary for fifteen years,” Bird explained. “He was a genius, you know.”

“We’ve interviewed several people who also say he was a tyrant,” Lois said.

“He had a company to run. It wasn’t easy, starting his own line of software,” Bird stated defensively “And then, to find out that Lena and Eugene were... he didn’t deserve to be two-timed.”

“There was some evidence that indicated Harrison was abusive toward his wife,” Lois told her.

“Nonsense. He loved her,” Bird scoffed. “He would never touch a hair on her head. In his will, he left her everything. All the stock...”

“The debts...” Lois added.

“That’s not fair,” Bird protested. “All these accusations against Mr. Harrison. He’s not here to defend himself.”

“No, he’s not,” Clark stated pointedly.

“Henry Harrison had a heart of gold. One morning he found a homeless man sleeping in the generator room. He got him a cot. Brought him food. Does that sound like a monster to you?”

“Where is this homeless man now?” Lois asked “We’d like to talk to him.”

“I don’t know,” Bird admitted. “Since the murder... I suppose I can’t blame him for not wanting to sleep in that room

anymore.”

“Well, thank you for your time,” Lois told her.

Miss Bird smiled. “You’re welcome... I’m just straightening up... we’re closing the doors tonight,” she said. “Look, I know it’s part of your job to dig around looking for new angles on stories, but... Eugene Laderman killed Mr. Harrison. That’s the real truth.”

Their next stop was Lex Luthor’s penthouse. Harrison had been let go from LexCorp. There was a chance that Luthor might remember Harrison.

Nigel St. John ushered them through the study to the balcony. Luthor was dressed in ‘hunting’ garb — a green and brown suede vest with padding on the right shoulder. He was shooting clay pigeons off the balcony. Lois watched as Luthor launched another pigeon and shot. The clay pigeon shattered. Clark had a bemused expression on his face as he walked to the edge of the balcony and looked down.

“What happens if you miss?”

Luthor shrugged. “Interesting question, Mr. Kent. Let’s see... This clay pigeon weighs two ounces. We are on the one hundred and twentieth floor, approximately fifteen hundred feet above street level. Considering the G force and the speed... if the object hit the pavement, or some hapless passer-by, it would make contact at about two hundred miles per hour. My guess is that it would, unfortunately, kill him or her, instantly.” Luthor smiled. “I never miss.”

Luthor set aside his shotgun and kissed Lois on the cheek. “So nice to see you again, Lois.”

“Nice to see you, Lex,” Lois said. She hadn’t returned any of his phone calls and was hoping he had given up his interest in her. It seemed she wasn’t going to be so lucky. Being ‘hard to get’ simply piqued his interest. Lois caught Clark rolling his eyes at her interplay with Luthor.

Luthor seemed amused by Clark’s reaction but remained the perfect host, inviting them to return to his study. He motioned for them to sit as he moved to his desk.

“About Henry Harrison...?” Clark began.

“Yes, when I received your call, I requested that the head of the software division personnel pull his file,” Luthor said. He handed Lois a file. “I’m afraid there’s not much there to help you.”

“Did you know him personally?” Lois asked.

“Oh, yes. He was quite an ambitious and talented man when I hired him,” Luthor said. “Great thinker. Ahead of his time.”

“Is it true he was fired only a month before he was eligible to retire on a full pension?” Clark asked.

“Yes. When we downsized the company during the recession, hundreds of employees were forced out,” Luthor admitted smoothly. “We made every effort to relocate them. But Henry decided he wanted to be his own boss. Shame about the murder... have they caught the man yet?”

“No, not yet,” Lois said. She tried to keep her voice even. She knew that Luthor had a gift for sniffing out weakness.

She caught him studying her. “Lois... is there some doubt in your mind as to the man’s guilt?”

“Yes. A great deal of doubt,” she admitted. Luthor seemed to consider her statement as she and Clark stood to leave. “Thanks for your help.” Lois started for the door then turned back to Luthor. “Lex, have you ever heard of a software program called ‘The Ides of Metropolis?’ Something Harrison was working on.”

“Ides of Metropolis? No, I haven’t,” Luthor said. “Sorry I couldn’t have been of greater assistance.”

“Do you believe LexCorp let Harrison go simply due to downsizing?” Clark asked Lois on their way back to her car.

“Well, firing someone just before they’re eligible for full

retirement is one way to save on personnel costs,” Lois said. “Brutal but undeniably efficient. However, given that Lex personally hired Harrison, I doubt it was anything as simple as downsizing.”

“Luthor described Harrison as ‘ambitious and talented,’” Clark said. “From what I’ve seen of LexCorp, that’s a dangerous combination. What’s in his personnel file doesn’t tell us anything except that he was team leader for a major software program code-named ‘Star City’ and his reviews were adequate.”

“Which tells us absolutely nothing.”

“Which tells us that either Harrison’s temper didn’t show while he was at LexCorp...”

“Or his reviews were whitewashed?”

Lois concentrated on traffic for a few moments. “Clark, didn’t LexCorp release ‘Gateway’ about the time Harrison was let go?”

“The operating system? Yeah, I think so,” Clark said. “Do you think that was the program Harrison was working on?”

“Hottest O.S. release ever,” Lois commented. “Even the Planet is using it. According to Jimmy it’s damn near bullet proof and the networking ability is simply unbelievable.”

“Uh, didn’t Jimmy also say the network at work was on the blink?”

“I don’t believe it,” Lois protested as she and Clark watched the video tape Jimmy had brought in.

On the monitor, Lena Harrison, wearing a fur coat, strode purposefully across the lobby of the Lector hotel. The camera drifted to catch a pair of long legs in a mini-skirt, then whipped back to follow Lena again.

“How’d you get this? And what about Reed?” Lois asked. “Weren’t her men tailing Lena as well?”

Jimmy made a face. “Two guys in a car in front of the hotel. Some stakeout.”

On the screen, Lena walked toward the elevators. Suddenly, a man wearing a trench coat and a hat fell into step behind her. Just before the elevator doors opened, Lena and the mystery man kissed.

“So much for the grieving widow,” Lois announced. She couldn’t keep the triumph out of her voice.

Jimmy turned off the video player and turned to face Lois and Clark. “What now?”

Clark agreed to accompany back to her apartment. Laderman was still hiding out there. Lois surprised and more than a little annoyed to find Laderman working on her home computer. He looked up at her and smiled.

“I’ve straightened out your files, Lois. Gave you a simpler directory.”

“You... those were personal files, Eugene. I had a password.”

Laderman shrugged. “I know. ‘Superman’. Wasn’t too tough to figure out.”

Lois was too embarrassed to check Clark’s reaction, but she heard a dry chuckle from his direction.

“Eugene, let’s go over what happened the day Harrison died,” Lois ordered, shifting into reporter mode to cover her embarrassment.

“Well, like I said, I found this now program he was working on. It wasn’t in the regular files, but I figured out his security bypass pretty quickly...”

“About the fight...”

“Henry asked me how much of the program I’d seen. Suddenly he was screaming at me, saying that I had stolen his wife and now the ‘Ides Of Metropolis.’” Laderman told her. “I started yelling back at him. I said I’d kill him if he hurt Lena again.”

“So, Lena came to your apartment...” Clark prompted.

“I told her about the fight and she said she was going to the office, to have it out with him. When she didn’t come back, I got worried, went to the office.”

“You smelled something burning, went into the generator room. That’s when you found him...” Lois continued.

She was interrupted by a sharp knock on the door.

“Quick. In the bedroom,” Lois ordered Clark and Laderman as she headed to answer the door. It was Detective Reed and two uniformed officers. Reed pushed past Lois, looking around.

“I have a warrant to search the premises,” Reed announced, waving a sheet of paper under her nose.

“My apartment? Are you crazy?” Lois tried to keep from screeching. She knew she needed to buy time for Clark to find a way to hide Laderman — otherwise they were both in deep trouble, not to mention the trouble Laderman would be in as an escaped felon.

Reed grinned at her. “I don’t think so, Ms. Lane. Call me wild, call me crazy, but I have a hunch that you’re hiding something... or someone.” She nodded to the two uniformed officers who started moving through the apartment.

“Why don’t you just have a seat on the couch,” Reed suggested. “This won’t hurt much, and it’ll be over real soon.”

As instructed, Lois settled onto her sofa. She tried to relax, to keep from showing Reed how tense she was.

After a few minutes the officers returned to the living room, shaking their heads.

Reed managed to cover her disappointment. “Ms. Lane, it appears I was mistaken... for the time being.”

“I hope you never find him,” Lois stated with false bravado. “Eugene didn’t kill Harrison.”

Reed seemed amused. “Do tell.”

“Lena Harrison killed her husband.”

“Interesting theory. Unfortunately at precisely the time of Harrison’s death, Lena was at a Neighborhood Watch meeting. She was seen by at least twenty people who positively identified her.”

But Laderman had said Lena told him she was heading to the office. “But why would a man set fire to the room the body was in to destroy the evidence, wait there for the police, then sign a confession? And why didn’t he take the stand in his own defense when his attorney begged him to?”

Lois thought she saw a glimmer of something in Reed’s eyes. Curiosity?

“Good night, Ms. Lane. Remember to lock your doors and windows. We’ve got an escaped killer on the loose.”

Lois locked the door behind Reed and the two officers. A moment later Clark led Laderman back into the room.

“Talk about being out on a ledge,” Clark commented.

Laderman looked shaken and headed into the kitchen. Lois was sure she didn’t look much better.

“Where did you guys hide?”

“On the ledge,” Clark said. “Eugene is afraid of heights. I guess the cops knew that. They didn’t even check the window.” He studied her more closely. “Lois? You okay? What’d Reed say?”

“Oh. Not much. Just that Lena Harrison has an iron-clad alibi for the night of her husband’s death.”

“But Eugene told us...” Clark began.

“Exactly.”

The next day was relentless in its tedium, as Lois and Clark attempted to follow up on the reports they’d received the day before. Unfortunately, it also allowed them time to argue. Clark was being positively lunk-headed.

“Clark, men and women lie to each other all the time. It’s a national pastime. Sometimes it’s okay to lie.”

“It’s never okay,” Clark stated.

“So, you’ve never lied to me?” Lois asked. She knew the answer, even if he didn’t know she knew.

“I didn’t say that. I said it’s not okay. Besides, we’re talking husbands and wives here,” he said, holding his phone to his ear. “Yes. I can hold.” He turned back to Lois. “I just happen to think that it’s always better to tell the truth, get everything out in the open.”

“So, you’re saying you’ll never lie to your wife, assuming someone is crazy enough to say ‘I do’ to you.”

“That’s right.”

On her own phone, a live person had finally come on. “Transfer me to who? I’ve been holding ten minutes... Ugh.” Back to Clark: “Okay, here’s the scene. Your loving wife of twenty years has spent the entire day at the beauty shop. Dyed her hair red, got it cut... all to please you. Except she looks ghastly. She stands there when you open the front door, so hopeful... and says ‘Honey, do you like it?’ What do you do?”

Clark looked puzzled. “My wife would know I love her the way she is. Why would she dye her hair red?”

Perry strode past them on his way to his office and the conversation stopped. They both smiled at him and he smiled back.

As soon as his office door was safely closed: “Okay. I’d...” Clark continued. “Tell her the truth. That I love her. That I liked her hair better before, but that, if she’s happy with it, that’s the important thing.”

Lois was only half listening. “But I’ve already left a message,” she was saying to the person on the other end of the line. “Never mind.” She hung up and turned back to Clark. “Poor woman,” she muttered.

“Who?”

“Your wife. She’s married to Mr. Right. Mr. Always Right.”

Clark just gave her a confused look. Perry’s door opened and he stuck his head out.

“Lois? Clark? A moment of your time?” he called. Lois detected a false cheerfulness in the editor’s voice.

Lois and Clark walked into Perry’s office and Clark closed the door behind them.

Perry peered at the two of them. “Is there something the two of you want to tell me?”

“No, not really, Chief,” Lois told him.

“Huh. Well... good,” Perry said. It was obvious that he didn’t quite believe her. “You sure now? Nothing you want to get off your chest, uh, chests?”

“We’d like to tell you, Chief, but we can’t. It’s better this way,” Lois told him.

“Better off not knowing,” Clark added.

“Well, I think it’s a little late for that,” Perry told them. “I know.”

“You know?” Lois asked. She was certain she and Clark had covered their tracks. Even Reed didn’t know they were in contact with Laderman.

“What exactly do you know?” Clark asked.

“You know... about... him. Where he is,” Perry said cryptically.

“Oh, you do know,” Clark said, giving Lois a worried look.

“How do you know?” Lois wondered aloud.

“It’s better you don’t know,” Perry said. “Course, I don’t know officially. But, let’s face it. If a man in my position didn’t know, unofficially, then, well, he wouldn’t be a man in my position.”

“So, now that you know, unofficially, are you going to tell anyone else that you, you know, know?” Lois asked.

“No. I just wanted you to know,” Perry said with exaggerated seriousness.

“Thank you, sir. I feel much better knowing that you know,” Clark told him. Lois wasn’t sure if he was joking or not.

“Me, too,” Lois agreed.

“There is something I’d like you know, though,” Perry added. “What’s that?”

“The minute you step outside that door, I no longer know. And I don’t want to know anything else worth... knowing... in the future.”

Lois and Clark both nodded and Perry waved them out of his office.

“What just happened?” Clark wondered aloud.

“Well, he is a man in his position...”

The rest of the day was spent pouring over the trial transcripts. There was nothing there that looked helpful in clearing Laderman. Reed and the D.A. had done their jobs well, as far as preparing their case against Eugene. It was what wasn’t there, what Reed hadn’t looked into that Lois was interested in. Where was the homeless man Harrison allegedly befriended? And who had been in the clinch with Mrs. Harrison at the Lexor?

They finally called it a night, picked up two pizzas with salads at the local pizzeria.

Laderman was still sitting at Lois’s computer when they walked in.

“Thank God you’re back,” Laderman said with a gush of relief. “You told me not to use the phone or go out, or...”

“What happened?” Lois asked. Clark set the pizzas on the table as he listened.

“Nothing happened. It’s what’s going to happen. I think.” Laderman said worriedly.

Lois had no idea what he was talking about and the quizzical look Clark was giving Laderman confirmed that she wasn’t alone.

“All the programs on your computer were sluggish today,” Laderman explained. “So I tapped into the Daily Planet’s network. They’re slowed down, too. So I traced it back as far as I could.”

“Eugene, there are more important things going on than a temporary computer slowdown,” Lois told him. She didn’t mention how annoyed she was that he was still playing with her home computer.

Laderman looked even more worried. “That file that Henry was working on... it wasn’t a program. It was a virus. A polymorphic encrypted virus targeted at LexCorp’s Gateway O.S.”

“Come again?” Lois asked. He was talking gibberish. A ‘polymorphic encrypted virus’?

“The worst kind,” Clark said. “It can attack any computer system, taking on different shapes to avoid detection.”

“Makes sense,” Lois said thoughtfully. “The man was about to lose everything, might as well take everybody else’s system with you. I’m betting he targeted LexCorp?”

Laderman nodded. “And most of the city uses Gateway’s default internet portal which is run by LexCorp.”

“Which means nearly every computer in the city has this virus,” Lois reasoned. “How bad could this make things?”

“Bad,” Laderman said. “Plus LexCorp is tied to the stock exchange, banks, you name it... it could mean... disaster.”

“What can we do?” Lois asked. What he was describing was a disaster of potentially biblical proportions, at least for people and businesses dependant on their computers. Assuming he was telling the truth.

“You have to break me into MUT,” Laderman told them. Clark gave him a blank look.

“Metropolis University of Technology,” Laderman explained. “I need a powerful mainframe to work off of. I have to find the antidote. I teach a class there... my students can help.”

Clark beckoned Lois aside. “You’re already harboring a fugitive, you want to add breaking and entering to your rap

sheet?” he whispered.

“Clark. I don’t know if he’s telling the truth. But if he is... and the virus gets out...”

“Lois, all we have is a guy, a wanted guy, looking at a computer screen and telling us the nation’s at risk,” Clark said grimly. “We need more proof.”

Part 18

“So, everything okay on the home front?” Lois asked Clark the next morning. She knew his mom had flown in to talk to his dad. Clark was looking a little more relaxed than he had been. The situation between his parents had dragged him down more than he wanted to admit, especially to her. She had to admit she hadn’t been as sympathetic as she could have been. Plus, Lena Harrison’s ‘affair’ with Eugene Laderman, and Lena’s apparent betrayal of both her husband and her ‘boyfriend’, hadn’t done anything good for his peace of mind, or hers.

“They talked,” Clark told her. “I guess Dad has been feeling a little... insecure, especially after some of the old biddies in town started telling him Mom and her art teacher were seen in town several times after class.”

“And that painting? The one your dad found hidden in the barn?” Lois asked.

Clark managed a chuckle. “It was a birthday present. I guess he’s been feeling a little old and unwanted on top of everything else.”

“Hey, I’m glad it was just a misunderstanding,” Lois told him. He might not believe her, but she really was happy for them. In her experience, too many couples bailed at the first bump, even if simply talking about the problems might solve them.

“So am I,” Clark admitted with a chuckle. “Having my father as a roommate was getting old fast.”

“So, when are they heading back?” Lois asked.

“Tomorrow,” Clark said. “They’re planning to ‘paint the town red’ tonight. I got them reservations at the Lexor tonight.”

“You are such a good son, you know that?” Lois told him.

“I try.”

She told Clark she was meeting a source on something she had on the back burner. To her surprise, he accepted her excuse to get out of the newsroom.

Jonathan and Martha were waiting for her at the coffee shop around the corner from Clark’s apartment.

“Lois, is everything all right?” Martha began as soon as Lois sat down.

“I’m not sure. When Clark first lost his memory, you told me you thought Superman was still alive. Hurt and confused, but alive, and that Clark and I would be the first to know if and when he was coming back,” Lois said.

“Yes...” Martha nodded warily.

“Last night, we had a situation at my apartment and Clark, and someone else, had to leave in a hurry, out my bedroom window onto a narrow ledge,” Lois told them. “Please don’t ask why.”

Martha frowned but nodded for Lois to continue. Jonathan’s expression was unreadable.

“I happen to know the ledge is only wide enough for one person,” Lois told them. “And the person with Clark was desperately afraid of heights.”

“Have you asked Clark about this?” Martha asked.

Lois shook her head. “I wanted to talk to you two first...” She paused, trying to find the best words for her next question. As she sipped her coffee she also realized she was afraid of the answer. “Why haven’t you told Clark that he used to be Superman?”

Martha gasped and Lois looked up to see Jonathan glowering at her.

“How did you...?” Jonathan began.

“Little things started coming together,” Lois told them.

“Things that should have been obvious if I hadn’t been so wrapped up in the hero that I ignored the man.” It was embarrassing to admit to his parents, but she was fairly certain they knew the facts. “Why haven’t you told him?”

“Doctor Friskin advised us not to,” Jonathan told her. “We don’t know why he lost his memory, or his powers. But she thought that telling him outright might actually make matters worse.”

“If he has blocked his memories because he ran up against something too horrible to handle, then he may have problems when those memories finally break through. She’s been working with him on it,” Martha said. “We just have to be patient.”

“Martha, I think his memories, and maybe his powers, may be coming through,” Lois said. “He told me he’s having dreams about flying like Superman. And there was an incident last week when he... well, he did something dangerous and he told me that he knew he could handle it. He knew he wouldn’t get hurt.”

Martha and Jonathan exchanged one of their knowing looks.

“What happened?” Jonathan asked.

“We were chasing down a story... the Rose and Nick Collins’ kidnapping?” Lois said. “They’d been taken by some evil sorcerers... Don’t laugh, there was some seriously weird stuff happening that day. And Clark just... he just went ahead and ran in to the rescue, completely ignoring the danger.”

Martha and Jonathan both chuckled and Lois found herself smiling. “Yeah, I know it’s a bad case of the pot calling the kettle black, but still...”

“Lois, he’s learned from the best,” Martha said gently. “When have you ever held back from chasing a story just because it was dangerous?”

Lois had to admit the older woman had a point. Even as a child Lois had been a risk-taker. She always had to be the first one to the top of the climbing structure, the first one to the biggest and baddest rides at the amusement park. As a teen, her reckless tendencies hadn’t abated, but had merely been channeled into more productive areas — school, writing, martial arts. She’d been born too late to be at the forefront of women’s rights on the school ground, but there had still been battles to be fought and won, her grades and ‘reputation’ be damned.

In college it had been more of the same only more so. Her father had wanted her to go into medicine — he had no son to carry on the ‘Lane’ name, but another ‘Doctor Lane’ in the family would have been good enough — but the sciences left her cold. Where she had excelled was in writing and activism. Again, she had been born too late to be an anti-war activist but human rights, both at home and abroad, had held her interest. Journalism had fed both her strengths — her heroes had been, and still were, the men and women who went onto battlegrounds with utter disregard for their own safety to find the truth and tell the world about it.

“The story doesn’t always wait for it to be safe to report it,” Lois said.

“And Clark has never been able to simply stand back and not get involved,” Martha told her. “Even as a little boy, he was the one who would defend the littler kids, the weaker ones when the playground bullies attacked. He can’t not help.”

“Used to drive me crazy,” Jonathan admitted. “I was always afraid someone would notice he was different, ask questions we couldn’t answer. But it’s just the way he is.”

“You know his secret’s safe with me, right?” Lois asked.

“We know,” Martha told her. “We wouldn’t be sitting here talking about it if you couldn’t be trusted.”

“I’m not sure how much Clark trusted me,” Lois admitted.

“Lois,” Jonathan began. “All his life we’ve told him to lay low, don’t get noticed, don’t get caught. He trusted you enough to

take your advice on finding a way to help. You invented Superman as much as he did.”

“He didn’t trust me enough to tell me the truth,” Lois complained even though she suspected she knew Clark’s reasons for not confiding in her. He hadn’t known her well enough at first, and then after he got to know her, he hadn’t been able to find a way to tell her that wouldn’t have endangered his life or hers — Superman or not.

“I think he was planning to, after he got back from Nightfall,” Martha said softly. Martha reached into her purse and pulled out an envelope. She handed it to Lois who unfolded the sheet of paper inside.

The letter was on Superman Foundation letterhead, just as hers had been.

Dear Mom and Dad, If Murray has given you this, then the world is okay but I didn’t make it back.

I want you to know how much I love you both and how lucky I am to have had you as my parents. Not many couples would have had the love and courage to take in a foundling and raise him as their own. No one could have had better parents, or a better life, than I’ve had.

I want you to know that I only have one regret — that I haven’t been more honest with Lois about my other ‘job’. I trust your judgment on telling her the truth. Hopefully she’ll forgive me, eventually.

Mom, Dad, I love you so much and I hope to God you never see this letter. But if you do, I want you to know that I went out to do a job only I could do. You didn’t raise a coward or a quitter. And I hope you are as proud of me as your son as I am at having you as my parents.

Please take care of each other and remember me.

Your loving son, Clark.

Lois handed the sheet back to Martha. Her tears had started to fall as she read through it. Looking over at Clark’s parents, she realized there were tears in their eyes as well. Martha was holding her husband’s hand.

“I’ve always been proud of him,” Jonathan said, wiping his face. “And I don’t care if he never completely recovers. I’m still proud of the man he’s become.”

Martha took a sip of her coffee, her expression pensive as she regarded Lois. “Lois, tell me, how has it been for Clark since...?”

Lois shrugged. “He’s ‘okay’. It’s funny, really. Without the other job he’s been able to concentrate on work and it does show. Perry’s noticed it, even if he hasn’t said much. Clark has more of a tendency to go into ‘crusader’ mode than before and Perry likes that, even if he doesn’t say it. Clark doesn’t disappear at odd times anymore and people have noticed that, too.”

“And the city?” Jonathan asked. “I know the national news talked about how much Superman was missed during the first few weeks after the funeral, but what about Metropolis?”

Lois sighed as she thought back over the past weeks. “We miss him. It was nice to have that safety net. But Metropolis survived for more than two hundred years without having Superman around. And I think people are looking out for one another a little more than they had been. He was a good example for all of us — someone who cared about others without any regard for race or creed or net worth. But we do miss him.”

“Lois, what do you think will happen if he does come back?” Martha asked.

“There will be a lot of questions,” Lois said. “But I think it will depend on how he comes back. We still don’t know why he disappeared.”

“Keep us posted, okay?” Martha asked.

“Of course.”

Clark was waiting for her when Lois got back to the newsroom. “Did your source pan out?”

“I got some background I needed,” she told him. “What about you? Anything more on the virus Harrison was working on?”

“According to the experts I talked to, a virus like Eugene described is not only possible, there’s evidence that LexCorp’s computer systems are already under attack,” Clark told her. “And if LexCorp goes down...”

“Do they have a way to deal with it?”

Clark shook his head. “They all agree that without access to the original code it’ll take time to create a filter and an antidote.”

“Or access to someone who knows how Harrison thought?”

“Maybe,” Clark admitted.

The elevator doors opened. Lois looked over to see Detective Reed crossing the elevator lobby and trot down the stairs to their desks.

“Do you have a warrant to search the Daily Planet as well?”

Lois asked. It was harsh and uncalled for but Lois didn’t really care.

“Nope,” Reed answered. If she noticed Lois’s impoliteness, she didn’t show it. “Thought I’d fill you in on something, though. Wondered if you might have a take on it.” She opened her briefcase and handed Lois a slim file.

Lois opened it. “The deceased was exhumed at approximately...” she read aloud. She looked up at Reed. “You dug up Henry Harrison’s body?”

“Per your suggestion, I dug up a body,” Reed said. “But it wasn’t Harrison’s.”

“If the body found in the generator room wasn’t Harrison, who was it?” Lois asked.

“A homeless man who lived in the generator room of Harrison’s building,” Reed said. “He’d been reported missing by his family. Seemed he called them once a week. Dental records match.”

That didn’t make any sense. “How come they weren’t checked before the trial?”

“They were. There was a match.”

“How is that possible?” Clark asked.

Reed grimaced. “Computer records can be falsified. Especially by computer experts. Besides, Lena Harrison identified the body.”

“Eugene was telling the truth,” Lois murmured to herself. Reed gave her a sharp look. “You can call off your manhunt now,” Lois added, returning Reed’s look.

Reed shook her head. “I have a dead body on my hands, and Harrison’s still missing. For all we know, Laderman may have killed two men.”

“You can’t be serious,” Lois protested.

“I’ve got a job to do. Maybe he did it, maybe he didn’t. That’s up to the courts to decide,” Reed stated. “But right now, I intend to bring him in... by any means necessary. So if you know where he is, tell him to turn himself in. For his sake.”

Lois tried to look impassive as Reed turned and headed out of the newsroom.

“So, Lena perjured herself to cover her husband’s disappearance,” Lois commented.

“Insurance fraud?” Clark asked.

“Nothing about any big insurance policies came up during the original investigation,” Lois reminded him. “But it’s definitely something to check into. It would explain why Lena lied about the dead man being her husband.”

“Lois! Clark! Check this out,” Jimmy yelled from his own desk. Lois hurried over to Jimmy’s desk, Clark following on her heels. Jimmy was pointing to his computer monitor. The text on the page was barely recognizable as text — it was distorted into moirŽ patterns. Other staffers were groaning and swearing, some pounding on their monitors as though the machines were being disobedient.

Then new text appeared on the screens. ‘BEWARE THE

IDES OF METROPOLIS’ scrolled across in bright block letters.

Lois felt her gut clench — this was exactly what Laderman had warned them about. Clark’s expression was at least as horrified as hers was. They shared a look and raced out of the newsroom. Clark had demanded proof and now it was all over the Daily Planet newsroom. Laderman knew about the virus and everyone agreed he was a brilliant programmer. Maybe he could do something.

The radio was full of reports of the other computer systems that had been attacked. “The ‘Ides of Metropolis’ appeared this morning on the screens of over a million computers, and with its arrival came a catastrophe of unparalleled proportion,” the LNN newsreader was saying. “World financial markets are collapsing... Banks and other financial institutions have closed their doors creating mass panic... Doctors are performing emergency surgeries under war zone conditions... Airports are shutting down; several near misses have been reported... Utilities, phone systems... nothing seems to have escaped this deadly virus and there’s no end in sight. At this time, the Army and Navy are on full tactical alert due to the failure of the computer systems controlling the ground to air missiles...”

“I wonder how they’re staying on the air?” Lois wondered aloud.

“I’m betting they have older equipment as back-up,” Clark said. “Those will be the systems that aren’t hit.”

“The ones not running Gateway?”

“And the ones not hooked up to LexCorp.”

“And the ones what have been hit...?” Lois began to think aloud. “Banks, the exchange, airports, hospitals, utilities... Those are all industries Luthor has pushed for modernization and streamlining over the last couple years. He practically donated the computer equipment for the city offices and the utilities.”

“Not to mention ‘upgrading’ the hospital systems and airports,” Clark muttered.

Laderman was waiting for them when Lois and Clark arrived at her apartment. “I’ve been watching the news,” he said. “It’s even worse than I thought it would be.”

“You really think the main frame at MUT has a chance of finding a cure for this virus?” Clark asked.

“It’s one of two on the east coast with enough horsepower to even have a chance,” Laderman told him. “My students and I designed the firewall and antivirus software ourselves, so I know it won’t have been hit.”

Metropolis University of Technology was one of the largest and highly regarded technical institutes in North America, coming in just after MIT and Caltech. The campus was in the eastern part of the Old City, overlooking the island of Hell’s Gate. Despite the fact that the university specialized in bleeding edge technology, most of the buildings dated from the turn of the century.

Luckily, the computer science lab was as modern as its technology. Lois and Clark looked on as Laderman and a coterie of students in their late teens and early twenties worked feverishly. Lois watched the young intent faces and felt old.

“Were you ever that young?” Lois murmured to Clark.

Clark chuckled. “Were you?”

“Not that I’ll admit to.”

Laderman was swearing under his breath as he glared at his monitor and keyed in another sequence.

“What exactly are you looking for?” Lois asked.

“An entry code, so we can analyze the virus and find a cure. I’ve tried all the ones Henry ever used. Every member of his immediately family, etc. Now we’re trying number combinations,” Laderman explained.

“What about the name of the program ‘The Ides of

Metropolis’?”

Laderman shrugged. “‘Ides’ refers to the fifteenth day of certain months. I’ve tried some letter/number combinations using that factor, but so far...”

“What about the dramatic reference? Julius Caesar...” Lois suggested “‘Beware the Ides of March?’ It’s a long shot, but...”

“I’ll give it a try,” Laderman said but he didn’t sound encouraged. ‘Incorrect Password’ appeared on his screen. His shoulders slumped.

“The play was about a conspiracy. Traitors, politics...” Lois said, thinking aloud. “Maybe there’s another connection.”

Laderman gave her a thoughtful look before turning back to his keyboard and monitor.

The door to the lab slammed open and Reed rushed in, gun in hand. Behind her was a uniformed officer.

“Police!” Reed yelled. “Step away from the desk. Laderman, down and kiss the floor.” The students looked up, startled and wide-eyed in astonishment and fear.

Lois moved to intercept Reed. “No, you can’t. Eugene is working on finding the antidote to the computer virus. He may be close... he’s the only one who can do it.”

Reed glanced over at Laderman and his monitor. Lois took advantage of the other woman’s momentary distraction. A well placed kick knocked Reed’s gun out of her hand. Reed responded by going into a wide stance, hands out in a self-defense stance. She kicked out and Lois blocked. Reed was surprisingly adept and Lois guessed the policewoman was at least as well trained as she was.

“Are you ladies finished?” Clark asked. There was an odd sarcastic note in his voice. He was holding Reed’s gun and had it trained on Reed and the uniformed officer.

“Yes, we are... Mr. Law and Order,” Lois stated. Clark seemed to realize what he was doing. He emptied the bullets from the gun and dropped them into his pocket. He tossed the gun to the uniform, then walked up to Reed.

“Don’t you see what’s going on? Have you read the news? Eugene may be our only hope,” he spat at her.

Lois thought she saw a flicker of understanding cross Reed’s face. “Eugene worked under Harrison. He saw Harrison develop the virus. He’s the only one who can find the antidote. For God sakes, let him try,” Lois pleaded.

Reed stared at her a long moment then turned to her companion. “Stay here. Don’t let anyone in or out of this room.”

“Where’re you going?” Lois demanded.

“HarriTech,” Reed said. “It was supposed to be closed down, all locked up. But I followed Lena there last night. She’s got some explaining to do.”

“I’m coming with you,” Lois announced.

“In your dreams, Lane.”

The HarriTech building looked like it had been abandoned for ages rather than the few days it had actually been locked up. Reed had handed Lois a flashlight from her unmarked car. The light beams cast eerie shadows on the walls, the covered benches, the abandoned equipment.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Lane, Ms. Reed,” a man said as the lights switched on. He was wearing the same hat and trench coat as the man Jimmy had caught on camera meeting Lena at the Lexor. He was also holding a gun on them.

“Permit me to introduce myself. I’m Henry Harrison,” he said. He nodded to Reed. “We’ll relieve you of your weapons now.”

“We?” Reed asked. Her question was answered by Lena Harrison who stepped into the room to stand beside her ‘late’ husband.

“You were in on it all along,” Lois realized.

“Of course,” Lena said smugly. “I believe in marital fidelity.”

“What about your loyalty to Eugene? He loved you.” Lois asked.

“Yes. Poor Eugene. I thought the legal process would finish him off, now...” Lena shrugged. “I’ll have to do it myself.”

“Why?” Reed asked Harrison.

“I can answer that,” Lois said. “Revenge. Luthor humiliated him, stole his ideas, tried to destroy him. HarriTech was about to fail, probably thanks to Luthor. His virus would hold the world hostage, starting with LexCorp.”

“Quite correct, Ms. Lane,” Harrison said. “Billions are at stake. I needed to disappear beyond suspicion. Like dead. Eugene was the perfect foil.”

“Forgive the cliché, but you’re not going to get away with this,” Lois stated. “Eugene is working on the antidote as we speak.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Harrison said. “Within the hour every computer system in the country will be shut down.”

“The nuclear missiles...?” Lois asked.

“Give me a little credit, Ms. Lane. Surely you don’t think I’d destroy all those potential customers. Of course, a few shut downs here and there, medical facilities, control towers, automated machinery... there’s bound to be a few glitches.” He seemed pleased with himself. Lois knew that he was also lying, or at least fooling himself.

“I can get you a deal,” Reed offered.

“I doubt that very much,” Harrison told them.

“So, what are you going to do now? Kill us?” Lois asked and promptly wished she hadn’t. Harrison smiled. It was a smile she’d seen before — on a madman.

Lois found herself thrown into a small grey concrete room with Reed. There was trash, including pieces of electronics scattered across the floor.

“Great. Now you’ve done it!” Lois fumed.

“Me! You’re the one who said, ‘What’re you going to do now, kill us?’ They teach you that in journalism school?”

“Well, I suppose you called for back-up and told them to burst in if we didn’t come out in ten minutes,” Lois retorted.

“They teach you that in Detective School?” She looked around the room. There was something odd about it — there was a seam all around two of the opposing walls. “What is this place?” Lois had a suspicion as to what the answer was and it didn’t bode well for them.

“How do you get it to do that, anyway?” Reed asked, watching her.

“What?” The change of subject was a little confusing.

“Your hair. That bounce thing. When you turn your head,” Reed pointed out.

“I don’t know. It just... does it,” Lois said. She didn’t pay all that much attention to her hair. It was straight and it took an extremely talented hairdresser to get it to take a perm. Lois took an evaluating look at her companion. Reed’s hair was brown and curly — frizzy actually — and the humid warmth in the room was making it even frizzier. But Reed’s hands were fabulous — long polished nails, smooth skin. Lois’s hands never looked that good, even after a session with the manicurist. “I wish I had your nails.”

“You can. \$1.98 at Price House.”

“Get out of here!” Lois protested. “They look so real.”

As they had talked they had settled down on the floor with their backs to the wall opposite the door. Lois smiled when she realized they had spent the past minute or so just chatting like friends. Lois didn’t have all that many friends outside of work and even there, there weren’t many people her age. She played poker with them, went drinking occasionally. But she didn’t ‘hang out’ with any of them, except Clark.

She glanced at her companion to see an identical wistful

smile on her face.

“Must be tough being a reporter. Especially for a woman,” Reed said after a time.

“No tougher than it must be for a detective.”

“It’s a boys club.”

“Tell me about it,” Lois said. “Perry, he’s my boss, hired a green hack from Nowheresville on the strength of a touchy-feely story I wouldn’t take. Then he had the gall to assign him to be my partner. Like I needed a partner...”

“You’re talking about that hunk you work with, right?” Reed asked. She sounded amused.

“Yeah, but that wasn’t my point,” Lois said. “I worked hard to get a job at the Planet. I turned in my first story to Perry when I was in high school. I interned at the Planet during college, worked my buns off. And Clark waltzes in with a stack of pieces from the Borneo Gazette and a story about a theater and he has a job.”

“But he’s not hard to look at, either,” Reed commented. “All the guys I work with are either too old, too married, or too full of themselves. And this thing with Laderman and Harrison isn’t going to make things any easier. I should have figured out the insurance fraud angle and the whole thing with Lena leading Laderman on. I knew it didn’t smell right, but I let getting the case to trial override my instincts.”

“Harrison and his wife had everybody fooled,” Lois told her. “They had to have been planning this ever since LexCorp fired him and stole the programs he’d designed for them. Maybe even before.”

Suddenly the room was filled with the sound of a motor coming alive somewhere near, and a scraping screech. The side walls had started to creep together. Lois and Reed were on their feet, looking around the floor for something to stop the walls from moving closer.

“Find a brace, anything,” Reed ordered.

Lois found some lengths of steel conduit to brace the walls apart, but even steel wasn’t strong enough. “It’s no use,” she said as she watched the pipes bend. “What does the manual say to do in a time like this?”

Reed just looked at her a long moment before opening her mouth to scream for help.

It was no use. They were going to die from a movie cliché and there were no droids to save the day. At least Clark was safe and would carry on their investigations, even if he never came back as Superman.

Clark... He would hate himself for not being there to save her but there was nothing to be done about it. She realized that she had but one regret — she hadn’t been able to overcome her fear of getting close to a man. She was going to die without ever feeling Clark’s strong arms around her in a lover’s embrace, without ever feeling his lips on hers in a lover’s kiss. Without ever feeling his hands on her body as they lay naked together.

Reed was swearing at her impotence, pounding on the sealed door. Suddenly the walls stopped moving. The screeching stopped, the motor noise stopped. The silence was deafening.

The door swung open and Lois saw Clark standing outside. She ran to him and gave him a hug.

“I thought I...” she began. “Oh Clark...”

“I got worried when you didn’t check in...” Clark told her, returning her hug.

“Laderman and his team did it?” Reed asked. Lois looked up and realized that Reed wasn’t addressing Clark. Bill Henderson was standing in the hallway with him.

“Yes,” Henderson said. “It’ll take a few days for the virus to get completely cleared out of everyone’s computer systems, but the worst of it’s over.”

“Harrison’s alive,” Reed stated. “It was all a set-up with Laderman as the patsy. And it’s my collar.”

“So, are you going to tell me what happened at MUT?” Lois demanded as soon as they were away from Reed and Henderson.

“Well, Eugene found the password. You were right about it being related to Julius Caesar. It was ‘Et tu, Brute’. Eugene and his students managed to create the antidote. But we had to get Luthor involved so they could load the antivirus program into the LexCorp system and let it propagate.”

“But it worked,” Lois insisted. Clark nodded but there was still something wrong. She could see it in his expression. “What else happened?”

“While Eugene was working on the LexCorp system, he came across some encrypted files pertaining to Superman,” Clark told her.

“And?” Lois prompted.

“And... remember that series of bizarre ‘tests’ that happened a few weeks after Superman first arrived in Metropolis? The ones that seemed designed to test how fast and strong he was?”

Lois nodded. She’d been injured when a bomb went off in a bank — a bomb designed to test how invulnerable Superman was. She still had the fragment of cape she had found at the site.

“One of the files had all the details on those tests, including Luthor’s personal notes,” Clark told her.

“According to the notes he left us, Superman suspected Luthor was behind the tests, but he couldn’t prove it,” Lois reminded him.

“We still can’t,” Clark told her. “We can’t prove that the files haven’t been tampered with to implicate Luthor. But wait, it gets better. Another document outlined a plan to clone Superman. Apparently Luthor managed to get hold of that hair sample Superman donated for the Coates Home fundraiser. Luckily it seems that Earth science isn’t up to cloning humans yet, much less Kryptonians.”

“Lucky for us,” Lois murmured. “Can you imagine someone with Superman’s powers under the control of someone like Luthor?” She shuddered.

“I don’t even want to think about that nightmare. Let’s just be happy Doctor Leek’s research was cancelled.”

“Doctor Leek? Doctor Fabian Leek?”

Clark nodded. “You know him?”

“I know of him,” Lois said. “He was one of the foremost researchers on cloning and stem cells. He’s also dead. Some sort of weird lab accident last week.”

“Was it an accident? Or was somebody cutting their losses?” Clark asked.

“Now you’re sounding paranoid,” Lois said.

Clark sighed. “Maybe so, but the last document was an internal memo to Luthor from the head of LexLabs giving an analysis of the Nightfall meteorite, its expected environmental impact on the planet and the suggestion that Superman be asked to handle it. It also contained an analysis of Superman’s expected oxygen usage during his flight and the energy output needed to divert the mass,” Clark said.

“That was in Luthor’s files?”

Clark nodded, unable to meet her eyes. “Superman was given an air supply that should have kept a human alive for six hours. That’s what he was told. He was also told that his normal oxygen consumption wasn’t all that much above what a human of his mass would use. But LexLabs’ analysis indicated his oxygen consumption would be much higher than that. Maybe twice as much given what he was doing.”

“No wonder Luthor was convinced Superman was dead,” Lois said. “He knew all along that Superman had to have run out of air at just about the time he needed to make the push to divert the asteroid. He had his contingency plans in place. He didn’t care which way it went.”

They both sat down at their respective desks. The files

Laderman had retrieved were damning but they still didn’t prove anything. The one thing the documents did give them was more places to look for hard evidence — evidence Perry would accept.

“So, Harrison and his wife were working together to frame Laderman?” Perry asked, coming out of his office and stepping over to their desks.

“For the insurance and so Harrison could cover his tracks before Luthor figured out what was going on,” Lois told him.

“Laderman should be a free man tomorrow,” Clark added. “MUT has offered him a full professorship once the legal stuff is handled.”

“Nice work,” Perry said. “It’ll make a great story for tomorrow’s paper.”

“And thanks for not blowing the whistle on us,” Lois said almost as an afterthought.

“I trust your instincts,” Perry assured her as he walked away. Clark watched after him a moment before turning back to Lois.

“Well, go ahead. I’m waiting.”

“For what?”

“The morality play,” he said. “The ‘you should have trusted me and my infallible reporter’s instinct’ lecture.”

“Clark...” she began. He was watching her, waiting for her to continue. “Come on, I’m starving and you’re buying... And just in case you did miss the moral to this story... You should trust what’s in people’s hearts, not just the facts, ma’am.”

“And you knew Laderman well enough to know what was in his heart?” Clark asked.

“Well, I like to think I did. I know that things didn’t add up right in the case,” Lois told him. “And I was right. Harrison was masterminding the whole thing and he was a cold-blooded killer. So was Lena. I guess Reed and I are lucky you called Henderson to get us back-up.”

“Like I said, I got worried when neither you nor Reed checked in,” Clark said.

Lois sat back and considered his statement for a moment. Superman wasn’t flying through the skies of Metropolis anymore, but he was still hard at work saving lives in the guise of mild-mannered Clark Kent. “Have I told you recently what a good friend you are?”

“Not recently, no.”

“Well, remind me to do that over dinner,” she ordered, picking up her purse and grabbing her jacket. “By the way, I know for a fact you didn’t tell me your biggest secret.”

“Oh, and what exactly is my biggest secret?”

“If I told you, then it wouldn’t be your biggest secret anymore, would it?” she asked, sauntering to the elevator.

The Ides of Metropolis was written by Deborah Joy LeVine

Part 19

“So, you know I didn’t tell you my biggest secret,” Clark began over dessert. “You already know what it is, but you won’t tell me so I can confirm or deny it?”

Lois licked the chocolate mousse off her spoon and grinned at him. They were sitting in a booth at Alfonso’s, a small Italian eatery not far from Lois’s apartment. “But if it was a secret, would you confirm it?”

“It might depend on what it was,” Clark argued. A waiter refilled their coffee cups and dropped off the bill.

“Well, I did get confirmation from your parents,” Lois told him. “Unless you have secrets you haven’t let them in on.”

“Everyone has things they haven’t told their parents,” Clark retorted. “I haven’t lived at home since I got out of high school. I’ve done lots of things they don’t know about.”

Lois chuckled. “Uh huh. So, are you still unicorn bait?” She was surprised to see color climbing into his face. “You are!”

“Unicorns go after maidens. I wouldn’t qualify even if it was true,” Clark stated. “And I certainly wouldn’t admit it to you.”

“You are!” Lois giggled. “Detective Reed thinks you’re a hunk... I don’t see it myself, you know. I mean, you eat like an eight year-old out on their own.” She was grinning to take the sting out of her words. “I know Cat agrees with Reed. But we both know she’ll chase anything with a ...”

“Lo-is.”

“It’s okay, Clark. We both know you’re much too straight for her,” Lois told him. “Besides, that wasn’t the secret I was talking about.”

“So, are you going to tell me what it is?”

“Well... it has to do with Superman,” Lois said, throwing him a proverbial bone. She watched for his reaction.

He sighed, disappointment and frustration written across his face. “Lois, you know I...”

“I know you still don’t remember him,” Lois assured him. “But you told me you’ve been dreaming about him, haven’t you?”

He nodded.

“So you’re remembering things, right?”

“Lois, I’m not dreaming about him. I’m dreaming about being him.”

She reached out and patted his hand. “Clark, it’s okay. Maybe that’s just your subconscious’s way of processing the information that’s coming forward.”

“That’s what Doctor Friskin says, too.”

“Well, she’s the doctor,” Lois said. “She’s probably right.”

Lois spent the weekend cleaning her apartment with several hours off to treat herself to the indulgence of a massage, haircut, and manicure. It had been a hectic two weeks — hell it had been a hectic six plus weeks since Superman’s presumed death. Too full of grieving and surprises, regrets and discoveries.

She needed a few days to herself to come to terms with the truth — that Superman wasn’t dead. He just didn’t remember being Superman, even though his powers seemed to be creeping back — that was the only way Clark could have saved Laderman that night.

Lois wondered what had really happened out there while he was all alone facing the asteroid. What he felt when he realized his air was gone? She shuddered. Maybe that was what had driven him to forget.

But Clark had always struck her as being very resilient and, despite calling him ‘Mister Greenjeans’ and a hack, she knew from reading some of his earlier work that he’d seen, and written about, horrors better left unimagined. He had walked away relatively unscathed from car bombings and assassinations, although she did wonder what his nightmares were like. She had spent several weeks in Africa earlier in her career chasing down a story. She still had nightmares about what she had seen there — the petty cruelty, the desperation, the open hatreds. But she had survived and so had he.

Were his problems somehow related to the makeup of the asteroid itself? Possibly. Some of what fell to Earth had been radioactive and resembled kryptonite.

Laderman had found evidence that Lex Luthor may have been involved in Superman’s ‘death’. It was a forgone conclusion that Luthor had found Superman’s disappearance to be extremely convenient. So had the rest of Metropolis’s criminal element. The MPD had beefed up their patrols in traditionally high crime areas but petty crime was still on the rise. It was amazing how Superman’s mere presence in the city had cut crime rates.

Her musings were cut short Sunday afternoon when her phone rang. She’d been letting her answering machine screen her calls all weekend. Clark hadn’t called but she knew that some of his old friends from high school were visiting Metropolis and he had promised to show them around the city.

‘Lois, I know you’re there so please pick up,’ Lex Luthor’s

voice announced over the answering machine speaker.

Luthor was the last person she wanted to hear from. Her, and Clark’s, investigation into Luthor’s dealings were technically on the back burner. Superman’s notes had given them some good leads but caution and double and triple checking the facts made it slow going.

She took a deep breath and picked up the phone handset. “Hello, Lex.”

“Lois, my dear, you haven’t been returning my calls,” Luthor chided.

“You know how it is, Lex. Work, work, work,” Lois responded. “So you knew I was here? Was that a good guess or do you have my apartment under surveillance?”

There was a pause then. “Missus Cox called your office and she was assured that you were taking the weekend off. I took the chance that you were spending some of that time at home.”

His explanation was so smooth, so glib that if she hadn’t found the surveillance devices in her apartment two months before she might have believed he was telling the truth. “Well, you were right. Here I am.”

“You sound like you’re not pleased to hear from me,” he chided.

“I’m sorry, Lex,” Lois said, trying to sound contrite. “It’s just been a hard couple weeks, that’s all. What can I do for you?”

“We never did get together for lunch after the funeral,” he reminded her. “I was hoping that enough time had passed for you to be out of mourning. The city certainly is.”

“Superman was my friend,” Lois told him, making her decision. It was time to take the investigation into the jackal’s den. “But you’re right. It’s time to move ahead. My calendar’s pretty free this week so far. What day would work for you?”

“You make it sound so business-like,” Luthor told her. “I had hoped we had moved past my simply being someone to interview.”

“You’re right and I’m sorry,” Lois said. “But you do have to remember, I’m a working girl. So flying off to Venice for dinner and an opera has to be a weekend outing.”

“I am hoping that at some point that won’t need to be a consideration,” Luthor said. A chill ran down Lois’s spine and settled into her belly. She had hoped he had finally given up his obsession with her but apparently he still had plans to woo her.

“However, since as you say you are still a working girl, how does lunch on Tuesday sound?” he continued.

“Tuesday sounds great,” Lois said hoping Luthor couldn’t hear how choked her voice was. Her mouth was dry. She could barely make words come out.

“I’ll tell Chef Andre to prepare your favorites,” Luthor promised.

“I’m looking forward to it,” Lois said. She hung up the phone and hugged herself before remembering that Luthor had no doubt had more surveillance cameras put in her apartment. With any luck, whoever was watching would interpret her action as simply being chilled.

Now all she had to do was convince Perry and Clark that she’d made a good decision in renewing her association with Luthor.

The next morning was cold and oddly enough Lois made it into the newsroom before Clark did. Everyone else was already hard at work on their assignments but Lois was having a hard time getting started. She still hadn’t come up with an angle to convince Perry and Clark that she was doing the right thing, having lunch with Lex Luthor. She also wasn’t having any luck coming up with an angle that would make the piece she was working on come together — the newest crime statistics for Metropolis.

Jimmy and Cat weren’t doing much either. Jimmy was

reading a magazine and Cat was filing her nails with geometric precision, watching the elevator doors open and close. Lois was attempting to ignore the both of them — at least she was trying to work.

Jimmy grunted as he set aside his magazine.

“What?” Lois demanded, looking over at him.

“According to Metropolis Science Magazine, the statistical probability that any two people living in Metropolis are blood relatives is over ninety percent,” Jimmy stated.

Cat stared at him. “You and I are related?”

Jimmy nodded. “As long as our families have lived in the area at least three generations.”

“I don’t think so,” Cat stated, returning to her nails.

Lois got up and crossed over to Jimmy’s desk, cupped his chin in her hand and gave Cat an appraising look. “I don’t know... There is a definite family resemblance.”

“I don’t think so,” Cat repeated.

“Wanna bet?” Jimmy challenged. “That you and I are related by blood?”

Cat stared at him. “What are the stakes?”

“If I win... a night of passion,” Jimmy offered.

“Yours or mine?” Cat asked dryly.

“Optimistically, ours. Realistically, mine,” Jimmy replied with a grin.

“And if you lose?” Lois asked. She was bored enough that even this was looking interesting.

“When you lose,” Cat corrected.

“Name it,” Jimmy ordered.

“You repaint my apartment, every room, top to bottom. Pink fades,” Cat stated.

Lois noted the hesitation on both sides but after a moment Jimmy and Cat shook hands.

“I expect detailed family histories including charts from both of you no later than tomorrow,” Lois announced. “Also, blood tests.”

As Lois spoke, she noted that Clark had finally arrived. He was now sitting at his desk and seemed oddly subdued as he turned on his computer.

Perry came out of his office and went to the ramp.

“Everyone, listen up. Your editor-in-chief has an announcement,” he said.

Lois chose to ignore him for the moment. The bet between Cat and Jimmy was more interesting.

“Why blood tests?” Cat demanded.

“She’s kidding,” Jimmy said.

“No I’m not,” Lois told him. Lois figured that given Cat’s history, Jimmy had the right to know what he was getting into. Literally.

“Your editor-in-chief has an announcement to make to anyone currently employed by the Daily Planet and about to undergo their quarterly salary and expense review,” Perry announced loudly.

That caught Lois and Cat’s attention. They both turned to look at him.

Perry smiled. “Much better...” he murmured then raised his voice again, “Everyone!”

Finally the bustle of the newsroom quieted.

“It is my pleasure to announce that this year’s candidates for the Meriwether Award for Journalistic Excellence have just been released and the Daily Planet’s very own writing team of Lois Lane and Clark Kent are among the nominees,” Perry announced.

The newsroom broke out in applause and congratulations. Lois was pleased but it wouldn’t do to show how proud she was to be nominated for the Meriwether. While not as prestigious as the Metropolis Press Club’s Kerth award, it was still an honor to be nominated for the East Coast Publishers’ award.

Jimmy gave Clark a high five. “C.K.! You’re the man!”

Lois glared at the gofer. “And you’re the woman,” he added as an obvious afterthought.

“All right, all right, back to work,” Perry said as the hubbub died down. “It’s an announcement, not a national holiday.”

As everyone else settled back at their desks, Perry turned to Lois and Clark. “Good job you two. Just don’t expect to rest on your laurels.” He nodded to Lois. “How you coming on that piece on the recent rise in crime in Metropolis?”

Lois shrugged. “You know, gathering information, checking sources, compiling data. That sort of thing.” She glanced at the blank screen on her computer monitor.

“That bad, huh?”

“I’m still looking for an angle,” she admitted.

“Angles just don’t drop from the sky, Lois,” Perry told her pointing up for emphasis. “We have to create them... The Committee vote on the Meriwether Award is only a couple of days away. Be nice to show them a strong finishing kick.”

Lois watched Perry head back to his office. Nothing like a little pressure, Lois mused with a sigh. She settled back at her desk and the empty monitor screen.

Clark’s phone rang. At least that was another distraction.

Clark didn’t say much to the person on the other end of the line, but his expression became more and more upset. Finally he said, “I’ll be right there...” just before he hung up and grabbed his coat.

“What?” Lois demanded.

“My apartment’s been robbed,” he told her. “I’ve got to go.”

“Clark, how awful. I am so sorry. To be violated like that, to have absolute strangers pawing through your personal belongings, to endure...” Lois went on. Clark seemed to be ignoring her as he headed for the elevator.

She grabbed her own coat and ran after him. She finally had the angle for her story. “Wait! I’m coming with you!” She looked to heaven. Her prayer for an angle had been answered. “Thank you.”

Clark’s apartment was a mess. Books had been pushed off the shelves, clothing thrown around on the floor. It looked like whoever broken in had been looking for something. Even the pictures on the walls had been shoved aside as though to look behind the frames.

Clark seemed dazed. Lois was furious at the wanton disregard for personal property. Clark knelt down to pick up a book that had fallen open on its spine.

“Clark, don’t touch anything!” she ordered. “This is a crime scene.”

His jaw set into a familiar stubborn line as he picked the book up and placed it on a shelf. “It’s my crime scene.”

“How do you expect the police to catch whoever did this?” Lois began.

“I don’t,” Clark stated flatly.

“If you insist on tainting the evidence?” Lois finished.

“Someone call a cop?” A familiar voice called out from the broken front door. Lois turned to see Bill Henderson making his way down the front steps.

“Finally. Okay, Henderson, what’s our first move?” Lois demanded.

Henderson gave her a bemused look. “You live here, Lois?”

“No.”

“Then our first move is for you to butt out,” Henderson told her cheerfully. His expression became more serious as he turned to Clark. “Morning, Clark. Anything missing?”

“Yes, Inspector. I mean, I haven’t checked everything, but the TV and VCR are gone and so are my tapes and CDs.”

Henderson reached into his jacket and pulled out a form which he handed to Clark. “Fill this out. Bring it down to the station.”

“What is it?”

“Inventory of stolen items. Don’t forget serial numbers. Something turns up, we’ll call you,” Henderson explained. “Don’t hold your breath. We’ve had a lot of these type break-ins in this neighborhood lately.”

Henderson started up the steps to leave.

“That’s it? That’s all?” Lois asked, appalled by his callousness. “Don’t you look for clues? Dust for prints?”

“Waste of time.”

“Waste of...” Lois didn’t believe what she was hearing.

Henderson was supposed to be their friend. “Let me tell you a little story, Henderson.”

“Shoot.”

“It’s late at night. A sweet, innocent little old lady, probably someone’s grandmother, is preparing for bed. Suddenly, burglars burst in, knock her down, and steal her life savings from underneath her mattress,” Lois began. “Wanna know why?”

Henderson gave her another bemused look. “Why?”

“Because some cop like you was too lazy to dust for prints on a prior, so the burglars were never caught.”

Henderson chuckled. “Good story.”

“Thank you.”

“Now I got one. Wanna hear it?”

“Shoot.”

“That same sweet, innocent, little old grandmother is preparing for bed when she hears burglars breaking into her house. She rushes to the phone and dials 911, but, by the time help comes, it’s too late. Wanna know why?”

“Why?” Lois asked knowing it was a trap.

“Because all the good cops are out somewhere else dusting for prints.” With that Henderson climbed the steps and walked out with a sympathetic wave back at Clark.

Lois was furious.

“Calm down, Lois,” Clark ordered. “This is my problem.” He disappeared around the corner to his bedroom.

“Hey, I’m sympathetic!” Lois called after him as she followed.

The bedroom was as trashed at the living room had been — books thrown on the floor, the bedcovers ripped from the bed. Even the mattress had been shoved off onto the floor. She watched as Clark surveyed the damage.

“At least Superman’s globe wasn’t here,” Lois said.

“I don’t know if it was or not,” Clark told her. “Mom and Dad still won’t tell me what they did with it.”

“So, what else is missing?”

“Just some... personal things,” Clark answered, looking around more carefully. “Trophies, keepsakes... some art pieces from my travels... irreplaceable.”

“Not bad. Forget the monetary loss: it’s stealing parts of a person’s past,” Lois said, thinking aloud for her article. “The sense of vulnerability, the sense of invasion. Urban angst. You feel...”

She looked over at Clark, at his stricken look in her direction. She sighed, recognizing how heartless she sometimes seemed when on the trail of a story. Only this time it was Clark she was doing it to. She took his arm. “Don’t worry, partner. We’ll get your stuff back. Maybe the police can’t help, but I know who can.”

Clark was quiet as Lois drove them into one of the less savory neighborhoods in Queensland Park. Clark had filled out the form for the police and they dropped it off at the precinct house nearest his apartment. He had a copy of the form in his pocket.

Lois pulled the jeep in front of a non-descript storefront with blacked out windows in a block of taverns, pawnshops, and tattoo parlors. The urban renewal that had been going on in the area

hadn’t reached this section yet and when it did some of the neighborhood color and charm would fade away into urban uniformity. She hoped it wouldn’t happen for a long time. She had fond memories of this part of town. Clark seemed uncomfortable and she wasn’t sure if it was the neighborhood or he simply didn’t want to be a bother.

Inside was as dark and smoky as she remembered. It felt good, almost like visiting home, only visiting home had never been this comfortable. There were only a few players at the pool tables at this time of morning. She walked up to one of them.

“I’m looking for Louie,” she announced.

The player didn’t seem to notice her as he lined up his next shot.

“He’s not here,” Clark said. “Let’s go.”

In answer Lois picked the cue ball off the table and tossed it to Clark.

“Louie,” Lois stated with exaggerated clearness. “Tell him it’s Lois Lane.”

The player set his cue on the corner of the table and stared at her a long moment. Then he disappeared through a door at the back.

“This is a mistake,” Clark told her. He picked up the cue stick and laid the ball on the table.

“What are you so nervous about?” Lois wondered aloud. It wasn’t like him to be so ‘twitchy’.

“Where do you know this guy from?” he asked in return as he lined up a shot.

“Around,” Lois responded. “I’m a reporter, Clark. It’s my business to know the people who know what’s going on in this city.”

Clark made his shot and a ball fell into a side pocket. “And?”

He wasn’t buying her story. “And, his daughter was my tennis doubles partner in college,” she added.

A fat middle-aged man had come out of the back and was waving at them. “Hey, kid. Over here.”

Lois grinned and headed over to the table he was settling in at. Behind her, she heard pool balls being struck. She turned to see Clark at the pool table sinking each ball like a pro, or a hustler. After a few moments the pool table was empty and Clark joined her at Louie’s table.

“He’s good,” Louie commented.

Lois grinned. “He’s just full of hidden talents.”

Lois and Louie chatted for a few moments before getting down to business — finding Clark’s stolen property.

“Kicked in the door?” Louie asked around his sandwich.

Clark nodded.

Louie shook his head scornfully. “Amateurs.”

“What do you think?” Lois asked.

Louie considered the question for a long moment as he chewed his sandwich. “I can maybe find ‘em.”

“How?” Clark asked.

“They gotta try and sell the loot. I know guys who know guys,” Louie answered. “I’ll need a list. Anything special I should watch for?”

“No, not really,” Clark said. “Look, the police have all the information. Maybe we should just leave it to them.”

Louie shook his head, giving Lois a look of sympathy. Lois wasn’t sure why Clark was being so difficult.

“Clark, this is great stuff,” Lois told her partner. “If nothing else, for my article.”

“Uh, Lois, these guys I know don’t exactly like to read their name in the papers,” Louie said nervously.

“Louie, this is Lois,” she responded, insulted that he would even think that of her.

“So, if you do this, what are we supposed to do for you?” Clark asked.

Louie pointed at Lois with the remainder of his sandwich.

“For the kid? It’s a freebie. What a backhand she had.”

“When do you think...?” Lois prompted.

“I’ll call ya,” Louie told her. He turned to Clark. “You need help on the insurance claim? I know guys who know guys.” He gave Clark a toothy grin.

“Uh, no thanks.”

Louie turned back to Lois. “Straight arrow, huh?”

“You have no idea,” she said with a chuckle.

Her mood was more serious by the time she and Clark got back to her jeep. “Clark, what has gotten into you?” she demanded.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You were as ansty as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs,” Lois told him, throwing the jeep into gear. “What’s going on? What are you not telling me?”

“Lo-is...” he began. “I just had a real bad night and then this happens.”

“What happened last night?”

He shook his head.

“More nightmares?” she speculated.

He sighed. “Yeah. Luthor mostly. Screaming at me, laughing as I fell from the sky. But there was a different one, too. A strange one, not a nightmare really.”

“Want to tell me about it?” Lois asked. “It might help.”

“It probably doesn’t mean anything,” Clark told her.

“And maybe it does.”

He took a deep breath. “There was a man in a white robe with Superman’s symbol on his chest. He said his name was Jor-El and he was my father. He was calling me Kal-El. He said that Krypton was getting ready to explode from some problem with its core. He and his wife, Lara, were working on building a spaceship to get their son off the planet.”

“Some dream,” Lois commented. A thought occurred to her. “Do you think it has anything to do with Superman’s globe?”

“Maybe it was a message for him and the globe doesn’t know he’s dead?” Clark asked. “But why send me the message?”

“Maybe the globe knows something we don’t?” Lois suggested.

Clark gave her a disbelieving look. “You still think he’s alive somewhere and the globe is trying to contact him?”

Lois nodded, keeping her eyes on the traffic.

“So why give the message to me?”

“Maybe the globe thinks that you know where he is,” Lois said. He opened his mouth and she continued before he could start his protest. “Maybe not consciously, but buried in your subconscious.”

“Lois, I felt him die.”

“What if you’re wrong?” Lois asked. “What if what you felt wasn’t his death, but his despair at thinking he failed to save Earth?”

“If he didn’t die, then where is he?”

“Someplace safe where he can recover?”

She watched him out of the corner of her eye. He was studying her.

“I wish I could believe that,” he said after a long moment. “I wish I had your faith.”

“It’ll be okay, Clark. I promise.”

Foundling was written by Dan Levine

Part 20

Lois spent the evening helping Clark clean up the mess the thief left of his apartment. Luckily very few things had been broken. A few books had pages creased when they were tossed onto the floor and the thief hadn’t even bothered with the kitchen except to grab the microwave.

Still, Lois wondered a little at what the thief did take. The

television and VCR, the stereo and CD player, Clark’s small collection of music and movies all were fairly typical things for thieves to take. They were easily gotten rid of. But the art had been folk pieces of little value except possibly for a collector, and the trophies had no value except for Clark and his parents. Plus the apartment looked like it had been searched even though Clark’s reaction indicated nothing else was missing.

While cleaning up she took the time to do her own search. If she was right, if he really was Superman, his uniforms had to be somewhere and the most likely place was a hidden spot in his apartment. She almost had it pinned down — the bedroom closet seemed shallower on the inside than normal but by the time she started looking for a hidden latch, Clark had finished with cleaning up the living room and was ready to call it a day.

“We don’t know why he lost his memory, or his powers,” Jonathan had told her. ‘...telling him outright might actually make matters worse.’

Was Superman’s globe the key to Clark’s memory and Superman’s return? Or was Clark in such deep denial that even that wouldn’t trigger his recovery? How long would she be able to keep from telling him what she knew? He was her partner...

Cat and Jimmy had dived headlong into their bet and were huddled over their family trees, ignoring the bustle of the rest of the newsroom.

“Your Great-Uncle Howard married the same woman twice?” Cat was asking Jimmy.

“Well, see, he didn’t realize it was the same woman... until after...” Jimmy explained. “Howard had poor eyesight, and Aunt Millie suffered from a hormonal imbalance. She used to go through these huge weight fluctuations...”

“If it does turn out we have any of the same genes, I’m having mine altered,” Cat announced.

Lois tuned them out, concentrating on her article. ““And so the cycle repeats itself. Stolen goods traveling from owner, to thief, to fence, to wholesaler, to retailer, and finally to a new and unsuspecting owner,” she read aloud to Clark. “You think it’s too wordy?”

Clark rolled his chair next to hers to read over her shoulder. He seemed more tired than usual, yawning and rubbing the back of his neck. He was on his fourth or fifth cup of coffee already this morning.

“Did you sleep at all last night?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Not really.”

“More nightmares?”

“Yeah.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“Not especially,” Clark said. Lois had the feeling he was shutting her out, that more was going on with him than he was willing to discuss.

“You know you can talk to me, right?” she asked. He nodded but his expression was closed to her.

“Did you finish that inventory list?” she asked, changing the subject a little.

“Uh, no.”

“Clark, why are you stalling on this?”

“Why are you so insistent I do this?”

“I’m just trying to help out a friend.”

He shrugged and gave her a crooked smile. “You’re trying to write an article.”

“That, too,” she admitted. She pointed to the article on her screen. “See, I put the list in the article as an example of how some people get unreasonably, sentimentally attached to their old junk.”

“Aside from the fact that not all of it was old junk, I would really like to just put this all behind me,” Clark said. “I appreciate you wanting to help but, as I said before, it’s my problem.”

“And it’s my story,” Lois protested. “Besides, what about Louie?”

To Clark’s obvious astonishment, Louie called Lois right after lunch. They hurried over to the pool hall.

Louie was waiting with one of his people who was knocking balls around the nearest table.

“Where is he?” Lois asked.

Louie jerked his thumb toward a bench against the wall. A young man, a boy really, with dark hair and sullen eyes sat on a bench, his arms behind his back. A pile of CDs, tapes, trophies, and native sculptures. Clark’s belongings.

“That your stuff?” Louie asked, indicating the pile.

Clark looked through the pile on the table. After a moment he nodded to Lois.

“Kid tried to move it through a guy who knows a guy I know,” Louie explained. He held up ten hundred dollar bills. “Had this on him, too. Yours?”

“No.”

Louie offered it to Lois. She considered taking it and finally did, putting the money back in its envelope. She approached the boy on the bench. He glared her.

“That’s my money, Lady.”

“You robbed this man’s apartment?” she asked, jerking her head in Clark’s direction.

“I found that junk in a dumpster,” the boy said. “I should’ve left it there.”

“How old are you?” Clark asked. He sounded bemused rather than angry.

“How old are you? Look, I don’t know anything,” the boy snarled. He struggled to free his hands and Lois realized he was handcuffed. “Just let me go.”

“Louie,” Lois said, giving Louie a chastising look.

Louie nodded to the pool player. He tossed a key to Lois.

“Careful,” Louie warned as Lois approached the boy to release him. “You got yourself a real rabbit there.”

Lois hesitated, considering. The boy was a thief and he’d been in possession of more money than was reasonable for a boy wearing a worn jacket and torn jeans.

“We’re not the law, Lois,” Clark said. “He’s just a kid.”

Against her better judgment, Lois uncuffed the boy.

He rubbed his wrist and glared at Louie. “Yeah, I could sue you for kidnapping.”

Louie shivered in mock fear.

“I’m waiting for an answer. Did you rob this man’s apartment?” Lois demanded.

The boy didn’t answer. Lois watched his eyes as he looked for an escape route.

“Where’d you get the money?” she asked.

Still no answer.

“Look, this doesn’t have to go to the police,” Clark said, interrupting Lois. “Everything appears to be here.”

“You could save yourself a lot of trouble,” Lois added, speaking to the boy. “Hey!” she yelled as the boy grabbed the money out of her hand and bolted. Clark grabbed him.

“What’s your name?” Clark asked.

“Jack,” the boy spat. He winced. Clark loosened his grip just a little but ‘Jack’ wasn’t going anywhere.

“Just Jack?” Clark asked.

“Yeah, just Jack.”

“A grand in nice new bills is a lot of money for someone trying to make a living selling used CDs,” Lois commented. The boy’s eyes widened momentarily before he looked away from her. Bingo.

“What were you looking for?” Lois demanded.

“Nuthin’”

“There were other break-ins in the neighborhood, but none of

the others had their place torn apart,” Lois told him. “What were you looking for? And who paid you?”

The boy winced as Clark’s grip tightened.

“A ring. A fancy ring with a blue stone,” Jack finally admitted.

“And who wants to find this fancy ring with the blue stone?” Clark asked.

“I don’t know,” Jack said. Clark shook him once.

“I swear I don’t know,” Jack protested. “I met this guy with a funny accent who paid me a grand up front to toss the place and find the ring. He promised to pay me another two when I gave it to him.”

“And how is he supposed to get the ring and give you the money?” Lois demanded.

Jack’s shoulders slumped, all the fight gone out of him. “I’m supposed to meet him tonight in the alley behind here at ten tonight, but there’s no way I’m gonna’ show.”

Clark handed the boy one of his business cards. “If he gets in contact with you again, give me a call, okay?”

“You don’t have the ring, do you?” Lois asked as they headed back to the Planet. If they hurried she could just make her lunch appointment with Luthor.

“No,” Clark answered. “I gave it back to Henderson while we were still down at headquarters after that whole kidnapping mess.”

“Which kind of limits our suspects to someone who saw you wearing it at headquarters or the sorcerer who escaped,” Lois said, thinking aloud.

“I asked Henderson when he was at my place yesterday if they had any leads on the one that got away,” Clark said.

“And?”

Clark shook his head. “Nothing official... and unofficially who ever it is, is very good at covering their tracks. But this may be the break we need. Apparently that ring has a long history. The stone is from Charles Beaufort’s original ceremonial ring. The stone in its current setting belonged to Anthony Blackthorn.”

“And someone is still after Blackthorn’s legacy?”

“That’s what it looks like,” Clark agreed.

Luthor was waiting in the newsroom when Lois and Clark got back. “Lois, I was afraid you had forgotten our lunch appointment,” he announced as soon as he caught sight of her coming out of the elevator.

“I thought we’d agreed you...” Clark hissed at Lois.

“I can’t put him off forever,” Lois hissed back. “It’s not like I’m going to marry him... A lunch, that’s all.”

“Lo-is.”

“Clark,” she hissed. The last thing she wanted was for Luthor to suspect that she and Clark were anything other than work-mates even if that was all their relationship was at the moment. “I’ll talk to you when I get back,” she promised.

“You promised you’d stay away from him!” Clark shot back.

“Is there a problem?” Luthor asked, eyeing Clark.

Lois smiled brightly at the billionaire and hurried over to him. “Oh no,” Lois assured him, “We’ve been hard at work tracking down leads for a story and Clark just doesn’t know when to take a break sometimes.”

“Ah, I understand,” Luthor said cheerily. “But all work and no play makes Clark a dull boy, doesn’t it?”

Clark sighed, but to Lois’s relief, he didn’t rise to Luthor’s bait. Instead he headed to his desk and turned on his computer.

“Well then, Chef Andre is waiting,” Luthor announced cheerily. He nodded in Clark’s direction. “With your permission, of course.”

Clark finally looked up at the billionaire and shrugged. “Lois is a grown-up. She can go out with whomever she pleases.” He

nodded to Lois. "I'll get research onto what we found, see where that leads us."

"I'll be back in a couple hours," Lois promised. Clark simply nodded and returned to his computer.

As usual, lunch was superb. Again, Andre had out done any restaurant in Metropolis, with the possible exception of her Uncle Mike's.

Over dessert, Luthor studied her as though trying to fathom something. "Kent really is quite protective of you," he said. There was an undertone of wonder in his voice. Lois waited for him to continue. "Of course, it is quite understandable. You're quite an attractive woman," he finally went on.

"Thank you," Lois said.

"Of course, I am appalled at the risks you insist on taking," Luthor continued almost as though he hadn't heard her. "Aiding in the escape of a convicted felon, a known murderer. It's something of a miracle he didn't kill you to cover his escape. Desperate men do desperate things."

"He was innocent," Lois reminded him. "It would have been proven when Harrison showed himself after the virus attack. And he did save your computer system from Harrison's attack."

Luthor shrugged. "My people were aware of the problem and were working on a solution. Laderman simply found it first. And who's to say Harrison would have ever come forward to claim responsibility for the virus? He did fake his death for a reason and he killed a man to do it."

Lois conceded the point. If she and Reed hadn't been hot on his trail, it was unlikely Harrison would have been brought to justice.

"Lois," Luthor continued. "I really must insist you at least try to avoid taking so many risks. A story in tomorrow's cat box liner isn't worth your life."

"Is that what you think of the Planet? Tomorrow's cat box liner?" Lois asked.

"Lois my dear, the Daily Planet serves its function, informing its readers of the events that occurred in the city, in some cases even educating them on matters of import. But the days of the crusading publisher are over. Scripps and Pulitzer are no more. Neither is Tammany Hall. There's no need for a reporter to risk his or her life or freedom to right a wrong no one will remember the next day."

"You're saying we didn't need Woodward and Bernstein? We don't need Gil Gaul or Mark Thompson? Freedburg or Ashenfelter? What about Brazil and Berry? What they did, exposing corruption and cover ups and public danger, was worthless, meaningless?" She was having a hard time believing what she was hearing.

"Orlando and Philadelphia are not Metropolis," Luthor stated gently.

"Oh, and Metropolis doesn't have innocent men and women behind bars? Corrupt city officials, or industrialists who take advantage of lack of regulation, or who simply ignore what's there? There's no one in the city so venal that they'd ignore the public safety to line their own pockets or protect their own hides?" She was angry and frankly didn't care that he knew it.

He raised his eyebrows in surprise. "I apologize for impugning your chosen profession. I was merely saying that you don't have to take it all on yourself. As I told Clark, all work and no play..."

She just looked at him.

"I mean, you're a woman as well as a reporter..." he continued. He seemed to be trying to mollify her. "A beautiful woman at that." He reached out and caressed her hair, trailing his fingers down her cheek. She jerked away from him then stopped herself.

"I'm sorry Lex," she said, taking his hand. "It's been hard since... you know. I guess I've just buried myself in my work."

"I quite understand," Luthor said, kissing her palm. "Perhaps dinner later in the week? I promise not to talk about your work."

"That would be nice," Lois admitted. She checked her watch. "I really have to get back."

"I'll have Phillip drive you," Luthor offered as she stood to leave.

"Thanks."

She was almost to the door when he called out, "I forgot to mention. My people suspect that when Laderman was working on the LexCorp mainframe, he accessed certain private and highly sensitive files. I was wondering if you knew anything about that."

She turned, trying to act nonchalant. "I'm told Eugene was pretty busy curing the virus. I doubt he had time to break into your files."

"So you know nothing about it?" Luthor insisted.

"I'll ask Clark if Eugene told him anything about any sensitive files he may have accidentally gotten into. But Clark would have told me if anything like that happened," Lois assured him. "Why? What do you think he found?"

"Nothing important," Luthor said. "I'm sure you're right. Laderman was too busy to have broken into my personal files. And Kent would have said something to you, unless..."

"Unless what?" Lois asked.

"Unless he's hiding things from you."

Lois smiled and shook her head. "With Clark what you see is what you get. He wouldn't lie to me about something like that." He'd lie about Superman, but not about a story we were on. And what is Lex up to?

Asabi nodded cordially as she passed him on her way to the elevator. The man with him looked oddly familiar but she couldn't place him. She made a mental note to ask Asabi about the man the next time she saw him.

The man noticed her interest and gave her a cold look. She shivered, but not from cold. Evil seemed to pour off the man like a bad odor. The elevator doors opened and she was glad to make her escape.

"How was lunch?" Clark asked as soon as she got back to her desk.

"Interesting," she replied. "His people think Laderman broke into some sensitive files. I told him I didn't know anything about them and he suggested you were holding out on me."

"Did he believe you?" Clark asked. "That you didn't know anything?"

"I think so. I hope so." She turned and looked him in the eyes. "Would you hold out on me to get the inside track on a story?"

He gave her a thoughtful look. "I think it might depend on the story," he admitted. "Or if it was information I was allowed to share."

"Like the globe?"

Clark nodded.

"Has anything come back on him?" she asked softly. There was no one near them and anyone watching would assume they were discussing a story.

Clark sighed. "My parents have the globe. But you're right. It's been sending messages about the last days of Krypton, about how the planet was being destroyed. His parents were trying to modify a ship to get him away, to save him."

"Clark, we've all assumed Superman arrived on Earth not long before he appeared in Metropolis, right?" Lois asked quietly. Clark gave her a worried look but nodded.

"What if that assumption was wrong and he arrived earlier than that. A lot earlier?"

Clark seemed troubled by the idea. "Lois, if you're thinking what I think you're thinking..."

“Clark...” she tried again. He turned back to the article he was working on. It was one of his most annoying tactics, blocking her out by concentrating on work.

“You’re probably right,” she said anyway. “It was a ridiculous idea that Superman arrived here as a child, maybe even a baby. I mean, who in their right minds would send a baby off to another planet?”

“People who knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that they and their entire world were doomed,” Clark answered softly.

Clark was very quiet when Lois picked him up to go check out the alley where Jack was supposed to be meeting the man who wanted the ring. She parked the jeep a short distance away from the pool hall.

“Do you think he’ll show?” Lois asked as they made their way into the alley. Lois had their hiding place scoped out — there was a convenient dumpster behind the pool hall.

“Depends on whether or not he knows Jack isn’t going to show,” Clark responded.

Lois checked her watch. The meeting was scheduled in fifteen minutes time. She beckoned Clark to join her behind the dumpster. He hunkered down beside her, pulling garbage sacks over them. Lois was glad she had changed out of her suit and chosen black trousers and a pullover. So had Clark.

Lois was always amazed how good Clark looked in all black and tonight was no exception. She warned herself to stay in focus. They were in the alley to find out who gave the order to rob Clark’s apartment.

A black car drove up, blocking one end of the alley. From where she was, Lois couldn’t identify the make or model of the car.

The crunch of gravel underfoot. A figure in a long coat and a wide brimmed hat was striding down the alley from the other end. The figure stopped near the dumpster and looked around. Lois held her breath to keep from gasping. The single light bulb above the pool hall’s back door illuminated the man’s face momentarily. He was the man she’d seen that afternoon with Asabi.

After a few moments the man looked around the alley again. Then he slowly made his way toward the car.

“It would appear our bird has flown,” a familiarly accented voice said. Lois couldn’t see who it was, but she recognized the voice. Luthor’s factotum, Asabi.

She couldn’t make out what the man in the coat and hat replied. The car sat across the alley for several minutes after the car doors slammed. Then the car sped out.

“That was Asabi at the car,” Lois breathed.

“And the man in the hat looked a lot like the one who got away,” Clark told her, helping her to her feet.

“I saw him this afternoon with Asabi,” Lois told him. “As I was leaving Luthor’s penthouse.”

Part 21

The next day was quiet. They had reported their sighting of the Sorcerer to Henderson before heading home the night before — in Lois’s mind ‘the one who got away’ had a title, something to hang a headline on. Henderson had given her a tight smile when she told him. She knew he wasn’t impressed.

Clark seemed tired and distracted, doodling on his notepad as he nibbled on a donut. Lois picked at her croissant and watched him out of the corner of her eye. Over the past few days he’d been getting more and more distant. She had not seen any evidence that he had any powers aside from strength. She figured she would recognize them — the lowering of his glasses the momentary look into the distance. Those were things she had previously dismissed as ‘Clarkisms’ until she realized the truth. He’d been using his special vision and hearing things no normal

human could hear.

But something was going on with him, something that he didn’t want to talk to her about.

Jimmy and Cat were bent over their charts again. Lois noted in passing that nearly all the blanks in their charts had been filled in. Jimmy was nearly beside himself in excitement.

“Wait a minute! Wait a minute!” Jimmy was nearly shouting at Cat. “See here, your mother’s half-sister, Elena by your grandfather’s second marriage... married, for her third marriage, a man named Stanley Nugent.”

“I never liked that man,” Cat commented with a sneer.

“And Stanley was, in fact, my Great-Aunt Edna’s son out of wedlock, by a man named David Wilson, Uncle Dave, who she later married, but not until after her marriage to Uncle Harvey.”

“This is a nightmare,” Cat stated.

Jimmy opened his arms wide as he reached for Cat. “Cuz...! Your place or mine?”

Lois’s observation of Cat and Jimmy was interrupted by Perry’s approach.

“Good piece,” Perry said to her. “I loved the personal angle. Too bad about the Meriwether Award, though. Maybe next year.”

“Thanks, Chief,” Lois said as Perry headed back to his office. She sighed. It didn’t bother her as much as she thought it would to lose the Meriwether. It was who she lost it to that irked her. Linda King at the Star.

Clark’s phone rang and he picked it up. Lois watched as he listened to the person on the other end of the line. He was growing more and more worried as he listened. Finally: “Where are you? Okay. I want you to go straight to the 12th Precinct police station and ask for Inspector Henderson. Got that? Inspector Henderson. Tell him I sent you. Don’t worry about Jack. We’ll find him.”

“What’s going on?” Lois demanded as Clark hung up and grabbed his coat.

“Could you go down to the 12th and stay with a kid named Denny? He’s 13 or 14. I’ll check in with you there,” Clark told her.

“Clark, what’s going on?”

“That was Jack’s kid brother,” Clark explained. “Some men came and grabbed Jack.”

“And what makes you think you can find him on your own?” Lois asked. The question came out sharper than she intended. Clark’s shoulders slumped.

“For just a moment I...” his voice faded.

“What, Clark?” Lois asked.

“For just a moment I had an idea on how to find Jack,” Clark said. He sounded discouraged. “But it was nonsense... Superman’s dead.”

“Let’s both head over to Henderson’s office,” Lois suggested. “Maybe he has some ideas.”

“You two have a positive gift for stirring up hornets’ nests,” Henderson grouched at them. “No, better analogy. You two are walking lightning rods.”

“What did we do now?” Lois asked.

“Do you know anything about Jack?” Clark asked at the same time.

Henderson gave them both a bemused look. “The kid’s fine. Just a little shook up, that’s all,” the officer answered Clark’s question first. “After you told me the connection between the break-in at your place and the Sorcerer, we managed to convince young Mister Miner to carry a tracking device.”

“And?” Lois prompted.

“And, my people were able to follow him and his abductors and effect a rescue before things got out of hand,” Henderson explained.

“And the Sorcerer?” Clark asked.

"We're still questioning the two that grabbed the boy," Henderson said. "So far they don't seem to know anything useful, but every little bit helps. We will catch him, you know."

"Hopefully before he comes after me to find Beaufort's ring?" Clark asked.

"Hopefully," Henderson agreed. "Just remember to watch your backs."

By the time Lois and Clark made it back to the newsroom, Cat and Jimmy had put away their charts and Cat was hard at work writing something. Lois had no idea what.

Jimmy sauntered over to the older woman's desk and Lois stopped to watch and listen. "So... When's the big night?" Jimmy asked Cat.

Cat sighed and turned to face him. "I've been meaning to talk to you about that," she said with a little pout. "I think I'm going to have to declare the bet null and void."

Jimmy's jaw dropped. "Null and void?"

"Jimmy, I've always thought you were kind of cute. And, if before, you'd told me that you also found me attractive, who knows what might have happened? But, now that I know we're related by blood, I can't go through with it. After all..." She patted him on the cheek like an old maiden aunt. "...we're family."

Cat stood and strode off, leaving Jimmy staring after her. "It's not illegal!" he called.

"Poor Jimmy," Clark said, settling in at his desk. "So close and yet so far."

"You know she was just stringing him along, right?" Lois asked.

"The question is: when will he figure it out?" Clark responded.

Lois sighed. "I've never liked those games."

"Then don't play them."

"Sometimes, there's not much choice. We both know that."

Another cold morning. Even the newsroom seemed cold and Perry's irritable attitude wasn't making things any better. Jimmy was in the corner listening to the new police scanner while the rest of the staff gathered around Perry and an easel someone had set up with copies of the Planet and the Star pinned up with some sales charts. The Planet's headline read 'Council to Debate Coliseum'. Not the most scintillating headline, Lois had to admit, but it was an important debate dealing with whether or not the city should agree to build the Metropolis Tigers a new playing venue against the threat of the team moving to Coast City.

The Star's headline was pure checkout stand tabloid: 'Crooks 1, Cops 0!' Most of what was in the article was equally overblown.

Perry gestured to the easel. "The sales department just sent this little reminder down. I'll make it easy. It says that since Preston Carpenter bought the Metropolis Star and started throwin' his money around, the Star's selling twice as many papers as the Planet, newsstand and subscription. Anybody know how?"

Lois couldn't help herself. "Bigger type, smaller words?"

Perry glared at her. "Uh-uh. Carpenter's got people out-hustlin' us on the streets, Lois. In the last month they scooped us on nearly every major news story in this city. Now what am I going to lead the next edition with that's gonna change that?"

"Secretary Wallace is in town to sign that nuclear arms treaty with Omir," Clark said. "We're waiting to hear on a one-on-one."

"I can see them lining up at the newsstands for that," Lois commented. She couldn't help it. This wasn't the first time a competitor had threatened the Planet's standing as number one and wouldn't be the last. Perry had to be overreacting.

"You got something better?" the editor growled at her.

"Police charity scams?" she suggested, knowing that wasn't exactly what he was looking for. But except for the Ides of Metropolis computer virus attack, there simply wasn't much happening in the city aside from the usual fires and murders.

"At least it's local," she defended herself.

"People, people," Perry shouted to get everyone's attention.

"For fifty years the Daily Planet's been the top dog in this town and the Metropolis Star's been the dirty little puppy nippin' at our heels. Now I don't mean to be an alarmist, but if we don't start getting some big stories of our own, the faces around here may start changing. We need a good scandal, or a crime wave or a..."

"Hotel fire!" Jimmy yelled from his station.

"That'll do," Perry agreed.

"Police scanner," Jimmy explained, pointing to the device.

"There's a woman trapped on a ledge of the Metropolitan and the fire department's ladders can't reach her."

"Clark, Lois! Shake some tail!" Perry ordered.

Without another word, Lois grabbed her coat, purse and notepad. She ran to the elevator without even checking to see if Clark was following.

The Metropolitan was one of those high-rise hotels that had started out posh but was now running down at the heels for various reasons — disinterested ownership, the economy, the high cost of competent labor, whatever the blame game chose for that day.

Dark smoke poured out of the upper story windows, darkening the sky. Lois maneuvered her jeep into an alley and set out on foot the last few blocks to the scene. Clark was right beside her, but occasional glances in his direction told her he wasn't faring very well. He was keeping up with her, but he was pale as he watched the smoke and flames.

He gasped and she followed his gaze back to the Metropolitan. Something was falling from the building. The object disappeared, hidden by equipment and fire-fighters. Lois realized with a lurch that it had probably been the woman who had been trapped on the thirtieth floor.

She heard retching and looked back to see Clark throwing up.

"Clark, maybe they had that balloon thing out for her. We don't know she's dead," Lois said, guessing what was wrong. There was a chance she was right and the woman had survived. Of course Superman would have been able to save her easily, almost without thinking, assuming he was around anymore.

Another block and they were among the bystanders watching the firefighters.

Lois caught sight of an unpleasantly familiar face. The blonde woman was chatting cheerfully into a cell phone.

"What are you doing here?" Lois demanded.

Linda King smiled brightly at her. "Nice to see you, too, Lois. What's it been, six years since graduation? Unfortunately, you haven't changed a bit."

"Look, Linda, we're not starting that again," Lois stated.

"Where's Chief Comstock. I'd like to talk to him."

"You just missed him," Linda said, still smiling brightly. "He was very helpful. Even gave me a quote for my story about the woman's death."

"Your story...?"

"Haven't figured it out yet?" Linda said without losing her smile. "You've just been scooped."

Lois couldn't believe how wrong her day had gone. First Perry on the warpath because the Star was nipping at their heels, then Linda King gloating over scooping her when a woman had just jumped to her death. Lois tried to focus on her notes and the other papers in front of her as she sipped her coffee in the Planet lobby coffee shop.

"So you got scooped. It happens" Clark was saying. "You just

have to focus on the next story.”

“Spare me the Smallville pep talk,” Lois complained. “I wasn’t just scooped. A hideous part of my past has reared its ugly head.”

Clark managed a chuckle. “Never let it be said Lois Lane doesn’t have a flair for exaggeration.”

Lois gave him a sharp look then relented. “I’m sorry, Clark. It was just a very horrible surprise seeing her there, especially after... Are you sure you’re okay? No nausea or weakness, anything like that?”

Clark shook his head. “I’m fine. I’m not really sure what happened. It’s not like I haven’t seen people die before. I’ve covered gun battles, even an execution, but this time it was like part of me was saying I should have been able to do something to stop it. Only there was nothing I could have done. At least I didn’t throw up in front of your friend.”

“Linda King is not my friend,” Lois stated firmly. “You don’t know this woman, Clark. She has no conscience. She couldn’t even spell it.”

Clark smiled and intoned: “It was a dark day for the Daily Planet when Linda King rode into town.”

“Go ahead. Mock me,” Lois said. “But there are no depths to which she won’t stoop for a story... or anything else for that matter.”

“Do I detect the scent of jealousy?” Clark asked.

“You detect the smell of a rat,” Lois corrected. A movement on the sidewalk caught her eye and she looked up to see Linda King breeze through the revolving doors of the lobby. “And it just scurried in,” Lois added.

Linda seemed to home in on Lois, striding across the marble floors as if she owned the building.

“Hello, Lois. I thought we could get re-acquainted,” Linda said, stopping at Lois and Clark’s table. Lois ignored her, making a show of reading her notes.

“Or not,” Linda added. She turned to Clark, who had risen from his chair, and extended her hand. Lois seethed as Linda poured on the charm.

“Well, hello. I’m Linda King,” the woman practically cooed.

“Clark Kent,” Clark introduced himself.

“You were with Lois at the hotel fire,” Linda said. “Tragic, wasn’t it?”

Clark nodded. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Linda chuckled, a deep throaty sound some would describe as sexy. “From Lois? Let me guess. No conscience. Will stoop to anything.”

“See?” Lois said, not raising her head.

“She’s kidding,” Clark told Linda.

“No, I’m not,” Lois corrected. She spotted Linda trying to read her notes and hurriedly shuffled them together. She stuffed them into her briefcase and walked away.

After a moment she realized Clark was still talking to Linda. She was too far away to eavesdrop and she wasn’t going to give Linda the pleasure of watching her move closer. Clark nodded and smiled at the woman and finally, Linda moved off.

As soon as the other reporter was out of sight, Lois hurried over to Clark. “All right, what’d she want? Spill it.”

Clark gave her an innocent look. “She invited me, us, to a dinner Carpenter’s throwing tonight. Want to go?”

“How could you accept an invitation from her after everything I just told you?” Lois demanded.

“Lois. We might learn something.”

“I’m sure that’s the only reason Clark Kent, All American Boy, is going,” Lois growled. Linda was doing it to her again.

“What time should I pick you up?” Clark asked, ignoring her tone.

“You will not be picking me up,” Lois stated firmly then quickly added: “I’ll meet you there at seven.”

Lois was still fuming about Clark and Linda when she got to the Metropolis Press Club. She was a member, naturally, but she rarely went to the club unless she was trying to impress friends from out of town — and she had to admit those were few and far between — or when she was attending an award ceremony.

She looked around for Clark amidst the tuxedoed men and fashionably dressed women. A small combo was providing music and a few couples were dancing. She finally spotted Clark weaving his way through the crowd.

“Lois, you look... incredible,” Clark said.

She ignored his compliment as she continued to scan the room. “Have you seen Linda?” she asked after a moment.

“No one fields a compliment quite like you,” Clark commented.

Lois continued scanning the room. “I wonder what she’s going to be wearing.”

“Wild guess here, but there’s more to this rivalry than just who’s the better reporter. Right?”

“Don’t insult me.”

“I insulted you?” Clark said, sounding surprised.

“There’s no question who’s the better reporter,” she explained, making it sound obvious. Just then Linda swept into the room like she owned it. She was dazzling with her blonde hair upswept, wearing a designer original gown that had to have cost more than Lois made in a month. Lois grabbed Clark’s arm and turned him away to keep him from watching Linda. “Don’t look at her,” she ordered.

Too late. To Lois’s horror Linda had spotted them and was heading over to them.

“Lois, what a surprise,” Linda said with a smile. “You’re Clark’s date. What else do you do together?”

“I thought you two might enjoy catching up,” Clark said as if to explain.

“What happened, Linda, your date stand you up?” Lois asked.

Linda’s eyes narrowed but the smile remained on her face. “Of course not. Follow me. I’ll introduce you.”

She led them through the crowd, chatting as she walked. “I love your dress, Lois. You’re so lucky. I can never wear anything off the rack.”

It was all Lois could do to keep from grabbing Linda’s hair. Clark’s hand on her arm was a gentle reminder for her to stay in control. To Lois’s surprise, Linda walked up to Preston Carpenter. Lois took a moment to study the man. He was about Perry’s age, but slender and fit, wearing a crushed velvet tuxedo and carrying an ivory headed walking stick which he waved around as he spoke, almost as if he were directing an orchestra. But there was something cold and calculating in his eyes.

“Linda,” Carpenter greeted her with a broad smile. He gave her a kiss on the cheek before turning to Lois and Clark. “I am at a loss for words to describe her,” he explained.

“I can help there,” Lois muttered under her breath as she tried to put a pleasant smile on her face.

“Preston, I’d like you to meet Clark Kent, a reporter with the Daily Planet,” Linda said. “And Lois Lane. His date. Clark, Lois, Preston Carpenter.”

“Actually, Lois and I are a reporting team,” Clark said, obviously trying to save face for Lois.

Carpenter waved away Clark’s correction. “The Daily Planet was a fine paper in its day. Fine paper. But things change. That’s the lesson of life now, isn’t it? You either make it happen, or it happens to you.”

Lois had to work to keep the smile on her face and she was certain Clark was having the same problem. The Daily Planet was a staple in Metropolis, an institution. Lois took a breath to begin defending the paper when a gray expressionless man tapped

Carpenter on the shoulder.

“The Mayor would like to have a moment with you,” the man quietly told Carpenter.

Carpenter smiled at his guests. “Please excuse me.” Then he and the man disappeared into the crowd.

Lois turned to Linda. “Well, now we know how you got your job,” Lois spat. The accusation didn’t seem to bother the other woman in the least. The band began another tune, a slow dance this time.

“You don’t mind if Clark and I dance, do you?” Linda asked, giving Lois a saccharine smile as she held out her arm to Clark.

Clark gave Lois a questioning look but Lois simply shrugged, feigning indifference. She wasn’t about to let Linda King know how much she didn’t want her dancing with her partner. Besides, she and Clark were simply partners, right? Just friends?

So why was she feeling so miserable at seeing Linda in Clark’s arms?

The next morning was busy and conducted without Clark. She hadn’t realized how much she’d come to rely on him over the past few months until he wasn’t there but Lois had left Carpenter’s party alone and Clark hadn’t called her to fill her in on what happened after she left. That wasn’t like Clark either.

Lois got to the newsroom early, then headed out again. She had a hunch about the Metropolitan fire. Her experience covering fires told her something was off.

It was nearly lunchtime before she got back to the Planet. Jimmy was at his desk reading the Star. Lois ignored him as she headed to her own desk and pulled out her notes. Clark’s desk was empty and she didn’t see him at the coffee machine.

“Where have you been?” Jimmy asked, breaking into her scan for Clark.

“Fire department,” Lois answered. “They think the hotel’s a probable arson. I want you to get down there, get me some aftermath photos, investigators sifting through the rubble, that kind of thing.” She eyed the paper on his desk. “Why are you reading that tabloid rag?”

“C.K. got his picture on the society page,” Jimmy told her, opening the paper to the photo in question. “He’s dancing with Linda King.”

Lois looked at the photo. Clark actually looked happy to have Linda in his arms. First Paul, now Clark. She felt all the energy go out of her as she fell into her chair.

“I need some good news,” she ordered.

Jimmy shrugged. “Then don’t read the bulletin board.”

“Why?”

“The paper’s cut out expense accounts,” he said.

“They can’t do that!”

“Just did. Memo says it’s cost cutting due to lower circulation,” he explained. He leaned closer and dropped his voice to a whisper. “C.K. thinks paid sick days are the next thing to go.”

Lois glanced at Clark’s empty desk again. “Where is Clark?”

Jimmy managed to look miserable, like he was being forced to betray his best friend. “I think he had a lunch date with Linda King. Sorry.”

She sighed. This day was just getting better and better. Now Clark was off with Linda and the farmboy was just naive enough to fall for the blonde’s feminine wiles.

Lois shoved her notes back into her bag. “If anybody wants me, I’ll be at the Fudge Castle. On my own money.”

The Rival was written by Tony Blake & Paul Jackson

Part 22

The afternoon didn’t get any better. An elevator accident in one of the city’s older office buildings cost the lives of three people and Linda King had been right on the spot. Lois could

only hope that next time Linda would be a victim instead of a witness.

Clark had been pale when he came back to the newsroom late that afternoon but he gamely wrote up the story for Perry, even though the deadline for the next edition had passed. The Star was already on the newsstands. The Daily Planet’s lead story was about the weather and the predicted summer drought.

“How could you let that... that... bottom-feeder scoop you like that?” Lois demanded.

Clark gave her a blank look. “Bottom-feeder?”

“And what were you doing having lunch with her anyway?” she continued. Perry had come out of his office, holding a copy of the newest edition of the Star.

“What are you asking him for?” Perry growled. “If you want to know something, buy the Star. They know everything!”

“Bet they don’t know how much rain we got this year,” Jimmy muttered.

Perry glared at him a moment before clearing his throat. “People,” Perry yelled at everyone. “I can assure you, if we don’t come up with some solid page one stories PDQ, the only writing you’ll be doing is your resumes!”

A phone rang and Jimmy moved to answer it.

“Well? Anybody?” Perry asked loudly. There was no answer from his audience. “Oh, this is just great,” he added sarcastically. “I can see the next edition already. Under ‘Today’s Top News’ we’ll just print ‘We haven’t got a clue!’ Just what in Sam Hill am I supposed to tell the publisher if he calls?”

“Whatever it is,” Jimmy spoke out. “He’s waiting to hear it on line one.”

Perry just sighed. “Just a warning, folks. I’ve seen papers shut down. It’s not a pretty picture. Not pretty at all.”

He disappeared into his office. Lois sighed and went to the coffee machine to refill her cup. It was going to be another long day. Clark was sipping his own coffee, staring at the photo on the front page of the Star.

“I know Linda’s writing style is absolutely mesmerizing, but please, don’t drool,” Lois snapped at him.

“How long are you going to keep acting like this?” he asked, folding over the paper.

“Me? You’re the one who’s more interested in making the Star’s society page than the Planet’s front page.”

“Is that what this is about?” he asked, sounding surprised. “You’re jealous because you think I’m infatuated with Linda King?”

“I wouldn’t care if you were infatuated with Don King,” Lois growled at him. “What I care about is the quality of reporting at the Planet.”

“Then you’ll be happy to see this,” Clark said, reaching into his jacket pocket and pulling out a Polaroid photo. Lois glanced at it. It was a picture of a piece of cable.

“Okay, I see it. When do I get happy?”

“This is elevator cable,” he explained. “From the accident. Check the end.”

“Well, I’m still not happy,” she told him. “But I’m closing in on bored.” She wasn’t about to admit she was curious as to where he was going with this.

“It’s not frayed, Lois,” he went on patiently. “It’s smooth. Like it’s been cut.”

“Then the accident...”

“Wasn’t,” he completed for her. “Elevators don’t just fall. There are too many safeguards. Somebody wanted that elevator to fail.”

Lois could feel the excitement rising. “Clark, do you know what this means? I can scoop Linda!”

“You?” Clark repeated warily.

“Us,” Lois corrected herself. “Didn’t I say us? I meant us.”

“Uh-huh,” he said like he didn’t quite believe her. “Before we

write anything, I want the building inspectors and the forensics team to verify my, I mean, our theory.”

“Of course. Absolutely,” Lois agreed too quickly. “That’s the rational thing to do. Let’s get down to the forensics lab.”

“Lois, let’s grab a bite to eat, sit down and talk this through,” Clark suggested. “You seem a little tense.”

“Tense? Me? I’m fine,” she protested. Clark just looked at her.

Clark took her to dinner at the Metropolis Press Club. Given the way things were going at the Planet... She didn’t want to think about what she would do if the Planet’s doors closed. She refocused on the story at hand.

“All right, let’s think it through,” she began. “Assume the elevator was sabotaged. Who would benefit? You’d kill a random person.”

“The building owner?” Clark suggested “An insurance scam?”

A waiter passed by, presenting each of them a copy of the Star.

“What’s this?” Lois asked.

The waiter shrugged. “Every customer receives a free copy.”

Lois handed it back but Clark opened his copy, frowning. The waiter moved on to the next table.

“It’s bad enough Carpenter cut his newsstand price. Now he’s giving it away,” she grouched. Clark didn’t look up. “What are you looking at?”

“Carpenter has an editorial demanding stronger building codes in light of the elevator accident, calling for a criminal investigation into the manufacturers,” he answered.

“So?”

“So he’s a fast writer,” Clark said. “It’s in the same edition as Linda’s article.”

“Clark, the man’s a walking opinion,” Lois told him. “It’s not like he has to do a lot of thinking.”

“Still...” Clark started thoughtfully.

Lois needed to take a break and rose from her chair. “I’ll be right back. Order me a linguine pesto,” she instructed then headed for the ladies’ lounge.

Lois considered Carpenter’s editorial as she dried her hands. The man was a fast writer. And even though the Planet would likely get the scoop on the fact the elevator had been sabotaged, it still didn’t help that the Star had gotten the initial disaster story first, even if they had jumped the gun on the causes.

She finished drying her hands and tossed the wadded paper towel into the waste container. As she did so, the clasp on her bracelet broke, again, slipping into the trash. She sighed and reached down to retrieve it. It wasn’t an expensive piece of jewelry but it had sentimental value. Her father had given it to her after she won her first Kerth.

The door to the lounge opened and Linda King walked in.

“Looking for your career?” the woman asked.

“I lost my bracelet.”

Linda moved to look at her own reflection in the wide mirror. “I’ve seen how you accessorize, Lois. Believe me, it’s not worth the effort.”

Finally, Lois felt the bracelet chain and grabbed it. She straightened up and dropped it into her purse. “Is there no getting away from you?” she asked.

“Actually I’m surprised to find you here.”

“I’m a member.”

Linda gave her a smug smile. “Really? I thought members had to be working for a news organization that was still in business.”

“I wouldn’t start swaggering yet,” Lois warned her. Then she smiled. “Though, on second thought, your hips could use the

exercise.”

Linda simply shrugged. “Speaking of bodies, your partner has a great one. Talk about buns of steel.”

“How would you know?” Lois demanded.

“You don’t need Superman’s x-ray vision to figure that out,” Linda said with a chuckle.

“I’m warning you, Linda. Stay away from him.” Lois ignored the little voice that said she was just playing into Linda’s hands.

“He looks like a big boy to me.”

“Clark’s good-hearted... and a little naive. I don’t want to see him get hurt. I know you only want to use him to get back at me,” Lois told her.

“Lois, for me to want to ‘get back’ at you, you’d have to have done something that mattered to me,” Linda stated. “Which you haven’t.” With that, Linda sauntered out of the lounge.

Lois followed her, only to find the woman was heading toward where Clark sat waiting.

“Clark, I need to ask you a favor,” Linda began.

“He’s working,” Lois interrupted “We’re working.”

“You look like you’re about to have dinner,” Linda commented.

“You had lunch with the man. Aren’t you full yet?” Lois asked as she sat down across from Clark.

Linda ignored her. “I’d like you to walk me to the subway. It’d really help me out.”

“By all means, Clark. Help her out,” Lois said, not bothering to keep the disdain out of her voice. “Then lock the door behind her.”

“Such wit, Lois. I hope it’ll help pass the hours at the unemployment office.” There was something very unpleasant in Linda’s voice.

“Do you two mind if I speak?” Clark asked.

“Tell her ‘no,’ and let’s eat,” Lois ordered.

Lois watched Clark hesitate. “She probably doesn’t know her way around,” Clark said finally.

“She knows her way around enough to beat us twice since she got here,” Lois reminded him.

“Trust me,” he told Lois quietly as he got up from the table. “There’s a subway a couple of blocks from here,” he told Linda then turned back to Lois. “I’ll be right back.”

Lois glowered at them as Linda snaked her arm through Clark’s and led him away. Linda looked back over her shoulder and grinned at Lois.

Lois didn’t wait for Clark to return. She couldn’t believe he was so naive as to fall for a bleached blonde in a tight dress. But he had left her waiting for him and that was something she simply wouldn’t stand for. It was bad enough when he disappeared on her to do a rescue as Superman. But he wasn’t Superman anymore. He had no excuse.

She was scrubbing the grout on her kitchen counter when there was a knock at the door.

“Who is it?”

“Lois, it’s me,” Clark announced from the hallway. “I’m sorry.”

She unlocked the door for him but didn’t bother to open it as she hurried back to the kitchen and her cleaning.

“I was only gone a few minutes,” Clark said. “You didn’t have to leave.”

“I’m a busy person. I have things to do. I have to...”

“Scrub your grout?” Clark asked. “You’re really letting this woman get to you.”

She whirled around, waving the toothbrush in her hand at him. “Get to me?” she spat. She stopped and considered his observation. She had been letting Linda get to her. “This does not leave the room, understand?”

Clark nodded.

“Okay. Linda and I were best friends. But it was very

competitive. You may not believe this, but there was a time when I had to be the best at everything,” Lois said. She ignored the bemused smile that came to his face. “Anyway, there was this editor I was trying to impress, a guy named Paul Bender. He was a senior, and I had a very big crush on him. My first. So when I found out some of the school’s football players weren’t taking their own exams, I thought, this is it. This is the story that’s going to get Paul to really notice me.”

“Did it?”

“No,” Lois admitted. “Somehow Linda stole my story and wrote it under her name. Of course, he fell for her and she continued to impress him, in ways I won’t go into. Needless to say, that was the end of our friendship. So now you know everything. Happy?”

“So, she stole a story and she stole a guy and now she’s trying to do it again, huh?” Clark summarized for her.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” she warned him.

“Hey, don’t take this out on me.”

“Why not? You say ‘yes’ to her party, ‘yes’ to lunch, ‘yes’ to walking her home. You’re behaving like her indentured servant.”

“So it’s okay for me to be your servant, but nobody else’s?”

Clark asked.

“You’re my partner and what you do reflects on me. I don’t want the world to know my partner’s a doormat for women,” she spat.

“That’s not true, Lois, and you know it,” he said. He sounded hurt by her accusation.

“You want truth? You’re a doormat with no taste,” she yelled.

“I’m out of here!” Clark yelled back.

“Perfect. Fine. I’m sure she’s waiting for you.”

“And you know what? I’d love to hear her side of this,” Clark told her. “And I could tell her a few things about how impossible you are to work with!”

She opened the front door. “Really? Then why don’t you go to work with her, too?”

“Maybe I will.”

She pushed him out the door. “You two deserve each other!” she screamed, slamming the door behind him. She leaned against the closed door, listening. After a moment she heard his footsteps heading away from the door. Then, with a sob, she slid down the door to sit, fighting to keep from bursting into tears.

Clark wasn’t at his desk the next morning. She tried his apartment and got his answering machine. He didn’t answer his beeper. Finally, heart in her mouth, she called someone she knew at the Star.

Lois barely believed what her source told her. Then she burst into action, running into Perry’s office. She ignored Jimmy standing in the office. What she had to tell Perry was more important than anything Jimmy had to say.

“Perry, I just got off the phone, I hate to be the one to tell you, especially when the paper’s in trouble, but we’ve got a turncoat, a Benedict Arnold and you’re never going to believe who.” She managed to get it all out in one rushed breath.

“Kent,” Perry told her quietly.

Jimmy seemed surprised to hear it.

“He offered two weeks notice but I told him he was free to go,” Perry continued. “So he’s gone.”

“Boy, you think you know someone then...” Jimmy muttered.

Lois gave him a dark look. She was in no mood for his childishness.

“It’s her!” Lois told Perry. “Linda King! She’s cast some kind of spell on him. Drugs or something.”

Perry shook his head. “He’s worried about his future. The way things are going around here, I couldn’t give him much of an argument.”

“Did he mention what kind of medical plan they have over there?” Jimmy asked. Lois couldn’t believe how oblivious he was. Finally he noticed the glares in his direction. “I think I better check with the lab about... something,” he said, sidling out of the office.

Lois turned back to Perry. “Don’t you see what she’s done? She waves her skirt in front of him and he turns into a pathetic little puppy.”

“Don’t go jumping to conclusions,” Perry warned her.

“Then what about loyalty? What about going down with the ship?”

“That’s for captains. That’s why I’m still here.”

“How can you be so calm?” Lois asked. It wasn’t like Perry to take something like this laying down.

“What’s my choice?”

“Well, since I’ve worked here, I’ve seen you scream, throw things, you even put your fist through the conference wall once,” Lois told him.

“All we can do is keep doing what we’re supposed to be doing,” Perry said. He glanced at the assignment sheet. “Now according to this, what you’re supposed to be doing is covering the Orani Jewels that the Ambassador of Omir’s giving to Secretary Wallace as a lovely parting gift.”

“That’s the best we’ve got?” Lois asked. It was a society piece, not the front page.

“No,” Perry told her. “The best we’ve got is the editor of the Daily Planet hanging from the top of the Global Commerce building in a gorilla suit. But my costume hasn’t arrived yet. I’ll page you when it does. Now, go on. It’ll be okay. Trust me.”

“That’s what Clark told me.”

Perry just shrugged.

The ballroom at the Omir Embassy had been set up for a news conference. A small stage held a covered display case and a podium. The display case no doubt held the Orani jewels everyone had been talking about.

Doors opened on the far side of the room and Secretary Wallace entered, accompanied by an assistant and the ambassador of Omir along with a small entourage of Omiri aides. They moved quickly to the stage and the display.

Lois spotted Clark with Linda and looked away. It wouldn’t do to look interested in what he was doing.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Wallace began. “The Ambassador and myself will be happy to answer a few questions before the unveiling.”

Clark spoke up first. “Mister Secretary, Clark Kent, Metropolis Star. What do you think...?”

Lois cut him off. “Mister Secretary, Lois Lane, Daily Planet. Is it true...?”

“Excuse me!” Linda jumped in. “But I believe Mister Kent was asking a question.”

“Mister Kent can speak for himself,” Lois retorted, not bothering to look at either of them.

“Maybe. Except he’s gotten so used to you doing it for him,” Linda spat.

Wallace simply looked confused while the rest of the press corps tried to keep straight faces.

“Hypocrite,” Lois sneered, finally turning to face Linda.

“Me? You sure can dish it out but you can’t take it,” Linda shot back.

“Oh, get off your high horse!”

“And get down in the gutter with you?” Linda shouted back.

Wallace began to shout for order. “Ladies, please! Please! No questions. That’s it...”

Lois snapped her mouth shut and glared at Linda.

Wallace continued. “Let’s get to the real reason we’re here, the ceremonial exchange from the Kingdom of Omir to the

United States. Ladies and gentlemen, the gift from the Ambassador of Omir, the Orani Jewels.”

Wallace turned to pull the cloth from the display when a loud crash echoed through the room. With everyone else, Lois turned to see that one of the large statues in the hallway had tipped over. Then Lois caught sight of Clark whispering something to one of the uniformed guards.

It would have taken superpowers to knock that statue over. Clark’s powers were coming back. But was he smart enough to keep from revealing himself to Linda King? There was no telling what Linda would do if she found out.

Lois waited until she was sure Clark would be home before heading over to face him. She wasn’t sure what she was going to do, but she was sure she was going to have to save him from himself. He was just so naive sometimes. Of course, blowing up at Linda during the news conference wasn’t going to help her case.

She knocked hard on his apartment door. After a few moments the door opened. Clark seemed surprised to see her there.

“All right, Clark?” Lois demanded “You can run, but you can’t hide. What’s going on?”

Clark eyed her warily. “What do you mean, ‘What’s going on’?”

Lois pushed past him. “Don’t give me the innocent act.” “Me?”

“So, that’s how you’re going to play this, huh?” she commented. She wasn’t surprised. He was very good at the ‘lil ol me’ bit, then something else occurred to her. “Oh, I get it. She’s here, isn’t she? You can’t talk because she’s here.” Lois started looking around Clark’s apartment. “Come out, come out, wherever you are.”

He followed her around, watching as she checked behind the sofa, under the bed, in the shower. Finally she opened the closet door and found... Perry.

She looked back at Clark. “Either this is a lot sicker than I thought, or it’s not what I thought I thought. Which is it?”

Both men gave her sheepish looks. “Clark’s been working undercover at the Star,” Perry finally explained.

It all made a bizarre sort of sense. “Of course! You couldn’t possibly be ready to throw away everything you have for...” she could hardly stand to say it. “Linda King.”

“You’re right about that,” Clark said. He sounded sincere.

“So talk,” she ordered.

“These accidents aren’t accidents,” Clark said. “The arson fire that Linda happened to be at. The elevator fall during lunch. There was even supposed to be a heist of the Orani jewels.”

“We thought they might be staging crimes just to scoop us,” Perry added. “So we staged Clark’s defection.”

“You could have told me!” Lois said. She felt betrayed. She had always been the one to go undercover.

“My idea,” Perry said as if reading her mind. “You seem to be personally involved here. I didn’t want to risk it.”

“You mean I’ve been going through all these feelings for nothing?” She wailed then promptly regretted it. Clark’s eyes had lit up.

“What feelings?” Clark asked innocently. No, innocent wasn’t the word for it. Clark had managed to pull the wool over Linda’s eyes and that took talent. The woman was a man-eater. And Clark...? Well, Clark had been fooling everyone with his innocent farmboy act ever since he got to Metropolis.

“Forget it. I’m not feeling them anymore,” Lois told him. She resolved to deal with the feelings Clark’s apparent betrayal had brought her later. “So, Linda is in this up to her surgically sculpted chin.”

“I don’t think so,” Clark said. “I mean, I thought that was it,

that’s why I wanted to get partnered with her. But I think she’s out of the loop.”

“What do we do now?” Lois asked. That Linda might, just possibly, be innocent in all this only bothered her a little. She knew she had to be guilty of something. It was only reasonable.

“Well, now that you know, the two of you might as well start working this together,” Perry suggested brightly. “That is, if you think you still can.”

“Chief, I’m fine. It’s Clark who’s been turning to mush whenever he’s around Linda,” Lois said.

“Me? You’re the one who fell into the black hole the minute you heard she was in town,” Clark retorted.

Perry just smiled benignly at them.

“Don’t exaggerate,” Lois warned Clark. She pitched her voice high, mimicking Linda’s voice. “Clark, can you walk me to the subway?”

“I was just being polite,” Clark defended himself.

“There’s polite and there’s pushover. You’d fly her to the moon if you could,” she came back. It felt good to be arguing with Clark, even if it was about Linda King. She didn’t even notice when Perry left.

Part 23

To Lois’s surprise, Linda agreed to meet her for breakfast at the Press Club.

Lois let Clark lay out the evidence. She knew her own dislike of the woman would keep her from being helpful.

Linda simply stared at them when Clark was finished. She pushed back from the table so hard the coffee sloshed in the cups. “That can’t be true. It can’t be,” she protested.

“Think about it,” Clark urged. “Carpenter always calls to verify your location, right? He’s the publisher. He doesn’t need to do that.”

“Unless he needs to make sure his man, or woman, is in place before he pulls the trigger on whatever he’s got planned,” Lois added.

“Like the elevator. The police have established it was no accident. You just ‘happened’ to be there. Just like you ‘happened’ to be at the fire,” Clark said.

“Just like Carpenter ‘happens’ to have a page ready to run in the same edition,” Lois added.

Linda stared at them. It had to be a blow, discovering you’d been used. Linda took a deep breath, blowing it out her nose.

“I feel so... so...”

“Abused? Duped? Used?” Lois listed cheerfully.

“What are you, a thesaurus?” Linda asked.

“Why don’t you both put this on hold?” Clark interrupted them. “We have a lot of work to do.”

“We? ‘We’ is an inclusive term Clark, one used to indicate all people present. That would be a clear misuse,” Lois stated.

Linda stared at her. “You’re a dictionary?”

Clark took a deep breath. “Bottom line, it’s a Planet story.”

“Absolutely!” Lois agreed brightly.

“Which we can’t possibly prove or print without Linda’s help,” Clark added. Lois sat back, folding her arms over her chest. She knew Clark was right, but she didn’t have to like it.

“Exactly!” Linda chimed in. Then she seemed to recognize what Clark meant. “What am I supposed to do? Walk up and say, ‘Hi, boss, where are you staging your next disaster?’”

“You need to get Carpenter out of his office long enough for us to get into his computer,” Clark told her.

“How?” Linda asked.

Lois couldn’t keep from smirking. “You could use your ‘other talents.’ It wouldn’t be the first time.”

Clark glowered at her then turned back to Linda. “You said he’d been hitting on you. Maybe you could... hit back?”

Linda nodded. Lois could tell the wheels were turning in

Linda's bleached blonde brain.

Lois hid with Clark behind the door to the fire stairs. It seemed to be taking forever and Lois could only imagine what Linda was telling Carpenter to get his interest. Lois had to admit, there were times that she had used her gender to get a story. She had even gone so far as to string a man along to get the information she needed. Lois was surprised to find she was actually a little worried about Linda. Carpenter had a reputation for having 'interesting' appetites and she wasn't sure how Linda would handle herself.

Finally the door to Carpenter's office opened and Linda and Carpenter stepped out. Carpenter closed the door, making sure it was locked. As he started toward the elevator, Linda slipped her arm through his and gave him a seductive smile.

"You're a very interesting woman, Linda," Carpenter was saying.

"And the day is still young..." Linda responded, a little too cheerily for Lois's taste.

It was all Lois could do to keep from groaning. Linda wasn't going to have any problems handling Carpenter.

Clark checked to make sure the hallway was clear and stood watch as Lois made quick work of the lock. The door opened and they both slipped inside. Lois spotted the computer on Carpenter's desk and headed for it. Behind her, she heard Clark lock the door.

Carpenter's computer was still on. Lois studied the monitor. "We're in luck. I know this system."

Clark came to watch over her shoulder as she began to search through the file directories.

Suddenly, the doorknob jiggled and she looked up to see a shadow fall across the frosted glass of the door. Keys jingled as the shadow put a key in the lock. Clark pushed Lois under the heavy desk. There was only enough room for one of them but there was no time to think.

The door opened and heavy footsteps crossed the floor. The footsteps stopped then retreated to the door. Lois breathed a sigh of relief as the door closed again.

"That was close," Lois murmured. Clark helped her out from under the desk. "Where did you hide?" she asked.

He pointed to the potted plant in the corner, giving her a sheepish look. "Let's not waste any time in case he comes back," he suggested before she could ask any more questions. She knew he had to have hidden on the ceiling and wondered how often he'd done it before while they were breaking and entering.

Lois sat back down at the computer, tapping a few keys. "We're in... I'm betting this is his subdirectory... Yep."

"What's that file? 'Musings?'" Clark asked. Lois opened the file and they both started reading.

"Looks like a personal diary," Lois said as she scrolled down the file. But it wasn't a diary or if it was it was evidence of an extremely disturbed mind and a possible sexual predator. "This man is very sick. In an x-rated kind of way."

"Let's hope Linda doesn't have to call his bluff," Clark told her.

"Don't worry," Lois said grimly. "They're probably perfect for each other."

"We need proof, not scandal," Clark reminded her. "Try another file. That one." He pointed at file labeled 'camelot'. Lois attempted to open the file but a password request came on the screen.

"This must be it. But we need a password to get into it."

"Try Kane. K-A-N-E," Clark suggested. "Linda says he's got a Citizen Kane fixation."

"No kidding," Lois muttered as she typed it in. "Nope. Let's see... How about... Rosebud?"

Clark said it at the same as she did.

"Great minds think alike," Lois said with a grin. "We're in."

"Look!" Clark pointed at the document on the screen.

"There's the editorial that went with the hotel fire."

Lois scrolled down the page. "There's the one on building inspections that ran with the elevator accident." She scrolled down further. "Wait a minute. 'An eye for an eye is the only course this country can take after today's brutal assassination of Secretary Wallace at his hotel by Omir extremists...'" she read aloud. "Wallace isn't dead."

"Yet."

"Carpenter's willing to kill a member of the cabinet to sell a few papers?" Lois asked.

Clark nodded. "To drag us into a war. And he'd also be willing to kill Linda if he knew she was on to him. Let's go."

Lois hesitated. There was more to the document than they'd read. She hurriedly put a floppy disk into the drive and copied the file. Clark glared at her. "I'm coming already!" she said, grabbing the floppy and following him out.

Wallace was staying at the Grand Hotel, not far from the Omiri Embassy.

The taxi pulled up in front of the hotel and Lois and Clark were out of it almost before it stopped. Lois spotted Linda running toward them from the ground floor restaurant.

"What are you doing here?" Linda hissed at them "You'll blow everything."

"Carpenter's going to kill Secretary Wallace!" Clark told her.

"He's already written the editorial," Lois chimed in. "All he needs is your 'exclusive' report."

"Stay here," Clark ordered. "I'm going in to warn the Secretary." He ran inside the hotel before Lois could protest. Linda just raised one eyebrow at Lois.

"Stay here.?" Guess we know who calls the shots on your team." Linda said.

"You have no idea," Lois told her. She wasn't about to explain Clark's protective streak, or anything else, to the woman.

Linda shrugged. "I just know what I see."

"Stay here," Lois ordered. "I'm going after Clark."

Linda grabbed Lois's arm, keeping her from leaving. "Nice try."

Lois and Linda ran to the front door, following Clark. Lois looked for him, but he had vanished.

"There they are!" Linda pointed out four men entering the elevator. Lois recognized Carpenter and the man who had been with him at the party. The other two were strangers, dressed in hotel uniforms. The elevator doors closed on them and the level marker indicated the elevator was heading down.

Lois ran for the nearest stairwell, Linda on her heels. They got to the lower level and peeked out the stairwell door to see Carpenter and the three other men passing through swinging doors at the end of the corridor.

As they hurried to the doors marked 'Banquet Kitchen', and peeked through the door portholes. Beyond the doors was an empty kitchen, empty except for Carpenter and the three men with him. The four men were huddled around one of the prep tables.

"One of us should notify the police. The other should stay on the story," Lois said, keeping her voice low.

"Great," Linda agreed. "You take the police."

"I was thinking you would handle that."

"Think again," Linda announced, pushing open one door and dropping to a crouch. She was inside the kitchen before Lois could grab her. Furious, Lois dropped down and followed Linda into the kitchen. The two women approached the men under cover of the kitchen's large appliances.

"I'm here, on the roof across the street," Carpenter's assistant was saying. "You two set up here, and here. Fire when you hear

my shot.” He turned to Carpenter. “What about your ‘friend?’”

To answer, Carpenter pulled a cell phone from his pocket and keyed in a number.

Suddenly, Linda’s cell phone rang. Lois and Linda grabbed for it but it was too late. The men had heard the sound.

“Linda, dear,” Carpenter began as he stood over them. “I guess I don’t have to tell you I’ve been detained, do I?”

Within minutes Lois and Linda were sitting on the floor of the hotel’s walk-in freezer, tied up back to back, hidden behind a tall stack of hamburgers in cases. Stark — Linda had told Lois who he was — checked their bindings one last time as Carpenter watched.

“I can’t tell you how truly sorry I am that things turned out this way,” Carpenter told them. He didn’t seem at all concerned about what was happening. “On the other hand, you two are going to be part of a fabulous forty-eight point headline.”

He walked out, followed by Stark. Lois heard the thump of a heavy door closing behind them. The two women struggled against the ropes but Stark had done a professional job in tying them. The ropes cut tighter the more they struggled.

“Life is cruel,” Lois muttered. She didn’t remember how long it would take for hypothermia to set in but she knew the freezer’s temperature was well below zero Fahrenheit.

“Don’t get philosophical,” Linda grouched. “It’s never been your strength.”

“Well, doesn’t it strike you as ironic?” Lois asked. “That the two of us should have to die together?”

“We were best friends,” Linda reminded her.

“Were.”

Linda snorted. “Let’s clear this up once and for all, okay?”

“Let’s not and if there’s anybody on the other side who asks us, let’s just say we did.”

“You think I stole Paul Bender from you. But I didn’t,” Linda said, obviously ignoring Lois’s wishes. But that was just like Linda, ignoring other people’s needs and wants. “You weren’t even dating him.”

“But I really cared for him, and you knew it.”

“He came on to me,” Linda told her.

“And you had no will power, huh?”

“None,” Linda cheerfully admitted. “I would have done anything for Paul.”

“And I guess you had no will power when you stole my story?”

“Okay. I’m weak. It doesn’t mean I wasn’t a good friend,” Linda said. “It just means I wasn’t as strong as you are.”

“Wait a minute. You’re backing into an apology by arguing that you stole a story and a guy because you were under the influence of your hormones and because I was your best girlfriend at the time that I should have forgiven you then and not make a big deal about it now?”

“Right,” Linda agreed.

Lois couldn’t feel her feet and the cold was creeping into her bones. Her breath was beginning to freeze on her face. But even half frozen she knew Linda’s argument had major holes in it. Lois just wasn’t in the mood to work them out with a half-frozen brain.

“Okay. I forgive you,” Lois said. “But what about Clark?”

“I never cared about him,” Linda said but there was something in her voice that told Lois she was lying. “Take him. He’s yours.”

“He’s not mine to have.”

“Well, you can have him if you want,” Linda offered.

Lois just shook her head. She was beginning to hope the cold would get to them fast. Otherwise, she was going to go quite mad with her unobtainable desire to choke the life out of Linda King.

She didn’t know how much time had passed. She really

didn’t care. The cold had finally crept up on her and unconsciousness was a blessed relief. Linda had slipped into unconsciousness sometime before Lois did.

Then the pins and needles pain of returning circulation forced her to open her eyes. Lois looked up to see Clark’s worried face.

“You’ll feel better in a little while,” Clark reassured her. She had started shivering again and someone wrapped another blanket around her.

“Did you... did you... stop them...?” she managed to get out.

“Yes,” Clark said. “Carpenter, Stark, and their two accomplices are in custody. Wallace is on his way to the airport.”

“And Linda?” Lois croaked out.

“She should be fine,” Henderson’s voice said from somewhere near. “Now, just lay back and enjoy your ride to the ER so they can check you out...”

The Daily Planet’s headline read ‘NEW AGE KANE NABBED IN ASSASSINATION PLOT’.

“Great story,” Jimmy was gushing at her and Clark over coffee in the lobby coffee shop. Lois had to admit, it was a good article — well-written, factual yet punchy. Clark had done his usual good job on it, not that she would ever tell him that.

By the time she had gotten to the ER, Lois had mostly stopped shivering. The doctors kept her for observation for a few hours and released her. She promptly headed to the Daily Planet to write up the story only to find that Clark was nearly finished with it. He had only needed the addition of what Carpenter and Stark had done to her and Linda to add the last coffin nail to Carpenter’s publishing career, and the Star’s dominance in the Metropolis news market.

Lois read the paper in front of her more carefully. “She did it again,” she growled.

Jimmy and Clark both gave her curious looks. “What?”

“The by-line, Clark,” she said, pointing it out to him. “‘By Clark Kent and Lois Lane.’ ‘Special’ contribution by Linda King.” She let her voice drip with sarcasm. “Right.”

“Now how did she do that?” Clark wondered aloud. He honestly sounded as surprised and annoyed as she was.

Jimmy nodded toward the elevators. Perry was saying goodbye to Linda. The older man spotted Lois and Clark and disappeared into the elevator. Jimmy apparently decided that discretion was the better part of valor. He took off as Linda approached the two Daily Planet reporters.

“Mister White is such a generous man,” Linda gushed, indicating the newspaper.

“You have no shame,” Lois stated, crossing her arms like a disapproving school marm.

“Yes, I do!” Linda protested. “Not a lot, but some.”

Clark shook his head and smiled. “So, what’s next for you?”

“I’ve taken a job on the west coast,” she said. She laid a hand on his arm suggestively. “You want to keep the team together, come with me?”

Lois glared at her.

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding,” Linda protested with a smile.

“Lois, I have something to say to you.”

“Don’t,” Lois warned.

“When you told me you accepted my apology... that meant a lot to me.”

“Not to me. I thought I was dying and I wanted to clean the slate.”

“You don’t mean that,” Clark told Lois. He turned to Linda, “She doesn’t mean that.” Lois glared at him. “She means it.”

“Look at it this way, Lois. Maybe you’re the reporter you are because of the competition you felt with me.”

Lois was appalled. “Not only am I supposed to accept your lame apology, but now I’m supposed to thank you?”

She looked to Clark for support but to her annoyance, he only

smiled at her.

“So, Linda, which paper are you headed to next?” Clark asked.

“No paper,” she said. “LNN offered me the morning anchor spot at their L.A. bureau. In fact Mister Luthor offered it to me personally. I’m flying out tonight.”

“I can’t believe it,” Lois moaned to Clark over lunch. “I mean, first she talks Perry into giving her a piece of our byline and then Lex personally gives her a job in L.A. What am I doing wrong? I’m a good reporter. I’ve won three Kerths. I have the respect of my peers... Don’t I?”

“Of course you do,” Clark assured her. “And... well, Linda was a little... ‘predatory’. I know she was out of the loop as far as Carpenter was concerned, but I have to wonder exactly how innocent she really was. I mean you and I, even Jimmy, realized there was something fishy going on with them scooping us so conveniently.”

“But when did she find time to get to Lex?” Lois asked. She stabbed her spoon into her dessert, chocolate ice cream with raspberry sauce, one of her favorites.

“Stark, probably,” Clark answered. “Henderson let me look at the background check they did on him. He’s ex-NIA. Got let go for being a little gung ho when it came to creating politically expedient ‘accidents’ and his politics were a little suspect. But get this. One of his close liaisons was a man named Nigel St. John.”

“Who now works for Lex,” Lois completed for herself. “So, do you think Lex was behind Carpenter?”

“Lois, you know my opinion of Luthor,” Clark reminded her, “but, if Luthor was involved, I’d place my bets on Stark being the one on Luthor’s payroll and I’d bet his orders were to keep Carpenter busy until Luthor was ready to make his move, whatever that was, or will be.”

Lois sighed. “Clark, I know I promised you and Perry I wouldn’t do it. And I know how upset you were when I went to lunch with him...”

“Lois, you’re a big girl,” Clark told her but she could see the stiffness in his posture, the little muscle in his cheek that twitched when he was trying to hold his temper.

“I know that’s what you told Lex,” Lois told him. “Clark, our investigation into Superman’s notes hasn’t got us very far. All we have are hints. Even the other files haven’t really led anywhere. I’m the only one who can get close enough to him to find out anything. I know it’s dangerous. I know he has a reputation of bending people to his will. But I need to know that you’ll be there when I need you. That you won’t get all bent out of shape if it looks like... I need you to help keep me grounded.”

“Lois, there has to be another way,” Clark protested. “He’s obsessed with you. The idea of you and if... if he finds out you’re playing him, he could very easily kill you.”

“Clark, I know I wasn’t very nice when Linda went to distract Carpenter, but after I read what he wrote, after I realized she knew what he was like... Clark, somebody has to go after him. I’m the one with the best shot and we both know it,” Lois told him earnestly. “Besides, I saw him when I was under the influence of Miranda’s spray, remember? I wasn’t attracted to him. I walked right past him because I wanted someone else. I’m not going to fall for him.”

Clark bowed his head and nodded and she knew she’d won this battle.

“We need to let Perry know what we’re planning,” Clark said after a moment.

“I’ll brief him in the morning,” Lois promised. “Lex has been trying to talk me into going with him to see Madame Butterfly. I’m sure he’ll be happy I’ve finally agreed.”

“I just hope you’ve read him right and you’re not getting in over your head,” Clark said quietly.

‘I hope so too,’ Lois thought. ‘I hope so too.’

Part 24

“Lois, I thought we’d agreed you wouldn’t go after him personally unless all other options had failed,” Perry was saying.

“Perry, everything has failed,” Lois told him after she and Clark had come back from lunch. “Even the notes Superman left... you know all we’ve got is hints and bits and nothing to tie them together.”

“We do have a lot of hints and bits,” Clark added. “But Luthor is a genius at covering his tracks. We can’t even tie Carpenter and Stark back to Luthor, only to his assistant.”

Perry eyed Clark for a long moment. “Are you okay with this, son?”

“No,” Clark admitted. “But as much as I hate to admit it, Lois has the best chance of anyone for getting in beneath the radar. Hopefully he’ll slip and she can catch it. In the meantime... I think it might be even more convincing if... I know it sounds cheesy, but if I do the jilted suitor thing. You know, start digging into his past, former girl friends, that sort of thing. He’ll be expecting it and who knows, I might find something usable.”

“How about, instead of ‘jilted suitor’, you do ‘worried partner’?” Lois suggested. She thought she caught a flicker of disappointment cross his face before he nodded agreement. “Uh, Clark, I just think it might be better if he doesn’t have you pegged as the competition,” she added to take the sting out of her suggestion. “We both know he considered Superman to be the competition.”

“And now he’s dead,” Clark completed the thought for them both.

“So, when do you plan to start?” Perry asked after a moment.

“I have a date with him tomorrow,” Lois told him. “Dinner and an opera. Madame Butterfly.”

Lois spent the day cleaning house and getting ready for her ‘date’ with Lex. She knew something about opera, enough to know she usually found it boring, listening to singing in a language she didn’t know and couldn’t follow, and story lines that were overblown and overly dramatic or just plain silly. She knew that Madame Butterfly was one of Lex’s favorites and she pulled out her copy of Great Opera Explained to review the storyline.

Lieutenant Pinkerton, U.S. Navy, marries a young, naive Japanese girl from a disgraced family who believes he will be hers forever. Then, when his tour of duty is over, he abandons her, not knowing she is pregnant with his child. When Pinkerton finally returns to Japan, it’s with his American bride. Distracted and even further disgraced, Cio-Cio San kills herself, leaving her child to Pinkerton and his new wife.

Lois knew that Puccini’s opera was one of the staples of every opera company in the U.S. if not the world, but she had to wonder why Luthor liked it so much. She doubted it was because the music was so beautiful. Maybe it was because the Cio-Cio San not only gives up everything for the man she loves, even her life, but the man then walks away with all the prizes, seemingly unscathed. Was that how Luthor looked at the world? That the Pinkertons of the world had the right to lie and cheat and abandon the people who cared for them because they could get away with it? Because their own twisted morality said that women, especially working women, had no value?

She knew deep down that Clark didn’t believe that, but too many of the men in her life saw the world that way, including her own father. She still wasn’t sure which came first, her mother’s drinking or her father’s infidelity. But in the end it was the same, each one using the other’s failings as an excuse for their own hateful actions. Neither of them had given a moment’s thought to what it was doing to their children.

She found she actually envied Clark, at least a little. His parents loved him and were proud of him and they made sure he knew it. They were moral, honest, hard-working people and they had raised him to be moral, honest, and hard-working. He had never come home to his mom passed out on the couch and his father off with another woman.

The limo was right on time to pick her up and take her to the LexCorp tower and Lex's penthouse. Dinner was ready when she arrived. Lex hated to be late for the opera.

Again, Andre had produced a masterpiece, even if Lois couldn't identify the dishes. It was a Japanese theme this evening, in honor of the opera. Lex ostentatiously pulled out a pair of ebony chopsticks to eat his meal with. Lois chose to stick with her fork. She knew how to eat with chopsticks, even if poorly, but she had the feeling that Lex would start lecturing her on proper Far Eastern etiquette rather than let her enjoy her meal.

Clark would laugh with her instead of at her, correcting her hold on the chopsticks and sharing cultural tidbits he'd picked up on his travels. But Clark would never lecture for the sake of showing off.

Lois tried to steer the dinner conversation to the events of the past week, to Carpenter and Stark and Linda King.

"Miss King?" Luther repeated, puzzled. Then his expression cleared as though he had made the connection. "Charming young woman. Very talented. She'll make a fine addition to LNN's L.A. bureau."

"I'm glad," Lois managed to say. "Did you know Stark?"

"I may have met the man at some function," Luther told her, giving her a puzzled look. "But I meet so many people."

"He was an associate of Nigel St. John."

At that Luther chuckled. "Nigel has many associates, former and current, who I would not want to meet in a dark alley. But that's one of the things that makes Nigel so valuable to me. He handles the dirty little details that even the most honest business man has to come to grips with from time to time."

"And Asabi?"

"My, you are curious this evening," Luther commented.

"A hazard of my profession," Lois said with a smile. "I can't help but ask questions. So, tell me about Asabi."

Luthor smiled amiably. "Asabi is — how shall I put it? My spiritual advisor. He's the one who assured me that we were destined to be together. Forever. As soul mates." As he spoke, he took her hand. He moved to kiss it but she slipped her hand away. She thought she caught a flash of anger in his eyes before his face returned to its usual mask of urbanity.

"I don't know much about soul mates or reincarnation," Lois told him. "Maybe Asabi can explain it to me sometime."

"I'm sure he'd be delighted."

"Then, maybe I can ask him about the man I saw him with as I was leaving last time," Lois said. "I thought I recognized him..."

"Recognized who, Miss Lane?" Asabi asked. She looked up to see him standing beside her. She hadn't seen him enter the room.

"The man you were talking to in the corridor as I was leaving last time," she said.

"I do not recall the incident," Asabi said. "Do you know who the man was?"

Lois shook her head. "Someone involved in a story I covered a while back. I've been trying to identify him. He may have been a witness to a crime," she added for good effect.

"I'm afraid I cannot help you, Miss Lane," Asabi told her. "I do not know the man you are referring to."

The limo was nearly to the opera house when Lois's pager went off. She checked the number — one of her sources at MPD

headquarters. Luthor let her use the limo's mobile phone to return the call.

"He what?" she nearly shrieked into the phone. Her main source of information on a story on drug counterfeiting had just been arrested for solicitation. "Thanks, Joey," she managed to mutter before ringing off.

She turned to Luthor. "This'll only take a minute, but I have to get to the Planet."

Luthor had been visibly annoyed, but he ordered the driver to take them to the Daily Planet building.

"Lois, the opera begins in thirty minutes," Luthor reminded her again as the elevator doors opened onto the darkened newsroom floor.

"Well, how did I know one of my sources would get arrested? I have to rewrite my lead," she explained. She led the way through the maze of desks toward her own desk. There was a light on in Perry's office and at least one computer was still on. As she got closer she could see Jimmy and Perry working in Perry's office. A pile of junk on the floor indicated Jimmy had been tapped for Perry's annual, and utterly futile, spring cleaning.

Clark was at his desk, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt while someone else was playing a game on his computer.

"Don't any of you people have homes?" Luthor asked. There was an odd touch of petulance in his voice.

Clark looked up then focused on Lois. "Evening, Lois."

"Clark, what are you doing here?" she asked. She was sure he'd told her had plans for the evening.

"Taxes," Clark answered.

"It was supposed to be a movie," the young man playing the game said. Lois finally recognized him. Jack, the boy who had robbed Clark's apartment. She recalled Clark mentioning getting the boy a job at the Planet as a gofer as part of his rehabilitation.

"We can still make the late show," Clark told Jack. He turned back to Lois. "Aren't you a little over-dressed for a night at the office?"

Lois ignored him as her computer finally booted up. She began to type furiously on her document.

"We were on our way to 'Madame Butterfly,'" Luthor explained.

"Ten minutes," Lois said without looking up. "All I need is ten minutes."

"Super Bowl Twenty, Bears and the Pats. What a blow out," Perry said from somewhere behind her.

"Why, it's a party," Luthor stated, but there was something condescending in his voice.

"Evening Mister Luthor, Lois. Just getting rid of a few things," Perry explained.

"Anybody want a pizza?" Jack called out.

"Sure. Fresh tomatoes, mushrooms, peppers, olives..."

Jimmy yelled back.

"Hey, if it goes on a salad, it doesn't go on a pizza," Jack told him.

"Elvira, Mistress of the Dark," she heard Perry muse. There was a sound from Luthor and she looked up at him, then over to where Perry was gazing lovingly at a cardboard cut-out of the late-night movie vamp.

"She's a little scary to me, boss," Jimmy said, shivering just a little.

"Not to me, son. She's the reason I've seen Godzilla a hundred and sixteen times," Perry told Jimmy as Lois returned to her work.

The stairway door opened and someone stumbled onto the floor. Lois looked up to see Cat locked in a passionate embrace with... someone.

"Oh. Hi, everybody. This is George," Cat managed to get out. 'George' gave them an embarrassed wave.

“What are you doing here?” Lois asked. Seeing Cat on a Saturday night wasn’t her idea of a good time. The edits were taking more time than she had hoped and she knew Luthor was getting impatient.

“It’s what we were going to do here, but it’s a little crowded,” the gossip columnist said with a grin.

“I could’ve lived without knowing that,” Jimmy stated. His arms were full of Perry’s junk and he seemed to be heading for the storage room.

“Come on, George, I think the observation deck at the Metropolis Tower is still open,” Cat told her date, grabbing his arm and leading to the stairwell.

The elevator doors opened once again and a very old man in a security guard uniform stepped out.

“What’s going on here?” the old man demanded as he surveyed the group.

“Hey, Willie, it’s just us,” Clark announced.

“You’re not supposed to be here now,” Willie complained, checking his pocket watch.

“Everything’s fine, Willie,” Perry assured the old man without paying much attention. “Don’t you worry about a thing. Keep up the good work.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. White,” Willie said. He hobbled back into the elevator and the doors closed behind him.

Then Lois heard Jack yelling into the telephone. “Hello? Anybody there? All right, who cut me off?”

At the same time, her story disappeared from her monitor and a blue and white box came up. ‘Unable to contact network’. She growled in frustration. “The system’s down. I lost my story.”

“Better luck tomorrow,” Luthor said, holding out his arm for her to take. “Shall we?”

Suddenly the lights flickered and Lois realized there was something seriously wrong. She saw that Clark knew it too, even if the others hadn’t realized it yet.

The elevator dinged and the doors slid open to reveal five people dressed like SWAT team members and carrying automatic weapons. The five spread out across the newsroom. One, a tall woman with dark hair and a hard expression, sprayed the ceiling with bullets.

“What in the Sam Hill is...?” Perry began, coming out of his office. One of the invaders grabbed him while the apparent leader, a slick, ominous looking man in black leather fired a few more rounds into the ceiling.

“The Daily Planet building is now ours,” he announced. “I suggest you cooperate and everything will go smoothly.” He nodded to the man who had grabbed hold of Perry. “Let him go.”

The invader released Perry, pushing the older man to stand by Jack and Clark. Lois noted that Jimmy was nowhere to be seen. The woman tossed the leader a nylon bag. He unzipped it and pulled out a small black device with a digital readout on the front and several buttons.

“And in case any of you feel the need to contact the authorities,” the leader continued. “You can tell them I’m holding a small but dirty nuclear device and if I catch so much as a glimpse of a badge, this building and the gene pool of Metropolis will pay the price.”

The leader held the device up so they could all see that it was armed and he had his finger on the button. Someone put their arm around Lois’s shoulders in a protective gesture. She glanced over and realized it was Luthor. Clark appeared to be studying the situation.

“So relax,” the leader continued. “By morning this will all be over, one way or another.”

They were herded into the conference room. One of the invaders, a big, beefy man, was ordered to stand guard. He stood with his back to the door, sub-machine gun in his hand.

“No telephones. We’re too high up to signal for help,” Lois

listed off. She kept her voice low. “It could be morning before anyone even realizes something’s wrong.”

“That’s what they’re counting on,” Perry said.

“My driver should realize there’s something wrong,” Luthor put in.

“Unless someone told him you were staying longer than you’d planned and he should take the car back,” Lois suggested.

“But what do they want with the Daily Planet?” Perry asked.

“And what are they going to do with us when they’re finished?” Jack wondered aloud.

The boy was right. “We’ve got to find a way out of here,” Lois announced.

“Negotiation,” Luthor stated. “I’ve dealt with worse across a boardroom table. We find out what they want, then offer them a better deal.”

“If we had a way to disarm the bomb...” Clark muttered, rubbing the bridge of his nose as if he had a headache coming on. “Too bad Superman’s not with us anymore.”

“I have a feeling they’d go ahead and press the button if they saw anything resembling a red cape,” Perry commented.

“It’s five against five,” Jack put in. “I say we take ‘em. I bet that bomb’s not even real.”

“We don’t know if it is or not,” Clark argued. “Besides, in case you hadn’t noticed, they’re armed and we’re not. Maybe Superman was faster than a speeding bullet, but I don’t think any of us can... I mean, we can’t take that chance, can we?”

“Clark, they’re going to kill us,” Lois said. She wasn’t sure what his problem was. It was almost as if he was afraid to act, and he kept rubbing the bridge of his nose like he was in pain.

“We don’t know that,” Clark said, his voice low.

“We can identify them,” she reminded him.

“The safest thing for all of us to do is just wait,” Clark insisted.

“What about Jimmy?” Lois asked, looking around pointedly. “Maybe Jimmy can save us.”

“Jimmy couldn’t save baseball cards,” Perry grouched.

“I know these kinds of people,” Luthor broke in. “We should consider ourselves dead. In that regard, we have nothing to lose. We must take the offensive.”

“Luthor, what if he’s telling the truth about that being a nuclear device?” Clark asked. “Don’t do anything to provoke him.”

“Well, now that we know what Mr. Kent is made of,” Luthor sneered. “It’s obvious we need someone with a cool head and a keen sense of judgment to take charge.”

“You?”

“I have thousands of employees...”

“Now, just a doggone minute,” Perry interrupted. “This is my ship and I’m still the captain.”

“Yeah, the Exxon Valdes,” Jack muttered.

Through the glass door, Lois could see the leader and the woman cross the floor to the elevators. They disappeared inside of one of them. The beefy guy was alone. Now was their chance.

“Lex is right, we need a plan,” Lois announced.

“It’s too risky, Lois,” Clark protested.

“We’re wasting time,” she said. She turned to Luthor. “I’ll create a diversion. You hit him with a chair.”

“Lo-is...”

She ignored him. She didn’t have time to try to coax him into doing what needed to be done.

“Chief, sit down,” she ordered. “You’re having a heart attack.”

Perry just looked at her in confusion. She pushed him into a chair then ran to the door, banging on it to get the guard’s attention.

“Help! Help us! He’s having a heart attack. Quickly! He needs a doctor.”

Perry had no choice but to play along. He clutched his arm and started to breathe hard. The guard opened the door and looked in, training his weapon on Lois.

“Do something,” Lois ordered. “He’s going to die and then where will you be? On trial for murder that’s where.”

Out of the corner of her eye she could see Clark moving closer to the guard, ready to jump. Then the leader and the woman appeared in the doorway. They both had their guns drawn. Lois backed away as the leader pointed his gun in Perry’s direction and fired. No one moved. After a moment Lois realized that Perry wasn’t dead.

The leader had fired at the floor.

The man smiled — a cold, brutal smile. “A nine millimeter automatic. Better than a triple by-pass.”

Perry nodded. He was almost pale enough to be having a real heart attack. The leader moved closer to Lois, staring her down. “There will be no more tests of my patience, is that understood?”

Lois was about to argue when Clark interrupted. “She understands, sir.”

She gave him a dirty look before moving to stand next to Luthor. She knew Clark had managed to defuse a tense situation, but she hated it when he, or anyone else for that matter, spoke for her.

A loud noise by the elevators caught everyone’s attention. The other two members of the gang were moving some heavy equipment off the elevator.

“They’re on the wrong floor,” the leader said grimly. “Schumak, go. Tell them it’s down one.”

They left the conference room, shutting the door behind them. The leader and the woman began to talk. The woman was waving her arms, pointing to the conference room.

“Lois,” Perry began, interrupting her observation of the two intruders. “I swear, if you ever rope me into anything like that again, you’ll be writing recipes for the food section.”

“There won’t even be a food section if we don’t do something to stop them,” Lois spat back.

“Division among the ranks is a sure sign of weakness,” Luthor stated. “I suggest we put this incident behind us and concentrate on learning their next move.”

Clark appeared to be ignoring Luthor but Lois suspected he was listening in on the conversation outside.

“They’re waiting for someone they’re calling the ‘boss,’” Clark said, confirming her suspicion. “The woman wants us dead now, but the man is saying they have to wait for instructions.”

Luthor scowled at Clark. “And how could you possibly know that?”

Clark shrugged. “I can read lips.”

“You really believe that’s a nuclear bomb?” Jack asked.

“I don’t know,” Clark admitted. He turned and looked at the younger man. “We’re going to be fine.”

“Yeah, I hear you hardly feel a thing at ground zero,” Jack muttered.

“You don’t think they’d really blow themselves up, do you?” Lois asked.

“Terrorists know that the value of one life, even if it’s their own, doesn’t equal the importance of their cause,” Luthor explained.

“I don’t think we need worst case scenarios right now,” Clark told him.

“The point is, it’s up to us to stop them,” Luthor insisted.

“It’s up to us to stay alive anyway we can,” Clark stated.

Luthor’s expression turned ugly. Lois knew he wasn’t used to people questioning his judgment and it was obvious he didn’t like it. “Then what do you suggest, Mister Kent? That we just sit here? Let them do whatever they want, then wait for them to kill us?”

“We need to find out what’s going on, what they’re after,”

Clark said. “I don’t think they’re terrorists. They haven’t made any demands. No manifestos, no political statements. I think they’re a well organized gang and they didn’t think anyone would be here tonight.”

“And now you’re an expert in criminal psychology?” Luthor asked. He was taunting Clark and it seemed he no longer cared if Lois knew how poor his opinion was of her co-workers. Clark didn’t rise to the bait. Instead he was concentrating on what was happening outside the room. But Lois noticed he was still occasionally rubbing his temples.

An hour passed. The little group of prisoners — Lois wasn’t sure if ‘hostages’ applied since that implied they were being held hostage against someone else’s actions and no one even knew they were in trouble — settled into relative comfort in the conference room. There were snacks and water — at least they wouldn’t starve in the short term. Lois poured herself another drink of water from the pitcher. She drank it down as she watched Clark. He was still watching the two gang members that had remained in the newsroom.

“I wonder if they’ll let us go to the bathroom?” Jack asked.

Lois abruptly realized that drinking the water may not have been one of her brighter ideas. “I have to go.”

“Okay, see you tomorrow,” Jack said.

Lois glared at him. “No, I mean, I have to go.”

“All of a sudden?”

“No! Just since you mentioned it, thank you very much,” Lois retorted.

“They have to provide us with the means to sustain basic human needs,” Luthor mused.

“I don’t think anyone told them that,” Lois came back.

“I think you should tell Miss Congeniality out there that it’s her responsibility to escort you to the facilities,” Perry suggested.

“Or you can hold it. Indefinitely,” Luthor suggested.

Lois chose to ignore Luthor’s snide remarks. She went to the door and started banging on the glass. After a moment, the woman opened the door.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” Lois told her.

“Too bad,” the woman said.

“You can’t treat us like this,” Lois protested.

The leader came to the door. “I thought I told you not to make trouble.”

“Evidently my bladder didn’t hear you,” Lois complained.

She watched as the leader considered the problem. Finally he turned to the woman. “Take her. I’ll watch them.”

The woman grabbed her arm and pulled her toward the ladies’ room. She stood outside the stall as Lois completed her business. Lois weighed her options. She was good at tae kwon do, although not as good as her teachers. But the other woman was armed with a semi-automatic and Lois was wearing an evening gown. There was no way she was going to be able to kick the gun out of the woman’s hands. Clark was right — they were simply going to have to sit it out and hope for an opportunity to escape.

Suddenly she heard a fire alarm and water running. It sounded like the sprinkler system. Then there was the pop of gunfire.

Part 25

The woman pushed Lois out of the ladies’ room. Luthor was standing, holding a hand to his shoulder as the water from the overhead sprinklers showered down on him and Clark.

“Lex?” Lois asked. There was blood on his hand.

“It’s nothing. I’m fine,” Luthor assured her. Lois didn’t believe him, especially after she caught the guilty look on Clark’s face. He also looked like he might be sick.

Lois wondered exactly what happened.

The leader of the invaders looked furious, pointing his gun at Luthor. “No second chances.”

They were herded once again to the conference room, only this time, the leader wasn’t taking any chances. He handcuffed Lois and Luthor together, Jack and Clark together. Perry was handcuffed to one of the rolling chairs.

“We’re now operating under the buddy system,” the leader announced grimly. “If one of you is missing or tries anything heroic, your buddy dies.”

Perry addressed the empty chair. “No heroics, buddy.”

The leader gave him a grim smile and walked out.

Lois stayed still for several minutes, deciding what to do. She pulled a hairpin from her hair and made quick work of the handcuff that tied her to Luthor but she stayed seated next to him. It wouldn’t do to make her move too quickly. A part of her was scared to death while another part was already outlining the story.

“This is going to make an incredible story,” she told Luthor. It was more to keep her spirits up than anything else. “I mean, how many journalists have had this kind of opportunity? To be in the belly of the beast, part of the event, not just a casual observer. Just like those guys in the Bagdad Hotel.”

Luthor didn’t say anything but was leaning heavily against her. After a moment, his head fell on her shoulder.

“Okay, so we don’t share the same enthusiasm, you don’t have to fall asleep,” she said, nudging him. He didn’t wake up. She moved in front of him to check on him. He was pale and clammy — shock. She opened his jacket and saw that his shirt was soaked with blood.

There was no more time. She moved over to Clark and Jack, staying low, out of sight.

“Lois, what are you doing?” Clark whispered as she undid his handcuff.

“Lex is really hurt,” she told him. “You have to do something.”

“What can Clark do?” Jack demanded. Lois glared at him and he had the sense to shut up.

“Lois, you don’t know...” Clark began.

“I know more than you think, Clark,” Lois interrupted. “If he dies, and you could have stopped it, it’ll haunt you the rest of your life.”

Clark stared at her and she realized how scared he was. He was almost as pale as Luthor.

“Clark, please try...”

He nodded and moved closer to Luthor. He gently removed Luthor’s jacket to expose the wound. “The bullet went straight through, but he’s losing a lot of blood,” Clark said after a moment.

“We have to close the wound,” Perry told them.

Lois just looked at Clark.

“I’m going to need three tea bags, a cup, an orange and a pack of gum,” Clark told them. Jack and Perry gave Clark incredulous looks. Lois simply nodded.

“It’s a remedy I learned from a Borneo medicine man,” Clark explained. “It should stop the bleeding.”

It took Perry only a few moments to collect the ingredients.

“Open the tea bags and combine the leaves,” Clark instructed. He turned to Jack. “Chew as many sticks of gum as you can.” Finally Lois: “Squeeze some orange juice into the cup. The oils and tannin from the tea leaves, combined with the peppermint from the gum and the ascorbic acid from the orange juice form a very potent healing mixture.”

Lois hurriedly peeled the orange and squeezed out as much juice as she could. She seriously doubted the concoction would do anything aside from adding germs to the wound, but it was keeping Perry and Jack busy. Even though she was watching for it she almost missed Clark lowering his glasses and focusing a hard stare at the bullet wound. There was a faint smell of burning

flesh.

“Kent?” Luthor murmured. He was obviously slipping in and out of consciousness. Lois just hoped they’d been soon enough to save him.

“Don’t worry, you’re probably a little dizzy but you’ll be fine,” Clark assured the billionaire. He looked at Lois. “Is it ready?”

Lois held the cup out to him. It looked like something she might find in the back of her refrigerator, even though it smelled better. Clark took Luthor’s handkerchief, tore it in half and wet both halves in the solution. Then he placed one piece of fabric on the entrance wound and the other on the exit wound. Luthor winced, but made no other sound.

Based on what Lois had seen while on the crime beat, Luthor was damned lucky to be alive.

Luthor struggled to sit up. “Lois, help me up. I’m fine...” he insisted.

Instead, Clark pressed him back to the floor. “You’ve lost a lot of blood,” Clark said simply.

The building shuddered.

“What was that?” Lois asked.

“An earthquake,” Jack speculated.

The building shook again.

“I don’t think so,” Clark said. He was staring at the door.

“They must be using that machinery we saw them bring in here.”

“For what?” Perry demanded. “Why would they come in here and destroy the Daily Planet?”

Clark moved closer to the door to watch through the window. “I don’t think they’re trying to destroy the Planet, Chief. I think they’re looking for something.”

A shot rang out from the newsroom.

“Guess they didn’t find it,” Clark added. He watched a few more moments. “Dragonetti?”

“Dragon what?” Lois asked.

“They said Dragonetti.”

“Dragonetti?” Perry’s eyebrows threatened to reach his hairline. “Well, I’ll be damned. I haven’t heard that name in years.”

“You know him, Chief?” Lois asked.

“Know of him,” Perry said. “Pino ‘Pretty Face’ Dragonetti. One of the fiercest gangsters in Metropolis during the Prohibition era, as ruthless as he was handsome.” His expression turned thoughtful. “Dragonetti actually built this place. He and a consortium of other high profile gangsters. They hid behind a dummy corporation and tried to launder their gin money through the real estate market. This was before the Daily Planet moved in, of course. Anyway, Dragonetti used this as his headquarters. There was even a speakeasy in the basement, right where the cafeteria is now.”

Clark motioned for them to be quiet. “They’re coming back...”

Lois went to sit with Luthor, clicking the handcuff around her wrist as the leader opened the door.

“The computer system’s locked up,” he stated. “Now who can get me on-line with the computer?”

Lois opened her mouth but Clark cut her off. “I can help you. What file do you need?”

“That’s not your concern,” the leader told him. The woman went over and began to unlock Clark’s handcuffs.

“Just get me onto the Metro-Comp data base,” the leader ordered.

“Metro-Comp?” Lois chimed in. “That’s the old system. We updated three years ago. He won’t know how to use it. You’ll have to take me.”

The leader nodded. The woman released Lois’s handcuff then cuffed Clark and Luthor together. Both men gave her worried looks.

"Be careful," Luthor ordered.

"Always," Lois responded.

The leader dragged her into Perry's office and pointed to the computer on the desk.

"Sit down."

"I'd prefer to..."

"Sit," he ordered, pushing her into the chair. "All right, give me your access code."

Her mind spinning, she gave him the first password that came to mind.

The leader keyed it in. 'Wrong password' appeared on the screen.

The leader wasn't amused. He grabbed her hair, forcing her head back. "Now, Miss Lane, I've spent the last eight months planning for this night. Your life means less than nothing to me right now, so if you don't give me the correct access code I'm going to break your lovely little neck."

"Superman," Lois managed to choke out.

"Superman is dead, or haven't you heard?"

"Superman is my access code!" Lois spat.

The leader sat her at Perry's computer. "The file is named D-P-B-L-P-R-N-T."

Lois keyed in the letters, confirming as she went. "Daily Planet... blueprint?"

"Just call it up."

"So you must be interested in architecture," Lois said, trying to draw him out as the computer searched for the file on the system. "I always found this building particularly fascinating myself."

"There it is. Bring it up," the leader ordered.

"Yes, sir. Daily Planet Blueprint."

The leader smiled as soon as the document appeared on the monitor. Page after page of plan drawings.

"Find the floor below us," he ordered.

"I think that's the advertising department. Thinking about placing a personal?"

He ignored her as he studied the screen. "Now, show me the plans to this floor."

He studied the screen and his smile got even wider. He clicked on the military style walkie-talkie he pulled out of his pocket. "Bring the equipment up here," he spoke into the microphone.

"Now, what could possibly be here in the Daily Planet newsroom that would be worth risking your lives and the lives of everyone in Metropolis?" she asked.

"What else has man sought after without pity or remorse since the dawn of time?" the leader asked in return.

"Inner peace?"

"Cold, hard, cash."

"Oh." Clark had been right. These people weren't terrorists. They were common crooks.

"Now print me out those plans," he ordered.

"Sure. But they'll come out over there," she said, pointing to the wide carriage printer near the coffee corner.

"Fine. Do it."

She keyed in the commands. After a few moments, she heard the printer begin printing.

"Well, since I've already been so helpful, how about giving me an exclusive interview?" Lois asked brightly. She was still trying to make personal contact. She knew that if she could get him to see her as a real person, as someone who might be convinced to come over to his side, he might not kill her.

"We'll discuss the future later, Miss Lane," he said. He walked out, leaving her alone in the office. She knew she didn't dare get out of the chair but he had left her alone with a computer. She logged onto the email system.

'WELCOME TO THE COMPU-LINK E-MAIL SYSTEM.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO: A) RECEIVE MESSAGES? B) REVIEW MESSAGES? C) SEND NEW MESSAGES?'

She chose the third option and quickly entered the MPD's general email address. The leader came back into the office holding the fresh printouts. She smiled at him trying to look innocent as he sat down opposite her. Lois' eyes went back to the screen. The text box was waiting for a message.

She eyed the leader but he seemed engrossed with the plans, making notations on them. She slowly moved her hand to the keyboard. 'S.O.S.'

The leader still wasn't paying any attention to her. She pressed the 'enter' key and 'Sending Message' began flashing on the screen.

The computer beeped. The leader looked up and Lois smiled. The computer beeped again and this time, he looked suspicious. He came around the desk and peered at the screen. He stabbed at the escape button and the text on the screen changed. 'Message Interrupted: Retry?'

"You've got a lot of nerve, Miss Lane," the leader stated. "Not good judgment, but a lot of nerve."

He roughly grabbed her arm and dragged her out of the office. As they passed where he had been working, she managed to put up one of the sheets of notes.

The woman looked up as the leader shoved Lois back with the others.

"I'm beginning to think you were right about our uninvited guests," he told the woman. She re-cuffed Lois and Luthor together, separating Clark from Luthor.

"Thank God you're all right," Luthor murmured. "I wanted..."

Lois nodded, only half listening to him.

The leader had turned to the woman. "I've found it. They're bringing the equipment back up but time is definitely a factor now so get down there and help."

The woman nodded to Lois and the others. "What about them?"

"If anyone tries anything, we shoot to kill," the leader told her. She seemed pleased with his decision. The leader stared at Lois. "Anyone."

The leader went back to Perry's office, shutting the conference room door behind him.

"What did you do in there?" Clark asked. He had gone back to his position by the door.

"He had me pull up the architectural plans for the building," Lois told them, talking fast. "They're looking for money." She pulled the stolen paper from her pocket. "I grabbed this."

She handed the sheet to Clark. "It's a diagram of these offices," he said.

Luthor grabbed the sheet away from Clark. "And a very familiar name," he said. 'Dragonetti' was written in the corner by the plans to Perry's office.

"So you think Dragonetti's vault is still here in the building?" Lois asked Perry. Clark's face had taken on that familiar, far-away look.

"Well, I always thought it was one of those tall stories, you know," Perry said. "Like that mess Geraldo got himself into? But maybe there's some merit to it after all." He gave Lois a thoughtful look. "According to the stories, Dragonetti had nearly over a hundred million dollars stashed away when he died. His business partner, the front guy for the real estate part, was in jail for murder, but he never told anyone where the cash was hidden. In fact there were rumors that Dragonetti had framed him for the murder he went to prison for."

Clark seemed to come back to the here and now. "Willie..." he murmured.

"Willie!" Lois said, suddenly remembering the old man. "He's still making his rounds. He'll save us. He's a security

guard.”

“He’s an octogenarian,” Perry reminded her.

“He has a gun.”

“He has a hernia,” Perry shot back.

Jack interrupted. “We’ve got to get to him before they do. He can go for help.”

“And how do you propose we do that?” Luthor demanded, gesturing with the handcuff that connected him to Lois.

Jack held up both his hands — without cuffs. “Lois isn’t the only one with hidden talents,” he said. He peeked through the glass then cautiously opened the door. “I’ll be back before they know I’m gone,” he promised. Then he was through the door.

“I can’t let him go alone,” Clark announced.

“Be careful, Clark,” Lois ordered.

“Hurry back, son,” Perry instructed. Then Clark was gone as well.

Once again, Lois made short work of the handcuffs that bound her to Luthor. She crept over to the door and peeked out the window. The four of the five crooks were pulling the machinery from the elevator. The leader had the plans in his hands.

He spoke to the big man, Schumak, who started toward the conference room.

Lois hurried back to sit by Luthor again. In the meantime, Perry had been busy. He gestured for her to sit in front of his creation.

“What’s going on?” Schumak asked, looking around the conference room.

“We’re getting tired,” Lois told him.

“So we’re taking shift’s sleeping,” Luthor added.

“You got a problem with that?” Perry added for good measure.

Schumak looked over them, peering at the two figures under the stack of blankets. After a long moment, Schumak seemed satisfied. “No, no problem. Better for us if you all go to sleep.” He laughed at his own joke and closed the door behind him.

“And they wanted me to throw this stuff away,” Perry mused. Lois took a closer look at the figures beneath the ‘Halley’s Comet’ blanket — ‘Elvira’ and the GOP elephant Perry had protested was a historic artifact.

Luthor seemed weaker, leaning against Lois for support. “Now that I know it’s money they want, all I need is five minutes alone with their leader.”

“I don’t think they’ll go for it, Lex,” Lois said. “They have no reason to trust you, and they’ve already got a bird in the hand.”

“It’s worth a try. As soon as Kent and the kid get back I’ll begin to negotiate,” Luthor told her. “It’s only money, Lois.”

“A lot of money.”

“But what is it really worth?” he asked. “It can’t buy a perfect blue sky, the symphony of waves crashing against a rocky shore, a hand to hold when you’re alone.”

He took her hand in his and kissed it tenderly. This was a different side to Luthor than she was used to. He seemed sincere as he gazed into her eyes. There was something hypnotic in his gaze. She could get lost in those eyes.

The elevator dinged. Lois peeked through the glass. The crooks were all in Perry’s office and Lois had doubts they noticed the elevator’s noise or the doors opening.

Cat Grant sauntered out of the elevator and headed straight for her desk.

“We’re saved!” Lois told the others. “Ca...”

Perry laid a hand on her arm. “Shhh. Don’t draw their attention to her.”

Perry, Luthor and Lois all started waving frantically at Cat through the window. She was busily pulling lingerie out of her desk drawer, obviously trying to make a decision. She saw them waving and waved back, holding up one of the teddies for their

approval. She chose one, waved again and disappeared back into the elevator.

“If I’m alive on Monday morning, she won’t be,” Lois promised.

There was a sharp sound in the distance. Lois frowned. It had sounded a little like a gunshot. “Did you hear something?”

“Faintly,” Luthor admitted.

Lois looked over at the group in Perry’s office, still unloading their tools. Apparently they hadn’t heard the noise. She spotted Clark and Jack crossing the floor one at a time. She breathed a sigh of relief as Clark sat down next to her. He snapped the cuffs back on his hand and then to Jack’s wrist. Lois watched him study the decoys. Then he grinned at her.

“Did you find Willie?” Jack asked.

Clark nodded. “Help’s on its way. What have they been doing?”

“Futzing around with those fancy tools,” Perry told him. They watched as Schumak and one of the other men carried jackhammers into Perry’s office. The leader and the woman followed with chain saws and picks.

“What the...” Perry murmured. Two of the men in Perry’s office were dragging his desk across the office. It didn’t seem they cared what they damaged in the process.

“Not the Elvis box!” Perry protested. His complaint was cut off by the roar of a motor starting.

“They’re not doin’ what I think they’re doin’...” Perry breathed in horror.

The little group watched as jackhammers tore apart the floor of Perry’s office. The noise was horrendous and the dust was overwhelming.

“Looks like they’ve found Dragonetti’s vault,” Clark commented.

“And it’s been there all the time,” Jack said. “Right under the chief’s... nose.”

The office was in shambles. Sparks flew as metal hit metal. The machinery noise ground to a halt.

The woman pulled down the visor of a welder’s helmet and lit a welding torch. The leader stepped over to the conference room and opened the door.

“As you can see, we found what we were looking for...” he announced.

“Dragonetti’s vault,” Clark said.

“I’ll double the amount in that safe if you release us unharmed,” Luthor offered.

“From what I’ve heard, I’d be better off out there with the hounds of hell on my tail than you, Mr. Luthor,” the leader told him.

The woman came out. “We’re close.”

“Good,” the leader said. “I think it’s only fitting that after all the trouble he’s gone to, I allow the mastermind of this plan to do the actual unveiling, don’t you all agree?”

“I knew he wasn’t smart enough to think of this on his own,” Lois muttered to Clark under her breath.

“Besides, I know you’ll all enjoy meeting him,” the leader continued. He spoke into his radio. “We’re ready for you, sir.”

The elevator dinged as if on cue. The doors opened and Jimmy stepped out, his hands in the air. Behind him walked the familiar figure of Willy the security guard. He was holding Jimmy at gun point.

“Willie?” Lois and Clark said together.

Her heart sank. “But this means...”

“Help is not on its way,” the leader told her with a smirk.

Perry seemed stunned. “Willie, how could you? Why, I recommended you for this job.”

Willie looked at him through watery eyes. “Would you have recommended me if you knew I had a prison record?”

“Willie, just because you did something bad in the past

doesn't mean you have to turn to a life of crime in your sunset years..." Lois began.

"I just got out ten months ago," Willie told them.

"Oh. Well, nothing you did could possibly be as bad as armed robbery and kidnapping," Lois tired again.

"Murder One," came Willie's response.

Lois swallowed hard. "Oh."

"You killed someone?" Jack asked. Lois couldn't tell if he was excited about the idea of meeting a killer or scared.

Willie gave him a horrified look. "Of course not! Don't be ridiculous. I couldn't hurt a fly."

"Then why were you in prison?" Clark asked.

Willie sighed. "My 'partner' wanted everything for himself. My part of the money, my girl. Him and a crooked cop framed me for a killing I didn't do. I lost a lifetime because of Dragonetti and I swore, if I ever got out, I'd come back for what belonged to me," Willie told them. He chuckled dryly. "Dragonetti got his due, though. He was gunned down a week after I went to prison."

"Willie, they're going to send you right back to prison for what you've done to us," Clark reminded him.

"But you weren't supposed to be here!" Willie protested. He turned to the lead crook. "And you broke your promise. You said no guns."

"I lied," the man said. "About a lot of things." The man grabbed Willie and handcuffed him to Perry's free hand.

"Fuentes, what do you think you're doing?" Willie demanded.

"Sorry, Pops. You're a liability."

"But I'm the one who told you about the vault in the first place."

Fuentes gave him a sardonic smile. "And I'll always remember you fondly for it. But we've got to make a clean getaway and you're not exactly at your physical peak."

The woman stuck her head out of the office door. "We're in."

"Good. Load the bags."

"What about us?" Lois asked.

"Remy!" Fuentes yelled.

The woman stepped over to him, carrying two of the heavy canvas bags.

"I believe I've come around to your way of thinking,"

Fuentes told her. "We'll take these up and meet you at the chopper. They're all yours." He scanned the little group and made a decision. "Except her..." He unlocked Lois's handcuff. "We may need a hostage if anything goes wrong."

Lois watched Luthor struggle to his feet. He lunged at Fuentes but Remy simply pushed him away.

"You can't just kill them," Lois protested.

"You'd be surprised what you can do for a hundred million dollars," Fuentes said. He pulled her along with him. Lois looked back to see the woman pointing her gun at the remaining group. Clark was helping Luthor to his feet.

"I suppose this means I can't have the interview," Lois said. She gave Fuentes a weak smile. She hoped Clark would be able to handle Remy and rescue everyone else. Everything was riding on Clark. She just hoped he realized it.

Fuentes dragged Lois out the roof access door. They were followed by Schumak and a man Lois still didn't have a name for. The men looked around the roof in confusion.

"Where's the chopper?" Fuentes asked.

"I don't know," Schumak told him, dropping the bags he was carrying.

"Newberry!" Fuentes yelled.

The third man grimaced. "He can't even drive a car."

"Then who took it?" Fuentes demanded.

"Superman's ghost?" Lois suggested.

Fuentes grabbed her arm and pulled her back inside the building. The others followed as they headed back to the

elevators.

"Down to the garage," Fuentes ordered. "We'll take the van."

Before Fuentes could touch the call button, the entire floor was plunged into darkness.

Lois took a deep breath then screamed. "We're up here!"

"Shut up or I push the button," Fuentes hissed at her. He pulled out a small flashlight and swung it around. They appeared to be alone in the hallway. "Schumak...? Blackman?"

There was no answer. Fuentes seemed nervous.

"I told you. It's Superman's ghost. He used to like hanging out on the roof here."

"And I told you unless I make it out of here with the money, the whole city goes."

He dragged her back onto the roof and headed for the ledge. She heard footsteps on the roof and looked over Fuentes's shoulder to see Clark and Jack running toward them.

"Clark!"

Fuentes pulled Lois over the ledge, onto the window washer's scaffold hanging off the side of the roof. Fuentes was still holding the bomb, but he was using his free hand to keep a hold on Lois. In turn, she tried to grab the device away from him.

"I'm going and I'm taking you all with me," Fuentes snarled at her. In desperation, she grabbed his wrist and simply bit down. He dropped the device and it skittered over the edge.

She didn't have time to be relieved. Fuentes lunged at her, pushing her against the safety chain. Then she slipped and went under the chain. It was a long way to the pavement. She closed her eyes. "Superman, where are you?"

Part 26

She was falling. Then a pair of strong arms enveloped her and she was standing on her feet. She opened her eyes to find she was in front of the Daily Planet's main doors. Clark was standing a short distance away. He was trembling and the terrified look on his face broke her heart.

"Clark, it's okay," she said. He didn't seem to hear her. She stepped over to him and laid a hand on his arm. Finally he looked at her.

"Are you okay?" His voice was a near whisper.

"I'm fine, Clark," she reassured him. He seemed to calm down a little.

"I, uh..." Clark began. "I think we need to talk..."

Lois nodded.

Sirens sounded close by and several MPD panda cars pulled up in front of the building, disgorging uniformed officers in flack jackets. Henderson climbed out of his own unmarked car.

"We had a call on a hostage situation," Henderson began.

"There was one. Now there's one bad guy tied up in the west stairwell, two on the roof, and one on the window washers' scaffold," Clark said quietly.

"One of them claimed he had a nuclear device," Lois added. "It fell around here somewhere."

Clark looked around the ground then picked up something. It was Fuentes's device, dented and broken.

"It was a ruse," he said, handing it to Henderson. Lois noticed that the older man didn't seem surprised that the hostage incident had gotten handled before the police even found out about it.

The main doors to the building flew open and Perry, Jimmy, and Willie ran out, supporting Luthor between them. He seemed dazed.

"Hey! We've got an injured man over here!" Perry yelled. Paramedics rushed to Luthor, checking his injuries and forcing him to sit down on the back of the ambulance as they examined him.

Luthor looked around, eyes lighting on Lois. "Lois? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Lois said, coming over to him.

"What an experience. At least I got to spend the night with you," he managed to joke. "I didn't know you were that type of woman."

"Hey, I'm full of surprises." She tried to keep her voice light, to keep him from realizing that he wasn't the only thing on her mind.

He took her hand but the paramedics interrupted them, insisting Luthor get into the ambulance.

She turned to Clark. "Well, I guess I should ride with Lex," she said.

He nodded.

"Look, as soon as I know he's going to be okay, I'll stop by your place so we can talk, okay?"

He nodded again. She turned and walked to the ambulance. Luthor stretched out his hand and she took it, looking back at Clark. Then one of the paramedics closed the back door, blocking her sight of him. And even though Luthor was right here and there were two paramedics, she felt utterly alone.

"So, what do you have to talk to Kent about that's so important that you'll leave me in the hands of these..." Luthor began. His wound had been treated and he'd been admitted for observation, although he had insisted his personal physician would tend to his injury once she arrived. He agreed to stay only until she and Nigel or Asabi came for him.

The emergency room doctors had been surprised that Clark's concoction had stopped the bleeding, but there was little doubt that something had and it no doubt had saved Luthor's life.

"I promised Clark we'd talk, that's all," Lois told him. "He's been having a hard time ever since Superman..."

"Hasn't everyone?" Luthor asked. "The city worshiped the alien. No one, not even you, recognized the danger he presented to the people of this planet."

"Lex, I'm not going to argue with you. Clark's my friend," Lois said. "I need to get going."

"I'll call you," Luthor promised. "We still have an opera to see."

The sun was already peeking over the roofs when Lois got to Clark's apartment. She knocked and he opened the door so quickly she wondered if he'd been listening for her.

"How's Luthor?" he asked.

"He'll be fine," Lois told him. "The doctors aren't sure what stopped the bleeding, but whatever it was, it no doubt saved his life."

Clark didn't respond. He turned and led her down the steps into the living area.

"Clark, I told you I know more about what's going on than you think," Lois began.

"Want some coffee?" he asked, not meeting her eyes. She looked around. She had no reason to suspect Clark's apartment had been bugged, but it was better to be safe than sorry considering the discussion she knew was ahead.

"How about I buy breakfast?" she offered.

He nodded, but the worry was still there.

Lois drove him to a twenty-four hour greasy spoon she knew in Queensland Park — Doc's Dog House. It was dark and smoky and Lois knew the owners. She led Clark to one of the back corner booths. No one bothered to give her or Clark a second glance. No doubt they saw women in evening gowns come in near dawn every day with men in jeans.

"How are you feeling?" she began.

"I'll be okay," he said but she wasn't sure she believed him. There was still a slight tremble in his hand as he stirred sugar into his coffee.

"Clark, I know you caught me when I fell," she began again.

She hadn't thought it was possible, but he went even paler than he'd been before.

"You noticed."

"Actually, I've suspected it for some time," she admitted. "The statue falling over at the Omir Embassy. You finding Linda and me in the freezer..."

"You're not going to tell anyone, are you?" he asked.

"Why would I do that?"

He looked down to stare at his hands.

"Clark, what do you think is going on?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"What does Doctor Friskin think is happening?"

"I stopped seeing her," he said softly. "I got scared when strange things started happening. I keep hearing my dad's voice telling me 'they'll dissect you like a frog'."

"Clark, nobody is going to dissect you," Lois assured him. She was hoping she was telling the truth. She still had nightmares about Trask and Bureau 39. But she had to wonder why Clark was remembering Jonathan's warning now.

"Lois, I..." His voice dropped to a whisper. "I think, somehow, when he died, he transferred his powers to me. That's why the globe started transmitting to me. It thought I was him and if anybody finds out that it's possible..."

"Clark, I don't know if Superman's powers could be transferred to anyone else. But even if he could do it, I don't think he did," Lois told him.

"So how do you explain what's been happening to me?"

Lois took a deep breath. This was not going to be easy. He seemed to be in deep denial of what was staring him in the face. "Clark, Superman didn't transfer his powers to you and the globe didn't make a mistake."

Clark stared at her a long moment, his face pale in the dim light. "I don't understand."

"I think you do," Lois said. She didn't want to press him — she could see how upset he was — but she saw no choice. "But, I think you don't want to admit it, even to yourself."

"You think I'm him."

She nodded.

"That's why I dream of being him, instead of seeing him?"

She nodded again.

"Why didn't you tell me before? Why didn't my own parents tell me I was a freak?"

"Clark, you are not a freak and I don't ever want to hear you talk about yourself that way again!" Lois found herself raising her voice. She took another deep breath to calm herself. She continued more quietly. "Doctor Friskin told your parents that it wasn't a good idea to just simply tell you. We don't know why you lost your memory and why some of it's still gone. We don't know if it's physical or psychological. And if it's psychological, we don't know why. Doctor Friskin was afraid we might actually make things worse for you by forcing you to face it before you were ready."

Clark was silent for a long time, staring into his coffee.

"Worse than what I've been thinking?" he finally asked.

"We don't know what happened to you up there," Lois reminded him. "We suspect that you-know-who may have tried to sabotage Superman's attack on the asteroid."

"I hear him, too," Clark admitted. "It gets worse when I try to do something freaky."

"What does the voice say?" Lois asked gently.

"The world doesn't need a flying freak, things like that."

"And it's Luthor's voice?"

"It sounds like the same voice that threatened to kill me," he said. "So, yes."

"Clark, I know it sounds paranoid, but we know that Luthor's people knew Superman was going to be in a vulnerable position assuming he survived the attack on Nightfall. What if they made

additional contingency plans?" Lois asked. "Constance Blackthorn was using LexCorp people in her plans to brainwash the world and she was using a drug laced with kryptonite."

"But we both know it didn't have any effect on me except to make me sick," he reminded her.

"So, maybe it needed to be a larger dose..."

"Or maybe the drug she had wasn't as effective?" Clark suggested.

Lois breathed a silent sigh of relief. He was not rejecting the idea outright at least. "Lex said his people had scoured the planet to find Superman, assuming he made it back to Earth," Lois reminded him.

"The question then becomes, what were they planning to do if they'd found him?"

"Lucky they didn't find him," Lois told him.

That earned her a faint smile. He was taking the revelation quite well, actually. She couldn't imagine how scared he must have been, his powers coming back and being terrified of being thought a freak or worse.

"Assuming I accept your explanation, what do we do now?" Clark asked.

"Keep working on Luthor," Lois suggested. "I mean, it's possible he's just as much as a pawn as Romick or Eugene, but..."

"It's not very likely he could have gotten to the place he is by being anybody's pawn," Clark completed for her. He studied her face a long moment. "What about...?" He made a sideways motion with his hand.

"You'll know when you're ready," she assured him, reaching out to take his hand.

"And if that time never comes?"

"Clark, you're still a damn good investigative reporter. And the world can use as many of those as it can get."

Clark saw her to her door. She was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to get out of her evening gown and heels and into a nice soft bed.

But once into bed, she found she couldn't sleep.

"You'll know when you're ready," she had told him.

"And if that time never comes?"

She had thought she was in love with the superhero. She had mourned his untimely death with the rest of the world and had turned to her friends for comfort. Friends like Clark, Jimmy, and Perry. Clark had saved her life more than once, stepping up to become a hero in his own right despite his memory problems.

But Superman wasn't really dead. He had been a disguise for Clark Kent. And Clark was still suffering from whatever had happened to him when he flew into space to save the planet from the Nightfall asteroid. And somehow she knew it was Luthor's fault. Which brought her back to the same old problem — how to prove it.

When Lois finally fell asleep, her dreams were uneasy.

Monday morning came too soon. Luthor had been released from the hospital into the care of his personal physician and Lois hadn't been able to get through to him on the phone. The newsroom was still buzzing with stories of what happened over the weekend. Everyone who came into the bullpen stopped by to try to see into Perry's boarded-up office.

"Oh well, I guess the place needed a lift," Lois overheard Perry tell Jimmy as they watched the rubber-neckers.

The insurance adjusters had been out earlier and repair to his office was scheduled to begin in a few days. Willie's lawyers were already working a deal with the D.A. concerning the money in the vault. One of the items left in the vault had been Dragonetti's books. It seemed Dragonetti had actually made notes concerning his plans to deal with the competition and to frame

his partner. It also detailed payments to MPD officers to look the other way.

Lois wondered if Luthor was so vain as to have documentary evidence of his crimes. Dragonetti was supposed to have been a smart man, yet he had left what amounted to be a full confession in his vault.

Clark was busily working on a follow up to Saturday night's story. He didn't even look up when a messenger crossed the floor to deposit a flower arrangement on Lois's desk. Curious, she opened the card. 'Love, Lex,' it read. The flowers were exotic and lovely.

The elevator dinged and Cat swished in.

"What a weekend," Cat announced to anyone who would listen. "I know he may not look it, but under that plain, mild-mannered facade, George is a wild man." She lowered her voice conspiratorially. "I spent most of the weekend in handcuffs. So, what did you guys do this weekend?"

Clark, Perry, and Jimmy were glaring at the gossip columnist. Lois started toward her, hands out as if to strangle the other woman.

Cat's eyes widened and she backed up. "Gee, sorry I asked," she muttered as she hurried to her own desk.

"Good thing murder is against the law," Clark said.

"Sometimes I think that's the only thing keeping her alive," Lois muttered.

It was strange. With Carpenter's arrest and the Metropolis Star's sale to an offshore entertainment consortium, everyone on the Daily Planet staff had assumed that the Planet's financial woes would be over. Instead, it was in a deadly downward spiral. The advertisers Carpenter had wooed away weren't coming back. Even the exclusive story on Dragonetti's vault and increased newsstand sales weren't bringing back the real money.

News was a newspaper's business, but advertising was its life's blood. And the Daily Planet was hemorrhaging to death.

The one personal bright spot was that Clark's cheerful demeanor had returned after their talk and he promised to go back to Doctor Friskin.

Another bright spot was Luthor seemed to be allowing her to get closer to him. They finally made it to the opera — the Met actually held Madame Butterfly over an additional day just so Luthor and his guests could see it. And in a show of magnanimous goodwill, the 'guests' were high school seniors and their teachers.

"Math and science are all well and good and necessary for an industrial society," Luthor had explained to her. "But a well-rounded education is also essential for a smooth running society. I do what I can."

She had several lunches and dinners at Luthor's penthouse, but she noticed that Asabi and St. John never stayed long in her presence. Mrs. Cox seemed to hover in the background, but occasionally Lois thought she saw something in Cox's eyes. Mistrust, possibly even jealousy.

"I was hoping to ask Asabi about that whole soul mates thing he told you about," Lois asked over one of Andre's phenomenal dinners. "Not that I believe any of it," she amended hurriedly.

Luthor gave her an indulgent smile. "Perhaps I can explain, although I admit I don't understand it nearly as well as Asabi. Souls transcend both time and space but they also tend to travel in groups. Chances are very good that everyone you are close to is someone you knew before."

"And soul mates?"

"A soul mate is a soul with which you have a special affinity. The person you are meant to be with," Luthor explained. "You are meant to be with me."

What he claimed Asabi had told him didn't quite jive with what she had read. While it was apparently true that soul mates

had a special affinity, they didn't always meet up in each incarnation. Sometimes their paths were too different. And the relationship didn't always mean a sexual or marital one. Soul mates could be best friends or siblings or even a parent and child with close bonds.

"They are both old souls," Esther had said — it seemed so long ago now. "They've trod this path many, many times. Almost always together."

Loisette de Lynmoran and Charles Beaufort, Lucinda Lyons and Calvin Kearney. And in the background, the third leg of a seemingly eternal triangle — Bayard Tempos in his various incarnations.

Lois had managed to find some information on Lucinda Lyons. Born in Metropolis, Lyons and her parents moved to the Oklahoma Territory when it was opened to white settlers. The Lyons weren't farmers or ranchers, but storekeepers. By the time Lucinda was twenty-three, not only was their mercantile doing well, but their ranch was one of the most prosperous in the area.

According to the history book Lois had found, Lucinda Lyons had been betrothed to local businessman, Lysias Templeton, but married a man named Calvin Kearney. Kearney was a federal marshal who had come to the area to investigate a land speculator and murderous thug known locally as Tempest Tex — Lysias Templeton. The book didn't tell of Templeton's fate.

But Lois knew that what was written in the history books wasn't the whole story. She had dreamed about being Lucinda for several days after reading the book she'd found. In her dreams, Templeton was an utter monster and he looked a lot like Lex Luthor.

"How does Asabi know that we're soul mates?" she finally asked.

Luthor gave her a confused look. "He checked the soul records," he said, making it sound as though it should have been obvious to her. "We have danced this dance many times before. I have been powerful men and you have been by my side."

"Interesting idea," Lois commented. "But where does that leave personal choice?"

"You don't believe that we're soul mates?" Luthor asked. "You don't feel the eternal connection between us?"

Lois shook her head. "No."

"I keep hoping you'll feel it like I do."

"Lex, I know you think you love me..."

"I do love you and I'm hoping you'll choose to spend the rest of your life with me."

Her eyes widened as he suddenly dropped to one knee and brought out a large velvet ring box. He opened the case to reveal a platinum ring with an enormous diamond surrounded by green stones — she assumed they were emeralds. He offered it to her. She took the box and inspected the contents. It was impressive, she had to grant him that.

"Lois Lane, will you marry me?"

"I don't know what to say."

"There are only three possible choices: Yes. No. Maybe."

"It's not that simple. What about my life at the Daily Planet? Clark, Perry, and Jimmy are like family. I..."

"I believe in families. Large ones," he said smoothly.

He was moving too fast. This wasn't right. "The past few weeks have been wonderful," she tried to explain. "But... I hardly know you."

"The only thing you need to know about me is that I love you." He seemed utterly sincere and that scared her. She looked away from him, trying to think how to handle this.

He seemed to sense her reluctance. "Is there something else? Some other hesitation?"

"I... this is a lot to take in," Lois managed to say. She didn't want to say no. She didn't want to lose her access to him and she wasn't sure what his reaction would be to her rejection.

"But you'll give it some thought?" he insisted.

"Yes."

"So, it's 'maybe', for now."

"Maybe 'maybe'," she said, handing him back the ring. "But it is beautiful."

"Without you, it's just a chunk of rock. On your hand, it's priceless to me, more important than any other object in my life," he told her. Again he seemed sincere.

There was a knock on the door and Mrs. Cox walked in. "A call on line two," she told him then discretely left the room.

"Excuse me," Luthor told Lois as he went to one of the wall cabinets and pulled out a phone. He listened for a moment to the handset. "When can I expect delivery?" Another pause. "Done." He hung up and smiled at Lois. "Priceless."

Something in his smile left a cold knot in her chest.

Part 27

Lois didn't sleep well again. Luthor's proposal felt wrong on too many levels. Again her dreams were filled with the trials of Loisette and Lucinda.

Baron Tempos had Sir Charles at his mercy. "I hope you believe in the afterlife."

He prepared to plunge his sword into his defeated adversary's heart.

Loisette screamed. "No! Stop!"

Tempos caught himself, although he kept his booted foot on Charles's chest.

Loisette took a deep breath. "If you spare his life... I will wed you."

"Touching," Tempos sneered. "But if I do not spare his life, you will be forced into my marriage bed in any case. So why should I spare him?"

"Because you will gain the one thing you cannot force: my fidelity."

Charles tried to protest but Tempos cut him off. "I accept, on one condition, non-negotiable. Sir Charles is to leave this country, never to return. Not that I don't trust you, m'lady, but why tempt temptation?"

Again Charles tried to protest. Loisette cut him off this time. "He accepts," she said. She smiled sadly at her lover. "I cannot let you die."

"Getting cold feet, my darlin'?" Tempest Tex was saying. He was all but dragging her down the aisle at the small church. He was holding Lucinda's parents somewhere and had threatened to kill them if she didn't cooperate in this farce.

"More than understandable," Tempest continued. "After all, marriage is a big step, not to be taken lightly. Especially in this case, when so much is at stake and time is so short. Shall we?"

He gave the reverend a nod.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are gathered here today to unite these two fine people in holy matri..."

"Skip on down, Reverend," Tempest ordered.

Reverend Percy flipped the pages of his book. "Do you, Tempest Tex, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, in sick..."

Tempest was getting exasperated with the minister. "I do."

"Aw," Percy whined. "I was just getting to the good part."

"Sorry, but we need to accelerate things. Now, skip on down!"

Percy gave Lucinda a sympathetic look. "Do you, Lulu, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband... Blah, blah, blah, 'til death do you part?"

Lucinda was scanning the open windows for Calvin and Sheriff Jeremiah. She didn't see them.

"Answer the good man," Tempest demanded.

"Um... could you repeat the question, please?" Lucinda asked.

Lois knew her subconscious was screaming warnings at her. But she had no idea what she was supposed to do about it. Turning Luthor's proposal down was as dangerous as turning Tempus down would have been for Loisette. All she could do was find a way to make him change his mind, without putting everything she knew and loved at risk.

The one thing she knew she had to do was keep her problem from affecting her work or her relationship with Clark. He needed her to be strong and he didn't need any more pressure put on him.

"How many is that?" Lois asked Clark as they crossed the Daily Planet lobby to the elevators. She tried to keep the frustration out of her voice. One of the radio announcers had been talking about brain challenges. Clark had challenged her to list Santa's reindeer.

"Six," Clark told her.

She counted off on her fingers. "Dancer, Prancer, Comet, Blitzen, Dasher, Cupid... Donner..."

"That's seven... One more."

"Donner..."

"You're stuck," Clark announced.

"I am not stuck," Lois protested, then she thought about it a moment. "I'm stuck."

"Five bucks. 'Bucks', get it?"

"Okay, okay. Just tell me the name."

He put his arm around her and grinned.

"Vixen."

They had arrived at the elevators and were waiting for the next car.

"Double or nothing?" Lois offered.

"Okay... The Seven Dwarves."

"You're on. Piece of cake... Happy, Dopey, Doc, Sneezy, Sleepy, Grumpy..."

"That's six."

"Sleezy?" Clark shook his head. "Dippy, bippy, sloppy, wheezy... Joe, Steve..."

"Time's up. That's ten you owe me."

"I hate this, I hate this. Tell me."

"It's so obvious," Clark told her with a grin.

The Daily Planet was a non-smoking building and had been for some time. Signs were posted in all public areas. A man in a business suit cut in front of them to get into the elevator. He had a lit cigarette hanging from his mouth and Lois snatched it, broke it in half and dropped it into the trash bin. The man stopped and stared at her, dumbfounded.

"Can't you read?" Lois demanded, pointing to the 'No Smoking' sign. She followed Clark into the elevator. The man chose to stay outside.

"Bashful," Clark said as the elevator doors closed.

The doors opened onto the barely controlled chaos of the newsroom, only this time it looked like the beginnings of a riot.

"So when will we be paid?" Jimmy was demanding of an obviously tired and irritable Perry.

"They didn't say," Perry responded. "I guess when there's money to pay you." He held up his hands as a chorus of protests began. "I'm just the messenger, boys and girls. I can only repeat to you what I've been told. And that's not much."

"What are we doing to resolve this?" one of the other reporters, Sanchez, asked. "I mean, what is the paper doing?"

"I have no idea. They haven't asked for my input," Perry told them. He seemed to be having trouble hiding his own feelings on the subject.

Lois and Clark moved to Jimmy's side.

"What's going on?" Lois asked.

"Have you tried to cash your paycheck?" Jimmy asked.

"I deposited it," Lois told him with a sinking feeling.

"Rubber."

"Again?" Last week she'd had to run her paycheck through twice to get it to clear.

"They said last week's problem was a clerical error," Clark reminded them.

"Yeah, like being broke," Jimmy said. "There's a rumor the paper's going under."

"Jimmy," Perry interjected. "There's always a rumor."

"And it's usually true," Lois added.

"Anything else, Chief?" Clark asked. "Any more surprises?"

"They talked about layoffs," Perry admitted.

The protests began anew, rising in volume to the point that Perry raised his hands once again for quiet.

Lois could hear muttered complaints. "That's not fair. What about the union? They can't do that."

"All I know is if we don't find ways to save money around here, we're gonna be out of business."

The room quieted.

"So they haven't been paid upstairs either?" Lois asked.

"I'm not sure about that," Perry admitted.

This time Perry didn't bother to try to quiet the shouts of outrage and disapproval.

The suits from upstairs sent down their suggested cuts.

"No business lunches, no payments for sources, no cabs..." Lois read from the list. Clark, Jimmy and Jack were standing beside her desk. She looked up at them. "We might as well hang up our word processors."

"We'll adjust," Clark said. "Hopefully it's only temporary."

"Clark, we're newspaper people," Lois stated. "We're supposed to have the resources to write the news as it happens. Old news isn't news, it's history."

"Well I think it's a scam. The pinstriped pinheads upstairs only want us to think the Planet is broke," Jimmy stated.

"Why would they do that?" Jack asked.

"I've seen this before," Lois told them trying to sound more confident than she really was. "Management pretends there's this big crisis to panic everyone into cutting costs."

"I heard some people talking about a strike," Clark said.

"Strike?" Jimmy said. "No way, not me. I feel like I just walked in."

"Tell me about it," Jack muttered darkly.

"Besides, this is the Daily Planet," Jimmy added as a messenger handed him and Jack envelopes. They tore them open. "We may be down, but we're not out. Things could be a lot worse. At least we're still..."

The envelopes held pink sheets of paper.

"Unemployed," Jack said.

Jimmy stared at the slip. "Amazing. They really are pink."

Lois's heart sank. Things were even worse than she'd imagined if the suits were laying off the 'non-essential' personnel.

"I could talk to Perry," Clark offered.

"We both could," Lois added.

Jimmy shook his head. "Nah. It's not his fault. He would have prevented it if he could. He probably feels bad enough."

"I guess it's back to a life of crime for me," Jack said. Lois and Clark both frowned at him. "It's always nice to have something to fall back on."

"This could turn out to be a good thing," Jimmy told them. It was obvious he was trying to stay cheerful.

"How?" Lois asked.

"Remember my friend Buzz?" Jimmy asked. "We've been talking about going into business together."

"Buzz, your reform school roommate?" Clark asked. His tone indicated he wasn't sure he was going to like Jimmy's idea.

"He got a bum rap, too," Jimmy defended his old friend.

"The guy is a marketing genius."

“He’s a con man,” Lois reminded the younger man.

“Same thing.”

“What kind of business?” Jack asked.

“We had this great idea: ‘A Day in the Life of... You.’

Anyone can do a wedding or a bar mitzvah, but we go into your home and capture an ordinary day on video. Kind of like your own personal ‘Truth or Dare’.”

“Wouldn’t that take equipment and capital?” Clark asked.

Jimmy shrugged. “I’ve got money saved. Not that much, but enough to get us started. Once it catches on, we’ll be rolling in it.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Lois commented. Jimmy didn’t seem to hear.

Sanchez walked past them. He seemed dazed, almost ill.

“Steve, are you all right?” Clark asked.

The older man seemed to have aged years in just a few minutes. “I’ve just been laid off. I’ve been with the Planet twenty-five years. Where am I going to go?”

He walked away before Clark could come up with any suggestions. Lois knew Sanchez wasn’t an award winning writer but he was solid and reliable and Perry thought highly of him. Sanchez also had two kids in college.

“It’s a massacre,” Jack announced, echoing what was going through Lois’s mind.

“It’s all happening so fast,” Lois said.

“Maybe not,” Clark said quietly. “We know Carpenter hurt you pretty badly. Maybe management was having serious money problems even before then... We both know the employees are always the last to know.”

“This is ridiculous,” Lois protested. “The Planet’s had hard times before. We came through then...”

“Lois, I have a feeling this is more than just a ‘hard time,’” Clark said.

“Clark, you don’t think...?”

“I don’t know what to think,” Clark admitted. “But I do have a very bad feeling about this and I’m not just worrying about my job.”

Lois looked around to make sure no one was listening. Jimmy and Jack were clearing out Jimmy’s desk.

“Clark,” she began then hesitated. She took a deep breath and began again. “Luthor proposed to me last night. I haven’t given him a decision but I know he’s expecting one soon.”

“Lois, you can’t possibly say ‘yes,’” Clark protested.

“And I’m afraid of what may happen if I say ‘no,’” she told him.

Lois let her voice fall as Perry came out of his office.

“What’s up?” Clark asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Perry told them. He sounded worried. “I got a call from upstairs to expect an announcement right about... now.”

The elevator doors opened and Lex Luthor, accompanied by several men in dark suits, emerged. Mrs. Cox was by Luthor’s side as though she’d always been there and always would be.

“Please let this be a bad dream,” Lois heard Clark mutter. Unfortunately, Lois knew it wasn’t a bad dream — it was an all out nightmare.

Luthor took a position on the upper level, looking over the newsroom floor which had fallen silent, waiting.

“For those of you who don’t know me, my name is Lex Luthor,” he began smoothly. “I, no less than you, have been greatly distressed by the sea of troubles that has mired Metropolis’ one great newspaper. I don’t know why your advertisers have deserted you and circulation is down. I don’t know why the banks have shut off your credit lines. And I don’t know why you depleted your cash reserves through unnecessary expenditures.” With that, he glared at the several men with him. “Though I have my suspicions... I do know that the problems can

be solved with strong leadership and fiscal responsibility.

Therefore, I have taken the one step that would guarantee the future well-being of this newspaper: I bought it.” He paused for effect. “I am the new owner of the Daily Planet.”

Cheers erupted from the newsroom floor, except by one desk. Lois, Clark and Perry were simply stunned. Clark actually looked a little sick.

“Today begins a new era,” Luthor continued. “I promise you no interference, only a few minor modifications, and no layoffs. Why tamper with greatness?”

Cheers drowned out whatever else Luthor had to say.

“Happy days are here again!” Jimmy yelled. He began to unpack the box on his desk.

“Maybe it won’t be that bad,” Lois suggested weakly.

“And maybe that’s what Loisetette thought when she agreed to marry Baron Tempus,” Clark said.

The next day seemed to be business as usual — the newsroom people were at their desks, hard at work on their assignments. Someone from maintenance was hanging a large portrait of the new owner by the elevators. No doubt it was a reminder than no matter what he had said, Luthor was the boss.

Luthor had settled himself into Perry’s office with someone Lois didn’t recognize. She hadn’t seen Perry yet and assumed he was somewhere handling some sort of crisis.

The elevator doors opened and Perry hurried to his office. After a few minutes of conversation, Lois heard raised voices coming from the office.

“Luthor just told Perry he was now answering to a Supervising Editor-In-Chief,” Clark murmured to her. “The guy has no journalism experience. But he was top of his class at Harvard Business.”

“What happened to ‘minor modifications’?” Lois muttered back. Clark shrugged.

The office door slammed open and Perry stalked out, grimaced. After a moment, he returned to the office and left again, this time with his Elvis portrait under his arm.

“Perry?” Lois asked. “What’s going on?”

“I’m going home,” Perry stated. “If you have any problems, take ‘em up with our new owner and his new Supervising Editor-In-Chief.”

With that, Perry headed for the elevators.

Jimmy paused by her desk, carrying a box filled with personal items.

“What are you doing?” she asked. Another sinking feeling. “But I thought you got your job back. Jack, too.”

Jimmy shook his head. “We got jobs back. But not the ones we had,” Jimmy explained. “We report downstairs to the printing plant tomorrow.” He shook his head again and sighed. “I’m having a tough time thinking of this as a lateral career move.”

She watched after the younger man as he headed for the elevators. After a moment, she turned to find Luthor leaning over Clark’s desk.

“Excellent piece of writing, Clark, but I think we’ll hold off on running it,” Luthor was saying.

“Why? This is a hot topic.”

“‘Controversial’ would be a better word.”

“Allegations of excessive rate hikes at Metropolis Electric is controversial?” Clark asked.

“That necessary rate hikes are ‘excessive’ is your opinion, not the opinion of this paper,” Luthor told him. Luthor’s expression was icy.

“This wouldn’t have anything to do with your being on the Board of Metropolis Electric, would it?”

“That inference is insulting and unprofessional. I expected more from you, Kent,” Luthor said.

Jack had his own box in his arms as he passed close to

Clark's desk. He muttered something under his breath.

"What was that, young man?" Luthor demanded.

Jack stopped. "I said: 'Who died and made you king?'" With that, Jack hefted his box and continued to the elevators. Luthor stared after him.

"That boy has courage. I hope it doesn't get him into too much trouble," Luthor muttered.

"Is this how it's going to be, Luthor?" Clark asked. "The 'free press' free only to do your bidding?"

Luthor's expression turned ugly with anger. "If you don't feel 'free' enough around here, Kent, you're 'free' to leave."

Clark gave him a slight bow. "Milord, do I have your permission to look into the double murder at the Hob's Bay Carnival or is that too 'controversial'?"

Luthor glared at him and stalked back to Perry's office. Lois stepped over to stand by Clark's desk. She was reasonably certain Luthor didn't realize she had overheard his conversation with Clark.

"Why tamper with greatness?" Clark muttered bitterly.

Lois didn't have anything to say to that. She knew exactly what Clark meant. Metropolis would be better off without the Daily Planet at all than with Luthor calling the shots.

Luthor was just about to settle in at Perry's desk when Lois walked in. He smiled at her, his anger at Clark apparently already forgotten.

"Lois. Just the woman I wanted to see."

"Lex, what's going on? Did you fire Perry?"

"What? No, of course not," Luthor protested, seemingly surprised by her question. "I just hired another fellow to work with him. Take some of the load off."

"But Perry wants the load," Lois told him. "He won't accept this. He'll quit."

"I sincerely hope not. It would be a great loss to the paper. If he only weren't so resistant to progress," Luthor told her. He seemed genuinely worried. "If I've made a mistake, I better talk to him. I'll apologize."

"And Jimmy and Jack?" Lois asked. "And Clark? What were you two arguing about?"

Luthor shrugged. "I gave Jimmy and Jack jobs. The only ones available. I'll have them back up here as soon as humanly possible. I promise," Luthor said smoothly. "As for Clark, he seems to have this unreasonable hostility toward me. I don't know why. I have nothing but respect for him." He reached over and took her hand. "Lois, I'm working to save the Planet. Give me a chance. Trust me. Everything will turn out fine."

Lois forced herself to smile.

Lois sat across from Clark in the Planet lobby coffee shop. She stared down into her coffee.

"I can't believe this is happening," Lois said.

"Believe it," Clark said.

"I want to believe he's being honest and aboveboard," Lois said. "I want to believe he wants to turn things around for the Planet."

"But?"

"I know it makes me sound self-centered, maybe even delusional," Lois began. "But since when does the new owner of a business with more than six hundred employees bother to know the names and fates of two junior gofers, except that they happen to be my friends?"

"If you expect to utterly defeat a battlefield opponent, you must destroy their support system, their allies, and any avenue of retreat," Clark quoted.

"You think he's decided I'm an opponent in a battle?"

"Lois, in his mind you were the property of his most formidable opponent," Clark said. He held up his hand when she opened her mouth to protest. "When that opponent fell, you

didn't. You didn't fall into his bed when he crooked his finger at you. That makes you a challenge and maybe even an opponent in his sick game." He sighed. "Do you know what he does for fun, aside from buying and demolishing companies?"

She shook her head.

"He hunts predators, the more dangerous the better," Clark said. "And he cruises places outside the metro for young, attractive, married working women. Waitresses mostly. He offers them money for sex, a lot of money, then takes off before they can decide whether or not to break their marriage vows."

"And how...?"

"One of them was arrested a few months ago for making threats against him," Clark explained. "I checked into it, found out that she wasn't the only one he'd approached. Technically, what he does isn't illegal. No money has changed hands and all he has to say is that they approached him. Who'd believe a billionaire like Luthor would make a habit of soliciting waitresses?"

"How long until he fires you?" Lois asked. Clark was the next person Luthor was likely to target.

"I think he'll try to discredit me first," Clark answered.

"Make it impossible for me to do my job, make me want to leave."

"Like Perry."

Clark nodded.

"What are we going to do?"

Clark just shook his head.

Part 28

Over the next few days, things seemed to settle into a routine. As Luthor had promised, everyone who had been laid off had been invited to return to work, although not everyone accepted the offer and many of the returnees were coming back with a loss of seniority.

Luthor finally moved into his office upstairs, leaving the day to day running of the paper to his pet, Chip Peterson, the 'Supervising' Editor-in-chief. Perry had called in sick, saying his doctor had ordered him to rest.

Clark had turned in the story on the double homicide at the Hob's Bay Carnival. It had ended up buried in the Metro section.

"Anything more on those murders at the Carnival?" Lois asked when Clark walked in.

"Henderson's keeping this one close to his chest," Clark told her. "They've finally released the names though. Thomas Devane and John Linquist. Devane was retired military intelligence. Linquist was an actor — commercials, professional extra. His family told the police he said he had a role in a new production that was supposed to be his big break."

"So, why was he out at the carnival grounds?" Lois asked.

Clark shook his head.

Peterson stuck his head out of the editor's office door. "Kent, where's that story on the parking lot rates at Met General?"

Clark pressed a key on his keyboard. "It's in your inbox, milord."

Lois chuckled but she noted Peterson's glare in Clark's direction.

"I'm just waiting for the other shoe to drop," Clark said softly to her. "Peterson told me this morning that he thought it was a waste of resources to have writing teams. That if we couldn't stand on our own, we shouldn't be here."

"But Perry thought it was a great idea," Lois protested.

"Perry isn't here," Clark reminded her. "Also, the medical insurance plan has been changed. Long-term therapy for work-related mental health issues is no longer covered."

"So, no more visits with Doctor Friskin?"

"She called me this morning," Clark said. "Apparently someone claiming to be from the Planet's health insurance carrier

called her and demanded copies of my treatment files for review by them.”

“What about doctor-patient confidentiality?”

“She told me she has no intention of turning anything over to them aside from the insurance claim paperwork. Diagnosis, treatment recommendation, prognosis.”

“But that’s bad enough,” Lois said worriedly.

“I know.”

Clark winced and then Lois felt the building rock, almost like an earthquake. People started running toward the stairs.

“That was a bomb,” Clark stated. “Get everyone out!”

It was horrible. White flames licked out of the windows and the fire department was having trouble dealing with it. Planet employees stood across the street to watch the building die.

Lois looked around to see if Jimmy and her other friends had made it out. She spotted Jimmy covered with soot, standing with other members of the pressroom crew. Jack was nowhere to be seen.

Suddenly the flames seemed to flicker and die back as more fire engines arrived. Soon, surprisingly soon, the fire department had the fire under control.

Lois finally spotted Clark. He was covered with soot and his jacket was charred. His complexion was ashen and he seemed to be in shock.

“Clark?”

“Jack’s dead,” Clark said. He was shaking and he seemed ready to burst into tears. “He was helping people get out. He went... I couldn’t stop him. He went back inside and the second bomb went off. There were about fifty people left in the building when... when...”

“Who would do this?” Lois asked.

“You have to ask?” Clark said. “The question is who is Luthor going to frame for it?”

It was a soggy, blackened ruin. Fire crews were still watching for hot spots, but for now it appeared the fire was out. Perry had joined her, Clark and Jimmy to stare at the ruins. They were all in shock. So many horrible changes.

“Gone. All... gone,” Perry murmured.

“We’ll rebuild,” Lois promised, trying to sound more positive than she felt.

“Sure we will,” Jimmy said. But his tone said he didn’t believe her.

“This is about the worst thing I can imagine,” Perry said.

“Not the worst,” Luthor said as he approached them. Lois hadn’t noticed him then she realized he had come out of one of the police cars that had pulled up.

“The worst would be that one of our own employees set this fire deliberately,” Luthor stated, his face a grim mask. He pointed to Clark. “That’s him.”

Lois was horrified. “No.”

Two officers came forward and handcuffed him.

“Lex, this is a mistake,” Lois protested. “Clark would never...”

“No mistake. The police found the explosives he used to make the device hidden in his apartment,” Luthor said. “And you, of all people, should be aware of his mental instability.”

Clark didn’t say a word as the two officers put him in the back of one of the squad cars.

Luthor watched after them for a moment. “A sad day for all of us,” he said finally.

“An historic day,” Perry corrected. “Tomorrow, for the first time in two hundred nineteen years, there will be no edition of the Daily Planet.”

The building had been condemned and was cordoned off with

yellow crime scene tape. Lois stood with Perry and Jimmy as the globe over the entrance was removed.

Lois knew Perry was trying not to get emotional, but she could see the tears brightening his eyes. She pulled him into a hug. “It’s okay, Chief. We’ll bounce back,” she promised.

“I’m afraid the Planet and I are all bounced out,” Perry said softly. “‘Will not reopen in the foreseeable future’ was the phrase Luthor used at the press conference.”

“Come on. I’ll buy you guys a cup of coffee,” Jimmy said. “I always wanted to be a reporter for the Daily Planet. Now I guess I’ll just have to be satisfied with being a video tycoon. That’s the way it goes sometimes.”

Perry led the way to a sidewalk cafŽ the Planet staff people frequented. With the Planet gone it was going to be harder for them to survive too. All the threads that tied businesses to businesses, people to people, had been sundered in one horrific act.

The trio sat and sipped their steaming coffee, each one lost in their own thoughts for a while. Perry drained his cup and got up to grab the coffee pot from the service counter. The waitress started toward him but he waved her off. “I got it, Candy.” He poured coffee for them and started to speak. “I was only seventeen years old when I came here. I had an interview with Krebs — assistant copy boy — and I was already late. But I stood under that globe and just stared at it. I knew that my future was in that building.”

“I can’t believe Clark could do such a thing,” Jimmy said quietly.

“Jimmy, I can’t believe you’d say that,” Lois protested. “We all know Clark’s incapable of doing something like that.”

“But the evidence...”

“Jimmy, do you really think Clark’s stupid enough to leave evidence of a capital crime in his own apartment?” Perry asked.

“The police seem pretty convinced,” Jimmy reminded them. “But I hear Luthor’s hired a high-powered lawyer for him.”

“Who will make sure Clark never sees the outside of a prison for the rest of his life,” Lois said bitterly. “If you expect to utterly defeat a battlefield opponent, you must destroy their support system, their allies, and any avenue of retreat,” she quoted.

“Guys, I know it sounds self-centered, but Luthor asked me to marry him last week. I told him I had to think about it. Then, things started to happen. Bad things.”

“Hon, I know you and Clark where chasing down leads on possible criminal activities, but you think Luthor is behind all this because of you?” Perry asked.

She nodded. “Clark thought so too. He was just waiting for something to happen that would discredit him, force him out of the Planet. Like Luthor did to you. Heck, my father is in Africa, courtesy of Luthor. My sister has a fabulous job in California, courtesy LexAir. My Uncle Mike got deployed suddenly to Europe even though he’s up for retirement in a few months. That could be a coincidence, but I doubt it. And my mom checked in earlier this week to an alcohol treatment center courtesy of guess who? Am I paranoid, or is somebody out to get me?”

“But aren’t those all good things for them?” Jimmy asked. He was right to be confused. At any other time, Lois would have been pleased that things were working so well for her family. But this wasn’t ‘any other time’.

“Jimmy, my family is spread to the four winds. I can’t just call if I need them,” Lois explained. “All I had left was you guys and Clark. All I had left was my family at the Planet. Now that’s gone too. All in a week.”

Perry sat back in his chair. “Alice and I talked last night. I was planning on taking early retirement. I’m too old to start interviewing with runny-nosed kids with more diplomas than good sense.”

“And now?” Jimmy asked.

“Now I’ll have Alice put off the real estate agent for a few days. A man shouldn’t rush into retirement.” He eyed her. “But Lois, if Luthor really is behind this, we don’t dare let him know we suspect there’s anything wrong aside from the obvious.”

“You mean we can’t help Clark?” Jimmy asked.

“No, I mean we can’t let Luthor know we’re gunning for him,” Perry said. “And Lois, most of that’s going to be up to you.”

Lois found Luthor having lunch at his desk in his penthouse. Mrs. Cox was there, as usual. Luthor dismissed her with a wave of his hand.

“Lex... I need your help,” Lois began.

“With what?”

“With rebuilding the Daily Planet,” she said, trying to make it sound obvious.

“Lois, there isn’t an advertiser in this city that I could count on for revenue. Besides, the Planet was pitifully under-insured. Rebuilding makes no economic sense,” Luthor told her. His demeanor dripped with sincerity. “I’d like to, but I can’t. I have the other stockholders to think of.”

“But everyone’s so lost,” Lois told him, pleading. “No one knows where or if they’ll find another job... Perry’s threatening an early retirement.”

“Is that all bad? Perry deserves retirement. He’s worked too hard for too many years. Let him enjoy life for a change,” Luthor said.

“His life was the Planet. Mine, too.”

“Lois, I know you called the Planet home,” he told her. “But I can make another home for you.”

“Lex, I couldn’t just sit around organizing dinner parties. I need to work.”

“I know that, my darling. That’s why I have a job for you. At Luthor News Network.”

“Television?”

“The on-ramp to the information highway,” he assured her. “The future is five hundred interactive channels of television viewing. Let me show you around this afternoon.”

“I guess it won’t do any harm to take a look,” she conceded.

“That’s my girl. Speaking of which...” He pulled the ring box from his pocket and set it on the broad desktop. “Have you reached a decision?”

“Not... quite yet. Soon,” she promised.

Luthor News Network was a modern, bleeding edge, high-tech maelstrom. Large monitors showed what was on the air on the various networks. Linda King was on the LNN-LA monitor. Lois tuned her out.

The Metropolis newsroom was sparkling clean and bustling. It was exciting. She realized she could probably fit in there except for one problem — Luthor. She knew he wasn’t going to allow her to put down roots here. ‘...destroy their support system, their allies, and any avenue of retreat...’

Steeling herself, she smiled at him. “It’s wonderful. When do I start?”

Dinner was with Luthor again. She listened as he extolled the virtues of the information highway that LNN represented. How information was the currency of the future.

Lois left early, citing a need for good night’s sleep before her first day at LNN.

Mrs. Cox was waiting for her beside the penthouse elevator.

“You know, you’re the only woman he’s proposed to who didn’t say yes immediately,” Cox stated.

“And how many women has he proposed to?”

“You’re number seven.”

“Lucky me,” Lois said. She wasn’t sure what Cox wanted but

the woman seemed sincere. Then Lois recalled Mrs. Cox had been an actress.

“You do know that there are only two answers to the question he asked. Yes and no. And the longer you delay telling him yes, the more convinced he’ll become that you mean to say no. And the worse it will be for the people you care about. Because no one tells Lex Luthor ‘no’.”

“Are you threatening me?” Lois asked.

Cox seemed amused by the accusation. “Not me. But if you’ll take a little advice from someone who’s been there... take the ring, climb into his bed, and graciously accept his settlement when he realizes you’re just like all the other sluts he’s wooed and screwed.”

“Like you?” Lois challenged.

Cox chuckled. “I have other talents he appreciates, but yes. Like me.” The elevator doors opened. “Just remember what I said, Miss Lane. No one tells Lex Luthor ‘no’. No one.”

There was a message waiting for her when she got to her apartment. Inspector Henderson asking her to come down to Central Holding as soon as she could.

She hurriedly changed into jeans and an oversize sweatshirt and headed out.

Metropolis Police Department’s Central Holding Unit was next to police headquarters and across the street from the Superior Court Building. Enclosed aerial walkways connected the three buildings. Police headquarters and the courthouse were both Art Deco, in much the same style the Daily Planet had been. Central Holding, aka city jail, had all the charm of a cinder block. Heavy steel mesh covered the high narrow windows. ‘Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.’

Lois found a parking space and hurried into the building. The desk sergeant gave her an incurious look as she walked up to the bullet-proof glass enclosure.

“I’m Lois Lane,” she told him keying the microphone on her side of the partition. “Inspector Henderson asked me to come down.”

The sergeant beckoned to a uniformed officer and Lois heard the door unlock. The uniformed officer opened the door and allowed her through. She followed him to a locked elevator. “The inspector’s waiting up in the infirmary,” the officer told her.

“What’s happened?” she asked the officer. His nametag said his name was Mooney.

“I can’t really say, Miss Lane,” Mooney told her. The elevator doors opened onto a dingy corridor. Mooney ushered her out and led the way to another locked door. He pressed a button by the door and after a few moments, the door opened.

The area beyond was a pallid green. She spotted Henderson standing at the end of the corridor and hurried over to him.

“I only got your message a little bit ago,” Lois explained. “I came as soon as I could.”

Henderson nodded. He looked tired, like he hadn’t slept. But of course he hadn’t. Murder investigations went full tilt for at least the first forty-eight hours. Nearly all solvable crimes were solved within that time frame. Beyond that, memories became contaminated by what was on TV and in the newspapers, evidence became scarcer and less trustworthy.

“What’s going on?” Lois prompted.

Henderson took a deep breath. “Kent had a ‘seizure’ of some sort a couple hours ago. The docs are keeping him here for observation overnight.

“Is he okay?” Lois asked.

“I’m told he should recover,” Henderson told her.

“But something’s wrong, isn’t it?” Lois insisted worriedly. A ‘seizure’?

Henderson turned the key and opened the door in front of them. More pallid green. A man in an orderly’s uniform was

seated by the door. He looked up as they walked in then went back to his magazine. But it was what was in the center of the room that made Lois's blood freeze. Clark was lying on a hospital bed in four-point restraints. Wires snaked from under the sleeveless scrub style shirt to an EKG monitor that beeped in a steady rhythm. His eyes were closed and his glasses were missing.

"What happened?" Lois asked, unable to keep the horror out of her voice.

Clark opened his eyes to look at her. "Before or after I fired Luthor's lawyer?"

Henderson turned to the orderly. "We'd like some privacy."

"He's not to be left alone," the orderly told him.

"You can wait outside the door," Henderson told him. "I'll yell if anything happens."

The orderly frowned, but grabbed his chair and went into the corridor. Henderson shut the door behind him and leaned against it.

"What's going on?" Lois demanded. "Why...?" She gestured to the restraints.

"Inspector," Clark began. "Would you please...?" He wiggled the fingers on his right hand.

"You know I can't do that," Henderson admonished. He nodded to a camera set into the corner of the room. They were under video observation. "Doctor McCorkle will be here in the morning and do an evaluation. That should handle it."

"What's going on?" Lois repeated.

Clark sighed. "The lawyer Luthor hired for me came in with his mind made up. Hardly even talked to me. Kept insisting I should cop a plea. I didn't buy it. I mean, what's the difference between life in prison for a crime I didn't commit or fifty-four counts of second degree murder at twenty years apiece? So I fired him. Even one of the public defenders would do a better job of defending me. At least they wouldn't be coming in convinced I was guilty. I wasn't very polite when I told him to go away."

"What happened then?" Lois asked.

"After I fired him, I told the officer taking me back to my cell what had happened and I didn't want to see Mister Halstead again," Clark told them. "The next thing I know, I'm in a solitary confinement cell."

Henderson picked up the narrative. "Halstead told one of the officers that Kent had threatened him and had said that he'd never go to prison, that he wouldn't even come to trial. When we get word that a prisoner's been making claims like that, we don't assume he means he thinks we're going to drop the charges."

"You assume he means to kill himself," Lois said. "So...?"

"Clark's on suicide watch," Henderson confirmed.

"But I never said those things," Clark said.

"Doesn't matter," Henderson said. "He said you did."

"Okay, you fired Luthor's lawyer and he got even. What happened then?"

"Nothing much until dinner time," Clark said. "I remember the little door opening for the meal tray then it all gets hazy until I came to here. What I'm told was that I screamed and when they opened the cell door to check on me, I was fighting off something nobody else could see. Then I collapsed and stopped breathing." He swallowed hard. "They had to do CPR. What I do remember is the feeling that I was being buried alive. I was trying to break open the coffin lid and I couldn't."

"What caused it?" Lois asked.

Henderson shrugged and Lois caught the blue glint of his Brotherhood ring on his finger. "The blood tests have come up negative for drugs, at least those we can identify," Henderson said.

"Blood tests?" Lois thought. She was afraid to ask the question of how they managed to get blood from Clark.

"The Brotherhood thinks it may have been a psychic attack,"

Henderson continued. "A very powerful one. Against anyone else it would probably be fatal."

"So what happens now?" Lois asked.

"The Maddox Foundation is assigning an attorney to Clark's case. A man named Webb. He's solid, reliable," Henderson said. "Not that he'll have much to do. The evidence against Clark was purely circumstantial and we know it was planted. We're now looking to identify the persons who planted it."

"So, why haven't you released him and announced he's been cleared?" Lois demanded.

"Because so long as the press has a scapegoat the real bombers will think they're in the clear," Clark explained with a resigned air. "Which means there's a greater chance they'll relax and make a mistake."

"They've already made several," Henderson added. "It's only a matter of time before we catch up to the real perps."

"But in the meantime, you're letting people believe Clark's guilty," Lois pointed out.

Henderson made a face. "He'll be safer here than on the streets," the officer said. "I understand you and Perry White are doing your own investigating into the failure of the Planet and Luthor's takeover?"

Lois nodded.

"Do yourself and everyone else a favor," Henderson told her earnestly. "Work with us on this one. If Luthor really is 'the Boss', he's incredibly dangerous. He would have no compunctions about killing you or anyone else who gets in his way."

"No one says 'no' to Lex Luthor," Lois quoted.

Henderson gave her a curious look.

"He proposed to me," Lois explained softly. "I haven't accepted. But his assistant warned me just this evening that bad things were likely to happen to the people around me if I didn't say 'yes'."

"I can't advise you what to do, Lois," Henderson told her.

"But if I do say yes, he might just lay off the people I care about," Lois said.

"Or he might not," Clark said quietly. "How is everybody anyway?"

"Jimmy and Perry are worried about you," she said. "Cat already has a job at Newstime. I start at LNN tomorrow. I'm going to try and bring on as many Planet people as I can, but knowing what I know, I'm not holding out much hope. Perry was talking about retiring."

"He'll go crazy after a couple weeks," Clark said.

"Tell me about it," Lois said.

There was a knock on the door. "How much longer are you going to be?"

Henderson opened the door. "I think we're done here."

"Lois, be careful," Clark called as she moved to the door.

"You too."

The orderly settled back in his chair with his magazine. The door closed behind her and Henderson.

"Are you really looking into Luthor's connection to organized crime in Metropolis?" she asked him.

"Yeah, but it's slow going," Henderson told her. "We have a lot of little pieces. We're looking for the key that will make everything fit."

"I had copies at home of everything Clark and I had put together," Lois told him. "Including material Superman collected before he... before he died. He was investigating Luthor too."

"Do you think Luthor had anything to do with what happened to Superman?"

"Yes," Lois said. "I'll make sure you get copies of everything we have."

"If I'm not available, give them to A.D.A. Drake," Henderson told her. "She's been spearheading this project."

“A.D.A. Drake,” Lois repeated. “I’ll do that.”

Luthor was waiting for her in his study when she walked in. She hadn’t bothered to go home and change again so she was still in jeans and a sweatshirt. He stood to greet her with open arms although he did stare at her sweatshirt for a moment. It was simply one she’d thrown on without paying much attention.

“Lois, what brings you back so soon?”

“I... I needed to talk to someone,” she finally said. “Inspector Henderson left me a message asking me to go over and see Clark.”

“And how is he?” Luthor asked, sounding sympathetic.

“He... He fired the lawyer you got him, apparently made threats. They have him on suicide watch...”

“I’m sorry. I wish there was something I could do to help,” Luthor told her. “But apparently, Clark doesn’t want my help.”

He took her into his arms and she had to fight to keep from shuddering at his touch. She stared up at him.

“What is it?”

“Nothing,” she lied. “It’s just... do I really know you? Know enough about you?”

“My life is an open book,” he said with a smile. “Shall I read it to you?”

“Only the parts you wouldn’t want anyone else to know.”

“Okay... I started with nothing... orphaned at age thirteen...” he began.

“It must have been terrible,” she said sympathetically.

“Yes. But it made me strong,” he told her. “I’m no saint, Lois. I’ve done questionable things in pursuing success. Unfortunately, that’s the nature of big business. Sometimes, out of jealousy or frustration, I’ve over-reacted. I’ve been ruthless toward my enemies.” He pulled back a little and looked her in the eyes.

“But, as God is my witness, I swear to you, from this moment on, I will change. I no longer want to hurt anyone.”

He let her go and walked over to his desk. He opened a drawer and took out the box with the engagement ring in it. He brought it back to her. “Lois, I’m ready to devote my life to you, to commit to you utterly and eternally.”

He was down on one knee again in front of her.

“Will you marry me?”

Lois stared at him a moment. Her stomach was roiling and she almost felt like throwing up. “Yes, Lex. I will marry you.”

He pulled her close and kissed her with growing passion. She tried to keep from pulling away, imagining it was Clark she was kissing instead.

“No one will ever come between us, ever,” he promised her. “Not Superman, not Clark Kent, not anyone.”

That was when she realized she was wearing a Midwest University sweatshirt. She was wearing one of Clark’s sweatshirts. Her blood ran cold.

Part 29

“What have I gotten myself into?” Lois repeated to herself once she got back to her apartment. Luthor had tried to talk her into spending the night at the penthouse but she begged off once again. Morning and her first day at LNN was going to come too soon.

But sleep has a luxury she wasn’t to have. She couldn’t understand what had happened to Clark. How had the infirmiry doctor gotten a blood sample? Had Clark been exposed to kryptonite or had something else happened? Henderson had been wearing his Azure Brotherhood ring which meant strange things were afoot. And he had said something about a ‘psychic attack’.

“You don’t believe that we’re soul mates?” Luthor had asked. “You don’t feel the eternal connection between us?”

She didn’t dare tell him she knew who her soul mate was, and it wasn’t him.

Lois didn’t often pray. Church had been hit or miss while she was growing up and by the time she reached high school she was firmly agnostic. But now she prayed — for herself, for Clark strapped down to a bed in the city jail, for Perry and Jimmy and everyone else she cared about.

Why had she worn Clark’s sweatshirt to Luthor’s penthouse?

She was still trying to figure that one out when she fell asleep.

“No need to worry, m’lady,” Baron Tempos was saying. “I believe the best way to gentle a horse is with a firm but gentle hand.” They were walking down the aisle in the manor’s chapel. A priest she didn’t recognize was waiting for them. She realized there was no one in the chapel that she knew, not even her parents.

She had watched Charles and his small band leave, accompanied by a small contingent of the baron’s soldiers. Charles was leaving, never to return. In return for his life, she had promised her fidelity to this man, this monster.

She knelt and prayed to Mary, blessed mother of sweet Jesu, for deliverance. And if not deliverance, for mercy.

Lois got up early, collected the research she had hidden at home, including Superman’s notes, and headed over to the district attorney’s office. A.D.A. Drake was one of the new assistant district attorneys — young, aggressive, smart, and female.

“Inspector Henderson asked me to bring these to you,” Lois told the woman, handing her the box of evidence. Drake was about Lois’s age, but blonde and buxom. Mayson Drake looked more like a cheerleader than a lawyer. Maybe that was one of her strengths — people underestimated her.

“The inspector told me you and Kent were looking into Luthor’s possible criminal activities,” Drake said. “Do you think your investigation could have been a motive for the bombing of the Planet Building?”

“I don’t know,” Lois admitted, twisting the engagement ring on her hand. “We tried to keep it under wraps. As far as I know, the only people who knew about it were Clark Kent, Perry White, Jimmy Olsen, and myself.”

Drake had been taking notes but looked up in surprise when Lois said the names. “So few?”

“Mister White felt it was better we kept everything low profile,” Lois explained. “A large task force would have attracted attention.” She was still twisting the ring.

“Miss Lane, is everything all right?” Drake asked. She was watching Lois, eyebrows drawn together in concern.

“No,” Lois told her. “My partner and best friend is in jail for something he didn’t do and...”

“And what?”

Lois sighed. “Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you have to do something you find repugnant in order to keep something worse from happening?”

“You mean like cutting a deal with scum to get the goods on their boss?”

Lois nodded.

“It’s part of my job, but yeah,” Drake said. “I’ve even gone undercover, pretended to be... well you can imagine... You have to do what you have to do.” She studied Lois, eyes finally lighting on the ring. “You want to talk about it?”

Lois took a deep breath. She really didn’t want to talk about it, but Drake could well be in a position to help. And a woman might understand her position better than one of the guys. “Ever since that pheromone poison incident last year, Lex Luthor has had an abnormal fixation on me, probably because of my relationship to Superman,” she explained. “Then I discovered I was under surveillance. My apartment had cameras and audio pickups all through it and Luthor knew things that happened there

he couldn't have found out any other way."

"Who else knows about this?" Drake asked.

"Clark," Lois answered. "Someone tried to get in and bug his place too. His parents caught it and stopped it."

"Good for them. But of course you can't actually trace any of this back to Luthor."

Lois shook her head. "I had an acquaintance take care of the bugs and according to him they were made by LexCorp and were supposed to go to the government."

"Any chance the feds were keeping a brotherly eye on you?" Drake asked.

"I wasn't working on anything that would have gotten their attention and it's not their style," Lois explained.

"Very true," Drake agreed. "Go on. What else?"

"Last night I agreed to marry Luthor because I believe if I put him off any longer, or if I say 'no', people around me will get hurt. And I'm positive that Clark is at the top of his list of people to 'deal' with."

"Then it's a good thing we moved him to a more secure location," Drake told her.

"Where?"

Drake smiled and shook her head.

"Look, at least you know he didn't do it, don't you?" Lois asked, pleading.

"We're not pressing charges at this time," Drake told her. "But he is a material witness currently in protective custody and we'd rather his change in status not be publicized."

"Is there anything you can tell me?" Lois insisted.

"We know that the evidence was planted in his apartment," Drake said. "Lucky for him it turns out the security in his building was recently upgraded to include video cameras in the hallways and on the stairwells. Two men were caught on tape bringing the stuff in immediately after the bombing."

"Do you know who they were?" Lois asked.

"This is strictly off the record," Drake warned her. Lois nodded agreement. "Two guys with long histories in the Metropolis court system. They were paid a lot of money to plant the evidence but they can't, or won't, tell us who gave them the stuff or who paid them. They claim it was all a hush hush spy kind of operation. But while in custody, they were boasting their orders came straight from the 'Boss'."

"Who may well be Lex Luthor," Lois said.

"Maybe what you brought me will help prove it," Drake told her but her tone indicated she wasn't confident the proof was in the box on her desk. "Thank you."

Lois turned to leave. She was going to have to hurry if she was going to make it to work on time.

"And Lane," Drake added. "If you find out anything else, anything at all, don't hesitate to call me or Henderson."

Lois nodded. Maybe things were starting to look up. Maybe.

Lois's new office was large and bright with a modern steel and glass desk and credenza. Her desk chair was white leather, as were the two side chairs. But the room felt empty, lifeless. She had brought a selection of books from home to start filling in the bookcases — history, biographies, cultural studies. It didn't help to bring life to the office. Maybe some plants would help.

She considered calling some of her friends then realized, not for the first time, that most of her friends had been at the Daily Planet. She had called Perry earlier from a payphone and left him a message about her engagement and about meeting with A.D.A. Drake. She didn't expect to hear back from him until later.

A yawn escaped — the dreams were keeping her from getting any rest. Loiset's life, her choices, was haunting Lois's dreams. But Loiset hadn't really had any choices, had she? She was a prisoner of her times, her society. She had made a promise and she'd had to keep it.

Lois leaned back in her chair then sat forward, afraid that if she relaxed, she would fall asleep. And sleep would bring more dreams. She was arranging her pencil cup when she heard something happening outside her office.

She hurried out to the LNN newsroom to find LNN's star reporter surrounded by a group of staffers. They were excited, frustrated, talking over one another a mile a minute.

"What's going on?" Lois asked.

Sandra Ellis, LNN's on camera star looked up. "Sources inside the courthouse tell us the Grand Jury may be about to come back with indictments against two city councilmen."

"The Redevelopment Fund scandal?" Lois asked. It was a story she had been working on before... before the nightmare.

Ellis nodded. "Yep. We have a camera crew there, but they've been denied access," she said. "We don't know which two were named, or even if our information is accurate."

"Until you know that, there's no story," Lois told them.

"But we also hear CNN's about to go with it," Ellis added. "So..."

"So they know something we don't know," Lois reasoned. "Let me make a few calls. I know some of the bailiffs."

"I'm on the air in four minutes," Ellis warned.

"Not unless you've got something to report," Lois retorted.

Lois grabbed the phone and called her friends at the courthouse.

"The Grand Jury today handed down indictments calling for the arrests of Metropolis City Councilmen Ferdig and Montang," Ellis announced to the world three minutes later. On the screen behind her was footage of the two councilmen trying to hide their faces from the cameras as court bailiffs grinned and waved.

"As you can see from this exclusive tape taken outside the courthouse," Ellis continued. "The councilmen have already been remanded into custody and we'll be covering their arraignment later this afternoon. For now, this is Sandra Ellis for LNN News."

The director signaled the end of the broadcast and finally, the newsroom broke into applause. Lois grinned and bowed. Maybe working for LNN wouldn't be too different from what she was used to. The rules of journalism hadn't changed. The pace was faster, deadlines more immediate, but she could handle it.

Maybe things weren't quite as bad as she'd thought.

The job at LNN proved to be as exciting, and almost as comfortable, as Lois had hoped. Ellis was a competent broadcast journalist and Lois was learning a lot from the LNN team.

But in the weeks after her move to Luthor News, Perry had only called her once and that was to leave her a message that Jimmy had moved in with him and Alice — his venture into entrepreneurialism had failed disastrously — and that Clark was still in custody, somewhere.

It hurt that Perry wasn't talking to her, even though she knew he didn't really want to hear how great electronic media was. But he was also leaving her out of their investigation into how the Planet had fallen into financial ruin. And she was worried about Clark. Henderson wouldn't tell her where Clark had been moved to, only that he was safe and doing well.

Lois felt she was in limbo as far as her old friends were concerned. She couldn't be sure, but she suspected that her association with Luthor was keeping them away. Even Cat Grant hadn't returned her calls. Were they afraid she had joined the enemy? It was a question that had come to her more and more often in recent days.

Lois hadn't had a chance to do any investigating on her own. She was never allowed alone in Luthor's office and any questions she asked of the various members of the staff she met were politely but firmly rebuffed.

Luthor had set the wedding date without consulting her. It was now only a few days away. Mrs. Cox was handling the

wedding arrangements and Lois's input was minimal. It certainly wasn't how she had envisaged how her wedding would go. She had always expected her mother to be involved, to fight with her over the arrangements. Mom would want ridiculously expensive and garish things like doves or bell ringers, anything to make her ex-husband suffer financially.

Mrs. Cox's arrangements would be tasteful and befitting the wedding of Lex Luthor. But no one seemed to really care what Lois Lane wanted.

Lois sighed as she looked at the floor plans Luthor had spread out on his desk. Luthor's new country estate in upstate New Troy. She had wanted to go to the opening of the Superman exhibit at the Museum of Natural History. In fact, she had originally been scheduled to make a presentation but somehow that got cancelled.

"This is wrong. I wanted the doors off the master side balcony to be sliders," Luthor complained. She gave him a curious look and he went on. "French doors make the room look smaller."

"Lex, the master bedroom is three thousand square feet. That's more than twice the size of my apartment," she told him.

"Well, what about the exercise area? Should we put it back on the ground floor?"

She studied the bedroom plans. It was huge and the centerpiece was a custom super-king bed reminiscent of the beds used by the wealthy in the middle ages but on a larger, more grandiose scale. In fact, the entire house bore an uncanny resemblance to an ancient manor house. She suppressed a shudder at the realization. All that was missing was the chapel.

"No, I think this is right," Lois managed to say, trying to get back on track. "It'll be great to get out of bed and have that stair climber staring me right in the face saying 'Now, Lois. Now'."

"But, darling, that'll be my line," Luthor told her with a smile. He kissed her and she forced herself to return it. He tasted like stale tobacco. He reached for her breast and she shied away. He backed off but she knew he wasn't happy about it.

"Thank you, Lex, for understanding about my wanting to wait... for our wedding night. I just want it to be special," she told him.

"It will be," he promised.

There was a knock on the door and Mrs. Cox walked in. She gave Lois a cool look before speaking. "Lex, could we run through your schedule for tomorrow?"

"Of course. Come in, Mrs. Cox," Luthor said.

Cox laid a leather bound daily calendar on top of the blue print. She pointed to one entry where an entire block of several hours had been marked off. "Asabi hopes that you'll be able to join him for his 'experiment'."

"Hopefully it will be more successful than his last one," Luthor commented sourly.

"He has high hopes for its success since he now has the abbot's ring," Cox said.

The phone rang and Cox picked it up. She listened for a moment then put the caller on hold. "Bagdonis in Chicago."

"I'll take it in the library," Luthor announced. He left Lois alone with Mrs. Cox.

After a moment Lois asked, "What sort of experiment is Asabi doing?"

Cox gave a dry chuckle. "He thinks he's something of a wizard. Has this idea he can cast a spell, call up the spirit of a dead man, and get his secrets."

"And Lex has bought into this?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

Both women looked over at the door as it opened and Luthor walked back in. He nodded to Mrs. Cox. "Anything else?" he asked.

"Nothing I can't handle," the woman assured him.

"Thank you, Mrs. Cox. That'll be all for now," Luthor said, dismissing her. Lois watched her leave, wondering why Cox had been so forthcoming about Asabi's plans.

"Interesting woman," Lois commented.

"She's easily the best assistant I've ever had, but, if you object to her, I'll..."

"Why would I object to her?" She stood up and walked out onto the balcony. It was cold but she didn't mind. Luthor followed her out.

"What is it?" he asked. "You seen distracted this morning?"

"Well, with my mom getting out of treatment and coming in..."

"What else?"

"Oh... I was just wondering how everybody was. I haven't spoken to Perry, or Cat, or Jimmy in weeks."

"Why don't you give them a call?"

"I think I will," she said but she already knew they weren't likely to call her back. "Any news about Clark?"

Luthor shook his head. "The police still have him closeted away. I've made inquiries, had my legal people look into why the case hasn't been taken to the grand jury and why Clark's still being held if the district attorney's not intending to press charges." Luthor shook his head. "The man's obviously a fool and I won't be supporting him for reelection... But I have tried. I even went so far as to ask one of the city's most noted psychiatrists to be allowed to examine Clark but the officer in charge of the investigation refused to allow it."

"Henderson's a good man," Lois said. "I'm sure he had a good reason to turn down your offer."

"Henderson's a..." He stopped himself and seemed to weigh his words before he began again. "Darling, I know you're worried about Clark, and so am I. But there's nothing I can do to help him," Luthor said. He seemed sincere, but then he always seemed sincere. Luthor continued. "He didn't want my help when I offered it. One of the best criminal lawyers in the country and he fired him without hardly talking to him. Is that the act of a balanced mind? And now the police appear to be holding him incommunicado."

"I'm sure it's not like that," Lois told him, but she wasn't sure which one of them she needed to reassure more.

Luthor shrugged and gestured to the blueprints inside on the desk.

"Now, did we decide on the twelve car garage, or the fifteen?" he asked.

Lois had hoped that going to work would raise her spirits. She also hoped that Perry or Jimmy would finally call her and let her know what was going on with Clark and their own investigation into the fall of the Planet.

She was surprised however, when she walked onto the LNN newsroom floor and Lorna, her secretary intercepted her.

"There's a man here to see you," the woman told her. "He refused to give his name... I assume he's one of your sources?"

"Where is he?"

"In your office."

Lois rounded the corner to look through the glass partition to her office, Lorna still by her side. She couldn't imagine who would be waiting for her. The man was slender and of average height, dressed in a suit. He turned and grinned as she opened the door.

"Jimmy?" Lois turned to Lorna. "It's okay, Lorna. I know him."

Lorna gave her a disapproving look as she left, closing the office door behind her.

Lois ignored her, pulling Jimmy into a hug. "I've missed you guys so much..." She stepped back and inspected him. He'd had a haircut and looked every bit the young professional. "Perry left

me a message that he and Alice had taken you in after..."

Jimmy shrugged. "My old 'buddy' was up to his old tricks. Took me for everything he could. Jack's kid brother found me. We were going to stay over at Clark's since... well, you know... but his parents are staying there. They hooked us up with Perry. The rest is, as they say, history."

"You're lookin' good," Lois commented. "Any news on...?"
 "How about I buy you a cup of coffee?"

Jimmy took her to a small coffee shop several blocks away from the LNN building. He led her to a back booth where two men were already seated. She recognized Perry, of course, but the other man was hunkered down in the corner with his back to her. He looked up as she slipped into the booth beside Perry. Clark.

She wanted to move to the other side and hug him, but Jimmy had slid in beside him.

His hair was longer and he'd changed his large eyeglass frames to something smaller. He was sporting a little goatee and moustache. It made him look dashing and dangerous, especially with a black shirt and jeans. He also looked tired and she suspected he'd lost weight. She noted that he was fidgeting with a ring on his right hand — with an ornate ring with a blue stone.

"I guess this means you've been cleared?" she said hopefully.

"I was a suspect for all of six hours, if that," Clark told her. "Henderson and his people were hoping the other side would show their hand if I was on the inside."

"Did it work?" she asked.

"We know who actually planted one of the bombs," Clark told her. "And who planted the evidence in my apartment." He nodded to Jimmy.

The younger man picked up the narrative. "A guy named John Black. He'll do just about anything he's paid to do: break in, plant explosives, anything. Just like he did for a woman named Cox in Clark's case. He even gave me her number... for a reference."

"And Henderson knows this?"

"Oh yeah," Perry told her. "Don't think we haven't been working with him on this. Bill and I go way back."

"Okay, so why the charade that Clark's being held incommunicado by the police?" Lois asked.

"Aside from what Luthor's lawyer did to me, there were two attempts on my life while I was in lock-up," Clark told her. "The first one you know about."

Lois nodded.

"The second one was after McCorkle took me off of suicide watch and I was back in with the other prisoners. One of them came after me with a knife."

"That was what led us to Black," Perry added. "The attacker's only visitor while at central holding was Black's brother and that happened only an hour before the attack on Clark."

"And Black led back to Mrs. Cox, Luthor's assistant," Lois added.

Clark nodded. "Henderson, Drake, and I agreed it would be better if I dropped out of sight for a while."

"And you won't tell me where?" she asked.

Clark smiled and shook his head. "Believe me, it's better you don't know."

It was the answer she expected, even if it wasn't the answer she wanted.

"So, what have we got on Luthor's take-over of the Planet?" Lois asked.

"The old Board of Directors didn't want to talk to me, but with a little help from Jimmy and Cat... The Planet board originally voted not to sell to Lex Luthor. Then, suddenly, they all changed their minds. They were all also driving new Ferraris. Luckily for us Simon Truesdale, former Daily Planet board

member, had a sudden attack of conscience. He 's confessed to receiving a substantial cash 'inducement' I think he called it to support the sale of the Planet to Luthor."

Lois narrowed her eyes at him. "Any particular reason for this 'sudden attack of conscience'?"

Jimmy grinned. "It might be related to a certain video tape he's hoping his wife never receives."

"Poor woman," Lois murmured.

"Not after the divorce settlement," Perry said with a chuckle.

"But this can't be all," Lois pointed out.

"It isn't. There was additional insurance on the Daily Planet building through a subsidiary of LexCorp called Lexel Investments. About twice what it would've cost to repair it," Perry told her. "Lex Luthor cleared a cool seventy-five mil on the deal."

"Lex told me he'd taken a major loss on it," Lois told them. "It wasn't worth it to rebuild."

"Lois, hon', a newspaper isn't a building," Perry said very seriously. "It's people and a printing press. People can work damn near anywhere and you can borrow or rent a press. Hell, the Star would probably have agreed to help us out in the short term if Luthor had just given the go-ahead."

"But what about the advertisers?" Lois asked.

"Bob Macklin from ad sales has been checking into that," Perry said. "It seems the first ship jumpers were from the three big ad agencies in town and guess who owns them through a series of dummy corporations and subsidiaries?"

"Luthor," she answered.

"And once the big guys bailed, it was only a matter of time before the little guys started to get worried," Perry continued.

"Not to mention the fact that many of them were given heavy incentives to move their business to the Star or one of the other papers," Jimmy added.

"What kind of 'incentives'?" Lois asked.

"Anything and everything," Clark answered. "Changes in their merchant card terms, their financing, threatened union problems, supplier problems, legal problems, physical threats. Whatever it took."

"So, you guys have everything sewn up," Lois told them. She felt left out — they'd done everything without her. She knew she shouldn't feel hurt at being left out; she'd been too close to Luthor and she knew that he was suspicious. Still, she was supposed to be the investigative reporter. It was a come down to realize they hadn't needed her.

"You guys know that none of this'll bring back the Planet," she reminded them.

Perry shrugged. "Elvis's first recording session for Sam Phillips, June of '54 it was, didn't turn out too well, but darned if he wasn't back in that studio in July and turning out his first couple of hits."

"You just know there's a point to that story," Jimmy commented to no one in particular.

Perry looked straight at Lois. "Elvis didn't give up; we won't either. Got it?"

"Got it," Lois told him. "So, when is Henderson taking him down?"

"Drake and the D.A. are reviewing everything now," Perry said. "I'm hoping Clemens will authorize an arrest today. Henderson thinks tomorrow is more likely."

"Perry, I'm getting married to that monster tomorrow," Lois reminded him.

"We know, hon'," Perry said. "We're hoping we can get it done before you have to go through with it." He patted her hand. When Luthor made that gesture, it was patronizing. When Perry did it, it was comforting.

"I've missed you guys so much," she told them. "I'll be so glad when this is over."

“We all will, Lois,” Perry said quietly. He checked his watch. “I have to meet someone,” he announced. “Jimmy?”

Lois got up to let Perry out. “Can I speak with Clark privately for a few minutes?” she asked. Perry gave Clark a worried look and the younger man nodded.

“I’ll grab a cab,” Clark assured him.

Perry nodded, paid the waitress and disappeared out the door with Jimmy.

Lois slipped into the seat beside Clark. “I was really worried about you,” she began. “I mean the last time I saw you...”

“I was a little worried too,” Clark admitted. “The evidence against me looked pretty convincing. Luckily the fire went out faster than the arsonists planned and enough evidence survived to raise serious questions about what really happened.”

“The second explosion?”

Clark nodded. “High temperature accelerant. If it had burned as planned, there wouldn’t have been enough of the building left to even consider rebuilding.”

“Then it’s a good thing it didn’t burn as planned,” Lois told him. She studied his face for a long moment. She recognized the look, the pensive sadness that he hadn’t been able to do more.

“Clark, you did everything you could, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t stop the nightmares. I hear them screaming, the ones trapped when the HTA exploded. Jack running back to help, getting caught in the flames.” For a moment Lois thought he was ready to burst into tears then he caught himself. “As fast as I am, as strong as I am, I couldn’t save him. He died right in front of me and I couldn’t do anything for him.”

“Clark, even Superman couldn’t save everybody,” she reminded him.

“I know. But it doesn’t make it any easier.” He was silent for a long moment as he sipped his coffee.

Lois took a deep breath. “I didn’t want to ask in front of Perry or Jimmy, but in the jail, how did they get blood from you?”

“We’re still not sure,” Clark said, keeping his voice low. “But Jackson thinks the first psychic attack may have temporarily depleted my aura.”

“And what about...?” She made a sideways motion with her hand to indicate flying.

“Things are coming together more and more,” he told her. “But I don’t know if I can do that again. I don’t know if I can be that person anymore.”

He was fidgeting with the ring again.

“Clark, it’s okay. Really,” she assured him.

“I wish I could believe that,” he told her. He sighed. “I have to get going.” He started to get up then stopped. “Lois, if we can’t get there before... Just do what you have to do to stay alive, okay?”

She nodded. “I will. And Clark, be careful.”

“Aren’t I always?” he asked with a cheeky grin. Then he disappeared out the door.

Part 30

The rest of the day was a blur. Lois was relieved to know that Perry and Henderson were working on taking down Luthor. She was relieved to know that Clark was okay. It was something she would hold close to her as she went through the motions of getting ready to be married. Now all she had to do was keep up the charade that she didn’t know about Clark being cleared or how close they were to exposing what kind of monster Luthor really was.

She had dinner with Luthor at a small table set up in his private box at the Metropolis Performing Arts Center. Othello was the performance on stage. It was a new production with a new art director and the reviewers were saying nice things.

But Lois wasn’t especially interested in the play — she preferred ‘Romeo and Juliet’ to ‘Othello’ any day — and the closing curtain couldn’t come down soon enough.

It was raining by the time Luthor guided Lois to the waiting limo. He gave the driver instructions to take them to Lois’s apartment. She had steadfastly refused to give up her place until they were actually married. One more small attempt at keeping her independence as long as possible.

“I don’t know when I’ve had better garlic chicken. Chef Andre deserves a raise,” Luthor was saying. Lois was only half paying attention to him as she watched the city go past the windows. The rain suited her mood.

“And what a magnificent production of Othello. I especially liked the black and white set. Very inventive,” he continued. “You know, Shakespeare didn’t write Othello. It was actually written by Dr. Seuss.”

She still didn’t react. Oh, she knew he’d said something clever to get her attention but she really didn’t care at the moment.

“Lois, am I boring you?” he asked.

She shook herself to return to the here and now. It was stupid of her to get lost in her own thoughts that way. She turned and put a hand on his arm.

“No, of course not,” she said. “I’m sorry. All I can think about is that enormous stack of RSVP’s on my desk... Minus a few.”

“Your dad and sister absolutely can’t make it back?” he asked. As always, he sounded sincere.

She shook her head. “My dad’s medical relief mission is in Africa, and Lucy can’t possibly get time away from her new job. At least my mom’s coming. But it’s not just my family,” she added. “Not one of the people I thought I was closest to is coming to the wedding.” Her statement was strictly true — but she knew why they wouldn’t be there.

“Propinquity,” Luthor stated.

“What?”

“Propinquity. A relationship based on convenience. You work in a particular place, shop in certain stores, become attached to the people that surround you. But, when you move on, the relationships end,” he explained. “That’s what you have to do, Lois. Move on. It’s not fair to you... or to me.”

She sighed. “You’re right,” she told him. “I just wanted our wedding day to be something I could share with Clark and Perry and the others.”

“After the honeymoon, I promise you we’ll heal all old wounds.”

“You still won’t tell me where we’re going?” she asked him. He had been very secretive about his honeymoon plans — more secretive than he usually was.

“No,” he teased.

“Not even a hint?” she cajoled.

“Clothing is optional.”

She laughed, hoping he wouldn’t hear how hollow it was. She laid her head on his shoulder. He wouldn’t be able to see her face.

“Lex... when the Planet was destroyed, you lost quite a bit of money, didn’t you?” she asked.

“Yes, but I have wide shoulders and deep pockets,” he assured her.

“But, I mean it wasn’t a total loss. There was insurance.”

“Several policies,” he told her. “Unfortunately, not enough to justify reconstruction... Why the sudden concern?” There was a touch of suspicion in his voice.

“Because I can’t help but feel that your buying the Planet in the first place had something to do with me,” she told him. She hoped he’d buy her excuse for bringing it up.

“It did,” he admitted. “I’m embarrassed to admit it, but I

bought the Planet in a desperate, lovesick attempt to bring us closer together, to bring my life in tune with yours. Ironically, it wasn't necessary: here we are together. Our love was too strong. We were meant to be together."

She suppressed a shudder as he ran a finger along her jaw.

"Lois, it won't be long until we..." his voice trailed off suggestively. It was all she could do to keep from retching.

Loisette had sat through the banquet in stoic resignation as Tempos and his men drank themselves into stupors. At least drunk, Tempos was unlikely to demand she do the things he'd intimated was his husbandly right — the things the village girls did for him when he demanded his lordly pleasure from them.

She didn't know what Tempos was likely to do when he discovered that she and Charles had... It didn't do to dwell on such things. Charles was gone and so was Friar Harry and Marta and Jon and all the others who had followed him in hopes he could bring order to this beleaguered land. At least they were alive, even if she never saw them again.

Too soon, Tempos staggered to his feet and grabbed her arm. For a moment she was afraid he intended to take her in front of his 'guests'. Luckily he headed up the stairs to his bedchamber, dragging her along like a recalcitrant child.

He watched hungrily as she disrobed. She steeled herself to the touch of his rough hands on her body as he took her to his bed. Instead, he forced her to lean over the desk as he took her like a dog.

"Am I as good as Charles?" he murmured in her ear. She bit her lip to keep from crying out in pain and anger as he spent himself. He staggered off to his bed, leaving her naked and humiliated. The one consolation she had was that she would not have his child — she still had the herbs Marta had given her. Loisette would never bear Tempos's children if she could help it.

Lois woke up in a cold sweat. She checked the time on her alarm clock — early, too early to be getting up but she knew she wouldn't be able to get back to sleep. The dream about Loisette had been too real. She could almost smell Tempos's sour sweat, the feel of his hands as he forced himself on her. No, as he forced himself on Loisette.

She got up and pattered around her apartment. She had promised Luthor she would pack up her things when they got back from the honeymoon. Six hours... six hours until she was faced with walking down the aisle toward a man she didn't love.

She turned on the news. Today might be her wedding day, but she was still a journalist working for a news organization. Keeping track of what was going on in the world was part of her job. The top story was the insurgent uprising in Qurac. CNN was preparing to move their people out of the capital.

She looked over at her phone, wondering why it hadn't rung. She picked up the phone and dialed her office at LNN.

"LNN, Lois Lane's office," a woman's voice announced after only two rings.

"Any calls, Lorna?" Lois asked.

"No, Ms. Lane."

Lois didn't believe it. "Nothing? What about the uprising in Qurac? Are we pulling our correspondents out? I have to decide..."

"Oh, I thought you knew," Lorna said. "Mr. Ahern already arranged their departure. I guess he didn't want to bother you."

"What?" Lois nearly yelled. The correspondents in Qurac were her responsibility.

"We just assumed... with your wedding and all..." Lorna sputtered.

"Now I am bothered," Lois told her. "I'm bothered because no one bothered to bother me. You expect me to work at LNN day after day, week after week, completely... unbothered?"

"Ms. Lane?" Lorna asked, obviously confused.

"Never mind," Lois ordered, hanging up the phone. It infuriated her that they made the assumption that she would ignore her job just because her wedding was coming up. Everyone who knew her knew her dedication to her work. Her wedding to Luthor was not going to change that. Of course, she had no doubt that he had other ideas. The country estate was proof of that. How could she work if she was trapped in a manor house, away from Metropolis, away from everyone, everything, she knew and loved?

One of Luthor's drivers was scheduled to pick Lois up at ten so she could get ready for the wedding — make-up, hair, final fitting and last minute alterations to the wedding dress. Her mother was being driven in from the 'hospital' by another of Luthor's people and would meet her at the penthouse.

The stage was set for the play he was putting on for the public. The curtain would rise at noon unless someone called it down before the show started. Somehow she doubted it would happen. Luthor was too powerful, too evil, to be taken out simply or easily.

She drove herself to the tower an hour early and pulled the jeep into her usual parking spot. She waved at the attendant.

"Don't bother to call up," she told the young man cheerily. "I want to surprise him."

The elevator opened on the now very familiar hallway. This month's art display was watercolors by various modern artists.

She heard Luthor's voice shouting. As she moved down the hallway to his office, she began to make out words.

"You told me you could do it!" Luthor was yelling. "You told me you could break the link... That you had the abbot's ring and you could destroy him for all time!"

Another voice replied — Asabi. "His will is stronger than I had anticipated. It will..."

"Then kill him and be done with it," Luthor ordered.

"His death will not resolve anything unless..."

"Unless?" Luthor's voice was at a near screech. "Unless?"

"Unless he dies by her hand," Asabi said. "That is the only way to break the link between them. For her to knowingly and willingly end his life."

Lois had a terrible suspicion that she knew what Luthor was ranting about. "We're soul mates," Luthor kept telling her and he no doubt wanted to believe it. But she knew in the deepest part of her own soul that it wasn't the truth. She didn't love him, not in this lifetime nor in any other that she was aware of. Luthor and Clark were trapped in a seemingly eternal struggle of dark and light even though the terms were meaningless except in contrast with one another. Two sides of the same coin and she was but a pawn in the war. But that wasn't right either. She was the third party in an eternal triad.

"Miss Lane?" Mrs. Cox's voice interrupted her thoughts. "You're early."

"I... I wanted to see if there were any last minute things I needed to take care of," Lois managed to get out.

Mrs. Cox arched one perfectly formed eyebrow at her. "Everything's been handled. The driver picked up your mother ten minutes ago. Everything is on schedule for noon."

Lois looked at the office door and Mrs. Cox frowned at her.

"I thought I heard Lex talking to someone. I didn't want to interrupt," Lois explained.

To answer, Cox knocked lightly on the office door.

"Yes?" Luthor said from inside. He sounded angry but Mrs. Cox didn't appear fazed by it. She opened the door.

"Miss Lane is here a little early," Cox announced. She opened the door further to let Lois pass.

Luthor was all smiles when he approached Lois, giving her a kiss on the cheek in greeting. Asabi was nowhere to be seen.

"Anxious to get started?" he asked.

"I just wanted to double check a few things," Lois told him. "Mrs. Cox assures me everything is handled," Luthor said. "There's nothing to worry about. I have a very efficient staff."

"I thought I heard you yelling at someone," Lois told him. "It was nothing," Luthor assured her. "One of my managers having a problem, that's all."

"Is it something I could help with?"

"Possibly," Luthor told her. He studied her for a long moment, like a horse breeder evaluating a potential addition to his herd. "Would you do anything for me?"

"It depends on what it is, I guess," Lois told him.

"Something that would make this day perfect," he said. "Something that would make you mine for all eternity." As he spoke he went to one of the bookshelves and touched something. The bookshelf slid open like a door, revealing an elevator door. He pulled a simple key ring from his pocket and stuck one key into a key-slot beside the door. He turned the key and then returned it to his pocket.

"Only my closest and most trusted employees know about this," he told her. "It's a special escape elevator in the event of an emergency. It's not even on the plans the city has of this building."

"Where does it go?" she asked, trying to keep her voice from shaking.

"Why don't I show you?"

He ushered her into the elevator. There was only one button and he pressed it. Lois felt the floor drop from beneath her as the elevator started down at high speed.

The elevator slowed and stopped. The doors opened onto a white tiled corridor that looked oddly familiar — Luthor's underground bunker. She didn't remember if she'd told Perry about the bunker. She also wondered if the city knew about it, or how many other modifications had been made to the building above that the city hadn't been informed of.

"It's mostly empty, as you can see," Luthor told her as he led the way through the maze to one door. He unlocked it and swung the door open. For a moment Lois was afraid he'd brought her to the emulation of her apartment. Instead, a flight of steps led to a dimly lit room filled with heavy wine racks and kegs.

"However, since it's completely climate controlled, I've found it makes a marvelous wine cellar," Luthor went on. "It's also sound proof." He led her to another door and unlocked it.

This room was lit only by candles which flickered fitfully, throwing monstrous shadows on the walls. She made out two robed figures but what was on the floor nearly made her heart stop. A pentagram was incised in the concrete and spread-eagled on the pentagram was another robed man — Clark. His eyes were closed and in the flickering light she couldn't tell if he was alive or dead.

"No..." Lois murmured.

His head moved and his eyes opened to look right at her. She thought she saw a smile flicker across his face, but she could have been mistaken. At least he was alive.

Luthor reached over and caressed her face. This time she didn't bother to suppress her flinch at his touch.

"The one thing that would make this day truly perfect... his death," Luthor told her. He was breathing hard, as though he was getting aroused. She felt sick.

"You brought me down here on my wedding day to watch you commit murder?" she managed to ask.

"You misunderstand," one of the robed men said. With the hood up she hadn't recognized him but she recognized his voice — Asabi. "To break the evil that has bound Loisette and Charles together in their unholy union, it is you that must destroy his current incarnation."

Lois's breath caught in her throat. Then: "You are all out of your freaking minds!"

Luthor's expression had been childishly hopeful. "You won't do this for me?"

She was trembling in anger and fear. She clenched her fists to keep them shaking. "I will not commit murder. Not for you, not for anyone. Not ever!"

"Pity," the other man said, speaking to Luthor. Lois didn't recognize his voice but she did recognize his face when he lowered his hood — the Sorcerer.

Luthor looked down at Lois. He seemed worried. "You won't do this? You won't break the spell that binds you? That keeps you from me?"

"I'm not under a spell, Lex," she told him. "But I do know about Loisette and Charles. I know the bargain she made."

"I don't understand..." Luthor said.

"Don't listen to her, Luthor," the Sorcerer ordered.

Luthor ignored him. "Lois, what bargain?"

She stared at Asabi and the Sorcerer. "Spare his life, let him go free, and I will walk down the aisle with a smile on my face. I will go to your bed without a word. I will never speak of this insanity to anyone."

"Lois, no..." Clark murmured.

"But harm one hair on his head, harm anyone I care about and I swear to God I will see you burn in Hell," she continued, turning to watch Luthor's expression. He seemed confused. Had he honestly expected her to blithely commit murder for him?

"Luthor, don't listen to her," the Sorcerer ordered. "You know what sort of lying..."

"Shut up," Luthor ordered.

"Lois no..." Clark tried again.

"I won't let him kill you," Lois told Clark. "I'll be okay. Lex wouldn't hurt me. Would you, Lex?"

"Of course not, my darling. I love you," Luthor assured her.

"Then swear to me by everything you hold sacred that you will let him go unharmed," she pressed.

Luthor nodded. "As soon as the ceremony is finished, he will be released," Luthor promised. "And then we can begin our life together."

"Swear it," Lois insisted.

"I swear it," Luthor said. "In fact, to prove it, I'll have him come to the reception."

"Luthor, it's a trick!" the Sorcerer shouted. "She has no intention of..."

"I told you to shut up!" Luthor shouted back. Suddenly he had a pistol in his hand. The Sorcerer's eyes widened in horror as he realized what was happening. A single shot rang out in the small space and the Sorcerer looked down at his chest. He touched the red blotch that was staining his robe and stared at the blood on his hand. Then he dropped to the floor.

Luthor grabbed Lois's arm and started for the door. He looked back at a dumbstruck Asabi. "Do what needs to be done," Luthor ordered.

He dragged her back to the elevator, keeping hold of her arm until they reached the penthouse.

Mrs. Cox was waiting in the office. If she was surprised to see them coming out of the private elevator she didn't show it. Luthor shoved Lois at her.

"Do not let her out of your sight until the ceremony," Luthor ordered.

The order seemed to break through Cox's iron reserve. She actually looked surprised. "Of course, Lex," she said. "I just wanted to let you know that Mrs. Lane is waiting for Miss Lane in the guest quarters."

"Excellent," Luthor said. He nodded to Lois. "Now go make yourself beautiful for me," he ordered. "I want nothing else to mar this day."

Lois looked at her reflection in the full-length mirror. The

cosmetologist had done an excellent job on her make-up, elegant and understated. Her hair was too short to do much with but the stylist had given her a trim. The dress was magnificent, befitting a princess.

And like an old-time princess, she was a player in a game that knew few rules and took no prisoners. What her heart wanted was irrelevant at the moment. She knew what needed to be done and that there was no one else who could do it. She practiced smiling, stifling her desire to break into tears.

Mrs. Cox had positioned herself by the hallway door. Her expression made it clear she would rather have been anywhere else. Baby sitting Luthor's bride-to-be was not high on her list of things she wanted to be doing. Lois could hardly blame her. Standing in front of a mirror in a wedding dress wasn't high on Lois's list of things she'd rather be doing.

Her mother was sitting on the sofa watching. She was wearing a cotton-candy-pink suit and looked like the picture perfect mother-of-the-bride. She was even sober. Lois was hard put to remember the last time she'd seen her mother sober.

There was a knock on the door and a voice announced: "Five minutes, Miss... Mrs. Luthor."

Lois took a deep breath. "Mom, what am I going to do?" she asked softly.

"Honey, if you're not sure..." her mother said.

"It's too late," Lois said, fighting the tears that threatened to overwhelm her.

"No, it's not. Do what your heart tells you to do," Ellen Lane advised her.

"I wish it was that simple," Lois told her.

"It's time," Mrs. Cox announced, opening the door.

Lois nodded. She dropped the lace veil over her face and picked up her bouquet, white and pink rosebuds and baby's breath. She took a deep breath and stepped into the corridor beyond. Her mother followed her. Mrs. Cox shut the door behind them and followed them down the corridor to the ballroom.

An usher, one of LexCorp's managers, offered his arm to Ellen Lane and led her to her seat. Lois was alone with Mrs. Cox, waiting for her cue.

"Why are you going through with this charade?" Mrs. Cox asked. Her voice was so low that Lois almost missed the question. Lois gave the woman a curious look, wondering what prompted the question but the woman seemed genuinely worried.

"I made a deal with the devil," Lois told her. "If I don't go through with it, Lex will hurt, probably kill, the people I care about."

"And you think he won't do it anyway?" Cox asked. "Kent, White, your parents... a series of tragic 'accidents' while you're away on your honeymoon. You'll have sold your soul for nothing."

"I know," Lois admitted. "But maybe I bought them some time."

Lois peeked around the door to look at the audience. She could only see the backs of their heads but she did spot her mother sitting near the front.

"Everyone who's anyone is here," Mrs. Cox commented. "The social event of the year."

The organist at the front of the room began to play 'the Wedding March'. Conversation in the converted ballroom died down as Luthor walked in and took his place by the temporary altar. A man in ornate white and gold vestments came from behind the altar to stand in front of the assembly. Lois considered it more than a bit pretentious, making the clergyman Luthor had selected dress as a prince of the Church.

"Show time," Lois murmured as she moved to the center of the double doors. Mrs. Cox nodded and ushers opened the doors. All eyes turned to look as Lois began her slow march down the aisle. There were no attendants, no bridesmaids or groomsmen.

Luthor hadn't wanted anyone to outshine his bride.

The march ended as Lois stepped up even with Luthor. He was smiling at her as though he was the happiest man in the room. She stared at the clergyman Luthor had managed to recruit. The man wasn't simply dressed as the archbishop.

"The Archbishop?" Lois whispered to Luthor.

"The Pope had a prior engagement."

A soprano from the Metropolitan Opera Company led the congregation in Love Divine: Love divine, all loves excelling, Joy of heaven to earth come down; Fix in us thy humble dwelling; All thy faithful mercies crown!

The Penitential Rite, the Opening Prayer. One of the archbishop's assistants read the Old Testament reading, the responsorial Psalm, the New Testament reading, the Gospel Reading, all familiar parts of Mass. Cardinal McNeeley gave the homily. It was mercifully brief.

"Lois and Alexander, have you come here freely and without reservation to give yourselves to each other in marriage?" the archbishop asked. "Will you honor each other as man and wife for the rest of your lives...? Will you accept children lovingly from God, and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church?"

Luthor nodded.

"Since it is your intention to enter into marriage, join your right hands, and declare your consent before God and his Church."

Luthor grabbed her hand.

"Do you, Alexander, take this woman for your lawful wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do you part."

"I do," Luthor answered.

"And do you, Lois, take this man to be your husband? Do you promise to be true to him in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do you part?"

Lois paused, looking around as the assembly waited for her answer. She prayed that she'd see Perry and Henderson coming through the door to put an end to this travesty.

"Lois," Luthor said gently.

Lois closed her eyes a moment. There would be no cavalry riding over the hill to save the day.

"I do," she murmured.

"You have declared your consent before the Church," McNeeley stated. "May the Lord in his goodness strengthen your consent and fill you both with his blessings. What God has joined, men must not divide."

"Amen," Luthor intoned with the rest of the assembly.

It was done. She was now Mrs. Lex Luthor. She prayed she had made the right decision. That she really hadn't sold her soul to the devil for nothing.

Part 31

The reception was set up in the large room adjacent to the ballroom. Lois knew that Chef Andre's staff had been working overtime to get everything ready.

Luthor took Lois's arm and led her to the reception room. The room was resplendent — all white and pink. Even the huge wedding cake from Carlisle's Bakery was trimmed with pink and white roses. Carlisle's had created the wedding cakes for every Luthor wedding since the Civil War. Lois had always wanted a Carlisle wedding cake — but this wasn't the way she had ever imagined getting one.

Luthor guided her to stand with him at the entrance to the reception room to greet their guests. The mayor, the chief of police, even District Attorney Clemens. Clemens mouthed 'sorry' at her as he shook her hand then moved on.

The head of the Metropolis Art Museum, opera stars, the conductor of the symphony, the presidents of several of the colleges Luthor gave scholarships to, several prominent doctors — a ‘Who’s Who’ of Metropolis society. Even the new publisher of the Star was there to give the new couple his congratulations.

Lois thought the line would never end. Finally, she spotted Clark. It was all she could do to keep from breaking into tears with relief as he approached her. He was dressed in a dark suit and dark tie. She pulled him into a hug, ignoring Luthor’s glare.

“You okay?” Lois murmured to Clark. He looked a little pale but otherwise unhurt. He’d even managed to shave.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“I promised you he’d be here,” Luthor interrupted. “Did you doubt me?”

“Of course not, Lex,” Lois assured him as she let Clark go.

“I’m just very happy he managed to come.”

Clark turned to Luthor and shook his hand. “Congratulations.”

Luthor moved his head slightly, accepting the offered sentiment.

Clark smiled at Lois and moved on, disappearing into the crowd. But Lois noticed Asabi standing at the door, back in his usual white suit and turban. He was watching Clark and if looks could kill, Clark would have been a smoldering pile of ashes.

A jazz quartet was playing softly, somewhere.

“Our first dance as man and wife?” Luthor asked. She nodded and he led her to the center of the floor. The guests made a space for them. On some hidden signal, the jazz band switched to a rendition of ‘Unforgettable’. Luthor pulled her into his arms and they began to dance. Lois had to admit, Luthor was a good dancer — but then so was Clark.

Suddenly the doors to the reception room burst open. One of the ushers hurried over to Luthor, followed by Inspector Henderson, A.D.A. Drake, Perry, and Jimmy. In the hallway beyond, Lois saw a large number of uniformed police officers in helmets and bullet-proof vests. Several of them were carrying rifles.

“Sorry, sir, but...” the usher stammered out. Luthor pushed him aside.

“What is the meaning of this?” Luthor shouted. His face had gone red with fury.

“I think, Mister Luthor, it would be better if you came quietly,” Drake said, keeping her voice low. The reception guests had gone quiet as they watched. The mayor began to step forward but Clemens put a hand on his arm, stopping him. Clemens shook his head.

“I will not!” Luthor spat.

Drake took a deep breath and addressed the guests. “Ladies and gentlemen, if you would please proceed to the exits in an orderly manner. The officers outside will see you to the elevators.”

“How dare you!” Luthor shouted.

The crowd began thinning as the guests took Drake’s advice and began leaving the room. Clark stepped forward and moved Lois away from Luthor.

“What is the meaning of this?” Luthor repeated with a hiss.

Drake shrugged but it was Perry who spoke. “The meaning, Luthor, is that you’re through. We have all the evidence against you we need.”

Drake held up a sheet of paper. “We have a warrant here charging you with arson, murder, and that’s just the start.”

“You must be out of your minds. All of you,” Luthor screamed. The guests who stopped to watch, who may have even been sympathetic to him, started to back away.

“You have the right to remain silent,” Henderson began. “You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney...”

Luthor glared at him. “Will you stop that? I can afford a

thousand attorneys. I’ll have your head...” he caught himself. “... badge for this. Someone get the Governor on the phone! Wait, make it the President, make it...”

There was a motion near the doors. Lois looked over to see Mrs. Cox flanked by two officers. Her hands were behind her and Lois assumed she was in handcuffs. Luthor’s mouth had fallen open in shock at seeing his assistant standing there. Cox shrugged nonchalantly.

“Et tu, Mrs. Cox?” he murmured. “Sorry, Lois. I’m afraid something’s come up.”

Luthor moved forward toward Henderson who put out his hand to grab Luthor’s arm. Lois watched in amazement as Luthor twisted away from the officer’s grasp. Several martial arts moves disposed of two uniformed officers in his way. He disappeared through a side door.

Henderson ran after him only to find the door bolted. He ordered his team to search for Luthor.

“Lois, I’m so sorry we couldn’t get here earlier,” Perry told her. “There were problems getting the building secure and then...”

Henderson walked back to them. “Don’t worry, we’ll get him. We have the entire building sealed off. He’s not getting away.”

“You know this building had escape routes not on the city’s plans, don’t you? He has a whole complex beneath the building,” Lois told him.

“We know,” Drake told her.

“Let’s get out of here,” Clark suggested. Perry draped his jacket over her shoulders. She reached up and pulled off the veil. She handed Jimmy the bouquet. She looked around the room. Carlisle’s was going to be disappointed that no one would enjoy their cake.

“You have to give him one thing, though,” Lois commented. She got curious looks from everyone around her. “He sure knows how to throw a party,” she explained. Clark and Jimmy both chuckled.

Lois let Clark and Perry guide her and her mother out of the building. Police cars and personnel were everywhere. Most of the wedding guests were milling around on the blocked street, trying to make sense of what was happening. The mayor and D.A. Clemens were conferring with Drake beside one of the police cars. Mrs. Cox was nowhere to be seen. Lois assumed she’d already been taken off to jail.

“It was a dangerous move, arresting him at the reception,” Clark was saying to Perry.

“Based on the information we had, leaving it until after the party would have been too late,” Drake said, joining the little group. “Our analysis indicated he probably wouldn’t risk his reputation by creating a hostage situation.”

“He probably wouldn’t?” Clark asked.

“We had a hostage negotiator standing by, and sharpshooters,” Drake told them. She turned to face Lois. “I am sorry you had to go through all that. But it’ll be over soon.”

“Over?” Lois asked. “I’m married to the monster.”

Clark cleared his throat. “Actually, no,” he said. “The two of you never applied for a marriage license. That’s not something you can delegate. No license, no legal marriage.”

Suddenly one of the police walkie-talkies squawked. “He’s back at the penthouse.”

Lois looked up. She could just make out a tiny figure on the penthouse balcony. “Lex?”

The image was surreal. The tiny figure separated itself from the building. Luthor had jumped rather than face his crimes.

She felt the air move beside her and realized Clark was gone. Another figure appeared in the sky. A murmur came up from the onlookers. “It’s a bird...? No, a plane...? No...”

“It’s Superman!” Lois shouted.

“Superman?” Drake asked looking up.

The first figure's fall was broken. As they got closer to the ground, Lois could hear Luthor screaming. "Lex Luthor will not live in a cage!" He was struggling against Superman's iron grip. "Unhand me, you freak! You're dead! I ordered you dead! I buried you!"

Superman came to earth a short distance from Drake and several uniformed officers. Luthor was on his feet, fighting to get away. Superman nodded to the officers and they stepped forward to take custody of Luthor. He kept fighting even as they handcuffed him.

"Do I understand that you are confessing to conspiring to murder Superman?" Drake asked Luthor.

"You can't murder something that isn't even human," Luthor spat.

Drake's expression turned hard. "Funny but I've heard that song before. Against blacks and Jews, anybody the bigots choose to hate. I knew you were crooked but I never took you for a bigot, Mister Luthor," Drake said. "I guess I was wrong."

She nodded and the two uniformed officers took Luthor to one of the nearby panda cars. Then she turned to Superman. "Welcome back, Superman."

"It's good to be back," Superman said.

Lois studied him as he spoke to the other woman. She wondered how she could have missed it for so long. A change of hairstyle, clothes and a pair of glasses.

It was good to see him back in action.

"Where have you been?" Lois asked. The question needed to be asked.

He didn't seem surprised that she'd asked, even in the middle of a crisis. "Recovering. I was seriously injured during my attack on Nightfall. Mister Luthor's murder attempt didn't help."

"Welcome back, son," Perry said, clapping him on the back. "We've missed you."

Superman smiled his thanks and lifted off, disappearing into the sky. A moment later, Clark reappeared, adjusting his tie.

"I'm glad he's back," he said. Lois pulled him into a hug.

"So am I. But I'm happier you're okay," Lois said.

'Superman Returns' the headlines screamed in the Star. Luthor's fall from grace had been relegated to smaller type. 'Luthor Arrested for Murder, Arson, More.' Headlines in the other papers were similar — Superman's resurrection/homecoming was bigger than Luthor's fall.

The police found the Sorcerer's body in the sub-basement — his real name had been Daniel Poldan and he had been wanted for various unsavory crimes in several states. The slug belonged to the gun Luthor had in his possession at the time of his arrest. They also found drugs and drug labs in the underground warren.

Apparently Asabi was singing like a bird for lesser charges. Nigel St. John was still at large and there was no word on Mrs. Cox.

A few days later: 'Luthor Vast Criminal Network Revealed.' The AP byline on that one was Lois Lane and Clark Kent. It felt good to be working again and she needed the job, even if it was as a freelancer. Her position at LNN had disappeared when it appeared she was married to Luthor. He'd had no intention of letting her work in her chosen profession past the wedding.

Lois was determined to put the experience behind her as much as she could. But she still had questions.

What had Luthor planned for their honeymoon? He had told her that 'clothes were optional,' but there had been no flight plan submitted for Luthor's private jet, nor had visas been requested. They had found out that Luthor owned a small island in the South Pacific and it was assumed that was where Luthor planned to take her. It was uninhabited except for a few LexCorp employees.

There was also the question of the marriage license. Why hadn't Luthor gotten one? It wasn't a difficult process — go

down to the registrar's office with a witness, fill out some papers and plunk down your fifty dollars. Had he thought he was above the law? Or had he planned to use it as a 'get out of jail free' card in the event he discovered that having her wasn't as good as wanting her?

"Or maybe he delegated to someone who just didn't do it," Clark suggested as they sat in a coffee shop near her apartment.

"I'm embarrassed to admit I didn't even think about it," Lois said. "Mrs. Cox was in charge of all the arrangements." She sighed. "Maybe she really was trying to help me out."

"Henderson told me that Cox was the one who clued them in on the extra escape routes and the various sub-basements and bunkers," Clark told her. "He didn't say it, but I got the impression she'd been working fairly closely with him and Drake to bring Luthor down."

Lois was silent as she concentrated on her coffee. There was so much about what had happened that didn't make much sense.

"Clark?" she asked finally. "How did Luthor and Asabi grab you?" She'd been afraid to ask before.

Clark shrugged. "Who says they did?"

She glared at him and he ducked his head.

"Asabi and his accomplice were waiting for me outside the coffee shop. You'd been followed from your office by one of their people," Clark explained. "I played along with it."

"You mean you were never in any danger?" she asked sharply.

"I wouldn't put it that way," Clark told her as he sipped his coffee. "There was always a chance they might have kryptonite, or pieces of the asteroid. And Asabi's magic was pretty potent. But the drugs they forced down my throat didn't have any effect on me, so I was able to stay in control of things."

"Luthor thought that if I was the one to kill you, the link between us would be broken," Lois told him.

Clark shook his head. "Another of Asabi's lies. A soul can be injured but never destroyed. And for a soul, even having an incarnation be murdered is just another experience to be learned from."

"So, there's no way to break the soul mates thing?" Lois asked.

"I expect it could break if the two souls in question grew apart over time, had different things to do and learn. But they'd probably still be in the same group, like you and me, my parents, Perry, Jimmy, even Luthor. Kind of like a family unit traveling together through time."

"A pretty dysfunctional family, if you ask me."

Clark shrugged. "Maybe this time he'll actually learn something."

"Or not. He honestly thought I would kill you for him. I hadn't realized until that moment how sick he really was," Lois said. "I'm glad he's locked up for observation at least. Drake thinks it'll be a long time before he's let out to stand trial."

Clark's head came up in the way she'd come to recognize. "I'll take care of the bill," she told him. He nodded and disappeared out the door.

She sat back in her seat and smiled. Luthor was locked up. Superman was back in the skies. All was well with the world. Almost.

The Daily Planet was still gone.

A few days later Lois, Clark, Perry, and Jimmy stood outside the barricades in front of the burned building that used to house the Daily Planet. The entrance had been boarded up and 'Building Condemned' signs were nailed to the plywood.

"I wish they'd get it over with and tear this old place down," Jimmy complained.

"Yep, too many memories," Perry agreed.

"Most of them good," Lois reminded them.

“There’s a lesson to be learned here,” Perry said.

“Why am I not surprised?” Jimmy said with a grin.

“We ought to appreciate what we’ve got when we’ve got it,” Perry continued as though Jimmy hadn’t spoken.

Lois looked over at Clark who was looking at the ruin, hands in his pockets.

“It’s my fault, you know. All of it,” Lois said sadly. “If Luthor hadn’t wanted me so badly he never would’ve destroyed the Planet. I just don’t understand why. I mean, I know he was a sick man, but why me?”

“Because Lex Luthor always wanted what he could never have,” Clark told her.

“He almost did,” she reminded him. “I said ‘I do’.”

“You only did what you had to do,” Clark told her. “And no one blames you for what he did. Sick or not, it was always his choice.”

Lois had no answer to that. She knew what Clark was saying was true. Luthor had gone after her because she had no interest in him. First there had been Superman, and then there was Clark Kent. It was a good thing for her sanity that they were one and the same person.

“All those deaths for nothing...” Clark murmured. He was staring at the building again and Lois knew he was feeling guilty for not having been able to do more.

“Clark, even Superman couldn’t have done anything,” she said. “Luthor planned it that way.”

“I know,” Clark said. “But it doesn’t make it feel any better. At least Luthor’s not going to be able to hurt anyone else for a long, long time.”

Perry sighed. “I know I’ve said this before, but I hate the idea that Lex Luthor got his way...” He motioned toward the ruins. “...even in this one thing.”

“He didn’t,” a man’s voice announced. The speaker appeared from around the corner — an older heavyset black man in a custom tailored business suit. Franklin Stern, the media mogul. He was pointing at a crane and a flatbed truck that had just rolled up to the building. “Look!”

There was a large roundish object under a tarp on the truck. Workmen pulled off the tarp to reveal the Daily Planet globe. The crane began to move it into position above the boarded up main door.

“Great Shades of Elvis!” Perry murmured.

“We’ll start on the building next week, but first I thought we’d announce to the world we’re back in business,” Stern said cheerfully. “I reconsidered your proposal. I agree with you, Mr. White. Metropolis needs the Daily Planet. Besides, one more nail in Lex Luthor’s coffin suits me fine.”

Lois grabbed Clark in a hug. Jimmy clapped her on the back then moved off.

“There were some ideas I had about modernization,” Stern was telling Perry.

“Modernization?” Perry asked.

“Yes, improvements, expansions...” Stern said. “Would you like to see the plans?”

Stern moved off, Perry and Jimmy trailing after him.

“Now, Stern? Stern!” Perry yelled. “Wait just a doggone minute!”

Lois was left alone with Clark. He was gazing at the globe.

“I’ve never seen anything so beautiful in all my life,” he said.

“Neither have I,” she said, but she wasn’t referring to the globe. He turned and gave her a confused look.

“Clark, I really would have gone to bed with him, if it meant you would be safe,” Lois said. “But I want you to know, it would never have been his face in my mind while we... He would have had my body, but he never would have had my heart. That’s already spoken for.”

“Superman.” He said it flatly but there was just a hint of a

twinkle in his chocolate eyes.

She chuckled. “A pretty face and a flashy costume? Nah. Besides, being known as his girlfriend is a little on the dangerous side.”

“What about your three rules?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Rules are meant to be broken, aren’t they?”

“Does that mean you’ll go out with me?”

“You mean, like on a date? Get dressed up and not talk about what we’re working on?” Lois asked coyly.

He nodded.

“That works for me,” Lois said with a grin. “My mom needs time to recover from my last wedding anyway.”

His head came up and his eyes went out of focus. “Uh...”

“Go,” she ordered.

She only felt the air move as he disappeared. Lois grinned and looked up at the globe. Superman was back in the skies. The Daily Planet was going to reopen. Clark was back to ‘normal,’ or at least as normal as he ever was. All was well with the world.

Loisette stood over the grave of Bayard Tempos. Five years after he had sent her to the convent for not bearing him children, ten years after he had forced her betrothed into exile and made her wed him instead, he was dead. He hadn’t died in battle, or even an assassin’s blade, but of madness — he had escaped his caretakers and thrown himself from the roof of the keep.

She had sent a message to Charles that he could return home if he chose, although she knew the chances were unlikely that he would come. They both had duties and obligations to their orders, to their people, to God.

“Milady?”

She turned to see several men on horseback waiting outside the cemetery. Two were men-at-arms. One man, dressed in the black robes of a monk, was dismounting his horse. He was dressed as monk but there was something about his carriage that said he was a warrior too. He lowered his hood and she finally saw his face.

It was the face that had been in her dreams for the past ten years.

“Charles.”

He was older, more careworn than she remembered, but then so was she. She pulled him into an embrace and realized he was wearing chain mail beneath his robes.

“I’ve missed you so much,” he murmured.

“How long can you stay?”

“Not long,” he told her.

“Long enough to sup?” she asked hopefully.

He smiled and her heart sang. “Long enough to sup.”

Lois Lane smiled in her sleep. All was well with the world.

THE END