

# When Death Comes Knocking, Punch Him in the Mouth

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Rated PG-13 (for violence)

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Summary: Lois is wrongly diagnosed with terminal cancer and decides to go out with a bang — literally. Clark scrambles to find her before she does something which can't be fixed. Set at the end of Season 1.

The familiar characters of this story are not my own but are the property of corporate entities (DC Comics, December 3rd Productions, ABC, etc.) other than myself. This work is a labor of love and is presented with no expectation of remuneration.

Warning: This story is NOT a deathfic!

Nobody dies in this tale. But someone vitally important to the Lois and Clark universe thinks she's going to die, so she does some very unusual things, some which might be considered — eek! — out of character. Please trust me when I say that she thinks she has a very good reason for behaving this way.

This story takes place at the end of Season One, after Lex has made his pursuit of Lois plain but before he bombs the Daily Planet. It replaces the end of the Lois-Lex romance arc.

It also takes place before many of today's legal restrictions on sharing of personal medical information in the United States were put into place.

Enjoy.

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## Prologue

Bill Cumberland was bored out of his skull. He'd thought that a degree in chemistry would be an easy slide into an exciting life, full of thrills and chills and important discoveries. He'd envisioned himself as assistant to the next Louis Pasteur, finding a cure for some exotic disease. Or maybe he'd work in a lab where the next miracle drug would be developed. Failing that, he could work at S.T.A.R. Labs and assist important scientists in their research into the mysteries of the universe.

Instead, he was stuck in a small lab on the north side of Metropolis, pushing vials of blood through a machine which printed out the chemical results.

No intrigue, no mystery, no excitement, just mind-numbing grunt work any trained chimp or stoner with the munchies could do. But no, they had to have someone with a degree in chemistry to oversee the tests for the doctors and scientists who sent their samples to the lab for analysis. His boss told him it was to satisfy the various attorneys and insurance companies involved, but Bill didn't believe it.

Well, he thought, if he had to do something so impersonal and joyless, at least he should get paid well for it.

No dice there, either. Bill barely made enough money to support himself in a cheap one-bedroom apartment. It wasn't enough to support a girlfriend, which was why Candy had broken up with him the day before.

It was also why he was not only bored out of his skull but also frustrated and depressed.

Even the course catalog for the Master's program in chemistry lying open on his desk didn't draw his interest today. An advanced degree would give him some of the opportunities he longed for, and he'd made the decision to look into the program at Metropolis University, but he hadn't done anything about it yet. The cost of the program was out of his reach at the moment, and he was two months behind on his current student loan. The collection officer had made the appropriate sympathetic noises and then had told him that if he didn't get caught up soon, they'd have to report him to the credit bureau as a bad risk, and he might never get a better job or better place to live or a newer car because of it. Things were so bad he was actually contemplating moving back home to live with his parents — or worse, moving in with his brother.

So he was bored, frustrated, depressed, and morose about his job, his life, his romantic prospects, and his immediate future.

And those were probably the reasons he inadvertently switched the report for "Lane, L" with the one for "Lani, L" and put each result with the other's return envelope.

Bill never realized what he set in motion that morning. But since it didn't gain him any money, get him a new girlfriend who was more interested in him than she was in what he could get her, push him toward that advanced degree, or drop some excitement or intrigue into his life, he wouldn't have cared in the slightest. The only thing that kept him from deliberately switching results around was his inherent honesty.

That was all that would save him from being prosecuted later on when it all came out.

And it was also the only thing that would keep a certain misdiagnosed patient from hunting him down and dismembering him slowly and excruciatingly. That, and the myriad activities and their consequences with which she would soon be swamped.

So, without knowing it, Bill really had it good at that time of his life. He never had to face Mad Dog Lane in person.

## Chapter One

Lois slumped back in the chair in her doctor's office, stunned. No. She was shocked.

No. This was beyond stunned, beyond being shocked. She felt as if she'd just been hit in the face with a baseball bat.

She gathered herself, then stood and blinked. She saw the young doctor's mouth moving and realized that she hadn't heard a word of what he was saying. "Wait!" she cried out. "This — you can't be right about this! There's no way I have — that there's — that —"

He needed to work on his sympathetic look. "Ms. Lane, I'm sorry. The diagnosis is real. You are suffering from advanced late-stage pancreatic cancer."

"But — but I — you can't — I —"

"I'm truly sorry, Ms. Lane. I can refer you to a specialist for further care."

"But — No! I only had a low-grade fever! I only felt a little tired!"

"You're young and strong. Your body hid the major symptoms from you until just last week. You're still doing far better than most patients in your condition."

Clark's recent story on the current state of cancer research and treatment popped into her mind. "Wait! Wait a minute! My paper recently published a story on survival rates of a bunch of different cancers! And the experts said that — that pancreatic cancer had a very low survival rate!" She paused to remember more, then said, "How advanced is this cancer?"

He frowned. "Ms. Lane, I'd rather you go over this with the oncologist. He or she can give you more precise information —"

"No! You tell me right now! How bad is this? How sick am

I?”

The doctor – who looked younger than Doogie Howser to her – frowned, then sighed deeply, then said, “Most patients who are initially diagnosed at the stage you’re in have two to four months.”

Her vision grayed out for a moment and she fell, loose-limbed, back onto the chair. “You – you mean – four months – to live? That’s it?”

“I’m afraid so. I’m still surprised you didn’t show any symptoms before now-”

“I came in two days ago thinking I had the flu.” She took a deep breath and her eyes focused on the boy in front of her, the doctor whose voice hadn’t yet gone through puberty. “Now you’re telling me I probably won’t see my twenty-seventh birthday.”

“Sometimes these cancers present few overt symptoms in young, active patients. Ms. Lane, I’m sorry to give you this news. I really am. I wish it could be better.” He knelt down close to her and spoke as gently as he could. “Shall I set up an appointment with the oncologist? We have a close working relationship with an excellent clinic.”

The kid’s name had leaked out of her mind like water through a sieve. She looked at his ID tag and read ‘Gregory Bell.’ “Huh? Oh, yeah, sure, Dr. Bell. Do that.”

“Good.” He stood. “I’ll have Connie call you.”

“Connie?”

“Connie Schwartz, the nurse who took your blood earlier. She’ll take care of all the arrangements. Should she call you at home or at your office?”

She’d forgotten Connie’s name, too. “Uh. Home, I guess. If I’m not there, call the Daily Planet.”

He extended his hand to her. “I think you should be with your family now. Let them help you get used to the situation.”

She stared at his hand and almost burst out laughing. Situation? He wanted her to get used to the situation? He expected her to just pull the covers up over her head and let death creep up on her and take her without a knock-down drag-out war?

Not likely. Not her. Not Lois Lane.

Or did he expect her family to help her? Her absent father, the great doctor and inventor with no time or appreciation for her? Her mother, the serial drunk? Her sister, the flighty flake?

That wasn’t likely to happen either.

She stood without taking his hand. He stood also and tried to appear sympathetic, but to Lois he just looked like a boy dressing up in his father’s clothes. Lois leaned forward and glared at him from inside his comfort zone. “I may not have much time left, Doctor, but I’m going to do something important, something significant, something noteworthy with it. You just hide and watch.”

His smile didn’t light up his eyes. “Good for you, Ms. Lane. I’m certain you’ll do exactly what you intend to do.”

He didn’t believe her. He thought she’d dry up and blow away. But she’d built a life by confounding the expectations of others, whether it was her father, her sister, her mother, her faculty advisor, her boss, or her partner. She’d build her death the same way. If she had to go out now, she’d do it on a high note and make people remember her.

The office door didn’t hit her in the backside as she stormed out.

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By the time she opened all the locks on her apartment door, the bravado she’d displayed at the doctor’s office had evaporated and she was fighting tears. The slam of the door signaled that battle was lost.

She never knew how long she lay prone on the living room carpet, crying and wailing and pounding the floor with her fists or

curled up in a ball trying to hide from the awful truth that she was dying. Her death, once far in the future, was crashing into her life with the force of a runaway subway train. If cancer could have been flushed out of someone’s body by weeping, it would have left Lois and been swept downstream to Hob’s Bay.

But she finally ran out of tears. She sat up, knuckled her eyes dry, and began thinking about what she needed to do next.

The thought that resonated in her mind like an air horn in a gymnasium was that she would not – absolutely would not – give up and die without accomplishing something important. And the best way to do that would be to break some story that would give people something to talk about at her funeral, one over which people would shake their heads in wonder. It would be her continuing epitaph, a marker she would sink deep into the earth to tell everyone who passed this way that Lois Lane had been here, and that Lois Lane had made a difference for good with her life.

But what story? How could she work out of the Planet without letting Perry and Jimmy and Cat and Eduardo and Clark and everyone else know about her illness? There was no way they’d treat her with anything other than kid gloves once they knew. They’d fuss over her and bring her drinks and snacks and put those fake smiles on their faces and remind her of her appointments and ask her if she’d taken her medication and treat her like she was made of wafer-thin porcelain.

Especially Clark.

She almost started crying again as he took center stage in her mind, but she ruthlessly pushed the tears back. She couldn’t allow herself to weep every time she thought about him, or about any of her other friends at the paper. It was time for her to be hard, to be merciless, to be fearless and determined.

And it was time for her to make a decision about Lex. The man had flown her to Italy for dinner. He’d taken her to the opera as his special guest. He’d offered her an executive position at his TV news network. He’d defended her that night at the Planet when those armed thieves had shot him. He’d proposed to her, told her he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her.

And that thought brought her up short. She realized that she didn’t want to spend the last few weeks of her life married to Lex Luthor, using the initials L.L.L or – horrors – L. L-L, assuming he’d even go through with his proposal once he found out she was dying. No, if she were going to spend her last days hyphenated with anyone, it would be Clark.

“Clark Kent?” she wondered aloud.

She turned the thought over in her mind several times, took it out and looked at it from all sides, and decided it was one of the best thoughts she’d ever thought in her life. Even better than dying in Superman’s arms.

That just wouldn’t do. The superhero would baby her, cater to her every whim, try to amuse and distract her, but when it came right down to it, she didn’t want to die in Superman’s arms. He’d want to save her, to heal her, but he couldn’t, and it would tear him apart to watch Lois’ death. If she had to close her eyes for the last time while raging against the dying of the light, the person she would want to be holding her when she breathed her last was Clark.

The realization stunned her, but it was a good kind of stun, the kind that lit up your entire week and put a near-permanent smile on your face and opened your eyes to possibilities and realities you’d never considered before.

Lois was sure of this one. She’d rather die in Clark’s arms tomorrow than live a few months as the wife or girlfriend or consort or whatever to the third richest man in the world. Clark would take care of her without demeaning her, without treating her like a glass sculpture, and he’d give her everything he had to give without reservations or conditions.

Lex’ devotion to her wouldn’t – couldn’t – come anywhere

near Clark's love. And that assumed that Lex would continue their relationship once he found out about the cancer.

Besides, she loved Clark, not Lex.

And that realization gave her the courage to do what she knew she needed to do next. It would be hard on her friends, and doubly hard on Clark, but if she was going to leave her mark on the world she couldn't drag anyone else along with her. No one else could suffer along with her while she conducted her own personal crusade. She had to do this alone.

If the mark she left on the city was going to be a big one, she had to bring in the biggest story of her career – no, the biggest story the Planet had ever printed. And in moments it came to her what she had to do.

Someone out there was pulling a lot of the criminal strings in the city, someone who was all but invisible, someone who was hidden from the view of the lower-level hoods and thugs, but who controlled most of the major crime in the city. That person was the Moriarty to her Holmes, the Napoleon of crime to her stand for justice and truth. There was no proof that such a person actually existed, and no real evidence of this alleged person's identity, but she knew – as surely as she knew her time on Earth would soon end – that there was someone directing the evil afflicting her city.

That was her target. That was her story.

She had to take down The Boss.

That would be her legacy.

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Perry leaned out of his office and glanced at the empty desk. Lois hadn't come back from her doctor's appointment, nor had she called in. It wasn't like her to be out of touch this long on a Tuesday afternoon, even if it was a slow news day.

Although her partner was at his desk. The young man was busy frowning at something on his monitor and making lots of notes. Maybe he knew something. "Kent," Perry called out through his open office door, "have you heard from Lois since she left for her appointment this morning?"

"Huh? Uh, no, actually I – I haven't."

Perry watched the younger man's face morph from mild surprise to real concern. "Son, if you do hear from her, let me know right away."

"Yeah. I mean, will do, Perry."

The editor ducked back into his newly remodeled hidey-hole. Luthor's money had refurbished the building and filled the Planet's pages with advertisers and their coffers with profits once again, but Perry wasn't sure he liked all the changes. He and Luthor had butted heads more than once in just the few days since the transfer of ownership had been completed, and he'd come to dread the man's sudden appearances on the news floor. It seemed that trouble followed Lex Luthor wherever he went. It coated everyone in his wake with soot and grime and slime, yet it never splashed a drop of mud on him.

Like now.

Perry sensed the shift in mood on the floor before he smelled the expensive cigar smoke Luthor seemed to exude from his pores. Through the window, Perry saw the new owner lean down to speak to Clark. He also saw Clark's body tense as Luthor spoke. And he was almost gratified as he watched Luthor's frown grow.

But that gratification fled as Luthor straightened and strode to Perry's office, trailed by the tall Englishman who Perry mentally called Luthor's White Shadow.

"Perry, have you heard from Lois today?"

"Why, no, Mr. Luthor, I haven't. She left for her doctor's appointment at ten and she hasn't been back."

Luthor glanced at the gem-studded Rolex on his wrist. "It's nearly three o'clock now. Might she have gone home?"

"It's possible, but she's always kept in touch on stuff like this.

If she's sick at home, she hasn't called in."

For the first time in Perry's experience, Luthor looked as if he didn't know what to do. If not for their shared concern for Lois, Perry's gratification would have made a curtain call and bowed to the audience.

Finally, Nigel St. John leaned in and whispered something to Luthor, who hesitated before nodding his head sharply. Then he turned back to Perry. "I'll let you get back to work now. Please let me know if you do hear from her."

"I will. I hope you'll do the same if you hear from her?"

Luthor locked eyes with Perry for a moment as if reestablishing his authority. "Of course, Perry. We'll chat later."

Not if I see you first, thought Perry.

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Clark Kent actively disliked Lex Luthor. Of course, he knew the man for who he really was, but that knowledge had come to him because Clark was also Superman, and he couldn't get Lois to believe bad things about Luthor unless he told her while wearing the Suit. There was no reasonable way for Superman to know some of the things Clark knew about Luthor. And if Superman were to inform Lois of his suspicions, she'd eventually want to know how Superman knew things that only Clark should have known. The old "We're good friends and we talk" excuse was wearing pretty thin by now, and Clark couldn't risk his secret leaking from Lois to Luthor. He wasn't too uncomfortable with Lois knowing, but Luthor could never know. That was a possibility too horrible to contemplate.

But the slimy worm did have a legitimate concern. Lois should have been back by now, or, failing that, should have called by now. Of course, if she were covering a story she'd stumbled into on her way back, that would not only explain her absence, it would be typical of Lois. She could get in trouble or snag a headline while going to the grocery store for a quart of milk.

He had just about decided to put off worrying about her when his phone rang.

"Daily Planet, Clark Kent speaking."

"Kent, why does your partner need a gun?"

Clark blinked in confusion for a moment. "What? Who is this?"

"This is Bobby. You know, Bobby Bigmouth?"

"Oh! Sorry about that, Bobby. You took me by surprise when you – hey, what do you mean about Lois needing a gun?"

Bobby sighed into Clark's ear. "About forty-five minutes ago, Lois bought a three-fifty-seven magnum double-action revolver with a six-inch barrel, a box of thirty-eight special ammo, and six three-fifty-seven rounds from a street dealer in Suicide Slum. She made him show her how to hold it, how to load it and clean it, and she even made him explain how the revolver would hold either three-fifty-seven magnum ammo or thirty-eight special ammo because the diameter of both rounds is the same but the three-fifty-seven cartridge is longer and shoots a bigger bullet faster and makes a way bigger bang and causes more damage. Plus she had him show her how you can pull the hammer back into the cocked position or just pull the trigger to shoot it."

"I don't need a ballistics lesson or a sales pitch here. I need you to tell me what you know about Lois."

"I'm telling you about Lois! After that little lecture, she loaded the gun, had Walt – that's the guy who sold her the gun and ammo and only charged her two-fifty for the whole thing, which is about the best deal you'll get anywhere – anyway, she let Walt check it and make sure it was right. Then she pointed it at his head and demanded to know who he was working for, who he reported to, who he paid off, and who supplied the guns he sold."

Clark didn't respond for a moment. This did NOT sound like Lois. It had to be a joke of some kind, maybe something she and Bobby had cooked up to yank his chain. That was it. Had to be. No way this was true.

“Look, Bobby, you can tell Lois that it isn’t funny and I didn’t buy it. Now put her on the line so I can—”

“You idiot! Your partner has flipped out! She’s gonna kill somebody if you don’t stop her!”

“Who, Lois? Kill someone? Come on!”

“You stupid – Look, Walt didn’t spill the beans just because he had a gun pointed at him. He’s a little guy but he’s a lot tougher than that. So Lois pulled back the hammer and told him to answer her. He laughed. And do you know what happened next?”

He was sure it was a joke now. “No, Bobby, tell me! I’m dying with anticipation!”

“She shot him in the foot and threatened to put the next bullet in his knee. Then he answered her questions. And when she left, he dragged himself to a phone and called me to take him to the emergency room.”

Clark waited a moment. “That’s not much of a punch line.”

“Punch line?” Bobby’s voice got louder. “Punch line! One of my friends is in the Metropolis General emergency room right now! He’s going to have surgery on his foot and it’ll be weeks before he can walk normally again! And your partner has gone crazy and is shooting her snitches! She might even take it into her head to shoot me! And you think this is a joke?”

“Wait – you’re serious? This is for real? You’re not kidding me?”

“I’m not kidding you, Kent! Lane is out there now with a gun and a bunch of bullets and she’s willing to use them! You need to bring her in before she kills someone!”

And with that, Bobby Bigmouth hung up.

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Perry had watched Luthor leave. He’d glanced at Clark as the reporter’s phone rang, but he’d been distracted by his own phone call. “Perry White, Daily Planet.”

“Yes, this is Connie Schwartz calling for Lois Lane, from Dr. Bell’s office. I’m unable to get her on her business line.”

“Ms. Lane isn’t here at the moment. May I take a message?”

“Hmm, that’s strange. She’s not answering her home phone either.”

“Well, that’s our Lois. May I take a message for her?”

“Yes, please. Tell her to call Dr. Bell’s office as soon as she can. And please tell her that her diagnosis was incorrect.”

Her diagnosis? “I’m sorry, Ms. – Schwartz, is that your name?”

“Yes. I’m Dr. Bell’s nurse.”

“Okay, Ms. Schwartz, what diagnosis are you talking about?”

“The one Ms. Lane received this morning. You see, Dr. Bell is also the attending physician for Ashton Acres Retirement Community, and we have a comatose patient there named Louis Lanier, and apparently the lab work for Mr. Lanier and Ms. Lane got mixed up at the lab and we thought Ms. Lane had terminal pancreatic cancer but it’s really Mr. Lanier who does and we didn’t realize it until just now when Dr. Bell saw that Mr. Lanier’s lab report said he wasn’t pregnant and-”

“Look, Ms. Schwartz, I understand about the mix-up. Can you tell me what’s really wrong with Lois Lane?”

“Oh, I guess so, since you already know about that wrong diagnosis. She’s just a little run-down, slightly anemic due to poor sleep habits and an unhealthy diet, and she’s suffering from stress. All she really needs is a few days of rest and healthy meals and she’ll be as good as new.”

“Thank you, Ms. Schwartz. I’ll give her that message. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye, sir.”

As he put down the phone, he noticed Clark standing in his doorway. “Chief, I just got the craziest story about Lois from Bobby Bigmouth. I don’t think it’s true – I don’t even understand how it could be true – but Bobby believes it.”

Perry nodded and sat back. “Well, you sit down and tell me your story about Lois, and then I’ll tell you one about Lois that will top yours.”

“I don’t see how, but okay. Bobby said that Lois just bought a gun from a street dealer and then shot him in the foot when he wouldn’t answer her questions any other way. Isn’t that insane?”

Perry frowned in thought. Then his eyes bugged out and he lurched forward. “Lois’s doctor gave her someone else’s diagnosis and she thinks she’s dying of cancer.”

He watched Clark put the two tales together in reverse order and saw his face as he came to the same conclusion that Perry had – that Lois was going after a big story she didn’t think she had time to work correctly and had thrown all the rules out the window.

In unison, they blurted out, “We have to find her now!”

## Chapter Two

For Lois, step one in her master plan had been fairly easy. Rent a cheap, furnished apartment on an upper floor with a reliable fire escape and store some clothes and writing material there. She hadn’t even needed her thin disguise, since the building manager was too drunk to see straight. She wasn’t sure he even knew he’d rented out that apartment for three months to Wanda Detroit – a name no one in her circle of friends and contacts would recognize – who had paid the full term in cash. It left her with enough operating capital to lay out some small bribes and still leave meal money for the time she’d be here. After all, dead women didn’t need savings accounts.

Step two had been quite a bit harder. Buying a gun from Walt had been easy, but getting any real information out of him hadn’t been. The one good thing that had come out of that encounter was that she now knew she could shoot someone if the situation required it. She just hoped he wasn’t hurt too badly.

Step three would be a bit time-consuming but not hard. She’d have to cut her hair short and change the color to make it harder for people to recognize her. This was the ultimate undercover assignment, one where she was not just hiding from the bad guys but from the police and her friends and coworkers.

And from Superman.

The thought that she’d never see Superman again, at least not as a friend, bothered her, but not as much as she would have believed a few days ago. The hero couldn’t help her now. She didn’t even miss his presence as much as she thought she would. It might have been nice to have a superhero along for this, the final great ride of her life, but Lois Lane didn’t need Superman to be a great investigator.

She did, however, miss Clark’s presence. The big Kansas farm boy had wormed his way past her defenses and made himself important to her. He’d never spilled any of the secrets she’d entrusted to him, and he always kept his word. Sure, sometimes he vanished into thin air when she wanted him with her, but thinking back on it she realized that he never disappeared when she really needed him.

And those few kisses they’d shared were little slices of heaven. Those were memories she’d take out and savor as the end came closer. The knowledge that Clark was not only a good kisser, but that he really wanted to kiss only her, warmed her heart and brought a smile to her lips. Lex’ kisses were skilled, precise, and exact. Clark’s were soft and warm and gentle. And his lips fit hers quite well.

The assurance that Cat Grant wasn’t the woman of his dreams was nice, too.

But there wasn’t time for that now. She had to act on the info Walt had given her before it was too late. And she needed to change her look first.

The scissors were sharp enough to shorten her hair, and the package of blonde highlights promised to make what was left of

her hair Shine Like The Morning Sun! Lifts in her shoes, dorky horn-rimmed glasses with clear lenses, and some judicious makeup would alter her appearance, as would the oversized sweater and pants stuffed with washcloths. It would also give her a convenient place to hide her revolver. So, before she lost her nerve, and before the cracked mirror over the bathroom sink could fall apart, she began the ordeal of becoming someone else to the outside world.

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Nigel had never liked Lois Lane. He would have been far more content had his employer allowed her to die during the failed cyborg boxing venture, but the man had saved her by killing a valued associate instead. Failing that, Nigel would gladly have given up his usual stipend for assassinations to tie her to an anchor chain and drop her into Hob's Bay, but the Boss had forbidden him to take any overt action against her.

Nigel had never disobeyed any of his employer's instructions, but he'd been within a breath of doing so after Lex had ordered him that very morning to bend every effort to find Lois Lane. The woman was more than a nuisance – she was an actual danger to the smooth operation of Luthor's real businesses. Deliberately seeking out this woman was tantamount to taking an afternoon stroll among the targets at a shooting range while wearing an elk disguise.

Nigel decided that he actively disliked Lois Lane and would do almost anything to split her away from Lex Luthor.

In the meantime, he had a job to do, so he did it in the best way he knew how. His informants would relay any and all information to him as soon as she was located. Then he would inform his employer of her whereabouts and be instructed to either watch over her or – shudder – to fetch her back.

So when his personal cell phone rang during his daily report to Mr. Luthor, he excused himself and opened it.

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Lex hated it when Nigel answered his phone during a briefing, but he knew that the man would do so only in order to carry out his instructions. Patience wasn't part of Lex' personality, but he'd learned the hard way to allow people to do their jobs without his constant interference.

He stood and picked up a fresh cigar, then lit it, half-listening to Nigel's side of the conversation.

"Yes. You have? Tell me what happened." A pause, then a sigh. "Young woman, I am not in the habit of playing games. When you have – excuse me?" A longer pause. Lex looked up and saw Nigel's eyes open wide. "Are you certain of your information? There is no doubt?" Lex began to feel concern. Nigel hadn't worn that expression of open-mouthed astonishment since the shuttle bombing had been foiled by the newly revealed Superman. "Yes – of course I'll pass on the information! Just keep looking! Then we will double your usual fee! Yes, double! Call back when you have something useful."

Nigel closed the phone and stared at it as if it had just told him that he was working for a Jamaican midget wrestler. He turned to Lex and opened his mouth, then closed it again.

"Nigel?" Lex prompted. "Has something untoward taken place?"

"I – yes. Assuming this latest report is to be believed."

Lex swiveled to face him. "Do you believe it?"

"I'm – not certain. The source is generally reliable, but – this is so out of character for her!"

"Out of character for whom?"

Nigel stood straight and tall. "My apologies, sir. I was quite taken aback by this – this call. My informant tells me that Lois Lane purchased a firearm on the street – a revolver, I believe the source said – and used it to extort information from the weapon's seller. She even – excuse me, sir, this is the part I find most difficult to credit – Ms. Lane allegedly shot him in the foot to

make him talk."

The imported nine-dollar cigar dropped from Lex' mouth and fell to the floor. "She – she what?"

Nigel lifted his hands. "I also have difficulty accepting this tale, sir, but we must consider the source, who is reliably placed and has an excellent track record. However, I advise verifying this information before making any decisions based upon it."

"But – why would Lois shoot someone? What was she doing? Was she researching a story?"

Nigel shook his head. "My first thought is to say 'no.' Any information obtained in such a manner cannot be admitted as evidence in a court of law – at least, not when obtained by any law enforcement agent – and Perry White's ethical standards would not permit him to ask any of his reporters to do anything like this. I am at a loss to explain her actions, sir, assuming that this report is accurate, of course."

Lex looked around and saw the cigar on the floor, burning a spot in the expensive and irreplaceable Persian rug. He picked it up and stared at it for a moment, then muttered, "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar."

"Excuse me, sir?"

"What? Oh, nothing, Nigel. Just rejecting some symbolism." He stubbed out the cigar in the ivory ashtray on his ebony desk. "We will verify this story. Find out what really happened."

"Yes, sir."

As Nigel strode gracefully out of the office, Lex flopped down into his chair. Lois had shot someone? Why? What was going on in her beautiful mind?

Maybe Perry White knew more than he was willing to admit.

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Perry and Clark collided in the doorway of his office, then almost as one they stopped and stared at each other. Perry beat Clark to the word when he said, "She's gone to ground. We won't find her by running around like chickens with their heads chopped off."

Clark sighed and nodded. "I know. She's not at home, not here, not at the doctor's office, so – where do we look?"

After a moment, Perry snapped his fingers and said, "Henderson!"

"You want me to call?"

"No. You take my cell phone and go poke around at the hospital where that guy who got shot is being treated. I'll call Henderson and then give you whatever info I can get out of him."

"Right. Thanks, Perry."

Clark grabbed his coat and sprinted for the stairway. Perry watched him go, momentarily envious of the younger man's strength and speed and agility, then walked back in his office, trying to keep the limp he'd picked up from colliding with Kent to himself.

The phone rang before he could lift it to dial out. "Perry White, Daily-"

"White, what's wrong with your people?"

Perry pulled the phone back and looked at it, then said with exaggerated politeness, "With whom am I conversing, please?"

"Sorry. This is Bill Henderson. What's this about Lane shooting a guy?"

"I was about to call you about it. I've heard the story but haven't confirmed it yet."

"Consider it confirmed. This guy Walt McNally is a street hustler and gun dealer. Word on the street is that if you want a clean piece, you go see him. Lane shot him in the foot to make him talk about his network, specifically who he reports to. They're prepping him for surgery right now."

Perry sighed. "I was hoping this was just some crazy mix-up, but now I'm convinced. Lois got a bad diagnosis from her doctor and she thinks she's terminally ill."

Perry thought he heard Henderson swear, but he wasn't sure.

Then the inspector came back on the line. “Look, we have to find her before she kills someone. If she thinks she’s dying there’s no telling what she might do or who she might do it to.”

“I know. Look, Bill, I wish I knew where she was. But you know Lois. If she wants to blend in, she blends in. And if she doesn’t want to be found—”

“I know, I know!” Perry waited for Henderson to speak again. “I’m sorry, Perry, but I have to put out an APB on her and list her as armed and dangerous. I can’t risk my people.”

“I understand. Is there anything you can give me that would help me find her?”

“You now know everything I know. And in violation of normal protocol, I’m going to include you in our loop on her. Unofficially, of course.”

“Of course. In that case, I’d better tell you that Kent is headed to the hospital to interview the guy with the foot wound. Can you tell your officers he’s on his way so they don’t shoot him?”

“Will do. I can’t guarantee Walt will talk, but we’ll see what Kent can get out of him.”

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Clark walked into the ER entrance before Perry hung up his phone. He strode directly to the admissions desk and beckoned to one of the nurses. “My name is Clark Kent and I’m with the Daily Planet. Do you have a Walt McNally here as a patient? Gunshot wound to the foot? I need to talk to him as soon as possible.”

The tall redhead frowned at him. “Sir, you must be aware that I can’t give out any information on any person who might or might not be a patient here except to a family member. Are you a family member?”

“No, but I—”

“Then I can’t tell you anything, sir. You’ll have to leave—”

“But I have to talk to him! Other lives are at stake!”

“I’m sorry, sir, you—”

“Hey!” Bobby Bigmouth leaned out from behind a curtain in the treatment area. “Get in here, Kent, before they take Walt up to surgery. It’s okay, Brenda, I’ll vouch for him.”

The nurse frowned and shook her head, then pointed at the curtain. Clark all but ran into the treatment area.

The man on the treatment bed was shorter than Lois and might, after a huge meal and a quick swim while fully clothed, have weighed as much as she did. His face was pale and his eyes were vacant from the painkillers he’d received, but he proved he was at least partially aware of his surroundings when he saw Clark.

“Is this the guy?” he slurred.

“Yeah, Walt, this is the guy. He’s straight as a laser beam but he keeps his word.” Bobby turned to Clark and pointed a long index finger in his face. “And you gotta promise both of us you won’t use anything you hear in any kind of investigation, see? We both have reps to consider.”

Clark frowned. “I can’t do that. All I can promise is that I won’t go after either one of you. My only goal right now is to find Lois, and I can’t do that without your help.”

Walt threw his head back and barked out a drugged laugh. “Ha-ha! On you, Bobby! He jus’ like the rest of ‘em, lies through his pretty, pretty teeth.” He leaned forward and squinted. “Hey, show me them pearly whites! Smile for me and lie to me some more!”

As Clark moved forward, Bobby put a hand on his shoulder and stopped him. “Hang on, Kent. Walt’s already gotten his pre-op meds and he’s pretty loopy. Just stand here a minute, okay?”

“I don’t have time to—”

“Hey! You want to find Lane, you stand there and let me talk.”

They locked eyes for a long moment, then Clark relaxed

slightly and moved back. “Go,” he said. “Talk away.”

Bobby nodded and turned to Walt. “Hey, Wally, pal, Kent won’t lie to ya. I swear. All he wants to do is find the dame who plugged you in the foot.”

“Yeah. My foot. They think I’ll walk okay. But I won’t have my pinky toe.” The man sniffed and looked at the far end of the bed. “They couldn’t find it. Couldn’t find it, can’t sew it back on. Rat prob’ly ate it by now.” He covered his eyes with his hands and began to cry. “She shot off my toe! Why’d she shoot off my toe? What’d my toe ever do to her?”

“That’s what Kent wants to know, Walt, and he has to find the dame before he can ask her. C’mon, man, we gotta give him somethin’ to go on.”

“My toe, my toe – she shot my toe! I told her not to but she did anyway!” Walt fell back against the pillow. “Now she’s gonna shoot Mike’s toe off too!”

“Mike? You mean Big Mike? She’s gonna shoot Big Mike’s toe?”

“Yeah! I told her where he was! I had to! She was gonna shoot off my other pinky toe!”

Bobby glanced up and Clark and nodded. “Okay, Walt, where did you tell her to find Big Mike?”

“She’s gonna shoot his toe off and he’s gonna blame me! You know how he is, Bobby! He don’t understand about a man’s toes!”

“Hey, Walt, if Kent can find Big Mike before Lane does, he can—”

“Lane? Who’s Lane?”

“Lane’s the crazy dame who shot your toe. Where’s she gonna look for Big Mike? Huh, Walt? C’mon! Where did you tell her to look for Big Mike?”

Walt sniffed and wiped his eyes, then blinked several times. “I don’t remember – wait – yeah, she’s gonna go see him at his office. You know, his basement office?”

Two men in surgical garb opened the curtain and moved to the bed. “Okay, Mr. McNally,” the taller man said, “we’re going to take you to the operating room now. We’ll fix you up just as good as new.”

“Good as new?” The nurse nodded and Walt smiled. “Really?”

“I wouldn’t lie to you, Mr. McNally.”

Walt’s eyes brightened and he smiled crookedly. “Then – you found my toe? You got my toe away from the rats and you’re gonna put it back on my foot?”

“Something like that. You just relax and let us take care of you.”

Walt sniffed again. “Okay. Hey, Bobby, you hear that? They found my pinky toe!”

Bobby nodded and smiled at Walt. “Sure, buddy. You just rest and let them take care of you. I’ll see you later.”

“Okay. Bye-bye for now.”

Bobby turned to Clark as soon as the men wheeled Walt out. “I’ll write down the address for you. But you gotta be real careful. Big Mike is mean, and they don’t call him ‘Big’ because he gives a lot of money to charity.”

Clark took the napkin Bobby scribbled on. “Got it. I’ll let you know what happens.”

“Okay. Hey, wait! Why is Lane going all Calamity Jane all of a sudden?”

“I’ll tell you later. Right now I need to go stop her from shooting someone else.”

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Big Mike leaned back in his chair and stretched. “Hey! Kowalski! You out there?”

“Sure am, Boss! You need something?”

“Yeah. I’m hungry and it’s almost dinnertime. Go get me a turkey and cheese at the deli shop around the corner.”

The smaller man poked his military-style buzz cut around the door. “Uh, Boss, remember, they moved the shop about three blocks over last month?”

Mike frowned at him. “So walk a little farther!”

“You sure? I don’t wanna leave you here alone. You know what happened to Walt earlier today.”

“I’ll be fine, Ski. I got Mr. Smith and Mr. Wesson to keep me company. Go get the sandwich.”

“Fourteen-inch turkey and Swiss with all the trimmings, right? Not toasted?”

“That’s it. And pick up a two-liter soda and a party-sized bag of chips before you come back.”

“Will do. Be back as soon as I can.”

As Kowalski trotted up the steps, Mike opened the top drawer of his desk and lifted out a forty-four caliber magnum revolver. It was his favorite pistol, and unlike most shooters, he was strong enough to fire it quickly and accurately with one hand. He had won quite a few bets at the shooting range by putting all of his bullets inside a seven-inch circle at thirty yards with that one hand, firing all six rounds within five seconds. And it had been a long time since anyone had been dumb enough to bet against him on his prowess with the weapon. Big Mike felt quite safe.

Scant seconds after Kowalski left, he heard the front door of his office open. He snatched up the pistol and held it down beside his leg as he stood and moved cat-like to the front wall of the room he was in. Then he waited.

After a moment, an old woman’s thin, ragged voice called out, “Hello? Is – is anyone here? Can anyone help me?”

“Whaddya want, lady?”

“Oh, thank goodness!” she quavered. “Please, I’m hurt. My leg is all bruised up. I fell against the curb outside.”

He began to relax as he heard the intruder shuffle farther in. “How’d you get hurt?”

“Oh, silly me, I just stepped off the curb to cross the street and I fell. Please help me. I need to get back to my cart. Someone will take all my stuff if I’m not there to protect it.”

Mike relaxed and laid his pistol on the edge of the desk. It was just one of the old homeless bag ladies, pushing all her belongings around in an old beat-up shopping cart. He stepped through the doorway to the outer office and saw an older chubby woman with dirty blonde hair sitting on the couch in his outer office, rubbing her lower leg tenderly.

He decided it couldn’t hurt to kneel down and check her out. “C’m on, lady, let me take a look. I bet you ain’t hurt bawwkkk!”

He didn’t see her other foot snap up into his throat, but he felt it. The huge man rolled onto his back, clutching his neck and trying to breathe.

He’d kill her, he thought as he rolled to sit up and face her. He’d strangle her with his bare hands. He’d –

He’d wait to see what she was going to do with the revolver she was pointing at him. It wasn’t as large a caliber as his, but at this range it didn’t have to be.

“Okay, Mr. Big Mike,” she said in the same thin, reedy voice, “you’re going to tell me who you report to and who the Boss is.”

“Why – agghh!” Mike coughed several times, then growled, “Why should I do that?”

“Why, so I won’t shoot you, my dear.”

He tried to laugh but couldn’t, so he settled for slowly turning on his haunches to one side so he could get his feet under him and make a move. “Now why don’t I believe you’ll—”

The pistol exploded in the old woman’s hand and Mike felt a sharp slap against the outside of his left hip. He collapsed on the concrete floor and grabbed at the offended portion of his body, then lifted up a bloody hand. “Ow! You crazy old – you shot me!”

She smiled. It was a grandmotherly smile, all warm and tender with straight, white teeth. “And I’ll do it again if I have to.

Do I have to, young man?”

“You shot me in the butt!”

“I can shoot you somewhere else if you want.”

“Oh, yeah?” It was a weak comeback, he knew, but it was the best he could do at the moment.

She raised her eyebrows. “I could shoot you in the shoulder. No, you might bleed to death if I hit an artery. Let me see – of course. Your knee. Now which one? Left, right, or both? Would you prefer a cane or a wheelchair for the rest of your life?”

“Now wait a minute—”

“Or I could split the difference and make sure you pee sitting down for the rest of your life. Just how much do you like Little Mike, Big Mike?”

Mike’s stomach contracted. There was no reason for him to think that this nutty old broad wouldn’t do exactly what she threatened to do. He had no weapon and she’d incapacitated him. Besides, Mr. Robertson could take care of himself.

He realized that he’d almost waited too long to speak when she pulled back the hammer. “Come now, dearie, I don’t have all day.” She smiled that crazy smile again. “And neither do you.”

Mike lifted his unbloodied hand. “Okay, okay! What do you want to know?”

“The name of the man you report to, dearie, with his address and a description. And I want you to tell me where you get your money and who gets a cut of your money.” She leaned closer and her voice went all grandmother-in-the-kitchen-with-sugar-cookies. “Then I want you to tell me who the Boss of Metropolis is.”

The combined effect of her appearance and her voice and her pistol almost made Mike shudder. This dame was cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs.

“I don’t know the Boss at all, lady.” Her weapon angled toward his groin. “Wait! Wait just a minute! I don’t know the Boss’ name but I’ll give you the guy I report to! And – and everybody who reports to me! That’s all I got! You gotta trust me on that!”

“Oh, I don’t trust you at all, Big Mike.” Her smile made him shudder. “But if that’s all you know, then it will have to do.”

He took a breath and relaxed for a moment. Then she said – in a cold, dead voice—“Just don’t disappoint me.”

With that, Mike was totally convinced. He opened his mouth and spilled all the beans he had.

### Chapter Three

No one would ever accuse Roger Kowalski of being a genius, but he noticed everything that went on around him. He had to. It was his main talent, and despite their friendship it was the main reason Big Mike kept him around. If there was something odd or unusual or out of place in his field of vision, he noticed it, remembered it, and could give a detailed description of whatever had caught his attention days later.

When he left the office to get Mike’s sandwich, he saw the rusty old Ford Thunderbird parked across the street a few doors down, but since it was in front of a known house of ill repute, he figured one of the girls had an early appointment. He also saw the fat old homeless woman limping around across the street, but the area had a revolving cast of homeless people wandering in and around and through it, so he’d noticed her but had thought nothing of it.

The Haitian girl behind the deli counter recognized him and smiled. “The usual, Mr. Roger?”

“You got it, toots. Two extra-longs, a two-liter soda, and a big bag of chips.”

“Thank you, sir! Coming right up!”

As Roger left the sub shop and turned onto the street where Big Mike’s office resided, he saw that the T-bird was gone. It was then that he realized that he hadn’t heard the old car drive up

earlier. A car that badly painted and boasting multiple dents but which ran quietly usually meant trouble.

He walked as normally as he could with the load of sandwiches, chips, and soft drink. He also shifted them so he could get to the Browning nine-millimeter semi-auto he carried under his left shoulder. Nothing else in his field of vision seemed out of place, so he walked down the steps to his boss' office and pushed open the door.

With the pistol in his hand, he looked around the front room. There was a fresh stain on the carpet in the middle of the office which looked like blood, but it wasn't big enough for someone to have bled out there. He let the door slam behind him, stepped to his right, and called out, "Boss? I got lunch."

He heard a deep sigh from the next room, followed by the clicking of a pistol being decocked. "Ski?" Big Mike called. "Come on back and give me a hand with this."

"This" turned out to be a bullet hole in Big Mike's left butt cheek. Without asking any stupid questions, Roger put the food on Mike's desk and opened the first aid kit. He cleaned the wound as best he could, stuffed sterile cotton in it, and taped a thick gauze pad over it. The only response from Mike as Roger worked was an occasional hiss of indrawn breath.

"You're gonna need a doctor, boss," he said. "That bullet needs to come out. I think it's in there pretty deep."

Mike turned and gave him a deadpan look. "Oh, you think it's in there pretty deep, huh? Well, Doctor Kowalski, you're right, it's in there deep. And it hurts."

"Oh, I bet it does, Boss." Roger put away the kit and helped Mike pull up a pair of sweat pants to replace the blood-soaked slacks. "Uh – mind if I ask you a question?"

Mike sighed. "Go ahead."

"How long will we be gone?"

Mike frowned at him. "That's your question?"

Roger nodded. "Somebody shot you, Boss. You're too good with a gun to shoot yourself, especially there, and that forty-four magnum would have torn your whole butt off. This wasn't a hit or you'd be dead. You didn't get off a shot, so whoever it was surprised you." He shook his head. "Somebody waited till I was gone to come in. This had to be about information. And you're still alive, so you gave them something good enough to satisfy them, which means that somebody else will know about it soon, which means we can't stay here."

Mike nodded. "Yeah, that's about it. We gotta get going."

"Now? Shouldn't we wait until a doctor can look at your – your wound?"

The bigger man almost smiled. "We're going to Gotham City, just across the river. I know a doctor over there who'll fix me up, and he's only about an hour away."

"Then what? The boys on this side of the river'll find out what happened and come lookin' for us, and I don't wanna be around when they do."

"I know a guy who knows a guy who has a legit bar. We can get work there, hide out in plain sight, like."

"Legit work? Mike, are you thinkin' straight? The Boss will find us inside a week!"

Mike began the laborious process of standing up without bending overmuch at the hip. "I don't think that's going to be a problem, Ski. The Boss is gonna have his hands full real soon. C'mon, help me out to the van. I'll watch while you pack up our necessities."

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Lois made it back to the bathroom in her crummy hotel room before she threw up.

She retched until there was nothing else to hurl, then bent over the toilet with dry heaves. She finally relaxed enough to slide to the sticky floor and cry.

She'd shot a man. And she hadn't flinched at it. She'd just

pointed the revolver and pulled the trigger and bang! A man had a bullet in his hip, one she'd put there. She hoped he wouldn't die of either infection or loss of blood.

But she'd had to do it. She'd had no choice and she knew it. There was no other option open to her. Big Mike wouldn't have talked to a reporter, assuming he'd even have let her leave alive, and just the threat of the pistol would have done nothing. The disguise and the shooting were necessary evils.

So her reaction had to be due to her illness. She was finally showing some real symptoms of the pancreatic cancer eating away at her vitals. She had to rest and get something to eat, and since she'd barfed up all the liquid in her stomach she needed to drink some fluids. The antacids she'd brought with her should help, too.

Now she had another name and another location. Either Big Mike hadn't known who the Boss was or she hadn't been able to scare him enough to tell her who it was. But Alan Robertson, criminal attorney and certified public accountant, was her next target. All she needed to do was find him, get him alone somehow, then pull out her pistol and "convince" him to give her the next animal above him in the food chain.

First, though, she needed food, drink, and rest. Working undercover was more stressful than she remembered, and the added tension of having no backup was starting to tell on her. Now that her illness was beginning to bring her down, she needed to speed up her schedule.

But the pillow was so inviting and the bed so welcoming, and she drifted into the arms of Morpheus almost as soon as she achieved horizontalness.

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Clark handed the driver two twenties and got out of the cab, which was gone in a cloud of tire smoke before the back door closed completely.

Clark didn't blame him. This was not the kind of neighborhood anyone would choose to live in if there were any better options, and it was probable that the only worse option was an address in Suicide Slum.

Big Mike's office address was four houses from the corner where the cabbie had dropped him off, so he set off down the street in that direction. Before he'd taken ten steps, though, the door opened and a normal-sized man appeared with a suitcase in either hand. The man trotted up the steps and tossed the luggage into a cargo van, then he looked in either direction along the street.

When he saw Clark he froze in place.

Clark decided to smile and wave. Big mistake. The guy panicked and yanked a pistol from under his coat and let off two wild shots in Clark's direction, neither of which came anywhere close. Clark ducked behind an old Chevy pickup parked against the curb and waited.

He heard the man stage whisper, "Mike! Someone's out here! We gotta go right now!"

"How many?" came the reply.

"Just one!"

"One? Come on, Ski, you know better than that! The Boss isn't gonna send one guy to take us down!"

"Then who is he? Why's he here? He don't belong here, I can tell!"

The quality of the second voice changed. Clark looked around the tire to see a much larger man struggling up the steps with a duffel bag in one hand. "Gee, I don't know, maybe you could—" the last two words were delivered in a loud growl "– ask him!"

"Oh. Yeah. Hey! Buddy! You okay?"

Clark lifted his eyes and peeked over the hood of the pickup. "Yeah, I'm fine. You didn't come anywhere near me."

"Yeah, well, you caught me by surprise. Want me to try

again?”

The big man spoke again. “Cut it out, Ski! Right now!” The big man who Clark assumed was Big Mike called out, “Hey, mister, come on out. You’re safe.”

Clark rose slowly to his full height. “You’re sure? I don’t want your partner to correct his aim.”

“Naw, he ain’t gonna shoot at you no more! Are you, Ski?”

The man called Ski sighed and put his pistol back under his jacket. “No, I won’t shoot. But what’re you doing here? I still say you ain’t from around here.”

“I’m looking for Lois Lane, a reporter for the Daily Planet.”

Both men frowned in obvious puzzlement. Big Mike said, “Tell me what she looks like.”

“She’s about five-foot-six, brunette with shoulder-length hair, slender, mid-twenties, very attractive and very determined.”

Ski laughed. “Ain’t nobody like that been around here, mister! If she was here I mighta kept her!”

Clark nodded. “Okay. Can I give you my card so you can call me if you do see her?”

Mike shook his head and hobbled to the van. “We’re pullin’ up stakes, mister. If she comes around here we won’t see her cause we won’t be here.”

“I understand. My name’s Clark Kent. If you happen to see her, please call me at the Daily Planet. I won’t tell anyone where I got the information.”

“Silence of the press, right?” said Ski.

Clark smiled. “Something like that. Thanks for your time, guys. Have a good trip.”

“We will. Bye now.”

Clark watched while Ski helped Big Mike ease himself into the passenger seat. The way the big man was holding his leg stiff bothered Clark, so he decided to take a closer look.

When he saw the bullet wound he took off running.

“Okay, Ski, let’s whoaaaaahhhaaahh!”

“Who shot you?” Clark demanded.

Ski yanked out his pistol again and pointed it at Clark’s face in the driver’s window. “Hold it right there! I won’t miss this time!”

Clark snatched the weapon out of Ski’s hand and held it down beside his leg, outside the van where Ski couldn’t reach it. “Look, all I want to do is find Lois Lane! I think she shot you!”

Ski pulled the invisible trigger on his missing pistol and yelped. “Hey! Gimme back my gun!”

“Not until you tell me who shot you! Now talk! Who was it?”

“Some guy from a rival gang,” answered Ski. “They was three or four of ‘em. They woulda killed Mike if he-”

“No.” Everyone stopped and waited for Mike’s next words. He bit his lower lip, then said, “It was some fat old bag lady with short blonde hair. I thought she’d fallen down outside and she suckered me and shot me.”

Ski looked at him as if his favorite hockey player had just announced that he intended to start playing girls’ volleyball. “But – but you – you said-”

“I din’t say nothin’, Ski, I just let you believe it. Sorry, man.”

Clark reached in and tapped Mike on the forearm. “You said a fat old bag lady shot you? Couldn’t she have been wearing a disguise?”

Mike shrugged. “I guess so, but I couldn’t tell. She looked like any old homeless woman with a cart for a closet to me.”

“No!” cried Ski. “No, she was – it had to be her car – she was drivin’ a rusty Ford T-Bird! Had, um, Kentucky plates and a busted right taillight. What paint was still on it was dark blue, but it was red before that. And the car had an old Landau roof that was coming apart.”

Clark’s eyebrows rose. “You sure about that?”

Mike nodded. “If Ski says that’s what he saw, that’s what he saw. Ski, did you see her in the car?”

“No. But the car was parked in front of Julie’s place when I left, and it was gone when I came back.”

“Where’s Julie’s place?”

Ski pointed at the large house across the street and down a few doors. “There,” he said, “the one with the green doors. You know, like that old song, the Green Door? ‘Cept in the song it was a speakeasy and that’s a cat house.” He glowered at Clark. “Now can I have my gun back?”

Clark dropped the magazine out of the pistol and worked the slide to eject the round in the chamber, then lowered the hammer. He reached in and tossed the pistol, single bullet, and the magazine onto the luggage in the back of the van. “Take off, guys. Try not to get shot again.”

Mike nodded and pointed forward with one finger. “Let’s go, Ski.”

Roger wailed, “But I gotta get my gun back!”

“Why, so he can take it away from you again? You can pick it up when we get where we’re going. Now put this thing in gear and get me to that doctor!”

Grumbling under his breath, Roger attacked the ignition key and slammed the van into gear. He left enough rubber on the street to coat a pair of cheap tennis shoes.

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Julie peeked out the window and frowned. There had been what she’d thought was a shot about fifteen minutes ago, and just then she’d heard two more she was sure were gunshots. Since none of them had hit the house, she risked a look outside.

A well-built man was standing beside a van, arguing with Mike and Roger, who were inside the van. After some gesturing from all three of them – but no more shooting – the van roared off, leaving the good-looking guy in the charcoal suit and slightly dorky glasses standing in the middle of the street.

Poor guy. He looked like a little lost rabbit. Oh, well, rabbits usually didn’t live long around the wolves who hung around this part of town. It was a rough place full of rough men and nasty women. Julie prided herself on being one of the nastier women around, but she took great pains to conceal her true nature.

Especially to good-looking rabbits who came to her door with wallets stuffed with lettuce. She watched as the rabbit headed directly for the house’s front door.

The knock was more assertive than Julie had expected, so she stopped in her office and secreted a nickel-plated thirty-two automatic in her bra. The weapon was well-hidden, and no man had ever discovered it was there unless she’d wanted him to find it.

She opened the door to the end of the security chain. “Yes? Whom shall I say is calling?”

The man lifted up an ID card of some kind, but Julie ignored it. If this was a raid, it was just about the dumbest one ever to send just one guy. If he was a potential customer, all she cared about was the color and amount of his money.

“I’m looking for a woman. She’s-”

“Well, darlin’,” she drawled. “you done come to the right place. Come on in and we’ll ease your weary mind.”

She unhooked the chain as the man said, “No, I’m looking for a particular woman. She’s about five-six, blonde, a bit heavy, and she was driving an old blue T-Bird. The car was parked in front of your building for a while earlier today.”

“Oh.” Not a customer, then. Maybe he was looking for a runaway girlfriend? But the description didn’t fit any of the girls working at the house. “Sorry, mister, I ain’t seen her.”

“But did you see the car? It’s really important, miss.”

The form of address surprised her. No one had called her “miss” for years, and it angered her for a moment. Then she realized that this man was just trying to be nice to her, whether society said she deserved it or not.

“Um, I dunno when the car left, but yeah, it was here earlier. I

didn't see a woman drivin' it, though. Sorry."

He sighed. "That's okay. It was a long shot anyway. Thanks for trying."

Such a good-looking rabbit, she thought.

He turned to go and she called out, "Wait! Maybe one of the girls saw something. Come in for a minute."

The man followed her into the house with only the slightest of hesitation. Julie raced up the stairs and opened door after door until she found one of the girls awake. "Shelly, did you see anyone driving a blue T-Bird this morning?"

Shelly lit a cigarette and blew out a lungful of carcinogens. "Blue T-Bird? Yeah, I did. Thing ran real quiet, like it had a new muffler and a well-maintained motor." She glanced at her watch. "Fat blonde got in and left about twenty minutes ago, heading downtown."

"Thanks. And no smoking around the customers! You know the rules."

Julie turned away before she could 'officially' hear Shelly's expected reply of "Yeah, yeah, stick a tampon in it" and ran down the stairs again. "Mister! There was a fat blonde girl driving the car. It was headin' towards downtown when it left here. That help you?"

She was rewarded with a thousand-watt smile and a gentle touch on her hand. "It sure does! Thank you so much, Julie!"

He turned and stepped toward the door, then stopped and dug into his pants pocket. "Wait. Here you go."

She looked at the pair of twenties in his hand and felt ashamed. "No, no, that's okay, I really didn't do anything."

"You gave me valuable information on a story I'm working."

"Honey, I don't get paid for talking."

He smiled again and nodded. "Then how about you take your – your girls on a picnic? On me. I insist."

She hesitated, then took the cash. "That's – thank you. You're very generous."

"Not at all. My name's Clark Kent and I work for the Daily Planet. If you need any help a newspaper can give, don't hesitate to call me."

He held his first and second fingers on his right hand together and gave her a quick salute with them, then all but jumped out the door. When Julie looked out the window, he was already half-way down the street and looked to be gaining speed.

She blinked and he was out of sight. That was one fast-running man!

Then she chuckled and shook her head. He was gone like a scared rabbit and she hadn't even kissed him!

It didn't matter. It was time to get the girls awake and moving. The doors to Julie's place opened at six, and she didn't want any of her customers to leave for someone else's dubious charms.

Still, it would have been nice to just sit and talk with that guy who'd just left. Julie had the feeling that he'd be a perfect gentleman.

She shook her head and frowned. Like any guy would hang around her for anything other than what he could take from her. She'd known too many men for that to happen.

Julie sighed and turned toward the stairs again. It was time to get the girls up and ready for business. And she had to air out Shelly's room again. Some customers were real particular about cigarette smoke.

She crumpled the two twenties and slipped them into her pants pocket, and any thought of a picnic with her girls evaporated like water on a hot griddle.

#### Chapter Four

Slowly, Lois' senses came online. Her eyes opened onto a dark room missing the comforting outlines and scents of her own bedroom. Someone's kidnapped me again, she thought. They'll

try to get some information from me or make me call for Superman or –

No!

She lurched up and nearly fell off the badly worn mattress. She hadn't been kidnapped. She was dying of cancer and she'd shot two men and she was hunting for the Boss and she was going to take him down with her last breath—

And she really, really needed to go to the bathroom.

The thrift store sweat suit and the towels and T-shirts and such that she'd stuffed inside the sweat suit made it difficult to complete her necessary errand, but she got there in time. After she flushed the toilet and rinsed her hands – there was no soap in the bathroom – she realized how bad she smelled. Her first thought was to ignore her fetid odor and consider it part of her camouflage, but then a thought tapped her on the shoulder.

After Big Mike's report, Robertson, her next target, would be on the alert for a homeless, smelly, fat blonde. But he might not be so cautious around a slender, sexy brunette in a short black dress.

That was the ticket. She could use the hair from her chubby blonde disguise to scope out Robertson's office and home, but her sexy seductress model was the way to get close to him. And the T-bird wouldn't work for this phase. She could use the car theft skills Jimmy had taught her during the Messenger crisis to pick up a much nicer ride when it was time to move on Robertson.

The plan was risky, of course, and it would take several days to bring it to fruition, but there was no gain without risk. And since she only had a few months to live anyway, the risks weren't that great. Get arrested? Die in jail waiting for trial. Get killed? Die a little earlier than planned, and almost surely a lot quicker and with less pain. And if Lois Lane feared anything, it was dying alone in a hospital bed in agony against which no drug could defend.

She shook her head at herself. No slow death or hiding until the end for Lois Lane. She'd face death on her own terms and leave a legacy of justice behind her.

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Alan Robertson sat at his office desk and frowned at the scribbled note from one of his off-the-books operatives. There was still no word about Mike Pittman or Roger Kowalski. The man who'd checked Mike's office had found old blood on the floor but no bodies or signs of death. The big man's van was gone, along with some of his possessions, so apparently they had simply fled.

But that made no sense. Robertson's contacts in the police department hadn't heard anything about a case against Pittman or Kowalski. They hadn't been arrested, they weren't in any of the District Attorney's safe houses, and they weren't anywhere around their usual haunts. So where were they?

More importantly, why were they missing?

It was late in the evening and he was tired. The backlog of collections Pittman had left behind had resulted in more work for two of Robertson's other subordinates, which was a violation of the guidelines he'd been 'strongly advised' to follow in his illegal activities. He understood that by restricting contact between his criminal associates, he would make it harder for law enforcement to use any of them to get to the others and, ultimately, to him. But in order to make his own scheduled payments, someone had to collect from Pittman's clients, and that meant some additional expenses for him as well as some unavoidable cross-contact in the lower levels.

He had two candidates who might take Pittman's place, but he had to be careful. The worst thing he could do would be to set up a competition among his associates which might turn violent. Such violence would bring unwanted attention on his own activities, and he was satisfied with appearing to be a mid-level contract attorney and conservative certified public accountant. He

might have been a tall, fierce-looking black man with a shaved head and manicured goatee who kept himself in better shape than most his age, but he both hated and feared violence, especially when it might be directed at himself. And the people who reported to him knew that. It made a troubling situation even more dicey than it might have been.

It was time to go home, such as it was. His strikingly beautiful but amoral younger wife, whom he had wed in order to appear more socially acceptable, and who had no inkling of his extra-curricular activities and less interest in them, might or might not be waiting for him. He neither knew nor cared if she'd snagged a new boy-toy. Her freedom to live as she wished was his insurance that she wouldn't rock the boat for him, so long as he financed her lifestyle. She was just part of the law-abiding disguise he wore. Robertson was just happy that she'd never gotten pregnant.

On top of the Pittman matter was the strange woman with blonde highlights in her brunette hair who seemed to be following him. He'd noticed her at lunch the day before and again today. And today they'd made eye contact as she'd dabbed her mouth with her napkin. As she'd left, she'd paused beside his table for just a few moments and looked directly at him. Her smile and slow wink had completely disconcerted him, and she'd walked away with an exaggerated hip sway before he'd recovered his equilibrium and say anything to her.

Alan Robertson wasn't a social moron. He'd understood the offer she'd made, and she wondered if she'd been Pittman's woman for a time. How else could she have known who he was? Could it have been a coincidence, her coming on to him so soon after the Pittman trouble?

He didn't think it was a coincidence. Like most law enforcement officials, he deeply distrusted that such things actually existed. But he didn't think this woman was Pittman's type, either. He would have expected Big Mike to – what was that crude phrase – oh, yes, “hook up” with a loud, brassy, slightly sleazy and barely legal nitwit, not the elegant and obviously intelligent woman he'd seen.

And none of those thoughts helped him in the Pittman matter. Where was the man?

A call to his best police informant – which he knew his supervisor would not think prudent – had yielded nothing. Not only was there no investigation under way which might point to him, the MPD seemed to have no knowledge of his function, much less his existence in the Boss' hierarchy. His own superior in that chain was a successful marriage therapist who'd declined three different offers to move her local show into wider radio syndication.

Robertson also knew for a fact that she was ruthless with underlings who made serious mistakes. He personally knew of one young man she'd ordered beheaded because he'd blown a neighborhood numbers ring apart through his own greed in selling tickets to a police informer. There was no way Robertson was going to admit to Dr. Jenna Leibowitz that he'd misplaced one of his operatives. Nor did he have any desire to draw attention to himself, either from the police or from Dr. Leibowitz.

There was no point in staying at the office tonight. It was too late to accomplish anything positive. He'd go out the street, call a cab, and go home.

But when he stepped out of the building, he found the fetching brunette in front of his office in a light blue late-model Porsche with the top down, the twelve-cylinder model that could accelerate from zero to awesome in three heartbeats, or so the advertising copy said. She smiled coyly from under her blonde highlights and leaned her shoulder against the driver's door.

“I thought you were going to spend the night in there, Mr. Robertson. Don't you think you'd have more fun with me than with your clients' tax records?”

Many criminals were sex-crazed. Many were open to the illicit opportunities afforded them by their position and their money. And many were just too dumb to look at the big picture and wonder why a beautiful woman with a sports car carrying a high six-figure price and exhibiting a willing attitude would be waiting for him at the end of the day.

Alan Robertson was none of those things. This woman wanted something from him. And she looked distantly familiar somehow, as if he'd seen her photo before but not her.

He stepped closer. “How do you know my name, young lady?”

She smiled wider and tossed her hair away from her exotic eyes with a graceful head flip. “I asked around. Besides, it's on the building directory. Not exactly a secret.”

“Very well. What is it you want from me?”

She tilted her head to one side and her hair fell artfully to her eyebrows. “I'm in town for a couple of weeks, I'm between photo shoots, male models are generally dumb and boring and self-absorbed if not completely brain-dead, the production people treat us like props that eat and get special treatment for no good reason, and I just thought I'd like to spend some time in the company of a man who knows the difference between a salad fork and a tuning fork.”

“Photo shoots?”

“I'm a magazine model. I do print ads for perfumes, credit cards, shoes, TV shows, whatever they pay me to do.” She straightened and held her right hand out of the car. “My name is Lola Dane, and advertising things is my game.”

Ah. That had to be it, that had to be the reason she looked so familiar. He must have seen her face in some magazine ad somewhere. The name meant nothing to him, but then he didn't know the names of any of the female artists on Billboard's Top Forty list or any Oscar-nominated actresses either.

Lola Dane was a beautiful woman. That was a stunning automobile. Alan worked hard, maybe too hard, and perhaps tonight was an opportunity to change that circumstance.

He slowly stepped closer and took her hand gently. “You don't sound like I imagined a model would sound.”

“Really? How would you have expected me to sound?”

“I would have expected you to sound self-absorbed, self-centered, and quite vapid. That's not how you sound at all.” He ventured a thin smile. “You have excellent diction, for one thing, along with a very pleasing voice. And you appear to – as you phrased it a moment ago – know the difference between a salad fork and a tuning fork.”

She laughed softly. “I have been hoist upon my own petard, I suppose.”

The laugh and her response clinched it for him. She couldn't have any connection to his missing operative. No dumb mob girlfriend would be so willing to laugh at herself or to use such an archaic metaphor. “What are your plans for the evening, Ms. Dane?”

“Right now they're wide open. If you know of a good restaurant where we could be inconspicuous, I'd go for that.”

He smiled. “I know just the place.”

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Bill Henderson usually wasn't a pacing man, especially in another person's office, but today he couldn't be still. “C'mon, Perry!” Bill insisted. “There's got to be some way to contact Lane, some way she'd know it was you and not someone else trying to trap her!”

“Like a secret newsman's code?” Perry offered. “Sorry, there ain't no such thing. If Lois doesn't want to be found—”

“I know, I know! But I have a responsibility to this city to keep people safe!”

“Even criminals, Inspector?” Clark asked.

Henderson whirled to face him. “You knew the answer to that

one before you asked it, Kent! I took an oath to enforce the law for the benefit of every person in this city!”

“What about this ‘Boss’ we’ve been hearing rumors about, Bill?” Perry asked. “If Lois is goin’ after this guy, she’s probably not gonna stop until she’s found him.”

“Yeah, you said that already,” Henderson retorted. He stuck one hand in his pants pocket and resumed pacing. “I still don’t understand why you can’t broadcast an appeal for her to come in.”

Clark frowned and sat forward. “Is that what you’d do if you wanted one of your people to come back to base?”

“This is different! My people wouldn’t be out there doing a Lone Ranger impersonation! She doesn’t even have a Tonto to watch her back!”

“Bill, I won’t put that kind of appeal in the Daily Planet. I can’t. Not only would it destroy her effectiveness as an investigative reporter for the rest of her life, it would put half the bad guys in the state on her trail to kill her.” Perry paused. “Look, I know you’re worried about her. So are we. It’s been six days since she had that run-in with Mike what’s-his-name. She’ll pop up soon, I’m sure.”

“And before she pops up like a Lois-in-the-box, will we have another emergency room case, or maybe a body this time? I can pretty much guarantee you we won’t be able to keep that out of the media. We were just lucky Mike and Ski skipped town instead of staying and taking their medicine.”

Clark almost grinned. “I got the impression that they thought their ‘medicine’ would have been too much to take.”

Perry forestalled Bill’s sharp reply by asking, “Have your people found that old T-bird yet? Clark gave you a good description of it. There can’t be that many cars like that in the city.”

Bill turned his piercing gaze to the editor’s layered and much-callused armor. “Both foot and car patrols have been warned to be on the lookout for the car, but there’s not much chance of finding it except by luck. All we’ve found so far is a guy who put an ad in the paper who might have sold her the car. I wish you’d gotten the license number, Clark.”

“I did my best, Inspector. At least we know what car she’s driving.”

Perry frowned and tilted his head. “Shouldn’t the seller have the license number?”

Henderson sighed. “It was a curbside deal. The guy had an expired plate on the car and he never expected the police to come knocking on his door looking for either him or the T-bird. I figure Lois grabbed a plate off some junker in a salvage lot or from a long-term parking garage to lower the chance of getting a ticket.”

Clark nodded. “That sounds like Lois being resourceful.”

Before Henderson could make a pithy comment about Lois’ resourcefulness, Jimmy opened the office door and leaned in. “Inspector, call for you on line three.”

“Tell them I’ll call them back.”

“Uh – it’s the District Attorney’s office, sir. The person on the other end of the call didn’t sound like she was willing to wait.”

“All right, fine, I’ll take it!” Henderson picked up the phone and punched the button as Perry fixed Jimmy with a hound-dog look and asked, “This about Lois, son?”

Jimmy frowned and took a deep breath. “Yeah. And I’m pretty sure none of you will like it.”

Perry pointed at Henderson and mouthed ‘tell me now’ at Jimmy, but the young man shook his head and closed the office door. Clark lifted his shoulders at Perry, who shrugged and pointed at Henderson.

The editor and the reporter listened to one side of the conversation. It had many long pauses and two eyebrow raises in it. Perry couldn’t hear the words the caller spoke, just the tone, but due to his long experience with angry women, he recognized

one when he heard her.

“Henderson speaking. Oh? Yes, ma’am. Of course. Yes. No, I did not know. That’s – very interesting. Yes, ma’am. Of course. Thank you for the call. As soon as I know anything. Yes, ma’am, I understand completely. Goodbye.”

Henderson sighed, then put down the phone and grimaced at it. “That was Assistant District Attorney Mayson Drake. Her office has just received new information on the activities of one Lois Lane, fugitive from justice. As you have probably already deduced, Ms. Drake is not at all enamored with the ongoing activities of one Lois Lane, fugitive from justice.”

Perry and Clark leaned forward together. Perry said, “C’mon, Bill, don’t keep us in suspense! What happened?”

Henderson sighed again and put both hands in his pockets. “Two days ago, Lois Lane, fugitive from justice, stole a year-old Porsche from a dealer’s home in Gotham City. She – Wait a minute, Kent! Let me tell the story and you’ll know how we know it was her!”

Clark closed his mouth and made a ‘go-ahead’ gesture with his hand. Henderson continued, “As I said, she stole the Porsche – light blue, twelve cylinder engine if it makes a difference – and used it as a prop to entice Mr. Alan Robertson to ‘go away’ with her for the evening. Unfortunately for Mr. Robertson, his idea of a night on the town with a beautiful model did not intersect with Lola Dane’s idea of the same activity.”

“Lola Dane?” spluttered Clark. “You’re saying that Lois used that name with Robertson?”

“That’s what Robertson says. Now listen close, because the next part is a doozie. I, personally, have never heard of Mr. Alan Robertson, nor was I aware of his position in Metropolis’ criminal hierarchy, but Ms. Drake told me that Lois Lane, fugitive from justice – Ms. Drake repeated that phrase numerous times during our conversation, emphasizing it very strongly each time – took Mr. Robertson to a very nice restaurant two nights ago and plied him with food and drink. She also plied him with Rohypnol, commonly referred to as ‘roofies,’ a date-rape drug which made him very compliant. He therefore did not find objectionable her plan to drive across the river to Gotham City, enter an isolated and empty warehouse on the riverfront, and question him about his ties to the Boss here in Metropolis.”

Perry leaned back as Henderson paused. “Let me guess the rest. She questioned him about his connections and he spilled his guts to her.”

Henderson nodded. “Something along that line. He also picked up a thirty-eight special bullet wound from point-blank range in his left upper arm – Mr. Robertson is right-handed, something Lola Dane asked him early on in her interrogation – and that appears to have been the impetus for much of his soul-baring confession to her, or at least the illegal parts.”

“And how do we know all this?” Clark asked. “Did the forward-thinking and resourceful Lois Lane, fugitive from justice, happen to leave a record of her time with the estimable Mr. Robertson?”

Perry looked at his reporter and said, “Son, you need to save your adjectives for your articles. Don’t want you to run out when you really need one.”

Henderson snorted. “I’m glad you both find this so amusing. Yes, she did leave a tape recording of their session, in which she not only identified herself but gave a pretty complete rundown of Robertson’s criminal activities and his organization, including some interesting details on the missing Mike Pittman and his rackets. Gotham’s DA got it from their caped vigilante, the Bat-guy, or whatever his handle is—”

“He’s Batman,” growled Clark from the back of his throat.

Henderson favored him with a piercing deadpan stare. “Thank you for that informative and timely interlude, Mr. Kent. May I continue?”

“Oh, I hope so, Inspector,” Clark replied.

“I appreciate your generosity. Anyway, the Gotham City DA has generously shared a copy of Robertson’s tape with us for ‘future considerations,’ if you know what I mean.”

“They’ve scratched our back, you’ll need to scratch theirs sometime in the near future,” offered Perry.

“Right in one try. The Gotham City District Attorney’s office is launching a couple of investigations as we speak as a result of the information contained on that tape. Anyway, Robertson now denies everything he said on the tape, but while under the influence of the drug he named the person to whom he reports. We’re currently trying to arrange police protection for this person in exchange for information about the person to whom that person reports.”

Perry frowned. “Pretty detailed, Bill, except for the last bit with all the ‘persons’ in there.”

“Sorry, Perry, but I can’t give you any more than that. Direct orders.”

“Any idea who the next one up the chain is?”

“No, Kent, I don’t, and I couldn’t tell you if I did know.”

Henderson moved toward the door. “I have to get back to the office and do some police work. If I get anything we can release for publication, I’ll call you guys first, but don’t hold your breath waiting.”

The door closed behind Henderson as Perry leaned forward. “Well, what do you think about that?”

Clark shook his head. “That’s our Lois. I can’t wait to hear that tape.”

“You may have to wait a good while. The DA’s office won’t release it to the public before Robertson is arraigned, and maybe not even after that.”

“I bet I could get a copy of the transcript. I know one of the clerks at the DA’s office pretty well.”

“You probably could at that.” Perry sighed deeply. “As interesting as all this has been, it doesn’t get us any closer to finding Lois.”

Clark’s mouth quirked. “Maybe, maybe not. I have an idea that might give us another lead.”

“Does it have anything to do with confronting Alan Robertson?”

Clark’s mouth quirked again, then flattened out. “It might.”

“Uh-huh. Just don’t get arrested, son. I can’t afford to have both of you out of action.”

“I’ll be careful, I promise.”

“Good. Now, before you go rattle Mr. Robertson’s cage, do you think you could condescend to finish up the Formula One race cheating story? We need it for the morning sports section.”

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The Porsche was gone, abandoned outside a night club in Gotham City that, oddly enough, featured a facade over the entrance which resembled the entrance to a giant igloo. Lois had smoothly slipped into a knot of club patrons walking away from the main entrance, and no one seemed to notice the car. It was easy to slide away from them after a few blocks to pick up the T-bird one more time.

It was time to lose the old Ford too, and she felt a twinge of sadness at the thought. The car had served her well for several days, but its description was surely out on the street by now, even in Gotham. And she didn’t want to get the Batman on her trail, especially if he was real and not just an urban myth.

And now she had another name in the criminal chain, one that had deeply shocked her. Dr. Jenna Leibowitz’ sterling reputation as a marriage counselor spanned the entire state, went as far north as Maine, west into Pennsylvania, and south to Virginia, but apparently all that was just a cover for her real career. If Alan Robertson hadn’t lied to her – and she was certain that he’d been too frightened, too drugged, and too off-balance to

lie, especially after she’d put a bullet through his arm – Jenna Leibowitz was the last person between herself and the Boss. So Jenna Leibowitz was her next target.

But Lois needed to vanish for a few days. There was a cab stand just around the corner from the bus station, and she could hang around there as a pudgy blonde for a few hours until there were cabs available after tomorrow morning’s rush hour. The cab could then take her close to the flophouse and to temporary safety. And she would use the time both to plan her approach and rest up after her ordeal.

It was getting easier to shoot them.

And it wasn’t clear to her if that was a good thing or not.

The one thing that was clear to her was that she could never allow her own therapist to know what she knew. Dr. Friskin almost idolized Jenna Leibowitz. She had all of the marriage counselor’s books on her shelf at her office, and Lois knew that several of them were signed. Two of them were even inscribed with personal messages. Friskin would find out eventually, but Lois would be gone by the time any trials rolled around. She didn’t want to die with the memory of disillusioning Dr. Friskin in her mind.

Another thought jumped into her mind. She’d left Robertson alert and terrified, and surely by now he’d relayed his experience to the evil doctor. Getting to Leibowitz now would be no picnic.

But she’d get there. She had to.

She still had a few weeks to live and one last big story to chisel on her tombstone as her epitaph.

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Perry glanced out his open office door and spotted what he interpreted as an angry Lex Luthor bearing down on him. He saw the White Shadow – Nigel St. John – disengage from Luthor’s heel and lean over Clark’s shoulder to say something to him.

Then Luthor was in his office and closing the door.

“Why do I have to hear from the police about Lois Lane’s activities? I thought we both understood that we would share all information about her.”

Perry shrugged. “I’m sorry, Mr. Luthor, sir. What I have is information about her from the police which I was told not to share with anyone. It was definitely not for publication.”

Luthor put both hands on the desk and leaned his face close to Perry’s. “Don’t forget, Mr. White, that you now work directly for me. And when someone works for me, he or she does exactly what I instruct him or her to do.”

“Like Lois?”

Luthor snapped back as if a wasp had stung his upper lip. “I am not responsible for Ms. Lane’s activities of the past fortnight. I am attempting to locate her in order to help her. After all, she and I are – seeing each other.”

“You mean you were seeing each other.”

“The status of my relationship with Lois Lane is not the subject of this conversation.”

“Maybe not, but I think it’s pertinent. She hasn’t confided in you any more than she has in me. I can understand her not contacting me because I’m her boss, but you were supposed to be a lot closer to her.”

“We are closer!”

Perry’s eyebrows rose and fell. “I really don’t think so, Mr. Luthor.”

Luthor’s eyes narrowed. “I can see that you do not intend to cooperate with me. Very well. I can always reassign more of your duties to Chip.”

Perry nodded and stood. “Yes, you could do that. But I wonder how many of my reporters would pay any attention to a young punk like Chip. Clark Kent is probably the nicest guy on the Planet’s payroll, but he’d eat your little Chipster for breakfast and have room left for a bag of bagels with cream cheese.”

“I am not in the habit—”

The argument was interrupted by a crash from outside. They both turned to see Nigel St. John rising up from behind a desk to straighten his tie. A few paces from the other side of the desk stood an obviously angry Clark Kent, his body turned to one side and his left arm extended slightly as if ready to defend himself.

And his fists were clenched.

Nigel squared off about five feet from Clark and said something Perry couldn't hear, and before he could leave his office to stop the beating Clark was sure to get, Luthor burst through the door and jumped between the combatants.

"Not here, Nigel," Perry heard, "and not now. We have another mission we have to complete first."

Nigel, his breath hissing through his teeth, appeared not to be aware of his boss. "Nigel," Luthor repeated, "not now! Maintain priorities at all times."

Nigel's eyes slowly lost their angry brightness and he nodded once. "This is not over, Mr. Kent. We will continue our conversation at a later date."

Clark's arms had relaxed to his sides and his hands were open, but his feet were still poised to move quickly. "Any time, Mr. St. John. You know where to find me."

In a change from their usual manner, Luthor followed Nigel out of the newsroom, so close behind him that Luthor seemed to be pushing Nigel. Perry let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding as the elevator doors closed.

He turned to Clark. "You know you've just made yourself an enemy, don't you?"

"Those two had already made themselves my enemies. I just dug the line in the sand a little deeper."

"Uh-huh. About that – the line in the sand thing – what just happened?"

"Nigel hinted very strongly that I not only knew where Lois was and what she was doing, I was giving her logistical and financial assistance."

"That's stupid. We know she cleaned out her savings account the day she shot that gun dealer. And Luthor knows everything that goes on up here. He probably has people watching all of us."

Clark nodded. "Nigel got mad and let something slip." He turned to face his boss. "Just before I pretended to lose my temper, he said something about Lois climbing the food chain."

"The food chain? What the heck does that mean?"

Clark grinned ever so slightly. "It means that Luthor – or at least Nigel – knows more about what Lois is trying to do than he's letting on. It means that he has some definite connection to the Boss that Lois is hunting."

Perry's eyes narrowed. "You mean – are you saying what I think you're saying?"

Clark's voice dropped even lower. "That Luthor is the Boss in Metropolis? I don't know and I can't prove it from the little that Nigel said. But I am sure that Luthor knows who that person is and what he or she plans to do in the next few days."

Perry sighed. "That means that Lois is in more trouble than we thought."

Clark's hangdog look would have depressed Elvis. "Isn't she always, chief?"

## Chapter Five

The pain in Lois' stomach woke her before sunrise and she barely made it to the nasty toilet before she threw up. It hurt down deep in her belly this time, and at least half of her time on her knees was spent dry retching. Incongruously, she remembered her sister Lucy referring to her current activity as 'calling Ralph on the porcelain telephone.' It didn't surprise her at all that she didn't think it was as funny today as it had been in the past.

Lois finally finished heaving and crawled to the tub on her hands and knees. Too weak to stand, she turned on the cold water and let it run over her head for a while, then rinsed out her mouth

as best she could.

Cancer is not a fun way to die, she mused.

That microwave burrito she'd eaten the night before probably didn't help, either. If she was lucky, she wouldn't have food poisoning for the next few days. She needed the time to plan her next move, the move against Dr. Jenna Leibowitz.

The doctor would be forewarned and on alert for a young woman coming into her private life at this time. There was no safe way to confront her directly, so Lois had to approach her from a different angle.

There was too much Lois didn't know about the minutia of Leibowitz' criminal activities. Lois couldn't risk showing up as a potential criminal associate; she'd get tripped up in the first five minutes. Any new patients would receive the strictest screening now. Her staff would be on the alert for someone trying to slip in as a new counseling patient, and Lois didn't have a partner to pose as her spouse. According to the very helpful Alan Robertson, Leibowitz didn't see individual patients, only couples, and she doubted that she could con the doctor's staff into letting her slip through the screening –

Wait a minute.

Staff.

Leibowitz was still a licensed counselor. She had to maintain her facade of seeing patients. And she couldn't do all that grunt work by herself. She had to have legitimate staff who would set her schedule, call patients, collect fees, contact insurance companies, set up payment plans, type up her non-confidential notes, and so forth. Most of them probably had no idea what she did in her spare time.

That was the key. The doctor's staff was the way in. She had to begin soon.

As soon as her stomach stabilized and she could get up off the bathroom floor, that is.

Just then her belly once again shoved against its fleshly restraints and tried to send its nonexistent contents spewing out to freedom. She lay over the edge of the tub and tried to time her breathing around her dry heaves.

Cancer was truly a sucky way to die. She'd rather go out with a bullet in her head.

Just – not quite yet. The job wasn't finished. And Lois hated to leave things undone.

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Nigel's daily report was incomplete. Lex couldn't believe it, couldn't quite credit it, but it was true. For the first time since Lex had met him, Nigel had been knocked mentally off-balance by an opponent.

"Nigel, my good man," oozed Lex, "please sit down and stop pacing. You're allowing Kent's lucky punch to put you off your game. I'm sure you'll devise a suitable reply when the time comes."

Nigel took a seat and looked away. "If only," he muttered.

"If only what?"

Nigel's eyebrows rose as if he'd been surprised by the question. "Nothing, sir. I hadn't realized that I'd spoken aloud."

"But you did. You're obviously distressed by something. I ask you to share it."

Nigel drew himself up. "It is – of a personal nature, sir."

Lex pulled his chair closer to Nigel's. "I understand. I truly do not wish to poke around in your personal life. I respect your privacy. But whatever this is has affected your job performance."

"Sir! I respectfully--"

"You told me three times about Jenna Leibowitz' collections being down over the past two weeks, Nigel. You also left out the details of Alan Robertson's recorded confession. I know that much of it won't be admitted as evidence, but we'll just have to —"

"It was Lois Lane!" Nigel blurted out.

Lex turned his head slightly and looked at Nigel out of the corners of his eyes, trying to divine a fresh perspective on his longtime right-hand man. He carefully reappraised the man without whom he might have failed in many of his enterprises.

And what he saw both surprised and dismayed him.

"Nigel," said Lex, "I believe that your – ah, lack of enthusiasm, shall we say – for my plan to marry Lois Lane has clouded your judgment. I realize that she is not your favorite person, and I understand why. But I still plan to make her my wife."

Nigel all but leaped to his feet. "But she has disrupted our operations! She may, at this very moment, be closing in on Dr. Leibowitz and her business! No one has heard from the Lane woman in five days! From the doctor it is only one short step to you! She has placed you in personal peril!" He turned and, with a visible effort, calmed himself. "Sir, if you will allow me to proceed with the original plan to bomb the Daily Planet, I'm certain that Miss Lane would reveal herself to you. I've no doubt that she would, as you planned, submit herself to you both professionally and personally."

Lex stood and slowly padded to the front of the desk, then sat down on the edge. "You might be right about Lois, Nigel. But I firmly believe that our backup plan, which admittedly was thrust upon us, has a higher probability of success than the original one. Once Lois learns that she does not and never did have terminal cancer, she will let me know where she is so that I might extricate her from the resulting dire circumstances."

"Sir, she is an investigative reporter! She will never be anything other than that!"

"I don't believe that's true, Nigel. I do, however, believe that anyone – including Lois – can be induced to ignore his or her ethical standards if the potential reward is sufficient, and I submit Lois' current activities as evidence. I also believe that after all the violence and pain Lois has inflicted on others, she will be very grateful for my help in making the consequences of her actions go away. Then, because she will be very, very grateful to me, and because she will have tasted the illicit wine of such activity, she will be more than happy to become my wife and enjoy my protection."

Lex leaned back against the desk and smiled wide. "Everyone has a price, Nigel. Everyone, including Lois Lane. She has taken her first steps along the path of unrighteousness. And, in time, she will become as amoral and driven by pure success as I am. When that happens, she and I will truly be perfectly matched. And she will stand beside me as we rule first this city, then the state, and then the entire nation."

He saw Nigel's objections before he voiced them. And he knew that Nigel knew what he would say. So, like a perfect butler, Nigel swallowed his words, stood, and calmly took his leave.

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"Kent!" shouted Perry. "Come in here!"

Clark knew it had to be about Lois. For that matter, the entire news staff knew it had to be about Lois. Even Ralph had made a crack about her the day before, suggesting that she'd decided to go into business competing with The Boss instead of trying to track him down.

Clark had barely restrained Jimmy from flattening the older man. Then he'd taken Ralph aside and explained to him, very calmly and carefully, that any more such opinions which Ralph voiced in Clark's hearing would be met with firm and possibly unrestrained enthusiasm.

Ralph had puzzled through the double-talk for almost fifteen seconds before he'd paled and haltingly promised Clark that any mention of Lois Lane was off limits for him. Clark had barely seen the man in the office since.

Clark didn't bother to close Perry's office door as he breezed

in. "What's up, Chief? Something new about Lois?"

Perry put his face in his hands and fell back in his chair. "No. Not from the police, not from any of my contacts, and not from any of the known criminals she's already shot."

Clark sighed. "I wish I had something."

Perry gave him a hound dog stare. "Not even from the fish guy?"

"What fish guy?"

"The fish guy, Larry Largemouth or something. Lois' snitch."

"Largemouth?" Then it hit him. "Oh, you mean Bobby Bigmouth."

"Right, right. I keep getting him mixed up with largemouth bass. I haven't been sleeping well lately." Perry leaned forward. "Have you even heard from him since Lois shot off that guy's toe?"

"Walt McNally. Bobby's called me twice since then, and both times it was to ask what I knew. I don't think he has anything."

"Nuts. If only we had some idea where she's hiding!"

"Well – if it helps your peace of mind any, I asked Superman to keep an eye out for her. He hasn't seen her either. It's as if she's dropped off the face of the earth."

Perry let out a long breath. "Okay, let's review and see if we can come up with something. You write this down, Clark, because I'm not sure I'll remember this conversation in a couple of hours."

Clark hesitated. This exercise would help to organize Perry's thoughts and help them find Lois. But would finding Lois help her or hurt her? Was she actually going after the Boss, as they had all surmised, or was there something else going on, something more sinister? Was Lois still one of the good guys? Or had she crossed the line and become a criminal?

And what was her relationship with him now? Luthor still thought of her as his almost fiancée. Lois had never given Clark any real indication that she cared about him the way he cared about her, other than a few times when one or both of their lives had been threatened.

But maybe she'd just been reacting to the stress of the moment. Maybe she didn't care about him the way he cared about – no, be honest, he told himself, you love her. And since her first actions after being convinced she had only a few months to live didn't include coming to him for any reason, the only logical conclusion was that she didn't love him back.

That hurt. A lot.

He decided to write down Perry's points and ponder his relationship with Lois at a later date. "Ready, Chief."

"Good. Number one, Lois is very good at disguises. Ha! You should have seen her in the office that day just before you came on board. Mustache, short hair, coveralls, mechanic's hat, she looked just like a slender young man.

"Number two, she's willing to go undercover and take all kinds of risks. If those car thieves had figured out who she was and what she was doing they might have killed her. She knew that and still pushed ahead.

"Number three, she thinks she's only got a few months to live. That's bound to push her to take even more chances than she ordinarily would.

"Number four, she's out to hunt down The Boss. We've been hearing vague reports of someone in charge of almost all the crime in the city for several months, and every once in a while Lois will pull the file and go through every scrap in there."

"I've seen her do that, Perry. She even asked me to go through it with her one day. There's a lot of information in there, but it's too scattered and unconnected to build an investigation on, whether it's us or the police or the DA's office. You can't even pick a starting point from anything in there."

"Not legally, no, but Lois is obviously doing this outside the law. It's going to bite her in the backside when she finds out she's

not dying and she has to face the music.”

Both men were silent for a long moment. Then Clark directed a stare at the pad of paper he held and said, “You’re assuming that we’ll find her before someone kills her.”

Perry fixed him with a sad glare. “I have to assume that, son. I couldn’t get up in the morning if I thought otherwise.” He sighed deeply. “Although I’m not sure I’d rather see that day than see the day when Bill Henderson tells me that Lois has killed someone.”

Clark’s autonomic responses weren’t the same as a normal human’s, but he still felt his face grow pale.

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Brett Cumberland dropped the psych reference book on the hardwood floor and the slap it made sounded like a gunshot. He looked around sheepishly and muttered, “Sorry. It slipped.”

Zoe, the new clerical intern from the local secretarial school whose last name he hadn’t bothered to learn, frowned at him and stalked away. Brett thought she was being overly dramatic and serious to impress either Dr. Leibowitz or Karen Carter, the doctor’s receptionist and personal assistant. He didn’t think he liked Zoe, but he had to admit that she was already better at her job than Tiffany had been. Brett remembered how upset Karen had been when Zoe had walked in four days ago just before noon, announcing that the school had sent her to replace Tiffany, who had simply failed to show up that day. Karen had been glued to her desk ever since then, watching for Zoe to make a mistake, just as she had been this morning.

Except Karen wasn’t at her desk. She’d apparently jumped at the sound of the book’s impact, all the way from her chair to the relative safety of a metal filing cabinet. And Dr. Leibowitz had thrown herself on the floor behind the couch in the reception room. As each woman cautiously raised her head and glanced around the room, they reminded Brett of a Whack-A-Mole game at the local kiddie pizza place.

Too bad he didn’t dare laugh at them.

Dr. Leibowitz was first to her feet. “Please – please be more careful in the future, Brett,” she intoned in a shaky voice. “We wouldn’t want to alarm our patients. Some of them have been under fire before and that – well, we don’t want to set them back, now do we?”

He nodded slowly as Karen pushed herself off the floor and staggered to her desk. “Of course, Doctor,” he assured her. “I’ll be more careful.”

“See that you do. Karen, when is my next appointment?”

Karen fumbled with the computer for several seconds before telling Doctor Leibowitz that the next couple was due in one hour and forty-two minutes. The doctor nodded sharply and hurried into her office. Brett picked up the book from the floor and replaced it on the shelf from which he’d knocked it, then gathered the insurance files on which he was supposed to verify coverage. Except for their reactions to the book he’d dropped, things looked almost normal.

But they weren’t. Both the doctor and the receptionist had been on edge for the past four days, jumping at every sound and flinching away from every new patient, especially the female ones. Karen had spent at least an hour in the doctor’s office three days earlier, the day after Zoe had joined them, and while he hadn’t made out any of their conversation, he could hear the tension in their raised voices.

And Zoe was the most competent intern he’d ever seen. She spoke only when spoken to and always handed Dr. Leibowitz or Karen exactly the form or letter or document they asked for, sometimes almost before being asked for it. And nothing seemed to bother her, not loud noises or unexpected changes in appointments or patients showing up early or late or the police who’d come to see the doctor on her first day. She just took everything in stride. She was at the office waiting for one of them

to unlock it in the morning and always walked out with whoever locked up at night.

She was hot, too, or she would be if she dressed a little nicer. Brett wasn’t a big fan of red hair, either, although he did like her long below-the-shoulder tresses. Nor did he like the way her squared black plastic frames covered the upper part of her face. Her voice was a bit on the nasal side and she didn’t seem to understand that humans had to blink at least once an hour. And she always ate lunch by herself. She seemed to favor bland food and milk, as if she had a stomach condition she didn’t want to aggravate.

He couldn’t figure out how old she was, either. She looked to be twenty-five or maybe even a little younger, but she acted older, like someone who’d been through a lot in her life and was feeling the weight of her years. The girl was a puzzle, all right.

And figuring her out was above his pay grade.

He took the piles of files to his office, shut the door, sat down, and began dialing insurance companies. This was the part of the job he disliked the most, mindlessly calling insurance companies and talking to equally uninspired drones at the other end of the line. These were the times when he almost – not quite, but almost – envied his brother Bill and his job at the medical testing lab. At least Brett made a decent salary.

Brett didn’t know that he was about to miss the most exciting thing ever to happen in that office as he dialed and checked off boxes on his paperwork. Of course, several days later, when he finally did find out, he decided that being endangered by people with guns and hypodermic needles exceeded his desire for excitement and he quit his job on the spot.

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Karen bent down and pointed to the printed schedule on her boss’ desk. “No, Doctor, we have Mr. and Mrs. Kennedy scheduled at two tomorrow. We can’t put them off again, even for the Trumps. We’ve already bumped the Kennedys three times this month.”

Dr. Leibowitz pressed her lips together and sighed. “You’re right, Karen. It’s just that having David and Yvette Trump would be a wonderful advertisement for the practice.”

Karen smiled slightly. “We can’t advertise using any patients’ real names—”

“But we can let it be known among the finest social circles in both Metropolis and Gotham City – quite discreetly, of course—”

“Of course.”

The doctor smiled. “It could be hinted that the Trumps are seeing us professionally. And any perceived improvement in their relationship would be a boost for the practice.”

“I agree. But it won’t do that much good if we lose Chester and Patricia Kennedy over it. The negative publicity could outweigh the positive.”

“Hmm. That’s true. Let me see the files on both couples, please.”

Karen stood and called out, “Ms. Cunningham, please bring me—”

“The Kennedy and Trump files, Doctor.”

Karen smiled momentarily at the red-headed intern. “Thank you, Ms. Cunningham. That was very efficient on your part. That’s all for now.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

Both women behind the desk slowly looked up to see a large-caliber revolver in Zoe’s right hand. Karen quickly glanced around the office and saw that the door to the reception area was closed and locked.

Karen lifted her hands and cautiously straightened up. “Zoe, what are you doing?”

The redhead waved the pistol at the doctor. “Lift your hands, too, Doc. Besides, the shotgun under the desk isn’t loaded.”

That statement shocked Karen far more than the presence of

the pistol had. It meant that Zoe, or whoever she really was, had taken the time to examine the office and neutralize their defenses. It made her wonder who the girl was working for.

And what she intended to do with them.

"Please stand up, both of you," said Zoe. "I want you to stand on this side of the desk, your hands locked behind your heads and your backsides leaning against the front edge."

The two women complied. "Feet out a bit more, please," Zoe said. "I don't want to shoot either of you because you suddenly jumped at me in a vain attempt to be heroic. And move further away from each other. That's better."

Zoe's nasal voice had begun to grate on Karen's ears even more than before. "What do you plan to do with us?" Karen asked.

Zoe tilted her head to one side and smiled. "My, that was fast. You're already past the 'you're a junkie looking for drugs' stage and even the 'we don't keep cash in the office' stage. You've assumed that I'm here for some purpose other than robbery. Have you considered that I might be a hired assassin?"

She leaned closer and pressed the pistol against the underside of Karen's right breast. Karen stopped breathing for a long moment. "Ever seen how much damage this weapon can do at close range, Karen? It makes a hole going in that's about the size of a dime, but the hole it makes going out is bigger than a silver dollar. I could pull this trigger and paint the wall and ceiling with the tissue from inside your boob. At least, I think that's what would happen." The redhead smiled evilly. "Shall we test my hypothesis?"

"No!" cried Leibowitz. "Please don't – don't shoot us! We've never done anything to you!"

"No? Are you sure about that?" Zoe stepped back and Karen's lungs slowly refilled. "Well, it doesn't matter, does it? Both of you kick off your shoes. Now."

They both pushed their shoes toward Zoe. "Now, Karen, since you're wearing a very nice pantsuit, how about you lose your slacks and pantyhose?"

"Wh – what? Why?"

"Doctor, you're the psychologist, you tell her why." Leibowitz pressed her lips together and didn't respond. "No? Then I will. Modern Americans feel much more vulnerable when they aren't wearing the amount of clothing they feel appropriate to a given situation. If I take your pants, you're far less likely to do something stupid that I'd have to shoot you for. And I'll know for sure that you aren't carrying any concealed weapons. Now drop them and toss them next to your shoes."

Karen was scared now. She could face a sane person with a weapon, but facing a crazy woman with a pistol terrified her. She cut her eyes to Jenna Leibowitz, mutely pleading for help, but saw only a granite mask excluding her.

She would have to face this maniac alone.

Karen unfastened her trousers and let them fall the floor. "Kick them over on your shoes," grated Zoe. "That's right. Now the hose."

Karen hesitated. "I – I'm not wearing anything under them."

Zoe shrugged. "I don't care. Will it help if I promise not to take any pictures?"

Karen's ire flared. "You stupid little—"

The 'snick' of the pistol's hammer being pulled back stopped her.

"Just drop them, Karen, and don't give me any back talk. Because I just might shoot you and leave you bleeding on the floor the next time you don't do what I tell you to do."

Karen looked into Zoe's green eyes – contact lenses, she realized – and nodded. After a moment, her hose joined her pants in the pile on the floor.

"Hands back behind your head, Karen. Link your fingers together. That's it. And lean back against the desk like before.

Feet apart. Good. Now, Doctor Leibowitz, it's your turn."

"This is a one-piece dress," growled the doctor.

"So it should come off easily. Or should I shoot it off?"

"No! I – I'll take it off."

Leibowitz fumbled with the zipper in the back for a moment, then slipped it down and let the dress fall to the floor. "Much better," smiled Zoe. "Now the slip and the hose."

Leibowitz hesitated, then pulled the slip over her head. She balled it up and threw it on the floor beside her shoes.

Zoe whistled. "Very nice, Doctor. Garter belt and nylons instead of plain old pantyhose. That brings a number of interesting questions to mind, if only I had time to ask them. Come on, unsnap the nylons and pull them off."

Karen expected Jenna to show some kind of resistance, a gesture or a growl or even a fierce scowl, but she saw none of that. Jenna meekly did as she was told.

It was disappointing.

Then Zoe gestured with the pistol again. "Okay, you two, turn around and reach over the desk. Grab the far edge and stay that way. Oh, Doctor, the little thirty-two semi-auto isn't in your upper right drawer any more, so don't try to grab for it."

Karen tried for a moment to preserve her modesty in that position, but reluctantly gave up after she realized it was impossible. The edge of the desk was too far to grab, but she did hook two fingers of each hand on it. After all, dying wasn't on her to-do list for the day.

Then Zoe did something Karen would never have expected.

The cold metal of the pistol's muzzle was suddenly thrust against her bare backside. Karen jerked, then forced herself to remain still.

"Very good, Karen. Now move just your left hand to the small of your back."

Karen felt Zoe wrapping something around her wrist, then the girl said, "Now the other hand." Whatever it was quickly encased her right wrist also. Zoe then grabbed Karen's hair and pulled her upright, then pushed the muzzle of the pistol into her ear.

"Very slowly now, turn one quarter turn to the right and kneel. That's it, facing away from the good doctor, an adjective I use quite loosely. Now stay there and don't move or I'll shoot something you don't want shot."

Zoe then gave Jenna the same instructions as she had Karen. Karen took the opportunity to test the wrappings on her hands. It wasn't rope or duct tape, so what did—

It was their hose. Zoe was tying their hands with their own hosiery. And Karen knew from experience that you could hang a large person with a nylon stocking. They weren't going to break out of these restraints by themselves.

Karen felt her hands pulled backward roughly, and she realized that Zoe was tying their hands together. Then a length of nylon encircled her throat and she flinched hard, trying to move away.

Zoe rapped her head above the ear with the pistol barrel, and Karen saw stars for a moment. Zoe's voice came from far away. "Now you're ready to answer my questions."

Karen's vision finally cleared and she looked around. She could feel Jenna's fingers exploring the knots that held them, and she saw Zoe pull a chair to the middle of the room so she could watch both of them.

"Hope you two aren't altogether uncomfortable, despite almost being in the altogether together," the redhead chuckled. "But now that you're ready, you're going to answer some questions."

Jenna's voice assumed the familiar counselor's soothing tone. "Zoe, you can't believe that you'll get away with this. You're getting yourself in a lot of trouble just to steal patient information."

Karen relaxed slightly. This was a bad situation, but Jenna

could talk them out of it. Jenna could talk to anybody about anything. And surely Zoe wasn't going to kill either of them over their files.

Zoe's smile was predatory instead of amused. "I guess it would be if I were after patient information. Someone with an evil mind could steal those and probably blackmail any number of people in the city. That is, if that was what I was after."

"Oh? If that's not what you want, what are you looking for? You know you don't have that much time. Brett will be finished soon, and I don't think he's wearing nylon hose today."

Zoe nodded. "That's probably true, Doc. But if he does stick his head in here, the first thing he's going to see is you two half-naked and tied up. It's a frat boy's dream come true, don't you think? And I'll have time to do whatever I need to do to neutralize him."

Karen sighed. She knew she should have fought for her pants. "That's pretty good thinking on your part, Zoe," purred Jenna. "But I don't believe you'll actually shoot either of us if we don't cooperate."

Zoe leaned forward. "Alan Robertson didn't think so either."

Karen nearly lost control of her bladder at the mention of Robertson's name. She'd all but demanded that she and Jenna take what money they could carry and head west when the news of Robertson's shooting and subsequent arrest had broken. The news reports hadn't revealed much detail, but it was obvious to Karen that Robertson had talked freely, especially since he'd been released so quickly. Jenna had refused to leave, insisting that they had in place sufficient protections, both legal and not so legal, to keep them safe.

Apparently she'd been mistaken.

Now all Karen could anticipate was a permanent scar from a bullet and an extremely painful injury which would require surgery to repair and long hours of therapy to fully recover from. And she wasn't likely to get that kind of care behind bars.

"I'll tell you!" Karen blurted. "I'll tell you everything!"

"No!" hissed Jenna. "You'll ruin everything! You can't mrgluph grrrrppg!"

Karen didn't know what Zoe had shoved into Jenna's mouth, but whatever it was it had shut her up. Zoe then knelt down beside Karen and allowed the pistol to point in the general direction of the floor between Karen's knees. "I think we're going to have a very nice conversation, Karen. Don't you?"

Karen nodded sharply, hoping not to alarm whoever this frightening young woman really was.

The redhead smiled again. "Now let me show you something."

She reached into her outer jacket pocket and produced two capped syringes. "Doctor, you'll want to hear this. One of these needles contains a double dose of a fairly powerful narcotic. It's pretty much guaranteed to put you to sleep for hours. The other is — well, let's just say that the sleep that one will give you will be much deeper. And, I'm afraid, very permanent."

Karen's eyes widened at the sight of the syringes and she gasped. She could feel Jenna stiffen and stop working on the knots holding their hands.

"If you answer me truthfully, Karen, I won't have to use these. But if you don't — or if I don't believe you or if you try to lie to me — then I'll have to squirt one of these into Dr. Leibowitz's butt and the other into yours. And I'm really sorry, but I was so tired that I completely forgot to label them when I made them up last night, so I really don't know which one is the sleepy dose and which one is the even more sleepy one."

Jenna whimpered against her gag and shivered. Karen sat back on her haunches and pulled her knees against her chest. "Please," she begged, "please d-don't use them! I swear I'll tell you everything I know."

Zoe tilted her head and smiled. "See? That wasn't so hard,

was it? Now, if you promise to tell me the truth every time I ask you a question, we won't have any problems. Okay?"

Karen looked down past the nylon noose pressing on her throat and took a shuddering breath. "Yes!" she whispered fiercely. "No — no problems at all."

Zoe touched the pistol barrel to the floor between Karen's feet, then slowly lifted the pistol until the front sight touched Karen's bare crotch. Then she smiled. "That's good. Because you don't want to disappoint me, do you?"

Karen could feel her navel trying to retreat into her stomach. "No! I — I mean, no, I d-don't want to disappoint you!"

Zoe leaned back on her heels and took the pistol away. "That's just fine. Let's start with some simple things and work up to the really important ones in a few minutes, okay?"

Karen knew that Jenna would probably have killed her at that moment if she could, and that Jenna's boss would almost surely order it if Jenna didn't. But Karen also knew that Zoe — or whoever she was — was at least as likely to shoot her right here and now. The girl wasn't just behaving erratically, she was probably sociopathic. She might or might not take pleasure in killing them, but she didn't seem to care about the moral issues involved.

Laying aside the moral questions one might ask about Karen's own activities over the past few years, she didn't want to die, not ever, and certainly not while half-naked in her own office and tied up like a calf at slaughter. Whether Intergang or some Mob boss had sent Zoe or she was a loose cannon operating on her own didn't matter at this point. Karen had only a slim chance to survive until her next birthday, and answering this certifiably insane girl's questions was the best shot she had — the only shot, in fact — at living out the day.

Karen took a shuddering breath and gazed into Zoe's green plastic lenses. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything connected with the Boss to whom you report." The redhead's smile widened almost maniacally and her head tilted to one side. "Why don't you just start talking? If I think you've missed something, I'll ask you to clarify." She leaned closer and touched her lips to Karen's ear and softly whispered, "Do try to be complete. I really hate asking for clarification. I tend to get—" she lowered the hammer on the pistol — "impatient."

Karen started talking. And she didn't intend to stop until she'd told all she knew.

## Chapter Six

When Lois finished asking Karen all the questions to which she needed answers, she pulled out the two syringes she'd purchased on the street and injected each of the women in the hip with a five milligram dose of Scopolamine mixed with a fifteen-cubic-centimeter one-percent saline solution. Despite her threat to Karen, both doses were as safe a knockout drug as she could get from the street vendor she'd met the previous night, and as long as neither woman had a pre-existing heart problem, they'd be fine the next day.

She hoped so, anyway. She'd used all the Rohypnol she could get on Robertson.

If she hadn't insisted that they lie down first, they would have fallen over. The surgical anesthesia drug hit both of them like a runaway truck and they were unconscious in seconds. And according to the pusher from whom she'd bought the doses, their short-term memories would be suppressed. Whatever they remembered, it would be fragmentary and unclear, assuming they remembered anything for the previous few hours.

She still felt dirty from the grin on the dealer's face when he'd sold her the date-rape drug. He hadn't said anything to her, he'd just laughed cruelly. But it had to be done if the Boss was going to face justice sometime before Lois closed her eyes for the

last time.

Lois tucked a couch pillow under each woman's head and made sure they were breathing easily. Then she removed the stockings from around their necks and wrists and straightened their hair. She folded their clothing neatly and stacked it on top of the desk. She amused herself by imagining how the women would try to figure out what had happened to them.

Her pistol slid easily into her purse, along with the micro-recorder she'd used to tape Karen's answers to her questions. She was glad not to have fired her weapon this time, but only because it would have made her escape more difficult. And she didn't want anyone interfering with her when she mailed this tape to the DA.

Or, on second thought, maybe there was another way to get this information to them. She'd have to think about it later.

She unlocked the office door and slipped through, then closed it firmly. Brett was still in his office making calls, so she tapped on his door and waited for him to tell her to come in.

"Dr. Leibowitz wants you to knock on her door twenty minutes before the next patient comes. Karen may be in there with her, so you'll need to answer the phones, too."

Brett frowned. "Where will you be?"

"I have some errands to run, so I'm going for an early lunch. I should be back before the next couple arrives."

She could tell that Brett didn't like it, but he nodded sharply. "Fine. Leave the door open so I can see anyone who wanders in."

"No problem. See you later."

She waltzed out as if she owned the place. She wished she could see Brett's face when he discovered those two half-naked women out cold on the floor in the doctor's office.

The elevator was empty when the doors opened for her on the sixth floor. She pulled off the wig in the elevator and stuffed it in her oversized purse. The third-floor ladies' room gave her a place to straighten her hair, lose the wig in the trash can, and turn her jacket inside out to show the tan pattern instead of the solid black. The green contacts also ended up in the trash, and her black plastic glasses went in her pocket and were replaced with thin wire-frames. No one would associate the short-haired brunette who walked out the front door of the building with the long-haired redhead who'd come in to work that morning.

It was time to digest the new information she'd gotten. Karen had been most informative once she'd begun talking.

Lois now had detailed information on Jenna's criminal hierarchy, from the seven people who reported directly to her and many of the people who reported to those seven. Below that, Karen didn't know the details, but she knew about the general activities they'd engaged in. Lois wasn't surprised to learn that collecting from the house of prostitution she'd used as camouflage when casing Big Mike was the responsibility of one of Jenna's subordinates.

The only hiccup had been when Lois had asked about the next level up. Karen had sworn on her mother's grave that a tall, white-haired, goateed Englishman — whose name she claimed not to know — was the person Jenna Leibowitz reported to. Karen had admitted to seeing him several times and had spoken with him twice. He'd always been charming, if a bit low-key, and unfailingly polite.

He'd also exuded an aura of menace so palpable that Karen hadn't wanted to talk any more. Lois had had to place her pistol against the doctor's head and cock the hammer to get her speaking again. Leibowitz had tried to scream through her gag, presumably for Karen to shut up, but Karen had believed Lois' bluff and spoken about Nigel by name, then poured out all she knew of his activities.

Lois climbed on a city bus and rode it downtown, then switched to another which took her closer to her hideout apartment. The wire frames disappeared into her purse on the

second bus, and she turned her jacket inside-out one more time just before her stop. The effect made Lois look like yet another person to the casual observer. She felt invisible, and safe, again.

Except there was a young cop in front of her apartment building as she rounded the corner two blocks from her refuge. Without breaking stride, she kept walking past him without turning her head, then turned into the alley where the building's fire escape terminated. If she couldn't get in the back way, she could climb the ladder.

But a quick glance over her shoulder told her that not only was the cop not following her, he hadn't seemed to even notice her. And, as she'd hoped, the emergency exit of the building was still unlocked from the outside, something that would have aroused the ire of any safety inspector should one ever visit this dump.

The stairs weren't too hard on her legs, even if she hadn't been to the gym for almost two weeks. And her stomach felt better today. Maybe she would have a good day today and not ralph up the contents of her belly.

She snickered to herself as she thought of Ralph and vomiting at the same time. It was an apt juxtaposition. The guy was just irritating, even when he was actually working.

Then her smile turned upside down as she thought of Cat and their verbal battles, of Jimmy and his enthusiasm and untapped talent, of Perry and his Elvis stories, of Eduardo and his proud tales of his children and what they had already accomplished in life —

And of Clark.

Her eyes threatened to overflow and her vision blurred and she almost tripped on the wrinkled carpet leading to her room.

Blast it! She'd let him sneak up on her again!

She missed all of the others at the Planet, but she missed Clark most of all. She wished that she'd taken him seriously all the times he'd tried to warn her about Lex Luthor. She wished she hadn't seriously considered accepting the man's proposal, a proposal Clark had all but begged her to decline.

And she wished she'd told him that she returned his love that day in the park.

She dropped her purse and the foot of the bed and turned to lock the door behind her. Her lip trembled and she stumbled to the bed to fall face-down on the comforter.

Of all the people she regretted pushing away from her, it was Clark who was her number one regret. He'd never revealed any of the secrets he'd learned about her, he'd always come through for her, he'd always been there to lift her up when she was down, and no matter how hard she tried, she hadn't been able to run him off. For most of a year, she'd tried to shove him away from her, but like a puppy he kept coming back for more.

No, not a puppy. He was smart, handsome, and had an inner strength that would have given anyone Lois knew a strong test. He was also faithful to a fault, and even though he had no compunction about correcting her grammar or spelling or actions, he always did so with the goal of helping her be a better reporter, a better writer, a better person.

He had to be in love with her to put up with such lousy treatment from her.

She curled up in a ball and prayed silently as her tears dampened the covers. She prayed that she'd wrap this up soon enough to tell Clark how she really felt about him. She prayed that her cancer would let her enjoy a few weeks, or even just a few days, of his company. She prayed that he'd understand that she loved him no matter how short her time was.

Then her hands began trembling.

She tried to stop them but couldn't. She felt as if she were coming down with a serious case of chills, but she didn't have a fever. Maybe — maybe her tremors were another symptom of the cancer manifesting itself.

Her legs began shaking and her chest spasmed. Her breath came in short, sharp gulps snatched from between her chattering teeth. Her head jerked up and down against the pillow and a scream began making its way up from her abdomen.

Lois managed to shove her face against the pillow just before the wails began – even here, a screaming woman would bring attention she didn't want. Her tears soaked the pillow and mixed with her drool. Her fingers clawed at the sheets and tore through the cheap weave in at least two places.

It was either the cancer or the emotional reaction of missing Clark so much. It had to be. She couldn't be reacting to what she'd done – and threatened to do – to Jenna and Karen. It had been wrong, she knew, but there was no way to get the information she needed quickly enough. The end justified the means – at least it did in this case.

Her wild lunges and shakes finally subsided into deep, heart-rending sobs. She missed Clark. She missed Perry and Jimmy and even Cat. She missed her own apartment and her Jeep. Most of all, she missed doing her job, talking around and through obstinate police officers, getting information no one else could get, seeing her name above the fold on the front page, because it meant that a bad person wouldn't hurt anyone any more.

She cared about the awards, the recognition of her peers, the knowledge that she was near the top of her profession, but most of all she wanted the bad guys to pay for what they did. She slept well knowing that one or more evildoers were put away where they couldn't hurt anyone.

She wiped her eyes and nose on the edge of the grimy sheet and told herself that she'd find the Boss and prove his or her identity. And she'd sleep well for eternity knowing that she'd brought the Boss to justice.

Exhausted sleep overtook her before she could move from that spot.

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Lex pressed the intercom button. "Jennifer, please locate Nigel and ask him to come to my office immediately."

"Yes, sir," the woman responded.

Lex leaned back in his chair. He didn't know whether he hoped Nigel already knew all about the scene in Jenna's office or that he would be shocked by the news. Lex was certainly shocked, and not a little concerned. Jenna knew enough about Lex' business – his real business – to put him in prison for the next few decades of his life, assuming he could avoid the death penalty.

A knock on the door signaled a visitor. It had to be Nigel, or his secretary would be in for a very uncomfortable lesson. "Come in, Nigel."

The tall Englishman stepped in and closed the door, then moved further into the room. "You summoned me, sir?" he asked.

"Yes, Nigel, I did." Lex picked up a cigar – this one a domestic brand – and puffed it until it was lit to his satisfaction. He glanced at Nigel, who hadn't moved from that spot. "Have you heard the latest about the assault on one of our subordinates?"

The man frowned slightly. "Unless you refer to Mr. Robertson's ordeal, and I doubt that you do, no, I have not heard, sir."

Lex nodded. "Funny you should mention Mr. Robertson. I just took a call from him." He stopped and took in a long puff from the cigar, then let it out in a smooth stream. "It seems that he went to his supervisor's office to – how did he put it – oh, yes, to 'plead his case with her.' An appropriate turn of phrase for an attorney, don't you think? Unfortunately, his supervisor was, er, unable to converse with him."

Nigel started. "She's dead?"

"No, not dead, but she was drugged and unconscious. Mr. Robertson took charge of the situation by telling the young man

in the adjoining office – a civilian employee of Dr. Leibowitz – that the young man needed to go to Mr. Robertson's car and retrieve an emergency medical kit while Mr. Robertson revived the two women in the doctor's office."

"I'm sorry, sir, two women?"

"Two, Nigel. Dr. Leibowitz and her associate Karen Carter. Both women were in a shameful state of undress, and Robertson apparently did a good job of covering them and hiding their clothing – which was neatly folded and stacked on the doctor's desk – before the young man returned. Then somehow he convinced the young man that the women had been felled by some virulent pathogen and needed to be quarantined. Next – and this is the part I appreciated the most – Robertson convinced the young man that he had not been exposed to the pathogen but he, Robertson, had been, and that the young man needed to lock himself in his office to prevent such exposure while Robertson contacted the authorities and secured the room. Robertson then contacted an associate of his, who assisted him in transporting the two women to a safer location."

Nigel nodded, then blinked. "Uh, sir, if you don't mind a question or two?"

Lex waved the cigar expansively. "Go ahead."

"How did you come to be in possession of this information?"

"Ah! A very good question. Jenna has my private number here. Instead of merely memorizing it, as instructed, she entered it into her personal cell phone under the initials 'L L' with no accompanying description. Robertson found the phone, took it with him, and called the number when it became obvious that the good doctor would survive her ordeal. I nearly hung up when I heard his voice, until he told me that Jenna and Karen were safe with him and recovering under a physician's care. Unfortunately, their memories are somewhat clouded, so we do not know the extent of the damage as yet."

"I see, sir. Then I must ask – who has perpetrated this deed?"

"Robertson reported that Jenna had taken on a new staff intern several days ago, a young red-headed woman named Zoe Cunningham, possessing excellent organizational skills and a three-fifty-seven magnum revolver. Jenna was quite clear in relating that detail to Robertson, one of the few details of which she was certain. Does that sound like anyone we know?"

Nigel took in a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "Regrettably, sir, this sounds like the work of one Lois Lane, renegade investigative reporter for the Daily Planet."

Lex straightened in his chair. "I agree. Robertson was unable to obtain any concrete information about what the young woman – almost surely Lois – had acquired from Jenna and Karen, but there was a brief mention of a microcassette recorder and the district attorney's office. I suggest that we attempt to intercept that tape, if possible, and destroy it. If we can, there will be no record of what actually happened in that office, as both Dr. Leibowitz and Ms. Carter were removed from the building before anyone saw them."

Nigel nodded. "He did well, sir. I assume the young man in the outer office has been eliminated?"

Lex shook his head. "No. Robertson felt that because he had neither seen nor heard anything incriminating, it was safe to have another associate take him home. The associate then injected a sedative into the young man's arm after telling him that he should receive a preemptive inoculation against the virulent pathogen which felled the unfortunate doctor and her office manager. I expect that by now the young man is fast asleep and will remain so until late tomorrow." Lex stood. "If it's any consolation to you, I believe that you have trained Mr. Robertson well."

"Thank you, sir, but I must decline all credit for his—"

"Of course you must!" Lex slammed both fists on the desktop. "It was your incompetence in failing to locate Lois that has allowed this situation to develop as it has! You cannot be held

responsible for its beginning but I do hold you responsible for its continuation!” He stomped around the desk and glared up at his subordinate. “I want you to stop that tape from reaching the authorities, Nigel. And then I want you to find Lois Lane and bring her to me alive and unharmed! And this time I will accept no excuses, no prevarications, no explanations! I want results!”

Nigel didn’t shift position, but his face tightened and his words were even more clipped than usual. “Yes, sir. Unless you have additional instructions for me—”

“GO!” roared Lex.

He went.

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Nigel was furious.

No. His black rage went beyond furious, beyond livid, beyond inflamed, beyond anything he could name. He hated Lois Lane with a volcanic passion. He didn’t just want her dead, he wanted her disemboweled with a dull box cutter and eviscerated with a red-hot butter knife. He wanted her drawn and quartered by four teams of Galapagos tortoises and her body salted and drawn into jerky. He wanted to drill holes into her skull and force in boiling salt water to flush out her brain matter. He wanted her to die in screaming agony, terrorized beyond coherent speech, drowning in her own blood.

And he wanted to do it all himself.

It didn’t matter what Lex Luthor had told him. It didn’t matter what his instructions were. It didn’t matter what Lex Luthor wanted. Nigel St. John was going to kill Lois Lane.

And if he couldn’t do it with a box cutter or butter knife or tortoises, he’d settle for dropping her off a tall building or crushing her skull with a concrete block.

First, though, he had to stop that tape from being delivered.

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Maura Ingles put the phone down and wept silently. She knew that her life was over no matter how this turned out. The Englishman had never asked her to steal anything or destroy anything before, only copy papers for him or delay certain office deliveries a day or two. And he’d always paid her both well and on time.

Now, though, she was being asked – no, she’d been ordered – to intercept a particular envelope containing a specific tape and give it to the Englishman. He couldn’t tell her what size or color the envelope was, how big the tape was, who it was addressed to if not just to the District Attorney of Metropolis, or what the return address was, assuming one would be on the envelope. But she had to find it anyway or suffer the consequences.

Maura didn’t want to know what the consequences might be.

If she found the tape and gave it to the Englishman, he’d hold it over her head for the rest of her life. She was neither a law enforcement official nor an attorney, but the eight years she’d spent in the bowels of the District Attorney’s office had been good ones. She’d prided herself on helping the city keep a handle on the criminal element, and her contributions in keeping the lines of communication among the various attorneys and clerks in the department had been substantial and material, at least in her own mind. She rationalized her extracurricular activities by telling herself that no criminal had ever escaped justice because she’d shared information on any ongoing prosecution.

But the money wasn’t enough this time. Surrendering that tape would interfere with a criminal investigation and prevent someone from paying for a criminal act. Maura knew that without knowing what was on the tape. She wouldn’t have been given such an urgent and dangerous mission if that weren’t so. And she wouldn’t have been promised triple her normal payment if it had been her usual copy-the-brief or mislay-the-affidavit job.

There was really no question about what Maura would do. She’d get the tape and deal with the other stuff later.

Assuming, of course, that she lived long enough to deal with

the other stuff.

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Lois sighed as she put the tape into the manila envelope, along with a piece of cardboard on either side of the tape to stiffen it, sealed the envelope, and wrote the DA’s address on the front. She frowned in thought for a moment, then wrote “Photo – Do Not Bend” below the address. As an added bonus, she put Lola Dane on the return address field and added the Daily Planet’s street address along with it. It might keep the envelope closed long enough for the tape to find the right person.

She sighed. If the DA got this tape and acted on it, both Jenna and Nigel would be trapped in the investigation. If it fell into the wrong hands, though, someone was likely to die at the hands of the criminals she was pursuing. Upon reflection, Lois decided it would be fitting if there were one or two bad guys who went into eternity with her. It wouldn’t be as good as bringing down the entire organization, but it would be better than nothing.

Of course, the original tape was already on the way to Perry’s home with the same return address. Her old boss would know what to do with it.

### Chapter Seven

Alan Robertson looked up as the door to his office swung open to admit a tall, broad-shouldered younger man who strode implacably toward his desk. Robertson’s secretary Margaret trailed in the man’s wake, nipping at his heels like a puppy and yipping that he couldn’t come in. The man ignored her and didn’t stop until he rooted himself to the floor in front of Alan’s desk.

“Mr. Robertson,” he said, “I’m Clark Kent from the Daily Planet. I need to speak with you.”

“I do not give interviews, Mr. Kent. Please follow my secretary out of my office and out of the building and do not return.”

Kent leaned on the desk even as Margaret tried to pull his arm back. Judging by the effect she had on him, she might as well have tried to pull a fifty-year-old oak tree out of the ground.

“I’m not here to interview you, Mr. Robertson,” Kent growled. “I want to talk to you about Lois Lane.”

Alan looked into the man’s eyes and saw steely determination. He sighed, knowing now that Kent wouldn’t leave without accomplishing his mission. “It’s all right, Margaret,” he grunted. “I’ll speak to Mr. Kent. Please go back to your desk.”

“I could call security, Mr. Robertson. You shouldn’t tire yourself. You know what your doctor said.”

“I’ll be fine, Margaret. Really. Thank you for your concern, but please leave us alone for now.”

She glared at Kent for a long moment, then turned and stormed out. The door slammed into its frame with enough force to shake the wall.

Alan turned to the invader and said, “Please tell me what you need to know and let me answer your questions. My doctor still has me on half-day office hours and I tire quickly.”

“Fine.” Kent straightened and loomed even larger. “I’ve read the description of the woman who shot you. It sounds like Lois Lane in a thin disguise. I also saw the police sketch of her face. It looks like Lois with shorter hair.”

“I do not believe the woman was wearing a wig, Mr. Kent.”

“Neither do I, which means she cut her hair and dyed it. Did she say anything to you about why she was doing this?”

“Have you heard the tape?”

“I read the transcript.”

“Then you know as much as I do. I do not believe I can add to your knowledge on this subject.”

“I think you can. You can tell me what the two of you talked about at dinner. The police report was pretty thin on those details.”

Alan leaned back and took another look at the reporter, then

thought hard for several seconds. Then he decided to take a chance.

“You are in love with her, are you not?”

Kent’s face flushed and Alan knew he’d scored a hit. “We’re not talking about me, Robertson, we’re talking about you and Lois.”

“I have not changed the subject, Mr. Kent. You were the man of whom she spoke at dinner.”

“What? What man? What did she say?”

“As we ate our salads, before the entrees arrived, I asked her why she, such a beautiful, confident, intelligent woman, was not already involved in a satisfying romantic relationship. She told me that she had been all but engaged to a wealthy man who did not love her and whom she did not love, and that she had foolishly rejected the love of another man who did love her quite unreservedly. I asked why she did not seek to rectify that situation, and she put down her fork and said – quite cryptically, I thought – that time did not permit her to pursue that option. Then she brightened and redirected the conversation to me and tried to convince me that being a corporate attorney was a fascinating occupation.”

Kent’s expression fell. “That’s it?”

“I fear so. I made two or three attempts to learn more about the woman who I knew as Lola Dane, print advertisement model, but she parried them quite deftly and repeatedly turned the topic back to me. I must admit that I was flattered – until I found myself tied to a chair in an abandoned warehouse in Gotham City, pumped full of mind-altering drugs, and shot.”

“You confessed to a great many crimes, Robertson.”

“I am not a criminal attorney, Mr. Kent, but I have employed one for my own defense. And my attorney tells me that my so-called ‘confession’ was coerced under very dubious and stressful circumstances. I was also drugged. There is no way to prove any of those allegations. Any investigation resulting from that tape would, in legal terms, be the ‘fruit of the poisoned tree’ and therefore would not be admissible in a court of law. No judge would allow such calumny in his courtroom.”

He didn’t tell Kent that the rules for police interrogations and civilian tips weren’t quite the same, and that evidence from a citizen wasn’t subject to the same strict guidelines as information gained during police questioning. He also didn’t reveal that his attorney feared that there were many judges in the state who would be thrilled to hear that tape and preside over any of the resulting trials, Robertson’s own included.

Kent’s voice yanked him back to the moment. “Calumny, huh? That’s a three-dollar word if I ever heard one.”

“Please do not insult me by implying that you do not know that it refers to a malicious slander.”

“I won’t.” The reporter shifted his weight slightly and seemed to grow denser. “Did she say anything about where she was living?”

Robertson tried not to show his sudden fright. “No. She allowed me to believe that she lived from hotel to hotel as she traveled to her photography jobs. You did know that she approached me pretending to be a lonely model looking for intelligent dinner company, did you not?”

“Yes. So you have no idea where she might be now?”

“So long as I do not find her waiting for me in a stolen sports car when I leave my office, Mr. Kent, I could not care less where she is now or where she will be in the future, whether near or far.”

Kent seemed to deflate slightly. “Okay. I guess that’s all I have to ask you. Thanks for your help.”

“You may best thank me by not harassing me. Should there be a next time, I will not be so patient with you.”

The man’s chocolate eyes turned to ice. “The next time you see me, Robertson, I’ll be watching you in court.” Those eyes

narrowed and his voice turned hard. “And if a quarter of what’s on that tape is true, I hope they throw you under the jail and leave you to rot.”

Kent spun on his heel and yanked open the door, then left as abruptly as he’d arrived. Alan let out a long breath in relief. He’d had no doubt that the younger, bigger, and obviously far stronger man could have overcome him in seconds had the impulse overtaken him. And Margaret, as short and slender as she was, could only have called for an ambulance to take his body to the emergency room or the morgue, depending on how angry Kent really was.

Things were not going well. Dr. Leibowitz and Ms. Carter were back in their office, but despite Alan having come to their rescue after that very distressing episode in the doctor’s office after the assault by her intern, Dr. Leibowitz had not spoken with him since the tape of his ‘confession’ had been sent to the police. His own organization was in disarray as some of his underlings deserted the city like rats from a sinking ship, while others demanded larger shares for their own work and for taking over for their departed peers. He had enough hidden cash on hand to make his payments for the next three weeks, but beyond that he would have to dip into his private savings, the money not even his defense attorney knew about, unless the situation turned around quickly.

Or – perhaps there was another option.

Instead of making his usual payments to Leibowitz, he could take that money, his personal savings, the cash and bearer bonds from his safety deposit box, and run. The total added up to a sum over three hundred thousand dollars. All he needed to do was go west, maybe as far as St. Louis, to hide from Nigel St. John until he could make his way to Barbados or San Juan. If Nigel caught him, no one would find his body for years – if it ever was found.

But if he could avoid Nigel, he could live like a king in either of those places.

Or, perhaps, Haiti would be a more convivial destination.

That island country was rife with corruption and graft, and with his dark skin and education and obvious sophistication, he would fit right into the upper tier of society. He could offer his legal expertise to the Haitian leaders and generals to help them hide their ill-gotten gains from the local police and from the American authorities who regularly swept through the island nation to ‘fix’ it. The island nation was a shining opportunity for Alan to enter a new phase of his life.

Yes, that was a viable option. He’d consider it from all angles tonight and make his decision tomorrow. If he decided to go, he could buy a car or van for cash and disappear before Margaret could miss him.

There was no percentage in hanging around while waiting for either Jenna Leibowitz or the court system to get their hooks in him. Neither of those options sounded good to him as long-term solutions. It was time to fold his tent and set up shop using one of his other identities.

Sometimes it was good to be inconspicuous.

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Clark stopped on the street outside Robertson’s office, pulled out Perry’s cell phone, and dialed the office. His boss picked up after two rings.

“Perry White, Daily Planet.”

“Chief, this is Clark. Robertson didn’t give me anything I could use to find Lois.”

“Well, son, we knew it was a long shot going in. Come on back to the office and you can get started on your next assignment.”

That wasn’t what he wanted to hear. “She’s still out there. I need to find her.”

“We won’t stop looking, I promise you. But we do have this little thing called the Daily Planet which you and I have both

neglected a bit recently.”

“I want to take a shot at Dr. Leibowitz. I think I can get something from her or her staff.”

“I’m sorry, Clark, but the answer is no. We can’t get in the way of an active multi-jurisdictional investigation and you know it. Much as it pains me to say it, we have to wait for Bill Henderson on this one.”

Clark controlled the reaction to his frustration and didn’t crush the phone in his hand. “Maybe if I talk to someone in the DA’s office?”

Perry’s voice turned more urgent and more intense. “Don’t you dare! You know that Bill is not only honest but dedicated to justice. Not all cops are both of those things. The people in the DA’s office are dedicated to closing cases and convicting the guilty, not finding wayward reporters. And if you let anyone else in that building know about the group working on the evidence from those tapes, the bad guys will find out before the day is done and you’ll be guilty of obstruction of justice and I don’t want my two best reporters at odds with law enforcement at the same time.”

Clark sighed, knowing that Perry was right but hating to admit it. “Okay, I’ll come in. But if I hear anything solid about Lois’s whereabouts, I’m going out again.”

“Fair enough. Now come on back here and give me something I can put on the front page.”

Clark closed the phone and returned it to his pocket. He really hated the way he seemed to be two steps behind Lois no matter how fast he moved. He’d always known she was very good, but he was gaining a new respect for her talents. No one would admit to knowing where she was, and, unsurprisingly, none of the people she’d ‘interviewed’ – he liked Perry’s term for it – would give him any real information. He’d hit the proverbial stone wall.

Maybe the best thing he could do would be to go back to the office, get his assignments, and work them from the street angles until they found Lois. After all, she thought her condition was terminal, and that meant she wouldn’t stay hidden for long.

He’d find her.

He’d save her. He had to. He just had to.

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Lois sat on the bed in her seedy apartment, sipped a lukewarm soft drink she’d bought from the dented vending machine downstairs, and pondered her next move. She’d appeared as an older, chubby blonde bag lady, a sensuous brunette with blonde highlights, a testy redhead, and herself. In order to get closer to Nigel St. John, she’d have to appear as someone else, someone he wouldn’t necessarily expect but who wouldn’t set off any alarms for him. It wasn’t going to be easy.

He’d be alert for any woman he didn’t already know. And Lois was sure that he had all of his snitches on the lookout for her. Whoever she appeared to be, she needed to blend in to the background, yet be noticeable enough for him to listen to her suggestions.

But how?

How could she disguise herself this time? Bag lady was out, sultry model was already used, snippy secretarial intern was off the table, hookers didn’t wear enough clothes for a disguise –

Wait a minute.

All those roles were female roles. Maybe – just maybe – She had to think.

Of course! She could recreate her disguise for the car theft ring she’d infiltrated the year before! Jimmy had helped her with the walk and the voice, but she was sure she remembered it all. She’d have to scrounge up an Ace bandage to squish her breasts and pick up some generic men’s clothing from the local Goodwill store, but she was sure she could do it.

It meant cutting her hair even shorter, but she was more than

willing to go that route if it meant that she could get one step closer to the Boss. And when she did, she’d make him pick up a telephone and call the police and confess to keep her from shooting him right there on the spot. All that she’d learned since she’d gone underground had convinced her that if Nigel wasn’t The Boss – and she didn’t believe he was – he reported directly to whoever was The Boss. And Nigel reported directly to Lex Luthor.

The man who’d told her that he loved her and who had led her to believe that he planned to ask her to marry him.

The man she was starting to believe was, indeed, Metropolis’ resident criminal mastermind.

All the little clues that Clark had tried to get her to look at, all the little things she’d learned by herself over the past few weeks, subtly pointed to Lex Luthor as The Boss. Not any one piece of information confirmed that suspicion, of course, and each one of them could be explained away individually, but when she combined them with the information she’d gotten from all the people she’d ambushed since her terminal diagnosis, the fickle finger of fate indicated her erstwhile boyfriend.

The people she’d spoken with since beginning her end-of-life quest – Lois didn’t like to think of herself as an armed bully – had repeated rumors to her that the tests of strength Superman had undergone not long after he’d arrived had been directed by Lex. Her father’s involvement with the cyborg boxers – and Lex’ shooting of Max Menken – had been cast in a different light by other things she’d learned. Lex’ appearance at the Metro Club when she and Clark were investigating the Toasters and their arson now seemed most incriminating. She’d discounted Clark’s assertion that Lex had been involved in the Smart Kids case, but the things she’d learned from her interrogations had convinced her that Clark had been right. She’d even uncovered signs that Lex had been deeply involved with Miranda and her stinky Revenge perfume.

And the hits just kept on coming.

The weight of the evidence had all but convinced her that everything Clark had told her, everything he’d hinted at, everything he suspected about Lex Luthor was right. The man was a heel, a criminal, a thief, a murderer, and a surprisingly adroit liar. It would not have surprised Lois if Lex had pressured the advertisers to leave in droves in order to drive the Daily Planet nearly out of business, just so he could swoop in and save it and thereby impress her with his business acumen and compassion.

She shuddered as she remembered that she’d kissed that man right on the mouth.

None of what she’d learned was airtight, alibi-free, proven-in-court solid. But even the possibility that he’d been involved infuriated her.

She had to get to him. And the best way to do that was to go through Nigel.

She seriously doubted that Nigel would respond to simply having a weapon pointed at him, so she’d have to shoot him to make him talk. And she’d probably have to shoot first or he’d kill her. He was far better than she was at hand-to-hand combat, not to mention far more experienced and lethal. She couldn’t risk arousing his suspicions.

So where could she hide her weapon?

She felt her frown turn upside down and morph into a laugh as she realized that if she disguised herself as a man, she already had the perfect hiding place. And if her jeans were loose enough, no one would ever find it because no man would search her in that area.

She pulled a pen and notepad out of her purse. If Nigel was going to buy the story she planned to tell him, it would have to be a very good one, with no holes or weaknesses. He had to believe that her new persona – perhaps Tyler Josephs would be a good

name for him – that Tyler was a street thug and a reliable source of information, just a little off on his timing. She'd have to maneuver him until they were alone together, some place where he couldn't call for reinforcements.

And then she'd shoot him and question him. She could shoot him in the knee. He couldn't hurt her then, as long as she kept his hands off her. It was short and simple, like all good plans should be.

She could do this.

She had to.

And she had a good idea where to start. After all, Lex had to store his cars someplace.

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"St. John here. Yes, I know. I'm sorry, she did what? Are you certain? Have any warrants been issued? Yes, yes, you'll be paid! Double? Now see here, I will not – No. I will pay four times the standard rate for this information. If that is what you feel you must do, then by all means, look for another purchaser who can protect you from my displeasure. It is that or I will visit your Uncle William in his senior living center. That is what I thought. No later than tomorrow morning. Have I ever failed to pay you before? That is not germane to – very well. Yes, direct wire transfer. I have your account number."

Nigel hung up the phone in his office and sat back to think. This was bad news, very bad news.

Nigel would never admit, even to himself, that he was frightened. Not after the capers on the Continent during which he'd more than earned his 'double-oh' designation – his license to kill – while employed by British Intelligence. His far more famous compatriot James Bond had nothing on him, either in missions successfully accomplished or in body count. Nigel had never faced a situation while under contract to MI-6 which had frightened him. He'd been puzzled, stressed, pursued, even fooled once or twice, but he'd never been frightened.

Now, however, he felt – mild concern.

He stared at the telephone on his desk. Sometimes he hated telephones. They occasionally conveyed such distressing information.

His mole in the District Attorney's office, Maura Ingles, had finally secured the tape he'd ordered her to find and delivered it to him in return for an envelope full of cash. Then the traitorous little child had returned to the District Attorney and made a full confession of her activities for the past three years, naming names and revealing cases which she'd influenced by simply rerouting or delaying the delivery of documents. There were no warrants issued for Nigel's arrest as yet, but it was only a matter of time – a very short amount of time.

The worst part was that Nigel hadn't told Luthor about this latest development. It was Luthor's probable reaction to this news which filled Nigel with – mild concern.

It was time for him to leave. Nigel had always known when to shut down an operation, and this one was unraveling fast. It was almost inconceivable that one skinny reporter with exotic eyes and a harpy's tongue could shake the carefully constructed edifice of his criminal activity at its very foundation. Luthor, with Nigel at his side, had kept Intergang out of Metropolis, had prevented the Russian mobs from establishing a beachhead in the city, and had even driven the majority of the old Italian mobsters out of the state to greener pastures. None of them had thwarted Luthor's will. Yet Lois Lane, in less than three weeks, had hacked her way through their defenses and was poised to do even worse.

And Nigel still didn't know where she was.

It didn't matter. Nigel needed to run, and he needed to do it now. It no longer mattered where the Lane woman was or what she might do next. It no longer mattered that his network of spies was melting away like fog under the summer sun. The only thing that mattered was getting out of the city safely.

He hoped Link was working in the garage today. Link could get the Lincoln Town Car, the one with the cache of cash and spare clothing for him, and give Nigel the keys without asking questions. And the town car had the range to take him south, out of Luthor's immediate reach. From there he could pick and choose his destination and his new identity. He rather fancied becoming a beachcomber, wearing a canvas hat, denim shorts, flip-flops, and a ragged shirt. Anyone looking for Nigel St. John would never see him as Old Bob, British expatriate and bum, down there in Margaritaville.

It was best done quickly.

He took his favorite Beretta out of its desk drawer, checked the breech and the magazine to make sure it was loaded and ready to fire, and settled it into his shoulder holster. He hung two more fully loaded twenty-round magazines under his right shoulder, then picked up a laptop computer and slid it into his briefcase, along with the bearer bonds and cash from his office safe. This close to the mid-day meal time, no one would question his appearance or movements for perhaps an hour. He would need no more time than that to disappear as if he'd never been to LexCorp.

He nodded to his secretary as he ghosted through the office to the executive elevator bank. As always, the car was available for him as soon as he pressed the button. He pressed the button for the garage level as the doors closed.

Nigel breathed a silent sigh of relief as he exited the elevator and saw Link at the garage desk. The older black man struggled to his feet and smiled, making his chubby cheeks poosh out even farther. "Good day, Mr. St. John," he called. "Shall I get the Jaguar for you?"

"Not today, Link. Please bring the light blue Lincoln Town Car around."

Link's eyes flickered, but his smile never dimmed. "Sure thing, Mr. St. John." Link opened a nearby wooden stand and pulled a ring of keys from one of the posts. "Yo! Carleton!" he shouted. "Got a car for you to bring up. And make it snappy!"

A slightly sloppy young man with a thin moustache and ragged hair stepped around the corner. "Sorry, Mr. Link," he said, "Carleton already went out to lunch. I'll get the car if you want."

Link nodded and tossed the keys to the young man. "Okay, Tyler, go get the light blue town car in slot sixteen, this level."

"Yes sir!"

Nigel watched as Tyler quickly jogged down the rows of vehicles. "I don't know that young man, Link."

"Oh, he's new, Mr. St. John. Started yesterday mornin'. He's got a little bit of a smart mouth on him, and he knows how to use his fists. Seems to be a good worker, though." Link frowned. "There ain't no problem, is there, sir?"

"As long as he brings the correct car, I don't care if he's a professional cake decorator in his spare time."

Link smiled with relief. "He'll get that car, sir. Oh, look, he's bringing it already."

Nigel nodded with approval as the car slid to a gentle stop. He'd half-expected the young man to squeal the tires both starting and stopping, but he'd handled it with skill and care.

Tyler emerged from the driver's door and handed the keys to Nigel. "Here you go, sir."

Nigel took them and sat in the driver's seat. Behind him he heard Link say, "Hey, Tyler! Next time you just leave the keys in the – hey! Get out of there!"

Before Nigel could turn his head and look, the driver's side rear door opened and slammed shut. A quick glance in the rear view mirror showed Tyler's youthful face, now wearing a mask of barely controlled fury.

It also showed a large-caliber revolver pointed at Nigel's neck.

The young man ignored Link's shouts and gyrations outside

the car and pulled back the hammer on the pistol. “Drive!” he growled.

Nigel started the car and pulled forward. “Which way?”

“You pick the route. But know and believe that if anything bad happens, I will shoot you.”

Nigel turned right and glanced back at the mirror. Tyler’s eyes were narrowed and determined but not desperate. If Nigel kept his head, he would live through this day.

“You do understand that you cannot succeed in this endeavor, young man, whether you have robbery or kidnapping or some other motive for this rash action. There is no avenue for success open to you.”

“Doesn’t matter, Nigel. I’m on a dead-end street anyway.”

Nigel blinked. That voice – the eyes – of course!

He was an idiot. It was Lois Lane in the back seat of the car holding a weapon on him, not some frightened and idiotic young punk. Maybe he could talk some sense into her.

“Very good, Miss Lane. You had me completely fooled.”

“Shut up.”

“I only-”

She poked him in the neck with the muzzle of the revolver. “I told you to shut up.”

“As you wish.” He raised his hand to rub his neck and she poked him again.

“Both hands on the wheel, Nigel. Don’t touch anything else except the turn signal lever or you’ll have an extra hole in your head.”

He returned his hand to the steering wheel and nodded. “I assume you were responsible for the chaos in Dr. Leibowitz’ office a few days ago.”

“I was. And before you ask, yes, I’m the one who got Alan Robertson to bare his soul on that tape. And before that I shot Big Mike Pittman and Walt McNally to get information from them.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know those last two names.”

“Low level crooks in Lex’ organization. No reason you should know their names. They didn’t know you, either.”

“I see. Then, if I may ask, how did you locate me so quickly?”

She tapped him on the shoulder with the muzzle of the pistol. “Take a right at State, then another right at Ninth when you get there. And don’t move too fast or I’ll get nervous and pull the trigger.”

He glanced at the mirror again and decided that she was not bluffing. “Consider it done.”

They drove in silence until he turned at State, then stopped at a traffic light at the next intersection. “You were about to tell me how you found me so quickly, Miss Lane.”

“Pure luck. After a few days puttering around in the parking garage, I was going to find an excuse to go up to see you. But you came to see me on my second day. How very accommodating of you.”

The light turned green and Nigel guided the big car down the street, grinding his teeth at his misfortune. He’d made the right decision at the right time, and it had blown up in his face. He knew that operations sometimes went that way, that the most careful planning might be for naught if your opponent did something either out of character or unexpected.

Something out of character –

Why was Lois Lane acting like this? Why did she say that she was on a dead-end street? Why was she using violence to investigate Luthor’s illegal businesses?

“Miss Lane? Might I ask you a question?”

“No. Shut up and drive.”

“But I-”

She poked him in the neck again, harder this time. “I will drop you right here and now if you don’t shut up!”

He had no choice but to comply. They reached Ninth Avenue,

and Nigel turned right on the street. They were now about eight blocks from LexCorp Towers, and he wondered what the next turn might be. It was obvious, to him at least, that her real target was The Boss, and she seemed to know who that person was.

Wait a moment.

She’d mentioned Lex’ organization, not Nigel’s. And Nigel hadn’t expressed surprise or corrected her description.

He sighed quietly. Even the rawest rookie agent would not commit such an egregious error. He was an idiot twice in one day. If the woman hadn’t already had proof that Luthor was The Boss, she’d just received confirmation of it from Nigel’s own lips.

And if she gave Luthor that little bit of information, no place on Earth would be safe enough for Nigel to hide from the man’s wrath. He would spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder, waiting for Lex Luthor to bring that final sting of death to him.

An idea formed in his mind. If he brought her to Lex Luthor, his position in the company might still be secure. If Lex had Lois in his grasp, he might overlook Nigel’s failures to this point. It might work even if all he brought was her dead body.

All he needed to do was to wait for his chance.

Then another phrase she’d spoken surfaced in his mind, that she was on a “dead-end street.” What did that mean? What was she –

No. It couldn’t be –

Yes it could.

Of course. It was so obvious it was almost funny.

She still thought she was dying of cancer. She was working her way up the organization’s command structure in this manner because she didn’t believe she would survive long enough to do the job legally. And that gave Nigel an edge. As soon as he took that revolver away from her, he’d inform her that her diagnosis had been in error and that she was as healthy as she had ever been. The shock would take away her desperation and anger, rob her of her motivation to destroy what it had taken Lex and Nigel years to build, and she would easily surrender to Nigel’s tender mercies.

Then he’d shoot her in the head and take her body back to Luthor.

The most direct route back to LexCorp Towers was a right turn onto Park Lane, but Lois allowed him to pass it. Then she tapped his shoulder again and said, “Take a right down the alley beside Harper’s Dry Goods. Go just past the service entrance and stop.”

“You’re climbing the food chain, aren’t you, Miss Lane? You’re looking for the top predator. How do you know it isn’t me?”

“I never heard of anyone so chatty who had a gun pointed at his head and was told repeatedly to be quiet. Now stop talking.”

He nodded. This was an excellent place for him to overpower her. His training and experience gave him the confidence that he could best her in any fight, irrespective of any initial disadvantages he might face. The day was not over for Nigel St. John.

The car glided to a silent stop as Lois had directed. “Now put the transmission in park and turn off the key. Slowly, very slowly, take the key out of the ignition and hand it to me.”

This was his chance. He would take her now.

He moved the shift lever to Park, then turned off the key and slid it out of the ignition as he –

BLAM!

The bullet tore through the seat, then hit the back of his right shoulder and threw him forward as the impact twisted his torso to the left. The keys flew out of his hand and he slumped down to the middle of the front seat, stunned and bleeding.

Through the haze of stabbing pain and confusion, he thought he heard Lois say, “The police will be here soon and they’ll bring

an ambulance. Stay down and close your eyes because I'm going to put two more shots through the windshield to make sure somebody calls the cops." Then he thought he heard her grunt, "And it'll look more like a crime scene and they'll search the car and find whatever you've got hidden in here."

The back door opened closed and he heard running feet, then two shots rang out from outside the car. Glass fragments scattered around his head and left arm, and he glanced up to see spider cracks from the bullets spread across the windshield.

He grabbed the wheel with his left hand and slowly pulled himself upright, then reached for the ignition when he remembered that the key was somewhere on the floor of the car. He gave up and leaned back, knowing that he didn't have the strength to pick up the key even if he could find it. He couldn't even reach the bullet wound over his shoulder blade. He was only glad the round hadn't exited the front of his shoulder and made two bloody holes in his torso.

He looked down the alley and saw Lois shoot twice into the lock on the side entrance to the company parking garage, then pull it open. From that door, she could climb the stairs all the way to the top floor and walk directly into the executive offices. She must have researched the mechanism and discovered the best way to destroy it, he mused. The woman was nothing if not prepared.

Under other circumstances, he might have admired that quality in her.

An outside door slammed behind him and someone shouted for someone to call the police. A jowly middle-aged woman slowly crept into his line of sight and yelled at him through the window, asking him if he was hurt.

He gave her his best withering stare, one which unfortunately had no effect on her screeching calls to him. "You hurt, mister?" she repeated. "Don't worry, the police are coming now."

Had he still had the strength, he would have thrown the car door open and run. But he couldn't move his right arm at all, and he had begun to feel cold. His vision grayed out and he knew he was going into shock. The pain would get worse, he knew, before it got better.

The best outcome he might hope for was to awaken in the hospital surrounded by police officers. And it was the second worst fate he could imagine for himself.

The worst fate, of course, was to be dead.

## Chapter Eight

Link was scared, really scared. Not in a million years would he have thought that Tyler – or whoever he really was – would pull a gun on Mr. St. John. It couldn't be a kidnapping, because Tyler had left Link as a witness. No kidnapper would have left him alive to talk to the cops or anyone else. Same thing for a robbery or a carjacking. It just didn't make sense.

Link knew what he was supposed to do if anything out of the ordinary took place. He was supposed to call the head of security and tell him what had just happened. But if he did that, people would find out that Link hadn't done anything to stop whatever had just happened, and they'd all be mad at him. Like he could have stopped it. It had all happened too fast for him to stop it. And Link never carried a gun. But if he didn't tell them, Mr. St. John would tell them, and then they'd be even madder.

He couldn't win. All his life he couldn't win. He thought he'd found a cushy job for the rest of his life thanks to Nadine, and all of a sudden he was looking at jail or getting shot or running. He might as well die of a heart attack right now.

He dithered for several minutes, pacing back and forth in front of his desk and trying to decide. He knew he looked as scared as he was but he didn't know what to do. He had no instructions for something like this. Even though he hadn't hired Tyler, those people would make out like it was his fault no matter what he did. He couldn't run – he was too old and he wasn't

ready for something like this. If he got fired he'd never get another job. And he wouldn't last a week in jail.

He was still trying to make up his mind when the door to the tunnel from LexCorp's main office opened. He spun around and saw Mrs. Cox stride into the garage and smile at him. It was their secret routine on the days she went out for lunch. She'd smile real nice, he'd smile back, she'd call him Mr. Link, he'd call her Mrs. Cox like he hadn't known her since she was Nadine Hanover the five-dollar hooker and pool hustler down on Forty-Ninth and Vine, and he'd bring her car around himself and close the door for her like a gentleman treats a real lady.

Not today.

The closer she got, the more her smile dimmed. "Mr. Link, what's the matter? What happened?"

Her soft voice pried open his mouth and it all poured out. "Oh, Nadine, we got trouble! That young man Tyler they sent me yesterday done stole Mr. St. John's car with him in it! Boy had a gun pointed at Mr. St. John's head and they drove away!"

Mrs. Cox' lips parted slightly and she stopped in mid-step. "What?"

One of the conditions of his job was that he never – not ever! – refer to her as Nadine. They had both left the old grifter life behind when she'd become respectable. "Oh, I'm sorry! Mrs. Cox! That boy done took Mr. St. John away in the car and I don't know where they is now and I so scared I can't think!"

She took a deep breath and put her hand on his arm. "Take it easy, Artie. Just relax. Okay? Now tell me, how long ago did this happen?"

He wiped the sweat from his face and glanced at his watch. "Maybe ten minutes past. No more. Nadine – Mrs. Cox, what we gonna do?"

She smiled slightly and shook her head. "Nothing out of the ordinary. You're going to bring me my car – no. Which car did Nigel take?"

"The – the Lincoln. Light blue Town Car."

She nodded. "That's what I thought he'd do. Artie, I want you to bring me the silver and black Crown Victoria with the Landau roof. And then I'm going to take you to lunch."

Lunch? That should have been the last thing on her mind! "What? You can't – I mean I can't – lunch?"

Her smile grew. "Bad things are about to happen to Mr. Luthor, Artie, and we don't want to be here when the crap hits the fan. We've had a good run here, you and I, but it's time to go."

"But–"

"The silver and black Crown Vic, Artie. Please don't keep me waiting."

He shuffled to the key safe and opened it, then turned to face her. None of this made sense to him and he had a million questions, but all he could think of to ask was, "Lunch?"

Her head tilted to one side and her smile widened even further. "You ever been to Toronto, Artie?"

His eyes widened and his jaw fell, then the penny dropped. He nodded with comprehension. They were both running. Together again. They'd find a way to get back what they were losing here, everything except the trouble that would follow them unless they left the state. "You think you'll like Canadian food, Mrs. Cox?"

"I think I'll like it better than prison food. And from now on, just call me Nadine, okay?"

He grinned and started for the car. "Okay. Okay!"

He didn't bother to close the key safe. As far as he cared, anybody wanted a car now, they could take it.

Even Mr. Luthor's brand-new red Maserati.

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Lex' intercom buzzed and he pressed a key to respond. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry, sir," his secretary said, "but Mrs. Cox does not

answer either her desk phone or her cell phone.”

He paused for a moment and frowned, then pressed the key again. “Thank you, Jennifer. Please try again in ten minutes.”

“Yes, sir. I’m still unable to locate Mr. St. John, sir.”

“Keep trying to call him, too. Same interval. And keep me apprised of the results.”

“Yes, sir.”

He waited for her to tell him something else he didn’t want to hear, but nothing else came over the evil talking box. Lex almost grinned as he considered his mental description of the intercom as an ‘evil talking box.’ All it did was send or receive electronic impulses and translate them into speech. The box had no more hand in stirring up his troubles than the Dalai Lama did.

And then he did smile as he imagined the intercom with hands. Would those hands have five fingers like a human, or would they have only four or fewer, as in many older cartoons? Would the box be right-handed or left-handed? Would it walk on those hands or would it also have feet? Or would it extrude wheels and roll across his desk? Would it have eyes, and what color might they be?

He shook himself out of his escapist fantasy and pulled a fresh cigar out of the humidor at the bottom of the desk drawer. As he lit it, he considered the possible ramifications of both Nigel and Mrs. Cox being absent at the same time.

Those ramifications were dangerous, even deadly. He knew them both well enough that he was confident that whatever they were doing, it had nothing to do with some cheap assignation in a tawdry hotel and a bed that would be used but not slept in. That eventuality was so improbable that he discounted it immediately.

A second scenario was that Mrs. Cox had found Lois and had asked Nigel to help her bring Lois in. That was more plausible than the first scenario, but still highly unlikely. The day Nadine Cox admitted that she needed help doing anything would be the day Superman did a public striptease in Centennial Park. And Mrs. Cox wouldn’t need Nigel’s help with Lois.

Perhaps they were working together on some private project, either to promote their own interests in the company or to somehow upset or even displace Lex himself. It wouldn’t be the first time they’d planned something like that, either individually or collectively, but it might be the first time they had actually put such a plan in motion. It was certainly the first time Lex had been this vulnerable since both of them had joined his organization.

But it didn’t feel right.

Lex hated for anyone reporting to him to say that some possibility ‘felt’ a certain way. His professional practice was to look at the facts and only the facts in determining a course of action, and if the facts didn’t lead him in one direction or the other, he’d gather more facts until he saw the correct path clearly. Even so, there had been times when he’d been forced to take action without all the facts and without a clear direction. Sometimes things had worked out.

At other times – like this time – things had not gone so smoothly.

If Nigel and Mrs. Cox were both missing, it didn’t necessarily follow that they were together. But it might mean that both of them had examined the current business situation and come to the same conclusion.

At the risk of mixing his metaphors, it was probable that both of them, either independently or in consultation with each other, had decided that it was time to get out of Dodge before the roof fell in on them.

If two of his top lieutenants had come to the same conclusion at the same time, then perhaps it was time for Lex himself to make a discreet exit from the stage. He had enough cash on hand to set himself up anywhere he chose, and there were enough unattached mercenaries in the country at any given time and in most cities that he could easily rebuild his shattered criminal

empire elsewhere. It would take time, and it would destroy his influence in the legitimate world, but that was preferable to rotting in prison.

He’d read Milton’s “Paradise Lost” as a youth and had always identified with Lucifer’s assertion that it was better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven. He’d reigned for years in this city, in this state, and he could go somewhere else and rule again. Perhaps he’d never reach these exalted heights a second time, but wherever he went, he’d end up on top.

Having come to this conclusion, he began to implement a plan of action immediately. He accepted the state of reduced personal security that would ensue as an acceptable risk. After all, it would only last a day at most, probably much less.

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Jennifer Marlowe was no dummy. She’d grown up listening to her grandfather Philip’s tales of being a licensed private investigator on the West Coast during and after World War Two, and she’d watched her father retire just three years before as one of Metropolis’ most decorated police officers in the city’s history. He’d done more to clean up the department than any other high-ranking officer before him, and if a citizen called for help today, that citizen could be confident that the responding officer or officers would be honest and law-abiding.

If not for a knee injury she’d suffered in high school track, she might have followed in the family tradition. But even though she wasn’t a cop, she had ingrained cop instincts and a nose for trouble.

That nose was twitching harder on this day than it had at any time since she’d become Lex Luthor’s personal secretary six years earlier.

She’d seen Nigel St. John leave earlier. The timing of his departure wasn’t suspicious, since the man seemed to run on his own schedule, but there was something about the way he walked and the weight of the briefcase by his side that set off alarm bells in Jennifer’s mind. Mr. Luthor’s tight voice as he repeatedly asked her to contact both Nigel and Mrs. Cox was another factor tickling her nose. And the way a select few of Mr. Luthor’s regular visitors and callers had behaved in the past few weeks had made even the newest staff intern nervous.

She recalled a conversation she’d had with her father years before, just before starting her job at LexCorp.

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“Congratulations, sweetheart,” he said. “Lex Luthor doesn’t hire anyone but the best. And you’re the best.”

She smiled and tapped her Coke bottle to his. “Thanks, Pop. That means a lot to me.”

He took a swig and sighed with just a suggestion of regret in his face. “Not as good as a fine Guinness ale, but not too bad either.”

“You know what your doctor said, Pop. No alcohol. None whatsoever. Your liver and pancreas can’t take the stress.”

“I know, I know! You sound like your mother.”

“I’m flattered, as always, to be compared to her.”

“You should be. You two are the tops.” He leaned back and lifted the bottle to his lips again, then set it down and glanced around. “You know who you’re working for, don’t you?”

She sent him a hard look. “Don’t start that again, Pop. This is the best job I’ve ever had. Not only is the money great, the benefits are out of this world, and the potential for growth is almost unlimited. My new boss is the eleventh richest man in the world and he’s not satisfied with that ranking. With the stock options I’ll get, when he makes money I’ll make money. Tons of it.”

“He’s not satisfied with a lot of things, honey.”

“Dad, please—”

He lifted his hand and forced a smile. “Easy, Jen. I’m not trying to change your mind. I just want you to think about

something.”

She leaned back and crossed her arms. “I’m willing to think. Go ahead.”

“I know that nothing can be proven about Lex Luthor’s alleged illegal activities, not by the DA or by me or by anyone else in the department. And I’m not asking you to investigate him. That’s not your job and I don’t want you to make it your job. If you’re right, there’s nothing to find and you’d just make him mad and interfere with your career. But if I’m right, someone would figure out what you were doing and your life would be in danger.”

She nodded. “This is old ground so far.”

He reached out and waited until she put her hand in his. “I know. But if I’m right, you’ll figure it out without having to dig for it. If that happens – and I repeat, I don’t want you to do anything that would put you in any kind of danger – I want you to tell me about it.”

She squeezed his hand and smiled. “You know I would, Pop. You taught me well.”

He relaxed and pulled his hand back. “There’s one other thing I haven’t mentioned before, something I don’t think you’ve considered.”

“What’s that?”

“If Luthor really is who I think he is, then what better way would he have to disguise his real self than to hire the police commissioner’s daughter as his personal and private secretary? It’s as if he’s flipping on a neon sign that says ‘Look at me! I’m either completely honest or I’m really stupid!’ It’s just about the perfect cover.”

Jennifer’s eyes popped open at that thought. If Luthor were indeed a criminal mastermind, she’d be the perfect camouflage for him. A politically-minded DA would take one look at her situation and think exactly what her father had just said.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly before saying, “I hear you, Pop. I’ll watch my step.”

He smiled and patted her hand. “That’s my girl. I’m sorry, but I have to get back to the office. No rest for the good guys.”

She crossed her arms in mock sternness. “When are you going to retire, Pop?”

He smiled again, softer this time. “When my doctor tells me I can’t handle it.” Then his face lit up with an impish grin. “Or when your mother tells me it’s time, whichever comes first.”

“I bet she wins that contest.”

“She probably will, Jen.” They hugged before parting. “Work hard and make good use of that excellent mind you have.”

“I’ll do my best, Pop. See you for dinner next Friday night?”

He laughed and pointed his index finger at her. “If you don’t show up I’ll arrest you myself.”

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Over the years since then, she’d occasionally reported little things to her father that proved nothing but made her furrow her brow in thought. And she’d noticed a correlation between spectacular successes or failures in law enforcement and Mr. Luthor’s mood on the following days. Cops make a big bust? Luthor frowns and chews harder on his cigars and his staff stays away from him. Cops miss something big? Luthor smiles more and smokes less and his staff people don’t get their heads handed to them for saying ‘Good morning’ in the hallway.

She’d learned that she could practically set her day’s agenda by the morning crime news.

And the situation with Lois Lane had created more tense undercurrents than any other she’d ever been associated with in her time here. In the past three weeks, more people had come in or left her boss’ inner office with sweaty faces or nervous tics or clenched fists than ever before. She’d read the papers and heard the news and she knew that the Lane woman was acting like a vigilante instead of a reporter, but she didn’t know why. And she

was sure that Lois Lane was the reason for all the tension she was sensing.

She’d been putting off this decision for too long. It was time to either fish or cut bait, and Jennifer didn’t like to postpone the inevitable.

She picked up the phone and dialed a number she knew well. “Matt Schwartz’ office, please. Good. Yes, I’ll wait.”

After a long moment, her stockbroker picked up. “Conner and Conner Investing, Matthew Schwartz speaking. How may I make you so much richer today?”

“Hi, Matt. This is Jennifer Marlowe.”

“Ah, yes, Ms. Marlowe, of the California Marlowes! What can I do for you today?”

“I want you to convert all my LexCorp stock and options into cash as fast as you possibly can. Speed is more important than maximizing profit.”

Matt hesitated, then said, “Are you sure about this? If you sell over the next few days—”

“No. Now. All of it. Don’t dump it, but get it done by close of business today.”

He sighed into the phone. “Okay, if that’s what you want. Mind if I ask why?”

“I’ve been presented with an impressive opportunity and I don’t want to miss it.”

He waited a moment, then asked, “That’s it? That’s all you’re going to tell me?”

“That’s it. Can you do it?”

“Well, yeah, but you’ll lose some profit if you sell it all today.”

“Just do it, Matt. I have some places I’d like to put that money in a few days. I don’t want to get taxed to death on those meager profits you’re going to earn for me.”

The broker hesitated another moment, then asked, “You don’t have any information the Securities and Exchange Commission would frown on you having, do you?”

“Matt, I am not trading on insider information. This I promise you as a cop’s daughter.”

Matt sighed into the phone. “I will do it, Ms. Marlowe, beginning as soon as we hang up.”

“In that case, we’ll chat later. Bye.”

She disconnected the phone line to call Mrs. Cox once again and her eyes flickered up at the movement near the stairway door. A young man with a thin mustache and wearing a LexCorp parking attendant’s uniform with its short-billed flat cap was exiting the stairs and heading her way.

Jennifer’s first thought on seeing him was that he looked like a scruffy nerfherder, thin and fair of face with hard eyes focused on her boss’ office door. He walked oddly, almost as if he were more female than –

In her mind, she superimposed a woman’s features on his face. It was a skill her father had taught her when she was in grade school, one that had come in handy several times. She waited for the mental ‘click’ that told her that she’d found a match.

She almost laughed aloud when the image ‘clicked’ in her mind. The young intruder wasn’t a man. It was a woman.

A woman named Lois Lane.

Jennifer would have bet every naturally blonde strand of hair on her head that Lois was not here for a social visit. And the way her denim uniform jacket bounced hard against her right hip told the cop’s daughter that the visitor was carrying a weapon in her pocket.

Standard procedure dictated that if anyone ever got this far with any kind of weapon, the staff was to press the emergency button under any desk and sprint for the safe room in the far corner of the office. That room would withstand anything short of repeated rocket impacts, and triggering that alarm would also

alert LexCorp security of an armed intruder. The entire floor could be flooded with any number of debilitating gasses in seconds, and because the alarm would also activate a hermetic seal on Mr. Luthor's door, no one could get in without the aforementioned rockets.

Jennifer's hand crept under her desk.

She made eye contact with Lois.

Lois slowed down and stared directly into Jennifer's soul.

Jennifer tried to read Lois' mind and failed.

She thought about how much money she'd made working here and how little real evidence she had of any wrongdoing on Luthor's part.

She thought about what she knew, what little she could prove, what she suspected, and what her father had told her over the years.

She thought about having to start over at another company, maybe even another line of business altogether, and how difficult that would be.

Then she pressed the button to unlock her boss' office door.

"Have a nice day, sir," she called.

Lois nodded at her once and pushed into the office.

Jennifer picked up the phone and called her father at home. When he answered, she spoke the code phrase they'd developed for just such a final occasion.

"Dad? This is Jennifer. The Hindenburg is about to go down in flames. Yes. I'll be there as soon as possible. Bye."

She hung up the phone, then pushed her chair back and picked up her purse. "Bailey?"

The serious brunette at the next desk gave her a quizzical look. "Yeah, Jen?"

"Let's go get some lunch. My treat."

"Where?"

"You like Mexican?"

"If there's a side order of antacids, sure. What's the place called?"

"Café Policia, One Police Plaza."

Bailey hesitated a moment, then smiled and picked up her clutch. "Sounds like a plan to me. You're on."

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Clark was beyond frustrated. There was no trace of Lois to be found anywhere. None of his snitches had any current gossip on her, and the few of Lois' snitches who would talk to him had nothing. Even Bobby Bigmouth came up dry, despite Clark's warning that he would force-feed Bobby a Happy Meal the next time they met.

Bobby's face had fallen so far at the threat that Clark had taken pity on him and bought the perpetually ravenous man a Chinese feast.

As he walked back to the Planet to check in with Perry, a police car swished past him with lights flashing but no siren. More importantly, Clark heard through the open window the radio dispatcher say the words "Gunshot victim outside LexCorp headquarters."

Those words galvanized him to action.

He thought about slipping into an alley to change into Superman, but instead he kept his civvies on and began running at top human speed toward the convergence of lights eleven blocks away. Now he could hear sirens in the distance, and he followed them as they gathered around the gunshot victim like white-tipped sharks assessing a shipwreck survivor.

He whipped off his glasses and stared through the intervening buildings to see what was going on. When he saw Nigel St. John being loaded into an ambulance, he picked up his speed even more and risked hurdling the hood of a parked car to shorten his trip.

If this wasn't Lois' handiwork he'd eat his word processor.

He slipped his glasses back on and slowed to a fast jog as he

entered the alley where Nigel's car was parked. The paramedics were still securing Nigel's gurney into the ambulance, so he started breathing heavily and pulled out his press pass.

Two burly uniformed officers held out their hands to stop him. "Hey, buddy, you got no business in there. Back off, okay?"

He lifted his ID and panted, "Daily Planet! Need to see – gasp – Bill Henderson!"

One cop shook his head, but the other frowned and said, "What's your name?"

"Clark Kent."

"And you're with what paper?"

"The – pant – the Daily Planet!"

The second cop turned to the first one and said, "This is the guy Henderson told us to look out for. Wants to see him if he shows up."

The first cop shrugged. "So take him to Henderson. He can yell at both of you."

The second cop looked at Clark. "Come on, Kent, let's go find us a detective."

They hadn't taken three steps when Bill Henderson broke away from the group around the car's open driver's door and waved for Clark to come closer. "About time you got here, Kent. Stan, you go back over with Mitchell and don't let anyone else in the alley."

The cop with Clark nodded. "Yes, sir."

Bill took Clark's arm and dragged him to the open ambulance doors. "You can have two minutes with Mr. British Super Secret Agent here. They've already hit him up with some painkillers and he's a little loopy. See what you can get from him."

"For publication?"

"I don't care if you put it on a billboard outside the mayor's office! Just find out where Lois is."

Clark hopped up into the ambulance and leaned over Nigel's prone form. "Hi, Nigel. I guess you won't be throwing punches at me any time soon."

The female paramedic glanced at Clark with wide eyes, then went back to work security the plasma IV attached to Nigel's arm. Nigel rolled his head toward Clark and opened one eye, then the other. "Oh! Hello, Mr. Kent. Fancy meeting you here."

"I don't fancy it at all. I just want to know if Lois was the one who shot you."

Nigel grinned almost sideways. "Miss Lane? No, it was a young man named Tyler something, or perhaps something Tyler, I do not know which. Last name, first name, don't know. He shot me."

"Why?"

Nigel frowned as if studying Clark's glasses. "Why what? Oh, you mean why did Tyler shoot me? Perhaps he was angry about something, but I really cannot say because I don't know. Don't know, don't know, don't know."

Clark reached down and thumped him between the eyes with one finger. "Stay with us, Nigel."

The woman paramedic turned to Clark and hissed, "You can't do that, sir! This man's been shot!"

"He wasn't shot in the forehead and I won't touch his shoulder." Clark looked back at Nigel, who now appeared much more lucid. "Answer my question."

"I can't. I'm drugged."

"You're not as thick as you drugged I am."

The nonsense seemed to baffle Nigel for a moment and Clark took advantage. "Why did Lois shoot you, Nigel?"

"She wanted information."

"Oh? What kind of information?"

"She wanted to know about—" Nigel abruptly clamped his mouth shut as if abruptly realizing that he'd said the wrong thing.

"Come on, Nigel, spill it. Or do you want another thump?"

Nigel's eyes almost crossed as he stared at Clark's hand

approaching his face. “No! I mean, no, don’t thump me. I could get a concussion.”

The paramedic frowned. “That’s very unlikely, sir.”

Nigel blinked. “I don’t think as strong as he knows he is.”

Clark and the paramedic both paused at that piece of gibberish. The paramedic shook her head at Clark and said, “I don’t think you’ll get anything more lucid from him than that, sir.”

Clark sighed deeply. “Okay. If Lois shoots Luthor, we’ll have a charge of obstructing justice to add to his crimes.”

Nigel’s eyes opened wide. “What? Wait! I have never obstructed justice! Not today, I mean.”

Clark smiled. “Look, Nigel, I’m all for you getting well so we can go a couple more rounds together, but it won’t happen unless you tell us where Lois went. Okay?”

Nigel held Clark’s gaze for a moment, then exhaled sharply. “Very well. The last time I saw her she was entering the LexCorp parking garage via the side entrance. From there she has access to almost every floor of the main office.”

“You think she’s going after your boss?”

“Probably.” Nigel’s mouth grew into a lopsided smile.

“Perhaps we will all be quite fortunate and they will shoot each other. Would that not be a fitting end for such a bothersome woman?”

Clark licked his lips. “I don’t think it would be.” He reached out and patted Nigel on the leg. “You get well, okay? You need to be healthy so you can serve all those long sentences the judge is going to give you.” He turned to the paramedic. “What’s his prognosis?”

She shrugged. “Assuming the surgeons don’t find more damage than I think he has, and assuming that he doesn’t pop an artery on the way to the ER, he’ll live. He might not have full use of his arm without some extensive physical therapy.”

Clark smiled. “Hear that, Nigel? You’re probably going to live. Maybe I can come and cheer you on while you do your therapy.”

Ignoring Nigel’s drugged glare of death, Clark turned and hopped to the street. “Bill, I’m going after Lois. Nigel says she’s going to Luthor’s office to shoot him.”

Henderson frowned. “She’s already in the building or we’d have found her by now. And we can’t get in there without a warrant or a reported criminal act.”

Clark lifted one eyebrow. “I can get in. And I’ll call you on Perry’s cell phone when I find her. Wish me luck.”

Henderson shook his head. “Can’t let you do that, Clark. In fact, I can’t let you go in there by yourself at all.”

“How are you going to stop me?”

“Like this.” Henderson turned and took three slow, meandering steps away from Clark and put his hand on another uniformed officer’s shoulder. “Patrolman, I want you to stay with this man.”

“Which man, sir?”

Henderson turned and pointed at Clark, who by this time was nearly at the door at the end of the alley. “Oh, rats. It was that guy right down there. He’s pretty fast, isn’t he? Look, if you see him again, make sure you stay with him.”

The patrolman frowned and nodded. “Sure. Uh, how long do I stay with him?”

Henderson shrugged. “I’d say fifteen seconds should do it.”

Clark smiled to himself as he the door closed and cut off the rest of the conversation. Bill was a better friend to Lois than she knew. Maybe Clark could get them both to admit it to each other once all this was over.

First, though, he had to make sure this thing was actually over.

## Chapter Nine

Lex opened a large soft-sided briefcase and dropped a handful of file folders in the bottom, then reached down to his desk drawer to pick up several more. He’d thought about taking only the ones he knew would incriminate him the most, but at the last moment he decided to take as many as he could and destroy those he didn’t need later. As long as he had the blackmail material on the state and local officials and judges, he could carve out a new life elsewhere.

A soft click told him that his office door had opened. He straightened up with the files in his hands and said, “It’s about time you got—”

He stopped when he saw, instead of Nigel or Mrs. Cox, someone he didn’t recognize holding a magnum revolver in his hand.

In a surprisingly high and thin voice, the young man said, “Don’t put the files down, Lex. Just keep holding them.”

“Young man—”

“If you drop those files I will shoot you.”

The voice didn’t match the image of a LexCorp parking attendant despite the uniform. “Who are you?”

He pulled his cap off and tossed it away with his left hand. “You mean you don’t recognize the woman you claim to love, Lex? I’m completely devastated.”

It wasn’t a young man. It was a woman – Lois?

This was Lois?

He stared, open-mouthed, as she yanked the fake mustache from her upper lip, flinching as she did so. Without the cap and with an unobstructed view of her face, he realized that it was, indeed, Lois Lane pointing a pistol at his chest.

“What – Lois? What are you doing?”

“To use Nigel’s phrase, I’m climbing the food chain. And guess who I find as the apex predator?” She lifted the pistol and aimed it at his head. “I find you.”

He took a deep breath and held it for a long moment before letting it out slowly.

Upon reflection, perhaps Nigel was correct in his assessment of Lois as a threat instead of being a potential asset. He didn’t know how she’d breached his security and entered his office without being stopped, but he was certain he could talk her out of doing him any harm.

He began a turn toward his desk so he could put the files down. “Lois, my dear, let me explain what—”

She pulled the hammer back on the pistol and quick-stepped around the desk for a clear field of fire. “I told you not to let those files go, Lex. You drop them and I will shoot you. And this time I don’t think I’ll aim for an arm or a foot.”

He froze in place, the stack of files just inches from the desktop. He could drop them and snatch his favorite thirty-two caliber gold-plated semi-auto pistol out of his desk within a second. But if Lois was speaking the truth and not just trying to alarm him, she’d have time to shoot him at least twice before he could aim.

He looked down the exposed cylinder of her weapon, trying to see if she’d reloaded since the last time she’d fired it.

“I reloaded at the top of the stairs, Lex,” she growled. “I needed the breather. And I put the magnum rounds in this time. No thirty-eight special bullets for you. You know what kind of hole a three-fifty-seven magnum will make coming out the other side, don’t you?”

He nodded slowly, because he did know. He might have risked a thirty-eight bullet, but the magnum round would produce a crippling if not immediately fatal wound at this range. His only weapon was his voice, his only hope of escape were his next words.

“Please, Lois, let me speak. If you’ll tell me why you’re so angry, perhaps I can explain the situation to you.”

“Really?” she asked. “Can you really explain it all? I wish you would, Lex. Just step back a little. Slowly, now. You don’t want me to twitch my finger at the wrong time.”

He took three slow steps back and stopped. She fished in her jeans pocket with her left hand and pulled out a microcassette recorder, then pressed a button on the recorder and placed it on the edge of the desk. “This is Lois Lane, recording Lex Luthor in Lex’ private office. I’ve been working on my last story, the best one of my career, and I’ve tracked the man called ‘The Boss’ to his lair. Now I’m going to get a full confession, or at least one good enough to keep the investigation going.”

“Investigation? What investigation?”

“The one that the DA and the Daily Planet are going to cooperate on. The one that will condemn you to prison and destroy your organization. The one that will be my epitaph!”

Lex opened his mouth and smiled, then leaned toward her. She moved her hand to her right and pulled the trigger.

Even over the thunder of the discharge and the flash of heat and residue from the blast, the bullet whispered ‘wheet’ as it whipped past Luthor’s head and smashed into the wall behind him, destroying two shelves and most of the pieces of art on each one. “You don’t move unless I tell you to!” she screamed.

Lex knew his expression matched the one he’d worn the day Superman had fired his prized Colt .45 at his chest and then caught that bullet before it hit him during the days when Lex had been testing the hero, but he didn’t care. Lois was all but unhinged in her quest to bring him down, and he had to try something.

Then he realized – she’d referred to the investigation as her epitaph.

She still thought she was dying!

That was his ace in the hole, his leverage into her psyche, his escape pod. His get-out-of-jail-free card, if you will.

Lex relaxed and smiled warmly. “Lois, my dear, you don’t have cancer.”

She blinked once but the pistol didn’t waver. “What?”

“You don’t have cancer or anything else terminal. You’re at least as healthy as I am, perhaps more so.”

She tilted her head to one side. “I am, huh?”

“Yes, you are. Perry White told me himself. He said that your doctor confused your diagnosis with that of a comatose patient in a retirement center.”

Her eyes narrowed and she sidled closer to him. “Perry told you I’m not sick? That I don’t have terminal pancreatic cancer?”

“No, my dear, you don’t. Isn’t that wonderful news?”

“It would be fantastic news – if it were true.”

Lex’ mouth fell open. She didn’t believe him? “But – but it’s the truth! You aren’t sick at all!”

She shook her head slightly. “That’s pretty weak, Lex. You found out that I was on the warpath and you found out why, so you’ve been holding this in reserve just in case I got to you.”

“No, Lois, it’s really the truth! You can call your doctor and ask him!”

“Like I’d believe anything you told me right now!”

He lowered his voice and put as much charm in his next words as he possibly could. “My darling Lois, surely you believe that I love you.”

She straightened her head and the pistol barrel lowered – until it was pointing at his groin. “I think, Lex, that I’m going to shoot you right in the gonads for that particular insult.”

The phrase “Bad move, Space Cadet!” rang out in his head, complete with the original distorted computer-generated tones from the Phoenix arcade game. “No!” he cried out. “That – isn’t necessary!”

“Then you’d better answer my questions when I ask them. I’m not very patient these days.”

Before Lex could respond, a soft knock sounded at the door.

“Lois? Is that you?”

“You come in here and I’ll kill your boss!” she snapped.

“It’s Clark. And I’d rather you didn’t shoot Luthor just yet, even if he sort of does still own the Planet and kind of still is my boss.”

“Clark?” she breathed. “Is – is it really you?”

“It’s me. May I come in?”

Lex was astounded to see her dash sudden tears from her eyes with her free hand. “Yes. Yes, Clark, come on in. But make it slow and easy, okay?”

“Nothing but.”

Clark slowly pushed the door open and stepped into the office, then eased the door shut behind him. His smile seemed to light up Lois’ face and she sobbed once. “Hi, partner,” he said softly. “You have this interview all wrapped up yet?”

Lex took a slow step toward his desk, hoping for a chance at his pistol, but Lois’ weapon snapped up again. “Last warning, Lex. Start talking or I just might pull this trigger until I hear a click instead of a bang.”

Clark lifted his hand. “That’s not necessary, Lois. We don’t need his testimony.”

“What?” snapped Lois.

“What?” blurted Lex.

Clark smiled at Lex. “Sorry, old man, but we just want you arrested. Nigel St. John is on his way to the hospital, and I’d guess he’s already made a deal with the DA to save his own skin. He’d much rather see you in prison than go to the gas chamber himself.”

Stunned, Lex asked the only question that occurred to him. “Hospital? What happened to him?”

“Oh, I shot him,” Lois offered. “Do you think he’ll live, Clark?”

Kent ignored Lex’ shocked expression. “The paramedics thought so. It was just his shoulder, but I doubt he’ll be able to fight as well as before. Especially at the age he’ll be after he serves out all of his sentences.”

Lex knew his mouth was hanging open again when Kent snorted quietly. Then the younger man continued, “Not only does the DA have Nigel’s testimony, he’s got Dr. Leibowitz’ confession.”

Lex saw Lois’ mouth spread into a cruel grin and he blurted out “But Nigel said he stopped the delivery of—”

Both Clark and Lois nodded in unison as Lex shut up – eight words too late. “That’s good news, Clark. What about Alan Robertson’s tape?”

“The DA’s office has it, and the prosecutors there would really like to talk to him. But it might be a little difficult to get him to testify. According to the FBI, he slipped onto a flight out of St. Louis International Airport yesterday afternoon. The flight went to New Orleans, and then on to Haiti. We have an extradition treaty with Haiti, but it’s a little hard getting people out of there at times.”

Lois chuckled. “Guess I scared him more than I thought.”

“Oh, you scared him, all right. He didn’t like talking to me at all, but I think he would have moved in with me and become my butler and personal toilet-scrubber to avoid another encounter with you.”

No one spoke for a long moment. Then Lois asked, “So what do we do with the Boss here?”

Clark slowly walked around the far side of the desk from Lois and her deadly aim. “I think we should tie him up and call Bill Henderson to come get him.”

Lex shook his head. “No police officer can enter this building without either an invitation or a warrant. And I’m not inviting them in.”

Clark slipped a cell phone out of his pocket. “Doesn’t matter. I’ll just tell him that someone tried to shoot you and poof! The

police have their probable cause to enter the building in force and come up here.”

“But no one tried to shoot me!”

“Oh, I’m pretty sure Lois tried. That big hole in the wall behind you is proof of that.”

Even with Kent in the room, Lex could weasel out of this. Lois wouldn’t risk hurting her precious partner and friend. “No, no, that’s not what happened at all! Lois was showing me a weapon she’d found outside and it accidentally discharged. No one tried to shoot anyone.”

Lois lifted both eyebrows. “Well, I think I can fix that.”

She lowered her aim again and pulled the trigger.

The bullet slammed into the floor and exploded the carpet and wooden parquet under-flooring between Lex’ ankles. He went down in a painful heap and dropped the handful of files he was still holding.

As he curled into a ball and grabbed at his legs to check for missing or bleeding body parts, he heard Kent say, “Lois, don’t! You don’t have to do it this way!”

“Yes I do!” she almost wailed. “I have to do this! I have to take down the Boss! I have to stop him while I still can!”

Kent’s hands were suddenly on Lex’ legs, apparently also checking for injuries. “Yeah. About that, Lois, um – you don’t have cancer.”

“What? What do – wait a minute, that’s what he said!”

“It may have been the only truthful thing he’s ever said to you, but for once he was being truthful.” Kent stood. “You don’t have cancer. You’re fine.”

Having determined that he’d suffered no serious wounds, Lex opened his eyes and looked at Lois. The pistol was drifting downward and her hand was relaxed.

This might be his last chance. Lex rolled slowly to one side. If he could grab –

The sudden pain in his right wrist from a size eleven loafer stopped him. Kent looked down at him and said, “You be still, Lex, or I just might grab one ankle in each hand and make a Jean Claude Van Damme wish.”

“What?” grunted Lex.

“Think about splitting the turkey’s wishbone at Thanksgiving and you’ll get it.”

Van Damme’s signature move was the horizontal side splits. His legs could spread out to a straight line underneath him. Lex’ legs couldn’t do that without ripping and shredding muscle and sinew.

The image chilled him and he decided that resistance was futile.

He looked up at Lois and sighed when he saw her expression. Her tear-filled eyes were gazing at Kent as if he were the second-richest man in the world and had just offered her the moon. If only the man’s foot wasn’t cutting off all the blood flow to his hand, he might be able to snatch Lois’ pistol from her and shoot them both.

Then Lois lifted the weapon and pointed it at his face. “Go ahead and tie him up, Clark. I’ll make sure he doesn’t bother you.”

Kent’s foot slowly came up and released his arm. The bones felt as if they’d been bent to their limit, and his fingers wouldn’t obey his instructions. Even if Lois had placed her pistol on the desk and walked away, he couldn’t have made his move now.

Kent came back with what looked like drapery cords. “Best I could find on the spur of the moment, Lex,” he said. “Hope they aren’t too expensive.”

“Do you care?” Lex growled.

“Not really. Now roll over on your stomach – come on! There, that’s a good criminal, good boy. Now put your hands behind your back if you don’t want me to pull them back there.”

Lex obeyed. Kent seemed to take an extra bit of pleasure

securing the restraints on Lex’ wrists. “That’s – ow! – a little tight, don’t you think, Kent?”

“Nope. I think they’re just about perfect. Oh, Lex, you’ll need to see a doctor about those splinter wounds on your feet and shins. Most of them have already stopped bleeding, but we don’t want you to get an infection, now do we?”

Lex ignored the younger man’s sarcasm. “May I sit up?” he asked.

Lois shook her head. “I think you’ll be fine right where you are. Clark, could you call Henderson now?”

Kent smiled at her in the same misty-eyed, soft-hearted way that she’d beamed at him. “Of course. Would you mind putting your pistol on the desk? I doubt you’d want to get accidentally shot by the police now that you know you’re not dying.”

Wonderful, thought Lex. Bested by a mere woman. It was most humiliating.

He didn’t care how long it took, but he vowed in his heart that he’d have his revenge against Lois Lane and Clark Kent.

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Lois watched the police come in through the door, snickered as they replaced the woven silken cords on Lex’ wrists with metal handcuffs, saw them lift Lex up and take him away, and felt Clark’s hand on her shoulder the whole time. When it finally got down to just Bill, Clark, and her, Clark looked at Bill and said, “Can you give us a minute? I think she has some questions she needs answers to.”

Bill gave them both his patented world-weary glare. “I have some questions for her, too.”

“You have her tape recorder. It was running almost from the time she came in until you knocked on the door. There’s a lot of dead air in there, unfortunately, because Luthor wouldn’t answer any of our questions about his real businesses.”

“I can’t let a prisoner out of my custody, Kent. You know that as well as she does.”

“Have you arrested her?”

“Well, no, but that’s just a technicality at this point. She has to come with me, one way or another.”

Clark straightened and looked directly into Henderson’s eyes. “I give you my word that she won’t leave this office without you.”

Henderson hesitated, then shook his head. “Fine. Talk to her alone. Just don’t spread this part around, okay? I’ve got a reputation to maintain.”

She smiled at him. “Thanks, Bill. I’ll be a good girl, I promise.”

Henderson turned and walked toward the door. “That’ll be a first. I’ll put it in my journal, save it for my memoir. Lois Lane was a good girl today.” He paused with his hand on the knob. “One minute. That’s all I can give you. I need to get some people in here to collect evidence, so don’t touch anything.”

Clark nodded. “That’ll be enough time. Thank you.”

As the door closed, they turned to face each other. She looked into his deep chocolate eyes and smiled, unable to think of anything to say.

He touched her cheek. “You’ve lost some weight.”

“Yeah. Haven’t been eating very well.”

He gave her a lop-sided grin. “I’m not surprised. And you’ve lost some hair, too.”

She tilted her head to one side. “Now that I’m not facing chemotherapy, I’m pretty sure it’ll grow back out.”

“I’m looking forward to that.”

“Hey, I kind of like it short. I may keep it cut back.”

“That’s your choice. Personally, I think you look good in hair whether it’s long or short.”

She giggled. “Thank you. It’s good to see you, too, Clark.”

He leaned toward her and kissed her on the forehead, then lowered his head to touch hers. “Lois, I can’t tell you how scared

we all were.”

She closed her eyes and tried to hold back the tears. “I’m sorry. I just didn’t think I could take being fussed over by all of you, being treated like fine crystal, having everybody be so – so nice!” She looked up at him. “Even Cat would have been kind to me. I didn’t want to put her through that.”

He laughed softly. “And you’re so compassionate toward those healthier than you think you are.”

After a moment she joined him. “Yeah, that does sound pretty dumb, doesn’t it?”

“A little.”

She pulled back but kept her hands on his arms. “How long have you known I wasn’t dying of cancer?”

He tried to put on a frown, but she could tell his heart wasn’t in it. “Your doctor tried to call you at home and at the office the same day you disappeared. You didn’t answer, so he ended up calling Perry and told him you’d gotten a wrong diagnosis.” He straightened his arms and held her there. “And you owe Bobby Bigmouth big time. That was his friend Walt whose little toe you shot off.”

She felt her eyes widen. “What? Oh, no! I shot his toe off?”

“Yes. But before you panic, listen. The orthopedic surgeon on call repaired his foot and he’s walking just fine now, as long as he has his therapeutic shoe insert. Henderson talked to him about testifying against you, but Walt realized he’d have to reveal who sold you the pistol, so he declined to provide testimony. And none of your other – ah, ‘interview subjects’ – are in any position to press charges against you. Big Mike insists he accidentally shot himself. Alan Robertson is in Haiti and isn’t coming back any time soon. You didn’t shoot Jenna Leibowitz or Karen Carter, and their memories are still scrambled by whatever you gave them. So nobody is going to testify against you. Except maybe Lex, of course, and you didn’t actually shoot him.”

“Huh. How about that?” Another thought came to her mind. “What does Perry think of me now?”

“I think he said something about you being dumber than a box of rocks and that you’d better bring in the story of his career – and he said his, not yours – for him to talk the suits upstairs into keeping you on the payroll as a researcher. Assuming, of course, you stay out of jail.”

“Researcher?”

His face grew sad. “I think you’ve worked yourself out of investigative reporting, Lois, at least on the undercover side.”

She knocked his arms apart and dove against his chest. “Oh, Clark, I’m such an idiot! Can you ever forgive me?”

His arms enveloped her, warmed her soul, and pressed her against his solid body. “Maybe. Probably, even.”

She sniffed once and pushed her face further down into his embrace. “Thank you! Oh, thank you!”

“Hey, what are partners for, anyway?”

She squeezed him for all she was worth for a long moment, then leaned back. “That’s something we need to get straight, and this is as good a time as any. I’m not just your partner, Clark. I’m in love with you.”

She felt him grow still. “Lois – do you know what you’re saying?”

“Yes. I know exactly what I’m saying. And I’ve had lots of time to think about what you said to me in the park, too. I think you love me almost as much as I love you.”

His body relaxed slightly. “Well, there might be some disagreement there.”

She laughed. “I don’t care who loves who more! I love you and I want to marry you!”

His head rocked back and he laughed. “This is not at all how I expected this to go.”

“What did you expect? A romantic dinner, a walk in the park, a sudden shower drenching both of us, you kneeling in front of

me in the rain, you offering me a ring, me saying something completely stupid like ‘not now’ and totally messing everything up—”

“What? What do you mean, ‘not now’?”

“No, Clark, no! That’s just what’s in my mind and I have no idea why it would be there. I’ve been thinking about this ever since I got that diagnosis. I was trying to wrap this up as quickly as I could so we could spend just” – she sniffed – “just a few weeks together. But now we can spend a lifetime together! I want to marry you as soon as we can find someone to ask me if I want to take this man.”

He nodded. “That sounds wonderful. But can we delay the public announcement until we get a chance to talk some more? There are a few things you need to know about me.”

She pulled his head down and kissed him softly. “I already know everything I need to know.”

His head slowly rose from hers and his eyes eventually opened. “Yeah. Well, there may be a couple of things you’ll want to hear before we buy the matching rings.”

“If you say so, darling.”

She pulled his head down again, but before their lips met, a knock sounded at the door. Reluctantly, she pulled away from him and called out, “Come on in, Bill.”

Henderson opened the door and slipped in. “Okay, Lois, it’s time to go downtown and answer some questions.” He looked at the bullet hole in the wall, the wrecked shelves around it, the broken ceramic pieces littering the floor, and he sighed deeply. “A lot of questions, actually. Come on.”

She nodded and followed him to the door, then stopped and turned. “Clark? I forgot to ask you what the doctor said was actually wrong with me.”

He smiled back. “You were a bit run-down and needed a couple of days of rest. That’s it.”

Her jaw dropped. “That’s it?” she barked.

Clark nodded.

“That’s all that was wrong with me?”

His smile faded a little and he nodded again.

“You mean that I did all this – this – this stuff because I thought I was dying and all I really needed was a good night’s sleep?”

Clark’s face smoothed over and he stood perfectly still.

Lois took two dangerous steps toward her partner. “Are you joking? Because if you are I’m going to rip something very precious to you from your anatomy! I will make you pay if this is some kind of gag!”

Clark actually looked alarmed. He lifted his hands in surrender, took a step back, and said, “Lois, I promise you that’s what the doctor told Perry. You’re fine, or at least you were before you started sleeping in fleabag hotels and eating who knows what out of the neighborhood trash cans.”

She stuck out her index finger and started forward again, but Henderson grabbed her arm and turned her around to face the door. And he didn’t let go of her until after Lex’ office door closed behind them.

“I’m getting you out of there, Lane, before you really do hurt someone badly enough for me to arrest you.”

“What? You mean – I’m not under arrest?”

“Not yet. But you are a material witness and you need to meet with the DA about your recent activities. So if you come along quietly, I won’t put cuffs on your wrists.”

She growled audibly and crossed her arms as they faced the elevators, but the absurdity of her emotional flip-flop with Clark got to her after a few moments. She started laughing softly.

Bill glared at her for a moment, then he broke into a thin smile, which for him was practically the equivalent of a full belly laugh. “Yeah, Lois, it’s funny now, but I don’t think Kent sees the humor yet.”

The elevator car arrived and the doors ghosted open. “He will, Bill. He will.”

As Henderson pressed the button for the ground floor, she leaned back against the wall and said, “I’ll make sure Clark sees a lot of things I’ve hidden from him up to now.”

Just before the doors closed, Lois threw her hand against the edge and forced them open again. “Bill! Please, fifteen seconds more.”

He took a breath and Lois was sure he was about to refuse, but instead he sighed and seemed to collapse in on himself. “You know he hunted for you the whole time you were missing, don’t you? I don’t think he slept more than four hours straight during that time. Perry told me that Clark would walk on water for you or drown trying to do it. I believe he would, too.” Bill tilted his head toward Luthor’s office door. “Go ahead. But if you don’t come this time I will have to arrest you for real.”

She grinned grabbed him in a quick hug. “Thanks! Be right back.”

She sprinted across the open office area and dashed a tear from her eye. Just as she reached for the doorknob, the door opened inward and Clark stood there with a startled look on his face and a cellphone in his hand. “I’ll tell you the rest later, Perry,” he said to the phone. Then he closed it and eyed her cautiously.

“You haven’t come back to yell at me again, have you?”

She answered by leaping against his body, locking her arms around his neck, and plastering her lips against his. After a moment, he wrapped his arms around her and melted into the kiss.

After about ten seconds and fifteen all-too-brief years, Lois lowered her head to his massive chest and squeezed tight. “I have to go, Clark. Will you wait for me?”

“Of course I will. You shouldn’t even have to ask.”

“No. I mean—” she pulled back and looked him in the eyes “—I might have to go to prison for what I’ve done. I don’t know how likely it is that I’ll end up behind bars, but it might be some time before I’m free. In a legal sense, that is.”

“Lois, you don’t—”

“I need to know if you’ll wait for me. Even if I have to spend several years in prison! I can serve whatever sentence they give me if I know you’ll be waiting for me when I get out.”

His smile softened and his hand found her hair. “I waited more than a quarter of a century to meet you, Lois. I’ve waited almost a year to hear those three wonderful words from you, and I would have waited many more if I had to. If it means that we’ll be together, I can wait for you as long as I need to.” He drew her close again and put his lips next to hers. “I love you, Lois Lane.”

She felt the tears come again. She felt his lips on hers. It was the nearest thing to Heaven she could imagine. She was on top of the world.

Then she felt Bill Henderson standing next to her. A quick glance to one side confirmed it – she’d run out of time. His face spoke volumes about her abuse of his generosity.

Well, that and the handcuffs he was brandishing.

She almost giggled as she brushed away her tears. “I have to go, Clark. Wait for me.”

He planted a quick kiss on her mouth and stepped back. “As long as it takes. No matter how long it takes.”

Bill took her hand and moved the cuffs toward her wrist, then stopped. “Do I need these, Lane?”

“No,” she smiled. “I’ll come peacefully, Inspector.”

As she entered the elevator again, she turned to see Clark enter beside her. “You shouldn’t be here, Kent,” Bill muttered. “We usually allow only attorneys to go downtown with material witnesses.”

Almost unconsciously, her hand entwined with Clark’s.

“Don’t worry, Inspector,” Clark smiled. “You have her for the

duration of the investigation. But I’m going to have her for the rest of our lives.”

She leaned against the man she loved and put her other hand on their joined ones. Her eyes closed of their own accord and she blessed the day she’d barged into Perry’s office so he could see her. Then she heard Bill try to stifle a chortle and fail. “I never thought I’d see the day when Lois Lane wrapped up a story holding hands with a man she claimed to love. Let me be the first to wish the two of you the best of luck. I have a feeling you’re both going to need it.”

Lois didn’t voice the thought, but it still ran through her mind. She loved Clark. Clark loved her. And she wasn’t dying any time soon. How could she possibly be any luckier than she was at this moment?

“Bill,” Clark asked, “what do you think will happen to Lois? Will she serve time?”

Bill sighed. “I don’t know and I don’t want to get your hopes up. But I’ve seen a couple of other cases similar to this, and the DA is usually willing to make deals with citizens who pull stupid stunts like this as long as it’s the first time and there’s a low probability of repeating the behavior. Of course, you shot a bunch of people, Lane, and that might change things.”

She shrugged. “Nobody died, Bill, and I didn’t keep anything I took.”

“Those may be the only things that keep you out of prison. But I wouldn’t be surprised if you get a long probation and maybe some hefty fines.”

“She probably saved a lot of lives doing this.”

“You know that’s no excuse, Kent. She’ll still have to face the music.” The elevator stopped and the doors slid open as Bill shook his head. “Maybe if you get the right judge and the right attorney and the Iron Maiden isn’t mad enough to lock you up and lose the key.”

“Who’s the Iron Maiden?” asked Clark.

“Deputy Assistant District Attorney Mayson Drake. She hasn’t been there eight months and that’s her reputation. If she gets your case, Lane, you’ve got a real tough uphill battle to fight.”

She felt Clark grip her hand tighter as he led her across the building’s entrance lobby. “We’ll get through it together, Bill,” he said. “I told her I’ll wait for her and I meant it.”

“Yeah, you just remember that when Drake files a notebook full of charges against your girlfriend. Worst case scenario, she’ll face trial for grand theft auto, multiple counts of assault with a deadly weapon, vigilantism, illegal possession of a handgun, trespassing, intimidation, interference with police investigations, unlawful restraint, and who knows what else. That can add up to a lot of years behind bars.” Bill paused and looked into Lois’ eyes. “I’m not trying to scare you, Lois, but you need to know what might happen to you.”

Lois turned to Clark and smiled again. “I’ll face it, Bill, whatever it is. With Clark in my corner, I can face anything.” She lifted their joined hands and kissed his knuckles. “I’m the luckiest woman in the universe.”

### Epilogue

Bailiff Alphonse Deaton stood to his full five feet seven inches of height and bellowed, “Hear ye, hear ye, court is now in session, Judge Robert B. Parker presiding. All rise!”

Everyone in the packed room rose to his or her feet as His Honor Judge Parker strode to the bench. He paused a moment to gaze out over the crowd, just as he had the previous three sessions, then gathered his robes and sat.

“Be seated, everyone,” Deaton commanded. He waited until everyone else was seated, then he moved to his place beside the bench, ready to do whatever the judge required of him.

“We are now adjudicating the case of the People vs. Lois

Lane.” Parker picked up the sheet of paper in front of him. “Will the defendant please rise?”

Lois and Rhonda Albright, her attorney, both stood. “Ms. Albright,” said the judge, “this piece of paper states that you and your client have arrived at a plea agreement with the District Attorney’s office. Is that correct?”

“Yes it is, Your Honor.”

“Hmm. Assistant District Attorney Drake, do you concur with Ms. Albright’s statement?”

Mayson rose and nodded sharply. “The People agree, Your Honor.”

“Very well. This agreement states that Lois Lane, defendant in this trial, has agreed to testify in regard to what she learned last April and May about the criminal activities of a number of people, including one Lex Luthor. In return, the defendant has agreed to a probationary period of three years, less time already served, for one count of grand theft auto and two counts of endangering the public by discharging a firearm within the city limits. She will remain within this jurisdiction unless granted permission by either this court or the District Attorney’s office, and will keep said authorities apprised of her living address at all times. She is also required to remain gainfully employed for the duration of her probation.” Parker shook his head and sighed. “Should she complete this probation as indicated, the defendant’s record will be expunged.” He lowered the sheet and glared at Mayson. “Is this accurate?”

Mayson ground her teeth. “It is accurate, Your Honor.”

“Has your boss signed off on this deal? If the defendant completes her probation, her record will contain nothing of her recent activities.”

“My boss and I are fully aware of this, Your Honor.”

Parker sat back and entwined his fingers across his ample stomach. “Counselor, this is a most generous plea deal on the part of the State of New Troy and the city of Metropolis, especially since Ms. Lane stands accused of shooting at least four people, shooting directly at another, and threatening to shoot at least two more. There are also possible kidnapping and forcible detainment charges involved in this case. Not to mention things like trespassing, illegal entry of private property, carrying an unlicensed firearm within the city limits, and destruction of personal property. Can you give me some of the reasons why you would even consider making this offer?”

Mayson hesitated, then straightened even more. “Your Honor, the people whom the defendant is accused of actually shooting either can’t be located within our jurisdiction or have declined to offer testimony in this case on advice of counsel. Neither we nor the police have located any corroborating witnesses to the other shootings or threatened shootings. The two victims of her – I’m sorry, the alleged victims of her alleged threats to allegedly shoot them also refuse to testify, both on medical grounds and on advice of counsel.”

“Medical grounds?”

“The alleged victims of the alleged threats can’t remember clearly what happened. Apparently – I’m sorry, allegedly – they were given a sedative which interfered with their short-term memories. The two alleged victims cannot – or will not – corroborate each other’s stories.”

Parker sighed deeply. “So, Ms. Drake, you’re left with a defendant against whom almost no one will testify, but who is willing to offer her testimony in turn against a number of alleged criminals? And this is why you’ve given up on this case?”

Mayson closed her eyes and paused for a moment as her lips moved. The bailiff thought she was counting to ten, but he didn’t know why.

She opened her eyes and exhaled. “Your Honor, there are extenuating circumstances. The defendant is an investigative reporter for the Daily Planet, and this kind of case would fall

under her purview at work. She was also operating under the incorrect belief that she was suffering from a late-stage fatal cancer, one from which she would have died within a few short weeks. The District Attorney’s office is also of the definite opinion that Ms. Lane is most unlikely to repeat her actions for any reason.”

“I see. And why, Ms. Drake, would your boss make that assumption?”

Mayson turned her head and glared at the defendant. “Aside from the facts that the defendant has no prior criminal record, has freely confessed to all of her illegal activities, and has in the past garnered numerous awards for bringing other criminals to justice – the legal way – she plans to get married as soon as she can.”

Parker’s eyebrows rose. Bailiff Deaton’s eyebrows also rose. He’d never before heard that particular piece of information included in a plea bargain review.

The judge leaned forward and spoke sharply. “Ms. Lane?”

“Yes, Your Honor?”

“What would you do if I declined to accept this plea bargain agreement? You do understand that I can do that if I see fit, don’t you?”

“I do understand that, Your Honor. I guess I’d go through a trial on some or all of the charges you mentioned earlier.”

Parker nodded. “And what about your testimony against these other defendants? What would happen to that?”

“I would still testify, Your Honor.”

Parker’s voice showed his surprise. “You would?”

“Yes, sir.” Lois’ voice rose and carried through the room.

“Because I believe that justice is more important than my own comfort. I believe that our city deserves to be free of the criminal organization and the corruption that has been choking it for so many years. I want to see Metropolis free, even if I’m not.”

Deaton looked at the defendant with new respect. He’d heard all kinds of excuses, rationalizations, explanations, justifications, and the occasional confession from many on trial for their freedom in the last dozen years, but he’d never heard this before. His opinion wouldn’t make any difference to the judge, he knew, but Alphonse Deaton believed this woman. He believed that she’d do what she thought was right, irrespective of the judge’s decision.

He glanced at Judge Parker, who had sat back in his chair, his mouth open slightly and his eyes wide. Apparently this was something new to him also.

After a long moment, Parker grasped his gavel and raised it, then hesitated. “Ms. Lane, is the man who is willing to marry you in the courtroom today?”

Behind Lois, a broad-shouldered man wearing a conservative suit and a tie with an Escher design on it stood and raised his hand. “I’m here, Your Honor.”

“And what is your name?”

“Clark Kent, sir. I also work for the Daily Planet.”

“I see. And you believe that you can keep this young woman out of trouble for the next three years?”

Kent smiled and his gaze slipped to Lois for a moment. “I sure hope so.”

Deaton could see a tiny smile trying to work its way onto the judge’s mouth. “Young man, do you understand what you’re letting yourself in for? I have a hunch this woman would be very difficult to break to harness.”

Kent smiled wider. “Then I guess it’s a good thing I plan to marry her instead of throwing a saddle and bridle on her, isn’t it, sir?”

Deaton almost smothered his laugh, and he was more successful than the judge was. Parker let the chuckling go on for several seconds, then he banged his gavel once. “Okay, folks, quiet down. That one’s on me for laughing. Just don’t push your luck.”

Parker held the gavel horizontally, the handle in one hand and the hammer end in the other. “Ms. Drake, I am going to sign off on this deal.”

“Thank you, Your Honor,” Mayson said.

“Just a minute. Ms. Lane, do you understand that you will be on probation for – let’s see – two years, eight months, and about twenty days? That you can’t leave the state without permission from this court, that you can’t afford so much as a parking ticket in that time, that you can’t cross the line into anything which is the least little bit illegal without being immediately incarcerated?”

“I do, Your Honor.”

“I certainly hope so, both for your sake and the sake of that brave young man behind you.” Parker lifted the gavel and whacked the wooden block on his bench. “So ordered. Ms. Drake, you will see that Ms. Lane is – hey!” He smacked the gavel down twice more as the crowd noise grew. “I’m not finished, people! Quiet down!”

As the noise level retreated to an anticipatory buzz, Parker continued. “Ms. Drake, you will make sure that Ms. Lane is introduced to her parole officer, that she is made aware of her reporting schedule, and that she signs all the necessary paperwork.”

“I’ll make sure of it, Your Honor.”

“I mean you will personally accomplish all these tasks, Ms. Drake.”

Mayson’s expression of horror almost made Deaton laugh again. “B-b-but – Your Honor, that’s not my—”

“Don’t tell me that’s not your job, Ms. Drake! For this defendant, it is your job. You submitted this plea deal, got it approved and talked me into it, so you get to walk it all the way through to the end, and you’ll have to make sure every ‘I’ is dotted, every ‘T’ is crossed, and every tiny detail is seen to with the utmost alacrity and precision. Do you understand?”

Mayson’s teeth ground together again, but she answered, “Yes, Your Honor, I understand.”

“Good,” intoned Parker. “And don’t make a habit of putting deals like this in front of me. You’ll ruin my reputation as a fierce defender of Lady Justice.”

“Of course, Your Honor.”

Parker slammed down his gavel once more. “Court is adjourned.”

Deaton immediately stepped forward and called out, “All rise!” When the judge was out the door, Deaton walked to the defendant’s table and gestured with his hand. “You’ll need to accompany ADA Drake, ma’am, to get the process started.”

“Oh.” The woman looked startled. “Do I – will they take me to another cell somewhere?”

“No, ma’am, just to the DA’s office for some paperwork. As long as you keep your nose clean, you won’t see the inside of a cell again unless you bring it on yourself.”

“Thank you. I promise not to do that.”

Deaton lifted one eyebrow. “Don’t give me that promise, Ms. Lane. Give it to the tall bright-eyed and handsome man standing behind you.”

Her eyes brightened and she smiled slightly. “You mean Clark?”

“No, I was talking about Denzel Washington. Of course I mean Clark! Me, personally, I hope I never see you sitting or standing at this table again.”

The defendant smiled at him – another first, he mused.

“Thank you, sir,” she said. “I promise you that I’ll promise him.”

Lane’s attorney leaned in and touched her arm. “You’ll be fine now, Lois. Call me in the morning so we can meet and go over everything once more. And bring Clark with you if you can. This will concern him too.”

Lane nodded. “Is ten o’clock too early, Rhonda?”

Albright shook her head and grinned. “Not for me. Just don’t keep your handsome young man out too late.”

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Mayson all but snarled at Lois as they strode down the hallway. “You do know what a pain in the butt you are, don’t you?”

Lois didn’t look at Mayson. “I’m sorry. I didn’t do all this just to irritate you.”

Mayson grabbed Lois’ elbow and yanked her to a halt. “You might just as well have done – never mind.”

Lois was surprised at the quick move but didn’t react. “May I have my arm back, please?”

Mayson huffed at the wall and released Lois’ arm. “You know, you’re almost as bad as Superman.”

Lois’ eyebrows rose. “Almost as bad as Superman? What does that mean?”

Mayson spun and pointed her index finger at Lois’ face, then lowered it and stepped closer. “No. You are worse than Superman. You’re both vigilantes, you both think you’re doing such very good things for the city, you both think you’re helping the police, but at least when he brings them in they aren’t bleeding all over the place!”

“I’m not going to do anything like this again. Not ever. Not even if I get a real terminal diagnosis in the future.”

Mayson crossed her arms and stepped back. After a long moment, she said softly, “I know. If I thought you might, I wouldn’t have pushed for this deal.”

“Thank you.”

“I didn’t do it for you.” Mayson’s face changed as if she’d said more than she’d intended, then she touched Lois’ elbow and took a step down the hall. “Come on. That paperwork won’t sign itself.”

“Wait, please.” Lois stopped them in the hall, looked both ways to see if anyone was watching them closely, then moved closer to her companion. “What did you mean, you pushed for this deal? I thought it was the DA’s idea all along.”

ADA Drake’s eyes narrowed. “My reasons are my own. You have no right to question me about them.”

“Rights? No, I don’t. But this feels – it’s personal, isn’t it?” Lois’ felt her eyes widen as she realized something. “You don’t like me, not one bit. And it isn’t just me, is it?”

“Look, Lane, if you want to serve your time behind bars, I can go back to the judge and make sure you—”

“It’s Clark.” The words popped out without deliberate intent, but when Mayson’s face shifted and her eyes softened, Lois knew she was right. “You want Clark! Or at least you want a chance with him. Right?”

“You don’t get to—”

“I’m right, aren’t I? You’re in love with Clark. And I’d bet he doesn’t have the first clue how you feel about him.”

Mayson’s face suddenly fell and she turned away with her hand beside her mouth. Lois reached out but at the last moment decided not to touch her. “Mayson, I’m sorry. If it were any other man, I’d tell you to open up to him. But this is the man I love, the man I want to marry as soon as I can. And you know that. I’ve told you, he’s told you, your boss has probably told you, so why would you let me out of jail? Why would you make it easy for me?”

Mayson sniffed hard. “B-because if you – if you went to prison he’d wait for you. He wouldn’t look at another woman. He’d visit you every chance he got and encourage you and promise to wait for you and – and I couldn’t compete with that. No one could. But if you were free, maybe – just maybe – he’d get tired of you and your danger-magnet ways before you could put a ring through his nose. And – and I’d be there for him to talk to, get closer to, be friends with, and maybe even fall in love with.”

Lois waited a moment, then said, “You know that’s not going to happen.”

Mayson dashed at her eyes with a vicious swipe. “Long shot, yeah, but those were the only odds I could get. And don’t get cocky! If I thought for one second that you were a danger to the public you’d be on bread and water and in solitary for the duration of your sentence. Everything the judge said in there was the truth.” She turned to Lois with dry but reddened eyes. “I refuse to allow anyone to be a danger to public safety. I don’t believe you’re a danger, except for your habit of jumping in with both feet before you know if you’re headed toward water or acid.”

Lois almost smiled. “I hope I’ve learned my lesson in that regard.”

“You’d better have. Or I just might join you in the prison exercise yard. I doubt the judge would be so accommodating to either of us next time.”

“How about we get that paperwork done instead? That way neither of us has to be introduced to the joy of busting rocks.”

Mayson gave her a look that was half-way between irritated and amused. “You know we don’t do that anymore.”

Lois shrugged as she fell into step beside the attorney. “Just as well. I sunburn easily.”

This time Mayson actually smiled without meeting Lois’ gaze. But Lois didn’t care. She was marrying Clark Kent, the man who on occasion disguised himself as Superman to save lives and help people, the best man on two planets, and not even a confession from a potential competitor for his affections could dampen her day. In a matter of days, if not hours, she and Clark would be exchanging vows, rings, and promises for their joined futures.

On top of that, Lex’ empire had all but disintegrated. Even if Lois had chosen not to testify against him, the number of witnesses and victims who had come forward after his arrest had astounded even Clark. It seemed that nearly every person of influence in Metropolis had accused Luthor of wrongdoing, and his chances of ever being free were so close to nothing that they weren’t worth computing.

And that didn’t take into account what he’d tried to do to her personally. She would have testified against the lying snake even if he hadn’t tried to seduce her into marrying him. And the overpowering urge to gargle her tongue out at the slightest hint of any memory of his kisses was finally starting to wane.

The two women stopped in front of a door labeled Asst. DA’s Office. Mayson touched the doorknob, then looked at Lois. “One more thing, Lois. Clark doesn’t get to hear any of what I told you. Agreed?”

Lois tilted her head and asked, “Hear what? I don’t remember you telling me anything.”

Mayson’s expression softened. “Thanks. I owe you one.”

Lois waltzed through the door as Mayson opened it. “And I plan on collecting as soon as I get back to my desk at work. There are a couple of stories I’ll need information about, and I’m sure we can work something out.”

“Be careful about promising something you can’t deliver. You’re on probation, remember?”

“I don’t think my parole officer would object to you and me sharing the occasional lunch.”

“Gaahhh!” grunted Mayson. “Please let’s not end up friends.”

A crooked smile surfaced on Lois’ mouth. “That works for me, too. Now where are those papers? I still have to call my mother and tell her I’m getting married without her input on the wedding plans.”

Mayson’s grin turned evil as she indicated a stack of papers written in legalese. “Really? In that case, maybe you need more sympathy than I can give you. I know how my mother would have reacted.”

Lois picked up a loose pen and leaned down to sign the top page where Mayson was pointing. “If I need police protection, I’ll give you a call.”

“Have Clark call me.”

Lois stopped writing but didn’t look up. “My memory would have to improve first.”

“Ugh. I’d rather owe you one.”

“Done. Next page?”

“Slow down, Lois, you’ve got quite a few pages to go.”

“No problem. I’ll just pretend I’m signing the marriage license.”

Mayson didn’t answer, but Lois knew it wasn’t over between them. It was going to be an interesting competition between them as they both worked for truth and justice. They’d never be close friends, but Lois was sure she could work with Mayson to put the bad guys behind bars where they belonged.

As long as Clark wasn’t around Mayson too much.

And as long as Lois was around Clark a lot.

THE END