

Dance With Me

By Morgana [cynthia.mccoy533@gmail.com]

Rated: PG

Submitted: February 2016

Summary: The dance sequence in the films *Miss Potter*, *Young Victoria* and *Cinderella* got me to thinking how to set these enchanting moments to an Alternative Universe Lois and Clark for sheer romance!

Story Size: 20,656 words (117Kb as text)

A/N: Hopefully everyone will enjoy the results. Special Thanks to KatherineKent and MikeM for the great beta work.

LEGAL DISCLAIMER: Most of the characters in this story are property of DC Comics, December 3rd Productions and Warner Bros and whomever owns legal claim to them. The song, "When You Taught Me How to Dance" is by Kate Melua. No copyright infringement is intended. I have merely borrowed the characters for a little while.

Chapter One

It was a warm Friday night in August and the *Daily Planet's* bullpen staff was in the midst of altering from the day shift into night. A trio of young, attractive women clustered around the elevator talking excitedly. One of them, a statuesque blonde in a fabulous cream-colored suit separated from them and with the stride of a gazelle, walked down the ramp over to Lois Lane's desk.

"Lois! Where have you been all day? Perry hasn't chained you to the desk on a Friday night because you were chasing down a source that didn't pan out? He's gone for the night, give the writing a rest, shut down your monitor and get out from behind that desk! Stacy, Erin and I are going for dinner and a couple of rounds of darts at our favorite journalist hangout the *Pen and Pencil*. After that we're heading over to the Imperial Theatre to check out that new British Regency romance movie, *The Queen's Consort*. Come with us, the Pulitzer Prize isn't going anywhere!" Diane Pallister said with a generous smile.

In her characteristic typing pose of hunched shoulders and jaw tightly clenched, Lois never lifted her head from the monitor while banging away on the keyboard. "Perry may be out for the evening, but Ivan is waiting for this final draft on the Alistair Grigg's murder case. The crime lab boys *finally* figured out what poisoned him *and* the method of delivery. That little tidbit has gotta be included in the evening edition!"

Fascinated, Diane walked closer to Lois' desk and looked over her friend's shoulder as green characters, glowing dimly against a black background, appeared on the monitor while the murder investigation story took shape. She insinuated herself into the visitor's chair and said, "Oh yes, the case has been discussed by several media outlets for the past week. How was Mr. Griggs poisoned?"

Lois snorted, "The simplest type of poison, which told me the killer was a clever amateur not a professional: contaminated water. Griggs just got back from visiting potential clients in an emerging Third World country. So it was assumed he contracted cholera while there. But after a bunch of expensive phone calls to the clients and the hotel where he was staying, it was discovered he *only* drank bottled water. The man was a nut on the subject, even brought his own supply of water from Metropolis for

drinking *and* bathing."

Diane's eyebrows disappeared under heavy blonde bangs. "Wow that *is* extreme. So he had to have been poisoned in New Troy?" she said, following Lois' line of reasoning.

"That's right. His business partner, Lance Aldrich, was the murderer. He met Griggs at the airport and they had celebratory drinks in the limousine on the way home. Griggs had his usual bourbon and branch water, while Aldrich drank Scotch, neat."

"How did the police know it was Aldrich?"

"Once the autopsy revealed he had been poisoned, the lab boys descended over every place Griggs had been once he got home, especially his home kitchen, office fridge and the limo that he rode in and came up with zilch. That is until Inspector Henderson questioned the limo driver who said Aldrich took the liquor bottles *and* Griggs' glass with him. Apparently Aldrich was the type who didn't clean up after himself. He has cleaning 'staff' for that sort of thing. The driver saw Aldrich take the bottles and glasses with him. He didn't think anything of it until later. ..."

Diane chimed in, "...When he read about the story of Griggs' suspicious death in the *Daily Planet*, written by intrepid reporter Lois Lane."

"Exactly!" Lois responded, her brown eyes flashing with excitement. "The driver came forward and told Henderson about it. I just happened to be at the precinct this afternoon regarding another story and overheard the whole conversation. Henderson had to call Judge Harper for a search warrant. I knew by the time the paperwork arrived, all the evidence would disappear into Hobbs Bay."

"Don't tell me, you did something Perry doesn't want to know about and dragged poor Clark into it?" Diane said as a worried frown creased her pretty face.

Lois stopped typing as a thoughtful expression briefly clouded her face. She answered slowly, as if discussing her impulsive behavior was something new. "Yeah I did do something ... rash. But as Perry always says, a reporter needs the 'cold, hard facts' to back up any story. After hearing all that at the precinct, I bolted out of there and decided to visit Aldrich."

Shocked, it was all Diane could do to keep silent while letting her friend finish the story.

"When I first arrived at his home, Mr. Aldrich thought I wanted to interview him about his late partner. Apparently he thought he was in the clear. He tried to be polite, even cordial, but anyone who listened closely could draw the conclusion that he and Griggs were no longer the best of friends."

"After a few more probing questions, Aldrich revealed that Griggs had cheated him out of untold millions in profits and was planning on - by legal chicanery - removing him from the company they had started as young men." Lois smiled like a Cheshire cat and said, "That's when I lowered the boom on him and asked if he had killed his partner."

"We were in the living room which had a huge fireplace. When those words came out of my mouth, he jumped up, grabbed a poker, and held it over his head, ready to strike!"

Her audience gave a tiny gasp, but made a hasty gesture with her hands for Lois to continue.

"It was weird; I guess the thought of killing an innocent person was too much for him. Suddenly the poor man dropped the poker, fell to his knees and started sobbing. The gruesome reality of what he had done finally hit him."

Lois' attention returned to the keyboard, the staccato sound of the keys filled the bullpen. She may have acted as if the encounter was of no little consequence, just another day in the life of Lois Lane, ace investigative reporter. But honestly, Lois had been badly frightened and did not want anyone to glimpse the fear that the memory of the encounter with Aldrich had brought to her eyes.

Diane placed a hand on Lois' shoulder and said, "Please tell

me Clark was in the Jeep outside! Imagine what might have happened if Aldrich didn't have an attack of conscience?"

The rapid-fire typing suddenly ceased. Lois looked down at her now still fingers, turned around in her chair and grimaced. With more than a hint of Mad Dog in her voice she said, "It figures you and everyone else in the bullpen would think Clark was nearby, but he wasn't. I confronted Aldrich alone ... just like when I first started investigative reporting!"

Astounded, Diane said, "Come again? This isn't going undercover to expose a congressman's mismanagement of funds or catching an international jewel thief. You were *alone* with a killer!" Diane responded in a chiding tone.

Brushing aside the comment with a wave of her hand, Lois answered dismissively, "Stop worrying. Henderson and his happy band of flatfoots showed up just in time ... with a search warrant. By then, I had Aldrich eating out of my hand. He even asked me to ride in the squad car so he could finish relating his side of the story."

"Aha! So, that explains where you've been this afternoon." Diane said rather dryly.

"Yes! Once he was booked, Henderson gave me permission to write the story, so the *Daily Planet* has an exclusive! This article missed the evening edition, but will make the morning papers." She mused, "A picture of Aldrich being arrested wearing handcuffs, now that would have made a nice touch! I love it when a story comes together! So no, I won't be joining everybody tonight, but thanks for asking me." She spun around in her chair and started typing again.

"Great story Lois! Perry's gonna love it! Still, there's more to life than chasing a headline." Diane said with a sigh, "It doesn't hurt to have a social life *outside* of the newsroom."

Again, the brunette stopped typing, lifted her head and fixed a pointed stare at Diane. "Please! I already have a little sister who insists I have some fun and meet eligible men every time she calls me. I don't need *another one* playing the same tune while I'm at work."

Diane held up her hands in mock surrender. "Okay! Okay! It was merely a suggestion!" With a flash of insight, Diane suddenly understood the actual reason why Lois tackled Lance Aldrich alone; she said gingerly, "Speaking of life outside of work. Clark has been squiring his old high school 'friend' Lana Lang around town a lot since she moved here from Los Angeles. By the way, where is he?"

In response to Diane's question, Lois answered with an indignant sniff. "Oh, you mean Clark *and* Lana? He accompanied her to some function at the Metropolis Museum. Apparently her job as an assistant curator provides all kinds of opportunities to rub shoulders with the rich and famous, such as; Lex Luthor, Jasper Templar the computer genius and the Swiss media mogul Gregory Daae to name a few."

"Oh my! That's a lot of power and money concentrated in the same room." Diane whistled appreciatively.

Ignoring her comment Lois continued, "Personally, I don't care if they swing from the bullpen's ceiling fans! I'm interested in a real man..." Despite her determination to sound indifferent, the tone although pure 'Mad Dog', held a touch of petulance.

Diane shook her head in askance then said, "Oh yeah, that's right, the one with the red cape and blue tights. He's gorgeous and a gentleman, but honestly, I can't see him shootin' a round of pool or knocking back a few with the guys on a Friday night. We won't even mention Perry's weekly poker game."

Nettled by Diane's candor, but deciding not to let her know the comment stung, Lois pointed with her chin to the elevator and said, "Stacy and Erin are starting to get impatient. Listen, thanks for the invitation." She hesitated and then continued with a lopsided smile, "I'm sorry for snapping at you, but I've got another story outline to wrap up before leaving. Have fun and win

a game of darts for me. See you on Monday."

Sighing in defeat, Diane realized that trying to convince Mad Dog Lane to spend an evening out with the girls was a lost cause. Sooner or later the Lana issue was going to have to be faced; otherwise she was going to lose her handsome partner forever. She said in a kind voice, "Sure, have a good evening. Don't work too hard." She stood up, turned away and returned to Erin and Janet who were indeed getting a little irritated.

Lois smiled after her friend and turned back to the monitor and continued typing. Fifteen minutes later the bullpen was quiet. Night Editor Ivan Horvath and his staff were in different parts of the building, preparing the morning edition. She was in need of a break and so leaned back in her chair thinking about that night at the movies.

How could she tell Diane that she had indeed seen *The Queen's Consort* with its dashing male lead, Hugh Cain and his stunning co-star, Terisa Hatcher? Her mind drifted backwards to last Saturday night.

FLASHBACK

After spending the day cleaning her apartment and paying monthly bills, Lois wanted to do something besides sitting home alone with a tank of tropical fish. She went over her options: Molly Flynn was out of town promoting her latest computer manual and Lucy was studying for her finals. Perry and Alice had extended a standing invitation to dinner, but she felt it would be extremely rude to drop in on them at the last minute. Maybe she could have dinner at her uncle's restaurant, *Café Americana*, but dismissed that thought; the café always did a brisk business on the weekends and she didn't feel like fighting the crowds. Maybe she and Clark could get together and do something?

With a snort she remembered Clark was spending that evening with Lana Lang ... as he had for the past three weekends. Normally however her partner amused himself outside of the office was his own affair, but to hand over copious amounts of free time to an opinionated, stubborn woman like that was crazy.

Sure, she led an interesting life as an assistant curator in the Metropolis Museum and traveled all over the world acquiring, cataloging and studying artifacts from ancient ruins. Still, why did she have to monopolize *all* of Clark's time? It was the primary reason why she hadn't asked Clark to help her tackle the any cases. Her work partner was too busy as Lana's escort and having drinks with members of Metropolis' social elite to concern himself with mundane investigations.

Even his friends, Dr. Pete Ross and Skip Rowans had complained about Lana. Since her arrival they had not gone to a basketball game or played poker together.

She was flipping through the *Daily Planet's* entertainment section when she came across Film critic Waldo Lydecker's glowing review of *The Queen's Consort*. His quote made her chuckle, "'This film is so first-rate, I recommend it as the perfect date movie — even if the 'date' is with yourself.'" Waldo had a reputation for being stingy with his praise. The movie section said it was playing at the Imperial and the next showing was at 6:45PM. If she hurried she could beat the crowds.

It was a muggy evening; the oxygen was so tight and humid it felt like she was breathing through a sponge. Not a puff of cool air could be felt. She looked skyward, thinking rain might be in the forecast, but was disappointed. What did anyone expect in the middle of August? She was ecstatic to find an empty cab - with working air conditioning - that got her to the theatre in record time.

Once inside the blissfully cool theatre she paid for her ticket, a small bag of popcorn — no butter, no salt — and picked a seat among a group of older people. Hopefully they were not the type who talked a movie to death. Quickly the seats began to fill up, she realized a trip to the ladies' room was necessary and asked the

woman next to her to save her seat. The woman kindly agreed. Lois returned just as the theatre lights went down and the previews began.

Through the flawless combination of talented actors, historical settings and meticulously crafted, colorful period costumes the story had transported her to a bygone era of grace and refined manners. By the time the credits rolled, her eyes were puffy with happy tears, nothing was better than a good movie. Much as the hard-edged journalist tried to hide it, she was an unabashed romantic.

Just as the lights went up she heard the familiar voice of Lana Lang loudly talking to someone in self-assured tones, disparaging the cast and everything else about the film. She remembered thinking. *Who would have imagined that a woman raised in bucolic Kansas farm country could sound so Manhattan upper crust and arrogant?* It seemed ridiculous that kind-hearted Clark ever dated such a creature.

In the middle of her mental ramble, another voice, aching familiar in its deep, masculine rumble gently answered, saying the movie was much better than he had anticipated and for once, the film and its actors had lived up to the media hype.

With an inward groan she realized Clark had taken Lana to the movies! Of all the movie theatres in Metropolis, why, oh why, had he taken her to this one? They must have come in while she was in the ladies' room. Going into undercover mode, Lois pulled the black Metros baseball cap over her face and sunk down into her seat. The *last* thing she wanted Clark to see was her sitting in a movie theatre on a Saturday night ... dateless.

After a few moments the couple made their way out of the theatre with the rest of the crowd. Employing her skills as an investigative reporter, she hung back until the house lights came up and a crew of three young women came in carrying brooms and dust pans to sweep up the leftover popcorn, Twizzlers, paper cups and other debris that had spilled between the theatre seats onto the floor.

Only then did Lois vacate her seat to walk briskly to the lobby and onto the street, leaving behind the crisp coolness afforded her by the air conditioning and into the sweltering humid August evening. Trying to hail a cab at that hour was close to impossible. No one wanted to walk through air that felt and smelled like a discarded gym sock. Lois groaned and reluctantly accepted the fact that she would not be riding home in air-conditioned comfort. Nonetheless the discomfort was worth it *not* to have run into Clark and Lana.

It took about fifteen minutes to make the ten-block walk to her apartment. Never was she as grateful as when the air of the lobby enveloped her in a welcomed, glacial embrace. After feeding her fish, she indulged in a long, cold shower to get the sweat off her body. It was a relief to put on a cotton tank top and sleep shorts and then hop into bed. The climactic ballroom scene from the movie kept playing in her mind. The soon-to-be-crowned young queen had a final dance with the man she really loved, not the nobleman her parents had dictated she marry. With a smile of sheer delight Lois wondered if something so completely magical could ever happen in her life. As sleep claimed her for the night, Clark's handsome face appeared unbidden in her mind.

END FLASHBACK

Dragging her thoughts back from that night she returned to the job at hand, once the finishing touches for the Griggs investigation was complete. She needed to type up another article for the business section which Perry has requested. Of course, business journalism was not her forte, but the story *was* compelling. Lex Luthor had agreed to donate one million dollars to the Metropolis Museum in order to help them build a secure facility for the amazing rare art treasures Superman had recently discovered in an underground vault. Lex Luthor promised that the

security measures would be the best his experts could provide. "So that all of Metropolis and the world could view and appreciate these previously unseen priceless works of artistic expression."

Lois yawned and stretched as she put the finishing touches on the final draft. Lex was certainly a man to be admired. The greatest philanthropist Metropolis had ever known. How fortunate that he lived here. His business and personal interests were helping to line the pockets of not a few of New Troy's citizens. She admired Lex Luthor and wished more of the world's wealth was focused on such acts of generosity.

Again her mind drifted, this time weighing the elusive billionaire on a more intimate level. They had gone out a few times, when she attempted to in-depth interview him. He had even hinted at putting their relationship on a more serious footing. Lex was indeed charming and very attractive. From time to time she imagined what marriage to such a charismatic man would be like. It was a certainty that all those doors which were closed to Lois Lane the reporter would be opened wide for Mrs. Lois Luthor.

But no, she no more belonged in his champagne-and-caviar-world than he did in her cream-soda-and-pizza one. Besides there were times when she detected flashes of something almost sinister in his eyes which gave her the shivers. It was better for all concerned if they remained polite acquaintances.

Hours had passed. The night shift staff was in the conference room discussing tomorrow morning's edition. Lois had given the Griggs murder investigation article to Ivan, who was just as cantankerous about her spelling and grammar as Perry or Clark.

She grumbled something not quite ladylike under her breath when she thought of her partner running around town with his former Smallville girlfriend. The petite blonde was pushy, opinionated and did not respect Clark — or his co-workers. Clark didn't need her; he needed ... the errand thought stopped as if it was stuck in one of the Daily Planet's giant printing presses. Where did such a thought — even a half-baked one — come from?

After all? Wasn't she hopelessly *in love* with Superman?

As she typed furiously the bright-green crystallized words began to form on the DOS computer screen. Finally around 11:30, the final draft was just in time for Ivan to look over for the Saturday afternoon edition. Triumphant, she leaned back in her chair, opened the lower right-hand drawer and pulled out a Double Fudge Crunch bar to celebrate. As the creamy richness of milk chocolate melted over her taste buds, Lois realized she should be sharing this moment with friends or someone special not sitting in a deserted bullpen on a Friday night; her only companion a half-eaten candy bar.

"No!" she said aloud, "I just finished two stories in one day! Two very good stories, I have a lot to be proud of!"

So why did she feel so empty and alone? True, the murder investigation story was complete; she could have gone with Diane and the girls. Another 'good deed' article about the fabulously wealthy Lex Luthor could have been written up in her spare time on Sunday and delivered to Perry's inbox on Monday.

Unexpectedly a familiar sound of rushing wind pricked the quiet, one usually associated with Superman when he flew towards a rescue at a high speed. She looked up and there was the mysterious superhero, suspended in mid-air just inside the large window with the Metropolis skyline serving as a shimmering backdrop behind him.

Without preamble he said, "Hello, Miss Lane."

Words, which usually came so easily, were caught in her throat. But, after taking a quick breath, she managed a husky, "Hello, Superman."

The red-and-blue figure floated downward without a sound into the newsroom, never taking his penetrating brown eyes from hers. When had it become the norm to see a man fly as easily as if he were walking? More to the point, when had she casually

accepted that norm? When his red leather boots touched lightly on the floor right next to Clark's desk, she could barely breathe and only started to do so when he said, "What are you doing here so late on a Friday night? Shouldn't you be with friends after a long week at work?"

Terribly flattered that the superhero thought of her, Lois responded, "Oh, I was going to join some of the girls I work with, but a story just had to be written. Besides, the movie they went to, *The Queen's Consort*, I've already seen. It must have been last Saturday, what a humid night that was!" She forced herself to stop babbling, turned to the desk and indicated with her slightly shaking hand, the small pile of folders and research notes. "Uh, besides, there was this story about Lex Luthor's contribution to Metropolis Museum I had to finish ..."

Upon hearing the billionaire's name, he grimaced slightly, his jaw visibly tightening while gritting his teeth. "There's *no* article about Luthor that can't wait until Monday morning."

Surprised by his reaction, she nodded and said, "I guess you're right, articles on Lex Luthor are written all the time. This one could have waited. Anyway, it's finished now."

He looked intensely into her eyes and the tightness around his mouth relaxed. He asked quietly, with more than a little concern. "Did you attend the movie alone?"

Embarrassed, Lois looked down at something on the floor, feeling suddenly like she was back in high school, ashamed to talk with a cute boy she had a desperate crush on. "Th_ there's nothing wrong with seeing a film alone is there?" She didn't mention how often she had gone to the movies unaccompanied when friends were unavailable. It had never bothered her in the past, but now, for some reason it did. Diane's words came back with stinging effect. How could this man, who lived above everyone else, ever have the time to take Lois Lane to something as mundane as the movies? He could fly for Pete's sake!

Superman did not smile; in fact, there was the tiniest hint of gentle sadness in his deep brown eyes.

Uncomfortable with his expression, she said quickly, "The movie was everything our film critic, Waldo, said it was. The plot was sweet and dreamy, but very well written. Clothing, especially the dresses worn by noblewomen from the Napoleonic era were effortlessly simple, yet sewn from the most sumptuous fabrics and embellished with handmade colorful lace and ribbons. Honestly the whisper of delicate yellow and cream muslin as the Queen took to the dance floor was ..."

"Romantic?" he said, now a mischievous smile *did* tug at his lips.

"Yes," she sighed. Remembering with every detail of the ballroom scene where the Queen and her true love danced in public for the first time.

"Miss Lane, perhaps you should have gone with your friends in order to experience the ballroom scene again." He took a commanding step towards her, just like the hero in the movie.

"Maybe ... maybe I should have," she whispered, her voice soft and distant; suddenly being so close to this strikingly handsome man was overwhelming her senses. Nonetheless a scrap of thought tugged like a loose thread at her mind. How did the Man of Steel know she was talking about a *ballroom* scene?

Before she could think about it any further, he held out a hand, like an eager suitor his voice rumbled gently, almost seductively in her ears. "I cannot take you to the movies, but would you care to dance, Lois?"

Without a moment's hesitation she stood, slipped into his embrace as a warm muscular arm encircled her waist. In her mind the boxy gray business suit fell away replaced by a pale lavender gown made of finest muslin and embroidered with silky silver thread. Her feet were wrapped in delicate kidskin, perfect for dancing.

He was no longer wearing the familiar blue-and-red spandex

suit of a superhero but the evening garments of a refined nobleman about to dance with his lady. How could arms strong enough to hoist a space shuttle into the Earth's atmosphere hold her with such incredible tenderness? Somehow in the magnificence of the moment, the fact hardly seemed an issue; she simply did not want him to ever let go. With an easy, sinuous grace they moved around the newsroom floor. He began to sing, she immediately recognized the song, but could not place where it came from.

When you taught me how to dance

years ago with misty eyes

every step and silent glance

every move a sweet surprise.

Someone must have taught you well

to beguile and to entrance

for that night you cast your spell

and you taught me how to dance.

Like reflections in the lake

I recall what went before

as I give alone to take

and will be alone no more.

Other lights may light my way

I may even find romance

but I won't forget that night

when you taught me how to dance.

Cold winds blow but up on those hills you find me

and I know you're walking 'round behind me.

When you taught me how to dance

years ago with misty eyes

every step and silent glance

every move a sweet surprise.

Someone must have taught you well

to beguile and to entrance

for that night you cast your spell

and you taught me how to dance.

He stopped singing and they gazed into each other's eyes, nothing but unvoiced love and admiration swirled around them like a thing alive. Their physical movements conveyed a musical communication in a song so profound and startling to her that nothing, not the wooden floor beneath them or even the air that drew into her lungs mattered. Oddly in the depths of her consciousness, her dance partner's movements were familiar, almost comfortingly so. She wanted to study that glimmering thought, but it was at that moment Superman transformed their physical communication from a tender engaging song into a symphony, she felt her body lift up and they were literally dancing upon nothingness. A tiny gasp escaped her lips, but she trusted this man and so they continued as he taught her an entirely new way to be a part of the dance. They floated on glossamer wings of emotion above the bullpen for what seemed like an eternity, then, slowly ever so slowly, he descended until their feet touched down on the floor and they were by her desk once more.

The dance, with its accompanying symphony, had come to an end. The ethereal garments of another age had vanished, they were back to their normal selves, but oh, the unfulfilled passions that emerged with that return was exquisite torture!

She could tell by the darkly passionate gaze in her partner's deep brown eyes he felt exactly the same way, but abruptly it was replaced by a far and away look. He bowed and in a courtly manner said, "Thank you for the dance Miss Lane, but sadly, I am needed elsewhere." He took her hand in his and allowed his soft lips to brush over each of her knuckles, then turned over the palm of her hand and kissed it with aching tenderness. "Good-night, my lady," he said with all the gallantry of a young nobleman in love.

With those simple words he alighted into the air once more and flew out of the newsroom.

Lois looked after him, then her knees gave way and she

almost fell into her chair. “Oh my ... what a dance,” she whispered.

Abruptly, the sound of a door opening and a man’s voice shattered her thoughts. “Hey Lane! It’s nearly midnight. Ain’t it time for you to go home?”

“What? Oh! Ivan I ... I was just packing everything up and getting ready for the weekend!” With that she turned off the computer, unceremoniously dumped all the files and notes into an already bulging camel-colored briefcase and quit the newsroom.

Chapter Two

Twenty minutes later Lois slowly unbolted the multiple locks to her apartment door, stepped inside, snapped on the lights and closed the heavy door behind her. Her mind was still dazzling from dancing with the Man of Steel. Forget Fred Astaire, move over Gene Kelly and the young tap dancer Savon Glover, the last son of Krypton *truly* danced on air!

After Lois dropped the heavy briefcase, she giggled and began to dance and pirouette about the living room with childish glee, humming the same romantic tune Superman had sung to her. She felt cherished and innocent, like a lady of the nobility from the times of Regency England, attending an Embassy Ball. It was a rare *mélange* of emotions and cheerfully embraced.

Eventually she stopped dancing in front of the fish tank. The tiny multicolored occupants were watching; their hungry mouths agape. Seeing them, she sighed quietly, it was time to leave youthful fantasies behind and feed the fish.

Once her pets were attended to Lois began her evening routine for bed: a quick vanilla-scented bubble bath, to rinse off the perspiration of her walk through Metropolis on yet another humid summer night, followed immediately afterwards by a brisk towel-down and then rubbing soothing rosewater lotion over her body. The last vestiges of tension from tightly coiled back muscles evaporated.

Lois went to the bedroom and opened the lowest drawer in a tall wooden bureau. Inside were sleeping clothes made of either cotton, silk or satin. She pulled out a lovely soft, white cotton nightgown with lace appliqués of pink and light-blue thread. The gown’s downy fabric felt like a sinful caress as it easily slid over her skin, reaching her toes; the nails polished a dainty seashell pink. The garment was utterly dreamy, just what Lois needed.

She was still too keyed up to sleep, and so entered the living room to put on some soft music - the fluid strains of classical music being light and gentle - and then made a cup of chamomile tea, brewed from a tin branded with the name Taylors of Harrogate, a brand that was only made in England. Clark had given her the tin last week, making her a cup to calm her down after Superman had rescued her from a stakeout which had gone horribly wrong. She took gentle sips, enjoying the mixture of flavors as they flowed over expectant taste buds.

After twenty minutes of listening to the light and airy strains of classical music and drinking tea, Lois felt tired enough to finally go to bed. As she snuggled between sheets that were cool, fresh and scrumptiously inviting, she thought again about the romantic film seen last weekend and the deep impression it had made. Superman had called her ‘my lady’ just as the princess’s true love had done in the film. She stopped for a moment, where had the tune he had hummed come from? Was it possible he had seen *The Queen’s Consort*?

Did ... did Superman believe love could exist between himself and a Terran female?

If so, was she to be that fortunate woman?

So many improbable questions, yet for now, far too many for a tired mind to contemplate. Her mouth opened with a wide yawn and, soon, eyelids heavy with exhaustion began to flutter. Before Lois realized it, a deep, restful sleep had claimed her. Her last thoughts were of Superman’s powerful arms around her waist and

oddly, Clark’s voice whispering endearments softly.

Dream Sequence

The herald’s voice rang out to the crowd gathered below, “My Lords and Ladies, the moment we have awaited. I present to you, her Royal Highness, Princess Loysa!”

The scene in the ballroom froze into utter stillness for a tiny march of heartbeats as a respectful hush fell over the crowd. The beautiful, young Princess Loysa of the country of Metpolria arrived at the great White Ball. She stood at the top of palace’s grand staircase, swathed by carpeting in a royal blue so deep, it seemed almost purple. The lavender-hued gown she wore was made of the finest Chinese silk; the hem was embellished by tiny roses, embroidered with lavender and silver threads, perfectly suitable for a young princess about to have her engagement announced to the Royal court. Her mask was also lavender and silver, topped with orchid feathers.

Below her stretched the vast ballroom, adorned with tea-lamp wall sconces and boasting a cathedral ceiling that held substantial candle chandeliers, which were supported by grand white columns made of smooth plaster, modeled after ancient Grecian design.

Against the walls on tables covered with snowy white linens laden with exotic fruits, meats, pastries and drinks were great aqua-blue vases filled with magnificent bouquets of flowers, their various scents mingling into a heady perfume, tantalizingly spicing the air. Stunning colossal windows allowed the guests to look into the world-famous gardens of Metpolria from which those same flowers had been gathered. King Samuel had ordered that the great outdoor torches be lit to cast illumination onto the grounds in order to display the garden to guests and visiting dignitaries alike.

Over two hundred members of the nobility and statesmen from five different countries awaited her descent. The ladies scented and clothed in superb gowns so colorful and shimmering they were almost iridescent — like jeweled butterflies. The pampered daughters of the elite who looked up to the Princess were attractive — even pretty. Their makeup and hair were done in the very height of fashion, yet try as they might; none were as captivating and as beautiful as Princess Loysa.

In stark contrast, the gentlemen were bedecked in coats of somber, dark broadcloth and variously hued waistcoats set off by crisp white shirts with expertly tied cravats. Although this was a masked ball, none of the participants wore costumes, merely elaborate masks to add a sense of whimsy to this festive gathering.

Normally Loysa would be keenly excited and look forward to the joviality of the evening. But now she was on display to not only the elite of Metpolria’s society, but that of Northumbria’s as well. This ball was unlike any other and she needed to play her part to perfection.

At the far end of the ballroom were her parents, King Samuel and Queen Eleanor, seated patiently on their thrones. Standing by her father’s side was the man whom every person in the kingdom presumed would be her future husband — Crown Prince Alexi of Northumbria. The prince was of good height, with a strong body, typical of a man who rode horses and was fully engaged within his country’s military. His hair was curly and dark, but his eyes were different, deep pools of blue, the shade of which she had never seen before.

Many of the elite had expressed their tacit approval of the match, stating she was fortunate to have such a fellow to stand by her side. Their life together as a royal couple would never be uninteresting.

There was a perfectly good reason for such expectation and approval; tonight her father would announce her engagement to Alexi, which made the White Ball not just an event, but a state occasion. She should be thrilled; yet a pinprick of anxiety, even a

little trepidation chased through her body whenever the older man stared at her. Lord Alexi was not a terrible man; indeed he was handsome, sharply intelligent even kindly. Precisely the sort of nobleman King Samuel had wanted his only daughter to wed, and thus seal the treaty between their two countries. He was entirely suitable

Yet he was not the one she secretly desired to spend the passing years with.

Surreptitiously scanning the room, she searched for the one face in that gleaming assembly who meant the world to her. Where was her childhood friend, Sir Kaldar of Kent? After a few seconds the search was abandoned, he was nowhere to be seen. She needed to walk down the grand staircase before the courtiers sensed her unease. With confidence born from years of training to be a lady and future Queen, she placed one dainty foot, clad in a lavender-colored silk slipper on the first step.

When she reached the bottom of the staircase, as if on cue courtiers and servants alike parted from her like the opening of a large book, the leaves of the pages parting to sanction her passage. They bowed and paid homage as she strode past, their faces more of a blur now than from the top of the staircase.

A bubble of panic welled up as she drew closer to her parents and Lord Alexi.

At the edge of her vision, she spotted a man in a gray mask whose movements and agile form were as familiar to her as her own. The breath caught in her throat and she almost cried out his name in happiness. Kaldar! His attire for the White Ball was fitting for a man of his rank; an expertly tailored black wool coat, tan pants, white waistcoat and perfectly tied cravat, but she detected by the rigid set of his shoulders, that he was ill at ease. Suddenly she noticed the petite blonde woman, her face concealed by a golden mask with thin white ribbons trailing down the sides, standing closely — perhaps too closely — by his side.

Despite the mask, it was a certainty to be Lady Ileana Dupree, one of the lesser women of rank within the court. Many a sharp-eyed matron had speculated she would be a perfect love match for the gentle young man. Loysa was fully aware that, although the two had known each other since they were children, the only thing they held in common was their birthplace. Since the arrival of Prince Alexi and his entourage, Kaldar had been seen frequently in the lady's company. Had their relationship changed? The tiny bubbles of panic were replaced by concern. Was that why she was standing so close to Kaldar?

Her legs stiffened as she watched Ileana possessively take the crook of Kal's arm, stand exquisitely on tiptoe and whisper in his ear. His face, despite the gray mask, normally so open and cheerful became serious and closed as tight as a fist. He bent down and whispered something to Ileana and then quickly departed, leaving the young lady standing alone, now her shoulders were tense.

Witnessing such an intimate exchange between the couple, she wanted nothing more than to turn around and flee from the opulent ballroom. The low sound of voices filled her ears; observers had noted her hesitation. Immediately duty and training forced her silk-bound feet to continue walking towards her parents, towards her future throne and the man she would soon wed.

Finally she arrived in front of the dais, walked up the steps and curtsied to her parents. Her father said, with concern in his voice, "Are you well child? Did your steps not falter?"

Blinking, her dusky eyelashes fluttered. "Yes, but it's just the excitement of the evening ...". She glanced at Lord Alexi, who had extended a hand to her and smiled. Obediently she stepped up to the dais and stood by his side.

"Ah, that is perfectly understandable, my dear!" King Samuel smiled expansively and with a nod to the Queen he stood. Once more the music ceased and the guests grew silent as they waited

for their sovereign to speak. In a deep, clear voice he said, "My lords and ladies, assembled guests of Metropolia and Northumbria, I welcome you! Please partake of food and wine and then to the floor and dance!"

High above the dancers' heads, in the gallery, skilled musicians stuck up a lively waltz that was currently in fashion. Several eager courtiers moved throughout the candlelit room to find their respective partners and, with a swish of rich fabric and the sounds of happy conversation, energetically took to the floor.

Prince Alexi was the picture of courtly manners as he bowed deeply and said, "May I have the honor of this dance, Loysa?"

She was slightly taken aback at the use of her first name without the title coming so freely, but adhering to protocol she curtsied and said, "Of course, my lord."

His thin lips formed into a genuine smile. "Loysa, we are about to be engaged, and soon after will be man and wife. Surely you can call me Alexi ... in private?"

"Yes, my ... Alexi." She felt foolish and very immature; with a mental shake she looked at her future fiancé and said, "You are right, please call me Loysa, for I have no simpler name."

"There is nothing simple about you." His blue eyes danced with mischief as he led her down the dais stairs. Together they entered the dance floor and joined the enthusiastic throng. Loysa did not speak, but let her years of dance training take over. Their movements were smooth, but at times hesitation, on the princess's part, ruined their footwork. At one point the slippers nearly got tangled in the gown's hem.

Embarrassed by such clumsiness she apologized, "I am sorry, Alexi. My dance master would be very disappointed in me."

His dark blue eyes shined. "It is not a concern. Tonight is a different night than any we have experienced. You have every right to be nervous."

"But you are not?" She asked, doe-like eyes looking at him with astonishment.

He bent down quickly and soft lips barely swept her bare neck. An extremely risqué move which she hoped neither of her parents noticed. He whispered in her ear. "Ah such innocence is a treasure! Soon, Loysa, we shall share a 'dance' that your dance master could not teach."

Her innocent ears were unaccustomed to such conversation, so it was not surprising that the tiniest of gasps escaped past her lips.

Prince Alexi smiled knowingly and continued to lead her around the floor.

A tall man dressed from head to toe in black appeared at the top of the staircase at the height of the dance. With the athletic control of an expert swordsman, he stepped with fluid grace down the great carpeted staircase and moved smoothly through the crowd of courtiers, foreign dignitaries and busy servants.

Some of the Metpolria's doyens studied his form with their upraised monocles, following his fluid movements, and realized he was not someone of the court, but a stranger. They murmured enthusiastically among themselves and were eager to learn his identity. In their exclusive world it was tactically understood that such a man, if unattached — and if he was of royal blood — was suitably eligible for marriage to one of their daughters.

The stranger ignored the quiet undercurrent of whispers and rampant speculation that followed his wake. Besides his unknown identity, it was solely that a properly groomed gentleman did not appear in public all in black. It was most definitely not the fashion. But here he was, breaking an unwritten rule. Once the music ceased, he stood apart from the spectators, watching and waiting for a chance to brazenly shatter another.

His sharp, brown eyes were concentrated on the couple; she in lavender and he wearing a crisp, dark uniform of Northumbria's

army. She was ravishingly beautiful with thick, dark brown hair, piled high on her head. Despite the festively plumed mask he would know her anywhere. The diamond jewelry that adorned her sparkled like white fire. Their nation demanded that she marry a man he knew she didn't love. Much as it pained and angered, him to the depths of his heart, he must stand by and allow it to happen. Still tonight, for this one true time he would hold her in his arms publicly.

"Loysa, my friend, my love and my life, after tonight nothing between us will ever be the same again," he murmured to himself.

The music stopped and Princess Loysa looked up at her partner, still embarrassed by their intimate exchange moments earlier. "Alexi ... please, it is warm in here. Could you bring me a small glass of lemon punch?"

"Yes, of course." With a tiny nod of his head, Prince Alexi walked towards one of the refreshment tables.

The dark stranger approached Loysa just as the musicians struck up the tune for another waltz. He bent down close to her right ear and whispered formally, "My lady, will you honor me with a dance?"

Loysa whirled around and gazed up at the somber man before her. In his black garb and mask he seemed like a warrior about to enter a very different battlefield, not one of steel and gunpowder, but of the heart. His name escaped her lips in quiet surprise, "Kaldar?"

He responded, keeping his voice low, "Yes, my beloved. It is I."

Responding in kind, she said, "What are you doing? Why did you change your attire?"

"To conceal who I am. It was the only way to dance with you without the elite raising their monocles in askance and asking unwanted questions."

Looking about nervously at some of the diplomats studying them with disapproving looks, Loysa said, "They *are* asking questions. It is one thing to dance with an old friend, it is quite another to dance with a stranger garbed in ebony."

"Just so, after tonight it will not matter." He extended his hand and against her better judgment, took it. Their fingers entwined and immediately they fell into unison, Loysa and Kaldar danced with spirited, flawless steps, in time with the strains of music.

Several people stepped back as the princess and her mysterious partner moved with elegance unmatched by any other couple. It could not be argued that they made a strikingly attractive pair.

All who knew Kaldar, the gentle scribe who was usually quiet and self-effacing, would have been stunned into silence by his uncharacteristic boldness. Like a warrior clad in light-weight armor, he defied his king and all the council to satisfy the fondest desire of his heart: to publicly hold in his arms the woman he loved.

Loysa for all her attention to duty, honor and decorum danced with Kaldar in a passionate style which was sorely lacking while on the floor with Alexi. The girl who descended the lushly carpeted grand staircase had vanished, to be replaced by a woman who chose to live by a different set of rules — if only for one simple waltz.

As the slash of ebony and wisp of lightest lavender pirouetted around the vast ballroom floor, with the flickering candle chandeliers illuminating every step, nothing, not the gossiping courtiers observing them with keen eyes, not the musicians playing exquisite music in the gallery nor even Lord Alexi, could pry her eyes away from the handsome masked man holding her in his strong, firm arms.

Unfortunately not everyone was enchanted or approving of the dancers' display. The collective ire of Northumbria and

Metroplia's councilors could not be ignored.

Leaning over the king said with a growl, "Eleanor, *who* is that young man dancing with our daughter?"

His wife smiled behind her mask, practicing her own unique brand of diplomacy. "A gentleman who is not afraid to show our daughter how to *truly* dance. She is so nervous around Prince Alexi, the girl stumbles over her own feet."

He responded with a hint of anger, "She is embarrassing her fiancé! The council and I have gone through great lengths to procure this treaty and the marriage is the final piece."

Patting her husband's hand she said soothingly, "Oh Sam, the announcement has not been made yet. Please, leave Loysa alone and trust her instincts as you have always trusted mine."

He sat back, mollified for the time being, and then growled again, "Very well, my dear ..."

The musicians ended the waltz and moved into a spirited and rather popular reel. Several of the younger people caught up in the excitement, forgot about the princess and entered the dance floor. Loysa and the mysterious stranger moved off to the side, away from the older participants questioning eyes.

Kaldar bowed deeply, his voice was formal. "Thank you for dancing with me milady, I shall hold the memory in my heart forever."

Seeing his pained expression and knowing she was the cause of it, Loysa grabbed his hand and held him fast. "Why? We have always been friends, why should now be any different?"

He looked down at his feet, the long black eyelashes almost lying on his cheek. "It would not be proper for a scribe — even one of noble lineage — to be seen spending so much time with the future Queen. We must realize that the joys and irresponsibility of childhood and youth are finished; tonight our good King shall announce your engagement. That is something I cannot bear to witness."

"Oh." The word escaped her lips like a single teardrop. Her lower lip began to tremble as the realization of his words resounded in her ears.

"Loysa, please don't cry," he whispered sadly. "Please, come with me. I have wanted to speak with you in private for days, but so many people have surrounded you since Prince Alexi arrived that I was prevented."

"Yes we should before Alexi returns." The bravado she had displayed during the waltz had not yet faded.

With those words he propelled her across the room and through one of the tall glass doors leading off into the garden's freshening embrace of cool night air. They held hands and walked across the garden to a secluded place only they knew. After a moment, they found themselves behind a large shrub, away from prying eyes. Kaldar removed his frockcoat and draped it over Loysa's shoulders to ward off the night's chill. They sat on a heavy bench made of cold Etowah marble, hewn from mountains in the south. Even in the dim light of the torches, veins of blue, black and hints of salmon could be seen streaming through its gray surface.

"Now my dear love, tell me, why must you leave?" Loysa asked.

"Leaving is not my desire. But how can I defy the wishes of your father, mother and the Council of Lords? How can I remain here and watch it all happen? To stay means doing something impossibly rash and perhaps plunging our nation into war. After your engagement is announced I ... I must away to my ancestral home in Kent. Ileana and her mother shall accompany me. She has been a source of great comfort to me these last few weeks." He hesitated, took a deep breath and continued. "We are friends ... good friends. There are worse companions to share one's life with. After the banns are read, we shall wed at high summer."

They sat in silence as the surprise of his news settled into her brain. Gentle night breezes flowed about them, carrying the scents

of moist earth and lush flowers. Strains of music reached their ears, coupled with the chirping of crickets, the sounds made a strange but soothing melody. Nonetheless Kaldar knew time was of the essence, he must act swiftly before some meddling aristocrat or worst yet, Prince Alexi intruded on their last private moments together.

He reached into his waistcoat pocket and withdrew a white handkerchief trimmed with heavy sapphire thread. With anxious care he unfolded the scrape of fabric to reveal a pair of matching gold signet rings with an onyx stone fitted in the center.

"I wanted gold bands with onyx, but, the resemblance to wedding bands would be marked. The master jeweler, Lazar suggested something unique, but not so different that it would raise suspicion. These rings will serve as a reminder that my heart is ever yours."

Loysa nodded. No matter what her parents and the council may decree, these rings would stand as a silent acknowledgement of their love.

"All I shall ever do as a Queen shall be to make you proud, beloved."

Kaldar's hand trembled as he removed one glove from her slender left hand and then slid the small ring over the third finger. She did the same with his ring. Their eyes met, he took her sweet face in his hands knelt down and softly kissed tender lips tasting their sweetness one last true time. A thousand unrealized thoughts, dreams and hopes were lived in that lush moment; the dances never shared, the children never born. So much sacrificed to keep their country secure.

Gradually, they separated from the embrace and rose from the still cold marble bench, Loysa returned Kaldar's frockcoat, who slowly, reluctantly put it on. She replaced her glove, concealing the ring. He took her small hands in his larger ones and gave them a light squeeze. His gentle brown eyes examined every inch of the cherished face before him.

"If for any reason my help is needed, please send the ring and I shall come."

A quiet, nervous laugh escaped her lips. "May I send it tomorrow?"

The question went unanswered.

Hand in hand, they walked towards the double doors leading back to the ballroom in companionable silence. He opened one of the doors and allowed her to enter first. A blast of heat from the crush of bodies inside was overwhelming, especially after the garden's cool, refreshing breezes.

Alexi stood by the door, his expression unreadable as questioning blue eyes moved from Kaldar to Loysa. "Ah, there you are! Please, your father is about to make the announcement. He stepped between the couple and took Loysa's hand, together they returned to the king and queen.

"Loysa, who was that gentleman?" Her mother asked, softly.

Trying unsuccessfully to remain calm Loysa said, "No one in particular ..."

"Kaldar has always loved you, as much as you have loved him. The events of the past few days could not have been easy for him to watch. His restraint is admirable."

"Mother ..."

Queen Eleanor rested her on her right hand, and spoke. "My child, Prince Alexi is a good man. He is not the one you love, but in time perhaps love will grow, as it has between your father and me. Come, Samuel is about to make the engagement announcement. You must put all thought of Kaldar from your mind ... forever."

With her mother's words ringing in her ears, Loysa stood by as her father called the assembled guests to attention. "My Lords and Ladies and honored visitors from Northumbria. We are here this evening to officially announce the engagement of my daughter Princess Loysa to Crown Prince Alexi!"

Thunderous applause broke out among the assembly as the Prince held up for all to see a ruby ring surrounded by diamonds set in a gold band. He walked over to Loysa and placed it on the third finger of her right hand. He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it gently.

It was all Loysa could do not to watch as Kaldar grasped Ileana's offered hand and led her out of the ballroom. Her heart breaking just a little more with each step he took

Lois sat up in bed and cried out. "No! No! Kaldar don't leave!"

A torrent of thoughts raced through her mind. Why would Kaldar allow the woman he loved to marry another man, no matter how kind? Why on earth would he run away to his estate with a woman he didn't love? Why was Kaldar dressed in black and wearing a mask when he danced with Loysa? Was it a secret identity to keep Prince Alexi and others from knowing who he was? This dream was a weird melding of *The Queen's Consort* and her wretched love life ... or lack thereof.

Clark.

It was time to see Clark. Lana may have been his high school sweetie, but the woman was most definitely not kind. She couldn't allow her best friend to make the biggest mistake of his life! Plus ... there was something more to it than that. Something she had hidden from for far too long. She loved Clark Kent, a mild-mannered reporter who was also her best friend

Not Superman, because although the memory of their whimsical dance-on-air would stay with her forever, the Man of Steel was one hundred percent fantasy and she could not imagine spending her life with him. She needed a man who could publicly deal with supermarkets, not super villains.

Lex Luthor — her other possibility — was a billionaire who gave to numerous communities around Metropolis and throughout the world. But he did not strike her as a man who ever gave of himself. If that was the case, how could he be truly intimate with whoever became his wife?

And that left Clark. But not as some second-rate consolation prize, but as the 'victor', the only one who fulfilled all her needs, hopes and yes — dreams.

Clark needed to know how she felt about him and she also needed to apologize for the cold way she had been treating him since Lana showed up.

Quickly she jumped out of bed. Without thinking about the hour, with almost maniacal energy, she pulled on jeans, a light cotton shirt and comfortable walking sandals. After running a brush through sleep-tossed hair she grabbed keys and purse and bolted for the door.

A half hour later after parking the Jeep, that energy still coursed through her. With eager footsteps she climbed up the metal stairs to his apartment. Just as she raised a hand to knock, Clark's voice could be clearly heard through the glass door.

"Lana, we discussed this already; relocation is out of the question. My place is here, your place is —"

A small, anguished cry escaped from Lois' throat, drowning out Clark's words. They were discussing relocation. Together! That could only mean ... No. He couldn't be leaving. It was too horrible a thought to consider. She was going to lose her best friend!

But ... he'd said that his place was here ... in Metropolis. Maybe he wasn't leaving. Her heart lightened for a moment, until she remembered his next words. Lana's place was ... by his side. Was that what he had been continuing to say? Did that mean ...? Had he proposed, and this was their discussion about ... future living arrangements?

The cold realization slid through her stomach as sharp as a sword's blade. So, that was it. Clark had proposed, Lana had clearly accepted. She had indeed lost her best friend! Tears filled

up her eyes and almost blindly she sat down on the chilly iron steps and began to weep. Memories of happier times came and went with frightening speed. How could she have been so stupid and let the best thing that had ever happened to her slip through her fingers? This was so much worse than the dream could ever have been!

But then resolve, like a brick wall firmed her mind. No way was Mad Dog Lane backing down and letting Miss Dairy Freeze win. Not without a fight! She stood up and went back to the door and began to pound so hard on the wood-and-glass door that the frame began to shake. “Clark Jerome Kent, open this door right now!”

Chapter Three

It didn't take long before she heard rapid, heavy footsteps and then Clark, looking too handsome for his own good wearing black sweatpants and a gray t-shirt flung open the door. “Lois? What on Earth are you doing here? It's 4:00AM!”

She pushed past him, stepped over the threshold and ran down the stairs into the small, but comfortable air-conditioned living room. The tone of her voice was acid when she responded “Oh I don't know, maybe find out how great the evening went at the Metropolis Museum since you and Lana decided to bring the ‘party’ here! All right Lang! Come out and show yourself!” She raced into the sleeping alcove and ran around the bed, giving the tousled sheets more than a cursory, angry glance, with Clark trailing close behind.

Even more puzzled than before, he responded, “What are you talking about? Lana isn't here. I dropped her off at her place after the party. But we were on the phone or at least we were until I heard my door being pounded off its hinges. Now, will you *please* tell me what's going on?”

Her inspection of the alcove complete, ignoring his anxious comment, Lois charged on. She flung open the balcony door, permitting thick, humid air into the room. She grimaced remembering the awful weather. After quickly inspecting the outside, yet still managing to talk at a rapid-fire pace, she turned to him and snapped. “I won't have your life end up like Kaldar's! Imagine leaving the love of your life to marry a woman who isn't your equal in rank or personality! He and Loysa didn't have a choice, but you do! That's one dream — or rather nightmare — that had better not come true and ...”

Lois stopped mid-babble, realizing the entire mad situation was being fueled by a movie and a dream — a dream she had slipped and unwittingly admitted to Clark about. A moment of silence passed between them as she watched him think about what she said, then comprehension dawned, an expression in equal parts disbelief and bemusement on his face. “Wait a second. Since when does a *movie* about fictional star-crossed lovers have anything to do with Lana and I?”

In a superior tone Lois responded. “Ha! You think you're so smart all the time correcting my copy. For your information, the proper grammatical phrase should be Lana and *me*!”

“Okay, I stand corrected. But Ms. Lane, it's a small apartment.” He gestured with an outstretched hand. “Do you see any sign of Lana?”

Her anger faded away and the Mad Dog Lane persona took a hike. Lois' voice reflected equal parts embarrassment and relief — that Clark was thinking about the movie and not her dream — as she spoke in a tiny, discomfited voice. “She she's really not here?”

Clark's eyes glared behind the wire-rimmed glasses as he crossed his muscular arms over his chest.

“No, Lana is most definitely not here.” There was something authoritative and commanding about his stance, it was almost familiar ...

Head bowed and feeling more humiliated by the second, she

skirted around the bed and went back into the living room. “I ... I thought I heard you talk about moving in with her ...”

The surprised expression on his face should have been enough to tell her that such a scenario wasn't possible. He ran long fingers through thick, black hair, took a deep breath and desiring to ease the tension of the situation said, “Look, do you want something to drink? I can make us a fresh pot of Moroccan coffee?”

Lois sat down on the familiar, comfortable couch and folded her arms tightly over her chest. In a vain attempt to cover over a whopper of a mistake, she sighed. “Yes, a cup of good, strong coffee is what we need at this hour since there's a lot to talk about!”

He nodded, “Okay, make yourself at home. Brewing will take a few minutes.”

Clark, still in confusion about Lois' odd behavior, went into the small kitchen and began getting ingredients for Moroccan coffee which was one of their favorite blends. They drank several cups sometimes when working at Clark's apartment compiling information on an investigation. It took a few minutes for the highly spiced brew to bloom, Lois recognized the pleasant aroma, an intriguing fusion of cinnamon, nutmeg, cardamom pods, cloves and other spices used in North Africa. She sighed, that man certainly knew his way around all things culinary, especially brands from exotic, faraway places.

She remembered with a mental grimace that Lana was also quite capable in the kitchen — apparently it was a talent people born in Kansas had to excel at before being allowed to leave the state. A talent she had never expected to master.

Clark emerged from the kitchen and handed her a hot cup nestled on top of a saucer as colorful as its contents were piquant. She took a grateful sip and for a second was ready to forget why she came here in the first place. Clark sat at the other end of the couch; the coffee mug he was holding disappearing into his large hands. If it was at all possible, the underlying current of nervous anticipation on Clark's part had increased tenfold. He took a slow intake of breath and said, “So here we are, with no distractions of any kind, let's talk.”

A profound breath escaped her lips, why was *she* so nervous? Clark was the one who had broken all the rules allowing an obnoxious woman, an outsider really, to run his life. “Okay, look, it's none of my business what you do after quitting time. But honestly Clark, this excessive time spent with Lana is affecting everyone else.”

A tiny, mischievous smile quirked at the corner of his mouth. She suspected he was surprised - even a little relieved — about which way the conversation was going.

Cocking an eyebrow, he said, “Oh? Like who?”

Mentally she cast about. Who had been affected adversely since Lana showed up and then she remembered not just one person, but two. With a smirk, she launched into a spirited attack.

“Like I have to remind you about Jimmy's moving party and your failure to appear? You were supposed to drive the truck remember? He was pretty let down. Especially after all the hard work he's done researching people, places and things for us over the past few years! Jack, Eduardo, Stacy even Cat showed up — wearing a pink jumpsuit and heels — but at least she was there! Let me say, driving that heavy truck on a Saturday afternoon across midtown traffic was not easy!”

A faint blush appeared under Clark's smooth olive complexion. He said weakly, “Lana needed help getting her own heavy furniture moved. I ... I tried to get away, but she changed the layout so many times! When the furniture arrangement was done she insisted I stay for lunch, which was cold chicken sandwiches and homemade apple pie. It was her way to thank me. By the time I got to Jimmy's old place, everyone was gone. It was a terrible thing for me to do, but I did apologize to him. Two days

ago, we rebuilt his car's transmission, now that was a job!"

He didn't add that moving the furniture had only taken thirty minutes. Even after eating lunch there was still plenty of time for him to get to Jimmy's, but an emergency rescue of an oil freighter caught in the grips of a stormy North Atlantic had occupied the rest of the afternoon.

Rubbing her chin she muttered, "Yeah, he did tell me about that. Okay, what about Jack? It is very difficult for him to ask for help of any kind. He didn't say anything, but he was disappointed."

His face went an even deeper shade of red, in many ways Jack was more of a younger brother than Jimmy. After all, Clark had literally pulled him off the streets after the globe disaster was finally settled. Clark felt particularly responsible for him and his younger brother Denny.

Whenever he thought about that night he winced in guilt. Lana had begged him to be her date for a very chic dinner party at Mayor Gansey's official residence. In a turnabout on tradition, Lana had arrived at his apartment, rather than have him pick her up at her place. When he opened the door, he was speechless. She wore a deep green, sleeveless dress adorned over all with lace and a scalloped hem which hit just below the knee. He had to be careful; Lana was trying to set the tone of the evening in the opposite direction of where he wanted to be. She was looking for him to be her date, whereas he was attending this dinner as a friend.

It was only as they were leaving his apartment for the evening, both dressed up to the nines, and almost locking the door, that the phone had rung. Jack had been wondering where he was, and in that moment, Clark had realized that he'd got the date wrong in his calendar.

Either way, Clark was now ready for a fancy evening out, with Lana outside on the steps waiting impatiently. The toe tapping of her expensive shoes reached his ears, telegraphing her mounting displeasure. Jack had let him go begrudgingly, but throughout the evening Clark had felt remorse about not helping, after all he was the one who pushed Jack to get his high school diploma.

The dinner party had been a success; he managed to cultivate a valuable source on the mayor's staff. While Lana worked the room, garnering contacts, especially with a certain Swiss business mogul — a Mr. Gregory Daae — and smiling happily whenever anyone said she and Clark made a 'lovely couple'. He had picked up those comments and by the dinner's end, his ear tips were beet red. The time was getting close to inform Lana his affections were not for her.

He had every intention of making up for his blunder at the first opportunity. He had to admit, between Superman rescues and Lana insistence on his presence at odd times for museum fund raisers and society dinners, he was losing his reputation for being reliable to his friends and co-workers. With a heartfelt sigh he said, "Jack and I talked about it. He understood. With Eduardo's help he aced the SAT exams."

"Uh huh, he specifically asked for help from his big brother ... you. Perry is a father figure." She added as an afterthought. "Eduardo is more like an uncle."

"True, nevertheless Eduardo was the better tutor than I could have been, his sons had taken the same tests as Jack; so he was a lot more familiar with the material. Jack is intimidated by him because of his status as a globetrotting journalist."

Lois shook her head. "That's not the point. When your friends need you, please don't push them aside for her!"

Clark got suddenly quiet. "Does this have anything to do with why you tackled Lance Aldrich in his home without me? Lois, you could have been killed. You're not just my friend, you are my partner. We work together ... *especially* when it comes to dangerous cases like that."

Now it was her turn to be red-faced. "How ... how did you know?"

"I met Diane and the girls in the lobby. She told me the whole thing."

After folding slender arms over her chest in a huff, a groan escaped her lips, "Great! I thought she was my friend!"

His quiet voice continued, "She is and so am I. Friends help one another."

Dark brown eyes flashed with indignation, she put aside the coffee and said with more heat than was necessary, "That's funny coming from a guy who let down *two* of his best friends when they really needed him!"

Clark also set down his cup and raised both hands in surrender; it was time to put this portion of the conversation to rest. He felt bad enough and did not need Lois to add to his regret. "I explained and everything you said is perfectly true. Look, going forward I will make a stronger effort to be the kind of friend Jimmy and Jack deserve."

The flash of anger disappeared and Lois looked thoughtful. That was one knotty problem out of the way. Now for the truly messy one ... the one that had the potential to make Lois Lane either very happy or sad. After saying a quick prayer she said in the softest, most honest voice imaginable. "That's good to hear — about being a better friend and all. But I ... I have to imagine this relationship with Lana is serious. Someone like you is too much of a gentleman to lead a woman on. Should ... uh, Perry be informed one half of the hottest team in town is getting married?"

He had picked up the cup and was taking a sip while hearing this. He sputtered, causing the hot liquid to slosh over the cup and spill on his sweatpants. "Married to Lana! No! Why on Earth would you think that?"

Exotic brown eyes narrowed and words tumbled like a waterfall over her lips, "Isn't it obvious? While we were in Smallville covering the Bureau 39 story Martha told me about Lana Lang ... the high school sweetheart who walked away. Pete even hinted about those days in high school, when you and Lana only had eyes for each other. He was surprised wedding invitations weren't handed out before graduation! Besides, isn't that what people do in Smallville? Get married to their high school sweeties, settle down to a tight little marriage and have two point five children?" Shaking her head in disbelief she rattled on. "Urgh! No, this is Kansas ... three children or four, not the nation's norm of two point five!"

Clark let the quip pass and moved closer, gently took her hand and whispered, "Lana and I are a long way from Smallville. Yes, when she first moved to Metropolis she thought of picking up where we left off. But those days are over. We aren't in high school anymore. The phone call this morning was a last effort to ..." A thoughtful smile touched his lips and he finished, "Encourage me. Lana has been offered a position in the Chicago Museum of Renaissance History. She knows influential people on all the major newspapers in that town. It would have been a simple matter of her picking up the phone and I would have had a job."

"Oh." Lois whispered very softly, happy Lana was leaving town, the sooner the better. "This is nothing like my dream at all. Loysa and Kaldar didn't have a chance. We do."

A puzzled look crossed his face. Lois wondered if he could have heard her, then dismissed the thought as impossible. She took another sip of coffee and the warm liquid felt good going down. She allowed him to continue talking.

"I was telling Lana, my place is here in Metropolis, where I work at the best newspaper in the world, live in a great apartment in an up-and-coming neighborhood and have friends who mean a great deal to me, especially you."

A torrent of profound relief washed over her. "Really?"

"Yes. I meant every word of it. It was probably making sense

to Lana as well. I was waiting for her response when unfortunately; I had to hang up, because a certain person was banging my door down.”

A rush of heat covered Lois’ face. “Oh Clark, I’m sorry. I really made a mess of things.”

With a gentle squeeze of his hand he said, “Don’t ever be sorry Lois, it shows you care.” He was still for a heartbeat and then asked, “However, I thought the Man of Steel had your undivided attention?”

She looked at him and thought about the romantic dance she and Superman had shared last night. It was a moment which would live in her memory forever; sadly it was not real, not as real as the man beside her. The dream had in an odd way brought clarity to her mind.

Carefully, as if the colorful cup would break, Lois set it down on the coffee table again, and then looked at the way Clark held her hand in his. It was as if their hands were meant to be held by one another. A deep sense of contentment covered her like a comfortable old quilt. Now there was no reason to be concerned about losing him to Lana and then moving away. Miss Dairy Freeze had lost out, Clark Kent was *staying* in Metropolis.

They sat together on the couch holding hands and enjoying the tranquility between them. Clark’s face was intensely contemplative, as if he was weighing something of immense significance in his mind. She wondered what it could be. Rather than interrupt, she determined for once to measure the water level and not jump in now was the time to be patient and allow him to speak.

“Lois, there was another person who was very deeply affected by the time I spent with Lana.”

“Really? Who?”

“She’s a very important part of my life and her initials are LL.”

“Oh that’s just great! Lana strikes again! Her initials” Lois’ voice trailed off into stunned silence at the realization of who ‘LL’ was.

Clark stood up from the couch, the conflict on his face, whatever it was, had resolved itself. With the resolution made, he was determined to carry out that decision. He looked down on her and said, “Lois, we do have a lot to talk about. I want our relationship to be deeper and more meaningful. More than the time we share as work partners. Still, before that happens there’s much to tell you and it will neither be easy for me to say nor for you to hear.”

He walked a few feet to the shelf holding his stereo system, looked through the wooden cassette holder, removed one and placed it into the player. His broad back was to her as he slowly removed his glasses and placed them on the shelf, then with both hands pushed his hair back. The strong shoulders, which had been slumped, were now thrown back, his body language altered, flowing like mercury from one persona to another, completely different and yet achingly similar. He turned erect and strong, just as Kaldar had changed his clothes to hide who he was from the elite of Metpolria so had Clark Kent transformed into the Man of Steel.

Lois stared at him, wholly at a loss for words.

With a gentle voice he said, “I’m still trying to figure out what a dream about *The Queen’s Consort* has to do with everything, but if it has led us to this conversation ... this moment ... then that’s fine.” He turned and suddenly Superman in Clark’s clothing stood before her as an unexpected yet familiar song filled the room:

*When you taught me how to dance
years ago with misty eyes
every step and silent glance
every move a sweet surprise.*

The song continued playing, yet the words were unheard, only the sound of blood rushing to her head. Lois wanted to faint, but

with every vestige of self-control held on, and then after taking several shallow breaths of air she managed to speak. “It ... it was you in the newsroom last night.”

Clark bowed his head. “Yes. After speaking with Diane in the lobby, I wanted to come upstairs and make sure you were all right. But then I heard a cry for help and it was necessary to leave immediately.”

Despite her confusion, ever the reporter, Lois asked in a shaky voice, “What ... what happened?”

“There was a fire in an abandoned apartment building on Casement Street, not too far from Napier Avenue.” He held up a hand to stop her from speaking. “Don’t worry, your aunt and uncle’s restaurant was untouched. No one was harmed; I arrived in plenty of time. Mike is a great guy! With all this heat and humidity the fire fighters, paramedics and police needed water. He provided that, iced tea, fruit and pastries. The emergency crews were very appreciative. I intend to make sure the Superman Foundation gives him a check to cover for the refreshments.”

She whispered, “Thank you. I can’t begin to imagine all the disasters you have averted and all the people you have helped. Yet all this time I never knew.” She gave him a quizzical look and said, “That fire was early in the evening, ‘Superman’ did not show up until much later. Where were you?”

“After the fire was contained, one rescue after another kept popping up. I still wanted to see you, but not with the smell and grit from the flames clinging to my suit. A quick flight to the Atlantic Ocean and diving into the waters took care of that problem. I should have changed into street clothes then, but I was anxious to get back to the newsroom before you went home. I came back and saw you eating a Double Fudge Crunch bar ... a victory celebration — but from the look on your face — a lonely one. At that moment, Clark Kent should have been there for his partner, not the Man of Steel. I was going to change except when you said aloud, “I just finished two stories in one day! Two very good stories, I have a lot to be proud of!”

She did not allow him to finish and said, “I heard that familiar sound of wind whenever Superman is present and turned around. Guess I ‘caught’ the Man of Steel before he could fly away and turn into Clark Kent.”

He nodded sadly. “I couldn’t leave, so I called out your name ... we talked and then ... we danced.”

She spoke with a voice that stumbled, cracked and finally smoothed itself out to be recognizable. “Yes, we danced ... and it was the most enchanting thing that has ever happened to me. I loved feeling your arms around me ... “

Clark’s voice was hesitant and a little scared as he stammered out, “Lois ...”

She held up a hand to stop him, “No, let me finish, that was cruel what you did; romancing me while wearing a cape and blue spandex. Yet when you’re dressed as Clark Kent you are a friend ... my very best friend — —” Lois’ voice broke, when she really wanted to scream, wanted to pound her fists against his chest and rain down a thousand blows. He had humiliated her by not revealing this significant secret before now. But in the midst of her own emotional maelstrom, she looked into those quiet brown eyes and saw so many feelings mirroring her own: fear, hope, disappointment, and most of all, an unfathomable yearning for her understanding and compassion. There was so much at stake here; could she not listen to what this man had to say?

Riveted to the couch Lois clasped her hands tightly and muttered, “Go ahead, Clark, please explain, I ... I want to know.”

He knew it took no small amount of restraint to rein in that famous temper of hers; she had every right to be furious with him. “Many times I wanted to tell you and somehow there was never the right moment. This secret doesn’t just involve me, but my parents, Pete Ross and the people of Smallville ...”

She nodded thoughtfully, allowing all of his words to sink in.

“Yeah, which makes sense. You want to protect them. As investigative reporters it sometimes seems like we have a lot more enemies than friends. Does ... does Lana know?”

He shook his head adamantly, “No, Lana, doesn’t know anything about me, if she did, my life would be ... different. Pete found out years ago by accident, but he understood what a burden it would be on me if I knew that he knew. So he worked hard to keep the knowledge from me and clandestinely assisted me on a few occasions.” He smiled sheepishly. “Once he even suffered a broken arm so the football team wouldn’t discover the truth about me!”

“Now *that* will make an interesting story to hear sometime soon. Pete is a good friend,” Lois said with a crooked smile.

“Yeah, it wasn’t until after I moved to Metropolis and became Superman that Pete admitted he knew about my abilities. You can imagine how that frightened me. Yet he reassured me that he understood just how important keeping the secret is. Not simply for me, but for my folks and others. Honestly, it’s a relief to have someone who knows who I am besides Mom and Dad. As a matter of fact, he was the one who kept telling me to let Lana sort out her own dates for big events and if she needed furniture moved to ask the building superintendent.”

Lois couldn’t help but chuckle in amusement. “See! He knows who’s good for you and who is not!”

He took a thoughtful sip of coffee before replying. “Pete says he’s never seen me happier than when I talk about you. He wanted to know why you and I are not in a serious relationship.”

A look of puzzlement marched across her face. “Why did he say that?”

Despite the seriousness of the conversation he said with a grin. “Because the name Lois Lane, whether playing poker or shooting hoops with the guys, always seems to crop up in my conversation. He is not the only one who notices. My parents think you are simply the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“Martha and Jonathan think of me as more than a friend and co-worker?” She asked in genuine surprise.

He crossed the room and sat once more on the couch. “Lois, they are very much aware you are more than a co-worker to me. No matter what the crisis, we have always been there for each other. Now, tell me, why you really come here tonight ... er this morning? Faint traces of a smile touched his mouth. “Surely not to talk about *The Queen’s Consort*!” We have discussed movies before, like *Die Hard* and *Lethal Weapon* at the office during downtime. But you never felt the need to come to my apartment at dawn to talk about them. Both of which are great flicks, however let’s leave the running around barefoot at night in buildings under siege to Bruce Willis. “

A smirk came to her lips. “He is cute! But as far as I’m concerned, Alan Rickman as Hans Gruber is totally sexy, especially with that accent!”

“Well, if they ever do a sequel, I promise to take you.”

“That’s nice. But it’s not necessary, unfortunately, since Alan Rickman’s character died, it’s highly unlikely he’ll make a cameo appearance. Pity, the film would be a lot better with Rickman, Bruce is cute, but he’s no Antonio Banderas!”

He shook his head in amazement. “What do you and all the women in the bullpen find so fantastic about Antonio Banderas? Personally, I never liked the guy. All right, maybe I can’t get you Alan Rickman, but how about coming with me to the David Bowie charity concert for MetroGen? Pete had suggested a week ago I take you. He has the tickets all lined up. Now that the Lana situation is settled, will you come with me, as my date?”

Lois’ eyes grew wide and her voice squealed with excitement. “David Bowie?! That’s right; Cat mentioned he’s doing the concert to help raise funds for cardiac research. I heard his wife Iman is going to be there. She is so glamorous! Are you kidding? Of course I want to come, as your date!”

Clark rewarded her with a smile, one which touched his eyes and her heart. It was good to be opening up to one another without the barriers that had hung between them previously. His revelation about being Superman had provided an explanation for his odd behavior over the past two years. Unconsciously, she moved closer to him on the couch. Her thoughts were interrupted when he repeated his earlier question.

“So, besides wanting to confront Lana, why did you come here at 4:30 in the morning?”

Embarrassed at her earlier brash behavior, she said, “I ... I couldn’t sleep.”

Once again Clark was amused and asked. “You couldn’t sleep? “What about that old-fashioned remedy, making a cup of warm milk to soothe you down? That’s not too difficult to make, just pop a small cup into the microwave. Wait; don’t tell me, you ran out of milk?”

She gave his shoulder a light, good-natured tap. “I have plenty of milk in the apartment, thank you very much! Actually I was thinking about *The Queen’s Consort*, my dance with Super ... ah you, when I got home from work. It’s not every day that a woman truly dances on air with a man she is cares about. Anyhow, eventually I dropped off to sleep and dreamt about us playing the parts of Loysa and Kaldar. That was the most vivid dream! Even now every detail and nuance is still in sharp focus. At first it was gorgeous; the ballroom, dresses and even how the musicians were seated in the gallery were so breathtaking. But then events started to change.”

“How so,” Clark asked, his curiosity piqued.

“As you remember, in the movie Princess Loysa and Kaldar overcame all obstacles, were married and he became her royal consort.”

“Right, the film ended in a traditional happily ever after.” Clark said with a thoughtful nod.

A deep sigh expelled from Lois’ mouth. “There was no ‘happily ever after’ in my dream. Loysa made her grand entrance into the Ballroom and after searching the crowd of faces, saw Kaldar with her rival Lady Ileana.”

He cocked an eyebrow and said, “Uh, I take it she was supposed to be Lana?”

“Yes,” Lois sighed, put down the cup and began picking at a stray thread on the couch. “Until this very moment, I had no idea the depths of my jealousy.”

He placed a comforting hand on hers, gave it a gentle squeeze and said softly. “It’s okay, Lois. I understand.” A moment of quiet passed between them. Only the strains of violin music filled the emptiness. Again their hands were clasped together as if they always sat on his couch in this very intimate manner. Than Clark cleared his throat and said, “I have a confession to make.”

Incredulous, she leaned forward and said, “*Another* one?”

“Yes, Lana and I were at the same Cineplex as you. I saw you hiding under the seats. The baseball cap did nothing to hide your face. I would know you anywhere.” What he didn’t say, was he heard the excited beating of her heart. It was as distinctive to him as her face in a crowd.

Her eyes grew wide. One again her voice was filled with surprise, as well as a little shock. “All this time you never said anything!”

“On Monday at work, I wanted to ask why you were there alone. Unfortunately, that was a busier than normal day in the bullpen and a chance to talk in private never came up.”

Lois sighed. “Come on, Clark, I haven’t made things easy for you in the past few weeks. Approaching me with my guard up isn’t a task for most people. Even the Man of Steel has to walk carefully around me. I’m ... I’m sorry”

He nodded in agreement. “It’s been difficult since we haven’t exactly been on the same page of late. What about your sister and Molly? Surely they would have loved to come?”

“They did, but both of them were busy and I really wanted to go since Waldo’s reviews grabbed my attention. You know how picknickety he is about period romances. Besides, I couldn’t think of a better thing to do on a humid Saturday night.”

Clark left unsaid that she could have called him and he would have jumped at the chance to spend some time with her. But he had already promised to take Lana. At the thought of escorting both women a tiny shiver went down his spine. Better to face the Nightfall asteroid again! Instead he said gently, “Tell me more about the dream.”

She reached down and picked up the cup, took a quick sip and said, “You might not like this next part.”

He nodded and motioned with his hands for her to continue.

“Loysa was engaged to Crown Prince Alexi. Her father was going to make the announcement at the Ball.”

Her friend’s eyes narrowed. “Alexi, as in Lex Luthor?”

“Yes.”

Lois considered Clark’s handsome face; the expression had abruptly gone tight and fierce. It was obvious there was thinly veiled animosity between him and the billionaire, but now that she knew he was Superman, there were good reasons to feel as he did towards Luthor. Perhaps her partner knew things about Lex that any other law-abiding citizen of Metropolis would be blissfully unaware of. If that were the case, then it was time to start a Luthor investigation and discover the real man under those flawlessly tailored Savile Row suits.

But their sleuthing into the underbelly of Lex Luthor’s world would come a little later on ... like Monday morning. Currently she needed to reassure him that any slender romantic feelings she had had for the older man were long gone.

“I ... I mean Loysa, was not happy to be marrying the crown prince. In fact she was miserable and only wanted to see Kaldar. But her parents wanted her to dance with Alexi and then Kaldar disappeared from the ballroom and suddenly this amazing man dressed completely in black with a mask appeared and he asked Loysa to ...”

For the next ten minutes Lois continued her narrative. Clark listened with rapt attention, watching her expressions alter between dreamy bliss to despair. Each piece of the dream fit with rather distinct pieces of Lois own life, the center being their relationship.

When her words ran down to silence he said anxiously, “That’s it? Kaldar leaves with Lady Ileana for an empty life on a country estate with a woman he doesn’t love? Loysa marries a prince to stop their separate countries from going to war? Wow. That’s not a dream; it’s a nightmare on a galactic scale!”

Lois made a face. “Tell me about it. At least we don’t have to worry about my parents marrying me off to Lex Luthor. I can’t image Martha and Jonathan would ever dream of doing such a thing to you.”

“Mom and Dad aren’t the type to force a marriage on anyone,” he said quietly. “My birth parents on the other hand that might have been a different story.”

She looked at Clark for a moment and once again the reality of who her friend was washed over her. “Wait, are you trying to say you are ‘royalty’?”

He glanced uncomfortably at a small wooden box on the book shelf. It contained the globe which had acted as a guidance system for the tiny ship that brought him to Earth and taught him about Kryptonian culture and history. But this morning was not the time to bombard Lois with even more information about his heritage. There would be time enough in the future to explain about marriage customs among Kryptonian nobility. Hesitantly he said, “Yes. But it doesn’t matter, Krypton no longer exists.”

A picture of Clark wearing a long purple robe with a gold circlet on his head popped unbidden into her mind. She immediately dismissed it, but the image lingered. This was

another new concept for her to absorb. They were learning a lot about each other. “Royalty? How can I compete with that?”

Once again he took her hands in his and said, “Why worry about competing with people who no longer exist? I wasn’t born on this planet, but I was raised here, which makes me a citizen of planet Earth — one with special powers, but a citizen nonetheless. Yet despite that, all my life I have desperately wanted to fit in. I’ve traveled all over the world, looking for a place of my own to call home. Metropolis is that place. To move anywhere, especially with Lana, would be a disaster.”

“Miss Dairy Freeze can go to Chicago, by herself. We need you ... heck, I need you! When she arrived in town and took up more of your time than was necessary, I was jealous. So much so, I pushed you away. Truthfully, not having you around for Jimmy’s move was a relief. I had no idea what my reaction might have been if you came. Inside I felt like ... like you were abandoning me. That’s why I tackled the high-risk investigations myself. To prove to everybody I could do them without you. That ... that I hadn’t lost my edge ...”

He sat back and looked at her dubiously. “Lois Lane lose her edge? That’ll never happen! Regardless, please don’t ever do something like that again. Aldrich might have killed you; I could never have forgiven myself.” He said this with a hoarse whisper.

Her mouth turned down into a pout as the lone tear tracked its way down her cheek. “I didn’t know that at the time! Between disappearances for Superman rescues which I was completely ignorant of and Lana, I thought for certain in a few weeks you were either getting another job or engaged!”

He took her face in his hands and gently rubbed away the tear with the pad of his thumb. In a deep rumbling voice that was so uniquely his own, he whispered, “Lois, honey, you’ll never have to play second fiddle to Lana or Superman.”

“Oh Clark! I don’t care about fiddles, violins or any of that, just let me be in the orchestra of your life!”

Clark stood from the couch, all during their conversation the soundtrack to *The Queen’s Consort* played softly in the background. Now it was done. He got up, crossed over to the shelf, opened the stereo, reset the cassette and started to play the soundtrack again. “This may not be a magnificently decorated ballroom in a grand castle, with musicians playing in a gallery over our heads, so we’ll have to make do with my humble living room. Would you care to dance with me, fair lady?”

She could feel a flush of embarrassment spread over her face. Lois Lane, better known by her associates in the newspaper business as “Mad Dog” Lane was blushing! Only Clark Kent with his maddening Mid-western manners and gentle ways could make her blush. A mélange of queries, emotions and thoughts still raced through her mind. At this very moment all that was put aside, she was eager to dance with him, the man who claimed her heart. Gradually her hand reached out and took his; the warmth of his touch was both familiar and welcome. He tugged gently and without a moment’s hesitation enfolded her into his arms. They were not dressed as a young future queen and her loving consort yet what did that matter?

Lois studied the strong features she had come to know nearly as intimately as her own. How could this man’s eyes be so warm, so trusting and innocent one minute and filled with deepest longing at the next? Gradually, as if she were jumping off a high ledge into the sky her head tilted up and their lips met. His lips were soft and inviting, sweet and sensuous, they parted and his tongue touched hers, tasting like the delicate herbal notes of coffee and desire. Clark moved his hands around her waist to further enjoy their embrace. They did not dance in the air as they had done last night, no, only their senses pirouetted and dived as they touched and explored this fresh and tenuously precious new element of their relationship.

For them this was better than any dream or even the dance

they shared in the newsroom. Because now nothing and no one stood in the way of their own future, bright with promise and the years untold to come.

The End.

Epilogue

With practiced ease, Superman touched down on the terrace and entered the air-conditioned apartment, relieved that the evening was at an end. Tonight's patrol had kept him on his toes; a fire near Uncle Mike's restaurant, three muggings in Suicide Slum, an attempted high-end burglary in one of the swankier parts of town and, to top the evening off, rescuing a disabled freighter in the turbulent North Sea - another typical Friday night for Metropolis' favorite superhero.

The beginning and the middle of the evening had been quite different. Nonetheless it was the end of the night that made it special ... very special indeed.

The night didn't start off that way. Around 6:00PM he and Lana were attending another glossy event that had been put together by the Metropolis Museum. This was the third such occasion he had attended with Lana. It was not that he disliked hobnobbing with the rich and famous, it was a pleasant alternative from the usual Friday night sports activities with his friends. Still those changes are always better when your companion is on the same page as you, which Lana Lang most definitely was not.

As soon as they arrived at the museum they were guided to the European Sculpture Court which was designed as a classical French garden, presenting large outdoor Italian and French sculptures dating from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. Here the party was being held and, from the movements of the dancers and pleasant hum of conversation was in full swing. Lana spent the evening networking with several influential contributors to the museum, while introducing them to Clark in a manner that once again strongly insinuated they were much more than friends.

At one point, the enigmatic Swiss businessman, Gregory Daae entered the court and the atmosphere of the room seemed to shift. Many of the party guests studied the urbane older man who had recently arrived in Metropolis and was swiftly making a name for himself within the city's business and social circles, having recently completed successful media and computer deals with Lex Luthor and Jasper Templar respectively. Clark wondered when he had time to work out; most men of his ilk were not athletic, yet his body was trim and hard. He carried himself with the dignity and power of a man born to a noble house. Something about Gregory Daae made him cautious, not as much as being around Luthor, but the feeling was there nonetheless.

Lana obviously got a different sensation from Daae. Without a word she separated from Clark and became involved in an intense conversation. Because Daae was a member of the board, he assumed they must have been talking about some significant project. Lana was involved with at least three that he knew were rather important. But did they warrant such intensity?

He had done a little background checking on him for an article in the Weekend section of the *Daily Planet*. His reputation as a businessman was respectable, but he evaded any conversation into his private life. Something like that always brought up a red flag. He was tempted to listen in, but decided against it. After all, this was Lana's world and she was more than capable of handling herself in it.

While Lana and Daae were having their discussion, some of the society matrons had come over to congratulate him on his conquest of Lana. In a determined mood to conceal his annoyance, Clark put on his best Mid-western manners and chatted with them, firmly stating that Ms. Lang and he were old friends from the same town back in Kansas ... not involved with one another. The skeptical ladies gave him knowing glances and one even stated that soon they would be. Deciding further

conversation was a waste of time; he gave them a witty smile and moved off.

He could put all that nonsense aside and enjoy the rest of the night and would have if it had it not been for his encounter with Lex Luthor. He had just departed from the older women and started towards Lana, who was still in conversation with Gregory Daae when he encountered the Billionaire.

"I cannot help but notice you were looking for Ms. Lang. She is a charming, accomplished young woman, Kent. Just right for you. Don't be a fool and let her walk out of your life." He had smiled, looked away and surveying the vast space said, "By the by, where is your stunning partner, Lois Lane?"

Through a smile of gritted teeth, Clark had replied, "Working on a story."

Lex's black eyes had sparkled at the knowledge. "Ah! Ever the diligent reporter is our Miss Lane." He paused for a beat and said, "I must *personally* look into correcting that oversight. Excuse me, Kent. There's Senator Ian Harrington, I need to have words with him."

Luthor then moved away, melting into the crowd, oblivious to dark eyes unable to veil a flash of anger at the man's back. He would do whatever was necessary to keep Lois safe from Luthor.

Lois. Her lovely name brought Clark back to the present.

A wide, happy grin brightened his expression. She was the real reason why tonight had been so special. Tonight he had danced with her in the middle of the bullpen ... on air. The strong attraction between them couldn't be denied, it was far deeper than physical desire. Yet it was still a lowly sham. Not only was it the wrong thing to do, it was unkind. She was already getting emotionally involved with the superhero when he really wanted her to see him — Clark Kent — as more than just a work partner. He needed to put an end to this strange three-sided love affair and the only way was to reveal who really wore the suit.

Nonetheless, he could not help but smile at the memory of their rather unique dance and the feeling of holding the woman he cherished so close.

He stripped out of the suit, tossing it into the hamper and then stepped into the bathroom for a much-needed hot shower. The amount of water vapor in the atmosphere on this late August night made the air oppressively heavy and even flying was a touch unpleasant. The bracing chill of cold water felt good and refreshing as it flowed over tight shoulders and down his back, wiping away the dust and grit of tonight's work. Sadly it also washed away a faint trace of Lois' perfume: a mixture of orange blossoms and fresh bergamot. The scent served as a reminder to resolve this matter between his lovely partner and himself before Luthor decided to step in to cause trouble.

No, she was smarter than that. Lex Luthor might attempt to dazzle her with a classic pasta dinner at the Hotel Aden in Rome. She said watching the sunset from the rooftop dining area was magnificent. They had shared walks through beautiful old piazzas and trips to the opera, but due to his own lack of emotions, he was incapable of touching her heart.

After toweling off and putting on a pair of sleep shorts, he slid under the bed covers and was soon sound asleep. It was a few minutes past midnight.

The harsh blare of the phone ringing on his nightstand jarred Clark back to wakefulness.

Fumbling for the phone, he picked it up and in a voice laden with sleep said, "Hello? Lois, is that you?" thinking only she would have the nerve to call him at that hour of the morning.

A familiar female voice answered, yet it was most definitely not the pretty brunette, but a slightly perturbed blonde. "No. This is Lana. Did I wake you? Aren't journalists always ready to jump on a story?"

He growled back. "Yes, you did. No, not when we are supposed to be *sleeping*." He glanced up at the alarm clock and

said, "It's 3:30AM. Is everything all right?"

"Life couldn't be better! I'm moving to Chicago and *you* are coming with me!"

Shocked, he sat up in bed and threw the covers off his muscular frame. "Excuse me, what did you just say?"

A flirty peal of laughter came over the phone like a froth of champagne sliding over the sides of a bottle. "Oh, why don't I come over and explain the whole thing to you. This is a fabulous opportunity for both of us!"

The thought of having Lana Lang in his apartment in the wee hours of the morning could only lead to further misconceptions on her part. He suspected this was going to be a long conversation, so he got up and made his way into the living room and sat down on the couch. He needed to dissuade her quickly. Nervously he countered, "No. No, best you stay home. After all it's pretty late, and neither of us should be out at this hour. Now what is this all about?"

"Honestly, Clark, you're such an old man! Anyway, Daae has hired me away on a temporary basis from the Metropolis Museum to be the Project lead putting together an exhibit about Napoleon Bonaparte. He's well versed on the subject! Just like Lex Luthor is about Alexander the Great ..."

Lana continued on while he was remembering the stormy night of the White Orchid Ball, when he and Lois had slipped into Luthor's study and seen a rather impressive array of ancient weapons — especially the sword that Lex had held to his throat. Clark fervently hoped Daae's interest in the French emperor was more benign in nature.

"The perks are fantastic, so it would be the perfect fit."

His mind snapped back to Lana's voice. "What? Wait a second, 'perfect fit'?"

"Yes exactly! Gregory has a controlling interest in the *Chicago Tribune*. It just *happens* they need an assistant editor for the Weekend Magazine. Your reputation in the Metropolis newspaper game is well respected. I've spoken very highly of you and Gregory has read many of your solo articles — and a few of the investigative pieces with your partner."

Clark couldn't help but hear the chilly edge to Lana's voice when she said, *your partner*. He also heard a distinct note of pleasure when she spoke of Daae. It was time to be honest with Lana about the futility of a relationship between them, just as there must soon be a serious conversation with Lois about the hope of a stronger relationship — even a commitment between them.

"It's flattering that Mr. Daae thinks my abilities are worth offering me such a position, yet working as a reporter for the *Daily Planet* has fulfilled my dreams. Someday, if an editorial position which interests me — at the *Planet* — becomes available I'll apply for it. Taking a position simply because the owner wants to please someone else is not the way to get a job. Besides, Lana, you're forgetting one thing."

"Really? What's that?" There was a challenging tone in her voice.

"I don't want to go to Chicago. The *Tribune* is an outstanding newspaper, but it is not the *Daily Planet*. My home and friends are here. Why go to another city and start all over again?"

An exasperated huff was heard to the other end of the phone, he knew Lana was winding herself up to explain just exactly why his life should change around to satisfy her whim.

"Because Daae recognizes good talent and this my old friend is that rare once-in-a-lifetime kind of career opportunity which shapes a person's life!"

A touch of annoyance was beginning to stir within him. "You certainly have a lot of faith in this man. Why?"

He could clearly see Lana in her apartment; she was so angry with him the furrow lines of frustration on her forehead felt like taut lines between telephone poles. "I can't believe how blind you

are! This move will improve our careers immensely! In Chicago we do have to start over again, but because of what I've built in Los Angeles and the reputation you've carved out in Metropolis, we'll *still* be ahead of the game!"

"No Lana. We discussed this already; relocation is out of the question. My place is here, your place is ..."

"Wait. What about the perks? The newspaper job in Chicago will pay ten thousand more than what Perry White is currently giving you! They have a cable station, it's not much — now, but in a couple of months with your good looks and intelligence, they'll probably give you a spot on one of those morning news shows. After that, the sky's the limit! Look, you've traveled all over the world; Borneo, Paris, Alaska even Invercargill, New Zealand for pity's sake! This could be the place where you start a brand new — probably a *better* life than in Metropolis!"

He took a shallow breath and realized it was time to end this conversation. Although he didn't require sleep as humans did, he was a little tired. It was Saturday and in a few hours he wanted to visit his folks for the day. "My place is here, your place is ... well, it's possibly in Chicago. This is a fantastic offer for you. I'm not actually blind about that, Lana. But you keep saying 'start over' as if that's a good thing. For me ... I don't want to start over. There is absolutely nothing wrong with my life here."

There was a silence for a moment, as these two people realized the time had come to once again go their separate ways — perhaps forever. Finally Lana said, "So the *Daily Planet* and Metropolis itself are not what's keeping you here ... it's Lois Lane."

She knew him so well that the smile of pure joy in his voice at hearing that woman's name came over the phone, a joyful smile which had not been directed at her in years. "Yeah Lana, she's pretty special ..."

Suddenly he heard the sound of banging on his front door. Banging so loud, the sturdy iron hinges were actually rattling.

"Clark Jerome Kent, open this door right now!"

"Sorry Lana, it's Lois, something important must have happened. Thank you for the offer, but I can't accept it. I hope the new job is everything you want it to be. Let me know if there is anything I can do to help you get packed. Good-bye."

At super speed he changed into black sweatpants and a shirt and then zoomed up the staircase. He wondered what was so urgent Lois had to come by at this hour of the morning?

Across town in her apartment, Lana disappointedly looked at the receiver as the dial tone replaced the rumble of Clark's voice. He had turned her down flat.

Why? Because he wanted to stay in Metropolis with that obnoxious partner of his. What did he see in her anyway? Didn't he prefer blondes? In her opinion, the famous Lois Lane could do with a little loosening up!

Metropolis had proved to be a disappointing stop in her career path. Chicago was a much better location, even if it was a little cold. Considering the wretched heat and humidity she had put up with this summer, maybe the 'Windy City' might prove to be a better location.

Gregory Daae had phoned shortly after Clark had dropped her off earlier that evening. They had talked for more than an hour about plans for the exhibit and his hopes that she would accept his job offer. It was funny how hearing that voice with its twist of French and German accents felt so right in her ear. Even now, as she turned out the lights the soothing tones felt comfortable and easy, much more so than Clark's rumbling voice.

She fluffed her pillows and got ready for bed. In the morning she intended to call Gregory to accept his offer and explain that Clark wasn't coming along. After that there was the tedious process of subletting her apartment and packing. This was the second major move in less than a year, yet she felt with absolute

certainly going to Chicago was the right thing to do.

Funny, when the position had opened at the Metropolis Museum she was ecstatic to come here and rebuild her friendships with both Pete Ross and Clark Kent. They were old friends and had both promised to help her get settled into life in Metropolis. The moment she saw Clark again at the airport with his clear, open smile and kind manners she decided then and there to become a permanent fixture in his life. After all when they were dating as teens he was practically clay in her hands, eager to do anything she said. Everyone was jealous of them. Especially that twit Rachel, the sheriff's daughter. Back then they were too immature to get married, but now, nearly ten years after graduating from high school, it was time for the star quarterback of Smallville High turned journalist to marry the Homecoming Queen who knew her way around the movers and shakers of two major cities.

But there were two obstacles in her way; a demanding work schedule for her and Clark's equally demanding work partner, Lois Lane. From the moment the two women met, they took an immediate dislike to each other. Mad Dog was determined to keep Clark all to herself, but Lana decided to play helpless innocent alone in a new city. With every possible excuse she found ways for Clark to spend time with her. It was great fun for them to be together ... even if he occasionally ducked out on her with the most ridiculous excuses she ever heard. Cheese-of-the-Month club indeed!

When he wasn't available she called on Pete, but not very often, she had no intention of playing the two men against each other.

The more they spent time together, the more she wove tales of them as a couple to her co-workers and for a while it seemed to be working ... until tonight when he saw her talking with Daae.

Gregory was tall, handsome with striking blue eyes and prematurely white hair. She knew not a jealous bone existed in Clark's body, yet he was cautious about her soon-to-be new employer. Maybe she should be as well? But why? Just because one half of the hottest newspaper team in town felt uncomfortable about him? Clark had felt the same way about Billy Slade, thinking he was a 'bad boy' in the making. But after Billy had accidentally broken Pete's arm during football practice the guy had come around and was well on his way to making a few million in computer software designs. Ha! Clark wasn't always right.

No. Time to cut her losses and leave Metropolis. If the job truly was only for six months she could return. Gregory would see to that. Maybe she should have let him take her home tonight rather than Clark. They could have talked more in the comfort of her place rather than on the phone. He was fifteen years her senior, yet those blue eyes of his were like chips of ice, they seemed to bore into her very heart. His hands, even though slightly calloused, were beautiful as well. He told her they had gotten that way because he liked to sail his own yacht across the Atlantic. As a matter of fact, he was planning on sailing to Greece in a few days and spending a little time on the isle of Santorini. It was easily one of the most spectacular Greek islands; dominated by a crescent of multi-colored cliffs that were formed after one of the biggest volcanic eruptions in history. Around 4,000 years ago, a huge chunk of the Cyclades collapsed and the Aegean Sea flooded into the vacuum, creating a giant caldera which now measured seven miles wide and fourteen miles long.

The island was a Mecca for well-heeled tourists and celebrities. He had hinted at having her accompany him during the trip.

Lana sank down further in her bed, perhaps she would be going to Chicago later rather than sooner — after a brief stop in Santorini. From Daae's in-depth description, the cliffs sounded positively majestic.

THE END

A/N: Yes the song, "Taught Me How to Dance" was the lovely theme song for *Miss Potter*. Still, I thought it would work perfectly for the mythical film, *The Queen's Consort*. It was also important to mention David Bowie and Alan Rickman, each were special in their particular field of entertainment. Their talent and genius will be sorely missed.