

Vatman – Matchmaker Style

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Rated: PG13

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Summary: This is the tenth story in the Matchmaker Style series. Luthor clones Superman, but Lois can easily tell the difference between her husband and the imposter.

Story Size: 27,915 words (149Kb as text)

A/N: When Virginia proposed the challenge of taking a first season story and having it result in Lois and Clark being married I took up the challenge and “The Green, Green Glow of Home — Matchmaker Style” was the result.

That was all well and good, but then I started thinking — What about future episodes? How would the fact that they are now married affect the dynamic? For instance, how would “Pheromone My Lovely” have been changed by the marriage? How would it affect “Honeymoon in Metropolis” and “All Shook Up”, “Witness”, “Illusions of Grandeur”, “Ides of Metropolis”, “The Foundling” and “The Rival”?

In the previous stories, you’ve seen my take on the answer. So, now, to answer the question — ‘What if Lois and Clark were already married when Vatman happened?’ I offer the following.

As with the series as originally aired, the episodes build on one another, making a contiguous story. It is recommended that if you are reading this story out of sequence you will miss some references. Please go back and start with the first episode of the set “The Green Green Glow of Home — Matchmaker Style and take the episodes in broadcast order from that point.

Vatman — Matchmaker Style

Rated PG-13

Disclaimers: The characters in this story are property of DC, December 3rd productions and Warner Bros. No Copyright infringement is intended. I have just borrowed the characters for a short time.

In this, the sequel to The Rival — Matchmaker Style. Lois and Clark have been back from the assignment in Smallville for a few months. The events of PML were delightful; however, Lois really has no recollection of what happened. Clark finally had a chance to give Lois a real honeymoon. Then her life had been threatened because she had witnessed a murder. Next they investigated the kidnappings of the children of wealthy families. They have dealt with a murder and a threat to the internet and the messages regarding Clark’s origin. Now they have to deal with a rival paper.

Lois and Clark now have returned to Clark’s ‘old’ apartment.

In this particular story a lot of the dialogue is taken from the script text. I wish to express my thanks to my Beta readers Artemis and Ray Reynolds for their invaluable help. This was a VERY rough draft when it first landed in their hands. This story is also a cross-over to a Morgana story. She loaned me a location — Chez Morel and her character — Amandine Morel from her Café Americana

story for this one.

* * denotes emphasis

< > denotes thoughts

As always comments are welcome. (ken.janney@kjanney.com)

Chapter 1

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Universal Locator Designation

Alpha -34 x Gamma 255 x Tau -225

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Two months prior to the events in this story — during The Rival — Matchmaker Style.

Lex Luthor was looking at the sales numbers for the Star and comparing them to those for the Planet. The Star was outselling the Planet two to one. He wondered how Preston Carpenter was doing it. The Star was actually a second rate paper, but somehow he was challenging the Planet for supremacy. As he put down the paper he received a call on his direct line, “Lex Luthor … Ah, Dr. Leek. How is our patient, today? … Oh, that soon. … I’ll be in to see you, shortly.”

Lois shifted her position in her sleep. As she did she felt her leg fall off the edge? The movement woke her up and she looked around thinking that she had scooted to the edge of the bed during the night. As she started to come to full wakefulness she remembered that she and Clark had engaged in a long drawn out lovemaking session before falling asleep and she had actually been lying on him when they both fell asleep. That had become one of her favorite positions in bed maybe even more than lying next to him with her head pillowled on his chest or spooning. Peeking around him she saw that they were in fact hovering five feet above the bed. She smiled and pulled her leg back up over his. Remembering what had happened the last time, when the alarm had gone off and it had startled Clark to wakefulness, she was careful not to startle him. When he had been startled, they had crashed to the bed, almost breaking it. She had been happy for his aura protecting her so she hadn’t been injured in the fall. She scrunched up and managed to reach his lips with hers. The kiss was soft and sweet and Clark awoke slowly, with a smile on his face.

“Good morning, wife.”

“Good morning to you, husband. I’m glad I didn’t startle you. All that practice has paid off.”

“Why?”

“Look at where we are.”

Opening his eyes and glancing around he saw where they were and slowly lowered them back to the bed. “I’m glad it was you and not the alarm. If it had been the alarm we might have fallen like the last time.”

She smiled and said, “That’s why I decided to awaken sleeping beauty with a kiss,” and chuckled as she finished.

As she slid off of him and onto the bed, her mind drifted back over the last few months. She had gotten married literally to the man of her dreams, totally unexpectedly. She had had to save him from Trask and his green Kryptonite. She had been exposed, twice, to the pheromone spray that Miranda had invented. Their weekend honeymoon had been interrupted by an investigation. Then she had almost lost her beloved when he went to battle a seventeen mile wide asteroid. When as a result of that battle he had lost his memory, she had managed to bring it back by using her special ‘therapy’. It was a good thing that she had managed to bring it back because she had needed him to protect her when an

assassin came after her because she had witnessed him perform a hit. She had been hypnotized, harbored a suspected murderer, found out that Clark's biological parents hadn't abandoned him, they had sacrificed their lives so that he could be hers and most recently they had investigated a later day Citizen Kane.

She asked, "Life is never boring around you, is it?"

Raising one eyebrow, Clark replied with a smile, "I would be tempted to say the same thing about you. Wherever you are, trouble seems to follow."

"I'm just glad that things have gotten back to normal since we busted Carpenter. Newsstand and subscription numbers are up higher than they were before the Star debacle. People just don't trust the Star anymore. Perry is as happy as ... how would he put it? Oh, yeah, 'As happy as a pig in a mud wallow.'" Glancing at the clock, she saw that the alarm was about to go off so she reached over and turned it off, "Oh, well. Time to get up."

Clark scooted over and gave her a kiss before heading to the bathroom.

By the time she had gotten up, put on her slippers and a robe he was coming out dressed and ready for work. "How do you want your eggs this morning?"

She had a thoughtful look as she said, "Hmmmm, why don't you surprise me."

He had a mischievous glint in his eyes as he said, "Okay, surprise eggs, coming up."

She knew that he was up to something, but she smiled and headed to the bathroom knowing that whatever it was, she would like it.

Jimmy was at his desk running a search for Eduardo when the elevator chimed its arrival. Jimmy looked up when it did and as the doors opened he caught a glimpse of Lois and Clark breaking from an embrace and smiled. He had always liked Lois. She had taught him so much about reporting and Clark, ever since he had joined the staff, he'd been like a big brother to him. Seeing the two of them together and so happy made him feel that all was right with the world. It also gave him hope that maybe, someday he'd find someone as special to him as Lois was to Clark. Maybe Lois would allow him to date her sister now that she had returned to Metropolis. He'd have to ask her, sometime. He'd asked her before, but she had been so protective of her sister that she had hit him with all of these ... requirements. He hoped that now that she was married, she had mellowed ... somewhat.

His eyes followed them down the ramp and to their desks. Clark's hand was at the small of Lois's back the entire time, just a gentle touch, but that touch obviously meant something. Not possessiveness, nobody could really possess Lois Lane. It obviously meant something more ... intimate ... to both of them. They seemed to touch ... a lot. Maybe even more than most couples he knew.

What Jimmy didn't know was that Lois and Clark had been told was that the more that Lois was within Clark's aura, the sooner her metabolism would be changed. Once it was sufficiently modified, then she could become pregnant.

Jimmy noted that as they parted and Clark moved to his own desk, Lois followed him with her eyes. It was like she was still touching him.

She dropped her bag next to her desk and once they were both seated, she took a swig from her travel mug, sighed in blissful pleasure at the flavor, put it down, reached out to turn on her computer so that she could check her e-mail and punch up the stories she was working on.

A few minutes later, the elevator dinged again and Jimmy looked up to see who was on board. He was surprised to see Inspector Bill Henderson step out. Jimmy watched as he scanned the bull pen, finally spotting Lois and Clark. Jimmy watched as he made his way down the ramp to their desks. Standing next to

Clark he cleared his throat.

Jimmy saw Clark's startled expression as he looked up and for the first time was aware that Bill was there. Jimmy heard him ask, "Bill, what brings you here?"

"Can we talk? Privately?"

When Henderson spoke, Jimmy saw Lois's head come up and look in Clark's direction, spotting Henderson. Apparently, her curiosity was piqued because she stood up and approached, but as she did, Clark stood and the three of them moved to the conference room. As Jimmy watched, Bill first closed the door and then the blinds, blocking them from his view. He wondered why he was there and why the need for privacy.

Lois had been curious about Henderson's reason for visiting. Seeing him close the door, Lois's curiosity meter was pegged out. When Bill closed the blinds her curiosity went on overdrive. This had to be Big with a capital 'B'.

Bill finally walked over, perched on the side of the conference table and said, "We've been doing an internal investigation into the death of the truck driver." (see Foundling — Matchmaker Style, chapter 10)

Clark started to smile.

In his normal, flat, tone, he said, "No, it wasn't a result of our conversation. It is standard procedure whenever a prisoner dies while in custody. We have found some interesting things. You were right. The MPD has been infiltrated. I have identified a number of individuals that I suspect.

Lois asked, "Are you going to fire them?"

"No, if we did that then their boss, I suspect — 'The Boss', would know that we were on to them and then just corrupt some more. I think we can learn more by keeping an eye on them. We might be able to feed them false leads. It is a chance to control the flow of information.

Clark said, "That sounds like a good idea."

"I have also acted on your other suggestion. Outside of center city is a precinct house that has virtually been abandoned. It's in a low crime area so a strong MPD presence wasn't needed. It's in the Brightview section. It's a section of older homes, mostly brownstones dating back to the twenties. The area used to be rank with racketeers and bootleggers, bathtub gin and speakeasies, but that went out with the end of the Prohibition era. Over the last few weeks, I have been able to transfer trustworthy people into the facility. Men and women I am sure of and that I trust to keep secrets. I think we are ready for operation 'Downfall'."

Clark smiled and said, "That sounds great, Bill. We'll drive through Brightview and get a feel for the area. I don't think we've had to go through there on a story. It isn't that familiar."

Lois was getting a little irritated at being left out, "I've heard of Brightview. It's in the North-east section, isn't it?"

Bill nodded his agreement.

Still curious, Lois asked, "Okay! What is this ... Operation 'Downfall'?"

Clark filled Lois in, "Remember I had Jack identify those voices on the tape?" (see The Rival — Matchmaker Style, chapter 8)

Lois nodded her head.

"I took the affidavit and the tape to Bill. I told him that we were investigating Luthor as possibly being 'The Boss' and Bill is helping." He turned back to Bill and said, "Now we need to start collecting our other witnesses."

"I think I have that worked out."

"Great! We now have evidence of invasion of privacy, illegal wire tap and, thanks to Jack recognizing the voices, purchasing stolen property. Through Luthor's possession of Superman's globe which Superman found in the hidden underground art gallery we now can link him to the stolen art. We still need some more things."

"We are going to start moving on that, but we can't move too fast. We don't want to make him suspicious."

"Right, we don't want to move too fast and blow it."

Lois and Clark had been out of the office the previous day. They'd had an appointment with the agency that was preparing a new ad campaign. This had been a photo shoot and they had been asked to bring a couple of changes of clothes with them.

A while after Bill left, Perry received a packet of pictures from the agency so that he could pick the shots to be used. When he opened the packet and pulled out the pictures he gasped and dropped them on his desk. He roared, "LOIS AND CLARK — GET IN HERE!!"

Lois and Clark were both startled when they heard Perry bellow. They both jumped up and hurried to his office.

When they entered the office they could see that Perry was visibly upset, Clark worriedly asked, "What is it, Chief? What's wrong?"

Perry gave him a look of disbelief as he exclaimed, "What's wrong? Look at these!" He pushed the pile of photos across his desk.

Seeing the picture on top Lois started to smile. It was of her and Clark in an embrace, his shirt open, his tie askew and she had her hands under the shirt on his chest while Clark had his right hand on her left thigh, pulling her short skirt even higher.

Seeing that smile only infuriated Perry. They had gone on a photo shoot to get pictures for an ad campaign and what he got back were some photos that verged on an 'R' rating.

Lois picked up the pile and started to go through it. In the next one she had moved behind Clark, he was holding her leg with her arms over his shoulders and her hands pulling his shirt open and on his bare chest. She smiled or chuckled at most of the pictures and made side comments to Clark as she thumbed through them.

The more Lois smiled and giggled the madder Perry became. What was going on here?

Perry watched and once they had gone through them, Clark sorted them into two piles.

Picking up one pile, he handed it to Perry. That pile consisted of only six pictures. "Here you go, Chief. I think some of these will be suitable."

Perry started to calm down as he was going through them and then laid out three for a closer look. This was more like it. One was of Lois standing by Clark. Clark was in a charcoal suit and Lois was wearing a brown pantsuit with a jacket. Both were also wearing serious expressions and holding notepads and pencils as if they were making notes. The second one was somewhat more relaxed. Clark had his hands in his pants pockets with his jacket open. Lois was wearing a short skirt with a cream colored blouse, open at the neck. She was leaning back against him with her right shoulder against his left. They were looking at each other and smiling. In the third one, Lois was up on Clark's shoulder. Perry didn't even bother to look at the others.

Tapping the one pile, Perry said, "*These* are the ones to be used for the new ad campaign." He went on to explain the reason for the assignment, "After blowing the lid off of Preston Carpenter's little shenanigan, Marketing decided that we could boost sales even more by advertising the team that broke the story. They came up with your new slogan, you know like 'The Dynamic Duo'. They want to call you 'The Hottest Team in Town'." Indicating the pile of photos that Clark had in his hand, he asked, "What were those others?"

A little embarrassed at their excess, Lois spoke up, "Well, Perry, you see, it's this way. We haven't had that many pictures, of us, as a couple, so we, sort of, had some extra shots taken."

"One that I saw almost looked like you were having sex, with your clothes on. What about that one where Clark is bent over and you are lying on his back with your arms and legs outstretched.

What was that all about?"

In that one, Lois had been pretending to fly using Clark as her support, but she couldn't say that to Perry, "Oh, we were just ... kidding around."

A few days later, Lois and Clark showed up at the Metropolis Women's Prison with a request to interview Toni Taylor. They were shown to an interview room and asked to wait.

They sat at a table and a short time later, Toni was brought in. She sat across from them and looked at them skeptically. She zeroed in on Clark and said, "Good to see you again, Charlie or should I call you Clark?"

Clark replied sheepishly, "It's Clark. I'm sorry that we had to deceive you, but that's our job. Go in and get the story."

"Well, you sure fooled me. I thought there was something special between us, but it all turned out to be a sham. I still remember that kiss in your apartment," she said with a hopeful, wistful tone.

Lois had had just about enough of this and decided that it was time for Toni to know that Clark was off the market. "A lot has happened since then." She brought her hands up and laid them on the table so that Toni could not help, but see her rings, "Clark and I are married now."

Toni looked back and forth and Clark nodded his agreement.

Toni sighed and shook her head in resignation, "You'll never know what you're going to miss."

He replied, "I know what I have."

As Clark started talking small talk, Lois opened a notebook and passed it to Toni. She placed her finger on the page of the notebook emphatically and another finger to her lips indicating silence. While Clark kept up some chatter which Lois added to, Toni was busy reading.

As she read, her eyebrows climbed almost into her hairline. Various emotions crossed her features, fear, disbelief and finally relief. When she finished reading she closed the notebook and passed it back to Lois. Once this was done she participated in the conversation. They talked a bit about her time with the Metros. When Lois asked how she liked prison life, she responded with the code words, "It could be better, but it's better than being dead." The use of that phrase indicated that she agreed to the proposal.

After another ten minutes of more or less meaningless conversation, Lois and Clark thanked Toni for her time and took their leave.

The following week, Lex Luthor called Nigel St. John to his office. Luthor asked, "Status?"

"Operations are at a low key right now per your instructions. Oh, we just got a report from our contact in Metropolis Women's Prison. Last week, Lois Lane and Clark Kent went to see Toni Taylor. The tape made during the interview didn't disclose anything. She was not giving them any information."

"A few days later the inmate that was keeping an eye on Toni reported that she started complaining of abdominal pain. The staff didn't think anything of it and did nothing. Eventually she apparently passed out."

"They found her unconscious and rushed her to the hospital. It would appear that her appendix had ruptured. She failed to receive the necessary care in time and died on the operating table." Nigel finished his report calmly.

Luthor sat back in his chair and took a deep drag on his cigar savoring the taste before blowing a smoke ring. "Such a pity. I'd had high hopes for her. She was keeping her mouth shut. If she had opened up to Lane and Kent, we would have had to shut it permanently. This just saves us the trouble and future worry. I really hate loose ends, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

The day after Toni Taylor's death, Clark received an e-mail from Bill Henderson telling him that if Lois didn't pay her parking fines she would have her license suspended.

As soon as Clark had opened it, he had called Lois over to read it. As soon as she did, they high fived.

Jimmy was doing some research for Cat and watching Lois and Clark from his desk as he ran a search program. When he saw the high five he began to wonder just what the source of the celebration was. Lois and Clark were both pleased with whatever news they had just gotten. He tried to think of what kind of thing would make them both happy at the same time.

As he was mulling over the possibilities his computer beeped as it completed its search. The search was related to the recent kidnappings of the children of wealthy families in Metropolis. A list of children names started to scroll across his screen. That gave him an idea.

He tried to get a good look at Lois's abdomen, but she was sitting at her desk again.

Just then she stood up and went to the supply closet. As she stood, Jimmy noticed how she was dressed, sexy, but demure. An odd combination, low cut and short, but somewhat loose around the middle.

Jimmy thought, <Could she be? They do talk an awful lot about having a baby. I wonder.>

A little later, Jimmy was in Perry's office and he asked, "Chief, have Lois and Clark said anything to you?"

"About what?"

"Oh, I don't know. What they're doing? They were out the other day."

"Oh, that. They went for a photo shoot. Marketing is planning a new ad campaign featuring them as 'The Hottest Team in Town'. I have to say, some of those shots I saw were hot. Some of them looked like they were having sex with their clothes on."

"Uh, huh. That's what I thought. You know how they can't keep their hands off of one another. I just saw them celebrating like they had gotten some good news. Do you think, Lois could be..."

"What? They have been married for over six months. No, well, they haven't said anything to me."

"Look at the way she's dressed today, loose fitting clothes."

Perry looked out his window and saw Clark hovering over Lois at her desk. It looked like he was giving her a back rub. He thought, <I used to give Alice back rubs when she was pregnant.> Aloud he said, "I see what you mean. We'll have to keep a close eye on them."

Chapter 2

A few days after the death of Toni Taylor, Lane and Kent made another visit to the Metropolis Women's Prison. Ostensibly they were there to investigate the death of Toni Taylor. They interviewed the staff and admin personnel that had been involved, making copious notes. While there they asked if they could speak with Miranda Michaels.

They were conducted to the same interview room they had been in before and were asked to wait.

The interview with Miranda played itself out as a duplicate of the one with Toni. This time when asked what she did to pass the time she replied, "I've started reading romance novels." That signaled her agreement to the proposal.

Two weeks later, Miranda was found in her cell, unconscious. She had a reddened area on her leg which looked like an insect or spider bite. She was rushed to the hospital, but was pronounced dead on arrival. The prison staff moved the inmates from the adjacent cells and called in an exterminator to treat the area.

The next day, Clark had a note from Bill Henderson thanking him for getting Lois to pay her fines.

Clark showed Lois the note and there was another high five.

Seeing this, Jimmy was more convinced than ever that they had some good news that they were keeping to themselves. He just couldn't figure out what it was. Lois was dressed in a form-fitting dress that showed off her slim figure. There was no evidence of a baby bump.

The following week, on one of his many visits to Luthor's office, Nigel reported on Miranda's death. "The staff believed that she was bitten by a venomous spider or an insect of some sort. They moved the prisoners from the adjoining cells, including the inmate that was watching her for us, and called in an exterminator to treat the entire wing."

"Ah, it seems as though fortune has smiled upon us, once again. Another loose end tied up without our having to lift a finger."

"It would seem so, sir. It is curious though that once again, Lane and Kent interviewed her sometime before her death."

"When? Why were they there? Was it specifically to speak with her?"

"It would appear not. They were there to investigate the death of Toni Taylor. The interview with Miranda appears to have been an afterthought."

"Was there anything of interest on the tape?"

"No, sir. Just small talk. They did ask if she would return to her perfume business. Her reply was that she didn't think so."

"All right. So, she was also keeping her mouth shut."

"It would seem so."

"Good. I have been having regular calls from Dr. Leek for some time and my latest project is nearing its completion. I will be busy for some time, quite busy as a matter of fact. I must play papa. Wish me luck."

"Quite right, sir. Good luck."

Lois and Clark were driving through the Brightview area, on one of their visits to the 'safe house' that Bill had set up. As they were driving, Lois was looking at the houses they were passing and commented, "Aren't these absolutely lovely houses? These old brownstones remind me of my old apartment in some ways. You know, Clark, I love our apartment, but we could really use some more space. We know that we will be having a baby and our apartment doesn't have room for a nursery. Don't you think we should maybe start looking for a bigger place? We have the money I was saving for the Tahiti trip. We could use that as a down payment. With our combined salary, now that Daddy is paying for my old apartment so that Lucy can live there, we could afford a reasonable mortgage. Bill did say that this was a low crime area so it should be a safe place to have a family. We've already seen how unsafe our apartment is. Jack broke in easily and stole all our stuff. What'd'ya think?"

"You're probably right. We can drive around one day and see what is available."

The ad campaign had been in full swing for some time and the team of Lane and Kent had lived up to their billing. Since the start of the campaign they had brought to task two City Councilmen for malfeasance in office, both of whom had resigned. There had been a construction project on the east side that had been using sub-standard building materials; Bobby had given them the tipoff on that one. The head of the construction company had been indicted on that one and finally there had been a string of arsons. That turned out not to be for profit or an insurance scam, but was simply someone that liked to watch fires and firemen at work. It had cost several lives, therefore a charge of Murder in the First Degree had been sought by the DA. His public defender had plea

bargained it down to manslaughter with commitment to a mental institution.

Clark was out of the office checking with a source and Lois was working on a follow-up to the firebug articles when the TV caught everyone's attention.

Standing, Lois joined the crowd around the TV watching LNN, in horror at what was happening. The LNN anchor, Frank Madison, was giving the details as they turned the sound up. "We are now getting a report that the Seven-Ninety-Seven is making its last circle before it attempts a landing at the Paris International Airport." He paused and pressed his earpiece more firmly into his ear as he listened, then he spoke again, "I'm reminded of the vigil for Charles Lindbergh not so far from this spot. Only now, it's a giant airliner with its landing gear and wing flaps inoperative."

Lois was thinking, <Where's Clark? He should be there by now. I hope he's on his way. He should have heard about this.>

Perry looked around and asked, "Lois, where's that husband of yours?"

Without taking her eyes off of the monitor she replied, "He had to go meet with a source. He should be back shortly."

After a brief pause, Frank came back on and said, "And instead of a lone American pilot, there are 220 passengers and a crew of ten living this last hour in the cold fear of a possible violent death."

Lois didn't really need to hear that graphic description. She had needed to comfort Clark too many times when he had failed to rescue someone that he felt he should have and blamed himself for failing to do so.

While they all watched the TV the elevator dinged and the doors opened to reveal Clark Kent. He appeared to be completely unaware of the situation in France. He exited the elevator heading for his desk, but he saw everyone gathered around the TV.

Lois had heard the elevator chime and spotted Clark as he was exiting it. She hustled over to him and whispered, "Where have you been ... never mind. You're needed in France. There's an airliner in trouble."

He looked at the TV. He asked, "What's going on?"

Frank was saying, "They're only three minutes from touchdown." He listened to his earphone again before he said, "We now have an LNN Reporter on the scene ... Let's see if we can go to their satellite feed."

The screen behind Frank came to life and was a split screen. There was a photo of the local newscaster and one of Orly Airport. The voice of the reporter came from the speakers, "In his last circle, the pilot used up all but enough fuel to complete the landing, so this is it ..."

Perry answered his question, "Serious situation at Orly. Plane's got no landing gear, about to attempt a belly landing."

Lois and Clark exchanged a look. They needed to come up with a reason for him to leave, but before they could they heard Jimmy's shout, "Look!"

Lois and Clark both turned and looked at the screen. What they saw startled them both.

Perry shouted, "I don't believe it."

Lois breathed, "It's Superman! He's there. In Paris." She looked again at Clark.

Clark shrugged his shoulders and shook his head as a group cheer went up. They turned back to the monitor.

Perry muttered, "Great shades of Elvis!"

Lois watched as Clark lowered his glasses slightly and looked over the top at the screen.

As he watched, someone that looked just like him, had flown into the scene and was flying alongside the aircraft.

As if to confirm what he was seeing, the local reporter said, "This just in. Superman, the famed Man of Steel from Metropolis, is flying alongside the stricken airliner."

As they all watched, Superman flew in under the aircraft and supported it while it made its final approach and came in for a landing. Superman continued to support the aircraft while maintenance crews drove on scene and freed the landing gear. Once this was done he lowered the aircraft onto its wheels and flew off.

The LNN reporter had given a blow by blow description, "Superman is setting the big aircraft down, gently as a feather. It's almost on the ground ... and now ... he's done it! The plane is safe! Superman has saved the day!"

The newsroom erupted in cheers for the local hero, but Lois and Clark were just looking at one another in disbelief.

Lois whispered, "We have to talk."

He nodded and turned in the direction of the conference room.

Once they were inside and the door closed, Lois asked, "Who was that?"

"I honestly don't know. I've never seen him before. He looked like an exact copy of me. I mean closer than a brother. Like an identical twin."

"He looks like he's as old as you. Where could he have been hiding all of these years?"

"I don't know. I was the only one in that ship. The globe didn't say anything about another one."

Lois asked, "Would Jor-El have mentioned another ship?"

"Lois, you saw what I saw and heard what I heard. There was only one ship. It sure looks like he has my powers and he looks just like me. To all intents and purposes, he could very well be me."

A panicked look came on to Lois' features. "Clark, we have to figure this out. You know and I know that it was not you. How can we find out who it was?"

"Maybe we should just double-check with my parents. There might be something they haven't told me."

"Sounds like a good idea. We can call them as soon as we get home."

The rest of the day proved to be uneventful so at quitting time, Lois and Clark packed up and went home.

Clark was in the middle of helping Lois cook dinner when the phone rang. Clark grabbed it and said, "Kent Residence."

The voice that came from the earpiece was instantly recognizable, "Clark, that was so thrilling. Honey, it's been a while since you've had a major save like that. Things have been very quiet recently."

Jonathan added, "All those people ... we're so proud."

Martha came back on and said, "It was quite a surprise though, seeing you in Paris."

Clark interrupted, "I'm glad you guys called. We were going to call you after dinner ..."

"Oh, I'm sorry, honey! Did we interrupt your dinner with Lois?"

"No, we were just making stir-fry. Lois is cooking. Listen, can we call you back?"

"Sure, son. Whenever you and Lois are free."

Looking over at Lois and, seeing where she was with the meal preparation, he said, "We'll call in about forty-five minutes, okay?"

"Sure, that will be fine."

After dinner, Lois and Clark called Smallville. Once they were all on the line, Clark said, without preamble, "Mom and Dad, how much do you know about my arrival?"

"Not all that much, son. We found your ship in Shuster's field. We saw it land and investigated. When we opened the ship, there you were."

"Then there wasn't another baby in there with me?"

"No. Why would you ask that? If there had been another baby, you would have had a brother or sister. We would never have

separated you."

Clark let out a sigh of relief, "That's what I thought. The reason I asked is ... that wasn't me in Paris this afternoon."

Jonathan blurted out, "What? If it wasn't you, who was it?"
"That's what we're trying to figure out, Dad."

Lois spoke up, "Jonathan, Clark was standing right there, next to me watching it on the TV. It wasn't him."

"That's why I was asking if there was another baby. It was somebody ... some*thing* else. We watched it, too, at the newsroom." Clark paused as he thought about how to express how he felt, "When I saw him ... it was like my whole world turned upside down. If it wasn't for Lois, I don't know what I'd do. I'd think I had a serious mental problem."

Martha was still having a hard time understanding, "But Clark ... we saw you ... You were wearing your outfit. You *flew* What ... *who* else could do that?"

Lois answered, "That's just it, there shouldn't *be* anyone else."

Jonathan added, "This is unbelievable." Jonathan thought for a second before he added, "Maybe you should make a public statement, get this out in the open, let the world know there's an imposter out there."

Lois said, "I don't think that's such a good idea. With all that Clark can do, if he announces that there's someone else out there that can do what he does, it might cause a panic."

"He seems to be helping, just like Clark."

"Mom, we have to figure out what or who we are dealing with here before we do anything."

"I wonder, after what Mr. Wells told us about parallel dimensions ... could he be from one of those?"

"I don't think so, Mom. I think Mr. Wells would have come to us to let us know if he was bringing a visitor with him."

"Okay, well, you keep us posted, son."

"We will, Dad. Thanks."

As soon as they had hung up, Lois asked, "How can we confirm that he is really as much like you as he appears to be?"

Clark thought for a second and then snapped his fingers. He said, "He was holding that airliner up. Maybe he left handprints. I could go and see if they match."

"Sounds like a good idea."

"Want to go?"

As soon as he asked, Lois started to get excited. "Fly to Paris? The City of Lights? Me? I'd love to."

"Let's go early. There's this little bakery that makes the absolutely best croissants in the world."

Lois threw her arms around his neck and started kissing him, "You ... are ... the ... best ... husband ... ever." The words were interspersed with kisses.

Clark lifted her into his arms and carried her to the bedroom. "If we are going to get an early start, I think we need to get to bed early."

"But I'm not sleepy."

He bounced his eyebrows and said, "Who said anything about sleep?"

She squealed in delight and kissed him again.

He carried her through the archway and laid her on the bed. They simply cuddled and kissed for a while.

Then slowly piece by piece their clothes came off.

Within minutes, Clark was caressing her breasts, kneading them and gently pinching her nipples and, as he did, her breathing began to be somewhat ragged.

This started a period of marital intimacy.

When they were finished, Lois fell asleep and he lay there, under her and marveled once again at his good fortune. To have the woman that he loved so completely as his wife and the promise of children with Lois in the future was almost overwhelming to him. He drifted off to sleep with a smile on his

face.

Chapter 3

When they got up and dressed for the trip to Paris, Clark knew that he was going to be in trouble. It was going to be sheer torture to look at her all day and not be able to make love with her, every hour on the hour. She loved to tease him with her wardrobe and she must have thought that a trip to the city of romance called for a special outfit. Seeing how she was dressed, he knew that he would be in a constant state of arousal and in the Suit, that fact would be impossible to hide.

As soon as he did his spin change and stood before her, Lois smiled at his condition and said, "I can tell that you like what you see." Stepping over to him she ran her hand over the front of his briefs. She was pleased to hear him groan in response.

He scooped her up in his arms and said, "If we don't leave now, we won't be leaving for a couple of hours."

With mock innocence she giggled, wrapped her arms around his neck and laid her head on his shoulder.

Long before the sun came up in Metropolis, Superman, with Lois in his arms, was flying eastward.

They were half way across the Atlantic when Lois gushed, "Ohhhh ... the sunrise is so *spectacular*. It's just jumping up there. Incredible!" She buried her head in the crook of his neck and started nibbling on the skin just above the Suit.

He faltered slightly and Lois yelped as they suddenly lost altitude. He got himself back together and resumed the flight.

She asked, "What happened?"

"As if you didn't know. You distracted me. The way you are dressed is distraction enough, but nuzzling my neck that way was just too much."

Looking down at the expanse of water below them, contritely, she replied, "All right. I didn't wear my bikini, so I'll be good."

Arriving in Paris, they landed in a dark alley near Chez Morel and Clark spun into streetwear. He directed Lois to Amandine's boulangerie, a little bakery that was one of Clark's favorite haunts. He had discovered it while he had been in Paris during his world travels. Amandine was a motherly woman that had taken a liking to the itinerant American journalist. Clark made a point of stopping in occasionally when he was in Paris and had made special trips there to fetch treats for Lois.

As they rounded the final corner Lois stopped in her tracks and took in a deep breath through her nose. She let out a heartfelt, "Mmmmmmmmm, what a wonderful aroma!"

Clark smiled and said, "Welcome to Chez Morel." He reached for and opened the door. When he did, an early morning customer came bustling out. As he did, he tipped his chapeau to Lois and as he took in her trim figure, the décolletage displayed by the low scooped neckline and her long legs below the very short skirt which were accentuated by the stiletto heels she was wearing and said, with obvious interest "Bonjour, Mademoiselle, enchanté!"

Lois corrected him, "Madame not Mademoiselle."

He looked at Clark and his face fell. He simply said, "Pardon," and passed on.

Lois smiled at his discomfiture and passed inside, followed by Clark.

Lois was overwhelmed when she was finally inside. The sights and smells that assaulted her senses literally took her breath away. Lois didn't know where to look first so she just started at one side and worked her way around. The space was large; on the left side stood a long countertop covered with colorful pastries; éclairs, crullers and tarts. On the right were more counters displaying all manner of breads: long elegant baguettes, thick country white bread, ring shaped breads called couronnes and sweet bread that looked like a muffin with a round dot on top, the fluffy brioche. Along the wall behind the counter were dozens of baskets filled

with additional bread loaves, rounds and rings delicately sprinkled with herbs.

There were several staff members serving the early morning customers. They were all wearing white, white shirts, pants and aprons. They also had white kerchiefs covering their hair which most had pulled back in a bun or a pony-tail. Even their faces were white, at least mostly, but this was the result of flour and powdered sugar. Even though they worked the front, some of the breads were sprinkled for appearances and they got it on their hands.

As they entered, Clark heard a voice giving directions to the staff. The voice caught the attention of both Lois and Clark. When they both looked in that direction the owner of the voice spotted them. The owner was a tall woman who appeared to be past middle age, in fact her snow white hair, styled as it was, in a pixie cut, would place her age at well past middle age, but some of that could possibly be attributed to flour, although Clark knew that her actual age was something over sixty. When her bright blue eyes fell on Clark her face lit up and she exclaimed, "Bonjour Clark! Back in Paris so soon?"

Seeing Madame Morel's haircut, Lois started to think about how much easier it would be to take care of that short style. She thought she might just try it. It wasn't like it wouldn't grow back out.

"Just a short trip. While I'm here I'm supposed to look into that incident at the airport yesterday."

Madame Morel looked at Lois and asked, "And this is?"

"Mme Morel, se il vous plaît laissez-moi vous présenter ma femme, Lois." [Madame Morel, please allow me to introduce my wife, Lois.]

"Cette merveilleuse nouvelles. Elle est belle. Vous êtes un homme très chanceux." [Such wonderful news. She is lovely. You are a very lucky man.]

Lois didn't know much French, but she knew enough to understand that she was being talked about and blushed as a result. She said meekly, "Thank you. Clark has always told me about your shop and from time to time has brought me some of your croissants. Just looking around the shop with the breads and pastries is fantastic!"

Amandine laid a gentle hand on Clark's shoulder and said, "Show her around, pick whatever food you wish. Tell the ladies I said it is my wedding present to you."

"Madame Morel, vous êtes trop gentil" [Madame Morel, you are too kind?] Turning to Lois he said, "Madame Morel said to pick anything and that we should consider it to be a wedding gift. I just thought, we didn't have a wedding cake." Looking around he spotted a chocolate frosted muffin he said to Lois, "Perhaps a muffin."

Lois turned to Madame Morel, "Thank you, Madame Morel. That is very kind of you. Clark has told me so much about your shop. I've been looking forward to visiting it." Lois looked around, "Everything just looks so wonderful."

"Please, for the wife of my good friend, Clark, pick anything. It is yours."

The old expression, putting the fox in charge of the hen house would apply here. Everything looked so good that Lois selected representative samples of quite a few items. By the time they left they were each carrying several pink and white bags with delicacies, Lois was nibbling on a fresh cruller and sighing her pleasure at the warm bread.

Spotting a phone booth, Clark stopped, dropped a few coins in the slot and dialed. The phone was answered quickly by a feminine voice, "Sûreté nationale."

"Bonjour, c'est Clark Kent avec la Daily Planet. Pierre Delacroix est disponible?" [Hello, this is Clark Kent with the Daily Planet. Is Pierre Delacroix available?]

"Oui. Moment."

A mild male voice came on the line, "Delacroix."

"Pierre, Clark Kent. Could you help me? I'd like to examine the aircraft that Superman saved yesterday."

"Je crois que je peux vous aider. Me rencontrer à l'aéroport. [I believe that I can help you. Meet me at the airport.]

"Merci. Je vais vous rencontrer là." [Thank you. I'll meet you there.]

Pierre Delacroix was there by the time they arrived. When they met him, Clark introduced Lois, "Police Inspector Pierre Delacroix, this is my wife, Lois Lane."

He took Lois's hand, bowed over it and kissed it. When he replied he spoke heavily accented English, "My pleasure. It was very lucky that you were here in Paris on assignment. I've read many of your articles on Superman in the international edition of the Daily Planet."

Lois retrieved her hand and said, "Thank you for meeting us."

Delacroix was a short man with a pleasant enough face that he thought of himself as quite the ladies' man. He was really giving Lois a once over, taking in her slender shapely legs below her short skirt and the creamy flesh of her full bosom. Lois loved to tease Clark so, for this trip, she had worn a blouse that was so low cut that she had needed to wear a bra with demi cups. She had picked one with lifts to push her breasts up to tantalize him that much more. The overall effect could be seen on Delacroix, he couldn't tear his eyes away from Lois, "It is my pleasure. I have made arrangements for you to examine the plane. It is grounded until the repairs are made."

Clark took Lois's hand to reassert his possession and said, "Thank you. We just need to verify ... something, for our article." Having Lois there was going to help. He turned to Lois and said, "Lois, why don't you interview the Inspector while I check out the plane?"

Lois knew without being told that he needed her to distract the inspector while he checked so she pulled a notepad and pencil from her ever-present bag and started asking questions about the rescue.

Clark sauntered away and, once out of sight, zipped over to the plane and then, seeing that he was alone and unobserved, he floated up and placed his hands in the depressions made by the other Superman. They were a perfect fit. He floated back down and returned to Lois and the Inspector.

Taking Lois's hand in his, Clark said, "Thank you, Inspector. You have been most helpful. Come on, Lois. It's time for us to go. Please excuse us inspector. We have a flight to catch."

Lois flashed the inspector a grin reached up, stroked his jaw, leaned in slightly to give him a kiss on the cheek which gave him a close up view of her bosom and said, "Bye, Inspector. It was nice meeting you."

He was speechless and grinning like a fool. The sight of her cream colored mounds and her touch had put thoughts in his head. He was so distracted by her that it never occurred to him to think that there were no flights to the U. S. scheduled for that hour. Then he thought about his wife and how he wished she looked more like Lois Lane. Ah well, it was not to be. She looked the way she looked and no matter how much he wished she looked more like Lois Lane, she wasn't going to be changed. He had to accept that. Besides, a woman that looked that good would probably be vain and not even know how to cook. He had a good wife. She cooked his meals and did his laundry. They had three children. He shook his head and turned toward his car.

Once out of the inspector's sight, they had ducked behind a building and Clark had spun into the Suit. After picking Lois up and cradling her in his arms, and with Lois cradling their bakery bags, they lifted off and headed for Metropolis.

Once they were over the Atlantic, Lois asked, "So, what did you find?"

"I found a set of handprints that could very easily be mine on the underside of the fuselage."

"Okay, but that really doesn't prove anything. So he has hands like yours, he still isn't you."

"I guess we'll just have to wait for him to show up again."

A few minutes later they landed on the balcony of their apartment and, after setting Lois on her feet, Clark spun out of the Suit and into his work clothes.

Lois turned to and asked, "Did you like my outfit?"

With a leer, he said, "What there is of it, yeah. I think Pierre did too."

She swayed her way over to him and said, "I didn't dress for Pierre, I dressed for my husband." Reaching up she wrapped her arms around his neck and then started a kiss. The kiss quickly escalated and Lois felt Clark's hands on her derriere. She wiggled her body against his and felt his growing erection. Breaking the kiss, she said, "I think we have some time before we have to be in."

Nodding his agreement, he lifted Lois and carried her to the bed. He reached up under her skirt and, grasping her panties, pulled them down her long slender legs. Stroking up her legs he pushed her skirt up until it was bunched around her waist revealing the curly brown thatch at the apex of her thighs.

While he was doing this, Lois reached under her top and released her breasts from the demi-cups of her bra and pulled her top down to release them.

Loosening his pants, Clark moved over her and, as she offered her breasts to him, started to nibble on the hard little nubs of her nipples. Her sighs of pleasure told him that she was enjoying what he was doing so he ministered to the other nipple as well.

His super-sense of smell picked up her fragrance and told him that she was becoming excited. He released her nipple and moved up for a kiss.

This started a period of marital intimacy.

Once he was breathing normally again, he quipped, "If this is what it's going to be like afterward, I'll have to take you to Paris more often."

Her reply was equally breathy, "If this is what it is going to be like, I'll let you."

After several more minutes, they separated and got dressed. Lois put most of the bakery items away and change out of her stilettos into more comfortable heels and Clark made their coffee before they moved out to the Jeep and headed for the Planet.

Lois was still carrying one of the bags from Chez Morel in one hand, her coffee in the other hand and the strap of her bag over her shoulder as they exited the elevator.

When the doors opened they revealed that Cat was standing there waiting for the elevator. When the doors opened she saw Lois and Clark breaking from a kiss. She noted Lois's outfit and especially her top and said, "Looks like you've been taking my advice. Nice outfit."

"Thanks, Cat. I'm trying."

As they descended the ramp, Jimmy shouted, "Hey, have you guys seen the latest?"

Lois replied, "What now?"

As she set down the coffee mug, Jimmy handed her a copy of the evening edition. It carried an account of a Superman rescue. After reading it, Lois decided that it could help The Secret if she played it up, so she asked Clark, "It's been three days since Superman has even been seen in Metropolis. Don't you find that just the tiniest bit odd?"

His reply was flat, "Not if there were no emergencies to be handled."

As they were speaking, Perry exited the elevator. He was wearing a ball cap and had a garment bag over his shoulder.

Clark said, "Morning, Chief."

Perry smiled and as he passed he tipped his hat to Lois.

Lois referred to the paper and said, "Look at this. In the last thirty-six hours Superman's saved that airplane in Paris, righted a sinking ship in Rio, rescued a busload of school children in Surinam, wherever *that* is, and on and on. Never once talking to the press or even sticking around to see how things came out." Under her breath she said, in a tone so low only Clark could hear with his super-hearing, "No wonder you haven't been able to find him. He's been all over the place."

Jimmy had been eying the bag that Lois was holding and so Lois offered him the bag.

Jimmy dipped his hand in and came out with a croissant. He tore off a piece and popped it into his mouth. He chewed thoughtfully then swallowed.

Jimmy asked, "I guess the question is ... why isn't he **here**? Why isn't he saving sinking ships or rescuing school children in Metropolis like he's always done?" The flavor of the croissant finally hit him and he said, "These are incredible. Where'd you get them? It must have been somewhere nearby, it's still warm."

Lois replied, "Oh, a little French bakery that Clark knows about. You know, Jimmy, Metropolis doesn't **own** Superman. Maybe he's on vacation."

The word vacation triggered a memory and Jimmy suddenly realized that he had some things on his desk that he needed to give to Perry so he excused himself and hurried to pick them up. Once he had them in hand he checked to make sure that all were accounted for then headed for Perry's office.

Without even knocking, he entered the office. When he did he caught Perry checking himself out with a hand mirror. Hearing Jimmy, Perry quickly pulled the mirror down and placed his hand over it as if to hide it.

As soon as he crossed the threshold Jimmy was speaking, "Chief, I got you those brochures on that white water rafting trip, but frankly, it looks a little dangerous ..." His speech faltered as he saw what Perry was doing and was somewhat startled by what he saw. Perry was wearing a toupee.

Perry affected his usual bluff and bluster as he replied, "Dangerous? Good."

As he was speaking, he lowered the mirror to his desktop and placed his ball cap over it to conceal it. Looking up, Perry caught Jimmy staring at him.

He was staring because, with the hair piece, Perry bore a striking resemblance to Dan Rather. Realizing he had been caught he quickly dropped his eyes to the brochure in his hands.

Perry, having caught Jimmy decided that more bluster was in order and barked out, "Yes? You were saying?"

It was now blindingly evident that the Chief didn't want anything said about his changed appearance so Jimmy did his best not to look at his hair. "Uh ... oh, right ... those brochures ..." He almost literally buried his nose in the brochure so that he wouldn't be tempted to look at Perry's hair. As he looked down, he asked, "Chief? Everything okay?"

Perry was still in bluster mode as he answered, "Why shouldn't it be?"

Jimmy was relieved and yet not relieved. He kept his eyes down as he closed the brochure and then brought it up and hid behind it as he said, "Oh. Good. That's ... good. Anyway, they say that this trip is not for the faint of heart, solid swimmers, etc." He couldn't help himself and peeked around the brochure.

Perry caught him and he retreated behind it again. Before Perry replied, "Always hated swimming. Never much good at it either. Sometimes you've got to live out there on the edge."

Jimmy gathered his courage and his will power and lowered the brochure. He moved to the side of Perry's desk and as he laid it down he said, "Uh, I'll just leave these things here. On your desk, Chief."

Perry intercepted it and started to peruse it. While he did that, Jimmy was examining his hairpiece.

Looking up suddenly, Perry caught him staring. Jimmy hastily turned away and left, closing the door behind him as Perry examined the brochure.

Seeing that Olsen had left, Perry picked the mirror back up and looked at his reflection. He was apparently pleased with what he saw because he started to smile.

Lois and Clark were speaking in low tones as they left the elevator, "I mean what's going on with this guy? Why is he gallivanting all over the world? Is he trying to avoid any possible confrontation with you? I could leave messages for him to call me with every correspondent and news bureau of ours worldwide. Maybe we could talk to him then."

"Lois, you're brilliant!"

As they neared her desk, she replied, "I'm glad you finally realize that. Uh, what'd I say?"

He waited for her to sit down then he leaned against her desk and said, in a low tone, "We need a way to lure him out into the open. We need to trap him."

Her voice went up a notch in volume, "Wait a minute. For a trap you need ..."

"Bait," he said, matter-of-factly and nodded.

Her voice went up another notch, "You want to use me as bait," she stated flatly, incredulously.

Clark looked around to see if they were attracting attention before he said, "If he is anything like me he won't be able to resist you. Let's follow through with your plan. Leave messages with all of the out of town bureaus for him to contact you."

"If he can do everything you can do ..."

"Don't worry, I'll be there."

Shaking her head in disbelief that she would be putting herself in this position, again, Lois put the plan into operation, making call after call and sending numerous e-mails. She was wary, but convinced that Clark would be there to protect her.

During the midday lunch hour, a familiar figure in a familiar red, yellow and blue uniform was streaking through the sky. Clouds flashed by as he exceeded Mach 2. The problem was that he was low in the atmosphere and the sonic boom created by his passage followed close behind him, and it was very disruptive. He dove toward the ground and flew through the canyon created by the skyscrapers of the city. The individual flying so fast and low was actually looking behind to see just what effect the boom he was creating was having. He saw pedestrians covering their ears because of the loudness. He saw a waiter at a sidewalk café startle and drop a tray full of drinks. There were several near collisions resulting from startled drivers. Seeing this, he laughed out loud and let out a whoop as he zoomed up above the spires of the city once more. In his exuberance he did several barrel rolls.

While Lois was making her contacts and leaving messages, Clark had gone downstairs. He exited the elevator, and carrying some photos, he approached Lois's desk. "Lois, do you have a magnifying lens? These are some stills I got from our Paris bureau."

Reaching into her desk drawer she pulled out a magnifier. Clark handed her a still photo to examine. She gave it a close perusal and then, seeing several people nearby when she looked around, said, "Sure looks like Superman to me."

He nodded in agreement and said, "Me too."

"People are going to think that we're fans looking at our hero. Before we were married, I had to have been the biggest Superman fan in Metropolis. Maybe we should join the fan club." He gave her a look of disbelief before, in an undertone, she said, "It'd help with the secret. You'll get a button. Who would ever think that a Superman fan would actually be Superman? Think of it as camouflage."

Thinking about how Lois's mind worked, Clark shook his head and returned to his desk. Lois got up and followed him. Sitting in his guest chair, she slowly crossed her legs, causing the short skirt to become just that much shorter. She watched his eyes move to her display and smiled at the attention, before she continued, "It's crazy, really." She dropped her voice to a whisper, "I still have a hard time believing that I, little old me, I ... am married to the one and only, Superman."

"Maybe not the one and only any more."

"I can't believe that even before we were married I had the gall to believe that Superman was mine ... uh ... Metropolis'. I really had no idea. I mean, unselfishly speaking, I suppose Superman should belong to the world. But then again, selfishly speaking ... I thought this was his home and now that we are married, I know it for a fact. It's amazing. You're amazing."

He reached out and took her hand in his, "Wherever you are is where my home is, Lois."

The tender tone and the sentiment expressed was pushing her close to tears as she said, "That's what is so mind boggling, that I mean that much to you. I'm nobody."

"Oh, quite the contrary, Lois, you are the most special woman I have ever known. You complete me. Without you, I'm only half a man. I love you."

As a single tear of joy trickled down her cheek, she smiled a gentle smile and leaned in for a kiss.

Chapter 4

That night, Superman was out looking for the imposter again. He was thinking to himself how possibly fruitless the search would continue to be. He could only be in one place at a time and he was coming to the realization that it was indeed a very large planet. The more he thought about it the more he was convinced that Lois's idea was the best way to go. He was just about to head home when he suddenly heard, "Hey! You," coming from above him.

Clark stopped, hovered and looked up as the imposter slowly floated down. The imposter was arrogantly assuming Superman's folded arms posture. Once they were eye to eye they both slowly descended to ground level. It was a staring contest the entire way and neither flinched even when they both touched down.

Once they were on the ground, Clark started examining the imposter, closely. He was stunned to realize that the imposter was an exact duplicate in every way, but one. While Clark had a serious expression and was treating the situation with the gravity it deserved, the imposter's attitude was that of mocking Superman.

Clark finally broke the silence, "Who are you?"

The imposter's reply was couched in a petulant tone, "I don't want to talk. You're my enemy!"

Clark was taken aback at this and asked, "Why would you say that?"

It became obvious to Clark as the imposter was speaking that he had been carefully indoctrinated in that belief, "I am the most powerful man in the universe. You've outlived your usefulness."

Shocked at this, Clark asked, "Who told you these things?"

With childlike smugness the imposter replied, "My father."

Really curious now, Clark asked, "Who's your father?"

With childlike determination not to disobey, the imposter said, "I promised never to tell."

Seeing that this method of approach was failing, Clark tried another approach, "I'm not your enemy. I want to be your friend. I want to know more about you, like where you come from."

Displaying what appeared to be a rudimentary understanding of biology, the imposter replied, "I was born in the womb. My father took me out."

This seemed to be a natural answer, so Clark followed it up with, "Okay. How old are you?"

Smugly the imposter replied, "As old as you." He appeared to be quickly tiring of the conversation, just as a child would and with a child's flightiness suddenly took off and shouted back, "Catch me if you can!"

Taken off guard, it took Clark some seconds to get himself together and give chase. He could keep the imposter in sight because of his super-vision, but since they were equally fast, he couldn't close the gap, all he could do was follow and try to keep the imposter from losing him.

The imposter led him a merry chase, high into the stratosphere, for many miles through the waters of the Atlantic, through tunnels (fortunately there were no trains passing through them at the same time) and around mountains.

Finally as they were passing by the Alps, the sonic boom created by the imposter's passage caused an avalanche. Clark saw a village that would be threatened and stopped to help while the imposter continued on and out of sight.

The imposter finally arrived at his destination without his follower. With stealthy tread he entered a large room, breathing a sigh of relief in the belief that he was home scot free. He was startled and stopped in mid stride when the lights suddenly went on.

He turned toward the light to see Lex Luthor sitting in an easy chair with a book that he had apparently been reading in hand. Luthor, in a chiding tone said, "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

The imposter hung his head in shame and said, "Sorry, father." Then in a childlike attempt to please a parent, he said, "I was just ... practicing — like you told me. My 'out-of-town' tryout. I think I did good."

Luthor was his usual urbane self as he replied, "Yes. I saw you in Paris."

Seeing that his 'father' was at least not dissatisfied and possibly even pleased he added, "And I saved that sinking ship in Rio. That was fun."

Luthor's tone was scolding as he said, "All well and good, but when I say 10:00, I mean 10:00." Thinking that he needed to assure himself of his 'child's' obedience, he asked, "You haven't been flying around Metropolis, have you?"

Knowing that he was lying, but hoping that he wouldn't be caught in the lie the imposter said, "Oh, no father, you told me not to."

Luthor, in a calculated show of affection, gave his 'son' a hug which the imposter returned.

Breaking the hug, Luthor said, "Come with me, son. Time for bed."

The imposter started to smile and jumped up on Luthor's back for a piggy-back ride. Once he was held securely, he asked, "Will you tell me a story?"

Luthor talked down to him, as if to a child, "Maybe. If you're in bed quickly, with no fuss."

Luthor carried his charge into an adjoining room which was crammed full of electronic and chemical equipment, all of which surrounded a central chamber. The imposter quickly removed the Superman uniform and, clothed simply in swim trunks, pasted some contacts to his body. Through regular practice he knew just where to apply them. The wires that led from them were attached to the equipment and item after item, as the leads were attached, came to life and started to display their information — blood pressure, pulse and respiration among others.

The imposter jumped down off of the platform he had been standing on, into a large tank.

While the imposter had been changing and preparing, Luthor had been engaged in telling his story, a corrupt version of Red Riding hood, "... and then the Wolf said to Red Riding hood, 'Are you sure the policy is in your name?' And Red Riding hood said,

'Yes. Grandma said when she passed away I would inherit everything.' So the Wolf said, 'Let's pay grandma a visit.'" Luthor paused while he hit a set of switches in the sequence that Leek had drilled into him before he continued, "And so, Red Riding hood took off her hood and cape and gave it to the Wolf."

It was apparent that either he had heard the story before or else he knew how Luthor thought because the imposter finished for him, "And the Wolf went through the forest to Grandmother's house, ate her, and he and Red Riding hood split the money."

A pleased smile lit up Luthor's face at his response and commended his 'son' by amplifying, "That's right, as it should be. The grandmother was old and it was time for the younger, stronger generation to take over." Luthor paused to throw some more switches and then continued in a thoughtful tone, "And so it is with you and the old Superman. You and I are destined to control this city and eventually the world."

When Luthor closed another switch, the tank that the imposter was in began filling with a murky fluid. The imposter donned a breathing apparatus as a lid descended and sealed against the bottom of the tank, completely enclosing it.

Before the tank was completely full, Luthor admonished him, "Remember: All that ultimately counts is winning. All that satisfies is power. Might is Right." He closed another switch to activate the magnetic seal and said, "Obey me in all things and we shall realize our dream."

As the fluid closed over the imposter's head, Luthor's eyes had the fire of hate in them. He muttered, "To destroy Superman. He is my enemy. Therefore, he is *your* enemy. You will be the instrument of our victory, then *you* will be the one, the only Superman. *My* Superman."

Luthor put out the lights as he left the laboratory, because that was precisely what it was.

When Clark arrived at home, he found Lois, already in her robe, curled up on the sofa. The TV was on, but she was asleep. After turning the TV off he picked her up and cradled her to his chest. Even in her sleep her arms automatically made their way around his neck and she snuggled her face into his shoulder. In her sleep she murmured, "Oh, Clark. You're here with me."

Clark planted a kiss on the top of her head and said, "I wouldn't be anywhere else," and carried her into the bedroom. He placed her on the bed on her side and lay down behind her. Reaching around, he untied the belt of her robe and gently worked it off of her. When he did he discovered that she was naked underneath. Reaching around he cupped her breast and she started sighing as she stirred and awoke. She said, "This had better be my husband and not the imposter."

"If it was the imposter, what would you do?"

"I'd scream for my husband and then I'd rip your arm off and beat you over the head with it."

"Well, I'm certainly glad I don't have to worry about that, my love."

Lois pulled his hand off of her breast and pulled it up so that she could kiss his palm. As she did she smelled his hand. Shifting around, Lois leaned in and smelled and then tasted the skin of his neck. She said, "So far so good. You smell and taste like my husband." She started trailing her hands over his chest and down to his erect manhood.

When she grasped him he gasped. She smiled and said, "Feels like my husband."

"What do I have to do to prove that I'm your husband?"

"No one could kiss me like my hus ..."

Anything more that she was going to say was lost when his lips sealed to hers. Only seconds later his tongue swiped across her lower lip seeking entrance to her mouth. She parted her lips and their tongues started a slow tango.

When they both needed air, they broke from the kiss. Lois

smiled and said, "Just one more te ..."

She stopped speaking and emitted a sigh of profound pleasure as he entered her. Her arms came around his back and pulled him tight as her legs came up around his hips.

Breathlessly, she whispered, "No one else could love me like this. Hello, husband."

As they were lying together, basking in the after-glow of their lovemaking session, Clark said, "I finally ran into the imposter."

"Oh, how did it happen?"

"He actually found me, not the other way around. It was weird, like looking in a mirror. He's identical to me. I could hardly tell the difference. He told me that I was his enemy. He said that his 'father' had told him that. When I asked who his father is he said that he had promised not to tell."

"With that attitude there isn't much question who it is."

"Yeah, that was my conclusion as well, but how can we prove it?"

"You need to follow him home, wherever that is."

"Luthor hasn't been away so, logically, 'home' is somewhere in Metropolis. He must have been on his way back home when he accosted me."

Why didn't you follow him?"

"Oh, I tried, but he led me on a merry chase. He created an emergency that I had to deal with and by the time I was finished, he was gone."

"I hope our other plan works."

"So do I."

The next morning Lois and Clark arrived at the Planet and they both had smiles on their faces as they exited the elevator. They moved to their desks and after taking sips from their travel mugs started their day.

Perry wasn't sure what his star reporting team was working on, but mid-morning he stepped out of his office. Anyone looking at him would have done a double-take. Instead of his normal dress shirt open at the collar with his tie loose and just a vest over, he was dressed in an Armani suit with a Jerry Garcia tie. Most striking of all was the hairpiece. It seemed to take ten years off of his appearance. Neither Lois nor Clark noted this because they were not looking in his direction as he shouted, "Lois! Robbery and hostage situation at the Metropolis Merchant's Bank. Shake a leg."

Lois looked at Clark and in response he nodded and headed for the stairwell.

When she turned back to Perry she actually saw him for the first time that morning and was stunned. She did a double-take and asked, "New suit?"

Perry smiled at the recognition and replied, "As a matter of fact, yes."

This was so unusual that Lois had to ask, "Huh. Special occasion?"

Perry had actually been expecting something along that line, but was still unprepared, "Not really, no."

Lois looked him up and down and huffed, "Huh." Then as an afterthought, asked, "You okay?" His changed appearance was throwing her off. This almost stranger that was speaking with Perry's voice was confusing her. Her intuition was screaming at her that there was something wrong, but she couldn't tell what it was.

Not wanting to prolong the conversation, Perry asked, "Lois?" Still distracted, she answered, "Yes?"

Like he was speaking to a ten year old, Perry reminded her, "The bank."

Lois broke out of her surprise and replied, "Oh! Right!" She grabbed her bag and dashed for the elevator.

Jimmy had been an interested observer of their conversation

and, coming up behind Perry, asked, "Chief, are you sure you're okay?"

Perry was already uncomfortable as a result of the confrontation with Lois and this final straw broke the camel's back and he snapped at Jimmy with a raised voice, "Yes! I'm okay! Why is everybody asking if I'm okay?! I'm okay, okay? I'd be better if everyone around here minded their own business. Can't a man change his outfit without going through the third degree?" He looked around so that everyone knew that the following was a general announcement and bellowed, "The next person that asks so if I'm okay will be fired!" He looked around, challenging anyone to say anything and then with a huff turned and went to his office, slamming the door closed behind him.

Jimmy muttered to himself, "That man is not okay."

When Lois arrived at the bank everything was quiet. Many of the police were simply milling around. To all intents and purposes, the emergency had been handled and they were in mop-up mode. She saw one patrolman standing nearby who was busy writing in his notepad. Lois approached him and identified herself, "Lois Lane, Daily Planet. What happened?"

The cop continued his notes as he spoke, "Tense stand-off until Superman got here."

Lois knew that Clark had been keeping a low profile while he looked for the imposter so it would be natural for her to evince surprise. In an excited tone, she asked, "He's here? In Metropolis?"

The cop finally looked up from his notes and nodded. Her eyes followed his finger as he pointed up and said, "He flew in the top floor window, apprehended the perp and freed the hostages." Shifting his stance he pointed off to the side, "He's over there."

When Lois turned in the indicated direction she saw Superman standing by as two uniformed officers loaded the perpetrator into the back of a Paddy wagon while he spoke with a couple of officers.

Lois was relieved to see Clark standing there talking to the cops. She shouted, "Superman! Superman! You're back!"

Suddenly there was a shout from the Paddy wagon, "Watch out," and the perp broke free of the officers and started to run away.

He had only gone a couple of steps when Superman caught him, lifted him by a handful of his shirt and then threw him almost twenty feet into the back of the Paddy wagon. The watching police simply shook their heads, but Lois stood there aghast. That wasn't something that Clark would do. This had to be the imposter.

One cop climbed into the back and secured the prisoner while another closed the doors. As soon as this was done he banged on the back as a signal to the driver that he could leave.

As the cops dispersed, Lois, in a desire to get a closer look at the imposter, slowly moved in his direction.

He saw her approach and turned toward her. He was staring at her, but there was no recognition in his eyes cementing the knowledge that this was indeed the imposter. She asked, "Superman?"

As he replied he was looking her over like a hormone driven teen checking out a co-ed classmate, "Yes?"

She decided to see just how much like Clark he actually was and so she said, "It's me. Lois."

There was still no spark of recognition, but there was a lustful look before he smirked and taking off, flew away at high speed.

Lois watched him depart and had a puzzled expression on her face as she wondered where Clark was.

Jimmy had been doing some research for Cat and was at her desk, delivering the latest results. As they discussed the results, the sound of voices at the elevator attracted their attention. When they looked up they saw Perry talking with a couple of visitors.

In an aside to Jimmy, Cat commented, "Well, whatever the reason, I, for one, like his new look. I think he's sexy."

Jimmy was surprised and barely kept his voice low enough that it wouldn't be heard at the elevator, "Mr. White? Sexy?"

Cat looked at Jimmy in disbelief and said, "Very. I mean, he always had that aura of power, but now he's mixing it with a little style. Why do you think women flocked around Henry Kissinger? Because he had tight buns?"

Jimmy shook his head, <Women> he thought and then said, "Still, there's something going on. He's never acted like this before." He thought for a second and then continued, like a cop analyzing a crime scene, "Ever since last week ... half the time he's poring over the brochures I got him ..."

Curious as her namesake, Cat asked, "Brochures?"

Jimmy ran off the litany of what he had provided, "White water rafting, tent safaris, Death Valley hikes ... a far cry from his usual two weeks in the Catskills with the Mrs. and yesterday he said something about 'living on the edge.'"

Picking up on Jimmy's concern, Cat replied, "Perry? The man's a permanent fixture in the slow lane." Her investigative instincts kicked in and she asked, "Anything happen last week that was unusual?"

Jimmy became lost in thought for a second and then he said, "I've been trying to think ... there was an awards dinner, stockholder's meeting, his annual medical check-up." Jimmy stopped abruptly and a look of fear came over his features. Cat's investigative instincts must have deserted her at that time because she did not pick up on the look or the statement.

She offered, "Well, let me know if you need any snooping around. I'm good at that. *Very* good." When she finished speaking she turned back to the printouts that Jimmy had just given her.

Perry had finished his conversation and returned to his office. A few minutes later, he came out and as he was passing Jimmy on his way to the elevator he said, "I'm history, Jimmy."

Jimmy was surprised at the terminology and asked, "Where are you going?"

Breezily, Perry replied, "Lunch. Thought I'd try some of that Japanese delicacy — blowfish sushi."

Jimmy was alarmed and blurted out, "Isn't that the kind that can kill you?"

Perry smiled and said, "Sayonara," in his southern accent.

Jimmy watched Perry disappear into the elevator and decided that some investigating was in order so he headed for Perry's office.

Once he was in Perry's office, he started looking at the items that he had left on his desk. He was surprised to see a hand mirror in amongst the loose papers. Finally his eyes lighted on his desk calendar. There was nothing on the current page so he started flipping through. He had been going backward in time and came finally came across a notation, "Doctor Zohar. Annual physical, 10:00 a.m." He remembered that appointment, but wondered if that was the cause of the Chief's changes. Thinking that that was past and that there might be some future event that all of this was pointing, he started flipping through again. This time he went forward in time. A few pages, or days, from the current day was a notation, "Metropolis Bridge. Jump. 11:00 p.m."

Even more concerned now, but not knowing just what to make of it, Jimmy returned the calendar to today's date and left Perry's office. As he did he puzzled over what he had read, "Metropolis Bridge? *Jump*?"

Chapter 5

A few minutes later, Lois came in. Agitatedly she looked around for Clark. Her disappointment was obvious when he

wasn't there to greet her on her arrival. She thought, <Maybe he's following the imposter, I hope.>

A few minutes later, Clark exited the stairwell, straightening his tie as he walked. Lois stood and met him as he hit the bottom of the ramp. Without saying a word, she grabbed his arm and practically dragged him to the conference room. Once the door was closed, she challenged, "Where were you?"

"By the time I got there, he was already on scene. I didn't think it would be a good idea for both of us to be seen at the same event so I hid."

"Well, he certainly isn't you. He isn't gentle and caring the way you are. He's harsh and almost brutal. I watched him toss this robbery suspect into a police van from twenty feet away. Knocked the guy out cold. You wouldn't do that. And another thing ... when he looked at me, it was almost as if he didn't recognize me, so he may look like you, but he doesn't have your memories. In fact, he smirked at me. Superman doesn't smirk. It's like ..."

"Like what? What was your impression of him?"

"I don't know. He's just ... bizarro, that's all. I wish I could talk to him in private. Maybe he'd talk to me where he wouldn't talk to you."

Shortly after the incident at the bank, the imposter was back 'home' in the laboratory. He was sitting stiffly in a high backed chair while his 'father', Luthor, paced back and forth before him. It appeared as though Luthor was indoctrinating his 'son' with his own ends in mind. "Once again. Why must the old Superman die?"

Almost like a child learning a catechism and replying with answers learned by frequent repetition, he replied, "Because he's outlived his usefulness."

Luthor was pleased with his response and went on to question number 34, "And why is he our enemy?"

He knew the answer to this one as well, "Because he stands between us and unlimited power."

Spying a framed photograph of Lois Lane on a shelf near Luthor's shoulder the imposter said, "I saw her there today."

The change of topic took Luthor by surprise. Seeing where the imposter was looking he glanced sideways. Realizing that he was speaking of Lois, he said, "Oh. Lois Lane."

The imposter started to leer at the picture as he said, "What a babe!"

Luthor pulled the picture off the shelf and looked at it adoringly as he said, "Yes, indeed. Also, she is a brilliant investigative reporter for the Daily Planet."

With a somewhat puzzled expression the imposter said, "She talked to me like I was supposed to know her." He thought for a few seconds, weighing the pros and cons of his next question. Finally his hormones spoke for him, "Dad? Can I see her again?"

Luthor flipped the picture around and said, harshly, "You stay away from her." He flipped the picture back around, looked at it adoringly again and then placed it back on the shelf.

Feeling that enough had been done for one day and needing to return to his office, Luthor walked out. He didn't notice that the imposter was continuing to stare at the photo.

Early that afternoon a messenger walked up to Lois's desk at the Planet. She was busily typing up her report of the bank holdup/hostage situation on her computer and wasn't aware of his presence until he noisily cleared his throat. When she looked up he asked, "Lois Lane?"

Lois wasn't expecting anything, so warily she said, "Yes."

He handed her an envelope and offering her a clipboard said, "Sign — here," as he pointed to a line.

She signed on the line and set the envelope he handed over to her on her desk. Mentally dismissing the transaction she immediately returned to the story ... until the messenger cleared

his throat again. She looked up and realized for the first time that he hadn't left. She asked, "What?"

He replied, "I'm supposed to wait for a response."

"Oh, okay," she nodded and picked up the envelope. It wasn't even sealed so she opened the flap and extracted a sheet of paper. She read — *"Dear Lois: Please forgive me my behavior today. I have so much to tell you. May I see you tonight? I could be at your place at nine. Please say yes. Yours, Superman."*

She looked up at the messenger and said, "The answer is a definite, yes."

The messenger nodded and left to deliver her message.

Lois caught Clark's eye and standing up, walked over to his desk.

She handed Clark the note to read.

He said, "Well, it looks like we don't have to keep searching for him. He's going to come to us."

That evening, in order not to scare him off, Clark allowed Lois to be alone in the apartment while he stayed nearby dressed as Clark.

Knowing that this was simply a trap so that Clark could talk to the imposter, Lois went about preparing a dinner that she and Clark would share after the imposter left. She made it look like she didn't know that he was not the real Superman and also made it look like she was preparing for a special encounter. She was darting back and forth between the kitchen and the bedroom. Her hair was up in curlers and she was wearing a very daring dress, low cut and short. As it neared the time for his arrival, she was putting on her heels, hopping on one bare foot while slipping one on and then hopping on the heel while she put on the other as she continued to move from the bedroom to the kitchen.

She was making a pasta dish and decided to test the noodles. She used a fork to pick out a single noodle and holding it up, tilted her face ceilingward and slowly dropped it in, chewed and swallowed. Still not sure, she picked out another one and flung it against the ceiling. When it stuck she reached over and turned off the heat.

Moving over to the table she picked up the lighter and started to light the candles as she heard a whoosh. She looked up to see the front door swinging closed and Superman standing in the living room. She said, "Oh. Hello. You're a little early."

Chagrined, he asked, "Is that okay?"

Looking around, Lois saw that she was actually finished and said, "Sure. Everything's ready." She still couldn't get over how much he looked like Clark and her brain was puzzling on this. She knew that she had to keep him here and try to get him to talk, so she asked, "Would you like something to drink?"

He hadn't been around much so most of this was very new to him. He tried to give an acceptable answer, "Drink? I guess so. I mean, I don't really need to."

They had discussed this beforehand and decided that they should explore the limits of his similarity. What if he wasn't invulnerable? What if alcohol affected him? So Lois lifted a chilled bottle of champagne from the ice bucket and said, "Well, nobody needs champagne, but that's what makes life interesting, n'est pas?"

In a Superman-like response, he said, "Life is interesting."

Lois very expertly removed the wire and popped the cork on the champagne, but even the most expert won't be able to avoid the fountain of bubbles that escaped.

As she was working on the bottle, Superman had moved in close to her. He said, "You spilled some."

Ignoring the spilled liquid, Lois poured each of them a glass.

He was leering at her as she did, he said, "You look really hot."

Taken aback, not exactly insulted, but not appreciating the crassness of the comment, Lois said, "Oh. Thanks."

Superman asked, "Can we sit on the sofa?"

Hesitantly, Lois said, "Okay." She was wondering just how soon Clark was going to make his appearance.

As they sat down, the imposter pulled a teen-ager trick, he faked a yawn and stretch, putting his arm around Lois. Lois was thinking, <Where are you, Clark? Get in here!>, but she didn't say anything.

He brought his arm off the back of the couch and laid it on her shoulders circling his hand around her upper arm. He asked, "Do you like me?"

Lois needed to stall so she replied, "Of course. You know I do. Although, I am a little concerned about your behavior lately." She knew she was treading on shaky ground.

He was surprised and said, defensively, "I haven't done anything wrong."

Lois knew that she was taking a chance, but she had to challenge him, "It's just that ... I saw you throw that man and ..." Lois faltered, fearful that she could be going too far.

He replied, without thinking with the response that he had been catechized to repeat, "Might is right." He leered at her again and asked, "How about a kiss?"

Lois was surprised at this turn of events and said, "Huh?"

Before she could say anymore or even move out of the way, he grabbed her shoulders, pulled her in close and kissed her. He was eager and in his exuberance a little too forceful, possibly because he lacked experience.

Lois finally collected herself and, placing her hands on his chest, tried to push him away, but he was holding her tightly and she couldn't overcome his strength.

Just then, Superman zoomed in and asked, "Am I interrupting?"

The imposter was startled by the intrusion and relaxed his grip on Lois so she was able to escape and jump off of the couch. As soon as she was free she breathed in relief, "Superman," and ran to him. He put an arm around her shoulder, protectively and moved her slightly behind, placing himself between them.

The imposter stood and faced Superman. He had an angry expression as he said, commandingly, "Go away."

Superman replied, "I think Lois wants me to stay."

Lois stuttered, "Yes! Yes, I do! Please stay. Clark would want you to stay too."

The imposter approached Superman and raised his hand to grab Lois to take her away from Superman, but Superman grabbed his wrist and prevented him from doing so.

The imposter had to have known that Superman would be as strong as he, but Luthor's indoctrination had convinced him that he would be superior and the fact that he was displaying equal strength surprised him.

"What's so important about Clark wanting you to stay?"

"Didn't you know that Lois is a married woman? She's married to Clark Kent."

Confused, the imposter blurted out, "But she invited me to dinner."

Lois spoke up, "Yes, but as a friend! Not a potential boyfriend or lover. Superman and I have been friends for a long time and Clark is his best friend."

Superman was about to start questioning the imposter when he broke it off. With a disgusted look he pulled his arm from Superman's grasp. He turned away and said, "I have to go now. It's almost ten." He looked specifically at Superman and said, significantly, "I'll be seeing you again." As soon as he finished speaking he zipped out the front door, up and away, too fast for Clark to follow. He felt that he needed to stay there with Lois, just in case it was a feint to draw him away so he decided to stay and protect Lois. He spun into his Clark clothes and took Lois in his arms.

Seeing the imposter leave, Lois had started to relax. She

looked up into Clark's face and asked, "Well, wha'd'ya know about that. It looks like his father has given him a curfew. Hungry?"

Clark pushed Lois away slightly so that he could place his hands on her shoulders, look her straight in the eye and ask, with a worried tone in his voice, "Did he hurt you?"

"No, not really. He kissed me. What took you so long?"

"There was a mugging in Centennial Park."

"You deserted me?!?!"

"I knew you could handle him and I didn't think he intended you any harm." He chuckled and said, "I was surprised to see that he had both arms."

"It's a good thing you got here when you did. He was about to lose one. He was like a teen-ager with raging hormones. I was afraid that I would be responsible for you losing your virginity ... again. Unbelievable. You know, if in no other way, when he kissed me, I knew he wasn't you. It just didn't feel anything like you."

Early the next morning, before Lois and Clark arrived; Jimmy was knocking on Perry's office door. He didn't wait for him to call out, but simply opened the door and entered. When he did he saw Perry, leaning back in his chair, staring out of the window. He asked, "Chief? You wanted to see me?"

Perry's voice had lost some of its gruffness as he asked, "Run an errand for me, will you, son? I'd like some of those taquitos with the green sauce from Manny's."

Jimmy was shocked and it was in his voice as he replied, "Mr. White, it's eight in the morning!"

Some of the gruffness returned to Perry's voice as he replied, "So what? Sometimes you've got to go for the gusto and damn the consequences. Life's too damn short."

The pieces of the puzzle all started to fall into place. This was just too much for Jimmy and tears started to form in his eyes, "It's ... happening soon, isn't it?"

Perry was taken aback. He asked, "How'd you find out?"

"I put two and two together like you always taught me."

Perry swiveled around and pointed his finger at Jimmy's face as he said, "I don't want any to-do. And I don't want anyone else in on it either. Got it?" Perry lowered his finger having made his point. He finished in a wistful tone, "A man goes his whole life saying 'later.' 'Later I'll do this, experience that.' Then, you run out of 'laters.'"

Jimmy was very moved, emotionally and suppressed a sob, before he replied, "I understand, Chief." He sniffed and continued, "I just want you to know that I think you're the bravest man I've ever met. You're handling this with such grace, such dignity."

Perry waxed philosophical, "Well, time marches on, kid. You either accept life's process, or ... not."

"Chief. There's something else." Jimmy paused to wipe at a tear, "You've always been like a father to me. I ... love you."

Perry was touched by this sentiment, but puzzled as to why Jimmy would be getting so emotional, he asked, "Jimmy? You okay?"

Jimmy was in awe, "Me? Oh, Chief, you're too much. Too much."

Perry watched in consternation as Jimmy slowly walked away closing the door behind him.

A little later in the day, Lois and Clark had been researching possibilities for an explanation of the imposter. They had been brainstorming when she suddenly stopped her pacing and blurted out, "That's it!"

Clark quickly moved to her side. In a quiet tone, he asked, "What'd you find?"

She lowered her tone and looked around before saying what she thought, "A clone."

He matched her subdued tone as he replied, "You really think

he could be a clone?"

She said, "Yes, it's so obvious. You suggested the possibility that he was a robot, but there's no technology in the world that could produce a robot like that." She paused and lowered her voice further, "And we know Superman doesn't have a twin. We learned that from the globe."

"Why couldn't he be a robot?"

She lowered her tone even more and said, "Come on, Clark. Give me a little credit. I'd know the difference between flesh and blood and a robot. He kissed me, remember? Those were flesh and blood lips. Besides, who would program a robot to act like a hormone driven teenager on his first date? That leaves only one possibility. That means that someone has cloned Superman. They've made an exact genetic copy."

Clark was still not convinced, "How? They can't do that yet. We're not that advanced."

Lois countered, "Maybe we are. I read an article in the Metropolis Science Magazine ..." She shifted focus and spotting Jimmy, shouted, "Jimmy!"

He looked up from his monitor as she issued her orders, "Down to the stacks. Metropolis Science Magazine. Sometime last year, oh, the last three months of the year. An article on cloning."

He didn't budge from his desk as he replied, "I'll get right on it."

Frustrated that he wasn't moving fast enough for her, she said, "Jimmy, I need it, yesterday!"

Somewhat panicked, he jumped up and started to jog away, "Right away."

Lois had a smug look as she folded her arms across her chest and turned back to Clark, "We'll see."

Ten minutes later Lois had the magazine in her hands. She quickly re-read the article to refresh her memory and then lifting the phone dialed information, "Yes. I'd like the number for a Doctor Fabian Leek." She gave Clark a look that said, "Am I good, or what?"

Chapter 6

An hour later Lois and Clark were in a rundown laboratory on the east side. At least it looked rundown, but that could simply be because there were a lot of samples lying around in containers, jars and Petri dishes on every flat surface.

Lois had felt uncomfortable ever since they had walked in. She was regretting her choice of wardrobe today. Although the tight top with the scoop neck showed off her figure to advantage, she was just happy that it wasn't like the top she had worn to Paris. This one was marginally more modest. At least she wasn't wearing the push up bra. The skirt was short and as if that wasn't enough, it was slit up the left side in the front so that when she walked her leg showed all the way to mid-thigh. Whenever she had looked up from her notes at Leek he had been leering at her and she had felt like she was she was a specimen being examined as a candidate for cloning.

Even as he was answering her question, he was leering at her, "You see, my dear Ms. Lane, it's child's play to clone individual cells. As simple and natural as the reproductive act itself." As he mentioned 'reproductive act' he smiled at her as if testing the waters to see if she were willing.

She replied with a stern expression. With Superman for a husband and sex partner, why would she ever consider Leek, but she couldn't say that. Instead, she challenged, "But, you wrote a paper in college that said entire human beings could be cloned if the right genetic material were available. It was printed in Metropolis Science Magazine."

Fearing that if Luthor found out that he had said anything, anything at all about his work that he wouldn't live to regret it, he said, "Yes, but I was young and, unfortunately, overly optimistic.

It's taken me thirty years to finally be able to clone a frog. The process is much more difficult than I imagined. We're years away from successfully applying the technique to human beings."

While Lois kept Leek busy, Clark had been looking for anything that might give them a lead. So far he hadn't found anything encouraging and right then he was looking into a fish tank that contained only a frog, a very dead frog. He said, "And I guess the process isn't exactly foolproof."

Seeing what Clark was looking at, Leek reached in and grabbing the dead frog lifted it out of the container. He was standing there holding the dead frog as he said, "Unfortunately, you're correct, Mister Kent. I'm sorry I can't be of greater assistance."

As Lois and Clark headed for the door, Dr. Leek grabbed Lois's hand and pulled her back toward himself, "I would however, be very honored to take you to dinner, Ms. Lane. We could discuss the miracles of life in more, shall we shall, tangible terms."

Thinking fast, Lois smiled a deceptively shy smile as she said, "I have a better idea."

Leek brightened up, "Yes?"

In a sultry tone, Lois said, "Why don't you ... go home ... change into something more ... comfortable ... pack an overnight bag and then come back here ..." Lois paused to see what effect she was having on him. She was satisfied to see that he was practically salivating at her supposed proposition, "and take all these poor frogs and release them in the nearest lily pond. Oh, and by the way, the name is Lois Lane ... *Kent*."

At her emphasis on her married name, Leek looked abashedly at Clark.

Lois turned and hooked her arm through Clark's as they left the laboratory.

As they exited the building, Lois was fuming and Clark was chuckling. Lois exclaimed, "That guy is a real piece of work. A lying, sleazy, piece of work." She thought about what they had gotten and fumed, "He completely backtracked on all of his recent research."

He was still chuckling at what she had done to him. "You really had him going there. He actually thought you were accepting his proposition. The look on his face was priceless." Clark was thinking along more practical lines as he said, "Still ... in order to even begin to make a clone, they would have to have used cells from Superman's body. I'm invulnerable so ... how? How could he have gotten a sample to start with?"

"I don't know, Clark. But somebody figured it out. And we're going to figure out who."

"Lois, I think we already know who. I think we need to check and see just where or who Leek's funding is coming from. If we can trace it back to Luthor, it'll be another item on our list, although I don't think that there have been any laws passed concerning cloning human beings as yet. I think I need to confront the imposter again and this time get some real answers. I'll meet you back at the Planet."

Lois nodded and Clark ducked around the building to change. A few seconds later Lois saw a red and blue streak fly away.

Clark was banking on the fact that he hadn't needed to be too active in and around Metropolis lately so his doppelganger would have little fear of running into him and thus be somewhat careless. Reaching an altitude of twenty-thousand feet he hung motionless in the sky. He was above the service ceiling of all but high-performance aircraft used in civil aviation and below the air lanes used by commercial aviation so there was little fear of being a traffic hazard. He scanned the area between him and the ground looking for movement. After almost an hour, he finally spotted a red and blue streak crossing the cityscape below him. He took off in pursuit.

He put on a burst of speed, flashed to a position in front of the imposter and hovered there waiting for him to arrive.

When he did, he was startled and came to a hover facing Clark. The imposter was a little less cocky, possibly due to the interaction he had had with Clark the previous evening.

Superman addressed him, "I need to ask you something. Last time we talked you told me you were as old as I was."

The imposter thought for a second and then, in a mature manner replied, "Yes, that is correct."

Superman challenged, "Are you sure? I mean, do you have memories of your life?" Wondering just how much he should reveal he decided to get it out there, "Do you remember growing up? Do you have any friends? When did you learn to fly?"

The look of confusion on his face spoke volumes to Clark. Lois was right, he had to be a clone, but how? What was the source of genetic material?

The imposter tried to slough it off, "So what if I can't remember?"

Superman tried to be reasonable as he explained, "You can't remember because your 'father' made you, built you from a part of me. You're a biological machine. You have no childhood memories because you never existed until recently."

Then the imposter proved that he hadn't actually matured all that much as he replied, "That's a lie. You're a liar. You're not even really Superman. You're Clark Kent."

That statement surprised and worried Clark. He tried to figure out how he knew, but came up with a blank. He asked, nervously, "Have you told anybody, your father, that?"

Sensing that he had the upper hand, the imposter pushed his advantage, "Not yet, but I might."

The imposter was pleased that he appeared to have a hold over Superman when Superman pleaded, "Please don't."

Arrogantly, the imposter challenged, "Why shouldn't I?"

Superman replied, confidently, "Because *someone's* been lying to you, but it hasn't been me. If you tell your 'father' someone could be hurt, perhaps, Lois."

Puzzled, the imposter spun around and took off.

Clark met Lois back at the Planet a few minutes later. Lois saw the worried look on his face as he stepped out of the stairwell. Without a word she stood and headed for the conference room.

Once they were in there and the door closed, Clark said, "He knows who I am."

Lois was startled, "What?!? How?"

"I don't know. He must have hung around last night. Saw me change and stay home."

"Wow, what if he tells his 'father'?"

"He told me, that he hadn't."

"But he could. I'm afraid."

"It's funny, though. I should avoid him. I should fear him and what he could do, but ..."

"But what?"

"He's just ... so much like me. So much like the brother I never had, never will have. I imagine it's the way I would feel if Herb actually did bring one of the Supermen from another universe here for a visit. The same way you would feel if he brought his Lois with him. She would be much closer than your sister, Lucy. She'd be another you."

"Did he tell you what he wanted?"

"No, but the other night he said that I was his enemy. I'd say that a confrontation was inevitable."

Worried now, Lois asked, "Could he hurt you?"

"I'm not sure. From what I've seen, he has every power and ability that I have. If it came to a fight, one or both of us could be killed or neither of us. It is like the age old question of the immovable object and the irresistible force. Which would win? Would the irresistible force be strong enough to move the

immovable or would the immovable *remain* immovable? We are both equally invulnerable and equally strong."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that. Let's go out to my desk. I want to show you what I found."

They moved out to Lois's desk and she picked up an article, but before showing it to him she said, "I found it! This has to be it." She held up a paper for Clark to see and while he read she talked, "Look! 'Superman donates a lock of hair for charity auction.'"

Clark nodded thoughtfully and said, "Of course, I remember." He tried to remember, but was drawing a blank so he asked, "Does it say who bought it?"

"I'm way ahead of you. Mrs. Doyle Alexander. I called her and she said that there was a break-in at her house the day after the auction. The lock of hair was stolen. They never found out who took it and she never got it back."

Clark pulled Lois into a hug and gave her a kiss of appreciation, "Good work. Now we know how it was done. Now all we have to do is prove the who."

"My money is on Leek and that Luthor's money is behind it."

"I agree with you, but proving it will be difficult."

"Not if you can get him to talk."

"Him ... who?"

"The clone, the imposter."

"He seems to have been pretty well indoctrinated. I asked him who his 'father' was and he said that he had promised not to say."

"Well, that's one way he's like you. He keeps his promises."

That evening, after this latest confrontation with Superman the clone was lying on a table in the laboratory where he had been 'born' and Dr. Leek was performing a regular exam. He was currently shining a bright penlight into his eyes checking the papillary reflex. That was a simple test that can disclose the presence of a brain injury even one as minor as a concussion.

Then Dr. Leek moved the light back away and as he moved it from side to side, said, "Follow the light."

The clone attempted to follow the directions, but was unable to completely comply. There was a slight hesitation, a lag which Dr. Leek found troubling. He was careful not to say anything that the clone could hear that would cause a problem so he said, "All right, all done. For now." He turned to Luthor, who was an interested bystander and said, "Isn't it time for bed?"

Picking up on Leek's unspoken suggestion, Luthor said, "Yes, son. Time to go to bed. You've had a long day."

Luthor started to move in his direction as if to help put him to 'bed', but the clone became petulant and said, "I'm not a child anymore. I don't need to be told when it's time to go to bed."

Luthor was angered at this display of rebellion. He wouldn't put up with it from his minions and he certainly wouldn't put up with it from his creation. He reached out, took him by the ear and said in an angry tone, "You look here. I'm still your father and you will do as I say." Using his ear as leverage he started walking him toward the tank.

The clone, gave up his rebellion and asked, "Why don't I have any memories of growing up?"

Luthor became evasive, "That's not something for you to worry about."

"Superman said that the reason I don't have any memories is because I am not real. I'm a biological machine."

Luthor replied, "That's not true."

"What is the truth?"

Luthor had to resort to the only refuge of the liar caught in the lie, bluff and bluster, "How dare you question me?"

Reverting to childlike behavior, the clone said, "I bet I know some things you'd like to know."

Intrigued, Luthor asked, "Like what?"

Seeing how anxious Luthor was for the information, the clone

hesitated. What Superman, Clark Kent, had said about the possibility of Lois being hurt if he said anything bothered him. He knew that she was married and he didn't have any chance with her, but he still didn't want to see her hurt. He did like her. He liked her a lot. She seemed to draw him in some inexplicable way.

Deciding to keep the secret, he said, defiantly, "I think it's my bedtime." He was already dressed in the swim trunks so he hopped into the tank and started attaching the leads to his body.

Once the chamber was closed and sealed he appeared to go to sleep.

Completely forgetting that the clone had Superman's super-hearing, as they were walking out, Luthor turned to Leek and in a worried tone, questioned, "What is it?"

Leek's response wasn't comforting, "We have a little ... problem."

Luthor was petulant, "Enlighten me."

Leek sighed and said, "His vital signs are weakening: brain wave activity erratic, irregular heartbeat, and so on."

Never on to beat about the bush, Luthor cut to the chase, "Prognosis?"

Leek's reply wasn't encouraging, "He's dying. Like the frogs." In an attempt to assuage Luthor's anger he continued, "He was our first, our prototype. I warned you there might be ... complications."

Hearing this Luthor became concerned, but it was obvious that his concern was not for the welfare of his 'son' as he asked, "Has he lost any of his strength or powers yet?"

Leek replied, "Not yet, but time is running out."

Luthor made a decision, "Then it must happen tomorrow."

Leek challenged, "What makes you think he can win?"

Luthor demonstrated just how amoral he was when he replied, "Because, if it meant the difference between winning and losing, he'd pick up a train loaded with passengers and use it to bash Superman's skull in. Unlike Superman, he has no restraint, no morality. *I* taught him."

Luthor turned to look at the clone. He was suspended in a murky liquid within the tank. Musingly he said, "Tomorrow. Tomorrow he will kill Superman."

As Luthor and Leek turned to leave the lab, the clone opened his eyes and watched. What he had heard had been very enlightening, every single word.

The next day, Lois and Clark broached an idea to Perry. They wanted to see how well it would be accepted. They went to see Perry in his office.

Lois asked, "Perry, what would you say if I told you that there were two Supermen?"

Perry was incredulous, "Two Supermen?"

Lois tried, "I know it sounds farfetched, but ..."

Perry was less than impressed, he retorted, "Farfetched? Lois, if I told you I saw Elvis last night at the LexSave what would you call it?"

Lois rebutted, "But Chief ..."

Perry was poking holes in the story and actually responding in just the way that they had expected, "Look, you say that since this 'clone' appeared, the 'real' Superman hasn't been seen. Think about it. Maybe there aren't two of them, but the real one has gone ... crazy."

Cat was attracted by Perry's tirade and wandered into the office.

Lois tried to convince Perry, "No. I'm telling you he's a clone. I should know. He showed up at our apartment last night."

Cat asked, "What'd you do, kick Clark out so that you could have a rendezvous with Superman?" Cat schmoozed up to Clark and put her hands on his arms as she finished, "Next time send him to my apartment. I am sure I could entertain him. He might not want to come home."

The look that Lois gave her left no question in her mind as to what Lois thought of her suggestion. She quickly removed her hands from Clark's arm, slunk out of the office and returned to her desk.

Perry watched Cat leave and then turned back to Lois. "Lois, I don't know what to tell you except ... don't even *think* about writing this story until you can present me with solid evidence."

Lois and Clark returned to their desks, Lois sighed and said, "So much for testing the waters."

Clark said, "I don't know. I've got a feeling that something's going to happen that will resolve this issue ... soon."

Jimmy saw Lois and Clark leave Perry's office and he decided that he needed to talk with him. Getting up from his desk, he moved to Perry's office and, without knocking, walked in. Without preamble, he asked, "Chief?"

Perry appeared to be slightly annoyed at the interruption as he replied, "I'm in a rush this morning, Jimmy. A lot of things to do before ..."

Jimmy cut him off in mid-sentence, "That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I have a phone number here ... it's the Metropolis Hot Line. Twenty-four hours. There are counselors there, ready and willing to hear your problems."

Perry was totally mystified with Jimmy's statement, but decided to be polite. He hoped the kid wasn't losing it, "Thanks, Jimmy. I'll keep them in mind."

Jimmy was pleased that Perry hadn't thrown him out on his ear so he pressed his advantage, "Chief, there are people out there who know what you're going through. You don't have to suffer alone."

Perry was more confused than before and was about to ask Jimmy to please tell him what he was talking about when his phone rang. "Hello? Yeah, Alice, hold on a sec." He placed his hand over the mouthpiece and asked, "Anything else?"

Jimmy wasn't sure what to say so as he left he offered, lamely, "Uh, no. I'll be right outside. If you ... need a shoulder to lean on or something."

Jimmy exited and Perry shook his head in bewilderment. He muttered, "What's gotten into him?" and then spoke to Alice. They were planning to have dinner together.

Chapter 7

A little later, Clark went out to once again search for the imposter and Lois went back to working on their other current stories, but she still wanted more information. "Jimmy?"

He happened to be passing her desk when she called him and he stopped, "Yeah, Lois."

Lois noticed his mood and asked, "Something wrong, Jimmy?"

"It's the Chief. Something's going on and I don't know how to help out."

"You know Perry, if he needs help, he'll ask."

"I don't think so, not this time. I think it's something serious."

"Well, I don't know what to say. I've noticed some changes, but hey, so he decided to get a new suit, so what's the matter with that?"

"There's more to it than that. I don't know ..."

"Well, anyhow, I need you to find me everything you can on clones and cloning."

"Okay, I'll find what I can."

"I also need you to check on Fabian Leek. I need to know where he's getting his funding and who he works for."

"Anything else?"

"No, that'll do for now. Thanks, Jimmy."

"No problem, Lois." He turned away and headed for his desk. Just then there was a familiar whooshing sound and Superman

appeared in the bullpen. Lois looked up and was surprised to see him standing next to her desk. She looked closely, but still had to ask, "Superman, is it really you?" She couldn't understand why Clark would arrive in costume, but assumed that he must have a good reason.

He replied, somewhat self-deprecatingly, "In the flesh."

She tried a small test, "Where have you been?"

His answer matched with what she basically expected, "Trying to get the low-down on this imposter. Lois, I need your help."

Happy that he was including her, she said, "Anything."

He held out his hand and said, "Come fly with me."

Lois was always eager to fly with Clark. That was one of her favorite perks of being married to Superman, she got to fly with him whenever she wanted to so, with eager anticipation, she grabbed her bag and leapt from her chair.

Superman swept her up in his arms and that was the first clue she had that this was the imposter. It just didn't feel right. The way he was holding her was a little awkward. She almost fought against him, but she realized that making a scene there in the bullpen could be counterproductive and he *was* much stronger than her so she decided she needed to pretend that she didn't know the difference and go along with it. Besides, she wanted to find out why he was doing this.

As Superman swept Lois up, Cat stood by her desk and watched with envy. Shaking her head, she muttered under her breath, "I still can't believe it. She's married to a gorgeous hunk and she still gets to fly around with a demigod in a cape. Why can't I be so lucky?"

A few minutes after Superman flew off with Lois, Cat saw Clark exit the stairwell and head for his desk.

As he was passing Lois's desk, he noted that she was missing and spotting Cat asked, "Cat, have you seen Lois?"

With a wistful expression, she replied, "Uh huh. She left a few minutes ago ... with Superman."

His startled expression caught Cat's attention, "What?"

With a sly expression, Cat said, "Yeah. They flew out that window ... is something wrong ... I hope? You know, if she throws you over for Superman, I'm still available."

Clark wasn't even finished with her statement when Clark turned around and charged for the stairwell.

Shaking her head, Cat muttered, "I don't know what he expects to do against Superman."

Seconds later, Superman, the real one, was in the air above Metropolis. He was searching for any signs of the imposter and Lois.

He had been at it for about twenty minutes when he suddenly heard her scream. Pinpointing her location he zoomed down and landed. They were in a historic recreation area where old buildings had been imported and restored the way they had been in the previous century. There were dirt roads, wooden sidewalks and hitching posts. The re-enactors were apparently on break because the streets were empty.

There was an open jitney style bus with tourists coming through and the driver was describing what they were looking at. "The re-enactors are on break right now. If you look closely, you will see cameras. This area is occasionally used as a location for movies, but I think they are currently filming a documentary of the historic area. This street is supposed to be Metropolis in the early days of settlement when it was still a frontier area. The next street over is like it was fifty years later on."

After the jitney had passed on, Superman landed and looked around. Finally he spotted Lois. She was tied to a post under the sign 'Village Blacksmith'. The imposter stood there, brandishing a red hot iron menacingly in front of her. Lois struggled against her ropes in a vain attempt to break free. The imposter laughed and then ...

Superman said, in a threatening tone, "Let her go!"

The imposter put the red hot iron down and then turned to face Lois. In a gentle tone, he said, "I never would have hurt you, Lois. But the only way I could guarantee Superman would fight me was to make him think your life was in danger."

After saying his piece, the imposter stepped back, allowing Superman to free Lois. When he finished untying Lois he turned around only to see that the imposter was not in sight.

Lois was rubbing her chafed wrists as he turned and asked, "Did you see where he went?"

Lois pointed across the street and said, "Those saloon doors are swinging. They shouldn't be."

"Okay. Look, Lois, there's no way to know what is going to happen. If anything happened to you, I'd never forgive myself. Stay here, please."

Superman entered the saloon and looked around. The imposter was sitting on the far end of the bar. Grabbing the bar, Superman pulled it forward. The imposter was now face to face with Superman. Jumping down off the bar, the imposter lifted Superman up and threw him across the length of the bar, through the glasses and bottles, and straight through the window to the outside. A second later, Superman flew back in. Just then, unexpectedly, Lois entered through the swinging doors. Superman saw her, turned to the imposter and said, "This town isn't big enough for the two of us. Let's take this fight outside." The imposter smirked at him and leered at Lois before he moved outside. Exasperated, Clark turned to Lois and said, "Stay here."

Lois pouted and said, "I want to help."

"You'll help by staying here and out of trouble." He turned and stalked out.

Apparently the workers were starting to return to work because there was a painter starting his work. He heard the creak of the hinges from the doors of the saloon and looked up. When he did, he saw Superman exit. Then he saw a feminine face in the window. When he looked around he saw a second Superman in the street. He looked back and saw the woman gesturing for him to leave. He looked back and forth between the two Supermen and saw hostility. Deciding that discretion was the better part of valor he heeded the woman's admonition and, dropping his painting supplies, ducked into the apothecary. A second later the window shade was yanked down and the words "CLOSED" could be read on the shade.

Superman stepped into the street. When he did, he was facing the imposter. Slowly they approached one another. In the dusty street it looked like a western movie where there was to be a shootout at high noon. Once they were about twenty feet apart they stopped and glared at each other. Superman was glaring at the imposter because he had threatened Lois's well being.

The imposter was there because he had been told by his 'father' that his foe needed to be eliminated, but the things he had heard the night before were going round and round in his mind. Things that Superman had said had also been going round and round. He was confused and trying to sort out the truth. He was weighing what he had been told by Superman against what he had been told, all of his existence, by his 'father' and the weight of truth seemed, more and more to be falling on Superman's side of the balance, yet he had been given a chore to do and he knew that he must not disobey his father. His father knew best, or did he?

They stood there facing one another with their hands at their sides. You could almost imagine them wearing gun belts with their fingers itching to grab the gun butts, draw and fire.

Suddenly they were interrupted by the tour jitney passing through on the way back. The driver was saying, "This representation of 'old' Metropolis has the flavor of an old west town ..." She saw the two Supermen in the street and pressed down harder on the pedal, "They must be filming something. I don't understand ... two Supermen."

As the spectators watched, the imposter unleashed a blast of

heat vision. Fortunately, Superman had been expecting an attack of some sort and was prepared. His Infra-red vision had picked up the heat buildup in his opponents eyes and he was able to counter with a similar beam. There was a visible coruscation of power where the invisible beams intersected. They each held their positions as they each increased the power of the beams.

As the confrontation had started, Lois felt like she had to do something to help so she left her hiding place in the saloon and carefully made her way out the door and along the sidewalk until she was off to one side. She found a post with a barrel next to it and crouched behind it.

Unfortunately, Lois made a noise which distracted both the imposter and Superman and they reflexively looked in her direction. The heat vision beams followed and when the combined beams hit the beam next to where Lois was crouched the wooden beam almost exploded. As that happened, Lois jumped back.

Seeing what was happening, the tour leader's foot came down on the pedal and as quickly as the jitney would move, they left the area.

Seeing what had nearly happened to Lois had frightened Clark. He knew that in order to keep Lois safe he had to end this conflict as quickly as possible. With renewed vigor he shot his heat-vision at his antagonist again. The imposter countered with his heat-vision and they returned to a stalemate.

Even while he was straining to overcome the imposter, he tried to convince him of the futility of the fight, "Don't you understand? This in a fight neither of us can win!"

Almost imperceptibly the spot where the invisible heat beams became a visible coruscation of energy moved toward the imposter as his energy drained from him.

The rate at which the spot of intersection was moving toward the imposter accelerated until it reached a spot two feet in front of him and then suddenly, his energy gave out and his beam collapsed allowing Superman's beam through. It hit him in the chest with the effect of a physical blow, knocking him backward. As he fell there was a distinct look of pain on his face.

Full of compassion, Superman stopped his attack and sped to the imposter. As he knelt next to him, he seemed to recover, slightly, but the strain was apparent in the lines in his face and the sweat on his brow.

In a shaky voice he said, "Go ahead. Finish me off. Might is right. Only the strong survive."

With a tone of compassion in his voice, Superman said, "I don't want to hurt you, I never did. You and I ... we have so much in common. We're linked. We're closer than ... brothers. They made you from a lock of my hair. You are a duplicate of me."

He was in a quandary over his statements and asked, "I don't understand. Why wouldn't you want to rule alone?"

Superman tried to explain, "I don't *want* to rule. I want to be respected, yes. But you earn that respect by caring for others, not overpowering them."

The clone had a very thoughtful look as he tried to assimilate this idea. It was completely contrary to what he had been taught by his 'father' that it was almost unbelievable. Suddenly he was hit with a wracking pain. He grabbed his chest and grunted.

Concerned by what he could see happening, but not understanding why, Superman asked, "Are you all right?"

The truth of what he had overheard the previous night hit him like a blow. He stated matter-of-factly, "I'm ... dying." He thought for a second before he continued, "Maybe it's for the best. If I'm not real, if I was created from your DNA just to do my father's bidding ... to kill you, then there's nothing left to live for anyway. I no longer want to kill you, no matter what my father says."

Seeing that the conflict appeared to be over, Lois finally came out from her concealed location and approached. Standing next to Superman she had heard the tail end of his statement.

The clone looked at Lois and then back at Superman. He said,

"You're a lucky man," he nodded in Lois's direction, "she loves you very much. She must have known I wasn't you, but she went with me anyhow to try and keep you safe." He turned back to her and said, "I meant what I said, earlier. I never would have harmed you."

Shakily and with Superman's assistance, the clone rose to his feet. He looked at Superman and said, "I have something to do. Will you wait here for me?"

Superman and Lois both nodded and the clone took off.

Lois asked, "Where's he going?"

Still watching the sky where the clone had gone, he replied, "I don't know. Come on, let's get you out of here."

Lois crossed her arms indicating that she was going to be stubborn and said, "I'd rather stay. I want to see this through to the end."

Seeing her posture, he realized how useless it would be to argue with her so he just smiled and nodded.

Chapter 8

Luthor and Dr. Leek were in the lab.

"Well, doctor, what is your prognosis. They should be finished any time now. Will our creation win?"

"I don't know. It is really hard to predict. From what I was observing of his deterioration, if it isn't finished quickly, he will be finished. If he fails, what will you do?"

"We will start over. We have plenty of genetic material. You will use what we learned this time to make improvements with the next one. If that one fails also then we try again and again and again until we win. I will not accept defeat!"

If Luthor was going to say anymore we would never know because right then the clone flew in.

Luthor demanded in a gruff voice, "Well, is it done?"

The clone was putting up a brave front. Even though he was weakened and growing weaker by the minute, he was determined to finish this, "No. I heard what you just said. I know the truth now. He is the rightful Superman. I was just a pawn ... something for you to use to kill him."

Leek, seeing that all of the clone's attention was on Luthor sidled over to a table and picked up the gun that lay there. He brought it up and shot the clone at point blank range.

The clone, because of his weakened condition was actually wounded by the bullet and staggered. He gathered his strength, straightened up and staggered toward Leek. Even though Leek knew that he had been able to shoot the clone fear clouded his judgment and in fear cringed back, coming up against an electronic cabinet.

The clone was on him in a second and picked him up. The gun fell from Leek's nerveless fingers as the clone lifted him and threw him into the vat that had been his 'bed'.

Seeing this, Luthor cringed back in terror. He knew how strong the clone was and now seeing this powerful individual with the lack of moral teaching that Superman demonstrated, but instead the amoral teaching he had provided, he quailed in abject fear at his approach.

Towering over Luthor, perhaps not in actual stature but in power, the clone said, "I want the lock of hair."

Luthor temporized, "I don't have it here."

Luthor's worst fears were then realized when the clone said, "You're lying. Give it to me or I will kill *you*." His amoral indoctrination of the clone was coming back to haunt Luthor.

Luthor had always been a survivor and realizing that the clone really meant business and that his only hope of survival was to capitulate, he turned to a vault behind him and spinning the dial a few times opened it up. He reached in and pulled out a small glass container that you could clearly see the hair in and handed it to the clone.

Luthor was seeing all of his dreams of conquest and ultimate world domination crumble and tried to change the clone's mind, "You must not do this. You are my son. My own ... creation. Together we can ..."

The clone looked at Luthor with disdain and even perhaps loathing as he said, "No! It's over." Turning, the clone took off, flying erratically because his injuries were causing him great pain. He made his way back to where Lois and Superman waited for him.

After the clone flew off, Luthor mused, "You breed them, raise them, want the best for them. One day, you're the center of their universe, the next they've flown the nest and the phone never rings." He looked around and spotted Leek on the chamber. He looked as if he wasn't moving for several seconds, but then he started to stir. "Oh well, I can't even blame his death on Superman. I guess it's back to the drawing board."

Lois and Clark were standing side by side scanning the heavens each looking to catch that first glimpse of the returning clone. Lois happened to be the one looking in the right direction as he came into sight. She grabbed Superman's arm and pointing up said, "There he is." As they watched they could both see the erratic course he was following. Lois, with compassion in her voice said, "I think he's hurt."

Her supposition was confirmed when he landed heavily and collapsed to his knees. They could see the blood stain on the side of his Suit. His head was bowed as he held up his hand. He said, "Here." It was the container with the hair that he had in his hand. "They won't be able to clone you again. At least, not after you take the last step."

Superman was confused, "Last step?"

The clone nodded and said, "Yes. They could use some of my tissue to create another clone. You have to destroy the lock of hair ... and me." He looked at Clark and saw the horror in his expression, "I'm dying. I'm in pain."

This was going against everything that he stood for and Clark demurred. "I don't think I can do that."

The clone encouraged him, "You must." He reached up and grasped Superman's arm in a tight grip, "My father once read me a story about a Viking Funeral." He looked pointedly up toward the sun, "Do you understand?"

Desperate to do anything to avoid taking a life, Clark looked for a way out of the situation, "There's got to be another way."

The clone in a faltering tone said, "There isn't. You do understand? What if my body retains some of its invulnerability and doesn't decompose like a human's. Cells could remain. A super Viking funeral for a Superman."

Nodding his understanding and acceptance, Superman said, "Yes, I understand."

The last of the clone's strength finally gave out and he collapsed into Superman's arms. Superman lowered him to the ground and cradled his near lifeless body.

The clone had some parting words, "It's not really the end. As long as you're still here ... brother."

With sadness on his face and in his voice, Superman said simply, "Brother."

The clone had breathed his last and Superman closed his eyes. Lois said, "It's so sad," and there were tears in her eyes.

Superman handed the container with the hair to Lois and said, "Here, keep this safe until I can dispose of it."

As Lois took the container, he looked up at the sun and said, "I'm going to give him the funeral he asked for. I'm going to take him up and launch him into the sun. From now on, whenever I look at the sun ... I'll think of him."

Lois placed a comforting hand on his arm and said, "I will too."

Picking up the clone, Superman said, "What about you?"

As she stuffed the container with his hair in her bag, she said, "I'll meet you back at the Planet. Don't worry about me. Take care of him." She choked up, "Give him his final wish."

He nodded and slowly lifted off while she headed for the entrance to the park to call a cab.

Later, back at the Planet, things seemed to have gotten back to normal. Lois was disappointed that they wouldn't be able to write the story, but it was better that the world didn't know that Superman had been cloned and how close they had come to having a brutal, amoral sociopath as a dictator backed by a man possessing Superman's powers as an enforcer. A Superman lacking all of Clark's inherent goodness and mid-west morality.

She pulled the container with the lock of hair from her bag and looked at it. Looking at it, she was in a quandary. Should it be destroyed or should it be kept, but kept safely. Perhaps it could be kept with the globe in Smallville. Nobody would ever think to look for something like that there and Jonathan and Martha would keep it safe. She opened the container and picked up the lock of hair. Pinching it between her thumb and forefinger she brought it up to her nose and stroked it across a few times reveling in the feel of her husband's hair on her skin. Maybe she'd ask Clark if she could keep it. She could get a locket and keep it in there. That way she would have him with her even when he was away on a rescue. She didn't really fear that he wouldn't return from rescues because they hadn't had the baby yet. He would always come back to her, but it would be a comfort to her to have him with her like that.

A short time later, Clark stepped out of the stairwell, straightening his tie. He had a mournful expression on his face that wrenched at Lois's heart.

Lois stood as he approached and putting her arms around him and laid her head against his chest. She gave him a tight hug and asked, "How did it go?"

His arms went around her, "It was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do in my life. I don't know why. He was already dead and it was his last wish. It just ..."

Lois interrupted, "I know, it was like watching a brother, a brother you never knew you had, die. I can imagine if it had been Lucy."

Jimmy came out of the elevator and passed them headed for Perry's office. He was obviously preoccupied or he might have made a comment about the PDA.

They were standing there, comforting and being comforted for a minute.

They were interrupted by Jimmy as he rushed out of the Chief's office and over to them. He asked, "Where's Perry?"

Without releasing Clark, Lois said, "Oh, he left about fifteen minutes ago."

Jimmy's face paled and he blurted out, "No!"

Instantly picking up on his mood, Clark asked, "What's going on?"

Jimmy's worry was evident and he was desperate to help his boss and mentor. He had promised Perry that he wouldn't say anything, but he was desperate, "I promised I wouldn't tell but ... I found out that the Chief got bad news at his physical last week. I think he's planning on doing away with himself."

Still holding onto Clark, Lois looked at Jimmy and said, "Jimmy, that's absurd."

Jimmy's tone held conviction and worry as he replied, "No, I swear! There's an entry in his calendar for tonight that says he's going to the Metropolis Bridge. I think he's going to jump!"

Lois and Clark were still skeptical, but the seeing the sincerity in Jimmy, they exchanged a suddenly worried glance and joined Jimmy as he left to grab a cab.

After a wild cab ride, they arrived at the Metropolis Bridge. As

they climbed out of the cab they saw a crowd gathered on one side near the center. They headed in that direction and started elbowing their way through.

As they worked their way through they saw Perry standing head and shoulders above everyone else. Lois realized that he had to be standing on the railing on the side of the bridge. As they watched he nodded to them, then turned and dove off the side.

Jimmy cried out, "Chief! No!"

Lois stopped in mid-stride and turned to Clark who had suddenly disappeared. She heaved a sigh of relief and headed for Jimmy.

Jimmy was crushed. He had been too late to save him. He couldn't help himself, he had to see. He rushed to the side and as he got there Lois joined him.

Perry was still plummeting, falling faster and faster. In the dark it was hard to see, but Lois heard a metallic rustling sound and her attention was diverted from Perry to see what was causing the sound. She spotted a heavy metal buckle of some sort attached to a structural member. Looking more closely she saw what at first glance appeared to be a thick rope attached to it. She smiled in understanding and looked back at Perry. When she did, she saw a blue and red figure next to him, paralleling his plummet, but not interfering.

As they watched Perry's shout finally reached their ears, "Geronimo!"

Suddenly as they watched his plunge slowed and finally stopped.

At the bottom of the plunge, Perry shouted, "Great ... Shades ... Of ... Elllllllllllvis!!!!!"

Superman hadn't acted, but unbelievably, Perry started to move back up against gravity toward the bridge.

Jimmy was stunned and was standing there gaping.

Lois took pity on him and pointed out the buckle and the bungee cord attached to it and Jimmy almost collapsed as relief flooded through him.

After Perry had bounced a few times and the ride appeared to be over, Superman grabbed him and flew him back up to the bridge surface. Once there, the event team removed the harness from around his ankles. He thanked them and joined Jimmy, Lois and Clark. They all sat on the curb as Perry caught his breath.

Jimmy was beside himself and asked, "What's going on, Chief? I was afraid that you were committing suicide."

Perry was shocked, "Suicide? Turning fifty isn't a reason to do away with yourself?"

Clark asked, "Fifty, huh?"

Shaking his head in chagrin, Perry replied, "The big five-oh."

Jimmy was coming out of his shock. He smiled and said, "Well ... congratulations, Chief."

Perry smiled at his protégé and said a heartfelt, "Thank you."

Lois wasn't sure how Perry was going to take her next comment, but decided to go for it anyway, "Uh, Perry? One thing. I'd lose the hair piece."

Perry gave her a wry grin as he replied, "Alice says it turns her on. Says I look like a young Dan Rather. I must say, though, the other night when she cried out 'Oh, Dan,' I began to have second thoughts. So, well, I left that sucker down at the bottom of the canyon. So much for my mid-life crisis."

Jimmy and Perry stood and Perry draped his arm across Jimmy's shoulder. He asked, "You really thought I was gonna do away with myself?"

"Well, yeah. You had your physical and I thought that you had gotten bad news, like you had cancer or something."

"I hope you've learned your lesson, son."

Jimmy snarkily replied, "Yeah, never trust an old guy."

Perry smiled and said, "No. A good reporter never jumps to conclusions, Jimmy. You always have to verify your information and make sure it's correct. Without hard evidence you don't have a

story. Keep that in mind next time you are working a story.”

Jimmy brightened up, “The next time I’m working a story?”

Perry realized, belatedly, what he had said and tried to backtrack, “Well, yeah, eventually, uh, keep going the way you are and … sooner or later … sooner or later you’ll be a reporter, but don’t rush it. You’ve still got a lot to learn.”

Lois and Clark gave them a head start and then they got up and strolled after them. They had their arms around each other as they walked. Clark had a resigned tone in his voice as he said, “Well, there’s only one Superman again.”

“Yeah. All’s right with the world … er. Metropolis at least.”

Clark replied, sadly, “Almost.”

Lois challenged, “Almost?”

Clark looked up and said, “It might have been kind of nice. You know, to have two of us.”

Lois was curious, “Why?”

Clark was surprised at her response, “Then I would have a brother. Someone to talk to, share with. We all need that.”

Lois stopped them, turned to Clark, put her arms around his neck, brought her face close to his and said, “Well, I guess you’ll just have to talk to me instead. I can be a pretty good listener, you know.” As she finished speaking, she kissed him lightly.

He quickly forgot all but the woman in his arms, the woman that meant more to him than any possibility of a brother. The woman that completed and complicated his life in so many ways.

It was late afternoon when Luthor had arrived back in his office. As soon as he was ensconced behind his desk he had opened the humidor and selected a cigar. Once it was lit he depressed a switch on his intercom, “Nigel. My office.”

A few minutes later, Nigel St. John entered and stood expectantly in front of Luthor’s desk. He was expecting to hear from his boss that Superman had been eliminated, but he was to be disappointed.

“We failed, or I should say, the clone failed in its mission. Superman still lives.”

“Very disappointing. Are you going to try again?”

“Worse luck, the clone rebelled and took the hair sample, presumably to destroy it or, I shudder to think, return it to Superman. There will be no more clones of Superman unless we can find another sample of his DNA.”

“What will you do next?”

“I think we will leave Superman alone for the time being. We will concentrate on Kent. The hit and run failed. Let’s try something else next time.”

“I got a copy of the report on the hit and run. It was just dumb luck that it failed. If he’d used a car instead of a truck he might have succeeded. There was just too much clearance under the vehicle. He was able to hang onto structural members underneath and avoided being dragged to death.”

A few days later, Lois and Clark had received a call requesting that they meet an anonymous informant. It was requested that Clark meet them alone. Lois insisted on driving him to the meeting. She would wait in the Jeep while Clark met with the source.

At the appointed time, Lois pulled into a parking space near an intersection. Clark climbed out and crossed the street to the meeting location. It was the middle of the night and there was virtually no traffic.

Clark waited for ten minutes, but the tipster failed to show so he retraced his steps across the street. Lois was watching for him and when she saw him start to cross the street, the light from a pair of headlights reflected from her mirror into her eyes and she heard an engine rev. She instantly flashed back to the hit and run with the truck. This appeared to be a car or minivan, but the result

would be the same. He wouldn’t be able to claim that here was enough clearance to avoid injury. His secret would be revealed.

Fortunately, as soon as she had seen Clark approaching she had started the engine. Without even considering the consequences, Lois threw the Jeep into gear and pulled out, directly in the path of the car.

The driver, seeing her pull out, reacted by yanking the wheel over in an attempt to avoid her, but in doing so the torque on the steering wheels was such that the bead was broken and the right front tire instantly went flat. The wheel rim dug into the macadam, creating a furrow. That resistance caused the car to flip over, barely missing the Jeep in its gyrations.

Lois had cut her wheels to the right as soon as she had jogged into the street rather than continuing across and quickly stopped the Jeep. She jumped out as Clark pulled the driver from the wreckage and ran to him.

He looked at her with concern in his eyes and asked, “Are you okay, Lois?”

Dismissively she said, “Yeah, I’m fine. Not a scratch. I think we need to call Bill.”

“You think this was deliberate?”

“Yeah, it was just like the last time. Look at it. You got an anonymous tip to meet a source that didn’t show up. As soon as you start across the street this car starts up and heads right for you. If I’d let him hit you, you wouldn’t have been hurt, but the secret would have been revealed. I had to stop him. I didn’t have any choice. Now, let’s call Bill and have him sequestered.”

“Okay, you’re right.”

Clark made the call. Bill came to collect the unconscious driver and Clark helped load him into the back of his car. Bill turned to Lois and said, “That was quick thinking, Lois. Thanks to you, Clark wasn’t hit again. I don’t know that he’d have survived this time.” He turned to Clark and said, “It sure looks like someone is out to get you. Next time they may try to shoot you.”

Clark smiled.

Lois said, “I think he’ll be bullet proof.” She had an idea. Considering the fact that it was rather dark, she opened Clark’s shirt, carefully, showed some blue material and said, “Bullet proof vest.” She closed the shirt and said, “He’s almost as bullet proof as Superman.”

In his normal phlegmatic tone, Bill replied, “As long as they don’t shoot him in the head.”

THE END

To be continued in: Fly Hard — Matchmaker Style