

All the Daytime and the Nighttime

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Rated PG-13 (for adult situations and mild violence)

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Summary: First meetings are important. What would happen if Clark Kent first met Lois Lane at the Metro Club in their undercover disguises of “Charlie King” and “Lola Dane”? And what if Clark Kent wasn’t a journalist at all, but an FBI Agent? This story explores the dynamics between these two characters and is the first in a new Alt-Universe LnC:TNAOS series. The story begins in 2003, a decade after our beloved series.

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Chapter 1.

*“I can hear the sound of violins
Long before it begins”*

Clark Kent was really excited. Really, really excited, but he was trying to remain cool, calm and collected in this undercover assignment, his first. Finally he was out of the laboratory and in the field. No more microscopes, slides, dead bodies, tomography, blood analysis, bullet penetration dynamics or tons of paperwork. Although paperwork was a misnomer, since everything was digital these days.

The Metro Club’s newest bartender carefully rearranged the bar glasses to his preference all while keeping an ear out. Johnny Taylor was rumored to be the leader of the local crime gang at the Riverfront, but Clark couldn’t help thinking his sister Toni had the real smarts in the family.

“Charlie.”

Deep in thought, Clark kept working at the bar.

The voice came louder. “Charlie!”

Oops. Clark looked up, abashed. His ear was fine, it was his mind that was behind. “Yes, Ms. Taylor?”

“Did Frank give you a full briefing about the special drinks for our regulars before he left? We have a very particular clientele here.”

Clark picked up the leather bound bar book and waved it. “All right here.”

Toni slid a piece of paper across the bar top toward him. “Just don’t take too long looking things up tonight. I need you to sign this nondisclosure agreement. Like I said, we have particular - and prominent customers.”

“Not a problem, Ms. Taylor.” Clark really looked at her as he reached for the paper and produced a pen from his vest. She was a very nice looking blond with a good figure and an attractive face. On reflex he smiled one of his megawatt smiles. “That is a very nice dress, Ms. Taylor.” Clark pulled the paper toward him, scanned it briefly and scratched “Charles King” on the signature line. When he looked up, he caught Toni looking him over.

“Call me Toni.” She smiled back at him and took the signed paper with her left hand, which had beautifully manicured long red nails and a notable absence of a ring on her fourth finger. She

turned and walked back toward the office.

Clark watched her leave. Was that an extra wiggle in her hips?

Clark was getting into the rhythm of the bar work and interacting with the waitresses as the afternoon progressed. The interior of the upscale club was dim, with work lights on the stage where rehearsals of a sketch about farm life, if the bale of hay was the clue, were underway. Die hard bar aficionados were whiling away the afternoon at the bar stools and tables in the darkest part of the room. But when Clark took off his glasses and looked through the walls of the club, he could see the shadows lengthening as the day passed into night.

As night approached, the Metro Club took on a different aspect with more subtle lighting, real tablecloths on the tables and the departure of the afternoon bar patrons. As instructed, Clark brought out the evening drink menus. He opened one and goggled at the prices. ‘Wow, I hope the entertainment is worth this,’ he mused.

A spangled curtain was now drawn across the stage and background music played softly. Well-dressed patrons in evening garb started filtering in and bar business picked up. In Frank’s absence, Charlie/Clark was the sole bartender. But with his speed and eidetic memory of the regular patrons’ usual drinks from Frank’s book, he had no trouble keeping up. He also had the advantage of hearing the patrons call for “the usual” after being addressed by name by the *Matre d’*. He now had a list of the early regular patrons, which would be helpful in his report if the suspicions of criminal activities here were proven true.

Inspector William Henderson walked into the situation room at Metropolis Police Headquarters where Sergeant Gomez was watching the feed from the hidden cameras at the Metro Club.

“Anything happening yet?”

“Not much,” replied Gomez, swiveling his chair around to look at the Inspector. “How did Kent get such high angles with the cameras? I’ve never seen a view like that. And what’s the story on him anyway? Why isn’t one of our guys undercover?”

Henderson shrugged, deciding to answer the last question first. He looked Gomez sternly in the eye and said, “We wanted outside help in case one of us was involved. This whole op is limited to very few people, if you remember your briefing.”

“Oh right,” replied the subdued Sergeant.

“As to the rest, he is who Washington sent. Turns out he was a lab rat in FBI forensics and decided to go for a field rating. Scuttlebutt has it he aced the training at Qantico. Supposedly the guy is indefatigable.”

“Well, if we get the goods on who we want, he may need to be indestructible too,” Gomez muttered.

Henderson nodded solemnly in agreement and resumed watching the feed. Man, that Kent was fast at the bar!

Johnny Taylor was seated prominently at the host table by the office door. His sister Toni was circulating around, talking to the guests. At her signal, the four piece band behind the curtain struck up the strains of “How ‘ya gonna keep ‘em down on the farm” and the curtain opened on the bale of hay. Three girls dressed in short shorts and plaid shirts tied under their breasts and three dressed in barnyard animal costumes, danced out from the wings. For some reason Clark noticed the perky yellow chicken.

They sang while dancing:

“How ‘ya gonna keep ‘em, down on the farm,

After they ‘ve seen Pa-ree?

How ‘ya gonna keep ‘em away from Broad-way;

Jazzin’ a-‘round’,

And paintin’ the town?

How ‘ya gonna keep ‘em away from harm?

That’s a mistery;

*They'll never want to see a rake or plow,
And who the deuce can parleyvous a cow?
How 'ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm,
After they've seen Patee?"*

Well, Carnegie Hall it wasn't, Clark mused. Suddenly the doors blasted open and four men burst through the door, all dressed in aluminum suits and toting the long flame guns of the Toasters. The apparent leader called out "Johnny, you're a dead guy" and aimed for him. Johnny quickly dove under the table, hiding.

The farm girls and barnyard animals scattered, screeching. Smoke started to fill the room from the burning stage and curtain. The chicken was right in the path formerly occupied by Johnny. Clark was desperate. He couldn't let someone get flamed to death, no matter the cost to him.

Clark quickly lowered his glasses and shot out the camera directly opposite him with his laser vision, then he supersped to the chicken and placed his back between her and the flame. He grabbed her and jumped the tables and went out the door to deposit her unceremoniously on the sidewalk. As Clark started to loosen his grip, he strangely felt like he didn't want to let her go. What was that? He had never felt anything like that before.

Nevertheless, he immediately rushed back in as everyone, including the Toasters, was hastily exiting the building from all doors. Toni and Johnny were the last to leave.

Clark took a deep breath and blew out all the fires, still carefully out of the field of view of the remaining cameras.

"Oh, my God!" Henderson exclaimed. "Call the fire department, Gomez and get some units down there!" Henderson noted that one camera had gone out with the heat of the Toasters flames igniting the stage. Suddenly the air cleared and the fire was out.

"What just happened?" Henderson asked Gomez after he had completed the call for help. He could clearly see the word "Toasters" burned into the back of the stage. "Well," he said ruefully, "I guess we know who did it. Those guys are not only a pain in the Riverfront area, they are messing up a very important sting operation!"

The chicken walked into the bar with her head under her arm. Clark felt a light touch on his shoulder and a soft voice asking, "Are you all right?" He turned to look at a pretty brunette with warm brown eyes filled with concern. He was momentarily stunned. She was gorgeous, even in a suit of scorched yellow feathers.

"Well, I'm in better shape than my clothes," he said, trying to turn and look at his back.

The chicken gave out a choked sound, cleared her voice and said, "You really don't have much on your back left. But you seem to be undamaged." She cleared her throat again.

"Too much smoke in here. You'd better go back outside. I don't think there will be any more shows tonight."

"Only if you will come with me." She took his hand, pulling him toward the front door.

Clark felt a sappy grin he could not help forming on his face as he followed the chicken out the front door.

"Oh, my God, no!" Henderson exclaimed as he saw Lois in scorched yellow chicken feathers lead Clark out the front door on the camera from across the street. "Lois Lane. Dressed as a chicken! Why is she there? No, I know. She's got a lead and we're dead meat," Henderson moaned to himself.

"Well, she is a good looking chick." Gomez said, trying to control his laughter.

Fire trucks were racing up to the front door, sirens blaring.

Clark was pulled off to a side where there was a modicum of quiet. The chicken put the head down on the pavement and started brushing the smoke and dirt off Clark's vest and shirt. "Are you all right?"

Clark stared into her eyes and swallowed hard. For some reason he was tongue-tied.

"Yes, I'm just fine, Miss...?"

"Call me... Lola."

It was clear that Johnny and Toni had some connections. The Metro Club was cleaned, repainted and ready for business by the dinner hour the next day. Clark felt a sense of déjà vu as he was once again positioned behind the bar, ready for the evening to begin.

He had also had to find a moment to replace the camera he had zapped the night before.

The early regulars came in, exclaiming their distress and surprise to Toni as she greeted them, assuring one and all that the Metro Club was up and fully functioning as usual.

The farm skit was evidently scrapped, perhaps for want of costumes. The hay bale was definitely gone. Instead a small band of drums, keyboard and horn were playing jazz background music.

Several hours in, Clark noticed a commotion at the door podium. The Matre d' Maurice jumped forward excitedly and exclaimed, "Mr. Luthor. It's a pleasure to see you as always. Your usual table?"

Clark's back was turned getting a fresh bottle. He turned slowly around to view the legendary Lex Luthor up close and personal. He noted the table Maurice was escorting Lex to with much bowing and scraping. Syble, the waitress, zoomed over to take his order. Clark's heart rate increased. His target was here. Showing no outward excitement, Clark reached for the 100 year old single malt scotch in a special section of the bar. It was Lex's "usual".

The arrival of Lex Luthor was evidently some sort of signal. Immediately Toni arrived at his table to sit with him. Clark caught her look at him and quickly began making a Long Island Iced Tea. Syble arrived just as he finished to carry both drinks to Luthor's table. Toni noticed and smiled at him.

A plate of appetizers appeared from the kitchen as the drinks arrived. Still working alone at the bar, Clark kept an eye on Luthor as he busily mixed drinks. Toni made a subtle gesture at the band and they finished the current number with a flourish and the new velvet curtains closed. Clark focused his hearing on that table, trying to filter out the noise of the other patrons. He heard Toni say to Luthor, "I think you will like this next act, Lex. It's very much your style."

A loud drum roll came from behind the curtain and Clark winced. His hearing had been turned up too high.

As the curtain opened, the offstage announcer exclaimed, "And now, Ladies and Gentlemen, straight from Gotham City...Miss Lola Dane!"

Revealed, as the curtain parted, was a stately brunette with long hair in a form fitting blue gown standing behind a single microphone. The band began the introduction and she sang in a sultry voice

*"How glad the many millions
Of Timothys and Williams
Would be, to capture me
But you had such persistence,
You wore down my resistance
I fell and it was swell"*

The singer turned and gestured toward the table with Toni and Luthor and continued.

*"You're my big and brave and handsome Romeo
How I won you I shall never, never know"*

Clark stood with a glass in hand, frozen, mesmerized.
*"It's not that you're attractive
 But, oh, my heart grew active
 When you came into view
 I've got a crush on you, sweetie pie
 All the day and night-time give me sigh
 I never had the least notion that
 I could fall with so much emotion."*

Clark came out of his daze and noticed Luthor seemed equally transfixed. Toni had a small smile on her face. His brain catching up to his reaction, he realized the singer was the chicken from yesterday. Lola, a name he could never forget.

*"Could you coo, could you care
 For a cunning cottage we could share
 The world will pardon my mush
 'Cause I have got a crush on you
 Could you coo, could you care
 For a cunning cottage
 That we could share
 The world will pardon my mush
 'Cause I have got a crush, my baby, on you."*

Lola ended with blowing a kiss at Lex Luthor. Luthor responded with an enthusiastic cry of "Brava." Toni smiled wider and applauded too. Clark broke the glass he was holding into small shards.

Chapter 2

"Other dancers may be on the floor"

Quickly Clark brushed the shards off his hands into the large bar trash bucket. He ignored the crunching sounds from the shards that had fallen to the floor as he moved around behind the bar, simultaneously filling orders and trying to figure out why he was so flustered. His hearing was still tuned to Toni and he heard her say, "Lex Luthor, may I present Miss Lola Dane, our new Metro Club songstress. Lola, this is..."

Lola cut in, "Lex Luthor. Of course, who doesn't know the famous Lex Luthor?" Why did the sultry purr in her voice cut icicles into Clark's spine? With that, he couldn't keep his eyes off Luthor's table. Toni rose smoothly, gesturing elegantly to her chair. "Here, Lola. Join Mr. Luthor." She turned to Luthor and apologized, "I must excuse myself. Work never stops." Was that a wink she just gave Luthor?

There was dead silence in the police situation room as Henderson and Gomez avidly watched the monitors.

"Oh, I wish we had a bug at that table," Henderson finally muttered.

"Maybe Kent does?" Gomez asked hopefully.

Clark Kent didn't have a bug, but he did have his hearing. Unfortunately, none of that was admissible in court because it was just his word. There had been a bug on the underside of Toni's drink glass, but the ever efficient Syble, hoping for a big Luthor-size tip, had cleared it early and Toni hadn't wanted another drink. So there was something there, but he wouldn't know what it was until he got it to MPD and they read and logged it. The band was still playing and Lola's back was to him, so he really couldn't hear what was happening with the band and surrounding noise. Luthor look pleased, whatever it was. That made Clark displeased for some reason.

Clark decided it was time to leave his post at the bar and get new supplies of the popular labels. His path around the room allowed him to look at the front of Lola and Luthor. She was talking and daringly patting his hand. He looked quite entranced.

Clark gathered the needed bottles and returned to the bar on the reverse path. Suddenly, the band, which had been playing soft jazz, struck up the fanfare again and the announcer said, "And

here she is again, the beautiful, the popular, Miss Lola Dane!" With a final pat of Luthor's hand, Lola walked back to the microphone.

Clark stored his bottles and began filling orders again at the bar. He turned sideways to look at Lola full on as she snapped her fingers in rhythm and began:

*"Oh, it really wasn't my intention
 To disregard convention
 It was just an impulse
 That had to be obeyed.
 Though it seems convention we've been scorning
 I'll still not go in mourning
 Though my reputation
 Is blemished, I'm afraid."*

What? Was she channeling Ella Fitzgerald tonight?

*"With just one kiss
 What heaven, what rapture, what bliss"
 Oh god, she was smiling at Luthor!
 "Honestly, I thought you wouldn't.
 Naturally, you thought you couldn't.
 And probably we shouldn't.*

*But aren't you kind of glad we did?
 Actually, it all was blameless.
 Nevertheless, they'll call it shameless
 So let's keep the lady nameless
 But aren't you kind of glad we did?"*

She cast a gesture and a wink at Luthor. Could she be more obvious about...something? Clark hoped steam wasn't coming out of his ears.

*"Socially, I'll be an outcast
 Obviously, we dined alone
 On my good name there will be doubt cast
 With never a sign of any chaperone.
 No matter how they may construe it
 Whether or not, we have to rue it
 Whatever made us do it
 Say, aren't you kind of glad we did?"*

The band built the tempo, Lola leaned close to the mic until she was almost touching it and finished in a sultry purr:

*"Whatever made us do it
 Say, aren't you kind of glad we did?"*

Clark reached up to his forehead and then looked in puzzlement at his fingers. Was he sweating? The waitresses were lined up at the bar staring in amazement at Lola.

With a graceful bow and a blown kiss, Lola walked regally offstage.

The rest of the evening was a blur for Clark. He did notice Toni and Johnny in a tux going into the office. Several other very large and well-dressed gentlemen followed them in at discrete intervals. He needed to get a bug into that office. Even with his hearing, he couldn't hear anything over the noise of the room.

"Kent's got to be dead on his feet. My butt's dead just sitting here," Gomez muttered to himself, still staring at the monitors. Henderson had left when Luthor left the club around 11 p.m. The kitchen had closed at midnight and the bar was closing now at 2 a.m.

Kent was cleaning up, washing and polishing the glasses, setting the liquor bottles back in their places and getting ready to lower the grate over the back of the bar. The band was packing up its instruments.

Toni had disappeared into the office after Luthor left. And there was no sign of Lois Lane. What was she up to? A story on Luthor, obviously. But why and what about?

Gomez sighed in relief as Kent walked to the back with the cash box from the bar, turning off the lights as he went. No lights, no need for him to watch monitors.

It was nearly 3 a.m. as Clark walked back to his flop at the Apollo. All in all, he was relatively pleased with his day's work. After Toni had reimbursed him for his damaged clothes, he had bought a new dinner jacket. He now kept it at the Metro Club, since walking the streets of Metropolis at 3 a.m. in a fancy jacket was not the wisest thing to do, no matter who you were and what you could do.

In the process of storing and changing clothes to jeans and a sweater, he had managed to drill a hole in the wall between the kitchen and the Metro Club office with his laser vision so he had a cover story for being able to observe and record the goings-on in the secluded room.

He could see it was a spacious office, equipped for large conferences. He planted his bug on the office side of the hole. Hopefully tomorrow he would have more information on their plans for the Riverfront area.

The world saw Lex Luthor as a great philanthropist, but Clark's superiors had intelligence from overseas that indicated a large part of his fortune was from illegal activities. His job was to collect the evidence that would stand up in court. With backup from the Metropolitan Police Department, he remembered.

Clark was passing an alleyway one block from the Apollo, when he felt a sharp object in his ribs and a low voice say, "Your wallet. Now!" He must have been daydreaming, or night dreaming considering the time, to not hear them before they actually attacked him.

Clark sighed and moved to face what turned out to be three guys, one with a gun. He slowly lifted his hands.

"O.K. It's in my back pocket." Slowly he reached down to pull out his wallet with his fake I.D. and credit card and real money. Oh, he hoped they used the fake credit card. They'd be in jail so fast their heads would spin.

Carefully removing the wallet with his index and middle fingers, he held it up for them to see. The guys were as scruffy looking as expected in this neighborhood. Second Guy, who reached for the wallet and evidently had more curiosity, said, "So what yer doin' out so late at night?"

Shrugging eloquently, Clark replied. "I'm a bartender at the Metro Club. Just got off work."

Clark was astonished to see that at the words "Metro Club", all three guys turned white as sheets and Second Guy threw the wallet down on the ground and pleaded, "Forget it. We weren't here. We're ghosts." With that, the trio turned and fled deeper into the alley.

Clark shook his head in surprise, picked up his wallet and without further incident, and reached his room. Even he was tired after such a long day. But he had important things to do.

At the small table in his room he set out a pad of drawing paper and grabbed a soft pencil. Super quickly he sketched Lola's face. Then he got up and reached for the battered suitcase under his bed and removed the small computer and hooked it directly to the payphone in his room and dialed his office in Quantico.

Feeding the sketch into the scanner, he sent the image to his office computer. Face recognition software didn't normally work with sketches; it was photograph to photograph. But he had modified the software to work from his sketches. He waited impatiently while the computer searched. Finally, four names popped up on his small screen, but only one lived in Metropolis.

That person was Lois Lane, a reporter for the Daily Planet. Why hadn't he recognized such a prominent person? Then he remembered that the Daily Planet didn't print pictures or sketches of its reporters to preserve their anonymity for undercover work.

Wow. Clark was close to flummoxed. He had expected an entertainer of some note, not a reporter. An undercover reporter looking into doings at the Metro Club and most likely targeting Lex Luthor. Did he have an ally or an enemy? What was his plan

now? Tomorrow he would try to find out what Toni knew about "Lola." But first he had to get the bug from under Toni's glass to MPD.

Clark was at the Metro Club at 10 a.m. sharp, before the 11 a.m. opening, and, more significantly, before the morning trash pick-up. He walked to the storage room and found a Glenlivet tin, removed the bottle and put his envelope containing the small bug inside, then walked out to the trash area.

He lifted his glasses and examined the trash in each of two bins, then threw the Glenlivet tin box into the vegetable bin, where it would stand out. Satisfied, he brushed his hands together and smiled.

He was walking back in, when he noticed someone, clearly a woman, moving the plates from in front of the hole he had drilled last night. She had turned to head to listen to the conversation on the other side and was looking away from him. He levitated so he wouldn't make noise, passed her and went back to the locker area, pretending to be getting ready for work.

As if he had just arrived at his locker he stood with arms crossed, ready for her to turn around and see him. At the same time he was listening to the argument in the room beyond.

Johnny said, "Rocko, you tell the Robertson boys they got one week to pay up, then you take care of it. Next, Lou, numbers, what's the take this week?"

Lou replied, "The numbers are down this week, Johnny. There's less street traffic because of the fires. We still have our high payers, but that's not enough. We need to talk about the fires."

Johnny shot back, "So, you want to run the meeting now, Lou?"

Clark could see through the wall that Lou shook his head and fell silent.

Johnny continued with finality, "Then shut up and worry about your own problems, like getting revenue up before I give Briggs your territory."

Silence fell, and then Toni, dressed in a very sharp business suit, spoke up. "Johnny, Lou's right, I think we should discuss these fires."

Heads nodded in agreement around the table, but nobody spoke up.

Johnny turned abruptly to his sister and spit out, "You got something to say, save it for later!"

"If I've got something to say, why shouldn't I say it now?"

"Because you don't talk at meetings, that's why."

"Maybe I should start."

Johnny said to the group, "You hear that?" He turned back to Toni with anger in his voice "Let me tell you something, Miz M.B.A. All that piece of paper means around here is -- do the books and stay out of business."

Toni retorted equally vehemently, "Stay out and watch it go down the drain you mean."

Clark noticed that the six men were looking anywhere but at Toni and Johnny.

Toni rose to her feet slowly and leaned in to the table, tapping the table for emphasis.

"Ever since Papa died I've sat back and watched my brothers run this organization. First Tommy, who didn't stay alive long enough to do much damage, then Gus, who we won't see for another two hundred and forty years, even with good behavior. And now you, Johnny."

Toni looked at each of the men at the table in turn. "We're inefficient, we're misdirected, and we're a fraction of what we could be if only we concentrated on real business instead of this nickel and dime gangster stuff. Look at us. We're more interested in the new lounge act than in preserving the family legacy. What would Papa say?"

"Papa would tell you to find a good husband, start havin' some babies and leave the real work to the men."

"That's what he did tell me, Johnny. Only he didn't realize that you would all destroy it."

With that, Johnny pulled out his gun. "I'm still the head of this organization, and don't you forget it!"

He fired multiple shots into the wall above Toni's head but she didn't flinch. The woman at the peephole dove for cover. Clark just stood and continued watching. He heard Toni have the last word. "Just what we need. A cool head in charge."

The mysterious woman came up from her crouch, uncovered her ears and stood there staring wide-eyed at Clark.

Clark wasn't surprised to find he was looking at Lola.

Chapter 3.

"Make me thrill as only you know how"

Clark heard Toni slam the office door and start walking toward the kitchen. He had a choice to make and had to make it quickly. Training told him to get the civilians out of the way of possible deadly action. As he had been watching the drama in the Metro Club office, he had realized it could be more dangerous than either the MPD or the FBI had anticipated.

Several exit scenarios had played out in his mind. Supposedly, Lola/Lois was well connected with the MPD. He could grab her, dump her in the trash bin that was about to be picked up and let Henderson find her along with the bug. Somehow, Clark didn't think she would be too happy about that.

On the other hand, Lola/Lois was apparently here on a job too and he needed a possible ally rather than an enemy. For some reason it hurt to think of Lois as an enemy. Toni was about to enter the kitchen area where the two of them were staring at each other. Without really consciously thinking, Clark closed the distance to Lois, swept her into his arms and began kissing her.

He heard Toni stop and open the door, then start tapping a foot.

"Interesting place for a bartender. Run out of olives?" Toni exclaimed acerbically. "I see you've met our new singer, Charlie!" With a huff, she turned and left.

Clark heard her go, but he was really enjoying what he was doing and didn't look up as she left. He had discovered that after the initial resistance, Lois was responding to him.

Slowly, he loosened his arms and started ending the kiss. As he lifted his head, Lois opened her eyes and looked at him, a dazed expression on her face.

"What was that for?"

Clark released her fully, holding her by the elbow until she seemed steady on her feet, and nodded to the doorway. "Toni was coming and I thought you needed an excuse to be here where you possibly could be caught spying on the Metro Gang." He indicated the hole in the wall with his other hand. "I don't think she saw the hole."

"Yeah, from what she said, I don't think she was too pleased at what you were doing."

His smile blazed forth and he said softly, "Oh, but *I* was. Pleased that is." Clark released her elbow and extended his hand and changed his smile to friendly.

"Yesterday we didn't really do introductions during the excitement. I'm Charlie King, the new bartender."

Lois extended her hand. "L...Lola, the singer. Thank you for saving me yesterday. I'm afraid I was a little abrupt. I think it was the after effect of getting flamed at by the Toasters."

"Yes, I remember." He grinned, "Your feathers were a little scorched. I must say, Ms. Dane, I was really impressed with your singing last night." The grin turned into a frown. "So was Lex Luthor, I noticed."

They stared at each other for a moment, evaluating each other. Then a loud sound of a truck and a lot of clanging occurred

outside.

"Trash truck," Clark said unnecessarily. Anything to keep her here and talking. For the case, of course. "Picking up the trash."

Lois broke eye contact first. "Yes, well, I'm here to pick up my dress."

Clark turned and watched as she left for the dressing rooms, feeling a loss. What was that reaction? Shaking his head in puzzlement at himself, he returned to the storage room and grabbed the bottle of Glenlivet.

Clark returned to the bar and apparently absently set the Glenlivet bottle on the bar, label facing the camera. He turned and opened the grate, confident that Henderson would know what to look for in the trash.

Early in the evening there was another meeting in the back office. Frank had returned, so Charlie could take a break. He decided to go outside by the dumpsters and stare openly through the back wall once he found he was the only one out back. As before, everyone was arranged around the table.

Johnny looked around the table and said, "The first thing we gotta do is find out who these Toaster guys are and arrange for a little payback."

Toni looked him in the eye. "I don't think so."

"Hey, I'm talking."

"Not any more you're not. Your days of speaking for this organization are through. You should've seen this coming and you should've taken steps to protect us before it happened. As of now, you're out."

"Says who, you?"

"Let's leave it up to the boys."

Clark was amazed to see one by one the Metros stand and walk over behind Toni, leaving Johnny very much alone.

"Take a vacation, brother. A long one."

Johnny started to pull a gun on Toni, but she nodded and loyal Lou and another Metro grabbed him by the arms.

Toni gave them a dismissive gesture. "Get him out of here."

Toni turned to the remaining Metros. "I know some of you want to go back to the way things were when my father was alive, but that's not going to happen. We've got an opportunity to move our organization to the next level. Out of the back room and into the boardroom. If any of you disagree, you can always join Johnny in retirement. Any questions?"

Toni eyeballed each person. Not a word was said. With a nod, she finished, "Good. Let's go to work."

Clark walked in the back door to find Lois replacing the dishes in front of the peephole. He smiled and winked at her and headed for the door to the club without comment. As he went through the doorway, he turned and caught her startled, then puzzled look and smiled again.

Henderson walked through the front door of the Precinct and caught the news report airing on the waiting room TV.

The announcer intoned, "And yet another case of arson has drawn firefighters to the Riverfront area. That makes six in the last twenty-four hours and still Metropolitan Fire Department officials have no leads."

He shook his head in frustration as he went on past his office. Things at the Riverfront were not going well. There had been an attack on a police station in the area and he took it as a personal affront. They needed to find and break the Toasters.

"What's up, Gomez?" Henderson asked, coming into the situation room.

Gomez shrugged. "Not much. Luthor is a no-show so far."

Henderson noticed Gomez' computer screen. "What's that. Info on Kent?"

"Yeah. I couldn't get much out of the FBI site but name and basic statistics.

I figured it was worth knowing the guy we were working with.”

Henderson stared silently at the screen for a moment, then read out loud, “University of Kansas at Lawrence? Bachelors Degree in Criminal Law from the School of Law? Well, I guess that figures if you want to get into the FBI. Hmm. Summer study program between the Junior and Senior year in Istanbul, Turkey? Graduated in 2000. Three years ago. That’s a fast riser.”

“Ah, but that’s not all, boss. Take a look at this part. It’s a double major with the School of Engineering Physics. He also got a Bachelors of Science in Aerodynamic Physics and Astronomy with a minor in Math.” Gomez held his head as if it hurt from reading it. He was from the Police Academy straight from High School. He scrolled the screen down. “And he played Jayhawk football. Wide receiver.”

Henderson again read out loud, “Clark Jonathan Kent. Born Smallville, Kansas, June 10, 1978. Parents Martha and Jonathan Kent died in a car wreck July 4, 1988. No other relatives. Sent into foster care. Legally emancipated himself at the age of 16.”

He muttered to Gomez, “Probably how he got an interest in the law.”

Henderson continued. “He graduated from Smallville High in 1994. Eagle Scout, 1993. Wow! Talk about an early success story!”

Softly to himself, Henderson mused, “And I wonder what he is going to go on to do. He is only 25 now.”

It was only 2:30 in the morning as Clark walked back to the Apollo in his jeans and sweater. From the mouth of the same alleyway as last night a grubby looking man emerged. “What is this place, the Union Station of muggers?” Clark wondered to himself.

The man brushed casually against Clark and Clark felt an envelope in his pocket. Whoops. Good thing he didn’t take the guy out. Obviously he was a courier from MPD. Clark walked casually on to his room, eager to find out what the MPD had recovered from the bag.

In his room, Clark retrieved his computer and plugged in the small storage device from the envelope into his USB port. The audio between Toni Taylor and Lex Luthor played out softly.

“TT: ‘I think you will like this next act, Lex. It’s very much your style.’

LL: (suavely) ‘You have very good taste, Toni. I like your plans for the West River; slum clearance, uplifting the neighborhood, micromanagement, and as a result, growth and prosperity. And your proposition is interesting, but I have my own plans and bigger sources of revenue.’

TT: ‘I like your plans for LexHarbor, Lex, but aren’t you worried about making such a large investment in the Riverfront area at this time?’

Lola began singing in the background.

LL: ‘My plans include schools, shops, restaurants, theaters, offices, apartments; a self-contained community. A giant step forward in urban reawakening. A new, bright jewel in Metropolis’ crown. Riverfront is currently a blight on the face of our fair city. LexHarbor will change all that.’”

Clark thought he sounded rehearsed, like he was giving a press conference.

The recording continued. “LL: ‘Riverfront is currently a blight on the face of our fair city. LexHarbor will change all that.’” Luthor repeated for emphasis.

Clark could visualize him tapping the table.

Lola was singing in the background. “But you had such persistence, you wore down my resistance, I fell and it was well.”

“TT: (protesting) ‘But Lex, I can...’

LL: (interrupting) ‘Quiet. Let’s listen. You are right. She is amazing.’

TT: (clink of ice cubes) ‘You’re my big and brave and handsome Romeo. How I won you I shall never, never know. It’s not that you’re attractive. But, oh, my heart grew active, When you came into view...’ Lola’s song continued with no more words from Toni or Luthor.

“TT: ‘Another drink for Mr. Luthor. I’m fine.’

Sound of glasses being picked up.

Syble: ‘Yes, ma’m, Mr. Luthor.’”

Turning off the computer and putting it back in the battered suitcase, Clark reflected that Toni and Luthor did have some sort of business arrangement and that Toni herself had designs on the West River area.

Could either one of them be behind the Toasters? So far, the Toasters had confined themselves to the Riverfront area of Metropolis. Was there a specific reason for that? Clark had come to gather data on Luthor, but all criminals were fair game. Clark had joined the FBI because he was tired of seeing criminals take hard-working average citizens advantage of with no respect for the law.

The next morning, Clark had been out early checking out the damage to the police station near the Riverfront for himself, coming back to the Apollo to get ready to leave for work at 9:30 a.m. He was just getting out of the shower when he heard the surprising sound of stiletto heels in the hallway. Quickly looking through the wall, he was amazed to see Toni Taylor walking toward his door.

Clark definitely didn’t want to be caught in just a towel around his waist, so he supersped into a clean poplin shirt and jeans. He was ready just as she got to the door and knocked. He waited half a minute to open the door, revealing Toni Taylor with a McFriendlys bag in her hand.

She was dressed in tailored pants and a silk blouse and held out the paper bag. “Hi Charlie. Can I interest you in breakfast?” Clark let his surprise show. “Yeah, sure. Come on in. Be warned, it’s not much.”

Toni swept into the room as if it were a fancy suite. “I’d be suspicious if it were,” she smiled.

Enlightenment swept across Clark’s features. “Checking out the help, eh?” Then he blushed at the unintended double entendre and gestured to the small table and two chairs in front of his kitchen sink.

Toni appeared to ignore the unmade bed and dishes in the sink and gracefully sat down in one of the chairs, opened the bag and removed two coffees and bagels with an assortment of cream cheese, condiments and plastic knives.

“Believe me, I’ve seen worse. Although I probably don’t look like I have.”

Closing the door, Clark sat in the other chair and accepted a cup of coffee. He rummaged among the condiments and pulled out three sugar packets and two half and half after Toni has fastidiously picked up a yellow artificial sweetener and poured it into her cup.

He noticed Toni’s eyebrows rise and just shrugged. “Fast metabolism,” he muttered. He then took one of the pre-cut bagels and one of the cream cheese packets and a plastic knife and asked, “Cream cheese or butter on your bagel, Toni?”

Toni’s eyebrows climbed higher at his offer of fixing the bagel for her. “Cream cheese, half the packet on each side.”

Clark fixed it as ordered, tore out the side of the sack to make a plate and served it to her. Then he fixed his own bagel with the four remaining packets, lifted his coffee in salute and said, “Thanks for the breakfast.”

Toni delicately took a bit of her bagel and they continued

eating in silence.

When they finished, Clark wiped his hands on the paper napkin, cleared his throat and began, “Did you hear about the Toaster’s latest stunt? Those criminals burned a police station to the ground about a couple of blocks from the Metro Club.”

Toni was surprised at his vehement tone and shook her head. “This bad for business. They’re out of control. They’ve got to be stopped.”

“What are you doing about it? Not that it’s any of my business,” Clark hastened to add. “I just don’t like anything dangerous getting too close to you.”

“That’s quite a line you’ve got. Do you say that to all women?”

Clark look pained. “I just don’t like to see people getting hurt. There’s too much savagery in the world. Let’s hope there are no Toaster fires tonight.”

“They wouldn’t dare tonight.”

Clark showed his surprise. “Have you found something out? If I don’t know what’s going on how can I help?”

“Why should I trust you? I hardly know you.”

“In your position I’d probably feel exactly the same way.”

Toni continued ruefully, “My position. Sometimes I think I could cheerfully trade it all for a quiet life far away from Metropolis. Growing up I used to sit at my father’s knee and listen to him talk. I learned so much but I never thought I’d have to apply it. If my brothers hadn’t turned out to be such idiots...”

“I thought you enjoyed running things?”

“Someone had to. Let me tell you, Charlie. I don’t want to run a crime syndicate. I want to run a conglomerate. In five years, if I have my way, all Metro business is going to be legitimate. A legitimate corporation with me as CEO. I want to take what my father started and make him proud, put our name up there with the captains of commerce, the Lansings, the Schwabs, the Luthors. No more dirty money, no more shady deals.”

Surprised at her forthrightness and apparent sincerity, Clark could only respond, “Sounds like a good plan.”

“If I can just get past this thing with the Toasters.”

Clark looked her in the eye, “You will. With my help, this thing will end, one way or another. Now, I’m just a poor working stiff and I need to get to work.”

“Come on. I’ll give you a lift to the Metro Club.”

“You parked in this area? Isn’t that a little risky to your car?”

“Not really.” Toni smiled a smile that wasn’t all roses and puppy dog tails. “Lou’s in it circling the block.”

Clark gave a bark of laughter. “Apparently dangerous, but not risk taking. I like it. Let me get my coat.”

Chapter 4.

“When marimba rhythms start to play”

Toni was waiting for Charlie as she stood by his door. “So, how well do you know Lola?”

Clark looked at her with some trepidation as he finished putting on the coat. “I just met her when the Toasters tried to flame Johnny. She was in the path of the flame behind him and would have been severely burned. I didn’t find out her name until we were out on the sidewalk.” He met her at the door and looked down at her. “Why?”

Toni shrugged while opening the door and going through. “I just wondered if you knew her before getting the job at the Metro Club. You two seemed awfully familiar with each other in the kitchen.”

Clark locked his door and turned and looked at her and smiled his most ingratiating smile. “Nope. Never saw her before the Metro Club.” Which was the truth. He was always truthful. “She’s a captivating singer, and she’s a woman and I’m a man.” He shrugged, trying to look guileless.

Toni paused, examining him, but said only, “Lou’s waiting to

take us to the club.”

The liquid lunch crowd was filtering in to the Metro Club and Clark was behind the bar, dressed in his white shirt, black pants and vest, serving customers.

Loyal Lou was at the end of the bar checking out the customers. Suddenly Toni came out of her office and up to Lou and slammed a newspaper down beside him, hissing, “Since when is Metro business front page news?”

“Since the Toasters declared war on us.”

Toni raised her voice in frustration, “I don’t mean that, I mean information that could only have come from our meeting, that I’m the new head of the Metros. Could Johnny have leaked the story?”

“Uh-uh, we put him on a plane, like you said.”

“Then it’s someone else. Find him. Fast. We can’t afford this kind of exposure.”

The newspaper remained on the bar after Toni and Lou left for the office, and Clark walked over to turn it to read. He wasn’t surprised to find it was today’s edition of The Daily Planet with an above the fold story headlined “Toni Taylor Takes Over Metro Club Gang.” And the story was written by, “Of course, Lois Lane,” he muttered to himself.

Casually turning the paper back around so the camera could catch a good view of it, he placed an ashtray beside it. If the MPD was awake in the situation room, they would realize there was a problem brewing.

Although Clark looked calm on the outside, he realized Lois could be in real danger now if Toni ever found out Lola’s true identity.

Henderson was awake in the situation room. Suddenly he was *very much* awake. Of course he had seen the morning paper and read the story with a muttered, “Lane, what are you doing?” But Toni’s reaction put a new level of concern on it.

He hadn’t heard what Toni had said, but her body language had been clear enough. She was hunting for rats in her organization.

Henderson dialed Perry White’s direct number, a number he was very familiar with.

The gruff baritone with a southern accent came on the line immediately, “Perry White.”

“Hi Perry. It’s Bill Henderson. We have an issue with Lois’ last story.”

There was a soft chuckle on the other end of the line. “Ever tried to milk a steer, son? What’s the problem today?”

“The last story has caused a ruckus among the current people of interest. I let you in on this operation in hopes Lois would be a help, you’d get a good story, and I’d get some evidence. She needs to slow down and let us do our job. Can you please talk some sense into her?”

“Yesterday I asked her how the undercover work was going and she said, ‘Fine, just fine.’ I found out about the scorched chicken costume from Jimmy only today. She was in high dudgeon when he found out about it. I guess the bartender saved her?”

Henderson suppressed a chuckle. “Yes he did. We’ve got it on tape.”

“Good. If this turns out right, I might want to torture her with it at the Christmas Party.”

“Well, she needs to think about getting out from undercover before things go south.”

“Yeah, some hope of that. Yesterday she accused me of trying to get her to give up a scoop on the Riverfront fires by ‘not letting her take a few little chances.’”

“As you know, Perry, sometimes a ‘few little chances’ is one too many. Try to get her to be a little more careful.”

Perry sighed. "I'll try. Ordering her to quit won't work."
 Bill signed off with a resigned, "I know."

The lunch crowd had thinned out and Clark stood in his arms-crossed comfortable thinking pose behind the bar. Clark didn't realize that a man with his build standing like that looked a bit intimidating. He was lost in thought, feeling a bit frustrated. He had hoped that getting into the field as an agent would allow him more opportunity - and yes, freedom - to help people. Right now he felt more constrained than he did in his lab doing post-mortems on incidents that had already happened. He remembered with a small smile his very first rescue. An event that made him realize he was different.

Clark was thirteen and it was three years after his parent's tragic accident. He and his foster brother Pete Ross were swimming in Smallville Lake on a hot August Kansas day. Clark had obligingly helped Pete out on the Ross' small farm in the cooler morning and they had decided a swim would be good. After chores and lunch, they had walked, or skipped, or run, as boys do, down to the lake without telling their mother Sarah. Dr. Ross was at his medical practice in Smallville. Pete was five years older than Clark, so Clark followed his lead like a good younger brother should. Also Clark was frequently lost in daydreams, so following Pete was an easy choice.

The brothers cannonballed off the dock into the lake with great glee. No one was fishing since it was the middle of the week and the middle of the day in the heat. They had the lake, and probably the surrounding miles, all to themselves. There was a boathouse on the lake that had fallen into disrepair over the many long winters. The lake was on private property, so neither the city nor the county would dismantle or fix it.

Fearless teenagers as they were, they swam under the boathouse and its decrepit dock for the shade and fish viewing. Clark found he could really hold his breath and see the small lake trout really well. Suddenly he felt a disturbance in the water and heard something crash into the water. He felt alarm, like when his parents were in the car just before the accident, and started looking for Pete.

A big timber was lying across Pete's chest under the water. Clark could see air bubbles coming out of Pete's mouth. He swam as fast as he could over to Pete and somehow lifted the timber off his chest, grabbed Pete and towed him to shore. Clark wasn't trained in CPR, but he laid Pete out on the bank and turned his head so water could come out. Fortunately, the time was short underwater and Pete began to cough up water on his own and began to recover.

Clark then realized two things: he needed to learn CPR, and he hadn't taken a breath since fish exploring, rescuing Pete and laying him on the ground. He also wasn't winded at all. He stared at his hands that had lifted the rotted timber and saw no slivers, cuts or bruises.

After their clothes had dried, he had helped Pete back to the house. They had both sworn secrecy to each other to not ever tell their mother what happened. Clark returned to the lake that night and quickly dismantled the boathouse and dock, neatly stacking the timber on the side of the lake. It was a month before anyone noticed the boathouse was down and word was spread in Smallville.

Clark snapped himself out of his reverie and began getting the bar ready for the evening, checking through the office wall every now and then to make sure Toni was still inside.

The usual crowd had come in for the evening entertainment and Toni was once more in an evening gown welcoming the customers. Lex Luthor, however, was again a no-show. Toni did not look disappointed at all.

She approached Charlie for her evening Long Island Ice tea. "So how is the evening going, Charlie? Lou said something about

the ice machine being broken?"

"Yeah, it was. But I fixed it." He didn't mention he 'fixed it' by blowing freezing breath over the water filled ice cube trays.

Clark quickly made her drink and once again hid a bug on the bottom of the glass, disguised by the ice inside and the five bumps on the bottom and handed it over. Toni looked over the rim of her glass as she took a sip. "You're a very handy man to have around. I feel I owe you more than a McFriendlys bag breakfast."

Clark smiled easily and shrugged. "You pay me a good wage."

"I could pay you more if you did more than tend bar for me."

Clark was flummoxed. Did that have a double meaning? Taking a calming breath, he managed, "What did you have in mind?" Oops, maybe that was too direct. He was also conscious of the bug. Everything *they* said would be heard by MPD. Best to assume she was still talking business, preferably gang business.

Toni leaned on the bar to make the conversation more private, not knowing her efforts were futile with the presence of the bug. "Well, I have a lot of errands to be run during the day. You could learn a lot from Lou."

Bingo, he was in. He broke out one of his best smiles and softened his voice. "That sounds very promising, Toni. I'd like to give it a try."

"Good. We will see if you work out." She winked and turned away from the bar with a flourish, carrying her drink with her.

Clark watched her walk away. Then he realized the three-piece band had been playing for some time in the background. Suddenly the introductory fanfare began and the off-stage announcer called out again, "And here she is again, fresh from setting Metropolis afire with her singing, Miss Lola Dane!"

The curtain opened and Lola stood there in a shimmering white and crystal gown in front of the standing mic. She began to sing in her pleasing contralto:

*"After one whole quart of brandy
 Like a daisy I awake
 With no Bromo Seltzer handy,
 I don't even shake.
 Men are not a new sensation;
 I've done pretty well, I think.
 But this half-pint imitation
 Put me on the blink."*

Clark suddenly felt weak in the knees. He instantly recognized "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered" by Lorenz Hart. His most treasured possession was his parent's collection of Broadway show tunes on vinyl records. They lived in Kansas, but they had loved Broadway music. They had had the Midwest traditional piano in the living room and his mother used to play. He even took lessons.

Lola's voice soared as she hit the chorus:

*"I'm wild again
 Beguiled again
 A simpering, whimpering child again
 Bewitched, bothered and bewildered am I
 Couldn't sleep
 And wouldn't sleep
 Until I could sleep where I shouldn't sleep
 Bewitched, bothered and bewildered am I"*

Lola took the mic stand in her left hand and swept the audience with her right. Then she brought her hand back to her heart.

*"Lost my heart but what of it?
 My mistake I agree.
 He's a laugh, but I like it
 Because the laugh's on me."*

Oh, my God. Was she looking directly at him? He grabbed the bar top for support.

*"A pill he is
But still he is
All mine and I'll keep him until he is
Bewitched, bothered and bewildered
Like me.
Seen a lot
I mean a lot
But now I'm like sweet seventeen a lot
Bewitched, bothered and bewildered am I
I'll sing to him
Each spring to him
And worship the trousers that cling to him
Bewitched, bothered and bewildered am I."*

Clark started to blush. He knew the lyrics. He knew what was coming next.

*"When he talks he is seeking
Words to get off his chest.
Horizontally speaking
He's at his very best.
Vexed again
Perplexed again
Thank God I can't be over-sexed again
Bewitched, bothered and bewildered am I."*

Lola turned to the other side of the audience to sing to them. Absently, Clark noticed Toni went into her office.

*"Wise at last
My eyes at last
Are cutting you down to your size at last
Bewitched, bothered and bewildered no more
Burned a lot
But learned a lot
And now you are broke, though you earned a lot
Bewitched, bothered and bewildered no more
Couldn't eat
Was dyspeptic
Life was so hard to bear;
Now my heart's antiseptic
Since you moved out of there
Romance-Finis
Your chance-finis
Those ants that invaded my pants-finis
Bewitched, bothered and bewildered no more."*

Clark signaled to Frank he was taking a break. He just had to go backstage and see Lois. On his way there, he looked into Toni's office and saw that she was watching TV avidly. The sound was turned down low, but he could hear it. LNN was covering a new fire set by the Toasters. He was aghast when it realized it was his hotel, the Apollo. There were poor souls living there because that was all they could afford. Not to mention that his equipment was stashed under the bed. He had to help - somehow. But first he had to warn Lois so she could get out of there.

He saw Lois coming toward Toni's office, no doubt to spy on her again, and grabbed her by her arm. "Lois," he said in a low intense voice, "you have to get out of here now! Things are getting bad fast!"

Lois looked up at him, startled by the use of her real name. "How do you know my name," she said sotto voice.

Clark had to think fast. What would persuade her to leave? "The Toasters just torched the Apollo Hotel." He didn't mention that was his hotel. "I think Toni is on to you after this morning's article in the paper. She was pretty intensely upset by it. She knew it had to be from someone who was here when showdown with Johnny happened."

Lois quirked her lips in a smile. "What, she didn't believe our kiss was genuine?"

Clark smiled back. "Oh, but it was. But you are in danger.

You have to leave." He looked her over appreciatively, "But first, I suggest you change clothes into something less conspicuous."

"But I have another set."

"Cancel it. Your life is more important than a story."

"Well, it's clear you are not a journalist."

Was she kidding? He drew back and looked into her eyes. She was. Kidding that is.

"Go back to the Planet. I'll give you the rest of the story later." "As much as I can tell you," he thought. With that, he released Lois' arm, went to his locker and grabbed his dark sweater and black jeans. He left out the back door as fast as he decently could.

Chapter 5.

"Hold me close, sway me more"

Lois Lane stood stock-still in surprise, or maybe shock, looking at Charlie King disappear through the back door. As she watched she relived the memory of seeing his naked back when his clothes had been scorched off by one of the Toaster's flames. The flame that was meant for Johnny, but would have hit her square on if he hadn't gotten her out of the club somehow. She really did not have a clear memory of exactly how that had all transpired.

All she knew was that one moment she was in the club and the next she was on the sidewalk being held upright in his strong arms. She tried to keep him from going back into the club, but he had insisted.

She followed him into the club moments later and saw the clothes burned away from his back. Luckily for him, his back did not seem red and burned. What she *had* noticed was the very strong musculature thus revealed. Then they turned to see the "Toasters" name singed in black on the back stage wall.

Lois had come to the Metro Club as a ploy to meet Lex Luthor and get him to notice her. Her hope was to get the first one-on-one interview with the second wealthiest man in the world and Metropolis' greatest philanthropist. Along the way, she had come to discover Toni Taylor's involvement in the current gang war, which netted her an even bigger story and a front page one at that.

Speaking of that, she had come back here to spy again at the peephole and find out what Toni was doing. Shaking off Charlie's warning in her head, she went to the hole and moved the covering plates aside again.

Toni was all alone in her office watching a TV tuned to LNN and it was showing a raging fire in a run-down single resident only fleabag hotel. To Lois' on-looking horror, Toni suddenly smiled broadly and said something softly that Lois couldn't understand. What she could understand was Toni going to the wall safe, entering the combination and removing stacks of money. She retrieved a briefcase from under her desk and hastily stuffed the money inside. She then went inside the office bathroom and came out in pants and blouse and hurriedly threw on a trench coat.

Lois ran to her locker and quickly changed her spike heels for tennis shoes and grabbed her own raincoat and went to the back exit, waiting for Toni to emerge. Silently and in the shadows she followed Toni down the street.

Toni finally came to a burned out building with a sign still legible, saying "Future LexHarbor Development Site," along with a drawing of an ultra-modern building. Toni slipped into the condemned shell, still carrying her briefcase.

Lois walked down the alley at the side of the building Toni had entered, looking for a back door. Finding the back door, Lois slipped silently inside. She had begun maneuvering herself closer to the front when she accidentally tripped over a dangling cord. A rusted old toaster fell off the crate next to her. She frantically caught it before it crashed to the floor and revealed her presence.

Lois looked for a way to see the cleared area at the front unobstructed, and found some stacked crates that seemed pretty solid. She climbed up, thanking her climbing wall work at the local sports megastore, then watched as Toni moved around fallen walls and demolished furniture from the front door.

Toni stopped, standing in the center of a large eerie and dark space holding the briefcase out, as if it were an offering. One by one, each of the Toasters appeared, stepping out of different hiding places, holding their weapons and surrounding her.

Toni looked around at the group fearlessly. "Is this really necessary?"

After a moment the first Toaster took off his mask and asked roughly, "Did you bring the money?"

After a moment of staring and stony silence, Toni opened the briefcase, balancing it awkwardly on her uplifted knee. "One hundred thousand in Benjamins." After lowering her foot to the floor, she turned it and presented the open side to the Toaster so he could see.

The head Toaster was angry. "You said two."

Toni bit back, "Considering how badly you botched the hit on my brother, you're lucky I'm even here and willing to pay you. Do you realize I could have been killed?"

"Yeah, that would've been a real shame."

Lois, observing from her perch, was surprised a thug knew sarcasm. This was interesting, surprising, and damning for Toni. She wished she had her camcorder with her. What a great story this will make. Not only was Toni the head of Metro Gang, but also she had paid off the Toasters to torch the Riverfront area and take down her brother so that she could be the head of the gang. Talk about sisterly love!

Toni continued, unaware of Lois' presence, "Just don't forget who's running the show. The fires were supposed to stop as soon as I took over. What do you think you've been doing? Why torch that flea-bag hotel?"

"Having fun."

"Well, the fun stops now." Toni held out her hand for the flame weapons.

"Give me those things."

"Maybe I'll take this instead." The leader grabbed the briefcase from Toni.

"We've kind of decided to hold on to these handy gadgets."

"Listen punk -"

"No, you listen for a change. You and the Metros, you're nothin'. We could wipe you out by just pullin' a trigger."

Toni was furious. She had planned long and hard on the takeover from Johnny and beating Lex Luthor at his own game. "I made you! I gave you those weapons." She was not about to admit the source of the weapons.

"Yeah, and we're real grateful." The Toaster leveled his weapon directly at her and told the gang, "Take her."

Lois had moved even closer on the top of a very large crate, avid to hear every word. She watched in amazement and a bit of relish as the Toaster snatched the briefcase and his men grabbed Toni and wrapped her wrists with duct tape.

Toni made good use of what was left to her, her mouth. "Four of you against the Metros? You don't have a chance."

"Why just four? Why not forty? Or four hundred. Recruiting's a snap. Plenty of guys out there love to see things burn."

"Ah, genius, you don't have the weapons for them."

"Not yet, but we'll figure out how to make more. We're not as dumb as you think. And there are smart guys out there who like to see things burn too."

Lois in her hiding place tried to change her position and accidentally hit a bottle lying beside her on top of the large crate. She watched helplessly as the bottle rolled off the crate she was on and crashed to the cement beneath. The Toasters were startled

at the noise and two of them rushed toward her vantage point. The noise covered the sound of Lois moving on to a rafter beam.

Toni looked over in hope that someone was there to rescue her.

"Anything?" the leader asked his men as they returned to him. His men shook their heads.

"A broken bottle, that's all."

The leader said with some relish to Toni, "You wouldn't believe how big the rats get around here."

"Oh I believe it." Toni was still undefeated, giving the leader a fierce glare. Loyal Lou would find her and bring help. "What now? What about me?"

"Well, we've got a little bar-b-que planned for tomorrow. We thought we'd start with the wharf and work our way back to the Metro club. When we're done with that, we'll get back to you. If the rats haven't gotten you first."

The leader turned to one of his henchman and ordered, "Keep an eye on her."

Toni watched the designated Toaster settle against a crate for the first watch with a shake of her head and a sigh. At least they had tied her to a chair so she wasn't still standing and none of the large rats were in her vicinity.

Lois, still up on the beam, was trying to find a way down and out to the back door to get help from the MPD. She had her cell phone, but couldn't call in the presence of the armed Toaster. And then, to her horror, she found she was eye to eye to one of the large beady-eyed rodents. Right now, Lois was stuck between a rat and a hard place.

Clark had left the Metro Club as fast as he dared. Fortunately there were not many lights out back and the neighborhood of the club was not well lit. He jumped up to a four story building next door and rapidly changed to his tighter black pants and sweater. He had found, through trial and error, that the tighter clothes did not burn off of him in a fire. He still shuddered at the memory of the fire in the women's dorm at KU. He barely got out of there with his modesty intact after putting out the small fire.

At rooftop level, Clark sped rapidly to the Apollo. He could see the fire had been started at the first floor and in the debris of the cluttered dingy alleyways nearby. That left the roof and upper floors pretty much intact. The fire trucks were arriving and starting the fire hoses. The ladder trucks had not yet extended their equipment. Unfortunately he also saw that the water pressure in the fire hydrants was not very much in this neglected part of town.

Flying over to the top of the rusty fire escape, he avoided the lights playing over the building and entered the top floor through the end window. He opened doors along the way, telling each of the occupants to get out down the fire escape outside the hallway window. When he had them going out, he rushed over to the stairwell and played his freezing breath down at the flames.

Taking a moment to grab his suitcase with his electronic equipment, he went down to the next floor and got those residents going out the other fire escape on the front. He checked the equipment inside his briefcase with his X-ray vision, found it was intact and then continued fighting the fires through the remaining floors.

Bill Henderson had hopped a ride in a squad car when he found out there was a fire at the Apollo. He stood back, across the street and watched the firemen work. All of a sudden, he heard a voice by his ear.

"Bill, my gear is by your foot. Take it to the precinct and lock it up, please. I'll come and get it later."

"Kent?"

Henderson looked around, but no one was there. There was, however, a battered small suitcase standing by his left foot. As he

watched the fire further, men began coming down off the fire escapes and out into the street. The fire seemed to be dying down, almost of its own accord.

Satisfied that the fire was under control, Clark returned to the Metro Club to get the bug in Toni's office. He left his "rescue" clothes, which still stank of the fire and the chemicals the Toasters used in their flame guns on the roof of the building next to the Metro Club. He came in the back entrance wearing his bar clothes. A quick X-ray scan showed him that Lois was not in the building. Toni was not in her office and neither was her crew. He pulled the bug through the hole and put it in his pocket, trying to figure a way to get it to MPD.

When he got to the bar, Frank signaled he wanted a break, and Clark was left alone behind the bar, pondering what to do next. He made and drank a large glass of water. For some reason, fighting fires made him thirsty.

Maurice, the Matre D' who doubled as the stage manager, came up to Clark and said, without his fake French accent, "Have you seen Lola?"

Clark turned, startled. "No. I haven't since her last number."

"Well, she's due on again and we can't find her."

Clark was trying to think of a cover story for Lois, when Lou rushed up to him. "Do you know where Toni went?" Lou looked at Maurice and he slunk away.

"I last saw Toni head for her office right at the end of Lola's number."

"Toni told me you were going to help us out around the club more. True?"

"Yeah, she offered me a pay raise for it. I can always use the money."

Lou leaned over the bar. "Well, I have an idea where she is and she might be in trouble. Wanna come?"

"Yeah, sure. But Frank's got to cover the bar and he just left."

"I'll go get him. He smokes too much anyway. Meet me by the back door." With that Lou left for the back.

Just then Sgt. Gomez walked up to the bar dressed in a nice suit, blending with the patrons. Clark tried not to react in surprise. "What beer do you have on tap?"

Clark named the brews and stared at Gomez, trying to divine what he was here for. Suddenly it hit him. The bug. Gomez ordered his glass and Clark filled it and put it on a coaster in front of him with a flourish. "That will be \$9.20."

"Wow, expensive beer," Gomez said and laid out a ten.

Clark took the money and got the change and the bug and handed it to Gomez. Rather than just lay the money on the bar, as was the standard practice, he held it in his right hand and waited for Gomez to extend his hand palm up and then placed the change in it. Gomez put the change in his pocket and turned, surveying the room and casually drinking his beer.

Just then Frank walked back up. "Charlie, Lou wants to see you out back."

Clark turned to Gomez and said with a smile. "Frank here will take care of you. I've got to find a friend."

With that strange comment, Clark left Gomez standing at the bar looking puzzled.

Chapter 6.

"Long before it begins"

Bill Henderson was sitting at his desk, staring at Clark Kent's suitcase on the desk in front of him. Curiosity was the hallmark of a good police officer. Henderson stared at the CK monogram on the front of the battered brown small suitcase. It was almost a briefcase, but thicker. Clark Kent; Charles King. Did he plan to keep the initials in all his undercover identities?

He had left the fire after Kent had given him the suitcase because the fire seemed to be almost out. Somehow he felt he

needed to protect this suitcase. How had he not heard Kent come up to him from behind? Even in the ordered maelstrom across the street, he should have heard Kent make some noise.

He stared at the single lock. "Come, touch me," it seemed to whisper to him. "Open me. Find out Kent's secrets." Hesitantly he reached out his finger. Then, deciding there was enough of this shilly-shallying, he moved the bar sideways and the lock sprung open. It wasn't even locked, really. Maybe Kent hadn't had time to lock it amidst the excitement of the fire.

Suddenly, Henderson stopped in thought. Wait, how had Kent gotten from the Metro Club to the Apollo and up to his fourth floor room to rescue his suitcase? Maybe he had it with him at work. But then, why come to the Apollo to give it to him? On that confusion, Henderson lifted the top open. Taped to the inside of the lid was a poem, clearly printed from a computer and encased in plastic:

"Watch your thoughts; they become words.

Watch your words; they become actions.

Watch your actions; they become habits.

Watch your habits; they become character.

Watch your character; it becomes your destiny."

-Lao-Tze

Henderson reached into the pocket on the lid and pulled out a sketchbook. He flipped it open, all in the name of research, he told himself. He saw sketches of Centennial Park; the Metropolis skyline, obviously from an airplane; the MetJets Stadium with the LuthorPark name emblazoned on it, also from the air; and the outside of the Metro Club from the ground. They were all amazingly good and detailed. The very last sketch was of Lois Lane's face beautifully, almost lovingly, rendered.

Carefully he placed the sketchbook back into the pocket. He looked into the bottom of the suitcase and saw a simple laptop from the top P.C. maker in the country. A simple plastic pencil case neatly held all the wires to make connection. He saw another case with solid state miniscule bugs in them. They were the same bugs MPD was decoding with gear provided by the FBI. There were no labels on anything that screamed "FBI" or "NIA". "Good spy gear," he muttered to himself. He fastidiously put it back together the exact way it had been, latched it and then put it in the kneehole of his desk.

Henderson had sent Gomez to the Metro Club to see if Kent needed help when he himself had hopped in a squad car to go to the Apollo. Gomez should be back any moment to let him know what happened there.

Clark met Lou outside the back door. Lou tossed him a set of car keys and gestured to the black SUV. "We'll take this one. You drive, I assume."

Snatching the keys from midair, Clark smiled, "Oh, yeah. Where to?"

"Riverfront by Hobbs Bay," Lou said as he entered the passenger side. "I'll tell you where when we get closer."

Sliding under the steering wheel, Clark was happy to note he was quite familiar with this particular make of vehicle. In fact he had done his defensive driving qualifying test down at Quantico in this exact model. He quickly adjusted the seat backward and the steering wheel up for his build. As he inserted the key, he noticed Lou subtly rearrange his gun in his shoulder holster. 'Show time,' he thought. He peeled out of the alley fast but without squealing tires and executed the turn into the main street smoothly.

"Go over to 124th and take it down to Bay," Lou ordered.

Simply nodding in acknowledgement, Clark complied. Lou wasn't much of a chatterer and he was glad of that.

Lois Lane had spent the beginning of the night waiting for her opportunity to depart unnoticed by the Toaster below the

large beam that was now her temporary bed. Toni had fallen asleep, still bound to her chair. At least the *Rattus norvegicus* that had been her earlier bedmate had departed silently out of its own boredom. Suddenly her eyes popped open in instant alertness as she heard the voice of the Toaster.

“All right, I see you and I’m gonna get you before you cause any more trouble. Your little tail is mine.”

Lois was fully awake now, adrenaline pumping. She peeked cautiously over the edge of the beam, expecting to meet her demise but instead saw the Toaster aiming at a rat with his weapon. She looked over to see Toni, tied and asleep, and took her opportunity to depart by quietly dropping from the beam, back down to the crate and retraced her steps to the back door, silently and with relief, emerging into the still dark alley.

Looking about for any more Toasters on the loose, she cautiously moved down several blocks before flipping open her cell phone and pushing the rapid dial number for Henderson’s personal cell.

“Hello, Lois,” Henderson answered promptly, thinking caller ID was one of the world’s great inventions.

“Bill,” Lois whispered. “I’m down at the Riverfront. Toni Taylor is tied to a chair in the old warehouse at Bay and 124th. Turns out she *was* the head of the Toasters as well as the Metro Club gang until the Toasters staged a little coup.

“How do you know?”

“Because I followed Toni from the Metro Club to this place and managed to eavesdrop on her paying them off. Or trying to. They didn’t like the amount and have ambitions for a bigger group.”

Henderson rolled his eyes and muttered, “Just like you.”

“Whatever. The Toasters are out of control and planning to burn Riverfront to the ground, starting from the wharf and moving toward the city. Unless, that is we can stop them. But I don’t know that we can. They intend to burn the whole area down, starting...” Lois turned suddenly as she saw flame light up the sky as a building down the block began to burn. “Eeep! Right now. A building at Bay and oh, probably 128th just started to burn.”

Bill said calmly. “I’m in the situation room. I’ll call the fire dispatch right now. Try to get somewhere safe and let me know where you are.”

Clark and Lou were driving toward Bay when a car suddenly exploded into flame in front of them. “Whoa!” Clark pulled the vehicle over to the curb. “We’re not driving into that!”

“Then we’ll walk,” Lou bit out. He looked really upset. The sound of fire trucks suddenly began, but they sounded far away.

Clark turned to Lou. “Lou, what’s down at Bay Street? I’ll run down and do whatever you need.” Lou didn’t look like he did much running these days.

Lou looked desperate. “All right. Toni went to meet the Toasters in the warehouse there. I warned her they weren’t to be trusted, but...” He shook his head. He pulled out his gun and started to hand it over butt first. “I’ll follow you as fast as I can, but you may need this. For the Toasters. Those flame guns are mean. I told Toni not to give them those guns. She’s like a daughter to me.”

Clark patted Lou’s shoulder. “Keep the gun, I don’t need it. I’ll go get Toni and bring her back.”

“O.K. I have a backup in my boot anyway,” Lou muttered as Clark left the SUV. Lou left the car also and began walking past the flaming car, gun in hand, ready.

Clark began to run slowly - for him - past the burning car. Confident Lou could no longer see him, he increased his speed, thankful it was still night and he wouldn’t be seen. Unfortunately he was still in his bartending clothes and the white sleeves of his shirt were visible in the feeble light in this area.

He sped over toward the warehouse fire, ready to put it out, when he saw the Toasters marching down the center of the street, a trail of burning cars raging behind them. The Toasters paused before a storefront.

“Gentlemen, I’d like to propose a toast.”

Clark could see them all begin to adjust their weapons. He increased the magnification of his vision to the weapons and saw them move the dials from “Light” all the way up to “Toast”. He could hear the whine of the guns charging.

“Let’s cook.” The lead Toaster gestured to the storefront.

Clark accelerated his speed to the gear where time slowed down for others. He looked around frantically for a water source and found that the building that was their current target was still occupied by a business. Better luck was that it was an older building with a water tower on the roof. He leapt up to the roof, got up near the top of the water tower at the back and pushed. The tower came down satisfactorily, spilling its contents on to the Toasters and their weapons. As he expected, electricity and water didn’t mix and the weapons flamed out.

Clark could hear the 451 - arson - call from a nearing police car and left the arresting to them. He hoped they had a big wagon coming soon.

While the gang suddenly dropped the weapons, loudly exclaiming four letter expletives, and dancing about from the shock they had gotten, he dropped back to the ground and continued running toward the warehouse where Toni was supposed to have met the Toasters.

Clark saw Toni with his x-ray vision before he reached the door. She was struggling helplessly with her bonds and tied to a chair. Clark entered the front door and moved to her side to release her.

Toni looked over at Clark in surprise. “How did you find me?”

“I drove Lou over. He knew where your meet was. A burning car and the Toasters marching down Bay Street stopped us. They were, well, toasting everything. Lou’s behind me, but he doesn’t move fast anymore.”

Clark paused, pulled her upright off the chair and looked her in the eye. “Lou also told me you are in charge of the Toasters.”

Toni looked at Clark with pleading eyes. “Not anymore. They are out of control! We’ve got to get out of here before the Toasters come back!”

“The fire department and the cops are taking care of them right now. They don’t know that you are here, though.”

“Looks like you came through for me.”

“Looks like you let me down.”

Toni protested with a shake of her head. “I swear I didn’t know they were going to torch the Apollo. That was their own doing.”

Toni looked at the door at the sound of police and fire sirens approaching. She stared at Charlie for a moment, and then lowered her eyes. “I had to create a situation that would allow me to take over the Metros from Johnny. There was no other way.”

“Staging your brother’s fake hit isn’t the solution to any problem, Clark stated vehemently. “There’s always another way.”

“Charlie, please --,” Toni pleaded.

Just then, Lou walked in the door.

Lois had watched wide-eyed as the Toasters had marched down the street, flaming cars on the way. They were past her when they stopped in front of a storefront and aimed at it. All of a sudden, a large amount of water came off the roof and doused them. Lois looked up and could see the water tower now laying flat on the roof, its contents spilled. How had the tower collapsed at that particular time?

Fire trucks were now converging on the warehouse fire and also starting to work on the burning cars. Lois had seen the figure

of a man walk by and realized it was Lou from the Metro Club, moving at a determined pace toward the rat central Lois had just left and totally ignoring the dancing Toasters.

Turning to follow Lou, Lois was surprised to find a black and white pull up beside her.

The officer called out, "Are you Lois Lane?"

Startled, Lois turned and said, "Yes, that's me. What do you want?"

"Inspector Henderson called and asked the nearest unit to give you a lift to the precinct. He wants to talk to you."

Momentarily undecided, Lois' head swung from the officer's face, back down the street and then back to the officer. Finally she decided it was time to regroup. Maybe Bill had some information for her to help round out her story.

She nodded her acquiescence, the officer opened the back door for her and she slid in with a sigh.

Chapter 7.

"I can hear the sounds of violins"

Toni saw Lou and gave a sigh of relief.

Clark was watching Toni as he heard Lou wheeze through the clutter around the doorway and enter the cleared space. He saw Toni's eyes widen suddenly with a startled expression of - fear?

Clark turned around to see Lou pointing his gun at Toni, a grim look on his face.

"Lou? What is this?" Toni choked out.

In the light from the few working streetlights that filtered through the rubble of the semi-destroyed building, Clark thought he saw tears on Lou's face.

"You weren't supposed to be involved. I promised your Dad. You weren't to get hurt, but then you went and kicked Johnny out and hooked up with these fire freaks. We had a good gig with the Metro Club and the side action, but you had bigger plans. Johnny told me you weren't to be trusted, with your high falutin' ideas. I didn't put Johnny on a plane. He's here in town ready to take over again."

Toni said disgustedly, "Johnny couldn't get a bright idea rubbing two chopsticks together. We had to move into the future, Lou. Everything was going downhill, and going downhill fast. Crime isn't what it once was; payola doesn't work on every cop anymore. We needed to think ahead and Johnny wasn't doing that."

Toni moved slowly closer to Lou's gun hand while pleading with Lou. "Come over to my side. You've known me since I was a little girl. I'll make it well worth your while."

Lou was a man of few words to the end. He closed his eyes and fired his gun.

Time froze for Clark as he shifted into high gear and pushed the bullet just enough to get it past Toni's shoulder. It buried itself harmlessly into one of the crates. He had enough evidence on the whole Metro Gang-Toasters case to put them away, so he decided now was a good time to come out of undercover mode.

Lou's eyes opened and his mouth fell open as Toni stood there unharmed. Lou had had a lot of faith in his ability to hit a target with his gun. He had lived his life by it.

Toni closed her eyes and took a deep breath in relief. But her day was not going to get better. She looked at Charlie in puzzlement as he snatched Lou's gun away and stuck it in his waistband. Then Charlie held out his hand and said, "Give me your boot gun too, Lou." There was something different in his voice - quiet and commanding - and he stood up straighter.

Seemingly confused, Lou quietly did as Charlie commanded. Charlie slid the boot gun into his pocket. Then he turned to Toni.

"Toni Taylor, my name is Clark Kent and I'm an officer of the law. I hereby place you under arrest for arson and related criminal activity. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You

have the right to an attorney present during questioning. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for you. Do you understand these rights?"

Totally stunned and speechless, Toni sank back into the chair from which Charlie - no make that Clark - had recently released her. She murmured a soft "yes" on an exhaled breath that Clark could only hear with his special hearing.

Clark turned and addressed Lou. "Lou, what is your last name?"

Lou looked even more bewildered at the sudden turn of events. "Ahh, Corleoni?"

Clark raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Lou whatever-your-last-name-is, I arrest you for being an accomplice in premeditated arson and other criminal activities." He Mirandized Lou also and he produced two sets of plastic handcuffs and cuffed Toni and Lou individually, hands in front of them. It would be more comfortable in the patrol car that way. Clark knew they couldn't get away from him. The fight seemed to have gone out of Lou and Toni looked both chagrined and resigned.

Toni just stared at him openmouthed, bereft of any more words.

Clark pulled her up out of the chair rather gently and said, "Like I said. There's always another way. Come on, we're going out front. I'm sure we'll find a ride to a precinct. Since the nearest one was burned down by the Toasters, it will be a little further than usual."

Rather wearily in the dawning light of the new day, Lois climbed the back stairs to the precinct and followed the familiar path to Henderson's office.

Henderson looked up at Lois as she walked in, from her tennis shoes to her fancy dress to her now open dirty raincoat. "Well, look what the cop dragged in."

"Funny," Lois noted acerbically.

"Coffee?" Henderson asked as Lois flopped into his guest chair, feet out and splayed. He gestured to the plate at the front of his desk. "Bagel?"

"Please."

Getting up and over to his coffee pot, Henderson said calmly, "You know, Lois, sometimes you show up at the most inconvenient times." He turned and handed her a full paper coffee cup and a packet of pink artificial sweetener. He returned to his chair and looked over at her. "Nice singing, by the way. I didn't know you could sing like that and we've known each other, what, four years?"

Lois looked up startled from where she'd sat up and set the coffee cup on the other side of his desk and was adding the sweetener. "How did you...?" She restarted. "I didn't see you in the audience!"

Henderson quirked his lips. "What, you didn't notice the cameras? The great Lois Lane?"

Lois seemed to shrink in on herself. "Cameras?"

A satisfied full grin lit Henderson's features. "Hours and hours of videotape. Hours," he emphasized.

"Tape," Lois whispered, knowing he could torture her for many years with those tapes. Determinedly, she gathered herself and straightened up, brain finally kicking in as she grabbed a fresh bagel. She waved the bagel at him, "What, no jelly donuts? On a health kick here?"

Henderson snorted. "Nice change of subject. Now, here's what we're going to do. I am going to wrap up this case. *You* are going to the Daily Planet and write your story on Toni Taylor and the Toasters. Especially the demise of the Toasters at the hands of the local police and fire departments. If you hurry, you can make the afternoon online edition. Then around 10 a.m. tomorrow, you are going to come back here and give me a formal statement. We are closing down the Metro Club. I'll get your stuff out of your

locker and give the stuff to you then. Agreed?”

Lois sat munching her bagel and staring at Bill Henderson, thinking. There was more here than he was admitting. What was it? Finally, she said, “Agreed. But first I’m going home to change clothes. And probably write it from home. Can you get me a ride?”

Henderson rose from his seat in clear dismissal and nodded. “That sounds good. See you tomorrow, Lois. Oh, and you might let Perry know you are alive. He was a little concerned about your undercover work.”

Henderson walked Lois to his door. She knew when she was being abruptly dismissed. But why?

As Lois sat in the front police station lobby waiting for her ride, the things Henderson had said began to sink in. Cameras captured everything, so there was a sting at the Metro Club. The Metro Club was being shut down. Like a lightning strike, she realized Charlie was in jeopardy. What was she going to do? Could she do anything?

Just then, the young officer that had given her a ride came up to her again and began to usher her out the front door. “Where to, Ms. Lane. Home or the office?” he inquired cordially.

As Lois turned to go, she heard a great commotion at the back of the precinct, but couldn’t see anything.

Perry White read the afternoon online edition of the Daily Planet with great satisfaction.

“Metro Gang Linked to Toasters” the headline screamed. A file photo of Toni Taylor was included next to the text. And the byline, of course, read “Lois Lane.”

Perry glanced up at a casually dressed Lois lounging against his office door. “Great work, darlin’. How’d you find all this out?”

Lois smirked. “Well, first, I had to sleep with a rat.”

Perry’s eyebrows rose. “A rat as in...?”

“Relax, Perry. A rat as in a small mammal that inhabits nearly abandoned warehouses.”

Perry heaved a sigh of relief and relaxed back into his chair. “Henderson called me, you know.”

Lois pushed her shoulder off the doorframe and came in and sat in Perry’s guest chair, showing obvious interest. “No, I didn’t know that. He told me he knew you were concerned about me. When was that?”

“After your headline outing Toni as new head of the Metros. Bill called me to warn you off. Said you were in danger of busting his sting.”

Lois was triumphant that her hunch was verified. Still, she said disingenuously, “Sting? What sting? I went there to get Lex Luthor to give me an interview. I didn’t know about internecine rivalry in the Metro Gang or a hookup with the Toasters.”

Perry shrugged. “I don’t know. He was very hush hush. He called me again after you left his office early this morning and said the sting was over and the ‘people of interest’ were in custody.”

“Hmm. Well, he asked me to come back at 10 a.m. tomorrow. Maybe the details will come out then.” Lois tapped her foot in thought and picked idly at a thread on the upholstered arm of the chair. Apparently casually, she asked, “Did he happen to say what happened to the bartender? Was he arrested?”

Perry shook his head. “No, no he didn’t. He didn’t really say much of anything.” As an afterthought, he said, “Bill did say he did enjoy your singing, though. He wondered where you learned to sing so well.”

Lois laughed. “In church, believe it or not.”

“In church?” As far as Perry knew, Lois was not very religious.

“You know I’m a Navy brat, right?”

Perry nodded. “Admiral Sam Lane, currently stationed here

in Metropolis.”

“Right. Well, when I was growing up the best place to meet other kids was in church. So I sang in church choirs. It was really great when we were stationed in Naples, Italy with the Mediterranean Fleet. And I went to Italian opera there too. Dad was stationed in port and he wasn’t an Admiral yet, so we had time to be a family.”

Lois smiled at the memory and laughed a little. “Dad said he was tired of flying around a big ocean trying to find the postage stamp of a carrier flight deck to land on. That he wanted to stay on ground that didn’t move for a while. It was a good time. And I learned Italian! Not all of it suitable for polite company!” She winked at him.

Perry leaned over to speak to Lois confidentially, even though they were the only ones in the office. “Tell me the truth, Lois. How’d it feel to be on stage?”

“Well, it was pretty exciting, Chief. But I don’t think I could handle a career in show biz. I much prefer journalism.”

Perry smiled fondly at her. “Just you be careful out there, Lois. You know, it’s always been my policy to stand behind my reporters and their methods one thousand percent. Why, if you opened up that window, said you could fly, I’d back you up. I’d miss you, but I’d back you up.”

Chapter 8.

“When we dance you have a way with me”

After handing Toni and Lou over to the MPD and finishing the requisite paperwork, Clark was returning to the Apollo to see if he had any clothes or possessions left. Henderson offered to get him a ride in a black and white, but Clark preferred to walk.

The day was still young and new and he had some thinking to do. Walking was not a problem, because he didn’t get tired physically. Emotionally he was as vulnerable as any one else. Clark was really rather hurt by Toni’s callous actions and he didn’t really understand why. Granted, torching the Apollo was not her idea, but that of the Toasters run rampant. Nonetheless, she admitted she gave the nascent gang the flamethrower technology, but she stubbornly refused to say where she had gotten it herself. Was that due to fear of retribution from the person who had developed it?

Clark sincerely doubted she had ordered the development herself. Had someone with more funding and organizational infrastructure developed it and given it to Toni? If so, who benefited from clearing out the Riverfront area other than Toni? Suddenly it hit him and he flashed back on Lex Luthor’s conversation with Toni at the Metro Club. His eidetic memory replayed the conversation between Toni and Lex Luthor at the table at the Metro Club. He was startled to realize that was only three days ago.

“TT: ‘I think you will like this next act, Lex. It’s very much your style.’

LL: (suavely) ‘You have very good taste, Toni. I like your plans for the West River; slum clearance, uplifting the neighborhood, micromanagement, and as a result, growth and prosperity. And your proposition is interesting, but I have my own plans and bigger sources of revenue.’

TT: ‘I like your plans for LexHarbor, Lex, but aren’t you worried about making such a large investment in the Riverfront area at this time?’

LL: ‘My plans include schools, shops, restaurants, theaters, offices, apartments; a self-contained community. A giant step forward in urban reawakening. A new, bright jewel in Metropolis’ crown. Riverfront is currently a blight on the face of our fair city. LexHarbor will change all that.’”

Although his undercover work at the Metro Club was done, maybe his investigation into Lex Luthor was still hot. His thoughts ended as he arrived at the Apollo. He felt really sorry for

the former residents who had nowhere else to go and now no possessions to speak of.

The Apollo was still sealed off for the after-fire incident teams to do their forensic work, but Clark fished his badge out of his old suitcase where it had been safely kept by Henderson and showed it to the police at the door. As he walked up the four flights, he continued to reflect on the morning.

Bill Henderson was a bit of a puzzle to him. It was apparent he was a forthright honest cop, but he seemed to have a strange relationship with Lois Lane.

Clark recalled the meeting in Henderson's office after Toni and Lou had been processed.

Henderson had offered Clark a coffee and a bagel and gestured to his guest chair. "So, you do know that Lola Dane is really Lois Lane, a reporter for the Daily Planet" he stated casually.

Clark had nodded in assent. "Yes. I identified her from a sketch I made."

Henderson had cleared his throat, a somewhat guilty expression on his face. What was that?

"Yes, you saw her story on Toni taking over the Metro Gang. Thanks for the tip, by the way."

Clark shrugged, "Just doing my job. Toni was really going to hunt for the mole in the organization and I knew Lola...Lois would be suspect and I wanted to warn you."

Henderson had fixed Clark with a piercing gaze. "I've known Lois for some years and she is like a pit bull when she is after a story. Perry White, the Daily Planet editor and the others in office call her 'Mad Dog Lane' when she is on the hunt. I can't believe she didn't get into some kind of trouble while she was going after the information. Just how did she find out that Toni had taken over the Metros?"

Clark had not been able to keep the slight smile from his face as he recounted the story to Henderson. "Well, I had made a hole into Toni's office from the hallway to the kitchen. That's where I planted the bug inside."

"After I had put the bug from Luthor's table in the scotch can for pick-up I came back in and found Lola, er Lois, listening at the hole and she heard everything. So I wasn't surprised she had the information. I [b]was[b] surprised, though, that she went directly to a front page story the next day."

Clark continued, "That's when things became more dangerous. Toni walked in on the two of us in that hallway, listening."

Henderson leaned forward, intent on the story. "So what did you do?"

Clark could feel that he was blushing. "I, er, kissed her. For cover."

Henderson's eyebrow had risen in doubt. "And she didn't deck you with a Tai Kwan Do move?"

Clark couldn't suppress the smile. "Nope. She appreciated the, er... help."

Henderson had sat back and muttered under his breath, "Will wonders never cease?"

Clark had heard him, of course. He was puzzled but somehow warmed by the thought.

At the end of that thought he was standing in front of the destroyed door to his old room. He walked in and looked around. The window over the sink was broken out from the heat, plastic dishes were melted on the coated iron sink and storage unit and his bed and table were partially burned. The walls had burn marks on them. Clearly he wasn't sleeping here tonight even if he would be allowed to by the fire department.

He inspected his clothes. Everything smelled of fire and chemicals. He decided he needed new clothes. Besides, Henderson wanted him back in his office at 10 a.m. tomorrow for a final briefing and he needed his "duty suit" to look official.

That meant a trip home to his place just off Dumfries Road near Quantico, Virginia.

But how to get there? It was too dangerous to fly himself in broad daylight. But he could get himself over to Metropolis International Airport (MIX since MIA was Miami, Florida) via rooftop and hop the 10:10 a.m. to Ronald Reagan International Airport outside Washington, D.C (DCA). From there it was half-an-hour drive to home if there wasn't too much traffic on I-95. At least he would be driving opposite the morning commute into D.C.

Plan in mind, he took his suitcase and exited through the end window and up to the roof of the Apollo. At least on the rooftops, he just had to worry about news and traffic helicopters, since people never seemed to look up. Idly he wondered if he ever would be able to use his abilities openly. That would be so much easier, not to mention faster. After a good night's sleep in his own bed, he would hop the morning plane back to Metropolis in time for the meeting at Henderson's office. He felt a surge of excitement about the upcoming meeting.

The next morning Lois was a wreck getting ready for work. She'd tried on three suits and discarded them as too businesslike, too frilly or too unattractive. What was the big deal? She was going to work as usual and then making her way over to Henderson's office before 10 a.m. and picking up the small amount of stuff from her locker at the Metro Club. Henderson would fill her in on the sting operation and that would be that. What in the world was this knot in her stomach?

At her desk at the Daily Planet, Lois could finally take it no longer. She grabbed her purse out of the bottom drawer and went to Perry's office door.

"Perry. I'm off to give Henderson my statement on the Metro Club investigation. I'm just sorry I didn't get the interview with Lex Luthor. He only came that one night."

Perry rocked back in his chair and turned to speak to Lois.

"Well, you caught another fish instead. You'll get that Luthor interview yet. Say hello to Henderson for me."

"Will do." With that, Lois was across the pit, on to the elevator, down to the basement parking lot, to her Grand Cherokee and into the driver's seat. She squealed the tires as she exited the garage rapidly. Consequently she was into the precinct 10 minutes early.

Approaching the front desk, she said, "I have an appointment with Inspector Henderson this morning, Murphy."

Murphy looked at his book, then his watch and waved his pencil over his shoulder. "Go on in."

Lois charged on by the desk, knowing very well the path to Henderson's office.

"Inspector Henderson said you'd be 10 minutes early. He was right," Murphy offered as she flew on by.

Henderson's door was closed, but she opened it, knowing Murphy had alerted him about her arrival. She charged in and saw Henderson standing behind his desk, facing a man in a black suit. She noticed the man was tall with broad shoulders, highly polished black shoes and black hair. The suit was nicely tailored.

"Oh, I didn't realized you had someone with you!"

Henderson looked past the man and smiled at her. "Come on in, Lois. You're early, but we're ready for you."

"We?"

Henderson's smile broadened as the man turned around to face the door.

"Charlie!" Lois exclaimed as she saw the face of Henderson's guest. She felt like running to him and giving him a hug. She had been really worried about him.

Henderson's smile grew even wider. "Lois, I'd like to introduce you to Special Agent Clark Kent of the FBI. Agent Kent, this is Lois Lane, top reporter at the Daily Planet."

“We’ve met,” Clark smiled his dazzling toothpaste ad smile and walked toward her, hand outstretched.

Numbly, Lois extended her hand. “Special Agent? FBI as in Federal Bureau of Investigation?” Lois recovered herself and smiled. “So you do more than mix drinks. Plant bugs and cameras, perhaps?”

Clark gently shook her hand and moved closer to Lois. “Touché, Miss Lane. My enjoyment of your singing was a genuine bonus on this operation.” He moved even closer and dropped his voice, “And I told you I’d give you the story later. Well, later has come.”

Lois replied just as softly, “Er, how much detail does Henderson know?”

“Not everything,” Clark whispered and winked before dropping her hand, turning and drawing her over to one of the two guest chairs with a gentle hand on her lower back.

No one ever touched Lois Lane like that, gently steering her path somewhere. Strangely though, she realized she liked it. He saw her seated before he sat himself.

Henderson seated himself in his desk chair at the same time, eyebrow raised, obviously enjoying the little byplay between them. He saw them continuing to stare at each other and decided it was his job to get the ball rolling.

Henderson lifted a large paper bag from the floor beside his desk and plopped it on the top with a thunk as loud as he could make it. The paper bag was folded and stapled at the top and “Lola Dane locker” was written in marker pen on the front. “Lois,” he said rather loudly, “here’s the stuff from your locker like I promised.”

Lois tore her eyes from Charlie/Clark’s face and actually blushed! Henderson was totally amazed. He had never seen Mad Dog Lane act that way around anyone.

Lois recovered and reached for her satchel/purse. “Here’s my statement all typed up nice and neat and I’ll sign it in your presence.” She began to hand it to Henderson and he gestured to Clark, a small smile on his lips. “He reads it too,” he said by way of explanation.

Clark appeared all business as he accepted the pages from Lois and began to read. His eyebrows crept up his forehead in incredulity as he read. “You followed Toni from the Metro Club? Climbed on crates? You heard all this? Too bad you didn’t have a recorder with you.” Clark had silently noted that she stated the building had a sign on it “LexHarbor Development Site.”

Lois smiled. “Yeah, I thought that too at the time. But I have a good memory.” She was glad she had left out a comment about sleeping with rats. Henderson would have enjoyed that, but this was going into court records.

“Apparently so. You sure have convincing evidence against Toni.” Clark handed the statement to Henderson who skimmed it and emitted what appeared to be a satisfied grunt. He handed it back to Lois with a pen and she signed it. Then he passed it to Clark and he signed it as a witness. Clark felt a sense of accomplishment at signing his own name on his first case. “O.K. Lois, you can go. Thanks for the statement and the work, uninvited though it was, it proved to be key evidence.”

Lois felt back into the chair, hand to her heart. “Be still my heart! Wild Bill Henderson gave me a compliment!”

Clark stared at her, utterly entranced by her playfulness and animation. Oh, what he would give to have that directed at him.

“O.K., kids, you can both go. I’m done here. How about you, Special Agent Kent?”

Smiling, Clark said, “Yes, I’m done here too. We’re both out of here.”

Lois rose to leave and remembered something. “Oh, and Bill, Perry says hello to you too.”

Henderson smiled back. “Perry’s a good guy. You should listen to him more often.”

Clark went to the door first and opened it to let Lois pass through. “And I owe *you* a story.” He heard Henderson laugh softly as he closed the door behind him.

Clark and Lois walked companionably but silently through the precinct to the front door. Murphy stared at them as they exited to the steps.

Lois stopped at the bottom. “Where to?”

“How about lunch?” Clark leaned close to her and whispered conspiratorially, “Interrogation *always* goes better over lunch.”

Lois’ laughter pealed freely. “Interrogation, hunh? I thought you were giving me a story for the paper.”

Clark was transfixed by her unfettered laughter. He cleared his throat. “Where’s a good place for lunch around here?”

“Around here? This is a police station. The only thing near here is ‘Donuts-to-go’. Note the plural in the name. How about Centennial Park?”

“Well, lunch in a park sounds great. What, is it like Tavern on the Green in New York or something?” Clark was suddenly worried about his finances as an image of the very posh New York eatery sprang to mind.

Lois laughed again. “Not hardly. But there is a very nice hot dog stand there. Actually that’s a misnomer, it has way more than just hot dogs. How they get that variety of food there I don’t know.”

“Sounds great. My car is right over there.” He gestured toward the parking lot, still smiling. He couldn’t seem to stop smiling.

Lois looked him over very obviously head to toe, playing it up, taking in the trim fitted pants, narrow belt, and starched white shirt and thin black tie. “Well, you look fit enough. How about we walk. Do you like to walk?”

Clark blushed, happy she appeared to like what she saw. “I love to walk. Lead the way. I’m new in town and have no clue how to get to Centennial Park from here.” They began walking slowly. “You’re not from the local fibi office?” She pronounced it as one word, not three initials.

Clark was confused. “Fibi?” Then it hit. “Well, I’ve never heard it called that. Especially in front of a,” he used two fingers on each hand to make quotation marks, “Special Agent.”

Lois laughed delightedly. It was clear Clark didn’t take himself too seriously.

“I run.”

“You run?” Again, Clark was confused. “Is this verb conjugation? I run, we run, he, she, it runs?”

Another infectious laugh issued forth. “No. In the morning, I run for exercise. Keeps the mind sharp and gives the ability to climb crates in dilapidated warehouses. I feel like running right now, but I can’t in these shoes and this suit. I also practice climbing on the wall at the local MegaSports. Bet I can climb faster than you.”

This time it was Clark who laughed whole-heartedly. “No way, lady. I can climb faster than you.” He couldn’t remember when he had enjoyed walking with someone so much. Lois filled his senses in a way that no one else had. Her smell, her voice, the sense of her movement beside him surrounded him and seemed so right. They continued to the park, Lois providing running commentary on local sights since Clark was new to the city.

Chapter 9.

“Dear but my eyes will see only you”

“So I guess you don’t live in Metropolis? Everyone here knows Centennial Park. It’s where everything happens that’s notable.”

“No, I’m from out of town.” - ‘Way out of town.’ - “I rent an apartment near Independent Hill in Virginia. It’s near Quantico, where the FBI lab is. I was a Lab Rat for two years. This was my first field assignment.”

“You’re first? Wow, I wouldn’t have guessed.”

Her comments warmed Clark’s heart and her presence walking beside him sent a heat wave through the rest of his system.

“Yep. Our lab coats had signs on the back; capital L, lower case a and b, capital R, lower case a and t.”

“You’re kidding.” Lois’ laughter pealed forth.

“Yep.” Clark gave her his megawatt smile. “I am.”

Too soon, the park came into view. It was a shady place with many park benches and the promised hot dog truck labeled “Camino Real.”

“Strange name for a hot dog truck,” Clark mused.

“Yeah. ‘Royal Road.’” Lois answered.

“You speak Spanish?” Clark asked. Of course, he did, in many varieties; Castilian, American Spanish and Catalan.

“Nope.” She answered and turned and smiled at him, “But my sister Lucy lives in Los Angeles. Does that count?”

They reached the food truck and perused the choices. “Oh, Polish knackwurst with sauerkraut. Yes!” Clark exclaimed, but he politely waited for Lois to order.

Lois stepped up to the truck and said, “Hot dog and diet soda please. And a Polish with kraut for the gentleman. What kind of drink do you want, Clark?” She proceeded to pass a \$20 bill to the vendor.

“A regular soda. But I asked you to lunch. This is my treat,” Clark protested.

Lois shrugged. “I buy you lunch, you give me a story. Seems like a fair deal to me.”

They got their order and dressed their respective dogs, a little mustard for Lois and a lot for Clark. Personally, Lois thought it would be a miracle if he could eat that and not get something on his suit.

As they carried their food and drink carefully to a nearby bench, Lois asked “Too macho to let the lady pay, big boy?”

Clark gently shook his head so as to not dislodge any food or drink. “No, not that. But I asked you to lunch. After all you helped me with the case.”

“Well, that wasn’t the original plan,” Lois stated.

“What was the original plan?”

“I was there to get the first one on one interview with Lex Luthor, that was all.”

“That fact wasn’t in your statement.”

Lois had set her drink on the bench and waved the free hand dismissively. “Wasn’t germane to the case at hand.”

Clark tried to keep his features neutral and his voice even. “Why do you want to interview Lex Luthor?”

Lois snorted a very unladylike sound. “Because he is the second richest guy in the world and a great philanthropist in Metropolis, if not New Troy or the nation.”

She turned to him to change the subject. “So what are you doing this afternoon?” As soon as it was out of her mouth, she realized that perhaps that was a little too forward. “If you can tell me, that is,” she finished for a recovery.

Clark was relieved at the change in topic. “Hunting for an apartment. I lived at the Apollo.”

The change in Lois was instantaneous. Her eyes widened in horror. “You did? And it burned down last night.” She touched his knee in sympathy.

Clark nodded freely, having successfully eaten his wurst and kraut without damage to his person. “Well, I was living there for the cover. That was a good thing, because Toni Taylor visited me there to check me out.” Clark stumbled to a stop. “Wait, that didn’t come out right. She was there to check that I was who my cover said I was.”

Lois was now suppressing laughter and removed her hand from his knee. Clark felt the sudden loss.

“I think your first statement is more correct than you realize,

but I understand. After all, this is 2003 and a new age. Well, she said she was mad at the Toasters for torching the Apollo. Maybe that was why.” Lois’ eyes were twinkling.

Lois finished her dog and neatly wiped her hands on the napkin, turning to Clark. “O.K. You’ve read my statement about what happened. I want to know your side; what happened to you?”

“So this is the interrogation, the price for the food?”

“Yep.” Lois wiggled her fingers, hand palm up. “Gimme.”

“Greedy much, are you?”

A thought appeared to suddenly hit Lois. “Hey, did you see how that water tank on the top of the building got spilled right over the Toasters?”

“You saw that?” Clark almost squeaked.

“No, I saw the Toasters hopping around in the sparks from their wet weapons. What did you see?” Suddenly she waved her hand dismissively. “Wait, I’ll get confused. Start from where you left me after telling me to get out of the Metro Club and promised me a story later.”

Clark took a deep breath. “O.K. I was going backstage after your ‘Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered’ number and I heard through the hole into Toni’s office that the news was saying the Apollo was on fire. I just had to go see if I could help and maybe get some of my stuff.” He shrugged with what he hoped was a guileless look on this face.

To get attention back to Lois, Clark said, “I have a question for you that wasn’t in your report. What made you decide to follow Toni down to the Riverfront? You just said you did it, not why.”

“Well, after you left, I looked through our spy hole and saw Toni watching the report of the fire on LNN. She smiled and looked quite happy about it.”

Clark held up a hand to stop Lois. “Wait, Toni was happy about the Apollo being torched?”

Lois nodded. “Yep, that’s what her expression said. Or maybe more satisfied. But later she chewed out the Toasters for starting the fire. But maybe it was because she didn’t order it.”

“Suddenly I don’t feel so bad about arresting her.” At the look from Lois, he continued, “Not that I really ever did. Feel bad, that is. Go on with your story.”

“Toni then went into the office restroom and changed into pants and started throwing money into a suitcase. I figured it was payola time for someone and I decided to follow her. So I got my tennis shoes on and waited outside in the dark for her to leave. Then I followed her.”

Taking up the story at the common point, Clark continued. “Well, when I got back I found Toni was gone and Maurice came looking for you, so I assumed you had left as a result of my warning. Foolish me! Then Lou rushed up looking for Toni and he asked me to help him. I was supposed to start working for him for more pay. I was hoping that was an in to find out what was going on, but it turned out to not be necessary.”

“So Lou said he knew where Toni was going and had me drive him down to the Riverfront. We got to the burning cars and had to walk from there. I went ahead since Lou doesn’t walk very fast.”

“So did you see how that water tower came down and soaked the Toasters? As I said, when I got there, they were all hopping around soaking wet and mini lightning bolts were going off.”

“Yeah, that was quite a sight,” Clark smiled broadly. “But I didn’t see the tower come down. Maybe one of the fire departments did something.” He hurried on before she could question him further.

“Anyway, I ran on by and got to the warehouse and released Toni. She admitted she was in charge of the Toasters and I told her the cops and fire departments were rounding them up. Then Lou finally made it to the warehouse and came in.”

“Yes, I saw him walking down the street. But I didn’t see you earlier.”

Clark shrugged then shook his head in dismay. “I never should have believed Lou when we were in the car. He said Toni was like a daughter to him. That sure isn’t consistent with what he did in the warehouse.”

“I almost followed Lou back to the warehouse, but an officer sent by Henderson pulled up and offered me a ride to the station. So what did Lou do?”

“Lou came in and pointed his gun at Toni. She was surprised, let me tell you! Funny thing was, Lou was crying while he did it. So clearly he had mixed feelings about the deed.”

“Oh, my.” Lois had a hand to her mouth in amazement. “Did he shoot?”

“Yep. But he missed, fortunately. The bullet went somewhere in the crates.”

“Maybe he missed on purpose? You said he was crying. Did he explain why?”

Clark shrugged. “He gave a rambling explanation about being loyal to Toni’s Dad and that Johnny was still in town ready to take the Metros back.”

“Maybe when he said she was like a daughter to him, he meant she should be in her limited obedient daughter role, not trying to run a big organization.”

“Wow. That’s a good thought. I didn’t think of that. Toni had big plans to go legit and make the Metros the foundation of a real corporation.”

“Well, you’re not a woman. You wouldn’t naturally think of that.”

Clark grinned again. “I’m glad you noticed that I’m not a woman. But I always thought I was enlightened. My sister would kill me if she thought I was acting like a chauvinist pig.”

“You have a sister too?”

“Yep. Same age as me. I’m her foster brother.”

Clark snapped his fingers and pointed at Lois. “You left your stuff from the Metro Club locker on Henderson’s desk.”

Lois waved her hand dismissively. “Henderson will give it to Murphy and I will pick it up when I get my car. What made you think of that now?”

“Shoes?”

“Shoes?”

“My sister Rita loves shoes. We’d hit all the shoes stores in Wichita and Kansas City every time we went shopping. She has a closet full. And she would love those shoes you wore with the white and crystal beaded dress you had on last night.”

“Wichita and Kansas? I thought you lived in Virginia.”

“I do. But I was raised in Smallville, Kansas.” Clark nodded, “Yes, I’m from Kansas. I’m a graduate of the University of Kansas.” He flashed his KU ring on his right hand. “There. My official KU ring.”

“University of Kansas is abbreviated KU? Why?”

Clark leaned over to her as if imparting a great secret, plus it was an excuse to get closer to her. “We don’t really know. We think that it is because ‘UK’ might lead to inappropriate nicknames. But really, ‘UK’ is the University of Kentucky. They got there first, I guess.”

Just then Lois was startled to see Clark suddenly jump off the bench and snatch a toy football from midair. She watched in fascination as he changed his grip and threw it expertly to a kid running toward them to retrieve the errant ball. She was surprised at how much she enjoyed watching him move in action. He threw and expert spin with a crummy toy football.

The kid’s worried look changed to one of glee as he saw the ball being passed to him and he caught it. “Thanks, man,” he called as he went back to the scrimmage of kids toward the middle of the Park.

“Wow. We could use you on the MetJets team. They’re in the

toilet now.”

“I know. But they don’t need my help. I’d rather chase the bad guys. I spent two years in the forensics lab at Quantico learning just how mean, nasty and dirty humanity can be.” Clark gave her a rather intense stare.

This really meant something to him. Like her penchant for trying to put the bad guys behind bars with her hard-hitting journalism. Lois shook her head as if to clear it. “So back to last night. What then?”

“I had enough evidence, so I identified myself and arrested both of them. I handcuffed them and took them out to the street and got a ride to Henderson’s precinct.”

“I was there talking to Henderson. We must have just missed each other!”

They sat on the bench facing each other and looking into each other’s eyes. Clark blinked first. What was it about this woman that fascinated him so, he wondered. Everything about her entranced him like no other he had ever met.

Lois broke eye contact. “Well, this has been fun, but I need to get back to the Daily Planet and find a new story. In my business, you are only as good as your last story.”

Clark stood and held out his hand to help her stand up. “Well, in my business you’re only as good as your last crime investigation. Maybe we’ll work on something together again. Thanks for showing me the way to Centennial Park.” Clark was reluctant to let her small and dainty hand go, but he knew he had to.

They began to walk together back to the precinct, talking about nothing in particular, but enjoying each other’s company.

Finally they reached Lois’ Jeep and she propped her large purse on the hood. “Hold up a minute.” She started fishing around and pulled out her business card holder. Taking out her business card, she pulled her pen from her story notebook and wrote a phone number on the back. “Here’s my home phone number. Give me a call when you get settled in and we’ll do lunch.”

Clark held his breath. Somehow her ‘we’ll do lunch’ didn’t sound meaningless and pro forma at all. He looked at the silver card case with the initials “LL” engraved on it and commented, “Nice card case there.”

Lois smiled. “A gift from my Dad when I got hired on at the Daily Planet.”

“Lois, I, unh, don’t have a card, local phone or an address here at the present, but I intend to shortly.” He fixed her with his large brown eyes. “Give me another of your cards and I’ll give you my phone number in Virginia. You can leave a message and I can pick it up remotely.” ‘Or when I’m there at night now.’

Her smile got bigger. “Great idea!” She gave him another card and he wrote a phone number on it and handed it back. “Sorry, it’s a long distance number.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’ll call from work.” She looked up at him then and said softly, “Or maybe not.”

Gathering herself, she started to walk to the precinct front door. “I’ve got to get my stuff from Murphy.” She waved a farewell and began walking, feeling that if she didn’t go now, she might never want to.

Clark stood transfixed as she left and then sighed and went to his company car. He had to apply to the local FBI office and then find a place to live in Metropolis. For now he could commute at night, flying himself to his apartment on Dumfries Road.

On the highest floor of Lex Towers, Lex Luthor was in his office with his loyal factotum, Nigel St. John. Lex was standing next to his gleaming model of LexHarbor, his design for the Riverfront area near Hobbs Bay.

Nigel had just brought the news that the Riverfront had burned down from the Toasters actions.

Lex queried Nigel to be sure of his facts. “Every parcel on the list is destroyed? That is most excellent. There is nothing like a little firestorm to lower prices on real estate. We’ll move directly to phase two. I’d like to break ground on LexHarbor sometime next month.”

Nigel’s suave tones asked, “But sir. What about Toni Taylor. Won’t she, shall we say, ‘spill the beans’ on your giving her the flamethrower weapons the Toasters used?”

Lex shook his head. The action did not move a hair on it. “No, I wouldn’t worry about that. Toni Taylor and I have an arrangement. Things haven’t worked out exactly the way she hoped but she won’t spend much time incarcerated. When she gets out, she knows I’ll be properly grateful for her silence.”

“But sir. What shall we do with the weapons?”

“Destroy them. The plans for them, too. Should we ever need to revive the Toaster technology, it’ll be easy enough.”

“Yes, sir. I will get to that quickly.” With that, Nigel left the room via the private elevator.

“I know you will. That’s what I pay you for,” Lex said to himself softly after the elevator doors closed. He looked at the LexHarbor model like a proud father, already looking into the future, envisioning the reality.

Chapter 10.

“Only you have that magic technique”

Clark Kent sat patiently at the table in an interview room in Metropolis’ Women’s Central Jail. It was a small room, but it was to be used only by one accused person at a time, thus affording privacy between lawyer and client, or, in this case, interrogator and client.

Clark looked up as the guard ushered in Toni Taylor, not so stylish now in a jail drab jumpsuit. But she didn’t look intimidated by either Clark or her surroundings. The guard left them and returned to his post outside the door.

“Hi Charlie,” Toni said softly.

“Clark,” he replied firmly.

“Clark,” she acknowledged. “Why are you here?”

“Trying to help you.”

Toni snorted derisively. “Yeah, sure you are.”

Clark leaned forward to her across the table. “Toni, you are in serious trouble. The Toasters burned a large section of the Riverfront to the ground. That makes you responsible for Arson in the First Degree.”

Clark slid a piece of paper over to her so she could read along and then recited from memory, quote:

“A person is guilty of arson in the first degree when he or she intentionally damages a building or motor vehicle by causing an explosion or a fire and when (a) such explosion or fire is caused by an incendiary device propelled, thrown or placed inside or near such building or motor vehicle; or when such explosion or fire is caused by an explosive; or when such explosion or fire either (i) causes serious physical injury to another person other than a participant, or (ii) the explosion or fire was caused with the expectation or receipt of financial advantage or pecuniary profit by the actor; and when (b) another person who is not a participant in the crime is present in such building or motor vehicle at the time; and (c) the defendant knows that fact or the circumstances are such as to render the presence of such person therein a reasonable possibility.”

“2. As used in this section, “incendiary device” means a breakable container designed to explode or produce uncontained combustion upon impact, containing flammable liquid and having a wick or a similar device capable of being ignited.

The Toaster’s flamethrowers certainly qualify.”

Clark continued, “I know we went over this when you were booked at the precinct, but maybe by now it has begun to sink in. Arson in the first degree is a class A-I felony, and although no

one died by your hand, you are facing a life sentence in jail.”

Toni looked up from the paper defiantly. “So, do the crime, do the time.”

Sitting back in his seat, Clark regarded her silently. Something was off. She had had such big plans but was willing to spend her life behind bars?

“You know,” he began softly, conversationally, “I was undercover at the Metro Club for something other than your or Johnny’s activities.”

Toni’s eyes narrowed. “I never got a clear idea of who you work for. You said ‘officer of the law,’ and I sort of assumed MPD. But maybe not.”

“Not.” Clark smiled. “Federal Bureau of Investigation.”

Toni’s face changed from surprise to calculation. She was a smart woman and Clark was hoping for a deal.

“Sooo.” Toni drummed her fingers in thought. “Interstate or overseas crime is the FBI bailiwick. But Metro and the Toasters stuff was strictly local. Although I hoped to go bigger.” She paused and then continued, “And eventually legit.”

“You can’t do that behind bars. Even if you don’t get life, you’ll be an old lady when you get out. And that would be a shame.” Clark smiled again.

“What do you need?”

“Where did you get the Toaster’s weapons? You didn’t design and build them yourself. Terrorist weapons are under my jurisdiction.”

“I can get killed in here, you know. Some people have really long tentacles. If I want to get out of here in one piece, I just can’t blatantly hand information over to you. The Boss has snitches everywhere. Maybe even in this room.”

Clark had checked with his special abilities. There was no surveillance gear of any kind in the room, but she couldn’t know how he knew that. “The Boss?” he asked quietly.

Her hands were now resting on the table in front of her and she made a distinct cutting motion with her right hand. There would be no more discussion about The Boss.

Clark gave a small nod. He understood her fears. Maybe he would even check that she was O.K. from time to time.

She said softly, “The cops cleared out my office, right?”

Clark nodded again.

“In the desk was an invitation to Lex Luthor’s White Orchid Ball at the beginning of next month. Use it and go.”

Whoa. Clark’s eyebrows rose in amazement. Was she handing him Lex? He looked at her questioningly. Toni sat back and looked impassive. “That’s all I have to say. Get the guard, I’m ready to go back.”

As Clark walked through the front doors of the Daily Planet, he felt the same sense of awe that he had in walking into the FBI Headquarters in Washington, D.C. for the first time. Journalism wasn’t his profession, but he had worked on the Smallville High and KU school papers and wasn’t a bad writer. Lately his writing had been restricted to dry technical reports, but he hoped to change that, someday. Exactly how he hadn’t yet figured out.

He went to the directory by the elevator bank and found the floor for “Perry White, Editor.” Smiling, he got in the car and pushed the button for the floor. It was mid morning and he was alone in the car. He casually pulled down his glasses and looked through the doors to see what was on the other floors as he ascended.

Clark emerged into the Bull Pen area and just stood and looked around. A woman passing from the coffee break area stopped in front of him and said in a throaty voice, “Well, hello there, handsome. Can I help you find something? Me, maybe?”

The attitude and the attire of the woman took Clark aback.

The dress was a barely there sundress and it was not summer outside. She extended her hand to him, backside up and arched as

if he was supposed to kiss it in the bygone European manner. "I'm Cat Grant, Daily Planet entertainment and personality columnist. No doubt you've read my work, Cat's Corner."

Yes, indeed he had, but he wasn't about to tell her what he thought of it to her face. He shook her hand. "Hi, I'm looking for Lois Lane." He smiled his medium-wattage ingratiating smile.

"Well, she's not here right now. Out on assignment. There's her desk over there. Take the guest seat there and wait for her if you want. If you need anything else, let me know." She patted his chest in a too familiar manner that made him uncomfortable and left to go over to her desk. He noted that fortunately it was a ways away from the one she had pointed out as Lois'. After she had seated herself primly, in a manner in direct contrast to her attire, she fixed Clark with a stare as he still stood by the elevators. He moved down into the pit, found Lois' desk and sat in the chair beside it. He noticed it was just outside Perry White's office. That spoke to him of Lois' status with the paper.

Outside the Daily Planet, a cab pulled up to disgorge a slight Young Man with a mustache and beard wearing baggy jeans, jeans jacket, a stocking cap pulled low over his eyes, and a tool belt around his waist. He entered the building without hesitation as if familiar with the route.

Clark saw a Young Man exit the elevators and walk toward him and sit down in the desk chair right beside him. Apparently not noticing anyone in the guest chair, he rotated the chair so his back was to Clark, and sat with a tired sigh. He took off his shoes, and began rubbing his feet. He was proceeding to take off his jacket and remove his T-shirt when Clark cleared his throat loudly, then said, "Maybe you want to do that somewhere else?"

Startled, Lois turned around to see Clark in her guest chair. In the process of taking off her cap, she said "Oh, I didn't see you there."

Clark grinned. "Yeah, I got that. I see you are still going undercover. Personally, I liked Lola Dane better."

Lois removed the cap and shook her head to let the hair fall. Clark felt his throat constrict at the sight. She continued her disrobing, fully removing the jacket, unperturbed by his presence. Clark's eyes widened as he saw her feel her chest through the T-shirt. It was a chest noticeably smaller than he remembered from the Metro Club. She evidently was feeling a terrible tightness. He was beginning to feel one too. She grabbed a pair of scissors off the desk, then lifted up her T-shirt just enough to reveal the bottom of a large Ace Bandage and started to cut. She expertly maneuvered under the T-shirt, cutting away, finally unraveling the bandage and pulling it through the sleeve of the T-shirt. She took a deep breath, sitting back in her chair.

Clark was in awe. He thought Lois looked great in an evening gown, but her unfettered bosom under a plain white T-shirt overwhelmed him. To give himself time to recover, he said, "I like the beard. But the mustache isn't working for me."

Lois suddenly remembered and touched her face.

"Want me to do it?"

Lois nodded and Clark stood up partially, reaching over and taking the corner of the mustache and then ripping it off, holding it as he sat back down.

"OUCH! Hey," Lois protested. "I thought you were the undercover expert. That hurt!"

Clark shrugged. "I didn't have any artificial face hair. Mine comes naturally." He stroked his clean shaven jaw, then patted it gently.

"Yeah, rub it in." Lois said. She saw Perry White come charging out of his office like a bull at a rodeo. Lois quickly grabbed her jacket and put it back on.

Clark blushed as he avidly watched her do it.

"Hey, what's the commotion?"

Lois demonstrated by pulling off the beard. "OUCH!" Then

she rubbed her chin in imitation of Clark a moment before and raised her eyebrow at him. She turned to White and exclaimed, "I nailed 'em cold, Chief." She pulled out a tiny camcorder and pushed "play."

Lois, in her Young Man get-up, is helping make the arrest of a band of car thieves at the Metropolis pier.

"You're in the picture, so who took the picture, Lois," the Chief asked.

"Henderson."

"Busy boy," Clark said under his breath.

Perry White turned his attention full on to Clark. "And you are?"

"I'd like to see you in your office, Mr. White." I didn't sound like a request, but more like an order. "Along with Lois."

Perry straightened up, a little surprised at the stranger's tone and then waved them both in. "Well, come on in, then."

Perry walked behind his desk and sat down in his chair, looking at Clark expectantly.

Clark gestured Lois into the far chair and remained standing in front of the desk. He reached in and smoothly took out his identification wallet and flipped it open to the badge, then the ID card. He held it out for Perry to see it clearly, then switched it to his left hand and extended his right to Perry for a handshake. "Clark Kent, Special Agent FBI."

They shook hands and Perry had an amazed expression on his face. "FBI. Is Lois in trouble? I know she takes risks, but she's the best darn reporter the Daily..."

Clark held up his right hand to stop Perry's ringing endorsement of Lois and then sat down next to her, stuffing his ID away in the process. "I know she is, Mr. White. That's why I've come. I would like her help on a case we were just on."

"A case? On together? When was that?" Perry looked bewildered, as if Lois had done something on her own initiative and it had gotten her into trouble.

Lois spoke up. "The Metro Club. Clark here was undercover as the bartender."

"You didn't mention that in your notes or stories."

She shrugged. "I didn't know until after it was over. I found out in Henderson's office. Clark and Henderson are tight." She held up the index and middle finger entwined together.

"Oh, in that case. If he's working with Henderson, why that's...O.K."

"Don't get overenthusiastic, Chief," Lois commented sardonically.

Perry looked Clark in the eye. "Look, Kent, I'm sure your job is fascinating, but this is the Daily Planet, the greatest newspaper in the world! Our people are dedicated servants of the fourth estate who deal routinely with matters of international significance."

"You may not be aware of it, Mr. White, but the FBI has overseas offices in more than 50 U.S. embassies. We have a mission in counter-terrorism, counter-intelligence, cyber crime, information technology, security, forensics, training, and criminal programs. We work closely with the NIA. And I would like to utilize Lois' knowledge and experience in handling this case. In return, she gets a story to write, if she agrees to do this." He turned to look at Lois. "But I need to brief just Lois for the moment and then it's her choice to join me or not. You will be informed of details later by Lois at her discretion."

"O.K., do what you have to do, but the paper gets the exclusive."

Clark nodded in the affirmative. "Yes, the Daily Planet gets the exclusive."

As Lois rose to leave his office, Perry pointed the first two fingers on his open hand at her. "Just you be careful, Lois."

As they left the Editor's office, Clark turned to Lois and asked. "Where can we talk in private? Your desk is too public."

“Conference Room.” Lois looked around the edges of the Bull Pen and then pointed. “Over here.”

Jimmy Olson, the chief’s Chief Gofer was standing by Cat Grant’s desk, watching Lois and Clark walk across the Bull Pen.

“Who’s the guy with Lois?”

“I don’t know, he wouldn’t say.” Cat pursed her lips in disapproval of his independent thinking. She hadn’t met a guy she couldn’t seduce out of something. “He was looking for Lois for some strange reason. Guess he found her.” She brightened and looked at Jimmy. “I bet he’s an athlete!”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, for one he walks like one. Football! That’s it. Maybe he’s the new tight end for the MetJets, here to save their lowly butts!”

Clark opened the Conference Room door for Lois and they entered, Lois closing the door and both sat at the end of the conference table. “I didn’t think I’d see you so soon, not to mention at the Planet. It’s been what, a week and a half?” Lois said with feigned indifference.

“Yeah, a week and a half. I didn’t mean it to be that long,” he said quietly. “I had a lot of things to do like get a job here and then move to Metropolis. And I see you were busy too.” He gestured at her outfit. “Catching thieves.”

She shrugged and smiled at him. “It’s what we do.”

He smiled back softly. “That it is. I went to see Toni Taylor this morning. She’s in Women’s Central Jail now. She’s taking the fall for somebody else on the Toaster’s weapons issue, but she was afraid to tell me who. All she could do was point me to this.” Clark pulled a large envelope of very expensive stationery from his coat pocket and placed it on the table between them, still keeping his hand on it.

“Lex Luthor’s White Orchid Ball,” Lois breathed. Only Perry and the suits upstairs were going from the Daily Planet.

“You said you were at the Metro Club to get an interview with Lex Luthor. This may be your chance.”

Lois reached eagerly for the ducat. Clark kept his hand on the envelope and raised his index finger, wagging it back and forth in a “No” gesture. “Unh, unh. There are some conditions.”

“Like what?” Lois challenged.

“Well, for one, we both go. You as my date.” Fascinated, Clark watched the expressions cascade over Lois’ face. Surprise, irritation, puzzlement, then pleasure.

Satisfied, Clark released the envelope to Lois’ grasping fingers and watched her open the luxurious invitation.

“To be clear, what’s in it for me?”

“A one on one interview with Lex Luthor. How you set it up is your call.”

“What’s in it for you?”

“Getting in Lex Luthor’s door and observing him in action. Not to mention getting a date with you.”

“For that, you could just ask, or phone.”

“Good. I’ll remember that.”

“Are Lola and Charlie going or Lois and Clark?”

Shaking his head, “I don’t think Luthor knows me as Charlie. Syble served the drinks, I was invisible. That’s why I was a bartender. You,” he pointed at her very cute nose, “were very visible as Lola Dane.”

“Well, I did have a plan,” Lois defended. If we did do more than sit at a table, I was going to tell him who I was and ask him for an interview. He never showed up again after that one night, though. I wonder why.”

Clark just shrugged, feeling that was the wisest choice rather than giving air to his suspicions.

“Well, I can go as Lois Lane since I’ve been barraging his secretary’s office for an appointment for an interview. Who are

you going to be?”

“I could just go as myself.”

“And wave your badge around? I don’t think so. You need a cover story.” She snapped her fingers as an idea hit. She gave him such a thorough once over that he began to blush. She pointed at him with the envelope. “You can be a new hire at the Planet. We’ll get Perry in on it and he can tell the suits if they ask.”

“What? Pretend I’m a member of the vaunted fourth estate?” he joked.

“Don’t worry. I’ll do all the heavy lifting and the writing.”

“Deal.” Clark extended his hand, she took it and shook it. He kept his grip on her hand and leaned closer. “That event is two weeks away. How about we get to know each other a little better first?”

Oh, Lois was tempted, but she shook her head ‘no’ and extracted her hand reluctantly from his. “Nope, I live by three rules: Never get involved in your stories, never let anyone else get there first, and never sleep with anyone you work with. Now, this is business.”

It was going to be a long two weeks, Clark realized. And he hadn’t even gotten near the thought of sleeping with her - yet.

Chapter 11.

*“Like a flower bending in the breeze,
Bend with me, sway with ease”*

Lois and Clark walked side by side into the White Orchid Ball in the ballroom atop Lex Towers and simply stared. The rainstorm raging outside could be seen through the windows and doors that led to terraces, but the sound was muted inside.

“You were right, Lois,” Clark murmured. “Everyone who is anyone is at this shindig, and dressed in their very best. And I don’t think I’ve seen anything like this room since a tour of Versailles.”

The grandeur of the penthouse was awe inspiring. “This is the home of a very wealthy man. You see why I want that interview now?” Lois turned to Clark. “I’m going to go circulate and see who is here, who Luthor thinks are his friends.”

“Or enemies. Remember it was Toni Taylor’s invitation we got in on.”

Lois angled off and Clark saw Perry standing with a group of people and waving to him, so he headed that way.

He came up to Perry, who was standing with an attractive older woman. “Alice honey, this is our new hire at the Planet, Clark Kent. Be gentle on him, he’s from out of town. Clark, this is my wife Alice.”

“Pleased to meet you Mrs. White.” Clark took her extended hand and shook it delicately.

“Clark has the courthouse beat,” Perry explained to Alice. It was the cover story the three - Perry, Lois and Clark - had agreed upon. The paper didn’t pay Clark and he didn’t write any stories.

“Very pleased to meet you, Mr. Kent. Where are you from? Are you adjusting to life in the big city? Let us know if we can help.”

“Mr. White has been very helpful. I’m from Kansas by way of Virginia, so I’ve had some experience with big city life.

Alice looked around the room. “Isn’t this incredible?”

“Well, I must admit there is nothing like this in Kansas. Have you ever met him -- Lex Luthor?”

Alice responded, “No, but I read all five of his unauthorized biographies. Perry here doesn’t have time for all that.” She patted his shoulder affectionately. “Luthor’s story is a one of rags to riches. [From coming from the wrong side of the tracks to self-made billionaire who owns dozens of companies and employs thousands of people. He is voted Metropolis’ Man Of The Year, every year, has his finger in every pie, but rarely appears in public. And he won’t give personal interviews.”

Perry pointed to the top of the stairs. “Hey. There he is.”

Clark looked to the stairs. He had seen Luthor at the Metro Club and he was an imposing figure then. But atop the grand staircase the tall figure stepping into the light seemed almost otherworldly. At that exact moment, a bolt of lightning struck outside, illuminating the stained glass window behind him. Lex Luthor appeared ageless, dashing handsome, suave, brilliant, and a force to be reckoned with. He posed effectively at the top of the stairs and descended imperially down the staircase. Clark was reminded of a king descending into the midst of his subjects. When he reached the ballroom floor, his admiring guests immediately surrounded him. He moved through the crowd, shaking hands with them and paying his respects to the powerful.

Clark tuned in his hearing to Luthor as he proceeded across the room. “Good evening, Ambassador. Hello, Margaret. Thanks for coming, Charles. I ...” He winced when Lois’ voice rang out across the ballroom floor. Her trained singing voice could be heard above all the conversation.

“Lex Luthor... why haven’t you returned my calls?”

“Well, that’s one strategy,” Clark thought. He personally wouldn’t have tried burning the gates down to see if the emperor was home, but he hoped it worked for Lois.

Luthor turned to see who was addressing him. The other guests moved rapidly away from the person who called out as if to distance themselves from such a breach of manners.

“Lois Lane. Daily Planet.”

Even though he had escorted her into the ballroom, Clark was transfixed by Lois in the spotlight, waiting for Luthor to approach. Her upswept hair and understated deep maroon one shoulder gown emphasized her luscious figure. Simple diamond earring drops hung from her earlobes.

Lex Luthor was clearly admiring her. “I can assure you, I’ll never make that mistake again.” Lois smiled and Luthor reached dramatically for her hand, elevating it as he used it to draw her to him.

The orchestra, taking the cue from the actions of Luthor, started playing dance music softly and other couples turned to each other to dance.

It was a good thing Perry and Alice left, because Clark found himself inadvertently floating and had to force himself back to earth. “Oh. She’s something! A force of nature.”

Lois had her prize in her arms. “Will Luthor recognize me from the Metro Club? One thing for certain, he is a very smooth and athletic dancer and executes the 1-2-3 moves of a waltz with aplomb.” He held her closer than protocol dictated, but so far they are not tripping over each other’s feet. “I hope you’ll forgive me for being so bold, but...”

“Boldness is a trait I find very attractive in a woman, Ms. Lane.”

Lois noted his voice was low and seductive. “Oh. Thank you. Anyway, I was wondering, Mr. Luthor...”

“Lex.”

His scented breath puffed her cheek. “Lex. I know you’re hesitant to give interviews...”

“I hope you can understand that a man in my position wouldn’t want to be misinterpreted, and I have had one or two bad experiences with the media.”

“But not with me.”

Luthor looked into her eyes and smiled. “Why don’t we make it for dinner?”

Lois’ eyes widened. She’d done it! “I’ll hold you to that.”

“My secretary will call your people.”

Lois really didn’t have “people”, but she accepted his offer.

Suddenly Clark tapped Luthor on the shoulder and said, “Mind if I cut in?”

Lois and Luthor stopped dancing. Lois apparently grudgingly introduced them. “Lex, this is Clark Kent. He works at the Planet.”

Luthor’s attention was suddenly captured elsewhere and he disinterestedly said, “A pleasure.”

To Lois he said, “Later, then” and handed Lois over to Clark and walked off. Lois spoke in a whisper. “He agreed to the interview! You know it’s taken me a year to get this close.”

Clark pulled her into his arms and they began to dance. “This close?” Frankly, he didn’t know what had come over him. For some reason, he couldn’t stand to see Lois dancing with Luthor, plan or no plan. To act so on his emotions was very unlike him.

“Well, we made first contact anyway and he didn’t appear to recognize me,” Lois rationalized, not at all unhappy to be in Clark’s arms for the first time since the unexpected kiss at the Metro Club.

“Context.”

“Context?”

“You’re here in an invitation only ball. Your other persona wouldn’t be.”

As they glided along, Clark held her at the proper distance and she said, “You’re an amazing dancer.”

He smiled. “I learned from a Nigerian princess who studied ballroom dancing in England. During my school year in Istanbul, I also got to see a lot of Africa.”

Slowly, he was leading them to a side hallway that led to Lex Luthor’s private elevator and his apartment. Just after they had arrived at the ball, he had had a chance to X-ray the floor plan and memorize the layout.

Lois noticed that they were on the edge of the ballroom.

“Where are we going?”

“How about Lex Luthor’s private study while he is otherwise occupied?”

Lois smiled at him. “Sounds like a great plan.”

Moments later Lois led the way into Lex’s private study. The study was paneled in dark wood, rich with leather furniture and collections of ceremonial weapons. A fire was burning in the fireplace on this wet evening. Lois crossed the room and went through another door while Clark stopped to examine an antique crossbow. Hearing something, he turned around and saw Lex Luthor holding a sword pointed at his chest. Unperturbed by the threat of the weapon, Clark calmly studied it in detail.

“Macedonian?”

Luthor nodded curtly, controlling his anger but looking like he could easily use the sword. “Yes, it belonged to Alexander the Great. He was a brilliant - and young- tactician.” He lowered the sword and handed it to Clark with one hand under the hilt and the blade resting on his palm.

Clark examined it closer as Luthor continued speaking.

“Alexander’s strategy was simple: always control the high ground. It was with this sword that he...”

“... defeated Darius III, and was proclaimed King of Asia.” Clark finished for him.

“You surprise me, Mr. Kent. I’m not often surprised.”

Then Lois returned, saw Luthor and tried to cover her intrusion of his private domain. “I hope you don’t mind our looking around... you have a beautiful home, Lex.” She smiled ingratiatingly. “Well, he said he like boldness.”

Luthor wasn’t too convincing in his acceptance of the transparent excuse, but he continued as the perfect host. “Have you seen the view from here?”

Luthor gestured to Lois to move toward the terrace. Clark followed after he replaced the sword in its holder. The lights of Metropolis shone below through the quieting rainstorm. “This is the tallest building in Metropolis. I must confess a certain pleasure in knowing that everyone in the city has to look up in order to see me.” Luthor stopped himself, perhaps afraid that he may have revealed too much already. “Let’s get back to the party. I think my announcement will interest you.” Luthor made sure they proceeded him out of his study.

A crowd was gathered to the side of the bandstand, where a smaller stage stood curtained. Luthor arrived to stand in front of the curtain to make his announcement.

“Honored guests. We’re here tonight for a good cause. Thanks to your generosity, Luthor House for Homeless Children will soon be a reality. As you know, I have dedicated my life to improving the quality of the lives of the citizens of Metropolis. Tonight, I’d like to go further. We had a recent tragedy in the Riverfront area of our fair Metropolis and many abandoned buildings were burned to the ground.”

“This city needs new housing for all levels of income, from the wealthy such as yourselves, to the homeless who need a safe haven in inclement weather. Therefore I propose to begin building immediately on...”

The band played a fanfare and Lex pulled the curtain open himself to reveal:

“LEXHARBOR. A fully contained community with shopping, entertainment and outstanding views of our fair harbor. The construction process will engender many new jobs as well as funds for construction materials. All buildings will be beyond code in quality of construction and safety. Schools, shops, restaurants, theaters with both live theater and cinema, offices, apartments: a self-contained community. A giant step forward in urban reawakening. A new, bright jewel in Metropolis’ crown.”

Lois, clapping enthusiastically, made eye contact with Luthor on stage, who smiled at her. Clark unhappily noticed the by-play even though it was part of their plan.

After the ball, the valet pulled up Clark’s car in front of the parking circle for the LexTower complex. The valet opened the door for Lois and she dropped into the passenger seat, tired from the events of the evening. Clark got into the drivers seat of his personal 2001 Acura Integra two-door coupe GS-R. He hadn’t wanted to bring Lois to the ball in the large obvious company car. The rain was again beating down outside with a vengeance.

Clark pulled away smoothly, headed for Lois’ apartment. After several blocks, Clark asked, “You’re awfully quiet, Lois. Are you O.K.?”

“Yeah. I guess I’m just tired. Treading around Minefield Lex was tougher than I thought.”

“Minefield Lex?”

“Well, now he isn’t just a guy sitting at a table in a nightclub. He walks, he talks, he moves and shakes things - and people. There’s something, I don’t know, creepy about him.” Warming to her subject, Lois turned in the seat as much as the seatbelt would let her and starting talking and gesturing to Clark. “Look, the Riverfront burned down only three weeks ago and he’s got models and plans in great detail to build on the vacant land. With all the city heads of departments there, he probably already has the permits in his pocket.”

“Those environmental studies take a long time, Lois. With all that manufacturing that was in the Riverfront, it’s going to be a long time before LexHarbor becomes reality.”

“I’m not so sure, Clark.”

Still with his eyes on the road in the downpour, Clark reached over and laid his large hand on top of Lois’ petite one. “Anytime you want out, you can, Lois. We’ll get him another way.”

“I’m not a quitter. And it would be a great story however it turns out. Philanthropist and hero or control freak and power mad and maybe something else?”

“No you’re not a quitter, Lois,” Clark agreed, “But retreat is a strategic maneuver, not cowardice.”

The streets were getting dangerously slushy from all the rain. Just then, Clark felt a sudden jolt and looked in the rearview mirror, startled. A very large SUV had just bumped him. The streets were deserted at this hour and there was no other traffic.

“Lois, tighten your seatbelt. I’m going to do some fast driving. There’s a car trying to get us off the road.”

“What?” She’d felt the bump too and looked in the wing mirror. The chrome grill behind her was like a grinning shark’s mouth. “How fast can this car go?”

Clark smiled a shark smile too. “Fast enough. I’ve got a special engine in it.” He did, namely himself.

They wove through the deserted streets and through red lights, the SUV trying to hit them again. Clark remembered something from his stay at the Apollo and headed for that part of town. There was a major bridge under repair over the North River and the bridge was down in the direction they were traveling. He would definitely lose their pursuers there.

Lois saw Clark heading for the orange warning cones and the big sign “BRIDGE OUT”.

The detour sign pointed sharply to the right. Clark knew the detour took about half an hour to make it across via another bridge. Lois screamed, “CLARK. WHAT ARE YOU DOING!”

Clark accelerated through the barriers and became airborne over the missing part of the bridge. He was about 100 pounds heavier than Lois and left of the centerline and forward of the center of gravity of the car. He counteracted the car’s tendency to roll left and pitch down with his abilities. There was also a slight left yaw he needed to correct before his wheels touched down. Making sure his front wheels were straight ahead, he floated the car fast to the other side in a forty-five degree maximum range trajectory. He touched down with not too big a bump and crashed through the exit barrier. The SUV was left on the other side. Tomorrow he would have to do some bodywork on his beautiful Nighthawk Black Pearl car with his hands.

Safely across and away from pursuers, he slowed, then stopped the car and looked over at Lois. She was looking at him, jaw open. He didn’t think her eyes could get any wider. “Oh, my God. We made it! I didn’t think we would.”

“Like I said, special engine.” He patted the steering wheel affectionately. “You ready to go home now?”

Lois nodded numbly. “Take me home, Clark.”

Having to take the long way around to get back to Lois’ apartment and avoid the SUV, it was another half an hour before Clark pulled up in front of her place. He undid his seat belt and turned to touch Lois’ shoulder to find she was shaking violently.

Deeply concerned, Clark asked softly. “Lois? Are you alright?”

Lois turned her large frightened eyes on Clark. She choked out, “I don’t know. Will you come up with me?”

“Certainly,” was the only reply possible. Clark came around to the passenger side and opened the door, undoing Lois’ seatbelt and pulling her from the low slung seat into his arms. “I’ve got you. You’re safe now. I didn’t realize you were so upset. Come on. You have to show me where your apartment is, you know. You never let me come over before.”

She understood he was trying to sooth her and make little jokes to get her back on an even keel. But understanding it and having it calm her emotionally were two different things. She handed him her purse with the keys. “Apartment 501. There’s an elevator.” Her teeth were now chattering in reaction, making her voice choppy.

Clark was getting concerned that his tactic for getting rid of the SUV might have been too much for her. “Come on. I’ll get you there. Do you have any hot chocolate? I could sure use some with this wet night.”

Clark stared bewildered at the five locks on her front door. He had his arm around Lois’ shoulders supporting her as they stood. The keycard for the front door of the building had been plain enough, but the five keys on the ring stumped him. Fortunately Lois was coming back to herself and said softly, “Here, let me.” She selected a key, stuck it in a lock and turned it,

Clark supporting her shaking arm. This was repeated three more times, until Lois stuck a key in her door lock.

"I've got this one," Clark said and opened the door with relief. He turned on her lights and looked around, spotting two white bench-like sofas. He was wet, she was wet and he decided that was not compatible with the sofas, so he piloted them to the dining chairs by her kitchen.

"Here, put one hand on the table and let me get your coat off." He proceeded to remove one arm from the sleeve and get the coat down to the other arm. She switched arms automatically and Clark realized she was getting better. "Where do I put the wet coat?"

She pointed to her washer and dryer beyond the kitchen. He walked over and put her coat on top of the side-by-side appliances and then shucked his wet coat and put it there too. On the way back, he grabbed a dishtowel and wiped down his wet hair. She had managed to pull out a chair and sit down by the time he got back. Suddenly spotting a throw on her couch, he grabbed that and put it around her shoulders. "You need to get warm." Behind her, he pulled down his glasses and shot a gentle beam of heat on the throw. She still wasn't talking, probably because her teeth were still chattering, but she smiled and pulled the throw tighter around her shoulders.

Taking off his tuxedo jacket and hanging it over an extra chair, Clark unloosened his bow tie and pulled it off too, opening his top collar button. Meanwhile he was scanning through her cupboard doors, hunting for the makings of hot chocolate. Bingo, there was chocolate powder, but a quick opening of the refrigerator revealed no milk. Water it was then. Securing a pot and filling it with water, he put it on a burner on the stove. He took another towel and wiped his wet glasses down, taking the opportunity to encourage the water to boil faster with his heat vision. Making a brief show of hunting for cups, he took two, poured chocolate mix in and then water and stirred. He turned, cups in hand, to see Lois' lambent eyes staring at him. "Marshmallows?" She shook her head no.

Clark put the cup in front of Lois and sat next to her, taking her free hand. "Drink up." He watched as she took a tentative swallow and then smiled slightly.

"Hey, I didn't think my driving was that bad. I didn't realize how it must have been for you. I know what my car is capable of, but you didn't."

The hot chocolate helped her immediately and she found her voice. "Thanks. I'm sorry for falling apart on you. How come you are so good at this?"

"Comforting women? Remember, I have a sister. I have practice being there for her." He didn't bother to tell Lois he definitely didn't think of her as a sister. "It was a busy night."

Squaring her shoulders and tightening her grip on his hand, she said, "Somebody tried to kill us tonight!"

Clark watched in awe as that thought seemed to strengthen her and she was slowly turning back into Mad Dog Lane. He was both relieved and saddened at the sight. His fantasies of getting personally closer to Lois seemed to vanish in a puff of air. But maybe not, since she was turning the grip on his hand into a death grip. "Thank you so much for helping on the case tonight, not to mention saving our skins. I'll let you know when Lex's people get in touch with me to set up the interview, O.K.?" She took a deep breath and released his hand.

Clark used the now free arm to hug her around the shoulders again. "I'm glad to see you are better, Lois. But there is no rush here. I can stay as long as you need me to. Can I do anything else for you tonight?"

Lois leaned her head on his shoulder. He felt her wet hair on the side of his face. "You are still wet. And tired. You need to get to bed and rest."

She mumbled something that sounded like "...three rules."

Giving a low laugh, Clark said, "Finish your chocolate and I'll carry you to bed then leave. Alright?"

She sat upright again and Clark took a momentary opportunity to dry her hair a little with his heat vision.

He finished his chocolate, then stood and lifted Lois out of the chair and carried her into her bedroom. He laid her on the bed and pulled the comforter over her. He heard something like "...dress." "That you have to do yourself, Lois." "For now anyway" the thought came. "Call me when you wake up, no matter the time, O.K."

"...kay"

"Goodnight, Lois."

"...ni"

After donning his clothes again, Clark let himself out, but was able to lock only the one lock. But he guessed she would be safe enough tonight. He would check on her in the morning.

Chapter 12.

*"Other dancers may be on the floor
Dear, but my eyes will see only you
Only you have that magic technique
When we sway I grow weak"*

The black SUV pulled into the former Metro Gang warehouse in the Hobbs Bay district. The two large muscle men climbed out and went to the front of the car. A clipped British accent came from an area of shadow and asked bitingly, "Well, did you run them off the road? Scare them? How are they?"

Muscle One, the driver, shook his head in a negative. The shaking was rather easy, because he was shaking all over. "The Gentleman" with the British accent like a nail gun scared them. The former Metro Gang low-lives felt adrift after first Johnny had been sent packing by his own sister Toni and then Toni had been arrested for setting up the Toasters. The Toasters had scared them too. It felt like time to leave Metropolis, but they didn't know where to go or what else to do with their lives.

Muscle One cleared his throat. "Unh, no. They escaped. They went through the construction on the North River Bridge. We dunno if they made it, since the bridge is down, or they fell into the drink, 'cause by the time we made it around the detour, there was no sign of them. The little car was a powerful little thing like a sports car, an' they could've made it."

The nail gun noise spat at them again. "The Boss will not be pleased." The shadow turned and disappeared further into the dark.

"Oh, God save us." The men collapsed against the front of the SUV, ignoring the heat of the engine, and contemplated their lack of a future. Maybe Tucson. They had heard things were good in Tucson. His cousin had gone there.

In under an hour, Clark was sitting comfortably propped against the parapet of the roof of Lois' apartment building, directly over her living room.

Somewhere between Lois' front door and his car, Clark began to realize that the attackers, whoever they were, might just come to Lois' apartment and try to kidnap, or worse, kill her. He felt she was the more logical of the two of them to be the target, since she had written the Metro Club article and she had boldly announced her identity to the people at the White Orchid Ball.

So he had driven his precious car back to his apartment and stored it in its locked garage. Having a locked garage had increased the rent he had to pay, but it was necessary in a city like Metropolis. He changed out of his tux, did a quick shower and dry and dressed in his dry black sweater and pants.

Flying back, he hunted for any sign of the mysterious SUV and found nothing. He had seen the license plate as he sped ahead of it toward the missing bridge.

Fortunately, New Troy was a two license plate state like

Virginia and Washington, D.C. Kansas only required one plate on the rear of the vehicle. If that were the case here, he couldn't have gotten the plate number. But even with the number, Clark felt it was probably a fleet vehicle or a rental. Tomorrow he could check it at his FBI office. Right now he was concerned about Lois' well being.

When he had landed on the roof, he glanced into her bedroom and saw the evening dress flung over a chair. So she had felt well enough to change into sleepwear. He manfully resisted actually "looking" to see what she was wearing under the bed covers. He also checked and found that she had had the strength to lock the other four locks.

So he really didn't need to stay, but somehow he didn't want to leave. As he leaned against the wall, his mind replayed the evening. There were dual threads interwoven through his memory. The most enjoyable, of course, was his pleasure at being with Lois and his enjoyment of her company.

The other thread was her determination to get the interview with Lex Luthor and her boldness at invading Luthor's private property. That whole second thread was a cause for concern and raised dread in his heart.

Speaking of heart, he suddenly realized he was hearing a rhythmic continuous sound. He concentrated his hearing and realized it was Lois' heartbeat he was hearing. Its smooth sound comforted him.

Suddenly jerking awake, Clark realized he had fallen asleep on the roof, soothed by Lois' heartbeat. That was a totally new experience for him. He'd lived with the Ross household since he was ten years old. When he discovered his full range of abilities about the age of eighteen, life with the Ross's was still the same. Nothing like this had ever happened with any of them.

Slowly Pete had begun to think there was something extremely special about Clark and confronted him one day. That day Clark had taken Pete back to the old Kent farm and in its privacy, showed him exactly what he could do. He'd also sworn Pete to secrecy, like a brotherly pact.

Well, all this rumination wasn't making a dress for the baby or paying the preacher, as his mother Martha used to say so long ago. It was getting daylight and he was going to be visible soon. He needed to leave the roof.

But first, he looked down into Lois' bedroom. She was still sound asleep. And soon she would be hungry. If he found some breakfast - and coffee, especially coffee - for the two of them, he could perhaps spend the day with her. It was Sunday morning after all.

Knowing Lois was not a morning person, Clark waited until 8 a.m. to call her. He felt nervous with anticipation as the phone rang.

"...lo" came the soft mumble.

Clark cleared his throat to give her a little more time to wake up. "Hi, Lois. It's Clark. Did you sleep O.K. last night? I know I asked you to call me when you woke up after last night, but I wanted to bring breakfast to you. And coffee."

The bedclothes rustled and Clark could envision her sitting up a little more alertly. "Coffee?"

"Yep, got some already brewed right here. And some fresh croissants. So you don't have to do anything but get dressed and I'll bring breakfast. How does that sound?"

She gave a little chuckle. "That sounds great. Maybe I could forget the getting dressed part?" Lois laughed out loud as she heard his gasp. "Just teasing, Clark. Give me half an hour and I'll be ready. What time is it anyway?"

His voice sounded a relieved as replied, "Just a little past 8 a.m. It'll take me half an hour to get there anyway, even with no traffic on a Sunday morning."

"Great. Just call me at the building door and I'll buzz you up."

Twenty-five minutes later, Clark pulled his car up in front and proceeded to the front door. As promised, Lois buzzed the door and let him in at his call. On his way up Clark thought about the security of Lois' building and realized it was pretty good. He rang her doorbell and smiled at the peephole in the door when he saw an eye appear, then held up the thermos and the bag of croissants.

After the sound of four bolts sliding open, the door handle turned and a fresh, relaxed Lois in a simple T-shirt and two-piece jogging suit opened the door for him, smiling as she did so. "Come on in." She admired his look in a crisp blue shirt and brown dockers.

As he entered, Lois continued. "Over at the table. Not being totally inept, I did start a pot of coffee in case we wanted more. Coffee that is. I'd show you around, but you've been here before." Her voice was light a teasing and she had a large smile for him.

"Well, yes. I was here. But it looks a lot...er...drier and brighter now," he returned in a similar manner. Cups and dishes were laid out on the table and he sat and poured two cups. A pile of rather bedraggled sugar packets and dry creamer from various restaurants was in the middle of the table along with a bowl of artificial sweetener packets.

Lois saw him look at the pile and shrugged, "I don't have much in my cupboard as you know."

"It's fine, Lois. I can take it straight if I have to."

"Ah, a manly man." Lois sat.

His smile grew larger. "Probably it would be a good idea to use whatever is available. This is Kona Coffee from the Big Island of Hawaii. It's got a kick to it, but I figured we needed it after last night." He fixed his coffee with two sugars and a creamer.

"Well, if you find me walking on the ceiling after drinking it, you'll know it worked," Lois winked, putting in an artificial sugar packet. "I've had Kona before and it can give a real buzz."

"And I could be walking on the ceiling just being with you," Clark thought. But he just said, "It sure does. Great for all night jobs. And here are the croissants."

He opened the bag and the aroma sprang forth. He had "freshened" them on the way with heat vision. Not too much or they became hard and less wonderful. He put one on each plate, wishing suddenly he'd brought a whole dozen as Lois' eyes started to glow as she sniffed the aroma and delicately picked hers up and put an end in her small dainty mouth and bit down, rolling her eyes in ecstasy at the taste.

Clark heard himself sigh, "ohhhh," clamped his free hand around the chair seat as he started to float and forced himself to close his dangling jaw.

Lois chewed the bite. "These are wonderful! Where did you get them?"

"From a French bakery," he mumbled around his own croissant.

"Here in Metropolis? Of course, what am I saying, they have to be from here."

"Not necessarily, Lois." "Yes, the Boulangerie Francaise over by the corner of 14th and Whalen."

"Never heard of it. Here you are a newcomer to Metropolis and you find the best French bakery in town. How did you find it?"

Lois eyes fixed on Clark's fingers as he licked the butter off them after eating his croissant.

Clark watched Lois' tongue skim along her lower lip as he licked his fingers.

Silence filled the room. Lois suddenly hopped up and went to the counter. "Napkins. We need napkins, they are so buttery." She brought a stack back to the table.

Clark quickly picked up a napkin and started wiping his right hand. Lois looked at his very large masculine right hand. He

cleared his throat, then squeaked out, “When” before starting over in a lower register, “When I get to a new town, I hunt for the bakeries. I’m a nut for great bread and baked goods.” ‘Besides, I don’t gain weight.’ He picked up his cup and downed a large swallow of coffee, still looking at Lois’ eyes.

Lois lowered her eyes demurely to the croissant on her plate and then began delicately pulling off a piece of croissant and making a show of placing it in her mouth and chewing it slowly. Chewing really wasn’t necessary since they almost dissolved by themselves. She finished the motion by looking directly at Clark.

Things were literally going south rapidly. Clark’s chair scraped on the floor as he hurriedly got up and went to the counter. “How about some more coffee,” he said, totally ignoring the thermos still on the table.

He gripped the counter as he could feel her come up behind him. He felt her hand touch his back at the same time he felt the tile in her counter start to give under the pressure of his fingers. He consciously released the pressure.

Lois could feel him shaking as she touched him. “Clark, I want to thank you for last night, for getting me home safely.”

“I’m just glad you are feeling better today,” he said to the coffee pot. His emotions were in a turmoil. He knew what he wanted to do was the thing he shouldn’t do.

He felt Lois’ hand trail from the center of his back over to his shoulder. She exerted a small pressure and he turned to face her. He looked down into her eyes to see them gleaming up at him with almost the same glow she gave the croissant, and then looked down at her lips and licked his.

She dropped her eyes from his to see him lick his lips. She licked hers in return. “You kissed me once.”

“That was a cover for an investigation.”

“But I didn’t know that and I enjoyed it.”

“But what about your...”

Lois put her finger over his lips to silence him.

He opened his mouth and sucked her finger. Her knees suddenly gave out and he caught her around the waist and brought her up against him.

She removed her finger and put both arms around his neck. Clark easily lifted her onto the counter away from the coffee pot and stepped between her outstretched legs.

“Are you sure you want to do this, Lois?”

“Very.” She kissed him. He tasted like butter and coffee and something else she couldn’t define. She encircled him with her legs and crossed them behind his back.

He was lost, lost, lost. Not a single thought could enter his brain. He could taste the coffee and the butter and pure Lois and he wanted to devour her. He wanted to see that expression of ecstasy for something he did to her. He held her head and plundered her mouth with his tongue. She responded by sucking his tongue like he had her finger.

His knees were giving out. He couldn’t remember that ever happening to him before. Lois was different than any woman he had ever met. He wanted her and he needed her. He could hear her heart speed up and thought of falling asleep to her heartbeat last night. He wanted to do that every night of his life.

Lois broke the kiss and began panting open mouthed. She felt for Clark’s chest and rubbed her hand across it, realizing what a magnificent chest it was. She tweaked Clark’s nipple and he groaned her name out, “Lois.”

He started kissing along her neck as she continued to breathe heavily. She pulled his shirt out of his pants, reaching up underneath to tweak him some more.

“Oh, God, Lois. That feels so good. You are amazing.” He reached under her T-shirt and felt bare skin. It was full of goose bumps. He pulled back and took the sweat top off of her shoulders.

She could live her life doing this. All the Daytime and the

Nighttime, just like the song title.

Just then the phone rang. Or maybe the phone had been ringing for a while. A woman’s voice filled the otherwise quiet room. “Lois, Lois are you there? Pick up honey. I want to talk to you about dinner tonight. The Admiral and I are eager to see you again after a month. Call me soon. Love You, Bye.”

At first, Clark was ignoring the message since it was meant for Lois. But then it started to sink in. It also started to penetrate his brain that they were moving awfully fast, enjoyable though it was. He carried her to the couch instead of the bed and began the slow down comforting gestures that he had developed dating girls that liked him more than he liked them. That wasn’t the case with Lois, but still they needed to slow down and he didn’t want their future friendship - and maybe love - ruined.

Lois didn’t appear to be mad at the turn of events. Perhaps she too realized things were going too fast and accepted his soft soothing kisses and loving but not passionate touches.

As the message from Lois’ mother began to sink in, he realized to his horror that he was making wild passionate love to the boss’ daughter.

Admiral Lane, who he was now presuming was Lois’ father, was the head of the combined FBI-NIA-Homeland Security task force headquartered in Metropolis, New Troy. His boss, three levels up.

Lois Lane drove to her parents’ house in a state of confusion. That had been pretty much her state since a month ago, the Sunday after Lex Luthor’s White Orchid Ball. She had had a really good time with Clark as her date at the Ball and had captured Lex Luthor’s attention, thereby managing to snag an interview with the elusive billionaire. The interview over dinner at his penthouse had gone as well as could be expected, she reasoned. He was pretty reticent with information on himself and seemed more interested in hitting on her in a high class, albeit creepy manner.

What bothered her most was Clark Kent’s behavior. Directly following the Ball, mysterious people in a large SUV had attacked them. Clark saved them by jumping them in his high-powered car over a bridge under reconstruction. She still didn’t know who those people were or who had ordered the attack on them.

But the worse part was Clark’s behavior the morning after the attack. He had comforted her directly after bringing her home and seen her safe to her bed and come back the next morning with breakfast. As they ate the croissants at breakfast, sparks had sizzled between them and they wound up making out rather vigorously on her kitchen counter. She still had fond memories of that and occasionally patted her kitchen counter. But then her mother had called to remind her of that month’s dinner and Clark had slowed them down rather abruptly.

Since then he had been attentive at the Daily Planet, where he still came in for his cover as a reporter in their separate ongoing investigations. But the spark between them had died or been buried by him. It was just as well, for Lois Lane had her third rule, “never sleep with a coworker.” Still, Clark technically worked for the FBI, not for the Daily Planet.

This Sunday, Lois drove up to her parents’ townhouse complex in upscale the upscale Mt. Rose section and found a free parking space near their front door. It was time again for their traditional monthly dinner.

Lois rang the doorbell and Ellen opened it immediately. “Come on in, Lois. The Admiral is at the grill.” Ellen, like many military wives, habitually called her husband by his rank instead of his name. It was rather old school, but Lois was used to it.

Ellen enveloped her daughter in a big hug and took her coat. It was cold weather time in Metropolis and the grill being used

was the indoor Jenn-Air appliance with the large fan that popped up from the back of the cooking island when it was in use.

Sam greeted his daughter over the grill as she came into the spacious richly appointed kitchen. “Hi there, Princess. How are you this cold evening?”

“Just fine, Daddy, just fine.” Lois waved a hand. “Busy at work, you know.”

Sam’s eyes narrowed at his daughter, examining her more closely. The statistics of international trade, criminal activities and threats to the country wasn’t the only kind of intelligence he brought to the table. But he said nothing, even though he had a feeling all was not sunny in Loisland.

The Lane’s sat down to a dinner of steak for Sam and skinless chicken breasts for Ellen and Lois, with a salad of sliced greenhouse tomatoes alternated with fresh mozzarella cheese drizzled with good olive oil and a dish of fresh baked ziti. Their years in Italy had switched them to mostly a Mediterranean diet, which they found healthier. Lois noticed her father eating his steak in the European manner, fork in the left hand, tines down and spearing the bit of steak.

Dinner at the table was pleasant as they caught up with each other’s doings. Sam’s golf game, now on the indoor practice field since the weather was so grouchy, was improving. Lois shared that she was making progress toward her black belt.

“That’s wonderful, Princess,” Sam exclaimed. “Did you know your Mother is now the coordinator for all the Navy Relief in New Troy?”

“No, I didn’t. Wow, congratulations, Mom.” Ellen had always been active in the charity for the young enlisted men and women. It was a traditional military wife’s role, but she brought great energy and organization to it.

Lois smiled and raised her water glass in toast to her Mom. Sam followed suit. Ellen smiled in appreciation and gave a little nod with her head. “Thank you all. It really is sad that the young military can barely scrape buy with the salary they are paid. It’s a privilege to help them. And their young babies need help with the layettes and supplies. The Metropolis seniors group is very active in knitting and crocheting the items needed and giving them to us.”

Cutting more steak and pushing it onto his fork, Sam asked his daughter, “So, how’s work at the Daily Planet these days?”

“Just fine, Daddy. I’ve got several big stories I’m working on.” She hadn’t mentioned Clark at the last dinner because her feelings were still so uncertain and confused. “Oh, and I have a partner some of the time now. His name is Clark Kent.”

Lois noticed her father maintained his same expression, but switched the fork to his right hand, tines up, to stab a piece of steak. That struck her as very odd.

Sam cleared his throat. “Clark Kent, you say? Where’s he from? Is he a good journalist?”

“He’s from Kansas originally. He’s an adequate writer, but a great investigator.”

Lois couldn’t figure out the expression on her father’s face as he over vigorously chewed his steak. “Is that so?”

Driving home after dinner, Lois was still mulling over her father’s reaction to the name of Clark Kent. She was a good investigator herself - her father’s daughter he told her - and something was out of whack. As far as she knew, Clark was a new young FBI agent in the Metropolis office. On the other hand, Admiral Sam Lane was working in the local Navy District office, presumably as the head of it. She suddenly realized she didn’t know for sure. When was the last time she had seen her father in his uniform?

Maybe she should turn the Lane investigative capabilities on Special Agent Clark Kent.

Notes: Chapter Titles from “Sway” by Pablo Rosas Ruiz and Norman Gimbal (lyrics)

*When marimba rhythms start to play
Dance with me, make me sway
Like the lazy ocean hugs the shore
Hold me close, sway me more*

*Like a flower bending in the breeze
Bend with me, sway with ease
When we dance you have a way with me
Stay with me, sway with me*

*Other dancers may be on the floor
Dear but my eyes will see only you
Only you have that magic technique
when we sway I grow weak*

*I can hear the sounds of violins
Long before it begins
Make me thrill as only you know how
Sway me smooth, sway me now*

*Other dancers may be on the floor
Dear, but my eyes will see only you
Only you have that magic technique
When we sway I grow weak*

*I can hear the sound of violins
Long before it begins
Make me thrill as only you know how
Sway me smooth, sway me now*

*You know how
Sway me smooth, sway me now*

*Other dancers may be on the floor
Dear, but my eyes will see only you
Only you have that magic technique
When we sway I grow weak*

*I can hear the sound of violins
Long before it begins
Make me thrill as only you know how
Sway me smooth, sway me now
You know how
Sway me smooth, sway me now
Sway me now*