

Games People Play

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Summary: In the sequel to "Lessons," Lane and Kent set out to discover the real reason for Luthor's hidden bunker under Metropolis. What they find is a danger to Earth as great as that of the Nightfall asteroid.

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This is the sequel to Lessons.

From "Lesson":

Outside there was a sudden roar of voices, and Lois looked through the window in time to see Superman streak across the sky. Then he was gone. An instant later, the window of the conference room opened and the familiar figure in blue floated to a touchdown next to Lois. "Ms. Lane, I believe I promised you a quote."

"Yes, you did." She smiled at him. "Come on into the other conference room. This shouldn't take long." Lois was aware of Cat's gaze on her and on Clark as she led him toward the other room, but she didn't look back.

Seconds after Superman had flown away, the door to the stairs opened and Clark stepped through. Whistling softly, he descended the ramp to the newsroom floor.

"Did I miss anything?"

"Just Superman saving the world," Lois said. "I'm writing it up now. How are you feeling?"

"All right," Clark said.

"I guess your memory is back?"

"It seems to be," Clark said. He didn't elaborate, but Superman's remark about him owing her something popped into her mind, and she wondered exactly what he had meant. Maybe, someday, when she let him know that she had guessed his secret, or, more ideally, when he told her, she could ask him.

"Good," she said. "I knew you'd bounce back pretty fast. But Clark, you and I need to talk about what happened to me last night. Remember how you've said a couple of times that you don't trust Lex? Well, I think you might have a point...."

The door to Conference Room One closed behind them. Lois locked the door and turned to her partner. "You were right about Lex," she said baldly. "I found out the hard way."

Clark's heavy brows snapped together. "What do you mean?"

"Do you remember when I got that phone call last night?" she asked. At his nod she continued. "It was Lex. He said he wanted me to interview him about Lex Corps' intentions of helping survivors if the asteroid hit us. That wasn't really what he was up to, though."

"What did he do?" Clark asked. He had lost his smile and looked surprisingly grim. In fact, he looked very much like Superman and Lois was thankful that she had decided to tell him

the story here in the conference room, and not where people could see him.

In as few words as she could, she told him what had happened to her in the hidden bunker beneath Lex Tower, and saw his expression grow grimmer and grimmer. Hurriedly, she concluded with Superman's timely rescue.

"Anyway," she said, "now I'm not sure what to do. If I report it, Lex will find some way to wiggle out of it, claim that he had nothing to do with it, even though I know he did. Nigel made it pretty clear when he was talking to that guy in the storeroom that Lex knew what was going on."

"I agree," Clark said. "In fact, I'm not sure he won't come after you, knowing what you know."

Lois shook her head. "I think I'm going to call him and tell him what happened to me, and let him give me some kind of explanation," she said. "I'm sure he'll be able to come up with something. And I'll believe every word of it, too."

Clark's lips twitched. "I'll bet you will," he said.

"But we're going to investigate him all the same," Lois added. "I want to know what you know about him. You obviously know something, or you wouldn't have been so suspicious of him all along."

"Well," Clark said cautiously, "a lot of it was circumstantial."

"Just like this last thing," Lois said. "We'll talk it over after I've talked to Lex. I don't want him to do anything stupid that I'll regret."

"Good idea," Clark said.

"I'm glad you agree," she said, reaching for the conference room phone. "Let's get this over with."

The voice that answered the phone was very familiar. Nigel St. John's accent wasn't one she was likely to mistake. "Mr. Luthor's office."

"Hello, Nigel," she said. "This is Lois Lane. Is Mr. Luthor available? I need to speak with him. It's urgent."

"Ms. Lane?" There was a faint note of surprise in St. John's voice.

"Yes," Lois said determinedly. "I need to talk to Le -- to Mr. Luthor right away. Something happened to me yesterday when I left Lex Tower that he needs to know about."

"One moment," St. John's voice said. The phone went silent and Lois thought that he must have put his hand over the receiver. Listening closely, she thought that she could hear the murmur of voices, but she couldn't tell what they were saying.

She glanced at Clark and noted that his head was tilted slightly, as if he were hearing something that she couldn't. Of course, she thought. Superman was listening to whatever was going on at the other end of the line with his super-hearing. Something as simple as covering the phone was unlikely to prevent him from being able to overhear it. Briefly, she was slightly envious of the ability.

Suddenly there was sound again on the line. Lex's voice, warm and friendly, emerged from the speaker. "Lois, my dear! Nigel tells me that you needed to speak urgently with me. Is anything wrong?"

"Kind of," Lois said. "Do you remember when I came over to your penthouse last night?"

"Of course I do." Was there the faintest hint of wariness in his tone? "I understand that Superman has reappeared and that Nightfall is no longer a danger to Earth. That's a great relief to us all. How can I help you?"

"I needed to tell you what happened after I left the penthouse," Lois said quickly. "I was in the elevator, and two men kidnapped me."

"Kidnapped you?" The shock in his voice certainly sounded genuine. If she hadn't heard enough during her escape to convince her that Lex knew all about her abduction, she might have believed him. "In the penthouse elevator?"

"Yes," Lois said. "It was the weirdest thing. I got away, but

since it involved your -- specialArk, I thought I should let you know so you can investigate. I'd rather do it in person so there's no chance of being overheard. Could I come over and tell you what happened?"

"Certainly," Lex said. "Fortunately, with all the disorganization over the asteroid, I have no meetings scheduled for this morning. Where are you?"

"I'm at the Daily Planet."

"Nigel will pick you up in twenty minutes," Lex told her. "You aren't hurt, are you?"

"No. I'm fine."

"That's a relief," Lex said. "I'll be waiting for you."

Lois hung up. Clark was frowning. "You're going over to Lex Tower? Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"It's the only way I can think of to convince him that I don't suspect him," Lois said. "If I'm willing to go over to his penthouse alone, it should help convince him, but do you think you can contact Superman and have him hang around nearby, just in case?"

"I'll sure try," Clark said. He hesitated as if he were about to say something else, and closed his lips together tightly. "Be careful," he added after a pause.

"I will. It's important, or I wouldn't take the chance," she said. At his skeptical look, she added, "I *wouldn't*! I may take chances for a story, but this is really important! If he'd kidnap me for hisArk, think what he might do if he thinks I suspect him! I *have* to convince him that I think it was someone on his staff that's out to get me for some other reason!" She added, "And, when I'm finished, we're going to go back to your place and you're going to tell me *everything* you know, don't forget! So you'd better start getting your notes together."

A little smile. "I'll do that."

Lois glanced at her watch. "Nigel is picking me up in eighteen minutes. I need to change. You get busy and call Superman." She jumped to her feet and hurried out.

Clark looked after her for several seconds and then shook his head. Lois was definitely on a tear this morning, even given the fact that she had apparently spent the night escaping from Lex Luthor's hidden stronghold. Well, he could sort out all the questions he had thought of during her story later. Right now Superman needed to be hovering over Lex Tower, just in case his partner ran into trouble.

As he exited the Conference Room, Perry's voice stopped him. "Clark! Where are you off to?"

Clark paused. "I need to get hold of Superman. Lois is headed over to Lex Tower to talk to Luthor."

"What? After that business last night? Is she crazy?" Perry stopped. "Never mind. Get goin', son. Make sure she has some backup. How are you doin', by the way?"

"I'm fine," Clark assured him. "I'll tell you about it later, if you really want to know." He headed for the stairs at just under a run, and completely missed the sideways look that his boss cast after his retreating form.

Lex Luthor was waiting when Lois stepped off the elevator into his luxurious penthouse, a slightly concerned expression on his handsome face. He held out his hand to her at once.

"Lois, my dear. Are you sure you're all right?"

"Pretty much." She gave him a little smile. "I managed to skin my knees during my escape, but other than that there's no damage. Perry suggested that I tell you right away what happened to me. Whoever was behind it has access to yourArk, and he knows I got away. We thought you might be able to give me some idea who to check into."

"Come into my study and tell me what happened. I want to launch an investigation into this as soon as possible," Lex said, leading her toward the study door. "I'm just thankful you don't

suspect me of instigating it, since it apparently happened here."

"You? Don't be silly," Lois said. "You're just not the kind of person to do anything like that. And even if you were," she added, "I'd think you would have too much to lose to even think about it. I'd guess that it has to be someone with some kind of axe to grind against me, or even against you. I doubt you got where you are without making some enemies along the way."

"You'd be right," Lex said. He opened the door and let her precede him into the luxurious study. "Won't you sit down? Now, tell me all about it. I've told my people that we aren't to be disturbed except for an emergency."

Lois settled into one of the overstuffed chairs and Lex seated himself at right angles to her, leaning forward with a concerned expression. "This is very serious," he said. "I fully expect my business rivals to attempt to outmaneuver me professionally, but to attack you seems somewhat over the top."

Lois shrugged. "I'll let you be the judge," she said. "After I left the penthouse yesterday, I took the elevator down. It stopped somewhere on the way, and two men got on --"

She told the story briefly, leaving out any parts that would incriminate him, and when she got to the point of Superman's arrival, she stopped. "You know what happened after that," she concluded. "Of course, I wouldn't have started a fire in the basement if I had realized it was your basement. I put the pieces together afterwards, after I found out I had been in your Ark all along. What do you think?"

Lex was frowning. "This is extremely serious. You realize, of course, that someone must have had your apartment duplicated exactly, without my knowledge?"

At her nod, he continued. "I will certainly launch an investigation into this at once. The culprit will be found, I promise you, my dear. Assure Mr. White of that. My guess is that it is an attempt to discredit me by one of my business rivals. I imagine all of Metropolis knows of my admiration and respect for you."

"Me?" Lois said.

"Don't tell me you weren't aware of it," he said with a smile.

"I knew you liked me," Lois said.

"Liking doesn't describe it at all," Lex said. "We'll leave it at that for now, but rest assured that I'll spare no effort to discover who caused you this inconvenience."

"Thank you," Lois said. She glanced at her watch. "Perry's expecting me back," she added. "I feel better, knowing you're taking what happened seriously."

"You're very welcome," he said. "I'll escort you down myself, to be certain something of the sort doesn't happen again. And thank you for having faith in me."

"Of course I do," Lois said. "You'll let me know what you find out, won't you? I have a personal interest in this particular investigation."

"I certainly will," Lex said. "I'll call you when I know more."

"Thank you," Lois said.

When she stepped off the elevator into the newsroom, she glanced around for her partner. He was nowhere to be seen, but at that moment the door to the stairs opened and Clark emerged. "Hi. How did it go?"

"Pretty good," she said. Why hadn't he been in the newsroom? she wondered. With Superman's speed, he could have easily arrived here before her, even if he had been flying over Lex Tower during her meeting with Lex. "I think I convinced him."

"I hope so," Clark said. "I was just talking to Superman, and he says that after you left, Luthor called St. John and they headed down that elevator into his bunker. It's lined with lead -- at least the top layer is, so Superman couldn't see where they went after that."

"We need to get down there ourselves," Lois said. "I want to

explore it a little. There must be some reason besides Nightfall that he had it built. I want to find out what it is. But --" She took his arm. "First, we're going to go somewhere private and you're going to tell me everything you know about Lex."

"Okay," Clark said. "Where do you want to go?"

"How about your place?" she suggested. "I don't know about you, but just knowing that Lex's people have been inside my apartment -- which they must have been, to make such a perfect copy of it -- makes my skin crawl."

"Yeah," Clark agreed. "I don't blame you." He rang for the elevator as he spoke. The doors opened almost immediately, and they stepped inside. Lois pushed the button for the first floor with her thumb.

As the car began to drop, Clark said, "I guess I haven't thanked you for everything you did for me yesterday."

"You remember everything?"

"I think so," he said. "You let me stay at your place, and you took me to see Dr. Friskin. You did everything you could think of to help me remember. You have no idea how much I appreciate that."

Lois squirmed a little. The fact that she had known he was Earth's last chance had contributed to her efforts, although she couldn't tell him that. But wouldn't she have tried to help anyway? She thought so, although she couldn't know for sure. Still, she had come to know a lot more about Clark as he really was in the last couple of days. He was a good guy, and that wasn't something she could say about many of her male acquaintances. If he had been just an ordinary man, he would still have been worth her friendship.

"What's the matter?" Clark asked. "I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"I just did what any friend would have done," she said. "You don't have to thank me."

"Even friends should say thank you," Clark said. He smiled at her. "And now I know why I felt so good about you when I couldn't remember anything else. I should have known that I was going to be okay with Lois Lane fighting in my corner."

Lois could feel the heat rising in her cheeks and looked at the toes of her shoes. "I'm glad I was able to help. But that's still not going to get you out of telling me all you know about Lex."

"Not a chance," Clark said. "Would I dare hold out on Mad Dog Lane?"

"You'd better not!" she said. And the uncomfortable moment passed.

Fifteen minutes later, a cab dropped them off in front of Clark's apartment house. Clark paid the driver and the two of them ascended the steps of his unit. Clark unlocked the door and let her enter first. "Want some coffee?"

"Do you have any?" she asked, dropping her shoulder bag onto the nearest chair.

"Just let me turn on the coffeepot," Clark said. "Make yourself at home."

Lois had already flopped down on his battered but comfortable sofa as he said this, and was in the process of kicking off her high heeled shoes. She had changed into the spare outfit she kept at work for emergencies a short time before. Little had she guessed when the idea had first occurred to her to keep extra clothing at work how prescient it would turn out to be. Still, making an appearance at Lex Luthor's penthouse in jeans and jogging shoes would certainly have looked very odd. She could clearly visualize Lex's raised eyebrows were she to show up in the things she had been wearing this morning.

It was funny, she reflected as she flexed her toes, free at last from the confining leather of the footwear, how comfortable she always felt in Clark's company. It was as if there was nothing that she could say to him, or do, that he wouldn't understand and accept. Unlike Lex. That must mean something, but she didn't want to analyze it further. It was enough for now that he was her

best friend.

Superman's best friend, she thought, almost amazed. For some reason, Superman, who was really Clark when he wasn't on stage, so to speak, had chosen to make her his best friend. Then she recalled her reasoning of the night before, and thought she understood. He wanted a girlfriend, not a groupie, and a friend generally learned your faults as well as your virtues and so was less likely to idolize you. She suspected that Clark was uncomfortable with the adulation with which many people seemed to regard him and liked it even less from her. She was going to have to severely alter her behavior when it came to Superman -- not all at once, but a gradual change would probably work. Especially now that she knew that Superman definitely had foibles and flaws, just like everybody else.

"The coffee will be ready in a few minutes," Clark said, dropping down on the chair opposite her. Lois almost jumped. Enough with the introspection, she decided, straightening up on the couch. Time to find out what Clark knew about her other suitor.

"Good," she said briskly. "So start talking, Kent. What do you know about Lex that I don't know?"

Clark dropped his gaze to his hands, and Lois saw that he had clasped them tightly in his lap. He was silent for a long moment. She waited.

At last, he looked up. "Where should I start?"

"The beginning is always a good place," Lois said. "What made you first suspect him -- and when was it?"

"It was something Antoinette Baines said," he said unexpectedly. "Do you remember when she had us chained up in that hangar? You asked her why she sabotaged the Messenger, remember?"

Lois cast back in her memory. "Yeah, I remember."

"And she said her reason was profit. 'Outer space is no different from any new frontier. It will belong to those who get there first and seize the high ground,'" he quoted.

Lois felt her eyebrows rise. She had been operating on an adrenaline high that night, and the memory of the conversation with Dr. Baines was probably one of those things that she would never forget.

"Luthor said something very similar to me at the White Orchid Ball, about Alexander the Great," Clark continued. "You were there. He said that Alexander's strategy was to always control the high ground. Then, just as we escaped the hangar, the helicopter exploded. The next day, you discovered the bomb in the Messenger rocket. Dr. Baines couldn't have planted it; it would have been discovered if it had been there since the night before, which meant that somebody put it there during the final inspection of the ship. That was when I was certain that someone besides Baines was involved, and the most likely person was Luthor."

"How did you figure that?" she asked. "You barely knew him at the time."

"I know," Clark said. "But Dr. Baines wanted the space station to fail so she could 'seize the high ground.' What good would it do her unless she could replace the station with one that she controlled?" Clark looked back at his clasped hands. "And that led back to Luthor, again. The only possible replacement for Prometheus was Space Station Luthor. That was when I realized what kind of person we were dealing with. To make his plan succeed, Luthor was willing to sacrifice the lives of every colonist on board the Messenger. But he never intended to share the profits with Dr. Baines. She was a liability, until the convenient helicopter 'accident.'"

Lois swallowed. Put that way it made a lot of sense, especially after what had happened to her the night before. "I see."

He glanced quickly at her and then went back to studying his hands. "After that I watched him," he continued. "I saw a lot of

strange coincidences that -- in spite of the laws of probability -- always seemed to benefit Luthor, but the evidence was hard to pin down."

"What were they?"

The coffee timer beeped in the other room and Clark got to his feet. "I'll get the coffee."

She followed him into the kitchenette. "The coincidences you were talking about," she said. "What were they?"

Clark found a pair of mugs in a cupboard and proceeded to pour coffee into them with all the finicky care of an alchemist compounding the elixir of life she thought, somewhat amused at his meticulous attention to the project. Clark was definitely uncomfortable telling her this.

"There's some packets of artificial sweetener and creamer in the drawer behind you," he said suddenly.

Lois retrieved them and turned back in time to see Clark dump four heaping teaspoons of sugar into his coffee and follow it with a generous helping of real cream from a carton in his refrigerator. Naturally Superman wouldn't think about his weight, she thought. He probably burned calories like crazy with all the stuff he did. In the back of her mind, she wondered how many calories it might take to land an airliner like the one he'd brought in at Metro Airport three weeks ago, or how much it might have cost him to shove Nightfall out of its collision course with Earth. No wonder Clark never worried about getting fat.

She took an experimental sip of the coffee. Like all the coffee she had previously sampled at his place, it was excellent, but she didn't intend to get sidetracked. "What coincidences?" she repeated.

Clark led the way back into his living room and settled into his chair. "Well, there were the tests of Superman," he said. "Not long after he appeared. You probably remember Jules Johnson and Monique Kahn, right after the bomb in the bank? Those were tests of Superman's powers. Superman figured out that Luthor was behind them. And then there was that business with the Smart Kids. There was a mystery donor who funded Dr. Carlton's work -- I was never able to identify him, of course -- but he must have been pretty well off."

"Lex again?" Lois asked.

"Probably. And we know he funded Miranda when she developed the 'Revenge'. I doubt that was a coincidence."

"And the nuclear plant," Lois said slowly. "It nearly drove Superman away."

"Which," Clark agreed, "would have benefited Luthor. He knows Superman is watching him, and he's tried to chase Superman out of Metropolis before by threatening innocent people."

"When was this?" Lois asked quickly.

"Superman confronted him over the tests. Luthor suggested the tests would continue, and would threaten innocent lives, unless Superman left Metropolis."

"Superman told you that?" Lois asked.

He nodded. "There have been a few other things here and there, but those are the main ones that I can think of," he said. "And then last night he tried to make you a 'guest' on his Ark."

"Yeah," Lois said. "A lot of things are beginning to make sense that didn't before."

"So what are you going to do?" Clark asked.

Lois smiled without mirth. "I'm going to go on dating him, and I'm going to use the relationship to investigate him. And you're going to help me."

"Don't think I'm going to date Luthor," Clark said. "He's not my type."

"You're not his, either," Lois said, rigorously suppressing the temptation to smile. "Do you think Superman would be willing to help us, if we needed him?"

"Probably," Clark said. "What do you have in mind?"

"Nothing, yet, but that won't last long. I'll let you know

when I come up with an idea that looks like it has a chance...."

Lois had shed her shoes, Clark noticed. It was something she invariably did when they were working together on some story or other at his place. He'd seen her discreetly remove them under her desk, as well.

He got to his feet, noticing her empty coffee mug. "Want some more?"

She covered a small yawn with her hand. "Sure." With the other hand she gave him the empty container and flexed her toes again. "I'm going to need it after last night. You know, I really don't like the idea that one of Lex's people was inside my apartment. How do you suppose he got in with all the locks on my door?"

"There's always your windows," Clark pointed out, raising his voice a little so she could hear him from the kitchenette, where he was refilling the coffee cups. "Do you lock them?"

"I lock the one by the fire escape," she said.

"Well, any crook with a head for heights could get to one of the others," Clark pointed out. "Or a burglar could lower himself from the roof. Maybe you should lock them, too."

"You're probably right," Lois said.

He returned to the living room and set the coffee cup on the end table. "There you go."

Lois was standing by the window, looking out at the street. Clark glanced through the wall over the tops of his glasses, but saw nothing unusual. "Anything interesting?"

She shook her head, covering another small yawn and turned back toward the sofa, and the coffee. "Just thinking."

"That's a dangerous pastime, or so I hear."

"Especially for me," Lois said. "You know, I'd like to get down into Lex's Ark again, and look around. I didn't really have much time for exploring, but what I saw was interesting. I'd like you to come with me, and I don't want Lex to know that we're there," she added. "We need to find out why he built it. He sure didn't just throw it together in the days since he heard about Nightfall, so what's it for?"

"Good question," Clark said. "When do you want to try?"

"Probably tomorrow, after I've had a night's sleep," she said. "Aren't you going to try to talk me out of it?"

Clark rigorously avoided smiling. "I figure I owe you something after the last couple of days," he said. "And if I object, you'll go anyway, so I might as well agree. Besides, I want to know what he's up to as much as you do."

Lois eyed him a little suspiciously but said nothing. She took a sip of the coffee. "This is good, but I could eat a horse. I just remembered I didn't have any breakfast."

"Or any sleep since night before last," Clark said. "Would you like me to make you some lunch? I went shopping the other day, so I've got all kinds of ingredients."

"Just as long as it's not Ho-Hos and Ding Dongs," Lois said.

"How about a tuna salad sandwich?"

"That sounds great," Lois said.

Apparently it really did, Clark thought. He could hear her stomach growl at the mention of food. "Give me five minutes," he said.

The promised sandwich took actually three minutes all told, since Clark put a little super speed into the preparation. Lois was finishing the last of her coffee when he set the plate and a glass of orange juice on the coffee table. "Your dinner is served, Madam."

"More like lunch," she said, reaching for the sandwich.

"Technically breakfast, since you haven't eaten since yesterday."

"Don't quibble." She took a large bite, chewed rapturously and swallowed. "This is really good. I didn't know you could cook."

"Mom gave me a few lessons," he said modestly. "It's a bachelor necessity these days. Besides, I didn't heat anything

up."

Lois was in the process of inhaling the sandwich. When the last piece vanished, she drank the juice in one marathon session and set down the empty glass. "I feel better," she announced.

"Good." Clark scooped up the empty plate and glass. "Want any more?"

She shook her head. "No. That was just right."

"If you say so. If you change your mind, I've got more tuna salad in the fridge. Let me just wash these off under the faucet and I'll be right back."

Lois nodded, putting her feet on the coffee table, and slumped comfortably against the sofa back. Clark smiled at his partner's image of relaxation and went to the kitchen sink to rinse off the plate and glass. It took barely a minute to wash and dry them, and store them in his cupboard, but when he returned to the living area, Lois was sound asleep.

Clark grinned a little at the sight of his sleeping partner, and after a moment's consideration he went into his sleeping area and returned with a light blanket, which he spread over her lap. Then he went quietly into his bedroom and picked up the phone and punched in the number for Jimmy Olsen's desk at the Daily Planet.

"Daily Planet, Olsen speaking," Jimmy's voice said after three rings.

"Hey, Jim," Clark said.

"Hi CK," Jimmy said. "What's up?"

"If anyone asks," Clark said, "Lois and I are following up on what happened to her last night." He crossed his fingers. "We won't be back in the office for two or three hours. If Perry asks, pass that along, would you?"

"Sure," Jimmy said. "No problem."

"Thanks," Clark said. "Talk to you later. Bye."

After he hung up, he glanced thoughtfully at his partner. She was going to get a crick in her neck, trying to sleep in that position. Carefully, he shifted her until she was lying full-length on the couch, with a sofa cushion under her head. Lois grumbled faintly and subsided.

Clark turned and went back to the kitchenette. Moving silently, he tidied the remaining traces of his food preparation, but while his hands were busy, his mind was elsewhere, reviewing what he had seen and heard that morning.

The conversation on the other end of the phone had been interesting, if inconclusive, but one thing was clear: Lois was going to have to be very, very careful. If she gave Luthor the slightest indication that she suspected him, there would be no second chance. He was going to have to be alert for trouble. He would not allow Luthor to harm Lois, no matter what, and judging from what he knew of Luthor, if he realized that she knew his real nature she could be in real danger. And if that meant that Clark had to maintain an around the clock vigil to protect her, then that was how it would have to be.

But right now, since she was asleep on his sofa, maybe he should pay a super fast visit to her apartment. If Luthor's people had been there, it might not be a bad idea to check and see if they had left any clues or other, more tangible, traces of their presence.

Accordingly, two seconds later, Superman floated outside the window of Lois Lane's apartment and x-rayed the premises. His eyebrows rose.

"Well, well," he murmured to himself. He was about to streak into the apartment, when an idea made him pause. There might be a way that he and Lois could use this development to their advantage if they played it right....

Lois was still sleeping when he returned, and he was careful not to disturb her. As a matter of fact, he had spent a sleepless night as well. A moment later, he had stretched out on his bed and closed his eyes. Any movement in the apartment would bring him awake, he knew. The fact that he knew Lois could be in jeopardy

was enough to keep that part of him that was always aware of her presence alert. Superman could go for long periods without sleep, but that didn't mean he was impervious to fatigue, and since he was going to need to be awake later, now was the perfect time to catch forty winks.

It was rather more than three hours later that he awakened, alerted by the sounds of stirring in the living area. Quickly, he floated into an upright position, hastily tidied his clothing and stepped around the partition.

Lois was just sitting up, covering a yawn with the back of her hand. "Clark?"

"Right here," he said. "Since you decided to take a nap, I did, too."

"Were you tired?" she asked, sounding slightly surprised, and then seemed to catch herself. "I mean," she added hurriedly, "you seemed wide awake this morning. I thought you'd probably gone to sleep at my place."

He shook his head. "I was too worried about you."

"Oh. Yes, of course you were. I guess you remembered how I sometimes got in trouble, even with amnesia," she said.

"Well, sort of," he said. "Anyway, I talked to Superman after you went to sleep. He checked out your apartment for me. Luthor's people -- or somebody, anyway -- left some bugs in your place. Microphones."

"What?"

He almost winced at the volume level. "Somebody bugged your place," he repeated.

"Why that -- that peeping Tom!" she said. Then she seemed to think of something. "Did Superman clear them out?"

"Not yet. He said he would if you wanted him to, but he thought maybe that would give things away," Clark said.

"Besides, it might work out to our advantage if Luthor were to overhear us talking in your place. What do you think?"

"That's just what I was thinking," Lois said. A faint but definitely malicious smile curved her lips. "This might work out all right after all."

Lois opened the door of her apartment. "Come on in and sit down," she said to her partner. "I just need to find my notes and we can go."

"We've got almost an hour," Clark said, following her into the room. He took a seat on one of the sofas as Lois locked the door. "Take your time."

"You never know what traffic's going to be like," Lois said. "Or whether there'll be a taxi. It seems like every time I really need one, there's never one around -- especially today. Everything's still disorganized after the Nightfall scare. Speaking of which, how are you, now? Any more memory problems, no dizziness or headaches or anything?"

"No," Clark said. "I still don't remember how I hit my head, but except for that, everything is fine. And speaking of that, you still haven't told me everything about what happened to you last night. I was worried about you when you didn't come back. Did I hear you tell Perry that you were kidnapped again?"

Lois cast him an exasperated look. The "again" wasn't part of the script they had worked out. Clark was poking fun at her -- something that he had done since the beginning of their acquaintance, and which no one else dared to do. That should have been a clue right there, she thought. Only Superman was likely to have the courage to actually kid her -- except that Superman never joked with anyone.

Well, that wasn't quite true. He never joked with anyone else that she was aware of, but he did occasionally let traces of his sense of humor slip around her. And that should have been another clue, she thought.

He met her look with one of complete innocence. Deciding that the best thing to do was to ignore it, she began to ruffle audibly through the drawers of her writing desk. "Yes I was --

and don't you dare laugh! It wasn't funny!"

"Do you have any idea who was behind it?"

"Not yet," Lois said. "Lex said he thought it might be some competitor of his. I'm not so sure, though. It wouldn't be the first time somebody has gone after me for revenge, or something."

"Like the time that drug kingpin in Little China had you tied hand and foot and threw you into Hob's Bay, three weeks ago?" Clark interjected. "It was a good thing Superman was nearby when it happened or you would have been fish food."

"It's a good thing I'd been working on my gag and managed to yell for help," Lois countered. "Not to mention that water survival course I took a couple of years ago. I was able to float until he got to me. I'm not helpless, you know. Superman hasn't always been around to get me out of trouble."

"That's true," Clark said. "I can't think of anyone I know that's better able than you at taking care of himself. But even the best of us sometimes get into things they can't get out of without help. It scares me sometimes."

"Anyway," Lois said, determinedly bringing the subject back to the point, while tabling the rest of that remark to think about later, "I'm going to have Jimmy do a search and see if anyone with a grudge against me has been let out of jail recently."

"Unfortunately," Clark said, "a lot of people *not* in jail have grudges against you, too."

"Yeah," Lois admitted. "But outside of Chin Chu or whatever his name was, I can't think of anyone I've caused trouble for in the last month or so, so maybe we can narrow it down. And Lex's people might turn up something. It happened in the Lex Tower elevator, you know. They must have left some traces, or maybe somebody else saw them. Bad guys don't operate in a vacuum, and Lex can probably afford the best investigators in the business."

Clark made a face. "I'd say that's a given."

"Here they are," Lois said. "Now all we need to find is a cab on short notice. I've almost saved up enough for a good down payment on that Jeep Cherokee I've been planning for. Then we won't have to rely on city transportation anymore."

"That'll be convenient," Clark said. He got to his feet and went to unlock and open the door for her. "After you."

Once out in the hall, Lois closed and locked the door again, and then stopped to take a deep breath. "How did we sound? Do you think we convinced him?"

"I think we sounded pretty good," Clark said.

"No thanks to you! You kept going off script!"

"I figured a little joking around would sound more genuine," Clark said solemnly, but she could see the little devil dancing in his eyes. Come to think of it, she had seen that expression a few times on Superman's face as well, and she was quite sure that he never showed that side of his character to anyone else while in the Suit. For some reason it made her heartbeat speed up a little, but she pretended to consider his statement objectively.

"You're probably right," she admitted grudgingly, at last. "But next time warn me."

"It sounds better unrehearsed," Clark said, the little devil in his expression a little more pronounced. "Don't worry. I think he's probably as convinced as he's going to be. But that doesn't mean you should get careless."

"Not a chance, Kent. I didn't get where I am by being careless. Now, let's head back to the Planet. I need to get hold of some props."

"Props?"

"If we're going to go sneaking into Lex Tower tonight, and prowl around through Lex's bunker, we're going to need some supplies. And plenty of film."

"Oh. Okay." Meekly, he followed her toward the elevator.

The city was nearly dark when Lois and Clark, clad in business suits, approached a side door of Lex Tower.

The traffic around the building had thinned considerably from what it had been during the day. Lex might not have had a lot of meetings because of the asteroid, but it had picked up as the day wore on. But the building had closed for business at eight, and now the area toward the side and rear of the towering structure was deserted. Lights from the passing cars on the street that the building faced sent shadows racing eerily across the pavement and reflected from the window glass of surrounding buildings, but where they were it was dark.

Lois turned her head, listening intently, and hoped that Clark's super senses were also scanning the area. He must be, she thought. The only time they had ever been caught while sneaking around enemy territory had been during that odd situation in Smallville when Clark had somehow acquired a paper cut. That incident still needed to be explained, but that had really been a very strange scenario, come to think of it. Clark's allergies, when Superman didn't get allergies, the paper cut, the fight with Trask which had left him with a slightly discolored spot on his cheek that had somehow disappeared by the next day...Trask had been searching for a rock that he thought would kill Superman, and Clark had been very quiet about it, she realized suddenly. Except when he had named it Kryptonite. Was it possible that the stuff actually existed and that he had somehow found it and been hurt by it? It seemed unlikely, but a lot of things that had happened since she had met him seemed unlikely.

Anyway, there were no strange rocks, meteorite or otherwise, present now. Clark was right beside her, and she could see him turning his head right and left in the dimness. Superman was on the job, she thought, and it was immensely reassuring.

"Anything?" she whispered.

"Not yet," Clark said. "Hurry up and pick that lock, will you?"

"There's an alarm on the door," she said. "I have to take that out first. Keep an eye out and let me know if anyone's coming."

"Sure." He had turned to examine the door more closely. "Just a second. I've seen this kind of lock before when I was in the Philippines. The wire is inside the door and runs over to the left along here. If you break the contact in here, it goes off. Let me borrow your pick."

Silently, she surrendered the instrument and watched, slightly bemused, as he inserted it in the lock.

"Keep watch," he told her softly. "This won't take long."

Lois turned, but kept a surreptitious eye on what he was doing. Clark lowered his glasses and suddenly something inside the lock sizzled faintly. Casually, she shifted her position, pretending to scan the area. So *that* was it. He'd done something with his amazing vision powers to short the lock out. The sneak!

Oh well, she decided, he'd saved her a lot of work and time.

Clark was easing the door open. "It's clear," he whispered. "Come on."

Lois slipped through the doorway after Clark. Her partner was utterly silent. His feet made no sound on the carpeted floor, not even the faintest whisper. Lois had thought that she held the record for expertise when it came to moving quietly, but she had to admit now that Clark was at least as good as she. He had lowered his glasses slightly and was turning his head back and forth -- scanning with his super powered vision, she suspected, and she took the opportunity to glance at his feet.

No wonder he was so quiet, she thought an instant later. His feet didn't quite touch the surface beneath them. If she hadn't been paying close attention she wouldn't have noticed it, but there was the tiniest sliver of space between the soles of his shoes and the carpet. He was literally walking on air. She lifted her gaze instantly from his feet and took in the lay of the land. Now wasn't the time to pay attention to Clark's unique "Superman" techniques for breaking and entering. They had a job to do. Still, the reminder, as if she needed it, of who exactly her partner in

this venture was, and the things of which he was capable, sent a wave of reassurance through her. She still couldn't afford to be careless, but it was nice to know that it was Superman who covered her back.

The hallway stretched ahead of them, lit by smaller light sources on the ceiling instead of the ones that were employed by day. As far as she could see, nothing was moving.

Clark pulled his glasses down slightly and she watched him turn his head right and left. He began to move silently forward, and Lois followed, instinctively straining her ears for any sound, although she knew -- at least intellectually -- that Clark would hear anyone coming long before she could.

There was none except for the faint swish of air from overhead air ducts. She had never consciously noticed the sound before in Lex Tower -- but never before had she been in the place when it was so silent.

Clark turned his head abruptly. "Somebody coming," he breathed. He glanced swiftly at a door that opened off the corridor and reached for the knob. For a second, Lois thought it was locked. Then there was the faintest undefined sound, almost as if something had snapped, and the knob turned. She went quickly through and Clark followed, closing the door after them with almost no sound.

He kept his hand on the knob. Lois pressed her ear to the door, and was able to hear, very faintly, the sound of hushed footsteps on thick carpeting. The steps proceeded past them and retreated. Clark also had an ear pressed to the wood. One hand still rested on the knob and he touched his lips with an index finger, cautioning silence. A moment later, she heard the footsteps returning slowly. They drew closer and paused before the door. Lois held her breath.

The knob rattled. Lois glanced at Clark's hand, gripping the inner knob. His hand didn't budge, nor did the inner knob move. After a moment, the footsteps moved away again.

It was four minutes by actual count when Clark eased the door cautiously open and peeked out. "He's gone," he breathed. "Come on."

Lois followed him out on tip toe. She glanced back doubtfully at the door. What had gone on there, anyway? Clark had held the knob against the guard, who had obviously been checking it to be sure it was locked but she was almost sure he had done something else. What had it been?

Oh well, time to figure that out later. She moved ahead of her partner, leading the way. The stairway by which she had escaped from Lex's basement wasn't far away.

The hallway that they traversed intersected another, wider hallway, more of a main artery of the building. Lois sneaked an eye around the corner and surveyed the area.

The lighting was still dim. Lex Tower was closed down for the night, and the only persons abroad in it were the security guards, none of whom she saw, and themselves. She beckoned to her partner and stepped into the open.

The door to the stairway was perhaps halfway down the corridor. She held herself to a brisk walk. If someone saw them, they might just possibly be able to bluff their way out if they acted as if they had every right to be where they were. Lois had learned a long time ago that people tended to believe her if she projected an air of confidence. Of course, explaining why she was in the building after it was closed down for the night just might possibly engender some doubt, she acknowledged. But she had talked her way out of worse situations. A few, anyway.

The door was locked, she discovered, when she tried it a moment later. She pulled out her lock pick. "Keep watch," she whispered.

Clark nodded and turned to survey the empty hallway. Lois bent to her task.

The lock was a simple one and came open readily. Lois pulled the door open and stepped through, Clark on her heels.

Once inside, she took the time to stop, exhale the lungful of air she had been holding, and put the pick back in her pocket.

"This is the stairway to the basement," she whispered. "We need to get down there to reach the way down to the bunker."

Clark nodded and gestured to her to lead on.

The flight of stairs led to the basement, as Lois had said, and she pulled out the little penlight that she had slipped into the pocket of her outfit's jacket in preparation for this excursion. Dim lights glowed on the walls, just as they had this morning when she had made her escape from Lex Tower, illuminating the vast area just enough to prevent persons from tripping over obstacles. The beam of her light played across a cleared area where scorches on the floor and on nearby crates showed traces of the fire she had started to enable her clandestine exit from Lex's bunker.

Softly, Lois descended the steps, Clark on her heels.

The previous time, she had not had the leisure to explore the place. She had been in a desperate hurry to get away. Now she flashed the light around, trying to make out many of the anonymous shapes in the shadowed basement. There was the wine rack, and the massive swordfish on a plaque that she had noted previously. The sarcophagus still leaned against one wall, part of its enameled surface scorched and blackened. She wondered what Lex would have done with it, and if he would have the damage she had inflicted repaired. The artifact must be worth a small fortune, if it were genuine, and somehow she couldn't see Lex owning anything like this thing that wasn't. The marble arms were also there, untouched by her fire.

"Now what?" Clark whispered.

"Over there." She flashed the beam of her penlight in the direction of the stairwell through which she had reached this place -- had it really been only this morning? "Come on."

Together they made their way across the cluttered floor. The beam of her flashlight brushed what looked like a clawed foot covered with white hair and she shone the beam up a large, white hairy torso, huge, muscular arms, also covered with white hair, and to a head where beady dark eyes stared glassily, and a wide mouth opened, displaying wicked fangs.

"Is that what it looks like?" Clark whispered.

"I have no idea." Lois turned her face away, refusing to look again at the thing, or think about what it implied. "This way." She opened the door to the stairwell that she had traversed before dawn only this morning and stepped through.

Somewhat more than an hour later, they had descended uncounted stairs. Lois wasn't sure how many floors they had passed when she paused on the landing and peeked out the small window into the sterile white corridor beyond.

There didn't seem to be anyone passing by, and she had seen for herself the night before that the nightlife in this place was scarce. The next thing they needed to do was to get hold of a couple of the shapeless white coveralls that she had used as a camouflage during her escape.

Cautiously, she eased the door open, wincing slightly at the faint squeal of hinges.

The hallway beyond looked very familiar: sterile white metal everywhere, with fluorescent tubes illuminating everything in their harsh, bluish white light. It was empty, as she had expected. Slowly, she stepped into the hallway, and Clark followed her. He looked around without expression, and she again saw the "Superman" look on his face. Carefully, she kept her expression sober and looked back and forth.

"This way," she said. "If this floor is like the others, there might be a storeroom around here."

Clark rubbed the bridge of his nose, turning a little away from her, and she saw him lower his glasses slightly. She looked away, giving him more freedom to use his super vision to locate what they needed.

"How about over there?" Clark pointed toward a door far down the corridor to their right.

"I guess that's as good as any," Lois said. She turned and started for the door, keeping her pace businesslike. So far there was no sign of any of the occupants of this place, but that didn't mean they weren't around. Some of the personnel that she had encountered the previous night had been dressed in street clothes, so if someone saw them the chances were that they wouldn't get suspicious if she and Clark weren't doing something out of the ordinary. She hoped. Of course, that was exactly what she and Clark were planning to do.

They reached their destination and Clark tried the doorknob. Lois watched his actions without seeming to and this time she saw what he did. For a bare instant his hand paused and she guessed the door was locked. Clark gripped the knob firmly and exerted force. There was a barely audible snapping sound and the knob turned. Her partner had broken the lock by sheer strength. Not exactly a masterpiece of finesse, she decided, but it worked.

Carefully, Clark eased the door open and entered, Lois on his heels.

This room was not a storage room, or at least, Lois amended, it didn't contain crates of food. There were no living things evident, as she had expected. She was fairly certain that Clark had ascertained that fact before he had chosen this room. Low lights illuminated the place, although it seemed brighter than the lighting in the stairwell -- or maybe her eyes were simply starting to get used to low lighting -- and in the faint glow, she could see that there were pieces of heavy machinery sitting motionless in irregular rows on the far left side of the place. With the aid of her penlight, Lois identified several fork lifts clustered in one corner, and various other kinds of construction and moving equipment as well. She was at a loss to guess what some of the stuff was for, but Clark started forward on silent feet and again she followed.

"I'm going to get pictures," her partner said softly. "We're going to need some kind of evidence."

Lois nodded. "I'll check around and see if I can find us something to wear for camouflage," she said.

Clark didn't answer. He was fishing a miniature camera from his pocket. Lois had already spotted what looked like a closet door to her right, behind a metal desk and chair that contained stacks of folders in a basket. Those might be worthwhile checking out, she thought as she made her way to the door.

It wasn't locked, she discovered, and opened easily.

It was a smaller storeroom, with pieces of electronic equipment sitting neatly on the shelves on one side. The other held what looked like specialized tools of some kind. In some disappointment, she looked around. This place didn't seem likely to hold clothing, she thought. Still, above her head were closed cupboards, and she opened one of the doors, unwilling to give up until she had explored all the possibilities.

In the third she discovered the boxes of coveralls, exactly as she remembered them.

They were labeled small, medium and large. For herself, Lois chose a small, which, it turned out, was still somewhat large on her petite frame, and she chose a large for Clark.

Her partner was standing in the center of the room when she returned, turning slowly in a circle and apparently studying the room.

"Here," Lois said. "Get changed."

He took the outfit, glancing at her in the shapeless clothing, and disappeared behind one of the machines. Lois turned and retraced her steps to the desk while her partner donned the approved uniform of this place. The top folder was the logical first choice, and she opened it.

It appeared to be several inventory sheets, she saw, in some disappointment. After glancing through it perfunctorily she picked up the second folder in the stack. On the inner front page, this one was labeled "ILSS". What the heck was that? she

wondered, glancing down the incomprehensible list of equipment. On the next page were neatly labeled line drawings of equally incomprehensible components for something or other, she thought. It didn't make any sense to her, but it might to someone over at STAR Labs. Lois extracted the tiny camera that she had tucked into one of the capacious pockets of the coverall and began to photograph the pages.

She had barely finished when Clark appeared beside her. "Someone's coming!" he whispered. "This way, quick!"

Lois followed her partner as he ducked behind one of the big fork lifts and the two of them crouched down, trying to breathe quietly. The doorknob rattled and then the door opened. Two men, also dressed in the white coveralls, entered. One of them was speaking.

"... Busted door lock. Better give Maintenance a call first thing in the morning. The Boss won't like it a bit if he finds out about it."

"Yeah," the second man agreed. "Look, go ahead and find that thing. I'm ready to knock off and get some dinner."

The footsteps echoed eerily around the big room as the two men headed over toward the storeroom closet. Lois heard the rattle of the doorknob again and then the faint squeal of hinges.

"They're right in front on the bottom shelf," the first voice said.

"What did the doc say they are?" the second voice inquired, sounding a little muffled.

"Thermistors," the first voice said. "Right there. Get one and let's go."

There was an unidentified rattle, the sound of footsteps and of the storeroom door closing. A moment later the door to the hallway opened and closed.

"Whew!" Lois said. "What were they after?"

"A thermistor," Clark said.

"What's a thermistor?"

"I think it's something to make a temperature sensing device," Clark said.

"How do you know?" Lois asked.

"I read it somewhere," Clark said. "What did you get from the desk?"

"There was a folder of stuff," Lois said. "ILSS. Do you have any idea what that is?"

"It stands for Integrated Logistics Summary Sheet," Clark said.

"What did you do -- memorize a dictionary?"

"I'm a speed reader."

Yeah, he probably was, Lois acknowledged. "So what is an integrated whatchamacallit?"

"It's generally a complete list of components for some machine," Clark said. "It can be for just about anything."

"Oh," Lois said, a little disappointed. "It's probably for repairing a microwave oven or something."

"Maybe," Clark said. "But it can't hurt to check it out. Look, let's get out of here and look around some more. I want to know what your boyfriend is up to."

"He's not my --"

"Well, he'd like to be," Clark amended. "Come on. There's a lot to this place and not much time for us to explore."

"Last night, the other storeroom I hid in had a freight elevator in the back," Lois said. "Maybe this one does, too. It's faster than stairs and we're less likely to run into anyone than in the regular elevators -- at least at this hour."

Clark nodded silently and gestured for her to lead on.

True to form, there was a big freight elevator in the back. Clark glanced around as if to assure himself that there was no one to hear, and pressed the call button. They waited, Lois watching the indicator above the doors and mentally urging it to hurry.

By her watch it was barely three minutes, but to her jumping nerves it seemed much longer. The freight elevator slid

ponderously to a stop and the doors slid open. Clark let her enter first and then followed almost on her heels. The doors slid shut, as Lois pushed the indicator button for the 95th level -- the lowest one.

The big car rumbled slowly downward. Clark grasped the rail lightly, looking slowly around the elevator, although what he might be looking for Lois couldn't guess. Maybe he didn't know, either, she thought.

At long last, the freight elevator reached the bottom level and the doors creaked open. Clark checked the room without, but it seemed to be simply another storeroom, dim and uninhabited.

They left the elevator and exited into the storeroom. In this one there appeared to be many crates of various shapes, stacked against the walls and piled neatly about in uneven rows. Clark paused suddenly, and she saw his nostrils twitch.

"What is it?" she asked.

He was silent, frowning, obviously thinking.

"What's wrong?" she asked again.

"Can you smell it?" he asked.

Lois sniffed. "What?"

He sniffed again. "Something --" He paused, lowering his glasses slightly as he turned his head. Then he took several steps to the right, into the widest walkway between the lines and lines of crates. Suddenly he paused and knelt, examining the surface of the floor minutely. "Do you have a container I can put something in?"

"I brought along a few envelopes in case we found something worthwhile."

"Let me have one." He held out a hand, and after a few seconds of slightly perplexed hesitation, she extracted one of the envelopes and gave it to him.

Clark took it almost absently. He was still looking at the floor, and now he reached forward to pick up a few nondescript pieces of something and place the fragments in the envelope.

"I'm going to want someone at STAR Labs to check this out," he said. "I'm not sure, but --"

"About what?" Lois demanded in a fierce whisper. "Stop being mysterious, Kent! What do you think it is?"

Clark sealed the envelope. "I'm not one hundred percent sure," he said. "But I think it's solid rocket propellant. Just a few pieces of it."

"Rocket propellant," Lois said blankly. "What would something like that be doing down here?"

"Good question," Clark said.

"Evidently sitting in the hands of someone that really has no business to have it at all," Lois said, answering herself. "How did Lex get hold of something like that?"

"I'd guess illegally," Clark said. "I think we've uncovered everything about Lex Corps, and we turn around and find something all the way from ordinary to the practically impossible."

"How the heck do we ever come off ahead of these people?" Lois asked what she was sure he knew to be a rhetorical question. "Where would Lex get hold of something like rocket fuel? And why?"

"With Luthor, I'm sure it's nothing good," Clark said. "I always wondered what would have happened if he'd gotten Space Station Luthor into orbit and operational. What if he'd managed to get some kind of weapons delivery system on board? It might have gotten pretty bad."

"What do you mean?"

"What if he'd threatened the world with nuclear weapons from space?" Clark said in a low voice. "We might have been under the reign of Luthor the First."

Now that was a scary thought. "It sounds like something from some of those old Flash Gordon comics," Lois said. "Do you really think Lex would do something like that?"

"Well, he funded Miranda's 'Revenge' for some reason,"

Clark said. "We know that from the records. He claimed he had no idea what she was doing, but I'm not so sure. What if he was interested in political power? Can you imagine what use millions of persons, influenced by the pheromone, might be to an ambitious man? And that's only one possibility."

She hadn't thought of that but, now that Clark had mentioned it, all sorts of hair-raising possibilities began to lift their heads. Lois shuddered. "I get the idea. So what do you think we should do now?"

"The only thing I can think of is to look around some more and see what we can find out. I wish we had a map of this place."

A faint memory of something that she had seen during her escape nibbled at the back of her mind. "I think I know where there's one. When I first got out of my 'apartment' there was some kind of a diagram on the wall next to the elevator, like the kind you see in department stores that show you where all the different sections are. I think it must have been a map."

"Where was it?" he asked at once.

"It was on the wall beside the elevator. Maybe there's one on this floor, too."

"Maybe," Clark said. "They might have them on every floor so the employees can find everything they need. Stay here. I'll go check."

Lois thought that one over for a bare second. She was tempted to agree, but that wouldn't have been in character for her before she knew his secret. "No way, Kent. This way." She stepped out into the pathway between the crates and made for the door that must open into the hallway, if this floor followed the same floor plan that all the others did.

A moment later, they paused by the door. Lois put her ear against it, and Clark did the same.

Silence, except for the sound of blood thrumming through her ears. She looked at her partner. "Anything?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so." He grasped the knob. "Locked. Got that magic lock pick of yours?"

She produced it from a pocket of the coveralls. "Someday I'm going to have to show you how to do this."

"It would be nice to know how," he agreed. He cocked his head and then leaned forward to put his ear against the door again. "Nobody there that I can tell. Do your stuff."

There was no one in the hallway when Lois eased the door open a moment later. She slipped through and Clark followed her. The elevator was only a short distance away, and, as there had been on the level where the duplicate of her apartment was located, on the wall next to it was a schematic drawing that must be a map of this complex.

Or at least one floor of it, she realized a moment later. On one side of the map was a listing of the other levels -- all 94 of them, along with labels that detailed the general purpose of the floor such as LVG QTRS, HDRP GRDNS and so forth. Lois squinted at the column of incomprehensible abbreviations and looked helplessly at her partner. "Great."

"Abbreviations," Clark said. "'LVG QTRS' must mean living quarters, I'd guess."

"Well, that isn't important right now," Lois said. "The map of this floor is what we're interested in." She regarded the spiderweb of hallways and rooms, labeled with numbers and letters, as well as abbreviations detailing, she supposed, the functions of the individual rooms.

Clark leaned forward, studying it. "There's a lot to this place. How do you suppose he managed to build it without anyone being aware of it?"

"I'm beginning to wonder if there's anything he can't do," Lois said. "At least he didn't manage to drive Superman away."

Clark smiled faintly. "Because of you," he said. "Both times. I think that Lois Lane is more than a match for Lex Luthor." He went back to studying the map while Lois felt her jaw drop involuntarily. Did he actually credit *her* with saving Superman?

Wow!

She took a split second to recover from the remark and Clark continued to frown slightly at the map. To cover her confusion, she also leaned forward to study it. "Can you make anything out of this?"

"I think so." He traced one of the lines with a finger. "This is where we are, and this place here is the storeroom. The rest of these seem to be more storerooms and some kind of administrative center, or something, over that way." His finger traced the spaces labeled as such and one large room marked "CTRL." "This hallway must go for miles under the city," he added, indicating a long passageway running roughly west from the main complex. "I'm not sure what this abbreviation stands for, though." He indicated the large roughly circular area some distance from their location at the far end of the western passage. "It's a pretty long way from the rest of the complex. I wonder --" His voice trailed off.

Lois squinted at the tiny letters. "OP EMP? What does that mean?" At his shrug she continued, "Well, I guess we could go see."

Clark hesitated, glancing at his watch. "It's quite a walk," he said. "Probably several miles. Are you sure you want to?"

Lois nodded. "If you can do it, so can I. There has to be a reason he's got this one thing so far from everything else. Besides, maybe we can find some kind of transportation. I can't see Lex wasting time by making his employees walk all that way. Let's go."

Clark seemed to hesitate for a split second and then he nodded. "Okay."

Clark surveyed the map one more time. As Superman, he could have checked out this thing in less than a second, but Superman was pretty much grounded at the moment. It was too bad that Lois insisted on exploring this particular lead, but there wasn't much choice. His volatile partner was nothing if not persistent, and it was probably a good thing that she was, even if it sometimes nearly gave him heart failure, he pointed out to himself. She hadn't given up on him after she had found him in Suicide Slum, following his uncontrolled plunge to Earth, and in the end her scream for Superman was probably the catalyst that had forced him to remember. Not only Superman but Earth itself owed Lois a debt for her tendency to attract trouble.

But now he was really beginning to worry about what they had found. Lois's instincts had been right on the mark, as usual. Luthor hadn't constructed this huge complex under Metropolis so that he could have a place to hide from stray killer asteroids, and he doubted that the man would build an underground ark this way unless he had something very definite in mind -- something that the rest of the planet would likely find detrimental, to say the least. He had hidden it with lead lining from Superman, and now it seemed that there was something on this bottom layer of the mysterious "ark" that he kept at a considerable distance from the rest of the place. Somehow, that wasn't very comforting.

"Are you coming?" Lois asked impatiently.

"Just memorizing the map," he assured her. "We don't want to get lost, and I don't want to have to count on finding more maps conveniently posted so we don't get turned around."

"Oh. Okay." She eyed him thoughtfully. "Are you going to be able to remember all this?"

"Sure."

Lois had an odd expression on her face that he couldn't figure out. Frequently he could read her expressions fairly well, but there were times that she baffled him. "What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing," she said airily. "Are you ready?"

"Let's go." He gestured her ahead of him. "The first turn is the one ten doors down to the left."

Lois started off briskly and he followed, still puzzling over Lois. It was almost as if she were watching him, waiting to see

what he would do. Maybe, he reasoned, she wasn't quite sure that his memory was back to normal after his bout with amnesia. He could see how that might make her a little unsure of his capability. Well, after he demonstrated that his memory was working normally, it ought to reassure her on that point.

Twenty minutes later, they came to the main route that would lead them directly to the room marked "CTRL" on the map. He figured it must be some kind of control room for the complex. Maybe that was where they coordinated things like distribution of the food supply, or the power or air circulation, or something. Those things would have to be regulated somewhere, after all. The hallway proceeded on past "CTRL" and led directly toward the "OP EMP" room, whatever that was. Judging by the scale of the map, it was still several miles away. As a matter of fact, it might actually be physically located beyond the boundaries of the city proper, and that meant they were in for a very long walk unless they could find some faster form of transportation than their feet.

The sound of footfalls ahead of them warned him and he touched Lois's arm. "Someone coming," he informed her in an under voice.

Lois paused infinitesimally and then resumed her businesslike stride. "Act confident," she whispered.

Clark grinned, familiar with the tactic. It had gotten them out of inconvenient situations before. He continued to walk steadily forward beside her. Ahead of them another man, dressed in an identical coverall to the ones they wore, rounded the corner of an adjoining hallway. He barely glanced at them as he passed.

He had to exert a fair amount of self control not to look over his shoulder as the footfalls retreated, and the back of Clark's neck prickled. It was obvious that, although they were sparse, some inhabitants of this place were abroad. He hoped none of them would see fit to ask Lois or him questions, since neither of them had the slightest idea what kind of answer would be acceptable.

Lois glanced quickly back over her shoulder. "He's gone," she said. "I'm glad he didn't stop to talk to us."

"Yeah, me too." Clark lowered his glasses, looking over them to check the immediate area. What he was searching for wasn't far ahead -- another storeroom where numerous little carts were neatly parked in rows near the front. Behind them were larger pieces of equipment, evidently meant for moving heavier items, somewhat like they had seen in the first storeroom they had entered. "I think there's a room a little way ahead where we can get some transportation. If I read the abbreviation right."

"I'd like that," Lois said. "Otherwise this could be a very long walk." She paused. "You've got a good memory."

"Yeah, pretty good," Clark agreed. He resisted the sudden entirely unexpected temptation to tell her the truth. Lying to Lois, even by omission, went against the grain. He pushed the temptation down again. When he worked up the nerve to actually tell her the truth, he didn't want it to be in the middle of a touchy investigation, in the bowels of an enemy fortress. "Come on before we run into somebody else."

The room in question was only a short distance farther down the passageway, and the door was unlocked. Clark scanned the place thoroughly with his x-ray vision before Lois opened the door, making certain that they weren't going to meet any surprises.

Lois flashed her light over the rows of vehicles. "Wow. This ought to speed things up a lot." She glanced at him and then moved forward toward the nearest cart. Clark followed.

"I hope the keys for these things are in the carts," she said. "I've never hot wired a golf cart before." She leaned into the cab. "No key."

Clark peeked over the tops of his glasses, scanning the vehicle from one end to the other. He lifted a seat cushion. "Here it is."

"How did you know to look there?" Lois asked.

"I didn't. I just guessed."

"Good guess. Let's get moving. We haven't got all night."

"Don't you want to drive?"

She got into the driver's seat. "Of course. You hold the door for me."

Clark obediently went to the room's door and opened it wide while Lois started the little car and maneuvered it out of the room. He closed it carefully behind her, making an effort to do so as silently as possible, and then jumped in beside her.

Despite Lois's remark, it wasn't really a golf cart, but a small electric vehicle of about the same size: sort of a miniature car. Clark scanned the controls, noting that the thing was apparently capable of speeds up to sixty miles per hour, although he couldn't quite imagine anyone driving one of these things through the halls of this complex at that speed.

Lois pushed the pedal down and they glided forward silently. Slowly, she accelerated until the vehicle was moving at about four times the speed of a brisk walk. That was probably the fastest they ought to go in the hallway, Clark thought. Besides the safety concern involved in steering in the relatively close quarters of the hall, there was the issue of occasional pedestrians. If they rounded a turn and found someone in their way, the last thing they wanted to do was run over him. In addition to the obvious, running someone down was bound to attract unwelcome attention.

But no one was to be seen. Clark scanned ahead of them, looking over the tops of his glasses the few times they approached another, crossing hallway, although as they went on they encountered few such intersecting passages. They passed the cluster of offices and the one marked CTRL without encountering anyone, to Clark's relief, and silence greeted his ears when he listened for any activity behind the closed doors. At last they were past the doorways and headed down the long corridor that lead to the OP EMP, whatever it was. With the long, straight empty passageway in front of them, Lois pushed down harder on the accelerator. Clark gripped a handhold and said nothing.

"This is spooky," Lois whispered after a while.

Clark didn't blame her. The engine of the electric cart was completely silent, and around them the long tunnel was devoid of sound. In contrast, her whisper seemed loud. Even Clark found himself straining his ears for a sound that wasn't there. Time passed as they flew along, and still there was no sound except for the faint swish of the tires on the concrete floor.

Because of that, when a sound finally did reach his ears, he nearly jumped out of his seat. They were approaching the OP EMP room. Not far ahead was another of the rooms with the same abbreviation on the door as the one from which they had acquired their pseudo golf cart, and the OP EMP room was some distance beyond that. From somewhere ahead came the sound of a door opening on non-too-well lubricated hinges. A voice was suddenly speaking.

"That's it. Everything's ready to go. Finish that stuff and let's get out of here."

Clark lowered his glasses and looked ahead.

The passage curved slightly a short distance away and the voice was coming from around that curve. A glance at Lois told him that she had heard nothing.

Ahead, he heard the distinctive click of a door closing, followed by the sound of two men walking toward them. The sound nearly made the hair rise on his scalp.

"We're getting close," he said quickly, keeping his voice low. "We'd better not go any farther in this thing."

Lois immediately took her foot from the accelerator and applied the brake. The car came to a gentle stop. "What do you want to do?"

A little surprised at her quick acquiescence to his suggestion, he pointed to where a wide door broke the blankness of the wall.

"I think that's another 'garage' like the one where we found this thing. It should be, according to the map. Let's park it there, out of sight, and go ahead on foot."

"Good idea." Lois piloted their silent little car to the door and Clark jumped out to open it.

The room wasn't lit, but he could see the interior from the light that filtered in from the passageway. It wasn't as large as the place where they had acquired their transportation, but parked inside was another small vehicle just like the one they had borrowed. To the rear of the room a somewhat heavier, but not much larger machine, that looked like some kind of specialized forklift, sat askew.

Lois drove through and at Clark's gesture piloted the small car into the back of the garage to a far corner, where it was partially concealed by the somewhat larger vehicle. Hopefully the approaching persons wouldn't notice the presence of an unexplained car, or wouldn't think it unusual. He hoped.

The footsteps were closer, and someone coughed, the sound loud in the silence around them. Lois had heard it too, for she glanced quickly around. "Someone's coming!" she breathed. "What'll we do?"

Clark looked frantically around. There was nowhere to hide, except the forklift. He hurried to it and checked the cab.

Not much room for a full-sized man to conceal himself, but Lois might just conceivably be able to scrunch down far enough to be out of sight. "Get in here and don't move," he whispered. "Hurry!"

Lois did so, looking back at him with that odd expression. "What are you going to do?"

"Never mind! Get down on the floor and don't make a sound!"

Lois didn't waste time debating but slid onto the floor of the forklift, wedging her body into the painfully tiny space. Her head came just below the level of the metal side of the machine. Clark moved quickly to close the door and then floated straight up to lie flat against the ceiling.

With the door shut the room was completely dark. Lois's heartbeat was loud in his ears, and he had to remind himself that the intruders wouldn't be able to hear it. He held his breath, hoping that the approaching men wouldn't come into the room, but he heard the footsteps and voices approach the door, and, an instant later, the door swung open.

Lois heard the creak as the hall doors started to open, tried to duck her head down a little farther and to breathe quietly. For a brief moment she wondered where Clark would hide and then she dismissed the thought. He would find some place, she assured herself. He was Superman. He wasn't going to let them catch him, and if they found her he would certainly do something, although she didn't know what.

Still, the fact that he had been investigating Lex and so far hadn't been able to pin anything on him, in spite of *knowing* that Lex was dirty, was slightly intimidating. To be able to evade even a suspicious Superman under those circumstances meant that Lex had to be more intelligent than even she had suspected, and far more cunning. It was absolutely imperative that they not be caught.

The sounds of footsteps echoed around the room as the intruder, or intruders, entered. Lois tried to keep her breathing absolutely silent in the quiet little room and hoped the echo of the footsteps would be enough to cover any slight noise. It sounded as if there were at least two, she thought, but she didn't dare even to shift position, in spite of the cramp that was beginning to knot in the calf of her left leg, much less raise her head to check.

"Man, I'm shot," a male voice grumbled. "I'm ready to head for the sack. These hours suck."

"A couple more days and that'll change," another, deeper voice replied. "We're all set. Now we just wait for the boss's

orders."

Various scrapings and other unidentified noises met her ears. The muscle in her leg quivered on the brink of a more severe cramp, and the back of her neck crawled. Lois closed her eyes and bit her lip, willing herself not to move, no matter what happened.

"I hope he finishes up soon," the first voice said. "I want to get back on a normal schedule."

"Yeah, me too. You want to drive?"

"Nah. I'd probably fall asleep at the wheel." A light door slammed. "You take it."

"There's a rumor that he's going to test it in the morning," the second voice said. "I'd kind of like to see it."

"You wouldn't see nothing," the first man said. "It'll all be out in space, and the only ones that'll know what's happening will be the egghead crowd in the control center. Hurry up and get in. I'm asleep on my feet."

The cramping muscle twinged and Lois barely restrained an exclamation of pain. A trickle of perspiration ran down her neck with a crawling sensation. She gritted her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut. No matter what, she mustn't make any noise.

The second car door slammed. "Yeah, I guess you're right. Let's go."

There was the faint swish of tires, a pause while Lois debated raising her head. The urge to scratch her neck was almost overpowering. She resisted it by concentrating on her cramping leg muscle. It helped her to ignore the itching, but made the pain of the cramp more noticeable. She began to count backwards mentally from one hundred.

There was the sudden sound of the room's doors closing. Darkness closed down abruptly.

She lifted her head and scratched her neck vigorously, squinting against the darkness, but there was no hint of light. She fumbled for the penlight in her pocket.

Another light flashed on. Clark was standing beside her hiding place, holding a mini-mag in one hand. "They're gone."

She began to unwind herself and winced as the cramping muscle in her calf protested strenuously. "Ow!"

"Are you all right?" He pulled open the door and lifted her down without apparent effort. "Lois?"

"I'm all right," she managed between gritted teeth. "I've got a muscle cramp in my leg. I'll be fine as soon as I straighten it out."

"Put your hand on my shoulder," he directed. "I'll stretch it out for you."

She obeyed, tensing involuntarily as he bent to take her ankle in one hand and grip the front of her leg just above the knee. "Careful."

"I'll try to be. Tell me if I hurt you."

"You won't be able to not hurt me," she grumbled. "Just don't do it too fast. It's sore."

He began to stretch the leg out and she squeezed her eyes shut and gritted her teeth against the cramp. A sudden warmth enveloped the spasming muscle and she felt the cramp begin to reluctantly release its grip. She gave a tiny sigh of relief as Clark straightened the leg and then lightly began to massage the offended muscle. It was sore, but much less so than Lois had expected.

"That feels good," she murmured. "Thank you."

"Can you walk on it?" Clark asked.

"Yeah. Just give me a minute." She stretched the leg and bent it experimentally. The muscle protested only slightly. "Wow. That's the fastest I've ever had a muscle cramp like that go away. You've got magic fingers." She cautiously set her foot on the floor. "I think it's okay. Let's go."

Clark hesitated and then nodded. "Okay, but if you need to rest your leg, tell me."

"It's just a cramped muscle," Lois said, a little surprised at his

tone. "It'll be fine. Come on -- let's go see what this OP EMP place is."

He nodded and led the way to the door. After a pause while he listened, he opened it onto an empty hallway. "I don't hear anyone around. Let's go."

Trying to move as quietly as Clark, and knowing all along that it was a useless effort, Lois followed him almost on tiptoe, resolutely not glancing at his feet. The complete silence in which he moved told her that her partner was again walking on a fraction of a millimeter of air. It seemed unfair, but why shouldn't Clark utilize every ability he had in an investigation like this? She certainly did. The only difference was that he had so many extra ones that ordinary people like her didn't have.

But at least he utilized them in the service of Lane and Kent, and never tried to claim extra credit. That was one thing in his favor. And besides, how many investigative journalists in the city -- or the world, for that matter -- could claim that she had Superman for her partner?

Only Lois Lane.

Face it, she thought to herself. Clark Kent was one heck of an investigative reporter. He'd undoubtedly do better without her holding him back, so why did he seem so happy to have her for a partner? There had to be some reason but she couldn't think of any. She'd thought early in their relationship that she had him figured out, but it was becoming more and more obvious to her that there was a lot more to Clark Kent and even Superman than she had realized.

She glanced uncertainly at him as he moved by her side. His whole attitude telegraphed caution. She saw him tilt his head slightly, listening, she thought, for the slightest indication that anyone else was nearby, but apparently they were alone. They rounded a turn in the corridor and Lois saw the door of the mysterious OP EMP room.

Clark paused for a long moment. Then, he moved swiftly forward and grasped the knob.

"Locked," he said. "Still got that magic lock pick?"

Lois produced it. "Any sign of an alarm? You seem to be pretty good at spotting them."

He had turned back to face the door and she saw him lower his glasses slightly. After a moment he pushed them back into place. "I don't see anything. Do you?"

She didn't smile, but moved forward and made a show of inspecting the lock. "No."

He stepped back. "Go ahead."

"Okay, but *you* let me know if you hear anyone coming."

"I will."

The lock was a heavier one than the lock on the storeroom door and it took more effort and time to pick it, but at last Lois succeeded. It occurred to her to wonder why he didn't simply break the lock but concluded that taking such a chance wasn't a good idea for a man trying to conceal his super strength. Once or twice when it wasn't obvious he might get away with it, but he had to know that she was pretty observant and might catch him if he pushed his luck. And besides, if Lex's people found too many doors with their locks broken, someone was bound to add up the numbers and realize that Superman had been checking out their Ark. The last thing either of them would want was for Lex to decide to hide the evidence.

Lois could think of only one way he might be able to do that, and knew that such an act would necessarily involve the deaths of everyone on Lex's Ark.

Would he do such a thing? She liked to believe that he wouldn't -- that no matter how ruthless Lex might be, he wouldn't sacrifice the lives of his employees to hide whatever he was doing down here -- but she was no longer sure of that. He had been ruthless enough to kidnap her "for her own good" when he thought that Superman wasn't around to rescue her, and Clark had told her enough to make her understand that she didn't know

the real Lex Luthor at all. He had been willing to kill every colonist on board the transport, for if the bomb had exploded after takeoff there could have been no other outcome. Would he destroy his hidden fortress under the city along with all its inhabitants in order to protect himself? Regrettably, the answer was almost certainly yes, and she was sure Clark thought the same thing. They couldn't afford to leave any more evidence, if they could help it.

At last the lock clicked open and she pocketed her lock pick. With another glance around, she turned the knob and pushed the door open.

The room beyond had obviously been a natural cavern originally, that those who had dug this fantastic place must have stumbled upon, but it had been adapted for another purpose since then. Lois stepped inside, followed by her partner, and he closed the door behind them. Then they both paused, staring around in silence.

The walls were of some kind of natural rock, but naked wiring ran up the walls and was draped from the roof between unshielded fluorescent lighting fixtures, and on the walls were various screens, now blank. Around the big room were consoles, each with a computer screen and an array of instruments. From somewhere came the faint hum and click of equipment running in the background. On one wall to Lois's left was a single, larger screen that was lit, showing a computer graphic of the Earth, rotating slowly, and around it a display of minuscule moving points of light that seemed to always maintain their relative positions over the planet.

"What's that?" she whispered. The room was empty of human life but somehow the incredible scene seemed to require that she keep her voice down.

Clark was frowning at the display. "I'm not sure. It looks like a computer animation of Earth and some kind of satellites in geosynchronous orbit around it."

"What kind of orbit?"

"A geosynchronous orbit is the kind where an object stays above the same spot on the planet -- it moves at the same speed as the Earth's rotation," Clark explained. "Look in the lower right corner. There's the real Earth. It looks like pictures I've seen taken from Space Station Prometheus."

Now Lois saw the much smaller picture where Clark had indicated it. She hadn't noticed it among all the various readouts and symbols crowding the bottom of the screen. "You mean those lights are satellites?"

"I think so," Clark said. "It looks like about --" He was silent for several seconds, squinting at the screen. "I think there's about six."

"I only see four."

"Yeah, but each one is positioned over a large land mass." He pointed. "One each over Europe and Asia. One over Africa and another over Australia. The other big land masses -- not counting Antarctica -- are North and South America. If you look at the graphic there's a ghost outline of them on the other side, showing through, and one point above each one. Now why would Luthor be monitoring a bunch of geosynchronous satellites orbiting the Earth? Surveillance satellites, maybe? And how did they get there? I don't recall any launches from EPRAD recently."

Lois stared at the screen. "And what do they have to do with OP EMP?" she added.

Clark looked at her sharply, and Lois could almost swear that she heard an audible click. "Electromagnetic pulse," he said slowly. "EMP is an abbreviation for electromagnetic pulse. OP might mean operations or something, but the EMP is the important thing, if I'm right. And it makes sense."

"Well, it doesn't to me!" Lois said caustically. "What's an electromagnetic pulse, and how does it make sense?"

"Come on," Clark said. "Let's look around while we have time. An electromagnetic pulse is produced from the explosion of

a nuclear weapon. It will fry any unshielded electronic equipment within its range. If you explode it in the sky above an area, anything that uses electronic circuits will stop working, unless they're shielded."

"But what has that got to do with anything?"

"Think of Metropolis suddenly without power. No internet, no communications. Nothing. A lot of cars wouldn't work, because most of the newer cars use electronics -- not like the old ones. And they'd run out of gas before long because it takes electricity to run the gas pumps. No running water because we pump the water in. Then think of it that way everywhere."

Lois found herself staring at him in horror. "Earth would be practically back in the Stone Age!"

"Yeah," Clark said. "Sort of like after Nightfall."

Lois swallowed. "And if Lex and his people were down here with tons of food and technology they'd be fine. There would be chaos at first, maybe some wars, lots of people dying, but in a few years things would settle down and then he could come out and --"

"Luthor the First," Clark said. "It would have been nice to have Space Station Luthor to live and rule, and play emperor from, but I think he'd make do here. No wonder he had this place waiting when Nightfall showed up."

"I wondered about that," Lois said. She cleared her throat, trying to dispel the sensation of a lump of stone settling in her stomach. "How do you think he's going to do it?"

"Those guys said the boss is going to test this set-up in the morning," Clark said. He also cleared his throat. "Which continent do you suppose is going to be suddenly thrown into the Stone Age?"

"I don't know," Lois said. "But something doesn't make sense here. Won't the government or the military or maybe some of the other countries figure out he did it? I mean, if he launches a missile, or something, can't they somehow track it back to where it came from? Won't they come after him?"

Clark hadn't taken his eyes from the display. "What if he doesn't have to," he suggested.

"What do you mean?" She stared at the screen and the blinking lights. It had to be her imagination, but the six tiny sparks that represented the orbiting satellites had assumed a faintly malevolent glow.

"I was thinking -- what if those satellites--" He nodded at the screen. "What if those satellites are actually nuclear weapons just waiting for the signal to detonate?"

That was an appalling thought. "How would he have gotten them into orbit?" she asked. Her voice sounded faint to her, and she cleared her throat again. This couldn't be happening! Except that it was.

"I don't know, but he got the satellites up there somehow. They could easily be nuclear bombs. Maybe Antoinette Baines managed it somehow during the Prometheus project," Clark said. "How many launches were there?"

"I don't know," Lois said. "If Lex used the Messenger launches to put his satellites in orbit --" She broke off. "He might have, I guess. Especially if he's got some of his people at EPRAD, or up on the station."

"Or both," Clark said. "I suspect there's not much Luthor can't -- or won't -- do."

"But why didn't Superman spot them?" Lois asked. "I mean -- he flies into space sometimes, doesn't he?"

"I suppose so," Clark said. "But there's a lot of space up there, and he didn't know about them. I'm not sure he'd be able to find them even if he was looking for them, if he didn't have some idea where they were."

That made sense, Lois thought. Even Superman must have his limits. "Isn't there any way to protect electronics from this EMP thing?"

"Sure. The military has shielded some of their equipment from the possibility of an EMP, but mostly everything else would be affected," Clark said. He turned his head, surveying the room, illuminated by the garish light of the unshielded fluorescent bulbs.

Lois produced her camera. "We need evidence," she said. "Let me get some pictures."

"Right. But make it fast." Clark glanced again at the screen and then began to move around the room, briskly opening drawers, obviously looking for anything that might be used as evidence.

"I wonder how they intend to handle Superman, though," Lois said. That seemed like a rather large oversight in Lex's plan, and it made her uneasy. If there was anything she knew about Lex it was that he wasn't likely to make that kind of mistake.

"I've been wondering about that, myself," Clark said, carefully closing a drawer. "He has to know Superman isn't going to let him take over the world, no matter whether he has all the technology or not."

"Well, I have enough pictures," Lois said, shoving the camera down into the coverall's pocket again. "Let's get out of here. If we can get hold of Superman, maybe he can stop them before they start their test. Even if we can't, we have to alert the authorities. If he explodes a bomb over somebody's country, you know what it'll look like. It could start a nuclear war. Maybe -- maybe that's how he intends to handle the military when he blows up those things." She gestured vaguely at the screen. "If they tear each other apart, he wouldn't even have to get his hands dirty. I don't know if even Superman could stop a nuclear war in time." She bit her lip. It went against the grain, but Clark certainly could get out of here by himself faster than he could if she tagged along. "Maybe we should split up," she suggested. "That way there's a better chance of one of us making it." And then he could come back as Superman and take care of all this.

Except that they didn't have any real proof of what was going on here. Lex was bound to have some kind of cover story, no matter how unlikely it seemed. It might be that they were going to have to let him at least start his plan, and catch him in the act, as it were. That was playing it awfully close, but what choice did they have?

"There's no way I'm leaving you alone in this place," Clark said flatly. "Let's go." He glanced at his watch. "It's one-twenty-four," he added, with a faint note of surprise in his voice. "We've got some time, so let's not waste it."

In spite of her resolve, she was glad he refused to leave her here by herself. "All right. Let's get out of here."

He raised his head and she felt an instant thrill of alarm. She knew the meaning of that pose. Clark was hearing something that she couldn't, and that could only mean someone was approaching.

"Somebody's coming," Clark said, on cue. "Quick; this way."

He hustled her toward the back of the big room, pulled open a door that she hadn't even realized was there and pushed her through. The faint squeak of hinges nearly made her hair stand on end, but almost at once she realized that it wouldn't have been heard outside the room. Beyond the door there was a narrow, dark, very cramped space. Clark crowded in beside her and pulled the door shut.

It was pitch black inside, and Lois pushed backwards, trying to give her much larger partner more room, but the rattle of a key in the outer lock, followed by the sound of footsteps in the room they had just vacated made her freeze. Beside her, Clark was motionless as well. Footsteps came nearer, and Lois held her breath. Very slowly, she eased backwards in the narrow space. Whatever this place was, if she and Clark were found Lex would know that he had been discovered and act immediately. Even Clark might not be able to find and render the bombs -- if indeed that was what they were -- harmless before the damage was done.

Besides, could Superman withstand the explosion of a nuclear weapon at close range? Lois didn't know, and she didn't want to have to find out. Lex's seeming oversight on the subject of Superman nagged at her. There was something she was missing.

Something metal gouged her in the middle of her back.

Another doorknob, she realized. The little room had an exit. She poked her partner in the side. "There's another door here," she breathed.

Silence beyond the door. Lois held her breath, straining her ears.

"Can you hear anything through it?" he whispered back.

"No."

Another silence. "Me either."

Lois gripped the knob and tried it cautiously. It was locked. "Locked. Just a minute." She reached into the capacious pocket of her coverall and found her lock pick again. Operating by touch, she slipped the little instrument into the keyhole of the knob and began to work.

It seemed like ages but in reality must have been mere seconds before the knob turned under her hand. The faint squeal it made caused her hair to try to stand straight up, but she controlled the urge to shove the door wide and instead eased it open as quietly as she could. She couldn't prevent a slight grating sound, but although it might seem loud to her, in the operations center it was probably inaudible against the background sounds of running equipment. As soon as the aperture was wide enough, she slipped through and paused, momentarily disoriented.

The room was as dark as the little closet had been but she had the impression of a good deal of space around her and for a very short few seconds she felt alone in the echoing silence.

Then she realized that Clark hadn't followed her. She turned back, suddenly aware that the door was open. Clark was still in the closet.

She held perfectly still, waiting. What her partner was doing she wasn't sure but she had no doubt Superman was up to something.

An instant later, he stepped soundlessly through the door and closed it very gently, holding the knob so that the latch closed softly instead of with an audible click. Then he produced his light, illuminating rough, unfinished stone walls and an uneven stone floor. Piled some distance away were a number of unopened wooden boxes and one open one. From the top of the open box trailed an array of wires and what appeared to be a set of earphones.

"What were you doing?" she whispered.

"Listening," Clark said. He looked grim.

"What did you hear?" Lois asked. Peering at him in the illumination of her flashlight beam it almost appeared as if there was perspiration on his forehead. "Who was that?"

"Luthor," Clark said. "And several other men. They're starting their test. We've run out of time."

"We've got to get out of here," Lois said.

"I know."

For a brief instant she fought the same battle that she had fought with herself in the control room. "Let's split up," she said again. "Maybe there's another way out of here. If we both look, maybe we'll find it. One of us needs to get out and warn someone. You go that way." She waved vaguely into the darkness. As dark as it was in here, surely Superman could slip away from her and do something. Clark couldn't let Lex get away with this, could he?

"The only way out is the door we came in," Clark said. "I'm going to have to make one."

"Huh?" For a split second she stared at him, not understanding what he meant. Then comprehension dawned. She hadn't expected it to be so easy.

From the little closet came the faint squeak of hinges. Someone was opening the outer door.

Clark glanced swiftly over his shoulder. "We have to go now. I can't leave you here alone. If Luthor finds you, I'm afraid of what he'll do. Come on."

"What?"

"I'll explain later, if you're still talking to me," Clark said. He wrapped an arm around her, and pulled her tightly against his side. "Tuck your face into my shoulder and hold on."

Wordlessly, she obeyed and felt herself suddenly become lighter than air. Then they were lifting off and she pressed her face tighter into his shoulder. His arm clamped her against him like a bar of iron.

They floated straight upward, and below her Lois heard the inner door open.

Like ghosts, they hovered in mid air. Lois found that she was holding her breath and forced herself to breathe silently. Below her she saw a human figure carrying a flashlight and heard the echoes as footsteps crossed the stone floor. The figure bent over the wooden boxes and she heard the clatter of something falling to the ground. There was a muffled thump that made the echoes reverberate around the cavern and a four-letter word. Then the footsteps were retreating and she heard the door close noisily.

"He's gone," Clark's voice said. "Are you all right?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" she asked. "Why aren't you going to go back and stop them?"

"I can't." His voice sounded odd. "Do you mind if I explain later?"

She shook her head.

They began to rise slowly again. "Here we go," Clark's voice said. "Keep your eyes closed so you don't get rock dust in them."

Lois squeezed her eyes more tightly shut and then an almost indescribable sensation engulfed her, a vibrating, grinding feeling. Clark had to be digging through rock and soil, one-handed, literally burrowing an exit route for them. Then the sensation was gone and cool night air blew against her skin. She raised her head to the sight of a brilliantly starred night sky past a shoulder clad in blue spandex, and of the ground far below. They had to be well away from the city.

But only for a few seconds. Then the lights of Metropolis were sliding by below. Clark certainly wasn't wasting any time, she thought.

"I'm going to put you down by the Twelfth Precinct. Henderson is on night shift right now. You can tell him everything. I've got a bomb to get rid of."

Lois nodded. "Clark --"

They swooped downward. "We'll talk when I get back. I'll explain everything, but I want to go somewhere that you can yell at me in private." His boots hit the ground in front of the police station and he pushed open the doors. "Sergeant Binns!"

The man behind the desk glanced quickly up. "Superman?"

"Tell Inspector Henderson I said Ms. Lane has something very important to tell him," he said. He looked apologetically at Lois. "I'll be back as soon as possible."

"Be careful," she said, fixing him with a patented Lois Lane glare. "If you get yourself killed, I'll never speak to you again!"

He smiled. "I will." In the blink of an eye he had vanished. In the distance, Lois heard a sonic boom that rattled the windows.

With a sigh, she turned to Norman Binns. The sergeant was staring at the space where Superman had been with a startled expression on his face. "Could you call Inspector Henderson, Sergeant? There isn't much time to waste."

With the intense speed of which he was capable but rarely used within the atmosphere of Earth, Clark streaked toward space, leaving a sonic boom in his wake that probably shook windows all across the continent.

The satellites were centered over each large land mass, in geosynchronous orbit, according to the computer image. That meant, Clark thought, that Luthor didn't intend to simply

detonate the bombs on the satellites. That would be much too high to accomplish what he wanted. He was going to have to launch his weapon from each satellite for it to reach the desired altitude above its target -- high enough for the pulse to reach every corner of the land mass below, but not so high that the effect might be too attenuated by distance. Exactly what that distance was he wasn't exactly sure but he figured that Luthor wouldn't put the satellites any higher than they absolutely had to be.

The things were bound to be small; probably not much larger than a Volkswagen, he thought, and very likely coated with some kind of non-reflective substance to conceal them from accidental discovery. But he had seen the computer simulation, and he thought he could figure out from that information, and reasoning, where the satellites were hiding. But he had to move fast. How long it would be before the signal would be sent he didn't know but it couldn't be long. And of course, he had no idea which one of the six was going to be the Guinea pig.

Before he left the atmosphere, he took a deep breath of air, filling his lungs. He could hold his breath for twenty minutes, or, in a pinch, one or two minutes more, but that was his limit. Then, holding his breath, he accelerated upward, trying to estimate from the diagram that he had seen in Luthor's fortress where he would find the satellite.

He had a one in six chance, and he felt slightly guilty as he hovered protectively above the North American continent. Superman wasn't supposed to play favorites but this was the part of the world where the people he cared most about lived. Lois, his parents, the people at the Planet, the residents of Smallville. He had to start somewhere, he rationalized, and here was as good as any.

What was *that*?

Black on black, at first he wasn't sure that he was seeing the thing, an amorphous black blotch against the black of space. The only indication that there was anything was the pinpoint of light, the tip of the sword in Orion's belt, that winked suddenly out. Then another star and another vanished in a leisurely way as he zeroed in on the patch of blackness. Then he saw it, a smooth outline of dull black against the faint cloud of stars behind it. He approached it carefully, unsure of what to do now that he had found one of his targets. If he shoved it out of orbit so that it plunged into the sun or something, would those below, tracking it, realize that something was wrong and --

And what? He didn't even know which satellite was the right one. He was going to have to wait to see which one it was. He needed to locate all six, so that when it happened he could take out the active one, and quickly remove the others.

But the position of this one gave him some clue to where the others probably were. At least he hoped so.

He looked down, setting in his mind the landmarks on the huge blue, green and brown globe beneath him. He was directly over Kansas.

Okay, the other satellites were most likely at this level and centrally located over their individual continents, he thought. Just like on the computer diagram miles below him and to the east. Turning, he raced south.

The satellite was more or less midway over South America. Again he turned and a moment later was headed west.

Each satellite found gave him more certainty of finding the next. Within minutes, he had located all six. With that information in hand, he began to circle the globe, flying west around the equator, keeping watch over the continents.

He had to dip downward once into the atmosphere for a second lungful of air, but he instantly resumed his vigil. And when the rocket fired, he saw it.

The missile burst from the satellite that hung directly over Kansas and accelerated toward the west. He began to follow and paused. The rocket was angling lower, obviously headed for the

level where its burst could sow destruction and chaos as it took out the electronics of the civilization on the continent below, but as he watched it leveled out, and at once he realized its purpose.

The rocket was circling the globe and by the time it completed its orbit of the planet and reached Kansas again it would be at the correct elevation for the air burst. Well, it wasn't going to reach Kansas again. Not if he had anything to say about it.

Rather than chase the thing, Superman flew east, tracking the rocket's trajectory over his shoulder until it disappeared around the planet's horizon. In a burst of speed he accelerated, and intercepted the oncoming missile partway around the globe.

With a quick motion, he ripped the object into two pieces and hurled them outward at escape velocity. They were well beyond the elevation at which their satellite had orbited when the nosecone exploded in an enormous globular burst of nuclear fire.

But Clark was already moving. He didn't know if the people down in Luthor's command center had any way of telling what was going on up in space, but he had no intention of giving them the chance to do any more damage. Knowing where the other satellites orbited made it childishly easy to find and dispose of them, one at a time.

But he had no intention of letting all the evidence get away. A quick dive into Earth's atmosphere to refill his air supply for a third time, a race to the Moon, guiding one remaining satellite, and a short time later he lifted off the dark side of Earth's barren companion, leaving behind his prize, its nuclear payload intact.

He hoped Lois had been able to convince Henderson in time to do some good, he thought as he entered Earth's atmosphere and set a course toward Metropolis. If Lex Luthor realized that he and Lois had been there and what they had seen, Clark knew enough of the billionaire to realize that he wouldn't hesitate to destroy the evidence, and with it every denizen of the underground bunker. As it was, Luthor had to know who had disposed of his nuclear satellites. Clark wasn't sure what the man would do, but he was fairly certain that Luthor would do something.

But just this once it was going to have to be brought to an end by Metropolis's Finest. Superman was going to have to stay at a safe distance.

Lois Lane tapped her foot crossly and then drummed her fingers on the chair arm.

She shouldn't be so annoyed, of course. Her report to Henderson had been met with far more belief than she might have expected, especially after Henderson had her photos developed in the station's lab. And then there had been the explosion in space.

No one missed that. The ball of light had blazed brighter than the Moon in the night sky, and Henderson had run out along with everyone else to see it.

"Looks like Big Blue got the test bomb," he said tersely, after he and Lois were alone once more in his office.

"What are you going to do about it?" Lois demanded.

"Take it easy," the Inspector told her. "I'm getting a warrant from a judge I can trust."

"What do you mean, 'trust'?" Lois asked.

Henderson's lips stretched in a dry smile. "Let's say that Mr. Luthor has a lot of persons on his payroll that don't appear in the official records," he said. "You don't think you were the only one that suspected him of a skeleton or fifty in his closet, do you?"

She shook her head.

"Actually, I'm a little surprised," Henderson continued. "I thought he'd taken you in completely."

She wasn't about to admit to Henderson that he was right. "Have you ever heard of an undercover investigation?" she inquired crossly.

Again that dry smile. "That was why you showed up with

him on the society page last week? And the one the week before?"

"Never mind that," she said. "Yesterday was the breakthrough I'd been looking for. I couldn't wait any longer to report it -- not with what Clark and I found."

"I'm glad you did," Henderson said. "But where's Kent? Did you say he was with you?"

Darn it! How was she supposed to cover that part?

"Yes, he was. He got hold of Superman for me. He's holding off on writing the article until the MPD gets finished with whatever you guys are going to do, though."

"I'm surprised it's not already on the news," Henderson said drily.

"Clark and I aren't stupid!" Lois said. "We don't want Lex to get away with this either!"

"I guess I should be grateful for small favors," Henderson said. He turned his head as the intercom squawked at him.

"Yeah?"

"We got it, Boss," a woman's voice said.

"Great. Is everybody ready?"

"Ready and waiting."

"I'll be right there." Henderson got up and paused as Lois also rose. "Where do you think you're going, Lois?"

"With you! I've got a story to report on!"

Henderson shook his head decisively. "You'll hear about it when we get back. I'm not going to risk a civilian getting hurt or killed down there. Or, equally important, an eyewitness."

"But --"

"I don't have time to argue," Henderson said. "Stay here." He relented slightly at the sight of her rebellious expression. "Look, you've got the exclusive. That's a promise. But I don't want you anywhere near that place, or near Luthor's goons. It would be awfully easy for you to catch a stray bullet. Besides, I'd miss your insults." He left the room without another word, leaving Lois to glare at the unresponsive door.

Five minutes later, Lois poked her head out the door and looked carefully in both directions. Henderson was probably gone by now and if she hurried she wouldn't be too far behind him. Lex Tower was only a few blocks away and if she was lucky enough to spot a taxi she might be able to get there in time to see most of the action.

Carefully, she closed the door to Henderson's office and turned quietly toward the rear of the building.

The door through which she exited a few moments later opened upon an alley, and she was able to reach the street in less than a minute.

It was still dark, of course, but the streets weren't empty. Cars passed on the thoroughfare, perhaps not with the same frequency as in daylight, but still in respectable numbers. A glance at her watch told her it was sixteen minutes after three.

She glanced upward. The remnants of the nuclear explosion still glowed in the night sky, and Lois shuddered. Clark had pushed that thing out of orbit around the Earth, taken the bomb to a safe distance where the electromagnetic pulse that it produced would not harm the planet. She hoped sincerely that he had been a safe distance away before it had blown. How invulnerable was Superman, anyway?

She frowned, still looking at the glowing embers of the nuclear blast in space. He could be hurt, she knew. Maybe even killed. In Smallville, a few months ago, she had seen him first affected by allergies and then the victim of a paper cut.

But that wasn't right, she thought not for the first time. Superman didn't get either allergies or paper cuts.

And then it was as if something in her brain clicked.

Superman couldn't be cut or shot. He could hold his breath and fly into airless space without a suit -- and yet his finger had been bleeding that day in Smallville. She hadn't had enough information back then to put the pieces together and had thought

nothing of it, but that was before she and Clark had stayed in the Honeymoon Suite at the Lexor, when Lois had made her discovery.

They had gone to Smallville months ago and run into Bureau 39, headed by Jason Trask, hunting for a mineral that he had believed could kill Superman. Clark had named the imaginary stuff Kryptonite for their article a few days later. Lois had given the hypothetical substance little credibility at the time, and very little thought about it since. But there *had* been Kryptonite in Smallville. There was no other explanation.

Clark must have encountered it that first night sometime before she had come downstairs to check the fax machine and found him sitting at the kitchen table with his parents, in obvious physical distress. And the next day he had cut his finger on a sheet of paper. Whatever Kryptonite was, it had taken away his invulnerability, and maybe more. He must have recovered later, so the effect was temporary, although who knew what might have happened if he had stayed near it longer?

And a short time ago, instead of going back -- as Superman -- to stop the test, he had elected to take her to safety and go to stop Lex's nuclear devices directly.

Of course, it was possible that he might not have been able to stop the test down in the bunker, but he could have grabbed Lex when he had come into the room where they were hiding, and he hadn't. She had wondered at the time what was wrong. Now she knew that he had feared a nuclear explosion less than he feared Kryptonite.

Wayne Irig had sent a piece of the alien mineral to a lab for analysis, Lois recalled, and it had vanished. She should have added it up before. She might have if she had known the truth about Clark.

Lex had tentacles everywhere, and the possibility of a weapon against Superman must have been irresistible. Of course he was behind its disappearance. Looking back on the episode from her new perspective it was obvious. If it was as effective against Superman as Trask had believed, Lex would use it against Superman in his bid to become Luthor the First in the antediluvian world that he would create with his EMP weapons. It all added up.

Lex must have had the Kryptonite, whatever it was, with him back in the cave and apparently it really was so dangerous that Clark dared not get close to it.

She was almost surprised at the steely determination that washed through her then, but not really. Lex Luthor could not be allowed to use the Kryptonite against Clark, nor must he be allowed to give it to someone else for the purpose. And almost as important, the knowledge of what it could do to Superman must not be allowed to become public. Even Lex couldn't be sure, she thought, and she couldn't let him find out for certain.

By hook or by crook, she was going to have to get hold of it herself.

Fifteen minutes later, Lois Lane, clad in the slightly loose outfit of a member of Metropolis's SWAT Team and clutching a full automatic rifle, strode confidently toward the entrance to Lex Tower. The operation was underway. The radio receiver in her ear faithfully relayed the communications flying back and forth between the officers involved in the invasion of Luthor's bunker. It was a little hard to follow, but it seemed as if things were going smoothly, at least so far. Without difficulty, she picked up the distinctive voice of Inspector Henderson, and had to remind herself that what she was doing was absolutely crucial, because it was for Clark.

It hadn't been difficult, once she had spotted the vehicle belonging to a female officer on the unit. Popping the car's trunk had taken seconds and pulling on the clothing hadn't consumed much more time. Two men stood at the main entrance of Lex Luthor's headquarters, guarding the doors against escapees, and

Lois approached, almost holding her breath.

But neither man objected. She nodded to them as she pushed her way through the entranceway and into the big lobby of the Tower. Once inside, she didn't hesitate but hurried toward the main hall with a businesslike stride, passing two other SWAT officers without speaking. She needed to find Lex at once, and if he was already in custody she needed to get her hands on anything that they had taken from him that might be the mysterious Kryptonite. She had no idea what it might look like, but she was fairly confident that she could figure it out fast enough.

Someone's voice spoke in her ear, telling all officers in general to be on the lookout for Lex. Lois gathered from the announcement that they had not located him yet.

Well, he could be in his underground fortress, of course, but Lois didn't think so. His test had failed, and Lex would have to be a lot stupider than she thought he was not to realize that something had happened to his bomb -- and who had caused it. So what would he do?

Well, Lex couldn't know that Superman had reason to connect his bunker to the orbiting weapon. If Lex was half as smart as she thought he was, he'd have left no identifying features on the orbiting bomb. He might very well figure that Superman had spotted the weapon on one of his trips beyond Earth's atmosphere. Superman had never been very forthcoming about the extent of his powers, or exactly what they were. People were free to speculate, and Lois thought that approach was probably a good one. The less people knew about Superman's abilities, the harder it was for them to predict what he could and could not do.

In any case, on her hurried trip to Lex Tower, Lois had decided upon her approach. What Lex would probably do, she thought, was go up to his penthouse and act innocent, so that would be her method of attack. Surely, he wouldn't carry the Kryptonite with him all the time, would he? But if he did, she still might be able to work out a way to get her hands on it.

The elevator that Lex Luthor used to reach his penthouse was in the hallway just beyond the lobby. Lois strode confidently through the lobby, nodding to the SWAT officer who appeared to have been stationed there to keep an eye on things, and entered the hall.

Several SWAT officers were waiting at the elevator.

Lois stopped. Getting into the car with several members of Metropolis's SWAT team probably wasn't a good idea. If they got a close look at her they would know at once that she wasn't a member of their group.

But there was another elevator two halls away that went to the floor directly beneath Lex's lavish penthouse, and that would be almost as good, because it opened on Lex's servants' quarters and on the penthouse kitchens. And in the kitchens there was another elevator -- a dumbwaiter, actually -- that opened on the room adjacent to Lex's luxurious study.

Clark Kent, in his guise as Superman, entered the Twelfth Precinct and approached the desk sergeant. "Sergeant Binns?"

The man hastily laid a raised doughnut down on a greasy napkin, chewed laboriously at the chunk he had just bitten from the confection and swallowed convulsively. "Superman?"

"Is Ms. Lane still here?" he inquired.

The man nodded. "She should be waiting in Inspector Henderson's office," he said. "The Inspector isn't here, though. He left with the SWAT team about --" The sergeant glanced at his watch. "About twenty minutes ago."

"Would it be all right if I went back to wait for him?" Clark inquired politely.

The sergeant nodded. "Sure. Go ahead."

"Thanks." Clark went past him toward the door at the rear of the room. The sergeant picked up his doughnut.

Clark strode quickly down the hallway, his cape waving behind him. A vague sense of uneasiness warred with his relief at the outcome of his mission into space. Something wasn't right, and he couldn't put his finger on it. He knocked on the door to Henderson's office.

There was no answer. He knocked again.

Still nothing. He x-rayed the room beyond the door.

The room was empty.

That was what had been nagging at him, he thought. Lois's heartbeat was nowhere in the building.

He stood for a split second with the thoughts racing through his mind, along with a sinking sense of certainty. Henderson would have refused to take Lois with him to capture Lex Luthor, and Lois would have refused to accept Henderson's decree.

Clark had a pretty good idea where his partner was.

Scrunched tightly in the confined space of the dumbwaiter, Lois gritted her teeth and tried to concentrate on counting backward from ten thousand. The thing moved with snail-like speed, and in the darkness she could feel her pulse beating hard in her throat and the blood singing in her ears. She hoped that no one would be nearby at this hour to hear the faint rumble the thing made as it moved slowly upward toward Lex Luthor's penthouse.

With a faint groan the device ceased to move and Lois held her breath. She could hear nothing except the sound of her heartbeat. Had the dumbwaiter stalled under her weight? At a little over a hundred pounds, she was undoubtedly heavier than any of its normal contents. Cautiously, she reached out and felt the wall beside her.

It was the door that opened on the little room next to Lex's study. Or, at least it was a door, and it should be the right one. Cautiously, she pushed at it, and it opened outward on an unlit room with a faint squeak of hinges. A doorless arch opened onto Lex's study, now also unlit.

Lois held perfectly still, listening. From somewhere she could hear the murmur of voices, although she couldn't make out the words. One sounded like Lex's cultured voice, and the other, somewhat deeper, might be his butler's. Nigel St. John was a big man, and Lois had never particularly liked him, although she wasn't sure why. Perhaps it was the expressionless voice and face of the man, matched oddly with the far from expressionless dark eyes that seemed to watch everything around him with faint amusement -- except her. He always seemed to be watching her warily, as if he were trying to make up his mind about her, somehow. As if, she thought with sudden comprehension, he regarded her as a threat. Nigel didn't like her -- had never liked her, any more than she liked him, although why she was sure of that she couldn't have explained.

The voices were slowly approaching, she realized suddenly. If they found the dumbwaiter open, they might become suspicious.

Trying to be as silent as possible, Lois crawled out of the dumbwaiter and closed the door. Then, on tiptoe, she crossed the room to where thick draperies were drawn across the windows and slipped behind them, pressing herself flat to the wall. In the dimness, they probably wouldn't notice her, as long as they didn't enter the room, and turn on the lights.

"... Be here shortly," Lex's voice was saying. "They're stalled in the elevator for the moment, but once they get out I expect to have them knocking on my door. I trust I can depend on you. Nigel."

"Of course, sir. I shall be the perfect butler -- offended that someone would dream of arriving at such an hour, but prim and correct. You have been here since twelve o'clock last night and are at present sleeping soundly."

"I knew I could rely on you," Lex's voice said. "I trust you called the lawyers?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good night, Nigel."

"Good night, sir," Nigel said. "Sir --"

"Yes, Nigel?"

"Perhaps it would be best to conceal that item elsewhere."

"Oh yes," Lex said. A pause. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Very, sir."

"I find it ironic that the weapon that will bring Superman's destruction should have been named by his chief admirer. Kryptonite. A mineral that very likely hails from Superman's own planet. How appropriate."

"Indeed, sir."

Lex's voice sounded insufferably self-satisfied. "Amusing, isn't it? His own world will be the source of Superman's destruction. It's fitting, somehow. But I must find some way to detach Lois from her infatuation with him."

"I'm sure you will succeed, sir."

"And, of course, to soothe her distress when he meets his end. It's too bad we didn't learn of it until too late."

"Sir?" Nigel asked.

"If I had been able to incorporate a piece in each of the satellites, we wouldn't have needed to worry about the unforeseen spanner in the works earlier tonight," Lex said. "I underestimated his abilities once. I won't do so again."

"Of course, at the time you placed the satellites in orbit, you had no idea that such a super man existed, sir."

"That's true. But I know now, and I have this, and I intend to use it to good effect in the near future. According to our people, it should affect him just the way Jason Trask believed."

"Perhaps an actual test first, sir," Nigel said. "It might be best to confirm the laboratory's findings before you move ahead with another plan."

"You're right, of course," Lex said, after an infinitesimal pause. "One should never take the unsupported word of anyone else. In the morning will be soon enough. If I had followed your advice sooner I wouldn't have had to deal with this setback."

"Setback, sir?"

"Of course," Lex's voice said urbanely. "That's all it is. A setback. My backup plan will have to be launched to undo the damage that muscle-bound oaf caused, and that will take some months. It's sad that such a work of art could be destroyed by such methods, but the alternate plan will go forward. I am not so easily thwarted and the next time he won't be around to stop me. Perhaps you would like to be Viceroy of Australia?"

"A pleasing thought, sir. I always wanted my own desert island."

Lois gritted her teeth. She was learning a lot of things tonight.

Even though Lois had not had any real doubts about him since Clark had told her what he knew or suspected, even after her own kidnapping the previous night, actually hearing Lex speaking of his intention of killing Superman this way, in a matter-of-fact voice, as if it were no more than an everyday business decision, was somehow shocking. Somewhere underneath she had entertained the faint hope that Lex might have some sort of mitigating reason for his behavior, even though she couldn't think what it might be, but the conversation with his butler killed that last half-formed notion dead in its tracks. Now, it seemed, he was even worse than she had imagined. She stood completely still, breathing as softly as she could, listening to the conversation as it began to grow fainter.

"But the meteorite, sir?"

"I intend to put it in the safe."

"The safe?" Nigel sounded doubtful.

"Not the main one. The hidden one in my office. No one who didn't know it was there would be able to find it."

"Quite true, sir. Perhaps you should hurry. The police will be here shortly."

"You're right of course, and we mustn't upset any of

Metropolis's Finest in any way. Take your place for the first act. I'll take care of this business and do the same."

Lois had to strain her ears to hear the last of the conversation. Nigel said something else, which she didn't catch, and the voices faded out. She slipped out from behind the curtains and stood for a bare second, trying to decide what to do.

Apparently there was a hidden safe in Lex's office. It was a good thing she had friends in high -- or low -- places. She would have to remember to send Big Louie a box of premium cigars if this panned out. But she needed to get moving. Henderson's people would be here shortly. She didn't want them to know anything about Kryptonite, any more than she wanted Lex to have it in his possession. The fewer people who knew, the better.

She had to get to Lex's office.

Wishing that she hadn't been forced to leave the rifle behind in order to fit into the dumbwaiter, Lois glided silently forward. Thanking Providence that she had taken the opportunity to explore Lex's place when she had attended the White Orchid Ball, and later, during several visits for dinner since, she checked the wide, dim hallway and then, on cat feet, tiptoed toward the huge, luxurious office from which Lex Luthor managed his financial empire.

The silence of the place wasn't complete. She could hear the faint background hum that was normally not noticed in occupied dwellings, and from somewhere she could hear the faintest shuffle of bedroom slippers on the rich carpet, but there was no other sign of life. Tiny nightlights glowed in wall sockets, giving her just enough illumination to avoid bumping into obstacles as she progressed.

There was the faint click of a closing door and the shuffling sound was gone. Had Lex gone into his office? She turned into the small room that was the domain of Lex's secretary. There was now, of course, no sign of life. She passed through it on tiptoe and moved to the door of the office.

Silence. Lois put her ear against the door.

Now she could hear motion. There was a soft scraping noise and then, incongruously, the faintest of chimes. Another sound that she couldn't identify, and then the grating noise again.

And suddenly, the sound of footsteps was coming down the hallway.

In three steps, Lois was at the secretary's desk and had ducked under it. She held perfectly still, listening.

Someone knocked gently on the office door. After several very long seconds, it opened. Lex's voice said clearly. "What is it?"

"Progress report, sir," Nigel's voice said. "A repairman has been called to assist the police officers in the elevator. They estimate another ten minutes before they are freed."

"Excellent. Just enough time for me to take my position in this little drama. You, of course, will be completely bewildered when they arrive, Nigel."

"Of course, sir."

"This will be one more point to be chalked up against my Nemesis," Lex said calmly. "I only wonder how he induced Henderson to conduct this expedition into my home."

"Ms. Lane may have told him about your bunker, sir."

"Probably. But Superman doesn't break and enter, and the entire place is behind lead shielding. If someone had wanted to investigate below stairs, Henderson would have arrived last evening; not in the middle of the night. And there isn't any reason to connect my shelter to the orbiting weapons, in any case."

"True," Nigel said. Lois had to smile at the unquestioning belief that Superman didn't break and enter. Superman might not, but Clark Kent did, especially when he was with her. It was an interesting distinction between her partner's two identities. It seemed that her partnership with Superman's other self had caused him to change some of his approach to certain situations.

Well, that was all to the good.

"It is possible," Nigel said slowly, "that he is able to sense electromagnetic forces and tracked the signal to its origin. We know only a little about his amazing powers."

"Hm -- now that's a disquieting thought," Lex said.

"Fortunately, he won't be around for the next wave. If that's so, however, he hasn't any physical proof. I trust that part of the complex has been completely sealed off?"

"Completely, sir. There is no trace that the Operations Room ever existed."

"Excellent. We'll discuss this later. Go back to your room, Nigel, and be appropriately drowsy when the minions of the law arrive."

"Very well, sir." Nigel's voice was as expressionless as usual, and Lois could tell by the receding sound of footsteps that the two men were retreating down the hallway. "Sleep well."

"Oh, I shall," Lex's voice had a smile in it. "And I shall make sure that Inspector Henderson spends the remainder of his days thinking of the vast mistake he made and the career he threw away when he intruded on my home in the middle of the night." From somewhere a door opened and closed. Nigel's footsteps continued on alone until they finally vanished. Taking a deep breath, Lois eased her way out from under the desk, trying to make no sound in the sudden quiet of the room. Henderson's people would be here within a very few minutes. She had better move.

The lock on Lex's office door was an ordinary one and succumbed quickly to her lock pick. Lois eased the door open and slipped inside.

The huge office was dim. Not even night lights glowed in the wall sockets, and Lois had to resort to her flashlight.

Lex had a secret safe in here. Where would he hide it? She flashed her light over the walls. Rare paintings, tapestries and various knick-knacks decorated the surfaces and for a moment she felt a sense of hopelessness. How was she supposed to find a hidden safe in all that stuff? All she knew was that it was hidden, which wasn't much of a clue.

But that wasn't true, she thought at once. There had been the sounds she heard just before she had been forced to hide. A scraping noise that might have been the closing of a safe door. And a chime.

Once more she flashed her light over the walls, inch by inch, looking for what might have made that sound. It had been a musical sound, like a mass of bells clashing softly together. Time was short but rushing and thereby missing something wasn't going to work, either.

It was on the wall that separated the office from the exercise room next door, where Lex took breaks to exercise and maintain his fitness, that she saw what might be her target.

It was a clock.

Not a modern, electronic clock but a lovely, antique Swiss-made clock, the kind that wound up with a key. Seeing it, she recalled the day that Lex had first shown her his office, when she had marveled at the magnificent view from the glass wall of the office, from which she could see the City of Metropolis spread out below her. The clock had begun to chime. She had noted it and asked if it, like many of the other items here, was an antique. Lex had smiled and admitted it. The clock was over a hundred years old, bought from a collector many years ago in Austria.

Lois crossed the thick, sound-deadening carpet to the clock.

If there was a safe here, it wasn't obvious. Of course, a hidden safe wasn't likely to be easily noticed, she told herself. If a thief were looking for a safe, wasn't he more likely to look behind some of the paintings that graced the walls? She examined it carefully, trying to see how the thing might conceal a safe.

Something tapped on the glass wall behind her. Lois turned her head.

Superman was floating just beyond the glass. Lois stared at him for an instant. If there was Kryptonite in the room, he had to stay away, but he might be able to tell her where the stuff was hidden. Quickly, she pointed to the exercise room. In there, she knew, a door opened onto a small balcony, and a few feet away was the door that allowed Lex to exit conveniently into the other room. Quickly, she hurried into the exercise room and unlatched the balcony door.

Naturally, Clark thought, Lois couldn't be quietly watching the action. No, instead she was here in Lex Luthor's inner sanctum, dressed as a SWAT officer, and apparently engaged in some sort of search.

He floated over to the balcony that Lois indicated and waited for her. Still, Lois was no fool, he knew, even if she was a bit reckless, and if she was here under the current circumstances, then there was a good explanation for it. Lois wouldn't be skulking around in Lex Luthor's penthouse, considering what they had seen earlier this morning, unless there was a very good reason.

The balcony door opened and Lois grabbed his wrist. Clark barely refrained from letting his eyebrows fly up in surprise. "What are you doing here?" he demanded in a whisper.

"Lex has a piece of Kryptonite," she said.

How had she figured that out? He'd intended to tell her about it later, but it seemed, as usual, that Lois was a couple of jumps ahead of him. "I know."

"Yeah, well what you *don't* know is that he's stuffed it in some hidden safe in his office! We need to get hold of it before the police arrive."

He stared at her, his mouth half open for several seconds.

"How --"

"Never mind," Lois said sharply. "I'll explain it all later, but I need to get hold of it, and Henderson and his people are on their way up. They'll be here soon. Can you tell where the safe is?"

"I can try," Clark said.

"Good. Is Kryptonite dangerous to you?"

He nodded. "It produces some kind of radiation that doesn't hurt regular people, but is dangerous to me."

"Is there any way to protect yourself from the radiation?" Lois demanded.

"Distance. And Dad had the piece in a lead tool box at the farm. It wasn't until he opened it that I felt the radiation."

"Okay." Lois bit her lip. "Find it for me and then go and get me something lead to put it in so you can get me out of here."

Instinctively, he followed her into Luthor's office. He had often seen it from the outside when he watched Luthor from a distance, and now he glanced swiftly around with his X-ray vision.

And of course, there it was. "There's a safe behind the clock." He reached out and touched a hidden switch. The clock moved smoothly upward with the faintest of chiming noises to reveal behind it the door of a safe.

"Can you open it?"

"I can work the combination." He turned his head.

"Henderson and his men just arrived. He's showing a warrant to that butler of Luthor's."

"Nigel St. John. Hurry up. Just don't open the safe door, okay?"

One had to admit that Lois was single-minded, he thought, but he nodded and began to turn the dial.

It took less than thirty seconds. "It's open."

"Go get me something to put the stuff in," she commanded. "Hurry!"

Clark found himself obeying in a somewhat bemused way. Once Lois had found out the truth about him, it hadn't taken long for her to start giving orders to Superman, he thought. Oddly enough, he liked it. But where was he supposed to get hold of a

lead box at this time of night?

Well, didn't hospitals that had X-ray machines have those protective lead aprons? One of them should do, and he could return it later.

On the thought, he was on his way toward Metropolis General.

As soon as Superman had vanished, Lois eased the door of the safe open.

She didn't know what she expected but she would have realized at once that the thing inside wasn't from Earth. It was a chunk of some kind of crystal a little smaller than her clenched fist, but the thing that made it stand out was the fact that it glowed a bright green color. In its own way the thing was beautiful, but knowing that it could harm Clark was enough to give it a sinister appearance that was certainly only her imagination. Quickly, she removed the object from the safe, closed the door and slid the clock into position again.

In the dark room the brilliant green glow made it easy to see her surroundings, and anyone that happened to enter the office couldn't miss it. She had to hide it at once. If Lex came in here and saw her with the meteorite, she was cooked. Where could she hide it so it would be safe until Clark got back?

She held the object high, illuminating her surroundings. Well, the first thing was to find a place to stuff it just to keep it out of sight. No one besides Clark would be able to tell that it was not in the safe where Lex had placed it.

There was a treadmill in the exercise room against one wall, she recalled. Lois wrapped the Kryptonite in her handkerchief and hurried into the other room, to shove the chunk of mineral well beneath the piece of equipment. There. If anyone came into Lex's office before Clark returned, at least it wouldn't be obvious.

Once the Kryptonite was hidden, she turned to the next problem. What was going on between Lex and Inspector Henderson out by the elevators? True, her curiosity was one of her greatest weaknesses, but she had to know. What was Henderson doing, and what was Lex telling him? Lois tiptoed back to the door that gave onto the secretary's office and pressed her ear against the wood.

"I assure you, Inspector," Lex's voice was saying smoothly, "whoever told you this fairy tale has sent you on a fruitless quest. I had nothing to do with whatever explosion appeared in the sky an hour ago, but if you must verify it for yourself, Nigel will take you into my underground shelter and demonstrate for you that there is no connection to any atomic warhead. I find the whole premise somewhat fantastic, to say the least."

Henderson's dry voice was as expressionless as Lois had ever heard it. "Thank you, Mr. Luthor. Considering the seriousness of the accusation, I'd prefer it if you were to accompany us. I'm sure you understand my concerns. After my people check things out, I'll be glad to leave you in peace, assuming things are as you've described. I'm sure you'll agree that an atomic explosion in space above the United States is important enough to merit an investigation."

"Of course," Lex's voice rejoined at once. "But are you certain that was what it was?"

"Completely," Henderson said, flatly. He didn't elaborate.

"But, I don't understand," Lex said. "Who could have turned suspicion on me? Surely no one could possibly believe that I could have anything to do with such a thing! You must know, Inspector, that Luthor Industries has a spotless ethical reputation."

"I'm afraid I can't give you that information, Mr. Luthor. It apparently came from a very highly placed source." Lois's mouth almost dropped open at the apparent sincerity in Henderson's voice, as well as the implication of ignorance. Highly placed source indeed! -- Well, she supposed that you could call

Superman a highly placed source, she conceded. Henderson was a lot brighter than she had ever given him credit for, and that was saying something. She would remember that the next time she had to deal with him.

"Very well," Lex was saying smoothly. "I'll be glad to escort you and your men down into the shelter."

"All right," Henderson said. "I'm told that the part I'm interested in is the 95th level." His voice sounded, conversely, completely disinterested. Lois made a mental note to remember that. Henderson might sound bored, but she knew darned well that he wasn't. But the recollection of a previous conversation between Lex and St. John, about that part of the complex being completely sealed off galvanized her into action. Maybe Henderson would figure it out but if he didn't they wouldn't have a second chance to find what needed to be found. By the time anyone was able to get back, Lex would have completely destroyed the Operations Room from which he had detonated the bomb over North America, instead of concealing it behind a fake wall or something. She had to follow Lex and Henderson as closely as she could safely do so.

But first she needed to warn Clark about the place where she had hidden the Kryptonite. She hurried to Lex's desk and grabbed up the gold pen from its stand. Now for some paper --

Didn't Lex have any paper? she was wondering a moment later. What did he use the pen for, anyway? Abandoning her search at last, she ripped the top sheet off the desk calendar and scrawled a quick note to her partner, stuck it between the balcony doors in such a way that he couldn't fail to see it, and returned to Lex's office. Cautiously, she opened the door to the hall a fraction of an inch, checked thoroughly for any observer, and slipped through.

When Clark arrived at Metropolis General, he headed directly for the X-ray Department. The hospital was quieter than it normally was during the day, since there were few visitors at this hour, and most of the patients were asleep. The X-ray Department, however, was almost certainly staffed, since illness and emergencies didn't keep set hours any more than crime did, and sure enough, the place was inhabited by a single, sleepy X-ray technician, a short, plump young woman who waked up noticeably when Superman walked in. She seemed a little surprised at his request to borrow a lead apron, but collected her wits rapidly.

"Sure, Superman," she told him. "There are several in the back. I'll get you one."

"Thank you," Clark said, giving her his best smile. "I appreciate the loan, and I'll bring it back as soon as I'm finished with it."

She nodded vigorously. "I'll get it for you right away." She turned and hurried through a door in the back of the waiting room, only to return in less than a minute with one of the heavy, lead-impregnated aprons used to protect patients during an X-ray procedure. "Here you are."

Clark took it with another smile. "I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important," he assured her.

"Does it have anything to do with that explosion in the sky?" the technician asked. "Was that what it looked like?"

"Yes," Clark said. "The story will be in the papers sometime tomorrow, I suspect. Thanks." And he whisked out of the department so quickly he must have seemed to the technician to simply vanish.

There was no sign of life when he arrived at the balcony outside the exercise room in Luthor's penthouse, the lead apron draped over his arm, but a piece of paper that appeared to have been ripped from a desk calendar was stuck prominently between the doors and he instantly recognized Lois's handwriting.

"Lex is taking Henderson down to the 95th floor," she had written. "He's hidden the Operations Room. If you get back in

time, meet me there.

P.S.: the K is in the exercise room. Be careful."

She had signed it simply with the letter L.

Clark destroyed the paper with a burst of heat vision and scanned the room beyond. Sure enough, the Kryptonite had been wrapped in a wad of Lois's handkerchief and stuffed well under the treadmill where no one was likely to find it. But if Lois was headed down to the bunker in order to show Henderson where Luthor's Operations Room was, he wasn't going to let her go alone. It didn't occur to him to wonder how it was possible for Luthor to hide something the size of the room from which he had controlled his nuclear weapons. Lois said he had, and Clark believed it, but although he had great faith in his partner, he also had less trust in Luthor's good behavior than she did -- at least he suspected that such was the case. If she betrayed Luthor, Clark was quite sure that the crime lord would not hesitate to act as decisively against her as he would against Henderson or any other opponent.

On the thought, he headed for the bunker in a burst of super speed, still clutching the lead apron.

Inside the stairwell for the first flight of steps from Lex's basement into the bunker, Lois stripped off the one-piece outfit of the SWAT officer and tried to brush the wrinkles from her clothes. She wasn't particularly successful, but at this point she didn't care. Grasping the rail, she half-ran down the steps, disregarding the noise of her progress.

When she reached the first landing, a gust of wind from nowhere blew her hair around and Superman materialized beside her, looking maddeningly neat and unruffled compared to her own rumpled condition.

"Hold on a minute," were his first words. "Let's work together on this. What's going on?"

It was amazing how much better she felt all of a sudden. "Lex is escorting Henderson's people down to the 95th floor," she explained. "But I heard Nigel St. John tell him that the part of the bunker with the Operations Room was sealed off. Henderson won't find it."

"Yes he will. We'll see to that." He extended an arm. "Let's go."

"What's that?" she asked, poking a forefinger at the apron.

"My Kryptonite-handling equipment," Clark said. "I'll explain later."

"Okay. I guess later's soon enough." She gave the apron a second look and let him scoop her against his side.

The next seconds were a blur. Lois tucked her face against Clark's shoulder as she had done before and was aware mostly of motion, and then the coolness of the night air on her face. Clark paused in mid-air and Lois found herself looking down at a dark open hillside now bathed in the faint light of starshine. The Moon had set. "Where are we?"

"That's where we came out earlier tonight. We're going back in the same way."

"What are you planning to do once we get there?"

"We'll have to decide that when we see what the situation is. Hang on for one more minute."

Another burst of speed and they paused inside the inner cave. From somewhere Clark produced his flashlight, and she saw him squinting slightly toward the Operations Room. "Empty. Let's go see what they've done to hide this place."

Lois pushed open the door that led through the short closet and into the room with all the equipment that they had seen before. The monitors were still on, and she could hear the hum of running machines as they moved through the room toward the exit into the hallway.

The place hadn't changed, Lois saw. The stone corridor was as empty as before, and she found herself instinctively walking on tip toe to avoid the echoes of footsteps. Clark was squinting

past her, and glancing at his spandex-clad form she had to subdue the faint feeling of awe that the sight produced. After all, in spite of the fact that this was Superman, he was still her partner, Clark. But the blue spandex and waving red cape, and the ripple of muscle through the thin material underscored the fact that this wasn't an ordinary man. Clark was a man from another world, who had come to Earth for some reason only known to him, and he was using his unearthly abilities right before her eyes. She had settled in her own mind some time back that he wasn't here for any sinister purpose, but she still didn't know everything. Well, now that he knew that she knew, she could ask him for the whole story, and he was darned well going to tell her.

After this was all over, of course. After they had made sure that Lex was arrested for his crime.

After all, there had to be something illegal in an attempt to plunge the world into the Stone Age again. At least, she hoped so. Besides, wasn't it against the law for unlicensed civilians to mess around with nuclear weapons?

"Come on," Clark said suddenly. He picked her up again and then they were flying down the curving stone corridor as silently as ghosts. This time he didn't fly too fast for her to see the passing scenery -- what there was of it. The bare stone walls flowed toward them and Lois found herself holding her breath.

"Luthor and Henderson, and his SWAT team, just stepped out of the elevator," Clark explained in a low voice. "This whole corridor has been closed. We have to open it."

"Do you know how -- or are you just going to knock down the wall?" Lois asked.

He gave a faint chuckle. "No, but I want to get a closer look at the controls." As he spoke, they rounded a corner and found themselves faced with an apparently solid stone wall. "Here we are." He fell silent, apparently studying the wires that ran along the ceiling.

"Well?" Lois demanded.

"The wires along there control the false wall," Clark said, pointing. "They run back to that other room that was labeled CTRL on the map. Remember? It must be the master control room for the complex, like we figured."

Lois nodded impatiently. "What are you going to do?"

"They're headed this way," Clark said, keeping his voice low. He pointed to one of the blank doors that opened in the corridor walls. "In there. Then I'm going to open it."

The door proved to open on some kind of storeroom. Clark eased it nearly shut after them and peeked through the narrow opening. "Here goes," he whispered. Lois heard the faintest sizzling sound and smelled scorched insulation. There was a sudden grating noise and Clark quickly shut the door the remainder of the way and put a finger to his lips. Lois put her ear against the door and tried to breathe quietly.

"I thought," Henderson's somewhat muffled voice said, "that this hallway didn't go anywhere." A pregnant silence ensued.

Lex's smooth voice seemed to have acquired a faintly ragged edge. "I assure you, Inspector --"

"Let's go," Henderson continued. "This is beginning to be very interesting."

The faint sound of footsteps approached the door behind which Lois and Clark hid. Lois was concentrating so hard on interpreting the muffled sounds from without that she almost missed Clark's sudden indrawn breath. She turned her head in time to see him stagger slightly and reach out a hand to brace himself against the wall. She was instantly at his side, but he was already pushing himself upright again.

"What's the matter?" Lois whispered.

The footsteps were retreating in the direction of the Operations Room, which was still some distance away by foot. In the pale light of the single tiny light bulb that shone from the one wall socket in the room, she could see Clark wipe the sleeve of his Suit across his forehead. Understanding burst suddenly on

her. "Someone out there has Kryptonite! Are you okay?"

"Yeah." His voice wasn't entirely steady. "I think so."

"Lex!" Lois said, still keeping her voice down, although the footsteps had faded into silence. "He must have a piece of it on him!"

"It can't be a big piece," Clark said, and Lois again saw him wipe his face with a suddenly unsteady hand.

"What do you mean?"

He hesitated for a second. "I still have my powers. At least I think I do."

She eased the door open a crack to look after the men who had passed a moment before. "They're gone. Let's get out of here."

"Not yet." Clark's voice had regained its steadiness, but he was frowning. "We have to follow them."

"Clark --"

"I don't trust Luthor. Do you?"

Put like that, he was right, she supposed, but she wasn't willing to concede the entire argument. "All right, but we've got to stay back far enough that you can't feel that stuff!"

"I don't think that will be a problem," Clark said. "I can feel it just a little, right now, but as long as we don't get any closer to it, I should be okay. I just don't want to leave before we're sure he doesn't have another rabbit to pull out of his sleeve. There must be some reason he's got the stuff."

He had a point, Lois thought. Why would Lex feel it was necessary to have a defense against Superman if he didn't think he might need to do something sneaky? Or worse. Particularly the worse.

The thought brought her up sharply. When had she fully accepted that there was very little that Lex wouldn't do to get his way? She didn't know, but after what she had seen tonight, somewhere along the line she had finally realized that the Lex Luthor that she thought she knew did not exist and never had.

She should have figured that out last night, when she had discovered who her kidnapper was. Certainly she should have known when she realized that he had a piece of Kryptonite that he intended to use against Superman. But perhaps it had really been those odd conversations with Nigel St. John that had been the clincher. Lex, she understood at last, was a sociopath, a man without a conscience. He did as he chose, knowing that what he did was against all the standards of lawful human conduct, but the fact was, the concept had no meaning for him. He literally didn't care that what he did was considered wrong by the vast majority of humanity. To him, right and wrong had no real meaning. It was simply what he wanted. The rest didn't matter.

"Is something wrong?" Superman asked, and she realized that she was trembling. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she said, aware that her voice shook slightly.

"How could I have not seen what he was, Clark?"

"Superman."

"Right. Superman. But why didn't I see what Lex was? It isn't as if I haven't seen slick criminals before. How could he have fooled me so easily?"

Clark didn't answer at first. "Luthor is very plausible," he said finally. "And he was always on his best behavior with you."

"He wanted to fool me," Lois said bitterly. "But he didn't fool you!"

"I was in a position to see more of what he did," Clark said. "I told you why I suspected him in the beginning."

"Was that really what made you suspect him?"

"Pretty much. And once he knew I knew, he didn't wear his mask when I was around."

Lois gave a short laugh. "Well," she said, "no matter what kind of mask he wears for me from now on, he won't fool me again."

Clark smiled. "I'm glad of that," he said. He eased the door open. "We'd better go."

"All right." Lois glanced up and down the hallway but Clark firmly preceded her from the room, looking in both directions as well. Superman was very definitely in protective mode, Lois thought. Otherwise, he would courteously allow her to go first. Clark always did that, she thought. She had been initially amused at his old-fashioned courtesy, but she hadn't been when Lex did the same.

Lex was always on his best behavior with her, as Clark had pointed out, and yet Clark had fooled her at first, too. In some ways, Clark and Lex were similar, in that each had a secret and each controlled enormous, although completely different, sorts of power. But just as their power was different, so were their characters. Lex still thought he was fooling her. Clark had willingly revealed his secret earlier tonight. He'd had no way of knowing that she had already discovered it.

"Hurry," Clark said softly. "I don't want them to get too far ahead."

"Just make sure you don't get too close," Lois said, also keeping her voice low. "Can't you use your super-hearing to tell what's going on?"

"I am," Clark said.

Of course he was. Superman knew his business best. But it was hard not to be the one in charge, Lois acknowledged. Now that they both knew that she knew who Superman was behind the cape, it was a little difficult not to assume her normal role of giving the orders -- not that he seemed to mind. Together, they hurried after Henderson's group, keeping an adequate distance behind them. Henderson was a pretty competent guy, Lois thought hopefully. Maybe Lex wouldn't have a chance to pull anything unexpected. But underneath she wasn't so sure. Lex wasn't an ordinary criminal. He was unique in his scope and power. Something told her that he would rather die, and take his enemies with him into death, than allow them to triumph over him. And the realization that the idea didn't shock her at all was curiously reassuring. Maybe she had lost her perspective on Lex at first, but she had it back now. Suddenly she had a pretty good idea of what he was going to do if he couldn't deceive Henderson. That must be why he had Kryptonite with him. He must have, she thought, taken a small piece from the larger chunk and was now carrying it along concealed, as Superman insurance -- perhaps as a piece of jewelry. It would make a good ring or tie clip. Had he taken time to change into his day clothing before bringing Henderson down here? Wouldn't that have taken too much time? Maybe he was wearing it as a ring or on his watchband. Nobody would think twice if he'd put on his watch.

Clark stopped and caught her arm, bringing her to a stop. "They've gotten into some of the little cars. Wait until they're moving again."

"Lex showed them the cars?"

"Not willingly. Henderson pointed out that they must have some kind of transportation in this place and he wanted to know where it was. Luthor pretty much had to produce it."

Leave it to Henderson, she thought. But Lex's acquiescence to Henderson's request bothered her. This was too easy.

Clark said it aloud a few seconds later. "That was too easy. Something's wrong."

"I think so too," Lois said. "Lex is up to something."

His heavy brows drew together. "What do you think it is?"

Lois shrugged. "Lex doesn't like to lose," she said. "I think he'd rather die than go to jail. He wouldn't have a piece of Kryptonite with him if he didn't think he might have to deal with Superman. He has something in mind."

"And we can't do anything about it until he's tipped his hand," Clark said.

"Yeah. We're going to have to let it play out."

Clark had tilted his head a little and she guessed he was listening to what was happening with the party ahead of them. "They're moving again. Come on." He shifted the lead apron to

the other arm and scooped her up. "I promised I'd take care of this, or I'd leave it," he said in response to her glance. "I don't want the tech who loaned it to me to get in trouble."

"Of course not," Lois said. Clark's compulsive honesty was at work again, she thought. Of course, Superman always kept his promises. Then she frowned. "What were you going to do with it?" she asked as they glided through the air after Henderson and Luthor.

"Have you wrap the meteorite in it," Clark explained. "That would shield me from it 'til I could get something else to put it in."

That made sense. "What if you put it on? Won't it protect you from the piece Lex has with him?"

"Most of it, I guess," he said slowly. "My arms, legs, neck and head would still be exposed, but I guess most of my body would be protected."

"It might give you more time," Lois said. "If you moved fast, I'd think it would help."

"You might be right," Clark agreed. He fell silent, but from his expression Lois thought he was considering the idea. She saw him glancing around as they flew onward, keeping to the same speed as the little car that Lois had driven earlier in the evening. Time seemed to stand still in the silent, never-changing stone passage. At last Clark paused in mid-air and then floated down to a equally silent touchdown on the stone floor. He released her and touched a finger to his lips.

Ahead was the curve in the passage beyond which was the OP EMP room. Whatever Lex had in mind had to happen soon, Lois thought. There was nowhere else to go. She began to tiptoe forward until she was just barely concealed by the curve of the wall.

"I take it this is the end of the line," Henderson said.

"Exactly." Lex's voice held a note of finality, Lois thought. Whatever he was up to was coming within moments.

"Open the door," Henderson said. It was amazing, Lois thought, what one could read into a voice when you couldn't see the speaker. Henderson sounded wary. The detective knew something was up, even if he wasn't sure what it was.

"Certainly, Inspector," Lex said urbanely. "Now you shall see that I am as completely innocent as I have stated from the beginning. A man can't be blamed if he has the resources to protect himself against the unforeseen. You will find, if you bother to check, that I have ownership rights to all the land above this complex, and rights as well to the resources in the earth under it. All of this is completely legal."

"I'm sure it is." Henderson matched Luthor's tone. "But I still want to see what's in there."

"Very well." There was the faint creak of an opening door.

Followed by silence.

"What is this place?" Henderson's voice asked slowly. "It looks like one of the control rooms at EPRAD."

"Indeed," Lex said. "Lex Corp maintains a great many such stations, hidden for security reasons."

"I'm going to want to see the records on this," Henderson's voice said, sounding warier than ever. "The people I contacted said there were no permits for anything like this in the Greater Metropolis area."

"It's top secret, of course," Lex said. The tone of his voice made a prickle of apprehension run across Lois's scalp. Lex was being backed into a corner, and that was always a dangerous thing to do.

"Let's take a look." Lois heard the shuffle of feet as the party moved through the door and then the creak as the panel closed.

Clark had moved up beside her. "Something's wrong."

"You're telling me!" she said, the emphasis in her voice not at all diminished by the fact that she spoke in a whisper. "Can you hear what they're saying?"

It was obvious that Clark was listening, and the squint of his

eyes told her that he was watching what was happening on the other side of the wall. "Henderson is looking around. I don't like the look on Luthor's face. Henderson says he's going to take Luthor back to the station, pending confirmation of his claim."

Lois drew a breath. Lex wasn't going to like that at all. Especially since he really *was* responsible for the explosion in space, and he had to know that Henderson would find that out once Superman reported back to him. Lex wasn't going to let them arrest him. He was bound to do something first.

It was at that instant that an alarm went off.

William Henderson was surveying the huge control center to which Lex Luthor had guided him, and everything he could see further convinced him that Lois Lane's story was accurate. "Interesting place," he said mildly. "You do realize, Mr. Luthor, that we'll need to keep you in custody until we've verified what you've told us. Considering the nuclear explosion in space, we can't afford to make a mistake."

"You'll find that you've made a very big mistake, Inspector," Luthor said with deceptive pleasantness and a faint, sardonic smile. He sauntered forward a few steps, his hands in the pockets of his robe. "Let me show you a little about this establishment. Perhaps I can convince you of my innocence."

Henderson slid a hand inside his jacket, reaching for the weapon in his shoulder holster. Luthor's words were innocuous, but Henderson didn't like the situation at all. He had been watching Lex Luthor for months and somehow the man always managed to avoid connection with any criminal enterprise that Henderson was investigating, even when the Inspector knew very well that Luthor was behind it. Right now it seemed that, with the assistance of Lois Lane and Superman, he had very possibly managed to corner the kingpin of the biggest crime syndicate in Metropolis, but it would be a mistake to let down his guard too soon.

"Keep your hands where I can see them," he cautioned.

"You have no reason to worry about me," Luthor said. He withdrew his hands from the pockets of his robe and exhibited them. "No weapons." Casually, he rested a hand on the surface of one of the consoles beside him.

Panels of clear Plexiglas slammed down between Henderson and Luthor, and all around the room, separating the police effectively from their quarry. Somewhere an alarm went off.

Henderson flung himself ineffectively against the Plexiglas barrier. Beyond the glass, Luthor smiled sardonically.

"Quite useless, Inspector. I fear you'll have to stay where you are." His voice sounded a little muffled, but the mockery was clear. The business magnate began to maneuver around the panels toward the door. Belatedly, Henderson realized that he and his men were cut off from the door as well as from Luthor.

"I can't have you taking me in," Luthor continued. "I'm afraid I'll have to leave you here. It won't be for long. Just until I've had a chance to leave the area. After that -- well, we won't dwell on unpleasant subjects. The room will self-destruct in approximately fifteen minutes. More than enough time for me to put a safe distance between it and myself."

"Don't do it," Henderson said. "You won't get away. Superman will hunt you down if the MPD doesn't."

"I hate to contradict you, Inspector," Luthor said, "but Superman is the least of my worries." He paused in his careful maneuvering and raised a hand. The gold watchband with a single cut gemstone of a brilliant green color winked evilly at Henderson. "I have my defense against Superman right here. Now, I mustn't waste time convincing you how helpless you are. I'll simply bid you adieu."

It was then that a fist came through the door, followed by a wrist and forearm clad in a very familiar blue sleeve. The arm withdrew and the hand grasped the metal of the door, which was wrenched from its frame with irresistible strength.

Superman stood there, and Henderson blinked at him, confused. The Man of Steel wore what appeared to be a heavy apron that covered him from throat to knee level. He didn't hesitate but strode forward and seized Lex Luthor by the arms. In an instant the billionaire was face down on the floor, with Superman's knee planted firmly in his back.

Lois Lane appeared in the doorway. She rushed to Superman and knelt beside Lex Luthor. "Where is it?"

"The watch," Superman said, his voice strained, and Henderson was astonished to see beads of sweat standing out on his face. Lois wrenched the watch from Luthor's wrist and retreated from the room.

Superman got to his feet and hauled Luthor with him. "Let's turn off that timer," he suggested in a much more normal voice.

Luthor's mouth set. "No," he said. "Lex Luthor will not live in a cage."

Superman turned and narrowed his eyes for an instant, and then strode directly to the console from which Luthor had triggered his countdown. He didn't speak, but Henderson saw him touch something. The glass panels withdrew at once.

"That won't help," Luthor said. "You have ten minutes left."

"Take him," Superman said to Henderson. "Get out of here. I'll stop the bomb."

One of Henderson's men clicked handcuffs on Luthor's wrists and the small group exited from the room as hastily as dignity would permit. Henderson glanced back. "Good luck."

Superman nodded absently. He was squinting at the console. "Go," he said. "If it blows, I don't want you nearby."

Henderson obeyed. His men had already started up the two electric vehicles that they had used to get here. Lois Lane had vanished, Henderson noted. Well, he figured the Daily Planet's top investigative reporter could take care of herself most of the time. At least he hoped she could, because he didn't have the time to hunt for her. Together, William Henderson, his four men and their captive, pushed the electric cars to their top speed, trying to put as much distance between themselves and the operations room as they could.

A few moments ahead of Henderson and his men, Lois piloted the miniature forklift along the narrow corridor. It was lucky, she thought, that she had remembered the vehicles in the storeroom, only a short distance from the OP EMP room, where she and Clark had hidden a few hours ago. She had slipped Lex's watch onto her forearm, and now she concentrated on steering the unfamiliar vehicle at the highest speed that she could manage as the minutes ticked down. Behind her somewhere, Clark was trying to defuse a bomb, and it went against all her instincts to leave him there, but it was imperative that she remove the piece of Kryptonite from his vicinity as expeditiously as she could. Superman had defused dozens of bombs in the months that he had been in Metropolis. He could manage this one much better than she could, and far better if he wasn't distracted by her presence.

But he'd better keep his promise, she swore to herself. He'd promised to be careful and not get killed, so she could interview him afterwards. They both knew that wasn't her greatest concern, but it was better than telling him how she really felt. It would embarrass her, and probably him -- and besides, she was all but certain that he had guessed what she really meant.

Surely the time was up by now, she thought, glancing at her watch.

From somewhere there came a muffled rumble, and the ground shook slightly. Lois eased up on the accelerator pedal. It looked like Clark had been forced to use a cruder method than defusing the bomb after all, she thought. But as long as he was alive, that was all that mattered.

But was he? Had the Kryptonite in Lex's watch weakened him to the point where he couldn't withstand the bomb? Lois bit

her lip, fighting the urge to turn around and go back. He wouldn't thank her for putting herself in danger coming after him, but she had to exercise every bit of discipline she had not to retrace her path back to Clark.

The open door to the main passage loomed ahead. Lois turned the little forklift out into the passage and braked to a stop. If Clark didn't show up fast, she was going to forget about her promise not to go back after him.

The two electric cars driven by Henderson and his men emerged from the door after her. Lex looked at her with a faint, enigmatic smile. "I should have known," he said dryly. "'Twas Beauty killed the beast."

"King Kong," Henderson said, deadpan. "Faye Wray has nothing on Lois Lane."

"Don't be ridiculous," Lois said crossly.

"Just one thing," Henderson said. "How did you and Superman happen to arrive so conveniently?"

"We followed you," Lois said, looking past Henderson through the door from which they had just come.

"Why did you follow us, and how?" Henderson pursued. "And for that matter --"

"Look," Lois interrupted, "can't this wait? I'll answer all your questions later. I've got something else to do right now."

"If you're planning on going back that way, I'm pretty sure part of the tunnel collapsed from the explosion," Henderson said, nodding at the door. "Superman will probably be waiting for us when we get back upstairs. Do you want to ride with us, or do you plan on using that thing to ride back in?"

"I'll go by myself, thanks," Lois said, shortly. "And I'll come by to the station later to give my statement, if you don't mind."

Henderson found himself stifling a laugh. Lane was in fine form this early morning, setting down the conditions as if she were the one in charge, as usual. Well, he figured he probably owed her something, after that rescue by Superman a short time ago. Luthor had seemed to have some sort of weapon against Superman, judging by what he had said, and Superman's appearance wearing what looked strongly like one of those lead aprons that they used to protect you from radiation in the x-ray department at Metropolis General. Lane had taken Luthor's watch and removed it quickly from Superman's vicinity, so it looked as if she knew something that he didn't. Henderson was itching to ask her about it, but he suspected that she wouldn't answer him, and it was just as well not to bring the matter to the attention of his men. If there was something around that could harm Superman, the fewer people who knew of it the better.

So he ignored the fact that she was wearing Luthor's watch on her forearm, and nodded. "Suit yourself. I'll expect you to come by later and give me your statement. Deal?"

"Whatever," Lois said, forcing Henderson to exercise heroic self-control to maintain his deadpan expression. She put the forklift in motion again and accelerated away from them at a speed that looked downright dangerous in the confined space of the tunnel. He hoped she didn't crack up before she got where she was going.

Ten minutes later, Lois drew up by the elevator. She braked with a screech of tires, jumped off the forklift and pressed the call button with unnecessary emphasis. Darn Clark anyway! He must know that she would be worried about him. If he was all right, why didn't he show up and let her know?

The elevator arrived and Lois boarded. As she did so, she glanced at Lex's watch on her arm. That might be part of the reason he hadn't appeared. She needed to get this thing somewhere safe, encased in lead, and she needed to retrieve the chunk hidden under the treadmill in Lex's gym, upstairs, somehow. And then she needed to get that one shielded, too. Hopefully Clark -- Superman, she corrected herself mentally --

would find her in the meantime. He just had to be okay, she repeated silently. She would never forgive herself for abandoning him if he didn't, even if it had been the only thing she could sensibly do.

She silently counted the seconds that crawled by with unbelievable slowness as the elevator ascended to the top floor, which was Lex Tower's basement. When the doors slid open she disembarked, squinting around in the Stygian gloom. Didn't this horrible place have a light switch? It must! If Lex came down here at all frequently, he wasn't going to grope around the place with just a flashlight to guide him.

She brought out her own flashlight and flicked the beam over the walls, and, of course, now that the idea had occurred to her, the switch was easy to find on the wall at the bottom of the flight of stairs that led out of this place. Lois flipped the switch with an almost defiant gesture and at once the sinister basement was flooded with the warm light of several electric light bulbs hanging from the ceiling.

Lois looked around almost incredulously at the basement. There were what looked like oaken wine casks by one wall, and, of course, there was the Egyptian sarcophagus in all its scorched splendor. And the white-furred thing with its mouth wide open, baring fearsome fangs.

She had seen it the first time on the way into the bunker and refused to think about it. Its mere presence was bad enough, if she thought about it too hard, but the implications that attached to it were even worse. People told stories about these things, and the stories often implied that the creatures were intelligent. And this one was Lex's trophy.

She looked quickly away from it, resolutely refusing to acknowledge the shiver that ran down her spine. Could that thing possibly really be what it looked like? But that meant that Lex -- or somebody -- had actually shot one, and.... No, absolutely not. She positively did not believe in abominable snowmen, yetis, Loch Ness monsters or even Bigfoot. Maybe it was a mutant polar bear or something. But maybe, somewhere in this den of impossible artifacts, she could find some container made of lead that was big enough to hold Lex's watch and the chunk of meteorite that she had left upstairs.

On one side of the room was a wide shelf, fastened to the wall several inches above her head. All sorts of small items that apparently had no relationship to each other were set neatly along its length. Lois surveyed them, then stood on tiptoe and cautiously picked up one that seemed to be some sort of pot, but it was too light to be made of lead and she replaced it carefully. And then her gaze fell on what appeared to be some kind of old-fashioned jewelry box, encrusted with what looked very much like rubies. Cautiously, she picked it up.

It was surprisingly heavy, and the silvery metal in which the stones were set could very well be lead.

It didn't look like silver to her, or iron, and besides, it was too heavy to be made of anything else, except maybe gold, and it wasn't the right color for gold. Well, if it wasn't lead, she would soon find out, and she could return it after she and Clark disposed of the Kryptonite. Quickly, she opened the box, pulled Lex's watch from her arm and dropped it into the box.

Hopefully, no one would be waiting for her upstairs she thought. She was going to have to dodge Lex's people and maybe the SWAT officers. Uneasily, the memory of the female officer, whose property she had borrowed came to mind. Well, hopefully, she could get the stuff back to the woman anonymously.

Lois started for the flight of stairs and paused. In the wall, directly opposite the one where the elevator to the nether regions of Lex Tower was located, was another elevator.

Well, it probably was simply another entrance to the bunker, but it was worth a look. Lois crossed to it and pushed the call button.

The car was apparently not far away for the doors slid silently

open in under a minute and Lois peered inside. The floor was carpeted with the kind of rug that you could lose your feet in, the walls seemed to be covered with some kind of elegantly designed tiling, and the railings seemed to be of polished mahogany -- definitely unlike the utilitarian one that ferried passengers down into Lex's bunker. The row of buttons within, one of which was marked "penthouse," was more welcome than she could have believed and she boarded.

Judging by the buttons beside the door, this must be a private elevator that skipped the lower floors of Lex Tower, for it granted access only to the basement, the first floor and the top four levels, which included both floors of the penthouse and the two directly beneath it. Lois jammed her thumb on the one that would take her to the floor where Lex's office was located and leaned back against the wall as the device slid into motion. All of a sudden she was immensely tired, but she couldn't rest until the Kryptonite was under wraps and she knew that Clark was safe. Once she was sure of those two things, she planned on sleeping for a week. She certainly had enough vacation time saved up, considering that she had skipped vacation every year since she had gone to work at the Planet. Perry was bound to wonder if she was sick or something, but she didn't care. She could never remember being so tired in her life -- not even the nights she had spent awake on surveillance could measure up to this one.

The elevator sliding to a stop jolted her out of the doze into which she had slipped. Lois shook herself awake and straightened up. If Nigel St. John was waiting for her, she'd better have her wits about her, but the room where the elevator had deposited her was surprisingly empty. The penthouse wasn't, however. From somewhere not far away she could hear the sound of several voices raised in simultaneous conversation. Lois stepped out into the carpeted room, looking around and trying to orient herself.

She was in Lex's office. And when she turned, she saw that the doors to the elevator appeared to be plain wall -- if you could call the hardwood paneled walls plain. Rapidly, Lois made a beeline for the gym and the treadmill.

The Kryptonite was still there, and within seconds it nestled on the velvet lining of the jewelry box. Lois closed the lid and fastened the old fashioned catch. Now, she only hoped all this sneaking around wasn't in vain, and that Clark was all right and able to answer her. She stepped out onto the balcony. From this vantage point, the whole city of Metropolis was laid out below her, bathed in the ruddy light of a brilliant sunrise, but Lois paid no attention. There was only one sight that she wanted to see right now. She opened her mouth and shouted at the top of her voice, "Help, Superman!"

A whoosh of air answered her, and a familiar caped figure was hanging in the air ten feet away. His Suit was smudged and dirty, as were his face and hands, and the cape was slightly frayed along the edges, but he was very much alive.

"It's about time you showed up!" she snapped. "Didn't you know I was worried?"

He looked slightly guilty. "I had to catch St. John. He was high-tailing it out of Lex Tower," he explained. "And I had to return the lead apron. I figured you knew I was okay."

"Well, I didn't! I knew the Kryptonite in Smallville took away your powers! How was I supposed to know that it hadn't happened again? I was afraid you'd been blown up by the bomb!"

His eyebrows flew up. "How did you know about the Kryptonite in Smallville?"

"I've got a brain," she said shortly. "Once I knew you were Superman, a lot of things suddenly started making sense." She held up the box. "Is this lead?"

He squinted at it. "Sure is. Where did you find it?"

"Lex's basement. I put both pieces of Kryptonite in it. Can we just get out of here, now?"

Clark smiled suddenly. "We sure can." He settled gracefully down onto the balcony and lifted her effortlessly in his arms.

"Someday you're going to have to explain why I was able to do without your help for so long."

"I can't figure it out either," Lois said, with a wide yawn. She probably ought to tell him, she thought, that she had figured out his secret a couple of months ago, but she was much too tired to go into all of that at present. She had the sneaking suspicion that it was going to be a discussion that would demand that she be at her sharpest. Right now, she could barely keep her eyes open.

Lois wedged the box down firmly in her lap and against Superman's side so that it wasn't likely to slip if her grip on it relaxed. His shoulder was looking more and more tempting by the second. After a few second's deliberation, she rested her head against the smudged blue spandex and closed her eyes.

Epilogue

"Kent!"

Perry White's voice reverberated through the newsroom just as Clark stepped out of the stairwell. It looked to him as if Perry had been on the watch for him -- not a surprising circumstance when you considered that it was nearly four in the afternoon and the dispatches he had already sent to the Planet were blazing from its front page. With more to come.

He trotted down the ramp and headed for the Editor's office. When he pushed open the door, Perry White was sitting bolt upright in his chair, his eyes fixed on the door. Clark pasted a smile on his face. "You called me, sir?"

Perry jabbed a finger at his computer screen. "This is the craziest story I ever read!"

"What is, sir?" Clark asked innocently.

Perry glared at him. "Why do I get the feelin' that there's a lot more behind this than you and Lois saw fit to print?"

"Because there is," Clark admitted. "We promised Inspector Henderson we wouldn't print anything without an okay from him, though. Luthor's legal team will just be waiting for an opening. The whole story will come out later, but the government doesn't want to risk its case by letting out too many details."

"Lex Luthor? Under arrest for trying to --"

"Trying to explode nuclear devices over every inhabited continent on Earth," Clark confirmed. "The EMP wave would have been worse than the Nightfall asteroid. Superman managed to stop it, and saved one of the satellites as evidence. The government has experts going over it right now."

Perry appeared to contemplate that for a moment. "Do I want to know how you and Lois got involved in it?" he asked finally.

"Not officially," Clark replied uncomfortably.

"Whatever you say doesn't leave this room," Perry said. "I haven't been a newsman for thirty years without learnin' a few tricks of the trade. Besides, I know Lois."

"Well -- Lois and I broke into Lex Tower and explored the bunker last night," Clark admitted, somewhat sheepishly, resolutely ignoring the faint choking noise that Perry made. "We didn't expect to find anything like this, though. But Lois figured that Luthor hadn't built the place just in case a killer asteroid showed up, and she wanted to find out the real reason."

"Great shades of Elvis!" Perry said. "So it was you two that alerted the police? And last night Luthor actually tried to explode one of those things over the United States?"

"Yes, sir," Clark said. "Fortunately we'd already got hold of Superman and he pushed the satellite out of its orbit around Earth, to a safe distance. It was a pretty close thing."

Perry shook his head. "So where's Lois now? I haven't seen her all day, and she doesn't answer her pager or her phone." That wasn't surprising, Clark admitted privately, since he had accidentally-on-purpose unplugged the phone in her apartment and turned off the pager.

"Sleeping," Clark said. "She'd been up all the night before, all day yesterday and all of last night. She told me to tell you she was taking the next couple of days off while she catches up on

her sleep."

Perry raised his eyebrows and a faint grin twisted the corners of his mouth. "Yeah," he said, a little dryly. "And if I ever bring it up, she'll make me pay. Take a lesson from this, son. It's stories like this that make me willin' to put up with some of her other behavior."

Clark smiled. "I know."

"Yeah," Perry admitted. "I guess you would. But don't tell her I said that. I need all the advantages I can get." He paused. "Well, what are you waitin' for, Kent? Get out there and get me a follow-up!"

"Yes sir," Clark said, and made his escape.

"You aren't so shabby yourself, son," he heard Perry murmur behind the closed door.

Clark made his way to his desk and reached for the phone. He hoped his boss was right, but there was a lot still hanging in the air. Lois hadn't even brought up the revelation that he had made last night, and he figured that discussion was still coming. Lois had to have been really exhausted to fall asleep on him on the way to her apartment, without once even mentioning the incident. He'd left her asleep on her bed and cleared out the spy devices before he had headed for Henderson's office, with a side-trip to Smallville where he left the ruby-encrusted lead box buried under the mound of hay in his father's barn. Dealing with the Kryptonite would have to wait until Lois woke up.

The Twelfth Precinct had been in a state of complete chaos by the time he got there, and he'd had to deal with various and sundry persons from the FBI, CIA, the Justice Department, and representatives of a couple of dozen other government agencies as well. Eventually, he'd managed to satisfy all of the different groups for the moment and gone away to return as Clark Kent, only to endure another round of questions. Lois was going to have to deal with Inspector Henderson later. He'd had it for the moment.

After all the thunder and lightning died down, he figured Lois was going to tear strips out of his hide, and invulnerability wasn't likely to save him. On the other hand, he was oddly glad that the big secret was out. The fact that Lois hadn't exploded was still puzzling him a little, but after all, they had been too busy literally saving the world for her to take time out to rip him apart. Now, all he had to do was survive the wrath of Mad Dog Lane. Surely Superman, who could swallow a bomb with nothing more than a mild burp, could withstand the wrath of his partner. Hadn't she been worried enough about him, after the capture of Luthor, to tear into him because he hadn't shown up at once to show her that he was all right? Well, yes, but that didn't mean that he was safe.

He realized that he was holding the receiver of the phone to his ear and staring blankly at the keypad. Well, that wasn't unusual. It tended to happen a lot when he was puzzling over some facet of Lois's behavior.

Clark put the receiver down and got to his feet. Maybe, if he went back and checked out the remaining parts of the bunker at super-speed, he could present her with enough information and an angle on the many follow-ups that he suspected they would be doing over the next two or three weeks, that it would divert her attention from the urge to shred Superman and Clark until it became unimportant. Besides, he wanted another look at the stuffed yeti or whatever it was.

As he made the decision, the telephone rang. Automatically, he answered.

"Kent."

"Clark? Is that you?" Lois's voice said. There was the impression of a massive yawn in the middle of the sentence.

"Yes," he said.

"Would you mind visiting one of your famous eating places and bringing me something to eat? There's nothing in my fridge and I'm starving."

"Okay," he said, before he thought.

"Thanks." Again Lois's voice trailed off into another yawn.

"No problem," he said. "I'll be there in a little while." He put down the phone, rapidly running over a list of breakfast places in his mind. Maybe something from France would do, he considered. Lois still hadn't sounded mad, but if he took too long that could change. Okay, France it was.

Clark made a beeline for the stairs. Maybe crepes, he considered. And something with chocolate. Chocolate was almost always a safe bet where Lois was concerned. Briefly, the ironic thought crossed his mind that the person of whom he was most apprehensive was also his biggest supporter, and the only one more lethal to Superman than Kryptonite. Lois, of course, had certain advantages that the bad guys lacked. It looked to him as if Superman's greatest test was coming up.

The door closed behind him and Superman was on his way.

THE END