

Café Americana

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Rated PG

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Summary: What happens When Lois' favorite uncle falls in love, but is too afraid to let the woman of his dreams knows how he feels? Sound familiar? Somehow, Clark has to keep Lois from playing matchmaker while trying to crack the case of a mysterious jewel robber. How to do that, when their wedding is only two weeks away? All in a day's work for Lois and Clark!

Although he only made one appearance on *Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*, Mike Lane has popped up quite a bit in fan fiction. Wouldn't it have been great if the series writers had decided to make him a semi-regular like Dr. Klein?

This fic takes place in the same universe as my story 'Stranger in our Midst'. It occurs between the time of Clark's proposal and their evening garden wedding. A few people suggested that the segment regarding Rhapsody Knits and Café Americana could possibly stand on its own. At the time I was far too busy working on 'Stranger' to give it another thought. But in the back of my mind a small story was brewing. What if the owners of these two establishments very much wanted to became more than just friends? How to overcome the obstacles? Somehow Uncle Mike has to do this while planning a rehearsal dinner and catering Lois and Clark's wedding reception!

There is also mention of a character call Lady Polara Lo. She is Clark's maternal grandmother and her influence on Clark's life will be explained in another upcoming fic called *The Globe*.

It is not necessary to read 'Stranger' in order to enjoy this story, but I won't try to stop you!

Oh, since this is taking place in the 'Stranger' universe, Lois only dated Lex Luthor to interview him, Dan Scardino never showed up and Mayson Drake is just an Assistant District Attorney.

Many thanks of appreciation to several people: Anti-Kryptonite, UltraWoman, KenJ and most of all HappyGirl and Iolanthealias! Without their editing, this story would have been a complete mess! If I have left anyone out, please believe it was only because my memory is not what it once was, but that does not mean your contribution was any less valued.

Most of the characters and some of the dialogue are property of DC Comics and December 3rd Productions. I only borrowed them for a little while and will make not a dime of profit.

And now, gentle reader, without further ado...

Prelude

Midnight — Lois' Apartment

"Clark, we have to get this whole mess straightened out immediately! Our wedding is only two weeks away!"

<<Honey, it's going to be okay. After all we've faced since our engagement, this ought to be a piece of cake!>>

Even over the phone line, Lois could hear the smile in her fiancé's voice and see him running his fingers through that luscious black hair. The visual made her smile — just a little. "Yeah, compared to the New Kryptonians this is the kind of normal Earth problem all engaged couples face when dealing with family and wedding arrangements."

<<Yeah, it will be over soon and we can get on to more important things.>>

"Like our honeymoon?" she asked slyly.

<<Exactly! Hawaii awaits!>>

"OK, Farmboy. I'll take your advice and get some sleep. See you in the morning." They exchanged goodnights, hung up their respective phones and prepared for bed.

But Lois could not sleep.

Hugging close to her chest the stuffed bear Clark had won for her at the Smallville Corn Festival years ago, her mind raced, contemplating how they had tried several attempts to work around this current problem. After all, they were 'The Hottest Team in Town'. They had endured tougher challenges than this particular situation! Earlier in the day they'd sat hunched over their desks making furtive phone calls, begged, pleaded and cajoled sources for assistance. Over lunch, Lois had asked Diane if any of her social connections could be of assistance. Unfortunately, there had been no relief from that quarter. Heck, she even called Seattle and asked Cat for help!

Even Superman, for all his powers, was helpless in this situation.

The couple's level of frustration had ratcheted up a few notches as time grew shorter. Clark went on more than the usual number of rescues to ease his stress while Lois cleaned, organized and went over her insurance policies.

At the moment her apartment and desk at the Daily Planet were pictures of cleanliness and organization.

"What are we going to do?" She moaned into her pillow. Suddenly a plan fully realized bloomed in her mind. She must ask the one person in Metropolis with the needed connections to handle this problem. Hoping against hope for a solution she finally eased into a light sleep.

Part One

Early Morning — Café Americana:

He stood at his habitual spot just outside the café looking across the busy street to Rhapsody Knits, glancing at his watch and restlessly awaiting the arrival of the yarn shop's owner.

"Good morning, Mikel!" One of his regular customers called out, interrupting his 'sentry duty'.

"What? Oh, good morning... Sherry," he replied, wishing the woman would make her order and go away.

"What's the special muffin today?" she asked.

"Rhubarb and strawberry," Mike replied over his shoulder in an absent-minded manner. He was anxious to get back to his watching, thus missing the patron's positive response. Sighing to himself, he walked over to Karen, the café's hostess, and asked, "How's the morning till?"

She tossed a long sinuous braid of red hair over her shoulder and answered cheerfully, "Just fine, Mike. Folks are raving about the new chocolate croissant!"

"Good! My niece suggested we add them to the menu. Her fiancé got the recipe from a little café in Paris."

The hostess's face split into a huge grin. "He's got great taste in food and his choice in a future wife. Say, how many more days until the big event?"

"Ah! Less than two weeks and counting!" Mike responded with an equally large grin. The conversation over and the receipts checked, Mike returned to his vigil.

Only five paces away in the background, Ryan the head waiter and his assistant Zachary, who was swiftly going over breakfast orders, also observed their boss's behavior.

"She hasn't gotten in yet?" Zachary asked

"Nope, can't you tell? He's all nervous and stuff," Ryan answered while smoothing his neatly trimmed brown mustache.

"Oh brother! It's going to be a long morning if she doesn't show up," Zachary groaned.

At that precise moment, both men noticed a petite, handsome

Asian woman in her mid-fifties wearing a light floral dress walk past the restaurant with quick determined steps. And then cross the street towards Rhapsody Knits. The waiters knew their boss was also aware of the woman's approach. They noticed with wry amusement as he ducked hurriedly back into the café and made a beeline for the kitchen.

"Here we go again," Ryan said with a chuckle.

"This happens every morning," his companion responded.

"Don't worry, *one* of these days he'll open up," Ryan said.

"Yeah, but when? The busboys are betting he'll just keep playing sentry duty and suffer in silence," Zachary grumbled while shaking his nearly bald head.

"Really?" Ryan said in surprise. "I thought the wait staff had a betting pool riding on Mike *finally* asking her out by summertime. Oops! Get to your station. Here she comes!"

With studied casualness, the waiters sauntered over to expectant breakfast patrons and ignored the rapidly moving owner of Rhapsody Knits, Grace Chen.

"Good morning, Ms Chen. May I help you or is Mike getting your usual order?" Karen asked.

"Oh yes, my usual order of green chai tea and a yogurt parfait." Her expression was a cacophony of amusement and confusion.

"Excuse me; did you say Michael was getting it for me?"

Karen stammered and her face flushed red in a vain quest for the right words. "A...absolutely! Mike always bags up his usual morning customer's breakfasts. A...all part of the service, you know!"

A shadow of a smile flitted across Grace's delicate features and she answered in a gentle voice, "Of course it is. I shall wait here by the door until he comes out."

At that moment, a smiling Mike Lane hustled out of the kitchen holding a crisp white paper bag with the name *Café Americana* emblazoned across the front. He walked past Karen as if she didn't exist and went straight for Grace.

"Good morning!" he boomed with more enthusiasm than necessary. "Here's your fruit parfait and hot water. The chai tea bag is on the side, not in the cup, as per your request."

"Thank you, Michael, that's very kind. I'm running a bit late today; my family is town and staying with me in the brownstone. Today we are attending my niece's graduation from medical school."

"You don't say? Then it's a big day in your family!"

"Yes, indeed. Lisa is the first doctor in the family. By the way, I know it is the middle of the breakfast rush, but may we speak for a moment?"

"Sure, Grace. Let's step away from the cashier." Turning to Karen he said, "Mind the wait staff for a few minutes please."

Karen complied with a brief businesslike nod of the head. "Sure thing, Mike."

The couple walked outside and talked in the same location Mike had stood sentry only ten minutes before.

Grace bowed her head, than looked up at her friend. "Um... well, Michael, I never got a chance to express my gratitude to you for having Mr. Kent write that lovely article about my shop. Nearly a year later and customers are *still* talking about it. In addition to that, Metropolis General has sent a few recovering cancer patients over to learn how to knit or crochet. It has done wonders for their morale."

"Express your gratitude? Aw, c'mon, Grace it was high time the great work that you and the Rhapsody Knits staff and local artisans do was properly recognized. Besides, Clark was only too happy to write the story. After all, he did win a Merriweather award for it."

"True, but I want to do something nice for *you*, so why don't I knit a pair of comfy merino wool and silk socks? If the café can spare its owner for a minute, let me take some measurements to assure a custom fit."

"Really?" Mike's hands lay on his chest in surprise. "A pair of socks from the extremely talented owner of Rhapsody Knits? I'm flattered. Sure, I can spare a few minutes."

Mike tried hard to conceal his sense of utter glee as he and Grace made their way across the street to her quaint yarn shop.

Exactly as she promised, Grace measured his foot and ankle and had him back at the café in no time at all. The breakfast rush was now in full swing. This was his favorite time of the day, when workers from all over Metropolis came in to grab breakfast and then select a sandwich for lunch. Many of these folks were regulars like Grace. He heard several of them call out his name in greeting and he returned the compliment. He was in the very midst of ringing up a large breakfast order when he heard a familiar voice — in high babble.

Mike looked up to see his beautiful niece Lois running towards him. "Oh! Uncle Mike! There you are! Thank goodness. It's awful! It's HORRIBLE!"

"Slow down! Slow down! Where's the fire?" he inquired while skillfully bagging up the order. He could see his normally unflappable niece was in full panic mode. Especially since she was wearing a crisp plum two piece linen suit — with green flats. He decided it was best not to mention it. Knowing Lois, she had more suitable footwear stashed away in her desk.

"Oh, it's terrible! Uncle Mike, the rehearsal dinner has been canceled!"

"What? Come again?" he asked.

"Mother and Daddy were *supposed* to work together on getting a restaurant and sending out the invitations to the wedding party and a few close friends."

Mike closed his eyes and said, "Oh, boy." He turned to Karen and said, "Take over here." He guided his niece over to his 'sentry post' outside, studiously ignoring stares from the customers waiting to pay for their meal. Patiently, and for the second time that morning he had a private conversation with a special woman in his life.

Lois, now far away from listening ears, launched full throttle into total babble mode. "Yeah, well, fireworks always start when they get together, but I figured just this *once* for their daughter's sake they could act like adults. They had picked La Cira, where Cat got engaged, than changed the location to Arabella's, but Daddy wanted to use their banquet room, while Mother was determined to rent out the *entire* restaurant."

"Why? There are only going to be forty people at the wedding and fifteen at the rehearsal dinner, right?"

"Mother feels we ought to have guests at the rehearsal dinner who aren't invited to the wedding."

"Uh huh." Her Uncle said. "Let me guess. Some public relations guys from her publishers to help plug her latest medical mystery? By a brief interview at her famous journalist daughter's rehearsal dinner?"

Lois stopped in mid-babble and said, "Mother couldn't be so crass. Could she? Anyway, let me finish. They got into a huge dust-up with the manager because they couldn't decide. The poor man had to have an answer, and since they couldn't give him one he canceled the whole event and refunded their deposit."

"Ellen strikes again," Mike disgustedly muttered.

"Never mind that! We have people coming in less than two weeks! Clark and I have called in favors to every high-end restaurant in Metropolis. There's *absolutely* nothing available for that Friday night!" I thought that maybe you might know someone who could open their place for us. Otherwise I don't know what we'll do!" Lois leaned against the wall, her eye filled with unshed tears. Despite the earliness of the hour, his niece suddenly looked very fragile and young.

Mike's heart gave a lurch. He placed both of his hands on her shoulders and gave an affectionate squeeze. "Honey, there *is* one place available: Café Americana!"

"No! Absolutely not! Your staff is already catering the reception. It's too much!" Lois' eyes flashed in determination.

"What, are you kidding? Remember, I learned to cook in the army! Fifteen or one hundred and fifteen, it's all the same to me. Besides, the banquet room ain't gonna be used that Friday night anyhow." He gave her chin an affectionate tap. "Come on; let your ol' uncle have a little fun!"

"B...but Uncle Mike," she replied meekly.

"No. It's done. This rehearsal dinner will be a smash, just wait and see. Don't worry about a thing. I will handle Ellen."

There were not too many people in the world Lois Lane had utter respect for besides her fiancé. Mike Lane was one of them. She nodded in submissive acquiescence.

Out of the corner of her eye, Lois noticed Grace Chen walking in the restaurant, obviously searching for someone.

"Uh, Uncle Mike, I see Grace is here." Lois' voice changed; there was approval in her teasing tone.

She watched as her uncle's face flushed with embarrassment.

"Grace looks like she wants to ask me something." He absentmindedly patted Lois' hand and fairly danced away from his niece to speak with Grace. Lois observed all this with wry amusement. At last, something sweetly unexpected besides a headline story to occupy her mind during all the wedding chaos. <I knew it! Mike's got a thing for Grace! Wait until I tell Clark!> She was about to leave the café when Mike said. "Lois, don't leave. I'll have Ryan pack up a chocolate croissant and a low-fat latte mocha."

"Good morning, Grace. How are you?" Lois asked.

"Just fine, thank you. How are the wedding plans?"

"They are coming along great, but Clark and I will be *very* glad when it's over."

Grace gave a heartwarming smile that reminded Lois of Martha Kent. She said, "Oh, have fun with the plans and excitement! Sooner than you can imagine possible, the first anniversary will have come and gone. Has Michael told you about his socks?"

"Socks?" Lois answered, slightly confused by the change in conversation. "What socks?"

Again, Lois could not miss her Uncle's face turning an even deeper shade of red.

"It is a thank-you present for Michael. After all, he was the one who told your fiancé about my shop. Without that article we might not have gotten as much support for our artisans knitting items for cancer victims."

"Don't sell yourself short, Grace..." Mike interjected.

"Uncle Mike's right! What you and the group of knitters are doing is a help to many cancer victims in Metropolis," Lois said.

"Thank you both. But, since it's getting busy around here, I simply wanted to ask Michael what color socks he wanted."

"Oh, uh... brown."

"Perfect. Brown it is. A pair will be ready by the end of the day tomorrow! Bye Michael! Nice to see you again, Lois." With those parting words, Grace made her way through the doors, carefully dodged a car while crossing the street to her shop.

Mike's eyes gazed after her in loving appreciation. His niece looked on in bemusement and could not help teasing him gently. "So, Uncle Mike, what's going on with Grace?"

"Nothing," he murmured.

"Really? That's not what I'm seeing."

"Hey, kiddo, turn off those reporter's instincts. There's no story here!"

"Uh huh." Her brown eyes glittered merrily, a complete change from the panicked bride to be who had stormed in mere moments before.

He was about to say more, but at that moment, several hungry customers came into the café, Ryan arrived with Lois' breakfast, and one of the cooks was signaling him. "Uh... Lois, I would love to continue this conversation, but I have to get back to my job as owner/manager of this establishment. Now, remember about the rehearsal dinner. There's plenty of room for fifteen guests. Bring everyone over around 7:00 p.m. Oh yeah, tell Dr. Pete Ross I don't want him eating me out of house and restaurant! The last time he and his buddies from the hospital were here the kitchen ran out of flapjack mix!" With those words he handed the bag over to his niece, kissed her on the cheek and moved towards the kitchen.

"Thanks, Uncle Mike!" she called after him and quickly left the restaurant.

Part Two

Late Morning — Daily Planet

Clark smiled to himself as the familiar cadence of Lois' heartbeat reached his ears. He was getting a little concerned, especially after their conversation late last night. The problem with the restaurant reservations was another in a long line of delays and problems with getting married. They were both almost to the point of cancelling everything and eloping. Maybe do something crazy — like get married on a hilltop — just them and some broken down old justice of the peace presiding as they exchanged vows.

At that moment, Lois stepped off the elevator, scampered straight down the ramp and with a happy expression on her countenance moved towards her fiancé's desk.

"Clark... oh good, you're here. Great news! We don't have to worry about the restaurant for the rehearsal dinner. Uncle Mike said we could have it at his place! One thing's for sure: Mother won't try to change things around. And another thing: Daddy trusts his brother's cooking. Oh yeah, and one more thing — we, have to set up Uncle Mike with Grace Chen."

Jimmy, who was discussing his latest Superman photos, smiled, patted his friend on the back and moved away. He knew better than to put himself ahead of Lois.

"Good morning to you, Lois. Now what's this about Uncle Mike and his old friend Grace?" Clark leaned back in his chair and smiled, pleased to see his fiancée in a better mood than last night.

"Exactly! Mike needs a date for our wedding and it *has* to be Grace Chen."

"No, we are not matchmaking! It never works out," Clark responded emphatically.

"Tell her, Clark, that's definitely not a sport for the faint of heart," Science Editor Janet Owens said in passing.

"I'd rather go into a Boston bar in the North End wearing a Yankee baseball cap!" Steve called over from his desk.

"What are you guys thinking of?" Diane chimed in as she sipped her coffee. "Matchmaking almost never works."

The voice of the Daily Planet's editor boomed out, "Who's matchmaking with whom?"

"Nobody around here, Chief," Clark said with a shrug.

"Good, 'cause this ain't the lonely hearts club, it's a great Metropolitan newspaper which ain't gonna be so great if my staff aren't working," Perry said as he barrelled over to the reporting team.

"Hey!" Lois shouted to the newsroom at large. "My fiancé and I were having a *private* conversation!"

"Not with your voice that loud, Lois," Eduardo shot back, trying without success to hide a snicker.

Lois rolled her eyes in irritation and was about to respond when Perry said, "Never mind! What headline-grabbing story have you two got for me today?"

Lois sat down at her desk, took a sharp yellow number two pencil, began twirling it around her fingers and said, "You know, Chief, we're researching sources and checking our facts..."

"In other words, you *and* Kent have nothing. Perry remarked casually. "Come on, kids, I'm not asking for a Pulitzer Prize piece, just enough material to fill six inches of space. Which does *not* include your Uncle's love life. Get on it. Oh, by the way, Lois, nice suit, but the shoes don't match!" So saying, Perry ambled over to Steve in the sports section to see what sort of havoc he could raise in that part of the bullpen.

Looking down at her feet, Lois squeaked. "I'm wearing green flats with a *plum* suit? Now I know this whole rehearsal dinner thing is getting to me!" She dived into the bottom drawer of her desk and pulled out a pair of black pumps. "Wow, Perry's in a foul mood," Lois remarked as she kicked off the offending footgear.

"Bet the suits upstairs are giving him a hard time again," Clark said sighing.

"Nope, not this time. Alice is forcing him to stick with his diet. She wants him to fit into his new tuxedo for the wedding *and* keep his cholesterol down." Turning to her computer monitor she continued. "OK, the discussion about Uncle Mike and Grace can wait until later. We need to write a story for this evening's edition. It's time to contact Bobby Bigmouth." Lois put the receiver to her ear and asked, "By the way, what are your parents doing today?"

"Mom is shopping and Dad has gone to the Home Station store for lumber." Clark lowered his voice considerably while saying, "He's making additional shelves for the 'special closet'."

Lois nodded, understanding immediately just which closet in the townhouse would be receiving the elder Kent's personal attention. "Right. I'm sure Jonathan knows just what to do. Oh yes, don't forget to tell them they are invited to the Café Americana for dinner this Friday night. Mike wants all of us to taste the food he's preparing for the reception. Oh, did I tell you last week Martha's recipe for rosemary biscuits is a definite as well as filet mignon?"

"That's great! Mom will be very proud; that recipe has been in the Kent family for generations." Clark hesitated a moment then said, "When are you calling Sam and Ellen to let them know Mike is handling everything?"

"Hmm, right after I contact Bobby. They know *not* handling the restaurant reservations properly was a big mistake. But they're still my parents. Mother will probably bring up the subject Friday night at the food tasting," Lois groaned.

"Right. After what they did to our rehearsal dinner plans, would it be too much to ask for a nice quiet evening as one big family?" His handsome face held a thoughtful expression.

"I'll see what I can do. But don't get your hopes up! Maybe Mike can ask some of his old army buddies to stand guard while we eat. Consider it early training in combat...Lane family style!"

A slow, easy smile spread across Clark's face. He leaned down and whispered in her ear, "There is only *one* member of the Lane family I want to have 'combat' with. But since we have to wait a little while longer, is there anything I can do to make the rest of Friday night better?"

Lois' face grew flushed with embarrassment. Her eyes darted around the newsroom hoping no one noticed their intimate tête-à-tête. "Well, how about taking me to someplace simply amazing after dinner for dessert? Say maybe — Paris? I always wanted to see that lovely bakery where those sumptuous chocolate croissants are created."

His eyes sparkled at the suggestion. "Hmmm, that might be arranged..."

Suddenly, Perry stormed past their desks and barked, "Lois! Clark! In my office! A story has landed in my lap that's just perfect for The Hottest Team in Town!"

The partners looked at each other with quizzical expressions. "Bobby and my parents will have to wait," Lois muttered as she put the receiver back in its cradle.

"This can't be good. Perry has that look on his face," Clark said as he funneled long fingers through his thick dark hair.

"The one with the toothy grin?" Lois groaned.

"That's the one," Clark answered nervously.

"Great. You know what that means." They filled their lungs with air and simultaneously shouted, "Jimmy!"

He came bounding over to them a questioning look on his face. Placing both hands together and bouncing on his toes, he spoke in a joking tone. "My Lady and Lord, you bellowed?"

"Jimmy, stop playing games. The chief wants to see us in his office pronto. Be ready for *anything!*" Lois snapped as she stepped towards Perry's office.

"Sure. Photography no problem. Story sidebars no problem. Doing research...big problem! The chief wants me to sharpen my skills as a photojournalist. So research is out. It's kinda like a promotion! But feel free to use my protégé, Jack."

"Jack?" Clark said. "No offense, he's good, but he's not in your class."

"Lane! Kent! Get a move on, you two! The colonel didn't have this much trouble getting Elvis into the studio!" Perry roared from his office.

"No time to discuss this now. Just tell Jack to get his computer warmed up!" Lois said as she followed her partner.

"Now maybe dropping this project in your laps this close to the big day is asking a lot, but what would you two say to a juicy case? This will be a great story. Guaranteed," Perry said as he paced the cramped office and rubbed his hands in anticipation.

"Any chance of sharing the gist of the case with us — this century?" Lois asked as she made herself comfortable on the plaid covered couch.

"Oh sure, sure. You kids have been so busy with your wedding; I haven't had the heart to disrupt the plans with any story that required mountains of research and hours of time. In any case, there has been a series of jewelry store robberies in the Topaz district of Metropolis. The robber's MO is always the same; he uses tear gas to subdue his victims, then proceeds to steal the loose stones since they are easier to fence. Both of you work with Inspector Henderson and his people turn over every stone to bring this crook to ground. Those golden-throated sources of yours have to know *something*."

"Funny, we were just getting ready to call one when..."

Jack knocked on the door, and then stuck his head inside the office. "Hey Lois and Clark! I've got some dude on my phone looking for you two. He says his name is Bobby..."

"Bigmouth!" The partners said together.

"He must have ears to match his stomach!" Perry said. "Well, don't just stand there. Answer the phone! There could be a Kerth award on the other line!"

Jack jumped out of the doorway as the two reporters raced past him.

"No matter how long I work here, I'll never get used to those two!" Jack said as he made his way back to his tiny cubicle.

Racing back to their desks, Lois set the call to conference mode so Clark could listen in. "Bobby, tell me you have the goods on this guy robbing the Topaz district."

"Oh yeah him," Bobby said in a tone bordering on respect. "Don't know his name, think he's new to Metropolis. But I'll tell you what, he doesn't use a gun. There is a partner who's only there to help carry the loot. He's pulled four jobs, all as smooth as silk and perfectly timed. Kinda like a good soufflé. Word is there's going to be another big loose gem shipment coming into the district probably in the next couple of days. It's a sure bet he's going to pull another job."

Clark jumped into the conversation and said, "Great, Bobby! What do we owe you? A large pizza with all the works?"

"Nah, consider this my wedding present," he said. "After all, you guys — at least Kent does — provide the best tips!"

Lois worked hard to keep from laughing. "Bobby, speaking for both of us... that's sweet."

"Think nothing of it. Just have a great time on your honeymoon. Gotta go. I smell a tuna fish salad that's just dying to be my new best friend!" Without further ado, the snitch ended the phone call.

Clark joined Lois at her desk and said, "Great, we now know this guy isn't interested in hurting anyone, he just wants loose gem stones. It should be easy to track him down."

"This has been a great day so far!" Lois' eyes searched the newsroom, looked at her fiancé and whispered, "Farmboy, what else does this fantastic Paris bakery of yours have besides croissants?"

Clark's mind went back to his early days of backpacking through Europe. He remembered the scent of freshly baked breads and pastries which had just emerged from ancient stone ovens and how those aromas tantalized the nose of a lonely young man far from his homestead. How the taste of the hot crusty breads made him yearn for the simple Kansas farm and all its familiar comforts. There were an assortment of pastries, breads, and delicate sweets to satisfy anyone's fancy; he chose chocolate croissants for Lois because of her penchant

for the flavor.

After describing the shop he said, "Honey, it will be a treat, especially after dinner at Mike's."

She leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the nose.

"Considering we are less than two weeks away from getting married, my parents have botched our rehearsal dinner, Mother will probably attend the tasting — only to change the menu, Perry's dropped this 'juicy case' in our laps... it better be!"

Clark stood up, smoothed his tie and said, "Look, I'll get the conference room set aside so we can do some research on this guy — maybe ask Jack and Stacy to help. At least we don't have to worry about your uncle's love life right now."

The brunette's head snapped up quickly, she smiled and said, "Oh yes we do!"

Part Three

Mid-morning — Early Evening Rhapsody Knits

Martha Kent pushed gently on the heavy wooden and glass door of the store. As she stepped inside, the delicate sound of tiny bells chiming and the insistent ticking of an old wall clock reached her ears. <How lovely!> she thought as the last emanations of the bells faded away. Not only did the entry bell's quaint tinkling bring back memories of a simpler time, but the yarn shop itself was a sweet mixture of past and present.

To the right were several tall, carefully marked large shelf units filled with colorful yarns of every possible weight and description. Cashmere blends for sweaters and socks, bamboo DK weight yarn for snuggly baby items and thick alpaca for hats and garments of all types. Perched on top of each black wall unit were body forms displaying elegantly knitted or crocheted sweaters, shrugs and shawls. Martha eyes flitted, from one perfectly created item to another. Her fingers began to twitch eagerly, ready to begin a new project. Being an experienced welder, she had coaxed life from cold inflexible metal, but to have a pair of hand carved bamboo needles in her hand and feel skeins of yarn become a lush comforting bed throw or warm garment — such creations demanded real skill!

Martha was so enamored with the beauty of the place that she did not see or hear anyone.

"May I help you, my name is Grace Chen?" an elegant middle-aged Asian woman said, approaching her.

Slightly startled, yet quickly regaining her composure, Martha answered, "Yes. Do you have any yarn suitable for knitting a bulky sweater coat?"

"Which color did you have in mind?"

"A variegated wool yarn, heavy cream with touches of red or burgundy. I want something that will work with much of my wardrobe. This sweater will be worn in a barn as well as in the classroom!"

Martha said, her eyes twinkling in delight.

Grace nodded. "Perhaps Peruvian yarn might do the trick. Please come with me."

The two women walked over to a high black shelf unit with several nooks each filled with yarns from Peru. Grace worked with her examining the various yarns and shades of cream and red. As they did so, more customers entered the shop and were helped by Grace's assistants. Martha was duly impressed by the shop owner's smooth efficiency. This was much better than the shop she frequented in Smallville. The aged, dilapidated and disorganized store was run by a crusty old woman, more interested in foolish gossip than helping her customers unearth the items they needed.

Working with Grace Chen was a welcome change and sheer joy. It was almost like going shopping with an old friend, wise in the ways of the knitter's craft. Shortly they found exactly the color and amount required for the pattern.

"This will work perfectly. I better take one skein extra just in case, especially since I live in Kansas. Thank you so much, Mrs. Chen."

"You are most welcome! But you need not worry. We can easily ship additional yarns or tools to you — Mrs.?"

"Kent. Martha Kent," she responded.

Grace's mouth formed a small smile. "You would not be related to the Daily Planet reporter, Clark Kent?" she asked.

Martha's face beamed with pride. "Yes, he is my son. His father and I are here helping him prepare for his wedding to..."

"Lois Lane! Michael's niece!" Grace said.

Martha laughed. "Exactly! Clark had told me about the article he had written on Rhapsody Knits. I should have mentioned it when I first entered your shop. But there were so many exquisite yarns, patterns and tools here that cannot be purchased in Smallville I completely forgot all about that."

"Thanks to your son's writing such a compassionate article, a number of crafters in yarn guilds stepped up to create warm hats and gloves for cancer victims. Please tell him hello for me."

"I will indeed! There is so much to do with less than two weeks before the wedding, but I have been itching to take a peek inside Rhapsody Knits, and now that I have this yarn it will knit up beautifully. Clark will hear about this tonight over dinner. Speaking of which, I need to get a move on if I'm going to make a decent meal for my husband and Clark."

Grace laughed as she rang up and packaged the yarn. "If your cooking is *half* as good as Clark's writing, dinner will be delicious!"

Martha thanked Grace again, gathered her purchases and with a last look around reluctantly exited the yarn shop.

After Martha Kent's departure, Grace assisted a steady stream of customers, some demanding, some pleasant and a few nervously approaching the art of knitting for the first time. It was a typically busy yet profitable day at the well-known Metropolis establishment. In between helping customers and directing her small staff, Grace sat behind the cashier desk and worked industriously at her computer and on Mike's sock. The navy blue merino wool and silk blend felt warm and reassuring under her skilled fingers.

Inevitably as with all her projects she thought about the person who would eventually wear the article of clothing. <He is a most pleasant man, very gentle and loving, the kind who will stand by your side no matter what may come. Ah, if only he would open the door of his heart and bid me inside. There must be a reason for his reluctance.> She put the partially completed sock down and thought with a pang of sadness. <But perhaps I *do* know what obstacles stand in his path, yet am too afraid to give them a voice?> She continued to muse about her friend for the course of the day. Conversations they had shared in the past convinced her that he felt loneliness like the rustle of dead leaves in the wind — a sad empty feeling she knew all too well.

She remembered one instance in particular where he complained bitterly that Lois would end up an old maid with a display case full of prestigious but dusty old awards — yet no one to love — if she did not leave the newsroom every once in a while and have a real life.

A tiny smile tugged at her lips, <Perhaps he should follow his own advice and get out of that restaurant 'every once in a while' himself. It seems the Lanes are a family driven to be the best in their chosen fields. But not long after that conversation Lois began working with a mild-mannered young man named Clark Kent and the rest, as they say, is history.>

She sighed. <Sooner or later I have to decide whether to wait for him to make the first move or move in a different direction.> Looking down at her handiwork a decision bloomed in her mind. <Perhaps these socks will force a tiny wedge into his heart and we can begin to be more than friends?>

A few hours later Grace watched the door close behind her last customer of the day, a young woman anxious to recreate a complex shawl from her Grandmother's old Icelandic pattern. They had worked hard to find the proper materials and tools to duplicate the pattern just as she had remembered its appearance to her as a child. It was an exacting task, but seeing the happy expression on the customer's face when the correct materials had been assembled was reward enough for

Grace.

Now with practiced ease she began the routine of closing the shop for the evening. First, she and her staff restored all the misplaced skeins of yarn and backfilled any sparse shelves. The floors and shelves were carefully swept and dusted and all the display items were brushed for lint. The register was emptied and locked and the black and gold bank bag readied for its nightly drop.

"Michelle, Christine, you can leave. I will make the drop tonight," Grace said.

"It is getting dark. Shouldn't we do that together?" Michelle asked with concern.

"Oh, I should be fine! Look across the street at that dinner crowd over at the Café Americana. Many people are milling around on the street, especially near the bank! Both of you go home. See you tomorrow morning!" She hugged both women and sent them out the door.

She locked the front door behind them and turned over the 'Closed for Business' sign. Lights in the large display window shone down onto numerous paraphernalia of the knitter's craft.

Just before turning off the display lights she stood at the door of the shop gazing across the darkening busy street and saw Mike Lane greeting customers entering Café Americana for their evening respite. Leaning against the doorway Grace watched him for a time, her thoughts considering the friendly energetic man once more.

Many was the morning she would see him standing just outside the restaurant greeting customers and looking after people having their breakfast in the bright, morning sunshine rather than inside. They had gotten into a comfortable morning routine, she picking up her usual order and pretending not to notice he had been outside waiting for her to appear he pretending Grace was just another customer. Yet there was a tug of happiness, a string of joy which seemed to grow tighter as time passed and their friendship deepened. Mike was always catering her artisan events and she was a sounding board for incidents happening at the restaurant.

Theirs was a sweet, comfortable friendship, a place to come into after the storms of the day, yet Grace's heart yearned for more. She was going to be fifty-five next month. Her children were grown and off on their own adventuresome lives. Her late husband Jeffrey had been an excellent provider, good father and a considerate husband, but their marriage had been more of a friendly business liaison punctuated by affection. After his death, Grace had sold their landscaping business and with single-minded purpose turned her love of the knitting craft into the comforting new reality that was Rhapsody Knits. For several years she endured widowhood with its expected loneliness. After her own brush with cancer she needed — no wanted to take on a new adventure, one of the scariest of all — falling in love.

The gentle chime of the wall clock reminded Grace of the time. She gathered up bank bag and her leather handbag, stepped outside, locked the heavy wooden and glass door and made her way across the street towards the bank.

"Good-night, Grace!" Mike shouted from his customary post.

"Good night, Michael!" She called back. A curious trill of contentment went through her being when she caught sight of him. With a happy smile playing on her lips, she walked on, satisfied at the end of a busy day.

Part Four

Four Days later at Café Americana

Early to late evening

Weekday evenings at the Café Americana were busy affairs, Friday nights especially so. Most workers, particularly the young married professionals and conservative businessmen, frequented the restaurant for its relaxed, unpretentious atmosphere and comfort foods. After a long hectic week, it was a great place to signal the beginning of the weekend.

The restaurant hummed with the sounds of a dozen conversations, some groups boisterously letting off steam, while others were muted with the distinct undercurrent of tension. The clinking of glasses

against dishes seemed to sway in time with the atmosphere. Displaying easy, practiced precision moves, busboys noiselessly whisked away debris from the previous diner's meals, skillfully replacing dirty dishes and soiled linens with gleaming cutlery, china and fresh white napkins. The wait staff moved to and fro between calmly taking a patron's order in the main dining room, to the planned hysteria of the kitchen. They returned minutes later, bearing metal trays heavily laden with choice dishes, the mouthwatering aromas tantalizing the senses of all who breathed them in.

Managing the scene like a general patiently guiding his troops was Mike Lane overseeing any and all situations — whether it be getting a high chair for a small child or making sure there were enough mints for departing guests and whatever else was needed.

Whatever else meant this particular evening was presenting samples for Lois and Clark's wedding reception meal to the happy couple and their parents. Ensconced in a large horseshoe-shaped booth sat the Lane/Kent party — the two families were laughing and exchanging stories.

Mike studied the group thoughtfully. Clark wore a charcoal grey suit, crisp white shirt and a burgundy paisley tie — a definite improvement over the loud neckwear the young man usually sported. A quiet smile tugged at Mike's lips. His niece was wearing a black suit with a burgundy paisley scarf. He wondered if the tie and scarf were planned or a happy accident? Either way it was a sharp indication of how much his niece had changed. In the past if a guy had appeared on a date wearing a tie that matched her scarf she would have promptly ditched the scarf — *and the guy*.

Martha and Jonathan were a loving couple of long standing; he recognized and missed the sense of teamwork and friendship there'd been between himself and his late wife Rita. After all these years, the once crisp memories had softened to a pleasant glow, but he treasured them still.

His brother Sam had worked hard to put aside old differences with Ellen to make their daughter's wedding and reception a successful event. So far, he was the picture of fatherly pride and happiness. Even Ellen was on her best behavior, considering her elaborate plans for an overblown, fancy wedding for her daughter had been dashed in favor of a quiet ceremony. They had both behaved like adults until this whole rehearsal dinner debacle! No matter what happened, Mike intended both meals to be a complete success — despite the bride's parents!

"Daddy!" Lois exploded, "Don't tell Clark *that* story, he'll think the worst of me!"

"Princess," Sam Lane said with a sly wink, "he might as well understand the *whole woman* and not just the reporter." Turning to Clark, he began relating the tale of how Lois burned the kitchen curtains in her one and only attempt at making French toast. When the story reached its painful conclusion, Lois' face had grown flushed with embarrassment and mortification. Sensing his future daughter-in-law's discomfort, Jonathan launched into an equally embarrassing tale about Clark, which the young man took in stride.

Ellen wanted to tell her own Lois story, but at that moment Mike appeared with another platter of food for them to taste. "Hey, enough embarrassing stories about the kids!" Mike said. "It's time to sample the finger sandwiches, *hors d'oeuvres, main dish and sides!* Nunzio has been working in the kitchen all day whipping up his expression of the very best dishes for next week. Ha! The crowd at Arabella's couldn't make anything this good. I'll bet Lex Luthor's chef, Andre Fournier, couldn't come close!"

The group savored the lavish samples and most were in agreement with the choices, except for Ellen. Apparently she felt that cucumber sandwiches with butter were too fattening. "After all, I'm thinking about the health of the guests. Look at Jonathan! The last thing he needs is extra calories!"

Martha had opened her mouth to say something when Clark, placing a restraining hand on his mother's arm, hastily intervened. "Ellen, maybe a substitution can be made, perhaps cucumber and

arugula sandwiches with goat cheese and Italian parsley instead of butter? This way it satisfies everyone.”

“Everyone except me,” Jonathan grumbled, nettled at the barb. Ellen had tactlessly tossed his way. Although he had not known Jonathan very long, Mike knew the comment had hurt. The elder Kent was a product of his Midwestern upbringing. He had confided in him that Martha was the cook in their home and she always tried to make healthy, nutritious meals. It wasn’t her fault that he liked to sneak over to Maisie’s diner for helpings of her famous thick ham sandwiches and heavy desserts.

Mike was impressed at how deftly Clark had stepped in and smoothed over what could have been an uncomfortable situation. World travel and living in Metropolis had given Clark a sense of grace that his father as a Kansas farmer lacked. But for all the years he had known her, the utter thoughtlessness Ellen Lane sometime displayed was beyond him.

He figured now was a good time to step in before another word could be spoken. “Anybody want to try the rosemary biscuits?”

“Rosemary biscuits? Biscuits cannot be served with filet mignon and asparagus!” Ellen said in aghast.

“There is nothing wrong with biscuits and filet mignon. Besides, this is Martha’s recipe and Nunzio loves the idea,” Mike fired back, despite his earlier determination to remain calm.

Ellen responded quickly, “Nunzio is an excellent chef, but biscuits for my daughter’s wedding reception? Mike, how could you?”

Her former brother-in-law uttered a quick prayer, and then sat down next to her and said, “Easy, I made an executive caterer’s decision. Besides, the wedding cake *you* picked out is delicious! That’s your special contribution to the reception. So be happy!”

“Come on, Ellen, relax!” Sam said. “Mike’s doing a great job!”

Mike looked at his big brother and shook his head. “Nope! All the credit goes to Nunzio; I just provided the recipes.”

Happy applause ensued and requests for additional samples were heard. Lois leaned over to Clark and whispered so only he could hear. “At this rate, we’ll be too full to eat anything in Paris!”

“Well, by the time we get there Amandine should just be taking baguettes and croissants out of the oven,” Clark whispered back.

Mike’s face suddenly went still as Grace entered the restaurant wearing a stunning white pants suit. Not a few of the male patrons, including Jonathan and Sam, gazed in appreciation at the well-dressed woman as she moved serenely towards the booth. She came over and placed a gentle hand on Mike’s shoulder. In her other hand was a small green shopping bag with the stenciled logo ‘Rhapsody Knits’.

“Good evening, everyone,” she said to the table occupants. Then turned to Mike and said in a tone only meant for him, “Good evening, Michael.”

“H...hello Grace. You look gorgeous!” Mike whispered as he stood. “What is the occasion?”

“Remember, my niece graduated from medical school. The Yuang family is out tonight celebrating. We are going to see ‘A Little Night Music’ in the theatre district.”

“Oh, that’s a wonderful piece of theatre, I’m sure the entire family will enjoy it!” Martha said enthusiastically.

“Yes. We were about to leave when I remembered to give you your presents.” So saying, with a gentle bow of her head, Grace, using both hands, presented the bag to a surprised Mike.

“Well!” Sam’s deep baritone could be heard at the next booth. “That’s a first; my brother is speechless!”

Mike felt happy butterflies flitting inside him as he took the bag. Inadequate words of thanks danced on his tongue, but Grace quickly spoke up.

“I wasn’t sure which suit you were wearing to the wedding, so I made four pairs of socks: navy blue, heather grey, black and chestnut brown.”

“Aw, Grace, this is too much. Thank you!” Now, fully recovered, Mike’s voice was firm and strong. The kindness and sentiment of the gift deeply touched him. He began to open the bag, but Grace laid her

delicate hand on his work roughened one and said, “Please look at them later. I really should not have been so rude and disturbed this family gathering.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble at all!” Lois piped up. “In fact, if you weren’t going out with family we would ask you to join us. Right, Uncle Mike?”

“Yeah! Uh, no! I mean...”

“What Mike means, Grace, is that you are a friend of his, so that makes you a friend of ours.” Jonathan spoke in his usual gentle, quiet tones, but the depth of meaning was clearly evident.

“Thank you, Mr. Kent! I see where Clark gets such excellent manners.” Grace responded her eyes sparkled with delight.

Just then Mike noticed a tall, impeccably dressed Asian gentleman in his early to late fifties enter the restaurant. The man’s expression seemed tight with anxiety as he intensely searched the faces of the patrons and then spotted Grace. With a fluidness of movement which belied his age, he quickly walked around the tables and past waiters until he reached their booth. For some bizarre reason Mike felt uneasy. Why was this man looking for Grace? More importantly, who was *he* to her? A friend? Perhaps even more than a friend? She did say the family was going to celebrate her niece’s graduation. Was this fellow — her date? Insidiously the uneasiness coiled into something small and ugly he had not felt since Rita was alive — jealousy.

The newcomer nodded acknowledgement to everyone in the booth and, turning to Grace, said, “There you are! All and sundry are waiting. Remember, the curtain goes up in forty-five minutes.”

“Ah yes, but please, let me introduce you! Everyone, this is Raymond Yuang, my older brother. It is his daughter’s brilliance and determination to become a doctor we honor this evening.”

Mike felt as if a solid steel vise had released his heart. He beamed a warm smile. “Brother? You’re Grace’s brother? She has mentioned you on a few occasions.”

Raymond’s face relaxed a little and he spoke quickly. “Yes, I’m from San Francisco. My wife and I have been here in the past to visit our daughter. My sister has mentioned you as well, but unfortunately we have never crossed paths.”

Mike, now all smiles and congeniality, shook Raymond’s hand and said, “We need to correct that problem. Please come by for dinner tomorrow night and bring the family.”

“I am afraid that will not be possible. My family and I are flying to London tomorrow evening for a brief vacation. But perhaps on our return we can come for dinner?”

“Great! I look forward to it!” Mike answered.

Raymond said good-bye to everyone, turned to his sister, and escorted her outside.

Mike looked back at his guests, a lopsided grin on his face and jerking his thumb in the departing siblings’ direction. “Isn’t that great? He’s her brother.”

“Yeah, we noticed,” Sam answered deadpan.

“She seems like a perfectly charming person. Mike, who is she?” Ellen asked.

“Mother, that is Grace Chen. She owns the knit shop across the street. I told you about her. Clark wrote a piece on the shop last year.”

“You two write so many articles, how can *anyone* keep up? Still, if she made socks for Mike perhaps she can make a sweater for me? There’s this darling pattern...”

Martha very diplomatically interrupted and said, “Uh, I think the socks were made as a present. Grace is too busy to with her shop and other matters to knit a sweater for just anyone. Besides, aren’t we here to sample food for the reception?”

Ellen, outdone again by no less than a Kansas farm housewife, did something very rare — she held her tongue.

For the remainder of the evening the group eagerly went over plans for the wedding and reception. The main topic was arranging sufficient tables and chairs to accommodate forty people in the townhouse backyard. Once the arrangement for the tables was in place, the equally thorny problem of seating the guests came next.

Fortunately this was all settled by the time they reached coffee and cake. It was at this point, Clark mentioned that he and Lois had plans and would be leaving soon.

"Why?" Jonathan asked, "What's going on, son? Perry gave you two another assignment?"

"Yes!" Lois answered, grabbing for a credible excuse. "We are trying to write an article about a series of jewel robberies and we need to contact a source!"

"Right," Clark added, touching his glasses. "I forgot to tell you about this meeting, Dad. Lois and I will be out late, so you and Mom can enjoy the rest of the evening. Don't worry about waiting up for me at the townhouse; it's going to be a long night."

"Just one minute, young lady!" Ellen interjected. "I have not seen your wedding gown since it arrived from the seamstress. Lois, you and Clark will have *plenty* of time to lurk around seedy back alleys and cemeteries, but I really would like to see this gown — such an unusual design. I'm sure Martha would like to see it as well. This back alley person can wait. Lois, please gather up your things! Its late, but maybe the three of us can catch a cab outside."

Lois looked pleadingly at her father, but received no assistance from that quarter. "Your Mother's right, Princess. Besides, isn't this all part of mother/daughter bonding while planning a wedding?"

Mike looked at her and shrugged, but at the moment he was assisting one of the waiters with a problem. This time Lois would have to effect her own escape from Ellen. He watched as she fought hard to be gracious. With an effort, Lois smiled sadly at her fiancé, whispered something in his ear and departed with her mother and Martha.

Sam said. "Nice dinner and food tasting, brother. As usual the selections were exceptional. Jonathan, Clark. Want to share a cab?"

"Well, son, care to come back with me to the house?"

"Yeah, Dad, I guess our 'stake out plans' have been put on hold," Clark sighed, trying to hide his disappointment.

Jonathan Kent looked at his son, a twinkle in his blue eyes. "Don't worry, son, there will be other days."

Both men shook hands with Mike and thanked him for an excellent sample tasting. Joining Sam by the front doors, the three men exited the restaurant.

Part Five

Lois' Apartment

Late Evening

Ellen and Martha stared at the shimmering silver creation suspended from the dainty pink satin-covered hanger, each woman's countenance bearing a very different expression.

Martha gazed serenely at the dress, silently approving of her future daughter-in-law's choice. The garment was nearly an exact copy of the gown worn by Clark's maternal Grandmother, Lady Polara Lo. The official historian of Krypton was a regal yet tragic figure, one who filled in many of the cultural and historical gaps in Clark's knowledge of his home planet.

To know Lois would be attired in a similar earthbound version of the gown filled Martha with pride. Her son had chosen well. Here was a woman happily willing to embrace both halves of Clark's unique heritage. She glanced quickly at the solid gold bracelet on the younger woman's slender wrist. Since the night of their engagement, neither she nor Clark had been seen without them on.

Ellen, on the other hand, did not agree with her daughter's choice.

"This is what Clark will see you wearing as you walk down the aisle?" she queried.

"Yes! I love the design," her daughter responded with firm resolve.

Turning to Martha, hoping to draw her in as an ally, Ellen asked, "What do you think?"

"Since Lois is the bride; the wedding dress really is her choice," Martha responded with equal firmness.

"Naturally you agree with her!" Ellen turned away from them both and sat heavily on one of the settees.

Lois looked first at her Mother and then at Martha, helpless to say or do anything. It was just like Ellen Lane to create a scene in order to

get her way.

"Talk to her," Martha mouthed silently, as she began to furtively pick up her jacket and make for the door.

Lois gently laid the dress across the other settee and gazed at it lovingly. Even if Lady Lo had not appeared in the strange holograph wearing the silvery garment, she probably would have picked something similar, but how to make her Mother understand? Then quickly she came to a decision.

"Mother, neither you nor Martha have *seen* me in the dress completely finished. Why don't I put it on?"

"Really? But I thought — oh, never mind, yes, put it on!" Ellen sighed as she shook her head.

Lois grinned and carefully, almost reverently picked up the gown. Then with a burst of energy ran towards her bedroom. She could hear Martha and Ellen talking in low tones. Oh how she wished for Clark's superpowers — especially hearing — right now!

"This is so exciting watching our children take such a huge step together! I can hardly wait for their wedding day!" Martha said, trying to lighten the gloom which seemed to settle over Ellen like a fog.

"I don't mean to sound harsh, but you only have a son, whereas I have two headstrong daughters, neither of whom listens to my suggestions." Ellen turned her head towards the closed door of Lois' bedroom and sighed even deeper this time. "It's just that from the moment a woman sees her tiny baby girl for the first time she dreams of seeing that same child all grown up and wearing a fabulous wedding gown. But Lois wanted to do everything regarding the gown on her own; she didn't even ask my advice about the fabric."

Martha sat down next to Ellen and patted her on the back. She spoke consolingly, choosing her words with the utmost care. "Perhaps Lois meant to surprise all of us; the gown appears to be perfect — even regal — for her. It's almost as if she were marrying someone of royal blood." Realizing she had made a slip, she quickly continued, "Not to say my boy is a real prince, but shouldn't every parent feel that way about their child? Besides, without your help Lucy and Lois might *still* be at the engraver's trying to pick out invitations!"

Ellen smiled a little at that and said, "Neither one of those girls knows how to deal with a tradesman, but we got the best invitations for the money!"

"See! What did I tell you!" Martha beamed.

"Still," Ellen sighed, "the dress is the centerpiece of any wedding. Maybe when I see it on..."

Suddenly the sound of a door opening, accompanied by the barest whispers of satin moving sensuously, reached both women's ears. A vision of loveliness clad in soft glistening silver swept serenely into the room. The off-the-shoulder gown had a formfitting waist which flowed into a full skirt. Although Lois was small-framed, the gown did not overwhelm her. Rather its easy feminine lines enhanced her beauty. She was no longer an Earth woman, but a citizen of Krypton, Lady Lois, fitting consort to Kal-El, First Lord of Krypton.

"Oh my," Ellen said, her voice cracking a tiny fraction. "You *do* look like royalty. The dress *is* perfect." Tears sprung to Ellen's eyes. She got up from the settee, excused herself and went in search of a tissue.

"D...did she like it?" Lois asked in a small voice as she smoothed down the fabric with a shaky hand.

"Oh, honey, how could she not help but like it? It's a gown fit for a queen!"

"I...I overheard some of the conversation between you. Martha, do you mind if I talk to my mother for awhile?"

Martha was about to say something when Ellen came in, dabbing her eyes with a tissue. Lois gathered her skirt and ran over to her mother, hugging her fiercely. She pulled back and studied Ellen's tear-stained face. By excluding her from helping in the step-by-step creation of the gown, she had stolen a precious rite of passage. How would she feel if her daughter behaved in a similar fashion?

"Mother, forgive me for the way I've acted regarding the dress. It

was unfeeling and wrong. Your help in putting together this wedding has been fantastic. Honestly the cake, the flowers, Lucy's gown..."

"Remember the invitations? Wayne and Sally Irg thought they were very unique," Martha chimed in.

"Thank you both, I feel so much better after seeing it on you rather than the hanger..."

Before Ellen could finish her sentence, the jingle-jangle of keys was heard in the hallway as well as two voices giggling mischievously. A cacophony of harsh metallic clicks assaulted their ears as multiple door locks were swiftly, almost savagely opened.

Lucy burst into the apartment, her head turned toward the hallway talking to her date in a teasing light voice, "Come on in, Jimmy. They won't be home for at least an hour...maybe more!"

Her older sister stood up, crossed her arms and gave her sister a hard stare. The gracious Kryptonian noblewoman vanished, replaced by a decidedly annoyed Earth woman. "Sorry to disappoint your plans, Luce; we got home early!"

"Oh! I thought you weren't going to be back until very late." Lucy's face flushed with embarrassment.

"Hmm, I'll just bet you did!" Ellen muttered.

All of a sudden Lucy realized what her sister was wearing and gasped. "Lois, the dress is fantastic!"

Jimmy's mouth hung agape, but he quickly closed it. He had never seen his friend and colleague in so feminine an outfit. Clark was indeed a lucky man. "So, Lois, maybe I shouldn't see you like this...?"

Lucy turned to see her date then playfully hit him on the shoulder. "Lunkhead! You're not the groom!"

"Yeah, but your sister looks so — well — nice?"

"James Bartholomew Olsen, I'm wearing the most amazing dress ever and the only word that comes to mind is *nice*?" Lois fumed.

Jimmy shrugged and ran his hands through short cropped black hair. "Uh, Lois, you're like my big sister. What else am I supposed to say?"

Mollified, Lois gave a curt nod and said, "OK, I can accept that. But you better not utter a word to Clark. Otherwise Perry is going to be looking for a new staff photographer!"

A sweet grin spread across the young man's face. He raised his hand and said, "Scout's honor!" He turned to Lucy, took her hand and said, "I had a great time, are we on for tomorrow?"

"You bet!" Lucy answered with a happy gleam in her eyes.

Martha spoke up at this point and asked, "Jimmy, if you're driving, can you give me a lift back to Clark's townhouse?"

"Uh, well, I used the motorcycle this evening."

"Great!" Martha said, clapping her hands in excitement. "It's been a couple of weeks since I rode a chopper. Do you have an extra helmet?"

"Yeah...it's downstairs," Jimmy responded, trying hard to keep the surprise out of his voice.

"Fine, let's get going. These ladies need to get their rest." Martha said her goodnights to everyone and gave Lois a careful hug so as not to crush the gown. Then she and Jimmy exited the apartment.

Ellen shook her head, "Riding a motorcycle? That woman knows no limits!"

Lois and Lucy exchanged looks. That was the reason why Martha Clark Kent was so young at heart, she was always testing her limits, whereas their mother was tightly confined in hers.

"Well!" Ellen said happily, "Now that Martha is gone, we can sit down for a nice mother/daughters chat! Lucy, can you put on some tea while your sister changes out of that lovely gown?"

"Sure thing, Mom." Lucy replied and quickly made herself busy in the kitchen, opening cupboards and pulling out cups, teabags, honey and a tin of shortbread cookies. She opened the tin and breathed in the scent of freshly baked cookies. "Hey, Sis!" she shouted. "Where did you get these? They smell delicious!"

Lois emerged from her bedroom wearing a Kansas State University t-shirt and black sweats. "Oh, Clark got them from a little teashop..." Lois eyed the tin nervously; the 'little teashop' was in

Edinburgh, Scotland.

"Wow! He finds the best stuff! I wonder if he can share his contacts with me? After all, he's family now."

Ellen came over, took the tin out of Lucy's hands and began arranging the golden brown cookies on a plain white plate. "Honestly, Lucy, there are plenty of stores in Metropolis. Bothering Lois and Clark every time you need something is impolite and annoying. Now, let's all sit down and enjoy ourselves. It's been a long time since I spent a quiet evening at home with my girls."

Once the tea and cookies were set down on the coffee table, Lois and Lucy made themselves comfortable on one settee while Ellen ensconced herself on the other. At first conversation was slightly stilted; the younger Lane women rarely had a quiet evening with their mother. Once Sam Lane ripped himself away from their lives Ellen had had to work hard as a night nurse in Metropolis General's ER. The position was brutal in both physical and emotional trauma, yet somehow Ellen managed to provide for them.

Lois remembered her mother's only escape — reading trashy detective novels. One particular day Ellen decided she could write a better story than the ones she read. Over the course of a year, the incessant clack of typewriter keys was heard in the Lane kitchen. It took another year to pitch the manuscript around publishing houses until finally a small struggling firm took a chance and printed her novel.

The critics were lukewarm at best to Ellen's efforts, but the general public enjoyed reading her detective story set in the corridors of a major research hospital.

The Lane family was in a better position financially, but the years of neglect on Sam's part and Ellen's pursuit of her next novel had estranged both parents from their children.

Lois had escaped by moving out at eighteen and attending New Troy University on a journalism scholarship. Without her sister's attention and guidance, Lucy had become a party girl until she had the misfortune of meeting Johnny Corbin — a two-bit thug and sponger who eventually became the madman Metallo.

After Johnny's death Lucy had taken a seriously look at her life and decided she desperately needed direction in her life. With her parents' blessing and not a little financial assistance she had gone back to school on the west coast. Upon graduation, she returned to Metropolis and seriously pursued her career in sports medicine.

So now the three women sat in Lois' apartment, determined to make up for lost time and be a family once more.

"So, how did the sample tasting go?" Lucy chirped.

"Surprising well," Ellen said. "Even if your uncle thinks rosemary biscuits go with filet mignon."

"Mother, the menu is fine." Lois turned to Lucy and in a conspiratorial whisper said. "Uncle Mike may just have a girlfriend!"

The heavy ceramic mug hit the coffee table. "Excuse me. What girlfriend? When did this happen? Mike hasn't *looked* at another woman since Aunt Rita passed away!"

"Oh, your sister's just embellishing the event." Ellen rubbed her chin and continued, "Although I must say he did look very relieved when he discovered Raymond was her brother and *not* a boyfriend."

"See, there is something going on between him and Grace!" Lois crowed in triumph.

"No, he's still in love with Rita," Ellen snapped back.

"Mother, how can anyone have missed the exchange between them? And you call yourself a writer?" Lois responded.

Lucy watched as her sister and mother engaged in a lively verbal tennis match until she shouted, "Enough!"

Lois and Ellen looked at Lucy as if seeing her for the first time. "Oh, I guess we should fill her in. But young lady, this is what happens when you don't attend family functions..."

Lucy swallowed her comments. Her mother was right, but the chance of spending time with Jimmy Olsen was not to be missed!

Ellen smiled, sipped her tea and began, "Now, as I was saying, it all started when Mike offered those delightful hors d'oeuvres..."

Part Six

Early morning — Daily Planet Newsroom

Even tourists who aren't terribly food conscious could not fail to be awed by their first encounter with a Paris boulangerie shop window. Despite the recent emergence of 'Twentysomething' coffee shops and 'fast food cafes', Parisian boulangeries-patisseries have managed to withstand globalization, mass production and questionable marketing techniques by continuing to produce quality breads, pastries and cakes that are eye-catching, sumptuous, and just plain yummy. With one on practically every corner, you will never go croissant-hungry, but if you're looking for that extra-special baguette or raspberry tart, here's a guide to ten of the best bakeries in Paris...

Lois read hungrily about the different boulangeries and their products. Her mouth began to water and her stomach protested the lack of nourishment. She and Clark had tried on more than one occasion to sneak off for a brief date to Paris and sample some of his friend Amantine's freshly baked wares. Sadly, something always came up, whether it was Superman rescues, wedding-related issues or this blasted jewel robbery case they were working on.

"At this rate, we'll get there some time around our second wedding anniversary," she sighed softly.

"Smooth, Lois, making plans for the second anniversary when the wedding hasn't taken place yet?" Jimmy said as he walked to her desk with a large roll of stiff, heavy paper and a file folder under his arm.

"First, you have to have time to make plans for an anniversary," she growled, looking up at him. "What have you got there?"

"A map of Metropolis' Topaz district, indicating the time and places of the jewel heists by our friend, The Phantom."

"Oh, don't tell me you're falling for that silly tag Eduardo stuck on this guy?" Lois shot back.

"I heard that!" called her amused colleague from the coffee station.

Ignoring the comment, Lois took the roll of paper from Jimmy and continued. "So setting aside our thief's cheesy nickname, where did you get time to do all this?"

"I didn't. Jack — with a little assist from Stacy — did. After all, I am a full-time staff photographer for a great metropolitan newspaper," he said, mimicking Perry's deep southern accent.

"Yeah, right," Lois muttered as she began studying the sheet, her face growing more thoughtful as she read.

"Is the conference room free?" Lois asked.

"It is now, honey," Clark's voice carried over from his desk.

His fiancée looked at him askance. "When did you get here?"

"I...uh...came in just a second ago...from the ...copy room," he said while adjusting his tie.

Lois quickly took the hint, and after handing the map over to Jimmy, announced, "Let's meet in the conference room in ten minutes. We need to go over this material and figure out when 'The Phantom' is going to strike again."

"Phantom? What Phantom?" Clark asked innocently.

Shaking her head in bemusement she continued, "Honestly Clark, you really need to keep up! That's the new moniker of our mysterious sleep gas using jewel thief."

"Hey, three seconds ago it was cheesy. What happened?" Jimmy asked.

"Woman's prerogative — I changed my mind," Lois said as she sauntered up the ramp.

"Honey, where are you going?" her fiancé inquired.

She turned around and looking rather sheepish, said, "Downstairs to grab a Double Fudge Crunch bar. Suddenly, I feel hungry."

Exactly ten minutes later the trio was poring over the map and information provided by their research assistants.

"Jimmy, this is first rate stuff. I have to hand it to the research team of Jack and Stacy — the really delivered the goods. This map is very detailed, giving the date, time and location of each of The Phantom's victims," Clark said.

"Yeah, they do work well together. Stacy has encouraged him to reach for his full potential. Since Jack has completed his GED, she has even convinced him to attend college this fall."

Lois looked up from her scrutiny of the file and said in a teasing tone, "Are you saying it takes two of them to equal one of you?"

Her colleague looked at her, moved his head slightly and smiled, "Well, since you put that way..."

Lois rolled her eyes in mock fury and went back to reading the file. At that moment there was a gentle knock on the door.

"Come in," Clark called out.

Jimmy opened the door and Stacy Hunter peeked around the doorframe. When Stacy had first arrived in Metropolis her hair had been long and held in a ponytail with a dark brown plastic clip. Now, with a little encouragement from Lois and Diane, her brown hair was cut into a manageable style and the ugly horn rim frames of her glasses were discarded for lighter wire frames which opened up her face. The result was an attractive young lady, growing into her new city lifestyle and work environment.

Despite working in the Bullpen with all manner of odd personalities, most of whom she got along with famously, she was still a little shy around Lois and Clark. After all, it was because of their work as journalists that she wanted to work for the Daily Planet, and that it was here that her abilities as a researcher were always being used by The Hottest Team in Town.

"Come in, Stacy, Jimmy and Clark were praising your work. I think it is excellent — all this information about the stores. But what is this repair reference to Metophone?"

Stacy entered quickly and laid another file folder on the conference room's already cluttered table. "That's what I came to talk about. The day before each one of the robberies, Metophone sent a team of repairmen out to each of the stores. I called all the stores to ask them about it and apparently there was intermittent heavy static on the phone lines, usually a day or two before the robberies. A repairman showed up to fix the faulty line. They would enter the shop, always followed by a security guard and work on the phone box. The repairman departs, the phone static problem is ended. A couple of days later — The Phantom strikes!" Stacy's brown eyes lit up in excitement.

"Nice lead; one repairman showing up at a shop is fine, two a coincidence, but all five high-end jewelry stores having static on their phones? Impossible. It has to be part of The Phantom's MO," Clark said.

"Hmmm... maybe Eduardo's got something there. After all, the guy is as smooth as silk. Uses sleeping gas to knock out all the customers and staff. No time to sound an alarm..." Jimmy broke off in mid-sentence. Then he stared at Stacy. "What does the repairman do while he's there? After all, the security guard is watching him every step of the way?"

Clark was about to speak when Lois noticed a familiar far off look in his eyes as nervous fingers began fiddling with his tie.

"Hey, Clark! Why not ask No Knees Nolan if he has any leads on this guy and possibly his crew?"

Her fiancé's gave her a grateful smile. Then, turning in Stacy's direction, he said, "Nice work, this is an excellent lead. Maybe my source can corroborate it." With those words he dashed out of the conference room.

Over the past few months the young woman had gotten used to Mr. Kent's odd disappearances, but at this point she was a little surprised. As she shook her head, the freshly cut hair swung freely. In disbelief she said, "Mr. Kent doesn't have to corroborate anything. Jack and I already did. I called Metophone and asked if there were any records stating the need for line repairs in that area. No complaints about static on the phones were reported and no repairman was ever dispatched to those locations."

"Oh," Lois said in a small voice, but she recovered quickly. "Well, don't worry. If I know Clark, he'll find something to link The Phantom with his next crime..." <Oh great, she thought, how am I going to get Clark to do that?>

After Stacy departed the conference room, Jimmy asked, "Which one of the jewelry stores was the next target? If the Phantom is working a cluster pattern either of these two locations could be his next target."

"Cluster pattern?" Lois' expression was puzzled.

"Yeah," Jimmy answered. "See — these three stores are at the top of the Topaz District, these other two are on the bottom. Two locations remain — Lazar's to the bottom right and CJ Abelhammer's in the center."

Lois leaned over the table to examine the map further. "Hmmm... this whole pattern theory of yours might just work. If so, then Lazar's store *might* be his next target. Ask Stacy or Jack to contact both stores, ask if they have experienced phone static, and, if so, when."

Jimmy bounced expectantly on his toes. "Ok, that sounds good. Hey isn't Lazar's where CK got your ring?"

His colleague bit her lip and looked down at the sparkling diamond on the third finger of her left hand. It was modest by many people's standards, but the simple perfect gem meant the world to Lois. She looked at Jimmy and nodded quietly. "Yeah, Mr. Lazar is a lovely man. I would hate to see anything happen to him or his staff."

"Don't worry. We'll get this Phantom Guy." Jimmy spoke confidently as he packed up the map and files.

"We?" Lois fixed the earnest young photographer with a sharp glare, yet could not help smiling.

"Yeah. It's been awhile since I've come along on a genuine Lane/Kent stakeout. Hey, the pizza — with extra pepperoni — is on me! Besides, the chief's been badgering me to get more front-page photo material. In a stakeout like this there are bound to be plenty of action shots, *especially* if Superman shows up!"

"This wouldn't have anything to do with impressing Lucy, would it?" Lois said, arching her eyebrow.

Jimmy was about to strongly deny it, but nervously shrugged his shoulders in defeat. "Guilty as charged."

Part Seven

Late Evening — Topaz District

Metropolis' world famous Topaz District was a cacophony of sights, blaring noise and hurrying people during daylight hours. Ill-tempered bicycle messengers frantically weaved in and out of traffic in the narrow old streets, delivering items from less prestigious jewelry stores in Metropolis. Hotdog, pastry and soda vendors hawked their hot and savory wares to business folk too rushed for a proper meal. Impeccably dressed international gem merchants flew in from every corner of the globe for trade in their ancient business. This particular street, Austen Court, attracted some of the best gemstone cutters in the world. In the Topaz District young men — and a few determined women — were trained in the delicate art of precision diamond cutting. One slip of the hand could render a priceless rough diamond into a worthless piece of crystallized carbon. On any given day loose gems and diamonds worth millions were exchanged, examined and stored.

Lazar's jewelry store and its rival, CJ Abelhammer's held the largest collection of loose gemstones in the famed district.

Earlier in the day Clark had approached Mr. Lazar and informed him of the possible danger to himself and his staff. The older gentleman, with his trademark genteel manner, thanked Clark for his timely warning, but he was sure no harm would come to them.

"Young man, if I ran from every threat of theft, Lazar's Jewelers would not exist. Please go ahead with this stakeout of yours. We will continue to conduct business as per usual. Tonight is our monthly inventory, so although the store shall be closed for business at the usual time, we will most definitely be here." His eyes lit up when he said, "Please give my regards to your lovely fiancée."

On any typical business day, the Topaz District literally teemed with people moving about from one shop to another. But every evening at five o'clock precisely the doors to the prestigious stores were shut. Then traffic quickly dwindled until the streets were empty and silent. Only a few cars remained parked and before long they

would vanish as well.

But currently a certain silver Jeep Grand Cherokee was parked across the street from the jewelry store and Lois and Clark sat in the front seat; they had been on stakeout since closing time watching patiently for anything out of the ordinary. The fading aroma of pepperoni pizza hung petulantly in the air. Jimmy had eaten the last cold slice over an hour ago.

After taking a sip of low-fat mocha latte, Lois trained her powerful Zeiss binoculars on the storefront while Clark looked inside via his x-ray vision. Neither could discern anything unusual besides Mr. Lazar and his staff of two younger men moving about the display cases.

"Just another 'exciting' stakeout with Lois and Clark. We have been here since five o'clock, and so far nothing more interesting than a delivery of priceless gemstones has happened." Jimmy spoke in bored tones into his microphone.

"Is this training for writing future articles?" Clark asked. "You have been faithfully keeping electronic notes every hour on the hour."

"Yeah, were you planning on *writing* this story?" Lois said suspiciously.

"Hey, it's Wednesday; you two are getting married on Saturday. I want Lucy to help me look for a new suit tomorrow after work. I can't do that if we are sitting here on stake out again. But to answer your question; no not originally, but at the rate this so called heist is taking place, I might have to because you two will be on honeymoon in Hawaii!"

Clark could not help but smile to himself. The contemplation of a week spent in a tropical paradise with his future wife brought very pleasant thoughts to mind indeed. "Yes, we are really looking forward to Hawaii," he said dreamily. "Still, I thought you were backing up Jack and Stacy, researchers extraordinaire? According to them — and No Knees Nolan, The Phantom is using a stolen Metrophone vehicle and pretending to be a repairman."

"Yeah, Jack said Lazar's Jewelers store had a visit from a 'repairman' yesterday, so if The Phantom is keeping with his schedule, Lazar's gets hit tonight." Lois suddenly went quiet, bit her lip and turned to her fiancé, "Oh Clark, why was Mr. Lazar being so stubborn? Anything can happen! After all, a few years back Metallo robbed his store! It would be awful if he or any of his staff were hurt. He helped you find the perfect engagement ring for me, and our wedding bands."

"Don't worry, Lois; nothing will happen. Besides they have plenty of security." Clark spoke in such a manner as to remind her that Superman could move fast enough to prevent anything from happening to the older gentleman. He squeezed her hand and looked compassionately into her pleading brown eyes, all but forgetting their colleague's presence.

Jimmy, on the other hand, had no intention of being ignored; noisily he cleared his throat and said in a serious tone, "Uh, Lois, mind if I ask a personal question?"

Lois turned slightly in her seat to look at him and then said reproachfully, "In the middle of a stakeout? Isn't this the wrong time to be asking personal questions?"

Ignoring her comment, Jimmy shrugged, took a deep breath and said, "No time like the present. Do you think Lucy might be interested in a guy like me?"

Lois scrutinized Jimmy's face as best she could with only streetlights filtering into the Jeep; she had suspected such a question had been looming on the horizon. Ever since his Friday night skating date with Lucy, he had been slightly nervous around Lois. He must have been contemplating this conversation, perhaps earnestly searching for the right moment to broach the subject, one fraught with minefields and traps of all kinds.

Lois, deciding to go easy on him, spoke lightly. "Sure Jimmy, why wouldn't she be interested in you? After all, didn't Ultra Woman tell me you were cute?"

He smiled thoughtfully at the comment, rubbed his nose and replied, "That was a really nice compliment from the lady. But without sounding like a jerk, I've grown a good deal both personally and

professionally since then. My father has led an exciting life as an undercover agent, yet it didn't leave a lot of time for Mom and me." Jimmy hesitated and then continued. "What he does is important, yet I don't want to be the kind of person he is. It's time to sink roots and I'm serious about having a good relationship with the *right* woman... like you and CK have together. So it's important to know before my heart gets involved, is Lucy thinking along the same lines?"

She thought for a moment. Jimmy deserved a good woman to share his life and if that woman could be her sister he needed to know if his chance was a realistic one. "Lucy has matured since she went to back to school. Her life does not revolve around fun and dating Neanderthals anymore. She's very serious about having a successful career in sports medicine. Not monetarily, but where it counts, in helping athletes return to their sport after being injured."

Clark's quiet rumble was heard through the Jeep. "Jim, if you feel strongly about dating Lucy. Then by all means communicate with her your thoughts and intentions honestly. It is the absolute best way to begin *any* relationship. Having secrets or being inconsistent — a jerk — is the best way to end a relationship before it begins." He looked sidelong at the beautiful woman by his next to him. He was a word class lunkhead for not revealing his secret sooner. He — and Lois — had learned the valuable lesson of honesty and openness in their life together. He dreaded the thought of Jimmy wasting time and making the same blunder.

Jimmy's eyes were gazed in deep thought as he considered the conversation and his possible future with another woman named Lane. The couple watching him knew that the Jimmy who sat at Cat's wedding reception six months ago flirting shamelessly with three young women had departed forever. Lois could not imagine having a better brother-in-law, but there would be plenty of time for that later. Meanwhile, they had a thief to catch.

Suddenly, Clark's head cocked to the side and he began to listen intently. Lois sensed rather than saw in the grayness of the Jeep's interior, his expression of concentration. She was about to say something to cover his imminent departure when a loud, metallic rending sound, cracking the smooth night air, wrenched her ears.

"What was that?" Jimmy whispered.

"If I'm not mistaken, it was the sound of a door being pried off its hinges! I'm going to call for the police."

"But CK, don't you have your fancy new cell phone?" Jimmy said.

A momentary silence filled the car, while Clark anxiously tried to figure out an excuse. Even Lois was at a loss for words. Clark groaned internally and decided to call MetroPD. He reached into his suit jacket and pulled out the bulky gray plastic device. He punched in the security code numbers, than 911. A message flashed up informing him he was out of the designated call area.

Snorting in disgust he said, "So much for technology! You two stay here. I'll find a phone booth and call the local precinct." So saying, he unlocked the door and bolted out of the car.

His partner called after him in a loud whisper, "Clark! Be careful, you don't want those guys to see you!"

Jimmy tried to look after his fleeting form, but it was just too dark. "There he goes again! Your fiancé disappears at the drop of a hat! One of these days he's going to do that when we really need him!"

Lois was grateful her friend could not see her biting on her lower lip. But right now she needed to deflect Jimmy's attention away from Clark's disappearance and back to Mr. Lazar's jewelry store.

"Keep down, but be ready with your camera," she whispered.

"Gotcha. Hey, look over there!" Jimmy said.

The incredulous tone in the photographer's voice caught her completely off guard. From across the narrow street the spill of the street lamp provided an excellent view of Lazar's. A strange heavy green mist or gas seemed to coil up malevolently from the floor. They watched in horrified silence as the owner and his two assistants began to shake, cough, and then without opening their mouths collapse. The gas grew thicker, so much so that it quickly obscured their view. Suddenly, without warning, the lights within the store winked out.

"Oh no!" Lois shouted. "We've got to help them." She reached over to open the car door, but Jimmy held her shoulders fast.

"Lois, wait! Remember what CK said!"

Before she could answer, they witnessed two beams of light erratically highlighting the green mist within the darkened store. The harsh sound of shattering glass — probably the display cases — reached their ears. The front door abruptly flew open and some of the eerie looking green mist billowed outside. Lois and Jimmy could hear men's voices sharply arguing.

A man's voice squawked, "There ain't enough here for all the risk! Let's blow this taco stand before it's too late!"

"No, my information *cannot* be wrong! Perhaps there are more loose gems in the safe," a cultured voice responded.

"How are we supposed to open the safe? Old man Lazar is the only one with the combination! Look, we've got enough swag from this job! Let's go." His partner snapped back in anger.

"No! Lazar owes me! I could have been the best diamond cutter in the District!"

"Sounds to me like The Phantom and his buddy are having a difference of opinion," Jimmy snickered quietly as he released Lois.

Suddenly, a well-known sonic boom ripped through the night air, and a brilliant flash of red and blue sped past the Jeep and into the store.

Loud shouts of angry protests were heard from within the shop. Despite the hard illumination from the street lamps, neither Lois nor Jimmy could see into the building. Gradually the sounds of struggle stopped, only to be replaced by the reverberation of metal grating against itself.

"Come on, Jimmy!" Lois fairly launched herself out of the Jeep, with the photographer only two steps behind. They raced to the open door, barely heeding the gas, when the Man of Steel emerged with two men wearing gas masks, each holding their bound hands in front of them.

Lois stood in front of the trio and folded her arms, looking very authoritative in her blue suit. "What do we have here, Superman? A couple of jewel thieves?" she said smugly.

Superman responded with his usual disciplined politeness, "Given their familiarity with the layout of the store and what The Phantom said about Mr. Lazar, it sounds to me like they are a couple of disgruntled former employees. Good thing they weren't carrying guns."

The older of the two men, perhaps in his late forties, raised his head and barked, "I don't believe in guns — OK? Somebody's bound to get caught in the crosshairs. I use a little sleeping gas, wait for it to take effect, break in the back of the store, grab the loose gems and run. Nobody gets hurt, no fear of eyewitnesses talking. It's a better, more elegant way to commit a crime."

Jimmy, in the midst of frantically snapping pictures of the trio, smiled triumphantly, "Hmm, 'elegant crime' ... that oughta make a great quote! It should look nice under these shots — tomorrow's edition is gonna sing! The headlines should read, 'THE PHANTOM AND PARTNER NABBED BY SUPERMAN!'"

"The Phantom?" the assailant said, "Who came up with a cheesy moniker like The Phantom?"

Lois smiled, "A colleague of ours at The Daily Planet. He is going to be pleased to know you are a 'gentleman' thief after all!" she began to yawn, "Maybe I should get away from that gas, it's making me sleepy." Turning towards Jimmy she asked, "How are you holding up?"

"I'm a little woozy, but listen, police sirens. CK must have gotten a hold of Henderson."

While this exchange took place, Superman gently deposited both assailants on the cold concrete sidewalk, flew swiftly inside the store and brought out Nicholas Lazar and his assistants. He checked their pulses to make sure no one was in need of a quick trip to the hospital. Once the examination was completed, the hero approached Lois and Jimmy.

"The fresh air should revive them." He said. He cocked his head to listen. Now if you will excuse me. I am needed elsewhere." Without another word, the Man of Steel flew into the night.

"Wow, that was quick," Jimmy said as he watched the swiftly disappearing figure. "You know, Lois, ever since you and CK got engaged, Superman seems...well, a little standoffish."

Lois felt her face flush. She was grateful the street lamp's light was so harsh, otherwise Jimmy might have picked up on it. Before she could reply, she heard familiar footsteps behind her and Clark's voice say, "What did I miss?"

Before either Jimmy or Lois could answer Clark, they turned as one at the sound of deep coughing — Mr. Lazar was rapidly reviving. All three raced to his side and knelt down beside him.

"Sir, please take it easy," Clark said soothingly. "You and the others must have been exposed to sleeping gas; it will take awhile for the effects to wear off."

The old jeweler looked at the younger man. Incredibly, despite the night's events, his bright blue eyes held their familiar twinkle. "Right now, the night air has the crisp bite of champagne! It positively tickles my nose." He breathed slow shallow breaths through his mouth and continued. "Mr. Kent it, appears you were correct this morning. Wh... what happened?"

Clark turned to Lois, his eyes quietly asking her to fill in the old gentleman.

Instead the task fell to Jimmy as he enthusiastically launched into a spirited description of the last five minutes.

By the time Jimmy finished, Mr. Lazar was sufficiently recovered to attempt standing. "Incredible. You say this...Phantom robbed my store? Where is he?"

"Over there," Jimmy pointed to the criminals still sitting on the curb near the Jeep.

"That's The Phantom!" he gasped... "Why, it's none other than my former pupil, Phil Slater, and Reese Lloyd, one of my former salesmen!"

"Could Reese have used his insider information to help plan this heist?" Clark asked.

Mr. Lazar snorted. "Reese? He's so dense he couldn't find an emerald in a small canister of diamonds!"

"Hey!" the smaller man shouted, "that's not true!"

"Some part if it must be!" Lois laughed. "Otherwise, you wouldn't be here!"

Abruptly the night's quiet was shattered again when Henderson's police car and a patrol vehicle roared into Austen Court.

The police read The Phantom, aka Phil Slater, and his partner Reese their rights. As they were putting the assailants into the patrol vehicle, Nicholas Lazar related that Slater had had a promising career until his penchant for stealing gemstones was discovered. Reese had been his fence, selling the purloined items on the international black-market. This particular revelation added the final touch to the story. Jimmy was granted not only photo credit, but a contributing byline as well.

"What a great article! Perry will be singing Elvis songs all day!" Lois chuckled. "Even a little thing like Clark and me getting married can't stop The Hottest Team in Town from breaking a story!"

It was a long time later after giving Henderson a statement, the trio returned to the newsroom and wrote up an account for the morning edition. Jimmy was so excited about the fantastic pix and byline that he wanted to call Lucy immediately and share the good news.

Lois adroitly put a stop to that thought. "Not a good idea, Jimmy. Lucy's got to be at work-study early in the morning. Why not save the big news until tonight? Tell her over an excellent dinner."

"Yeah, Jimbo, make sure it's a quiet place, perfect for serious conversation," Clark said as he leaned back in his chair.

"This has been a great night! Thanks, CK! Oh, thanks, Lois, for the 'sisterly' advice." He patted Clark on the shoulder and surprised Lois with a quick hug. "You two are the best!" With those happy

words he bounded up the ramp and disappeared inside the elevator car.

Lois waited until the elevator doors snapped shut. Then she whirled around and slapped Clark lightly on his shoulder.

"Nobody's around, so you don't have to pretend that hurt!" She snapped peeishly.

Part Eight

Two a.m. Daily Planet Newsroom

"Hey!" Clark said, clutching his arm, "What was that for?"

"No matchmaking my foot!" Lois began pacing back and forth in front of Clark's desk. "You gave all this great advice to Jimmy, but you won't help my Uncle Mike get together with Grace! What's that all about? Some kind of cockamamie double standard against my family? Ok, so maybe my parents aren't the poster children for staying together, but Mike and Rita did. The only thing that ended that marriage was death. Now my uncle has a possible second chance at love and *you* want me to ignore it. What about caring for Mike's needs and wanting to see him happy?" Lois sighed and wrapped her arms around herself.

Clark's expression transformed from startled bewilderment to complete comprehension. He stopped Lois from pacing by gently holding her shoulders and looking into those sweet deep brown eyes. As he spoke softly and slowly, his voice — that familiar rumble — entered her ear and caressed her sensuously all the way to her toes.

"Lois ... Honey. Mike's situation is different from Jimmy's in so many ways. From everything you told me, his marriage to Rita was happy: home, children, a successful business they built together. Think about what you're saying. As a mature man who's lived a full life, he might deeply resent anyone pushing him into a relationship. If you really insist on nurturing their friendship, then by all means, encourage Mike to bring a date. If his choice is Grace, fine. But, afterwards, let them take it from there."

After a few moments Lois nodded her head in acceptance. "Oh, Clark, you're right. It's just that Mike Lane has been more like a father to me than my own father. Oh, Daddy and I are getting along much better these days. Still, it's hard to ignore all those years growing up when Mike and Rita were there for me. I watched him suffer while Rita was dying and helped him grieve when she passed away. He's been lonely for such a long time. He deserves someone special."

"With a family like ours to support him, he'll never be lonely. As for finding someone special, only time will tell if Grace is the one." Clark cupped his long fingers under her chin. "Mike will find someone, honey, but it has to be at his own pace — not yours."

Lois looked at him intensely. Her lower lip trembled and her brown eyes brimmed with unshed tears. She whispered softly, "Like you found me?"

He nodded then opened his arms wide to gather her close. Lois held him tightly then spoke, her voice slightly muffled. "Thanks for not letting me make a mess of things."

He answered in a slow western drawl, "No problem, Ma'am, all part of the service." Releasing her, he walked back to his desk, sat down and hastily wrote an e-mail. "Speaking of which, we have given quite enough to Perry and the Daily Planet for awhile. I'm leaving a note to Perry, letting him know we are going on vacation, starting today."

Despite herself, she chuckled softly, remembering once again all the reasons she loved this man.

"Now that this case is wrapped up, Miss Lane, would you care to accompany your fiancé to a much mentioned boulangerie for coffee and a freshly baked chocolate croissant? Oh, and did I point out the croissant or as they say in French *pain au chocolat* will be baked by a woman named Amandine... and — she lives... in Paris?" Clark bowed low and offered his arm to Lois.

A warm grin of sheer pleasure spread across her face. "Why, kind sir, I thought you would never ask!" She took Clark's arm and together they walked up the red staircase towards the Daily Planet's darkened rooftop.

Seconds later the familiar sonic boom was heard over

Metropolis...

Dawn — Paris

The flight over was brief, all too brief for Lois who had flown the Atlantic Ocean before. Of course she had never seen it from this vantage point. She had never had the chance to appreciate the vast blackness below or the sea of stars above. In the inky blackness of the waters below, occasionally small points of light quickly appeared and just as quickly were swallowed up by the night. Lois reasoned they must be vessels of all sorts plying their trade upon the Atlantic. Wrapped securely in Clark's voluminous red cape and wearing a pair of jeans and a light blue cashmere turtleneck, Lois was protected from the chilly air of Earth's upper atmosphere.

They had stopped at their respective homes and changed clothes. Clark's parents were sound asleep as befits folks who get up with the chickens. Lois' mother was not staying at her apartment that night, which she counted as fortunate, and Lucy was sound asleep. Lois imagined the argument that would have ensued about her running around Metropolis at all hours of the night. Their former attire had been slated more for working in the newsroom and tackling jewel thieves. But her business suit and matching pumps were definitely *not* suited for a leisurely early morning breakfast and perhaps a quiet stroll along the Champs Élysées.

They landed in a darkened alley behind the bakery. Lois' nostrils were offended by the anomalously mixed scents of freshly baked bread and garbage. She could hear the frightened hiss of a cat swiftly departing.

Clark chuckled, "I guess we scared the little guy."

"You would be nervous too if a man and woman came upon you from the sky! We probably disturbed him in the middle of hunting a mouse."

As they talked, they stepped cautiously out of the alley and onto a quiet, wide sidewalk. The night was slowly passing away and the streetlights were still on. Hand in hand they walked to the bakery shop called Chez Morel. Lois inhaled the sumptuous smells of freshly baked breads and heard her stomach rumbling.

"Sounds to me like somebody's hungry," Clark said.

"Farmboy, the only thing I've had in the past eight hours is a couple of soggy pizza slices and a low-fat latte. My stomach is looking for some serious food."

The couple walked swiftly to the front door. Just as Clark reached to pull it open, a man hastily exited. He was rapier thin with a long face. In his right hand he held a long baguette and in the other a chunk of crusty bread. Seeing Lois, he bowed and held the door open with his foot.

"Bonjour, Mademoiselle," he smiled, taking in her beauty and totally ignoring Clark.

Lois bowed her head in quick acknowledgement of his kindness. The man smiled as they passed and let go of the door, right on Clark's backside. If it were not for his quick reflexes, the door would have shattered.

Neither Lois nor Clark cared; their senses were being treated to a sumptuous culinary heaven.

The boulangerie's space was large; on the left side stood a long marble green countertop covered with colorful pastries; *éclairs*, *religieuses* and *tartes*. On the right were white marble counters of different heights displaying all manner of breads: long elegant baguettes, thick country white bread, ring shaped breads called couronnes and the delightful sweet bread that looked like a muffin with a round dot on top, the fluffy brioche. Along that wall behind the counters were dozens of baskets filled with all manner of bread loaves, rounds and rings delicately sprinkled with herbs.

Some early morning customers milled about, their netted shopping bags already filled to capacity with the boulangerie's wares. The female staff members working behind the counters were in the process of bringing more hot and crusty breads from the shop's rear.

"Jacques! Combien de fois devrais-je te dire de ne pas claquer la porte sur le nez des clients? Mon Dieu! Cet homme!" [Jacques! How

many times do I have to tell you not to let the door slam on customers! Mon Dieu! That man!]

The owner of the voice was a tall woman on the wrong end of middle-age. Her short cropped hair was as white as snow. But if her hair spoke of age, her unlined face belied it. With the exception of a few delicate lines around her mouth and eyes Amandine Morel looked younger than her sixty-two years. Her bright blue eyes shone with good humor, as she approached the couple, a small, knowing smile on her face.

"Bonjour, Clark! Back in Paris so soon? Surely your newspaper cannot afford to keep sending you here on such short assignments? She turned to look at Lois. "My young friend, you mentioned she was pretty, but said nothing about her being beautiful. This must be..."

"Madam Morel, my fiancée, Lois Lane," Clark finished her sentence.

"Of course!" Amandine wiped her hands on a flour dusted apron and then enthusiastically shook Lois' hand. "Mademoiselle Lane, it is a pleasure to meet you. Clark has spoken of you ever since he started working at the Daily Planet."

Lois felt her face flush and said meekly, "Thank you. Clark has always told me about your shop. Just looking around the shop with the breads and pastries is fantastic!"

"Wait until you taste some!" Clark said with a grin.

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

"C'est gentil, Amandine, mais vous m'avez donné de la nourriture gratuitement dans le passé. Je devrais" [Amandine, that's kind, but you gave me free food in the past I should...] Clark started.

"No my young friend, accept this gift. It is a pleasure to see both of you so in love and happy. After all, isn't that what life should be?"

"Thank you," Lois said. She was already eying the brioche and croissants.

"You are most welcome! Please come back again. Do not forget to bring at least one wedding picture! Please excuse me; sadly I must get back to work. May you both have much success and happiness in your life together." The tall woman enveloped them both in a quick hug. Then with long legged strides, moved effectively past customers and disappeared into the back.

"She is quite impressive," Lois said.

"Yeah, she is." Clark commented. "Almost every time I come to Paris I stop by to pick up something wickedly delicious. Now...what strikes your fancy?"

"Are you kidding, Clark? What doesn't?"

It was still dark when they emerged from Chez Morel carrying a pink and blue bag filled with sweet and savory delights. They each held a large paper cup of coffee — freshly brewed from Amandine's own kitchen. Early morning pedestrians were beginning to fill the wide sidewalks. No doubt workers either returning from work — or on their way — just like in Metropolis. Lois smiled to herself thinking of the similarities. Even in romantic Paris work still had to be done.

They passed several people and a few caught her eye. One was a heavily made up middle-aged woman, trying desperately to look ten years younger. Her slash of bright red lipstick formed an odd contrast to the dull red, black and gray scarf carelessly wrapped around her neck. In front of her another, much taller woman, with blonde hair, was more sensibly attired in a chic black suit with a crisp white blouse. She was obviously a fashionable lady who knew what worked for her.

A trendy young couple wearing black business suits walked by purposefully, the man was pushing a baby carriage which had floating above it a lovely pink balloon. Lois could hear the happy sounds of an infant cooing. The soft noise made her heart do a tiny dance, and for a moment her thoughts wandered into previously forbidden regions.

Behind them they heard the plaintive voice of a woman; her Midwestern accent reminded Lois of Stacy Hunter.

"Jordan! Slow down, boy, we're almost there! The couple turned

around to see a slender young woman with very long brown hair. She wore faded blue jeans and a white T-shirt. She was walking a magnificent golden retriever. The friendly dog strode right up to Lois and Clark, wagging its tail furiously.

Clark knelt down and patted the dog's head. Its golden fur felt warm and silky under his long fingers. "Hey, boy, you're a good dog. Must smell our food, huh?"

Je suis... sorry. Lui... well trained et normally lui ne pas courir to strangers. [I'm sorry! He well trained and normally doesn't run up to strangers.] She said breathlessly in a mixture of French and English.

"You're from America, right? Which part?" Lois asked.

"Oh good, you speak English! I'm working hard to speak only in French. It's getting easier, but it's nice to take a break. My name is AnnKay, from Casper, Wyoming. I'm here studying History at the Sorbonne. This frisky fellow here is Jordan and he *does* smell your food. I recognize the bag as coming from Amandine's boulangerie. Sometimes — when he's good — she gives him a treat, we are on our way there now."

Clark stood up with a wistful expression. Amandine was a kind woman indeed, always ready to help a starving student or budding journalist. "Well, you don't want Jordan to miss his treats."

"Thank you! Enjoy Paris! With that, AnnKay walked — or rather was pulled on — towards the bakery.

Lois shook her head adamantly. "Don't get any ideas! We *already* have a cat! Pepper won't be too happy sharing us with a dog — no matter how beautiful!"

"Yeah, well we can table that discussion for another time." He took her arm. "Right now we need to visit Notre Dame before the spotlights are turned off. It really is quite a sight." Touching his glasses, he said, "Walking from this section of the city might take too long..."

"Are you saying we should go there by Superman Express?"

Clark nodded. He figured that in the twilight, no one would see them moving at accelerated speeds. Without another word, Lois hopped into his arms and off they went!

It took all of five seconds to reach the ancient building, its imposing form jutting into the brightening sky. It was an impressive sight, all history, mystery and romance wrapped into one structure. They decided to sit on a nearby bench to drink the remains of their coffees and share a chocolate croissant.

"Flyboy, next time we come back make it around midnight. Paris at night is so...romantic." Lois said around a mouthful of the delightful pastry.

"Romantic?" her companion said with a teasing tone. "The Lois Lane I met years ago would *never* have used the word, much less apply it to herself."

She took a contemplative sip of the still warm brew then said. "I can't tell you how happy I am *that* Lois no longer exists! She wouldn't be sitting here taking in the sights and sounds of Paris, only days before exchanging vows with a guy from Kansas." Her brow furrowed. "She'd be probably too busy trying to dive into a case of bank fraud or busting a drug ring."

"Hey! Don't ever stop 'diving and busting'...its one of the many things about you I love!"

In happy response, she laid her head on his strong shoulder and sighed in what could only be described as utter contentment. They sat on that bench, talking and contemplating the future and all the joys and frustrations that future would bring.

Slowly, softly, the greater luminary of the day began to rise and take its place in the early morning Paris skies. Their conversation dwindled to a pleasant quiet.

"Are you getting tired, Honey?" Clark asked as his long fingers stroked her cheek.

"Now that you mention it. Yes, maybe it is time we went home. Lane and Kent the reporting team might not be working, but Lois and Clark still have a few things to do before they exchange their vows." She attempted, but failed, to stifle a yawn.

"We should find a quiet dark spot to...you know." Clark made a sweeping motion with his hand as he stood up.

She took his arm and smiled up at him, "OK. Just be careful with Amandine's presents! We don't want to drop anything over the Atlantic."

Part Nine

Early Morning — Late Evening — Café Americana

As was his habit Mike Lane stood just outside the door of Café Americana, watching regular early morning customers faithfully order their usual breakfasts. Of course, he had another motive for his sentry duty, but the lady in question had not yet arrived. It had been a few days, and he was curious to know how the graduation celebration had gone. Suddenly he saw her coming up the street, moving with her usual purposeful stride, looking absolutely lovely wearing a light peach colored dress. She had been to the florist; her large canvas shopping bag held a bouquet of stargazer lilies surrounded by sprigs of baby's breath, their fragrant scent carried on the wind to his appreciative nose.

Grace came up to him smiling. "Good morning, Michael!"

"The same to you, Grace. It's been a few days since I last saw you. How did 'A Little Night Music' turn out?"

Her eyes lit up with the memory of the evening. "Oh! It was as everyone said: 'powerful, moving and yet very entertaining.'" My niece thought it was a great graduation gift. It's a pity the visit could not last a few days longer. They wanted to be in London to catch an Egyptian exhibit at the British museum. It is the second half of their vacation before Lisa begins working at Metropolis General."

"Well, I have no doubt they'll have a great time. Tell Raymond they have a standing invitation at the Café Americana for dinner."

"I will do that, kind sir. Is my regular breakfast order ready?" Grace asked.

Mike shook his head. "No, not yet. For some strange, but happy for the restaurant, reason, it's unusually crowded this morning. Hey, my guys are fast, but not that fast!"

Grace smiled in acknowledgement, "Very well, I can wait."

"Great. So," Mike asked hesitantly, "what plans do you have for the evening?"

"Uh...nothing really. I'm meeting a friend — well, actually he's a business acquaintance of Raymond's — for drinks at La Cira."

Mike suddenly felt as if his heart was going to drop and his mood change from contentment to disappointment. "Drinks... at La Cira? Tonight?"

Yes, Sidney Finch will be in town for a few weeks and Raymond wanted me to look after him — show off the sights of our grand city." Mike studied her face closely and could see she genuinely meant to play tour guide to this newcomer to Metropolis. Still, he could not help but feel that the man was invading his territory — spending time with *his* lady. He was so deep in thought he failed to hear her next words.

"Oh, what were you saying?" He asked.

"I said, 'Why not come with us?' It will be grand fun! As a lifelong Metropolis resident, you could probably provide a much better tour and better stories too!" Grace's eyes gleamed with mischief.

"Oh no, no. Three's a crowd," he responded gruffly.

Grace looked at him. A puzzled expression marred her face. "Is it? I didn't think spending time with each other and another person constituted a crowd."

Just then Ryan, who had been standing a few feet away, came over to Mike, explaining there was a problem at one of the tables.

"Uh, I have to go, Grace. Enjoy your dinner. I mean your smoothie, ah, yeah. Listen, have a great day." With those words he bounded off.

Ryan unfortunately was a hapless spectator to the brusque latter part of the exchange between the two friends. He witnessed the confused expression on Grace's face and the disappointment and hurt on his employer's. The younger man wanted to say something encouraging to Grace, but decided instead to continue his duties and keep the matter to himself.

Mike Lane went through the entire day being utterly unlike the friendly, easygoing man his staff knew and loved. He barked at the waiters; spoke in a surly manner to suppliers, and accidentally disconnected one long-time patron while making reservations. The final straw came during the dinner rush; he thought one of Nunzio's kitchen assistants was not moving fast enough on a particular order. Mike decided to create the dish himself. Unfortunately, his mind drifted to Grace, wondering if she was having a pleasant time with her brother's 'business associate'. He was called away for a moment and the dish was completely forgotten. When it emerged from the oven it matched his temper — burnt to a crisp.

Thankfully Nunzio was such an expert chef; he was able to recreate the dish in record time.

The situation had gotten so bad, Ryan had mentioned to Zachary and Karen that one of them *had* to talk with Mike and let him know his behavior was ruining the harmonious work environment of the restaurant and annoying his employees.

Ryan was completely unaware that Mike was in the cloakroom and had overheard his conversation. The café owner felt very ashamed, realizing he was taking his worry and disappointment out on everyone. After all, Grace had the right to date and have drinks with anyone she chose. His staff, one and all, was hard working and dependable. Truth be told, any and all mistakes or problems that evening could easily be traced back to his terrible attitude.

It was time to make amends to everyone — especially Grace.

Mercifully, the evening finally ended. It was after closing for the night, when all the kitchen and dining room cleaning was completed, that Mike gathered the entire staff together and apologized for his behavior. He went out of his way to make amends to Nunzio and the young apprentice. Once that necessary, but unpleasant, chore was completed, he dismissed the staff and the café was closed for the night. Now it was well after midnight and he sat, a solitary figure contemplating the events of the day in his mind and feeling very sorry for himself.

He started thinking. <Talking to Grace like that this morning was inexcusable. Snapping at her was mean and cruel. Why did I let her go out by herself with that Sidney Guy? Why didn't I go with her? Who knows, it might have been fun to spend time with her, even if this other person was around. Maybe we all might have had a lot of fun! Ryan or Karen could have run the place while I was out enjoying myself. Café Americana has become my *life* since Rita died. It is long past time to move on, like Rita begged me to. Grace and I have to talk. It's high time she knows my feelings for her!>

Just then he heard a gentle tapping on the door of the restaurant. Enough of the unpleasant mood lingered for him to want to answer in an angry voice, "We're closed!" But he didn't. Instead he looked up and saw Grace's concerned face. Anxious that something might have happened to her, he rushed across the empty restaurant, dodging tables and chairs in the process, then fumbled with the lock and swiftly jerked open the door.

In a rough voice he scarcely recognized as his own, he said, "Grace! What are you doing here at this hour? Is everything all right?"

She looked into his face and said breathlessly, "Michael, I saw a single light on and you sitting alone. I thought perhaps something was wrong. Are you all right, my dear?"

The use of the words 'my dear' made him pause, take a deep breath and say in a gentler tone, "I'm fine. What happened to your 'date'?"

Hurt and not a little impatient, she retorted, "Sidney was *not* a date." She sighed tiredly and asked, "May I come in and have a seat? We really need to talk."

Mike realized he was being something of a cad, stepped away from the door and gestured for her to enter, "Sure, make yourself comfortable. It's been a long day."

"For both of us." She sat with serene poise in the wicker back chair he offered her. Wearing a pair of comfortable blue jeans and a

faded red shirt she looked years younger. Patiently, she waited until he sat down beside her and then in a quiet voice spoke. "Maybe it was a date... at least from Sidney's and my brother's prospective."

"Terrific, sounds to me like your brother was fixing you up," Mike said morosely.

"Oh, don't blame Raymond. After all, he's my brother and has always wanted to see me happy and taken care of. But in any case, Sidney and I did have drinks, which progressed into dinner. He wanted to eat at Arabella's. Which, you will admit is a pretty decent establishment. Sadly, I don't remember tasting the food. He is a brilliant conversationalist, a perfect gentleman who walked me to my front door at a decent hour and even kissed my hand good night. Sadly during our time together and after arriving home, I felt the evening was a complete waste of time. My brownstone seemed so lonely and quiet; the walls were caving in on me. I had to get out, so I came here."

"Oh, why is that?" Mike asked, curious despite himself.

"Because regardless of his qualities, personality and warmth, I didn't want to spend time with Sidney Finch. All I could think about was..."

"Yes," said Mike breathlessly.

"You," she answered.

Suddenly he felt the walls of gloom tumble down, to be replaced by something like a shaft of sunshine, like something akin to joy. Words failed him, all he managed to push from his throat was a weak, "Oh".

"Yes," she said her voice and manner turning as shy as a young schoolgirl.

Mike's heart was full, almost too full for words. Still he knew he *had* to keep talking, say something. "My lady, we have to talk, but first, can I make you something to eat? Apparently, Arabella's food wasn't good enough to tempt you."

"At this hour? It's got to be after midnight," Grace replied.

"Ah, it's much closer to one o'clock in the morning. What better time to indulge in an early breakfast?" Mike said, shrugging his shoulders.

She laughed, and her voice reminded him of bells tinkling. They stood up and Mike gallantly offered her his arm, which she gratefully took. Their steps were none too steady — they were too busy shaking with laughter — as they moved into the restaurant's sparkling clean, stainless steel kitchen. Like a couple of excited teen-agers, they began to rattle off ideas for the morning's feast.

"What about freshly ground Blue Mountain coffee?" he said.

"Eggs and toast?" she said.

"Toast? Woman, be serious — brioche!" he snorted in derision. "This is one of my famous breakfast brioches, so light and fluffy it will melt *before* the bread touches your tongue."

"Yum! There's a few remaining from yesterday's breakfast?" she asked hopefully.

"Nope, but I can make us some!" he replied.

"Ah, no, remember... brioche takes *two* if not more raisings. We don't want to be here when the morning staff arrives!"

He laughed heartily, "You are a baker — forgive me, I forgot.

"Forgiven. Forgotten. Besides, there's more to me than just knitting!"

"Maybe brioche is out of the question, but there's still some yeast rolls from tonight's dinner."

Laughter bounced off the walls. There was an easy camaraderie between the two — always had been from the first day they met.

"So, you really didn't want to go out with him?" Mike said, picking up the conversation.

"Well, perhaps it was a pleasantly different way to spend the evening. But no, dear Michael, I really wanted to be with you. Why else would the invitation to join us be given? He was a pleasant enough fellow, a businessman, successful to be sure, yet not a man for me."

"I'm a businessman."

She rolled her eyes and groaned. "He makes ugly steel pipes for industrial sewage. You are a great deal more creative — and colorful!"

"Speaking of creative, I can whip up a mean salmon omelet."

She made a contented humming sound, then, "Michael, that sounds positively decadent!" she laughed.

"Very well then, my lady, one 'positively decadent' salmon omelet with all the works coming up!" Mike's voice sang out. He was feeling more alive than he had all day. He pulled open the massive door to the stainless steel walk-in refrigerator and began removing scallions, red bell pepper, fresh dill, Portobello mushrooms and a small piece of salmon.

All the ingredients were laid on the thick oak chopping table. With swift, expert knife strokes, Mike sliced and chopped the vegetables as Grace took out an iron skillet and laid it on the Wolff stovetop. Returning to the walk-in fridge, she searched diligently and found a tub of creamy butter. With quick movements she put two pats onto the skillet, watching as they slowly started to simmer, melt and gently bubble.

"Here, you'll need this for the eggs." Her kitchen mate handed over a small delicate wire whisk and a mixing bowl which held six large eggs.

"Thank you, kind sir," Grace said. She began cracking the eggs with one hand.

He looked over to her and sighed. "Aha! A woman who knows how to crack an egg! That's the way to a man's heart."

"Yes, well, when a woman finds a man who cooks, now that's a real treasure!" she countered.

For the next few minutes they bantered and talked. Making their late dinner — early breakfast would be as much fun as eating it. Once the omelet was plated, Mike removed the yeast rolls from the warming tray. With a flourish characteristic of chefs everywhere, he placed the food in front of his guest.

"This is a work of art. I don't know whether to eat it or take a picture. Thank you, Mike."

"You are more than welcome. Come on, let's eat!"

Picking up plates, forks and their coffee cups the couple made their to the staff dining table. Mike placed his items down, turned to Grace and taking her items, settled them into place as well. He then held the chair out for his 'date'. As soon as he was seated, they tucked into their food.

As they lingered over the remains of the meal, Grace realized just how much she had wanted someone to share her life with. How special sharing something as simple as preparing a meal together made her feel. The only question remained, did Michael feel the same? Was he truly willing to make the next step? They had complemented each other throughout the evening. Now what?

"Michael, this was sinfully indulgent, just as you promised. If I were not so afraid of gaining weight from the high-quality breakfasts created in this kitchen, I wouldn't always order a yogurt or muffin."

"Come and sample whatever strikes your fancy. My door is always open to you, for breakfast, lunch, or dinner."

They sat quietly for a while in the kitchen sipping freshly ground Blue Mountain coffee, flavored with just a hint of Amaretto creamer. Now was the moment to relax, absorbing the warmth and solace of each other's company.

"This is nice," she whispered.

"Grace," Mike said tentatively.

"Yes?"

"Since you opened the shop years ago, Rita and I valued your friendship. A...after her death, my heart became brittle. Yet you remained a steadfast friend, gently pushing me to live again — for my children, friends, customers and myself. You called me to see how I was doing long after everyone else's life returned to normal. I will always be grateful to you for that. It took a lot of courage; some... times I wasn't very pleasant."

Remembering that awkward painful time she wiped a solitary tear from her cheek, took a short breath and spoke. "It was a hard task. You

were in so much hurt... so much grief. But how could I not help? After the sudden death of my husband, there was a support system for me to lean upon. God, without them recovery would have been impossible. Still, bit by bit, step by agonizing step the foul darkness receded. How could I not help my friend do the same?"

"But Grace, three years later when you were ill with cancer, it nearly tore me apart. I wanted to say something, to let you know how deeply I felt. Fear stopped me in my tracks. Now the wasted time seems like a tragedy. I wasted even more time by standing every morning..."

"By the café's front door and watching me walk to the shop. I think I have always known what you were doing." she said, taking his hand.

His eyes opened wide in surprise. "You did?"

"Yes, and I felt the same way. But it did not seem appropriate to get involved with someone who had lost their wife to that same terrible disease. Once my cancer went into remission, it seemed unfair to expect anyone to perhaps have to suffer through such an ordeal again. Oh Michael, I wish..." The friends looked intently at each other. Words were useless.

On impulse, they leaned over the table and their lips met in a full sweet gentle kiss.

"Wow," Grace giggled as their lips separated.

"That was groovy," Mike said with a lopsided grin.

"Groovy? We are showing our age, Michael Lane; you for using that term, and me for understanding it!"

He touched her forehead with his middle finger and ran it through her sleek black hair liberally streaked with gray. "That's fine with me. We suit each other perfectly. You my lady, are to use another old phrase, 'outta sight'. We should stop wasting time and enjoy a real date."

"A real date?" she snorted. "This is a real date. It is so much better than what happened earlier this evening."

"Don't you mean last night? It's almost three o'clock in the morning."

There was a brief moment of silence as they realized that in a short span of time they had gone from being friends to becoming a couple. Mike took her small hand and squeezed it gently.

"Oh my, I have to get home get some rest! In a few hours the shop has to be opened." Grace said.

Mike leaned over the table and said in a husky voice, "What do you say to taking a little time off and enjoying tomorrow — today — with each other?"

She giggled nervously and then asked shyly, "Can we do that?"

"Sure we can! Haven't we spent years building our respective businesses and hiring good people so we can take a day or two off every once in awhile? Listen, Lois is getting married on Saturday. Today is Thursday. I need a new suit to wear for the event. My very talented, very beautiful friend knitted four different pairs of colored socks. She has to help me pick out a suit that'll look good for a wedding and smashing with one pair of those socks."

Grace kissed him on the cheek. "Your friend knows just the place for such a suit!"

"Great! Uh, Grace, would you like to come with me to Lois and Clark's wedding — as my date?"

"Yes," she said, squeezing his hand.

He came around the table, pulled her to her feet and kissed her mouth. "Thank you! Let me tidy up this mess and leave a note for Ryan telling him I won't be at work today. Besides, it high time I gave him more responsibility. Then my lady, I'll escort you home."

A short time later a very happy Mike and Grace exited Café Americana and walked down the street, arm in arm. The darkness of the spring night surrounded them, but between them and in their hearts a light as bright as the sun shone, promising many more such days to come.

Epilogue

High above Café Americana, Superman and Lois watched the

couple walk serenely down the street.

“Lois, I think Uncle Mike is going to make a request to increase the headcount at our reception by one.”

“Oh, Clark, this makes the entire evening perfect. Uncle Mike and Grace look awfully cozy together. Who cares if he asks to increase the headcount? After all, he is the caterer! Wait until I tell everyone my uncle is dating Grace.”

“If he’s half as happy as I am, they won’t be dating for long.” He looked at his fiancée and noticed something on her cheek. “Hey, you’ve got a smudge of chocolate... let me take care of it.” Clark leaned close and kissed the confection from her face.

She giggled and said, “Only a few days more, flyboy.”

“I can hardly wait! Visiting Paris was an appetizer. Our honeymoon in Hawaii will be the main course,” Clark said.

“...and dessert.” Lois finished his thought. With his enhanced vision, he could see her eyes raking over his body.

“Minx! I’m taking you home before we skip the wedding and everything else!”

“No way, flyboy! We waited this long, we’re going the distance!”

So saying, the couple laughing in anticipation of their new life together flew on into the early morning darkness.

THE END