

The Vampire Murders

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Summary: Lois and Clark investigate a series of strange murders in Metropolis, and the main suspect may be ... a vampire?

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Lois Lane looked up from a study of her handwritten notes for the fourth time in ten minutes and rubbed her eyes. Really, her handwriting was getting worse and worse all the time, she thought, rubbing her neck with one hand. She was going to have to work on her penmanship.

Across the room, the television was on and she noted that the blonde who co-anchored the local news channel was speaking. The sound was off, and this program didn't use closed captioning, so she couldn't tell what the woman was saying, but her male partner, a young man just as pretty as she was, was laughing, so it couldn't be anything too important.

Her gaze shifted to her apartment window. It was a clear night, a little cold for the season, and she had closed the glass but left the curtains open, just on the off chance that Superman would fly by. She studied the window uneasily. It was almost as if someone were watching her. After a moment, she got up, locked the window and pulled the curtains.

The feeling of observation faded away and she felt her shoulders relax. After a moment, she went into her kitchen, filled the little-used Corningware teapot with water and set it on the burner. Somehow this evening a cup of the Oolong Tea imported from China, that Clark had given her a few months ago when she had been fighting a head cold, sounded good.

While the water heated, she consulted the instructions that Clark had painstakingly written out for her, and at what she judged was the right time, removed the pot from the burner and dropped in the tea leaves, wondering what Clark's thing was for tea leaves instead of tea bags. Maybe that was why the tea he made at his place always seemed so much better than hers. But his coffee was better than hers, too, she reflected. Maybe that was because he ground his own coffee beans, bought from who-knew-where. And maybe it was just because he knew what he was doing. Besides, Instant was usually her coffee of choice, even though she had a coffee maker. It was faster and a lot easier.

She set the timer to allow the tea to steep. Clark evidently had wisely decided that it would be prudent not to leave the timing to her judgment, she thought. She would never admit it, but he was probably right. She resolutely did not look at the plastic tray, which had held her frozen turkey dinner, protruding from the kitchen trash can. Okay, so cooking wasn't her strong point. At least her partner didn't seem to mind.

Again, she glanced at the window, now covered with the curtains. Was it her imagination or had a shadow passed across it? Who would be likely to cast a shadow on her window curtains except Superman? She was on the fifth floor, after all.

She started to cross the room to pull back the curtains when her gaze fell on the television, which was showing a breaking live

news report. Superman was engaged in an interview about the robbery that he had apparently just foiled, judging by the print scrolling across the bottom of the screen. Lois reached for the remote that lay on the counter and turned up the sound.

Her window rattled faintly, and her head snapped around toward it. Was that shadow back? If Superman was across town, talking to a reporter, then what was rattling her window?

After a second, reason took over. It was the wind gusting against the side of the building, of course. The weather report had said they were in for thirty mile-an-hour winds tonight and tomorrow, followed by clouds in the afternoon.

Her timer rang, and she turned back to the teapot. Her hand was almost steady as she poured out the tea into an earthenware mug. She added artificial sweetener and blew gently across the surface of the liquid to cool it, but all the time, her ears were straining to hear any other sound coming from beyond the window.

There was nothing, and the faint rattle had ceased.

She sipped the tea, raising her eyebrows at the delicate flavor. Clark evidently had either picked out really good tea, or the directions had worked out right after all — or both. She sank back against the couch, wincing at the non-yielding piece of furniture. Clark was right. This thing was an instrument of torture. It wasn't designed to relax on.

She turned up the TV's sound.

The newscaster was speaking. "... Body of the unidentified man was found in Centennial Park. The discovery was made late this evening by a couple who, according to their statement, were taking a short cut through the park ..."

Lois sipped her tea slowly, savoring the taste. She definitely had to preserve Clark's directions, she thought, as she listened to the report with half her attention. She had phoned in this story to the rewrite desk an hour ago. The victim had been discovered on the main path, and couldn't possibly have been there long. The case was similar to another one, two days before, but the police spokesman had refused to comment on the possibility, raised by Clark, that there might be any connection.

Her gaze was drawn back to the window once more. She didn't see any sign of a shadow now. Probably there had never been one, but the faint uneasiness wouldn't quite go away. Deliberately, she finished her tea and turned off the television. It was high time for her to head for bed before she completely spooked herself out — but just in case, she decided that, if only for tonight, she was going to leave all her lights on and make sure that every window was locked, fifth floor or not.

The sky was clear the next morning as Lois drove to the Daily Planet, and the wind was gusting enthusiastically as she maneuvered through the streets. Pedestrians clutched hats that tried to fly away and coats flapped in the vigorous breeze.

A flash of red and blue above and to her left made her look up quickly as she turned into the entrance to the Daily Planet's parking garage, but if it had been Superman, he was already gone. She slid her pass card through the scanner and waited while the bar lifted to allow her into the lot. A few moments later, she was on the elevator and headed for the newsroom.

The car slid to a stop on the first floor and, to her surprise, Clark Kent stepped in. He smiled cheerfully when he saw her. "Good morning!"

"That's a matter of opinion," she said. "I haven't had my coffee yet."

"We can take care of that when we get upstairs," Clark said.

"Depends. Do you actually call that stuff in the coffee machine coffee?"

He chuckled. "Well, maybe just for starters. We can pick you up some real coffee later."

"I guess," she said. "Have you heard any more about that

thing last night?"

"What thing? Oh, you mean the murder case. A contact of mine at the station called me this morning with the autopsy results." He scowled. "Weird, really."

She waited impatiently as the doors closed and the elevator resumed its creaky journey upwards, and then prodded, "What do you mean 'weird'?"

"The cause of death," he said.

"Yeah? So what was so weird about it?"

"The cause of death was blood loss."

"How is that weird? Lots of people die of stab wounds."

"He wasn't stabbed," Clark said. "Or shot. The cause of death was complete blood loss, but the only wounds on the body were two small punctures in the neck, right over the carotid artery."

"You're kidding." Images of the last vampire movie that she had seen popped into her mind, only to be dismissed.

Clark's expressive eyebrows flew up. "I don't kid about murder."

"Sorry," Lois said. "That's strange, all right. What did the medical examiner think?"

"My contact is faxing over the report," Clark said. "It should be waiting for us by the time we get to the newsroom."

As he spoke, the elevator opened and they stepped out into the morning bustle of the Daily Planet newsroom.

The place, as usual, was a madhouse, even this early in the morning. As they descended the ramp into the Pit, Jimmy Olsen waved a piece of fax paper over his head. "Hey, CK! You got a fax in just a minute ago!"

"There it is," Clark said. He speeded up slightly and met Jimmy at the foot of the ramp. "Thanks," he said, beginning to scan the paper at once. Lois waited impatiently.

"Well? I thought you were the speed reader," she said finally as Clark continued to scan the fax.

"Here." He handed her the paper, frowning. "It looks like somebody hit our man over the head before he was killed."

"Well," Lois said, "I don't see a vampire needing to knock somebody out before killing him, do you? It sounds like we have a really twisted killer, though."

"That's putting it mildly. Look at the rest." Clark indicated the information at the bottom of the page. "The guy's name was Frederick de Mint. Employed by Cost Mart for the last four months."

"Aha," Lois said quietly. She turned, looking around for Jimmy, who had departed after handing Clark the fax. "Jimmy!"

Jimmy waved a hand in acknowledgment and dropped a small stack of papers on the desk of the business editor, then turned and made his way to Lois's desk, arriving there just as she sat down and switched on her computer. "You bellowed, ma'am?"

"I did indeed," Lois said. "We need some background on this guy." She handed him Clark's fax. "His name's Frederick DeMint. Everything you can find on him, yesterday, if possible."

"I'll get on it as soon as I can," Jimmy promised. He turned his head at the shout of "Olsen!" from the Editor's office and grimaced. "S'cuse me." He hurried away, nearly running.

"Olsen!" The yell came from across the newsroom, in the general vicinity of the Sports desk. Lois shook her head. It looked like Jimmy was in high demand this morning. It might be a while before she got her information.

Perry's door burst open again and their editor stuck his head out. "Lane! Kent! Get over to the Wishing Well at Centennial Park! They've found another body!"

"Another one? What the heck is going on?" Lois grabbed her shoulder bag that she had just kicked under her desk and got to her feet. Clark had already retrieved her jacket from the coat tree and she accepted it without comment. "Let's go, partner."

Inspector William Henderson, Metropolis Homicide Division, was standing with his hands shoved into the pockets of his light jacket, a dour look on his dark, slightly saturnine face. As usual, he wore his dark glasses, which gave Lois the impulse to shake her head, as clouds were beginning to drift across the sky, dimming the bright sunlight. Around him was the organized chaos of a police investigation.

The area where the victim lay had been roped off, of course, and Lois glanced briefly at the sheet-covered silhouette of the form that sprawled on the grass. She saw Clark fiddling with his glasses, which he did all the time. She thought it must be a nervous habit, and had never mentioned it to him. Her partner lowered the spectacles slightly, apparently looking over the tops of the lenses at the shrouded form; then he shoved them back into place and trod determinedly over to Henderson. Lois followed.

Henderson's dour expression didn't change when he saw them, except to grow a little sourer. "Well, well," he remarked. "Look what the cat dragged in. What can Metropolis's Finest do for the Daily Planet today?"

Lois glanced over her shoulder at the victim. "What happened?"

"He was murdered," Henderson said, laconically.

"No kidding." Lois regarded him with disfavor. "How did he die? Was it anything like what happened to the guy last night?"

Henderson shoved his dark glasses back onto the bridge of his nose. "Since we aren't sure what killed the other victim, I can't really say," he said.

Clark's hand squeezed her wrist slightly. "The victim last night was drained of blood," he pointed out. "I don't suppose anything like that happened to this fellow?"

Henderson appeared to relent. "We don't know for sure," he admitted, "but it looks a lot like last night's case. There isn't any blood to see, but the victim appears to have been exsanguinated, and there are two small holes on his neck — right over the carotid artery." He blew out his breath. "Somebody's playing some sick games."

"How about the victim a couple of nights ago?" Lois inquired. "I don't suppose he had any similarity to the last two."

"You know, Lois," Henderson said, "you have all the delicacy of a bull in a China shop."

"I'm a reporter," Lois said. "Did he?"

Henderson shrugged. "Yeah, he did."

"Drained of blood?"

Henderson grunted. "Yeah."

"So that's three," Lois said. "What's going on? Somebody playing vampire?"

"Maybe," Henderson said. "I don't want to draw any conclusions yet."

"Who found this one?" Clark asked.

"Early morning jogger. Guy looks like he's been dead several hours. We'll know more by this afternoon."

"Can you fax us over the report when the medical examiner has finished?" Clark asked. Lois didn't speak. She'd noticed that Henderson was much more likely to cooperate if Clark made the requests.

Henderson sighed gustily. "Sure. Why not?"

"Thanks, Bill," Clark said. "We owe you one."

"Don't mention it," Henderson muttered.

"This is really weird," Lois said. They pushed their way through the revolving doors into the Daily Planet's lobby. "What's going on, do you think?"

"Well, the one victim we know anything about," Clark said, "worked for Cost Mart. I wonder if Bobby would know anything about him."

"He might. Jimmy might have something for us by now, too." Lois punched the call button for the Planet's elevator with

unnecessary force. “But he was the second victim. Who was the first, and who was this last guy? Henderson wasn’t very forthcoming, if you ask me.”

Clark stuck his hands in his pockets. “We’ll find out. First things first, though. What I want to know is why the murders were done in such a weird way. I don’t think anyone seriously believes it could be a real vampire.”

The elevator arrived and they entered. “You thought of the same thing, huh?” Lois said.

“I’m sure we were supposed to think of it,” Clark said. He pushed the button for the third floor. “What I want to know is why.”

“Me too. Halloween was over three weeks ago, so I think the ghoulish factor is kind of stretching it.”

“Oh, I don’t know. How about that woman last week, who was keeping Lex Luthor’s body for herself? That’s pretty ghoulish.”

Lois shivered. “Don’t remind me. I’d rather deal with a vampire.” She frowned. “You know, Lex’s body disappeared right after that. You don’t suppose —”

“I definitely don’t,” Clark said, with unnecessary emphasis.

“Me either,” Lois said with equal firmness, resolutely banishing the hair-raising thought. Vampires were nothing but stories to scare children and the superstitious. There was no point in creeping herself out over this whole, very weird episode. There had to be a logical, rational explanation for the whole thing.

The elevator doors opened and they stepped out, to be greeted by the usual hubbub of the newsroom in the midmorning. It was so normal that the creepy idea that had been worming around in Lois’s thoughts instantly receded. She and Clark would figure this out. Supernatural agencies weren’t something that she needed to worry about. Something had killed those three victims in the park, and that something was almost certainly human. And given that, the perpetrator must have left some clues. She and Clark had only to figure out what they were.

“Jimmy!” she shouted.

The young computer expert was at his small desk, obviously concentrating on his computer screen and hadn’t heard her. Lois disdained the ramp and took the short cut down the steps to the Pit, Clark on her heels.

“Jimmy!” she said again.

This time, he looked up. “Oh, hi,” he said mildly. “I’ve been researching your murder victim.”

“Any results?” Clark asked.

Jimmy shook his head. “Not a lot,” he admitted. “The only information I can find on him is limited to the last year, and there isn’t much of that. Social Security number, driver’s license, address — that kind of thing. He’s worked at Cost Mart as a shelf stocker for the last four months. I’ll keep hunting, though. Since he was murdered, we know he exists, so there’s bound to be some stuff on him somewhere, if I can find it.”

“Maybe he was using another name,” Clark suggested.

“I thought of that,” Jimmy admitted. “I’m looking for what I can find on that front, too. I’ll let you know as soon as I find anything.”

“Well,” Lois said, “give us what you have and we’ll start looking from that end. And there were two other victims — no names yet. See what you can do about them, too.”

Jimmy nodded. “You got it. If you find out more you might tell me. It’ll help me with the searches. Oh, you’ve got a fax, CK. I left it on your desk.”

“Thanks.” Clark headed over to his desk. “Huh. That was fast.”

“What was?” Lois peered over his shoulder, trying to see the printout.

“The medical examiner’s report. Henderson must have put a rush on it.”

“I’ll say,” Lois said. “He must have got the examiner on it before the body got to the morgue.”

Clark was scowling at the report. “There’s a note here from Henderson, too. The victim’s name is Tom Baucus. Look who he worked for.” He extended the paper.

Lois felt her eyebrows rising as she scanned the document. “Cost Mart. This can’t be a coincidence.”

“Well, it could be but it makes it less likely.” Clark reached for the phone. “I’m going to call my contact and see if he can get me the info on the first victim.”

“And I’m going to call Bobby,” Lois said.

Bobby Bigmouth was a lean, nondescript man with an unflappable demeanor and an expression that never changed. Somehow he always managed to project a faint air of gnawing hunger, even while wolfing down some massive sandwich or other substantial dish brought to him by Lois.

Bobby was in the serving line at the Fifth Street Mission when Clark and Lois came through the line. Their snitch helped himself to a generous bite of the tuna noodle casserole before spooning a serving onto the tray of one of the mission’s clients.

“Hi, kids,” he greeted them. “You got my snack?”

“Uh, yeah.” Clark looked around doubtfully. “Actually, it’s a pre-paid dinner at the Mandarin Palace. Just give Lois’s name.”

“Okay,” Bobby said amiably. “I’ll drop by there right after my shift is over.”

“Great,” Lois said. “Now that we’ve taken care of the important stuff, how about some information?”

Bobby took another bite of casserole, followed by a swig of milk from a half gallon carton sitting beside the serving container. “Sure.” He looked over his shoulder. “Fred, canya take over for me a minute?”

A lean Asian man took Bobby’s place. “Five minutes,” he said, glancing at his watch.

“Sure thing,” Bobby beckoned to Lois and Clark. “Come on outside. I’m gonna get some air.”

Lois didn’t think much of the “air” since Bobby’s chosen spot was beside a large garbage bin. She sniffed and wrinkled her nose but said nothing. If their snitch was on a time schedule, he wouldn’t be late when there was food back in the mission dining room. Instead, she came directly to the point. “You’ve heard about the murders in Centennial Park? There was a body found there last night, and a second one this morning.”

“And one three days ago,” Clark added. “Can you tell us anything?”

“Yeah.” For the first time, Bobby looked a little uncomfortable. “The last two guys were newcomers. They worked over at Cost Mart on the night shift. One of them was a security guard, and the other one stocked shelves. Kept to themselves, pretty much. I saw ‘em a couple of times at Clemantina’s All Nite Diner, after their shifts.”

“Newcomers?” Lois asked.

“Uh huh. Hadn’t seen ‘em before about six months ago.”

“How about the first victim?” Clark asked. “Can you tell us anything about him?”

“Yeah” Bobby said. “His name was Manny. Homeless guy, never caused any trouble. Friend of mine. He slept outside in the summer and fall, then when it started to get cold he’d go over to the shelter. Kinda quiet. The night before he was killed —” Bobby stopped, looking even more uncomfortable.

“What?” Lois asked. “Did he get into some kind of trouble?”

Bobby shook his head. “No. He came into the shelter at a dead run. Said something was chasing him.”

Lois felt a faint tingle of alarm run over her scalp. “Did he say who?”

“Not who,” Bobby corrected her. “What. I help out there sometimes. I was there when he came in. He was outta breath,

and scared. Said some kinda flying thing had come at him outta the dark.”

“A flying thing?” Clark said, frowning. “A bat?”

“No.” Bobby shifted nervously and looked at his watch. It was a very nice watch, Lois saw. “Look, I gotta get back.”

“Did he say what it was?” Lois asked. “Superman?”

“No,” Bobby said. “He wasn’t scared of Superman. He said this thing was black, the size of a man, and it came from above him. He ran and got inside the shelter.” He turned and started back toward the mission, then he hesitated a second, half-turning back to look directly at Lois. “I don’t know what it was. But I think it got him the next night. Or something did. If you go looking for it, better be careful.” He disappeared through the door without another word.

Lois and Clark looked after him, speechless, and then at each other.

“What on Earth —” Lois said.

Clark was fiddling with his glasses, still looking after Bobby. After a moment, he shoved his glasses firmly into place and stuck his hands into his pockets. “I didn’t think Bobby was superstitious,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“Did you notice what he was wearing around his neck?”

Lois hadn’t. “What?”

“A gold chain. I got just a short look, but I think he was wearing a gold crucifix.”

“Bobby?” Lois stared at her partner. “You don’t think he really thinks it was actually a vampire? This is 1994!”

Clark didn’t answer. “I guess the whole thing spooked him, especially since his friend was killed the next night,” he said slowly. After several seconds he shook his head. “Let’s get back to the office,” he said. “Maybe Jimmy’ll have something more for us by now.”

Jimmy wasn’t in evidence when they walked back into the newsroom, but there were several papers lying on Clark’s desk, on top of the fax from Henderson, weighed down by Clark’s coffee cup. Lois pulled them unceremoniously out from under the cup. The container teetered and nearly upset and Clark caught it quickly. “What have we got?”

“This must be the stuff from your contact,” Lois said, scanning the paper. “It says the first victim was Manfred Chesterton, and lists his official address as the homeless shelter. Age, weight, apparently had a drinking problem. Spent the night in the drunk tank last month. No connection mentioned to Cost Mart.” She raised her eyebrows slightly. “Apparently he was a former aerospace engineer, fired from NASA five years ago.”

“Any information about how he died?”

Lois shook her head. “No signs of trauma on the body,” she said, still reading from the paper. “No overt cause of death but blood loss, and two small punctures over the left carotid artery.” She handed the paper to Clark. “I can’t see some guy standing there letting his murderer drain him of blood without putting up some kind of fight. That guy last night had been hit over the head, remember. The medical examiner must have missed something.”

“Maybe we need to talk to Henderson again,” Clark said. “He might know more than he’s saying. Anything more on the third victim?”

Lois had been looking. “No. Name, age, driver’s license, Social Security number, address. Just like the one last night. No history past about a year ago.”

“Something’s fishy here,” Clark said. “Two murder victims with no history to speak of and a homeless man. Where’s the connection?”

“The only one I can see,” Lois said, “is Cost Mart. Which one did they work at?” She shuffled the papers again, looking for the information. “Looks like the new one, over by Old Town. I guess

we need to go over there next.”

“They aren’t going to talk to us,” Clark pointed out.

“Sure they will,” Lois said. She stood up and reached for her jacket. “If they want to look innocent, the last thing they should do is refuse to talk to the press. Let’s go.”

“Is that it?” Lois nodded out the side window as the SUV approached a very large, box-like building, surrounded by a spacious parking lot. To one side, wooden barricades blocked off a section of the lot where torn pavement and piles of dirt indicated that there was some sort of construction going on. Several pieces of earth-moving equipment sat idle about the site, and men in hard hats were seated here and there, apparently eating their lunches.

“Looks like it,” Clark said. “There’s a parking spot,” he added.

“I wonder what they’re doing to their parking lot,” Lois remarked. “They’ve blocked off half the parking spaces.”

“Looks like they’re digging up the pavement,” Clark said. “Maybe they’re adding on to the building.”

Lois parked the Cherokee and cut the engine. “Well, let’s see if we can talk to the manager and get his official take on the deaths of his employees,” she said. “And I want to look around a little. It might not be a bad idea, in case we have to come back later.”

“Are we coming back later?” Clark asked.

“Maybe,” Lois said. “It depends on what we find out.”

Inside the building, it was identical to the Cost Mart nearer to the Daily Planet, where Lois had shopped on more than one occasion — a big, warehouse-sized, box-like store with an amazing variety of merchandise, ranging from massage chairs to cold pills to actual grocery items. Prominently displayed in the inner entrance walkway was a bright red Ferrari, along with a glaring sign announcing a drawing on the last day of the month for some lucky customer. Lois passed it without a second look and led the way to the service desk.

The customer service representative was a young woman, who smiled brightly at her. Her smile widened when she saw Clark, Lois noted, unreasonably irritated. “May I help you?”

“I hope so,” Lois said. She produced her press credentials. “I’m Lois Lane and this is my partner, Clark Kent, from the Daily Planet. We were hoping for a chance to speak to your manager —” She glanced at the plaque on the wall behind the woman that listed the store officers. “Mr. Clarence Brunner?”

“Uhh —” The receptionist appeared slightly perplexed. “Why?”

“This is about the two Cost Mart employees found dead in Centennial Park,” Lois said. “One was found last night, and the other this morning. They apparently worked at this store, and we were wondering if your manager might have any insight on the event.”

The woman’s eyes grew large. “Dead?” she squeaked.

Lois nodded in her most matter-of-fact manner. “I’m afraid so, and the deaths were a little unusual. My partner and I are writing a piece about it for the Daily Planet. A statement from your manager would be useful. May we talk to him?”

The woman swallowed. “I’ll have to make a call.”

Clarence Brunner was a large, sleek man with a head of thick, shiny black hair, a broad nose and a thin black mustache on his upper lip. The instant Lois saw him, an image rose in her mind of one of the recurring bad guys in the old Dick Tracy comic strip that had been a feature in the Daily Planet when she had been a child. His broad shoulders and the thick cigar that smoldered in the gold ash tray on his desk only made the image more familiar. He smiled when his secretary escorted them into his office and extended a hand to Clark.

“Ms. Lane, Mr. Kent.” He shook Clark’s hand and turned to Lois. The handshake lacked enthusiasm, to say the least, Lois thought, but he ran his gaze over her from head to toe. She tried to ignore the sudden sensation of having ventured out on business far too lightly clad. “Delighted to meet you. I recognize the names, of course. What can I do for the Daily Planet?”

Lois smiled pleasantly and let her partner take the lead. If she was any judge, this guy didn’t have a lot of respect for females.

Clark smiled as well, and if she hadn’t known her partner well, she wouldn’t have spotted the fact that the smile was just as insincere as the one Brunner had given them. “You may have seen the report last night,” he said, “about the body discovered in Centennial Park. Another one was discovered this morning, not far from the wishing well.”

“That’s too bad,” Brunner said, “but how does this involve me?”

“You’ve had no contact from the police?”

The man shook the ash off the tip of his cigar and took a deep drag. “No. Should I expect them to contact me?” He blew a cloud of smoke that made Lois want to cough.

“I’m surprised they haven’t,” Clark said. “Both men were identified as employees of Cost Mart — specifically, this Cost Mart. Frederick de Mint stocked shelves. He was the man discovered last night. The other was a security guard here, named Thomas Baucus. He apparently worked the night shift as well. We were wondering if you might have any comment?”

“How very strange.” Brunner’s voice was a study in oily disinterest. “Still, since I’ve heard nothing of this, I’ll have to say ‘no comment’ to your questions. If you’d care to return at a later date, after I’ve had a chance to review their employment records and to speak with the police, I’ll try to have something for you.”

Lois glanced at Clark. Her partner’s face was impossible to read, but something about his expression raised red flags for Lois. She stepped in quickly. “Can you think, Mr. Brunner, why anyone might have killed two of your employees?”

The man shook his head decisively. “Absolutely not. Whatever happened, I doubt there can be any connection to Cost Mart.”

“I don’t believe him for a minute,” Lois said. They stepped out the main doors of the Cost Mart store and into the parking lot. “Neither do I,” Clark said. “He was lying.”

“No kidding. But about what?”

“I don’t know.” Clark had tilted his head, as she had seem him do many times. “Do you hear a jackhammer?”

Lois paused, listening. Now that he had drawn her attention to it, she did hear something. “Where have all the workmen gone? It’s barely one o’clock.”

“Probably back to work.” Clark was fiddling with his glasses again, she saw. “I wonder what they’re really doing, digging in the parking lot.”

Lois cast him a suspicious glance. “Do you know something I don’t, Kent?”

Clark shrugged. “Not really. It just occurred to me to wonder if those two men, who both worked the night shift around here, saw something they shouldn’t have,” he said. “If Cost Mart is part of Intergang —”

“Which it is,” Lois interjected.

He shrugged. “Yeah, probably. Maybe they came across something that their bosses didn’t want them to see.”

“Maybe,” Lois said, “we should come back here tonight and see if we can find anything.”

“Together,” Clark specified quickly. “You won’t come back here by yourself.”

She cast him an exasperated glance. “Of course not. As long as you’ll come with me.”

“Oh, I will. Definitely.”

She eyed him suspiciously. “Why aren’t you arguing? You always argue.”

Clark shoved his glasses firmly into place. “Because I know very well you’re going to come back here whether I want you to or not, so I figure if I come along, at least I’ll be here to help if it gets dangerous. Besides,” he added, “I think you’re right. Something pretty nasty is going on here. I want to know what it is.”

Lois opened the door of the Jeep and got into the driver’s seat. “So do I. I guess you’re learning things hanging around me after all, Kent.”

Clark looked as if he were struggling not to grin. “You have no idea.” He went around the back of the Jeep and got into the passenger seat. Lois started up the motor.

“One more thing,” she added. “Be sure you wear stuff you don’t care too much about.”

“Why?” Clark asked.

“Well, it’s probably dumb, but I want to see what they’re doing with all that digging in the parking lot.” She nodded at the signs of excavation beyond the barrier as she put the Jeep in forward. “It’s probably nothing, but I want to make sure. They’re probably just fixing the wiring or repairing the plumbing or something, but we won’t know for certain unless we look. So we’re going to look.”

“Okay with me,” Clark said. “I was thinking the same thing, myself. If Cost Mart is connected with Intergang, they could be up to anything.”

“Exactly. And I still want to know more about victims two and three. But there’s still victim number one, who *didn’t* work for Cost Mart. There has to be a connection somewhere.”

“I got the background on victim number one,” Jimmy was saying a short time later. “As far as I can see, there isn’t any obvious connection to the other two guys except that he was killed the same way they were, and found in the park. Maybe the police will be able to tell you more than I can.”

“Fat chance of that,” Lois said. “Have you found anything more on the Cost Mart employees?”

“Nope.” Jimmy shook his head. “It’s as if they didn’t exist before last year.”

“Maybe they didn’t,” Clark suggested. “I mean, maybe they were using aliases.”

“Both of them?” Lois frowned. “I guess it’s possible, but if they were it wasn’t an accident. Could they have been working together?”

“Maybe undercover police?” Jimmy hazarded.

“That might explain it,” Lois said, trying not to sound excited. “If they were cops, and their bosses at Cost Mart found out —”

“I think we’re jumping ahead of ourselves a little,” Clark said. “They *could* have been police, I guess, but there might be other explanations, too. Did you get pictures of the two victims, Jimmy?”

“Yeah.” Jimmy nodded at the folder of papers to the side of his computer.

“Do you think you could try to compare them to pictures of some of Metropolis’s police officers? Say, Homicide, or some of their detectives?”

“I guess it can’t hurt,” Jimmy agreed. “I’ll let you know if I come up with anything.”

“You do that,” Lois said. She glanced at her watch. “I think this thing has stopped.”

Clark knew how she felt. Considering their plans for later this evening, the minutes seemed to be crawling by. However, he might be able to make some use of the time left . . .

He glanced at his watch. “I’ll be right back,” he said. “I just have time to drop off the videotape I meant to return this

morning.”

Lois sighed. “I don’t think I’ve rented as many videos in my life as the number you return,” she said.

Clark managed to look contrite. Really, he had to think of some more convincing excuses to run off. The videotape thing was starting to get old. “I’ll be right back,” he said. “Then, since we’ve got that ... stakeout tonight, let’s drop by Martino’s for some dinner before it gets dark. I’m paying,” he added quickly as Lois opened her mouth to object. “I think I owe you for the last cab ride, anyway, so that ought to even the score.”

He headed toward the exit before she could reply.

Superman cut through the late afternoon air of Metropolis toward the Twelfth Precinct. Hopefully, William Henderson was in his office and would be willing to tell Superman more than he had told Clark Kent. Something was definitely not normal here. He had caught a short glimpse of that so-called excavation work in the Cost Mart parking lot today, and what he had seen called for a closer look.

The desk sergeant looked up as Clark, clad in the famous red and blue uniform, pushed open the doors of the office. “Hello, Superman. Can I help you?”

“Thank you, Sergeant. Is Inspector Henderson in?”

The man did something to the board in front of him.

“Inspector, Superman’s here to see you.”

Clark heard Henderson’s voice, somewhat distorted by static. “Send him back.”

Henderson was seated behind his desk when Clark knocked on the doorframe, apparently reading something on the screen of his desktop computer. He looked up at the sound. “What can I do for you, Superman?”

“I needed some information,” Clark said. “You seemed to be the one to ask.”

“Oh? And what would that be?”

Clark stepped into the office. “The two men found dead in the park,” he said. He hesitated. Henderson’s face was expressionless, but he could hear the man’s heartbeat speed up slightly. “By any chance, were they connected to the police department?”

One of Henderson’s eyebrows slid up. “Now, why would you be interested in that?” he asked slowly.

“I have my reasons,” Clark said. “I need to know.”

Henderson regarded him for another long moment. “They were undercover officers,” he said abruptly and very grimly. “I had the fun of informing their families that they weren’t coming home.”

Clark nodded. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“I’m going to get whoever did this,” Henderson said. “I don’t buy the drained of blood explanation for a minute. Somebody murdered two of my best men.”

Again, Clark nodded. “Is there any connection you know of to the homeless man who was found a couple of days before?” he asked.

Henderson shook his head. “We don’t know. He was a former NASA employee who’d been living on the streets for several years. We’re still looking into his background to see if we can make a connection, but there must be something. We’ll find it, and when we do, hopefully it will help us identify the killer.”

“Thanks.” Clark regarded Henderson soberly. “I’m sorry about your men. If I find out anything concrete, you’ll be the first to know. For the record, I don’t believe in vampires, either.”

“Don’t tell me you came here out of curiosity,” Henderson said.

“No, but like you, I don’t know anything yet. All I have are a few guesses. At least you eliminated one question.” He glanced at the clock on the wall of Henderson’s office. “You’ll be hearing from me, but I need to go. Thanks again.”

Old Town was lit up like a Christmas tree when Lois and Clark drove along the street that passed in front of the huge box-like building, but, except for the lights along the roof that illuminated the area in front of the door and along the sides of the Cost Mart building, the vacant parking lot was dim. There were a few light poles supposedly for security, but the actual illumination there was pathetic in Lois’s opinion. They could stay in the shadows without too much trouble, she thought. She had also spotted a video camera covering the entrance, this afternoon, but she hadn’t noticed any others, so getting in might not be impossible. There was always the probable danger of security guards, but they could be avoided if one was careful. In any case, the first place to check was probably the construction zone. It was by far the easiest to access.

Lois parked the Cherokee a block from the Cost Mart, near the Old Town Theater and she and Clark walked briskly through the cold, crisp November air toward their destination.

“There’ll be security guards around,” Clark said softly. His thoughts had obviously been paralleling hers.

“I know. Just stay alert.” Lois approached the parking lot, walking quietly but not stealthily, careful to keep out of the light.

Clark kept pace with her, moving silently on her left, and Lois had to give him credit. When Clark wanted to be quiet, he was really quiet, which led her to wonder peripherally where he had learned it. Her partner had, of course, traveled the world before he had come to work at the Planet. Hadn’t he mentioned once that he’d learned to dance from a Nigerian princess? She seemed to recall him saying that on some occasion or other but the event escaped her. But in the time she had known him she had come to realize that her partner wasn’t nearly the novice that she had branded him when they had first met. In fact, it hadn’t taken long before her (to be honest) contempt had faded to be replaced by reluctant, if unspoken, respect.

“Where first?” Clark’s whisper was a bare thread of sound.

“The construction area. We might as well look at the easiest part first.”

Clark didn’t answer but changed direction slightly. Remembering his extraordinary night vision, Lois followed. Her partner might wear glasses but she had discovered on a previous black bag job that he had the best night sight of anyone she’d ever known. Sure enough, they had gone barely a hundred feet when one of the yellow wooden barricades loomed out of the dimness, its reflective bands glowing faintly in the dark. They maneuvered around it and moved slowly into the area of broken pavement and piles of dirt and rocks.

Clark stopped. “Here,” he said. “There’s a ladder.” He paused. “I’ll go first,” he added.

“Go ahead,” Lois said. She crouched down on her heels to present less of a silhouette for anyone who might glance in the direction of the lot. “Hurry up.”

“Right.” Clark swung himself down the rungs of the ladder. Lois waited, pulling her jacket more tightly around herself. After a moment, she heard a faint whistle. She felt around, found the cold metal of the ladder and slid her feet over the edge of the hole. After a few seconds of fumbling, her foot touched a rung and she began her descent.

It was almost completely dark in the hole, for here even the starlight was blocked. She counted the rungs as she descended and as she reached forty-two her foot hit stone.

Stone. Her mind registered the fact. Not dirt.

A hand touched her arm very lightly, and Clark’s voice said, “Back this way. Away from the opening.”

She followed the tug of his hand, and a few steps along he stopped. “Cover your eyes.”

She obeyed, but the flare of light against her eyelids almost made her jump. Slowly, she opened her eyes, letting them adjust

to the light. Clark had turned his mag-light on low and was shielding it with one hand, allowing only a tiny beam of light to escape.

Lois blinked away the sudden watering of her eyes, letting them adjust to what was actually very faint light. Clark had turned the flash away from her, shining it on rough stone walls. Lois squinted around at what she could see of the place. “What’s this? Some kind of subway tunnel or something?”

“I don’t think so,” Clark said. “Let’s take a look around.”

The tunnel stretched away in both directions, featureless. The walls were rough concrete, and now that she looked, the stone floor wasn’t really stone, but concrete as well, thoroughly tracked with muddy footprints. They moved along it as quietly as they could, heading, Lois thought, in the direction of the Cost Mart building.

The passage turned suddenly, ran on another hundred feet or so, and they were abruptly faced with a metal door, set in the stone. Lois carefully tried the doorknob.

“Locked,” she whispered. “I don’t see a keyhole.”

“Probably bolted on the other side,” Clark whispered back. “I think we’re close to the Cost Mart store. I guess they didn’t want anybody getting in by accident. Look.” He shined the light on the door frame, revealing a small, black button.

“Doorbell,” Lois said. “I guess we’re supposed to ring for admittance. I don’t think we’d better do that.”

“Probably not,” Clark agreed. “My question is: what do you suppose this tunnel is for?”

“It looks like some kind of secret entrance into Cost Mart. How far down are we?”

Clark looked around. “I’m not sure. Twenty, maybe thirty feet.”

“So this leads into the basement of Cost Mart?”

“I think we’re too far down for that. Maybe a sub-basement,” Clark said. “Maybe tomorrow Jimmy could find us the plans for this place.” He flashed the light around again, still keeping the light carefully shielded. “What do you want to do next?”

Lois had been thinking about that. “Well, there’s nothing to stop us from going to see where the tunnel comes from, is there? Maybe that’ll tell us why they have a secret entrance into their store. Do you suppose they could be smuggling in something?”

“I’d say that isn’t impossible. Maybe even likely, if they’re actually part of Intergang.” Clark suited the action to the word, and several minutes later, they came again to the ladder by which they had found this place. Now they started in the other direction.

The tunnel ran relatively straight for some distance. The walls were rough concrete and here and there they encountered places where wooden timbers supported walls and ceiling. It looked as if the construction were still in progress in this part of the tunnel. In several places the walls were literally dirt, and in one spot it appeared there had been a small collapse. More wooden timbers braced the spot.

Just beyond that, the tunnel made a sharp turn to the right. Again it ran on straight for some distance and abruptly came to an end. They were faced with another ladder. They looked at each other. After a moment’s pause, Clark handed her the mag-light. “Hold this. I’ll go up and take a look,” he said quietly.

Lois started to object, but the words froze in her throat at the sound of voices from above them. “Get the first box. I’ll help lower it down.”

“Wish they’d hurry and install the hoist,” another voice said peppering the simple remark with four profanities. Lois sensed rather than saw Clark glance uneasily at her.

“Yeah. I’ll be happier when they finish fixing this whole end,” the first voice said, matching the previous speaker with several expletives of his own. “Every time I take the stuff through here, I’m afraid the ceiling’s going to come down on me.” From above came the scraping sound of something being lifted, and

pale light sifted through the opening.

Clark tugged on Lois’s arm and they retreated quickly in the direction from which they had just come. They rounded the corner and Lois stopped.

“Why are you stopping?” Clark whispered.

“I want to see what they’re doing,” she whispered back, twisting the mag-light to turn it off. Darkness descended at once, broken only by the small amount of light leaking past the turn in the tunnel. At once, she peeked around the wooden beam that braced the ceiling at this point to peer back at the exit.

In the low light, she saw the silhouette of a man swing down the ladder. He held a flashlight in one hand, which explained the source of the light, and now he turned to shine it upwards. Something came into view — a good-sized box, lowered down on some kind of rope arrangement.

“Come on!” Clark whispered urgently.

Reluctantly, Lois yielded to his tug on her arm, and they started back the way they had come, but almost at once Lois saw, well up the tunnel, a flicker of light. Someone was coming toward them from that direction as well, holding a flashlight to light his way. They were trapped.

Clark’s hand on her arm tightened, and then he was pulling her toward the area of the small cave-in. He tugged her back into the shadows of the timbers that had been placed there to support the crumbling wall, pulling her down to her hands and knees an instant later, and at once she realized his intention. Maybe, in the dimness of the tunnel, if they crouched down and were very quiet, they might not be seen.

The place where the fall of dirt had occurred was deeper and roomier than she had realized. Feeling with her hands so as not to hit anything and cause a further fall of dirt, Lois crawled forward a little farther, followed by Clark, and quite suddenly there was more room around them, and a musty smell that she couldn’t identify.

The wall where the collapse had taken place had fallen in because there was an opening on the other side, she realized, after a confused second or two. There must be one of the old, disused subway tunnels back here, after all. It looked as if Murphy was looking the other way for once.

No. Clark was pulling her to her feet and tugging her away from the hole in the wall, and they were walking on real stone, this time, not concrete or dirt. The floor was rough, carved stone, as if someone had chipped this narrow little tunnel out of the living rock. In the very faint light of the nearly completely shielded mag-light, she could see that Clark was bending down to walk, as the roof was only a few inches higher than Lois’s head.

“What is this place?” she whispered.

“I don’t know.” His voice was barely audible, and he abruptly switched off his light. “Sh.”

Together, they paused in the pitch darkness, listening.

There was the sound of scuffling feet, unidentifiable thumps and muffled voices. Lois held perfectly still, one hand in Clark’s, trying to breathe quietly as the sounds seemed to pause just beyond the crumbling entrance to the tunnel. She held her breath.

Then the sounds were retreating, and Lois found herself able to breathe again. “Whew! That was close!”

Clark also drew a deep breath. “A little too close for my taste.”

“Lucky we found this tunnel. Where are we?”

Clark twisted on the mag-light again, still shielding the light with one hand, and flashed it cautiously around over the floor and walls. Then he bent closer to the rough stone wall, examining something. “Look.”

“At what?”

He pointed at the wall. “Looks like some kind of primitive drawings.”

Lois moved closer and examined what he had found in the

beam of the mag-light. “What are they? Stone age drawings or something?”

“I don’t know.” Clark was frowning at the faded scrawls on the stone. “Didn’t this area originally have an Indian tribe or something living here when the European settlers first came?”

Lois squinted at the faint lines scratched on the wall. “Yeah. They did. We studied them in third grade, I think. Is that what this is?”

“I think maybe so,” Clark said. “The construction people must have broken through the wall when they started digging here. It’s a good thing they didn’t come in here and start messing it up. This could be a valuable archeological find for Metropolis.”

Lois was less interested in the archeology of the tunnel than the modern criminals on the other side of the wall. “Do you think they’re gone?”

Her partner covered his light again and moved back to the hole through which they had come. Lois followed, trying to make no noise at all.

A faint clang alerted her at once to the fact that someone else was approaching, followed at once by the mutter of voices. More men were moving around in the outer tunnel. Clark’s light abruptly went off, leaving them in pitch darkness.

“Hurry up!” one voice was heard to growl. “They need to get the stuff moved down here before the prowler comes around again.”

More thumps and scraping sounds. Something thudded heavily to the floor. More sounds of effort and someone cursed fluently. Then, at last, she heard the sounds of retreating footsteps.

“Great,” Lois whispered. “It sounds like there’s going to be a lot of traffic through here for a while.”

Approaching voices and footsteps underlined her observation.

Clark tugged on her hand, pulling her away from the opening. A short distance down the low tunnel, they stopped and he again turned on his light, shielding it with his hand.

“Now what?” Lois whispered.

“Well, maybe there’s some other way out of here. The tunnel goes in both directions.”

Lois regarded his face in the dim illumination of the shaded mag-light. “Optimistic, aren’t you? But I guess checking around is better than sitting here waiting for hours. Can you manage? This place isn’t exactly roomy.”

Clark’s lips twitched. “I noticed. I’ll be fine. Which way?”

Lois shrugged. “Since we’re here to check on Cost Mart, let’s go toward it. Who knows — maybe they’ve broken another hole in the tunnel somewhere.”

“Your wish is my command.” Clark turned and started in the direction that Lois judged to be the general direction in which the huge warehouse-sized store lay. If nothing else, she thought, maybe they could find more Indian artifacts. It might make a good story about the cultural history of Metropolis — *after* they managed to figure out what was going on with this operation, of course. Whatever this was, there were three dead men to account for, very probably connected with it.

Every ten feet or so, Clark paused and flashed his light on the walls. The drawings or writings or whatever they were, were becoming denser and clearer as they progressed and now Lois began to recognize some of the symbols. There was a human figure in some kind of robes, and a little farther on a cross and as they went along, other rough drawings of a religious nature.

“Looks like the settlers converted some of the local inhabitants,” Lois remarked softly. “Well, that makes sense. This wasn’t exactly Plymouth Rock, but there were colonies all around here that came for religious freedom. I guess some of the indigenous people recorded some of the history of the early colony. I remember a little of it from my New Troy Social

Studies in elementary school.”

“Looks like it,” Clark said. He ducked his head to avoid a particularly low patch of ceiling. He had uncovered his light now, and flashed it around the tunnel. There was a square opening in the tunnel on the left, and he flashed his light inside. “Looks like some kind of living quarters. You know, I think this whole area was leveled for industrial development about fifty years ago. There were hills here. I wonder if this was part of a native settlement or something.”

“Could have been,” Lois agreed. “They weren’t nearly as worried about destroying historical stuff fifty years ago as they are now.”

Clark flashed his light inside the room, illuminating walls and floor. Lois looked over his shoulder and drew back slightly at the sight.

Half a dozen wrapped forms lay on wooden platforms, and the shape of the forms told her without doubt that the forms were human. A rough wooden cross adorned the wall, and the stone walls were thick with the Indian hieroglyphs. The musty smell was much more pronounced than it had been farther back.

“That explains it,” Clark said. “It’s a burial ground. A crypt, of sorts. I’ll bet if we were to explore this place, we’d find a lot of these.”

“Yeah, well I’d like to get out of here,” Lois said. “This is getting creepy.”

“Yeah.” Clark backed out of the room. They went on in silence, but a moment later their trip came to a stop. The tunnel ended in another room with more mummies, if that was what they were, Lois thought.

“I guess we go back the other way,” Clark said after a moment.

“Yeah,” Lois agreed. “Come on.”

Clark shut off his light again as they approached the area of the small gap between the crypt and the Cost Mart tunnel. It was probably a good thing they had come when they did, Lois thought. The construction crew would probably seal up the small slide in a few days before they had a serious problem, like a collapse or something. They stood still in the dark, listening.

There was still motion in the tunnel. Lois checked the glowing dial of her watch. It had been a good half hour since they had entered this place. How long were they going to be out there?

Clark’s hand touched her arm and they moved past the slide, careful to make no sound in the pitch blackness. A short distance on and the shrouded light of Clark’s mag-light came on again.

“I wonder if there are any more ‘rooms’,” Lois whispered.

“We passed four on the way back,” Clark said. “I was looking. I guess nobody had any idea this was here. Like I said, they leveled this area for construction quite a while back. Either no one knew about the Indian burial ground, or they didn’t care. I guess by this time the record — if there ever was one — is long gone.”

“Well, it’ll make a good story,” Lois said. “That is, after we figure out what else is going on here.”

She saw her partner’s silhouette nod against the faintly illuminated stone. “I just hope there’s another way out of here,” Clark said. “I kind of doubt it, though, or things would likely have been disturbed. We’re probably going to have to wait until they get finished with whatever they’re doing. I don’t think it can be legal, though. Did you hear what that one guy said about a prowler car?”

“Yeah. But maybe that means they’ll hurry,” Lois said hopefully. “I never liked mummy and vampire movies. Exploring crypts kind of creeps me out.”

“How many crypts have you explored?” Clark asked. Even his whisper sounded amused.

Lois resisted the temptation to elbow him in the ribs. “This

one. And I'm crept out, believe me. If we walk right into Dracula, I won't even be surprised at this point."

The light slid over another opening in the wall. Lois resolutely turned her face away until they had passed it. The tunnel continued on, growing narrower and more cramped. They passed several more of the small rooms. Finally, they reached the end, a circular chamber somewhat more distinctive than the others. This one held a disintegrating mat of dried reeds on the floor, and a rough, wooden box disturbingly similar to a coffin in Lois's estimation. The markings on the wall were thicker than they had been in the other rooms, and a cloth tapestry, thin and faded with age, was fastened to the stone wall behind it. Lois took one look and averted her eyes.

"Hmm," Clark said. "This must have been for some important personage in the group. I wonder who he was."

"Would you believe I don't care?" Lois said. "I guess we're going to have to go back and wait for those characters to leave if we're going to get out any time soon."

"I guess." Clark was squinting at the markings on the tapestry. "I must be wrong. That can't mean what it looks like."

"You read this stuff?" Lois asked, somewhat incredulously. "Just like you read Chinese?"

"Not exactly," Clark said. "One summer I worked at a dig with an archaeologist who was studying Native American artifacts. I picked up some of the simpler stuff, but I've got to be reading that wrong. Something about 'the sleeping one.' or something."

"Maybe they just meant it as a polite way to say somebody important was dead," Lois said.

"No," Clark said. He pointed. "See that squiggly lines? That definitely means sleep. The symbol for death is different. Or at least I think it is. And the next one means to awake. The one after that is something like 'fate' or something. The one after that is the death symbol. That little hook on the end makes it different from the symbol for sleep."

"If you say so," Lois said. "I don't see the difference."

"Whichever it is, it doesn't make much sense." Clark repeated. "I must be reading it wrong. The cloth is in pretty poor condition. It might have damaged some of the symbols."

"I hope so," Lois said, "Otherwise, the natives were talking about whoever is in that coffin waking back up, and that isn't possible. How long do you think all this stuff has been here?"

"Good question," Clark said. "Three or four hundred years, probably. If somebody was asleep here, he'd be long dead by now."

"Maybe," Lois said, "somebody was imprisoned alive in here. An enemy leader or something."

"I don't think so," Clark said. "The place looks like it was just sealed up and nobody touched it again until we came in."

"You're right," Lois said. She gave a one sided smile. "I guess the creep factor is making my imagination go a little nuts."

"Well," Clark said, "there's one way to be sure." He stepped forward into the room.

"What are you going to do?" Lois asked.

Carefully, Clark surveyed the rough, oblong box. "This thing isn't even sealed," he said. He slipped his fingers under the lid and lifted. His eyebrows rose slightly.

"What is it?" Lois asked.

"Come see," he said.

Lois hesitated. Up until now she'd been halfway joking, but she was darned if she was going to admit to Clark how much the whole idea was really raising the hair on the back of her neck. Steeling herself, she stepped forward into the room and looked.

Nothing met her gaze but a few layers of coarse, wrinkled cloth. Carefully, she let out her breath. "Nothing. If there was ever anything in here, it's gone. Maybe we aren't the first ones here after all."

Clark was frowning slightly. "There isn't even any dust on it," he said.

"Will you stop it?" Lois said, more sharply than she had intended. "I've seen enough of this place. After we wind up this thing, we can get experts in here and they can translate all of it. It ought to keep them busy for years. In the meantime, let's go back and wait for those guys to leave, okay?"

Clark glanced at her, and somehow she had the impression that he saw a good deal more than she wanted him to see, but all he said was, "Okay."

The wait by the narrow slide area was shorter than Lois had expected, to her vast relief. She and Clark sat in utter silence on the tunnel floor, listening to the sounds of men transporting what must be fairly heavy boxes for perhaps fifteen minutes, and then the area grew quiet. Lois could see nothing in the pitch darkness, but after several minutes of silence, she felt Clark's hand on her wrist. "I think they're gone." His voice was a bare thread of sound. "I'm going to check."

"Be careful," she whispered.

He crawled past her, his legs brushing her jeans, She listened closely, but could hear only the very faintest of scraping sounds as he moved. Silence again.

Then his voice, pitched very low. "They're gone. Come on out."

The relief that surged through her was completely disproportional to the situation. Feeling with her hands, she found the opening and crawled through it. Light met her eyes at once as she emerged into the outer tunnel, and she knew that Clark had turned on his mag-light.

Her partner gave her a hand to her feet. "Shall we get out of here now?"

"Not a chance, Kent," she whispered. "I want to see where all that stuff came from. Let's go."

Clark shrugged. "Okay, but we don't know if anyone's still up there," he pointed out.

"So we'll be careful," Lois said. She turned back toward the bend in the tunnel and the ladder.

"At least let me go first," Clark said, as they paused at its foot.

"Okay, but watch your step."

"No, I was planning to go bursting up there like Rambo," he said dryly. Lois stifled a snort at the thought of Clark doing anything of the sort. Low key was her partner's specialty.

Clark handed her the light and went up the ladder with his own brand of silent grace. He paused at the top, evidently feeling around over his head, and then seemed to be listening. After several seconds, Lois heard a faint grating noise.

"Come on up," Clark's voice whispered. "There's nobody here."

Lois tucked the light into her pocket, felt around for the rungs and began to climb. Once, she banged her foot painfully on one of the metal rungs, but at last there were no more rungs, and Clark's hand was grasping hers as she emerged from the tunnel into a slightly less dark space of some kind, an alcove that opened into a larger room. A window opened on a palely lit stretch of sand, and she could see the reflection of the Moon on water beyond it. To the right of the window was a closed and bolted door.

"Where are we?" she whispered.

"I'm not sure. Some kind of building." Clark carefully closed the trap door behind her.

"Let's take a look and see," Lois said.

Clark raised his head and then, so quickly she was startled, pulled her down against the wall, under the window.

A flashlight shone through the glass an instant later. It traveled across the floor and around the room for nearly a minute

and just as suddenly was gone. Lois and Clark remained kneeling against the wall for a long count of one hundred and then Clark released her. “Sorry,” he whispered. “There wasn’t time to warn you.”

Lois told her heart to stop racing. “No problem.”

“Building Security, I think,” Clark said. He got quietly to his feet, keeping out of the line of sight from the window, and carefully peeked around the edge of the frame. “Yeah, I thought so.”

“What?”

“That’s Mariner’s Cove out there.”

Mariner’s Cove was a section of Hob’s Bay that dipped inward from the main bay, with a sloping sandy beach, and the strip of land between Old Town and the beach itself had been turned into a small but elegant resort for some of the more well-off citizens of Metropolis.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“We’re right on the water?” Lois whispered.

“Yeah. Take a look. There’s the private pier for this duplex,” he said.

“You know, I wondered if it might be smuggling,” Lois said. “What could they be bringing in?”

“Could be anything,” Clark said, “but whatever was in those boxes was heavy.”

“Weapons? Drugs?”

“We’re going to have to find out,” Clark said. “But first we need to get out of here without getting caught. There’s not supposed to be anyone in these places at this time of year.”

“Which way did the security guy go?” Lois got to her feet, her rubber soles silent on the wooden floor.

“I don’t see him.” Clark pressed his face to the glass, trying to see as much of the area as he could. “There’s a small house on one side of us, about a hundred feet away,” he said. “It looks like this is the last house in the row. Wait — I see a light. He’s headed away to our left. Let’s go.”

“How about the prowler car?” Lois asked.

“The road’s on the other side of the house, I think, but I don’t see any headlights lighting up the place.” Clark said. “My guess is that it’s come and gone. Once we’re out of here they at least can’t charge us with breaking and entering if they catch us.”

Lois had to agree with the reasoning. Clark opened the door silently, took another quick look around, and they slipped outside. Clark gently closed the door behind them.

Lois looked quickly around, but there was no sign of life. She almost jumped when a seagull screeched a minute later.

“Guess we’re disturbing the local wildlife,” Clark whispered. “We’d better make tracks.”

“Before we do I want to get this place’s address,” Lois said. “Just in case we have to come back.”

“Okay, but hurry.”

Rounding the corner of the house some few minutes later, Lois looked around carefully for guards, or any sign of the advertised prowler car, but she saw nothing. The house number was located prominently on the right side of the door, and she copied it quickly.

“Hey!” A flashlight pinned her against the door, and she saw the pudgy form of the security guard lumbering toward them. “You two stop right there!”

Needless to say, the Hottest Team in Town did nothing of the kind. Clark grabbed her hand and the two of them ran. The street dividing the little beach resort from the rest of Old Town was only sparsely traveled at this time of night, and they fled across it as fast as they could move, dodging the two cars that happened to be traversing the thoroughfare. Only one driver slammed on his brakes and blew his horn indignantly, but they gained the

opposite sidewalk intact and fled toward the main avenue that intersected it a short distance away.

Casting a look over her shoulder, Lois saw that the guard had given up the pursuit and was leaning against a streetlamp, apparently trying to catch his breath. They rounded the corner on flying feet and slowed down at once to a casual walk. No point in attracting the attention even of the two or three lone individuals in sight.

“Whew!” Clark said. “I think we lost him.”

Lois laughed a little hysterically. “At least one thing went right.”

“What do you want to do now?”

She looked at him in astonishment. “We need to go back to Cost Mart. I need to know what was in all those boxes. I’m guessing weapons, from the weight, but I could be wrong.”

“You’re probably right,” Clark said, “but there’s likely a lot of people still milling around inside. Maybe we should try coming back during the day. If we go in with a lot of shoppers, we might have a better chance of getting in without them noticing. I mean,” he added, “they just smuggled whatever it is into the store. It’s probably not going any farther tonight.”

Lois had to think about that, before reluctantly admitting that he had a valid point. “But I still want to be sure they’re not shipping whatever it is out once they got it into the store,” she said. “Let’s get the Jeep and just sort of park across from the lot, and watch them for a while.”

“In the shadows,” Clark specified. “Where they can’t tell if anyone’s in the car.”

She cast him an exasperated look. “Nah, I was thinking of driving up to the front door and asking if we could help them move their smuggled goods! Don’t try to teach Grandma how to knit, country boy.”

Clark snorted. “You’ve been hanging around me too much, city girl.”

The SUV, naturally, was parked two blocks on the other side of Cost Mart from their current location, but they made a point to pass near the big box store to see if any obvious activity was taking place. The parking lot was in darkness. There was no sign of life, although Lois was quite sure that inside the store there was a good deal of action going on.

A shadowy figure bearing a flashlight strolled casually around the building’s corner and ambled at no great speed across the store front, flashing his light around in a careless way. Other than that, Lois could see no sign of life.

Clark was fiddling with his glasses. “Store security,” he whispered. “I don’t see anyone else, do you?”

Lois shook her head. “No. Let’s see if we can get a look through the windows.”

“I thought we were going to get the Jeep.”

“We are. This will just take a minute.”

But, as might have been predicted, the side windows of the building were locked and shuttered. Old Town’s Cost Mart, to all appearances, was deserted and closed up tight.

They looked at each other.

“Okay,” Lois conceded. “You go get the Jeep. I’ll wait and watch the store until you get back.”

“Are you crazy?” Clark whispered. “We know there are a bunch of smugglers inside this place! I’m not leaving you here alone!”

She glared back at him unapologetically. “I’ll be fine! Besides, somebody’s got to watch until the other one gets back with the car, and if anything goes wrong I can defend myself better than you can, unless you’ve been taking secret Tae Kwon Do lessons! Hurry up! The sooner you go, the sooner you’ll get back!”

Clark stared back at her, frustration evident in his expression, and she knew she had won. “Go on! Hurry up! If anybody comes

out we're going to need the Jeep to follow him!"

Clark hesitated and she thought he was gritting his teeth. "All right," he said finally, "but I'm not leaving until you're across the street, out of sight of anybody in that place that decides to check."

"I'll be fine," she repeated, her command none the less fierce for being uttered in a whisper. "Go!"

"Not until you're away from this building," Clark said stubbornly. "That's final!"

Once in a while, when Clark felt strongly about something, nothing she could say was going to move him, and Lois had begun to recognize when she had reached that point. This was one of those times.

"All right!" she whispered back angrily. Without hesitation, she headed for the crosswalk and marched across the street, barely pausing to allow the traffic light to change. Clark hurried after her. She strode toward the corner and rounded it, pausing in the shelter of the canopy of a long-since closed restaurant. "There!" she said, looking challengingly at him. "I can see the place without them seeing me. *Now* will you go?"

Behind his worried expression, she could swear she could see a grin lurking. "All right, but *please* don't go any closer until I get back. Promise?"

"All right, I promise," she said in exasperation. "Now go on!"

Clark looked at her for another long moment and then nodded. "Okay. But I'll need the keys."

"Oh." She fished them out of the pocket of her jacket and dropped them into his hand. "There. Go."

Without another word, he turned and jogged away. Lois watched him until he crossed the street and vanished around the corner, half a block from her position. Silence, except for the much reduced and mostly distant sounds of traffic, and the occasional short blasts of wind, descended.

The street wasn't exactly deserted, since Metropolis never actually slept, but there were only one or two pedestrians within sight, and none of them were less than a block from her. Every now and then a car rolled down the street, but they were scarce as well. Standing in the shadow of the closed and shuttered restaurant, out of the pool of light from the nearest of Old Town's light poles, for the first time Lois became aware of the near quiet that reigned around her, and the shadows that lay between the pools of yellow light cast by the old-fashioned street lamps. The breeze that gusted erratically between the buildings was chilly, and she pulled her coat more snugly around her. Unexpectedly, she found herself hoping that Clark wouldn't take long. The area was somehow more intimidating without the solid bulk of her partner beside her.

Knock it off, Lois! she told herself. She had done this kind of thing before Clark had become her partner, and she was more experienced now. Certainly, no mugger was going to catch her by surprise where she stood, and even if someone tried, she could handle it. She was a week away from taking her test for Tae Kwon Do black belt at the dojang. Unless somebody showed up with a gun, she could handle stray assailants. Besides, Clark would be back in minutes with the Jeep. There was no reason to get nervous, just because she was standing here on a dim street of Old Town, by herself at — she glanced at her watch — two-fifteen in the morning.

From somewhere she heard the faintest hint of flapping of wings and twisted her head around to try to locate the sound. Probably a pigeon roosting somewhere in the eaves of the building behind her, she thought. Unbidden, the image of that rough, wooden coffin in that little stone room below the surface of the Cost Mart parking lot came to mind. Instantly, she banished the image. Vampires didn't exist, and even if they did, there were no legends of vampires among the Native American Indians.

But that crypt had shown signs of European influence, too, she reminded herself. So the European settlers had been here when that crypt was dug.

But that had no relation to anything, she reminded herself. Superstitions couldn't hurt anyone, and that was all this vampire thing was. Those bodies in the park had been put there by some human agency — one that liked to play games. Probably the culprits were inside Cost Mart right at this very minute, figuring that they had confused the police.

Another rustling of wings and more flapping, louder this time. Lois strained her ears, trying to discover where the sound was coming from. And then —

From somewhere above her, something large went by in a rush of air. Lois felt it rather than saw it. She ducked, which was silly, she reminded herself a second later. She was under a canopy, and nothing was going to descend on her from above without some kind of warning. She moved forward so that she could peer upward in the direction the thing had gone, but she could see nothing against the cloudy sky.

The flapping of wings had gone silent, she realized, all at once. There was no motion around her at all.

Her spine prickling, Lois backed under the canopy, as far back against the stone of the building as she could. It had probably been an owl, she thought, but if there was something out there, like that thing that Bobby Bigmouth had described, the thing that he thought had killed his friend, she wasn't going to help it surprise her. Whatever that had been, it certainly hadn't been Superman.

Motion out of the corner of her eye caught her attention, and she drew in a gasp of relief, when she saw the Jeep turn the corner and roll toward her. Clark pulled up next to her hiding spot and in an instant Lois yanked the passenger door open, jumped into the cab and slammed the door behind her, locking it all in one motion.

"What's the matter?" Clark asked at once.

"Nothing," Lois said. "It's cold out there when you aren't moving around."

The look he gave her told her he didn't believe the explanation for a minute, but she had no intention of letting him know that her imagination had been getting the best of her out there in the dark. Whatever that had been that had swooped past her had probably been an owl or something. She'd seen them at night occasionally when driving past Centennial Park. Didn't they eat mice or something? There were bound to be mice around the bay and in a part of the city so given over to little outside coffee shops and snack stands, so there were probably owls here, too. Determinedly, she shoved the incident to the deeper recesses of her mind and directed her attention to the business at hand. "Find a place to park where we can watch the doors and the parking lot for a little while and where they can't see us very well. Once we're sure they're not going anywhere tonight, we can go home."

"I'm all for that," Clark said. "I think we've found more than enough for one night. I just don't think they'll risk moving whatever it is right now. A bunch of trucks driving around Metropolis's streets at two-thirty in the morning is bound to get somebody's attention. I'd think they've got some other scheme to dispose of their contraband."

"Yeah, probably." Lois wasn't about to admit that she was pretty tired. It had been a very tiring evening, filled with unexpected developments, and she was ready to go home, crawl into bed, and catch some sleep. But first things first. "But we're going to be sure. I'm not losing this story because Bill Senior or his little boy decided to put one over on the Metro Police and move out their contraband before anyone could get a warrant to search the place."

"Okay, okay." Clark drove cautiously around the block, and

when he returned to the street that ran across in front of Cost Mart, he turned left instead of right, let the car roll to a stop in the shadow of a tall evergreen tree, fifteen feet from the corner, and cut the motor.

Lois relaxed. Somehow, sitting safely in the cab of the Jeep, with Clark sitting next to her, all the nervousness she had felt earlier was gone. They sat still in the darkened vehicle, watching the Cost Mart store.

Silence descended. The street grew quieter, although the occasional lone passersby went past the Jeep, walking briskly along the sidewalk. There was no activity to be seen at the Cost Mart.

At last, when three-thirty had come and gone, Lois was forced to concede that there would probably be no more action tonight. She yawned behind her hand. "Let's go," she said through the yawn, "I'm thinking more about my warm bed than anything else right now."

"You got it." Clark turned on the engine, backed carefully out of their hidden parking space, turned on the lights and moved slowly and carefully forward on the street.

As he turned the corner, the headlights illuminated a single figure standing on the sidewalk. A man wearing a dark suit and a dark, form-fitting overcoat. He lifted his head and Lois saw a face that she would not forget for some time.

The face was narrow and pale, with dark, piercing eyes and a head of thick, black hair. As the headlights flashed across his features, he ducked his face, shading his eyes, half covering it with the lapel of his form-fitting, black coat. Then, he stepped swiftly backward out of the passing lights and was gone.

"You don't have to walk up with me," Lois protested, but her voice lacked conviction, and Clark frowned slightly. He hadn't said anything about her precipitous entrance into the Jeep an hour and a half ago, nor did he comment now, but she suspected he was thinking a great deal. Clark wasn't stupid, and he probably knew her better than — well, just about anyone.

Instead, his expression changed to the faintest of smiles and he put his hands into the pockets of his jacket. "You know me," he said. "When I escort a lady home, it's full service."

"You haven't changed a bit since last year," she said, recalling the last time he had escorted her back to her apartment when she had been more than a little worried about the consequences to her of an investigation, although she would have died before she admitted it to a rookie reporter, as she had erroneously pegged him at the time. And she almost had. That time, he had shown up the next morning just in time to save her life, and she had subsequently discovered, although he didn't know it, that he had almost certainly spent the previous night staking out her apartment. If it hadn't been for that, Mr. Makeup would have brought an abrupt end to her career.

"All right, come on," Lois said. To tell the truth, having Clark's solid form beside her was enormously reassuring as they proceeded up the steps and into the deserted entrance hallway of her apartment house. The sound of the elevator descending a moment or two later when she pressed the button, reminded Lois that elevators were good places for assailants to hang out, so Clark wasn't going to get an argument here, either. Normally, she wasn't so chicken-hearted, she rationalized, but this had been the kind of evening that was likely to give her uneasy dreams tonight. It was okay to be just a little edgy.

The memory of the lone man on the sidewalk near Cost Mart came to mind. He was probably just an innocent passerby, but the image stuck with her and for some reason the picture gave her chills on the back of her neck. Admittedly, vampires weren't supposed to be able to enter a building without invitation from an inhabitant, but that prohibition had no effect on general run-of-the-mill criminals, and the events of the day, as well as the night,

had left her feeling just a little bit skittish. Intergang was definitely up to something, and it was certainly a lot more dangerous than any mythical member of the undead. She didn't think that she or Clark had given them any reason to be suspicious but you never knew.

The car arrived after a minute or two and Clark let her enter first, shoved his glasses back into place and followed. Lois pressed the button numbered "5" and they waited. The doors slid decrepitly shut and the elevator began to rise.

"I want to go back there tomorrow," Lois said.

"I figured," Clark said. "Let's make it a little later in the day, though — say about the time that there's likely to be a rush of shoppers."

Lois nodded. "After work — say about four-thirty. I figure we can go in to work about noon, after we've had a little sleep. I want to be at my best when we try this."

"Good idea." Clark looked faintly relieved. "Maybe Jimmy can do a little work on locating the plans for that building, too. We know there has to be a sub-basement. Maybe he can find out where the entrance is."

"I'll call him in the morning," Lois said. She yawned behind her hand as the elevator came to a creaky halt and the doors scraped open. Clark let her exit ahead of him, and followed her down the hallway.

The hall was dim. Lois hadn't been too happy when the building's owners had installed dimmer switches to help save electricity, but so far there hadn't been any untoward consequences. No muggings or anything had occurred to disturb any of the tenants. Still, the dim passage made the memory of that shadowy crypt, and the crude wooden coffin rise suddenly in her mind and she was silently glad that Clark accompanied her to her door. Not that she really had any fears of vampires rising from their coffins to feast on the living, but it had been a creepy evening. She stopped in front of her door and unlocked the series of locks before opening it.

The lights were out, of course, and Clark reached past her to snap on the switch by the entrance. The warm yellow light sprang to life at once and they stepped inside. Clark glanced unobtrusively around.

"Everything looks okay," he said.

"No reason it shouldn't," Lois said. She yawned again. "I'd invite you in for coffee, but I'm going straight to bed. Are you sure you prefer to walk? I would have driven you home first if you wanted me to."

"But that way I couldn't have seen you to your door," Clark pointed out. He crossed the room to check her window and nodded when he discovered it to be locked. He pulled the curtains firmly. "Good night, Lois. Get some sleep."

"I will," she said. "Good night, Clark."

He stepped outside and waited while she closed the door, and only then did she hear his footsteps retreat down the hallway. She turned the locks, smiling faintly. Clark was so obvious, sometimes. She'd thought he was a little spooked, and she was right. It was just like him to make sure she was safely inside before he left.

Well, it was well past time for her to be in bed. Lois crossed to her bedroom and snapped on the bedroom light, before turning off the switch by her bedroom door that also extinguished the living room light. Somehow, once Clark was gone, the apartment had an empty feel to it that she hadn't been aware of before. She checked her bedroom window and made sure the shade was pulled before she changed quickly into her flannel pajamas. Of course, they weren't particularly glamorous, but after she had seen a photo in the Planet of a hapless woman descending a ladder clad only in a bedraggled negligee while fire decimated her apartment building, Lois had made certain that she was always decently clad even at night, especially in the winter, and

had a robe close by, just in case. Somehow the notion of Superman seeing her scrambling awkwardly down a ladder, while most of Metropolis got a good look at her clad only in semi-transparent lace and goose-bumps, didn't appeal to her at all.

She brushed her teeth quickly, made a few swipes at her hair with the hairbrush and went to switch off the bedroom light.

The living room window rattled and every faculty she possessed went on the alert. Perhaps it was the evening she had spent sneaking around in underground crypts, but all of a sudden her scalp was crawling.

It was probably just the wind, she thought. Or maybe Superman had flown by. He sometimes did, she knew. She had seen him late one night last summer when she had been doing research, with the windows partially open to cool the room, and Superman had drifted down to float outside the window to ask if she was all right.

But somehow she didn't feel at all like opening the curtains to check tonight. Besides, if he wanted to talk to her, he'd probably knock.

Again the faint rattle came, and then nothing. She waited, listening for several minutes, but whatever it had been seemed to have stopped.

Lois closed and locked her door and crawled into bed. After a moment, she switched on the lamp on her night stand.

The room looked exactly the same. There was nothing to alarm her, and yet her nerves were still tingling. She knew this mood. She wasn't going to get much sleep until she worked out what had set her on edge. Telling herself that she was being spooked by an overactive imagination wasn't going to help, either.

Fifteen minutes later, she was still wide awake. Fatigue pulled at her, but sleep was still very far away.

Lois got out of bed and went to her dresser. Her jewelry case sat there with rings, bracelets, chains, earrings, a string of pearls and a pendent tangled together in the bottom.

In a small compartment on one side, however, was something she hadn't looked at in years. A tiny, silver cross on a thin, slightly tarnished silver chain, it had been a gift from her grandmother one Christmas.

Lois took it out, carefully untangled the chain and contemplated it. It was silly, of course, but what was the harm?

She unfastened the catch, slipped the chain around her neck and, with some fumbling, refastened the catch. Then, feeling somewhat shamefaced, she returned to bed, pulled the covers up and determinedly extinguished the bedside lamp.

In less than three minutes, she was sound asleep.

In the light of late morning, when Lois crawled out of bed, her fears of the night before seemed a little silly. She brushed her teeth, got dressed and arranged her hair, eyeing the silver chain and its tiny silver cross thoughtfully.

If she wore it to work today, was Clark likely to tease her about it if he noticed it? Once, while she was scrubbing an upper molar and again while she was brushing the hair in the back and contemplating its length, she had the impulse to remove the chain, but in the end she left it on and simply tucked it beneath the neck of her knit sweater.

Okay, she thought a little defiantly, so it wasn't something she usually wore. Why shouldn't she wear it today? And if Clark dared to make the slightest remark about it, she was perfectly capable of putting him in his place. It had nothing to do with coffins or bodies drained of blood, strange-looking men in dark coats, or hidden crypts under the Cost Mart parking lot. She just felt like wearing her grandmother's gift. Was there anything wrong with that?

Stepping out into the open a short time later, she discovered that the cold, crisp night last night had morphed into a damp,

gray, cloudy day with a light scattering of tiny snowflakes floating lazily down. She clutched her coat tightly at her throat and unlocked the door of the Jeep quickly. A few moments later, she was traversing the snowy streets of Metropolis toward the Daily Planet.

Fortunately, the morning rush hour was past. Pulling up to a light, she put her foot on the brake, only to discover that in the slush of snow melting on the pavement, that she suddenly had no brakes. The Jeep slid forward into the intersection and an oncoming Volkswagen had to swerve to avoid her.

The blue and red figure that appeared in front of the sliding vehicle almost startled her. Superman brought her to a stop and stepped around quickly to the window. After a shocked pause, Lois lowered the glass.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes." Lois found herself slightly breathless and told her heart to slow down. "Thanks. I didn't realize how slippery the road was."

"I've been trying to prevent accidents all morning," he said. "It's always this way with the first snow of the season. There's fender-benders all over the city. Be careful driving the rest of the way to work. It's just as bad farther on."

"I will. Is the other driver all right?"

"He's fine. Be careful, all right?" Superman stepped back and moved quickly to stop another car that tried at that moment to slide into her. "Better get going. You're blocking the intersection."

Lois rolled up the window and crept away at half the speed limit. Behind her, someone blew his horn in exasperation, and a moment later a station wagon tore past her, spraying her windshield with snow. The next instant, the brake lights of the other vehicle came on and the car skidded, its back end fishtailing as the driver tried to stop.

Lois turned right, leaving the other driver to his fate. Why on Earth couldn't people be more careful? Most of the accidents this morning could probably be avoided if the drivers would exercise some elementary caution!

She turned another corner, cut down a narrow alley and emerged onto the street in front of the Daily Planet, and moments later was parking the Jeep in the Daily Planet's lot, under the building. Maybe, she thought, she and Clark could take the bus over to Cost Mart today. Not only did she want to try to sneak into the sub-basement and see if she could locate the smuggled goods that had come in last night, but she wanted to have another try at interviewing the manager. Surely Henderson had talked to him by now. Not that she expected to get anything truthful out of the man, but it was possible that they could learn something he didn't intend to tell them if she was clever enough.

Naturally, when she reached the newsroom, Clark was nowhere to be seen. She dropped her purse beside her desk and glanced around. "Jimmy!"

Jimmy was crossing the Pit with a large box of doughnuts. "Yeah?" he inquired.

"Have you seen Clark?"

"Yeah. He was here for a little while, but he ran out about half an hour ago and hasn't got back yet."

That figured. Lois checked her watch. It would be the lunch hour in forty minutes, and the perfect time to go into Cost Mart with the crowd of lunch time shoppers, and of course Clark was missing.

She picked up her purse. Well, she was just going to have to go by herself. She didn't want to miss the opportunity to find out what that batch had been bringing in last night. Clark would figure out where she'd gone when he got back, and if he was lucky he'd join her in time to help her do some snooping.

"When Clark gets back," she told Jimmy, "tell him I've gone

to check into that stuff we discussed last night. He'll know what I mean."

"If you mean Cost Mart, I haven't had the time to get the plans yet," Jimmy said. "Clark said you were going over there after work."

"I figure lunch hour should be even better," she said. "There'll be more customers around. Don't forget to let Clark know, if he gets back in time."

"But —" Jimmy's voice trailed off uncertainly. Lois paid no attention to his feeble protest. With a brisk step, she headed for the elevator.

In the end, Lois drove her Jeep to Cost Mart.

The snow was coming down more heavily than it had been earlier and instead of a coating of half-melted slush on the sidewalks and in the gutters, an actual layer of white crystals was beginning to collect on awnings and to form little snowdrifts against buildings. It looked as if the first snow of the season was going to be more than a foot note in the weather report tonight, she thought, as she left the Daily Planet. Superman must be having a good time, trying to prevent accidents.

Lois considered the options of catching one of the crowded city buses, no doubt packed to bursting with damp people, versus taking a cab, driven by a cab driver who treated the snow as a mere inconvenience and his car as one of the flying vehicles out of the Jetsons, and decided that if she was going to risk her neck that it would be in her own Jeep. Besides, one never knew when one was going to have to make a hasty exit, and trying to flag down a cab at such a time was bound to be more than a little awkward.

The parking lot at Cost Mart was very crowded, which meant, Lois thought with satisfaction, that the store was going to be crowded as well. All to the good. It took her more than ten minutes to find a spot, which she grabbed without courtesy when a Ford pulled out of a space, beating another car to the punch and narrowly avoiding a collision as she did so. Ignoring the colorful comments of the other driver, as well as the single digit salute he threw her way, Lois pulled triumphantly into the spot.

Shoppers streamed through the store's main doors in an unending mass. Lois joined the crowd and entered the big building apparently unremarked by any of the employees. Grabbing a cart, she rolled it down the first aisle, trying to look the same as the hundreds of other patrons rushing into the discount store, searching for bargains during their lunch break. Passing a shelf offering mouthwash, Lois appropriated a bottle at random, and a moment later a bottle of aspirin. A real customer was going to have merchandise in her cart so, to blend in, she needed it as well.

From her previous visit, she knew that the manager's office was in the back of the store, reached through a door adorned with an authoritative sign reading: "Employees Only". Lois worked her way through the mob of shoppers, pausing now and then to throw some small item into her cart, until she had reached a spot from which she could see the door that opened onto the hallway that led to the office of the manager and whoever else might be in some position of responsibility here.

There were, of course, two employees presently within sight, who would be certain to see her, Lois thought in disgust, if she attempted to go through that apparently hallowed door. She stopped before a shelf displaying several different brands of bug spray, and pretended to be examining the offered products. It was too bad, she thought belatedly, that Clark wasn't with her. He was good at creating diversions when she needed to get in somewhere without being seen.

Well, she was just going to have to figure out how to get past them by herself.

Lois replaced the can of bug spray on the shelf and continued

on down the aisle, closely inspecting the wares displayed on the shelves. Maybe the employees would leave on their own. One of them was sweeping the area of floor in front of the door through which she wished to pass. The other was apparently changing the prices on the items on the bottom shelf next to the door. Neither showed any sign of going away any time soon.

Lois glanced casually around, and after a moment's inspection she verified what she had suspected. Although they were inconspicuously placed, there were surveillance cameras in strategic spots around the store: Security here was tight, which made sense, considering the variety of clientele that patronized Cost Mart. Anything out of the ordinary that she did was going to be observed. Unless

The ladies' room a short distance away wouldn't have cameras.

Without further internal debate, Lois turned in the direction of the washroom. Leaving her cart by the door, right against the wall where it was unlikely to impede traffic and might thereby draw attention, she entered the ladies' room.

There was someone in one of the four toilet stalls and another woman brushing her hair in front of the sink. Lois glanced upward, striving to assure herself that there were no viewing devices evident, but could discover none. Well, at least they seemed to be allowing their customers some level of privacy. Lois entered one of the stalls. In her purse, she had the equipment to create her distraction. Now, all she needed was the opportunity.

After a moment, she heard footsteps and the bathroom door opened and closed. That was probably the woman who had been brushing her hair. That left one woman in the bathroom stall

The toilet flushed and after a moment she heard footsteps again. The water came on. Various noises told her that the unknown woman was washing her hands. She would probably leave shortly. Now, if no one else came in

The water went off and Lois heard the rattle of the paper towel dispenser. Then footsteps and the sound of the door again.

In an instant, Lois was out of the stall. In her hands was a ball of wadded up paper towel and a bottle of fingernail polish remover. She stuffed the wad of paper into the trash container, typically filled nearly to overflowing with paper towels. Without pausing, she twisted the lid from the bottle of polish remover and dumped it over the paper ball, saturating it. In the metal container, in the tile-lined room, no fire was likely to go far, especially with the sprinklers that she had already noted, installed in the ceiling, but the metal swinging door and domed lid of the container should prevent it from being put out too soon. It would set off the fire alarm and/or the smoke detector, which might very well draw the employees away from their very inconvenient posts for a few vital moments.

She always carried a cheap lighter in her purse in case of emergency. Now she flicked it on, lit another paper towel, pushed the little swinging door of the container open and dropped it atop the lighter-soaked ball of paper towel.

The paper lit instantly and flame burst upward as the lighter fluid caught. Lois wedged the metal door partially open with another wadded towel, turned and walked to the door, exited casually and reclaimed her cart. Trying not to look as if she were hurrying, she steered it quickly back toward the doorway that was her first goal, expecting at any second to hear the wail of the fire alarm.

But she reached her destination without any sign of her sabotage bearing results at all. She considered with mild dismay, the possibility that it had gone out instead of lighting the paper towels in the trash container, and stood, apparently studying (again) the various brands of bug spray. She was comparing a can that promised to exterminate roaches, termites and ants to another that promised to eliminate those pests in addition to fleas, spiders and flying insects as well, when the shriek of the siren nearly

made her jump out of her shoes.

The results, however, were all that she could have wished. People looked around frantically, then dropped whatever they were doing and converged on the source of the alarm. Even shoppers trailed after the employees rushing toward the ladies' room. Lois smelled the smoke from the burning damp paper towels. It seemed as if her sabotage had been effective after all. And if she was lucky, it would distract the attention of the persons monitoring the cameras as well.

Without hesitation, she abandoned her cart and walked briskly toward the door that led into the back sections of Cost Mart.

Having been here the previous morning, she identified without difficulty the office of the manager. Lois went past the door without a pause or a glance, scanning the area for any indication of a way into the basement of Cost Mart.

There was none in sight on first sight, but ahead the corridor ended in a T crossing, which went right and left. Lois hurried to the intersection and looked quickly both ways.

To her left was a very ordinary sign that announced the elevator and beside it, the stairwell.

She turned left. As she approached the elevator the bell signaling the arrival of the car rang sharply and she heard the distinctive sound of compressed air that announced the opening of the doors.

It was too late to hide. Lois stood still, trying to look as if she belonged. The doors slid aside and a man emerged.

Lois gave him a casual glance and moved past him into the elevator. He was a short, dark man, dressed neatly in jeans and a green T-shirt with the logo of Cost Mart on the left breast. He barely looked at her, but moved down the hall in the direction of the main store. Lois looked over the control panel and punched the button for the basement.

The elevator moved downward, and an instant later stopped with a soft sigh of air in what was purportedly the basement of Cost Mart. The doors opened.

The hallway beyond the elevator doors was white-walled and otherwise featureless. Lois stepped out, listening closely for sounds.

Somewhere, not far away to her left, she could hear voices and the sounds of people moving around. Would there be a way to access the sub-basement that she knew was here? Probably, but it might not be obvious. Still —

Lois turned right, away from the voices and other sounds, toward a place where the hallway branched, going left and right. Perhaps, if she looked around, she could find some other way down. There didn't seem to be much in the way of activity down in this direction, so maybe that would be where they would hide a secret stairway or something.

The intersecting hallway, when she reached it, was deserted and quiet, and led to a series of doors in each direction. Lois turned arbitrarily right and moved quickly to the first door. Pushing it open, she saw it apparently led to a storeroom where large crates stood ready for unpacking. The next, somewhat farther down the same direction, was more or less the same. The hallway ended beyond the next door in a pair of wide doors that opened on another dimly lighted room. Large wooden crates were stacked against one wall, and stacks of pallets and cardboard boxes were piled about the room. An aisle-truck, its fork stacked with several boxes, was parked beside a pair of doors that apparently marked a freight elevator.

That might be what she was looking for, of course, but she could come back to check once she had verified that the hallway in the other direction held nothing of interest. Lois turned and retraced her steps to the place where the corridor branched.

The passage in the other direction was short. It turned to the

right, jogged right again in a short dog-leg and ended in a blank wall. Lois stopped. This was to say the least of it, unexpected.

As she hesitated, the apparently blank wall began to move, sliding silently aside, revealing a lighted interior, and three men, standing within. For an instant, no one moved, and then Clarence Brunner, the manager of this branch of Cost Mart, followed by two other men, exited. Beyond them, before the door slid shut, Lois could see that the small, lighted room was actually an elevator. She had, apparently, found the way to the sub-basement. Unfortunately, the circumstances were not exactly ideal.

Lois stood still. The Cost Mart manager regarded her expressionlessly.

"Miss Lane," he said. "I see you found it necessary to explore the premises on your own. That was very unfortunate."

Lois backed away a step. "The last I heard, trespassing wasn't a federal crime."

Brunner smiled faintly. "Trespassing? Of course not."

"Well," Lois said, "if you're going to call the police and arrest me, get on with it."

Brunner shook his head. "I'm afraid not." He nodded to one of the men. "Bring her along."

Lois found each of her arms being grasped by an unsmiling man. The sliding door to the elevator opened again and Clarence Brunner stepped back within, followed by Lois and her captors. The panel slid shut.

"Hey!" Lois said. "What are you doing? Are you crazy?"

The manager didn't answer. The elevator dropped slowly and came to a stop.

"This way." The doors slid open and the man led the way down another hallway and paused beside a section of blank wall. Brunner stepped between her and the wall and Lois heard a faint beeping sound. The wall slid silently aside and she was pushed unceremoniously through into a small, square room.

"What are you doing?" Lois protested. "All I did was —"

Brunner smiled without humor. "Miss Lane, I don't have time to fool around with snoopy reporters. You found too much for me to let you go free. I'll have to consult with my superiors to decide what to do with you. There's no way out of that room without the key, so I advise you to behave." He stepped backward, and the door slid shut with a soft click of finality. Lois was alone.

"Where did she say she was going?" Clark asked, a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach.

"You know Lois," Jimmy said. "She said to tell you she'd gone to investigate what you were discussing last night. I think she meant the Cost Mart you guys staked out. I know you said you were going there after work, but she said she thought the lunch hour would be even better."

"Oh, great." Clark knew better by now to even doubt that Lois would do any such thing. Of course she would. "How long has she been gone?"

Jimmy glanced at the wall clock. "She left about noon. It's been nearly four hours."

"I'd better go over there and see if I can find her," Clark said. "If she gets back before I do, page me, okay?"

"Sure," Jimmy said. "I hope she didn't get into any trouble."

"So do I." Clark headed for the stairs.

As the door slid shut, Lois threw herself against it, but it was too late. She was sealed in, and true to Brunner's statement there didn't seem, at least on a first, cursory examination, any way to open the door.

Of course, that didn't necessarily stop Lois Lane. She stood back taking stock of her current surroundings.

She was in a room about ten feet by ten feet. The floor was covered with a plush carpet, and the furnishings consisted of an elegant sofa against one wall, a large, luxurious armchair, a

coffee table, constructed of what looked like mahogany, and a graceful floor lamp with a shade in the shape of a lily. On the shelf beneath the table lay two books and several magazines. A small door to one side opened on a tiny lavatory with a toilet and a sink. There were no windows, in the main room or the bathroom, air was apparently blown into the room through a six-by-four-inch grated vent in the ceiling and the door was a flat rectangle that fitted precisely with the wall, and matched it so perfectly that if she had not seen it close she would have had no idea where it was located. There was no way she was going to be able to pry it open with the materials at hand.

They had taken her purse, of course. Lois kicked the door angrily.

Well, Jimmy would tell Clark where she had gone, and her partner was bound to come looking for her when she didn't return. He'd probably enlist Superman to help hunt for her as well, so the case wasn't completely hopeless, but it was frustrating to be so completely stymied in any attempt to get out of a room. It wasn't her way to simply sit and do nothing.

Well, maybe she could figure something out. Carefully, Lois began a minute, inch by inch examination of the walls.

Nothing. Lois flung herself down in the armchair in exasperation. She had gone over every possible inch of her prison, and there was no chink in the walls, no possible way, as far as she could see, to force the door open. Nothing but a snake was going to get through that tiny air vent, and she had tried yelling for Superman until her throat was hoarse. Apparently the place was sound-proofed, too. So she was trapped, until and unless Clark managed to find her, or her captors decided to open that door.

She checked her watch, which informed her helpfully that it was now nearly five o'clock. Surely Clark was looking for her by now! Maybe he would call Superman if she was gone long enough. *Come on, Clark!* she thought. *You know how often I get into trouble! Just once, just once! call Superman! Call Henderson and tell him what we were doing and what we found! This is one time I can't do it by myself! Please have an attack of common sense and get someone down here to help me get out of this place!*

But, of course, there was no answer. Unable to endure doing nothing, Lois got to her feet and paced. There had to be something she could do, she told herself, but she had explored every square inch of this horrible little room and there was no way to get out of it. Lois hated the feeling of helplessness. Having to depend on others was something she had sworn never to do after she had left home. She hadn't been able to depend on her parents; she hadn't wanted to depend on a partner, but now the only thing she could do was to hope that Clark would somehow manage to locate her and get her out of this place before Brunner or his superiors decided to come back and eliminate her as a threat.

But no one came, and time ticked by second by endless second. Pacing was a completely fruitless activity, and eventually Lois flung herself back into the chair again. Her watch now said it was past six. It would be nearly dark by now. The sun would be down, and the bright colors of sunset would be fading to pale pastels in the evening sky. Clark had to realize that she was in trouble. Surely he was looking for her!

The only problem, of course, was the fact that he really had no idea where she was. He might guess that she was somewhere near Cost Mart, but he couldn't be certain, and he couldn't know about this hidden room. The chances of him finding her were not high.

But Clark had come through for her many times, she knew, and so had Superman. And there was still the chance that she could somehow manage to outwit Brunner and his thugs when

they came back for her, and manage to escape. She had wiggled out of tight situations before.

The silence in the room was maddening. She got up and walked again, just for something to do. Maybe their plan was to drive her insane with the solitude and suspense, she conjectured. If so, they were going to be disappointed.

Again, she glanced at her watch. Seven-thirteen. It would be pitch dark outside now. The early nightfall of winter would have descended and the sun would be long gone. She wondered whether the snow was still falling. Her Jeep in the parking lot would be covered in white, but maybe Clark would see it and realize at least that she had been here. She hoped so. Cost Mart closed at eight, and Lois figured that Brunner would wait at least until the store closed to do anything to her. Most likely they would wait until it was much later, so there would be fewer people around to see them take her away to whatever fate they intended for her. Whatever it was, she figured that their intentions could not be to leave her alive. There was far too much money involved for Intergang. She was too much a loose end that needed to be removed.

Again, she flung herself into the chair. It would be a relief even if the Intergang thugs would come back. At least then she might get out of this place, even if they were going to try to kill her. If she ever got out of the room, she could scream for Superman. Maybe he could get to her before somebody shot her or something, if he was anywhere nearby.

Without a sound, the section of wall that was the room's door began to move.

"We've got out an APB for her," Henderson was saying. Perry White paced the floor of Henderson's office at the Twelfth Precinct. "Superman already notified me that she'd disappeared. He's looking for her too."

"I swear, that woman is taking years off my life," Perry said, running his hand through the thinning hair on top of his head. "Nobody's seen her since about noon. She told Olsen she was heading over to check out Cost Mart —"

"Yeah, I know," Henderson scowled. "Look, Perry, we're doing our best with short staffing. Superman's out there looking, and so's Kent. So far we've found nothing. No sign of her, her vehicle or —"

The ringing of his cell phone cut off whatever he had been going to say. Henderson flipped open the phone. "Henderson."

Perry paused, trying not to distract the police inspector. Henderson listened for several seconds. "No sign of foul play?"

Again the person on the other end of the call spoke at length. Perry held his breath.

"Good. I want the area searched. Keep me updated." He closed the phone. "One of my guys spotted her car. It's parked in the lot on the east side of Centennial Park."

"I guess she isn't in it," Perry said.

"No. Look, Perry —" Henderson regarded him with a trace of sympathy, "why don't you head home. There's nothing you can do right now, and I'll be sure to call you if anyone finds anything."

Perry chewed his lip. He knew Henderson was right, but it was hard to just go about his normal routine when Lois was missing, and he knew very well that she was probably in serious danger. He scowled at Henderson. "What in Sam Hill would Lois be doing at Centennial Park? She told Jimmy she was going to check out what she and Kent were discussing last night — and Kent said that was Cost Mart. The one over by the bay."

Henderson shrugged. "Good question."

Perry's scowl grew more ferocious. "You know Lois. She's like a terrier with a bone. She gets hold of somethin' and chews on it 'til she figures out what's botherin' her about it. What if she went over to Cost Mart on a snoopin' expedition and got caught?"

Henderson regarded him thoughtfully. “I thought you said you didn’t think the Churches would have anything to do with criminal activities.”

“I did,” Perry said. “But just because I don’t think they could doesn’t mean somebody else wouldn’t. Kent was pretty close-mouthed about what they saw last night, but he said he thought they had a good lead on those vampire murders in the park. He wouldn’t say anything else — but I know Kent. If Lois went back to do some snoopin’ without him, and found out too much —”

Henderson straightened up. “Kent told you that? Did he give you any idea of what he found?”

Perry shook his head. “No. He said they needed to do some more checking, and were going back this evening — but Lois jumped the gun, and now she’s missing. I don’t like this a bit.”

“No,” Henderson said. “Neither do I.” He got to his feet. “Come on.”

“Where?”

“I figure,” Henderson said, too casually, “that it wouldn’t hurt if we took a short trip to Cost Mart, just to see what we can see. Feel up to it?”

Perry nodded. “Let’s go.”

“You bring your car?”

“Sure.”

“Good. I’m driving.”

Superman circled in the air high over the bay and Cost Mart. The area was dark with the setting of the sun, except for the artificial lighting provided by street lights and advertising signs, and the snow continued to fall lightly, drifting on the soft breeze from the bay. The air was chilly, but had a damp quality that smelled faintly of the ocean. So far he could see no sign of Lois, nor could he hear any trace of her heartbeat, but something deeper than thought, some instinct, perhaps, told him that Lois was somewhere nearby. She had come here; of that he was sure. It wouldn’t be the first time that his partner had managed to get herself in very deep trouble while in single-minded pursuit of a story.

He had already X-rayed the tunnel dug by Cost Mart under the parking lot, as well as the parallel one that housed the Native American crypt. There was no sign of activity there now. He had scanned the entire area accessible to his X-ray vision, including the resort house where the smuggling tunnel had emerged, so it looked as if Clark Kent was going to have to do some more direct hands-on exploration, and the first place to look was Cost Mart.

On the thought, he landed behind the huge store, changing from Superman to Clark as he landed, and a few minutes later, Clark Kent, clad in a pair of jeans, a T-shirt and a leather jacket, and minus his glasses, was crossing the parking lot and entering the portals of the “Biggest Bargain Store in Metropolis.”

Cost Mart was due to close at eight, and it was now close to seven, but the crowd inside the big store hadn’t thinned at all. Clark appropriated a basket and walked casually down the aisles, just as Lois had done several hours ago, working his way toward the back. Along his path, mingled with the crowd of shoppers, he noted Cost Mart employees engaged in various tasks, usually a young man or woman wearing jeans and a green T-shirt bearing the logo of Cost Mart on the left breast.

The “Employees Only” door in the rear, which led to the offices in the back of Cost Mart, was his objective, and Clark stood, apparently examining two different cans of bug spray while he scouted the situation unobtrusively. Here and there, store employees went about their jobs, but they could be circumvented if he moved fast enough. There were security cameras in strategic locations on the ceiling and walls, but they had speed limitations. If he moved fast enough, they wouldn’t see anything at all.

Clark pushed his cart toward the end of the row of various insecticides and cleaning materials, and for an instant stepped out

of the view of the security camera. Instantly, he shifted to super-speed and a split-second later was through the door and headed toward the back of the store.

And, at that exact moment, a woman screamed.

Instinctively, Clark turned toward the sound, looking through the wall, trying to locate the screamer with his X-ray vision. It was a woman, and she stood in the small secretary’s nook, at the door of the manager’s office, staring at something that lay on the floor. She screamed again.

It was a man, Clark saw: a man lying on his back on the carpet, and even from where he stood Clark could tell that he was dead. As he zeroed in on the corpse, his super senses registered further details, and he knew that his face had gone white.

Two tiny punctures marked the man’s throat, directly over the left carotid artery. Clark controlled the urge to grimace and looked further.

Sure enough, the body had been completely drained of blood.

William Henderson guided Perry White’s car into the Cost Mart parking lot and pulled into in the nearest space. “Here we are. Let’s see what we can see.”

Perry swung open the passenger door as Henderson killed the engine. “Where first?”

Henderson shrugged. “Let’s just take a look around inside. Then, we’ll look around a little more.”

Perry fell in beside him as they headed across the lot toward the main entrance. Pools of illumination from the tall lights set here and there about the area punctuated the darker sections of the lot, and Perry couldn’t help glancing a little uneasily about, wondering what it was that Lois and Clark had found in relation to the so-called vampire victims in the park. Not that Perry believed in vampires for a minute, but that report had been downright creepy. It was a relief when they stepped into the light in front of the main entrance, and pushed through the doors into the store.

The place was typically crowded, and Perry and Henderson came in with the crowd of shoppers. As far as Perry could tell, nothing was out of place, but then how would he know, after all? What was Henderson looking for, except, of course, Lois?

“The manager’s office is in the rear,” Henderson said briefly, and Perry reminded himself that the police had probably been here yesterday to speak with the manager. “Let’s go pay him a visit.”

If the manager had anything to do with what was going on, Perry thought, he wasn’t going to be happy to see Henderson. Maybe the police inspector intended to see if he could throw a scare into the man. It was easy to act calm when one wasn’t suspected of anything, but if he got nervous, he might do something stupid.

Henderson’s cell phone began to play its cheerful little tune. He extracted it from a pocket and held it to his ear. “Henderson . . . repeat that. Two of them? Any identification? Close off the area and get a forensics team on it. I’ll get Wolfe over there shortly. Yeah. Henderson out.” He snapped his phone shut. “Well, that was interesting.”

“What was?” Perry asked.

“The men searching the park found two men. No identification. They were both dead. Drained of blood.”

Perry stared at him in shock. “What in Memphis —”

Henderson had his phone open again, and hit his speed dial. A few seconds later, he spoke. “Jim, it’s Henderson. We’ve had another one. I need you to sub for me for an hour or so. Get hold of Gheraty’s team and join him at Centennial Park, would you? — Thanks. I owe you one.” He snapped the phone shut.

A scream echoed through the store. Perry’s head whipped around, toward the sound. Henderson said something under his breath and strode quickly in the direction of the screams. A third

scream sounded as Perry followed him.

The cries had come from the back of the store, and as they neared the location, it was obvious that the source was somewhere on the other side of the door labeled “Employees Only”. Henderson pulled out his ID and pushed his way inexorably through the crowd.

“Police! Let me through!”

The crowd parted slowly for him, and Perry followed in Henderson’s wake as he forced a path into the hallway beyond. People were bunched in front of the manager’s office, and when Perry and Henderson arrived, Perry at once identified the screamer. A young woman was seated in a chair, her face in her hands. On the carpet, in the entrance of the manager’s office lay a man.

Henderson dropped to one knee beside him and rested his fingers on the skin of his throat — right beside, Perry noted with a shudder, two small punctures in the skin.

Henderson got to his feet.

“Dead?” Perry asked.

The police inspector nodded curtly and took out his phone once more. “This is turning into a really bad evening,” he remarked.

Lois instinctively moved behind the heavy armchair as the door to her prison began to slide open.

She expected to see Brunner and his thugs waiting outside, but although the man standing in the doorway seemed somehow vaguely familiar, she couldn’t quite place him. She and the newcomer looked at each other for several seconds, Lois striving to recall where she had seen him before.

He was a short slender dark man of indeterminate age — not young, not old — dressed in slightly worn jeans and a green shirt with the Cost Mart logo on the left breast.

A light jacket hung open over it. His skin was brown and his hair and eyes were obsidian-black. The memory of the Native American crypt flashed through her mind, but with it came the awareness of how silly the whole idea was. A Native American vampire? Come on, Lois, let’s get real! An employee of Cost Mart was real, and probably far more dangerous to her life and liberty than any vampire that ever lived. Or didn’t live. Or whatever.

The man’s eyes crinkled and his somewhat forbidding aspect was suddenly erased by an unexpectedly attractive and disarming smile. He held up empty hands as she eyed him distrustfully from her position behind the chair.

“Am I speaking to Miss Lane?” His voice was a deep baritone, and surprisingly pleasant, with the faintest hint of an accent, although she couldn’t quite identify it.

“Yes.”

“You needn’t fear me,” the newcomer said. “I am here to set you free. Come quickly. There is a great deal of excitement going on above stairs. If we move swiftly, you will be away before anyone discovers your absence.” He stood back, indicating that she should exit into the hallway.

Lois hesitated, but there was really no choice. She could stay and face Brunner and his thugs, or take a chance with this guy, whoever he was.

“Who are you?” she asked, not really expecting an answer.

“You may call me a friend.” From beneath his jacket, the newcomer produced her purse. “Who I am is unimportant, but I am no friend of Mr. Brunner or of his minions. Come. There may not be much time.”

Lois picked up her coat from the back of the armchair almost absently, and stepped cautiously out into the hallway, still not completely certain that this was a good idea. But staying in that place wasn’t any better, she pointed out to herself. Brunner certainly had no intentions of letting her go alive. Of course, this

guy might be the thug that he’d given the job of disposing of her, but at least this way she had a fighting chance. In that room, she had none.

The wall slid shut behind her with a faint, final click. Well, whoever this guy was, she was committed. She couldn’t go back in, no matter what. Not that she wanted to. Standing in the hallway, she watched her presumed rescuer warily.

The man had stepped back and now he glanced cautiously in both directions. “I suggest you put on your coat. The snow is still falling.” He presented her with her bag as she slipped the item of clothing on. “You will need this. This way, if you please.” Turning, he led the way down the corridor in the opposite direction from which she had come, hours before. Lois dithered for a split second and then followed. After all, what choice did she have?

The path her rescuer took led her down through several intersecting hallways and around numerous corners. Trying to keep track of the route left Lois slightly bewildered, but after the fifth — or was it the sixth? — turn, her guide stopped before a wide double door, similar to the doors on the storage rooms that she had investigated earlier on the floor above. He twisted the knob, and Lois could have sworn that she heard the snap of a breaking lock. The door swung open at his touch, showing an unlighted room beyond.

“Your way out is through here.” He produced a flashlight. “Come.”

She hesitated and then with a mental shrug, followed the stranger into the room. Her guide turned and carefully closed the doors, leaving the room in darkness, except for the circle of illumination provided by the flashlight.

It was a storage room. Wooden crates were stacked against one wall, almost invisible in the dimness.

“This way.” He led the way directly across the room to the opposite wall, where another door broke the concrete surface. Lois’s rescuer turned the very ordinary knob and pushed the door wide. Darkness met her gaze and he trained the light through the aperture. Lois discovered that she was looking out into the smuggling tunnel that she and Clark had explored the night before. Her guide stepped through the door and led the way into the tunnel. The door closed behind them.

It took only four or five minutes and they reached the ladder that led to the outer world of the Cost Mart parking lot. They paused, and Lois’s mysterious acquaintance smiled, showing a flash of very white teeth that gleamed like milk in the pale illumination of the flashlight. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Miss Lane. Go now, and may fortune be with you, but do not forget that for which you came.”

“What —”

“The men of this place deal in dreams and death,” he said. “Dreams for the lost.” His obsidian eyes met hers, and he laid a small, plastic package in the palm of her hand. “Give this to your flying friend. Tell him he must seal up the tunnel, and stop the ones who use it. If you do not, great evil will be released upon your city.”

He stepped back, indicating with one hand that she should ascend the ladder. “Take this,” he said. “You will need it.”

Lois found herself accepting the flashlight. “But, where are you —”

Her rescuer took another step backwards. Lois glanced up the ladder at the faintly lighter circular opening, through which occasional snowflakes drifted. She turned to look back at her companion, but now no one stood there. He had vanished silently into the dimness of the smuggling tunnel and the light failed to reveal him anywhere.

Her spine prickling, Lois hurriedly dropped the packet into the pocket of her coat, put a hand on the chill, damp metal of the ladder and stepped quickly onto the bottom rung. From the

depths of the tunnel, she heard a soft laugh, and somewhere, the faintest flutter of what might have been wings.

The snow was indeed coming down, Lois discovered, as she emerged into the open. The surface of the parking lot was inches deep in half-melted slush. Within a very few minutes, her feet were soaked and chilled. And fifteen minutes later, after a fruitless search for her car, she succumbed to a mild attack of nerves, as well as temptation and annoyance. She was tired, cold and definitely creeped out by the events of the last several hours. Especially, for obvious reasons, the last half hour. She kept fighting the urge to look over her shoulder, expecting to see a slender, dark man with the blackest eyes she had ever seen, and an unbelievably white smile.

She closed her eyes, shoved her hands into the pockets of her coat and took a deep breath.

“Help! Superman!”

The swoosh of the arriving superhero was the most welcome sound she had heard in hours. She opened her eyes to see his red boots hit the ground in front of her. Was it her imagination, or was there a trace of anxiety in his expression?

“Lois! Are you all right?”

“Yeah.” The sense of relief made her feel almost light headed. She leaned backwards rather limply against a battered, blue Ford and pulled her coat tighter around her torso. “I shouldn’t have called you, but I can’t find my car, and —”

“Your car is over at Centennial Park,” Superman said. “Henderson has had the whole Twelfth Precinct looking for you. Everybody has been looking for you for hours. Where have you been?”

Lois shivered. “Could you take me home?” she requested, mortified that her voice had begun to shake. “It’s been a very long, weird day.”

“I think I should take you to the Twelfth Precinct,” Superman said. “Henderson found a body in the manager’s office in Cost Mart, and his men found two more in the park, not far from your car. Where have you been?”

“A body?” Lois said faintly, fixing on the first part of the sentence. “He said there was a lot of excitement going on above stairs.”

“He?” Superman asked sharply.

“The guy who rescued me,” Lois said.

“Who rescued you?” Superman asked.

“I don’t know,” Lois said. “He didn’t tell me his name. But he gave me something to give to you.” She removed the plastic packet from her pocket and laid it in his hand. It was filled, she saw now, with a fine, white powder.

Superman looked at it and his eyebrows snapped up. “He gave you this? Where did he get it?”

“He said I shouldn’t forget what I came for,” Lois said. “He said the people there deal in dreams for the lost, and death. I thought that was a funny way to say it, but —”

“Sort of, I guess,” Superman said. “He was right, though. I’m pretty sure this is almost pure, uncut heroin.”

Lois nodded soberly. “I figured it was probably something like that.” She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. “Things didn’t go quite like I expected tonight.”

“Let’s get you inside,” Superman said abruptly. “You can tell me what happened when you feel better.” He reached out to scoop her into his arms and leaped into the air. Barely five minutes later, he was setting her on her feet in the lobby of the Twelfth Precinct.

William Henderson lowered his cell phone from his ear and glanced at Perry White. The editor of the Daily Planet was, Henderson saw with amusement, taking quick notes on a notepad that he had apparently appropriated from the office of the

murdered man. Once a newsman, always a newsman, Henderson thought. Perry hadn’t lost his reporting instincts simply because he had graduated to editor of the most prestigious newspaper in Metropolis a decade before. He moved over to the editor and got his attention.

“Got a call from my office,” he said. “Superman just showed up at the Precinct with Lois. She’s all right.”

Perry blew out his breath in a gusty sigh. “Did they say what happened?”

“Nope. Nobody’s had a chance to interview her yet. You want to take off and find out?”

Perry shook his head. “I’ll stick around until the kid from the office gets here. You’re sure that’s Brunner?”

“We’ll get an official identification later, but, yeah — his secretary says it’s him, and she should know.” Henderson resisted the temptation to jam his hands into his pockets and kept his expression carefully blank.

“Drained of blood —” Perry lowered his voice. “I don’t believe in vampires, but this almost makes me have second thoughts.”

“Yeah.” Henderson shrugged, and then nodded toward the hallway. “I think your man is here.”

Perry followed his gaze, noting the latest transfer to the evening shift, Harry Williams, had arrived. “Over here, Williams!”

Williams hurried over to Perry and Henderson. “I got here as fast as I could, Chief.”

“Yeah. I’ve got the background. Stick around ‘til they’re finished here.” Perry glanced at Henderson. “Mind if I get my keys back now?”

“Huh? Oh.” Henderson produced the keys to Perry’s car. “Here you go. I’m glad Lane’s all right. If she knows anything about this business, I expect to hear from her tomorrow.”

“You will.” Perry turned to Williams. “Bottom line: that’s the manager of this Cost Mart in there. Secretary found him dead on the floor of his office. Looks like he’s been drained of blood.”

Williams eyebrows rose almost to his hairline and Henderson saw him swallow convulsively. “Has this got something to do with that vampire story floating around?”

Perry grunted. “Your guess is as good as mine. Just get the facts for the Planet. Remember. Hard facts, Williams. Not sensationalism. I get enough of that from Ralph.”

“Yes, sir.” The man stiffened almost to military attention, Henderson noted with dry amusement.

“See you later, Bill.” Perry nodded to Henderson and departed. Henderson turned back to his people. This evening was turning out to be a pain in the rear. Now all he needed was to come face to face with a real vampire or something. How would he be supposed to report that?

Dismissing the bit of mordant humor as foolishness, Henderson turned back to his job. Whoever had murdered his men might very well be behind the murder of the Cost Mart manager. He intended to find out who that somebody might be.

Clark, in his Superman guise, set Lois down inside the Twelfth Precinct and stood back. “Hold still.”

He trained his heat vision, suitably attenuated, on her soaked feet, and damp clothing, and walked slowly around her, drying and warming her from all sides. He could see the shivering easing off as he did so.

Sergeant Crandall, the desk sergeant, got to his feet. “Are you all right, Lois?” It figured, Clark thought, that the guy recognized his partner.

Lois gave a wan smile. “More or less. Let’s just say I don’t want to go through that again.”

“Want to tell us what happened?” Crandall asked. “I haven’t seen Henderson that worried about anybody in years. And your

boss was in here, wearing a path in Henderson's carpet."

"Where is he?" Lois asked, glancing at Clark. "I thought you said he found a body at Cost Mart, but I didn't see any police cars."

"They were on the other side of the building, in the employees parking lot," Clark said, brushing back the cape of his Superman outfit as he took a seat on the nearest wooden bench. "The police came in the back way. Henderson's with them. I thought you'd have seen them. You said you were looking for your car, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but I left it in the main lot," Lois said reasonably. "Why would I go around the building to a place where I hadn't parked?"

That figured, Clark thought. Sometimes his partner's thinking processes left him scratching his head.

"Anyway," Lois said, "I'm all right now. An employee — I guess he was, anyway — gave me that packet, and said that I should give it to Superman. Would it be all right if I go home, now?"

"What packet?" Crandall asked.

"This one." Clark handed the little package Lois had given him to the man. "You need to have it analyzed. I think it's heroin."

"Where did it come from?"

"Cost Mart," Lois said.

"Who was the person that gave it to you?"

"I don't know," Lois said frankly. "I've never met him as far as I know, but he seemed to know who I was."

"I'll report it to Henderson," Crandall said. "I'm sure he'll be interested. What else happened to you? You've been missing for hours."

"I went over to Cost Mart to talk to the manager," Lois said. "Clarence Brunner. I went into the back of the store, but I guess I took a wrong turn and wound up in a part of the offices where I wasn't supposed to be. A couple of security guys grabbed me and stuck me in a room and locked the door. I couldn't get out and I was there for hours. Then this guy opened the door, asked if I was Miss Lane, and took me out through a basement door. He gave me that packet and said I should give it to Superman. That's the whole story."

Clark would have bet his red boots that it definitely wasn't the whole story, but he didn't say so. Maybe she would tell Clark the real story later. He glanced at Crandall, who looked a little skeptical as well. "Why did they lock you up?" the sergeant inquired.

"I don't know," Lois said. "Unless they thought I'd found their heroin stash or something. I really can't tell you."

"I'll bet," Crandall said, under his breath, but Clark heard him. "Do you know anything about the guy that was found dead in the manager's office?"

"No," Lois said, flatly. "The first I heard of it was when Superman told me about it."

"How about the two men found dead in Centennial Park a little way from your Jeep?"

Clark saw her eyes widen. "No, of course not! Who were they?"

"We haven't identified them yet," Crandall said. "They may be connected with the death at Cost Mart. All right, Lois, I guess you can go. Do you need to call a taxi?"

Clark stood up. "I'll give Ms. Lane a lift," he said.

Crandall nodded. "You may get a call from Henderson, tomorrow," he pointed out. "Especially if this stuff does turn out to be heroin."

Lois nodded. "I'll expect it, but I doubt I'll be much help," she said. "As far as I can remember, I've never met the guy that gave it to me before. The only thing I can think is that he might have known about it and wanted to stop it, but didn't want to talk

to the police himself."

"Probably," Crandall said. "Can you describe him?"

"Sort of, I guess," Lois said. "He was short — maybe an inch taller than I am. I'm not sure what race, but it wasn't white or Hispanic — maybe Native American. He had black hair, and black eyes, maybe forty, give or take five years, wearing jeans and a Cost Mart T-shirt. That's really it. I only saw him for a few minutes, and most of the time his back was toward me." She turned to Clark. "That lift home would be great," she added.

Clark smiled. "I'm at your service, Lois." He looked past her at Crandall. "If Henderson needs me, tell him to get hold of Kent at the Planet," he said. "I imagine he'll be busy for a while with the murder at Cost Mart, but if I can be of any help, I'll be glad to give it."

"Yeah; thanks, Superman." Crandall nodded, and fell to examining the packet of powder. Then, he picked up the telephone receiver. As he escorted Lois out the Precinct doors, Clark heard the officer speaking. "Lab? Yeah, I got something here for you —"

Lois was just stepping out of the shower when she heard the knock on her door. She grabbed a towel and began to dry herself hurriedly off, and stuck her head out the bathroom door. "Who is it?"

"Clark," her partner's voice said.

"Hold on a minute," she called. "I'll be right there!"

Quickly, she wrapped her dripping hair in a towel, dried herself off, more or less, and pulled on a robe. A moment later, she was opening the door.

Clark looked slightly taken aback at the sight of her in her robe. "If you like, I can come back later," he began.

"Don't be silly. Sit down while I get some sweats on," Lois said, heading back for her bedroom. Five minutes later, she stepped into the living room again, to find her partner seated on her sofa, waiting patiently.

"Hi," she said

Clark got to his feet. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Lois pushed back the sleeves of the sweatshirt. It was his shirt, and was, consequently somewhat large on her petite frame. "I'm fine."

"Superman said he picked you up in the Cost Mart parking lot," Clark said. "You'd been missing for hours. What happened?"

"Didn't Superman tell you?"

Clark shook his head. "He said you'd run into some trouble but you were okay. You aren't hurt, are you?"

Lois shook her head. "I'm okay, except for being creaped completely out," she said. "That was the weirdest evening I've ever had. I still don't believe in vampires, but for a while I was sort of wondering."

"Oh?"

"Yeah." She sank down on one of her sofas. "It was really strange. I didn't even tell Superman what happened, and I couldn't tell Crandall, over at the Twelfth Precinct. Outside of the fact that I was sneaking around where I wasn't supposed to be, he'd have thought I was completely insane."

"So what *did* happen?"

"Well — I headed over right after I got to the Planet, just in time for their lunch hour rush," she said. Trying to be as detailed as possible, she described to Clark the events of the day, trying to read his expression as she proceeded, but, except for a slight frown, he didn't appear to disbelieve her.

"So, I climbed out of the tunnel, and started hunting for my car," she concluded. "I couldn't find it, and I was getting pretty cold, so I finally called Superman. He said my Jeep was over in Centennial Park. I guess Brunner must have had his people move it after he took my purse."

“Which your mystery guy returned,” Clark said. “I’d like to know how he got hold of it, too. Henderson’s men found two men dead not far from your car, in the park. They’d both been drained of blood.”

“Crandall said something about that. Have they identified them?”

“Superman said they may have been Cost Mart employees,” Clark said. “They apparently had some kind of identification on them when they were found. But, Lois, the dead man at Cost Mart this evening, was Brunner. Perry and Henderson went over to Cost Mart to try to find some trace of you, and were there when someone found him.”

“Terrific,” Lois said. “Don’t tell me. He was drained of blood, too.”

“Yeah,” Clark admitted. “At least that was what Superman said. And he had two punctures on his throat, right over the carotid artery.”

Lois swallowed, the vision of her rescuer’s white teeth popping into her mind. It couldn’t possibly be, could it? After a moment’s doubt, she again dismissed the thought, albeit with a little effort. “Somebody’s running some kind of scam,” she said. “And I’m betting that it has something to do with that smuggling tunnel.”

“Probably,” Clark said.

A horrible idea occurred to her. “You don’t suppose the two they found were the men that helped Brunner put me in that room?” she said.

“I guess it’s possible. Do you think you’d recognize them if Henderson asked you to try to identify them?”

Lois made a face. “Maybe.”

“I think we should find out,” Clark said. “Unless you —”

“Unless I what?” she said, bristling slightly. “Can’t handle it or something? I’ve seen bodies before.”

“I know you have,” he said quickly. “But it was an unsettling episode.”

“Yeah, but it will be even more unsettling if more people die because I don’t help Henderson find out what happened,” she said. “Is he still over at Cost Mart?”

“I think he got back to the Precinct about an hour ago.”

“Good.” Lois reached for the phone.

William Henderson was in the process of filling out the umpteenth part of his report on the murder of the Cost Mart manager when his phone rang. He picked up the receiver. “Henderson.”

The voice on the line sounded tired. “Sir, you’ve got a call from Lois Lane. She’s insisting on talking to you directly. I told her you were busy, but she —”

“Put her on,” Henderson said. “I wanted to talk to her anyway.”

“Yes sir.” There was a click on the line.

“Henderson?” Lois’s voice said.

“Hello, Lois,” Henderson said. “You wanted to talk to me?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I heard you were there when they found the manager.”

“I’m sure you didn’t call me to verify that,” Henderson said. “What’s on your mind this evening?”

“I also heard that your people found two bodies near where you found my Jeep,” Lois continued. “Brunner locked me in a room in Cost Mart’s sub-basement. He took my purse, with my keys.”

“What’s your point?”

“He had two pieces of muscle with him that did the strong arm stuff. It’s possible that they’re your dead men. If they are, I might be able to identify them.”

Henderson’s eyebrows rose slightly. “Crandall said something about that,” he said, “but he didn’t give details.”

“I know. It didn’t really occur to me about the dead men until I talked to Clark. Listen; can you fix it so I can see them? I might be able to tell you whether it was them or not.”

“I think I could manage that,” Henderson said. “Crandall said you got your purse back. How did that happen?”

“That’s complicated,” Lois said.

“I’ll bet,” Henderson murmured. “Well, we’ll deal with that later. All right, I’ll send somebody to pick you up. Ten minutes.”

When Lois and Clark walked into the morgue, Clark became aware that Lois, in spite of her apparent calm appearance, wasn’t nearly as composed as she looked. Her heart had speeded up and he could tell by the set of her jaw that she was clenching her teeth.

William Henderson, who, rather surprisingly, accompanied them, greeted the medical examiner with a nod. “Hi, Barney. This is Lane, and her partner, Kent,” he said. “You ready?”

“Sure.” The man laid his ham sandwich down on the napkin that lay on his desk, scrubbed his hands across his slacks and got to his feet. “This way.”

Clark had long ago become inured to all kinds of smells, and the scent of formaldehyde and various other chemicals was not unexpected. Lois, of course, had been in this room before, but he saw her nose wrinkle slightly as they followed the man through the door into the tile-lined room with its refrigerated units and metal tables, and glass cases with all kinds of metal implements of the trade. Clark kept his eyes on Lois. Her shoulders were tense, but she trod resolutely after Henderson as they followed their host.

Barney stopped beside a table which held a sheet-covered form. “Here we are.” Without hesitation, he pulled back the sheet, revealing the face of the victim.

“Well?” Henderson asked, turning to look at Lois. “Recognize him?”

Lois had taken an involuntary step back, but now Clark saw her take a deep breath and step forward to look long and hard at the victim’s face. She nodded. “Yeah,” she said finally. “This was one of the men with Brunner.”

Henderson nodded and Barney efficiently re-covered the first man and stepped to a second table, also bearing a sheet-covered form. He pulled back the cover.

This time Lois didn’t hesitate. She stepped past the medical examiner and took a long look.

“Yes,” she said. “This is the other one.”

“Okay,” Henderson said. “I guess that answers one question. And opens up a lot of others.” He shoved his hands into the pockets of his coat. “Thanks, Barney. I guess you can go back to your dinner.”

“So,” Henderson said, as they crossed the snowy hospital parking lot toward his car, “for some reason, whoever did this decided to take out all three men that locked you in Cost Mart’s basement. You got any idea why?”

“No,” Lois said.

“Want to tell me what happened?”

“Only if it isn’t official,” Lois said.

Henderson snorted. “No recording devices,” he said. “And no witnesses that will ever admit to hearing it, I imagine.” He glanced meaningfully at Lois’s partner. “It won’t come up unless I need it to nail the murderer. You have my word.”

He saw her glance at her partner, who gave the faintest nod. “All right.”

Henderson opened the door of his car and they got in. He started the engine, and after a moment, turned on the heater. “Go ahead.”

“I guess,” Lois said, “that we need to tell you about the tunnel —”

“Tunnel?”

“Under the Cost Mart parking lot,” Clark said. “We checked it out last night.”

Henderson listened without comment to the description of Lois and Clark’s excursion into the depths of Cost Mart’s smuggling tunnel, raising his eyebrows at the information that the tunnel had apparently encroached on some kind of Native American crypt. When they finished, he was silent for several minutes. It was too bad, he found himself thinking, not for the first time, that Lane and Kent had chosen to be investigative journalists instead of cops. On the other hand, their talents in this direction could have as easily been applied to a life of crime, so he was probably lucky they had decided on a career that stayed marginally within the law.

“So, this tunnel leads to one of the vacation houses in Mariner’s Cove, which is apparently being used for smuggling?” he summarized.

“It sort of looks like it,” Clark said. “Of course, we didn’t see anything stored there, but they were moving something through the tunnel — several boxes of something heavy — and they must have brought it through the house to get it into the tunnel.”

“And the door at the other end opens into the storeroom in Cost Mart’s sub-basement,” Henderson said slowly. “I thought I’d seen everything when it came to ingenious ways to smuggle drugs during my year on the Vice squad. Unfortunately, I can’t use most of this for evidence.”

“Yeah, I know,” Lois said. “But there must be something we can do.”

“Not ‘we’,” Henderson said. “I.” He regarded Lois thoughtfully. “I can use some of what you’ve told me as a ‘tip,’ but if I reveal how you got the information it might open you up to prosecution — trespassing, at the very least. But I appreciate what you’ve told me. It helps make some sense of the whole thing.”

“Some of it,” Clark amended. “It still doesn’t explain the blood-drained bodies, though.”

“There is, of course, that minor detail,” Henderson agreed. “And I really want to nail whoever it was that killed the men in the park.” He hesitated. “Look, this is off the record. Deal?”

Lois nodded.

“Victims two and three were my men. Undercover officers that worked at Cost Mart. They were there trying to find out who was behind the drugs coming into Metropolis. There’s been an up-tick in the last year and we had information to the effect that someone from Cost Mart might be involved. But somebody killed them. I want the ones involved in it.”

“Is it possible the smugglers did it?” Lois suggested.

“Maybe. But then why were Brunner and his two buddies killed the same way?” Henderson said.

“Good question,” Clark said. “Maybe they weren’t in on it.”

“Then why did they grab me and lock me up if they weren’t up to something they shouldn’t be?” Lois pointed out reasonably. “Brunner said that I’d seen too much for him to let me go. I think he meant the elevator to the sub-basement.” She made a face. “Something really doesn’t add up.”

“You know, Lois,” Henderson said, “I’ve noticed you have a real talent for understatement. I’m going to take a look at the plans to the place when I get back to the Precinct. I’m willing to wager money that they don’t include a sub-basement in any form, much less a tunnel.”

“Me too,” Lois said.

Henderson regarded her thoughtfully. “Care to show me this tunnel?” he inquired, as casually as he could.

Clark’s heavy eyebrows rose slightly. “Isn’t that illegal?” he asked, looking a little amused.

Henderson shrugged. “There’s no law that says I can’t go into

the Cost Mart parking lot — even if it is nearly midnight.” He removed the wallet bearing his badge from his pocket and laid it on the passenger seat. “In any case, I’m not going to do this as a cop.” He put the car in gear and they rolled slowly out onto the street.

The Cost Mart parking lot was dimly lit, Lois noted, just as it had been earlier, when Henderson pulled his car into a parking space not far from the tunnel. There were noticeably fewer cars now than when she had prowled around here through the snow, looking for her own vehicle, which was currently in the hands of the Metropolis Police Department. Henderson turned off the engine and killed the lights.

“That it?” he inquired, nodding at the area blocked off by the wooden barrier.

“Yeah.” Lois opened her door, and belatedly pulled the leather jacket that she had brought from her apartment more tightly around her torso. It wasn’t snowing any longer, but the damp air had a sharp bite to it. The mist of her breath curled away, dissipating like ghosts in the darkness.

“Okay,” Henderson said. “Let’s go have a look-see.” He pushed open his door and got out as well, followed by Clark. Leaving the doors locked, and his badge prominently on the passenger seat, they moved cautiously toward the construction area.

There was no one to be seen. Between the lateness of the hour and the icy air, it seemed that no one was anxious to be out in the open just now, Lois thought. She skirted the barrier. “This is it.”

Henderson knelt and peered down the hole. “There’s a ladder,” he confirmed. “Okay, here’s where I do a little trespassing.”

“Are you sure you want to do this, Bill?” Clark inquired. “You can’t use anything you find as evidence.”

“I know,” Henderson said shortly, “but there are two widows, and seven kids who will never see their dads again. I owe them a lot more than I can ever make up for. I want to know what’s going on and I’m going to find out.”

Put that way, Lois could sympathize. Clark nodded. “Want me to go first? That way you can come to the rescue if I run into trouble.”

One corner of the Inspector’s mouth twitched. “No. You follow me.” He swung over the side of the hole and began his descent.

As soon as he had vanished down the ladder, Lois got one foot on the top rung and followed. In less than a minute, her feet hit the stone of the tunnel floor, and seconds later, Clark joined them.

Henderson had a flashlight in one hand and was shining the light over the walls. He turned right. “Let’s check out the door to the sub-basement, first.”

“It’s probably locked,” Lois pointed out.

“Probably.” Henderson started off toward the right, keeping his light trained on the mud-tracked stone floor.

As it had before, it took only seven or eight minutes until they came up against the metal door. Henderson flashed his light over it, examining it minutely. “Okay, let’s go look at the rest of it.” He turned and began to retrace his steps.

Lois and Clark followed Henderson as he made his way back to the ladder which led to the parking lot. The passed it and continued on toward the jog in the tunnel a hundred feet or so farther on. They walked in silence, Henderson shielding the light from his flash so that Lois could barely see where to put her feet.

“There’s the entrance to the crypt,” Clark said. He pointed at the spot, which, in the dim illumination of the shaded flashlight, appeared to be simply a darker spot in the wall where some of the dirt had collapsed.

Henderson nodded. “I’m going to want to look at that, too,” he said. “First I want to see where this tunnel goes.”

Clark’s head whipped around abruptly. Lois looked in the same direction, but saw nothing but the dark tunnel behind them. “What?” she asked.

“I heard something.” With one hand, Clark fiddled with his glasses, still looking back the way they had come. “I think someone’s coming.”

Henderson strained his ears. “I don’t hear anything,” he whispered.

“Hurry,” Clark said. “Through there.” Lois found herself being urged through the entrance into the crypt. Her spine prickled, but she was well aware that Clark’s hearing was acute and that he very well might be able to hear things that she didn’t.

Henderson came through on her heels, and Clark crowded through after them. The inspector abruptly flipped off his light. “Shh.” His whisper was a thread of sound.

Together, they crouched in the darkness. Outside their hiding place, Lois could now hear the soft scrape of approaching footsteps on stone. Beside her, she felt Henderson’s body stiffen.

There was only one person, she thought. He moved swiftly through the tunnel, and she saw a tiny flicker of light filtering through the opening. She felt Henderson move quietly next to her, and in the faint illumination she saw his silhouette inching toward the opening to peer out after the mystery passerby. With difficulty, she restrained the temptation to grasp his arm, to caution him not to reveal himself. But Henderson relaxed suddenly, easing back into his previous position.

“He’s gone,” Clark’s voice said softly.

“Yeah.” Henderson’s voice was as quiet as Clark’s. “How do you two manage to get mixed up in these things?”

“Good question,” Clark said, a trace of humor evident in his whispered words. “Shall we follow him?”

“Not yet.” How Bill Henderson could sound dry and cynical when all she could hear was a voiceless whisper in pitch darkness, Lois wasn’t sure. “As long as we’re here, let’s take a look at this place.”

“You don’t want to see where he went?” Lois demanded, almost outraged.

“We know where he went,” Henderson said. “We aren’t here to make an arrest. We’re just here to explore and see what there is to see. We’ll go see your beach house in a bit. I don’t want to run into a pack of smugglers armed with AK-47s or something when all I have is my .38, and no warrant. Why don’t you show me this coffin you found?”

He had a point, Lois decided.

A light came on, and she realized that Clark had produced a penlight and was shining it on the walls of the ancient tunnel. “Here’s some of the hieroglyphs we were telling you about,” he said softly. “What do you think?”

Henderson got to his feet, although he hunched down slightly to avoid bumping his head on the low roof and leaned close to the spidery writing on the stone walls. “Hmm.” His own light came on, illuminating the markings more clearly. “I recognize this style,” he said finally. “We have some examples of it in the Metro Museum of Natural History. The local tribes that were here when the European settlers came often decorated burial crypts with a version of this. It’s a combination of Indian hieroglyphs with influence from the English settlers.”

“You *know* this stuff?” Lois nearly squeaked.

“Sure,” Henderson said. “I studied some archeology in college with a particular focus on local folklore, and I’ve made a point of studying it in more depth in my off time. It’s kind of a hobby. The Metro Museum of Natural History has some really beautiful artifacts from their civilization. Why?”

“Uh — I was just surprised. Not too many people know much about the — uh — indigenous people that used to inhabit this

area.” It figured, she thought. First there was Clark, who didn’t even come from Metropolis, who could actually read some of this stuff. Now Henderson turned out to be an amateur archeologist and knew about it too. Sometimes she wondered if she had wasted her time in college, especially when somebody like Henderson, who had always impressed her as a no-nonsense law officer, turned out to have an interest in some esoteric subject like the early history of New Troy.

The Inspector’s face remained deadpan. “I do have a life besides the one at the Precinct,” he remarked. “Which way?”

“Follow me.” Clark led the way toward the room where they had found the coffin.

As they walked, Henderson flashed his light on the walls of the tunnel, illuminating many more of the spidery hieroglyphs, and Lois saw him narrow his eyes as they passed a fairly thick bunch of them on the wall just before they reached the end chamber.

“What?” she asked.

“I’m not sure.” Henderson stopped, shining his light on the markings. “I’ve seen these symbols before — exactly the same.”

“Where?”

“At the museum. They’re painted on a deerskin that belonged to one of the medicine men of the tribe. It’s dated at about the end of the fifteenth century.”

“And?” Lois continued, when he stopped.

“I’m not sure. I’m going to need to talk to the museum director tomorrow.”

“Why?” Lois asked.

“There was a legend,” Henderson said. “I doubt it can have anything to do with this case, but I’d like to know, just for my own satisfaction.”

“What kind of legend?”

Henderson shook his head. “I’ll let you know after I talk to the expert,” he said. “Let’s go on.”

“It’s right through there,” Clark said, pointing his light at the entrance to the end chamber. He moved ahead, ducking somewhat to avoid the low roof. Henderson followed, and Lois trailed behind.

And suddenly the men stopped. Lois nearly ran into Henderson. “Hey!”

“That’s odd,” Clark said.

“What is?” Lois asked.

“We left the lid closed,” Clark said. “Now it’s open.”

Lois poked Clark sharply in the back and instantly regretted it. She tended to forget it, but her partner was heavily muscled — something she should keep in mind, she reflected, rubbing the offended digit. The build that he had displayed that day she saw him in a towel at the Apollo Hotel hadn’t been acquired in typing class. Clark almost certainly lifted weights and did other exercises at a gym or something, since that kind of muscle didn’t develop on its own. “Mind letting me take a look?” she inquired with the faintest edge to her voice.

“Sorry.” Clark quickly moved aside, training his light on the rough wooden casket. The lid, Lois saw, rested on the rough stone floor, leaning askew against the side of the casket. Lois moved forward and peered into the interior.

In the darkness, it was difficult to see anything. “Clark, can you shine your light in here a minute?”

“Sure.” Her partner obediently flashed his light into the casket. Lois leaned forward, examining the wrinkled cloth that covered the bottom. At one end the cloth was stained with some brown, crusted streaks. She eyed them thoughtfully, but refused to speculate on what they might be. Instead, she stood back, looking at the lid, leaning carelessly against the body of the casket. Who had opened it? Had one of the workers in this tunnel, or one of the smugglers, perhaps, decided to investigate the

tunnel accessed by the small slide? Maybe someone had found the place and opened the casket out of sheer curiosity. The fact that it was empty might have any number of explanations, but a vampire was definitely not one of them. Probably there had never been a body. For some reason the thing had probably been left empty. Who knew what strange customs the original inhabitants of New Troy had followed, after all? Maybe there was something symbolic about “the Sleeper” that the writing on the tapestry above the casket talked about.

“Well,” she said, keeping her voice low, “do you suppose that whoever was in the tunnel is gone?” She pulled her jacket a little more tightly around her body. “I’d like to get out of this place.”

The men looked at each other and Henderson nodded. “I have to agree with you,” he said. “Let’s go see if the way is clear.”

When they reached the exit, both Clark and Henderson switched off their lights, and the three approached the opening with caution. Lois felt her way in her larger partner’s wake and bumped into him in the dark when he stopped.

“Sorry,” she whispered.

Together, they waited in the pitch darkness, listening.

“I don’t hear anything,” Clark’s voice whispered at last.

“Come on.” Henderson’s light came on, shielded by his fingers to allow only the tiniest beam of light to escape. One after another, they crawled through the hole into the main tunnel. Henderson turned toward the jog in the tunnel, treading very softly. Clark and Lois followed.

Just beyond the bend, of course, was the ladder. Clark moved quickly past Lois and Henderson and beat them both to it. Lois blinked in surprise. He set his foot on the first rung and began to climb. Henderson paused for an instant, as if a little surprised as well, and then followed. Lois found herself hugging Henderson’s heels.

Above, Clark’s shadow reached the trap door. He looked down, his glasses reflecting the faint light of Henderson’s shrouded flashlight. “Shh. Turn that off. If there’s anyone up there, I don’t want to notify them we’re here.”

The light went off. Lois waited, straining her ears.

There was the faintest of scraping sounds, a tiny, unidentified snapping sound, and then pale grey light filtered into the tunnel. Gradually, Clark lifted the trap door, and the light grew infinitesimally stronger but Lois could hear no more sounds. Then, Clark’s silhouette moved upward, no more than a blotch of darker shadow against the rectangle of lighter darkness beyond the opening. She heard and felt Henderson move after him and climbed carefully in the detective’s wake, striving to be absolutely silent.

Clark’s hand caught hers as she reached for the edge of the door and helped boost her through the aperture. “Shh,” he whispered, his voice a thread of sound. “There’s somebody out there.”

Lois peeked out of the alcove but saw only the darkened room with its un-curtained window that opened on the beach. “I don’t see anyone.”

“Someone’s moving around in the next room.”

Lois strained her ears, trying to hear what her partner had already detected. Beside her, Henderson was completely still, even to the point of holding his breath, she realized. Beyond the window the picturesque wooden pier extending out into the choppy grey water of the bay, and the sandy beach itself with the filtered moonlight reflecting off the sand, was strangely blurry, and she realized with slight dismay that it was snowing again, fairly heavily. That figured. Maybe they could go back to the car through the tunnel instead of walking the distance, she thought fleetingly. It looked very cold and miserable out there.

There was the scrape of very soft footsteps on wood, bringing her attention sharply back to the business at hand. How Clark had

heard those faint sounds, she couldn’t imagine. It must be that amazing hearing that he had demonstrated now and then. He’d explained once that growing up in the country had not exposed him to the unending noise of the city, and so his hearing hadn’t changed much from the way it had been when he had been a child. Whatever the reason, he had the disconcerting ability to pick up the tiniest of noises.

“This way,” Clark said. “Quick.”

He moved in utter silence across the room, opened a door on the opposite side that Lois hadn’t even noticed, and stepped within. Henderson and Lois joined him at once, cramming their bodies tightly together in the small space, and Clark pulled the door closed, holding it open no more than an inch. Lois plastered her ear against the tiny opening.

It was less than a minute later that a man entered the room, followed by a second, carrying a flashlight. Lois could see the beam as it flashed about the floor and walls. She hoped the two wouldn’t notice the fact that the closet door was slightly ajar, but it was too late to close it now.

“Turn off that light, idiot,” the first man whispered sharply, over his shoulder. “This house is supposed to be empty!”

The light went off. “I can’t see!” the second man whispered.

“Eat more carrots,” the first man said, and Lois could hear the sarcasm dripping from the whisper. “Come on! We need to get back to the boat or they’ll leave us behind.”

Boat? There was a boat?

Of course there had to be, she realized at once and kicked herself figuratively for not realizing it earlier. If these people were smuggling in something, where else was it going to come from?

There was silence for a moment and then the front door opened and closed softly. Lois let out her breath.

“Did you hear that?” she whispered. “There’s a smuggling boat!”

Henderson switched on his light. “Where would somebody hide a boat around here?”

They looked at each other in the illumination of the flashlight.

“Wilson’s Cove,” Clark said. “It’s only a little north of here, and there’s half a dozen inlets at least that somebody could run a small boat into and not have it seen because of the water plants and stuff.”

Of course, Lois thought. Wilson’s Cove was ten square miles of land that had been set aside some fifteen years previously as a sea-life and waterfowl refuge. There had been a massive cleanup of a neglected area of the coastline, and it would be a perfect place for their smugglers to conceal a smuggling craft.

“Let’s go!” Lois said.

“Are you out of your mind, Lane?” Henderson said. “It’s dark as pitch out there, not to mention there’s four inches of snow on the ground, with more coming down, and this boat could be in any one of the inlets.”

“You’re just going to let them get away?” Lois demanded.

“This time, yes. The merchandise has apparently already wound up in Cost Mart anyhow. What would I charge them with, if there’s no evidence? And if they see us, we tip them off that we know about their game. I’m going to come back tomorrow, with a team, and see what I can find. Then, the next time, we can be waiting for them.” He raised an eyebrow at her. “Trust me. I have no intention of letting this lot get away, but I need to find out more before I move.” He held her eyes steadily for several seconds. “They’ll be back. We’ve been investigating this case for months. We’ll get them, Lois.”

“Do we get an exclusive?” Lois demanded.

Henderson chuckled mordantly. “Why doesn’t that question surprise me? You have my word.”

Henderson pulled his car up to the curb in front of Clark Kent's apartment. The Inspector didn't cut the engine, but he gave Clark the faintest of smiles. "I hate to admit that the two of you have gotten farther than the Department has, but I will. Thanks, Kent. You'll be hearing from me."

"Thanks, Henderson." Clark opened the door and smiled at Lois. "See you at work tomorrow, partner."

Lois nodded. "Lock your door," she instructed, surprising herself.

Clark nodded soberly. "I will," he said. "There's too many unexplained pieces to this puzzle to take stupid chances." He looked back at Henderson. "Make sure she's safe inside before you drive off."

Henderson smiled grimly. "Two great minds," he said briefly. "I will."

Clark opened the door and got out. Henderson kept his car idling by the curb until Lois saw Clark open his door, enter, and close it behind him.

The snow had lightened again, but it definitely hadn't stopped. Henderson turned up his windshield wipers before pulling out onto the street again. The blades swooshed the ice crusts away, clearing the windshield somewhat, although tiny flakes coated it again almost instantly. "This has probably been one of the most — interesting evenings of my life," the Inspector remarked. "Tell me you and Kent don't do this kind of thing often."

Lois shook her head smiling a little. "I have to admit this has been a pretty weird day," she said, "but we've done stranger things."

Henderson gave a bark of laughter. "I don't think I want to know what they were. I want you to promise me you'll lock your doors and windows once you're inside your place, Lane. Like Kent said, there's too many unexplained pieces to this puzzle to take chances. Not to mention, we've still got six bodies drained of blood, and a mysterious employee of Cost Mart, that turned up very conveniently, to rescue you. If he knows who you are, he can find out where you live pretty easily. He may be a good guy, but until we know for sure, don't take any chances. Or am I talking to myself?"

Lois suppressed the tiniest of chills that tried to tingle its way across her scalp. "Not this time."

"Good." Henderson swung his car around the corner, drove down half the block and pulled a U-turn in the middle of the street, coming to a stop at the curb in front of her apartment. He cut the engine. "Here we are. He opened his door. "Come on."

"Where are you going?" she asked in surprise.

"I'm walking you to your door, just to be on the safe side. You can bet Brunner's bosses know you were sneaking around in the back of the store, and that he locked you in that room. They know you're suspicious of them, and you know what happened to my men. I don't want to find your body drained of blood lying around somewhere." She couldn't read his expression, but something told her that arguing with him would be futile. She opened her door and got out, locking it behind her.

Henderson closed and locked his door as well. In silence, they ascended the steps to her apartment house, and he waited while she used her tenant's key to open the door, and then followed her inside.

"You men," Lois said, a little crossly. "I'm not a helpless female, you know."

"Oh, I'm well aware of that," Henderson admitted. "Humor me, all right?"

"Hmmp!" Lois didn't argue further and secretly was a little relieved that he had insisted on going with her, but admitting it to him was not going to happen. They arrived at the elevator in silence and Lois punched the call button.

She heard the familiar clunk and squeak as the elevator went

reluctantly into action, and a moment later the doors opened. She boarded, followed by Henderson. She glanced at her watch. "It's nearly three in the morning."

"Time flies when you're having fun," Henderson replied. He punched the button for the fifth floor.

"Yeah, I guess," Lois said. The elevator lurched into motion and rumbled slowly upward. After an interminable time, it came to a stop on the fifth floor with a wheeze of exhaustion and the doors moved reluctantly open.

The apartment house was completely silent as they stepped out into the hall, except for the faint throb of the furnace that kept the interior at a temperature somewhat higher than the outer air. The thin, ancient carpet of the hallway did little to muffle their footsteps as they made their way toward apartment 501. Lois fumbled in her bag for her keys.

Standing outside the door as she unlocked her numerous locks one by one, Lois became aware of an icy draft, coming from beneath her door. She glanced down, but could see nothing.

Henderson must have been more alert than she realized. He looked sharply at her. "What?"

"There's cold air coming from under my door, but the heater was on when Clark and I left, earlier."

Henderson moved to one side of the door, drew his .38 and shoved her unceremoniously behind him. Very cautiously, he turned the knob and pushed the door open.

Pitch blackness met their gaze. Henderson didn't take his eyes from the dark aperture, nor did he move. "Did you leave the lights off when you left?"

She shook her head, aware that her heart had begun to thump uncomfortably hard in her chest. Henderson reached into his pocket and produced his flashlight. Very cautiously, he thrust it past the doorframe and switched it on.

The room appeared to be empty, but the Inspector seemed in no hurry to enter. Lois strained her ears, trying to hear any sound, but outside of the swish of warm air through the vent behind her, there was nothing.

Except that the apartment was icy cold.

"Maybe there's a window open," she suggested.

"Did you leave any windows open?"

"One of the living room windows was unlocked," she said. "It wasn't open, though. It opens on the side of the apartment house."

Henderson flashed his light cautiously around the room. Nothing moved. Very slowly, he reached around the door to flip on the lights.

Nothing happened. "Lights are out," he said shortly. He still appeared to be in no hurry to enter. Again, he flashed the light around. "Stay here."

Lois nodded. Henderson moved forward with unexpected speed, his feet almost silent on the thin carpet. He ducked around the door quickly, minimizing the instant where he was silhouetted against the lighter hall.

Nothing happened. Lois waited for what seemed hours. "Can I come in?" she asked finally.

"Stay there," Henderson's voice said.

Time seemed to stretch interminably. "The window's wide open," Henderson's voice said suddenly. "Someone's been here."

"Can I come in?" Lois asked again.

"Come in and close the door, but stay next to it." Henderson's voice sounded a little less grim. "Whoever was here is gone."

Lois obeyed with uncharacteristic meekness. Henderson exited her bedroom back into the living room. "I think you'd better pack up a change of clothes and check into a motel tonight," he said. "I'm going to call the Precinct and bring in a couple of men to check this place over."

Outside the open window, something moved. Lois couldn't contain a gasp of shock, and Henderson spun, his .38 lifting.

A dark shadow floated there, and out of it peered a white face, glaring in at them. It came through the window in a blast of cold air.

A man in a dark, form-fitting overcoat, a narrow, pale face with dark, piercing eyes, a head of thick, black hair, and a thin-lipped mouth. The mouth opened, baring white teeth, and revealing elongated canines.

Henderson raised his weapon. "Freeze!"

The teeth flashed in a feral grin, and the creature moved toward them.

Henderson's snubnose spoke sharply, twice. Two holes appeared in the overcoat right over the heart.

The intruder must have felt the impact of the bullets, for he jerked sharply, but he didn't fall. His lips peeled back, giving them a clear view of the fangs, and he stepped forward again, toward Lois.

Lois moved almost instinctively. She ripped open her jacket, reached down the neck of the knitted sweater that she wore under it and encountered her grandmother's gift. She yanked it out, snapping the slender chain, and held up the tiny, silver cross, gleaming in the grey moonlight filtering through the window.

The man fell back with a snarl. He raised a hand to shield his eyes, and then suddenly, he was gone through the window, and had vanished.

Henderson and Lois stared at each other for an instant, and then Henderson rushed to the window to peer out.

Lois sank down in the nearest chair, her legs literally unable to hold her upright. "Where did he go? Do you see him?"

Henderson pulled his head back inside. "No. Too dark, and too much snow." He looked at his .38. "I don't believe in vampires," he said firmly. "I'm a cop. Vampires don't exist." He glanced at Lois. "Are you all right?"

She nodded shakily.

"Good. Come on. You're not staying here tonight."

"Can you take me back to Clark's?" she whispered.

"Yeah. Grab some night gear, and let's go." Henderson looked again at the .38 and then examined the floor where the apparent vampire had stood. "No blood. I don't know what that was, but it wasn't a vampire."

"Are you sure?" Lois whispered. Somehow whispering seemed to be appropriate for the situation.

"I'm sure," Henderson said firmly. "And I'm going to prove it."

High above Wilson's Cove, Superman circled, scanning the snowy landscape below him for signs of the smugglers' presence. With deliberation and meticulous care, examining every inch of the ground beneath, he floated over each of the seven inlets, searching for an indication that a boat had moored there, that men had hauled packs of smuggled goods from that mooring place, through the snow, mud and sand, to the small vacation cottage at the nearer end of neighboring Mariner's Cove.

The inlets could easily conceal a boat, he thought. Tall water reeds and small, spindly trees grew thickly here, and obscured vision even from above. It would take a small miracle if anyone were to find such indications unless one knew exactly where to look, or unless the boat was, for some reason, still there.

It wasn't, of course, but looking down from above, he became aware of a narrow, winding foot trail, mostly masked by the vegetation, tracked through the undergrowth and now rapidly filling with snow. If he, Lois and Henderson had tried to find it on foot, they would still be searching.

Having found the path, it was the matter of a few moments for him to track it from the resort, two miles to the third of the narrow inlets, where it ended at the water's edge. The reeds were trampled at that spot where men had apparently unloaded the goods. Clark marked it carefully in his memory, sighting in on

several landmarks visible from his vantage point. He intended to make sure that Henderson saw this.

In the distance, the Metropolis Bell Tower chimed three o'clock. Well, perhaps he could wait until tomorrow morning, he decided. It seemed unlikely that anyone would come around here to do anything about the marks left by the smuggling crew. Unless one knew where they came from, they would mean nothing; besides who was likely to come wandering around in a marsh at three in the morning with the snow coming down and a very cold, damp wind making the conditions even more unwelcoming?

Making a loop in the air, he turned and headed toward Clark Kent's apartment.

Even at this hour, and in these weather conditions, Metropolis was still awake. He had never really seen the city when it was completely quiet. Passing over the Bayside Expressway, he was in time to see an eighteen wheeler begin to drift into the meridian. The front left wheel struck the divider and the truck slewed, beginning to tilt. He shot downward to catch and right the huge vehicle, seeing as he did so the driver jerk himself awake. He brought the truck to a standstill and walked around to the driver's cab.

"Are you all right?"

The trucker nodded, gripping the steering wheel with white-knuckled fingers. "Y— yeah," he stammered. "Thanks, Superman."

"There's a rest stop about three miles ahead," Clark told him. "I suggest you pull into it and get a couple of hours of sleep."

The man nodded. "I will. I promise."

"Beating your time schedule isn't worth it if you get killed," Superman pointed out, a hint of sternness in his voice.

The trucker nodded again. "Don't worry. I'll do exactly what you said."

"Good." Clark lifted off and watched for several minutes while the trucker started his truck up once more, and ten minutes later, true to his promise, was pulling the truck into the rest area. Satisfied that the man had taken his words to heart, Clark accelerated back toward his apartment.

As usual, before entering his apartment via the window, he paused to survey the area below him. His apartment was empty, but a very familiar car had pulled into the empty space in front of his apartment building. As he watched, William Henderson got out of the car, and Lois opened the passenger door. It was clear that they were headed for the steps to his apartment.

Something must have happened, Clark thought. Why wasn't he surprised? At least, no one seemed to be hurt, but he'd better be where he was supposed to be when they knocked.

Accelerating sharply, Superman zipped through the window of Clark Kent's apartment and closed it behind him. A moment later, Lois Lane rapped on his front door.

Clark waited. It would be best, he figured, not to appear to be right on the ball when someone knocked on his door at this hour. After all, he was supposed to have been asleep. Almost immediately, Lois rapped again, more urgently, and her voice called, "Clark? Clark, wake up! Are you there? Are you all right?"

"Just a minute!" he called back. He grabbed a T-shirt, ran a hand through his hair to ruffle it somewhat, and made his way to the door.

Lois and Bill Henderson were standing there, and Henderson was holding Lois's small, overnight case. Yep, something had happened, all right.

"What's going on?" he asked. "Is something wrong?"

Lois opened her mouth, but Henderson cut across her first word. "Kent, I need to get back to Lois's apartment. I've got a cop standing guard, but I want to be there when my team arrives. She needs to stay here tonight."

Clark felt his eyebrows rise involuntarily. He reached out to take the overnight case and stood back, opening the door wider. “Come in,” he invited.

Henderson shook his head, giving Lois a light push. “Lane will tell you what happened,” he said briefly. “I need to get back. Lock your door and windows.” He added to Lois, “I’ll give you a call when I find out more.”

Lois, uncharacteristically, merely nodded. “Thanks, Bill,” she said soberly.

The corner of Henderson’s mouth twitched in a faint, one-sided grin. “Record this moment for history’s sake,” he told Clark. An instant later he had turned and hurried down the steps to his car, jumped behind the wheel and started the engine, all with his usual effortless efficiency. A moment later, his taillights were disappearing down the street. Clark found himself blinking after him, slightly bemused.

“Shut the door,” Lois said. “It’s cold.”

Clark obeyed and turned the lock before looking at his partner. “What happened?” he asked.

“Is your bedroom window locked?” Lois asked, with apparent irrelevance.

“Yeah. Are you going to tell me what’s wrong?”

His partner nodded, a little jerkily, and reached for her overnight case. “Yeah. It was really weird.”

“What was weird?”

“Well,” she said, “Bill doesn’t think it was a vampire, and I don’t either, really, but it sure looked like one. And I don’t see how he could have gotten to my fifth story window unless he flew. I mean, the one by my kitchen has the fire escape next to it, but that one was locked. The side window to my living room opens on empty space, but he came through it.”

“Who came through it?”

“The vampire. Or rather, the guy that wasn’t a vampire.” She shivered suddenly. “But he sure looked like one.”

Clark sighed. “Would you mind starting from the beginning? Right now you’re not making much sense.”

“I know.” Lois went past him down the short flight of steps into his living room. “Is it all right if I sleep on your couch?”

“You can have my bed,” Clark said automatically. “I’ll take the couch. Are you going to tell me what happened or not?”

“I can’t take your bed,” Lois said. “The couch will be fine.”

Clark sighed. “Look, sit down a minute and I’ll make some tea,” he said. It was obvious to his experienced eye that his partner was on the edge of a full-fledged babble, which meant he wasn’t going to get much sense out of her until she managed to unwind a little. Lois was one of the most hard-headed reporters in the business, but her way of handling stress tended to leave him slightly baffled. Besides, it was pretty obvious that unless he got her to relax, neither of them were going to get any sleep for the remaining short hours of the night. A glance at the wall clock told him it was past three-thirty, and even Superman needed a few hours of sleep. From the looks of things, tomorrow was likely to be a very busy day for both of them.

Lois sank onto the couch. “I like your furniture,” she said, jumping from the subject of the not-vampire with her usual speed. “It’s more beat-up than mine, but it’s a lot more comfortable. I couldn’t sleep on my couch, but yours is big, and wide, and soft. Mine’s hard as a rock.”

“I know,” Clark said. “Try to relax while I put the hot water on, okay?” He turned and went into his kitchenette. “Is Oolong tea all right?”

“Is there more than one kind?” Lois asked.

“Yeah, but never mind. This will only take a minute.”

Moving quickly, Clark filled up his kettle and set it on the stove to heat. Surreptitiously, he shot several darts of heat vision into the water to heat it more quickly. The water boiled in seconds, and he removed it from the stove and dropped in his

scoops of tea leaves, procured by Superman from a little shop in China. Collecting a pair of mugs on the way past, he rejoined Lois in the living room.

“Wow,” Lois said. “That was fast.”

“I used hot water to start with,” Clark said, mentally crossing his fingers. “It only took a minute to boil, but it still has to steep. Just a second and I’ll get your sweetener and the sugar.” He set the pot down on the table, careful to place it on a pot lifter in respect for his mother’s old coffee table, and went back for the promised items. Back within seconds, he set them on the table, and then seated himself next to Lois on the sofa.

“There,” he said, smiling at her. “Now, while the tea steeps, do you want to tell me what happened?”

“Yeah.” Lois was watching the curl of steam arising from the kettle, not looking at him. “It was really weird. Kind of scary, too.”

“I figured that out,” Clark said. “Why don’t you start at the beginning?”

“Everything was okay until Henderson and I got to my apartment door,” Lois said. “While I was unlocking my door, I noticed that cold air was coming out from under the door . . .”

She went on to describe the events in her apartment. While she was talking, Clark checked the tea, and quietly filled one of the mugs, added sugar, and stirred it gently. Other than that, however, he simply listened without comment until she finished.

“So Henderson and I waited until the local cop got there and Bill told him to watch everything until he got back or the investigation team showed up,” Lois concluded. She took a final sip of the tea that had quickly vanished while she spoke. “It was only a few minutes, and then he brought me over here.”

Clark was silent for nearly a minute. “But Henderson said it wasn’t a vampire,” he said. “What do you think?”

“Well,” Lois said slowly, “I don’t think it was a vampire either. I don’t believe in vampires. At least,” she added, a little sheepishly, “I don’t believe in them right now, sitting here next to you in a warm, lighted room with all the windows locked and the shutters closed, but back in my apartment I wasn’t so sure.”

“Yeah,” Clark said. “You said you were wearing the silver cross your grandmother gave you. You know, if it was somebody pretending to be a vampire, he’d have to act like the cross drove him off. But you probably already thought of that.”

“Yeah, I did — but not right away.” She reached into the pocket of her jacket and withdrew the little piece of jewelry on its silver chain. “I’ll have to get the chain fixed tomorrow.”

“Let me see it,” Clark requested.

Lois dropped it into his hand and he examined it closely.

After a second, he pushed his glasses up to make the job easier.

“I’m nearsighted,” he explained to his partner. “I can see it better without the glasses.” He squinted at the damage. “It looks like you just bent one of the links. I have a pair of tweezers in my tool chest. Want me to try and fix it?”

“Sure.” Lois yawned, and listening to her heartbeat, Clark was somewhat relieved to realize that she had calmed considerably from the time she had arrived on his doorstep.

“Okay, I’ll see what I can do with it,” he said, pushing his glasses back firmly into place again. “In the meantime, why don’t you go on into my room and change? You can have my bed, and —”

“I’m not taking your bed,” Lois said firmly. “I’ll sleep on the couch. It’s almost as comfortable as my bed, and besides, you have that big glass window with no curtains. I don’t want to wake up and find that guy staring through it at me.”

She had a point, he had to admit. “All right. Go ahead and change. We both need to get a little sleep before tomorrow and it’s past four.”

Lois looked at her watch. “You’re right. I didn’t notice.” She stood up. “I’m not sure I’ll be able to sleep anyway, but I feel

better than I did a while ago, so maybe it's not a lost cause."

"Maybe," Clark agreed with a slight smile. "There's something else to think about while you're changing. According to legend, a vampire can't enter a home without permission of the owner, and this guy came through your window without any problem. And second, do you think it's possible that your 'vampire' was wearing a bullet proof vest, by any chance?"

There was a slight pause. "I didn't think of that for some reason," Lois said. "That makes me feel better — knowing there might be a logical, rational explanation for what happened. But why would this 'not-vampire' go after me?"

"Well —" Clark was slow to answer. "Brunner's bosses probably knew you were in that room in the basement, you know. You got out, and they have to know that, too. Maybe they think they can scare you off, especially with the other 'vampire' murders in the last few days. It wouldn't be the first time the bad guys have underestimated Lois Lane."

"I hadn't thought of that," Lois said. "You're right, and you're also right that they haven't scared me off."

"I knew that," Clark said calmly. "But the next time you decide to go snooping in the back rooms at Cost Mart, do you think you could wait for me? If it hadn't been for your mystery man this evening, you might still be stuck in that room."

Lois nodded. "All right; just this once," she conceded. "Just don't think I'm going to make a habit of it."

Naturally, Lois overslept. She became slowly aware that her bed wasn't the one she was used to, although it was quite soft and comfortable. She opened her eyes to discover that she was sleeping on Clark's couch. A downy feather pillow was tucked under her right ear, and a thick, warm quilt covered her. From Clark's kitchenette, the rich aroma of coffee being made drifted through the air, along with the unmistakable smell of frying eggs and bacon. The sun was shining brightly through the side window, and through it she caught a glimpse of a cloudless blue sky. The snowstorm had apparently passed.

Slowly, the events of the previous day and night came back to her and she had to remind herself firmly that any hypothetical vampires that had been running around the city last night would not be able to go outside in the daylight. If it hadn't been a vampire — and really, that was most likely, after all — then he was human and therefore no more difficult or dangerous to deal with than any other garden-variety crook. However, it somehow seemed later than the usual time she woke up. A glance at her watch brought her into a sitting position so quickly that she felt light-headed for a moment and had to flop back down on the sofa.

"Lois?" It was Clark's voice, speaking from the entrance to the kitchenette. "Are you all right?"

Slowly, she sat up again. "It's ten-fifteen! We're late! Perry's going to kill us!"

"No he's not. I called him and told him what happened last night. Henderson had already called him and told him you were safe. He said not to wake you up." He crossed the room to her and set a cup of coffee down on the slightly battered coffee table. "Here you go. Fixed just the way you like it at the office."

It smelled a lot better than the office java, Lois thought, reflecting guiltily on the fact that she hadn't called her boss last night to let him know that she was all right. On the other hand, she rationalized, she hadn't known that he was looking for her or had been worried about her safety. She picked up the coffee cup, blew on it gently and took a sip. It was definitely better than the office brew, as might be expected, and Clark had fixed it exactly as she liked it. She took another sip, savoring the taste. Whether she would admit it aloud or not, Clark made a killer cup of coffee.

"I'm getting breakfast," Clark said. "Bacon and eggs and

pancakes. It should be ready by the time you are. Then, I was thinking we should call Bill and see what, if anything, he managed to find out after he dropped you off here last night."

"If he's at his office at all," Lois pointed out. "He might sleep late after spending the whole night awake. He probably didn't get to bed before five or six. Besides, I have a better idea."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I want to go over to the Museum of Natural History and see if we can find the deerskin thingy that Henderson was talking about last night — the one with the symbols like the ones on the wall in the Indian crypt. And maybe we can find out something about this legend he mentioned. It probably doesn't have anything to do with the case, but I'd like to know about it, just to be sure, so we can rule out hypothetical American Indian vampires. And then we can decide what to do about finding where the smugglers brought their cargo ashore."

"I don't know about that last part," Clark said. "We don't want to screw up Henderson's investigation."

"We won't," Lois said. "If we find it, we can show him where it is. And we won't disturb anything. There's no way I want this batch to get away with this stuff. I hate drug dealers more than just about anything else — except maybe rats," she added parenthetically. "Anyhow, that's for later. First, I want to find out everything we can about the local inhabitants when the settlers first came to New Troy. I want to be sure there were no vampire legends to worry about."

"I can't argue with that," Clark said. "There's something else I'd like to do, before we start prowling around in Wilson's Cove, though. I want to take a look around your apartment house. Your non-vampire guy last night 'flew'. Unless he's another Superman clone, he must have faked it, somehow. I want to see if we can figure it out, if Henderson hasn't already done it. Go ahead and get ready, and after we've had breakfast, we'll go on over. I figure you'd better eat. It might get pretty busy today."

Sometimes, Clark had some pretty good ideas, she thought. "Right. Do you mind if I get a five minute shower?"

But Lois discovered that she had underestimated William Henderson. When they arrived at the Metropolis Museum of Natural History an hour later, William Henderson was just ascending the flight of steps that led to the entrance. The man regarded the two of them with his usual deadpan expression.

"Fancy meeting you two here," he remarked. "Somehow, I suspect this isn't a chance encounter."

"Don't you ever sleep?" Lois asked.

"I got a couple of hours this morning. There's a couch in my office, in case you've forgotten."

Recalling the battered leather couch that sat against one wall of Henderson's office, Lois's respect for the officer rose a notch. If he could sleep on that scratchy, hard piece of furniture, he was tougher than she had realized. "I remember. We came over to see if we could get a look at the deerskin thingy you were talking about last night. Mind if we go along with you?"

Not a muscle twitched in the Inspector's face. "I can't stop you. Come on." He ascended the flight of steps and pushed open the glass doors of the establishment.

The museum's visitors were thin at this time in the morning. A small crowd of children of about the third or fourth grade level were following a teacher and a uniformed museum employee through an exhibit of some kind of primitive art in one section of the first large main room. The children looked bored, as might be expected, Lois thought. Henderson led the way without hesitation to one of the smaller rooms in the back, opening off the main section. Lois had been in the museum once or twice, but this particular room had never come to her attention before. She followed the Inspector inside and looked around, wondering where the stuff about the deerskin hieroglyphics was kept. And

where did you find out about Native American legends? Weren't they supposed to have some kind of explanations about this stuff beside the exhibits, or something?

The artifacts weren't much to look at from her perspective, although an archeologist would probably get a lot out of them, she figured. The relics of the civilization that had existed on the site of New Troy looked pretty much like any of the other ones she had seen when her high school history class had come here to see the mock-up of the settlement at Plymouth Rock. There were models of the box-like dwellings, the examples of art and deerskin clothing, and arrowheads found on the sites of the villages, and various implements that meant nothing to her. Natural history had never been one of Lois's areas of interest.

Henderson headed directly across the room to the exhibit portraying the tribal medicine man, the elaborate ceremonial clothing that he had worn, and the various tools of his trade. And there it was. Hanging on the wall, incased in glass, was an animal skin, very pale in color, marked with the same kind of symbols they had seen inside the crypt.

Clark went past her to the exhibit and leaned forward, lifting his glasses as he had done the previous night with the silver chain that now hung around Lois's neck once more, and examined the parchment minutely.

"This was an albino deer," he remarked at last, shoving his glasses into place. "From what I've read, albino animals seemed to have had some kind of religious significance to the local natives."

Henderson glanced at him approvingly. "I see you've done your homework," he remarked. "Albino animals were considered the most effective against the evil spirits. This particular artifact belonged to one of their most powerful medicine men who was said to have tamed the blood spirits that threatened the tribe."

"Blood spirits?" Lois asked.

Henderson nodded. "Legend had it that there were blood spirits that would lure the youths away from home and feast on their blood."

Lois shivered. "Sort of like a vampire."

The corner of Henderson's mouth twitched. "Sort of. Anyhow, this guy, whoever he was, was a legend, sort of a demigod to the tribe. He was said to have taken the power of the blood spirits from them in a great battle by absorbing it himself, and died as a result, but his spirit remained to guard his people as long as they lived in his sacred land." He pointed to a plaque under the deerskin. "Another version says he became a shade by day and was only solid by night. After the white settlers came, his protection extended to them. The only price was that he had to have blood to sustain him as well, and the hunger would take over his soul until he was fed. The tribe regarded it as the price it must pay for his protection."

"Sounds like a two-edged sword," Clark said.

Henderson shrugged. "According to the legend, the medicine man's spirit only fed on the worst of the tribe. The criminals, the spreaders of discord, the slothful, which no primitive people could afford to have. I suspect that part was added later — sort of a moral lesson to the kids not to shirk their duties or misbehave, or the guardian would come after them."

"That makes sense," Clark agreed. "A lot of cultures have legends of bogeymen, who come after naughty kids, meant to enforce good behavior. I guess you had time this morning to do a little research, huh?"

"Now that you mention it, I did. The crypt you found sounds as if it's tied in with the legend. I wonder if our friends at Cost Mart investigated it and maybe decided to adapt the legend for their own reasons."

"I guess it's possible," Clark said. "We've seen crazier things."

Lois nodded, somewhat relieved to know that there could be

a normal explanation for all the weirdness of the past few days. "What about the guy last night? Did your people find anything?"

"We're still investigating," Henderson said. "Assuming that it wasn't a vampire, I'd guess that it was someone rigged up to look like one. He probably wore a bullet proof vest on the chance that he could run into someone with a gun, like me, escorting you to your place."

"That's taking quite a risk," Clark observed.

"Some," Henderson agreed. "But most of the people running around with guns are cops. We're trained to shoot at the torso. Biggest target," he added. "I find it very interesting that the lights were out, by the by. The circuit breaker had been tripped. If the guy wore some kind of harness so he could 'fly' that would be necessary to keep you from seeing it, wouldn't it, Lane?"

Lois nodded. "I guess so. Did you find any place where he could have anchored a rope? I didn't hear a helicopter or anything."

"We're still checking," Henderson said. "I don't expect it to be obvious."

"Yeah — probably not," Lois admitted.

"Maybe I could ask Superman to look around," Clark suggested. "He's very interested in solving this thing, too."

"I was going to ask you about that," Henderson said. "I'd appreciate it."

"You make me feel better," Lois said. "I don't really believe in vampires, but —"

"Yeah, I know," Henderson said. "I don't either, but for a few seconds there I had my doubts."

Lois found herself grinning slightly and had to compose her features before she glanced at him. "Are you sure you feel all right, Bill?"

"Call it momentary weakness from fatigue," Henderson said, completely deadpan. "Once we figure all this out, maybe I can get a decent night's sleep again. In the meantime, I'm just going to keep plugging."

"What about Wilson's Cove?" Lois asked.

"What about it?"

"Aren't you trying to find the place where their boat docked, so they could bring their drugs ashore?"

"Sure," Henderson said mildly. "But there's a lot of land to search and we don't want to chance missing anything — or let on to the bad guys that we might be onto them. My men are being careful. They'll report if they find anything." He paused and looked at her thoughtfully. "You stay away from it, Lane. The last thing I need is a reporter destroying evidence by trampling all over it. Leave it to my men. I've already promised you've got the exclusive if and when we find something."

"I won't destroy any evidence," Lois protested. "When have I messed with your evidence before?"

"District Attorney Drake had a few pointed things to say about you and her pager," Henderson observed. "Something to do with that Intergang witness that was in the hospital last month."

"I saved your witness's *life!*" Lois shot back, thoroughly annoyed.

"I know that," Henderson said mildly. "That's probably why Drake didn't charge you with petty theft — that, and the fact that proving it would be a waste of time. For the record, the Department appreciates what you did, but don't push your luck. You'll have all the relevant information soon enough."

"Hmmp." Lois glared at him and received Henderson's most annoying deadpan look in return. "Well, when can I go back to my apartment?"

"Any time you want," Henderson said. "We're all finished with it. Just don't go prowling around on the roof for a while. We're still checking it out."

Clark cleared his throat. "Uh, I'll be right back. I need to visit the restroom."

Lois nodded absently as her partner made a quick exit from the room, and quelled her irritation. “How about Cost Mart itself? Are you watching it to make sure the drugs don’t leave until you’re ready to make some arrests?”

The Inspector nodded. “We’ve got cops all over the place, supposedly investigating the death of their manager and the two we found in the park last night. I doubt they’ll risk moving their cargo until things quiet down again. That should stall things for a day or so, anyhow.”

A gust of air blew Lois’s hair into her face. She brushed it back into place, only to see Superman standing beside them. “Superman!”

“Hi, Lois,” he said. “Inspector Henderson, Clark Kent called me last night and told me what you’d discovered. I took a look around in Wilson’s Cove, and I may have found something you’re looking for.”

Henderson’s left eyebrow rose. “And that would be ...?”

“I think I may have found the spot where the drugs came ashore.”

Henderson’s eyebrows both snapped up at this announcement. “Can you show me where?”

Superman produced a sheet of paper. “I drew you a map,” he said, matter-of-factly.

Lois leaned forward to see past Henderson’s body. Superman’s map was so precisely drawn that it looked like a very high resolution photograph of that section of the Metropolitan coastline, and she found herself once again in awe of the Man of Steel’s many talents. The drawing showed an aerial view of Mariner’s Cove, and the vacation cottage where they had emerged from the Cost Mart tunnel, and the neighboring Wilson’s Cove, the reeds, and trees, and the inlets, as well as a very narrow path winding its way through the vegetation, to a section of the third inlet where trampled grass showed evidence of recent human presence. Superman glanced apologetically at Henderson.

“I discovered this early this morning,” he explained. “Before dawn. I would have gone back with photographic equipment, but I didn’t want to be seen over the area by day. If the people behind this are watching, it might have given away the fact that we suspect what they’re up to.”

“Probably,” Henderson said, studying the drawing with critical approval. “We could use you as a police artist down at the station. I take it these positional points are accurate?”

Superman nodded. “Yes, they are. I hope this helps.”

“It should. Thanks.” Henderson glanced at Lois. “Tell Kent I needed to take off. I’ll let you know how it comes out.”

“Now wait a —” Lois might have been speaking to a wall.

Henderson was gone almost as fast as Superman could move, she thought in disgust. And, by the way, where was Superman? In the split instant that she had looked away, he had vanished as silently as a ghost.

Clark rounded the corner. “Where’s Henderson?”

“Superman showed up with a map,” Lois said. “He said he’d found where the drugs were landed. Come on!”

“Where are we going?”

“Over to Wilson’s Cove, of course!”

Clark’s eyebrows flew up but he said nothing. A few moments later, they were on the sidewalk, looking around unsuccessfully for a cab.

“Where’s a cab when you need one?” Lois grumbled. “They were all over the place a little while ago!”

Clark was looking vainly up and down the street. “I don’t see any.”

Lois growled under her breath and then made up her mind. “Come on.”

“Where?” Clark inquired, falling into step beside her.

“There’s a pay phone on the next block. We’ll call a cab.”

“Do you know where every pay phone in the city is?” Clark

inquired curiously, keeping pace with her easily as she started down the sidewalk at a brisk pace.

“Mostly. I’ve had to phone in stories from most of ‘em,” Lois said shortly. “It’s a good thing I didn’t wear heels today.”

Ten minutes later, she stepped into the phone booth and grabbed for the telephone book dangling from its metal cable. A moment later, she was talking to the cab company representative who answered her call. Emerging triumphantly at last, she found Clark drinking what appeared to be coffee from a Styrofoam cup. “Where did you get that?”

He swallowed and nodded to the little booth a short distance away where a vendor was dispensing various drinks to passing citizens. “I got you a Cappuccino,” he informed her, handing her a second capped container.

“Thanks.” Lois accepted the drink. “The cab will be here in a minute. But I have a better idea than going over to Wilson’s Cove.”

“That was fast,” Clark said, eyeing her with a slightly wary expression. “If we’re not going to Wilson’s Cove, where do you want to go?”

“Over to Mariner’s Cove,” Lois said.

“What for?”

“I figure Henderson can find the spot Superman told him about,” Lois explained. “He’s going to tell us about that anyway. I want to try to get a look around the guest cottages and see if we can find anything. We didn’t really have much of a chance to look during the times we were there so far, but I don’t think anyone’s going to be hanging around there in broad daylight. Do you?”

“Well, except for the security guy,” Clark pointed out in his usual maddeningly matter-of-fact way. “There’s probably one there twenty-four/seven.”

“We can get around him,” Lois said confidently. “He’ll never know we were there.”

Clark opened his mouth and then closed it, which she took for assent, and a few minutes later, they were climbing into one of the rattier specimens of cabs from the Metro Cab Company. Lois gave the directions, and the vehicle took off with a shriek of abused tires. Hanging on grimly to Clark’s arm with one hand and the door’s safety grip with the other, Lois belatedly recalled the reason why she had vowed, for the thousandth time, never again to patronize a Metro cab when last she had had the misfortune to ride in one of these deathtraps, which had actually been this morning on the trip to the Metro Museum of Natural History. Why didn’t she ever learn?

Amazingly enough, however, fifteen minutes later the cab rocketed to a stop at the curb, unscathed, and the driver glanced back at his shattered passengers. “That’ll be sixty-four thirty-one,” he informed them.

Wordlessly, Clark released his own grip on the seat where his fingers had left deep impressions in the cracked faux-leather and reached for his wallet. A moment later, they were standing on the sidewalk as the vehicle peeled away from the curb amid a blast of exhaust fumes and a screech of tires. Lois took a ragged breath and looked at her partner.

“After we’re done, maybe we could take a bus back,” she suggested.

“That’s one of the better suggestions I’ve heard today,” Clark said.

“Well, that’s for later,” Lois said, returning single-mindedly to business. “The resort’s down this way. Let’s go.”

Clark moved to the position between her and the street and they began to walk. “Why do you do that?” Lois asked.

“Do what?”

“You always walk on the outside.”

“That’s the way Mom and Dad always taught me,” he said. “Manners.”

Lois glanced at him oddly. “Manners?”

“Sure. The guy always walks between the woman and the street.”

“To protect her from dirt thrown by the horses?” she asked with a grin.

He grinned back. “Well, that was where the custom came from,” he agreed. “Or so I’m told. Now it’s just good manners.”

She shook her head. “Smallville must have been a fun place to grow up in.”

“Actually, it was,” Clark said imperturbably. “At least for me.” He was looking carefully around as they approached the strip of land that marked the border of the vacation resort. Some distance beyond the first of the cheerful little cottages, the ocean looked bright and blue with sunlight reflecting off the waves. Gulls circled above the beach and as Lois watched, she saw one sweep by almost overhead and drop something that struck the sidewalk sharply. At once the bird swooped down to snatch up part of the dropped whatever-it-was, and several others followed. The first bird launched himself and flapped away, the others in pursuit.

“What was that all about?” Lois asked.

“The first guy had some kind of shellfish, like a clam or an oyster or something,” Clark said. “Gulls drop them on stone — or in this case, the sidewalk — to crack the shell so they can get at the inside part. The other gulls saw him do it and tried to steal his dinner.”

“Oh,” Lois said. She looked sideways at him. “Don’t tell me they had an ocean in Kansas, too.”

“Huh? Oh.” Clark grinned. “I collect trivia.”

“Yeah, I’d almost forgotten.” Lois stopped and stood surveying the landscape. “Do you see any sign of the security guy?”

“Not so far. Let’s go on. As long as we stay on the sidewalk they won’t bother us even if they see us. The house is the last one in the row — the white one — about four blocks farther on down.”

“I know,” Lois said, resuming her pace. “Try to act casual, but see if you can spot the guard.”

“I’m looking,” Clark told her. He sauntered along as if he had no place urgent to go and Lois walked beside him, trying not to hurry. Charging along the sidewalk as fast as she wanted to go was certain to attract unwelcome attention, and if there was a guard anywhere around he was bound to get curious if he saw her rushing along, but it wasn’t easy to go slowly. Some hunch that she wasn’t even fully aware of was urging her to hurry up and check out the house, that maybe they would find more answers to the questions they had been trying to answer for the last couple of days if they could just get inside and have a little time to look around in daylight.

“There he goes,” Clark said in a low voice. Lois followed his gaze and saw the chubby figure of the resort’s security guard strolling along the beach in the opposite direction. “He doesn’t look like he’s in much of a hurry.”

“Keep walking,” Lois said. “Wait until we get the cottage between us and him. He doesn’t look like he’s expecting any trouble.”

Clark didn’t answer, but he continued to stroll casually beside her as they approached the end of the strip of land that marked Mariner’s Cove. Lois glanced carefully over her shoulder to assure herself that they were safely concealed by the bulk of the cottage before she stepped off the sidewalk and strode confidently toward the building.

Clark was still beside her, looking in the direction of the surf. The security guard wasn’t in view, and Lois moved to the right, keeping the building between them and the spot where she had last seen the man.

Clark pushed his glasses up on his nose. “I think he’s still headed the other way,” he said, keeping his voice low. “Got your

lock pick?”

“Better,” Lois informed him. “I stuck a wad of chewing gum into the latch last night, just in case we needed to get back in today. Unless somebody found it, we shouldn’t have any trouble.”

Clark’s expression didn’t change, but he nodded matter-of-factly.

They reached the corner of the house and Lois flattened herself against the wooden side. Very cautiously, she sneaked an eye around the corner.

The guard was much farther away now, his back still toward them. She looked back at Clark. “Let’s go.”

Their footfalls were silent in the white sand. Quietly, they moved around to the wooden porch where residents of the duplex could sit on warm summer evenings and watch the waves rolling in. A swinging wooden seat hung from the overhanging porch roof on each end of the structure, and toward the center, two doors, one to each half of the duplex, were closed and blank. Lois moved to the one on the left and experimentally tugged on the knob.

After an instant’s initial resistance, it came open, and she looked triumphantly at her partner. Clark’s lips twitched, but he said nothing, and together, they slipped quietly inside.

The room was almost familiar to Lois by this time, although she had only seen it by the light of a flashlight before. The floors were of polished hardwood, and there was no furniture to be seen — probably it was stored somewhere for the winter, Lois figured, to be taken out when the place was rented out to the well-heeled vacationers at the beginning of summer.

“There’s the place where the basement door opens up,” Clark said softly, pointing. “The closet’s on the other side. I wonder if there’s any kind of door opening from this side into the other half of the duplex.”

“Maybe,” Lois said. “Let’s just look around for now, okay? I want to see if there’s anything in here that we ought to know about.”

Clark nodded, but Lois had the feeling he didn’t entirely agree. Quietly, they moved past the alcove that housed the invisible trap door to the tunnel beneath Cost Mart’s parking lot, and entered the back sections of the house.

A hallway led them to a small but elegant dining room and a kitchen with all the latest appliances. Lois observed the chrome dishwasher that looked as if it could handle the dirty dishes for a platoon of Marines, a stove with enough bells and whistles to satisfy the most exacting chef, and the formidable seven-foot matted steel refrigerator and freezer combination with attached icemaker, and briefly envied the next persons to enjoy the luxuries of this vacation cottage. But then, the place had been designed for well-to-do vacationers, so it wasn’t really surprising, she supposed. On the opposite side from its entrance into the dining room, a door in the wall exited to what was probably the back steps.

On the other side of the hallway was a luxury bathroom with a tub the size of the Children’s Pool at the Metro Public Beach, and a little farther down, three bedrooms with carpet that you could lose your feet in. The furniture, of course, wasn’t in evidence, although she could see traces of where it had stood. A second, smaller, but no less luxurious bathroom attached to the master bedroom, but nowhere did they discover any sign of the criminal activities to which this place had been put two nights before.

In some disappointment, Lois turned back toward the front when Clark pulled her quickly into the smallest of the bedrooms and pushed the door gently shut.

“Clark! What are you —” she began when his hand closed over her mouth.

“Listen!”

Lois bit off the words mid-sentence.

From the direction of the living room, a door closed, and footsteps crossed the hardwood floor of the living room. The footsteps were abruptly muted as whoever it was apparently reached the carpeted hallway.

Clark tugged her wrist and she followed him as he crossed the room on silent feet and opened the closet door. They had barely entered the small room and pulled the door to, when the muffled footsteps paused outside the bedroom.

Lois held her breath.

Beside her, Clark moved softly, and then his hand was pulling her gently to the back of the closet. Lois went with the pull, expecting to encounter the wall.

“Duck your head,” Clark’s whisper directed. Lois obeyed.

It was just as dark, but somehow the closet seemed larger now than it should have been. There was the impression of more space around her. Clark reached past her and she heard the faintest of scrapes, as of a sliding panel, and then a soft click.

“What —”

“There was a sliding door in the back of the closet,” Clark said, keeping his voice so low that she had to strain to hear the words. “I think we’re in the other side of the duplex.”

Lois reached back the way she had come, and her hand encountered polished wood. Then there was the faint sound of a latch turning, and a line of light appeared, at once showing her that they were in the mirror image of the closet where they had just been. Clark’s silhouette was pressed against the door, and her partner was obviously taking in the lay of the land. After several long seconds, he pushed it open.

Lois peered out into the room beyond. It was exactly the same as the one they had just left, and she was aware of a stab of disappointment.

But Clark was moving forward into the room, taking care to make no sound at all. Not knowing what they might encounter, she figured that made sense. Besides, there was somebody in the other side of the duplex that might hear them if they weren’t careful.

Clark paused by the door which hung slightly ajar, and listened. Lois strained her ears, but could hear nothing but the distant sound of the surf. Still, it was highly suspicious that there had been a sliding door in the closet. She’d be willing to bet that it hadn’t been part of the vacation cottage’s original design.

“Hear anything?” she whispered, barely breathing the words.

He shook his head and pushed the door wider. Together, they tiptoed out into the hallway.

It was, as Lois expected, empty, however leaving now was probably impossible, at least if they were planning on doing so without being discovered. Clark had turned toward the master bedroom and Lois followed him, the back of her neck prickling. They had no way of knowing if whoever had entered the other side of the duplex was going to come in here next.

The master bedroom’s door was closed, and Clark paused, listening for several seconds before he quietly turned the knob and pushed it open.

Clark gently pushed the door open.

When he and Lois had entered the other half of the duplex, he had taken the opportunity to scan the house completely, and had seen what he was now aiming for.

The master bedroom, of course, was empty of furniture, and the door to the attached bathroom was closed. He turned toward it, listening intently for any sound in the structure. The footsteps of the person who had nearly intruded on them earlier had stopped but he could still hear the man’s heartbeat. A glance with his X-ray vision over the tops of his glasses told him the fellow — a thick-set, beefy man in the outfit of a Cost Mart employee — was lifting the trap door that led to the passage under the Cost

Mart parking lot. That was interesting. What was going on there this time?

But right now, the master bathroom was his destination. Moving quietly, Clark crossed the thick carpet of the bedroom, listened a moment, and opened the door.

Clark Kent was rarely caught by surprise in a situation such as this one. His better-than-human senses were always on the alert and warned him well in advance of any unexpected events that might decide to spring themselves on him but there were those few occasions that caught even him without warning. This was one of them.

He had already peeked into this room earlier, and knew that, although there was no one present to interfere with them, there was something else of interest in here — several items that certainly did not belong in the luxurious bathroom of a vacation cottage. Listening now, before he opened the door, he had heard no sounds of breathing, and no heartbeat. The room was still uninhabited.

Or so he’d thought. There shouldn’t have been anything alive in the room, but there was definitely someone present now when he opened the door.

At first he thought that he and Lois had stumbled on a corpse, for the man sleeping in the enormous bathtub lay deathly still. The blinds were pulled across the frosted glass of the window, blocking out the direct rays of the noon sun, but there was enough indirect light to see. Lois sucked in her breath in a shrill gasp at the sight of the figure, and the man’s eyes opened.

Clark would have expected an expression of surprise in such a circumstance, which was odd to say the least, but the man looked at them calmly for several seconds and then slowly sat up. He surveyed them both with expressionless calm. Clark felt Lois’s hand clutch his arm almost convulsively.

“It’s him!” she said.

“Who?”

“This is the guy that rescued me from that room in Cost Mart!”

Clark looked sharply back at the man, who was now getting to his feet. “But not the one in your apartment last night?” She shook her head. “No.”

The unknown stepped from the tub with unimpaired calm, as if being found sleeping in a bathtub was an everyday event in his life. In the filtered light from the window Clark surveyed him with rigidly concealed interest.

On first appearance, he didn’t seem particularly unusual. He was a short, slender brown-skinned man, dressed in slightly worn jeans and a green Cost Mart T-shirt with the Cost Mart logo on the left breast, which implied, at least, that he might stock shelves or do other basic duties for the store, and over it he wore a light jacket. His hair, eyebrows and eyes were of an almost glassy black, like obsidian, Clark thought. High cheekbones, a straight, full-lipped mouth and a firm, determined chin gave him a slightly Native American appearance. He stood straight, his shoulders back, and folded his arms casually across his chest in an almost Superman pose, watching the two of them stolidly.

Lois took a half-step forward. “You never gave me a chance to thank you last night.”

The mystery man’s mouth curled in a faint smile. “You are most welcome, Miss Lane.” His strange, black eyes shifted to Clark. “And this is Mr. Kent, I presume.” It was not a question. Clark nodded. “And you are —?”

“A friend,” the other man said, with another faint quirk of his lips.

“What are you doing here?” Lois asked.

“I do not wish to be found by the men of Cost Mart.” The voice held a faint accent that Clark couldn’t identify, and he thought he had heard most of the accents on Earth. “I concealed myself here, with samples of their wares until nightfall.” He

nodded at the two wrapped packages and the pair of automatic weapons lying in a long, wooden container in the corner, their surfaces gleaming slickly with oil. "I was unable to return to my usual quarters at the present time."

That was an odd way to put it. Clark frowned slightly. "Where would that be?"

The man glanced sideways at him. "That is not your concern. Are you able to contact your police inspector? I wished to show him this evidence, and speak to him of the men bringing these things into your city."

"We'll be seeing Henderson later," Lois said. "We could give him a message if you want."

The man nodded and gestured at the packages. "This is but a small sample of the death these men deal. They must be stopped. You must tell this Henderson that the shipments come in a vessel that sails beneath the surface of the sea. They wait now a little way from the shore to bring in more of these wares when his men no longer watch."

"A sub?" Lois said. She and Clark looked at each other. "That would explain why they haven't been picked up by the Coast Guard."

"Yeah," Clark said slowly. "It would, wouldn't it? If it's a small sub, and there's enough clearance in that inlet, it would be the perfect way to avoid detection by the authorities. Then they bring the goods into Cost Mart and distribute it from there."

"We can introduce you to Inspector Henderson if you like," Lois said. "I'm sure he'd like to talk to you."

"I dare not venture into the open now," the other man said. "Take my message to him. Bring him to this place where he may see these things."

Well, they couldn't force the guy to go with them, Clark supposed. "You'll be all right here?"

"Do not fear for me," Lois's mystery man said. "I shall be safe. Go now."

"You're sure?" Lois said. She glanced at Clark, looking a little uncertain.

The dark man's lips parted in a smile, and two rows of startlingly white teeth flashed for an instant. "I am sure. Time is, however, as I have heard said, of the essence. Tell your law enforcement officer what I have told you."

Clark made up his mind. "All right. Come on, Lois."

As the door closed behind them, Lois hesitated. "Should we leave him here? What if he's gone when we get back?"

"We can hardly drag him along against his will," Clark pointed out. "And I don't want to leave you here alone with him. He may have rescued you, but we don't know anything about him, really."

"Yeah," Lois kept her voice low. "There's something different about him. I don't know what it is."

Clark glanced back at the closed door. There was definitely something different about the mystery man, and the possibilities nearly raised the hair on his head. However, he simply nodded. "I know what you mean. Come on, though. We need to try to find Henderson."

"Won't he still be hunting around in Wilson's Cove?"

"Maybe," Clark said. "Or maybe he's just sent his people to do the hunting. If we can get out of here without being seen, maybe you can find the nearest pay phone and call the Precinct."

"There's one about two blocks from here," Lois said. "Do you think whoever that was next door is still there?"

Clark shrugged. "I don't hear anyone walking around," he said. "Do you?"

Actually the intruder, whoever he was, had descended the ladder down into the underground tunnel about the time they had encountered Lois's mystery man. There was no one in the vacation cottage now except themselves and the dark man in the master bathroom's tub. Assuming, Clark thought whimsically,

that he had decided to continue his nap after they left.

Lois was silent, apparently listening. "No," she said at last. "But I don't want the security guy to spot us leaving, either. The other night, he probably thought we were just random trespassers, but after what happened yesterday I don't want to count on it."

"Me, either. If he reported it to his bosses, they might decide it was too dangerous to continue their operations, and we might not ever be able to pin it on them. That wouldn't be so good."

"That's for sure." Lois led the way out of the master bedroom, walking almost on tip toe. "We'll just have to be careful."

"Why don't we go out via the kitchen door?" Clark suggested. "That way we'll have the house between us and the beach."

Lois regarded him thoughtfully. "You know, for a farm boy, sometimes you have some pretty good ideas."

"We Kansas farm boys try to please, ma'am," he said, thickening his Midwestern drawl slightly.

"I've noticed that," Lois said. "Somehow, I'm starting to wish I was in Kansas right now, even with your Kansas oceans and Kansas sea gulls. I think all this creepy stuff is starting to get to me. I'd like a nice, straightforward, honest Corn Festival, with lots of handsome, corn fed farm boys to ogle instead of blood-drained bodies and vampires in the dark. A nice sunny day in Kansas is looking awfully attractive at the moment." She straightened her shoulders. "But, we've got a gang of smugglers to bring down, so let's get cracking."

Their departure from the kitchen door of the duplex was without incident, however. When they were sauntering side by side down the sidewalk once more, Lois felt her shoulders relaxing.

"Hold it a minute," she said, after a moment.

Clark paused. "Something wrong?"

"No. I just need to empty the sand out of my shoes. Mind if I lean against you?"

Her partner's teeth flashed in a grin. "Never," he said. "Lean away."

Lois pulled off a shoe and shook the sand from it, utilizing her partner as a leaning post. He stood patiently while she completed the operation and steadied her while she re-tied the jogging shoes. "Now," he added, "Where is the nearest pay phone? You notice I'm relying on your expertise."

"Just over two blocks from here," Lois told him. "It's over by Petrovitch's Gas Station."

"Who?"

"It's one of the little independent stations," Lois informed him. "The owner's name is Harvey Brown."

"I thought you said the station was called Petrovitch's."

"It is, but the owner is Harvey Brown. Come on."

A short time later, Lois put down the phone. "He's not there. They don't know when he'll be back."

"Great." Clark had acquired a pair of canned sodas while Lois was on the phone. "Here, you probably need this."

Lois accepted the cream soda. "Thanks. Henderson's probably still mucking around in Wilson's Cove, when we have information he'd probably kill for. What do we do now?"

Clark was frowning. "Let's get back to the Planet. With a little luck, I might be able to get hold of Superman. He might be able to get to Henderson, wherever he is, and pass along the message. Where's the nearest bus stop?"

"We don't have time," Lois said. "I'll call a cab."

"I thought you didn't want to ride in any more Metro cabs," Clark reminded her.

"I don't, but we're in a hurry. At least cabs are fast," Lois pointed out, a little crossly. "If I thought we had a chance of finding him, I'd personally invade Wilson's Cove, but we'd

probably miss him, or the Cost Mart goons would find us first, or something.” She grabbed up the receiver. “Let’s get this over with before I lose my nerve.”

Clark hesitated, and then nodded. “You’re right. Like our friend back there said, time is of the essence. I don’t suppose your friend Harvey would loan you a car or something.”

Lois put down the receiver. “Clark, you’re a genius!”

Thirty minutes later, Lois pulled the rusty and battered pickup truck, reluctantly loaned to her by the owner of Petrovitch’s Gas Station, into her parking space at the Daily Planet and cut the engine. “Come on; let’s get up to the newsroom. I don’t want to be seen in this thing.”

“What’s the matter with it?”

“It looks like it came from a junk yard!”

“Well,” Clark unwisely pointed out, “Mr. Brown said he’d just finished renovating his other car.”

“He was afraid the same thing would happen to it as happened to the last one,” Lois grumbled. “It wasn’t my fault that that drug kingpin in Suicide Slum had his goons blow it up. It was just lucky I wasn’t in it. Harvey swore he’d never loan me another car.”

“How come he loaned you this one, then?”

“Because he owed me a favor. Come on!”

Lois rang for the elevator. Noting that the lighted number indicated that the elevator was on the ninth floor, Clark resigned himself to several minutes of waiting, and a question that had been circulating in the back of his mind surfaced. “Why didn’t you ask the guy at the Precinct to get a message to Henderson?”

Lois shrugged. “We’re talking about Intergang here. Remember what you said happened when you guys were investigating Lex last year. Henderson didn’t tell anybody but the people he trusted ‘cause he didn’t know who might be on Lex’s payroll. How do we know Intergang doesn’t have plants in the police department?”

She had a point, Clark had to admit. When it came to the international crime syndicate, discretion was probably the safest course. He glanced at the indicator again. The car was now on the sixth floor. He shifted his weight and sighed. If Lois weren’t with him, he’d take the stairs but Lois wasn’t likely to go for walking from the underground lot up four flights of steps to the newsroom after all the running around they had been doing all day.

“What do you suppose that secret door in the closet was for?” Lois said.

“Good question. My guess would be to move stuff from one side to the other without going outside.”

“Probably. I wonder who rented the house last summer.”

“We can find out,” Clark said. “Or, rather, Jimmy can find out for us.”

“Yeah.” Lois chewed on her lower lip, obviously still thinking. That, when they were involved in a complicated investigation, usually meant they were going to be doing something outrageous before long, Clark knew, but he said nothing. Lois wasn’t going to change her mind just because he raised objections. He wondered, sometimes, why it was that most of the important women in his life tended to be Type A personalities. It just figured that Superman preferred high-maintenance women, of which Lois was a shining example. It was probably just as well that she didn’t have super powers. He would never have been able to keep up with her. He barely managed as it was.

The elevator bell dinged at that instant and the doors slid open.

Stepping out into the newsroom some minutes later, Clark could hear Perry’s voice harassing the business editor, but he broke off at the sight of them. “Lane! Kent! In my office! Now!”

Clark glanced at his partner. “Here we go again,” he remarked in an undertone. Lois rolled her eyes, but preceded him down the ramp, Clark trailing in her wake.

Their editor was already sitting behind his desk when they entered his office.

“Hi, Perry,” Lois began. “I guess I should have called you last night, but I didn’t know you were looking —”

“Clark called me this morning,” Perry said, cutting directly to the point. “He told me some cock and bull story about a vampire in your apartment last night, and a lot of other things. Care to bring me up to date?”

Lois shrugged. “It’s kind of a long story.”

“I’ve got time.” Perry fixed her with an uncompromising stare. “Why don’t you sit down and tell me all about it?”

“Fine with me.” Lois looked at Clark. “You need to take off and see if you can find Superman in the meantime. He needs to get hold of Henderson with that message as fast as he can.”

Clark nodded. “I’ll do my best. Excuse me, Chief.”

Perry had opened his mouth to protest, but Lois spoke quickly into the silence. “I sort of ran into trouble over at Cost Mart. You know — the one over by Mariner’s Cove?”

“Yeah, I know. What were you doing over there?” Perry asked.

“Well, it had to do with those bodies that were found in the park,” Lois said. “The ones that had been drained of blood.”

“I figured that. I was there with Henderson when they found the manager, last night,” Perry said. “The guy had been drained of blood, just like the ones in the park. If you’ve got any idea what in Memphis is going on, I want to hear it.”

“All right, but it gets a little complicated. You remember, day before yesterday when they found the third body in the park —”

Clark slipped quietly out the door while Lois began the story of how they had decided to check out that particular Cost Mart, and made his way toward the stairs. The message Lois’s rescuer had given them still needed to be delivered.

A bare minute later, Superman was touching down in front of the Twelfth Precinct. A quick scan of the building told him that William Henderson was just entering his office. He’d probably just returned from Wilson’s Cove, Clark figured as he strode up the steps and opened the glass doors.

Sergeant West looked up from his study of a document on the desk before him. “Hello, Superman. Can I help you?”

“I hope so,” Clark said. “Is Henderson here? I need to speak to him.”

The sergeant didn’t bat an eye. “I’ll see if he’s got a minute.” He did something to the board in front of him and spoke.

“Inspector? Superman’s here. He wants to see you.”

“Send him in.” Henderson’s voice was a trifle scratchy over the intercom, but perfectly recognizable.

The sergeant looked back at Clark. “Go on in.”

“Thank you.” Clark went past him, his red cape waving behind him.

Henderson looked up from his computer screen as Clark rapped lightly on his doorframe. “I guess this isn’t a social visit.”

“No. I’ve got a message for you.”

“And?”

“I need you to come with me,” Clark said. “The message is from the guy that rescued Lois, last night. He needs to talk to you.”

Henderson got to his feet. “I’ve been wanting to talk to him,” he said. “Where?”

“I’ll take you there,” Clark said.

Henderson didn’t answer, but followed Superman as the hero led the way out the side door of the building a short distance from Henderson’s office.

Apparently, Henderson realized, the Man of Steel intended to

fly him to wherever Lois Lane's mysterious rescuer awaited him. Evidently the man was unwilling to come to the Precinct in person, and considering the grisly deaths of the manager and his two subordinates the night before, he guessed he couldn't really blame him.

He had never flown with Superman before, although he knew from observation that Superman had transported literally hundreds, if not thousands, of people by air during rescues. He had seen Superman lift trucks and cars from the ground, and had even seen him land a jumbo jet, and once, on television, had witnessed the hero bringing in the Space Shuttle. He would rather have literally died before he would admit that the thought of actually flying with Superman made him nervous. If Lois Lane could casually accept a lift from Superman, Henderson wasn't about to allow anyone to know that the idea intimidated him.

"One thing," he said. "I'll go with you, but not like you carry Lane."

Superman's teeth flashed in an unexpected grin. "Don't worry."

He stepped forward, clamped an arm around Henderson and in an instant they were in the air, and Henderson was watching the Twelfth Precinct dropping away beneath him.

Henderson let out his breath. The sensation was unlike flying in any man-made aircraft. For one thing, there was no sense of acceleration, and no feeling of weight, either.

"Interesting," he said finally. "It's different than I imagined."

Superman gave a slight grin. "Different principles of flight," he said. "I cancel gravity, somehow, and control my direction mentally."

"How?" Henderson asked, curiously.

"I have no idea," Superman said. "I want it to happen and it does. Anyway, that isn't what's important right now."

Henderson pulled his thoughts from the flight and back to business. "I take it Lois's rescuer doesn't want to be seen in public?"

"I assume so." Superman didn't seem quite sure. "When Lois and Clark talked to him he was more or less hiding in the vacation cottage the three of you were in last night. He says he has some information for you, and asked them to get a message to you. Hopefully he's still there."

"I hope so too. Maybe he can answer some questions."

"Maybe." They were dropping toward the vacation cottage as Superman spoke. "I'm going to take you in fast, to avoid the Security patrol."

Henderson nodded and almost unconsciously braced himself for a burst of speed, but there was no such sensation. The scenery around him blurred for an instant, and Henderson found himself standing on the front porch of the vacation cottage where he had emerged from the tunnel the night before. Superman quietly opened the door on the right and gestured him inside.

"We were in the other side of the duplex," Henderson felt obliged to inform him in a low voice.

"I know. But he's in here — or he was when Lois and Clark talked to him." Superman's voice was also lowered. "This way."

This side of the duplex was a mirror image of the one Henderson had been in last night, at least from what he could see. They progressed through a well-equipped kitchen and emerged into the hallway that had opened from the living room. Superman turned left and led the way past three more closed doors to the one at the end, which opened upon what must be the master bedroom. It was empty, of course, but Henderson noted where sliding doors apparently concealed a large closet, and a closed door to one side that must be the master bathroom.

Superman paused for a second, his eyes narrowing briefly, but then he crossed the bedroom and knocked lightly on the bathroom door.

There was a moment's wait and then the door opened on

well-lubricated hinges, and Henderson got his first look at the man who had seemed to inject himself into this very odd situation for no reason that anyone knew.

He was short and slender in build, but somehow gave the impression of controlled power, even just standing in the doorway. His skin was brown, his eyes, eyebrows and hair so black that they had almost a blue tinge in the dimness of the room. He surveyed Superman and Henderson expressionlessly for several seconds.

"I see you have brought your officer of the law. I believe you are called Henderson, are you not?"

Henderson nodded. "Yes. And you are?"

The man's full lips twitched at the corners. "You may call me a friend. I wished to show you samples of the wares in which the men of Cost Mart traffic. Come in."

He stepped back from the bathroom door and gestured them inside.

Henderson's gaze was drawn instantly to the weapons lying in a long wooden crate against one wall. "They're bringing in weapons."

"And more." He gestured with one hand at the wrapped packages. "In there you will find more of the substance Miss Lane brought you last night. There is a great deal of it in the sub-basement of this Cost Mart. There is more waiting to be brought in after your men have withdrawn."

"Where?"

"A vessel waits off shore," the man told him. "It sails beneath the surface of the sea, and its cargo is death."

Henderson detached the tape holding the package shut and assured himself of the contents. "If this is what I think it is, I'm holding a small fortune in heroin here," he observed.

Superman nodded, his expression unreadable.

"You say they're waiting for me to remove my men?" he asked the mystery man.

"Of course. They fear discovery."

"I'll bet," Henderson murmured. He carefully closed and sealed the package once more.

"This underwater craft will sail into the area you call Wilson's Cove," the man continued. "The third inlet is deep enough to allow it passage. It is there that they deliver their cargo to those who transport it to the basement of Cost Mart through the tunnel, which you explored last night."

Henderson raised an eyebrow. "How did you know that? Did Lane or Kent tell you we were there?"

"I have my ways," the other man said. "Rest assured that no one else knows this, however. I leave the remainder to you, as you are the guardian of this place in this time."

That seemed like an odd way to express it. Henderson was silent, regarding the man a little warily. Something about the stranger made the short hairs on the back of his neck want to rise, and what he called his "detective sense" stirred. Still, he had no feeling of threat from the other, but there was something definitely strange about him. "Thanks," he said finally. "Can you tell me when the next delivery will be?"

"There will not be another until your men are withdrawn," the other said. "These men have limited fuel, however. If they cannot make their delivery soon, it may be weeks before they return."

"All right." Again Henderson looked him over, but he was just a slender brown-skinned man in a green Cost Mart T-shirt and jeans. The fact that he gave Henderson a mild case of the willies was probably no more than his imagination. "I'll deal with it. What about you?"

"I shall wait here for a short while, still," the dark man replied. "It will be dark soon and I may leave this place unremarked by the man who watches. It would not be well, otherwise. You will take this with you?" He gestured to the guns

and packages of drugs.

"I'll get it," Superman said. "Where do you want me to put it?"

"Drop it in my office for now," Henderson said. "I'll take care of it when I get back to the Precinct."

"You got it." Superman and the smuggled merchandise simply disappeared. Henderson tried not to blink in surprise.

The dark man seemed un-fazed. He simply stood unmoving, waiting.

"Where are you from?" Henderson asked suddenly. "I don't recognize your accent."

"English is not my native tongue," the other man replied.

"I figured that part," Henderson said. "What I don't understand is how you're mixed up in this."

"That is not your concern," Lois's rescuer said. "I am not a part of this, but like you, it is my duty to interfere when evil threatens the innocent."

That was definitely a weird way of saying it, Henderson thought. He was about to speak again when Superman reappeared out of thin air. "All done."

"Yeah." Henderson looked thoughtfully at the stranger. The obsidian eyes met his and suddenly the lips split in a smile, revealing very white, straight teeth.

"Good evening, Inspector Henderson," he said. "And my wishes for good fortune go with you. Please tell Miss Lane that I hope she will suffer no ill effects from her adventure last night."

"I'll do that," Henderson muttered. He glanced at the frosted glass of the bathroom window, from which the indirect light of the sun had almost disappeared. Somehow their host seemed more solid and intimidating than he had a few moments before. The man opened the bathroom door and gestured, inviting them to exit. Henderson nodded to him and did so, followed by Superman. Their host followed them, shutting the door behind him.

Henderson followed Superman as they made their way to the hallway. The room was only very dimly illuminated now, with the dying rays of the setting sun reflecting indirectly through the shaded window in the opposite wall.

There was the faintest fluttering sound behind him and he glanced back, wondering if a bird had been somehow trapped in the building, but now there was no one and nothing there. Lois's mysterious rescuer had vanished as if he had never existed.

Henderson was still puzzling over the disappearance of their "friend" as he had described himself, while Superman presumably scanned the area beyond the door of the duplex. There had been nowhere the man could go, and yet he had vanished as silently as the proverbial ghost.

Perhaps, Henderson speculated, he had simply stepped back into the bathroom and not exited behind them as Henderson had assumed he had.

Superman had said nothing, and his expression, in the dimness of the room's interior, was difficult to read. Henderson continued to run the events, and the information imparted to them by their strange informant, through his mind.

"There's no one there," Superman said suddenly. "Let's go."

They slipped through the door into the chilly, dark outer air, and an instant later were rising rapidly into the darkening sky. The scenery blurred again, and cleared. Henderson found that they were high above the beach cottages, and then Wilson's Cove was sliding to their rear as Superman flew swiftly toward the Twelfth Precinct.

"Where did he go?" Henderson asked suddenly. Superman, with his acute super-senses would probably know, he figured.

Superman didn't answer at once. At last, he spoke, sounding, Henderson thought, a little reluctant.

"I'm not sure."

That left Henderson speechless for several seconds. By the time he spoke again, they were losing altitude, descending toward the narrow alley that ran beside the police station. "You don't know?"

Superman set him on his feet. "No. I was checking the area before I opened the door. He vanished while my attention was distracted."

Something in the Kryptonian's voice told Henderson that Superman was hedging. He looked the other man in the eyes. "What is it?"

Superman shrugged slightly. "I'm really not sure."

"The guy can't have vanished into thin air. I don't think you believe in ghosts or vampires any more than I do. What is he — some kind of ninja warrior or something?"

Superman shook his head. "I don't know. I doubt it."

"I'm beginning to wonder," Henderson said.

"So am I. But, Bill —" Superman broke off in a pause so long that Henderson thought that he had decided against completing the sentence.

"But, what?"

"I checked that room — the bathroom — before I knocked." Another pause.

"And?" Henderson said finally.

"It was empty. Except for the weapons and the packages of drugs."

"Then where did he come from?"

"I don't know."

A faint, reluctant chill crept over Henderson's scalp, but he shook off the feeling. "He must have come from somewhere."

"Of course." Superman's reply was almost too quick. "What are you going to do with his information?"

Henderson blinked. "And I thought Lois could change the subject fast."

A slight grin quirked the Man of Steel's lips. "Sorry. Too much exposure to Lois, I suppose. But you haven't answered me."

"I'm going to find an excuse to withdraw my men tomorrow — not too suddenly. And then we're going to watch and see what happens."

Superman nodded. "If I can help, just ask. I want to solve this case as much as you do."

"How do I get hold of you?"

"Well," Superman said, "I guess you could always yell 'Help, Superman', but it would probably be more dignified to call Kent, at the Planet."

Henderson blinked at him for an instant, as he took off in a rush of chilly air. Had the Man of Steel actually *joked* with him?

As Superman vanished into the dark sky, Henderson stood looking after him. A tiny star winked at him, and was blotted out for a second as a body crossed between it and him. Then he shook his head and opened the side door into the Twelfth Precinct Police Station. He had a few things to arrange for tomorrow.

Lois Lane saved her article and began to re-read her work. She had started proofing her writing more carefully recently. It was always a point of contention when Clark pointed out her typos and in the spirit of competition, she had grown more determined that he should not find misspellings and mistakes in her copy.

She glanced at the windows, noting that the sun was setting in a blaze of pink and gold beyond the buildings, and returned to her article. She corrected a minor error that turned a harmless word into an unprintable one, finished reading her piece and saved it again, and then LANned it to her editor.

"Lois," Jimmy said from behind her, making her start slightly. The gofer was presenting her with a sheaf of paper. "I found that information you wanted."

“Great,” Lois said, accepting the offering. “So who rented the cabin last summer?”

Jimmy looked worried. “Bill Church Jr. I guess that was while Bill Church Senior was scouting locations for the Cost Mart stores. They bought out the Lex Save chain last summer, you know — I guess Lex Corp was unloading a lot of its holdings about then. The Cost Mart store nearby is an old Lex Save.” Jimmy didn’t need to add that this must have been the month after Lois’s disastrous almost-wedding to Lex Luthor. That had been a period of frantic activity for Lex Corp, while the Board of Trustees battled to save at least part of the Lex Corp empire. It figured that Intergang had seized the opportunity to get a toe hold in Metropolis, Lois thought. Now, if she and Clark could only prove that Bill Church was actually involved

“Bill Church Junior?” she repeated.

“Yeah,” Jimmy said. “He and his wife signed the lease.”

“Bill Church Junior is actually married?” Lois said, incredulously. From the little she knew of the man, his lifestyle included multiple females of easy virtue, and it was a little difficult to grasp the concept of a married Bill Church. What woman would be crazy enough to marry him?

“Yeah, he is,” Jimmy said. “I almost didn’t believe it, either, until I checked the New Troy Bureau of Vital Statistics. There’s a marriage certificate, all right.”

“Incredible,” Lois murmured, under her breath. “Okay. So the Churches are connected to Wilson’s Cove. Why am I not surprised?”

“Good luck tying them to whatever’s going on,” Jimmy said. “The rest of that stuff is about the indigenous people that lived in New Troy when the colonists came, and their legends. Some of them are really weird.”

“Good,” Lois said. “That may be just what I need.”

“What’s it all about?” Jimmy inquired.

“Clark and I think somebody might be running a scam based on one of these old legends,” Lois said, scanning the papers quickly. “Ah! I think this might be it. ‘The Legend of the Blood Spirits.’”

“It’s creepy,” Jimmy told her. “I didn’t think Native Americans had things like vampire legends.”

Lois looked up quickly. “Vampires?”

“Well, not exactly,” Jimmy said. “But pretty close. Say,” he said, “this wouldn’t have anything to do with those ‘vampire murders’ in the park, and the Cost Mart manager, would it?”

“Maybe,” Lois said. “It’s one angle we’re following.”

“Cool,” Jimmy said. “It sounds like that vampire hunter movie they showed on Halloween. It figures you and CK would get to hunt vampires. You always get to do cool stuff nobody else does.”

“Jimmy, I doubt there’s any real vampires involved,” Lois told him.

Jimmy looked crestfallen. “No, probably not.” He started to turn, and swung back, giving her a startled look. “Why are you wearing a crucifix pendant, then?”

“This?” Lois touched the silver chain, trying her best to sound disinterested. The little silver cross had worked its way from under its concealment and lay exposed, a little crookedly, on the material of her blouse. “My grandmother gave it to me.”

“Recently?”

“No. It was when I was going to college. I just — felt like wearing it.”

“Oh,” Jimmy said. “Well, I guess better safe than sorry.”

Lois decided that arguing with him about her wearing a crucifix would only serve to make her look silly. She picked up her shoulder bag, slipped the sheaf of paper into it and swung it to her shoulder. “I’m going home. I’ll read this later.”

“Okay. I guess I’ll see you tomorrow,” Jimmy said. “Maybe after you read that stuff you can tell me what a blood spirit is.”

“Didn’t it say?” Lois paused in the act of putting on her coat to stare at him.

“Nope. They sound like Dracula or something.”

“What did they do?”

“The stuff I found says they were supernatural creatures that lured the young warriors and maidens away from their camps at night with promises and songs and then feasted on their blood. That’s why I called them vampires. There was this one shaman, Night Eagle, or something like that, who went up against them and beat them with his power, destroyed them, but he paid a price. He was only corporeal by night, afterwards, and was sometimes overcome by the blood thirst, but apparently he confined himself to various malefactors and the good-for-nothings in the tribe.”

Lois resolutely ignored the slight crawling sensation on her scalp. “I heard that part of the story before,” she said. “Did they say what happened to him?”

“Kind of,” Jimmy said. “He was supposed to have gone to sleep in a hidden place, but he promised his tribe that if he was ever needed again, he would return to defend the people of his land. Kind of sad, really.” He glanced at the main window.

“Look, you’d better hurry up. It’s almost dark.”

“Yeah,” Lois said. “I guess I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Okay,” Jimmy said, but she could have sworn that he looked at her with just a touch of awe before he turned away.

The bright colors of sunset had just about faded from the western sky by the time that Lois pulled Harvey Brown’s battered pickup out of the Planet’s parking lot and into the street.

It would have been nice, she found herself thinking, if Clark had returned in time to accompany her home. Not, of course, because she might want him to walk with her through the halls of her apartment house, or be there when she opened her door.

No, it was simply that she would have liked to discuss the case with him, and, of course, to hear if he had managed to locate Superman, and if he had learned what had happened.

She maneuvered her way through the late rush hour traffic and at last turned off the main drag onto one of the quiet side streets, and five minutes later was pulling the pickup into the small lot behind her apartment building, reserved for its occupants.

One of the lights that illuminated the lot was out again, she noted unhappily. There was a large stretch of shadow between the parking space she had chosen and the sidewalk that gave passage around the building to the front of the apartment house. Lois told herself again that there was no reason for her heart to be beating light and fast in her throat. It was just that the past couple of days had had a definite creep factor attached to them.

Well, the quicker she got over to the sidewalk, the quicker she would be inside. She sternly suppressed the little tingle of nervousness that tried to lift the hair on her scalp.

Carefully, she peered around but could see no motion anywhere. Except for the several vehicles parked in such a way that made it impossible for her to park any closer to the building, the lot was deserted.

With a quick motion, before she could change her mind, Lois opened the door of the truck and got out, pushing the locking button on the door and slamming it behind her. With long, swift strides, she headed directly toward the sidewalk and the pool of light from the lamp perched on the corner of the building, ducking quickly through the patch of shadows.

And, as she reached it, the front doors of the car parked almost entirely concealed by the thick band of shadow, opened and almost simultaneously a man emerged from each door. The dim moonlight gleamed off the dark metal of the handgun gripped firmly by the closer man as he pointed it directly at her.

“Get in the car, Ms. Lane.” The voice was a deep rumble in

his throat. The second man said nothing, although he, too, displayed a weapon.

At least this was the kind of danger that she could understand, Lois thought half-humorously. Kidnapping attempts might be irritating and inconvenient, but at least kidnappers were human. She stopped, stock-still, evaluating the situation.

Not too good. Tae Kwon Do against handguns wasn't what she would consider favorable odds.

The bigger thug brandished his weapon. "Get in the car," he repeated. "You got an appointment with a vampire."

Lois kicked him in the crotch. As he doubled forward, she followed the kick with another, this one to his gun hand and had the satisfaction of seeing the weapon flying through the air to land with a clatter and a splash somewhere to her left. In the next split-instant, she dived sideways as the second man's weapon spoke.

She could have sworn the bullet twitched a lock of her hair as it zinged past her cheek. Lois rolled to her feet, ready to follow up the attack — and froze.

Something dark, a shadow the size and general shape of a man, swooped suddenly out of the night from above her. The man who retained his gun fired at it, but the shadow didn't even slow down. Lois caught a second look at it for a frozen split instant before she turned to flee.

Definitely not Superman. The thought crossed her mind as she ran for the sidewalk and the path between the apartment house and the structure beside it. Behind her were more gunshots.

Looking back over her shoulder for an instant, she could see the gunman firing at something, a darker spot of black in the darkness. The gunfire stopped abruptly with two distinctive clicks.

Running, while looking back over one's shoulder, she discovered an instant later, was probably not a good idea. Her toe snagged on the curb and she fell flat, the breath knocked completely out of her.

The gunman screamed.

The first scream was followed by a second, which cut off in the middle with a kind of gurgling sound. Lois struggled to her feet, gasping for air, and caught a last, confused glimpse of the situation before she stumbled around the corner of the apartment house, sucking air desperately into her burning lungs.

Something, the man-shaped blackness, half-obscured the gunman and his partner. Lois didn't wait to see more. She ran toward the street as fast as her wobbling legs could carry her, toward light, and the noise of passing traffic, and safety.

As she rounded the corner at the front of the building, she almost collided with a familiar figure: a short, slender dark man wearing dark jeans and a leather jacket. She skidded to a stop so suddenly that she almost fell over.

The man who had rescued her the previous night caught her arm and helped her regain her balance.

"Miss Lane," he said by way of greeting. "Are you all right?"

Numbly, she nodded, telling her heart to slow down. "I need to call the police," she half-gasped. "Two men tried to kidnap me in the parking lot."

Her rescuer looked serious. "Then you must at once summon the police," he said. "I will accompany you until an officer of the law arrives."

"There's a phone in the lobby," Lois said, still struggling a little to recover her breath. "Come on."

He opened the door for her and stood courteously back to let her enter first. Lois did so and crossed to the wall-mounted phone. Not bothering to fish around in her purse for money, she punched the O, and waited.

The phone rang four times, and she had nearly given up hope that the operator would get back from her coffee break in time to

answer, when there was a chime on the line, and a man's voice said, "Operator."

"I need to call the police," Lois said, still panting slightly. "Two men tried to kidnap me in the parking lot of my apartment house."

"Did you say you were nearly kidnapped?" the man asked, sounding not in the least alarmed.

"Yes. Two men. I need to call the Twelfth Precinct," she said. "Hurry, please!"

"You have a specific precinct you call?" the operator asked, sounding a little skeptical.

"This is Lois Lane, and the Twelfth Precinct is about four blocks from me!" she said, beginning to be a little angry.

"Hurry!"

"The reporter?" the man asked, curiously. "Why don't you just yell 'Help, Superman!'"

"Because Superman isn't my personal errand boy! For Heaven's sake, get the police! They had guns!"

Lois became aware abruptly that the sound of distant sirens, always present in Metropolis, were approaching her location rapidly. A police car, its red and blue lights brilliant in the dusk, screeched to a stop in the street in front of the apartment building as she looked through the glass of the front door, and the deafening siren died with a hiccup. More sirens were converging on her location. The operator said, "Sounds like they're already there. Somebody must have reported the gunshots."

"No thanks to you!" Lois said. "If I'd had to depend on you, you'd still be arguing with me!" She slammed the phone down.

"Be at ease, Miss Lane." The voice of her companion nearly made her jump. She had almost forgotten his presence while she argued with the skeptical operator. "The police are here. Perhaps you had best speak to them."

Two police officers were approaching the building as he spoke, she saw, and a moment later one of Metropolis's Finest shoved the door open.

"Excuse me, ma'am," he said. "We got a report of gunshots. Did you possibly hear anything?"

"Yes, I did," Lois said. "I was trying to call the police and got slowed down by a smart Alec operator. Two men tried to kidnap me in the parking lot behind the building!"

"Your name?" the second officer asked at once.

"I'm Lois Lane. I live in this building. I'd just got home from work, and parked in the apartment's lot, as usual, when two men got out of a car and tried to force me to go with them."

"Can you show us where this took place?"

Lois nodded. "Sure. It's around in the back —"

There were several more police officers just climbing out of their cars as Lois led the two, to whom she had spoken, down the steps to the apartment and around toward the rear parking lot.

The lot was still dimly illuminated, but it was silent now. Nothing moved within Lois's range of vision except the police. But on the pavement lay a dark, indeterminate shape. Lois drew in her breath, realizing what that shape probably was.

The beam from one of the flashlights employed by the responding officers played over the shapeless bulk, and there was a sudden movement toward what Lois could see now were two bodies, one lying across the other. Neither was moving, and, as she followed the police toward them, the light flicked over their faces and clothing. Clothing that was spattered with blood.

"Are these the two men who attempted to abduct you, Ms. Lane?" The voice of the officer who had taken her name broke through the faintly sick feeling in her gut that was suddenly taking up all her attention.

"Maybe," she said. Her voice sounded choked, even to her. "I didn't see their faces. It was too dark. I ran toward the street to get away."

Two of the police officers were bending over the still forms,

and another was speaking rapidly into a radio. The man who had addressed her was a dark shadow in the dimly lit parking lot, but she could tell he was watching her closely. “Do you want to tell me in more detail what happened to you here?”

“Are they dead?” she asked, marginally aware that her voice was shaking slightly.

“Looks like it.” The man was silent a moment. “I don’t suppose you know what happened here?”

Lois shook her head. “Were they shot?” she whispered.

“Hey, Sarge!” A voice from one of the figures standing by the two dead men interrupted her. “Looks like we got another couple of vampire victims like those guys at Cost Mart!”

From somewhere, she heard a familiar whoosh of air, and an instant later, an equally familiar voice sent a wash of relief through her.

“Are you all right, Lois?” Superman asked. “What’s going on?”

She didn’t answer at once. Looking around, she realized abruptly, that her companion from the Cost Mart tunnel was nowhere to be seen.

“You know, Lois, I thought I’d seen the last of you for today, when I talked to you this morning,” Bill Henderson remarked. “I should have known better.”

The lobby of her apartment building was none too large, and was now occupied by Lois, the cop who had first spoken to her, whose name happened to be, of all things, Sergeant Schultz, and Bill Henderson, as well as Mr. Tracewski and the larger of his two sons, who stood a head taller than the manager, and massed at least twice his weight, most of it pure muscle. Sergeant Schultz, however, didn’t look anything like the actor portraying his namesake on the old sitcom. He was a tall, lean police sergeant, who had not yet begun to develop a gut, or a matching wide seat. He had maintained a polite but neutral air toward Lois ever since the discovery of the bodies.

“I never thought I’d be glad to see you, Henderson,” Lois replied acerbically. “Two men tried to abduct me in the parking lot, and your sergeant here seems to think I might have sucked all the blood out of their bodies.”

Henderson looked as deadpan as always. “I’m tempted to take you into protective custody to keep you out of trouble,” he said, “but I guess I owe you a favor or two. I know Ms. Lane,” he continued, this time speaking to Schultz. “She didn’t kill your John Does. In fact, she’s been reporting on our so-called ‘Vampire Murders’. How did you get mixed up in this one?” he added to Lois.

“You’re not going to believe me,” Lois said. “I wouldn’t believe me!”

“Try me. I’ve seen more stuff I don’t believe in the last week than most men do in a lifetime. Besides, I’ve already spoken to Superman, which is why I’m here.”

“Can we do it in private?” Lois asked, glancing at Schultz.

“So you didn’t tell him everything?”

“Well — I told him the believable stuff.”

The faintest quiver passed over Henderson’s face, but his voice was as perfectly deadpan as ever when he answered. “Go on out and take over from Krutzfeld, Wally. I’ll talk to Ms. Lane.”

The sergeant regarded Lois with a look as deadpan as Henderson’s. “She’s hiding something, sir,” he said.

“I’m sure she is, but she still didn’t murder anybody. Go on.”

With a last, doubtful look at Lois, Schultz departed. Mr. Tracewski spoke up. “You want Joey and me to stay, Miss Lane? We will, if you want.”

“No.” Lois smiled gratefully at the apartment house manager. Mr. Tracewski had managed the place since before she had first come to the apartment on Carter Avenue, and regarded his tenants

as his responsibilities. As soon as he’d realized that she might be in trouble, he had come out to be a quiet, but reassuring witness to Lois’s encounter with the enigmatic Sergeant Schultz, and brought his eldest son along for good measure. “Inspector Henderson’s okay. But thank you for being here.”

“All right, but you call me if you need me.” Mr. Tracewski cast a suspicious look at Henderson and departed, followed by Joey.

“Looks to me like you have a champion there,” Henderson said mildly.

“Mr. Tracewski takes this whole vampire business seriously,” Lois said. “He asked me if I wanted to borrow an extra crucifix, but I told him I was already wearing one.”

Henderson shook his head. “I’m glad I’m not the only one, but if you ever tell anybody —”

“You?” She was aware of a faint sense of relief. Maybe she wasn’t being silly, after all. Or if she was, at least she was in good company.

“Yeah.” Henderson patted the front of his shirt. “I guess I’m more superstitious than I like to think. But it’s only for moral support. I don’t believe in vampires.”

“Neither do I, but after this evening, I’m beginning to wonder,” Lois said.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?”

“I’m not sure I want to tell anybody what actually happened, but if I was the superstitious type, I’d think I was the first real witness to our vampire in action.”

Henderson looked sharply at her. “You’re not joking?”

“Do you think I’d joke about something like this? Superman must have told you those two men tried to abduct me in the parking lot, and when I got back with the police they were dead, each with two holes in his throat.”

“I was just pulling into my driveway,” Henderson told her. “He came to get me not only to get you out of trouble, but because he knew I’d want to know.”

“Where did he go?”

“Wherever he goes. Maybe he’s looking for your vampire. Kent’s out there watching the investigation, though. He arrived about the time I did. I told him I’d talk to you and rescue you if necessary. Now, what happened?”

Lois sank into one of the straight-backed chairs that had been in the apartment lobby for as long as she had lived here. Now that the tension was easing, she discovered that her knees felt a little wobbly. “I’m not joking,” she said. “Even if I didn’t see the vampire attack those guys, I saw *something*, and it wasn’t your ordinary murder, or assault. It definitely wasn’t.”

“All right: I believe it wasn’t ordinary. Why don’t you tell me what it looked like?” Henderson’s voice was a little gentler, and she realized that the voice was the reassuring one that he used when trying to calm a witness or a victim, in the course of his job. Bill Henderson saw a lot more than she gave him credit for.

Taking a deep breath, she shoved away her reaction to what had happened this evening, and began to speak, trying to be as clear and concise as she could. Henderson remained silent, even when she got to the most unbelievable part, the black flying thing that wasn’t Superman. And then, her meeting with the man from the Cost Mart tunnel, and the way he had disappeared when the police arrived.

“What time did all this happen?” he asked at last.

“I’m not sure. The sun had been down maybe ten or fifteen minutes, I guess. It was pretty dark.”

“So that was just about the time Superman and I were leaving Mariner’s Cove,” he said finally. “But I don’t see —” He was silent for several seconds, obviously thinking. “Well,” he said at last, “I’ll have to talk to Superman again, obviously. You’re free to go, Lois. But do me a favor. Don’t go running around by yourself in the dark until we get this thing solved.”

“There was one thing,” Lois said suddenly. “When those two pulled guns on me, one of them told me I had a date with a vampire. I almost forgot. What do you suppose he meant?”

“Good question,” Henderson said. “I doubt it was anything good.”

“What if Intergang killed those men in the park,” Lois said. “Maybe even the Cost Mart manager. If they faked the vampire deaths, maybe they intended to do the same thing to me.”

“Intergang?” Henderson said. “I thought we were talking about smugglers based in Cost Mart.”

Lois could have bitten her tongue, but it was too late to back out now. “Clark and I think Bill Church is the head of Intergang,” she said. “And Bill Church owns the Cost Mart chain.”

“Isn’t Church a friend of your boss?” Henderson inquired.

“Yes. Perry thinks we’re barking up the wrong tree.”

“That sounds like something White would say,” Henderson said dryly. “Maybe you’d care to fill me in on this theory when we have more time. In any case, I doubt they’d have killed their own men while they were attempting to bring you in, so that doesn’t explain this incident. I’d like you to promise me that you’ll stick with Kent or even Olsen when you’re going about your business for a few days until this thing is wrapped up. I don’t want to find your bloodless body lying around somewhere. Whoever they are, you’re obviously a thorn in their side. A word to the wise.”

Someone knocked on the door and Lois looked past Henderson to see Clark peering through the glass pane set in the door at them. Henderson glanced over his shoulder and waved for Clark to enter. “Speak of the devil, here he is now. Kent, I’m appointing you her bodyguard until all this is over. It’s obvious to me that somebody would like to get rid of a snoopy reporter. Stick with her whenever she’s running around loose, would you?”

“No problem,” Clark said. “Would you like to tell me what happened?”

“I’ll let Lois do that. I want to see a little of the lay of the land.” He smiled dryly at Lois. “And I used to think police work was dull.” With that sardonic comment, he pushed the door open and went out into the chilly night air.

“So, I guess you’re not a murder suspect?” Clark said, as the door swung shut behind the police inspector.

“I guess not,” Lois said. “I think Schultz wanted to arrest me but Henderson vetoed the idea.”

“Lucky for you that Henderson knows you as well as he does,” Clark said.

“I was glad to see him show up,” Lois said. At the expression on her partner’s face, she hastily added, “But if you ever tell him I said that, I’ll call you a liar to your face.”

Clark grinned faintly. “Don’t worry about it.”

In truth, Lois wasn’t worried. In the months since they had been tied up in the shuttle hangar at EPRAD, not long after Clark had come to work at the Daily Planet, she had discovered that Clark’s ethics might be irritating, but despite the fact that she could sometimes talk him into a little breaking and entering, there were certain things upon which he could not be brought to compromise. If he made a promise, he kept it, sometimes going to ridiculous lengths to do so. And if he was given a confidence, he never broke it.

“So, what exactly happened?” Clark asked. “Superman said you might have seen the vampire in action?”

“Or something,” Lois said. “To tell you the truth, I’m not sure what I saw. I can tell you what it looked like. What actually happened is anybody’s guess.”

“Well,” Clark said reasonably, “tell me what it looked like, then.”

Lois repeated the story she had told Henderson and Clark listened without comment until she had finished.

“And that’s it,” she said at last. “When we found the dead guys, I realized that our friend from Cost Mart was gone. He just vanished.”

“Again,” Clark murmured.

“Yeah. He’s really good at the disappearing act.”

“What time did all this happen?” Clark asked.

“Henderson asked me that, too. The sun was setting when I left the Daily Planet, and I went right home. It was pretty dark by the time I got there.”

“And when you got around to the front of the apartment, you ran into your mysterious rescuer.”

“That’s right.”

“Interesting that he turned up here just at that minute,” Clark said.

“I suppose so,” Lois admitted.

Clark was silent again, frowning at nothing. It wasn’t an angry frown, Lois thought, but it seemed that he was working on something that puzzled him. “What?” she asked.

“One of the dead men said you had a date with a vampire,” he said. “But it looks as if someone else had it in for them. Does it occur to you that someone rescued you?”

Lois stared at him. “Rescued me?”

“Well, something sure interrupted their attempt to kidnap you.”

“Something is right!”

“Just as your friend rescued you from that room in the sub-basement of Cost Mart. And the three Cost Mart employees responsible for it wound up just like that pair.”

“Do you really think there’s a connection?” she asked. “He was here, but I don’t see how he could have had anything to do with what happened in the parking lot. He’d have had to be in two places almost at once, or else be as fast as Superman. Besides, he looks pretty human to me. No elongated fangs or anything.” But he sure had a beautiful set of teeth, she reminded herself. Not that the fact had any deeper meaning, of course. He couldn’t possibly be a vampire, even if such things existed. He’d saved her life, and hadn’t offered her any harm at all. Therefore, he wasn’t a vampire. QED.

“You’re right,” Clark said. “But something doesn’t add up here.”

“I’ll say!”

He gave a small grin. “I guess that’s pretty obvious. Do you want to hang around here, or shall I escort you up to your apartment? Henderson appointed me your bodyguard, and I always take my responsibilities seriously. I’ve got all the notes I need, and we can pester Henderson for a quote or two later if we decide we want one. We can write up the article and fax it in to the night desk if we hurry, so it’ll be in the morning edition.”

Lois got up quickly. “Great idea, but let’s be *sure* Henderson hasn’t found anything else before we send it in.”

“I’ll go out and ask him right now. Want to wait here where it’s warm?”

“Not on your life! Let’s go!”

Henderson was talking to Sergeant Schultz when they located him. The lean sergeant gave Lois an impassive look when they approached and said something to Henderson that Lois couldn’t hear. Henderson glanced briefly in their direction. “Now what?”

“We just wanted to ask for a quote,” Lois said, almost meekly. Her own voice surprised her. “Do you have any theories about this situation?”

“Somebody’s running a scam,” Henderson said. “A lethal scam. There’s a logical, rational explanation for all of these events, and I intend to find it. And no, we haven’t figured out what really happened, and we haven’t identified our victims yet.”

Clark tugged at Lois’s sleeve. “I think that will be fine, don’t you, Lois? Let’s go write the story. If we hurry, we can get it in

the morning edition.”

“When you find out who they were, could you give me a call?” Lois asked shamelessly. Henderson cast her a glance which she could have sworn was half exasperation, half admiration at her persistence.

“I’ll consider it,” he said. “Just stay out of trouble for twenty-four hours, will you?”

“I’ll try,” Lois said. “I really wasn’t looking for trouble this time.”

“I’m sure. But it found you anyway, like always. Go away, now, and let me finish here. I promised my wife I’d try to make it home in time for dinner. I’m already late.”

The sun was shining brightly when Lois opened her eyes. The window shade that protected her eyes from moonlight at night and sun in the morning — on those rare days that she slept late — had been imperfectly closed and a stray beam of sunlight lay across her pillow, and that, naturally, had awakened her. A glance at her alarm clock told her that it was past eleven and she sat up sharply. She was four hours late, and Perry was going to have a fit!

Then she recalled the events of the night before and relaxed. She and Clark had called the office, after writing their article about the strange events in her apartment’s parking lot last night. Since it was quite late, she had informed them that she wouldn’t be in until afternoon. The fact that she hadn’t wanted to tell Perry what she intended this morning, or where she was going, had also played a part. Clark had looked disapproving, but had, as usual, said nothing. It was a good thing that she could count on her partner to back her up, she thought. Poor Clark! Having her for a partner must be rough on his nerves, considering that it was usually she that led them both into sticky situations. On the other hand, her tendency to attract trouble — and sometimes to stick her head into the lion’s den — had certainly broadened his horizons since Perry had partnered them up. It couldn’t help but make him a better investigative journalist, she figured, although she had to admit privately that he was already pretty darned good. But he was, in her opinion, much too cautious. If he really wanted to be a successful investigative reporter, he was going to have to be more assertive, and Lois Lane was the one to teach him. He’d thank her eventually.

It was one of her secrets to the big scoops that she never mentioned to any of her colleagues. Most of them seemed to depend on tips from people on the inside, when there was some kind of scandal, or something shady brewing in government or business circles. It wasn’t that Lois didn’t have her circle of contacts and snitches, but her real key to the big scoops was to go out and investigate, hands on. Never mind that it frequently got her into trouble. Many of her colleagues were just plain lazy, in her opinion. They didn’t get their hands dirty, actually checking out the tips they got. Lois did, and so did Clark. They hadn’t become the hottest team in town, as the Planet billed them, by warming their desk chairs. Besides the fact that he was as dumb as a chunk of granite, that was Ralph’s biggest problem. He sat there and expected the big stories to fall into his lap and then he got annoyed when she and Clark brought in the headlines and he got stuck with the dog shows. Maybe that was why he had a nose for scandals. They were the only thing that motivated him to get onto his feet, and away from the safety of his desk. Well, that and leaning against the water cooler, trying to impress the women in the research pool.

She stepped around the partition that opened into the main room of her apartment, and stopped in surprise. She had gone to bed last night ... well, actually, she didn’t recall going to bed. She’d put on her pajamas, robe and slippers, and had been sitting on the sofa with Clark, working on a sidebar to the main story. She remembered sitting back, sipping on the Oolong tea Clark

had brewed up, and then she had awakened in her bed, and it was morning. And Clark was presently sleeping on her sofa, wearing the sweats that he’d loaned her weeks ago, after that assignment that had wound up with him dragging her out of Hobb’s Bay.

She could smile about that episode now, considerably later, in a warm, dry apartment, but it hadn’t been much fun at the time. Councilman Slaughter had had them both dumped out there in thirty-five degree weather and left to drown, but Clark had somehow managed to stay afloat and had somehow gotten his feet loose. He’d had her lie across his body while he kicked, and they’d made it back to shore. Then Clark had used a piece of broken glass to cut the ropes on his wrists and freed her as well. They’d gone back to his place, since it had been closer, and changed. And then they’d proceeded to bust the Councilman, with Henderson’s sardonic cooperation, naturally. His dry comments about her penchant for hanging over the jaws of death on a regular basis she had dismissed as irrelevant. Henderson wouldn’t be Henderson if he allowed emotion of any kind to disturb his normally cynical worldview.

That had been one of their better scoops, although Lois’s propensity for digging around in person had been what precipitated their abrupt descent into the coldest water she ever remembered being thrown into. It was just as well, she thought, that Clark had been in Boy Scouts as a child in Smallville. There might not be a mythical ocean there, but apparently there was pretty much everything else, for her partner was far from the hick she’d assumed that he must be when they’d first met. Of course, having a former Navy SEAL as his Boy Scout leader probably hadn’t hurt. It was amazing how many strange things she’d learned about his past. If all country boys had acquired the knowledge he had, city-bred journalists wouldn’t stand a chance. Lois Lane excepted, of course. Even Clark had to admit that.

Quietly, she returned to her bedroom and changed into her work clothes. Not work clothes for the Daily Planet, however. If she were to present herself in the newsroom this morning wearing slightly battered blue jeans and a heavy leather jacket, Perry might not say anything, but that was only because he had already seen her show up there at odd hours, wearing some pretty outlandish things. Ralph, however, would make her life miserable for days about it. One of these days, she thought, he was going to go too far and wind up cold-cocked in the middle of the Pit.

As she entered the living room, Clark sat up, rubbing his hair and yawning.

“Good morning,” Lois said. “How come you’re here? I didn’t invite you to stay, did I?”

“No, but Henderson said I was to guard you,” Clark said. He swung his feet to the floor. “I didn’t figure I could do a very good job of guarding you all the way from my place, so I borrowed my sweats and slept on your couch.” He rubbed his back. “If I have to stay again, tonight, I think I’ll sleep on the floor.”

Lois couldn’t repress a small twinge of sympathy when she glanced out of the corner of her eye at the sofa. How Clark had ever managed to sleep on that thing she couldn’t fathom. It was too small for his six-foot frame, for one thing, and about as soft as a stone slab.

“If you do, I’ll get out my hide-a-bed,” she said. “It’s kind of narrow, but it won’t ruin your back. Why don’t you get ready and we’ll head over to Cost Mart.”

Clark looked quickly at her. “Cost Mart? Why? I thought you wanted to prow around in Wilson’s Cove.”

She barely glanced at him. “Because we’re going to take a look around Cost Mart first,” she said. “Then we’ll scope out Wilson’s Cove. Henderson’s hands are pretty much tied by the law. Maybe we can find some evidence that he can use to get a warrant or something.”

“Superman said that Henderson is withdrawing his men from Cost Mart,” Clark said. “He wants to see what they’ll do when

they think they're not being watched anymore."

"You didn't tell me that last night," Lois said sharply.

"I forgot you didn't know," Clark said. "Henderson and Superman talked to your mysterious friend yesterday evening, and apparently he gave them some useful information. That's why Henderson is publicly withdrawing his men. He said he'd give us the exclusive if it pans out."

Lois shrugged. "If anything is going to happen, I want to be there for it," she said. "Hurry up and get dressed."

"I'm going to want to stop by my place to get something clean to wear," Clark said. "It'll only take a few minutes."

"Great. Then grab a Hot Pocket or something for breakfast and let's go. Every minute we waste, something big could be happening."

Later, she would recall that remark with a sense of irony.

"You know," Clark remarked a short time later, just as the beat-up vehicle that she had borrowed from Harvey Brown bounced sharply when one wheel hit a pothole in the street, "this truck reminds me of the one my dad had before he got his new one. Its shocks were pretty much gone, too."

Lois grunted inarticulately. "I just hope Henderson gets my Jeep back to me pretty soon. He never did say why they were keeping it so long."

"Well, since those two guys were killed in the park, and they probably drove your Jeep over there, there might have been some evidence in it that would help Henderson figure out who our 'vampire' really is, and maybe solve this thing," Clark said mildly, pointing out the obvious.

Lois didn't answer. The light sprinkling of raindrops that was half-slush, was getting thicker, and she turned on the windshield wipers, which promptly smeared mud across her field of view. She hit the washer button, but water failed to spray onto the glass.

"Maybe the water in the reservoir is frozen," Clark suggested.

"More likely it's empty," Lois said, squinting to see past the smeared mud. "Damn it; I can't see!"

A spatter of rain hit the glass suddenly, accompanied by tiny grains of ice that turned instantly to water on the windshield. The shredded windshield wiper swished back across the glass, marginally clearing some of the mud. Lois cursed under her breath. "Where the heck did the sun go? It was shining in my window this morning!"

"The weather report said there was a storm moving in," Clark said, helpfully. "I guess this is it."

Lois turned left onto Clinton Street and pulled up in front of Clark's apartment. "Hurry up," she told him. "I want to get over there and see what's happening."

Clark shook his head stubbornly. "I'm not leaving you by yourself," he said. "That business last night is a pretty good clue that somebody wants you out of the way."

"Oh, all right." Lois switched off the motor and dropped the key into her bag. The spray of water that greeted her as she opened the door almost convinced her to change her mind, but her promise to Henderson the night before had been for a reason. They half-ran up the steps to the apartment and Clark got the door open quickly and closed it as quickly behind them.

Lois mopped at her face. "Do vampires come out in the rain?"

"I wouldn't know," Clark said. "Never having met any vampires. I'll get you a towel and then change."

Lois accepted the thick, blue towel he handed her a moment later, and sat down on the comfortable old couch that occupied Clark's living room. Her partner vanished into his bedroom and she heard him moving around, opening his dresser drawers. Slowly, she began to dry her face and hair. It just figured, she thought, that the day they picked to go over to Cost Mart to see what would happen when Henderson's men were no longer in

evidence, would be the day that the weather would turn nasty again. She picked up the remote control and turned on Clark's television.

The Metro Sports Channel was on, and she quickly switched the channel to LNN. Maybe they would have a weather report soon.

They did. Lois listened in dismay as the weather man cheerfully predicted the light rain to grow heavier and turn to snow by this afternoon. The storm was predicted to drop three to five inches of snow, and the wind from the northeast was expected to be fifteen to twenty miles per hour with gusts up to thirty. Great. Just great.

"You know," Clark said from behind her, "that our friendly smugglers probably won't be out until after dark. I just don't see them hauling in a bunch of contraband drugs and weapons during broad daylight. It's apt to attract attention, even in the rain. Or snow."

"I know," Lois said. "I just want to look over the lay of the land and find a good place to watch the action from, after dark."

"Maybe we could find a spot out of the weather," Clark suggested. "It's going to be a bit chilly."

"We'll wear warm clothes," Lois said. "Speaking of which, do you have a rain coat or an umbrella?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," Clark said, producing both items from his coat closet. "I think we'll only need them for a little while, though. I'm betting it'll be snowing by the time we get to Cost Mart."

Looking out the window at the wet, dreary landscape, and at the rain that had grown heavier in just the short time she had been in Clark's apartment, she was inclined to agree with him. The windshield of the truck was already beginning to collect a slight crusting of very wet snow. As usual, the weather forecasters were being too conservative in their forecasts, Lois thought, disgustedly. That was why her father had called them "weather guessers" when she had been a little girl. It had never failed to make her laugh.

Sternly banishing those long-past memories, Lois appropriated the rain coat, and opened the apartment door. "Let's go."

Forty minutes later, after a pitched battle with bumper-to-bumper traffic working their way past several fender-bender collisions, Lois pulled the pickup to the side of the street half a block from Cost Mart and cut the engine. "We walk from here. I don't think they'll notice us as long as we don't do anything to stand out."

Clark looked thoughtfully at the sparsely-populated sidewalks, quite rightfully avoided by most sensible citizens who preferred to stay out of the mixture of freezing rain and snow that was falling on the city of Metropolis.

"We're just going to stand out because there's almost nobody out there right now," he pointed out.

"I see a few people," Lois contradicted him. "We'll just look like them. Nobody's looking at them."

Clark lowered his glasses casually and glanced around. There didn't seem to be any reason to worry, but his ingrained awareness of the fact that Lois and trouble went hand in hand made him consider the potential for unforeseen difficulties. Still . . .

He opened the door and got out, bringing the umbrella with him, and went around to Lois's side rather quickly to hold it over her head as she exited the truck. She gave him a brief, curious look but said nothing as she slid her feet to the slushy sidewalk and turned to slam the driver's door.

"Brrr," she commented, and pulled the leather jacket she wore — also a relic of a different adventure with Clark, where he had ended up loaning her his jacket — tighter around her

shoulders. She tugged the hat she had chosen to protect her head and ears from the cold down a little farther. “Let’s head over to Cost Mart.”

Together, they moved down the sidewalk at a brisk walk: that of people anxious to get in out of the weather. Clark looked around, trying to spot any potential trouble, but it seemed as if Lois was right again. After all, what smuggler would willingly be out in this stuff?

On the other hand, nobody said the bosses of Cost Mart and Intergang were worried about their employees’ comfort.

The parking lot was only lightly populated today, and Clark saw virtually no one in the vicinity, but there were a fair number of persons clustered under the canopy that sheltered the entrance to the big store. They joined the crowd, keeping their faces down, and moved slowly into the building.

It was warm and dry inside, and Clark lowered the umbrella. Lois went to acquire a shopping cart. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s look around.”

Clark nodded, still with that faint feeling of uneasiness prickling the short hairs on his neck. It was probably nothing, he told himself. If nothing else, Henderson very likely had his own men around in here, just to keep on top of things. Maybe even some of those solitary figures out on the sidewalk had been his people.

The noise level in this place, unfortunately, made the use of his super-hearing virtually impossible. Between the gabble of normal conversation and the echo-effect of this cavernous box-store, it wasn’t at all easy to separate out individual voices, especially since he had no idea who he might be listening for.

“Where do you want to go?”

“To the back, where they’re opening crates and stuff,” Lois said. “Maybe we can pick up some gossip.”

That didn’t seem too dangerous. It wasn’t likely that the ordinary employees of this place would know much about the smuggling operation run by the management. Of course, Lois had to know that, too, so it didn’t totally surprise him, when they drew near to the door in the back that led to the offices of the officials around here, that Lois looked longingly at it. “I’d sure like to get another look back there,” she said softly. “I’ll bet anything you like that some of what’s going on isn’t day to day business.”

Clark picked up a can of bug spray from the nearest shelf and pretended to be reading the ingredients on the back. “That’s how you got in trouble in the first place.”

“Yeah, but Brunner isn’t here any longer,” she pointed out. “If we can get hold of a couple of the T-shirts, nobody will know the difference.”

“Don’t bet on it. I’d wager a small sum on their having your face up on the bulletin board or something, just in case,” Clark said.

“Look, can you create a diversion so I can slip back there?” Lois said, ignoring the remark. “I just want a peek. Come on, Clark!”

The mulish look on her face and a familiar sinking feeling in his stomach told him that Lois meant business. If he didn’t do something, she would just go set a fire in the restroom or something to distract everyone. His lovely partner didn’t kid around.

“All right,” he said grudgingly. “Just a minute. Wait for me.” Her instant smile lit up her face. “I knew I could count on you!”

Clark ducked quickly around the end of the shelf of bug spray, out of the view of Lois and the watching cameras, looking around quickly with his enhanced vision. There. That stack of cans should make a satisfying crash if it came down next to the rack of mops, brooms and other cleaning products.

Wondering why he always let Lois maneuver him into these

situations, he pursed his lips and released a sharp puff of air toward the base of the pyramid.

The results were all that he could have wished. A can on the bottom row tilted, apparently against all laws of physics, and slipped out from under the two it supported, destabilizing the entire pile. The cans came down with a crash and a clatter, rolling wildly in all directions. The stand with the display of cleaning equipment went over and collided with another display, this one of dog food. Those cans also cascaded down and the rolling cans became instant hazards to the employees rushing to the scene of the minor disaster, and the customers who immediately converged to see what was happening.

He stepped quickly back around the shelves to rejoin his partner, who was now making a direct path toward the door in the back. One of the young male employees heading for the location of the metallic avalanche went past her, never even looking at her, and Clark joined her a second later as she went through the door.

“That was good,” Lois said softly. “I can always rely on you for a good distraction. Come on. Let’s check out Brunner’s office.”

As much as he hated to admit it, he was putty in Lois’s hands. Superman’s great weakness wasn’t Kryptonite. It was Lois Lane, and he’d known it for well over a year.

Still, that didn’t mean he had to let her walk blindly into trouble. Looking around as casually as he could, and straining his ears to hear something besides the din in the shopping area behind them, he followed Lois down the carpeted hallway toward the office of the erstwhile manager of this branch of Cost Mart.

At least the area of the murder was no longer cordoned off with yellow tape, although traces of the chalk outline where Brunner’s body had lain were still visible on the expensive carpet. The secretary’s desk was clear. Only a small plaque that said “Patricia Filnor, Executive Assistant,” a plastic cup that held two pencils and a pen, and a clean mug that usually would contain coffee or tea remained on the polished, wooden surface. There were no stacks of paper or any other signs of the woman’s daily work evident to a first cursory glance.

“Looks like the secretary isn’t here,” Lois remarked, noting the obvious.

From somewhere down the hallway behind them, Clark heard the sounds of voices and the muffled scrape of approaching footsteps. This was, after all, the section of the Cost Mart store where all the management was conducted. He pushed Lois through the door of Brunner’s office. “Somebody’s coming!”

Lois didn’t hesitate, but ducked behind the half-open door of the room and pulled Clark with her. “Quiet!”

Hiding behind the door, their backs pressed to the wall, they waited. The footsteps approached and paused just outside the room.

“After you,” a voice said. Clark wrinkled his brow. That voice sounded very familiar. In fact, it sounded like . . .

The footsteps entered the secretary’s tiny office and stopped, barely five feet away from the two reporters, frozen behind the door of Brunner’s former domain.

“So have you thought about my request?” Bill Church Junior’s voice said. Something creaked, and there was the click of a closing door latch.

“Mr. Church, I appreciate the offer, I really do, but I’d rather not have anything more to do with this,” a different voice said, softly. “I’ve done what you told me, and I promise I won’t say a word to anybody. I’d just like my money, and a ticket to Montana with Patty. Nobody’s ever going to find me there.”

“Well, Filnor, I can understand that,” the voice of Bill Jr. replied, also in low tones. “But we’re not quite finished yet. That Lane woman is snooping around much too closely for our comfort. We failed to pick her up last night, and the rumors about

what happened to my men don't make any sense. I don't know what she did, but if Superman wasn't up to his bulging biceps in it, somebody's playing us for fools. You have one more appearance to make for us, and then you'll get your payment and that ride out of town. Deal?"

There was a long silence as the man called Filnor apparently thought it over. "That guy that shot at me two nights ago, the cop, could have killed me. I don't want to get shot at again."

"Nobody's going to shoot at you," Church's voice replied, soothingly. "Even if somebody loses his head, he'll go for a body shot. It's what cops are trained to do. The vest will protect you, but it isn't likely to happen. You're a vampire, remember."

"Well"

"And your help will be very much appreciated," Church continued, smoothly. "I imagine getting started in Montana will require some cash reserves, even for a talented actor such as yourself. We could double your payment, if that makes you feel any better, and then, once you finish this last job for us, no one will ever see you again. Isn't it worth a small risk?"

Another pause. "I guess so," Filnor's voice said, a little doubtfully. "But I want to leave town right afterwards. I don't want anything more to do with any of this. There's too many dead people turning up. Something's not right. Mr. Brunner was drained of blood, just like that first guy in the park. Patty was so scared she didn't even come to work yesterday or today."

"Well, neither of you will have to worry about any of this after tonight," Church said. "Right after you make one, last appearance. Then it will all be over."

"All right. Is it okay if I pick up Patty's mug? Her sister gave it to her when she got the job with Mr. Brunner."

"No problem," Church said. "See me in my office in an hour and we'll go over the script."

"Yes sir." Clark heard the scrape as Filnor apparently picked up the coffee mug. Cautiously, he turned his head and lowered his glasses. The solid wall disappeared before his eyes, and he saw the man whom Bill Church had called Filnor.

He was a slender man of medium height with a narrow, pale face, dark, piercing eyes and thick, black hair. It was the kind of face people remembered. He had seen this man before, Clark thought, and his memory went back to the night he and Lois had first investigated the tunnel under the Cost Mart parking lot. This had been the man whom they had seen on the sidewalk outside the big store, just as they were leaving.

Several things were suddenly beginning to add up.

The opening and closing of the outer door leading into the hallway was followed by complete quiet in the secretary's little office.

Lois remained still, listening intently, but no sound broke the silence that had fallen.

Clark's glasses had crept down his nose while they were standing frozen behind the door, Lois noted. He pushed them back into place and released his breath softly. "I think they're gone."

"Yeah." Lois kept her voice low. "Did you hear all that? This Filnor guy was the vampire that Henderson shot at in my apartment."

"Hired by the Churches," Clark said. "Things are finally starting to make sense."

"Well, some things are," Lois amended. "There are a few that still haven't been explained. But, you know, if I was that fake vampire, I'd worry. He's a liability. He knows too much for Bill Church to let him go. He'll never have the chance to get started in Montana or anyplace else. A gang that routinely assassinates world leaders and tried to kill Superman isn't likely to worry about getting rid of a third rate actor like him."

"If he has any sense at all, he'll run while he can," Clark said,

a little grimly.

"That's for sure," Lois said. "We need to tell Henderson. After we look around a little more," she added. "Like Perry always says, we need hard evidence."

"He's already got samples of the drugs and weapons," Clark pointed out.

"But no proof of where they came from," Lois patted the pocket of her jacket. "I've got a camera. We're going to get some photos of that storeroom in the sub-basement. But first, since we're in Brunner's office, let's see what we can find, while we give our friends a little time to go about their business. You take the file cabinet and I'll take the desk."

"They probably cleared out anything incriminating," Clark said, moving obediently to the file cabinet.

"Yeah, probably," Lois agreed. "But 'Patty' didn't come in to work today or yesterday. Maybe they slipped up."

"Maybe," Clark agreed. "It won't hurt to look, anyway, but we'd better lock the door. We don't need any interruptions." He turned and went to suit action to word, and then returned to examine the file cabinet that stood in one corner of Brunner's office. Lois was already opening the top drawer of the big desk.

"Do you need me to open the locks for you?" she asked, belatedly.

"No," Clark said. "It looks like the locking drawer is broken."

"What?" She turned her head.

"This is one of those file cabinets where you lock one drawer and that fastens all the rest," Clark said. He was ruffling through the top drawer's files as he spoke. "It's open. Looks like the lock's broken."

"Lucky," Lois said, returning to her investigation of the desk and thinking absently that Clark seemed to have incredible luck with locks that way. The top drawers produced nothing of interest and she opened the second drawer down on the left.

Neither it, nor the corresponding one on the right, or the bottom left drawer contained anything that she could use as incriminating evidence, but the bottom right drawer was locked. She tugged on it a second time and then fished in her pocket for her lock pick.

"Try this," Clark said. His hand appeared over her shoulder and in it was a small key. "It was in the file cabinet."

Lois took the key. Sure enough, it fit and she opened the drawer.

At first, she didn't see anything of value that might warrant locking the drawer. In some disappointment, she picked up the top folder in the very small stack that occupied the space.

Inside were several 8X10 photographs of men's faces, all smiling with what she would call professional charm at the camera. Lois frowned. The man in the first photo looked vaguely familiar, as if she had seen him somewhere, but not on any significant occasion that she could place. He resembled an actor that she had noticed in a spaghetti sauce commercial she had seen on television now and then.

The second photo was similar — in fact, Lois was sure this guy had been in a recent soda commercial, wearing speedos, displaying his rolling biceps, and guzzling down a cola while some blond bimbo fawned over his bronzed chest.

She dutifully riffled through the remaining photos without much expectation of discovering anything of interest, but on the fifth one she froze, staring riveted at the features that looked back at her. "Clark! Look at this!"

Her partner turned from his investigation of the file cabinet. "What?"

"It's my vampire! — the guy who came through my window and Henderson shot!"

The man in the picture was smiling and showed no sign of elongated fangs, but there was no question in her mind that it was the same man. The dark hair was arranged attractively, and his

features were pleasant, even mildly handsome — not at all like the “vampire” in her apartment, but if he was an actor, how much talent did it take to bare your teeth and snarl, anyway?

Clark was looking over her shoulder. “I’ve seen that guy before.”

“I’ve seen a couple of these guys before. I think they’re aspiring actors or something. This one was my vampire. Where have you seen him?”

“The night we first investigated the tunnel under the Cost Mart parking lot. Do you remember that guy we saw just as we were leaving?”

“What guy?”

“He was standing on the sidewalk when we drove away. I noticed him because he was the only person around. I thought it was kind of strange. It was three in the morning and snowing besides.”

Now that he mentioned it, she recalled the incident. “Yeah, I remember him now, too. You think this was him?”

“I’m sure it was the same man,” Clark said.

“What do you suppose he was doing there?”

“Who knows? But if this is your vampire —”

“It is. No question.”

Clark took the photo and turned it over. “‘Aloysius Filnor, performing artist,’ and a phone number. This is a publicity photo.”

Lois removed her tiny camera and took pictures of both sides of the photo. “I want to show this to Henderson.”

“I suspect he’ll recognize the vampire, too. Find anything else in the desk?”

“Not so far. Keep looking,” Lois ordered. “We don’t have all day.”

“If I were an Intergang boss, I wouldn’t keep evidence around,” Clark said.

“Neither would I,” Lois said. “But Bill Church seems to run Intergang like a branch of his business, so it wouldn’t surprise me if he keeps records like any CEO. Maybe they slipped up and left more behind than just these pictures. I’m sort of surprised they even left them.”

“Well, they’re just pictures. Unless you saw the vampire up close, probably nobody would think much about them. They’d probably think Cost Mart was just looking for a spokesman to hawk their stuff.”

“You’re probably right,” Lois admitted, returning to her task.

But despite a fairly thorough search of the office, nothing else of interest came to light. At last, Lois straightened up from the bottom drawer of the file cabinet, where she had been helping Clark to sort through the contents, and pushed the drawer shut with one foot. “Nothing.”

“Not nothing,” Clark said. “We have copies of the vampire’s picture. That’s worth a lot right there. What do you want to do now?”

“I don’t think I signed up to have Little Merry Sunshine for my partner,” Lois grumbled. “Okay, in case you didn’t notice, there’s an executive washroom over there —” She pointed. “There also happens to be a very nice suit hanging on the shower stall. It looks about your size, and if we go any farther, you’ll be a lot less noticeable dressed like an executive around here instead of jeans and a polo shirt. See if it fits you.”

“If it’s Brunner’s, it won’t. I’m taller, and nowhere near as chubby.”

“Don’t nitpick,” Lois said. “Try it on.”

Clarence Brunner had been a little shorter than Clark, but his shoulders had been broad. Unfortunately, so had his middle. Clark pulled the belt of the slacks tight around his narrow waist and straightened the florid tie. Yuck! Clark’s ties were usually bright and eye-catching, but this thing was a bilious green and a

kind of nasty yellow-brown with shapeless little blobs of red dotting it as if someone had thrown paint at the owner. It fit the man’s character, Clark thought, distastefully, shrugging himself into the jacket. The shoulders were a little snug, but the cloth hung loose around his middle.

“I guess Brunner was fighting middle-age spread,” Lois observed. “Button it up and stand up straight. I don’t think anybody will notice unless he really looks closely.”

Clark sighed and obeyed. Surveying himself in the door’s full-length mirror, he didn’t look too bad, he decided, after a critical scrutiny. With a small amount of luck, maybe it would be enough.

“Wow,” Lois said. She felt the tight cloth across his back. “Your shoulders are almost too wide for this thing.” She added, “I remember the time I saw you in a towel, back when you first came to work at the Planet. I guess you still work out a lot, huh?”

“Sort of,” Clark said, uncomfortably. “Let’s get going, huh? I’d like to be out of here sometime today. Preferably without being caught by Bill Junior’s goons. Besides, his shoes don’t fit me. I’m going to have to wear my jogging shoes. Let’s hope nobody notices.”

“They probably won’t,” Lois said. “They’re dark, and you’re not going to be standing still, talking to anybody for long.”

“Not if I can help it,” Clark said firmly.

“Just keep that in mind. Act like you own the place and people will think you do. The area I’m aiming for is the sub-basement. The room I was locked in is there, and so is the storeroom where I saw the packages, and who knows what other stuff they’ve smuggled in. Our friend from the beach house let me out the door there, right into the underground tunnel. I think I can find the elevator again without too much trouble. As soon as we’re sure the hall is clear —”

Clark put his ear against the door. His super-hearing didn’t pick up any sounds from the other side, and, looking over the tops of his glasses, he verified that the hallway was empty, at least for the moment. Quietly, he unlocked the door and stepped out into the hall. Lois followed him. He glanced at her briefly. “Okay, lead on.”

“Keep going that way,” Lois said, pointing. “When you get to the end of the hallway, turn left. There’s an elevator to the first basement ...”

The elevator to the basement was empty, fortunately. Clark wasn’t so sure of Lois’s blithe assurance that nobody would give him a second look, but fortunately, it wasn’t immediately put to the test. The elevator’s control panel gave them options of the store’s upper two floors and a basement. Lois punched the button for the basement.

When the elevator door opened on the basement level, a man in battered jeans and the green T-shirt of Cost Mart was waiting to board. They stepped out onto the carpeted hallway, and the man went past them, barely glancing at them. Clark let his breath out softly as the doors closed and the elevator departed upward, but Lois said, “*That’s* where I first saw him!”

“Huh? Saw who?”

“The guy that rescued me from the room,” she replied. “The first time I came through here, when I got on the elevator a man came out of it, wearing the same things as that other guy we just passed. That was where I first saw the man who rescued me. I’m sure of it. Later, when I saw him, he looked familiar, but I didn’t know why until now.”

“So he apparently knew about the sub-basement,” Clark said.

“He must have. And he must have noticed me and realized I was heading for trouble.”

“Or found out about it later,” Clark said. “Our mysterious friend seems to have ways of finding out things that people are trying to hide.”

"I'll say," Lois said. "I'd still like a satisfactory explanation for him being here."

Clark didn't say so, but he definitely wanted an explanation as well. There were too many things about their mystery man to make him entirely comfortable in the other man's presence.

"This way," Lois said.

The first basement level, Clark thought, appeared to contain a number of small offices and various larger rooms which seemed to be used for storage. He scanned them as they passed, and verified that they mostly contained store merchandise.

The white walls of the basement showed no pictures such as those that dotted the walls along the executive's hallway on the floor above. They moved along at a brisk pace intended to discourage any possible passerby from trying to snare them into a conversation which would surely prove to be their undoing.

They came almost at once to a place where the hallway branched, going both left and right.

"This way," Lois turned left.

"Where are we going?" Clark inquired.

"This is the way to the hidden elevator." Lois strode ahead confidently.

The passage this way was short, Clark saw. It turned right, and then right again, and ended in a blank wall.

"This is it," Lois said. "When I got here the first time, all of a sudden the wall started sliding and there were elevator doors behind it. And then Brunner and his two muscle boys stepped out, and you know the rest."

Clark bent forward, examining the wall. "There's probably something on this side to open the door," he said. "I don't suppose you know what it is."

Lois shook her head. "They just forced me into the elevator," she said.

"Yeah." Clark turned his head, looking over the top of his glasses. "Look for anything that might be a call button," he suggested. "There has to be something."

"Maybe it's on one of the side walls," Lois suggested. "I don't see where it could be hidden, though. How do you hide something on a white wall?"

"You make it the same color as the wall," Clark said. "Look."

"What?" Lois turned her head.

"Here." Clark indicated an inch square section of wall that, of course, wasn't wall at all. It was a white square of plastic set flush with the wall several inches above his eye level. If he hadn't been looking for it, he would never have seen it, and having X-ray vision certainly made it much easier to find.

"How did you see that?" Lois said. "Should we push it?"

That, of course, was the question. If they called the elevator, they would be able to reach the sub-basement. On the other hand, if someone happened to be in the elevator, they could be in trouble.

As the thought occurred to him, the wall started to move.

The afternoon was turning into early evening when William Henderson's phone rang. He restrained himself from snatching the receiver up too quickly. "Henderson."

"It's Jackson, sir," a voice said. "Our boys still report no sign of anything. Yet."

"I don't expect anything until it starts to get dark," Henderson said. "Just keep your eyes on things until then, just to be sure. And if you do see anything the least bit unusual, call me right away."

"Yes sir," Jackson said. "We've got the landing site that Superman spotted on camera from three directions. If they show up, we'll have it on video. No action around the cottage or parking lot yet, either. But —"

"But what?"

"Sergeant Schultz reports one of his men spotted Lane and

Kent entering the Cost Mart by the main door about two hours ago. No one has seen them leave."

"Was it a positive ID?" Henderson quelled a faint sense of dismay, intermixed with exasperation. In his experience with Lois Lane, such a circumstance usually meant trouble.

"He was sure of Lane, and almost sure the guy with her was Kent."

"Hell —." Henderson bit off the expletive. "Well, if they've gotten into trouble, let's hope they can get themselves out of it. They know the risks. I'm not going to blow the one chance we've had to crack this operation open. Tell Schultz to pass along to his men to be aware that Lane and Kent are probably inside and may be prisoners." He didn't even want to contemplate the very real probability that if Church and his subordinates got hold of Lane and Kent, that they could wind up as two more "vampire victims" to add to the growing total, but considered it because he was a cop.

"Got it, boss." Jackson's voice was completely businesslike. Henderson hung up and reached for his jacket. It was close enough to evening, he decided, shrugging himself into the garment and glancing at his desk clock, which showed 16:36, that he should be on-scene, just in case. And if by chance, Lane and Kent did manage to come out of this unscathed, he would be strongly tempted to arrest *both* of them.

The wall rolled smoothly aside, and behind it, the metal doors of an elevator parted smartly, to the soft "ting" of a bell. Two men, both in jeans and the green T-shirts, exited, glancing curiously at Clark.

Clark returned their look with one of the patented expressions of his alter-ego, designed to intimidate small-time law-breakers. Lois, standing directly behind him to present as little of herself to a clear view of the new arrivals as possible, fortunately was in a poor position to see his face.

It worked. The two men quickly looked downward at the carpet and moved past Clark with barely restrained haste. As they disappeared beyond the turn in the passageway and their voices faded, Lois released her breath in a faint sigh. She must have been holding it, Clark surmised, and probably wasn't nearly as sure of herself as she pretended, which didn't surprise him. The insane risks his partner sometimes took stemmed, he very well knew, not from overconfidence, but from a determination to prove to the world, and mostly to her father, that she deserved the reputation that she had established over the years she had worked at the Planet. Clark, of course, knew very well that she more than deserved the reputation and the awards that her derring-do had won her, but he also knew that no matter how many she earned, that her harshest critic, and one that would never be appeased, was herself.

But he never said so. He simply made it his business to keep her alive, because a world without Lois Lane in it was one he didn't want to contemplate.

"See?" Lois whispered. "The suit fooled them! I told you it would. Quick! Get in before it closes!"

Clark reached out to catch the closing door, and the two of them quickly entered the elevator.

"Better get behind me again," Clark said. "You should be wearing a green T-shirt and jeans to pass for a Cost Mart employee."

"I don't think it would matter," Lois said. "Did you notice the bulletin board when we came into the store?"

Clark hadn't. "What did you see?"

"My picture, in living color. I thought you saw it from what you said."

"I didn't, but I'm not surprised. Every criminal enterprise in Metropolis probably has your picture posted if they have any sense." Clark pressed the button for the bottom floor. "Okay; here

goes nothing.”

The doors closed and the car began to descend. Clark looked downward, lifting his glasses slightly in order to see below them. The hallway below seemed, at least for the moment, to be empty of life. Slightly relieved, he pushed his glasses back into place, but kept his super-hearing peeled for any changes.

At last, the car reached the sub-basement and came to a halt with a softly elegant, pneumatic sigh. The doors slid open to the discrete “ting” that announced its arrival.

Lois poked her head out from behind Clark’s shoulder to survey the empty hallway. “I’d like carpet like this on my apartment’s floor. You know, for a bunch of thugs, they sure do like the finer things in life. Who puts Persian carpet in one of these things?”

Clark could have said the same thing about her ex-fiance, but refrained. No one knew better than he how sensitive his partner was about that particular episode in her life, no matter how hard she tried to pass it off as a meaningless mistake. One day he intended to apologize sincerely to her for his own childish behavior, which, he freely admitted, had more or less pushed her into Luthor’s arms, but he wasn’t quite in the position to do that yet. A number of other things had to be resolved first, and then he might offer that apology. With luck, she wouldn’t kill him first.

Slowly, he stepped out of the elevator into the hallway. Lois followed him.

“Can you find the room where you were held?” Clark inquired softly.

“Yeah; I think so. It’s this way.” Lois took the lead, walking slowly, examining the wall on her left. It had been on this side, she recalled, and from the outside it showed no sign of a door. Partway down the hallway, she stopped. “I think it was about here.”

Clark was fiddling with his glasses, as he frequently did for no reason she could discern. It was probably a nervous habit. Slowly, he reached forward and rapped softly on the wall.

“Shh!” Lois looked around quickly. “Do you want to let everybody know we’re here?”

“I don’t hear anybody,” Clark said. He rapped on the wall a little farther down the way. “Hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“It rattled a little. I think your door is right here.”

“Probably.” Lois looked nervously up and down the hallway, but there was no sign anyone had heard the faint noise.

“How do you suppose they open it?” Clark stood back, surveying the wall. “Aha! Another camouflaged button.” He reached up and pressed on another inch square of white plastic, slightly above his eye level.

The wall section slid smoothly open and Lois found herself looking in at a room she never wished to see again. “Yeah; that’s it.”

“Think you can find the way out from here?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Our mysterious friend led me out, but there were so many turns I’m not sure I can find it.”

“Well, which way did you go first?”

She pointed on down the hallway. “That way.”

“Okay.” Clark started slowly in the direction she had indicated. He was fiddling with his glasses again, she noticed. Then he reached into a pocket and produced an old fashioned compass.

“What’s that for?” she inquired.

“It’s a compass.”

“I know that; but why do you have a compass?”

“I figured I could use it to tell which way we’re going, so we know roughly which direction the parking lot tunnel is located.”

“You know how to use one?” Lois inquired. “Because I don’t.”

“Sure.”

“I’ve been meaning to get one of those new GPS systems for my car,” she said irrelevantly. “They’ve been out for a couple of years now. My sister has one.”

“Oh? How does it work?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t used it. Which way is the parking lot?”

Clark pointed, looking at his compass. “There’s a place where the hallway turns ahead. I think we should go right.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Lois grumbled.

“So do I.” Clark turned right. Lois followed, wishing that this place had some kind of landmarks, but all the walls were the same. They passed big double doors here and there in the walls, which must, she figured, open on storerooms for Cost Mart goods. And maybe, of course, other things not quite so legal, if Cost Mart were indeed a branch of Intergang. Which she was sure it was.

“How far away are we?” she asked, at last.

“I don’t know for sure. There’s another turn ahead. We need to turn left, this time.”

“How do you know?”

“The parking lot is northwest of the main entrance,” he explained, “and by the time we got into the back with the offices, it was mostly north of us. I’m trying to estimate roughly how far we’ve come, and where the tunnel should be from where we are. Maybe that’ll be enough.”

Lois hoped so, although she didn’t have much faith in the little compass or in her partner’s estimations, but since she had no better idea she followed along, her ears straining for any sound that might tell them that they weren’t alone down here. Clark turned left and right, and left again and before long, as she had been the first time, Lois was completely turned around. Finally, Clark stopped.

“By my reckoning,” he said, “the tunnel should be about a hundred feet that way.” He pointed directly at a pair of doors that must open on one of the storerooms.

There was a sudden, loud click above them. Startled, Lois looked up in time to see a cloud of mist begin to spray from the vent in the ceiling, and at the same time, doors slid out of what had appeared to be blank walls, trapping them in a ten foot section of hallway.

She tried to push at the doors to the storeroom, beside her. Maybe if she and Clark could get into the larger space, the gas would be diluted. If they could make it to the tunnel.

Lois’s eyes felt oddly unfocused, and her legs didn’t want to work. She had a vague feeling that she was tipping forward into a swirling pit of blackness and mist and tried to save herself, but she couldn’t lift her arms. From somewhere she heard Clark’s voice, telling her to hold her breath, but she couldn’t do that either.

Her last vague thought before she slid off into oblivion was that maybe this hadn’t been such a good idea, after all.

Clark saw Lois slump and tried to cushion her fall. They were probably on camera somewhere, he thought, which effectively barred Superman from going into action to save the day, so he allowed himself to fall to his knees and collapse to the floor.

As he did so, the hiss of gas stopped, and after a few seconds, the sections that blocked the tunnel slid silently back into the wall once more. Three men, wearing gas masks, who had been waiting on the other side, moved forward and one of them scooped Lois unceremoniously off the floor. The remaining two seized Clark by the arms and between them, dragged him after them along the floor, back in the direction they had come.

Moments later, they paused. Peeking under his lids, Clark saw the man carrying Lois over his shoulders like a sack of meal reach up and push the little plastic square above his eye level.

The wall slid open. He proceeded through and dumped his burden unceremoniously onto a chair. The two men dragging Clark followed and let him thump ungently to the carpet.

"That's it. Let's go," one of them said.

"Not yet," the man who had carried Lois said briefly. "The boss said there's one more." He chuckled softly. "Vampire's gonna be busy tonight."

There was a general laugh.

Clark didn't dare open his eyes now, as he was face up, and all three men were standing within feet of him. He concentrated on breathing naturally and listening to everything around him.

Footsteps were approaching, and a very familiar voice was speaking.

"Why are you doing this? I already promised I'll never tell anyone!"

"That's what we're going to make sure of," someone else said, sounding disinterested. "In there, now."

"My God! You've killed them!"

"They're not dead. Not yet, anyway." That was the voice of one of the men who had dragged him, Clark thought. "Sit down, Vlad. You got some time to kill."

"My name," the man addressed as Vlad said, "Is not Vlad!"

"Close enough," someone else said. "Let's go." That was evidently addressed to his companions. There was a general shuffle of feet, and then the soft click as the door slid shut. Clark opened his eyes.

Aloysius Filnor, dressed once more in his vampire costume, stood staring at him. They were in the room where Lois had been imprisoned only a few days ago. And this time, Superman was imprisoned with them.

Great, Clark thought grimly. Just great.

Lois Lane opened her eyes. She was lying on a sofa that she had hoped not ever to see again, with a sofa cushion supporting her head, which was throbbing painfully. The sound of voices nearby made little sparks of light seem to dance across her vision with every beat of her heart. She groaned faintly.

"Lois?" Clark was suddenly kneeling beside her. "How do you feel?"

She moaned a little louder. "Keep your voice down," she whispered.

"Oh." Clark's voice was suddenly a whisper. "Bad, huh?"

She raised a hand to cover her eyes from the incredibly bright light that seemed to be blazing in her face. "Can you turn off the floodlights?"

The light went off, leaving the room pitch black. An instant later, a light came on somewhere to her left, but since the back of the sofa was between her and it, it was bearable. Just.

"Lie still," Clark's voice said softly. "You'll feel better in a while."

"I'm really sorry, Ms. Lane," another voice said from out of the dimness, sending small pulses of pain through her temples once more. "I really didn't think anyone would get hurt."

"Be quiet," Clark's voice said softly. "You heard her."

"Haven't you ever had a hangover?" Lois half-snarled. "Shut up!"

Silence fell. Clark didn't speak again, nor did the other, unidentified person. Very gradually, the throbbing in her head receded to bearable levels, and she began to recall what had happened just prior to waking up here. They were in the Cost Mart prison where she had spent a very uncomfortable afternoon and evening a few days ago, followed by other equally disturbing events. It looked like the luck for the Hottest Team in Town was holding true.

She began to push herself cautiously to a sitting position, and at once Clark's hands were there, helping her. She leaned forward, burying her face in her palms.

"Are you all right?" Clark asked.

"No," she muttered. "And keep your voice down."
"Oh. sorry."

Gradually, the slight nausea engendered by her change in position subsided somewhat, and she was able to raise her head. Clark had seated himself beside her, and in a chair across the room, the man who had burst into her apartment in an attempt to scare her away from her investigation — or something, she figured — sat watching her apprehensively.

She looked steadily back at him and watched him begin to squirm uneasily.

She rubbed her temples gingerly. "I hope," she said at last, "that you've learned something about making deals with criminal syndicates. They don't keep their end of the agreement very often. It's inconvenient."

The "vampire" looked at the toes of his shoes. "So Mr. Kent explained," he said in a low voice. "I'm sorry. I didn't think anyone would be hurt. It was just an acting job, and I needed the money."

"And just where did you think all the bodies were coming from?" she demanded acerbically. Again she rubbed her temples. Her stomach seemed to be fairly steady, which was remarkable. The last time she'd been hit with chloroform, she'd been sick for quite a while after waking up. But it probably hadn't been chloroform. She didn't remember the telltale odor.

The man shifted uncomfortably. "I really didn't connect them with ... with what I'd been hired to do," he said. "No doubt it was very naive of me, but —"

"That's one way to describe it," Lois said shortly. "Why didn't ... what do we call you, anyway? I can't go on thinking of you as the 'fake vampire.' Do you have a name?"

"He said to call him Al," Clark interjected quietly. "It's been about forty-five minutes since they caught us. After I made sure you were breathing, he and I had time to talk a little."

"All right," Lois said. "And do you have any idea what's going on?" she asked, fixing Al with her most intimidating stare.

The man shook his head. "Not really. Mr. Church wasn't very specific. He told me what I had to do and I did it. It seemed rather strange, but I was just doing my job."

"Right," Lois said. She looked at Clark. "I searched this room from one end to the other, the last time I was trapped in here," she said. "I couldn't find a way out. If it hadn't been for our mysterious friend, I'd probably have been killed that night, and that's what will happen to us soon, if we don't find a way out of this mess. Do you have any ideas? I don't think we can count on him rescuing us a second time."

Clark shook his head. "I'm not going to let that happen," he said flatly.

The note of finality startled Lois. Clark had a grim expression about his full-lipped mouth that gave her a faintly uneasy feeling. Her partner looked almost as if he had resigned himself to making some kind of final decision.

Well, if he had any ideas of sacrificing himself for her, he was way off the mark. She had no intention of letting him do any such thing.

"Have you looked at the door?" she asked. "Can you find a lock anywhere?"

"I think the only way to open this is from the other side," Clark said.

"Well, maybe there's something we can figure out," Lois said. "We usually work better together than we do alone. If we had some tools, maybe we could figure a way to undo that door."

"What do you mean?"

"Clark," she said, with determined patience, "I knew there was a chance I could get trapped in here another time when we came over here. I'd already had one try at it, hadn't I? This time I made a few preparations."

“Preparations?” His eyebrows flew up. “They cleaned out your purse before they threw us in here, you know.” He nodded at her shoulder bag, lying discarded on the carpet.

“Do you think I’d be so stupid as to bring anything important in here in my *purse*?” she said incredulously. “Clark, how dumb do you think I am?”

“Not a bit,” Clark said, the faintest of smiles on his lips. “You’re one of the smartest women I know. In fact, the only other woman I know who’s as smart as you is my mom. So what did you do?”

Lois bent to remove her shoe. “Didn’t you notice my joggers have kind of thick soles? I got these from Louie last year. They’re specially made.”

“Who’s Louie?” Al asked, sounding bewildered.

“He’s a guy who knows guys,” Clark told him, absently. His attention was focused on Lois. “I take it Louie included some useful stuff?”

“Exactly,” Lois said. She hooked her fingers in the back of her shoe’s heel and pulled.

The apparently rubber heel clicked downward and several very small items fell out onto the pillows of the couch. Lois shut the heel again, shoved the shoe onto her foot and removed the other one. Quickly, she repeated the motion, and displayed her treasure trove.

“Lock pick,” she said, exhibiting the tiny, well-folded item. “Micro-miniature, diamond-tipped drill for cutting through metal, and battery. Some assembly required. Mini-scalpel. Miniature wire cutters. Of course, they only cut small wires. Forceps. Ear plug, micro-mini-button microphone. Light. Can you do anything with this, or should I?”

“No explosives?” Clark said, sounding disappointed.

“No. There was a limit to what would fit in my heels,” she said. “Don’t be silly.”

Al’s jaw was practically sitting on the floor. Good, Lois thought. Maybe the demonstration would give him an inkling in his tiny little brain exactly who he was dealing with. With fingers that still shook slightly, she began to snap together her litany of tools.

Clark watched his beautiful partner assembling her weapons with grim determination and felt his hope growing. Lois had come through again, as she always did when Superman needed help desperately. He had resigned himself to the probability of having to reveal his identity to get them out of this mess. If Lois had been the only one in the room, it wouldn’t have been so bad. He’d been thinking hard for some time about the possibility of telling her the truth about his relationship with Superman. He hadn’t worked up the nerve yet, but he knew that eventually he was going to have to do so. If they had been alone, she would probably already know, or if not, would within a few minutes, but with Al sitting chaperone beside them, he had been putting off the event in the faint hope that something would occur to make it unnecessary. It looked as if Lois had supplied the event. Even if the tools proved inadequate to the job, they would provide the cover for him to use his special gifts to open that door and credit the tools, but it was quite possible that Lois would succeed all by herself. She deserved to. He certainly should have known that Lois Lane wouldn’t be caught in the same trap twice without some kind of backup plan.

Lois looked up at last. “Okay. That’s the best I can do,” she said. “As I remember, the door is over there.”

Clark walked over to the door and put his finger on the spot that marked where the latch was on the other side. “I think the lock is about here.”

Lois inserted the button receiver in one ear and moved carefully over to the door. “I wish my head felt a little better.”

“If you like, I’ll do it,” Clark offered.

“Give me a minute,” Lois said. “If it gets too bad, you can take over.” She took the miniature drill between her fingers and flipped the tiny switch.

The mechanism responded with a soft hum. Lois applied the point to the wall and the hum turned into a high whine that made Clark wince, but a peek with his X-ray vision showed him that she was drilling right into the mechanism. Whether it would be enough he couldn’t be sure, but Superman’s heat vision could finish anything the drill couldn’t.

There was a tiny clinking sound. The drill bit had encountered the actual tumblers. Lois withdrew it for a moment to check the tip. It seemed undamaged.

Clark knelt beside her, shining the tiny flashlight into the pinpoint hole. The little flashlight was barely half the diameter of a cigarette, and he wondered absently where she had gotten the batteries. “I think you hit the tumbler. Try moving it a little to the right. Let’s see if you can cut a few holes in the shaft that’s holding the door closed. If you can weaken it, maybe I can break it open.”

Lois nodded and re-inserted the drill. For several seconds, she felt around with the tip and then switched it on once more.

Following the progress with his X-ray vision, Clark could see that she was cutting a tiny hole directly through the metal bar that inserted into the door frame. He hoped the battery would hold out long enough, but even if it didn’t, he at least had an excuse for the latch to break when he hit it with his shoulder. And there was nothing to say that he couldn’t use the hole for a path for his heat vision to improve the job.

For long minutes, there was no sound in the room but the whine of the drill and the breathing of three people. Lois cut the power, felt around again, and turned it back on. After a moment, she repeated the procedure. Clark tuned out his super hearing and tried to ignore the sound. It wasn’t the most comfortable feeling to have that high buzzing in his ears, but he figured he could manage it as the price of their freedom and his secret identity. He wondered how Lois stood it with the little receiver in her ear.

“What are we going to do about the surveillance camera?” Lois asked, not pausing in her work. “And why do you suppose they didn’t spot me when our mystery friend rescued me the first time?”

“My guess is the camera is close to the exit,” Clark said. “We can hope so, anyhow. As for the other — who knows? Maybe he was the one watching it. Or maybe he turned it off or something.”

“He was wearing a Cost Mart uniform,” Lois said. “I guess he might have been able to do something like that.”

“Or maybe the camera wasn’t on or something, and he knew it,” Clark said. “He seems to know a lot of things he isn’t expected to know.”

“I noticed that,” Lois said. Again she withdrew the tiny drill and re-inserted it. “I think I’ve got about four holes through the latch,” she added. “Do you want to try your brute strength thing now?”

“Sure,” Clark said.

Lois pulled the drill back again, got to her feet and stepped aside.

Clark had been checking with his X-ray vision and his enhanced hearing, but there were no sounds in the vicinity. Bracing himself, he rammied his shoulder against the door with considerably less force than he was actually capable of, but that, of course, didn’t matter. There was a slight screech of metal and the door popped smartly open.

Lois stood looking at him with her eyebrows slightly raised. “Wow,” she said.

“You did a good job with that drill,” Clark said. “Let’s get out of here.”

Lois hastily dumped her implements into her otherwise empty handbag and glanced quickly at Al. “Better move, pal.

Unless you want Bill Church to finish the job.”

Al got hurriedly to his feet. “I’m coming, but what are you going to do?”

“We’re going to make tracks as fast as we can,” Clark said. He glanced at his partner. “Do you want to try to get out the tunnel again, or do you think we should try the elevator?”

“Good question. Do you think they’d be watching? They think we’re locked up, so they may not expect trouble. Besides, they might be guarding the elevators.”

“Let’s head back toward the exit to the tunnel, but watch and see if you can spot the camera. And we move fast,” Clark said determinedly. “We know where they caught us. If we’re quick enough —”

“You lead,” Lois said. “I’m rear guard.”

Clark nodded and took the lead, scanning the area ahead of them with his enhanced vision. Each time before turning a corner, he paused to carefully check for the security camera that had betrayed them the last time. Al stumbled noisily along behind him until Lois whacked the man on the shoulder with one hand.

“Look, idiot,” she said, her voice no less intense because it was kept to a whisper, “if you can’t make less racket, maybe you’d like to duck into one of these rooms and hide until we come back with the cops! We’re trying to be quiet!”

Clark felt slightly sorry for the man, but Lois had a point. The last thing they needed was to get caught again simply because Al blundered along like a small herd of cattle. He paused at the corner that led into the final hallway, and started to peek around it.

A short, compact, dark-featured figure, wearing the green t-shirt and jeans that was the Cost Mart employee uniform was standing only a few feet away. With a start, Clark recognized Lois’s rescuer.

The slim, muscular man with the glittering black eyes held a finger to his lips and beckoned. Clark hesitated only a second and obeyed the silent command.

Behind him, Al gasped audibly, and he heard Lois whack the hapless actor again. “Sh!”

The dark man’s teeth flashed in that brilliant, white grin, and he turned, beckoning again. They followed him down the short corridor, toward the doors that led to the storeroom, and beyond it the exit into the tunnel. He opened the door and waved them through, all in utter silence, and Clark pushed first Lois and then Al through the opening. He followed, aware that the dark man was silently closing the door behind them. For a few seconds they stood in complete darkness, and then a low light came on overhead.

“Your Inspector Henderson has laid his trap well,” the low accented voice said quietly. “He is, however, most annoyed with you. Perhaps it would be well if you stayed in the outer corridor until events resolve themselves outside.”

“How come they didn’t see you on camera?” Lois demanded.

“I believe you would call it a trade secret, Ms. Lane.” The dark eyes of their strange friend held a faint twinkle of amusement. He extended a hand, and Clark saw her miniature camera lying in his palm. Lois almost snatched it up. “Take your photographs for your story quickly, and then go,” their rescuer said. “It is possible that Mr. Church or his minions will seek to escape the hands of the law by this route when they realize that their scheme has been revealed to others.” He shifted his attention to Al, who had wrapped his vampire cloak around himself in an almost defensive pose.

“So this is the fool they chose to tell their lie. You are more fortunate, my friend, than you deserve. Do not fail to learn from this.”

“What are you talking about?” Al demanded.

The dark man’s face grew remote. “Fools who fail to learn from experience do not remain fools long,” he said. Clark felt a

chill tingle across the back of his neck, although it was said in a perfectly expressionless tone.

“You’ve been right in the middle of this since almost the beginning,” he said suddenly. “What happened to Henderson’s men?”

The dark man regarded him soberly. “They were victims of this evil enterprise called Intergang. They saw too much, and those who hired them knew that they saw.”

“How about the first body in the park?” Lois asked suddenly. “The homeless guy?”

The dark man was silent for a long minute. “That was the beginning,” he said. “His death was accidental and unfortunate. The result of too long a time in darkness. The leaders of Intergang saw it and used it for their own purposes.”

Clark didn’t comment, but a shiver tried to lift the hair on his scalp. The dark man regarded him soberly. “Time is short,” he said. “Do what you came to do and depart quickly.”

From her expression, Lois hadn’t missed the significance of what he had said, Clark thought, but she turned away, lifting her camera. A number of the boxes stored in this place had been opened, and their contents lay exposed to the overhead light. Lois began taking pictures.

Clark listened. There was no noise in the outer corridor, but there was noise some distance above their heads, and coming closer with surprising speed. The dark man was watching him silently.

“Do not take too long to decide,” he said suddenly. “One can lose a great deal with an excess of caution.”

Somehow Clark didn’t think he was talking about Intergang. “I take it you speak from experience?” he asked.

“I knew such a one as she, long ago,” the dark man said. “They were much alike both in beauty and in spirit. I wished to protect her, but in the end I paid dearly.” He turned his head. “You must go, now.”

Clark could hear the rush of approaching footsteps, but he hesitated. “Someone tried to kidnap her last night,” he said. “And someone who wasn’t Superman saved her.”

The other man looked away. “We all have our secrets,” he said. “Go. Hurry.” Without another pause, he crossed the dim room to the exit and opened it without ceremony. “You must go now!”

Clark grasped Lois by one wrist and Al by the upper arm. “Come on, quick.” He hustled them out the door into the stone corridor beyond. Behind him, in the room, he heard the opening of the door to the hall. The dark man stepped silently through the opening behind them and closed the door with the same eerie silence.

“Come,” his voice said quietly. A penlight in his hand cast its pale beam on the stone floor. “There is not much time.”

Lois looked back as their guide closed the door silently behind the little group and then up at her suddenly assertive partner. Clark had a scowl on his face that she couldn’t quite interpret.

Their mystery man turned quickly toward them. A little penlight in his hand illuminated the narrow, dark tunnel. “Come. There is not much time.”

Lois opened her mouth to protest, but found Clark tugging at her arm, and shoving Al ahead of him down the tunnel.-

The cement floor was illuminated by the penlight, and was free of any debris from the passage of Cost Mart’s smugglers, and their helpful, if mysterious friend urged them ahead with a low-pitched warning. “Quickly. They will come soon. This is their only avenue of escape.”

“What is this place?” Al stuttered.

“A smuggling tunnel your boss and his friends built under the parking lot,” Lois said. “Why haven’t they opened that door,

anyway? They were right behind us.”

“I am not entirely without resources,” the dark man said. “But my measures will not hold them long. Do not waste valuable time. There is very little of it, now.”

As if to underline his warning, a loud clang echoed around them, as if someone had struck the metal door with a hammer or a crowbar.

“Hurry!” Clark whispered urgently.

Lois hesitated no longer, but turned and strode down the tunnel toward the exit ladder, pushing Al ahead of her without further argument. Behind them were more sounds of metal striking metal, which served only to urge the party to greater speed. Ahead, some distance away, was the metal ladder that led to the parking lot exit. That might be a good place to get out before the Cost Mart goons behind that door managed to break through into the tunnel, she thought.

When they had gone what seemed to her to be considerably farther than the length of the parking lot, she realized that the utter darkness of the tunnel ahead wasn’t so intense all at once. A pale, faintly ruddy light, which must be the last, ghostly rays of sunset, was sifting through the opening above. The exit!

She increased her stride to nearly a run to reach the ladder, crowding Al’s patent leather boot heels in her haste. As she set her foot on the first rung, however, a loud explosion almost over her head, followed by several yells and a volley of more shots, made her stop.

“That’s definitely not a good way out,” Clark said, abruptly. “We’d be lucky not to be shot if we climbed up into that.”

Another duo of shots, a little farther away, and a scream punctuated his words.

Behind them, the sounds of metal striking metal increased, and there was a sudden, protesting screech that nearly lifted the hair on Lois’s head.

“The door is coming open,” their guide said quietly.

“They’ll be through it in a minute or two,” Clark said. “Go on. There’s still the ladder into the vacation cottage.”

“We’re going to get killed!” Al whispered as loudly as he dared.

“We will if you lose your nerve!” Lois retorted. “Move!” She gave him a push and started forward again.

They hurried ahead as fast as they dared. Somewhere behind them, another screech of agonized metal told them that the door had come open at last, and Lois wondered in the back of her mind what their guide had done to block it that way. She hadn’t seen him do anything, but he had managed to prevent it from opening for more than five minutes. Some distance ahead, the corridor made its sharp turn, passing the opening in the wall that was the entrance to the crypt. Some way beyond that would be the ladder up into the vacation cottage.

Lois hurried ahead, rounding the turn and glancing at the spot on the wall that she and Clark had discovered, and wasn’t particularly surprised to see that the dirt had been cleared, revealing the opening starkly in the light of the small flashlight. The hidden entrance was no longer hidden.

There was no time to explore it now, however. Ahead, perhaps another couple of hundred yards, was the ladder that ascended into the vacation cottage.

Behind them, more muffled now, she could still hear the sounds of gunshots echoing from the parking lot exit. Al jumped every time an explosion echoed through the tunnel. Lois wondered if he would ever recover from his experiences this evening. Hopefully not. It might make him think twice the next time someone offered him too good a deal.

“There’s another way out ahead,” she said. “Hurry up, or those guys behind us are going to catch up.”

Behind her, the dark man raised his penlight, shining it ahead of them and revealing the metal ladder in its pale light. Al saw it

and increased his pace.

They had barely crossed half the distance to their goal, however, when a voice shouted from somewhere above them, and several very loud explosions brought them to a stop. More shots were followed by the unmistakable chatter of automatic fire. Al turned a terrified face toward them.

“They’re shooting! We can’t go there!”

In the rear, their guide’s voice spoke softly. “The others come. In moments you shall be trapped.”

“What’ll we *do*?” Al squeaked.

“Quickly,” the dark man said. “This way.”

Al opened his mouth to argue and Lois whacked him sharply between the shoulder blades. “Do what he says!”

In seconds, they were beside the entrance to the crypt. The dark man indicated it with a pointed finger, glancing at the same time over his shoulder. “Hurry. They will be here in less than a minute.”

Lois dropped to her hands and knees and crawled through the opening. She heard a faint protest from Al, which was cut off sharply, and moved back in time to avoid the hapless actor tumbling on top of her, evidently shoved forcefully from behind. An instant later, Clark scrambled through the opening, the penlight in one hand.

“Hurry. Back there,” he said breathlessly, and Lois found herself being pushed back deeper into the passage, away from the opening. It was several seconds before she realized that the dark man had not followed.

Clark extinguished the light. “Quiet!” he breathed.

“What if they look in here?” Al whispered loudly.

“Sh!” Lois restrained the urge to smack him again.

Clark shoved Al farther back into the passage. “Keep quiet!” he ordered in a stern whisper. He pushed Lois after him and took a position between her and the opening into the Cost Mart tunnel. Lois opened her mouth to protest and then shut it again. Now wasn’t the time for a debate, but if they got out of here alive, she intended to have a few words with her partner. Where the heck did he think he got the right to play human shield for her, anyway?

Silence. Lois waited in the darkness, listening to the sound of her own heartbeat and the blood thrumming in her ears.

And then the footsteps of several men broke the silence. The low opening in the tunnel wall was illuminated by the yellow light of what was probably another penlight.

“Who the hell are you?”

Lois started at the sound of that familiar voice. Unless she was very much mistaken, the speaker was Bill Church Jr.

The dark man’s chuckle held an almost sinister note. “Who I am is not important. By all means, continue on your way.”

The explosion of a gunshot shattered the air. A little rattle of stone followed the sound.

The dark man laughed, and the sound made the hair on her neck want to stand up straight.

Another gunshot followed close on the laugh, and then someone screamed. Lois tried to squirm past Clark to see what was happening, but her partner had become the proverbial immovable object, and he didn’t budge.

Another shot went off, and then two, together, followed by another scream, the sound of scuffling bodies, and then another gunshot. Clark’s immovable form between Lois and the outer tunnel effectively frustrated her instinctive attempt to squeeze past him.

Then there was silence. A whole lot of silence.

Clark’s penlight came on, illuminating the rock walls of the crypt. Slowly, he moved back to the hole and dropped down to crawl through the opening. Lois was right on his heels.

Four men were sprawled on the floor of the tunnel. The dark man stood observing them for a long minute in the light of a

newly acquired flashlight, and turned to speak to Clark.

“The conflict above ground appears to have ended. Perhaps you should summon your friend, Henderson, to take custody of these men.”

“Are they dead?” Lois whispered.

He glanced enigmatically at her. “They live, Miss Lane.”

“I’ll go up and see if I can find Henderson,” Clark said.

“Keep an eye on them.” He inclined his head at the four unconscious men on the floor of the tunnel. “And don’t let Al leave, either. He’s got some explaining to do to Bill.”

“That’s for sure,” Lois said. She glanced toward the actor, crawling dejectedly through the hole in the wall, and then back toward the dark man, opening her mouth to ask him what had happened out here in the tunnel while they had been inside the crypt.

But in the split second between the time that she had taken her eyes from him and looked back, he had disappeared. Perhaps it was only her imagination that supplied the sound of fluttering wings somewhere in the darkness beyond the circle of light from the penlight. She hoped so, anyway.

Clark pushed the trapdoor in the vacation cottage open an inch or two.

The trapdoor flipped up suddenly and he found himself staring into the muzzles of three M-16s held by officers of the Metropolitan Police Department.

“Hold it!” barked an official voice.

Clark froze in place. True, if the officers fired at him, he couldn’t be physically hurt, but it would set off a chain of very bad circumstances for Clark Kent and Superman.

“Climb out of there,” the same voice ordered. “Slowly.”

Clark did so. As he stepped out into the room, a large hand shoved him against the nearest wall. “Put your hands behind your head and don’t move!”

“I won’t,” he said. “My name is Clark Kent. I’m looking for Inspector Henderson.”

A hand tugged at the wallet in his hip pocket. Other hands patted him down efficiently. There was silence for several seconds. “Turn around. Keep your hands behind your head.”

Clark obeyed. A flashlight shone in his face as the three officers apparently compared his face to the photo on his driver’s license.

“All right, you can put your hands down.” The cop who seemed to be in command gave the order. He glowered at Clark. “Henderson isn’t happy with you, Kent. You’ll be lucky if he doesn’t arrest you for interference.”

“Sorry,” Clark said. “I have some information for him, though.”

“Tell me what it is and I’ll decide if it’s important enough to interrupt him.”

“All right,” Clark said. “My partner has Bill Church Jr. and three of his men waiting for you down in the smuggling tunnel.”

The silence that followed this announcement was gratifying. The officer stared at him for several seconds. “Stay here.” He pivoted on his heel and left the room.

In less than two minutes, he returned with William Henderson, looking bulkier and much more formidable in tactical gear. The Inspector looked balefully at Clark. “I should arrest both you and Lane, Clark. You could have been killed, and it would have served both of you right!”

“Probably,” Clark said. “Did Sergeant Drummer give you my message?”

“That’s the only reason I’m here. What’s the situation down there?”

“Lois and Al — I’ll explain Al later — are standing guard over Bill Church Jr. and three of his men in the smuggling tunnel.”

“All right.” Henderson spoke into the microphone of his headset. “Schultz, take over for me.” He turned and nodded to the three cops. “You three are with me. Lead on, Clark, and let’s hope Church and his boys are where you left them.”

He was not to be disappointed. When Clark led the small contingent of police into the tunnel, Lois and Al were standing beside the four inert bodies of Bill Church Jr. and his henchmen. Lois and Al had evidently turned them on their backs while Clark had been getting help, for they lay face up, breathing heavily. Henderson waved for his men to check on the four and turned to Clark. “You got time to tell me what happened now?” He glanced sideways at Al, prominent in the bedraggled vampire outfit. “I get the feeling you and I have met before.”

Al looked down. “Yeah, we have.”

“This is Al,” Clark said. “He’s an actor hired by Bill Church to play the part of the vampire. He was slated to be killed along with Lois and me.”

“Inspector!” Sergeant Drummer said. “Look at this!”

Henderson turned. “Yeah?”

“Look at their throats!” The man’s voice held a note that Clark hadn’t heard in it before. He knew why, but he looked at Lois, who met his eyes for an instant, and then looked down. She said nothing.

Henderson looked, and Clark thought his expression grew a little grimmer. Clark didn’t blame him.

On every throat were two small, telltale punctures — each just over a carotid artery.

Henderson was silent for a long moment, and then he spoke into the microphone of his head set again, summoning police paramedics and others to transport the four men to the nearest hospital. He looked at Clark and Lois who now stood side by side, watching the scene. “I take it there’s an explanation for this.”

“We didn’t actually see what happened,” Lois said. “We were hiding in the crypt.”

Henderson looked at Lois and Clark without expression. “When the paramedics get here,” he said, “the three of you are coming upstairs with me, and you’re not leaving until I’ve heard everything that happened to you. Is that clear?”

Somehow, Clark suspected that now was not a good time to argue. He nodded without speaking. And for once, Lois didn’t argue, either.

Eventually, Henderson let them go. By that time the mop-up was well underway, and both Lois and Clark spent their remaining time at Cost Mart conducting interviews with anyone who could be persuaded to answer questions, no matter how trivial. Henderson sent Al back to the station under escort, but forbore to arrest him, at least for the present.

“No,” he replied to Lois’s inquiry. “Unless I find out something incriminating about him, I won’t hold him after tomorrow. It’s not a crime to be naive.”

“You mean dumb as a rock,” Lois said, earning her a pained look from Henderson.

“I’m holding him for his protection,” Henderson said. “I don’t want his bosses to decide to eliminate him. Once I have his signed statement, I’m going to ask Superman to get him and his wife out of town as quietly as possible. He thinks he’s in danger from his boss, and from what you told me, I tend to agree.”

“Yeah, he probably is,” Lois admitted. “But I still haven’t completely forgiven him for that trick in my apartment.”

Henderson snorted, but chose to drop the subject. “What do you plan on writing about the crypt?” he inquired. “I’m including the discovery as a footnote in my report, but no one will be allowed near it until we’re sure we’ve got all the evidence we need.”

“Clark and I decided to do a preliminary story on it,” Lois

said. “He’s filling in the background and I’m writing about what we found in it, just to get people interested. After all, it’s a local historical artifact. We figured we could do a series about the native inhabitants and some of their legends. I imagine you’ll have people from the Metro Museum of Natural History wanting to get a look at it as soon as possible.”

“Probably,” Henderson agreed. “I’ll be interested in what they find, myself.” He removed his helmet with a faint sigh of relief and scratched his scalp thoroughly. “I’m glad to get that off,” he remarked. “We’re just about through here, for now. Can I give you and Clark a ride home?”

“As a matter of fact, we have a ride,” Lois said. “I borrowed it from a friend.”

The police inspector gave her a searching look. “Lois, even I wouldn’t be crazy enough to lend you my car,” he remarked. “The last time you borrowed someone’s car, if I remember correctly, somebody planted a bomb in it.”

“That was last year,” Lois said. “And most of the cars I’ve borrowed have been returned without a mark on them!”

He raised an eyebrow at her, but didn’t reply. Instead, he said, “You can pick up your car at the station whenever you like. We finished with it last night.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that this morning?” Lois demanded.

Henderson didn’t answer. Instead, he picked up his gear and started toward his car which was parked in the lot some distance away. Lois glared after him.

Clark laughed softly. “Never mind,” he said. “Let’s go home and write the story.”

The major story about the police raid on Cost Mart broke in the morning edition of the Daily Planet, with plenty of follow-ups coming in by the minute for the evening edition. Lois and Clark spent a large portion of their time on the phone or rushing in and out from interviews with “anonymous sources.” In between that, Clark had Jimmy researching as much of the information that he could find on the local Native Americans that had been New Troy’s first residents, in preparation for the story about the hidden crypt that was set to break that evening.

“Brr!” Lois pulled off her coat, shook it vigorously and hung it on the coat rack. Ralph, just passing by, ducked to avoid the spatter of drops from the melting snowflakes that liberally peppered him. “Hey, watch it, Lane! This is a new sports jacket!”

“Then why did you wear it on a day like this?” she inquired with a wave of her hand at the window that showed that the snowfall outside had not abated one jot from this morning.

“I didn’t plan on going out in the snow with it,” Ralph grumbled.

“Ralph!” Perry’s bellow cut across the racket in the newsroom on cue. “The dog show starts in twenty minutes! You’re supposed to be across town right now! Get goin’!”

“Uh — I thought I’d handle it by phone,” Ralph replied. “I’ve got the phone number of one of the contestants.”

“What, you’re gonna interview a French poodle?” Perry demanded.

“Well, one of the owners,” Ralph amended.

“Yeah, that’ll make for dramatic journalism,” Perry said ironically. “Get yourself over there. And don’t forget a photographer!”

“Chief, it’s snowing!”

“All of a sudden you’re gonna dissolve in a little snowstorm? Get a move on, or you’re fired!”

Ralph threw Lois a dirty look, grabbed his overcoat off the rack and started for the elevator. “You’re with me, Pielke! Let’s go!”

The photographer who usually worked with Ralph picked up his camera and followed, taking his coat from the rack as he passed.

“They’ll probably cancel the show with all this snow,” Lois remarked to Jimmy Olsen, who arrived at her desk at that moment. “Perry’s going to want a few things to fill up space if they do.”

“Maybe you and CK could do the one on the Blood Spirits,” Jimmy suggested, dropping a stack of printer paper on her desk. “I found some more stuff on the legend. Some local anthropologist wrote a whole book on them.”

“On the Blood Spirits?” Lois asked, startled.

“Well, no, on the legends. But the whole legend of Night Eagle was there. Kind of romantic in a sad sort of way. I felt kind of sorry for him.”

“Oh? What happened to him?”

“Well, Night Eagle loved this girl, Laughing Bird, but he didn’t know if she loved him. She was the chief’s daughter. Anyhow, her younger sister was lured away from the camp by the Blood Spirits and Laughing Bird went after her. Night Eagle discovered it and went charging to the rescue. They were already drinking Laughing Bird’s blood when he arrived, and he had to challenge the Blood Spirit chief to win her freedom. He destroyed them, but he was hurt in the fight, and then, in order to save her, he was forced to absorb her curse. After that she was okay, but he was only corporeal by night, and by day he was just a shade.”

“Sounds like a hero to me,” Lois said, thinking of the mysterious man who had saved her from the Cost Mart gang. Was it possible — no, definitely not. Vampires — even benevolent ones — didn’t exist. “So what finally happened to him?”

“Well, evidently, after he’d saved her and taken her curse, he and she were tied together, destined to live, never aging and never changing, until the curse was broken. Because of the curse, sometimes he was overcome by the blood thirst and fed on the worst of the tribe, and, of course, he was afraid to tell Laughing Bird the truth. One day she ran away, and nobody ever saw her again. Anyhow, after that Night Eagle closed himself off in a dark place, but promised his people that if the land was ever threatened again, he would return to defend it. Then he went to sleep to await her return, since they can only be freed from the curse by true love. Kind of sappy, really.”

“Sounds like the poor guy was in a real bind,” Lois said.

“I’ll say. Anyway, that’s the story, more or less. Maybe CK and you could put it in the article about the crypt. Besides, it sort of fits into the smuggling story. They were using the vampire shtick to try to scare people away, weren’t they?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Lois said.

“I guess you’re not worried about vampires anymore, anyhow.”

“I never was,” Lois said.

“I guess not. What happened to your crucifix, though?”

Lois scowled. “I got home last night and it was gone. I guess I lost it while all the things were happening yesterday. I couldn’t go back at two in the morning in a snow storm to look for it: I wouldn’t even know where to start looking. But I put an ad in the paper this morning. Maybe somebody will find it and give me a call.”

“I hope so,” Jimmy said. “That’s a real shame.”

“What is?” Clark asked, looking up from his computer screen. He had arrived only minutes before and had been typing furiously ever since.

“Lois lost her grandmother’s crucifix yesterday,” Jimmy said. “That’s too bad,” Clark said. “Maybe somebody will find it, though.”

“I hope so, but I’m not counting on it,” Lois said. “Anyway, here’s the stuff on the local legends Jimmy found for you.” She indicated the stack of printer paper. “Better get busy. We’ve only got an hour to deadline.”

Clark picked it up. “Right after I finish writing up the info I

got from my source,” he promised. “And the Superman rescue I happened to come across on the way back. He stopped a pile up at Fourth and Main when a dog ran into the street. Somebody slammed on his brakes to avoid it, and skidded into a fire hydrant. Cars were sliding all over the place, but fortunately, Superman was able to save the day, again. It’ll make good filler.”

“Was the dog all right?” Jimmy inquired.

“Yeah. His owner showed up in the middle of everything and took him away,” Clark said. “Thanks for the research, Jimmy.”

“No sweat,” Jimmy said. He turned his head at a shout from the sports desk. “Oops. Gotta go.”

“What did your informant have to say?” Lois asked.

“Several things,” Clark said, typing as he spoke. “I wanted to know what happened to Bill Church Jr. and his friends after that business in the smuggling tunnel, for one.”

“And?”

“They were examined last night at Metro General’s emergency department,” Clark said. “Bill Church was showing signs of shock and wasn’t making much sense, and today he claims he doesn’t remember any of it.”

“I guess that figures,” Lois said. “Even if he did remember, he’d never admit it. ‘I don’t recall’ is one defense nobody can disprove.”

“True,” Clark agreed. “Anyway, they’re in the prison ward for now. Charges are pending, but nobody knows exactly what they’re going to be. On the other hand, several of the prisoners from the raid last night have fingered Clarence Brunner as the one that ordered the deaths of Henderson’s men, and his two personal muscle men as the ones that carried it out. Apparently those would be the two who tried to pick you up the other night in your apartment parking lot and ended up dead.”

“Convenient,” Lois said.

“That’s what Henderson said. On the other hand, it’s been corroborated independently by three different people, so it might even be true. I guess we’ll find out as the investigation goes forward, but it will take a while. Bill Jr. has lawyered up and Intergang’s apparently got an army of lawyers on the case, and nobody’s talking anymore.”

“Figures,” Lois said philosophically. “I don’t suppose anybody’s been arrested for Brunner’s death.”

“Nope. But remember, all three of the men involved, including Brunner, wound up dead, and so did the two who tried to kidnap you. It almost looks like you had a guardian angel during this whole affair.”

“I suppose it does.” Lois was silent for a long minute and then she shook her head. “I *don’t* believe in vampires,” she said firmly. “Not even in friendly Native American ones with a Superman complex.”

“Neither does Henderson,” Clark said. “Let me just finish this up and LAN it to Perry, and then I’ll get started on that piece about the crypt. Jimmy’s research about Night Eagle should help with the background and, at the same time, tie it to the smuggling ring.”

Lois nodded. “Perry will like it,” she said. “The Legend of Night Eagle as a tragic hero, sort of a Superman for his people, and Intergang, which tried to use his legend to smuggle guns and drugs into Metropolis. You don’t suppose that really is Night Eagle’s cave, do you?” She stopped. “What am I saying? He was probably nothing but a legend. Better hurry up and finish.”

The sun was setting when Lois finally shut off her computer and began to tidy up her desk. Clark’s desk, characteristically, was organized and tidy, and her partner waited while she cleaned her computer screen and put a notebook pad into a bottom drawer of her desk. A considerable number of small, miscellaneous items had collected on the desk top and rather than pick them up individually, she swept them into the top drawer and pushed it

shut.

“Ready,” she announced.

Clark retrieved her coat and held it for her. Ready at last, they ascended to the upper level of the newsroom and Clark rang for the elevator, which arrived almost immediately.

Lois leaned her shoulders back against the wall of the car and blew out her breath. “What a day!” she said.

Her partner grinned. “You wouldn’t have missed a minute of it,” he pointed out.

She pretended to consider that for a moment and then laughed. “You’re right. I just wish I knew who our mysterious friend really was, and how he was connected with this — and how Bill Church and his goons really got those marks on their throats.”

Clark didn’t answer, and Lois continued, not noticing the expression on his face, “I don’t buy the vampire explanation for a minute. There has to be a rational explanation for the so-called ‘vampire’ deaths that we can’t account for via Intergang.”

“Henderson may get the whole story yet,” Clark said. “He doesn’t buy the vampire angle either, even though Church is now claiming that he and his men were attacked by something in the tunnel.”

Lois snorted. “Interesting how his story has changed since this afternoon. I think he’s fishing for an insanity defense.”

“Probably,” Clark said.

The elevator reached the ground floor and the doors creaked open. Clark stood back, letting her exit first.

The sun had set, Lois noted as they went through the revolving doors into the chilly night air, and the twilight was deepening into night. To the west, the mass of storm clouds was colored a deep old rose that shaded upward into darker red-purple to purple that merged slowly into layers of somber gray-black snow clouds that hid the sky and from which descended with unwearied persistence the steady rain of flakes. Lois pulled the collar of her coat about her throat against the bite of the chilly air and turned left toward the lot, four blocks away where she had left her newly-returned Jeep. The sidewalk beneath her feet had been freshly swept, but already the feet of passing pedestrians were beginning to turn the new, light coating of snow into a trampled, muddy mess.

“I feel like a pizza tonight,” she said.

“You don’t look like one,” Clark pointed out.

“Don’t push your luck,” she said. “Shall we go to Philippi’s and have his special for dinner?”

“Sure,” Clark said. “It sounds good.”

They turned at the corner and came unexpectedly face to face with Inspector William Henderson. Lois stopped short. The Police Inspector didn’t even blink.

“Lane and Kent,” he remarked blandly. “What a pleasant surprise. I was on my way to the Daily Planet, hoping to catch you before you left. I saw your car in the lot near where I parked, so I’ll walk along with you if you don’t mind.”

“What do you want, Henderson?” Lois inquired, bluntly.

“I’ve just come from Cost Mart and have some disturbing news for you,” he said, matching his stride to theirs as they resumed their progress. “I was wondering if you might know something about it.”

“Cut the cr —” Lois glanced at Clark. “Quit beating around the bush,” she substituted. “What disturbing news?”

“Surely you remember the coffin you found in the Sleeper’s chamber.”

“What about it?”

Henderson shoved his gloved hands into the pockets of his overcoat. “I went to look around the crypt, in a general way, since it’s obvious somebody’s been digging around the entrance. The coffin is gone. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

"It's *gone*?" Lois repeated, slightly dismayed.

"Who took it?" Clark asked.

"If we knew that, we might have some chance of getting it back," Henderson said. "It's a valuable historical artifact. You're sure you don't know anything about it?"

"Of course not!" Lois said. "Why on Earth would we steal a coffin?"

"I didn't say you did. But I keep thinking about your mysterious friend," Henderson said slowly. "Where did he come from — and where did he go? You say he was there in the tunnel with you and I believe you, but he vanished, all the same. We had every possible exit covered. Nobody could have smuggled that coffin out without being seen, either, but it's gone." He scowled darkly at Lois. "I don't believe in vampires," he said with unwonted emphasis, "but I'd sure like some answers."

"So would we," Lois said. "Did any of your people have a look at the basement door that enters the tunnel? Could it have been taken out that way?"

Henderson shook his head. "We had a guard on it after Clark came to find me, but we had every outer exit under surveillance from the previous night onward. Everyone that came and went was accounted for, and no one took a coffin out. Period."

"It probably won't help, but I'll let Superman know," Clark said.

"You do that. And ask him if he knows what happened to the lock on the basement door while you're at it."

"What was the matter with it?" Lois asked.

"The mechanism was melted solid," Henderson said. "Like Superman had used his heat vision on it."

Lois paused momentarily. "Melted? It was fine when we went through the door."

"Well, it was melted when we saw it," Henderson said. "The parts were completely fused."

Lois looked at her partner. "The mystery guy did something to delay Bill Church and his men, remember?"

"Yeah," Clark said. "They had trouble opening the door. It took them several minutes to get through."

"You think he did it?" Henderson asked.

"I guess it's possible," Clark said, "but I don't know how."

"Well, that's one more question to add to the list," Henderson said dryly.

Lois glanced uneasily toward the west. The last traces of sunset were barely visible amid the masses of layered clouds shrouding the western sky and snowflakes fell steadily and unceasingly, visible in the circles of light from the streetlamps. The lot where she had parked her car this morning was only a short distance away, and was only sparsely populated with vehicles at this hour of the evening. Traffic moved slowly down the street, their headlights reflecting off the snow and ice, and people huddled in coats went past them on the sidewalk.

The lot, when they arrived, had not benefitted, if that was the word, from the passage of hundreds of passersby, for snow coated the pavement with a thick layer of pristine white all around the spot where the Jeep sat, illuminated by the light on the pole directly in front of its fender. The snow on the front windshield and hood was sharp and clear, and letters, written by a human finger, stood out starkly.

Lois stopped, carefully examining the unmarked snow all around the vehicle. The message could not have been written more than a few minutes before, for they were just now beginning to fill with a light coating of flakes.

"Farewell. I resume my vigil. Tell your flying friend, do not forget."

The message was unsigned, but on the hood, directly beneath the message, lay a familiar silver chain with its little, silver crucifix.

Clark looked wordlessly at the message and the expanse of unmarked snow all around the Cherokee.

While he had stood in the crypt, shielding Al and Lois from the danger of flying bullets, the same phenomenon that had occurred when he had looked through the bathroom door in the vacation cottage had been apparent. In the dim illumination of the penlight held by Bill Church Jr, he had seen the four men, but of the dark man there had been no sign, except for the odd dance they seemed to perform on the stone floor of the tunnel. The only conclusion he had been able to draw from that had been as much of a blow to his view of the world as the discovery that he had come from another planet. It was something that he would have to consider carefully before he made up his mind, but if the ancient, half-blood-spirit medicine man had emerged into the modern world to defend Metropolis — and Lois — from Intergang

He'd seen stranger things. Or almost. A few, anyway. Maybe. "Somebody has a weird sense of humor," Henderson said flatly.

"Probably," he heard himself say. "But either way, I think we're done with vampires in Metropolis, at least for now. Can we give you a ride anywhere, Bill?"

Henderson glanced again at the letters on the Jeep's hood, scowled deeply, and shook his head. "No. My car's only another block over."

"Come on," Lois said, "we'll give you a ride." She fastened the chain of her pendent around her neck once more. "It's getting darker by the minute."

Clark slid into the passenger seat and fastened his seat belt while Henderson got into the back and Lois took the driver's seat.

He wouldn't forget. And their strange friend had left him with a big decision to make. He had no wish to be a tragic hero, no matter how romantic it sounded, and there was no doubt in his mind that he could wait too long to tell Lois the truth. He didn't want that, either. Maybe it was time for Superman to come clean.

"There's my car," Henderson said, pointing. Lois obligingly pulled to the side of the street.

"Thanks for the lift," Henderson said, opening the door. "Oh, I almost forgot."

"What?" Lois asked.

"Just one more small mystery for the Hottest Team in Town to chew on," Henderson said. "Remember the first body found in the park? The homeless man that was a former NASA engineer?"

"What about him?"

"He's disappeared."

"What?"

"The body was scheduled for cremation, but it vanished from the morgue two days after he was found."

"Two days?"

"Well," Henderson amended, "it might have been the next day, but nobody checked until the next morning. Maybe Intergang goes in for body snatching."

"Yuck," Lois said. "I wouldn't put it past them."

"Just thought I'd let you know," Henderson said mildly. "If you happen to figure it out, you'll save the Metro PD a minor headache."

"Is that why you told us?" Lois demanded.

Henderson grinned sardonically, but didn't answer. "Thanks for the ride," he said, stepping out of the Jeep and shutting the door with a decisive slam.

"Every time I start to like him, he pulls something like that," Lois said, sounding half annoyed and half amused to Clark's experienced ear.

"You do the same to him," he said, wondering if he was inserting his foot into his mouth.

"Oh, I know," Lois said, dismissing the matter. "Do you think there's anything to it?"

“Probably not,” Clark said. “Of course, there’s the old legend about the victims of vampires rising from the dead to stalk the living.”

“Not again,” Lois said, throwing him a half-exasperated look. “Besides, nobody mentioned that in the legend of the blood spirits.”

“That’s true,” Clark agreed. “But we don’t know it doesn’t work that way.”

Lois turned in the direction of Philippe’s Pizza Grotto. “I’ve had enough of vampires,” she stated flatly. “I don’t want to hear anything more about them. Got it, Kent?”

“Yes ma’am,” Clark said obediently. “No more vampires in Metropolis.”

“If they know what’s good for them,” Lois added.

Slowly, the silver Cherokee bearing Lois and Clark moved down the street in the gathering dusk, toward the main drag.

It was still snowing.

Epilogue

Bobby Bigmouth glanced casually at the glowing dial of his watch, which informed him that it was quarter to eight. He was supposed to be at the homeless shelter at eight-thirty, but with the heavy snow falling, nobody would mind if he was a little early. Besides, Bibbo always had some kind of snacks set out for his helpers, and Bobby was anxious to get out of the cold.

So, apparently, were quite a few others. It looked as if a large fraction of Metropolis’s homeless population had already arrived, he noted, stepping through the rickety wooden door and pushing through the shield of blankets that had been hung in front of the entranceway to block drafts, into the back room of Bibbo’s. The rough but well-intentioned owner, for several years now, had turned his large back storeroom into a place to sleep for those who had arrived too late to find a bed at the more formal homeless establishments about the city. Some officious meddler had reported the situation last year and the Department of Public Health had arrived to shut down the impromptu homeless shelter. A homeless man had subsequently frozen to death in an alley, having been denied a cot due to lack of space. It had been Lois Lane who reported the disgraceful indifference of the city leaders to the situation. That had been followed by an outcry from the ordinary citizens of the city, who apparently had the common sense to understand that it was somewhat less healthy to die huddled outside in a freezing alley at night than it was to sleep wrapped in a blanket on the floor of a warm Suicide Slum dive, and the red-faced authorities had been forced to back down. Somehow, the situation had not arisen this year.

Bobby had to admire Lois, the way she stood up to the stuffed shirts that ran the city. It couldn’t make her very popular with them; that was certain, but it never seemed to stop her, and now that Kent was working with her, Bobby was willing to bet the Hottest Team in Town scared the pants off a lot of the more corrupt leaders of the city. Look at how she and Kent had taken care of the Cost Mart smuggling thing. The police might have made the bust, but Bobby knew who had started it. And they had turned up that Native American crypt under the Cost Mart parking lot, too. He hoped that the vampire business was finished now, but the story still didn’t explain what had happened to Manny, and that bothered him.

It had been just before dawn when Manny had burst into the homeless shelter across town where Bobby had been working that night, out of breath and scared out of his wits, gasping out the story of the nameless black thing that had swooped down from above. He’d stayed inside until well after the morning sun had illuminated the city, and then ventured out to his usual haunts. Bobby had advised him to get under cover before sunset, but apparently he hadn’t made it, for his body had been found in Centennial Park the next day, the first victim of the “vampire.”

Bobby fingered the crucifix he wore under his shirt. The people he associated with would probably razz him if they found out about it. It was pretty well established that the murders had been the work of the smugglers who had used Cost Mart as their base of operations, which, Bobby knew, meant Intergang, but he couldn’t quite convince himself that they had been responsible for Manny’s death. Why should Intergang kill Manny, who had no connection to their organization at all? Besides, as far as Bobby knew, the only man who could fly was Superman, who wouldn’t kill anyone, not even bad guys. Yet Manny, and later Lois, herself, had seen whatever it was, and it had probably killed the two Intergang thugs who’d tried to kidnap Lois.

Something still didn’t add up, and Bobby hadn’t been able to make sense of it at all.

It made him unhappy.

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Bigmouth.” The voice held an accent Bobby didn’t recognize, and he turned to see a short, brown-skinned man standing beside him, holding the arm of another man who was bundled in a heavy coat.

“Yeah?”

Something about the stranger made the hairs on the back of his neck prickle slightly, but the man gave him a faint, pleasant smile, showing a glimpse of gleaming white teeth. He was dressed in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, and did not appear to be in the least uncomfortable in the temperature of the room, which, although considerably warmer than the outer air, still was cool enough that Bobby had no immediate wish to shed his coat.

“I am told that you are a good friend of my companion. I would like to leave him with you until he recovers. It is quite cold outside.”

Bobby glanced at the other man, and then looked more closely. Wrapped in the ragged but warm clothing, with a muffler wound around his neck and lower face, he had an unnerving resemblance to Manny. He glanced back at the dark man who had spoken to him, only to find that he had vanished.

“Come on, pal, let’s see if Bibbo’s got any hot coffee around,” Bobby said after a moment. The guy looked as if he really needed to warm up.

The other man blinked at him as if trying to focus his eyes. “Bobby?” he muttered.

Bobby reached out to pull down the muffler, only to find himself staring into the face of Manny, who for a week he had believed to be dead. Very little surprised Bobby anymore, but this was one of the few.

“Manny?” he stuttered.

The former NASA scientist peered hazily at him, looking as confused as Bobby felt. After a moment, the snitch managed to get hold of himself and get his mind back on what needed to be done.

“Come on, Manny,” he said, matter-of-factly, “let’s go get you some coffee.”

It was done, and he was very tired.

The death of the homeless man was an error that could not be left to stand, no matter the cost. It had been very long ago that his power had been utilized in such a way and the skills of his profession had their price. It would require much rest and sleep to recover his strength and power, but there had been no choice.

He who had been Night Eagle soared through the night over the great city that had taken the place of the land that he had once known.

His new place of concealment lay beneath it: a set of empty, long-abandoned rooms that were tucked away in a hidden corner of the great system of tunnels that honeycombed the ground. Through them, great vehicles ran on rails, bearing thousands of people to their destinations, day and night, but the tiny corner was cleverly concealed and its chances of discovery were slim.

He had again defended the land to which he was bound, and if the need arose, he could do so again. And one day Laughing Bird would come to him, and the curse would end.

He had done all he could for his land and its people, and the new and worthy friends he had come to know. They called him 'vampire' he thought with grim amusement. How little they knew. If the spirits were kind, perhaps they would never need to know more.

Lois Lane's spirit was so like that of his Laughing Bird that they could have been sisters. He could not have refused to help her when the need arose. For a brief instant he wished that she had indeed been the one for which he waited, but she was tied to the other, the man called Superman, who worked beside her in hidden guise. Another guardian of the city of Metropolis. Perhaps Clark Kent would take his advice before it was too late.

Silently, the dark man landed near one of the entrances to his hidden lair. It would be dark and quiet once more, and he could rest.

He was content.

THE END