

Ides of Metropolis: Matchmaker Style

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Rated: PG13

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Summary: Seventh in the Matchmaker Style series. Lois is convinced that Eugene Laderman is innocent of the murder of which he was just convicted. While trying to prove his innocence, Lois and Clark have to save the fledgling internet.

Story Size: 34,692 words (186Kb as text)

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

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

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

The Ides of Metropolis — Matchmaker Style

Rated PG-13

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

In this, the sequel to “Illusions of Grandeur — Matchmaker Style”, Lois and Clark have been back from the assignment in Smallville for a few months. The events of PML were delightful; however, Lois really has no recollection of what happened. Clark finally had a chance to give Lois a real honeymoon. Then her life had been threatened because she had witnessed a murder. Next they investigated the kidnappings of the children of wealthy families. Now they are dealing with a murder and a threat to the internet.

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

In this particular story a lot of the dialogue is taken from the script text. I wish to express my thanks to my Beta readers Artemis and Ray Reynolds for their invaluable help. This was a VERY rough draft when it first landed in their hands.

* * denotes emphasis

<> denotes thoughts

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

Chapter 1

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Universal Locator Designation

Alpha -34 x Gamma 255 x Tau -225

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A couple of days after Lois and Clark finished the investigation into the kidnapped children (See Illusions of Grandeur — Matchmaker Style) the following headline was printed.

“Body Found In Burnt Out Utility Closet

By: Eduardo Friez

A body, burnt beyond recognition was found in the utility closet of the HarriTech building this morning. Paint thinner and other flammable liquids are believed to have been ignited by some used rags that spontaneously combusted. The body has as yet not been identified. Story continued A-4”

The next day the following appeared:

“Burned Body Identified

By: Eduardo Friez

The burned body recovered from the utility closet at HarriTech has been positively identified as that of Henry Harrison, founder, president and CEO of HarriTech. Lena Harrison, the wife of Henry Harrison, had reported her husband missing, and when asked by police she identified the remains as those of her husband. Detective Sgt. Betty Reed, the detective assigned to the case, gave the following statement, “We have been looking into the events surrounding the disappearance of Henry Harrison and there is cause to believe that there was foul play involved. We have a person of interest and will be bringing him in for questioning. I intend to solve this case and if it turns out to be a homicide, I will see to it that the perp pays the price.” Story continued A-3”

“Arrest Made

By: Eduardo Friez

Eugene Laderman, the person of interest in the Harrison homicide has been arrested and bound over for trial. It has been proven that Harrison died from two gunshot wounds to the body. The police believe that the fire was started in order to cover up the crime. The DA felt that there was enough compelling evidence to bypass the Grand Jury process and go directly for an indictment. Story continued A-2”

The trial of Eugene Laderman for the murder of Henry Harrison had caught Lois’s attention and she had asked Perry if she could cover it. He had agreed, even though it wasn’t an investigation. It was getting toward the end of the year and it seemed like the criminal elements were taking a holiday break. Clark was going to be doing follow-ups on the kidnappings so Perry thought it would make a good change of pace for her.

Lois’s interest had been sparked by the fact that Eugene had been one of Jimmy Olsen’s computer programming instructors and Jimmy had been very dubious about the charges. Her sympathies were with Jimmy and if there was any way to help, she would.

When she arrived at the courthouse the opening day of the trial she had been among the first to arrive so she had a choice seat near the front. When the bailiff brought Eugene in she gave him a close examination. Eugene was a lanky middle aged man, maybe early middle age, with thinning hair and a prominent Adam’s apple. He struck Lois as quiet and unassuming, a lot like Clark’s Clark persona. He actually struck her as kind of geeky, which was to be expected based on his vocation.

The trial started off with a bang. The DAD.A. promised to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that Eugene was guilty while in *his* opening statement, the defense argued that all of the ‘evidence’ that the state had was circumstantial.

When the trial was recessed for the day, Lois found out where Eugene was being held prior to transport back to his cell. She

managed, since the guard hadn't been given orders to the contrary, to convince the guard to allow her a few minutes to interview Eugene, one-on-one. During that interview, Lois became convinced of Eugene's sincerity and his innocence.

Pictures of the dead man, a burned corpse, were presented and purported to be the remains of Henry Harrison which had been found in a burnt-out utility room at the HarriTech facility. His wife, Lena, had testified that she had identified the corpse.

As the trial progressed, Lois had seen numerous holes in the evidence presented by the state. For one thing, other than Lena's identification there had been no comparison of fingerprints of the victim to Henry Harrison. The forensics people said the corpse was too burned to get reliable prints so they hadn't even tried. Lois was surprised that no dental records were compared or that if they had been, it was not presented. It seemed to her that as soon as Lena identified the corpse they said, 'That's good enough for us.' and let the investigation drop at that point.

As a prosecution witness, Lena also testified that she had overheard Eugene threaten Henry, but that she had never seen Eugene being violent at any time and didn't believe that he could be. She had made this statement under cross-examination and the prosecution had objected since the answer was subjective. The judge had upheld the objection.

There had been the usual round of witnesses from the police and the forensics people. Toward the end, the DA finally introduced into evidence a confession, signed by the defendant.

At that point it seemed like it was all over but the shouting, but since it was nearing Christmas, the judge held the trial in postponement until after the holidays.

Lois lay in bed and she could feel her husband spooned against her back. She had just awakened and when she did, feeling his presence, she had awakened with a smile on her lips, pleased that he hadn't been called away from her on a Superman rescue. Without stirring, she started thinking.

Time seemed to be just flying by and it didn't need the assistance of Mr. Herbert George Wells in order to do so.

Ever since the incidents in Smallville involving Green Kryptonite, Trask and their marriage, the weeks and months had just whizzed past. Of course they had had a lot of things to keep them busy. First there had been the pheromone incident; Lois still wished she could remember all that she and Clark had done on the island. Then they had tried to take a weekend honeymoon at the Lexor only to have an investigation dropped into their laps. Then there had been 'Nightfall' and Clark's loss of his memory. Actually, thinking back on how she had restored Clark's memory brought a smile to her lips. No sooner was that wrapped up than she had been contacted by Dr. Vincent Winninger about an interview. That should have been fairly straightforward, but how was she to know that she would witness his murder? No sooner were Barbara Trevino and Sebastian Finn caught than Lois and Clark started investigating a string of abductions. The children of wealthy families were being kidnapped and held for ransom. That had all been done to finance an attempt to brainwash the world's population through the use of subliminal messages beamed into their home on the TV by a very bitter woman that thought of herself as the greatest magician in the world.

Lois stirred slightly and felt her husband's arm tighten around her in reflex. Reaching down, she touched his hand as she had done almost daily since they had gotten married and he received her message. His hand slowly, tantalizingly and tenderly moved up and cupped her breast in a possessive, but loving gesture. She sighed in contentment. She just loved waking up this way and he knew it. A few seconds later she felt kisses being placed on the back of her neck and a thrill travel up her spine in response.

She whispered, "Good morning, husband."

She heard a replying whisper, "Good morning, my love, my

life, my wife."

She could feel dampness at the corner of her eye as she heard this and the sentiment it expressed and replied, "Yes, my husband, and my life."

Interrupting this tender moment was a knock on the door and Martha Kent's voice asking, "Are the two of you going to sleep all day? Come on, it's Christmas Day. We want to open the presents and breakfast is waiting."

Lois could feel Clark smile as he replied, "Aw, Mom. Just five more minutes, okay?"

Lois giggled, thinking, <That must have been his usual answer when he was growing up.>

There was a laugh from the other side of the door and Martha replied, "Come on, Clark. You don't want to be late for school, do you? If you don't get a move on, you'll miss the bus."

Laughing at this byplay, Lois spoke up, "We'll be right there, Martha." She was glad that her mother-in-law had such a great sense of humor. Smiling she stood, slid her feet into slippers and put on her robe as Clark did the same.

It had been nice and cozy and warm under the covers with Clark, but now that she was standing in the room she felt a distinct chill in the air. She looked at the window and saw frost crystals all over the pane. Moving over to the window she rubbed a circle and looked out. She saw a white blanket covering the ground and snowflakes continuing to fall. She squeaked in delight and said, "Clark! It's a white Christmas!"

He asked, "Really? Let me see." He moved over and wrapped his arms around her from behind and looked over her shoulder. After looking out for a few seconds, he said, "Sure enough, it is a white Christmas, all right." He kissed the top of her head before he loosened his arms around her waist.

She spun in his arms and gave him a kiss on the lips. Joy in her voice, she said, "This is our first Christmas together." Her voice turned introspective as she continued, "Christmas has never been a happy time for me, that is, until now. Daddy was never around and Mom ... when she was around she was usually incapacitated. The other times she was in rehab so it was usually just me and Lucy. This week, here with your folks, putting up the tree, wrapping the presents, it's like no Christmas I have ever experienced. For a change it's a happy time. Being a part of this family ... I just don't know what to say. It feels like I've been wandering around in a desert, homeless, all of my life, but now, with you, I'm home." She brightened up again, "Now I can wear the sweater that your mom knitted for me!" She moved to the dresser, pulled out the garment and held it up for inspection. It was a white knit sweater and on the front was embroidered a Christmas tree complete with ornaments. She threw it on the bed, stripped off her robe and nightie, and grabbed a bra and panties.

Before she put them on she looked at herself in the mirror, placing her hands on her flat tummy with a look of disappointment. Turning to Clark she asked, "Are you as disappointed as I am that all that activity didn't result in a baby?"

Clark wrapped her in his arms and said, "It'll happen, sooner or later. We know it will. We just have to be patient."

"I wish Herb had told us when."

With a laugh he replied, "You know what he says, 'Too much information, too soon is not good.' He wouldn't have told us if we had begged him." Noticing that she was starting to shiver, he said, "I think you need to get some clothes on. You're getting cold."

With a sly smile she looked at him and said, "You could take care of that with a little heat vision."

"Tell you what ..." He turned away and used his heat vision to warm the clothes she had laid out. "There, now you can get dressed."

Lois picked up her bra and felt its warmth and smiling, quickly donned the garment, luxuriating briefly in the warmth, then her panties followed by a pair of jeans and finally a tank top

and the sweater. Rather than sneakers, she kept her fluffy slippers on her feet to keep them warm.

“Mom’s gonna love seeing you wear that.”

“It’s hard to believe. I never thought I’d wear something like this, but I’m not doing it just to please your mom. I would never have felt like wearing something like this before now, but here, with you and your . . . **our** family, it just seems right.”

While she had been dressing, Clark had grabbed a pair of jeans and an old red and blue check flannel shirt and dressed. They both finished at the same time and after Lois quickly ran her brush through her hair, hand-in-hand they moved downstairs for breakfast.

After breakfast they moved into the living room for the gift exchange. Clark used a blast of his heat vision to set the logs stacked in the fireplace ablaze.

The tree was in the corner, not too close to the fire, and was so tall that the star on top almost brushed the ceiling. Lois looked at that star and thought back to how it got there. Clark had held her and floated them up so that she could place it on the top bough. The thought brought a smile to her lips. She had been told that in the past, at least since he had been able to control his floating, that had been Clark’s special chore. That he had shared it with Lois had made it very special to her.

Jonathan sat in his favorite easy chair while Martha, Lois and Clark all sat on the sofa with Lois in the middle.

With some help from Clark, Lois had gotten a gift for Martha, a ticket to an art exhibit in Wichita with a ticket for Jonathan so that he could accompany her. For Jonathan she had purchased a lined flannel shirt for those cold winter days on the farm.

Martha had knit matching sweaters for Lois and Clark from the finest merino wool.

Jonathan gave Lois a gag gift. When she opened it she found a box filled with electronics with an on/off switch, a knob and an earphone plug. While she held it, she gave Jonathan a quizzical look.

He chuckled and nodding his head in Clark’s direction said, “I figured that you needed some help to keep up with that husband of yours. He has telescopic vision, you have binoculars. He has super hearing, now you have a sound amplifier. Just plug in earphones and turn it on. You’ll hear almost as well as him.” He pointed out an attachment that looked like a little horn, “Clip this on and it is directional.”

Lois quirked an eyebrow in Clark’s direction. Clark started to laugh, but Lois wasn’t laughing and had a thoughtful look as she picked up her bag and immediately put the device inside.

From Clark, Lois received a box set of two complete seasons of “The Ivory Tower” complete with outtakes and bloopers.

When Lois gave Clark his present it was an envelope. Inside the envelope was a pair of tickets to the upcoming playoff game between the Metropolis Metros and the Philadelphia Seventy-Sixers. Lois said, “The second ticket is for Jimmy.”

Clark noticed that Lois was a bit downcast and he pulled her into a hug and asked, “What’s the matter, honey? Why so sad?”

“I had wanted to give you a different present.”

“These are terrific. What could have been better?”

“I wanted to be giving you some baby booties, but that didn’t work out.”

Clark pulled her in closer and gave her a kiss, “That would have been nice, but not necessary. I know how much you are looking forward to our baby. I’m looking forward to him just as much, but we know he’ll be here sooner or later. Let’s just enjoy each other until he arrives and not stress over it. He’ll get here when he’s supposed to.”

“You’re right, I know,” she pointed at her forehead, “up here, but,” she pointed at her heart, “down here . . . I miss him.”

Martha tried to be of some small comfort, “Lois, honey, just

keep on the way you are going, and it’ll happen. Sooner or later, it’ll happen. You already know that it will. You just need to be patient.”

There was a note of frustration in her voice as Lois replied, “Oh, Martha, I’ve never been a very patient person. This is the first time I can remember when I didn’t snoop and find my presents early and open them because I just couldn’t wait for Christmas.”

Martha smiled and said, “There, you see. You are already starting to develop patience.”

Lois smiled; it was still a sad smile just the same, and said, “I guess you’re right. And I guess I did have a little patience when Clark lost his memory back during the Nightfall adventure. Actually, I have Henderson to thank for that. He challenged me, indirectly, but he challenged me and I met the challenge. My own way.”

Martha laughed and said, “Well, we can’t complain about the results. Your ‘therapy’ sure restored his Clark memory. It’s a shame that his Superman memory wasn’t restored at the same time, but you brought that back when no one else could have. It was your telling him of all the times he had rescued you that restored those memories.” Martha reached out, took both of Lois’s hands in hers, looked Lois square in the eyes and turned serious as she continued, “You know . . . the world is singing Superman’s praises for saving everyone from that asteroid, but if it hadn’t been for you, his wife, there wouldn’t have been a Superman to save everyone. Superman is a hero, but you, my very, **very** dear daughter-in-law are every bit as much a hero, although an un-sung hero, as the man in the blue suit. Maybe, sometime in the distant future, everybody will know, but for right now, only the four of us know that you saved the man that saved the world. Not just once, but twice, from Trask and the Kryptonite and by restoring his memory. We’d all be very much dead if it hadn’t been for you. He couldn’t be who he is without **you** in his life. We are very happy to have you as a member of this family. The love that the two of you share . . . it is beyond obvious. And we love you too. You’re the daughter we always wanted. The **perfect** wife for our son.”

By the time Martha finished speaking . . . the sincerity with which the words were spoken . . . tears were flowing down Lois’s cheeks. Lois threw her arms around Martha in a fierce hug which Martha returned and joined in the water works.

Jonathan and Clark looked on and both had smiles on their faces. They both loved both of the women of the family.

Jonathan was actually surprised at how quickly Lois had wormed her way into his affections. He did love this girl like a daughter, the daughter they’d never had, just as much as he loved his son. Martha was right, she **was** the perfect wife for his son.

After a Christmas dinner of turkey with stuffing, gravy, cranberry sauce, vegetables and, of course, pumpkin pie a la mode, the Kent family sat around the table and discussed the future. Lois and Clark had the week off and were planning to spend at least some time on the island, but Martha insisted that they return for New Year’s Eve. “Smallville is going to put on a fireworks display down at the lake. Everybody will be there. Clark, it’ll be a chance for you to catch up with Pete Ross, Lana, Rachel and Billy Eck. I know you haven’t seen any of them for a while.”

With a sly grin, Lois said, “Yeah, we could catch up with Rachel.”

Clark knew that she was teasing him and he played along, “Maybe we could invite Rachel over and we could play Spin-the-Bottle.”

Lois gulped, then had a thought, “Only if you invite this Pete and Billy. I’d like those odds better.”

“To make it even we’d have to invite Lana as well.”

Martha interrupted, “You do know that Rachel has started

dating Billy Eck, don't you?"

Clark looked sheepish and said, "No, I didn't."
 "And that Lana is dating Pete?"

Lois chortled, "No, we didn't. Well, I guess that lets out Spin-the-Bottle as a party game. Besides, I don't want Clark kissing any other women. It would spoil them for their future husbands."

Clark added, "When you get right down to it, I'm kinda territorial when it comes to my wife's kisses as well."

Lois moved over, sat in his lap and proceeded to seal the bargain with one of those kisses.

Later, because a farmer's day starts with the sunrise, no matter what the weather, Jonathan and Martha had headed off to bed leaving Lois and Clark alone. He had promised Lois that her present would get a workout in the morning.

Clark had removed a cushion from the sofa, placing it on the floor near the fire. Lois grabbed the blanket that was draped across the back of the sofa and moved over to sit on the cushion while Clark turned off the room lights. Clark joined Lois on the cushion and wrapped her up in his arms and the blanket. She snuggled back into his embrace and released a contented sigh.

As the fire flickered on the hearth and the lights twinkled on the tree Lois said, "The perfect end to the perfect Christmas day, the bestest, most perfect Christmas day ever." Craning around she gave him a kiss. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"Oh, just for being you and for making me a part of this family. I never knew that being in a family would be this nice. I feel utterly content."

"I'm glad you are. I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Your mom says that I am the perfect wife for you. I hope she's right."

"She is very seldom wrong. I think you should have seen that by now. You are the perfect, the only woman that could ever be my wife. You have accepted me and what I can do right from the beginning; almost from the time I fell in love with you, which was the moment that I saw you. Since we've been married, we've been through so much. I don't know if any other woman could have handled it all."

Lois quipped, "All in a day's work, a day in the life of the wife of a true superhero that is." She turned serious as she continued, "Our love sustains me. It keeps me focused. It is the anchor that keeps me from drifting. It's the cornerstone upon which we will build our own family one day."

"Yes, our love will see us through. I don't know what the future holds, but I do know that whatever it is, we will face it together."

The silence that followed was not strained, but companionable as they simply cuddled and watched the flickering flames and the twinkling lights.

Chapter 2

The day after Christmas, Lois and Clark packed a few things and some food, enough for three days, and Clark flew them to their island getaway.

Lois was dressed for Kansas in the middle of winter with a snowstorm raging when they left. The temperature had moderated somewhat as they had proceeded west. Once they were approaching the equator, Lois was thankful for the presence of Clark's aura because it protected her from the heat.

Clark was monitoring Lois's heart beat the entire time. He knew that Lois loved to fly with him and that her heart beat reflected that excitement, yet it was calm, not stuttering, because she trusted him implicitly. As soon as they crossed the equator though, her heart rate started to pick up. The closer they got to the island the faster it was. The anticipation of the time on the island

and what they would be doing was getting her excited.

He landed them in front of the little bungalow he had constructed for their time on the island. As soon as he set her down and she was released from his aura the heat hit her like a hammer. After the frigid air of Smallville, just a few minutes earlier, the stifling heat of the tropics was a shock to her system. She couldn't get her clothes off fast enough. The winter coat hit the sand almost before she was steady on her feet. The sweater quickly followed. She unbuttoned and unzipped her jeans and with a shimmy of her hips slid them down her legs, toeing off her boots at the same time. After removing the tank top she had worn under the sweater she was effectively dressed in a brief bikini consisting of her lacy, see-through bra and matching panties.

Looking at him, she asked, "What are you waiting for?" She spun her finger.

He nodded and did a spin change into his underwear.

She stepped over to him and put her arms around his neck. Rubbing her body against his, she said, "I like this place. Nice and private and I have you ... all ... to ... my ... self." The words were interspersed with kisses.

Picking her up, he flew them the few feet that separated them from the bedroom in the bungalow. Laying her down he removed the final pieces of her clothing.

She pushed on his chest and he rolled over on his back. She knelt next to him and slid his underwear from his body.

This started a period of marital intimacy.

Lying on top of him she sighed and said, "I needed that. Having your parents down the hall just ... and it was too cold to go out to the barn for a ..."

She had been interrupting her statements with kisses.

He kissed her, stopping her flow of words and then said, "I know what you mean. I've been waiting for this since we left the Planet for this holiday."

With a wicked grin, Lois asked, "Are we finally going to try for twelve?"

He rolled her over on her back and moved between her legs starting another period of marital intimacy.

They actually spent four days on the island. Lois and Clark had each brought some casual clothes with them and Clark flew them to Honolulu one afternoon for dinner and a movie. They found something that interested both of them. It was a triple feature that contained all aspects of the genre. There was plenty of action and adventure. There were chase scenes, shootouts and large explosions. There was romance and there was comedy and tragedy. What they went to see was Episodes IV, V and VI of Star Wars. The showing started mid-afternoon and lasted into the evening, just in time for Clark to take Lois out for dinner and dancing. When they made it back to the island, they were both tired but a very happy couple.

As they were settling in bed and cuddling, Lois started thinking about the movies and said, "You know, a lot of what the Jedi could do is what you do. Your heat vision is like their light sabers. You can fly, actually better than their levitation. They can use mind control to make it so they aren't seen, you have super speed. They could lift heavy objects and so can you," as she drew random patterns on his chest with her finger, tracing lines around his nipples.

Clark got into the spirit of the conversation, "You would make a terrific Princess Leia. Those robes she wore in Chapter IV, A New Hope, looked almost Kryptonian. You'd look good in them. You're aggressive, no-nonsense. You take charge easily and just like her you leap before you look, like when they dove down the chute into the trash compactor. Do we need to add that one to your bucket list?" He started laughing when she gave him a dirty look.

"I'd never do anything like that and you know it."

"You've done plenty of things of a similar nature, admit it."

She thought for a second, before she replied, “Yeah, I guess you’re right. I’m trying to do better, though.”

“Yes, you are trying. I’ll give you that.”

She had a funny look as she asked, “How am I supposed to take that? Do I try your patience or something?”

“You sure have, in the past. I have to admit that you haven’t deliberately put yourself in danger, recently.”

Two large pickup trucks made their way along the roads of Smallville. The sides of the roads still sported a covering of snow from the Christmas snowfall.

Each vehicle held two people. Billy Eck was in the lead vehicle with his date, Rachel Harris. Billy was very pleased. He was looking forward to catching up with his old High School buddy, Clark Kent. Rachel on the other hand was somewhat apprehensive. The last time that she had seen Lois Lane and Clark Kent had been a few days after the incident involving Jason Trask. She had gone to the farm to see how Clark was healing from his gunshot wound and have the two of them sign the statements that she’d had typed up. She had been amazed that someone as small as Lois had been able to kill someone as big as Trask, even accidentally, but she had done just that. Rachel had still been reeling from Lois’s revelation that she and Clark were married. It had come as an almost crushing blow that Clark chose this city gal over someone that he had grown up with. True, they really had had only one date, the Prom, but that night had been the best night of Rachel’s life to that point. When he had shown up again that day at the Corn Festival, all she could think about was renewing that relationship and perhaps moving it to the next level ... or even beyond the next level.

Pete Ross was driving the other pickup and he had Lana Lang as his passenger. Pete was also looking forward to seeing Clark again. He also looked forward with eager anticipation to meeting the woman that Clark had married. Pete had been at school when Lois and Clark had last been in Smallville so he hadn’t seen them, but he had heard about their marriage, through the Smallville ‘grapevine’. Lana Lang, on the other hand, had been one of the girls that Clark had dated seriously while in High School. That had been broken off when she’d had to go with her Dad on an archaeological dig their senior year. She had completed that year as a home schooler with her father, Professor Bertram Lang, as her teacher. She had done her senior year through correspondence under his tutelage and managed to graduate near the top of the class.

As the two vehicles neared their common destination the excitement grew within each of the vehicles occupants although for a multitude of different reasons.

For New Year’s Eve, Jonathan and Martha had arranged for a surprise visit by Rachel, Lana, Billy and Pete. The two couples arrived about an hour after Lois and Clark returned from the island. They drove up in two pickup trucks. Billy had a large four by four that he used at the feed store and Pete had a large bed pickup that his father used around the farm. Pete was home on winter break from the college where he was teaching Metallurgy and Mineralogy.

As they approached the door, Rachel Harris was in the lead. She stood at the door and waited for Billy to knock.

When the door was opened by Martha Kent, Rachel swallowed hard and entered, unsure of what kind of reception she would receive. As soon as she stepped through the doorway she spotted Lois and Clark. Clark had his arm across Lois’s shoulders and Lois had her arm around his back. Rachel took off her ten-gallon hat and handed it to Martha who put it on a side table.

When Rachel looked back, she saw Lois remove her arm from around Clark. Lois no longer felt threatened by Rachel in her relationship with Clark. Rachel stepped in their direction and held

out her hand for Lois to shake and was surprised when Lois ignored the offered appendage and pulled Rachel into a hug. She was flabbergasted when she heard, Lois say, “Rachel, it’s so good to see you again. How’s the sheriff business?”

Lois was surprised to see Rachel Harris, but unlike the previous visit she was no longer apprehensive. Now, secure in the knowledge of her relationship with Clark she felt free. She no longer had to compete with this woman. She thought to herself, <The better woman won.> She was able to greet the other woman warmly.

Rachel came out of her stupor enough to say, “Well, you know what they say, ‘same old, same old.’” She turned to her date and performed the introduction, “This here is Billy, Billy Eck.”

Lois held out her hand and said, “Pleased to meet you, finally. Clark has told me so much about you.”

Taking her small hand in his large paw, Billy laughed, self-deprecatingly and said, “Nothing bad I hope.”

Lois reassured him, “All good, I assure you.”

The next to approach was Pete Ross. Clark performed the introduction, “Lois, this is Pete Ross. There was never a better left tackle in Smallville Crows’ history.”

Pete smiled and said, “I had to protect the quarterback so that he could make the big plays, didn’t I?”

He turned and said, “And this is Lana Lang. Her father is a famous archeologist.”

Lois pulled Lana into a hug and said, “Clark’s told me about you as well. Planning to follow in your father’s footsteps?”

Lana looked significantly at Pete as she said, “That all depends on a certain someone. I could be a scientist or a scientist’s wife.”

That generated laughter from the entire group, some of it nervous.

After they had all been gathered for a time the girls and guys separated, the girls for ‘girl talk’ and the guys to talk sports.

Rachel and Lois had become acquainted when Lois and Clark had been there during the Trask incident and were really just getting to know one another. Now that Rachel was dating Billy she could release any designs she might have had on Clark and look objectively at the relationship that he had with Lois. What she saw was a woman who actually glowed with happiness and a man who was completely satisfied with his life. She noted the little glances that the couple shared even as they interacted with the others in their group. She sighed and thought to herself, <It’s a good thing that I finally gave up on Clark and found Billy. Clark is very much taken.>

Pete Ross and Billy Eck were catching up with Clark. They had been called the “Three Musketeers” in high school because they were always together. Pete had always worried about Clark, ever since that camping trip when he had awakened to see Clark floating above his sleeping bag. He had kept a close eye on Clark from that time on and little by little seen how his powers were being used to help people, like the time he picked up a tree that had fallen on Billy so that they could get him out. That was one of the reasons he had made it his personal duty to protect the quarterback. He didn’t want one of the opposing players to get hurt trying to tackle Clark. Billy had been the tight end and Clark’s ‘go to guy’ in a pinch on the field. Among them they had led the Crows to a State Championship their senior year.

Pete knew that Clark was a good guy and he never worried that he would abuse those powers. When Superman made his debut he had been happy that Clark had found a way to use his abilities openly. He hadn’t doubted for a single second that it was Clark in the colorful suit. Pete had always worried about Clark having a romantic relationship. Could any woman cope with what Clark could do and what he did do for humanity? After meeting Lois, after seeing how happy they were together, seeing the little glances they exchanged even while they interacted with the others

of their group Pete knew that he could put those fears to rest.

When the other girls took off their long winter coats, Lois had noted the way that Rachel and Lana were dressed. Both were wearing short flouncy skirts with crinolines under them and western boots. The boots made a lot of sense to Lois, the snow from Christmas was still hanging around, but the short skirts had her wondering. She asked Rachel, "How come you guys are dressed like this. Isn't it kind of cold to be wearing something that short?"

Rachel and Lana both laughed at the question and then Rachel explained, "When we leave here, we're going to the New Year's Eve dance at the Grange Hall. We were going to ask you and Clark if you wanted to go too."

Lois smiled and said, "I'd love to and I'm sure Clark would too. Let me check." She turned to Clark and asked, "Clark? Do you want to go to the New Year's dance at the Grange Hall?"

Smiling, Clark said, "Did you bring your dress and boots?"

Nodding, Lois said, "I wouldn't be without them when I'm here in Smallville."

"Then, all right. I guess we'll need to change clothes."

At the dance, Lois was in the middle between Lana and Rachel while Pete, Clark and Billy were in line behind their respective partners.

This time there was a friendly competition between the girls. At the end of the dance, both Rachel and Lana admitted that the dance queen trophy had to go to Lois. She was a natural and had outdone both of her friends and they were all now friends. Their friendship had been cemented during the course of the day.

As they were leaving the dance the three girls all shared a group hug and promised to get together again, soon.

By the time they got home, to the farm, Lois was tired, but very happy. She had a husband that loved her and whom she in turn loved very much and now had a couple of wonderful girlfriends. It had always been hard for Lois to make friends, but ever since she and Clark had gotten married, it just seemed easier, somehow.

Chapter 3

After New Year's Day they had returned to Metropolis.

As they were getting ready in the morning, Lois was saying, "I had such a good time with your parents. I can't tell you how happy I am to be a part of this family. Christmas was wonderful. The dance was fun and New Year's was quiet, but that was nice too. Now I really have to shift gears. The trial was recessed for the holidays, but it will be back in session today. There is a possibility that the case could even go to the jury."

"Do you have any feeling on how it is going to go?"

"There is really only one way it can go. Eugene signed a confession. For the life of me, I don't know why. It had to have been under duress. I don't see how the judge even allowed it."

"You sound like you're not convinced of his guilt."

"No. No, I'm not. We'll just have to wait and see. I'll drop you off at the Planet on my way to the court."

"Thanks."

When Lois arrived in court one of the bailiffs was just bringing in Eugene Laderman. Eugene was a mild mannered man, a computer geek of slight build whose pale skin reflected the many hours he spent in front of a computer monitor, jokingly referred to as a computer tan, and who now looked very afraid. The vicissitudes of real life had almost overcome him. He was sweating profusely, even in the cool courtroom.

Lois was near the front on the other side of the gallery. A couple of minutes after Eugene was brought in the Clerk of the Court announced, "All rise!"

The judge entered and as he sat down said, "Please be seated."

As everyone took their seats, Eugene looked around and made eye contact with Lois. She nodded in acknowledgement.

The jury filed in and took their seats. The judge addressed the jury, "I wish to express my thanks to the members of the jury for suffering through this delay. If we had finished up earlier the last day we could have been finished. Now it is time to deliver the charge."

The judge went on to charge the jury, reiterating the duty to weigh the evidence and bring back the appropriate verdict. As soon as he finished the charge, the jury was guided by a bailiff to the deliberation room.

As soon as the jury left Eugene was taken to a holding cell. The rest of the spectators dispersed. Most of the reporters gathered in a coffee shop nearby.

An hour and a half later a messenger that had been dispatched by the Clerk of the Court arrived at the coffee shop and announced that the jury had reached a verdict. There was a mad scramble as the reporters all settled their bills and headed back to the courtroom. Lois, had been careful to pay her bill immediately, therefore she was among the first out of the shop and into the courtroom.

As she waited the bailiff brought Eugene in and guided him to the defense table. A few minutes later the judge entered and the Clerk shouted, "All rise!"

Once he was seated he said, "You may be seated. Bailiff, bring in the jury."

In response the jury filed in and took their seats.

While the jury filed in, Eugene looked at Lois. Making eye contact with her she could see a plea in his eyes for her to believe in him. She smiled and nodded in response.

Once they were all seated the judge said, "The defendant will please rise," and then addressed the foreman of the jury, "To the charge of murder in the first degree, how say you?"

The foreman stood and facing the judge said, "To the charge of murder in the first degree: guilty."

Hearing this, Eugene was visibly shaken and almost collapsed. His lawyer held him up and requested, "Please poll the jury."

The judge turned to the jury and one by one had them state their agreement with the verdict.

There was really no surprise. From the time that his signed confession had been admitted into evidence the conclusion had been a foregone one.

Even so, Lois had a shocked expression. Her reporter's instinct and her famous intuition had led her to the conclusion that he was in fact innocent.

Sitting in another row was a woman with a very self-satisfied smile. This verdict had vindicated the work she had put in on this case. She was Detective Sergeant Betty Reed and she was certainly no fashion plate. Her brown hair was frizzy and unkempt like it hadn't seen a brush in a week. Her clothes were serviceable, but went a long way toward hiding the fact that she was in fact a woman, slacks, a jacket over a blouse and flats being her normal wear. It actually made sense to Lois. Whenever she was doing a B&E job she always dressed for conflict wearing slacks or jeans a dark top and running shoes. For Reed, dressing that way would facilitate foot pursuit of a suspect. Lois actually felt some pity for the woman. If she could only do something with her hair she might actually become attractive, in a homely way.

After the members of the jury had resumed their seats, the judge turned to Eugene and asked, "Mr. Laderman, before this court imposes sentence, do you have anything to say?"

Eugene was visibly shaken and so was his voice as he answered, "I'm innocent, Your Honor."

If the judge had any inclination toward mercy, he didn't show it, nor was he in any way moved by Eugene's protestation of innocence. He lifted his gavel and said, "It is the decision of this

court that Eugene Laderman be immediately transported to the Metropolis Maximum Security Prison to begin serving a term of life without the possibility of parole.” When he finished speaking he banged down his gavel and said, “This court is adjourned.”

As he stood to leave two bailiffs stepped up behind Eugene to take him into custody. As they stepped up behind Eugene each placed a hand on one of his shoulders. In a panic, Eugene looked around the gallery and finding Lois gave her a pleading look as he was taken away.

Lois could only watch as Eugene was led away, her frustration building.

Lois was among the first to leave the courtroom, but necessarily it was still some time after Eugene had been led out. On previous occasions she had been able to interview Eugene in the holding room while waiting for transport back to the prison. She headed in that direction now.

When she turned the corner of the hallway she saw that a bailiff named Ben was on guard duty. She had dealt with him on a number of previous occasions and she had gotten to know him, quite well. She always did this because she knew that sooner or later that knowledge would be useful.

She strode up to Ben and asked, in her sweetest tone, “Could I have a minute to talk with Eugene?”

Ben was standing as rigidly as one of the Beefeaters on post and relaxed only slightly as he replied, “No can do, Ms. Lane. Now that he’s been convicted you’ll have to go to the jail to see him. Rules are rules.”

Lois lost her sweet tone as she replied, “Don’t tell me what the rules are, Ben. I’ve broken every one of them before.”

Ben dropped some of the formality and relaxed his stance slightly, “I can’t let you in there, Lois.”

Lois changed her tone again, this time it was more wheedling, “But you *know* me. I’ve been covering this trial since it started. I just want to get a statement.”

Ben started to object, “It’s against the ...”

Lois interrupted and used the information she had gathered over the course of time and asked, “You’re a football fan, right?”

Ben was obviously being tempted, as he replied, “Depends on where I’m sitting.”

Knowing she had hit pay dirt, Lois reached into her bag thanking her lucky stars that she had prepared for this eventuality. She pulled out two tickets and showing them to Ben, asked, “How about the fifty yard line?”

The temptation proved to be too much. Ben grabbed the tickets and shoved them into his pocket as he turned and punched a code into the door lock. As the door was opening, he said, “Ten minutes.”

As the door started to swing open he started to step back. Before he was completely clear, Lois started forward. Before she was able to pass the door she stopped and both she and Ben gaped at the empty room.

Lois and Ben exchanged a glance. Lois held out her hand and Ben reluctantly dug into his pocket and returned the tickets which, without a word, Lois immediately stuffed back in her bag.

Late in the afternoon, Clark had been called away from the Planet on a rescue. By the time he finished up with that it was already getting dark so instead of heading back to the Planet he headed home hoping that Lois would already be there. As he was approaching he looked for her Jeep, but he didn’t see it and was disappointed that she wasn’t home yet. He was wondering what could have delayed her when he heard a noise coming from the apartment.

Cautiously he landed on the balcony and looked in through the window. All he could see was a large, burly man with a flashlight prowling around. Quietly he let himself in and then super sped over, grabbed the intruder and spun him around.

When he did the hand with the flashlight changed direction and illuminated the face of the intruder.

There was instant recognition and Clark blurted out, “Dad? Don’t scare me like that!”

Jonathan replied in a shaky tone, “Scare *you*? How’d you like to be tackled by Superman?”

Properly chastised, Clark said, “Sorry. What happened to the lights?”

“I don’t know. Fuse must have blown.”

Clark moved to the fuse box, reset a breaker and threw the main power switch on. As soon as he did the lights flared on. When they did, Clark finally got a good look at his father. He was rather disheveled and careworn. Between that and his unexpected arrival in Metropolis he realized that there had to be a major problem in Smallville.

Clark said, “Have a seat, Dad. I’ll change and join you.”

Jonathan headed for the couch, Clark super sped through the bedroom, changing into jeans and a sweatshirt as he did and met Jonathan in the living room.

As they both sat down, Clark broke the silence, “You’re the last person in the world I expected to see. We just left you and mom, day before yesterday. Everything okay at home?”

Looking down, Jonathan started to answer, “No. Son ...” He trailed off as if deep in thought, considering just how to answer. Finally he decided to just put it out there. Hesitantly, he spoke up, “I think ... I think your Mom’s having an affair ... with a younger man.”

There was a look of stark disbelief on Clark’s face when he heard this. When he got his thoughts together he said, “Dad, don’t be ridiculous.”

Shaking his head in chagrin, Jonathan continued, as if speaking to himself, “What am I going to do? How can I compete? The guy’s forty-seven. He doesn’t need glasses. He can see his toes. To top it off: he’s an artist.”

Clark tried to reassure his father, “Dad, Mom would never ... Dad, you said he was an artist. There’s nothing wrong with him painting her portrait.”

Jonathan interrupted him by jumping up and saying, “Take a look at this. I found it, right after you guys left, in the barn, covered up.” As he was speaking, Jonathan was walking back toward the entryway. Next to the steps was an item that Clark had not noticed. Jonathan picked it up. It was obviously a picture. As Jonathan uncovered it, Clark could see that it was a painting of a nude woman reclining on a chaise lounge. Upon closer inspection, Clark gasped out, “Mom???”

Jonathan said, “He painted her ... this way. If this isn’t proof ...”

It was late afternoon when Eugene made his escape and the investigation into it had lasted well into the evening. The courthouse had been on lock-down and no one was allowed to leave or enter. Courthouse staff and police were everywhere. Police forensics teams were dusting surfaces for prints and looking for any other types of evidence.

Lois, because she had been responsible for the discovery and Ben, the bailiff that had been on guard were in the holding room that Eugene was supposed to have been in and they were being questioned by the detective that had been the one to bring Eugene in, in the first place, Detective Reed.

Lois was sitting at the table and Detective Reed was questioning her. “Okay, and when the door opened?”

Lois, near exasperation replied, “Like I told you, twenty times already, he was gone.”

Detective Reed was interrupted by a police technician who approached. He had a pad in his hand and referred to his notes as he presented his report, “He accessed the code number from the central courtroom computer. And the evidence room was broken

into. A gun is missing, a thirty-eight revolver. There is no ammunition missing though.”

Lois made a mental note of this report.

Ben started to speak in his own defense, “Detective Reed, I don’t think that . . .”

Whatever Ben thought we will never know, because Detective Reed cut him off, “You don’t *think*, period. I’ll be mentioning the fact that you opened the door for Ms. Lane in my report.”

Lois came to her friend’s defense, “It wasn’t his fault. I . . . made him do it.”

Reed shrugged Lois’s statement off, “He wasn’t following procedure.”

Lois pointed out, “If he hadn’t opened that door, you might still not know that he escaped.”

Reed looked thoughtful and then said, “You’re free to go, for now.”

Lois said, “Thank you,” somewhat sarcastically, sent Ben a look of apology, as if to say, ‘I tried,’ and turned to go.

Lois exited the courthouse and headed for her car pulling her keys out of her bag as she walked. As she approached the car she hit the remote door lock button to unlock the car. Glancing at the windshield she saw a piece of paper. Picking it up she let out a growl of frustration and muttered to herself, “Another parking ticket.” She shoved it into her bag, climbed in and put the key in the ignition. She put on her seat belt, turned the key to start the car and then looked in her rearview mirror prior to driving off. When she did she saw a shadowy figure in back. Suddenly a .38 cal revolver protruded from between the front seats and Lois stared at it in fascination.

When he spoke, Lois recognized the voice and knew just who it was, Eugene. He said, “Drive.”

Rather than do as he commanded, Lois turned around in her seat to confront him, “Eugene! What are you doing?”

In a deflated tone, he replied, “Just . . . drive.”

Realizing that the front of the courthouse was not the best place to have this conversation, Lois put the Jeep into gear and drove off. Lois drove for a short time and then found an alleyway to pull into which she did. Once in the alley, Lois put the Jeep in park and shut off the engine.

Turning in her seat to face him, Lois said, “Eugene, this isn’t going to work. **Everyone’s** looking for you.”

Eugene tried to sound commanding as he said, “I said drive,” and waved the gun around.

Undeterred, Lois replied, “I know what you said, Eugene. Now give me that gun before you get into even more trouble.”

Eugene shrugged his shoulders and with a chagrined look handed it over. He said, “It wasn’t loaded anyway.”

Lois replied, “I know. I heard all about it.”

After Lois had the gun, he said, “Even if it had been loaded, I never would have . . .”

“I know, Eugene. I know you wouldn’t have.”

Eugene sounded like he had reached the end of his rope as he said, “Ms. Lane. You’re the only one I could turn to.” He looked around before he continued, “You know all the evidence against me was circumstantial. You know I didn’t kill Henry Harrison.”

Lois had a sympathetic look as she said, “Eugene, I believe you’re innocent. But you’re also an escaped felon now, ‘armed and dangerous.’ What are you going to do?”

Eugene was a pathetic sight as he replied, “I don’t know except . . . I have to see Lena. Something’s wrong. She didn’t even look at me during the trial; she never visited me in jail.”

The tone in Lois’s voice was one of humoring an errant child as she replied, “Eugene, you were just convicted of killing her husband.”

Eugene was desperate to prove his point as he said, “But she loves me! And I love her. Please. I have to talk to her. Help me.”

Lois gave him a sympathetic look and started the car.

Chapter 4

When Lois arrived home, she was surprised to find Jonathan as she walked in through the door. “Jonathan! Hi! Is Martha here too?”

In a somewhat embarrassed tone, Jonathan replied, “Uh, no. Martha is in Smallville.”

Picking up on his tone, Lois inquired, “Jonathan . . . what’s going on? Why are you here and Martha there?”

“Uh, that’s a long story.”

Lois crossed her arms and said, “We’ve got time. Okay, what’s the story?”

Clark piped up, “Dad thinks that Mom is having an affair with a younger man.”

Lois blurted out, “I don’t believe it! Not for one second.”

Jonathan asked, “How can you be so sure?”

“Look, I haven’t been a member of this family for very long, but I think I know Martha well enough to know that she would never . . .”

Lois stopped speaking when Jonathan pulled out the picture and showed it to Lois.

Lois sputtered, “Mar . . . Martha?!?!?”

Jonathan asked, “You see?”

“Yeah, I see a picture. I don’t see an affair.” Lois looked at Clark and said, “I don’t know that I would be so bold as to pose nude for an artist, but I do know that if I did it would only be if the picture was for Clark’s eyes alone.” She looked back at Jonathan and asked, “Did you ask her about that?”

Chagrined that he might have jumped to a wrong conclusion, Jonathan slowly shook his head.

Lois challenged, “Don’t you think that you need to talk this over with her before you decide what to do?”

“I guess you’re right.”

Lois said, “Let’s sleep on it.”

“I’ll help you with the pull out, Dad.”

“Thanks, Clark.”

After they were in bed, Clark asked, “So, what happened today?”

“Would you believe that the jury returned a guilty verdict?”

“Lois, he did sign a confession, after all.”

“I still believe he was innocent.”

“So, you filed your story. Why were you so late?”

“They had the courthouse locked down.”

Alarmed, Clark blurted out, “Why did they have the courthouse on lock down?”

“Eugene escaped.”

“He escaped?”

“Yeah. And he stole a gun.”

“Great! You should have told me earlier. I should be out there looking for him.”

He started to get up, but Lois grabbed his arm and pulled him back down. “No need. I know right where he is.”

“What??? How do you know where he is?”

In a small voice she replied, “Because I took him to his hideout.”

“You what?”

“I took him to his hideout. Look, it’s only until we can prove his innocence.”

“Lois, the man is a confessed killer.”

“He says he’s innocent and I believe him.”

“But he signed a confession.”

“It might have been under duress.”

“Lo-is, he needs to turn himself in. This is just making things worse. Where is he?”

“You have to promise not to take him in. I want you to talk to him yourself before you make up your mind.”

Clark released an exasperated sigh before he said, “Okay, but if I’m not convinced you have to call the MPD and turn him in or he has to turn himself in.”

Lois cuddled up to Clark and said, “Let’s sleep on it. Maybe things will look different in the morning.”

“You didn’t tell me where he is.”

“I’ll tell you in the morning. Goodnight, Clark.”

“Aarrggg. Okay. Goodnight, Lois.”

At five-thirty Lois and Clark were both awakened by noises from the kitchen and the smells of food cooking. They were both bleary eyed from lack of sleep because of the early hour. After donning robes they made their way out only to find Jonathan at the stove with an apron on and a spatula in his hand.

As Lois emitted a jaw cracking yawn, Clark asked, “Dad? It’s five-thirty!”

Jonathan, looking chastened said, “Oh, sorry. Guess I’m used to getting up with the chickens.”

Running his fingers through his hair, Clark asked, “Was the pull out okay?”

“Oh, sure, fine. I guess I’m just not used to sleeping without your mother.”

Seeing his downcast look, Clark reached over and patted his dad on the shoulder and asked, “So ... what’s for breakfast?”

Jonathan, in a desultory, flat tone said, “Ham ‘n eggs, hash browns ... you want some hotcakes, too?”

Lois said, “I don’t think so. What I need right now is coffee.”

Clark said, “This’ll be fine.”

Jonathan reached for the handle of the skillet and picked it up only to let out a yelp of pain and drop it immediately. He started fanning and blowing on his hand while he quickly moved to the sink and put his hand under the cold water.

Clark and Lois had looked on in shocked surprise while this had been happening.

Jonathan looked at Clark and explained, “I’m used to insulated handles. You don’t even have pot holders!”

Clark said, “Sorry, Dad. I didn’t think. I never need one.”

Clark reached for and picked up the skillet by the hot handle and transferred the food to plates before depositing the pan back on the burner which he turned off.

As they sat down at the table, Lois and Clark could both tell that Jonathan was still upset. Clark tried to comfort him, “Dad, it’s going to be fine, I promise.”

Lois added, “Are you sure you don’t want to call Martha? I’m sure there’s a logical explanation.”

Jonathan’s reply spoke of his stubbornness, “She knows where I am.”

Clark asked, “What’d she say when you left?”

Jonathan shook and lowered his head, “We had a big fight.”

Lois asked, “About the painting?”

Jonathan nodded and said, “And ...”

Clark asked, “Did you ask her ... I mean, if there was anything ...”

Jonathan looked shocked as he replied, “Not in so many words.” His tone and countenance were both miserable, “I couldn’t ask her.”

Lois reached out and put her hand over Jonathan’s and said, “I wish you had. I bet that her answer would have been, no.”

Just then the phone rang. Knowing the time, Clark said, “That can’t be the office. Even Perry doesn’t get in this early.”

In a rhetorical way Lois asked, “I wonder just who that could be,” as she looked pointedly at Jonathan.

Clark asked, “You want to answer it, Dad?”

Jonathan looked at the phone like it was a snake about to strike and said, “No, I’d better not.”

Clark jumped up and picked up the phone, “Hello?” Clark listened for a few seconds and then answered, “Hi, Mom! Yes, we’re fine. How’re you?” Clark listened some more.

The tension was getting to Jonathan and Lois could see it as could Clark. Finally, Jonathan stood and moved over to stand next to Clark. Clark held the receiver away from his ear so that Jonathan could hear.

Martha’s question was obvious from Clark’s next answer, “Yeah, he’s fine. We’re having breakfast. When? Oh. Okay, that’ll be great. See you then. Bye, Mom.” Clark hung the phone up.

It became obvious that Jonathan hadn’t heard what Clark had intended because he asked, “Well? What’d she say?”

Clark’s answer was disappointing, “Not much. Said she wanted to talk to you in person. She’s coming in.”

Lois offered, “That’s a good sign.”

Jonathan brightened somewhat and asked, “When? Tonight?”

“No, day after tomorrow.”

Downcast, Jonathan said, “Probably doesn’t want to miss her life drawing class.”

“Maybe we should move you to Lois’s old apartment. We were going to give it up, but her sister, Lucy, said she was planning to return to Metropolis so we kept it for her to use.”

Lois gasped and blurted out, “No! No, we can’t ... he can’t!”

“What? Why?”

“Remember that thing we were talking about last night?”

“What thing?”

“That thing I told you I’d tell you today. That’s it.”

Clark’s frustration was growing, “What’s it?”

“That’s where Eugene is.”

“What?!?!?!?!? We’re harboring a criminal?”

“No! He’s innocent, I tell you.”

Later, at the Daily Planet, some of the staff were gathered in the conference room around the conference table. On the table, prominently displayed for all to see was the front page of the Daily Planet. The headline read — “Convicted Killer Escapes!” Immediately below the headline were pictures of Eugene Laderman, the convicted killer; Henry Harrison, the victim; and Lena Harrison, the victim’s wife.

Lois and Clark were a bit nervous, knowing that Eugene was in Lois’s old apartment.

All eyes turned toward her when Perry asked, “Lois, you doing a follow-up on Eugene Laderman’s escape?”

In her distress, Lois had been looking at Clark for support and Perry perceived that she was distracted, but misinterpreted her look, “Lois, this is work time, not play time. Save that for when you and Clark are at home.”

Realizing that she had to say something, Lois replied, “On it, Chief.”

“All right then. Let’s get to it, people.”

Before they had a chance to disperse, Clark said, “Lois is bummed out over the verdict.”

Lois offered, “The man is innocent. He’s no more a killer than I am.”

Perry pointed out the obvious, “Man signed a confession, didn’t he?”

Defensively, Lois retorted, “He was under duress when he signed it, didn’t even have his attorney present.”

This was the conversation that Clark had wanted to have with Lois, but she had been avoiding. In a reasoning tone, Clark offered, “Lois, the guy shot his boss, then set fire to the room to try and hide the evidence.”

Jimmy started going through the evidence, “Fingerprints on the gun. His clothes had Harrison’s blood on them. Not to mention that he and Harrison’s wife were ‘doing the deed.’”

Lois was itching for an argument, “Jimmy, it’s okay to have an affair when your husband is a brutal sociopath.”

Clark quipped, “No, it’s not. It’s not okay, but I guess I’m safe then.”

Lois’s argumentative mood was broken by his remark. She couldn’t help but look at him and smile.

Clark asked, “Should we assume that it’s true?”

Perry had been trying to follow the byplay, but was somewhat confused with how fast things were happening. “What’s true?”

Clark explained, “That they were having an affair.”

Perry couldn’t help, but seize the opportunity to launch into an Elvis story, “Well, you know, when Priscilla left Elvis, February ’72, she went straight into the arms of her karate instructor, Mike Stone, also married at the time. The King was devastated — he was the one who introduced Priscilla to Mike a year before.”

Lois interrupted Perry, “Chief, forgive me, but I am not in the mood for another Elvis yarn. Besides, what does Elvis Presley have to do with an innocent man fighting for his life?”

Perry’s face fell with her outburst, “You’re not in the mood for an Elvis yarn?”

As if trying to explain to a five year old, Lois started to say, “Chief, Eugene and Lena ...”

Lois was interrupted by a whistle from Jimmy and, “Speak of the Devil ...”

Lois turned toward Jimmy and seeing this he nodded in the direction of the pit. Seeing this Lois turned in that direction and saw Lena Harrison entering. Lena Harrison was an attractive woman in her late forties dressed in a conservative pantsuit. Lois had seen Lena at the trial, but a thought crossed her mind, unbidden, <Why are they always blondes?>. Grabbing Clark’s arm, Lois said, “Let’s go see what she wants.”

Chapter 5

Lois and Clark moved to the bullpen and intercepted Lena. Lois said, “Why don’t we go into the conference room,” and turning, led the way.

Once they were in the conference room they pulled out chairs so that they were face to face.

Lena was the first to speak, “I’m very worried. I haven’t heard from him.” Lena reached for and took one of Lois’s hands.

Speaking with sincerity in her voice, she said, “Jack wrote to me, told me how much he trusted you. You were the only one who believed in him. “

Lois was mystified and asked, “Jack. Who’s Jack?”

Lena replied, “Oh, that. Jack is what I call Eugene. Most people called him Gene for short, but not me. To me he was Jack.”

Lois and Clark exchanged a glance and then Lois asked, “What can we do for you?”

She released Lois’s hand and pulled a hanky out of her bag. She waved it around as she spoke, “They’ll find him. They’ll track him down and kill him. Please write something in the paper. I know he’ll read it. Tell him that if he really loves me he’ll turn himself in. There’s the appeal ... there’s always hope.” At that point Lena put her hanky to use as she broke down and tears started to flow.

Looking on, Lois was struck by this. To her it looked rather contrived. Blame it on her cynical nature, but it just looked faked.

True to his nature, Clark tried to offer her comfort, “Mrs. Harrison, I know this must be very difficult for you ...”

As fast as the waterworks had started they stopped when Lena interrupted Clark, “My husband was a violent and cruel man. There were nights, so many nights, that I thought ... God forgive me ... if only he were dead, then Eugene and I ...” Her flow of words stopped as if she were considering what to say. “He did it for me. And when I think about him, out there, alone, hunted ... I hope he’s all right.”

Just then, Perry stuck his head in the door and said, “Uh, Lois? Can I see you for a moment?”

Lena stood, took one final swipe at her tears and said, “I have to be going anyway.”

Clark said, “We’ll write the story.”

Lena gave him a smile and said, “Thank you.”

Perry stepped back, out of the doorway and allowed Lena to exit. Lois and Clark followed her out, but stopped near the doorway to talk to Perry as they watched her leave.

Lois turned to Perry and asked, “What was it you wanted, Chief?”

Perry nodded his head in the direction of Lois’s desk.

Looking in that direction, Lois saw a woman sitting in her visitor chair with her back to them. This woman was intently watching as Lena left via the elevator. As soon as the doors closed she stood and turned around. When she did, Lois recognized her as Detective Reed, the detective that had arrested Eugene.

Lois gulped and sent up a silent prayer that she’d be able to avoid any difficult questions and started to walk in her direction. When she approached, she held out her hand and said, “Detective Reed.”

The detective acknowledged the greeting, “Ms. Lane.” She nodded her head in the direction that Lena Harrison had gone and asked, “Lena Harrison have anything interesting to say?”

On fairly safe ground, Lois replied, “She’s worried about Eugene. She wants us to write an article telling him to turn himself in.”

Detective Reed nodded in understanding and said, “Good idea.” She looked back at the elevator as if to indicate who she was talking about, “We’ve been tailing her since last night.”

Lois asked, “No sigh of Eugene?”

With a shake of her head, she replied, “The fugitive is still at large.”

Perry asked, “Is there something specific we can help you with, Detective?”

Detective Reed weighed her next statements carefully before asking in her deceptively naive sounding down home southwestern drawl, “Well, no, not really. It just seemed to me that during the trial, Ms. Lane and the escaped felon, became, well ... friendly-like.

Lois, trying to deflect, said, “I’m a journalist. I covered the trial.”

Detective Reed demonstrated that her affected drawl was cultivated by her to give a false sense of security to those she was interrogating and hide the sharp mind hidden under her curls said, “Yes. And, of course, I’m *not* a journalist, but it did seem to me that your articles seemed slanted toward proclaiming his innocence.” She looked back and forth between Lois and Perry. When no reply was forthcoming, she continued, “I was wondering if you might have any information as to the whereabouts of Mr. Laderman.”

There it was. Just what Lois had feared. She hoped that her fear wasn’t visible, but she tried to maintain a stoic mask.

After waiting a second for her to reply, Reed pressed the point, “He hasn’t called you, has he?”

Feeling back on safe and solid ground again, Lois was able to reply, truthfully, “No. He hasn’t called me.”

Reed nodded in acknowledgement. Based on the way Lois had replied, she accepted the truth of Lois’s statement. She said, “Well, just in case, if you do hear from him, give *me* a call, will you?” As she was saying this, she handed Lois her card.

After Lois took the card Detective Reed turned and ambled to the elevator. As she did, she said, over her shoulder, “Don’t worry, Ms. Lane. I brought him in once, I’ll do it again, dead or alive.”

Lois had a shocked expression on her face as Reed was leaving. Perry picked up on her distress, but didn’t say anything. Perry knew that Lois was always driven to be the best reporter there ever was and that carried with it a lot of passion. Passion for her job, passion for the story and fortunately for Clark, passion for

her husband. He wasn't surprised to see Clark take her by the elbow and lead her to the conference room.

Once the door was closed Clark addressed her, "Lois, you have got to call Reed and tell her where Eugene is."

"I can't do that, Clark. Eugene trusts me and I believe him when he says, he's innocent."

"He was tried and convicted by a jury of his peers. The man is dangerous. He killed Harrison. He could kill you. Lois, you ... we are harboring a wanted fugitive. The man is a convicted murderer. It doesn't matter that we aren't living in that apartment anymore. It's still in your name until Lucy assumes the lease."

"Oh, leave the truth and justice stuff to Superman, will you? Clark, I need you to talk to him yourself. With your special abilities you can tell if he's lying or not when he answers your questions. If you still feel that he's a murderer ... then you can call the police."

Lois and Clark has stopped and picked up some lunch, enough for three, before heading to Lois's old apartment.

Eugene was just finishing up on his sandwich. He was sitting on Lois's sofa facing a skeptical Clark who was asking him some very pointed questions and pointing out flaws in his story. "You were heard having an argument the day before he was killed."

Eugene replied, "That's true, but ..."

Clark interrupted his answer, "And you admit that you hated him."

Eugene replied, "It was the way he treated Lena."

Clark accused, "You were having an affair with his wife."

Shaking his head, Eugene replied, "It wasn't an affair. We were in love, but Lena didn't want to consummate it until ..."

Clark finished for him, "You killed him?"

Shaking his head in denial, Eugene clarified, "No! Until she left him." He looked back and forth between Lois and Clark before he finished, "You didn't know him. Lena would come to work with bruises on her arms."

Lois prompted, "Tell Clark about Henry."

Nodding, Eugene launched into the new topic, "He developed his own software and started his own company after he got fired from LexComp."

Clark's interest was instantly piqued, "He worked for Lex Luthor?"

Nodding as he replied, Eugene said, "For twenty years. He was fired a month before he was eligible to retire with a full pension." Again he looked back and forth between them, assessing how his next statement would be received, "His company wasn't making it. That's what I think drove Henry crazy."

Lois questioned, "What do you mean, crazy?"

Shaking his head he said, "You have to understand, he was a loose cannon. One day I found a program he was working on ... the Ides Of Metropolis. When he discovered that I'd seen it he went berserk, threatening me, threatening Lena."

Clark challenged, "Why did Lena testify as a witness for the prosecution?"

Eugene replied, "She was subpoenaed. She had to tell the truth. And the truth was there was no way she could prove I *didn't* kill her husband."

Clark replied, "She thinks you did it. She said so, today."

Eugene was shocked, "You saw Lena?"

Lois nodded as she replied, "She came to the Planet." She looked at Clark before she continued, "It's a good thing you didn't go to her house last night — she's being tailed by the police."

It was as if Eugene had been struck with a baseball bat, he was so shocked.

Lois stood and headed for the kitchen, "I'll make us some coffee."

Clark followed Lois into the kitchen. He had a troubled expression as he paced the floor. Finally he grabbed the phone and

handed it to Lois. He said, "Make the call."

Lois was startled by this. She whispered, "Your super senses tell you he's lying?"

"Well, no. I can't be sure. His elevated pulse could be simply from fear. It's hard to tell."

"Then I can't call. If you can't be sure then he could very well *be* innocent."

Clark still held the phone as he said, "Lois! We had a deal. I haven't heard a single thing that makes me feel he's less guilty or less of a threat to you."

Lois took the phone and hung it back up. "Clark. Please. I'm sure about this."

"Lois, you're always sure."

"Yes, I am and I'm usually right, too. Two days. Give me forty-eight hours. The man's going to prison for life."

Suddenly a noise from the side drew their attention and they both turned to see Eugene standing there, watching. The expression on his face could only be described as one of pain.

Lois noted his expression and asked, "Eugene, what is it?"

When he answered, his tone was one of disbelief, "Lena told you that I killed Henry?"

"She said you did it for her."

Eugene's expression was a mixture of disbelief and hurt as he turned away and made his way back to the living room.

Lois and Clark exchanged a look and then followed him. Lois watched as Eugene moved to the sofa and sat down. She moved over in front of him and said, "Eugene, I think you better tell us the truth."

In a dispirited tone, Eugene said, "Lena was right about one thing. I did do it for her."

Shocked, Lois blurted out, "You killed Harrison?"

Eugene looked up, but now his expression was that of a whipped puppy. "No. I originally confessed, then later, refused to take the stand to protect her." He put his head in his hands.

Disbelievingly, Clark asked, "Lena?"

Looking up again, Eugene said, "Yes. She's the one who did it. She killed her husband."

Lois and Clark were both startled at this declaration. Neither had expected anything like this.

"Eugene, are you saying that you were covering for Lena? That she was really the murderer?"

His expression was sad as he replied, "Yes. At least I think so. I didn't actually see it, but I believe that Lena was responsible. I thought that the case against me would be so weak that they wouldn't convict me. I didn't want to see Lena go to jail."

Clark had been listening to Eugene's heart rate to see if he was lying. Though some of his statements were subjective there was no indication that he was in fact lying. He could be a very practiced liar which would invalidate his conclusion, but Eugene didn't appear to be one of that ilk.

Lois looked at Clark. He nodded his head.

"Eugene, Clark and I are going to have to look into this. You realize that she is throwing you to the wolves by accusing you of the murder. Would she do that if she loved you? That's something that you have to think about."

Lois started to gather her things. "We have to get to the Planet. It'd probably be best if you didn't go out."

Chapter 6

Lois and Clark had left Eugene some time earlier and as soon as they had arrived at the Planet had put Jimmy to work doing research on the trial.

Lois was at Clark's desk for a change, sitting in his guest chair. They each had a cup of coffee in hand. Lois had just taken a sip and was grimacing. "I'll never be satisfied with the coffee from that machine again. You, Mr. Kent, husband mine, have

spoiled me.”

Just then, Jimmy came by and dropped a pile of papers on Clark’s desk. As he did he said, in an apologetic tone, “Transcripts from the trial, DA’s depositions, forensic reports ... more to come, computer’s on the blink.”

As she grabbed the top sheet, Lois said, “Thanks, Jimmy. Nice work.” She hesitated and then added, “Stay on Lena today, all right? The police say that they are following her, but the more eyes the better.”

Jimmy nodded and headed off. Lois looked at Clark and was surprised by his stern expression and his arms folded across his chest, Superman fashion. She asked, “What’s eating you?” Then she added in a whisper, “Unfold your arms. You look too much like Superman.”

With a shake of his head, he unfolded his arms and said, “I’m sorry. I can’t help the way I feel. Just because Eugene *said* Lena killed her husband, doesn’t mean she *did* the deed.”

After looking around to make sure no one was within hearing distance, Lois whispered, “But your super senses said he was telling the truth.”

With a shake of his head, he said, “That doesn’t prove anything. A skilled liar can fool a polygraph. The same thing can happen with me.”

Lois sat back and asked, “Clark, when did you become so cynical? I’m usually the one saying ‘hogwash.’ What happened to that bright-eyed bushy-tailed Kansas boy I married?”

Clark replied, “Maybe he’s been hanging around ‘Mad Dog Lane’ too much.”

Jimmy was walking by Clark’s desk on his way out and caught the tail end of the conversation and laughed at Clark’s remark.

Lois gave him a look; he stopped laughing and high-tailed it out of there.

Once Jimmy had left, she said, “Or, maybe ... he found out that his perfect little world isn’t so perfect. That’s something about your mom, but I still don’t think that it is what it looks like. I’m sure there’s a logical explanation.”

“I sure hope so.”

Lois tried to comfort him, “I’m sure nothing’ll come of it. You know my Mom and Dad got divorced when I was a teenager.”

“How’d you take it?”

Lois tried to pass it off as nothing, but Clark could hear the pain in her voice as she said, “I pretended that it didn’t bother me. A lot of the girls I went to school with came from broken homes. But, it did. It bothered me; it affected me ... more than I thought. I guess we really owe a big debt of gratitude to Herb. If not for these memories we might not have ever gotten together. I had several relationships that would qualify as federal disasters. I had basically sworn off men in general and relationships with them in particular ... until then. Now I know what a loving relationship is because of you and I see the same thing with your parents. It’ll work out.”

“You know, we could continue to work on this if he was back in jail. As long as he’s in our apartment, we are aiding and abetting.”

“Clark, I’m not going to turn him in. At least not yet. I believe him. He said that Lena Harrison is guilty and I intend to prove it.”

Clark was less than enthusiastic as he replied, “Okay, I’m with you, partner.”

While Jimmy went to find and follow Lena Harrington, Lois and Clark went to the HarriTech facility on the outskirts of Metropolis. That was where the body had been found and it was where the dead man had worked.

When they had arrived they had identified themselves they had done some on-the-spot interviews with random people and been sent back to Harrison’s personal assistant. The nameplate on the desk proclaimed the inhabitant to be Miss Bird. When they

started talking to her, Lois decided that the name was apt, but that she was a specific bird. She certainly wasn’t an owl because she wasn’t that bright. Nor was she a dove, peaceful and quiet. She was more like a raptor, fierce and loyal to her former boss.

In response to Lois’s question, Miss Bird said, “No one knew Mr. Harrison better than I did. I was his personal secretary for fifteen years.” She huffed and folded her arms across her chest before she finished, “He was a genius, you know.”

Lois said, “That may be, but we’ve interviewed several people who also say he was a tyrant.”

Lois could see that she had metaphorically ruffled Miss Bird’s feathers because her posture and attitude changed as she answered, “He had a company to run. It wasn’t easy, starting his own line of software. And then, to find out that Lena and Eugene were ... he didn’t deserve to be two-timed.”

Lois tried to throw her a curve, “There was some evidence that indicated Harrison was abusive toward his wife.”

Miss Bird became smug as she replied, “Nonsense. He loved her. He would never touch a hair on her head. In his will, he left her everything. All the stock ...”

Lois finished for her, “The debts ...”

Miss Bird didn’t miss a beat as she replied, “That’s not fair. All these accusations against Mr. Harrison. He’s not here to defend himself.”

Clark tried to defuse the situation. He gave Lois a warning look as he said, “No, no he’s not.”

Taking the cue from Clark, Miss Bird said, “Henry Harrison had a heart of gold; one morning he found a homeless man sleeping in the utility room. He got him a cot. Brought him food. Does that sound like a monster to you?”

Lois was still not to be put off, even by Clark, she asked, “Where is this homeless man now? We’d like to talk to him.”

At a loss for an answer, Miss Bird finally said, “I don’t know. Since the murder ... I suppose I can’t blame him for not wanting to sleep in that room anymore.”

Lois was disappointed, but she still said, “Well, thank you for your time.”

Miss Bird, was disappointed as she replied, “You’re welcome ... I’m just straightening up ... we’re closing the doors tonight. Look, I know it’s part of your job to dig around looking for new angles on stories, but ... Eugene Laderman killed Mr. Harrison. That’s the real truth.”

Lois and Clark exchanged a look. Lois’s was one of disbelief, Clark’s was questioning.

They headed back to the Daily Planet.

Lois suggested, “Harrison worked for Lex Luthor ...”

Clark interrupted, “Why am I not surprised? I wonder what nefarious schemes he was working on.”

“Hopefully we can find out and add it to our file on Luthor. I think we should call and ask for his employment record.”

“Most of the time, those things are confidential.”

“Lex apparently is still interested in me. Maybe we can use that to get the information. Let me make a phone call.”

A few hours later.

Lex Luthor was on his balcony holding an over/under two-barrel 12 gauge shotgun. He was wearing a nattily tailored shooter’s vest in beige with a leather shoulder pad.

Nigel St. John had clamped a clay pigeon launcher to the balustrade and at Luthor’s shouted command of “Pull!”, Nigel launched the clay into the air out over the street.

With apparent ease Luthor brought up the gun, sighted and fired, blasting the clay pigeon into small fragments.

Seeing the pigeon explode, Nigel complimented his employer, “Excellent shot, Sir.”

As he finished speaking and before he had a chance to load another clay the intercom on Lex’s desk inside the office buzzed.

Nigel moved inside to answer it.

When he returned, he announced, “Ms. Lane and Mr. Kent are here, Sir.”

“The ... sanitized version of Harrison's file ...”

“On your desk, Sir.”

Nodding, Luthor commanded, “Have them come in.”

Nigel moved across the office to the inner door and opened it to allow them to enter. Nigel closed the door and escorted the couple to the balcony.

While Lois and Clark watched, Nigel launched another clay pigeon, Luthor brought up the gun and shot. As they all watched the clay pigeon exploded into small fragments.

Clark walked to the edge and looked down. He asked, “What happens if you miss?”

Luthor pondered for a second before he replied, “Interesting question, Mr. Kent. Let's see ...” He picked up a clay pigeon and hefted it before continuing, “This clay pigeon weighs two ounces. We are on the one hundred and twentieth floor, approximately fifteen hundred feet above street level. Considering the G force and the speed ... if the object hit the pavement, or some hapless passer-by, it would make contact at about two hundred miles per hour. My guess is that it would, unfortunately, kill him or her, instantly.” Luthor smiled and added, “I never miss.”

He effectively dismissed Clark as he turned to Lois and said, “So nice to see *you* again, Lois.” He was reaching for Lois's hand, presumably to kiss it. She started to raise it, but Clark reached for her hand and pushed it back down. Luthor gave Clark a look of anger at being thwarted, but he recovered his veneer of urbanity quickly and motioned for them to join him in his office as he moved in that direction, “Please, join me.”

Luthor, ever the gracious host, indicated a couple of chairs, offering for them to be seated.

Rather than taking the offered seat, Clark started to ask, “About Henry Harrison ...”

Luthor cut him off, “Yes, when I received Lois's call, I requested that the head of LexComp personnel pull his file.” He turned to his desk, picked up a manila folder and pointedly handed it to Lois, “I'm afraid there's not much there to help you.”

Seeing how the wind was blowing, Lois asked, sweetly, “Did you know him personally?”

Responding to Lois, Luthor said, “Oh, yes. He was quite an ambitious and talented man when I hired him. Great thinker. Ahead of his time.”

Pressing her advantage, Lois asked, “Is it true he was fired only a month before he was eligible to retire on a full pension?”

Luthor was his most conciliatory as he replied, “Yes. When we downsized the company during the recession, hundreds of employees were forced out.” He paused as if searching his memory before continuing, “We made every effort to relocate them. But Henry decided he wanted to be his own boss. Shame about the murder ... have they caught the man yet?”

Lois replied, “No, not yet.”

Luthor picked up on Lois's tone of voice and asked, “Lois... is there some doubt in your mind as to the man's guilt?”

Lois nodded and replied, “Yes. A great deal of doubt.”

Both Lois and Clark could see the metaphorical wheels turning in Luthor's mind until Lois spoke up. “Thanks for your help.”

Lois and Clark started for the door, but Lois stopped and turned back. She had decided to try for a reaction, “Lex, have you ever heard of a software program called ‘The Ides of Metropolis?’ Something Harrison was working on.”

Lex might have hesitated a second, but Lois couldn't be sure as he answered, “Ides of Metropolis? No, I haven't.” He smiled and finished, “Sorry I couldn't have been of greater assistance.”

As soon as Lois and Clark had left, Lex turned to Nigel and asked, “Are our technicians at LexComp still having those same

problems ... the computers running slow?”

“I believe so, Sir.”

Luthor thought for a second and then said, “Hmmm. You'd better get me LexComp internal security.” As Nigel turned away to comply, Lex stopped him and asked, “Nigel, do you think it would be possible to have Kent shot and blame it on Laderman?”

“Highly unlikely, Sir.”

“Well, it was a thought. Lacking enough evidence of Lois's straying so that Kent will divorce her, I need to eliminate Kent and a direct confrontation is out of the question.”

Nigel thoughtfully rubbed his jaw as he said, “Yes, Sir. Direct confrontation would be ill advised.”

Luthor rubbed his jaw, the same way as Nigel, as he said, “I too have felt the consequences of direct confrontation of the mild mannered Mr. Kent. You are right. All those years, growing up on a farm has given him more strength than is apparent under those loose suits. Let's pursue the ‘mugging’.”

When they returned to the Planet they went through the scant information contained in Harrison's personnel jacket from LexComp.

Lois voiced her frustration, “Nothing! There's nothing here. It lists his credentials, but there's nothing about his personality at all. No complaints from co-workers. That was all we heard about at HarriTech.”

Just then, Jimmy came in. He was grinning like the Cheshire cat and waving a videocassette in the air. He shouted, “Wait till you guys see this!” He led the way to the conference room while Lois and Clark followed. Once they were inside, Jimmy closed the blinds and popped the cassette into the player.

On the screen, Lena Harrison, wearing a scarf and sun glasses, was seen crossing the lobby of a hotel. Suddenly the scene shifted to a shapely pair of legs revealed by a mini-skirt traveling in the opposite direction. After a couple of seconds of tracking the legs the scene shifted back to Lena Harrison and picked up the trail once again.

Lois asked, “How'd you get this? And what about Reed? Weren't her men tailing Lena as well?”

Jimmy nodded and smirked, “Two guys in a car in front of the hotel. Some stakeout.”

As they watched the screen, Lena approached an elevator. Suddenly, almost blocking the view of Lena, a man in a trench coat and hat moved up behind and then next to her. Just before the elevator doors opened the man leaned down and they exchanged an intimate kiss.

Lois was jubilant as she chortled, “So much for the grieving widow!”

Jimmy hit rewind and when it finished ejected the tape and handed it to Lois. As he did he asked, “What now?”

Lois replied, “For the time being, go back there and see if you can trail one or the other of them when they leave the hotel. Don't waste too much time though. It is late.”

“You got it.”

Chapter 7

When Lois and Clark arrived at home they found Jonathan pacing the floor like a caged lion, muttering to himself.

“Hi, Dad. How'd it go today?”

“You know, Clark, I've come to a conclusion. Maybe I need to shed some weight. Become more fit. If I could get slim and trim ...”

“Dad, you don't have a lot of time between now and when Mom gets here.”

“I know, but I should get started. You know, show her that I'm serious about my health and fitness.”

“Well, you could go with us tonight. The other side of the dojo

is a gym. We could spend some time there.

“Dojo?”

“That’s where Lois and I study karate.”

Lois chimed in, “He’s a natural. He’ll be a black belt before you know it. Come with us. You can watch our class and then Clark can take you into the gym.”

A few hours later, after the karate class, Jonathan was dressed in a set of sweats and had a towel draped around his neck while Clark, dressed in cut-off sweat pants and a muscle shirt, showed him how to use the weight equipment. In the background, over concealed speakers, up-tempo music played. In one corner an aerobics class danced to it. Around the room were miscellaneous stair-steppers and treadmills, most of which were occupied.

While Jonathan and Clark were in the gym, Lois had gone out to grab some food for Eugene.

Clark led Jonathan to an unoccupied weight machine. Before Jonathan laid down on the bench, Clark asked, “Dad, are you sure you want to do this?”

Jonathan nodded his head and said, “I’ve got to get back in shape. Get back to the man your mother married.”

Clark said, in a sympathetic tone, “Dad, I think getting in shape is a good idea, but you’re doing it for the wrong reasons. Now, if you want to feel better, that’s one thing, but Mom loves you just the way you are.”

A woman that Clark recognized as one of the female trainers approached. Jonathan couldn’t help but stare. She was dressed all in spandex. A spandex sports bra, spandex micro shorts with a G-string over and her assets were on display for all to see just how fit she was. She was a walking advertisement for the gym.

She walked up to Jonathan and asked, “First time?”

Clark could hear Jonathan’s heart rate kick up and thought it best to interrupt, “Thanks anyway, but I pretty much know my way around the gym.”

She gave Clark and appreciative look, up and down and said, “Yes, I can tell.”

Jonathan gave Clark a look and said, “*I* could use a few ... pointers.”

She gave Jonathan a knowing look and turned away, “He says he can handle it, and I believe him.”

Jonathan’s eyes followed her as she swayed away.

Taking Jonathan by the arm, Clark led him over to a military style bench press machine. As they approached it, Clark said, “Okay. Just a few light reps, then we’ll hit the showers.” Clark turned his father around so that he was facing away from the weight stack. As Jonathan was about to lie down on the bench, a very large, thick hand clamped on his shoulder. Accompanying that hand was a deep voice, “That’s my machine.”

Clark turned to confront the man. When he did he saw an over-muscled individual with an ego to match his biceps, an IQ to match his shoe size and the arrogance of Lex Luthor.

Clark stopped him and said, “I didn’t see anyone using it.”

The self-importance of the individual knew no bounds, “Everyone knows I use this machine at this time every day, so buzz off, four-eyes, and take grandpa with you.”

Jonathan was ready to capitulate and as he was standing said, “Come on, son.”

Hearing the confrontation, the female trainer had returned to watch and become a peacemaker if needed. She stood by and observed.

Clark crossed his arms across his chest. He was determined to take this arrogant snob down a peg. “No, Dad, we’ll wait.”

As the bodybuilder was laying on the bench he flexed his muscles, and placing his hands on the bar, said, “Might be a while. Once I start pumping, it’s hard for me to stop.”

Clark smiled and asked, “Really?”

The bodybuilder didn’t see it, but Clark had placed one finger on the weight stack.

The bodybuilder gave a mighty heave and pushed up, but nothing moved. He had a startled expression. He jumped up and checked the weight setting. Everything looked right so he resumed his position and heaved against the bar again. Still nothing. The veins were standing out on his temples, a sheen of sweat covered his face and arms, his muscles bulged, his mouth was fixed in a grimace as he strained to push the bar up, all to no avail.

In frustration he dropped his arms and sprung out from under the bar a look of anger on his face as he panted from the exertion and stared at the rebellious machine. He voiced his frustration to the trainer, “Stinking machine is broken!”

Clark questioned, “Really?” He turned to Jonathan and said, “Go ahead, Dad. Show him how it’s done.”

By this time, the grunts and groans of the bodybuilder as he had struggled with the machine and his exclamation as to the machine’s faults had attracted a small crowd.

Realizing that Clark was up to something, Jonathan played along. Stepping over to the machine, Jonathan lay down on the bench.

Clark coached Jonathan, “That’s right. Put your hands on the grips. Take a breath in, and, as you exhale, push up.”

The bodybuilder was an interested observer and snorted in derision as Jonathan lay on the bench. His snort of derision turned to an exclamation of disbelief when with obviously little effort; Jonathan lifted the bar with apparent ease. He performed several repetitions before Clark said, “Don’t you think that’s enough, Dad? You don’t want to overdo.” Turning to the bodybuilder, Clark said, “Once he starts pumping, it’s hard for him to stop.” In response, Jonathan slid out from under the bar. Everyone had been focused on Jonathan so no one had seen Clark surreptitiously turn the pulley that lifted the weights.

Jonathan stood and stretched and Clark started to lead him away.

Before they got two paces the beautiful female trainer approached and said, “Oh, Jonathan ...”

Jonathan and Clark both stopped and looked at her as she continued, “Would you like to ... spot me?”

Jonathan looked at Clark, grinned, sucked in his stomach and strode off after the trainer as Clark looked on in amazement and consternation.

While Jonathan and Clark were spending some time at the gym, Lois had gone to a fast food franchise and picked up a couple of burgers, some fries, and a couple of drinks to take to Eugene.

When she got there she found Eugene watching LNN on the TV. His escape and continued fugitive status were the main topics being discussed.

When Lois entered Eugene was instantly on his feet and Lois handed him the food which he immediately set about devouring.

“Thanks, Lois. I was starving.” Eugene saw that Lois had a big bag over her shoulder. He asked, “Is that by any chance a laptop?”

Lois was startled by the question, but answered, “Yes, actually it’s my backup. I thought you might need something to occupy your time.”

“Thanks! That will sure come in handy. I had my class working on a project. Now I can check on their progress.”

“Is that really a wise thing to do? Can’t they trace back on the signal and find you?”

“Nah, I can bounce off a couple of servers around the world to mask my location.”

“Look, Clark and I will be here sometime later to give you an update.”

Eugene was busy setting up the laptop and eating as she exited to go pick up Jonathan and Clark from the gym.

After dropping Jonathan off at the apartment, Lois and Clark

went to Lois's old apartment to see Eugene. When they entered, Eugene was totally absorbed in what he was doing on Lois's laptop.

Lois said, "Eugene, we're here."

Eugene straightened up from the hunched position he had been in and turning to Lois said, "I've straightened out your files, Lois. Gave you a simpler directory."

Startled, Lois blurted out, "Eugene! You ... those were personal files. I had a password!"

Eugene smirked and replied, "Yeah, I know, 'Superman'. Wasn't too tough to figure out. Hasn't anyone talked to you about computer security? The first thing a Hacker or Cracker tries are personal names, addresses, birthdates, pet's names and such. You really need to work on that."

Lois gave Clark an embarrassed look to which he smiled.

In an attempt to change the subject, Lois said, "Eugene, let's go over what happened the day Harrison died."

Eugene nodded and said, "Well, like I said, I found this new program he was working on. It wasn't in the regular files, but I figured out his security bypass pretty quickly ..."

Lois interrupted, "I mean about the fight ..."

"That's what I was getting to. Henry asked me how much of the program I'd seen. Suddenly he was screaming at me, saying that I had stolen his wife and now the 'Ides Of Metropolis.'" Eugene paused for a breath and then continued, "I started yelling back at him. I said I'd kill him if he hurt Lena again."

Clark offered, "So, Lena came to your apartment ..."

Eugene nodded his agreement as he continued, "I told her about the fight and she said she was going to the office, to have it out with him. When she didn't come back, I got worried, went to the office."

Lois remembered having been told something and offered, "You smelled something burning, went into the utility room. That's when you found him ..."

Suddenly there was a knock on the door. Clark looked around and pulled his glasses down his nose so that he could x-ray the door. Having done that he quietly said, "It's Reed."

Eugene asked, "How do you know?"

Lois offered, "It was a police ... kind of ... knock." Lois leapt into action, "Quick, into the bedroom."

As soon as Clark and Eugene had disappeared down the hallway, Lois answered the door. When she opened it she saw not only Detective Reed, but two other plainclothes cops.

Without being invited, Detective Reed entered the apartment followed by the other two. When she was inside, she walked past Lois and looked around. Speaking to Lois, without even turning to look at her, Detective Reed held up a folded document and said, "I have a warrant to search the premises."

Lois was incredulous, "My apartment? Are you crazy?"

"I don't think so, Ms. Lane. According to my information, you don't actually live here any longer."

"Well, yeah, but the apartment is still in my name. My sister is coming back from California. She's going to be living here."

"So, that explains why you've been visiting it so often?"

Lois sputtered out, "You've been tailing me?!?!?"

"Well, let's just say that I wondered about just how involved in Eugene Laderman's disappearance you were. Call me wild, call me crazy, but I have a hunch that you're hiding something ... or someone." She nodded to the two plainclothes cops and said, "Check." While they started going through the apartment, Reed stood there, staring at Lois, observing her reaction. Noting the fact that Lois was somewhat apprehensive, Reed said, with conviction, "Why don't you just have a seat on the couch. This won't hurt much, and it'll be over real soon."

Lois was worried, but tried not to look it as she sat on the couch. She hoped that Clark would be able to do something.

After what seemed an interminable time to Lois, but which

was actually less than a minute the two plainclothes cops returned to the living room and reported, "No one there." They checked behind the drapes and out the window in case he was on the fire escape. The second cop said, "Nope. Nothing."

After receiving the report, Reed was somewhat disappointed. She had really expected to find Lois harboring the fugitive. She said, "Sorry to have bothered you, Ms. Lane. It appears I was mistaken ... for the time being."

The reason that the plainclothes cops hadn't found Eugene was actually fairly simple to explain, Clark had taken Eugene out through a bedroom window. This window did not have a fire escape attached so when the cop looked out, not seeing a fire escape he didn't look any farther. Clark had taken Eugene to the side and had him pressed up against the side of the building, the tips of his toes on a small ledge. With their dark clothes it would be nearly impossible to see them from the street. That was especially important since the ledge stopped short of where Clark hung motionless, in mid-air.

In reply to Reed, Lois said, "I hope you never find him. Eugene didn't kill Harrison."

Reed was skeptical, "Do tell?"

Lois spoke with conviction, "Lena Harrison killed her husband."

Reed was quick with the repost, "Interesting theory. Unfortunately at precisely the time of Harrison's death, Lena was at a Neighborhood Watch meeting. She was seen by at least twenty people who positively identified her."

All of the wind left Lois's sails. This didn't square with what Eugene had told them. She sputtered out, "But why would a man set fire to the room the body was in to destroy the evidence, wait there for the police, then sign a confession? And why didn't he take the stand in his own defense when his attorney begged him to?"

Reed maintained a cool exterior, but Lois could see that her argument had struck home. There was a flicker of something in Reed's eyes that convinced Lois that her argument had struck a nerve.

Reed resumed her professional demeanor and said, "Good night, Ms. Lane. Remember to lock your doors and windows. We've got an escaped killer on the loose."

Lois closed the door behind the representatives of the MPD. As she started throwing the locks Clark and Eugene came in from the bedroom. Eugene headed for the kitchen to get a drink of water to soothe his nerves as Clark approached Lois.

"Talk about being out on a ledge." He noted the look on Lois's face. It was not a happy look. "You okay? What'd Reed have to say?"

As Eugene came into the living room Lois pinned him with her eyes and said, "Oh. Not much. Just that Lena Harrison has an iron-clad alibi for the night of her husband's death."

Clark had been starting to believe Eugene, but this revelation threw him back on the side of doubt. He joined Lois in staring at Eugene.

Chapter 8

The next morning, after a hearty breakfast prepared by Jonathan, Lois and Clark made it in to the office. They were both working the phones trying to get to the bottom of the story. Both were spending significant amounts of time on hold so they had plenty of time for banter.

Lois held the phone to her ear with her hunched shoulder, freeing both hand to gesticulate as she spoke, "Clark, men and women lie to each other all the time. It's a national pastime. Sometimes it's okay to lie."

The Superman side of his personality couldn't be denied, "It's never okay."

With an arched eyebrow, Lois came back at him, “So, you never lied to me?”

Clark, chagrined, replied, “I didn’t say that. I said, it’s not okay. Besides, we’re talking husbands and wives here and that was before we were married.” He turned his attention to the phone, “Yes, I’ll hold.” He turned his attention back to Lois and said, “I just happen to think that it’s always better to tell the truth, for a husband and wife to get everything out in the open.”

“So, you’re saying that you’ll never lie to me?”

Lois could hear the sincerity in his voice as he gave his simple reply, “That’s right.”

Suddenly there was a voice in Lois’s ear. “Transfer me to who? I’ve been holding ten minutes... Ugh.” Pinching the phone between her ear and shoulder, she turned back to Clark. “Okay, here’s the scene. Your loving wife of twenty years has spent the entire day at the beauty shop. Dyed her hair red, got it cut ... all to please you. Except she looks ghastly. She stands there when you open the front door, so hopeful ... and says ‘Honey, do you like it?’ What do you do?”

Clark smiled at this little game, “My wife of twenty years would know I love her the way she is. Why would she dye her hair red?”

Their banter was interrupted by Perry White walking by on the way to his office. He stopped between their desks and gave them each a look before he moved on. Lois and Clark both smiled at him, but he maintained a stern expression. It was always best to occasionally instill a little fear in the staff, but when he got into his office with the door closed he smiled at what he had seen and heard. He was very pleased at how their relationship had been developing. Lois had always been like a daughter to him and it hadn’t taken long for Clark to become like a son. Seeing them together and happy pleased him very much.

Clark returned the conversation, but in the middle it suddenly changed from the impersonal to the personal, “Okay. I’d ... tell her ... you ... the truth. That I love you, that I liked your hair better before, but that, if you’re happy with it, that’s the important thing.”

Lois heard noise in her ear again and listened. When they were finished she said, “But I’ve already left a message. Ooooo, never mind!” She hung up in frustration. Looking at Clark with adoration, she said, “I guess I’m lucky to be married to you, Mr. Right. No, Mr. *Always* Right.”

Just then, Perry stuck his head out of his office and called, “Lois? Clark? A moment of your time?”

Lois gave Clark one last smile, picked up her notepad and a pencil, stood and preceded Clark to Perry’s office.

When they walked in, Perry was behind his desk. He said, “Clark, why don’t you close the door. Thanks.”

Clark closed the door and joined Lois near Perry’s desk as Perry sat down. Perry was silent, for a long time, so long that both Lois and Clark started to become uncomfortable.

Finally, Perry broke the silence, but it did nothing to relieve the unease that the pair was feeling, “Is there something the two of you want to tell me?”

Lois was still uneasy, but now she was also mystified. She had no idea as to what Perry could be referring, “No, not really, Chief.”

It was almost too easy and as a result, Lois was still uneasy, especially when Perry continued, enigmatically, “Huh. Well ... good.” He looked down at his desk and then back up at them before he continued, “You’re sure now? Nothing you want to get off your chest, uh, chests?”

Now, instead of unease there was distinct worry. Could he be asking about The Secret? Lois looked at Clark and he looked at her and their worry looked like they were suffering from a guilty conscience.

Lois decided to keep it vague, “We’d like to tell you, Chief,

but we can’t. It’s better this way.”

Picking up on where Lois was taking this, Clark played along, “Better off *not* knowing.”

Perry’s reply didn’t relieve their anxiety in the slightest, “Well, I think it’s a little late for that.” Perry paused, possibly for emphasis, “I know.”

Startled, Lois blurted out, “You know?!?”

Clark asked, “What exactly do you know?”

Perry’s reply finally brought the relief that they needed, “You know ... about ... him. Where he is.”

Lois almost swooned in relief. Perry *wasn’t* talking about Superman. He was talking about Eugene!

Clark was also relieved, “Oh. You do know.”

Lois asked, “How do you know?”

Still being deliberately vague and secretive, Perry replied, “It’s better you don’t know.” He looked down at his hands for a second before he continued, “Course, I don’t know officially. But, let’s face it. If a man in my position *didn’t* know, unofficially, then, well, he wouldn’t be a man in my position.”

Now, Lois was worried, but for a different reason, “So, now that you know, unofficially, are you going to tell anyone else that you, you know, know?”

Perry sat back in his chair and said, “No. I just wanted you to know.”

Clark was actually relieved, “Thank you, sir. I feel much better knowing that you know.”

Lois added, “Me, too.”

As Lois and Clark started to turn to go, Perry added, “There is something else I’d like you know, though.”

They stopped and turned back to him. Lois asked, “What’s that?”

Perry steepled his fingers as he said, “The minute you step outside that door, I no longer know. And I don’t want to know anything else worth ... knowing ... in the future.”

Lois and Clark both nodded an acknowledgement and headed out the door.

Perry watched their retreating backs and smiled. He had reasserted his supremacy again.

A little later, Lois and Clark walked into Lois’s old apartment. Clark was carrying a couple of pizza boxes while Lois had a bag containing sodas and napkins. Eugene was still hard at work on Lois’s laptop. As soon as he heard them he jumped up and rushed over to them.

In a very agitated tone he said, “Thank God you’re back. You told me not to use the phone or go out, or ...”

Lois was wary, “What happened?”

Still in an agitated tone, Eugene replied, “Nothing happened. It’s what’s *going* to happen. I think.”

Lois and Clark exchanged a look. Something, as yet unspecified, was going to happen, but they had no clue as to what.

Seeing their look of confusion, Eugene elaborated, “All the programs on your computer were sluggish today ... so I tapped into the Daily Planet computer bank. Their systems are slowed down, too.”

Lois metaphorically shrugged this problem off, “Eugene, there are more important things going on than a temporary computer slowdown.”

Eugene finally came to the point, “That file that Henry was working on... it wasn’t a program. It was a virus. A virus designed to destroy all other software programs. A polymorphic encrypted virus.”

Lois shook her head, not understanding, “Come again?”

Clark showed some level of understanding as he said, “The worst kind. It can attack any computer system, taking on different shapes to avoid detection.

Gleaning some understanding from Clark’s explanation, Lois

said, “Makes sense. The man was about to lose everything, might as well take everybody else’s system with you.”

Clark asked what could very well be *the* critical question, “Can a virus just start up without the programmer initiating it?”

Eugene thought for a second before answering, “Maybe. If it had some kind of doomsday code on it. That would activate it if no kill signal was received by a predetermined time or date.”

Lois still didn’t know a lot about computers or computer systems. She used them on a daily basis, but to her it was simply a tool to use, like a hammer. How much did you need to know to use a hammer? “How bad could this virus make things?”

The level of concern was evident in his voice as Eugene answered, “In a nation entirely dependent on computers ... it could mean ... disaster.”

Clark started to enumerate for Lois’s benefit, “Banks, the stock exchange, air traffic control ... even our nuclear missiles. They’re all run by computers.”

Seeing the enormity of the problem, Lois asked in a hushed tone, “What can we do?”

Eugene’s reply was succinct, “You have to break me into MUT.”

Clark wasn’t familiar with that acronym and asked, “MUT?”

Eugene explained and expanded, “Metropolis University of Technology. I need a powerful central computer system to work off of. I have to find the antidote. I teach a class there ... my students can help.”

Even before doing so, knowing that it was a foregone conclusion, Clark looked at Lois and asked, “We’re already harboring a fugitive, you want to add breaking and entering to our rap sheet?”

Lois shrugged and said, “Clark, look, apparently you understand these things more than I do and I don’t know if he’s telling the truth. But if he is ... and the virus gets out ... Besides, there’s a critical facility that you left off of your list ... hospitals. There are lives at stake.”

Clark was still somewhat skeptical and he voiced his skepticism, “Lois, all we have is a guy, a wanted criminal, looking at a computer screen and telling us the nation’s at risk.” He paused to take a breath, “We need more proof. We’ll have to get back to you, Eugene. Let’s go, Lois. Dad’s going to be waiting for us. Mom’s due any time now.”

Lois sighed and said, “You’re right. We’ll get back to you, Eugene.”

They headed out the door.

After they left Eugene they returned to the Clinton St. apartment. Upon entering, they saw that the apartment was deserted.

After throwing their coats over the back of the easy chair, Lois moved over to Clark, threw her arms around his neck and gave him a kiss. When they broke from the kiss, Lois asked, “What are we going to do about Eugene?”

Gazing into her eyes, Clark said, “He could be right. Computer viruses are such a new thing, not that many people know anything about them. If this one does what he says it will, it could be disastrous.”

“He seems to think that he can come up with a cure for it.”

“If we break him into MUT, he will be ‘out there’ and the police can find him.”

“What alternative do we have?”

Lois was about to answer when there was a knock on the door interrupting her.

Without waiting for anyone to answer, Martha Kent opened the door and entered. She stopped just inside the door and looked around. She smiled when she saw Lois and Clark in an embrace.

Lois and Clark both smiled and arm-in-arm approached and started a group hug with Martha.

Martha basked in the love she felt from her children for a few seconds and then asked, “Where’s your father?”

Clark answered, “We don’t know. We just got in. Perhaps he went to the store. I’m sure he wanted to be here when you arrived. Aren’t you a bit early?”

Concern in her voice, Martha asked, “Is he all right?”

Clark said, “Yeah, he’s okay, but I’m not sure I am.” He looked at Lois for support. “Dad says that you’re having an affair with that art teacher of yours. Is that true?”

Martha pulled Lois and Clark along with her as she moved to the sofa and sat down.

In a very serious tone, Martha said, “Clark, there are a lot of things that go on between a man and woman, a husband and wife, that you two have yet to experience.”

This really wasn’t answering, Clark’s question and he asked, “Mom ... what are you saying?”

Just then their conversation was interrupted by the door opening and a joyous Jonathan entering. He was carrying a bouquet of flowers. He exclaimed, “I found them.”

Lois turned to look at him and asked, “Found what?”

“Peonies! She loves peonies! These are her favorite flower ...” He saw Martha and stopped.

Martha stood, faced him and slowly moved in his direction as she asked, “Are those for me?”

Lois stood and pulled Clark to his feet. Once he was up she started pulling him in the direction of the kitchen so that Martha and Jonathan could have some semblance of privacy.

Before they got out of earshot they heard, “There’s nobody else.”

In a quiet tone, Martha replied, “For me either, Jonathan.”

Jonathan, seeking reassurance asked, “Is that true?”

Martha put the palm of her hand on Jonathan’s cheek in a gesture hauntingly similar to how Clark cupped Lois’s cheek frequently and said, “Yes. You were the first man I ever kissed. You’ll be the last.”

Jonathan choked out, “So ... no affair?”

Martha almost laughed and said, “Well ... not unless you call two cups of coffee at Maisie’s an affair ...”

Jonathan’s expression was sheepish as he said, “I should never have doubted you. I know you too well.”

Martha almost shocked him as she said, “Yes, and you should also know that just because I may qualify for membership in the Gray Panthers, that doesn’t mean I’m slowing down. And it doesn’t mean that I have to stop growing, experimenting, thinking, making friends with interesting people.”

Jonathan replied, “I just hope I can keep up with you.”

Martha smiled and said, “You don’t have to. Just understand me, like you always have. Just be there for me, like I know you always will.”

“But what about that picture?”

“That was an experiment. It was supposed to be one of your Christmas presents, but it wasn’t finished in time.”

“But, you posed ...”

“Just once. He took a Polaroid, which he gave me and painted the picture from that.”

“I don’t know where we would hang that picture. Surely not in the living room. I don’t want people ogling at my naked wife.”

Martha thought for a second and then with an arched eyebrow said, “I was thinking of the bedroom.”

“I’d be satisfied with the Polaroid. I can put that in my wallet.”

Martha pulled Jonathan into an embrace.

Lois and Clark were standing in the kitchen also embracing watching all of this unfold. As Martha and Jonathan started a gentle kiss, Lois reached up and wiped away a tear, just before Clark started to kiss her.

After a few minutes, Martha turned to Clark and asked,

“Should we take our bags and go to the other apartment?”

Lois pulled away from Clark and said, “Uh, no. About that, the other apartment isn’t available.”

“Oh? Has your sister arrived? I didn’t think she’d be here for a few weeks yet.”

Clark replied, “Uh, no, it’s not that. There’s someone ... someone else there right now.”

“Oh. Okay. Well, we’ve slept on the pull out before. Come on, Jonathan, let’s make the bed.”

Chapter 9

While Jonathan and Martha were reconciling, Lex Luthor was at home. Lex was in his favorite location, on his balcony looking out over the twinkling lights of the city, his city. He owned it in spirit if not in fact.

His musings were interrupted by the arrival of his Major Domo, Nigel St. John. Nigel reported, “Security has confirmed your suspicions, sir. There is a computer virus.”

In a musing tone, Luthor said, “No one is invulnerable, not even Superman, even though he purports to be. No system is guaranteed secure. At no time in history has the power of one destructive individual been so amplified. It’s the ultimate terrorism. We should have explored this possibility earlier.”

Leaving his balcony, Luthor moved to his desk and opening his humidor, selected a cigar from the Cuba. He loved a good Havana, government embargo notwithstanding. After nipping off the end he put it to his lips and Nigel used a lighter to apply a flame to the end for him.

After taking a long puff and savoring the taste, he blew out the smoke and said, “I’ve often wondered what would happen if our entire infrastructure dissolved.”

Suggesting the obvious, Nigel said, “Perhaps we are *too* dependent, sir.”

Luthor nodded, deep in thought and then replied, “Yes. Perhaps. I’ve never fancied myself as being dependent on anything, or anyone. And yet ... I’m a slave. Like you, Nigel, like all of us ... to a system we created. Still ...”

Luthor was quiet, contemplative for almost a minute and then suddenly he started to laugh.

Mystified at this behavior, Nigel asked, “May I inquire?”

Luthor sobered and then answered, “Just ... musing, Nigel. What it would be like. No Luthor Technologies, no Luthor Industrial, no Luthor Communications ... The real question is, could I weather it, Nigel? Could I ... A man who never has to think about money, could I do without? It might be for the best. I could go back to nature. Buy a pair of hiking shoes, get in my car, a car with no driver and drive as far as I could before I fell off the edge of the world, metaphorically, of course. Could I? Would I?”

Nigel felt like he had been dropped between Scylla and Charybdis. No matter how he answered, depending on how Luthor took it, he could be wrong. He decided to be truthful, “I think not.”

Lex surprised Nigel by smiling at his evaluation and saying, “Yes. Quite right.”

The next morning, Lois and Clark left for the Planet after eating a hearty breakfast, prepared by Martha, with her and Jonathan.

Lois noted a twinkle in Martha’s eyes during breakfast and as they were walking to the car, she said to Clark, “I think that your mom and dad will be happy to have the apartment to themselves today,” and bumped his hip with hers.

He laughed and said, “Was it that obvious?”

“I wasn’t even looking for it. It was obvious.”

They both were laughing as they entered the Jeep.

Lois and Clark were both at their desks. Lois was checking the

transcripts of the trial while Clark was talking with Jimmy.

“Jimmy, I need everything you can dig up on computer viruses.”

“No prob, CK. That was the subject of the class I took at MUT with Prof. Laderman.” Jimmy glanced over at Lois. “I still can’t believe that he did that.”

“You’re not the only one, Jimmy. Lois is convinced of his innocence and I am beginning to agree with her.”

Just then they were all interrupted by the arrival of the elevator with a ‘ding’. As soon as the doors opened, Detective Reed stepped out and spotting Lois and Clark started to move in their direction.

Lois saw her as she neared and with a sarcastic tone and grimace asked, “Do you have a warrant to search the Daily Planet as well?”

With a shake of her head, Detective Reed replied, “Nope. Thought I’d fill you in on something, though. Wondered if I might have your take on it.”

Reed pulled a folder out from under her arm and handed it to Lois.

Lois was giving her a skeptical look as she took it. Then, opening it, she started to scan the contents. She started to read aloud, “The deceased was exhumed at approximately ...” She stopped reading and looked at Reed with a question in her eyes, “You dug up Henry Harrison’s body?”

Reed nodded and replied, “Per your suggestion, I dug up a body. But it wasn’t Harrison’s.”

Lois was flabbergasted, She blurted out, “But, if the body found in the utility room wasn’t Harrison, who was it?”

“A homeless man who lived in the utility room of Harrison’s building.” She paused to let that sink in before she continued, “He’d been reported missing by his family — seemed he called them once a week. Dental records match.”

Lois challenged, “How come they weren’t checked *during* the trial?”

With an exasperated sigh, she replied, “They were. There was a match.”

Clark asked, “How is that possible?”

With a shrug of her shoulders she stated the obvious, “Computer records can be falsified. Especially by computer experts. Besides, Lena Harrison identified the body.”

Lois jumped on this and almost shouted, “Eugene was telling the truth.” Her smile was wide as she said, “You can call off the manhunt now.”

Reed metaphorically threw cold water on Lois as with a shake of her head she said, “I have a dead body on my hands, and Harrison’s still missing.” She looked around and added, “For all we know, Eugene Laderman may have killed *two* men.”

Lois was incredulous, “You *can’t* be serious.”

Reed sounded a lot like Henderson as she replied in a monotone, “I’ve got a job to do. Maybe he did it, maybe he didn’t. That’s up to the courts to decide. But right now, I intend to bring him in ... by any means necessary.”

So saying, Reed turned and made her way back to the elevator.

Lois was just staring after Reed as she left, but her musings were interrupted by a shout from Jimmy, “Lois! Clark! Check this out.”

The urgency in Jimmy’s voice galvanized both Lois and Clark into action. They rushed to Jimmy’s side and looked at what the monitor was displaying. As they watched, the text on the screen fuzzed, swelled and then faded. Once the screen was blank a new display came into existence and it read, in big, bold letters, “BEWARE THE IDES OF METROPOLIS.”

Simultaneously from workstations scattered around the newsroom, groans of frustration could be heard as the phenomenon spread. Moving from station to station, Clark confirmed that each one was displaying the same message.

Returning to Lois's side he said, in a low whisper, "Eugene was right."

Lois nodded and asked, "What are we going to do?"

A short time earlier, a man in a trench coat entered the darkened HarriTech offices. The staff had all cleared out the day before so there was no one to challenge his presence. The man didn't have to break in because he had a key, a skeleton key perhaps, but a key nonetheless. Once inside he proceeded through the corridors until he came to a particular door. He let himself in to this office and moved past a desk. Pressing a hidden switch opened a hidden door which he passed through. Once inside he flipped a wall switch and subdued lighting flooded the space revealing banks of computers and a couple of desks with terminals on them. There was also a large screen which was displaying the graphic — "BEWARE THE IDES OF METROPOLIS."

Seeing this he smiled in satisfaction and started to laugh as he removed his hat and coat. To all appearances he was settling down to work.

Work, apparently not only in the newsroom, but almost everywhere had come to a screeching halt as the 'Ides of Metropolis' graphic had taken over machine after machine. Since they were all unable to work the newsroom staff was all gathered around the large screen TV monitor that was tuned in to LNN.

Frank Madison, one of the news anchors was on the screen, "The 'Ides of Metropolis' appeared this morning on the screens of over a million computers, and with its arrival came a catastrophe of unparalleled proportion."

As he continued to speak, his visage was replaced by scenes from stock markets around the globe where pandemonium appeared to reign. Screens which would normally have displayed the current prices of various stocks all had the 'Ides of Metropolis' graphic as the only display.

The voice-over continued, "World financial markets are collapsing ... the prices of stocks cannot be obtained in the usual way. Transactions are being delayed, so far by only minutes, but the volume is down and investors are starting to panic. It isn't like they could go back to the technology of the twenties and thirties, the old stock ticker ... they just aren't available anymore."

The scene shifted to what appeared to be a city street and the façade of a bank. People were lined up at the doors and down the street.

"Banks and other financial institutions have closed their doors creating mass panic. Angry lines of customers can't get their money out."

Once again the scene shifted. This time it was apparently either stock footage or some from a previous emergency of a hospital setting. There were doctors and nurses dressed in surgical gear, operating under low light situations, the bank of lights that dangled directly over the operating table was dark. The only light was being provided by emergency lights that had been set up on the periphery.

The voice-over continued, "Doctors are performing emergency surgeries under war zone conditions."

Suddenly, it became obvious that this was in fact a live shot, because the one operating computer monitor in the OR suddenly dissolved to the 'Ides of Metropolis' graphic.

The scene shifted again, this time to an airport where planes stood idle on the tarmac, takeoffs and landing having been suspended.

"Airports are shutting down; several near misses have been reported."

There was a shot of the Air Traffic Control center in the Control Tower and there was a shout of dismay as the final screens went dark.

The scene switched back to Frank as he continued, "Two 747s

have had a 'near miss' above the skies of Metropolis. Utilities, phone systems ... nothing seems to have escaped this deadly virus, with no end in sight. The Army and Navy are on full tactical alert due to the failure of the computer systems controlling the ground to air and nuclear missiles ..."

As they were all watching, startled, Jimmy voiced his feelings, "Great shades of Elvis."

Perry, startled by Jimmy's exclamation, usurping his favorite saying, gave him an angry glare. Jimmy didn't notice and before he did, Perry relented and simply said, "You can say that again."

Lois and Clark had left while everyone else was distracted by the newscast. Slipping out through the stairwell, Clark super sped them to the garage level.

As he set Lois back on her feet, she kissed him and said, "One of the perks of being married to Superman. Let's go. We need to get Eugene to MUT."

They hurried to the car and headed for Lois's old apartment. When they got there they actually found Eugene waiting for them. He had been watching the TV and noting the developments had assumed that they would be coming for him.

After a short drive they arrived at MUT. Eugene had rolled up his pants legs, put on a trench coat and borrowed a scarf from Lois to cover his head for the trip from the car to the building. He just hoped that no one would look at his feet.

They followed Eugene as he moved through the corridors, shedding his scarf and coat and unrolling his pants legs as he walked quickly to his class room/laboratory.

When they entered his students were there working on a project that the substitute had assigned.

They were surprised when he came in through the door, but were happy to see him. They jumped out of their seats and mobbed him. It took a few seconds to restore order, but when he did, he said, "Guys, we have a problem ... a BIG problem to solve. There's a virus that has been released on the Internet and we have to capture it, analyze it and come up with an anti-virus program that will kill it and we have to do it as quickly as we can. Let's get started."

One of the students, Herb Greenlaw, said, "I already captured a sample. I was curious, so I starting to deconstruct it."

"Terrific! What do you have so far?"

There ensued a technical discussion that left Lois and Clark in the dust. The class broke up into groups, each having a separate assignment and they all feverishly went to work.

Finally, Eugene pushed back from his keyboard and rubbed the back of his neck. Lois seized the opportunity to ask a question, "What exactly are you looking for?"

Eugene replied, absently, his mind was obviously on other things, "An entry code. We have a sample, but, I could use an unadulterated copy of the original so we can analyze the virus and find a cure. I've tried all the ones Henry ever used. The names of every member of his immediately family, their birth dates etc. Now we're trying number combinations."

Clark suggested, "What about the name of the program 'The Ides Of Metropolis'?"

"I don't think that Henry would use the name of the program as the password, but I'll try it." He started typing and when he stopped and hit enter, the screen flashed up, "ACCESS DENIED."

Eugene started muttering to himself as he continued typing, "'Ides' refers to the fifteenth day of certain months. I've tried some letter/number combinations using that factor, but so far ..."

Each try had the same result, "ACCESS DENIED."

Lois was getting into the mood and offered, "What about the dramatic reference? Julius Caesar ... 'Beware the Ides of March?' It's a long shot, but ..."

Eugene said, "It's as good as any. I'll give it a try."

Eugene tried, Julius Caesar, Brutus and sever others, each

gave the same response.

Lois made another suggestion, “The play was about a conspiracy. Traitors, politics ... maybe there’s another connection.”

Eugene considered what Lois said and turned back to his computer. Just as he did the door to the classroom burst open and Detective Reed and two plainclothes police charged in. The first thing that they all saw was the gun in Detective Reed’s hand.

Reed shouted, “Police! Step away from the desk. Laderman, down and kiss the floor.”

Lois moved to interpose herself between Reed and Eugene. In a very agitated tone, she said, “No, you can’t. Eugene is working on finding the antidote to the computer virus. He may be close ... he’s the only one who can do it.”

Reed looked past Lois at Eugene and the computer display. She was only distracted for a second, but Lois saw her chance and took it. Lashing out with her right leg, she kicked Detective Reed’s right wrist knocking the gun from her grasp and sending it flying.

The gun flew through the air and second nature caused Clark to reach out and snag it.

His attention was drawn back to Lois and Reed. After that kick, both women assumed martial arts fighting stances. Reed tried to retaliate with a kick which Lois deftly blocked. Lois then attempted to knock Reed’s legs out from under her, but Reed blocked the attempt.

Having thus taken the measure of each other they both resumed a defensive stance and glared at each other. It was a standoff and neither one liked it. They were both used to winning and it galled Lois in particular.

Clark interrupted the standoff by asking, “Are you ladies finished?”

When Clark finally took his eyes off of his wife, he saw that Reed and the other cops had their hands up.

Seeing this, Lois looked around and with a snicker said, “Yes, *we* are ... Mr. Law and Order.”

It finally dawned on Clark what they were all staring at. He was holding Reed’s gun and negligently he had trained it on the cops. He knew just what he had to do then. He dropped the magazine and jacked the slide to remove the round from the chamber. Then he dropped the gun to the floor and put his hands up.

One of the plainclothes men walked over and stooping, picked up the gun and the ammunition.

While he was doing this, Clark walked over to Reed and said, persuasively, “Don’t you see what’s going on? Have you read the news? Eugene may be our only hope.”

Reed had been giving Lois a wary eye, but Clark was a handsome man and Reed reacted to that fact. Clark could see that she appeared to be listening.

Seeing Reed loosen up some, Lois tried to reason with her by making an impassioned plea, “Eugene worked under Harrison. He saw Harrison develop the virus. He’s the only one who can find the antidote. For God sakes, let him try.”

Reed considered Lois’s argument. She looked around. The classroom didn’t have any windows, so Laderman couldn’t escape that way. There was only the one door. Making up her mind, Reed turned to the plainclothes men and said, “Stay here. Don’t let anyone in or out of this room.”

The cops nodded in acknowledgement.

Lois asked, “Where are you going?”

Reed finished reloading her weapon and put it in her waist holster before she replied, “HarriTech. I followed Lena there last night. She’s got some explainin’ to do.”

“We were told that they were locking up the building as soon as everyone left. Look, I’m going with you.”

Nursing a grudge from their brief fight, Reed said, “In your dreams, Lane.”

Refusing to be denied, Lois followed Reed out the door.

Chapter 10

When they arrived at the HarriTech facility all was dark, but upon trying the front door they found that it was surprisingly unlocked.

Lois delved into her ever-present bag and came up with a flashlight. Reed had brought one with her from her patrol car.

Lois stopped her and said, “Wait a minute. I want to try something.” Delving into her bag again she pulled out a small box. She explained, “This was a Christmas gift from my father-in-law.” She plugged earphones into it and turned it on. She adjusted a knob on the side to increase the sensitivity and then started swinging it from side to side like a radar dish or a directional antenna. When she was sure she had the strongest signal, she pointed and said, “That way.”

She led the way down a corridor and to a particular door. She turned off her sound amplifier and put it back in her bag. As she pointed at the doorway, she whispered, “In there.”

Lois eased the door open and as she and Reed stepped through they both froze in their tracks as a voice spoke from the dark, “Good evening, Ms. Lane, Ms. Reed.” As the final word was spoken the light switch was thrown, flooding the room in fluorescent light glare.

Lois and Detective Reed turned toward the voice to see a man in a trench coat and hat holding a very large bore automatic pointed at them.

As he removed his hat he said, “Permit me to introduce myself. I’m Henry Harrison.” He paused a second to allow them to absorb that information and then said, “I’ll relieve you of your weapons now.”

Neither Lois nor Reed had expected this and they exchanged a look of surprise and disbelief.

With a wave of his gun, Harrison commanded, “Take out your weapon. Use two fingers and drop it on the floor.”

When Reed had complied, he said, “Okay, now, kick it over here.”

In an irritated tone, Reed muttered, “That makes twice in one day.”

Harrison was curious, and asked, “Twice what?”

“Two times that I’ve been disarmed in one day.”

Harrison indicated a doorway across the room and said, “Through there.”

As Lois and Reed moved through the door, they saw Lena Harrison and Lois blurted out, “You were in on it all along!”

Lena snickered and replied, “Of course! I believe in marital fidelity.”

Lois challenged, “What about your loyalty to Eugene? He loved you.”

With a wicked smile, she replied, “Yes. Poor Eugene. I thought the legal process would finish him off, now ... I’ll have to do it myself.”

Reed turned on Henry Harrison and asked, “Why?”

Lois interrupted, “I can answer that. HarriTech was about to fail. His virus will make all software other than his obsolete.”

Harrison made a slight bow, “Very astute. Quite correct, Ms. Lane. Billions are at stake. I needed to disappear beyond suspicion. Like dead. Eugene was the perfect foil.”

Lois smirked and replied, “Forgive the cliché, but you’re not going to get away with this. Eugene is working on the antidote as we speak.”

Henry waved a hand negligently and said, “It doesn’t matter. Within the hour every computer system in the country will be shut down.”

Lois was startled at his statement and blurted out, “The nuclear missile control computers!”

Harrison sneered, “Give me a little credit, Ms. Lane. Surely you don’t think I’d destroy all those potential customers. Of course, a few shut downs here and there, medical facilities, control towers, automated machinery ... there’s bound to be a few glitches.” As he finished speaking, he moved over to a console and pressed a button which started a countdown timer to display.

Reed offered, “I can get you a deal.”

Harrison replied offhandedly as he hit a few more switches, “I doubt that, very much.”

Lois came to the realization that once again she had jumped in without checking the water level. At least this time she had the excuse of having been *with* the police when she had done it and not on her own. In a small voice she asked, “So, what are you going to do now? Kill us?”

Harrison turned toward the two women and his smile was malevolent.

When Lois and Detective Reed left to find Lena Harrison, Clark stayed with Eugene and his students as they all slaved over their terminals. Occasionally he would hear a snort of frustration from one of the students as they worked.

When Eugene looked up from his work, Clark asked, “Is there anything I can do?”

Eugene looked around and chuckled before he said, “I think my students could use some refreshments. Could you get us all some Mountain Dew? Programmer’s brains are fueled by caffeine.”

Clark nodded and said, “Sure.”

“The machine is just down the hall.”

Clark went to the machine and brought back enough sodas for everyone, including the policemen.

The students all chugged the sodas and returned to their work.

A few minutes later, Eugene shouted, “Got it!”

At that exclamation, all work ceased and all of the students gathered around Eugene. Clark stood behind them and watched over their shoulders.

Eugene explained, “Lois was right, the play’s the thing.” Looking back over his shoulder at Clark he said, “‘Et tu, Brute’ That’s the password.”

Clark asked, “What now?”

Turning back to his computer, Eugene hit a few keys and on the giant monitor a map of the United States popped up on the screen. Superimposed on the map was a grid of lines and dots. There were dots of several sizes with three dots that were much larger than any of the others and most of the others in some way or another were connected through them.

Pointing to the screen, Eugene explained, “By our calculations, in order for the virus to reach full distribution, it has to pass through these three centers. Those three centers are called the main DNS Nodes. DNS stands for Domain Naming System. There are only three main nodes in the world. They are the masters and for protection they are located in high security areas on U.S. military bases.” He hit a button and the three biggest dots began to flash. There was one on the east coast, one on the west coast and one in Middle America.

Clark offered, “So ... we contact the centers and have them apply the antidote.” Seeing the look that Eugene was giving him, he answered his own question, “No, huh?”

Eugene explained, “No, the problem is that the fix has to be applied at the source, not remotely.” He picked up a three and a quarter inch diskette and said, “I’ve downloaded the antivirus program to this disk. It has to be put into a diskette reader on the device and run locally. It will clean the virus off the DNS server and prevent re-infection.”

Clark asked, “How much time do we have?”

“Virtually none. Like I said, this has to be done locally. I can copy this disk, but by the time we fly a copy to each facility, the

damage will be done. The virus is already spreading through the network.”

Clark reached out and took the disk from Eugene. He said, “I know a way.”

As Clark approached the door, the plainclothesman stiffened. This wasn’t just a soda run and Reed had left orders that no one was to leave.

Seeing this, Clark lowered his voice so that it was close to his Superman voice and said, “Don’t even think about it. This is life or death.”

THE voice had the desired effect. The cop swallowed nervously and then opened the door and stepped back.

Minutes later Superman’s sonic boom could be heard north of Metropolis as he headed for the east coast facility housing the DNS master server. Landing at Watervliet Arsenal he quickly explained his errand and was escorted into the facility. He handed the diskette to one of the operators. It was inserted and it was a testament to the trust that reposed in Superman that it was run without question. A copy of the disk was made and Superman was off with a promise that a phone call would be made to the other centers, alerting them to his errand.

As Superman was leaving the Watervliet Arsenal a phone call was in process of being made to the mid-west center. As he flew he flashed past several trains, one of which was a much advertised ‘bullet train’. He passed it as if it were a slow freight. He was so high that no one on the train even suspected that he was overhead. There were telephone lines that paralleled the train tracks and without realizing it he was racing against the call. The impulses of the telephone call were traveling slightly faster than he was so the call was completed as he arrived at Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri.

After Clark left, Eugene and his students all gathered around the large monitor to track the progress of the infection. They had no idea as to how Mr. Kent was going to accomplish the task, but they needed to see if their work had been effective. The virus had been spreading out from the point of infection, which was Metropolis, and spreading like a dark cloud across the map. The cloud had already enveloped most of the east coast. Suddenly, the marker for the east coast DNS servers changed color and the cloud started to disappear around it. Eugene crowed, “He did it. I don’t know how, but Kent did it. I just hope he can get to the other centers before it’s too late!”

Superman didn’t know that Lois was in danger, but even if he had, he would have had to rely on her to get herself out the same way she had so many times before. This was a task only he could perform and the fate of a nation, if not the world, depended on him completing said task.

Back at HarriTech, immediately after Henry hit the button to start the virus propagation he turned his attention back to Lois and Detective Reed. Aloud he said, “Now, what am I going to do with you two?”

Lois took a chance that her taunt wouldn’t be prophetic, but would result in a break in concentration as she asked, “‘What’re you going to do now, kill us?’”

Lois was disappointed that this elicited no response that she could see. The gun in his hand did not waver in the slightest. Then she became concerned when the knuckle of his trigger finger began to whiten as he applied pressure to the trigger.

Stopping him, Lena offered, “Henry, not here! We do have one place that they won’t be able to escape from. Solid concrete walls ... only one door and that can be securely locked ...”

Henry looked at Lena, smiled and said, “My sweet, you are brilliant,” turning back to Lois and Reed he gestured with the gun, “Okay, both of you, through that door and left down the hallway. No false moves. I’d rather not shoot you, but I will if I have to.”

They followed his directions which led to the door in question

which was in the basement. Henry opened the door and not taking any chances stood back and said, “Okay. Inside, both of you.”

Rather meekly, both of the women entered. As the door slammed closed behind them they both looked around, taking in their surroundings. As Lena had said the walls were made of concrete. They both turned to the door and tried their strength against it, to no avail.

In her frustration, Lois kicked at part of a computer which lay on the floor amongst some scattered trash and railed at Reed, “Great. Now you’ve done it!”

Reed was abashed, she retorted, “Me! You’re the one who said ‘What’re you going to do now, kill us?’ They teach you that in journalism school?”

Lois rebutted with, “Well, I suppose *you* called for back-up and told them to burst in if we didn’t come out in ten minutes.” She paused long enough to observe Reed’s response which told her that she had hit home before she continued, sarcastically, “They teach you that in detective school?” Lois had a smug look as she finished.

Realizing that they had each scored a point and were now to all intents and purposes even they each decided that it was time to call a truce.

Silently, Lois walked over and sat down on the floor against one wall. Reed shrugged her shoulders and sat against the wall next to her.

Lois looked around again and voiced the question that was on both of their minds, “What is this place? It reminds me of something out of a movie, but I can’t put my finger on it.” Lois was looking curiously from side-to-side as if looking around would provide the key to the memory. As she did, her hair flowed free and easy around her face.

Reed had been watching Lois rather than looking at the room and asked, “How do you get it to do that, anyway?”

Lois, having absolutely no idea what Reed was talking about asked in bewilderment, “What?”

Reed was nonplused, “Your hair. That bounce thing. When you turn your head.”

Lois was surprised that Reed would be taking about something like that when they were trapped, but decided that she might as well have a friendly conversation. At least it would be better than sniping at each other. “I don’t know. It just ... does it.” Looking at Reed, Lois could understand her curiosity. Reed’s hair lacked body. It was long and frizzy, like a bad Afro, but with less style. It sure looked to Lois as if for Reed a ‘Bad Hair Day’ was the norm rather than the exception.

Deciding to throw her a bone, Lois glanced at Reed’s hands and then at her own. Because she did so much typing she had nails that were rather short. With envy in her voice, she said, “I wish I had your nails.”

Reed smiled and said, “You can. \$1.98 at LexSave.” Reed held out her hands, inviting closer examination.

Lois was startled, “Get outta here!” She finished in an awed tone as she reached for the hands for a closer examination, “They look so real.”

This time, Superman was flying toward the setting sun. He was traveling so fast that the sonic boom that followed was many seconds behind him. Many people that happened to be outside heard the boom and looking up saw a perfectly clear sky. Occasionally military jets passed through the area, but often if they looked up they could see the jet in the distance. That was not the case this time. In order to maximize his speed, Superman had gained considerable altitude so that he was traveling through the thinner air of the stratosphere. He had no fear of running into other aircraft because that high only a military jet, one with a greater thrust-to-drag ratio to compensate for the loss of lift, would fly. It was something he hadn’t been able to do on the trip between

Metropolis and the east coast facility since they were relatively close. As a result of being in the denser atmosphere he had kept his speed to just over Mach 2 so that the sonic boom wouldn’t result in broken windows or worse. As it was there were a number of windows that rattled in their frames so violently that they almost cracked. In the thinner air of the upper atmosphere he was able to exceed Mach 5. It was safe to travel at that speed that high up because the thin air didn’t compress as much so the sonic wave created was attenuated and would have less effect than the wave created at Mach 2 in the lower atmosphere. As he landed at Whiteman Air Force Base he realized that he was near Kansas. He thought that it would be a good idea to possibly stop on the way back and check on the place.

Superman was doing his best to beat the virus. The operator was just hanging up the phone as he arrived. Without delay Superman was conducted into the center and an operator ran the anti-virus program. Even though time was of the essence Superman waited a minute to insure that the task had been completed successfully before taking off again.

Chapter 11

A few minutes after being locked in together, Lois and Reed had lost their animosity toward each other. Eventually they were sitting side by side chatting like old friends. Suddenly it dawned upon each of them that they had just spent several minutes in what could be considered ‘girl talk’ and Lois was actually pleased that it had happened. Lois started to smile and seeing it, Reed replied in like manner.

In a desultory tone, Lois said, “I don’t think there’s any way out of here except through that door,” as she nodded in that direction.

Reed nodded and put her hand on the floor. What she felt caused her to look down at the floor, more closely. As she did she said, “I thought it felt rough on my butt. Look at the floor. I wonder what these scratches are from.”

Lois tried to dismiss it, “Rough poured concrete,” but something in the back of her mind was blaring a warning signal.

Reed looked again, “Maybe so, but the gouges are in parallel lines and they are perpendicular to the wall. Must mean something.”

Lois’s mind was racing trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together.

Back at the MUT classroom, Eugene and the students were watching the screen, breathlessly. Suddenly the mid — west center marker changed color to indicate that it was clear and a cheer went up. Eugene shouted, “Just one to go. He must have contacted Superman! There’s no other way it could have gotten there so quickly.”

When Superman took off from the Whiteman Air Force Base he rocketed almost straight up to gain altitude before heading into the setting sun once again. He soared through the troposphere and left it behind at about 35,000 feet, what airline pilots call Angels 35, and into the stratosphere. When he reached about 63,000 feet, far above the service ceiling of all but the most sophisticated military aircraft, the temperature was close to sixty degrees below zero Centigrade, approximately seventy six degrees below zero Fahrenheit, almost one hundred degrees of frost since freezing is at thirty-two degrees. Superman was thanking his lucky stars that he’d had the forethought to place the diskette under the collar of the Suit, in contact with his skin, so that his aura would protect it. Once at altitude he accelerated to Mach 5 again, racing against time and the virus. Once he passed the Sierra Nevada Mountains he started to slow and descend until he finally landed at Fort Irwin in California.

When Superman landed at Fort Irwin in California, they were waiting for him and he was taken directly in so that the program could be run.

Back in the classroom Eugene and his students were figuratively glued to the monitor. As they watched, the cloud that represented the virus infestation was receding from around Watervliet Arsenal. The spot representing Whiteman Air Force Base had gone green and the cloud surrounding it had started to dissipate.

As they watched, suddenly the dot that represented Fort Irwin flicked from red to green. Another cheer went up, this time the plainclothes cops joined in. Eugene shouted, "We did it! We did it!" As they watched, the cloud which had been approaching Whiteman started retreating.

Henry Harrison was screaming in frustration. He had a monitor displaying a graphic similar to that which Eugene and his students were tracking the spread of the virus. When the first center switched from red to green he wasn't too worried. That virus would still spread out and cover most of the country and once that happened, secondary infections would re-infect that DNS server.

When within literal minutes the second center went green he knew that there was a major problem.

So did Lena. She said, "We need to eliminate the witnesses and clear out."

Henry hit a switch which started the trash compactor operating. They started grabbing incriminating evidence so that they could take it with them.

Lois's musings were interrupted by Reed saying, "Must be tough, being a reporter. Especially for a woman."

Lois's time with Clark appeared to be softening her somewhat, because her reply was conciliatory, "No tougher than it must be for a detective."

Reed shook her head and replied, in a bitter tone, "It's a boy's club."

Lois nodded in agreement and in a heartfelt tone replied, "Tell me about it."

As Lois finished speaking they suddenly heard a noise. It was barely perceptible initially, but the sound level slowly rose. They looked around for the source and didn't see anything that could be causing it.

Suddenly, Lois and Reed both felt the wall start to push against their backs. Lois shouted, "That's it!"

Reed shouted back, "What?"

"The movie — Star Wars! When Han, Luke and Chewie were rescuing Princess Leia from the detention block. They were in a fire fight and Leia grabbed a blaster to blow open the door to a chute. Leia, Han, Chewie and Luke dove through that door slid down the chute and they landed in the trash compactor."

Reed was startled, "This is a trash compactor?" Beads of sweat suddenly appeared on Reed's forehead.

Lois shouted over the noise, "Yes! Those parallel grooves in the floor were caused by the moving walls! We need to do something to stop these walls or we'll be squashed flat as one of Martha's pancakes! At least we aren't standing knee deep in muck with some creature trying to grab us and have us for lunch."

Reed shouted, "Yeah, at least there's that." Somehow, Reed managed, even though she was shouting, to make it sound sarcastic. "Look around for something to brace between the walls to keep them from closing!" Suddenly what Lois had said registered and she had to ask, "Who's Martha?"

Lois shouted, "My mother-in-law." Lois smiled as she said it then another memory of the movie struck her, "At least you don't have your gun. Imagine if you tried to use it on the walls. The

ricochet could kill one of us. Han Solo tried his blaster and almost hit one of his friends."

Reed shouted back, "Are you likening me to Han Solo?"

Lois looked at Reed and couldn't pass up a final shot at the detective, "With that hair you're more like Chewbacca."

Reed sniped back, "Oh, and I suppose that you're Princess Leia?"

Lois was looking around for something, anything to use to stop the walls as she replied, "I guess I could have played the part. Classical good looks, nice hair ... she used a long fall, you know. That wasn't all her real hair. Good figure. I could have done justice to that bikini she wore in the third one."

"The Empire Strikes Back?"

"No, Return of the Jedi."

As they were sparring they found some metal angle iron and lengths of pipe and pulled them up to brace between the walls. It was totally ineffectual. The bar and pipes started to buckle in the center.

Remembering more of the movie, Lois shouted, "The way they stopped it was Luke used his communicator to call R2D2 for help. R2D2 plugged into the ship's systems and turned off the compactor." They looked at each other and as if by unspoken agreement they both took deep breaths, looked up and shouted, "HELP, SUPERMAN!!!!!!!!!!!" in unison.

Clark had considered stopping to check on the farm on his way back to Metropolis, but he thought back to the time he had left Lois to attend that Sixth Grade Career Day and the trouble that Lois had gotten into. He hadn't been gone on this mission all that long, but he realized that it didn't take Lois Lane very long to get herself into trouble. He decided to head straight back. He remembered that Lois had accompanied Reed on her way to the HarriTech facility so he thought that it would be prudent to check there first. If she was going to get herself into trouble, that would be where it would happen.

As he neared the facility he used his x-ray vision duplexed on his telescopic vision to check out the building. He saw four people in the building in two groups of two. He was slowing for a landing when his super hearing picked up on the shouted, "HELP SUPERMAN!" coming from joined female voices, one of which he recognized as Lois's. He crashed in through the door and at super speed made his way to the lower level where the compactor was.

He ripped the door off of its hinges. When he did, looking in he saw Lois and Reed, each with their back against a wall with a leg extended, the foot propped against the moving wall. With a suppressed chuckle he stepped inside. He placed one hand on each moving wall and standing between them, pushed. There was a whine as the motors that were pushing the walls together tried to overcome the resistance. The whine escalated to a scream as bearings started to heat and rods slipped. The smell of smoke started to permeate the atmosphere.

Calmly, Superman said, "If you ladies would like to leave, the exit is behind me."

Detective Reed ducked under Superman's arm and made for the door. Lois paused to give Superman a quick kiss before she also ducked under his arm and out the door. As she exited quickly, she didn't see his responding smile and shake of the head. "Only Lois", he thought.

Once Lois and Detective Reed were safely out, Superman exited the trash compactor and led the way upstairs. They arrived at the door just as Henry and Lena were leaving. They both had their hands full so neither of them were holding weapons. Seeing two automatics stuffed into Henry's waistband, Superman removed both before he had a chance to drop what he was holding and grab one or the other. Recognizing the Glock as Detective Reed's sidearm, he offered it to her, "Detective, this one is

probably yours. This other one would be a little harder for you to conceal on your person.”

Gratefully, Reed accepted the automatic from Superman and held it on Henry and Lena. She started to recite, “You have the right to remain silent ...”

Reed called for a black-n-white to pick up Henry and Lena. Once they had been taken away, Reed gave Lois a ride to the Planet.

While they were in the car, Reed asked, “Where was that playing?”

Mystified, Lois asked, “Where was what playing?”

“That triple feature, you know ‘Star Wars’.”

“Oh, that!”

“Yeah, I’d kinda like to go see it, especially after what we just went through. Is it at a local theater?”

“Well, no, uh, I don’t know. We ... we were out of town at the time.”

“Oh, Gotham, some place like that?”

“Well, actually a little farther than that.”

“Oh, how far?”

In a small voice, Lois replied, “Honolulu. We were on vacation at the time and decided to go to ‘the big island’ for a movie and dinner.”

“Must be nice! Vacationing in Hawaii. I presume that you flew.”

“Yeah, those frequent flyer miles really pile up when your in-laws live a few states away.”

Once Reed brought in Henry and Lena, Eugene turned himself in and was immediately released on his own recognizance.

Lois and Clark followed everyone through the process and finally when they were satisfied that all was well, they headed home.

When they walked in the door, Martha and Jonathan were sitting on the couch watching an old ‘B’ movie. Martha was leaning into her husband and Jonathan had his arm across her shoulder.

After taking in the scene, Lois cleared her throat noisily.

Martha and Jonathan both turned to look at them.

Lois said, “The coast is clear now. We can move you to the other apartment anytime, like now.”

Martha with a mischievous expression asked, “Is that really necessary? We like this pull-out soooo much, besides we will only be here another day or two.” She started to giggle as she finished.

Lois’s expression told it all. She loved her in-laws, but she loved her husband and while his parents were there she couldn’t enjoy him the way she liked to. Still, she played along, “I know how disappointed you will be, but I think you’ll appreciate the privacy you’ll have there.”

An hour later Martha and Jonathan were settling down at Lois’s old apartment and Lois and Clark were returning to their apartment.

Once inside, Lois threw her arms around Clark’s neck and kissed him soundly. When she pulled back, both of them were breathless.

It always amazed Clark. He could hold his breath in space or underwater for twenty minutes, but kissing Lois Lane left him breathless.

Lois was always an eager partner, but tonight she was absolutely frantic. As they were moving in the direction of the bedroom, both were shedding clothing. Their shirts were next to one another on the floor. There were two pairs of shoes, each consisting of a woman’s and a man’s. Her bra lay on top of his t-shirt. Their pants and slacks were next to the bed along with their remaining underwear.

As the final pieces of clothing fell to the floor, Clark wrapped Lois up in his arms and floated them onto the bed. They had hardly broken the kiss from the time they had started at the door.

This started a period of marital intimacy.

She finally let out a sigh of satisfaction and said, “I thought I would be safe what with being with a cop and all, but he almost killed us. If it hadn’t been for you,” she wiggled her hips, “coming to our rescue, I’d have looked like road kill, only flatter.”

Finally, they lay side by side and cuddled in the afterglow. She said, “Thanks for saving me ... again.”

“Always, my love. Always. Does this mean we can check Trash Compactor off your bucket list?”

“Well, you did say I was a lot like Princess Leia.”

“The resemblance is scary.”

Darkness had fallen swathing the city in darkness. The street lights and the lights from the neon signs didn’t reach to the top of Luthor Tower where Lex Luthor lived.

Luthor was sitting on his balcony, he had on his shooting vest, his double barreled shotgun standing nearby and he was idly with a set of night-vision goggles as he waited.

After a minute, Nigel arrived carrying the clay pigeon launcher and some clay pigeons. He placed the clay pigeons on the floor near the balustrade and affixed the launcher. He loaded a clay pigeon and stood by.

Luthor, satisfied with the function of the night vision device slipped it on over his head, picked up his shotgun, checked that it was loaded and approached the barrier. He barked out, “Pull!”

Nigel triggered the launcher and the clay pigeon flew out over the street.

In one swift movement, Luthor brought up the shotgun, sighted along the barrel allowing a lead and fired. The clay pigeon exploded into very small shards.

As Nigel loaded another pigeon, he said, “It is amazing, sir. All things considered, LexCorp came through this computer virus relatively unscathed.”

“Pull!”

Another pigeon was launched into oblivion first by Nigel and then by Luthor’s shot. After the shot as he savored the victory, he replied to Nigel’s comment, “Yes. Tragedy averted. For now.”

Surprised, Nigel replied, “For now?”

As Nigel loaded another pigeon, Luthor elaborated, “Yes. You never know when another virus might hit, one that has no code, or no code capable of being broken.”

Nigel offered, “I suppose so. What a horrible and desperate act, utterly unthinkable. Unless ...”

Luthor said, “Exactly, Nigel. Unless it belongs to me. This time there was a genius equal to Henry Harrison to break the code that he had written. We must see about hiring Eugene Laderman.” He paused a second and then shouted, “Pull!”

Nigel launched the pigeon. Luthor obviously had his mind on other matters, because his timing or his aim was off by a fraction because he ... missed.”

As he pulled the night vision device off he said, “Ooops.” He stepped to the edge and joined Nigel as they looked down following the falling intact clay pigeon. After a moment, Luthor said, “Nigel, call ...”

Nigel finished for him, “The lawyers. Yes, sir. Right away.”

The next day Perry observed Lois and Clark as they stepped from the elevator carrying their matching travel mugs of coffee. Lois’s hair was a little mussed and her cheeks were flushed and they both had smiles on their faces. They made it to their desks and Perry couldn’t help but notice the little bump Lois’s hip gave Clark as she swayed down the ramp, trying to make it look like a simple sway of her hips. Perry smiled to himself. He loved those two kids as if they were his own and to see them happy made him

happy.

Perry gave his star reporting team a few minutes to get settled before he picked the early edition from his desk and walked out into the pit, stopping near their desks. “Eugene’s a free man, thanks to you. Nice work.” He pulled up the paper and indicated the story, above the fold, “Great story!”

Lois replied, “Thanks, Chief. And thanks for not blowing the whistle on us.”

“How could I blow the whistle on you for something, I didn’t, you know ... know? And next time, I don’t want to know what I shouldn’t know.”

After Perry departed, Lois turned to Clark and looked at him. Clark shrugged and said, “Well, go ahead. I’m waiting.”

Lois, with feigned innocence looked at him and asked, “For what?”

Clark shrugged and said, “The morality play. The ‘you should have trusted me and my infallible reporter’s instinct’ lecture.”

Lois reposts, “Clark, you don’t need me to remind you of your shortcomings. I would have thought, by now ... they’d be obvious, but I love you anyway.”

“At least there’s that.”

Lois said, “Come on, I’m starving and you’re buying.” After a few seconds, she said, “And just in case you *did* miss the moral to this story — you should trust what’s in people’s hearts, not just the facts, ma’am. I hate to say, I told you so, but I told you that Eugene was innocent. My gut told me that he was.”

“Lois, if I have ever had any doubts about your intuition in the past, I need to make a note to not ever doubt it in the future.” He stood and helped Lois with her jacket, “Let’s go get lunch.”

As they were on the way to the elevator, Lois wrapped her arm around his and leaned into his shoulder. As the doors were closing, through the final gap, Perry saw her go up on tiptoe and give him a kiss.

Chapter 12

After lunch, back at the Planet, Clark was looking over an article that Lois was working on when Jimmy passed by and dropped an envelope on Clark’s desk. He called over, “Hey, CK. There’s a letter here for Superman. It came ‘care of Clark Kent’. You’ll see to it that he gets it, right?”

Looking around, Clark said, “Sure thing, Jimmy. Next time I see him, I’ll give it to him. Thanks.”

A few minutes later, Clark moved back to his desk and picked up the envelope. It was addressed in a flowing, feminine hand. Lois came over and looked over his shoulder. She also noted the handwriting and asked, “Does Superman have a female admirer?”

Looking back over his shoulder he said, “Superman has a lot of female admirers. He gets offers from them all of the time. They range from one night stands, to permanent commitments.”

Lois looked around to make sure they weren’t overheard and asked, “Do you reply and tell them that Superman is not available, I hope?”

He asked, “Jealous?”

Lois gave him a coy look, “Me? Never. I know what I’ve got and I think he knows what he has.”

Craning around, he gave her a kiss on the cheek and said, “I sure do.”

Just then, Lois’s phone rang and she went to answer it. Clark sat there looking at the envelope. It was addressed to Superman c/o Clark Kent at the Daily Planet and it was postmarked Chicago. Finally making up his mind, he opened the envelope. When he opened it a snapshot dropped out onto his desk. He picked it up and turned it over to look at it and saw the smiling face of a beautiful 6 year old girl with brown eyes and hair. After looking at the picture for a time he opened the letters, there were actually two of them. The first, written in a practiced feminine hand read:

“Dear Superman,

My name is Phoebe Harris. My daughter Carrie was the little girl you rescued from the fire a few weeks ago. I wanted to take a minute to thank you for what you did for me and my family. Carrie is a special little girl and very precious to her father and me.

In your brief encounter with my daughter you would not have known anything of her background.

It is not apparent, but Carrie suffers from a form of epilepsy. Her seizures can come on very suddenly and can be very violent. Until we got Scrappy they would be totally unexpected. We are very grateful that when you saved Carrie that you saved Scrappy as well. Scrappy is a working or companion dog. You had already left when Scrappy became very agitated and started barking which is the way he alerts us that he has sensed the onset of one of Carrie’s seizures. Thanks to Scrappy and his alert we were able to properly care for Carrie and have her protected from injuring herself during the seizure. Normally her seizures are controlled through medication; however, they still do occasionally occur. In this situation, since the fire had destroyed her meds she suffered several seizures before we were able to renew her prescription. Scrappy was able to warn us each time. I don’t know what we’d do without that dog.

Her epilepsy is a result of an inoperable brain tumor. Because of it we are not sure just how long Carrie will be with us. So far we have had her with us for six wonderful years.

Because of her affliction we have been homeschooling her. Because of the attention she receives she is already approaching grade level two even though she is just at the age for kindergarten.

Carrie wanted to write you her own letter and I have included it.

Thank you for what you did for my special little girl.

Sincerely,
Mrs. Phoebe Harris”

Clark just sat there re-reading the letter a few times before he picked up the second letter. This one was written in a child’s scrawl.

“Mister Superman,

Thank you for saving me and Scrappy from the fire. Scrappy is my special friend and I would miss him. He helps me and helps my mommy and daddy take care of me. He lets them know when something bad is going to happen to me.

He helps me like you help other people.

When I grow up I want to help people too.

Love,
Carrie.

Clark was near tears as he folded both letters and placed them along with the picture in his inside pocket to show to Lois when he joined her in the evening. After doing this, he sat there, thinking about how he could help. He decided that two heads were better than one, and four heads were even better so he would discuss it with Lois and his parents when he got home.

By the time Lois returned from her desk he had composed himself.

“So, who was the letter from?”

Looking at his watch, he said, “I think it’s getting late. Let’s call it a day. Mom and Dad will be returning to the farm tomorrow and I think we should have dinner with them. What do you think?”

“I think you’re trying to distract me. Who wrote the letter?”

“Can it wait until dinner? I’d like to go over it with you, but I want Mom and Dad to hear it too.”

“Oh, okay. As long as it isn’t someone propositioning my husband I’m happy. Let’s go.”

They were visiting with the Kents later that evening in Lois’s old apartment. After a dinner prepared by Martha, Clark brought out the letters. Turning to Lois he asked, “Remember, I told you about the little girl I saved from the fire.”

Lois replied, "Let me see, you mean the one you saved from that fire in Chicago?"

"Yeah, that's the one. Well, I got a letter from her and one from her mother." He pulled the envelope from the pocket of his jacket, which was over the back of his chair. "Before I read them, let me show you this." He pulled out the picture and handed it to Lois.

As soon as Lois saw it she gasped and said, "You're right! She looks like she could be our child. Here Martha, take a look."

Jonathan looked over Martha's shoulder as Martha looked at the picture.

Martha gushed, "Is this a preview or what? She sure looks like she could be yours. The coloring is perfect and that mouth! It's shaped very much like yours. Her big doe eyes are just like yours too. She's an absolutely beautiful child."

When they had finished Clark said, "Let me read you her letter." He read Carrie's letter first.

When he finished Martha said, "That's so sweet. She wants to help just like Superman. How can we help her do that?"

Lois said, "I have one idea right off the bat. I had been saving for a trip to Tahiti." She smiled as she continued, "Since I won't have nearly the expenses now, I'd like to use some of that money to pay for her schooling."

With a downcast expression, Clark said, "Let me now read her mother's letter."

When he was finished, Lois picked up the picture again and stared at it for a long time while Martha wept silently.

Finally, in a subdued tone, Lois asked, "Is there nothing we can do? Isn't there a doctor we can contact to help?"

Before Clark was able to answer, there was a knock on the door. Lois said, "That can't be Luce. She's not due for a couple of weeks yet."

Clark slid his glasses down his nose and x-rayed through the door. After he did, in a hushed tone he said, "I'll be ... We may be about to get an answer."

Lois was mystified, "Huh?"

Clark smiled and said, "Herb."

"Oh! Well, don't keep him waiting. Answer the door."

Clark super sped to the door and opened it. "Welcome, Herb. Come on in."

Seeing that everyone was around the table, Herb took off his Derby hat and said, "I hope I'm not interrupting a family gathering."

"No, Herb. It's all right. Come on in. We were wondering if we were ever going to see you again." Clark took his hat and put it on a side table.

They joined the rest of the family at the table. As they did, Herb spotted Carrie's photograph lying on the table. He nodded in understanding and said, "Ah, I see you have received the letter, uh, letters."

Lois held them up and asked, "You knew about these?"

Herb nodded and said, somewhat sheepishly, "There isn't much that happens to you that I don't know about."

Lois got right to the point, "Okay, so, what can we do about this little girl?"

Herb replied, "At the present time, not much. Rest assured that in the future there will be significant contributions made by all four of you to this particular child's welfare. All I can say to you at this time is — be her friends."

Lois felt a chill of apprehension go up her spine. "What are you saying, Herb? Is she somehow involved in our future?"

Herb smiled and said, "Too much information, too soon is not good. Just be her friends. At the proper time the proper steps will be taken." Turning to encompass the entire family, Herb continued, "I've told you about parallel universes. It is remarkable how events in various universes are repeated in others." Singling out Clark, Herb finished, "With some variations, of course, for

instance in your case, Lois had to save you from Trask. It was not that way in other universes." Tapping the picture, Herb continued, "This particular young lady has appeared in several universes. Sometimes she has a tumor and sometimes she doesn't. In all cases, if she is present, she is intimately involved in your, that is, Lois and Clark's and to a certain extent, Jonathan and Martha's future."

Lois broke in, "Speaking of the future ... I have these memories ... memories of our baby. We've been trying and trying, but we haven't, you know ..."

"Ah, I understand. I don't think I would be telling you too much to say that it will require some time before that will happen. Your body, Lois, is undergoing a metamorphosis, like a caterpillar in a cocoon. By being exposed to the Kryptonian aura certain physiological changes are being made which, in time, will make your body compatible with a Kryptonian and capable of pregnancy."

"Oh, so when I become a butterfly, I can get pregnant," Lois reposted with a pained, sarcastic expression on her face. Clark hugged her in sympathy and she gave him a watery smile.

Herb nodded and calmly replied, "In a manner of speaking, yes. The changes will not be evident, on the outside like a caterpillar changing into a butterfly. That was a metaphorical example. They are internal. You are slowly becoming Kryptonian. When you are approximately one half Kryptonian your bodies will be compatible and pregnancy possible."

"Does that mean that eventually, I'll be fully Kryptonian and super, like Clark?" Lois smiled, hopefully.

As usual Herb gave an enigmatic smile and said, "Too much information ..."

He was interrupted by an irate Lois, "Herb, you *can't* do that to us! We have a need to know."

Herb was calm as he answered, "How will your life be enhanced by the knowledge? How would your behavior be modified by knowing? We cannot take the chance that we would adversely affect future events by having prior knowledge."

Lois gestured with her hands, pointed at her head, snorted and challenged, "But I do have prior knowledge. I've got these memories ..."

"I know, my dear, and I am sincerely sorry about that, but it was necessary. It was done to give you the incentive you needed to save Clark from Trask."

Lois gave Herb a look of disbelief, "Who says that I needed that incentive?"

Herb turned to her and asked, in a serious tone, "If not for the fact that you had those memories and considered yourself married to Clark, would you have even thought to put your own life in jeopardy in order to save him?"

Lois was taken aback at the question and thought seriously for a time before answering, "I don't know." She looked at Clark and said, "I honestly don't know. Before the memories, I ... well, I liked you, sort of, but I also didn't like being teamed with a rookie. I guess I might not have. I might have left it to the police."

Herb looked at her with understanding and said, "That was the reason you were given the memories. It was necessary that Clark survive. If he survived, I knew that you would also, therefore he had to survive. There was a chance that if he died you would also. It was a calculated risk, but it did work out."

Lois returned to her prior theme, sweeping her hands down her body, she asked, "So when does this caterpillar turn into a butterfly?"

Herb chuckled a self-deprecating chuckle and said, "The legendary Mad Dog Lane tenacity. All I can say now is that you will know at the proper time."

"How will I know?"

"I'll be back before that time. When the time is very near and I will bring you a present ... a very special present, but you must be

patient. You have many adventures in store before that time arrives. One of them will involve,” Herb placed a finger on the picture, “this young lady.”

Lois said, “Then it must be soon. She has some kind of tumor that could shorten her life.”

Herb smiled that insufferably, infuriatingly, enigmatic smile of his that told them nothing and yet held a world of meaning.

The eyes of Lois and Clark as well as Jonathan and Martha were irresistibly drawn to the picture. The thought on all of their minds was — how could this child be so important to them?

Herb stood up from the table and pulled a device from his pocket. It turned itself on as soon as he touched it. After reclaiming his hat he punched a few buttons and a portal opened in the air between the dining room and the living room. He turned to them, tipped his hat and said, “Ciao,” stepped through and the portal closed behind him.

Lois, who had stood in the heat of the discussion flopped back down in her chair and let out a breath, “Whew. He is so infuriating! He tells us a lot without telling us anything. What are we supposed to do?”

Clark picked up the letters and looked at the postmark. “I think that Superman has a date to visit a little girl in Chicago. He needs to acquire more background information on this little girl. From what Herb said, I may need to bring her here. He said that we were all involved so maybe Smallville would be better.” He looked around at his parents and asked, “You guys up to it?”

Nodding in the direction that Herb had departed, Jonathan said, “He seems to think it’s important so I think we need to go along with it. Who knows, we might even like her.”

Martha slapped his arm and said, “Look at that face.” She picked up the child’s letter and thrust it into his hands, “Read that letter ... she’s a sweet child. How could we not like her?”

Jonathan rubbed his arm in mock tribute to the hurt he did not actually feel and smiling said, “Actually, I thought it would be a foregone conclusion. How could I help, but like her? She is the spitting image of Lois.”

Martha smiled and moved into Jonathan’s arms, “You big old softie! I love you.”

Jonathan replied, “I love you too and I don’t need that picture to remind me what you look like. I’ve got the real thing all the time.” He gave her a kiss.

THE END