

Life and Death in the Other Lane

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Rated: PG-13 (for violence and serious WHAM)

Submitted: September 2015

Summary: In a very alt-world, Lois Lane disappears from the Congo while chasing a story and is presumed to be dead. But when she suddenly reappears in Clark's life, she brings a hidden past and violence with her.

Story Size: 81,000 words (445Kb as text)

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Prologue

The late afternoon sun was almost completely obscured by the roiling dark clouds scudding across the slate-gray sky. The slicing wind pursued dead autumn leaves across the cemetery in a macabre game of tag. Without using his special vision abilities, Clark couldn't see the freshly cut epitaph on the tombstone clearly. But he didn't need to see it. He knew what it said. He'd more than memorized it over these last seven days.

The words were branded into his brain, burned deeply and painfully.

He'd failed. Superman had failed. When push had come to shove, he'd failed to save the life of someone who was important to him. When his abilities had been needed the most, they had failed him. When his good judgment had been most needed, he'd made a choice, and then he'd watched someone close to him die. A life had ended, a life with so much promise, so much ability, so much potential, so much love. Now all that was left was a cold earthen blanket over a coffin that held her mortal remains.

He didn't look up. He didn't have to. He'd known they were coming before they'd arrived. All of them had come today: the short, out-of-time-and-place man with the funny accent and funnier-looking time machine, the dour police inspector, his humorless by-the-book partner, and the woman who — without her quite knowing it, without his quite realizing it — had held the key to his heart for so many years.

At least one of them, more often more than one, had come for him each day at about the same time, waiting, hoping that he'd come away from the freshly turned earth, hoping he'd leave with them. He could hear them talking, and he knew that they knew he could hear them clearly, so none of them raised their voices above normal conversational tones.

The woman put her hand on the gate and peered into the gathering gloom. "Clark?" she almost whispered. "Are you ready to go?"

He didn't move. There was a hitch in her voice as she continued, "Remember what you once said, Clark? You told me that today is the first day of the rest of my life. Please, please be ready to live again. I am."

He still didn't respond. She turned to the older man beside her. "Mr. Wells, do you think I should go and get him? You know, bring him away from — from there?"

In another time, at another place, Wells' reply might have

been preceded by a hearty chuckle instead of a mournful sigh. "And how do you propose to perform that super-human feat, my dear? If Clark Kent does not wish to be moved, there is no power on Earth that can force him. At any rate, even were his strength only that of an average man, your recent injuries and subsequent recuperation have reduced any physical force you might have brought to bear against him."

She sighed back. "You — you're right, of course. I just wish — Clark?" She turned and called to him again. "I'm coming over, okay?"

He thought about waving her away, but he didn't. Maybe it was time to let go. Maybe it was time to go home.

Stiffly and cautiously, she knelt down beside him on the damp, clammy grass. "Clark? Come on home. Please. It's time."

He didn't raise his head. He thought his eyes would fill again, but they only stung. Maybe he was finally running out of tears.

He sighed deeply, a shuddering sigh that racked his powerful frame. "I should have saved her."

She sniffed once. "You tried, Clark. You did your absolute best, just like you always do. And you did save me."

"It wasn't good enough this time. I wasn't good enough."

One hand lifted to brush away a tear. "You can't save everybody. No matter how hard you try, you can't do that. No one can."

"But — she — I —"

"Clark?" She touched his cheek with her palm. "I loved her too. We were family. And I'll miss her for the rest of my life." She brushed the edge of his jaw with her thumb. "But it's time to go home now. Please?" She tugged gently on his elbow. "Please — come home with me?" She hesitated, then added, "And I mean — with me to my place? Where I can take care of you?"

He opened his mouth, but no sound came out. He turned to her and his eyes betrayed him. She reminded him so very much of her sister, so much so that it was almost painful.

The tears he thought were long drained from his body started again. He was tired, so very tired, and he would have fallen to the ground had she not held him upright and tugged him against her shoulder. She wrapped her arms around his head and held him while he sobbed. Her tears mixed with his, and they embraced each other as their grief and pain overwhelmed them both.

"That — that day —" he bit out. "That day — when —"

"Shh. I know, Clark, I know."

Without meaning to do so — and all the while wishing he could somehow forget — his perfect, blemish-free memory replayed it all, beginning with the dinner he'd hosted for his friends.

Chapter One

from the journal of H. G. Wells

I approach this new alternate universe with joy, and not a small amount of trepidation. In this time, in this universe, I have the opportunity to help Clark Kent and Lois Lane to meet for the first time, at a moment when they are somewhat older than they were in my own home universe. They have been separated for a number of years, and apparently — I know not how, nor do I particularly care — they have each been completely unaware of the other's existence. This moment is an historic one, and I also feel what I can only describe as a measure of youthful giddiness. I truly wish I could reveal myself to both of them and observe their first meeting.

This Clark has, of course, met the Lois Lane who is married to Clark Kent in her home universe, which is my home universe also. For better or worse — and I believe that history will agree that it has been for the better — I brought her here to help this Clark become Superman, and some months later he assisted me in recovering the original Superman from Tempus' time trap. I feel as if I owe the young man a great deal, and this will begin the

repayment of that obligation.

I have seen some worlds where Lois never loses her heart to Clark, or Clark loses Lois to some seemingly random tragedy either early in their relationship or before they even meet, but this world is unique in my experience. The poor woman in this universe apparently survived being assaulted in the Congo only to fall victim to a kidnapper who, rather than demand ransom for her release, fell in love with her and forced her to remain with him for some seven years, all of it against her will. The story she related to me pained my heart, despite the paucity of detail.

Miss Lane was, at first, understandably apprehensive about my offer to return her to Metropolis, but I managed to convince her to ‘give it a go,’ as some might phrase it. I have just now set her down on the outskirts of Gotham City, where she will purchase a ticket to travel in an omnibus to Metropolis. I envision a cautious meeting between these two, especially since this Clark has never met this Lois, and nearly six years have elapsed since I brought the Lois Lane from my world to set him on the path to being Superman.

I believe it is time for Utopia, guided by the linked examples of Lois Lane and Clark Kent, to begin to take shape in this version of Earth, despite the difficulties in beginning their relationship, difficulties for which I blame my nemesis Tempus and his attempts to derail the history of this world. I hope I am able to remain for a sufficient period of time to witness the results of their reunion — or, perhaps I should say, their first meeting.

Clark stirred the potatoes and called out, “Dinner’s almost ready. Who’s up for setting the table today?”

“I’ll do it,” answered Lucy.

Lana stood and put her hands on her hips. “Hey! It’s my turn.”

Lucy smiled at Lana’s tone of mock offense. “Lana, Clark is flying you and Pete back to Miami tomorrow morning. You’ve knocked yourselves out every time I’ve been over here with you guys. The least I can do is let you be guests on your last Friday in Metropolis.”

Without standing up from his chair, Pete tugged on Lana’s wrist. “Come on, honey, let Clark serve lunch.”

“It’s the big meal of the day. It’s dinner.”

“At one in the afternoon? It’s lunch.”

She frowned down at him. “It’s dinner, Pete. Supper is the evening meal.”

“Oh, all right, if you say so. Will you have dinner with me and let Clark serve us? He wants to.”

She turned and leaned down for a quick kiss. “Okay, but can I at least go wash up before the stampede?”

He grinned. “Oh, I suppose so. Hey, can you go to the bathroom for me while you’re in there?”

“Oh, I don’t know if I could stand that.”

Clark winced and grinned at their terrible jokes even when they gave away Entirely Too Much Information. He truly enjoyed their byplay. Once again he was thankful that he had friends with whom he could forget he was an internationally famous superhero. He’d been Superman for more than half a decade, and people still mobbed him when he showed up in the Suit. Civilian clothes were better, but not by much, because then he’d be a target for hordes of young women — or even some not-so-young women — as soon as someone recognized him. And because, unlike his counterpart from that other world, he hadn’t traveled the globe at a younger age, he didn’t have the same easy facility with other languages. He could stumble along in Spanish or Italian or even German, but anything more than that pretty much eluded him.

And if he went anywhere, someone inevitably recognized him. Several times he’d been on the verge of asking Lucy if she’d pose as his companion for public occasions at which he couldn’t avoid appearing, but after thinking about it he always changed his

mind. They were good friends, and had been ever since he’d ended his frustrating and ultimately unsuccessful search for her sister Lois, and he didn’t want to jeopardize their relationship. Besides, such a role would surely blunt her own chances of meeting someone special.

And surely Lucy deserved to meet someone special. She’d suffered so much in her youth, first when her parents divorced, and again when Lois had gone missing. Then the ‘other’ Lois had appeared for a few days, but before Lucy had even known she was there, she was gone again. The ‘other’ Lois had spurred him to become Superman, but did she know the emotional collateral damage she’d left behind? Did she understand how hollow and empty he still felt, how incomplete he seemed when he looked at his life? Had she even considered how lonely he would feel without someone to share his being Superman, with all the attendant stresses and problems?

Did she even care that she’d wrecked his world?

He stopped and checked his own emotional reaction. There was still that lingering emptiness in his heart when he thought of Lois Lane, either the one from the other dimension who had invaded his life and turned it upside down forever, or the one from his world whom he’d never met and whose ultimate fate was still unknown. But the emptiness didn’t threaten to split his heart any more. He’d moved on, as much as a man who’d been in love with an apparition might ever move on. If the Lois of this world was still alive — and he didn’t believe it was possible at this point — she didn’t want to be found. She’d been declared legally dead three years before, and there had been a quiet memorial ceremony attended only by her family and closest friends. Clark would not have been there had not Lucy and her parents insisted. Were Lois to appear now, it would open several huge cans of both legal and personal worms. And he didn’t think he wanted her to.

He banished his dark thoughts and sprinkled another dash of garlic salt in the mashed potatoes, stirred them for a moment, inhaled deeply, and decided they were done. “Feed bag’s ready! Come and get it!”

Lucy stuck her head in the kitchen doorway. “Hey, Clark, you got any pickles?”

He nodded to the refrigerator. “Bottom shelf in back. Big jar of whole dills. What do you need them for?”

“Lana wanted some.” She slid past him with easy familiarity and pulled out the jar. Behind her, Clark poured the potatoes from the cooking pot into the serving bowl.

“So Lana wants pickles.” He lowered his voice. “You think that means anything?”

“You mean, is the first Ross child going to make his or her debut next spring?”

He grinned and lifted the bowl. “Isn’t a yen for weird food a symptom of expectant motherhood?”

She canted an eyebrow at him. “I’ve never been pregnant, so I don’t know. Why don’t we just let them tell us in their own time?”

“Sounds good to me. Shall we eat before it gets cold?”

“You’re the host. It’s your call.”

“Then come, let us go and went to dinner.”

Pete and Lana were already seated. Their eyes bulged with anticipation as they surveyed the steak and potatoes meal Clark had prepared. They all fell to with gusto.

Clark observed the feeding frenzy and cautioned, “Hey, save room for dessert! Lucy made lemon cake with vanilla icing and it’s great.”

Lucy grinned past her fork. “You tried it already?”

“Of course not. I just know what a good baker you are.”

Pete asked, “You baking for anyone in particular these days, Lucy?”

“You mean, am I dating anyone?” Pete nodded, and Lucy frowned at him. “No. I guess it’s kind of a downer for a guy when I tell him I’m a personal friend of Superman. Hard to compete

with that.”

Pete’s eyes widened. “You mean you tell guys that right off the bat?”

“No. Just when they ask me for a date.”

Lana grinned and shook her head. “Maybe you should save that piece of information until later on the in the relationship.”

“I tried that a couple of years ago. Clark, you remember Darrin?”

Clark frowned. “Yes. A complete waste of polyester and DNA, if you ask me.”

Lucy half-grinned. “I didn’t ask, but I agree with you. He grabbed me so often I thought I was eating dinner with an octopus. I must have slapped his hands a dozen times before the check came, and I even slapped his face when we left the restaurant. All it did was make him that much more certain that I couldn’t live without him, so when he pushed me against a wall and tried to unzip my skirt, I yelled for super-help.”

Lana was drawn into the story. “So that’s when he let you go?”

She bounced once in her chair and waved her free hand. “Oh, it gets even better! He kept at me until Clark landed behind him and pulled him back and said, ‘The lady said no.’ Darrin got all huffy about Superman minding his own Super-business, and then Clark saw me trying to refasten my skirt and got just a little bit miffed. He picked Darrin up and carried him over to the restaurant dumpster and dropped him in, then welded the top shut with his heat vision.”

Pete guffawed. “Clark, you didn’t!”

“He did! You should have heard Darrin cuss and yell and threaten, until I went over and kicked the side of the dumpster hard enough to make his ears ring and told him that if he tried to make any trouble for Clark over this I’d have him arrested for attempted sexual assault. That shut him up but good. Haven’t heard from him since.”

Lana giggled. “I guess you showed him a really good time!”

Clark blushed slightly and frowned. “The dumpster was only half-full, and I only spot-welded one side of the top. All he had to do was move over and push the other lid open to get out. And he could have broken that spot weld if he’d really wanted to.”

Pete grinned and lifted his glass. “Dude, I think you did real good. From now on, he’ll think twice about forcing himself onto some woman who doesn’t want him.”

“I hope so. Next time I might have to seal him in a sewer.”

Lana almost spit out her tea. Pete handed her a napkin and said, “You shouldn’t be surprised at some of the things Clark says. You know he’s been doing super-stuff since high school.”

“Yeah,” she choked out, “but I didn’t know he enjoyed it so much!”

They all laughed aloud at that, especially Clark. When Lana calmed down, she asked, “Lucy, since your personal life is currently on hold, how are things at work?”

Lucy swallowed a mouthful of steak and smiled. “They’re great. I got another raise along with my five-year anniversary, and we’ve added twelve new positions in my office, all of whom report directly to me. I’m fully vested in both the company retirement program and my personal retirement savings fund, and my IRA is as healthy as a horse. Wayne Information Services is a pretty good place to work, people. Hey, do either of you two have a deep, long-repressed desire to join the best Information Technology company in Metropolis? Or on the Eastern seaboard, for that matter?”

Pete laughed. “No thanks, Lucy. We’re expecting a big shipment of rare antique porcelain items from the Middle East in a couple of days, and I’m pretty sure Sayid wants us to sign for it personally.”

“So, you guys are still importing exotic goods?”

“Just the cool ones, thank you, no hot merchandise.”

Lucy’s eyes widened. “Hot — you mean like stolen?”

“Not if we know about it,” Pete said. “About a year ago, we tipped Clark and the Florida state cops about a man who wanted us to buy some stolen artifacts. No one else has bothered us since then. Of course, it’s probably due to Clark flying over there and letting all the slightly shady dealers know that he’d take it very personally if anyone tried to hurt us or deliberately damage our business.”

Clark poured more tea in Lucy’s glass. “I meant to ask you if you lost some suppliers because of that.”

Lana took up the narrative. “Yeah, we did, but they were the ones we could afford to lose, know what I mean? The ‘guys who know some guys?’” She lifted her hands, then for a moment she bent one ear forward and pushed her nose to one side for what everyone knew she called her ‘gangster face.’ “You know, the mooks with broken noses and cauliflower ears. But the honest dealers flocked to us. They figured out that with Superman looking over our shoulders, we couldn’t afford to cheat them any more than they could afford to cheat us. Our gross cash flow has almost doubled since then.”

Lucy nodded. “That’s great, you guys.” She took a bite of potatoes. “Wow. Your news is almost as good as this dinner. Clark, you’ve just about outdone yourself this time.”

Pete stabbed the last bite of steak on his plate. “Yeah, this is fabulous.”

Lana sat back and sighed. “Oh, if I had known you cooked like this, Clark, I might have kept you.”

Pete swallowed hard and hesitated a moment, but before he could say anything, Lana continued, “But then, I would have missed out on marrying Pete. And despite your obvious strengths, Clark, I wouldn’t trade him for you if you threw in a CostMart franchise.”

Pete’s expression softened. “Thank you, Lana. That means a lot to me.”

She turned to him. “Hey, babe, you — wait — oh, no! Honey, I’m so sorry! I was just stupid again, wasn’t I?”

He took her hand. “No, I don’t think so. You just said you prefer me over Superman, so what do I have to complain about?”

“I’m so sorry, darling!” She lifted his hand and kissed it gently. “I didn’t mean I regret not being with Clark. I love you, Pete, and I’m glad you’re so patient with me.”

He cupped her face with his hand. “It’s only because I love you, too.” He leaned in to kiss her. She kissed him back. They seemed to forget they weren’t alone.

Clark smiled to himself, glad that his friends were happy with each other. He snuck a peek at Lucy, and he was surprised to see that her eyes were shiny and her face betrayed a longing he hadn’t known she felt. As Pete and Lana threatened to continue their lip gymnastics, Clark said, “Much more of that and you won’t get dessert.”

They pulled back and leaned their heads together. Pete muttered, “Why’s that?”

“Because you’ve already ingested enough sugar to cause an insulin reaction.”

All four of them laughed, and Lucy took the opportunity to dry her eyes. Clark deliberately didn’t look at her, thinking she’d prefer her reaction to remain unnoticed.

Suddenly she got up and walked into the kitchen. “It may be early, but I’m bringing the cake out now.”

Lana called, “Okay,” but as Lucy disappeared from the dining area, Lana whispered, “Go help her, Clark!”

“What? Why?”

Lana gave him the ‘look’ that said he was a really dumb male and denser than depleted uranium. “Just go, okay?”

He shrugged and stood. As he entered the kitchen, he saw Lucy standing beside the counter with a dish towel pressed to her face. He stood behind her and put his hands on her shoulders.

“Hey, are you okay?”

She lurched away from him. “Y-yes, I’m fine, Clark. Those two! They’ve been married for what, almost four years? And they can’t keep their lips off each other even after all that time together.”

“Yeah, it’s kinda nice. I’m glad Lana’s happy.”

She was still facing away from him. “Are you — do you regret not staying with her?”

His voice softened. “No. I like her and I think she’s a nice person — at least, she’s a nice person now — and I’m sorry I hurt her when we were together. But no, I don’t regret what happened. It was for the best.” He almost touched her shoulder, but pulled back at the last second. “Lucy? Is something wrong?”

She turned towards him, still holding the towel over her eyes. “Why are you in here?”

He shrugged again. “Lana told me to come and help you.”

She pulled the towel down and revealed damp eyes. “Since when do you do what Lana tells you to do?”

“Since she gives me that ‘look’ that scares Pete so much.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, ‘oh.’ So, do you know why she told me to come in here?”

“How could I know that?”

“Because you and she are both women, and despite my special abilities, I’m just a dumb old insensitive man.”

Lucy grinned despite her obvious discomfort. “I think she wants you to talk to me about something.”

He stepped closer. “What might that be?”

She looked up at him warily, but didn’t move away. “Probably the same thing she mentioned to me day before yesterday.”

He tilted his head and lowered his voice. “And that thing was?”

She slowly reached out and touched his elbow. “You and me.”

His eyebrows rose, but he didn’t say anything.

“I know what you’re thinking, that there’s not a ‘you and me’ right now, and you don’t want to take advantage of me, or maybe you don’t want to risk being rejected, and even though Lois is gone we both still remember her and—”

“Hey.”

She pulled her hand back. “What?”

Clark recaptured her hand in his. “It’s okay. I wasn’t thinking about Lois.”

Lucy leaned closer. “What were you thinking about, Clark?”

“You mean besides your babbling?”

She smiled and shifted her feet towards him. “Yeah, besides that.”

As opened his mouth to answer, the phone on his kitchen wall rang.

They both snapped their heads around and stared at it. Only about a dozen people ever knew his unlisted home phone number, and he changed it every few weeks to keep it secret. Someone always seemed to dig it up somehow.

It rang again. Clark turned to Lucy, but she said, “You have to answer that, I know. Go ahead.”

He picked up the phone and spoke the recognition phrase in a high, reedy tenor. “King Pizza Parlor, this here’s Charlie. You want a Royal Large Sampler with breadsticks? On special for half-price today only!”

“Clark, this is James Olsen. I need you to come to my office at the Daily Planet.”

Clark resumed his normal baritone. “Now? Jim, I have dinner guests. Can’t this wait a while?”

Olsen sighed. “No, Clark, it can’t. I wish it could, but I need you here as soon as you can get here.”

“That fast, huh?” There was no response. “I guess you mean it, don’t you?”

“Yes. Please apologize to your guests for me, and make sure I

get all the blame.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll do that. Can you tell me what to expect when I get there?”

Olsen hesitated for a long breath, then said, “You can expect to meet Lois Lane.”

Clark almost crushed the telephone receiver. “What! What did you just say?”

“I know it’s a shock, Clark, but a woman claiming to be Lois Lane is here. I need you here to help verify her story, preferably before we release this news to the public.”

“Yeah. I’ll be there in two minutes.”

“I’m sorry, Clark. I wouldn’t have called if I hadn’t really needed you.”

“I know. I — ah — I need to get going.”

“Right. Bye.”

Clark hung up the phone and almost ran into Lucy as he turned. She stopped him with a touch to his wrist. “Clark! What’s going on? What is it?”

He opened his mouth to tell her that her sister had returned from the dead, but something held him back. ‘A woman claiming to be Lois Lane’ was what James Olsen had said. He didn’t think he could break Lucy’s heart over her sister again, not until this woman’s claim was verified.

“I — I’m sorry, Lucy, but I can’t tell you, not now. Will you wait here?”

“Wait for what?”

“For me to either come back or call you. This — this may involve you.”

“What? Me?” She pulled her hand back. “How am I involved?”

Their previous conversation came back to him, along with the possibility that Lois was actually alive. “I’m really sorry, Lucy, but I just can’t tell you yet. Please? Please trust me on this one?”

She frowned, but nodded. “Okay. I trust you.”

“Will you wait for me to contact you?”

She nodded. “I’ll make myself busy somehow.”

“Thanks. I promise I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

She smiled. “Okay. Smooth flying!”

She leaned in for what had become a custom between them. When he’d leave her company, if they weren’t in public, he’d give her a quick, light, almost-but-not-quite brotherly kiss on the forehead or the cheek. Lately he’d suspected that if he kissed her somewhere else — like on her lips and in an other than brotherly fashion — she wouldn’t object.

He pursed his lips for their customary parting kiss, but suddenly he froze. Instead, he patted her awkwardly on the shoulder, then jogged out to his open patio and spun into the Suit before launching himself skyward.

Lucy was disturbed by Clark’s behavior. First, he’d almost spoken tender words to her, words she’d wanted to hear for a long time, then he’d gotten some shocking news on the phone, then he’d almost run away from her. And all without offering his obligatory parting kiss on the forehead, the one that lately was making her wish that either she were several inches taller or Clark would bend down a little more.

She was certain she hadn’t done anything to offend him, so what was bothering him? And how did it concern her?

She shook her head and her eyes found the cake. At least the three of them could enjoy her creation, even if the one for whom she’d really baked it wouldn’t get the first piece.

As she carried the plate to the dinner table, Lana leaned back and crossed her arms. “He ran out on you, didn’t he?”

“What? Oh, no, he got a phone call and had to leave.”

“Uh-huh. What was so important about a phone call that he left you her with us?”

Lucy focused on cutting the cake. “He didn’t say.”

Pete's head snapped up. "Wow. If Clark didn't tell you what it was about, it's got to be important."

"Oh, I don't know. He doesn't tell me everything."

Lana stopped Lucy's hand with a touch on the wrist. "And you don't tell him everything either, do you?"

Pete looked at his wife, then at Lucy, then said, "Please excuse me. I — have to go do something in another room where I won't hear a word either one of you say."

Lucy sensed rather than saw him exchange a glance with Lana. As soon as he was gone, Lana said, "I thought you were going to tell him how you felt about him."

Lucy sniffed and wiped her nose with a napkin. "Oh, yeah, I can do that! 'Hey, Superman, did you know I'm carrying a torch for you?' He doesn't need another woman chasing him through the streets."

"But you're not just carrying a torch for him, Lucy, you're all but standing in front of a flamethrower. And you aren't chasing him. Besides, I know that Clark thinks the world of you. He's told me so more than once. And I know what you think of him, too. To you, he's Clark Kent, a truly fine man who just happens to have the most interesting part-time job in the world."

Lucy chuckled. "That's what makes him such a good friend. And I wouldn't risk that friendship for all the rugs in Persia."

Lana feigned a pout. "Now that's hitting below the antique silken belt, girlfriend. Look, you have to be honest with him. And you have to be honest with yourself. You two make a great couple, and there's no reason for you to put yourself down."

Lucy lifted her eyes to her friend. "Lana, do you know how many guys I slept with by the time I was twenty-two?"

"No, but I don't think Clark cares about your past—"

"Fourteen."

Lana's eyes bulged for a moment. "Oh. I mean, that's — you — yeah, okay."

"Right after the last one, and I mean when I was still finding his orphan socks in the laundry, I met Clark. Superman, actually. He was hunting for Lois and wanted to talk to me about her. He thought the more he knew about her the better his chances of finding her would be." She dabbed at her eyes with her napkin. "It didn't help."

Lana frowned. "Did you know that I met that other Lois, the one Clark said came from another world?"

"Yes. Except for having short hair and being a little thinner, she was a dead ringer for my sister."

"I didn't like her."

Now Lucy's eyes bulged. "What? You didn't — but why not?"

"Because she was so — so absolutely certain she was right. Because she was convinced that Clark was destined for greater things than just reporting. Or for working in my father's bank. And because she made his eyes light up like I never could."

"Oh. I'm — I'm sorry, Lana, I never knew that."

"Nobody except Pete knows. And if you tell Clark I'll wrap you up in a rug and ship you to Timbuktu." The two women shared a smile before Lana continued. "Ever since that Lois vanished, Clark's eyes have been muted. I've never seen them twinkle like that again." Lana reached out and took Lucy's hands in her own. "Until recently, that is, when he looks at you. Now they sparkle like diamonds at high noon." She tugged on the other girl's arms and said, "Lucy, you have to tell him what's in your heart. Tell him how much you love him."

Lucy's mouth moved but nothing came out.

"I mean it, honey! You need to talk to him. Assuming, of course, that your eyes light up for him, too. And I'm pretty sure they do."

A smile slowly made its way across Lucy's face. "Okay. I'll give it a shot."

Lana smiled back. "Attagirl! You'll be amazed at the good

things that can happen when people talk to each other."

— Interlude One

— Seven years ago

— The Congo

The big, dark-haired man with the unkempt brushy mustache brought in the same folding chair he'd used the previous four times and sat down across the tent from her. His body looked fat, but Lois had seen him move and knew that whatever fat he carried sheathed hard cords of muscle. He looked at her with dead, flat eyes, as if she were just a piece of raw meat. Even his voice was flat, almost toneless. "Your name is Lois Lane, correct?"

"Yes."

"Are you married? Do you have children?"

"No to both questions. Why do you—"

"Why are you here?"

"I was supposed to meet a source. That's all it was. Just a meet with a source. I do it all the time in Metropolis."

"What happened when you attempted to meet this source, Miss Lane?"

"The Congo isn't Metropolis."

"No, it is not. Please continue."

This was worse than talking to Metro PD after she'd scooped them. If not for the other men in the tent — all armed, all silent and brutish — she would have tried to run. "We've been going over this for hours and I'm telling you the same thing every time! May I have some water? I'm really thirsty."

"Very soon. Now, your story, please?"

"The guy told me he'd take me to the camp where the gun-runners were getting ready to ship out several truckloads of munitions. We met outside the hotel just before midnight and I followed him, camera and notepad and satellite phone all ready to use. I rode in his Land Rover for about half an hour, then hiked for nearly that long. I knew I was fully dependent on him, but I really thought the two thousand dollar payoff I'd promised him would keep him happy."

"And did it?"

"No. Turned out he valued his skin more than my money."

"Ah, that sometimes happens here. Tell me the rest."

"We — I don't even know your name!"

"That is not important at the moment. What is important is that you tell me all that you know."

This was definitely worse than the police. The big guy sitting in front of her was truly scary. "O — okay. We stopped outside the camp and watched for about ten minutes, I guess, and then there were three guys with guns behind me yelling at me to raise my hands and go with them."

"You obeyed, of course."

"Yes! I was afraid they'd shoot me if I didn't."

"They would have, Miss Lane. Now, please, tell me the rest of the story."

His calm assurance that she had almost been shot startled her and she tried to take back control of the conversation. "Of course, Mr. Harvey."

"My name is not Mr. Harvey."

Something in his eyes frightened her and she tried to backpedal. "Sorry. There's a reporter named Paul Harvey back in the US who goes on the radio and tells heartwarming stories about famous people from before they became famous, and he ends the segment by saying, 'Now you know the rest of the story.' It's quite popular."

"I am sure it is. But now you should imitate your Mr. Harvey and tell me the rest of your own heartwarming story."

"But that's it! The men with the guns brought me into the camp and beat me up and asked me questions and I told them what I know and I've been here since yesterday getting yelled at and pushed around and pushed around and yelled at! I'm a reporter for the Daily Planet in Metropolis and you really

shouldn't treat me this way!"

"What should happen to you and what will happen to you may be two very different things, Miss Lane. Are you certain you have told all that you know?"

"Yes! That's it! And now I don't have any proof because your bully boys took my camera and recorder and purse and notepad and phone and everything!"

"Yes, that is a shame. How much of this information have you transmitted to your employers in Metropolis?"

"Nothing! I told you that already!"

"So your employers know nothing of our operation here?"

"Only that there is one. And before you ask again, they don't know where it is or how much stuff you're moving because I didn't know any of that before I got here yesterday and I didn't have a chance to tell them!"

The man stared at her for a long moment, then nodded. "Very well. I believe you."

"So — that means I can go home?"

"Home? Oh, no, Miss Lane, you will never go home."

"What? No! I have to go back! I have a life there!"

"That life is over. Your life now belongs to me."

"Belongs to — no way! You're crazy! I'm not a slave!"

"Yes, you are. You are a slave. My slave. You will never see your home again. You are now my property, mine to do with as I wish."

"But you — I don't even know your name!"

The man stood and folded the chair, then waved one hand at the other men in the tent with them. "My name? You may address me as Rodolfo, Miss Lane."

"Wait! Where are you going — what do you guys think — Hey! Rodolfo! Come back! No! What are you doing? Get your hands off me! You can't — Rodolfo! Help! Stop it! No! Let go of me! Noooo! Help! Aaaaahhh!"

Lois lay on the thin blanket, sobbing past her bruised eyelids. Her eyes were swollen shut and her nose felt broken. She thought she was bleeding internally, too.

The blood flowing down around her thighs had mostly dried. It adhered to the skin on both legs, gluing them together like a macabre adhesive. The remains of her shredded clothes were strewn around the room as if thrown there by a tornado.

The date rape stories she'd covered in college had taught her that rape wasn't about sex but about the attacker demonstrating his own power and strength, about demeaning and dehumanizing his victim. She'd occasionally wondered if some of those girls had brought their pain on themselves by their actions or attitudes or their need for affection.

But now she knew better. It wasn't that. It wasn't that at all. Rape was about dominating someone, destroying someone, proving that someone had no right to exist beyond serving the momentary whims of the attacker.

At least, that was what this kind of gang rape was all about.

The three muscular men who'd loomed over her in the hut while Rodolfo had interrogated her, the three who had set upon her with animal desire when he'd left and had dropped her where she now lay half-unconscious, had said nothing to her, hadn't smiled, hadn't seemed to realize or care that Lois was human. They had simply stripped off their clothes and attacked her. The only reaction any of them had shown was near the beginning of the attack when she'd bitten one man's tongue and drawn blood. Her momentary flash of triumph had been overwhelmed by the tsunami of blows she'd received in return.

She'd lost count of the times the men had violated her.

All Lois wanted to do now was die. The Planet didn't matter, her sister didn't matter, Perry didn't matter, her parents didn't matter, the story absolutely didn't matter. Death was her best option, her only friend, her only recourse.

Her biggest fear was that they wouldn't let her die.

Before she could plan her demise, exhaustion overtook her and dropped her into painful sleep.

She sat outside the doctor's office staring into space. In a false show of compassion and care, Rodolfo had allowed his camp's physician to examine her and treat her injuries. Lois had hoped for some flash of humanity from the doctor, some sign that he knew he was associated with an evil man, that he cared what happened to her, but the only communication between them had been his impersonal questions about her physical condition. She might as well have been a fish for all the human respect he'd given her.

Now she sat waiting. For what, she didn't know, but at that point she didn't much care.

She no longer had anything of her own. The tan one-piece zippered jumpsuit she been given, the underwear she wore, and the sandals on her feet were from Rodolfo. Her hair was a rat's nest of tangles and her hands looked as if they'd been removed from a paper shredder at the last moment. Her face felt like the speed bag looked at her dojo back in Metropolis. Her only good news was that doctor had found no internal injuries or broken bones, and he had finally decided that her nose was bruised but not broken.

The door across the room opened and Rodolfo slipped in. "Hello, Lois," he purred. "I am glad that you are feeling better this morning."

The statement was so far out of context — and so devoid of truth — that Lois' only response was to stare at his chest and take a deep breath before returning to her contemplation of the opposite wall.

Rodolfo picked up a chair and set it close to hers. "I regret last night, really, but I have learned that the quicker my trainees are broken, the more malleable they become."

That statement was also out of context, but at least it contained some information. Lois turned her head to stare at his shoulder — she couldn't look at his face — and repeated, "Trainees?"

"Yes. I will train you to serve me."

"It'd be cheaper and quicker to buy a crate of Japanese blow-up dolls."

He chuckled. "Very good! I had hoped that your spirit would remain unvanquished." He stopped and crossed his legs as he laid his massive forearms across his knees. It was a very European gesture. "But that is not the service I require from you."

She turned her head away and risked one more wisecrack. "I hope you're not in the market for a new cook. I really suck at that."

He shook his head. "No, no, not as a cook. Nor as a writer. I will explain." He put both feet flat on the floor and leaned his elbows on his knees. It wasn't much of a change of posture, but with his face that much closer to hers and his voice almost a whisper, Lois felt threatened.

"You will serve me," he said, "and I will train you. You will learn to shoot, to survive in the woods, to avoid detection and capture, to fight with any weapon and with no weapon save your own body, and you will be paid well. You will learn to disappear in a crowd of people and move among them like a ghost. You will fight for whatever person or side I tell you to fight for."

"But you must know this also: you are dead. No one in your old life will ever see you again. You will not contact them. You will not notify them of your whereabouts. As far as anyone who ever heard of you knows, you disappeared and died this week in the Congo and your body will never be found."

"Wh-what? I — I don't understand what you mean."

"That is not a problem. You will learn, and learn well. You see, one of the businesses in which I am invested provides soldiers for those who are willing to pay for them. My people are

among the best-trained and most effective in the world, and that includes the American Green Berets and Special Forces, the British Commando Force, and even the East German Spetsnaz.”

“But — there’s not—”

“There is no East Germany? Not any more, no. But I have been in this business for many years, and I am very successful. You will be one of my better graduates.”

“No — no! I can’t be a soldier, a mercenary!”

“Yes, you will.”

“No! I can’t shoot — I can’t kill people!”

He leaned closer and she smelled the cheap tobacco on his breath. She saw the pores on his nose and forehead and his face loomed huge in her line of vision. “You will do everything I have told you and more. Or I will leave you dead beside the road for the vultures and jackals to consume. And then your family and friends may mourn your actual death.” He reached out and took her chin in his greasy hand. “Do you hear me, Lois Lane?”

“No — please don’t—”

His hand tightened and threatened to crush her jaw. “I asked you if you heard me.”

His eyes captured hers and she looked into them, really looked, for the first time. No humanity gazed back at her. No compassion or care made itself evident. She saw only the flat black of his greed and violence.

“Y-yes! Yes, I hear you!”

He released her and stood easily. “Good. Remember that I require total obedience from you, and you will suffer far less pain. Now come, breakfast awaits. You may not feel hungry, but you require nourishment. We must leave this location soon, perhaps tomorrow or the next day. You must be prepared to travel.”

She had no choice. She rose and followed him on unsteady legs that felt seven feet long and toothpick-thin. Her obituary formed in her mind as she stumbled toward the rude cafeteria.

Lois Lane, reporter for the Daily Planet, intrepid and brave, taking risks that no one else would take in order to get her name on the front page above the fold, had finally jumped too far and fallen too hard. She was twenty-five years old at the time of her death from unnatural causes, and will surely be missed by her family and a few colleagues. Mourn for her now, for soon she will slip from your minds. She’ll be forgotten within a few months, except as an answer to a trivia question, and someone else will take over her desk and her beat and her position as top dog in the newsroom.

Top dog. She almost laughed. They’d called her Mad Dog Lane for her crazy stunts and her tenacity in getting the story. But she wasn’t top dog here. She was at the bottom of the ranks, lower than the malnourished children she’d seen scrounging for food along the side of the road. She was less than human now.

Rodolfo had shown her true inhumanity, true madness, true evil. And she’d never be able to write about it. No one would believe her if she did.

The worst part was that even though she would rather be dead than serve this monster, there was a small part of her that didn’t want to die. That miniscule part of her mind, her spirit, her deep well of anger, wanted to learn everything Rodolfo could teach her, soak up all of his lessons, absorb all the skills he wanted her to acquire.

And when that was done, that small part wanted to kill him.

She decided she would live at least long enough to accomplish that last act of defiance and independence. Rodolfo would die.

And she would eliminate his odious existence from the earth. If she could.

Two days later, early in the morning, she climbed into the back of an old farm truck and sat down against the wooden frame of the cargo area next to the cab. Two young men, each one barely

needing to shave once a week, wearing jumpsuits and thin sandals like hers, climbed in and sat down on the other side of the truck bed.

Rodolfo and another man Lois hadn’t seen before followed them. “We are going to the airfield now,” Rodolfo said. “We will make a stop before we arrive at our final destination. The stop will have food and drink and you will be able to stretch your legs and relieve yourselves, but if you try to run you will not survive.”

She glanced at the two men whom she surmised were captives as she was. They were both bruised and appeared frightened, and for a moment she wondered if they had received the same kind of treatment she had.

She decided she didn’t care.

It really didn’t matter. Together, she and the two men outnumbered their captors, but they had no weapons and all three of them had been beaten into submission. There was no way for them to overpower two alert, armed, and violent men and find their way back to civilization.

The truck lurched away and began bumping down the trail. Lois did her best to find a comfortable position, as did the two men. Those guys seemed to know each other and leaned against one another, either for warmth or comfort.

Lois had no one to lean on.

After a few minutes they swung onto a smoother road. She closed her eyes to sleep, but she couldn’t quite get there. Her bruises kept bouncing against the hard frame of the truck’s bed and her body refused to find a comfortable spot. So she settled for closing her eyes against the morning sun and feigning sleep.

She heard Rodolfo’s companion say something she didn’t catch, then Rodolfo said, “Because it amuses me.”

“It is dangerous, Rodolfo. Any of them might rise up and murder you in your sleep.”

“Yes, I know. That is part of the amusement.”

“I don’t understand.”

Rodolfo chuckled. “This one, dozing by herself. Five days ago, she planned to discover the truth about me and report it in her great American newspaper. She was so confident, so self-assured, so certain that she could not be hurt. Yet now, here she is, my captive, one with whom I will do as I please. And it pleases me to use her to make a great deal of money.”

“Perhaps. And perhaps she will not survive long enough. It is a great risk you take.”

“A great risk, yes, but for great rewards, not all of which are financial.”

“I do not think she will become your willing lover.”

“Nor do I. The rewards of which I speak are not physical.”

The man shook his head. “I still do not understand. The others — even these two boys — are already outside the law. They are thieves and thugs and bullies and one or two have already killed. Why this one, who is honest?”

“The question answers itself, Abdul. Because she is pure, because she is honest, I will mold her as I wish for her to be molded. I will make her one of us. There is no greater pleasure than to corrupt the good.”

She waited to hear more, but Abdul pointed out some animal not far from the road and they began talking about hunting. Lois finally shifted to move the discomfort to a different part of her body and turned her face toward the wooden beams.

No one would rescue her. No one would ever know where she was or what had happened to her. Her disappearance would be a mystery for a few days or weeks, then she’d fade away and be forgotten.

She was going to die alone and unmourned. And her tears refused to flow.

Chapter Two

from the journal of H. G. Wells

I have, on occasion, been accused — by both my co-workers and the people in the Bureau of Temporal Affairs to whom I report — of behaving as if I knew all the answers. I have also been accused of being arrogant and of ignoring certain facts which do not fit neatly into my own view of the world. I have always discounted those criticisms as either unjust or prompted by envy of my many accomplishments.

I am no longer so certain of the untruth of those accusations.

Since dropping Miss Lane off just outside of Gotham City, I have uncovered several unsavory rumors about her, along with a few equally unsavory and indisputable facts. I have also come to a few conclusions about the young lady, and I am no longer certain that I have done the right thing in this case.

However, now that I have done it, I do not know how to undo it. And I am not altogether certain that I should. Having admitted to this, I intend to take a more personal interest in this case than is recommended by the Bureau. Perhaps I can help Clark to fetch a victory from the clutches of disaster.

And I also hope that I am being unduly melodramatic.

Clark kept his speed well below Mach one to prevent a sonic boom, but he still arrived outside James Olsen's office fifty-two seconds after he'd hung up the phone. He didn't have time to fully process the news that Lois Lane might be in the Daily Planet's owner's office. He didn't have time to deal with the sudden resurgence of feeling for his concept of the woman he thought Lois was. He hadn't even tried to resolve the conflict that had sprung up between his remembered feelings for Lois and his fairly new, very current feelings for Lucy, all mixed up with his very real connection with the Lois from the other universe, the one who'd convinced him to put on the suit in the first place, the one whose husband he'd impersonated for several days, the one he'd almost kissed—

The one he'd wanted to stay with, despite everything else and everyone else in his life. The one for whom his current feelings were quite confused.

He'd have to deal with all that later. He landed on the office's balcony, spun back into civilian clothes, and knocked on the door.

James opened it almost immediately. "Thank you for coming so quickly, Clark. Please, come in."

He walked in cautiously, as if expecting a trap of some sort, but all he saw inside the office was a rail-thin brunette woman standing in front of James Olsen's desk smoking a foul-smelling cigarette. She was wearing scuffed jeans, a brown cowgirl shirt, and sandals. Her ragged hair was cut short, almost above her ears. Her nails were as badly worn as the rest of her seemed to be.

She opened her eyes wide at him and said, "So you're the big hero! You made really good time."

He stopped, not knowing what to do. The internal resonance he remembered from the other Lois was strangely absent here. Perhaps it was because she'd never met him, or because he didn't really know this Lois. At least, not yet.

He offered his hand and she took it. "When I'm dressed like this, people usually call me Clark."

"Got it. You're 'Clark' when you're wearing your civvies, and — Superman? — when you're in the blue and red suit, right?" She pulled her hand back and took another drag on her cigarette. "Hey, you know, I've been out of the loop for a while. A little over seven years, actually."

James nodded and held out a piece of sculpture that had apparently been designated the ashtray du jour. "So, Lois, can you tell where you've been since you left on that gun-running story seven years ago?"

She took one last drag and crushed out the butt, pointedly not looking at either man. "Around, and I mean all over the place. Asia, Africa, Europe, and a couple of real short trips back to Central America." She made momentary eye contact with James

and turned away again. "I was taken prisoner by the chief gun-runner in the Congo, and I didn't get away from him until about six weeks ago when one of his bodyguards shot him dead."

Clark frowned at her. "They just let you go?"

"Hardly. I had to shoot my way out. And they were shooting back at me."

She lifted her left arm and pulled back her sleeve. Clark looked closer at the bullet wound she revealed in her upper arm. "Wow. This is pretty new."

She pulled the sleeve back down. "Yeah, I was lucky. It went through without breaking the bone. And it's a little late to do much about the scar. It'll fit in well with the rest of them, I guess."

James frowned. "The rest of them?"

She limped slightly as she walked across the office to the window. "I have a pretty good collection. Those guys weren't real gentle with me." She turned back and noticed Clark looking at her intently. She frowned and spoke sharply to him. "Whassamatta, Buster, ain't you never seen a woman before?"

He relaxed and put his hands in his pockets. "I was using my X-ray vision to check you for other injuries. I think you should see a doctor as soon as possible."

She crossed her arms and scowled. "Oh? You think I should see a doctor? What brilliant genie whispered that little suggestion in your ear?"

He refused to be baited. "The fracture in your right lower leg is healed, but it's not quite straight. It's throwing off your gait. A physical therapist could probably help you. You have what looks like a pocket of infection in your left knee, just behind the kneecap. It's another reason you're limping. Your body fat percentage is too low, like you've been on short rations for several months. Your lungs are showing some damage from smoking, but I'm sure you already knew that. And you have a little fluid in the lower lobe of your left lung. Have you recently had pneumonia?"

"Yeah, I did." She stared, open-mouthed. "You can see all that?"

"Yes," he replied.

"Huh. You a doctor, along with everything else you can do?"

Clark shook his head. "No, but I do have quite a bit of experience with trauma victims and illnesses."

"So, you pretty much know what you're talking about here?"

"Yes."

"But — you — wow. You are pretty super, aren't you?"

He shrugged. "Some people think so. I can take you to a doctor if you like. Or maybe—" he hesitated, then went on. "Or maybe your sister can take you."

Lois was visibly stunned. "My sis — Lucy? You know Lucy? Is she — where does she live? Can I call her? Wait, that's stupid, the shock might kill her! Does she even know I'm back? Has anyone told—"

James held up his hand. "No, Lois, I didn't tell her. Clark is the only person I've called so far."

"Oh. Good, yeah, she needs to know. Either one of you guys know her well enough to drop this bomb on her?"

Clark nodded. "I'll do it. In fact, I can bring her here now if you like. Or I can arrange a meeting later. Depends on what you want."

"Um. You think she'll want to see me? I've been gone for a long time and she might be mad."

"Believe me, Lois, your sister will want to see you."

"Uh, yeah, okay, bring her here. How long will it take to get her here?"

James began, "About two minutes or—"

Clark interrupted. "I'd say about half an hour."

Lois flared up. "Half an hour? I thought you were Super-fast-guy!"

"Superman. And I am pretty fast. But don't you think she

should have a few minutes to adjust to your being alive? You were declared legally dead three years ago.”

“I was?”

“Yep. There was a funeral and everything. You should have heard what a wonderful person you were and how much everybody missed you.”

“Crap. I didn’t know about any of that. I thought I — I was still officially just missing.” Lois paled slightly, then rallied. “Yeah, give her a few minutes to get used to the idea of me not being dead.” She sat down and pulled out another cancer stick. “I think we’ll both need the time.”

James brought the impromptu ashtray to her as a match flared to life. “We’ll need to call Perry White, too, and then you and Lucy can contact your parents.”

“My — my parents? They’re still around?” She swiveled her gaze between the two men. “Are they together or — can they even stand to be in the same room together?”

James laughed lightly. “You can ask them that when you see them. Let me just speak to Clark for a moment before he leaves.”

“Oh, yeah, sure, I’m not going anywhere for a while.”

The men walked out onto the patio. James pulled the door shut behind him and stood so that Clark could glance over his shoulder. “Is she listening to us?”

“Doesn’t look like it. Why?”

“I have to ask you this, Clark. It’s part of the reason I brought you here. Do you think this woman is Lois Lane?”

Clark hesitated. “I’d guess ‘yes’ but I’m not completely sure. There’s no evidence of plastic surgery on her face or her body, except for her fingerprints.”

“Fingerprints?”

“She doesn’t have any. I’m not certain, but I think they were surgically removed.”

James grimaced. “So we can’t prove or disprove that she’s Lois Lane.”

“If she’s not Lois Lane she’s Lois’ natural double. And she seems to know things that only the real Lois should know, like the former state of her parents’ relationship and how Lucy might react to this news.”

“That could also be quality research and some good acting.”

“It could be, yes.”

“But you’re not certain? Not either way?”

“I didn’t know her before she left for Africa, Jim, remember?”

“Right. I’d forgotten that.” James pursed his lips together.

“Just for the record, I’m willing to believe she’s really Lois unless someone can prove to me that she isn’t.”

“Well, I sure can’t. In fact, I’m leaning that way myself.”

“Have you seen or heard anything to give you any doubts?”

Clark hesitated again. “Her speech patterns are a little off, like she hasn’t spoken much English for a while. I heard bits of foreign pronunciation, like the way she says ‘doctor’ or ‘man,’ like she’s been using a lot of French or Italian or even German. And before you ask, no, her accent and speech patterns aren’t quite like the ‘other’ Lois.”

“Good to know. One more question before you go.”

“Go ahead.”

“Do you think she’s telling us the truth?”

“You mean about where she’s been and what she’s been doing for the past seven years? She didn’t say very much about it.”

“No, she didn’t, and she changed the subject pretty quickly. But do you believe what little she did tell us?”

Clark looked through the wall again and saw her sitting on the couch, her arms folded across her chest, rocking to a rhythm only she could hear. “No. I don’t think she’s being anywhere close to truthful. I think there’s a whole lot more to her story than just being some criminal’s prisoner for over half a decade.”

“I agree with you.” James clapped him on the shoulder. “Now go and give Lucy the shock of her life.”

“Oh, thanks, I’m so looking forward to that.”

Clark landed on his balcony and spun out of the spandex again. He took a deep breath and slid open the door.

Lucy was alone in the dining room, cleaning off the table. She looked up as he stepped in. “Hi. Pete and Lana had to make some business calls, so I walked them to the street and they took a cab back to their hotel. We saved you some cake.” She looked closer and frowned in concern. “Clark? Is everything okay?”

He closed his eyes for a moment and focused his mind. “No, it isn’t.”

She stopped. “What is it? Is someone we know hurt? Did someone — is someone dead?”

“No — no one I know has died today. That’s not it at all.” He took the plates out of her hands and put them on the table, then led her to the living room couch and sat her down. “Lucy, this is — well, it’s going to be a shock. I want you to get hold of yourself.”

She put her hands in her lap and took a deep breath. “Okay, Clark, I’m ready. You can tell me now.”

He sat beside her and held her hands. “Lucy — I’m sorry. I can’t think of a way to say this gently, so I’ll have to just blurt it out.” He took a deep breath of his own. “The call I got earlier was from James Olsen. There was someone in his office at the Daily Planet he wanted me to meet. In fact, she’s still there.” He hesitated, then lifted her hands to his lips and kissed them. “There’s a woman there who says she’s Lois Lane.”

Lucy’s eyes bulged and her face paled. Her breath caught and she stopped breathing. Then her pupils dilated and she lurched forward.

Clark caught her before she hit the floor. “Lucy! Lucy, I’m sorry!” He knelt in front of the couch and let her slide into his arms. “Lucy! Breathe, Luce, breathe!”

He thumped her back sharply, hoping she wasn’t so shocked she’d need mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. She gasped once, then gulped in a huge lungful of air and let it out in a piercing wail.

Her cry tore at his heart and he pulled her close. She clutched at his arms and back and dug her nails into his flesh hard enough to make him glad she couldn’t hurt him. Her eyes filled with tears and her body lurched in shock, but after a long few moments her breathing slowed and her color improved. Clark held her in his arms until she got herself under control and released her death grip on his shoulders.

She finally settled down enough to talk. “Clark, is it — is she — are you sure it’s really Lois?”

He frowned as she slowly released him. “I can’t be absolutely certain, but at this point in time I have no proof that she isn’t who she says she is.”

She wiped the tears from her cheeks. “I mean — is this our Lois?”

“Huh?”

“You remember the ‘other Lois,’ the one who suddenly showed up for a few days and then had to ‘go back home?’ Is the Lois you met really from this — this dimension or reality or whatever ‘this’ is that we live in?”

“Oh.” He thought for a moment. “I suppose it’s possible she’s from some other reality, but I don’t think so. I just met her, but the impression I got was of someone who’s where she’s supposed to be. Universe-wise, that is.”

“I see.” She settled back against the couch. “So — what does this mean for — to you?”

Clark got the distinct impression that Lucy had almost asked a different question. “I don’t know what it means, except that we need to welcome her back. Assuming, of course, that she turns out to be the one and only real and actual Lois Lane.”

Lucy nodded. “Can I meet her? I mean, see her? Soon?”

He smiled. “Of course. Would you like to change?”

“What’s Lois wearing?”

“Jeans, sandals, and Western shirt. All of it looks, um, well-seasoned.”

Lucy looked down at the light blue wool-blend pantsuit and flat shoes she was wearing. “I think this will do. Just let me freshen up and I’ll be ready.”

Lucy was glad Clark took it slow on the flight back to the Planet. He didn’t try to talk to her, either, for which she was also grateful. It gave her some time to think.

She wished fervently that the phone had rung a few minutes later — or even one minute later — than it had. Then she might have heard Clark tell her that he’d been thinking about her. He might even have kissed her, right smack on the mouth, so she could kiss him back and let him know how she felt about him, tell him how much she loved him.

Because she did love him. Lana had known without being told. Her insistence that Lucy tell Clark how she felt had irritated her at first, but Lucy was finally ready to admit that Lana was right.

When Lucy had first met him, years ago during his ultimately disappointing search for Lois, she’d been stunned by his presence, bowled over by his smile and his face and his body, and deeply impressed by all he could do. But as she’d spent time around him, she’d learned so much more about the man inside the red and blue suit. She’d been impressed by his determination and his single-minded pursuit, by his high ethical standards and his refusal to compromise them. She’d looked at her own lifestyle, compared it to his, and decided that living from struggling musician to starving artist to bit-part actor was not what she wanted to do for the rest of her life.

She’d moved to Metropolis, at first to be close to him as a source and to be a sounding board when he followed up lead after lead that went nowhere while searching for Lois, but she stayed as a friend. She’d enrolled in college again, and this time she’d graduated with a B.A. in management information systems. She’d joined Wayne Information Services as a programmer trainee and had risen rapidly through the ranks. She’d even gotten a personal thank-you letter from Bruce Wayne himself for her hard work and excellent results.

Now she was self-sufficient, established, and finally grown up. She regretted her past and all the men who cluttered it up, but she also knew it was also part of who she was at this point in her life. She’d learned late — but she had learned — that men who primarily wanted to share a bed with her rarely, if ever, wanted to share anything else with her, including a future. She had helped her parents reconcile, and she had worked hard with them to restore their family. She and her parents had grieved for Lois together, and they’d learned to accept her loss.

She’d also watched Clark come to terms with the fact that Lois was gone forever, probably dead in an unmarked grave somewhere in central Africa. She herself had come to accept her sister’s death, worked past the self-blame and anger and realized how much she missed her big sister without allowing that loss to cripple her emotionally.

She’d even allowed herself to hope and dream that Clark would someday look down at her and see a woman who was willing to share his future, with all the attendant troubles and distractions inherent in Superman’s lifestyle. She wanted to share her life and her love with him, no matter what the cost.

But a simple phone call had quashed those dreams and stirred up a hornet’s nest of emotions inside her. First and foremost, she wanted Clark to be happy. She knew how he felt about Lois, or at least how he used to feel. If he still loved Lois — or still wanted to love her — then she’d step aside. She’d even help her sister learn all of Clark’s little foibles and quirks, like the way he’d tell a joke on her and step back so she couldn’t reach out and slap his

arm playfully without chasing him, or how his eyes sparkled when he smiled at her, or how he still agonized over all the people he couldn’t save.

And she’d make sure Lois treated him right. If not — well, that didn’t bear thinking about at the moment.

Clark slowed and swung her to a vertical position before she realized they’d arrived. He touched down on the patio and set her gently on her feet, then took her elbow and guided her to the door.

He slid the door open for her. She blinked at the change of light levels, then saw a painfully thin brunette woman with a thin scar over her left eyebrow. Her cigarette hung loosely from her lips.

Cigarette? thought Lucy. Lois doesn’t smoke!

The woman turned and looked at her. Lucy stood two slow strides towards her and stood quivering for a long moment, then reached out.

“Lois?”

The brunette dropped the cigarette and crushed it on the carpet without looking away from Lucy’s face. Lucy glimpsed James Olsen’s slightly distressed expression, then the other woman reached out with her own trembling hands and grasped Lucy’s hands.

“P-Punky? Is that you? Is that really you?”

“Yes! It’s me! Oh, Sis! You—”

Lucy’s vision was washed out by her sudden tears. She lurched forward and grasped the taller woman around the ribs, then lifted her off the floor.

She’s so thin and light! Lucy marveled.

She put Lois down and leaned back. The two women wiped tears from each other’s eyes as they laughed and hugged and tried to speak but failed.

Lucy was barely aware that James and Clark slipped into the outer office together and closed the door behind them. She didn’t see the concerned expressions on their faces, or hear their whispered comments to each other. She only reveled in her sister’s seemingly miraculous resurrection.

Chapter Three

from the journal of H. G. Wells

Something is assuredly amiss.

I have learned that, when I approached Lois Lane in Brussels, Belgium, she was not there on holiday, as she led me to believe. She was working under the direction of her brutal criminal captor, whom she told me was recently killed by his own bodyguards in an attempt to take over his illegal enterprises. This inconsistent information both puzzles and alarms me. Why is Lois doing the man’s bidding if he is no longer alive? If he is not dead, why did Lois attempt to make me believe that he is dead? And if he did not author this scheme, who has done so?

I have not determined why she was in Belgium or what her mission was, but she was not convinced of my veracity until I actually transported her through space with my machine. Even then, her reluctance was evident, until I informed her that we were on the outskirts of Gotham City, and that she was but a relatively brief bus ride from Metropolis.

Even now I can see the faraway expression which settled on her face. It was as if she was remembering a time, or perhaps a place, where she felt confident and in control, where she was mistress of her own fate. Or, it might have been a longing for the Lois Lane she had been prior to her ill-fated journey to the darkness of the Congo. Or perhaps I am indulging in romantic fantasy.

At any rate, I was encouraged to learn that she had enough American money to purchase lodging, a meal, and transportation to the city which she adopted as her home so many years ago.

I only wish she had been looking forward to it with more enthusiasm.

And that I had more confidence in my own judgement.

James softly pulled his office door shut and turned to his secretary. “No calls, please, Mrs. Cox. Clark and I will be in conference room two if you need either of us.”

She nodded. “Yes, sir.”

James flipped on the lights in the conference room and pulled the door almost shut, leaving an opening large enough for either of them to hear if Lois or Lucy came out of his office.

He gestured for Clark to sit down. “What do you think now?”

Clark shook his head. “I think Lucy believes she’s who she says she is. And I trust Lucy’s judgment.”

James nodded. “I agree with you on that point. I’m still not convinced she’s told us the whole truth about where she’s been and what she’s been doing.”

“Did the two of you talk while I was gone?”

James made a steeple with his fingers. “I tried. She dodged and bobbed and weaved more than anything else, but she did say that she’d spent a significant amount of time in the Middle East and in India, and I don’t think either trip was for religious reasons or for personal enlightenment.”

Clark gave a humorless chuckle. “You’re getting cynical in your young age.”

“You really think so?”

“If you can’t take the word of a woman who appears after more than seven years of being presumed dead and three years after being declared legally dead, who hasn’t claimed to be an amnesia victim, and who has thus far declined to give a reasonable explanation of her absence, whose word can you trust?”

“Now who’s being cynical?”

“I call it being cautious.” Clark spun his chair in a complete circle. “What did she talk about while I was gone?”

James leaned back and put his hands behind his head. “Mostly about Lucy and her parents, how she was looking forward to seeing them again. She mentioned you a couple of times, but just in passing. I didn’t get the impression she was trying to fool anyone about who she really is.”

“So, we’re going to take her on faith for now?”

James blew out a long breath. “Yes. I really don’t see any other choice, but I also want to be very careful. Oh, I almost forgot something.” He stood and opened the door. “Mrs. Cox?”

She turned and smiled. “Yes, Mr. Olsen?”

“Would you call Dr. Frazier and schedule a visit for Miss Lane? See if you can get her in this afternoon, or early tomorrow morning if that’s not possible.”

“A general checkup or something more involved, sir?”

“Good question.” He thought for a moment. “This needs to be as complete a physical as she can give. Oh, and would you also tell the doctor that this is for a prospective employee and not give her a name?”

“Of course, sir. Anything else?”

“Not right now, Mrs. Cox. Thank you.”

“Of course, sir.” She turned to her computer and punched up a data record, then picked up the phone and began dialing.

James pulled the door almost shut again. Clark drummed his fingers on the table. “That young lady is most efficient.”

“Yeah, she is. I’d have a lot harder time trying to run the Planet and stay on top of my financial interests if she weren’t sitting at that desk. She’s light years ahead of the woman who was there before her.”

“Have you told her that?”

James looked genuinely shocked. “Of course I have. What kind of employer do you think I am?”

Clark grinned. “A good one who jumps whenever I yank his chain.”

“Har-de-har-har. Johnnie Letterman must be losing sleep

worrying about you.”

There was a soft knock on the conference room door, then Dominique Cox pushed it open. “Excuse me, Mr. Olsen? Dr. Frazier has an opening at three o’clock today. She was a little leery at not having a name, but I told her I didn’t have it and she accepted that. She’s ready to examine an anonymous thirty-something woman.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Cox. Good job.”

Her mahogany face beamed at the praise. “That’s what I’m here for, sir.”

Lucy and Lois sat together on the floor, alternately caressing and embracing each other for what seemed like hours before either of them could speak coherently.

Lois recovered first. “So — Punky — what’s my baby sister been doing for the last few years?”

Lucy rubbed her face dry. “Oh, Lois, there’s so much! I work for Wayne Information Services now as — what’s the matter?”

Lois’s eyes suddenly bulged. “You work for Bruce Wayne?”

“Yes, I’m assistant manager of programming here in — what’s wrong? What is it?”

“You’re working for that playboy?”

Lucy grinned. “Maybe he used to be a playboy, but he brings his A-game to the boardroom every day now. We have top of the line hardware and software and all the tools we need to run a very efficient and productive operation. Why?”

Lois visibly controlled herself. “Nothing. Really, Luce, it’s nothing. Go on, tell me more.”

“Okay. I’m the Metropolis data center assistant manager. I just had my five-year anniversary and—”

“Five years! Wow.”

Lucy smiled. “I know. I used to mark the duration of my jobs with an egg timer.”

Lois scrunched one side of her mouth. “Oh, Punky, I’m so sorry I ever said that to you!”

“You were right, though. I was the quintessential butterfly back then.”

“You’re obviously not now. Hey, what about a boyfriend?”

Lucy blushed slightly. “No. I — I think I’ve taken a sabbatical from men.”

“Oh. Uh, does that mean you have a girlfriend now?”

“What! No! No, I still like men, it’s just — I’m not so sure they like me. At least, not for the right reasons.”

Lois rearranged her feet yoga-style. “What about Superblueman out there?”

“Who? Oh, Clark!” Lucy tried to laugh. “Oh, no, no, he, um, Clark and I are just friends. Good friends, you know, but — just friends.”

Lois fixed her with a glare. “Uh-huh. He knew exactly where you were, though, didn’t he?”

“Sure he did. I was at his place.”

The glare was joined by raised eyebrows. “I see. You were at his place. As his good friend.”

Lucy tried to glare back. “You’ve got it all wrong! We were having lunch with some old friends of Clark’s, a couple from his home town. We were all there when he got the call that — that you were back in town.” Lucy leaned towards her sister and lowered her voice. “What happened to you, Lois? Where have you been for all these years? What have you been doing?”

A brittle hardness came over Lois’s face. “I’m — not ready to tell you that. And I’m pretty sure you’re not ready to hear it.”

Lucy gentled her voice even more. “We need to know. And you need to tell us.”

“I need to forget it. The past few years haven’t exactly been a vacation for me.”

“That’s why you need to talk about it. You can’t keep it bottled up inside you. It’ll burst out when you least expect it to.”

Lois stood abruptly. She winced slightly and visibly tried not to grab her left knee. “I think someone mentioned my seeing a doctor today. I’d kinda like to get that over with as soon as possible.”

“Sure, Lois.” Lucy stood beside her and smiled. “Hey, can you at least tell me about why your hair is so short?”

Lois’s eyes took on the consistency of granite. “It was mostly burned off in a fire almost two years ago. I got used to short hair. It’s easier to keep clean.”

A bad lie, but one which Lucy decided to let slide for now. “Okay. How about I check on the doctor’s appointment?”

Lois’s face relaxed and some animation returned to her eyes. “Sure. I need to take a — find the ladies’ room anyway.”

Lucy followed Lois through Mr. Olsen’s office door. Mrs. Cox was in her customary place, smiling as usual. “Hello, Lucy. Oh, Miss Lane, your doctor’s appointment is today at three o’clock. Is that okay?”

Lois frowned and put a hand on her hip. “Let me check my social calendar, okay, sweetheart?”

Lucy was startled by the sharp edge in Lois’s voice. “It’s fine, Dominique. I’ll take her, unless Mr. Olsen has something else planned.”

“I’ll check, but I think he was anticipating you and your sister going together.”

Lois barked, “Hey, Chocolate! Where’s the women’s bathroom?”

Dominique’s expression didn’t waver a millimeter. “Out this door, ma’am, down the hall to the left, third doorway on the right.”

Lois looked at Lucy. “I’ll be back in a flash.”

As Lois pushed through the door and disappeared down the hall, Lucy said, “Dominique, I’m so sorry! I don’t know what got into her. She was never like that when — before she — I mean—”

Dominique smiled more warmly. “It’s okay, Lucy. I’ve heard lots worse.”

“But you shouldn’t hear it at all! That was so wrong.”

“I’d rather hear it and know it was there than wonder.”

“Oh.” Lucy lowered her voice. “Dominique — do you think I — do you wonder about me?”

Dominique smiled and shook her head. “No, Lucy. I’ve known you for over three years, and you have a good heart and you really don’t care what shade my skin is. Neither does Mr. Olsen.” Dominique leaned closer. “And neither does Clark Kent. You’d be wise to hang on to him, girl. He’s a keeper, for sure.”

Lucy blushed again. “Oh, Clark’s not interested in me like that!”

“Really?” Dominique canted her head to one side and quirked one eyebrow. “Then he’s not anywhere near as smart as everybody says he is.”

Lucy had just opened her mouth to insist once again that she and Clark were just friends when James Olsen opened the conference room door. “Do either of you ladies know where Lois is?”

Lucy pointed to the hallway door. “In the ladies’ room. She’ll be back in a moment.”

“Good. Mrs. Cox, Clark and I are going to out to eat tonight. Would you care to join us, or do you already have dinner plans?”

Dominique’s customary smile fell away and she looked flustered for the first time in Lucy’s memory. “Dinner? With — Well, uh, I, uh, no, I, uh, don’t, uh—”

He walked to her desk and smiled. “It’s okay, you don’t have to come if you don’t want to or if you already have plans. Clark was just tweaking me about not letting you know how much I value your contribution to this office, and I decided he was right. And, to make sure you know that this is not a clumsy attempt at romance, Clark’s coming whether you do or not. If you don’t come, it won’t show up as a negative item in your performance

review, I promise.”

She recovered from the surprise. “And will it show up in my review as a positive item if I do come?”

He stood as tall as he could and crossed his arms. “Only if you don’t spill anything on me.”

She laughed. “I think I can control myself that far, at least. I’ll call my roommate and let her know I have a date with the boss.”

“Uh, this really isn’t a date, it’s more like an appreciation dinner—”

Clark came up behind James and put his hand on the publisher’s shoulder. “Mr. Olsen thanks you, Dominique, and I’ll be there to make sure he doesn’t embarrass you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Kent. Are we driving or flying to dinner?”

“I don’t know. Dominique, would you mind standing up for me?”

She stood and turned as if modeling her dress for him. He smiled and shook his head. “I think we’d better drive. That’s a very attractive outfit, but I don’t think you should wear it while flying with me. Your modesty might get a little wind-blown.”

She smoothed her dress against her legs and grinned. “You’re right, of course. Mr. Olsen, shall I call for your driver to pick us up at five-thirty?”

James raised his hands to shoulder height and then dropped them. “Nuts. Outmaneuvered again. Sure, five-thirty is fine. I’d planned to go sort of dressy-casual, so you’ll fit right in. Can you leave right from work?”

“Of course. Let me make those calls.”

Lois pushed back through the door as Dominique lifted the phone. “Okay, Luce, I’m ready to go see the doctor. How do we get there?”

Lucy smiled and took Lois’s arm. “We walk down to the street and call for a cab. Couldn’t be simpler.”

Lois’s eyes popped open in alarm. “Cab? I can’t take a cab!” She yanked her arm free. “Cabs are — I mean, why can’t SuperClark take us? Why can’t he — well, he flew you, can’t he fly both of us?”

Lucy frowned. “Clark has other plans, Lois. Besides, cabs aren’t any more dangerous now than they were before you — before you left.”

“Uh-huh, sure.” Lois turned to Clark and put her hands on her hips. “So, can you?”

Clark lifted an eyebrow as Lucy reached out to touch her sister’s arm. “Lois, I don’t think—”

As Lucy touched Lois’s elbow, Lois snapped a kick at Lucy’s lower leg, then spun and cocked her fist for a punch. Lucy cried out and fell to one knee as Lois aimed a blow to her face.

The punch came up short. Clark put his hand in front of Lois’s fist and caught it as gently as he could.

Lois’s eyes grew wide and she drew back in shock. “Wh — Lucy! Oh, Lucy, I’m so sorry! I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry please I’m so sorry—”

Lucy held her hand up. “I’m okay, I’m okay.” She winced. “I think.”

Clark took Lucy’s outstretched hand and lifted her from the floor. Lois clenched her fists and crossed her arms across her chest. As she stood in that position, Lucy could see her force the tension from her body.

Lois finally lifted damp eyes to her sister’s. “Lucy. Please. I — I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to hit you, really. It — it was a reflex response.”

Lucy leaned on Clark’s arm until her leg could take her weight. “What happened? Did I startle you?”

“Well — yeah, you did. It’s hard for me to — to hold back. Those reflexes have saved my life more than a couple of times.”

Lucy nodded and flexed her knee. “Nothing’s broken, at least. But I think I’ll have a lovely bruise on that shin tomorrow.” She winced and caught her breath. “I’m just glad I had most of my

weight on my other leg.”

“I’m so sorry—”

“Lois, I said I’m okay. Really. You don’t have to apologize again.” She took a couple of experimental steps. “Yeah, it’ll be sore, but I’ll be fine.”

“Good.” She turned to Clark. “Hey, you really are fast. Or were you looking for something like that?”

Clark shook his head. “No. You took me completely by surprise with the kick. I barely had time to react to the punch.”

“Still, you’re very fast. Um, just how quick are you?”

He crossed his arms. “You know, I never know how to answer that question. Why don’t we just leave it at ‘very fast’ and move on from there?”

Lois raised her voice. “Because I want to know—”

Lucy held her hand up. “I know a way.” She limped to Dominique’s desk and picked up a pen, then handed it to Lois. “Hold this.”

Lois frowned. “Hold it how?”

“Extend your arm and grasp the point, loosely. That’s it. Now dangle it down.”

“Like that?”

“That’s it. Now start counting.”

Lois raised her eyebrows. “Counting?”

“You remember counting, don’t you? One, two, three—”

“Yes I remember!” She took a deep breath. “One, two, three, four, five—”

Lucy nodded. “Any time, Clark.”

“—six, seven, eight, ni — hey! Where’s the pen?”

Clark held it up between his fingers for a moment, then put it back on Dominique’s desk.

Lois was suitably impressed. “Wow. I did not see you move. I did not feel the pen leave my fingers. I didn’t hear a thing. It was right here in my hand, and then in the next instant you had it.” She gave Clark another once-over. “Wow. That is really fast.”

He grinned. “I thought we were going to call me ‘very fast.’”

“Yeah.” Lois smiled. Her expression reminded Lucy of a leopard sizing up its prey. “I think ‘very fast’ is more than apt. What else can you do?”

Lucy held her hand up. “You can interrogate Clark later, okay? You still have a doctor’s appointment to keep.”

Lois nodded and smiled at Clark again. “My secretary is calling. I’ll see you later, hot stuff.” She followed Lucy through the door, walking as seductively as her attire and her injuries allowed.

H. G. Wells sat in the coffee house across from the Daily Planet, sipping his low-fat latte and smiling to himself. He was relatively satisfied with Miss Lane’s progress thus far, and he envisioned a spring wedding for her and Clark. He had convinced himself that his misgivings about Lois Lane were of little or no consequence.

As he contemplated how he might attend such an event without disturbing the timeline, he suddenly realized that a thin, dour-faced man wearing wire-framed glasses had sat down across the table from him. And an attractive but stern-looking blonde woman had sat down beside him, effectively trapping him in the booth.

“Hello,” he ventured. “Might I purchase a beverage for each of you?”

The man stared at him for a moment, then said, “You’re H. G. Wells, aren’t you?”

Startled, Wells drew back. “My word! How did you come to that conclusion, sir? I believe the worthy gentleman to whom you are referring passed away in nineteen forty-six.”

The woman leaned back and crossed her arms. “You’re right, Bill, he is slippery. I bet I can get him to talk, though.”

“Easy, Mayson. Mr. Wells, we’re police detectives, but we’re

not here on official business. We just want to have a conversation with you.”

Ah. Bill Henderson and Mayson Drake. Now he thought he knew who they were. Wells nodded and said, “If I could be assured of your identities, please?”

“You want to see our badges, Mr. Wells?”

“If you please, sir, yes.”

Bill sighed and flipped out his wallet. “Detective William Henderson, Metropolitan Police Department, homicide division.” He flipped the wallet shut and pocketed it. “My partner, Detective Mayson Drake, same unit.”

Wells frowned. “I do not understand. Has someone been murdered?”

“No,” answered Mayson, “and we don’t want anyone to get murdered. We caught the case back when that Tempus guy tried to blow up City Hall and all the people in it. I was a uniformed rookie then, Mr. Wells, and I saw you with that bomb plain as day.”

“What! But I was trying to disarm it!”

“That’s what everybody said on the record, including Superman, so we had no reason to hold you or spend too much time looking for you. But the last time you showed up, we nearly had a disaster here.”

“Please! I assure you, I intend no harm to anyone!”

“Do you read much, Mr. Wells? For pleasure, I mean.”

Bill’s question threw him. “Read — read what, for instance?”

“I assume you knew Mr. Tolkien? Personally, I mean.”

“I have read most of his works, Detective Henderson,” Wells answered cautiously.

“Do you remember an uncomplimentary name for Gandalf, the wizard in the Lord of the Rings books? One of the riders of Rohan, I think, who Gandalf was trying to warn of the coming danger, mocked him and called him Storm-Crow, because whenever Gandalf showed up, trouble followed close behind.” Henderson leaned his elbows on the table and fixed Wells with a gimlet stare. “Are you a storm-crow, Mr. Wells?”

Wells licked his lips and looked from Henderson to Drake and back again. There was no gentleness in either detective’s expression. “I have no intention of bringing trouble to anyone. I only wish to right a wrong done years ago.”

Mayson snorted. “You can’t fix everything and everybody, Mr. Wells. Can you go back in time and make sure my parents don’t get cheated out of their life savings so I have the money to go to law school instead of settling for the police academy? No, you can’t. Can you go back and make sure President Heston gets elected the first time he runs instead of the second? No, you can’t.” She leaned closer to him and growled, “So stop being such a goody-two-shoes! Some wrongs just can’t be made right.”

Wells leaned against the window, away from her vehement outburst. “Please excuse my partner, Mr. Wells,” said Henderson. “She’s still passionate about her job even after all these years. Even if she — settled — for being a cop instead of a lawyer.”

“Oh, I quite understand. I am not offended in the least.”

“Good. Then Mayson and I will be on our way.”

“Before you go, detectives, I was wondering how you located and identified me.”

“Through the Justice League.”

“I’m sorry, the what?”

Mayson smiled with little humor. “That’s the name the cops gave the detail that watches over Clark Kent. Every rookie who comes on the force spends a few weeks with the unit. They record everyone who comes by Kent’s building or the Daily Planet or approaches him on the street. That way, every cop in the city knows something about his habits and loses some of that scared hero worship, and Superman gets a chance to see him or her.” Her smile melted away. “You showed up on the League’s radar for the first time yesterday afternoon, right here in this Starways. It

seems you really like the coconut latte.”

“Yes, well — I assure you that I have no evil motives or intentions toward Clark Kent or anyone acquainted with him. I wish only for his good health to continue and for his happiness to grow.”

“That’s good to hear. Thank you for your time, Mr. Wells,” said Henderson. He and Mayson stood beside the booth for a moment before Bill said, “I’m sure we’ll be seeing you again soon.”

Not if I divine your presence first, Wells thought with some asperity.

Chapter Four

from the journal of H. G. Wells

I am experiencing difficulty checking in with the Bureau. There is no video connection, and the audio connection is intermittent. I am at a loss to explain why those things might be. My communications unit has passed its internal diagnostic tests, but it still will not allow me to consult in depth with my nominal superiors.

The only other time anything similar to this has happened to me was when Tempus trapped poor Clark in time and we nearly lost him. But during that event, I completely lost contact with the Utopians. This situation does not exhibit the same indicators. I know they are still there, but we cannot see each other or speak clearly enough to gather information from each other. I will try again later.

And I am burdened by the knowledge I have gained about Lois Lane. She is not the woman I have met in the other universes. I have not been able to trace all of her movements between the time she disappeared in the Congo and the moment when I rescued her, but there are many aspects of her life which I fear will interfere with her relationship with Clark.

I hope she did not bring her pistol with her in the time machine. I now regret my failure to scan her luggage for contraband items, but her two small suitcases and shoulder bag seemed innocent enough.

In addition, I am constrained to be as invisible as possible by the knowledge of me held by the Metropolis police. Having met both William Henderson and Mayson Drake in several different realities — although I have never before met her as a police officer — I know that both of them are relentless in their pursuit of justice. Should I make an error here, or make myself too visible, I have no doubt that they will move against me, if not arrest and incarcerate me.

James, Clark, and Dominique stepped out of the limo and walked right past the doorman at the Metropolis Men’s Club, earning fierce stares and exclamations of surprise from the group waiting for entry. Clark shook his head and said, “Are we getting in because of James Olsen or because of Superman?”

James grinned up at him. “Me. Unless you have a membership here.”

“Nope. Wait, maybe it’s Dominique. She could class up any joint.”

She laughed lightly. “I doubt it. I’ve not been here before.”

James stuck his thumbs under his lapels and puffed up his chest. “Then give credit where credit is due, good people. They like me. They really like me!”

All three shared a gentle chuckle as the maitre’d showed them to their table. The waiter had just left with their drink orders when another couple was led to a table beside them.

James lost his smile as the waiter seated the woman at the other table. “Hello, Lex.”

Luthor turned and smiled expansively. “Why, hello, James. This must be Mr. Kent, also known as Superman. It’s good to finally meet you.”

Clark took Luthor’s hand and shook it cautiously. “Hello, sir.”

“Please, call me Lex. And who is this stunning beauty gracing your table? Surely, my dear, you aren’t with either of these two gentlemen.” He took her hand and kissed it. “Lex Luthor, at your service, my dear.”

Dominique smiled tightly. “Dominique Cox, Mr. Luthor.”

“Charmed. Oh, how terribly rude of me. Please, allow me to introduce Dr. Arianna Carlin, my wife. Arianna, this is James Olsen of the Daily Planet, Clark Kent, who sometimes calls himself Superman, and the lovely Dominique Cox.”

James and Clark both rose and bowed ever so slightly. Clark asked, “What is your specialty, Dr. Carlin?”

“I am a psychiatrist, Mr. Kent. I specialize in psychotic criminal behavior.”

“I see. Taking a break from the grind tonight?”

“Excuse me?”

Clark gestured at the interior of the restaurant. “I assume you aren’t doing field research here.”

Luthor lifted his head and smiled broadly as if he were sharing Clark’s jest. Arianna’s expression and voice suddenly reminded Clark of an ancient glacier. “If you please, Mr. Kent, Lex and I are here for some light diversion and a pleasant meal. That plan does not include conversing with such as you. Good evening.”

Clark lifted his eyebrows at Luthor, who gave him an apologetic smile and a slow nod. “My apologies for disturbing you, Dr. Carlin. Please enjoy your evening.”

She leaned towards Luthor and whispered, “I want another table.”

“But Arianna, this is one of—”

“Now, Lex.”

Lex nodded. “Of course.” He waved for a waiter. “I’m sorry, the lady and I would prefer another table. Perhaps one with better lighting is available.”

“Of course. Mr. Luthor, Dr. Carlin, would you come with me, please?”

Dominique watched them leave from behind her menu. “Brr. I’m glad this is late spring. That woman is colder than a brass monkey in January.”

James nodded. “She makes Batman look like a Cost Mart greeter.”

The waiter appeared that moment, bringing drinks and an offer of appetizers or salad. Clark ordered shrimp cocktail, James chose lobster-stuffed crab, and Dominique agreed to a Caesar salad with no dressing.

She excused herself to visit the ladies’ room. Clark and James stood as she left, then seated themselves.

James attacked the wheat loaf with great vigor. Observing his actions, Clark asked, “Why didn’t you just give the bread a bad performance review?”

“What?”

“I doubt it can survive your assault much longer.”

James stopped and looked at the knife in his hand, then allowed himself a guilty smirk. “Sorry. Lex Luthor just pushes my ‘irritate’ button.”

“It looks like he must have pounded on it recently.”

“Yeah, actually, he has. The trucker’s union has been making noises about a strike unless the Planet raises the wages and benefits for all the drivers and loading dock people, and Lex was quoted yesterday on LNN saying that those folks deserve every penny they’re asking for.”

“So? The union knows that Lex Luthor doesn’t speak for the Daily Planet.”

“No, he doesn’t, and yes, they know that, but his timing couldn’t have been much worse. We were supposed to discuss a compromise proposal this morning. The meeting was scheduled before Luthor made his statement, and as of ten-thirty this

morning, the union's negotiation team refused to finalize the deal, saying that the rank and file members wanted all their original demands met, and if Lex Luthor thought they deserved a raise it had to be a good idea, and they wanted every penny of what they'd demanded." James sighed. "I don't want to seem like a miser, Clark, but the Planet can't remain profitable if I give in on all their demands. They've refused to meet with us since then unless I state that I'm willing give them everything they want. But doing so would put the Planet in the red unless I cut other people's salaries and benefits, and I can't seem to make them understand that. I'm just not willing to make the union leaders look good for a few months and then take everyone's job away."

"Can't you use non-union people?"

"Legally, yes, we can, but I don't want the bad publicity or the potential for violence that goes along with using strike-breakers. You remember what happened two years ago with the city garbage collectors, don't you?"

"That was caused by just a few agitators from out of state, Jim! The truckers for the Planet won't be that stupid."

James shrugged. "I don't know whether they would or not, but I don't want to risk it. I'm going to try to wait them out, then try to get them to agree to something close to what we had a few weeks ago. I just hope they go for it."

Dominique glided to their table just as their drink orders appeared. She favored both men with a gold-medal smile. "Say, I must live right. Two handsome men having dinner with little ol' me." She waved to them as they stood. "Please don't get up, gentlemen. I'm a big girl and I can pull out my own chair."

Clark sat down again, but James gently insisted. "It's not a comment on your intelligence or abilities, Mrs. Cox, but an acknowledgement of your grace and beauty, and recognition of the fact that you bring up the attractiveness quotient at this table by several orders of magnitude."

She focused her smile on James and almost blinded him. "In that case, Mr. Olsen, I accept your courtesy and thank you for it."

Clark watched, amused, as James tried to speak but had to remind himself to breathe first. "Ah. You're more than welcome." He waited for her to be seated, then took his chair again. "And I think you can call me James while we're here."

"Just while we're here?"

He smiled and nodded. "This is a social engagement, not a professional one. If we can keep it light, I think things would go more smoothly."

She nodded back. "Thank you, James. Please call me Dominique. While we're being social, that is."

"I will, Dominique. And thank you." He sat beside her. "I promise not to abuse the privilege."

Their waiter chose that moment to bring their appetizers and salads. Clark picked up his menu and said, "Could we have a couple more minutes to look this over?"

The young man nodded. "Of course, sir. I'll be back when you're ready."

Dominique picked up her own menu as the waiter left, and the three of them decided on their meals. After ordering and surrendering their menus, Clark said, "Dominique, would it upset you if I asked you about your husband?"

Gazing around at the room, she said, "I'm no longer married."

"I knew that much already. Would it bother you to tell me what happened to him, and why you're no longer married?"

She glanced sharply at him. "Maybe a little. Why would you ask?"

"Because I don't know. And because I like to know more about my friends. I've found that the more I know about them, the better friend I can be."

She waited a moment, then nodded slowly. "I guess it wouldn't hurt for me to tell y'all about this. I'm originally from southwest Louisiana, a little bump-in-the-road town you've never

heard of just south of Lake Charles. Mitch and I got married right after I graduated high school. He'd dropped out before his senior year to work at his father's auto body shop, and I got a job as a receptionist in a dentist's office."

She sighed. "After a year or so, Mitch decided he wasn't making enough money in the auto body business, so he robbed several convenience stores and a couple of gas stations." She stopped and drank some water. "He took off running north and never made it home that weekend. The police cornered him in Shreveport and arrested him. He's serving a minimum of twenty-five years for armed robbery, assault on several police officers, possession of a number of unlicensed weapons, and various other crimes."

Clark's eyes widened in surprise. "That's a lot of time for a first offense, even with those charges."

"Yes, it is, but he was almost uncontrollable during the trial, wouldn't talk to the district attorney or the psychologists even when his lawyer advised him to, got into several fights in the holding area, and tried to grab a bailiff's gun during his lawyer's closing statement. The judge threw the book at him, didn't even give him credit for time already served."

James squirmed in his chair and almost reached for her hand, but stopped himself just before he touched her. "I'm sorry, Dominique. I had no idea you'd gone through all that."

"Thank you." She shifted in her seat and dropped her gaze. "I went to see him before the trial. He told me he'd get off on some technicality, which of course he didn't. As I was leaving, his girlfriend walked in and we had a big argument and I almost got arrested for assault and battery right there in the prison visiting area. After he was convicted, I found out he'd been seeing her the whole time we'd been married, and he'd gone on this robbery spree to get enough money to run off with her."

She leaned back and crossed her arms. "I divorced him about the time he started serving his sentence. Last I heard, the girlfriend got married to someone else. Mitch is out of my life forever and I'll regret my lousy judgment for the rest of my days."

Her story stunned the two men into silence. James finally said, "I'm truly sorry, Dominique."

"For what? You didn't have anything to do with it. And you didn't know."

He shook his head. "No. I'm sorry you had to be clobbered like that. Everybody eventually learns that life isn't just a bowl of cherries, but it's no fun being whacked over the head with the empty bowl as a part of the lesson."

She stared at him for a moment, then forced her lips together and started shaking, first slightly and then progressively harder. James looked at Clark as if to ask him what to do with a hysterical dinner guest. Clark raised his eyebrows and shrugged microscopically as if to reply that he had no idea what to do and he was sorry he'd begun the conversation in the first place.

Then a splutter escaped Dominique's lips. It blossomed into a guffaw, which mutated into a cackle, which finally morphed into a full belly laugh. The neighboring diners glanced over for a moment then looked away. Some were amused either by the young woman's laughter or the mule-kicked expressions of her two male companions. Others were scandalized that such hilarity was being allowed to escape into the eye of the public in such a cosmopolitan establishment. A few simply didn't care.

Dominique finally regained control of herself. Cautiously, James asked, "Are you okay now?"

She favored him with another mega-watt smile. "Yes, thank you. I was laughing at the mental picture you created. I envisioned myself taking that bowl of cherries and whacking Mitch smack on top of the head with it, and it felt great!" She chuckled, then gently touched James' arm. "Thank you again, James."

James smiled softly. "You're welcome, Dominique."

It was a private moment than none of them had anticipated. Clark felt like an interloper as he watched James being drawn into Dominique's gentle smile. He grinned to himself as he watched two of his friends touch on something that might lead somewhere, someday, and he sighed to himself as he thought about his own private life.

Just how much change did Lois Lane bring? How much should he expect to see happen to him? And what about Lucy? Were his feelings for her real, were they mixed up somehow with the very real friendship they had together, or was there something more there?

And did Lois Lane carry the other part of him, as H. G. Wells had led him to believe? Why hadn't he felt that ping of recognition, that sense of connection, when he'd seen her? What was she hiding from them?

Just who was this universe's Lois Lane?

Clark shook his head. Speculation such as this would make him a horrible dinner companion, although it might not matter to James and Dominique. Clark looked up and saw the waiter headed their way, laden with food. He cleared his throat a little louder than necessary and said, "Here comes dinner, you two. I hope you've still got room for it."

James and Dominique both seemed to recover from their respective swoons at the same time. "Room for it?" asked Dominique. "I've barely had a chance to touch my salad."

His lopsided smile tipped her off and she started smiling again. "Actually, I was thinking about all those cherry pits on the ground."

"Cherry pits on the ground?" James burst out.

"From that bowl of cherries. I'll bet Mitch has a terrible headache right about now."

The waiter handed out their meals and hoped their gales of laughter portended a generous tip.

Dr. Tamara Frazier stepped back from the examining table and nodded. "We're all done now, Miss Lane. I'll write a prescription for those antibiotics for you. Make sure you follow the directions."

Still sitting on the exam table, Lois asked, "Is it okay if I get dressed?"

"Sure. I'll just wait out here with your sister."

Lois froze. "Wait just a minute, Doc! You're not going to tell her anything about me, are you?"

Dr. Frazier frowned. "No, of course not. These are your own very private, very personal medical records. Legally, I'm not allowed to pass on any personal information to anyone without your written permission."

Lois nodded. "Good. You let me tell her all that's wrong with me."

"There's nothing wrong with you that good nutrition, regular exercise, and cutting out smoking wouldn't cure. You already know, of course, that your musculature is well-developed, so I know you already work out some. You're a little underweight but basically healthy, other than the localized infection, and the antibiotics should take care of that."

Lois stood carefully. "Good to know."

"Of course. You have to take care of yourself so you can take care of your child. Do you have more than one or—"

Lois' voice was suddenly flat and hard. "Are you telling me that I'm pregnant?"

"Oh, no, you're not pregnant. I just saw that you've had at least one—"

Within the blink of an eye, Tamara Frazier's face was pressed against the examining room wall and her wrist was twisted up between her shoulder blades. Lois's voice was an acid hiss. "Listen to me very carefully, Doctor Tamara Frazier. You will not repeat what you just said. You will not write it down anywhere.

You will not hint about it to anyone. You will keep it to yourself for the rest of your life or I will hunt you down and kill you."

Tamara panted from shock. "Miss Lane, I assure you — ahh!"

Lois pressed harder. "Did you hear what I said, Doctor? I will kill you. You will die messily and painfully over a very long period of time and they will have to search diligently to find all the pieces."

"Please—"

Lois twisted Tamara's wrist to within a millimeter of shattering under the pressure. "Did you hear me?"

"Agghh! Y — yes. Yes! I heard you!"

"You're certain?"

"I'm sure! Ahh! Yes! I heard you!"

Lois slowly released the doctor's wrist. "Good." She stepped back. "Thank you for that comprehensive examination, Doctor Frazier. I'll get dressed now, if that's okay with you."

Trembling, Tamara turned around and looked into her patient's face. The woman's icy stone eyes spoke of pain, of anguish, of relentless retribution, of the end of existence. For the first time in her life, Tamara Frazier was afraid of instant, immediate, and imminent death.

Lois Lane's eyes were those of a monster.

She nodded and slid slowly towards the door. "T-take your time, Miss Lane. Take — you just take all the time you need."

"Doctor!"

Tamara's hand froze on the doorknob and her bowels threatened to give way. "Y-yes?"

"Will you give that prescription to Lucy? I'm sure she'll be able to find a good pharmacy."

Tamara nodded abruptly. "Yes. Yes, I'll give it to her."

"Good." Lois waited a beat, then added, "I'll be out in a moment."

Tamara slipped through the door and drew it shut behind her. She forced herself to breathe normally and ordered her knees not to collapse underneath her.

After a very long moment, she felt almost strong enough to walk. She passed Lucy and handed her the prescription without saying a word to her. She felt hollow and weak inside, as if someone had removed her internal organs with a hot spoon and replaced them with Jell-O. She took three more steps before she was sure she wouldn't burst out crying right there in the hallway.

Fear. She felt raw, naked, uncompromising fear. Terror had drained her heart of blood and frozen her courage. Shock had slapped any thinking ability far, far away from the vicinity of her brain. Dread of that woman and her capacity for sudden violence followed her to her office and sat down next to her, even with the door locked. Panic nibbled at the edges of her consciousness and threatened to overwhelm her.

Lois Lane was a monster, the beast from her childhood night terrors, the creature slithering through her dreams to clasp her and draw her down into a cold, watery grave. She was more terrifying than the creatures from H. P. Lovecraft's horror tales. That face was one she'd see in her nightmares for the rest of her life. It was a face that would haunt her as she slipped into fitful slumber and as she lurched awake from the haunting visions which would bedevil her every time she closed her eyes.

Tamara could not have been more terrified at that moment and remained sane.

She curled up on her office sofa and crushed a pillow to her chest for childish comfort, then pressed her face deep into the fabric. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried not to release her sobs. She didn't want her co-workers to see her in this state. She felt more helpless than a two-year-old alone in a room with a habitual child molester.

If Tamara Frazier never saw Lois Lane again for the rest of her life, it wouldn't be long enough.

Lois finished dressing and walked out of the exam room. “Ready to go, Punky?”

Her sister snapped her head around and stared at Lois for a moment, then took a deep breath. “Sure. I have your prescription.”

Lois smiled and nodded. “So let’s go.”

As they walked out of the building, Lois thought about how weird this assignment was shaping up. When she’d left Johannesburg for Brussels to wait for her target, she hadn’t factored in a goofy little guy with a psychedelic movie prop who would take her close to Metropolis. Or meeting her sister again, something she was absolutely forbidden to do. Or the prospect of meeting her parents once more. Or learning about and then meeting Superman, or Clark Kent, whatever he called himself.

Her decision to sit in Wells’ nutty back-to-the-future-looking sled had been one born out of whimsy, and now she wasn’t sure it had been a good one.

She was pretty sure Rodolfo wouldn’t like it, either. Superman would be an obstacle for her, and anything she did to alter her plans at such a late date upset Rodolfo. And she still wasn’t supposed to be in America, much less let anyone from her former life know she was still alive. Rodolfo would be most upset if he knew she was here. But, as she had assured him any number of times, that was what backup plans were for.

As Lucy flagged down a cab, she thought about which extraction plan to activate. She’d have to get out fast and stay out of sight, especially if Kent could do half the things Lucy had suggested he could do. Too bad he was such a goody-two-shoes. She could have used someone like him to watch her back.

They didn’t have to like each other to cover for each other. She and Carla had proven that truth. Of course, since Carla was dead, she couldn’t argue against Lois’ conclusions.

The cab pulled to the curb and Lois looked inside. Oh, great, it was some dark-skinned guy with dreadlocks and beads on the front seat. She hated those guys.

Some of them were dead because of her. That wasn’t what bothered her.

She hoped that wasn’t it.

— Interlude Two

— Six years and eight months ago

— Madagascar

There were fourteen of them in the exercise yard, eight men and six women, all listening to the drill instructor’s shouted directions. Flex at the knees. Extend the left arm with palm up and elbow slightly bent. Extend the right arm with the thumb side up and fingers straight until even with the left elbow. Shift your weight to the front leg. Don’t bend at the waist. Grab your imaginary opponent’s collar with your left hand and punch him in the nose with your right fist. Hear the crunch and see the blood spurt. Yank your right knee up into his groin. Loop your right arm around his neck from above, secure it with your left hand, lift up hard, and crush his throat. Watch him silently suffocate.

Krav Maga was an efficient way to kill. It wasn’t just for the Israeli Defense Force.

It was only one of the dozen or so ways they learned to kill hand-to-hand. They also learned to strangle a person with a man’s tie, either worn by the killer or taken from the victim, or with a woman’s scarf — again, worn or taken. A shoelace from a high-top sneaker worked well also, especially when each end was tied to a four-inch long three-quarter-inch diameter bolt. When looped once around the neck and yanked tight, it made an excellent garrote. There were also several techniques to crush the esophagus using one or both hands, a side or front kick, or dropping an elbow or knee on the exposed larynx.

Then there were the usual standbys: a rock or metal pipe to the temple or just behind the ear, a bag of heavy shotgun pellets to the bridge of the nose to drive the bone into the brain, disabling

the victim and holding the nose and mouth shut as he or she asphyxiated, thumbs to gouge out the eyes and then push into the brain — the list was almost endless.

They learned how to kill using a knife, how to cut across the stomach or below the belt line to drop the intestines onto the ground, how to cut the throat, how to open the femoral artery on the inside of the thigh, how to slice the wrists to make the victim bleed out quicker, how to stab downward in the neck from behind to cut the brachial artery in the shoulder and at the same time silence the target, how to stab upward through the solar plexus into the heart, how to thrust upward under the jaw through the sinus cavities and into the brain.

And if you didn’t want to kill your opponent, just put him or her down, there were even more ways to do that. There was the stomp on the toes or the instep, a kick to the side of the knee so the leg would bend ninety degrees from the direction it was designed to bend, the always-useful groin kick, the kick to the top of the hamstring at the back of the thigh, a sharp blow to the side of the ribs where the kidneys were closest to the skin, the heel of the hand driven up from behind to the base of the skull, a knife-hand blow to either the carotid artery or the jugular vein, either of which could render the strongest man unconscious. But the last two were dangerous, because they could also kill.

Lois had a slight advantage over most of the rest of the group due to her training in Tai-Kwando, but she still fell onto her cot exhausted each night, just as the rest of the group did. They held their language lessons during the heat of the day and sometimes late into the night, learning conversational and technical French, Spanish, German, Farsi, and Russian. They pushed and drilled and drilled and pushed everyone to the point of breaking, then pushed and drilled even more. Not one of them had the time or energy to plan any kind of escape.

Only once did any of them men try to molest any of the women. The man leading that attempt was bruised and battered from head to knees the next morning and couldn’t stand up straight. The instructor only smiled at him and nodded to the women in the group, then muttered, “You are learning. Good.”

They were learning how to fight and how to kill. Whether or not she would ever utilize those new skills was a question Lois hoped she’d never face. At any rate, she had no time to plan her own escape, nor did she have the opportunity to feel out her fellow trainees for a cooperative venture.

And where would she go? Madagascar was a good-sized island somewhere off the east coast of Africa, but Lois didn’t know exactly where. She might have been able to swim to the mainland or to one of the small islands nearby — a very big maybe — but she didn’t know whether she could swim that distance through the unknown currents or if there were sharks or other predators between herself and safety. She wasn’t skilled enough to sail a boat that far by herself, and she couldn’t believe that any motorboats would be left where one might be stolen. She also didn’t know if there was anyone on the island who didn’t owe Rodolfo big time, who would either turn her in to her captors without a second thought — or perhaps just kill her and be done with her.

So she concentrated on her lessons. It was easier than fighting back, easier than trying to get away, even easier than giving up and dying.

Besides, she was beginning to think that killing Rodolfo might not be a bad idea after all.

After eighteen days a black belt Aikido instructor arrived and began teaching them more ways to take down and immobilize another person. And it didn’t matter how big or how strong that person might be. The proper leverage against an elbow or a shoulder — or even a finger or two — would make the most aggressive man in the training group whimper like a whipped puppy. From the judo instructor, Lois and the others learned the

skills the ancient Japanese foot soldiers had used against mounted samurai or other infantry, and she proved to be the quickest in the class in picking up these techniques.

She learned the arm bar, which could rip apart the opponent's elbow or destroy a shoulder, depending on the leverage applied. She learned several wrist and hand grabs, any one of which would bring a champion weightlifter to his knees begging for release. She learned to freeze a man's hand with a thumb applied to the pressure point just behind the elbow. She learned to shock her victim into silence with a finger strike against the side of the neck.

She learned even more ways to kill with her bare hands.

And with every technique she mastered, every hold she perfected, every throw she programmed into her muscle memory, every punch or kick she executed properly, she imagined using it against Rodolfo.

The last week, the instructors eased off on the physical training slightly and began emphasizing stealth, both in the city and outside it. Lois learned to set snares to trap unwary searchers, learned to dig holes with sharpened stakes in the bottom to disable anyone following her, to set traps to discourage or even cripple anyone pursuing her. She and the others learned to slip through a wooded area in silence, to follow a subject on a crowded city street without being spotted, and how to find clean water in the driest terrain. They learned what roots or berries they could safely eat and how to trap and cook small game.

None of these skills were applied to injuring or killing any of the other people in the group. But they did practice their throat-cutting lessons on a herd of domesticated pigs. Lois quickly learned to point the wound in the aorta away from her to keep from being sprayed by the spurting blood. A cut on the right side, while just as fatal, didn't pulse the same way and took slightly longer for the pig to bleed out. Of course, a cut across the entire throat, while very messy, would slice open both major vessels and the airway and drop the blood pressure in the brain to almost nothing in scant seconds. There was no way to avoid a blood spray that wide.

Lois decided she wouldn't mind wearing Rodolfo's blood.

They also learned to defend themselves against such attacks, since it was unlikely that any of their targets would stand still and let himself be slaughtered by a sudden assault. In this, Lois shone again. Instead of earning her classmates' admiration, however, she saw anger and jealousy in many of their eyes. She knew she'd have to watch her back every minute.

It was a good thing, too, because two days before they left, one of the men decided to take her out for real during a practice session. Lois managed to deflect his first attack and responded by breaking his nose and then his right elbow. The man sprawled on the ground, moaning and helpless, while the instructor shook his head and muttered, "Someone is learning."

Then he spoke louder. "The woman who did this will not be punished. She only defended herself against her attacker. Had she been the aggressor, however, she would be the one punished."

From behind him, one of the men called out, "What if you couldn't tell who started it?"

The instructor turned to face the group. "Then both would be punished." He turned to face Lois again. "You have done well." He paused, then added, "This time."

Lois didn't smile. She wouldn't smile until it was Rodolfo on the ground at her feet, his broken nose bleeding into the dirt, one arm ruined.

Maybe both arms ruined.

And one eye gouged out.

And a compound fracture of the tibia sticking out through the skin of his lower leg.

And a trail of ants crawling into and out of his ears and nose.

She shook her head. I'm getting bloodthirsty, she thought.

On reflection, though, it didn't seem to be a bad thing. Not

here. Not now. Not with the hate for Rodolfo she couldn't help but feel churning in her belly.

He'd stolen her identity, her future, her life, nearly her entire self.

She wanted to return the favor.

Only thirteen of them left Madagascar. She never knew what happened to the man she'd clobbered.

She knew it should have bothered her that she didn't much care, but she couldn't generate the necessary energy. It took everything she had — plus a bit more — just to keep herself alive.

Chapter Five

from the journal of H. G. Wells

I have finally succeeded in contacting my home office, but the news is not good.

The Lois Lane of this world followed a life path similar to the one in my home world up to the time she arrived in the Congo to investigate the gun-runner story which nearly killed her. This Lois, however, was captured by the gun-runners and turned over to a European criminal, who kept her with him day and night for nearly a year while he trained her to assist him in his brutal business. I have been unable to discover exactly what her role was with this man's organization, but it cannot have been anything Lois Lane, crusader for truth and justice, would fervently embrace. I fear that she may have lost a part of herself during those years, years when her youthful idealism would have been crushed out of her soul by the horror and violence she must have been forced to live with on a daily basis.

And I fear that I may have inadvertently placed someone in deadly danger. I must tell Clark about this — but I am limited in what I might say without creating further temporal difficulties. Yet warn him I must.

I only hope I can warn him sufficiently.

As they cab pulled away from the medical complex, Lucy patted Lois's hand and was rewarded with a sneer and a barely suppressed growl. "You're all done with doctors for a while, Sis. It wasn't so bad, was it?"

Lois grabbed the cab door's armrest as they took a corner at high speed. "Not as bad as this!" As the car straightened, she snarled, "Stupid camel-kissin' raghead!" loudly enough for the driver to hear. His back stiffened and he let out an exasperated sigh, and his dreadlocked head shook under his rainbow cap.

Lucy frowned but didn't speak. This woman was so very different from the Lois she'd known and loved in the past. Her sister had always been intense, but she'd never exhibited racial or ethnic prejudice. Lois had told Lucy on numerous occasions that people might look different on the outside, but inside they were all the same color.

The Lois Lane sitting next to her was nothing like that. She seemed perpetually angry at someone or at something. She made rude and vile comments about people she saw based on their ethnicity or some other external characteristic. She offered opinions on the sexual habits and abilities of men they passed on the street, the sort of comments Lucy would have expected her mother to make when seriously drunk.

What had happened to Lois to change her so?

The cab screeched to a stop at a traffic light. Lois opened her mouth to yell at the driver again, but Lucy quickly asked, "How does dinner at my place sound?"

Lois's head snapped around. "What?"

"My place. Dinner. Soup and sandwiches okay with you?"

"I thought you were making lasagna."

"If you don't mind waiting, that's what we'll have."

Lois's expression softened. "Sure, Punky. Lasagna at your place is fine."

Lucy hesitated, but then pressed on. "You can even spend the

night if you want. I have a guest room and no guests at the moment.”

From somewhere in the mists of the past, Lois’ smile slowly emerged. “Yeah. That sounds great. Oh, can we get my luggage from the bus depot?”

“Of course.” Lucy leaned forward and tapped the driver on the shoulder. “Please swing by the bus station, sir. We need to—”

“Non!” he growled back. “I don’ take her dere ‘less I leave her dere!”

Lucy leaned closer to get between Lois and the driver before Lois reached over the seat. “There’s an extra twenty in it for you.”

He ground his teeth for a long moment, then barked out, “Forty!”

Lucy shook her head. “Twenty-five.”

“Thirty-five!”

Lucy’s voice took on a firmer tone. “Thirty even and that’s my last offer.”

He ground his teeth again, but nodded sharply. “Thirty extra it be! You pay me when we stop and de meter keep runnin’!”

Lois grabbed her sister’s arm. “Luce, you don’t have to—”

“Done! You just drive sanely, okay? We’re not racing anyone.”

The man glanced at her in his rear-view mirror. “Maybe you don’ race no one, lady, but I do. More fares I get, de more money I make. Got to pay for all dis fine city livin’ some ways.”

“Just get us there in one piece and I’ll be happy.”

“Huh!” he grunted. “You fren’ not too happy.”

Lois shouted, “That’s because you—”

Lucy elbowed her back and was thankful that she didn’t lash out again. “I’ll worry about her, okay? You just drive.”

The cabbie pulled a toothpick from his shirt pocket and jammed it between his stained teeth. Lois glared at Lucy and flopped back against the seat, then dug in her purse for another cigarette.

“Hey!” he shouted. “You don’ smoke back dere, lady! Read de sign!”

Lois snatched the cigarette from her mouth and leaned forward. “You don’t tell me what to do, you—”

Lucy pulled on Lois’s arm. “Lois, please! Let the man drive, okay?”

Lois turned and glared fiercely at her sister for a long moment, then abruptly flopped back in the seat. “Fine!” Then she crumpled the cigarette in her fingers and threw the remnants on the floor of the cab as if daring the cabbie to say anything to her.

It was the stress, Lucy insisted to herself, and all the newness of being back in Metropolis after years of being away. That was why she was acting so out of character.

Then Lucy thought — and not for the first time — Where is she back from? Why did she come back now? And how long is she staying?

Was the woman next to her in the cab really her sister? Or had something driven out the Lois who had been and replaced her with someone far worse?

James and Dominique didn’t intend to leave Clark out of their dinner conversation, but they did. James told several stories of how he’d started playing the markets using an old Radio Shack computer, a used TV as the monitor, and software he’d written himself, and how he’d tracked market trends for six months before diving in with actual money.

Dominique laughed with him as he told her that he’d actually gone deep into debt within five weeks, but then had turned it around in four days and made enough to get an up-to-date computer and his own office. He hadn’t looked back since then, and without actually bragging told her he was the seventh-richest individual in the world. He seemed disappointed and then embarrassed when she told him she already knew that fact. But

then he shared a laugh with her when she reminded him that she was Olsen Industries’ executive secretary and was well-versed on such public knowledge.

Dominique made him smile again as she talked about her junior high school days in Louisiana and the Cajun country where she’d grown up. She told him about her ninth-grade drama and speech teacher who’d recognized her potential and helped her lose her bayou drawl and replace it with the Midwestern tones of a radio news announcer. And how she’d gone to college on a theatre scholarship, had supported herself by doing small parts in several movies and a recurring role in a television show for two seasons, but decided to focus on business rather than acting. Actors were paid well when they were working, but nearly whether in film or in television or on Broadway, over ninety percent of all actors needed a second job to make enough money to live on, and only the top three or four percent had anything resembling job security. Even those, she insisted, were just one or two bad career choices or personal problems away from bankruptcy.

James told her that she had complete job security with him, that his office had run like a Swiss watch from the day she’d started. She smiled openly and sincerely, then thanked him in a soft voice that hinted to Clark just how much she appreciated the praise.

Clark sat back and smiled. He was glad his friends seemed to be hitting it off. He even hoped they’d eventually take the relationship to another level, assuming they both wanted to.

And that thought led him to drift away, thinking about Lois Lane.

Which Lois should he think about? The one from the other universe whom he’d met for a few days and then seen only once more, the one who’d made such a tremendous impact on his heart and his life? Or the Lois from this universe about whom he’d learned from Lucy and her parents and Perry White and the other people at the Daily Planet? Or the ill-tempered she-cat who’d burst into their lives earlier that day?

He’d expected to feel something upon meeting her, some twinge of connection, some empathy with her or at least a spark of recognition. The only feeling Clark had gotten was a kind of wariness of her, as if she might jump in an unexpected direction without warning. She resembled a detonator set on a hair-trigger, ready to explode at the slightest touch.

Just as if she actually were a feral cat returning to human company after a lengthy absence.

He forced the thought away. He should enjoy the time with his friends. For a change, no autograph hounds had approached him, although he’d felt a number of stares boring into his back. There was little chance for him to appear in public without being disturbed, but fortunately this was one of those rare times.

He came back to the conversation just as Dominique repeated his name. “Clark?”

“I’m sorry, I was wool-gathering.”

She smiled mischievously. “I had just asked James if he’d heard of Thibodeaux and LeBlanc.”

Clark quirked an eyebrow. “I don’t think I’ve heard of them. Why don’t you tell both of us?”

She fell into a sing-song Cajun accent. “Well, as it happen one day, Thibodeaux, he drivin’ along past where his frien’ LeBlanc live and he see a sign nail on the tree what say, ‘Boat For Sale.’ An’ that be the firs’ time he ever hear about his friend LeBlanc got a boat, let alone a boat for sale. LeBlanc got a pirogue — ever’body on the bayou got a pirogue, that be like a flat-bottom canoe — but mos’ don’t got no real boat.

“Well, he turn his pick-em-up truck around so fast he almost lose his dogs right out de back o’ the truck. He pull up in the driveway in front of the double-wide and he jump out his truck almost before it stop.”

She was really getting into the story, thought Clark. Her eyes

were wide and her accent thickened. “Thibodeaux, he run up them steps and then he whap-whap-whap on de door wit his hand. LeBlanc, he open de door and say, ‘Thibodeaux, ma good fren’, what de matter be?”

“LeBlanc, say Thibodeaux, ‘how long we be friends?’

“Why, ‘bout near all our lives,’ say LeBlanc.

“Then how come,’ say Thibodeaux, ‘I got to find out you own a boat jus’ when you gonna sell it?’

“LeBlanc, he get all funny-lookin’ on his face and say, ‘Thibodeaux, I ain’t got no boat! If I got a boat, I done tole you ‘bout it already!’

“Thibodeaux, he turn and point at the tree an’ he say, ‘Den how come you got a sign out dere what say Boat For Sale?’

“LeBlanc, he laugh and say, ‘Oh, Thibodeaux, I ain’t sell no boat!’

“Thibodeaux, he cross all two of his arm and say, ‘Den you gots to ‘splain dat sign!’

“LeBlanc, he smile and point to a nineteen-and-seventy-one Ford half-ton pick-em-up truck at one end of the double-wide and say, ‘Thibodeaux, you see dat truck?’

“Yah, I see dat truck.’

“LeBlanc, he turn and point to a nineteen-and-sixty-eight Chevrolet three-quarter ton pick-em-up truck on de other side of the Ford and say, ‘You see dat dere truck, too?’

“Thibodeaux, he frown at his fren’ and say, ‘Course I see dat truck too!’

“LeBlanc, he raise his hands and say, ‘Well, dey boat for sale!’”

Clark hesitated a moment, then groaned and leaned to one side as he got the punch line. James spluttered and almost spat out the drink of water he’d just taken. Dominique wore a cat-who-ate-the-canary grin as she speared another bite of vegetables.

James turned to Clark. “Maybe I should pay more attention to what she says when she’s taking my calls.”

Clark laughed out loud. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lex Luthor’s dinner companion aim a toxic glare in his direction from across the dining room.

He ignored her. “That might not be a bad idea after all, James. After all, she is the first person your visitors speak to.”

A distinguished whisper reached his ears. “Clark?” it said. “Clark Kent? Might I have a word with you? I assure you that is most urgent.”

Clark lifted his gaze and saw a short man in Victorian dress, complete with a small derby and a long bumbershoot, peering intently in his direction. The headwaiter apparently wouldn’t let him into the dining room, and they were beginning to pull in different directions.

It took a moment for Clark to place the man, but then he realized that he was looking at H. G. Wells. Maybe Mr. Wells had some information about Lois Lane. At any rate, if Clark didn’t move quickly, the man might be gone.

He put his napkin next to his plate. “Excuse me, please,” he said as he stood. “I need to see a man about a horse.”

James looked puzzled, but Dominique smiled brightly. “Of course,” she purred. “Make sure you check the molars for excessive wear.”

Clark smiled and stepped towards the man who might have some important answers for him.

Wells was most apprehensive. He didn’t recall any point in his life when he might have made a mistake of this magnitude. There were any number of permutations, branches, and possibilities, and most of them were not conducive to the formation of Utopia on this world.

And now he had to confess to Superman what he’d done. To say that he was reluctant to engage in this conversation, much less begin it at all, would be an understatement of the highest degree.

However, having offered the invitation meant that he had no choice but to go through with his planned confession.

“Hello, Mr. Wells,” Clark said. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

Wells winced. “No pleasure, I’m afraid, Mr. Kent,” he replied. “Is there a room with a degree of privacy where we may converse?”

“I don’t know.” Clark turned to the headwaiter and asked, “Can we use a private room for a few minutes? We won’t be there long.”

The headwaiter assumed an expression which made Wells think the man was suffering from a chronic digestive complaint. “I will escort you, gentlemen. But I must insist that you depart from the room within ten minutes.”

Wells sighed. “That would be splendid, sir, and more than a sufficient amount of time. Thank you.”

His lips still pursed tightly, the headwaiter turned and headed down a wide hallway.

He stopped the parade in front of a redwood door with the label “Davis Room” on it. “Here we are, gentlemen,” he forced out. “There is a business engagement scheduled for nine o’clock tonight, and we must begin preparing the room in — he glanced at his watch “ — nine minutes or less.” He unlocked the door and opened it for them. “The door will be locked to prevent outside entry, but you may depart by simply turning the doorknob. Please close the door firmly when you exit, as it will engage the lock and prevent unauthorized entry.”

Wells almost bowed to the man. “You are most kind, sir. Thank you very much.” Then he scurried into the room and held the door until Clark followed him.

Clark stopped for a moment and turned to look at the huge room. Wells joined him appreciating the immense space, though he thought it looked like a library from one of the nineteenth-century robber barons. The floor area had to be close to two thousand square feet, the ceiling was over twenty feet high, the furniture appeared to be authentic early American, and the walls were covered with full bookshelves and oil portraits of stern men in formal dress.

Clark shook his head and faced the smaller man with little patience in his voice. “Okay, Mr. Wells, what’s going on?”

Wells pulled a kerchief from his vest pocket and wiped his forehead. “I fear, Mr. Kent, that I have committed a grave error.” “Oh?” Clark crossed his arms.

It was most intimidating. Wells felt like a tiny Capuchin monkey about to be eaten by a ravenous leopard. “W-well,” he stammered, “you see, I should not have — rather, I believe my timing was a bit — oh, I am so sorry!”

Clark held his pose and waited for a long moment, then said, “Do you mind telling me why you’re so sorry?”

“It’s Lois Lane!” Wells turned and began pacing from the middle of the room to one wall and back again. “I failed to perform due diligence when investigating the timeline here. It appears that Lois Lane in this dimension is not who she is in nearly every other dimension I have visited.”

Clark frowned as if in thought. “I know that she’s been through a lot more hardship in her life than the other Lois I met.”

“Oh, it’s much more than that, my boy!” Wells halted under a painting of a long-dead banker. “I cannot tell if this was forced upon her due to her unfortunate circumstances or because of some fundamental flaw in her character, but this Lois Lane is not who she appears to be.”

“In what way?”

Wells pulled out the kerchief again and mopped his face. “Does it seem warm in here to you? I feel warm.”

“Mr. Wells!” Clark barked out. “Tell me what you mean!”

Wells hesitated. If he told Clark too much, it would befoul the timeline even further. It was possible that he’d already said too

much. But if he told Clark too little, the young man might not be as wary as he needed to be. And the future was closed to Wells at the moment, possibly because he himself was involved in setting it on its new course.

“My boy,” he finally said, “I must warn you that the Lois Lane you met some years ago bears very little resemblance to the woman I brought back from Africa. She—”

Clark’s arms dropped to his side and he appeared stunned. “Is that where you found her? In the Congo? After I searched under every rock and giraffe on the veldt?”

“No, no! I first located her in Johannesburg. South Africa. And I first made contact with her in Brussels. Belgium, that is.”

“That’s not anywhere near Africa.”

“No, it is not, but that is where she was.”

Clark stopped and seemed to draw into himself. Wells was relieved for a moment, but then he realized that Clark was thinking. And the conclusions he drew were sure to puzzle him.

So Wells decided to forestall him. “My boy, you must ask Lois the questions you now wish to ask me. I cannot interfere any further without endangering the future.”

“Really? You said you’d already endangered the future.”

Wells sighed. “I did say that, and I have done that. But I fear that giving you more information would do irreparable damage and endanger the Utopian society you are intended to establish.”

“I’m not nearly as concerned with the future as I’m concerned about the present! Now give me whatever you can and do it now! I’ve got friends waiting for me out there.”

“Harrumph! Yes, of course, young man.” Wells closed his eyes for a moment and made a decision. “When you next speak with Lois Lane, ask her questions about the time she was missing and listen to her responses. Watch her facial expressions and her posture as she answers you. It is possible that she might attempt to mislead you concerning her activities for the last seven years.”

Clark blinked. “That’s it? That’s all you’ve got?”

“I fear so, yes.”

Clark frowned at him. “I’d already decided to do that, Mr. Wells. I don’t need you to be Captain Obvious with me.”

Wells started to ask with which branch of service Captain Obvious had served, but Clark overrode him. “I already knew she wasn’t being honest. Most of those injuries didn’t happen in a car wreck or a plane crash. They were inflicted during several different fights over a period of several years.”

Wells didn’t answer. He knew of many of the conflicts in which Lois had been engaged, though he was not privy to all the details. And he didn’t dare hint about her children to Clark. Heaven only knew what Superman might do upon learning that information.

“You’re not going to tell me anything else, are you?”

Clark’s flat declaration brought Wells out of his reverie. “No, I fear that I cannot. I am not even certain that I should have shared with you that which I already have shared.”

Clark lifted his hands to the sides in apparent exasperation and let them fall. “Then why in the name of leftover pizza did you even show up tonight?”

Leftover pizza. It was quite typical of Clark to use such an expression.

Wells pushed aside his amusement. “Because I am responsible for the developing dangers. Had I not acted rashly, these things might have taken the path they were intended to take. Your life would surely be different without my meddling. You might never have met your Lois and you very likely would have—”

Shut up! he told himself. Do not say any more! You dolt, you have said too much already!

Clark eyed him with speculation but didn’t pursue the thoughts at which Wells had hinted. “Okay, Mr. Wells, I’ll be careful around Lois. Anything else you have to not tell me?”

Wells sighed yet again. “I apologize for my lack of clarity, my

boy. I only wish I could point you in the proper direction.”

Clark moved past him and opened the door. “How about we settle for you not getting in the way anymore?”

Wells nodded and left the room, then continued down the hallway and out the front door.

His time machine was hidden in his rented cargo van. He hoped that the clerk would not be in too much trouble when he discovered that Herbert George did not live at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Gotham City. Perhaps it would help if he left the van in the rental parking lot.

Or perhaps he’d ruined the lad’s life. He seemed to be doing such things with ease lately.

At any rate, he had a few errands to run, beginning with discovering Lois Lane’s real reason for being in Belgium in the first place. And perhaps he could discover why she was so reluctant to divulge her whereabouts during the previous few years.

Clark was well versed in wearing outward disguises. He could easily seem to be aloof, stern, firm and unyielding, or utterly confident while wearing his flashy suit. Or he could appear to be gentle, kind, open and friendly, or the perfect confidant in his business clothes.

But he had learned repeatedly that he had trouble fooling the people who knew him well. Which, of course, meant that he was not a good liar. And that, he decided, was not a bad thing to be.

Except sometimes.

James called him on it almost as soon as he sat down. “How was your horse — hey, what’s wrong?”

“What? Oh, nothing.”

Dominique narrowed her eyes at him. “Honey, that horse o’ yours ain’t winnin’ no races any time soon, is it?”

He sighed. “No, it’s not. And I’m not sure what to do with it.”

James tilted his head. “I assume fixing the race is out of the question.”

Clark recognized the attempted joke, but the statement was too close to reality for him to think it was funny. “No. I think the worst thing I could do right now would be to try to fix the race.”

Dominique tapped his wrist and smiled. “Then let’s enjoy our meal and the company. My mother loved to tell me not to borrow trouble from tomorrow, and I’ve tried to live by that piece of wisdom for years.” She lifted her tea in salute. “To our friendship.”

James and Clark both tapped their glasses against hers and they all drank together. But Clark noted that he dropped out of James’ and Dominique’s mutual line of vision almost right away.

If these two can find something with each other, mused Clark, maybe there’s hope for me yet.

His attention drifted, and he inadvertently tuned in on part of the conversation between Lex Luthor and his dinner partner. “— don’t think the Belgians want anything to do with you or your company, Lex! They keep putting you off and delaying any decision to let you start exporting!”

He shouldn’t be listening in. Doing so was unethical.

But it was also getting quite interesting, especially the part about the Belgians, Belgium being the place Lois had been when Wells had located her.

Like any good investigator, Clark hated coincidences.

“Arianna, my dear, perhaps we should not discuss this in a public place.”

“Pfft! No one can hear us, unless it’s that superhero over there, and he’s supposed to be too ethical to listen in on private conversations like this one.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Clark watched Luthor shoot a quick glance his way before saying, “Arianna, you must allow me to make this decision. If my Belgian partners require a personal visit from the head of LexData in order to close this deal, then I

shall have to go there. After all, if the mountain will not come to Mohammed—”

The mention of LexData — the main competitor of Wayne Information Services, where Lucy worked — was enough for Clark to decide to keep listening.

“I still don’t like it,” Arianna grumbled. “Georges is being unreasonable, and he’s not an unreasonable man. There’s something else going on in the background, something we’re not seeing.”

Luthor let out a sign which sounded to Clark like exasperation. “You are behaving in an almost paranoid fashion, my dear Arianna. This is a business deal, nothing more, nothing less. Both of our companies stand to make a great deal of money, and Georges simply doesn’t want to be cut out of the profits.”

“And you’re too trusting, my dear Alexander,” she purred back. “You think you’re immune to coercion or scandal or even assassination because you’re so rich and powerful. You’re not. In fact, there could be two or three people right here in this room thinking about where to ditch your body.”

Clark wasn’t sure of that statement, but he admitted to himself that he could imagine that there were several people who wouldn’t mind Dr. Carlin’s absence being made permanent.

Lex answered her with some aspersion. “Arianna, we are husband and wife. We are not mere business partners. I will listen to your advice and to your counsel on such matters, but I will not be ruled by your words. I do not try to guide you in treating those of your patients with mental issues because you are far more qualified than I to perform that function. And while you are far from a novice, I will thank you not to assume that you understand the world of business and high finance more thoroughly than I do.” Luthor picked up his menu and scanned it. “I suggest the baked grouper. It’s fresh tonight.”

Clark forced himself away from the conversation and focused on his friends again. After seeing what might be developing between James and Dominique, any parallels between them and the pair he’d been listening to were disturbing. He reminded himself that one couple’s troubles didn’t necessarily presage trouble for another couple.

But he also made a mental note to look closer into Lex Luthor’s business dealings to see if he could find something that didn’t look kosher. After all, as Mr. Wells had hinted, it pays to be cautious.

Chapter Six

from the journal of H. G. Wells

This is most vexing.

My machine has malfunctioned at the least opportune moment. I have discovered that Lois Lane was given an assignment, the exact nature of which is unclear to me, to meet a man in Brussels. I am unaware of the identity of this man. Nor is it clear to me what was supposed to transpire between them. Instead, however, I have transported her to Metropolis, where the man whom she was to meet in Belgium is now in residence. Since I have learned that her — I have no other term which might describe this beast who seems to control her every action — her master is indeed living and appears to have no other subordinates either working with or watching over Miss Lane, it seems obvious that he is confident that she will carry out whatever his instructions might be without the need for supervision.

Now that I have learned this much, however, my machine has refused to activate, even though I am certain I have sufficient fuel. I am stranded in this warehouse in a village outside Brussels, attempting to repair my mechanism without knowing exactly what the problem might be. I do not believe that I am in any immediate danger, but I cannot leave, nor am I able to warn the home office of my plight, as my communication device cannot or will not connect to my supervisor’s terminal. And I am in danger

of arrest and incarceration should the local authorities wish to examine my identification or travel documents, of which I have none suitable for this time period.

I fear that Miss Lane’s intentions are not benign. And I also fear that I have precipitated a series of events which might defeat my main purpose in arranging a meeting between Clark Kent and Lois Lane — namely, the beginnings of Utopia on this world.

Lucy had the cabbie drop her and Lois off at the drugstore two blocks from her apartment to fill Lois’ prescriptions. As they waited for the pharmacist to finish, she watched her sister wander aimlessly through the store, looking at the full displays of goods as if she hadn’t seen such things for many years.

She really hasn’t seen them for years, Lucy realized with a start. Where has she been for all this time?

After a few minutes watching her sister, Lucy also realized that Lois always kept herself partially hidden from the front door as she wandered the aisles. Her body was always turned to give her a good view of the front of the store, and she never turned a corner without inspecting the area first. And Lucy could see her visually check out every person who entered the store.

Lucy didn’t know why Lois was acting that way. But it made her uneasy.

Then Lois found the paperback book section and stopped. One particular volume seemed to attract her attention, and Lucy got up from the pharmacy waiting area to look.

The first book didn’t surprise her. It was “Superman’s Women” by Claude DuBarrie, a cheap and tawdry piece of thinly disguised soft porn authored by a former reporter for the Daily Planet. Lucy and Clark had read it separately when it had been published three years earlier, and then they had compared their impressions of the volume. He had laughed at the depiction of Superman as a kind of super-Don Juan, but Lucy had been furious. She’d urged him to sue the author, but Clark had just waved it off. And when Lucy had demanded specific answers from him about some of the women mentioned in the book — women such as Lana Lang, Rachel Harris, Mayson Drake, Princess Diana Asagba of Nigeria, Melanie Davis, Kelly Verlander, not to mention numerous Hollywood starlets — she and Clark had argued. The confrontation had mushroomed until she’d stomped out of his apartment and slammed the door behind her.

It had been their first real fight. And it had taken weeks for them to repair their friendship. Clark had never hinted that Lucy might have been jealous, but she eventually admitted to herself that it was true.

It had been shortly after that time when Clark had begun to leave her with a brotherly kiss on the forehead or cheek, something she hadn’t realized before seeing Lois holding that awful piece of trash. Lucy was surprised it was still selling well enough to be displayed on the rack.

Lois turned as her sister walked closer. “Hey, Luce. This thing any good?”

“No.” She took it from her sister’s hand and put it back on the rack. “It’s worse than useless. The best thing anyone could do with it would be to recycle every copy as cheap toilet paper. It’s poorly written and the few times any real sources are cited they’re poorly documented, and on top of that they’re unsubstantiated. Pretty much the only thing about it that’s even slightly true is that it’s a book.”

Lois smirked. “Come on, Punky, don’t beat around the bush. Tell us how you really feel.”

Lucy chuckled. “If you want some light reading — hmm, let’s see — yes! This one is light years away from that other thing.”

Lois took the book from Lucy’s hand and read the title aloud. “‘Clark Kent, the real Superman.’ Says here that Clark hid his abilities for years before he came out.” Lois frowned at the back

cover blurb. “Came out of what? I’m pretty sure he’s not gay, so what is this about?”

“I guess you really have been away. Clark was engaged to a girl from his hometown until you — uh—”

Lois turned to her. “Until I what?”

Lucy sighed. “Okay, you may or may not believe this, but here goes. Clark put on the flashy suit one day because a woman claiming to be you showed up at the Daily Planet and convinced him that his girlfriend — her name was Lana Lang, by the way, one of the few things in the other book that had a grain of truth in it — was holding him back, that he was meant to be a superhero. A few days later, some guy named Tempus threatened to blow up the city council, and when Superman flew in to rescue everyone, Tempus tried to kill him with a piece of radioactive rock. Superman was weakened but still saved the day by smothering an explosion with his body, and during all the hubbub Tempus showed some video of Clark flying in civilian clothes and using some of his other powers. Blew his secret completely apart. After that, the woman claiming to be you went back home.”

Lois frowned again. “Went back home where?”

Lucy bit her bottom lip for a moment, then said, “To her own dimension on a parallel world where she and the version of Clark who lived there were engaged to be married.”

Lois snorted and put the book under her arm. “Right. Tell me another one later. I could use a good laugh.”

Just then the pharmacist announced over the store intercom that a prescription was ready at the counter for Lane. “Come, on, Lois, let’s get your meds and get you home. I bet you’re hungry.”

“Yeah, I am. I hope you’ve learned to cook since I last saw you, because I still can’t.”

Lucy grinned. “Not to worry. That lasagna I’ve got stashed in the freezer will give you a mouthgasm on every bite.”

Their dinner over, Clark sat in the back of the company limo across from James and Dominique, but he might as well have flown home ahead of them. The two of them were talking about nothing and smiling as if they were high school juniors on their first date together.

Clark was glad for them. He was happy that they were getting along so well, and he was happy that they both seemed to have so much in common. And he was glad for himself because he was the inadvertent catalyst for their warm smiles and gentle handholding.

But he was still on the outside looking in.

His friends accepted him as an equal. The public, for the most part, seemed to have accepted him as a friend who wanted to help. The federal government, despite some dicey days in the beginning of his career, seemed willing to let him alone. And he still had a job that paid the bills, along with a generous stipend from the Superman Foundation which usually ended up in some worthy charity’s coffers.

But there was no one waiting for him when he went home. There was no one to smile at as he fell asleep, and no one to wake up with in the morning. There was no one to dodge playfully while he brushed his teeth. There was no one to share the home chores with. There was no one to cook for him or for him to impress with his culinary knowledge and skills.

Suddenly it was too much.

He tapped on the partition behind the driver’s compartment, and when the window rolled down, he said, “Please drop me off at the next corner, Mr. Roberts. There’s something I need to take care of.”

“Yes, sir,” replied Roberts. “There’s one coming up now.”

“Thank you.”

The window slid up again and he turned to see James’ quizzical expression directed at him. “Superman emergency?”

Clark shook his head. “Not an emergency. You two have fun.”

Dominique leaned toward him. “I’m sorry, Clark. We shouldn’t have shut you out tonight.”

He tried to smile. “Don’t worry about it. This isn’t anything new in my life.” The big car rolled to a stop and Clark moved to the door. “You two have a good time with the rest of the evening.”

“See you tomorrow at the office, Clark?” asked James.

“Unless something comes up that needs my personal attention, yes, I’ll be there.”

Dominique all but whispered, “*Bonne nuit et bonne chance, mon ami.*”

Clark smiled again, this time with sincerity. “Good night and good luck to you also. And I’m happy that you’re my friends.”

Dinner with Lucy had been fun, for the most part. All Lois had really needed to do was dance around any real explanation of where she’d been and what she’d been doing for the last few years. She knew Lucy wouldn’t understand, couldn’t possibly understand, why Lois had done all that she’d done. And she also knew that she couldn’t take it if Lucy wouldn’t forgive her.

As if forgiveness were still an option for Lois Lane.

They’d cleaned the dishes and watched some TV in the living room. Lucy, after commenting that her sister could use a good laugh or two, picked situation comedies. Lois, of course, didn’t know most of the actors and fewer of the shows, so she gave her sister a lot of “This is supposed to be funny?” looks as the evening wore on. Eventually, Lucy’s head nearly fell off when she yawned. The sisters laughed and decided it was time for bed.

Lois hoped Lucy had gone to sleep quickly. The kid deserved it. She’d been through a lot today, and it was all Lois’ doing — well, Lois and that funny little man with the goofy hat.

It wasn’t the original plan, nor was it the one she’d thought she’d activate, but she decided it was worth the risk to make the call from Lucy’s home phone. When she heard the man’s voice answer, she said, “We need to meet.”

A sexy male voice purred, “For such a lovely voice as yours, of course. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Operation Fortitude.”

The voice flattened. “I — I think not. There would be consequences.”

“Either meet me or my boss. Your choice.”

Now he sounded nervous. “I choose neither, please. I mean no offence, but I must bid you good-bye.”

“Then you choose death for yourself and your family.”

A startled gasp came across the line. After a moment, the man grunted out an address and a time, then broke the connection. She hung up, confident that she’d just initiated a valid improvisation to begin her mission.

Lois sat on the soft bed in Lucy’s guest room and leafed through the book she’d gotten at the pharmacy. It appeared that Clark’s Superman character was just as nice a guy as he appeared to be. He didn’t hunt down high-powered crooks or use his powers to investigate them, he just caught criminals in the act and turned them over to law enforcement. And that mission seemed to be secondary to helping out at disasters, both natural and man-made.

As she read more, she understood why she hadn’t heard of him. His initial appearance had taken place more than six years before, well after she’d been taken and while she was in training with Rodolfo and his crew. The entire team had been under media lockdown during those eight months, and none of them had heard anything from the outside world during that time. When the first burst of news about Superman had died down and for the most part he’d remained in the U.S., the African news organizations had dropped the story. Even during her assignments in the Mideast and western Asia she’d avoided learning about him, since that knowledge wasn’t necessary to her for her missions. And on the few occasions when she’d gone to Europe, they had been

quick in-and-out trips which gave her no time to sightsee or get caught up on world events. She learned what Rodolfo wanted her to learn and very little else.

Of course, by the time she'd completed her training, her focus had turned from gathering and publishing the news to not being a part of the news. The only way for her to survive long-term — and later, to protect her children — was to stay hidden, to remain a ghostly presence in the world, to keep anyone from knowing who she was, or even that she was still alive.

She couldn't keep her mind on the book, so she turned down a corner of one page and put it on the nightstand. She smiled to herself as she did so, remembering how frantic she once would become at a single dog-eared page in a library book, much less mark a book in that manner herself.

Those innocent days were a misty memory now.

She wished again that she had a picture of her babies. The security protocols Rodolfo strictly enforced forbade it, but there were times she needed to see their faces. Collette, her little girl, was almost five now, and her mind was as piercing and far-ranging as Lois' had been as a teen. Her son Jean, named for the hero of *Les Misérables*, was only two, but he already knew when to be silent and still and when to behave as a normal little boy.

Sometimes she wished she knew who their fathers were. Then she'd remember why she didn't know and was thankful that her babies would never know either.

The children had been forced on her but she loved them fiercely. The circumstances of their births didn't matter to her. They were hers, she loved them, she she'd do anything to protect them.

Including carrying out her current assignment to kill one of Metropolis' leading citizens.

The funny little man had caught her between arrival in Brussels and beginning her plans to set up the hit, so she'd decided to humor him and see what he was talking about. If he had actually been crazy, she could have easily killed him, and by some slim chance if he did have some way to get to Metropolis without going through customs, she'd take it. Once she completed her assignment, she had at least three ways ready to leave the country. She just had to pick one and activate it.

Given Superman's presence, it would have to be one of the quick ways out.

She'd been shocked when the thing she'd sat in — it had looked like a bejeweled air boat to her — had actually taken her to Gotham City. Security for the inter-city bus lines wasn't anywhere near that of the international airports, which was part of the reason she hadn't asked him to bring her to Metropolis in the first place, but the funny little Wells guy had certainly come through for her. The bus had brought her to Metropolis, and a taxi had taken her to the Daily Planet, where she'd learned that Perry White was no longer the editor, was in fact the city's mayor, and that James Olsen was now editor, owner, and publisher. After that, it was a quick walk to the library to get Olsen's business schedule and address, and another walk back from the library to the Planet building.

She grimaced as she recalled those taxi rides. She'd have to avoid them for the rest of her stay in Metropolis. None of the drivers had met with her approval, and she knew it had been a mistake not to tip any of them. Ready cash wasn't the problem, but every nickel she spent was money she couldn't put in her private accounts. But taxi drivers usually remembered people who yelled and didn't tip. Not to mention the fact that she was used to countries where the cabbies were in business to rip off customers who weren't "important" people.

If Rodolfo knew about that money, he'd never mentioned it to her. He probably believed that the leverage of her children was enough to keep her in line. And it hadn't escaped her notice that he'd given her a longer leash ever since Colette had arrived, and

an even longer one once she'd birthed Jean.

Yes, she was securely hooked to his leash. She was a trained attack animal, forced to do a monster's bidding. She hated and feared Rodolfo for the power he had over her. And she hated herself for it.

Then she'd met the Superman.

She hadn't been impressed at first, but he'd kind of grown on her as she spent more time with him. Lucy was quite taken with him too, and not because of his powers. Lois could tell that her sister thought that Superguy — or, rather, Clark Kent — had hung the moon in the sky, along with a significant number of the stars. No wonder she didn't have any other boyfriends.

He was kind and gentle, yet so very powerful. When she'd nearly clobbered Lucy that first day and he'd caught her hand, he'd used only enough strength to stop her. She knew now that he could have ripped her head from her shoulders with no real effort, but she also knew that he wouldn't have. And that funny tingle she'd felt when he'd held her fist had thrown her a bit off-balance. He was a man no woman could resist — no normal woman, anyway.

Lois no longer considered herself normal. Normal women didn't do what she did for a living.

His questions hadn't been as easy to deflect as Lucy's were, probably because Kent was a reporter and Lucy wasn't. He was smart, cagey without being sneaky, and as far as she could tell, he was honest as the day was long.

Which meant that she needed to finish this job quickly and disappear so she could go back to her children, before Kent could learn anything significant about her. No one would separate her from her babies.

The one thing she'd always insisted on with Rodolfo was that when the job was done, she would make a call to report in and she would talk to her children. Rodolfo always argued with her about it, saying that it was an unnecessary exposure for both of them. But Lois was adamant. She would speak with her children after every job or she'd come after him.

It was a measure of his respect for her abilities that he had never called her on it. There was no way for him to know if her threat was a bluff or not, and he refused to take the chance. Only Lois knew that it was no bluff.

She tried not to think about the training camp again. She refused to think about it again. So she got ready for bed and lay down with one of Lucy's romance novels in her hand and thoughts of Superman flitting across her mind.

She was nearly asleep before she realized it. And the memory invaded her dreams yet again.

~~~~~  
It was the training run.

The training run where the other two women had failed and died.

Once again she saw the blood and bone and the dead women and Rodolfo's pistol growing like a cartoon cannon until she lost her balance and fell into the muzzle and—

~~~~~  
She rocketed up out of sleep and nearly fell from the bed to the floor. The book which had sagged to her chest did fall, and Lois barely controlled her bladder in that moment of obscene terror.

She got to the bathroom with no time to spare. This time she managed not to throw up.

The training run dream memory always tore her up. And the memory of the final training test was far worse.

As she reentered the bedroom, she glanced at the clock. It was just minutes after three-thirty.

There would be no more sleep for Lois Lane tonight.

Lucy wasn't usually a light sleeper, but the knowledge that

her long-lost sister was in her guest room popped her eyes open several times during the night. About four o'clock, she got up and padded to the bedroom door and peeked into the hallway.

A light shone under Lois' door.

Lucy listened intently, but didn't hear any noises. The TV apparently wasn't on, Lois wasn't crying or pacing, so maybe she was just sleeping with the lights on. Lucy hoped so.

She considered knocking on Lois' door, but didn't. They had only just met again and the relationship was too new, too raw, too tender to press her on anything. It hadn't escaped Lucy's notice that Lois had dodged almost all the questions about her recent past. Lois was as much a mystery now as she had been for the last half-decade and more.

That mystery would need to be solved, and fairly soon. The one thing Lucy had picked up from their conversation was that Lois wasn't back to stay. Where she had to go, why she'd come back now, what she felt she needed to do, Lucy didn't know. All she knew was that her big sister was not being honest with her.

Despite the distance between them brought on by the years of separation and half a decade of distinctly different experiences, the realization hurt.

Why was Lois so different today? Why did she seem to hate people with dark skin? Her rudeness to Dominique and angry exchanges with the cab driver were a shock to Lucy, something totally out of character for the Lois she remembered from long ago. That Lois would make excuses for their father's affairs, for their mother's frequent sojourns to the land of the soused, for Lucy's poor grades and even worse judgment where her boyfriends were concerned, for almost anything.

The Lois in her guest room made few allowances for anyone. She seemed distant, almost cut off from other people, even Lucy. And why had Dr. Frazier acted so oddly yesterday? She'd been fine before the exam, but when she'd left the room she'd been corpse-pale and almost vibrating with what Lucy could only assume was terror.

That brought up yet another question. Could Lois have frightened the doctor that badly? And if she had, how had she done it?

Even more important, why had she done it?

Lucy turned and slipped her bedroom door shut. The next time she saw Clark, she'd have to have a serious talk with him about all this.

Assuming she got enough sleep first.

Lois dressed quickly and quietly, then ghosted across the living room of her sister's apartment. A short peek into Lucy's bedroom told her that the younger woman was asleep.

Lois picked up the spare keys from the rack beside the kitchen and slipped out the front door. Her luggage held a few things she could disguise herself with, one of them being the shoulder-length bobbed wig which resembled her old hairstyle. Another was the unmarked biker jacket cut to hide her shoulder holster and a pair of biker boots with knife sheaths molded into each inseam. They weren't comfortable, but she didn't have that far to go. And the knives were something of a comfort to her after Libya.

She locked the front door and catfooted down the stairs to the side utility entrance. As she'd expected, the door was propped open to allow the trash to be taken out to the main dumpster. It was a simple matter to walk out under the two sleepy workers' noses as they yawned through their labors.

The subway was three blocks away and her destination was four more from the closest underground terminus, but she refused to take a cab. They were too easy to trace, and at four-thirty in the morning a cabbie would be far more likely to remember her than a subway conductor or ticket-seller would. So the two ten-minute walks and the twenty-five minute ride were small prices to pay for her continued safety.

As she approached Nick's All Night Bar and Grill, just across the street from the Greyhound bus terminal and a block from New Troy General Hospital, she automatically checked her perimeter for any suspicious characters. No one triggered her paranoia, so she pushed through the door and went to the breakfast bar.

It was the kind of diner where one would expect to see William Holden chatting with Humphrey Bogart while Lauren Bacall hung decoratively on Bogey's arm. She half-expected the scene to revert to black-and-white as Burt Lancaster matched quarters with Kirk Douglas at the bar to see who paid for their chicken sandwiches. Even the Formica-topped tables and metal-framed chairs were appropriate for that period.

The older woman behind the counter — who looked more like Lon Chaney than Lauren Bacall — looked at her with eyes as deep as a child's wading pool and grunted, "Whaddaya want?"

"Coffee, black with five sugars," Lois growled back. "And you got any fresh Danish from Brussels?"

The woman's face didn't move but her pen hesitated, then finished writing the order ticket. "No Danish till six. I'll get your java." Her path to the coffee pot took her past a small non-descript man with a thin mustache and a nervous tic in his fingers.

As she waited for her contact, she sipped her coffee and checked out the other diners without being obvious about it. A short, powerful Hispanic man in a booth in the corner was munching on toast while his tall black female companion leaned away from him and dabbed at her nose with a handkerchief. The pairing was unusual enough to be staged, but Lois didn't think so. She picked them up too quickly for them to be police.

She'd watch for them when she left anyway.

Aside from that couple, there were two men in bus uniforms wolfing down what appeared to be bacon cheeseburgers, a woman at the far end of the bar smoking a thin cigar and sipping a milk shake, and three young men with nature-boy country haircuts and small disposable cameras who looked and acted like they'd slipped their senior trip chaperones for the night. She'd have to be careful not to let them catch her face in any "candid" shots.

The twitchy little man finally got up and nervously approached her. "Er — excuse me, please. I mean no offence, but you look very familiar to me. Perhaps — perhaps we have met before?"

"Maybe." She turned to him and tried out the contact phrase. "Have you ever been to Siberia, Florida?"

A grin tried to appear on his face as he jerkily sat on the stool beside her. "Yes, I — I have. Last summer during the wheat harvest."

It was him. Now all she had to do was get him to agree to her proposal.

She gave him her best smile and lowered her voice. "I think we can do business. Just act like I'm a hooker and we're negotiating a deal."

He actually paled at the suggestion, so she added, "That's just to fool the 4H boys in the booth near the door."

He jerked his head around to look at them and they burst out in suppressed giggles. "Them? Why don't you just — just take them — I mean, get rid of—"

She leaned closer and almost whispered, "If I kill anyone who isn't my target, it'll be you. Now let's get down to business."

He swallowed hard and sat straight on the stool. "What do you want?"

She told him. As expected, he wanted nothing to do with it. "No!" he squeaked. "No, I — I'm sorry, I can't do that."

"Lower your voice, Slick," she purred. "Act like you're anticipating the next hour with relish and not terror."

"But I can't do as you ask! Those negotiations are at a sensitive juncture, and my boss would have my head delivered to my wife in a box if I fouled them up!"

Lois put her hand on his wrist and leaned closer. "I'm not

asking you to foul up the negotiations. My boss has an interest in things happening the way your boss wants them to happen. All I need is a slight — hitch, I guess you'd call it, in the deal."

Twitchy wiped his face with his free hand. "This is more than a hitch."

"You'll recover from it. Who knows, it might even help the union get what they're asking for."

He shook his head. "I can't, I really—"

Lois glanced up to make sure the gargoyle-faced waitress was out of earshot, then pulled open her jacket for a moment. "Plan B involves me leaving you dead in front of union headquarters. I'd rather not fall back to that one because it's more risk for me. But one of the plans we've discussed will happen. Your choice, Sport, either plan A or plan B. You have five days to decide."

His wrist suddenly felt clammy and his eyes shrank to pinpoints. "What? No! You — you can't just—"

"Yes I can, Slick." She pulled him closer and kissed him, ignoring the gasps and giggles of the schoolboys behind her. With her lips beside his ear, she said, "Just like Debbie Harry said, Slick. One way or the other." She smiled brightly and tapped his nose with her index finger. "It's your call."

She left two dollars under her cup and sauntered to the door. Just as she put her hand on the push bar, she turned to the three teens and said in a throaty voice, "Come see me later, boys. I'll give you a group discount."

She slinked out the door into the night, confident that the boys would remember to breathe before they passed out.

The willowy black woman looked at her partner and softly sobbed, "Well, Miguel? Do we stay with the nervous little mob guy or follow the woman he just talked to?"

Miguel shrugged. "Mob guy. He's our assignment tonight."

"What if she's important?"

Miguel shrugged again. "You think she's important, you tell the day shift sergeant. He loves to hear about working girls expanding their horizons. Right now, you need to stay in character. We don't want mob guy to figure out we're cops."

"I think she might be important."

He sighed. "Dana, she's just a streetwalker trying for an easier mark than a biker gang. Those guys can be pretty rough. And they usually don't tip well."

Dana dabbed at her tears to add a little more irritant to her eyes. "I don't think so. She had the jacket and boots but no club logo."

"So she's a freelancer! Let it go, okay?"

Dana didn't answer this time. She only glanced out the window as if avoiding eye contact with Miguel. The woman in question was striding toward the subway entrance with her head up, her eyes probing every shadow.

Hookers were victims. Victims walked with their heads down, trying to avoid being seen, trying to stay away from the predators.

Whoever this woman was, she was no victim. She was one of the predators.

Maybe one of the most dangerous ones.

— Interlude Three

— Six years and six months ago

— Western Sicily

Of the thirteen who left Madagascar and journeyed to Sicily, one man and two women couldn't take the increased intensity of the training and fell out, physically unable to continue. Each one was carried from wherever he or she fell and not seen again. As a group, they were physically exhausted, worn, stressed, and emotionally broken down, barely able to make it from day to day.

They were also learning how to do things few other people in the world could do.

Lois knew, intellectually, that the goal was to mold their minds to obey any and all orders and develop their bodies to carry

out those orders, but she didn't have the energy to resist or even truly care. She was one of the youngest and most athletic of the group, but it was all she could do to get through the day. The only plus at this time was that the food was excellent, even though there was rarely enough to make her full. There were no scales around, but she had to take up her pants in the waist twice.

She lay in bed one night, thinking about her sculpted body. There were rich women in Metropolis who would have paid dearly for a shape like the one she had now. Of course, those same women wouldn't last half a morning in Rodolfo's training regimen. Lois almost smiled until she remembered that Rodolfo's training regimen was designed to make her a soldier, not a fashion model or trophy wife.

Then she almost smiled because of what she knew she could do. Like the army commercial boasted, she did more before breakfast than most people did all day.

Lois was determined not to be one of those who broke.

After about three more weeks, the boot class, which now consisted of six men and four women, entered a new, even more intense phase. Each man was paired with another man as a training partner, each woman with a woman. The complete training regimen was intense, it was brutal, and it would take a total of eight months. Each pair trained with all sorts of weapons, continued training in multiple forms of hand-to-hand combat, and for day-to-day wilderness survival. It wasn't unusual for all ten of them to drag themselves to bed at midnight and be awakened at three-thirty the next morning for a thirty-mile hike with full pack, dummy weapons, and fake ammunition. And they did all this while continuing to learn enough Arabic, French, Italian, Spanish, Farsi, and German to blend into the general populace in just about any country in Europe or the Middle East.

They were still fed, of course, but the meals were sometimes delivered to them cold in the field, then scooped out of plastic or metal containers and eaten with fingers. Lois lost a few more pounds, but by now she was whipcord lean and rock hard, just like the rest of them.

They were graded on their team's performance, not their individual scores. Both members of each pair had to succeed for either of them to continue the training.

And they were all told that from that point forward, the penalty failing any part of the training was death.

They were told repeatedly what the price of failure would be. They were told that their former lives were over, that their loved ones were convinced that they were dead, and that there was no life for any of them to go back to. They would either finish their training or die in the attempt, along with each one's training partner.

Lois thought it was a stupid and wasteful way to create mercenaries, but they had taught her not to complain. Rodolfo's training methods were brutal but effective.

One woman named Nancy never quite believed either that Rodolfo would kill them for failing or that they could never go back to their former lives. Nancy and her training partner Tiffany argued about the consequences of failure for six weeks before Nancy fell during an obstacle course run and wrenched her knee badly. Tiffany tried to get her off the trail and hidden in the brush before the sweepers found them, but it didn't happen.

Lois and her partner — a tall, hard-faced French redhead named Carla — finished the course first and were surprised when they were kept at the finishing area, since the usual procedure was for the teams completing the course to move on to the next item for the day. The three male teams were also kept there as they completed the course.

Then Rodolfo arrived.

The first thing he did was have canteens of water passed out to the finishers. Then he told them to sit down and rest. Carla

almost refused until Lois tugged on her sleeve and whispered, “You’d better sit down. He wants us to see something.”

Carla sat. “I would wager that he will force Nancy and Tiffany to run the course once again. They are late.”

“I wonder if one of them got hurt?”

Carla tipped her head to one side. “Of course. That must be the answer. Rodolfo is going to show us his magnanimous nature and his compassion by allowing them to continue despite a single failure.” She leaned closer to Lois and smiled with just her mouth. “Congratulations. You have once again discovered the real reason we are here.”

“Uh-huh. You should have a warning light in your forehead that comes on when you pour on that much sarcasm at one time. A person could overdose on it.”

One of the guards lifted his 12-gauge riot gun and audibly snapped off the safety. “Silence!” he growled. “Rodolfo will tell you when to speak!”

Lois nodded to the man and ducked her head, but Carla glared daggers at him. Lois wanted to tell her to cut it out, but she didn’t. Not only would she be talking after being ordered to be silent, she didn’t know if Carla would take her literally and try to remove something from the man’s body with her knife. Carla carried the largest and heaviest combat knife of any of them, kept it razor sharp, and not only did she know very well how to use it, she relished each and every opportunity to demonstrate her skill with it.

After a long few minutes, during which Lois slipped her backpack from her shoulders to the ground between her feet, two men carrying a stretcher brought Nancy to the clearing. Tiffany followed a moment later and knelt down beside Nancy when the men set the stretcher down. They could hear Tiffany reprimanding Nancy for not moving into cover quickly enough, and Nancy’s response that she had been hurt made no impact on Tiffany’s stuttering apprehension.

Rodolfo slowly walked over to the two women and smiled. “I understand that one of you is injured.”

Nancy said, “Yes. I fell and twisted my knee.”

“Did your partner not attempt to move you to concealment?”

“Yes!” Tiffany blurted. “I tried, I really did, but she wouldn’t let me!”

“Is that true, Nancy?”

Nancy sighed. “Yes. Tiff tried to help me get up, but my leg hurt too much. I’m going to need a doctor for my knee. I’m pretty sure I tore something important in there.”

“Oh, I do not believe that you will need a doctor.”

“But my knee is really hurt and—”

Rodolfo drew a small revolver from his pants pocket and shot Nancy in the belly three times as she lay on the stretcher.

Tiffany whimpered as she fell back and tried to crab-crawl out of the way, but she didn’t make it. Rodolfo shot her twice, once in the middle of her chest and once in the face.

She was dead before her head slapped against the ground.

Then, as Nancy bled out between her clasped fingers, Rodolfo turned to the remaining eight trainees. “I am sorry that you had to learn this by an object lesson. You were warned, but at least two of you did not listen. If you fail, you die. If you die, your training partner will also die.”

Rodolfo seemed to grow huge in Lois’ eyes. The small pistol looked like a cannon as he pointed it at Lois’ face.

Then he pulled the trigger.

The hammer clicked on a discharged cylinder.

He smiled at Lois’ panicked expression. “A utility weapon, caliber .38 Special, sometimes called a hideout gun. Although it holds but five rounds and is accurate only in close range due its very short barrel, it can be very useful at times. You should remember just how useful.” The revolver slid back into his pocket. “We will now take a brief break while Lois and Lester

change their clothing.”

Still panting, Lois glanced down at herself, wondering what he meant. Then she saw the dark wet stain spreading out below her belt and she understood. A glance at Lester told her that he, too, had emptied his bladder.

Rodolfo had intended to terrify the rest of them with his ruthlessness. It had worked on her and on Lester. It probably had even made Carla’s heart speed up for a moment.

It would not work on Lois ever again. She swore it to herself.

She stood and pulled her spare trousers and underwear out of her backpack and stripped without moving behind a bush or a tree. The flare of terror in her chest transmuted to cold fury and settled deep in her belly. She would do everything Rodolfo told her to do. She would obey his every command. And she would finish this training and become whatever he wanted her to become.

Because then she would be fully capable of killing him.

Chapter Seven

from the journal of H. G. Wells

My situation has advanced beyond vexing and has become most disturbing.

I have finally determined precisely why my machine will not activate, and also why I am unable to utilize my communications device to contact my nominal superiors. It is not the fault of the machinery, nor have I forgotten how to utilize it properly. It is because the time stream itself has become muddled, almost certainly due to my eagerness to bring Clark Kent and Lois Lane together and my apparent interference with their destinies.

Had this Clark met this Lois some years ago when they were both younger, before Lois was taken from the Congo, I believe it is probable that they would have followed a path similar to that which their analogues on most other worlds have; namely, they would have fallen in love and married in due time. But they are both older, have had far different life experiences, and have grown — or, in Lois’ case, possibly been twisted — into someone quite different from the person either one was half a decade past. I truly hope that I have not damaged either one’s chances for happiness.

It is also possible that there are forces at work outside my ken which are attempting to prevent Lois and Clark from becoming who I believe they should be, both to each other and to the world. And if that is so, it is also possible that I have indeed frustrated those evil intentions.

Perhaps I have once again thwarted a plot engineered by my enemy Tempus, this time without his deliberately planning to do so. Forcing Lois Lane to become a criminal would certainly suit his convoluted sense of irony, and my foiling such a scheme would surely cause him much grief. Yet I cannot depend on such a set of circumstances unfolding in this manner.

More troubling, there are aspects to this version of Lois Lane which are hidden to me. I am still unable to trace her actions and her movements from the week she arrived in the Congo and disappeared until the day I deliberately provoked an encounter with her in Brussels. I have uncovered only vague rumors and unsettling references to her. And there are signs that her current method of supporting herself is not at all legal, although I believe she may be forgiven much for surviving on her own for so long in such hostile environments.

But I cannot be certain of any of this. I am merely speculating, and doing so without verifiable information. The outcome of whatever I have set in motion is still very much in doubt. I am unable to peer into the future of this timeline beyond an hour at most, though that maximum is not reachable often. Most of my scrutiny of what will come has been limited to mere minutes, although I have succeeded in avoiding being noticed by the police on two occasions by such narrow margins.

Still, I am somewhat alarmed. I can only hope my warning to

Clark was clear enough without disclosing too much information. And since I am stuck here in Belgium, I cannot communicate with either Mr. Kent or Miss Lane at all, either to elicit information from either of them or add to their store of knowledge.

I desperately hope that I have not made a terrible error.

Detective Mayson Drake paid for her order at the counter, then slipped into the coffee shop's common area and sat down at the table beside two young officers in civilian garb. One was a short, stocky young Latino man, and the other was a tall but rail-thin black woman. None of the three looked directly at Clark Kent's apartment building across the street.

Mayson nodded to the two. "Dana, Miguel. How's it going today?"

Miguel took a sip of his coffee. "I think I've gained a few pounds on this detail, Detective."

She almost smiled. "I'm just Mayson. And you wouldn't be the first to finish this assignment a little tighter in the waistband than when you started."

Dana took a bite of her cinnamon roll and sighed. "Speak for yourself. I've never eaten better than I am right now."

"No silver spoon in your mouth?"

Dana grimaced. "We each had our own knife and fork, had to wash it after every meal. Only Mama and Daddy had spoons."

"I see. Then you are coming up in the world, aren't you?"

"I don't have to wash my silverware every time I'm done eating. And when I took my rookie physical, the department doctor told me I could afford to put on another fifteen pounds of muscle." Dana licked her fingers and sighed. "Still working on it."

Mayson looked up as the perky young barista placed her coffee and Danish in front of her. "Anything else, ma'am?"

Mayson shook her head. "Okay, then," the young girl bubbled, "you folks just let me know if I can get you anything. Just ask for Greta."

"We will, Greta. Thanks."

Greta bounced away as Mayson turned to the other two. "How about a quick and informal report, guys?"

Dana looked at Miguel and nodded, so he spoke. "Everything seemed normal until five days ago. Big 'S' flew off while he still had dinner guests at his place. Two of the three, Pete and Lana Ross, left by the front door where the doorman called a cab. The third guest, Lucy Lane, escorted the Rosses to the front door and returned to the apartment just before Big 'S' flew back. After about twelve minutes, the two of them flew off. Ms. Lane has not returned the apartment via the front door since then, and if Big 'S' flew her in he did it on the sly."

Mayson turned to Dana. "Anything to add?"

"Not to an informal report, no."

"So let's pretend it's a little more formal."

Dana nodded. "Okay. Big 'S' has seemed preoccupied since then. We caught a bad wreck two nights ago as we were going off-shift, seven or eight cars in a pileup on the Curt Swan. We assisted the officers who responded to the emergency call. Big 'S' got there in plenty of time, but he acted like his mind was somewhere else."

Mayson frowned. The car wreck and Superman's assistance at the scene were both common knowledge, printed in the daily papers and mentioned on the local newscasts, but the information about Clark's attitude was news to her. "Just how distracted was he?"

"Not to the point where anyone was hurt or had medical care delayed, but when he was unpacking the cars, he lifted one and the bumper came off in his hand. It dropped and hit the ground pretty hard, too, although I think it would have been totaled anyway. But he just looked at that bumper for a few seconds like he was surprised. After that he seemed to focus in more and there

were no other incidents."

"Why didn't I hear about it before now?"

"We didn't put it in our daily log," offered Miguel, "because we were just assisting. It wasn't our precinct and wasn't our beat. Besides, we were off duty." He slurped some more coffee. "Ask the regulars who showed up right before we did how come they didn't write it up."

"Oh, I will."

Mayson's tone seemed to catch the attention of the younger officers. How long, she wondered, had it been since she looked and acted so young?

Miguel's voice brought her back to the present. "Will there be anything else, Detective?"

Mayson noted that she'd been demoted to her title again. "No. And I didn't come down here to bust you two for anything. I'm just getting a little nervous in my old age, I guess."

Dana tilted her head and smiled. "Now, Mayson, you're not that old. You don't look a day over forty-two."

The shot hit home and Mayson's eyes narrowed. "You don't know me well enough to kid with me like that, Officer Banquo. You two children just keep your eyes on Kent and keep your mouths shut." She lurched to her feet, grabbed her coffee and Danish, then shoved the chair with her hip hard enough to rattle the salt-and-pepper shakers sitting against the wall. "And don't fudge on your next report."

With that bit of intimidation finished, Mayson turned and stalked out of the Starways shop. There was something going on with Clark Kent, something that she didn't like, and it had something to do with H. G. Wells being here. The man was sure to cause trouble — she could almost taste it. Mayson didn't know all the details, and she didn't have any evidence to back up her feelings, but she could sense something in the air, something that did not bode well for Clark's well-being. Whatever it was, she'd find it, thwart it, and protect the man who protected the city she loved.

And she'd protect him, too. After all, she loved him even more than she loved the Big Apricot, the City with the Long Reach.

Even if neither of them knew it.

Lex put his office phone down and glanced up at the slight noise his visitor had made. He was mildly surprised to see his wife standing near the door, her body still with what he hoped was controlled tension.

He rose and came around the desk. "My dear, I didn't know you were coming. I know it's early in the day, but since you're here, would you like to have lunch with me?"

She pulled off her sunglasses and lifted red eyes to him. "Lex — it's Georges. He — he's done something very bad."

He stopped with his hands before him. "What has Georges done?"

She snatched his hands out of the air. "I think — I think he's sent someone after you."

"Wait — Arianna, I don't understand what you mean. Who is after me? And what is that person to do to me?"

She squeezed his hands harder. "I don't know who, darling, but I think I know what Georges intends."

"And that would be — what?"

She closed her eyes for a moment and took a long breath. When she finished exhaling, she almost whispered, "I think Georges has sent someone to kill you."

Lex' mouth opened but nothing came out.

He forced himself to consider the situation objectively. Georges Daquin was his closest competitor in the international trade of cutting-edge technology, not a Mafia chief intent on eliminating a rival. Daquin Industries and LexLabs had simultaneously announced a newer, faster peripheral processor

designed to make computer networks move data from one network node to another up to five times faster than units from Bob Fences' hardware company could perform the same operations. Lex' upcoming trip to Brussels was supposed to be the first step in creating a joint venture to produce the chips and the controllers they would power. Both companies would make massive amounts of money.

But if Arianna was right, and Georges had Lex killed, the LexLabs chip would not move to the market before Daquin Industries made their chip available. It would cost Lex' company millions of dollars and do incalculable damage to their reputation. And Georges would surely poach away as many of LexLabs' top researchers and technical people as he could afford. It would be a crippling economic blow, not just to Lex' companies but to the entire Eastern seaboard.

By the time Georges became a suspect in Lex' murder, it might be too late for Interpol or U.S. law enforcement to bring him to trial. Any evidence of such a deed would have been hidden or destroyed as soon as the deed was accomplished.

If Arianna was right—

He came out of calculation mode. "How and when did you learn of this?"

"This morning," she answered. "Nigel St. John and Asabi both came in about two minutes after you left home. They explained everything to me and told me to tell you what they'd said. They're going to try to trace the hired killer."

"Do you know how they plan to trace him?"

She waved one hand aimlessly. "Not all of it. Nigel said something about a visa search for any names he might recognize. Asabi added something about a network of informants he runs. I'd never heard of it before, but he thought he could come up with something by this evening."

Lex nodded. "Very well. If this is accurate — and neither Asabi nor Nigel frightens easily — then you must leave the city. I want you to —"

"No! I want to stay with you, Lex. I — I don't think I could go on without you!"

He folded her into his embrace. "My dear Arianna, I love you. I don't want to be separated from you either. But if you stay with me, you might very easily become an additional target for this killer. Or he might use you to get at me. You know I would never allow you to come to harm. And we cannot allow this person to use that against us."

She lay her head on his shoulder and wept for a moment, then sniffed hard and straightened up. "You're quite right, of course, Lex. Don't worry about me. I'll go to one of the safe houses out of state. I won't even tell you which one so no one will be able to learn of it from you."

He nodded and cupped her face with his hand. "That's my brave and brilliant Arianna. Who will you take with you?"

"Can you spare Diana and Wendy? I'm comfortable with them, and I know you'll need both Asabi and Nigel."

"Of course. Excellent choices, both of them, my dear."

She smiled through her tears. "You sound as if you're recommending a fine wine at a restaurant."

He chuckled. "Perhaps I am complimenting your tactical sense instead. At any rate, you should leave as soon as possible. Are you packed?"

"One suitcase and one overnight bag. Standard getaway protocol."

"Very good. Did you bring a car or hail a cab?"

Arianna gave him a mock frown. "Please, Lex, I brought the armored Mercedes. Cabs are far too vulnerable."

He smiled. "You have been listening to my safety lectures, haven't you? Never mind. Have either Diana or Wendy bring another car to the downstairs garage exit. I'll have one of my other people drive the Mercedes home. If anyone is watching you

now, it might deflect their attention."

"Of course, darling. And — Lex?"

"Yes, Ari?"

She put her hand on his chest. "I'm so very sorry for arguing with you the other night at the restaurant. Please forgive me — and please be careful."

He moved closer and kissed her softly on the lips. "Of course I shall do both. Don't give our disagreement a second thought. You were merely looking out for my interests. I have the best wife any man ever had to come home to."

Her eyes glittered again. "Ungrammatical, darling, but so very true. And if I were to lose you, I would never marry again. I could not find a better man for me in all the world."

He kissed her and sighed. "We will have to continue this conversation at a time when neither of us is in immediate danger." He slipped away from her and pressed a button on his desk.

"Yes, sir?" came the response.

"Please have Diana Tyler and Wendy Montgomery report to my office immediately for a long-term protection assignment. Tell them that they're taking Mrs. Luthor on an out-of-state trip and they should pack accordingly."

"Yes, sir. I'll send them right up."

He looked up at his wife. "They'll be here in minutes. I assume you're armed?"

She patted her purse. "Nine millimeter Beretta and three spare twenty-round magazines. Eighty rounds total. If I need more ammunition than that, you'll have to read the goodbye message in my last will and testament."

He blinked. "Yes. Let us hope that neither of us will read the other's will for many decades to come."

Lucy was still toweling her hair after her shower when the doorbell rang, so she stuck her head out of the bathroom and yelled at her sister. "Lois? Can you get the door? I'm not dressed yet."

"Who are you expecting this early?" growled Lois.

"It's probably my grocery delivery. I sent in the order last night."

Instead of closing the bathroom door right away, Lucy watched and listened as her sister rose out of her chair and quickly stepped into the guest bedroom. When she finally made her way to the front door, there was something in her hand that Lucy couldn't see clearly.

The doorbell rang again. Lois stood near the hinges of the door and called out, "Who is it?"

"Grocery delivery, ma'am," came the masculine reply.

"How much is it?"

"Ms. Lane, you already paid online, just like you usually do. I just need you to sign that you got all the stuff you ordered."

Lucy watched Lois hesitate, tense up, and yank the front door open with her left hand. Lois peered around the edge of the door, keeping her right hand hidden.

She knew what Lois would see. There was a young man, probably either Freddy or Conner, holding a clipboard and a pen. Beside him would be a rolling upright cart with several boxes stacked on it, each one holding parts of her order.

The young man spoke again. "Here you — oh. I'm sorry. I thought — well, this is the right apartment. Did Ms. Lane move or something?"

Lois seemed to relax a bit, and she put whatever she had in her hand in the waistband of her slacks at the small of her back. "This is Lucy Lane's apartment. I'm her sister. I'll sign for the delivery."

"Uh — yes, ma'am. Here you go."

Lucy watched Lois move silently away from the door with the clipboard in her left hand. "Do you usually put the stuff away or just leave the boxes?"

“I put the boxes on the counter in the kitchen. Ms. Lane likes to put her own stuff away.”

That was Conner, thought Lucy. He’s very polite and very thorough. Lucy suspected that he had a mild crush on her and was disappointed that Lois had answered the door.

Lois signed the document and handed the clipboard through the doorway again. “In that case, kiddo,” she grunted, “come on in here and do your job.”

Lois backed up as Conner wheeled his cart into the apartment. Lucy noticed that Lois made sure that she was facing the young man the whole time, and that she was at least two steps away from him. Lois also had backed up close enough to the bathroom door for Lucy to see what Lois had put in the waistband of her slacks.

It was a compact semiautomatic pistol.

Lucy felt her face go pale. Why would Lois have a pistol with her? How did she get it past Customs? Or had she bought it here, and if she’d done that, where had she gotten either the money or the identification? Was it an illegal weapon? Why did she look so comfortable holding it?

Lucy silently closed the bathroom door and quickly finished getting dressed. They were supposed to go to the Metropolitan Museum of Natural History today, have lunch together, and in general try to get caught up with each other.

She had to know. She had to ask Lois why she was armed and why she was concerned about a grocery delivery.

And Lucy wasn’t sure she really wanted the answers to those questions.

Lois watched the young man lift the boxes one at a time, place them on the kitchen counter, and open the tops. None of them seemed to contain anything but foodstuffs and cleaning products. And other than a couple of curious glances sent her way, the kid kept his eyes on the job he was doing.

Lois knew she was probably being overcautious. This kid almost surely had nothing on his mind except doing his job and getting a tip and a smile from an attractive woman. The tip she could handle, but the smile would have to come from Lucy. Lois didn’t have many smiles left.

He put the last box on the counter and turned to face Lois. “That’s the last one, ma’am. I’ll be on my way now.”

Lois reached into her pants pocket with her left hand and pulled out a small roll of bills. “What’s the usual tip, kid?”

The young man frowned at her, and Lois felt disconcerted. She didn’t know if he was bugged because she’d called him ‘kid’ or because she’d asked him about the tip.

He lifted his hand, palm toward her. “No tip required, ma’am. Just doing my job.”

“And a fine job it is that you’re doing, Conner.”

The bad Irish accent coming from Lucy’s mouth, combined with the fact that she hadn’t noticed Lucy was out of the bathroom, startled Lois. She took a quick step backward and started to reach for her pistol before she forced herself to relax.

This was a grocery delivery, not an ambush, she reminded herself.

Lucy smiled fetchingly and spoke again as if she hadn’t noticed Lois’ reaction. “You can’t get away without my tip, young man. I want to make sure my eggs are whole next time you come.”

Conner blushed as if Lucy had said something vaguely off-color. “Yes, ma’am.” He accepted the ten-dollar bill Lucy handed him and nodded his head awkwardly. “Thank you, Ms. Lane. I appreciate it.”

“Thank you for being so prompt and so conscientious. See you next time?”

He glowed at her like a puppy being petted. “I hope so.” He turned to Lois and his smile went from natural and free to forced and nervous. “Good to meet you, ma’am.”

Lois nodded sharply. “You too.”

Conner turned and walked out the door, pulling it shut behind him. Lucy sauntered over and threw the deadbolt as she asked, “How many times were you going to shoot him?”

Lois stiffened in surprise. “Who said anything about shooting him?”

“Nobody. But you have a gun in the waistband of your pants, and you were moving like you know how to handle it.”

“Owning a firearm is legal this city and state. I’m not breaking any laws.”

“No, but things have calmed down quite a bit in the last few years. Back when Clark first showed up as Superman, there were people carrying AK-47s and military-grade M16s on the street. I saw vans with M60 machine guns mounted in turrets on the roof and pickup trucks with Gatling guns in the beds. I even saw a bus with a 40-millimeter Bofors anti-aircraft gun at each end. You don’t see that kind of thing very often any more, although lots of folks still carry pistols under their jackets or in their purses.”

“Really? What caliber weapon do you carry?”

“We’re not talking about me, Lois.”

“If you’re gonna bust me for having a gun handy, yes we are. Now what do you have?”

Lucy sighed and looked at the floor. “I have a .327 Magnum revolver in my purse and a .223 Ruger Mini14 in the closet. I can’t handle the bigger calibers.”

Lois thought for a moment, then pulled her pistol from behind her. “That .327 isn’t a very big round. You might check into a .40 caliber semiauto with an extended magazine. Holds twelve rounds plus one in the chamber instead of just seven like your revolver and doesn’t kick much more.” She dropped the magazine out, worked the slide to eject the round in the chamber and lock the slide open, then offered it to Lucy. “Want to check mine out?”

Lucy pressed her lips together and shook her head. “I don’t walk around armed in my own home. It makes me wonder why you do.”

Lois thought for a long moment, then she reloaded her pistol while she considered her response. She couldn’t tell her sister that she was in town to kill someone. Nor could she tell her how many times she’d protected herself or her children with that same weapon.

So she make an excuse and hoped Lucy would buy it. “I’ve been gone for quite a while, Punky. I don’t know the city well any more. I had no idea if that delivery guy was really a delivery guy or a rapist looking for his next victim.” The pistol returned to its hiding place. “I want to make sure I live through the next few days and weeks, or at least until I know I won’t need to shoot anybody. If that means having a weapon in the shower with me, that’s what I’m going to do. And if you have a problem with that I need to go somewhere else to sleep.”

Lois tried to put a little bit of fear in the last sentence, as if she were afraid that Lucy might actually tell her to go. And it worked. Her sister’s face clouded up, and she lunged at, then embraced, Lois.

“You’re not going anywhere! You’re staying right here with me as long as you need to!” Lucy sniffed and hiccupped. “I just got you back, Sis, and I’m not letting you go for anything. I love you and I need you around, so you just get used to it! You’re here until you’re ready to move out, not before!”

Despite her training, despite her real employment history, despite the constant threat of betrayal — and sometimes the reality of it — over the past seven years, Lois’ eyes filled with unfamiliar fluid. She forced her eyelids shut and fiercely returned Lucy’s embrace. Being loved and accepted unconditionally was something she thought she’d never experience again, and here it was being handed to her on a silver serving dish.

Then the memory of Rodolfo’s grin as she left on each mission intruded on her mind. The image of him cocking a heavy-

caliber revolver and pointing it at her daughter's head flooded back to her. It was his parting gift to her every time she left Sicily on a mission, his promise to her that her children's continued survival depended on her carrying out her assignment. He knew that she would challenge Hell itself to protect them.

It was a good thing Rodolfo didn't know that she'd reconnected with Lucy. Lois didn't know how to choose between her sister and her children. Usually there was no contest in her mind — her babies came first, above anyone else alive — but the vanishingly rare moments like this gave her cause to think long and hard about it. And thinking about such things could get her killed.

She hoped she'd never have to find out which choice she'd make.

- Interlude Four
- Six years and one month ago
- Sicily

Now it was just the two of them. Only Lois and Carla were left.

The other female pair had been killed early in training. Two of the three male teams had died separately over the last six months, and Lois had learned not to react when Rodolfo shot a man or slit his throat or garroted him with a wire. By this time, she knew that they were being trailed to be assassins, not simply as common mercenaries, but she'd almost stopped caring. Just staying alive was all she could handle.

She'd refused to waste time wondering about Peter and Lester, the other surviving pair. One day they'd been there, the next day they hadn't. She hadn't seen them for almost a month, and no one had explained their fate to Lois or Carla. She'd never really liked Peter, who thought he was the ultimate lover and wished to share his alleged gifts with any female he saw. Lester's South African dialect and manners and superior attitude had alienated both Lois and Carla very early on in the group's training. It was one of the very few things the two women agreed on.

Lois and Carla were lounging in the rec room of the training camp in Sicily, waiting for Rodolfo to arrive with their final assignment. Despite having learned to depend on each other for their mutual survival, the two women still disliked each other. Carla, tall and powerful and self-sufficient, hated Lois' ability to keep up with her in the physical portions of their exercises and resented the smaller woman's quickness and speed during fight training. Carla was big and limber, and strong enough to take down most men in a face-to-face fight. Lois got similar results using guile, speed, technique, and deception, and she was repelled by Carla's innate cruelty and obvious relish for fighting for the sake of fighting.

So, as usual, they weren't making small talk with each other. Lois was re-reading the operations manual for her favorite rifle, the AK-74, the Kalashnikov assault rifle which used the smaller 5.45 millimeter round similar in size and performance to the .223 caliber round used in the American M-16. Carla was sitting across the room, sharpening her combat knife to a razor edge yet again. Lois liked the AK-74 because it was lighter than the original AK-47, had a longer effective range, fired with less recoil, and it could accept a 45-round magazine. Carla liked using the American .30 caliber M-14 on full automatic just because she was strong and could keep it on target — which Lois could not — and, beyond that, she didn't need a real reason. Other than the scrape of Carla's knife on the whetstone or paper crinkling as Lois turned a page of the manual she held, there was no sound in the room.

Suddenly Rodolfo burst in, almost laughing, followed by one of his nearly silent shadows carrying a twelve-gauge pump shotgun. "Well, my ladies, today is your graduation day! One more practice mission and you will be ready! Are you both prepared?"

Carla nodded and slowly slipped her knife into its scabbard. "We're ready," Lois replied.

"Good! That is very good. Now, each of you must go to your starting point and begin when you are told. For this final mission, you may either remain in town or venture out into the country. But you will be judged partly on the discretion you display. The more noise you make in town — or the more damage you do — the poorer will be your grade. And time is not of the essence. You may complete your tasks within five minutes or take a week to finish."

"And what is this mission, Rodolfo?" grated Carla.

He grinned and pointed to both of them, one with each hand. "Each other."

It took each woman a moment to process what he was saying. Lois almost asked him if he were joking, but Rodolfo never joked. He might laugh — usually just before he killed someone — but he never kidded them or made jokes to them.

Carla recovered first. She stood and drew her knife. "Just a moment, Rodolfo. I will not be long."

The smaller man stepped out from behind the bulky Rodolfo and raised his shotgun. "No, my bloodthirsty Carla," purred Rodolfo, "you may not begin yet. I have not completed my briefing."

Despite the shotgun, Carla took a step toward Lois. "I am to kill her! What more need I know?"

"If you do not put away your knife, I will take it from you and cut both of your hamstrings with it. Then I will give the knife to Lois and she will attempt to kill you. I doubt she would have much difficulty."

Carla stared at him for a long moment, then sheathed her knife and grunted. "Now, a few minutes, a few hours, no matter. I will kill her."

"Perhaps, perhaps not. We shall soon see. Now, there is one more thing I must tell you. Once you leave the town, assuming you do not choose to finish this here, neither of you will return until the other is dead. And I believe, Lois, that if you choose to extend mercy to Carla, she will not reciprocate."

Lois nodded and tried to swallow. "Yeah. I kinda got that vibe from her too."

"Good! Now that we all understand each other, you two will go to opposite ends of the main street and pick up whatever gear you think you will need. Know that the more you carry with you, the slower you will move and the sooner you will tire."

"That is second week of class material, Rodolfo," Carla snapped. "We know how to gear up."

He nodded. "As you wish. Carla, you will go with Juan. He will escort you to the south end. Lois, I will escort you to the north end. Both rooms have identical equipment and weapons. You will have ten minutes to select what you wish to carry. You will exit your respective equipment rooms when I blow my whistle. If you do not exit immediately, I — or Juan — will kill you. You may not load any firearms you select until you leave the equipment room." He smiled as if sharing a small joke. "Neither Juan nor I wishes to die prematurely." Rodolfo waved his hands for the women to follow him. "We will go now."

Once outside, Lois glanced over her shoulder to see Carla striding purposefully but cautiously in front of Juan, so she broke into a trot until she got to the building where she knew her defense lay. The door was, of course, locked, so she stepped back so Rodolfo could open it for her. She looked down the street to see Juan and Carla in a similar formation. Rodolfo gave a sharp blast on his whistle and unlocked Lois' door.

She dove into the room and snapped on the light. It was a guerrilla's dream armory, with everything from small utility knives to shoulder-fired RPGs. Below every firearm was a bin with ammunition and magazines if the weapon took them.

Lois grabbed a webbed pistol belt with a covered holster, a

spare holster which she also threaded onto the belt, then a backpack and a shoulder bag. She snatched five days' supply of emergency rations, a dozen energy bars, a plastic camelback water carrier, a bottle of water purification tablets, and a first aid kit, then jammed all but the water carrier in the shoulder bag and buckled on the pistol belt. She paused for a moment, then snatched a folded poncho and shoved it in on top of the first aid kit.

Eight minutes later, the holsters held two Smith and Wesson .38 Special revolvers, each with a six-inch barrel for better accuracy. The backpack contained two changes of underwear, a spare pair of boots, a spare jumpsuit, and two boxes of .38 Special ammunition at fifty rounds per box. They joined a two-hundred foot roll of nylon climber's rope, a four-hundred foot roll of fishing line, a pair of survival knives, a small folded entrenching tool, and two 45-round AK-74 magazines. One hundred rounds of 5.45x39 millimeter ammo for her rifle topped it off quite well, leaving just enough room for one fragmentation grenade.

"How much time left?"

Rodolfo looked at his watch. "One minute, forty seconds."

Lois nodded and began filling the water carrier. It would last her the rest of today and most of tomorrow, and she could purify water from any stream or well on the island when she refilled it. As soon as it was full, she strapped it onto her back, then covered it with the backpack and looped the shoulder bag to hang to her left. A third survival knife was sheathed on her left side, but close to the front where she could reach it quickly. Like Carla, Lois believed that knives were useful items and one could never have too many of them.

Unlike Carla, she didn't use knives to kill slowly and messily.

Rodolfo smiled as she picked up her assault rifle and stood by the door. "Ready with fifteen seconds to spare," he purred. "Very good. I only hope Carla has thought ahead as well as you have."

"We'll see, won't we?" she snarled. She adjusted the rifle's sling one more time. She'd hate to drop it now.

Rodolfo opened the door and stepped out, then lifted his whistle to his mouth. As soon as he exhaled, Lois burst out and broke for the light forest surrounding the camp. With her size and strength, Carla had the advantage at the moment, and Lois needed to put some distance between them and load her weapons before the bigger woman ran her down and cut her to pieces with that huge blade.

A quick glance over her shoulder showed Carla trotting in her wake, her M-14 looped over her shoulder by the strap and her hands busily loading a magazine. As Lois watched, Carla dropped a cartridge and ran on.

Careless and overconfident Carla. Lois hoped that was the truth. Then she'd have a better than even chance of surviving this hunt.

The last thing she heard before she put the camp behind her was Rodolfo shouting, "Good luck, Lois! I am cheering for you!"

Oh, great. That made her feel ever so much better.

For the next five days, Lois and Carla played their lethal game of hide-and-seek in the woods around the town. Twice Carla caught Lois away from cover and shot at her with her M-14, once late on the first day and again on the morning of the third day. The second time, Lois was hit as a round burned across the back of her upper left thigh. The wound wasn't serious, but finding a safe place to dress it was difficult, as was applying the bandage. She only hoped that Carla would believe her more seriously injured than she was, given the awkward fall that she'd taken, and that Carla would not be as careful as she should be.

And Lois had gotten in her licks, too. Early on the first day, Carla had been arrogant enough to walk over the crest of a small hill standing up. Lois had reminded her not to do that with a series of long-range single shots from her rifle, and Carla had appeared

to catch at least one round low on one side. On the third day, as Carla had hunted for her prey, Lois had hidden in a brush pile and fired at her with one of her pistols. That was when she discovered that Carla had chosen to wear a Kevlar vest despite its weight. Three of Lois' shots had struck Carla in the middle of her body and stunned her, but the vest had saved her life. And Lois hadn't been able to close in quickly enough before Carla had recovered and started blasting away in Lois' general direction, which was when she'd been hit in the leg. She'd felt lucky to slip away without any additional holes in her skin.

On the fifth day, Lois refilled her water carrier from a small stream and dropped in the necessary purification tablets. She also checked her supplies and decided that she had to be in better shape than Carla. The bigger woman had run out of .30-caliber ammo and had smashed her M-14 against a tree so Lois couldn't use it. It also appeared that Carla hadn't figured on a long game of hide and seek, since Lois hadn't found any discarded meal trays since the end of the third day. According to their training, their trash should have been buried to hide their trail, so Carla's sloppiness indicated that Carla was either still overconfident or had been hurt worse than Lois thought.

Or maybe Lois was putting more pressure on Carla than she knew.

Still, Lois was almost exhausted from the lack of sleep and the constant stress of watching for her opponent all the time. She was lucky that Carla, who moved like a ghost inside a city, wasn't quite as good in the woods as she was. Three times she'd escaped night sneak attacks, and twice Carla had escaped hers. Lois couldn't go on much longer.

The fishing line had been useful more than once. She'd strung it around her camp and tangled leaves and small branches in it, and when Carla's heavy step hadn't awakened her, the noise made by the line snagging on Carla's boots had. And using one of her survival knives in a tension trap had alerted Lois to Carla's sneakiest approach just before dawn on the next-to-last day. Three rounds from each of Lois' pistols had ended that stalk.

Late that night — or early the next morning, Lois couldn't tell — she was awakened by a snapping twig and a scrape of fishing line against a pile of leaves. She'd grabbed her revolvers and emptied them in the general direction of the sound and was rewarded with what she thought was a grunt of pain and the sound of a body falling. But going after Carla on a cloudy night was suicidal, even with Lois' advantages in the woods. So she'd reloaded the pistols and waited for morning.

At first light, she ate her last energy bar and checked the area as best she could. All she found was a spattering of dried blood on some of the leaves around her hiding place. She'd hit Carla at least once the previous night, but the big Frenchwoman had gotten too close for safety.

It was time to end this hunt.

Lois checked her rifle and her pistols once again, drank deeply from the camelback, ate one of her remaining cold meals, and set out to find her opponent.

It didn't take long. Despite her Kevlar vest, Carla had been hit harder than Lois had thought. The woman's gasps of pain were audible several yards from the small depression where she was resting. Lois' French was not as good as her German or Spanish, but she still understood Carla's muttered imprecations. As soon as she'd finished dressing her wounds, she planned to hunt down Lois and decapitate her. Slowly and with great relish. And without killing her first.

Lois refused to allow that to happen.

Silently, she slipped out the grenade she'd been saving, pulled the pin, released the spoon, and silently counted. On "Three!" she tossed the grenade into the depression and dropped to the ground with her arms covering her head.

She heard one frantic cry — "Mon Dieu! Non!" — before the

grenade exploded.

When the smoke and debris cleared, she lifted her rifle and slowly peeked over the edge of the depression. The grenade had apparently bounced or rolled or been shoved further away from Carla than she'd expected, although within ten yards of the blast it didn't make much difference how close you were. The big Frenchwoman lay unmoving on her right side, facing away from the blast area, almost touching the near incline.

Then she took a shuddering breath. "Lois?" she whispered. "Are you — close now?"

Lois slid down the incline and stood perhaps six feet from the injured woman's head, her rifle held at the ready. "I'm here."

Carla tried to laugh. "It — was a good contest — was it not?"

"I'm still alive. That's all I care about."

Carla moved two fingers of her left hand. "Please — come closer. I would — I would see you — once more."

Lois edged sideways so she could see Carla's face clearly. "This is as close as I get. You still have that nasty pig-sticker."

Carla's right hand slid out from under her head, the big knife in her palm. She smiled and tried to chuckle but only coughed up blood. "You are — right — to be — careful. But I — I am dying now. I — I cannot — hurt you."

Frozen fury welled up in Lois' heart. The woman had done her very best to kill Lois for almost a week. Lois was worn out, sleep deprived, hungry, filthy, footsore, sunburned, dehydrated, running a fever, bitten all over by insects, and her bullet wound throbbled. It was probably infected. She was already hurt, and her rage boiled over.

"You can't hurt me, huh? Mind if I make sure of that?"

Before Carla could speak, Lois lifted her rifle and squeezed off three quick shots.

Carla's head exploded onto the scarred ground. Her legs straightened with a jerk, then went limp.

Now Lois was sure.

She inched closer and reached down to take a trophy to prove to Rodolfo that Carla was dead. Carla would have brought in Lois' ears or nose or even her scalp, but that wasn't Lois' style. Carla's knife — the knife with which she'd planned to mutilate Lois' face and separate her head from the rest of her body, the knife she'd used to kill even before she'd been recruited, the knife she kept closer to her than any human being — would have to do.

Lois picked up the knife and stepped back. Then her knees turned to jelly and she fell to the forest floor and puked out her guts.

She was lightheaded and short of breath and her vision kept going fuzzy but she didn't stop, wouldn't stop, not until she'd given Carla's knife to Rodolfo. She had to prove to him that despite his cruelty, despite his deliberate attempts to end her life, despite his making her a target for a psychotic French Amazon, she was still alive. It would be the ultimate revenge on him.

Short of killing him, of course.

She paused at what she thought was the bottom of the last hill and leaned against a tree. A few deep breaths helped her to think clearly again, and she realized she was still carrying all of her equipment and weapons. She didn't need them now. Her training told her to leave behind whatever she had to in order to survive, so she pulled out the drinking tube from the water carrier and took in as much as she could comfortably hold.

After a few moments she felt better. Her vision cleared and she saw the town entrance. Surely Rodolfo knew she was there.

A quick inventory later, she dropped her shoulder bag, backpack, and water carrier. She unloaded her rifle and slipped the magazine into the backpack, then stood the weapon up against the tree she where she'd paused. She pulled off the pistol belt and took one of the revolvers out, then slipped it into her pocket. It was another lesson learned long ago — don't get caught totally

unarmed.

With Carla's knife in her hand and all that weight off her back, she was able to struggle up the hill to the entrance of the town. Sure enough, Rodolfo was waiting beside the nearest building, a huge smile on his face and the little runt Juan standing behind him, still holding the shotgun.

Rodolfo spread his hands out to her. "Lois! I had hoped it would be you. I congratulate you on your resourcefulness and skill. You will have three days to rest and recuperate." He paused and tilted his head. "I assume you have proof of your victory?"

She stopped about eight feet from him and took two deep breaths. "Here's her knife. You know the only way she'd give it up would be if she were dead."

She tossed it into the dirt at his feet. He frowned and said, "You do not wish to keep it as a souvenir?"

"No. I just want to take a shower and see the doctor and sleep for a couple of days."

"Mmm, perhaps the doctor first, then the shower."

"Fine. Where is he?"

The doctor dressed her physical wounds in silence and gave her a shot of antibiotics, then another containing a vitamin cocktail. Lois then spent almost twice the normal amount of time carefully scrubbing under a hot shower. No sense in opening her wounds again.

She was concerned that she'd have trouble going to sleep, but she didn't. Being clean and horizontal was enough for her to drop off almost immediately. She didn't bother with bedclothes and barely remembered to throw her wet towel on the floor.

She awoke fourteen hours later, stiff and sore but refreshed and alert. She took her time getting dressed and brushing out her short, tangled hair. And despite her fear to the contrary, she could look at herself in the mirror and not see Carla's face staring back at her.

When she left her room and entered the common area, she wasn't surprised to see Rodolfo. "Greetings, Lois. Once again I offer my congratulations for your success."

Unconsciously, her hand slipped to her pocket before she could stop it. Rodolfo saw the movement and chuckled. "My dear Lois, I have been doing this for quite some time. I took the liberty of removing the revolver from beneath your pillow while you slept. Surely you checked for it before leaving your room."

"A reflex." She took a deep breath to calm her suddenly racing heart. "Thanks for all the trust in me."

"It is not a question of trust but a question of good sense." He stood. "I will leave this folder with you. You still have almost two days to recover from your ordeal, so there is no urgency, but three days from today I will review your mission with you."

The folder slapped on the table and he stepped back. "Have you ever been to Greece?"

"No."

He smiled. "Then you should enjoy this journey. You will see many ancient and wonderful things."

The words slipped out before she could stop them. "Who am I going to kill?"

Four weeks later Lois was back in Sicily.

The mission had gone off without a hitch. She'd established herself as something of an airheaded blonde American who spoke only English and who apparently believed that she could make herself understood by those who did not understand English by talking in a loud, slow, almost Brooklyn accent. The more native Greeks she irritated — or even offended — the less likely it would be for anyone to suspect that she was there to kill a man. To the locals, her only redeeming quality was that she tipped very well.

She started off where most American tourists would, in

Athens. She toured the Parthenon, the Athens Zoo, the Acropolis Museum, and the Temple of Hephaestus. She also sampled the fish, the various fruit and vegetable dishes and medleys, and even visited a Russian-themed restaurant. Twice in the first sixteen days of her visit she feigned a severe stomach upset and refused to allow anyone in her hotel room. She spent those days reviewing the upcoming Greek Labor Day parade, which would be led by various officials in different parts of the country, depending on various political factors.

Her target would lead the parade in Tripolis on the lower peninsula, one hundred fifty-eight kilometers from Athens. If Rodolfo's preparations were complete, she could get there on a small motorbike in less than two hours, make the shot, and get back to her hotel in Athens in another two. One of the maids would be paid very well to open the side emergency exit to admit a plump redhead — the plumpness enhanced by strategic padding — wearing cheap, ripped clothing and far too much makeup. Another of Rodolfo's operatives, one who Lois would never see and who would never see her, would dispose of the bike when she returned. Her fake papers would pass muster in Greece if she were stopped anywhere during her mission, although they probably would not pass muster in New York, which was where they said she was from.

The day of the mission dawned clear and warm with no hint of death in the air. She spent it in the room with another "attack" of digestive troubles.

In Tripolis, she found her pre-set sniper's perch in an empty third-floor apartment with ease and checked her American-made M1903 Springfield bolt-action rifle, complete with a laser spotter and a six-power telescopic sight. With thirty minutes before the parade began, she slipped on her latex surgical gloves, loaded her rifle, and settled into her perch, then waited inside the darkened room and ate an energy bar while watching for anything out of the ordinary.

But nothing unusual happened. The lights in the streets flickered on and the parade participants began assembling. Her target would stand in the back of a modified Cadillac limousine, surrounded by armed security walking beside him over the parade route. He would be accompanied by a bevy of beautiful young women wearing the skimpiest beachwear they could get away with.

Lois guessed that the man had angered some powerful father in the area, perhaps the father of one of the swimsuit models who surrounded him, but she had no real idea as to why this man had to die or who had paid for it to happen. All she had to do was to put a bullet in the middle of his chest, preferably just to the left of his breastbone. She was set up two hundred sixty-five yards from the limousine, and the rifle was supposed to be sighted in at two hundred seventy-five yards. It meant that she'd need almost no correction in her sight picture, that the bullet would strike her target mere millimeters from the crosshairs.

Then, of course, she had to get out alive.

The brass marching band behind the man's limo began tuning up for the final time. Lois nodded to herself as they found common melodic and harmonic ground. They might not have been professional musicians, but they weren't drunks yanked out of the neighborhood saloons, either.

Rodolfo had told her that the client didn't care when the target took the bullet, but he had suggested taking him out at the very beginning of the parade, as the band hit their first loud notes and while everyone behind them was still milling around and trying to find where they were supposed to be. Confusion would be the best cover for Lois' getaway, and her master wanted her to come back in one piece. Rodolfo would sponsor no suicide missions.

She readied the rifle in her hands and slowly slid the bolt home. She had five rounds in the rifle, but if she had to shoot more than once, it would seriously impair her chances of

escaping. So she determined that her first shot would be perfect.

A man with a walkie-talkie ran to the driver's door of the car and held up one finger. Through the scope she could see the driver nod and start the car. As soon as he revved the engine, the band members came to attention and the bandleader lifted his baton. Her target was already standing and waving at the crowd.

The bandleader waved his baton and counted one-two-three-four.

Lois' shot rang out at the same moment all the cymbal players crashed their metal disks together. Her target's arms dropped to his side, his head lolled onto his chest, and he toppled forward. The girls around him laughed at what they apparently thought was the man playing a game — all but the brunette behind him who had been waving at someone in the band. The bullet had passed through the target and struck her in the middle of the back, and she twisted and slowly fell to the floor, blood pouring out of her wound. As the other girls realized that their friend had been shot, they began screaming and trying to jump out of the car. The area quickly became a madhouse and the confusion spread rapidly outward.

That was good enough.

Lois opened the bolt to flip out the empty brass, worked it to remove the four remaining cartridges, and slipped in a special thermite round. It wouldn't propel anything down the barrel, but five seconds after she pulled the trigger again, it would melt the rifle into slag. She took one more look through her scope at the car and saw the security people pulling their pistols and searching for the source of the shot. The bikini-clad girls were crying and screaming their heads off, and the members of the band rushed up to try to help but only contributed to the general confusion and got in everyone else's way.

It was time for Lois to go.

She laid the four live cartridges on her perch and rested the rifle on top of them, then pulled the trigger. If things worked as she hoped, the heat from the thermite round would set off at least one of the rounds below it and draw attention away from her.

She pulled a .32-caliber revolver from her vest pocket and held it down beside her leg as she bolted out of the apartment. She turned left and headed toward the back stairs, listening and watching for anyone who might poke a head out to see what was happening.

And one elderly woman did.

The woman jumped and fell against the door jamb as Lois lifted her pistol. The woman slammed the door and Lois fired two rounds through the top of the door to keep the woman down on the floor and away from the phone. One shove through the exit door and down three flights without seeing anyone else and Lois jumped on her motorbike.

She shoved the pistol inside her vest, then jammed on the helmet and kicked the starter, which caught immediately. She pointed her bike toward highway 7 and pattered across town at a slow speed. There was no sense in attracting attention by racing away. Her best bet was to put distance between herself and her target without attracting police attention.

Less than two hours later, the fiftyish maid answered her knock and opened the door. Lois glared at her until the woman dropped her gaze and turned away. Without a word, Lois climbed the inside stairs to her room.

Inside, she stripped. The ripped jeans and vest went in a bag which she would drop in a dumpster several blocks from the hotel. Her pistol, bathed in cheap perfume to hide the scent of gunpowder, went into the hidden panel in the bottom of her suitcase. As soon as she could, she showered, then dressed in her regular clothes.

A call to room service was answered by a weeping concierge who told her of the tragic murder of "the very good man from Tripolis." Between sobs, the young woman promised to send up

soup and sandwiches to “the lovely American lady” who thankfully seemed to be feeling better.

Lois turned on the room’s TV. The newscaster said that the man had died before receiving medical treatment. The woman who had been hit in the back by the spent bullet was expected to survive and make a full recovery. The cowardly assassin had not yet been found, nor did police have any information they could release to the news media.

Lois waited four more days to see if she’d been identified or if she were under suspicion, but other than a routine police visit to question her about her whereabouts at the time of the shooting, there was nothing. The killer had apparently vanished into the ether from which he’d come. A sympathetic smile aimed at the officer with whom Lois spoke gained her the information that the assassin’s rifle had been melted to scrap and gave the police no clues.

When she passed through customs to board the commuter plane which would take her to Reggio Calabria in Italy, just a short ferry ride from Messina, Sicily, she was stopped and questioned again, but one of the customs officers muttered to his buddy that she didn’t fit the physical description of the woman who’d been spotted brandishing a pistol at the scene. Lois pretended not to understand them, and even made a couple of insensitive comments about how sorry she was that someone got killed in Greece just like President Kennedy had been killed in Dallas. She was waved through to her plane with no more difficulty.

As the plane took off and pattered across the Ionian Sea between Greece and southern Italy, she relaxed and thought about what she’d done and tried to feel something about it. She didn’t even flinch when she recognized Juan in a seat a few rows up and across the aisle. She should have been angry, or afraid, or offended that he’d been there watching over her, making sure she didn’t run or chicken out at the last minute. But all she could muster was relief that her first mission had gone off without a hitch and that she’d survived. At that moment, nothing else mattered to her.

Rodolfo would have someone waiting for her in Messina, or perhaps she’d catch a ride with Juan. She’d travel across the rocky country of Sicily and sleep in her own bed tonight. Tomorrow she’d be debriefed and paid and she’d stay in one of the camps for a week to ten days, then have permission to go somewhere else for a bit. Rodolfo had told her that he preferred that his associates — what an innocuous word — not stray too far right after a mission. It reduced the chances that they’d either be recognized or make a foolish mistake.

Lois didn’t care. She’d done what she was supposed to do. And she’d survived. As far as she was aware, no one was looking for the ditzy American blonde she no longer was in connection with her target’s death. She was as safe as she could be, under the circumstances.

And she was a little closer to the day when she’d kill Rodolfo.

Chapter Eight

from the journal of H. G. Wells

I have succeeded in moving my machine. I cannot traverse forward or backward in time, but I am able to move laterally within a moment, which means that I have finally departed from Brussels and returned to Metropolis without attracting excessive attention. I am glad that the storage room I rented last week is still empty, since the safeguards on my machine prevent it from materializing within a solid object or onto an unsafe or non-level surface seem to be disabled.

I have learned nothing more about Lois Lane and her activities. And I am still unable to peer into the future of this world, nor am I able to contact my headquarters to call for assistance or even guidance. I am not even certain that taking the

time to write in my journal is warranted, given the precarious circumstances in which I find myself, but I have trained myself to record my thoughts and actions on missions so that I may study them for insight at a later date.

I also record my thoughts and actions in order to inform my compatriots of my final failure, should such be my own fate. Hopefully, that event is still far in my own personal future.

But one should be prepared for any outcome, including the least desirable ones.

Dana Banquo told herself not to get involved. She was alone and off duty. She’d just finished a filling meal. She wasn’t in uniform, had no radio with her, no way to call for backup, this wasn’t her precinct, she only one extra magazine for her service weapon, and her backup weapon was locked away in her gun safe at home. She had no business moving toward the sound of the disturbance near the Daily Planet truck dock.

But rookie or not, off-duty or not, under-gunned or not, she was MPD. The crowd was getting rowdy, and she could see the half-dozen uniformed officers inside the semi-circle of protesters were cut off from their squad cars. If she were in that situation, she’d want someone to come help her.

She didn’t recognize any of the officers who were in danger, and so far no one was throwing anything but insults at them. So she sauntered toward one of the three police cars parked nearby and reached out for the door handle.

A man put his hand on her wrist and said, “Wait up, sister. That’s phase two, remember? Just stick with the plan.”

Dana made a snap decision. She planted her foot and drove her fist into the man’s midsection, then pushed his collapsing body away from her and yanked the door open. She lunged inside, then slammed and locked the doors to keep anyone from stopping her.

No keys. Not in the ignition, not behind the sun visor, nothing. She couldn’t move the car, but she could call for backup. She found the unit number and turned on the radio.

“Detective Dana Banquo calling from Unit Eleven-One-Seven at the Daily Planet loading dock. Uniformed officers are cut off from their cars and surrounded. There is no violence yet, repeat, no violence, but the situation is volatile. Requesting backup immediately.”

The speaker crackled to life. “This is dispatch. Repeat your ID, Detective.”

“Detective Dana Banquo, shield number Tango-Delta-three-three-one-seven-Able, requesting backup at Daily Planet loading dock. I don’t know the street address.”

After a moment, the radio came alive again. “Confirmed, Detective Banquo. Please remain where you are and—”

A bottle of something flammable smashed against the windshield and fire splashed across the glass. Dana dropped the microphone and jammed her hand down in front of the seat, then caught the Lex-Tec semi-automatic shotgun as it slipped out of its rack. She only hoped the 20-round magazine was full.

She risked spending an extra second in the car by lurching across the front seat and slamming out the passenger door. As she’d hoped, the bulk of the group assaulting her was on the driver’s side. She lifted the shotgun and fired into the air twice, then moved toward the encircled officers with the weapon at her shoulder.

The result was as good as she could have hoped. The men and women surrounding the trapped police were startled at the twin booms from her shotgun, and when they saw her coming they scattered. She ran through the hole in the formation and took cover behind a dumpster beside a grizzled older man.

He leaned over to her, holding his service weapon in a two-handed target grip. “You a cop or a concerned citizen?”

The noise from the mob, which had abated somewhat at her

appearance with the shotgun, rose once again. “Detective Dana Banquo. Just passing through and thought you shouldn’t have all the fun by yourself.”

“Very funny, Detective. Where’d you get the shotgun?”

She glanced at the stripes on his sleeve. “From the patrol car that’s on fire now. I called dispatch for backup. I think they got the message.”

“I sure hope so.” The sergeant let out a long sigh. “I don’t know what set them off. None of my guys had guns out. We were even trading jokes with some of them. All of a sudden it’s like we’re all Frankenstein’s monsters and they’re the villagers come to kill us.”

“I don’t think this is spontaneous, Sergeant.” She told him about her encounter with the man just before she opened the patrol car door.

“Great,” he growled. “If this is phase two, I hope they don’t have a phase three.”

“I wouldn’t count on it.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing, Sarge.”

But it was something, and Dana knew it. There was a connection between the union creep she and Miguel had seen talking with Lois Lane a few nights before. Dana didn’t know what the connection was, but she was certain that it was real and that the Lane woman was involved somehow.

Now all she needed to do was get through this incident and report her suspicions to her boss. The mob seemed to be building themselves up to something. They were shouting louder and the few words she could make out held more and more vitriol. Their faces looked harder and a little crazier to Dana, and they began to shuffle around in a kind of Brownian motion that brought them closer to the officers with each passing moment.

A brick arched up from the middle of the mob’s formation as if thrown by a catapult. Surprise froze her, and it appeared to Dana as if she was about to get clobbered by phase three if she didn’t move.

And she would have been clobbered had the brick not been snatched out of the air by a pair of super-hands. Nothing like a last-instant rescue, she thought.

Superman dropped to the ground hard enough to crack the concrete beneath him. He walked toward the mob, held the brick aloft between his raised hands, and crushed it into powder.

The crowd noise diminished appreciably. Superman brushed his hands together and took two long steps forward. His eyes, narrowed and angry, scanned the crowd.

Then he spoke and his voice rattled windows all along the street.

“I don’t care if you want a raise in pay or better hours or improved working conditions. Those are all legitimate subjects for you to discuss with the management of the Daily Planet. You have the right to go on strike to leverage James Olsen to accede to your demands. I will never interfere with those rights.”

He balled his fists and seemed to grow bigger. “But I will NOT allow any of you to harm police officers who are only doing their duty! These men and women did not threaten you. They did not attempt to stop you from exercising your legal rights. They did not interfere with your demonstration as long as it was peaceful.”

Superman then did something Dana didn’t know he could do.

He rose up and hovered about six feet off the surface of the parking lot, then clapped his hands together between each word of his next sentence.

“I! WILL! NOT! ALLOW! THIS! VIOLENCE! IN! MY! CITY!”

The claps and Superman’s words echoed from building to building. Windows rattled again, harder this time, and Dana saw a couple of dogs running down an alley with their tails tucked

under. Several nearby car alarms went off, and nearly everyone listening — Dana included — ducked their heads and covered their ears. The mob’s momentum was broken and they were no longer a threat.

The Man of Steel hung in mid-air for a moment longer, then lowered himself to the pavement and crossed his arms. Staring at the protesters until they left the area, he remained there as a sentinel of safety for the officers.

Dana turned her head and looked at the sergeant. She could see his mouth moving but couldn’t understand his words, so she looked where he was pointing and saw the patrol car which had been fire-bombed while she’d been in it.

It was encased in a sheath of ice.

Of course, she thought. Superman froze the car to put out the fire and keep it from blowing up before he caught that brick. That was a good idea, and she planned to thank him for his foresight.

Just as soon as the blacksmiths in her ears quit beating on their anvils.

Lucy sat on the edge of the chair and gnawed at her knuckle as she listened to the TV commentator report on Superman’s actions in breaking up the near-riot at the Daily Planet. She was thankful that Clark had been there, and she was glad that no one had been seriously injured, aside from one near-incoherent man claiming police brutality and several protesters who claimed to have suffered hearing damage from the level of noise Clark had produced. The only property damage was to the police car which had been fire-bombed and then frozen.

The TV talking head read a statement from the truckers’ union denying any responsibility for instigating the conflict, then a statement from James Olsen about suspending the contract negotiations until things and people calmed down. Oddly, the commentator also mentioned that Lex Luthor had been asked for a comment. The next clip showed Luthor replying that he was sorry the negotiations had spiraled down into violence, and that if the union or its membership had instigated it they were totally in the wrong. He called on the union leaders to bargain in good faith as long as James Olsen doing so, and if the talks broke off at this point it wouldn’t be the fault of his good friend James. The police commissioner added that there would be extra security in and around that part of the city for the foreseeable future.

Lucy clicked off the TV and sat gripping the remote. She was scared. It was almost as if the days before Superman had gone public had returned, with people firing weapons in the air at the slightest provocation and everyone either averting their eyes from all strangers or staring at each other in open challenge. She’d witnessed two shootings back in those days resulting from nothing more than people who refused to allow others to pass them on the sidewalk. And those hadn’t been the only ones she’d seen.

She heard Lois pad softly into the room and was surprised when her big sister put one hand on her shoulder. “He’s okay, Luce,” whispered Lois. “He’s big strong Super-guy, remember?”

Lucy blinked the sudden tear from her eye and shook her head. “It’s not him I’m worried about.”

Lois’ hand tightened on her shoulder. “Maybe not all, but it’s a big part of it.”

Lucy’s head ducked and she sniffed once. “Before he showed up, the murder rate in Metropolis was over a dozen per day. Mayor White did his best to get people to stop carrying weapons in public, but almost no one listened. The biggest line item in the annual police budget was new weapons and ammunition and the training for the cops to use them. In one day — one very bad day — the police killed fifty-eight people in gunfights on the street and lost twenty-three of their own.”

She lifted her head. “Then Clark began talking about people disarming voluntarily. He said that he recognized that people had

the right to defend themselves, but it had gone way beyond that. Innocent people were dying in shootings. Homes and businesses were getting shot up or becoming armored forts. School busses had pairs of officers guarding the kids with automatic weapons, and the kids were wearing bullet-proof vests in their own front yards." She looked at Lois. "Almost all of that is gone now. Clark — or Superman, I guess — is a symbol for peace and safety. We still have murder, rape, assault, home invasions, robbery, but the rates are less than a fifth of what they used to be. He's stopped so much of that mindless violence, just by being himself."

Lucy stood and faced her sister. "And now — well, this feels almost like the old days, Sis. I'm scared of what people may do, even with Superman around. I'm scared of what it might do to him if he has to stop a mob that won't back down. And I'm scared of what might happen to us if he ever decided he couldn't help."

Lois slowly nodded. "And all that is why you reacted the way you did when that delivery came yesterday."

"Yes." Lucy pressed her hands together and started pacing the living room. "Being disarmed is still new and uncomfortable to a lot of people. There's a guy running for the state senate, Anson something or something Anson, who closes all of his speeches by saying that an armed society is a polite society. It's a crock. People who have bad intentions are going to use weapons to do bad things, and so many people just can't see it."

She stopped and turned to face Lois. "I don't want to go back to that. I don't want to have to carry my Mini-14 over my shoulder when I go to work or out shopping or out to eat. I don't want to feel like I have to pull my revolver out of my purse when I get on an elevator so I'll have a chance if someone tries to rape me. Clark likes to say that laws guide honest people, and that an honest society doesn't need tons of laws about everything under the sun. But making something illegal won't stop criminals from doing bad things. We, as a society, have to decide to be honest and do good things."

Lois smirked and shook her head. "Sounds to me like he's living in a fantasy world."

Lucy smiled for the first time. "Maybe he is. But it's a good fantasy, and we're so much closer to that fantasy being a reality than we were seven years ago. Most of that is because of Clark, and I want to help him any way I can."

Lois' expression changed and her head tilted to one side as if looking at things from a new perspective. Lucy thought she'd continue their dialogue, but she didn't.

"Hey, Punky, have you heard from Mom and Dad? I'm beginning to think we should all get together for dinner or something."

Lucy hid her surprise, both at the sudden change of subject and the new topic. "I got a long email from them this morning. It seems that they're touring northern Africa with a U. N. medical mission and won't be back for a couple of weeks."

Another surprise came when Lois looked almost alarmed at the news. "North Africa?" she all but demanded. "Why there?"

Lucy took a moment before answering to make sure she didn't anger her sister. "I don't know what you have or haven't heard about the region, but it's pretty volatile right now. Since the Columbian and Mexican drug cartels just about wiped each other out, others have popped up to take their place in Morocco and Tunisia and even Southern Sudan. There are thousands of children being forced to maintain and harvest the crops the cartels are growing, and a lot of them get sick or hurt and die due to lack of good medical care. Dad wants to set up mobile hospitals to treat the diseases they come down with and the malnutrition they end up with. Mom went along to train the local nurses to provide better first aid and long-term care."

Lucy thought her answer would satisfy Lois, but all it did was make her sister act more agitated. Now it was Lois' turn to pace the room for a long moment.

She did two laps before she stopped in front of her sister. "Doesn't Daddy know how dangerous that area is?"

"Yes. But you know Daddy. He thinks because he's a doctor who only wants to help people, no one will bother him."

"Yeah, right. Do you have any idea how scary violent those people are? They shoot their own people just for talking out of turn in the public square."

"I do know about that," Lucy said. "But they wanted to go. Oh, Lois, I wish you could see them! For the last three years or so, they've been spending most of their time together and most of their money doing things like this. Daddy doesn't chase the high salaries or his nurses anymore and Mom doesn't hide in a bottle. When they talk about what they've done or what they're planning to do, their eyes light up and they look fifteen years younger. Both of them really love each other and really love working together." She chuckled. "They told me last year that I'd better have a good retirement plan, because they probably won't have much to leave me when they pass on."

Lois stopped and stared at the blank TV screen. "You think they'll be all right?"

"Clark promised to check on them every few days. And the cartels know him. They know he won't interfere with what they're doing, no matter how much he wants to, unless they start hurting innocent people."

Lois snorted. "I thought the kids were innocent people."

"They are, but Clark can't touch them for that. The cartels all have deals with the local governments to let them work those kids, and the parents are all too scared to put up a fuss. Besides, Clark would have to move there and monitor every one of those locations all day every day to stop them, and not even he can do that. As long as they maintain the fiction of just being businessmen, he doesn't have many options."

"Okay," Lois finally said, "I guess that makes a twisted kind of sense. So we'll see Mom and Daddy when they get back. You said a couple of weeks?"

Lucy nodded. "Yes, unless something else comes up. As soon as their travel plans are finalized, they'll let me know when their plane is supposed to land."

"Okay. Have you — did you tell them I'm back?"

"Not yet. I thought it would be better if we dropped that bomb on them in person. Besides, I don't want to interfere with this mission. It's important to both of them. And to the people they're helping, of course."

"Yeah, okay. Good." Lois seemed to force herself to relax.

"That's good. Hey, why aren't you at work today?"

"I called my supervisor over the weekend and told him that some family I hadn't seen for a long time blew into town and I needed to take some of my vacation time. He made noises about how I was messing up his life and making more work for him and I should spend as much time with my family as I could."

A tiny smile appeared on Lois' face. "And what did you say to that?"

"That I guessed I could do it if I had to, and if someone had to do the dirty work it might as well be me."

A real smile — the biggest one Lucy had seen on her sister's face since her return — blossomed, and she reached out to give Lucy a Dutch rub. "Hey, Punky, if it's that hard to do, maybe I should go."

Instead of fighting back or returning the kidding as she had so often when they were kids, Lucy grabbed Lois and squeezed her for all she was worth. "No way! I've got you back and you're staying right here with me! I'm not letting you go now!"

Lois froze for a moment, then melted into the embrace. And when they finally separated, Lucy couldn't tell which of them had more tears on her cheeks.

Lois had finally persuaded Lucy to let them both go to bed.

She hoped Lucy had gone to sleep.

She knew she wouldn't.

Africa.

Her parents were in Africa.

Lois shuddered. She desperately hoped that no one in the cartels would connect them with her. She'd never used her real name on any assignment, but there was a good bit of family resemblance between herself and her mother when it came to their faces, not to mention their body shape, mannerisms, and speech habits. Lois hoped no one suspected they were related, or she might have a personal revenge mission after this one was finished.

And the criminals in Libya had good reason to hate and fear her. No one who'd known who she was and gotten a good look at her face was still alive, but there were three shallow, unmarked graves in the Libyan desert just southeast of Tripoli to mark her handiwork. The Libyan cartel calling itself The Scourge of Allah had put a reward of one million dollars on her head — or, at least, on Lola Dane's head — dead or alive. And all the cartel leaders really wanted was her head, preferably in a cardboard box. Yeah, she'd pretty much worn out her welcome there.

Lois would never forgive herself if her parents were hurt because of her.

What was she thinking? After seventeen contract murders, seven kidnappings for ransom, the robbery of an entire cruise ship in the Mediterranean, not to mention the collateral damage of her other activities and the casual brutality she'd learned to deal out, forgiveness was not an option for her.

She rolled over in the bed and faced the wall. She wished she could convince herself that it was all for her children, that she kept doing what she was doing to keep them alive and safe. They were the two biggest reasons now, that was true, but it hadn't been true at the beginning. She'd killed to stay alive and there was no way to rationalize away that reality.

She lay in the bed almost paralyzed as the memory of her training graduation washed over her again like the overflow from a clogged sewer.

It was the first time she'd killed anyone.

There were times when Lois could remember Carla's build, the sound of her voice, the details of the combat knife she'd thrown at the feet of a smiling Rodolfo, but Carla's face wouldn't come into focus. All she had to do, though, was to remember the moment before she'd pulled the trigger those last three times. Then Carla's face would appear, clear as a photograph, just before Lois' bullets ripped it to shreds.

It was only the first of many kills. Lois didn't want to remember all the faces. But they wouldn't go away. They haunted her in the cold hours of the morning after it was too late to go back to sleep. And she'd begun seeing them on the streets she walked, whether in Libya or Jordan or France or Germany or Nigeria or any other country she'd been sent to ply her lethal trade. Even on the missions where she wasn't given a human target, their faces pursued her around the clock.

Death was her constant companion and he refused to leave her alone.

This was no way to live. This wasn't even any way to survive. She had to figure out a way to escape Rodolfo with her children.

She had to.

And if she had to choose between the lives of her children and someone else's life, she would make the choice and learn to live with it.

Chapter Nine

from the journal of H. G. Wells

I have received some encouraging information from my superiors concerning this dimension's long-term future. It seems that there is a high probability that Lane and Kent will be recognized as visionaries and co-laborers for a better life for

mankind during their own lifetimes. It is the first heartening news I have received since I began this ill-fated venture.

This future, however, is not cast in stone. There is no clear path leading to this eventuality, nor is this positive time track the only future which might come to pass. There is another potential future, one with a similar probability of coming to pass — and which is much darker — in which the chaos of a half-decade past returns and overwhelms the Man of Steel, and Clark not only gives up the fight against the forces of evil, he withdraws completely from human society, leaving mankind to their own violent devices. To my deep chagrin and utter shame, this potential future did not manifest itself until I transported Lois Lane back to the United States.

I cannot determine, from the limited information available to me, which of these diametrically opposed future paths is the more likely. There are a few paths which track a middle course between these two, more or less, but the probabilities for them are quite low. In fact, the probabilities of either of the extreme futures becoming reality exceed one hundred twenty percent.

This means that a critical juncture in time is upon these good people.

It also means that I am the one who has brought them to this critical juncture.

I write this through damp lenses, knowing that I have made what may be the most mistake of my career as a Temporal Mechanic. I also am quite limited as to what actions I may take to rectify the situation, despite the situation being one of my own making. The fact that I do not know the correct path I must take to redeem this state of affairs further limits my options.

As a matter of fact, I have virtually exhausted those options. I have, in the vernacular of this time period, run out of cards to play.

I must trust the people whom I have involved to make the proper decisions.

Lois was fully awake before she moved a muscle.

Her ears took in the sounds in the air, her nose the scents, her skin the feel and texture of her bed. It was a habit drilled into her by Rodolfo and his instructors, one which had been reinforced with severe blows. They were not allowed to injure her seriously, but they were required to leave bruises in the muscles of her arms and legs to reinforce to her that moving before knowing her surroundings might bring instant death.

Her memory returned, reinforced by the evidence provided by her senses, and she cautiously opened her eyes. The room was just as it had been the night before, except there was light streaming through the translucent curtains over the window. She glanced at the bedside clock and read the time.

By conditioned reflex, she snapped erect and yanked the pistol out from under her pillow, then relaxed as she forced herself to remember where she was. This was her sister's apartment and she was as safe as she had been since before leaving for the Congo those many years before.

She extended her hearing and detected furtive noises outside the bedroom, as if someone were already awake and making a sincere effort not to disturb her. That must have been what woke her, she mused. And Lucy had to be the one making those sounds.

She listened for a few seconds and recognized her sister's muttered voice. She seemed to be berating herself for something.

Lois rose, pulled on a borrowed terrycloth robe, and dropped the pistol in the right pocket. Then she unlocked the door and peeked out.

It was indeed Lucy, racing around the living room in her underwear and hose, trying to get something done before she — before she left? Hadn't she told Lois she was taking some vacation days?

Lois let the door swing open and scratched her head. She

yawned loudly as if not yet fully awake. “Punky? What’s going on?”

Lucy stopped in her tracks and nearly fell with surprise, then sighed and dropped her arms to the sides. “Oh, Sis, I’m sorry! I was trying to be quiet and not wake you. I got a call on my cell this morning. Bruce Wayne himself is coming to the facility and my boss is about to have three litters of kittens all at once. He thinks having a pretty girl around will make Mr. Wayne back off and not yell at him for anything that’s really nothing to yell about.”

Wayne’s target profile popped up in Lois’ mind once again. Orphaned at age ten by a mugger who’d shot both of his parents, absurdly rich, lived on his father’s estate outside Gotham City, single and a definite ladies’ man, active in the city’s cultural and financial circles, not very political, not a high-level threat. The “Do Not Engage” notation figured brightly in her memory, although she didn’t know what it was about Wayne that warranted it.

She shook her head at Lucy and shuffled forward. “So, you gonna be gone all day?”

“Hope not, but I’m afraid so. You’re welcome to cook something for lunch, or you can have a couple of those microwave meals in the freezer, or you can go out. I left a couple of twenties on the breakfast bar with my note, which you don’t need now, along with my spare key. I’ll try to be back before five, but I may not make it until then.” Lucy pulled on a matching blouse and skirt as she hunted for her purse. “Where is that — oh, yeah, got it.” She stumbled toward Lois as she pulled on her shoes. “The fridge is full if you want breakfast. Oh, don’t forget your antibiotics, okay? And call me if you need anything. I don’t care how much Mr. Wayne is worth, I’ll be here if you need me.”

Lois chuckled and hugged her sister. “It’s okay, Luce. I’ll watch some TV, read something, maybe take a long bubble bath. I’ll be fine.”

Lucy dodged Lois’ hand as it made a beeline for her scalp. “Uh-uh! No noogies! You’ll mess up my hair and I have to go to work and I’m just on the near side of late as it is.”

They embraced for a moment, then Lucy danced away and smiled wide. “It’s great to have you back here, Lois. We’ll have dinner tonight and then sit and talk, okay? I’ll tell you all about my life so far.”

“Okay, Punky. See you tonight when you get here.”

It didn’t escape Lois’ notice that Lucy hadn’t suggested that both sisters exchange their recent life stories. It couldn’t have been a slip. There was no way her younger sister was going to let that go.

Lois made certain the front door was locked, then went to each window to close the curtains and blinds without framing herself in them. It was highly unlikely that there was anyone across the street with a Barrett.50 caliber sniper rifle or a rocket-propelled grenade launcher, but one of the lessons she’d had drilled into her repeatedly was to take nothing for granted.

A long soak in the bathtub actually sounded nice. Maybe she could read for a while, get her mind off her assignment and relax. Lucy had a number of romantic novels on her shelves, along with a large section of technical books Lois would read only if she wanted to bore herself to sleep, but nothing caught her eye.

She glanced at Lucy’s desk, but after that glance decided not to touch anything there. The books and papers looked to be arranged just so for a student working on a research paper, and the few specialized terms Lois recognized were obviously above her level of technical knowledge.

Lois smiled to herself. Her little sister was indeed bettering herself. Ten years ago little Punky not only would not have recognized the majority of those terms, she wouldn’t have cared to learn what they meant. Now she was using them as easily as a

skilled musician used chords and rhythm to write a hit song.

As fulfilling as that realization was, it still left Lois with nothing to read in the bath.

Then she remembered the Superman biography they’d bought from the pharmacy when they’d filled her prescription. That would keep her interest.

The bath water was almost frigid and the bubbles were long gone, but Lois was aware of none of it. She was absorbed, enthralled, almost enraptured by the story of a man who’d given up everything he’d known to help a world which couldn’t quite make up its mind whether or not it wanted his help. And to her, the most compelling part of the story was Superman’s search for Lois Lane.

She, of course, knew why he’d never found her. She’d been taken out of the Congo after only a few days of captivity, before anyone in Metropolis really missed her. Rodolfo had transported her, drugged and disguised, to Crete and then to Madagascar for what Rodolfo had laughingly called “orientation,” then to Sicily for the rest of her training. There was no trail for even a Superman to find, no clue as to her whereabouts, and he’d confined his search to central Africa based on the premise that she’d never left. The conclusion that she’d died there was not only reasonable, it was all but inevitable.

The few photos of the “other Lois” chilled her. That might have been me, she thought. She might have been the one to come within a hair’s breadth of dying in an explosion. She might have been the one menaced by the mystery man called Tempus.

She might have been the one he’d held so tenderly in his arms.

But she wasn’t. The real Lois Lane of this world — whatever that really meant — was a highly trained, highly skilled, and very successful assassin for hire, available for the right price paid to Rodolfo, an amoral criminal kingpin of uncertain lineage. She was wanted, though not by her real name, in several European countries, and was on several death lists in Northern African dictatorships and democracies alike.

At least she was still non-political.

The old joke didn’t grant her the wry amusement it had when she’d first heard it. For that matter, nothing amused her any more — nothing except spending time with her children. Despite her real status, despite the way she’d lived the last seven years, she truly loved them. And she’d do almost anything to protect them.

She closed the book and sighed. If only she could get Clark to help her. If only he could get her babies away from Rodolfo. If only—

Wait a minute. Was she really that galactically stupid?

He could help her.

He was Superman. He could do it. He could zip in, grab them, and zip out again before anyone even knew he was there. All he needed was their location and their situation and he’d go heroing off after them.

It would take some thought, but maybe she could come up with a plan, one that would let her ignore her assignment and get away with her babies. Of course, she’d have to reveal what she knew about Rodolfo and his organization, something that would surely put a stop to both his and her criminal activities, but given the small fortune she’d hidden away in the Cayman Islands, she thought she could eventually get over that disappointment.

And then she felt the wry amusement.

At 8:53, Lucy jumped out of her car and all but sprinted across the parking lot and into the security entrance. She squeezed through the door almost before the security system recognized her access card and hurried to her boss’ office.

And then she got her first glimpse of Bruce Wayne.

He looked just like his photographs. He was tall — a little

taller than Clark — broad-shouldered, square-jawed and handsome, built like a brick house and dressed to the nines, every hair in place and a perfect smile on his face, displaying both grace and restrained power in every movement. Had she not known Clark so well, she might have been knocked breathless.

But she did know Clark, so while Wayne impressed her, he didn't overwhelm her.

She slowed her pace and joined the group. Calvin Starnes, her immediate supervisor, gave her a quick glower around Wayne's shoulder and said, "Mr. Wayne, this is the young lady I was telling you about, Lucy Lane. She's one of our best team leaders, and she's better qualified to show you the nuts and bolts of our operation than I am."

Wayne put his hand out and waited for Lucy to take it. "Pleased to meet you, Ms. Lane. Shall we begin our tour?"

As he released her hand, she realized he wasn't alone. A tall, slender, athletic woman with her reddish-brown hair in a tight bun stood beside him. She carried a computer tablet with a stylus clipped to one side. She was stunning, even with the sensible business suit and wire-framed glasses she wore, and Lucy's first impression was that the woman was one of Mr. Wayne's arm candy secretaries.

Until Lucy looked at her eyes. They were sharp, piercing, intelligent eyes that evaluated Lucy even as Lucy evaluated her. A hint of amusement danced at the corners of the woman's mouth, and she nodded to Lucy as she spoke to Wayne.

"Mr. Wayne, please remember that you have the one-thirty meeting with Senator Palmer today."

"Oh, yes, Ms. Kyle, thank you. We'd better get this show on the road then, hadn't we?"

He gestured for Lucy to lead the way. "Thank you, sir. I want to apologize for being late this morning. No excuse."

Wayne glanced at his wristwatch and frowned. "You're not late, Ms. Lane. You're right on time. Besides, Calvin told me he'd called you in from a vacation day. Had I known that before he called you, I would have insisted on someone else showing me around."

"Oh, I don't mind, sir. This area is kind of my baby anyway."

His charming smile returned. "In that case, please introduce us to your baby. Oh, I'm sorry. Speaking of introductions, I haven't introduced you to my personal assistant, Selina Kyle. Ms. Kyle, Ms. Lucy Lane."

The trio stopped while Lucy and Selina shook hands briefly. Lucy got the impression that Selina approved of her, at least conditionally. "Pleased to meet you, Ms. Kyle."

"Please, call me Selina. I'm not as formal as Mr. Wayne is, even though I'm almost as essential."

Lucy chuckled with her. "I'm Lucy. And I think you'll both like what you see."

"Well, Mr. Wayne, we've seen the break room, the programmer's cubicles, the regular conference rooms, the videoconference room, the test area and the quality control area, talked with a bunch of the programmers in all those areas, and sampled the coffee, which I think is better here than it is in most companies. What else would you like to see?"

Wayne tilted his head. "The coffee is better than just most companies' coffee?"

Selina chuckled again. "Mr. Wayne, I doubt that Lucy has had the opportunity to sample the coffee in every company in Metropolis."

He shrugged. "I suppose not. As long as it's better than LexCorp's coffee."

Now Lucy laughed. "Sorry, sir, I've never been there long enough for coffee."

Selina's eyebrow rose slightly. "But you have been there, I take it?"

"Yes, for an interview when I first went looking for a career-type job. But they told me I didn't qualify for anything they had open. Wayne Tech, on the other hand, not only gave me a job, they — that is, your company, Mr. Wayne — gave me the time to learn how to do the job. I also got additional training both on my own time and on company time to improve my skills and the chance to show what I could do with them. Now I'm working on a Master's degree in Information Technology from New Troy State University, and I have my eye on one of those big offices on the upper floors."

Selina turned a constrained smile to her boss. "Careful, Mr. Wayne, you may have some internal competition."

Wayne smiled at Lucy. "I certainly hope so. We all have to be pushed, at least a little bit, to achieve our best."

For some reason Lois' face flashed in Lucy's mind. She nodded at the visitors and said, "I agree. A little pressure is good for all of us, at least some of the time."

And a little pressure was what Lois was going to get today, too, decided Lucy.

He sat back in his chair and rubbed his face with his hands. The mighty, powerful, influential James Olsen was constrained and frustrated. His flagship business, the Daily Planet, was in the middle of one of the ugliest labor disputes in the history of Metropolis.

And the worst part was that he had no idea how it had gotten to this point.

It had started five months ago when the trucker's union had requested a meeting to talk about salary and benefits. Since the current contract had, at that time, had eight more months to run, he'd expected it. And his opposite number in the negotiations, union representative Martin Moreau, had begun making polite but firm requests for salary increases, to which James had responded with offers of smaller increases with additional insurance coverage. The meetings had taken place every two to three weeks, with both sides apparently coming closer to a new contract.

Then several days ago — five days before Lois Lane had magically rematerialized in his office — Martin had stormed into the room with four husky bruisers in his wake and slammed him with a demand — not a request, but a demand — for an immediate across-the-board twelve percent salary increase, a sixty percent cut in the employees' cost of insurance, a guarantee that no employee would lose his or her job for the duration of the contract, and a fully funded pension plan for everyone working twenty-five hours a week or more. James had tried to explain calmly that the Daily Planet couldn't afford that level of benefit increase, whereupon Martin had leaped to his feet and screamed accusations of exploitation and abuse and promised a strike unless their demands were met at that very instant. He had refused to discuss the terms which James had thought were almost finalized and stormed out dramatically.

James frowned. Upon reflection, he thought it had been a little too dramatic. And given the timing of Lois Lane's reappearance later that same week, a little too convenient to be coincidence.

Especially given the information he'd learned about the almost-riot two days before. The so-called 'spontaneous gathering' had been nothing of the sort. The police had pulled their own video recordings of the area and requested the Daily Planet's recordings also, which had been delivered with alacrity.

The results of the video analysis was disturbing. Over half of the people in the crowd were either union members from other nearby towns or cities — more than half of those were known to live in Gotham City — or thugs picked up off the street. The DA had identified over fifty of them as members of local gangs who often hired out to serious criminals. This was a planned, deliberate event.

But planned by whom? And why? What purpose did it serve?

After a moment's thought, James realized what that purpose was.

The near-riot distracted both the Daily Planet, still the city's most reliable news organization, and Superman, who had broken up the demonstration once it had turned violent. This, along with the sudden return from supposed death by Lois Lane, had cost Olsen Enterprises the close guidance of its founder and still CEO — himself.

There was something he was missing, something important, something key to the entire situation. It couldn't have been Lois — she wasn't even in the city when negotiations had broken down. And while he wouldn't put anything past some of his rivals, not one of them would be stupid enough to authorize a move like that.

Not even Lex Luthor.

His desk phone suddenly buzzed and he took a couple of deep breaths to slow his heart rate back down to slightly abnormal before lifting the handset. "Yes, Mrs. Cox?"

Dominique's formal office voice reassured him. "Sir, you have a personal call from Mr. Lex Luthor. Shall I put him through to you?"

Wow, spooky. And a little creepy. The old cliché "Speak of the devil and he shall appear" flashed through James' mind, but all he'd done was think about the guy. "Luthor? Did he say what he wanted?"

"No, sir. I got the impression that he didn't think I would repeat his message accurately. He insisted that he would — and I quote — 'explain to his good friend James Olsen himself.' End quote, sir."

James grinned. Dominique had taken their agreement to behave as complete professionals in the office to heart, but he could hear her dislike of the man coming through the line. For that matter, James wasn't all that fond of him either, but when one very rich man calls another very rich man, the second very rich man should, at the very least, listen to the first very rich man.

"Very well. Please put him through. And secure the call from this end."

"Yes, sir."

A few clicks and pops sounded in James' ear, then he heard his rival's barbed urbanity. "Hello, Jim? Is that you?"

"It's me, Lex. To what do I owe the pleasure of your call?"

Luthor hesitated, then asked, "Is this phone secure?"

"It's as secure as your scramblers talking to my scramblers can make it."

"Good." He hesitated again, then finally spoke. "My wife has left the city for what I hope is a short time. I am not aware of her current location, save that she is safe."

James waited for more, then said, "I hope you haven't called to get me to set you up with a date."

There was no humor in Luthor's reply. "She is out of town to preserve her safety. I believe I have been targeted by an assassin, possibly sent by one of my foreign rivals, and I want her out of the potential line of fire."

James blinked several times as he digested the unexpected news, then asked, "Are you looking for help? Of the unofficial and unreported kind?"

Luthor sighed. "Thank you for the offer. I understand that your father works for the National Intelligence Bureau."

"He does, but we haven't spoken much in the last few years. He does his thing, I do mine, we exchange birthday and Christmas cards and not much else."

"Nevertheless, I must ask you a tremendous favor. If you could contact him and let him know that I would be open to any assistance he might lend me, I would surely be in your debt."

James took a moment to think. If he did this and his father helped Luthor, it might give him a small advantage to use the next time he needed to make a major computer hardware purchase for

any of his companies. Of course, it might not, in which case he'd have one more reason not to trust Luthor any farther than he could spit on level ground.

If he declined, Luthor would probably hold it against him later, assuming this mythical assassin turned out to be real and also assuming that he or she failed to kill Luthor. The same would hold true with Arianna Luthor if the assassin succeeded. But if Lex were killed, the resulting power vacuum at LexCorp would probably tear the company apart and destabilize the tech industry in New Troy long enough for his rivals to build up a technological advantage that would last for years, perhaps even decades. And that scenario didn't have any upside to it for anyone.

He made his decision. "I'll call him, Lex, and I'll explain what little I know and ask him to call you, but I can't make him do anything."

A sigh of relief came over the line. "Thank you, James. That's all I can ask of you, and more than I might have done in your place."

"Just remember that the next time I buy something from you. You can apply it to my discount."

Luthor chuckled. "I shall. Now I must allow you to go on with your business, as I must go on with mine. Good luck."

"Thanks. Hey, wait a minute!"

"Yes? Is there something I can do for you now?"

"Actually, there is. I'd like to have everything you have on those demonstrators at my loading dock, and I mean everything."

Luthor paused. "That is a great deal to ask. Simply revealing some of that information would inform a discerning man such as yourself how that information was obtained."

"Give me what you have and we'll call it even between us. Deal?"

"Ah, you do realize how explosive some of this data would be, do you not, were it to become public knowledge?"

"I give you my word that I will guard it as though it were my own personal medical information."

James thought for a moment that Luthor would refuse, but the man surprised him. "Consider it done. I'll have everything messengered to you by mid-afternoon today. And I will redact nothing. Much of it will be in digital format, but there is still a sizable portion of the information existing only on paper."

"Thanks, Lex. As I said, I'll do my best not to reveal anything that might cause problems for you, but I can't make any promises."

"The knowledge that you will do your best will suffice. We'll speak again later, hopefully when both of our lives have quieted down."

"I'd rather not wait for both of our retirements."

Luthor's sincere laugh bounced down the line. James smiled to himself, knowing what the volume and timbre of the sound would do to the ears of anyone trying to unscramble the call and listen in. "Then we must not wait that long. Good-bye for now."

"Yeah, don't take any wooden CPUs."

The line went quiet and he slowly hung up. If Lex was right about someone hunting him, it wasn't good news for any of the rich men in the state. None of them wanted to declare open season on the wealthy, not really. They were the ones who owned companies and created jobs and kept the economies churning. Oh, it wasn't unreasonable for some politicians to demand that the rich pay higher taxes than the "little people" the politicians claimed to represent, but arranging for untimely deaths for multi-millionaires was quite another subject altogether. It was bad for business, bad for the city, bad for the community all around.

He lifted the handset again and pressed the intercom button. "Mrs. Cox, please inform security that I'm expecting a delivery from Lex Luthor this afternoon. When it comes, they are to process it normally and make sure it's safe, then bring it to my office the moment they're finished."

“Yes, sir. Anything else?”

He hesitated, then plunged ahead. “How do you feel about a late-evening document scan with me?”

“Tonight?”

“Yes. And before you ask, the delivery I’m expecting is a document drop. I have no idea how much data will be in it or how much will be printed as opposed to digital, and we can’t put any of it on our systems for analysis.”

“Hmm. May I make a suggestion?”

“Of course.”

“We could use the stand-alone system behind your office if we need to. That machine can be easily disconnected from the office network or the Internet. If we turn off that link, no one could hack it because no one could see it online.”

“Good idea. Any other suggestions?”

“Just a question. What kind of pizza do you prefer? It sounds as if this will be a long session.”

He smiled. “I’m a thin-crust pepperoni man myself. What about you?”

“Oh, I prefer deep dish samplers. So I’ll order one of each and tell the delivery person to expect cash. Is four-thirty a good time for me to place the order?”

“If you’re calling the Pizza Palace, any time is a good time. I’ll put some cash on my desk for the pizza and a tip, assuming, of course, you think it’s warranted.”

“It will be if I have anything to say about it.”

James glanced at the clock on the wall and shook his head. This wasn’t the first time he’d worked until nearly midnight, but then he wasn’t as young as he once had been. He and Dominique had worked on these documents for almost six hours, pausing only for pizza and pit stops. He’d had no idea that Luthor’s information-gathering apparatus was this widespread or this effective.

He stood and moved to the open table where Dominique was matching a list of names from the demonstration with a similar list from the New Troy State Investigations Section. The latter list had been something of a gift from his father, who’d called in a couple of favors when James had told him about the threat to Lex Luthor. They’d made some possible connections between the demonstrators and a shadowy criminal organization called Intergang which James didn’t believe anyone else had made.

He touched her on the shoulder and she grunted without turning around. “Dominique, I think we should break for the night. It’s late, we’re both worn out, and I’m starting to see Ninja assassins coming out of the wallpaper.”

She dropped her pencil and leaned back, then rubbed her face with both hands. “You’re right, you’re right, I’m exhausted, but we’re close to putting these things together and I don’t want to stop.”

“I don’t either, but if we both stay at it after we’re too tired to think, we won’t get anything useful out of the exercise.” He took a half-step back and held out his hand. “Look, let’s plan to hit this again at ten in the morning, after you clear all the junk out of my day. You can call in your substitute and we’ll lock ourselves in here and finish up.”

“James, I really want—”

“Please, Dominique. For my sake.”

She looked up at him for a long moment and he fancied that he saw something in her eyes, a message just for him that he couldn’t quite read. But no, it had to be fatigue he saw there.

Then she took his hand and stood up and didn’t let go and brought her lips within inches of his face and stopped. “I don’t want to do something stupid,” she whispered. “But I’ve wanted to kiss you since you dropped me off from the club the other night.”

He swallowed hard. “I — that’s been on my mind, too.”

She smiled slightly and leaned closer. Their lips touched and

James forgot about Luthor, forgot about the demonstrators, forgot about his father, forgot how tired he was. For a long moment, the only reality he experienced was her soft lips on his and the warmth of her soft hands on his chest.

It was a good moment that didn’t last as long as he’d suddenly hoped it would. She tried to move away but he put his arms around her and held her gently. “Dominique, please — please stay here with me for a minute.”

Her arms came up under his and her head nestled against his shoulder. “You talked me into it.”

His hand rose almost of its own accord and gently pressed her head closer to him. His eyes closed and he blocked out everything in the room but the feel of her hair, the closeness of her body, the warm after-impression of her lips on his, the feathery awareness of her breath on his neck, the scent of her hair, the texture of her skin.

He could easily fall deeply in love with this woman.

Finally they drifted apart, still touching and being touched. The glistening in her eyes surprised him, and he lifted one hand to brush the tears from her cheeks.

“You know,” she breathed, “I could chalk this up to the intensity of what we’re doing, the tension of Lois Lane coming back from the dead, the late hour, the pizza we ate—” she paused as James chuckled “—but I’d rather believe that it’s real, or at least the beginnings of something real.”

He gave her a jaunty grin. “Me too. Dominique, I think—”

She quickly put a finger on his lips. “Unless you were about to ask me to call a car to take each of us home, I’m not ready to hear what you think.” She quirked one eyebrow upward and tilted her head. “Sir.”

His grin softened and he cupped her cheek. “I’m only ‘sir’ during working hours, remember? Besides, I don’t want to rush you into anything. As much as I’m enjoying this moment, as much as I hope we have many more moments like it, I don’t want to hurt you or get hurt myself. I plan to take things slowly, if only because I don’t want to run off the best administrative assistant in the state.” He gently kissed the tip of her nose. “You’re way too valuable to me on too many levels.”

“Thank you.” She moved back a half-step and cleared her throat. “Shall I call that car for us now?”

“Yes. I’ll shut down the computer while you do that.”

She leaned toward the phone, but instead of picking it up, she suddenly hurled herself into his arms and grabbed him around the chest again. He caught her and returned the embrace until she pushed back out of his reach. Without quite looking him in the eye, she quietly said, “Thank you for what I think you were going to say.”

He smiled and caught her eye. “You’re welcome.”

“I just—” She turned away and sighed. “I’m a couple of years older than you are and I’ve been around the block a few times. I’ve had a few disastrous relationships, starting with Mitch, and you may see me for who I really am and run the other way as fast as you can.” She made a fist with one hand and slowly released it. “And I wouldn’t blame you a bit if you did.”

“I don’t care how many blocks you’ve been around, Dominique. Everything you’ve been through has helped make you the person you are right now, and that’s who interests me. I only care about who you are now, not who you once were.” He reached out and gently touched her shoulder. “And I like who you are now.”

She returned the smile he sent to her, then turned to the phone and wiped her eyes before picking up the handset and making the call. He turned to the computer and powered it down, then checked the room’s security controls. As soon as they left, anyone entering the room would have fifteen seconds to enter the nine-digit code into the keypad on the wall beside the door before the entryway would slam shut and the room would be filled with

knockout gas. Having that gas was one of the perks of one's father being an NIB agent, and it would help make sure that the contents of this room would be safe for the night.

As they waited for the elevator, both shyly trying to decide whether or not to hold hands, he realized that he'd have to work harder than he ever had in his life to keep from falling any harder for her than he already had. He'd always respected her professionalism, her skill, her charm and diplomatic demeanor, her efficiency and ability to anticipate his needs, but now he realized just how wonderful a person she really was. It was as if their relationship had been hiding just out of sight for years, waiting for the exact moment to burst into the open. No friendship, no partnership, no vapid arm candy model looking for a mention on Entertainment Now had ever felt quite as perfect to him as the prospect of a real relationship with Dominique Cox did.

He shook his head and smiled at her as the elevator doors opened. It probably wasn't worth the effort to keep himself from loving her.

Chapter Ten

from the journal of H. G. Wells

I am in deadly danger.

I have received another transmission from my associates, a text-only message. Though incomplete, the message tells me that the conflicting probabilities of which I wrote earlier have all but crowded out any other possible future tracks. This world will tip in one of two directions, toward either a Utopian future or a descent into chaos and anarchy.

And the fulcrum of this historic lever is Lois Lane.

Not only is this world in danger due to my actions, I am in danger of being stranded here should the negative future be realized. If I am to depart, it must be very soon, if not immediately.

Yet I cannot leave. I must not. I have instigated these events and I must remain and witness the final outcome. I will attempt to transmit some record of my actions to the future of my home dimension, but I cannot know that I will succeed. My reply to their most recent transmission was not acknowledged, and I do not know if it was received. It is possible, I fear, that it is too late for me to depart even now.

To paraphrase my contemporary Mr. A. E. Housman, I am indeed a stranger, and afraid, in a world I have well and truly made.

Lucy had enjoyed a fine lunch — compliments of Bruce Wayne — and had begun a tentative friendship with Selina Kyle, woman of mystery and seeming brilliance. Wayne's reputation as a flighty dilettante and vapid playboy had taken a number of hits during their conversation as he asked insightful and probing questions about the operational procedures by which Lucy's department was constrained. She told him what she liked, what she understood needed to be in place but didn't necessarily like, and about the few things that she didn't understand. Two things seemed to get Selina's attention more than the others: the restrictions against programmers working from home on a semi-regular basis and the resistance to giving the tech people, especially the developers working on new projects, flexible work schedules. Lucy had the distinct impression that those things might change in the near future.

"You make some very good arguments, Ms. Lane," smiled Wayne. "Let me kick some of these things around with the board of directors and see what we can do."

Lucy dabbed her mouth with her napkin and smiled. "Thank you, Mr. Wayne. I appreciate your time and your willingness to listen to me."

"He wouldn't listen to you if you didn't make good sense,

Lucy," Selina purred. "I'm sure you realize that many of the people who work for Mr. Wayne either babble incoherently or freeze up when he smiles at them. You did neither."

Lucy shrugged. "As impressive as Mr. Wayne is, both as an authority figure and in person, it's hard to be overwhelmed with anyone once you get to know Superman."

Wayne smiled even wider. "Ah, yes, Superman. He's quite famous, even in Gotham."

"More so than Batman?"

Lucy's offhand comment seemed to startle both Selina and Wayne for a moment, then they both relaxed. Lucy noted that neither of them had looked away from her until the odd moment passed.

Selina leaned back and crossed her arms. "Superman operates in the light, Lucy. Everybody who wants to know about him can find out almost anything. The Batman — well, he's kind of a night owl, and he's very secretive. Not many people know that much about him, and if anyone knows who he really is, they're not telling."

Lucy shrugged. "All I know is that he operates in Gotham and you guys have some really crazy crooks over there and he seems to be up to the challenge. Most of what I've heard about him is good, at least to a point."

Wayne frowned and tilted his head at Lucy. "What point is that, Ms. Lane?"

Lucy hadn't been intimidated by Wayne's money or position or body, but she suddenly felt like a gazelle staring down a lion. Had she met the intense, powerful man she now faced on a dark street, she would have pulled her revolver out of her purse and pulled the trigger.

Then Selina touched Wayne's forearm and squeezed slightly. "Mr. Wayne, Lucy was only saying that she'd heard rumors. I think we should give her a break and not force her to repeat them, especially since she hasn't done so up to now."

Lucy watched Wayne dial his intensity down several notches until his charming smile returned. "Of course, Ms. Kyle. My apologies, Ms. Lane, for coming on a bit strong. I suppose I'm a bit sensitive to anything which might besmirch my city's reputation."

Lucy nodded. "I understand, sir. I'm kind of proprietary about Metropolis myself." Lucy and Selina stood at almost the same moment, followed immediately by Bruce Wayne. "Thank you again for the meal and the company. I look forward to seeing both of you again."

Wayne and Selina each shook hands with her. "Perhaps Wayne Tech will invite you to headquarters soon, Ms. Lane," he said. "I think you could make an impression on some rather stodgy and hidebound directors."

Lucy shook her head. "That might make me babble or freeze up."

The three of them shared a chuckle, then Wayne turned to leave. "Unfortunately, that meeting with the senator cannot be rescheduled. We must leave now or risk being late, and I need to sway the good Solon on of couple of issues if I can."

"Good luck on that, Mr. Wayne. Shall I walk you back through security?"

"Only if you're leaving also. You have a vacation to resume, remember?"

Lucy smiled again. "Yes, I do. Thank you for remembering. If you'll let me tell Calvin that I'm leaving for the day, I'll meet you right outside the cafeteria."

Well, well, thought Lucy as she strode to Calvin's office. It appeared that there was something to the buzz about Bruce Wayne and Selina Kyle, and it had nothing to do with her ability to take shorthand.

A wild thought appeared. Maybe, she mused, Clark and I can double-date with them some day. Of course, that would depend on

what happened with Lois.

It was a sobering thought.

As the pair of visitors stood beside the cafeteria door and watched Lucy stride down the hall, Selina murmured to Bruce, “You were right. She’s really on the ball. You’re almost as lucky to have her in your organization here as you are to have me in your main office.”

She felt, rather than heard, his rumbling chuckle. “I knew she was good, but I didn’t know just how good. We may have the wrong person running this division.”

“You’re not going to toss Calvin out on his ear, are you?”

“Of course not. He hasn’t done anything wrong and he isn’t lazy. For the most part, he knows what he’s doing and does it very well. He just doesn’t have that ‘It’ factor that Lucy Lane seems to have. You saw how she handled those programmers. Every one of them is an individual to her, not just an interchangeable piece of the machine. I think she’s quite capable.”

“It helps that she’s an attractive young woman who knows her own mind, though, doesn’t it?”

“Why, Ms. Kyle, what a catty remark. One might think you were jealous.”

“She’s hardly planning to join you across a Gotham gargoyle, Bruce. That’s not her style. She’s more at home in this place than I’d ever be.” She shifted her stance and moved a half-stride away from him. “And that ‘catty remark’ crack? You’re going to pay for that one.”

“I hope so.”

She snorted in surprise, startling a bustling young brunette woman hurrying past. “Sorry,” said Selina. “Allergies.”

The young woman’s gaze was torn between Selina and Bruce and her open mouth refused to emit any sound. After a moment, she nodded sharply and resumed her hurried pace down the hallway, nearly colliding with a returning Lucy.

Selina watched as Lucy smiled at the girl and exchanged a few words with her. When Lucy was close enough to speak with, Selina asked, “Is that young lady all right?”

“Sure, Brenda’s fine. She’s a newly graduated programmer trainee and she recognized Mr. Wayne when she said she heard a cat growl at her.”

Selina forced her face to go smooth to keep from laughing. “A cat growled at her? You mean like a house cat?”

Bruce’s mouth took on a warped shape as she realized that he, too, was holding back a laugh. Lucy apparently saw it also, although if she did she was too polite to mention it. “No,” said Lucy, “she said it was a big cat, like a cougar. I don’t know what she was talking about.”

Cougar? thought Selina. I’m too young to be a cougar!

Bruce derailed that train of thought when he looked at his watch. “I think we have just enough time to meet with Senator Parker if we leave immediately. Thank you again for the tour and for your company, Ms. Lane.”

“Thank you, Mr. Wayne. And just so you’ll know, I’m pretty sure Mr. Luthor would have sent Selina by herself if he were in your position.”

Selina couldn’t help the frost that crept into her voice. “Lex Luthor will never be in Bruce Wayne’s position, I promise you that.”

With that statement, she stepped off toward the front door, leaving both Bruce and Lucy trailing in her wake. She only hoped Lucy didn’t think too hard about that last reflexive comment. People heard enough gossip about her relationship with Bruce in Gotham — there was no need to feed the animals here in Metropolis. If they were lucky, Lucy would just assume that Selina had a personal thing against Luthor and not read anything else into it.

Lucy unlocked her apartment door, determined to confront Lois on anything and everything she thought needed to be clarified. It was past time for her big sister to come clean and spill all the beans.

She laughed silently at the self-contradictory mixed metaphors. And that made her smile to herself because the reason she recognized them as mixed metaphors was her relationship with Clark and his skill as a writer.

Her relationship with Clark was another thing which needed clarification. Just not right now.

The door swung open to reveal Lois sitting at the breakfast bar, still wearing her borrowed terrycloth robe, surrounded by the remains of a pizza and soda, with Lois’ attention focused on a legal pad over which she held a pencil.

As Lucy’s mouth opened, Lois forestalled her. “Punky! Good! I’m glad you’re back. I need to talk to Superman. He has to do something very important for me. When can you get him over here?”

“What? Why do you want to talk to Clark?”

“Not Clark,” Lois insisted, “Superman! I need the really fast guy who can’t be hurt and stands for truth and justice and all that neat stuff.”

Lucy nodded slowly. “Okay, you need Superman, not Clark. But my question stands. Why?”

Lois’ brow furrowed and her eyes flashed. “I’m not telling this more than once. It’s too complicated. Get him here and I’ll lay it all out for both of you.”

“Okay. I’ll call him, but I can’t promise anything. I don’t know what his schedule is.”

Lois’ face relaxed into something like a smile. “You’re kidding yourself, Luce. If you set your mind to it, you could get him to do just about anything. And he’d enjoy making you laugh while he did it.”

Lucy turned and walked slowly to the phone, Lois’ words echoing in her mind. Was that true? Would Clark give her anything she asked for? And if that were true, what did he have or could he get that she wanted?

The answer came to her even as she formed the question in her mind. Her only doubt was whether or not he’d accept her own heart in return.

Lois was putting on a pair of flats when the doorbell sounded and the tall, handsome man greeted Lucy. He shook her hand quickly but tenderly, then stepped past her to greet her older sister. “Here I am, Lois. Can you tell me what’s going on now?”

“Thanks for coming so quickly, Superman. I barely had time to get dressed.”

“Lucy said it was important.”

“And you believed her?”

Clark frowned at her. “Of course I did. Lucy wouldn’t ask me to come over and say it was important if it weren’t important. I trust her.”

Lois wasn’t looking at her sister, but she still caught the quick smile that flickered over Lucy’s face.

But this wasn’t the time or place to delve into their relationship. “Let’s sit down. This — isn’t going to be easy for me.”

Lucy sat on the couch beside her and Clark sat in a chair a few feet away, on the other side from Lois. Lois forced herself not to jump up and move so that she wasn’t bracketed. This was her sister and her sister’s good friend, not a pair of hunters out to kill her.

She looked at each one in turn, then focused on Clark. “Okay, then, you two, I’m going to have to trust you both with the biggest secret I’ve ever had.” She stopped, took a deep breath and held it for a moment, then realized that this time she didn’t have to fake any emotional responses.

“I have two children, a girl and a boy. They are being held hostage by a criminal who calls himself Rodolfo. I’m being forced to work as one of his undercover operatives. And before you ask, I’m supposed to acquire some secret information about a particular industrialist here in Metropolis and report back to Rodolfo. If I don’t complete my mission within a certain time frame, my children will — he’s threatened to — to kill them.”

She waited, staring at the floor beside her feet, while her companions processed her multi-level revelation. She also waited because she refused to cry in front of either of them and she needed to regain her control. They didn’t need to know everything about her.

Clark spoke first. “Where are your children being held?”

She sighed with relief at the question. “Probably on Sicily. Rodolfo has a couple of bases there.”

“Where exactly are those bases?”

“I can’t give you map coordinates because I don’t know them. But he has two camps near the western end of the island. The nearest big towns I know of are Marsala and Mazara del Vallo, and both camps are west of Salemi. The beach is about twelve to fifteen miles from the camp closest to the ocean. And the camps aren’t just tent cities, either. They have permanent buildings and their own sewage systems and running water and electricity and and lots and lots of guns.”

“Why Sicily?” asked Lucy.

“Because it’s centrally located for his purposes. He can get to any place in southern Europe or north Africa easily. The Middle East isn’t much farther. He also has an airstrip that will handle anything up to a twin-engine Learjet. The guy’s almost bulletproof over there.”

“And the local police can’t get to him? Or won’t try?”

Lois shook her head in the negative. “Can’t, although very few of them have thought about it seriously. You remember Frank Lucas, gangster and drug dealer and murderer and de facto ruling warlord of Harlem back in the seventies and eighties? He set up free clinics, child care facilities, gave people rent money, pressured landlords to repair buildings in the area, and paid off the local cops and judges. It took the federal cops years to build a case against him, and they were trying hard.”

Lois sat back and hugged herself. “Rodolfo is a lot like Lucas without the publicity. The people in the surrounding villages love him because he brings money and jobs to the area, the mayors of the towns grovel at his feet, and the cops ask him who they can arrest. There were several cities in Wisconsin who treated the gangsters of the twenties and thirties the same way. Even if you could find a local cop with the ba — with the courage to go after him, he wouldn’t last long, and his upstanding fellow citizens would make sure he got a nice funeral and remember him as an object lesson. It would take a military-level incursion to penetrate Rodolfo’s defenses, and lots of people would die on both sides. As long as he behaves himself in Sicily, no one wants to try it.”

“He’s that powerful?” asked Lucy.

“He is in Sicily. Even what’s left of the Mafia treat him like he’s radioactive. They won’t even try to touch him. And Rodolfo keeps a low profile, too. None of that ten-million-dollar mansion in the middle of town vanity for him. And if the local rumors are half-true, he’s got friends in high places in Spain and Italy and France and maybe Germany. Last year he even sent me to Turkey pick up some information about a printer manufacturing firm that wanted to partner with Bob Fences.”

She managed to stop talking before she told them that she’d had to kill a man and a woman in order to get out with the information.

Lucy tilted her head. “Who wanted the information?”

Lois shrugged. “I don’t know. He doesn’t tell me who or why, just where and what to bring back. A lot of the stuff I pick up I don’t understand, like that stuff on your desk. I recognize some of

the terms but I don’t know how they fit together, and I sure as sh — I sure don’t know what to do with them. I just give it to Rodolfo and he pays me and gives me back my kids until my next mission comes up.”

Clark sighed. “Do you have a picture of your kids? Something I can use as a reference?”

“No. Rodolfo won’t let me keep any.” She folded back several pages on the legal pad she held. “But I made a sketch of each of them, along with a detailed description. Can you spot them using these drawings?”

Clark took the pad and frowned at the pages for a few seconds, then nodded. “As long as they aren’t in a big bunch of kids their own age, I think so.” He held the pad out to Lois.

“No, you keep it for reference.”

“I have an eidetic memory. I won’t forget them.”

That wasn’t good news. She flinched and blinked several times. “Wow. Super-memory along with everything else.”

“It’s not always a good thing.”

Startled, Lois waited for a further explanation, but none came. And Lucy’s face had suddenly gone smooth. There was something going on between them, something she’d triggered with either what she’d said or what Clark had said, but she didn’t know what it was, and at the moment she didn’t care. All she knew was that she finally had a chance to get away with her children, a chance for a real life somewhere, a chance for something better and safer.

And she didn’t much care what it was. Even if she ended up running a laundry for lumberjacks in Oregon, it had to be better than being an international assassin. Anything would be.

Lucy listened to her sister’s story and knew, despite the depth of her revelations, she hadn’t told them everything. She wasn’t sure how she knew, she just did. There was a big part of the past seven years that Lois didn’t want them to know about, something that Lois believed would have caused Clark not to agree to help her.

Lucy didn’t have an eidetic memory, but she’d trained herself to remember little things in computer systems and put them together to form a picture of the problem. Debugging systems — not just individual programs — was her strong suit, and it was one of the reasons she’d risen so quickly in Wayne Tech, the main reason Calvin had encouraged her to pursue her Master’s degree. He’d told her repeatedly that some people didn’t respect anyone who didn’t have the educational qualifications they did, and while Lucy already knew most — if not all — of what the degree program would present to her, she needed to have the proof that she knew what she was talking about.

So when Lois looked alarmed when Clark mentioned his memory — something that should have encouraged her — Lucy started putting together some facts.

Before this past week, Lois hadn’t known there was a Superman in America, much less known anything about him. That was almost unbelievable — unless she’d been in hiding the whole time, cut off from the usual news sources.

Clark’s memory meant that any inconsistencies in Lois’ story would show up in his mind as soon as he thought through everything she’d told him.

She had suffered numerous injuries over the past seven years, some of which were recent. The vast majority of those injuries had resulted from up close and personal fights, either hand-to-hand or with firearms.

Lois was still alive even though she’d been shot at — and shot — from close range.

Her reflexes were on a hair-trigger and she struck hard without warning.

She said that her reflexes had saved her life several times. And she was a fierce hand-to-hand fighter.

She had handled her pistol with professional skill and expert

ease — almost as if it were a part of her body.

Her attitudes toward non-Caucasians ranged from extreme distaste to overtly hostile.

She'd spent a great deal of time around Africa and the Middle East.

She'd been afraid for their parents' safety when she'd learned that they were in Africa.

She'd revealed that she had two children but had said nothing about their father.

She claimed she was being forced to perform industrial espionage, but the level of coercion she claimed was brought to bear on her was far more than was needed for any corporate spy to do such a job.

She had said or done something to terrify Dr. Frazier during her physical exam.

She hadn't shown real regret for any of her actions.

She was working for a man — a criminal — a man she originally claimed had been killed recently, but a man who frightened her so much she was too scared to quit.

And she still hadn't revealed what had happened to her in Africa so many years ago when she'd first disappeared.

Lucy didn't want to come to this conclusion, but it was the most reasonable one, even if it did require a big leap of logic. Lois was hiding something about herself, something violent and lethal and deadly.

Lois Lane wasn't just a corporate spy. She wasn't just doing international industrial espionage. She was willingly working for this madman who held her children. And her job involved fighting — and probably killing.

Lucy didn't know the circumstances or the reasons. She didn't know how or why Lois had become who she'd become. She had no idea how many deaths Lois had on her tally sheet. But she was as certain of her conclusions about Lois as she was about Clark's faithfulness or Dominique Cox' friendship. People had died because Lois had killed them.

Maybe she'd been forced into it. Maybe she was still doing it to protect her children. Maybe what she was doing now really was a desperate attempt to escape that life.

But it didn't change the basic deduction.

Lucy's sister was a cold-blooded killer.

"What are your children's names?" asked Clark.

"Hmm? Oh, my son is Jean, spelled and pronounced in the French manner, and my little girl is called Collette. He's almost thirty months old, and she has almost five years. Mother's pride, maybe, but they're both brilliant and I love them so much and — and I miss them and—"

Lois stopped and stifled a sob. Clark noted that she'd used a non-American idiom when relating how old her daughter was. It seemed to go with the little hints of multiple foreign accents she occasionally let slip.

He looked around for Lucy's living room tissue box, the one with the Goofy model beside the opening that he'd given her on her third anniversary at Wayne Tech. It was a too-cute piece of Disney kitsch, totally out of place in her modern living room, but she said she loved it because he'd given it to her.

As he rose to bring the box to Lois, he wondered once again whether he truly wanted Lucy to care deeply about him as friend or as something much more.

Then he banished the thought. It wasn't the time or place to consider himself. The primary goal here was to get Lois' children away from this criminal Rodolfo. If possible, he'd make sure Rodolfo was arrested for his crimes, but that was a secondary goal.

As Lois tended to her tears, he said softly, "I need to ask you some background questions."

Lois' eyes snapped to his. She gave her nose one last swipe

and said, "About the bases' layout, right?"

"If you have that, yes. But I need to know if your kids have a code phrase, something I can tell them that will let them know I'm not a bad guy."

She nodded. "There is one. Just tell them that Puff the Magic Dragon sent you."

He almost grinned and she almost returned it. "Puff the Magic Dragon?"

"Yes. Jean may not remember right away, but Collette will. She'll know that I sent you if you tell her that." Lois shifted on the chair. "Anything else?"

"I need more information about Rodolfo. I don't remember seeing or hearing anything about him from Interpol, and I don't recognize his organization from the little you've said about him. I have to know more before I go busting in there. I don't want the local police to accuse me of kidnapping."

Lois nodded. "What do you need to know?"

"Everything you can tell me."

She tapped the pencil's eraser on her front teeth. "Tomorrow morning I'll write up a summary of what I can testify to. I'll give it to you when you bring my children back safe and sound."

Lucy frowned and shifted in her seat. "That's a little like blackmail, isn't it?"

"That's the deal. Maybe it sounds selfish and self-serving, but that's the condition. My kids for my testimony against Rodolfo."

Clark nodded. "Sounds fair enough to me." He handed her the legal pad. "Can you sketch him too? And give me a good verbal description. I don't want to confront the wrong man or waste time looking for him."

"No problem."

"And some personal information, too. For example, what languages does he speak fluently? Where was he born? What do you know about his family?"

Lois stopped her hand and looked at Clark. "You know the joke about what you call a guy who speaks two languages, three languages, or just one language? The answers are bilingual, trilingual, and American. Rodolfo is at ease in five languages that I know of and can make himself understood in a bunch of others, like Arabic and Farsi and a few African tribal languages. No one I've ever talked to knows anything about his background or his youth or his family. All I know is that he's a cold-blooded murderer who'd cut out his best friend's heart with a butter knife and I want to get away from him and stay away."

"So, you and he don't exchange Christmas cards?"

Both Clark and Lois stopped and turned to face Lucy, who wore the most innocent expression Clark had ever seen on an adult. His mouth dropped open, then slowly bent into a smile, which was quickly followed by a soft but honest laugh.

Without planning it, without thinking about the consequences, he reached out and captured Lucy's hand in his, then said, "That's my Lucy. You always know just what to say to lift my spirits."

Her eyes brightened and she shifted as if to reach out to him, then stood and let her hand slip from his. "I'll go pour everybody some iced tea. I don't know if you guys are thirsty, but I sure am."

Clark turned back to Lois, who was staring at him with an odd expression. "What is it?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know. Maybe — maybe some things could have been different if other things were different."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Nothing. Forget it." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I'm sure you noticed that Collette and Jean don't look that much alike. And I've noticed that you haven't asked about their father."

Clark didn't answer. He sensed that this was something Lois didn't want anyone but him to know, and only because he needed to know.

She bit her lower lip, then looked away and said, "I've been gang-raped five times since Rodolfo took me, including that first

night. The second time was after I came back from my third mission. That's where Collette—" she stopped and blinked several times. "If he thinks I'm getting too independent, he drugs me and leaves me in a room full of young men who are more animal than human. Some of those guys disappeared. A couple of them are dead. I never knew any of their names. I don't — there's no way for me to know who fathered my children."

Clark froze. He wanted to comfort her, but he didn't know how. A woman who had suffered that much in that way would be unlikely to accept an embrace from any man, even if she knew he had no designs on her.

She dashed a tear from her cheek. "You won't tell Lucy, will you?"

He listened toward the kitchen for a moment. Satisfied that Lucy was still busy with beverage preparation, he turned to face her and said, "I will never reveal anything you have told me to anyone unless you give me specific permission to do so."

The ghost of a smile drifted across her face. "And you always keep your word, don't you, Superman?"

"Yes."

Lois turned her head toward him and her eyes bore into his for a long moment. Then she nodded. "You know, I think you really do keep your word." She broke eye contact and resumed sketching Rodolfo. "I've been thinking about some things, some stuff I read in that book about you."

"Which one?"

"The one by the guy from the Planet, the one Lucy doesn't think should be recycled into toilet paper."

He allowed himself a slight smile. "I know the book. What were you thinking about?"

Her pencil slowed but didn't stop. "The part about the 'other' Lois Lane, the woman who talked you into wearing the fancy costume."

Clark's eyebrows drew down. He should have expected this topic of conversation, but he had assumed that Lois' concern for her children would have driven the subject from her mind. Once again, though, one of the Lane sisters completely fooled him.

"Ah. Her," he said, emphasizing the pronoun.

"Yeah. Her. The Irene Adler to your Sherlock Holmes."

He frowned in thought. "I guess that's an appropriate comparison, if not an exact one."

"It's close enough for government work. What was she like?"

He frowned, thinking for a moment. "She was like you and not like you. Of course, she came back to Metropolis from her assignment in the Congo."

"That would make us different, all right." Lois's pencil paused and she cleared her throat. "How was she like me?"

He shrugged. "That's hard to put into words. I've met her twice in a bit over seven years, and both times she was under a lot of stress. She's like you in that she's smart, determined, talented, very attractive, and focused on her work. And I know that I felt a kind of connection with her, but she was very much in love with the Clark from her world and refused to think about getting involved with me."

"Getting involved with—" Lois' eyes widened. "You hit on her?"

He sat back and almost laughed. "No! There was no hitting on anybody going on. We just — I liked her, admired her, and respected her. And that was it."

"Uh-huh. And what did Lucy think about all that?"

"I didn't mind."

Clark had heard Lucy's stealthy approach with the tea, but apparently Lois hadn't. Clark stiffened for quick action as Lois flipped the pencil in her hand and gripped it underhanded like a knife, but relaxed as Lois slowly turned it back to hold the point and return her attention to the sketch.

But Lucy wasn't finished talking. "Clark and I didn't know

each other very well the second time he and the other Lois met, and I only knew of her from the news reports the first time she showed up. Our friendship started while he was looking for you in Africa."

Lois smiled at her sister and picked up her glass. As she lifted it to her lips, she muttered, "I wish he'd found me."

Clark assumed that Lois hadn't meant that comment to be heard, so he didn't respond to it. Instead, he pointed to the pad and asked, "Are you finished?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I guess so. Here."

He took the pad and looked at it. The man staring back at him didn't look like a master criminal. He could pass for someone's jolly Uncle Roddy, the man who came to holiday dinners and sent nice presents to his sister's children. He could be a department store Santa, bouncing children on his knee and promising them the best Christmas ever.

Then Clark looked closer.

The eyes were flat and dead.

If this was an accurate rendering of the man — if this was what he really looked like — Clark would never forget him. He wouldn't be able to forget him. If the eyes were truly the windows to the soul, and if Lois had drawn him accurately and not inserted her bitterness and hatred for the man into the sketch, then there was no way to put Rodolfo out of his memory.

Those empty, frigid eyes would remain with him for a long time.

"I'll find your children and bring them back, Lois." His eyes locked with Lois' and he added, "I give you my word that I will do this."

Lois reached out and grasped his hand. "Thank you! Thank you so much!"

Then she burst into tears.

Lois cried herself out on Lucy's shoulder, and it didn't take much convincing to get her to call it a night. Clark waited by the front door as Lucy put her sister to bed.

Lucy smiled at him and out of habit pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. She surprised herself as she realized that she hoped he thought it was an endearing trait. "Thanks, Clark. I appreciate what you're doing."

"I'm glad to do it, Lucy." He glanced at his watch and said, "I'd better head back to my place. Even Superman needs his beauty sleep, and I've got to be up in the middle of our night to meet Horst when he begins his workday."

She smiled softly and drew him close. "Just to be on the safe side, let's say goodnight in the hall. I don't want to disturb Lois."

He nodded and opened the door. As she stepped out and pulled the door shut behind her, she reached up and pulled his head down for the most tender and intimate kiss they'd ever shared.

Clark seemed surprised but pleased as he returned her warmth and pulled her close to him. When she finally slid her lips from his and put them near his ear, she whispered, "I really enjoyed that, Clark. And I meant every moment of it. Remember that when I ask you this next question."

He tried to pull his head back to look at her, but she held his head still. "I need for you to look through the door and see if Lois is still in her room."

He frowned as if puzzled, but he complied. "Yes. She's snuggled down under the covers like a good little girl."

"Good." Lucy slowly pulled away and looked into his eyes. "I need to tell you some things very quickly so she doesn't hear, so stay close."

He nodded. "Okay."

She took a breath and told him all that she knew about her sister, about her attitude toward minorities, her reaction to the news that her parents were in northern Africa, her apparent effect

on Dr. Frazier, and her skillful dodging of Lucy's questions about her activities over the past seven years.

But she didn't tell him what she suspected.

If her conclusions were wrong, she didn't want him to have to deal with her paranoid suspicions, and if she were right, he'd come to the same conclusion that she had. Either way, he needed all the facts about Lois he could get.

When she finished, he looked past her shoulder and said, "She's still in bed." Then he looked deep into her eyes. "Is everything you've told me verifiable?"

"By me or others. I've either seen it or seen the effects."

"Are you worried about staying here with her?"

"No. She and I are family. Besides, she really wants her kids back. She won't do anything that might put them at risk."

"I hope you're right." He held her gaze for a long moment, then nodded. "Okay. I believe you. And thank you."

He almost slipped away from her, but she stopped him with a touch on the cheek. "Clark? Please remember what I said."

"Of course I will."

"Good." She tugged his head down and kissed him again. "I mean this, too. I'm not just using it as a way to get you alone and talk." She dropped her head to his chest and wrapped her arms around his massive torso as far as they would go. "I just wish I hadn't waited so long." She sniffed and added, "I haven't waited too long, have I?"

"Lucy, I — H. G. Wells thinks I'm supposed to be bonded to Lois, that we're linked by some mystic tie throughout history and even across dimensions. And before you ask, I'm not sure if I believe it. All I know about it is that he does. That's why he brought her to Metropolis, to meet me and get our relationship started." She felt his sigh as much as she heard it. "We're supposed to have this connection between us, some kind of mental or spiritual tie that binds us. Wells used the term 'soul mates.' I would have said that I've never felt it, except that tonight is the first time I've met her where I felt like she was being more like herself, and I felt — something. I don't know what it was or how to describe it, but something's there."

Control. She had to maintain control. She forced her voice not to betray her. "Are you saying that — that I have waited too long? That you — that I'm going to be your sister-in-law soon?"

Gently, he lifted her chin with his finger. "No. I'm not saying anything like that. And I have no idea what Lois is thinking. But it's something we need to discuss later, don't you think?"

She tried to smile. "Yes. Later. That's a good time." She slowly pulled her arms between them and grasped his hands with hers. "As long as it's not too much later."

His eyes deepened and she felt as if she were falling into them. "It won't be, I promise." His lips touched hers once more and drew back too quickly. "I'll be at the Hamburg BKA office first thing in the morning their local time," he said. "That's what they call Interpol in Germany. I'm sure my buddy Horst can help me. I'll come back and see you when I know something more."

This time she let him go as he slipped away. "Godspeed, Clark," she said.

I hope you love me half as much as I love you, she thought.

As he disappeared down the stairs, she wished she'd said it aloud.

Chapter Eleven

from the journal of H. G. Wells

I have attempted to move within this time to warn Clark of the danger to this universe's timeline posed by Lois Lane, but I cannot. Once again, my time machine has ceased to perform its primary functions. My current location — an icy gully somewhere in northern Canada, near the Arctic Circle — is made tenable only by my machine's ability to maintain a 'bubble' of meteorological conditions which were snatched from Metropolis

when I departed the city some eleven hours ago. Were it not for the heating elements within my machine and the automatic renewal of the oxygen I breathe, I might have perished already.

According to my initial briefings when joining the Time Patrol, there was an incident where a machine and its operator disappeared under circumstances similar to mine. That loss was followed by the entire planet's demise within four hours of the machine being trapped in a time-particle/wave bubble similar to the one now restraining me. It was never determined whether the operator had somehow caused this catastrophe or was simply in the wrong time and place.

I am glad for only one thing at this point, and that is that I succumbed to peer pressure and allowed the Patrol to retrofit my machine with crude personal facilities and a store of emergency rations and water. I have availed myself of all of these advantages since the interrupted transport which deposited me in this inhospitable location. And I shall never again jeer at the cautious preparations made by my comrades before setting out on their respective assignments.

That, of course, presupposes that it is not my final adventure with the Patrol. And, of course, that I shall survive this assignment.

At five minutes after eight o'clock local time — two o'clock in the morning Metropolis time — Clark hovered over the Hamburg office of the Bundeskriminalamt, or BKA for short, at twelve thousand feet, trying to decide on his best approach. If he arrived in the flashy suit he'd probably receive a celebrity's welcome, and that wasn't his goal. If he knocked on the door wearing civilian clothes, it might take longer for him to see his friend Horst or someone else who could help him, but he'd make less of a splash.

And that thought decided him. He'd go in wearing civvies. No splashing today.

He spun into a business suit with the collar undone and no tie, then zipped down to earth two blocks away in an alley between two office buildings. Despite the full trash bins on either side of the alley, it was far cleaner than any he'd seen in Metropolis. And no one gave him a second look as he strode onto the sidewalk and turned toward the BKA building.

The middle-aged woman just inside the front door smiled at him as he approached her desk. <Guten Morgen,> she said. <Wie kann ich Ihnen helfen?>

In English, Clark replied, "Good morning, madam. I hope your English is better than my German."

"I will attempt to speak it well enough, sir," she said. "Good morning. May I help you?"

"I don't have an appointment, but if Horst Müller is available, I'd like to see him, please."

"May I say who is calling, please?"

"Clark Kent."

Her eyes flickered for a moment and her hands paused for the slightest instant as she seemed to recognize his name, then she lifted the phone and tapped in a number. <Herr Müller, Clark Kent möchte Sie sehen. Ja. Ich werde ihm sagen.> She hung up the receiver and said, "Hauptkommissar Müller will see you within five minutes, Mr. Kent."

He gave her his best smile and said, "Danke. I'll just wait here if that's all right."

"That will be fine, sir. Thank you."

He had barely settled into a comfortable chair when Horst Müller came through the double doors to the right of the receptionist's desk. "Clark, my good friend! I am glad to see you. I hope this is a personal visit and not a professional one."

Clark took Horst's hand in his. "I'm sorry, but it's professional. Could I have about fifteen minutes of your time?"

"My time is yours, Clark, you know this. Were it not for your

efforts on my behalf, I would not be alive today. You know that you may ask me whatever you wish, whenever you wish it.” He turned to the receptionist and said in English, “Frau Blaschke, would you hold my calls for fifteen minutes?”

“Of course, sir. Have a good visit.”

Horst led his visitor down the hall to his office, chattering the whole time about the latest antics of his five-year-old son. “Fritzi has achieved top scores in his class. He can recite both the German and English alphabets, and he knows his numbers and can count to a thousand by several different factors in either language. His teacher tells me that Fritzi knows more about the law than she does, although on this point I think she tries to flatter me.”

Clark smiled. “I think there’s some truth in there too, Horst. I’ve met the little guy, remember? He’s really quite bright.”

“Now you flatter me, my friend. But I do not mind. I will tell my wife Steffi that the famous American, the Super-Man, made a special trip today to tell me how favorably he thinks of our son. And she will boast of it, quite modestly of course, to her friends and especially to her parents, who still believe she could have wed a better man.”

“That’s true,” replied Clark. “She could have married me.”

“Ah, but even policemen have more consistent schedules than Superman.”

“So Steffi likes consistency?”

“More than I would have suspected, my friend.”

They shared a chuckle as Horst opened the door to his office. Clark was once again struck by the difference between Bill Henderson’s floating chaos and Horst’s calm organization. It was, Clark believed, a cultural difference and not an indicator of their relative effectiveness.

Horst waved at the chairs in front of his desk. “As I am certain you are not in Hamburg to lure my beautiful Steffi away from me and our son, how may I help you, my friend?”

Clark pulled the drawing of Rodolfo out of his jacket pocket. “I’ve been asked to investigate this man with the intent of removing two pre-school children from his control.” He flattened the drawing on the desk. “Because the mother is connected to this man by some less-than-legal ties, I can’t go through the courts or any of my diplomatic contacts. I don’t want to spook this guy.”

Horst leaned over for a better look. “Please remind me of the use of the word ‘spook’ in this context.”

“Sorry. I don’t want him to know what I’m doing or why. He might vanish or even harm the children.”

“I see. Hmm. What is his name?”

“The mother knows him as Rodolfo.”

“Hmm. Rodolfo, Rodolfo... The name is slightly familiar to me. Where is he known to operate?”

“Sicily, North Africa, the Middle East. Maybe southern Europe.”

“Ah. North Africa...” Horst tapped his forefinger on his desk several times, then abruptly stopped. “May I ask one of my colleagues for assistance in this matter?”

Clark smiled and lifted his hands, palms up. “Any help you can give me will be more than I had before coming in today.”

“Thank you.” Horst picked up his phone and tapped the keys. “Frau Blaschke? Please see if Komissarin Schultz is in her office. If so, please ask her to come and see me. I need her expertise. Yes, now, if she is available for a few moments.”

He hung up. “Mika Schultz is the local agent most familiar with North Africa. I assume that this man is not a — how is it called in English — a ‘white hat’ fellow?”

“If you mean that he’s a criminal, you assume correctly. At least, that’s what I’ve been told.”

“Ah. Then you are here to gather more information about this man as well as to seek out two missing children, yes?”

Clark shifted in his chair. “I’m not sure how much I should

share with you, Horst. I don’t want to spread rumors about a man who might really be innocent.”

“I see. Perhaps—” A double knock on the door interrupted them. “Bitte, come in,” Horst called out.

The door opened and a slender blonde pixie stuck her head in. “Hiya, Boss Man. This the perp you want me to pop?”

Clark stared at her for a moment, then laughed as he stood. “I see you’ve been watching American police shows on TV. Hi, I’m Clark Kent.”

She took his hand and tried to squeeze it. “Mickey Schultz, at your service.” She looked at their handshake. “Huh. Your hand feels hard as a rock. Do you work out a lot?”

Horst exhaled deeply. “Before you attempt to wrestle Herr Kent to the floor, Frau Schultz, I would like for you to examine this pencil sketch and tell us if you recognize this man. My friend Clark tells me he uses the name Rodolfo.”

Mika glanced up at Clark as she sat down in the remaining chair. “Any other aliases, Mr. Kent?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Let me see. Yes, I think I know — Alter Schwede!”

The woman’s eyes bugged out and her shoulder muscles tightened. “You recognize this man, don’t you?” Clark asked.

“Yes! I think I do! If it’s the same man — Herr Müller, I must show this to my partner!”

“Is your partner here?”

She leaped to her feet. “Yes, Victor is in our office! He will want to see this!”

Horst lifted his hand. “Wait.” He picked up the phone again, Teutonic calm personified, and tapped the keys. “Frau Blaschke? Please have Kommissar Paulsen join me in my office. Yes, it will be crowded with him in here with us, but we will manage. Danke.”

Mika bounced on her toes like a game show contestant called out of the crowd. “Herr Müller, I am sure this is the man for whom Victor and I have been searching! I am certain of it!”

“To which case do you refer, Mika?”

“The international terrorist! The one who pimps out killers for hire!”

“Mika, please, use standard English or speak German. I cannot easily—”

Three firm knocks on the door interrupted him. <Herein.> Horst called out. To Clark, he said, “Victor is learning English but is not yet fluent in it. We will translate for you both if it becomes necessary.”

A very muscular man, quite large in both height and girth, opened the door. Clark immediately got the impression of controlled power and serious determination from him. <Sie wollen mich sehen, chef?> he rumbled.

<Ja.> Horst lifted the sketch. <Erkennen Sie diesen Mann?>

Paulsen squinted at it for a moment, then nodded. <Ja, Herr Müller. Er ist ein gesuchter Verbrecher, ein Mörder und Erpresser.>

Horst nodded. <Danke. Bitte bleiben Sie einen Moment.>

Clark took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “If I understand Officer Paulsen correctly, he knows this guy Rodolfo as a murderer and blackmailer, right?”

Mika broke in. “He’s a smuggler, too, Mr. Kent, and a gun-runner.” She squinted as if trying to focus on something. “That is the correct English term, yes? Gun-runner, one who smuggles weapons and other munitions?”

“That’s the word,” Clark agreed. “So how come you folks haven’t arrested him?”

“We lack sufficient evidence which can be presented to our courts, Clark,” replied Horst. “I cannot arrest this man without it, and when he comes to Germany he does not advertise his presence.”

“He is cuddled with La Cosa Nostra, also,” added Mika.

After a moment, Clark realized she meant ‘close to’ and decided not to correct her. “How close is he with the Sicilian Mafia? If he lives and works there, he must have some arrangement with them.”

“We are sure that he does, Herr Kent, but we do not know if they are operating under an armed truce or if he pays a percentage to them. We do know that they have assisted in suppressing evidence against him and his operatives a number of times in the past. And Rodolfo has sheltered members of the ruling criminal families when the police attention became too warm for them.”

Victor grappled with his meager English and offered, “Also he trains — those who fight for pay.”

Mika snapped her fingers. “That’s right! You know that a number of smaller governments hire mercenaries to fight their border wars, Herr Kent? This Rodolfo trains people who have little combat experience and is paid very well for his labors. We estimate that fifty to seventy prospective mercenaries go through his booty camp every four or five months.”

Clark blinked and tried not to smile. “His what camp?”

“Booty camp — oh, that is not the correct English word, is it?”

“Well, I’ve always heard it called ‘boot camp’ when I talk to military people. I think the other term has an entirely different meaning.”

“Ah,” she smiled. “Thank you for teaching me.”

Horst lifted one hand and said, “Clark, what are your intentions toward this Rodolfo?”

Mika bubbled, “Are you going to bust him and let him lawyer up or just pop a cap in his—”

“Mika!” Horst growled. “Mr. Kent’s other identity is that of Superman. He will not harm or even arrest someone without legal authority, which he does not have in Germany. That is why he is here, to proceed through legal means.”

“I don’t have authority in Sicily, either,” said Clark, “and I think that’s where I’m going to find him. But if you folks have better information on his whereabouts, feel free to share with me, assuming you’re allowed to do so. I don’t want anyone to get in trouble for talking to me.”

“That will not happen,” said Horst, “unless someone becomes overly enthusiastic and speaks too freely about your purpose here.” He looked at the other two officers in turn. “And that will not occur, will it?”

Mika snapped her mouth shut and nodded sharply. Seeing Victor’s puzzled expression, she put her index finger to her lips and tapped them twice. His face cleared and he nodded in comprehension.

“Good,” Horst said. “Now, what other assistance might we offer Mr. Kent in retrieving these two young kinder?”

Victor blinked in apparent surprise. “Welche Kinder?”

Mika’s voice flattened. “Yes, Herr Kent, what children?”

“The ones I’m looking for.”

“So you are not seeking this Rodolfo for law enforcement reasons?”

“No, Ms. Schultz, I’m not. Their mother claims that Rodolfo is holding them to force her to spy for him.”

“So you are working this case as a child kidnapping?”

Clark shrugged. “That’s as good a description as anyone might come up with, I suppose.”

“Do you have a likeness of the mother, sir?”

“Mika,” growled Horst, “that is enough.”

Clark waved his hand and picked up a pencil, then turned over the drawing of Rodolfo. “I don’t mind sharing this information. It may help.”

He sensed, rather than saw, Mika look at Horst for some kind of permission. When Horst leaned back, Mika asked, “How well do you know this woman, sir?”

He kept sketching. “I met her for the first time about a week

ago. Before that, I thought she’d died in central Africa seven years ago.”

He paused and looked at his drawing, then added more detail around her eyes. “This is the best I can do. I’m pretty good, but I’m not quite the artist she seems to be.”

“What color is her hair?”

“Very dark brown. I understand she used to wear it shoulder-length instead of this short style.”

He sat back and let Mika pick up his drawing. She glared at it for a long moment, then turned to her immense partner. “Ist das die Frau?”

Paulsen sighed deeply and nodded. “Ja.”

She turned to face him directly. “Sie sind sicher?”

He nodded again, then turned to his boss. “Das ist die Frau, die wir gesucht haben.”

“Wie ist ihr Name?” asked Horst.

“Wir wissen von drei Aliasnamen, Sir. Sie hat die Namen Lola Däne, Wanda Detroit, und Sparky verwendet, den letzteren ohne Nachnamen.”

Clark looked at Horst. “I’m sorry, I’m not getting everything Officer Paulsen said.”

Horst looked at Clark and pressed his lips together, then said, “Mika, please tell Herr Kent who this woman is.”

Mika put the sketch down on the desk so that Clark could see it clearly. “If Victor is correct — and I have never known him to be wrong when he says he is certain, as he has just done — this is the woman for whom we have been searching over the last two years. She has used several other names as aliases in other countries.”

“You’ve been looking for her?”

“Yes.”

“Her name is Lois Lane. What were those other names Victor mentioned?”

“We think she uses the various aliases when she travels,” replied Mika. “Two of them are Lola Dana and Wanda Detroit. Another is Sparky, no family name. In fact, we have an open request from the Libyan government to watch for Lola Dane. I do not recall hearing the name Lois Lane in connection with her activities.”

Clark frowned. “Why have you been looking for her? And why does Libya want her?”

Mika looked at Horst again. He nodded, and she sighed. “Because, Herr Kent, we believe she is one of the operatives Rodolfo hires out to whoever can pay his price. She is wanted in Libya in connection with the recent disappearance of three Libyan citizens of questionable character but powerful political influence.”

“Disappearance? Do they think she kidnapped them?”

Horst sighed. “No, my friend. I am sorry to tell you this, but the Libyan authorities believe that she killed those three.”

“What!” Clark lurched to his feet. “You — you can’t be serious! This is a mistake — it has to be a mistake! Her name is Lois Lane and she was a reporter for the Daily Planet in Metropolis and she disappeared in the Congo chasing a story about some gun-runners—”

He felt the light flicker and catch in his mind.

Rodolfo’s probable criminal activities. Lois’ injuries. Her refusal to share her recent history. Her hair-trigger responses and her fighting ability. Her effect on Dr. Frazier. The vague warnings from Herb. Her hard-minded attitude toward minorities. Her knowledge of and skill with weapons. Lucy’s suspicions.

Everything came together as if a nuclear reaction were reaching critical mass and bursting upon his mind.

Lois Lane was indeed a hired killer. And he had pledged himself to help her.

As Lucy put away the lunch dishes, Lois chewed on her

finger nails and paced around the living room. The nail-chewing was yet another mannerism she'd picked up since Lucy had last seen her.

"Did you have time to finish that thing you were going to write for Clark?"

"Under my pillow on the bed. Hush, okay?"

"Do you want to catch an early movie or—"

She flipped her free hand at her younger sister without making eye contact. "Shh! Thinking."

Lucy almost grinned. That was a familiar mannerism, one that Lois had used against her whenever she needed to think hard about something without Lucy's incessant questions. It meant that Lois was focused on a problem she believed required a solution immediately.

She tried again. "It's too early to expect results."

"I know."

"He's only been in Germany for a few hours. He hasn't had time—"

"Germany!" Lois burst out.

"Yes. He's going to check with a friend of his in Hamburg to see if they have any leads on this Rodolfo character before he goes to Sicily."

"Blast it, he should have just gone to Sicily and grabbed them!"

"He's not going to kidnap them back, Lois. If he does this all legal and tucks it in with hospital corners, Rodolfo won't be able to put legal pressure on him to get the kids back."

"I know, I know! I just don't like it, that's all."

Lois clenched her fists, then crossed her arms and resumed her pacing. Apparently the news about Clark's visit to the German branch of Interpol was not what she'd hoped to hear.

Lucy waited until Lois stopped on the opposite side of the room, then she stood and walked to her "Maybe I could help if you told me what you're thinking so hard about."

Lois stopped and glared at her sister, then sighed. "Yeah, maybe." She turned and sat down on the arm of the couch. "I've been thinking. I'm supposed to get some information from someone here in Metropolis. I know Clark is going to do his super-best to get my kids away from Rodolfo, but if something goes wrong I need a backup plan."

Lucy frowned. "What kind of backup plan?"

"Something I can use for leverage. Rodolfo wants this job done and I want my kids. It may be enough to force him into a trade."

Lucy frowned again. "I don't know anything about that part of your life. I'll help you as long as no one gets hurt, but I can't decide whether or not it's a good idea."

Lois went stiff again. "This isn't some Saturday morning serial or after-school special, Punky. Sometimes people get hurt in my line of work. There are no guarantees. None."

"I'm not going to help you kill anyone."

Lois had been reaching for a cigarette, but at Lucy's words she froze in place. Even the sound of her breathing disappeared.

Lucy went as silent as Lois. Neither of them spoke for an excruciatingly long moment.

Then Lois spoke in a quiet, flat voice. "Why did you say that?"

Lucy knew she was in trouble, but she didn't know how much, so she tried not to make it worse. "I didn't mean to say it. The words came out wrong."

"What did you mean to say?"

"That — that I wouldn't do anything that might hurt someone."

Lois eased in Lucy's direction like a serpent uncoiling. "You already said that and you don't repeat yourself like you used to. You're direct and firm. You say what you mean and mean what you say. Now I want you to tell me why that sentence came out of

your mouth when it did."

Lucy stared. This was a Lois who was wildly different from the Lois in Lucy's memories, different from the woman Lucy had been reacquainting herself with over the past week. This Lois was a coiled steel spring, taut as a lion about to crush its prey's throat. And she was just as dangerous and deadly.

She was finally showing her true colors.

Lucy had to regain control somehow. "I don't know what you've up to for the last few years, Lois, but I know you haven't been just doing corporate espionage. You've had violence done to you and you've done violence to others. I don't know if you've actually killed anybody—"

"Seventeen."

Lucy's mouth fell open. "Wh-what?"

"Who else have you told?"

"Wh — wait, Lois, I—"

"Who else have you told about me?"

"N-no one!"

"Not even SuperDuper Clark?"

"No! Not even Clark! I don't even know for a fact that it's true!"

The voice, totally devoid of feeling, might as well have come from a wooden carving. Or a computer. "It's true. I've deliberately targeted and killed seventeen people since Rodolfo took me, and that doesn't count the ones I killed because they got in my way. I'm a stone cold killer. I'm the woman that terrorists tell their kids about when they want to scare them and make them behave. If a European billionaire even thinks I'm on his trail, he wets his pants and passes out. Two years ago, one guy saved me the trouble of tracking him down by poisoning himself when he heard I was after him."

"No, please—"

"I've shot them, knifed them, dropped them from high places, and I even strangled one with his own tie last year. And I'm not just some hack killer. Remember that Mediterranean cruise ship that got robbed two years ago? I was in on that. It was a slick operation, in and out in under four hours and we left no clues. Didn't have to kill anyone that day, either."

Lucy felt herself pale. "Lois, you—"

"They know me in Libya. I took out three of their best just two months ago, buried them in the desert. That's where I picked up that pneumonia and the bullet wound in my arm. And it was why I got worried when you said that Mom and Dad were in North Africa."

Lucy's knees threatened to give way. "Please don't—"

"I'm here to get some information from a man and then kill him. I don't want to hurt him and I don't want to keep on with this life. But if I don't get something from this guy, Rodolfo will kill my children. I won't allow that. If Clark gets them away from him, great, they'll be safe. But I can't walk away unless I know they're okay. After that, we'll have to go on the run and hide somewhere. I'll testify against him and tell the police and Interpol everything I know. I'll turn State's evidence, get full immunity, and go into the witness protection program. But I have to have my kids with me first. And no one is going to get in my way."

Lucy forced herself to breathe. "Not — not even me?"

"Not even you." Lois' eyes turned obsidian. She reached behind her and brought out her pistol. "Turn around, Lucy."

"What — no!"

"They're my kids. Turn around."

"Lois, please! I'm your sister!"

"You'll just call the police or try to call off Superman. This is the best chance I've ever had to get away with Jean and Collette, the best one I'll ever have, and I won't let you screw it up."

"No, Lois! I want them back too! Please don't—"

"Turn around now."

"No, please! I have so much to live for — please don't take it

all away!”

Lois raised the pistol to Lucy’s face. “You can turn around or take it between the eyes. It makes a bigger mess and the morticians usually can’t fix it for the viewing.”

“For God’s sake, Lois!”

Lois’ teeth ground together. “Your funeral. Literally.”

“Okay!” Tears ran down Lucy’s face as she slowly turned.

“You don’t have to do this, Sis! You don’t!”

“Actually, I do. And believe it or not, I’m really sorry.” Lucy heard Lois’ shoes slide across the carpet. “Goodbye, Lucy.”

Lucy closed her eyes and sniffed and thought about Clark and how much she loved him and she hoped he’d miss her terribly but not forever and she hoped it wouldn’t hurt too much and she hoped Mom and Da—

Homicide Detective Mayson Drake sat on the park bench across from Lucy Lane’s apartment building surrounded by the remnants of a cold deli sandwich, pretending to read today’s Daily Planet. From time to time, she’d pick up a pad of paper and a pencil, then scribble as if she were taking notes from the classified section. Dressed in jeans, denim shirt, low-heeled sneakers, reversible vest, wearing plastic-framed glasses with her hair pulled into a casual ponytail, she looked like a college student hoping for an interview with almost anybody who’d hire her.

She was really waiting for something to happen.

And maybe that something was stepping out onto the street now.

Lois Lane strode out of the building, tension radiating off her like microwaves off a cell phone tower. She paused as if deciding on a direction, then yanked a cigarette out of her pocket and lit it. That was when Mayson stood and stepped off down the street. It was the opposite of what a tail was supposed to do, so she really hoped that the Lane woman would dismiss her as a threat.

Mayson’s glasses held clear non-corrective lenses, of course, but they also held tiny convex mirrors near each hinge. They enabled her to get an idea of who, if anyone, was following her, and when she saw Lois Lane head in the opposite direction, Mayson turned and skipped across the street.

As soon as Lane turned a corner, Mayson shoved her glasses in her pocket, reversed her vest, then pulled a dark windbreaker out of her purse and put it on. Her final move was to pull her long blonde hair out of the elastic band which had held it secure and shake it loose around her head.

She shifted from undercover mode to cop mode within three steps. It made her walk with her head lower and her stride more determined, and her face went from genial confusion to cold granite. She’d perfected the quick change after working with Bill Henderson for a few months, and now she was better at it than he was. Any stranger who hadn’t seen her transformation would not believe that the two women were the same person.

The odds that Lane would have picked out a ditzy blonde on a park bench as a possible tail were slim, but Mayson’s quick change would have thrown off anyone lacking super-vision. She had even tailed Superman once using this technique, and as far as she was aware he hadn’t picked her out. She was very good and she knew it.

She also knew that Lois Lane was dangerous. And there was no way she’d let this woman hurt the city or the hero she loved.

Even if neither the city nor the hero knew where her heart lay.

Lois clamped down on her emotions as hard as she could. She’d left her sister, bleeding and still, on the floor of her own apartment. And Lois had used her own pistol to put her there.

It was for her children, she insisted to herself. For Jean and Collette. So the three of them could be safe from Rodolfo or any of his cronies.

Maybe if she repeated it often enough she could learn to

believe it.

Lois walked with a purpose, seeing the people around her not as people but as obstacles in her path. The few times she caught sight of a face, it almost always reminded her of one of her victims.

There was the man in Turkey last year.

One of the men in Libya.

A woman in Pakistan.

The chubby little guy who just got in her way in Spain.

Carla.

The woman in Turkey.

Another of the men in Libya.

The man in Greece she’d viewed only through a telescopic sight.

She couldn’t stop seeing them. She couldn’t turn off her mind, couldn’t force those memories away, couldn’t keep from thinking about them. A part of her congratulated her for not becoming the mindless, soulless, remorseless murderer Rodolfo had tried to force her to become.

Another part of her reminded her that the people she’d killed were just as dead.

It was too much. She couldn’t take it anymore.

She’d go to the Daily Planet, find her target, get the information she needed, and bargain with the local cops, the FBI, Interpol, Rodolfo, whoever she had to, so she could get her kids back and go somewhere and disappear. She’d testify at all the trials and disappear again. She could do it. She knew how to find people who would help her get fake ID, birth certificates for the kids, a credit history, anything she needed.

It would take money, of course. She might have to risk tapping her offshore funds. Or maybe her target would pay her for not pulling the trigger. Maybe she could get into some witness protection program, move to Canada or Hawaii or Ecuador, anywhere she could escape Rodolfo’s clutches. At any rate, she would no longer kill because he told her to.

And if he came for her, or sent someone after her, she’d protect her babies and herself no matter what.

If only Clark had found her before Rodolfo—

But he hadn’t. And now he’d never forgive her for what she’d done. That funny tingle she felt when she looked into his eyes would never become anything else. The dream she’d had last night, the one of Clark smiling at her and holding her hand gently, would never come true.

And she’d never know what it was to be deeply loved by a truly good man.

The buzz coming from James’ intercom startled him, but he took a quick breath and focused. “Yes, Mrs. Cox?”

“Sir, you have a visitor who did not make an appointment.”

That was an odd way for her to put that. “Who is it?”

“The person does not wish that his or her name be spoken over any electronic device, sir.”

Weird and weirder. “I’ll come to the door, Mrs. Cox. Please ask our mystery visitor to wait at your desk.”

“Yes, sir.”

He closed the connection, wondering who would behave so oddly in the middle of the day, then decided he’d have to find out.

As he cautiously opened the door, he looked for strangers in Dominique’s office, but saw only Lex Luthor.

Why was Lex acting so weird?

He exited his office, and as soon as Luthor saw him, the man strode toward him. “James, thank you for seeing me on literally no notice. I need to speak with you privately. Is there a place we can go which is not on this floor?”

“Why not this floor?”

“Perhaps I am being paranoid, but I would prefer not speaking to you here. There is too much danger of being overheard.”

Luthor clasped James' hand and squeezed. "Please?"

James looked into Lex' eyes and saw desperate fear, something he'd never thought to see in the man. "Very well. Dominique, do you have a suggestion?"

She frowned in thought for a moment, then nodded once. "The news floor conference room. It's glassed-in but soundproof."

Luthor sighed and released James' hand. "That will do. Thank you."

"Then let's go."

"A moment, please. Might we have your administrative assistant accompany us? I would appreciate having a witness to this conversation, and I have a deep-seated mistrust of reporters."

James looked at Dominique and she nodded. James looked back to Luthor and said, "Sounds like a plan. Shall we?"

Luthor bit his lip and jerked his head down once. "Yes, please, as soon as possible."

James tried to lead the trio to his personal elevator, but Luthor shook his head. "If I am correct about being tracked, I would rather that everyone on this floor know that I am no longer here. I would not want anyone here to become a target because I was not observed leaving that person's work area."

Dominique's voice squeaked, "Target?"

Still speaking quietly, Luthor turned to her as they walked to the non-private elevator bank. "I apologize for being so melodramatic. I judge it to be a slight but distinct probability."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "You don't want to put innocents you've never met in danger but you don't mind exposing James to it?"

Luthor's eyebrows lifted as he digested the secondary meaning of her words. James caught it too: she was more worried about his safety than her own. "I must apologize once again," Luthor said after a long pause. "I was not aware that the two of you had entered into a relationship."

Dominique led the trio into the elevator car and pressed the button for the news floor. "It's really none of your concern, is it?"

"No, not directly," answered Luthor, "but I like to keep up with my friends and business associates. Something in a man's private life can have profound effects on his business life." He spread his hands. "I offer my current circumstances and behavior as an example."

James cleared his throat. "For what it's worth, Lex, I'm of the opinion that it can have only a positive effect." He glanced at Dominique. "A profoundly positive one."

Her expression softened and she almost smiled at him. Luthor watched their exchange, then said, "For what it might be worth on my part, I assure you that I will not make this information a subject of common gossip. I might not even tell my wife."

The doors slid open and James led them onto the news floor. "Just for the sake of having a cover story," he said, "you're here because I'm interviewing you over a new tech breakthrough your company has made and Dominique is here to take notes."

Luthor smiled and clapped him on the shoulder. "I'm pleased to release this new information to you, James. I'm sure that having the Daily Planet publish this story will significantly increase LexTech's bottom line."

"I think so too. Let me tell the associate editor what's going on."

James strode confidently to the office next to Perry White's old digs and knocked. When he heard a voice say, "Come in," he opened the door and leaned in.

"Mike, I need to commandeer your conference room for an hour or so. Will that interfere with anything you—"

He stopped as Mike shot a glance at the other occupant of the office. The man stood and smiled. "Hello, Mr. Olsen. It appears that my original plan has been simplified."

James frowned. "What plan?"

"I was going to convince Mike to lead me to your private office, but it seems that the reason for my being here has come to me instead. Let's go out on the floor, shall we?"

"Why? And who are you?"

The strange man gestured to Mike to precede him with one hand, then brought the other from behind his back.

It held a black semi-automatic pistol.

"This is all you need to know. In my hand is a nine millimeter Glock 17, Mr. Olsen, and it holds seventeen rounds in the magazine. There are two spare magazines in my pocket. I already have one round in the chamber, and I'm fairly certain you'd rather I didn't start blasting away indiscriminately at your staff. I want good old Mike here to evacuate the floor, except for you and Mr. Luthor and the attractive lady behind you who has seen my weapon." He nodded to Mike and added, "I want you to do that right now, please."

Mike looked at James, who nodded slowly. "Do as he says, Mike. Tell everyone that it's an unscheduled fire drill, and try to sound bored when you say it. Just get everyone out of here now."

Mike took a deep breath and blinked. "Yes, sir." He pushed past James and called out, "Okay, everybody, fire drill, fire drill. Right now. Everybody down the stairs and out on the street, okay?"

A young woman called out, "Now? Aw, Mike, you're freaking kidding me, right? I'm in the middle of something important!"

"No, Allison, I'm not kidding. If you're still in the building four minutes from now you get suspended for a week without pay. Come on, everyone, it's not my idea. I'm in the same boat as you."

With groans and mutters, the staff exited the floor. Mike was the last one to enter the stairway, and he looked back at James as if trying to tell him something.

James shook his head and pointed. "Go on, get out of here," he mouthed.

Mike stomped through the door and let it swing shut behind him. The man with the pistol smiled. "There, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

Dominique slipped closer to James and angled her body in front of his. "I suppose you've got some kind of ransom demand?"

The man chuckled and shook his head. "Actually—"

The stairwell door opened and closed again. All four of them looked up to see a woman standing at the top of the handicap ramp, wearing an amazed expression.

The new arrival tilted her head and looked directly at the man with the Glock in his hand. "Lester?"

Lester's jaw dropped. "Lois?"

Chapter Twelve

from the journal of H. G. Wells

I am cold. So cold.

My machine is running out of power. I have barely enough reserve to move to a warmer clime, assuming it begins to function within the next few minutes. The batteries are nearly drained and I must try to — to — do — something, I cannot—

...

This may be my final entry. I am sorry for being such a silly ass.

It took Clark most of the day to get a special dispensation from the Italian government to go to Sicily and retrieve Lois' kids, assuming he could find them. The associate diplomatic attaché in Berlin had tried to stall him, but Horst had managed to pull some strings and get around the officious and maddeningly stubborn Madame Meucci to her boss, who rubber-stamped the request and sent it up the line for official approval.

Horst kept assuring Clark that the Italian diplomats were

moving faster than he'd ever seen them move, but to Clark the clock was ticking and he was ready to go.

He hoped that Lois didn't divine any of Lucy's suspicions. There was no predicting what she might do if she thought she was being pressured. But surely she wouldn't risk her children's safety by doing something stupid.

The emergency dispensation came in just after five o'clock that evening. Horst handed it to Clark and said, "This will be in effect for twenty-four hours, and it will not only enable you to legally search for the children, it will allow you to arrest anyone who tries to interfere with your mission. I urge you to depart now. Rodolfo may have ears in the Italian diplomatic corps, and I cannot predict his actions should he discover your intentions."

Clark nodded. "Thank you, Horst. Please thank Mika and Victor for me. They were both most helpful. And please blame me for making you late for supper with your family."

Horst smiled. "I shall do all those things, my friend. When this is all finished, please come back and let me know — quite unofficially, of course — the result of your endeavors." Horst shook his hand firmly. "I wish you success and smooth flying."

"Thanks. I think I'm going to need your good wishes."

Horst held the handshake. "Wait — please, I must ask you a question, my friend."

"I'm kind of in a time crunch here, Horst. Can this wait?"

"I think not."

Clark sighed. "Fine. Go ahead."

"What will you do with the children should you retrieve them today?"

"Well — um — ah — I don't know." He frowned. "Guess I haven't thought that far ahead."

"Perhaps I have a valid suggestion. If you find them tonight, or by early tomorrow, bring them to my home. Steffi and I will watch over them, quite unofficially and only as friends would watch over another friend's children, until you know where they should be. And you will not have to worry about passports or official forms or awkward questions from the authorities and such."

Clark smiled and shook his head. "You know, sometimes I wonder who's the superhero and who's the guy just learning how to walk and chew gum at the same time." He tightened the handshake again. "You're a genius."

"I think not. I know that Steffi's mother thinks not."

They shared a laugh. "When I come back with the kids I'll tell her she's wrong. Thank you so much, my friend." He stepped toward the door. "And now I have to go or Lucy will have my head."

"One day soon we will all eat dinner together. And your Lucy may tell my Steffi and her mother that I am indeed a brilliant man."

A quick call to Lucy's apartment went unanswered, so he assumed that the two sisters were out on the town somewhere. They'd probably gone to lunch someplace to talk about Lucy's newly discovered niece and nephew. Or, maybe they were shopping for new clothes for Lois. Given the current state of her wardrobe, she could use a new look.

Clark flew over western Sicily, looking for small towns which didn't fit the map he'd memorized. From six thousand feet, it was almost impossible for anyone on the ground to see him unless he happened to cross the sun's face. So he kept to the east and scanned for signs to tell him where Lois' kids might be.

He wished he could have gotten away from Horst's clutches far sooner, but that was like wishing he actually understood women. Besides, it wasn't Horst's fault. You couldn't get any government official anywhere to move faster or slower than his or her usual speed, irrespective of the urgency of the situation.

He hated to leave Lois back in Metropolis without letting her

know what was going on, but everything would be fine if he brought the kids back. And the mission really was time-sensitive — if he could liberate her children, she could walk away from Rodolfo and begin a new life with them. Besides, he'd given her his word. His suspicions, as strong as they were, and his conclusions, logical as they might be, didn't constitute proof, and he agreed with Lucy's reasoning that Lois would remain quiet until Clark brought back her children.

He thought about what he'd told Lucy, that he thought he'd felt something between Lois and himself the previous night. It was the truth, he had felt some kind of link between them, but as he mulled over his feelings and reactions, he knew that whatever he'd felt had been but a shadow of what he'd felt when meeting the 'other' Lois. Even that tie, or bond, or link, or whatever it was, even as powerful as it had been, never felt quite right, never felt settled or smooth. The link with the 'real' Lois, the one who had suddenly appeared just days ago as if back from the dead, was tenuous, thin, old and worn, as if the person on the other end had almost faded out of existence.

Lucy, on the other hand, was real. She was alive. Whenever they were together his heart felt light and free. And he was sure she loved him.

He compared what he felt and knew about Lucy to what he felt with and knew about this Lois.

There was no real comparison.

He loved Lucy Lane.

And he'd have to do something about it when he returned home. Right now he had to find Lois' kids—

And maybe he'd just hit paydirt.

There were eight or nine — no, eleven pre-school kids in the playground behind a house in one of the unmapped camps. He descended slowly and stretched out his arms to either side, which he knew made him look like a big bird to any ground observer without binoculars or a telescope. Two thousand feet was about the limit for that illusion to hold, so he stayed that high and tried to pick out Jean and Collette, and he was surprised when he recognized them so quickly and easily. Something in their mother's face showed up in theirs and made them unmistakably hers. Of course, her sketching skills were outstanding, too.

He didn't want to create a Superman incident, even with the diplomatic papers he now carried, so he dropped to the ground about two miles east of the camp and changed into civilian clothes, complete with his old glasses, a baseball cap, sneakers, water bottle, and an expensive camera. Maybe if he played the clueless American tourist he could get close enough to get the kids, get away, and not reveal his powers.

But he knew he'd get them in any case.

He walked through the thin woods, grumbling to himself about being lost and making as much noise as he thought an irritated and lost American tourist might make. It wasn't long before he saw the edge of town below the setting sun.

He took a drink from his water bottle and started breathing more deeply as if he were close to being worn out. Before he'd gone another dozen steps, a man carrying a pistol under his shirt appeared out of the bushes not far from him and called out in what Clark assumed was Sicilian.

He stopped and lifted his hands to either side. "Sorry, I don't speak Italian."

The man grimaced and waved for Clark to come closer. "That was not Italian, sir, it was Sicilian. The Italian tongue is partially derived from the Sicilian language, not the other way around as most — Americans believe."

He said 'American' as if it were a disfiguring disease, or perhaps a congenital deformity. A proud man, touchy and sensitive about his heritage. Clark could use that.

"Sorry again, mister. I got separated from my tour group. We were supposed to hike back to salami and—"

“Salemi,” the man growled, “not salami. The second is a food, the first is the town.”

Clark shrugged. “Sorry. Sounds the same to me. Anyway, I got separated when I had to — ah — go visit the little boy’s bush, you know what I mean? I needed some privacy. And when I got done, I was all alone. They walked off and left me! Can you believe that? Is this somewhere near salami?”

The man’s teeth clenched. “No, this is not near Salemi. You have walked west when you should have walked east. You are lost.”

“Huh. Well, I’m not lost now, cause you found me. Hey, if there’s a place to get something to eat up ahead and maybe some wine or even a phone, there’s five American dollars in it for you. How about that?”

The man’s expression told Clark he’d been accepted as a typically disgusting Yankee boor. “Come with me, American. We will try to find you a meal. With some wine.”

“And a phone. Don’t forget that.”

The man’s lips pressed together. “I will not forget.”

He turned and began walking without a backward glance, as if his unexpected guest could follow him or not, didn’t matter to him. “Thanks,” Clark drawled. “Hey, if this town isn’t — ah, Salemi, what is it?”

The man didn’t look at him. “It is none of your concern.”

“None of your concern, eh? Funny name for a town.”

The man stopped and looked over his shoulder. “Please refrain from trying to be humorous. You have not the skill.”

Clark blinked and smiled thinly. “Well, then, I guess I won’t quit my day job.”

The man started off again without replying. Oh, well, thought Clark, at least he thinks I’m harmless.

Rodolfo watched as Emil escorted the goofy-looking American — there was no better way to describe him — up the street toward the cantina. He knew that his rocking chair and wide-brimmed hat made him look like the cliché version of any older Italian man taking his ease before dinner, so he wasn’t surprised when the American called out “Hey!” and stepped toward the porch with his camera raised. Before Emil could stop him, the shutter snapped and the man said “Gracias!”

The great fool, thought Rodolfo. He does not even know the difference between Italian and Spanish. And his Spanish accent was truly terrible.

Emil took the fool’s elbow and guided him toward the eatery, where Emil would surely arrange an unfortunate but now unavoidable mishap with his expensive camera. They could not allow even an idiot such as this one to have in his possession a clear photograph of Rodolfo. It was either the camera or the man’s life, and since broken cameras created far less paperwork for the police and required far fewer bribes to smooth any ruffled feathers, the choice was clear.

Rodolfo watched as the man slipped away from Emil quite deftly and began snapping pictures of the buildings on the street. He was also photographing some of the people in the camp, something which made Rodolfo lean forward in the chair. Emil turned and caught his eye, then made a scissors gesture with two fingers followed by the press of an invisible shutter release.

Good. Emil understood that the camera was not to survive this man’s visit.

As the two stepped up to the cantina’s entrance, the fool stopped and slipped Emil’s grip once again, then ran around the corner of the building. Rodolfo blinked, thinking that he’d missed something. No one could move that fast, and no one could get that far away from Emil without pushing him back first.

But Emil just stood in his tracks for a moment before running around the building to retrieve his charge. Rodolfo wondered what the man might have heard or seen—

The children.

He had heard the children at play and now he wants to photograph them.

The fool was making it harder for Rodolfo to let him live. Perhaps the man’s death from a broken neck suffered when he fell from a height on a rocky slope would take care of him and not draw too much attention to the camp.

Rodolfo was considering which ravine to dump the body in when he heard two shots fired from behind the cantina.

He leaped to his feet and followed Emil’s path. A moment later he was standing next to Emil, looking around for the dead fool.

The dead fool was not on the ground before him.

“Emil, what happened? Where is the body?”

The other children and the two older women who were watching them were all sprawled out with their faces down on the ground. The little ones had been trained from the time each one began to walk that when someone discharged a weapon the child must lay flat on the ground. Rodolfo decided that after this situation was resolved, he would be mildly pleased that this part of their training had taken hold. A treat of some kind would be in store for them.

But not now. Not yet.

“Emil! I asked you — what are you looking at?”

Emil pointed to the sky with his pistol and did not speak.

Rodolfo lowered his voice and slowly stepped closer. “Emil, my old friend, please tell me what has taken place. Why did you fire your weapon?”

Emil shook himself as if coming back to his body from a far place. He blinked several times and slowly said, “The man — he called to the children. He took two of them and — and went away.”

Still speaking quietly, Rodolfo said, “Is that why you shot at him?”

“Ah — yes, that is why.” Emil pointed to a spot on the ground not far in front of them. “He knelt down right there and picked them up.”

“Which children did he take? Do you know?”

“Y-yes. He took — he took Lois Lane’s children.”

Rodolfo’s eyes widened. “What? How did he know which ones to take?”

“They ran to him.”

“RAN to him?” demanded Rodolfo.

Emil flinched and blinked again. “Yes. He called their names and said — he said that Puff the Magic Dragon had sent him to take them to their mother and the girl took the boy’s hand and they ran to him and he knelt down to receive them.”

Rodolfo stepped forward and pointed at a disturbance in the dirt. “There? The man knelt there?” Emil nodded. “And you missed a target that close to you?”

“Oh — oh, no. I did not miss, Rodolfo. I shot him twice. In the back.”

“Then where is he?”

Emil pointed the barrel of his revolver at the sky again. “He went to the heavens.”

“You mean you killed him and he went to heaven?”

“No. I shot him and he picked up the children and turned to look at me for a moment over his glasses. He seemed angry. Then he — he flew away.” Emil lifted his revolver again. “I tried to shoot again but I could not. My pistol would not fire.”

“What?” Rodolfo gently took the weapon from Emil’s slack hand and examined it closely. He tried to pull back the hammer but it refused to move. He pointed it up at the sky and tried to pull the trigger. Same result.

He looked closely at the cylinder and—

It was not possible.

No one could do this.

The metal of the front of the cylinder and the metal of the frame were fused together as if they had been heated and melted by a tiny welding torch. The Colt Python .357 Magnum revolver was now a kilo of scrap metal.

Rodolfo stared at the pistol for a long moment, then realized what had to have taken place. They had finally been found out. The authorities — or perhaps La Cosa Nostra, or another of his business rivals — had tired of waiting for him to make a mistake and had sent the one man he feared most to find him.

They had sent the Superman from Metropolis to kill him.

The realization took his breath away — but only for a moment. He spun around and shouted, “Emergency evacuation! Pass the word! Take only your survival bags! Find your evacuation partner and go! Go-go-go-go!”

He turned around to shout at the women minding the children, but almost swallowed his tongue when he saw the idiot American in front of him. Only he didn’t look like an idiot now. He looked like an angry underwear model with huge muscles and a sneer on his lip.

The man grabbed Rodolfo’s belt buckle and shirt front and snarled, “You’re coming with me.”

Then they rocketed into the sky.

Rodolfo fainted before he could vomit.

Clark dropped Rodolfo off at the Carabinieri office in Messina, the Italian national police force working with Interpol, and asked them to contact Horst Müller in Hamburg. He was lucky, because the officer in charge of the office was one of the truly honest ones, and he also knew Horst by reputation. Clark stayed there long enough to be sure that Rodolfo wouldn’t wiggle free any time soon, then briefly dropped in to Horst’s home to see that Lois’ kids were playing with Fritzi under Steffi’s watchful eyes.

It was time to let Lois know what was going on. An overseas call, even over his cell phone, would have taken too long, so he didn’t bother with it.

Crossing the Atlantic from Germany was fairly simple. He just checked for aircraft overhead, shot up to about 65,000 feet, and headed west toward Metropolis. He was looking forward to the thank-you hug Lois was sure to give him.

And he was hoping for an even bigger hug from Lucy.

Still smiling, he flashed through Lucy’s open window and closed it behind him. Before he could call out for anyone, though, he smelled the blood.

It wasn’t fresh blood, either. That alone alarmed him.

He immediately swept the apartment for a victim and gasped when he found Lucy lying face down on the floor, her head and arm covered with blood.

In an instant he was beside her.

No, he thought, no! Please, God, no!

He touched Lucy’s back, expecting to feel cold flesh.

It was warm.

He looked again at the wound. Blood was still seeping out of it.

But that meant — her heart was still beating!

He listened and heard her heartbeat. Then he steeled himself — knowing that Lucy had to be barely clinging to life — and looked inside her head for the bullet that he knew from experience had to be there.

But it wasn’t there.

She hadn’t been shot in the back of the head. She’d been slugged just behind and below her left ear with something hard and unyielding, maybe a pistol butt or a piece of pipe. He checked her skull and didn’t find any broken bones, so he reached down to pick her up.

Then he stopped and flitted to the window, then reopened it and secured the drapes to either side. In an instant, he was

airborne with his precious cargo.

He landed at Met General in front of the emergency room entrance and pushed the doors open with his breath. “Head injury!” he called out. “Blunt force trauma to the skull, patient is breathing shallowly with thin but steady pulse but is unresponsive. She’s lost a lot of blood. I need help right now!”

Hold on, Lucy, he thought at her. You have to hold on. You have to get better.

You just have to.

I’m not going anywhere.

Chapter Thirteen

from the journal of H. G. Wells

I am safe and whole. But I can scarcely credit what has taken place.

Nor am I able to relate it here. It is too painful for me.

My only solace — and it is a thin solace, at that — is that the conflicting potentials for the future of this timeline have now been resolved. This universe will now proceed on its way without further interference from me.

But the cost—

Doctor Linda Downing listened to the Man of Steel’s report on the young victim he was carrying and snapped her fingers at the admitting nurse. “Get me a gurney, now! Set up Trauma Two for head injury care. Make sure we can get a good X-ray. Give me a plasma infusion until we can type and cross-match.”

“Yes, Doctor!”

As the gurney rolled toward Superman, she ran to his side. “Thank you for getting her here, Superman. We’ll take good care of her. Can you tell me anything else about her?”

He lifted damp eyes to her. “Her name — she’s Lucy Lane. WayneTech employee. Her medical data is in the computer.”

Dr. Downing turned to the admitting nurse. “Did you get that, Karen? Lucy Lane with WayneTech!”

“Got it. I’ll send her profile to Trauma Two.”

She turned back to her patient. “Okay, let’s get her loaded. You can put her down now, Superman.”

The only move he made was to look at the girl’s face again. “I — Lucy? Lucy, please don’t die. Please!”

Linda had seen this reaction many times, just not from the Man of Steel. The thought that Superman had a girlfriend — especially one who was so gravely injured — stunned her and made her feel slightly sad.

She put her hand on his elbow and pressed lightly.

“Superman? Please put her down now. We’ll take good care of her. Okay? Can you put her down on the gurney?” She shook him ever so slightly. “I can’t treat her as long as you’re holding her, Superman. You need to let us do our jobs.”

He slowly looked at Linda again. “I — please help her.” One tear ran down his cheek. “Please?”

“We’ll do our best, just like we always do. But you have to let go of her first.”

He shuddered and closed his eyes, then opened them and laid her gently on the gurney. As the nurses wheeled her down the short hallway, he stammered, “Can I — can I wait — with her?”

“You know it’s best if you stay here. I promise that I’ll let you know as soon as I know anything. Okay?”

He sniffed once and straightened. “Yes. Yes, you’re right.”

Still holding his elbow, she asked, “Was there anyone else injured?”

He shook his head. “No. just the one — the one victim.”

“Good. Now you just sit over here — or you can stand right where you are if you’d rather. Is there anyone who needs to be notified?”

The light came back into his eyes and he pulled a cell phone out of a pouch on his belt. “Yes. Can I make a couple of calls

from here or do I need to go outside?"

"Right here is fine as long as you don't get any closer to the machines than you are now. We'll report this to the police and let them know when she's stable."

His eyes hardened. "I'll call them. This is something they need to know about right now."

Lois stared at Lester. "You — I thought you were dead!"

Lester smiled and shook his head. "That's what I thought about you for a couple of years, too, but then I started hearing rumors about Rodolfo's greatest achievement and I figured it was Carla. The woman who never missed, who always completed her assignments, whose name struck fear into the hearts of police and targets alike. But it was you all the time, wasn't it?" He laughed. "Shoulda known. Carla would've bought radio time to announce that she was the big shot."

She came down the ramp. For an instant, she remembered that it was once a short flight of steps. "I guess so. What are you doing here?"

He chuckled. "Same old Lois, direct and to the point."

"Lester," she growled, "why are you here?"

He nodded his head toward the other three people in the room. "Got a job."

Lois slowed her approach. "Are you my backup?"

Lester's eyebrows rose. "I don't think so. It's not like you need it, do you? Anyway, I'm here for the rich guy."

Dominique suddenly demanded, "Which rich guy?"

Lois scowled at her. "Shut up, Brown Sugar. You're not a target." She turned back to Lester. "She did ask a good question, though. Which rich guy?"

Lester shrugged and pointed with the Glock. "Luthor. Who's your assignment?"

"It's me, isn't it?" James grunted.

Lois sighed. "Yeah. It's you."

"You started that almost-riot on the loading dock, too, didn't you?"

"Not me personally, no, but it was part of the plan. It was supposed to divide your focus and let me sneak in closer."

"Well, it worked." James put his hands on his hips. "Why me? Who wants me dead?"

"I don't know why or who. I never do. I just get the dossier and a time frame."

"Same here," offered Lester. "We're just doing a job, okay? This isn't personal. Right, Lois?"

"Yeah. It's just business."

"Okay, Lois. It's time. You want to go first or should I?"

"What!" snapped Dominique. "Just like that?"

"Just like that, *kaffir*. We're professionals. It's our job." Lester turned to Lois. "Well? You or me first? And who gets the porch monkey?"

Lois hesitated. If she killed James Olsen, she'd never see her children again and she'd probably spend the rest of her life in one prison or another, assuming she wasn't executed. If she let Lester take out Luthor, the same thing would happen.

Dominique's voice broke into her thoughts. "Why didn't you shoot him when you first got to Metropolis, Lois?"

"Are you complaining about my timing?"

Lois noticed the black woman shift her feet to bring her a little closer. "No. I just don't know why you'd pass up the chance to kill him then and come to do the job now. You didn't know the guy with the smarmy grin was going to be here."

"Hey!" Lester said. "That hurts my feelings."

Lois ignored him and reached behind her for her pistol. "No, I didn't. Olsen was supposed to be in Brussels in a few days and I was going to meet him there."

Dominique looked at James and frowned. "That trip was supposed to be secret. I didn't tell anyone about it."

James shook his head. "Neither did I. I guess someone in Belgium really doesn't like me."

Lois checked her weapon. "Sounds reasonable. But then, I actually didn't come to the newsroom today to kill Olsen."

That got a reaction from all four of the others. James squished his face in thought and said, "Then why are you here if not to kill me?"

"My boss wants some financial information from you first. I was going to try to wheedle it out of you, but Lester kind of stole my thunder. Hey, Lester, how'd you get here anyway?"

Lester shrugged and waved his hand toward his intended target. "Mr. Luthor wouldn't come to Belgium, so I snuck in over the Canadian border and found him in his office here in Metropolis. I followed my target here on foot. You know, Luthor, you almost lost me in the subway. That was pretty sharp for an amateur. But going aboveground on foot, unarmed and with no backup, was stupid."

Lois watched Luthor's face as Lester berated him. Something was wrong with Luthor's reaction, though, as if he knew something the rest of them didn't—

Luthor wasn't stupid.

He did have backup.

Lois lifted her weapon and spun to cover the stairway just as a tall white-haired man burst through the door with a pistol in his hand. She pulled the trigger twice and hit the man in the middle of the chest with both rounds, but just before she released her shots she saw him fire once. That was the only time he discharged his weapon, however, because his pistol fell from his limp fingers and bounced away as he dropped to the floor in a heap.

She did a quick mental check to make sure she hadn't been hit. As she stepped toward the white-haired man to make sure her target would stay down, she heard someone behind her fall against a desk.

Mayson had stayed a floor below the white-haired man creeping up the stairs until he stopped outside the newsroom. The small box he was carrying — which looked like an old transistor radio, complete with earphone — ended up on the floor away from the door. She remembered that he was one of Lex Luthor's inner circle but couldn't recall his name.

The man slowly drew a semiautomatic pistol from under his jacket and checked the magazine and the chamber. He threw open the door and charged through it and she heard three quick shots fired. She yanked out her cell phone with one hand and her service weapon with the other, then dialed 9-1-1 and reported gunfire in the Daily Planet building.

As she was speaking, two more shots rang out almost as one. They didn't sound like they'd come from the same weapon. She crept to the stairwell door and risked a quick glance through the reinforced glass. She saw a middle-aged man in an expensive suit with his hands in the air and Lois Lane holding a pistol at the ready, both standing halfway across the room. She wasn't sure what had happened, but she thought that another man, younger and shorter than the first man, was kneeling over a second woman lying limp on the floor. Between the two groups, a third man lay slumped against a desk, a fast-spreading stain darkening his shirt.

A quick check of the box on the floor told her it was some kind of directional locator. A medium-pitched tone was barely audible through the small earpiece.

She slid back to the stairs and knelt halfway down the flight for cover in case someone decided to shoot in her direction. Her thumb dialed Bill Henderson's cell phone almost of its own accord.

"Mayson! Where the—"

"Daily Planet stairwell just below the news floor," she said quietly. "Shots fired, at least two casualties."

"Did you shoot anyone?"

“No. I just got here, haven’t fired my weapon.”

“Stay where you are! I’m pulling up outside the Planet building now. There’s a whole bunch of people milling around on the sidewalk — hold on, the precinct is calling me.”

Mayson grimaced but didn’t make any noise. She waited while Bill listened to the call.

Twenty seconds and two hours later he came back on the line. “There’s a nutjob up there with a gun and he’s threatening Lex Luthor, James Olsen, and Dominique Cox. Stay put. I’m coming up the stairs.”

“Lois Lane is in there too.”

Bill paused, then said, “I’m not too surprised. Superman got her kids back from her boss and—”

“What? What kids?”

“Just listen and I’ll tell you what little I know! Hold it.”

She heard him call out to the Planet’s security chief and identify himself, then tell the man to evacuate the lower floors and tell anybody in the upper floors to lock themselves in an office or a conference room with a solid door. She heard the man reply that he’d already done that, and that’s when the door below Mayson banged open and a dozen or so panicked people scampered down the stairway in Bill’s direction.

Her phone crackled. “Mayson! Still there?”

“Still here. Bad guys still in the newsroom. You’ve got some bystanders coming down the stairs so hold your badge up. Go ahead.”

“Okay. Superman got Lois’ kids away from her boss and left them with a cop he trusts in Germany. He — yes ma’am, I’m with the police — he also picked up the bad guy boss and took him to some other cops in Messina, Sicily. Somehow he got the Italian government’s okay to arrest the guy, and the Italian national police are sending in a bunch of people to clean out the camps and arrest anybody they don’t have to shoot. Superman came back to Lucy Lane’s apartment to tell Lois the good news and found Lucy on the floor, bleeding from a head wound. He took—”

“What! Lois killed her own sister?”

“No, just clubbed her, probably with a gun butt. Lucy’s in the Metro General emergency room for a head injury and probably a concussion and possible skull fracture and Clark doesn’t want to leave her.”

“So he’s not coming here? We kind of need him, don’t you think?”

Bill’s footsteps scuffed on the stairs as he lunged up to Mayson’s hiding place. They both put away their phones. “This is our baby, Mayson,” he puffed. “He may be Superman, but right now he’s scared of losing someone he cares about a lot and he’s not leaving until she’s out of danger. Besides, nobody’s been brave enough to tell him about this situation yet. He doesn’t know what’s going down.”

She tried not to let her reaction to the news about Clark’s affection for Lucy show in her reply. “Lovely. You called the hospital to get someone to tell him, right?”

“Yes, but even Superman can’t be everywhere at once. And I don’t know when anyone will say anything to him, assuming anyone does.”

“Great,” she muttered. “So it’s all up to us.”

“We can handle it.”

“Yeah.” She nodded once. “How do you want to do this?”

He took two more deep breaths, then said, “You ever shoot anyone?”

She glanced at her pistol and shook her head. “You know I haven’t.”

“Think you can do it if you have to?”

She caught his eyes and saw his concern for her. No — it was more than that. They were partners and friends, but maybe Bill hoped they’d be more. Someday, maybe, but right now was kind of a bad time for that particular conversation.

But how could she be unfaithful to Clark?

She almost giggled with hysteria, then clamped down on her control. Maybe they’d talk about it later. “I think I can if I don’t have another choice. But I won’t really know until I’m actually looking through my sights at someone.”

“That’s probably the best answer you could have given me. Okay, let’s do this. I’ll go first and dive left. You follow and go right.”

She nodded. “Sounds like a plan to me.”

He gave her a quick grin and checked his weapon. “Locked and loaded?”

“Ready for bear.”

“Just remember, this bear shoots back.” He edged up the stairs with Mayson two steps behind. He reached out to grab the doorknob with his left hand, then turned and whispered, “I count one-two-three and we go in on three.”

“Got it.”

“Ready?” She nodded again. “One. Two. Three!”

Clark stood to one side of the waiting area staring at the floor with his arms folded. He’d never felt so helpless in his entire life, not even when his parents had died in the car wreck he’d been too young to prevent.

He’d also never been so scared.

He wanted to look through the walls to see how Lucy was doing.

He was too afraid to look through the walls to find out how Lucy was doing.

Head injuries were unpredictable. He’d rescued enough people with them to know that. Twice over the years he’d pried highway crash victims out of cars who seemed completely lucid, had looked him in the eyes and thanked him, hadn’t displayed any symptoms of injury other than a bloody scalp abrasion, and who had collapsed and died from the trauma within twenty-four hours. He’d also rescued several who looked to be on death’s doorstep but who made complete recoveries within days.

And there had been others. Most had suffered long-term effects. Some of those effects were crippling.

There was no way to predict how Lucy would react to her injury. He wanted — no, he needed to be there for her. No matter what happened, no matter how badly she might be hurt, he had to be there when she woke up.

Assuming, of course, that she did wake up.

A basketball-player-tall, muscular police officer walked in through the automatic doors with his walkie-talkie to his lips. All Clark heard was, “Copy, dispatch. Rose out.”

The man strode past Superman and leaned on the registration desk. “Karen, we’ll probably have some more gunshot victims here soon. There’s a hostage situation at the Daily Planet and shots have already been fired.”

Clark snapped his attention to the officer. “Excuse me, but did you say shots have been fired at the Daily Planet?”

Officer Rose turned and looked down at Superman and blinked. “Huh? Oh, hi. Sorry. Didn’t see you there.”

Clark lowered his eyebrows. “You said, shots fired?”

“Shots — right, right. There’s a guy with a gun holding several people hostage on the news floor. That’s all the info I have right now.”

“Who’s on the scene? Who’s in charge?”

“We don’t have a commander on scene yet. A couple of patrol cars have responded and a SWAT unit has been dispatched.” Rose paused, then said, “You know, if you have some free time, they could probably use you over there.”

Clark froze. Leave Lucy? Without knowing if she was alive? Without knowing that she’d be there when he came back?

Then he licked his lips. “You’re right. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

As the white-haired man lying on the ramp breathed out his last, Lois turned to see who had fallen. All she saw was Dominique Cox diving for the floor in front of Lester, who was sitting on the floor with blood covering the left side of his shirt and wearing a stunned expression on his face.

The white-haired man's last shot had hit him hard. Lester appeared to be close to death already.

But the black woman wasn't going to help Lester, she was diving for his Glock.

Lois stepped to her right and lifted her pistol as Dominique rolled away from Lester and came up on one knee with the Glock pointed at Lois' abdomen. They fired at almost the same moment.

A bullet burned hotly across Lois' left leg just below her hip. It wasn't a direct hit, but it still cut a furrow across her skin and into the muscles of the outside of her thigh. All in all, it was a good shot for an untrained civilian using an unfamiliar weapon in a stressful situation. She stumbled against another desk and managed to stay upright.

Lois' bullet struck Dominique in the lower left side of her stomach, the kind of wound that was invariably fatal in the almost any Western movie Lois had ever seen.

It was often fatal in real life, too.

It was all going wrong.

That idiot Lester had blown everything up. She hadn't come here to kill anyone. She'd come to wait for Superman to bring back her children. If Lester hadn't already been shot, Lois would have killed him.

Olsen ran to the wounded woman and knelt over her, then yanked off his jacket and wadded it up to pillow her head. Lois took the opportunity to limp toward him and kick Lester's Glock out of Olsen's reach. "It's okay, Dominique," he said, "it's okay, I'm here."

"I — I tried — sorry — tried to help—"

"Shh. Don't try to talk. It's okay. We'll get you to the hospital."

"Put direct pressure on the wound," Lois said.

Olsen's head snapped around, his face blazing with rage.

"Shut up! Get away from her or I'll kill you myself!"

The intensity of his reaction staggered her and she stumbled back several steps. Luthor lifted his hand and waved it like a first-grader asking to go to the bathroom. "Excuse me, Ms. Lane, but may I assist James? I have some experience with such matters."

Lois looked at him and nodded, then waved at him with her weapon. She limped over to pick up Lester's Glock, then moved toward the stairwell.

"Wait," said Luthor. "Does this mean that you are no longer planning to kill James?"

She stopped, and without turning, she said, "I didn't come here to kill him. All I wanted to do was get some information from him. Wouldn't it be stupid to decide to quit the killer's life and celebrate by killing one more person?"

She heard him take a slow breath, then say, "Have you not done so?"

"I didn't plan it! I only — never mind. I'm out of here."

"I see. I cannot stop you if you choose to depart, but I doubt the police will allow you to escape."

"Not sure I care anymore."

"Oh? Why is that?"

Instead of answering, Lois decided to depart on that cryptic comment. Always leave them wanting more, she thought. That way they'll come to the next show.

Except there wouldn't be a next show.

Tired. She was so very tired. Tired of shooting people and getting shot. Tired of running and hiding and living a fake life. She'd seen too much death and destruction and pain. She couldn't do it for one more minute. It was past time to stop. Besides, her

leg was bleeding and burning and her eyes didn't want to stay open.

There would be no more contracts, no more kills, no more faces haunting her dreams and her waking hours.

Lucy's face swam into focus in her mind's eye.

She'd almost pulled the trigger. She'd almost killed her own sister. But she realized that if she had killed Lucy, Superman would have hunted her down no matter where she might have run. He might have simply captured her and taken her to the police, or flown her to one of the countries who would surely imprison or execute her, or he might have just pulled her head from her shoulders and left the pieces to rot where they fell. In any case, she'd have been without her babies and they'd be without her. She couldn't take that.

But the biggest reason was that she couldn't add Lucy's face to the parade of dead who haunted her in her sleep. Her finger refused to complete the motion to fire her pistol. Smacking Lucy's head with the butt wasn't being nice, but she should survive that with no long-term ill effects.

Probably.

She hoped so, anyway.

But she hadn't been able to kill her sister, not even for her children's sake.

Thinking about Lucy led her thoughts to Clark. He was a good man, the kind of man she'd decided didn't exist anymore, assuming they ever had. Even after she'd told him about her children's dubious ancestry, he hadn't flinched or changed his mind. He'd still been willing to help her.

If only, she thought. If only she'd come back from the Congo. If only he'd found her soon enough. If only she could have escaped from Rodolfo and made her way back to Metropolis. If only he'd found her before she'd killed Carla. If only—

She shook her head. If wishes were horses, beggars would ride. She was what she was and nothing could change that. Superman could never love a murderer.

Lois took one more step toward the stairwell door, then it burst open again and two more people exploded from it.

Her fatigue, her regret for all the death she'd brought, her unspoken sorrow for Dominique's pain, her own wound, her fear for her children, her guilt over Lucy, her frustration that this whole thing had ended with more people dying, all slowed down her reflexes and made her hesitate half a heartbeat. She didn't react until the man screamed "Police! Drop your—"

Up snapped both her pistol and Lester's Glock. She fired one round from each weapon at the man with the glasses, then shifted her aim at the blonde woman sliding across the floor in the other direction. She was sure she'd hit the man at least once. But before Lois could fire again, the blonde woman pulled the trigger on her pistol three times.

The blonde was well-trained. All three bullets hit Lois in the middle of her body.

Both weapons tumbled from her nerveless fingers. Her head sagged toward the outside wall. She fell to her right and hit the floor limp and slack. Then she saw Superman smash through a window. That used to be my desk, she thought, and now he's got broken glass all over it. I'll have to speak to him about that.

Then the big strong guy in blue and red — who was really, really fast — flashed past her and picked up Dominique and was gone through the hole he'd made in the wall before the plaster stopped falling. Lois tried to take a breath but couldn't tell if she was inhaling. She tried to speak but no sound came out.

Then strong and gentle arms lifted her and she felt air rushing past her face.

Superman bent his mouth to her ear and said, "Your children are safe."

At almost the same moment, she felt herself lowered to a cloth-covered surface. She managed to lift her hand to Clark's

face and touch his cheek. She tried to thank him, but there was no strength for words.

He took her hand and held it for a moment, then put it down beside her uninjured hip. His hand touched her forehead and brushed her hair for a moment. “Get well, Lois,” he said. “It’s what Lucy would want.”

She almost smiled. Then she closed her eyes and slipped into the beckoning darkness.

James and Lex slowly stood from where they’d knelt beside Dominique and raised their hands. Bill Henderson lay on the upper landing of the newsroom floor, groaning. The woman who’d shot Lois lay ten feet from him, her hands gripping her weapon, still pointing it at the place where Lois had been standing.

Lex whispered, “Don’t make any sudden moves, James. The young lady might shoot at us.”

James looked around at Lester, his eyes closed in permanent sleep. The blood had stopped draining from his body, and he looked like a rag doll carelessly tossed into the corner of a closet.

Lex called out, “Excuse me? Officers? Neither of us is armed. We are, in fact, two of the victims here. May we move now?”

Bill sat up and groaned again. “Man, that’s gonna leave a mark. Thank God for Kevlar vests. Yeah, you guys are good to move. I know who you are.” He retrieved his weapon from the floor and holstered it. “Mayson? Mayson! Are you — ow! Are you hurt? Were you hit?”

Her only response was to point her weapon at the ceiling with one hand and cover her face with the other. Then she started crying.

Bill levered himself up off the floor and slowly moved toward her, then took her weapon from her hand. “Mayson? I’m okay. And you did exactly what you needed to do. You did good, honey. You did real good.”

She responded by curling up into a ball and letting out a wail that lifted the tiny hairs on the back of James’ neck. James watched Bill sit down beside her, then gently lift her into his embrace. He held her head against his shoulder and let her sob and cough and howl and shudder.

It had to be a reaction to her shooting Lois. James wanted to do exactly the same thing and he hadn’t fired a shot.

He watched Lex walk to the tall white-haired man on the floor and check his neck for a pulse, then lift one eyelid for a moment. Lex sighed deeply and straightened. “Nigel St. John was a good man. A faithful man. A man who was dedicated to my safety. I am sorry that he died defending me.”

“You make him sound like an Irish Setter.”

Lex turned rheumy eyes to him. “He was also my friend. I have known him for more than fifteen years and I shall miss him greatly.”

“I — I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No, you should not have. But I think you are to be excused, given the circumstances.”

“How did he find you here, anyway?”

Lex pointed at his belt buckle. “This is a very high-frequency radio transponder. Nigel followed the signal to save me.” He clenched his jaw and wiped his eyes. “I am deeply sorry that our friendship cost him his life.”

“But you’re still alive. Sounds to me like he’d rather it be this way instead of him standing there mourning you.”

“You are probably correct in your assessment. Perhaps it will help me later.” Lex took a cautious step toward Bill. “Speaking of the circumstances, perhaps we should inform the police waiting below that the situation has been resolved and there is no immediate danger here.” He stopped turned to James. “And you, I think, should be waiting for a certain young lady to awaken after her surgery.”

Hope tried to blossom in James’ chest. “You mean — you think Dominique will make it?”

“I am not a doctor and therefore I can make no promises, James, but I have seen people survive similar wounds. Your presence will help her to recover faster, if I judge the depth of her feelings for you correctly.”

He almost smiled. “Thank you.”

He looked toward the elevators again and realized that Mayson had almost stopped crying and was just holding on to Bill as if he were her anchor to reality. Her voice broke as she stuttered, “I — Bill, I — I—”

“I know. You did good, May, you did real good. You’re a good cop and you saved my life.”

She squeezed her eyes shut again. James expected her to start weeping again, but she didn’t. But she also didn’t let her partner move away from her.

Bill worked one hand loose and pulled his cell phone out of his pocket, then dialed it with one thumb. “Dispatch? This is Bill Henderson at the Daily Planet. We need a coroner here. Yes, two dead. Two others with gunshot wounds, already taken to the hospital by Superman. Oh, you do? Yes, I’ll relay the message. No, everything’s under control now. Yes, the situation has been resolved. We have two unarmed and uninjured witnesses. No, I thought we’d just ignore them and hope they go away on their own. Of course I’ll make sure we get their statements! Right, sorry, just a little emotional here. Sure, no problem. One of the vics in the ER was shot by a police officer. The one with multiple chest wounds. My partner. Right, full report this afternoon. Already have the weapon. No, I didn’t fire, didn’t have the chance. And I don’t think I’d be alive right now if she hadn’t taken the shot. That’s it. We’ll be back at the precinct in about forty minutes. Yeah, make the call to Internal Affairs, but this one’s going to come out clean or I’ll have somebody’s hide on my wall.”

He closed the phone and put it away, then gently stroked Mayson’s hair. “Mayson? Come on, honey, we have to report in. Can you stand?”

Her only reaction was to tighten her grip on Bill’s upper arm. Then, to James’ utter astonishment, the crusty veteran Detective Inspector William Henderson bent his head close to hers and kissed her gently just above the ear. Then he lifted damp eyes to James and said, “Go. Go be with your lady friend.”

James didn’t wait for a second invitation. He walked to the stairwell and trotted down the stairs. He was briefly detained by two officers on the second floor, but Mark Bailey, the Planet’s chief of security, identified James for them and escorted him to the lobby.

They stopped at the security desk. “Mark, are there any cars here that I can use to get to the hospital?”

Mark pointed at a young uniformed Asian woman near the front door. “Officer Marian Hu has been detailed to escort you, Mr. Olsen. Good luck.”

“Thanks. Thanks for everything.” He turned and began trotting toward the front door.

“And tell Mrs. Cox that we’re all rooting for her!” Mark yelled out.

James waved at him as the young officer opened the door for him and pointed at a police cruiser. “She’s in Metro General, sir. I think they took all the victims there.”

He all but jumped into the passenger seat. “Thank you, Officer Hu.”

She started the car and tapped the siren as cars and people opened up in front of her. “When the Chief of Police gives me a personal instruction, sir, I do what he tells me to do.”

“Well. Thank you in any case.”

She glanced at him. “You’re welcome, Mr. Olsen.”

Dominique had to make it, he thought. She just had to.

He hoped the policewoman who'd shot Lois — Mayson something — would recover from the experience and be cleared. If the police needed his viewpoint on the events of today — and surely they would — he'd testify on her behalf.

And even he even hoped that Lois Lane, the woman who had come to Metropolis to kill him, would survive.

Too many people had died today. It was senseless and stupid. They might never know all the reasons why he and Lex had each been targeted, why someone had wanted them dead, why someone had sent uncaring assassins to take their lives and destroy whatever good either man had built up. There was no rhyme or reason to the events of the past few days. He would never understand. It was enough to question his belief that humanity deserved a chance to live and thrive together.

He couldn't imagine life being any more unfair.

Epilogue

from the journal of H. G. Wells

My machine is now functioning normally once again. The timeline in this world has finally stabilized and I am almost ready to depart, save for one more sad task which I must complete.

I have learned a great deal here. I have learned to do as little as possible in order to produce the desired outcome. I have learned to hold back and observe even when my reason and my emotional state tell me that I must act.

Most of all, I have learned that I am most fallible when I am most certain of my path.

I very nearly made a terrible hash of everything and everyone in this dimension. By my intemperate actions, I precipitated a crisis which, had it not been resolved as it was, might have destroyed any hope of Utopia on this Earth. I fully anticipate further training and possibly even disciplinary action when I return to my home base, and I shall accept any and all procedures against me because I surely deserve them. Everything did, of course, work out in the end, but it was in spite of my actions, not because of them.

I am deeply saddened by the death and misery I have brought to these people. Perhaps one day one or two of them might find it in their hearts to forgive me.

I do not foresee being able to forgive myself, not in any future I might imagine.

Lucy pulled Clark into her embrace beside the fresh grave. Had she not been there, he might have toppled over onto the thin brown grass. His voice broke. "I failed her. When she needed me the most, I failed her."

She knew she was the only one who could reach him now, the only one who could comfort him in his pain. "No, Clark, no, you didn't fail her. You did the best you could have done. No one could have done more for her than you did."

"It wasn't enough," he hiccupped. "She's — she's dead."

She stroked his hair. "I know. But it wasn't your fault, Clark. Not even you can save everyone. Please believe me."

"I should have — that day — the day she—"

She knew the day he was thinking about. She had been thinking about it, too. It was the day when their lives had changed forever, the day her sister had returned as if from the dead but had brought only misery and pain trailing in her wake.

But Lucy had learned a very painful lesson over the past weeks, that no one has as much time as he or she wants, and that there was no better time than right now to make a change in her life. Hopefully, it would be a change for the better, both for herself and for the man she loved.

The cemetery was getting darker. The fading daylight was losing the battle against the heaving, blackening clouds. She fished a handkerchief out of her coat pocket and wiped the tears from his face. "Clark? Please come on home. Let me take care of

you."

She desperately hoped he'd hear her love for him in her words. She wasn't sure he was ready to hear her tell him that she loved him.

Even though she did.

He looked into her eyes and his face slowly relaxed. She hoped he could see her love for him emanating from her eyes. Maybe some of his super-powers had rubbed off on her and she could project her care and compassion for him the same way he projected beams of heat from his eyes.

He nodded slowly, and she smiled hesitantly. "No pressure, okay, Clark? You aren't committing to anything and I'm not expecting anything from you except a chance to take care of you as long you need me around." He opened his mouth to speak but she stopped him with a finger on his lips. "Shh. When I said 'no pressure,' that's exactly what I meant. When we're both back on our feet, we'll take it from there."

Lucy's fingertips gently caressed his cheek as the cold rain began plogging down around them. They were big heavy drops, the kind that left tiny craters in the already moist dirt when they hit, the kind that presage floods and darkness and violent storms. But she felt she had a shelter from those storms now, for the first time in her adult life, and she would share that sense of safety with Clark as long as he needed her.

Maybe — if she were very, very fortunate — he wouldn't ever stop needing her any more than she would always need him.

He stood and offered his hand. She smiled more easily and allowed him to lift her to her feet. She put her arm around his waist and guided him to the gate.

The couple walking away from the grave marker stopped beside the little old man who looked — and felt — as if he were carrying the weight of a dozen worlds on his shoulders. He opened his bumbershoot and lifted it over his head. The rain intensified, drumming on the calfskin umbrella like a percussion clinic on amphetamines.

Not a simile Holmes or Watson would use, mused Wells to himself, nor would Samuel Johnson or even Boswell, but in his mind it sounded appropriate nonetheless.

Wells took a deep breath and stood straighter. "I am gratified that you have decided to go home, Clark. I fear Miss Lane would have remained with you, even in this torrential downpour, risking her own health for your well-being."

Clark's voice broke for a moment before it evened out. "Yeah. I — I think so too. And she's already experienced too much of that risk." He hesitated, then said, "Mr. Wells — I know you didn't want any of this to happen."

"No." He dropped his gaze and fumbled with his own kerchief. "One never does."

Lucy put out her free hand and touched his arm. "You aren't used to this, are you?"

"Miss Lane, one never becomes fully accustomed to death, whether by natural or by violent means. Quite apart from that, I feel responsible for this entire situation."

Clark shook his head. "You didn't do this, Mr. Wells. She — we all did it."

Wells pursed his lips and looked at the ground around his feet. "My boy, when one rolls a large stone down a hill, one is at least partially responsible for the damage done by the resulting avalanche."

"That's bull crap," Henderson snorted. "Wells, you're no more responsible for anyone else's actions than I am the king of Prussia. People aren't rocks, they have free will and make choices just like you and I do. You may have initiated this chain of events, but you didn't make anyone try to kill anybody else." He pulled the collar of his trench coat closer to his neck, then pointed at the older man's face. "It isn't your fault, so don't try to make yourself

out to be a martyr over this, okay?"

Wells sighed deeply. "I suppose you are correct, Inspector. It is still a heavy burden to carry."

"Life happens whether we want it or not, Wells, and sometimes it's tough to handle. All you can do is get tough right along with it."

"With that particular sentiment, I must agree wholeheartedly. Well, my friends, I am getting much wetter but no younger. I fear I must be on my way."

Clark tilted his head. "That sounds more like 'good-bye forever' than 'see you next week,' Mr. Wells."

"I believe it is. While no one may guarantee what might take place in the future, I do not plan to interfere in your lives again."

"I don't think of it as interference." Clark smiled at the young brown-eyed woman holding his arm. She leaned her head over and rested it on his shoulder. "At least, not right now I don't."

Wells lifted one jaded eyebrow. "Thank you, young man. In any case, I bid you all a fond farewell, and I wish you long life and good fortune. Especially you, Clark. You certainly deserve it after all you have suffered."

"Thank you, Mr. Wells. Inspector, are you here on business?"

He looked at Lucy. "Personal business. I wanted to make sure this lady gets where she's going in one piece. She's been through a pretty tough time lately."

She grimaced at him. "We all have, Inspector. This has been a bad time for all of us."

"Yep. Looks to me like you're in good hands now, though. Oh, Clark, Mayson reminded me to tell you the kids are okay."

Clark blinked once. "I knew that. I got them out of Sicily, remember?"

"I mean, they're playing like real kids, having fun and yelling and running around and knocking stuff over and watching TV like any other brother and sister would. And they both love books. Apparently Clifford the big red dog is still popular with the preschool set."

Lucy and Clark laughed with him. Bill continued, "They'll probably need professional help to get through the really rough stuff ahead of them, but at least now they've got a fighting chance."

Clark shook his head. "Poor kids. What's going to happen to them? I mean, are they wards of the state of New Troy or what?"

"I don't know. That's something for the Sicilian government to work out with the State Department. But from what I've heard, Lucy will have some say in the matter. After all, she's their closest relative. Along with her folks, of course, since they're the only grandparents."

Lucy rubbed her nose with her free hand. "I just thank God the kids are safe. And thank you, Clark. I don't think anyone else could have saved them from that — that animal."

"And Interpol has Rodolfo locked up in Germany,"

Henderson said, "as a kind of apology for not getting him sooner. If I understand them correctly, your buddy Horst Müller is sitting on him. He's not getting out of there any time soon, either. I imagine that they have several prosecutors sitting in a room gleefully thinking up more charges to file against him. He'll go away for a long, long time, and he'll serve that time in a lot of countries, assuming whoever tries him first doesn't execute him."

Lucy glanced over her shoulder to the marker Clark had finally left. "I hope someone does execute him," she growled, "with a dull knife and a branding iron. I hope he dies slowly and painfully, screaming in agony, and I hope he burns forever in Hell for what he did."

Clark squeezed her hand and changed the subject. "Do you know where James Olsen is, Inspector?"

Henderson nodded. "Sure do. He's still sitting in Dominique Cox's hospital room. That's one tough lady, you know that? A lot of people with that kind of wound would have folded up and died

right away, but she's already sitting up and using a walker and giving her physical therapist all kinds of grief. The doctors say she should make a full recovery."

"Good. Speaking of tough people, tough guy, how's your side?"

He winced and pressed a hand to his rib cage. "Bruised but intact, thank you. I'm thankful that it wasn't a heavier caliber round. The bullet came in at an indirect angle so it deflected off the vest and into the support beam beside the elevator. I expect that Mayor White will spin an Elvis yarn about it the next time he visits the newsroom."

Clark nodded. "Probably." He put his hand out. "Thank you. Thank you both."

Henderson took his hand. "I'll relay the message to my partner."

"She doesn't like the way this went down, does she?"

The handshake ended and both men lowered their arms. "No, but she understands why it's happening. She won't make any trouble for you or anyone else involved in this monumental snafu. And nobody's going to advertise Lois Lane's presence here in Metropolis or that this is where she actually died."

Lucy pulled her collar closer to her neck. "A cover-up, Inspector?"

"What would you do if a professional assassin snuck into your city without you knowing about it?" he snapped.

Lucy blinked and looked away.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been so abrupt." Bill took a deep breath and let it out all at once. "Call it whatever you want to call it. That part of the story hasn't been and won't be released into the wild. As far as the general public knows, the other dead guy, Lester something, was the only shooter in that room." He snorted. "Nobody looks very good for letting a professional contract assassin into the state, let alone two."

Wells gasped and almost confessed to bringing Lois to Metropolis, but Clark spoke over whatever he might have said. "Is Lex Luthor safe now, or should I watch over him more closely?"

Bill shrugged. "I guess he's okay. I do know that his business rival in Belgium is trying to answer some really hard questions from Interpol. This incident may not have been made public, but law enforcement officials from the East Coast to western Europe know that something big almost went down. They're turning over rocks and stomping on pests all over both parts of the world." He growled. "Rodolfo's reach is turning out to be longer than we thought, even with Lois's written testimony."

"Will that be used in court?"

"Depends on the jurisdiction and how much evidence they need to smash these guys. Any way we look at it, the folks wearing the white hats are going to be busy for the next several years on this."

Clark nodded. "How's Mayson doing?"

"Personally? She's taking it hard. It's the first time she's fired her weapon at anything other than a cardboard target. I think if I keep telling her that she saved my life, which she absolutely did, she might begin to believe it."

"What about her job?" asked Lucy. "She's still going to be a cop, isn't she?"

"Sure. She'll be on administrative leave for a couple more days. Standard procedure in a shooting case like this. She'll be okay as far as the department goes. She'll probably get a commendation, too."

Lucy's face hardened again. "For killing my sister?"

Bill sighed. "No. For saving the lives of at least four people, including her own. Lois Lane would have shot Mayson if she'd had the chance, and no telling how many more when she tried to escape."

Lucy hesitated, then dropped her gaze. "I'm sorry. You —

you're right, I know. But I don't think I'll be able to be civil with her for a long time. This is all just too painful. But I am glad that Mayson is okay. And — and even though I don't want to be best friends with her, please tell her that I don't hate her for what she did. I know in my head she really didn't have a choice." She paused and sighed. "My heart is going to take a little longer to convince."

"I'll tell her. And I'm sure she won't hold it against you. She's really glad that Dominique's okay, too, and that you're on the mend, but don't tell her I tattled on her and damaged her reputation as a true hard case. She'd drop me off a wharf somewhere and lose the paperwork."

Clark lifted one eyebrow. "In that case, we won't say a word. Besides, I'm sure we'll see each other again before long."

"I can promise you that, Kent. Your talents are too valuable to lose." He took a step away, then spun around, flipping rainwater off his coat. "And call me Bill, okay?"

Clark smiled. "Okay, Bill. Tell Mayson 'hi' for me, won't you?"

Bill pointed an index finger at Clark and quirked one side of his mouth upwards. "Man, for that one, you're on your own."

Clark laughed. It was a small laugh, but the sound of it warmed Wells' heart and eased some of the pressure on his soul. Laughing was good. Laughing was positive. Life would, as the redoubtable inspector had said, continue on its own terms. All anyone really controlled was one's own reaction to what life decided to throw in one's way.

Clark turned to face the short, natty Englishman. "Mr. Wells, thank you." Clark took the hand of the woman beside him and gave it a gentle squeeze. "We both thank you."

Wells smiled sadly. "I fear that I hindered events more than the reverse, but you are welcome, both of you. This was not the outcome any of us desired, I know, but it is, at least, a final one."

Lucy nodded and wiped some of the moisture — both nature's and her own — from her face. "I'm going to take Clark home now, Mr. Wells. I hope you come by and at least check on us at some time in the future."

Clark grinned. "Let's hope it's in the future."

Wells frowned in thought for a moment, then chuckled for nearly two seconds. For him, and especially under the current circumstances, it was the equivalent of a sustained belly laugh. "Should I ever have the opportunity to make a return visit, it will be in your future, young man, I assure you. As for you, it would probably be for the best if you took this young lady home and allowed her to rest. Remember that she sustained a terrible blow to the head herself."

"I'll take care of her just like she's going to take care of me." Clark extended his hand. "Goodbye, Mr. Wells."

She put her hand over their joined hands. "Goodbye, and thank you."

"Goodbye, both of you. May your futures both be bright, and may you live long and happy lives." He released their hands and made a shooing motion. "Now go! Preferably before the young lady contracts a serious case of pneumonia."

Clark squinted slightly. "You mean there are humorous cases of pneumonia?"

They shared another laugh, which settled into soft smiles. Slowly the couple turned away, then ran through the downpour toward Lucy's minivan. Wells watched as Clark turned his smile to Lucy, whose eyes shone back at him with unconcealed fervor. They weren't the eyes Wells had expected would shine at Clark when this entire painful episode had begun, but there was no mistaking the depth of feeling and commitment in them.

They would be fine. Wells knew that she would make sure of it.

Wells lifted his gaze and watched Henderson stalk around the expanding puddles to his car and get in. His partner, seated in the

passenger seat, nodded to him and they drove away without a word to each other. He watched Clark gaze at Lucy until a hint of steam rose from her clothes. The two of them sat in the minivan until Henderson's car spun past them, then they pulled away more sedately, but with the same sense of finality.

Wells was the last one left at the cemetery. He turned to look at the tombstone once more. The headlights from the departing cars illuminated the facing surface. Along with the birth and death dates — including the new, corrected date of her death — the epitaph read: Lois Lane, Beloved Daughter and Sister. We Will Miss You.

It was true. She had been loved, and she would be missed, deeply and painfully, by many.

He wondered at the vagaries of time and space, how different some realities were from others, and how such a small difference in any given reality could change so many things. Odd, he thought, that two who love each other so deeply and completely can be so close to each other for so many years and not quite realize how tightly they were linked. Here, in this time and space, in this universe, it was Lucy Lane, and not her sister Lois, who would be his companion as they began that fragile journey toward Utopia. Lucy was the person who completed him, who made him stronger than he ever could be alone. And they'd almost missed it, partly because of his interference and his own hubris in believing that Clark had to be with Lois Lane, and only Lois Lane, or Utopia would never exist.

He sighed. If Utopia came to be on this world — and the probabilities were high, according to his supervisors — it would do so from the combined efforts of Lucy and Clark. He'd nearly blocked their love from taking its proper course. He'd almost destroyed the future he so desperately wanted to create.

Well, that would not happen again. He was out of their lives forever. Nor would he ever again charge in blindly, cocksure and full of unmitigated gall and unreasoned arrogance, ready to correct a situation which required no correction.

He hoped that Clark and Lucy would be happy together for a long, long time.

He smiled to himself, then turned to walk toward his time machine. Perhaps he would make a return visit after all, say, two decades in their future, just to check on them. What harm could possibly result?

THE END