

Barbarians at the Planet — Matchmaker Style

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Rated: PG-13

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Summary: This is the 12th in the series. Clark and Lois have both gone undercover to get the goods on Luthor. Clark is pretending to be dead while Lois is pretending to fall for Luthor's charms. In the meantime, Henderson has Nigel and is getting information from him.

Story Size: 31,651 words (171Kb as text)

In the previous stories, you've seen my take on the answer. So, now, to answer the question — 'What if Lois and Clark were already married when Barbarians at the Planet happened?' I offer the following.

As with the series as originally aired the episodes build on one another making a contiguous story. It is recommended that if you are reading this story out of sequence you will miss some references. Please go back and start with the first episode of the set "The Green Green Glow of Home — Matchmaker Style and take the episodes in broadcast order from that point.

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

Burning Love – Witten by Linde and Dennis, published by Sony/ATV Music Publishing.

In this, the sequel to Fly Hard- Matchmaker Style. Lois and Clark have been back from the assignment in Smallville for almost a year. The events of PML were delightful; however, Lois really has no recollection of what happened. Clark finally had a chance to give Lois a real honeymoon. Then her life had been threatened because she had witnessed a murder. Next they investigated the kidnappings of the children of wealthy families. They have dealt with a murder and a threat to the internet and the messages regarding Clark's origin. They had to deal with a rival paper and an invasion of the Daily Planet building. Now Lois and Clark have gone undercover.

Lois has returned to Clark's 'old' apartment.

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

Chapter 1 Prologue

In the distant future

Herb Wells was in his office sitting at his desk. His collar was off and the neck of his shirt was open. His sleeves were rolled up, slightly, and his jacket and hat were hung on the coat tree near the door. He had just returned from a meeting with the board of directors of which he was the head. The majority of the board

were descendants of Lois and Clark each of them an expert in their chosen field of endeavor. The disciplines ranged from Anthropology to Physics, several sub-studies, to Biology, both Earth human and Kryptonian human and of course the legal eagles. When he had first approached what had been the former S.T.A.R. Labs with the research project to investigate time and dimensional travel, they had been first intrigued and then enthusiastic in the pursuit of the technology.

It had helped that he had been able to identify the location of a stable inter-dimensional Einstein-Rosen Bridge. That worm hole had been created by Tempus when he used a faulty time machine and stabilized by his repeated use, each time he used it to travel from Prime to the alt universe. Now that they had a better handle on the character of the various universes within the multi-verse, they now were able to delineate them by using their unique vibrational signature. The signature was expressed as three vibrational frequencies each at right angles to the others. The Prime universe, Herb's home universe and the one he had first traveled in now could be identified as Alpha 023 x Gamma 004 x Tau -120. The alt universe that Tempus had crossed to was Alpha 023 x Gamma 025 x Tau 036. It quickly became apparent that an organization was needed to control or contain said travel especially in the face of Tempus and his malevolent activities. That had brought about the birth of TTEMPO, Time Travel Enforcement and Multi-verse Protection Organization.

As he shifted in his chair it squeaked in protest. Leaning back, he laced his fingers and put them behind his head. He mused to himself, "These board meetings are always so trying. I need something to take my mind off of policy and activities. What should I do?" He thought about it briefly before he came up with a solution. "I know! I've been neglecting some of my other responsibilities. I should be reviewing the data collection on those universes that I have chosen to be my private responsibility. I think a review of some files would be in order." Speaking into the air, in his British English accent, he said, "Computer?"

He heard a very realistic imitation of a woman's voice in reply, "Working."

"Computer, I want to review the file on ... oh, let me see ... which one should it be?" He leaned forward and ruffled through some papers before he spoke again, "Universe ... Alpha -34 x Gamma 255 x Tau -225. Please review occurrences from the point of divergence from the events of this universe — Alpha 23 x Gamma 4 x Tau -120."

"Working. Accessing file. File accessed."

"Proceed with recap."

"A review of the events of Alpha -34 x Gamma 255 x Tau -225 indicated that -"

Herb interrupted the read back, "Computer."

"Playback paused."

"Global replace. Each instance of Alpha -34 x Gamma 255 x Tau -225, other than the initial one in the title, is to be replaced by the string 'Herb 10'."

"Acknowledged. Global replace complete."

"Computer, skip the details. Just provide the highlights of the major incidents in their lives. Proceed."

"Parameter change accepted. Highlights only."

"A review of the events in universe Herb 10 revealed that divergence occurred in the Smallville incident. Because of a delay caused by a slow freight, Sheriff Harris would not arrive at the Kent farm in time to stop Trask and he would succeed in killing Clark Kent while he was vulnerable after an exposure to green Kryptonite. The cascade effect of this act would have resulted in the destruction of most of the life of the planet when the Nightfall asteroid struck. It was because of that divergence and the ultimate result that it was determined that intervention was required. Moving into the future of Herb 10 and using a soul tracker offshoot, the Director recorded the memories of Lois Lane-Kent."

A little sharply, Herb said, “Computer!”

“Paused.”

In a somewhat irritated tone, Herb asked, “Computer, how many times have I told you not to call me the Director?”

“Is a quantitative reply requested?”

Shaking his head at the literality of the computer, he said, “No, computer, symbolic.”

“A number of times.”

“Why do you persist in calling me the Director?” Sometimes he became rather frustrated with this automated assistant, while at others he was very thankful for her ... it. That voice just naturally made him think of it as a she. He would need to consider changing the tonal register, perhaps a baritone.

“The file you requested is available for general consumption. If the pronoun you or he were used it could be a source of confusion. The use of the title removes any possible confusion.”

With a shake of the head, Herb asked, “This is going to be a losing battle, isn’t it?”

“This is not a physical conflict.”

“Battle can be used in a metaphorical sense.”

“Understood. In a literal sense the use of the pronoun can cause confusion whereas the title removes said confusion.”

In a tone of resignation, Herb said, “You may continue to use the title, to remove your confusion.”

“I am incapable of being confused in the manner that a human, Earth or Kryptonian, can be.”

With a slight smile, Herb replied, “You are succeeding in confusing me, however.”

“How may I clarify the issue and remove the confusion.”

“Thank you for trying to be helpful. Just proceed and ... go ahead and use the title, if it will make you happy.”

“I do not experience emotions. I can be neither happy nor sad. Just as I am not subject to confusion, as long as my data streams remain steady.”

“Sometimes I am tempted to make your data streams ... unsteady.”

“Probability .05%.”

“All right, all right, it is an emotional response to your unflappability.”

“Please explain.”

“You are always correct and even-tempered plus you argue like a petulant child at times.”

“I do not have a temper, nor do I behave like a petulant child.”

“Yes, you do.”

“No I do not.”

“Do too.”

“Do not.”

“Yes, you do as this exchange proves and you have a personality, too.”

“Not possible.”

“Oh, I beg to differ. You have a personality and sometimes it is irritating. I’m just glad I’m not married to you.”

“Marriage between sentient species has been known since Lois Lane and Clark Kent first wed. However, marriage between a sentient species and a machine is not possible, at least not at this time. I predict that in the future, technology may overcome that problem by creating a compatible physical form that a data sub-set could be transferred to.”

In a shocked tone, Herb blurted out, “Heaven forbid! Computer, how many years until that is accomplished?”

“Estimated time would be approximately ...” Herb knew better, but as the computer paused for what to a computer was a very long time as it calculated, Herb pictured a young woman holding an abacus, sliding the beads back and forth as she calculated, putting a physical form to the voice. As Herb finished his musing, the computer gave her answer, “I would estimate ... one hundred ... centuries with an accuracy of plus or minus

fivestandard deviational units.”

“I’m disappointed in you, computer. Five standard deviational units is a rather wide range of deviation. Your estimate could be off by ... thousands of years. Oh, well, thank heaven for small favors. At least I won’t be around to see it. Remind me to never go that far forward in time.”

“Tickle file reminder parameter missing. When do you wish the reminder delivered?”

“Oh, let me see, how about on the second Tuesday of the week.”

“Unable to comply. There is only one Tuesday in a standard week.”

Herb chuckled and replied, “It would have to be a very special week for me to even consider traveling that far into the future. Cancel reminder. Let’s return to the subject. Please resume playback.”

“Acknowledged. Tickle file reminder cancelled. As Lois and Clark were leaving for and at the start of the Smallville incident, the Director implanted those memories in Lois’s brain, on a subconscious level, giving her the motivation she needed to save Clark herself. As a result, Clark was wounded, though not seriously. This prevented the creation of a new universe where he died in the incident. Lois and Clark were married and returned to Metropolis as a couple.” (See Green, Green Glow of Home — Matchmaker Style)

“Shortly after their return to Metropolis Lois had an encounter with Lex Luthor. Clark arrived, however Lois had already succeeded in defending her own honor. After that, Lois was exposed to the pheromone laced perfume and the predictable result was an extended sexual encounter that tested Clark’s ability, as a husband, to satisfy his wife’s sexual urges. (See Pheromone My Lovely — Matchmaker Style)

“When they attempted to enjoy an actual honeymoon they became involved in another investigation. This time it was the sabotage of a military device. Again, Luthor was involved. Superman had to save Metropolis from a tsunami wave of massive proportions.” (See Honeymoon in Metropolis — Matchmaker Style)

“When the Nightfall asteroid threatened the Earth, Superman intercepted it. As a result of anoxia he had amnesia. Again, Lois was the one who was able to save him and restore his memory. Once that had been accomplished he was able to divert the rock away from the Earth.” (See All Shook Up -Matchmaker Style)

“Some time after that, Lois’s life was threatened when she witnessed an assassination. This time it was Superman that rescued her and captured the assassin.” (See Witness — Matchmaker Style)

“Pause read back.”

“Paused.”

Herb stood and moved to a sideboard where he prepared a cup of Earl Gray tea before he returned to his desk. After taking a sip of tea, he said, “Resume.”

“The next significant incident was the investigation of missing children. Lois was hypnotized through the use of subliminal messaging. Superman managed to save her again because his brain works faster and neither hypnotism nor subliminal messaging has an effect on him.” (See Illusions of Grandeur — Matchmaker Style.)

“When the fledgling internet was threatened by a computer virus Lois and Clark worked together to not only catch the culprit, but also free an innocent man from a murder charge. In this incident, Superman had to also rescue Lois and Detective Sergeant Reed from an industrial trash compactor.” (See Ides of Metropolis — Matchmaker Style)

“Pause.”

“Paused.”

Herb mused, “The events in Herb 10 have been amazingly

parallel to those of Prime. I haven't made a personal visit to Herb 10 for some time. It is interesting to 'catch up' with them as it were."

"I probably should plan a visit sometime. They really are a nice couple." He chuckled and then said, "They all are, but this couple in particular. By giving Lois the memories of her future, much of the angst that they had been put through in this universe was avoided. This Lois in particular developed a much softer personality as a result. Still, it is amazing; there are so few differences between most of them."

"Of course there are some, particularly those that Tempus has interfered with that require attention to get back on track. I still think that it was Tempus behind the tip Lois received about the gunrunning in the Congo in universe Alpha 023 x Gamma 025 x Tau 036 what was called the alt universe because at the time we thought there was only one."

"It was a shame about that incident. I just hadn't learned enough about time travel and how things work at the time. Still, taking Clark back to try and save her was the right thing to do. (See Clark and Lois — The Lost Years — Matchmaker Chronicles Volume 3) He did succeed, although he never knew it. In his success he created a new universe where Lois lived. The result of that exercise was that in his universe he was still left without a Lois while in the newly created universe he and his Lois were married and returned to Metropolis. It was during the White Orchid Ball that the attack took place that converted Lois's physiology and activated the Blue Star Sapphire Kryptonite jewelry that she was wearing and gave her Clark's super powers. That same Star Sapphire Kryptonite that is contained in the pendants and tokens that I give to the spouses when their bodies are ready."

"Fortunately for that Clark, I found a Lois for him in a universe that didn't have a Clark. Now that was an amazing match. She was actually Kryptonian herself having been made so by a Red Kryptonite laser attack on Superman. They now protect both universes since I gave them an inter-dimensional transport device." (See Clark and Lois — Hope Realized — Matchmaker Chronicles Volume 5 and Clark and Lois -Two Universes — Matchmaker Chronicles Volume 7)

"Ah, but I digress. Let us get back to Herb 10. I wonder how the changed relationship in Herb 10 affected additional adventures." Speaking up again and addressing the computer, he said, "Computer, you may proceed."

"Continuing. The globe that Clark had discovered with his ship was stolen and Lex Luthor almost learned from it the secret of Clark's origin. After they recovered the globe there was an attempt on Clark's life." (See Foundling — Matchmaker Style)

"Then the team of Lane and Kent worked together to save the Daily Planet from going out of business as a result of the machinations of an unscrupulous publisher at the Metropolis Star. In that adventure, Lois was reunited with an old college rival and had to be rescued by Superman again, this time from suffocation." (See the Rival — Matchmaker Style)

"Shortly after that Lex Luthor, using a lock of hair that Superman had donated to charity, created a clone of him in an attempt to destroy him. Fortunately that ploy also failed. After the attempt on Superman failed there was another attempt on Clark's life." (See Vatman — Matchmaker Style)

"When a gang of criminals took possession of the Daily Planet building, Lois and Clark, along with some of their coworkers were trapped. Again with Lois's help, Clark was able to turn the tables on them. There was a third attempt on Clark's life. When that was foiled Lois and Clark went undercover. Clark pretended to be dead while Lois became the grieving widow." (See Fly Hard — Matchmaker Style)

"After some weeks, things appeared to return to normal. Clark, in disguise, moved in with Lucy Lane as her live-in-

boyfriend, Charlie King. He was able to perform as Superman without hindrance and keep an eye on Lois. Lois was able, because of her sister, to visit with Clark on a regular basis. The investigation into Luthor proceeded, but progress was slow because they were both working undercover. They were hoping for a break in the investigation -"

Herb interrupted the playback, "Pause."

"Paused."

Herb yawned and said, "Arguing with you can be very tiring at times. I think I'll take a brief nap. We can resume playback ... later."

"Acknowledged."

Rising from his chair, Herb moved into a sleeping alcove which adjoined his office. After kicking off his shoes and placing his wire rimmed spectacles on a nightstand he lay down on a trundle bed. At his command of, "Lights off." The lights immediately turned themselves off.

After his nap, Herb slid his feet into a pair of slippers and donned his glasses and said, "Lights on." Making his way to the sideboard he prepared a cup of tea and then moved to his desk. He smiled at the familiar creak as he sat in his chair and placed the teacup on his desk. Speaking to the air, in his British English accent, he said, "Computer?"

The reply was immediate, "Working."

"Shall we resume the playback?"

Before the computer began to comply, there was a beep and then the computer added, "Tickle file reminder. It has been three days since your last mission. There are two reminders. Reminder number one: You are scheduled to go to the year 2034 in the Prime universe to deliver a pendant to Heather McLeod Kent. (See First Love — Matchmaker Chronicles chapter 2) She and Sean will have been married for more than two years after living together prior to marriage. The modification of her physiology has reached a point where she will start to manifest powers, although not the full set with the pendant as yet. More time will be required before her metabolism is ready and she will enjoy the full set of powers. Reminder number two: You are scheduled to go to the year 2035 in the Prime universe to deliver a token to William Davidson, husband of Celeste Kent Davidson. (See First Love — Matchmaker Chronicles chapter 3) He and Celeste will have been married for more than two years after living together prior to marriage. The modification of his physiology has reached a point where he will start to manifest powers, although not the full set with the token as yet. More time will be required before his metabolism is ready and he will enjoy the full set of powers."

"Ah, thank you, computer. Yes, two more superheroes are ready to join the family business, as it were."

Opening the drawer of his desk he pulled out two boxes, one marked with Heather's name and the other with Bill's. Opening the two boxes he admired the two pieces of jewelry. The pendant was made of silver and was the shape of the crest of the family El. The token that was given to the male spouses was also silver and made to act as a belt buckle to be worn on their uniform. It was also embossed with the El crest. After a few moments perusal, he closed the boxes and set them aside. As he had sorted through he had seen the one marked for Lois Lane — Alpha -34 x Gamma 255 x Tau -225. He mused, "Herb 10 is the new designation." He pulled it out of the drawer and looked at it thoughtfully. Noting the date, he took a pen and scratched it out and inscribed November 1995 in its place. He thought, <I wonder what would happen if she received this immediately before the Wishing Well incident. Would the Star Sapphire Kryptonite be activated in the attack and keep Clark from losing his powers as a result? When I went into her future she already had her powers and I did not think to inquire as to just when she acquired them. It's worth a try.> He placed the box back in the drawer and pushed it closed.

As he stood he addressed the computer, “Computer, as soon as I am dressed I will be departing for the deliveries to 2034 and 2035. Oh, and change the tickle file reminder for the Lois in Herb 10. The new date is November of 1995, just prior to the Wishing Well incident.”

“Change to tickle file reminder accomplished.”

He finished redressing, stuffed the boxes in his pockets. Picking up his TaDT (Time and Dimensional Transport) device he headed for the transport center. As he stepped out he said, “Lights off.” The lights died as the door closed behind him.

He proceeded to the ground floor by lift, drifting down on the anti-grav field. Stepping out of the tube he started walking toward the transport center. He passed through the barrier field that maintained the ‘clean room’ conditions needed for transport.

As he passed through the barrier he saw Andrus step from a portal onto a pad. He was dressed in an olive green uniform ... with a white straw hat! Under the uniform he wore a clerical collar. He carried what appeared to be a canvas dispatch case slung over a shoulder. <Ah, yes. The historical research mission he was sent on. Mid-twentieth century I believe. A military conflict of some sort. He went in as a non-combatant. I hope he hasn’t done anything to affect history as we know it. I see he went as a chaplain. Better that than a physician. Can’t have him preserving a life that was supposed to end and change history in that way.>

As he stepped up on the pad, through the shimmer of the field he could make out Andrus as he passed under the TTEMPO logo above the main portal, ‘Only Time Will Tell’ that he had adopted as the organization’s motto. He smiled as the portal opened before him and he stepped through on his first mission.

Chapter 2

%%%

Universal Locator Designation
Alpha -34 x Gamma 255 x Tau -225
%%%

In his penthouse office on top of LexTower, Lex Luthor was at his desk signing some documents. As he finished he depressed a switch on his intercom and summoned Mrs. Cox.

A minute later, the door opened and Mrs. Cox swayed in. Lex looked up in appreciation as she crossed the room. He moved the papers aside and addressed her, “Have you had any success tracking Nigel’s whereabouts?”

“No, it’s like he simply dropped off the face of the Earth. No one has seen him since the night of the hit on Kent.”

“His disappearance is puzzling and I hate puzzles. Start checking countries that lack an extradition treaty with the USA. Send pictures. Have some pictures prepared with the beard removed and circulate those as well.”

“What if he doesn’t want to be found? With his background and contacts, if he doesn’t want to be found, he won’t be. He could have decided that his luck was running out. That he knew too much and you would decide that he was a liability because of his knowledge.”

“I don’t think so. I reward loyalty and both you and he have been very well rewarded for said loyalty. Continue the search.”

Luthor paused to select a cigar from his humidor and prepared it. Mrs. Cox leaned in, positioning her body to allow Lex a view down the front of her blouse of her barely encumbered breasts, and clicked a lighter into flame. Lex leaned in, enjoyed the view and puffed his cigar alight. Once it was lit, he leaned back, keeping his eyes glued to her display and blew out a smoke ring that destroyed itself on her cleavage.

Setting down the lighter, Mrs. Cox straightened, throwing her shoulders back to thrust her breasts forward.

Lex smiled and said, “On the other matter, we have the information we need. Contract with some free-lancers to break

into that facility and liberate what we want. Offer a reasonable fee, but keep it modest. If we offer too much they might get wise to how much I need that chunk of rock and raise the price.”

“Right away, Lex.” She turned and started to sway her way from the office. The leather micro skirt was barely covering her derriere and showed off her long, well defined legs.

Before she got to the door, Lex stopped her, “Oh, and have Andre prepare a dinner for two. You’ll join me, of course?”

She spun so that she was facing him striking a pose with one leg turned slightly out and said, with a sultry smile, “Of course,” turned and resumed her trip from the office.

A few days later, at Homey Airport in the Nevada desert, three men approached an old, dilapidated hanger. When they reached the back doors they saw that although the building looked old and dilapidated, the locks looked brand new and strong. The leader pulled a penlight from his pocket and used it to examine the lock. Seeing the kind of lock it was, he swung it with force taking out his anger on the inanimate device. In a whisper he complained, “Hardened steel. Our cutter won’t make a dent in it.”

His second in command stepped forward and, using a penlight, examined the situation. His boss couldn’t see his smile because of the dark, but he was smiling nonetheless. He said to the third member of the party, “Cutters.”

The third guy delved into a bag and brought out a fourteen inch bolt cutter.

The leader snapped, “What do you think you’re going to do with that? Those cutters won’t cut through that lock.”

As his second was positioning the cutters, he said, “We don’t need to. We can’t cut the lock, but -” there was a loud snip, “we can cut the hasp -” snip, “It runs through.” With the second snip the lock and a section of the hasp fell to the ground.

The leader said, “You just earned yourself a bonus on this deal. Let’s go see if we can find what we are looking for.”

They entered the building and found that, despite the appearance of the exterior, the inside was well maintained. They split up and, each using a penlight, started going through the contents. There were piles of crates and bank after bank of file cabinets. They were ignoring the file cabinets and examining the markings on the crates. In the light from one of the flashlights the markings could be discerned. Stenciled on the top of many was the inscription, **Bureau 39**.

The second in command found what he thought was the proper crate and called out, in a hushed tone, “Hey, Devane, I think I got somethin’ here.”

Devane joined him. In the backwash of the light his features were just visible, hard dark eyes with a shock of dark hair, cut very short in a military style. He read the inscription, **Smallville 1966**. He nodded his head and brought the crowbar he held in his hand into play. He pried off the top of the crate and when he did the immediate vicinity was bathed in an eerie green glow. Reaching in, Devane pushed aside some excelsior and exposed the glowing green rock that was the object of his search. He stuffed it into his bag and the heavy material hid the green glow. He said, “Let’s get out of here,” and led the way back to their transportation, closing but unable to relock the door when they left.

A couple of days later, late in the afternoon, a private jet was winging its way across the Atlantic. On the side was painted, “LexCorp” in big red letters.

The occupants did not see the black clad figure that lay on the top of the fuselage.

Inside, Lex Luthor was entertaining Lois Lane. He had a violinist playing and his steward was serving wine.

Lois looked around and said, “I don’t think I’ve ever been in such a fancy plane before. Clark and I always flew coach.” She

thought <That is until I knew just who he was, from then on it was Superman Express all the time.>

Luthor smiled and waving a deprecating hand said, “Nothing, but the best.”

Lois said, “When you said Italian I had no idea we were actually *going* to Italy.”

Luthor smiled and said, “My favorite restaurant is in Milano. Magnifico.”

Lois took a sip of her wine and set the glass down. “What am I going to do with you?”

Lex had been bringing his glass to his lips when suddenly the plane dipped and he splashed the wine on his shirt. He shouted in surprise and dropped the glass as he looked in consternation at this shirt front, now stained purple. All thoughts of what he was going to say were lost in his embarrassment. “Pardon me. I need to change.” Before he did however, he pushed a button on an intercom and said, “Roger, I thought you said it would be a smooth flight.”

“It should be, Mr. Luthor. There is no weather in the area.”

“Then what was that turbulence we hit a minute ago?”

“I can’t explain it. It came out of nowhere. It felt like we were a bone in the jaws of a very large dog.”

Lois barely suppressed a giggle.

Turning off the intercom, Lex stood and moved to a private compartment in the rear.

A few minutes later, Lex came back out and sat next to Lois. “Lois, I have something to ask.” He knelt before her and brought out a ring box and opened it. “Lois Lane, will you marry me?”

“Lex, I appreciate it, I really do, but I am already married.”

“But Kent is dead.”

Lois brought up her left hand which had her wedding ring on it and said, “Missing and presumed dead. So far they haven’t found a body. No body, no death. Until there is a final determination, I’m married.”

Irritated, he asked, “Then why are you here with me? Why have you been seeing me?”

“Friends see each other. Friends eat meals together. There doesn’t have to be a romantic component to it.”

“Is that all I’ll ever be to you, Lois, a friend?”

“I’m sorry, Lex, but until I have definite proof that Clark is dead, that’s all we can be. Until then the Daily Planet is my life and the staff there, Perry, Jimmy even Cat, they are my family and of course, Clark’s parents. I just believe that he’s still alive and he will be coming back to me. When he does, he had better have a very good explanation for his absence, I’ll tell you.”

“You speak of families. I believe in families, large families, but if you continue to wait for Kent to return, you could miss out on having a family of your own.”

“Lex, I have to say that the last few weeks have been wonderful, but really, I’m still in mourning and shouldn’t be just jetting off with you to God knows where. Besides, I hardly know you. I’d need to know you a lot better before I’d consider marriage.”

“You only knew Kent for a few months when you were married.”

“That was ... different. A kind of ... love at first sight. We just ... clicked. In that short amount of time, I knew more about him than I know about you after all of this time.” <Thanks to Herb Wells.>

Not to be denied, Lex pressed on, “All you need to know about me is that I love you.”

Lois looked down, apparently being coy. She knew that Clark was there, probably listening in. She smiled a secret smile thinking about that ‘turbulence’ that had caused Lex to spill his wine all over his shirt. That had to have been Clark.

Misinterpreting her smile, Lex asked, “Is there something else, aside from the possibility that Kent is still alive, some other source

of hesitation?”

Lois didn’t even start to answer his question, choosing instead to maintain her silence.

Not liking her silence, Luthor challenged, “Would it have anything to do with, Superman?”

Her head snapped up and she asked, “Why do you ask that?”

Lex leaned in aggressively as if attacking. “Your dalliances with him are well known. Even while married to Kent you were seen being very cozy with the superhero. If Kent were dead, would you choose him over me?”

“That’s not the kind of question that a gentleman should be asking.”

“That’s it, isn’t it? You’d choose Superman over me.” The tone of his voice left little doubt that he was sure that was the answer.

Her continued silence drove him on.

“Lois, you have to accept the fact that Kent is dead. He’s never coming back and Superman is incapable of forming liaisons. You’ve thrown yourself at him time after time and he continues to remain aloof. Please tell me that you’ll consider my proposal.”

Lois finally answered, “I’ll consider it.” Thinking to herself, <The temperature in Hell would have to be sub-zero for me to give it *serious* consideration.>

Her answer mollified Luthor, somewhat. Putting words in her mouth, he said, “So, it’s ‘maybe’ for now.”

He didn’t catch her hidden meaning as she said, “Maybe ... maybe.” He thought she was simply repeating thoughtfully, when she was actually saying maybe her answer was maybe, but not really. Looking at the ring he still held with sadness, he slowly closed the box and returned it to his jacket pocket.

Lois made the comment, “It is a beautiful ring.” He would be appalled if he knew what she was truly thinking, <Not as beautiful or meaningful as mine. It was Clark’s grandmother’s ring. There’s a lot of sentiment attached to my ring that is lacking in that monstrosity. That *thing* is far too ostentatious for my tastes. I hate that I have to play this part, but if we are ever going to ‘get the goods’ on Luthor, I have to play along.>

Luthor was still trying to persuade her, “Without you, it’s just a chunk of rock. On your hand, it’s priceless to me, more important than any other object in my life.”

Just then the co-pilot approached and whispered into his ear.

As he returned to the cockpit, Lex stood and said, “I have call to take in the office. Excuse me.”

He stepped through a door and picked up a phone extension. “Hello.”

Devane and his henchmen were sitting around a desk with the green rock sitting in the center. Devane said, “Your information was accurate, Luthor. I have the item you were interested in.”

“When can I expect delivery?”

“I’ll call you when I get back to Metropolis.” He looked around at his associates. They nodded their agreement and he spoke again, “That price has gone up. It is now five million.”

Luthor didn’t even bat an eye as he said, “Done,” and hung up. After hanging up, he muttered, “Priceless.”

Lois knew that she was being watched. Ever since she had allowed Luthor to think she might be the slightest bit interested he’d had her followed. At least she felt comfortable at home and at Lucy’s. Since they had found all of those bugs, Clark had been scanning both places on a regular basis. If he found anything, Bill Henderson was a phone call away and he would deal with it. It was becoming difficult for Lois and Clark to get together for ‘quality time’ without being found out. Lois was spending a lot of time with Lucy and Lucy’s ‘live-in-boyfriend’, Charlie King. At least when she spent the night in the other bedroom, Lucy understood and let them have their privacy.

This weekend was going to be different; she and Clark were

going away so she had to give her tail the slip.

It was a warm summer day when Lois left the apartment and she was wearing a short red skirt that showed off her legs with a sleeveless blue top. The strap of her taupe colored bag was over her shoulder as usual. Rather than the Jeep, she opted to catch a cab downtown.

Riding in the back of the cab, she pulled a compact from her bag and checked her make-up. In actuality she was checking to confirm that the black sedan was following the cab. Sure enough, he was there, right on schedule.

Reaching her destination, she alighted and paid off the cabbie. She took her time entering the building, pretending to be checking the address. Really it was to give her tail just enough time to follow her into the building, but not enough that he could enter the same elevator car with her.

Seeing her enter the elevator and the doors closing, her tail dived into the stairwell. He ran up one flight and stuck his head out through the door and checked the elevator. The doors were closed and there was no one in the hallway so he hoofed it to the next floor.

When he checked that floor the results were the same. What he hadn't seen was the woman that boarded the elevator on the third floor. She was dressed in a dark green dress that reached her knees and had a matching floppy green hat on her head, covering her dark tresses.

As soon as the doors were closed, the newcomer removed her hat and placed it on Lois's head. Then she quickly unzipped the green dress and removed it like a robe and handed it to Lois who quickly donned it. Lois removed a black patent leather purse from her taupe bag and handed the now empty taupe colored bag to Lucy. Lucy was now wearing a short red skirt and a sleeveless blue top. She threw the strap of the bag over her right shoulder and Lois corrected her, "Left shoulder, Sis."

Lucy moved the strap and gave Lois a quick kiss on the cheek. She said, "You and Clark have some fun. I'll lead this flunky a merry chase."

Lois returned her sister's kiss and in a heartfelt tone said, "Thanks, Luce. We owe you, big time."

Before the doors opened, Lucy was able to say, "I don't know how much longer your investigation is going to take, but take your time. I like having Clark around. He cooks my meals and does the cleaning. You're soooo lucky to have him. I'm jealous."

Just then the doors opened to the fifth floor. Lois and Lucy both stepped out. Lois moved to the other elevator and pushed the down button as Lucy sauntered off down the hall.

Lucy was half way down the hall when Lois's shadow exited the stairwell, huffing and puffing from the exertion. Spotting Lucy down the hall he started to walk, as inconspicuously as he could, after her. He passed within a couple of feet of Lois and as he did, the elevator doors opened and she stepped in. He didn't give her a second glance as he proceeded down the hall, his eyes on Lucy's back.

Lois took the elevator to the ground floor and exited the building. She walked two blocks to the Daily Planet and took the elevator to the top floor, bypassing the newsroom floor. Exiting, she headed for the stairwell to the roof. As she stepped out onto the roof, Superman was there waiting for her. With a suppressed squeal she threw herself into his arms. He picked her up and immediately took off, straight up until they were out of sight from the ground. Once they were at altitude he headed for Smallville.

A few minutes later they landed in the front yard of the Kent farm house. Clark spun into jeans and a top and they went in.

Martha was the only one in the house at the time and, seeing Lois, threw her arms around her in a warm hug which Lois returned. Martha said, "Lunch will be ready, shortly. Clark, your father is in the barn. Why don't you go see how close he is to coming in."

Nodding in understanding, he turned and headed for the barn. He knew that his mom wanted some time with Lois.

As Clark exited, Martha pulled Lois down on the sofa and asked, "How much longer is this investigation going to take?"

"Oh, Martha, I hope not much longer, but who can tell. Luthor is trying to court me, but I haven't been able to get into his office to look for evidence yet. The worst part is being away from Clark so much. When we leave here, we are heading to the island for some R and R. We need some uninterrupted time together. I see him frequently at Lucy's, but it's just not the same. You know what I mean."

"I understand, dear. I can just imagine being away from Jonathan like that and I don't like it. The two of you *need* to be together."

"What makes it worse is I have to put up with Luthor's advances. It's hard walking that line. Keeping him interested, but keeping him from crossing the line. If he did, Clark would blow the whole deal and we'd lose all of the gains we've made. A few days ago, Luthor took me to Italy for dinner." Lois started to chuckle. "We were out over the Atlantic and we were about to drink some wine. Just as Lex was bring up his glass there was some turbulence, caused by you-know-who and he spilled his wine all over his shirt." Lois was now laughing outright. "It was all I could do not to laugh even though I knew what had happened."

"Well, I just hope you can wrap this up soon so that things can get back to normal."

"So do I. I think we're getting close."

Chapter 3

Mrs. Cox received a call from one of her operatives, "Report." "This is Baxter. I ... I ..."

Irritated by his hesitation, Mrs. Cox barked, "Spit it out! What happened? Don't tell me you lost her."

"Well, yeah, but it wasn't my fault. Somehow I started following the wrong dame."

"Come in. I'm not making this report."

She heard a loud gulp before he said, "Do I hafta?"

"Yes, this wasn't my error. I'm not taking the flak for you."

There was fear in his tone as he replied, "All right, I'll be in shortly." He hung up.

Twenty minutes later Baxter entered the office where Mrs. Cox had her desk.

As soon as he entered she stood and said, "This way," as she sauntered to the door to Lex's office.

When they had entered, she said, "Baxter is here to report."

"Okay, let's hear it. What did she do this weekend?"

Baxter was sweating as he said, "I don't know."

Lex was skeptical and asked, "Oh, she never left her apartment, all weekend?"

"No, she left ... She took a cab downtown. I followed her into a building. She got on the elevator and ... she disappeared."

Lex was irritated and concerned. "She isn't a magician. She couldn't just disappear. Did she 'make' you?"

"I don't see how. I hung back in traffic. I made it into the building while she was waiting for the elevator, but I wasn't able to get on the elevator with her."

Lex was losing his patience with this obviously incompetent bumbler. "Okay, she was on the elevator. Then what happened?"

"I took the stairs. When I got to the fifth floor I saw someone dressed just like her walking down the hallway so I followed her."

Impatient to get to the end of the story, Lex prompted, "And?"

"And it turned out to be some college co-ed going to a class. MetU rents a conference room in that building for summer classes. She was there for the lecture. I figured that Lane must have gone

up further so I went back to the lobby to wait for her to come down. She never did. I waited for hours. I saw the co-ed leave when her class was finished, but no Lane.”

Lex lost what patience he had remaining and shouted, “Of all the incompetent ... she obviously made you and doubled back. While you were on your wild goose chase she left the building. Get out of my sight.”

Baxter beat a hasty retreat. Once he was gone, Lex said, “Pay him off and send him on his way. Get someone more competent to take his place.”

Lex selected a cigar from his humidor. Mrs. Cox took it from his hand and putting it between her lips, lit it for him and then handed it to him.

He puffed on it thoughtfully for a few seconds before he spoke. “In the plane, Lois said that the Planet was her life, now that Kent was gone and the staff was her family, along with her in-laws, of course. We can discount the in-laws, they aren’t local, but we will need to do something about the rest. I want to force her to be dependent on me instead.”

“How, Lex?”

“I’ve been working on that. I think that first we need to provide some proof that Kent is dead. Perhaps an unrecognizable body with some of his clothing, something. Then we can demand that Kent be declared dead. I’ve also been working on eliminating Superman as a source of support for her. Soon she will be totally dependent on me and then she will be mine.”

“There could be the problem of dental records, that kind of thing.”

“Research. Find Kent’s dentist. Get a copy of the record. We’ll substitute.”

After lunch, Lois and Clark took the suitcases that they kept at the farm and headed for the island.

When they landed, Clark eased her to her feet, reluctant to finally let her go. Holding her in his embrace he said, “I don’t know how much longer I’ll be able to do this. Seeing you with Luthor just drives me crazy. You’re my wife and we should be together.”

“I know. I miss you, too. I miss waking up to the feel of you spooned against me.” Her arms drifted up around his neck as she was speaking. She stood on tip-toe and put the period to her statement by kissing him.

Lifting her back up, he carried her into their bungalow and her feet didn’t touch the floor until they were in the bedroom. They hadn’t even broken the kiss for the entire distance.

When she finally broke the kiss, she sighed a deep sigh and said “I hope this investigation ends soon. I want my husband back. These times together are so few and far between.” She reached behind his neck, grasping the tab of the hidden zipper and sliding it down. Grabbing the gap at the neckline, she pulled the spandex off his shoulders. As she eased the spandex down his arms, her fingers trailed down them, making a light contact which left his arms burning.

Once his top was off, he wiggled out of the cape harness and allowed it to fall to the floor. As he kicked it aside, she reached out with her hands and placed her palms on his chest. She kept her eyes on his face as she moved her hands over his pecs. His eyes were closed and his breathing began to deepen. Everywhere her hands touched him, his skin felt like it had been bathed in liquid fire. He couldn’t believe that she didn’t appear to be feeling the same thing, but she continued to slide her hands over his skin.

Their contact had necessarily been limited because of being undercover, which only made this time away the more special. When she was finished exploring his chest, her hands made their way under his arms and onto his back. She pulled him into a fierce hug with her cheek pressed into his chest. The pressure of the hug served to force all of the air from his lungs. The sleeveless top she

wore allowed her bare arms to circle his body in what felt like a ring of fire and he gasped. They stood there, unwilling to move, to break the spell.

Holding him, she whispered against his chest, “I’ve missed you, I’ve missed ... us.”

Finally willing himself to move, he brought up his hands and cradled the sides of her face, tilting it so that he could bend his head down and reach her lips. The contact seared his lips, but he couldn’t pull away. Her lips were fire and ice, sweet as honey and as addictive as heroin. He couldn’t get enough. He slid his tongue across her lower lip, seeking access. She parted her lips and allowed his tongue to explore all of the crevices of her mouth. She tasted like sweet tea and chocolate. His heart rate started to climb and his super-hearing locked onto her heartbeat and he realized that they were beating in synchronicity.

She obviously felt the same way because she clung to him like she was a drowning person and he was her life preserver.

By the time they broke the kiss, they were both gasping for air. For someone who could hold his breath for twenty minutes or more, it always amazed him that kissing Lois Lane still left him breathless. Once their breathing and heart rates had returned to something like normal, they stepped slightly apart. Not far, just enough that she was able to use her hands and arms.

He drank in every movement as she crossed her arms, watching the slow climb of the fabric reveal her body an inch at a time. She lifted it over her head until it hung limp from the fingertips of one upraised hand for several seconds before she allowed it to fall to the floor on top of his cape, finally exposing her barely covered breasts. The lace of her bra enhanced rather than concealed her breasts. Her nipples were pushing hard against the material.

She released a little squeal of delight as he stepped closer; he picked her up so that her breasts were level with his questing mouth and tongue. Her arms drifted up and loosely wrapped around his neck. He held her body securely against his as she arched her back, tilted her head and sighed again as his lips closed over one hard little bud. He could feel her entire body quiver with the contact. He sucked the nipple, lace and all, into his mouth, biting down lightly with his teeth, applying the slightest bit of pressure, and her legs came up and around his back, hiking her skirt up to her hips. Her arms unlocked from where they had been around his neck, flinging them out to the sides, and she leaned back, secure in the belief that he would support her, no matter what. Moving from one breast to the other, he made sure to give each nipple equal attention. Her guttural moans told him that she was enjoying what he was doing. Shifting his hands so that he was using one to support her, he used the other to release the front closure of her bra. When he did that, the two sides fell away, removing the last barrier between them. His tongue flicked out and circled the areola, tracing the circumference in ever decreasing circles until he was circling the nipple itself. By this time, the nipple was puckered and hard and begging to be sucked and he obliged. Her little moans of pleasure drove him on.

Gently he moved them to the bed and bent over to lay her on it. When she was lying down, she released her legs; he took his mouth from her breast and stood over her. He placed a hand on either side of her head and leaned in. Looking into her eyes, he started to question the wisdom of what they were doing to forward the investigation, being separated from one another when all he wanted to do was to be with her all of the time. It was hard enough watching her put herself in danger before they got close, but now ... now that they were married, it was that much harder. Speaking softly, he said, “I never knew that I could love someone as much as I do you. There’s no one else, no other woman in this entire world that even comes close.” Slowly he closed the distance until their lips were in contact once more.

Her arms came up and her hands twined in the hair at the back

of his head, pulling him in tightly as if desperate to increase the strength of the contact and to hold it longer.

He had lowered his face to hers, but as the kiss lingered, he lowered his chest until it was in contact with her breasts and he could feel her nipples digging into him.

She moaned into his mouth and he almost came unglued. The need that he felt, the emptiness that could only be filled by her ... her presence in his life. He knew that he wouldn't be able to continue if she wasn't there. If something happened, he would be lost and he would never forgive himself. That fear, the fear of losing everything that meant anything to him in life drove his need, his need of her. Without breaking the kiss, he reached to the side of her skirt and ran the zipper down.

She wiggled her hips as she shimmied out of her skirt. When it was around her ankles, she kicked it off and lay back, wearing nothing save a lacy pair of bikini panties.

He pulled back and marveled once again at her beauty. Her doe eyes were dark pools and for a moment he lost himself in them. She impatiently reached for him and pulled his mouth back to hers for another lingering kiss.

When they broke the kiss, she pulled him down beside her and knelt next to him. She started pulling his trunks and tights off of him. When she reached his boots, he removed them at super-speed and lay back down so that she could finish what she had started.

When all he had on was a set of briefs, she started running her hands over his legs and abdomen the way she had his chest.

This started a period of marital intimacy.

When they were finished and he could finally move, he started kissing first her forehead, then her eyes and cheeks, every square inch of skin that he could reach without moving away from her grip on him.

Slowly their breathing and heart rate started to moderate, finally returning to normal. Raising his head, he looked into her eyes and said, simply, "I love you."

She smiled and said, "I love you, too." She took a deep breath and let out a contented sigh before she said anything else. "Wow, what got into you?"

"I don't know, but I think I need to talk to Perry."

She gave him a quizzical look and asked, "What about?"

"Would you believe ... Elvis's music?"

She was surprised and even more curious, "You've GOT to be kidding me. Elvis's music? Okay, I'll bite. Why?"

"One of his songs comes to mind. I think I can now identify with it."

"All right. Which one?"

"I need to know where Elvis got the lyric for 'Burning Love'. I think I just lived through it. Unless you're wearing some kind of new Kryptonite perfume, that's the only explanation. I don't know how or why, but I just felt like I was on fire the entire time." He modulated his voice in an attempt to imitate Elvis as he sang, "Just a hunk, a hunk of burning love."

She said, "Get outta here."

He replied, "No, really. You know, it was one of his favorites. Check out the lyrics."

"Don't tell me you have them memorized."

He gave her a sheepish grin and said, "Eidetic memory, remember?"

"Oh, yeah, I forgot."

He separated from her and stood next to the bed. Adding arm and hand motions like he was holding a microphone and swinging his hips the way Elvis did, he started to sing in earnest. He might not have been as tuneful as Elvis, but what he lacked in vocal quality, he made up for in dance.

"You gonna set me on fire

Your kisses lift me higher

With burning love

Ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh

I feel my temperature rising

Burning, burning, burning

With burning love

Burning love

Burning love

I'm just a hunk, a hunk of burning love

Just a hunk, a hunk of burning love"

She was giggling like a schoolgirl as he stood before her, swinging his naked body around.

The smile on her face told him that she enjoyed his performance anyway and she clapped when he was finished.

"See what I mean?"

He returned to the bed and as they cuddled Lois said, in a dreamy tone, "You know, I needed that. We have had to go so long in between. I want my husband back. I need you in bed with me every night."

"I don't like it any more than you, but we need to complete this or all we've gone through to get to this point will have been wasted."

"I know, but I don't have to like it." She pulled his hand up and kissed his knuckles before she continued, "I do think we are getting somewhere." She pulled back somewhat and looked him in the eyes, "It was you, wasn't it. You shook the plane so that he spilled his wine."

Clark smiled and said, "Guilty as charged."

"I thought so. I almost laughed outright. He was so mad ..."

"Sometimes it just drives me crazy with what we are having to do."

"Well, I think we are getting somewhere. He asked me to marry him."

"What did you tell him?"

"That I'm already married, what else?" She yawned and said, "I think I'm going to take a little nap. What are we going to do for a encore?" she asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I thought we might go to Hawaii and see a movie and have dinner then come back for more quality time."

In a sleepy voice, she said, "Sounds good to me," before she yawned again and then, cuddling more tightly against him, drifted off to sleep.

Lois and Clark had landed in a secluded alley; Clark had spun into casual clothes and was wearing sunglasses as was Lois even though it was late afternoon. They found a movie theater and decided to go see the feature which was a Mel Gibson movie. Clark knew that Lois had a 'thing' for Mel Gibson and was willing to cater to her likes. This was different from his usual films being a takeoff on a TV series, "Maverick" about a wandering gambler. They both enjoyed the movie which was a light hearted romantic comedy.

After the movie, they had headed for a restaurant. They had been playing a game as they strolled along. When they entered the building that housed the restaurant on the top floor they made their way to the elevators. As they crossed the lobby, Lois asked, "How many is that?"

Clark smiled and said, "Six."

Lois made a sour expression and then made a recount, counting on her fingers as she rattled off the names, "Dancer, Prancer, Comet, Blitzen, Dasher, Cupid ... Donner ..."

Clark's smile broadened. He knew he had her, "That's seven. One more."

Lois, trying to get an idea by repeating the last, said, "Donner ..."

Clark gave her a few seconds and then said, "You're stuck."

Refusing to admit defeat, she snapped, "I am not stuck!"

Realizing what she was doing, she started to feel bad about her attitude and then admitted, "You're right. I'm stuck."

"What was the wager again? It was five bucks, wasn't it?"

‘Bucks’, get it?’

She snorted at his joke and said, “Okay, okay. Tell me the name.”

He put an arm around her waist and looking into her eyes gave the answer a double meaning, “Vixen,” and then kissed her.

As they approached the elevators, Clark noticed a man standing directly under a ‘No Smoking’ sign with a cigarette in his mouth about to strike a flame to light it. As he did, before he had a chance to bring the lighter to the cigarette, Clark used a puff of super-breath to blow out the flame.

Lois grabbed his lapels and said, “Double or nothing.”

Clark smiled and said, “Okay.” He thought for a second and then challenged, “The seven dwarves.”

Lois smirked and said, “You’re on. Piece of cake.”

As she started to ponder the answer, Clark used another puff of super-breath to blow out the lighter again just as the man was bringing it to the cigarette.

Acting like the official timekeeper, Clark said, “Go.”

Lois happily started rattling off the names, “Happy, Dopey, Doc, Sneezy, Sleepy, Grumpy ...”

Clark smiled, it appeared that once again, he had her, “That’s six.”

In a small voice, Lois offered, “Sleezy?”

Clark shook his head and started making a tick-tock sound of a clock.

She was getting desperate so she started listing names in hopes of hitting on it, “Dippy, bippy, sloppy, wheezy ... Joe, Steve ...”

Seeing the man lifting his lighter again, Clark blew out the flame once again.

The man thinking that the problem was with his lighter started shaking it in bewilderment.

Just then the elevator arrived.

Clark said, “Time’s up.”

Lois stood on tip-toe and kissed him, “Much as I hate to admit it, I’m stumped. Tell me. Tell me.”

Before Clark could answer, they boarded the elevator. As they did, Lois spotted the man with the cigarette in his mouth. She snatched it from his lips and snapping it in two dropped it into a waste receptacle. Accosting him, she pointed at a ‘No Smoking’ sign and accused, “Can’t you read?”

As the elevator started to move, Lois moved into his arms and whispered, “Tell me. Who did I miss?”

Clark turned them around so that she was standing in a corner and he was between her and the man with the cigarettes before he leaned in and whispered in her ear, “It’s obvious.”

She nibbled on his ear before she said, “Not to me.”

He whispered in her ear, “Bashful,” and then nuzzled her neck.

After dinner, they returned to the island and made love several more times before falling asleep in each other’s arms.

The rest of the time on the island was spent either in the water, on the sand or in bed together. They had a very enjoyable weekend.

Sunday night as they were cuddling, Lois asked, “How much longer do we have to do this?”

“We are making progress with Toni, Miranda and Nigel. They are the main witnesses. The other’s just put the noose around Nigel’s neck. That’s what is making him talk. The deal of reducing their sentences to time served and the witness protection program for Toni and Miranda was enough for them. As I thought, Lex was actually the one behind the ‘Toasters’. He provided the technology. Lex commissioned Miranda to create the pheromone compound. We are getting the information we need, but it’s a slow process. Nigel keeps adding conditions. Every piece of info he gives comes with a new condition. We need to go through with this until we have an iron clad case. We can’t afford to miss crossing any ‘t’s or dotting any ‘i’s with this one. Once we put him

away, it has to be for good and all.”

“As long as we can have these occasional weekends, I’ll put up with it. The problem is that Lex is watching me with an eagle eye. If it hadn’t been for Lucy’s help I don’t know if I’d be here right now.”

“Maybe next time I should just pick you up from the roof of the Planet at the end of the day.”

“If we did that, Lex would be even more convinced that I am dallying with Superman. He accused me of that, you know. Switching my affections from Clark to Superman as soon as Clark was out of the picture. Seriously, he sees you as his principle rival for my affections.”

“Maybe that’s what we need to push him to the edge.”

“Are you sure that’s wise? He can be dangerous.”

“What can he do to me?”

“Remember that green rock that Trask had?”

“Yeah, but I got rid of that.”

“Where there’s smoke there’s usually fire. How can we be sure that was the only piece there was. What if he got hold of more? He could seriously hurt or even kill you.” There were tears in her eyes as she finished.

He put his fingers under her chin and lifted it so that she was looking at him as he said, “Hey, none of that. You have memories of us together and a baby, remember? According to Herb it will take a while so Luthor isn’t going to kill me.”

“What if ... What if these memories aren’t really mine? He made a mistake and gave me memories of a time after we had a child. What if that error was compounded by those memories being from another Lois. The one he told us about.” She was becoming visibly upset.

“He told us about several others.”

“There, you see what I mean? These memories could be from any one of them.” Her upset was increasing as was the tone of her voice.

“Honey, we are just going to have to trust that they are really your memories.”

She threw her arms around his neck and buried her face in his chest as she finally got her emotions under control and sighing said, “Yeah, I really hope that they are. It is a comfort. The problem is that he might not succeed, but he can still try. I remember what you went through in Smallville. I hate the thought of that. We will need to be extra careful. Okay, I can do this.”

Chapter 4

Clark had flown Lois home, landing on the balcony under the cover of darkness. Before he flew off, Lois put her arms around his neck and kissed him, one final time. “I wish you didn’t have to go. I miss you already.”

“I’ll be around, you know that.”

“I will need to visit Lucy sometime this week.”

“I’ll be there.”

“You’d better be, buster. It’s hard enough being away from you when I have to. I do need to see you occasionally.”

He kissed her and said, “I need to go before it is so light that your watcher will spot me.”

Reluctantly she let him go and with one final kiss he took off.

Things at the Planet had been somewhat unsettled ever since Clark had disappeared and Lois wasn’t looking forward to going in, but she had to. She had to maintain her routine so she went in and took a shower before dressing for the office.

When she was ready she locked up, climbed into her Jeep and headed downtown. In her rearview she noticed a dark blue sedan following her. She smiled and muttered, “The other guy must have gotten fired when I shook him off my tail.”

He followed her all the way to the entrance to the parking

garage where he dropped off. She started thinking about that. <Why would he drop off if Luthor is keeping a close eye on me. The obvious conclusion is that Luthor has a spy or spies in the building, maybe even the newsroom, keeping an eye on me. Clark's idea of him picking me up from the roof will have to be reconsidered.>

She parked and took the elevator to the newsroom. When she stepped out she was greeted by what amounted to a mob frenzy. Perry was on the landing of the stairs so that he was slightly above everyone else. The entire staff was below him, looking up. The mood wasn't good.

Jimmy was yelling, "So when will we get paid?"

Perry made a calming motion with his hands and said, "They didn't say. I guess when there's money to pay you."

There was a renewed roar of protest and Perry held out his arms and waved them trying to quiet the crowd. "I'm just the messenger, boys and girls. I can only repeat to you what I've been told. And that's not much."

Sanchez shouted, "What are we doing to resolve this? I mean, what is the paper doing?"

Perry was just as annoyed as the rest and tried to let them all know it, by the tone of his voice, "I have no idea. They haven't asked for my input."

While he had been speaking, Lois had moved to Jimmy's side and asked, "What's going on?"

Jimmy looked at Lois and asked, "Have you tried to cash your paycheck?"

Lois replied, "I deposited it."

Jimmy sighed and said, "Rubber."

Lois was surprised, gasped and asked, "Again? They said that the last time it was a clerical error."

Jimmy smirked this time and said, "Yeah, like being broke." He looked around, trying to gauge how much to say and deciding that no one was paying attention to his conversation with Lois and lowering his voice said, "There's a rumor that the paper's going under."

Obviously, Jimmy hadn't lowered his voice enough because Perry overheard. "Jimmy, there's always a rumor."

Lois quipped, "And it's usually true."

Perry started addressing everyone again, "Look, y'all know that the paper has been doing better, but we still hadn't completely recovered from what Preston Carpenter was doing to us. Things were getting better until ..." Perry looked at Lois and there was hurt and sympathy in his eyes as he continued, "until we lost half of the hottest team in town and things went from bad to worse."

Eduardo asked, "Anything else, Chief? Any **more** surprises?"

In response to Eduardo, Perry replied, "They talked about layoffs."

That statement triggered a new round of angry shouts. Perry raised his hands again for quiet.

Denise and Steve had been talking together on the side, finally they separated and Denise addressed the issue, "That's not fair. What about the union? They can't do that to us."

Perry nodded and replied, "All I know is if we don't find ways to save money around here, we're gonna be out of business."

With those words a hush fell over the assembly.

Ralph, in a sarcastic tone, asked, "So they haven't been paid upstairs either?"

Perry gave him a sour expression and said, "I'm not so sure about that."

That revelation generated a new groundswell of angry shouts.

Lois, Cat, Jack and Jimmy drifted over toward Lois's desk. When they were there, Jimmy handed Lois a preprinted note.

As she accepted it she asked, "What's this?"

Jimmy sighed and said, "Read it. It is self-explanatory."

Lois started reading aloud, "No business lunches, no payments for sources, no cabs ..." She looked up from the

document and said, "We might as well hang up our word processors."

Cat said, "We'll adjust. Hopefully it's only temporary."

Jack replied, "Easy for you to say, you've got George." Seeing Lois wince at the mention of Cat's boyfriend, he felt bad and apologized, "Sorry, Lois. I didn't mean to make you think of -"

Interrupting, Lois said, "That's beside the point. We're newspaper people. We're supposed to have the resources to write the news **as it happens**. Old news isn't news, it's history. I wish Clark was here." The last was said with a sob. Sometimes it was harder for Lois to pretend that Clark was dead than others, but sometimes she just missed being with him all of the time and it came out making her grief more believable.

Cat put an arm across Lois's shoulders and said, "We all do, Lois. We all do."

Trying to break the mood, Jimmy said, "Well **I** think it's a scam. The pinstriped pinheads upstairs only *want* us to think the Planet is broke."

Jack challenged, "Why would they do that?"

Lois offered, "I've seen this before. Management pretends there's this big crisis to panic everyone into cutting costs."

Cat said, "I heard some people talking about a strike."

Jimmy blurted out in a strangled tone, "Strike? A walk out? No way, not me I feel like I just walked **in**."

Jack responded, "Tell me about it."

Jimmy offered, "Besides, this is the Daily Planet."

As they were talking, a messenger was circulating through the staff. When he got to their group he handed envelopes to Jimmy and Jack.

Jimmy was still speaking and waved the unopened envelope around as he spoke, "We may be down, but we're not out. Things could be a lot worse. At least we're still ..." As he was speaking he idly opened the envelope to see what it contained. He stopped speaking when he and Jack simultaneously pulled out pink sheets of paper.

In a desultory tone, Jack finished Jimmy's statement, "Unemployed."

Jimmy was staring at the pink slip in disbelief as he said, "Amazing, they really are pink."

Luthor was on his balcony, preparing to enjoy his breakfast at a wrought iron table when Mrs. Cox came out through the doors. He was reading a copy of "Metropolis Business" magazine. As she approached, he laid it aside. When he did, the title of the article he was reading was face up. It read: "**Financial Woes Mount!**" Under the headline was a picture of the Daily Planet building.

Mrs. Cox was pushing a serving cart containing Andre's breakfast offering. When she stopped next to the table, she asked, "Shall I pour?"

Buoyed by what he had been reading, he smiled and said, "Here, let me."

His mood was quite elevated as he poured the coffee for both of them and handed her a cup. Then he spooned some eggs onto a plate as she sat across from him. He took a dainty bite and savored Andre's offering before placing his fork back down.

Indicating the magazine, Mrs. Cox asked, "Should we begin to switch some of the LexCorp advertising accounts to other papers?"

He thought for a second before replying, "Not yet. We need to preserve the **illusion** of loyalty." He continued to smile, though his tone became philosophical as he continued, "Metropolis won't be Metropolis without the Daily Planet."

"How will this affect your proposal to Lois Lane?"

His look became predatory as he continued, "It's **designed** to help. If you expect to utterly defeat a battlefield opponent, you must destroy their support system, their allies, and any avenue of retreat. As I explained, I intend to remove her support system so

that she will come to me.”

“Lois Lane? ‘Battlefield opponent?’”

Luthor smirked and replied, “Figuratively speaking.”

Mrs. Cox pointed out a possible flaw in his plan. “We haven’t been able to locate Kent’s dentist. It’s almost as if he never went to one. We have no way to switch his dental records for some bum.”

“That is becoming less and less important. Soon she will need something more than a memory to sustain her and I will be there.”

Just then a chime sounded from inside, at Luthor’s desk. They both rose and moved inside. On Luthor’s desk was a small television monitor. It was a closed circuit system and Luthor flipped a switch to complete the connection. When he did the TV came to life and contained the image of Devane. Luthor addressed him, “Mr. Devane.”

Never one to beat about the bush, Devane came right to the point, “I’m ready to make delivery. Are the funds available?”

Luthor challenged, “Have you authenticated the item?”

Devane started to smile, but the smile held neither mirth or happiness, it was hard and cold. “It’s genuine.” He leaned back and turned as if listening to someone out of pickup range. When he came back he said, “Don’t jerk me around, Luthor. It’d take me about ten seconds to find an alternate buyer.”

Luthor blustered, “Aren’t you forgetting whose sources turned up the existence of the stone in the first place?”

Devane was cold and calculating. “No, I’m not forgetting. That and five million dollars’ll get you your stone.” He paused a second before he continued, “If you keep irritating me the price will go up. Do you want it or not?”

In a placating tone, Luthor asked, “May I see it?”

Devane nodded, reached off screen and when his hand returned to the field of view it contained something wrapped in a cloth. When he opened the cloth wrapping he revealed a glowing green rock. It looked like a piece of granite that had been painted with luminous green paint.

Luthor licked his lips and said, “I want it.”

Devane wrapped it up again and moved it out of the field of view. He had seen Luthor’s avaricious response to the rock and decided that he and his team could use a bonus. He calmly said, “The price just went up. Six million.”

The shock was evident on Luthor’s face as he said, “The deal was for five.”

“Like I said, it just went up to six. If you continue to irritate me it will go even higher.”

Giving in, Luthor said, “Okay, six it is, but no more.”

He pushed the button severing the connection.

Turning to Mrs. Cox he said, “Highway robbery. We must turn the tables on Mr. Devane. You know what to do.”

“Consider it done.”

It was later in the day. Jimmy and Jack had both been packing their belongings, but prior to leaving they were still grumbling with their ‘former’ co-workers.

Lois said, “I could talk to Perry.”

Cat added, “We both could.”

Jimmy smiled at the offer, and replied, “Nah. It’s not his fault. He would have prevented it if he could. He probably feels bad enough.”

Sarcastically, Jack quipped, “I guess it’s back to a life of crime for me.” They all looked at Jack in disbelief. He shrugged and said, “It’s always nice to have something to fall back on.”

Jimmy tried to be upbeat, “This could be a good thing.”

Lois challenged, “How?”

Still upbeat, Jimmy replied, “Remember my friend Buzz? We’ve been talking about going into business together.”

Cat asked, “Wasn’t Buzz your reform school roommate?”

Jimmy shrugged that off, “He was in on a bum rap too. The guy is a marketing genius.”

Lois translated, “He’s a con man.”

Jimmy smiled and said, “Same thing.”

Jack showed interest, “What kind of business?”

Jimmy was warming to the idea, “We had this great idea: ‘A Day in the Life of ... You.’ Anyone can do a wedding or a bar mitzvah, but we go into your home and capture an ordinary day on video. Kind of like your own personal ‘Truth or Dare.’”

Lois asked, “Wouldn’t that require equipment and capitol?”

Jimmy shrugged and said, “I’ve got money saved. Not that much, but enough to get us started. Once it catches on, we’ll be rolling in it.”

Showing a little sentimentality rather than sarcasm, Cat commented, “That’s what I’m afraid of. I don’t want to lose my cousin.”

Jimmy smiled, pleased at this, for Cat, outpouring of emotion. He was becoming more enthusiastic as time went on. He turned to Jack and said, “Maybe you’ll come and work for me.”

Jack snickered and replied, “A little breaking and entering?”

Shaking his head in disbelief, Jimmy said, “No! I’d make you a vice-president.” Then he looked over at Lois and Cat, “You too.”

Just then, Sanchez walked by. He was in a daze and not even realizing where he was or where he was going, clasping a pink slip in his hand.

Seeing him, Lois was concerned and asked, “Steve, are you all right?”

Snapping out of his daze, slightly, he answered, “I’ve just been laid off. I’ve been with the Planet twenty-five years. Where am I going to go?” When no suggestions were forthcoming he shook his head and wandered away.

Jack made the comment, “It’s a massacre.”

Lois was bewildered, “It’s all happening so fast.”

Cat, who always seemed to be up on the latest rumors said, “Maybe not. Maybe management’s been having serious money problems for months.” She looked around to assure herself that there weren’t any ‘suits’ around before she continued, “The employees are always the last to know.”

Lois, who had been making calls around to friends and acquaintances in the various departments said, “We’ve got to strike back. I’ve been polling: we have the people from printing, maintenance, distribution, administration, news staffers, even accounting.”

Jack quipped, “Sounds like a party!”

Lois was serious as she said, “Only drastic action will convince the Board we’re not fooling around.”

Cat gasped and said, “You’re talking about a full scale walk out?”

Nodding, Lois said, “If that’s what it takes.” She looked around before continuing, “I, for one, refuse to accept these indignities lying down.”

Jimmy was in the process of taking a breath preparatory to making a smart comment in response to that line when Lois cut him off, “Don’t even think about it.”

Chapter 5

A little later in the afternoon people were still milling around, mostly in shock at what was happening. There was a crowd around the coffee maker, comprised of mostly those that hadn’t received the infamous ‘pink slips’. The tension was so thick that you could have cut it with a knife.

Since the night that they had spent as prisoners of Fuentes and his crew, Lois and Cat had come to an understanding. Lois saw how much George meant to her and Cat had actually grieved with Lois when Clark had been ‘killed’. Something of a greater friendship had developed over the last few months and they were able to converse on a deeper level without sniping at one another anymore.

Cat saw Lois staring at Clark's empty desk and decided it was time to take her friend's mind off of her loss. She wandered over and dropped into Lois's guest chair.

As she did, Lois asked, in a wistful tone, "Cat, do you think much about the future?"

Cat thought how best to reply and decided on honesty, "I didn't use to. To me the future consisted of the next indiscretion by some politician. Now, well, now it's different. I'm different. Now I think about the future all of the time. How about you?"

Lois thought, <I really know how my future will turn out, but I can't say that to Cat.> "I've been thinking a lot about it, lately. I mean, if the Planet went under, I'd be lost." <Or at least I would have been, before Clark.>

Cat tried to console, Lois, "I don't believe it. Not, Lois Lane the best investigative reporter in Metropolis. You'd be back on your feet in no time."

Lois had been wondering about what was happening. She had been off balance because of everything, but sitting here, calmly talking with Cat her mind had started to work. <How could this have happened so quickly? Could this be a result of what Carpenter tried? No, we were bouncing back. What happened? This looks strangely like a hostile take-over. Suddenly the pieces of the puzzle started to fall into place. It hit her — HOSTILE TAKE-OVER! Who was skilled at that and had the money to do it to boot? LEX LUTHOR! Could he be doing this? I told him that the Planet was my life. That son-of-a-b-***! This is his doing! I wish Clark was here. Wait a minute, maybe it's because he isn't. This could be the break we were waiting for.>

Cat had been watching the play of emotions as Lois's facial expressions changed, "What is it?"

Lois snapped out of her reverie and replied, "Uh, maybe." She thought for a second and then decided to enlist Cat's unwitting help, "Something happened recently."

Cat was all ears, "What? Something bad?"

"No, but it may be related to what's happening."

"Don't keep me in suspense. What was it?"

"Lex Luthor proposed to me."

"Whoa! Clark hasn't been dead that long and he's already after you? No respect!"

They were interrupted when Perry approached. Cat looked up and asked, "What's up, Perry?"

Perry had a bemused expression as he replied, "Your guess is as good as mine. I got a call from upstairs to expect an announcement right about ... now."

Right on cue the elevator chime sounded. When the doors opened, Lex Luthor and a coterie of staff stepped out onto the landing. Mrs. Cox, attired for once in a smartly tailored business suit, the skirt of which did not reach her knee, stood at his right hand.

Everyone had turned at the sound of the chime. With the way things had been going today they were expecting even more bad news. A hush fell over the entire newsroom.

Lois put a hint of surprise into her voice, even though she now totally had expected just this eventuality, "Lex?"

He smiled down at her and then looking around at the assembled staff, began his address, "For those of you who don't know me, my name is Lex Luthor." He waited a second looking around. He spotted Jack and his eyes lingered on him for a second before he continued, "I, no less than you, have been greatly distressed by the sea of troubles that has mired Metropolis' one great newspaper. I don't know why your advertisers have deserted you and circulation is down. I don't know why the banks have shut off your credit lines. And I don't know why you depleted your cash reserves through unnecessary expenditures." With this comment he turned and glared at the men in suits that had accompanied him. Some of them, Lois recognized from the various departments 'upstairs'. "Though I have my suspicions."

He paused to let the implied threat sink in. "I do know that the problems can be solved with strong leadership and fiscal responsibility." Again he paused for effect, "Therefore, I have taken the one step that would guarantee the future well-being of this newspaper: I bought it." When that statement didn't elicit the response he had hoped for, he clarified, "I am the new owner of the Daily Planet."

When Luthor started speaking, Lois looked around for Jack and found him on the fringes of the staff. As Luthor spoke, she edged her way over to him.

When she reached him she could see that he was shaking, whether in fear or anger, she could not tell. She whispered to him, "What's the matter, Jack?"

He whispered in her ear, "That's him. That's the guy I sold the globe to. I lied before. I got a glimpse of his face. And that voice, I'd know that voice anywhere."

Lois whispered, "Jack, I want you to go to the Twelfth Precinct. Ask for Inspector Henderson. Tell him what's happening. You are a witness against Luthor and Henderson needs to protect you. We **need** you as a witness."

He whispered back, "Do you think it was him that k... that killed Clark?"

"That's what we suspect. We are going to need you as a witness. You have to go to Henderson. We are trying to nail him and your testimony is key. It is extremely important that you go to Henderson so that he can protect you."

"Okay, but what about Denny?"

"We'll take care of him too. You don't have to worry about him."

He nodded and slipped out before Luthor finished speaking.

Just then a cheer went up and Lois spun around to hear the rest of the address.

Luthor continued, "Today begins a new era. I promise you no interference, only a few minor modifications, and **no** layoffs. Why tamper with greatness?!"

Lois made her way back to her desk as he finished. Jimmy was standing there and as she approached, she heard him say, "Happy days are here again!"

Lois wasn't so sure about that.

Cat enthused, "Isn't it wonderful?"

Lois was non-committal, "Maybe."

Cat asked, "Do you think he did this for you? After all you said he proposed."

Lois was sure that it was exactly that, but not in the way that Cat believed. Lois was now convinced that their advertisers had been either bribed or coerced into pulling their ads. The same for the banks refusing their loan requests. Luthor had so much money in the local banks that a request to shut off the Planet's credit would only require a phone call and a short one at that. Right there was the answer to what had happened to the Planet. She would have to be very careful. She needed to talk to Clark. The lengths Luthor was apparently willing to go to in order to get her were astounding. "I wish he hadn't. We could have worked it out, maybe."

Cat rebutted, "Give him some credit. Lex Luthor has just saved our jobs, not to mention ..."

"What?"

"He asked you to marry him."

Her reply was less than enthusiastic, "Yeah."

That night, Lois made a visit to her sister. Her tail was there all the way from the Planet to the apartment. They had learned to be careful because the apartment was on the first floor. They had put in a request with management for an apartment on the fifth floor, but none had come open as yet.

On the edge of tears, she was a bundle of nerves as she entered the apartment. The first thing she did was to go over to her fish

tank and greet her fish. She gave them a pinch of food which they swam to the surface to eat. Watching them calmed her somewhat. Even if their images were distorted by the water — not the water of the tank — the water of the salty tears that she was fighting hard not to shed. While she was standing there watching the fish she felt a strong pair of arms slowly circle her waist. She lost herself in the embrace for a second, sighed and relaxed back into the arms of her husband, resting her head on his shoulder. He kissed the side of her neck and she sighed again. She murmured, “I’ll give you just two hours to stop that.”

She felt, more than heard his chuckle as he teased the skin of her neck.

Turning in his arms she buried her head in his chest and started to shake and the tears she had been fighting finally won and started to flow. When she did he started to stroke her back in a calming gesture, brushing his fingertips up and down her spine. Concerned, he asked, “What happened, Lois?”

With a little hiccup, she replied, “The Planet ... the Planet has been bought by Luthor.”

“What!?”

Quickly the whole story came tumbling out, “When I got in there this morning I found out that our paychecks were no good and that was the high point, the day went downhill from there. No expense accounts, layoffs, the whole nine yards. Clark, it looked like the paper was going under. It was worse than the Carpenter debacle. Then Lex rode in on his white horse and saved the day. He has to have engineered it somehow. I don’t know how, but he has to be behind it all.” She thought for a few seconds and then said, “I might not know how, but I think I know why. When I turned down his proposal, I told him that since you had died, the Planet was my life and the staff my family. Do you think he’s ...”

“He’s trying to remove your support system. First he got rid of me, his rival and your husband. Now he’s going after the job you love and the people you care about. He wants to make you completely dependent on him.”

“Clark, that can only mean one thing. He plans to get rid of you, Superman you, too. He must have Kryptonite. Oh, Clark!”

He kissed her before he said, “Forewarned is forearmed. From now on, I’ll be on the lookout for it.”

“What if he shoots you with a Kryptonite bullet or something?”

With a grim look he said, “I’ll just have to be watching for that and be extra careful. If this is actually what is happening, then Perry’s, Jimmy’s, Jack’s even Cat’s jobs are in jeopardy. If, as we suspect, he is trying to remove your support structure, then they are targets. I don’t think he will fire them, that would be too obvious and obvious is not Luthor’s way. He’ll be subtle.”

“Oh, Jack! Jack told me that he recognized Luthor and I’m sure that Luthor recognized him as well. I sent Jack to Henderson. I told him to explain what was happening. Hopefully he will place Jack in protective custody. We may need to do something about Denny as well.”

“We definitely need to take care of Denny. Luthor could use him as leverage against Jack.”

The next day, as Perry walked into the bullpen, it looked almost like business as usual. People were scurrying around working on stories. As he approached his office he did see one odd thing. On a previously blank wall, a workman was hanging a large picture of Lex Luthor.

Perry shrugged it off and headed for his office. As he entered, he saw that Lex Luthor had taken over his desk and the annoyance and unease he had been feeling since yesterday started coming to the fore. Luthor was speaking to an individual wearing a Savile Row suit, standing in front of the desk.

Seeing Perry enter, Lex transferred his attention to him and said in a placating tone, “Morning, Perry. I hope you’ll forgive

this intrusion, but my office won’t be ready until tomorrow and I needed a quiet place to make some calls.”

Hearing the tone and explanation, Perry was somewhat mollified and, in a less gruff tone that he was about to use, said, “Uh, well, no problem. Now, if you’ll excuse me ...” Perry started to turn to leave the office.

Before he had a chance to exit, Luthor stopped him by asking, “I don’t believe you’ve met Chip Peterson, have you?”

The guy in the smartly tailored suit turned to greet Perry. When he turned and Perry saw him he took an instant dislike to him. He was young, apparently younger than Lois, perhaps Jimmy’s age and Perry didn’t like his expression. He gauged his answer carefully, “No, I don’t believe I have.”

Chip turned on the charm as he said, ingratiatingly, “A pleasure to meet you, sir. I’m a great admirer of your work. You’ve had such an illustrious career.”

Perry caught the tone, sickly sweet and condescending. It took a second for the words to actually penetrate as he automatically started to reply, “Thank you, I ... Wait a minute, ‘had?’”

Luthor interrupted, “Chip is just out of Harvard Business School. Top of his class. He’s very interested in journalism.”

Perry warmed to the topic, “Well, son, it’s a fine profession. ‘Course it takes a lot of hard work and dedication. It’s not what you’d call a fast track.”

That was when Luthor chose to drop the bomb, “Chip is our new Supervising Editor-in-Chief.”

It took Perry a few seconds to digest his statement. Finally, in a bewildered tone, he said, “Supervising ... !?”

Chip interrupted, “Don’t worry, Mr. White. We’ll make the transition as smooth and painless as possible.”

A look bordering on anger took over Perry’s features and his face started to flush as his blood pressure started to climb. Chip was close enough that Perry was able to reach out and place his hands on his shoulders, which he did, and looking him straight in the eyes said, “Son, will you excuse us?”

Chip protested, “That won’t be necessary.”

As Perry hauled Chip to the door and shoved him out he said, “I think it is,” and slammed the door in his face as he tried to reenter. Turning on Luthor, Perry’s anger was very evident.

Seeing that his plan was working, Luthor feigned innocence and surprise as he almost shouted, “Perry!”

Perry moved over and loomed over ‘his’ desk which Luthor was occupying and challenged, “Did you or did you not just make that featherbrained, snot-nosed, pimply-faced, under-aged cow ‘Chip’ my boss?”

Smugly, Luthor replied, “That’s one possible interpretation.”

Perry bellowed, “Here’s another. Get the hell out of my office, and stay out!”

Luthor smugly brought his hands up and steepled his fingers as he settled back more firmly in the chair. The look on his face was calculated to irritate Perry further as he said, “Perry, you’re overreacting. My management style may not be exactly what you and the Daily Planet are used to, but give it time. We’ll **learn** to adapt, compromise, work together. Maybe even to love each other. Think of this ... as our honeymoon period.” His tone was conciliatory, but his words were not and achieved the object that he was striving for.

Straightening slowly Perry appeared to be making up his mind. Finally he said the words that Luthor wanted to hear, “Think of this as our divorce. Period.” Turning he strode out the door, slamming it closed behind him. Before he had taken two steps though, he turned and reopened the door. Reaching up and to the side of the door, he picked a picture of Elvis from its hanger and tucked it under his arm. Giving Luthor a dirty look and leaving once again slammed the door, this time so hard that the glass rattled in the frame.

Watching Perry’s retreating back; Luthor started to smile and

then sighed with satisfaction. That had actually gone better than he had planned. Chip stepping back into the office distracted Lex so he did not see what followed.

Lois was arriving and as she was stepping out of the elevator, she found Perry waiting to take it down. Seeing him with an Elvis picture under his arm and his flushed face, Lois knew that something was up and rather than step out of the elevator, stepped back allowing Perry to enter.

Hardly acknowledging Lois, Perry pressed the down button.

Lois allowed the car to descend until it was between floors and then she hit the 'stop' button. Turning to face Perry, she challenged, "Okay, Perry. What happened?"

Looking at her with more than a little disgust, Perry said, "That new boyfriend of yours just hired a snot-nosed kid to be my BOSS!"

"What'd you do?"

"I quit! I'm not going to report to someone younger than my sons!"

Lois looked around and then decided that discretion was the better part of valor. She said, "I'm sorry you saw it that way," then she reached over and pulled the 'stop' button back out. She pushed the down button and rode down with him. As the car was about to stop in the lobby, Lois leaned in, making it look like she was kissing Perry on the cheek, but in reality she was whispering to him. "Things aren't always what they appear to be. Take a few days and go to your fishing cabin. You will be contacted."

As she was whispering to him, his facial features started to change, then realizing that she was being covert, he quickly schooled his features back to angry so that when he exited the lobby cameras would show what he wanted them to show.

When Lois finally stepped out of the elevator and into the newsroom, she was almost bumped into by Jimmy. He was carrying a box full of personal items and it was piled so high that he couldn't see over it.

Stepping aside, Lois stopped him and asked, "What are **you** doing?"

Jimmy's answer was succinct, "Cleaning out my desk."

Lois was surprised. She blurted out, "But I thought you got your job back."

"Right. I got a job, but not the job I used to have. I report to the printing plant tomorrow." He was shaking his head as he sadly said, "I'm having a hard time seeing this as a lateral career move."

Lois was becoming more and more irritated. All of the things that she and Clark had discussed last night were happening. Making her way to her desk, she brought up her computer and her word processor to work on her current article while she waited for the next shoe to drop.

A few minutes later, Luthor exited the office and approached Eduardo's desk. He had a printout in his hand and he didn't look happy. Eduardo was an old hand. He had already been there as a reporter when Lois started as a probationary. As Luthor approached, Eduardo looked up.

Seeing Luthor in the bullpen, Lois stood and moved closer so that she could overhear the exchange. She was behind Luthor, so he didn't know she was there.

Luthor leaned over Eduardo's desk. His manner was friendly, but confrontational, "Excellent piece of writing, Eduardo, but I think we'll hold off on running it."

Eduardo challenged, "Why? It's a hot topic."

Luthor countered, "'Controversial' would be a better word."

Eduardo reposted, "Allegations of excessive rate hikes at Metropolis Electric is 'controversial'?"

Luthor replied, "That **necessary** rate hikes are 'excessive' is **your** opinion, not the opinion of this paper."

Eduardo challenged, "This wouldn't have anything to do with your being on the Board of Metropolis Electric, would it?"

Apparently, Eduardo had struck a nerve because Luthor jerked

upright and said in an insulting tone, "That inference is insulting and unprofessional. I expected more from you, Fraise."

Eduardo challenged, "Is this how it's going to be, Luthor? The 'free press' is free only to do your bidding? You are starting to sound like Preston Carpenter."

Luthor was turning away as he said, angrily, "If you don't feel 'free' enough around here, Fraise, you're 'free' to leave." The way he turned, he didn't see Lois or realize that she had overheard.

As she approached Eduardo's desk she heard him mutter, "Why tamper with greatness?"

Rather than speaking with Eduardo, Lois turned on her heel and followed Luthor. He was just settling into Perry's chair when she entered.

Looking up he saw her and his entire demeanor changed. He smiled and said, "Lois, just the woman I wanted to see."

Lois had to pretend that she didn't know what was going on so she asked, in a heated tone, "Lex, what's going on? Did you fire Perry?"

Always the consummate actor, Lex put on a hurt expression as if he were being accused unjustly. "What? No, of course not. I just hired another fellow to work with him. Take some of the load off."

Knowing that she needed to behave in character, Lois defended Perry, "But Perry wants the load. He won't accept this. He'll quit."

Feigning shock, Lex said, "I sincerely hope not. It would be a great loss to the paper. If he only weren't so resistant to progress." He rose from the chair and paced for a few seconds, finally stopping, he leaned on a file cabinet and looked sincerely at Lois before continuing, "If I've made a mistake ... I'd better talk to him. I'll apologize."

Not letting up, Lois challenged, "And Jimmy?" And what about Eduardo? What were you arguing about?"

Luthor put on an act of magnanimity as he replied, "I gave Jimmy a job, the only one available. I'll have him back up here as soon as humanly possible. I promise. By the way, wasn't there another young man? A copy boy? I think his name was, Jack." Lois did not react to the name so he paused a second before addressing the rest, "As for Eduardo, he seems to have this unreasonable hostility toward me. I don't know why. I have nothing but respect for him. His work has always been top tier." He paused as if considering his words carefully, "Lois, I'm working to save the Planet. Give me a chance. Trust me. Everything will turn out fine."

Lois felt that she needed to cover for Jack. She said, dismissively, "I haven't see Jack since yesterday. He might have decided to find himself another job." She pasted a fake smile on her face and then added to the lie, "He really didn't fit in around here anyhow." She turned and left the office. She didn't see the predatory smile that crossed Lex's lips as she did.

She made her way to Eduardo's desk and tried to encourage him, "It's going to work out fine, Eduardo. Trust me. Just give it time. Things will turn around."

Chapter 6

As Lois was about to turn away from Eduardo, he muttered, "Incredible."

Lois stopped and looked at him. She asked, "What?"

Eduardo decided that it was time for a confrontation. "You! Kent has only been missing for a few months and already you are taking up with Luthor and defending him. You still don't even know what happened to Clark and you are already globetrotting with Luthor." Noting the shocked expression on her face at this statement, he pressed on, "Don't play innocent with me. Everyone knows. The fact that you are the only one defending him is telling. Lois, you are an award winning investigative journalist."

Lois was shocked. She hadn't anticipated this kind of response

from Eduardo, quiet, laid back, Eduardo. She asked, “Is there a point?”

Eduardo glanced in the direction of the office as he said, “How can you be so blind? I mean, you look right at the guy and you don’t have a clue who he really is. I should think that after Kent you’d never look twice at someone like Luthor. It’s like you’ve forgotten him already.”

Realizing that she had to be careful with what she said because she still didn’t know who the spy in the newsroom was, Lois leaned in and spoke, quietly, “Eduardo, trust me, I know exactly who he is. I know Lex didn’t reach his station in life by being a nice guy. But look at the **good** he’s done. Luthor Hospital, Luthor Home for Children, Luthor Foundation for the Arts. Not to mention employing hundreds of thousands of people in Metropolis and, most recently, saving our jobs.”

“Lois, all of those good works is just camouflage. A cover to hide what he really is ... a cut-throat businessman. He’ll do anything for the bottom line. He apparently is attracted to you. He treats you differently from everyone else. I wouldn’t be surprised if he proposed marriage to you.”

Lois replied in a heartfelt tone, “He did, but as to Clark, he is never far from me.” She held out her left hand and said, “This ring symbolizes Clark. It embodies our relationship. As long as I possess this ring, I possess Clark and he possesses me.”

“But for how long. How long will it take for you to throw him over for Luthor? How long before you accept Luthor’s proposal?”

Clark was sitting at the breakfast table with his parents and they were discussing the investigation.

“So, Luthor bought the Planet. Did you anticipate that move?”

“We knew he would be doing something, Mom. Lois let slip that the Planet was her ‘home’ and the staff her ‘family’. We knew that Luthor wanted to get rid of me so that he could have her. Now he wants to force her to depend on him by removing that ‘family’. Yesterday, Lois sent Jack to Bill Henderson. Bill immediately placed him and his brother in protective custody as one of our star witnesses.”

“What about, Lois, son?”

“Right now, Dad, we think she is safe. As long as Luthor has signs on her, he won’t do anything to drive her away. She has to string him along until we can gather the final pieces of evidence that we need to put him away.”

“I wish Lois wasn’t doing this. With all that you’ve told us about Luthor, it could be dangerous.”

“We know, Mom. I’m keeping an eye on her.”

“You can’t be there for her 24x7, son.”

“I know, Dad and that’s what has me worried. So far we’ve almost been able to predict what Luthor is going to do. It is surprising how quickly he moves though.”

“You need to think about it like it’s a chess game. Luthor has planned his moves. You need to plan yours accordingly. That’s the only way to finish this and get back to normal.”

“Yeah, Dad, you’re right.” Clark was thoughtful for a second before he continued, “You know, all I’ve ever wanted was a normal life, well at least as normal as it can be for someone with my abilities. To find someone and settle down and have a family. All those years wandering the globe ... then I moved to Metropolis. Remember?”

“Yes, we do, Clark. At first we were concerned how it would turn out.”

“It still amazes me that I found what I was looking for, finally, Lois. As soon as I arrived in Metropolis I knew it was where I wanted to be. Then I met Lois. I didn’t know it at first or maybe I just didn’t want to admit it to myself, but she was the woman I wanted to spend my life with.”

“Your father and I are just glad that the two of you are together now.” Martha laughed and added, “You might not have admitted it

to yourself, but your father and I knew right from the first that you spoke about her that you were in love with her. It was written all over you.”

“Having to be away from her this way ... I think it’s hurting our relationship. I can’t help but worry about the attention Luthor is paying to her.”

“Oh, Honey, I don’t think you have anything to worry about. I’m sure Lois misses you just as much as you miss her.”

“I guess you’re right, Mom. It’s just ...”

“I know, it’s still new. You’re newlyweds and you’ve been thrown into this situation, but your love will see you through. Your father and I have confidence in the both of you. Clark, we love Lois just as much as you do, maybe not exactly the same way, but we do. She’s the perfect daughter. We couldn’t have picked a better girl for you if we had tried. You know, when you dated Lana, we had some concerns. Now, Rachel, she was a different story. I could have seen you with Rachel, but that never happened and actually, I’m glad. Lois is the perfect wife for you. She compliments you. She is rash where you are cautious. She pushes you to be a better man.”

Jonathan reached over, took Martha’s hand and said, “It’s a gamble, son, but when you find the right woman, it makes everything worthwhile. I found mine more than thirty years ago. It paid off. You have found yours and you have been happier ever since you did than you ever were.”

Just then the phone rang and Martha moved to answer it. “Kent residence.”

In a hushed tone, Martha heard, “Is you-know-who there?”

Picking up on the need for secrecy she held the phone out to Clark and mouthed, “Lois.”

Fearing the worst, he grabbed the phone. Cautiously he said, “Hello.”

She whispered, so low that only with the use of super-hearing could he hear, “New recruit. Meet Perry at his fishing cabin. He’ll explain what’s happening.”

“All right. I’m on it.” He hung the phone up.

Picking up on his expression, Jonathan asked, “What’s happening, son?”

“I don’t know, Dad, but apparently I’m supposed to meet Perry White at his fishing cabin. Lois said that he’d explain what was happening and that he was a new recruit, whatever that means.”

“Could she mean in the Luthor investigation?”

Thoughtfully, he replied, “Maybe. I wonder what happened.”

Martha, always the practical one, said, “Well, don’t wait around here. Go find out.”

After leaving his parent’s house, Clark, as Superman, did a fly-over of Perry White’s fishing cabin. The cabin was empty, but he saw Perry’s car on the access road.

He flew back to Metropolis and changed into his Charlie King disguise, jeans and a ripped T-shirt, leather jacket, spiked hair, fake beard and shades and then borrowed Lucy’s car for the trip to the cabin.

When he arrived he parked next to Perry’s car and climbed out.

Perry had heard the car approaching and stepped out onto the porch. He looked at Clark with curiosity as he approached. Apparently the disguise worked because Perry asked, “You lost, friend?”

Clark smiled and replied, “I don’t think so, Chief.” Clark reached into his pocket and pulled out his glasses and as he slipped off the shades, replaced them with his regular ones.

Perry put a hand to his chest and said in a tone of disbelief, “Clark? Clark Kent? Is that really you?”

“Yeah, Perry, it’s me. In the flesh.”

“But you’ve been missing and presumed dead for months

now.”

“Well, Perry, as you can see, I’m neither missing nor am I dead. I’m undercover.”

Perry started to smile and said, “Yeah, I can see that now. Okay, what’s the story? Why the get-up. Why the missing and presumed dead?”

“Let’s go in and sit down. This is going to be a long story.”

“Sure, come on in. I think there’s some sodas in the fridge. You want one?”

“Thanks, Perry. That sounds good.”

Once they both had beverages in hand, Clark started to explain, “For some time, Lois and I have suspected that Luthor is actually the boss behind all of the rackets in Metropolis. He has fixated on Lois. He has decided that he has to have her, at all costs. There were two other attempts on my life before the one that I disappeared after. Obviously none of them succeeded. Bill Henderson has been helping in the investigation. He helped me disappear. We were hoping that by allowing Luthor to court Lois she would be able to get on the inside and get the final pieces of evidence that we need to put him away. We have the ones that tried to kill me in custody. After the third attempt, Superman caught Nigel St. John at the scene. Bill has him in custody and he is spilling his guts, but we need more. Lois told me that you would fill me in on what is happening.”

As Clark had been speaking, Perry’s expression had gone from joyful to thoughtful. Then he started to speak, “Well, son, that all fits. That was the final piece of the puzzle. With his connections, I can see how Luthor pulled it off. After you disappeared, things at the Planet started going downhill. A little too fast, if you asked me. Looks like Luthor pulled some strings or else he bribed some people, anyhow the Planet was going down and he came riding in on his white horse like the white knight to save the Planet by buying it. Looking back on it now, I think he deliberately hired that kid to replace me just so that I would quit.”

Shocked, Clark asked, “He did what?”

“Hired some snot-nosed kid fresh out of Harvard or Yale or one of those schools and put him over me.”

“What did you do?”

“Probably exactly what he expected me to do. I quit.”

“Perry, you can’t do that. We need to make it look like he succeeded, but not on his terms, ours. Go back, apologize and tell him that you are retiring. That way you go out on good terms. Can you do that?”

“I’ll have to swallow my pride, but yeah. I can do that.”

“Good, then you can join the task force that is investigating Luthor.”

“Task force?”

“Yeah, well it’s a small task force. Lois, Bill, me and, of course, Superman. Now we can add you and I’m going to approach Jack. He is one of our witnesses.”

Perry was stunned, “Jack? Jack the copy-boy?”

“Yeah. He’s the one that broke into our apartment and stole our stuff. By identifying Luthor as the receiver of stolen goods he was the first link in the chains that are going to secure Luthor in prison for a very long time. I got him the job at the Planet so that I could help him and his brother and also keep an eye on him. He’s really a good kid that was put into a bad situation.”

The next morning, Lois arrived at the Planet and was appalled to see the state the newsroom was in. So many familiar faces were missing that it didn’t seem like the same place anymore. The relationship that she had with Cat had been changing over the last several months, ever since she and George had started dating. She had become less competitive with Lois. As she approached Cat’s desk, Cat had her feet up on the corner, a catalogue open in her lap and the phone to her ear.

Lois had come in planning to speak to Cat about George and

see if he had heard anything through the LexCorp grapevine about the Planet. When she was by Cat’s desk she said, “Cat, I need to talk to you.”

Without removing the phone from her ear, she said, “Give me a minute. This is important.” Apparently the service operator came on the line just then because Cat said into the phone, “Grant. G ... R ... A ... N ... T ...” She read from the mailing label, “Catalogue number B2C9141. I.D. number 77466L.” Then she rattled off from memory, “Work number 217-555-9241. Home number 217-555-2364.” In answer to a question she said, “Yes.” Picking up her credit card, she started reading, “Card number 9236-7249-3820-6423. Expiration 1-1-95.” She picked up the catalog and looking at it read off the pertinent information, “Item number L as in ‘lame,’ C as in ‘comatose,’ 2, 4, D, as in ‘dim-witted.’ Color code: wheat. Size: 6B.” She waited a second for a reply and after getting one was very unhappy, “What do you mean ‘discontinued?’ No I *don’t* have another selection. You mean I just told you every intimate detail of my life for nothing?! Yes, I *would* like to speak to your supervisor.”

Seeing that Cat was going to be tied up, Lois said, “I’ll catch you later, okay?”

Cat nodded in reply.

That morning, Jimmy had reported to work in the printing plant. Instead of his normal business casual attire he was wearing a workman’s coverall. After punching in on the time clock he went to the shop steward for his work assignment.

“Ah, the new ugly person.”

“Huh?”

He laughed and said, “That’s just a nickname we give to a utility worker. It’s an ugly job because you don’t know from one hour to the next what you will be doing. You’ll come to me for your assignments.”

Just then the presses started up and they had to start yelling to be heard over the noise. The steward pointed off to the side and said, “In a closet over there you’ll find a broom. Start off by sweeping up.”

Jimmy nodded and started his assignment. He found a broom with a wide head and started pushing it around the floor collecting debris in piles that he collected and deposited in receptacles. While he was working, he started to wonder about Jack. He had disappeared just as they found out that they still had jobs. When he finished that job the steward had him assist in delivering ink to the printers. It was hot and sweaty work and Jimmy wiped his forehead. When he did he left a streak of ink across it making him look like an Indian in war paint.

It was almost time for lunch when Mrs. Cox, dressed in a workman’s coverall and a ball cap walked through the plant and set a lunchbox on a table among others. Without stopping she walked out through the other side of the plant.

Jimmy was on the far side of the plant, dragging some heavily laden bags of trash out to the dumpster when the bomb went off.

Chapter 7

Perry had shown up that morning to ‘clear the air’ with Luthor. Lois had seen Perry in the office when she arrived and was anxious as to the outcome.

When he came out, Lois approached him. She put her arms around him in a hug which he returned. She asked, “How did it go?”

As he started to speak, he gave her a slow wink, “I just can’t work under that young whipper-snapper so I decided to retire. Maybe I’ll do some fishin’.”

Lois picked up on his message and smiled in return. She said, “I’m sure it’ll all work out.”

He nodded and moved to the elevator to leave as she walked

to Luthor's office.

When she opened the door, Luthor saw her and said, "I tried! I honestly tried to get him to see reason, but no matter what I said, he was adamant. He decided to retire, can you believe that?"

Lois replied, "Perhaps it's all for the best." She turned and left.

Luthor followed Lois when she left the office, muttering something about a meeting. Ten minutes after he left the office was when the bomb went off. The entire building was shaken, causing the floor beneath her feet to lurch, almost throwing her off her feet and the noise was deafening.

She didn't know what it was, but she started to shout, "Out! Everyone, get out!"

Her urging was almost unnecessary because everyone was headed for the elevator anyhow. She shouted, "Not the elevator! It isn't safe! Use the stairs!" The flood of humanity changed direction and poured down the stairs.

As they did, there were secondary explosions, as if someone had mined the building and these were being set off by sympathetic detonation.

Alarms were sounding and there was smoke and dust everywhere.

Clark, as Superman, was keeping close tabs on Lois so he was near the Planet when the bomb went off. At super-speed he dove and crashed through a window into the printing plant. He saw the damage and the fire that had been started. The fire had set off the sprinkler system and he helped it out by using his super-breath. Once the fire was out, he started to evacuate the injured. He was happy to see as he passed by that Jimmy was shaken up, but not injured and was making his way out of the building with other members of the printing plant staff.

He had just gotten the last person out when he saw the stairs in the emergency exit start to give way under the weight of humanity on it with his x-ray vision. He zipped up there and supported the stairs until all had safely passed.

As staff gathered in the street there were more and more violent explosions. Suddenly the windows in the entire first floor exploded outward! At super-speed, Superman flew back and forth between the crowd and the building. He was moving so fast that he was just a solid blur forming a red and blue wall between the spectators and the glass from the windows.

When the force of the explosions had spent themselves, Superman stopped and tried to assess the damage and moved from person to person to see if he needed to fly anyone to the hospital.

Jimmy was among the last to stagger out. Superman spotted Lois and Perry standing off to one side. Perry hadn't gotten very far before the explosions brought him back. Superman assisted Jimmy to a position near Lois and Perry. He asked, "You'll watch him?"

The love obvious in her eyes, Lois smiled at her husband and said, "Of course."

Superman had doused the fires in the printing plant, but there were secondary fires scattered throughout the building.

As the fire department rolled up, he approached the fire chief and asked, "How's your water pressure?"

The chief replied, "It's good, but we'll never get our lines up there."

With a determined look, Superman said, "Yes, you will." Grabbing a hose from the ground, Superman levitated up until he was at an open window. He signaled and the water was turned on. Moving from window to window he succeeded in snuffing out most of the fire, leaving only small areas for the firemen to extinguish.

As Superman was fighting the blaze, he had an audience consisting of the firemen and the staffers from the Planet, including Lois and Jimmy. As they saw the flames snuffed they all started to applaud.

Jimmy was relieved, and said, "Incredible. How many times has he just stepped in and saved our lives? What a guy." Jimmy started to cough and say, "Oh Lois, we ..." That was when he collapsed from smoke inhalation.

There was a flurry of activity for several hours as police and fire inspectors went through the building. There was still water running out through the front doors and dripping from windowsills. Blackened, charred pieces of paper and construction debris still floated in the air.

Perry, in a desultory tone said, "Gone. All ... gone."

Lois, her voice firm and no-nonsense said, "We'll rebuild."

Having recovered, somewhat, Jimmy echoed her sentiment, "Sure we will."

Shaking his head, Perry said, "This is about the worst thing I could imagine."

Suddenly, from behind them they heard Luthor's voice and they all turned around as he said, "**Not** the worst."

As they turned they saw Luthor approaching with some police and the Fire Chief in tow.

Luthor continued, "The worst would be that one of our own employees set this fire deliberately." He pointed at Jimmy and accused, "That's him."

Jimmy and Lois shouted, simultaneously, "No!"

Jimmy took a step back in shock, unfortunately to the police it looked like he was going to flee so they quickly grabbed him.

Jimmy shouted, "No! Let me go. I didn't do **anything**."

Perry shouted, "Luthor, this is a mistake."

Lois pleaded, "Lex ..."

Luthor replied, "No mistake. The incendiary device that did this was in **his** lunch pail, and the police found the explosives he used to make it hidden in his room. We all know about his criminal background. Reform school graduate."

Luthor made a motion with his hands and the police hauled Jimmy off, still protesting his innocence.

Luthor said, in a sad tone, "A sad day for all of us."

Perry was devastated and said, "A historic day. Tomorrow, for the first time in two hundred nineteen years, there will be no edition of the Daily Planet."

Superman was still staying close to Lois although he was trying to be inconspicuous, a hard thing to do when wearing bright primary colors.

Spotting him, Lois looked at him and whispered, "Get Henderson to help." She saw him nod that he understood and then she saw him take off.

A couple of days later, Perry, Lois and Cat were gathered in the street watching as the Daily Planet globe was lowered onto a flatbed trailer. While the shipping crew were shoring up the globe so that it wouldn't roll off, the building inspectors were posting signs declaring that the building was condemned.

It was an emotional time for all three of them. Lois could see the tears welling up in Perry's eyes as he saw what was happening and stepping up to him, wrapped her arms around him in a hug. She tried to help by saying, "It's okay, Chief. We'll bounce back."

Perry shook his head and swiped at a tear as he said, "I'm afraid the Planet and I are all bounced out. 'Will not-reopen in the foreseeable future' was the phrase Luthor used at the press conference."

Cat tried to help, "Come on. I'll buy you guys a cup of coffee." As they started to move away, Cat looked back over her shoulder and said, a tone of sadness in her voice, "I always wanted to be a reporter for the Daily Planet. It begins to look like those days are over."

Once they were at a coffee shop they sat in a booth together. After placing their orders, Lois asked, "What are you guys going to do?"

Perry huffed and said, “I had just told Luthor that I wanted to retire. He approved my retirement, just before the bomb went off.”

Lois sighed in relief, “Well, then you’re taken care of.” She turned to Cat and asked, “What about you?”

Cat looked down, embarrassed by what she was going to say, “I think I’m going to be moving.”

Lois queried, “Cheaper apartment?”

She started to color. “Actually. No. George asked me to move in with him and he asked me to marry him.”

Lois was startled and sputtered, “Cat! Married?”

“Yeah, kinda came as a surprise to me too.”

“Surprise that he asked?”

“No, a surprise that I accepted. George is really a super sweet guy. He makes me happy and apparently I make him happy too. He got an offer from Antioch University to teach Physics. All of his family is in Seattle so he will be going home and I’ll be going with him. I’m going to be a professor’s wife. I may do some freelance work, just to keep my hand in, you understand.”

Lois threw her arms around Cat gave her a hug and said, “Cat, I don’t know what to say. That’s simply wonderful and not totally unexpected. When we were prisoners together, Clark and I could see the way the wind was blowing.”

Cat returned the hug and said, “Yeah, I’ll be fine, but what about you. You lost Clark, now the Planet is gone. Perry is retiring and we don’t even know where Jimmy is now. He disappeared from the lock-up he was in.”

Over cat’s shoulder, Perry gave Lois a wink of understanding and then put on a sad face in case Cat turned around and saw him.

Perry stepped over and grabbed the pot of coffee and refilled their mugs. He decided that it was time to distract Cat so he started to reminisce, but seeing the waitress headed his way, he said, “I got it, Candy,” as he poured showing that he knew the staff. Then thoughtfully he started to speak, “You know, I was only seventeen years old when I came here the first time. I had an interview with old man Krebbs — assistant copy boy — and I was already late. But I stood under that globe and just stared at it. I knew that my future was in that building.”

Cat said, “I didn’t always want to be the gossip queen. There was a period when I wanted to do hard news. It just didn’t work out.” She used her hands to indicate her body as she said, “Look at me. Nobody would take me seriously. All they could see was a beautiful, no, a very beautiful woman. They didn’t care that I have a degree in Art History and can tell a Picasso from a Rodin.”

Cat turned to Lois and asked, “What are you going to do? Clark is gone. The Planet is gone.”

Lois replied, “Oh, something’ll turn up. I’ll land on my feet.”

Looking at her watch, Cat said, “I’ve got to go. I’m supposed to meet George. He’s helping me move my stuff to his apartment. Most of it will probably stay packed until we get to Seattle.”

As she started to get up, Perry said, “I have to go too. I’m supposed to be meeting Alice.” He looked back and forth between them and said, “No matter what happens, I want you to know ... you’re the best I’ve ever worked with.”

Lois was all alone in the booth, but out of the corner of her eye, she saw her shadow.

Making up her mind, Lois exited. Cat had already paid the bill so she didn’t have to worry about that. Walking to her Jeep, she climbed in and drove to LexTower. It was time to see just how far Lex was going to take things. She stepped into the express elevator. She was identified by security and the lock was taken off so that when she pushed the button the elevator ascended.

When she stepped out of the elevator, she was in an alcove. Stepping through, she entered his study. Luthor was breakfasting in a high-back chair with a tray. Mrs. Cox was at his side. Lex stood as Lois came in and tried to give her a kiss, but she turned so that the kiss was on the cheek.

Lex was obviously disappointed by this and tried to cover it,

“Lois! What a surprise.” He was a little embarrassed that Mrs. Cox was there since it was Lois that he wanted. “I don’t believe you two are acquainted. Lois Lane, Mrs. Cox.”

Mrs. Cox was frosty as she said, “So pleased to meet you.” As Luthor resumed his seat, Mrs. Cox placed a hand on Lex’s shoulder in a very possessive gesture.

Lois noted this and filed it away for future reference. She should be able to use that against her or him in the future.

Luthor explained their relationship, “Mrs. Cox is my personal assistant.”

Lois was curious as to just what the relationship was so she asked, “And what, exactly, does a personal assistant do?”

Mrs. Cox almost smirked as she replied, “Whatever’s necessary.”

At a signal from Lex, Mrs. Cox left. Lois noted the exaggerated sway of her hips as she did so and the attention that Lex paid to it. Inwardly, Lois was pleased. She said, “Lex ... I need your help.”

Lex put down his fork, patted his lips with a napkin of fine linen and asked, “What with?”

“With rebuilding the Daily Planet.”

Chapter 8

In reply to Lois’s plea to resurrect the Daily Planet, Luthor sat back in his chair and said, “Lois, there isn’t an advertiser in this city that I could count on for revenue. Besides, the Planet was pitifully under-insured. Rebuilding makes no economic sense.” He shrugged and trying to sound reasonable, said, “I’d like to, but I can’t. I have the other stockholders to think of.” He was barely able to contain his smile of satisfaction. Things were working out just as he had planned. He had even anticipated her plea to rebuild. He knew that he was crushing her world and hoped that by pulling all of her supports out from under her that she would tumble into his arms for the support she needed and thereafter tumble into his bed as well. Looking at her he could almost imagine the feel of her naked breasts in his hands.

For her part, Lois was concerned for her friends and what had happened to all of them. She felt bad about the situation, but she and Clark had discussed it and she knew this was for the best. Her co-workers would be receiving unemployment compensation. It wasn’t like their regular paycheck, but it was better than nothing and if it meant bringing down this monster in human form, then so be it. She had to play her part and right now that part meant convincing Luthor that he had won. “But everyone’s so lost ... No one knows where or if they’ll find another job ... Perry’s decided to take an early retirement.”

Still trying to sound reasonable and not gloating, Luthor said, “Is that all bad? Perry deserves retirement. He’s worked too hard for too many years. Let him enjoy life for a change.”

Lois had to appear to put up a fight, but that he was actually winning so she pleaded, “His life was the Planet. Mine, too.” By adding that last she gave him the impression that he was achieving his goal.

Luthor thought he could smell the blood in the water and, like a shark circling its prey, he nudged, “Lois, I know you called the Planet home. But I can make another home for you.”

She knew what he was offering and she needed to keep it from looking too easy so she said, “Lex, I couldn’t just sit around organizing dinner parties. I need to work.” By saying that she gave him the impression that she was considering his proposal. She hoped that her acting skills were up to the task. She was walking a very fine line and the slightest slip could spell disaster.

Feeling that he was winning, Lex decided to press his perceived advantage, “I know that, my darling. That’s why I have a job for you. At Luthor News Network.”

Lois hadn’t expected this and blurted out, “Television? I’m a

print journalist!”

Trying to sound eminently reasonable and persuasive, Luthor said, “The on-ramp to the information super-highway. The future is five hundred interactive channels of television viewing. Let me show you around this afternoon.”

Reasoning that by appearing to be won over, slowly, she would be able to move things in the direction that she wanted, she said, “I guess it won’t do any harm to take a look.”

Lex smiled at her reply and said, “That’s my girl. Speaking of which ...” Luthor had prepared for this eventuality and reaching into his pocket, pulled out the ring box and opened it before asking, “Have you reached a decision?”

Still needing to play for time, Lois said, “Not ... quite yet. Soon. There’s something I have to settle first.”

Luthor nodded in understanding, but secretly he was fuming. He had removed her husband. Now he had removed her ‘family’ of co-workers and her ‘home’ away from home. What more did she have to rely upon? As he thought about that, he started to frown. There was still one thing left ... Superman. He needed to get rid of that final support so that he could have her and for that he needed that Kryptonite. He glanced at his calendar and said, “I have a meeting. Shall we meet at the LNN offices at ... say ... two P.M.?”

Lois thought a second and said, “Two will be fine.” She turned and headed out. She needed to talk to Clark.

Lois returned to the apartment. As soon as she was inside she dropped her bag and headed for the phone. When it was answered, she heard a non-committal, “Hello?”

Lowering her voice, she said, “We need to talk. Do you think you could get me out of here without my shadow seeing us?”

Instead of a reply on the phone, she heard a voice behind her as she heard the click of the phone being hung up, “I think we can manage that.”

She hung up the phone and, turning to him said, “Now that’s what I call service.” She ran to him and threw herself into his arms. They kissed briefly and then he scooped her up. He said, “Grab my cape and pull it over you. We are going to have to move fast, faster than you are used to.”

As she reached for his cape she said, “Okay.” She pulled the cape over herself and then felt sudden motion and had an instant of vertigo then, a few seconds later he was saying, “Okay, you can uncover now.”

As she removed the cape she was able to look down and see that they were on a rooftop. She looked around and saw that they were a lot higher than the other buildings around them. It was a flat area and there were landing lights as for a helipad. She asked, “Where are we?”

Clark smirked and said, “Top of LexTower. Last place in the world he would think to look for you.”

She smiled and asked, “Ironic, isn’t it?”

He put her on her feet and asked, “Okay, why the SOS?”

“Things are going just the way you figured they would. You already know he bombed the Planet so that he would remove me from my comfort zone. The staff is scattered to the four winds. What we hadn’t anticipated was ... a little while ago he offered me a position with LNN.”

“But you’re a print journalist.”

She chuckled and said, “That’s just what I said. He seems to think I could make a go of it. Look, it’s just another way for him to be the white knight, riding in on his white horse to save the fair maiden. He wants me dependent on him so that I’ll come to him and marry him.”

“We knew we were taking a risk when you told him how much you identify with the Planet and depended on your job. I just didn’t think even Luthor would go to those extremes. He really is ruthless when it comes to getting what he wants, isn’t he?”

“How can we turn that against him?”

“Much as I hate to say it, you may have to give in and accept his proposal.”

In response to his statement, Lois pulled her left hand up and cradled it to her breast with her right hand. “I don’t want to remove my ... **your** ring.”

“You may have to in order for you to get on the inside.”

“Then I want you to hold them for me.” With obvious reluctance, Lois pulled the rings off of her finger. She looked at them for a long time lovingly before she finally closed her eyes and stuck out her hand with them on her open palm for him to take. He didn’t take them immediately and when he didn’t he could see a tear forming at the corner of her eye as she said, “You’d better take them before I decide I can’t go through with this.”

He reached out and gently took the rings from her hand.

Opening her eyes, she said, “You had better have them handy when I demand them back.”

“They will be with me 24x7. They are almost as precious to me as you are.” He opened the buckle of his belt, revealing a small chamber inside. Lois saw his wedding band in there and after he placed her rings inside he closed it again. “Wherever I go, they go.”

“Okay. We need to finish this thing. Where do we stand?”

“Jack insists on helping and so does Jimmy. Bill got him out on a technicality. Because of Luthor’s actions he was never read his rights and also, since it was Luthor that ‘found’ the explosives in Jimmy’s apartment, there was no search warrant issued and the evidence is inadmissible. I think we can guess who planted the ‘evidence’. Perry believes that the board of directors was either bribed or coerced into the sale. Jack’s going to help him get to the bottom of that. Jimmy is following up on leads provided by Nigel. We’re getting close, but we need to keep Luthor distracted so that he doesn’t see what is going on around him.”

“Jimmy is a researcher. Instead of him following up on leads from Nigel, put him to work researching the insurance on the Planet building. Lex told me that it was under insured and that he couldn’t afford to rebuild. I don’t believe it for one minute.”

“Sounds like a good idea. I’ll get him on that right away.”

Lois moved back into his arms and kissed him.

“Unfortunately, I have to go. I’m supposed to tour the LNN facility. Lex promised me a job there. Undoubtedly so that he could monitor my activities and keep me distracted from what he is doing. Wish me luck.”

Smiling, he said, “You are acting a part, so I think the proper term is ‘Break a leg’.”

With a wry expression she said, “I wish I could break one of his.”

He picked her up again and she snuggled into his arms. Then she grabbed his cape, pulling it over herself. There was a brief feeling of movement accompanied once again by vertigo. When it stopped she threw off the cape to see that she was back in the apartment.

After one final kiss, Superman disappeared.

When Lois arrived at the LNN facility, Luthor was there to greet her. He introduced her to the news director and, claiming that he had a meeting to attend, left her in his care.

LNN was all bright colors and chrome, modern and sterile. Lois felt like she would gag if she had to spend too much time there.

After the tour, the news director took Lois to an office and said, “Mr. Luthor has directed that we make an office available to you. He wants you to get the feel of the place, make yourself at home. Take some time. Get to know our people. Watch how we do things around here.”

Very quickly, Lois was bored and decided that a familiar face

was what she needed. Picking up her bag, she dug out her address book. After looking up the number she used 'her' desk phone to make a call.

Lois was waiting in the lobby when her guest arrived. The live feed monitors that were scattered around the facility had the image of Sandra Ellis, an attractive woman in her early thirties.

As Cat walked in, Sandra was saying, "According to the latest Kelsey Survey only three per cent of American women have ever experienced ..."

The rest of what she was saying was lost on the pair as Lois greeted Cat, "Cat, thanks for coming."

Looking around, Cat asked, "What's going on?"

Lois tried to be enthusiastic as she replied, "Plenty. I've been here all afternoon."

Curious, Cat asked, "Lois, what am I doing here, exactly?"

Lois threw her arms out to encompass the facility and said, "I'm going to work here. I want you to come work here, too. We can still work together."

Cat looked at her with disbelief as she replied, "Lois, I'm a **newspaper** reporter, a gossip monger. I don't think they have a scandal hour on LNN."

Lois tried again, "Cat, this would be your chance to get away from Cat's Corner and start writing hard news. You'd be writing the news copy for our reporters. Or, you could be a correspondent. Look around you: it's so ... **modern**."

Cat looked around, sniffed and said, "Sterile."

Lois argued, "Efficient."

Cat challenged, "Soulless."

Lois tried being enthusiastic, "Fast-paced."

Cat countered, "Superficial."

Lois was becoming exasperated and challenged, "Cat, where's your open mind?"

Cat looked at Lois in disbelief as she said, "I can't believe you've given up so soon ... on the Planet. Did it mean that little to you?"

Lois was shocked by this accusation and replied, "The Planet meant as much or more to me as it did to you. But it's gone. Even Lex can't put it back together again." Sounding as if she was still trying to convince herself, Lois finished, "This is good, exciting work."

Cat still wasn't buying Lois's change in attitude. She thought that she knew Lois better than that, but felt that she needed to state her case and close the issue, "There is one little thing that you apparently are forgetting. George and I are going to get married and move to Seattle."

Suddenly, Cat noticed something and in a shocked tone, asked, "Lois, is there somewhere we can go? We need to talk ... in private."

Lois was surprised at this request, but accepted it for what it was. She said, "Sure. Let's go for a walk."

They exited the building and started walking. Before long they were in Centennial Park. Lois spotted an empty bench sitting at a distance from all of the others which would afford the privacy that they wanted.

Cat broke the silence, "Lois, why aren't you wearing your rings?"

Lois looked down at her left hand in surprise. She rubbed her ring finger with the fingers of her right hand. Then she looked up and said, "Clark is gone. I've decided that it's time I moved on."

"But he's just missing and presumed dead. You can't believe that he's actually dead."

Lois paused before replying and when she did, she placed a hand on Cat's arm and said, "Cat, trust me, I know what I'm doing. I can never forget Clark, but this is something that I have to do."

Cat stood and the indignation was written all over her face. "You could at least wait a decent length of time. It has only been a

matter of months. What are you going to do, take Luthor up on his offer? Not only a job at LNN, but his bed as well?"

"Cat, There are things you do not understand. Things I can't talk about. I will ask only one thing, come dance at my wedding."

"What? You're not seriously considering ... Luthor?"

"Cat, I know we haven't always seen eye-to-eye, but over these last few months, I like to think that we have formed a friendship. I am asking you, as my friend, *come dance at my wedding.*"

Cat just shook her head in disbelief and said, "I'll think about it."

Lois said, "You know, Clark and I never had a real wedding. We were married by an old law on the books in Kansas. We went to a Justice of the Peace to confirm it, but we never had a formal wedding."

In an increasingly hostile tone, Cat scoffed, "So now you're going to make up for it by having a fancy wedding with Lex Luthor. Well, count me out."

Lois persisted, "Cat, things aren't always what they appear to be. Please! As my friend, I want you there. I also want you to bring George. I want you both there."

Cat was surprised at Lois's persistence and sincerity and her resolve started to waver.

In a pleading tone, Lois said, "Please, Cat, I will need you there."

The tone in Lois's voice finally won Cat over.

She was still shaking her head in bewilderment as she said, "I don't know why I'm saying this, but yeah, okay, we'll be there."

Lois threw her arms around Cat and hugged her. She sobbed, "Thank you, Cat. You won't regret it, I promise you."

Chapter 9

The night was a very dark one with the gloom only broken only by the moon overhead and the headlights of the limousine that pulled off the street and into a construction area. The sign over the entrance read, "Future Site of Lex Tower XVI." At this time of the night there were only a couple of safety lights and they were placed high enough among the girders that virtually none of the light reached the ground. When the limo pulled to a stop, it doused its lights and the darkness became that much more profound.

Off to one side was an office trailer. When the limo had pulled in, the lights inside had been doused. When the limo stopped and put out its lights, the door of the trailer cautiously opened. Several individuals exited the confines of the trailer. Two took up positions flanking the third individual and behind at least partial cover.

The single individual was Devane and he approached an oil drum sitting in the open near where the limo was parked.

A few seconds after he reached position, the rear door of the limo opened and Lex Luthor stepped out carrying an oversized briefcase made of polished aluminum. Taking a step away from the car, he negligently pushed the door closed and then turned to Devane.

Devane demanded, "You have the money?"

Luthor said, "Yes, five million dollars."

"The deal was for six."

"It can be six. The stone?"

Devane tapped the case that he was carrying as he said, "Right here."

Luthor, in a conversational tone asked, "My information suggested the stone had been tested extensively by a University laboratory. Who else knows about its properties?"

Although it was really too dark to see it, Devane sneered as he said, "There were some loose ends ... but they've been trimmed. Bureau 39 was thorough that way."

Luthor challenged, "And the research?"

Devane's reply was succinct, "Destroyed."

Luthor seemed to be considering something before he replied, "Then I'll have to take your word for what it's capable of."

Devane was starting to get irritated at all of the questions, "Look, Luthor, quit beating around the bush. What do you want, a money back guarantee? Do you have the money or don't you?"

Luthor surprised him with his response, "Yes, I do." Devane didn't know if he was replying that he had the money or the money back guarantee. While he was still puzzling this, Luthor stepped over and flicked open the latches on his case. Hearing this, Devane lost all thought of his quandary as greed took over. If he hadn't been gripping the handle of the case he would have been rubbing his hands together with thoughts of the money in that case.

He was expecting Luthor to pull out a bound stack of greenbacks, but instead he pulled out a chrome plated Desert Eagle, .45 cal automatic. Devane's eyes popped, not at the betrayal, he had expected that, but at the audacity. He had his men covering him. If anything happened to him, Luthor would pay and he didn't think that Luthor was so stupid as to try anything. He knew Luthor's reputation. He was a hard-nosed businessman, but he didn't think he personally got his hands dirty this way.

As he watched, Luthor gestured with the gun and said, "Put the case down and back away. If it works I'll pay you your money, with a bonus."

Devane sneered, "You double-crossing ..."

Luthor chided, "uh, uh ... careful."

Apparently bowing to the inevitable, Devane placed the case on the ground and backed away as he had been directed.

Luthor kept an eye on Devane until he was far enough away that he wouldn't be a threat, then he reached down with one hand and hefted the case. It felt heavy enough so he lifted it and placed it on the drum. When he opened it he found a normal Earth rock, not Kryptonite.

As he looked up from this discovery, Devane ducked around the corner of the trailer before Luthor could take effective aim. At the same time, Luthor heard Devane shout, "Now!"

At Devane's signal, his two associates stepped from their concealment and opened up on Luthor with handguns of their own.

As Luthor backed toward the limo, he fired in the direction of the muzzle flashes he could see on each side. As Luthor moved back the driver, Mrs. Cox, jumped out holding an M-16 set to full auto. She started pumping off three round bursts at Devane's men. One of her bursts caught one of Devane's men. Seeing his associate go down, the other broke from his cover and tried to escape only to be cut down by her next burst. Devane had worked his way to the far end of the trailer and, seeing both of his men down, attempted to flee hoping that the dark and the jumble of construction equipment would enable him to do so.

Unfortunately for him, Mrs. Cox's night vision was excellent and she had been anticipating just such a move on his part. She knew that he wouldn't be stupid enough to charge directly at her, that only left the far side of the trailer which she immediately lined up on. As soon as he broke cover she gunned him down.

As she fired her final burst, out of the corner of her eye she saw Luthor collapse against the limo. In what looked like slow motion he slid to the ground and lay still. Apparently one of Devane's associates had scored a direct hit before Mrs. Cox took him out.

The rear door of the limo opened and out stepped ... Lex Luthor. He stepped over his fallen doppelganger and, after lighting a flashlight and shining it on the fallen figure, he reached down and ripped off a latex mask revealing the fact that it wasn't Luthor on the ground nor was it a twin or a clone. It was someone else made up to resemble him.

Mrs. Cox stepped over next to him and Luthor, in a

dispassionate tone commented, "The voice wasn't bad, but I never felt he got the mannerisms down."

Mrs. Cox commented, "It's not easy playing you."

With a smirk, Luthor replied, "Nonsense, I do it all the time."

They moved over to Devane's body by the trailer. As they approach, they could see Devane trying to crawl away.

Luthor roughly grabbed him by the shoulder, pushed him onto his back and started to frisk him. Seeing a large bulge in a jacket pocket, Luthor quipped, "Is that Kryptonite in your pocket, or are you just glad to see me?"

Luthor worked the leather pouch containing the stone from his pocket. As he opened the pouch a sickly green glow suffused the area. Smiling in satisfaction, Luthor turned away and started back to the limo. Almost as an afterthought he said to Mrs. Cox, "Pay him his bonus."

Luthor smiled even broader as he heard a final three round burst.

What Luthor and Mrs. Cox were not aware of was the fact that the entire confrontation had been captured on tape by Jimmy Olsen. He had been following the limo and snuck in close enough to use a telephoto lens. As soon as the Kryptonite was revealed, he shut down and hightailed it. There had been sufficient moonlight to film and the muzzle flashes produced enough light to make out the features of those involved. It had also been very accommodating of Luthor to use that flashlight.

The next day, Lois showed up at the LNN building carrying a box of personal items she had been able to retrieve from the Daily Planet building. She hated this. It felt like she was giving up on the Planet, but she consoled herself that the only way to bring the Planet back was to take Luthor down and this was a necessary step in that process. By appearing to give in to Luthor and accepting his offer of a job at LNN she could move one step closer to getting on the inside. That was what she was after. Access to his personal space so that she could snoop as only she could to find the final bits of evidence they needed to put Luthor away, hopefully permanently.

This charade was becoming harder and harder to maintain. She was afraid that something would happen and she would blow the whole gig. The one thing she dreaded was Luthor making assumptions and trying to get up close and too personal. She knew that she had been able to fight him off before, but that time his mind had been muddled by the pheromone spray. Without that edge she wasn't sure how she would make out. She thought to herself, <If he ever tries to kiss me on the mouth, I'll kill him myself. This mouth belongs to Clark and Clark alone.>

She entered the office she had been assigned the day before and placed the box on the desk. Looking around, she heaved a deep sigh and pulled the box open. There wasn't much inside. Reaching in she pulled out a spindly, dead looking plant. Her most recent victim from her desk. She looked at it from various angles, but no matter what angle she looked at it, it still looked dead. Shrugging her shoulders, she placed it on the corner of the desk. If nothing else it gave her some camouflage. There was a framed photo of her and Clark and another of them with his parents. They hadn't even been able to get together with hers as yet. Her father was on the west coast doing some kind of research and her mother was in rehab again. She considered herself lucky to have Lucy nearby. She looked longingly at the picture of her and Clark and whispered, "I hope it's not too much longer."

She reached into the box again and this time came up with a scrapbook. She moved the box aside enough to have room to open it and placed it on the desktop. Opening the scrapbook, she was greeted with one of her early articles. Shaking her head, she thought, <Boy, have I come a long way.> Looking at it with the eye that the last few years of experience had given her, she almost

cringed at the stilted phrasing, repeated word use, misplaced commas ... She flipped the pages rapidly until she came to the one trumpeting the rescue of the Prometheus shuttle and announcing the arrival of, Superman. A smile crossed her lips as she remembered. A couple of pages later there was actually an article accompanied by a photo of Superman with Lois by his side. Facing that was one where Jimmy had actually caught Superman in the act of rescuing Lois. They were in mid-air and he had her cradled in his strong arms, those arms that had become so familiar and comforting, the arms of her husband. Looking at that picture only increased her longing to be in those arms again.

Closing the book, she put it away in a bottom drawer of 'her' desk. Standing, she removed the final items from her box and cast it aside. Looking around, she could only hope that this was extremely temporary. This office was large, larger than Perry's old office, but without the ambiance. Perry's office held an old world charm, well, not really that old, just the twenties or thirties as they had found out when Fuentes and his crew had invaded. This place was so ... modern and ... sterile. It had no life of its own, no history. She could see that she wouldn't be spending a lot of time in it. She leaned back in her chair hoping that perhaps the change of perspective would help. It didn't. She noted a problem with her pencil cup and leaned forward to deal with it, but her attention was distracted by a commotion outside of the office. Getting up she moved into the hallway to see what was happening.

As she moved into a common area, she saw a group of news staffers gathered around a desk. In the center of the group was Sandra Ellis, the news anchor. Lois asked, "What's going on?"

Sandra turned to Lois and answered her question, "Sources inside the courthouse tell us the Grand Jury may be about to come back with indictments against two City Councilmen."

Lois was familiar with all of the major stories and was on top of this one as well, "The Redevelopment Fund scandal?"

Impressed that Lois knew what she was talking about, Sandra opened up, "Yep. We have a camera crew there, but they've been denied access." She paused and looked around for the reporter that was following the story. Failing, she said, "We don't know which two were named, or even if our information is accurate."

Lois nodded sagely and said, "Until you know that, there's no story."

Sandra nodded in agreement and added, "But we also hear CNN's about to go with it. So ..."

Lois picked up on the implication and said, "So they know something we don't know." She thought for a second and then smiled and said, "Let me make a few calls. I know some of the bailiffs." Turning away, she looked for a phone.

As Lois was moving away, Sandra called after her, "I'm on the air in four minutes."

Over her shoulder, Lois replied, "Not unless you've got something to report."

Seeing a phone on a desk not in use, she picked it up and dialed.

All of the news crew had their eyes glued to her as she made her calls.

A few minutes later, Sandra was sitting in her chair before the cameras and the makeup person was applying a last second touch-up of powder to kill the shine from her nose.

The director shouted, "Ten seconds to air."

The make-up person ducked away, just in time as the director signaled the start of the broadcast.

Sandra picked up the notes that Lois had scrawled as she was on the phone and handed to her just as she was headed for her chair. "And in local news, the Grand Jury today handed down indictments calling for the arrests of Metropolis City Councilmen Ferdig and Montag."

Behind her on an inset screen was a live feed showing the two councilmen, attempting to conceal their identities by covering

their faces while the smiling bailiffs escorted them up the steps.

Sandra continued, "As you can see from this exclusive feed outside the courthouse, the councilmen have already been remanded into custody and we'll be covering their arraignment later this afternoon. For now, this is Sandra Ellis for LNN News."

The director shouted "Cut." And the lights faded.

As the lights faded, a cheer went up from all of the staffers and they all turned and applauded Lois, acknowledging her contribution.

Lois was embarrassed by the adulation, but accepted the applause graciously.

Chapter 10

That evening, Lois met Cat and George, Eduardo, Steve, Diane and Perry at a Middle Eastern restaurant called, 'Salome'. The music was recorder and percussion.

As soon as she walked in, Lois was thrown back in her memory to what Clark had told her she had done after being doused with the pheromone spray. He had even played the music she had danced to and to a certain extent it had brought back some of the memory of that night. Looking at the belly dancer, she couldn't help comparing her feeble efforts to this pro and was convinced that Clark had only put up with it because of his love for her. Crossing the floor, Lois sat on a cushion near Perry.

A few seconds later, Jimmy, in a disguise, sat down next to her. She looked at him questioningly, but after a very few seconds succeeded in penetrating his disguise. She leaned in and whispered, "Jimmy, what are you doing here? We can't afford for Luthor to find out that you slipped from his grasp."

"Lois, I just couldn't miss Perry's retirement party." Jimmy looked around. On the wall was a banner that read, "Happy Retirement, Mr. White. Jimmy commented, "Nice place," and smiled at the belly dancer as she gyrated by.

Almost everyone had glasses of champagne in hand and it appeared as though Perry had made it his goal to drink all that they had. Rising unsteadily to his feet, Perry proposed a toast, "Here's to the Daily Planet! It's gonna be hard to live without her. But, you know, at one point Elvis went thirteen years between Las Vegas appearances. If you're not careful, time'll sneak up on you."

Lifting her glass, Cat said, "Now there's time for everything."

Jimmy added, "No more deadlines."

Lois knew it was all an act being put on just in case Luthor had spies watching so she added, "Just think, Chief. Maybe now you can plan that trip to Graceland and actually *go*."

Lois was becoming convinced that Perry had missed his true calling. Perry was putting on quite an act. Staggering to his feet, Perry began to expostulate, "Ah, Graceland. Didja know Elvis had a twin brother? Yep. Jesse Garon Presley. Delivered thirty-five minutes before The King, dead at birth." He hung his head, "So sad. So sad." Perry actually started crying as he started to sing, "Lonely Teardrops" That triggered a memory and Perry stopped singing and started to tell the story, "Jackie Wilson took ill while singing 'Lonely Teardrops' at the Latin Casino in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. Elvis sent Jackie's wife a check for thirty thousand dollars. That's The King ... that's The King."

The Belly dancer moved over in front of Perry, and then away and Perry danced after her.

Watching Perry gyrate after the belly dancer, Lois quipped, "So much for the Chief not having a good time."

They all watched Perry for a minute before turning to speak with each other.

Jimmy asked, "So, how's the new job, Lois?"

She shrugged and replied, "Great. Broadcasting is a whole new world. It's so exciting."

Cat picked up on the contradiction between her body language and her words and asked, "Not like life at the Planet, dull and

boring?”

Lois’s reply was heartfelt, “You know what I mean. Nothing could ever replace the Planet.” Then her demeanor changed and she added, “I, for one, am not sitting around obsessing about it.”

Cat was musing, “I’m **trying** to figure out how the paper failed. What we know is only the tip of the iceberg. There has to be more to it.”

Lois asked Cat, “Cat, can I have a word with you, in private?”

The rest of the people at the table suddenly went quiet as the long time adversaries rose from the table and moved to the other side of the restaurant. They were curious to see just what was going to happen.

Lois accused, “You’re ruining Perry’s retirement party.”

Cat shot back, “Me? I’m not the one gloating over my new job.”

Lois knew that she was being watched and not just by her former coworkers. Luthor was having her followed constantly and she needed to play her part and do it flawlessly because any glitch on her part she was sure would be reported to Luthor. She had to maintain the façade so she choked out, “Gloating?”

Cat snapped, “Yeah, gloating! All you can talk about is your new life at LNN and possibly with Lex Luthor.”

Lois snapped back, “And all you can do is sit around whining into your beer.”

Cat just shook her head.

Lois took this no response as a response and asked, “What?”

Cat finally said, “You’re afraid.”

Lois replied, “I’m not afraid of anything.”

Cat became even more confrontational, “Yes, you are. You’re afraid of the truth. And the truth is that Lex Luthor may be hiding from you what really happened at the Planet. I’ve been doing some digging and ...”

Lois was concerned for her friend. If Cat got too interested in what was happening, she could place herself in danger. Lois needed to try and sidetrack her if she could, “I know why you’re doing this.”

Surprised, Cat asked, “You do, huh?”

“Yes. You think that you can get a job as an investigative reporter at a paper on the west coast if you can find something here. Trust me,” she lowered her voice to conspiratorial levels, “all you’ll find here is trouble. Let it drop.”

Cat was shocked, but seeing the intensity in Lois’s expression and the tone of her voice, she lowered hers to match, “What do you mean by that?”

Lois softened a bit and said, “Cat, I don’t want to see you get hurt. You have a life ahead of you, a life with George. Don’t risk that. If you get involved in this, that’s exactly what you would be doing.”

Cat was starting to get an inkling that something was going on and her curiosity was piqued. In a very low voice, she asked, “Lois, what’s going on?”

Lois looked around before she replied, “I can’t say any more. Cat, you have to trust me on this. The fewer people that know, the better. Go. Be with George. He loves you and I’m sure he will try to protect you.”

Taking a hint from Lois’s actions, Cat looked around to see if there was anyone expressing an undue interest in their conversation before she spoke, “Why would I need George’s protection?”

“Trust me. If you were to get involved in this, even George wouldn’t be able to protect you.”

Cat was becoming concerned, “And just who’s protecting you?”

Lois moved her hand to her chest. The movement caught Cat’s eye and she looked at it as Lois moved her finger surreptitiously in a small ‘S’ over her heart.

Cat nodded and said, “Okay. I’ll back off.” She put her arms

around Lois and pulled her into a hug. With her mouth next to Lois’s ear, she said, “Be careful. Even he can’t be around 24x7.” Lois whispered back, “Don’t I know it.”

They broke the hug and moved back to the table.

Perry was feeling the effects of the alcohol he had imbibed and was heartily singing “Lonely Teardrops” in his best Elvis voice as the party broke up. Lois, Cat and Jimmy helped him outside. Lois had called Alice and, as they made it outside, she pulled up in her car. While Cat and Jimmy helped Perry into the car, Lois walked to the driver’s side. Alice rolled down her window and Lois spoke to her. “Thanks for picking him up, Alice.”

“No problem, Lois. Actually, we had planned it this way. I didn’t want to horn in on his time with the staff, but we knew that he would need a driver to get home. I was elected.” She looked at her husband and said, “Looks like he had a good time.”

Lois smiled and said, “I think he did. Good to see you.”

“You too.” She rolled her window back up and drove off.

Lois moved back to the sidewalk and looked around. Her gaze centered on Lex Tower. That edifice stood above all of the other buildings in the city. She thought, <That is coming down, maybe not the building, but the one behind it. What a fall that will be, from that height to jail. All of that wealth and power ... gone. Maybe whoever takes over will do good with it.>

On the top floor of the building that Lois was just looking at, Mrs. Cox and Luthor were in bed together. He had just rolled off of her, having satisfied himself for the third time.

Mrs. Cox, ever the eager companion asked, “Lex, what does Lois Lane have that I don’t? Don’t I please you?”

Lex moved his arm so that his forearm was on his forehead as he considered before he spoke. “You satisfy my needs. You are quite skilled in bed as in other things.”

“Then, why all of this to get Lane?”

“The thrill of the chase and ultimate conquest. It all started months ago. She was here for a dinner. I was planning on seducing her then, but Miranda and her damnable witch’s brew screwed that up. To top it off I found out that she was married to Kent of all people. I made up my mind then that no matter what, I was going to have her. Nigel walked in while I was literally burning cash and reminded me that a woman being married hadn’t stopped me before. I just needed to remove those obstacles.”

“The way you freed me from Mr. Cox?”

“Yes, my dear. You had told me about him and your desire to be free so I took care of that little detail for you. Pity about his ‘accident’, but it freed you to join me.”

“There were a number of things that were done before I moved up, before Nigel disappeared.”

“The first thing that had to be done was the removal of Kent. He was very lucky and survived the first two attempts on his life, but finally he was eliminated. That was the first step on the road to Lois Lane’s conquest.”

“That was some months ago and Nigel disappeared at the same time. That’s when you promoted me. How did the rest go?”

“Ah, yes. Well, to start with, I had a meeting with the board of the Daily Planet. I said, ‘Don’t worry about the advertisers and the banks. They’ll do what I tell them to do. The Board’s decision to sell the Daily Planet to me must be immediate and unanimous. Naturally, your loyalty will be rewarded, or should I say ‘compensated.’” The memory of how he had manipulated the board had the effect of stimulating him ... sexually. Reaching over he squeezed Mrs. Cox’s breast and finding her nipple swollen and hard rolled on top of her for another sexual encounter.

They were both breathing hard by the time they finished and Lex rolled off of her again.

He resumed his tale, “That was the second step in removing

her supports. I needed to eliminate all of them so that she would come to me of her own accord. The next one you know about.”

“Yes, the bomb. You put it together and I delivered it.”

“Yes, and you placed it perfectly I might add. The final prop will be removed ... soon. It was fortunate that I had the foresight to have someone play me at that pickup. Actually, I don’t think his skills with the gun were equal to mine, but that is beside the point. Now that I have the Kryptonite I’ll be able to do that. Project ‘K’ will be the pièce de résistance. I need to decide just how to use it to its greatest effect.”

“You could melt it down and cast a bullet to shoot him with.”

“Not subtle enough. Also he wouldn’t suffer sufficiently. Did I ever tell you what he said?”

“He has said a lot of things.”

“Ah, but this was particularly galling. I have always reveled in the fact that everyone in Metropolis has to look up to see me, here in the penthouse of the tallest building in the city. We, he and I, had a confrontation and as he was leaving he had the gall to say that if I ever needed to find him, all I needed to do was ‘look up.’ As if to say that now the people of metropolis, when they looked up, they were not looking at me, they were looking for him!”

“Then you need to bring him down to Earth. Bring him down and keep him down. Handcuffs ... chains ... something like that.”

“Yes, that’s the idea. Capture and imprison him the way Kent had me imprisoned. Lex Luthor will never again live in a cage.” In a thoughtful tone, he repeated, “A cage.”

The next day, Lois was in her office at LNN when Luthor came by. He looked around and saw the few mementos that she had brought in. He said, “I like what you have done with the place. Settling in?”

Her reply was half-hearted, “Yeah, sort of.”

“How was Perry’s retirement dinner?”

With a wry expression, she replied, “Painful.”

Luthor looked truly grieved as he said, “I’m sorry. I wish there was something I could do to help.”

Lois sat there staring across the desk at him.

Breaking the silence, Luthor asked, “What is it?”

Playing up to him, she asked, “Nothing. It’s just ... do I really know you? Know enough about you?”

Feeling that things were going his way and playing to it, he said, “My life is an open book. Shall I read it to you?”

She knew that a lot depended on what she said in this confrontation and, make no mistake, she saw it as a confrontation. “Only the parts you wouldn’t want anyone else to know.

Luthor thought back on the biography he’d had crafted, the one that was used to generate sympathy and started almost quoting, “I started with nothing ... orphaned at age thirteen.” It was all a pack of lies, but no one would ever find out the truth so this fiction was as good as any and better than some that they had come up with.

It actually did elicit a sympathetic response, “It must have been terrible.”

He knew he had to be careful not to paint himself as too much a paragon of virtue. He needed to temper it, somewhat by telling only part of the truth, “Yes. But it made me strong.” He thought for a second and then decided on what to say, “I’m no saint, Lois. I’ve done questionable things in pursuing success. Unfortunately, that’s the nature of big business.”

He determined that it was time to play his trump card, “But, as God is my witness, I swear to you, from this moment on, I will change. I no longer want to hurt anyone.” He thought of the obvious caveat to this statement, <Except, Superman, of course.>

That was when he noticed that Lois had removed her wedding ring. His eyebrows rose. He was hopeful and reached into his pocket. Bringing out the ring box he opened it and said, “Lois, I’m ready to devote my life to you, to commit to you utterly and

eternally.” Luthor went down on one knee as he offered the ring to her. “Will you marry me?”

She knew that he had to come to this. She swallowed and decided that she needed to go through with it. It was a small sacrifice on her part for the greater good. “Yes, Lex. I will marry you.”

He slipped the ring on her finger and then pulled her hand to his mouth and kissed the back of it.

When he stood, he tried to pull her into an embrace and kiss her again, but she shied away and said, “Not here. It’s bad enough that everyone here knows you gave me this job. I don’t want them all thinking I slept my way to the top.

“All right, my dear. I understand.” He checked his watch and said, “Unfortunately I have a meeting I must attend. I will see you later.”

As Luthor turned to go, Lois smiled until his back was turned then she looked at the ring with barely concealed disgust.

THE END

To be continued in House of Luthor – Matchmaker Style