

Airport

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Rated: PG

Submitted: July 2018

Summary: The action takes place in the alt-Universe of the episode *Tempus Anyone?* The story starts only a few moments after the ending of the episode *Lois and Clarks*. Alt-Clark and H.G. Wells are on the trail of alt-Lois in his world *before* she boards the plane to the Congo. Their mission is a success. But now that Lois is safe, what happens afterwards? Plenty! LexCorp is targeted to be taken over by a mysterious new enemy. Plus, there are additional behind-the-scenes machinations by an old one. Read on, gentle being, read on.

Story Size: 203,450 words (1,165Kb as text)

Here is another take on what H.G. Wells meant when he said, "Nothing is impossible".

Heartfelt thanks go to several people who have helped along the way: Anti-Kryptonite, Andreia, KenJ, HappyGirl, and MikeM; without their 'gentle' pointing of the editor's sharp blue stick, this fic would never have seen the light of day. Thanks to Ivy for being a very patient editor. It took three years after this story won a Kerth before the re-edits satisfied me.

Legal Disclaimer: This is a story based on the ABC television series *Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*. As always, I have no claim on these characters, nor will I receive any monetary compensation. Nonetheless, the story is mine.

Prologue

It was a dark, snowy night. A terrible night for travel, whether via train, plane or automobile.

Huge white flakes of innocuous, fluffy snow drifted down and blanketed the entire Metropolis area. Vehicles' windshield wipers were clogged with the white substance, making it almost impossible to see. Erratic lines of automobile traffic were beginning to snarl, meandering sluggishly through the icy streets. A few timorous or perhaps wiser souls pulled over and stopped, hoping a passing Metro police cruiser would pick them up and provide a warm and safe ride home.

An old and slightly battered yellow and red Metrocab, slick with a layer of snow hugging its pitted and dented curves, lumbered to the departure lane of *Zurich Air* and cautiously eased to a stop. An anxious young woman gingerly emerged. Her long brown hair fluttered in the wind, and quickly became blanketed with thick snowflakes.

"Hey, can you pop the trunk and help me get my stuff out?" the brunette asked.

The cabbie, a rather difficult fellow with a distinctly ripe body odor, replied, "Opening the trunk is fine, but youse gotta get ya own bags." This was the last fare of the day. He was ready to go home, in fact – and the 'Off Duty' sign had just flashed on.

The young woman - she could have been no more than twenty-two - tossed back her thick mane of dark hair, squared her shoulders, and snapped, "Excuse me? Your company has a contract with the *Daily Planet* – 'A full Service Car Service'."

"Take it up with my supervisor, sweetie," he growled.

The heavyset cabbie then heaved his considerable bulk out of his seat, tentatively walked through the sloppy snow, and after pounding his meaty fists on the hood to break the ice, quickly

opened the trunk. He stood back, forcing his fare to remove her unwieldy old backpack and moss green canvas bag from its cavernous depths and dumped them on the pavement. She held her breath while doing so. The fumes that rushed up to meet her nose smelled suspiciously like an ancient gym locker.

Once that was done, he slammed the trunk lid down hard, shattering the remaining ice, and hurried back into the warmth of the cab. His fare looked after him for a moment, shaking her head. She picked up the canvas bag, and with a grunt, threw the clumsy backpack over her slender shoulder. She ran towards the swinging glass doors.

Rolling down the passenger side window, the disgruntled cabbie roared, "Where's my tip?"

"Take it up with my supervisor!" the brunette yelled back.

His colorful comment was lost in the noisy blasts of the icy wind as the glass doors swung closed behind her.

After the biting cold of the outside, the terminal's heat hit her body like a crashing wave against a tropical island, at once comforting and yet shocking. She shook the snowflakes from her damp hair and brushed the remaining flakes from the quilted lightweight khaki jacket. It was perfect for traveling in the Congo, but not for today's chilling temperatures. Inquisitive brown eyes studied the terminal's huge information board high above. She found *Zurich Air's* check-in location and marched purposefully towards it, only to discover that at least ten other passengers stood in line ahead of her. Realizing it was going to be some time before her turn, she deposited the two heavy bags on the glossy floor and waited.

After twenty minutes, she finally reached the check-in desk. "Lois Lane," she sighed, "I'm supposed to be on *Zurich Air* Flight 1278 to Kinshasa, connecting through Munich."

The exhausted male ground attendant rubbed his hand through a thatch of blonde hair and somehow managed to smile graciously, "I am sorry, Miss Lane, but there is a thirty-minute delay while the wings are being de-iced. Please make yourself comfortable in the passenger lounge." He pointed to a cordoned-off area with decidedly uncomfortable plastic chairs. "Please listen for the PA notification when the de-icing procedure is complete."

The young woman groaned aloud, saying, "Terrific – a fast plane to nowhere!" She picked up her bags and walked desultorily to the passenger lounge where she quickly found a hard orange plastic chair to sit in.

"Blast the weather!" Lois thought. "I have got to reach Kinshasa in the Congo. There's a story out there with my byline on it! Perry has reluctantly trusted me to bring in an article about gunrunners in the Congo and *nothing* - not even a snowstorm - is going to stop me from bagging it!"

She sighed; the new managing editor of the *Daily Planet* had every reason to be reluctant. He had been promoted to his position by the suits upstairs after Vernon 'Old Man' Krebs had been forced into an early retirement when he foolishly approved an article about the Sanitation Department's illegal practice of dumping garbage into Hobbs Bay.

The story, written by reporter Ralph Lombard, was false. The Sanitation Department heads started screaming and sued the paper. The *Daily Planet* had to settle out of court. Ever since then, Perry was extremely careful about making sure all of his reporters had cold hard facts and evidence to back up their articles. Lois spent a lot of time in Constance Hunter's legal office going over some of her investigative stories even before e-mailing them to Perry. She had also spent the better part of a week trying to convince Perry to let her fly to Africa – on the paper's dime – to ferret out this story.

Frustrated, Lois sat down, fished in the green canvas bag, pulled out a small blue spiral notebook, and began outlining an action plan for her arrival in Kinshasa. An impatient person by nature, making detailed lists focused her thoughts and helped to pass the time. She was deep amid going over from which angle to

write the gunrunner story when an elderly gentleman sat down next to her. Surreptitiously, Lois cast her eyes slowly over to him in wonder. “Why is he wearing a bowler hat and a black frock coat? Perhaps the poor old fellow thinks he’s on his way to a costume ball?” she thought. The last time she had seen one of those outfits was in an old English film.

“Maybe,” her musings continued, “a party is taking place on one of the private jets, and he’s one of the participants? Lex Luthor and Gotham City’s own billionaire - Bruce Wayne – had been known for throwing parties on their private planes. But if that was the case, what was ‘Bowler Hat’ doing here in the common passenger lounge?”

The *Daily Planet’s* gossip columnist, Catherine Grant, had written about some such shindig a few weeks back. Once upon a time, Lois hadn’t taken much stock in anything that bookish woman wrote about. With her tired brown suits and thick eyeglasses, Catherine did not look like the type to write about exciting celebrity gatherings, much less attend one. It never ceased to amaze her that someone with a degree in finance from a prestigious institution like the Wharton Business School could end up as a gossip columnist. However, after suffering a painful experience with a former co-worker, she had learned it was sensible to listen on the rare occasions when the older woman offered advice.

Abruptly, her thoughts were interrupted by a cacophony of sound, light, and movement at the far end of the terminal. She, as well as other waiting passengers, turned to witness a swarm of paparazzi aggressively moving around an impeccably dressed couple. The man was tall with black curly hair and smoking a cigar, smelling of avarice and arrogance. He brazenly ignored the **No Smoking** signs posted everywhere. The tense, heavily made-up woman by his side held onto his arm tightly, as if fearing should she release him, he would be gone forever.

“Mr. and Mrs. Luthor! Look this way!” one of the swarm yelled. “Is it true you are donating part of the proceeds from the sale of your magnificent *Picasso* and *Degas* collection to help the homeless children of Metropolis?”

The elegant couple graciously halted their stride, pretending to notice the swarm for the first time. Looking at her husband as if waiting for a cue, Mrs. Arianna Carlin-Luthor smiled brilliantly, and with a cultured British accent, stated that although they had no official announcement now, many of New Troy’s orphanages would have better living facilities in the very near future. With a dismissive wave of her perfectly-manicured hand, the jet set duo walked into the private VIP lounge, leaving the lesser members of the fourth estate outside.

“Look at them,” Lois mused in annoyance, “Mr. and Mrs. Fabulously Wealthy! This is probably the closest those third-rate stringers would ever get to either one of them! When – not if – I bag an interview with the Luthors, it will be in a place of my choice. Not chasing around after them to get a meaningless quote. Possibly we’ll all sit around a table, sipping cocktails at their newly renovated villa in Capri during the summer? In their natural surroundings, they’ll be comfortable and perhaps willing to converse about anything.”

After the tumult of the Luthors’ presence had died down, Lois began working on a story outline. By the time the notebook was stowed in her bag, she had a framework for the gunrunner’s article, and once she arrived in the Congo, the rest would build from there. As she tried to relax, her thoughts began to drift to the *Daily Planet*. The past year rolled through her mind, populated by events both great and small.

Lois had come a long way since being called, ‘The best intern I ever saw’ – the managing editor’s words, not her own. After her graduation from Metro U, he had hired her as a cub reporter, having her cover everything from international dog shows to

society garden parties. No matter the article’s importance, she treated each story as if it were going to win the Pulitzer Prize.

Perry White had noticed and appreciated her strength of character and talent. Gradually, he had doled out tougher assignments. Through a new source, she had learned about a carjacking ring operating in Suicide Slum. After begging and pleading to cover the story, she had beat out seasoned reporters who had just as much determination and tenacity. But somehow, she got the goods, busted the ring, and won praise... and then Perry sent her to cover another dog show story.

Why?

Because she didn’t have enough facts to help the police make the arrests stick. Most of the gang was back on the street within two days after she broke the story. She received a stern talking-to from Perry and got off on the wrong foot with one of the Inspectors at the 12th Precinct, Bill Henderson.

It was a valuable lesson, and one she never forgot.

Three miserable months of writing puff pieces for the *Planet’s* Weekend section went by before she had the chance to take on another assignment worthy of her emerging investigative talents. This time it was an art dealer scam in the swanky NoHo neighborhood. Assisted by a newly-hired office boy with dreams of becoming a photojournalist named Jack Bartholomew, she had been able to solve the case – and this time made sure all the evidence was there, so the arrests could not be overturned.

Her front-page headlines brought grudging respect from some reporters and unwelcome attention from others.

Claude Debarre was one of the seasoned reporters whose attention she had desperately wanted.

Catherine Grant had discreetly warned her not to associate with the overconfident Frenchman, but Lois turned a deaf ear to any of her maudlin advice. He was tall and blond, with laughing gray eyes and a wickedly seductive French accent. He was thrilling and dangerous, deliciously draped in an elegantly tailored European mystique. She was certain he could teach her so much about journalism.

Instead, he taught her how to be heartbroken.

Over the course of several dates, Claude earned her trust. She took him into her confidence and talked about her stories, including one she had been working on regarding credit cards and other perks being given to star high school football players if they signed with New Troy University. As Lois dug further, she found greater involvement of several school officials and coaches. The complexities and long-range repercussions of such a high-level scandal were enormous.

Basking in the afterglow of his attention and praise, she kept him informed of every stage of the investigation. The more she revealed, the more intensely Claude pursued her. He painted grandiose pictures of their partnership being to newspapers what the old TV newscasters Chet Huntley and David Brinkley had been to television. His polished words, framed in that amazing accent, appealed to her innocence and affectionate heart. She imagined herself a young woman falling deeply in love.

The day she had completed the article, Claude had suggested they have an intimate supper at her place to celebrate. Rather than have Lois cook, he brought luscious baked ziti from her favorite Italian restaurant and even a bottle of expensive chilled white wine. They talked, laughed, and even danced to strains of the romantic song, *Fly Me to the Moon*. Claude whispered words of love and hinted he was looking for a special ring. Lois, against her better judgment, allowed herself to be inveigled into making love with him. After a wildly passionate night, Lois had awoken to cold sheets and an empty bed - Claude was gone. She noticed her computer was on and the file drawer had been forced open. In a rush of abysmal fear and hurt, she realized that he had stolen all of her notes and evidence on the college case. He was even so thorough as to have erased all of the files regarding the story from

the computer's hard drive.

By the time she had reached the newsroom, her story was being printed under his byline. There was nothing she could do; all her proof and dreams had vanished like shattered glass. Claude's smile was dazzling while he told Perry how he had painstakingly pieced together the evidence so it could hold up in court. Also, how dear, sweet Lois had provided the proper "input" to make the story sing.

How she hated him.

The anger and humiliation were at times more than she could bear. Whenever Claude smiled at her, the pit of her stomach tied into malevolent knots. She knew quiet, ugly rumors about them swirled around the bullpen. They had to have been spread by DeBarre, probably hoping to humiliate her into silence. Catherine Grant never spoke to her about the incident, but the older woman could tell from Lois's body language around Claude that something decidedly unpleasant had happened between them. From that day on, Catherine became a friend and ally to the younger woman.

The rumors and spiteful innuendos cut deep, yet Lois Lane had never walked away from a challenge. The thought of leaving the *Planet* and starting someplace new wasn't even considered. For now, the only course was to keep her distance from him and forge ahead with her career. But she promised herself that someday there would be a reckoning.

To help soothe her wounded pride and flagging self-confidence, she depended on other things to provide a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. As soon as the lease was up, she moved out of the cramped studio apartment where Claude had seduced her. Every nook and corner were packed with unpleasant memories of her time with him. Reluctantly, she moved back in with Sam and Ellen Lane. In six months, after saving up every spare penny, she moved into a new, comfortable apartment in a good neighborhood, and carefully decorated it with relaxed furniture and plenty of colorful plants.

Bored with unhealthy takeout food and eating on soggy paper plates, she took cooking lessons from her Aunt Rita. The dishes were not gourmet, but at least she could invite friends over and not be afraid of poisoning them. It was Rita who suggested buying proper cookware, colorful plates, and better-than-average flatware. No matter how grand or simple the meal, it should always be served with style!

Her parents were delighted their daughter was making a name for herself within the world of newspaper journalism. They mentioned her many articles while celebrating their thirty-first wedding anniversary with family and friends. Younger sister Lucy was always bragging to her medical school chums about her daring sister, the investigative reporter.

There was the allure of winning either a Kerth or Merriweather award, but she wanted to obtain the most prestigious of journalist honors: a Pulitzer. Three important things were attached to that word: a certificate stating that a story or series of stories was the best in her chosen field, twenty thousand dollars in prize money, and three words forever more after her name: Lois Lane, *Pulitzer Prize winner*.

But the accolades, both personal and professional, were not enough. Like a raw ache, the twin goals of establishing herself as a respected journalist and getting even with Claude pushed her to take on the most dangerous of assignments.

"Lois, this is an impressive piece of investigative journalism. Still, it was a wise move to come to the Legal Department before sending it over to Perry. An article of such caliber usually triggers a tidal wave reaction, one of global significance."

The young woman blinked in surprise. "Gregory Daae's media empire holds sway over communications from London to Bangkok and everywhere in between. News about him is reported

daily..."

Constance Hunter neatly replaced the papers and computer diskette into a blue folder, leaned back in her chair, and took a contemplative pose. How, she wondered to herself, do I impress upon this young firebrand what kind of man Daae is without dampening her enthusiasm *or* scaring her witless?

"Come on, Lois, you know better than that! Press releases, carefully scripted interviews, and photos shot with a long-range lens are not news. Just fluff for the general public's consumption. But what I'm reading here is completely different. Some of this material can have a domino effect on companies which contract business with the Daae Media Group. We don't know how this bombshell will affect how news is reported," Constance said, tapping the folder. "There's something else to consider, and actually, in my mind, it's more important. How will this story affect the *Daily Planet*? We could be in for a truckload of lawsuits."

"Maybe so, but it's the truth! My research bears this out! DMG has been manufacturing and/or creating stories for their cable TV news channel." Lois came around the desk, opened the thick folder and rifled through the papers until she reached a particular page. "Look at this one example: last year, there were reports of the salmon fisheries in Nova Scotia being contaminated. The fisheries were owned by Sir Lewis Benedict, a one-time friend of Daae's. Apparently, they used to play chess for cash. Sir Benedict lost a wad of money – something like fifty thousand dollars – to Daae and he refused to pay up. Two weeks later, these contamination 'stories' began to surface about the fisheries. They were later proven to be false, but by then the damage was done. Sir Benedict's company had to close. The town where the fishery was located still hasn't recovered economically from the shutdown. Of course, Daae's cable network covered the whole debacle, giving them a nice ratings boost."

"Okay," Constance said dubiously.

Lois pulled out more papers. "Look, I have statements from a number of experts swearing the waters surrounding the fishery were kept clean..."

The lawyer held up her hand to halt the onslaught of words. "This is not an argument. Unfortunately, all of these statements come from people who had a vested interest in keeping the company open. If you are going after a man of Daae's stature with accusations like this, the lawyers – like me – need to talk with people who are within DMG itself – whistleblowers – willing to tell the truth about this man. The *Daily Planet* simply cannot risk printing such a story without firm evidence. Men like Gregory Daae and Lex Luthor have deep pockets and unscrupulous lawyers. We are in short supply of one and thankfully without the latter."

"Luthor; he and Arianna are just as bad as, or worse than, Daae," Lois muttered.

"Lois, this is a business matter. All I can do is provide legal advice. It's Perry and the suits upstairs who have the authority and responsibility to make this decision. But from my experience working with Perry, he's going to say, 'Convince someone high up within Daae's organization to go on the record to corroborate this material. Otherwise, we can't print a solitary word,'" Constance said with finality.

"Fine! I'll get the proof on Daae, and not just a subordinate, but someone *within* his inner circle. Otherwise Daae can always say the person was creating these stories without his knowledge."

"Here, take the file and put it someplace safe. No reason for this research to go to waste. It might come in handy for another story about him." Constance noted how the younger woman's long dark hair hung limply between her slumped shoulders. Uh, oh, she thought. It was time for the legal counsel to perform damage control. "Lois, I meant what I said earlier. This is impressive work for a beginner. Still, you've got to be patient. Gregory Daae will

not escape your considerable investigative skills forever.”

Lois nodded, took the heavy folder, and departed from Constance’s office. It was Friday night and she had promised to visit Aunt Rita and Uncle Mike at Café Americana. Having dinner with them would be a pleasant change from the weekly grind.

She placed the thick blue folder into her desk’s lower left-hand drawer and locked it.

Less than thirty minutes later, she was seated at her favorite table, soaking up the warm atmosphere of the best restaurant in town: her uncle and aunt’s *Café Americana*.

A petite middle-aged woman with dark red hair who could only be described as ‘pixie-like’ came over to Lois’ table and put down a breadbasket filled with Parker House yeast rolls, fresh from the oven. “So, what will my favorite niece have on a Friday night after a long week at work?” Rita Lane smiled down at the young woman.

Lois sighed deeply. “Anything... just so long as it’s...”

“Chocolate?”

“Exactly!”

Rita cocked her eyebrow and said, “Nothing doing! First, you need some protein. Can’t take those Tae Kwon Do classes without proper food inside your stomach. Now, what’ll you have?”

Hearing her aunt’s remark, Lois responded more out of frustration than anger. “For pity’s sake, Aunt Rita, I’m over twenty years old! When is everyone going to stop treating me like I’m a kid?”

Rita’s sharp green eyes examined her niece’s face, noting the dark smudges of exhaustion under her eyes. That comment did not sit well with her at all. Instead of answering her niece, she pulled out a chair, sat down and laid a work-roughened hand over the younger one.

“That latest case you’ve be working on...the media guy... Daae? It’s got you beat,” Rita stated flatly.

Her niece nodded slowly, pushing her long hair back from her face. “No, not exactly. More like backed into a corner. The *Daily Planet*’s legal advisor says I need insider information, which is not going to be easy to obtain. It’s time to start digging around in the group’s inner circle; maybe get some credible leads.”

“Sounds like a tough road ahead. Well, to climb a mountain or break a story you still need food. How does salmon steak with lemon and ginger sauce and garlic string beans sound?”

“Perfect.” Lois’ lips formed a wan smile and she said sheepishly, “Uh, sorry about snapping earlier.”

Rita Lane stood up, patted her on the back, and said in an uncharacteristically soft voice, “One of these days you and I are going to have a long talk about all manner of investigations, both domestic and foreign.” Her voice returned to its normal tone and she said, “Be back in a jiffy with your order. Gotta light a fire under that husband of mine: can’t let a good, regular customer go hungry!”

Lois watched her aunt move around the tables and past customers. She was really a spitfire. Lois mused over her aunt’s parting words. “All manner of investigations, both domestic and foreign? What’s that about?” she wondered.

Suddenly, a tall, nervous-looking man wearing old jeans, a green t-shirt and a gray jacket sat down next to Lois. “Excuse me!” she snapped, “This is a *private* table.”

“Hey, Miss Lane. How are ya doing? You’re gonna love Mike’s salmon, though personally I think he puts too many capers in da lemon sauce.” He stuck a bony hand out to shake hers and said, “Name’s Bigmouth, but ya can call me Bobby. Your stories are good, and they’ll get better... if ya leave Gregory Daae and his media whatever alone.”

Lois looked incredulously at the thin man and hissed, “I’m going to call a waiter!”

Bobby waved his hands anxiously, “Hey, don’t do that! Mike,

Rita and even No Knees Nolan will vouch for me. I just want ta warn ya. Tangling with that guy is bad news! Ah, pardon the pun.” Pointing at the breadbasket with a long bony finger he asked, “Are ya gonna eat those rolls?”

Before Lois could speak, the still-warm fluffy Parker House rolls vanished into Bobby’s pockets. The lone survivor was hastily buttered and unceremoniously stuffed into his mouth. The man had mentioned her relatives and her best source. Pushing her long hair away from her face again, she leaned forward and said, “Okay, ‘Bigmouth’, you have my attention. This had better be good.”

“It is,” he said, nodding his head. “Well, for starters, the investigation is worthless. All the evidence ya gathered has been swept under da rug. Those folks around the fishery? Who wanted to talk? Well, they ain’t talkin’ now!”

“That’s impossible! I protect all my sources. What about their sworn statements?”

Bobby shook his head as if he were speaking to a particularly obstinate child. “Miss Lane, those car thieves and phony art dealers articles were small potatoes. This is da big leagues. Guys like Daae have paid ears in every major newspaper, especially when it comes to keepin’ an eye on hungry investigative reporters.”

“Oh, like me?” she responded acidly.

He shrugged, pulled another roll out of his pocket, buttered it, took a vicious bite and then continued. “Whatever ya got on him ain’t gonna be enough. Not nearly enough to bring down somebody like Daae. It’s gonna take years of gathering information on the sly. Everybody leaves a paper trail – hardcopy or electronic. That’ll stand up in the court of public opinion and the legal system. Oh, yeah, there’s one other thing you’ll need.” He took a final vicious bite and the roll vanished. “Mind if I tell ya?”

“Oh, sure, go ahead, you’re doing just fine,” Lois said sarcastically.

“Ya gotta have a decent partner. One who will stick with ya through a firestorm, and that’s what it’ll be, tangling with Daae. That Debarre guy ya was workin’ with before is a first-class scum sucker.”

“I work alone,” Lois snarled back, her voice dangerously icy and low.

“Yeah, well, start looking for one just the same. Ya know, Woodward had Bernstein and Huntley had Brinkley. It helps when somebody’s got your back.”

Lois shook her head and shot back, “Enough! Who are you and how am I supposed to believe any of this nonsense?”

“Like I said, ask your uncle and aunt. Ask Nolan. Better yet, call those folks up at the fishery. If any of them are still there. See if they take ya call. Listen, I’m sticking my neck in a noose just talkin’ to ya. Do me a favor, Miss Lane, leave Daae alone for now. I’m not saying give up the story altogether, just ease off a little bit until things die down. This article has Pulitzer written all over it. But it’s gonna take a few years to pull everything together. Look, I gotta go. Remember what I said.” With those words, the thin man stood up, and with long loping strides, walked out of the restaurant.

When Lois arrived home, she barely took her coat off before dialing Mahon Port in Nova Scotia where Lord Benedict had his former fishery plant. Every single person she had spoken to the month before had either moved away or quickly hung up as soon as they heard her name.

She sat down in defeat, mulling over a bowl of strawberry chocolate ice cream. First Constance tells me I need evidence from within the Daae Media Group to corroborate my witnesses’ stories, she fumed, then this Bobby person tells me to get a partner and drop the story until the heat dies down and now I can’t locate

my witnesses. She threw her hands up in frustration. Once again, a fantastic story had eluded her.

Bobby had suggested she get a partner to back her up. Partner. That word had a different meaning for her. It meant *traitor*.

That Monday she returned to the newsroom to see Claude in Perry's office. Of late, his productivity had not been up to the *Daily Planet's* standards and the managing editor had made a few disparaging remarks. But here they were emerging from Perry's office. The older man's voice was effusive with praise; he even slapped Claude on the back while saying, "It's a good solid story. But without additional collaboration we can't print it. But hey, I'm glad to see such top-notch work coming from you again."

"Thank you, Perry. Having your confidence is all that's needed," Claude responded with proper humility.

Lois rolled her eyes and wanted to gag listening to all that false flattery!

"No problem. As far as I'm concerned, the Arthur Chow interview is yours. Any man who can write an exposé story on Gregory Daae deserves a first-class assignment. Miss Grant can interview someone else. The second-richest man in the world needs to be handled by a seasoned journalist."

Even across the newsroom Lois could sense Catherine Grant's anger and bitter disappointment. The bookish woman had been working diligently to leave the hollow world of entertainment reporting behind and get into real journalism, especially in international finance. With Perry handing him the Chow interview, Claude had just stolen her passport.

Catherine stood, pushed back her chair, and walked confidently towards the two men. "Mr. White. That was supposed to be my interview. I have a degree in Political Science, slanted towards international finance. Mr. Debarre does not know the difference between a Daily Reset Paper and a Daily Reset List and which applies to the UK or the US." Her voice was as soft as a rose petal, but the tone was covered in frost. The voices in the newsroom died down a little as many turned to watch Catherine.

The tension in the room ratcheted up a few notches further when Lois called out, "Gregory Daae? That wouldn't be the account about his news division manufacturing stories?"

Perry looked from Catherine to Lois, "Huh, yes, Lois, it would."

Without thinking, the words escaped her lips. "That is my story. Claude *stole* it."

Typing stopped. Conversations were halted mid-sentence. Steve from sports continued pouring his coffee to listen, but then suddenly felt the hot brew scald his hand as it overflowed the stout white mug. No one noticed as he yelped and then quickly retrieved a paper towel to wipe up the mess. Except for the television monitors droning in the background, the *Daily Planet* newsroom had fallen into a tomblike silence.

Nothing was more damning to a reporter's reputation than the tainting accusation of outright plagiarism.

While everyone else was watching in stunned silence, Claude's response was as smooth and even as glass. His accented words were perfectly pitched to appease and beguile. "Ah! Perry, please forgive my memory lapse. Lois did assist with a little research, just as before during the college bribery scandal. There is more than enough material for her to contribute a sidebar or two." He smiled beatifically down on her with perfect white teeth. "Not bad for a tyro reporter."

Lois pointed an angry finger in his face and growled, "*Tyro?* You're calling me an absolute beginner? Why you self-serving cheap hustler. I showed that file to Constance in Legal..."

Perry growled, his face taking on the shade of beet red, not good for a man with his high blood pressure. "Hey, hey, hey! Catherine, Lois, and Claude, git yourselves into my office,

pronto!" He turned to the newsroom and bellowed, "The rest of you, get back to work! This is a newspaper. We're reporters, let's act like it!"

Perry swiftly ushered the trio into his office. He closed the door, and for added measure, lowered the blinds.

Outside, the newsroom bumped back into life, staffers got on the phones, and the copyboy ran over to the interns' cubicle. News of Catherine's anger and Lois' accusation against Claude spread faster than light speed throughout the building.

When word reached Jack Bartholomew in his tiny researcher's cubicle, he immediately made his way to the elevator. "Since Constance Hunter is supposed to have seen this story of Miss Lane's," he thought, "I better let her know what's goin' down."

Each person moved to different areas in the large office, which now suddenly seemed tight and hot. Catherine sat gracefully on the old plaid couch, her green eyes never leaving Claude, who casually parked himself in Perry's brown leather visitor's chair. Lois stood with her back to the window, the perfect vantage point to keep an eye on everyone.

Perry eased himself into an old wooden chair, and it creaked with comfortable familiarity. The managing editor began the meeting like an old backwoods lawyer ready to settle an important case. "Well, now, let's get down to brass tacks. Lois, Claude came in here this morning with a big story regarding Gregory Daae. He's got names, dates, sworn affidavits and a carload of other evidence to prove Daae's news network has been manufacturing stories..."

"...in order to garner ratings for his news channel. I know every inch of his research, Perry, because those are *my* files."

Claude shook his head as if he were trying to shake the accusation away. "This is a terrible waste of time, Perry *mon ami*. I wrote this article, and since there is not enough evidence to publish, the Chow interview is mine. These women are the ones trying to steal my story."

"I'm not trying to steal anything!" Catherine said coldly. "That interview with Arthur Chow was promised to me. Now the interview is awarded to a man whose productivity has been questionable of late?" She calmed herself, and continued, "Simply because he brings in an incredible story that can't even be printed? At the risk of sounding childish, Perry, that's plain unfair."

Perry said, "One thing at a time, Ms. Grant." Turning to Lois, he said in a careful tone, "Lois, accusing a fellow journalist of plagiarism is extremely serious. Do you have any proof this is your article?"

All eyes shifted to Lois who painfully remembered what had happened the last time Claude had stolen her story.

She felt terribly uncomfortable and felt as if a troop of mad spiders were racing up and down her spine.

"I...I... Let me check my drawer and computer."

"You see!" Claude crowed, "Mademoiselle Lane lies to buy time!"

Lois felt her throat go dry. She *was* buying time! If Claude was remaining true to form, he had stolen all her files from the desk drawer and erased everything from her hard drive. Even if they brought Constance into the conversation it would be their word against his. She straightened up from her position against the window, and with shaking legs walked towards the door. With each step, her career hopes of being an award-winning journalist for the *Daily Planet* grew dimmer. It seemed so unfair that a cheap, two-bit chiseler like Claude would be the one to end her career before it truly began. Sadly, she pulled open the door and walked straight into Constance Hunter.

"Oh! Excuse me!" the legal counsel said, as she adjusted her large-framed glasses. "Someone told me my name was mentioned regarding a plagiarism accusation. I just wanted to come

downstairs and see if I could be of service.”

Lois never thought she could be more grateful to see anyone in her life. She grabbed Constance by the arm and dragged her into the office.

“Constance, explain to Perry what you told me about the Daae story last Friday! Not enough evidence from within Daae’s inner circle...”

Claude jumped from his chair by Perry’s desk, “More lies? Has the entire female staff of this great paper gone insane?”

“Apparently, only where you’re concerned, Monsieur DeBarre,” Catherine stated dryly.

“Ha! I am surrounded by assassins!” Claude shouted as he pounded the wall so hard that Elvis’s autographed picture, taken at his farewell concert at the Grand Ole Opry, fell off the wall, making a sharp cracking sound as it hit the floor. The fragile glass within the cheap frame splintered into shards.

Perry’s eyebrows just about flew into his hairline when the King’s picture hit the floor. He got up, bent down to pick up the treasured photograph and tenderly placed it on his desk. When he spoke, all was quiet in the room. “Claude, sit down.”

The Frenchman did as he was bid, cutting cruel gray eyes first at Lois and then at Constance.

Constance calmly assessed the situation, rubbed her hand under her chin and spoke, “Perry, Lois did speak to me on Friday afternoon about an article on Gregory Daae’s Media empire. I told her in order for the *Daily Planet* to protect itself, she needs to have someone within the DMG to be a ‘whistleblower’. Otherwise, the week after we print that story, the paper will cease to exist – buried under a mountain of lawsuits.”

All eyes in the room shifted to Claude, who swore venomously in French. His face was so hard and taut it could have been used to strike a match. He spoke, and all vestiges of culture and charm in his voice had vanished. “A ‘supposed’ conversation between two women; one who cannot write a decent story without someone to show her the way, and another who failed so spectacularly as a trial lawyer she needs to hire out her meager services as an in-house counsel.”

It was quiet again and then Perry spoke up. “You owe these ladies an apology.”

Claude threw his hands in the air, grunted and sunk further into Perry’s thick leather visitor’s chair, saying nothing.

The lawyer stared at the man as if he were a particularly nasty bug. She reached into her old-fashioned tan blazer pocket and spoke with a gleam in her eye. “Mr. DeBarre will apologize to all of us, Perry. You see, when Lois had her meeting with me on Friday, I forgot to return this.” Constance Hunter removed a small black diskette from her pocket.

Claude took one look at the diskette and realized his gambit had blown up in his face. But he tried one last attempt to save his career. “There are no markings identifying the owner.”

Handing the diskette to Lois, Constance said, “Oh, no worries. I asked young Jack to do a little forensic work on both your computer and Ms. Lane’s. If everything is as you say, your computer will have a data stream of material and Lois’ will not.”

The atmosphere in Perry’s office had again gone deathly silent. Four questioning sets of eyes watched Claude DeBarre as his guilt became painfully evident by the way his body seemed to collapse upon itself.

Lois broke the silence by asking a question. “How did you steal my story... this time? I had it under lock and key.”

He snorted and said, “Those locks? A child could open them with their fingernail. The computer only took a little more work. Never use your birthday as a password. So stupid!”

Perry barked, “Hey, watch your mouth!”

He turned and said to his boss, “*Mon dieu...* Perry, *mon ami*. I needed a story... a great story.”

The managing editor turned away from him, looking at the

cracked picture of Elvis on his desk. “When I go outside to the bullpen in ten minutes your desk had better be cleared. Oh yeah, leave every scrap of material you stole from Lois, or so help me, I’ll have you up on criminal charges.”

Once the door closed behind Claude, oxygen seemed to flow effortlessly back into the room.

Lois handed the diskette back to Constance and said, “I clearly remember having only one diskette and I tucked that into my desk drawer along with everything else.”

“Oh, this?” Constance grinned, as she put the diskette in her pocket and patted it securely. “It’s the spreadsheet for the Legal Department’s vacation schedule!”

Perry shook his head, fighting to keep a grin from spreading across his face. “So much for Claude thinking less of you.”

Catherine spoke up, “So, Mr. White, does this mean Lois gets the Arthur Chow interview and I continue working on mindless gossip articles?”

“Nope,” Lois said with a smile. “Go ahead; take on the world’s second richest man. I’ll go after the definitive Lex and Arianna Luthor interview!”

As expected, the Gregory Daae article had to be shelved for lack of evidence.

Over time, Bobby Bigmouth became Lois’ best source for information. She had written a couple of outstanding stories which stemmed from material he provided, both of which netted her a Kerth award.

She had seriously pondered several times his suggestion about getting a partner, someone she could depend on in a crisis. Someone who would come through and deliver the goods much as Constance had done that day in Perry’s office.

Still, she wanted – no, needed – to erase the stain of Claude’s actions. Show Perry she was the better reporter, and in the process, gain the respect of the newsroom staff. Hence her determination to visit Kinshasa and find out more about the gunrunners who were supplying arms to both sides of the Congo conflict.

Her mind came back to the present. Thankfully, Claude was now a part of the past, and he was no longer a problem. Perry had refused to provide him with a reference, so he could not get a job in print journalism, and he had barely managed to land a position as a second-rate researcher in LNN. These days she had to deal with the rivalry between herself and Linda King.

Once her best friend in college, Linda had stolen a boy Lois had been dating. It seemed that ever since then she had been playing catch up with the hussy. It was rumored that Linda was dating Preston Carpenter, the new owner of *The Metropolis Star*. If true, it would certainly account for the fact that she now had a column dealing with international issues. Well, this story would put their rivalry on an even footing.

Lois’ thoughts were interrupted by the PA announcement:

“Attention. All passengers for Zurich Air Flight 1278 to Kinshasa. The flight has been delayed another thirty minutes, due to de-icing of the wings. You will be called when it is time to board.”

The ground attendant repeated this twice, then shut off the overhead speaker.

Lois made a rude noise in her throat and growled aloud. “Taking *this* flight is the next step in my career as a newspaper reporter! Somehow *this* stupid plane needs to get its wings de-iced, so I can get on with cracking *this* story!” She sat back in the uncomfortable chair and gave serious contemplation to using her press pass to enter the VIP lounge and get a brief interview with the Luthors. *Anything* was preferable than just sitting on these uncomfortable chairs doing nothing.

The oddly-dressed older gentleman next to her smiled pleasantly and said in a charming British accent, “Yes, this

wretched delay is rather disturbing. Please read my newspaper; it should help to pass the time. Feel free to dispose of it when you have finished reading it.”

Lois graciously accepted, not wanting to offend the old gentleman, although the *Metropolis Star* was not her idea of a newspaper, it being more like something a smelly old fishmonger would use to wrap his product. Upon unfolding the paper, she was stunned to read the headline:

Gun Smuggling Ring Busted in the Congo!
By International Correspondent, Linda King

She could barely speak, and when her vocal cords did start to function, only a few words pushed their way out.

“How. Dare. She! This was *my* story! That woman hasn’t even gotten on a plane! Where did she get the information? All my plans have crashed and burned! How am I going to face Perry at the office? Now I have to cancel my ticket for this flight.”

At that moment, the PA system blared: “Lois Lane, please pick up the nearest red courtesy phone. Lois Lane, please pick up the nearest red courtesy phone.”

With an act of will, Lois took a deep breath, then stood and walked over to the red courtesy phone stand. Before picking up the handset, she threw the offending newspaper into the trash. That done, she yanked the receiver off its cradle. “Yes! Who is this?”

A voice, dripping in honey and sarcasm, came over the line. “Ah, Lois, so glad I caught you. Remember me? This is Linda King. I called over to the *Daily Planet*, but they told me you had just left, on your way to the Congo. Your editor – Perry something-or-other – was screaming about Elvis. He wanted to catch you before the plane took off. Well, I’m so glad I caught you first. Now there’s no reason for you to go, since *I* broke the gunrunner story first.”

A curtain of deep red loomed before her eyes and surrounded her senses. Not trusting herself to speak, she ever so gently replaced the receiver and stormed away from the courtesy desk.

“Not only don’t I get the story, unless by some miracle the airline cancels this flight, I’m on the hook to the *Planet’s* travel department for my plane ticket!” she muttered aloud.

The young woman walked towards the Zurich Air desk to recoup her plane ticket. She was infuriated, and yet despite her anger, she noticed a very handsome man sporting circular wire-rim glasses, dark hair, light gray pants and a dark gray shirt walking towards the elderly gentleman who had given her the newspaper. For a brief moment he gazed at her with a curiously joyful expression on his face.

Lois tried to ignore the man. Yet for some inexplicable reason she felt drawn to him, maybe because he was so attractive? Angrily, she dismissed the notion. “Mr. Greenjeans,” she thought, “no matter how gorgeous, is not important and I’ve got bigger problems!” Linda King had won this round. For a certainty there had to be a story worthy of her talents out there. She needed to make a few phone calls, after she talked to the young man on the reservations desk.

The older gentleman who had so graciously given her the newspaper stood up, looked at his gold pocket watch and met the young man.

They stood watching Lois walk away, and the younger man observed, “Wow, she’s really steamed! I’m going to have quite a fireball on my hands. When you brought me here from Lois and Clark’s home in their universe and said, ‘nothing was impossible’, I did not realize it was to rescue her!”

H.G. Wells also looked after the determined young woman as she walked down the hallway towards a bank of payphones. “Yes, well, I suspect the Miss Lane of this dimension – ahem – *your* Miss Lane was meant to be stopped from going to the Congo, but something happened to prevent it.”

Clark asked, “Do you think it was that phone call?”

H.G. Wells looked at a small hand-held device and nodded, “Entirely possible. You see, she never boarded the *Zurich Air* flight. According to my records she departed with the Luthors who were on their way to Italy. They dropped her off in Rome, and from there she caught a flight to Kinshasa, and that is the last anyone heard of her.”

“Thank goodness! Maybe it was you giving her the newspaper which slowed her up long enough to get that phone call,” the younger man said.

“Precisely. Miss Lane can move forward with her life and you both shall meet under entirely different circumstances. This is a great victory, one to be savored, Clark. For this is the time pivot which forced your life on a different trajectory. Now we need to return you to two years *prior* to Tempus’ appearance in Metropolis so we can fix this wretched situation he threw you into.”

“Herb, do you really think it’s possible? What about my past self? We will exist at the same time.”

The little man bounced on his toes, apparently wanting to say something, but seemed reluctant to do so. “No. That will not happen. Please, please trust me; everything will be taken care of, all in due time.”

Clark whispered softly, almost reverently, “Lois and I will have a life... together.”

“Exactly, my boy, both of you will enjoy many adventures together and will be very happy...”

“But I won’t have a secret identity. How could an intensely private woman like Lois Lane deal with the paparazzi? You saw how that crowd of photographers chased Luthor and his wife.”

“Clark, let me assure you, Lois in this or any universe can handle those ruffians quite easily. Remember this is the Lois of five years ago. Despite the fact that she has won two Kerth awards, she is still an unpolished gem. But by the time Tempus shows up, she will be in the perfect position to prevent your secret from being discovered.”

Clark smiled, filled with a new confidence and a new sense of purpose, no longer dejected and fearful of a solitary and lonely existence. He and H.G. Wells walked away and entered a maintenance corridor where they disappeared to their respective places in time.

Meanwhile, outside, the worst blizzard to hit Metropolis in living memory continued building into a raging, arctic fury.

Part One

Three frigid winter days passed before Lois returned to the *Daily Planet’s* newsroom.

Due to hazardous blizzard conditions *Zurich Air* grounded the flight and refunded all the passengers’ money. Metropolis had been slammed by the worst snowstorm in decades. Who could have imagined that Idlewild Airport, indeed the entire city and its outlying suburbs, could be crippled for forty-eight hours by something which began with the gentle ruffle of innocent, fluffy white flakes? Everything was completely encased in a blanket of snow that quickly hardened into a thick layer of hoarfrost when the temperatures plummeted into double negative digits. The state of New Troy and Metropolis were at a complete standstill, and nothing on wheels or wings could get in or out.

The only serious newspaper representative at Idlewild Airport, as luck would have it, was Lois Lane. With a keen reporter’s eye, she recorded all the dramatic events of those two frost-bitten days. The most dangerous incident occurred when a freighter plane, heavily iced and nearly out of fuel, made a dramatic landing on the arctic-like surface of the only operational landing strip. Thanks to the skillful maneuvers of the pilot, the freighter narrowly avoided a vacant passenger plane as it skidded on the icy surface while dozens of frightened ground crew workers looked on, finally stopping only inches from the end of the runway.

Although that was by far the most terrifying story, there were smaller, more intimate ones. Groups of stranded passengers sleeping huddled together on cold, polished tile floors. Many used their jackets or coats as makeshift blankets. Lois noted one graceful young woman, obviously a seasoned traveler, removing her thick red woolen shawl, laying it on the freezing floor and falling fast asleep.

Her heart was struck with compassion when she watched a mother play games with her two small children, keeping the young ones happy and preoccupied. To do so during such a crisis required a unique blending of tenderness and patience.

A few unforeseen mishaps occurred to increase the misery of the stranded travelers. The water pressure in the bathrooms could not handle the sheer volume of demand. The massive food court, usually well stocked, ran out of food and drink for the same reason. Worst of all, after only a few hours of continuous use, the generators failed, and one by one the huge airport's buildings began to freeze; passengers and employees of the facility suffered the cold equally.

Of course, the Luthors and others of their ilk avoided all these inconveniences. Their private jet had managed to take off before all the travel restrictions had been issued. Lois wondered bitterly how the couple would have survived without their usual supply of champagne and caviar if they had been marooned with everyone else?

Lois never forgot the unbearable chilliness of those two days. When she arrived at the airport she had anticipated and dressed for the warmth of Africa. She did not expect to be stranded at the airport in the middle of a blizzard. Her lightweight quilted jacket barely kept her warm. Her entire body trembled while the tendrils of cold seeped into chilled flesh and clutched like vultures at her bones as the temperature within the terminal steadily declined. Fiercely determined to forget about her own discomforts and become the eyes and ears of this self-contained world, she phoned the office every few hours with updates. Elsie from re-write took down her story and had the article ready for Perry in time for the evening edition. How the newsies endeavored to get the papers onto the street after it left the printing presses under such harsh weather conditions spoke of the tenacity of the print crew and the people who distributed the paper.

Three days later, when Lois stepped off the elevator, Perry ran up the ramp and praised her, not just for being in the right place at the right time, but for writing the story with understanding and compassionate insight. Those two qualities had previously been foreign to her; usually her stories had been written with the subtlety and finesse of a sledgehammer. Unfortunately, in the face of all this triumph, Lois returned without the story she wanted, and to add salt to the wound, she had been scooped by an old rival.

Instead of wallowing in regret and chocolate ice cream, Lois decided to build a support system. Perhaps starting with a partner – someone to share the load when a story got particularly demanding – was part of that protection. Oddly enough, Bobby Bigmouth's advice about a partner was nettling, yet painfully true. She needed to at least be somewhat approachable to other journalists and most definitely to the staffers at her own newspaper.

If she had not been such a mad dog while chasing down her stories and stepping on anyone who got in her way, maybe, just maybe, her fellow reporters would have come to her defense the first time, when Claude stole her story.

It was a lesson well learned, but there were still others to follow. Over the course of the next two years, she endeavored to develop solid relationships with her co-workers. One of the closest was with the office gofer and budding photojournalist, Jack Bartholomew.

When Lois first arrived at the newspaper, she was inclined to be rash, impulsive and undisciplined in her behavior and speech.

Her trademark was jumping into almost any situation without checking out the water's temperature. For the longest time, that trait was valued by her editor and some of the Planet's reporters, but on a particular day that quality of hers nearly cost young Jack his life.

It began as an ordinary day, as most days like that tend to be. Lois was working on another story when Perry burst out of his office, saying: "Lois! Jack! There's a robbery in progress at the First National Bank on State and 53rd! There are hostages inside! The MPD SWAT team is on the way. Move it!"

Lois grabbed her briefcase and ran up the ramp, with Jack only two steps behind. "We're on it, Chief!" she yelled while running up the ramp. They managed to grab the elevator before the doors closed.

Twenty minutes later they arrived on the scene. Police cars, EMT units, and a monstrosity ugly black SWAT van surrounded the bank. MPD units blocked off the area. From what she could gather, they were all in for a long stand-off, a very bad state of affairs for the hostages. The only reason Lois and Jack were permitted over the police line was because she aggressively flashed her press pass, and even then Henderson wasn't happy.

After cooling their heels for an hour while a steely hostage negotiator talked to the robbers through a special phone hook-up, Lois noticed the heavily armored SWAT unit was preparing to move in. She spoke to Jack, "Come on, negotiations have broken down, and I'm betting those guys inside are going to make a run for it. Let's work our way 'round the back and be waiting when SWAT brings those guys down. The robbers don't want to sit through a standoff any more than we do."

The young man cautiously asked, "Uh, Miss Lane, maybe we ought to wait for the other reporters?"

She shook her head no. "Who? Those gutless, perfectly groomed TV network guys? They don't move for anything except a sound bite! Jack, this is front page journalism! You want Perry to give you that raise and promotion, right?"

He nodded thoughtfully, then after a moment's consideration, hefted his camera bag, and said, "Lead the way!"

They ran down a blind alley, uncovered by the police... straight into the bank robbers making a hasty exit.

The thieves were startled for a heartbeat, but then the two men realized only a slender young woman and a boy scarcely out of his teens stood in their path to freedom. The older of the two aimed his pistol and tried to squeeze off a shot... at Jack's head.

Miracle upon miracles, the gun misfired. As the robber pulled the trigger a second time, he swore, "Stupid reloads!"

His accomplice, realizing what had happened, quickly raised his gun. Jack remained frozen in place. Seeing this, Lois ran towards Jack, prepared to tackle him to get him out of the line of fire and praying that she would be in time. Suddenly the air of the gloomy alleyway stank from the bitter odor of gunpowder. The assailant had crumbled to the ground screaming, with his right shoulder shattered in a mass of blood and bone.

The whole event took place in less than sixty seconds.

Jack collapsed, his face pale with fright. Lois knelt by his side.

A terse voice spoke. Its quiet tones had been a source of annoyance and frustration on many an occasion to Lois, but at this moment, that voice was the sweetest, most welcomed sound she had ever heard. Henderson holstered his weapon and knelt next to them. "Lane! What in Sam Hill do you think you're doing? Trying to get yourself and this youngster killed?"

She looked past him and saw MPD uniforms and SWAT team members running into the alley with EMT units on their heels. A strangely chastened sound – her voice – crawled up a dry, strangled throat and spoke, "Th... thank you Bill... from ... both of us."

Henderson gave Lois an odd look, then extended a hand to

help Jack into a sitting position. The photographer regained his balance, pulled away from them, stiffly walked towards the men who had tried to take his life, and began taking their pictures. He behaved as coolly as any experienced war-time photographer under fire.

The wounded robber screamed as a medical tech tried to look after his injury. His accomplice glared hard at Jack, who snapped picture after picture of the police reading the thief his rights.

Henderson and Lois watched, speechless, as the scene unfolded.

Calmly, Jack spoke with members of the SWAT team, asking pertinent questions. When they had satisfied him, he then turned to Lois with an odd expression on his face.

"These pix should go well with the article, Ms. Lane." He casually looked at his watch. "We oughta make the evening edition if we get a cab right now." There was a curiously flat tone to Jack's voice, as if he was trying to distance himself from the situation. Without another word, he strode past Bill and Lois.

Lois tried to catch up with him when Henderson grabbed her sleeve. "Leave him alone, Lane. The boy is in shock."

She snapped, "All the more reason for me to go to him! It... it was my fault."

The older man shook his head slowly, "I've seen that look before on men who came back from a fire and lived to tell the tale. That young man has got a lot of moxie. When he's ready to talk, let him. Don't force it."

It was a tense, quiet cab ride back to the office. Jack looked out the window, seeing nothing at all. Lois kept her hands clutched tightly around her briefcase. Even the cabbie, bellicose to the point of downright exasperation, picked up on their cues and eventually fell silent. The silence grew longer and more strained after they exited the cab and Lois paid their fare. Jack ignored her and walked stoically towards the building. She followed him wordlessly through the lobby and waited quietly by his side as the ancient elevator leisurely made its way downstairs.

As the elevator began to move upward, Jack pushed the stop button, effectively halting the car.

Lois, her eyes flashing in anger, was about to speak when Jack said in a halting strained voice, "I... I came to work for the *Planet* because its reputation for fairness. Fairness is something I didn't have a lot of growing up. But most of all, the strong, honestly written articles by the reporters such as yourself really spoke to me."

"Jack... I..."

He held up his hand, bringing to a standstill the expected torrent of words. "Want to know why that raise is so important to me? I have a younger brother. His name is Denny. He's in a foster home with decent people, but it ain't like living with family."

"I... I didn't know," Lois stammered.

"Yeah, well, talking about my personal life isn't part of the job description. Denny and I are all the family we have. If anything happens to me, how long do you think it will be before he gets lost in the foster care system? In the past two years I've set aside a fair amount of money, but a raise will get me out of that crummy room at the 'Y' and into a halfway decent apartment. Now it's true, I agreed to go with you into that alley. If I had given it another minute's consideration I probably wouldn't have. I might have died today because of your compulsive need to beat everyone. In that case, where would Denny be?"

The full import of Jack's words slammed into her with the force of a hurricane.

"I still respect and believe in you, but don't *ever* force me to choose between my family responsibilities and a picture again." Jack grew silent after that, looking at Lois with determination and a touch of fear.

"Jack, it wasn't my intention to get you hurt, it was just..."

She hesitated and realized he was also trying to make a name for himself, gain respect from Perry, and take care of his brother. Her only responsibility was to herself and her goldfish. In that instant, Jack Bartholomew had earned her respect... and become the younger brother she'd never had.

"I apologize. Next time I go too far..."

Jack cut her off, "If the situation is too dangerous, I won't follow." His mouth was set in a self-conscious nervous half-grin.

Lois smiled, "Friends?"

Jack nodded slowly. "Maybe... how about allies for now and we see where things go from here?"

"Deal." Lois stuck her hand out, Jack took it, and shook once to seal the bargain.

He hit the start button, and the elevator, with a loud click and a creaking groan of ancient gears, lurched and rumbled into motion.

Two minutes later, they burst into the newsroom and ran to their respective desks.

"Chief! I've got all the bank robbery information and Jack got a couple of quotes and killer pix! Give me twenty minutes and I'll send the story to your inbox!" Lois booted her computer into life and started writing.

Perry barreled over from the Sports Department. He was angry in a way Lois had never seen before. "Hey, you two, Henderson called; what's this about one of the robbers who attempted a couple of shots at Jack? Lois, he's just a kid! No story is worth taking such risks ..."

Jack looked up from his camera and said, "Uh, Chief? I'm OK. Shootouts, especially when working with Ms. Lane, are all part of the job. Once these pictures are developed you'll *know* they are front page material. I'm heading over to the dark room now." With that, Jack turned on his heel, walked up the ramp and disappeared down the corridor.

Perry watched the young man, shook his head and muttered, "Well, I'll be. That kid's got the makings of a first-rate photojournalist." He then looked down at Lois who had been carefully typing away. He spoke in a softer voice, but there was a slight edge to it. "Lois, I know you had something to do with this. Jack needs a mentor... for Elvis' sake, don't get him killed in the process!"

Properly chastised, she shook her head in acknowledgment of his statement, yet refused to look up. Perry glanced at her fingers as they danced over the keyboard. They were slick with the water of her tears. Without another word, he returned to his office.

The incident at the bank taught Lois another lesson and it was one she stuck by. Her pursuit of the Pulitzer would mean nothing if an innocent person was hurt or lost their life for *her* ambition. She was still willing to take risks, but now was much more selective about the ones she took.

Over the next two years, Lois Lane honed her craft as a journalist. She wrote stories ranging from bikers commuting from outlying New Troy suburbs in frigid winter to how the police were doing more to stem Metropolis crime than throwing felons in prison. She went undercover as a lounge singer in a swanky nightclub to reveal a smuggling ring and in the process exposed a plot to assassinate the mayor.

The most daring investigation she ever undertook was disguising herself as a man to uncover a drug ring operating out of a bicycle messenger company. Bobby Bigmouth had provided the lead for that story and she paid for it with the thickest, juiciest porterhouse steak dinner in Metropolis.

Because her investigative and undercover work took her to the seedier parts of the city, Perry had suggested she undertake a course of self-defense classes. Maybe even carry a weapon of some kind.

The thought of learning to shoot and carry a gun made her ill

at ease; she decided instead to learn Tae Kwon Do. The classes were highly disciplined, which appealed to that side of her nature, and one of the best classes in the city was held only three blocks from the office. She loved testing her body and growing stronger, and after a few sessions she was hooked. It was not unusual to see a gym bag tucked discreetly under her desk. Following a year of intense practice, she became quite adept and had even participated in a small number of matches around the city.

With a decent bump in salary due to her new status as top investigative reporter on the city desk, Lois purchased a couple of snazzy business suits and glamorous pumps for herself. Over time, she began to incorporate other subtle changes into her appearance as well. Her makeup became that of a polished career woman instead of an awkward college girl. The \$1.99 Press-on acrylic nails from LexRite were ditched in favor of soothing professional French manicures.

The chunky, flashy cheap costume jewelry was replaced with a few classic, tasteful silver pieces that could work in the newsroom or while pounding the pavement for leads on a story.

There was one thing she kept the same, though: she refused to chop off the luscious brunette locks into a boring page boy haircut. "I'll look like a clone of every young female reporter in the city," she muttered to Catherine. As a form of compromise, she wore her hair in a sleek ponytail. On special evening occasions her stylist swept it into a sexy updo that exposed her elegant neck and shoulders.

As the months rolled by, she developed funny quirks, like chewing off the erasers on her No. 2 pencils when she was hot on a story, and eating Double Fudge Crunch bars when the trail went cold. The inhabitants of the bullpen were sometimes driven crazy by her leaps of intuition or non-stop babble when she became confused. But no matter what, Lois Lane produced the headliner stories that routinely raised circulation.

The brash young tyro that Claude had accused her of being vanished as Lois Lane's name and talent were recognized, and she began to take her place among the ranks of the finest investigative reporters in the country. The bike messenger/drug ring article provided her first Kerth award. Holding the award on the night of the ceremony gave her a powerful sense of validation; she had finally arrived as an investigative reporter. Perhaps now the ignominy of Claude's betrayal could be put behind her like the suffocating nightmare that it was.

In the meantime, she and Catherine had developed a strong friendship. The two women played off each other's strengths. The former gossip columnist tried to teach Lois the finer points of interviewing subjects without putting them on the defensive, while the younger gave a helping hand to her friend in an area she sorely needed.

Catherine's crackling good interview of the Asian billionaire, Arthur Chow, yielded not just a respectfully written article, but a budding friendship. After much gentle coaxing, Lois had convinced Catherine to shed her librarian image. Gone were the ugly horn-rimmed spectacles in favor of contact lenses, and she indulged in new clothes and a new hair style. The results were promising: upon her first appearance in the newsroom, rather than blending with the nondescript furniture, Catherine stood out, looked professional, sophisticated, and to the more intellectually-minded in the newsroom, tastefully attractive.

Through all the personal changes and journalistic challenges, Lois continued to painstakingly add scraps of information to her file on Gregory Daae. Her determination to bring the media mogul's nefarious dealings to the harsh light of day never wavered.

As for a regular partner on the city desk, she still had none, but had grown comfortable working with Jack, and together they had managed to present excellent stories with fantastic pictures. The young man's efforts had not gone unnoticed by Perry. He was

given a significant raise and was made research assistant *and* assistant photographer.

The first thing he did was find a suitable apartment in a good neighborhood for himself and Denny. Lois, Elsie, Steve, and others in the bullpen quietly got together and purchased a few items the brothers would need for their place. It gave Lois a terrific feeling to help Jack as if he were a younger brother.

It was around this time Eduardo Friez returned from the Madrid office for an extended stay in Metropolis. He was the *Daily Planet's* roving international correspondent. If there was a hot spot, chances were Eduardo could be found in the middle of it. He was tall, yet stocky in build, with a swarthy complexion and a black patch over his left eye. The eye had been injured while he was covering a hurricane in Florida years before. A small rock had struck the eye; his vision was instantly destroyed.

This handicap did not slow down his preference for covering dangerous news events. He wore a black eye patch and cut a dashing figure through half the newsrooms in Europe and America.

Perry had figured to put them together on occasion. Lois protested loudly against the arrangement - international correspondents reeked memories of Claude. Eduardo was sensitive to Lois' feelings. He had been in Metropolis at different points in her relationship with Claude and had observed the entire affair from a discreet distance. He privately thought of the relationship as the 'rise, decline and fall of the Roman Empire'. After Claude was dismissed, he respected her determination to put the past where it belonged and move forward in her career. Despite a rocky start, the two journalists managed to work together.

They ran successful investigations on police corruption and a scandal in the air traffic controllers union, and covered the Metropolis transit workers' strike. Readers of the *Daily Planet* knew an article written by Friez and Lane meant well-written stories based on fact, not sensational fluff. They had been operating more or less as a team for nearly a year before Eduardo, purely by accident, discovered the Daae file.

It was late one night at the *Daily Planet* bullpen, between the day and night shift change, when Lois was working on her massive accordion file of research materials that was usually hidden in Constance's office. She was so engrossed in writing margin notes that she failed to notice Eduardo walk up to her.

Eduardo's whistle came low and sharp between his moistened lips.

"What are you working on? The materials for all our joint investigations wouldn't fill half this file! This looks more like research on a book rather than a newspaper article."

Lois gasped in surprise and nearly fell out of her chair. "Good grief! Eduardo, you scared the life out of me! What are you doing here at this hour?"

He quirked a bushy black eyebrow and said, "I might say the same of you. So this is the material on the big 'Pulitzer Prize' story you have been researching for the past few years? I had originally thought those were vague 'water cooler' rumors."

Lois studied her occasional partner and friend carefully; she knew his reputation for reporting dangerous stories was only eclipsed by his legendary tact and discretion. She needed to stop thinking that every male international correspondent was Claude or that everyone was out to steal her story. She tapped the pencil twice against the desk, flung the long thick ponytail over her shoulder, and spoke.

"No, my 'Pulitzer' file really exists. I have been gathering facts on this article for more than three years, Eduardo. We are looking at raw material for the definite exposé on Gregory Daae's business dealings over the past two decades."

Again, the dark, bushy eyebrows went up in surprise, nearly disappearing into his hairline. "You're talking about Gregory Daae... as in the owner of the Daae Media Group?"

“Unless you know of anybody else with that name,” Lois responded crisply. She was still unhappy at having someone discover her researching this story. She trusted him to a degree, yet found it hard to have confidence in anyone with an article of this magnitude. Nonetheless, considering the scope and length of his career, Eduardo had probably forgotten more secrets than she had ever heard.

He whistled again, a sound filled with respect. “Ms. Lane, you aim high. With all this research and evidence,” he said, gesturing towards the folder, “what’s stopping you from writing up the article?”

A deep sigh escaped her lips, “It’s a long story, take a seat.” Eduardo made himself comfortable at his desk. She proceeded to inform him of all that had gone into the research. Of Constance Hunter’s legal decision not to publish the article because they desperately needed a DMG insider to corroborate everything. She grudgingly mentioned Claude’s attempt to plagiarize the story, which led to his termination from the *Daily Planet* and her decision to work on the article only when no one was around.

“Wouldn’t it be easier to do the research at home? There’s a lot less chance of someone like me scaring the wits out of you. Not to mention actually stealing the story.”

“All the research information is here. That new internet set-up for my home computer the suits keep promising hasn’t happen yet. Besides, anyone who sneaks up on me won’t have the drop for long! So, tell me, what are you doing here so late?”

“I’m going London,” Eduardo said quietly.

“Perfect! Besides needing insider corroboration, there are significant gaps in my information I can’t get my hands on here in the States, whereas a certain journalist with extensive resources in Europe might have a better chance.”

“Oh,” Eduardo nodded as he made himself comfortable at his desk. “Let’s just say I’m the ‘international correspondent’ who can look under particular rocks and see what crawls out?”

“Exactly!” Lois’s brown eyes lit up with dangerous fires. The workday had been long and grueling, but nonetheless, sharing information with Eduardo about her long-planned exposé on Daae had her adrenaline flowing. “I’m not asking you to spy on DMG…”

“No, not spy… just steal information which will eventually destroy the company,” he said flatly.

Lois let out a breath she was not aware she was holding in. She was about to rattle off why she had set her sights on Daae when Eduardo held up a restraining hand. If there was one thing he intensely disliked about Lois, it was her propensity to babble.

“But you have to understand Perry’s sending me on a special long-term assignment in our London office. Not Zurich where DMG is headquartered.”

His companion’s face fell. “What? How are you supposed to help me with this investigation?”

“Relax. DMG is based in Switzerland. My job requires me to travel back and forth to Zurich, so there’s no reason why I can’t work on both assignments. But of course, Perry’s take precedence.”

“Oh. Care to tell me what you’re working on?”

“Sorry, Lois.” The set of his jaw and the tone of Eduardo’s voice telegraphed immediately that the subject was closed. Eduardo’s reputation was built on the trust and discretion he had developed over the years with people. It was the primary reason Lois was willing to reveal her plans for Gregory Daae. Swallowing her curiosity, she simply nodded and said, “Okay. When do you leave?”

“I’m scheduled on the redeye flight to London out of Idlewild Airport next Monday morning. I can study what you’re working on if you can provide me with an overview of this… uh, material,” he said while gesturing towards the bulging accordion file.

Part Two

“Don’t get on that plane!”

Clark awoke with a start; his body and bed sheets were bathed in cold sweat. He thought, “Don’t get on *what* plane?” Surely not the flight he was taking out of Wichita later today. He and Lana had fought over his decision to move to Metropolis, but he was determined to make a career in journalism working for an important newspaper in a major city, not remain as managing editor of the *Smallville Gazette*. It was a respectable publication with a decent circulation and a secure future, but he wanted more.

A dream.

He had dreamt of Idlewild Airport in Metropolis. Of a funny man with a British accent wearing old-fashioned clothes and a bowler hat. It was wintertime and a frightening blizzard was beginning to cripple the airport. There were several photographers and some questionable people who referred to themselves as ‘reporters’. A wealthy over-groomed couple… and a beautiful woman with long dark hair and brown doe-like eyes.

There was something else. An odd flash of brilliant lights and the strangest feeling he existed in two places and times all at once. The dream, with its myriad sights and sounds, seemed more like actual memories. Yet try as he might, the dream with all its nuances faded like a freshly painted watercolor in a Kansas spring downpour.

He got up and slowly made his way to the kitchenette for a glass of lukewarm water, carefully avoiding the piles of boxes bound for storage. His throat felt sandpapery and constricted, and the rancid smell of warm human sweat invaded his nostrils.

Overall, he felt achy and extremely tired, as if he had never slept. Retracing his steps, Clark thought of returning to his narrow bed and catching a few more minutes of sleep. But the feel of damp sheets against his clammy skin made that impossible. Obviously, the dream must have been traumatic for it to have affected him on a physical level as well. Perhaps a dose of sunlight was what he needed. He wandered outside, and quietly stood just outside his front door, absorbing the gentle rays of the early morning sun.

It took nearly fifteen minutes before Clark began to feel better. At super speed he showered and dressed. No reason that Uncle Wayne and the Langs should have to wait for him. Lana and her parents had insisted on seeing him off, which meant he couldn’t fly on his own to Metropolis. She felt it would help him blend into his new life if he flew there like regular people. Fly like ‘regular people’? He was most definitely *not* a regular person! Regular people do not fly thousands of feet in the air under their own power to reach a destination. That was *regular* for him. Flying in a giant cylinder of aluminum, rubber and plastic only caused him to be impatient and slightly claustrophobic because he could get there faster than any airplane could fly.

Despite his misgivings about the flight, he was glad Lana had decided to follow him to Metropolis, where she could be working alongside her father as his assistant. Prof. Bertram Lang had been invited by Jefferson Bailey, the Creative Director, to head up the project team creating an extensive series of exhibits focusing on the French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. The exhibits, collectively to be called *The Age of Napoleon*, were showcasing major events in the former French emperor’s life, and would be on display at the Metropolis Museum of History and Art. It was a much coveted position and Prof. Lang had greeted the assignment with enthusiasm.

The phone rang, cracking the early morning stillness and curtly intruding on Clark’s thoughts. Quickly, he ran into the tiny apartment once more, careful to avoid the boxes, and snatched the phone off its cradle.

“Hello,” Clark said.

“Good morning, son, it’s Uncle Wayne. Penelope’s going to birth this calf sooner than expected. Doc Wilson’s on his way. But she can’t be left alone. Plus, with your Aunt Mary laid up with the

flu, we won't be there to see you off. You understand?"

"Sure, I do," Clark answered, careful to keep the disappointment out of his voice.

There was silence on the other end. Wayne knew the younger man would miss their presence at the airport. "I'm real sorry about this... it's better to say these things in person than over the phone lines. Ah, your folks would be mighty proud of you." The older man's voice nearly broke when he said the last.

"I... I know, Uncle Wayne. If you and Aunt Mary hadn't stepped in..."

"Now let's not start that! Jonathan and me, served together in Korea. He saved my life more'n once. No stupid high-handed judge was gonna tell me I wasn't gonna raise his boy. Adopted or not." Wayne's voice was gruff, but the affection for Clark and his deceased parents was deep and genuine.

Briefly, there was a moment of uncomfortable silence, and then his uncle continued. "You're a special person, Clark, in ways most folks don't understand. But don't let that stop you from helpin' where you can."

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Clark said, "Th... thank you for everything. I'll come back and visit to see Penelope's new calf. The fences on the north side will need tending to pretty soon. I can help with that."

"Good. We can talk all about your life in Metropolis." Wayne Irig hesitated, then said, "Uh, now, Clark, I don't want to stick my nose where it don't belong...but... but it's about Lana."

"Yes, sir?"

"Aw, well ...she's all right most of the time, but the girl don't hold to your... uh, talents. It was a rotten accident when she caught you behind the barn practicing your heat vision. That's water under the bridge, but she's never wanted you to use those powers for any reason. It's probably why you're flying on a plane to Metropolis rather than under your own steam."

Clark sighed mentally; he always suspected Uncle Wayne didn't approve of their relationship.

"...respect is important in a relationship. That's all I'm saying."

After college, Clark had travelled around the world for a few years. His parents' untimely death had left him rootless in a sense. He had been curious about life in other countries and had decided to explore them.

He accepted work from newspapers in different lands, where he would learn about the politics, language, customs, and non-tourist aspects of a country. Yet in all the years of travel, he had never found a city where he wanted to settle and truly call home. He knew in his heart it had to be a unique place, where he was no longer an outsider, and could fit into as perfectly and as completely as if he had been born there. To work at a great job, and build a good life with cherished friends. Often when he did begin to feel comfortable, his talents would somehow manifest themselves and he was obliged to move on.

Clark returned to Kansas fully intending to run the farm until he could find an experienced man to manage it. He loved the place and was determined that despite his absences the homestead would be kept up as if his parents were still alive. Shortly after his return, Seth Potter asked him to become the managing editor of the *Smallville Gazette* upon his retirement. Clark reasoned that since it was a weekly newspaper, it would be fairly easy to manage both jobs, especially with his 'distinctive' abilities. He agreed to be the temporary managing editor, provided Mr. Potter understood he was looking for job outside of Kansas. He reasoned that if they were willing to hire him under those circumstances, he could leave the *Gazette* and move on to hopefully his permanent home with a clear conscience.

It was not too long afterwards that Joe Cleve, a reliable young man who Clark had grown up with, agreed to take over the daily operations of the Kent farm. Clark arranged to let Joe and his

little family move into the old farmhouse and he moved into a small apartment over the garage of his neighbor, Mrs. Siegel.

Lana had graduated from college with a degree in European history, following in her father's footsteps, and specialized in the Roman occupation of Gaul; she then immediately joined her parents at a dig in the former Aquitaine Province of France. The dig was a treasure trove of artifacts from when Napoleon's army had set up camp in that area. When that excavation project was finished, the Lang family returned to Smallville shortly after Clark.

Clark and Lana had met purely by accident at Maisie's diner. Lana, pleased to see how mature her former beau had become, had decided she wanted to pick up where they left off in high school and began insinuating herself into Clark's life.

At first the relationship was easy and fun. Clark enjoyed having a woman in his life; someone besides Uncle Wayne and Pete Ross who knew his secret. It was a pleasure to do nice things for her with the aid of his super abilities. He did not have to pretend to be something he was not. But the more Lana spent time with him, the more she felt the need to manage his life, chiefly when it came to his persistent determination to render assistance to those in need. She felt he should blend in as much as possible, which meant ignoring cries for help, even if lives were at stake.

Life in Smallville did not suit Lana: she had seen beyond what Kansas had to offer, so that now living in a rural area felt more like a punishment than returning home. She mailed applications to dozens of colleges, prestigious universities and museums in several states, chiefly New York, New Troy, and California. While she waited for responses from her applications, Lana taught early French history at the local community college.

She felt certain her relationship with Clark was strong enough that he would follow her. After all, they *were* an attractive couple. They had dated for more than five months and there was talk around the small farming community that they would soon marry. Yet, despite his easygoing attitude, he had ambitions of his own: dreams of working for a big city newspaper. He also diligently submitted resumes all over the country. Several responded by contacting him via phone and conducting an initial interview right then and there. But unfortunately, none called him back for a follow-up.

He had been living in Smallville for about a year when, on the same day, he received four requests to interview him face to face - the only caveat being if Clark was willing to travel to these cities at his own expense. He happily told each interviewer that condition would not prove to be a problem for him. The newspapers were as impressive as they were surprising:

San Francisco Chronicle

Chicago Tribune

Washington Post

Metropolis Daily Planet

Clark eagerly set up interview dates with all four newspapers. He asked his old college instructor, Prof. Dade Carson, to write a letter of introduction to the managing editor of the *Daily Planet*, Perry White. Of the four newspapers, the *Planet* was the one where he most wanted to work.

He flew to Metropolis on a rainy Wednesday afternoon, and he had to duck into the men's room in the lobby of the newspaper's building and 'quick dry' his clothes by carefully using his heat vision. After taking a slow ride up the recalcitrant elevator, Clark stepped into the controlled chaos of the world-famous newsroom and a curious sense of calm came over him. After so many years of looking for a personal niche, he felt as if he had finally arrived home.

Perry White had him enter immediately into his office where the veteran journalist grilled the young man about his experiences abroad and as editor of the Smallville newspaper. He was pleased to see various first-rate investigative articles on subjects such as an

extensive cover-up by a well-known hardware chain that sold chemical fertilizers. The use of this particular brand of fertilizers had led to the contamination of the local water table. The article resulted in an in-depth investigation of the hardware company, which in turn forced them to use their own money to clean up the contaminated water supplies.

The interview ended with Perry offering Clark the job working alongside Lois Lane on the city desk. Clark was pleased to hear he would be teamed with a seasoned veteran. Even in Kansas, he had heard of her ground-breaking exposés.

He flew back to Smallville both elated and a little saddened. He was leaving his adopted family's home again and this time he knew that Metropolis would take its place within his mind and heart.

He had a long conversation with Joe to ask him to become the permanent caretaker of the farm. Needless to say, Joe was thrilled. Once that matter was resolved, he prepared himself for a rather painful discussion with Lana.

Lana had originally been less than supportive and grumbled about the new job at every other opportunity. She had told him her career should be considered first; after all, she reasoned, he could get a reporting job anywhere. Her attitude changed somewhat when her father accepted the invitation to become Curator of French History at the Metropolis Museum of History and Art. His first important project was to reconstruct exhibits of the world of Napoleon Bonaparte.

Prof. Lang was pleased and awed by the assignment before him. He asked Lana to come to Metropolis with him and help recreate five major scenes from the emperor's life. Apparently, she was more than willing to give up searching for a position at a big-name college in order to be his assistant. Having that on her resume would impress any college faculty. Obviously having Clark get hired by the *Daily Planet* in Metropolis meant he was going places and she wanted to be close by to guide his path to fame and hopefully fortune.

Now Clark was ambivalent where Lana was concerned. He cared deeply for her and was grateful to have someone in his life. Yet at the same time *knowing* about his background and *understanding* him - what drove him as a man - were two different things. Take, for example, her insistence he fly to Metropolis... via airplane so her folks could see him off. He really didn't have extra money to blow on a plane ticket...

Clark was roughly pulled from his musings and into the present when Uncle Wayne, in a loud tone, said, "Clark! Son, are you hearin' what I'm saying?"

A little embarrassed, Clark responded, "Sorry, I didn't..."

"Huh, well, never mind, you got enough to think about. All I'm saying is maybe seeing other women when you settle into that reportin' job is a good idea. Heck, have Pete fix you up with some good-hearted nurse or doctor. Lana ain't the only filly on the range."

"Maybe..." Clark said tentatively.

Wayne sighed heavily, "Son, you're a good man and I understand your feelings. But she *ain't* the one. I've said my piece. Do us all proud. Call when the plane lands."

The two men exchanged farewells and then Clark hung up.

Wichita Airport's main terminal was vast open space, with sweeping high ceilings resembling giant white Clipper ship sails gently billowing in the wind. The terminal made passengers and workers alike feel as if they were walking amongst the clouds. But if anyone examined the 'sails' at close range they would discover they were perfectly sculpted fiberglass sustained by massive support beams.

Several groups of travelers eagerly strolled through the security gates. Some held back, stretching out the final minutes before saying good-bye. One such group was made up of four

people: a middle aged couple and another couple in their mid-twenties. The tall, handsome young man was awkwardly trying to say good-bye. He gazed admiringly at Lana, who was wearing a pretty mid-length green skirt and fashionably cut white cotton blouse. No doubt it was purchased from her favorite boutique, *Sylvia's* in downtown Wichita. Sensing his discomfort, the young woman before him took his hand, squeezed it hard and spoke.

"Do you have everything, Clark? Did the *Daily Planet* arrange for someone to meet you?" the petite blonde asked. Her tone carried a distinct edge to it.

"Yes, anything that doesn't go in the belly of the plane I'll carry on with me. No, the newspaper did not arrange for someone to meet me. I'm not a VIP, just a rookie staff reporter. Pete's picking me up at the airport."

"Don't forget to call us as soon as the plane touches down," Mrs. Lang said, with her tone matching Lana's.

"Now remember, there's a two-hour time difference between Smallville and Metropolis. You forget that sometimes..." Lana said.

"Oh, and don't forget to call your Uncle Wayne and Aunt Mary! Otherwise, they'll call us," Mrs. Lang said, this time with a disapproving tone.

"Both of you stop treating him like a child," a heavy voice growled. "He's a grown man who has flown all over the world. The ins and outs of Idlewild Airport ought to be simple for him to navigate without having to check in with his 'handlers'." Professor Bertram Lang looked between his wife and daughter and then to his silver antique watch. "I need to get back and finish preparing my presentation on the *Age of Napoleon* exhibit to the Board of Trustees for the Metropolis Museum of Art. Kent, have a safe trip. Call Lana when you get settled and not a moment before." Lana's father shook Clark's hand with a crushing formal grip that would hurt another man. Years of excavating in all manner of soil during long, arduous archeological digs had calloused his hands and hardened his body. He nodded his leonine head once, and then walked away.

Professor Lang did not approve of Lana dating young Kent, although he knew there was little he could do to prevent his headstrong daughter from having her own way. Nevertheless, he was not going to actively promote the relationship as his wife had done.

He remembered Clark's adoptive parents and respected them. But they were simple farmers and it looked like their son would only be a print reporter. "Probably ending up writing nothing more significant than obituaries and want ads, although the *Daily Planet* was not the *Smallville Gazette*," he thought grimly. He wanted more for his daughter than a mere newspaper reporter's salary could provide.

Alberta Lang looked after her husband's swiftly retreating form and shook her head, thinking, "Bertram is a good man at heart, but sometimes he forgets the social niceties. There was nothing wrong with this mild young man courting their daughter." If anything, Alberta was relieved that Lana had renewed the relationship. While they were in France, she had been attracted to a powerful local aristocrat, and they had dated for a while, but Lana had soon grown bored with the drab young man and sent him packing.

Her mother suspected the end of the relationship had less to do with Lana being bored and more to do with him deciding he would not be manipulated. Clark, on the other hand, was not weak, but did not stand up to Lana as much as he should. Having been hired by an internationally renowned newspaper had to say something for the strength of his character. Between the connections Lana would garner from her time at the Museum and Clark's association with the *Daily Planet*, she had no doubt the couple would do very well in Metropolis, very well indeed.

Mrs. Lang stood on tiptoe and gave Clark a quick hug. “Have a pleasant flight. Oh, and tell Peter Ross he needs to call his folks more than twice a week. He may be a busy young doctor, but family comes first.” Turning to her daughter, she said, “Lana, we’ll see you at the car.” With those brisk words, she walked away to join her husband. The sound of her black patent-leather heels clicking on the tile floor momentarily overcame the noise of the airport terminal.

Lana turned to her boyfriend and said, “Daddy’s a little uptight about the Napoleon Exhibit. It is going to take absolutely months to label and catalogue all the items brought over from France, Switzerland, and Italy. Then another six to design the exhibit and finally two months for staging and execution of the appearance of Napoleon’s field camp, throne room and the other tableaux. It will be the high point of his career. Helping him put all this together will give my own career a boost.” She smiled coquettishly, blue eyes flashing in excitement, “Working and living in Metropolis should allow access to all sorts of prospects for us.”

“I’m happy for your father. It will be a really terrific opportunity for him,” Clark said.

Lana leaned in closer and wrapped her arms around him. “It will be an opportunity for us as well. Especially, once you get established at the *Daily Planet*...” She smiled in a seductive, knowing manner and her blue eyes twinkled. “Oh, well, maybe that conversation can wait until later.”

Clark was about to speak when the loudspeaker announced his flight was preparing to board.

“Uh, I gotta go. I’ll call you from Pete’s place.”

“Good, don’t forget to start looking for an apartment right away! Living with Pete would be inconvenient for... us.”

To change the subject, he said, “Aren’t you going to stay with Chloe Foster until you find a place?”

“My old college roommate has a tiny one-bedroom apartment, Clark. It’ll be great for a while, but only until I find a place of my own. That is, of course, unless you are able to find an apartment big enough for two?”

He shook his head, dismissing her words. “We talked about this, Lana. We need our own places, and time to get ourselves established before we go any further in our relationship. Adjusting to life in Metropolis is going to be a considerable challenge.”

Undeterred by his words, she spoke with a slightly flirty tone, as if promising a treat if he obeyed. She imitated her mother, stood on tiptoe, and said in his ear, “Oh, things, especially our relationship, will change when we get there! See you soon, and Clark, remember, NO FLYING!” This last was said in a whispering tone that was both seductive and unkind. Afterwards, she kissed his lips, gave him a fierce hug and then quickly walked away, her perfectly-tailored green skirt swishing in flirty syncopation with her hips.

Clark stood looking at her rapidly-vanishing petite figure, her head erect, expecting everyone and everything to make way for her wants and needs. Although, in a curious way, her self-confidence made up for what he lacked. Ever since his parents were killed a car accident when he was sixteen, Lana had been one of the people who helped him work through near-crippling grief. But once he had to make his own way in the world that need had diminished, and he felt in his heart that having Lana as his confidence booster was no longer enough. He truly cared for Lana, yet she refused to allow him to be... what?

With a gentle sigh, he picked up his luggage and walked through the bustling Air Alliance terminal towards the gate. The enigmatic thoughts of the strange dream from earlier in the morning came back to him. The people, wintry weather and the mysteriously beautiful dark-haired young woman who walked by him with strength of mind seemed far away. Whatever the dream represented was as unsubstantiated as a feather, gently floating on

a lazy summer breeze.

Overhead he heard the PA system announce his flight again. All thoughts of the dream faded away, and swiftly he hurried towards the gate and a new life in Metropolis.

“Here we are... home sweet home!” Clark’s boyhood friend Pete Ross said as he opened the door to a sunny apartment. The foyer was large and led straight into the sparsely furnished living room.

Clark cast his eyes over the spacious apartment. After living in cramped Parisian studios, in tramp steamer quarters and chilly cabins in Alaska, it was certainly bigger and brighter than he had originally expected. He released a low whistle, “Being a neurologist certainly isn’t hurting you.”

His old friend shrugged, “It has its perks. Come on, I’ll show you to your room,” Pete said as he turned to the right and guided Clark down a short corridor to a small, but brightly lit room. There was a large futon, a small wooden bookshelf, a chest of drawers, and on the parquet floor laid a faded blue, nondescript medium-sized area rug.

Clark watched the former halfback, who still held onto an impressive physique, one hardened by daily sessions at the gyms. “I really appreciate this. But listen, Pete; starting tomorrow, I’m looking for a place of my own. No way do I want to be an inconsiderate guest and wear out my welcome.”

Pete chuckled softly; the humor touched his blue eyes. “Right now, I’m working the night shift at MetroGen. So, we ought not be tripping over each other. As long as the apartment is kept clean and you cook some of those fantastic ethnic dishes, stay as long as you like.”

Clark bowed his head sheepishly and said thanks.

“Don’t mention it. I still have not found a medical group to work with on a full-time basis, so until then my hours are going to be set. Apparently, a lot of people in Metropolis experience critical head injuries at night.” His easygoing expression took a serious appearance, “Uh... that is, unless there’s an urgent need for a place of your own? Lana is moving in with her friend Chloe in a few weeks – not with you?”

Clark started unpacking. “Lana is staying with Chloe, at least until she gets her own place. After bouncing all over the world for three years, sharing cramped quarters with strangers, and then living in that tiny shoebox of an apartment over Mrs. Siegel’s garage, I want to live alone for a little while... in a place big enough to put all the artwork and books I’ve collected over the years.”

“Good. I do have one question: are your, uh... talents going to make an appearance?”

“Yes, but it has to be done in secret.”

“Is it because of Lana?”

“No... er, yes,” he himself admitted as he rubbed the back of his neck and sighed. “Honestly, I want a private life. If anyone caught me on film, that secret life would be the end of my real life and my relationship with Lana. Besides, you know how she gets when I use my abilities.”

The unspoken words regarding his relationship with Lana hung in the air and were not addressed by either man. Instead, Pete stood in the doorway of his friend’s room and talked about all the attractions that Metropolis held for the single male. Clark listened as he proceeded to take business and casual clothes out of the suitcases and then place them into the closet and dresser.

Finally, Clark said, “Pete, I care about Lana and want her in my life. But right now, we need to establish our own careers before we take the next step in our relationship. She did mention at the airport that she hoped I would be getting a large apartment quickly, but I’m not interested in living together. When the time is right, marriage is the only option.”

“OK,” Pete said. He hesitated and then decided against

saying anything further. “Look, there’s a great Italian restaurant down the block. They make the best Beef Carpaccio in town! Interested? ‘Cause I’m starving!”

“Sounds great, let’s go! When we get back I better call Lana and let her know everything is OK.”

That Monday morning found Clark, wearing his best charcoal suit with a white shirt and faded burgundy paisley tie, in the elevator of the *Daily Planet* building. The creaking mechanism had him worried until he used x-ray vision to examine the gears and discovered they simply needed a good oiling. Relieved that he would not have to make an elevator rescue in the near future, he tried to relax, but the well-dressed young man who shared the car with him made that almost impossible. His insistent high-pitched whistling grated in Clark’s ears. The fellow must have noticed Clark’s irritation, because he stopped, turned, and said, “Clark Kent, right?”

“Uh, yes.”

“Ha! Thought so. White told me about a new reporter hire. Midwest, right?”

Clark nodded slowly, not knowing what to make of the fellow’s questions.

“Oh, yeah, sorry, forgot to introduce myself. Olsen. James. I own this rag.”

He had not even cashed his first paycheck from the *Daily Planet*’s payroll, but hearing the beloved newspaper called a “rag” annoyed him greatly. His new boss was not someone he wanted to spend much time with. “Uh, Mr. Olsen, the *Daily Planet* is a fine newspaper. From what I’ve heard of ‘the Olsen touch’, your accountants would not have allowed you to make such a purchase if it truly was a ‘rag’.”

The young man observed Kent with cool brown eyes, making a mental appraisal, and then he smiled. “Smooth! Mr. White’s instincts were on point. Welcome to the *Planet*, Mr. Kent. We are expecting great things from you. Yeah, my accounting team makes suggestions, but *I* make the final decision. Ah, newsroom floor. This is your stop. Remember, my eyes will be studying all articles with the Kent byline. Have a good first day!”

As the elevator doors snapped shut behind him and the car continued its sluggish rise to the executive offices on the twentieth floor, Clark stood there looking at the doors and wondered what had just transpired. Did James – it was hard to consider calling someone younger than him *Mr. Olsen* – just test him? If so, life on this particular newspaper with its young publisher was going to be out of the ordinary, in a manner he had never imagined.

Clark’s first morning working in the bullpen was fast-paced and hectic. Perry had a youngster named Jack take him to the human resources department to obtain his work id, press pass, and benefits information. Afterwards he also gave him a tour of the different departments culminating with an extensive ‘insider’s look at the enormous – and extremely noisy – pressroom.

It was just after lunch before Clark could finally sit down to arrange his desk and get to know some of the people he would be working with. Several of the bullpen staffers like Catherine, Steve, Diane, and Stacy came over and introduced themselves to the new hire. He also met the office snitch... Ralph Lombard.

“Kent, that desk you are sitting in was once occupied by Eduardo Friez,” Catherine said respectfully.

His eyes opened wide in admiration and respect, “*The* Eduardo Friez? Who parachuted behind enemy lines to get the full interview of the former Yugoslavian ambassador after his escape from the opposition’s stronghold?”

“Yes,” she replied with a touch of pride. “He’s on assignment in London for an extended period, so don’t get too comfortable in that chair. If I were you, I would put in for another desk location. One never knows when Eduardo might show up.”

He swiveled in the wooden chair and smiled, “Why?” he asked playfully. “This is a really comfortable chair; I could get to like sitting here.” Looking over to his left, he noticed an unoccupied desk, decorated with family photos and a luscious African violet plant potted in an azure ceramic container. He nodded to the desk and asked, “Whose desk is that? Is it being held for someone as well?”

Before anyone else could answer, Ralph interjected sarcastically, “Oh, *that* desk belongs to the Ice Queen, Lois Lane.”

Ignoring the ‘Ice Queen’ comment, Clark said, “Oh, yes, that’s right. Mr. White mentioned we would be sharing the city beat. I read some of her articles while I was in Europe; very professionally written.”

“Yeah, buddy, you are going to be workin’ with her, and I pity you. She only got along with two men in the newsroom: Eduardo was one, and the other fella was Claude.” The ferret-like man spoke in a way that made Miss Lane seem licentious in some manner.

Catherine Grant walked up to him and said with a chilled voice, “Can you hear the sound of the rat catchers? They’re calling for you in the morgue. I suggest you get back there or your next ‘lateral job move’ will be the street.”

“Ha! Everyone thinks she’s better than they are. Jus’ you wait, Kent, pretty soon she’ll walk all over you too!” Ralph made his way up the ramp and back to the *Daily Planet*’s ancient records department.

“Sorry you had to hear that, CK. Ralph is always ragging on someone; unfortunately, Lois is his favorite target. One of these days, Perry will...” Jack said with feeling.

Steve’s deep voice cut off Jack’s comment, “People, it’s time to get back to work. Clark, will you be OK?”

“Sure, Steve, this word-processing program is like the one at my previous job.”

The small group disbursed to their desks. Clark decided it was best not to concern himself with Ralph’s unkind remarks. He began familiarizing himself with the computer and settling into his new job on the City Beat section of the *Daily Planet*. The rest of the day went smoothly and since he did not have any stories to file yet, he decided to head for home. Just as he was packing up his desk, a familiar scent of wildflowers assailed his nose. Lana was here.

He looked up and saw her stride down the ramp with her head held high and bestowing upon him one of her winning smiles. She was wearing a fashionable navy business suit that must have set her back a little, but she looked absolutely smashing – something every man in the newsroom recognized. He couldn’t help but return her smile in kind. She walked up to him, lightly took his face in her hands and asked, “Hi, handsome! Did you miss me?” Before allowing him to answer, she gave him a deliberate, but meaningful kiss on the lips. This was a very public way of informing all the women in the newsroom that Clark Kent was *hers*.

“I – I thought you weren’t coming for another week or two?” he said when they parted.

“The museum asked Daddy to start working earlier than they had planned. I called Chloe and she’s thrilled we are going to be roommates again. Once that was settled we packed a couple of bags and flew out last night. We started work at the museum early this morning. You cannot imagine the extensive amount of work we have to do to get the tableaus complete in time! I’m going over to Chloe’s after work, but Daddy is staying at a hotel until he and mother can find an apartment near the museum. My arrangements can change if you found the perfect place for us in record time?” she studied him carefully.

Clark was completely taken aback by this abrupt change of events. All he could manage to say was, “Not yet.”

“Okay! I’m starved; how about taking me out to an early

dinner?”

“Uh, Lana that’s not a good idea. After all, this is my first day. Give me Chloe’s address and I’ll pick you up around six o’clock.”

Watching the couple’s conversation from the copy machine, all Stacy could manage to say to Catherine in a hushed tone was, “Wow.”

“Yes. Such a subtle way to let the newsroom know she’s marking her property.” Catherine sniffed and said, “Paltry tactic.”

“How can you say that, Miss Grant?” the young woman asked with a quizzical expression. “She’s just happy to see him. Besides, what woman won’t do that, especially if her fella looked that hot!”

The older woman smiled knowingly at the girl, patted her on the shoulder, and moved back to her desk.

A week passed, Clark continued acclimating himself to working with the talented group of people in the Planet’s newsroom. He made friends with several woman staffers such as Catherine and her friends Janet Owens, Constance Hunter and research intern Stacy Jordan. He wanted to know why Catherine Grant had made a special point for him to meet and work with these women and she explained.

“Janet is the head of our science department. That section of the paper is printed every Tuesday. She’s your best person to ask technical questions, and if she can’t answer them, she can put you in touch with some of the best people in their chosen fields who can help, such as the folks at EPRAD. Janet knows Dr. Bernie Klein, chief scientist and administrator at S.T.A.R. Labs. When we are *really* stuck, we go to him. Constance is our in-house legal counsel and Stacy, even though she is an intern, is extremely good at tracking down information that eludes even Jack. In the course of working here, eventually you’ll need their expertise.”

“Oh - they will go over the scientific or legal aspects of my story to make sure nothing is wrong?” Clark asked.

“Exactly! Sometimes this newspaper goes up against influential men and powerful corporations. It is important all of our information and sources are bulletproof. Some of the words you’ll get tired of hearing from Perry are, ‘facts, people, give me cold hard facts.’ Lawsuits are a *messy business* and only generate news for our competitors. If a story we print causes legal issues, we want to be one hundred percent positive the jury rules in our favor.”

“Has the *Planet* ever gone to court on a slander case and lost?”

“Thankfully only once, under a previous managing editor, not during Perry’s watch.”

“Did the *Planet* win?” Clark asked.

Catherine shook her head sadly, “That man isn’t managing editor any longer.”

“Mr. Krebs? I wonder what he might have thought of my work and if he would have hired me.”

“Yes. Don’t worry, I’ve read your work from Smallville. That article on contaminated water was outstanding. It was crisply written and thoroughly researched. It’s highly unlikely any story of yours will be so poorly researched as to call down legal difficulties.”

“Anybody else get into trouble with the legal department?”

The columnist smiled in a secretive way. “A rumor or two might get around. It depends solely on the reporter and the story.”

“What about Lois Lane? I’ve heard a rumor or two about a big story she’s been working on.”

Catherine became very still and then her facial muscles shifted into a frown. If it were not for Clark’s super vision he might have missed it. “Now there’s the difference between a newbie reporter and a seasoned professional. Lois is always

working on a big story.” With those words, Catherine returned to her desk. Clark sighed. He had just stepped into a muddy puddle and knew it. Hopefully, he would remember to listen and ask questions only when he was certain they would not lead to disaster.

The rest of the day proved without incident between himself and Catherine or any other reporter. He filed his first story with Perry about an old theatre that was being razed to make room for a parking structure. He did not know which gave him the greater pleasure, watching the octogenarian give her final solo performance on the ancient wooden stage, or interviewing the actress.

True, it was not the kind of story normally found on the city beat, but from the reception it received from Perry, and the letters it later generated from more than a few readers, it was an impressive start.

Part Three

A tall man with expertly-clipped white hair, dressed in a perfectly-tailored black suit, emerged from his private jet shortly after it touched down in Metropolis’ Idlewild Airport. He walked purposefully down the stairs and stepped lightly onto the tarmac. Around him, the busy airport ground crew mingled with his own staff as they prepared to taxi the **Legend 100XP** into its private hanger.

Nordic blue eyes watched through expensive wire-rimmed glasses with cool detachment as the sleek craft rolled away until it was engulfed in the inky darkness of the hanger. His long angular body seemed to be in motion even though he remained perfectly still. In another time and place, the name Daae would have ranked first among the world’s great male ballet dancers.

Another man, not as tall, wearing a dark chauffeur’s uniform, approached the first man cautiously. He too waited until the plane was out of sight and then spoke in apprehensive tones.

“Sir, everything is arranged. If you will follow me this way, I can take you to the car.”

Gregory Daae turned as if he noticed the chauffeur for the first time. With a brusque nod, he fell into step beside him as they walked towards the Silver Shadow Rolls Royce.

“Was your trip satisfactory, sir?” the chauffeur asked cautiously.

“Yes, Duncan, as a matter of fact, it was. Now we can proceed with the next part of my plan. I trust all is arranged and Mr. Preston Carpenter will meet me at his office tomorrow?”

“Yes, sir. He’s awaiting your call to confirm.”

“Good, let him wait. What about the meeting with Mr. Luthor and his associates?”

“Mrs. Aronnax has confirmed the series of meetings with Sheldon Bender, Mr. Luthor’s attorney.”

“Excellent. As always, your services are impeccable.”

Duncan tipped his shiny black chauffeur’s hat while holding open the car’s heavy door. Upon hearing those words, his powerful wrestler’s body relaxed, visibly relieved. It had taken the better part of the day to discover the answers to these simple questions. Gregory Daae paid a great deal of money for him to perform such tasks as these and was not a man to take failure lightly.

Ignorant of his driver’s concerns, Daae settled gratefully into the luxurious supple leather seating. He had departed Rome several hours ago and worked almost the entire time as the sleek plane crossed in darkness over the Atlantic. No one – not even his enemies – could call him a procrastinator. He gave aggressive attention to the business projects which required it. For the ones that did not, he hired the right people to attend such manners.

“Head to my townhouse on Baylor Square. The sooner we conclude our business in this village, the sooner I can return to Zurich. Do you have the latest reports faxed in from Hong Kong

and Madrid?”

“Yes, they are in the leather portfolio next to the bar.”

“Excellent. Thank you, Duncan.” Slowly he removed a sheaf of American money from his wallet and laid it on the seat for the driver to find later.

Daae opened the thick red file folder and began writing notes for business appointments. He wanted to survey the Asian and European markets, specifically the movements of DMG’s media stocks. Within minutes he was deeply engrossed and paid no attention to the nighttime cityscape as Duncan drove through the darkness.

The traffic was almost nonexistent at that late hour. Soon, Duncan drove the shiny black Rolls Royce into the garage behind the turn of the century spacious brick townhouse. He breathed a sigh of relief as the duration of the flight was beginning to catch up with him.

Without a word to his driver, who held the car door open for him, Daae climbed out of the vehicle and let himself into the lower level of the building. He walked briskly upstairs, used a key to open the heavy oak door, then stepped inside. His housekeeper and cook, Cozette Faure, was not due until tomorrow, so Daae hesitated for a moment, breathed in the air of the room, and then his voice rang out.

“Madame, I know you are here. Come out of hiding.” With that, he switched on the overhead pot lights, bathing the expansive high-ceiling living room with its gleaming Brazilian hardwood floors and leather furniture into life under the sharp illumination.

A slim feminine form stirred on the long, red leather couch. Arianna Carlin-Luthor blinked, her eyes adjusting to the bright lights as she stood up and glided towards him. She must have been waiting for only a short time as the navy and cream pantsuit she wore was barely creased.

“Gregory, what gave me away?” Her puzzled expression indicated she was genuinely surprised. “I took every precaution. No one saw me enter the building.”

He walked past her towards the bar and poured a drink of twelve-year-old bourbon into a heavy cut-glass tumbler. “Arianna, my dear, we had this discussion years ago. That fragrance was designed for you by one of the leading perfumers in Paris. It is unique to your body chemistry, and since we were *les amoureux*, it is therefore familiar to me. The rest was a reasonable deduction.” Daae held out a glass of white wine which she took gratefully.

“Touché. Tell me, why are you here in Metropolis?” she asked.

“Considering the fact you broke into *my apartments*... shouldn’t I be the one asking that particular question?”

“Don’t be tiresome, Gregory. You gave me a key... remember? We were seeing each other at the time.”

He nodded, “*Oui*, during our last rendezvous you informed me of your intention to accept Luthor’s proposal of marriage. Not taking the key back was one of my few oversights; still, considering my mood at the time, that oversight should be forgiven.” His disposition changed from displeasure to exasperation. “Short flights are exhilarating at times, but Atlantic crossings are exhausting. State your purpose here and then please leave.”

She took a sip of her wine, savoring the delicate notes of flavor as it swirled around her tongue. She took a shallow breath and said, “I... I wanted to say my marriage to Lex was a mistake.”

It was Daae’s turn to be surprised. “Five years is a long time. What made you finally arrive at that foregone conclusion?”

She shrugged her shoulders with studied carelessness and walked back to the couch. “Let’s just say sitting on countless charity and museum committees without my husband around is not my idea of a life or a marriage. Lex gets... distracted. I thought since you were here... “

Daae looked down at her. There were rumors one of those ‘distractions’ was Mindy Church, the widow of the late Bill Church. He wondered if Arianna had anything to do with the contemptible blonde’s hasty departure from Metropolis. “It is one thing to acquire a man’s company and all his financial holdings; it is quite another to crawl into bed with his wife. My scruples are not numerous, but I have never stooped to that. Arianna... Mrs. Luthor, as I said before, it is time for you to return to your *own* home.”

But his visitor had no intention of leaving quite yet. “Perhaps the information I bear is worth something. I know for a fact that the reason why you are visiting Metropolis is to meet with Lex regarding a partnership of sorts with LNN? According to my dear husband, there have been a number of backchannel conversations between both of you for months. The meeting you are going to have with him tomorrow is the first in a series, and this time the lawyers and accountants are getting involved. It’s supposed to be very hush-hush. Any wind of such a partnership might create a backlash in the international stock markets. The last thing you and Lex want is for the media financial talking heads to make misleading comments that will cause LNN’s and DMG’s stocks to trend downwards.”

Any fatigue Daae might have felt evaporated upon hearing those words. He appreciated Arianna’s manipulative abilities, which made it essential to proceed cautiously. “I congratulate you on cultivating such an efficient network of spies within his company and the fact that he was willing to trust you. Apparently, charity work isn’t the only thing occupying your time. If memory serves me correctly, generosity was never one of your strongest qualities. No doubt there will be a heavy price to be paid for this information?”

Arianna smiled and leaned back into the cushions, making herself perfectly at home. Daae noted the look of calculation in her eyes as she spoke.

“My husband dreams of expanding LNN’s news coverage. Despite its brand of being the premier television news outlet in this country, he wishes to go international. Unfortunately, DMG’s own powerful network in Europe, Africa and Asia stands in his way; hence, this ‘partnership’. He’s obsessed with making LNN the foremost news service in the world. In the process, he’s ignoring me. I can fight another woman, but not a man’s obsession. So that is where you come in.”

As always, Daae thought, Arianna was skillful in getting what she wanted. But perhaps the material she offered might prove helpful in his negotiations with Luthor tomorrow.

“Very well, I accept this information, and should it prove useful, I’ll pay your price.”

She reached into a slender brown croco embossed satchel by her feet and pulled out two red and black colored diskettes, each stamped with the LNN logo.

“On the first diskette are spreadsheets with LNN’s cost run projections for this fiscal year, including overruns which won’t be seen on the report Lex will provide you with tomorrow. Those figures will be inaccurate, but not enough to be noticed at first examination. He will offer a program for information exchange with DMG – a limited partnership... regarding the space station.” She paused looked into his wintry blues eyes and said, “According to my sources, you want to purchase LNN outright. Don’t tell me you haven’t considered it. On diskette two is deep background material on all the key reporters, producers and directors. This kind of leverage material can be helpful should you succeed in buying the network, as having the best people in place already will save time and money.” She smiled, pleased with the fruits of her labors.

He nodded slowly. “Very impressive detective work, Madame, but you still have not revealed what your goal is.”

She smiled seductively, “My goal is to let you take ownership

of LNN and eventually LexCorp itself. DMG has several small businesses here in the States, but as yet, has failed to gain a foothold with any serious media outlets.”

“Ah, there is an unambiguous flaw in this scheme; I am not a U.S. citizen. Being Swiss puts any ownership of an American media organization or a corporation like LexCorp out of my grasp.”

She laughed and said, “How many shell companies would it take? Nothing has ever prevented you from taking chances before.”

“*Oui*. Acquiring a small chain of failing radio stations in the early eighties is one thing. Taking over an internationally known cable news network that is owned by the third-richest man in the world is something else entirely.”

Her tight lips moved into a rapier thin smile. “Thanks to a drastic programming revamp, that failing radio station chain, Daromax, is now one of the most successful in the country. I have an acquaintance who might be of some assistance, and perhaps even a very workable Trojan horse. His name is Jasper Templar.”

“Ah, that name is not unfamiliar to me. He owns a second-rate string of cable TV stations in the Midwest, known by the unlikely name of ‘ZeroM’ Communications. I understand they produce shows about food and home improvement projects. There might be something beneficial to catering to such a niche market. Are you suggesting I use him as a front?”

She took a delicate sip of wine before answering, “Why not? In my dealings with Mr. Templar, he has mentioned moving out of his small pond and into a much larger arena. You could be of assistance to each other. Who knows how many standing shares of LexCorp are out there. If Templar purchases several large blocks of shares, carrying at least thirty-eight percent of the stock, then you will have three seats on the board. With two seats you can influence the other members and forge a blocking position on matters of importance.”

He sipped his drink, and the smoky liquid played like velvet over his tongue. He was tired and in no condition to discuss such a deal at the moment. “Appealing proposal, Arianna, but shall we stop dancing around the question of your fee to broker this under-the-table partnership to bring down your husband?”

Arianna slowly removed her black Gucci leather pumps, tucked her legs under her derriere, and relaxed on the couch, as if to prepare for an overnight stay. This time, when her red lips formed a smile, they revealed two rows of brilliant white teeth. Her British accent, hinting at Mayfair and Oxford, sounded invitingly flirtatious.

“It’s quite simple, really. I want to be in the room when he learns LNN and LexCorp are no longer his. I want to be there to watch him fall to pieces. At that point I shall be free to pursue... other desires.”

He smiled to himself. There was much more to Arianna’s actions than merely witnessing Lex’s day of reckoning. Sooner or later the prize she really wanted would be revealed. He drained the last of his drink and carefully set the heavy glass tumbler down on the bar. Now that she had explained her point, it was time to put an end to this ‘meeting’.

“Building Mr. Templar into my Trojan horse shall require time. Do you have the patience to wait?”

She pulled one golden earring off and rolled it between her hands. She spoke in a soft, yet firm voice, “You know I do.”

He looked her up and down and thought, “Yes, like a hungry Black Widow spider, lying in the center of her web, waiting to ensnare her prey. Still, we were not discussing insects, but who shall be the master at playing corporate games.” Then he said, “Contact Mr. Templar. The terms of our agreement are these: The same shell companies that acquired Daromax will purchase his cable stations. It is essential my name does not appear on the public record of these transactions. The private arrangement will

allow him access to capital, so he can slowly buy stock in LNN. There will be no room for negotiations.

“I suspect discussions of the partnership between DMG and LNN should proceed very smoothly now that I have these in my possession,” he said, waving the diskettes. “You understand, of course, that this material must be examined by my own forensic accountants?”

Arianna stood and gracefully walked towards him. She reached up, loosened his burgundy silk tie and let her fingers sensuously caress his chest gracefully. This time her smile was openly seductive as she whispered, “The business half of my visit is complete. Perhaps we can... revisit old memories?”

He reached up and firmly, but gently, removed her hands. Arianna’s scarlet lips parted to protest, but Daae cut her off. “You did say this visit was strictly of a business nature. Let us keep it that way. Besides, you do need to contact Mr. Templar and discuss the terms presented by the future owner of ZeroM Communications. Please inform him that my team of forensic accountants will be flying to Omaha, Nebraska to scrutinize his business, and if there are any serious inconsistencies, the deal is off.”

“Gregory, if you didn’t have his books looked over, I would think you were going soft.”

He did not respond to her jab but said, “The hour is very late. I am tired, and tired minds do not think well. Please see yourself out. Good-night, Mrs. Luthor.” He walked over to the couch and picked up her discarded items. “Don’t forget your shoes, bag and earring. Please leave the key here. Considering the very delicate game we are about to play, there will be no more nighttime ‘business visits’.”

Her facial expression was flushed with embarrassment and suppressed rage. She reached into the satchel, pulled out the key, and slapped it into his hand.

Moments later he was alone in the townhouse.

As Gregory prepared for bed, he thought about the false excuse he would bandy about town as to why he was here. He owned a magnificently restored townhouse, in a fashionable part of the city, but it was no secret Metropolis was not his favorite place in the world.

Walking upstairs to his bedroom, Daae passed by his office and noticed the orderly stack of newspapers and magazines on the desk. As per standing instructions, Colette always collected a week’s worth of Metropolis’ newspapers for him to read. Perhaps a bit of light reading in bed would lull him to sleep.

In the Weekend section the lead article was about the Metropolis Museum of History, which was in the process of creating an exhibit displaying different events of Napoleon Bonaparte’s life. He was an icon of sorts to Daae. While in university, he had studied the late Emperor’s tactics and applied some of them in his own life. The results had, in some cases, been nothing short of spectacular.

Since he was on the board of directors and a major contributor to the museum’s coffers, he was quite keen on seeing the exhibit for himself. He had every intention of attending the museum gala event several months hence before it was opened to the public. Professor Bertram Lang had helmed the project from the beginning; it was emerging from the planning stages into a physical reality. Perhaps today – tomorrow – he could stop by the good professor’s office and see how matters were progressing.

But before he did anything, he needed to have his assistant, Mrs. Aronnax, contact a trusted locksmith to come by and alter all the townhouse locks.

“Gregory, it’s a pleasure to see you again,” Preston Carpenter said as he came around his desk to welcome his guest.

The tall man with the cool blue eyes looked down unemotionally at the publisher and pointedly did not take his hand.

"I hope to be able to say the same. Were your resources able to fulfill my request?"

Preston looked at his hand hanging in mid-air and then put it in his pocket. "Huh, Gregory, I only got the call this morning. It takes time to dig up that kind of information, especially on LNN. Luthor's people are pretty closemouthed."

Gregory sat down in one of the overstuffed muddy brown leather chairs. He could immediately tell, by the coarseness of the material and the slight squeak of the metal coils, that the seat had been made of inferior substances. For someone of Preston's wealth, such cheapness spoke volumes about the man's personality. If he were willing to surround himself with shoddy furnishings despite the fact that he could well afford some comforts for his work environment, what else would he skimp on?

"Preston, we have an arrangement: when I come to Metropolis and take the time out of my demanding schedule to visit your 'newspaper', it is with the singular goal of acquiring information. Last night I received valuable information about LNN which needs verification. If the *Metropolis Star's* researchers and journalists are not up to the task, I can take my business elsewhere – *all* of my business."

The skin around Preston's eyes narrowed with undisguised irritation. He swallowed and was about to speak when there was a firm knock at the door. A second later, a rather attractive redhead wearing a green business suit that did nothing to hide her figure entered the room. Gregory Daae stood up from the squeaking chair and smiled.

"Ah, I see Mr. Daae is here," Linda King smiled prettily at Gregory.

"Good morning, *Mademoiselle* King. How pleasant to see you again."

Linda extended her hand and murmured, "The pleasure is all mine, Mr. Daae."

He gazed into her green eyes as he bent to kiss her hand and they exchanged a silent communication which Preston observed carefully. Linda tore her gaze away from Daae and looked at her employer and boyfriend. She spoke with the smooth cadence of a woman who knows she has succeeded in accomplishing a near-impossible task.

"Preston," she said, "Here are the materials you requested this morning."

He accepted the manila folder from her and quickly scanned the papers within. After a moment he smiled in triumph, stood up and handed the file to Daae. "I believe this is all the backup material you requested."

Daae sat down once more in the squeaky leather chair and began perusing the papers within the file. The reading took him longer than Preston expected, but when he was finished, the suggestion of a smile came to his thin lips. "It seems your lady is accomplished as more than just a columnist. My thanks and gratitude, *Mademoiselle* King, I appreciate your providing this valuable information. It will make my meeting this afternoon with Mr. Luthor... enjoyable. May I ask how this was acquired?"

Linda looked at him, shrugged indifferently, and said, "A confidential source within LNN who is well paid for their information."

"Of course," he said, "the *journaliste* number one coin-in-trade, the protection of their resources. Now if you will please excuse us, I need to speak with Mr. Carpenter."

She gazed at Preston, who nodded his head. Taking that as a dismissal, she departed the office.

"That is an intelligent and extremely ambitious young woman. I could use someone like her on my staff. Keep supplying me with material like this and I might hire her away from the *Metropolis Star*. I will see you at the White Orchid Ball in six months' time."

Preston's head shot up. Last year he had been snubbed and

had not been invited, and the pointed insult still rankled. "How do you know the Luthors will send me an invitation?"

"Preston, you are dating a very influential, and needless to say beautiful, *journalise*. It stands to reason she will be invited. Attend with her. It should be amusing to see all of Metropolis' media leaders in one location. Thank you again for providing this information. Make certain *Mademoiselle* King is well rewarded. Good day."

Five minutes after Daae departed, Linda returned, and Preston could see she was visibly shaken.

"Every time that man smiles at me I want to take a bath from the inside out! Press, he scares me."

The publisher sat upright in his chair and grimaced. "The feeling is mutual, but don't let him know; right now, the paper needs all the advertisers he brings in. By the way, thanks for getting that file on such short notice. He was pleased."

"It wasn't a pleasant task; I had to pay my best contact at LNN, Claude Debarre, over three grand to get this information on such short notice. He was a little too quick with gathering the information on his co-workers. I have the uncomfortable feeling he has a dossier on everyone of importance at the network. Was that the only thing you two discussed?"

"People like DeBarre are a necessary evil in our business. If he proves too greedy, remove him from your rolodex. He cannot say anything about your association without implicating himself."

"Believe me, I intend to."

Preston made a grandiose show of opening a high gloss, dark wood finished humidior, with chrome plated hardware, removing a fat brown imported cigar and lighting it. Linda also made a show of being supremely patient, but inside she was screaming for him to answer. "In regards to your question, no, that is not the only matter we talked about. Daae wants to hire you."

She shook her head in disbelief, "I'd rather go back to writing obituaries for the *Miami Gazette* than work for that arrogant former peasant." There was heat and determination in her voice; it was a clumsy attempt at masking fear.

He looked up at her and answered soothingly, "I don't want you to. For now, we stay firmly in the background and do whatever he says. Sooner or later, he's bound to slip up. When that great day takes place, my precious Linda, we are escaping his grasp."

She came around the large wooden desk, took his hand and whispered, "Oh, God, I hope it's soon."

He kissed her hand delicately and said, "He wants me to reward you. I will cover that three thousand dollars you paid out... plus a new tennis bracelet."

Linda's face lit up and, smiling in appreciation, she bent down and kissed him firmly on the mouth.

Gregory exited the *Metropolis Star's* building. Indeed, in reality it was his own, especially since he quietly owned thirty percent of the newspaper and held the proxy for another thirty percent. But it entertained him to have Preston think the paper still belonged to him. Arianna would probably have been surprised to know that.

The file Preston, or rather Linda King, had provided served as back-up for the personnel information Arianna had given him last night. He could now proceed into his meeting with Lex Luthor even more confident he would emerge the winner.

Thus far, his trip to Metropolis was proving to be un *vrai succès*.

Part Four

It was early in the morning when Lois exited the elevator, grateful to once again breathe in burnt coffee, printer's ink and pencil shavings. She had just returned from a three-week long

investigation of a tragic mining accident in the back hills of West Virginia. Being surrounded by the well-known scents of the newsroom was heavenly. After living in the aged coal miner community of Beaver Creek, it was a relief to return to the vibrant pulse of Metropolis. Covering the dangerous conditions these brave men – and their families – endured every day of their lives was an eye opener. As much as she respected and admired their determination to strive, and indeed thrive under such conditions, living beneath the constant haze of coal dust and near-poverty was almost too much for her to endure.

When Lois returned to the comforts of her apartment, she spent the evening pampering herself, determined to wash the grime out of her hair, skin, and nails.

As she quick-stepped down the ramp, past the well-used coffee station littered with white ceramic mugs, wooden stirrers, pink sugar packets and stale doughnuts, she sensed immediately that **something** was out of kilter. Eduardo's desk had been moved closer to hers. All his personal items such as his nameplate, breathtaking pictures of Madrid at sunset and favorite coffee mug were gone. They were replaced by a black gooseneck lamp, a photo of the Great Wall of China and a white mug with the words "Smallville Gazette" stenciled in bold, black font.

"Hey Catherine! Why did Eduardo's desk get moved closer to mine? Whose stuff is that anyway?" she asked, with a nervous lump in her throat.

Her friend responded, "Perry thought it was best to give Eduardo's desk to a fulltime staffer. So, the new guy's got it."

Lois was greatly relieved. Nothing terrible had happened to her friend, but to have his desk taken over by someone else – especially a rookie – was unacceptable. She asked Catherine, while emphasizing every word, "What. New. Guy?"

Before Catherine could speak, a gruff voice rumbled over the bullpen. "The new reporter on the city desk... Clark Kent," Perry announced as he came out of his office. "My old friend, Professor Dade Carson at Kansas State, gave him a very good reference. Since Meyers is on maternity leave and Mitch Ryder needed Applegate on the nightshift, you can't handle the city desk alone."

"Come again?" Lois snapped as she turned around.

"Listen. I know you and Eduardo collaborated together on occasion, but I can't keep a desk empty while he's on assignment in London."

This was too much; first Eduardo's desk had been given to a rookie and now this same rookie was going to work with her on the city desk? What happened to seasoning a new hire? He had to be some kind of a hotshot writer to leapfrog over that time-honored process. Stunned, she shot back, "Chief! That's not fair! Besides, what if Eduardo just drops in? He's famous for that! Why can't we save his desk until he comes back?"

The managing editor made a wide gesture to encompass the entire newsroom. "If you care to notice, the bullpen ain't exactly overflowing with extra space. Besides, Kent has a fresh writing style. Better than that blunt instrument you like to sometimes refer to as 'writing'. You two are working together as partners until Eduardo comes back."

Lois retorted, "Chief, are you kidding me! Partner with a rookie? On the city beat? Isn't this a little soon? Besides, that 'blunt instrument' has won this paper Kerth awards!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. But what have you done for the paper lately?" Perry responded in his easy southern drawl.

Lois drew in a sharp breath to calm down. Maybe this might turn out to be a good thing; someone to help shoulder the load of shifting through endless mountains of paperwork. After all, working so hard these past few weeks had kept her out of the gym and she could feel it around her middle. Abruptly, she heard the sound of the aged elevator doors opening and out stepped the most gorgeous example of masculinity she had seen in a long time. He wore an out-of-date blue suit which had seen better days, but the

brilliant white shirt and outrageous purple and yellow tie made up for the suit. She looked down at his old shoes and noted they had been buffed to a spit-polish shine. This quick observation told Lois he took pride in being neat and tidy, which was more than what she could say for a number of men in Metropolis these days.

"Oh my..." she whispered reverently. "Hubba. Hubba."

Catherine Grant came over to her side and said *sotto voce*, "Down, girl. He's got a keeper."

Lois was about to ask who, when she noticed a petite blonde with shrewd blue eyes pop out the elevator and take the hunk's hand. She seemed to be reminding him of something very important. Her pointed tone of voice and body language gave off a definite aura of 'Keep Off, He's Mine.'

"Keeper indeed," Lois thought with a mental sigh, "She must be the girlfriend."

As the attractive couple made their way down the ramp, Lois sensed she had seen this handsome young man before. But for the life of her, she could not place where or when.

As the young man came towards her, he locked eyes with Lois. His deep, soulful brown orbs seemed to light up with recognition. But the blonde pulled his hand, and just as swiftly, the light faded away.

"**This** is the guy taking Eduardo's place?" Lois thought. "What would the adventure-seeking correspondent think of the man sitting at his old desk? Clearly Kent let this girl walk all over him. Great, just what the city desk needs: a purebred chicken masquerading as an Adonis! Terrific! This is the perfect start to another day at the *Daily Planet*."

Perry's deep southern drawl cut through her thoughts. "Lois Lane, meet Clark Kent, the latest addition to the newsroom." The young man reached over and happily shook her hand; the shy smile brought warmth to his face. Just as he was about to speak, the blonde noisily cleared her throat and glared at Perry.

"Oh yes... huh, this is... Lana Lang." There was a note of disapproval in Perry's voice; a tone usually reserved for Ralph or the suits upstairs, especially when they interfered with the day-to-day routine of running the newspaper.

Lana picked up on the tone as well. She turned towards Perry and probably would have given the older man a withering glare if he were not her beau's employer. Instead, she turned away from Perry and Lois, in effect dismissing them, focused her attention on Clark, and began issuing orders.

"Now, don't forget, Mother and Daddy are meeting us for dinner tonight at *L'Antica Trattoria*, that new Italian restaurant near work. It's important we be there on time. He wants to tell us about the announcement at the museum! Honestly, this is a big moment for him and I'm glad to be his assistant, but I really miss working in the digs."

"Digs?" Lois enquired politely

Ms. Lang looked at Lois as if she had just gotten off the last bus from the Moon. "Yes, my father is Prof. Bertram Lang, the archeologist. He's currently working for the Metropolis Museum, specializing in French history, and specifically Napoleon Bonaparte. You know, the Corsican who became Emperor of France? Right now, we are working on creating an exhibit depicting Napoleon's base camp at Waterloo; there will be four other scenes or tableaux within the exhibit as well."

"Oh," Lois responded. The closest she came to digging anything were old news files from the *Daily Planet's* morgue.

Lana raised one disapproving eyebrow as if she thought Lois was an uneducated bore. She decided to ignore Lois and returned her attention to Clark. Any further discussion with either Lois or Perry was clearly at an end.

Perry, obliviously used to Lana's rudeness, glanced at Lois, and put his hands up as if to say, "Glad I don't have to live with her!" He walked away and returned to his office. Lois, taking the hint, retreated to her own desk and began her morning routine of

starting up her computer. Meanwhile, she surreptitiously kept an eye on Clark's desk.

Lana, pleased the others were gone, reached into her large canvas tote bag, pulled out a big, square blue gift box with a white bow, and placed it in his hands. "Honey, I got *just the thing* for your desk. Open it!" Lana was bouncing on her tiptoes in anticipation.

He smiled graciously and tore the blue wrapping off, and then opened the box, which held a large gold picture frame containing a color photo of Lana. She was posed so that her left hand was touching her face and on the third finger of the left hand was Clark's college ring. He looked down at her and she grinned happily. "Isn't it just perfect?" Before he could answer, she looked at her watch and said, "It's getting late. I need to get to work." She started to walk away and added, "Don't forget: on the steps of the museum at 6:00pm sharp. You know how Daddy hates to wait."

Her boyfriend nodded in response, still holding the picture, and said, quietly, "Fine, Lana."

Secure in the knowledge he would be on time, Lana walked up the ramp and caught the elevator.

Lois looked on sadly and muttered under her breath, "Boy, she's done everything except tattoo her name on his forehead. Yup, a chicken that looks like Adonis... figures!"

She turned and sat down at her desk. If she had stayed a split second longer, the blush covering Clark's face would have been evident, although it would have been impossible for a normal person to have heard her comment.

Just then Jack ran into the newsroom, yelling, "Heads up, people, there's a bank robbery that's turned into a standoff over on First Avenue and Montrose."

Lois jumped up from her chair. "I'm on it!"

Perry, hearing the commotion came out of his office, and roared, "Lane! You and Jack cover this story!" As an afterthought he added, "Oh, yeah, take Kent with you."

Lois was already halfway up the ramp with Jack behind her when she heard Perry. She whirled around and shouted, "Chief! We can handle this!" The absolute last thing she needed or wanted was to work with a rookie in a situation like this one.

"No, Lois. Kent goes with you. It's time he learned from the best, which as you so often tell me is yourself."

Lois watched as Clark put down the picture frame, quickly climbed the ramp, and stood before her. Jack was at the elevator hopping from one foot to the other, eager to get started. She felt boxed in but decided now was not the time to argue. Turning to her 'new' partner, she said, "Come on, Kansas. See if you can keep up. Oh, and remember, I ask the questions. Stay in the background; this situation might get dangerous."

The object of her barb bowed his head in acquiescence and mumbled, "Uh, I'll try, Ms. Lane."

"Great; stand-offs can change into a firefight in a split second. I... I don't want any of us to get hurt."

He smiled at her. A smile as brilliant and sunny as the state he came from. "Why, thank you, Ms. Lane. But I can look after myself."

Lois felt something lurch in her heart; she could really get to like this man. "Careful, girl!" she thought, "He has someone in his life." So in response she said, "Kent, if I let anything happen to you, Perry will have both me and Jack in the doghouse for at least a month!"

The standoff could have very well lasted for hours, except for one strange thing: the robber's gun became too hot for his hand. He dropped it and the bank's security guard was able to subdue him. Then when the police went searching for the gun, it had mysteriously vanished.

"That's a pretty odd story; wonder what really happened to

the guy's weapon?" Jack said to Lois as he snapped pictures of the robber, who was holding an icepack to his burned hand, being hauled away by the police.

"Who knows. Henderson and his buddies better find it, or this guy might walk. Speaking of disappearing, where's Kent?" Lois asked, worried that he might have been injured.

Suddenly Clark materialized besides the duo and said, "Right here. Who's going to walk where?"

Not sure what to make of his unexpected appearance, Lois said, "It's high time you showed up. Never mind the perpetrator, where have you been while Jack and I were following this whole thing?"

"Huh, I... I'm not comfortable around loud noises and guns..."

Jack, after his own misadventure with a misfiring weapon, was not about to disagree, but he still couldn't keep the tone of disbelief out of his voice when he said, "Say what?"

Ignoring his comment, Clark said, "Uh, I might have missed the beginning, but not the end. I was inside the bank when Henderson located the gun and even managed to get a quote from him and the security guard. Look, maybe we, uh, should compare notes on the way back to the bullpen and then write up the account. Jack, don't you have to get those pictures developed before evening deadline?"

Lois looked the rookie up and down and thought, "Great! What happened to letting me ask all the questions? But at least he shows some initiative and isn't depending on me for everything."

The article depicting the bank standoff was run in the *Daily Planet's* evening edition. Lois and Clark's collaboration and the unusual circumstances of the robber's capture made it stand out from the other newspapers in town... especially the *Metropolis Star*.

After that first rocky start, the professional partnership between Lois and Clark developed into something that surprised the bullpen and even Perry. They wrote in-depth investigative articles that eclipsed anything done previously between Lois and Eduardo. The paper's circulation was guaranteed to increase whenever their bylines appeared above the fold. Perry, the suits upstairs, and especially the publisher, James Olsen, were pleased with the results.

Despite their success, Lois was always a little wary of the 'Hack from Nowheresville'. Ever since he showed up, a lot of things took place around Metropolis that really should not have happened.

Or to put it bluntly, things didn't *happen* that should have.

Massive highway car crashes, muggings and the occasional airplane mishap never took place. The witnesses from these *happenings* all made similar statements: They were being attacked, and unexpectedly the attackers were on the ground, unconscious. An out-of-control car made a complete and safe stop. An airplane with engine failure would abruptly right itself and land safely.

Slowly, but steadily, Metropolis was becoming the safest city in the country. There were numerous times the reporting duo and their photographer sidekick were covering a particular news event when something went wrong and invariably 'Kansas', Lois' nickname for Clark, would suddenly vanish.

After one such mishap, followed by her partner's disappearance, Lois mused about him, "He's around when things happen, then he's not around when they happen. Maybe he's the one that makes them 'unhappen'?" Lois chuckled. "Where did *that* thought come from? I must be going crazy; how could a guy like Kansas be anything but a mild-mannered reporter from the Midwest?" Nonetheless, the odd occurrences continued, and Lois' intuition worked subconsciously to make sense of the matter.

Lana Lang unfortunately proved to be a constant irritant. She

always called Clark at the worst possible times and wanted to know when he was on assignment with Lois or any female member of the Planet's staff. So far, Perry patiently tolerated her presence in the bullpen, but Clark was dreading the day when he would be called into the managing editor's office for a 'painful conversation' about his girlfriend.

Despite the fact that he was in a committed relationship with Lana, he was intrigued by Lois Lane. Her skills as a reporter challenged him with each story they wrote together. True, she made him fight for every inch of her respect. But she did respect him.

Six months had passed since Lane and Kent had teamed up. Then, out of the blue around quitting time, Lois asked her partner, "Hey Clark... do you own a tuxedo?"

Clark looked up suspiciously and responded, "No. But renting one shouldn't be a problem. Why?"

Lois rolled her eyes impatiently. "Tomorrow night Lex and Arianna Luthor are hosting their annual White Orchid Ball. It's only the biggest social event in Metropolis, second only to the Metropolis Museum's costume exhibit gala. *Daily Planet* reporters always cover it."

"My usual date for these things, Mitchell Samuels, has another one of his 'colds'. I need an escort and since you work for the Planet you might as well come along."

"Escort? But... but what about Lana?" Clark asked.

"Look, Kansas, we're not getting married. This. Is. Work. Want to prove yourself to Perry?" As soon as the words tripped over her lips she regretted them. Wasn't that what she had said to Jack before that awful bank robbery last year? They would be attending a fancy-dress ball, with elegant music and sinfully delicious food, rubbing shoulders with the city's upper crust. This was *not* a back-alley shootout at midnight. Think caviar, Lois, not Kevlar. She put the errant thought aside and looked at Kent, who was watching her with a curious expression. She suspected he mentioned Lana more out of habit than anything else.

"Yes, of course. This is a work event. Thank you for inviting me," he responded with a hint of eagerness.

"Good! Because Perry only provided a limited number of invitations. Jack has one, and I'm not staying home with my goldfish and letting my sometime partner bring his possessive girlfriend and write another gooey puff piece about the 'incredibly' wealthy Luthors."

Clark stared hard at her, the tone of his voice steely, and stated, "Lana is not possessive."

Ignoring the intensity of his stare and voice, Lois responded, "Okay. Here's a gold-plated-with-diamond-studs opportunity to prove me and *everybody* in the newsroom wrong. Meet me at the LexCorp lobby tomorrow at eight o'clock sharp." With those words she handed him a heavy gold envelope. Handwritten on the front in graceful blue ink calligraphy were the words *White Orchid Ball*.

Before he could say thank you, she snatched a pencil off his desk and yanked a sheet of paper off a notepad. She scribbled while talking rapidly. "If you need help with evening clothes, *Maxim's* is a good choice; plenty of the *Daily Planet's* reporters get their tuxedo rentals from them. Tell the owner, Remy Zurco, I sent you over. He owes me a favor or two."

"Uh, thanks, Lois. It's a dat... deal." Clark wanted to bite his tongue. "Yikes!", he thought, "Why did I say *that*?"

"Wonderful. Keep in mind that this isn't the prom at Smallville High. Don't wear a powder blue tuxedo, or I and the rest of the journalists attending will ignore you, and Arianna Carlin-Luthor is liable to have security throw you out for committing a crime against fashion." With those words, Lois went back to her desk, shut down the computer and prepared to depart for the evening.

Lois shook her head and thought, "I really have him on the ropes. He had proven himself over the past few months; it was probably time to back down on the Mad Dog Lane treatment." Clark Kent was a decent journalist and – dare she say it – a real gentleman. He was nothing like Claude. Maybe after observing how he handled himself with the city's upper crust at the White Orchid Ball, she should start treating him better. After all, didn't she promise herself to be kind to her co-workers? So why give this one so much grief? Was she jealous of Lana? No, that was crazy! To prove it to herself, as a final word, she said, "Right. And just so Ms. Dairy Queen doesn't get the wrong idea, please let her know Jack is coming along as well to take pictures." With that parting shot, Lois picked up her briefcase and walked up the ramp.

Catherine watched the exchange from her desk. Although Kent had partnered off and on with Lois for six months, he had yet to earn her complete respect. From the looks of it, if he didn't step up to the plate soon, he never would.

Clark observed Lois' commanding stride as she went up the ramp and out of sight. *Kansas*. She rarely used his real name, and the way she talked about Lana – that really bothered him. He gave a mental sigh. Why should it bother him when it was perfectly true? He did permit his girlfriend to run rings around him, but not on everything. Initially she had pushed hard for them to move in together, but he had resisted *that* decision. They needed to establish their separate careers before taking such a huge step. So for convenience's sake and for financial reasons, he had remained at Pete's, and she had moved out of Chloe Foster's apartment and had fortunately found another one in her friend's building. Which was great because it was not too far from her parents' townhouse.

When he had arrived in Metropolis, his finances had been in a sad state of affairs. After tramping around the globe for years and working for marginally good newspapers, his bank account was not what it ought to be. Before coming to Metropolis, he had been forced by necessity and by a keen sense of obligation to his late parents to return to Smallville and take a more hands-on approach to managing the farm. Uncle Wayne had looked after the place, but it had needed someone to live there and deal with the day-to-day activities – and headaches – of running a working farm. Clark had split his time between wearing several hats for the *Smallville Gazette* and working alongside Joe, tending the corn and wheat fields.

Fortunately, with his unique abilities and Joe's diligent work, the farm was coming into its own and gradually beginning to make a profit. It was quite an achievement and his bank accounts were finally getting to a point where he could afford to rent a fairly decent place. But he knew that right now, whatever he did find might not be good enough for Lana.

He sighed mentally, "Lana."

But before he went down that well-worn track, his ruminations oddly slid back to Lois. What was that crack about his fashion sense? True, his suits were old, but he had been saving his money. For the past couple of years, clothing had been the last thing on his mind. He examined the oversized camel-colored sports jacket, noticing that the elbows were a little worn and, truth be told, the cuffs more than a tad frayed. The white shirt he was wearing had seen better days, and the out-of-date tie could only be called garish and that was being charitable. A mental inventory of his sparse closet and the answer came back:

It was time to update his wardrobe.

He did need to look more the part of a seasoned professional, not a world tramping hobo. Even though being a slave to fashion was not his style, it might be better to have at least a couple of new suits and casual outfits in his closet and definitely two new pairs of shoes. The black wingtips he had on were polished and well maintained, yet they had a lot of mileage on them and regrettably, it showed.

Again, his mind took an odd detour: why hadn't Lana talked to him about his appearance? Could it be because she wanted to be the one who shined in the relationship? Perhaps she was ashamed of his small-town ways and wanted to keep him in the background?

Almost from the moment she had arrived in Metropolis, Lana had begun to transform, taking on the mannerisms and appearance of her colleagues at the museum. Now the girl from Smallville, Kansas fit completely in the mode of a young city professional. He had to admit the shift in her clothing was a definite improvement; she was an attractive woman who always wanted to look her best and appreciated male attention.

Yet with all the alterations, she never once asked him to change, to improve along with her. Weren't they supposed to grow as a couple?

But hadn't Lois done the exact same thing?

No, she wanted him to be better; she goaded him to be better in a dozen diverse ways, challenging him at every opportunity to reach his potential as a reporter. Exactly what a good partner does.

He ran his fingers through thick, wavy long black hair. It was time to accept her challenge. He was in the big leagues now. No reason to show up at this White Orchid Ball looking like a... a hayseed. Pleased with the decision, he started to dial the number Lois had given him, determined to find the absolute *best* tuxedo he could afford, and while he was there he intended to get some pointers on how to put together a wardrobe that wouldn't break the old wallet.

Jack's voice cut through the newsroom din. "Hey, Clark! There's a call for you on line two."

He disconnected the call for *Maxim's* and picked up line two. "Hello? Clark Kent speaking."

The deep baritone voice came easily over the line, "Good afternoon, Mr. Kent, my name is Todd Sylvester. I work for a French media company known as TresAx. We have several offices in the States. Are you familiar with the name?"

Scratching his head, Clark wondered why this man was contacting him. Perhaps he was trying to offer him a job? When he had first started at the *Daily Planet*, a few journalist's 'headhunter' firms who were aware of his international reporting background had tried to recruit him. But he always turned them down. From the sounds of it, this was more of the same. Time to set the record straight, hopefully for the last time.

"Sorry, Mr. Sylvester, I'm happy working here"

The man on the other line spoke softly, as if he did not wish to be overheard. "This is not about a job interview. Perhaps we should get together for coffee? My colleagues and I have a fascinating story to tell..."

Intrigued, Clark picked up a pencil and pulled out a slip of paper. "Okay, Mr. Sylvester, where would you like to meet?"

"Good day, *Monsieur* Templar. I trust you have enjoyed the perks of our association?"

Jasper Templar stood by a bookshelf looking over the leather-bound classics such as *The Three Musketeers* by Dumas, Dickens *Tale of Two Cities*, and *War of the Worlds*. He angrily grimaced at the last volume, then turned and smiled at his employer.

"Yes, it has been an education secretly purchasing stock from Mr. Luthor, but thanks to having access to the vast sources of DMG, I am learning a great deal. The acquisition process, as you can well imagine, has been a slow one, but nonetheless the results are extremely encouraging. Would you believe I have a couple of old ladies who are willing to part with their shares of stock for a fraction of what they are worth?" He smiled obsequiously.

Daae observed his employee carefully. He was tall, with thick blonde hair, blue eyes and a ready smile. Over the past six months it was the smile Daae had come to distrust – the emotion behind it never reached the eyes. There was something fraudulent about this

fellow he could not quite put his finger on. Thus far, Jasper was doing a superb job, so for the time being he would continue being Daae's 'stalking horse' and buy up as much of LNN stock as possible. But the moment he stepped out of line...

"How the stocks are obtained doesn't concern me, but swindling seniors out of their retirement funds will eventually raise questions. Purchasing LNN stock for too much, too little, or too quickly shall create ripples on Wall Street that will become a tidal wave. There is no reason to call attention to yourself and ultimately DMG."

The other man made a sour face and responded, "Very well, Mr. Daae, but really, why take all the spice out of the game?" He handed over a couple of buff folders. "Here are the reports for this month's acquisitions. We are on target to own forty percent of LNN by the end of this quarter. Soon this limited partnership with Luthor will fade into insignificance, and you will hold not just one seat on the board of directors but three."

Daae took the folders in hand and spent a few moments studying them in earnest. The reports were just as Jasper had presented them. He was pleased. Looking up, he said, "It is obvious you are quite good at your job. But regarding those old women, how many shares do they hold between them?"

The other man shrugged and said, "Twenty apiece."

"*Bien*. Be absolutely sure to pay them current market value, no more, no less."

A word of protest was about to escape Templar's lips when he noticed the cool appraisal of Daae's blue eyes and thought better of it. He quickly said, "Of course. Those forty shares will join the others by the end of the week."

"Excellent. See yourself out, s'il vous plait." Daae gestured to the door, and without a word, Templar departed.

Another door opened and Arianna stepped out, a smug expression on her face. "You see, Gregory, I told you Jasper is good at this sort of thing."

"*Oui*. Mr. Templar is good at strong-arming people who do not need to be bullied. He is also arrogant, conceited, and amoral. It's a wonder he was able to keep his cable company afloat without someone trying to assassinate him. Nevertheless, he is perfect for 'encouraging' certain shareholders to relinquish their ownership of LNN stock. Nonetheless, it would be very unfortunate for all of us if his overconfidence led to a serious blunder."

"Gregory, do not worry, so far our plan is working flawlessly. Are you ready for tonight's festivities? Don't allow Lex to steal the spotlight," she asked.

"*Ma chérie*, if I did not watch over such persons my business would not be where it is now. Still, I shall turn my attentions to this evening's plans where history will be made." He glanced at his watch. "It's getting late. Considering how long it takes for women of fashion to prepare for such an *événement*, you need to depart."

Arianna flustered and her heart skipped a beat. "Of course, Gregory, see you tonight." She walked over and kissed him lightly on the mouth. "I will be wearing *Chanel No. Five* - it is your favorite," she whispered huskily.

He did not respond, only watched as Arianna departed his office.

For a brief moment he was a younger man, happily in love, but all too soon the blissful memories were overcome by distressing ones of her decision to marry Lex instead of himself. He spoke aloud with a voice so filled with anguish and hurt no one would have recognized it as the voice of Gregory Daae. "No, Arianna, you wounded my *esprit* long ago. Only an imbecile would allow something like that to come about again. Our *navire* has sailed." He sighed sadly and departed for his townhouse to prepare for the ball.

Part Five

With a confident stride, Lex Luthor descended the grand staircase and entered the ballroom, scrutinizing the beautifully decorated space with a discerning eye. The months of preparation had borne superb results, and everything was as it should be: silverware gleaming, wait staff impeccably dressed and the orchestra playing classical jazz with effortless skill.

He moved about the ballroom like a sultan surveying his palatial tents. Underneath the massive crystal chandelier, opulently attired guests swirled about on the dance floor or stood by watching the dancers and sipping flutes of chilled champagne. The night promised to be an unequivocal success. All that remained was for him to make the announcement.

Unexpectedly, his eyes caught sight of a beautiful woman with skin the color of deep amber, whose white gown flowed effortlessly about her tall, shapely frame as he observed her. There was something about this lady that enraptured him. He was no stranger to stunning women; fashion models, actresses and singers all at one time or another had approached him, but there was more here than beauty. This delectable, mysterious creature seemed to reach out from across the room and capture his heart.

He smiled with pleasure in anticipation of meeting her, picked up two glasses of sparkling champagne and with the skill borne of many such encounters, approached.

“Good evening. A woman as beautiful as you should sip this champagne. I promise you it will quench your thirst.” He graciously handed her the flute of sparkling wine.

Her smile was open and warm as she accepted the glass, raised it to her lips and drank delicately. A pair of intelligent hazel eyes studied him over the rim of the glass. “Thank you, kind sir, my throat is a little parched. If I may be so bold, Mr. Luthor, I must tell you this... event quite takes my breath away.”

“Boldness is a quality I find very attractive in a woman. Especially one as striking as you... Miss...?”

“Mrs. Aykira Milan-Klein. My husband Bernard and I are part of the S.T.A.R. Labs Space Probe Science Team.”

Lex was briefly taken aback, but he swiftly rallied. “You surprised me... Mrs. Klein, and I am not often surprised.”

A firm, strong masculine voice from behind Lex said, “My wife’s ability to surprise was one of the many qualities which attracted me to her.” Bernard Klein spoke as he stepped around Luthor and gently took his wife’s hand. “I’m truly sorry, darling, last-minute paperwork for the launch. You weren’t lonely without me?”

Aykira shook her head, and the gold and diamond drop earrings tinkled, gently reflecting the light like tiny twin prisms. Lex observed how the couple’s eyes met, each comfortable to be with the other. For a brief, aching instant, he wished a similar rapport existed between himself and Arianna.

“Ah yes, paperwork, the bane of a scientist’s life. But no, Bern, not lonely, Mr. Luthor is a sparkling conversationalist.”

Lex’s smile did the job of hiding his disappointment that the object of his desire was smitten by her husband. He knew from experience that such women never strayed from their mates, no matter what the temptation. “Sadly, paperwork is the lifeblood of corporations as well; we are all trapped by it. But please, the night is just beginning. Eat, drink and enjoy our earthbound fare...”

“...for in a few days we shall fly?” Aykira finished his sentence, her smile displaying perfect white teeth.

“Yes, indeed, you shall fly. More is the pity; may your team reap bounteous scientific benefits from the next three months.” Taking Aykira’s hand, he bowed low, kissed it and then held on, perhaps longer than is considered polite - especially with the lady’s husband standing by.

He released her hand, and after exchanging a few banal pleasantries, watched with dark, envious eyes as Bernard Klein lightly placed a protective arm around her waist and gently

propelled her away.

“Incredible,” Lex whispered, openly envious, ““She walks in beauty and sets off my heart.’ I hope that fool Klein realizes what a treasure he has.”

“What *who* has, Lex?” said a familiar and extremely cool voice from behind him.

Lex turned around, his public masque firmly in place once more. “Ah, no one to concern yourself with, my dear, you are the most beautiful woman in the room,” Lex said to Arianna as he bent to lay a kiss on her cheek. He said and did this while all the time keeping a watchful eye on the retreating couple.

Standing not too far from the Luthors, by one of the buffet tables, were Preston Carpenter and his girlfriend, the exquisitely dressed Linda King. They carefully scrutinized the exchange taking place between Arianna and her husband.

Preston lit up a cigar and said, “Ah, Linda, all is not well in the house of Luthor. Their little tiff would make a succulent sidebar to the ‘About Town’ page!”

“I know it!” she said with a nasty gleam in her eye. “I’ll find out the particulars of that other couple and phone it into the night staff. The *Daily Planet* wouldn’t have anything like this to report. I don’t see Lois Lane or her buddy Catherine Grant around. The new gossip columnist, Peggy Becker, is worthless.”

“Careful, my pretty,” Preston spoke breathlessly into her ear, “Your rivalry with that reporter is not our reason for being here tonight.”

“Daae wanted us here for some reason, besides picking up bits of information and networking. Where is that ‘Salamander from Zurich’ anyway?” Linda responded boldly.

Preston looked around guardedly. “Don’t worry, he’s bound to slither out from whatever boulder he’s hiding under sooner or later.”

On the opposite side of the ballroom stood a young man who had witnessed countless elegant affairs in many different countries. Nonetheless, the grand sophistication of the White Orchid Ball could not be considered as anything less than magical.

Clark watched Lois enter the ballroom in a stunning burgundy gown. Her long hair was dramatically swept up and held in place with a single pearl studded comb, and adorning her ears were a pair of pearl earrings, with a matching strand around her long, sensuous neck.

Absorbing the magnificent sight of his lovely partner nearly thrust all thought of Lana out of his head. He thought, “She is absolutely dazzling this evening!” At that moment something almost primal stirred within him, nibbling frantically at his very essence. The unfamiliar emotion threatened to be overwhelming. He wanted to say something witty and entertaining, to make her see that there was more to him than just a man from Kansas. Their eyes met, and she approached with smooth, ballerina-like steps. Her mouth twitched into a smile and she spoke, while hitting him in a comradely fashion on the shoulder with a beaded purse that matched the shade of her dress.

“Good, you’re here! The tuxedo looks great; black really becomes you! See, taking my advice works! Come on, it’s time we get to work.” Standing on tiptoe and glancing over his shoulder she said, “*Where* is Jack?”

The delicate imagery shattered like a soap bubble as Clark set his mind back to the job of being a reporter. But he mused to himself, “She likes the tux? That’s a step in the right direction!”

“I’m over here!” the younger man said as he walked towards them. Jack was tugging on his collar. “Working these kinds of gigs is always a problem. Maxim’s can’t ever seem to find a tux shirt that fits my neck.”

Lois turned her attention to the room and its dazzling occupants. “Next time talk with Remy Zurco directly. Tell him you

know me. He'll make sure the shirt fits perfectly. Now, what's going on in this place?"

"Nothing really," Jack shrugged, "just a group of society snobs walking around, drinking wine and trying to sound important. This ain't exactly my idea of a photojournalist's dream. But you'll find the Congresswoman Coldivar speaking with Luthor, no doubt about LexSolar, and some engineers are talking about the Nuber Avenue train station. Oh, yeah, the *Metropolis Star* is represented by the owner and publisher Preston Carpenter..."

Lois sighed and shook her head. "...And his 'star' reporter Linda King," she said, finishing his sentence. Thanks for letting me know about the engineers and the congresswoman. Good use of observation skills, Jack! But right now, my target is the Luthors. Everything that has been written about them since they married five years ago is totally superficial. Better news could be found on the bottom of a birdcage! I want the definitive story on those two... starting tonight!"

She opened her clutch. Nestled between a metallic tube of *Helena Rubenstein* lipstick and silver compact was a small recorder. She pulled the device out and brandished it in front of them like it was a weapon.

"Uh, shouldn't that be a small notepad and pencil?" Clark asked.

"Get with the times, Kansas. I don't want to fumble around with that stuff on a night like this! As long as the person I'm talking to knows I have the device, its fine. Stand back, gentlemen, and watch a professional in action!"

Lois moved away from the duo with fluid gracefulness, yet her mind was anything but calm and peaceful. "My goodness! *He* makes that tuxedo, not the other way around. He's been hiding a *fantastic* physique under those boxy jackets and poorly cut pants! No wonder Miss Dairy Queen sticks so close! If he were my boyfriend, I wouldn't let him out of my sight either!"

A tiny mental voice whispered, "Don't think about Kent right now. You have other tasks to consider at the moment!"

Lois proceeded to work the room, holding up the miniature recorder and fearlessly asking questions of several of the more prominent guests.

"Senator Wilcox, the city of Metropolis is anxiously awaiting the conclusion of the new underground line and the Nuber Avenue station. Will it be completed by the proposed deadline?"

"Ambassador T'Quay, how are your people dealing with the drought situation – especially now that food and medical supplies have been pouring in from nations all over the world?"

"Congresswoman Coldivar, any indication as to which way you'll vote on the solar energy bill?"

And so it went. Lois continued garnering tips and ideas for at least three or more articles that would be of interest to the citizens of Metropolis. Clark now understood just why they had been asked to cover the event. It was a goldmine for enterprising reporters to network with international power brokers and cultivate those relationships. He realized with a great sense of humility that he was watching a skilled mistress of the game working eloquently at her craft.

He heard Jack say with admiration, "She's impressive."

"She most certainly is impressive. It's a miracle I'm able to work on the same level with somebody like that," he said respectfully.

"Hey, Clark, don't sweat it. If there was any indication you couldn't cut it over the past six months, Lois would have found some way to ease you out of working the city desk." He looked Clark over and said, "Great tux!"

Clark nodded; despite the change of clothing, Lois still didn't completely respect him. He wondered if his relationship with Lana had anything to do with that?

Lois, totally oblivious to the conversation between her colleagues, zeroed in on the Luthors. She noticed that they were having a discussion and from the appearance of their body language, it wasn't a cheerful one.

"Hmmm, trouble in paradise?" Lois thought. "I'll leave the gossip to our new columnist Peggy Becker; she could use the material."

She was about to approach the couple when the environment in the Lexor ballroom seemed to shift, almost as if it cracked with an electricity that had previously been absent.

Gregory Daae walked down the staircase shaking hands and greeting different guests as if he were a long-standing member of the Metropolis society scene. His refined confidence and grace put many of the party goers at ease while some athletic men half his age openly envied him, and no wonder: a number of the most attractive women in the room could not tear their eyes away from him. It was rumored that several society matrons had tried to ensnare him for their daughters. So far, none had been even remotely successful.

The man was the embodiment of charismatic charm and physical prowess - a latter-day European Cary Grant. There was something different about his eyes; the way he looked right at a person made it seem as though, for those few brief drops of time, that person was the center of Daae's universe. The side of his personality which terrified Preston Carpenter, Linda King, and countless others was, for the time being, submerged.

Ordinarily it was a rare thing for Daae to be in the States, much less make a public appearance at such an event as the White Orchid Ball. With the *Age of Napoleon* exhibit at the Metropolis museum now moving from the planning stages to actual construction, he was becoming a fixture in Metropolis. A number of pieces from his own private Napoleon collection were being displayed as well. It was said that Daae made several phone calls to Professor Lang on a weekly basis to discuss numerous aspects of the project.

He walked towards the Luthors. Lois could have sworn that for the barest of seconds Arianna gazed at Daae with open desire and then the look vanished.

Watching Daae, Lois drew her eyebrows together, noting the man's confident, even arrogant expression as his eyes swept over the room and then settled on the couple. He seemed to be slightly amused by Arianna and wary of Lex. She wondered thoughtfully, who truly was the master of the White Orchid Ball now that the Swiss businessman had arrived? He looked so smug in his Saville Row tuxedo. "Be patient, Mr. Daae," she mused silently, "I have a whole series of articles just *waiting* to be written up, telling all about you!"

"Lois! Lois!"

Startled, she turned to find Jack, with camera in hand. "Yes, what is it?" she hissed.

Taken aback by the anger in her words, Jack looked at her with a slightly hurt expression. "I was hoping you knew where CK was."

Lois bit her lip and took a calming breath. "Look, please accept my apology. That guy Daae brings out the worst in me. I thought Kansas was with you?"

"Nope, I've been taking pictures. Got some really good shots of Daae walking downstairs. From the way he acts, anyone would think this was *his* event, not Luthor's. I'll bet CK gets an earful from his girlfriend about this guy. From what I understand, he's very demanding of Professor Lang and all his staff."

"Well, I'm glad to see somebody is giving her grief for a change! Now where is Kent? Has he pulled another one of his disappearing acts?"

As if on cue, Clark appeared holding a petite plate of puffed pastries. "I'm right here."

“Fine. We have to split up: you need to speak with Lex and I’m going after Arianna.”

“Still trying to get that interview?” Clark asked with a small teasing smile as he popped a hot, flaky mini quiche in his mouth. Jack grabbed a small tart.

Entirely misreading his intention, Lois answered briskly. “Why else would I spend good money on this dress and get my hair and nails done by the best stylist in town... to dance the cornhusk two-step with you? It’s to land a thirty-minute interview with the most talked-about couple in Metropolis!”

Clark, properly rebuked, wisely kept his mouth closed. He watched as Lois turned her back on him and plunged into the glittering sequined fray once more.

After spending nearly an hour trying to speak with Arianna, Lois finally managed to buttonhole the better half of the Luthor duo. But Arianna, aware of to whom she was talking, slipped into banal social chit-chat. “Miss Lane, are you enjoying the evening?”

Hearing the boring cliché, Lois decided to play the game and responded in kind, “Very much. Each year the White Orchid Ball is an event I look forward to attending. The next day it is always the talk of Metropolis *society*.”

“We have an excellent staff that puts together these gatherings. Perhaps you would care to talk with them?”

“Actually, I want to conduct an interview with both you and your husband.”

The other woman tilted her head slightly as if measuring Lois’ determination. “Ah, as you are well aware, we are rather busy people. Getting one of us to sit down for an interview is hard enough, but both of us...?” Arianna shook her head and began searching the crowd as if looking for someone. “No, I am sorry, currently that is quite impossible.”

Seeing that Arianna’s attention was on the wane Lois continued, “But it has been a long time since a reputable newspaper like the *Daily Planet* had an interview with the Luthors. I want to ask a few questions.” Lois hastily reached into her clutch and pulled out the recorder.

Arianna’s social masque slipped ever so slightly, and she gently reprimanded Lois by saying, “Please, put away that vulgar device. I am enjoying a pleasant evening, and now is certainly not the time for interviews.” With those words, Arianna walked away, leaving Lois standing alone holding the unused recording device in her hand.

Realizing it would be foolish and completely unprofessional to chase after Arianna, Lois stuffed the recorder back into her bag. She had made an awful mistake going after her like that, but after seeing Daae, her competitive streak had surfaced and she was making a mess of things not only with Arianna, but with her fellow reporters as well.

Clark had observed the entire exchange and shook his head. Sometimes it takes more than just being “Mad Dog Lane” to catch a story. But then he realized if a seasoned veteran like Lois failed, he did not have a chance to convince Lex Luthor to have a one-on-one interview. Feeling the pressure of the situation, he took a glass of champagne, more to have something to hold in his hand rather than to drink, and began strolling around the ballroom. He was mentally looking to create an angle from which to write an article about this evening’s event.

Being a *Daily Planet* reporter for the past six months, he had built up a small, but creditable network of contacts. Some of them were present. He had just finished chatting with Neal Tesla, head of Electric General Corp., when Mrs. Luthor bumped into him, spilling champagne over his tuxedo.

“Oh, I beg your pardon, how clumsy of me! Please excuse me, Mr...?”

“Kent. Clark Kent. No problem, Mrs. Luthor, my dry cleaners will get this out.”

She looked up at him, her dark brown eyes briefly acknowledging how handsome the reporter was. “No, I insist on paying. My personal cleaning service shall take care of it. Before leaving tonight, give the jacket and your contact information to the concierge.”

Clark smiled shyly. “Thank you, Ma’am, but the *Daily Planet* will cover it.”

He noticed Arianna’s eyes narrow slightly; she was probably not happy about being pigeonholed by yet another reporter from the Planet. Before she could excuse herself, Clark stammered out, “Th... this is certainly a wonderful gala. I remember attending an event in the Louvre held by Madame Javier...”

The name seemed to mean something to Arianna, and she said, “Excuse me, Alexandria Javier?”

“Yes. Do you know her?”

“Of course! We attended the same school in Oxford. How do you know her?”

“My dance instructor, Abrihet Sensai, was able to get some of her students into the ball. It was quite a memorable evening.”

She smiled, and her eyes brightened, “The idea for this event was inspired by Alexandria’s own ball. She is a brilliant scholar; the Louvre is fortunate to have her on their staff. There were three such events.” Obviously, Arianna was doing a little digging of her own. She queried, “Which one was graced with your presence?”

There was a challenge in the question, and Clark felt his ears redden; he almost put both hands in his pockets when he remembered the glass of champagne. Quickly, he rushed to recover from the blunder. “I believe it was 1988...” Clark said, searching his memory. “The theme was Napoleon...”

“... and Josephine! I was there!” she said with genuine delight, then a slight cloud passed over her face and she whispered so low that only Clark with his enhanced abilities could hear her. “Lex and I were just engaged.”

Wisely, he let the comment go. It was not meant for him to hear. Arianna’s social face was firmly back in place when she spoke again, “Do you remember each woman was asked to wear a shawl?”

“Ah, yes. In honor of Empress Josephine, it was rumored she owned well over a thousand shawls. She was the undisputed Queen of Regency fashions. Poor Napoleon, he had to approve her shopping bills!” He smiled, thinking of a sea of lacy shawls in colorful fabric being tried on by the Empress.

Arianna continued asking Clark questions about the ball, which led to other topics. Finally, he said to her, “I really would like to conduct an interview between yourself and Mr. Luthor. The residents of Metropolis are not familiar with you. For instance, it was never discussed what led up to the decision to sell part of your Picasso collection and give the proceeds to several area orphanages.”

The muscles underneath her skin pulled the lips into an imitation of a smile which did not quite reach her large brown eyes. “Lex and I thought the buildings and gymnasiums in those facilities were desperately in need of updating. Nothing more involved than that. Still, that happened quite a while ago, Mr. Kent. I congratulate you on having such good research skills.”

Again, the Midwestern appeal came into play. “Not research skills, I like to know the movers and shakers in this city. After all, it is my home now.”

The expression on her face was one of genuine amusement. “A good newspaperman is to be respected, especially one who is as knowledgeable and charming as you.” She paused for a moment and then spoke again, weighing her words. “Getting both Lex and I together for an interview might be difficult, but perhaps we can conduct them separately? If you contact my assistant, Mr. Kane, he may be able to fit you into my schedule for a few minutes.” She looked over his shoulder and smiled. “It appears your associate Miss Lane wants to join us. If you wish, bring her along on my

interview, but not Lex's. Enjoy the rest of the ball, Mr. Kent." She extended her hand and he bowed over it, just short of giving it a courtly kiss.

Clark watched as Arianna melted into the throng and walked towards Lex and Gregory Daae. His self-confidence soared as if he were flying! All too quickly he was slammed back to earth when he heard a familiar heartbeat pounding in fury and then Lois' voice speaking with frigid sharpness.

"What were you and Mrs. Luthor talking about?"

"She granted me... uh, I mean us, an interview."

Her eyes grew wide with surprise. "What? That was supposed to be my interview! It's taken me months to get close to either one of them and you manage to get it in a few minutes!"

He put up his hands in a slight defensive gesture. "I'm sorry, Lois, but it's all about timing... and the proper approach..."

"Approach? She spilled champagne all over you! That's not an approach, that's being clumsy!"

"If it makes you feel any better, Arianna insisted you partner with me on her interview."

That got her attention. Her brown eyes fixed him with a laser-like stare and said, "What about Lex?"

"Nope, you are only allowed to accompany me on her interview."

"Figures! No thanks, I'm not going to hang around like you're my big brother and I get to be chaperone."

Clark couldn't help but grin, trying to make light of the situation. "Well, from what I could see, you were a little abrasive with Arianna. Honestly, Lois, this just fell into my lap."

She rolled her eyes and snapped, "Great! During the interview, try not to let Mrs. Luthor fall into your lap!" She looked over to the bar and growled, "I hope that bartender knows how to make a chocolate martini!" With those words she stormed over to the bar

Catherine chose that moment to come over. "I saw you talking with Mrs. Luthor. Was she sorry after spilling champagne all over your tux?"

He nodded, his eyes following Lois. "Yes, she was. Apparently, we have a mutual acquaintance in common. She granted me an interview. Huh, Lois will come with me, of course," he added hastily.

His friend looked at him and then gazed over to the bar where Lois was trying to catch the bartender's attention. She sighed and said, "Let me guess: Lois is asking him to make her a chocolate martini?"

Surprised, Clark said, "Yeah, how did you know?"

She patted his shoulder consolingly and smiled, "Women talk. Catch you later, Kent." With that, Catherine walked over to the bar in hopes of encouraging her friend. "Go easy on Clark. He is not Claude." The older woman said without preamble.

Lois sighed. If there was anyone she would listen to, it was Catherine Grant. After all, Catherine had quietly warned her about Claude, and she hadn't paid heed to the advice, leading to a lot of pain. "I know. You're right. But to lose out to Kansas? He's got such a touchy-feely writing style. The article will turn into just another puff-piece."

"Not with you being there to ask the right questions at the right time. Clark is a good reporter. I trust and respect him. You need to do more of the same."

The bartender placed the martini in front of her and moved off. Lois took a quick sip and smacked her lips. "Perfection," she said. "You are right. I will be nicer to him... after this Arianna interview is over."

While Lois talked to Catherine, Gregory spoke with Lex and his wife.

"Is everything ready for the announcement?" Daae asked.

Lex's social facade was perfectly in place, so he did not react

when hearing the demanding tone in Daae's voice. He smiled and then said, "Of course! Relax, Gregory. LexCorp is not the nervous board of directors for the Metropolitan Museum. I have the best people working for me." Luthor effortlessly picked up a flute of champagne from a passing waiter and pressed it into the other man's hand. "Drink up; the night will be a triumph for all of us."

The older man brought the glass to his lips and looked at Luthor, then rested his piercing blue eyes on Arianna for a moment. When he brought the empty flute down he said, "Yes, a definite triumph."

Around midnight, when the big band orchestra was at full swing playing Count Basie's *One O'clock Jump* and the guests were heating up the floor, the sound of a loud gong vibrated around the room and Lex's amplified voice rang out.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please accept my apology for interrupting your fun on the dance floor, but could I have your attention please!"

All eyes turned to Lex, standing at the top of the grand staircase. To his right, not surprisingly, stood Arianna and curiously, Gregory Daae on his left.

Lex continued, "My friends, we have a momentous announcement to make. Please look above you."

Suddenly the lights dimmed, and just below the ceiling, a large holographic display of what could only be a space station turned slowly above their heads. Like some latter day P.T. Barnum, Lex allowed the astonished audience to gape up at the sight before making his explanation.

"Over our heads is a tantalizing glimpse of the next step to mankind's exploration of outer space! EPRAD and Luthor Technologies have joined together and are in the process of constructing a space station which shall give the children of Earth a platform to the stars. Construction plans began over three years ago. The first five support modules lifted off successfully and will soon be joined by many others."

The room exploded into a loud dissonance of excited voices. The newsmen present were in a frenzy, all fighting to ask questions. The loudest among them was Ian Nansen of News Channel 12, a strong and highly respected competitor to LNN. Lex acknowledged him with a curt nod.

"Excuse me, Mr. Luthor, but this is incredible! How was your company able to launch a series of satellites – modules for a Space Station – in secret?"

"I... and my colleagues, are men of vision, Mr. Nansen. We, as a species, need to progress beyond the confines of our stifling little planet. There are worlds beyond this one. Worlds for us to explore, colonize and shape into our own. After establishing a permanent station in orbit around the Earth, the next logical step is a colony on the Moon. It is impossible to do that without the cooperation and blessings of our government, which is why this is a *joint* venture." His dark eyes sparkled with a brilliant light as he emphasized those last two words.

More voices shouted to be heard, some in amazement and others in protest. Catherine Grant, waving her arms to get Lex's attention, asked another question.

"What is the name of this 'venture', Mr. Luthor?"

Lex turned to Arianna, took her hand, kissed it and smiled serenely. "Care to tell them the name of the station, my love?"

She looked at him and smiled as well, as her genteel British accent rang out over the audience. "The name is Space Station Archimedes!"

A low swell of voices filled the room as the journalists started writing the information down, and some quickly exited the ballroom to find a phone. But a single voice - a woman's - cut through the hubbub and was heard loud and clear. All heads turned to Lois Lane as she spoke.

"What is Gregory Daae doing up there with you and Arianna?"

Does his media empire have a stake in this ‘joint venture?’” she asked sarcastically.

Lex leaned forward and was about to reply when Gregory laid a reassuring hand on his arm and then spoke with an easy, confident air. “Lex, my friend, let me answer this impertinent young woman’s question. It should be amusing.” With those few words, he had managed to insult and belittle Lois while at the same time upstaging Lex Luthor. He looked out over the crowd, waiting until everyone had quieted down, and he had their undivided attention. The Archimedes hologram, like a brilliant jewel, continued to turn silently above them.

“Miss Lane, you and your fellow journalists should know DMG and LNN will be working in concert to provide primary coverage of the space station’s construction and the gathering of its first group of colonists.” A low murmur could be heard from other reporters; the idea of being cut out of a story of note, much less a historic one, was an attack on freedom of the press. “I assure you, Miss Lane, all other news organizations the world over shall be provided with material and be given a chance to send their own people to the observation platform to report stories. DMG in Europe, Asia, and Africa, and LNN in the Americas, will have a separate channel devoted to covering the progress of construction, 24/7 from beginning to completion of construction.”

This was stunning news indeed.

“EPRAD and the government allowed this special channel to be created?” Lois was in such shock she almost squeaked.

“Yes,” he smiled, “it was part of the joint venture agreement.” Lois wanted to ask more questions, but Daae ignored her, continuing to speak. “This is the first of many stories to be covered by our corporations. DMG and LNN will work together reporting on stories throughout the globe and now in space.” He graded Lois with his attention once more and said, “I hope that has answered all your questions, *Mademoiselle* Lane?”

“That only leads to several more. Perhaps we can discuss this at length further?”

“No, *mademoiselle*. What I say to you will be heard by everyone. No reason to have my words misquoted or taken out of context. A press kit will be given to yourself and other members of the media in attendance tonight.” He addressed the crowd, saying, “Please continue enjoying the evening.”

Preston looked at Linda, who was now quietly tearing to tiny bits the information she had gathered on Bernard Klein and his new wife, Aykira Milan, during the evening. The last thing the *Metropolis Star* needed was to create a scandal involving the Luthors. LexCorp was partners with DMG which put them firmly within Daae’s sphere of influence, which in turn meant ‘hands off’.

Clark and Jack came up to her at the same time. “Check out the nerve of that guy! He didn’t even give you a chance to speak!” Jack said in a low growl.

“Nothing new there, Jack, it’s the Daae style. Step on anything or anyone that gets in his way.” She tried hard to keep a brave face, but the word ‘impertinent’ stung.

Perry arrived, with Alice by his side, holding a thick purple folder, “Great shades of Elvis! I grabbed a press kit! Let’s get back to the Planet! I want to personally make sure the early edition gets put to bed with this announcement! Well, don’t just sit there, people, let’s move! Jack, find Catherine and meet us in the lobby!”

After the dual announcements, the orchestra struck up Duke Ellington’s *Take the A Train* and many of the guests enthusiastically returned to the dance floor. Meanwhile, other members of the Fourth Estate discreetly made their way to the door. As soon as Catherine joined them, Lois, Clark and Jack dutifully followed the chief out of the building and onto the street. Perry, with the aplomb of a seasoned city dweller, hailed a cab immediately.

“Clark, Alice and I can take Catherine in our cab. Follow us

as soon as you can,” Perry said.

“Right, Chief! Come on, there’s another cab behind theirs,” Clark said as a yellow checkered Metro cab pulled up. They piled in. Jack was fiddling with his camera, Clark looked over his notes, and Lois sat between them, her voluminous gown wrapped around her legs. She was looking out the window, seeing nothing, her mouth set in a thin, hard line. “So much for looks and old-fashioned manners,” she thought with a mental sigh. “Once again, a story I’ve worked on for months has been snatched away. This guy may be from Kansas, but in some ways he’s just another Claude!”

Part Six

Clark stepped out of the elevator and into the newsroom at 5:00am. He had departed only three hours earlier. But after taking a shower, eating a leisurely breakfast and putting on one of his newly purchased suits with a shirt and a wildly colorful tie, he returned to the *Daily Planet*. There were too many tasks to do this morning that required his complete concentration. Early morning chatter from bullpen colleagues would only serve as a distraction. In preparation for the interview with Arianna Luthor, he needed to do background research in order to have a list of questions that would elevate the interview above that of ‘puff piece’.

His partner had been anticipating and preparing for long months which questions to ask the fabulous couple. Now he was the lead reporter and they would only be talking to half of the duo. The last thing he wanted to look like in front of either woman was a ‘wet-behind-the-ears’ rookie.

Lois.

It had been painfully evident to everyone how deeply disappointed she was that Clark had been granted the interview rather than her. Her sumptuous evening gown and jewelry, which earlier in the evening had made her look so elegant, seemed to envelop her on the return journey, as if she were a little girl wearing Mommy’s clothes. He imagined the dismissive comments from Daae had hurt her on a deeper level than just professionally. The cab ride back to the Planet with Jack had been subdued, and although he had made several attempts to cheer her up, all his efforts had been met with stony silence - which in Clark’s mind was far more dangerous.

To add insult to injury, Catherine had mentioned Clark’s ‘chance encounter’ with Arianna, and how it had resulted in him and Lois landing an interview with her, to Perry. When they arrived at the newsroom, Perry and several others had been effusive in their praise. In their minds, Clark was the hero of the hour.

Despite that, Lois had taken the lead on the White Orchid Ball article. She wrote with stoic efficiency and quietly tolerated it when Clark corrected her grammar and spelling. She put up with Clark adding his part of the account of the party, including the announcement of the limited partnership between EPRAD and LexCorp and the creation of a 24/7 channel between DMG/LNN about the construction of the space station.

Nonetheless, the boxing gloves jabs in the story were aimed squarely at Luthor and Daae’s intention to bottle up eighty percent of the construction story about the space station to their media companies. Albeit, the other news and media outlets had access as well, but LNN/DMG would in this particular instance always have the breaking news first.

Once Perry had edited and then quickly included their article in the morning edition, Lois had shut down her computer and departed immediately, saying good night to everyone except her new nemesis. Clark had felt the bitter fury radiating off her body like turbulent ocean waves crashing against a jagged shore during a raging storm.

The early morning hours flew by. A few reporters made their appearances, Clark was still at his desk. Perry arrived around 7:00,

looking rested and refreshed despite getting only a few hours of sleep. He entered the bullpen with his jacket casually slung over his shoulder. It was late spring in Metropolis and the weather was already promising to be quite warm.

The chief came over to Clark's desk, and seeing the slightly dejected expression on the younger man's face, said, "Lois is mad at you now, son, but she'll come around – give her a few hours."

Sighing, Clark responded. "Chief, she's angry with me for getting an interview she's wanted for years, but there has to be more to it than that. Whenever it appears like I have an edge on her, she treats me as if I were someone else."

Perry folded his arms across his chest and became quiet. "Does the name Claude DeBarre sound familiar?"

He nodded and then frowned and said softly, "From the water-cooler gossip around the bullpen, he was a former staffer who was fired for plagiarizing a story. But I never asked for details."

Realization about Clark's ignorance of the situation spread over the older man's face. "Well, no one could ever accuse Elvis of stealin' a song! But that's exactly what that low-down skunk did. He didn't just steal any story, but an exceptional article. Coming from a seasoned journalist such an article is expected, but from a rookie? It was remarkable. Unfortunately, I didn't find out about it until it was too late." Perry paused and then said, "DeBarre didn't just romance the story away, he also bruised her self-esteem, which could have destroyed a promising career."

Understanding washed over Clark. Of course she would be defensive! He would take pains to be supportive regarding her feelings about this particular interview. He appreciated, and more importantly, respected Lois' ability as a journalist.

Clark whispered, "I... I didn't realize."

A gentle smile came to the older man's face. "Yeah. Still, she overcame that pain and is one of the best investigative reporters in the newspaper game."

"Don't worry, sir; the Arianna Luthor interview will be a cooperative effort on both our parts."

"Thanks, Kent, I knew I could count on you." The managing editor clapped him on the back and walked over to his own office, ready for another day in his beloved newsroom.

The corners of Clark's mouth tugged into a thoughtful smile at the words of encouragement and this new knowledge about his partner. It gave him reason to hope the day would be a peaceful one. Carefully, he rolled up the sleeves of his new white dress shirt and stuck a pencil jauntily behind his ear. He was deep in thought, preparing insightful questions for his interview with Mrs. Luthor. He was considering how to frame the question about the donation of funds from the sale of some of Lex's prize Picassos when the elevator doors opened, and Lois appeared.

He knew by her heartbeat that she was uneasy. Daae's remarks towards her had really stung. He didn't doubt that some of their competitors from other news organizations had made a few backhanded comments as well. Over the years, Lois had scooped a good many reporters in Metropolis, and if they could land an unflattering shot back at her, the more unprofessional ones would do so. When she was upset or angry, Lois had certain defense mechanisms in place. Her two favorites were eating chocolate and dressing her absolute best. Today she wore a chic navy pants suit, looking regal, hot as hell and ready for combat from all comers. She pounded down the steps and took off the jacket to reveal a sleeveless peach blouse that showed off her perfectly sculptured arms.

Surreptitiously he watched Lois as with alacrity she went through the movements of starting her early-morning ritual. But today, the movements were not easy and familiar, but rather were crisp, precise and sharp. Lois Lane was indeed geared up for battle, like Eisenhower prepared for Normandy.

With a sinking feeling, Clark knew the beach she intended to

storm was called Kent, not Omaha. Perhaps he could make the first steps towards a peace offering. He went up to the coffee station, and prepared a steaming cup just the way she liked it, along with a fresh mocha chip muffin, still warm from the bakery. He brought them down to her desk and stood over her.

Lois turned away from her monitor and looked at him out of the corner of her eye, then stared down at the delectable muffin, clearly avoiding his gaze. In chilly tones, she said, "Thank you, Mr. Kent. Put it down on my desk." Without another word, she continued to study the words on the monitor.

Hurt, Clark did as he was bid and went back to his desk. He needed to give her time.

Studiously, they paid no attention to each other for the rest of the morning.

A few hours later, Lana stepped out of the elevator, wearing a lovely red dress that was cut perfectly for her petite frame. Several men in the newsroom looked on with approval, and some even said greetings. But the female staffers turned away. Lana was not a favorite among them. Acknowledging the men and ignoring everyone else, she charged down the ramp into the newsroom and went straight to Clark.

Jack, mixing up his second cup of coffee, noticed her and said to Stacy, "Doesn't she have a job?"

Stacy looked at him, shrugged and said, "She still does work with her father at the museum. You know, helping him put together that Napoleon Bonaparte exhibit. From what I understand, it's going to be quite an evening when the tableaux depicting scenes from his life are revealed to the public. Even the governor will be there."

"How did you find out all this stuff? Been listening to the bullpen gossip?"

"Yes, because I listen to conversations *and* put together the information, but I don't say anything to anyone until it's confirmed. Maybe you should read more than just the sports section. Look under *Arts and Leisure* in the *Daily Planet's* Weekend section."

Jack, completely embarrassed, shifted the conversation back to Lana. "Speaking of observation, do you ever notice how she always shows up for lunch after Clark has an assignment with Lois?" he remarked sarcastically.

"Hmmm, you're right. Wonder what *that's* all about?" Stacy adjusted her glasses and cautiously watched the modern tableau before her. "Right now, I don't think Ms. Lane and Mr. Kent are on speaking terms..."

"Clark," the overly sweet voice drawled, as she sat down in the visitor's chair, "I waited up for your call last night. I wanted to hear all the details of the White Orchid Ball. Plus, mother might have found the perfect couch for my place. If it fits, I'll need your help getting it up two flights of stairs and inside the apartment."

Lois watched as her erstwhile partner, who spoke with such fluid confidence with Arianna Luthor - the powerful and beloved *doyenne* of Metropolis society - became a mouse in front of the petite blonde dynamo.

"Hey, Lana, that's great about the couch. Sorry, now is not the time, I'm really busy... maybe we can catch up later?"

But the blonde continued as if she had never heard him. "The news was full of Mr. Daae and Lex Luthor's announcement this morning. Daddy told me all about the article you and your partner wrote up. Imagine LexCorp and Mr. Daae's company pulling off such a coup!" Her eyes fairly danced with excitement as she spoke. "They say Lex Luthor is exceptionally skillful at business matters, but Gregory Daae is another matter altogether! The word around my office is that he's something of a scoundrel! Why don't we talk about it over lunch?"

"Lunch?" Lois said from her desk, "It's only 11:00."

Lana turned and gave Lois an appraising look, then shrugged. “Not that it’s any of *your* concern, but I’m hungry... now. Oh, the *Metropolis Star* mentioned Gregory Daae’s comments about your being amateurish. I think he and Linda King got it right. Why put such a powerful man on the spot like that!”

Lois fairly bristled at the words and was about to fire back an answer when Clark stood and spoke, eager to defuse a potentially fiery situation. “Lana, I have a lot of prep work to do for an upcoming assignment. Why don’t we have dinner tonight?”

His girlfriend’s expression was not a happy one. “But you promised to tell me everything that happened. Imagine talking to Swiss media mogul Gregory Daae and even the governor. I can just imagine all the international, corporate, and political networking that took place. I should have been your date.”

Lois returned to the file she had been studying. Being involved in a conversation with Lana Lang for any reason was a waste of time. Besides, listening to the haughty edge of Lana’s voice ordering Clark around was more than she could tolerate.

“I’m sorry, but it’s impossible to step away.” Clark stood up, took her by the elbow and gently, but firmly, led her up the ramp and to the elevator doors. “Listen, I promise, we will talk about everything over dinner. We can go to Callard’s.”

At that moment, the elevator door opened, and Perry stepped out. From the look on his face he had probably just come from upstairs and his weekly meeting with the ‘suits’. His expression brightened somewhat when he saw Clark. “Kent! Exactly the person I wanted to see!” He looked over at Lana and nodded to her. “Good morning, Ms. Lang. What brings you to the newsroom?”

“My boyfriend, of course,” she said while twining her arm around his waist, “He’s taking me to lunch.”

Clark winced and said, “Lana,” with a touch of panic in his voice.

Perry noticed the strained exchange between the young people, quickly sized up the situation, and deftly stepped in.

“Uh... son, we really need to talk about this interview. Mr. Olsen is a good friend of Mrs. Luthor’s, so he’ll be watching very closely. An interview like this could be a boost to your career.”

He nodded and turned to Lana, whose expression had altered considerably. “Mr. White, are you saying my boyfriend is going to interview Lex Luthor’s *wife*?” She turned to Clark, her eyes flashing, and she stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek, “Honey, you do whatever it takes to prepare! Tell me all about it tonight! I’m so proud of you!”

After pushing the elevator button, the doors snapped open and Lana gracefully stepped inside. “Bye, Clark, meet me at Callard’s... six o’clock sharp!”

Once the doors closed, Clark turned to Perry and sighed softly. “Thanks, Chief. Lana is...”

Perry held up his hand, cutting off the younger man’s comment. “Say no more, son. I don’t usually stick my nose into another person’s love life, but you are steppin’ into the big leagues of journalism. Your attention needs to be focused. Time you had a talk with that young woman and let her know going out to lunch early while preparing for an important interview ain’t smart. Now, about this interview...”

The elevator doors closed on Clark and Perry White. As a rule, Lana did not particularly care for the bellicose editor and his endless tacky stories about Presley. However, the man did sign Clark’s paychecks, so for now, he had to be tolerated.

Her boyfriend had an interview with *Arianna Carlin-Luthor*? Finally, a story that would impress her associates at the museum. Who knew where this assignment might lead; conceivably to a significant raise or prestigious award? Her father might look past Clark’s farmer upbringing and be a bit more respectful of their relationship?

An unbidden thought bumped into her mind: what about

Gregory Daae?

She had failed to mention to Clark that this morning Daae had come into her father’s office with a security question regarding the priceless Napoleon articles he had loaned to the museum from his private collection. Since Daddy was not in the building she happily answered all of his queries. Mr. Daae had been gracious and charming, and even grateful for the assistance. She did not see evidence of his supposedly steely personality. Surely the rumors about him were simply unfounded.

When she had first arrived at the museum she had casually tried to be in the area whenever her father had a meeting with him. This morning was not the first incident Lana had spent time with him, but it was the first time he had invited her to lunch. Oddly, she had declined the invitation, on the pretext she was meeting Clark instead. Now she fervently wished her answer had been yes. Gregory Daae was intelligent, worldly and very attractive. She liked European men; they possessed a sophistication that their American counterparts sadly lacked. Guy de Momerie had allowed her a glimpse into the European aristocratic world, with its elegant gatherings and delectable luxuries. But his life course was set: no American wife for him, no matter how accomplished. Try as she might, she could not get him – or his family – to move on that point.

Nonetheless, Clark was safe, comfortable and, with little effort, easy to manipulate. Whereas Daae represented risks... precariously appealing risks with unlimited possibilities she was seriously tempted to take. It would be several years before Clark established himself as a reporter, and even more before his salary allowed them to live a comfortable lifestyle. Daae was benefiting from the lifestyle she craved now.

Such vague possibilities had no hope of crystallizing into reality unless she drew closer to him by accepting a lunch date or stepping out with him for a coffee. With a mental shrug, she decided, why not? Especially since now Clark was busy preparing for an important interview. He would never know...

The elevator slid to a halt and Lana emerged, skillfully moving through the number of people milling around the *Daily Planet*’s lobby. She ignored the admiring glances of several men as she walked by. It was time to head back to work at the museum, and if she was quick about it... a lunch date with Gregory Daae.

Clark and Perry continued to discuss some important points about the upcoming Arianna Carlin interview. He emerged from the editor’s office armed with notes. A stern warning also rang in Clark’s ears: “Remember, you have to handle Mrs. Luthor with kid gloves. Her husband pulls a lot of weight in this town.”

With those words in mind, Clark sat down and submerged himself in additional preparation. The familiar din of the newsroom faded into the background.

Sometime later, Catherine walked over to his desk and sat in the visitor’s chair.

“So, I hear congratulations are definitely in order. It takes a lot to impress the suits and Perry.” Catherine looked around and said, “Here’s a tip: getting Arianna to open up won’t be easy, but be careful, her moods tend to change.”

He nodded thoughtfully, “That may be true, but she was a perfectly gracious hostess. We talked about a mutual acquaintance who still lives in Paris.”

Catherine lowered her voice and spoke so quietly that Clark would have had difficulty hearing her without his enhanced hearing. “Good, she wasn’t happy earlier in the evening. Lex’s eyes were wandering again.”

“Really?” Clark responded in genuine surprise.

“Oh, Lex usually only dallies with the ladies of Metropolis society, and he is exceptionally discreet. The woman he flirted with last night must have been someone unique, since he could not resist flattering her and offering champagne. I happen to know

she's recently married and very much in love with her husband. The lady in question has no interest in Mr. Luthor or crossing swords with his wife."

Clark whistled softly, "I thought gossip was Peggy Becker's bailiwick?"

Catherine shrugged a shapely shoulder. For the past few months she had been working out at the gym downstairs and the results were nothing short of impressive. "It only takes listening and observation with a heavy dose of patience. Peggy's learning, but I was better at reporting the fluff and keeping the really dynamite stuff quiet."

"Good advice. I take it the Luthors are not as happy as they seem?"

A slight frown cast a shadow over Catherine's face, "They tolerate each other. According to one of my old sources, Lex had an affair. There's nothing new about that. But this time it distressed his wife to the point where she had the woman removed from Metropolis. So here's a little more advice: if Arianna invited you to an interview and told you to bring Lois along - do it. Don't be fooled. Mrs. Luthor might think turnabout is fair play." With those words, Catherine vacated her seat.

It was a good thing she moved away as otherwise she would have seen the distinct shade of red creep from Clark's shirt collar to the top of his head. Taking his occasional partner on the interview was apparently for more than simply moral support.

Mulling this over, Clark decided it was time to again attempt reconciliation with Lois. Saying a quick prayer, he walked over to her desk. "I could sure use your help in preparation for this interview, Lois."

The brown, doe-like eyes looked up and they sent a clear message that she was still miffed with him. The hoarfrost coming from her desk would have frightened a pack of Eskimos.

"Why?" she asked in a low growl. "So you can write it up and have all the credit for yourself?" With a vicious pull on the file drawer handle, she reached in, yanked out a thick, worn blue folder and slapped it on her desk. "For the past three years I've done extensive research on those two. In this folder are all the right questions to ask! But since you got the interview by being 'charmingly clumsy', now you can try being a 'real' reporter... do your own legwork!" With those words she grabbed the folder, dropped it into the drawer and closed it shut.

At that moment the elevator doors opened and James Olsen appeared. He jauntily stepped past a delivery person and moved down the ramp with relative ease. Clark sensed the atmosphere of the newsroom perceptively shift as it invariably did whenever one of the 'suits' made an appearance. He thought Mr. Olsen would head for Perry's office, but instead he walked straight over and sat down on Clark's visitor's chair.

"Afternoon to you both," he said, addressing Clark and Lois. "I hear from Perry that you two are going to interview Arianna. That's great. But she is specific about what questions she will and will not answer. Here's a list." He reached into his jacket pocket and handed each reporter a sheet of paper. Lois carefully went over the questions, snorted and handed the paper back to him. "James, that list will turn the interview into a puff piece. Hardly worth my time! Let Kent handle it."

The publisher, not in the least put off by her comment, replied, "Sorry, Lois, she wants both of you there. Otherwise, the deal's off."

Lois smiled sweetly, "Then it's off."

Between Lois' stubbornness and James interference, Clark's dreams of writing a quality interview piece on Arianna Carlin-Luthor were quickly vanishing. He understood what was driving her behavior and someday he would talk to her about it. But now was definitely not the time. Desperate, Clark spoke up, "Now just a minute, Mr. Olsen, this is my story. Lois is not going to kill it due to her non-participation. But together we can write a good

interview and work within Mrs. Luthor's request. It would make a great addition to the Weekend Section."

Lois was about to ratchet the disagreement up a notch when a firm voice with a deep southern accent cut through the dissension.

"Uh, excuse me. I think we all need to go into my office," Perry said.

James Olsen looked at the older man and was about to say something, then thought better of it. He stood and said graciously, "Sure, Perry, lead the way."

Once everyone was seated, Perry closed the door, turned, and spoke with his reporters. "Lois, Clark, no one disputes your abilities to write a story, separately or together, but..."

"Perry! It's always been one of my ambitions to get an interview with the Luthors *together* - on my own," she jerked her thumb at Clark, "but thanks to Kansas here, I have to act as a supporting cast member for his interview with her *only*! It's not fair!"

Unfazed by her interruption, Perry said, "Well, darlin', I always wanted to sing with the King, but since he's lost his voice, that ain't ever gonna happen. This time you are going to be a team player and *both* of you will write this interview."

"Excellent, Perry, now about Arianna's questions..." James began.

"Uh, Mr. Olsen, let's table that for a moment." He turned back to Lois and Clark. "Any questions?"

"None from me, Chief," Clark said.

"Lois?"

Lois was sitting absolutely silent, trying to hold onto her tongue.

"Lo-is," Perry said with an impatient tone.

"I'm thinking," she retorted.

"Good, that's what I want to see from my reporters." He gestured towards the door. "Now get out of my office and get to 'thinking' on that article... with Kent!"

Lois and Clark departed, each looking at the other with murder in their eyes.

James sat back in the leather chair, grinned, reached into his beast pocket, pulled out the paper and said, "Smooth, Perry, real smooth. Now about those interview questions..."

Perry looked at the young man and thought to himself, "Ah, I have to be careful how I handle this particular fox. He's lookin' to rob the wrong henhouse."

"Excuse me, James, but were those questions sent over from Mrs. Luthor?"

The easy atmosphere in the room changed somewhat. James sat up, slightly embarrassed, "Uh, no, actually, they're mine. I didn't want them to ask any questions that might be embarrassing to her. We... uh, that is, the *Planet*, cannot write or ask anything that would put the Luthors in a bad light."

"Ah, I see. Tell me Mr. Olsen, exactly *why* did you buy the *Daily Planet*?"

The younger man was taken aback. He calculated what the old newshound was saying for a moment and answered very slowly, "I've always respected the integrity of this newspaper. Its reputation for honestly and clear presentation of the facts is second to none."

Perry nodded in agreement. "Uh huh, that's good, but now, what is the *other* reason?"

Feeling a little like he was back in grade school, but determined to stand his ground, he said, "To help it generate money."

"How long do you think we will continue to gain your second objective if you sacrifice the first? Oh, you can go ahead and have all our reporters write puff pieces, but it won't be with me as managing editor, or high-caliber reporters like Lane and up-and-comers like Kent. You'll have a whole newsroom full of reporters even the Weehawken Gazette wouldn't claim as their own."

James Olsen looked at Perry White. He was not very keen on hearing those words and this is what his own father would have referred to as ‘a prickly conversation’. But he respected Perry’s nerve to say it and the hard-won experience to back it up. He stood, signaling the conversation had come to an end and walked over to the door. “Very well, Mr. White, I’ll stay in the Executive Suite and you handle the newsroom.”

Inwardly relieved that his point was made, Perry said, “Thank you, Mr. Olsen. See you when I’m upstairs.”

Lana arrived in the corridor leading to her tiny rectangle of an office in the subterranean bowels of the Metropolis Museum just in time to see her father coming out.

Without preamble, the elder Lang grumbled, “Something urgent has come up and I need your help. Where have you been?”

She smiled, hoping to avoid a fight, “Hello, Daddy. I went to have lunch with Clark. I wanted to know all about the White Orchid Ball.” She paused to look significantly up and down the hallway before she continued, “Can we talk about this in your office rather than the hallway?”

Her father agreed and presently she found herself upstairs in the executive offices sitting in a comfortable leather visitor’s chair looking across at her father, who at the moment was acting in the role of *Age of Napoleon* project lead and her boss.

His irritation under control, Professor Lang spoke briskly, “As you are very well aware, my duties vary greatly. Not only do I have responsibility for the Napoleon collection, but I must also oversee public relations, marketing, fundraising and education programs...”

Lana sighed. She knew where this was going, and father was right; she was taking shameful advantage of their family relationship. It was time to hold up her end of the deal.

“... we have talked before about you taking off to meet with that reporter boyfriend of yours. Young lady, it is twelve fifteen. You’ve got demanding work to do here and this morning we find ourselves in the middle of a crisis.”

Lana sat up and asked, “What sort of crisis?”

“Jefferson Bailey, the museum’s art director, contacted me this morning. The camp chair Napoleon used for his campaign in Egypt is not going to be a part of the exhibit. The owner, Garen Aymond, reneged on his agreement because of some imagined slight. I don’t have to explain to you how awkward the display would appear to the public, especially to experts – like Gregory Daae – if we provide a substitute of inferior quality.”

She blinked and mentally ran through the names of all the European collectors they could contact. Once a reputable collector was located, there were tedious international legal processes which must be fulfilled, not to mention packing, shipping and getting it to Metropolis without incident. If none of the collectors agreed they would have to redesign the tent layout. Either situation would throw the entire exhibit schedule off by weeks, if not months.

Her father’s voice broke into her train of thought. “I can think of a couple of people in France and one in Zurich who might be able to help us, although it will require a certain amount of hand holding. Collectors are a notoriously egotistic lot and some of these people will be considerably displeased that the museum did not approach them first. It’s impossible for me to leave right now, so I’m sending you in my stead.”

Lana blinked, then cocked an eyebrow and said, “What a chance to prove myself to the board of directors! Daddy, you can depend on me. I’ll get the job done, and the exhibit will be perfect.”

He nodded and for the first time that morning seemed a bit relieved. “Use the museum’s European contacts; they are extensive. Avoid stooping to the debased tactics of some of our less reputable colleagues. Do whatever is *legally* possible to obtain that chair.” He reached into a desk drawer and said, “Here is a list

of other items which are not crucial to the exhibit but have recently surfaced and might add a bit of texture and design to the overall display.”

“Thanks, Daddy! You won’t be disappointed.”

No sooner had the words escaped her mouth than there was a knock at the door.

“Come in!” Professor Lang said gruffly.

“Good afternoon, Bertram. Mademoiselle Lang.” Gregory Daae strode into the office; his poised presence immediately filled the room. “I understand there have been some difficulties acquiring the camp chair and some other items?”

“Yes, there are, but we are working on it. Lana will have to spend some time making the arrangements: such as creating a travel schedule, hotel arrangements and phoning our European contacts. It should take up most of this evening,” Prof. Lang responded.

“*This evening?* B... but I have plans.” Lana regretted saying the words as soon as they escaped past her lips. Didn’t she just say the camp chair would be located?

Her father turned and looked at her as if to say, ‘Your *plans* are on hold.’

Daae said, “Ah, it seems you have the situation well in hand. But if you require my aid, please do not hesitate to contact me.”

“Thank you, Gregory.” Professor Lang was about to say something more, but the phone rang. He picked up the receiver and upon discovering who it was, said, “Excuse me, both of you, but this call requires my attention.”

They exited the office; Lana softly closed the door behind her. She was all too aware of the tall, maturely handsome man at her side as they walked towards the elevator.

“It is a shame your plans for the evening have been significantly altered. But the chair is central to that part of the display. It would be a great pity to present a replica rather than the real thing.”

She sighed, “The chair is important. All my other work will have to be put aside until my return. I need to start contacting some of the collectors immediately; unfortunately, it’s close to dinner time in Paris.”

They had stopped in front of the elevator. Daae looked down upon her, and favored her with a surprisingly warm smile that touched his Nordic blue eyes. “I have some contacts in Europe, especially in Zurich and Paris. Please, allow me to be of some assistance to you... and of course the museum,” he added quickly.

To receive such obliging attention from this man was gratifying to Lana, and she responded, “I would appreciate that very much, Mr. Daae. Uh, *perhaps*, with your contacts, the other items on this list can be located quickly?”

As he took the list from her hand, he lightly brushed her fingers, which sent sparks tingling through her. He looked it over carefully and nodded. “*Peut-être*. I should think there would be no problem speaking to the owners of these items and encouraging them to loan them to the museum. Your father no doubt wants this matter resolved quickly. May I suggest rather than going through the time-consuming routine of making travel arrangements, you allow me to offer you a seat on my private jet?”

Lana was positively thrilled by such a generous offer and wanted to jump for joy. Not wanting to appear too eager, she said with a smile, “Th... thank you, Mr. Daae. That’s very kind, but I don’t want to be an inconvenience.”

“*Pas du tout*. I must return to Paris on Monday. Some of the Board members shall be flying with me. Consider how much this will save the museum, and all the inconveniences of traveling to and from the airport as well as going through security queues? Perhaps you will allow me to have my car pick you up either at home or here?”

Brightening at the thought of spending considerable

uninterrupted time with the urbane businessman, Lana agreed to fly back with him.

“Splendid. It will be a pleasure to have such an amiable companion to brighten a rather dreary flight.” Daae looked at her, and his mouth shaped into a surprisingly charming smile. He was close, close enough for her to breathe in his expensive cologne and take in every detail of his hand-crafted clothing. Mr. Daae dressed so much better than Clark, who until recently was adamant about saving money rather than looking like a professional reporter with polish. In some ways Clark was still a boy, whereas Daae... A thought clicked, and she decided to try something – push the edge of their new association a tiny bit further.

“Mr. Daae, I’m looking forward to it. But I have a tiny request which you are perfectly suited to assist me with.”

His expression became puzzled, “Please – in private call me – Gregory, I am at your service.”

“Could we speak nothing but French and German on the way over? It’s been nearly a year and my knowledge of both languages is getting out of practice.”

“*Bien sûr!* Perhaps we can start tonight... over dinner?”

“That would be great! I know a pleasant little bistro downtown, *Donatello’s*, have you ever heard of it?”

Daae barely suppressed a shudder; the thought of eating in an American-style restaurant that attracted obnoxious young business people with bad haircuts and even worse manners did not appeal to him.

“Please allow me to make the choice. You shall not be disappointed. My car will be waiting for you outside the employee’s entrance at 7:00. Until then... Lana.” He bowed his head, turned and walked swiftly down the corridor.

She secretly smiled to herself in triumph and thought, “This was far *better* than lunch!” She entered the elevator. Upon returning to the office, she called Clark and canceled their dinner date on the pretext that she had to work.

After making travel and dinner plans with the intriguing Miss Lang, Daae returned to his temporary offices in midtown Metropolis. He found conducting business at home intrusive to his privacy. It was best to work in a building that was designed for commerce. The five floors DMG leased within Meridian Towers gave him a space that was close enough to keep his figurative eyes and ears on both Preston Carpenter and Lex Luthor, but far enough away to conduct his own business in some degree of privacy.

He noted his assistant, the very capable Mrs. Aronnax, was away from her desk. Normally she was always there to greet him with messages and updates on anything that had taken place in his absence. “Ah, well,” he thought, she probably stepped away for just a brief moment.

He opened the door to find Jasper Templar placing a file on his desk. It was not so much his proximity to the piece of furniture, but his unmistakable expression of delight – even pride – at being in the room itself that set Daae on edge. “Templar, I do not believe we had a meeting set for this afternoon,” he said icily.

Jasper had the good grace to be startled by his employer’s unexpected entrance. “I... I wanted to drop off these new reports. If we continue buying up shares at this rate, LexCorp will be ours in about four months.”

“Very good...”

Suddenly Mrs. Aronnax stood in the doorway, a cup of steaming coffee in her hand and a small fruit salad sitting on a plate in the other. A puzzled expression was stamped firmly on her strong face. “Mr. Templar? I don’t have you down for an appointment... Mr. Daae?”

“It’s all right, Mrs. Aronnax. Please leave everything on the coffee table and close the door on your way out,” he said soothingly.

She nodded, did as she was bid and noiselessly closed the

door.

Turning his attention to Jasper, he inclined his head towards the door and said, “Mrs. Aronnax guards my office like it is a citadel. A good administrative assistant, like a good wife, is rather difficult to find. Wouldn’t you say?”

Jasper cleared his throat and made a feeble attempt at a joke, “Are you looking for a wife? If so, who is the lady?”

Daae turned to his employee. If it were at all possible, the clear blue eyes were colder than ever. “That, sir, is none of your affair. Just as being in my office without my knowledge is not your right. In future, if there is something of importance for me to read, leave it on Mrs. Aronnax’s chair if she is not available. Understood?”

Jasper nodded, and his cheek twitched faintly, a telltale sign he was both angry and embarrassed. He made a feeble attempt at conversation, but Daae dismissed him from the room. With alacrity that surprised even himself, Jasper made a hasty retreat.

“Good,” Daae thought, “He needs to know his position within the organization.”

Part Seven

Two days later, Lois and Clark were standing in front of the imposing steel and glass edifice which was LexCorp Tower, nerve center of the Luthor Empire, as well as home to its owner and his wife. Each was dressed in their most tailored and professional attire; Lois wore a flattering black dress with white piping, while Clark looked poised and polished in another one of his new suits paired with a solid blue tie.

“Hmmm, that’s the fourth one I’ve seen,” Lois mused silently, “He must have raided his bank account, but who cares? Dark gray looks great on him, and the effect is, if truth be told, quite... satisfying to my eyes.” Forcefully turning her mind back to the job at hand, Lois craned her neck to look up at the impressive building before them. Over a hundred and fifteen stories tall, it was listed in tour brochures as the highest building in Metropolis.

“Oh, I wish she hadn’t asked us to come so early! Seven o’clock in the morning for an interview? There wasn’t even time to grab a latte and muffin,” Lois sighed.

“Nervous? It is awfully early to do an interview on an empty stomach,” Clark asked

“Me? Why? After all, you’re taking point on this interview. If you get stuck, don’t look to me for any help. Maybe if she backs you up against the wall James’ questions might help!”

Steadfastly refusing to rise to the bait, he responded diplomatically, “Listen, we can make this into a terrific interview. For all the research I’ve done, it only scratches the surface. I want to learn from the best, and for my money, that’s you. Let’s share the questions, Lois, after all, she did invite *both* of us.”

With those words, the fight seemed to ebb from Lois’ small frame, and she looked over at her partner, shrugged, and said, “Deal. I get to ask the *first* question.”

Relieved they seem to be getting along, Clark grumbled good-naturedly, “Typical.”

The partners walked across the park like plaza and entered the skyscraper, both eager to get on with the job.

After passing through a security check in the lobby, the duo were given ID badges and escorted to a private elevator, which the guard operated with a keycard. He said tersely, “The elevator only stops at the penthouse. It should take just under a minute for you to get there.”

The gleaming steel doors closed and their stomachs dropped as the elevator car whisked them to the penthouse floor.

“Impressive. We should get one of these for the *Planet*,” Clark commented.

Lois shook her head, “Nyahh, I like our cranky old elevator better: it has personality!”

Simultaneously, laughter escaped from their lips and the final vestiges of resentment and anger vanished.

The elevator doors opened onto an extravagantly appointed foyer, filled with priceless Renaissance art from such masters as Donatello, Botticelli and Vasari. Clark noted as well works of several lesser-known painters who perfected their artisan's craft in the renowned city-state of Florence during the time of Da Vinci. He hoped the Luthors' were displaying excellent reproductions - not originals. The insurance premiums on a single painting would easily cover his and Lois' salary for a year.

A tall, solemn man with slightly stooped shoulders, gray hair, and a cultured British accent showed them into what Clark guessed was the 'living room'. It was perfectly decorated in rich, deep shades of scarlet with touches of gold. Hanging on the walls were several paintings, and flanking the massive bookshelf groaning with leather-bound first editions were display cases of ancient swords. If he remembered correctly, one was a wicked looking *katana*. They were characterized by their distinctive appearance: a curved, single-edged blade with a circular or squared guard and long grip to accommodate two hands. Such a weapon was used by the *Samurai* of feudal Japan in close combat.

Standing up from where she was sitting on a large couch covered with rich red damask, Arianna welcomed them into her home. "Mr. Kent and Miss Lane, please make yourselves comfortable. Can Nigel bring some refreshments? I took the liberty of asking our chef to bake some delightful blueberry scones with clotted cream this morning. We also have an excellent selection of British teas."

Clark smiled and said, "Thank you; Earl Grey with a teaspoon of honey."

Lois said, "Afternoon Ceylon, with sweet and low - if you have it."

Arianna nodded to Nigel who disappeared through a door.

"Your home décor is not what I expected," Clark said, trying to get the conversation started.

"Mr. Kent, my husband prefers this room; it suits his personality, but not mine. Now that we have all met, let's go someplace where we can be more relaxed." She walked through a door and down a corridor. The room they entered was as calming as the previous space was jarring. The large open living area was separated by specific furniture arrangements. Everything was tied together by the subdued palette of warm grays and lavenders, accented with butter yellows. On the sofa table directly behind where Arianna sat was a large mauve vase filled with fresh-cut yellow and white roses, their fragile scent filling the room.

"This is lovely!" Lois exclaimed.

"Thank you. I'm pleased my sitting room meets with your approval, Miss Lane. As you can see, my husband and I are attracted by very different things. He enjoys putting people on their guard, while I choose that any guest who enters my home should be set at their ease. The interior decorator used the reflective hues of the surrounding city buildings at dusk as the inspiration for the color palette. Asian antiques and art which I picked from my travels to that continent enhance the soothing mood."

Before Arianna could say any more, Nigel arrived with the silver tea service. He handed around steaming cups of tea, bowed, and departed the room as noiselessly as he had entered.

Taking the delicate china cup in her hand, Arianna sipped it, smiled and said, "Ah, now let us begin, shall we?"

Lois started with her much-desired first question, "Mrs. Luthor, before marrying Mr. Luthor you had a thriving psychiatric practice in Boston. Has it been easy giving up the profession you worked so hard to build?"

Arianna put the cup down, thought for a moment and said, "If you met the man you wanted to spend the rest of your life with, would giving up a career matter as long as you were together?"

"I'm the one asking the question," Lois responded in a sweet tone. She was determined to get her subject to answer. No way was this going to be a puff piece.

But Mrs. Luthor was adept at playing this game and responded with a slow smile. "Oh, come now, we are both career women. Isn't it a sacrifice to relinquish a cherished goal? Being a psychiatrist was something important to me, but my husband needed me by his side. It was a simple decision, really. Someday, if you are fortunate and have found the right man to share your life with, the same choice might come your way."

Clark, sensing the interview was getting out of control before it began, interrupted Lois before she could reply and said, "Our readers are curious about what encouraged you to leave England behind and move to America."

"There were a number of opportunities here. Life in London did not turn out as I planned. When my mentor, Dr. Julian Tarnower, offered me a chance to practice with him in Boston, I decided to accept. We managed to accomplish quite a bit of good, helping several patients handle or overcome their disorders. Although I must say, some of the cases were quite challenging."

The interview continued in much the same manner. Lois asked supplemental questions, and some Arianna answered with refreshing candor, while others she pushed aside or redirected. It took all of Clark's charm and tact to draw her out and keep the interview informative and entertaining.

Before any of them realized it, the sixty minutes she had granted them had elapsed.

"Mrs. Luthor, this has been a candid interview, and my partner and I appreciate the opportunity very much," Clark said.

"Yes, it was eye-opening," Lois said. "I just have one final question: what led you on the path to being such generous philanthropists? I believe everything started with the sale of a few Picassos to help finance major changes in some of the city's orphanages?"

Arianna smiled; obviously the question had pleased her. "You remember that? It had to have been three years ago at least."

"More like two and a half. It was the day of the blizzard that paralyzed the city. I was at Idlewild Airport, you and your husband were being trailed by paparazzi, and the announcement had not been made official yet..."

"Somehow our plans had been leaked to the *Metropolis Star*. Yes, Miss Lane, the incident does come to mind. Fortunately, Lex and I were able to make the sale without interference and those poor unfortunate children reaped the benefits. Happily, we did not suffer the inconvenience many travelers had to endure that day." Arianna smiled, as if asking forgiveness for not being troubled.

"Inconvenience!" Lois thought angrily. "Inconveniences like no food, heat and sanitary conditions that were frightening. It was more than a day!" But her professional side won out and she managed to keep silent.

Clark and Idlewild Airport.

Why did his name unexpectedly pop into her head? A memory of him wearing gray pants and shirt, with his hair was styled differently, flashed in her mind's eye. Was he at the airport? No. The snow had effectively shut off all access to and from the airport. By the end of those cold, miserable days, she knew the faces of most of her fellow stranded travelers. Clark's handsome visage - even two and a half years later - would have stood out. Something else came into her mind, but just as quickly, it vanished.

Arianna's voice broke into her musings. "In any case, Miss Lane, you could say that was the start of our charitable efforts, which have increased considerably since then." She made a show of looking at her watch, stood, and shook both their hands. "It has been a very great pleasure; I can't remember the last time an interview flew by so quickly." She turned to Clark and presented him with her most sincere smile. "Mr. Kent, your method of

interviewing is a breath of fresh air. The world of print journalism is the richer for having such a considerate member in their ranks. After enduring newspaper hacks like Linda King, it is refreshing to have a conversation with a gentleman.” She turned to Lois and said in the sweetest manner possible, “Miss Lane, you could learn a great deal from your colleague. Lex and I would have gladly granted an interview together long ago, but he appreciates subtlety, which your writing sadly lacks. Perhaps someday we shall get together... as long as Mr. Kent is your partner. May you both have a pleasant day. Nigel will show you out.” With those words, Arianna exited the room.

Lois’ jaw dropped in shock, then closed with an audible click.

“Imagine the nerve of that... that woman, telling me how to write an article!”

Clark had listened to her rail from the time they stepped onto the elevator until they entered the lobby. He was about to tell her to simmer down when her babble abruptly ceased, and she grabbed his arm and pulled him over to a magazine kiosk.

She hissed, “It’s Gregory Daae! What’s he doing here? Especially since Lex is out of the building. I can’t envision someone like him talking to an underling.”

Her partner shrugged, “Probably visiting LNN. After all, this is LexCorp headquarters.”

“Shows how much you know, Clark. LNN’s main office recently moved out of this building and they are now located ten blocks away.” Her voice fell silent as they both watched Daae enter the penthouse express elevator without checking in at the security desk.

“Well, look at that, trouble in paradise? Why are you seeing Arianna when Lex isn’t around?” Lois said with a smirk.

“How does anyone jump from Daae visiting to him having an affair with Arianna?” he asked in a whisper.

“Easy. He’s having an affair with Arianna,” his partner answered him with authority.

“That is the trouble with you: a highly suspicious nature,” Clark said playfully, shaking his head.

“Yeah, well, that ‘suspicious nature’ has netted me...”

“...two Kerth awards.” he finished her oft-repeated quote with an exaggerated sigh.

“No, buster! *Three!* Now don’t you forget it!” Lois fired back, sensing the humor in Clark’s words.

He shrugged again; the banter would have almost been comical if the subject were not so serious. Once Daae had vanished into the elevator, they exited the lobby into a dazzlingly bright spring morning.

Back at the *Planet*, they compared their rough notes on the interview, each merging their writing styles on the article to make a complete whole. The entire bullpen watched as the partners traded comments on the story with energy and practiced ease. It was enjoyable to watch. Suddenly, Lois’ phone rang and she answered quickly.

“Lane! How’s about lunch? It’s been a long time.”

“Bobby! What’s the problem? All the other reporters with money for food have run dry?”

“Hey, is that any way to talk to your favorite snitch? Let’s get together, at your uncle’s place. Today?”

She examined the Arianna Luthor interview notes, looked over at her partner, and noticed his desk was empty. “Perfect, she thought, “Lana must have swooped in and bagged him for lunch... again. Oh well, we are at a good place and I could use a decent salad. Those blueberry scones were delicious, but that was hours ago.”

“Yeah, Bobby, it has been a while. Give me twenty minutes.”

Not long afterwards, Lois found herself at Café Americana

having lunch with Bobby Bigmouth, who extolled the merits of her partner between bites of fish. “Kent’s a stand-up guy. You couldn’t do better for a partner.”

“A partner on a permanent basis is something I don’t want to deal with. Eduardo is the only one I could tolerate and since he’s in Europe on assignment for Perry, Kansas the rookie has been dumped on me,” Lois stated flatly, but her tone was not one of complaint.

“Yeah, but keep an open mind. I’ve been reading the stuff youse two have been writing. Da rookie has got style!”

“How would you know that?” Lois asked with a raised eyebrow. “I thought you only read the Food Section.”

“Hey, Lois, didn’t I tell ya? The *Daily Planet* is my favorite newspaper! The entire thing is good reading. Besides, I gave him a couple of tips. He paid for ‘em by poppin’ for pizza!”

She gestured to the meal in front of him, “Pizza! This tequila and lime catfish lunch is better than pizza!”

“Yeah, but this is gourmet pizza! He refuses to tell me which restaurant in Metropolis he gets it from. But the crust is homemade. For that kinda meal, I’d spill my gut to the *Metropolis Star*... and I hate that rag!”

“But we have an arrangement: if the material is really big, I get first crack at it.”

He took a savage bite of fish, chewed for so long Lois was about to scream from impatience, and then he said, “Uh, there’s been a slight modification to our deal: I give tips to you and *sometimes* Kent. Anybody else has to pay double. However... if there was a serious partnership, youse guys wouldn’t have ta share me...”

Lois looked up from her plate and glared at him. “Buster, you are getting this lunch because I owe you big-time. Don’t push it.”

Bobby glared back, indicating he was not afraid of Mad Dog Lane, and then chuckled, “See, da’s what I like about Kent, he’s got a sense of humor!”

She rolled her eyes heavenward and dug into the chilled asparagus salad. If Kansas had gotten to Bobby, then maybe, just maybe, he might be the ‘temporary’ partner for her.

As Lois made her way through the crowded streets of midtown back to the office, Bobby’s words echoed mentally on a continuous loop. Much as she was loath to admit it, having Kansas lead up the interview this morning made perfectly good sense. Arianna probably would have ended the session early if Lois had handled the interview in her usual take-no-prisoners style. Sometimes honey was much more attractive than vinegar. She also had to admit her anger after the White Orchid Ball was more because he landed the meeting with Arianna by using diplomacy and not a battering ram.

Her behavior at the White Orchid Ball had been aggressive and downright rude. She should have known better than to speak to Arianna in such a manner, especially on her own home ground. Arianna, a woman surrounded by paparazzi when in public, had no problem with setting straight a reporter who did not respect her. Lois didn’t like admitting it to herself, but there it was. Clark would probably have gotten the same result if he hadn’t miraculously come up with a mutual acquaintance to talk about. Once Arianna became comfortable with him, *she* suggested separate interviews. That was something Lois should have thought of, as it was probably the best solution to the scheduling problem a busy couple like the Luthors would have. She could have convinced Perry to hold the story for at least a week, until they had managed to interview Lex, and then merged the two discussions into one article.

Looking back, she vividly remembered that Claude employed flattery and thinly veiled backdoor tactics to get what he wanted. In this case in particular, and with life in general, Clark did neither. Sadly, Lois at the time did not permit little things like facts

to get in the way of her anger. Her behavior towards him had been shallow and unkind. She admitted begrudgingly that it had been fun interviewing Arianna together. Kansas' gentle Midwestern charm had put the reserved British woman at ease long enough for both of them to ask a few tough questions without upsetting her. Well, at least Clark didn't upset her. Who knows, maybe there might be something to this partnership after all... on a limited basis. These were the myriad of thoughts she seriously considered while boarding the elevator.

Even before Lois exited the elevator she could hear loud voices through the car doors. When they snapped open she stepped into a scene of controlled chaos. The sounds emanating from the newsroom floor seemed more like an animal howling in dismay than voices. Several members of the *Planet's* fledgling IT department were sitting at the reporters' desks working on the computers – obviously in a state of panic. The monitors did not display text, or even the *Planet's* logo, just long lines of green letters scrolling vertically down the screen. Apparently, from the snatches of conversations she heard, *all* of the computers in the building had been rendered useless.

One guy, whose name Lois remembered Isaac, said with his voice rising above the fray, "We should have listened to him and installed that virus-killer program."

"Maybe Mr. Olsen will listen to him *now*," Jack snarled.

"What's the point of hiring the best computer programmer in the business, if you won't follow through on his recommendations?" The young man was just sitting down at her desk and looking intensely at the computer monitor.

As Lois stepped to the railing she was worried. If the crisis was so bad that IT had to pull Jack into the fray, they were in deep trouble. She looked down to see him at her desk, typing intensely.

"Jack! What's going on? What's that alphabet soup crawling on the monitors?" Lois shouted as she ran down the ramp. "My story had better not be gone!"

Jack looked up, with a harassed expression on his young face. "The slang term is 'hex characters' and whenever they appear on a monitor screen that's not good. No, I managed to save all the work from this morning. But please tell me all your story files were saved on a floppy disk!" Jack said without looking at her.

Her voice dropped to a whisper, "Of course, I save everything! After the fiasco with Claude all of my files are backed up daily."

He spared her a quick glance, "Good, 'cause this particular virus is really nasty."

"Virus?" Lois said, frowning, "what virus?"

Just then the elevator doors opened, Lois wouldn't have paid any attention, but she heard Isaac say, "Finally, he's here!" She turned to see a medium-built, athletic man in his late thirties walking down the ramp with almost military precision. He moved towards Lois and Jack, nodded to her, and placed a reassuring hand on Jack's shoulder, and said, "Thanks, son, let me take things from here."

Lois watched with shock and surprise as the youngster took a deep breath in relief, pushed back from the desk, relinquished the chair, and said in a respectful tone he only used around Perry, "It's all yours, sir."

"Sir?" she thought. "Who *is* this guy?"

The gentleman was wearing jeans, a definite no-no for Perry; they were not allowed on the news floor. He must have been called in from outside. She stepped back as other techs surrounded her desk. The newcomer spoke, and his voice was calm and reassuring, almost like a surgeon talking to anxious parents before entering an operating room.

"I take it you went through the usual protocols?" He turned and, searching the IT staff, fixed his eyes on Isaac.

"Yeah, we all did," Isaac said from behind Lois. The chaotic atmosphere had settled down, and all attention was now firmly

focused on the technician sitting at Lois' desk. At that moment, Perry barreled over and said, "Great shades of the King! What are you guys doing, standing around? We've got a paper to get out and no computers to do it! Who is this guy?"

The technician stood up and said, "I apologize for being so late getting here, Mr. White. I'm Ken Janney, the new head of the IT department. Mr. Olsen hired me a week ago, but I wasn't supposed to start until next Monday. I did stop in earlier this week and sent over some recommendations which hopefully we will follow through on very shortly. But currently the *Daily Planet's* computer network is under attack from the AnnaK virus. It's a pretty nasty customer and will take some extensive steps to correct."

Perry looked about ready to shout, but remembering his blood pressure, only said suspiciously, "What kind of steps?"

"That would necessitate taking the server off of the network to prevent contamination and/or clean up."

Frowning, Perry said, "We have an evening edition to get out as well as the morning edition."

"I am sorry, Mr. White, but there's more unwelcome news. This virus will also require the techs to deal with each contaminated PC. It will also call into question the integrity of the files on the devices which is prompting the query about floppy backup."

Perry threw his arms up in surrender and said, "Hell of a way to run a railroad. Ok, Mr. Janney, tell me what you need, and I'll make sure you get it."

"Good, 'cause this is going to take the rest of the day to fix. Even Mr. Olsen is helping, which only makes sense, since he designed the system. Don't worry about the evening edition; there are at least ten computers in the building that are freestanding. There's also a couple of computers in my office that aren't hooked up to the internet, so they weren't affected." Ken turned back to Lois' monitor, checked something, then turned around and spoke with the technicians. "Ok, guys, once I isolate the problem, your tasks will be working to decontaminate each computer, individually. Once I work out the protocol on this machine, I'll let you know the process that you will follow. In the meantime, bring those two computers from my office and at least two more uninfected ones and set them up in the conference room." There was a murmur of assents and the techs scattered to their tasks.

Lois needed someplace to work on the remains of the interview. After looking down the hall in the smaller conference room and seeing that the sports department had taken over, she quickly came to the realization that something different had to be done. Not allowing herself time to reconsider, she walked over to Clark's desk and saw him banging furiously away... on a typewriter of all things! She said, "It's about time you came back. What happened?"

He looked up, his expression one of confusion, and then said, "Oh, I had a craving for a mocha latte with a double shot of espresso, so I went to the Java Perk. As I was coming back a traffic accident took place only a block away. Some guy got the passengers out of the vehicle before it exploded. I'm writing up the account for the evening edition right now."

"That's good. But compared to what we are working on, that's bread and butter stuff. Come on, Kansas, after all the preparation to get this interview we might as well work on it and give it a little style! Since the IT department is trying to fix our computers and the servers, we can work with less distractions on the computer at my place. Are you game?"

Clark swallowed and nodded, "Sure, Lois, whatever you say."

"Great! As soon as you finish writing up that article, pack up your notes!" She turned back to him and said, "Kent, if you keep drinking lattes with all that sugar and fat, those gorgeous new suits aren't going to look so good."

He smiled, hearing the banter under the bark, “Life is short, partner, gotta live it up!”

“That word! That word!” she thought, while throwing items into her briefcase.

As they walked out of the bullpen and began climbing the ramp, she asked him. “Don’t you have to contact Lana or something? She always likes to know where you are.”

When they reached the elevator, Clark sighed heavily, “Honestly, Lois, she’s not like that. We are both pursuing our respective careers, which means spending time with work colleagues.” For the sake of the newfound peace between them, he decided not to pursue that particular line of conversation.

It only took a few minutes for Lois to drive them to her apartment building which was situated on a quiet tree-lined street just twenty minutes away.

Once the front door was closed and securely locked behind them, she became acutely aware of Clark’s non-threatening, but extremely masculine presence. Suddenly, her spacious one-bedroom apartment shrunk to the size of a small studio. “Oh, stop!” A tiny voice yelled in her mind, “It’s just Kansas, we are here to work.”

Clark took off his jacket and sat down on her soft, comfortable lemon-yellow couch. Searching for something to say to fill the suddenly awkward silence, he said, “Your apartment is well-decorated. I... I like the way your work area is separate from the rest of the living room. Being in an ‘L’ shape makes that possible.”

Lois had finished hanging up her coat, and she nodded and said, “Yeah, the desk, chair and bookshelf are all about work. But my couch? Now that’s to relax on. Come on, we still need to finish merging our separate notes into one.” She started pulling papers from her briefcase. “This is a good amount of material to shape into an article. Despite being coy in some places, Arianna was really quite forthcoming with a lot of her answers.”

Before long they found themselves deep in the midst of their work. Clark stood up to stretch and then looked over Lois’ shoulder and noticed that she was typing about Daae coming to visit when Lex was not around.

“We don’t know why Daae was there. It’s a fact that can’t be included in this article.”

“Why not? He was in the lobby and we both saw him enter the private penthouse elevator without checking in with the guards.”

“Come on, Lois, that would lead to irresponsible speculation! When did we start writing like reporters for the *Metropolis Star*?”

She fought the smile that threatened to spread across her lips. “Aha! Arianna got to you.”

“No. She didn’t get to me, and just because they are public figures does not mean we speak about their friendship as if they have something to hide. Everyone, even those two, deserves privacy. *If they’re having an affair, it’ll surface soon enough.* Leave the gossip stuff to Peggy Becker. Besides, Catherine would never ‘speculate’; that leads to lawsuits. We need to stick with the subject and nothing more.”

Lois cocked her eyebrow and was about to speak, then thought better of it. Apparently, the rookie had toughness after all. “Yeah, you’re right, I’m not Linda King.” Quickly, the offending lines were removed. “Look, we’ve been working for a while. I’ll make us some tea and sandwiches. Does tuna fish salad on Italian bread interest those Midwestern taste buds?”

“Tuna fish salad is fine. What kind of tea?” he asked cautiously.

“A surprise. But don’t worry; it won’t be anything like what we have at the office. Not as good as what we had this morning, though.”

He feigned a look of profound relief, “Thanks! Considering

we were drinking tea at the Luthors’, that particular brand of Earl Grey was disappointing. I’ve had better at shops in London.”

Minutes later, Lois handed him a sturdy mug of tea. He accepted it gratefully and inhaled the delicate aroma and then took a gentle sip. Sweet notes of flavors; two he identified. Peach balanced with the taste of crisp champagne danced merrily over his tongue.

“This is delicious! What is it?”

Lois’ voice carried in from the kitchen, “It’s a blend of jasmine, peach and champagne teas. A small specialty shop here in Metropolis makes it. As much as I like coffee, after a grueling day at the bullpen, this is better than coffee, and not as expensive – or addictive – as wine.”

Clark blew gently over the cup and then slowly inhaled the wispy vapors of steam and exhaled deeply. “Ms. Lane, I have sipped tea all over the world and this is one of the best to ever hit my Midwestern taste buds.”

She smiled and chirped, “Good, I’m glad you like it! The sandwiches will be done in a minute.” She walked back to the kitchen and began assembling the ingredients, taking out Italian cibatta bread, fresh dill, parsley, mayonnaise, lettuce, one hard-boiled egg, red cabbage, and tomatoes from the fridge.

“Can I give you a hand?” he called out.

“No, keep writing!” She grew silent while blending the colorful and fragrant ingredients into a yellow earthenware mixing bowl. After typing a paragraph, Clark glanced up to see her expertly slice the hard, crusty bread and place it into the oven to be toasted. Surprisingly, Mad Dog Lane was no stranger in the kitchen.

Something furry rubbed against his leg, scaring him witless. He clamped down hard on his instinctive desire to fly straight into the air.

“Yikes!”

“What’s wrong?” Lois yelled from the kitchen.

“Meow!” came a very distinct noise from the floor. It was a large gray and white cat with beautiful blue eyes - blue eyes that were staring at Clark with equal parts curiosity and intense displeasure.

“*What is that?*” Clark said, trying to regain his composure.

“Oh, you’ve met Lady P.” Lois tried, but failed miserably, to hide her amusement.

“What’s a Lady P and why is she looking at me like that?”

“Her full name is Lady Plushbottom. It’s simple; you’re parked on her favorite spot.”

Clark carefully moved over to the other side of the couch and let the ‘plushy’ feline jump into her ‘spot’.

“All the time we’ve worked together, you never mentioned having a cat. There aren’t even pictures of her on your desk.”

Lois removed the bread from the oven, prepared the sandwiches, and then plated them. She walked in from the kitchen and in each hand was a plate holding the most magnificent tuna sandwiches he had ever seen. “Well, I don’t have a boyfriend who sticks a large picture of himself on my desk.”

Clark ducked his head and took another sip of tea, “Point taken.”

Lois, deciding to avoid conversation about Lana, continued, “Keeping my work life separate from my home life is something of an art form. The practice has come in very handy at times. Speaking of which, with the exception of Lana and your roommate Pete, I never hear you talk about a home life.”

“Oh, well, yeah.” Clark fidgeted on the sofa. “My Dad and Mom died when I was young. I’m adopted and an only child. There’s my parents’ close friends, Wayne and Mary Irig, who I consider my uncle and aunt, but they live in Kansas and I don’t get to see them as much as I’d like, so...” His voice trailed off.

Lois suddenly felt equal parts shame and compassion for the man before her. True, her family sometimes gave her plenty of

grief, but she did not dare contemplate life without them. In an attempt to lighten the mood, she flipped her long hair over her shoulder and said in a gentle voice, “Kansas, that sandwich was meant to be eaten, not stared at!”

He picked up the sandwich and bit into the warm, crusty bread, his eyes swirling in utter delight. A mélange of different flavors and textures caressed his taste buds: mayonnaise, Italian flathead parsley, tomatoes, a hint of red cabbage, crunchy bits of carrots, fresh dill, shredded boiled eggs, and of course tuna finished the ensemble.

Between bites, he said, “Yum! This is great! Where did you learn to create such a sandwich?”

“College. It’s easier to eat a sandwich than make a complete meal, especially while studying for finals.” She daintily wiped her mouth with a napkin and said, “Eat fast, Kansas, we’ve got work to do.”

Within an hour the interview article with Arianna Carlin-Luthor was complete. The time seemed to have flown by swiftly. Lois found it hard to imagine that what they were doing was actually work. It had been cool to bounce ideas and phrases off each other. Working with him like this was even better than working with Eduardo, if that were possible. It was close to six o’clock and she about to ask him if he wanted to go over plans for future assignments together when Clark’s cell phone rang.

Lois got up and removed the remains of their meal. Lady Plushbottom waddled behind, meowing at the top of her furry little lungs, begging for tuna leftovers.

He could hear Lana over the phone, her voice ringing with excitement. “Clark!” Lana gasped.

Worried that something had gone terribly wrong, he restrained himself from flying out the window. “Lana, honey, what is it?”

“Oh, the best news possible! Meet me at the employee’s entrance to the museum. I’m really hungry and I have a lot to tell you about today!”

“Sure, I’ll be there in twenty minutes.” He hung up the phone and turned to Lois.

“Listen, can we call it quits for now? Lana doesn’t have a car and it’s after dinnertime, so she’s probably hungry.”

She managed to hide most of the annoyance from her voice with a tiny smile. “Oh, yeah, sure. Go ahead, get Lana. See you tomorrow at the bullpen.”

Clark picked up his jacket, patted Lady Plushbottom on her head and departed. As he walked down the hallway he couldn’t help but notice there was an odd note in Lois’ tone, something like regret, but he couldn’t concern himself with that now.

Two hours later, Clark and Lana were walking home from dinner at *Callard’s* and she was still excitedly telling him about her plans. “This is *such* an opportunity. Daddy could have sent anyone, but I’m the one he trusts! Acquiring the Napoleon camp chair for the museum is going to firmly establish my reputation in certain circles.”

After giving her hand a tiny squeeze, Clark said, “I’m really proud of you. This is without a doubt something to celebrate! Pete will be glad to hear about it as well.”

Lana was thoughtful when she said, “Yes, this is wonderful! Imagine, three friends from the insignificant town of Smallville, Kansas doing so well!”

Clark said, “We have come a long way since then, haven’t we? But Smallville is hardly insignificant; after all it is the county seat!”

She let the humorous comment pass and said, “Absolutely! There is so much more for all of us to do! Pete as a surgeon and eventually you shall be writing award-winning articles for the *Planet*. Who knows, someday you might make the transition to broadcast news.”

“Lana,” he said gently, “I’m a *print* journalist. Established newspapers like the *Daily Planet* and the *Washington Post* provide substance: who, what and why. Broadcast news is fine, but there’s only so much the public can learn from a sixty-second sound bite.”

It was the old argument, set on new grounds. A short silence followed as they walked down the quiet street. She considered the *Daily Planet* to be a stepping stone in his career, but no more. In her mind, working for network television, with all its financial perks, was where he belonged. Whereas he wanted to make her understand that the *Planet* was where he wanted... no, *needed* to be.

Finally, they reached Lana’s apartment building, the same one where her friend Chloe was living. Shortly after Lana’s arrival in Metropolis, a spacious L-shaped studio had become available, and in typical Lana fashion, she jumped on the opportunity to live there rather than share a place with her friend. Clark appreciated the neighborhood’s brightly lit streets and dignified old brownstones. But despite the pleasantness of the surroundings and the companionable way they walked together, he sensed something was on Lana’s mind. She was weighing every word before speaking.

She looked up at him, her knowing blue eyes piecing into his. “Clark... you were right about us having separate apartments. Lately our lives have become so hectic! You’re working such crazy hours at the newspaper. I’m trying to build and establish a reputation at the museum, tracking down bits of history...” She hesitated, then said, “Will my being so far away bother you?”

He looked at her oddly, his brown eyes questioning her. “Since when has distance ever mattered?”

“Oh, yes, that’s right,” the tone of her voice was curiously flat, “distance doesn’t mean anything to a man who can fly.”

Clark smiled, trying to lighten the somber mood that had overtaken them, “That’s right; if you need me, I’m just a call away.” He brightened and said, “Hey, I’ll take time off work and fly you to the airport. We can spend a little more time together...”

She hesitated briefly, and then spoke. “That... that won’t be necessary, Clark. I’m leaving from the museum with some of the board members, on Monday afternoon, and we’re all flying to Zurich together. Why don’t we spend the weekend with my parents? We... we can even go to the baseball game. Ah, that is if you can get tickets and Pete doesn’t want to go?”

Clark could sense Lana’s desire to leave him and start making preparations for the trip. Her apparent excitement for the job ahead outweighed her wish to be with him. Still, he was happy that she was a good sport and would go to a game, as it would make her departure for Europe easier on both of them. “I wasn’t planning on going to the game, but I can get tickets from one of the sportswriters.”

“So are we on for the weekend? After that, I have a ton of packing to do. Please, say you understand?” She looked up, blinking her large blue eyes at him.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” He worked hard to hide his disappointment. All during dinner he wanted to tell her all about his interview with Arianna. Now, that seemed unimportant in comparison with her big plans.

Lana stood on tiptoe and placed her mouth firmly on his. The kiss was sweet and smooth; her tongue playfully teased his, leaving Clark feeling sad to see Lana depart. As she climbed the stairs, she said in a firm voice, loud enough only for him to hear, “Now remember: while I’m gone, keep away from flying! See you on Saturday!”

“Yes, Lana, good-night,” he said. Then he walked down the street, feeling an odd mixture of relief and sadness.

Upon arriving at home, he was surprised to find Pete sitting on the couch watching the evening news and waiting for him. Normally his roommate should have been pulling a twelve-hour

shift at the hospital.

“Great! I thought you would never get home. Look, are you still serious about finding an apartment?”

“Yeah. What’s up?”

“Well, sport, this is your lucky day! Two of the residents are looking to move out of their place on Clinton Street. I told Skip you were looking. Do you want to see it tonight? There’s bound to be a lot of applicants. It’s about a fifteen-block walk to the *Daily Planet*. Interested?”

Excited at the prospect of finding his own home, Clark answered, “Sure, let me change and we can go.” Clark took off his sports coat, went into his room, and emerged seconds later, wearing jeans and a dark blue polo shirt.

Pete shook his head in bewilderment. “No matter how long I know you, that’s one trick I’ll never get used to. Come on.”

After a quick cab ride, they came to Clinton Street. In the earlier part of the century, the district had been home to shipping warehouses and small industries, and now the neighborhood was either on the way up or down, depending on the realtor’s perspective. As they climbed out of the black and yellow cab, Clark noticed, in the darkness, laundry hanging out of someone’s apartment. He quietly shuddered and turned to Pete. “I thought we were friends. *This* is your idea of me having a ‘lucky’ day?”

The big man laughed softly, “Don’t let the laundry fool you, Kevin and Skip were running behind schedule and they thought this was quicker than wasting time at the local laundromat. Come on, the place is great.”

“If it’s so great, why are they leaving?” Clark asked, still apprehensive.

“Oh, Kevin’s moving back to San Francisco and Skip found a one-bedroom apartment closer to the hospital.”

Pete opened the door and they entered a large, barren corridor painted dark green that led to an elevator. Fortunately, the car was there, and they rode it to the fourth floor. They stepped out to another wide corridor. On one side was another hallway which led to a short flight of stairs up a wide raised platform. They climbed the stairs and Pete knocked loudly on the door.

A young man in his mid-twenties with curly brown hair and a quiet smile opened and beckoned them inside. “Man, this is great, glad you could make it,” he said, speaking to Pete. “You must be Clark. Name’s Skip McLaurin. The guy crashed on the pullout is my soon-to-be ex-roomie, Kevin DeLuca.”

“That’s DOCTOR DeLuca, peasant,” said a gravelly voice good-naturedly from under a pile of blankets.

“Get your lazy butt up and meet the prospective new tenant,” Skip responded in kind.

They stepped down a short flight of wide wooden steps to enter a large sunken living room, in the middle of which was a pullout bed and a small TV set. The young men exchanged introductions all around, and then Skip gave them a guided tour. Clark carefully looked past the bachelor pad dust and general disorderliness of the apartment’s occupants to its potential underneath. The wooden floors were in decent condition, but the walls needed paint, preferably a more dramatic color than the ugly industrial dark gray that was currently there.

The simple kitchen was serviceable, but cried out for a new stove and fridge, and the deep, well-placed cabinets only needed to be sanded and repainted. But the outstanding jewel was the island: it provided plenty of room to prep food or simply pull up a stool to eat a snack. Large open shelves and a cutlery drawer offered both function and style. It was built of solid maple with every attention to detail, from the distressed black finish, to features such as soft-close drawers, towel handles and cabinet doors. The thick oak top showed some signs of use, which only gave it that much more character. For an adventurous cook like himself, this kitchen, once it was renovated, would serve as a place for him to whip up a few culinary creations.

The exposed brick wall that separated the sleeping alcove from the living room could be a focal point to display his many pieces of art. He measured the area with his eyes and realized it could easily accommodate a king-sized bed, yet there was still enough room for the rest of his bedroom furniture. The surprisingly roomy bathroom with a separate tub, shower and small linen closet was past the sleeping alcove.

But what really caught Clark’s attention was the roomy balcony. He studiously avoided asking about the laundry stretched from the balcony to the building across the way. He could bring his parents’ old porch set and enjoy the calm of an evening. Despite being on the edge of downtown Metropolis, it was relatively quiet.

It also allowed him perfect access to and from the sky without being seen.

When he came back into the apartment and noticed the black wrought iron circular staircase in the bedroom he asked, “Where does that lead?”

Kevin gave a small shrug and said, “Oh, a loft. It can be used as a storage space or a small office. Pete tells me you’re a reporter, so consider it a writer’s retreat.”

Clark nodded thoughtfully. The building was old, it’s location a little iffy, yet the apartment itself had definite potential and appeal.

“How much is the rent?”

Skip said, “We pay seven hundred and fifty bucks a month.”

Clark blinked in surprise, looked at Skip and Kevin, and blurted out, “Pardon me, seven hundred and fifty dollars in rent from each of you? That makes the total fifteen hundred, far too rich for my blood.”

“No way! That’s the total rent! Man, this location is close to the downtown area, and when the transit folks finally finish the Nuber Avenue Station, you can hop the train and be at work in less than ten minutes,” Kevin said.

“Wow, I wonder how much the landlord’s going to charge *me*,” Clark thought.

Skip said, “One of the reasons why we didn’t do anything with the place is because the old landlord never did much with the building. Heat was a problem and so was getting basic services. But since Mr. Wrenn bought the building, we’ve seen a lot of improvements. Too bad, ‘cause I would have stayed, even though I’d have to foot the bill myself. But when the opportunity came to get a great spot closer to the hospital, I couldn’t pass it up.”

Kevin gave a sly grin and said, “Hey, if you’re interested, I’ll put in a good word for you. Better hurry; the moving truck is coming in a few days. There are bound to be a lot of folks at the hospital who’ll want this place.”

“Sounds fair. Give me your phone number and I’ll call you tomorrow morning.” Clark said.

Clark and Pete said their farewells. Soon they found themselves back on the sidewalk. It was such a gentle spring evening that they decided to walk home.

“So? Is this the place?” his friend asked.

“Honestly, Pete, the past six months have been great, but it’s time for me to have my own apartment. The possibilities are good, especially the balcony and the space for a small office. Much as I like the way Lois has her office set up in the living room, I prefer a separate area for an office and the loft fits the bill. The only thing that’ll get in my way is how much Mr. Wrenn will charge for rent. What with paying for some farm expenses and dropping money on my new city wardrobe, I need to keep a watchful eye on my finances.”

His friend nodded his head in agreement, “Yeah, you do have a lot to consider. But with your carpentry skills and other ‘abilities’, fixing that place up should be fairly cheap, especially if you plan on living in Metropolis for a while.”

There was a thoughtful tone in Clark’s voice, “I do, Pete.

This city is becoming my home. More than any other place I've lived in."

"That's good." Pete hesitated for a moment; the reference to Lois' apartment and not Lana's had not been missed by him, but he decided to leave that alone, and said, "Think Lana will like it?"

Clark sighed; in all the excitement of the past hour he had forgotten about Lana. "She's got an important assignment from her father. On Monday she flies to Europe for a few weeks. We're going to spend the weekend together, but it's doubtful there'll be time for her to take a quick tour of the place... if I get it. There will be plenty of time to show her when she gets back."

"Very impressive! She's moving into the big-time world of museum acquisitions. Quite a long way from digging around in trenches looking for ruins. Come to think of it, we all have come a long way this past year."

"Yeah, that's exactly what she said," Clark responded. He couldn't bring himself to reveal to Pete that something felt 'off' about Lana tonight. It wasn't merely the excitement of going to Europe in search of an antique chair, even if it was one that Napoleon sat on. Her mind was detracted, almost as if something or someone else had taken his place. He hoped he was wrong, yet if his instincts were correct, then what?

Meanwhile Lana had spent the next twenty-four hours preparing for the trip: things like understanding the current rate of exchange for the Swiss franc, going to Tech Hi-Fi – a high end electronics store for Swiss adapters that would allow items like her hair-dryer to fit in the wall outlets – not to mention the work visa that the department secretary had managed by some miracle to produce.

That evening she climbed upstairs, weary from all that and doing her job. She closed the door to her apartment and walked over to the small kitchenette to make some tea. There was a great deal on her mind, and she needed some quiet time to think before completing the task of packing.

Gregory Daae.

Lana couldn't get him out of her mind. They had dined at a very upscale French bistro called *Cercle Rouge*. She could hear Gregory's voice speak lovingly in gently accented French of the charming restaurant as he ate his dinner: *Demi-Poulet Bio* - roasted organic chicken, wild mushrooms, cipollini onions, and fava beans. "This restaurant is faithful to traditional French cooking. It also provides the class and comfort I crave while living in Metropolis." She had quietly eaten her meal: *Saumon Sauvage* – pan-roasted wild salmon, spicy couscous, dates, tomatoes, and lemon yogurt, eagerly hanging onto every word.

Spending time with him was a treat for her senses and mind. They had met this morning for breakfast not far from his townhouse. She had dressed carefully, in a simple green pantsuit, not wishing to draw too much attention to herself.

The fluffy white spinach omelets at Michelle Dean's café were simply amazing. Sitting outside in the fresh early-morning air, they had discussed the five rooms or tableaux of the *Age of Napoleon* exhibit. She had brought out her planner as the discussion of the tableaux continued, rapidly taking notes. Lana had lamented that they wanted to do at least two more rooms, but funds and space limited the display. Daae was something of an authority on the former French Emperor and had revealed intimate details of his life Lana was unaware of. She could easily have been content spending the rest of the morning listening to him. In an effort to stretch out their time together, she had eaten very slowly.

Unfortunately, their pleasant meal had eventually reached the coffee stage. Lana had certainly no interest in returning to her cramped office at the museum, but she had needed to end this lovely morning interlude and head to work. On Monday, they would be flying to Zurich. Suddenly, Daae had stared at her and said, "What shall you do after the exhibit is complete? Work on

another historic display?"

Lana had thought for a moment and then said softly, "I don't know..." Her voice had trailed off and then she had revealed something to him even Clark was unaware of. Looking straight into Daae's eyes, she'd said, "A year ago, I would have said teaching French history at a major university or working as some professor's assistant on a dig. Working for my Dad is fine, for now, and still there is so much more for me to learn and do. I'm a field person, and spending at least eight months out of every year digging around old ruins is my passion. Not sitting in an office cataloguing finds from other groups. I want to run my *own* expedition."

Her companion had nodded sagely and gestured with his hands for her to continue.

"Thousands of years ago the Romans marched through Gaul to reach England. They had a large colony in the Burgundy region. The region has been researched, but not enough. Currently no one is working the area. I want to go set up a dig and see what artifacts the Romans left behind."

She'd continued talking, her blue eyes sparkling with barely-contained enthusiasm as she warmed to the subject. He absorbed every word, his thoughts racing. "She has intelligence, passion and most of all, youth," Daae thought, "Lana reminds me of Arianna ten years ago. She fascinates me."

"...maybe when this exhibit work is complete, I'll join an archeological dig in Europe. It'll take time, but I'm confident of building my own reputation. After all, what person or foundation in their right senses would hand over hundreds of thousands of dollars in funding to an unknown beginner?"

"Financial endowments of that nature usually run into the *millions* of dollars. Totally unexpected expenses have a way of rearing their ugly heads," he had responded dryly.

Lana blinked twice, then puffed out her cheeks. "Backers who will cover those 'totally unexpected expenses' are very hard to find. I'll have to be like everyone else: approach a foundation with a well-written proposal and then get in line to wait for an answer."

"The process will take a considerable amount of time," Daae said dubiously.

"True. Nevertheless, one of the advantages of being here working for the museum is that I will be making all the right connections and..." While talking, she had gestured wildly and accidentally spilled tomato juice all over her day planner. She had quickly tried to soak up the spill with a napkin, but the cheap plastic and cardboard notebook had been absolutely spoiled.

"Drat! It'll take hours to transfer all my notes! That is, if I can read the sloppy mess."

"*Cheri*, it should not take too long. I suspect writing swiftly is one of your many talents," he'd said with a soothing voice.

There had been a brief silence between them as Lana tried to decipher the meaning of his words, then Daae had asked if he could call on Lana while she was seeing collectors in Zurich. She had readily agreed and given him the number of the place where she would be staying, the *Hotel Scheuble*, which was located in the old town section of Zurich.

A momentary shadow had seemed to cross his face. Lana had sensed he was not pleased with her accommodations, yet he'd refrained from mentioning it.

Their breakfast date at an end, he had a meeting and she needed to go to work. He dropped her off at the museum and departed, promising to see her at the airport on Monday.

Lana had watched the glossy black limo move into the morning traffic, thinking to herself that after two such exquisite meals, how was she ever going to go back to life at the Metropolis museum, eating lackluster ham sandwiches or a wilted salad for lunch? Poor Clark; nothing he could do quite compared to spending time with Daae. Oh, he could certainly *fly* her to Paris,

but after they got there, with their meager salaries, it was a sure bet they would be pinching their pennies the whole time.

On the other hand, money - and the exquisite little luxuries it could purchase - was never an issue with Gregory.

Later that day, after returning from a meeting with her father, a small package from Belgims, one of Metropolis' most chic upscale boutiques, had been placed on her desk. Eagerly, she'd torn open the package. Inside was a buttery soft, brown croco embossed leather agenda, her name stamped on a small gold plate. A note was tucked inside. Written on creamy vellum stationary with a heavy blue border in a firm, strong hand, it said:

'Zurich awaits and so do I...'

Lana smiled triumphantly. So did she.

Now, hours later, the feeling of triumph returned and not without a sense of nervous anticipation. Lana sat at the tiny wooden kitchen table that also served as her desk and sipped a cup of hot chamomile tea lightly sweetened with honey. She reached into her old black patent leather bag and removed the new agenda. She lovingly rubbed the exquisite rich croco surface and breathed in its smell. The binder was something very classy and luxurious to walk into a meeting with, but it symbolized much more to her. Perhaps this was the beginning of walking into a whole new world? Only time would tell....

Part Eight

It was Sunday afternoon in the Lane's comfortable, contemporary style kitchen. Lois was helping her mother prepare dinner, chopping the potatoes as if she was attempting to destroy them rather than make a side dish.

"What's got you so upset?" Ellen asked.

"I can't believe that guy. We put all this effort and research into the Arianna Luthor interview, and with a phone call, he up and disappears! Mother, that's been his MO since he arrived at the *Planet*. I ask you, what mature adult male behaves like that? I wonder what his story is!"

Ellen studied her daughter carefully and said, "I don't know about the young man, but what's *your* story?"

"Huh? What are you talking about?" Lois said with a puzzled expression.

"Mr. Kent's name has been on your lips whenever we talk or get together. No man has held your attention this way since... Claude."

After a brief silence, Lois responded in icy tones. "Mother, it's not the same thing."

Refusing to concede an inch of ground, Ellen responded, "Oh yes, it is."

Her daughter stopped chopping potatoes and folded her arms in a defensive stance. She refused to look at her mother, but instead studied the wooden floor. Ellen knew perfectly well when her daughter was being evasive, so she took the hint and changed the subject.

"Sam and your sister should be home any minute. Why don't you put the potatoes and a few cloves of garlic in boiling water and mash them? They are too small to be anything else."

She looked at the uneven white blocks and said wistfully, "Aunt Rita could make something out of these..."

"Neither of us is in Rita's class when it comes to cooking!" Ellen responded good-naturedly.

Lois sighed and began speaking again. "Mom, the man irks me. I can't figure him out! One minute he's a professional investigative reporter, and the next he's a puppy dog, hanging on every word that comes out of his obnoxious girlfriend's mouth."

Now it was Ellen's turn to be silent for a moment, and then she spoke. "He has a girlfriend?"

"Yeah," Lois said with a pout. She had poured water into a saucepan and was now mincing three large cloves of garlic.

"Since when does my daughter poach another woman's

fella?"

"Poaching? Mother, I'm not interested in this guy! Besides, he's one of those friendly types that everyone likes."

"Oh no? How can you say that? Every man who ever caught your eye - and I can count them on one hand - always irked and challenged you. That weasel Claude never did. This man Kent is not from Claude's mold. He's caught your eye, even if it's in a small way."

"What about the guys from high school?" her daughter countered quickly, trying to change the subject.

"Didn't I say *men*? Besides, back then you were much too young for a meaningful relationship." Ellen's voice softened, and she said, "Paul, in college, was another story. He had potential until Linda King turned his head." Unspoken between them were Ellen's warnings that she never trusted the traitorous redhead.

Lois groaned as she added minced garlic to the boiling water. "Molly warned me she was up to no good. I was too stubborn and should have listened."

"Now Molly is a good friend! A few years have gone by; consider that water under the bridge, dear heart. Listen, if this Kent fellow is involved with someone, steer clear of him. No one deserves to be hurt the way Linda's betrayal with Paul hurt you." Ellen's face, which Lois could not see, was pinched with irritation, the irritation of a mother whose child has been grievously wronged.

Lois sat down at the kitchen table, and spoke more to herself than to her mother, her voice rising slightly with every word. "Why would a man as intelligent as him want to waste time with a woman who clearly doesn't esteem him? Lana Lang... If she was right for him I would step back and respect his choice. Mother, he's too good for her!"

Ellen put on heavy red oven mitts and opened the oven. When she did the piney scent of rosemary filled the air. She carefully pulled out the lamb roast, basted it and said, "Newsflash: It's not your choice. It's Mr. Kent's."

Her daughter shook her head, refusing to listen, and babbled on. "Here's a perfect example: The White Orchid Ball. Lana was not happy to be left at home; she wanted to come along. Since they are not married, she was not invited! Those tickets were expensive: five hundred dollars apiece. Imagine me insisting on taking you and Daddy!"

"Hmmm. Don't I remember something about taking Mitchell with you?"

"Yeah, but that's different! I have seniority! Besides, I'm not seeing him anymore. Every time we had a date arranged he suddenly got 'ill' and broke it off."

Her mother smiled softly, remembering the wiry young doctor with a shock of brown hair done in a ponytail. Mitchell was a confirmed hypochondriac; neither he nor Lois would have been happy together. As a matter of fact, Ellen had seen him around the hospital. He was now dating a nurse. But she decided that was information her daughter did not need to hear right now. "There seems to be a lot of differences between what you do... er, did, with Mitchell, and what Clark and Lana are allowed to do."

Lois shut her mouth tightly, started chopping the flathead Italian parsley to garnish the mashed potatoes, and refused to talk any further. Why did her mother always have to be... so close to the target? It was infuriating!

Silence reigned in the kitchen while Ellen removed the lamb from the oven and wrapped it in foil, allowing it and the subject of her daughter's love life - or lack thereof - to rest. Lois, deciding she was not going to be outmaneuvered by Ellen's respectful silence, got up and started pulling out plates and silverware to set the table. After completing that task, she sat down again and said with a heavy sigh, "Lady Plushbottom likes him."

"*That* spiky little furball? She doesn't like anyone but you and then only just before dinner!"

“Yeah,” Lois muttered quietly, “tell me about it. Clark was over for one of my tuna sandwiches and we worked on the Arianna Carlin-Luthor interview. Most of the time, Lady P sat near him, purring for all she was worth. What a furry little traitor,” she mumbled.

“Well, if I remember correctly, Lady Plushbottom bit Claude...”

“Yeah, I know. I should have followed her lead and kicked his cologne-drenched butt out of my apartment and life then and there.”

A comfortable silence stretched out in the kitchen as the women went about their tasks, until with a gentle sigh, Ellen finally spoke, “Sweetheart, it’s plain to see there’s more to your feelings for Clark Kent than meets the eye. Unfortunately, he is involved in what sounds like a committed relationship. What if he gets engaged and marries this woman? Can you work with him day after day knowing how you feel about him?”

Defeated, knowing it was impossible to hide anything from Ellen Lane, she said, “Mother, of course I’ll continue to work at the *Daily Planet*! It’s my career! I’m not going to give it up on the off chance that a guy with corn still sprouting out of his ears might marry some social-climbing blonde! After all, I was in the bullpen first!”

Nodding sagely, her mother responded. “Fine, you’ve drawn the proverbial line in the sand. Now comes the hard part, sticking with it.”

“Yeah, well, I doubt if either of us will have to worry about any sand getting on his side.” At that point, they heard the front door open, and Sam and Lucy came in laden with groceries. The conversation ended, but Lois was sure she would discuss the matter again with either her mother or Aunt Rita. She loved her younger sister dearly, but Lucy was at an age where boyfriends were changed as frequently as socks. Besides, in this situation, the counsel of older, wiser minds was required to help maintain her resolve to respect Clark’s relationship with Lana.

After enjoying a pleasant dinner and evening with her family, Lois returned home, and rather than go crazy thinking about the revealing conversation with her mother, wrote out an e-mail to Eduardo.

Eduardo:

Why is the Media Mogul spending so much time in Metropolis? It’s no secret ours is not his favorite city. It can’t be because of the *Age of Napoleon* exhibit that will be opening in a few months? If so, is his interest in Napoleon Bonaparte a hobby an obsession?

Just curious, what is he loaning to the exhibit?

Why weren’t there any discussions, rumored or otherwise, about the limited partnership between DMG and LNN?

Please get back to me ASAP!

Oh yeah, I appreciate the assistance! By the way, when are you coming back to Metropolis?

LL

On Monday morning, Lois awoke determined to put as much personal distance between herself and Clark - Kansas - as possible. Her mother, as much as she hated to admit it, was correct: no one should have to endure the pain she had gone through when Linda stole Paul from her. Not that she had any plans of stealing Clark from Lana. After all, she had principles, even if her former friend had none. Still, she mused, Kent was looking *incredible* these days. The man had obviously spent more than a little money on new clothes and stylish glasses, and had started sporting a decent haircut.

Such were the thoughts that continued to parade through her mind, like the circus entering town, as she sat down at her desk

and quietly sipped her low-fat mocha latte.

“Good morning, Lois.” Clark went over to his desk and took off his jacket. He looked absolutely stunning in a new charcoal suit with a burgundy paisley tie and a shirt so clean and white it hurt her eyes. “How was your weekend?”

Determined to put her new policy into effect, she muttered, trying to sound non-committal, “Fine, spent time with my family,” and turned back to the monitor, pretending to read something of importance.

Clark sat down at his desk and looked over at Lois, his voice colored with concern “Hey, it doesn’t *sound* like it was a great weekend. Anything wrong?”

She looked up and responded tartly, “Wrong? Why would you think anything was wrong?” Trying to change tactics, she asked in a softer tone, “What did you and Lana do this weekend?” She avoided her usual custom of sneeringly emphasizing Lana’s name.

Surprised by her interest, Clark said, “Oh, I had dinner with her and her folks, then she came with me to the baseball game. That pitcher, Roy ‘The Shuttle’ Burns knows how to throw a ball! He almost had a perfect game...”

Lois jumped in and finished his sentence, “Can you imagine that Umpire Russo called an obvious out safe? He ruined that kid’s chances of getting into the Baseball Hall of Fame!”

“Don’t consider the baseball committee members as being narrow-minded. I imagine an asterisk will be put next to his name.”

“Glad you made appropriate use of those tickets, Clark,” Steve grumbled as he passed by Clark’s desk. As the senior sportswriter for the *Daily Planet*, he was clearly disappointed by not taking the tickets himself and watching the history-making game play out.

After acknowledging Steve’s comment, Clark turned his attention back to Lois. “I didn’t know you liked baseball,” Clark said.

“Are you kidding?!” Lois practically squeaked, “I love the game! One of my all-time favorite baseball players from the early twentieth century was the pitcher Christy Mathewson!” Lois’ brown eyes sparkled as she launched into a brief lecture about the legendary sports hero of a bygone era. “He was so well loved and respected that when the other players took to the field, Christy, or ‘Big Six’ as he was called, always came out last because the fans would cheer him so loudly. It didn’t take too long for Mathewson to become the unspoken captain of the Giants. He was even respected by crusty old John McGraw, the Giants’ renowned coach.”

“But one of the main reasons why I respect him is this: one of the journalists to unmask the infamous Black Sox scandal, Hugh Fullerton, consulted Mathewson for information regarding baseball gambling. Fullerton trusted Mathewson for his writing talent and on-the-field knowledge of the game. Representing the only former ballplayer among the group of investigating journalists, Mathewson played a small role in Fullerton’s exposure of the scandal. Imagine: Christy Mathewson was an investigative reporter! What a great combination of brain and brawn! Anyhow, my father and I watched the Metros most Saturday afternoons until I went to college.” Lois toned down her hero worship, and said in a calmer tone, “I would have thought Lana’s dad would be more interested in the game than Lana.”

“No, he had a meeting at the museum. Besides, Lana wanted to come with me.”

“Oh, does she like baseball?” Lois asked, raising a skeptical eyebrow.

“Uh, no, but since I was able to get the tickets, she wanted to come along so we could spend some time together.”

“She had a chance to watch what could have been a perfect game and she didn’t enjoy it? The Metros are in the pennant race!”

Her partner shrugged his shoulders and said, “She’s more into the city’s ballet and classical music. We wanted to spend some time together because she’s going to Europe for a couple of weeks. Apparently, she’s got to convince some collectors to let the Metropolis museum borrow a few artifacts for the *Age of Napoleon* exhibit.”

The thought flashed in her mind: “Lana is going to Europe? What a relief! The newsroom will be spared her intrusive presence for a while.” With a supreme effort, Lois fought to control her tongue; the last thing she needed was to complain about Kansas’ girlfriend. Remembering her decision from the previous evening, she wanted this conversation to come to an end. “Please phone, ring!” she begged mentally.

Miraculously, the phone *did* ring.

“Uh, sorry, Clark, gotta take this!” Her partner nodded and went to his desk. She picked up the phone, grateful to whoever was calling her for the timely interruption. “Lois Lane, *Daily Planet’s* city desk.” She could hear a slightly distorted voice, talking as if from great distance.

“Well hello, Lois, glad I caught you, despite the five-hour time difference!”

A flush of happiness danced through her, “Eduardo? This is a surprise! How are you?”

“Never better! Listen, I read your e-mail and those are particularly good questions. I’m sending out a package tonight and you should receive it in a couple of days.”

“That’s great! Anything I should know about beforehand?” Lois asked. Her curiosity was definitely piqued.

“Oh, I’ll let you take a look for yourself.” Swiftly changing the subject, Eduardo said, “I’ve been reading the stories you and this new guy Kent have been writing. I’m impressed. So much so, that there will be no lingering qualms about him permanently taking over my spot at the city desk.”

Lois, not sure she was hearing this correctly, asked, “Excuse me? What are you talking about? Why would you want to do that?”

“Because... I’m in love and I’m getting married,” Eduardo said with a jubilant smile in his voice.

“Married?” Lois squeaked.

A happy chuckle came over the three thousand miles of ocean and cable to tickle her ear, “Don’t sound so shocked, Lois, people do it all the time. My fiancé’s name is Samantha Pritchards. We met when I first arrived here. She’s an American journalist as well. We love London and have decided to remain in England. I’m giving up full-time reporting to teach American literature at one of the private schools here.”

“So, this is it? You’re not coming back?” There was a distinct squeak in Lois’ voice when she spoke, with a turbulent mixture of disbelief and shock.

“Nope. Sorry, those days of being a wandering reporter investigating international ‘hotspots’ are over. That’s the reason why this packet I’m sending over is so important, as it will probably be the last.”

She looked around, lowered her voice, and said, “You are not going to help me with the Daae exposé?”

“Lois, I’m fifty-seven, my left eye is gone, and arthritis is making its presence known more and more each year. It’s high time for me to settle down and have a real home and family life. I’m going to leave this story to you and Kent. I’m handing in the traditional resignation time - two weeks - and I’m still around if you really need my help in the future. The managing editor, Labbie Rathbone, will be able to forward any inquiries to me.”

“But... but we’re a team!” She hated how peevish her voice sounded.

The laughter she heard on the other end came through loud and clear. “Not anymore we aren’t! I have a new partner! Listen, with Clark Kent you should be able to wrap up the Daae case and

bag a Pulitzer nomination, if not the prize itself. Remember *you* started this investigation without my help. Considering the articles I’ve read from ‘Lane and Kent’, his writing style is a better complement to yours than mine.”

“Me and Kansas... get a Pulitzer, that’s unlikely! It’s still hard to believe you are giving up journalism to teach American literature. You’ll be bored silly within a week!”

“Not from where I’m sitting! Look, on occasion, if a story comes that’s juicy enough for me to come out of retirement, I’ll tackle it. In the meantime, can you forward this call to Perry? I need to have what will probably amount to a painful conversation with him. Take care of yourself! Don’t frighten Kent off and stop calling him Kansas! It’s disrespectful. Cheerio, mate!”

Reluctantly, Lois transferred the call to Perry’s office and then slowly, sadly, put down the receiver. At that moment, Catherine came over and said, “Did I hear you mention Eduardo? Was that him on the phone?”

“Uh huh,” Lois mumbled, shaking her head still numb with shock. “He... he quit!”

Catherine eyebrows nearly shot into her hairline from disbelief. “Wait a sec. My favorite entrenched correspondent doesn’t quit, he has newspaper ink flowing through his veins!”

“Not anymore. Apparently the prospect of wedded bliss has flushed all things newspaper out of his system. He’s getting married and will be teaching American literature in some snotty private school.”

“Well, blow me down,” the normally unflappable Catherine Grant whispered, as she sank into Lois’ visitor chair. “Eduardo, the last of the single globetrotting reporters, a married man.”

“Careful, if his fiancée hears that, she’ll be liable to get jealous, and we already have one guy with a resentful girlfriend around here,” Lois said with a wistful tone.

Catherine did not miss the hint of sadness in Lois’ voice, but decided to ignore it for the time being.

Suddenly they heard a loud, “Great shades of Elvis!” exploding from the chief’s office. They watched as he jumped out of his chair and quickly closed the door. The two friends looked at each other and decided to get busy immediately. There was no doubt in their minds Perry was going to be in shell shock *and* on the warpath when he emerged from his lair.

Later that day across town, Clark was meeting in the shabby ‘chic’ office of Mr. Nicholas Wrenn, landlord of the building on Clinton Street. The rotund, middle-aged, balding man sat behind the desk and wheezed loudly when he slowly stood to shake Clark’s hand in greeting.

“Kent, your references are first rate. It looks really good for you to move in as soon as the current renters vacate the premises. But I need to ask a few questions.”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“OK. Are you going to be a quiet tenant? Kevin and his roommate were real quiet. Heck, if it weren’t for the rent check I wouldn’t know they were breathing. Guess that comes with the territory of being a doctor. What do you do for a living? Travel for the company? Plan on giving wild parties? Got a regular girlfriend?” His double chin shook as he pointedly asked each question.

This was an invasion of his privacy. All Wrenn needed to know was if Clark could pay the rent. Not his personal life. The apartment had many attributes, but not if he had to suffer with a nosy landlord. Internally he was extremely nervous, but if he wanted to set a precedent, now was the time. Choosing his words carefully, he said, “I work at the *Daily Planet* as a reporter, sir. That doesn’t leave a lot of time for a raucous social life. Now, about the rent?”

Rubbing his chin, the rotund man said, “Okay. They’re paying \$850.00, so with the one-hundred-dollar increase, the new

rent will be \$950.00 which includes heat and water. You understand, after all, there are several renovations being made to the building. Clinton Street is the hub of a neighborhood revival and living in such an up-and-coming area ain't cheap."

The younger man nodded his head in agreement but said, "That's funny; Skip told me the rent was \$750.00. From where I sit, that's a *two*-hundred-dollar increase."

Wrenn was surprised that this mild-mannered young man had been so direct; he had looked like someone he could easily convince to pay the planned increase. "Well, like I said, huh, renovations have to be paid for..."

"... which should not come exclusively out of my pocket. Look, Mr. Wrenn, the Clinton neighborhood is improving, but improvements only go as far as the people who live here. It's in your best interest to attract *responsible* professionals who can pay reasonable rents. I am not going to haggle about the cost. I'll pay \$850.00 for a two-year lease. Take it or leave it."

"What! Two years? Ok, \$900.00."

Clark hated the idea of giving up such a perfect place, but Wrenn needed to know he was not going to be taken advantage of. Reluctantly he got up from his chair and purposefully walked towards the door. He began counting mentally: one... two... three.

Clark could almost hear Wrenn's jowls shake as he barked, "Okay, okay! It'll be \$850.00 for one year!"

Without turning around, and with his hand on the doorknob, Clark spoke firmly, "Two."

Wrenn studied the young man's stiff back carefully. He considered himself a good judge of character, but in this instance he was all wrong. Kent wanted the apartment, but only at the cost he could afford, and he was willing to walk away if he couldn't. He was also right about wanting to attract the attention of upscale professionals. Wrenn had a long-term strategy for the building in particular and the neighborhood in general. The bedrock of those plans was having stable tenants.

It might take weeks to find another well-groomed professional like Kent, and meanwhile the apartment would sit empty. Realizing his new tenant had won, with a deep sigh, he said, "Fine, two years. Come by this afternoon with a certified bank check and the lease will be all ready for you to sign."

Clark turned around, walked back over to Mr. Wrenn's desk and shook the landlord's outstretched, clammy hand, "Thank you."

Mopping his brow, Clark's new landlord said, "Mr. Kent, that was some mighty sharp bargaining. Where did you learn to do that?"

"My father was a farmer; he used to haggle with merchants at the Smallville Farmer's market every weekend."

The rusty bark that escaped his new landlord's throat, Clark decided to take as laughter. The heavy man grunted, "Farmer, huh? Ok, that makes sense. Most young city fellas don't know how to negotiate... no patience. See you this afternoon around 5:30. The lease will be waiting for your signature."

With no new investigations to run and Lana out of town, Clark figured this evening would be relatively free. "I'll be there," he said.

Across town, Jasper Templar had just exited Daae's office after another update meeting and walked to his own. He had taken to heart the rebuke Daae had laid upon him and never entered the office again without Daae's permission. In that particular instance, he had definitely overstepped the bounds of office etiquette. He appreciated his employer's razor-sharp mind and the nefarious scheme to take over LNN and ultimately LexCorp, but he had an agenda of his own.

Those plans were to be the owner and CEO of both companies.

Clark Kent was not truly Superman in this universe, and it allowed Jasper to operate freely to create the havoc and discord he

always wanted in his own universe. Still, he had to be cautious; working under the radar, he would not attract unnecessary attention. In this universe, he didn't have to worry about Lois Lane convincing Kent to be Superman. Lana Lang made sure he was too preoccupied paying attention to her rather than his partner. She held control over Kent, just as he wanted to hold control over this planet.

One of the best ways to control a planet's history, and to reshape it into whatever he desired, was to have power over its media.

He smiled to himself. What a lucky chance to stumble upon the angry and bitter Arianna Carlin-Luthor when he did. Manipulating her had been child's play, despite her being a knowledgeable psychiatrist. She would do anything to get back at her errant husband.

He used the extensive resources of Daae's company, DMG, to accomplish his own purposes. DMG's long and complicated history of manipulating the news could be used to his advantage if he were careful. He had made himself indispensable to Daae's takeover bid. Previously he had concentrated on purchasing small amounts of stocks from small-time investors. In this last meeting, he had provided a list of investors possessing huge chunks of LexCorp stocks. Some of them would be only too happy to sell their stock in order to keep their names out of a scandal; a scandal that would be created and served up by the Daae Media Group.

He merely had to be patient and make sure no one outside of his assistant Bonesteel knew what was going on. If word got out that LexCorp was in play, fiscal sharks would smell blood in the water and all his plans would be derailed. Even if a newspaper like the *Metropolis Star* put a hint in their shameful excuse of a financial page, problems could arise. No, he had to work carefully, but given time he would be the majority stockholder for both companies. The beauty of it was that Daae had unknowingly provided the tools for him to do so. God, he loved irony! With a malevolent chuckle, he entered his office.

"Bonesteel? Bonesteel! Where are you?!"

"Here, sir." A gangly middle-aged man with large ears that stuck out on either side of his skull and the thick glasses of an accountant stood up from his cubicle. With fluid, almost catlike steps, he walked slowly over to Templar. In a California dialect overlaid with a slight British accent that suggested spent time in Oxford, he said, "Yes, sir?"

"Here, catch!" Bonesteel, barely missing a beat, caught the diskette containing the list of investors Daae had provided. Templar said, "Get on the phone and start working on these investors, and make bloody sure to be discreet."

"Yes, Mr. Templar," he said, nodding, "Shall I send the report of my conversations with the investors to you in the morning?"

"Of course, imbecile," he snarled, "No one else should be reading those reports."

Bonesteel's facial expression was as blank as a sheet of white paper. He nodded again, took the diskette and walked with utmost dignity back to his desk.

Templar looked after him. Bonesteel was his secret weapon. He was the one putting in long hours of work, and Jasper took all the credit. Nonetheless, he was paying the submissive man a handsome sum for his talents, so Bonesteel had no reason to complain. It was in his best interests to be silent; one phone call to the Securities Trade Council and Bonesteel would be in jail for several counts of fraud and stock manipulation.

Sadly, for Bonesteel, the hapless MBA had attempted to secretly misappropriate funds from his former company's pension fund, and Templar, who was also working at the company, discovered the embezzlement purely by accident. When confronted with his 'extracurricular' activities, the accountant reluctantly agreed to do Templar's bidding in exchange for his silence.

Using the money Bonesteel had stolen, they had purchased a fledgling cable company and had built it into the Tempting Food Network or TFN. Templar wanted to expand the cable company's offerings into a channel that catered to the lifestyles of the rich and fabulous. It was a happy circumstance that he met Arianna Luthor in Chicago at a cable networking conference. Lex Luthor's wife had apparently taken a liking to him. She was intrigued and curious about his desires to branch his small company into new territories. They had kept in touch and eventually she introduced him to Gregory Daae. The media mogul surreptitiously provided him with funds to both expand ZeroM Communications and just as secretly purchase LNN stock. Meanwhile he – or rather, Bonesteel – toiled to do the same with DMG. Given time and the right amount of stocks, he would soon be in possession of both.

Jasper whistled happily as he pushed open the door to his lavishly decorated office. Life was moving along beautifully, exactly the way it should be.

Considering he was permanently stuck here because his time machine was damaged, the least he could do was make this world his own.

Lana climbed the narrow gangway up to the sleek silver aircraft. Its very design spoke unapologetically of wealth and opulence with careful restraint.

"Of course, it did," she thought.

A rather impressive steward, dressed in a starched white jacket dotted with golden buttons and black pants with pleats so crisp they could slice bread, took her luggage. Lana worked especially hard to remain calm and relaxed once she boarded Daae's private jet. She tried unsuccessfully not to be awed by the shameless luxury assailing her senses with layers of sumptuous fabrics, colors and aromas of rich leathers and French design. A quick search of her memory failed to yield any experience close to the one she was having now.

In lightly accented English the steward spoke, "Please, *Mademoiselle* Lang, come this way to the dining area."

Step by eager step she moved down the central aisle through a portal that opened into another world.

The interior was silky affluence itself. Four passenger seats of buttery soft cream-colored leather surrounded a walnut conference table. Already seated there were two men, Lord Julian Delgrave and Nigel Ashley-Pitt, Metropolis Museum board members. A uniformed waiter was quietly laying out menus on hot pressed paper for Daae's guests to complete. She chose a light shrimp and avocado salad accompanied by French onion soup for her meal. She sat in one of the chairs and almost gasped in admiration, as she felt its plush contours engulf her body. The muted tones, gleaming wood and comfortable seating was beguiling, and she had quite forgotten this was an airplane, until the steward spoke again.

"*Monsieur* Daae will join you shortly. He is in the cockpit going over the preflight check."

"He's going to fly the plane?" she asked in surprise.

"No, not this time, *Monsieur* Daae is a licensed pilot, board certified to fly here and in Switzerland. Sometimes he does fly this craft for business trips, but with guests onboard, the Captain will have the honors today. Please, *Mademoiselle* Lang, if you wish to freshen up, your private berth is located past the gallery."

She nodded and tried to behave as if it was perfectly normal to have a bedroom thousands of feet in the air.

Once the landing gear was locked into position and their meals were served, Lana joined in a lively discussion with the museum board members, Lord Delgrave and Mr. Ashley-Pitt, both of whom spoke exceptional French. After a time, Daae joined them and they delved into an intense conversation revolving around the logistics of acquisitions for exhibits covering the next five years. Lana, determined to take advantage of this

foreknowledge, took extensive notes which could prove useful at a later date.

Daae observed her carefully. She could have easily departed to one of the sleeping berths and read. Still, she had made the most of this exceptional situation and charmed her fellow passengers, which was not an easy task to perform with these men. She had quickly discerned the inner workings of the board, better than perhaps even her father, Professor Lang. Mlle. Lang was witty, intelligent, and more than willing to change a situation to her favor.

Again, this young woman had proven her quality. She would bear watching and careful consideration over the next few days. He was beginning to think pursuit of her would not be so much of a challenge, but a benefit.

A bright, star-filled night had fallen over the bustling city of Metropolis. Within its most imposing skyscraper was a dark figure sitting at a large antique desk. Lex Luthor broodingly smoked a finely turned Cuban cigar, a thick cloud of smoke swirling darkly around him. He had ensconced himself in the office, retreating from all within the Luthor household to meditate on current events.

He had recently completed studying the reports of Space Station Archimedes and the descriptions were glowing. Everything was proceeding according to schedule. The latest module carrying the hydroponics laboratory would be launched in a few hours. The standard press releases were prepared and ready to be sent to LNN and DMG. His dream of having an orbital station high above humanity was, bit by tantalizing bit, becoming a reality. He should have been happy – ecstatic – but a raw ache was gnawing at his mind like a tiny, incessant rodent.

The White Orchid Ball had been a rousing social success. Unfortunately, Mr. Daae had taken over the announcement about their joint venture. As the senior and wealthier partner in their business relationship, Luthor should have been the one to take the delectable Miss Lane down a peg or two, not this relative newcomer to Metropolis society. He had read the accounts in several newspapers, both here and abroad, and in all of them, Daae was recognized as the superior presence. If this was Europe or Asia, he would not care so much; after all, that was Daae's 'theatre of operations'. But Metropolis and the United States was his 'combat zone'.

Napoleon was Gregory's acknowledged hero, as Alexander the Great was Lex's. Could this be a war being played out between the ideological and intellectual descendants of these brilliant tacticians? Rather than sword and cannon, their weapons of choice in this conflict were economics and communications.

It was an intriguing thought, one he needed to meditate upon.

Arianna, who he usually kept out of his more intricate business dealings, seemed very keen on encouraging their partnership in this particular venture. She appeared happy, almost radiant, at the idea of having the Swiss businessman around. She had told him they had met in Zurich years before, but she had not elaborated on what kind of association they'd had. If there were more to the relationship than she was telling, it did not concern him. For quite some time he had accepted that their marriage was now nothing more than a social alliance. As long as Arianna did nothing to embarrass him publicly, what she and Daae did behind closed doors was none of his concern.

He reflected on his own illicit relationship with Mindy Church. It had been more for amusement than pleasure. She was captivating in a cheap way, but her plans for taking over Metropolis did not meet with his approval. News of Intergang supplying low-priced weapons to small-time gangs had reached him. Some had gone on a crime spree. She had unwittingly caused almost irreparable harm to some of his operations. He determined there could only be one Boss of Metropolis.

Mindy's inconsistent vacillations between 'dumb blonde' and criminal mastermind had become... disturbing. That dangerously irresponsible behavior could not be allowed to continue. Plans had been placed in motion to end her involvement with his life and the underworld activities of their 'fair' city.

So he was surprised and even pleased that a very jealous Arianna had skillfully eradicated the venomous creature from Metropolis. He never enquired, either through his criminal world connections or upper-crust liaisons, exactly what Arianna had done to ruin her rival's reputation with Metropolis' more unsavory elements. But his dear wife's actions had saved him time, money, and a considerable amount of nuisance. On his part, the right information in the proper ears of the police department had put an end to the gangs and their guns. He, and Nigel with his minions, moved in, and like a fast-acting cancer, effectively dismantled Intergang's global operations.

It had been an exhilarating time. Definitely the kind of epoch in a man's life that keeps *ennui* at bay.

As the deconstruction of Intergang had waned, the opportunity for LNN to be one of the two news organizations to cover the creation of the international space station had presented itself. The space agency felt, due to security concerns, that having only the two premier news organizations – their combined viewership was over sixty-five percent of the planet – was more than enough. They left it to Luthor and Daae's staff to hammer out the myriad details of the business contract. Several months of tense negotiations, meetings and phone conversations had preceded his decision to allow this partnership between himself and the European media agency to go forward. He had felt the other man's subtle, yet forceful, personality shape the meetings. It was paramount that he regained and maintained the upper hand between them and to the world at large.

The first step in recovering lost ground was granting an interview, one that was up close and personal - the kind which his lovely wife had participated in the week before. Since he was Metropolis's key business resident, the most popular news outlet would have to be the *Daily Planet*. With its international reputation for truth and fairness it was the only logical choice. What better reporter to ask than Lois Lane? He had noted Daae had taken considerable delight in needling her. After reading the news of her belittlement the next day in the *Metropolis Star*, he was certain her professional pride and private ego had taken a beating.

Miss Lane would be the perfect choice. He had no doubt she would supply all the necessary accolades to him and LNN in her article. All this while downplaying the achievements of a certain Swiss media mogul.

He relaxed, and no longer brooded, now that a fresh aspect of the game between himself and Gregory Daae had been formed. *Ennui* was again kept at bay. Nonetheless, prudence required he keep a vigilant eye on his dubious business partner.

Part Nine

Six days later, on a humid Saturday afternoon, Clark and Pete had just completed bringing up the last load of boxes from the moving van. Pete put down a heavy box, loaded with books.

"Whew, I'm glad that's the LAST one! Those stairs were killing me." He stood and surveyed the organized mess that was Clark's new apartment. "With your super speed and strength, we could have done this move in no time at all. Why did you want to do it the hard way?"

Clark bent down and opened a box marked 'artwork'. He carefully removed a wrapped object and said, "It was the right thing to do. Besides, Wrenn might have made an appearance."

"Don't worry; he was like that with Skip when he first bought the building. Kept thinking he was an 'over-educated' frat boy, but his checks never bounced. Once your rent checks start flowing,

he'll back off. How about grabbing a couple of burgers and then maybe you can tell me what's been bothering you?"

His friend moved his glasses up a bit and rubbed the bridge of his nose. It did not hurt, but whenever he wasn't comfortable about discussing something, this was what he did to stall for time and collect his thoughts. "Lana called a couple of days ago. She's settled into her hotel and is working with one of the board members to locate an artifact for one section of the exhibit. Apparently tracking down this particular item is presenting a few challenges, and she is going to be in Europe for a month or more." As he spoke, he unwrapped the object, revealing a beautiful piece of handmade painted Amazonian Indian pottery. Cautiously he placed it on the bookshelf.

"So? Since when is something like distance a problem for you? Fly over there for a quick visit. Surprise Lana and take her on a day trip to Paris. A quiet stroll on the Left Bank together would do wonders."

Clark nodded, seriously considering the suggestion, but then said, "Yeah, but she's working exceedingly hard to unearth this antique camp chair. We both know how she gets while focusing on a project. It means a lot to her father and her career. She – she asked that I not come over to visit."

Pete stiffened. For the past year Lana had indeed spent nearly all her considerable energies on two things: Clark and her career. Now suddenly she wanted to concentrate on work exclusively. Something did not sound right. Clark might have cause for concern. He knew his friend was a natural worrier, so he decided to lean towards the positive and said, "Isn't that what you wanted: to have time to concentrate on your careers? Look, work on the apartment, and when she gets back, show off your decorating skills. Knowing Lana, the thought of putting her touches on the place will be almost as good as living there!" He thought carefully over his next words and said, "Uh, are your 'talents' going to make appearances during her absence?"

Clark couldn't quite explain it, but he had been feeling a stronger sense of self-confidence, especially since dealing with Mr. Wrenn for the apartment's rent. The corpulent landlord had tried to pull another fast one during the lease signing. The amount on the lease papers was \$900.00 for two years. Clark had noticed the change and had stuck to his resolve to pay no more than what they had verbally agreed to.

"Yes. Yes, my 'talents' will be put to effective use. Still, I have to be extremely cautious. When I was traveling - more like tramping - around the world, early on I attempted to blend in, and yet there were times those attempts failed miserably."

"What happened?" Pete asked, his fatigue vanishing as Clark told his story.

"While I was living in Alaska, driving trucks on the ice roads, I had a little place among the Inuit people. It was nothing more than a shack, but the people made me feel at home. There was a family, really kind folks who had a young son named Akycha. We got to be friends, and he was almost like a little brother. Anyway, on one particularly frigid day on the edge of the forest, I was chopping wood with my bare hands and Akycha saw me."

A groan escaped Pete's lips, knowing what was going to happen next "Oh, no."

Clark's expression grew clouded with the memory and he sighed, "Yeah; I tried to play it off as using karate on the wood, but Akycha was no fool. From that day he avoided me. Not long afterwards, an early spring cleared the lake of heavy ice and my driving contract ended, so I decided it was time to move on."

The apartment was deathly quiet when Pete said, "Clark, that must have been tough."

"Yeah, it was a painfully hard lesson. Now, whenever the need arises to help, I use super speed and other abilities so rapidly as to not be seen. My powers must remain hidden; the expression on Akycha's face haunts me to this day. It reminds me that I am an

alien... different.”

There was a brief silence, then Pete asked carefully, “But you still want to help - despite the risks of being discovered?”

Clark face set into an expression of firm determination, “Yes. I have these abilities and they can save lives.”

His long-time friend nodded thoughtfully, pulled some tape off the box he had just brought up, and began inserting books in their place on the shelf by the Amazonian pottery. There was more at work here than ‘missing Lana’. Pete had become aware that, since Clark’s arrival in Metropolis, he had been noticing understated changes in his personality, changes he heartily approved of. One of the most significant: spending time with Lois Lane. She was demanding and brilliant, but in her own way she appreciated - and most importantly, respected - Clark, as Lana never had. Pete had met Lois a few years before, while he was still an intern. She was the daughter of respected neurosurgeons, Sam and Ellen Lane. When he realized she was the same Lois his friend had spoken so highly of, the thought of them working together was humorous. So, wisely, he decided to keep his mouth shut, and watch the sparks fly.

From the stories Clark had related, Lois wanted him to be the best reporter possible, which also meant looking the part of a professional journalist. He was purchasing clothing that only a year before he would have shied away from, not even entering high-end men’s stores like Armani and Razor.

His friend’s taste in coffee had also taken a turn for upscale as well. It was not unusual to smell freshly roasted exotic brew coming from the kitchen in the morning. Usually, it had been picked up in France or Ethiopia only hours before.

Clark had traveled all over the world but had always held onto his mid-western sense of *naïveté*. But this innocence had gradually faded away now that he was settled into one place. He was using all of his travel experiences and knowledge, blending them together, and in effect becoming a cosmopolitan citizen of Metropolis. But for all the outward changes, he was still driven to help those in need. He felt a sincere responsibility for the inhabitants of his new home in particular and humanity in general. Pete doubted very strongly if his friend would go back to concealing his special talents when Lana returned, no matter what she said.

Putting the thought aside when he heard his stomach rumble, Pete asked, “So, my friend, where do you want to eat dinner?”

“Funny you should ask. There’s this great place called Café Americana on Napier Avenue. Lois introduced me to it...”

For the following two weeks, Metropolis’ citizens were surprised by a number of rescues, unusual in every way. In fact, the news organizations were swamped by people reporting all manner of miraculous good deeds.

Muggings and street crimes of all types were down, and arrests were up.

Horrific car accidents were averted; the automobiles involved, that would have been destroyed, did not touch each other, as if they were cushioned by a gigantic pillow of air.

Several bank heists had been stopped. At each one, all the perpetrators had claimed the same thing: their guns had suddenly become too hot to handle or too cold to hold.

A school bus was prevented from crashing into Hobbs Bay.

Even a short-haired domestic feline named Copernicus had been rescued from a majestic oak tree in Centennial Park.

These ‘near-miss’ situations and rescues had been occurring for some time, but now they were on a definite upswing. The city of Metropolis seemed to be the epicenter of safety.

The only information any reporter could get out of the bewildered victims and eyewitnesses was that they all felt some kind of powerful wind and then saw a haze of motion. Afterwards there was only a happy situation rather than a dreadful tragedy.

It was over a week later that Lois received the slender package from Eduardo she’d been expecting. Inside were handwritten sheets which answered the questions Lois had e-mailed days before, not to mention more information she had needed to continue building her series of articles against the media magnate. Unfortunately, Lois could not ponder the material immediately. She had been running from one near-miss rescue situation to another, piecing together the different stories, and coming up with...

“Zilch! Zip! Nada!” Lois groaned. “How do all these ‘rescues’ take place, and yet no one can tell how they are accomplished? It’s almost as if our city has been overrun by a bunch of invisible do-gooders!” Lois said in an exasperated babble as she energetically paced back and forth between her desk and Clark’s.

“There is no such thing as an invisible man for that matter.” Clark said, in what he hoped was an off-the-cuff comment. These mysteries really had her going, so much so that of late she had refrained from wearing business suits with short skirts but instead wore comfortable pants outfits that allowed her to move freely during the many near-disasters she had covered over the past week.

“Oh, is that so?” she asked, placing the palms of both hands on his desk and glaring at him. “Then please tell me how Copernicus the cat got down from one of the *tallest* trees in Centennial Park? A cat, I might add, that is documented by its veterinarian to have a fear of heights!”

“That’s some wimpy cat,” Ralph said with a snicker as he passed by their desks.

“Nobody asked you, Lombard,” Lois snapped at his retreating back. Perhaps it was only because Lady Plushbottom was a member of the ‘catnip’ set, but Lois felt a strong, maternal need to defend all members of the feline race from creeps like Ralph Lombard, who for some reason had been returned to the newsroom, much to the chagrin of the female staffers.

Suddenly, the sound of an opening door was heard, and a loud familiar voice drenched in a southern accent rang out through the bullpen. “Hey, everybody, listen up!”

The staffers, as one, turned and watched as Perry held up a dummy of the evening edition. The headline read: **Drought in Upstate New Troy.**

Perry waved his hand languidly over the paper and his eyes searched the faces of the newsroom staffers. “In lieu of our usual 8:00am meeting, does anybody see what I see?” he queried his audience.

Ralph raised his hand and said, “The figures for the lack of rainfall this year?”

“Yes! Thank you, Ralph, for stating the obvious. But guess what, boys and girls? No one is interested in a drought that won’t impact them. Everyone is talking about these mysterious rescues that have been taking place! I want all of you highly paid members of the Fourth Estate to fan out and shake up your sources. Find out what in Sam Hill is going on! Either these folks are crazy or something very unusual is happening in our fair city. Now I expect all of you back here by one o’clock with answers!” His blue eyes searched the faces of the anxious reporters and growled, “What are you standing around for? Git!”

The chief did not have to speak a second time. Everyone grabbed what they needed and disappeared from the office. Clark quietly got up from his desk and moved desultorily towards the red staircase. He urgently needed to find an exciting story that had nothing to do with the mysterious ‘Rescuer’ in order to keep Perry off his back. Due to this attention, it would be a while before he would be in a position to help anyone else. Not with half the print and film media of the city ‘looking’ for an opportunity to expose him.

Still, if anyone truly needed his special talents, he would not ignore their call.

The phone on Lois' desk rang out as she started up the ramp. She was going to ignore it. Perry was right. The first person to find out who or what was causing these rescues was guaranteed a Merriweather or possibly a Kerth. Getting a fourth award would do wonders for her reputation. She smiled to herself, "Look out, whoever you are: Lois Lane is on the prowl!"

Stacy picked up the phone and said, "City Desk."

Lois continued walking up the ramp. Whoever it was, she would call them back later. Suddenly her name was hissed out; she turned back, having never heard that particular tone of voice from Stacy. The shy intern's face has flushed a deep red. "Yes, sir! She's right here. Just a moment, please." Covering the receiver, she hissed out Lois' name again. "Lois! It's Lex Luthor!"

Caught between surprise and incredulity, Lois ran back down the ramp and then whispered, "What does he want?"

Before Stacy could answer, Lois impatiently took the receiver from her outstretched hand. "This is Lois Lane speaking. Good afternoon, Mr. Luthor."

"Ah, Miss Lane, there's no reason to be so formal. Please, call me Lex."

Lois arched a finely tweezed eyebrow and said, "All right, then, Lex it is. How may I help you?"

Stacy looked on in amazement as the expression on Lois' face abruptly shifted from curiosity to barely contained excitement. After hanging up the phone, she was actually hopping from one foot to the other and practically squealing with glee.

Stacy said breathlessly, "What did he want?"

Lois yanked open her desk drawer to remove a recording device and a fresh pack of batteries. She also pulled out a well-worn blue folder entitled 'Luthors' from the file drawer. With deft movements the folder and other items were stuffed into her camel briefcase. In one breath she said, "Tell Perry to hold space on the front page below the fold. Forget about that drought upstate. I am getting a private interview with Lex Luthor about how he and Gregory Daae got the rights to the Space Station Archimedes story! I'll be back before noon and have it written up in time for the evening edition."

Fully equipped for her mission, Lois stormed up the ramp, and upon reaching the elevator, slapped her palm on the 'down' button. Amazingly the elevator car was already there. The doors flew open and she dove in. From the recesses of the car her voice hit Stacy's ears. "Don't forget to tell Perry!"

"Are you kidding?" Stacy mumbled as she walked towards the managing editor's office, "Of course I'll tell him. No one is going to call me crazy."

Lois fairly burst out of the elevator car as soon as the doors opened. For once, the cranky mechanism did as she wanted, and had taken her down to the well-lit parking garage with no problem. No matter how clean the custodial staff Mr. Olsen had hired kept the place, the rank smell of gasoline and greasy motor oil dominated the space. Quickly, she ran to her Jeep, opened the door, and jumped inside. On one side was Jack's dependable little car, and on the other was Ralph Lombard's late model red sedan. Vaguely, the thought passed her mind: how could a lamebrain like him be able to afford such a car? She pushed the notion away. There were much bigger fish to fry. Before she knew it, the powerful engine of her Jeep was running at full tilt and she was weaving her way through early-morning traffic.

Lex's words danced in her brain. "Arianna told me about the fascinating interview conducted by yourself and Mr. Kent. Imagine my surprise when I read the article in the *Daily Planet's* Weekend section. Excellently written, Lois! Please also extend my compliments to your partner, Mr. Kent. Dear Arianna can be a

trifle brusque at times and so I wanted to make up for it. I am free for an hour - today. If you wish, we can discuss how Mr. Daae and I were able to get the exclusive rights to report on the Space Station's construction."

"If I wish...!?" Lois said aloud in the Jeep. "Oh boy! This day is gettin' better every second!"

She drove into the underground entry of the LexCorp parking garage. A middle-aged security guard who looked like an ex-marine smiled tightly and said, "Mr. Luthor is expecting you, Miss Lane. Please take this ID badge and drive to the space marked *Visitor Zed*."

"Visitor Zed?" Lois said out loud. "That's an odd name for a parking spot, isn't it?"

He shrugged and said, "If that's what Mr. Luthor wants to call a space, that's his decision, ma'am. He pays the bills." The guard turned away and opened up the gate. Lois drove straight into the marked space, exited the Jeep, and walked over to the elevator. The ID badge permitted her to take the express elevator to Luthor's penthouse. She had interviewed congressmen, senators, rock stars and sports heroes, but this interview made her nervous.

The doors opened once again into the formidable foyer. In front of her, Nigel St. John stood solemnly, looking as grave and silent as he had on her previous visit. He raised his arm and pointed Lois to the seat of Luthor's power, his office, and said, "This way, please."

As they walked, she felt uneasy and wondered where Arianna was. Stories of Mrs. Luthor's jealous nature came to mind. So she asked Nigel, "Where is Mrs. Luthor today?"

He answered simply, "On a shopping trip. She is looking for a pair of leather boots and matching handbag."

"Oh, did she go somewhere in the city?"

"No. To a special shop in Greece. Mrs. Luthor prefers handmade footwear," the butler said with a haughty air.

Lois mused, "Lifestyles of the rich and famous." Still, it was good Arianna was out of town. The last thing Lois needed was to have the woman storm into the middle of their interview and ruin everything. Also, she disliked the idea of interviewing Luthor in the office. The room was more like a museum than an office, decorated with antiques and weapons of war, so she could be forgiven for being a little taken aback when they passed that door and entered another room. Lex greeted her wearing gray dress pants and a lightweight black cashmere turtleneck sweater. The outfit was the most informal she had ever seen him wear.

"Ah, Lois, how good of you to come at such short notice!" he said effusively. "Welcome to my study! Please make yourself comfortable and then we can begin."

With armagnac-colored walls serving as a backdrop, the space was filled with sleek furnishings, including cognac-colored deep leather side chairs, slant-backed bookcases, and rich gray carpeting with a tiny paisley pattern. It was a pleasant room, one with decidedly masculine overtones. She could well imagine her father unwinding in here after a long day at the hospital. Luthor gestured to one of the chairs and she quietly sat down.

Playing his role of the genteel host, Lex asked, "Please, may I offer some refreshments?" He indicated the tall crystal pitcher of lemon water on the coffee table.

Lois graciously accepted a tall glass and took a sip. The chilly liquid felt delightfully cool and invigorating as it slid down her throat. "This is a very pleasant way to begin an interview," she thought. Keeping in mind Lex's tight schedule and the *Daily Planet's* deadline, she quickly removed the recorder from her briefcase and placed it on the highly polished mahogany coffee table that separated them. Lois cleared her throat and began. "Let's get right to it, shall we? How did LNN and DMG manage to acquire most of the rights to report from beginning to end the progress of Space Station Archimedes? After all, this is *news*, the kind of which has never been heard of before. Colonizing space is

mankind's next frontier."

Lex began speaking, his rich cultured voice resonating throughout the comfortable room. He explained to her that unfortunately the world had changed since the early days of space flight. "What security measures they had at the time were laughable; reporters were allowed to roam around Cape Kepler like it was an amusement park. There were a number of incidents which are best left unreported. Today, the International Space Service felt it would be prudent to limit the number of journalists to those who passed rigorous security screenings. Those reporters would be part of news organizations that have impeccable reputations who would share equally the news with their respective global audiences. Between them and our soon-to-be-named 'Space Channel' there will be freedom of the press."

"That's a pretty argument, but will freedom of the press continue throughout the project? I can't help but think that this 'maiden voyage' of your joint venture with DMG will make a tidy profit for LNN in general and Lex Luthor in particular," Lois challenged.

Lex smiled a smooth, calculating smile that reminded her of an alligator. "Let me reassure you, Ms. Lane, LNN/DMG will not have exclusive rights. There is a list of reporters outside those companies being considered. I cannot give any names, of course, but rest assured they are persons within your community that are highly qualified and respected. On that other point, well, after all, I am a businessman." He looked at her oddly, as if he were speaking to a particularly stubborn child. "Did you watch the last moon launch?"

Embarrassed, Lois voice faltered and then she said, "No, no, I did not." She wished she could have taken those words back as soon as they crossed her lips. It was obvious what Luthor was driving at.

"Exactly. Space flight has become routine. If all the news networks were given access to the story, just how much attention and time will they provide for the proper coverage? How many inches of type will the *Daily Planet* and her sister newspapers worldwide give it? True, the media will provide ample coverage in the beginning of construction. But, between LNN and DMG, we will broadcast major highlights of the unfolding story of the station's assembly. We have the resources... by allowing us to do our job of recording this project, we will be able to cover the story from start to finish. Imagine how much better our understanding of history would have been if all great moments in history had been given such coverage?"

Lex continued talking, spinning an ingenious tale of the journalistic coverage of this mammoth construction project. As much as Lois hated to admit it, he was charming and very convincing. But she could easily imagine Perry having a fit over this partial muzzling of the news. Still, it was best to wait until the names of the other news organizations and their reporters were released before she condemned the man. Overall, this was a decent interview, but still a puff piece in comparison to what she had originally envisioned writing. It was odd, through, that Luthor did not mention his business partner very much during their sixty minutes together.

Just as quickly as the meeting began, Lois found herself exiting the parking garage and heading back to the *Daily Planet* to write up the article in time for the evening edition. She felt a curious letdown of a sort; Lex Luthor was not at all as she expected him to be. He had welcomed her into a warm, friendly environment, different from what his wife had indicated of her husband's personality. Yet there was a nagging sense in the back of her mind that as charming as Lex Luthor had been, the entire interview had been expertly orchestrated. Everything, from the timing of his phone call, to the room where they met, to the refreshing lemon water sparkling in its glittering crystal pitcher and glasses, had been done to set the event to his best advantage.

If such was the case, then Lois had been used, and she hated being exploited for any reason. There would be time to ponder these thoughts later. This might not have been the interview she had hoped for, but it was better than chasing around town looking for something or someone who might not exist.

It was shortly after one o'clock when Lois saw Perry emerge from his office and head in her direction to speak with her, his face beaming.

"Lois, I don't know how you managed it, but this is a great piece about LNN and DMG's involvement in keeping a living record of the construction of Archimedes. It's good to know that other news outlets will have a chance to participate as well. This takes a 'little bit' of the sting out of not being allowed onboard, but I have to tell ya, there had better be a *Daily Planet* reporter on that short list!" Perry's face held the wide toothy grin of a happy managing editor as he held the sheets of paper in his hand and ambled back to his office.

Catherine looked over her friend's shoulder while checking the monitor where the Luthor interview article was currently displayed. "Nice work, Lois. That is the best story today. So far no one has any more idea about these mysterious doings around town than we did this morning. Maybe this will give people something else to think about."

"Yeah, and it *keeps* me out of Perry's doghouse. We both know we're only as good as our next story," Lois said, with not a small amount of relief.

Her friend sighed, "Wish I could say the same, but sooner or later he's going to have to give up and set the bullpen to work on other stories. Speaking of which, I have to get back to work on Bill Fences' company. If my sources are correct; the software he's developing will change computers forever. But the man needs better business advisors. The barbarians are at the gates looking to take him down. See you later." With those words, Catherine went back to her desk.

A half hour later, Clark stepped off the elevator with other members of the bullpen, who, like himself, had come up empty regarding 'The Haze', a name they had given to the flashes of motion and sound that eyewitnesses swore accompanied every rescue.

Perry came out of his office and looked expectantly at the group as they returned to the newsroom, and was disappointed when Clark, acting as an unofficial spokesman for the group, shook his head and said, "Sorry, Chief, I've interviewed a dozen 'eyewitnesses' to these fantastic events and they can't add anything to their accounts. None of my sources were able to provide information. It looks like the story has run dry."

"All right, everyone, even the Colonel had bad recording sessions with Elvis. Let's leave this story on the back burner. Sooner or later, something has to give." With a sad shake of his head, Perry retreated into his office.

No one was more relieved than Clark to hear Perry utter those words. He had been forced to ignore some rescues and circumspectly handle others. He did not want to have his fellow reporters on his trail, especially one lovely lady reporter in particular. He walked over to his desk, slowly took off his jacket, and sat down. Leisurely, he removed his glasses and massaged the bridge of his nose. It had been a long, painfully frustrating day... basically chasing himself. He powered up the computer and opened up a file marked 'Article Ideas'. Maybe, if he worked fast enough, he could produce a story that would make Perry happy.

Lois looked over at him and thought, "Poor guy, he looks beat. It must be hard tracking down something that might or might not exist. Part of me wants to rub the Luthor interview in his nose, but that simply wouldn't be right. If our situations were reversed, Clark would be supportive, not vindictive. This Luthor interview just fell into my lap. I need to be respectful of what he and the

others tried to accomplish today. So no razzing!" Her mind also went back to a low point in her career when Claude had almost ended it. It was a stern reminder that a little consideration goes a long way.

True to her word, Lois quietly encouraged the other reporters on the newsroom floor. She even went so far as to offer Diane a chance to use one of her sources to verify a story she had been working on. Her thoughtful gestures did not go unnoticed by the other reporters or Clark.

Late afternoon found Lois again going downstairs to the parking garage. It had been a long day and the garage, although well-lit, seemed gloomy, almost foreboding.

She had spent a couple of hours going over the material Eduardo had mailed. It was surprising to discover a list of contacts in Switzerland and Paris - a list over three pages long. "Trust him to be thorough," she mused as the Jeep backed out of the parking space and moved towards the exit.

She pushed down gently on the brake pedal and without a hint of resistance, it sunk to the floor. The Jeep was accelerating, heading straight for the concrete wall that served as a barrier. If unchecked the powerful vehicle would plow straight through that concrete and steel barrier. A terrible, frightened scream ripped from her throat, leaving it raw and ragged. The oddest thought pierced her mind: Ellen Lane would probably insist she rinse her throat with salt water to soothe the pain. Brusquely her life passed before her eyes and the wall loomed closer and closer then abruptly, just inches before the Jeep would have hit the massive grey barrier, it stopped, completely dead.

She placed the gear shift lever in park, turned off the engine and leaned over the steering wheel, inhaling and exhaling great, halting sobs of air as hot tears streamed down her cheeks. Hysteria was edging into her mind when questions loomed up. "Why did that happen? The Jeep was checked out last week, and the mechanic said everything was normal. Better still, what stopped me from slamming into the wall?"

Suddenly a recognizable, anguished voice forced its way into her thoughts, "Lois!" Frantic heavy footsteps were heard slamming on the concrete flooring. The simple action of lifting and turning her head took the last vestiges of self-control. Clark came running up to her, his handsome face marred with concern and fear. Quickly, he opened the door and with infinite care, gradually helped her out of the vehicle. She leaned back against the automobile and tried to steady herself. Unfortunately, she began hyperventilating and was trembling so badly Clark thought she might faint. Her beautiful face was so bloodless it looked like a piece of broken white chalk.

Lois took one shaky step, crossing the space between them, and then grabbed him, allowing his strong arms to encircle her and for a brief space of time, let him take the weight of her fragile existence. It felt so good to feel the sturdy fabric of his jacket and beneath the jacket and shirt she swore she could feel his steely muscles flex. He felt so real and alive. They stood like that for more than a few heartbeats, he giving comfort, and she being comforted.

Clark drank in the scent of her long, dark hair. The bouquet of fresh jasmine and lemon was so tantalizing he wanted to run his fingers through it. He loved the exotic combination and wondered why Lana never wore perfume like that.

In the space of a heartbeat, he froze. Lana.

Gently, almost reverently, he pulled Lois away from him. Masking his true feelings with those of a good friend's concern, but also colored by a reporter's need to know, he asked her a few questions. "What happened? Are you all right?"

Reluctantly, she lifted her head off the comfort and protection of his strong, broad chest. Her features were coming under control, but those fine brown eyes were still rimmed with fear. Words

stammered out, "I don't ... I know, the... brakes... they... they failed. Someone... tried to..." She couldn't finish the words. She looked down at the ground.

"What? Here, lean against back the Jeep, I'm going to check underneath." Without another word, he took off his jacket and crawled under the vehicle. Lois leaned against the Jeep, allowing the automobile - rather than permit somewhat wobbly legs - to support her. A moment later he emerged from under the Jeep's body, slapping his hands on himself to remove excess dirt and grease from his clothes.

"Thankfully, I don't think this was sabotage, just a serious case of negligence. It looks like when they checked your brake lines for air, they failed to tighten the fitting adequately. The brake fluid leaked out a little bit each time you applied the brakes. If it had been sabotage, one of the lines would have been cut."

She shook her head in disbelief, "Th... that makes some sense. The vehicle was checked out a few days ago." Shock and fear were quickly replaced by a stark realization, "I'm... I'm a rescue survivor!"

"A ... rescue survivor?" Now *he* was nervous and clearly did not like where this was going.

"That's right! 'The Haze' was here!"

He hesitated before speaking, not allowing fear in his voice to puncture through a thin veneer of calm. "Oh, Lois, not you, too! Look, I've spent the better part of the morning searching for something or someone that doesn't exist. There was probably enough brake fluid remaining to stop the Jeep. It's the only logical explanation. Come on, I'll walk you home."

"What'll we do about my Jeep?" Lois looked at it sadly. It couldn't remain in that spot. It would be an obstacle for their fellow workers. "We can't leave it there," she sighed.

"Look, I'll go upstairs and call a mechanic I know, and he'll come by and take a look at the brake line. If it's an easy fix, he'll have it ready in no time."

Lois eyed him suspiciously, "Where does this sudden knowledge of mechanics spring from? You don't even own a car!"

"I don't. But my former roommate does. Pete's got a Jeep, and it's the same make and model as yours. He swears by Jeff's abilities as a mechanic."

Her regained composure had wavered ever so slightly, and she failed to suppress a shudder. They went back upstairs to the bullpen. Clark was as good as his word; he called the mechanic and surprisingly Jeff showed up thirty minutes later. Lois, satisfied that her beloved Jeep was in good hands, allowed Clark to walk her home.

As they exited the garage, a thought was nagging at her mind, "What was Clark doing in the parking garage if he doesn't have a car?" She wanted to ask, but the thought of pursuing this argument with him was not important. She had been through enough for one day.

As they approached her building, Clark was relieved to see her complexion had returned to normal. She was even talking about 'The Haze' again and he was trying to steer her away from the subject. He decided to attempt a little self-deprecating humor, so with a small bow he said, "As promised, Miss Lane, I have delivered you home, safe and sound."

Ignoring him, she continued her conversation with, "I can't help it. Something weird is happening in Metropolis."

He sighed. "Lois, there was enough brake fluid to keep your car from crashing into the wall. 'The Haze', or whatever Perry and the rest of Metropolis think this is, does not exist."

She thought for a moment, then looked at him and said, "Hey, you don't have any plans for dinner, do you?"

Caught slightly off guard by her abrupt change of subject, Clark said, "No, I was going to have a warmed-up chicken pot pie. Most of my pots and pans are still in Smallville. My Uncle Wayne

promised to send them, and they should be here by the weekend. I'm looking forward to cooking real food again."

"If that's the case, come on in. I've got some spinach lasagna leftover and there's a salad. My waistline won't allow me to eat all of it myself. Wanna share?"

Clark hesitated. After his lapse in the garage, he was nervous about spending any time outside of work-related activities with her. Lana had only been gone a few days. Being alone with Lois was the absolute last thing he should be doing. His work partner... disturbed him, in ways he did not, or rather should not, contemplate. But despite any misgivings, he heard himself saying, "Sure, sounds like a good idea."

The evening went very pleasantly indeed. Over a delicious lasagna and green bean salad, they discussed sports, previous articles they had written together and her interview with Luthor. They felt easy in one another's company, as if Clark visited Lois at her home all the time.

The next day Lois suggested they go over a story idea that Perry had pitched to them that morning, so they had dinner at Clark's new apartment. Lois was pleased with the layout and relaxed design of the space, especially his kitchen. The large island held a few essentials for serious cooks; she was very impressed with the well-used black cast iron skillet, red enameled Dutch Oven and muffin tins. All of this were indications that Clark was a man who liked to eat well and cook gourmet meals.

She loved the spiral staircase leading to his work area and was quite impressed with the terrace, although the old-fashioned lawn furniture was definitely not to her taste. She suspected that it was from his parents' home and genuinely appreciated that nod to his family's past.

Somehow, he managed to make a delightful casserole dish of baked Greek shrimp with tomatoes and feta from leftovers without his favorite pots and casserole pans. The traditional Greek recipe disregarded the notion that seafood and cheese don't mix, and it worked beautifully, resulting in a harmonious balance of flavors. The meal was finished off with generous slices of almond cake. Lois wanted to show off a new salmon with basil recipe, so she invited him over the next night.

That third evening at her apartment turned out to be different in a number of ways. They lingered over the remains of the meal and discussed the findings of their respective mechanics. Sonny, owner and operator of the Sunshine Garage and Lois' long-time mechanic, was understandably upset when they had confronted him about the brake failure. He presented them with the repair inventory. "We go over everything with a fine-toothed comb. That brake line was in perfect condition and all connections were tight when you picked up the vehicle."

On the other hand, Jeff, Pete's mechanic, stated the line had been deliberately loosened.

There was a disconnect somewhere. But one thing was absolutely certain: someone was out to get Lois Lane.

It had a sobering effect on their evening.

Lois, despite Clark's concern, didn't want to dwell on the unnerving subject. She got up from the couch and picked up the dinner dishes and then said with a cocky air, "Come on, Clark, death threats are all a part of an investigative reporter's job. I just have to be more careful in the future, although it would be nice to know who was trying to punch my clock."

His eye grew wide in alarm and he said, "Lois! How can you be so... so casual about this! Someone was trying to kill you! If there hadn't been some brake fluid remaining in that line..."

"That's another thing! No way should I have gotten out of that situation alive. If it hadn't been for The Haze..."

"We're not starting that again, are we?" Clark said, throwing up his arms in exasperation.

His partner responded in kind, "Kansas, why do you keep ignoring the fact that something fantastic, something

unexplainable, is going on in Metropolis?"

Clark followed her into the kitchen, Lady Plushbottom padding softly behind at his heels. "Because I don't want to go through wasting another day like this past Monday chasing after something that doesn't exist! You might feel the same if Luthor hadn't suddenly called and granted an exclusive interview."

Properly chastised, Lois said, "You're right, Monday was a pretty rotten day for most of the bullpen staffers." She stopped washing the plates, turned, and looked at her friend with a quizzical expression. "Say, come to think of it, what were you doing in the parking garage anyway? You don't own a car."

Clark swallowed. This was exactly what he was afraid of. Lois Lane had him in her investigative cross hairs, and it was time to come up with an answer quickly. "Uh, African violets! Ah, *your* African violet to be exact."

Confused, she blinked and said, "Come again?"

Warming to his story, Clark starting speaking quickly, "Oh, come on, everyone in the bullpen loves that plant! It grows so beautifully, even without a lot of sun! Anyhow, my apartment really needs something besides my art collection to liven the place up, and a colorful plant or two might be just the thing! Monday was so depressing, and I looked at the plant on your desk and thought to ask if you would come with me to the plant store."

It was bewildering listening to *Clark* babble. She said, "OK, let me get this straight. You followed me down to the parking garage to ask about a *plant*?"

Nodding like a bobble head, Clark said, "Yeah! How about helping me pick out some plants for my place?"

She looked at him oddly, and said, "You forgot about this sudden desire for a plant - until just now?"

"Hey, Lois, we were a little busy that evening. Come on, it's not that late. We can go to *Charles' Greenhouse*."

At hearing about the establishment, her eyes lit up in recognition, "Oh, yeah, Steve wrote about him, a former football player who blew out his knee?"

"Exactly! His store has several varieties of indoor and outdoor plants. He even raises orchids."

Lois smiled, warming to the task. It might be fun to walk around Metropolis streets at night and not go on a stakeout. "You know, Kent, that balcony of yours could definitely do with a little greenery to dress up that furniture. Let me get my sweater and bag. This should be fun!"

On Thursday morning, Lois sat at her desk and thought about the odd mixture of events the previous evening: the mechanic's findings and what it could mean for her. She also reflected on the delicious dinner and the time she and Clark had spent together, despite their disagreement about The Haze. Instead of salmon, she had made a vegetarian dish, zucchini au gratin. He was even so thoughtful as to bring the perfect wine to complement the meal and some cinnamon and orange rolls that, he'd said with a mischievous smile, he had baked in the cast iron skillet.

That smile. She could get lost in its sheer warmth. She had gotten lost in it while they pattered around *Charles' Greenhouse* looking for plants to brighten up his home. It was the type of smile that was filled with trust and friendship. She dearly hoped Lana appreciated the kind and gentle soul she was dating and would do nothing to hurt him.

Charles Greer, a friendly bear of a man, and his soft-spoken wife, Mia, had helped them find one perfect plant for each room in the apartment. For the entryway, Lois chose a sweet little red-edge peperomia, whose leaves had a narrow band of red surrounding a wide creamy margin. A Chinese evergreen for his living room, its spiky leaves punctuated with shades of silvery gray with touches of green, made an attractive choice to brighten low-light areas of the apartment. They choose two Dieffenbachia; the large, green-and-white leaves created a decidedly tropical look to the balcony,

thereby softening the hardscape. In Clark's bedroom, center perched on the window ledge, was a beautiful African violet with delicate purple flowers and fuzzy leaves. Mia suggested it was among the easiest to grow of the flowering houseplants.

The final choice was a modest herb basket for the kitchen. The aromatic blend of Thai basil, Italian flathead parsley, mint, sage and thyme was the perfect gift for an adventurous cook.

They had loaded the Jeep up with all these plants, and the air within the vehicle had been pleasant and rather comforting.

The entire evening had been a wonderful adventure. But she sighed. Lana's return from Europe was not that far off, and their innocent recipe trading, cooking, and plant hunting would be at an end. Their relationship had shifted immensely. Writing with him was more fun than work, and she had almost stopped calling him by disrespectful nicknames and referred to him only as Clark. She sighed again, looked over to the handsome man not ten feet away, and wished for the hundredth time that her mother was not right; it was not fair to poach another woman's man.

She had to stop thinking of her work partner as a potential boyfriend and focus on other things. Now, if she could just figure out what low-life scum sucker was trying to kill her?

Part Ten

Lana spent the first week after her arrival in Zurich, tracking down various antique collectors who lived in the "Old Town" section of the city. They claimed to have camp chairs that closely resembled the chair Napoleon Bonaparte had used during his ill-fated campaign against Russia. Her hunting up the antique led to long walks around the enchanting old segment of Zurich. The exploration became something of an education. The old-world Swiss culture was unique, hinting at the city's beautiful past, and yet buzzing with present-day energy.

Between appointments, she wandered the quiet narrow streets, studied her city guide, sat at a small table in a local café called simply *Kaffee*, and indulged in some delightfully different coffees from the usual fare served up at home. Her favorite drink was almond mocha with soy milk, plump dollops of whipped cream topped with pinches of cinnamon, and generous swirls of chocolate syrup. Afterwards, she poked around some of the different tiny shops and trendy boutiques. Despite having an expense account for meals, it was irritating to be on such a tight budget and not purchase any of the superb jewelry or couture apparel that caught her eye. Again, she wondered if marriage to Clark could allow them enough money to afford the first-class luxuries life had to offer?

At the close of the week, all her efforts to track down the antique had been in vain. Either the chair a collector offered was the wrong style, or the owners feared it was so delicate it could not possibly survive overseas transportation to Metropolis, despite her assurances otherwise.

It was a beautiful afternoon, one perfect for indulging in the delights of Zurich, yet Lana sat on the bed in her tiny hotel room looking out the window, dreading the phone call to her father. Prof Lang was depending on her to acquire the piece, as otherwise all the designs for that segment of the exhibit would have to be revamped. The expense and schedule delay would be considerable, not to mention the cost of sending her to Europe in the first place. To be sure, Gregory had provided a ride over in his private plane, but there were still numerous other expenses to consider, such as this chintzy second-class hotel room.

He had mentioned having associates here in Zurich and Paris - associates who might procure the chair, or at least have access to persons who could point her in the right direction. Before leaving the airport, Daae had even given her a beautiful card with his personal number, but the idea of asking for assistance from anyone - even Gregory - was irritating. *She* wanted to find the item. Now, after spending all this time looking for the chair and not having

anything to show for it, she was going to have to put professional pride on the wayside and consider the effects that pride would have on her career. Eager to put her plan into motion, she located the card, reached for the phone, and with trembling fingers punched in the number. The phone rang four times and then she heard his deep, cultured voice. "Bonjour? Daae here."

"Gregory... I am so glad to have caught you! This is Lana."

The smile in his voice came over the line. "Ah! Bon après-midi, Mlle. Lang! How goes your search for the Napoleon chair?"

With him, there was no reason to dance around the question, and she knew not to waste his time. "Rather badly, Gregory, every avenue of enquiry has been unsuccessful. I was hoping perhaps you might know someone..."

A mere day after their conversation, Daae asked her to meet him for a business luncheon - one where she could be introduced to several antique collectors, some of whom had a number of the smaller items on her list. As a member of Zurich's elite society, he wielded considerable influence and invited people whom he felt could advance his agenda. At this luncheon he hoped to help Lana make the kinds of connections she would need to succeed in her profession. Perhaps through these contacts she might be able to procure the chair. At least, those were his intentions on the surface.

Later that evening, Lana received a phone call from a Monsieur Garen Aymond, a dealer in antique furnishings. "Mlle. Lang, I have only recently returned from travels in Eastern Europe, and heard through my associates you are looking for a very specific chair?"

"Yes! Could you assist me in locating it?"

"Mademoiselle, s'il vous plait, permit me to do much more than that. The camp chair of Napoleon is in my possession. If your museum wishes to borrow it for an indefinite period of time, it is available immediately."

Lana was overjoyed and proceeded to do a tiny victory dance around the room. "Thank you! But Monsieur Aymond, how did you hear about this?"

She imagined hearing the voice on the other end take in a sharp breath and then say, "As you can imagine in our closed community, we hear a great many things. Once I knew of your quest, it was a simple matter to locate your hotel and contact you. This sort of thing is, how do you say, 'good for business'? Besides, it would be an honor to have my name on the display plaque. Is that at all possible?"

Puzzled, Lana said, "Of course... but..."

"Excellent! We have a pact. Quickly, take down my address and phone number. We can set up the contract and the chair will be ready for transport in a few days." Hastily, he rattled off his information, and after saying farewell, rang off.

Lana looked at the phone. Surprised and a little dazed by the conversation that had just taken place, she put down the receiver and punched out Daae's number. The phone, after a few rings, switched over to voice mail. Disappointed, she left him a brief message telling him had what happened and then hung up.

"I trust, Monsieur Aymond, the young lady will never know about our little 'arrangement'?"

The dapper antique collector wiped his sweating brow and nodded in the affirmative. "No, she will hear nothing from me. But Mr. Daae, please understand, sending the chair to that 'village' Metropolis is not like having it displayed in New York City or Los Angeles."

"Ah, just so, Garen. Nonetheless, *I* desire the Emperor's camp be displayed in that city, so make certain the contract is fair and in agreement with all international laws. It would be a pity if there was a delay..."

"Mon Dieu! That will not happen! I shall type up the papers of transit myself!"

Gregory nodded and gestured for the dealer to see himself out. Once the door was closed, he took a sip of aged cognac, allowing the smoky liquid to play over his taste buds, and smiled to himself. Lana would be most grateful. He was pleasantly enchanted by the vibrancy and intelligence of her personality. She was a significant change from the previous woman in his life. Comparisons to Arianna were inevitable. However, time eases all wounds, and he was certain the younger woman would assist him in finally moving past the pain.

The next three days were spent negotiating contracts for most of the other items to be lent to the Metropolis Museum. Once the contracts were settled and arrangements had been made by the museum and the owners' respective insurance companies, all that remained was to hire a security firm to oversee the transfer of the items from Zurich to Metropolis.

There were no such problems with Monsieur Aymond's paperwork. By the time Lana had arrived at his office the next day, everything had been completed to her satisfaction. She was ecstatic about the change of events; so much so that upon returning to her hotel room, she determined to contact her father and then Clark to relay the good news.

Before she could, Daae called and invited her to attend the *Versace* fall fashion event as his guest. Now that her main purpose for being in Switzerland was settled, she thought spending a few days with him before returning to the States was a well-deserved reward. The idea appealed to her and she deliberately phoned her father's work number during the wee hours of the morning and left a message informing him that she was in negotiations with the collector for the chair who had originally reneged on loaning it to the museum. The call was certain to put him at ease and allow her more time in Switzerland... getting to know Daae.

Any thought of contacting Clark was forgotten.

It was well past midnight when they returned from the exclusive showing of Gianni Versace's fall collection at the magnificent Chateau Claire just outside of the city. The event had been dazzling and crowded with European and American fashion and film celebrities, all of whom were vying to have their pictures taken by elite couture photographers. The party was just getting into full swing, but Daae and Lana needed to return to their respective homes as they both had pressing business appointments early the next day.

The simple act of driving about Zurich didn't get much more stately, opulent, and luxurious than riding in a Rolls-Royce Silver Shadow, she thought as the vehicle moved smoothly up to the front entrance of her hotel and came to a stop. Daae helped her out, being careful not to soil her gown, a beautiful pink creation made of the finest satin, that felt rich and wickedly sumptuous next to her skin.

He held her hand and they walked through the quiet lobby, insipidly decorated in late 80's chic, to the elevator. Lana was extremely aware of her escort's masculine presence, as well as the fact that he did not care for this particular hotel. He was never comfortable being here, stating that it was too coarse for her. They rode upstairs in silence, exited the car, and still holding hands, moved slowly towards her room. When they reached the door she turned to speak, but before she could utter a syllable, a muscular arm swiftly wrapped itself around her waist, enthusiastically pulled her to him, and leaned them both against the wall.

Gregory was taller and stronger than she and could have been forceful, but he was surprisingly kind and tenderly passionate. The kiss was deeply intimate; he gave totally of himself and she responded fervently in kind. The warmth of his tongue sent a current running through her body. She liked – no, *desired* – the precarious emotions racing through her as his lips pressed to hers. They leaned against the wall, mere inches from her door. She felt

hot, sultry and thoroughly engaged with his body, all at the same time. His lips explored her throat, traveled back up to her left ear and then to her throat again. Her breathing stopped, halted between heartbeats as his lips explored even further. She trembled and gasped in pleasure, overwhelmed by sensations, and was surprised to hear her voice, as if far away, pleading with him to stop.

He pulled back and twin blue orbs studied her, "Are you quite certain, *Liebling*?" He whispered in German. Those eyes, which were usually so cool and detached, seemed to darken and flicker with something indefinably dangerous.

"Y... yes," was her awkward reply.

He seemed to pick up the cue, nodded and slowly released her, his expression and body once again in complete control. "Very well. Shall my car pick you up tomorrow evening? We can have dinner at the Restaurant Lindenhofkeller. After a long day at our respective work, it shall give us time to relax and simply be together. It's situated high above the Limmat River and has an excellent view that only complements the mood created inside. A mood, I have no doubt, that shall be pleasing indeed." He raised her hand and gently kissed it.

She closed her eyes, absorbing and cherishing the feel of his lips against her skin. Her mind wandered in perilous thoughts, but with an effort returned to the here and now. "I... I... yes, dinner would be very good."

"*Liebling*," he whispered into her ear, "Until then, *gute nacht*." He brushed his lips against hers with a feather's touch and then walked briskly down the corridor. Within four heartbeats he was gone.

With unsteady hands, it took her a few attempts to get the key into the lock and gain entry to her room. Gregory's unexpected kiss had that effect; the tantalizing ability to amaze and disturb all at once. What happened in the corridor was exquisitely self-indulgent and she wanted more. Clark's kisses were warm and loving, like a cup of herbal tea by a glowing fire in midwinter. Whereas Daae, with his cool blue eyes and guarded persona, was someone, something else *entirely* singular.

She yearned for time to explore the deep contrast of emotions. There was much more here than merely gaining financing for an archeological dig in Burgundy.

After that evening at the restaurant by the river, the tenor of her trip to Europe changed. It was no longer a business trip, but one of utmost pleasure. She continued to hunt down some of the more obscure items on the museum's list, but she also indulged in all the finer things Zurich, Gstaad, and even Paris had to offer, with Gregory as her guide.

Her father was thrilled to hear that the camp chair was in transit and would let her know when the shipping crate arrived.

Lana had no qualms about cheating on her boyfriend. Clark was financially incapable of providing the kinds of luxuries and experiences Gregory could, so she saw no conflict in her behavior. As long as he did not know, what was the harm? She and Daae spent as much time together as their busy work schedules allowed.

From the moment Gregory had presented her with an haute couture dress to wear to the Versace event, Lana had been plunged into a world that heretofore she could only have dreamt about. She enjoyed being spoiled by such an attractive and wealthy man. Their fifteen-year age disparity made little difference, and being in his company was easy and natural. One night he surprised her with an invitation to attend a dinner party at his home where there would be numerous guests of intercontinental stature. The most familiar to her was the international financier, Arthur Chow.

Daae treated her to a day spa in order for her to prepare for the event: hair, full-body massage, make-up, manicure, and pedicure. When he collected Lana that evening, she noted his quiet smile of approval at her appearance; again wearing a fabulous

azure-colored designer gown, with elegant sapphire jewelry to match. He kissed her hand and the heat once more flared between them. They stepped into the Rolls Royce and were driven into the night.

Catherine sat drinking a rich Kona coffee, especially flown in that morning from the island nation of Hawaii, with Arthur Chow in his penthouse. Since her career-altering interview with him two years before, they had developed a friendship which was gradually building into something richer. They always had either lunch or dinner together whenever he visited Metropolis. This evening they enjoyed a pleasant meal of bowtie pasta, lobster and spinach swimming in a delightfully tantalizing cream sauce.

Now they sat in his dining room, chatting quietly, leisurely sipping coffee and nibbling on French pastries. She loved eating in this particular room. The vibrant red paint on the walls always stimulated her appetite, while the lush English Ivy plants with their sharp variegated leaves spilling from the oversized planters hanging from the walls gave an unusual dash of fascinating color.

“A penny for your thoughts, Arthur, you’ve been quiet all evening,” she said teasingly.

He looked up, his Asian features working hard to suppress a grimace. “International flights are always difficult. As I grow older, it’s becoming harder to physically adjust and then readjust to the time zone changes. The point is approaching for me to let the younger men in my company have all the fun of global commerce and settle down.”

Catherine immediately thought of Eduardo giving up his life as a journalist and she spoke without thinking. “Arthur, how can you consider ‘settling down,’ that’s unimaginable! You’ll go nuts from boredom within a month,” she said while taking a thoughtful sip of the coffee.

His voice grew wistful as he said, “Oh, I am sure to find something to occupy my life. Change is inevitable. Even that cold-hearted snake, Gregory Daae, seems to be heading in that direction.”

She almost choked on the liquid and fixed her dinner companion with a curious stare. “Daae enjoys playing the game too much. He’s a master at it and he wouldn’t let anyone else run his empire!”

“One never knows. While in Zurich, wrapping up some business matters, I received an invitation to dine with him. As we are ‘friendly’ adversaries, I saw no harm in accepting. A goodly number of Swiss bankers and the like were present. Some were correspondents, such as your associate Anna from the *Daily Planet’s* Athens office.”

Catherine nodded her head almost imperceptibly; trust Anna to be wherever the movers and shakers of world finance gathered. She listened intently as her companion continued.

“... charming young woman, petite blonde with intense blue eyes. He mentioned something about her being either an archeologist or a French historian. She was in Europe collecting a quantity of pieces of authentic furniture and suchlike for an extensive exhibit that will be taking place at the Metropolis Museum in a few months. They seem to be quite taken with each other.”

Catherine calmly took another sip of her coffee, and asked, dreading the response, “Wh... what was the woman’s name?”

“La... Lara... Ah! Lana Lang! Why? Do you know her?”

“You remember me mentioning a co-worker by the name of Clark Kent? He works with Lois Lane. That woman who is with Daae might be his girlfriend. She is supposed to be in Europe on a work assignment.”

Clearly surprised by this announcement, Arthur stood up and said, “Just a moment, there might be a picture of her in my bag.”

While Arthur went into his office, Catherine strived not to squirm in her chair. This bit of information that had fallen into her

lap was bad, very bad indeed.

“Yes, Anna took this group picture; Daae had copies made for all the guests as a gift commemorating the evening.”

Catherine studied the photo, and her green eyes gleamed catlike upon spotting a very chic Lana among the elegantly turned-out guests. Gone was the Midwestern small town girl. Now she had transformed into a sophisticated woman of fashion. The American city dweller had departed as well; she wore a blue gown, and her blonde hair was pinned into a very pleasing-to-the-eye, sleek chignon – very European. Clark’s so-called girlfriend smiled prettily at Daae, but that was not what caught her attention; the two were holding hands like lovers.

“Oh no! Should I tell Clark?” she thought in a panic.

Seeing the bitter expression on Catherine’s face, her companion asked, “Do you know the young lady?”

“Yes,” Catherine responded, her tone corrosive. “But she is *no* lady.”

“Are you going to tell your associate of her behavior?”

Taking her friend’s hand, she whispered hoarsely, “Oh, Arthur, I don’t know!”

Catherine was furiously typing up her notes from an interview with Senator Braxton, who was planning on making a bid for the Oval Office. Personally, she thought the politician’s chances were nil, and almost typed that in unflattering terms. The man had little charisma or knowledge of international politics, and according to rumors, his war chest wasn’t enough to sustain another senatorial campaign, much less a presidential one.

She blew out an exasperated breath. Unfortunately, for two days, the picture of a contented Gregory Daae and Lana Lang had been intruding on her concentration. The same wearisome thoughts were still tumbling over in her mind like a load of colorful laundry in an overactive washing machine. She sighed, stopped and started typing again. “Clark Kent is a loyal man; he doesn’t deserve someone stabbing him in the back like this. He deserves someone better. Someone like...”

Abruptly, a familiar voice broke through her dismal thoughts.

“Clark! Stop putting your grubby fingerprints on my monitor!” Lois noisily opened her desk drawer and removed a small bottle of window cleaner and a soft wipe cloth. Vigorously, she sprayed the monitor and wiped it down.

“...he **did** perpetrate the crime, not he **didn’t**. That’s altering the meaning of the sentence and the entire story!” her partner said calmly.

“That’s because Eugene Latimer is innocent, and I intend to prove it,” Lois fired back.

Catherine couldn’t help but listen to their bickering conversation. Since Lana’s departure from Metropolis, the partnership of Lane and Kent had improved tenfold. Clark seemed liberated, almost as if he had been dragged out from under some tremendous weight, while Lois talked to him without the snide, cutting tones that had marked the early days of their association. When they did argue, as they did now, it was more like brother and sister. But underneath the bluster, there was genuine admiration... and more importantly, respect, on both sides.

“That man should be with Lois, not that blonde Benedict Arnold!” Catherine thought angrily. She was obviously playing Daae along, although by the man’s reputation, Catherine was positive no one played Gregory Daae.

Catherine’s thoughts were so distracted that she accidentally typed the word ‘tramp’ instead of ‘stamp’. She grimaced, corrected the error, and resumed typing. Lana Lang was not her concern. If she had not been with Arthur, this unpleasant fact would not have surfaced. Still, if Lana breezed back into the newsroom and proceeded to act as if she had just returned from a business trip, then and only then would Catherine have an important chat with Clark.

She had no doubt he wouldn't believe her. Which was why she had the picture Daae had given Arthur. The most important part of any good story was the proof to back it up.

She glanced over to Peggy's desk and wondered if any news of the Swiss media magnate's new relationship had reached her. "Oh, I hope not," she thought. Peggy was not as discreet as Catherine had been during her tenure writing the gossip column. It was a common practice for Peggy to include the names of *Daily Planet* co-workers, friends, and significant others in her column. A practice Catherine frowned upon. Her society stories were second-rate, poorly written, and sometimes key facts were excluded. Nothing to get them into trouble with Constance Hunter and the legal department, but nonetheless something to keep an eye on. Overall, Perry was not pleased with her performance. If she didn't improve soon, the managing editor could terminate her contract, but breaking a juicy gossip story like this might hold him off.

The monitor flickered, a mute reminder that she was worrying about this situation on the *Daily Planet's* time. This article needed her complete attention, not the personal lives of her co-workers. With a deep sigh, Catherine put the unfortunate triangle aside and finished writing the story.

In the offices of DMG, Daae's assistant was being subjected to the daily harangue of Jasper Templar.

"Mrs. Aronnax, our mutual employer has not returned any of my calls. Isn't he interested in the doings of this office in general and my reports in particular?" he said with an ugly, sarcastic edge.

She responded patiently, "There's a six-hour difference between Zurich and Metropolis. He is probably engaged in a business dinner."

Jasper smirked, "Oh, by all means, let us not interrupt his evening meal. Here, take this and make sure he reads it. Otherwise it'll be on your head!" With that, Templar dropped the file on her desk and departed.

Mrs. Aronnax looked askance at the closed door and shook her head. Mr. Templar's behavior grew more intolerable with each day. His arrogant treatment of everyone on the staff, from office boy to executive, was becoming the stuff of corporate legend. He behaves like the owner of DMG, she thought to herself, not an employee.

"Green folder," she said aloud, "so according to my understanding with Mr. Daae, I can look through it, if I so choose." She opened the file, thumbed through the neatly typed pages and thought, "What was so significant about his weekly reports that he wanted Mr. Daae to read them... almost to the point of obsession?" She checked her leather-bound desk calendar and since nothing pressing was taking place, decided to ignore all calls for the next hour.

After carefully reading the file twice, she put it down, but not without suppressing a shudder. In her fifteen years as Gregory Daae's assistant in this country, she had witnessed a great deal and wisely never voiced an opinion. That did not mean she was incapable of taking some form of action, and on occasion, she did. Sometimes the information she gleaned helped her decide which stocks to purchase and which ones to sell. She had no desire to be accused of insider trading, so the transaction amounts were small enough that they did not draw unwanted attention.

It was time to consult her backchannels and get a better understanding of just who and what Jasper Templar was.

"Bonesteel!" Templar shouted when he reached his office.

"Yes, sir," Bonesteel stood in the doorway and replied in a bland voice.

"Do you have the number for Preston Carpenter?"

"Yes, sir. Shall I contact him?"

"No," Jasper sneered, "Keep the number in your rolodex. Of course, I want you to call him! Tell him I work for Daae and we

need to talk."

Bonesteel nodded stiffly, and without another word returned to his cubicle.

An hour later found Jasper Templar at the *Metropolis Star* office of Preston Carpenter, sitting on a rather uncomfortable black leather chair.

Templar studied the publisher as he sat tensely behind his desk, trying unsuccessfully to hide his discomfort at having a high-ranking executive from DMG requesting a meeting. He was pleased to see the other man so obviously on the defensive. Defensive people were sensitive and prone to making errors. This conversation, Templar thought wickedly, is going to be fun.

"Mr. Carpenter, our mutual employer has spoken a great deal about you."

Nonplussed, the other man said haltingly, "Excuse me... did you say mutual 'employer'? What are you talking about? Mr. Daae and I are business acquaintances. I most certainly don't work for him."

Templar studied his fingernails as if they were the most important item in the room, then he looked up at Preston and smirked condescendingly. "Come, come, surely you didn't think that Mr. Daae would stop at purchasing a measly thirty percent of your stock? Ever heard of RoyalPoint Financials?"

Leaning forward in his leather chair, Preston responded, "I can't say as I have."

"Oh... well, more the pity for you. RoyalPoint is a holding company which has shares in many different businesses. Currently it owns thirty-five percent of not just the *Metropolis Star*, but of several of your other interests."

The tension in the room ratcheted upwards as Preston reached into his humidor and removed a cigar, his flinty eyes never leaving Templar's face. He was trying to remain composed, but the mere stalling action of taking the cigar spoke volumes. After lighting the cigar, he leaned back in his chair, fairly sucked in the aromatic vapors, and spoke.

"Did *your* employer send you over here to test me out? Because it's a waste of my time and yours. It won't work. We have a deal. I've stuck to my part of the bargain; providing hard-to-come-by information whenever he requests it. He needs to do the same."

"Oh, you're good, Pres... mind if I call you that?" Templar smiled and answered for him, "Of course you don't." He sat back and attempted to get comfortable in the cheap black leather chair, but it creaked noisily under his six-foot frame. "This is not a test. RoyalPoint does own most of your companies and guess who owns RoyalPoint?"

The other man narrowed his eyes and said, "I'm sure you are dying to tell me."

Disappointed that the thunder had been stolen, Templar said peevishly, "Gregory Daae, but since he is in Switzerland most of the time and cannot possibly keep an eye on all of his concerns, I basically run RoyalPoint, which means I control how those stocks are manipulated on the open market. With one, maybe two phone calls, the pitiful newspaper known as the *Metropolis Star* will cease to belong to you. All that precious hero worship of Charles Foster Kane will go down in flames."

The cigar between Preston's thumb and index finger nearly collapsed from the pressure he exerted on it. But he had not risen to his current station in life without dealing with a few bullies. This Jasper Templar, despite his hand-tailored suit and sophisticated air, was nothing more than that. He would play Templar's game, for the moment. He placed the cigar in an ashtray and looked into Templar's eyes. "Stop wasting time, Templar, and get to the point."

The thin lips smiled, but any merriment did not meet Templar's eyes. "Ah, good. So glad to know you are not at all like

that fictional newsman Kane, but a reasonable businessman. We are about to become ‘silent partners’ in RoyalPoint Financials.”

Thirty minutes later, Templar exited Carpenter’s office, whistling to himself. “Step three of my plan is in place. Time to get Bonesteel started on step four. He needs to get in contact with Mr. Lombard of the *Daily Planet* and Ms. Nygaard of TresAx.”

It had been a busy week since the Jeep incident and Lois finally had a chance to study the material Eduardo had mailed over. There were several handwritten names on the back of one typewritten sheet, but one of them fairly jumped out at her: **Rita Gaskell – FBI operative - UBS - 1970.**

Lois’ eyes widened in surprise. Wasn’t that Aunt Rita’s maiden name? What was it doing on Eduardo’s list of contacts? The conversation they had had when she first presented the Daee investigation to Constance came to mind. Maybe now was the time to have a long-overdue talk with her aunt. She looked over at Clark’s desk and from the stormy expression on his face, either one of his contacts was giving him a hard time or Lana was making demands. She shook her head and wondered how anyone could exert such a strong influence from thousands of miles away?

Deciding it would be best not to disturb him, she took off for Café Americana, hoping to receive a few answers.

“It’s a simple thing to ask, Lana. I miss you. Why can’t I ‘come over’ for a few hours, just to catch up with each other?” he whispered into the handset.

Over thousands of miles of ocean and land, Clark could clearly hear the annoyance – and possibly a little strain in Lana’s voice. “My work is pretty intense; it’s reached the crucial stages.”

“That sounds like a line from a bad spy novel. Come on, what’s really wrong? Ever since your dad gave you this assignment ,you’ve been ducking me.”

“Really?” Lana fired back. “Weren’t you the one who *insisted* we pursue our careers before we got engaged? Now you’re acting like a caveman, demanding I drop everything and spend time with you! My job is important, and notwithstanding your ‘advantages’, that job requires one hundred percent concentration. Remember how many times a ‘big story’ came before a date?” She took a breath, and Clark could hear her heart pounding excitedly over the phone. “We won’t even go into the ‘other side’ of yourself. I may be in Europe, but the Swiss edition of the *Daily Planet* tells about how ‘safe’ it is to live in Metropolis. I wonder what or who the ‘Haze’ might be?”

Perfectly understanding the verbal shorthand she was using, Clark felt properly chastised and said, “Lana... sweetheart... don’t take it that way. Look, you’re right, tracking down the Napoleon camp chair is a big, stressful assignment. Your dad is depending on this trip being a success. I won’t ask to ‘come over’ again.” But he did not mention or apologize for his covert rescues.

His girlfriend’s voice calmed down slightly when she responded. “Thanks, Clark, I really appreciate your understanding. We can talk when I get back. It shouldn’t be too much longer. Gotta run... my antique collector wants to meet.”

“Okay. Call when you get a chance.”

“Of course, as soon as this meeting is completed... maybe tomorrow. Look, I really have to go. Goodbye, Clark.”

Clark put down the phone and sighed deeply. News of his ‘extracurricular’ activities had apparently spread overseas. No doubt Lana would have a great deal to say about that when she returned. Her opinion mattered to him in many things. Nonetheless, to be perfectly honest, he didn’t care what arguments she came up with. He *liked* being able to help and would continue to do so.

Still, there was something about her voice. The tones were wrong. He had known Lana Lang almost all his life. Could she be hiding something? Maybe Lana felt a degree of uncertainty about

their relationship. He couldn’t blame her on that score. Since coming to Metropolis they seemed to be steadily moving in opposite directions rather than drawing closer together.

He sat quietly at his desk, thinking matters over, the background noise and activity of the newsroom fading into a dull rattle and hum. Perhaps it was time to be mature and take steps in a different direction. They had been seeing each other for a long time. After all, his new apartment did have plenty of space for her things in the loft.

He pulled out a phone book to look up the address and phone number for Mazik’s Jeweler’s

“Uncle Mike!” Lois said, loud enough for her favorite uncle to hear, but not so loud as to disturb the mid-morning brunch crowd.

“Hey! Good morning, shortcake!” Her uncle advanced upon her with rapid steps and gave her a hug. “What brings you around today? Got an important interview? There’s a quiet booth in the back that just emptied out. One of the busboys will have it cleaned up in a jiffy!”

“Oh no, nothing like that. Is Aunt Rita here?”

“She’s probably in the kitchen. Can this wait a few minutes, or do you need to see her now?”

The cashier was ringing up customers, and waiters laden with fresh food swiftly moved back and forth throughout the space. Lois bit her lower lip. She didn’t want to put her uncle and aunt in a tight spot, especially during a busy time at the restaurant.

“How about I come back after the mid-morning rush?” she said.

A familiar voice was heard behind her, “Did someone need to see me?”

Lois told Rita she would come back later. But her aunt must have noticed the tense expression on the younger woman’s face. Rita turned to her husband and said, “Mike, she needs to discuss something important. Can you ask one of the guys to cover for me? Promise, we’ll be back in five... no, fifteen minutes.”

Mike agreed, although not without some reservation. After all, Rita was one of the chefs. He seated the two women in the empty booth, and then walked to the back of the restaurant.

“What can I do for you?” Rita asked crisply.

“Sorry, I should have come later, when it’s not so busy,” Lois said, looking around the busy restaurant.

“Ah, don’t worry about Mike. For you to stop by at this particular hour means it’s important.”

Lois quickly explained about Eduardo and his list of names. She produced the sheet of paper and pointed to her aunt’s name.

“Is this... you?” she asked without preamble.

Rita studied the name, date, and location. Her countenance flushed slightly, then speaking softly, she said, “My, my, the chickens have come home to roost.”

Part Eleven

Café Americana was in the midst of a hectic mid-morning. The sounds of dishes clattering and the voices of eager patrons freely mingled together. Busboys cleaned and reset tables with practiced ease. But in a small booth to the rear of the restaurant, two women sat quietly. When Lois’ aunt finally spoke, it was with a sad, almost haunted tone that Lois had never heard before.

Lois carefully studied the expression on Rita’s face. Her aunt’s green eyes had a faraway look in them. “Wh... where did your former partner Eduardo get this information from?”

Without answering her query, Lois, remembering a conversation from years before, said, “You once said, and I quote, ‘One of these days, you and I are going to have a long talk about all manner of investigations, both domestic and foreign.’ Has that day come?”

Rita continued looking at the names on the paper and said softly, “Yes. Yes, it has. Apparently, your associate has unearthed a few events from my days of working with the federal government. Events, I might add, that should have been taken care of a while ago.”

“What has that got to do with Daae?” Lois asked as she leaned closer, anxious to hear every word.

“These initials, UBS, stand for the *United Bank of Switzerland*. About twenty years ago, the former head of that Swiss institution had financial dealings with some vicious characters. Certain American mobsters were money laundering their illegal funds through UBS. We – that is, the CIA – were sent to investigate.”

Her head bent, listening carefully to every word her aunt spoke, Lois asked, “What tipped you guys off?”

“A well-respected journalist named Armin Rissler ran a financial newspaper in Zurich, and he was the one who gave us the first clues. He had an uncanny ability to ferret out fiscal misdeeds in Zurich. The stench coming from that particular banking institution must have been very enticing. The Swiss are proud of their banking industry and believe it should be protected. Honorable men like Rissler get seriously annoyed when anybody – even one of their own – messes with that institution. He had written several articles about the bank’s less-than-savory covert activities, which did not cast UBS in the best of lights.”

Rita stopped and looked around the busy restaurant, as if to remind herself she was in Metropolis and not Zurich. Once mentally reassured of that fact, she continued.

“Those unflattering articles raised a lot of flags. The Swiss police and Interpol sent in the blood hounds. After no small amount of backroom ‘diplomacy’, we sent in ours. When it comes to the Swiss, we like to keep things above board. Never know when they might need something from us - *Quid pro quo* and all that other good stuff.”

“Unfortunately, by the time our investigative and financial team was in place, only forty-eight hours after the last article had been printed, Rissler was dead - killed in an automobile ‘accident’. Not surprisingly, the driver of the other vehicle was never found.”

“Didn’t he have a partner or assistant, someone who could provide us with files?” Lois asked.

Rita shook her head, “From everything I read in his case files he was a real maverick. Apparently, on this particular investigation, Rissler did not believe in trusting anyone with his sources and materials. All of the evidence he had gathered against the bank had vanished as if it had never existed. Since there wasn’t a paper trail pointing a finger at the UBS, the investigation itself collapsed. Not long after that, his newspaper was purchased by a cartel that had no interest in launching an investigation against such a powerful financial institution without evidence.”

Shaking her head, long dark tresses brushing against her face, Lois said, “That doesn’t sound right.”

“No, it doesn’t. Our initial investigation only yielded the special numbered accounts owned by the American mobsters. All records of them were swept under the rug so completely that the paper trail Armin mentioned in his final article never materialized. That in itself was maddening, but since all the evidence had vanished, we had to pack up our tents and go home. Of course, not only was the head of the bank ‘retired’, but so were the entire board of directors. The Swiss authorities were satisfied and very politely told us our presence was no longer required or tolerated. It was a very humiliating experience for the CIA in general and my team in particular. We failed to get a handle on that case.”

Lois nodded her head and said thoughtfully, “I can imagine. But why do you say, ‘the chickens have come home to roost’?”

“That was my last case for the agency. Mike – rightfully so – wanted me to spend more time with him and our kids, not chasing bad guys all over the globe.” She sighed, “Still, it might have been

awfully satisfying to finish my career with a win. There was something about the case that never sat right with me or the rest of the team. We felt as if everything that happened had been manipulated. Like someone *wanted* us to make noise and not find anything. Almost like a distraction tactic.” Rita frowned and her face darkened with concentration. “Now, my question is: what has this got to do with your investigation, twenty-some-odd years later?”

Lois looked into her aunt’s eyes and said, “Do you know who was behind the purchase of the newspaper? I mean, who was really behind it?”

“No. Our section chief, Willis Figg, debriefed us and redacted any communications that might go public.”

“I’d like to talk with this Chief Figg. Is he still around?”

“Figg?” She shook her head. “No, he died five years ago, of lung cancer. Guy smoked like a chimney. What are you getting at, Lois?”

Lois’ face appeared thoughtful, “Eduardo must have seen a connection between what happened to Armin Rissler, UBS, and my investigation. The media and the Swiss financial world were maneuvered to further someone else’s ends. Plus, this looks a lot like another story...” Lois’ voice trailed off.

Rita interrupted her train of thought and said, “Right, like your fisheries case! Do you think Daae did all of this to make that story that Armin wrote go away? Eduardo must have serious connections to be able to find my name linked to UBS after all these years. He probably thinks my tenuous connections to Langley can help.”

Her niece looked at her, a hopeful expression on her face. “Can you talk to your old friends at Langley?”

Shrugging her shoulders, she responded, “Maybe... my former team is scattered, and I haven’t heard from most of them in years, but there still might be a few around.”

Lois looked about carefully and whispered, “I can’t believe you were a spy. I understand Uncle Mike’s concerns, but this was important work. Why leave?”

Rita cocked her head and said, “In that business, agents either move to a desk job, train new operatives, or retire. No one stays in the field forever.” She paused for a moment, then covered both hands over Lois’ and gave them a firm squeeze. “Honey, watch your back. These people, whoever they are, play for keeps. Mike and I don’t want to lose you.”

Lois could not help but notice her aunt’s hands were chilly with fear and apprehension. The tone in her voice also brooked no argument and suddenly Lois felt a tiny band of icy dread run through her heart straight to her shoes. Were these shadowy people from Rita’s past the ones trying to kill her?

Lana awoke lying between cool midnight blue satin sheets. She stretched her arms languidly and yawned, completely satisfied and content after yesterday’s excitement and the evening’s amorous labors. Finally, after denying him for weeks, she had shared the bed of Gregory Daae.

With every sigh and gesture, with every movement and touch, Gregory had sweetly pleased her body with reckless abandon and carnal skill which was so different from his normally controlled actions. The ardor of his lush, silken kisses caused her skin to flush a rosy pink at the memory. The experience – the sheer physical power of his sensuality – had been far more gratifying than she had anticipated. After all, he was several years old than she. Nonetheless, his urgent, yet surprisingly tender lovemaking had pleased her far more than her previous lovers. He, no doubt exhausted from the previous night, lay sleeping contentedly by her side. She marveled at the hard-chiseled form which lay softly outlined beneath the dark perfume scented sheets.

It was a bright clear Wednesday morning and she was here in a fantastic chalet in Gstaad with her husband of little more than

two days. Settling back into the deep, fluffy goose down pillows and luxuriating in their softness, she looked at the rings on the third finger of her left hand and smiled. The engagement ring was a masterpiece of delicate hand engraving, the natural pink diamond accents surrounding a square-cut diamond center. The slender yellow gold diamond wedding band created a perfect union between the two rings.

The rings meant something, more than just the fact that she was his wife; to her, they symbolized determination to maintain control. Despite the kisses they had exchanged since their first official date at the Versace Fashion show, she had steadfastly refused to sleep with him until there was a wedding band on her finger... not an engagement ring. Lana was fairly certain Gregory would have more respect for her character by waiting until they married before making love. Even Clark had the old-fashioned notion that a couple should wait until they were married to consummate their relationship. That attitude had annoyed her, but she had been willing to be patient. That learned patience had served her well with Gregory.

On the other hand, after the proposal, he had overcome her every objection, including her suggestion that they wait until they returned to Metropolis to ask her parents' permission for her hand. The laws in Switzerland demanded at least ten days for the banns to be read. But a man with his power and influence had been able to have that particular practice waived. They were both adults; there was no need to stand on outdated customs. A mere four days after asking for her hand, they were married in the Registrar's Office on Molkenstrasse.

He promised her that when they returned to the States she would have a splendid wedding and reception in Metropolis where her father could walk her down the aisle.

She very much wanted the ceremony and reception to take place at the Lexor Hotel. What better way to announce to her friends and co-workers that she had aligned herself with one of the richest men in the world? Finally, all the luxuries and financial security she could hope for were hers.

Her father would be thrilled that she had married so well. Now the worry of her marrying a poor upcoming journalist could be put to rest. Her mother might be a little disappointed, since she really did like Clark, but in the end, she would prefer Gregory's old-world charm and affluence. After all, the next time they came to Europe there would be no need for them to stay in an impersonal hotel. They could relax and reside in any one of her husband's apartments or homes.

Now her plans for an expedition to Burgundy could proceed as planned.

This was a marriage of convenience - the very best kind.

Lana ran her left hand through his thick white hair, inspecting how the early morning light sparkled on the delicate gems of her rings. The pre-nuptial agreement she had signed prior to the civil ceremony offered a total package of financial security for her comforts. If she did not produce a child for him within the first five years of their marriage they would divorce with a sizable settlement for her. If she did and the child was a boy, no matter what the nature of their relationship, a larger amount in her name would be deposited in a Swiss bank. In the meantime, he would fund her Roman colony archeological dig in Burgundy.

Not a bad outcome for two months' worth of work.

Still, she did have a single regret; Clark would be terribly hurt when he discovered she had flown off to Europe on a job assignment and returned married to another man. Explaining the situation would be a test of her manipulative abilities.

But for now, it was time to rest. Lana lay down next to her new husband and drifted into a light sleep.

Unbeknownst to her, Gregory was awake but merely pretended to be asleep. He was an early riser and soon she would learn that about him – and other supplementary information only

his wife should be aware of. His mind traveled back to what had led them to this tranquil, superbly appointed bedchamber...

On a beautiful Wednesday evening they were enjoying the boat tour on Lake Zurich. Gregory had been especially attentive all day. He wanted to ask her an important question but not on the boat. Would she join him for a champagne supper at Restaurant *Kronenhalle*, famous for its original paintings by Chagall, Picasso and Mir? She agreed and soon found herself seated at a white linen-covered table surrounded by fantastic artwork and the most elite members of Zurich's society.

Gregory ordered shredded calves' liver with *rösti*, while Lana requested filet of sole baked with olives and tomatoes. He scrutinized the petite blonde while sipping an excellent aperitif. In his mind, he was weighing the question he was about to pose. Many hours of carefully laid plans were coming to a climax this evening. Memories of when he first saw her darting through the back corridors of the museum came to mind. She moved like some elusive woodland creature, disappearing around a corner whenever he was near. Intrigued, he had made discreet inquiries and discovered Lana Lang was intelligent, ambitious, and determined to lead her own archaeological dig someday. The reports also revealed she was trying to learn as much about him as possible.

Amused, even refreshed, by her coquettishness, Daae decided to make the game easier, but on his own ground. It was he who had convinced the original owner of the Napoleon camp chair to renege on his agreement with the museum, which had forced Prof. Lang to send his daughter on a search for another chair. How 'fortunate' that Garen Aymond was willing to assist Lana.

He had originally thought that while in Zurich they would enjoy a brief, pleasurable liaison, but the young woman was captivating his normally guarded heart.

Now they sat across a table at one of the most romantic restaurants in the city.

He was not nervous, yet was concerned as to how he might react if the answer was a firm negative. Lana had mentioned that Clark Kent – partner to the obnoxious Lois Lane – was her 'boyfriend', but since Daae and Lana had started spending time together in Metropolis, the young man's name had never once crossed her lips.

Apparently, the relationship was neither serious nor committed; otherwise, his attentions would have been refused. He knew enough about the young woman to know she was not inhibited. If she truly loved this Kent person, she would have said as much.

After a time, the dinner dishes were cleared, and they sat, quietly drinking Italian roasted coffee and sharing a slice of warm strawberry and apple strudel, drizzled with a rich, creamy vanilla sauce, laced with brandy. They held hands and gazed at one another as classical music played softly in the background. The air swirling around them was perfumed with the spice of flirtation, ambition, and a dangerous hint of seduction.

Gregory broke the spell of the moment and said quietly, "I have something for you." From nowhere he produced a small dove-gray box and opened it. To Lana's astonishment a new star had joined the night: it lay on a pillow of sapphire velvet, a perfect diamond ring of such clarity and brightness, it nearly blinded her.

"A token of my admiration and pleasure, sweet Lana. These past few weeks since your arrival in Zurich have been a curing balm to my soul. I think continuing our involvement on a permanent basis... marriage will provide benefits to us both. Of course, if this ring is not to your liking, it can be changed immediately."

She considered the sparkling contents nestled within the well-designed box and a smile stretched across her perfectly lacquered red lips...one of triumph, with perhaps a touch of uncertainty.

"Marriage? But Gregory, we have known each other only a little over two months. How can you... how can we know this is

right?”

“Forgive me, chérie, but I am a pragmatic man. No one lives forever, and I do not have the time for tedious dating rituals... as if I were only ten years your senior. Let us marry. Provide me with an heir and I promise – in writing – to ensure a lifetime of comfort. If you wish me to pay for an archeological dig in Burgundy or anywhere in the world, so be it.”

Lana said nothing, merely squeezed his hand, and then kissed it.

They were married by special license at the registrar’s office in Zurich. The ten-minute ceremony was attended by only five people: Gregory and herself, the registrar and two high-level DMG executives. Not the most romantic way to begin, but he knew his new wife had plans forming for a lavish vow renewal ceremony and reception in Metropolis, one which her parents would approve of.

Suddenly, he felt a warm body snuggle up next to him and whisper his name. Turning over, Gregory opened his blue eyes, and they were ignited with passion and much more, perhaps even deep affection. “Good morning... *Madame* Daae,” he murmured huskily and drew her to him.

Lana thought, as their lips gently touched and the kiss deepened, that soon she must call her parents to give them the joyful news, before it was leaked to the media. Soft moans of pleasure escaped from her as his sweet lips traveled down her neck, and no further thoughts about Clark dared intrude.

Lois mused, as she sat at her desk, that it had only taken a few days before Aunt Rita had managed to locate the son of one of her former team members and promised to pass over any information she could glean from him. If Lois could get the name of someone who would be willing to talk on the record, the Daae investigation could begin in earnest. Speaking of talking, she needed to get Clark onboard. With the information Rita might provide, it was time to get him involved in this investigation. Actually, what was needed was a task force. Between Jack, Stacy, and her elusive partner, she might be able to pull this into a series of articles worthy of a Kerth... if not a Pulitzer.

Briefly, her mind drifted to the early 20th century female journalist Ida Minerva Tarbell. Tarbell’s groundbreaking series of articles in the now defunct magazine, *McClure’s*, on Standard Energy had shaken the company to its knees, causing the elder Rockefeller to move to Europe for two years and allow subordinates to run the company. It had eventually led to the trust’s break-up into many companies. She contemplated whether this series of articles might have the same long-range impact. It was one thing to do the research and quietly buttonhole confidential sources, but it was quite another to print the article and thereby kick over an international hornet’s nest.

Regardless of any misgivings, she was in a very real sense stepping into Miss Tarbell’s shoes and taking on a media company that sometimes operated very much like the old trusts of the past.

The clatter of typing and the drone of fax machines interrupted her thoughts. She could daydream about the Pulitzer, getting another Kerth award, and old stories later, but right now she needed to find Kansas.

Unfortunately, since that last phone call to Lana, he seemed, for lack of a better word, distracted. Regrettably, the *Daily Planet* did not pay him to be a heartsick teenager. She needed him focused and ready to work. Otherwise, he was not the newspaperman she thought he was. As she stood up to begin searching for Clark, she noticed James Olsen exiting Perry’s office. “Oh, good grief,” she thought, “What does he want?”

Across town in the Luthor penthouse, the phone rang in Arianna’s elegantly appointed gray room. She picked up the receiver, and upon hearing the voice on the other end, said happily,

“Alexandria! It’s been ages! How are you?”

Over kilometers of water and land, Arianna heard the clear-cut French tones of her old school friend. Alexandria was one of the few people who knew she was still in love with Gregory Daae. “All is well here, *mon amie*. Sadly, this is not a social call. There is news to be imparted, and it shall not be pleasant to hear. It is about Gregory....”

Five minutes later, Arianna thanked her friend for the information and bid her good-bye. Her ears burned with anger and shame. Months ago she had thrown herself at Daae only to be humiliated by his refusal to take her as his lover. She was willing to accept seeing him on rare occasions for their specific business, but he never encouraged her to think they could begin again once Lex was out of the picture. Now, he had wounded her as deeply and as painfully as she had done to him years ago.

She turned, and saw a beautiful crystal vase filled with a bouquet of lovely roses, daisy poms, alstroemeria and Monte Casino in shades of pink and purple on the sofa table. She had originally chosen these flowers because they reminded her of their walks in Paris during the spring. A fresh stab of pain entered her heart. With almost maniacal strength, she picked up the delicate vessel and hurled it against the wall. Water and delicate petals splattered everywhere, and the sound of crystal shattering was heard throughout the penthouse. Seconds later, a frightened maid entered the room, with Nigel not far behind.

“Mrs. Luthor! Is everything all right?” the portly woman asked.

Arianna’s dark eyes, laced with fury, stared at the woman, and she said in clipped icy tones, “Clean up this mess.” Turning to Nigel, she snapped, “What are you standing about for?”

Nigel, unperturbed by her behavior, said, “Merely looking after your well-being, Mrs. Luthor.”

She glared at him for a moment. He bowed slightly at the waist, and with his characteristic dark silence, stepped out of the room and walked down the hallway.

“My.... well-being?” she whispered in a sad, broken voice. “How... how can I be well, when the man I love has married someone else?”

Templar was whistling happily in his office when Bonesteel entered, a thick file under his arm.

“Ah, good, you’re here. Our employer will be returning in a few days. Is everything ready? Has Carpenter provided us with what we need?”

“Yes, sir. Mr. Carpenter had funds in the sum total of fifteen million dollars transferred to RoyalPoint accounts. We can begin purchasing the remaining stocks of LexCorp and DMG.”

“Excellent work, Bonesteel. But don’t ever forget, there is no ‘we’ in this arrangement, only ‘me’. I doubt if Daae could trust a man with such a shady background handling his household accounts here in Metropolis, much less his media empire. Leave the report and go.”

Bonesteel very carefully placed the file on the right-hand corner of the desk. His face was as calm and placid as a glass of ice water. He nodded, and with dignified grace, departed the office. Only seconds after the door closed, the phone rang. Templar snatched it off the cradle and barked into the receiver, “Yes!” Two minutes later, he replaced the phone, a bewildered look scrawling across his face. “Mr. Daae takes a bride. Well, well, well, this bit of news might have considerable impact on my plans,” he muttered. “Perhaps I should cultivate someone at the Metropolis Museum in case Mrs. Daae can be used in the future.”

James Olsen sat at his desk on the fifteenth floor of the *Daily Planet* building. The phone conversation he had just concluded was a happy one for the paper, and now he had to deliver the news to Perry White. The young man looked around his office and

thought of inviting Perry upstairs. He shook his head, dismissing that particular thought. Since he had purchased the paper, he had had a number of changes made to the décor of the executive offices. Instead of the stiff, formal feeling that had previously permeated the place, his designers had instilled a decidedly different, ‘downtown vibe’. As a result, most of the publishing ‘old guard’ made it a point to avoid the executive suite in general and his office in particular.

No, he would go down there and meet with the editor on his own ground. Truth be told, James liked visiting the bullpen, as it was the heart and soul of the paper. Still, he was not exactly crazy about delivering news like this to Perry, since the editor was sure to balk, but that couldn’t be helped. So, decision made, James exited the office and made his way down the corridor to the elevator.

With a purposeful stride, James stepped off the elevator and into the dull roar of the newsroom: the banging of keys on keyboards, the news monitors droning in the background, and the steady rattle of voices. A vibrant, colorful newspaper doing what it does best – reporting the news. The atmosphere shifted ever so slightly when everyone noticed that he had entered – no, invaded – their hallowed space. One could feel the mental message jumping from one person to another. The ‘head suit’ had arrived. They were probably all wondering what he was doing down here.

James sighed internally. He was about to have a conversation with Perry White regarding two of his top reporters. One of them, he knew, was going to be extremely disappointed by the news he carried.

Perry came out of his office and greeted the younger man, “Morning, James, anything I can do for you?”

James smiled to himself; there was a hint of concern in Perry’s tone, with a slender shade of challenge. Trust this bear of a man to protect his beloved newsroom and its staff, even from the owner. “Let’s talk in your office. This should only take a few minutes.”

Once the two men had settled in their chairs, Perry got right to it. “So, what brings you down here?”

James held up his hands in a gesture of surrender, “I’m not trying to write questions for an interview, but my visit does have to do with Lex Luthor. About ten minutes ago the short list of reporters who will be allowed access to Space Station Archimedes was released.”

“I see.” Perry looked crestfallen, “The people at DMG/LNN did not think our newspaper was important enough to have one of our own on that list? Well, Elvis turned to producing when his voice failed. I guess we can accept this.”

“Oh, no! We do have a reporter on that list! It’s just not the person everyone expected to go, but she is the best choice. It’s science editor Janet Owens, not Lois Lane. It was not a question of talent, but a question of expertise. Janet is a respected science journalist who is well-known by many of EPRAD’s officials and scientists. Lois is an investigative reporter who works the city desk and has no background whatsoever in space exploration. We need someone who understands technical jargon and can clearly explain what’s going on up there *without* an interpreter.”

The expression on Perry’s face covered a range of emotions, from happiness to disappointment and everything in between. He thought, “Both women were excellent reporters, each adept in her chosen field of expertise. But James was right; Lois might have the savvy to get the job done, but not the technical knowledge. The poor kid was going to be crushed.”

As if he sensed the myriad of emotions that churned beneath the surface, James said, “Let me tell her, Perry, there’s no reason for you to be the bad guy.”

“No. This is the newsroom... *my* newsroom. I’ll tell them both at the same time.” He hesitated and then said, “Real decent offer to smooth things over with Lois. I appreciate it.”

James nodded, “Let me know how everything turns out.” With that, the publisher of the *Daily Planet* opened the door and exited. He thought how fortunate he was not to be giving ‘Mad Dog’ Lane the bad news.

Catherine had just completed her story and sent it over to the group printer. She pulled the papers out of the bin and began looking it over. Suddenly she realized the material she was looking at was not hers, but Peggy Becker’s latest column, and quietly seethed. Once again, her replacement had written up a full column and had not done any proper research on her subject. It was nearly 11:30am and today’s evening edition deadline was looming. Constance Hunter would have to work overtime to double check her facts. This behavior had to stop. Also, one of the *Daily Planet*’s staff reporters was mentioned in the story. Nothing bad in itself, but it might put Carl Fiske in a tenuous position.

She walked over to Peggy’s desk and said, “Have you checked over the information in this article?”

Peggy, a bleached blonde with a high-pitched nasal voice, snapped, “No time to chat! The ambassador to Amir is in town and I understand he’s dating the tennis star, Korrine Vanger. I gotta get down to the Lexor before they leave for dinner. Have you seen Jack around here? I need pictures to go with the story.”

The one person in the bullpen Jack despised more than Ralph Lombard – if that was possible – was Peggy. Catherine suspected she would want him to work for her on the assignment, but the young man had skipped out of the office to do an errand for Elsie.

“Jack! Where are you!” Peggy shouted again as she snaked around Catherine and headed for the ramp.

But Catherine, determined not to be ignored, followed her. “Hey! I’m serious! Did Fiske actually *say* this? I happen to know Councilman Deatz. He’s a good man and the idea of him running off to a downtown hotel with his secretary in the middle of the afternoon for a tryst is pretty strong stuff! We could get into a lot of trouble.”

Peggy called over her shoulder, “That’s your problem, Grant, always worrying about everybody else’s work. What, are you bucking for, Perry’s job? I’ve already got Fiske’s quote, why talk to him again?”

“Who wants to talk to me?” A middle-aged man wearing an ill-fitting dark gray suit asked as he walked down the ramp. He was holding a white styrofoam cup of coffee and was lazily stirring it with his index finger.

“I don’t, but Miss High-and-Mighty Grant wants to talk to you about Councilman Deatz and his secretary. You know, how they spent some ‘quality time’ together at a hotel downtown?” Peggy said, her voice dripping with double meaning.

Fiske stopped stirring the coffee and said with panic rising in his voice, “Wait a second, Councilman Deatz and his *wife* were at that hotel raising money for autistic kids. Afterwards, they spent some quality time together. You mistook what I said! Please tell me that story didn’t get filed?”

“Oh, no, I... I didn’t.” Peggy said. Suddenly the high winds of arrogance were completely blown out of her sails.

The relief on Carl’s face was evident for all to see. “Thank goodness! She was ‘acting’ as his secretary, since his real secretary had to leave work due to a family emergency. *Mrs.* Deatz has lost fifty pounds, lightened her hair and updated her wardrobe. She looks twenty years younger! Listen, Becker, don’t ever ask me for a quote again if you can’t get the facts straight!” He turned to Catherine, “Thanks for stepping in. She would have gotten me into a lotta hot water!” With those words, Carl ambled over to his desk, loudly slurping his coffee.

Peggy snarled and went back to her desk, muttering darkly. She had to completely rewrite the story in less than ten minutes.

From behind her, Catherine heard a familiar voice say, “Peggy missed another opportunity for throwing the *Daily Planet*

into a lawsuit?”

“Yes, but I wonder how much longer before she does something that embroils this entire newspaper into a very real, and very ugly, legal case,” Catherine sighed, shaking her head. Something caught her eye and she said, “Lois, Perry’s waving for you to come into the office. Apparently Janet’s already in there.”

“Hmm, I wonder what’s up? James Olsen was in there a while ago.” She looked at her friend and said, “The space station! I’ll bet those guys over at DMG/LNN finally made a decision about which reporters will be doing the initial coverage.” Lois fairly ran into Perry’s office, her face shining with excitement.

Ten minutes later a crestfallen Lois emerged from Perry’s office with Janet Owens. The two women stepped just outside of the office and gave each other a hug. Perry watched, his face displaying a mixture of paternal pride and sadness.

“Lois, I wish we could *both* go,” Janet said sincerely.

The younger woman sighed deeply and said, “Perry’s right, the assignment should be given to the journalist with the best expertise. Besides, the officials at EPRAD know Janet Owens, not Lois Lane. Get home and tell the whole family. Hug Mike, my love to the girls and pet Shadow for me.”

Janet nodded, “Will do, on all counts. Thanks again, Perry.” With that, Janet bounded up the stairs and headed for the elevator. She had a lot to do before leaving for EPRAD and astronaut training, and the launch was set for six months from now.

It was a quite different Lois who walked over to her desk and sat down. She was deeply disappointed yet knew in her heart that the best-qualified reporter had been chosen for the assignment. A quick glance at Clark’s desk revealed that, not surprisingly, it was empty. “Rats! Doesn’t that guy *ever* stick around? Well, if I can’t go into space covering the construction of Space Station Archimedes, then I better get to work on more ‘earthbound’ stories.”

Just then, she looked up and saw her partner walking down the ramp and straightening one of his crazy colored ties, “Hey, Clark! Where have you been?”

Not missing a beat, he replied, “Checking out a story not too far from my own neighborhood. Apparently one of the local pawn shops was running a fencing operation for high-end jewelry. Inspector Henderson was happy to get the tip and the bust. I just came back from the precinct. This story has to be typed up before Perry comes out of his office.”

“Great! When you get finished, we need to meet in the conference room. I... I need your help.” Even though he was her friend and occasional partner, it was still hard to use the word ‘help’ around him or anyone else besides Eduardo.

Suddenly worried, he approached her and said with a touch of unease, “Is everything all right, Lois? What can I do? Do you need a loan until payday?”

She couldn’t help but laugh gently at the sincere concern on his face, “Oh, no, not that kind of help! I’m working on an important...” She stopped, looked around, and said, “Let’s not discuss it here. Look, get that story written up, and then we can talk.”

Less than thirty minutes later Clark joined Lois in the conference room.

“So what’s this mystery all about?” he asked in conspiratorial tones.

She studied him carefully and wondered for the hundredth time if he was the supportive work partner Bobby Bigmouth had suggested she needed. Eduardo was still the only reporter she could stand to be partnered with. But with a mental shrug, she began, “Clark, I have been working on an in-depth investigative story that, if it is published, will be a series of articles. This piece has been a work in progress almost as long as I have been at the *Daily Planet*. Eduardo helped me for a while, and even after he

went to work for our London office, he was still able to provide material that has shaped the European background of the account. Unfortunately, whenever I get close to someone who can corroborate the story, something happens. But it’s possible a new source has surfaced and I might finally be able to have the thin edge of the wedge to crack this story open. So do you want to help?”

He worked hard not to laugh. His lovely partner was in full babble mode. His voice devoid of humor, Clark said as he sipped his coffee, “Of course, Lois, whatever you need. Who or what is this story about?”

“You might be familiar with him: the European media mogul, and Lex Luthor’s new partner, Mr. Gregory Daac.”

He almost coughed up the hot liquid. “Whoa! That had better be some serious information! Daac is not exactly a light weight in the media world!”

“It is! I was going to write a story about him nearly three years ago, but it was bumped when my sources dried up. We can discuss that later on. Hey, how about coming over to my apartment for a quick dinner? You can go over the material I have. Then we can put together a game plan on how to tackle this story. What do you say?”

He rubbed his chin, thought warily about spending another evening alone with his beautiful colleague, and said somewhat half-heartedly, “Uh... not this evening. I have a lot of irons in the fire right now.”

“Oh, come on, Clark, how long can this research take? Besides, if my new source pans out, this story could not only net us a Kerth, it could also put us in the running for a *Pulitzer*. Just think of it: Lane and Kent, nominated for a *Pulitzer*!”

Her enthusiasm was contagious. He smiled and said, “Uh huh, Lois Lane would never be satisfied with the nomination. Only *winning* the prize would ever do.”

Her eyes lit up, “So you’ll do it?”

Gazing into those beautiful brown eyes, sparkling with excitement that he could never resist, he thought to himself, “I shouldn’t be going to her apartment alone. But she’s my partner, who might need protection if Mr. Daac gets wind of what we are doing.”

“Okay, Lois. Rather than cooking, we can pick up a pizza with all the works on the way.”

Lois pumped her fist in the air and said, “Yes!”

By the time they arrived at her door, the long shadows of early evening stretched throughout the apartment like giant fingers reaching over to snuff out a candle. Lois entered first, after noisily opening the myriad of locks on the front door. She held her ubiquitous briefcase under her right arm and in her left hand was a paper bag containing cold bottles of soda, diet cream soda for her and a Coke for him. Right behind her was Clark, carrying a pizza with hot spicy sausage, cheese, and pepperoni, and a crisp white dessert bag from her favorite neighborhood Italian restaurant, *Lubrano’s*. The fragrant, spicy aroma of basil, garlic and oregano filled the air.

Lady Plushbottom came bounding out of the bedroom, anxious to greet her owner and ready for her portion of pizza. She danced around Clark’s legs as he placed the white cardboard box on the kitchen table. Quick as a wink, Lady P pounced on the table with an audible thud and laid a dainty paw on the box. She meowed loudly claiming ownership of the contents within.

“Shoo, kitty! This is our supper! Beat it!” Lois said, in an attempt to get the tubby tabby away from the box.

“That’ll never work! She knows a good thing when she smells it!” Clark said with a chuckle.

“Yeah, well, I’m hungry too! She’ll just have to wait her turn!” With that, Lois swept the loudly protesting furball off the table and gently deposited her on the couch.

Properly chastised, Lady Plushbottom meowed again, flicked her fluffy gray and white tail in annoyance, and then tucked herself on the edge of the couch. Intense blue eyes watched and waited for a chance to strike. Meanwhile, Lois excused herself and went into her bedroom to change into clothing suitable for working and comfort.

“Do you want ice in your glass for the soda?” Clark called out as he rummaged around her kitchen. At this point in their friendship, he was quite familiar with its layout and the cupboards contents.

“Yes, please!” she responded from the bedroom.

Grabbing plates and silverware he quickly set the table. Lois came out wearing black jeans and a gray MetroU t-shirt that was tight enough to show she was a woman but loose enough for her to be a lady. For all that, Clark couldn’t help sneaking a few close looks at her. He quietly sighed, remembering she was still his friend and partner. Besides, wasn’t he planning on asking Lana to marry him? He had already purchased the diamond ring, one definitely out of his price range, and was only waiting for her to return home so he could propose. He firmly put all sensual thoughts about his beautiful companion aside while placing the bakery bag with their dessert, two thick slices of cheesecake, in the fridge.

Forcing his voice to be cheerful, he called out, “Last one in gets a cold slice!” Quickly, he zapped the pie with heat vision to give it a little extra heat.

Coming up behind him, Lois giggled, sat down, and took a hearty slice. “Oh, this is perfect!” she exclaimed between bites. “Lubrano’s makes the best pizza – and pumpkin cheesecake!”

For a good fifteen minutes, they chatted about other stories and ate three slices each of the pizza. Once they finished, Lois started pulling files from the depths of her briefcase and several more from a locked file drawer in her desk. Clark looked on in astonishment as she carefully arranged the larger accordion files, which were broken down by year and month, on the coffee table. Some of the files were marked by separate dates. When she was finished, fifteen large files and their contents covered the coffee table, the other couch, and finally spilled onto the floor.

Looking at the display of papers, he remarked, “Lois! There’s enough material here to write a novel, forget about three columns of type on the front page!”

Her small, delicate fingers tapped the manila folders impatiently, “Yeah, well, I’ve been working on this story for a few years now. It’s required hours of meticulous research and interviewing people who are too scared to go on public record against this guy. The subject himself is not thrilled about being under media scrutiny he doesn’t control. In fact, I’ll bet he gets a real kick out of controlling and even altering the course of a person’s life just because he has the power to do so!”

Clark nodded thoughtfully. Usually, Lois only babbled when either frightened, angry, or confused. This was something different and sounded almost like pain. He gestured to the piles before them and softly asked, “What’s driving you to bring this man down, Lois?”

Lois’ normally expressive face stilled, taking on a contemplative expression. She was about to reveal something of a profoundly personal nature. With a deep sigh, she leaned back into the couch and began to speak.

“During my second year at Metro U, the school was honored to have for one semester, as a guest instructor, Luka Brunner.”

Clark’s ears perked up instantly upon recognizing the name. “He was a force in German newspaper publishing! He was a young reporter, one of a few that stood up to Hitler before the war. The Nazi leader was so angered by Herr Brunner’s articles he ordered his arrest and somehow, by a miracle, managed to escape Germany with his family.”

Her head nodded, the waves of long dark hair falling gently

around her face. “Exactly. After the war, he returned from Switzerland and helped rebuild their newspaper industry. He was a fantastic reporter, editor, and publisher, a man who believed in telling the truth. I read everything I could about him. He was one of my heroes!”

“Oh? You mean there’s someone besides the baseball player and sometime writer, Christy Matthewson, you idolize?” he gently teased.

She blushed prettily and Clark felt his heart leap. Never in all their time together had he been on such intimate terms with her.

“Well, you got me there; it’s painfully obvious I still have a genuine crush on Mr. Matthewson!”

He looked into those perfectly-shaped eyes, sparkling with the memory of her infatuation with the baseball legend. A terrible thought invaded his mind: how he wished she would look at him like that! Shaking himself mentally, he decided to get her back on safer ground, and asked, “How were his lectures and classes?”

Those bewitching eyes continued to sparkle, and if anything, grew more intense, “Oh! You should have heard them! Wickedly funny, but very insightful. He told us about writing articles before computers! Boy, we should be grateful we don’t have to use messy carbon paper! I especially remember his definition of journalism, which is considered by many to be the standard. *‘Journalism is a process of enquiry and literary method used in social and cultural design. It serves the purpose of playing the role of a public service – by distributing news and information to inform and educate.’*”

“I remember reading that in my own journalism textbooks. He was quite an icon,” Clark said thoughtfully.

“Yes, he was. Many days, after the lectures, he invited some of us to his home and we enjoyed hours of discussions and some pretty lively debates. I remember during one of those visits Linda King asked him how he was able to stand up to people like Hitler and overcome other adversities during his long career.”

Clark sat very quietly. He knew enough about the infamous rivalry to know Linda King’s name *never* crossed Lois’ lips unless it was absolutely necessary.

“He said people like Hitler were a bunch of *eidechse* or lizards, who would swallow everything whole if we did not stand up to them. Clark, I like to think with my stories and investigations I help take down such people. Luka had great wisdom and insight, in many ways; he helped to shape me into the writer I am today.”

Nodding sagely, Clark added respectfully, “He helped shape a lot of us.”

“When the semester ended, he and his wife returned to Munich, where he ran one of the most influential weekly newspapers in Berlin. This was a newspaper Daae wanted, but Luka refused to sell. That didn’t sit well with Daae. He used some pretty underhanded tricks to undermine Luka’s reputation. Many people were loyal to him, but the rumors and lies spread about Luka’s ability to run a newspaper due to his age were beginning to have a nasty backlash. Try as he might, the new media company, DMG, was too powerful for him. Eventually, he sold his beloved newspaper for pennies on the dollar and then watched as Daae dismantled it. Daae fired everyone over the age of forty, sent the remaining staff to his different magazines, and then sold the printeries, equipment and the building that housed it.”

Shocked by the media mogul’s callous behavior, Clark said, “How did you find out about it?”

“One of my business acquaintances in Europe phoned me to say Luka Brunner had died. The doctors all said it was from overwork and exhaustion. Those of us who were aware of the struggle that Luka put up against DMG always attributed it to a broken heart. It was one of the saddest days in my life. He was a strong person and yet he was destroyed simply because he didn’t want Daae to take over his first love... the newspaper.”

The only sound heard was Lady Plushbottom’s loud and

persistent purring. During Lois' narrative, the chubby feline had jumped into Clark's lap, made herself comfortable, and gave no indication of moving.

Finally, Clark said, "I respect your determination to track down all the evidence and bring Daae to justice. Whatever assistance I can render as your partner... and friend, I'm willing to do. You can't fight this man alone, especially not with all his resources."

"He's a dragon," Lois said tightly.

Perplexed by the word, Clark said, "Uh, I beg your pardon? What about *eidechse*?"

"Gregory Daae, Lex Luthor, and yes, even Arianna are all like dragons, much more deadly than a lizard. Luka was right: it's up to everyone to fight against such persons, for otherwise all our freedoms are lost." Her voice, at once strong and defiant, suddenly became very uncertain. "Sometimes... sometimes I look at the folders, notes and files, and wonder if Gregory Daae can be taken down. I mean, Luka Brunner was smart, experienced and tough, yet he failed. I've worked on this story for years, and just when I get a break, something goes wrong. If we go forward this time, we can't fail. Luka Brunner and all the people Daae has hurt over the years deserve much better."

She heard his words, as if from far away, tickle around her ears. "Never doubt yourself, Miss Lane, I don't," Clark said in a husky whisper.

"I... we are going up against an extremely powerful dragon. This is not only going to test our journalistic abilities, but unless my evidence is bulletproof, the *Daily Planet* could suffer one helluva lawsuit. One we might not be able to come back from," Lois said.

"True, Daae is not a crooked art dealer or car thief, but we are all behind you. Perry, Jack, and the whole newsroom staff: we all think you are the best."

She looked at him with a lopsided grin, "Yeah, I must be good and getting really close to the truth; otherwise, why would someone try to kill me?"

A shocked expression ran across Clark's face, "Hey, don't say that! Not even kidding around. You mean a great deal to me... er, us. I'm not going to let anything or anyone hurt my partner and friend."

Partner.

That word again. Yes, she had thought they could make a go of it, but maybe there was more to his words than their work relationship. She gazed directly into Clark's deep, brown eyes and thought, "God, he's so handsome and attractive. Why am I resisting him? Besides, Lana doesn't care about him. We would be so good, so *right* together."

As if by unspoken agreement, they moved towards each other. Clark completely forgot about the large furry mass currently sleeping on his lap. Lady P gave out an involuntary cry, a cross between a meow and a squawk. The humans ignored her hisses and meows. Annoyed, she wiggled out of his lap, tumbled to the floor and waddled as fast as her short legs could take her to the kitchen and her food dish. Clark moved closer, his strong large fingers curled around Lois' smaller ones, the raw emotion in the movement could not be ignored. His voice had become soft and husky. "*We* are just the team to do it. We are stronger together than apart. Lois...?"

"Yes..." she responded with an equally husky whisper. Her heart pounded as her knees became weaker. She could only focus on how his presence overran all her senses.

The atmosphere within the apartment seemed to crackle with tension like a thing alive. The environment, the very air of the room, seemed to compress down to the two of them sitting intimately on Lois' couch, so dangerously close to each other. Awkwardly at first, like nervous teenagers, their lips touched, and the delicateness of the union was tremorous, yet oh so sweet. Their

discussion to bring down Gregory Daae forgotten; Clark's relationship with Lana; Lois' bitter memories of betrayal by Claude; all else melted into nothingness as they gave in to the heady maelstrom of heat and impassioned emotions.

The emotions that flowed through Clark were overwhelming as their lips and bodies clung together, touching, exploring, and wanting. Their desire was drawing them closer to a line that, when crossed, could not be denied. He pushed her further into the couch, their heated excitement growing stronger. His thoughts fell like shattered pottery into disarray. Even the serenity of flight was pitiful beside the strength of the attraction he had for the stunning woman with doe-like brown eyes by his side. Lana's blue eyes were often cold and distant, and they did not yearn for him as Lois's did.

Lana's blue eyes...

"Oh, no! What am I doing?" he thought, "Lana! I'm going to ask her to *marry* me!"

He broke the kiss and stammered out, "Maybe... I better go." He stood up like a scorched cat and began gathering his things.

"What? Why?" Lois, surprised, gasped out.

The words tumbled over his lips in a torrent, "Why? You deserve my respect and professionalism. Please... please accept my apology, Lois, this... this entire situation is my fault. I should never have disrespected my relationship with Lana or you. You're my friend, and I ignored that for a while and let things go farther than they should. I've enjoyed our nights of cooking and working together, but we cannot meet at our apartments to work ever again."

"Oh," Lois said, her voice sounding distant and a little hollow. "Well... thanks for helping with my research. I'll see you tomorrow."

Only five minutes ago the duo had been on the verge of something deeply intimate and special. Now they were farther apart than ever before. The atmosphere only moments ago had tingled with sensual excitement and spiced with anticipation, and now it felt tainted with confusion.

"Lois, are we OK? I... I really have appreciated dinner tonight. It's just... just..." He ran his hands through his hair, feeling shameful and at a loss for words. "What I did was wrong. I'm in a committed relationship with someone I've known all my life. I shouldn't have acted like this tonight... or any night."

"Oh, no problem," Lois said, working hard to keep her voice calm and even as she stood up. "Call Lana tonight. She's probably waiting by the phone, eager to hear your voice." Lois' back was ramrod straight as she walked over to the door and unlocked it, clearly indicating their personal time together was at an end.

"Thanks again for everything, Kansas. Let's pick up in the Daae research tomorrow... in the *Planet's* conference room."

His heart sank. She was angry, and much worse, embarrassed, by what might have happened between them. Humiliated, he walked past her, feeling the heat of furious eyes boring into his back. The door closed firmly behind him and he heard a series of hard clicks as the locks were set. Alone, he ran down the stairs and outside faster than the human eye could follow.

"Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!" Lois muttered darkly under her breath. She gathered up the dinner plates, glasses and pizza box and then carried them into the kitchen. It took only the work of minutes to clean the debris of the evening. "That's exactly what it is... debris. He... he must really love Lana." Teardrops slid like velvet down her cheeks. "What do I do at work tomorrow? Ignore him?"

Deeply disappointed by her callow behavior and saddened by the evening's end, she took a hot shower, changed into her favorite pajamas, turned off the lights and crawled into bed. The quiet of the night and the coolness of her sheets soothed her a little. Her mind took a strange path; there was nothing quieter or cooler than an old maid's bedroom. Was that where her future lay? To be alone

for the rest of her life?

She couldn't worry about that now. No matter what had happened between them tonight she was going to behave like an adult and deal with Clark Kent as she should have done from the beginning... at a distance. Still, for another hour, she tossed and turned, thoughts accelerating back and forth in her mind like a dirty, badly abused tennis ball. Finally, the battle lost, she fumbled in the darkness for the phone and punched in the numbers long etched in her memory.

"Hello," a woman's voice, thick with sleep, came over the phone.

Slowly, the tight lump in her throat loosened enough for her to speak through her tears, "Mommy... you were right."

Two weeks had passed, and Lois and Clark had managed somehow to push their personal feelings aside. The evening at her apartment was never mentioned, and slowly but surely they worked toward rebuilding and maintaining their professional relationship. But gone was the easy camaraderie, and in its place was a formal, sometimes stiff behavior between them. Lois resumed dressing in her 'power' suits again; they acted like armor against her innermost feelings. Besides, like the rest of the bullpen staff, she was no longer chasing after 'The Haze', but was concentrating her efforts on other stories, while still working on exposing Daae.

Clark went back to wearing some of his older, more casual business clothes, including some of his most outrageous ties. They worked quietly together in the conference room, slowly piecing together the information Eduardo had provided, but still they needed someone to hand them a smoking gun.

Several of their co-workers recognized the change; Catherine had asked her friend twice to talk about what had happened, but Lois steadfastly refused to discuss it. Her friend was fearful that the specter of Claude had risen again.

It was late afternoon and more than a few of the newsroom staff were winding down for the day. Clark hung up the phone. He had attempted numerous times in the past two weeks to reach Lana. She had moved out of her hotel but continued to call him. Apparently the hunt for the last item on the museum's list was still on. He wanted to find out exactly when she was coming home. He had purchased a simple one carat pear-shaped diamond ring in a gold setting and was ready to propose.

In the background, one of the national entertainment magazines was playing on the monitor. Glenda Rojas was reading news about the latest Hollywood scandal. Like the rest of the bullpen, Clark had long since tuned out that kind of soft reporting and only listened when real news was on. The news cycle was changing to a different story, and the scene showed an overview of an oddly familiar corridor in Idlewild Airport.

"Hello everyone, this is Shana Giovanni reporting from the international arrivals wing at Idlewild Airport. Lex Luthor has returned from his latest business trip in Europe, visiting with DMG and continuing to work on creating the news channel which will report on progress of Space Station Archimedes. He is accompanied by his business partner, Gregory Daae, and Mr. Daae's elegant new bride, Lana Lang-Daae."

One by one all normal sounds ceased. Conversations were either halted or shushed into stunned silence. Clark's face grew flushed with shock as he felt half the eyes of the newsroom on the monitors and the other half staring pointedly at him.

Ms. Giovanni, eager to get the first interview with the new couple, approached them and pushed a microphone in their faces. Daae gave a glacial stare at the device, stoically tolerating the interruption of their progress. Lana, thoroughly excited by the attention, smiled prettily for the camera. Her dress was the color of autumn leaves, which worked perfectly to show off a tanned complexion and slightly curvy petite figure.

The reporter gushed, "Mrs. Lang-Daae you certainly are radiant! Marriage suits you. Please, tell the audience how you were able to snag one of the most eligible bachelors in Europe?"

Lana took the microphone in her left hand so that everyone could see the glittering engagement ring and wedding band on the all-important digit. She gazed at her new husband and tried to suppress a wide grin of pride. "Love comes when we least expect it. Gregory and I started spending time together and the rest is, as they say, history!" she said triumphantly.

Clark's special hearing picked up Catherine's comment, mumbled darkly under her breath, "Oh, spare me!"

Ms. Giovanni smiled at the insipid remark and added one of her own, "All of Europe is buzzing about the 'Daae Look', with designers as different as Versace and Chanel lining up to do your bidding!"

"I can't speak about what the fashion world is saying. But we are planning on renewing our wedding vows here in Metropolis. As you may know, we were married in Zurich last month, but my father deserves to walk his daughter down the aisle. I've already chosen my gown – the designer's name is a secret! The invitations will be mailed out shortly. Perhaps we will see you there!" Handing the microphone back to the reporter, Lana took her husband's hand and quickly walked away.

Lex stood in the background, trying unsuccessfully to mask his annoyance at the reporter's dual blunders: her intrusion to his progress through the corridor, and ignoring him. Once again, Daae had managed to steal the spotlight from him. No one wanted to hear about the progress on their space news channel now that Mrs. Daae had taken center stage. She would be the 'Belle of Metropolis' until the wedding, effectively eclipsing Arianna's social position.

Someone groaned, "It must be a slow news day! I cannot believe that little wench!"

"Which one?" Diane said caustically. "The airhead reporter or her thoughtless subject?"

"Both," Jack responded.

"Ha!" Ralph crowed with malicious glee. "Even guys like Kent can't pick em!" Any further comment was abruptly halted when Stacy accidentally dropped her water bottle on his foot. It was the only sound heard in the newsroom.

Peggy Becker broke the silence by sitting down and pounding on her keyboard. Catherine looked up when she heard the noise and went over to her desk.

"What are you writing? It's awfully early to get a jump on tomorrow's column?" Catherine asked innocently.

She practically laughed while typing, "It may be tomorrow's column, but I've definitely got the inside scoop today! Imagine Mrs. Daae throwing over her boyfriend, a journalist for the *Daily Planet*, in favor of a Swiss billionaire! Perry, and Metropolis, will be happy to read about it!"

Catherine bent down, and in a low, angry voice whispered, "If there is even a *hint* about Clark Kent and his former relationship with Lana Lang in that column or anyplace else, I will make it my personal business to see you are bounced from this newsroom so hard you'll wish you had never heard of the *Daily Planet*. That young man's private life is not fodder for the citizens of Metropolis."

"It's news! I've got a job to do!" she said, the volume of her nasal voice rising.

"Helping to break an innocent man's heart is *not* part of this job!" Catherine hissed, her green eyes flashing dangerously.

Something about Catherine's body language convinced the gossip columnist it would be in her best interest to delete the page she was typing.

Lois caught her breath in shock. The paper she had held in her hand was crumpled. Clark was *loyal* to Lana, despite what had happened on the couch at her place. She respected his

determination to step back on and stay on the straight and narrow path... notwithstanding her own desires to the contrary. How could anyone be so insensitive? She heard a loud crashing sound, and tearing her eyes away from the monitor and looking over at Clark's desk, she noticed, not surprisingly, that Lana's picture was in the garbage can, the glass within the frame shattered, and his chair was spinning. He had disappeared from the newsroom.

Part Twelve

The shock of Lana's announcement during the late afternoon newscast pushed Clark to behave in a way that was out of character and could quite possibly put his private life in jeopardy. All he could think of was getting out of the newsroom and away from the stares and comments of his co-workers - especially Lois. He knew that they meant well, but nothing anyone could say would erase the deep ache of Lana's unfaithfulness.

Bursting from the stifling atmosphere of the bullpen with faster-than-normal speed, he fled the confines of the building and flew high into the late afternoon sky. The sun still shone bright and hard. Escaping Earth's atmosphere, he did not stop until he was utterly free of the confines of the planet. For a time, he floated aimlessly, gazing at the stark, cold beauty of the stars.

He flew to many lonely and isolated places on the Earth: the Bay of Whales in Antarctica, majestic Kilimanjaro in Africa and the North Pole in the Arctic. He contemplated the frozen, solitary splendor of these desolate locations, but they could not match the hollowness in his heart. After traveling aimlessly for a few hours, he arrived at the one place in the world he should have come to from the beginning. The warmth of an early summer Kansas evening was a welcome change from the chilly climates he had visited.

High above where no one could see him on a dark, cloudy Kansas night flew the solitary figure of Clark Kent. A mile below stood a familiar structure which spoke of memories of home, security and most of all... love. The Kent farmhouse was dark, save for a flickering bluish light in the living room. Joe and his young family were probably watching television, unaware of the alien phenomenon floating silently above their tranquil home.

Clark wanted to use his abilities to peek into the house and hope for the barest of miracles. To see his father and mother pattering around, being themselves... being a family again. His mind was perfectly aware they were gone, buried for many years in Smallville's simple cemetery on the other side of town. But it didn't mean the heart's desire to see them again didn't bubble up inside like a cold spring.

It made no sense to dwell on memories of the past. He needed to find a place to rest and grieve from the searing memory of the present.

So he turned to the east, to his second home in Smallville - the Irig's farm.

He wiped his face clear of hot tears and thought again of Lana. How could anyone - especially someone he thought he knew - be so calculating and heartless? Hadn't they spoken only a couple of days ago? Obviously, she had already been married to Daae when she called, and then didn't have the decency to tell him. Thinking back on it, he realized that from the day she had announced her plans to go to Europe she had been evasive and distant. Were they seeing each other even then?

He mind went back to a passionate moment - a lapse of judgment - with Lois. Wasn't he guilty of being unfaithful as well? If that was the case, instead of contemplating marriage with Lana he should be grateful they were now apart. How could he want to marry one woman and yet secretly yearn for another?

He remembered the last phone conversation with the normally personable Mrs. Lang. Her tone was nervous. She clearly did not want to talk with Clark. Perhaps she was embarrassed by her daughter's behavior? It was immaterial now. Besides his hurt,

he worried for Lana's safety. Daae was a monster. If an opportunity presented itself, he had to warn her.

He looked down on the Irig farm. Every light in the house was on, even the barn lights. Alarmed, Clark scanned the area and flew down and landed behind the barn. He walked slowly to the front porch, whistling loudly a tune from his childhood, letting the Irigs know it was him and not a stranger. It wouldn't do for them to receive frequent visits from Clark. After all, it would be hard to explain flying back and forth on a newspaper reporter's salary.

The familiar figure of his Uncle Wayne appeared on the porch. "Clark? Is that you, son?" he called out into the darkness.

Clark did not answer but trotted over to the house. He stood before his uncle feeling tried and far older than his twenty-six years. He pushed out the words, "You... you heard?"

Wayne nodded his head, "Pete called; tol' me everythin'. He couldn't find you and thought this might be the one place you would go. That's why all the lights were on."

"I... I was going to ask her to marry..." No further words escaped his lips.

The older man walked briskly over to Clark, and throwing an arm across his shoulder, said, "Come on into the house, son, sit down and have a bite to eat. Where have you been?"

"I... do... need to sit for... a while. I went flying. Don't know where, exactly... some cold places." The words fell from his mouth twisted and wrecked, like shards of a sword broken in battle. Slowly, as if his legs were sheathed in lead, Clark walked with his uncle. He balled up his hands and stuffed them into the expensive dress pants as if they were a pair of faded and comfortable jeans.

Wayne was briefly taken aback by his appearance and hopelessness. This was not the cheerful and positive Clark he'd helped raise. The change deeply concerned and even frightened him a little. Clark had suffered so much pain and rejection already in his life. He did not deserve any of this, especially from someone who knew *everything* about him. Wayne knew that if Lana were standing in front of him, he might be hard put not to give her a proper talking to for such shameful behavior. But right now, he needed to put any thoughts about that hussy aside, and help the young man before him. "Pete spoke to your boss. Mr. White says take a couple of days. He understands that this has been a nasty shock. Your old bedroom is already fixed up."

A quick scan of the farmhouse revealed it was empty. "Where... where's Aunt Mary?"

"Went to her sister's yesterday... I'm going to be a great uncle!" Wayne said cheerfully.

Clark smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "That's great. Nice to hear some good news for a change..."

As they walked up the front steps, he was deeply grateful for the warmth of his uncle's invitation and yet unsure what else to say. Upon entering the comfortable kitchen he sat down heavily at the large oak table and declined any food. All the pot roast and apple pie in the world could not ease the tearing emptiness of his heart.

Jack came up to Lois' desk and asked, "Any word from Clark?"

"Yes, his former roommate, Dr. Pete Ross, called. He said Clark just needed a few days. This announcement from Mrs. Daae," Lois said Lana's name as if it were poison, "was quite a shock. He'll be back soon."

"That's good. If he calls, please tell him 'Hi' from me and Stacy?"

Lois nodded her head in agreement and went back to reading the article on her monitor. It still seemed like a bad dream that anyone - even Lana - could be so cruel. Who does something like that, anyway? She had known that conniving blonde was self-absorbed, but this was beyond belief. Mentally she shook the

thoughts away. Much as she cared Clark, and she *did* care him, this was actually none of her business. When he returned in a couple of days, Perry would be sure to give him plenty of work to occupy his mind.

The Kansas morning dawned clear, hard and bright, the sunshine beaming down so strongly it hurt the eyes. Waves of rich, ripening golden wheat swayed in the soft breeze on either side of the old, but dependable red and white Ford pickup as it rolled easily over the paved road.

Clark drove the old truck and permitted the gentle beauty of the scenery to occupy his thoughts and allow him a little relaxation. He even listened with some appreciation to his uncle's well-worn cassette of Hank Williams tunes. Last night, after some fresh cold buttermilk and a few almond cookies, he had gone up to his old bedroom. Following a brisk shower, he had slid under the freshly washed sheets. They had felt cool and crisp next to his slightly damp skin. Maybe his parents weren't alive anymore and the Kent homestead was currently being occupied by another family, but Smallville always represented a serene haven for him.

With those thoughts moving lazily through his mind, Clark had tumbled into a light and fitful sleep.

Wayne had gotten precious little sleep himself last night. His nephew's face was etched with deep hurt. Apparently, he had been going to ask Lana to marry him. He couldn't have imagined a worst fate for the boy. Lana was not quality, no matter how wealthy her husband was. He wondered about the man she had chosen over Clark. He must be a real piece of work to take a woman who was seeing someone else.

Well, personally he was glad they had found each other and Lana could leave his nephew alone.

He decided it was time for a little conversation. So, noisily clearing his throat, he spoke up. "Glad you're here, son, those fence posts weren't about to fix themselves. But we're gonna do this the old-fashioned way!"

"Tell me where to stop," Clark responded in a lackluster manner.

The truck reached a bad stretch of road. They bounced along for a while, both of them feeling a little like peas in a can. Just when Wayne thought he had enough, the line of posts that needed to be replaced, pitted and scarred from years of wear, came into view. "Right about here."

Quickly Clark pulled the heavy vehicle over and together they removed the equipment for the job: shovels, a pickaxe, a two handled post-hole digger, the new posts and heavy work gloves.

From a bird's eye view, the two men could be seen toiling in the hot sun to replace a recalcitrant fence post on the edge of a wheat field. They worked in companionable silence, the older patiently waiting for the younger to speak. Around noon, as they were taking a break from their labors, Wayne leaned heavily against the truck, removed a blue and white handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the glistening sweat from his face and neck. "Gettin' warm. Time we stop for a bit. Please, hand me a bottle of water."

Clark reached into the cooler and produced a bottle of water and gave it to Wayne. Abruptly, he said, "Maybe if I had gone to Zurich, Lana wouldn't have married that Daae guy."

Wayne put a consoling hand on the younger man's shoulder, "Son, it makes no sense to be all busted up inside for someone who don't care a stick about you."

The words, although they made perfectly good sense, stung Clark, and he angrily shrugged off the hand, "B... but the man she's married to is dangerous! Lana could get seriously hurt simply *being* with him. She might need my help!" Decision made, he was standing up to leave when he heard his uncle's sharp voice bark. "Sit down!"

Shocked, Clark turned and glared at Wayne. "I am not a

child. Don't speak to me like one."

No, Wayne thought, he certainly wasn't a kid. Still, Wayne wanted to treat him like a teenager. Wayne paused and thought to himself, "Right now, Clark's behaving just like a boy who is suffering after bustin' up from his first sweetheart. Convincing him that he will survive this mess is gonna take some mighty straight talkin'." The old man studied Clark and then answered, and this time his voice was gentle in tone and volume. "Sorry, son, but shouting was the only way to get through that super-thick skull of yours. Have a seat," Wayne gestured to the tailgate of the pickup.

Clark's invulnerable body did not sweat, but he was hot with anger. In contrast, sweat pored off Wayne's face, and the back of his shirt was black with perspiration. Yet for all the heat beating down on them from the Kansas sun, Wayne was as relaxed as if he were drinking a tall, cold glass of freshly squeezed lemonade in his wife's kitchen. He took a long drink of water, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and spoke.

"Member we talked a mite before you left about Lana respectin' you? If she *wanted* to tell you about this fella, why not come right out and say it? They got phones in Zurich. What kept her from calling? Ever since she was a child, when Lana set her mind to something, she did it, and to hell with the consequences."

Clark held his head down, unable to answer, because no matter how hard it pained him to hear his uncle's words, Wayne was right.

Taking Clark's silence as permission to continue speaking, he said, "When your Pa and me was in Korea, at least four poor saps in our unit got 'Dear John' letters."

"It's not the same," Clark muttered.

"Sure it is! What those girls did weren't right... but at least they respected the men enough to tell them it was over."

"Maybe she didn't know how. Maybe... just maybe, she was afraid." His voice trembled slightly.

Genuinely perplexed, Wayne cocked his head and said, "Of what?"

Now the young man's voice was barely audible, and the older man had to strain to hear. "Maybe... maybe she was afraid of ... me."

"What!" Wayne exploded, "Why?"

"I'm not exactly 'Earth' normal. She could have been frightened of my temper."

"Well, if that...! Clark Jefferson Kent, you are one of the gentlest souls I know. Don't go thinkin' up excuses for her contrariness! She threw you over like a dented can of corn."

"But... Lana's always wanted so much out of life," Clark said softly. "I could have tried to give her that life."

"Yeah, but she also wanted it no matter what you or anybody else wanted, or what you would have had to sacrifice to give it to her." Wayne grew still, allowing a moment for reflection, and then said quietly, "The truth is, she found someone who could provide her with every *material* thing she wanted and that you couldn't. She latched onto him as quick as she could. Son, right now, the hurt and humiliation's runnin' deep. But give it time."

"How much time does it take to get over something like this?" Clark asked

"It'll take as long as it takes," he smiled grimly, and continued, "You're the only one who knows for sure. But I'll tell you this: Smallville stands behind you. After all, you are still a resident of this town, even if you don't visit as often as folks would like. If anyone receives an invitation from the Langs for that splashy city wedding she's plannin', those of us who remember Jonathan and Martha and have any respect for the Kent name won't be goin'." He chuckled softly to himself, "Mary called me this morning, and told me what she had heard from the folks eatin' breakfast in Maisie's diner! If Lana and her fancy new husband heard, it would have burned their delicate ears!"

Clark looked at Wayne, and a shadow of a smile fled across his lips.

The older man got up, put on his dusty, heavy work gloves and began walking towards the fence. “Let’s get a move on. Daylight’s wasting; those posts ain’t gonna fix themselves.”

Clark got up and followed his uncle, his heart felt a little lighter.

The sound of the phone ringing on her desk cut through Lois’ concentration. She stared at the device and wondered for the fifth time that day if it was Clark. She was concerned about him and understood all too well the feelings of chagrin and embarrassment he was experiencing. On the third ring, she picked up the receiver. “City desk, Lois Lane speaking.”

Rita’s voice, normally so cheerful, came over the line as thoughtful and subdued, “Glad I caught you. A package arrived from one of my old contacts this morning. You might just be interested in examining the contents. How about meeting me at the museum entrance near Shackleton’s statue at Centennial Park tomorrow after the lunch hour rush?”

Lois stood up, reached for her briefcase and was ready to charge out of the bullpen. “What! I can come over right now!”

“No,” Rita responded firmly. “Your uncle and the staff need my help today. I’m doing this favor without Mike’s knowledge. Understand?”

Lois nodded as if her aunt stood before her. For Rita to be doing this behind her husband’s back was serious. “All right, then, after lunch... tomorrow.”

“Good. See you then. ‘Bye.” Without another word, Rita hung up.

The next night, after spending another day in Smallville with Wayne and Mary, Clark landed on the balcony of his apartment. Simply being in Smallville again and doing hard physical labor on the Irig farm had started the healing process, but it was good to be back in Metropolis... home again. He opened the balcony door and stepped into the recognizable comfort of his bedroom. Everything was exactly the way he’d left it. But the subtle scent of exquisite perfume seemed to fill the air.

Suddenly, a familiar voice cut through the darkness, “Hello, Clark. Come in and shut the door. We have a lot to discuss.”

“Lana!” Stepping out from the brick wall partition, he couldn’t keep the bitterness out of his voice. “What are you doing here?”

He heard the sharp click of a lamp switch and then suddenly the living room exploded into life. Standing by the couch was Lana Lang-Daae. The exquisitely turned out lady before him bore little resemblance to the upwardly mobile professional girl who’d departed on a straightforward, yet important, museum assignment for Zurich two months earlier. In her place stood a fashionably attired young woman of considerable means, from her perfectly coiffed hair, lacquered nails, and make-up, to the delicate night-blooming floral scent of the classical French perfume, *Guerlain Shalimar*.

She smiled, and without a hint of remorse, said, “To see you, of course.”

Part Thirteen

The absolute *last* person he expected in his apartment stood in front of him as if she owned the place. Lana never did anything without a reason. From what he knew of Daae, she shouldn’t cross him by visiting her ‘ex-boyfriend’. With an effort he composed himself, and said, “How did you know I was coming home? Also, how did you locate and enter my apartment? After all, you did get married before I could show you the place.”

A glimmer of genuine concern emerged momentarily in Lana’s eyes. Unfortunately, as quickly as it appeared, it vanished.

He got the impression that for all her self-assurance, she was uncomfortable being alone with him.

Preparing to do battle, she straightened her back and said brusquely, “My call to Pete didn’t go very well. He told me you were in Smallville, but not where. It’s unlikely Joe would have room for a houseguest, so Irig’s was the best choice. He did mention that you had rented a place, and after some coaxing, gave me the address. I called the Irig’s from my car; as soon as Mary Irig knew who I was, she couldn’t hang up fast enough. So I drove over here and decided to wait.” She held up a lone silver key, and tossed it to him, which Clark easily caught and placed on the bookshelf. “Really, Clark, hiding a key in the planter out front is the first place a decent thief would look. You don’t live in Kansas anymore.”

Determined not to be rattled by her reproof, Clark folded his arms defensively and said, “What will your husband think if he discovers you were here?”

Her chin jutted upwards, a gesture of defiance. “Nothing at all, especially since Gregory is aware I’m visiting you. He... we feel it is important to ‘clear the air’.”

“Really? I think that was accomplished already in Zurich and then at the airport when you announced your marriage. You cleared me completely out of your life! All the time you were in Europe, you were seeing him.”

Lana’s pretty face twisted into a grimace, and she spoke sharply, “I never lied. There were a number of business contacts that had to be made in order to acquire the pieces necessary for the exhibit. Gregory helped me accomplish that task. Without his connections, locating those pieces and the Napoleon camp chair would have been close to impossible.”

“So, let me get this straight: over the course of a few weeks while ‘pursuing’ these pieces for the *Age of Napoleon* exhibit, I am supposed to believe you two ‘fell in love’?”

“Yes,” she responded flatly.

Clark studied his former girlfriend carefully. He knew her body language well enough to be aware when she was lying. But this time all the obvious physical cues - such as an erratic heartbeat - were missing. Could it be possible she was telling the truth? He sighed, shook his head, and sat down on the couch, gesturing for her to join him. Lana did so; the gentle swish of her silk skirt was a soothing sound in an otherwise tense atmosphere. Clark noted she was determined to sit as far away from him as possible. Then she carefully placed her left hand on top of the right so he could clearly see the large diamond engagement ring and wedding band. He thought of the small diamond engagement ring he had purchased a week ago, realized it was meager in comparison, and mentally sighed. Uncle Wayne was right; she was more interested in material things than in sharing a life with him.

His previous trepidation that she might be afraid of his super strength came to mind. Despite all she had done to him, she had to understand he would never harm her or anyone. Then he comprehended: Lana wasn’t afraid of him. She was a newly married woman alone with a man and was keenly aware of that fact. Conceivably she did have deep feelings for Daae.

“Look, whatever games that are going on between you and your husband, keep them to yourselves. Lana, what happened in Zurich cannot be undone.” He ran his long fingers through jet black hair, weighing carefully his next words. “But please understand... Gregory Daae is a dangerous, ruthless man. He uses his media empire to bring about whatever he wishes... and he’s destroyed people’s lives. I’m not saying this to get back at you. I have proof...”

“What proof?” she snapped. “My husband is a businessman! In business, people – incompetent people – get hurt. Gregory is not incompetent.”

“Come on, Lana! Don’t tell me that! Not everyone is incompetent! What about the innocent bystanders?” His voice

went soft and then he said, “What about people like... me?”

She bolted upright. Her conscience, for the first time, had been pricked. “Are you inferring my marriage is a cheap business arrangement? That you are collateral damage from that arrangement?”

This conversation was quickly getting out of hand; he needed to regain control. “You have to admit it looks strange. Nearly two months ago Lana Lang - *my girlfriend* - went to Switzerland for work and returned married to one of the wealthiest men in Europe. All the plans and dreams we had were effectively swept out of existence.”

She folded her arms and sat back down on the couch’s arm, and in a tightly controlled voice, spoke again. It seemed to Clark that she was talking more to herself than him. “Those... dreams are gone. Like I told you the night I found out about the trip. You, Pete and I have come a long way from Smallville, and there’s no turning back. No matter what feelings I might have had for you in the past, now my life is with Gregory.”

Dumbfounded, Clark could not believe she was beyond all reason. Surely Daae wasn’t that good an actor, hiding his true self. He needed to understand her purpose for being here. “Lana, why did you really come to my apartment tonight?”

Her blue eyes, always so intense, studied him, and when she answered, her voice was as brittle as freshly formed lake ice. “Two reasons, actually. First, I want closure. Our relationship – on every possible level – is over. Even though you and I were never... lovers, I don’t want Gregory to have any reason for concern. After all... he is my husband.”

Lana was excluding him from her life. There would be no way to protect her from the fallout, should he and Lois manage to get the proof they needed to print their series of articles. Despite all she had done, they had once been friends; very good friends, actually. Could he really just allow her to remain in a lion’s den of trouble? Sadly, if she stubbornly refused to listen, was there any other choice?

Clark nodded stiffly, “What’s the second reason?”

She studied her exquisitely lacquered pink fingernails. The high-priced manicure probably cost more than what most museum assistants made in a day. He recognized the physical sign; she was feeling more at ease, more in control of the situation. “Even before returning from Europe, I’ve been hearing about a series of ‘incidents’ around the city. The accounts vary, but they all agree on one thing: a ‘haze’ of motion and sound. Nothing will stop you from being a do-gooder, so I also need to distance myself from Clark Kent... would-be superhero.”

His self-control slipped and angry words tumbled out of his mouth before he could stop them. “I can no more stop helping people than you could become that man’s lover!”

As if he had stuck her, she flinched, stood up, and prepared to leave. “That remark was uncalled for! We... we were married before I let him touch me!”

Suddenly, his face burned with shame. It wasn’t like him to lash out as if he were a pimply-faced adolescent breaking up with his first crush. Yet Lana did not have the slightest regret about hurting him. Shouldn’t he strike back and let her know just how deeply her actions had pained him? Out of the blue, he remembered something his parents had told him long ago; something about how meekness did not necessarily mean he was weak, and that under the right circumstances, kindness, compassion and courage could sometimes break a bone.

He needed to be the better man. Nonetheless, he wanted to ask an important question, and then this fierce, perfectly attired stranger needed to depart forever from his life. Lana picked up her purse. Hand-crafted of the finest Italian leather, it was so new he could smell the vegetable-tanning oils. She turned and walked up the stairs to his door, out of the apartment and his life.

“Good night, Clark.” The words came out of her mouth more

like an edict than a final farewell between former sweethearts.

He looked up at the ceiling, took a deep breath, and closed his eyes, “Wait, Lana. Before you go, there’s only one final question for me to ask.”

By the way she held her shoulders, a hint of the old Lana surfaced. She did not turn but said, “Yes?”

“Were you ever in love with me? Or was I just a ticket to get you out of Smallville in case no college answered your resume?”

She bowed her head, the familiar voice as soft as a feather blowing in the breeze, “Isn’t the question rather moot now?”

He spoke to her back, “No, it’s important for me to know.” “Yes.”

Clark felt his knees weaken. He no longer had any claim to her, but perhaps she might accept his help. Before he could say another word, she continued.

“But you were never strong enough, Clark, never willing to take risks. The kind of strength I wanted from you - for us - was to be a force to be reckoned with... without using your powers. I wanted a husband who could provide more than just a ‘good life’ for our family. We should have been one of the fabulous young professional couples in Metropolis. You’re a good reporter, and someday you are going to be one of the best, but print journalism won’t get us where we should have been. Don’t worry about your secret; it’s safe with me. I will never betray you in that regard. That is a promise.”

She said all that without turning to face him. In anguished silence, he watched as she walked to the door, opened it, and stepped into the night.

The following day, Clark returned to the newsroom. His conversation with Lana the previous evening had put aside any hope of their even being polite acquaintances. She was ‘Mrs. Daae’ now.

He moved down the ramp and walked over to his desk. The familiar sights and sounds of the bullpen was like a warm balm, easing him into this new reality. It was good to be back. Quickly, he booted his computer into life, took off his jacket, rolled up his sleeves, and got into the rhythm of working on a story idea.

One by one, his co-workers came over and welcomed him back to the bullpen. Steve patted him on the back, trying to say with the physical gesture what his words could never express. Catherine greeted him with a smile, squeezed his forearm, and went back to her desk. Elsie from the re-write department, a grandmotherly woman who looked after many of the young reporters as if they were her own children, brought over a steaming mug of coffee and a fresh vanilla cream donut from Lucille’s bakery downstairs. Without a word, she gently placed the offerings in front of him and went back to her office, dabbing a tear from her wrinkled cheek.

Clark was deeply touched by the genuine concern and little gestures of comfort his friends and co-workers bestowed upon him. Everyone that mattered came over. Everyone, that is, except the lovely woman who was his work partner.

Lois held back and watched from her desk. She was proud of the newsroom staffers. Every person was trying to show they sympathized and would be there for him. She worked for the best newspaper and with the best people in the world. When the time was right, they would talk, yet for now he had to regain his emotional footing.

Across town, at the office of DMG, US Division, Stephanie Aronnax entered her office suite, carrying a white waxed bakery bag. The sweet buttery aroma of freshly baked croissant floated out of the bag and filled the office. She was surprised to see Jasper Templar’s associate in the suite, using her personal copier. “Good morning, Mr. Bonesteel, is there anything I can do to help you?”

Bonesteel, who was normally so proper, fairly jumped out of

his skin when he heard Mrs. Aronnax approach.

“No, ma’am, not at all.” His large ears were bright red as he smoothed down his perfectly straight tie in an attempt to calm himself.

“Very well, but I was wondering why you are using my personal copy machine. After all, this is Mr. Daae’s executive suite. Do you need something from him?”

“Ah, yes, I do. Mr. Templar provided this file with his weekly updates for Mr. Daae. Please, could you give them to him? I am already late for an appointment.” He handed the familiar green folder to her, while another file, marked with the initial ‘R’, remained firmly in his possession. He nodded his head slightly and walked away.

“Intriguing.” She looked at the copier and checked the settings, then smiled to herself. She went back to her desk and turned on the computer which was linked to the copier. This particular machine had a new innovation that only she was aware of. The menu came up and she scrolled through until the words “**Document Retrieval**” appeared on the screen. All of the copied documents from yesterday and today came into view, “Ah, that’s the one Mr. Bonesteel was copying. It looks like an expenditure spreadsheet for a company called RoyalPoint Financials.”

She was so intent on studying the document that she failed to hear Daae enter his office suite. “Good morning, Mrs. Aronnax. From the scent of butter, you have just returned from my favorite French bakery. I trust all went smoothly in my absence?”

Without giving away her own surprise, his administrative assistant looked up from her computer monitor, “For the most part, sir, the company has been running quite smoothly. Daily correspondence is on the desk arranged by date; weekly updates on your various interests with Mr. Templar are there as well. This is the latest update. Mr. Bonesteel brought it by only five minutes ago.” She smiled brightly and continued, “Oh, yes. Happy congratulations on your marriage!”

Daae’s face lit up. He quite enjoyed playing the role of bridegroom, and sometimes it did not seem like play. Only twenty minutes before he had dropped his lovely wife off at Darcy’s for the final fitting of her wedding gown. Thanks to the assistance of a talented wedding planner, the invitations had been mailed off to the guests and all the other preparations were rapidly concluding. He admitted to himself that now that Clark Kent was firmly out of the picture, he was starting to enjoy the excitement of planning their reaffirmation ceremony.

Lana’s father had been more than a little shocked when his daughter had telephoned him from their home in Zurich and told him the news. Bertram was not a bad fellow, just a little full of himself. Her mother, on the other hand, had been very understanding and welcomed him to their family by extending an invitation to their modest townhouse for dinner. He was pleasantly surprised by the delightful meal Mrs. Lang prepared. He would never allow Lana in a kitchen by herself. Her idea of *déjeuner* was burnt toast and black coffee.

Since their return to Metropolis, they had eaten with her parents several times. It gave him a sense of family that he appreciated for Lana’s sake. Unfortunately, these family gatherings would end after the *Age of Napoleon* exhibit’s opening night and his own business projects in Metropolis concluded when they returned to – and remained in – Europe.

But the tone of Mrs. Aronnax’s voice and manner suggested that something more than the usual doings of DMG was on her mind this fine morning.

His cool blue eyes affixed her with a stare, “Did something occur in my absence that concerns you?”

The older woman contemplated whether she should inform her employer about Jasper Templar’s unprofessional behavior. After all, Daae had given him the run of the place while he was in Switzerland, an action which still mystified her. She wondered

why Bonesteel was making a copy of the document here rather than at his own office. There was also the fascinating material she had read in the green files; there was an illegal corporate takeover being planned, without her knowledge, she was certain he did not want her meddling in this affair.

“No, sir, nothing at all. I will have your coffee and croissant in a few minutes.”

He cocked his head and said, “Good, then we can get to work.”

That was fine; it would provide her with more time to find out exactly what Templar was planning. She needed to contact her backchannels in order to learn more about the company known as RoyalPoint Financials.

The staffers in the newsroom were working in full swing and humming along with activity. Clark had just finished sending his latest story over to Perry. It had been a very productive day. After everyone had quietly welcomed him back he had quickly realized that the very best tonic for sadness was hard work. The TresAx article was shaping up nicely. So far his sources had provided excellent intel, and the additional research he had done was bearing that out. He had no doubt in his mind that when the time came it would cause more than a minor ripple in the business world.

He had noticed Lois sneaking glances over to him all morning, and he had wanted to talk to her. Unfortunately, their personal relationship was still fragile, and he wasn’t looking for sympathy; he simply wanted to work with his partner. He stood up and decided to get the ball rolling. He was about to move his feet towards her when Ralph came up.

“Hey! How ya doing, Clarkie boy? Now that the ball and chain has gone off to richer pastures, you and I can do a little clubbing together. Yeah, buddy, if you need anyone to help you get back into the swing of things, I have my little black book!” He took out a small, tattered black notebook that had seen better years and waved it under Clark’s nose. Clark looked down at the exasperating little man and walked away without offering any answer.

“Figures,” Ralph muttered darkly under his breath, “Him and Lane are cut from the same cloth. Too stuck up for their own good.” Disgusted, he strode up the ramp and headed for the elevator.

Clark continued walking over to a certain desk and said softly, “Lois, can we talk in the conference room?”

She looked up at him, her brown eyes questioning, “Uh, sure. It ought to be empty.”

Several sets of eyes watched the duo surreptitiously as they made their way over to the conference room. As soon as the door was closed behind him, Clark said, “I need to get to work on the Daae story.”

She was more than a little surprised at this and replied, “Oh! Don’t worry about helping me, I can continue on my own. Since Lana’s...”

His voice, gentle but firm, cut her words off. “No, let’s take Lana out of the equation. I’m a reporter and this media manipulation story demands to be told, regardless of my feelings. Especially if he is the kind of man you say he is. People need to be warned and protected.”

Lois was well aware of the emotional upheaval this man had endured over the past few days. Lana and Daae’s faces were plastered all over the local gossip columns and several tabloids were trumpeting their upcoming wedding ceremony. It was hinted by many Metropolis socialites to be the wedding of the year. No expense had been spared. Catherine had confided in her that it was she who had stopped Peggy from putting Clark’s name in her column. The last thing this mild-mannered, private man needed was for a dozen paparazzi to be camped out on his front door

demanding to know how it felt to be jilted. So with a voice laced with concern, she queried, “Are... are you sure?”

“Positive. This is the newspaper business and my personal feelings can’t get in the way of an important story.” He did not think telling her about what happened last night between himself and Lana would do any good. He didn’t want to hurt Lana, but since she chose to be with Daae there was nothing he could do to protect her from the fallout when the story was published. Weeks ago the only thing he had known about Gregory Daae had been that he was partnered with Lex Luthor. But since that time, the negative information garnered from his sources in the financial world alone was enough to make him wary.

Lois looked at him, and when the full weight of his words settled into her mind, a pixyish light of amusement and surprise fairly danced in her eyes, “Oddly enough, before the... uh... broadcast the other day, I wanted to tell you that of all people, my Aunt Rita might have more information for us about Daae.” She glanced at her watch. “As a matter of fact, I’m supposed to meet her in about thirty minutes or so. Do you want to come along?”

“Would you like me to accompany you? After all, this is your aunt, not No-Knees Nolan or Bobby Bigmouth, and she didn’t invite me,” Clark said softly.

She nodded in agreement. Rita was doing this as a favor to her niece, and her relative might not like the idea of having a third party with them at the park. “Yeah, you’re probably right; let me call her to confirm if it’s OK. If not, I’ll go alone and we can study the materials here.”

“Great, I’d better get back to work,” Clark said, with a whisper of a smile playing across his lips. With that, he exited the conference room.

Lois remained in the room for a few moments. “Who is this man? Clark Kent, the former boyfriend of Lana Lang-Daae or the hayseed reporter I called Kansas? No; this is a combination of both. In the few days since Lana’s betrayal, he’s changed, and developed into the kind of partner I always needed – and wanted. Now he seems to have crystallized into something – someone – better.”

He was not a man to date for a series of long luscious nights and then end the affair as if it were of little consequence. No, this was a man to hold onto with her mind and heart, a man to spend a lifetime living and working with. But to intrude on his sadness now, while his heart had been tattered and discarded, would be tremendously thoughtless.

Clark Kent needed a friend. Lois Lane needed a partner. For the time being, that’s what she intended to be, and she would trust that when the time was right, when he was thirsting for something deeper, like an abandoned man in a desert, he would be ready for not just a cup of clear cold water, but a refreshing oasis.

A slow smile spread over her face as she exited the conference room. “Watch out, Mr. *and* Mrs. Daae: Lane and Kent, the hottest news team in Metropolis, is on your trail!”

Ralph munched viciously on an apple while walking rapidly down the preserved old cobblestones to the east entrance of Centennial Park, not too far from the large decorative stone fountain that provided visual interest in that section of the park. It was a brilliantly crisp day and droves of Metropolis’ residents were taking in the sunshine. He wanted to meet with his contact as soon as possible and get back to work. Lately, Perry had been making snide remarks about ‘story productivity’, and if his own didn’t improve, he would be returning to the morgue – and this time, the move would be permanent.

Throwing the apple to the ground, he approached a hotdog vendor and asked for a dog with ‘the works’. He paid the vendor and stood in front of one of the cream-colored concrete pillars that framed the entrance. He studied the faces in the crowd while wolfing down an overcooked ‘tubesteak’ liberally covered in

relish, ketchup and raw onions.

Not too long afterwards, he spotted the angular figure of Bonesteel walking over the cobblestones, looking neat and tidy in a charcoal gray suit.

When the other man reached him, Ralph hissed, “It’s about time you showed up, Boney! Perry White is going to want to know why I’ve been disappearing and not pulling my weight in the bullpen. Templar had better fork over some swinging fringe benefits – especially since I’ve been doing a lot of extra work for him and DMG.”

Bonesteel sat down next to Ralph Lombard on a pitted wooden bench in Centennial Park that had seen better years. He was careful that his perfectly tailored River Brothers suit would not suffer any indignities due to this meeting. “Considering the fact that those ‘extracurricular activities’ are helping to pay off your gambling debts, among other things, deem yourself fortunate Mr. Templar still has need of your ‘assistance’.”

Ralph snapped back, “Don’t get high and mighty with me! Jasper Templar may be our boss, but we all work for Gregory Daae! Guys like Daae don’t have anything to do with people like us. We’re the ones who get our hands dirty while he stays out of the picture.” Seeing his remark had struck home, Ralph smiled and pressed on, “So, what does Jasper want? I told him messing with Lane’s car wouldn’t work.”

Bonesteel felt the tips of his ears turn red, which was the second time this morning. He sighed and mentally agreed. Not that he would publicly acknowledge anything this flea with onion breath had to contribute. It was best to get to the heart of the discussion and depart.

“Mr. Templar still holds you responsible for Miss Lane’s survival. The plan to sabotage her vehicle was supposed to be foolproof. Apparently the ‘fool’ brought in to adjust her brakes was not as proficient as purported.”

“Yeah, I’ve been meaning to ask you about that. Where is Fisher? None of his buddies have seen him since he did the Lane job for you.”

The right side of Bonesteel’s mouth twitched involuntarily, and he said, “I... I have no idea. As was once mentioned, ‘am I my brother’s keeper?’”

An edgy silence passed between the two men, and with a cold that speared into his bones, Ralph grasped the other man’s roundabout meaning. He would never see Fisher again.

“So, what... what does Mr. Templar want me to do now?” he asked, unable to hide the tremulous fear in his voice.

Bonesteel caught the use of ‘Mister’ but did not remark on it. “For the moment, removing Miss Lane is not important, but he is interested in knowing what new stories she and Mr. Kent are currently working on, especially those concerning Mr. Daae.”

“Kent? Nyah, he just came back from licking his wounds. Apparently his former girlfriend is now Mrs. Daae! Ain’t that a laugh? The poor sap is getting over a broken heart. I spoke with him this morning. Believe me, he’ll be less than useful for a while.”

Bonesteel studied him carefully. “Is this certain?”

“Yeah! You should have seen how everyone treated him... like he just came back from a funeral. If you ask me, he’s better off without her. Who needs a dame like that?”

Bonesteel cocked an eyebrow in his direction and said, “Mr. Kent’s love life is not our concern. We need to control him and his partner. From all reports, Ms. Lane is not one to be trifled with. Mr. Templar would like you to access both their computers and discover what stories they are concentrating on, and specifically if there is anything with the name *TresAx*. Remember, time is of the essence.”

Ralph whined, “Hey! I’m no computer expert! Besides, since that stupid virus outbreak, the new systems administrator has put all kinds of safeguards up. Don’t ask me to break into their hard

copy file; that's protected too!"

Bonesteel brought thumb and forefinger to his nose and pinched it as if he was in pain. "Why," he mused to himself, "Did Templar hire such an imbecile? Not only is he not up to the challenge, he is unaware of the stakes involved! Time to move his education a step further." Aloud, he firmly stated in a tired voice, "Mr. Lombard, a great deal of money was placed in a special offshore account for your use. I strongly suggest you begin earning those funds, or otherwise Mr. Templar will close that fat account, and just how long to do suppose you would survive once those casino pit bulls who want their money discover there is none to be had?"

An ugly, guttural noise escaped Ralph's throat, like a pig looking for scraps. Unfortunately, he was perfectly aware of what those 'pit bulls' were capable of and decided not to push Bonesteel any further. "I'll try. What does Templar want information from those two for?"

"That's not a matter for your consideration. Accomplish the task, as soon as possible." The accountant stood, checked to make sure his suit was in perfect order, and then said, "Send that information to me through the usual channels, Mr. Lombard. Much depends on it."

"Oh yeah," Ralph whined, and in a feeble attempt to be a reporter, asked, "What could be so important... Templar's business?"

Bonesteel looked at him, a sad expression cast over his long face. "No, Mr. Lombard, your life."

Part Fourteen

An agitated Ralph Lombard nearly jumped off the elevator. He hated riding the cranky machine, and it always seemed to make more noise than usual when he rode it alone. It almost seemed as if the infernal contraption really disliked him! He rubbed his aching stomach, which felt heavy and bloated; between the lousy hotdog and the news Boney had dropped on him, his digestion was out of whack.

He walked down the ramp and stepped onto the bullpen floor, which seemed to be bustling with more activity than normal. He noticed that Diane was looking mighty fine in a nicely fitting peach pantsuit. Good ol' Peggy was walking around the bullpen, chatting with her co-workers, her cheap stiletto heels making a clickity-click sound as she moved. Cat was talking into her new cell phone, probably hoping to get another dinner with that rich man, Arthur Chow. He snorted to himself; she was wasting her time, he was way out of her bookworm league.

Since his return to the newsroom after his probation was up, most of the female staffers of the *Daily Planet* avoided his company. Could he help it if he liked checking out a good lookin' babe? Even Peggy wasn't as friendly as before, but at least she smiled at him on occasion. Originally he had planned on keeping a low profile, but now with Boney demanding information on what Lane and Kent were doing, that plan was shot to the moon.

He looked around for Mad Dog and her wimp of a partner. Both of their desks were empty. That figures, he thought, they were probably out talking to one of their sources. How come they could get people to open up and he couldn't?

Suddenly Ralph noticed a familiar face. A technician – the one who was always messing with their computers – was talking with Jack and Perry near Jack's cubicle. He seemed really intense and kept pointing at Jack's computer. Ralph decided that it was time to find out what the tech was doing up here instead of sticking to his office.

"... so if that's what we have to do to keep everyone's computers safe, then so be it. Helluva way to run a newsroom. Cleat Johnson and ol' man Krebs would never have put up with it," Perry growled, none too happy about this latest technical intrusion on his beloved bullpen.

Ralph figured, from the tone of his voice, that Perry was not in the mood for games or more excuses about his lack of productivity. But he still wondered what Janney the IT geek was up to. He decided now was not the time to draw attention to himself. Bonesteel's veiled threat had scared him badly enough, and he didn't need more trouble. He changed direction and headed for his desk. Maybe he could cobble something together ahead of the evening edition deadline. Before he could sit down, the sound of Perry's clear, strong voice cut through the noise of the newsroom.

Perry walked out of Jack's cubicle with Ken at his side, and he gestured for all of the staff members to come over. "Gather around, kids. Uh, I've got an announcement...!"

Some of the people were a little hesitant to move forward, and hung back. They were fearful that Perry was about to announce budget cuts and that certain ones were headed for the unemployment line.

Steve called out jovially, "This should be good, Chief, are we getting a raise?"

A smile skittered across Perry's lips. Trust Steve to lighten up a situation. "Nope, not this afternoon. Besides, I doubt if the suits upstairs would allow it."

A few nervous giggles filtered through the group and they drew closer to Perry and Ken Janney.

"Ok, Ken, the floor is yours." Perry gestured for the systems administrator to 'step into the spotlight', so to speak.

Ken stepped into the center of the newsroom floor. His voice was gentle, almost fatherly, as he spoke.

"As you all know, the *Daily Planet's* computer network suffered an attack by a rather nasty computer virus a few weeks ago. Since then, the IT team has worked to put protocols into place that will prevent such attacks from happening again, either from within the newspaper's network, or from without."

"Excuse me, Ken, what do you mean from *within* the Planet's computer system?" Myers, a stiff looking, middle-aged man, asked incredulously. "I don't know of anyone in this room, with the possible exception of young Jack, who is computer savvy enough to be able to do that." He turned to Jack and said, "No offense, Jack."

"None taken," Jack said quietly and glared at the man.

Myers put his head down, embarrassed at the unfair accusation he had leveled at the former street kid. Sensing the tension, Ken continued, "Yes, to protect from within and without. Okay, as I said before, we have done a survey of security protocols."

"More protocols?" Peggy Becker whined. "It takes forever to get into my computer now."

Ken, not happy at being interrupted again, ignored her comment and continued. "Our analysis of the security stature of the *Daily Planet's* network revealed a number of problems that we will now be addressing. With the agreement of management and their full support, we will be changing some things in an effort to improve that security stature. The first thing we are doing is putting in place a new password protocol. There is a thing called Group Policy. Using Group Policy the users can be forced to use passwords, long passwords, complex passwords, long and complex, you name it. They can also be forced to change their passwords on any schedule that the administrator sets. Duplication can also be forbidden by requiring non-repetition or even block similarity, so that you can't use for example D0llyP@rt0nS0ngs1 and then D0llyP@rt0nSongs2 the next time." Looking directly at Meyers, he added, "Actually, Jack has been assisting us with this. He volunteered to help and has been testing the new protocols for us before we push them out to the general population. As a result of that testing, the next time you log onto your machine, you will be prompted to change your password. Your password will need to meet the new criteria, and if it doesn't, you'll be prompted to

correct it. The directions will be displayed at login.”

Diane piped up mischievously, “How about an Elvis password for Perry?”

He nodded at the comment. “Perry – and the rest of you – can choose whatever password you want. The new password criteria will be a minimum of 16 characters, with a mix of upper-case and lower-case letters, numbers and special characters. Just to show you how difficult it will be for someone to access your computer: the minimum number of permutations would be about 73 to the 16th power. Bottom line, people: without the correct password, you can’t break into each other’s computers, and neither can anyone on the outside.”

“Ken, we all have a lot of material on our computers, and some of it is rather sensitive. What happens if these safeguards and protocols fail?” Catherine asked.

Stacy chimed in, “All my research projects... and other stuff will be gone!”

He turned to Stacy, “I suggest regular back-ups at the end of each workday, and if there is something on your machine that is particularly of valuable, it needs to be copied to a diskette and updated as well. Keep in mind *anything* on a diskette can be stolen. If you forget your password, I can reset it for you, so there is no fear of permanently locking yourself out. That’s it, people.” He raised his arms in a gesture indicating that the impromptu meeting was at an end.

Stacy thought, “Oh, boy, I had better tell Lois about this meeting. If anything happens to her ‘Wanda Detroit’ novel, she’s bound to go into ‘Mad Dog’ mode for at least a month. Urgh! How do I do that without her finding out that I know about the novel’s existence in the first place?”

Ralph sat at his desk, thunderstruck. With all this new tech stuff in place, how was he to find out what information Lane and Kent had on their computers? “Maybe,” he thought to himself, “It’s time for me to blow town? Forget that; Templar and Daae have deep pockets, and they can find me. Have to think of something... fast!”

Across town, in Templar’s office, a discussion of a similar nature was taking place between Bonesteel and Templar.

“So, Bonesteel, will Mr. Lombard get what Daae is asking for?”

“I believe Ralph Lombard is a fool who will get himself caught the moment he touches either Mr. Kent’s or Miss Lane’s computers. We should hire a competent computer expert; one who can hack the *Daily Planet’s* computer system, get what is required, and leave no one the wiser. But if we use Lombard and he is apprehended, that will put those reporters on our trail, because he will speak to save his skin.”

Templar eyes flashed dangerously, “Bringing in another person to this project will be risky. Bonesteel, you will be personally responsible for his success, and otherwise the consequences will be most unpleasant. Do I make myself clear?”

He nodded his head stiffly and then departed from Templar’s office.

A burst of glee escaped Templar’s lips, and he gloated to himself, “Bonesteel thinks Daae wants the material. But I need that little story Lois Lane was working on about Daae’s media manipulation. If that fool Lombard succeeds, I can pass that material on to Preston Carpenter and his reporter girlfriend. Linda already has so much experience with stealing other reporters’ stories, and she’ll have a field day stealing from her old college chum! God, I love irony!”

“When the time is right, the story will be released, and DMG in North America and Europe will be almost worthless. I’ll be able to buy the entire corporation for pennies on the dollar. Daae will be too busy fighting legal battles on both sides of the Atlantic to care!”

He sat back in his chair and weighed Bonesteel’s words. “It might be prudent to have a back-up plan in case Ralph Lombard does fail. After all, he is not a computer expert.” He picked up the phone and dialed a well-remembered number. If this fellow was available, then Mr. Lombard’s use was at an end. It might be best if they met in public. Perhaps at the Lexor Hotel?

Bonesteel sat down in his cubicle. He was shaking from a combination of anger and trepidation. He thought, “Templar needs my financial expertise, but eventually my usefulness will cease and he will dispatch me with extreme prejudice. I am in an untenable situation; it was wise that I created some insurance. After everyone leaves this evening, perhaps another set of papers from the RoyalPoint file needs to be copied and digitized.”

Mrs. Aronnax did not depart from her desk until minutes after 6:00pm. She quietly locked up her desk and file drawers, but deliberately kept her personal copier on. She was well aware that Bonesteel had been using her copier at the close of business each day since the evening she had caught him there. Every morning she retrieved the documents from her computer, creating both a hard copy and a diskette. She didn’t want such a file on her computer in case it was accessed by someone else. The papers made fascinating reading, but she pondered why Templar’s assistant used her machine, and realized that he too must be creating a back-up file for his own use. He might even be planning on betraying either Templar – or even worse – Daae. It made it all that much more imperative that she get a clearer picture of what kind of corporate piracy Jasper Templar was capable of and how much damage it would cause.

Part Fifteen

On the other side of Centennial Park, Lois and Clark waited for Rita Lane in front of a bronze statue of Lewis and Dawson, the leaders of the first continental crossing of America.

“My curiosity is getting to me. How does your aunt, who works as a chef in a restaurant, know about someone like Daae?”

His partner avoided looking at him, but said in a low voice, “I’ll let her tell that particular story, if she wants to. Oh, look, here she comes!”

Rita, wearing a light green jacket over a cream-colored blouse and black pants, walked carefully over the cobblestones and soon approached the duo. Slung over her shoulder was a yellow canvas bag. “Good to see you, Lois.” She stood on her tiptoes and gave her niece a quick hug, then turned to Clark and looked at him carefully. Not in a coolly appraising manner, however, but like the protective relative she was. Lois was her favorite niece, and ever since Claude had nearly broken her spirit, the older woman acted more like a watchful mother hen whenever a potential boyfriend came around. “I’m surprised you asked to bring Mr. Kent along. I thought your work on this story was strictly a solo effort now that Eduardo is retired?”

Feeling a little like a teenager caught with a boy nobody cared for, Lois responded, “Like I told you over the phone, Clark’s my partner. We are going to finish writing this story as a team.”

Rita was not only a former espionage agent, but also a wife and mother of two boys. She was quite aware, just from watching their body language, that there was more to this ‘partnership’ than her niece was letting on. It was with no small amount of difficulty that she fought to keep a knowing smirk off her face.

“Okay: to begin. A few rather disturbing facts have come to light since I started re-researching this case.”

They made themselves comfortable on a lovely old wooden bench. Immediately, an alerted Lois said, “What kind of facts?”

“Well, for one thing, most of the agents - about ten people - who were involved in it on both sides of the Atlantic are either dead or missing. Only two others and I are alive. All three of us

retired from the service around the same time. Now, I'm no spring chicken, but that should strike anyone as odd."

"If you don't mind my asking," Clark said, "Wh... what did they die from?"

She looked directly at him with an unflinching stare, "Heart attacks or 'mysterious' accidents."

Lois was about to ask more, but Rita stuck up her hand and stopped her. "Listen, I've got thirty minutes before the dinner prep. Mike has no idea that I'm here talking to you about this. But if he knew, the old concerns from my years at the agency would worry him. Keeping him in the dark like this is not making me happy, so we need to get this matter discussed and settled as soon as possible. So for the time being, let's just assume that time and unforeseen occurrences happened to my fellow agents."

She pulled a thick manila folder, crumpled from age and use, out her bag and placed it in Lois' hands. "This envelope came to me yesterday afternoon from Mark Hickman, the son of my old partner, Avery. Avery died about a year after we returned from Zurich, of pancreatic cancer. His wife, Prudie, hated the service and everyone in it. She felt that Avery should have been home with her and the children. Apparently he received a package from Sharron Macready, a Swiss secret service agent who was helping us with the bank case. Unfortunately, when the package arrived, Avery was in the hospital dying. He never got a chance to open the envelope.

"After his death, Prudie boxed up all of these papers and put them into storage. They laid there for nearly twenty years."

"How did the envelope come to you?" Lois asked.

"Prudie died a few weeks ago of natural causes. Her son, Mark, went through her papers and discovered she had been paying for this storage unit for years. He opened the unit and discovered all of his father's papers. Some of it was garbage, but this envelope was most definitely not. There's a note in here with the names of all my team members. Mark remembered me, knew where Mike's restaurant was located, and mailed it."

"That sounds odd. Why send it to you and not the agency?" Lois said.

"It seems that Prudie's dislike of the agency was passed on to her children. Mark wants nothing to do with the contents of this envelope; I guess he figured mailing it to me was good enough."

Lois shook her head in amazement at the younger Hickman's behavior and was going to say something, but Rita continued.

"The material in here covers the entire messy situation with the Bank of Switzerland. There are names, dates, and places mentioned here that coincide with our investigation. But we don't know where this information came from."

"Can't you ask Sharron Macready? After all, she did mail it to Avery Hickman," Clark said.

Rita rubbed her chin, "I'd love to, but unfortunately, Sharron, and her partners Craig Barrett and Richard Sterling, were on assignment in Tibet when radar indicated their plane crashed into the side of a mountain. No wreckage was ever discovered."

A chill went through Lois, but she said, "I take it they are the missing agents?"

"Yeah, and they were the best of the best in their division. The entire USB case was the only time they ever failed. Looking at that file has opened a very large can of ugly worms. I contacted Tremayne, Sharron's original handler. He is a very old man. Somehow, your former partner, Eduardo, must have gotten in touch with him, knew I was still alive and pointed the finger in my direction. I have it on good authority that he was quite unhappy with the death of his agents. They were special to him, and the failure to bring the masterminds behind the USB case to justice has always been a thorn in his side."

"We'll match up this material with what I already have. Maybe something will come together we can use," Lois said thoughtfully.

"In the meantime, you both need to be extremely careful. *If* Daae is behind the deaths of so many people, especially Macready and her team, then none of us is safe."

As Clark and Lois made their way back to the *Daily Planet*, they passed the opulent Lexor hotel. A limo drove up and a middle-aged man stepped out. Lois studied him, thinking he was just another wealthy businessman visiting the renowned hotel. He was tall, and impeccably dressed in a perfectly tailored dark suit, black with a white shirt and a patterned gold tie. The man was also handsome, with wavy brown hair and piercing brown eyes. However, there was something about his manner that spoke of superiority, perhaps even malice. Who was he?

Unbeknownst to her, Clark froze in shock. Without breaking stride, Jasper Templar looked at him directly, smirked, and then walked past him and numerous other guests and into the hotel's extravagant lobby.

Unexpectedly the strange dream he'd experienced the day he moved to Metropolis came sharply into focus. He thought, "This makes no sense at all. Why should that dream come up?" Slowly, thoughts, events and memories surfaced from the abyss of his brain, leaving him feeling as if two long separated halves of a whole had unified.

Lois noticed that her partner was no longer walking beside her. She turned back and immediately became aware of his wane complexion and said, "Goodness, Clark, you look so pale! Are you all right?"

He shook his head, struggling to shake off his confusion, and said, "No... no, I'm not. Lois, please tell Perry I'm not feeling well and expect to be in tomorrow. He has a couple of filler pieces from me, for the evening edition."

"Don't worry about that! Do you want me to help you get home?" she asked, her voice filled with worry.

"No! Sorry Lois, I... I should be fine. Maybe... taking a nap for a while ought to help. See you in the morning." With that, he departed and went to his home on Clinton Street.

Lois watched him weave unsteadily through the crowd, walking as if he was carrying the weight of the world on those broad shoulders. There was something decidedly peculiar about her partner's sudden behavior, and it had nothing to do with Lana Daae. She wondered briefly if the man they saw entering the Lexor was someone they should both know.

Arriving at home, Clark felt wobbly and off-balance, maybe even more so than when he had seen that man outside the hotel. He managed to get out his keys, and with considerable effort, opened the lock. It was with profound relief that he entered the apartment and closed the door behind him. He leaned heavily against it, feeling the cold metal knob as it dug into his lower back. "Why do I feel so sick?" he wondered, "I haven't felt anything like this since my childhood."

Another heavy wave of nausea rolled over him like a tempest-tossed sea.

Tempus?

That name sounded familiar, as did the ugly emotions that roiled to the surface like a nest of coiled snakes. He seemed to scrape the very bottom of his reservoir of strength to lift his hand and bring it to his face. The appendage seemed faint; almost like a translucent membrane. Carefully, he walked over to the mirror, and what he saw tore a ragged, scream from his lips. His clothes were in solid stark contrast to his body. He was literally fading away. A thought, half-formed, galloped through his mind. Is this a late-blooming manifestation of another of his strange powers?

Abruptly a sharp knock on the door split through his shock and terror. Clark thought, "Who could it be? Maybe it's Lois checking up on me? I can't see anyone now!" The knocking started again, this time becoming more insistent. Then a voice with a distinct upper-crust British accent came through the door.

“Mr. Kent! Mr. Kent! I know who you are and what’s happening to you! Please... please let me in.”

Clark stumbled up the short flight of stairs and managed to walk to the door. Something about the voice was achingly familiar, and he somehow felt this was someone he could trust. He was reaching over to unlock the door when he noticed that his right hand had simply melted away. A strangled, frightened cry escaped his throat.

“Mr. Kent... Clark, you must remain calm, I can help you! Please do try to open the door.” Clark looked down and saw that his left hand was still strong and solid. With super speed he flung open the door. Standing before him was an older gentleman wearing a somber black frock coat and a black bowler hat. He looked like someone who had just stepped off the stage of an Edwardian play. Slung over his shoulder was a satchel made of dull metallic fabric which contrasted oddly with the man’s costume. He bounced jauntily on his toes and said, “H.G. Wells at your service! It is a pleasure to, ah, ‘see’ you again, Mr. Kent.”

The introduction on some level made sense to Clark, but he was too ill to care. “The writer? But you died in 1956. How... how do you know me?” he muttered.

Unfazed by Clark’s body oscillating between translucence and solid state, his visitor simply said, “Oh, dear, it appears I have arrived none too soon.”

“You... you understand why this is happening?” Clark whispered hoarsely

“Yes... yes, of course, my boy. But please, do let’s sit down! You look all in!” Draping Clark’s now solid arm over his shoulder, the older man gingerly helped him down the stairs and to the couch. The odd little man wearing the bowler hat, who called himself H.G. Wells, sat on the coffee table taking a moment to catch his breath, and said, “It’s a long story, Mr. Kent. Simply put, the very essence of your past and present selves are coalescing... becoming one as it were. I have in my possession a tool which should assist in making the transition easier and faster.”

He removed a device that looked like a fountain pen from the satchel, pointed it at Clark, and fired. A cool, silvery violet light bathed Clark’s body. Immediately, he felt stronger, and with feeling better came a barrage of memories, sounds, and voices moving purposefully through his mind, reshaping his memories like a box of colorful jigsaw puzzle pieces tumbling to a table and landing neatly into place, forming a new picture. A series of images arose from the main puzzle. One of the images was of himself at Idlewild Airport watching a younger Lois slamming a phone back in the receiver, angrily storming past him to the man behind the ticket counter.

Another memory was of him holding Lois. Her long brown locks had been cut very short and she was wearing a white pantsuit. They flew through the darkness, with the wind flowing around them. He was wearing some kind of costume with a red cape and matching red boots. But that wasn’t the most amazing thing about this memory, image, or whatever it was... he was flying. Yet Lois knew who he was, and she did not appear in the least bit concerned.

This reflection was replaced by images which frightened him. He was in a television station, again wearing the suit, and writhing on the floor in terrible agony as the sickly green glow of kryptonite washed over him. In the background, a chorus of voices was crying out in alarm and fear. On one of the monitors ran a news report of him flying as Clark Kent. His long-hidden secret revealed.

One voice stood out among all the others, that of a tall man with a mustache and light brown hair, calling Clark an alien and a freak. The voice belonged to the man he saw at the hotel, Jasper Templar, better known to him as Tempus.

As the numerous disjointed memories and images continued to form into a cohesive whole, the nausea passed, and Clark began

to feel more like himself. He understood that the time traveler who sat before him was a friend, someone who had helped him and Lois before, as well as assisting the *other* Lois and Clark. The Lois who had flown in his arms that night was that other Lois – married to Clark Kent in an alternative universe. Unfortunately, their old enemy, Tempus, had discovered Clark’s secret identity, and to satisfy his own twisted purposes, revealed it to the world. Sadly, in that other world, Lois Lane was dead, killed somewhere in the Congo long before Clark joined the *Daily Planet*.

But Tempus, the monster, using an ordinary television station as his stage, had stolen Clark’s anonymity, his chance for a normal life. Lana, his fiancée, had wanted nothing to do with him after that night. He shook his head as if to put the memory in its proper place. That was the life that *was*. In this moment, with Mr. Wells’s assistance, he had his life back.

So did Lois.

Looking at the older man with unyielding gratitude, he managed a lopsided smile and said, “Thank you again, Mr. Wells.”

A gentle smile creased the time traveler’s face, “Yes, my boy! Now all those memories are together in one place. But I have a gift for you.” He pulled a small silver globe from the satchel. Clark took it in his hands and immediately felt a connection to the device. It began to glow...

“This is from the other Clark? It’s from Krypton, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

As soon as his hands touched the globe, a silver-haired man wearing silver garb appeared before them, floating in mid-air. Clark’s mouth opened wide, as if to speak, but no words escaped his lips. He turned to H.G. Wells, but his visitor seemed calm and perfectly receptive to such a sight.

As the man spoke, Clark learned about himself, the history of his people, and the tragic reason why he was the sole survivor of a once-magnificent civilization. True, the other Clark – whom Wells referred to as Clark Jerome or CJ - had told him about Krypton, his birth parents and why he was here. Sadly, while in that universe, there had been no time to let him study the globe. Eventually the images ceased, and standing in the place of Jor-El was Mr. Wells.

Clark was overcome with surprise, joy and grief for the courage and love his birth parents had shown him.

After a few moments of silence, Herb’s voice broke into his thoughts. “My young friend, the other Clark thought that you needed to know more about your origins. Unfortunately, the globe, with its history, could not be given to you until this joining of your former past and new timeline took place. The reason why you were nauseous earlier is because of that merging. The device I used earlier sped up the process...”

Clark nodded as gradually the vague memories began to come into sharp focus. “That’s right; after we left the other Lois and Clark in their world, we traveled to Idlewild Airport and made sure Lois did not board the plane.”

H.G. Wells nodded in agreement. “Yes. Who would have thought that something as simple as Miss Lane accepting a newspaper from me would be the instrument to save her life? If she had not read it, out of sheer curiosity she would have joined the paparazzi trailing the Luthors, inveigled her way into the VIP lounge, and gotten a ride to Europe with them.”

“After she read that article by Linda King, going to the Congo was a waste of time,” Clark finished the story.

The older man hesitated, contemplating his next words with care, and then said, “Miss Lane’s memories were ‘interfered with’ as well.”

Suddenly overwhelmed with concern for his lovely partner, he said. “What? Why? She’s never had any contact with that maniac.”

“No, but she has had contact with you. Miss Lane possesses a mind that reaches conclusions with a bare handful of facts. She

vaguely remembered seeing you at the airport wearing lightweight clothing. Garments which were totally inappropriate for that time of year. Upon meeting you at the *Daily Planet* for the first time, her subconscious mind would have worked on that piece of information and eventually she would have wanted to know what you were doing there and how you managed to get away in the middle of a blizzard.”

He settled his exhausted body against the couch, still weary after his ordeal. “Could something so insignificant really be that damaging?”

“Perhaps not of itself, but in time, that short memory might have led Miss Lane down a path we do not want her to enter right now. Think what happened once you saw Templar.”

“Tempus,” Clark corrected him.

“Yes, once you saw Mr. Tempus, that was the ‘time pivot’ which pulled everything together. We are now in the point in time when/where I collected you to provide necessary assistance to the Kents in their world. But this time, your secret identity is intact.”

If Clark wasn’t nauseous and confused about what had happened over the last hour, a circuitous discussion of physics and time travel would have sent him to bed. Instead he decided to stay with something he could understand. “In the original timeline, Tempus was the one who revealed my secret identity and destroyed any hope of a normal life. I was engaged to Lana, and because of his actions, that relationship came to an end.”

“True, removing you from that timeline altered many things. I am sorry about the broken engagement in that timeline with Miss Lang, but it seems that the two of you were never meant to be husband and wife. Miss Lane, on the other hand, is alive and doing what she does best: investigating and exposing corruption, such as this fellow who owns DMG. The only way to put an end to this villain’s deeds is for you to work together as an investigative journalist team.”

“But how do I keep Tempus from destroying my life *now*? Surely he knows who I am? Unless...” His voice trailed off. “Lois and Clark from the other universe! I was... Superman to help him?” Clark said the name, testing the strange sound of it.

“Correct! When Tempus tried to destroy Clark Jerome Kent’s identity, you were there to prove him wrong – as Superman. But remember, so many events here have changed. Miss Lang is now married to Gregory Daae. Perry White did not run for office, so James Olsen won’t be arranging a debate between him and Tempus. You won’t have to face Templar at a television station. But eventually there will be a confrontation with him. He is a man of means in Metropolis, albeit not as well-known as either Mr. Daae or Lex Luthor, but he is a shadowy manipulator in the corporate arena.”

“What about Lana?” Clark asked. Despite everything, he still could not dismiss her as she had done to him.

The expression on Herb’s face was blank when he said, “Mrs. Daae has chosen her path. There really is nothing further to be done in that regard. Whatever difficulties she and her spouse face in the aftermath of the media exploitation investigations cannot be a barrier to your and Miss Lane’s investigation... or your future happiness together. My chief concern in this matter is Superman and Utopia.”

“Superman. That’s my secret from the dream I had. It is... my secret identity?” he asked in a bewildered tone.

“Indeed it is, and since in this universe we do not have Martha Kent’s seamstress skills to call upon, Clark Jerome or CJ’s mother created this suit for you to wear in order to protect that identity.” For the third time, Wells reached into the bag, removing a familiar blue and red suit and handing it to Clark. “This is as much a part of your heritage as being Kryptonian. Wear it with pride... Clark – Kal-El – Kent.”

Clark stretched his hand out to take the offered garment when lines of worry etched themselves bit by bit over his handsome

face. “The memories of how Tempus was able to track me down by following and capturing Lois are coming back. There are also memories of what my life was without Lois and a secret identity. I have to tell you that does not make me happy. Will... will that occur again?”

“Not at all. We will use a distraction that Mr. Tempus is ignorant of. Metropolis has a system of underground tunnels running throughout the warehouse district. In the early part of the nineteenth century, they were used originally by dockworkers to move supplies from the harbor to the main part of the city. As the roads within the city improved, these underground passages were all but forgotten. Somehow their existence was rediscovered, and during the early part of this century, those tunnels were used by Prohibition-era racketeers like Pino ‘Pretty Boy’ Dragonetti to transport illegal alcohol to speakeasies all over Metropolis.”

Surprised by his knowledge on the subject, Clark said, “That’s an incredible piece of history, but how does that help me keep my secret?”

“Thanks to a set of old blueprints of the city I was able to... procure, the secret to keeping Superman’s secret is right below our feet! Come along; we are making a visit to the building’s basement.”

Clark followed the time traveler out of his apartment and downstairs. He had never been to the basement; all the apartments had a washer and dryer. His landlord may have been difficult in the beginning of their relationship, but as the rent checks began to flow, Mr. Wrenn had quickly forgotten about his quiet, respectable tenant on the top floor and did not bother him.

As they made their way downstairs, Clark said hesitantly, “These ‘new’ memories are telling me I have done some pretty amazing things as the Man of Steel. But what if I... I don’t quite measure up to those memories? Can I truly *be* Superman again?”

Herb, undisturbed by this outburst, reached into his bag once more and pulled out a flashlight. “Yes, you can. There is no reason to be afraid; in both this world and CJ’s universe, the feats performed by you were laudable. After all, the ‘Haze’ has been around for months. It must be frustrating doing all you can do, yet working within the shadows. Shadows, as I am sure you will agree, limit the feats such powers can perform.”

“Yes, but Lana...” He stopped and realized he was hiding simply because he did not want to upset a woman who no longer deserved his loyalty - a woman who belonged to another man.

As if from far away, he heard H.G. Wells say, “CJ made the same decision. Isn’t it time to step out from the ambiguous shadows to be your own man – to become the Superman of this world – to help?”

Tempus wouldn’t expose him in a television station, but what was to stop him from doing it somewhere else? “I understand everything you are saying, but Tempus is aware of who I am. According to you, Utopia knows everything about Superman and his descendants. How can I possibly keep him from exposing that information and destroying my life and any chance of a real relationship with Lois?”

“Simply put, Mr. Kent, by doing something that is unrecorded and completely unexpected! He does not know *everything* about you or Superman. We are going to change the rules of the game.” At this point they had reached the entrance to the basement. Carefully, H.G. opened the door, and exposed an area that was completely unlike the rest of the common areas within the building, which were brightly lit, well maintained, and painted in vivid colors. The basement, on the other hand, looked like they had stepped into another world, or perhaps another century. H.G. turned on the light switch. With a flicker of an ancient blub that cast a yellowish light, the big room came slightly into view.

The walls were constructed of large rocks, the once-sharp edges made smooth and rounded with the passage of time. The

storage room held all manner of supplies and cleaning materials, covered with a thick veil of grayish dust, most of which had not seen the light of day in decades.

“Oh, dear, it appears this room is no longer used by the superintendent,” Herb said with a derisive snort.

“That probably makes sense. Each floor has a storage room for all of his maintenance and cleaning supplies. There is no reason for him to come down here,” Clark responded.

“Just so. Then this ancient storage room is perfect for your needs.” Wells consulted the paper map and then walked straight towards a wall lined with old wooden shelves. There were five shelves in all. Four were set against the wall, but the center one was set inside the wall itself.

“Ah, yes, here we are. Could you please use your x-ray vision to see beyond the center wooden shelf?”

Clark stared at the wall. On the other side was a passageway choked with cobwebs, dust and debris. To the right side was an old mechanism, which was probably used to open the door. Before he could tell his companion, the little man reached down under one of the shelves, pulled hard on an unseen lever, and then stepped back with an alacrity that surprised Clark. The noise that followed hurt his ears as ancient gears which had not moved since prohibition screeched in adamant protest. Little by little, like a flower blooming, the shelf opened in slow motion to reveal a tunnel. Tendrils of dank, musty, foul air assailed their nostrils, and both men sneezed in protest.

Despite the smell, H.G. Wells bowed and said dramatically, “Behold, Mr. Kent! A passageway from here to the *Daily Planet* building and throughout lower Metropolis! Using these tunnels will allow you to enter and egress without Tempus tracking your movements.”

Clark smiled. H.G. was right. Using these underground tunnels would keep him safe from prying eyes. He could perform all manner of rescues and disappear. If he was extremely careful, Superman’s true identity would be protected. Comprehending the myriad of possibilities was exhilarating. “When do I begin?” he asked his companion eagerly.

Part Sixteen

In the honeymoon suite of the Lexor Hotel, Lana was happily admiring her reflection in the floor-length mirror. Her petite figure was elongated by a sleeveless close-fitting sheath of creamy satin with a short train. The diamond and emerald jewelry Daae had given her was simple and uncluttered. Altogether, her appearance was the perfect ensemble for a woman preparing to renew her wedding vows.

Since arriving from Zurich, she and Gregory had slept apart in anticipation of this event.

She thought about the RSVP’s that had arrived from guests, many of whom she did not know and were most likely friends or business acquaintances of Gregory’s. Several of her co-workers from the museum would be attending, and Chloe Foster, her former roommate, would be there as her maid of honor. She seriously doubted she would spend any time with them today – or in the future. Gregory wanted to live in Switzerland, and after the *Age of Napoleon* exhibit was officially unveiled, her time at the museum would come to an end.

Pete Ross, as well as every person she had invited from Smallville, had returned the invitation with the NO box firmly checked off. Her mother had warned her, and she should not have been surprised that so many of their former neighbors had sided with Clark Kent. Lana snorted mentally. Those small-minded people lived in an aptly named town. They had no idea that her relationship with Clark had been simply going nowhere.

It didn’t matter. Gregory offered her everything. Someday soon she intended to present him with the one thing he wanted above all else – an heir.

Mrs. Lang’s voice, coming from behind Lana, broke into her thoughts, her gentle tone soothing. “The dress looks exquisite, Lana! I am very happy that you and Gregory are renewing your vows. This means a lot to your father and I, seeing our daughter married.”

Lana turned and hugged her mother. “It wouldn’t be right not having Daddy give me away and you watching it all happen. Is he ready yet?” she asked.

“No, he’s still fighting with his tie. After all the formal affairs he’s attended over the years, it should be simple. But he’s a little nervous; it’s not every day that a man walks his only child down the aisle.”

“Although he’s trying hard not to show it, Gregory is nervous as well. But Daddy will be just fine. This is a big day for our family! Th... thank you both for being so understanding.” Lana’s eyes gazed downward and for a moment she looked like a little girl embarrassed by her poor behavior. “I... I knew our courtship and marriage was a bit rushed, but Gregory didn’t want to wait until we came here to be married... neither did I.”

Her mother’s eyes welled up with tears and she nodded knowingly. “Yes, it’s all right, dear; you’ve made us both very... happy.” Behind the joyful tears Mrs. Lang could not help but be apprehensive about her daughter’s choice for a husband. Gregory was charming and attentive enough, but there was something in his manner that made her just a little uneasy.

Lex stood before the door to Arianna’s room. He never could understand why a woman as vibrant and intelligent as she would chose a drab, lifeless shade like gray as the room’s main color. After all, this was supposed to be her favorite room in the penthouse. He shrugged mentally. It was her and that elite designer’s choice, and they said the color was tranquil and easy on the eyes. He thought it sterile and tedious. Nevertheless he had given her license to do whatever she wanted with the space, so now he had to live with the results.

Right now, though, they needed to depart. He believed in punctuality, whether for business or pleasure. This day’s event would be pleasurable for him; Arianna’s emotional state, on the other hand, was another matter.

Knocking on the heavy oak door was out of the question. She was his wife, and this was their home. No doors should come between them. Oddly enough, it had been weeks since he had entered this room. As the door swung open, his eyes fell upon Arianna, who was wearing a lavender Dupioni silk robe, seated on an elegant lounge, staring out the windows watching as the day slipped lazily from morning to afternoon.

He cleared his throat and said, “My dear, it does not appear as if you are ready.”

The voice which responded, overlaid with the aristocratic British accent, was not firm and resolved, but lost and jagged with wretchedness. “Lex, please... please don’t ask me to go. It is distressing enough that he married Lana Lang... a nobody! But now to witness them exchange renewal vows is more than I can bear.”

Lex answered with unaccustomed gentleness, “Do you really love him so deeply?”

Her sad brown eyes were a mixture of curiosity and caution. At first she wanted to deny it, but unfortunately, it was impossible to conceal the obvious from this man.

“Yes.”

His face was a studied composition of once-sharp angles softly blurred by age. Normally the public mask smiled with the ease of an accomplished manipulator. This afternoon that smile had been replaced by a deep frown.

“I have always suspected that you still loved him. Nonetheless, Gregory has made his choice, just as you have made yours. This is the social event of the year, and it is paramount that

we, as the leading couple of Metropolis society, make our appearance. He is, after all, my business partner, and as the papers say, our ‘dear’ friend.” He glanced down at his Rolex watch, looked back at her and said, “I expect you to be ready in fifteen minutes.”

Arianna looked up at him, and saw no pity or compassion in his eyes. Realizing he would accept no excuse, her eyes, previously brimming with sadness, were now beacons of anger mingled with defeat.

“Fifteen minutes,” she answered mechanically, then got off the couch and walked to her bedroom.

As he prepared for today’s special event, Daae listened to the second movement of Mozart’s Violin Sonata number 35. The piece was one of his favorites from the Austrian composer. His mind drifted back to his detractors and enemies, such as the bothersome reporter Armin Rissler, and the editor Luka Brunner from years before. They had been a problem, but with judiciously applied pressure in the right places, their interference with his affairs had ceased. He mused that each decision he had made, for good or ill, had lead him to become one of the wealthiest men in the world.

His mind turned to Lana. She, with her youthfulness and intelligence, had brought spark into a life that heretofore had been consumed by the accumulation of wealth. In time, he hoped she would become *enceinte* and provide an heir. Normally he did not consider himself a jealous man, but the matter of her former boyfriend was of some note to him. He was certain Templar’s *Daily Planet* minion would be of assistance in that quarter, although he had no intention of informing Templar of his overall strategy. Each piece must fit precisely in the puzzle of his design.

His chauffeur and butler interrupted his thoughts when they entered the master suite. The butler surreptitiously set about laying out Daae’s black tuxedo jacket, shoes, shirt and cufflinks. The burly Duncan said with a slightly disapproving tone, “Mister Templar is here to see you, sir.”

Daae’s business acquaintance was supposed to be at the Lexor Hotel. Profoundly curious to know why the man was here, he said, “Send him up.”

“Excuse me, sir, but which vehicle do you wish to use today?” Duncan asked.

“The Silver Spirit would be perfect for this occasion.”

“Very well, sir. I will make sure the champagne is chilled. Is there anything special Mrs. Daae would like stocked in the bar?”

“No, we shall remain at the hotel after the *réception de mariage*. Just be certain that a cup of hot chai tea and a vegetable platter are waiting for her tomorrow morning on our way to the airport. Please make sure the plane’s crew have everything ready.” He thought for a moment and said, “Duncan, assign one of your associates to keep an eye on Mr. Templar.”

Duncan smiled tightly, nodded, and exited the room. Daae took note that the administrative staff of DMG were not the only ones who disapproved of the man. Moments later a fairly jovial Templar came in smiling. “Congratulations again on your upcoming nuptials! I still find it rather odd that no one is standing up with you. After all, the gossip pages say the charming Mrs. Daae’s friend, Chloe something-or-other, will be acting as maid of honor,” Jasper said.

Gregory stood motionless as his butler carefully tied his black silk tie. He responded offhandedly, “Reading gossip is a poor use of *temps*, or should I say time, Jasper. Lana wanted a proper ceremony with her family. It was her desire to have a *demoiselle d’honneur*, but I have no wish to press anyone into service as *témoin*.”

Neither man spoke as the butler completed dressing Gregory, then silently departed once his task was complete. Templar couldn’t resist saying, “Perhaps Lex Luthor could have stood up with you? After all, the tabloids and society columns keep

referring to you as his ‘best friend’ in Metropolis.”

Daae stiffened and did not trust himself to answer that particular statement. Templar, in his clumsy manner, was goading him into a conversation that would reveal more personal information about him than he wished to reveal. Nevertheless, the irony was not lost on him; the husband of his former lover acting as best man at his wedding. Even he could not do something so cruel to Arianna. Instead, he ignored the jab, decided to change the flow of the conversation, and said, “Yes, the media is also correct in referring to him as my business partner. As such, it is important that I maintain the ‘upper hand’.” Changing the subject abruptly, he continued, “I want all the latest reports for the LexCorp takeover on my desk as soon as I return from my *voyage de noces*.”

Templar nodded, “Bonesteel will deliver them personally.”

Daae studied his reflection carefully and then swiftly turned around, staring at Templar with appraising Arctic blue eyes which seemed to be cooler than usual. “Much as I cherish the lovely distraction my wife provides, it is time to get back to work. Every stock purchase must be *flawless* as we close in on LexCorp.”

Templar’s throat was suddenly dry and he swallowed before saying, “Of course,” without his usual swagger. Silently he reminded himself to look over the reports and make sure nothing was there that would leak his real intentions for DMG and LexCorp. They were at a critical juncture and the last thing he needed was for Daae to suspect the truth.

Abruptly, Gregory interrupted his thoughts. “Oh, has our source within the *Daily Planet* been able to break into either Lois Lane’s or her partner’s computer?”

“No, not yet. Why?” Templar asked.

“They need to be discredited as soon as possible. I have been extremely patient with Miss Lane over the past few years – it amused me to watch her struggle to put together an expose against my company. But now that Mr. Kent is working with her, he might use her story as an act of revenge against me.”

Tempus nodded in agreement, and said, “Our source will be ‘encouraged’ to find something tangible we can manipulate for our own use.”

“Good. Destroying his reputation will have a twofold use. No decent newspaper will hire him so his paycheck will be non-existent, and any story he or his partner have produced will be called into question. Don’t forget, Jasper, I want those reports waiting upon my return. Now, it is time for you to leave.”

Templar nodded and departed quickly.

A pensive Linda King and her date Preston Carpenter sat in a luxurious Cadillac, en route to the Lexor.

Preston took her ice-cold hand in his and gave it a little squeeze. “Why so quiet, Linda? I thought attending an event like this would be to your liking?”

She turned to him, a gloomy expression plastered on her face. “Sure, if it was anybody else. But we don’t exactly have a friendly relationship with that snake. This is more a grand ‘*entrée*’ to society for his pretty little wife – who only three months ago was working in the bowels of the Metropolis museum as an assistant to her father! I wonder if the former Ms. Lang realizes just what kind of man she has married? It wouldn’t be to her benefit to disappoint him in any way. Speaking of disappointment, I hope this ‘business’ arrangement with Jasper Templar doesn’t blow up in our faces. There’s something about him... he’s evil.”

The atmosphere within the car had plunged into further gloom, and Preston leaned heavily back in his seat. Linda was correct; he would much rather be on the links than taking part in this ‘celebration’. Who did something so asinine? He had been married twice; in each case, he did not see the need to renew his vows to either one of his former wives. Unfortunately, an invitation from Daae was more like a royal command, which

neither of them dared disobey.

He, too, hoped his alliance with Templar would be beneficial and put an end to all this toadying. Like his lover, though, he felt a strong sense of foreboding in his dealings with Templar.

Stephanie Aronnax moved around the sunny bedroom of her tastefully-appointed condo, preparing for her employer's wedding. While putting on a pearl necklace, she mused about the upcoming ceremony.

Mr. Daae's courtship and marriage were so different, she thought, from when she and her husband Arnaud married thirty years ago. Everything between Daae and Lana Lang had happened so abruptly. Some people within DMG were accepting it, and some were not. "Ah, well," she told herself, "That's not my concern. Perhaps they will have a proper life together."

She rubbed scented lotion over her hands, thinking about the many comments she had heard from her co-workers over the past few weeks. She also thought about Bonesteel and his curious habit of copying sensitive documents on her personal copier late at night. Sooner or later, that behavior of his had to be addressed.

"This RoyalPoint Financials matter is what truly concerns me," she decided. She resolved to sit down with her friends Emma and Tina next Saturday. Between the three of them, she believed they should be able to ascertain the reason for this shell company and Templar's objective. There was definitely more to RoyalPoint than met the eye. "Meanwhile," she said to herself, "It's time for me to finish getting dressed for this wedding."

James Olsen slipped easily into his meticulously tailored tuxedo jacket made of pure wool highlighted with satin lapels and buttons. He rather enjoyed getting dressed for occasions such as this one, as it was an improvement over his usual uniform of white shirt and khakis. Besides, he wanted to look his best, since Daae's wedding was bound to get a lot of media coverage. He had made sure that the story would be on the second page rather than the society section for such weddings. The research department had informed him that a number of upwardly-mobile women read the *Daily Planet* and would be eagerly reading every morsel about the fabulous pair.

Fortunately, Perry had not allowed Peggy Becker to drop the bombshell in her column that Lana had been dating a staff reporter at the time of her marriage. He had heard that Kent had taken his former girlfriend's defection badly, but after a few days off he returned to his desk. James admired the man for his determination to put the unhappy episode behind him.

No, for the *Daily Planet's* purposes, it was vitally important that the soon-to-be-wed couple represented the ultimate contemporary fairytale. Lana was the smart young working woman who went to Europe on assignment and came back with a wealthy husband. She was to be depicted as a modern Cinderella success story. The last thing the paper needed was to have the Kent/Lang relationship exposed and everyone involved placed in a bad light. James knew where to draw the line between fact and fiction. If he didn't, Perry White would call him on it, whether he was the owner or not.

It was one of the reasons why the *Planet* had retained a loyal readership and was still holding its own in the emerging world of technology and the internet. The stories and reporters were first-rate, especially Lane and Kent. He thought about how they had exposed New Troy Governor Montgomery's bullying tactics. Apparently, one of the mayors in their state had infuriated the Governor by not endorsing him in his bid for the White House. In retaliation, one of Montgomery's top aides had decided to teach the mayor a 'lesson' and had closed the docks and ferries around his city for two days for no apparent reason. The closures had caused massive problems for the city and a few dock workers were injured. At the time, many thought this was through negligence on

the part of the mayor. Happily, Lois and Clark had investigated the situation by going undercover; a heavily-disguised Lois worked as a cleaning lady in the mayor's office and Clark on the docks. The upshot was that the governor and all of his cronies were now under investigation and his bid for the oval office was permanently stymied.

James thought gleefully, "They had scooped every newspaper and media outlet in the state. Now there was even talk of them being a shoo-in for a Kerth... possibility even a Pulitzer. Needless to say, during the days the series of articles had run in the paper, the *Daily Planet's* circulation had been impressive."

Perry had been right to put them together as the 'hottest team in town'.

He wondered what the intrepid duo could *possibly* do to top that story...

Peggy Becker popped a breath mint in her mouth as she got out of the cab and stood outside the Lexor Hotel, watching eagerly as the elite of Metropolis' society entered the building. Daae had not invited her or any other society columnist in the city to the event, but that didn't stop her from asking some of the guests who were entering the hotel a few pointed questions about the bride and groom.

Some, like Daae's assistant, Stephanie Aronnax, and her own boss, James Olsen, smiled at her and gave happy comments. Others seemed to almost grimace and avoid her altogether. She thought for sure that Preston Carpenter was going to punch her. His date, Linda King, looked like she had swallowed a nasty bug as soon as she set eyes on Peggy.

But the most puzzling was watching Lex and Arianna Luthor. He was at his most typical, the suave and self-assured billionaire, shaking hands and smiling with the other guests as they entered the hotel. Arianna - normally a diva of fashion - wore a dark green gown that made her look positively gray, as if she were attending a funeral rather than a wedding.

She had heard that Arthur Chow had been invited, but he was the only person on the high-powered guest list who would not be attending.

Peggy did not consider herself an empathic person, but even a blind person could sense there were a lot of out-of-the-ordinary emotional undercurrents surrounding this wedding. She speculated just how long the quickly-formed Daae/Lang union would last in such an atmosphere.

"Come on, it'll be fun, Molly! When was the last time we hung out together?" Lois asked.

The voice on the other end of the phone sounded disappointed and distracted. "Yeah, it has been too long! But my computer consulting business won't run itself. Otherwise, visiting the golf range with you would be the perfect way to blow off a little steam. Unfortunately, my newest client is under a great deal of pressure, and he wants this program written up immediately. Can't Lucy go with you?"

"Nope, she's studying for her finals."

Over the phone line, a mischievous giggle reached Lois' ears, much like a champagne cork bursting from the bottle. "What about that hot guy you're partnering with; the one you call Kansas? He should be free."

"Molly!" Lois answered, "Today is *not* a good day for him! His ex-girlfriend is getting married or renewing her marriage vows."

The amusement turned to sympathy. "Oh, no, that's gotta hurt! All the more reason for him to get out of his apartment! Of course, I don't know if he is in his apartment. But if he is, he shouldn't be by himself."

Lois bit down on her lower lip. Molly was not aware of what had happened between herself and Clark a few weeks ago. Only

Ellen Lane knew and she wanted to keep it at that way. But she couldn't deny wanting to help her 'friend' through what must be a tough day. Their work relationship had improved immensely, but she was reluctant to go any further. Despite the impressive front Clark had put on, he was still hurting.

"Lois!" Molly's voice broke through her musings. "At least stop by and offer to treat him to a coffee after leaving the driving range."

"Okay, just to keep you quiet!" Lois groaned good-naturedly and ended the conversation.

Across town in Clark's slowly gentrifying neighborhood, he paced his apartment. Today, the normally spacious and bright loft seemed dim and oppressive. His mind was clouded with a myriad of thoughts. "What am I doing at home on a beautiful day like this? I should be outside, enjoying the sunshine and the delights the city has to offer. Maybe I should fly to Kansas and work the wheat fields with Uncle Wayne? Or perhaps, like H.G. said, make my debut as Superman?" He knew why he was feeling so agitated: he would do anything not to think of the event that was taking place in the swanky Lexor Hotel - Lana's 'wedding'.

He was about to step onto the balcony, spin into the suit, and leap into the air, when abruptly his thoughts were interrupted by a loud knocking at his door.

"Hey, Clark, open up! It's your old roommate!"

With steps taken at super speed, he spun into street clothes, and soon was opening the front door. He said with genuine relief, "Pete! To what do I owe this visit?"

His friend walked inside and said, "One of the doctors had to work an extra shift. He gave me his tickets to the Metros game. I thought since neither one of us is exactly doing handsprings about today's 'celebration', we could go. What's the worst that could happen? Maybe our favorite team will win for a change."

Clark's face split into a grateful smile. "A game would be great! Let's get out of here!" Taking only a moment to grab his wallet and keys, the two friends exited the apartment, talking excitedly.

Fifteen minutes later a slightly nervous Lois knocked on his front door. She waited for him to answer, but the apartment was silent.

Part Seventeen

It was a week after the Daae wedding, and lunchtime at the home of Stephanie Aronnax. Three old friends gathered at the dining room table. The meal, an expertly-plated cucumber salad accompanied by poached chicken breasts in a flavorful ginger, shallot and sesame broth, was ignored. The warm garlic parmesan rolls that Stephanie had baked earlier had gone ice-cold. The expressions on the three women's faces were serious and thoughtful.

"So, after going over all these files, what are your recommendations?" Stephanie Aronnax asked.

A petite woman with graying red hair looked up from the papers in her hand and carefully placed a stylish pair of reading glasses on top of her head, shaking it in equal parts admiration and trepidation. "The sheer scale of this plot is bold, yet stylishly conceived," Tina Belknap, a CPA with an international accounting firm, said. "I have to hand it to Daae; he's got nerves of steel, plotting a takeover of LexCorp. But if it fails, I wouldn't want to have Lex Luthor as *my* enemy."

"Sorry, Stephanie, but start looking for a lawyer," Emma Tremayne, a sophisticated, leggy blonde with a smoky voice broke in. "A damn good one who specializes in walking on the 'lighter side' of blackmail." She rubbed her chin thoughtfully, "Unfortunately, but it cannot be yours truly."

Astonished, her friend asked, "Why do *I* need a lawyer? Who's to say this whole deal with DMG and LexCorp will get

out? Also, why can't it be you? Nobody knows the movers and the shakers in Metropolis and New York better!"

Emma responded, "Because these guys don't just bring a gun to a knife fight: they bring a machine gun. When the time comes, the IRS, the FBI, and a horde of very good, very thorough forensic accountants are going to be crawling all over the American arm of DMG like a host of locusts. Since you are his executive assistant, *everything* in your office - even your espresso machine and favorite coffee cup - will be confiscated by the Feds and gone over with a microscope. My arena is corporate law, unfortunately; this might require the legal skills of an international lawyer."

"But Mr. Daae..."

Tina broke in, "Is a *Swiss* national, so the Feds can't touch him, without the permission of his government. But they can and *will* go after the American branches of his companies and its employees. There are plenty of executives in your company who must know about this takeover, which we know by the very nature of these papers is hostile. No one would believe his personal assistant was ignorant of his actions. Stephanie, like it or not, you've gotta protect yourself. He *knew* what he was getting into. Only someone extremely arrogant could imagine he wouldn't get caught."

In utter disbelief, Stephanie was frightened at the conversation's bleak turn. She licked her suddenly parched lips. Trying to defend her employer, she retorted, "But he's been so good to me over the years..."

"No doubt about it, he has been a great employer for you, but looking between the lines of these reports, a number of people have not been treated quite so well," Tina said in a consoling tone.

Emma rubbed her thumb and forefinger, a sure sign that she was concentrating sharply on every possible angle of the case. "OK, let's just say for kicks and giggles Daae is innocent and every dirty trick in these files was the doing of this Templar fellow behind his back. Knowing Gregory Daae as you do, can you honestly believe he would be that reckless? Allowing someone *complete* access to the empire he's built from the ground up?"

"This... this corporate takeover is not legal. Everything is being done through insider trading, bribes to upper - echelon officials in the SECC, shell companies and who knows what else. The accountant in me is cringing in fear. If any of my bosses found out I even *knew* these documents existed!" Tina said, shaking her head. "I would get fired and that would only be the beginning! We often talk about using our legal backchannels to get a job done, but these people don't use backchannels because the people they use *are* the underworld." Her smoky voice had dropped down to nearly a whisper.

Holding up her hands in defeat, Stephanie said, "Enough! Point taken! Where do I go from here?"

Emma said, "From where I sit, out of DMG as fast as possible!"

"Oh, I'm supposed to walk into my office while my boss is on his honeymoon, type out a resignation letter, hand it over to Jasper Templar and leave? That's going to look awfully suspicious."

"Why?" Tina gestured to the files on the table. "No one is aware of your behind-the-scenes knowledge. Look, if quitting suddenly bothers you that much, what's wrong with taking an early retirement? The kids are out of college and making their own way. Isn't it time for you to do the same? No one would blame you. Working for Jasper Templar makes you and a lot of other people uncomfortable. With his new young wife, Daae is not going to be in Metropolis very often. Without Daae keeping an eye on him, Templar will be in control. Also, if he does pull this off, Daae will not own his company for long. Life at DMG's executive suite will be decidedly unpleasant."

Stephanie's lower lip twitched. Her friends were right. After all, that was the reason she called them here this afternoon, to

make sense of these documents and to help her decide what to do. Illegal activities abounded, and from the looks of things, the only way to avoid spending several years as an unwilling guest of the government was to prove she was innocent before anyone twisted the truth to make her guilty.

Her shoulders sagged from the tension and stress. This was not how she wanted to leave her job. Daae was a good boss, but she knew in her heart that he had to be aware of most of what was going on. “OK. How would I go about being a whistleblower? Turn all this stuff over the Feds?”

“No. Give it to someone you can trust. Like a reporter,” Emma said flatly.

“What? Forgive me, but this situation is not *All the President’s Men*. Who would have the nerve to play Woodward and Bernstein?”

Tina’s eye sparkled for the first time that afternoon, “I was thinking of the reporters Lane and Kent.”

Stephanie stood up from the table and started for the kitchen. “Tina, surely you can’t be serious?” She lifted up her cup and asked her guests, “Coffee, anyone?”

Emma got up and looked at last night’s paper on the heavy wood coffee table. The headlines blared:

GOVERNOR MONTGOMERY CONFESSES TO ABUSE OF POWER!

By Lois Lane and Clark J. Kent

She said, “Yes, I would love another cup! There is nothing better than freshly brewed coffee! Hmmm, this might just be the ticket. Lane and Kent work for one of the most reputable newspapers in the country. They are the best investigative reporters around. Give the material to them. If Templar and Daae’s plans are exposed, you can always tell the Feds you gave them this stuff and demand immunity.”

Stephanie shook her head as she busied herself filling her cups. The aroma filled the room with a slightly nutty flavor. “You are both crazy! Since when does anyone demand immunity from a crime they were not involved in?”

Her friends said in unison, “When they hand over *prime* evidence.”

Stephanie set the coffeepot down and rejoined her friends on the couch. “But I haven’t done anything!”

Emma, always a straight shooter, said, “That’s just the point. Stephanie, it’s time to bail. As soon as Gregory gets back, tell him it’s time you concentrated on something else besides running his office. Arnaud would not have wanted his wife to spend time in a federal prison. Remember that, because corporate sharks like Templar and Daae *always* find someone on whom to lay the blame.”

Stephanie nodded. Reluctant as she was to admit it, Emma and Tina were right. The situation before her was explosive, and unless she desired to be in the middle of it all, the time had come to retire.

Part Eighteen

Phillip Vossen slowly made his way to the front cab of the new Metro train line. The gray-haired man with the slightly stooped back was a thirty-five year veteran train operator of the Metropolis Transit System. Today, for the first time, these innovative train cars were going to glide over brand spanking new tracks out of Oak Court Terminal, but it was the first, and *last*, time he would be driving them. Tomorrow he’d hand in his gear and close the noisy steel locker that had contained his personal items for all of those years. Retirement day had arrived. Not a moment too soon for him; the MTS’s ongoing upgrade would eventually replace its older operator-driven cars with fancy automated modules, each of which would contain multiple computer systems. Those systems would control everything from the interior lights to navigation. That was fine for the efficiency

experts and politicians and was supposedly a huge safety feature for the great number of passengers who would ride the modules every day, but he preferred driving with both of his hands firmly on the throttle.

The one bright spot would be guiding the train module into the Nuber Avenue station with its new-fangled design and technology. Imagine: him, a kid from Mulberry Gardens in the oldest part of Metropolis, driving into the station and getting his picture taken with all manner of famous people! Now that, in his humble opinion, that was the way to leave the job on a high note!

Brushing all other thoughts aside, he got himself situated within the driver’s booth and then called out to his crew. “Louie, Mac, you guys ready to go over this checklist?”

Louie answered crisply with a chuckle in his voice, “Ready when you are! This ‘list’ has got to be at least three miles long!”

“That’s okay; we do everything by the book, then we can pull out of the station,” Vossen answered back. This was going to be a fun drive, and he could hardly wait to tell Millie about it when he got home. With the back of his sleeve, he blotted beads of sweat from his forehead. Now, if only his left arm would stop hurting...

The newsroom workday was winding down. Several of the daytime staff had already departed and some of the night crew were shuffling in. Lois was desultorily packing up her briefcase getting ready to leave as well. It had been a long day, and her feet hurt from walking around town trying to track down a lead on a promising story about a ring of jewelry thieves, a lead that had eventually run dry. After such a disappointment, she was looking forward to soaking in a hot bubble bath and then watching a couple of hours of her favorite show, *The Ivory Tower*, on the VCR.

The highlight of the day had been helping Catherine get ready for her impromptu date with Arthur Chow. Lately the two had been seeing even more of each other than usual when he was in town. Although her friend had not said a great deal about those dates, Lois could tell by her enigmatic smiles that Catherine was quietly pleased with the change her social life was taking.

All of a sudden, Applegate rushed by her desk, sneezing and coughing as he went.

“Please cover your mouth; I don’t want to catch any germs!” she called after him.

Applegate uncharacteristically ignored her remark and made his way up the ramp.

Clark’s consoling voice reached her ears. “Lois, have a little pity on the man, he’s been fighting a bad cold all week. You’ve got to admire his dedication to the job.”

Her pretty lips twisted into a grimace, “That’s true. I don’t mind his dedication, just as long as I don’t get sick because of it.” She was about to launch into a discussion about spreading germs when Perry came out of his office and walked straight towards them. The wolfish grin on his face put Lois on guard.

“Uh, Lois, you do know tonight is the inaugural run for the new midtown line addition of the Metropolis subway system?”

Despite bone weariness, she managed a cautious smile. Perry was up to something. “Sure, Chief! Everybody’s talking about it. The Metropolis Transit System’s new underground line will make travel from the east side of Metropolis to the west side a lot easier. That new station installed on Nuber Avenue is a huge work of art and a bustling commuter hub. It’s a tech-friendly place, shiny, made of glass and it simply sparkles from all the natural light pouring down from hundreds of feet above ground. Heck, Clark and I could get to work much faster, which means you won’t complain about us being late! Half the bigwigs in the city will be there tonight - another opportunity to do political networking. Applegate will love...” Her voice trailed off as realization dawned as to just why her boss had asked that particular question.

Perry smiled with undisguised glee. “That’s perfect, Lois!

You are already familiar with the material.” He handed her a small envelope. “Here’s your press pass and invitation.”

“Chief! I’m an *investigative* reporter on the city beat! Since Applegate’s sick, ask Meyers or Richardson... even Peggy!”

“Nothing doing! Since you live so close to the Nuber Avenue station, the story will have a definite personal touch! The assignment is all yours. I want that copy to sing the praises of the MTS!”

Seeing her plans for a quiet evening at home evaporating, she jerked a thumb at her partner, and said, “Why can’t he do it?”

Before Clark could answer, Perry responded, “Because I want my ‘senior’ city beat reporter covering this story. There is no reason for both of you to be involved. Besides, Kent has to finish writing up that article on China’s new president. On your way out, grab young Jack from the darkroom. This story needs pictures.”

Lois started to pout, opened her lips to speak, and then decided against it. Once again, Perry had her dead to rights. “Fine! I’m going straight there!”

Ignoring her mood, Perry crowed, “See, that’s the kind of work ethic that made Elvis a star! Phone in the story to Elsie. Don’t forget, I want six inches of a perfectly-written story... with pictures!”

“Yeah, right. Applegate and his stupid cold in the middle of the spring - buddy boy, you owe me!” The words were fairly growled from Lois’s throat as she stormed up the ramp and caught the elevator.

“Perry, she’s really steamed. Why did you insist on her covering the event? Any of the people she mentioned – besides me – would have been perfect for the assignment.”

“That’s true, but none of those folks would be able to write it from the angle of someone who will personally benefit from this new subway line. Besides, Lois always tries to avoid events like this. She may be an investigative reporter, but every once in a while she needs to mix with the ‘common herd’, as it were. It’ll keep her sharp.” Perry gave Clark a conspiratorial wink and then went back to his office.

Clark chuckled softly as he turned back to his monitor to complete work on the article about the new Chinese president. He thought, “Common herd? I won’t dare tell her that!”

An hour later, the story was e-mailed to Perry. Just as Clark was about to shut off his computer, the phone rang. “Clark Kent, city desk!” he said briskly.

A familiar voice came over the phone line, “Hey, buddy, want to hang out with me and Skip this evening?”

“Yeah, that’s a great idea. We could grab a burger at Café Americana...” Abruptly his super hearing kicked in and he heard, “Somebody stop the train! He’s had a heart attack!”

“Pete! I gotta go!” Dropping the phone back into its cradle, Clark jumped and ran up the stairs at super speed towards the roof. He burst onto the roof and looked around. No one was there. Swiftly, he changed his clothes by spinning rapidly; a technique the other Clark had taught him when he had visited that universe with Mr. Wells. He emerged wearing the now-familiar suit of Superman. With a running leap, he jumped into the air, and for the first time in this world, savored the sweet freedom of flight without concern for his secret identity.

A sonic boom sounded though the canyons of Metropolis’ skyscrapers and pedestrians looked up in the sky to see where the resonance came from. They were greeted to the astonishing sight of Clark as he flew towards the Nuber Avenue entrance to the Metroliner.

Downstairs, the newsroom was still quiet. Since most of the night crew was gathered around the coffee machine or in the conference room, they failed to see Clark’s hasty departure. Suddenly, a lone figure exited the morgue and noticed that a particular computer was still running and had not yet gone into lock mode. Ralph walked over, checked to see that no one was

looking, sat down and then began typing.

After a quick cab ride to the new station, Lois and Jack had to wait their turn with several other journalists who were also going underground to interview political notables and Hollywood celebrities attending the event. Upon reaching the escalators, they descended four hundred feet into a gleaming wonderland of chrome, steel and wood. The station was set up so visitors could navigate through the main transit hall, which held several shops and restaurants. It was a huge elliptical and airy space measuring over three hundred feet in length.

Jack whistled appreciatively as he looked around. “This station is fantastic! My brother and I could play football here!”

“Don’t let station security catch you!” his companion said with a chuckle. “Nuber Avenue Station is the jewel of MTS system. They want the country and the world to know Metropolis has the infrastructure to play host to international commerce and draw Hollywood studios like Galaxy and Mammoth to shoot their movies here. New York, Los Angeles and Chicago watch out! Here we come!”

“That’s going to be the angle of your article?”

At this point, they had reached the bottom of the escalator and Lois was standing on tiptoe searching for a familiar face. “Yeah; now, if I can just snag one MTS official to get this story started...”

It took over ten minutes, but eventually Lois was able to locate and interview the station manager, Mr. Marc Baylor, a short man with small curious eyes that gazed at her through horn-rimmed glasses. The poor man had been talking for so long that his voice had gone hoarse. He was trying to explain the many technical aspects of the station and the underground transport line that it supported. A number of architects and politicians had fought against the new line, but the growth of Metropolis’ population demanded a faster, more efficient underground transport system from the outlying areas of the city.

Surreptitiously she noticed a number of transit workers moving swiftly to the station office. The mood within the station, which only moments before was jubilant and relaxed, had been replaced with the crackle of tension in the air.

Jack, who was snapping pictures of celebrities and politicians, had also become aware of a shift in the transit workers’ moods. He stepped closer to Lois. Just in case anything bad was about to go down, he wanted to protect his co-worker and friend.

A sweaty transit worker rushed up to Mr. Baylor, whispered something in his ear, and then rushed away. Baylor’s failed to conceal a tremor in his raspy voice when he said to Lois, “Well! Ah, Miss Lane, that’s about all I have to say. Please excuse me. I must report to the station office. You and Mr. Bartholomew should enjoy the festivities.” With those words, the little man swiftly followed after his colleague.

Sensing there was more going on than just waiting for the new train to enter the station, Lois stuffed her recorder into her briefcase and began following the track workers, who were now joined by station security and EMT personnel. She called over her shoulder, “Come on, Jack, something’s happening!”

At first there was a low rumble of voices, then she heard words like: Stroke. Heart attack. Dead man’s switch. Unstoppable. Just as she reached the station office, a bear of a police officer came running out and passed Lois. Overhead the PA rumbled into life, and a man’s voice, brusque, yet professional, reached her ears.

“ATTENTION! ATTENTION! EVERYONE, PLEASE WALK QUICKLY TOWARDS THE SOUTHBOUND EXIT.”

The announcement was repeated twice, followed by dead silence. Abruptly, people heard the far-off sound of the train, and suddenly, as a group, they understood the nature of the emergency. Immediately, a stampede of frantic people ran for the far end of the station, which happened to be at the exact opposite end of

where the train was supposed to complete its inaugural run. In the distance, the sound of steel screaming against steel could be heard. A gust of cold air blew past her face, leaving a shiver of fear running through her body. “The train!” she thought, “The train is out of control and no one can stop it!”

A wintry sluice of fear washed over her body. If she, Jack, and the rest of the crowd didn’t get out of here, there would be no story, no evening edition, no life for any of them.

A firm hand took hold of her elbow and she heard Jack’s voice say, with calm tones belying his youth, “Lois... we need to make tracks, and I don’t mean for the train.”

Quickly they began pushing with the rest of the crowd for the steel escalators and concrete stairs leading to the surface. She was surprised at Jack’s strength. If it weren’t for him holding her steady, she might have fallen and been trampled by the crowd. Because of his resolve, they reached the bottom of the stairwell. But it was four long flights of steps and scores of people were between them and their reaching the surface. The train, moving at full speed, would slam into the barrier wall. The shock wave would move through the underground and who knew how the surrounding rock, concrete, and metal would be affected.

Lois turned her head and saw a streak of silver and blue. The train was coming into the station! Adrenaline pumped through her veins, firing muscles and sinew. Her feet began to move faster when a startled voice cried out.

“Hey, look! There’s some nut in a suit on the track!”

The man, for that was what he was, held the train with strong arms, actually slowing the gigantic train down. The air filled with the sounds of metal screeching on metal. She and many others on the staircase turned to watch in what must surely be the last moments of their lives as a man braced the train, and steadily it slowed to a stop mere inches from the barrier.

After the horrific cacophony of sounds echoing within the man-made underground chamber came to a halt, even the air was now deadly still. Shocked onlookers walked cautiously over to where the train had stopped. They were met with the indescribable sight of a brightly-garbed man running from the back of the train to the lead car and attempting to open the door. When it refused to budge, he gently, but completely, removed the door from its hinges. Before the sounds of tearing metal had stopped, the stranger had entered the operator’s cab. Seconds later, he emerged, carrying the unconscious form of the driver. He called to the nearest transit worker in a firm, authoritative voice, “This man has had a heart attack. I’m taking him to MetroGen. Please call ahead and inform them of our arrival.”

Lois stood, mouth agape, looking at this marvelous example of male yumminess wearing blue and red spandex as he swiftly carried the train operator as if the man were a child’s doll. He walked past the crowd of stunned onlookers and made his way to the stairs, his long red cape with the ‘S’ symbol floating majestically down his massive shoulders. Any thought of Clark Kent flowed away from her mind with all the ease of sweet, fresh-churned butter over a hot, steaming biscuit. She sensed Jack coming up behind her. Without taking her eyes off the hero she said, “P... please tell me you are taking pictures of... Mr. Muscles!”

The sound of the camera’s shutter going off was heard when Jack replied, “Yeah! These should convince Perry to move me up to full-time staff photographer!”

“Great! Forget about calling this story into Elsie! Let’s get upstairs and grab a cab! I’m writing this story up before somebody tries to beat me to the punch!” An odd notion erupted into her mind as they moved towards the exit. “Jack, you... you don’t suppose that this ‘guy’ is the... well... ‘The Haze’?”

The youngster gave a shrug and pointed back to the train. “Considering all the fantastic stories we have been hearing about him for the past month, and since I haven’t seen anybody else

around who can bench-press a train like that, who else could it be?”

Before Lois could respond to her companion’s statement, she heard one of the transit workers’ voices, carrying above all the noise of several dozen people talking at once, declare, “That man was pretty amazing... you know... Super!”

Super? Yeah, Lois thought, he was that all right, and a whole lot more!

It only took them a few moments to run up the steep stairs into the welcome sights and sounds of downtown Metropolis at night. Although this night was hugely different. They were both determined to get to the Planet as quickly as possible and file the story. Unfortunately, several other members of the Fourth Estate had the same idea, but it was almost impossible for them to get to their respective newspaper offices. The streets were jammed with police cars, red lights flashing, shiny, black limousines of dignitaries and celebrities, and, of course, ubiquitous TV camera crews. Chief among them was Shana Giovanni, the same obnoxious reporter from LNN’s entertainment division who had interviewed the Daaes when they arrived in Metropolis. Now, she had her microphone posed towards a slightly disheveled Hollywood couple who were there for the event.

As soon as Lois and Jack emerged from the depths of the station, Lois searched in vain for the man in the red cape and blue tights, but did not see him. Around her, people kept saying in utter disbelief that he had literally *flown* the injured train driver to MetroGen.

“That’s impossible,” she mumbled running down the street past the crowds. “No one can fly. At... at least no one of this Earth.” The thought made her swallow hard around a tight lump in her throat. This mystery man, this... ‘Mr. Muscles’, had to be gone from Earth. Maybe he was a government experiment: one that had gone very well indeed! Whoever the scientist was, he certainly didn’t skimp on the looks department! Suddenly a familiar shouting voice broke into her roaring thoughts, “Hey, Lois, over here! I got us a cab!”

Shouldering her briefcase and cursing the fact that she was wearing pumps – even if they were her favorites – Lois continued running towards the familiar yellow Metrocab. Bless Jack’s sharp eyes for finding this cab. If the guy got them to the *Daily Planet* in record time, she was going to give him a ridiculously HUGE tip!

Fifteen minutes, later a frantic Lois exploded from the elevator and ran down the ramp, Jack following not two steps behind. Ralph narrowly avoided being run over by the duo. His plain face twisted into an ugly grimace, annoyed that they ignored him. In their haste, they never said a word of apology.

He muttered some choice words under his breath and then continued walking up the ramp. His hand was protectively covering his jacket pocket...

“Jack! Get those pixs developed, and make sure Mitch Ryder, the night editor, gets ‘em ASAP!”

“You got it!” he said and vanished into the darkroom.

Just as soon as her computer completed booting up, Lois began typing, or rather banging out, the story on the keyboard. Minutes later her head went up sharply when she heard the sound of Clark whistling happily. On one level her mind was pleased; for the first time since Lana’s marriage announcement, he seemed like the naive young man from Kansas she had met nearly a year ago. Then the image of the handsome, powerful stranger in the Metro station pushed aside those memories, and she kept typing, fingers moving faster than ever.

He walked over to her desk and watched, fascinated by her typing. “Lo-is, hey, Lois! Where’s the fire? What’s got you and Jack so excited?”

She looked at her partner in amazement, shook her head, and went back to typing, but started talking in her unique rapid-fire manner. “Kansas, what rock have you been hiding under tonight?

The train driver had a heart attack and the deadman switch failed to operate. The train was going to collide into the back of the station, but a man stopped it! MTS's Nuber Avenue station is *crawling* with people trying to find out who the guy was! An amazing fella in blue tights of all things! I don't care what I have to do, that man is *mine*! I'll bet anything he's the mystery person we have been trying to locate! The Haze!"

If Lois could see the look on Clark's face, she would have ceased typing. He was gaping at her with a stunned expression. The last thing he wanted was for her to use the *Daily Planet's* front page to officially saddle him with such a preposterous name. Before he could say anything, the elevator doors opened, and Pete Ross and one of the former occupants of Clark's apartment, Skip, came out and joined them in the bullpen. Pete said, "Hey, Clark, where have you been? I thought the line was disconnected. Oh, hi, Lois. Wanna come with us and grab a couple of burgers? We were thinking about going to your aunt and uncle's place."

She stopped typing long enough to look at Clark and his friends. "Didn't anybody ever tell you eating too much red meat is bad for your health? On second thought, considering the fact that you guys are a couple of hard bodies, a few extra calories won't make a difference. Now, could everybody *please* leave me alone so I can write my story in peace?"

Clark bent over her shoulder, stared at the monitor and said, "There are two o's in coronary."

"Kansas! Now is not the time to be editing my copy! Jack got exclusive photos of our hero up close. My story's gotta be finished before Mitch gets here, or worst yet, Perry calls to find out if it is done yet. This is a historic event!"

At that moment, Skip's stomach growled and he looked at them sheepishly and shrugged his shoulders. "What can I say? I'm super hungry."

Abruptly, Lois stopped typing and a slow, sweet smile spread across her lips and she laughed out loud. "That's it!"

"What's it?" Clark asked cautiously.

"Mr. Muscles now has a name. No one should call someone like him something as commonplace as The Haze! Talk about insulting!" Her brown eyes took on a dreamy quality and she continued, "What a man! Yum! No, from now on, I use the name... Superman!"

Relief swept over Clark; finally, the right name! Although he was a little worried, from her dreamy expression, that Lois seemed to have developed a slight crush on his alter ego. Who knew what manner of problems that could lead to! Still, it was great to return to the early days of their relationship when their camaraderie was innocent and new. He looked at Pete, who had a quizzical expression on his face, but Clark shook his head slightly, indicating they would talk about this development later.

"Ah, you got 'Superman' from my stomach growling?" Skip asked innocently.

But Lois was no longer listening to the men in the room. If it were at all possible, her fingers were flying even faster over the keyboard.

"Lois, can I bring you back something? Maybe a chilled asparagus salad?"

She ignored him, and waving her hand, said, "Yeah, yeah, go get your burgers!"

"Come on, fellas," Clark said, shaking his head. "She's in 'Kerth' mode. Nothing and no one is going to stop her."

The three young men started walking towards the ramp when Clark noticed his computer was on. He went over to turn it off, and when the monitor sprang to life it was not at the screen where he had left it. For some reason, an uneasy feeling like a troop of tiny ants wearing ice cube boots running up and down his spine hit him. He vaguely remembered seeing Ralph leaving the building as he was coming in. He would have to check his keyboard later. Now would not be the right time, especially with Skip and Lois

around. Nonetheless, despite his misgivings, as the elevator doors closed he smiled at himself. *Superman* – not The Haze – had made his debut!

Meanwhile, several blocks away, Ralph walked over to a phone booth. He kept looking around to see if anyone was following him, and his hand trembled slightly as two quarters fell noisily down the narrow slot. With any luck, the information he had gotten from Kent's computer would be enough to keep Bonesteel happy. Again he looked nervously over his shoulder as the phone rang on the other end. For some strange reason, the sparse mousey brown hairs on the back of his balding head were standing up.

After three rings, a familiar voice came over the phone, "Yes?"

"Boney, it me, Ralph. I got something for you... straight off Kent's computer."

"Just a minute, please." A hand was placed over the receiver; Ralph could barely make out Bonesteel's muffled voice talking with someone.

"All right, Mr. Lombard. Please come over at once. I hope for your sake this is something that will be worth your 'pay'."

The reporter swallowed and said, "It is! Kent's planning on writing an article about this French company that's taking advantage of loopholes in American corporate tax law. The company is called TresAx."

Part Nineteen

The next day, Templar opened the front door of his townhouse and picked up his morning paper. A plume of rage erupted through his body when he read the *Daily Planet's* headlines which trumpeted:

Superman Saves Train Operator! 'Man of Steel' to the Rescue

By Lois Lane

In a fit of anger, he tore several pages of the paper and threw it into the street. The papers fluttered in the air like a tiny snowstorm of confetti and then settled onto the pavement. He grumbled angrily, "Let the street cleaners pick up the mess; that's what my taxes in this misbegotten city go to!" Kent had the nerve to upset his plans and become that flying freak! There was no doubt in his mind that Kent was behind all of the mysterious rescues that had been going on around town for the past few months – probably because Lana Lang was in Europe and couldn't restrain his 'do-gooder' tendencies.

Ever since he had received a rather surprising phone call from one of his contacts in DMG Europe telling him Lana and Daae had married, he had dreaded this day. With the annoying Lois Lane around he could expect more of the same. He should have killed her when he had the chance.

Across town at the Metropolis Museum, Lana Daae entered her spacious new office, which had been decorated while she and Gregory were away. Her new assistant had carefully arranged hot coffee, fresh fruit, yesterday's mail and the morning newspaper for her examination on her desk.

Lana sat down and opened up the newspaper, only to greet the headlines with a deep frown. This was her first day back from a fantasy honeymoon at the *Cotton House* on the fabulous Caribbean island of Mustique. The front page said it all; Clark engaging in juvenile antics. With a deep sigh of relief, she was glad to have chosen her urbane Gregory over the man from Smallville.

In the executive office of James Olsen, champagne corks were popped, the frothy vintage happily shared with members of the board. Thanks to Jack's keeping a level head in a crisis, the

Daily Planet was one of the few papers that had photos of this ‘Superman’ character. James shook his head and thought that Lois Lane picked a great name! The public loved it - so much more descriptive and powerful than ‘The Haze’.

The newspaper’s circulation had skyrocketed thanks to Lois’s writing – more than it ever had with any other story in its two-hundred-year history. A few more exclusives, or even near-exclusives, like these, and he could stop having second thoughts about buying a newspaper instead of spending money taking down one of his rivals.

The sun had not yet peeped over the simple farmhouse situated on the edge of a golden wheat field in central Kansas. Mrs. Irig bustled about the warm, friendly kitchen, preparing a meal of blueberry pancakes, sausages and eggs for the farmhands who would soon be arriving for work.

Sitting at the head of an oak wooden kitchen table, one that had seen generations of the Irig family eat hearty meals, was Wayne. He listened contently to a radio broadcast describing Clark’s debut as Earth’s mightiest hero. The old man took a long thoughtful pull of his strong coffee, flavored with honey and milk, from a stout blue mug, leaned back in his chair and smiled.

“Good for you, son, your folks would have been proud.”

A week after Superman’s debut found Stephanie working later than usual. She was determined to clear off as many administrative tasks as possible before telling Gregory Daae she was retiring from DMG. It was the least she could do for the new assistant, whoever he or she might be. The last thing they needed was to walk into the quagmire of unfinished out-of-town meetings, misplaced documents, and outdated passwords. It was unfair to them, Mr. Daae, and her own reputation as an organized and detailed-oriented administrative assistant.

The thought of retiring from the company was not as bad as thinking she was betraying her employer. She felt it was important to at least give him some head’s up as to what Templar was planning. After all, he had built the company from scratch. It was wrong for this arrogant interloper to come in and take everything Daae and Mr. Luther had built. She had no illusions that Daae and Luther were paragons of virtue in the business world, but merely considering that Templar would perhaps someday be CEO of DMG and LexCorp was galling.

The decision-making process was never difficult for her; it was simply a matter of studying the facts, weighing the consequences, and making the final choice. But this was infinitely the most difficult work decision she ever had to make.

But on the other hand, staying could possibly mean being held up to public scrutiny and serving time in a federal prison.

On this particular night she was studying some old files and making sure there was nothing that Mr. Daae’s future assistant would require later. She was signing off on a document when her pen ran out of ink.

“Damn it! Just when this was almost done! I’ll have to get another one.”

She went into the supply closet, and after spending five minutes rummaging around for a fine-point blue pen, she returned to her office. When she opened the door, there in front of her was Mr. Bonesteel using her copier.

“What are you doing at my copier... again!”

He turned around and said, “Oh! Excuse me, Mrs. Aronnax, I... I didn’t think anyone was here.”

“That’s hard to imagine,” she said, looking at him suspiciously. “My desk is covered with papers and the lights are still on. What’s going on, Mr. Bonesteel? This is the *second* time I’ve caught you using my copier.”

Bonesteel’s face flushed red with embarrassment. “Mr. Templar...”

“Yes, your boss,” she snarled, “What about him? Ever since he and I had that minor disagreement while Mr. Daae was in Europe, he’s avoided me. But you have not. Care to tell me what’s going on?”

Bonesteel shook his head mournfully and said, “Pl... please, don’t ask me that. The information in these files could cause no small amount of trouble for you.”

Mrs. Aronnax took a deep breath. “In for a penny, in for a pound,” she thought. “You are referring to Mr. Templar’s determination to take over LexCorp, with Mr. Daae’s silent backing?”

The sound of a sharp intake of breath from Bonesteel was alarming. Blood drained from his face in sheer fright. “Who... who told you that?”

“The papers you have been copying on my machine make for a fascinating story.”

Bonesteel’s face became deathly white. “Oh no! If Mr. Templar knew this...”

Stephanie was suddenly feeling a little queasy. She had spoken too soon. But she was resolved to hold onto her veneer of calm and pressed on. “I wouldn’t worry so much about Templar. What about if our *mutual* employer discovered the backroom deals the two of you are up to?”

Suddenly Bonesteel’s own shell of calmness shattered like a dropped egg. Months of living with the anxiety and dread of discovery almost brought the man to his knees. He leaned against the copier, his face and hands sweating profusely.

“If you know, then others must know! Oh, that means I’m looking at time behind bars, or far worse.”

“Th... there is no reason for you to go to jail...”

“That is where you are mistaken, Mrs. Aronnax, incarceration would be the *best-case* scenario!” He looked nervously from side to side and said, “I’ve tried to resign, but he’s holding my past indiscretions against me. He’ll probably get someone to...” He took in a deep breath, trying to control himself.

Stephanie Aronnax was troubled. She had been foolish to tell this terrified man she knew about his employer’s activities, and now both of them were in danger.

“You... you must be mistaken. Decent upstanding citizens don’t just go around killing other people!”

“No, they don’t, but... but this man is anything but decent...” He reached into his pocket and removed a silk burgundy pocket square and mopped his brow. “Working for Mr. Templar has been... trialsome. I... I am sorry to have taken up so much of your time. There has to be another copier in the building I can use discreetly.”

She placed her hand on his and almost recoiled at feeling the cold dampness of his skin through the shirt’s fabric. “Mr. Bonesteel. Please don’t worry. No one need know about these ‘copying sessions’. Why were you doing it, anyway?”

He gave a helpless shrug. “Protection. Maybe, if I can get away from Templar, these papers can be used as some kind of leverage with the proper authorities. The SECC and several other government agencies would love to have long and in-depth discussions with him!”

Stephanie’s mind went back to that fateful conversation with her friends. There would be many forensic accountants at those conversations as well. All doubts vanished. It was time to leave DMG and give the needed materials to Lane and Kent without revealing who she was.

“Mr. Bonesteel, excuse me, but what is your first name?”

“Tristan, Mrs. Aronnax, my first name is Tristan.”

“My name is Stephanie. Tristan, what if I told you there might be a way out? One which would involve turning *all* the files over to people who will get the truth out there? Let me become the conduit. I will keep quiet about who gave me this information and you keep providing me with the concrete proof the reporters Lane

and Kent will need to write a series of articles about Templar. I... I have decided to retire from this company at the end of the month.”

He shook his head disbelievingly. “Weren’t you listening? Templar will kill you. He’s already killed one man and won’t stop until he has what he wants: both DMG and LexCorp in his control.”

Lois called out, “Jack! Stacy! Where’s that information and the new photos on Superman I asked for?”

Stacy materialized at her side. In each of her hands were the requested items. “You mean this file and these photos?”

Taking the materials like a thirsty woman in a desert grabbing for water, Lois snapped, “Perfect! What took you guys so long?”

The intern answered in a deadpan tone, “Uh, we only perform miracles every *other* day of the week. Honestly, you only asked for this stuff thirty minutes ago. I had to pull several files from the morgue for Meyers and Jack was developing pictures for Diane. Lois Lane isn’t the only reporter we assist.”

Lois decided not to take the bait and answered, “Stacy, Superman is the biggest story to hit this town in like forever! I have *every* intention of reporting it, with or without your help. Now call the hospital again to find out the status of the train operator.”

“According to my source, he’s in stable, but guarded condition - a step down from yesterday. His doctor expects him to make a complete recovery.”

Lois beamed and started to return to her work when a thought crossed her mind. “Thank you. Hey, when were you going to share that tidbit with me?”

Stacy gave her an uncharacteristic smirk and said, “When you finished chewing me out... like always!” With that, she turned and walked back to the intern cubicles.

“Terrific,” Lois mumbled under her breath in a mixture of annoyance and admiration, “That girl has been spending entirely too much time with Jack.”

She turned back to her keyboard and began frantically typing up the follow-up to her Superman debut story. Ten minutes, later she heard a familiar voice say, “Still working on that big story, partner?”

Without looking up, Lois responded, “No, this is the follow-up; something you would know if you stuck around the bullpen for more than ten minutes. Where have you been?”

“Oh, like I don’t know that Jack and Stacy have been scrambling around the morgue, looking for every story written about ‘the Haze’ for you. The materials from those stories will form the basis for your Superman interview questions?”

That got Lois’ attention. She looked at him while her fingers still deftly danced over the keyboard. “They told you that?! Wait until I get my hands on those two! It’s a breach of reporter/intern etiquette! How dare they spill my secrets!”

Catherine sauntered over. “It’s hardly a secret, Lois, when every reporter in the city is doing the same thing. Even Peggy and Ralph are tracking down old Haze stories to make a connection. The sudden appearance of our man in the blue tights has kicked over a hornet’s nest. Not just here, but in other cities too, like New York and LA.”

A noise that sounded suspiciously like a squeak escaped from Lois. “*New York? Los Angeles?* He showed up in those places as well? No way! He belongs in Metropolis! I saw him first! He’s mine!”

Peggy could be heard all the way from her desk, snorting, “Yeah, as if! Get in line with the rest of the pack, Lane!”

“Yeah, it’s not like you have an exclusive on him, Lois,” Steve called over.

“If I wasn’t sick, I would have been the reporter on the scene!” Applegate moaned. “Now I’m in Perry’s doghouse! Does anybody know how long the Metropolis Botanical Gardens will be holding its annual cactus festival?” He moaned in despair, a

mournful expression on his hangdog face.

A smile spread slowly across Lois’ face, and she couldn’t resist saying, “Consider that a life lesson, Applegate. Next time, cover the story, no matter how bad you feel!”

Listening to all the colorful comments from his co-workers made Clark shake his head ruefully. It was vitally important to keep his life as Clark Kent separate from Superman. If anyone discovered his real identity it would mean instant exposure. After all, which reporter among them could pass up the chance for such a career-making story? One which, if done properly, would surely net numerous award nominations?

He was grateful to Mr. Wells for informing him about the underground tunnels. In the past few days, he had located several more of the passageways, allowing him to appear and disappear from public view with ease. Until he and Lois could put a stop to Tempus, Superman would have to be extremely careful about his comings and goings.

Lois.

He wanted to tell his reporting partner *everything*. He remembered that Clark in the other universe had earnestly suggested he reveal the secret of Superman’s identity as soon as possible. By doing so, it would save precious time, and no small amount of heartbreak. He had hesitated before, when Lana was in the picture. However, was that really true now? From the moment he had stepped off the elevator and seen Lois standing at her desk, he had felt the strong connection between them. Before meeting with H.G. Wells, he’d denied the attraction for fear of hurting Lana, and perhaps he might even have entered into an engagement with her. But Lana’s treacherous actions had showed she had no qualms about hurting *his* feelings.

Obviously, for Clark Kent, there could be no other woman in his life besides Lois Lane. He had to reveal exactly who Superman was as soon as possible.

“Clark? Hel-lo, Clark! Are you listening to me?” The object of his reflections was leaning against her desk, staring at him intently.

“What? Oh, sorry, Lois, I was thinking about my article.”

“Which one? I hope you have at least two; to Perry, reporters are only as good as their last story.”

“It’s the TresAx piece. Constance wanted me to make doubly sure all my sources were airtight, just in case the company demands proof and I have to produce them. There’s no doubt in Perry’s mind that’s going to happen. The article will rattle more than a few of the folks on Wall Street.”

She nodded her head approvingly, “That’s what they pay us the big bucks for: writing stories that expose corruption! Come on, sit. Let me grab some coffee for you and one of those fattening donuts!”

Enjoying how easily they had slipped back into their comfortable banter Clark’s face broke into a grin. “This one should make him happy for at *least* a day.” He sat down, entered in his password, and the monitor sprang into life. He began typing:

Unfair and Illegal Tax Breaks for French Media Company
By Clark J. Kent

The French communications company **TresAx** receives handsome unwarranted tax breaks within Europe, and now that it has offices in Metropolis, Chicago and Atlanta, certain executives are quietly pushing for similar privileges in the United States. Should **TresAx** be allowed to use these unfair and illegal loopholes, their bottom line next year will move upward exponentially.

New Troy’s higher-ranking senator and presidential hopeful, Ian Braxton, and the company’s CFO, Mr. Armand Guerin, are behind these clandestine activities, and the evidence against them is mounting by the day...

The article continued with Clark naming names, giving dates and detailing events, his work thoroughly backing not just the two

main culprits, but also the entire company, into a corner. The piece of writing was not as extensive as the planned series of articles against DMG, yet he was pleased with how easily the story came together and even briefly considered the possibility of receiving a Kerth nomination.

Later that afternoon, Clark emerged from Perry's office. "Thanks, Chief, for running this by our legal department so quickly."

"No problem, son, standard procedure. Since those sources of yours checked out, Mr. Olsen and even the suits upstairs were happy. It'll make the morning edition, in the business section. Should make more'n a few people in Wall Street and Washington a little nervous! Good job, Clark, see you in the morning."

As the young man made his way to the elevator, a pair of eyes watched him, eyes that were self-satisfied, certain that the perfidy of his actions would ruin Clark Kent's career – and save the owner's hide.

Ralph picked up the phone, dialed, and when Bonesteel answered, spoke in hushed tones. "Tell Templar the TresAx story will be on the street with the morning edition."

"Thank you, Mr. Lombard." As soon as the connection was broken, Bonesteel passed on the message to his boss.

Later that evening, Templar phoned Linda King at home and said, "Inform your boyfriend to let his best writers loose. Defend Guerin, Braxton and TresAx in the paper. Once the *Star* prints articles denouncing the *Daily Planet's* story, the other papers will smell blood and there will be a feeding frenzy. When the legal pressure hits, Kent's sources will be completely discredited."

As she listened to Templar's instructions, Linda shook her head; he was far more treacherous than Daae. She had met Clark when he'd first arrived in Metropolis and in fact liked the handsome young man. His respectful treatment of herself and other female journalists at press conferences and other events was much appreciated. If he worked for the *Star*, she might have shared the credit with him on a few stories.

She mused: who knows what would have happened if she were not involved with Preston? If only her former college rival hadn't sunk her claws into Clark first, *she and Clark* might have been the new hot reporting team in Metropolis. She smiled to herself; perhaps 'heat' would be someplace else besides the newsroom. Much as she loathed Templar, he was the architect of this disaster and the one calling the shots, and she asked snidely, "How was Daae able to pull all of this together so swiftly?"

Ignoring the comment for the slight it was, he answered, "Although it is not public knowledge, TresAx is one of many companies he owns. Of all the stories that Mr. Kent could be writing about, he chose to expose a European media company that is owned by the man he and his soon-to-be ex-partner were bent on destroying!" The malevolent delight in his voice was almost palatable, even over the phone.

"Now, once it is revealed that Kent's story is a fraud because he can't produce a single trustworthy person to back him up, any further stories he would have worked on will be tainted, including anything with his partner! Oh, and did I mention that TresAx will mount a full libel suit against the *Daily Planet*? Ah! How sweet it is when a plan comes together!"

Linda had no love for the *Daily Planet*, but she knew this entire situation was immoral. "A... a set-up? Daae is *manipulating* the media? Both of you could land in a lot of trouble. If the word got out, no one would trust anything coming from him or DMG."

Templar said brightly, "Duh! Sold to the little lady with the big brain! Of course, he's manipulating the media. You and your boyfriend Preston do it all the time. Only Mr. Daae and his company accomplished the deed on a much grander scale. That's why he has both you and Preston under his thumb. I imagine the

Luthors would not have so rapidly developed their sterling reputation for charitable works without the *Star's* planting a story to help orphans, which happened to be carefully slanted to present the Luthors in the best possible light."

"But... but Mrs. Luthor did sell her Picasso and Degas paintings! The presentation of checks written out to the various orphanages was part of my follow-up story." Her voice trailed off as the full implications of what he meant sank in.

Templar continued, his voice taking on the tone of a parent speaking with an imprudent child, "Oh, my dear Linda, Arianna sold those paintings and a portion of the money did go to buy sports and computer equipment for a bunch of noisy orphans. But remember the *amount* of that well-publicized sale was never revealed. I have it on good authority that she salted away more than half of the money in Swiss bank accounts. As a... shall we say, a 'special fund', in case her marriage to dear Lex falters."

Completely annoyed with Templar's condescending tone and eager to end the conversation, Linda responded sarcastically, "Why don't you ask her? I'm certain Mrs. Luthor would be thrilled to reveal her financial secrets."

He said, "That's a capital idea. Perhaps I should have lunch with the dear lady and charm the strategy from her. How does one steal from the third-richest man in the world, who also happens to be your husband? I wonder how she and your newspaper would look if the truth were revealed."

Linda whispered, shocked at the direction the conversation had turned. "How did you know that? We have a loyal reader base! No one would believe you on the strength of one story!"

"Printing the orphanage funding story was only the first time the *Star* followed the Luthors' instructions. Nipping on the heels of that story was something else. Let me refresh your memory: does gun running in the Congo come to mind? We both know Mr. Luthor was behind all of that. He gave you that tip, so a rival gang could be broken and for his people could take control. That story was the foundation for your reputation as an investigative reporter... of a sort. Didn't those Pulitzer people nominate it for a prize?"

"No doubt Preston never told you Lex Luthor seriously considered giving Lois Lane the tip, but he knew she would never sacrifice her integrity for a story - no matter what the rewards." He let the words sink in and finished by saying, "Apparently, a troublesome matter like honestly was not an obstacle for Linda King."

Linda was speechless, and the receiver became slick with sweat from her hands.

"Good; silence means I have your attention. Be careful how you speak to me in the future. The outcome would mean wearing an orange jumpsuit and orange doesn't work with such delectable fair skin and red hair. Forget about telling another reporter to write up the story. I want you to write it for the evening edition, and have Guerin and Braxton loudly disavow Mr. Kent's article. I have no doubt Preston won't mind me taking editorial and publisher liberties. Oh, yes, dear, lovely Linda... one more thing."

Her voice was strained and frightened when she managed to push out a simple word, "Yes?"

"On my next visit to Preston's office, make sure that cheap leather chair is gone! Pay for it yourself if you have to."

With those caustic words, he ended the conversation.

It was early in the morning, two days after Clark's TresAx story had hit the newsstands. This was Perry's favorite time of the workday. He got more done between 6:00am and 9:00am than he did the whole rest of the day. Much as he loathed leaving the warmth of his and Alice's bed, such was the life of a newspaper man.

He sat at his desk, chortling happily over the early reports of the paper's circulation that week. Once again, his bullpen staff had

performed admirably. The public's response to the TresAx story Clark had written had drawn a lot of attention. Granting non-paying tax status to a foreign company really galled folks. The media frenzy had been fierce, especially from the *Metropolis Star*, which had taken up TresAx's cause with a vengeance.

He was so involved with studying the circulation report that he did not hear the door to his office open.

A man's cultured voice with a slight Bostonian accent said, "Good morning, Mr. White."

Startled to hear an unfamiliar voice at that hour of the morning, Perry looked up and rose slowly from his chair. Standing before him was a tall, handsome man with light brown hair done in the latest style, wearing a custom tailored three-piece dark gray pinstripe suit, with a vest, embellished by a white pocket square and expensive gold cufflinks. Everything about this man spoke of power and that indefinable quality of charisma. In Perry's estimation, he made Lex Luthor and Gregory Daae look downright shabby in comparison.

Something in this man's cool demeanor made Perry wary. It was not the first time he had entertained 'visitors' in his office at unusual hours – his mysterious source, Sore Throat, being a perfect example. But usually when those surprise visits occurred, they were late at night, not just as the bullpen's daytime staff began arriving. There was something about the man's body language, despite the expensive suit, that spoke of a street fighter. Unlike Luthor and Daae, who had numerous lackeys to do their dirty work, the man standing in front of Perry fought his own battles. But now was not the time to be rattled by first impressions. Perry needed to know what this man's objectives were, although the old newshound in him had a good idea.

"Who are you, and what's your business in my newsroom?" Perry barked, his southern accent more pronounced than usual.

"Good morning, Mr. White. My name is Sebastian Kell, of Litt, Ross and Crane. We represent the American branch of the company known as TresAx. They are demanding you produce all the names and addresses of all your sources, so they can come in for a deposition."

The editor fired back, "This state has shield laws for journalists to protect their sources!"

Kell continued talking as if Perry had never spoken, "The *Daily Planet's* legal department would never have allowed this story to have run without affidavits and any other documentation that led to these scandalous lies about their company. If those sources Clark Kent used to write that article are not given over to us within twenty-four hours as proof, this newspaper is going to be embroiled in a multimillion-dollar lawsuit. *That's* my business in your 'newsroom'."

The last time Perry had felt that angry was when James Olsen sent down an efficiency expert named Chip to change how the newsroom was run. The snot-nosed little twerp had lasted less than five minutes in his office. That was Perry's brand of efficiency. Filled with righteous indignation, he shot back, "Got any papers to back up that request, Junior?"

Perry watched as Kell pulled a thick envelope from his breast pocket and laid it on his desk. He smiled playfully at the older man, perfectly assured his charm would soften the blow until he said, "Don't think that the folding of this 'great metropolitan newspaper' will affect me. My paper of choice is *The New York Times*."

With those words, the man turned and exited the office, passing Clark's desk. He pointed to it and called out, "If I were you, I would distance the newspaper from this Kent person as soon as possible. He's poison. Have a good day, Mr. White."

Kell's visit had been lightening quick and just as devastating. Perry sat down heavily in his chair, stunned and still angry. "Great shades of Elvis," he whispered.

Part Twenty

Catherine stepped out of the elevator, her mind still considering a rather unusual conversation she had had with Arthur. He wanted them to solidify their relationship. At forty-five, he was widowed, his children were immersed in their own lives, and so now he was feeling a little lonely. Traveling for business or for pleasure was a bore without someone to share the experience. He wanted more out of life than to be comfortable and wealthy. She had thought at age forty that participating in a serious relationship was out of her grasp, but perhaps together they could build something they both could cherish.

So, her clumsiness could be forgiven when she nearly bumped into a devastatingly handsome man who should have been moving through the halls of GQ magazine rather than the rough-and-tumble *Daily Planet* bullpen. He gave her a smile which should have been dazzling if it had touched his brown eyes. He nimbly stepped past her, pushed the down button, and did not look at her again as the doors of the elevator slammed shut.

The faintest scent of the man's expensive cologne hung like a pendulum in the air. "Who was that?" she said aloud to the empty bullpen.

"I'll tell you who he is," Peggy Becker said an hour later, "He's Litt, Young and Crane's best gunslinger and they only tote him out for the big cases."

"Yeah, well, if Mr. Kell's so significant, why isn't he a partner, and who makes either an associate, or better still, a paralegal, do his dirty work?" Lois retorted. She had heard about the handsome lawyer's early-morning visit to the newsroom and it irritated her that someone would confront Perry on his home ground. "The man has absolutely no respect for boundaries."

She was wearing another one of her 'power' outfits, a blue pants suit; Perry was sending her on a press conference. It was a follow-up to the Metro story. The city's transportation department wanted to assure commuters that the system was safe and perfectly operational. But after hearing what had taken place earlier, she wanted to stay and do a little research on Mr. Sebastian Kell and find out just what kind of evidence he had against Clark.

"From what I have heard of his reputation, Mr. Kell is only respectful when it comes to his clients, paychecks and bonuses," Peggy responded, her annoying voice more grating than usual to her reluctant audience. It gave her no small amount of pleasure that for once she was ahead of the other reporters. They knew next to nothing about this lawyer, yet she, with her legal resources, had gotten the lowdown on Sebastian Reginald Kell, Esq. "But he's tenacious in his own research. If his client says there's something wrong with the story..."

Lois waved her hand dismissively. "Clark has all the proof he needs. He cleared everything before the story went to print. He won't give up his sources, but the documentation is enough to prove he's right, no matter what this high-priced lawyer says."

A new voice joined the conversation. "That's right, Lane, defend the boyfriend, for all the good it will do him," Ralph said sneeringly.

"Oh," Catherine jumped in before Lois could speak, "Is that from your expert *legal* opinion, or do you know something the rest of us don't? This from a man whose bungling of a simple interview with the mayor's wife led to Perry's predecessor going into early retirement and wound up with you sent to pull old files in the morgue."

Ignoring her statement about his past, Ralph said, "Hey, I didn't have to give up my sources..."

"Lombard, why would any decent source ever talk to you?" Lois shot back.

Ralph raised his voice in an act of uncharacteristic bravo. "I got *plenty* of sources, Lane, don't think I don't! There are other reporters on the *Planet* besides you and Kent. Anyhow, the inside

word is that Kent's washed up... not just at the *Planet*, but as a reporter, if he doesn't hand over his sources!"

Gradually, the normal background noise of the bullpen began to taper off as people stopped their work tasks and listened to the heated conversation. Peggy, realizing the exchange had sharply veered away from Sebastian Kell to much more dangerous waters, hurried to her desk, her cheap high heels making their signature clickity-click sound.

Lois stood up from her desk, walked over to the obsequious little man who had been a thorn in her side for years, leaned over him and then said, in a surprisingly gentle voice, "Whatever you know, Lombard... it had better be good because..."

At that moment, the elevator doors snapped open and Constance Hunter stepped out. She walked down the ramp and refused to impart so much as a glance at anyone in the newsroom. All eyes followed the woman in the ill-fitting green suit as she entered the editor's office without knocking. Perry stood up, his movements stiff and tense. Hastily he closed the blinds, an outward sign to all that they were not to be interrupted.

The blood quickly drained from Lois' chilled heart. The strained expression on Constance's face had spoken volumes. James Olsen and the suits must have had an emergency meeting after Kell's discussion with Perry. The sharks could smell fear in the water, so they were circling their wagons for the attack. In order to gain time, they would need to 'distance themselves' from the source of their current legal problems... Clark Jefferson Kent.

"Ha! Betcha that ain't a meeting about vacations! Your boyfriend is toast! Where is he anyway?" Ralph made a show of looking around the room. "He's probably off somewhere waitin' for Perry, one of the suits, or maybe James Olsen to fire him!"

Lois looked at Ralph, and his wide mouth split into a greasy smile. She could feel all the strain and anger in her body peak into an adrenalin rush which lanced through muscle and sinew and gathered into her right hand, shaping itself into a fist. With each chuckle that gushed past his lips, her arm rose, intent on smashing his face in.

Ralph stopped laughing when he saw the dainty fist and was about to duck, but it never connected with his frightened face.

Catherine, with no small effort, caught her friend by the elbow and whispered something into Lois' ear. With an effort she closed her eyes, muttered something dark under her breath and walked away. A rather startled Ralph made sure he moved in the opposite direction. The newsroom as a whole breathed a sigh of relief.

Over by the intern cubicle, two young people had watched the scene with a mixture of fascination and horror. "Jack, she would have decked him," Stacy breathed.

"Yeah," her friend said in his usual taciturn fashion.

"But... but wouldn't Ralph have brought her up on charges to HR?"

"Maybe, but for charges to stick, the personnel department, as well as the cops, needs somebody to agree with Lombard's accusation that Lois hit him."

"Right! But... but..."

"Uh huh, try and tell me that you haven't wanted to sock Ralph at least once a day? That's the thought of everybody in the newsroom with the exception of Peggy. Nobody respects her either, but she won't side with Ralph. Ralph hasn't a snowball's chance in a volcano of providing a witness to say she hit him."

"Oh." Stacy nodded, understanding what Jack was saying. "I just thought of something. I've been really sarcastic to Lois lately. Especially about her interest in following the Superman story. She might hate me for it!"

With a dry chuckle, Jack said, "Trust me, Stace, if there was a problem, Mad Dog Lane would *never* hesitate to let you know it."

Seconds later, Clark exited the elevator and came down the stairs, whistling and adjusting his tie. He had just returned from a

successful Superman rescue and was about to write up the story. He greeted several of his co-workers with a wave and a smile, so he was a little perplexed when they all refused to look at him or mumbled something and walked away. He looked about for Lois, but when he didn't find her, he walked over to Steve at his desk and asked, "What's wrong? Who died?"

Steve was about to answer him when they heard the door to Perry's office open and Constance stepped out. She quickly glimpsed Clark, stepped around him, and with a tearful expression, moved as fast as possible up the ramp.

Confused by her odd behavior, he was about to ask Steve again what was going on, when he heard Perry's voice speaking in a quiet, sad tone. "Excuse me, Clark, could we have a word please?"

"Sure, Chief." It finally dawned on the hapless young man that the bullpen's tense atmosphere had to do with him.

At that moment, a much calmer Lois returned to the bullpen. She heard Perry's request and said firmly, "Whatever you have to say to my partner, you can say to me..."

"Now Lois, that press conference ain't gonna cover itself..." Perry said.

She responded by squaring her shoulders and walking over to Perry. She stood in front of him and said, "Send someone else. According to certain people," she looked daggers at Ralph, "my partner's reputation is on the line."

The older man shook his head and muttered, "Hell of a way to run a newspaper. Since when do the reporters tell their editors what to do? Come in, then, and close the door behind you."

Ten minutes later a depressed trio sat in Perry's office. "That's the long and the short of it. According to the papers Kell presented me with, TresAx claims two of the three people you interviewed were not members of the accounting department and had limited access to company records. Any information they told you about the accounting department's tax dealing is either false, incomplete or merely hearsay, so the statements they signed off on are worthless. The third was fired recently for white-collar crimes and is being prosecuted by DA Mayson Drake, so her word is seriously suspected."

"So, Clark doesn't have to give up his sources because someone found out their names and gave them to Preston and the *Star*?"

Perry shook his head sadly, "Your contacts within the company were terminated yesterday. They refused to talk to Constance and have 'lawyered up'."

"What about Guerin and Senator Braxton? All the evidence I have points to him and his underhanded dealing with the IRS," Clark asked. His face had gone pale with disbelief as he watched a promising career as a journalist slither into a murky abyss.

"He emphatically denies the charges and is willing to undergo a lie detector test," Perry said in disgust.

A horrible feeling of déjà vu swept over Lois as Perry continued talking to Clark. Three years ago, when she accused Claude of stealing her story, Constance Hunter had arrived in the nick of time to save her career.

This time Constance had come downstairs *delivering* the bad news: the *Daily Planet's* board of directors wanted him out of the building as quickly as possible. If there was going to be a nasty legal battle in the near future, they had to build a defensive shield around the paper, and Clark Kent was to be put absolutely outside of its protection.

"Sorry, son, but we have to suspend you as a reporter until this whole mess is settled." Perry's voice quavered and then he said, "Uh, please... hand over your building ID card and press pass."

Jumping up from her seat, Lois shouted, "Perry! They can't be serious! Clark had his facts perfectly checked. Constance, Olsen and the rest of the suits upstairs gave the 'go ahead' to print

the story.” She felt frightened for the *Daily Planet*, Clark, and oddly, for herself.

Clark’s slow and measured words cut through the tension, “But there’s one possibility, Perry. Nobody knew about my research on that story but you and I. Those people came to me because I would keep their names out of the paper in order to protect their privacy and livelihoods. So how is it that the three reliable sources whose identities were unknown are suddenly known?”

“What are you getting at?” Perry said.

“The night of the Superman debut, I was at my computer, working on the President of China story. I sent that story over to you when Skip McLaurin and Pete Ross showed up. I... I must have left the computer running without locking it down. Someone accessed my computer and got into my story files.”

The older man shook his head desolately, “Son, that’s a mighty thin excuse, one that the suits upstairs won’t want to hear. Especially since one of them *is* a computer expert.”

“Why indeed,” Lois thought as she and Clark exited Perry’s office. Something important was nagging at the corners of her mind, but she just couldn’t get it to surface.

The mood in the bullpen had gone from apprehensive to sombre as a security guard reluctantly stood over Clark while he carefully packed his belongings into a large cardboard box. The sounds of keys typing and the printers whirling had gone mute. Only the monitors droning in the background continued as usual. Several of the staffers came over and spoke consolingly to him. Jack, Steve, Cat and others who worked especially close to him said good-bye.

White-haired Elsie from the re-write department, her gentle gray eyes red from crying, stopped him as he walked over to the ramp. She placed a white waxed paper bakery bag in the box. It was filled with plain doughnuts fresh from Lucille’s across the street.

“Something for you to munch on...” The dear lady was about to say more when her voice caught. She gave Clark a quick hug and then ran back to her office in the stacks.

Ralph and Peggy ignored him.

The security guard had been extremely generous with Clark saying farewell to his friends and co-workers, but now he had to perform the unpleasant task of escorting the reporter out of the building. Lois watched silently as Clark climbed the stairs. His broad shoulders, normally so strong and straight, were hunched in shock and defeat. He stood in front of the elevator, pressed the button, and waited for the car to arrive, not daring to look back. For once, the antique machine did not make a sound as the doors opened and allowed him to enter for the last time. Just as silently, they closed, carrying him away.

Lois desperately wanted to cry, but she would not give in. She had investigative work to do. There had to be a way to find out how the information about his story had been accessed. Abruptly, the thought nipping at the edge of her memory sprang forward.

“Jack!” Lois called.

The young man ran over to her, eager to be of assistance, “Yeah?”

She pulled him over to the coffee table. Other members of the bullpen avoided looking at them; they figured Lois might truly become Mad Dog Lane now that Clark was no longer around to hold her back. “Remember when Claude tried to steal my story? Constance had mentioned that you could run a forensic check on my computer to see who really did all the research and wrote the story. Could we do the same thing for Clark?”

The young man thought for a moment and said, “No. That would have been easy to do with the old system, but now that Mr. Janney has installed all those safeguards, with my level of expertise I couldn’t do it.”

The brunette rolled her eyes in agitation and muttered something along the lines that her friend Molly Flynn was right, technology *was* killing them.

“OK. Find Ken Janney. He’s in the building somewhere; his computer know-how should help us. If he’s not in the building, use ALL of your and Stacy’s resources to track him down.”

The young man nodded and ran back to his cubicle, dropped into his chair, grabbed the receiver and began dialing. Lois sat down at her desk, pulled a sharp yellow No. 2 pencil from a cup, yanked a battered, red leather notebook from her briefcase and started working on a plan of attack. Clark Kent might not be her partner anymore, but he was *still* her friend.

It only took fifteen minutes before Ken stepped off the elevator and searched the room for Lois Lane. He had a good idea what the intrepid female reporter was looking for and he wondered if it was simply a matter of someone using the station after the person left without locking his computer, or if it was it something more devious, like the person actually hacking his account. In either case, he would know in a few minutes.

Lois called out, “Ken! So glad you’re here! This way to Clark’s computer.”

As he started to follow Lois, Ken recognized Jack, who was standing nearby, and said, “Hey, Jack. How’s it going?”

Jack replied, “Not good. You probably heard what happened to Clark earlier today? Which is why Lois had me track you down. We really need your help.”

Ken waved him over and said, “I understand. Why don’t you look over my shoulder while we check this out? I can explain what I’m doing and why. Someday you may decide to transfer to IT and take my place.”

Jack gave a slow smile, and with an eager look, said, “I’d love to. Uh, look over your shoulder, that is, not take your job.”

Ken laughed and said, “I knew what you meant. Come on. Let’s see what we can see.”

Lois led Ken over to Clark’s computer and said, “Okay, I guess you know what you’re doing. I’ll just go over... there... and wait at my desk.” Lois hated to admit it even to herself, but his calm self-assurance about his abilities on the computer intimidated her. Sometimes the workings of the computers mystified her. She crossed to her chair, sat down and started working on her to-do list for helping Clark. The first item was crossed off: Ken was checking over Clark’s computer.

Ken reached over and turned the computer on. Once the logon screen came up he placed his administrator name in the username box. When he started typing in his password he went so fast that Jack was unable to follow. It was a complex series of upper and lower case letters, numbers and special characters that was much longer than the minimum requirements.

Jack was astounded and asked, “How do you remember such a complex password?”

“I’ll let you in on a little secret. All you need to do is come up with a phrase or sentence that you can remember easily and substitute numbers for some of the letters like ‘1’ for ‘L’ and ‘3’ for ‘E’ and special characters like ‘@’ for ‘a’ and ‘\$’ for ‘S’, for example. Start names or the sentence with a capital and you’ve got a strong password.”

The computer searched for a second and then came back with a desktop unlike any Jack had seen before. Instead of the regular *Daily Planet* logo there was a large banner warning:

YOU ARE ACCESSING CONFIDENTIAL
INFORMATION. UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS IS A FEDERAL
OFFENCE AND PROSECUTION CAN RESULT.

Ken clicked a button acknowledging the statement and then the screen painted with a picture of a cute, flop-eared bunny rabbit. Ken looked over his shoulder at Jack and said, “That desktop picture tells me I’m in the right place and that things are

working properly. For the staff we use local profiles, however, as the administrator, I have a roaming profile so that I have access to all of my tools, no matter which machine I log onto. If my admin logon had failed, I'd have the generic DP desktop picture."

Turning to Lois, he asked, "What is the date in question?"

"He said he left around 7:00pm on June 15th, so if there was a problem it would be that day."

Grabbing the mouse, he started clicking things and windows started to cascade open all over the screen. Picking one of the windows he said, "This is the event log for logons." As he scrolled through he muttered, "Everything looks kosher here. The only logons recorded are Mr. Kent's. Except here's a logon by someone else. Is R. Lombard supposed to have access to this machine?" Once he located the correct day, he highlighted the data for that day and hit <ctrl>-C to put the data onto the clipboard. Next he opened a new text document, and using <ctrl>-V, pasted the data to the new document. He saved the document using Clark's name in the filename.

Closing that window, he clicked on another and said, "This is the event log for file access. Let's see what we have." Jack could see lines of data slide by as he scrolled through looking for the correct timeframe. Once he located the correct day he highlighted the data for that day, copied it and pasted it into the document.

After closing that log window, he moved on to another window. He said to Jack, "Okay, this window shows print queue activity. Let's see what we have." Again, he scrolled through to the proper day, and after copying the data, pasted it into the text document.

Subsequently closing that window, he moved to another. The next popped up and he said, "This log shows network activity. If a file was sent from one machine to another it'll show up here." After scrolling through he again copied and pasted data.

A total of ten minutes passed, then Ken used the attached printer to print out the file he had built. Taking the sheet of paper, he stood and approached Lois's desk. "Can I speak with you and Mr. White in his office?"

Lois stood and followed him to Perry's office. Once inside, he closed the door softly. He asked, "Mr. White, can I borrow a blue pencil?"

Perry was about to give him a stubby chewed-on pencil, but thought better of it and handed him a freshly sharpened blue pencil. Ken turned to Lois, "Tell me again, what time did Mr. Kent leave on the day in question?"

Curious, Lois said briskly, "He said that he left at 7PM."

As he placed the sheet down on Perry's desk, Lois moved so that she could look over his shoulder. Ken drew lines across the paper at several locations, and satisfied with his results, he looked back and forth between Perry and Lois. Pointing at the line, he said, "This indicates the time he left. The entries below that line indicate where files were accessed." He drew a box around a set of entries. "These are the files in question. These were accessed after he says he left, as indicated by the timestamp." Using the pencil, he indicated a new set of entries, "These indicate where copies of the files were sent to another computer. This shows that these files were LANed to another computer, one assigned to R. Lombard. If you want to use his logon - This entry shows that another user logged onto his machine. The user's name is R. Lombard."

Perry shook his head and said disgustedly, "Can't leave a fox near the henhouse."

"More like a weasel," Lois muttered darkly.

Turning to the young woman, Perry spoke slowly, "Now, Lois, let's work our way through the facts. This is too important for us to make a mistake. The Colonel told Elvis that after he heard *Blue Suede Shoes* for the first time it sounded terrible. Made him go back into the studio and re-record it." Looking at Janney again, he said, "Ken, is this conclusive? I mean, this couldn't be the work of someone using Ralph's login?"

"It's unlikely anyone would want to have their name linked with his. He's one of the worst staffers my team has to deal with. This evidence is pretty clear, but be my guest and gather more facts so that HR, the lawyers and the police will be satisfied."

Lois breathed a sigh of relief, "At least now we're on the right track. Thanks a lot, Ken! We'll get that additional proof."

Ken smiled, stood and walked towards the door. "If anyone needs my help, have Jack get in contact with me."

CHARGES AGAINST TRESAX 'TAX SCAM' UNFOUNDED!!

Daily Planet and 'star reporter' Clark Kent brought to task

By Staff Reporter Linda King

Stephanie Aronnax briskly walked down the crowded city street on a mission. She passed a newspaper stand and looked at the surprising headlines that blared from the *Star's* front page, and her knees grew rubbery and nearly buckled from the shock. She was literally on her way to the post office to mail the generous file of critical evidence both she and Bonesteel had compiled on their employers to the reporting duo.

"If Mr. Kent cannot be trusted, then neither can his partner," she thought sadly. The red leather satchel felt heavier than usual. Who could she hand this explosive corporate information to? More importantly, if she couldn't give it to anyone, what would happen to her and Bonesteel if she did not? Head bowed in contemplative thought, she slowed down, turned around and returned to the office.

Lois Lane came home long after the sun had dipped below the western horizon. The door opened to her dark apartment, which was touched with silvery blades of light, gifted to her by the moon. An odd rustling sound reached her alert ears. At first, she thought it was Lady Plushbottom running up to greet her, but the furball was nowhere in sight.

She had accumulated not a few enemies over the past couple of years. A little caution would not hurt her. Dropping her briefcase, taut limbs slipped into a Tae Kwan Do stance of defense. Standing in the doorway, she called out softly, "Lady P?"

Unexpectedly, she noticed a man, his arms crossed at his chest, suddenly appear in the center of her living room, the moonlight revealing very familiar, brightly colored garb. He walked towards her with the calm measured strides of a man who was greater than other men, almost like a god.

A gasp escaped her throat, "Su... Superman? Wha... what are you doing here?"

The voice was formal, yet pitched in such a manner as to put her at ease. "Miss Lane? I apologize for appearing at your home without an invitation, but a friend of mine is in dire circumstances and requires your immediate assistance."

The words tumbled from her lips in astonishment. "My help? What can I do that you can't? Flying and super strength isn't my field of expertise."

The handsome young man smiled at her, "No, there is a great deal you can accomplish that I cannot. Please, come inside and turn on the lights. My night vision is perfect, but I suspect yours is not."

"Oh... right." Picking up the discarded briefcase, she stepped inside the apartment, flicked on the switch and placed her briefcase on the couch. Without realizing it, a torrent of words began to spew forth. "It's funny that someone you know is in trouble, because someone I know, my former partner - no scratch that, my *partner* - is in trouble. We have evidence proving his computer was illegally accessed and sources pertinent to his article were tampered with."

The young man nodded his head gravely and asked, "Who hacked into m... his computer?"

“A nasty bottom feeder who thinks he’s a reporter. Ralph Lombard is his name, and if we don’t act quickly to get additional evidence, his prediction will come true: poor Clark’s career in journalism will be over. Tell you what; I’ll help you with your friend if you help me with mine.”

Lois noticed that at the mention of Ralph’s name, Superman’s eyes had briefly flashed in anger, but he had quickly masked the emotion. Instead, his lips pulled into a shadow of a smile. “You dive right in, don’t you? Uh... your reputation as a tenacious reporter is well earned. It appears we are helping the same friend, Clark Kent.”

Her beautiful brown eyes, tired after a long and emotionally taxing day, looked searchingly into his, “How... how do you know him?”

Without a moment’s hesitation he said, “We met shortly before my debut. By the way, Miss Lane, I never had a chance to thank you for writing such a glowing story introducing me to the people of Metropolis.”

Flattered, she answered, “You’ve read my work?”

“Of course, Miss Lane, I read everything you write.”

She smiled; he *was* handsome, courteous and loyal to a friend. Great qualities to be admired in anyone, but to her, in this super person, those traits fit him like a hand in a glove. He was something else... impressive, gorgeous and *romantic* all at the same time. Her palms itched when the strange thought crossed her mind. She had to be a professional journalist, not a silly teenaged girl discovering her first crush. If the circumstances were different, she would have opened her notebook and pulled out the interview questions... or asked him to take her flying. She quickly pushed that thought aside. Interviews and flying... they could wait. Right now, no matter how distractingly handsome her unexpected visitor was, she needed to concentrate on helping Clark.

Slipping into ‘Mad Dog’ Lane mode she asked, “Could you lend a hand so Clark can get his job back?”

“I think together we can help him and solve this mystery,” her visitor said.

Relieved, Lois smiled and shouted, “Great! Let me call him right now! He can come over and we can brainstorm this situation as a team.” She reached over to the phone and began dialing. Clark wanted to stop her, but decided it was best for her to think he was out of his apartment.

The phone rang several times until the answering machine came on, ‘*Hi! You’ve reached Clark Kent. I can’t come to the phone right now, but please leave a message.*’ Suddenly the answering machine beeped rather loudly in her ear.

It was good to hear his voice sounding so confident, but she was still slightly nettled that he was not at home. How could he pull one of his disappearing acts at a time like this? The irritation came through while leaving her message, “Hey, Kansas, call me. I have good news!”

After hanging up, she turned to her visitor and attempted to hide her annoyance with Clark for not being home. Meanwhile, Superman’s lips were pulled into the faintest of smiles. “Miss Lane, the people who put Clark Kent onto this story have all been discredited. Their reputations are ruined, and their livelihoods gone. None of that would have happened if their identities had remained undisclosed. Maybe they can offer some insight that our friend Clark missed. He wants you to talk to Sylvia Nygaard and Dennis Shaw. He will talk to Todd Sylvester,” Superman said.

Lois smirked, “Not bad, Superman, you’re starting to think like a seasoned reporter. But why didn’t Clark ask me himself?” Waving her hand towards him she said, “Why send you? Metropolis has a greater need for your skills.”

The silence had stretched almost to the point of being uncomfortable when her visitor spoke very carefully. “Clark Kent would not want anyone to think the partnership still exists. It’s bad enough that one member has been suspended from the job, but it

would hurt him deeply if you suffered the same fate. He ca... respects the good work you do.”

Lois’ lips quirked into a nervous smile, “Thank you for telling me that Superman. I... I respect his work too.”

“Meow!”

Startled, they both turned to see Lady Plushbottom perched on the edge of the couch looking askance at the humans. No doubt she was not pleased to discover there was no supper in her bowl. Lois laughed nervously and blurted out, “I don’t think she likes you, Superman.”

In answer, he bent down and held out his hand to the prickly creature. “Hello there. You are a pretty... uh, ‘little’ kitty.”

Lady Plushbottom responded by rubbing her head against his hand and purring shamelessly.

“I’m impressed! She usually only responds like that to a select group of people,” Lois said, clearly thunderstruck by the large cat’s behavior.

Superman looked at her with a guarded expression, “Um... animals like me.”

Lois did not speak, only stared at her visitor dumbly. Not only was this man courtly and could bench press a passenger train, he was also kind to animals. Talk about perfection! The next words came out in a rush. “Excuse me, where are my manners? Can I get you something to drink? There’s a cream soda in the fridge? Ah, do you drink or eat?”

He fought to keep himself from grinning, turned towards the fridge and shook his head. “Yes, I do eat... especially when I’m hungry. But no, I don’t want to take the last cream soda, that wouldn’t be very polite.”

Surprised, she asked, “How did you know?”

“Maybe after this whole thing with Clark is settled, we can have a proper one-on-one interview. That way Metropolis will learn a bit more about its latest resident?” He cocked his head as if listening for something off in the distance, then turned to her and said, “Please excuse me, but it is time for me to start my nightly patrol of the city. Besides, from the growling sounds of its stomach, your cat is hungry, and I have no doubt you are tired as well. It has been a long day.”

When she had first walked inside the apartment, Lois had been tired, but talking with her attractive visitor had put a little energy in her step. She watched as he strode confidently towards her window and said, “May I?”

Confused, she said, “Of course.” Then, before she could stop herself, added, “How about taking me flying one of these evenings? It... it would make a great story.”

He looked at her with an odd expression on his face, and then said, “If your cat doesn’t mind waiting, why not now?”

Caught by surprise for the second time that evening, she said in a voice so high-pitched she did not recognize it as her own, “Really?”

By way of an answer, Superman removed his cape and gently wrapped it around her slender frame. “It gets cold out there.”

Lois could only nod, still surprised by what was happening. “Where are we going?”

“For a quick tour around the city, but Miss Lane, we will be moving at super speed in the beginning. For your safety, please allow me to cover your face.”

“This is going to be different from anything I’ve ever done before,” she said in a shaky voice as the warm red fabric covered her face. As he secured the cape, the faint scent of fresh air and wood coiled around her nostrils. Suddenly her feet were lifted off the floor and the sound of a stiff rushing breeze reached her ears. For the briefest of instances, the smell of dank earth was so strong it made her wheeze, then the cape was removed, and she was treated to the sight of Hobb’s Bay from a very different nighttime vantage point. Above twinkled a few stars and below the bay stretched beneath them.

Lois had always heard of the descriptive words “majestic sweep” applied to Hollywood epics such as *Alieanor of Aquitaine* or *Lawrence of Arabia*, and had always considered them simply high-strung adjectives.

Until now.

The strong arms that held her were capable of stopping a runaway train, yet tender enough to hold her. There was something familiar about the way his arms fit around her waist, yet how could that be? Over a month ago he did not exist in her life. Questions could come later, however at this moment in time she wanted to savor. Flying without the aid of a clumsy machine to protect her at night was breathtaking...

What seemed like a lifetime later, Superman deposited Lois back in her living room. Gently he removed the cape, and with a blur of motion, fastened it to the suit.

“That... that. How am I supposed to put what just happened into simple words?”

He gave a small smile and said, “I have no doubt you’ll think of something.” She opened the window, turned to her and said, “Now don’t forget you have to track down those two people for... Clark. Good-night, Miss Lane, thank you for the help.”

Lois wanted to tell him she knew how to do her job, when the astonishing sight of the brightly garbed young man flying out the window and into the night caught her off guard. She quickly closed the window, and then looked at her fridge. “How did he know I only had one cream soda left?”

Part Twenty-One

Lois came in that morning in full Mad Dog Lane mode, wearing a smart brown jacket and skirt set edged in electric blue piping – one of her favorite power suits. After her out-of-the-ordinary conversation with Superman last night she was more determined than ever to get her partner cleared of all charges and eliminate the threat of embroiling the *Daily Planet* in a nasty legal fight.

The incessant rattle and hum of the newsroom fell away as the previous night’s memory came to mind. A brief smile played over her lips.

Superman.

At first, he hadn’t seemed real that terrible night in the Metro tunnel, more like a fantasy. He tried to play himself off as remote and untouchable, like a man of steel. But conversing with him gradually wore the fantasy and shield away. He had abilities which allowed him to help a friend, which made him real.

The see-saw of last night’s emotions was... perhaps all too real? There was something about him which tugged at her in a way that was oddly familiar yet dissimilar. Something...

A decidedly familiar voice invaded her thoughts. “Lois! You look like some star-stuck teenager Elvis just kissed! What’ve you got for your ol’ editor today?” Since Perry had received the news that Clark’s story might have been stolen and his sources railroaded, he was in a more optimistic mood, but that didn’t mean he stopped being the managing editor.

“Uh, there’s the arson report follow-up on the Doolittle building fire that the networks don’t have, and ‘something else’ that I’ll run by you later today.”

The tone in her voice caused Perry to look at her closely. He stopped and wanted to talk, yet thought better of it and walked towards the coffee station instead, searching for a donut with vanilla glaze. In the years he had been working with Lois he had come to know the inflections of her voice like she was his own daughter. If there was ‘something else’ to run by him that shouldn’t be discussed in the bullpen, he could afford to wait.

After grabbing a creamy chocolate donut and a coffee, Lois started her morning work routine, beginning with contacting her acquaintance in the District Attorney’s office, Mayson Drake. Perhaps she could – covertly, of course – provide information

about the first person on her short list to interview, Dennis Shaw.

“Good morning, Mayson. How’s that cute boyfriend of yours?”

“Dan’s fine. I’m so glad you set us up! Unfortunately, he’s going to be stationed in D.C. for a couple of weeks. Listen, I can’t stay on the phone long, Lane, so to what do I owe the honor of this call?”

Lois could tell by her tone that Mayson was busy, with no time to spare on idle chitchat. So, without hesitation, she plunged into the reason for the call. “What can you tell me about Sylvia Nygaard? Did she really fabricate this whole story and told it to Clark? What about Dennis Shaw?”

“Ha! So, the rumors are true: that well-dressed snake Sebastian Kell is planning on representing TresAx in legal action against the *Planet!* Listen, take my advice – not that you will, of course – but stay away from this story. It has big money and big legal written all over it.”

“No way, this is important to salvaging Clark’s reputation! Yesterday we were able to unearth proof that my partner is innocent of all charges. Look, I know Nygaard is being investigated by your office for illegal stock trades, which makes her testimony with a certain reporter about her former employer moot. If my suspicions are correct, this could open up an investigation that’s right up your alley. Who knows, maybe the suits in Washington will send Dan back to help the D.A.’s office clean up the mess?”

Several seconds crawled by as she waited for Mayson’s response. She could envision the woman sitting at her chair, head cocked and twirling a lock of wavy blonde hair between her fingers.

“To begin with, talk with Dennis Shaw. He, at least, is clean of any illegal stock trades...” Mayson began with a sigh. “Oh, and Lois, you didn’t hear any of this from me!”

“TresAx means business; they hired Sebastian Kell, one of the best lawyers in Metropolis. I’m what they call a legal shark. Sebastian is the guy I call when something needs to be done that’s out of my sphere of influence.” Emma hesitated and then added, “He’s also not afraid to take steps that are ‘not exactly’ above-board.”

Stephanie could hear respect for the other lawyer in Emma’s voice, and with a touch of trepidation, said, “If he’s so good, why haven’t I ever heard of him?”

There was heavy silence on the other end of the phone, then Emma responded, “A shark never tells the prey it’s about to attack.”

With a groan, Stephanie said, “Oh, yes, that does make sense. Where do we go from here?”

“You still need to retire and hold onto that material. Currently, getting out of DMG is your number one priority. Tell Daae your intentions as soon as possible.”

After her friend hung up, Stephanie sat contemplating the discussion in her kitchen, quietly sipping an espresso which was now lukewarm. She decided it was time to have a little chat with Bonesteel. Perhaps together they could work on a strategy.

Jack and Stacy, who up to that point were ignorant of what Ken Janney’s computer sleuthing had uncovered, were determined to do what they could to assist in getting their friend’s name cleared of wrongdoing and back onto the *Daily Planet*’s roster of reporters.

According to Clark, only he and Perry knew about the TresAx story, and he had kept the article notes, interviews, and the names and addresses of the three people who were his sources in his home computer. It was not until the day he had uploaded the story from a floppy diskette onto the work machine - the day of Superman’s debut - that the identity of those sources had been

revealed. Clark was certain there had been no illegal entry into his home so that left only the unlocked work computer.

Surreptitiously, the duo discussed the evening in question with the entire night shift staff. They all admitted to either watching the monitors, which had showed Superman taking the unconscious trainman to the hospital, or chatting in the break area.

But Elsie, did remember hearing Ralph complain rather loudly that he had spilled coffee on the floor, near Clark's desk. "It struck me as odd at the time, because he sits on the other side of the newsroom. There's no reason for him to be there."

After a few moments of debate, the two approached a rather glum-looking Lois and asked for a brief chat in the conference room. Reluctantly, she joined them.

"What's up," she said, once Jack had closed the door.

After they had filled in Lois in on their investigations, Lois informed her two young colleagues about what Ken had discovered. Her expression became thoughtful. "Accessing Clark's computer without permission might be the additional proof Human Resources needs to get Ralph fired. But the question still remains; what's the motivation behind it?"

"Yeah, it's not like Ralph has a fan club ready to defend him. Spilling coffee near Clark's desk is a flimsy excuse to use to accuse Ralph of breaking into his computer and stealing a story. Although, it's water cooler gossip that his productivity has been down, even more than usual..." Jack mused.

Stacy joined in, "No way could that untalented excuse for a writer even alter the TresAx article to fit his own style. Between what Mr. Janney has discovered, and this information which places him in the newsroom at the time of the break-in, might that be all the proof HR could want to fire Ralph immediately?"

Lois rubbed her chin considering the intern's words, and then her face lit up. "Stacy! That's it, 'alteration' to the story!"

Stacy, confused, looked at Lois, and then at Jack who nodded, his lips quirked into a smirk. "Messing with the media!"

"Who do we know is the 'King' of changing stories to suit his needs?"

"Mr. Gregory Daae?" Stacy responded with a shoulder shrug.

"Right! We've got a lot of research to do. Stacy, can you dig around and find out who *really* owns TresAx? This caper has his slick fingerprints all over it... media manipulation on a large scale."

"But wait! What about Ralph?" Stacy objected. "If he did give this story to Daae, then we can't have him running around the newsroom causing all kinds of havoc! Who will his next victim be? We... ah, that is to say, Perry has to fire this guy."

"Stacy's right. If Ralph is a mole, we can't have him here," Jack responded hotly. "Who knows what other computers he plans on hacking into?"

Lois thought back to Bobby Bigmouth's warning years before: had Ralph been Daae's mole all this time?

"Agreed, Jack, but we need irrefutable evidence; the kind that will satisfy Perry, human resources... and a judge. We gotta catch him in the act." Her eyes gleamed wickedly as a plan began to form. "I know just the 'sting' operation to do it."

The workday was at an end, but Stephanie remained behind. She had finally completed her official resignation/retirement letter for Mr. Daae. It was a sobering correspondence to write. Should matters escalate, in the near future Emma's words would become a reality, and the Feds would be crawling all over DMG.

It was time for a little affirmative action for both herself and Bonesteel. With a slightly trembling hand, she picked up the phone and punched in a few numbers.

A recognizable voice came over the line, "Jasper Templar's office. May I be of assistance?"

She took in a breath and said, "Yes, Mr. Bonesteel, you can. My copier is acting up! All my color copies have been coming in

black and white! This temperamental machine seems to respond to your attention better than anyone else's."

This was their code for when they needed to speak with one another. Neither Bonesteel nor Stephanie could be sure the phone lines were not bugged. Without a moment's hesitation, he said, "Certainly, I will be upstairs in a few minutes."

"Thank you," Stephanie said and put the receiver back in its cradle.

Fifteen minutes later, Bonesteel was sitting in Stephanie's visitor's chair, eager to hear what his business acquaintance had to say.

"Tristan, are you aware that Mr. Kent has been placed on suspension from the *Daily Planet*? They are saying his sources from TresAx are incorrect and reported the company's tax situation falsely. Because Lois Lane is his partner, anything we give them might be considered tainted and held in contempt." She looked at him sharply, "Please be candid with me: is this part of Templar's or Daae's plan?"

"I... I don't know what to say in regard to this," Bonesteel said, staunchly holding onto his composure. "Templar and Daae both wanted Kent out of the way to get at Lois Lane. Miss Lane has been a thorn in Daae's side for years, but until recently he considered her more annoying than a threat. But now he's looking at her with a different eye. Templar, for whatever reason, cannot abide the woman."

"But why go after Clark Kent? Despite his success he's still a relative neophyte to Metropolis. Lois Lane, on the other hand, is definitely the more influential of the two."

He shrugged his shoulders and said, "True. But Mr. Kent is a newcomer who at one time was intimately involved with the new Mrs. Daae. Mr. Templar might have an agenda all his own."

Bonesteel allowed that to sink in, and when Stephanie did not answer, he continued, "I see your friends – the backchannels – didn't provide that bit of information?"

Stephanie shook her head. "No. No, they did not. But this no longer involves them. What happens now is up to us."

Dusk was falling when Clark stepped out of a cab in front of the pleasant colonial style home of Todd and Tara Sylvester in the quiet suburbs of Brookside Heights just outside of Metropolis. He wanted to talk with Todd because he was the one who had first put him on to the illicit tax situation at TresAx.

He knocked twice on the red wooden door. Inside he heard a comment and a few quick footsteps. A black man of average height and build opened the door abruptly, "I told you people to leave us..." The angry flow of words ceased when he recognized his visitor. With one word, his displeasure increased tenfold.

"Kent," he snarled.

He started to slam the door, but Clark was quicker. Careful, mindful of his strength, he kept the door from being closed in his face. "Todd! Listen, we have to talk. I'm here to help!"

Todd, still trying to close the heavy door spoke bitterly, "Help? You and the *Daily Planet* have 'helped' enough? I'm out of work... my dream job. Tara is being hounded by the 'reporters' outside *her* job. But worst of all... my kids. They were being harassed so much at school we had to take them out and send them to my mother's in Florida."

"That's why I'm here, to put a stop to all this harassment! Let me in so I can explain. Please!"

"Why? Trying to do an 'exclusive' follow-up on what happens to a whistle-blower? Get away from my door!"

"No! Let me in. This is about *all* of us! Please, trust me, Todd, let me in or I'll wait on your doorstep all night."

Across town, it was near quitting time at the *Daily Planet's* newsroom. Several of the daytime staffers were shutting down their computers. Around the elevator doors, a knot of people were

already waiting for the creaky elevator car to arrive, thus beginning their trek home. Diane walked up the ramp and waved good-bye to Catherine and a few others who remained in the bullpen. Jack exited the conference room and approached Lois' desk. He handed her a thin manila file and said in an uncharacteristic pleading tone, "Here's the information you asked for. Lois, you can't pick up where Clark left off! That story already got him put on suspension!"

"Yeah?" She picked up a black diskette and waved it furiously under his nose, her voice pitched a little louder than necessary, "Well, I've got *new* evidence that proves Clark is telling the truth and his witnesses are being railroaded." She looked out the corner of her eye to see Ralph's head go up like a shot. "Good," she thought, "He's listening. Hopefully, that weasel will take the bait. Catching him in the act ought to make this 'sting' operation that much sweeter!"

Her young colleague countered, "Really? What kind of proof is this?"

A coy expression crossed Lois' pretty face, "We can discuss what kind later. I want to upload the files on this diskette to my computer and start fresh tomorrow. I've been working really hard on this."

"You sure? 'Cause I can call for Thai takeout, grab Stacy, and we can pull an all-nighter," Jack said eagerly.

She patted him on the back. "Thanks for the offer and the folder. Go home, tell your brother I said hello, and get some rest."

Jack nodded and returned to his cubicle. A few minutes later, wearing his jacket and carrying a leather backpack, he exited the bullpen and boarded the elevator with Catherine and a few remaining staffers.

Minutes later, the bullpen was empty except for Lois and Ralph.

Lois was bent over her computer, concentrating on uploading the files. Once that was done, she opened one file and started making edits to the document. She reached into her desk and started rummaging around. Failing to find the searched-for item, she dived into her briefcase. Suddenly, she snarled, "Rats!" so loudly Ralph looked up from his computer.

"Hey, Lane! Pipe down! Some of us are trying to work. What are ya makin' such a fuss about, anyways?"

"I ran out of No. 2 pencils! How is a person supposed to write without them?" she groused.

Ralph made a show of getting out of his chair and coming over to Lois. With a greasy smile, he leaned over and stuck a 'pencil' in her face - If anyone but a mouse would consider the dirty, gnawed yellow stub to be anything even resembling a pencil. "See, I can be nice sometimes. Here ya go, Lane. Finish writing your story."

Between the noxious mixture of old cologne, sweat and pastrami, and his invasion of Lois's personal space, she wanted to yell, but instead pushed the pencil away and stood up. "No, thanks. I'll get a new box from the supply closet." With those words she bolted from her desk, out of the newsroom, and down the hall.

"Finally!" Ralph rasped as he slipped into her seat, "I thought she'd never leave!" Quickly his fingers started scuttling over the keyboard like a drunken crab and he typed some commands into her computer. He copied all the files from the disk drive to an e-mail and sent it over to his computer. He erased the e-mail from the sent folder, returned the monitor to the screen it had previous been on, and went back to his desk. The whole operation took all of five minutes; maybe less.

He was typing away at his desk when Lois exited the hall and reentered the bullpen, holding on to a new box of yellow No. 2 pencils.

Ralph called out amicably, "Find everything you need?"

She looked at him and said, "Yes, the supply closet is always

well-stocked. I have to thank Stacy for that."

"Yeah, she's a good kid. Pity we are gonna lose her when the intern program ends."

The thought nettled Lois. She had forgotten that Stacy was only going to be around until the end of the summer and then it was back to Metro U. The internship program did not apply to seniors. Perhaps Perry would make an exception in her case and hire her as a part-timer. Stacy and Jack worked well as a team, and besides, what college kid could turn down the chance to make a little extra money - especially if it was in the field of their coursework? It was something to consider. Many of the interns before Stacy had been less than impressive.

She looked down at the desk's surface and studied it carefully. The tiny slip of paper she had placed under the mouse pad before 'discovering' the lack of pencils had been moved. Now all that remained was for Ken to study the computer and discover if any of the files from the diskette had been copied and e-mailed to Ralph's computer. She had been careful to stay in the supply closet long enough for him to get all the information he needed.

"Gotcha," she whispered.

Part Twenty-Two

The impeccably decorated executive offices of DMG, USA were quiet and deserted except for Gregory Daae's conference room. Two individuals sat in black leather chairs at a conference table that was gleaming with beautiful hardwood inlays, carefully discussing their prospects and ultimately the future of the company. One member of the duo sat uneasily in her chair, looking around rather nervously.

"After all the things you've told me about my boss, I should think the *last* place we should meet is in this room. Who knows how many listening devices and cameras are in here?"

"Right now, this is the safest room in the executive suite, besides your own office. Daae has a special team of technicians sweep this office day and night for surveillance devices. They report their findings to me."

This bit of information calmed Stephanie's nerves, however, the hour was late, and she wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible. Listening devices notwithstanding, she imagined seeing Daae stride into the room at any time. "We have to give Lois Lane the material you complied against Templar and Daae. It's the only way out of this mess."

"They are very smart businessmen. How can you be certain that their crimes will ever come to light?" Bonesteel asked.

"Tristan, there are prisons crammed with white-collar criminals who thought they were 'too smart' to be apprehended. I've been an administrative assistant in this city a long time, and rest assured, only a small handful get away with these illegal maneuvers. I have learned that if the guilty party isn't apprehended, invariably some blameless middle-level manager or loyal assistant ends up taking the fall," she said rather pointedly.

He sighed, "Nevertheless, you haven't done anything wrong. Whereas myself..."

Stephanie shook her head. "True, but being interrogated by the SEC and having my life splashed on the front of every newspaper in the country is a scary prospect. Tomorrow morning I am handing over my retirement papers to HR. Soon afterwards, Miss Lane will be in possession of these files. Part of the deal I intend to make is that you turn over any additional evidence and then disappear into the Witness Protection Program."

"Does Miss Lane have that kind of authority?" he asked nervously.

"No. But I'm sure James Olsen can influence people who do." She laid her hands on the table as if to draw strength from the hardwood. "Now, Daae didn't get that information about TresAx from out of the blue. Who is his mole on the *Daily Planet*?"

Bonesteel said, with an audible sigh, "It is one of their low-

end reporters, Ralph Lombard.”

Her brow furrowed in concentration, “He’s Templar’s man? What’s his motivation?”

Bonesteel shrugged, “He owes a *substantial* amount in gambling debts. Templar pays very well for his information. He had promised Ralph that if he got into either Lane’s or Kent’s computer and found anything useful, Templar would pay enough to clear his debts once and for all.”

The administrative assistant gave an uncharacteristic snort. “Take it from me, Tristan. Gamblers seldom quit. They simply move on to another table. Nonetheless, what would have happened to Lombard if he failed?”

“Mr. Lombard’s life ... would be at stake if he failed.”

She suppressed a shiver, then said, “Enough! Too many lives are being torn apart by this insane deal our respective employers have put together. We must stop this great madness before someone is hurt or... killed. I’m handing everything over to Lois Lane at the end of *this* week.”

Ralph Lombard rode downstairs on the elevator. The car rattled and shook as it rolled past each floor. The diskette with all the downloads from Lois’ computer was tucked safely in his battered and scuffed briefcase. With a nervous giggle, he thought about Perry’s reaction when his favorite investigative reporter was also suspended. It didn’t matter. Because with this diskette, Ralph was sure that freedom from Templar, Daae, and the whole corporate jungle was comin’ down the pike.

The elevator lurched to a halt and the doors slid open. He fairly bounced from the car and ran over to the pay phone by the newsstand. He stuffed himself inside, closed the doors, and proceeded to dump change down the coin slot. Twice he dialed the wrong number and had to start from the beginning. Finally, the phone rang, and he waited for Templar’s toady, Bonesteel, to pick up.

“Come on! Come on! Where is that jerk?”

The call moved over to voice mail, and Ralph thought his heart would explode, it was pounding so loudly. Slowly, he calmed down and spoke. “Listen, Boney! It’s me, Ralph Lombard. I got more stuff about this crazy TresAx investigation. Sounds like Lane is trying to find proof that pretty boy is innocent. If ya’ play your cards right, she’ll get suspended as well. Call me at home.”

Angrily, he slammed down the phone and pushed out of the booth. “He’d better call me back,” Ralph mumbled.

Clark and Todd sat at a small table in a neat, contemporary-style kitchen, one which should have been occupied by a happy family having dinner rather than two men somberly talking over cooling cups of coffee. “So, let me get this straight: a co-worker broke into your computer, downloaded all the notes and article materials, and gave them to someone at the *Metropolis Star* and this fancy lawyer?”

“Exactly! I never told anyone who my sources were.”

Todd took some time to weigh Clark’s words then said, “So, what happens now?”

“Describe your last day at TresAx, and don’t leave out anything. The tiniest detail could make a tremendous difference.”

The other man gave Clark an odd look. Despite the fact that he had settled down, he was still wary of trusting the journalist. He shot back, “Is this going to help me return to my job, or at least get another one?”

“That’s a promise I will not give. But I still have a few friends in *Metropolis* who might be able to help you.” He left the rest unspoken.

“Right. At this point, what do either of us have to lose?” He took a contemplative sip of coffee, rubbed long fingertips over his bald head, and began his story. “The day started just like any other: I parked my BMW in the underground garage and rode up

to the twenty-eighth floor. Went into my office, sat down and got right to work.

“TresAx knows how to treat its executive staff. Man, I loved that space! Walls held some of my personal jazz art collection. Not prints, but the real thing. On my wall unit there was one shelf that held a small stereo, and that day it was playing music from my favorite jazz station, WRVR. It was on the corner, with a magnificent view of the harbor. Gotta hand it to Lex Luthor: his company did a bang-up job of cleaning up not just the neighborhood, but the river as well!”

His listener nodded slowly; there was no reason to rush Todd.

“Like I said, I was working when the door was pushed open, and the head of security walked in and told me to get away from my desk. Behind him was the company head of finance, Adam Guerin. Adam pointed a finger at me and demanded I be removed from the premises as quickly as possible. One of HR’s ‘legal eagles’ insisted all personal items had to go with me, but anything that the company owned had to remain there.”

“That must have been incredibly painful and difficult,” Clark said, remembering his own humiliation at having a security guard stand over him while he packed up his belongings, and leaving the *Daily Planet* carrying a cumbersome cardboard box.

“Yeah, well, you know the rest, since we have that in common at least,” Todd grumbled.

“No, we have a lot more in common than that. There is something we both cherish, and that’s our reputations. Somehow, this co-worker of mine passed on your name, Sylvia Nygaard’s, and Dennis Shaw’s, and we have to set the record straight and regain our careers. Unfortunately, none of that is going to come about unless we work together.”

Todd stood up and paced across the kitchen. This was a man who had carved out a life for himself from humble beginnings. He had had the good life in his grasp, and now he couldn’t fathom what the next step would be. Bitterly, he said, “Sylvia Nygaard is not part of this discussion. Those charges the DA’s office is leveling at her? They are real. She joined us ‘cause she figured by turnin’ state’s evidence against TresAx, the law would go easy on her.”

Startled by this new information, Clark said, “What? She told you this?”

“Yeah, Sylvia’s been walking down a dark road for a long time. When she first started with the company she had more energy than experience, and more raw talent than book smarts. But there was also a hunger; a determination to be the best.” He sighed, walked back over to the table and sat down heavily. “Unfortunately, that quality, on top of hanging around with the wrong associates both inside and outside of the company, led her to make a lot of stupid decisions.”

The defeated tone of Todd’s voice said he was mourning the loss of many things, and if he did not find something positive to fuel his energies, soon he could be on the same dark road. Clark cleared his throat. As much as it pained him, he needed to get past the other man’s brooding and the current unfortunate situation. Before he could say anything, Todd began to speak again.

“It’s funny; that dude with Guerin said my name was now worthless in the financial world. Effective immediately, I was ‘untouchable’. That my ‘friend’ on the *Daily Planet* was in just as much, if not more, trouble than I was. He even mentioned your partner, Lois Lane.”

A chill went through Clark, but his voice remained even. “Why would Gregory Daae mention Lois? I was the only one working on that article. Lois didn’t know about it until later.”

“Why would Daae be at TresAx? Nope, this was someone called Temp something. Real arrogant son of a gun.”

The chill increased as Clark felt a thousand tiny pinpricks of icy fear tighten his belly. He took a moment to compose his emotions so as not to alarm Todd, and then he asked, “Templar?”

Jasper Templar?"

"Yeah. He was a tall blond man with a goatee. Now that I think of it, Guerin seemed almost afraid of him. You know this guy? Who is he?"

Standing up from the table, Clark came over and shook Todd's hand. "He might be the missing piece to the puzzle. Listen, I know losing your position at TresAx was painful, but we'll find a solution."

Todd walked Clark to the front door. After the rather bombastic way he had initially greeted the reporter, now he was uncharacteristically silent. "Look, Kent, there is very little actual help I can give, but if you need me to testify in a court of law... well, call me. The thought of those jerks getting rid of me like I was nothing hurts my pride."

"Thanks. Right now, just worry about your family. As a matter of fact, it might be best if you and Tara join your kids for a few days." Clark pulled a notepad from his pocket and wrote his phone number and address. "Call me when you get settled."

Todd slowly took the paper and said in a worried, but angry voice, "Is there a possibility of a threat to my family?"

"No, this is just a... precaution. Listen, I'll be in touch. Please call me and let me know where you are, it's important." With that, Clark exited out the front door.

It was early in the morning. Gregory Daae was sitting behind his desk when Stephanie appeared, carrying a tray which held his usual morning repast, a fresh hot croissant, a bowl of fruit salad and a coffee. It was always pleasant to begin the day's routine with his assistant, who brought a sense of calm organization to the DMG executive suite.

Today Stephanie wore a hunter green jacket paired with a pencil skirt which displayed a mature figure that had never slipped into being matronly. She sat down in the visitor's chair, opened her notepad, and while he ate, they went over the day's activities. Fifteen minutes later, when his schedule had been planned and set, she cleared her throat and spoke.

"Mr. Daae, I need to take a few minutes to discuss a personal matter."

He looked up, genuine concern on his face, "*Oui?* Are your children having some difficulty? Are you well?"

"No... er, yes. There is no easy way to begin this conversation. Uh, that is to say, I wanted to let you know I am taking an early retirement and will be leaving DMG in two weeks."

Gregory Daae sat in his deliciously comfortable leather chair, with an unaccustomed expression of surprise on his face.

"*Impossible n'est pas français!* Retirement? Mrs. Aronnax — Stephanie, why leave DMG? There is so much more for you to accomplish here."

Stephanie's facial expression was a combination of happiness at his reaction to her decision and sadness as to the real reason for the imminent departure. "All the more reason for me to retire now, Gregory, there are places I have wanted to visit. Dear old friends to see, and college courses to be studied. If not now, then when shall I?"

Slightly taken aback by her use of his first name, he knew she was serious. "Is there anything I can do to change your mind?"

Stephanie said nothing, allowing the silence in his office to grow until it was uncomfortable. Then she spoke with admiration, "Your confidence in my abilities and the way you have allowed me to grow in my position gives me much satisfaction, but now it's time to do something else with my life."

"Does this have anything to do with my determination to remain in Europe with Lana?"

Carefully she weighed her response and said, "That is a personal decision, Gregory. But anyone can see you cherish Lana deeply and want to spend time with her."

"Does it have to do with Monsieur Templar? Many have expressed concern about his... manners."

That sentence caught Stephanie completely off guard, but she should have known Daae would not be ignorant of Templar's behavior towards his staff. Looking at the earnest expression on his face, her resolve almost broke and she wanted to tell him everything. But after her discussions with Bonesteel, fear and a newfound understanding of what he was capable of stopped her. Again, she cautiously tiptoed into the verbal minefield.

"Mr. Templar is... an adroit businessman. But after years of working with a person who treats others with respect, I find his style of management... *irksome.*"

Her employer gazed off into the distance, a finger gently rubbing his bottom lip. Then he sighed heavily and said, "Stephanie, it will be impossible to replace you, but your reasoning makes perfectly good sense. Allow me to contact HR today and have them draw up the paperwork. Your separation package shall be that of an executive: a year's salary, bonus, complete healthcare coverage for six months and shares in DMG stock over and above your pension."

Shocked by his generosity, Stephanie blinked uncontrollably, then managed to say, not without emotion, "Th... thank you, Gregory."

"Not at all, but I must ask a request or two, *s'il te plait.*"

She looked at him. *S'il te plait* was the informal way of saying please in French, as if she were his friend.

"Yes?"

"Rather than the customary two weeks, please stay for three? It will allow time to locate and interview your... replacement, although it will be difficult for anyone to fill the position without your signature flare," he said with a disappointed sigh.

There was a sense of sadness in the room; an end of something. Stephanie felt like a coward but was determined to conclude their association before everything Templar had planned blew up in her face. "Very well. The second request?"

"Return for the opening of the Napoleon Exhibit? Lana, her father and the staff at the museum have worked so tirelessly on it and I would appreciate having you there."

Stephanie rose from her chair with suddenly weak knees. The desire to leave Metropolis and be as far away as possible when the story about DMG hit the fan was acute. But if she refused, Gregory would be offended and perhaps more than a little suspicious. From what she had heard, Lana Lang-Daae had worked diligently on the massive project. But, she wondered in an uncharitable thought, had she invested as much time in grabbing up Gregory Daae as a husband?

"I... I am honored. Of course, I will be there."

Gregory stood up, came around the desk, extended his hands, and grasped one of hers, holding it like it was china. "Excellent! Lana and I look forward to seeing you." He released her hand and went back to his chair. Stephanie crossed the room, and had her hand on the doorknob ready to exit, when his richly accented words filled her ears. There was a hint of darkness in his tone. "Oh, Mrs. Aronnax, there is one more thing which I shall do for you."

The intimate tone of their discussion had gone. They had smoothly slipped back into their respective roles of employer and employee.

"Yes, Mr. Daae?"

"Soon, Mr. Jasper Templar shall not pose a problem for you or anyone on my staff."

In all the years they had worked together, she had never heard him speak with such icy finality. A lump of fear twisted in her stomach. Her tongue, sudden dry, had stuck to the roof of her mouth, rendering speech impossible. She nodded, opened the door, and departed his office, with ice-cold hands quivering with fear.

Lois emerged from the Metro entrance into a noisy, congested neighborhood. Children ran through the street firing water pistols while their parents watched from the windows of their apartments, yelling corrections at their offspring. Cars inched slowly along, trying to avoid hitting each other or the pedestrians who zigzagged in and out of traffic as if they were made of steel.

She was grateful she had decided to take the Metro rather than her car. It would have been nearly impossible to find a parking space. Her eyes scanned the numbers of the buildings and discovered the one she wanted, 955 Greensboro Road. With sure steps she navigated past a knot of children and mounted the steps. The name of the intercom said, “**Nygaard, Apt. 3J.**” Lois buzzed, and a gravelly voice snarled, “What!”

Slightly taken aback, Lois responded, “Miss Nygaard, my name is Lois Lane and I work for the *Daily Planet*.”

“Go away! I’m sick of reporters!” The connection was abruptly broken.

Lois glared at the intercom as if her angry stare would cause the door to open. She was about to dig into her bag for a lockpick when a young voice was heard behind her. Turning, she looked down to see a boy about Denny’s age, who said, “Hey, lady, you wanna go inside?”

“Uh, yeah. What’s your name?”

“Miguel. We live on the same floor as Nygaard. She ain’t a happy person, even before the cops showed up.” With that, the boy used his key to open the door and Lois followed him inside, though not without looking around first to see if this was an ambush. Miguel ran up the stairs and was in his apartment before Lois could catch up with him. “Ah, youth,” she thought wistfully, “Once upon a time I *walked* that fast.”

Pushing that thought aside upon reaching apartment 3J, she knocked on the door. Within, she heard a muttered curse and the sound of locks being turned. The door swung open and a grayish fog of cigarette smoke rolled out in front of her. A hard-edged, plump woman in her late thirties stood before her wearing black sweats, with grubby blond hair that looked like it hadn’t been combed in a week and a mangled cigarette hanging out of her mouth. The creature took out the foul-smelling cancer stick and bellowed, “Get away from me! Every since that fool Todd shot his mouth off to Kent, *my* life has been in the toilet!”

Undaunted, Lois snapped back, “Miss Nygaard, it wasn’t my partner’s fault that your identity was discovered. Right now, we are trying to find out who alerted your former employers...”

The other woman hissed something low and nasty at Lois and barked, “I don’t have anything to say to anybody. Right now, I’m facing a federal rap. Look, lady, if Todd hadn’t said anything, I would be in the clear – with plenty of money to spare! On a tropical island sucking up drinks with tiny umbrellas in ‘em! Now beat it, before I call the cops and we can both be in front of the grand jury!” With that, she slammed the door with all her strength. The loud sound reverberated throughout the building.

“Whew,” Lois whispered to herself as she walked downstairs. “Ms. Nygaard was not only unkempt, but from the smell of whiskey on her breath, drunk on top of everything else. Imagine, telling me she really *is* guilty of illegal trading. Since that’s the case, she would be a lousy person to use in building our story.”

Forty-five minutes later, Lois was behind her desk working on another story. So far, her efforts to locate Dennis Shaw had been futile. He had neither answered his phone nor been at home. So, for the time being, that part of her hunt had to be put on hold. It was important for her to continue working as otherwise she would go out of her mind with worry. Where was Clark? She hadn’t heard from him since the suspension. Maybe Pete Ross knew what had happened to him. As she reached over to dial, her phone rang.

Rats! *Now* she gets a phone call? Picking up the receiver, she said crisply, “City Desk, Lois Lane speaking.”

A familiar rumbling voice came over the line, “Well, hello, Miss Lane. Are you holding down the fort?”

Happiness sprinted through her heart and she wanted to cheer, but instead kept her voice down and whispered, “Where have you been, Kansas? I tried to call you a couple of days ago when Superman was at my place? He’s going to help us. By the way, why didn’t you tell me you knew him? Since then, I’ve found out some things that will be of interest to you. We have to get together...”

On the other end of the line, Clark could not keep from smiling. How he missed her take-no-prisoners attitude!

“That’s great, Lois! Let’s meet at Café Americana tonight after you get off work. We can compare notes.”

“Perfect,” she said, trying hard to convey a professional attitude while talking to her former partner, whom she was fonder of than she was willing to admit.

“Hey, Lois?”

“Yes?”

At that moment Stacy ran over and said, “Get off the phone! This is important! We gotta talk in the conference room!”

Lois looked up and stared at the young woman. She was fairly jumping up and down with excitement. “Can’t this wait?”

“No!”

“All right! I’ll meet you in the conference room.” Returning to her phone conversation she said, “Sorry about that. We can talk later. Uncle Mike and especially Aunt Rita would like to see you again.”

“Fine, see you soon.”

They ended the conversation and Lois got up and headed for the conference room. “This had better be good,” she mumbled.

Unbeknown to her, Peggy Becker had been standing not too far away, listening in on the conversation. She reached over and picked up her phone.

Part Twenty-Three

“Monsieur Daae, the *Coq au Riesling* is prepared. All you need do is warm it when your wife returns.”

“*Merci, Cozette, et bonsoir.*”

Only minutes after the cook departed, a gentle knock was heard on the heavy red oak door of the fashionably appointed townhouse of Lana and Gregory Daae.

“*Entrez,*” Daae called out, thinking it was Cozette who might have forgotten something. He walked to the door, and ignoring the security panel, opened it. Arianna Luthor stood before him wearing a salmon-colored pantsuit and a very contented expression on her face.

“*Mon dieu!*” he muttered darkly.

Ignoring his remark, she walked past him, trailing a cloud of Chanel No. 5 perfume and said, “Don’t concern yourself, Gregory, this is a business meeting... for the most part. After all, I can’t very well be seen at DMG, now can I?”

“So, you come to my home?” His tone was cool, but there was an edge to his words.

She sniffed the air with appreciation. “Ah, Cozette has not lost her touch.” She turned, and with a false smile, said, “Yes, it is the perfect place for us to meet. So *much* has happened since the last time I was here,” she said, looking pointedly at his gold wedding band.

She spoke in a flippant tone that annoyed him. The last thing he needed right now was for Lana to arrive home early and demand to know what Lex’s wife was doing here. The first months of their marriage had been an adjustment, but it was a pleasant adjustment, even surprisingly so. The untimely arrival of his former lover would disturb that peace, and he realized that was something he preferred to avoid.

Arianna entered the living room and noticed several changes in the décor. Most notably, the bar had been replaced with a

handsome maple wood bookcase filled with well-thumbed volumes on Roman and French history and archaeology. One shelf was reserved for two photographs in expensive, carved wooden frames, both of Gregory and Lana. In one, they were standing in front of an antique blue fountain, with Lana wearing a knee-length lacy white dress and clutching a simple bouquet of roses. It must have been taken in Zurich on the day of their wedding. Another was taken with Gregory wearing a classically-tailored black tuxedo and Lana in her sheath wedding gown, clearly photographed at the Lexor on the day of their reaffirmation ceremony.

In both pictures the bride and groom radiated happiness. Their blissful expressions were like a knife in her heart, which confirmed what her mind had known all along. Any thought or plan she devised to end this marriage was doomed to failure.

She continued speaking, but not in the haughty manner with which she had begun. “I see Lana has made some much-needed updates, and this is no longer the home of a confirmed bachelor. Nonetheless, I am so glad to see the red leather couch is still here.” So saying, she walked over and gracefully sat down upon it.

Daae’s cold blue eyes, behind the steel wire frames of his glasses, narrowed suspiciously as they followed her, and he said, “Do not get comfortable. State your business. I would assume Jasper is still providing weekly updates on the number of LexCorp stock shares he has purchased?”

Arianna studied his face and said, “Yes, the dear man has been very prompt in sending over those reports. He always makes certain neither Lex nor Nigel is around to intercept them. At the current rate you – or rather DMG – will own fifty-four percent of LexCorp in a few short weeks. Congratulations. Our goal is getting near.”

The faintest hint of a smile played over his thin lips, “True, DMG’s takeover of LexCorp would have happened, but not as quickly without your ‘cooperation’. Mr. Templar has also been a considerable... asset.

“That is exactly the reason why I am here: to discuss the second half of my payment.”

Daae sat on the chair opposite the couch. “Oh? As far as I know you have not received the first half.”

“I have been mulling over what would hurt him the most and serve me best.” She pulled off one of her gold teardrop earrings and began rubbing it between her hands. Gregory remembered that this was a nervous habit, and one she had attempted to control, but with limited success. “Of all of the companies and corporations Lex has under his control, none are as significant to him as LNN. Once he realizes LexCorp is no longer his, I want to inform him that I own the controlling interest in LNN.”

“Plunge the jagged dagger up to the hilt and then twist?” He wanted to add ‘Lady Macbeth’, but did not dare.

Her large brown eyes crackled with excitement and she said, “Exactly.”

With a dry chuckle, he responded, “My dear, it is a miracle Mindy Church survived your wrath.”

The beautiful face became cold and rigid, her small hand forming into a tight fist around the earring, “That brainless strumpet did *everything* in her power to humiliate me. If she wishes to continue breathing, returning to the state of New Troy would not be in her best interest.” Arianna took a moment to compose herself and then continued, “So, do we have an agreement?”

Daae nodded. She could have the controlling interest of LNN, but he would be the power behind the woman.

“Excellent. I want that in writing.” She reached into her bag and produced a thick sheaf of papers.

Daae cocked an eyebrow, but again controlled his expression and said, “You don’t trust me?”

She smirked. “No, of course not. This little transaction shall

be nice and legal. I have not survived five years of marriage to Lex without learning a thing or two.”

Without saying a word, Daae took the papers and studied them carefully. “A contract of this complexity cannot be just signed and handed over to you. Who wrote up this agreement? The last thing we need is for our ‘arrangement’ to become common knowledge – the legal complications could lead to federal prison... for you.”

She ignored his comment and said, “Don’t worry; Sheldon knows how to keep his mouth shut.”

“Ah, Bender, that sniveling maggot gives lawyers a bad name. Nonetheless, allow me to go over these papers in detail. If they meet with *my* approval, and only then, I shall sign them.”

Arianna stood up, signaling the meeting was coming to an end. “Very well, but that is my price for brokering this deal.” She walked over to him, as she had done months before, but this time not with the stride of a seductress – but rather as if she was gathering strength for some momentous exertion, then said, “One last thing..”

Daae quickly looked at the clock over the mantelpiece; Lana would be home any minute. “Yes?” he said with more than a hint of impatience in his voice.

“I am sorry, all those years ago, for causing you pain. As a person in my profession, it is my job to look beyond the façade to the person beneath. Anyone can see how much Lana means to you. Never in the future shall I try to meddle in your relationship with her. If I hadn’t been so thoughtless and materialistic, this could have been my home rather than hers. *Bon après-midi*, dear Gregory.” With that she turned, posture erect, head held firm and high like a goddess, and exited the house.

Stunned, he watched as she stepped into her limo, closed the door and drove away without a single backward glance.

“*Au revoir, ma chérie*,” he whispered, certain that a once-joyous element of his life had finally come to an end.

Ten minutes later, Lana entered the house. She called out, “Gregory! I’m home! Something smells delicious! Thank goodness, because I am ravenous. Cozette is worth every penny we pay her!”

Her husband appeared in the foyer, a welcoming smile on his thin lips. “*Bonsoir, leibling*. Dinner will be served in a minute. Please, join me in a glass of wine?” He handed her a chilled glass of white zinfandel.

Gratefully, Lana took the glass and sat down on the couch, sipping the delicate wine and allowing the cares of the workday to fade into the background. Suddenly her nose detected a scent of perfume, one she knew was neither hers nor Cozette’s. Gradually she remembered on whom and when she had last smelled that scent, during a private dinner at the Luthor’s penthouse. She sat up straight and said, “Gregory, which of our acquaintances was here this afternoon who wears *Chanel No. 5*?”

Lois weaved around the tables and patrons of *Café Americana*’s dinner hour. The insistent grumbling of her stomach was a signal that could not be ignored. She was famished but filed the thought away when she saw Clark’s smiling, handsome face. He was sitting at a table closer to the back, obviously not eager to have people see him with Lois, since the legal talent on both sides of the case might think they were in collusion. She couldn’t care less about that. How were they going to prove his innocence if they didn’t work together on this?

Lois came over, barely giving him a chance to speak before she started babbling, “Clark, it is so good to see you! Did you get a job? If you did, it better be a temporary one! Now, tell me, where have you been? Back home visiting Uncle Wayne?”

He stood to greet her, gave her a hug, and when they sat down, he answered, “Yeah, it would have been great, but since I’m on suspension, the old wallet can’t handle the cost of a round-trip

plane ticket to Kansas right now.” He winced, internally, at the mild deception. He had visited Uncle Wayne twice since his abrupt departure from the *Daily Planet*. If he could not have gotten there without the gift of flight, it would have been foolish to strain his funds.

Remembering her friend’s situation, Lois flushed slightly, mumbling, “Sorry, I forgot.”

Before Clark could answer, a familiar voice piped up. “Clark,” Mike Lane said, “My niece told me to expect you. It’s been a while since you and your friends were here. What are you eating? I know Lois is going to have a Cobb salad.”

“A cheeseburger with steak fries would be great, Mr. Lane.”

Nodding, he said, “Yeah, I knew that’s what the order would be... don’t even have to write it down. You need to slow down eating this kind of food all the time. It’ll catch up with you one of these days!”

Clark’s face colored, but wisely he said nothing.

“Thanks, Uncle Mike, he needs to be reminded about his terribly unhealthy eating habits at least once a day. Where’s Aunt Rita?” Lois asked, looking for her favorite aunt.

“Oh, someone is moving into the old consignment store across the street. Her name is Grace Chen, and she’s opening up a yarn shop, which she’s calling *Rhapsody Knits*. Rita went over to drop off a basket of baked goods and some chai tea for Grace and her husband.”

Lois shook her head in wonder, her long brown hair moving gently over her shoulders, “She’s amazing, always thinking about others.”

“Yeah, that she is. Get comfortable; I should be back in a few minutes with your orders.”

Mike hurried away to fill their orders. Lois turned to her companion and said, “So, you come here often?”

Her question was rewarded with one of Clark’s heartbreakingly beautiful smiles. Lois thought to herself how much she missed seeing that each day in the newsroom. “Actually, yeah, Pete, Skip and I used to come here on Friday nights for dinner before heading out to see a game. The food’s great and your uncle and aunt treat their regulars like family.”

“For a guy who cooks as well as you do, that’s a compliment.” Lois was suddenly nervous. This felt more like a date than getting together with her former partner... no, *partner*. From the sounds of it, Clark needed to find work; unemployment definitely could not be covering all of his expenses. Metropolis had one of the highest costs of living in the state of New Troy. But with the information Stacy and Jack had managed to dig up, that situation might change very soon. “Listen, Clark, if you need any money, I can loan you some until you get back to the bullpen.”

Touched that she would make such an offer, yet embarrassed that she felt the funds were necessary, Clark responded kindly, “Hey, things aren’t that bad! It’s only been a few days. Everything will be OK. Now, wasn’t there something about note comparing we had to do?”

Lois breathed a mental sigh of relief – she needed him to get back to the bullpen – and dived into her briefcase to pull out a manila file. Heedless of the carefully arranged glasses and silverware, she opened it and yanked out a few pages. “Stacy and Jack earned their pay this week! See, this is a list of companies owned by DMG. Some of them are real companies while others are shells. This one,” Lois pointed to a spreadsheet on the bottom of the second page, “You see? TresAx is a company that is owned by Sterling Securities which is a shell company for...”

“DMG!” Clark said in surprise.

Pleasure lit up her brown eyes, “Exactly! Gregory Daae found out about your sources after Ralph hacked into your computer and used that information to get all of you fired. I’ll bet Guerin really was doing all that illegal tax stuff, but somehow found a way to bury the information.”

“If Stacy and Jack can find out about this, so can that Kell guy.”

Lois’ face lit up. This is why she had gotten into investigative reporting: to bring the truth into the open. “That’s not all I discovered. Sylvia Nygaard is an alcoholic and she’s guilty of everything from embezzling funds to lying to you about what was going on in her department. She threw herself in with Sylvester and his partner thinking if she turned state’s evidence all her other crimes would be forgiven.”

Never one to be gleeful about the downfall of a person’s life, Clark shook his head sadly, “Sorry to hear that.”

His partner nodded in agreement. “Yeah, you three have to distance yourselves from her. She is bound to taint your case. We need access to some of TresAx’s files. Any good lawyer would throw out the fact that TresAx is owned by DMG. Let’s face it, that’s a pretty thin line.”

Clark suddenly became very still. His brown eyes, normally so honest and trusting, were hurt and sorely troubled. The pain reached deep inside, and when he spoke the attempt to hide the bitterness failed. “Not as thin as you might think. Daae is doing his best to discredit me; after all, I did date his wife. I was even planning on asking...”

His partner broke in and particularly growled, “No. Don’t you get it, Clark? He’s doing this to get at us!”

“Maybe,” Clark said, “But I don’t think so. Although there was someone there on the day Todd was fired, Jasper Templar...”

Her brows knitted in concentration, “Templar? Why does that name sound oddly familiar? Maybe I should have Stacy and Jack do a little research on him, and see what over lizards slither out from under that rock.”

“No! Don’t get them involved. Templar is dangerous and plays for keeps.”

Lois was surprised by the anger and fear in Clark’s voice. She was about to question him when a waiter set first one plate, then another, on the table in front of them.

“Arianna Carlin-Luthor.” Lana blinked in surprise. She suspected as much, but to face the reality was unsettling. They were sitting on the red couch, drinking the zinfandel and talking.

“But ... why would she be here? Did she have some papers to give you from her husband?”

A humorless laugh which sounded more like a bark erupted from Gregory. “For all of Lex Luthor’s faults, he would *never* ask his wife to act as a messenger regarding LexCorp business matters.” Gregory stared into his wine and for a moment seemed to have shut out his wife’s obvious concerns. He weighed matters and decided a half-truth was better than drawing her irrevocably into his ‘murkier’ business affairs.

“Arianna and I had a personal *entreprise* to discuss.”

His wife’s eyes widened, thinking about the French word. “What sort of *entreprise* did she have to discuss that could not take place in your office?”

Taking Lana’s small hands in his own, he began to rub them slowly, as if the action would smooth out the next words. He said gently, “*Cheri*, she and I were once *amoureux*.”

“Lovers? Once?” Lana said softly.

“*Oui*, it was a long time ago. She chose her husband over me. Sweet Lana, there is nothing to fear. Arianna has known for many years that my affections... my heart, is no longer hers. Now my love and tender affections are only for my wife.” With those words he released her hands, stood and walked in front of the shelf which held their wedding pictures.

The expression on his face was one of pain and deep regret, and she wondered if he was regretting losing Arianna and being married to her. Lana sat on the couch, the wineglass in her hand forgotten. Marrying Gregory so quickly was mad, even impetuous, but her desire for the good things in life had outweighed any sense

of responsibility. Clark, old friends, and yes, even her parents had silently questioned the wisdom of marrying a stranger. But their fears and concerns were unfounded. Over the past few months, she had come to genuinely rely upon Gregory and their relationship was gradually shifting from one of convenience to one of deep fondness ... perchance bordering upon love.

There was more at work here than her providing him with an heir, and his funding of an archeological dig.

Now that relationship was facing its first test of fidelity.

She sighed and responded, "Trusting you is simple, Gregory, but not her. Promise me we shall limit our contact with the Luthors in the future?"

His cool blue eyes, normally devoid of emotion, sparked something cool, yet amusing, as if he was concealing a private joke. "Cheri, I can promise you that soon, very soon, before we return to Zurich, the Luthors shall no longer be a problem."

A long breath escaped from the depths of her lungs that she did not realize she was holding in. Carefully, Lana put down the now-empty wineglass, stood up, walked over to her husband and gently wrapped him in her arms.

Once the waiter had placed the food before them and departed, Lois raised the question, "Who is this man Templar and why are you so afraid of him?"

Caught off guard by the directness of her question, Clark fired back a little too quickly, "Afraid? What makes you think that?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe because the simple mention of his name has your eyes darting about the room like an escaped felon! Honestly, Kansas, you're studying every diner – like we were being watched!"

Clark lowered his voice and said in a tone that brooked no argument, "Jasper Templar *is* a dangerous man. What's worse is he's a dangerous man who is a close associate of Gregory Daae. That alone should make us cautious. Stacy and Jack are just kids who don't need to be in his sights."

Although somewhat taken aback by Clark's intensity, his partner accepted it. Besides, he was right. Since this man worked with Daae... who knew just what he was capable of? "Look, Jack and Stacy won't step outside their cubicles to run a search on Templar. They know how to track somebody down without being detected via computer. They want you back at the newsroom as much as I do. So this isn't just about you. We are all in this together! Daae will do anything to bring us and the *Daily Planet* down! After researching his methods for years it's painfully obvious his perfectly-manicured hands are all over this! Manipulation of the media to further his ends is a Daae trademark."

The two stared at each other. They were working together again. Lane and Kent against the bad guys, just as it should be. Clark smiled; how he missed this! "Okay, so where do we go from here?"

"First up: Ralph Lombard. We catch him handing over my bogus files to whoever is handling him."

"But I thought he was in jail?" Clark said in surprise.

"No, Perry was adamant about catching him in the act. Proof, and cold hard facts that'll stand up in court, no matter what tricks that slick lawyer Sebastian what's-his-name tries to pull. Most important of all: we need to clear your name."

The noise of the restaurant, and even her words, died away as Clark studied the beautiful woman sitting before him. The passionate energy of her convictions ignited a brilliant flame from within her. How he wished that energy – that passion – was directed toward him. Even though their professional relationship had been shattered by outside forces, Lois Lane was battling to regain that partnership. He resolved that as soon as this nightmare came to an end, he would talk to her as he had never talked to a

woman before...

"Kansas! Hey, Kansas, are you listening to me?"

"What?! Oh, of course, Lois... Perry. Cold hard facts."

She gave him an odd look, then continued. "Yeah, like I said, we covered our bases. Jack caught him on camera going through my computer. Ken knows exactly what files were removed, and Henderson got a court order to have Ralph's phone at work bugged. You should have seen how fast James Olsen signed the paperwork to have all that done! Boy, I tell you, he was ready to go down there and fire that sewer rat personally! I think his conscience is bothering him about the way he had you suspended so quickly."

"Hopefully this will be done soon so I can get back to work. Maybe the others can get on with their lives as well," he said sadly.

Noticing his downcast look, Lois decided to change the subject. With a mischievous smirk, she said, "You know, it was fun to have Superman come over and ask me to help."

Clark caught the look and said nervously, "Do... do you like him?"

Catching a hint of jealousy, Lois countered with, "Uh, no, but I thought it was sweet of him to want to help. He's a good friend, Clark, to you, and maybe in the future – even for me. Right now, with this investigation, we need all the help – super-powered and otherwise – that we can get."

Across the street, a man wearing a Metros baseball cap pulled low over his face and a woman with long blonde hair and glasses observed them with eagerness. They turned to each other and smiled.

The woman said wistfully, "Watching them brings back so many memories."

"Yeah, honey, it does. Let's hope he doesn't make the same mistakes."

He could sense the woman beside him was rolling her eyes in exasperation and he could not help but smile.

Part Twenty-Four

The sharp clicking sound of steel handcuffs locking into place around her slim wrists caused sweat to erupt on her forehead and she began to tremble unceasingly. The cold metal felt both brittle and damning simultaneously.

A fresh-faced young police officer, one of Metropolis' finest, led her to his black and white patrol car. Actually blushing, the youngster refused to look at her, too shame-faced to see a famous newspaper's living icon's reputation wholly destroyed. Gingerly, he helped her into the backseat, taking pains that her head would not hit the vehicle's side. The sour smell of the car twisted up her nose like a snake and burrowed into her sinuses. Clearly it had been a while since the unit had been thoroughly cleaned.

With an unladylike grunt, she slid over cheap blue and grey automobile upholstery to make room for her partner, who was being pushed unceremoniously into the car. Apparently, the young officer's partner did not care who was wearing his handcuffs and what his position in the city had been mere minutes before. In the veteran cop's mind, her partner was another white-collar criminal, caught with his greedy fingers in the corporate cookie jar.

Outside, a frittering crowd of media locusts had trailed after them out of the building and now formed a semi-circle around the squad car. Several of them fired off questions, while photographers stuck lenses against the window of the patrol car, demanding the occupants turn to face them. Among the horde of reporters, both print and television, she saw Peggy Becker, furiously writing with a red pencil stub into a dirty tan-colored notebook, no doubt trying to get all the details of their arrest. Not that it mattered, since nine times out of ten the lazy woman never did any research and messed up the facts. It was a miracle the

Daily Planet hadn't been sued because of her ineptitude.

She growled to her partner in a pique of anger, "What's that tenth-rate, off-the-rack excuse for a gossip columnist doing? They should have at least sent a seasoned professional like Catherine Grant to get the story. She'd be unbiased and gets the facts straight!"

Beyond the cluster of hungry media were their co-workers. Among them were shocked friends, who found it impossible to believe what was taking place.

How had this happened? She should be right there at the head of the pack, asking intrusive questions. Not the one being marched off to jail.

The man by her side ignored the comment and the noisy throng, and as the car pulled away from their former place of employment, he continued staring through the dirty window, as if the passing cityscape was the universe's center. Of course, he didn't have to worry, she mused, since he had access to resources no one was aware of. It was a sure bet that once bail was made, he would be on the other side of the Earth, setting up a new identity.

A thought stuck in her mind like a hangnail caught up in a pair of new silk stockings: would he take her with him?

The minutes, like the traffic, crawled by, and she thought that if they did not reach the precinct soon, the dank smell of sweat mixed with other unpleasant odors would force her to vomit all over the floor, adding just that much more to the existing stench.

Suddenly they turned the corner, and she never thought the sight of Inspector Henderson's precinct would fill her with profound relief and heart wrenching dread. How could she face the laconic police officer?

Just then, the object of her thoughts came into view. Standing on the steps was Henderson, his long dour face an unreadable mask. When the vehicle rolled to a stop, incredibly, his face broke into a smile, the likes of which she had never seen. Then he did something even stranger: he *skipped* down the wide dingy grey concrete steps. The man was actually giddy with anticipation! When he reached the car he grabbed the handle and pulled. Her partner turned his body and shoved his manacled wrists in the cop's face. "Get these off!" he growled.

Without saying a word, Henderson produced a key and unlocked the steel impediments. Her partner exited the backseat and turned to look at her shocked expression. He smiled and stood up, and she watched him reach into his jacket pocket and pull out one of his expensive cigars. Preston Carpenter said, with triumphant glee, "There she is, Inspector, all ready to become the latest 'guest' of New Troy's penal system."

The veteran police officer pulled her out of the car, and none too gently, hauled her up the steps, the handcuffs cutting into her flesh. The younger policeman trailed behind. She turned to speak and heard her *ex*-boyfriend and Henderson talk like they were lifelong friends.

Henderson grinned like a shark, "With your cooperation, her arraignment, trial and conviction will be a piece of cake!"

Preston shrugged his shoulders, made broader by the skills of an excellent tailor, "Thanks! After all, I had to report her, ah... financial indiscretions with DMG and Arianna Luthor's tax fraud."

The dark animal sound that clawed up from the pit of her stomach and raced up her throat to burst free from her lips was indescribable.

"I DON'T WANT TO GO TO JAIL!!!"

She jerked upright in one motion screaming, her arms and legs tangled in sweat-soaked Egyptian cotton sheets.

"Oh, God! This can't be real! " Linda King fell back into her pillow, but instead of it being a fluffy comfort, it was just as wet as the sheets.

The dream was all too real. Yes, she and Preston had been together for a few years, but throwing her to the wolves to save himself - could he do something that appalling to her? He had told

her many times he was a survivor.

Yet, so was she.

Glancing at the clock, she saw it said 2:30 am. Trying to get any rest after that nightmare was out of the question. She got up and put on a pot of coffee. Only her favorite, the expensive Sumatra coffee best known for its smooth chocolate flavor with earthy undertones, would do to shake her into complete wakefulness. This was the third nightmare about Templar this week. Obviously, her subconscious mind was telling her no good would come from this association. She distrusted Daae, hated his insufferable arrogance and underhanded business tactics, but it was business after all. Show her one business titan who did not have a skeleton or two in their closet! Yet the thing that was most important of all: never had the sense of pure evil emanated from Daae in the way it did from Templar. When he spoke to her over the phone, she sensed him actually thriving off her intense discomfort and gnawing fear.

After her phone call with Templar, Linda had come to the frightening realization that working with him was not just exchanging one task master for another; it was placing their very lives in grave danger. They needed leverage. Just in case Templar turned on them.

Many of the things they had done for Daae had been on the edge of breaking the law. But Templar was different. All of these uncertainties had arisen to the surface from the moment Jasper Templar had entered Preston's office with a deal: a deal which should have freed them from doing Daae's bidding. Preston had jumped at the opportunity, especially since he revealed Daae actually owned not only the *Metropolis Star*, but through a series of shell companies owned stock in a several of Preston's other businesses as well.

Working for a man like that meant trouble. It was time for her to make other arrangements.

The prospect of leaving the city was not a concern; there really was no reason to remain. Truth be told, working for another newspaper here lacked any appeal. Especially since the only one that had a modicum of attraction was the *Daily Planet* which, unfortunately, was Lois Lane's power base.

Preston? In the recent past she thought he might have been planning to propose. Unfortunately, after three years of patient waiting, she was no closer to being Mrs. Carpenter now than when they had first started seeing each other.

Having inside information about certain stocks, she had very cautiously made a number of discreet investments. She had contacted a real estate broker and put her condo on the market. It was time to cash out and move on. Possibly move to Seattle and write a screenplay about the duplicity of the newspaper publishing business?

She was determined to unearth more about Templar. She had put her hard-won skills as an investigative reporter to work. Long before coming to the work for the *Metropolis Star*, she had cut her teeth on investigating all manner of crimes and persons, doing so in Florida, Los Angeles, and Washington D.C.

Some of her sources were deep within the intelligence community, some were other reporters willing to trade on information, and others were denizens of the underworld, too shady to ever be mentioned in any of her stories. Most of them owed her favors; time to call them in.

Jasper Templar was a snake and someone like him had to have stepped on a lot of toes on the way up. One or more of those persons was bound to have dirt on him: dirt they might want to see used against him for revenge. As the coffee flowed over her tongue, a mental list of the most discreet professional resources formed. Any reporter worth their salt had a carefully-guarded list of snitches and confidential informants, and Linda was no different, except certain people she needed to contact were not part of her usual list. She had a spreadsheet of names only to be

reached for emergencies. In fact, one of the names on the list was her contact at LNN – Claude Debarre was the one who had helped her gain information, on short notice, on all the key players at the news station.

There was no point in trying to go back to bed. Linda King picked up her steaming mug of freshly brewed Sumatra coffee, entered the home office, fired up the computer and got to work.

For the next two weeks, from the safety of outside pay phones, trendy coffee houses and out-of-the-way diners around the city, Linda dialed, made connections, bribed, bullied, cajoled, and tenaciously gathered scraps of intel on Jasper Templar. Finally, there was enough information against him that she intended to hand all of it over to Daae. He had every right to recognize that his empire was about to be legally stolen from him. True, she was betraying Preston, but they needed to get back into the Swiss businessman's good grace and work out a deal. Sadly, with each new bit of negative intelligence her sources provided about Templar, she was beginning to realize that was impossible.

In the course of her investigation, she uncovered a single piece of information that Lois Lane might give all of her Kerth awards for, a handy bargaining chip should she ever need it. The further she dug, the more one rather unsettling fact kept surfacing. Prior to eight years ago, nobody had ever even heard of Jasper Templar.

No tax records. No apartment rentals. No mortgages or credit card purchases. There weren't even dental records - it was as if the man had materialized from out of thin air!

Her government contacts could not locate a shred of information about him beyond that time either; witness protection was out of the question as well. The program couldn't permit a participant to hold a high-profile position that could lead to intense public scrutiny.

She was still in the midst of this thorny problem one late afternoon and Linda was in *Figaro's* Pharmacy several blocks from her condo. A drugstore built in the early 1920s, *Figaro's* was a throwback to the days when the local pharmacy did more than just dispense over-priced drugs. Children would rush to a candy counter filled with jellybeans, candy corn, peppermint sticks and other treats. Enticing games, wooden train sets, doll furniture, books and toys were displayed on wooden shelves that called to the little ones visiting the shops with indulgent parents.

It had a warm neighborhood appeal and charm that the ubiquitous coffee shops frequented by the 'twentysomething' crowd lacked. Clerks behind the massive white marble lunch counter served the best hot pastrami sandwiches, root beer floats and ice cream sodas in the city – for a price that could not be beat. While writing up story notes Linda sat in a comfortable wooden booth near a wall of payphones. Those payphones were used frequently so tracing her calls to sources both legal and illegal was nearly impossible.

The old-time, low-tech establishment was perfect for this kind of backstreet investigative work. Once, after meeting with a source for a story, an old man wearing a thirties style newspaper boy cap sat down at her booth. He introduced himself as Slip Muldoon, a 'retired' thug who used to run booze during prohibition.

Intrigued by the old man, she sat and listened to him spin tales about that long ago time in Metropolis history, when bootleggers and rumrunners were the order of the day. Hobbs Bay was a favorite place for derelict ships to bring in illegal booze from all over the world. Speakeasies sprang up and became hidden houses of spirits and mingling, giving the public the opportunity to drink, sometimes eat, and maybe dance. She was particularly intrigued by stories about legendary nightclub owner and mobster Pino 'Pretty Boy' Dragonetti, who frequented *Figaro's* for his banana splits. She could imagine the nattily turned out gangster

sitting in a back booth with a glamorous moll-of-the-week by his side.

Later that evening she did a little research on Mr. Muldoon, and he was indeed an interesting character from the earlier part of the century. Sadly, only days after their encounter, the old man had died, taking the last vestiges of Metropolis' colorful prohibition era with him.

Turning her mind back to the task at hand, Linda called one of her best sources in the NSA, a man known only as 'Mundy'. He confirmed her suspicions: Templar was not the false identity of a deep cover operative.

"Ms. King," Mundy went on, "Whoever created this cover did a job that was good enough to survive a basic background check, but sadly, he's not one of ours. Let us know what you find on him. He might be the deep cover mole of an unfriendly power."

Unfriendly power? She thought, then said, "Mundy, I doubt that. No espionage agent in their right mind could act like him."

The NSA man shot back, "Ms. King, have you ever heard of the phrase, 'hide in plain sight'?"

Nodding to herself, she muttered, "I see what you mean. Thanks, Mundy."

She hung up the phone, gathered up her purse and dropped the files in a large leather bag, and then departed the pharmacy. As she walked home through the quiet streets, a young mother with her little girl walked past. Her curly blonde hair bouncing, the child was happily babbling about her day at school. Linda looked on at the pair and wondered how anyone could put up with the insistent, noisy chatter of a kid. She wanted them to be out of her sight.

A long, black limousine pulled up beside her, like a snake circling its prey. The window rolled down and Jasper Templar called to her, "Oh, Miss King! Good evening! I understand you have been making a number of enquiries about me?"

Startled by both the voice and the statement, Linda nearly stumbled. But quickly she steadied herself and glanced over to the man in the vehicle and said, "Enquiries? What enquiries?"

Jasper snorted and fired back, "You know very well what enquiries, Miss King, about who I am and why there are no records going back further than eight years. Join me, and I will be happy to answer all your questions."

Linda searched his face and noted the malevolent gleam in his eyes. Frightened, she took a step backwards. Working desperately to keep the apprehension out of her voice, she said, "Can... can we talk another time? I really must be going."

He scolded her as if she were a mischievous child caught in a fib. "Now, here I am ready to answer your questions, and you want to leave me alone? How rude! Perhaps my little friend can convince you - especially after seeing that poor mother grieving over the death of her defenseless, innocent child." He produced a wicked-looking gun, all black with a black tube, presumably a silencer, attached to the end of the barrel, and pointed it at the unsuspecting pair. Suddenly the red dot of a laser sight appeared in the middle of the child's back. Linda could see it, but she was sure that the mother could not because of the angles involved.

"No!" Linda ran up to the car and after Templar opened the door, stepped inside. The opulently appointed automobile with its polished leather and gleaming chrome fittings seemed unreal after the vicious threat he had just made. The smell of expensive leather would normally have been very soothing, but the scent only made her want to gag. Like the smell of the squad car in her nightmare.

Templar took her expression as one of fear rather than revulsion. He said haughtily. "Good. Very good. Now we can have a pleasant and hopefully productive chat."

His passenger watched him, the revulsion now giving way to fear in her green eyes. Templar was deriving an obscene kind of pleasure from her discomfort, and if she were not so frightened it would have filled her with disgust. He kept the gun in his hand,

and ignoring her, kept an eye on the mother and her child, silently reminding Linda that if she attempted to escape, the little girl's life would be forfeit.

Linda could not help but think this lavishly appointed vehicle was the exact opposite of the one in her nightmare and the thought made her tremble. But she was an investigative reporter, and now that her subject knew her plans, it was time to get him talking.

Nervousness welled inside her throat like a piece of stale bread, but taking a quick swallow, she asked, "How... how did you know I was investigating you?"

Templar smiled with infuriating smugness, "Actually, I didn't, until one of your sources came to me."

She couldn't imagine that one of her regular contacts would speak to Templar. Surely, they had no idea she and Preston had anything to do with him? It had to have been one of the denizens of Suicide Slum.

Surprised, she blinked and said, "Since when does somebody from the streets get involved with a powerful corporate entity like yourself?" She said this with a weak, sickly smile in an attempt to be charming.

"Tsk, tsk, my dear, you really must expand your vision, yet at the same time be extremely cautious. Lowlifes come in all shapes, sizes, and *suits*. No one from the streets: it was your contact at LNN - how deliciously ironic that he's betrayed not only that annoying Lois Lane, but yourself as well. He may be a rat, but he's my kind of rat."

"Claude? Claude Debarre?" Before Linda could control herself, she sputtered angrily, "He's my best source at LNN!"

"Yes, well, sadly that is over. Now he's *mine*. Apparently, the poor fellow has some gambling debts that required an immediate infusion of cash." He muttered almost to himself, "There seems to be a rash of that lately. Otherwise, a gentleman by the unlikely name of 'Kneecap' would be coming around for a visit. Mr. Debarre is aware of the RoyalPoint arrangement and as such knows how important you and your dear Preston are to that deal."

"Me? How could I be important to taking over DMG and LexCorp?" she asked, puzzled.

"Hmmm, quite right, allow me to amend that, *Preston* is important - at least for the time being. His girlfriend/reporter Linda King is merely along for the ride. But your delectable presence makes Preston happy, and with him happy, he makes us happy. Just a wonderful circle of life... don't you agree?"

Linda was frightened, but that fear was now heavily infused with a good dose of anger. Hot blood rushed to her cheeks and she knew if her captor had not been holding a gun, she would have struck him and escaped. Threatening her with the life of an innocent child was an act of cowardice. Templar considered her nothing more than a useful appendage of Preston's - one to keep alive in order for him to do their bidding. She needed to rein in the panic and control her anger. Templar was in control... temporarily.

No matter how frightened she might be, it was time to be a reporter. Carefully she removed paper and pen from her large leather bag and began taking notes. "So, what's this with the missing years of your life? Where did you come from? I got in this car because of the kid, now how about telling me?"

He laughed. The sound resembled a harsh bark. "What, and spoil my fun? No, sweet Linda, that is for me to know and for you to never find out." Suddenly he grabbed her hand so hard the bones and tendons seemed to crush together, and she dropped the pen and let out a yelp of pain. Leaning over, Templar's hot breath hit her face. "Listen, King, stay out of my affairs and just keep doing your job, writing stories for your boyfriend's miserable rag of a newspaper, and keeping him happy. That way *both* of you will be very wealthy when RoyalPoint takes over LexCorp and DMG." Contemptuously, he pushed her away as if she were a rag doll. The ugliness of his voice was now replaced with sweetness. "If you are a good girl, when this is all over, I'll let you fire Claude. It won't

be the first time he was kicked out of a job for back-stabbing a fellow reporter. If you don't behave, the alternative will be very, very unpleasant. Ah, here we are at your apartment building. Nice place. The view from the twentieth floor must be breathtaking... it would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience to see the view on the wrong side of the glass." The car moved smoothly up to the front of a modern building complete with doorman. As soon as it rolled to a halt, Templar grabbed the handle, flung open the door and snarled, "Get out!"

Linda did not have to be told twice. She gathered up her bags, with the incriminating files tucked safely inside. With no small amount of relief, she made a hasty and undignified exit. As soon as her feet touched the pavement, the car door closed with a bang and the vehicle rolled silently down the street. Templar's business with her was done having been properly disciplined, she was no longer of any relevance to him.

This time the couple who had watched Lois and Clark at Café Americana watched as Linda ran to her apartment.

"I don't like what just happened in that car. Did... did he really threaten an innocent child?" said the man as he pulled a baseball cap further down over his face.

"Nothing that monster does could ever surprise me. I wish *we* could do something," his female companion snapped.

"Remember what he said: 'no interference' until it's time. This is not our world."

"Yeah, that may be true, but I don't have to like it. You... you wouldn't let him shoot that poor little girl, whether or not this was our world?" she asked.

He grimaced. "No. I would have found a way to stop him."

Part Twenty-Five

Linda's heart was pounding as she ran towards her building. In the reflection of the glass and chrome doors, the red brake lights of Templar's limousine was still visible. The sight made her throat dry, and in a near panic, she hurried past the doorman to the elevators.

Minutes later, with the door to the apartment firmly locked and the state-of-the-art alarm system set, Linda felt only a tiny bit secure. In a vain attempt to soothe jagged nerves, her eyes looked around the condo. A metallic floral-patterned wallpaper provided a luxe backdrop to the cozy living room, which featured a silvery linen sectional and a classic writer's desk. Soft, gauzy sheers trimmed in gold satin separated the living and dining rooms, as well as diffused natural light from the large windows at the end of the rooms.

Still, this did little to make her feel better. Striding over to the desk, she picked up the phone and dialed Preston's number.

The phone rang several times before Preston finally picked up. In the background, she heard playing softly, the piano music of Keith Jarrett's *The Köln Concert*, recorded in Europe during the mid-seventies, a tour de force in live improvisation. No matter what anyone else might say about Preston, his taste in music was impeccable. A man's voice, obviously unhappy about being disturbed, growled, "Hello?"

"Pres, thank God you are at home! We've got to talk. Can you meet me at my place in a few minutes?"

There was no mistaking the note of tired irritation in his voice, "Linda, it's been a long, rotten day. Can't whatever this is wait?"

After what had just happened she had no intention of waiting until tomorrow. They were in this disastrous situation together. "No, it can't wait!" she shot back. "This has to be resolved, *tonight!*"

Thirty minutes later, Preston Carpenter paced angrily back and forth, wearing a deep tread into her thick, golden-hued oriental area rug. He was gesticulating wildly with an unlit cigar.

Linda gritted her teeth with relief that he had not pulled out a match and lit the foul-smelling thing. The last time he had spent the night, smoldering ashes flickered off a cigar which they both thought had been extinguished and had nearly started a fire.

Once she finished relating the encounter with Templar, he asked, “Are you insane? Why check into the man’s background, for pity’s sake? He’s trying to help free us from Daae’s control. Once that Swiss mogul is gone, we’re in the clear. The *Metropolis Star* – no, I – pay a good salary for investigations the public wants to read about!”

Linda, refusing to be taken lightly, answered back, “Did your IQ take a sudden nosedive in the past couple of weeks? Templar threatened to kill a helpless child if I didn’t get into the limousine with him! A child whose only crime was walking down the street with her mother.”

His blue eyes narrowed in quiet anger. As if to calm himself, a match appeared, and he lit the cigar, much to Linda’s extreme annoyance. “Look, baby, this can’t be right...”

“The hell it isn’t! Jasper Templar’s eyes were on that little girl, his finger was on the trigger, and the most sickening thing... he was *enjoying* watching me squirm, knowing if I didn’t do what he wanted, he’d kill her.”

Preston looked around for an ashtray. Not finding one, he put the used match onto a thick unlit candle. “So what do you want to do? Leave? Go back to that measly newspaper, the Miami something-or-other, writing obituaries?”

“At least it won’t be *my* obit or some blameless bystander’s!” She stopped, took a breath, stood up and walked over to Carpenter, then stood before him, arms stiffly at her sides, hands clenched and nails biting haplessly into her flesh. In a calmer voice, she said, “Daae has not threatened to kill us, Pres. At least with him we have a chance. Templar is the insane one... not me. I wish we had never agreed to print those phony stories that Daae wanted in the paper.”

He shook his head. The thought popped into her mind that the cigar, stuck firmly between paper-thin lips, made him seem like a terrier shaking a bone. “Baby, don’t complain; it netted a few prestigious award nominations for the paper and for you.”

Hearing those words, like a dull razor blade scraping over her eardrums, Linda knew she had lost him. Indeed, had she ever had him? Pres’ voice glided into her thoughts, “Linda, you’re an intelligent woman. Working with Templar is the right thing to do. Look, sleep on it. Everything will look better in the morning.” Taking a glance at the outrageously overpriced Swiss chronometer on his wrist, he sighed, then smirked. “How about I stay the night? We can make each other feel better?”

Suddenly repulsed at the thought of his touch, Linda responded, “No. No, I’m tired and want to be alone. Good night, Preston.”

He shrugged, dismissing her concerns and refusal as unimportant. “Okay, see you tomorrow.” With those words he departed, leaving behind an exasperated woman who was now neither his lover nor his ally. Linda stood at the window and watched as the sun set. Abruptly, she realized that her every muscle and bone were weary to the point of fainting. The polished façade of an accomplished journalist had been worn away, and all that remained was a lady out of options and scared witless of Templar’s next move.

Lois sat at her desk, sipping coffee and quietly fuming. It had been a week since her dinner with Clark, and the suspension continued to drag on. Ralph had either handed over the phony disk to his contact within DMG or was holding onto it. Whichever way, until they caught him with proof that Clark had been set up, her partner was *persona non grata* in the bullpen. The thought made her angry, and all the more so when Ralph exited the elevator – whistling, of all things!

“Look at him,” she mumbled darkly. “Not a care in the world, and my partner is reduced to writing for small trade magazines as a freelancer!” She turned back to her monitor, trying to appear busy.

Ralph called out, “Hey, Lane! It must be hard covering the City Desk all alone! A new partner, ready to go to work, is just what you need!”

It was a good thing for Lombard that he was so far away. Otherwise, she would have cheerfully punched him. Instead, she felt her hand inching towards the lovely African violet plant perched on the edge of her desk. It would make an excellent missile. She thought better of it and shifted her mind back to the monitor. At that moment, Lois’ phone rang shrilly. She looked at the noisy piece of machinery and sighed; how was she going to get any work done with all these interruptions? She reached over and practically tore the receiver from its cradle and said, “City Desk, Lois Lane speaking.”

The cultured, gentle voice of a middle-aged woman came over the line. “Hello, Miss Lane, we are not acquainted, but information of a sensitive nature has recently come into my possession and I want to share it with you.”

Lois’ ears perked up and she quickly pulled out a sharp No.2 pencil and a sheet of paper to take notes. “Yes, go ahead, Ms...”

“Please, call me Clarice. May I come by the *Daily Planet* building and meet with you?”

“Ah, sure, what do you want to discuss?” Lois asked, her journalist’s curiosity piqued. This woman, whoever she was, sounded like the genuine article.

Clarice’s voice trembled ever so slightly, “I would rather not speak about it over the phone. Shall we meet at two this afternoon?”

“Certainly.”

The voice on the other end of the line took a shallow breath and said, “I assure you, Miss Lane, this will be worth your time. Goodbye.”

Putting down the phone, Lois replayed the conversation in her mind. The caller seemed extremely intelligent, and despite trying to hide it, more than a little frightened.

Instinctively, she looked around to her former partner’s desk, and was about to ask his opinion when for the hundredth time she remembered he was gone. She growled under her breath, “Kansas, I’ve got to get you back here! This ‘Clarice’ person had better not be a waste of time.”

A welcome voice reached her ears. “Lois, it’s been ages since we’ve had lunch outside of this place! Come join me?” Catherine asked, as she walked towards Lois. She was wearing a very stylish purple designer suit, which gave a hint of the fabulous figure underneath. The formerly bookish gossip columnist had come a long way since the days when most of her clothes were more frumpy than fashionable.

“Yeah, I could use a break. Ralph almost got punched. His constant needling about Clark’s suspension is beginning to get under my skin.”

Catherine’s face creased into a frown, “Odd, he’s been doing that a lot lately. So has Peggy.”

“Peggy? She barely spoke to Clark. By the way, where is she?”

“Who knows; as long as she brings back a decent, well-researched story for what used to be a gossip column.”

It was common knowledge that Peggy was terrible at her job and was hanging on to the post by a gossamer thread. Catherine, although no longer writing the column, was miffed at the slipshod way Peggy handled it. Lois could tell, by the exasperated edge to her friend’s voice, that Peggy had once again done something that was out of bounds.

Throwing her purse strap over one shoulder and taking Catherine by the arm, Lois said, “Come on, I hear Java Perk has a

spinach salad to die for.” They walked up the ramp and towards the elevator. It was only when the door had snapped shut and began its creaky descent that the remark about Clark came up again. “Why does Peggy care about Clark?”

Catherine smoothed back her newly coiffed auburn hair. The short bob was very becoming to her facial lines. She said, “Apparently, given that Clark no longer works here...” She forestalled Lois’ retort by holding up her hand. “Technically, he’s fair game. The only reason Clark’s name hasn’t appeared in her column is because Perry refuses to print it.”

Journalistic instincts came to the forefront, and swiftly ragged pieces of a small, but decidedly ugly, puzzle snapped into place. “She wants to write about his previous relationship with Lana. That she was actively dating him while running around with Daae in Europe?”

The other woman nodded sagely, “Yes, quite the little red feather in her cap. Breaking a juicy piece of gossip no one in Metropolis was aware of. At the time, Clark was too hurt to fight back.”

Lois added, “He’s also too much of a gentleman. But Daae, on the other hand...”

“Would have no problem turning his attention on the *Daily Planet* as a whole and would not simply concentrate on poor Clark. You, better than anyone, know his methods too well to deny that I’m right. Once again, Peggy nearly dropped us into an untenable position.”

Lois groaned, “Great! How could we fight off Sebastian Kell, TresAx, and *two* weasels in the newsroom! If Perry finds out, his blood pressure is going to go ballistic.”

“That’s not all. Since Clark is no longer in the building, Peggy has been keeping an eye and ear on what he’s been doing, such as having dinner with you. Not a wise move, Lois. As we both know, the lawyers would consider that collusion.”

Doe-shaped brown eyes grew large with disbelief, “Why didn’t you tell me that sooner? Speaking of telling, where did all this hot information come from?”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, a glint of amusement flashed in Catherine’s green eyes, “Why, Miss Lane, you are not the only one with exceptionally reliable sources. That’s also why we are having lunch offsite. My source at the *Metro Post-Times*...” At that moment, the elevator doors slid open and the two women stepped into the hubbub that was the *Daily Planet*’s lobby, full of staffers heading outside for lunch.

Talking further on the subject was out of the question, so the conversation shifted to different topics as they navigated through crowded streets until they reached the Java Perk. Jason, the owner, showed his two favorite female reporters to their seats, and they gave their orders for the house special, spinach salad. When he departed, Catherine picked up where she had left off in the elevator.

“Right now, this TresAx story is huge, and lots of reporters – including several bottom feeders – are looking for more dirt to throw on Clark and the other two. Sylvia Nygaard is no longer a part of the story since she’s facing separate charges of embezzlement from TresAx. Whoever made a significant break in the story would get a big boost in their career.”

Lois mused that Clark had thought that exposing the TresAx tax dodges would be a huge step in *his* career. Now he and the two whistleblowers had *become* the story. She said to Catherine, “What has that got to do with Peggy?”

Catherine’s hands made slashing motions as she spoke, “It’s common knowledge that her work and productivity has failed to impress Perry. Feeding information to the *Metro Post-Times* about what the *Planet* is doing to protect itself from legal action on the TresAx story and about Clark’s next move might pave the way to another job for her. Protecting my source at that paper is important. So, until either solid proof appears, or Peggy does

something really stupid, don’t talk to Clark on the phone with her around. Be discreet.”

Rolling her eyes in annoyance, Lois shot back, “I’m always careful when I’m on the phone.”

Her friend was about to answer when the waiter came and placed two large, colorful bowls of spinach salad, which included tomatoes, eggs, cheese, red onions, artichoke hearts, slivered almonds and fresh cranberries, in front of them. The wicked glint of amusement that Lois had caught in the elevator had returned to Catherine’s eyes and her voice.

“Oh, come on!” Catherine said teasingly, as she picked up a freshly cut lemon and squeezed it over the brightly-colored vegetables. “Everyone in the bullpen knows when you’re on the phone with Clark! You two bicker like an old married couple! Plus, your voice changes... like a teen-ager on her first date.”

What could she say to such a remark? Clark Jefferson Kent was attractive, kind, friendly and willing to put his needs on hold for others. Like when he pulled away from her like a frightened deer after that sinfully sweet kiss, thinking he was being unfaithful to Lana. However, while their working relationship had steadied after a few months, their personal relationship had certainly not been the same afterwards. She became aware of Catherine’s voice. “Earth to Lois, come in, Lois!”

“Oh, yes, Clark! What... what were you saying?”

Catherine snorted in a very unladylike fashion, and then gave her a speculative look and pointedly said, “Why are you mentioning *Clark* when you’re talking to me?”

Lois’ face flushed and, in an attempt to hide her embarrassment, she speared an asparagus tip and said, “What are you talking about?”

Inquisitive emerald eyes studied Lois carefully and then Catherine said slowly, “Lois Lane, are you falling for him or that Adonis in a cape?” She asked.

“What? No! Who has time to fall in love with Clark Kent, or Superman for that matter? Come on, tell me more about Peggy.”

It was easy to see her friend was trying to squirm her way out of the direction the conversation was headed. But Catherine was not having it. “That’s not important right now. Besides, Peggy’s days are numbered. We’ll put Clark on the back burner as well. Let’s get back to... Superman. Did something ‘important’ happen to you that I – one of your closest buddies – should know about?”

Lois chewed thoughtfully, and then in a very small voice, answered, “No... not really. He came to my apartment the day Clark was suspended. He actually wanted me to help clear his name. He... he’s very good-looking up close.”

Catherine leaned back, folded her arms, and studied her friend, and with a serious tone said, “Impressive. Congressman Ian Harrington thinks he’s a real ladies man; maybe he should take an arrow from Superman’s quiver. Half the women in the newsroom are swooning over him. Does Big Blue fly damsels in distress around by appointment? What happened next?”

Tense seconds ticked by as Lois fumbled with her napkin, wondering how much to tell, and then she blurted out, “He... he took me flying over Hobbs Harbor at night! Catherine, it was the single most magnificent thing I’ve ever experienced!”

The green eyes flashed with genuine surprise and spiked with just the tiniest hint of envy. “My! A new twist to being swept off your feet! Lois, that man is impressive! But... but what about Clark?”

Again, trying to deflect her friend from detecting the truth, Lois started to reply in what she hoped was a determined voice. Sadly, it came out more like a squeak. “What about him? He’s one of my closest... male friends.”

Silence surrounded the duo. One woman was very sure the other was trying to avoid the subject of her absent partner being more than just a workmate, while the other was desperately trying to hide the truth from her friend. The question on Catherine

Grant's mind was... why? "Hey, isn't that rather callous to poor Clark? Especially after all he's been through? From what I've observed of the two of you, it's possible he might have feelings for you which are stronger than simple friendship."

"Feelings?" Lois felt self-conscious that anyone might suspect the *mélange* of emotions that she felt for him. Catherine was not stupid, but Lois wanted to get off the subject as quickly as they had gotten on it. "He's a great partner and a good friend; unfortunately, it is too soon since Lana's deception for him to even *consider* getting involved with anyone else. Especially someone he works with." This was shorthand for Catherine to remember the last time Lois had been involved in a relationship with someone at work.

Ms. Grant speared an artichoke heart, bought it to her lips, dropped the vegetable into her mouth and chewed. Her piercing green eyes were scrutinizing Lois' expression. She finally spoke just as Lois was about to shout from the anxiety of taut nerves.

"OK. No more discussion about the man in blue spandex or Clark."

Lois could feel the pent-up stress slide off her back and shoulders like an avalanche.

"... for now," Catherine stated.

She saw the stricken appearance on Lois' face and decided to go easy on her. "Oh, lighten up! I was just kidding!"

Visibly relieved, Lois went back to eating her salad, then said, "Fine! Now what about Peggy?"

"I'm going to approach her soon... give her a chance to admit everything and then hand in her resignation so Perry doesn't have to fire her. Thereby cutting their pipeline to you and uh...Clark."

"Will you go back to writing the gossip column until Perry can find somebody else?"

Catherine shuddered and said, "No! It's taken me too long to build my reputation as a financial/political journalist, not a blasted gossip monger! Besides, Arthur thinks I do a much better job in that arena, rather than sifting through other people's dirty linens."

Hearing the financier's name, Lois thought about asking her friend what direction *their* relationship was headed in. But she knew pursuing that line of conversation would be foolish to pursue. Catherine had been low-key about their dates. But at least she did talk about them.

After all, she had assisted Catherine in making an exit from a position she loathed, and Arthur's interview had cemented her new position. Rather than asking about Arthur, she concentrated on the food, which was delicious. The chatter drifted into other areas and soon the two friends were enjoying each other's company and the calming atmosphere of the restaurant. So much so they lost track of time.

Wearing a blonde wig, sunglasses and a plain burgundy pantsuit, 'Clarice' walked down the crowded street, passers-by ignoring her as they went about the business of their own lives. Personally, she thought that wearing a disguise was a little ridiculous, but Tina had insisted. Tina's words came back to her: "The *Daily Planet* has lots of people in there who might know Daae. You don't want there to be a reason for word to get back to him that his former administrative assistant was there and then a few days later damaging articles about DMG come out."

It didn't help that these words lay in the back of her mind as she picked up her pace. Suddenly, she turned a corner and was greeted by one of the most familiar buildings in Metropolis, its front dominated by a giant globe. Somewhere she had read that during Prohibition, when Pino 'Pretty Boy Dragonetti' and his gang had ruled the city's underworld, the *Daily Planet* had been called a 'shining beacon of truth'. She hoped that held true for this time of coffee bars and feminism. The leather bag felt even heavier with all the files and diskettes within it. Soon, very soon, the burden would be taken from her and put into the capable hands

of people who were trained to handle this sort of thing.

When Gregory Daae had said his final good-byes to her on Friday, he'd had no thought that his former assistant was going to bring about a nasty disruption to his life.

For a moment she felt nauseous and wanted to turn around, hop on a plane, and start her new life in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Her new house, purchased with part of the money received from sold-off DMG stock, boasted a fabulous view of the Sandia Mountains. It was there that she planned to go back to school and learn how to be a potter.

Before doing that, she had other business to attend to. With a deep breath, she placed a cold hand on the door handle and entered the great metropolitan newspaper's lobby.

She intended to use the name Clarice, tell Lois the barest bones of a story, and get out of the building as soon as possible.

Part Twenty-Six

Stephanie Aronnax alighted from the elevator's relative quiet to the noisy and hectic activity of the *Daily Planet's* bullpen. Frazzled copyboys, their arms laden with files and photographs, were going to and fro. Staffers were hanging around a table with a large coffeemaker, an odd collection of ceramic mugs, and an assortment of colorfully glazed doughnuts, chatting about football scores and sources. The insistent drone of TV monitors were displaying various news channels and well-known talk shows. The clamor was unsettling after working in DMG's dignified, hushed corridors. She walked, not certain which way to go, towards a ramp leading into the center of the chaos, hoping to locate one female journalist in particular.

Cutting through the cacophony of sound was the distinct *clickity-click* from a woman's cheaply-made high heel shoes. Behind her, a whiney voice grated on her eardrums like a dull razor. "Lost?" The annoying voice said with an air of exasperation. As if it were every day that Stephanie came to this particular newspaper bearing evidence to harm, if not destroy, the international reputation of a media mogul.

Turning around, she saw a woman wearing a tight blue pencil skirt with a matching sweater approach her. "Yes. Yes, I am. Please, could you point me in the direction of Lois Lane's office? We have a two o'clock appointment."

The woman snorted derisively, an unpleasant sound and one which, in an unsubtle style, telegraphed that she did not respect the investigative reporter. "No one on this floor has an office except Perry White, the managing editor. Lois went out to lunch; ought to be back in a little while. So, what's your name?"

Uncertain as to whom this woman was, Stephanie determined not to provide more information than necessary. "It's... Clarice. Perhaps there is a place I can wait? A conference room or sitting area?"

The other woman looked her over and said dismissively, "Yeah, I guess Lolo would want you to be comfortable. I'm Peggy Becker." She stuck out her hand, which Stephanie shook reluctantly.

"Lolo?" Stephanie said, clearly confused. A memory was tickling in the back of her mind. Why did the name Becker sound familiar? What role did this woman play at the newspaper?

Peggy smirked and said, "Uh huh, that was her nickname in Metropolis High School. She hates it, which is why I use it when she's not around. Come on into the conference room and take a load off. Want somethin' to drink? Coffee? Lemon water?"

As they walked, Peggy guided the visitor to one of the back conference rooms away from the activity and noise of the bullpen. It was her plan to find out why this well-dressed woman was here. If the story was any good, her contact at the *Metro Post Times* would pay serious money for it.

Once they were inside a small, windowless rectangle of a room which held a dusty conference table and four mismatched,

worn, black leather chairs, Stephanie spoke up. “Excuse me, Miss Becker, there’s no need for me to wait in this,” she looked around the cheerless space and said distastefully, “closet.”

The woman shrugged. “Yeah, but she won’t be back for at least an hour. Why don’t we sit down and chat about why you’re here? If you have to leave, I can forward the information to Lolo. No big deal.”

Years of working within the corporate arena and learning about *quid pro quo* had taught Stephanie a thing or two, especially about deception and random gossip. This brash woman wanted information. What better way to get it than to lull Stephanie away from the bullpen? Abruptly, like a cold spray of water on a hot day, she remembered why the name and face was familiar. Peggy had been waiting outside the Lexor Hotel on Gregory and Lana’s wedding day. This was the *Daily Planet’s* gossip columnist! The absolute wrong person she needed to be anywhere near!

Quicker than Peggy thought possible for a woman in her fifties, Stephanie had exited through the door and down the hallway. She was about to charge down the ramp when two women bolted out the elevator. The tall auburn-haired woman wearing a purple suit spoke in gasps. “Your ... appointment had better be ... important! I almost broke my ankle running to catch this elevator. It has a mind of its own. No doubt Jason probably thinks we’re crazy!”

Another woman, slightly shorter and very attractive, answered her companion. “Never mind, he’s used to me dashing out in the middle of a meal! Lunch will go on my tab. My two o’clock appointment might have left by now!”

Stephanie looked at the breathless brunette who nearly collided with her. Lois Lane was much younger than she had imagined, but if Emma and Tina thought she was the precise person to write up an expose on Gregory Daae and Jasper Templar’s machinations... so be it.

“Excuse me, are... are you Lois Lane?” she asked.

Lois turned and saw an older woman, very well dressed, coming down the corridor. Not too far behind was Peggy Becker. “Yes? You are...?”

The woman standing before her had what her mother referred to as ‘bearing’, with fine bones yet strong features. She was the type people noticed, whether in a supermarket or a boardroom. She had chosen her clothing with care. The quality and tailoring of the Dupioni silk burgundy pantsuit was several cuts above Lois’ own wardrobe. The short blonde hair and unattractive black glasses seemed at odds with the rest of her visitor’s outfit.

Yet for all her presence and meticulous grooming, Lois sensed a barely concealed anxiety... even fear.

Relieved, Stephanie said, “We spoke this morning regarding some material you might find useful. I am... Clarice, your two o’clock appointment.”

Peggy Becker slid up to the three women, her noisy heels announcing her presence before her voice did, and said, “Lois! Great, you’re here! I was just talking to Clarice until you and Catherine got back. Well, gotta go.” With that, she raced down the ramp and back to her desk, wrongly thinking Lois would not imagine she was up to something, but she was mistaken.

At the top of the ramp, Catherine and Lois suspiciously eyed their soon-to-be ex-co-worker. Lois turned when she heard the visitor clearing her throat to draw the other’s attention to her, and said, “It’s good to meet you at last, Ms. Lane, but as you can imagine, I wanted to get this material to you as soon as possible. Can we sit down somewhere private and talk?”

Turning her head back to Clarice, Lois said, “Sure, right this way. Thanks, Catherine, we’ll talk later.”

Her friend was already walking towards the ramp. “Yes. Regarding that business matter we discussed over lunch? I’m going to handle it immediately.” With that said, Catherine nodded to ‘Clarice’ and departed down the ramp and headed towards

Perry’s office.

They walked to another hallway and into Lois’ favorite conference room, the one where she always did research for stories that demanded a degree of privacy.

When the door shut behind them, Stephanie looked at the gleaming coffee server on the highly-polished table and comfortable brown leather chairs, and said with relief, “My, this conference room is several steps above the one Peggy showed me. It’s clean, airy and has windows!”

Lois arched an eyebrow. “Peggy took you into the back conference room?”

Her visitor nodded, her voice a little tense, “Yes, I had the distinct impression she wanted to pump me for information. Now, Miss Lane, why would a gossip columnist want to do that to someone she doesn’t know?”

“Good question, and one that will be answered very soon. I could ask why Stephanie Aronnax, the executive assistant of Gregory Daae, CEO of DMG, would want to see an investigative reporter. Especially while wearing a disguise and under an assumed name?”

Stephanie wanted to let the lower portion of her mouth fall to the floor, but for the sake of her dignity, struggled not to give in to the impulse. “*Touché*, Ms. Lane. Apparently, my friends were correct in recommending ‘The Hottest Team in Town’ to write this story. It is unfortunate that due to the TresAx scandal, Mr. Kent could not be involved as well. But my precautions were necessary. If my presence here got into Ms. Becker’s gossip column...”

“Don’t worry, that TresAx mess will be taken care of.”

The older woman said, with a little trepidation, “I sincerely hope so. From what I’ve recently learned, Mr. Daae is not a man to cross.”

“Which is why, going forward, ‘Clarice’ is your name. Sort of like a secret identity.” Lois had been controlling her eagerness since she had seen Stephanie and recognized her. The names and photos of all of the major executives and their assistants in DMG were a critical part of her files.

The former administrative assistant sat down. The stomach nausea had returned in small waves, but she was determined to get things started. She reached into her heavy bag and removed a thick sheath of manila files and floppy disks. Carefully placing them on the table, she said, “Mr. Daae is no longer my employer. I retired from DMG last Friday. Nevertheless, with the able assistance of an ‘associate’, my departure was not, shall we say... empty handed. All of these files give a detailed story of stock manipulation, intimidation of key personnel in the New York Stock Exchange, and innocent people bullied into handing over their shares of LexCorp stock.”

“But there’s been no indication of this in the financial news circles,” Lois said, stunned.

“True, they have been methodical in covering their tracks. Mr. Gregory Daae is planning on a hostile takeover, using his arrogant second-in-command, Jasper Templar, to do so. It is my hope that a story can be written exposing all of this corruption. From what I understand, Lois Lane and the *Daily Planet* can accomplish just that.” She looked up at Lois and saw it was the reporter’s turn to be shocked.

With the able assistance of Stacy, Jack, and to a lesser extent Catherine, Lois turned the conference room into a large workspace. Stacy had printed out all of Clarice’s information, which matched what Lois already possessed. Once the materials were collated and dated, they were arranged into separate areas such as stock fraud, SEC officials bribed, wire-tapping and the names of elderly stockholders forced to sell their LexCorp stock at lower than fair market value.

The list of SEC persons involved in this hostile takeover was mercifully few. Yet, their names also appeared in Lois’

investigation. All of them reported to Daae through Templar.

But another set of files showed names that were unfamiliar to Lois. These people also reported to Daae. The list that was known to Templar was a handful and they were all paid through a company called RoyalPoint.

Looking up from the folder marked 'RoyalPoint', Lois asked, "Clarice, it's obvious RoyalPoint is a shell company."

She looked thoughtful and said, "RoyalPoint was started by Jasper. My associate says the five men whose names appear in that file are its only 'employees. One is a Certified Public Accountant, a second his assistant, and the others are 'muscle'. Templar uses both to make purchases of DMG stock. If I'm not mistaken, by the time of the *Age of Napoleon* exhibit opening night gala, neither DMG nor LexCorp shall belong to their founders."

Lois was surprised yet again. She muttered aloud, "That event is only weeks away. Wait... Jasper Templar is working with Daae to acquire LexCorp, and meanwhile Templar has his 'own' band of thieves and accountants to steal DMG from Daae?"

A sad little smile pushed the corners of Stephanie's mouth downwards. "Yes. That's exactly what these papers, PowerPoint presentations and rough notes imply." She dug into her tote and brought out a thick blue folder. "This other file demonstrates how LNN will report stories detrimental to both Lex Luthor and Gregory Daae, showing them to be too corrupt to run such powerful conglomerates. Ironic, isn't it... using Daae's purloined media empire's influence against him and his partner. During all the confusion, Jasper Templar moves into the power vacuum of one company and places one of his stooges in the other."

"But what about the companies' joint coverage of the space station's construction?" Lois was thinking of Janet Owens and all the months of training she was putting in to be a part of EPRAD's journalist division.

"Oh, yes, the station is significant, it goes on without interruption. LNN/DMG doesn't need the original owners for that to continue; besides, once construction is completed, it will be a huge money maker."

Lois' eyes grew wide at the sound of that statement; she and 'Clarice' were going to be here for a while. She said, "This story is getting bigger by the minute! The paper trail has to be longer and greater than the files you gave me. How many other diskettes do you have in that bag?"

This time Clarice's smile was genuine as she caught Lois' enthusiasm. "Plenty."

"Yeah, let's get started. I'll need your help matching up some of the dates and names."

It was six o'clock when Lois looked up from the final thick folder Steph... Clarice had provided. She needed to mentally keep referring to her by that name. No way was she going to place her source in jeopardy. It was also time to bring Perry, Constance, and probably James Olsen in on the surprising turn of events. But now it was time to make the first step towards putting an end to Daae and his media machinations.

"Clarice, I'm calling Constance Hunter, the head of our legal department. We need to get started on your deposition immediately."

Her companion's head went up like a shot. "Excuse me? What deposition?"

"It's fairly obvious; the *Planet's* legal team has to depose you to gather information as part of the discovery process..."

Stephanie shook her head. "Sorry, Ms. Lane, but it is impossible for me to be a deponent against Gregory Daae."

Lois looked at Stephanie across the conference room table in surprise, then spread her arms wide to indicate the piles of paper. "Wait, all of this incriminating material was brought over by *you* against your ex-boss. That tells me you are ready to appear in a court of law."

At that moment, the door opened, and Perry entered,

followed closely by Catherine, who, sensing the tension in the room, quickly shut it behind her. They stood transfixed, listening to the exchange. Clarice continued in a brisk tone that brooked no argument.

"That's precisely right, Miss Lane, I brought the evidence to you. My role is simply that of messenger. Everything written on these documents, I had no prior knowledge of."

Lois began to speak, but Perry put out a restraining hand. Turning his attention to Clarice, he spoke in easy, relaxing tones, as if she were frightened stallion, ready to bolt at any moment. "Ma'am... please, we won't call the suits downstairs, but we can't go any further without a credible witness to confirm your story. Try to see it from our perspective. Hell, if we printed this, I might as well turn out the building lights right now!"

Stephanie stood up, put on the previously discarded suit jacket, and picked up the leather tote, now considerably lighter, carefully putting the thick straps over her right shoulder, she said, "Please accept my apology, Mr. White; nevertheless, I've carried out my part of the bargain. Everything required to end this hostile takeover by Daae is in this room. I will try to get my associate – the one who provided all this material – to help you. As you can imagine, testifying against a man like Daae is an alarming prospect."

The idea of losing another potential eye-witness was too much for Lois. "Wait!" She stood up so abruptly the chair fell over and landed with a bang. "What if we could arrange for witness security and protection from prosecution?"

'Clarice' bit her lower lip, "Maybe, but those particular arrangements must happen quickly, and in writing."

Before Lois could speak, Perry said, "Clarice, let me talk to the publisher, Mr. Olsen, and see what he says. Is there any way we can get in contact with you?"

She shook her head so violently that the short blonde wig was in danger of sliding off. "No. No, my associate shall call Ms. Lane. Good-bye." Quietly, Stephanie opened the door and exited the conference room.

Perry let out a low whistle. "She hid it well, but that is one... frightened... woman."

Surprisingly, Lois said in a mild tone, "I can't say as I blame her. She's watched Daae operate up close and personal for a few years. Why, oh why, did I have to mention *deposition*?"

"If this mysterious associate of hers comes through, there won't be anything to worry about. There's enough material against Daae to write two books! Forget about newspaper articles!" Catherine said, looking over the files that had been collected by both Lois and by Clarice.

Lois turned to Perry and said, "With all the evidence Stephanie delivered into our hands, can't we get Clark back in here?"

Perry's taut facial muscles rolled into a painful expression, "Lois, honey, don't ask that. My hands are tied. Until we have definite facts to nail TresAx against the wall, Clark stays on suspension."

Lois gestured to the covered table and almost shouted, "Chief! How much more *evidence* do we need?"

"Because the *Daily Planet's* legal team need to have their ducks in a row before we go toe-to-toe with a hammerhead shark like Sebastian Kell. Despite all this evidence in regard to an illegal and hostile takeover of DMG and LexCorp by Daae and that rat Templar, there is no evidence connecting them to Clark's TresAx story. The legal eagles upstairs gotta go after them with something bigger than a harpoon made out of lily iron. Hell, they need a legal heat-seeking missile powerful enough for TresAx and the best legal closer in Metropolis to want to settle out of court."

"Why out of court? Isn't that the point of hiring Kell?" Lois said.

"Guys like Kell prefer settling cases like this one quietly,

because splashy trials present too many unknowns. What's here is good, yet not enough."

"But what about demanding Stephanie testify?" Catherine asked.

Perry shook his head sadly, "Not a credible enough witness."

"What?" Now Lois did shout. "Perry, she's worked for the man for years! Get a subpoena and force her to testify!" Lois finished in a slightly louder tone.

"Yeah? Lois, you heard her. She doesn't want to! I'm betting she's doing it because Daae would have one of his cronies plant incriminating evidence against her. A sharp lawyer like Kell would find out about her reluctance and make her a witness for the defense! Then, in minutes, proceed to tear her testimony apart. We don't dare put her on the stand."

Lois rubbed her eyes in defeat. "If this mysterious associate of hers doesn't come forward, who do we have left?"

Perry set his jaw hard and said, "Ralph. I'm calling Henderson and telling him to put a close tail on him. I want to know how much salt and pepper that creep puts on his eggs in the morning!" With a look of fire in his eyes, the editor got up and moved towards the door. Catherine stopped him just before he reached it.

"Chief, what about Peggy Becker?"

"What about her?"

"Before we got here she tried to milk Steph... Clarice. If she saw through that disguise, it could prove to be a problem."

Catherine then related everything she had heard from her source.

"Judas Priest. Send her to my office. Now! Is this a newspaper or a rat's den? I bet the Colonel didn't ever have to deal with this kinda thing!" Shaking his head, he opened the door and left.

"Thanks for the salads and coffee, Stacy. Go on home; I should be here a few more hours. Isn't Perry finished with that meeting upstairs yet?"

With a hapless shrug, the intern responded, "When he gets with the suits, nobody knows what time the meeting will break up." Looking around the conference room, Stacy noticed it had been turned into a nerve center for Lois' investigation: an investigation that, without a credible witness, would end in nothing, just as the fishery article had three years before. Too much was riding on this story: Clark's career, the *Daily Planet's* name, and her own reputation as an investigative journalist.

They needed to catch Ralph and make him talk.

Stacy and Jack had been spending a good portion of their time fetching supplies: a large whiteboard, colored dry markers and pictures of several DMG and LexCorp executives. Jack had set up Lois' computer where she was sitting in the conference room. The table was covered in neatly stacked papers and empty coffee cups. Stacy looked at her watch and asked, "It's only minutes to eight o'clock. Sure I can't lend a hand?"

Remembering what Clark had said at dinner about drawing Stacy and Jack any further into the investigation, Lois shook her head. "Nope. Everything's under control."

"Okay. Goodnight." Stacy walked towards the door, and in an attempt at humor, said with a smile, "Try not to burn the candle in both ends and then stick a wick in the middle!"

Lois barely acknowledged the comment and mumbled something about keeping plenty of candles burning and then returned to the stacks of files, and so did not hear the young woman when she exited. She couldn't believe all the fantastic material Stephanie had served up on a shining silver platter. Much of the information in 'Clarice's' files, such as dates, names, places, and events, dovetailed perfectly with Lois' own files. Once the collation of materials was complete, she could begin working on the DMG article series outline.

The euphoria which had enveloped Lois that afternoon had

softly faded. It was replaced by a resolve to pull all the material into a cohesive whole. Cohesive enough that it would appeal to a grand jury and keep the *Daily Planet* from being dragged into a fierce legal battle.

First: Files from Aunt Rita mysteriously provided by the son of a long-dead agent. Files from an old case given to him by agents who might or might not have been executed by Daae's nefarious associates.

Second: Extensive information on the hostile takeover of LexCorp which was a cover-up for the even greater takeover of both companies by Daae's disloyal second-in-command.

Third: Her own three-year long research covering Daae's activities from the past ten years which helped to draw the previous pieces together.

The papers spread before her read like a fantastic novel of international business filled with avarice, dishonesty and violence. Unfortunately, there were still pieces just out of her grasp, crucial lynchpins to tighten everything together, if she could prove that Guerin and the other executives at TresAx had been used by Daae to falsely accuse Clark of writing a libelous article.

Now if they could just find the smoking gun that proved TresAx was owned by Daae, then that would be the connection proving Guerin was a puppet for either Daae or Templar. This meant that the trail to destroying Daae was coming to an end.

An hour went by, and Lois felt her eyelids grow heavy with exhaustion, but she needed to get this story right. The mere thought of bringing down not only Daae but also his, by all accounts, sleazy right-hand man was enough to get her going again. Unfortunately, the words on paper started blurring together...

"Lois!" A hand gently shook her awake.

Her head shot up, "Jack! What are you still doing here?"

The young man stood by her with a tall, hot coffee in one hand and a pink bakery bag in the other. "I could say the same for you. Quitting time was hours ago."

Lois looked up; she tried to sound defiant, with a touch of humor thrown in. "I'm working. That brother of yours will be waiting for you." She glanced at her watch and said, "It's way past midnight."

Jack smirked and replied, "So am I. Remember there *are* other reporters on this floor besides you. Janet Owens needed those pictures of her leaving for the spaceport ready for the morning edition." He gestured to the items in his hands. "These are both from Clark."

"He's here?" Her brown eyes grew wide with excitement.

"No, security won't let him upstairs, but he wanted to let you know he appreciates everything we are doing to get him back here."

"Oh." Lois' voice sounded very small and disappointed. In order to steady herself, she took a tentative sip of the warm beverage. The rich coffee drink was loaded with mocha, a hint of cinnamon, and soymilk, and it tasted sinfully delicious, providing a much-needed pick-me-up. "Heavenly! Where did the coffee and pastry come from?"

The youth shrugged. "He didn't say. When are you going home?"

"Probably in another hour. All this material is beginning to shape into a fantastic story. If only..." She tried to hide her disappointment. Clark was always so good about going through files; so much better than anyone in the newsroom, even the Chief.

Her young friend gave her a pat on the shoulder and a rare, warm smile. "Hey, CK will be back with us before you know it!"

"Let's hope so, Jack! I can't - um, we can't - do a decent job without him."

Jack's mentor and friend could try to conceal her feelings, but he had known her far too long for that to be possible. Since Clark Kent's arrival at the *Daily Planet*, work had become decidedly

more interesting in the bullpen. Still, it was hardly his place to discuss with his co-workers their personal feelings. Instead, he concentrated on being as ready to lend a hand as he could. “Sure I can’t stick around and help?”

Touched by his concern and desire to help, Lois gave him a tired smile, and then said, “Nyahh, go home. Denny is bound to be calling in a few minutes.”

Jack nodded, gave her a snappy mock salute, and departed for the night.

It was so quiet the conference room wall clock’s usual soft ticking sounded more like an insistent gong. The delightful mocha caffeine hit was tapering off. Bit by bit, Lois realized it was time to go home for some badly-needed rest. The sound of footsteps echoed down the hall, drawing close to the room. “Probably a night shift staffer checking to see who was in here,” she thought. “It’s best for all concerned that I lock the door so none of these papers are disturbed.”

Just as Lois was tidying up, the conference door opened, but she assumed the person had to be one of Mitch Ryder’s consultants or stringers.

Without turning around, she said, “Tell Mitch I’ll be out of here in a few minutes. But the door is going to be locked. No one from his group or the morning crew is allowed in here. The materials for my article are not to be disturbed. If he has any questions, he can talk to Perry when the shift changes.” Lois spoke crisply to cover over any exhaustion she felt. Without waiting for an answer, her attention went back to the file-covered table.

“I don’t give a rat’s patootie about this room, because without the materials I’ve gathered, the rest of the stuff is never going to become an article for this ‘great Metropolitan newspaper’”.

For the second time that night, an adrenal spike drove itself through Lois’ body; she whirled around and came face to face with Linda King, leaning against the door jam, looking fabulous in a crisp black pantsuit and her usual arrogance. As if it was quite normal for her college nemesis to be in the room, much less the *Daily Planet* building. “Hey, what are you doing here?” Lois blurted out.

Linda’s eyes swept the room and her lips formed into a familiar smirk. “I have to admit I’m impressed, when you dig into an investigation, it’s no holds barred!”

“Yeah, well we know how you ‘dig’ into anything. Where’s Preston? Since when does he let you off the leash?”

The mask of bravado slipped, and Linda’s face grew pale. Her normally expressive eyes took on a haunted look. “Hopefully, nowhere nearby.” Her hand indicated an empty chair and she said, “May I sit down? It’s been a ridiculously long day and my feet ache.”

Unaccustomed to seeing such a strained expression on her rival’s face, Lois put her foot on the chair and pushed it over to Linda, who gratefully sat down, took off her expansive black stiletto heels, and closed her eyes. “Lois, I have information on Jasper Templar which will back up anything you have here. But most important of all, I have the proof you need that links TresAx and Guerin with him. They created a ‘sting’ operation to discredit not only your handsome partner, but the people who helped him as well.”

Surprised by this bold announcement, she said, “What? Where is this information?”

“Everything is on this diskette.” Linda held out a black diskette, and with a touch of her trademark haughtiness, gestured at the table and said, “Really, it’s time to ditch all these papers and files. We are on the verge of a new millennium! Working with that stuff is hellish on a woman’s manicure!” She looked at Lois’ bare fingernails and remarked, “Well, for those of us who *have* manicures.”

Lois stole a quick look at her nails. It was true, the pink

polish was chipped, and the edges were black with ink stains. When was the last time she had paid any attention to them? Tired and not interested in playing games, she retorted, “Work has kept me out of the salon. In case you haven’t noticed, there’s more going on here than manicures. None of this evidence makes a bit of difference, if no one will stand up in court.”

Linda was silent. Taking in Lois’ creased outfit and tired eyes, now was not the time for snappy comebacks or smirks. She simply took the diskette and put it into Lois’ computer. “You have been working all night and are pretty tired. Still, read these files and then we can talk.”

“The files on this disk are *that* important?” Lois asked, suddenly taken aback by Linda’s change of attitude.

A deep sigh escaped Linda’s lips and she said, “Yes... and I am that frightened.”

Without another word, Lois loaded up the diskette, pulled up the file, and began studying the glowing symbols on the monitor. At first, she was shocked, then a smile, thin yet wickedly mischievous, spread until it threatened to split her face.

“A *written* agreement between Guerin and two IRS officials permitting them to pay a fraction of the taxes they owe? We need to sic our own forensic accounting experts on this to discover if these procedures are even slightly legal.”

Linda shook her head, “Oh, I doubt if it is. Keep reading.”

“Jasper Templar brokered the deal? Why would an executive from DMG have anything to do with TresAx unless they were owned by the media company? Who is this man? He has his grimy fingers in every crooked business venture in Metropolis.”

“The last straw is on the final page,” Linda said smugly.

When she finished looking at that page, Lois let out a tiny gasp. “The IRS officials each received large deposits in their savings accounts on the same day this was set up? The check is marked from a company called RoyalPoint. That name has come up several times before in my investigation. No way can this be a coincidence. This seems like a stupid error for men who work for the IRS. They should have found a proper tax shelter... preferably one offshore.”

Linda shook her head. “I’m betting that money was placed in there as the beginning of a paper trail, to keep these men in line.”

“Sounds like Daae’s style. Now where did you get this information?”

“He... he’s an LNN staffer who is in Templar’s pocket.”

A clammy chill lanced through Lois’ heart. “An LNN staff member is your source? I want a name.”

“Claude DeBarre.”

The intensity of the chill grew to encompass the conference room, which suddenly felt confining. The women glared at each other; Linda represented the betrayal of stealing Paul, her college boyfriend, and Claude DeBarre represented stealing her innocence. When she broke the silence, angry words erupted into the air, like a broken tooth.

“Give me one good reason why I should trust a lying harpy like you? As for DeBarre... there are no words in the English or French language that describe what I think of that... vermin.”

Linda’s face grew flush with anger, and she violently stabbed a finger at the monitor. “This hasn’t got anything to do with trust, and DeBarre betrayed me to Templar. Using the material he gave me against Templar is my first step towards evening the score.”

“Betrayal is DeBarre’s stock in trade.” She wanted to say more, to make Linda feel some tiny measure of the pain she had experienced years ago. But remembering how Clark had conducted himself when Lana had betrayed him, she chose the high ground. Linda could barely conceal her surprise when her former friend said, “Let’s pay him back ... together. That no-talent hack won’t know what hit him!” Lois stuck out her hand to seal the bargain.

“Deal,” Linda said as she grasped the hand. “Oh, and Lois...”

“Yeah?”

“I want complete immunity, and when this is over, a secure place in the federal witness protection program.”

Lois rolled her eyes and mumbled under her breath, “Is there an echo in here?”

Part Twenty-Seven

That evening, Clark walked home to his apartment. Earlier he had flown to a modest old-fashioned bakery on Hanover Street in Boston’s North End for the kind of coffee and homemade chocolate cannoli that Lois loved. The task had been a decidedly welcome diversion from his normal routine. Working as a temporary features writer for the *Merchant Street Examiner*, a small neighborhood paper that was little more than a glorified coupon circular, was extremely tedious. The salary was a measly fraction of the one from the *Daily Planet*, but he was determined not to wipe out his savings or take any of the profits from the farm.

There was one small upside to this – for lack of a better word – exile. He was free to spend more time as Superman. Because he was using the ancient underground tunnels throughout Metropolis, tracking his movements was close to impossible. Nevertheless, that was a cold comfort for the fast-paced and appealing life he had once enjoyed as a *Daily Planet* reporter.

A thought surfaced, not for the first time in the past few weeks: where was H.G. Wells? Surely, Wells could be of some assistance to him, especially after all that Clark had done for Clark Jerome on his world. The least the enigmatic time traveler could do was appear and help him out of this TresAx situation.

He turned a corner and sighed loudly. When he had first started doing rescues, it was easy; muggings, a few bank hold-ups, and the occasional fender-bender on the interstate. But as he expanded his patrols to include the rest of the country and then the planet, he realized the disaster level and emotional intensity of the rescues had increased. The loss of life, the searing guilt of never being *fast enough*, was sometimes more than he could bear.

For a while there, not being able to discuss it with anyone had begun to take a toll on him. Oh, sure, there were times when he spoke with Pete Ross, yet he felt it was wrong to drop such an emotional load on his old friend, especially considering what his work day in MetroGen’s ER was like!

He was Earth’s super first responder, the Man of Steel, yet could he truly expect any human counselor to lend a hand in his unique situation?

An earthquake off the coast of Iceland had been the final crushing straw to his emotional back. Not too many people think of Iceland as being in the ‘Ring of Fire’, but this is inaccurate. Most people think of the Pacific rim, but Iceland is rife with volcanic activity and it is a source of much instability.

The loss of life, both human and animal, had thankfully been minimal, but Clark had spent the weekend flying survivors to safety and clearing tons of wreckage. By the time internal disaster relief teams arrived, he was as close to complete exhaustion as he had ever been.

At one particular rescue he had landed in front of a house that had caught fire when power lines had come down. They had ignited some trees which had fallen down and destroyed the house. Sadly, Clark had arrived too late to save the home, but fortunately the family had managed to escape without injury. A little towheaded girl, no more than five, had been looking at the heap of smoldering embers which only that morning had been her home, and sobbing uncontrollably.

Tentatively, Clark picked up the child and held her while hot unabashed tears left tracks down his soot covered cheeks. The rest of the family gathered around him and the child in a comforting embrace.

A young woman, taking pictures of the tragedy, had snapped

a photo of Superman and his new-found little friend, whose name he later learned was Katya. The photographer immediately sent the picture to a newspaper in Reykjavik.

The wire services picked up on the heartrending image and soon it was displayed around the globe with the caption reading:

MAN OF STEEL, HEART OF GOLD.

Without being asked, he had swiftly cleared the ashen heap of timbers, scorched brick and copper piping in preparation for the new home to be built. This simple act saved them hundreds, if not thousands, of krona. It gave Clark a strong sense of satisfaction to know he had made a difference to Katya and her family. But again, he pondered the thought; she had someone to talk to about her loss, and who did he have?

Upon his return to Metropolis on Sunday night, he had found the light on the answering machine blinking wildly from the several messages that had been left behind. One was a telemarketer, two were from *Daily Planet* staffers calling to invite him out for a beer, and another was from Pete checking on him after he saw the photo. The second-to-last one revealed the anxious voice of Lois wanting to know how he was doing working for a small paper. The final one was from Uncle Wayne:

“Son, this is Uncle Wayne. Your aunt and I are right proud of what you did for that child in Iceland. Come over as soon as you can.” There was a brief pause as the older man cleared his throat. “Ah... the barn roof needs fixin’. Ah... I could sure use your ‘talents’ with a hammer.”

A tiny smile tugged at his lips. Wayne, in his own taciturn way, wanted to make sure he was doing well.

The following afternoon Clark found himself on the roof of the ancient barn, removing weathered old sections. During their lunchtime break, his aunt brought out turkey sandwiches on thick slices of homemade bread, lemonade, and brown butter cookies. They sat on the porch, eating in comfortable silence. Suddenly, in a firm, yet strong voice, his surrogate uncle spoke about his days serving in the military in Korea.

“Me and Jonathan were a couple of wet-behind-the-ears recruits, walking around town in our freshly pressed uniforms and shiny buttons. Heh, you’d have thought we was on parade. The fillies liked our looks, too...” A quiet smile played over Wayne’s lips as a pleasant memory flitted through his mind.

“Yeah, we thought we were really somethin’ until one cold, wet night, when we found ourselves three thousand miles away from home and on patrol. It was mid-December and so dark you couldn’t see your hand in front o’ your face. Trying to keep warm, we was all bundled up in our greatcoats, mufflers and gloves. We even had on black knit caps under our helmets, you understand. It was god-awful cold and rainy. Suddenly, there we was, face down in the muck and mire, smack in the middle of a battle; we didn’t even have no foxhole to dive into. God, it was horrible; shells exploding, confusion, men screaming and dying, us firing our M-1s at an enemy we couldn’t even see. The smell of sweat, mud, and gunpowder is somethin’ my mind ain’t never gonna forget. It was the worst experience either of us had ever been through...”

Clark remembered vaguely that his adopted father never spoke of his actual time in Korea, only that he and Wayne had enlisted, and he listened in respectful silence. He watched the older man’s face, roughened by years of working under the rays of the Kansas sun, take on an impressive appearance, as if suddenly he was somewhere else in time. Wayne looked into the distance, remembering.

A deep, cleansing sigh escaped Wayne’s lips, as if the breath expelled had been held internally for years until that day. “Anyways, son, whenever you need to talk about the awful things that happens during a rescue... call me. If a man don’t open up to someone, sooner or later the memories are gonna break him down.”

With those words, Wayne took a small bite of his sandwich,

chewing slowly. Clark took that as an invitation to talk, which he did until his throat and the memories of past horrific rescues ran dry.

The afternoons spent in Smallville were what he needed: time away from rescues, from Lana's betrayal and sadly even from the desire to be working at the *Daily Planet* with a certain dark-eyed female reporter. Talking to Wayne had lifted a frightening burden from his heart, allowing him to move forward, but it still did not explain what had become of H.G. Wells.

At the top of the stairs, Clark pulled out his apartment keys and opened the door. He turned on the lights and discovered three people standing in the middle of his living room. He stood in the doorway, astounded; he must really have been deep in thought not to hear anyone's heartbeat.

"It's about time you showed up! H.G., Clark, and I were ready to go looking for you!" The woman, wearing a cheap long blonde wig and baggy clothes, said in a strikingly familiar voice.

"Good to see you again, Clark," the man said as he removed his baseball cap, revealing the original Clark Jerome Kent. "Since Lois isn't with you, I guess the secret hasn't been revealed yet?"

"Bad idea," said the blonde, rolling her eyes.

"Really, Mr. Kent, she is your greatest ally, in this or any universe," H.G. said rather dryly.

Clark, still surprised said, "What... what are all of you doing here?"

"That's easy: we're here to protect your secret identity from Tempus," Clark Jerome said.

H.G. cleared his throat, "Yes, and going forward, to make things easier on all of us, the original Clark should go by the nickname of 'CJ' and his lovely wife as 'Wanda'."

Lois responded, "That's Wanda as in the character from my detective series."

"Not as in Wanda Detroit, the famous Roaring Twenties torch singer?" Clark said, the weariness of the day coming through in his voice. "This evening is full of surprises."

The blonde said, "Wow! I didn't think she was a real person here. Anyway, I never liked my middle name. Do I look like a 'Joanne' to you?"

"Careful with the answer, buddy," said CJ with a chuckle. "She really does not like that name."

"Oh, boy, this has been a very long day," Clark groaned as he ran a shaky hand through his hair.

H.G. waved to the couch, "Please, Mr. Kent, sit down. It has been a rather arduous day for all of us. We need to talk."

'Wanda' walked over to the kitchen and began going through the takeout menus. "Good, while you boys get comfortable, I'll make some tea and order a large pizza. Extra cheese, pepperoni, and sausage, right?"

"Yeah, and add some garlic knots. Lubrano's make the best," her husband said.

She started running water into the kettle and said, "*Lubrano's* is in this universe? Great. Their cheesecake is to die for! She added sheepishly, "Huh... not that I'm ordering any!"

Clark sat down across from CJ and H.G. Wells. It was still disconcerting to be talking to another version of himself. Yet he could not help but smile; only minutes ago, he was hoping to see the famed writer/time traveler, only to have him appear – with reinforcements. Suddenly he did not feel quite so lonely, and in an odd way, defenseless.

"Ahem, Clark, this is a critical juncture in your universe. In the previous timeline, Wanda or rather 'Lois' and I appeared, and through a series of unfortunate events, changed your life."

"More like 'upended' it!" Lois said with a sigh as she put down the phone and joined the others in the living room. "The delivery guy will be here in about twenty minutes. I still feel

horrible about what happened, even if it looks like H.G. was able to fix things."

"Yes, yes. When CJ and I kept you – or rather the Lois of this universe – from traveling to the Congo, all previous time lines were altered to a much better state for our friend here."

"Tempus is going to be determined to expose Superman's identity in any way possible," CJ said.

"Why does that man want to ruin my life?"

"Because the continued existence of Superman *and* Lois Lane means their descendants will make Utopia a reality," H.G. said quietly. "Originally he was lashing out against that reality. But shortly after he arrived in this universe, one of the Time agents managed to destroy his universal transport, which marooned him here. Now he is determined to make this Alt Earth his kingdom through economic and media domination."

"When did he arrive here?" Clark asked.

"Perhaps a little less than seven years ago," H.G. replied.

"So, being Daae's henchman, and then taking over DMG, are his first steps towards that domination?" Clark said.

H.G. responded, "Quite right. Imagine how the media of any age forms the thinking of a community? In my day we had newspapers, but they only shaped the opinions of a small number. But in this time period, your electronic media is the tool that shapes the thoughts of millions. We are all writers, and as such, are perfectly aware of the damage which results from spreading irresponsible information."

"So, it's up to us to prevent Tempus from causing further harm?" CJ said.

"Yeah, but most important of all, we don't want him destroying your chance of a real life with Lois. CJ and I were at Café Americana watching while you two were eating dinner." Her smile was warm and genuine, causing Clark to quietly ache for his Lois. "It is perfectly clear to anyone there's something between you. I can't believe you haven't told her yet."

As if to punctuate this statement, 'Wanda' removed the long blonde wig, revealing short, curly brown hair. Clark's jaw almost dropped; his Lois's hair was long and thick with the faintest of blonde highlights. Witnessing this sudden change only added to the list of surprises this evening had offered. The kettle whistled shrilly, and she got up and started making everyone's tea.

"Honey, now is not the time..." CJ said patiently.

"Yes, Mrs. Kent... I mean, 'Wanda' ... or should I call you Lois since Miss Lane isn't here? Oh dear, now I'm getting confused!" H.G. groaned.

From where Clark sat, Lois was Lois, in this universe or any other. But to keep from getting confused, he had to think and refer to her as 'Wanda'. She started pouring water from the kettle into four cups, placing the tea bags in each and adding a teaspoon of honey from a small jar. Lois – Wanda – moved through the apartment as if she was perfectly comfortable with the layout. Was his apartment so much like CJ's old bachelor digs?

"Sorry, but 'Clark' here has to realize how much precious time he's wasting by not telling her. She could be a big help, especially when he's running out of the newsroom to perform a rescue. Lame excuses like 'Cheese of the Month' club are just plain... well... cheesy!"

Clark rubbed the back of his neck. Since becoming the man in the blue spandex suit, life had been incredibly busy; so much so that telling Lois about his 'other job' had never come up.

He said, without being able to look at 'Wanda', "There's been no time. Besides, due to this libel suit, Constance Hunter and the other *Daily Planet* lawyers want me to stay away from the building and its employees... especially Lois."

"Huh uh," Lois said as she plunked down a mug of tea in front of him and mumbled glumly. "I remember what that's like!"

"Then you should also remember how the *Daily Planet*, reporting, and this DMG story are important to Lois. Having

dinner with her last night was a mistake. It won't happen again. Being seen with me will only taint her. She doesn't deserve that. Look, I understand your concerns; they are valid and just. Nevertheless, this is a different world, we are different people, and we have led very different lives from the ones you and CJ had until you met at work. All of you please believe me: when the time is right, I *will* tell her." The determined look in his eyes spoke volumes.

A curiously happy Lois Lane-Kent sat next to her husband at the table, took his hand, and said, "Farmboy, this Clark is a keeper, he knows how important opening up is!"

"Ahem. Now that that is settled, let us discuss what we can do to assist poor Clark," H.G. said with a sigh.

For the next ten minutes they discussed possible plans until the pizza arrived. The conversation drifted for a time as CJ and 'Wanda' told Clark about what had transpired in their universe since his departure three months ago their time.

"It is imperative for you to continue using the underground passages, Clark. I have no doubt Tempus will keep an eye on this building, the newspaper and S.T.A.R. Labs," Wells said.

"What about Lois' apartment? It is one of the places Superman frequents."

Wells shook his head, "I must insist on curtailing all visits to Miss Lane as Superman for the foreseeable future."

The thought of Lois being watched by the minions of Tempus was disturbing: what if they made some move against her?

CJ laid a consoling hand on Clark's arm, "I know what's going through your mind. We will be moving back and forth between your universe and ours to keep an eye on both of you. Tempus won't cause Lois any grief unless he absolutely has to, and so far, she hasn't given him a reason."

"Honey, maybe you should do a few rescues while Clark Kent is working his 'day job'. It won't fool Tempus, but it should keep him off balance while bolstering the idea that Superman and Clark Kent are two separate people," 'Wanda' commented.

"Ah, Mrs. Kent," H.G. said thoughtfully, "Both you and your husband must be very careful. As we all know from bitter experience, Tempus is his most deadly when he is off balance."

Lois Lane looked at her husband, his doppelganger and the old man. On the surface, an unlikely group to defeat a master criminal, yet she was confident of their abilities, and gave them all her most winning smile. "That's very true, Mr. Wells, but this time Tempus is facing all of us! We have a better chance of finally beating him!"

H.G. Wells was encouraged by her bravado and heartily said, "Right you are, Mrs. Kent!"

Once dinner was finished, the Kents and H.G. Wells bade Clark farewell and departed for the night... through two different dimensional doors.

As the dazzling lights faded from the dimensional apertures closing, Clark shook his head in amazement, smiled wearily and mused, "Nothing is impossible."

Hours later, Clark was awake and still pondering the events of that evening when the phone rang. Thinking it was a wrong number, he quickly picked up the receiver and said sharply, "Whoever this is, don't you have a respect for a man's right to sleep? It must be 1:00am!"

A familiar, yet welcomed breathless voice came over the line, "Oh, I'm sorry, Clark, but this great news couldn't wait! We have enough evidence to prove Jasper Templar manipulated Armand Guerin! What Todd and his associate told you about the tax fraud was the truth. When Templar and his cronies found out – how, I don't know – that Todd and his friend had gone to you with the story, they wanted to discredit them and you at the same time. That no-good Senator Braxton was as much a part of the plot as Guerin was. Best of all, we have an eyewitness willing to testify against

both of them!"

Suddenly fully awake, Clark sat up straight. "What? When did all of this happen?"

"Under normal circumstances I would ask you to come over and talk, but I just got home from work and I'm bone tired." Clark could hear the shrill meow of Lady Plushbottom demanding her dinner, and he couldn't help but smile as Lois shushed the insistent feline. "Meet me at the *Daily Planet* tomorrow morning at 7:30. Perry, James and Constance Hunter will be there as well, so don't make a detour to drop off a video or anything else. Got it?"

He couldn't help but the grin grew wider. "Whatever you say, Lois."

"Good!" He could hear her draw in a tired breath; the adrenaline rush was beginning to wind down. "I need to get some sleep, today... yesterday was really long and today isn't looking to be any shorter. See you soon..."

"Lois?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks for believing in me."

The smile in her voice was unmistakable. "That's what partners – and best friends – do for each other. Good-night, Clark."

When the receiver was back in its place, Clark lay down on the pillows, and for the first time in weeks, enjoyed a deep, restful sleep.

The following morning was as bright and shiny as a new penny. With a tiny hint of apprehension and much excitement, Clark entered the revolving doors of the *Daily Planet's* lobby. He tried to head straight for the elevator when a new guard stopped him. Clark introduced himself and explained that he was expected.

"Nice to have you back, Mr. Kent. But the suits upstairs say you have to wait down here until someone comes to escort you."

Before Clark could utter a word, Sid the newsstand vendor came out, and in his bluff manner said, "Vic, I'll take Clark upstairs. You go back to your post."

The man started to argue with him but thought better of it. Sid was a permanent fixture of the building and legend had it that he and Cleat Johnson, the paper's most rewarded globetrotting reporter, were once drinking buddies. He knew many of the movers and shakers in the Metropolis publishing world, and everyone, even James Olsen, respected him. If anyone could thumb his nose at the Board of Directors of the *Daily Planet* and get away with it, it was him.

Mollified, the guard stepped back and said, "Oh, sorry, Sid." He looked at Clark and stuck out his hand for him to shake.

"Sorry, you understand."

Clark took the offered hand and shook it gratefully, "It's okay, you have a job to do."

Sid came over, clapped his hand on Clark's back, and propelled him towards the elevator, "Come on, Kent, can't keep the brass waitin'."

Minutes later, Clark was walking down the ramp towards his desk, which was surrounded by Perry, James Olsen, and Constance Hunter. Lois Lane was nowhere to be found. The young publisher was decked out in a dark suit, one more suited for the boardrooms of Wall Street than the bullpen. The expression he wore was also dark and tightly focused, suggesting to those present something important was indeed about to happen.

"Sid, thanks for bring him upstairs. Kent, glad to have you back in the bullpen where you belong!" James Olsen said as he handed Clark his ID badge. Sid again waved at Clark before he went back downstairs.

Perry grinned with a smile that was all brightness to James' darkness. "Clark! Great! The bullpen is almost back to normal. Now if Lois would just get in here! Great shades of Elvis! Of all the days for that woman to be late!"

"Thanks, Chief, Lois told me to get here and be prompt about it. What's going on?" Clark asked as he drew close to the little group and touched the desk's smooth wooden surface. It seemed almost unbelievable that last night he had despaired of ever entering the building again, much less sitting down again at his old desk.

Constance Hunter was the one who answered his query, "Oh, we have something very special brewing for the 'gentlemen' of TresAx and their high-priced lawyer, Sebastian Kell." As if to emphasize that point she took a loud sip of coffee. She was wearing one of her poorly-cut pants suits with a lacy blouse and scarf that was strongly reminiscent of the early eighties. Standing next to James they made a very strange contrast of 'geek' and 'chic'.

A door opened and Lois, holding a chocolate doughnut, shot out of the conference room. "Clark! Great, you're here! Come inside! We and our confidential source have a lot of work to do."

Somewhat taken aback, Clark said, "Confidential source? Since when does No-Knees Nolan or Bobby Bigmouth set foot in the bullpen?"

A beautiful woman with mischievous green eyes, shoulder-length red hair, and a rather tired expression came out of the conference room. "I don't know those sources, and from their odd names I don't want to. No, I'm going to help you guys take on TresAx and get a little revenge in the bargain."

Lois rolled her eyes with disgust. "Clark Kent, let me officially introduce you to my former college roommate... Linda King."

Clark looked at Lois as if she had sprouted two heads and then spoke very slowly, "Lois, since when does a key reporter from the *Metropolis Star* help the *Daily Planet*?"

Perry broke in, "Ah, Ms. King no longer works for the Star, so, technically, there will be no conflict of interest."

Still wearing an expression of surprise, he said to his partner, "Let me get this straight. Your greatest rival in the newspaper business is helping *us* with a case?"

"That's correct. My resignation letter is sitting on Preston's desk. He should be reading it anytime now. My name will be right next to yours and Lois'," the woman said with a smirk.

His partner's eyes narrowed, but to her credit she did not respond to the quip. "Come on, Clark, we have a ton of research to finish and then we start writing. Perry and James want the first part of this series to hit the stands by five o'clock tomorrow." She playfully took him by the tie and began dragging him into the conference room.

He whispered under his breath while walking into the conference room, "H.G. was right: nothing is impossible."

Linda's voice was heard to say, "Oh, Clark, does Lois still have trouble with her grammar? In college I always had to help her..."

The door closed before Lois's terse reply could be heard.

James smirked; the rivalry between Lane and King was well known within the Metropolis newspaper community. He wondered if those members of the Fourth Estate would consider the two women working together to be a tremendous hoax. He turned to Perry and said, "Now's the time to put the second phase of this operation into effect. Ms. Hunter and I have an important meeting with Armand Guerin of TresAx and his lawyer."

Perry responded with a wolfish grin, "Give 'em hell. I only wish I could be there to see the expression on Kell's smug face when you deliver the news."

Before Constance and James stepped off the high-speed elevator that brought them to the fiftieth floor of Commerce Tower, which housed the executive offices of TresAx, she spoke quietly to her boss, "Complex business negotiations are not new to you, but this one is filled with legal sinkholes. As we discussed

earlier, please allow me to be the lead."

James gave her a hard look and then said, "Okay, Ms. Hunter, but remember what's at stake if you drop the ball." He was paying her to do a job, and if part of that job required him to follow along, then as a good manager, he would do so. It was her show, after all. He had to trust that he had made the proper choice in her as the paper's legal representative, so he nodded agreement.

A bespectacled short young woman coolly introduced herself as Ms. Bell, Mr. Guerin's administrative assistant. She led them down a wide corridor, where the thick carpet absorbed all sound of their footsteps. On either side were offices, enclosed by bright glass, providing the casual observer the impression that TresAx's operations were completely transparent and above-board.

Finally, the trio arrived at the main conference room, all decorated in chrome finishes, with gray and black leather chairs around a long glass-topped table. The tone of the room was perfectly designed to either intimidate or impress visitors. There were no doubts that in the case of the *Daily Planet's* representatives, Guerin and his fellow board members intended the former.

There were only two occupants in the room: Armand Guerin, a slightly overweight man with salt-and-pepper hair, and the elegantly turned-out Sebastian Kell, who stood a head taller than his companion.

"Mr. Olsen, Ms. Hunter," Armand Guerin said, then paused a beat for emphasis. "From your request, am I to assume that you wish to settle this case out of court? You had better be serious, especially at 8:15 in the morning."

"You wanted to take this meeting offline in order to talk about a retraction in that rag you call a newspaper?" Sebastian Kell added with a smirk.

Constance sensed James bristling, but he kept his composure. He hadn't gotten to the top of the business world at such a young age by wearing volatile emotions on his sleeves. Still, Constance placed a warning hand on that sleeve and stood there facing Kell and Guerin with quiet confidence.

Kell scrutinized her. She was no fashion plate, unlike so many other female corporate lawyers in his acquaintance. Her suit was serviceable, but rather on the plain side, and did absolutely nothing for her figure. She wore oversized ugly glasses, little or no make-up, and 'old lady' penny loafers instead of heels.

Before the silence stretched out too long, Kell indicated a couple of chairs and all of the lawyers and their clients sat down at the conference table.

Constance made a show of pulling colored files folders from her briefcase, a battered affair that looked like something she would have used in college, and neatly arranged them on the table in front of her.

The appearance of poise on Constance Hunter's part began to grate on Kell's nerves. He knew her reputation, and everything he had heard indicated that she was strictly a minor-league player. That was why he was becoming concerned; she should be shaking in those tacky loafers. What could be the source of this confidence? What could they have found? Guerin and TresAx's Board of Directors had assured his firm that this would be an open and shut case. But from the way these two were behaving, it was beginning to look like something was wrong; horribly wrong. He would have to bluff his way through the meeting and employ legal intimidation, his favorite technique and one that he used so well. "We should open this meeting to discuss the wording of the front-page retraction and the size of the settlement to which my client is entitled?" Sebastian Kell enquired.

Guerin said, "It should be sizable, especially considering the amount of public humiliation TresAx has suffered from Kent's article. Todd Sylvester was a trusted employee; his lies have damaged our reputation both in this country and in France."

In reply, Constance calmly straightened the stack of files in

front of her, basically ignoring Kell's question and Guerin's statement. Her apparent unconcern started to shake Kell's confidence. He could feel the perspiration soaking his fine white twill shirt at the armpits and he was thankful for the dark suit coat he was wearing because it hid the effect she was having on him.

Constance was playing a psychological game with Kell. She hoped that her show of coolness in the face of his attack would put him somewhat off of his game. She would have been surprised had she known just how effectively the ploy was working.

Still silent, she opened the first white file on the stack and calmly perused the contents, slowly flipping through several pages before she said, without even looking up from the pages, "What would be the size of the settlement that your client would demand?"

"I think my client would be satisfied with \$15,000,000," Kell answered.

Without looking up, Constance closed the top folder, and calmly moving it aside, opened the second one, a folder with a deep blue color. She asked, "Oh... \$15,000,000, are you sure that would be enough?"

Kell couldn't believe his ears. Was she offering more than the inflated figure of \$15,000,000? This much cash had to be from Olsen's pockets. His research assistant Ruth had assured him the *Daily Planet* did not have such a depth of resources at their disposal. He decided to play it coy, "The judge could award us more if we actually went to court, but for an out-of-court settlement, that sum should be adequate."

Constance finally looked up and said, "But \$15,000,000 wouldn't even come close to being enough."

Kell was taken aback and blurted out, "Enough for what?"

Before she answered, Constance moved the second folder aside and opened the third, colored in blood red, as she said, "Let me propose a hypothetical scenario. Okay?"

Wary, Kell asked, "Hypothetical?"

"Yes, hypothetical. Hypothetically speaking, how would \$15,000,000 benefit TresAx, when in Federal Court it would be forced to pay the tidy sum of," she pulled a piece of paper from the folder and read from it, "in round figures, \$65,000,000 in back taxes? Hypothetically, of course."

"What are you talking about? I thought you were here to discuss the settlement of our case."

"No, Mr. Kell, we are here to make sure this company is very publicly embarrassed and then hauled into Federal Court and forced to pay in the amount of..." She made a show of consulting her notes. "Sixty five million three hundred fifty-one thousand ninety-one dollars..." she closed the folder and set it aside as she finished, "and seventy-five cents in back taxes."

Panic was evident in his voice as Guerin spluttered out, "What?! Where does a loser like you get the nerve to tell us how much back taxes we owe?" He leaned over the table, his face grown red. "Mr. Kell has informed me you have never won a case in trial," Guerin snapped.

Constance ignored this comment and again looked into the red file, then finally said, "I understand there are e-mails floating around your company's computers detailing the history of conversations between yourself, Pierce Arthur, Daryl Yates, and lest we forget, Senator Ian Braxton. He was the one who provided cover for all of this. Hmmm, I wonder what's going to happen with his bid for the White House. We are still speaking hypothetically, of course."

James was looking at her with an expression of surprise and not a little horror. He was about to blurt something out, but a sideways glance from Constance silenced him.

"That fool Braxton is not our concern. He must mount his own legal defense. Our concern in this meeting is for the company TresAx. Now, where did you get this information?" Guerin asked while pointing at the files.

Her gaze continued to rest on Guerin when she sighed, almost as if she were scolding them, "My source is not important at the moment. The fact is that the e-mails exist. Once we are in court, you fine gentlemen will be required to *allow* every e-mail on the servers in the building to be presented... including those and a good many others TresAx does not want to come to light. There's no doubt that Mr. Kell, although not wanting to go to trial, will make certain the jury selection will be in TresAx's favor. Those jurors might not appreciate the intricacies of international tax law, but I assure you they *will* understand withholding damaging evidence."

Sebastian looked daggers at Guerin. This conversation was out of his control and he was determined to prevent it from going any further. "Who are those men?"

Constance cleared her throat and then answered, her voice quiet and even, "Oh, I see your client did not inform you. They are the IRS agents who managed TresAx's case. Since we have these fascinating e-mails and their names, consider carefully, Mr. Kell, how much supplementary incriminating evidence the *Daily Planet* has at its fingertips? Such as who *really* owns your client's company and why he wants this newspaper legally silenced?"

Guerin's expression was unreadable, while his lawyer's face was taut. "Ms. Hunter and Mr. Olsen, may I contact you tomorrow?"

James said smoothly, "Of course, Mr. Kell. Make sure it's before 1:00 pm because that's when the *Daily Planet* starts printing the evening edition. Care to guess what the front-page headlines will be?"

Guerin practically jumped out of his chair. "It doesn't matter what's on the front page! We will deny it!" He leaned over the table and shoved the stack of files back at Constance. "Take this load of garbage with you!" He looked at James and said with a sneer, "Why are you letting this woman run a meeting you called for? What do you care if the *Daily Planet* sinks from a libel suit? Your computer firm is on the cutting edge of the electronic superhighway and making a boatload of money! Why protect such an anachronism? In twenty years nobody will be reading newspapers. The internet will replace them!"

The young man's answer was succinct, "All that may be true. First, for a 'loser', Ms. Hunter is doing a marvelous job of putting you into your place, which is what I pay her to do: legally protect the interests of the *Daily Planet*. Second, after working at the *Daily Planet* for a while, I've discovered a respect and love for newspaper publishing. The traditions need to be protected and cherished. Someday, all news will be on the internet, and if that's the case, the *Daily Planet* will be there to report it. As for this ridiculous libel suit TresAx is throwing at us? My paper didn't start this fight, but we will *finish it* with enough ammunition to send the entire Board of Directors and the CEO packing to the latest white-collar jail, oh, excuse me... detention center in the country." James grinned; he was enjoying this game.

The fight seemed to have escaped Armand Guerin, and he shook his head in disbelief. "You don't have the nerve to print the story. If one word of those lies appears..."

James cut him off. "You smart boys should have thought of that before you sent this fancy-dressed pit bull after us. Oh, just as a point of interest, Clark Kent is back on the staff working with his partner to write a story I have no doubt will net them a Pulitzer nomination." James picked up the files and handed them to Constance, who quietly put them back in her briefcase. They stood, signaling that the meeting, such as it was, had come to an end.

As they walked towards the door, Constance turned, stopped, and said, "Mr. Guerin, a bit of free advice? Give Todd Sylvester and his associate their jobs back along with a very tidy settlement. Otherwise, lawyers – excellent ones, not 'losers' like me – will be falling all over themselves to take on their case."

With those words ringing in the air, James Olsen opened the glass door for Constance, and they departed.

For a moment neither man said a word, then Sebastian gathered his things, stood up and walked towards the door.

“Where are you going?” Guerin snapped.

“To confer with my partners about this latest development and have my paralegal Ruth help me with some additional research. You gave me the impression Olsen and Hunter were bringing a peashooter to this meeting, but they brought a legal bazooka which might very well land you and a lot of other people in jail.”

“Okay, but you better get back here. We have to talk about what to say to these people by 1:00 tomorrow.”

Kell went out the door without answering his client.

Guerin grabbed the phone and his fingers savagely hit the buttons as if he were punching James Olsen in the face.

An unfamiliar voice came over the line, “You have reached the office of Gregory Daae. How may I be of assistance?”

As they walked out of the building, James asked, “Where did you get such a specific figure for what they owe?”

Her reply made him laugh, “I made it up.”

The chance that she had taken made his heart race, but when he calmed down, he asked, “Why?”

With a sly expression, she replied, “It makes them think that we have even more specific information than we really do. They will be panicky and driving their staff crazy trying to confirm that figure. If what they come up with differs, they will probably think that their staff has missed something and demand that they redo their calculations. They will be so distracted and worried that they will have no option but to drop the libel suit because they can’t risk going to court while we have such specific information. I would expect a call sometime well before your one o’clock deadline informing you that they are dropping the suit.”

Looking her right in the eyes, James said, “I always prided myself on knowing who the right person was for a job. You just proved that I haven’t been wrong. Taking on those guys worked up my appetite. Brunch?”

Constance nodded appreciatively, “Great, I’m famished!”

“Good. By the way, have you ever played in Perry’s monthly poker game?”

“No. Why?”

James, couldn’t help but chuckle as they stepped into his limousine.

During an excellent brunch at a local bistro, James did not mention the case to Constance. When they were back in his limousine, he said, “We shouldn’t have used that line about the e-mails. They are the property of TresAx, and since you obtained that information illegally, they will be inadmissible in court.”

“True, but sometimes something smaller has to be sacrificed in order to gain something greater. Besides, right now they have greater worries than those e-mails. As you said earlier, we needed TresAx to put an end to their libel suit. I would assume no matter what they say, you are going ahead with the article series on TresAx?”

“Of course! With Linda King’s deposition and her appearance in court – if this goes that far – I have every confidence we will win this case.”

“Agreed. Because once Lois and Clark finish the articles on TresAx, there is the little matter of facing down DMG. We both know that Guerin and company are guppies compared to that tank of sharks.”

“DMG is another matter entirely, and I won’t get into the water with them until we have more than just Linda King’s testimony. After all, she was Preston Carpenter’s girlfriend for years. That intimate relationship can be a help and a burden all at

once. A sharp lawyer like Sebastian Kell could turn her testimony into a case of a woman scorned. We need someone else to back up that part of her story.”

The two rode in silence for a while, then James said, “By the way, that was impressive legal footwork. Kell didn’t know what hit him.”

“Thank you.” With a perfectly straight face, she continued, “Compliments are very nice, but nonetheless I expect to see a more than decent bump in my salary after this is over.”

James nodded in agreement. “Hell, Constance, when the presses finish rolling out the last story in the series, everybody on the staff that’s involved in this case is gonna get a raise *and* a fat bonus!”

Part Twenty-Eight

“Yes! It’s finally done!” Lois crowed triumphantly over the final draft of the first article in the TresAx series as she reached for the ‘Send’ key to e-mail it over to Perry’s computer.

She stopped when Linda King, looking over her shoulder, said, “No, it’s not. Look at this sentence in the last paragraph: *than* is mixed up with *then*. Still can’t get rid of that pesky habit after all these years, Lane? No wonder you depend on Clark’s grammatical skills so much!”

Clark’s head shot up from a studying a file. It had been like this all morning, with him acting as reporter *and* referee. But despite the sharp words and barbs that flew back and forth between them, these longtime rivals had quickly forged themselves into a team. Linda was a tenacious and talented writer and could spot flaws in Lois’s copy, just as Clark did. Whereas Lois could plow through dozens of files, ingest the material and reach intuitive conclusions, frequently yielding correct results. He wondered what would have happened if Linda had not allowed her emotions and ambitions to sabotage their friendship?

“Let’s not worry about one grammatical error. Perry’s red pen will handle that.” Her finger stabbed down on the send key.

“We should think about the day after tomorrow’s follow-up article and sidebars,” Clark said.

“Yeah, like TresAx’s apology and how many members of their Board of Directors will still be around at the end of the week!” Lois said, chuckling.

There was a knock at the door, and Clark told the person to enter. Stacy stood in the doorway with a sunny grin on her face. “Lois, a call just came in from Senator Braxton’s office. Guess what?”

Lois was tired, yet she found Stacy’s enthusiasm uplifting and decided to play along, “No idea, tell me!”

“He wants to have a phone interview with you. Apparently, someone informed him about an early morning meeting that our publisher and in-house counsel had with TresAx.”

“Ha! Now we’ve got them on the ropes!” Turning to Clark, she said, “Hey, partner, maybe you ought to call him back. That’ll really make his day!”

Clark adjusted his glasses and said, “No, that might seem like gloating.”

Exasperated, Lois threw up her hands and fired back, “That’s exactly what this is, Kansas! That man and his cronies almost ruined your reputation and career!”

Clark put the pencil he had been holding behind his ear, placed his elbows on the table, and with a thoughtful expression, said, “Maybe, but thanks to your tenacity and Linda’s information, I’m back at work. Senator Braxton is scared, and he should be, but we have to leave room for our enemy to be our friend. I’ll talk with him. Whatever he has to say should make an attention-grabbing quote. He can provide us with additional information that’ll help Agent Scardino and Mayson Drake.”

His partner nodded. No matter what happened with TresAx, this scandal was going to impair the Senator’s reputation. Yielding

to Clark's better judgement, she said, "Okay, let's give him a little wiggle room... talk to his assistant and see what happens."

Stacy, who had been standing in the door throughout the exchange, asked, "So, what's the verdict? Do I transfer the call here?"

"No, Stacy, send it to my desk." He stood up from the table and walked towards the door. Suddenly he bent down and whispered into Lois's ear, "My conversation with Senator Braxton will take a while. Please put aside your differences with Linda and talk; she's a little down." With that, he followed Stacy into the newsroom and closed the door behind him.

Linda was silent. She had moved to the other end of the room when Stacy showed up, and for all her sarcastic remarks at Lois, she looked lost; the dark half-moons of exhaustion under her eyes were stark against her pale skin. She was looking at a file, but not reading it, and the sense of isolation and dejection that hung around her was palpable.

"Ah, are you okay?" Lois asked, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

"No, no, I'm not," Linda said, as she turned to Lois with tears in her eyes.

Feeling flustered and not a little embarrassed, Lois grabbed some napkins left over from lunch, crossed the room and gave them to her. A minute passed while Linda dried moist eyes and vainly attempted to fix make-up that was beyond repair. "Thanks for the tissue." She sniffed again, looked at Lois, and straightened her back, then said, with a shade of her natural audacity, "I... I always envied you."

Lois head snapped up, "*Envied* me? Why? You were the one who ended up with Paul and my story."

"Come on, Lois, none of the college newspaper staff really thought I had researched and written that article. One guy said it had your 'hell-bent-for-leather' style all over it. He was right. I had to work twice as hard as anyone in our class and three times as hard to keep up with the great Lois Lane. Our professors had you pegged to be a star in whatever branch of journalism you entered into."

"Funny, none of them ever told me that," Lois muttered quietly.

Linda sniffed indignantly and responded, "Sure, what professor ever tells his or her favorite pupil they're special until after they are no longer attending their class? Luka Brunner always had the highest hopes that you might visit him in Germany. Maybe even work with him for a while." She sighed, "It's a pity he died before you could go. Anyway, being with Paul was no prize; he kept talking to me about how great you were, not just as a reporter, but as a person. He dumped me shortly after we graduated. I really loved that man, but he was miserable with me, because he hurt you."

It was news to her that Paul had regrets about the way their relationship had ended. Nonetheless, Lois could not work up any sympathy for Linda on this subject, and so said nothing, allowing her long-time rival to continue.

"Did you know I tried to interview at the *Daily Planet*? But the managing editor at the time wouldn't even take my resume. I learned later that he already planned to hire the 'very talented' intern, Lois Lane. The *Star* had a hiring freeze, so after sending out literally hundreds of resumes and cover letters, I was hired by a newspaper in Florida and spent the first year of my career writing obituaries."

Lois replied with a small smile, "Perry says, 'Never underestimate the importance of a well-written obituary'."

"Yeah, well, I can't complain, since working there taught me a lot about the newspaper business. Stuff our esteemed professors would have NEVER mentioned in the classroom. But it took me five years before I could land a job in Metropolis, the town that was owned by the famous Lois Lane." There was a touch of

bitterness when she said this.

"Linda, I didn't realize you felt that way. To be perfectly honest, I always thought it was me who was stuck in the trenches, while you traveled all over the country."

A heavy silence settled over the conference room as each woman realized they had taken very different paths to reach this point in their lives. In the process both had lost something precious. One misplaced principles and abandoned her moral compass in pursuit of material gain and prestige, while the other had to a certain degree lost the ability to trust her male colleagues. The absence of such important qualities had crippled them both in ways they were only now discovering.

Deeply touched by Linda's embittered confession, Lois bit her lip. Once, long ago, she had promised to be kinder to workmates; Linda was working to expose a lot of dangerous people at the risk of her own life. The least Lois could do was be empathic to her now former rival's predicament. Slowly she reached out her hand and said, "Hello, my name is Lois Lane, welcome to the *Daily Planet*."

Linda took her hand and gave it a generous squeeze, "Linda King, pleased to meet you."

They smiled at each other, and Lois hoped they had turned a corner not only professionally, but also personally. "Likewise. Now, let's start outlining the second article."

Sebastian Kell stepped out to the elevator and walked down the ramp into the newsroom at 11:00am. Several people stopped typing and looked at the sartorially correct man. He walked purposefully towards Perry's office and, upon reaching it, politely knocked on the door. Perry, his face tight with anger at the man who had forced him to suspend one of his best reporters, ushered him in and closed the door, but did not lower the blinds. The *Daily Planet's* managing editor wanted the entire bullpen to watch this exchange.

Seconds later, the elevator doors opened again. This time Constance Hunter exited. Following on her heels was James Olsen, who was trying to hide a mischievous grin, as they made their way to Perry's office. Again, once they were inside, the blinds remained open.

Catherine stood between Lois's desk and Clark's. "Ladies and gentlemen of the press, something big is about to happen."

Steve leaned back in his chair and grinned like a hungry bear, "We should get popcorn. This is better than a prizefight."

"How much does anyone want to bet that Perry wins?" Diane said to no one in particular.

Elsie sniffed, "It's so good to have you back in the newsroom, Clark. That Mr. Kell is a horrid man!"

"Get a load of that Armani suit he's wearin'. It must have set him back a grand," Ralph said with envy.

There was an undercurrent of bitterness in the newsroom against Ralph, so no one bothered to answer his comment.

The voice of compassion and reason came from an unexpected corner. "Oh, I don't know, it takes a lot of guts to walk in here and admit that you're wrong, especially for a man with Kell's reputation," Jack said in a respectful tone.

Diane, not bothering to hide her surprise, responded, "How could you say that?"

His calm eyes scanned the room quickly, and then using his chin to point to Perry's office, Jack said, "Can any of you see Lex Luthor or Gregory Daae in there?"

A low murmur of voices moved about the room like a living thing. None of them could imagine either businessman doing such a thing. In fact, the possibility of the billionaires even *sending* a subordinate to accomplish the same task was unthinkable. Jack Bartholomew was right.

After a few minutes, James and Constance stood up, shook hands with Kell, exited Perry's office, and departed to their proper

domain upstairs, leaving Perry alone with the lawyer. The two men continued their conversation briefly and then Perry stood up and saw the younger man out.

Rather than make his way directly to the elevator and out of the building, Kell, empathic enough to know that not just a little animosity was aimed in his direction, walked towards Clark and held out his hand. “Mr. Kent, please accept my sincere apology. It was nothing personal. I came here today to officially inform Mr. White and Mr. Olsen, and of course your very capable legal counsel, Ms. Hunter, that as of today, our firm shall no longer represent TresAx. Their Board of Directors decided to follow Mr. Hunter’s advice. As our last official act for them, my paralegal, Ruth Brevard, has delivered two thick envelopes to Mr. Todd and Dennis Shaw which contain general non-disclosure agreements and sizable checks. They only need to sign the non-disclosure forms and then return to employment with the company on Monday.” He thought for a moment, then added, “If they so desire.”

Clark, somewhat taken aback, accepted the lawyer’s hand and shook it firmly. Catherine and Lois stood by, watching the exchange with similar expressions of astonishment on their faces. Clark recovered quickly and said, “What about the libel suit?”

The weight of tension seemed to lift itself from Kell’s shoulders, and he said with a smirk, “I have informed Mr. Olsen that my firm has severed all ties with TresAx due to their complete lack of transparency. It is unlikely any decent law firm would take on this case. Don’t be surprised if they make an announcement to drop the libel suit.”

It seemed as if the entire newsroom exhaled all at once upon hearing this news.

“So, Mr. Guerin will contact us about a statement?” Clark said.

“That will be up to his Board of Directors.” He turned and was about to make his way up the ramp when he stopped, and with the first genuine smile any of them had seen on his face, said, “Get back to work, everyone; you have a newspaper to get out – a well-written one which I might start reading. Have a good day, Mr. Kent.”

When he was gone, the bullpen was abuzz with excitement. Perry charged out of his office and said, “Lois! Clark! This story is fantastic! All the facts, with plenty of cold, hard evidence for backup. TresAx has gone completely silent. Great shades of Elvis! I wouldn’t be surprised if they call a press conference by this evening! Well, don’t just stand there! Get started on the next article!”

“Right, Chief!” Lois said, beaming. This was perfect, just like old times! She turned and noticed that her partner was headed up the ramp with a determined stride.

“Clark! Where are you going? We have to start on that second article, and there should be a celebratory dinner afterwards!”

“Sorry, Lois! My errand won’t take me very long... promise.”

“Uh huh, I’ve heard that before!” Lois muttered under her breath. But then she smiled. Yeah, this was just like old times. She returned to the conference room. At least she and Linda could still work on the second article’s outline.

As soon as the door closed behind her, Ralph picked up the phone and dialed Bonesteel’s number.

“We have to meet,” he said in a harsh whisper.

“Very well, Mr. Lombard. Where?”

“Metropolis museum, at the usual time.”

After a quick flight, Clark once again found himself at the Brookside Heights suburban home of Todd Sylvester. This time the former TresAx employee warmly welcomed him inside and introduced him to his wife Tara and their two children, Josiah and Daniele.

Tara, recognizing that her husband had urgent business to discuss with the reporter, said, “Babe, why don’t you and Mr. Kent go into the dining room, so you can talk without the children listening in? I can make some coffee?”

While they waited for the coffee, Todd and Clark discussed their amazing change of fortune, now that it was proven that TresAx was in the wrong.

“I suspect the libel suit against the *Daily Planet* is going to be dropped, but we are still printing the entire tax evasion story about TresAx. Mr. Olsen wants other corporations who take a pot shot at us to realize we always have irrefutable proof backing up our investigative stories.”

“Good. At least they’ll think twice before firing any other people who are looking out for the integrity of the company. Whoever provided that additional evidence really knew where the bodies were buried.”

At that moment, Tara came in with a tray holding two steaming cups of coffee. She set it down and then departed.

“There’s no doubt in my mind that several of the executives will either be terminated or forced to resign. They are going to want – need – people with integrity, in order to rebuild their reputation.” Clark stopped talking to let his words sink into Todd’s mind. When the silence stretched on, he added, “Of course, the choice of returning to TresAx is up to you.”

Todd said very quietly, “The check they sent over was for three million dollars. Guerin and that bunch of lowlifes must be awfully scared of one unemployed CPA.”

Clark said nothing and took a slow sip of his coffee.

“Tara and I were stunned when Ms. Brevard showed up here this morning. But no, I won’t take the job or any position with that company. The Board of Directors of TresAx ruined my life, my reputation, and frightened my family, all because Dennis Shaw and I wanted to do the right thing. Returning to that pack of cutthroats would be stupid; the environment is toxic for me. But I will sign this non-disclosure agreement and take the check. It’ll cover my legal fees and still leave more than enough cash for us to live on until I can find another position,” Todd said as he thoughtfully stirred his coffee.

“May I make a suggestion?” Clark asked carefully. He did not want to offend this proud man.

“Sure.”

“S.T.A.R. Labs in Alexandria, Va. is looking for an experienced CPA. They may be a nationwide research firm, with more geniuses working for them than any other think tank, but nevertheless they still need to keep track of the dollars. Having a man with your integrity working for them would be in their best interests. The *Daily Planet* does a great deal of business with them. Perhaps I can set you up with an interview?”

The black man nodded his head and said, “Yeah, my wife’s family is in Alexandria. They’ve been trying to get us to move down there for years. It won’t be Metropolis or New York, but yes, I would like to go on that interview.”

Clark stood, ready to take his leave, and shook Todd’s outstretched hand. “Good. Let me make a few phone calls to get the process started. I’m certain everything is going to work out for you and your family. S.T.A.R. Labs has been rated one of the ten best companies in the country. They can always use a good employee, especially one who has more than proven his uprightness. Oh, don’t ever think that contacting me was wrong, or a mistake. You and Dennis are to be commended.”

On the newsstands that afternoon the evening edition read:
TresAx Tax Fraud Real!

Daily Planet reporter exonerated!

Story by Clark J. Kent and Lois Lane

Special Contributor – Linda King

Evidence has come to light regarding accusations against this newspaper and one its reporters, Clark J. Kent. Apparently TresAx

has been shielded from paying taxes through the aid of two IRS agents. These agents, who are suspended without pay and currently under investigation, admit to their crimes as well as to who was behind their bribery payments. It is obvious that the *Daily Planet* was correct in its report of a month ago about the unethical practices of this firm. **Story continues on page A2.**

“Oui, ma petite, I shall meet you at *Mimi’s* for supper around seven o’clock.” Gregory Daae concluded his conversation with Lana and began working on a report. Married life with his lovely young bride was still fresh and exciting. She had overcome her jealousy about Arianna, although for a time living with her had been... *intéressant*.

His pleasant thoughts were interrupted by loud voices outside, followed by the abrupt opening of his office door. A very angry Jasper Templar stormed in and roared, “Gregory! Have you seen the *Daily Planet’s* front page? What is going on!”

Mrs. Nordell, his new assistant, said in an exasperated tone, “Sir, I... I tried to get him to wait, but he refuses to listen to reason!”

He turned to her, and said in a surprisingly kind voice, “It is all right. *S’il vous plaît*, do not concern yourself. As a matter of fact, take the remainder of the day off. Mr. Templar and I have matters of import to discuss.”

Looking from one man to the other and not knowing what to think, she nodded somewhat shakily and said, “Very well, good afternoon, sir.”

As soon as the door closed behind her, Daae turned his blue eyes to Templar. The fixed coldness which for the most part had been absent since his marriage had returned like an uncanny ice storm in mid-summer. His tone of voice was devoid of emotion. “Imbecile. Of course, I read it. Duncan brought it upstairs earlier.”

“What are we going to do? Those agents haven’t revealed my name, but it’s only a matter of time.”

“Perhaps you should have considered that when *personally* making arrangements with them and Guerin. It would have been much better to have sent a subordinate like Bonesteel. But it appears the taste of power to manipulate others was too great a drug for you to dismiss. It shall be your undoing.”

“*My* undoing! Didn’t you tell me on your wedding day to render Kent harmless? That’s what I did, and made the *Daily Planet* look foolish in the bargain. Eventually his partner had to be affected by the situation; anything she wrote would have been tainted.”

“*Mademoiselle* Lane is another part of our conversation. But first, let us approach the situation with TresAx. I am afraid the American authorities will need a, what is the word? Ah yes... a scapegoat.”

Meanwhile, just outside Daae’s office suite door, Bonesteel was entering as a rather agitated Mrs. Nordell was leaving.

“Good afternoon. I was wondering if Mr. Templar is in with Mr. Daae? I have some rather important matters to discuss with him.”

She shook her head sadly, “Yes, he is. They are having a ‘discussion’, if a shouting match can be called that. How Stephanie put up with working for that man while Mr. Daae was gone is beyond me. I’ve been given permission to leave for the day, so if you want to wait here for them, be my guest.” With those words, she quickly exited the suite.

Rather than waiting in the corridor, Bonesteel, usually the most circumspect of individuals, let himself into the outer office where Mrs. Nordell usually sat. He didn’t hear anything coming from the inner office and so decided to pass the time looking around. The disorganized desk and bulletin board were a far cry from Stephanie’s tenure. He was gazing disapprovingly at the tacky array of newspaper cartoons and family pictures when unexpectedly he heard Daae speak, in a sharp voice. “I told you to

gère... manage the situation. Now this house of cards is falling apart, and the fallout must be dealt with!”

Carefully, so as not to make a sound, he placed his large ear against the door and listened intently.

Bonesteel recognized Templar’s voice as he said, “Then let us sacrifice a pawn. Bonesteel is perfect. It will take only a few phone calls to the right people. I can summon him down to this office and within two minutes convince him it will be in his best interests to play the role.”

“Why him? Surely there is some other way to deflect attention elsewhere. His financial skills make him quite useful,” Daae said blandly.

Warming to his subject, Templar continued, his voice nasty as a coiling snake. “There *is* no one else, Gregory! Look, he has a history of pilfering from companies and doing it in a way they would never suspect until it is too late. That’s how we met; he was stealing from the cable company we were both working for. How do you think I was able to acquire the funds to buy ZeroM in the first place?”

“Good point. *Continue*.”

“All the information about TresAx is on his computer and private files. Besides, he would never say anything about us to the Securities Trade Commission as long as we promise to pay him to keep silent.”

“Ah, but what if he doesn’t stay quiet?”

Templar responded with a tight, mean smile. “Of course, we can arrange a rather unpleasant accident to befall him - with all the evidence of his illegal actions intact, of course.”

The eyes behind the steel wire-rimmed frames were narrowly appraising Templar’s glee over ending another person’s existence. It was revolting. He hid the emotion so well it was not betrayed in his body language or voice. He merely said, “Of course... ‘we’ could do something else.”

Templar looked up and said, “What else is to be done? This is the perfect set-up!”

“*Oui*, this is true. It is a perfect set-up for *you* to be thrown to the American authorities, not Tristan Bonesteel.”

Templar stared at his employer, dumbfounded. The words *American authorities* were not lost on him. “Me? Have you lost your mind?”

Daae’s shoulders gave the merest of shrugs. “Not at all. I have kept a close scrutiny upon you from the day Arianna introduced us. Jasper, I have met many a *scélérat* – villain – in my time, and none are as shrewd as you, but sadly, that shrewdness causes you to be *bâclant*... sloppy. It came to my attention early on that Mr. Bonesteel has been the agile mind behind all stock manipulations and research into acquiring LexCorp. You were the one handling miserly purchases from little old ladies and strong arming small-time investors; sloppy, illicit behavior that would have brought us to the attention of the STC.”

Taken aback, Templar said, “How...?”

Daae waved his hand airily. “It’s not important. But I will say this much: never underestimate the strength of a highly professional administrative team. Oh, and a driver who keeps his ear to the ground and follows you. Duncan informed me of the meetings to see Preston Carpenter and all about RoyalPoint. I suggest you go back to your office and pretend nothing has happened. Until the STC officials, FBI, and the police come, of course. Mr. Bonesteel will be taking your place.”

“You can’t do this! Blame will fall on you!” Templar exploded.

“That is doubtful. All of this happened while I was in Zurich. The dates of those reports you were so determined I read reflect that fact. Jasper, you have made a number of enemies within this company with your boorish behavior. There will be no shortage of persons who would be only too happy to see you gone. If need be, I will *personally* request that Mrs. Aronnax testify against you. A

woman with her pristine reputation will be very compelling on the witness stand. All the computers you have used contain the information the authorities will require in order to implicate only yourself. I thought that was *un touche élégant*. The file folders were placed there by a first-rate computer expert; one who is now living a very luxurious life in a country that does not have an extradition treaty with the United States.”

“Daae, don’t think you can get away with this! I’ll expose your and Arianna’s plans to take over LexCorp. I’ll even throw in the scandalous fact that you two have been playing around! Won’t your precious Lana like that?”

As if not hearing a single word, Daae continued, “What has become of the *criminel*, Fisher, who tampered with Miss Lane’s brakes? No doubt you probably led Mr. Bonesteel and others to think you killed him. But my underworld contacts inform me you had a person by the unlikely name of ‘Icepick’ take care of him? Monsieur Icepick was very cooperative and is willing to do time should the need arise. One has to admire a man who wants to take care of his mother should he be incarcerated.”

Templar looked on in horror. How could he have so wholly underestimated this man?

“As I said before, return to your office. Do not attempt to leave Metropolis. You will be stopped and the ‘arrangement’ planned for Mr. Bonesteel will happen to you.”

On the other side of the door, Bonesteel nearly tripped over himself attempting to run out of the office without making a sound. His thin legs moved quickly. He had to get to his computer and destroy all those electronic files. Thankfully, he kept hard copies at his bank in a safe deposit box. It was time to run to the *Daily Planet* and the federal government for protection. He intended to bring Ralph Lombard along as an additional prize.

A shaken Templar got up and walked towards the door, with Daae following not far behind.

“Jasper.” The cold lash of Daae’s voice caused him to turn around.

“What is it?”

With those words, Daae slammed his right fist into Templar’s stomach, knocking him to the ground and causing him to gasp for breath. Daae walked away from him and went back to his desk and sat down, completely unconcerned that Templar would dare to strike back, and convinced of the beaten man’s inability to do anything.

“Go back to your office, Jasper; it is a normal working day. Make certain your appearance is one of *dignité*... dignity. After all, you are an executive of DMG. If you ever threaten me by using my wife again, it will give me great pleasure to kill you, and I shall not use a subordinate.”

They stared at each other for the space of three heartbeats, taking each other’s measure. Then Templar, using the door handle as a support, slowly, painfully pulled himself off the floor, opened the door, and holding his sore midsection, stumbled into the outer office.

“Thank... you for giving me this phone number. It will come in handy. Mr. Lombard wants to meet me. Daae knows all about Templar’s ‘other’ business activities, so now is the perfect time to set a trap for him. It will make my case, especially with all the information provided to Miss Lane, more attractive to the *Daily Planet* and Federal Witness Protection.”

Stephanie’s heart caught in her throat, but finally she was able to ask, “Are you ready?”

There was silence over the phoneline and when he spoke the voice was tremulous, “No, definitely not. Nonetheless, it’s time I stopped sneaking around and letting others carry my responsibilities. If Mr. Lombard is not caught, he can do irreparable harm.”

“All right. What do you want me to do, Tristan?”

He sighed, regretting that this would probably be the last time they would ever speak. Still, he did not want her to remember him as a coward, incapable of standing up for himself. He was pleased to know Gregory Daae thought enough of his abilities to want to keep him on, but alas, that was a two-edged sword. Perhaps the day would come when he too would be thrown to the wolves. “Nothing. Enjoy retirement. Thank you for everything. Good-bye, Stephanie.” With those gently spoken words he hung up.

He looked around Daae’s conference room; it had been swept for bugs only an hour before. He had to make this next call very quickly. There was no doubt in his mind that an angry Jasper Templar would be looking for him.

He dialed the number, waited for the connection, and when a gruff voice came over the line, he swallowed and said, “Hello, Inspector William Henderson, my name is Tristan Bonesteel...”

Arianna Carlin-Luthor sat on the comfortable gray couch in her private room within the penthouse. She looked out over the city without seeing its afternoon skyline. On the floor beside her were the crumbled remnants of the *Daily Planet*, the front page trumpeting its headline with a picture of Jasper Templar being led away in steel handcuffs by the police. Matters were definitely not going according to plan; all her dreams of destroying a man who no longer loved her would be turned to ashes.

What was Gregory doing to protect himself and his young wife? The possibility that he might eventually expose her part of the illegal LexCorp takeover and head off for Europe was uppermost in her mind. He was refusing to accept phone calls to his private line and her presence in the DMG building would cause more than a few comments.

The bile of acidic fear rose up from a tightened gut and ran like a tiny, angry lizard over her tongue.

Two days later, an exasperated Ralph nearly jumped off the elevator as its doors opened to discharge him into the bullpen and then, just as unceremoniously, snapped closed behind him. “I swear that elevator is out to get me,” he mumbled under his breath.

“Morning, Lombard. What seems to be the problem?” asked Pete from Sports, who was stirring his morning coffee with a straw.

“Nothin’. That stupid elevator; every time I get on it, it shakes like drunken belly dancer! I need to start taking the steps.”

Pete gave him an odd look and said, “From the looks of you, it wouldn’t hurt.”

“Ha ha! Very funny, old man. Someday soon, I’m gonna kiss that elevator and this stupid job good-bye!”

Pete, unmoved by Ralph’s rude comment, said, “Well, now, I wouldn’t recommend you kissin’ the elevator car. There are literally decades of fingerprints and germs on the walls.” He lowered his voice, looked around and said in a conspiratorial whisper, “How do you plan on paying off those gambling debts without a job? Word is out the ponies haven’t been good to you.”

Ralph’s face flushed beet red. He gave Pete a dirty look and sneered, “Mind your own business! How... how’d you find out, anyway?”

“Steve’s been here for a while, but I’ve reported sports in this town for thirty-seven years. Word gets around. You need to watch out, young fella, the wrong kind of people will come around looking for you if those debts aren’t paid.” He took a loud slurp of his coffee, smiled, and then turned away.

Ralph swore under his breath and then walked down the ramp and over to his desk, thoroughly unaware that several pair of eyes were keenly observing him. Among those watching were a pair of calm gray eyes belonging to the network administrator, Ken. He was at a desk near Ralph’s and appeared to be working on the computer on the desk. Ralph booted up his computer and prepared

for the start of the workday.

But something completely out of the ordinary happened. His monitor lit up, but superimposed on the *Daily Planet* screensaver logo, an instant messaging screen popped into being. As he watched, bold-faced text began to fill in the message window.

Bonesteel: Ten minutes late, Mr. Lombard. Usually you are so prompt.

Ralph: I've been busy! That disk with the TresAx information from Kent's computer was a gold mine and all I got was peanuts!

Bonesteel: Yes, well. As you are no doubt aware, in light of certain revelations, TresAx is a well run dry. We have no further need for information on that front. Perhaps you have something better?

Ralph: I do. If Templar wants the disk from that broad Lane's computer, it's gonna cost him plenty. I'm sticking my neck out here. The night I stole that thing you never got back to me. So how much?

Bonesteel: Do you have the diskette on you?

Ralph: Yeah.

Bonesteel: Here is a bank check in the amount of twenty-five thousand dollars. I should think that would be sufficient to cover a good portion of your gambling debt?

Ralph: It's a start...

The glowing words ended. Ralph felt tiny beads of sweat pop up on his forehead and neck and begin a sticky slide down his hairy back. This was word for word his conversation with Tristan Bonesteel last night at the Metropolis Museum. The bank check was like a hot piece of coal in his pocket, signed and ready to be deposited in the bank.

In a panic, Ralph started looking around to try to determine who was the author of this message. His eyes came to rest on Ken, who was smiling in satisfaction at a job well done.

The sound of footsteps reached his ears, and he looked up to see an unlikely trio in the bullpen: Assistant District Attorney Mayson Drake, federal agent Daniel Scardino, and Inspector William Henderson, all wearing very serious expressions on their faces.

A sickly grin plastered itself on the hapless man's lips, "What... what's going on, Inspector? Got a meetin' with the Chief?"

Henderson said brusquely, "Ha! Don't you wish?"

Agent Scardino joined in. "We are interested in more than that discussion, Lombard."

Mayson Drake said, "That's only part of the transcript we have from your little *tête-à-tête* with Jasper Templar's right-hand man. You broke into Mr. Kent's computer and stole his story, which was sold to Mr. Templar, who we have no doubt informed Mr. Guerin and the board members of TresAx. Since all the stories written on the *Daily Planet's* computer are intellectual property of said newspaper, they can sue you." She looked over her shoulder and said, "For how much, Mr. White?"

Unnoticed by Ralph, Perry, who was flanked by Lois and Clark, had approached his desk. Perry looked sterner than Ralph could ever remember. He spoke in that low voice, the southern accent drawing out every word. "Don't know for sure, but it would have been a tidy sum. What do you think, Kent? It was your story this hound dog pilfered, and it was used to try to damage your reputation, which resulted in suspension without pay."

Clark Kent stood glaring at Ralph. At the moment he was anything but a mild-mannered reporter. "Something very significant, like over a million dollars..."

Ralph gasped, "Million dollars? Where? How?"

"Oh, you are just full of questions. Maybe while we're going downtown, we can provide you with a few answers?" Scardino said.

A hush fell over the bullpen as the laconic police detective

pulled out a small white card and began to read the Miranda rights. "Ralph Hatfield Lombard, you have the right to remain silent when questioned. Anything you say or do may be used against you in a court of law..." While the officer finished up, Daniel proceeded to put the cuffs on him.

As a dazed Ralph was led back up the ramp, the staffers of the *Daily Planet* bullpen looked on in stunned silence. This day had started with Kell's firm ending its business relationship with TresAx, and now Ralph Lombard was being led away in shiny steel handcuffs. The pause lasted until a familiar voice bellowed, shaking them out of their stupor.

"Hey, people! Its true, arrests of staff members ain't the usual thing to see around here, but we still have a newspaper to get out! Time to get back to work!"

Stacy walked over to Jack's cubicle and said, with a shaky voice, "Couldn't they have done that down in the lobby? It was so humiliating for him. I... I mean don't get me wrong, Ralph was a creep. But this was unreal." She shook her head.

"Stace, it had to be public. If there are any other moles in the newsroom, this will make them think twice."

"Ok - ay. That does make sense. Like Perry said, time to get back to work."

Jack looked at his friend and said with a smile, "Yeah, that research for Pete isn't going to happen by itself."

Before she could answer, Lois and Clark came over and she said, "Thanks for all the help!. Otherwise we would have never been able to set up the bogus disk theft."

Clark chimed in, "Not to mention all the top-notch research. You two make a great team. Stick around; we'll have more projects to do later." With that the partners went back into the conference room and closed the door behind them.

The evening edition of the *Daily Planet* led with the following headline:

**Additional Evidence Against TresAx!
DMG Executive implicated in scandal
Lois Lane and Clark J. Kent**

It has come to the attention of these reporters that not only have Senator Ian Braxton and Armand Guerin been involved in wrongdoing, but a highly placed executive, Jasper Templar, in the European Media Giant, DMG will also be brought in for questioning. **Story continues on A2.**

Part Twenty-Nine

Noisy echoes of conversation and equipment preparation bounced off the cavernous steel and glass lobby walls of the DMG building, which was filled with representatives of every branch of the media. Gregory Daae had boldly called a press conference, only hours after the *Daily Planet* had printed the latest story about the most recent aspect of the TresAx's financial outrage.

Lois and Clark entered the building through the revolving doors and boldly made their way through the noisy throng of reporters and camera crews. The partners looked like there had never been an involuntary break in their association. Clark was dressed in a sharp charcoal suit set off with a relatively conservative burgundy paisley tie, looking every inch the professional. Lois wore a lavender sweater dress that set off her complexion and trim figure perfectly. Her long, dark-brown tresses swept over slender shoulders and down her back. She reached into her ever-present camel-colored briefcase and pulled out a notepad and sharp No. 2 pencil.

Lane and Kent were ready to do battle with the dragon.

More than a few of their colleagues and rivals stepped back respectfully to allow them to the head of the pack. The pair had a right to be so audacious; after all, they were the ones to break the story about not only TresAx's tax fraud, but also about Jasper Templar's involvement in the scheme. It was one of the largest business scandals to hit Metropolis in a decade. While Braxton

and Guerin's names and reputations were permanently sullied, Kent, Todd and Dennis had emerged from infamy - and were now considered heroes.

Clark's brown eyes were keenly fixed on the temporary stage that had been recently erected in front of the two escalators, a perfect location for Daae's press conference. The platform was sturdy, with stairs on either side of the stage, covered with industrial strength gray carpeting and black skirting. Despite the effort to make it look pleasing to the eye with silver guardrails and a polished wooden speaker's stand, the hastily-constructed stage seemed better suited for a high school gym dance band than for the modern building set in the heart of Metropolis' business district.

"This is quite a change from last week," Clark spoke so only Lois could hear him. "Then, no one wanted to return my phone calls. Now, my home phone is ringing so much Uncle Wayne and Pete can't get through! Any idea what Mr. Daae is going to say?"

Lois sniffed, "Whatever it is, it ought to be an education for the younger reporters to see how Daae does damage control." She shifted the conversation, "Any word on whether Templar is still a guest of the MPD?"

Clark made a face when he heard the man's name. Lois realized he not only disliked the ruined executive, but, if it was possible, was afraid of either her or anyone else he cared about getting close to him. "Inspector Henderson says he's made bail, but with so many cops and reporters following him, he might as well have remained in custody."

Lois faced her partner and smiled knowingly. "Good. Templar needs to know he's being tailed and that his days of intimidating people are at an end. He shouldn't worry; his boss is the next one to be spotlighted. Soon he'll be doing another press conference, claiming he's innocent of tampering with the media to further his own ends."

"That will be fascinating to see." Clark placed a gentle hand on her shoulder and spoke with a hint of pride in his voice. "None of this could have happened if it weren't for your tenacity. Christy Matthewson and Luka Brenner would have been proud of you."

She looked at him intensely. Had it been a year since he quietly entered her life? So much had happened in that short time. He had changed; the openhearted, world-tramping young man had matured in a myriad of ways. He was still willing to smile, but there was a guarded look in his eyes. How she hated that loss of his innocence! They were closer than before as work partners, yet further apart as friends. The abruptness of Lana's betrayal and marriage still stung.

Since the single memorable kiss they had shared in her apartment, Clark was unwilling to be alone with her in private places. Certainly, it was not due to some misplaced loyalty to Lana Lang-Daae. There was something else just below the surface... a secret he wanted to share, but for the moment was powerless to do so. There was also a maddening certainty that they had met before, but for the life of her, the memory of exactly *where* refused to surface. Those matters could be handled in the future. But presently, they had business with a certain media mogul.

"Yes," she said softly, "Luka Brunner should be here to see this."

Clark's only response was to put his hand on the small of her back and guide her towards a chair near the platform.

At that moment, neatly attired in a dark blue pants suit, a very nervous Mrs. Nordell came out from between the escalators and stepped up to the podium. Her small form seemed to be swallowed up in the immense space. Lois could not help but wonder how Stephanie Aronnax, with her air of cool efficiency, might have handled the media. "Pl..please, ladies and gentlemen of the press, take your seats. Mr. Daae will be out to answer your questions in a few minutes."

But the pack refused to listen, and questions exploded from

them like a swarm of bees escaping their disturbed hive.

"Mrs. Nordell, how much money did Jasper Templar steal from DMG in order to bribe those IRS agents?"

"DMG's stock took a beating this morning when the news hit. Any idea what the effect this situation will have on the European and Asian markets? After all, that is Daae's stronghold."

Peggy Becker's irritating voice rang out, "How about giving us a clue to what this press conference is all about?"

Lois rolled her eyes. It figures, she thought, Peggy was now a stringer for the Metropolis Star, and she still hadn't learned to do research. It would be a miracle if she lasted for any length of time even at that rag. Nonetheless, all the questions had validity, and since the print journalist's deadline was looming, several members of the press snapped at the bit and hurled even more questions at the hapless assistant.

In the midst of the clamor, darkness entered the room, in the form of Gregory Daae. Wearing a perfectly-tailored black Savile Row suit, he walked between the two escalator banks and up to the platform, bent down, and whispered something to the relieved Mrs. Nordell. Quickly she moved aside, stepping off the platform and back behind the escalators, relieved to allow her employer to take center stage. Now that Daae was on the scene, the reporters had respectfully quieted down.

The unique lighting conditions of the lobby, which were designed to work with the seasonal light, spilled over Daae's tall, spare form. It gave him a rather unique appearance, his wire-rimmed glasses seeming to glow. When he finally spoke, it was with a cultured voice brimming with authority.

"*Bonjour*. It has come to our attention that a Daae Media Group executive, one who is from our inner circle, has committed several crimes against not only our company but against the government of this country. As a corporate entity, we will not permit such flagrant ignorance of the laws. The executive was arrested last night in this building. As of this morning, Jasper Templar no longer is employed by DMG. It is our intention that we operate with complete transparency in this matter."

Harold Judd of *New Troy Business Magazine* stood up, "Obviously, this is a serious matter, Mr. Daae. Is that why you, as the owner of DMG, are making this statement, rather than someone else?"

"*Oui*. Mr. Templar was part of my personal executive team; as such, it is my responsibility to work with the authorities in this matter. We have handed over to the federal and local agencies everything in his office, including his computer and personal effects."

"Should this go to trial, will you speak in behalf of Mr. Templar's defense?" Chris Solte of Channel Twelve spoke up.

Daae turned those cool blue eyes at the senior reporter. The light glinted off his steel-rimmed glasses, giving him a sharp, angry appearance. "That remains to be seen. The authorities have as yet not stated any reason to require my testimony. Still, in the spirit of cooperation..." He spread his arms wide in a welcoming gesture.

Clark was clutching his pencil and writing rapidly. "Oh, he's good. He is very good."

"He should be; the man has had decades of practice in this sort of high-level corporate chicanery," Lois muttered in a voice so quiet only her partner could hear it. "I wonder how much he's paying Templar to keep silent?"

"How much money would it take to be the central figure in a scandal that will destroy him professionally? Templar would have to be crazy to accept it," Clark responded.

His partner shook her head, "Maybe. But don't be surprised if there is a very large compensation package waiting for Mr. Templar after he gets out."

"We can do some research..." he offered.

"Forget it," she said dismissively. "That 'compensation

package' would be tucked away in an off-shore account. We can be certain of one thing: it's definitely not at any bank in Switzerland."

Her partner chuckled and responded, "Perhaps, but it would be fun to try, and maybe add another layer in our series of articles on Mr. Daae's serpentine media empire."

The lovely brunette by his side did not answer, but the faintest of smiles tugged at the corners of her mouth. It was so good to be working with Clark again! A few minutes later, Daae wrapped up his press conference and several reporters hurried to payphones in order to meet their deadlines. The reporters from the *Daily Planet* were among them.

Once the story had been phoned in, Clark said, "We should have asked him why he decided to throw Templar to the wolves. After all, we know he was the one behind this TresAx's tax dodge and the illegal takeover attempt of LexCorp."

"No, let's hit him when he least expects it. I think Perry wants to print the first article the Monday after the Metropolis Museum's gala opening of the Napoleon exhibit."

Clark became quiet as they walked along, "That night is supposed to be a triumph for Professor Bertram Lang." He sighed and continued, "It doesn't matter what night it is. Lana and her parents are bound to be affected, badly, by the articles."

His partner said nothing, merely taking his arm as they continued to walk down the street.

After walking for nearly a block in companionable silence, he said, "Lois... when all this is over, uh, we need to go someplace quiet. Where we can talk without worrying about being interrupted by villains, media moguls and story deadlines."

She tried to cover over a sharp pang of nervousness with a laugh, and then said, "Oh? That sounds serious. Where do you want to go to have this conversation, on a beautiful, deserted tropical island in the Pacific South Seas, where clothing is optional?"

He fought to hide a nervous smile. Her suggestion was actually not a bad idea. He would have to go looking for such an island, and if he found one, outfit it accordingly. "No. No, we have been through a great deal together in the past few months, and I..."

Happy butterflies pirouetting through her stomach with the prospects of where this conversation was going, Lois stopped walking, turned around, and placed a hand on his chest. "Clark, please don't say another word. We can talk when this whole situation with Daae is behind us. After working so long to bring him down I... I don't want to concentrate on anything else."

Clark started to speak, then took her hand, gave it a gentle squeeze, and said, "Okay, Lois."

Her mouth twitched, and then she said, "Come on, we better get a move on. Otherwise Perry is going to hang us out to dry!"

Later that day, Perry entered the conference room, and with a wide, toothy grin, laid the evening edition on the conference table in front of Lois. "Well, kids, that's the final article in the TresAx series. Are you ready to follow up with the DMG story?"

"Almost, Chief. This additional material provided by Tristan Bonesteel has been dynamite! Can you imagine Arianna Carlin-Luthor sold valuable paintings and only gave a quarter of the cash to those orphanages and squirreled away the rest? According to these papers, even her husband didn't know about the money! Luthor is going to be furious when he reads how she pulled the wool over his eyes!" Lois said with a chuckle.

"Did Agent Scardino take Bonesteel into protective custody this afternoon?" Clark asked

"Yeah. He and Linda King will be sequestered in a location outside of New Troy. The poor guy was scared to death, but he'll testify when the time comes. He wants Templar in jail in the worst way."

Clark nodded in agreement. He was the only one who knew exactly how dangerous Templar was. Tristan Bonesteel had good reason to be afraid of him. Still, he wondered how Templar could have allowed himself to be arrested in DMG's offices. He had had more than enough time to make a getaway. Did Daae somehow have a hand in that? If that were so, then the Swiss businessman was far cleverer and more dangerous than even Lois had suggested.

Maybe he should try one last time to talk some sense into Lana?

At that moment Jack walked in and said, "Clark, there's a phone call for you on line two." He hesitated for a minute and continued with a sour expression, "It's Mrs. Daae."

Clark looked confused at first and was trying to decide what to do when Perry said in a consoling voice, "Son, take the call in here. Come on, Lois."

Without a word, Lois got up and followed behind Perry, closing the door gently behind her.

Gingerly, he picked up the receiver, and said, "Lana?"

A livid female voice almost to the point of hysterics said, "I saw you at the press conference! I thought we were friends? How could you and that cheap excuse for a reporter write those articles?"

Taking a deep breath, he steadied himself, calmed down, and answered in a voice so composed that it sounded like someone else. "Lana, neither Lois nor I would write *anything* that wasn't backed up with firm evidence - facts which are irrefutable and will stand up in any court."

"Lois Lane has been out to get my husband for years, just because he purchased an outmoded newspaper that was owned by some old man suffering from the beginnings of dementia! But how could *you* have fallen for her lies?"

He felt a quiet anger stir inside him. This was so typical of Lana, refusing to listen to the other side of the story. He clamped down hard on the ugly emotion and said, "They are not lies. Daae did not simply purchase that newspaper, he also broke the heart of a great reporter by ruining his reputation and then closing that newspaper down. He did not have dementia. Lois and I are just picking up where Luka Brenner left off."

Lana huffed and then said, "Gregory doesn't know I'm calling you. My husband is a clever businessman, and he's above such things as extortion, but if there's another scandalous article about my husband's company, I swear I'll expose your secret... Superman!"

With that Lana slammed the phone down so hard it hurt Clark's eardrums.

Hours after work, Clark was in his apartment slowly pacing the floor and talking with Pete Ross who was sitting on the couch. His friend whistled softly and said, "She actually threatened to expose who you really are?"

"Right. What happened to the sweet-natured girl we grew up with? Didn't the three of us pledge to always protect each other and 'the secret'? I can't believe she would do such a thing." Clark stood facing his balcony and looking outside. If Lana went ahead with her threat his life would be ruined. What could he say to Lois, Uncle Wayne, and the rest of the bullpen?

"She's desperate. Clark, you can't give in to such emotional blackmail. If you do, it will never end."

He turned and said, "Yeah, tell me about it! But it's not just me at risk, it's anyone who's close to me. What about you? Not to mention Uncle Wayne and Aunt Mary could be deeply hurt by this. I'm a journalist. When a big story like this breaks, we like to dig into a person's background, which sometimes means going to their hometown. Smallville would be crawling with people who won't have any scruples about asking deeply personal questions... questions that would tear the town apart."

Pete raised his hands in protest, “Hey! Easy, Clark! I’m the least of your worries. As for the Irigs, don’t count them or our friends in Smallville out just yet. I doubt seriously if Lana will carry through with her threat.”

Clark rubbed the back of his neck. “That’s easy for you to say, pal, you didn’t hear her.”

Pete nodded sagely, “There’s someone else who is not going to be happy about you keeping this from her, that’s for certain. Maybe it’s time to finally tell Miss Lane exactly who you are? Lois is a clever woman and might help with a solution to the problem?”

At that moment there was a loud knock on the door. Clark looked through the wooden entrance with his X-ray vision and smiled for the first time in hours. “That solution is right outside.”

“Excuse me?” Pete asked.

With a burst of super speed, Clark opened the door with a flourish. On the other side stood CJ, Wanda, and H.G. Wells. Clark turned to his old pal and said, “Pete Ross, I’d like you to meet some friends of mine. They have come an exceptionally long way indeed to help.”

Pete was bewildered to see a doppelganger of his friend and was even more amazed that the famous author H.G. Wells was there. Oddly enough, once he got over the initial shock he accepted everything with his usual grace.

“After seeing a man fly, nothing surprises me anymore.”

“Thanks, and you should know that the Pete Ross in our universe is just as much a friend to me there as well,” CJ said.

“He was the best man at our wedding,” Wanda chimed in.

The big man laughed, “Well, that’s good to know!” He looked over at Clark and said, “Keep that in mind when the time comes, buddy!”

A thoughtful expression passed over Clark’s face. Marriage to Lois was in the future, but not as far-off as any of them would have imagined.

Shortly afterwards, Pete departed for home. He needed to get some rest before starting his ER shift at Metropolis General Hospital.

Across town, Preston Carpenter sat in his office reading the *Daily Planet*’s article covering Daae’s press conference. He took a cigar out of its humidor and lit up, then took a deep inhalation of it into his lungs, savoring the flavor. The *Metropolis Star* was the only paper in town that had buried the story on page six. The last thing he needed was another reason for Daae to be even more furious at him than he already was.

When the series hit the streets with Linda King’s name as contributor, Preston immediately went to her condo, only to discover it empty and up for sale. His former lover had vanished.

That evening Daae had appeared at his home demanding to know why Linda had betrayed them. Although he was frightened, Preston explained he was just as much in the dark as the Swiss businessman. Oddly, Templar had said nothing about his deal with Preston. But he wondered how long it would take for a federal prosecutor to sweat the information out of him.

He looked around the office. It was brightly lit, as if to keep enemies and the cavernous shadows of his nefarious plots away.

It was only a matter of time before Daae did discover the truth about Preston’s business relationship with Templar, and once that happened, his life would be over. The time had come to put an exit strategy into place. He took another long pull on the cigar and thought that Rio was lovely this year.

The next day, Lois found a royal blue envelope made of heavy vellum card stock, the kind used for high-end society weddings, on her desk. The address was lettered in an elegant gold calligraphy. She quickly opened it and read:

N

**The Metropolis Museum cordially requests your presence
At the opening gala of the Age of Napoleon Exhibit
Friday, September 13, 1996**

**EuropeanWing
305 Clarence Boulevard**

Metropolis

**Canapés & Champagne shall be served upon arrival
5 Star Three course meal**

Dancing immediately afterward with live entertainment

“Hey! Clark, Catherine, look at this,” she said, in a voice that was almost reverent in its tone.

“I received the same envelope,” Catherine Grant said in a similar manner.

“So did I,” Clark responded. “Why would they do that? After all, Daae and at least some of the folks from TresAx will be there.”

Perry stepped out of his office and approached the trio. “It looks like all of us are invited to a special bash at the Metropolis Museum. The food is going to be cooked by the staff of Gaston Bardot, the premiere French Restaurant in New Troy. They are flying in members of the Boston Symphony Orchestra to provide the music. Heck, the only thing that could make this a perfect evening is if the King himself showed up to say a few words.”

Catherine shook her head excitedly, “Talk about ironic! Invited to the social event of the season, toasting the success of Professor Lang and the museum’s Napoleon exhibit, and then the next day the *Daily Planet* is going to scandalize his son-in-law and the Luthors. What a week!”

“That is an understatement! I wish I could be a fly on the wall to see the reaction on their faces when they read that series,” Lois said, her eyes flashing.

Stacy walked over to them and said, “Besides the obvious, doesn’t anybody appreciate the amazing history of Napoleon Bonaparte?”

Lois shrugged, “He was the French Emperor, but his time is long past.”

A groan escaped the young intern’s lips. “Guys, if it hadn’t been for a Category 3 hurricane that swept over the English Channel, he would have conquered the British and history would have been completely different!”

“True enough. In the grand scheme of things, he was an impressive figure. I am looking forward to seeing these tableaux of major events in Bonaparte’s life,” Catherine said thoughtfully.

“Are there any scenes of his apartments in Paris?” Stacy asked.

“Sorry, the invitations do not tell of which parts of his life are going to be on display. Although I do know at least one is of Napoleon’s palatial war campaign camp tent and its luxurious furnishings. Why?” Clark asked.

The young intern’s eyes sparkled and then she responded, “There are so many interesting aspects to his life; soldier, politician, devoted son and loving brother. But there was one person he could never conquer...”

“Josephine?” Diane asked, joining in on the conversation.

“Yes. In the very beginning their relationship was similar to most liaisons of the time. Napoleon thought this marriage was a ‘good bit of business’. By marrying the widow of a nobleman, who possessed a fine townhouse in the best location in Paris, he was immediately granted entree into the ‘old’ society whose elegance and splendor he greatly admired.”

“Wasn’t Josephine rich?” Steve asked. You could almost see the dollar signs in his eyes. By now several members of the bullpen staff were listening as Stacy spoke. This was, without doubt, a change from the young woman’s usual intern behavior. At the moment she was acting as amateur historian and storyteller.

She chuckled, “That’s just it. Josephine was nearly penniless, but now that she had married Bonaparte, her financial status was on the rise. He didn’t discover this little tidbit about his bride until

sometime afterwards.”

Catherine smiled secretly to herself, thinking of Arthur, and asked, “Did they at least have a lovely wedding?”

“Nope. They were wed in the home of the mayor of the 2nd Arrondissement in the rue d’Antin.”

“The where?” Elsie asked, looking at Stacy over her spectacles.

“The city of Paris is divided into twenty arrondissements municipaux, administrative districts, more simply referred to as arrondissements. Anyhow, on the night of wedding, which was raining cats and dogs by the way, Josephine and some of her friends were waiting for the groom to arrive. Apparently, he was in the midst of preparing for the invasion of Italy and was running late.”

“How late?” Perry said. Despite the need to get the paper out, he, like everyone, else, was drawn into Stacy’s narrative.

She grinned, pleased to see such interest in the story. “Plenty! He was supposed to be there by seven but didn’t show up until minutes after ten o’clock! He quickly roused the mayor and the guests, and they were married in a swift ceremony.”

“Ouch!” said Perry. “That could not have made her, or the guests, happy. He must have heard about it later from Josephine.”

“Oh, Josephine didn’t say much, but the same cannot be said for her loyal dog, a pug named Fortune.”

“I’ll bite,” said Steve. “How did her mutt react?”

“Exactly right. Fortune was not used to Napoleon’s, ah, vigorous attentions to his mistress and let him know that. The great man, not wanting to share his wedding night with Josephine’s dog, removed the unhappy mutt from the bed; unfortunately, it returned and bit Napoleon on his left leg! Needless to say, the honeymoon was over before it began.”

Howls of laughter flew throughout the bullpen.

Stacy bowed to the newsroom crew in acknowledgement of her story and said, “Such is the rocky road of romance. Just think of that when attending this event!” With that, she turned about and headed back to her cubicle.

“All right, everyone! History lesson is over! Back to work.” Perry’s voice carried throughout the room. The bullpen staffers returned to their respective desks, chuckling.

Lois couldn’t help but smile at the impromptu performance Stacy had just put on; a great way to break up the day and learn something amusing about the late French emperor. Then she turned and looked at her partner, his face a mask of consternation, his lips pressed into a tight, firm line.

Perry also noticed and said to Clark, “Son, if you don’t want to go, I understand. Between Catherine, Lois, and I, we can cover the event. No problem.”

“No, Chief, I can’t duck a story every time there is a possibility of running into Lana. She chose Daae as a husband and whatever goes with being his wife.” His eyes got a faraway look and he said, “Excuse me, but I need to check on a source.” With those words he hastily departed.

All of them, especially Perry, watched him carefully as he rapidly made his way up the stairs. Catherine once again silently admonished herself for not telling Clark about Lana’s behavior sooner. With a nod to Perry and Lois, she departed for an appointment.

“Lois. Could I speak to you in private?”

“Sure, Perry.”

A few moments later, in the conference room that was still covered with documents and files, Perry spoke. “How is Kent holding up? Can he do this series? Exposing the husband of his former girlfriend is hitting pretty close to home.”

Lois rubbed her chin in deep thought and then said, “This is a painful subject, but he knows how crucial it is to bring Daae’s criminal activities to light. The man has viciously manipulated the media long enough. Three years ago, Constance warned me about

the fallout from this investigation, but with his right-hand man implicated in stock fraud and bribery, this is the right time to present the truth about him and his company. I think I can speak for both of us when I say that we are committed to seeing the job to the end.”

“Great! But keep an eye on him. There’s still a lot of ground to cover. Once we start this series the kid gloves will be off and it’s all-hands-on-deck. Constance has contracted two paralegals just to help with the legal paperwork on this series alone. When your partner gets back from visiting his confidential source, both of you lock yourselves in here and write up a story that will do the *Daily Planet* proud! I’m expecting at the very least a Pulitzer nomination for you both.”

“Perry, we won’t let you down!” Lois said smartly.

As soon as Perry returned to his office, she began working on the Arianna Carlin-Luthor part of the piece. An hour later, there was a knock on the door.

“Come in!” Lois called out.

Catherine entered holding her handbag. “Time to call it quits for today.”

“Are you nuts, Catherine? Look at all this paperwork!” She gestured to the files and printouts. “The series outline for the articles has to be finished, otherwise it’ll take forever!”

“Uh huh. Look, if there is anything I know about you, and especially Clark, is that you are the fastest typists in the bullpen! The outline will keep until tomorrow. But we, my dear friend, have more important matters to tackle.”

Lois stood up and glared at her. “More important than turning out a series of articles that has an excellent chance of winning a Pulitzer? Nothing could be more important!”

The older woman looked at her friend, folded her arms over her chest, and said, “Indeed. What were you planning on wearing to the *Age of Napoleon* event?”

Suddenly Lois looked surprised and tired all at once. She seemed to shrink into herself and said, “Oh, I hadn’t thought about that.”

“It is painfully obvious to me; you should. This gala is the perfect opportunity to shine so brightly Clark will forget about that stick-in-the-mud he used to date.”

“What?” Lois squeaked.

Catherine shook her head sadly, “This is me, Lois. I know you have been carrying a torch for the man from Kansas almost from the day you returned from that coal mine disaster story. Now, get your things, we have an appointment at *Darcy’s* to look for evening gowns.”

Lois sighed. “You’re right... I ain’t got nothing to wear! Let’s go.”

Later that evening, Clark was deep in conversation with H.G. Wells, CJ and Wanda. They had just finished a sumptuous meal of hashed Brussels sprouts with lemon, brown rice and sautéed chicken breasts. It was paired with a delightful chardonnay Clark had picked out from his wine collection. Lois had read about the dish in the *New York Times* and wanted to test it out. Her culinary skills had certainly improved under CJ’s tutorage. Wells leaned back with a contented air and said, “Ah, my friends, now that we have all dined sufficiently, it is time to discuss our plans. We must make certain Tempus does not reveal your secret identity to the world.”

“So that’s the reason for coming to the event with me?” Clark asked dubiously.

“No, it will be more like us shadowing you. It won’t do any good if people see Lois – ah, Wanda — and get her confused with the real Lois. Or, that is to say, the Lois from your world.”

“Exactly,” Wanda said while adjusting a short blonde wig on its stand. “CJ and I looked the place over and we can gain access to the building through a service vent.”

Clark shivered, “Service vent? Isn’t that rather dangerous? What if the vent turns on while you two are in there?”

Wanda smiled, “In our world we are used to doing a little breaking and entering. Something you and my doppelganger apparently haven’t indulged in... yet. CJ will disable the vent long enough for us to slip in and then wait until evening comes. Afterwards, I’ll change into a proper evening gown and mingle with the guests. CJ will stay out of sight unless he’s needed.”

“You two make everything sound so simple,” Clark said, shaking his head in disbelief.

“The best plans, my boy, usually are the most straightforward,” H.G. responded with relish.

“But why on the night of the ball? Tempus may be out on bail, but he’s keeping a low profile and has been under careful watch. Dan Scardino himself is heading up the detail.”

CJ bristled at the mention of the agent and said, “That man is a loose cannon. If he is in charge, I better fly over there and keep an eye on Tempus myself!”

“Maybe we should ask Mayson Drake to put Tempus under house arrest until he goes to trial?” Clark said.

Wanda’s head shot up, and she asked, “Wait a second. Mayson Drake is *here*?”

Clark looked curiously at the couple and said, “Is there something I’m missing ...?”

Quickly they filled Clark in on their history with Daniel Scardino and Mayson Drake. They were both relieved to hear that Mayson was alive, yet on the other hand were taken aback that she was a good acquaintance of both Lois and Clark and was currently dating the government agent.

Wanda said softly, “The more time we spend in this alternative universe the more amazing its differences are to me. At least this time your Lois and Mayson are both alive and well.”

“It’s still hard to believe Mayson is dead in your world,” Clark muttered.

Herbert cleared his throat and said, “Ahem, my friends, we are getting off the subject. It is imperative to discuss and formulate a plan for keeping Clark’s secret a secret.”

Wanda nodded thoughtfully. “When I came here the first time, your secret identity was exposed by Tempus during the live mayoral election debate between himself and Perry. Neither of us realized Tempus was having us followed and filmed you flying around Metropolis with Lois in your arms, in your regular clothing. We have to be certain Tempus does not succeed in revealing who Superman is during another public event.”

The expression on Clark’s face was grim, and his voice was bleak with remembered bitterness. “He wanted to use my being an alien as a threat to Metropolis and the world. To... to make me seem like a freak and a dangerous threat. If I hadn’t stopped that bomb – which he set – from exploding, many innocent people might have been killed.” He turned and looked at the time traveler. “If Mr. Wells had not stepped in and helped me prevent Lois from getting on that flight...” His voice trailed off.

Herb noisily cleared his throat, obviously embarrassed. “Ah... yes, circumstances have changed radically since then, but Tempus might decide to expose Clark Kent as Superman anyway.”

“Considering all the media attention Tempus has garnered of late, turning the spotlight on someone else will only be for his benefit. Your presence as the Man of Steel is firmly fixed in the public eye as a do-gooder,” Wanda said quickly.

CJ joined in and said gravely, “A do-gooder who is *most effective* as long as his secret identity remains intact.”

“Something I desire very much. In that previous existence, while I was engaged to Lana, my life seemed so shallow... pre-packaged. I allowed her to direct my every step. Ever since seeing Lois in the airport, my life has been running closer to the way it should have been.” He looked around the table and asked, “Does that make any sense?”

CJ gripped his shoulder, cast a brief glance at his wife, and said with deep empathy, “It does.”

“Anyway, going back to that way of life has little appeal. Lois... my Lois and I are becoming friends; maybe even more than friends. Gaining the chance to be with her is worth anything.”

H.G. Well’s eyes misted over, and he said in a wavering voice, “Words well-spoken, Mr. Kent. All of us shall endeavor to make certain such an existence becomes reality.”

Several blocks uptown in the Lane home, Lois and her mother discussed the jewelry she planned to wear to the Napoleon Gala while preparing Sunday dinner.

“Grandma’s sapphire necklace and earrings are gorgeous and should work flawlessly with the ivory gown, although I think the slit is a tad daring. Where did you get such a glamorous creation?” her mother asked.

“*Darcy’s*, that lovely boutique downtown in the ‘Ladies Mile’ district. Mom, the slit is necessary, without it, I can’t walk!”

Ignoring the comment about the slit, Ellen continued, “Oh, yes, you did mention that store a few times. How exciting! My daughter will be attending such a swanky affair, an event which gets coverage on all the media outlets! Your father has actually bragged about it to his surgical team!”

Lois felt the hot blush of embarrassment creep up her face. “Mom, Daddy shouldn’t have done that! It’s just a glorified exhibit opening.”

A voice floated in from the dining room. “Sure, an ‘ordinary’ exhibit opening that’s utilized the expertise of several Napoleon experts from Europe and has taken a lot of time and money to construct. According to Waldo Lydecker, of the *Washington Times*, ‘It’s the most lavish museum exhibit to hit Metropolis since the Picasso exhibit in the early eighties.’”

“Why are you reading the *Washington Times* instead of the *Planet*?” her mother called out.

A bespectacled Lucy entered the kitchen and said, “It’s what I read on the train coming up Friday afternoon. Mr. Lydecker’s column is relaxing after studying the human circulatory system all week.”

“It’s good to know you’re reading more than the gossip page. Now help us finish dinner. Your father will be home any minute from playing golf. I need you to prepare the asparagus for roasting.”

Lucy walked over to the fridge and removed a large bunch of asparagus spears, fresh garlic, basil, oregano, olive oil and parmesan cheese. She proceeded to take out a knife and an aged oak cutting board in order to remove the tough, woody ends. Her fingers worked quickly to prepare the dish, all the while listening in on the conversation between her mother and sister.

“After dinner, show Daddy the gown and jewelry. Your father may not have a great interest in women’s clothes, but he might want to see what his daughter is wearing while covering this event.”

“Oh, Mother, despite the media swirl, this *is* just another glorified society event. If we hadn’t been invited, none of us would have been in the neighborhood or paid any attention to it.”

Lucy piped up, “Hey, if you aren’t interested in going, let me take your place! After all, history bores you silly. Bet Clark looks sharp in a tuxedo!”

“Nice try, little sis, but Clark is most definitely *my* date for the evening. By the way, history, when told by the right person, can be very interesting!” Lois said with a happy chuckle.

“Aha! Things are getting serious?” Lucy asked, her eyes dancing with excitement as she drizzled olive oil mixed with oregano and the other herbs into a bowl to spread over the vegetables.

Ellen responded pointedly. “No, Mr. Kent is, to use an old-fashioned term, ‘escorting’ your sister to the event. They are *not*

dating.”

Lucy stopped tossing the vegetables with the fragrant mixture. The herbal aromas filled the kitchen. With a twinkle in her eye, she looked from her sister to her mother and said, “Which is it? Are you seeing Clark Kent or is he just an ‘escort’?”

Before either woman could answer, the sound of the front door opening reached their ears and Sam Lane’s gravelly voice was heard. “Ellen, whatever’s cooking smells great. I’m going to take a quick shower. Be down in a few minutes.”

“Lucy, I’ll put the asparagus into the oven. Can you go finish setting the table?”

The youngest Lane daughter gathered up four plates, silverware and napkins and then exited the kitchen, but not before turning to Lois and saying with a wink, “Call me after the event; I want to hear all about this ‘escort’.”

With her sister out of earshot, Lois said, “Thanks, Mom, Lucy means well, but I’m really not ready to talk with anyone about Clark just yet.” A tiny sigh escaped her lips, then she said, “I want to wait until this entire DMG series of articles are complete before we can think about drawing closer to one another.”

“That’s a good plan. It has been several weeks, yet the poor man requires a bit more time to recover from the news of Lana’s sudden marriage! It’s still hard to imagine anyone doing such a treacherous thing. He must have been devastated.”

Lois thought about the brief conversation they had had after Daae’s press conference. He was emerging from the cocoon of pain and hurt, and actually getting on with his life - despite the fact that her partner tended to disappear at odd moments. She suspected that even if Daae had not broken up the relationship, Clark and Lana might not have stayed together for very much longer. From her intense observations they were rapidly moving in opposite directions. Lana wanted to move within the upper echelons of Metropolis society, something Clark had never aspired to do. His fierce determination to have a solid career as an investigative reporter for the *Daily Planet* was not part of Lana’s agenda for their future.

“He was devastated. But the support of good friends and keeping busy is helping him to cope.”

Ellen’s voice dropped low as she placed the asparagus into the oven. “Be that as it may, don’t let him know how you feel until that minx is completely out of his system. Neither Sam nor I could take another late-night phone call from you like that last one a few years ago. Your father was ready to come down to the paper and give that young man a piece of his mind!”

Lois offered up a silent prayer of thanks that Sam Lane had never learned the entire story about Claude. If he had, both Sam and Uncle Mike might have beaten her former boyfriend senseless.

“I won’t. Clark and I shared a very ill-timed kiss. It was just as much my fault as his,” she said in a guilty tone.

“No reason to argue on that point. Nevertheless, it’s high time we met this partner of yours. After all, we know everyone else at the newsroom. What about getting dressed in your old bedroom instead of at home? The car service – and Mr. Kent – can pick you up here. Especially since we live much closer to the museum.”

Lois gazed at her mother with an expression mixed with surprise and not a little amusement. “Mother, this would be like when Sherman Grimes took me to the Senior Prom! Daddy was merciless!”

“Exactly!” Ellen shot back, her blue eyes twinkled with happy mischief as the memories of that long-ago night came to mind.

Part Thirty

The Metropolis Museum’s Annual Grand Exhibit Gala was, after the White Orchid Ball, the most prestigious and glamorous event of the city’s autumn social season. For one night in the year,

Hollywood actors, rock stars turned philanthropists, and international celebrities mingled with the elite of the academia and antiquities world.

As had been widely reported, the board members of the museum had spared no expense in making the unveiling of the *Age of Napoleon* exhibit one of the most lavish and chic in the institution’s 150-year- history. Old-fashioned Hollywood type arc-lights scraped across the clear, moonlit sky. A wide, plush cobalt blue carpet, edged with a gold Greek key pattern, spilled from the main entrance doors and ran fluidly down the granite steps, welcoming the excited guests as they stepped out of their glittering silver limousines and luxury black SUV’s. Not to be outdone by visitors to their city, the ladies from the upper echelons of Metropolis society were resplendent, wearing exquisite gowns from some of the top fashion houses in Europe and North America. Not a few of them were noted to be wearing silk gowns that Empress Josephine would have worn herself. The glittering array of gemstones such as diamonds, rubies and emeralds lit up the night as they were caught by the illumination of countless flashbulbs.

Their escorts were sartorial perfection itself in somber black tuxedos and vivid white dress shirts of Italian cotton with mother-of-pearl buttons. It should be noted some gentlemen sported cobalt ties that added a dash of energetic color to their evening attire.

A block away, far from the line of celebrities’ vehicles, Clark and Lois exited their modest gray Metro Towncar and paused on the sidewalk, looking up at the massive limestone structure outlined against the night sky.

“Can you believe this?” Lois asked, staring up at the billowing cobalt-blue-and-gold horizontal banners as they hung from iron poles in front of the massive granite building which took up three city blocks. “So far the entire evening has been breathtaking! We haven’t even entered the museum yet! Under these arc-lights, it’s as glistening and dazzling as Empress Josephine’s jewelry box! I’m thrilled we were invited to cover this event.”

Clark nodded soberly. Within the hour he would see Lana again — with her husband. He was nervous about that possibility; after all, this kaleidoscopic swirl of glaring lights and celebrity was now her world. He and Lois, along with their fellow members of the Fourth Estate, were outsiders peering in to catch a glimpse of its members’ storied lives. He reached over and gently placed his hand on the small of her back, careful that it be seen as a gesture of friendship rather than anything more. Nonetheless, he couldn’t help gazing at the beautiful woman walking by his side, wearing a floor-length strapless chiffon dress with a sweetheart neckline and draped bodice and slit at the front skirt, her long dark hair pulled back into a stylish chignon. The whole look was flawlessly set off by a dazzling array of antique sapphire jewelry.

She looked terrific. If at all possible, she looked even better than she had on the night of the White Orchid Ball. He recalled that at that event Lois Lane had been more of an irritating boss than his partner, and now they were on equal ground.

Lois felt Clark’s hand and smiled shyly to herself. She cared about the man at her side, but she was aware that the wound of Lana’s betrayal was still fresh in his mind. The quiet, self-effacing young man had matured a great deal since she had first met him nearly a year ago. Gone was his awkwardness, as well as the longish hair, boxy suits and wild ties. In his place stood a respected journalist, who had survived personal betrayal and nearly having his career ruined by a man who was originally her enemy — not his.

Tonight, he wore a classic-fit tuxedo from Maxim’s. Black suited his olive complexion. She was proud of the way he had handled himself over the past few weeks, and especially how he had even managed to win over her parents. Mother had been impressed with his confidence and easy Midwestern manners. Sam

Lane was at first quiet, even a little stern, and yet Clark, by simply being himself, had grudgingly gained the older man's respect. It was a small triumph, and one that spoke of better days ahead.

"We had better hurry and get inside before there's no place to stand," Clark said, breaking into her thoughts.

"Ha! Gregory Daae and the board of directors will make sure there is plenty of room. Even if it is a little crowded. Come on, partner!"

A dazzling smile replaced his contemplative expression. Notwithstanding his nervousness, he couldn't help but be enthused to be walking in with Lois. Her excitement was contagious! He noted, with satisfaction, not a few male heads turning to watch her with admiration as he and Lois walked towards the broad granite steps.

Even though they were not a couple, he could not help thinking mischievously, "Eat your heart out, fellas, the lady is with me!"

They joined the crush of lesser attendees, including local sports heroes, television entertainment magazine hosts, and other members of the print media as they walked up the wide granite stairs. They passed through the heavy oak doors and stepped into the Metropolis Museum Great Hall. With its three immense domes, eight dramatic arches, and marble mosaic floor, the Great Hall was the majestic main entry of the museum and had been filling visitors with awe for more than a century.

When they reached the massive octagon security desk in the hall's center, a grim-faced, middle-aged guard took their invitations and checked them against a list. His expression lightened slightly as he gave them each an ID badge and then said, "Clark Kent and Lois Lane, welcome to the Metropolis Museum. You will find retractable badge holders inside your tote. Have a pleasant evening."

On the guard's right, a pretty young woman handed each of them a tote bag filled with various gifts and giveaways. It was decorated with a picture of a young and dashing Napoleon carrying a flag. The description at the bottom read, "*Napoleon Bonaparte on the Bridge at Arcole, by Antoine-Jean Gros.*" "Good evening," she said. "The event will be held in the European Wing. Please read the name tags and note the table number on it. You will both be seated at table twelve with the rest of the *Daily Planet's* attendees. Once inside, feel free to get a drink from the bar and mingle with the other guests."

They thanked the attendant and began walking towards the expansively lighted staircase leading to the European Wing. Scanning the massive entrance lobby as they moved, Lois observed several men and women in dark clothing on the perimeter of the lobby, carefully observing the guests. "This place has more undercover security and MPD than the White Orchid Ball."

Clark nodded in agreement, "It makes sense. The White Orchid Ball is a Metropolis event whereas this affair is more on the international level. This is quite an experience. It's great to be able to report about this from the inside and not hang around outside with the rest of the news pack."

"You and me both, partner! Come on, let's do what the young lady said and mingle!" she said excitedly.

Lois, he mused, was so comfortable and relaxed with him now. What a refreshing change, nothing like the White Orchid Ball! Of course, he failed to mention the 'extra' special security detail mixed into the crowd. He wondered where Wanda and CJ were at this moment.

Not ten feet away stood Wanda, disguised in a blond wig, contact lenses that made her eyes blue, and an unremarkable red gown. In her hand was a gold bronze-beaded evening bag that looked like it came from the forties. She was careful not to be seen by any *Daily Planet* staffer, so when Lois and Clark walked

towards her, she quickly turned her back. Once they had passed, she resumed scanning the crowd, confident that she would recognize Tempus. She had seen him enough in various outfits, with and without a beard, that she didn't think he could fool her. Glancing up at the second balcony, she smiled upon spotting CJ, as he was watching the happenings from the depths of shadows.

Whispering so only CJ could hear, Lois said, "Still no sign of Tempus yet. Should we apprehend him as soon as we see him?"

Her husband's voice sounded tinny over the ear bud link. "No. Even though he's out on bail, as long as he doesn't do anything illegal, we can't prevent him from attending the event. When you spot him, just keep an eye on him, honey... but don't let him see you! Even with that terrific disguise, he might realize who you are."

"Yeah, the last thing we need is for Tempus to discover we are here from our own world. It will definitely put him on his guard."

Outside, a tumultuous clamor was starting to take place as Gregory and Lana Daae emerged from their Rolls Royce Silver Spirit. They were dressed with understated yet striking sophistication. Lana looked stunning in a gold gown which showed off the slight curves of her petite figure, and Gregory wore a European-cut tuxedo. With an almost practiced ease, they started to walk up the steps. A solid wall of flashbulbs erupted. Reporters and photographers started shouting questions from behind a thick, red velvet rope.

"Mrs. Daae! Lana! Over here! Is it true you are going to be on the cover of *Vogue* magazine as the year's most fashionable American woman?"

Deftly, she put on a public smile and generously acknowledged the statement. What she didn't say was that Arianna Carlin-Luthor, who had been the original choice for the cover, had been bumped to make way for her.

"That was a great press conference, Gregory! Do you think Jasper Templar will implicate you to save his own hide?"

"Hey, Mr. Daae, look this way! How does it feel to be married to a fashion icon?"

Gregory smiled tightly, irritated by the stupidity of the questions, and said nothing.

"Is it true you are both leaving Metropolis shortly after this event is over to live in Zurich?"

Neither Daae answered that question as they made their way up the stairs. The silence was evidence of the answer. A reporter managed to aim his camera directly in front of them, and an intense flash lit up the night, temporarily blinding Lana. There was an unyielding barrier of lenses all the way up to the main entrance.

Lana grabbed her husband's arm in support. "I... I can't believe how many reporters there are," she said, hesitating slightly.

"Look straight ahead, *ma cherie*, and smile," Gregory coached, although he most definitely did not feel like smiling. "Do not stop your feet, until we are inside and away from these ignorant peasants."

The spacious, central room of the European Wing, that normally displayed massive sculpture, paintings and decorative arts from several notable artisans and craftsmen, had been transformed into a glittering ballroom such as those in power during the Napoleonic era would have attended. A long table situated to accommodate the guests of honor was covered with white linen cloths and heavily laden with bone china, silverware, sparkling crystal goblets and dark blue napkins made of silk. It was suggested that this table was decorated in a similar fashion to the way Napoleon and Josephine had entertained during one of their more intimate dinners.

Thirty large, circular tables were strategically located in front

of the table for the guests of honor. Each guest table was covered with thick, white linen cloths and decked with gold-covered cutlery. The centerpieces were tall glass vases filled with aromatic white long-stemmed roses and greenery, which worked well in the large space with its high ceilings; the height of the flowers drew the attendees' eyes upward and created volume in the massive venue. The guests chatted and walked aimlessly among the various Greek and Italian statues to offer a clear view of the darkened entryway leading to the *Age of Napoleon* exhibit at one end of the hall.

The background music was enchanting and truly set the mood. Music was a key component of Napoleon's representation of himself and the construction of his legend. The emperor himself had commissioned some of the pieces being played tonight. Most of the music had lain, unused, in the archives for years, until Gregory Daae had them located, hired an orchestra and recorded them for this occasion. The aim was to convey the music of the Napoleonic era as contemporary audiences might have heard them.

From the flowers to the finishing touches, the reception was an elegant work of art.

Catherine Grant, wearing a sea-green gown, took a dainty sip of her champagne and scrutinized the fashionable horde crammed into the European wing, all waiting for dinner and then the unveiling of the *Age of Napoleon* exhibit. It was a welcome relief to know she no longer had to cover these events on a regular basis anymore. Now such occasions were actually a treat, and not work. She was scrutinizing her co-workers who were expertly working the room. Perry and Alice were in the corner talking to an older, distinguished-looking black man in a classic tuxedo, who she recognized as Kip Terrell, the editor-in-chief of the *San Francisco Gazette*. Meanwhile Jack was moving inconspicuously among the statues taking pictures.

Suddenly her eyes were drawn to Lois and Clark as they passed through the double doors. Just by their body language, she could sense something had positively shifted in their relationship. Although they were not touching, even the most casual observer could see they were more than just workmates. With a bemused tilt of her head, she wondered when the two of them would figure that out for themselves.

A cherished and familiar voice broke into her thoughts, "Aren't you supposed to be working?"

Her expression was one of quiet delight as Arthur Chow came over and kissed her gently on the cheek. When they parted, she whispered softly, "Of course, I am! All the details are being stored in my head, just waiting to be written down. As a matter of fact, I intend to speak with the Ambassador of Lampur in a moment. Care to join me?"

"Good. When you're done, I need to talk with Amjai myself. Can all that mental writing take a backseat while dancing with me?" he asked hopefully.

She couldn't help but laugh and laid a hand on his shoulder. "My first dance of the evening is reserved for you alone, kind sir."

"Following the dance, we need to talk about where I am going to live after announcing my retirement."

A little surprised at this bit of news, she said, "I know we've discussed this, Arthur. It's a big decision... for both of us."

He nodded quietly, took her hand, gave it a mild squeeze, and answered, "Completely."

She whispered huskily in response, "Then, darling, after the dance, the conversation will be about where we both shall live."

"I was thinking more about what kind of engagement ring you might like." His eyes crinkled with amusement.

"An engagement ring... at my age? No, that's not necessary; a wedding band is all the rest of the world needs to know that my name has changed to Catherine Grant-Chow."

An enigmatic expression played over her fiancé's face. He

wanted to kiss her again, but, mindful of where they were, the journalist and billionaire brushed their hands and then walked as one towards the Ambassador. The elegantly garbed people milling around the European Wing of the museum were ignorant of their future plans.

Outside the museum, all the important guests of the event had arrived, so most of the journalists had gone to file their stories. Peggy Becker was moving along with the rest of the pack when she noticed that a black town car had pulled up, away from the main group of limousines. The door opened, and Jasper Templar emerged, dressed to the nines. He strode up the granite staircase with a jaunty, even brazen, air.

"It takes a lot of guts to show up here. Since he's out on bail, there can't be any problems. I wonder if he's going to face Daae and get into a loud and heated discussion? What a scoop that would be!" she said to no one in particular. She turned and walked away. The usual annoying clickity-click of her cheap heels were swallowed up by the sounds of camera equipment being dismantled and carted away. The failure to follow up with the D.A.'s office about Templar's appearance was yet another example as to why she was not as good of a reporter as Lois Lane or Catherine Grant.

On the day Jasper had been released on bail, he had returned to his apartment and decided to put into play his fallback plan. He had never dreamed that it might actually be used.

He had waited until nightfall, easily eluded the District Attorney's detail assigned to watch him, and by a circuitous route, made it to the museum. Loitering near the service entrance, he waited for a particular individual, Calvin Hobbs, to arrive. Ever since Daae's wedding to Lana Lang, he had known that a contact on the inside of the museum was necessary; someone who could keep him abreast of Lana's movements should he need to use her as a pawn against Daae. Therefore, he had made the acquaintance of one of the janitorial staff. The janitor was an individual unhappy with his lot in life and particularly with the amount of pay he received on his job. Calvin was a somewhat slow but avaricious man who Jasper found ridiculously easy to bend to his will.

Jasper had been liberal, paying for the drinks when he met him at a local bar, the Corona. A few blocks from the museum, it was a place where many of the janitorial staff met after work. Jasper had worked to increase the minion's displeasure with the state of things and was happy to see the results of his efforts. Tonight, when he saw Calvin, he smiled. He intercepted him as he approached the door. "Calvin, good to see you."

"Uh, hey, Jasp, what brings you around?"

Wincing at the nickname, but surreptitiously checking to ensure that they weren't going to be overheard, Jasper said, "Join me at the Corona on your break. I have a proposition for you."

Looking around, Calvin said, "Okay. See you at ten."

Jasper was sitting at the bar, with a watered-down scotch in front of him and a glass of beer on the bar in front of the stool next to him, when Calvin walked in.

Calvin crossed from the door to the bar, slid onto the stool next to Jasper, picked up the beer, and greedily downed half of it in a gulp before he spoke. "So, I'm here. What kind of proposition?"

"One you will like immensely... the kind that pays well," Jasper said with a smirk.

"I don't want no trouble. I got enough as it is," Calvin mumbled, looking up morosely from his glass.

"No trouble at all. I just want you to drop something off for me."

"Drop something off?" He snorted derisively, never looking up from his glass. "Use a messenger service."

“I need it dropped off *inside* the museum.”

Even with as slow a wit as Calvin was, he was starting to get an inkling that something could be wrong with this... proposition. He asked, “It... it ain’t a bomb, is it?”

With a shocked expression, Jasper asked, “Why ever would you even think that? I would never ask you to do anything illegal!”

Mollified, Calvin asked, “Well, then, what is it?”

“Just a small package that I want you to leave in a locker in the change area, a special ‘gift’ for one of the guests. Now, if it was a bomb, why would I want it placed there? It wouldn’t do any damage. Besides, why bother the working guys’ area?” Jasper pulled the package from under his jacket and placed it on the bar, between them.

“I... I guess that would be right. What’s in it?”

Tempus shrugged. “It’s just a present for Gregory Daae.”

Eyeing the box, Calvin asked, “A present, huh? According to the papers, you two ain’t exactly on the best of terms right now.”

His companion nodded slowly as if contemplating the loss of a good friendship. “Yes, that’s true. My present should settle all that.”

“Why can’t you just bring it with you? Also, how are you going to find your way into the locker rooms?”

Jasper shook his head in dismay. “Don’t worry. I know where your locker room is. Just off the Great Hall. Now, as to why I want you to carry it in: look at it. It would ruin the line of the tuxedo I’ll be wearing! This is a once-in-a-lifetime event, and I want to look my best! It’s worth a hundred dollars to me.” He pulled a hundred dollar bill from his pocket and laid it on top of the box.

“Nope.”

Suddenly irritated that this imbecile of a janitor was giving him a hard time, Templar snapped, “What’s wrong? Can’t you do an old friend a simple favor?”

“Sure. But I need more. Elise skipped out on me, so I have to make up her half of the rent.”

Annoyed, Templar put another hundred dollar bill on the table.

As Calvin reached for the bills, Templar stopped him.

“There’s one more thing.” Tapping the box, he said, “This one goes to the locker room.” He pulled out a smaller package, one a little bigger than a cigarette case, and placed it on the bar. Tapping the second box, he said, “This one goes up on a balcony, out of sight.” He laid another two hundred dollars on top of the second box.

The light of greed lit up Calvin’s eyes, and looking around, he scooped up the bills and stuffed them into his pocket. As he picked up the packages, he said, “Sorry, Jasp, they *both* gotta go into Locker 25. Nobody is using that one. Security is tight, and none of the janitors are allowed near the balconies until the event is over.” Tucking the packages under his arm, he headed for the door without looking back.

Tempus watched him go, swallowed the remainder of his scotch, threw a bill on the bar, and left. Now all he had to do was be a good little boy on bail and wait until the day of the exhibit opening.

Templar checked his watch as he entered the Great Hall, presented his invitation and received the gift bag. He smiled, thinking while putting on the badge. Instead of quickly discarding the bag behind a statue, he could use it to hold the other ‘present’. He needed to get past a guard who stood in front of the corridor which lead to the janitor’s locker rooms.

At that moment, the loud, surly voice of a man arguing with the security guard was heard at the reception desk. “My name has to be on that list, I paid good money to attend this event! Get whoever’s on the board over here this instant!”

The security guards – including the one guarding the

passageway Templar wanted – moved speedily through the glitzy assembly of patrons and celebrities in order to subdue the situation. He thought, “Talk about perfect distractions! That noisy lout has made my entry into the locker area a hundred times easier!”

The route to the janitor’s area was simple. He drifted in the direction of a side corridor, and then ran down the long passageway, slowed and then silently walked through the door to the locker room. Before him was a long row of gray, metal lockers and in front of them were old, wooden benches. Locating locker 25, he opened it and pulled out the two packages. Ripping the larger of the two open he revealed his favorite .50 caliber chrome-plated Desert Eagle. With easy movements, he unbuttoned the tuxedo jacket and slipped the gun into his waistband at the small of his back. The other package was quickly opened to reveal a simple lead box which he opened, then removed the contents and dropped the empty box into the gift bag. He put the empty packages back in the locker, closed the door, and went back the way he came. Cautiously peering out into the hall, he noted that the guards were still dealing with the now even more irate man. Watching the scene unfold, he became even more confident.

He made it back to Great Hall and past the desk before the guards returned. They were in the process of escorting the obnoxious guest out. He merged with the crowd and walked over to the bar, coolly ordering a gin and tonic. Eventually, after taking a few casual sips of the poorly-made concoction, he moved towards the staircase leading to the European Wing. He was determined to wreak his vengeance on Daae and dear Arianna at the same time.

Gregory and Lana walked arm-in-arm as they entered the vast room and wound their way past several tables until they reached the table closest to the dais. Not too long afterwards, the Luthors and Lana’s parents joined them. Lois and Clark, careful to avoid the famous couple, drifted over to where Perry, Alice and Jack were standing by the punchbowl.

“Well, now, it’s about time you two got here. The food is great; a lot better than what we had at the North AM Journalist’s conference in Seattle last year. Right, Jack?”

Jack muttered, “How would I know? Because of Mr. Olsen’s initial cutbacks when he first brought the *Daily Planet*, photographers/research assistants couldn’t attend. But the food here is better than what I usually eat at these functions, and this is just the cocktail hour! Guys, try the wild salmon coated with – of all things – brown sugar!”

Alice looked around and said, “Where is James? Surely he was invited?”

Lois rolled her eyes and answered, “He’s in Chicago, looking to buy a computer company called Micro something or other. The owner, Mr. Fences, obviously did not have the financial savvy to keep the firm afloat. Apparently, he feels applying the ‘Olsen touch’ to that company is more important than attending this event.”

At that moment Catherine came over, her green eyes twinkling with excitement. “Good evening, everyone. Tonight is garnering more than a story about the glamorous exhibit opening for me. The ambassadors of Erani and Lampur have agreed to exclusive interviews about the upcoming treaty.”

“Great shades of Elvis! Switching you to cover Eduardo’s international political beat was a good move,” Perry said with a huge grin. “You were right, that political science degree from Wharton *has* come in handy.”

“I’m still in transition, but it is much better than covering gossip or local politics. Best to leave that to Lois and Clark on the City desk. They can handle those disreputable people in City Hall far better than I.”

“Speaking of disreputable, isn’t that Jasper Templar, the

fellow causing all that trouble for Daae's company?" Alice asked, tilting her chin in his direction. They all observed as Jasper passed by, working his way around the room until he located a table directly across from where the Daaes and Luthors sat with the Langs and other museum board members.

"Amazing! It takes a lot of gall for him to show up here," Lois snorted.

Clark had his back to the crowd as he and Lois were sipping their drinks and chatting when Templar passed by. Templar hadn't noticed them as Clark had his back to him and Templar was concentrating on finding a point of vantage. Templar was about fifteen feet away as he passed Clark and he felt the pain associated with kryptonite exposure. Even with his back turned, he knew that Templar had just passed because of that. Who else would have kryptonite? Although the pain was not enough to cause him to collapse, he could feel beads of sweat form briefly on his forehead, plus a slight burning sensation. This was nothing like in the previous timeline. Then he had been within ten feet and the pain had been ample as to bring him to his knees. That had been bad enough, but then Tempus had moved closer, eventually placing the kryptonite on the floor only a foot away.

Despite the pain, he vividly remembered that in the previous reality, he had been teetering on the brink of unconsciousness when Lois had finally been released by her captor and, having grabbed the stone, had thrown it into a far corner of the television studio. With every inch, as Tempus had closed the distance, the pain had increased. Tempus had done it slowly, as if torturing him. When Lois had thrown it away, the relief from the pain had been immediate, although it had taken some seconds for him to recover enough to formulate a plan to handle the bomb.

Overhearing Lois's comment, Arthur Chow said as he joined them, "Not a lot of nerve, merely a donation of over one hundred thousand dollars. Apparently, no one thought to remove his name from the guest list after he was arrested."

"Can't he be asked to leave? Surely the Daaes and Luthors will have something to say about his presence here?" Alice asked.

Arthur shrugged, "There's really nothing they can do. Asking him to leave might create more problems than it is worth." He turned to Catherine, a worried expression on his face, and said, "Unfortunately, urgent business has called me away. A central solar power station in Manila has gone offline. I promise to be back in Metropolis as soon as possible."

Clark, very concerned, asked, "How bad is it? Is there any likelihood of loss of life?"

The older man shook his head, "No. But I need to make an appearance before some of the news agencies in the Philippines to assure them we are doing everything possible to fix the problem."

"Sorry to hear you have to leave, Arthur. If the board members are not going to eject Templar, then it's best to leave him alone. Now that I think of it, his being here will be a good way to start off the DMG series. I'll think up a proper title to the story before the night is through. Come on, the wait staff is signaling us to sit down for dinner," Perry said, as he took Alice's arm and led her to table twelve.

Catherine walked off with Arthur. Lois couldn't help but smile to herself; something special was going on there. Sooner or later, Catherine had to enlighten Lois as to just what that might be.

Clark, realizing that Templar had arrived, did not move as the rest of the party walked towards their table, but turned and looked around, seeking Templar, and finding him quickly.

Templar, having found a location he was satisfied with, looked around. He finally spotted Clark, who was staring at the interloper. Templar noticed Clark and smirked. In a show of arrogance, he took a glass of champagne from a passing waiter, held it in salute to Clark, and then drank off the contents with one swallow. He then patted his left breast pocket with a self-assured smile.

A brief scan with his x-ray vision revealed a chunk of green kryptonite - which confirmed the pain felt earlier. It was time to warn Wanda and CJ.

Lois noticed he was not following them towards the table. Turning to him, she asked, "Is there a problem, Clark?"

Trying to cover-up for not following the group, he reached up and wiped the sweat from his forehead, which gave him the excuse he needed. He replied, "Just a slight headache." He wasn't exactly lying since the kryptonite had that effect on him.

Instantly attentive, Lois said, "Poor guy. Is there anything I can do?"

He tried to reassure her with a gentle smile, "No, it'll pass. I just need some fresh air..." As he said this, he looked around, trying to spot CJ. He needed to warn him. He knew since Tempus was here they had to be extremely watchful. Failing that, he looked for Wanda and finally spotted her on the far side of the hall, near the doors.

Concerned, Lois asked, "Do you want me to come with you?"

"What? There's no reason for both of us to miss the party. I'll be back in a few minutes. You won't even notice that I've been gone."

Lois watched him go, and then made her way to the table. When she arrived, Perry asked, "Where's Clark going?"

"He suddenly had a headache. He's going for some fresh air."

"Shame. If he doesn't return soon, he'll miss the first course."

Lois shrugged, used to her partner's inexplicable comings and goings. "I'm sure he'll be right back."

At the Daae table, heads turned when they noticed Jasper Templar sit down, grin, give a slight wave and then begin talking to the person next to him, as if he was without a care in the world.

Jefferson Bailey, the creative director behind the *Age of Napoleon* exhibit, paled. "His name should have been pulled from the guest list! Everyone, please accept my deepest apology! I will ask security to have him removed from the premises immediately!"

Lex's eyes were touched with a hint of amusement rather than apprehension. "What possible harm can he cause? The man is an imbecile who simply wants to rattle us with his presence, nothing more. With nerve like that, he should be in business. What do you say, Gregory?"

A humorless smile came to Daae's lips. He shrugged and then nodded to his father-in-law, saying, "Ask *Professeur* Lang. I may be a keynote speaker this evening, but he, my wife and his team are responsible for this event. I for one have no concerns regarding his presence. It is more disappointing that my former assistant, Stephanie Aronnax, could not come. Apparently, she is about to become a *grand-mère* and has decided to remain in New Mexico helping her daughter and son-in-law decorate the nursery."

During this exchange, Bertram glowered at Jasper Templar. "After all the months of planning and preparation, one man is not going to ruin everyone's evening. He can stay. Nonetheless, as a precaution, security is going to keep an eye on him. If he makes a move towards this table or any of us, he will be escorted out." With those words, the professor stood and departed for a conversation with the security team leader.

Mrs. Lang looked around and said to no one in particular, "Bertram will handle this." Jefferson nodded in agreement and then they started talking about what an excellent job the staffers had done in decorating the room.

Across the table, Lana took her husband's hand. This evening was full of surprises. First of all, sitting with the Luthors. Arianna treated her as before, but she could sense defensiveness from the older woman. After all, for five years she had been the undisputed leader in Metropolis' society, and now she was suddenly being pushed aside by a young woman who, six months previously, no

one but a handful of people in this room had even known was alive. Next, seeing Clark enter the chamber with a clear, pure confidence he had never displayed when she was with him. Could it be due to his new alter ego or to the influence of that partner of his? Finally, Jasper Templar slithering into the museum on what should be the day of triumph for both her father and husband. She could sense Gregory's body growing tense, but to his credit, only she knew how displeased he was.

Wanda had seen Clark leave the group of reporters and moved to intercept him near the doors. When they were close, she asked, "What's wrong?"

In clipped tones, he replied, "Tempus. He's here, seated at a table away from the Daaes and Luthors. He's keeping a very low profile, but he let me know he's carrying a small piece of kryptonite. He's passed within twenty feet of me and I felt it."

Wanda nodded in understanding and said, "I'll let my Clark know." She placed a hand to her ear in order to relate the bad news. Then she said, "OK, he's aware of it and will keep his distance. He's had a lot more experience with that stuff. He said that the effects decrease with distance. After about twenty feet you might not feel it at all because the strength is reduced to one quarter of what it is at ten feet. He said something about the square of the distance. I didn't get it all."

"I'll have to ask him about that later, but that's great. I have to get back to my table. Lois is probably going to chalk this up to another one of my 'mysterious' disappearances." He said this with a touch of humor.

Brown, doe-shaped eyes pierced him with a sharp glance, yet she said nothing about Clark's remark. He was aware she wanted him to reveal himself to the Lois of this world as soon as possible. But instead, she said crisply, "You can't go back in there! The whole point of our being here is to make sure your life is not destroyed. All Tempus has to do is get within ten feet of you and our efforts will be for nothing. Like before, at ten feet, it'll bring you to your knees."

There was more than a suggestion of impatience in Clark's voice when he replied, "Don't you think I know that? But Lois and a lot of other people I care about are in that room. Would CJ allow you to be hurt because of the fear of exposing the secret? I'll just have to be careful to keep my distance."

She opened her mouth to argue, then thought better of it. Neither this Clark nor her husband could stand by while others were in danger. "Time for me to get back to my surveillance of Tempus. Be careful, Clark, that man is one of our worst enemies and one of the cleverest." Without waiting for his response, she melted back into the crowd.

Clark watched her go and thought, "This woman who was Lois-yet-not-Lois was right; she and CJ had much more experience facing off with Tempus and several other criminal masterminds than I have. Their work this evening could not fail. It was the perfect opportunity to put an end to Tempus' interference in their lives forever."

Once Wanda was back in the ballroom, she looked up to where she had seen CJ before. He had shifted his position and she didn't see him immediately, but when she did, she realized he was looking at her. She knew that there was too much noise in the room for him to hear her whisper, so she nodded in the direction of the table where Tempus was seated. When he nodded his understanding, she started to move around the perimeter, always with her eyes trained on Tempus.

After taking pleasure in a delectable meal, the room became noisy with chatter and the chink of fine china. Amusing anecdotes were exchanged among the guests after the main course had been whisked away, replaced with an array of fruit and French pastries, still hot and flaky from the ovens.

Jack excused himself from the table. It was time to position

himself for taking photos of the various speakers as they went up to the podium.

All this time, Wanda remained in the shadows, behind a statue of Apollo, watching Tempus, her stomach gnawing in ever-increasing volume. When a waiter passed her with a silver tray loaded with croissants literally dripping with warm milk chocolate, she reached out, snatched one and took a quick bite. Involuntarily she moaned with satisfaction: that was sinfully delicious! She wondered was the rest of the food tasted like and hoped this evening would come to an end quickly.

Jefferson Bailey walked up to the podium and began to speak. After making comments about the time and effort it took to create the exhibit, he said, "Now, without further delay, I am certain we all want to hear the person who has been one of the guiding lights behind the creation of this magnificent exhibit. Mr. Gregory Daae!"

Applause filled the space as the spotlight moved from the podium to shine upon Table One. The light glinted off Daae's glasses as he said in a low voice to the guests at his table, "*Mes amis*, I shall endeavor to not spoil your dessert by making a boring, long-winded speech..."

At that moment, waiters were carrying large silver trays holding several bowls of baked Alaska. The fiery desert caught the eye of everyone in the room, and even CJ, high above, was watching in fascination.

As Daae began to stride towards the podium, one of the waiters tripped when a guest unwittingly stuck out his foot. The poor man fell, sending a tray of the dessert crashing to the floor. Amidst the cries of dismay from the startled guests and the confusion as several waiters ran forward to help clean up the mess, Templar knew this distraction was his opportunity.

Clark experienced the all too familiar tinge of pain from green kryptonite poisoning. He tried to use his x-ray vision to see through the floor, and unfortunately the sight of wooden planks beneath the floor appeared and then faded away. Oddly enough, as quickly as the pain came, it departed.

In the confusion, Templar hastily moved from his table and secreted himself behind a statue with a vantage point of the podium. Templar reached behind himself and pulled the Desert Eagle from his waistband. There was a subdued click as he cocked the hammer, and a second click as he took off the safety. He had loaded a round into the breach before packaging it up.

After being briefly distracted like everyone else, Clark looked for Tempus and found that he had moved. He knew that Tempus couldn't have moved in his direction as he didn't feel the green K radiation. High above, in the confusion CJ had also lost sight of Tempus. Fortunately, not everyone had been distracted; Wanda had kept an eye on Tempus and seen him move behind the statue.

Quickly, before anyone could stop him, he leveled the gun at Daae's back.

Wanda had been moving in that direction, from statue to statue, concealed position to concealed position, and when she saw Templar step from behind the statue, gun in hand she was slightly behind him and to one side, she shouted, "Tempus!"

CJ was distracted by his wife's shout and looked in her direction. It was only a brief look, but it still delayed his response, and Tempus was able to get off a shot.

Her shout, using Tempus' real name, startled both Templar and Daae. Daae stood frozen in position, but Templar, catching her movement out of the corner of his eye, flinched as he pulled the trigger. His bullet went wide of its mark, striking Daae in the left shoulder. The impact of the .50 caliber slug slamming into his shoulder spun him around and threw him forward onto the table. His silver-framed glasses, tumbled from his head and landed not too far away, one lens cracked and splintered, but the other intact.

At the sound of the gunshot, and the screams of pain, some of the people in the ballroom started to stand while others dove for

the floor. Lana, seeing Daae topple forward, threw herself over him as if to protect her husband from further harm.

The scream of pain served as another distraction for CJ. He used his super-vision to check on the injuries. He saw that Daae's injury was serious, but not life threatening. The distraction was enough to allow Tempus to get off his second shot.

Following the sound of gunfire, Luthor, who had been seated next to Daae, was standing. He saw him falling forward and spun to see where the shot had come from. As he did, he saw Templar with a very large gun in his hand. The recoil had jerked his hand up, but he was bringing it back down and shifting his aim away from where Daae had been. Since Luthor wasn't looking directly down the barrel, he realized that he wasn't the target of the next shot, but at the same time the realization hit him that the actual target was Arianna. That realization spurred him into action, and he jumped in her direction with the intent of knocking her out of the way. Just as he reached her there was the boom of the next discharge. Instantly, Luthor felt a searing pain in his left side and he was thrown forcibly into Arianna and they both toppled onto the table with Luthor landing on top of his wife. That position only lasted a second before Luthor slid off of her and fell to the floor, unconscious, with rich, dark red blood flowing from his gunshot wound. The sharp smell of cordite, a distinct contrast to the white roses, hung in the air.

A horrified scream tore from Arianna's lips, and then she sank to the floor by her husband's body and took his hand. Clark and Lois, with Perry not far behind, tried to cross the space to reach them, but stopped several feet away when they realized Templar held a gun on Lana.

CJ turned his super-vision on Luthor and realized that the billionaire's wound was life-threatening. They needed to end this, quickly, but with Tempus in possession of kryptonite, he couldn't approach him.

The room was plunged into silence as guests, wait staff and security watched in horror as Templar pointed the gun at Lana, who knelt by her husband's side. His sarcastic, ugly tones filled the great space as he barked out, "All of the security guards leave the room and close the doors behind you. Otherwise, Mrs. Daae will be my next target!"

"Templar, this is madness! Why are you doing this?" asked Kip Terrell, his voice hoarse with shock and fear.

"Revenge," Templar spat out. "The media holds up such social giants as Gregory Daae and Mrs. Luthor as civic-minded and kind. What would the dumb locals think if they knew what frauds they truly were, hmmm?"

The crowd, despite their dread, anticipated his next words in apprehensive silence. All except one individual, who crept closer, looking for an opening so that she could strike.

Waving the Desert Eagle as a way of emphasizing his power over them, Templar continued, "Mrs. Luthor sold some Picasso and Degas paintings a few years back in order to," his voice became mocking as he finished, "Help some poor urchins. What was neglected in the *Metropolis Star's* splashy coverage of her generosity was that only a fraction of the money was used for that purpose. The rest was spirited away to a bank in Zurich. Gotta love those Swiss, they really know a thing or two about hiding money for the wealthy of other nations - money that cannot be taxed in their own country."

Kip said aloud, "This whole thing is about a... a tax dodge?"

Templar smiled, exposing bright teeth. "Nice, neat little packaged arrangement, isn't it? Arianna gets to look gracious in front of her wealthy friends, and she has a tidy little nest egg should her marriage to dear Lex flounder. Best part of all? She only paid taxes on part of the sum."

Arianna's expressive eyes glared at him with an expression of pure hate. One angry word hissed from her lips, "Monster."

He turned from the crowd. His smile grew cruel and devoid

of mercy as he looked down at Arianna in her blood-spattered gown and said in a sneer. "Maybe we ought to ask Mindy Church about that. It couldn't have been easy for a woman like that to go from being a gorgeous blonde to bald. Did you shave her hair off or did you have one of your minions do it?"

Arianna's face flushed brightly. In a few short hours all of Metropolis would know what she had done to humiliate her husband's former mistress, and why Mindy had departed from the city so quickly. In truth, what outraged wife wouldn't do the same to her rival? Without a word, she turned her back on Jasper Templar and focused her attention on Lex, refusing to dignify Templar's statement with a reply.

Lana used a napkin to staunch the flow of blood from Daae's shoulder wound. Her husband's face was white with shock and, despite considerable pain, barely-suppressed rage. Her voice, cracked from shock, said, "Stop this petty arguing. Gregory needs medical attention!"

Waving the gun around as if it were a toy, Templar answered, "Oh, let him suffer for a change, he's not innocent. Far from it! Ask him about the plot he and Mrs. Luthor cooked up to bilk poor Lex out of his corporation. Also, there is not enough time this evening to relate Mr. Daae's numerous strategies to manipulate the media to his will." Tempus shook his head in mock pity. "In this one instance... Lex Luthor is the innocent bystander!" Looking at the figure lying on the floor, Templar shrugged and said, "Sorry to have shot you, old man. I really was aiming for the missus... God, how I love irony!"

"Clark... help us," Lana said in a strained voice.

Hearing that, Templar's face twisted into a malevolent sneer and turned his attention to Clark. "Don't expect the man in blue spandex to show up and save the day. Isn't that right, Mr. Kent?"

Horrified, because now he was as helpless as any human, Clark said nothing. At that moment, he felt Lois take his hand.

"What's wrong, Kent, cat got your tongue? Maybe this will loosen it!" Tempus pulled out the small box and opened it with one hand. "A little gift from your old home: something that can only harm Superman... kryptonite!"

In the few desperate seconds it took for Tempus to pull out the rock, Clark re-lived the last time this man had exposed his secret. Now, despite everything he and Wells had done, his life would be turned upside down again. He looked into Lois' beautiful brown eyes and saw that a peaceful existence with this woman would be denied him forever.

The sickly green glow was evident to those closer to Tempus. Although Clark was much further than ten feet, he braced his body, ready for the wash of pain to engulf him.

Nothing happened.

No pain lancing over him, crippling muscles and sinews.

No sweat running out of his pores.

But he did feel the tingling sensation again, stronger this time, enveloping him in its grip.

Nothing happened to Clark. High above he could hear CJ's sharp gasp of surprise. "You're so much closer to the kryptonite. Why... why isn't it affecting you?"

But Clark was unable to hear CJ's words. His powers were gone, but he was not in pain. It was as if his abilities were muffled or wrapped in some kind of cocoon. Protecting, or maybe the better word was shielding, him from harm on a molecular level.

Since Tempus needed to keep his gun on his prisoners, he couldn't close the distance, so nothing happened to Clark, because he was still out of range of those deadly rays.

Templar's astonished voice echoed CJ's comment, "This is kryptonite! You're Superman! Fall on the floor!"

All this time, almost no one noticed a small figure behind Tempus. Clark had watched as Wanda moved silently in towards Tempus ready to strike, and just waiting for the right moment. It was imperative that he keep talking to Tempus as a distraction. If

Templar's attention was centered on him, Templar might not see Wanda until it was too late. He hoped the other guests would realize what he was doing and follow along. There had been more than enough violence tonight. Showing a bravado he certainly did not feel, Clark snapped back, "Are you insane? It doesn't affect me because I AM NOT SUPERMAN."

Lana glared at him with angry eyes, thinking he was refusing to help Gregory. Wisely, she remained silent.

People were beginning to stir and murmur with restless confusion. There were others now who could see what Wanda was up to and they desperately wanted this mysterious woman in red to succeed. A voice, familiar in its southern accent, was heard above the others, "Mr. Templar, please release the wounded and the ladies. Maybe then we can sit down calmly, and some kind of deal can be worked out?"

A harsh bark of laughter escaped Templar's lips. "Make a deal with you? If it hadn't been for that rag of a newspaper, my plans would have succeeded! RoyalPoint was not that far away from conquering LexCorp and DMG, making it the most powerful media conglomerate on the planet! I should kill you rather than waste time on Kent!" With that, he turned the pistol on Perry. His finger tightened to squeeze off a shot that hit Perry in the leg. Alice screamed.

At that moment, things happened so quickly that the guests, when they were later questioned, said it was all a blur. CJ knew that he couldn't risk getting close to Tempus, so now that the gun was not pointed at Lana, he sent a narrow beam of heat vision at the weapon. Before Tempus was able to bring it to bear on another target, it started to glow a dull red. Tempus strained to keep a hold on the weapon to get off at least one more shot, but the color of the firearm rapidly moved to a bright cherry red, and before it got there, Templar was forced to drop it. As he did, the round in the breech did in fact fire, into the floor.

That was the diversion Wanda had been waiting for. She had managed to get close to Templar, and as he dropped the weapon, she lashed out with a round kick that took him in the stomach. With a whoosh, all of the air was expelled from his lungs and he doubled over. Closing with him, she stuck him again, this time on the left arm, and the sickening snap of the humerus bone echoed throughout the chamber.

"Get this hellcat off me!" Tempus screamed in pain and indignation as he cradled his injured limb with his free hand.

"Be grateful I don't do more! How dare you shoot Mr. White!" she shouted back in fury, as hot tears streamed down her face. She bent down, picking up the kryptonite that had fallen from Tempus' grasp. As she started to run away, she dropped the kryptonite into her evening purse and closed it with a fierce snap. Seeing her mentor and friend attacked was a terrible shock.

Once Wanda was at a safe distance, CJ flew to the floor, grabbing Tempus so hard he nearly broke the man's other arm. It took all his control not to do further damage. Although the Perry of his world was safe, he still felt sick with grief that this man, who resembled his friend, was injured. A brief examination showed the bullet had not hit the femoral artery. After assessing the injuries, he decided that right now it was vitally important to get Lex Luthor to MetroGen's E.R. to treat his life-threatening wound.

Perry had collapsed to the floor and Alice, heedless of her gown, had knelt next to him. Grabbing a handful of napkins, she applied direct pressure to the wound in an attempt to slow the blood loss. Jack, who had appeared from out of nowhere, took off his jacket and laid it over Perry to keep his body temperature consistent and optimistically ward off shock.

"Alice... honey... are you... all right?" Perry asked in a strained voice.

She responded through her tears, "That was the craziest, bravest thing I ever saw! Don't... don't you dare die on me!"

He gave her a wan smile that turned into a grimace of pain, "No, darlin'. I'm... like Elvis, no matter how bad I ache... the show has gotta go on." Then, with a deep sigh, he passed out.

At that moment, Inspector Henderson, leading a team of police officers and a SWAT unit, came storming into the room and began assessing the situation. Catching the attention of one of the uniformed police nearby, Superman said, "Please use your two-way radio to summon medical assistance. Mr. Daae and Mr. White shall require transportation to the hospital for emergency treatment."

Bill snapped out to a uniform, "DeVeers! You heard the man! Call an ambulance! No, make that two!"

Before he was even finished speaking, the cop had keyed his microphone to comply.

Selecting another cop, and indicating Tempus, Superman said, "Handcuff him. 'I have to fly Mr. Luthor directly to the MetroGen E.R.'" Directly, he scooped up Luthor and flew off. As he did, the cop moved to comply.

Suddenly, Jack said, "Hey, where is the lady in red? She's the one who took Templar down."

Everyone looked around for the elusive woman, but she was nowhere to be seen. Even Clark, using his returning enhanced vision to study the surrounding rooms, could not locate her. Somehow, she had managed to leave without anyone noticing. Lois Lane of the alternative universe did indeed know more about covert operations than the Lois of his world.

When the paramedics arrived to collect Daae, they found Lana kneeling beside him, weeping uncontrollably. They pulled her off so that they could examine him. They all heard the paramedic call in on the med-channel to MetroGen, "Male victim, about forty, single GSW to the left shoulder. Looks like the entire shoulder capsule is compromised including the clavicle."

There was a squawk and then, "Stabilize and transport immediately."

As they were moving Daae to a stretcher, Superman returned in his blood-stained uniform.

In order to hear the report on Luthor's medical condition, Lois, Clark, Henderson and several others moved towards the Man of Steel while he spoke to Arianna Carlin-Luthor. Superman said gently, "Your husband took a bullet in the left lung. An inch or so to the right and it would have hit the heart. I believe I got him to the E.R. in time and he will survive."

Her previously fine-looking silver designer gown was also stained bright red with Luthor's blood. Slumping into a chair in relief, she said, "Th... thank you, Superman. I... I need to get to him as quickly as possible. He saved my life." She repeated, shaking her head, "My husband saved my life." At that, her voice broke, and she began to weep bitterly.

About this time, Templar was recovering consciousness. Realizing that he had lost, and determined to still have his revenge, he started to shout, "Look at him! Look closely! Don't you recognize him? The great Superman! He's really that disgraced reporter from the *Daily Planet*, Clark Kent!"

The people standing around, including Lois turned their eyes on him and looked at him questioningly.

CJ turned to the crowd and said, "As you can all see, I'm obviously not Clark Kent. Clark is with his partner, Lois Lane, as he has been all evening, working to cover this event with his co-workers. The *Daily Planet* does not work with disreputable reporters."

Templar snorted in disgust, "Of course the *Daily Planet* doesn't work with 'disreputable reporters', but only recently they fired two of them! But it is him. This is obviously an imposter!"

Lois snapped, "Yeah, right! An impersonator with all of Superman's powers? Over three hundred people saw him fly Lex Luthor to the hospital! Templar, no one is going to listen to such

wild accusations. Whatever creditability you once had is long gone.”

“That’s enough out of you!” Henderson motioned to a couple of uniforms and said, “Make sure you get him in a squad car immediately.”

“Thanks, Bill,” Lois said with a watery smile. It was fun to have the taciturn detective on her side for once.

“No problem, Lane. It’s the least I can do. We’ve got a nice cell at the station all set for VIP prisoners like Templar. He was able to make bail last time, but the next time he sees daylight will be when we take him to trial. Now, if you will excuse me, I have to make sure he’s booked properly. I don’t want him getting loose on some cockamamie technicality.”

He was about to leave when, turning to Clark and shaking his head in disbelief, he said, “Yeah, you’re Superman! No disrespect intended, Kent, that’s crazy talk. The guy is a nut. Maybe I ought to make that a padded cell!”

All Clark could manage was a lopsided grin. “Don’t worry about it, Bill, none taken. With Superman standing right next to me, anyone can see that I’m not him!”

Catherine joined them at that point. “This has been quite the evening! I managed to get away and call Arthur to let him know what happened. Otherwise, he would have returned from the airport. I also called Denny for you, Jack. The poor kid would have been out of his mind with worry.”

Jack couldn’t help but give her one of his rare smiles. “Thanks, Cat!”

The older woman said, “Oh, please, don’t call me that!”

“Cat?” Lois said with a raised eyebrow.

“What?” The young man shrugged, “It’s my private nickname for her.” A smirk tugged at his lips and he said, “Hey, I just thought of something. If you and Arthur get together your married name would be Cat Chow.”

Cat’s only reply to the quip was a deep groan.

Before anyone could react to the young man’s comment, Superman’s authoritative voice caused all to turn around. “Excuse me, everyone, but I believe my services are required elsewhere.” With those words, the Man of Steel, in a flash of blue and red, departed.

Lois said wearily, “I wanted to get a few quotes from him.”

Placing a reassuring hand on Lois’ shoulder, Clark said. “Don’t worry, hon... ah, Lois, we have more than enough to write this story.”

Jack and Catherine exchanged glances and then pretended not to hear the endearment Clark had nearly said.

After the police had hauled Templar away, still ranting that Clark was Superman, the paramedics prepared to take Perry to the hospital. The reporters gathered their things and quietly began to follow behind Alice White and Kip.

She halted, turned about, and asked “Where... where are all of you going?”

Clark, acting as spokesman for everyone, said, “With you to MetroGen, of course. My best friend and former roommate Dr. Pete Ross is working there tonight in the ER. His team will take good care of Perry. We... we want to stay with you until he’s out of surgery.”

Jack said softly, with a catch in his throat, “The... the Chief would want us to look after you, Mrs. White.”

Lois and Catherine both voiced similar feelings.

Despite seeing her husband and others shot by a madman, Alice, a strikingly beautiful woman in her late fifties, managed to appear dignified and calm. Taking Clark’s hand, she gave it a gentle squeeze and said, “If your friend is there I have no doubt my husband will receive the best care possible. But all of you have a job to do. This event had been turned on its head and the people of Metropolis need to know what happened from eyewitness accounts. All of us have been through an ordeal. Nevertheless, the

story has to be written, for the morning edition.”

Catherine, deeply concerned about her friend, insisted. “But Alice, somebody has to stay with you. Besides, who will tell your sons?”

Kip Terrell stepped forward. Placing a consoling hand on Alice’s shoulder, in his baritone voice, he said, “My wife, Bebe, and I will stay with Alice. As soon as we get to the hospital, we’ll contact the boys. It’s time for the *Daily Planet* reporters to get to the bullpen ASAP! We can’t have those TV talking heads scoop the best newspaper in New Troy. The only pity is that there are no pictures.”

“Not necessarily!” Jack piped up and patted his camera. “While Templar was waving the gun around, I was very quietly taking pictures! The story is going to be great!” His face fell and he continued, “Just wish Perry hadn’t gotten shot!”

Despite the terrible events of this evening, Lois’ heart swelled with pride as gave she Jack a fierce hug. “Spoken like a true photojournalist! Great work, Jack! We need to grab a cab, get to the bullpen and write up the story!”

A paramedic spoke up, “Mrs. White, we are ready. You can ride in the ambulance with us.”

Alice turned to the woman, smiled, and expressed heartfelt thanks then she continued speaking to her friends. “As soon as Perry is out of surgery, Kip will call. Now, all of you, as Lois said, ‘catch a cab and go to work!’”

Part Thirty-One

As they had after the White Orchid Ball, Clark, Lois, Jack and Catherine bundled into the back of a large yellow Metrocab to return quickly to the newsroom and write up an account for the morning edition.

“If you can get us to the *Daily Planet* in record time, there’s an extra twenty bucks in it for you,” Clark said as he shut the door.

“Gotcha, pal! I’ll have you there in a jiff!” the cabbie said with a toothy grin, and with a jolt, dived into late night traffic. The move was so abrupt that Jack nearly dropped his camera case.

“Careful!” his fellow reporters shouted in unison.

“Jack, that camera case holds your future as a photojournalist! Don’t let anything happen to it!” Lois said with feeling.

The dynamic pictures Jack had managed to take under the circumstances would be key to the story. All of them slipped into a contemplative silence until they reached the *Daily Planet* building. For once, the cantankerous elevator operated in a hushed manner, seeming to pick up on the mood of its occupants.

“I wish we could have gone to the hospital with Alice. It feels like we are abandoning her and Perry,” Lois said as she walked down the ramp towards her desk.

“That’s true, but Alice is aware Perry will recover sooner knowing we are writing a story that will boost circulation *and* be a fantastic lead-in for the DMG series... especially with Jack’s pictures.” Clark turned to Jack and said, “Every single picture in that camera is vital!”

“Heading to the darkroom now. Glad to get out of this monkey suit!” Jack roughly removed the tie and started heading for the darkroom with the camera bag slung over his shoulder. “What a night! It’s a good thing the big guy was there! Hey, Clark, it’s still hard to believe Templar thought you were Superman! How could anyone be in two places at once?”

Before any of them could respond, Mitch Ryder, the night editor, an owl-looking man, came out of his office and gazed suspiciously at the foursome over his wire-rimmed glasses. He held a grudging respect for the group, especially Lane. It had taken courage and determination for her to continue on the paper after the way her relationship with Claude DeBarre had disintegrated. Nonetheless, he was disturbed at having these favorites of Perry invading the tranquility of the night staff and their routine. Clark

and Lois had virtually taken prisoner the main conference room with their research. His staff had been not so quietly grumbling about using the stuffy conference room down the hall. He hoped they were simply here to write up their stories and beat a hasty retreat.

With his hands on his hips, he looked around at the foursome, taking in their disheveled appearance and blood on Lois' gown. "Anybody want to tell me what's going on around here? Were you guys in a fight? It was my impression all of you were supposed to be covering that swanky museum event downtown."

The foursome exchanged glances, and by silent agreement, due to her seniority at the paper, made Catherine their spokesperson. She motioned Mitch over to her visitor's chair, while the others continued booting up their computers. Jack, without another word, hurried up the ramp to the darkroom.

A few moments later, Clark heard the older man whistle. He glanced over and saw Mitch shake his head, clearly ashamed by his earlier thoughts and murmured in a hushed tone, "Well, blow me down. Perry White has been shot! Lex Luthor and Gregory Daae were also shot by one of Daae's former executives?"

The letters on Lois' monitor swam into a murky blur of green and black as she listened to Catherine relate the night's events. With shaking fingers, she brushed away hot, salty tears that flowed down her cheeks. Uppermost in her mind was the prone figure of Perry lying on the floor, his trouser leg soaked with blood. It took a concerted effort to push the image from her brain and continue typing.

"Th... thanks for telling me." A visibly shaken Mitch rose heavily from the chair. "We'll make this story a tribute to Perry." Glancing at his watch, he said, "All of you have an hour to get your stories written up and submitted. Tell Jack I want whatever he's got in twenty!"

For the next twenty minutes or so, the only sounds heard were from three keyboards being pounded mercilessly. As the trio swiftly crafted their stories, Catherine focused on the impact on the financial and political scene both locally and internationally, while Lois and Clark concentrated on Jasper's arrogance during his attack and the unselfishness of Perry's decision to stand up to him.

Eventually Lois stopped typing and asked out loud, "What about the 'Lady in Red'? Without her decisive actions tonight, the outcome might have been far worse."

"True," said her partner thoughtfully as he came over. "She did make a difference when it counted."

Suddenly, an angry growl could be heard above them.

"Rats! In all the pictures I took, our mystery lady's face was either blurred or blocked!" Jack stormed down the ramp. Upon reaching his friends, he handed the pictures, still damp from the darkroom, to Lois. Clark abandoned his computer and Catherine put down her phone to join them.

She carefully thumbed through the shots: one of Daae faltering and clutching his shoulder, another of Lex Luthor on the floor with a weeping Arianna by his side, and the final photograph, of a blonde-haired woman wearing a red dress delivering a strong kick to Templar's mid-section. Her face was obscured by her hands which were up in a ready position.

"Too bad there's no picture of the woman's face, but nevertheless, these shots are good! It's the extra spice to make the story come alive for our readers!" Lois exclaimed.

Mitch came over, took the pictures from Lois, and studied them carefully. Finally, he said, "We'll lead with the Lady in Red's picture and put these other shots on page two. Our objective is to inform the public and perhaps discover her identity." He looked at all of them and asked, "Did anybody get a glimpse of what she actually looked like?"

Feeling the need to throw the others off Wanda's trail, Clark shrugged and said, "No. She moved so fast that she just looked

like a... a blur to me."

Lois turned around and stared at him. "What? Kansas, are you serious? Has anything happened to your glasses in the last five hours?"

Jack snorted, "A blur? Are you trying to tell me that this woman is somehow working with Superman?"

"Not necessarily, it's just... those karate moves were so fast. She really knew her stuff," Clark said with a helpless shrug.

Catherine was quiet as she took the photo in her hand and studied it with such intensity it was painful to Clark. "In Fact," she said quietly, "the lady's build and voice inflections sounded a LOT like Lois. Her voice was almost identical when she shouted his name. Actually, she mispronounced it. That's what made it stick in my mind. She called him Tempus instead of Templar."

As Catherine was relating this, Lois was thinking furiously. She had heard the shout, but you seldom actually hear the sound of your own voice, but that 'Keyaa'... that had been *hers*. It was unmistakable. "I have heard a lot of grunts, groans and shouts in the dojo. Everyone has their own particular shout when they are focusing on a strike or kick. It is as distinct as a fingerprint and what I heard was mine. Who was this woman that has my figure and voice? Well, no matter who it was, it obviously wasn't me."

Aloud, she responded to her friend, "Oh, boy, Catherine, it is the wee hours of the morning, so I'll excuse that comment. It couldn't have been me, although I'm probably that good. No way would I dye my hair! Besides, I was right there on the floor with the rest of you."

Mitch held up one hand to calm them, then said, "That's enough speculation for now. Under the picture will be a question, 'Who is this woman?' Maybe someone knows."

Clark thought, "Happy hunting with that idea. By this time, Wanda and CJ are back on their own world."

The phone on Catherine's desk started to ring. As quickly as she could with three-inch heels, she ran across the room and picked it up. Two minutes later she put it down, shook her head, and said, "The word is spreading about Luthor and Daae. Pretty soon, my phone is going to go ballistic! Frantic contacts on Wall Street and Capitol Hill will want to know what happened tonight. I'll bet my Wharton degree that DMG and LexCorp stocks are going to be down by several points."

Mitch nodded thoughtfully, "A truthful account of what happened might help. Is everyone finished with their articles? They have to be checked."

Clark replied, "Lois and I need to go over a few points."

The night editor gave them both an uncompromising look over his glasses and wondered how Perry put up with these two. "By a 'few points', you mean Lois didn't use the 'spell check' feature again?"

Embarrassed, Clark cleared his throat while Lois rolled her eyes, but now was not the time to get into an argument.

Catherine came over and said, "Mitch, my article should be in your inbox and the outline for tomorrow's evening edition has been sent as well."

He smiled and said, "Good work, Grant! Wait a sec, how about finishing the follow-up now?"

Before she could answer, a jaw breaking yawn escaped, then she said, "In two hours the sun is going to come up and the Asian markets shall be alerted that Daae and Luthor have been shot and hospitalized. I won't be able to get quotes for the rest of the financial talking heads until then. In the meantime, crawling under nice fresh sheets and getting eight hours of sleep is all I care about right now."

"Sleeping sounds good to me!" Lois said as she tried in vain to stifle a yawn. "I need to get out of this gown and take a shower."

Mitch grumbled, "Get the stories over to me ASAP! Then go home. You guys are great for the daytime staff, but you are not

night workers.”

Clark and Lois shared a Metro yellow cab to her place. They were silent nonetheless appreciated the comfort drawn from each other’s presence. When they pulled in front of her building, she had invited him upstairs for coffee, but he declined. Yet nonetheless, deciding to walk Lois to her apartment door, he sent the cab on its way. Now that they were out of the newsroom, Lois’ halting steps made it painfully evident that she was physically and emotionally drained from the stressful evening they had experienced. Tonight, had yielded very different results from those that they had anticipated.

Clark took her keys, opened the multiple locks, handed her them back and said, “Good night, Lois. See you in the morning.”

A tired sigh escaped her lips, “Good night. Are you sure about not coming inside for a cup of coffee?”

He looked her over. The once-shimmering white gown was now speckled with red blood stains from when she lain on the floor by Perry’s side at the museum. Tendrils of dark brown hair had tumbled loose from the confines of the pins holding it together. The once-flattering eye makeup was now streaked and unkempt from tears and perspiration.

Yet, in his eyes, she was the most stunning woman in the world. He leaned close, took her face in his strong, supple hands, and gently pressed warm lips on her forehead. The reward for doing something so tender and unexpected was to listen as her heartbeat passionately. Previously his attraction and feelings for the woman before him had threatened to get out of hand; once in the parking garage, and then at her home. Then, as now, those feelings needed to remain under control.

A voice, both rough and yet seductive, spoke, “Lois... I want to come inside and be with you. There... there’s a lot for us to talk about, unfortunately, and now is not the time. We’re both exhausted. I promise we will get some time at my place and cook dinner together and then we can talk all night if you want. Who knows, maybe we can make plans to visit that island in the Pacific.”

Lois was about to respond when a loud meow erupted from the apartment and Lady Plushbottom stuck her furry head out the door. She looked up disapprovingly at the humans with her blue eyes.

The feline’s untimely appearance put an unexpected end to their conversation.

“She’s looks rather hungry,” Clark said with a chuckle.

“Don’t kid yourself, Kansas, she’s *always* hungry,” Lois said while attempting to mask annoyance at her pet. “Maybe we can get together tomorrow and finish the first DMG article?”

He took her hand, gave it a gentle squeeze, and smiled. “I’d like that. See you tomorrow. Goodnight, Lois.”

She gave him a weary smile, “Goodnight, Clark.”

Twenty minutes later, Clark entered his apartment to find once again that CJ, Wanda — sans the blonde wig and blue tinted eye contacts — and H.G. Wells were there waiting for him. His eyes studied Wanda and CJ. They sat close to each other and held hands. In the time since he had met CJ, it was perfectly obvious their marriage had strengthened and matured. He was envious of their easy rapport with one another and fervently hoped that such a relationship would come about between his Lois and himself.

He greeted the trio by saying, “My apartment has become your home in this alternative universe.”

CJ answered with a gentle chuckle, “Well, it was also my apartment... with the exception of a few things, of course.”

“That’s true,” Wanda said, looking around the apartment with an expression of nostalgia on her face. “For instance, that picture of you and I leaving the Kerth awards is not on the mantle. Now *that* was a very special night. Clark, I’m sorry you and Lois did

not get to enjoy the opening of the *Age of Napoleon* exhibits. Now, what happened with those pictures of me kicking Tempus’ butt? You’ll never know how much pleasure that gave me! Please say that Jack did not get a clear shot of me!”

Clark shook his head and said, “There is not a single clear picture of the ‘lady in red’. But a photo of you punching Tempus will be on the front page of the *Daily Planet’s* morning edition. With several eyewitnesses, and with him shooting two public figures, we can all rest assured that Tempus is going to be in jail for a long time.”

H.G. Wells bounced on his toes and said, “Someone will be in jail, but it won’t be Tempus.”

“Huh?” Clark responded. “By the way, where have you been? I expected to see you at the museum.”

“A fair question, my dear Mr. Kent. Whilst the three of you were at the museum, I have been having conversations with some colleagues of mine. Remember Utopia? It will occur in your universe as well. But this Tempus is not from here. He is from CJ and Wanda’s universe.”

Closing his eyes in pain, Clark groaned, “Oh no! There’s *another* one out there?”

“Quite right, quite right, yet nothing to concern yourself with, my boy. The Tempus from this universe is actually a very pleasant chap. He’s one of the senior librarians for the *Cyclopedia Galactica*. One of the many people who has a hand in administering Utopia. The last thing Guy Tempus wants is for that peaceful existence to be destroyed.”

CJ asked, “So, I take it you have been talking to the Time Police of our universe?”

Herb nodded and said, “Indeed. We have very explicit plans for Mr. Tempus. He will be removed by a team of operatives from Newgate prison, led by someone who has a personal stake in making certain the plan is a success.”

“Oh? Who?” CJ asked.

“Lars Daae. Descendant of the Gregory Daae of your world, who is a very well-respected Swiss watchmaker, like Gregory Daae’s grandfather.”

The trio could not help but laugh.

“Yes, quite the ironic touch! Especially since he is such a lover of irony. Taking his place will be a specially designed robot — a synthetic human called a replicant. The replicant will stand trial, endure all the media attention, and eventually enter prison. Within two or possibly three years, it shall simply wind down and die. Tempus shall be nothing but a bad memory.”

“Thank goodness! That man has been a thorn in our sides for long enough!” Wanda said angrily.

“Are you certain?” Clark asked worriedly, “He’s escaped from prisons in the past. How do you know he won’t return?”

“Yes, Mrs. Kent, Utopia’s future is assured. Mr. Tempus is going to the most full-proof prison ever devised — in outer space. None of us will ever see him again; your future will be safe from any interference from him,” Wells said with visible relief.

“And so is *your* future, Clark,” CJ said. “He cannot expose your secret.”

“Neither can Lana... ah, Mrs. Daae,” Wanda said flatly. “Her creditability simply by association with her husband has been seriously compromised. Too many people — especially those of the fourth estate — were there last night and they witnessed Clark Kent and Superman standing side by side.”

Clark heaved a sigh in relief, “Good thing the kryptonite did not affect me as it has in the past.”

CJ rubbed his cheek and then looked intently at the time traveler. “What about that, Mr. Wells? Why wasn’t Clark in pain? He was close to the kryptonite? Oddly enough, now that I think about it, I could feel a slight tingling despite being in the upper balcony. But my powers were unaffected. That’s never happened before.”

A thoughtful expression crossed the time traveler's face. "Hmm, my only explanation, or rather hypothesis, is this: we know Tempus has visited our universe and Clark's. But what if he somehow managed to acquire kryptonite from yet *another* dimension? If that were the case, its radiation signature might affect each of you differently. With kryptonite from your respective dimension, the pain and removal of your powers usually occurs within ten feet. This conundrum would be something a man like Dr. Klein in CJ's universe would love to delve into. But in this situation, Clark was affected in one way and CJ in another."

Clark nodded thoughtfully, "It sounds like as good an explanation as any. In the confusion, I didn't notice, who has the kryptonite now?"

"I grabbed it after breaking Tempus' arm and dropped it into my Aunt Rita's antique evening purse."

"Evening purse? But CJ must have been affected afterwards?" Clark said.

Wanda gave him a mischievous smile and said, "Nope. Turns out that that particular line of evening purse had the beads strung together with lead wires, with just enough lead to keep the radiation from leaching out. It was insurance, just in case. Sorry, I should have told you sooner."

CJ said, as he held up the small lead-lined box, "Do you have anyone here who can take care of it? Otherwise, our friend Dr. Klein of S.T.A.R. Labs might want to take a closer look at it."

"Here Bernard Klein is an astrophysicist. As a matter of fact, both he and his wife Aykira are due to head back into space soon. So, I doubt if they will have time to study it. Please, take that blasted rock anywhere, as long as it's away from me!"

CJ and Wanda looked at each other and then at him with rather odd expressions on their faces.

"Huh, did Mrs. Klein used to work for the *Daily Planet*?" Wanda asked quietly.

"No, they met at S.T.A.R. Labs. Why do you ask?"

The couple shared another odd exchange, and then CJ said, while shaking his head. "Oh, it's a long story and can wait until we visit again."

Saddened, Clark looked down and said, "Could it be sooner rather than later? CJ, Wanda, these visits... well, it's like seeing my twin brother and sister-in-law. Maybe spend a little time with your parents? My friends here are great, but you two have become family."

CJ placed his hand on Clark's shoulder. "You are family! Don't ever forget it!" Looking at H.G. Wells, he said, "Can't you give him a device so he and eventually Lois can visit us?"

Bouncing happily on his toes, the time traveler nodded and said, "That can be arranged. Besides, it might be a good thing for all of you to grow closer. After all, Clark may need to come to CJ's universe and help him."

Clark looked at Wanda and CJ. "All you have to do is contact me. I owe everyone here a debt that can never be fully repaid."

Wanda smiled and gave him a hug. "Don't consider this a debt! We're family helping one another... it's what we do. Now please, tell us about poor Perry! Have you heard anything?"

On Wednesday morning, at the Luthor penthouse, Arianna, with cold, nervous fingers, wrote out a number of substantial checks in the presence of Sheldon Bender – as well as several members of the IRS. The checks were payments to institutions, those chiefly being orphanages and other charities, who would receive additional funds as well as new computers and gym equipment from Mrs. Luthor. Money and items they should have received initially if she had not tried to cheat them and feather her own nest. After Templar's announcement about how she had hidden the bulk of the money for the sale of the various paintings in a Swiss Bank account, the IRS and several other financial

watchdog organizations had appeared at the Luthors' front door.

She slid the final check over to a rather stern CPA who was also a forensic accountant. This particular check was the most expensive and painful, and yet it was the most important. It was the last in a series of heavy fines being charged to both Lex and Arianna for committing fraud and money laundering. There was serious conversation in the IRS offices regarding whether one or both should serve jail time.

As Catherine Grant had predicted, LexCorp stock was taking a serious beating. In order to improve the stocks, it was imperative that Arianna show a repentant attitude and pay back everything she owed. Lex was recovering slowly from his wounds but preferred to remain in the hospital where he could be shielded from the scrutiny of the press. In some media outlets, most notably LNN, he was being treated as a sympathetic figure, one who was not aware of his wife's perfidy.

Not many people in the country were willing to believe that.

When Nigel St. John silently closed the door on the last accountant, Arianna breathed a sigh of relief, sat down on the grey couch, and leaned back deep into the plush cushions. She looked over at Bender and St. John who were both standing by the door and said with real feeling, "Finally! Those insufferably miserable financial maggots are gone! Nigel, can you make a pot of tea?"

"No, Arianna. I shall not," he said. His few words were as brittle and dry as a dead tree.

Arianna. Nigel St. John had called her Arianna. He never used her first name. Something was happening, as if the whole world had simply shifted in an entirely new and alarming direction.

"What? Why not?" she asked, nervously glancing from one man to another.

Bender looked over at Nigel and said, "Please, handle that matter we discussed earlier, Mr. St. John."

Nigel bowed slightly at the waist and said, "As you wish, sir." Without another word, he slipped out of the room.

She pulled herself up from the couch, walked over to the lawyer, and said, with each word squeezed between her lips, "What is going on?"

Bender cleared his throat and looked at the plush gray carpeting. "Mr. Luthor. That is, your... husband, Lex, feels continued association with you has become... problematic."

Her large brown eyes grew wider when she said, "Problematic?"

"Yes, between the bad publicity for LexCorp, and the cost of paying back taxes and hefty fines, he feels it is time to agree to disagree."

Stunned, Arianna said loudly, "*He* feels it's time to agree to disagree? Sheldon, are you saying my husband sent you here to tell me he wants a divorce?"

The short man pulled his eyes from the carpet and then stared up at her. There was little compassion in his expression. "To put it rather bluntly, yes."

There was a knock on the door and then Nigel slipped inside. Without giving her a single glance, he said, "Arianna's bags are packed, and a towncar is waiting for her downstairs. The driver has been instructed to take her wherever she wishes to go." Nigel did not stick around to hear a response from either of them. He left the room without a word.

Her voice cracked and she grabbed the lawyer's arm. "Sheldon! He can't do this! I put up with that woman Mindy Church and... and all the others..."

Sheldon pulled away from her and again found something fascinating about the carpet. His bald pate was shiny with a thin sheen of sweat despite the room's air being cool. He responded drily, "Let's not travel down that unfortunate path. Mr. Luthor feels that taking a madman's bullet, which was meant for you, evens the scales." He reached into his briefcase and removed a

thick blue folder full of papers. “Sign these documents and we can get started with the separation process. There is also a banker’s check in the amount of three million dollars, more than enough to get you started on a new life. He is also willing to be quite generous after the divorce. That is, if you are willing to cooperate.” A silver pen materialized from his jacket pocket and he handed it to her. “Considering your damaging association with Mr. Daae and Templar and the legal entanglements to follow, I strongly suggest accepting this offer. There shall be no others.”

Defeated, Arianna’s shoulders slumped. Without another word of protest, she took the pen and signed on the lines where Bender indicated. He accepted the pen from her and placed the documents back in the briefcase. In a brisk, businesslike manner, as if they had concluded a simple transaction, he said, “Thank you. This was the best decision for all concerned. Please inform my office of your new address so the alimony checks can be mailed to you. Good-bye, Arianna.” With that Sheldon Bender held the door open, not intending to allow her to remove anything from the penthouse that had not been packed up.

With less ceremony than it would take to swat a fly, Arianna had been eliminated from her husband’s life. If there was any remorse for her actions against Lex they did not appear on her face. She spent a moment to take a brief look around the tastefully appointed space, and then opened the doorway and went into the corridor to begin a new and terrifying life as being someone who was *not* Mrs. Lex Luthor.

Shooting at Metropolis Museum!

International Media Magnets Lex Luthor and Gregory

Daae

wounded by Daae’s former disgruntled employee

By Lois Lane and Clark J. Kent

The frightening events that occurred during the *Age of Napoleon* exhibit opening night were splashed all over the tabloids and other media outlets. Of course the *Daily Planet* was the only paper that had photos of Jasper Templar being subdued by a mysterious woman in red. Such a photo did not hurt the paper’s circulation and the lady was the topic of discussion and speculation around water coolers and coffee carts in the offices and homes of Metropolis.

Unfortunately, despite a city-wide search, the elusive woman had at that point not been discovered. Without clear identification, with each passing day, it was more and more unlikely she ever would be found.

For the week afterwards, only the *Daily Planet* carried the story of how DMG had manipulated the news to further its own ends. Of course, this brought about a firestorm of accusations from the media company against the paper, but with each accusation, proof was presented to back up each article. Numerous former DMG employees began coming forward and telling their own stories. Victims of Daae’s crimes also wanted to be heard.

Consequently, the newsroom’s phones never stopped ringing. Even citizens from the fishery village, in Nova Scotia, who had not wanted to speak with Lois four years ago, now insisted on bending her ear.

As predicted by Stephanie’s friend Emma, the Metropolis offices of DMG were raided by every financial government agency imaginable. The board of directors, in a frantic move to save the company, insisted Gregory Daae resign as CEO and turn over most his shares of the company. After listening to his lawyers and financial advisors, he did so with the greatest of reluctance. Now, it was Friday night, and the final article wrapping up all the loose ends had been sent to Mitch Ryder for the Saturday morning edition.

Lois was working hard on finishing an unrelated article when her phone rang. On the other end was Bobby Bigmouth. In the background, she heard the sounds of a paper bag being crumpled,

and knew he was once again in the middle of his preferred occupation. “Hey! It’s your favorite snitch and street epicurean. See, I told ya my advice was good! Gregory Daae and his cronies are gonna get the comeuppance they deserve! Kent ain’t such a bad partner after all. Youse guys make beautiful copy together. Me and the crew in the Ninety-Second Street soup kitchen are all hoping this is gonna become a permanent partnership.”

Lois could not help but laugh, and then she said, “We’ll see about that! Where have you been for the past couple of weeks?”

“Doin’ what I do best: cook. A guy’s gotta eat. Anyhow, I called to congratulate you and Kent on breaking the Daae story and one other item of interest. Wow! The museum article on Saturday was good. Talk about a great appetizer! What’s the main course?”

“Now, Bobby, am I the type of literary chef who spoils the meal? Pick up a copy of the *Daily Planet* evening edition and find out. What’s this ‘other item of interest?’”

“OK. I can wait. Hey, you interested in how your ‘friend’ Linda King got all that information about LNN executives?”

Lois responded cautiously, “Yes. That material she gave us was pretty extensive, all the way down to each person’s particular habits. It had to have come from someone inside LNN.”

“Bingo! It did! From a former *Daily Planet* reporter, Claude Debarre! But you don’t have ta worry about that creep. Someone dropped a dime on him. He was canned yesterday and LNN is planning on pressing charges.”

Lois was quiet for a moment, but she gave herself a tiny mental shake, and remembered the wide-eyed, innocent young reporter he had seduced no longer existed. Releasing the breath she had not realized she was holding, she said, “That couldn’t have happened to a ‘nicer’ guy. Got anything else?”

The phone vibrated with the sounds of food being chewed. Lois waited patiently.

“Maybe. How about a little information regarding the former publisher of the *Metropolis Star*, Preston Carpenter? Last night he tried ta skip the country. Actually, he attempted ta make some big illegal trades on DMG stock. A hungry little birdie told Assistant DA Mayson Drake all about it. After the trial he’ll be wearing an orange jumpsuit and eatin’ real bad chow as a guest of the U.S. government.”

“Ha! That *is* something new. That’s the perfect way to cap off this series. Mr. Carpenter’s arrest by ADA Drake and company should make page one of tomorrow’s business section. Thanks Bobby!”

“Don’t mention it, Lane, and I mean don’t mention it! Now... ah, there is the tiny matter of my fee...”

Bobby let the hush on his end of the line draw out for dramatic effect until Lois broke the silence. She sighed theatrically and said, “Stop by Café Americana this evening and order whatever you want, as long as the tab does *not* exceed one hundred dollars.”

The chewing stopped and Lois actually heard the snitch squeak. “A hundred dollars? That’s not even a snack. Put Kent on the phone, he knows how ta treat a poor starvin’ hustler right!”

A full laugh escaped Lois’ lips, “Nothing doing! I’m grateful for the information, but the *Daily Planet* has a limit for all its confidential sources.”

The snitch began to whine. “I’ll take the payment in installments!”

“Bobby...” Her voice took on a warning tone.

“Okay, okay! Talk ta you later!”

Once again, a soft chuckle escaped her throat as she put the phone down. Bobby was a great source, but something of a drain on her expense account. Nonetheless, without his help and advice, this series of articles would have remained a thick file of notes in her steel cabinet at home, turning yellow and dry with age.

A soft ping alerted her to an e-mail that had come in. This

was another computer update that Ken Janney had the IT department install. E-mail was great, but sometimes the pings were more of a disturbance than helpful. With a quick sigh, she switched to the screen.

From: Eduardo

To: Lois

Subject: Congratulations!

Everyone on this side of the pond is excited and proud of you and Clark Kent for the outstanding work done on the DMG series of articles. Spoke with Labbie Rathbone last night, and she says if you ever want a job here, there's a space for you. Apparently, no one has been able to fill my shoes. ;-) That's a high compliment, Lois.

Samantha and I are enjoying married life. Teaching a new generation of journalists has its good days and its bad, but for the most part, it is quite rewarding!

Please come visit us as soon as you can. The word is you are on good terms with the Man of Steel. Maybe he could bring you over for a short visit? No need for a passport! I could have used his talents on some of my wilder assignments. The invitation is open. We have a spare bedroom in our townhome that Samantha has fitted out for guests.

Ciao!

A cheerful smile spread across Lois' lips. Of all the accolades she had received so far, this email was one of the best!

Bobby Bigmouth and Eduardo had created the foundation for the series, while Linda King and Bonesteel had provided the material, or rather steel framework of evidence, to go along with all her research. Stacy had helped with running down hundreds of different facts at all hours of the day and night.

Jack had provided attention-grabbing pictures from the museum event. He had taken the Sunday edition to the hospital and shown Perry. The old newshound was very proud of him and called HR directly and demanded his job title be changed from research assistant to full-time photojournalist — with a large bump in salary of course.

The former street kid with an attitude had grown up in four years. Together, they had gone from being 'allies' to good friends.

But she looked only a few feet away at the person who had given the most himself in this investigation. She could only imagine what the emotional price had been for him to financially destroy Lana's husband. "It has only been a year since I came back from the mining town story and we met in this room," she mused. So much had happened in that short space of 365 days.

With a flick of her wrist, she pushed her long brown hair back and realized he was more than a partner. He was her best friend. But being simply his friend no longer interested her. It was time for a deeper, richer relationship than what they had now.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a loud rumbling noise. She looked up and the elevator doors opened. Suddenly, the boom of a much-welcomed voice, complaining about the ancient elevator car, was heard. Then Perry, balancing on a set of crutches, stepped out of the car and into the bullpen, with Alice following closely behind.

"Great shades of Elvis! As soon as we finish here I'm going upstairs to Olsen's office to demand that that contraption be replaced with a state-of-the-art elevator. The cables sounded like they were going to snap at any moment! We could have been killed!"

No one else heard another word from Perry, as a chorus of hellos and welcoming cheers filled the air. Many staffers ran up to him giving him hugs and enthusiastic slaps on the back. With lightning speed Clark had beaten them all up the ramp, and he shook his boss's hand and said, "You look great, Perry!"

Lois stood up from her desk, ran up the ramp, and gave her editor the biggest and best hug. She had missed this bear of a man. "Oh, Chief, it's wonderful to have you back!"

Alice laughingly said, "I couldn't keep him away! The doctor insists this visit be short."

"I'm so glad ol' man Krebs had a ramp installed rather than stairs," Perry said as he slowly walked down into the bullpen. "We will go home, Alice, honey, like I promised. But first, let me check on a few things."

Mitch emerged from his office and greeted Perry enthusiastically. "Well, you're a sight for sore eyes! So glad to have you back!"

"Thanks for taking care of the newsroom, Mitch. It can't have been easy stepping in like that at the last minute," Perry said as they met and warmly shook hands. "Let's go in the office and talk."

Lois looked after the threesome with a teary smile. It was good to see Perry walking around the bullpen again. Pulling together this series had been pleasurable, but she had missed his particular brand of editing and straight-from-the-trenches advice. She was about to walk over to Clark's desk when the phone rang again. She glared at the device, certain that with all these interruptions, this article on the ecological impact of building townhome subdivisions in the suburbs would not be completed for the Weekend section.

"Lois Lane, City Desk!" she said, failing to hide a somewhat exasperated tone.

"Lois," said the gently scolding voice, "Is that any way to answer the phone?"

"Oh! Aunt Rita!" Lois said in surprise. "I didn't think it was you. Is everything all right?"

"Everything is fine. Congratulations on exposing those goons at DMG! Fantastic series! Many of our patrons read the *Daily Planet* while having breakfast. Some of them stayed at badly needed tables longer than they should have because they were caught up in the reading! Which is exactly why we are talking just before the lunch rush. I received a very strange phone call from Zurich last night. Do you remember Mr. Tremayne? He was the supervisor for those three agents who went missing after the USB investigation?"

"Yes, there was a question as to whether or not Daae might have been involved in their disappearance. It's funny, with all the information we were able to pull together for our series of articles, we found absolutely nothing to implicate him in the death or disappearance of those three agents or the members of your team. Maybe it was a matter of coincidence?"

"That's a good thought. After all, I'm still alive and kickin'. But I wanted to tell you, he died recently."

Lois sat up straight in her chair. Was Daae, despite being across the ocean in a hospital room, pulling malevolent strings and causing an old man's death? She said in hushed tones. "Oh, no, do you suspect...?"

"No. Mr. Tremayne was an old man and died of natural causes. But the day before that happened he had three visitors, a woman and two men. The woman was tall, blonde with high cheekbones and a fashionably dressed. One of the men was an American, tall, dark and rather stoic, and he was the spokesman. The final member of the group was British, the most approachable of the three. They were all very anxious to speak with Mr. Tremayne. It's almost as if they sensed his time was short."

Lois rubbed her chin and said, "From their description they sound like the spies who went missing."

Aunt Rita sighed and then said, "Maybe. I wasn't there. They stayed for well over an hour. After their departure, Tremayne's niece, Frau Zeigler, said he was serene in a way he had not been in a long time. She questioned him about the visitors, but he said they were people he used to work with. He had retired fifteen years before. They looked too young to have worked with him then. Shortly after his death, while going through some things, she discovered a picture of that same trio, taken in his old office. She

could tell by the décor and equipment that it had to have been taken in the late sixties or early seventies, and Lois, they had not aged a day.”

“Aunt Rita, that’s not possible! You’re kidding!” Lois gasped.

“No, I’m not. Something tells me we are not going to get an answer to this particular mystery on that score either. There’s another thing: Frau Zeigler apparently contacted the Swiss government about the strange visit. Because of my previous involvement with trying to bring down Daae, I received an international courier packet from Zurich yesterday. The Swiss government definitely does not want those agents’ names mentioned in the *Daily Planet*. If indeed it is those same people in the picture who visited an old man on his deathbed, you should honor that request and drop the matter entirely. I am also asking this as a personal favor.”

Lois was stunned by her request, “OK. We weren’t planning to mention them since we didn’t have any proof, but I’ll discuss the matter with my partner later today. Frau Zeigler is certain about what she saw?”

“Oh, yeah, when we spoke she was a little frightened. I’ll send over that Zurich packet so you can examine it yourself. Lois, honey, with this story you and that partner of yours have kicked over enough hornets nests. This one should be left alone.”

Nodding as if her aunt could see her face, Lois nodded and said, “That packet will be very interesting to examine. Thanks for calling.”

On the other end of the line, Lois could actually hear her aunt’s voice relax. “It was a bundle of fun working with you on this caper. Remember, don’t mention it to your uncle, and I mean *don’t* mention it ...ever. Stop by the restaurant soon. I have a great new dinner menu, and one of the items on it is swordfish served with black bean salsa. Yum!”

They said their good-byes and hung up.

“That’s odd, that’s the second time I heard that phrase today,” she mused.

In Perry’s office, the three people sat around the big wooden desk.

“Are you certain about this?” Mitch asked in disbelief.

“Oh, I’m certain. Right, honey?” Perry said, as he took Alice’s hand.

“Absolutely. It’s time someone younger takes the reins and we can enjoy life. Perry has always wanted to take me to Fiji. Once his replacement is settled in, we are taking off for a long-awaited vacation.”

Mitch shook his head, “The place wouldn’t be the same without you.”

“Oh, I’ll be around to write special editorials and help out occasionally, but my days as editor of the *Daily Planet* are almost over. I’ll be in on Monday, early, to start training her. You should call in my replacement. She is going to be shocked to find out about her promotion.”

“Yeah. I’ll bet,” said Mitch, and he stood up and went to get Catherine Grant.

Steve called out, “Clark, want to catch the game tonight? Our team looks good enough to take the pennant!”

“If this was any other evening I would take you up on the offer, but I really need to get some sleep,” the younger man said, as he started shutting down his workstation and preparing to leave. “Maybe game five... if there is one?”

Disappointed, Steve shrugged, “Sure, I understand. It has been a busy week for the team of Lane and Kent. But remember, with Perry back, you two are only as good as the next headline! See you on Monday!”

“Very funny, Steve!” Lois and Clark said simultaneously.

“Wow! How cute! Did you two practice that?” Stacy asked

while laying a file on Diane’s desk.

“No!” they said, again in unison.

Jack looked up from his new and much larger cubicle and shook his head. “Those two are beginning to scare me,” he thought, turning back to studying a photo.

Lois waited until he reached her desk and said, “A quiet night at home? I might get together with Diane, Lucy, and Molly, and maybe Detective Ann Reid. You know, take in a chick flick. I hear the *Queen’s Consort* is our movie’s critic’s new favorite of the month.”

He was surprised Lois had said that. He wanted to spend this evening talking to her about their future. Trying not to display any disappointment, he said, “Yeah, time to recharge the old batteries with some rest. Steve’s right, with Perry back, we need to keep our productivity up.”

She smirked and said good-naturedly, “With Superman flying around Metropolis? No way is *our* productivity ever going to drop off! See you on Monday!”

Again, quelling his disappointment, he said, “OK, Lois. Monday.” He did his best to appear upbeat while walking up the ramp.

Lois waited until he had disappeared into the elevator and quickly started shutting down for the day. She knew exactly what to do next: visit the Third Street Gourmet Market and get some fresh ingredients for a fabulous meal!

Clark was happily whistling as he mounted the stairs to his apartment with a jaunty spring in his step. The entire day had been crammed full of extraordinary news! That morning the Kerth committee had contacted Mitch; they were interested in interviewing him and Lois since the DMG series of articles was being considered for a nomination. Around noon, the National Journalist Society had called him, asking if he would speak at the annual fundraiser in Dallas. In the afternoon, just before Perry and Alice arrived there had even been a phone call from the Pulitzer committee, officially announcing the reporting team of Lois Lane and Clark Kent as nominees. Mitch came out of his office to share the announcement with the entire newsroom. The news had so excited Lois and Clark they had leapt from their chairs, run towards each other, and hugged, to the happy cheers of the bullpen staffers.

The accolades were flowing in because of their explosive series. As had been predicted, many in the journalistic and financial worlds were running for cover as their names were linked with either Daae’s media manipulation or Templar’s back-handed scheme to make both companies his. James Olsen and the suits upstairs were seriously discussing giving each of them a weekly column.

In between congratulatory phone calls from colleagues throughout Metropolis, a network headhunter had surreptitiously contacted him and wanted to know if he was interested in making the jump from print journalism to appearing on a twenty-four hour news network based out of Seattle. The money and the offer were tempting, *very* tempting; nonetheless, he was a print newspaper man through and through, and leaving the *Daily Planet*, Metropolis and especially a certain dark-haired lady reporter was out of the question.

So much had happened in the span of eight hours. What a change from two weeks ago!

He let himself inside and reached over to turn on the living room lights. He was just about to close the door when he froze. The scent of perfume, very expensive perfume, threaded the air. He turned swiftly to see Lana angrily walking through the door.

Stunned by the petite blonde’s sudden presence, he blurted out, “Lana! What... what are you doing here?”

She did not reply, only ran down the stairs and looked up at him, her eyes flashing with anger. Clark quickly ran down the

stairs to hear what she had to say and was certain that if she were ignorant of his powers Mrs. Daae would have slapped him. Instead, the acidic tone of her voice did the deed.

“Where else can I go to get a moment’s peace? Your apartment is one of the last places in Metropolis the media would look for me! Our former relationship was not broadcast on television. Who would believe half the journalist team to write this awful series of articles is my *ex-boyfriend*? The townhouse was swarmed by obnoxious reporters and camera crews. One of them even tried to break into the garage. Our housekeeper was terrified! I had to call the Metropolis police department to keep them at bay.”

“Lana, I’m truly sorry to hear that.”

Again, those brilliant blue eyes flashed, and she said feelingly, “I’ll just bet you are! My office at the museum has been searched by the MPD – all very correct with a search warrant. The DMG offices are under siege by government officials and lawyers, and even my parents’ home is staked out. Oh, and Interpol showed up at DMG headquarters in Zurich yesterday, demanding to have *everything* regarding the company’s dealing with the United Bank of Switzerland turned over to their accountants. I have never been so frightened and angry in my entire life!”

She glared at him and then said, “Who were those two people that at the museum? One of them was unquestionably super-powered, while the other was highly trained in the defensive arts.” These were not questions, but a statement.

He suspected Lana would ask this question and was ready with the answer. “They are friends, which is more than you need to know. The *Daily Planet* published pictures of Superman and me standing side by side. No one will ever question whether he and I are one and the same. So any threat of exposing my secret is forever null and void.”

“Oh, so you get to keep your privacy, while mine and Gregory’s is destroyed?” she responded quickly.

Clark took a breath to compose himself. As a reporter it was the normal course of the job to track down people in order to write a fact-based article. However, when that zeal to expose the truth of a matter directly affected the solitude of someone he knew, it was very different. Nonetheless, he could not help marveling at the sheer nerve of her words. Only a few months ago this woman was basking in the appraising glow of cameras and exultant media attention. Now she was running away from them. Twice in the recent past she had threatened him with exposure of his secret and now was furious with him being allowed to keep his own secret and for exposing her husband’s offenses.

What a hypocrite.

Normally he was a patient man, but this was more than he could endure. Everything had to be the way Lana wanted when they were together. They had gone their separate ways, and without a care, she had broken his heart in the process. Now, all consideration of her past misdeeds were to be put aside and he was to step back into the same tired old mold?

That shopworn pattern of behavior was not going to take place ever again.

He answered in a firm voice, “What happened to your husband’s media empire would have occurred whether you were married to him or not. Gregory Daae set all this in motion years ago the moment he thought he was more important than all the innocent people around him. Has he ever mentioned Luka Brenner, or a man named Rissler? These were men who stood against him and both were systemically destroyed. Luka’s protégé – Lois Lane – picked up on the story and began pulling together several clues. It was frustrating because each time a lead surfaced, Daae found a way to kill the story. But in time, others helped, all at the risk of their lives. Some from the shadows, others from the past, but this series of articles would have been written whether I worked for the *Daily Planet* or not.” His anger began to cool once

he finished speaking.

Some essence of his words must have touched Lana. The fires in her eyes seemed to diminish and the rigidity of her shoulders eased somewhat. With tired legs, she walked over to the couch and sank down into the cushions. The voice, which only seconds ago was corrosive with fury, sounded hollow and far off. “If what you say is true, that all happened long before Gregory met me. But others have been hurt by these articles you’ve written... my father has been put on ‘administrative leave’ with pay until the whole mess is settled. Thankfully, Jefferson Bailey and Sir Julian Belgrave have considerable influence, and they spoke up for him to the board members; otherwise, he would have been fired.”

Hearing these words saddened Clark. This was something he had not anticipated. Although Bertram Lang, with his gruff manner, was not an easy person to be around, but nonetheless the esteemed historian did not deserve to lose his position because of his son-in-law’s perfidy and crooked work ethics.

He sat down beside her and took both her pale, small hands in his. Even with his invulnerability, it was impossible not to be affected by the iciness of her skin. With memories of what they once meant to each other shading each word he replied, “Lana, I don’t know what to say...”

She snatched her hands away and snapped, “Say anything? Oh, you and that partner of yours have *written* more than enough! How... how do you apologize for taking away the work of a man’s lifetime?”

This was too much. Swiftly, he stood up from the couch, deliberately putting distance between them. He paced back and forth, running his fingers through his hair in an effort to keep his mounting temper under control. “Lana, we could argue all night about this, yet everything would be the same. I don’t remember any consideration as to how a relationship with such a man would affect your parents or friends or me. Not that it matters now, but I purchased an engagement ring, with the plan of proposing as soon as you stepped off the plane!”

Lana gaped at him, her expression a mosaic of shock and surprise.

Lois, obvious to what was taking place inside her partner’s home, was all smiles and giddy anticipation as she exited the Jeep and approached 344 Clinton Place. Her arms were filled with groceries from a favorite gourmet market; bright tilapia fillets to be baked in a tangy lemon sauce and served beside cucumbers with feta, mint, and sumac. Clark had an excellent selection of wines, so no need to think about what drink would best accompany the meal. For dessert, the crowning touch would be fresh strawberries, kiwi, and blackberries drizzled with chocolate sauce. Thinking about the chocolate sauce made her lips smack in anticipation. Undoubtedly, this food would make a memorable feast. Her excuse for barging in on him was to discuss the intriguing conversation she had had earlier with Aunt Rita.

Once the dinner had been eaten and the wine drunk, perhaps they – as a couple, not as work partners – might relax enough to talk about a possible future together. No more interference from distressing memories or unsavory people lingering from their past. She mounted the outside steps to Clark’s apartment, saw the door open, and was about to call out his name when she heard voices from within.

“Clark, you... you were going to ask me to marry you?” The sound of Lana’s voice was unmistakable.

He shrugged broad shoulders and, failing to keep the bitterness out of his voice responded, “Yes. Sadly, by the time it was purchased, you were already married.”

Lana did not answer.

Outside, Lois clutched the shopping bag so tightly that her

nails dug into the paper and tore it.

“Could it have been so difficult to phone me from Switzerland and say our relationship was finished? Hearing about it on the television with all my co-workers watching my every move was one of the worst things to ever happen to me.” Clark said flatly.

“I... I’m sorry for hurting you,” Lana said in a soft voice. “Can you for... forgive me?”

Trying to be quiet, Lois inched closer. The door was open, allowing her a clear view of the apartment’s occupants. She expected Clark to order his former girlfriend out of his apartment, but watched through the open door her mouth gaping in horror, as he embraced her. Her stomach tightened and a sick, queasy feeling spread throughout her body. Without a word, she turned and exited the building. Now that Clark had his true love back, what did he need with her?

Blinded by a curtain of tears, Lois’s footsteps were unsteady as she stumbled out of the building. Somehow after fumbling with the ring of noisy keys, she managed to open the car door, drop the bag of groceries on the backseat, opened the driver’s side and drag a quaking mass of nerves, muscle and sinew inside. Once the door was firmly shut, she put her head down. Lois felt despair run through her body like icy waters from the most frigid depths of Antarctica, chilling every pore and cell until the liquid erupted, inconspicuously, in the form of hot, salty tears.

After what felt like hours, a measure of calm settled over her, yet each breath that entered her body felt excruciating, as a troubled heart struggled to hold itself together and her mind contemplated what had taken place in Clark’s apartment. The shocking thought of them together only forced another jagged fit of tears.

Eventually, she turned the key into the ignition, activated the headlights, and drove down the street like a madwoman. If Lois had glanced at her rearview mirror, the petite form of Lana Lang-Daae would have appeared, dashing any suggestion that she and Clark were now lovers.

When they broke somewhat self-consciously from their embrace, Clark tried to smile, but found it hard to do. “I’m glad we cleared the air. What are your plans?”

“Staying here in Metropolis is out of the question. There... is no privacy. Gregory is sending Mom and Dad to Switzerland on his jet tonight.”

“What about the two of you?”

She looked up at Clark, a smirk on her lips. “Who’s asking: Clark Kent, my former boyfriend, or the ambitious reporter?”

Shaking his head in confusion, and more than a little tired of the accusations and her snide comments, he sighed. “My first question was never answered: why come to me to evade the media? You could have easily done that at a hotel under an assumed name.”

“You know perfectly well hotels have staff members who are paid snitches. Besides, coming here wasn’t my first choice. Pete wasn’t at home; he must be working late at the hospital.” Lana spoke with a touch of the old anger, but he could see her heart was not in it.

“Considering he’s working in the ER and the insane hours that part of the profession demands, of course it’s unlikely to find him home. It wouldn’t surprise me if he was there now,” he said with a shrug.

Lana nodded in agreement, realizing it made sense, and where else would he be? “I meant what I said earlier: hurting you wasn’t in my plans. When Gregory showered me with attention and the finest things life has to offer, it was very hard to ignore.”

“Lana...”

She held up both hands to stop him. “No, let me finish. I was selfish and you deserve better. I took great pleasure in every

delicious second, knowing full well you were waiting faithfully for me here.”

Clark winced for a brief moment when he heard those words, remembering that singular instance of passionate betrayal on Lois’s couch. Even now the encounter gave him pangs of regret and yet the sweetest touches of pleasure. Still, that was none of Lana’s business.

“Enjoying Gregory’s attention doesn’t make it right. Material things are no substitute for real friends. When Pete didn’t answer his door, I tried calling my old roommate Chloe, but she didn’t pick up the phone. So, once I was able to ditch the reporter pack, I turned to the only other person in Metropolis who truly knew me before I became ‘Mrs. Daae’. A man who all his life has been my friend and has shown me nothing but kindness. Who now I learned wanted to marry me despite our obvious differences, a man whose friendship I ought to have cherished rather than discarded.”

Silence filled the apartment. Neither occupant looked at the other. Everything negative about their former relationship had unexpectedly crystallized. Before leaving for Europe, Lana had mentioned how far they had traveled from Smallville. Little did she realize how great a distance they would separate from each other. Clark’s gentle yet firm words broke the tension like a soft breeze. “When we reconnected two years ago, on the surface it was comforting, more like a welcome home. Being with you brought back so many happy memories of my family and childhood on the farm. After college, my footloose travels around the world were actually an unconscious search for a new place to call home. Smallville is a town for me to visit, but it is no longer my place of permanent residence. For a brief span of time, our relationship gave me a sense of well-being. But there were still greater worlds for me to explore. Even if I had given you the ring, we would have never married. Something...”

She whispered so softly only he could hear, “Or someone.”

“...would have made us realize what kind of a misstep we were about to take. In fairness, we should have said our final good-byes at Wichita Airport and saved ourselves a ton of grief. You and I are not a good fit, Lana.”

She nodded in agreement. The coolness in her voice was unmistakable when she said, “We lead totally different lives. When all the legal entanglements and fines are done, Gregory and I are returning to Europe, permanently. He has never been comfortable in Metropolis and neither of us wants to run into that... partner of yours.” She stood up, signaling it was time to leave. “Good-bye, Clark.”

He sighed, and then thinking of the future and what he wanted to build with Lois, said not unkindly, “Lana, we have created separate lives. It pains me to say this, but no matter what happens in the future, please understand there can be no refuge in my home for you. Do not return.”

Before he could say anything else, Lana bent her head down, took a shallow breath, then looked up at Clark in a way so as to hold those handsome, familiar features in her memory. The pain and acceptance was there for him to see. Wordlessly, she touched his cheek, for them to share one final caress, than she turned, walked up the stairs, and with head held high and back straight, walked out of the apartment.

With a heavy sigh, Clark felt a strong sense of relief, that a door in his existence had been firmly shut. The words they had shared were agonizing, yet needed to be said and it was sad to comprehend he sincerely hoped their paths would not cross again. It was only then that he realized the front door was still open.

*A/N: In order to understand CJ and Wanda’s reaction to hearing about Mrs. Aykira Klein, read their story in *Stranger in our Midst* on the archives.

Part Thirty-Two

Mrs. Gregory Daae exited Clark’s building. A chill wind

sliced savagely through her bones, causing her to pull the belt on the lightweight red wool jacket a little tighter. She looked up to see a grey Jeep Grand Cherokee pull away from the curb, its tires squealing as if it were being driven by a madman. She looked after the vehicle, wondering who could be in such a tearing hurry. At that moment, a yellow Metrocab emerged from the darkness and quickly she flagged it down. "Take me to Metropolis General Hospital," she said, once the door was firmly closed.

The cabbie looked around. He was a heavyset, middle-aged man with freckles, bright red hair, and kindly eyes the color of serene tropical seas, and he said consolingly, "Miss, I hope the friend or family member is getting all the proper medical attention they need."

Lana wanted to bark at the man and tell him to keep his eyes on the road. But, looking at his sincere, concerned face in the rearview mirror, she relented and simply said, "Thank you."

The two rode in companionable silence as the vehicle moved through the brightly lit city streets bustling with late evening traffic. The driver weaved and threaded skillfully around heavy, noisy trucks, and passed large buses with colorful signs advertising all manner of products, services, and the latest blockbuster movie. Thousands of commuters were deserting the city in droves, heading home to the suburbs to join their families and friends for the weekend.

Once upon a time Lana had done the same with Clark, albeit most weekends remaining in Metropolis. How often had he met her at work and together they had walked to a favorite local restaurant and then taken in a show? They had enjoyed exotic lunches on Saturday afternoons at different ethnic restaurants, walks in Centennial Park and eating delicious roast chicken during quiet Sunday evening dinners with her parents. Occasionally their little group was rounded out with Pete and her former roommate Chloe.

On the whole, she didn't miss those days so much as she missed the sense of having a larger family. Marrying Gregory and living in Europe was the perfect answer to her dreams, but now those dreams were threatened.

Lana reflected back on the conversation she had just had with Clark. The seesawing of emotions between fury and contriteness were exhausting, but right now that's how everything – especially her mind – was going. Resentment at him for ruining a perfect life and yet sadness for giving him pain. Someday soon she would resolve these feelings, but not now and definitely not in Metropolis. She still wanted to know who those people were that helped him. But any answers in that direction would never come from him. He had effectively shut her out of his life forever. Right now, all she wanted was to be by Gregory's side.

Gradually, like an early thaw, she felt tension draining from aching muscles for the first time since she and Gregory arrived at the Metropolis Museum. It did not last for long. Prickles of anxiety ran up and down her spine as the cab approached MetroGen. Mercifully, there was not a single reporter or photographer in sight.

The cabbie's voice, like a soothing balm over a fresh wound, said, "Here you are, Miss, MetroGen. Have a good night. Hope your friend gets well."

Lana reflected on the fact that this humble man was the first person since the debacle at the museum occurred that had treated her with kindness without the thought of gaining anything in return. She fished into her wallet and found two crisp hundred dollar bills. Without thinking twice, she pressed it into his hands and said, "Keep the change." The driver was dumbfounded. Before he could utter a word of thanks, she stepped from the taxi and entered the medical building.

The hospital lobby was spacious and welcoming. The carpet colors were a tranquil blue and gray, which served to ground the cherry wood tables and upholstered chairs of the waiting area. She

approached the admissions desk and said, "I'm here to see my husband, Gregory Daae. He should be in room 1204."

The gray-headed volunteer nodded and said, "Yes, ma'am, he's still in the same room. His dinner was served a few minutes ago."

She thanked the woman and walked down the corridor painted a deceptively soothing sky blue, to a familiar area. Before going upstairs to see Gregory, she went to the ER in search of an old friend, hoping against hope he would not be busy. Walking down corridors filled with medical staff, orderlies or folks visiting loved ones, she was still uneasy. In her mind, hospitals were frightening places, and aside from helping women give birth, they were to be avoided at all times.

Upon entering the ER, she recognized the former halfback of Smallville High School talking to a middle-aged Hispanic woman, who wore green medical scrubs, in front of the admitting desk. He was quickly writing something in a chart. Without preamble, she asked out loud. "Pete, how is my husband?"

A very startled Dr. Ross turned around and looked down at the petite, stylishly dressed blonde who he had once counted as a close friend. He had not seen her since she had returned from Europe, and the change in her clothing and demeanor had taken him slightly aback. "Lana, what... what are you doing here?"

Before she could stop herself, a smirk tugged at ruby lips. "That seems to be a popular question this evening. Clark asked me the same thing less than an hour ago."

The doctor's eyes grew wide with surprise and then narrowed suspiciously. He decided not to ask what had been discussed between them. So, he simply said, "Instead of a lengthy medical description of your husband's condition, why don't I take you upstairs?" Pete spoke formally; too formally to someone he had grown up with. "He's doing remarkably well for a man in his condition. His arm and shoulder will be immobilized in an elaborate cast. Still, I should think by tomorrow we can release him."

By Pete's attitude and standoffishness, Lana knew perfectly well what he thought of her behavior in the past few months and that he wouldn't be speaking to her if it were not in a professional capacity. He thanked the nurse, handing her the chart. Pointing towards the elevator, they walked down the hallway and stood in awkward silence waiting as the doors opened. Two orderlies guiding an empty gurney exited and headed towards one of the ER bays. They stepped aboard, and once the gleaming steel doors closed on them, Lana attempted to enquire about her husband. She was met with stoic silence on Pete's part.

The elevator came to a smooth stop on the tenth floor, and they stepped into another corridor. This one was painted stark white. It was not the first time Lana had been here, of course, but the institutional sounds and smells rattled her senses. Already her eyes and nose were irritated from the pervasive smell of powerful disinfectant, urine, and human sweat. The insistent undercurrent of sounds emanating from electronic devices at the nurse's station and the patients were annoying. A young couple passed her, giddy with relief that a friend would recover from a foolish accident. She could hear a woman weeping not that far away from where she and Pete stood. In this one corridor the gamut of human emotions ran riot. Were it not for visiting Gregory, she would have been at home... packing.

Lana reached up, placing a tentative hand on Pete's arm, and the powerful muscles beneath his skin twitched in surprise. She gave it a soft squeeze and looked up at the big man. "After everything that's happened, I... I know you're uncomfortable talking to me. But I wanted to say thank you for helping my husband. It was terrifying when the paramedics took him from the museum with such a horrible shoulder wound." She shivered as the memory of that evening threatened to become overpowering. She still wondered who the 'other' Superman was, yet Clark

refused to say, simply calling the Doppelganger and his fierce blonde accomplice ‘friends’. Perhaps, she could get Pete to talk with her about them.

Pete looked down at her and said, in a voice alternating between professionalism and sadness, “I appreciate that, Lana, but it is my job. Mr. Daae sustained a nasty gunshot wound, but as I told Dr. Hexum, he should be able to leave tomorrow afternoon at the latest. MetroGen’s caring for both Lex Luthor and your husband has caused no small disruption to the daily routine.”

“Wasn’t Lex Luthor released?” she asked.

“Yes. Thank goodness. He has his own team of doctors looking after him.”

“Yet there is still so much security around. Is it just for Gregory?”

“Having police officers in the building is not unusual, but the amount of uniforms hanging around because of security has been stressful. Thankfully, they were able to get some of the more aggressive reporters away from the front of the building.

She gave him a tremulous smile and said, “I noticed that! Getting rid of those awful people is really appreciated.” Lana grew silent and then she said, “Perhaps... perhaps after this is over we can start to be friends again?”

The expression on his face was kind. She could sense he wanted to forgive and possibly forget, but when Pete spoke she could hear echoes of Clark’s dismissal in his voice. “This isn’t the time or place to discuss fixing the trust in a broken friendship. How things worked out between you and Clark was... unfortunate and incredibly sad. That’s all I want or should say on the matter. Now, go to your husband, Daae needs you. He will be rather happy to see a friendly face. Lana please... um... take care of yourself.”

Lana nodded stiffly. In that instant, all she had lost finally sank in. Her two closest friends from childhood had set her adrift in a different world which felt cold and unfriendly without their companionship. Part of her wanted to cry for that loss, but it was far too late. The threesome had indeed gone onto separate paths. One last mystery would remain; answers about the enigmatic duo at the museum would never come from either one of them. Turning away, she took a deep breath and entered Gregory’s room.

Pete stood by in the corridor until the door closed behind her. The past several months had been painful as he watched one old friend eviscerate the hopes and dreams of another. Truth be told, he had planned on endeavoring to talk Clark out of marrying Lana; anyone with half a brain synapse could see they were ill-matched. Before he could do so, all of Metropolis discovered Clark’s girlfriend had married another man behind his back. That day he had been in the doctor’s lounge after his shift when he saw Lana, her husband Gregory and Lex Luthor on the early afternoon news channel with Lana flashing her expensive engagement ring and wedding band around for all to see. He had been so completely taken aback that he fell onto a hard bench.

He had immediately tried to contact Clark, both at his office and apartment, but there had been no response. After the early morning shift had ended, he had even stopped by Clinton Place, but there had been no answer. He had departed; worried for his friend and hoping Clark was dealing with a rescue to take his mind off things.

Thankfully, Wayne Irig had called him a few hours later to let him know Clark was there. It was a relief that Clark had flown to Smallville and spent time with Wayne Irig. The kindly older man must have talked a good bit of sense into his nephew and for that Pete would be forever grateful. With Lana out of the picture, Clark was free to pursue a relationship with someone who appreciated him. Lois Lane would know how to take care of him. She had the unique combination of compassion, intelligence, and strength to handle the unexpected. A combination she no doubt inherited from

her parents. He smiled to himself; after meeting CJ, H.G. Wells and Wanda, she would need all those qualities to stand by Clark’s side. He had no doubt those two would be experiencing some exceptional adventures in the future.

Abruptly the harsh sound of the ER beeper attached to his belt went off. Placing all thoughts of the Daaes, Lois and Clark aside, swiftly Dr. Peter Ross rushed down the corridor towards the door marked **Stairs**. Running to the staircase, he unconsciously registered the sound of the elevator doors opening, but the staircase door closed so fast he failed to see a tall man, with his hands stuffed into the pockets of a tan trench coat, exit. The man’s face, like his hands, were tightly closed, and no spark of life seemed to reach his cold, black eyes. Despite being dressed in civilian clothing, his bearing was straight and erect, marking him as having a military background.

His lips opened and he spoke tersely, “Grimes, take Kowalski, Soames and Nelson with you. Make sure all exits are covered. We don’t want this particular fish escaping; he could disappear into a number of countries that don’t have extradition treaties with the United States. But make certain not to disrupt the patients or medical staff and their work.”

The young black man beside him nodded slightly and with the agility of a trained athlete, stepped off the elevator. He was joined by the others, who just as silently moved past the nurse’s station and walked towards the exits.

Lana plumped up a pillow by her husband’s left shoulder. It was held together with thick bandaging, and the left arm, as Pete had warned her, was in an elaborate cast with a prop to keep the arm elevated. Since the surgery, Daae had been forced to sleep upright and until today had been on strong painkillers. “*Liebling*, I’ve made all the arrangements; as soon as the doctor releases you, we can go home.”

“*Oui*.” Gregory said in a tired voice. “Recuperation shall be so much... better in... Zurich.”

“Zurich?” Lana wrinkled her brow in confusion. “But I thought we were staying in Metropolis until all the legal problems were ironed out?”

He waved his hand dismissively. “Which is why I have hired talented Harvard lawyers with backgrounds in international law who are paid a considerable sum to handle situations such as these. Home in Switzerland is where we should be.”

Before Lana could answer, there was a sharp knock on the door, and then it was swiftly swung open. The mysterious man in the trench coat entered, followed by a tall man with wisps of gray hair trying vainly to cover a bald head, MetroGen’s Chief Administrator, Dr. Hexum, who looked somewhat apprehensive.

Without preamble, the man barked, “Mr. Gregory Daae, I have been given authority to detain you for questioning in the illegal attempt at taking over an American corporation.”

Lana, thoroughly shocked, snapped, “Are you insane? My husband is recovering from a serious gunshot wound. Leave him alone!”

Dr. Hexum looked down, took a shallow breath, and said, “Please, Mrs. Daae, I am thoroughly aware of your husband’s condition. He is capable of answering a few of this agent’s questions.”

“You are not Gregory’s attending physician. Where is Dr. Ross? Nothing is so important that it cannot wait a few days!” Lana retorted.

Dr. Hexum countered, now on familiar ground, “Dr. Ross and his code team are in the middle of helping a patient who is suffering from a cardiac arrest. It is impossible for him to be here. During my conversation with him earlier today, he assured me Mr. Daae can handle short visits... such as this interview.”

“Sorry, ma’am,” the agent said, but his formal words and tone were anything but apologetic. “This won’t wait.”

“Monsieur,” Gregory said in a chilly authoritative manner, equal if not as determined as Dr. Hexum’s. “I am a *Suisse*. I shall not answer any questions put to me by you.”

It was clear the agent had expected this. He sighed and growled, “Why do people like you always make my job so difficult?” He removed an envelope from his jacket pocket. He approached the couple and handed it to Lana, who took it and opened it for Gregory, who read it eagerly. His face suddenly went ashen. From nerveless fingers the document dropped onto the bed’s thin, white coverlet.

Lana had known her husband in many moods, but she had never seen his face marred with fear. Coming around the bed and taking his right hand, she said, “*Liebling*... what is it? What is wrong?”

“The *Suisse* government is demanding I... I cooperate with all authorized agencies of the American government.” He glared at the agent. “What is your name?”

The man opened his wallet and displayed a shiny metal badge. In a terse voice he said, “Special Agent Jason Trask of the CIA’s Bureau 39: Foreign Investigations Division.”

Across town, high atop the LexCorp building, its owner was in an attractive Mediterranean style master bedroom suite, designed to be a quiet and peaceful space to unwind, and in his case, heal from a gunshot wound. Seeming out of place in those lush surroundings, Lex lay in the center of the room in a starkly functional adjustable hospital bed with an I.V. pole and a heart monitor machine standing next to it. The head of the bed was elevated. Scattered over the red and cream colored dupioni silk coverlet were papers, files, and a number of labeled black diskettes. He was in the midst of dictating letters to his new assistant, a beautiful, curvaceous blonde woman named Miranda, who sat perched on a black wrought iron chair, upholstered in soft, white leather.

Only two days ago, MetroGen had grudgingly released Lex from their care, however, he was confined to bed rest for three weeks. Luthor was attended upon by a round-the-clock staff of private physicians and nurses. The recovery from Templar’s gunshot wound had been slow and grueling; nevertheless, he had a business empire to direct. He was determined to return to the fray and conduct his corporate affairs both locally and international as usual, despite being in pain. The last thing he wanted was to have LexCorp run by a board of directors whose vision of the future was banal and limited.

Different projects came to mind, such as improvement on the solar panels which would supply unlimited power to the space station. One of his engineering teams was exploring the possibility of using crystals. The technology was in its infant stages, yet nonetheless looked promising. If it continued to pan out, the strategy was to keep the technology within LexCorp, and then charge astronomical sums to lease it to other space stations. Daae thought they were merely reporting on the construction of the space station when in reality Lex owned a sizable chunk of the investments that created it. For a brief space of time his ‘funds’ had run a little short and so he had convinced Daae to join him. As always, he had played a far deeper game than anyone suspected. With DMG embroiled in so many legal problems, it would be prudent to find a silent partner, willing to step in should Daae’s company fall apart.

His soon-to-be ex-wife, Arianna, had returned to Boston and was trying to pick up the pieces of her life. He doubted that was going to happen; despite paying numerous and expensive fines to the IRS, she was still facing a trial and the very real possibility of serving jail time in federal prison.

He found such thoughts soothing. So much for her plans to destroy *him*.

“Miranda, my dear, take a letter to Arthur Chow...” His

dictation was interrupted by Nigel St. John and Sheldon Bender, who entered the bedroom and told him several federal agents were in the penthouse suite.

“What do you mean there are federal agents outside? Sheldon, you assured me this matter regarding Daae was finished!”

The obsequious lawyer shrugged his sloping shoulders that had been built up by an expertly tailored suit. “Apparently this Agent Scardino has some questions. It has to do with a *Metropolis Star* story written by Linda King a few years back.”

Lex shook his head in disbelief. “It is a disgrace that a man cannot recuperate in the comfort and security of his own home.” He growled, “Tell them to return next week.”

Nigel St. John bent down and said in his deep, funeral-toned voice. “Mr. Luthor, it might be prudent to speak with them now. These government men were most insistent.”

Before Lex could respond, the door was unexpectedly pushed open. Agent Scardino entered, followed by two others, wearing black suits, white shirts and black ties, who stood impassively by the door looking every bit like guards.

Glowering at Nigel with murder in his eyes, Lex snarled, “What good is a security force if they cannot keep anyone out?”

Scardino held out his identification and announced, “Oh, don’t blame your boys, Lex. They were good, but no match for my guys! Now, next week might be a bit too late. Preston Carpenter informed us you were behind a little gunrunning operation in the Congo. That’s how his former girlfriend, Ms. King, was able to report that story without leaving Metropolis for Africa. I’ve heard of armchair quarterbacking, but that’s ridiculous!” He noisily pulled up a chair, a mate to the one Miranda was sitting on, straddled it, and made himself comfortable.

The expression on Lex’s face was ambivalent, but he kept his temper under control. Taking his assistant’s hand, he kissed it and said in a silken voice, “Miranda, my dear, we can finish the other letters later. Please don’t forget to set up an appointment with my physical therapist, Mrs. Lundquist.”

“Yes, Mr. Luthor.” With great dignity she stood up and departed from the room, her gentle footfalls hushed by the thick, antique Roman Oushak rug.

When the door was closed behind her, Lex’s attention shifted to the agent. His voice now held a sneer. “Get up from that chair. It cost a fortune and was not meant for the likes of you! I’ll have your arrogant hide nailed to the wall for invading my home. Bender, get the President on the phone... now!”

Agent Scardino smiled, but it failed to reach his usually expressive brown eyes. “President Warren thought you might say that.” Reaching into his jacket pocket, he removed an envelope. “This is an executive order from him allowing me to question you about the matter. If you refuse to cooperate, this building will be held under federal jurisdiction for seventy-two hours. All communications, inside and out, will be impossible. I would imagine that could prove to become problematic for a twenty-four hour, seven day a week news organization like LNN? How many billions of dollars will the corporation lose?” He handed the document to Sheldon.

Sheldon looked over the papers, and a shaky hand covered his mouth in disbelief. “What Agent Scardino says is correct. It’s all legal and binding with President Warren’s signature. You have to answer all his questions now, truthfully, otherwise there will be a Senate committee hearing.”

Lex’s voice was quiet when he said, “But he can’t do that.”

His lawyer swallowed and said, “He can, and he will. Lex, nobody’s playing anymore. If you don’t go along with this enquiry now, everything — and I mean everything — you have ever worked for will be gone.”

The big man, who was clearly enjoying watching these powerful, yet crooked individuals squirm, turned to Sheldon,

saying with a smirk, “Let’s not stand on ceremony... please call me Daniel. Now, Mr. Luthor, when did your ‘business relationship’ with these criminals in the Congo begin?”

Early Saturday morning saw Sam and Ellen Lane in their daughter’s apartment, watching her haphazardly throwing clothes into a large red suitcase.

“Princess, this makes no sense. Why are you going to leave Metropolis? This is your home. Working for the *Daily Planet* is a huge part of your life... especially after writing that fantastic series of articles,” Sam Lane said.

“To get far enough away from two-bit cheating partners who do nothing but promise the moon and then break those promises as soon as it’s convenient,” Lois snapped as she threw a pair of black heels and a peach sundress into the suitcase and hurried back to the closet for more clothes. Ellen carefully folded up the garment and put the shoes into a cloth bag that had been thrown on the floor.

“Destroying your wardrobe is not helping matters. Now sit down and talk with us,” Ellen said in an exasperated tone.

“Fine! But first, I need some liquid fortification,” Lois growled.

Putting down a large green and black make-up case, she stormed out of the bedroom, entered the kitchen. Pulling open the fridge, she hastily removed a cold bottle of cream soda. She twisted off the cap, took a long drink and then put the bottle back in the fridge – without the cap. The soda pricked the memory of the night Superman came to ask her to help Clark. A thrilling night of unencumbered flight over Hobbs’ Bay that she had mentioned only to Catherine. A deep sigh of genuine regret escaped her lungs like a burst balloon. Where was the Man of Steel now? Most likely in the middle of a rescue in some remote part of the globe, far too busy to fly over and bid her farewell if he knew she was leaving.

Sam stood in the doorway, quietly watching, and waited until she returned to the bedroom. He stepped aside to allow her to re-enter and resume packing while she spoke.

Lois took a deep breath and spoke calmly. “Mother, Daddy, there’s nothing to talk about. Clark Kent is still in love with his ex-girlfriend, Lana. I... I saw them together at his place on Friday night.”

Ellen Lane’s composure broke somewhat. “The same tramp who dumped him for that wealthy Swiss businessman. Has that young man lost his mind?”

Her daughter nodded slowly. She had spent most of last night and part of the morning lamenting the loss of what could have been so much more than just a work friendship. Now it was time for action; she was leaving Metropolis and starting life someplace new.

Between clenched teeth, Sam growled, “I’m going to kill him. This is almost as bad as when that louse Claude DeBarre hurt you.”

“Daddy, let’s not bring that rat into the picture,” Lois sighed.

Her parents shared a look, communicating in a way only long-married couples can. Lois’ father took the lead in encouraging her. “Claude was the worst excuse for a man I ever met. There was something in his eyes that didn’t ring true. Clark Kent did not strike me that way. I’m certain his feelings for you are genuine. A clandestine meeting with Mrs. Daae doesn’t make any sense. Frankly, this plan to move overseas doesn’t either. We were proud of the way you fought back from that previous unfortunate situation; it’s possible to do so again.”

“Oh, Daddy, it’s not so simple this time. I was really young and infatuated with Claude. He used charm and his good looks to make me think there was a future for us. But over the past month of our investigation of Daae, I discovered Clark Kent is a man I could really love... the only man. You’re right; I thought he had feelings for me. But after what just happened, what... what am I

going to do now?”

Rather than give in to another crying fit, Lois finished packing with Ellen’s able assistance. Soon, two large suitcases waited by her front door. A hissing Lady Plushbottom sat in an outrageously pink kitty carry case, watching the humans around her with suspicious blue eyes.

“Lois, are you certain about not staying with us? It’s no trouble,” Ellen asked.

“Staying with you guys wouldn’t be right. Besides Clark might want to see me and he knows where you live. Molly said I can stay at her place for a few days since she’s out of town. She gave me the key months ago. On Monday, Perry and I will talk.” She bit her lower lip and said, “Maybe... maybe I could transfer to one of our sister newspapers on the West coast. Kip Terrell, editor of the *San Francisco Gazette*, likes my work.”

Ellen shaking her head in disbelief, said, “The West Coast? Lois, that’s on the other side of the country! I don’t understand this determination to run away. Maybe you should see Clark and try to clear the air?”

Lois threw on a rust colored jacket, and her face set itself into a deep frown, “There’s nothing to say. Thanks for looking after Lady P.”

Sam gingerly picked up the carry case and heard a distinct throaty feline growl. “Yeah, well, I hope she behaves better than the last time we cat-sat! I don’t want her spending time in mischief eating our plants and hiding under the couch!”

A mere thirty minutes after the trio’s departure, Clark knocked on Lois’ door, only to be greeted by silence. He leaned against the wall and sighed in disappointment. After last night’s final conversation with Lana, he needed to reveal everything about himself to Lois. Since it was a clear, bright Saturday, this morning would be the perfect time for them to have that long put off discussion. He wanted to take her to Callard’s for brunch, but obviously Lois was out and about. Rather than stay home alone, he decided to fly to Smallville for a quick visit with Uncle Wayne.

Only a half hour later, Clark sat in the living room with his uncle on a large, comfortable green couch, watching his old college team, the Kansas Tornadoes, battle their long-time rivals, the Iowa Cornhuskers. It was an enthusiastic and evenly-balanced match, with each side scoring. The two men eagerly cheered on the Tornadoes’ efforts.

While former professional football players made commentaries during the halftime game report, Clark informed Wayne about the series of DMG articles and all the positive attention they had generated among his professional peers. He also told him about the visit from H.G. Wells and the mysterious globe which explained his Kryptonian origins and that culture’s vast history and customs, which were so different from Earth’s. With sober tones, he related point for point both of the unexpected conversations he had had with Lana, and how the second one was definitely the last. He finished by glowingly describing how close he and Lois had become and his hopes to make their relationship more than merely a working one.

“I... I decided to tell Lois everything about me. There’s no longer any reason to keep any secrets between us. She is the one I want to share my life with.”

Wayne had listened to all these revelations in stunned, yet respectful silence, never interrupting. Over the years, when it came to his nephew, he had learned this was the best way to be. But at this last little ‘announcement’, he turned off the television, looked instantly at Clark, and said, “Son, do you think that’s wise?”

A curious half-smile touched Clark lips, “I do. When Lois and I first met in the newsroom, Lana was standing right by my side. But for a brief second, it was as if she didn’t exist. At that very instant it felt as if the final piece of my life in Metropolis had

clicked firmly into place. Don't get me wrong. Lois and I have experienced some rough patches getting to know one another, but in the past year I have come to respect and cherish her friendship."

The older man rubbed his chin thoughtfully and said with a hint of joy in his voice, "You wouldn't be doing this just to have her as a girlfriend. So, I gotta assume that once matters are settled between you, the next step will be to get engaged. Marriage, Clark, is a serious step."

Without a moment's hesitation, Clark nodded in agreement. "Yes, it is. But life without Lois Lane would be hollow."

"Then you need to bring her here as soon as possible. Mary and I would like to meet the young lady."

His nephew said with a bright smile, "Is next Sunday too soon?"

Wayne's smile was uncharacteristically wide. He could barely contain his relief and pleasure that this dinner was not for officially welcoming Lana into the family. "Nope. Just tell us what time. But I suggest you make it early afternoon. I have no doubt that your Lois will have a lot of questions; after all, she is a reporter!"

Around six o'clock early Monday morning, Perry White was in his office looking over drafts from free-lancers who had e-mailed filler articles. He had been cooped up at home long enough, so Alice had driven him to work and dropped him off at five o'clock. With a steaming mug of coffee, he delved into work. This task was both enjoyable, and yet dreadful: enjoyable, because sometimes, like uncovering a gold nugget, a fresh new writing talent was discovered, and dreadful, because some of the articles were just that, so badly written that reading them was a punishment. Nonetheless, it was one of the many things he was going to miss when the reins of editorship were officially handed over to Catherine Grant.

Janet Owens was the logical choice to become the new managing editor, as she had been the more senior of the two and had greater experience as editor of the Science section. Were it not for Janet's training for her reporting duties on the space station's construction she would have won the position. James and the other suits had originally wanted Lois Lane for the position, especially now that the DMG articles had been so well-received by those within the industry.

To their complete surprise, Perry had staunchly vetoed the idea, stating that Lois was young and just hitting her stride as an investigative reporter. There was much for her to learn before taking on the mantle of editor – in any capacity. He placated the suits by outlining plans for Lois and Clark: they would continue to work together, and each would have their own column. He planned on talking to the team and pitching the idea as soon as they came in this morning. A newspaper column, whether daily or weekly, was a challenge, yet he was certain that if anyone could handle the pressure, this duo would be up for it.

His happy ruminations were interrupted when the phone rang and he picked it up on the second ring, "Perry White speaking."

"Morning, Perry, Bill Henderson here. Just wanted to let you know: both Lex Luthor and Gregory Daae were questioned over the weekend, and after not a little political wrestling, have been arrested."

Dumbfounded, Perry gave a long whistle, low and sweet. Then he shouted, "Great day in the morning! What are the charges?"

The laconic detective gave out a rare chuckle that sounded more like a wheezy growl. "Too numerous to go into over the phone, but the main ones are international racketeering and illegal stock manipulation, respectively. The legal battle shaping up will ensure the trials will be spectacular! The television media doesn't know anything about this, as the guys with the higher pay grades wanted to keep it quiet until this morning. Talking to you about

this is breaking protocol, but I thought it would be fun to give you the heads up and have Lane and Kent cover the whole trial, seeing as they cracked open this can of worms to begin with. They were actually arraigned here in my precinct. I got to fingerprint Luthor. The outraged expression on his face was priceless!" Bill said, with a touch of pride and not a little glee.

Perry was mentally rubbing his hands together in eager anticipation. "As soon as they come in, I'll send them down to the station house. Thanks, Bill!" The two men exchanged farewells and ended the conversation.

With that startling bit of news, the quiet morning and his musings were at an end. Perry went back to looking at the filler articles. He needed to finish up and be ready to leave promptly at noon as per the doctor's – and Alice's – orders. He looked up at the sound of his office door opening, and Lois walked in. No. No, walking would have meant she had a spine and greater self-esteem. The woman standing before him was a stranger. She wore faded jeans and a simply-cut cream sweater set. Rather than her camel briefcase, a backpack, which he had not seen in ages, was slung over her shoulder. Such was not at all the usual professional attire he insisted on for bullpen staffers. Still, there was something else; her slightly dazed expression like that of an experienced heavyweight prize fighter who had been soundly beaten by an unseasoned rookie, almost too punch drunk from the shock of the unexpected defeat to hold up his own weight. Even her long brown hair, normally so shiny and well-groomed, was pulled back into a messy ponytail. She stood in front of his desk and held out a plain white envelope. Written on top in bold black letters was his name.

He took the envelope in his hand but refused to open it. "What in Sam Hill is this?"

She huffed out the painful words, "My resignation. Effective immediately. I thought about transferring to one of our sister newspapers. I like San Francisco, but a clean break is better... no, necessary. It's best I no longer have any contact with the *Daily Planet*."

Perry eyes grew wide and he wanted to stand and lead Lois over to the plaid couch, but as he tried to stand, he remembered those stupid crutches. Instead, he said with grave concern etched in the tone of his voice, "Lois, honey, sit down and tell me what brought this on?"

For the next fifteen minutes, Lois told her boss, friend and second father everything about her relationship with Clark and what she had seen between him and Lana Lang-Daae on Friday evening.

Once Lois finished speaking, silence hung in the office while Perry thought furiously. Finally, he said, "Leaving the *Daily Planet* is out of the question. As a matter of fact, something crossed my desk yesterday that might be a perfect answer to the situation. Our bureau in London needs an investigator over there with your seasoning. Since Eduardo quit, Labby Rathbone has never found a suitable replacement. Listen, I'll tell everyone you are on the heels of another hot story. Meanwhile, go to London, work with Labby, write up a few stories and think matters through."

Rubbing her chin in contemplation, she nodded and said in a listless voice, "Funny, Eduardo sent me an e-mail on Friday, inviting me to come over for a visit. I'll call him from the airport. All right, we can say I'm following on the trail of one of his old cases. What about Clark? He's going to ask a lot of questions."

The angry words rolled over his tongue and across taunt lips like an avalanche. "I'll take care of him."

Despite her anger at Clark, Lois felt a shiver of fear and concern for her former partner. The last time she had heard Perry use that tone of voice, he was firing Claude DeBarre. "Perry, don't bother with him... he's not worth it. I have no doubt that once everyone discovers about him and Lana, his credibility both as a

man and as a reporter will disappear.”

She stood to leave. “I’m going to collect my bags and head over to the airport.” She glanced at her watch and said, “This is so sudden. Can the travel department have my reservations and tickets ready for a noon flight?”

He nodded. “Everything will be waiting for you at Alieanor Airlines courtesy desk.”

“Perry, this is so generous, I can’t thank you enough.” She got up from the couch and leaned down to give him an awkward hug.

She was about to leave, but stopped for a moment, her mind lost in thought. Then she said, “Perry... with me in London and other staff changes looming, it’s going to be shorthanded around here. So there is one thing you can do for me. Hire Stacy as part-time researcher and move Jack into the position of full-time photojournalist.”

Rubbing his jaw, he said, “Well, now, that might take a bit of doing.”

“No, it shouldn’t. They have both proved themselves time and again. Not just in this investigation but as long as they have been at the paper. If you don’t promote Jack, he’ll eventually leave to work at some picture magazine for a more lucrative salary. Stacy got another year at New Troy University and having a paying job will help her set aside some money before those student loans kick in. They are an excellent team and this newsroom would be all the poorer without *them*.”

He said hoarsely, “All right. I’ll have a serious talk with Olsen. He’s got the deep pockets to make this happen.”

“Thanks, Chief. Please give my love to Alice.”

“Don’t let his betrayal force you out of town. Come back to us, darlin’. The ol’ bullpen won’t be the same without you!”

Lois answered with a tremulous smile. How could she explain to this gentle bear of a man that perhaps this time she had no reserves of strength to fight back? She gave him a peck on the cheek, picked up the backpack, pulled out a blue Metros baseball cap, and placed it firmly on her head. Then, without a backwards glance, she opened the door and walked out, shutting it softly behind her. It was a good thing too; otherwise she would have seen a solitary tear flow down the old newshound’s face.

“Clark Kent does not deserve that woman’s loyalty,” Perry ground the words out between clenched teeth. “Don’t know how, but I’m going to make life in the bullpen so miserable for that weasel, he’ll be happy to leave!”

He spent a few minutes remembering Lois as a young intern, her first big story breaking a carjacking ring, Claude’s attempted theft of her story, and the day Jack almost got killed. Through it all, she was strong and refused to allow anything to get in the way of exposing the truth. Now, all of that seemed to have drained away, leaving only a thin shell. Maybe a fantastic story would fall into her lap when she got to London and it might just take her mind off Kent. It was then he remembered about the arrests, but by that time, Lois was out of sight. He sighed; someone had to cover the story of Luthor and Daae’s arrest. He reached for the phone and hoped to catch Diane Pallister on her new cellphone.

Lois walked through the bullpen, stopping briefly at her desk. It would remain untouched for a while, and then if the transfer was permanent, someone – possibly Stacy if she was still here – would box everything up and ship it to London. While in London, she could spend some time with Eduardo and Samantha. Apparently, according to his e-mails, the former globe-trotting journalist had settled into his new married life seamlessly. Love, it seemed, was for everyone except her.

Impulsively, she opened the drawer and removed her press pass. No harm in taking a little piece of the *Daily Planet* along for this new adventure in another country.

“Steady, Lois. Time to leave before anyone else walks off the

elevator. They are bound to ask a lot of questions I don’t want to answer,” she muttered softly.

She climbed the ramp, pushed the button, and waited in front of the elevator as it silently moved upstairs. Odd thing, ever since Perry’s threat to have the machine replaced, it had been quick, efficient, and most of all... noiseless.

As soon as it stopped and the doors opened, Catherine stepped out, wearing a brilliant smile. Upon seeing Lois, the tall auburn-haired beauty spoke with an exasperated tone. “At last! Where have you been all weekend? I tried calling several times, but only the answering machine picked up. I finally went over to your apartment, and even that noisy furball Lady Plushbottom didn’t respond to my knocking. I have great news!”

Lois, so amused by such an outpouring of emotion from the normally-composed Catherine that all her own sad musings were forgotten, asked. “What news?”

In way of response, Catherine took her friend’s arm and dragged her into the same conference room where only days before the DMG articles had been put together. She shut the door and smiled at Lois with such delicious happiness that she felt swept along in the older woman’s joy.

Catherine clasped her hands together and spoke, “First, business; Perry has asked me to become the new managing editor, and I accepted.”

“What!” The word exploded from Lois’ lips. The thought of Perry White not being at the helm of the newsroom was something she had never imagined. He must have been so surprised by her own news he didn’t mention his departure to her. “When did this happen?”

“I was called into a meeting with Perry, Alice and Mitch. That’s the real reason why Alice and Perry came down here on Friday: to let James know and to offer the position to me. There will be a transition period, of course, but I won’t officially take over until January 30th.”

“Why wait so long?” Lois asked, her expression one of absolute puzzlement.

“Because Arthur and I won’t be returning from Fiji until the 25th of January,” Catherine said with a mischievous twinkle in her green eyes.

Outright bewildered, Lois asked, “Fiji?”

Catherine extended her left hand. On her ring finger, set in gold, was an emerald-cut two-carat diamond. Its multiple facets sparkled and shimmered, creating a striking presentation. The words flowed from her lips like a cascade of water. “He gave it to me during dinner on Friday night. I didn’t want an engagement ring, but he was so sweet when he proposed. How could I refuse? I’ll probably wear a diamond and emerald band afterwards. We plan on getting married on his yacht, the *Dejah Thoris*, in Aruba on January the fifth, then sailing to Fiji from there. I couldn’t juggle being trained as managing editor *and* planning a wedding at the same time!”

This morning was proving to be one full of changes and surprises. Regardless of wanting to leave before Clark showed up, she was happy for her friend, and quite curious to hear more about Catherine’s fantasy wedding plans.

Catherine continued, “We are only having twenty people. Of course, you are my maid of honor! I fully expect Clark to be your date. After seeing how he kept looking at you during the Age of Napoleon event – before everything happened – it is impossible to imagine anyone else by your side.”

The achingly sweet, yet searing memory of a dashing handsome Clark in his black tuxedo was more than Lois could bear. “Clark and... I...” Her voice trailed off.

For the first time, Catherine noticed that Lois was wearing faded old jeans, a sweater set, and a baseball cap, not something that was allowed by Perry for the daytime newsroom staff. She also saw the leather and canvas backpack slung over her friend’s

slender shoulders, not the ever present camel-colored briefcase. Like silver waters descending down a window on a rainy day, the joy which had previously colored her mood slid away, replaced by apprehension. With tenderness, she placed both hands on Lois' shoulders and gently asked, "What's going on? Why... why are you dressed this way?"

"It's a long, sad story, and I don't want to talk about it. I'm leaving Metropolis today for London. Perry thinks it's temporary. My partnership with Clark Kent is over. He... he's seeing Lana again." Water filled into Lois' eyes, and with a blink, salty tears spilled effortlessly down her cheeks and splashed onto the floor.

Completely taken aback by this confession, Catherine wanted to ask more questions, but looking up at the clock, she realized that Lois had to leave the newsroom before anyone else arrived. No way could she allow her friend to be seen like this. Without uttering a word, she wrapped a protective arm around Lois' shoulder and led her out the conference room. Unseen by Perry, they quietly made their way to the back staircase.

It was nearly 10:30 before Clark arrived at the bullpen. He ran down the ramp, reached his desk and quickly started his computer. From his jacket pocket, he removed a small black spiral notepad, flipped to a page, and studied it carefully. He didn't really need to consult his notes; he had remembered every quote from Inspector Henderson and the arresting officers. He had just come from Hobbs' Bay, where some rather desperate characters had tried to hijack a shipment of Industrial diamonds from Mongolia. Now it was time to write up the account for the evening edition.

Looking over at Lois' desk, he saw that her desk was empty, except for the neat little African violet plant in its azure and white container. It was the same plant that Clark had used to change the subject when Lois asked him why he had followed her to the garage on the afternoon when her Jeep's brakes had failed. It led to him making an excuse about needing greenery to liven up his new apartment. They ended up spending at least an hour purchasing a variety of plants from Charles Greenhouse. Why on earth were all of Lois' personal items on her desk gone except that particular one?

Something was very, very wrong with this picture.

He saw Steve coming over, an expression of confusion on his face when he saw the empty desk. "Hey, where's Lois?"

"I was about to ask the same question. We haven't spoken since Friday evening," Clark responded in a concerned tone.

Diane looked up from her monitor and said earnestly, "Perry mentioned something about a big assignment in London. Wow, that woman doesn't let the grass grow under her feet. The DMG articles are generating Pulitzer buzz and she's off to bag another big story! It's supposed to be an open-ended assignment, which is why Stacy cleared off her desk a few minutes ago."

"Assignment? What assignment?" Clark asked, now completely confused.

"Hey, big guy, if you don't know, it must be hush-hush!" Diane said. "Maybe ask the chief?" With those words she turned back to the monitor and continued typing.

Clark smoothed down his yellow paisley tie and then said, "That's exactly what I intend to do." As he moved towards the managing editor's office, he wondered what reason Perry could have for sending Lois on assignment to London. Why would she be willing to go, knowing just how much was unsettled between them? What if this assignment had an element of danger? He had just found her only to lose her again. After telling Lois the truth about himself, he wanted to ask her something very special.

He entered the office without knocking and said, "Perry, where is Lois?" His heart thumped wildly in anticipation of the answer.

The older man's expression was one of profound disappointment as he looked at Clark. With a deep sigh he said,

"She came in here pretty early this morning. I thought it was to get a jump on a new story. Heck, and here I thought Elvis was a go-getter! But he's got nothing on Lois! A great new story wasn't the reason for her clocking in so early. She came here to resign. I couldn't let her throw away such a promising journalistic career, so I arranged a temporary transfer to our London office... I hated to lose her completely. James Olsen and the suits upstairs are throwing three kinds of fits."

Before Clark could respond, Catherine entered the office, also without knocking.

Perry said, "Catherine, where have you been? Diane had to write up the story of Lex Luthor's and Gregory Daae's arrest! She did a great job of it to. It might be time to promote her..."

"Ha! That's old news! My source in the LexCorp building says Luthor made bail. His lawyer – that toad Bender – says arresting a man in his 'weakened' physical condition is cruel! There's supposed to be a press conference in an hour. Who knows what kind of spin his legal team is going to put on this."

"What? Great day in the morning! Catherine, get over there! Take Kent with you!"

Hearing such news of the arrests was a welcome surprise, but it was not as important as discovering Lois' whereabouts. "Wait a minute: I'm not going anywhere until I know what happened to Lois!"

Perry shifted his attention towards Clark. Again there was the disappointed look. "Clark, right now your only concern is to leave with Catherine and cover what is bound to be a media storm at his penthouse."

Clark's eyes grew wide with shock. "But Lois is my partner. Why are you treating me as if I've done something to hurt her?"

Heedless of the discomfort, Perry stood up and placing his hands on the edge of the desk, stood up, leaned on them, and said in a tightly controlled voice. "Go. Cover the press conference. I will be here when you two get back. I... I just can't talk about it."

Catherine, although she was loathed to touch him, laid her hand on Clark's shoulder, "Come on. We need to leave."

They moved quickly out of the office.

He turned to Catherine for some kind of an explanation, only to read the same look of sad disappointment on her face. "Did I miss something? What's going on around here?"

"I don't know, you're an investigative reporter. You tell me!" she hissed.

At this point, Clark was totally confused. He took a deep, cleansing breath and said. "We need to talk. Come on, let's go to Luthor's penthouse."

Green eyes stared at him with an almost laser-like intensity. If Catherine had possessed heat vision, he would be a smothering pile of bone and plasma. "The only reason I'm going with you is because Perry asked me to." With those words, Catherine stalked over to her desk, grabbed her handbag, and walked past him up the ramp.

The atmosphere in the elevator was cramped and tense. Neither occupant looked at the other. Clark was still confused and deeply hurt by Perry's behavior. Determined to get the answers he needed, Clark stopped the elevator and turned to Catherine. "Why are you and Perry so angry? What's this about Lois wanting to resign?"

Catherine looked up at him and snapped, "As if you care!" His eyes narrowed suspiciously behind the wire-rimmed frames, taking Catherine's measure. They must suspect him of some terrible deed for both her and Perry to be so irritated. It could not be the secret, could it? No, he was fairly certain they would not be treating him like this if they knew he was Superman.

Taking a calming breath, he said, "Catherine, I think you, better than anyone besides Perry, know how I feel about Lois. She is the number one reason why I wanted to return to the *Daily*

Planet while I was on suspension. This entire weekend I have tried to talk with her. Especially after my final conversation with Lana at my place on Friday night.”

“That’s exactly why Lois is leaving! She saw you hugging Mrs. Daae!”

Startled by this revelation Clark blinked and said, “Lois was there? She saw Lana and me together?”

Instead of answering the question, Catherine said. “How could you take back a woman who caused you so much pain and humiliation? Now Lana’s forcing Lois to leave New Troy. She can’t be expected to watch the two of you together! I... I could have prevented this by telling you she was dating Daae, but I decided to wait until her return...”

“You knew about Lana?” Clark said in shock.

“Yes. It was a total fluke how Arthur and I found out.”

Quickly Catherine described how Lana’s relationship with Daae was revealed. With each word uttered, the anger and disappointment with Clark leaked away, leaving only acute embarrassment.

“Listen, that’s not how it was. On Friday night Lana came to my apartment in order to escape the media and have it out with me. I told her something which perhaps made her realize just how heartless her behavior was. She started to cry, and we hugged. It was painful last good-bye between us. We should have never started dating again once going our separate ways after high school. Lois is the woman I love, not Lana. I told her never to visit me again. After that, she left, and I noticed the door was open.” He squeezed his eyes shut upon remembering the front door had been open the entire time. “Oh no! Lois probably only saw us hugging and didn’t see or hear the rest. She told you and Perry what happened, didn’t she?”

“Yes, early this morning. I... I caught her only a minute after she left Perry’s office. I have not seen him this angry since he fired Claude.” Catherine groaned with the realization that Clark was innocent of any wrongdoing. “Thank goodness you aren’t going back to Lana! But Lois was devastated! She really thinks you are still in love with that two-timing harpy! Oh, this situation is so distorted, not even Superman can fix it!”

Clark’s voice was suddenly gentle. He placed a consoling hand on her shoulder and said, “We can worry about apologies later. Please, if you know, tell me where Lois is.”

“I drove her to the airport. She’s taking the noon flight to London on Alieanor Airlines.”

With a push of the button, the elevator kicked back into life and quickly descended to the lobby. As the door opened, Clark said, “I have to stop her before she gets on that plane thinking I betrayed her.”

Catherine said, “But... but what about the story at Luthor’s penthouse?”

He looked at her with a flash of steel in his eyes. “I told you before, without Lois in my life, there’s no reason for me to work at the *Daily Planet*. Please cover the conference without me. She’s in pain and needs to know the truth.” With those words, he stepped out of the elevator, exited the building, and ran down the street, loosening his tie as he went.

Clark could not possibly have seen it, but his statement brought a brilliant smile to Catherine’s lips. The soon-to-be managing editor of the *Daily Planet* said merrily, “Go get her, Kent. Anyone can see the two of you are going to be incredibly happy together.”

Epilogue

Earlier that crisp, autumn morning, a light blue convertible had driven up to the departure lanes of Alieanor Airlines. A tall striking woman in her late thirties had stepped out of the driver’s side and opened up the trunk, and with little effort, removed a large suitcase. Her companion, a younger woman, with an ancient

backpack slung over her shoulder, had pulled out the second, somewhat smaller case with equal ease, but a sense of sadness had draped itself over her like a thick, wet cloak.

Catherine rolled the heavier bag over to Lois and said, “Are you certain I don’t have to park? It’s no problem. I can wait with you. Traffic is still pretty light, especially for a Monday.”

A crooked smile tugged at her friend’s mouth, and she said, “No, it’s bad enough you’re going to be late for work. I can take it from here.”

The two women hugged each other tightly, and a solitary tear moved down Catherine’s cheek. When they separated, she said, “Thanks to you and Constance catching Claude with all his lies, I got a chance to interview Arthur. That led to a close friendship and now we’re getting married.”

“Arthur’s getting a good wife and a best friend. Don’t worry; no matter what happens in London, I’ll be your maid of honor.”

“You better be, Lane! Otherwise, I’ll have to borrow Arthur’s Learjet and fly over the pond myself to get you! Now, don’t forget: the cab drivers in London are consummate professionals, unlike Metro cabbies. Treat them with respect and they’ll be good to you.”

With a quiet chuckle, Lois said, “Thanks, Cat. I’ll remember.” Catherine very uncharacteristically rolled her eyes and said, “Don’t call me that! Just think, if it sticks, after Arthur and I get married, everyone will call me Cat Chow! Not a proper professional name for the new managing editor of the *Daily Planet*!”

For the first time in three days, Lois actually burst out laughing. “Okay, you have yourself a deal.”

“Well, if it got you to smile, maybe hearing that silly nickname was worth it... once!” They hugged again and then Catherine got back into her car and drove away. Lois watched the car as it smoothly moved into traffic and eventually disappeared, taking the last vestiges of her old life with it.

Twenty minutes after checking in, Lois sat on a cold, black plastic chair that was interconnected with several others, waiting at Gate 31 for Flight 1077 on Alieanor Airlines to London. There had been a few changes since the aborted trip to the Congo. The waiting area had seating alcoves with comfortable benches surrounded by small trees, real trees, not plastic. There were also several big containers of dieffenbachia, whose large green-and-white leaves were colorful and livened up the space. These plants were similar to the ones on the balcony of Clark’s apartment. Gazing at them reminded her of that pleasurable evening they had spent picking out colorful plants for his apartment at Charles Greenhouse. She sighed, turned around, and decided that with the memories they invoked, the privacy alcoves were definitely not for her.

Both suitcases had been checked in and now it was a matter of patiently waiting forty-five minutes before the boarding call. A progressive trickle of passengers walked by and began taking their seats. Two elegantly suited women across from her were talking intensely about an important project at their company. A large woman in a tight, short black dress studied her heavily made up face in a mirror. Her fingernails were long and painted a vivid shade of pink. A middle-aged man wearing pressed jeans and a denim shirt sat down next to her and talked on the phone with either his girlfriend or his wife in the soothing tones of a lover. All of these people politely ignored each other and Lois’ presence.

Funny how life had gone full circle. Long months ago, in this same airport, she had been determined to make an indelible mark as a journalist by exposing a gun running operation in the Congo. Now, with the support of co-workers, friends, one relative and a former rival, she had indeed written a series of articles which had brought recognition and accolades as a journalist. Without such a support, none of it would have ever happened.

But once again, her personal life was not as it should be.

Unlike the previously-planned trip, the take-no-prisoners determination to fight back was absent.

There was no way to sugarcoat matters: she was turning tail and running away. Definitely not the expected behavior of Mad Dog Lane.

Considering the circumstances, how could she be expected to work in the same city – much less in the same newsroom – with a man who was willing to take back the former girlfriend who had betrayed him on such a spectacular scale? The same man she had fought furiously to bring back into that newsroom. Maybe if her feelings, passionate feelings, were not involved, she could have shrugged the messy situation off with a smile and continued working with Clark. But no one would be fooled. As hard as she had worked to bury those feelings deep inside, she loved him.

In an attempt to distract her mind from such a well-worn path, she looked over to Gate Thirty-Two. Passengers were milling about wearing pastel t-shirts, intricately woven straw hats, and sandals, suggesting they were headed for Florida or perhaps the island nation of Hawaii. A funny little man dressed in old-fashioned clothing and a black bowler hat was among them, the somber dark clothes standing out in stark contrast to the people around him. He was reading a newspaper, carefully perusing each page over antique eyeglasses as if looking for a particular article of interest. The man looked up, and before Lois could turn her head, locked his eyes with hers. Completely embarrassed, she wanted to turn away, yet could not. The older gentleman smiled warmly at her, and in the courtly fashion of another era, tipped his hat.

Any discomfort Lois felt melted away in the presence of such refined manners. For the first time since Friday night, the tension slid like a boulder from between her stiff neck and tight shoulders. Suddenly, like a cascade of silver rain, long-forgotten memories clicked neatly into place in her mind. She had encountered this bespectacled man previously, had seen him reading a newspaper in this same airport, only then it had been in the frigid depths of winter, not early autumn. He had given her a copy of the *Metropolis Star*, where she had immediately discovered Linda King's scooping the Congo gunrunner's story. Only seconds later, she had been on the phone with her former rival as Linda gloated over the article.

With her mind's eye, Lois could clearly see herself that day walking back to the ticket counter and passing a strikingly handsome young man wearing lightweight grey clothes which were totally unsuitable for winter. The barrage of memories halted as abruptly as they began.

It had been Clark. What was he doing there at that time?

She lowered her head in deep thought. Somehow, this short weirdo in the black bowler hat was the key to everything. It was time to pin him down and get some answers, but upon looking up, she discovered her quarry had vanished and in his place stood her former partner. A massive glacier spread a tidal wave of bitter cold through her tightly knotted stomach.

Like a wash of heated anger trying to combat the cold, again the words came unbidden to mind: What on earth was he doing here?

She stood up, straight as an arrow, picked up her backpack, and walked away. The anger mounted with each quick step.

Clark's heartbeat faltered. The object of his pursuit had turned away as if he did not exist. After his conversation with Catherine, he had flown straight to Idlewild Airport to keep her from boarding the plane to London. Lois' appearance had shocked him. He had seen her in many guises, such as the determined reporter in keen pursuit of a story wearing business suits that were more like battle armor, or in jeans and a sweatshirt during the carefree evenings when they had cooked together.

But this was a changed Lois. Yes, she wore jeans, but the demeanor and body language was all wrong, one of resignation,

and dare he even think it... hopelessness? The last time they had been together in Idlewild Airport it was to prevent her from boarding the plane and save her from certain death at the hands of gunrunners in the Congo. This time it was to save both of them from losing each other and living isolated, lonely lives. No way could he allow such a fate for them, not after all they had been through.

"Lois! Wait!"

Ignoring him, she continued walking and passed a kiosk. Its racks of newspapers and colorful magazines stood out front announcing the latest headlines and fashion trends. But her eye caught the morning edition of the *Daily Planet*, its bold headline blaring:

Lex Luthor and Gregory Daae arrested!

By Diane Pallister

She stopped, stunned by a single sharp thought. Diane had written this story. I should be angry, but compared to my ruined relationship with Clark, I ought to be proud of Diane for getting the final article in this series written. After all, that was the goal, wasn't it? Have Daae pay for his numerous crimes over the years and making sure the whole world knew it? Agent Scardino hauling in Lex Luthor for his illegal activities was a bonus. No way were either he or Luthor avoiding justice by jumping off a roof or running away to a foreign country or something crazy like that!

My teacher, Luka, would have been pleased. Now her life truly had gone full circle. This time, a friend, not a rival, had broken the story.

"Lois!" Clark's voice broke through her thoughts. He sounded in equal parts fearful and questioning. "Thank goodness I found you before you boarded that plane! We need to talk about what you saw last Friday night at my apartment."

Whirling about, Lois' angry words erupted from the depths of a stricken throat. Her former partner stood six feet away. "Get lost! There's nothing to say. Your old girlfriend, Lana, only had to bat her false eyelashes and like some idiot you came running back. What a coldhearted woman, her 'current' husband hasn't even healed from his gunshot wound! May the two of you choke from happiness and eventually distrust! I'm leaving Metropolis to work in London."

Clark stuck both hands in his pants pockets and with an embarrassed expression, looked down at the floor. "Catherine told me you came to my apartment. I can't deny that you saw me holding Lana, but it wasn't what it looked like."

Not believing the words, she impaled him with a sharp glare, took a step towards him and snapped back, "Oh, yeah? You two looked awfully cozy!"

"Lana was upset and frightened by all the media attention our article stirred up. The museum, her townhouse and even her parents' apartment wasn't safe. She had no place to hide from the reporters who were hounding her. Remember, my relationship with her wasn't general knowledge, and she felt certain the less reputable ones, like that bunch from the *Dirt Digger*, wouldn't follow her there. She and Daae were planning on returning to Zurich as soon as he was released from MetroGen."

Pointing to the newspaper, Lois said, "Now that's ironic! Only a week before, Mrs. Daae was soaking up all the media attention, and now she can't get away from the flash bulbs and obnoxious reporters fast enough. According to that story, it doesn't look like they will be going back to their ritzy life in Switzerland anytime soon."

Despite the seriousness of their discussion, Clark couldn't help smiling sheepishly and said, "I'll bet Diane did a fantastic job on that article. Yet it would have been very satisfying for us to have written it... together."

She nodded thoughtfully, the burst of anger ebbing away, "Yes. Yes, it would have been. Please, I'm mentally and emotionally worn out, tell me, what did I really see?"

Gathering himself to speak, Clark cleared his throat and said, “Months ago, I purchased an engagement ring and planned on giving it to Lana as soon as she returned from Switzerland. I think hearing that bit of news made her cry. Because maybe, just maybe, the high cost of marrying Gregory Daae finally dawned on her.”

Lois took a step towards him and said, with a smirk, “Seeing you kiss Antonia Taylor that time when we were investigating her and the Toasters was bad enough, but this...” She shook her head, still in disbelief.

Clark, somewhat taken aback, said, “You saw me kissing Antonia Taylor at the nightclub?”

Shaking her head as if to push an unpleasant memory away, Lois continued, “Yeah, but that’s all water under the bridge. It’s a good thing she turned state’s evidence and moved to Buenos Aires, that’s another blonde I don’t have to worry about.”

Clark smiled. Lois was jealous of Antonia. Still, he ignored that and said, “Why were you at my apartment?”

She frowned, “It was supposed to be a celebration for completing the Daae articles and to discuss a conversation I had with Aunt Rita. I was going to cook a fantastic gourmet dinner using tilapia fillets with lemon sauce, crusty Italian bread and diced cucumbers with feta, mint, and sumac. For dessert, the crowning touch would be fresh strawberries, kiwi, and blackberries drizzled with chocolate sauce. Unfortunately, our dinner plans were ruined.”

He took two steps towards her, and responded, “With your excellent cooking skills that is one meal I would have savored. But listen, Lois, don’t you get it? Lana Lang-Daae is part of the *past*. I want you in my life. That night in my apartment, I told her our relationship should have ended before I got on the plane to Metropolis. It’s obvious to me now that even then we were rapidly moving in opposite directions. Sadly, I let our childhood memories and our previous relationship as high school sweethearts cloud my judgment. If I had stood up to her then it might have spared us both a great deal of pain. As soon as she was gone, I called your place. But there was no answer, and like a fool, I didn’t leave a message.”

She moved closer. “Why not?”

“It was Friday night; I figured you were out with Lucy and Molly celebrating.”

She took another step forward. The harshness fading subtly into a gentler tone. “No. After leaving your building, I sat in the Jeep for a while, gathering my thoughts, trying to imagine how to survive life... and work at the *Daily Planet* without you.”

He shook his head sadly, “I should have walked to your place, instead of calling. I went over to your apartment on Saturday morning figuring we could go to brunch at Callard’s.”

Her eyes grew wide, realizing how bad their timing had been. “You must have just missed me. I was with my parents, they... they helped me pack up a few things.”

“Your parents helped with the packing? The impression I got is that this was going to be a long-term assignment. What... what about your apartment? Friends? Your job at the *Daily Planet*?”

She sighed, “When I get to London I planned on subletting my apartment to Lucy. She’s taking an internship at MetroGen starting next month.”

“Lady Plushbottom can’t be happy about all this. Is she staying with your parents?”

“Yes.”

Running trembling, slender fingers through jet-black hair, Clark said in a hoarse whisper, “This can’t be happening.”

Hectic travelers walked past them as they moved towards their respective departure gates. Despite the width of the terminal’s corridors, Lois and Clark were slowing up progress. They each took another step closer. Now, they were only an arm’s length apart. He took a step closer and looked down at her and with trepidation in his voice said, “Honey... no more delays, we

have to talk – now. Our lives and our future happiness depends on it.”

Lois was close enough now that she could easily reach out to touch and explore the contours of his handsome face. Passersby looked at the attractive couple and assumed they were lovers ready to depart on some fantasy vacation, but not as yet.

She squeezed her eyes shut and whispered a tiny prayer. A swirling maelstrom of emotions swarmed in her head, so intense they threatened to give her a tearing migraine, but so many good memories of their happy friendship, the best she had ever had, outweighed the negative:

The first time she saw him, stepping off the elevator, wearing a hopelessly outdated navy suit and the most outrageously colored tie. She remembered how their eyes met and the certainty that she had seen him somewhere before. Only to have that moment swept aside when Lana stepped out of the elevator, silently proclaiming to every unattached woman in the newsroom Clark Kent belonged to her.

That glamorous, but humiliating society ball the Luthors and Daae had put together to announce the launch of their joint media venture. How Clark, simply by being himself, had garnered the much-sought-after interview with Arianna Carlin-Luthor.

Participating in Perry’s occasional poker games.

Discussing article outlines and Clark constantly correcting her grammar.

Nights on stakeouts during an investigation.

The dinners they cooked at each other’s apartments. Enjoying one another’s company until it led to a soul-stirring kiss. A kiss which, at the time, was a terrible mistake on both their parts, since after all, he was dating Lana.

Standing by his side while he dealt with putting his heart back together after Lana’s callous betrayal.

Long hours working together to break the Daae story.

It was such a rich, gorgeous tapestry of memories woven together to create their personal history. Why would she want to end their friendship? Hadn’t they gotten over much more difficult misunderstandings than this? Couldn’t she hear him out?

As if from a distance, his voice rumbled and caressed her ears, and like a potpourri of scented oils, soothed an anguished spirit. “Lois. Walk with me. Please?” He offered his arm and slowly she took it. They walked towards one of the privacy alcoves, the very one that reminded her of his balcony, and sat down. Despite being seated in a vast international airport, surrounded by throngs of people moving about, in that tiny niche, Lois felt as if it was just the two of them.

She let the backpack slide to the floor between her feet and said with a sigh, “It’s true, we need to talk. Clark, I... I want a future for us, but a relationship has to be built on trust. That little scene between you and Lana... well, it knocked me for a loop.”

“Please, forgive me. I know only too well the pain you must have experienced.” He sighed, remembering the miserable day in the newsroom when he discovered Lana was married to Daae.

Lois’ lips trembled, then she said, “Yeah. We have both been hurt severely by selfish people only interested in their own agendas. Those wounds dug deep, but they are in the past. Being with you, I feel alive and ready to take a chance on loving again.”

Clark, as he looked around, conscious of where he was, knew now was the time to speak. Softly, he said, “My only agenda is to build a committed relationship with you based on trust, because I trust you with my life... my heart, and my greatest secret.”

She leaned forward, looked around and said, eager to hear, “Secret?”

He took her small hands in his, leaned over and a tiny puff of air passed seductively over her cheek when he whispered tenderly in her ear, “I am... the Man of Steel... Superman.”

Lois took in a sharp breath, pulled back, and wordlessly, gently removed his glasses. With one unsteady hand, she

smoothed back the thick ebony locks of hair that always lay across his forehead. Doe-shaped brown eyes scrutinized those familiar features, and the realization of his words were suddenly mirrored in the shock of her expression.

“Wait, the day of the bank robbery... the gunman’s hand burned because the weapon was too hot to handle... that was you? Clark... I suspected... but thought the idea was impossible.”

He gave her a lopsided grin and said, “Over the past year or so, I’ve learned that nothing is impossible.”

She was about to say something more when the PA system went on:

“All passengers for Alieanor Airlines Flight 1077 bound for London will commence boarding at Gate 31 in ten minutes.”

They looked at each other. This was the defining moment which could send them on a lifetime path together or when single wrong word could propel them spinning away from each other on wholly separate trajectories.

Clark refused to allow that to come to pass. Lois had lost so much trust, first with Paul, and then with Claude. Giving her this information – this dangerous gift – was the best way for her to know how much he trusted her.

“Lois...?”

Tears started rolling down her cheeks, and through the watery mist, she could hear his words coming out in a torrent, the usual deep rumble was more of a stammering babble. “I... I should have told you how I felt about you and my... other job earlier. We... were in the middle of the investigation and I wanted to talk right after the Daae press conference, but you wanted to wait. Lois, honey, please... say something! I am so sorry, please forgive me.” In the midst of this wild confession, he took her hands again and held them as if both of their lives depended on it.

She took in a shuttering breath. This was the most physically powerful individual on the planet, and he was begging for her forgiveness? How could that be possible? This had to stop immediately.

Wiping the tears from her cheeks, she whispered, “Clark, it’s okay. I’m a little angry with you for not telling me sooner, but I’m more relieved to know what really happened between you and Lana. You’re right, we should have talked shortly after the press conference. Last Friday night was a serious case of incredibly bad timing. If I hadn’t spent so much time at the Third Street Market looking for just the right ingredients to cook dinner I could have been at your place a lot earlier, and when Mrs. Daae showed up, we as a couple would politely have asked her to leave.”

“Oh? Why do I get the feeling that ‘politely’ is not the word you really want to use?” He asked with a tiny hint of amusement.

A mischievous expression appeared and lit up her beautiful face. “I... no... we together can be very nice and polite.”

He released the breath he did not realize he was holding and took her hand, giving it a gentle caress. “Yes. Working together as a team. Because that is what couples do.”

The hint of a smile touched Lois’ lips. “So, it’s official, Kent? We are a couple?”

The excitement blazed in those eyes that had sudden grown bright with joy and passion. With a thoughtful nod, he said, “Yes. Sharing a life with you is what I want more than anything. We have not dated, and we don’t have your parents blessing. But, if it’s not rushing things, is it too soon to ask you to marry me?”

A silence came over the alcove. Two hearts beat wildly in unison and then Lois spoke, “It’s sweet that you want to ask for my Dad’s approval. Maybe we can start by us going over there this evening and letting them know our plans?”

With a nervous twitch of his lips, Clark nodded. “Okay. Whatever you want, Lois.”

“As for us not dating. No, as far as I am concerned, since Lana flew to Zurich, we have been seeing each other. That sweet, delicious kiss we shared at my place proved it. Were we wrong for

doing that? Technically yes. But we didn’t go any further... Lana did. Despite all of that, yes. I want the same, a lifelong commitment to you. Marriage.” She sighed, gazing so deeply into Clark’s gentle brown eyes and saw true love, shining and eternal in there depths. Tears of sheer joy sprang into her eyes and spilled down like drops of refreshing dew.

He took that beloved face in his hands and gently wiped the moisture off her cheeks with the pads of his thumbs. “Thank you, Lois. I love you.”

His voice returned to the gentle, sexy rumble she remembered that from the no longer ill-fated night in her apartment and chills raced through her body as she heard it again. Suddenly she was very much aware of the handsome man sitting so close, the scent of his cologne, the warmth and concern in those beautiful, soulful eyes.

“Yes. Now this is something else engaged couples do...” Clark Kent leaned over and touched his lips to hers, softly at first, then she opened to him and the kiss went on for tender moments; the thrill of wanting, of tingling emotions and jittery nerves all blended and stirred into a spicy cocktail of sheer bliss. This was the way each imagined sharing a kiss could be without hesitation. Such a tender reality was far more delicious and stronger than a fragile fantasy.

With the greatest unwillingness, they separated, yet their eyes were locked together, eager for their lips to meet again. And then plan a life together.

“All passengers for Alieanor Airlines Flight 1077 bound for London will commence boarding at Gate 31 in five minutes.”

Suddenly, Lois’ eyes grew wide with alarm. “My luggage!” “What?”

“My luggage! It’s aboard the plane. There’s no need for me to go run away to London. I’m not leaving my fiancé behind! But we have to get my baggage, some of my best outfits are in there!”

Clark chuckled and then whispered in her ear, “Lois. Honey, calm down. First we will going to the airline boarding desk and tell them you had to cancel your flight and need to retrieve your luggage.”

She pulled back, looked into his deep brown eyes, and pouted. “What if it’s too late?”

“Simple. I fly us to London. We can have dinner at a local pub I know. The Princess Louise should be open by now, it’s a great place for an intimate conversation, especially in the early afternoon. It’s a classic historic pub with vintage glass, and a roaring fireplace and large wooden cubicles that will make any new patron feel as if they have stepped back in time. If we can’t get the suitcases now, we can go to Heathrow and pick up your luggage.”

She looked at him carefully and said, “Being with you is going to make my life quite strange and exciting isn’t it? Are there any places we can’t explore?”

He shrugged, “None that I can think of. The only problem might be not getting the scoop on international events. Eventually suspicions might be aroused as to how we could be in different countries and our passports give no indication of us entering them legally.”

“Rats!” Lois said with a mock frown. Then they looked at each other remembering their jobs and a certain editor and simultaneously, they both groaned.

“Oh, Clark, Perry thinks you dumped me for Lana. He is so angry and deeply disappointed with you right now.”

He ran his fingers through thick black hair, he hesitated and said. “Yeah, Perry was upset when we spoke this morning. He wanted me out of his sight. Everything was made crystal clear after Catherine and I talked.”

“I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t have told him! But at the time...” With an utter sense of complete humiliation, she looked down in embarrassment.

He squeezed her hand, “We can explain things to him when we come in to work tomorrow, together.”

A smile tugged at Lois’ mouth. “Yes, it’s best we tell Catherine and Perry at the same time. After all, when she and Arthur come back from Fiji after their honeymoon, she’s going to be our boss.”

“Come again? Fiji? Who is going to be our boss?” Clark asked, his mouth hanging open in surprise like a fish freshly plucked from the water.

His partner proceeded to explain what had happened in the newsroom on Friday night after they had gone. Needless to say, Clark was genuinely surprised, but pleased.

“So, the bullpen is going to be run by Catherine. After all is said and done, she is the perfect person for the job. Is Arthur going to move here?”

“Yes. Apparently Lex Luthor has asked him to be his partner with the Space Station Prometheus coverage. Considering that Luthor is going to be ‘busy’ for the foreseeable future, it’s a good bet that Arthur will be overseeing the media coverage from construction to the opening ceremony. Since the *Daily Planet* editor is his wife, our Science section will get every exclusive. Janet Owens is going to be thrilled and busy!” Clark said.

“Exactly! Oh, I would give anything to be a fly on the wall when Luthor hears about that! He was so smug about how inadequate newspapers would be covering the construction of the space station when I interviewed him!” A pleasant smile sprang to her lips. “I thought this past week was busy! This week is going to be crazy!”

“Isn’t the possibility of a Pulitzer exciting enough?” Clark said with a twinkle in his eye.

Lois sat still for a moment, then gave Clark’s hand a gentle squeeze. “Not so long ago, even having my name mentioned in a sentence with a Pulitzer Prize was more than enough for me. But now, sharing my life with you provides a depth and richness I never knew existed. Come on, let’s go talk to whoever is in charge of the boarding desk and tell them that I’ve missed my flight. By this time, I’m sure my plane is taxiing down the runway. Then, we can ‘take-off’ on our own. I suddenly have a taste for fish and chips!”

They stood up. Lois picked up her backpack and threw it over her shoulder. “I exchanged my dollars for British pounds, so dinner is on me.”

A deep chuckle escaped his throat. “When I take a lady out, it’s first class. I pay.”

“Nothing doing, Buster; besides, transportation is your part of the deal!” They laughed, appreciating this new way of doing things, of sharing life and returning to their comfortable old banter.

Holding hands, they walked for a little ways, weaving easily through the crowds, looking for the Alienor Airlines boarding desk. Clark grew silent, then he said tentatively. “There is so much to tell you. Some of it is going to seem rather fantastic. For one thing, we have met or at least saw each other years before, when Idlewild Airport was closed down by a blizzard.”

She snapped her fingers. “I thought that was you! For the longest time until today I could never remember. By the way, whose your friend with the old-fashioned black bowler hat? Someone should tell him we are on the edge of entering the Twenty-First century; he looks like he’s dressed for the Nineteenth.” Suddenly, she stopped, her face growing very still, and said, “If you were with me at the museum, who flew Lex Luthor to the hospital?”

Clark thought, No more secrets! But explaining about alt CK and his wife Lois would take a lot of time. He said very carefully. “That – that is a close friend of mine and the Woman in Red who attacked Tempus is his wife. The gentleman wearing old-fashioned clothes, that’s ah, Mr. Wells. They are all very anxious to meet

you. Maybe we can get together at my place later this week and have dinner?”

“These are friends from your past? I mean, Smallville, Kansas?”

“No. Most they are definitely from my past, but the present and future as well. You’re going to like them as much as I do.” Clark said, the smile on his face a rather odd one.

The smile matched her own. “All right, what is it about them that makes them so special?”

He replied, “He is like my twin brother and she is ah... like your twin sister with really short hair.”

Uncomprehending, Lois said, quizzically, “But, I don’t have a twin sister. I just have Lucy.”

Rubbing the back of his neck, Clark said, “It will take some clarifying. It all started in the past, my past when I received an offer to help that I couldn’t refuse.”

Shaking her head in amusement, Lois said. “Kansas, nobody has as many secrets as you do! Speaking of the past, my Aunt Rita says the three agents Daae was supposed to have killed have re-surfaced.”

Intrigued, he cocked an eyebrow and said. “Really? Where have they been all these years?”

“That’s just the thing. Aunt Rita’s not completely certain it is them. Because, if it is, they haven’t aged since the day of their disappearance. The Swiss government and Aunt Rita have requested we not look into it. Still, I was thinking, since we have an easy form of transportation, we could go to Zurich next week and quietly poke around? Ask a few questions? ‘Unofficially’ of course!”

He knew where this line of reasoning was going. Lois Lane was hot on the trail of another story. A mystery whose trail had gone cold nearly two decades before. “Uh huh. Are you positive the story won’t end up in Perry’s computer? Especially since the Swiss government is asking us not to get involved?”

Lois’ face was a study of pure innocence. “No. I was thinking it could be part of the Kent/Lane... family chronicles. Whatever we discover shall never appear in the pages of the *Daily Planet*. The last thing I want to do is upset Rita. Besides, I’ve been intending to get a new watch as a reward for all the hard work we put into the Daae series. Maybe, while we are in Zurich, I could pick up a lady’s Tissot Swiss Quartz?”

He took her left hand and slowly caressed the bare ring finger. “We can also get some jewelry while we’re there,” he said with a knowing smile.

Her heart started to skip a beat. “Really? Tell me, what kind?” Lois asked in a silken voice.

“Rings. Your diamond engagement ring and wedding band in gold with diamonds and a plain gold wedding band for me.”

She closed her eyes and breathed to settle her beating heart and then said playfully, “Say, since we can travel anywhere, what plans should we make for our honeymoon?”

He answered the question with the most beautiful smile, one of pure joy. “Months ago, I built a house on a secluded south Pacific island as a place of solitude. As you are well aware, rescues can sometimes take a toll on me, both emotionally and mentally.”

Lois shook her head in sympathy, “I cannot even begin to imagine. It must have been very lonely for you.”

He nodded shyly and continued, “Yes, it’s the perfect place to forget about reality for a while.”

Lois whispered seductively, “Care to describe it to me? What down your bedroom look like? Hopefully its bigger than the sleeping alcove in your apartment. After all, it has to accommodate two people now.”

“Oh yes, the master suite is downstairs. Not to worry, the bed is king-sized. It has large picture windows so we can see the stars at night. Lois, it’s like nothing in the world, they are so numerous

it's like diamond dust spread over midnight velvet.”

“How about the kitchen?”

“There's enough space for of us both to prepare gourmet dishes. I'm looking forward to exploring the tastes and textures of Southern Pacific dishes such as cassava, sweet potatoes, and breadfruit with different types of seafood. I put in a half octagon wrap-around porch for a one hundred and eighty degree view of the ocean while we eat.”

“Hmmm, I foresee a lot of meals eaten outdoors. The sound of ocean waves lapping against the shore is so soothing,” Lois breathed.

Her fiancé continued, “On the second floor are two additional bedrooms and a loft which we can use as an office or a media center.

“The island is small, uninhabited, peaceful, and best of all, off the major shipping lanes. There are spots where we can spend time on the secluded beach colored with black sand or go swimming with brightly colored fish, sea turtles and every so often dolphins in crystal clear azure waters – and we will be the only ones around to enjoy it.”

All the remaining tension on her face faded away as she imaged the island paradise, and she breathed, “Sounds the perfect slice of heaven. Too bad we can't get married there.” Her face went still and she whispered, “Is that the island you were talking about after the Daae press conference? Ah, the one where clothing is ‘optional’?”

Her question was rewarded with a blush of bright red crossing Clark's face.

“After the honeymoon, will it be our private little hideaway to go to ‘unwind’? This is going to be a unique marriage in so many ways. I love you so much,” Lois said.

He wrapped his arm around her waist and gave her a tiny squeeze, hearing the sound of their children's laughter in her voice.

“I've always known that I wanted to be married but it wasn't until I met you that I could see it being a reality in my life. With you, I see a future full of unconditional love, endless support, and a lifetime of growing together.” With those words, Clark wrapped his strong arms around her slender waist, drew him to her and they kissed passionately once more. The pursuit of Lois' suitcases momentarily forgotten.

Again, those passing by them in the concourse thought this young couple was drinking in the joy of being together after a long separation. But no, this was a fresh, tantalizing union. The beginning of something extraordinary and new. There would be questions to answer and many long talks, yet for now there was this touching and sharing and joining of hearts and thoughts.

Not so far away, a man in a black bowler hat looked at Lois Lane and Clark Kent, consulted his gold timepiece, smiled, and walked with a jaunty stride down the concourse. He was soon joined by a man and woman who looked remarkably familiar to the couple going in the opposite direction.

“Capital!” H.G. Wells said with enthusiasm. “Alt-Clark's life course has been set aright at last!”

Lois leaned against her husband and said with a happy sigh, “Isn't it romantic? This all started when Tempus kidnapped me and forced him into revealing his secret. Now the Clark Kent of this world has the private life he deserves and the woman he loves. This time around, Tempus didn't destroy him.”

Her husband took Lois' hand and said, “Honey, if he is half as happy with his Lois as I am with you, everything will be perfect.”

With those words, the threesome walked away from the crowds milling around the concourse and ducked into a deserted, dark access corridor and with a brief flash of cool blue light, returned to their respective world and times.

A/N: This story will be my last full-length novel for Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman. Sadly, real life has made greater demands on my time than in previous years. But don't worry, I will around, there are still short stories for me to write!

Many, such as the wonderful folks mentioned in the beginning have been a source of encouragement, but five are truly extraordinary:

Erin Klingler - For getting me started.

Janet Owens - For keeping me here.

MikeM, Ray Reynolds and dear Kenard Janney, for helping me make a graceful exit. I owe all of them a debt of gratitude for encouraging my meager talent, for putting words to paper and coming up with a few good stories.

But most of all, I owe loving thanks to my husband, Ted. What a kind, patient, and gentle man he is!