

Set Up

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Rating: T

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Clark Kent looked around the holding cell and sighed. He'd seen the cells in Metropolis's central lock-up before, interviewed prisoners being held there for questioning. But this was the first time he'd been on the inside of one with the door locked behind him. The paint on the walls was peeling and the room smelled of mildew and stale sweat. The steel chairs and heavy wooden table had both seen far better days. The room was oppressive, redolent with lost souls. The lead paint on the walls didn't help.

The officers in charge had taken his clothes for evidence, giving him a pair of worn jeans and a frayed blue shirt to wear. He was a little surprised they hadn't opted to put him immediately into the orange jumper reserved for the violent and high security inmates.

The girl's death had certainly been violent enough to warrant it. She'd practically been gutted, but not until after her throat had been slit allowing her to drown in her own blood. She hadn't even been able to scream. He would have heard her scream.

He heard steps outside the door, the keys in the lock being turned, the door opening. Detectives Thrace and Palmer walked in, grimacing at him in apparent distaste. "Let's go over this from the top," Thrace began. "Why did you do it?"

Clark's heart sank. It was going to be a *very* long night.

Several Hours Earlier

'Despite ongoing efforts of socially concerned citizens and officials in all levels of government to stem the tide of children being exploited in the sex trade in Metropolis...'

"CK?" Jimmy Olsen's voice broke into Clark's thought processes. The story Clark was working on wasn't coming together the way he wanted, the way he knew it should. There was something missing. Something his subconscious wasn't giving up just yet. Something on the mechanics of how these kids were being found and exploited.

"The gang's heading over to Dooley's Bar," Jimmy continued. "You want to come with us?"

Clark shook his head. He wanted to have this piece squared away before he headed out. "I'll meet you there in a little bit, okay?" Clark told him.

Jimmy seemed mollified by the promise, even though they both knew that chances were that Clark wouldn't make it to Dooley's. He hadn't made it there any of the five previous Fridays since Richard White's murder.

"We'll see you there," Jimmy said, heading for the elevators. The newsroom wasn't empty by any means, but it was quiet enough for him to concentrate on his work. Finally, he gave up.

He would come back in the morning and finish it - the last little piece simply wouldn't come together for him. Hopefully a flight over the city and then some sleep might bring the missing pieces of the puzzle to light for him. But first, he'd make Jimmy happy by showing his face at Dooley's.

The bar was two blocks away from the Daily Planet and was a favorite after work haunt for the Daily Planet, WGBS, and Newstime employees. In fact, one of the bar's back rooms was named 'the News Room' due to the preponderance of clients from area news organizations.

The sun had gone down several hours before and the weather guessers were predicting more snow. They weren't quite ready to predict a white Thanksgiving, but it was a distinct possibility. Clark grabbed his overcoat - he had a bad habit of forgetting it and getting odd looks from his co-workers when they noticed he wasn't shivering when they were.

He wasn't caught completely unawares when he walked into the alley behind Dooley's. He'd heard a burble, almost like a kitten being drowned but not quite, and something like cloth being cut. Then the fast steps of someone running away. Clark didn't bother to switch into the blue and red Suit, although in retrospect it probably would have been a good idea, despite the number of people on the street outside the alley. It was inconceivable that no one had noticed anything odd happening in the alley but it was Metropolis after all.

The girl's heart was still beating, pumping her life's blood onto the filthy pavement, but her injuries were unsurvivable. Her heart gave up just as he dropped to one knee beside her. He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and punched in 9-1-1.

Then he felt a sharp pain behind his left ear as though he'd been struck. *Kryptonite?* He dropped his phone and heard it skitter across the pavement. Then he was pulled to his feet, away from the girl's body.

"Against the wall, scumbag," a harsh voice ordered. He complied, mostly out of surprise and confusion than anything else. The kryptonite was still somewhere near, making him weak and sick to his stomach. He felt a warm trickle of blood running down his neck into his collar. The officer patted him down then pulled Clark's hands behind his back and tightened handcuffs around his wrists.

That's when the patrol cars and aid car arrived, blocking both entrances to the alley and gaining the attention of the customers inside Dooley's.

The uniformed officers shooed away the curious, cordoning off the alley with yellow tape. Two plainclothes officers climbed out of an unmarked car and ducked under the tape.

"What've we got?" one of the men asked the officer who was still holding onto Clark's arm. Before Clark had left on his futile journey to Krypton, he had known nearly every police beat cop and detective on sight. He didn't recognize either of the detectives or the uniformed officer. According to his nametag, the uniform's name Brown.

"Caught him red-handed, over the body," Brown announced. "Poor kid didn't have a chance."

"I didn't kill her. I heard a noise and came to see what it was," Clark told them. He tried to keep his voice as neutral as possible. "I was calling 9-1-1 and someone clipped me on the back of the head. The next I knew, Brown had me in handcuffs."

"I don't see a phone by the body..." one of the detectives said - Thrace.

Clark shrugged. "I had it out. It's got to be here somewhere."

"Riiight..." the other detective sneered. They hustled him over to one of the patrol cars. Out of the corner of his eye Clark caught a glimpse of Lois and Jimmy. Jimmy with his

ubiquitous camera snapping pictures of him being taken away by the police. Clark could see tomorrow's headlines in his mind's eye: *DP Reporter Arrested in Brutal Downtown Murder*.

At least the police were getting him away from the kryptonite in the alley. He wasn't too worried about the police finding his *other* clothes. In going through the recovered Kryptonian data crystals, he had found schematics for a neat little device that stored items in a pocket dimension. The device was currently disguised as a gold coin and was keyed to his brainwaves.

What did have him concerned was that Thrace and his partner were ignoring the evidence of their own eyes and taking Brown's word about finding him actually committing the crime.

This was going to be a very interesting evening. He wasn't fond of 'interesting evenings.'

"So, what are you planning for Thanksgiving?" Jimmy asked Lois, breaking into her thoughts. She took a sip of her drink.

"It's my sister's turn this year," Lois told him. She didn't bother to add that except for last year, when Richard cooked the holiday meal, it had been her sister's 'turn' ever since Lucy had gotten married. It was well known that Lois's cooking skills topped out at grilled sandwiches and take away.

"What about you?" she asked.

Jimmy shrugged. "I volunteered to work. Clark hasn't been back long enough to get the holidays off, so I thought I'd keep him company."

Sirens wailed from somewhere close by and Lois was on her feet and out the door almost before the sound registered. She had spent her entire professional career working the city beat and her intuition was honed to a fine edge. Something was happening in the alley behind the bar. Something bad. Something newsworthy.

She skidded to a halt at the corner of the building, breath catching in her throat at the sight in the alley. Clark was in handcuffs, being led to one of the panda cars. About halfway down the alley was the half dressed body of a young woman. It was hard to tell in the darkness, but it looked like she was covered in blood. There was blood on the bottom of Clark's overcoat and on his slacks, almost like he had knelt in it.

A strobe flashed somewhere near her shoulder and she looked over to see Jimmy with his camera. More people from had come out of the bar to check out the action. More camera flashes.

A plainclothes officer Lois didn't recognize tried to shoo the growing audience away. He made a grab for the camera in the hands of one of the other reporters as uniformed officers strung yellow police tape across the alley entrance. Jimmy moved back out of sight behind Lois.

"Looks like they caught him red handed," someone said. Lois thought it was one of the idiots from Newstime.

"Clark didn't do it," Jimmy murmured, almost in her ear. "His hands and sleeves are clean..." He pulled out his camera's memory card and handed it to her for safe-keeping before ducking under the yellow tape to move closer to the body.

Lois pulled out her cell phone and tapped in Perry White's cell number. Something was seriously wrong with the scenario playing itself out in front of her. She watched the panda car with Clark in it pull away as Perry answered his phone.

As a writer the booking process was interesting. The last time he'd had his fingerprints

taken was when he'd gone undercover at the MPD academy. He wasn't sure what had happened to those fingerprint files - he had been assured he had legitimately passed the mandatory background checks for the academy accelerated course and he assumed he was still on file. Oddly enough, his prints hadn't been matched with Superman's then although he was sure that *someone* had to have lifted his prints off of *something*. It was virtually inconceivable that Superman's biometrics weren't in some federal database somewhere.

Clark wasn't sure what he was going to do if his prints came back as a match with Superman's this time.

He was asked to empty his pockets and to sign the inventory sheet for his belongings - watch, the gold coin, wallet including the amount of cash he had on him, his pocket knife, a leather notepad, several pens, and his keys. He asked to keep the notepad and one pen. That request was refused but the officer gave him a pad of legal paper and a pencil to write with instead.

Having his photo taken for the mug shot was also a new experience. Clark relaxed his back and shoulders. That took better than an inch off his height. It was the same as he did for his driver's license and passport photos. Clark Kent was more than an inch shorter and twenty pounds lighter than Superman - at least that's what he wanted everyone to believe. So far it had worked.

The holding cell was dingy and the lead paint on the walls made it feel even more oppressive. He could hear everything going on in the old building, but his vision was blocked. It was unnerving. He knew he could escape at anytime, provided he wanted to put Superman's reputation at risk. He wasn't ready to do that and he sincerely hoped it wouldn't come to that.

"Lois, are you sure we should be doing this?" Jimmy asked. Lois ignored him as she unlocked the door to Clark's apartment. She flipped a light switch as she walked into the room beyond.

Jimmy followed her in. He hadn't been in Clark's apartment before and he took a moment to look around. The walls were a linen color, about twice normal height with windows near the ceiling. The floor was hardwood and there was a large oriental rug under the single low table. A ladder led to a loft over the bathroom and kitchen and there was a door on the outside wall that no doubt led to a fire escape.

Two of the four walls had tall bookcases spaced far enough apart to allow for Clark's collection of African and South East Asian art to be displayed. A small stereo system was set up under a huge framed photograph of the planet Earth. Jimmy didn't see any evidence of a television.

Clark's laptop computer was sitting on the low table with a small pile of data CD's beside it. Aside from two stools at the breakfast bar, there seemed to be no other furniture on the main floor.

"Uh, Lois, what are we doing here?" Jimmy tried again.

"Investigating," Lois replied finally.

"But we both know Clark didn't do it," Jimmy said. "I mean, lets face it, if Clark wanted somebody dead, there wouldn't be a body for anybody to find."

"But he was taken away in handcuffs anyway," Lois reminded him. "What does that tell you?"

"Uh, the real perp wants to pin it on him?" Jimmy guessed. She nodded.

"I'll fix us some coffee while we wait," she offered.

They had almost finished off the second pot of coffee when there was a knock on the door. Lois hurried to open it.

A tall man in a wrinkled suit shoved past her.

"And you are?" Lois demanded.

"Police," he said. He pulled a sheet of paper from his jacket pocket and shoved it at her.

"Here's the search warrant." He stepped inside the apartment, beckoning the two men with him to get started.

She glanced at it, noting the name of the judge that had signed it. Thorgood Westover, the same man who had let Lex Luthor, Morgan Edge, and William Church Junior out of prison under the spurious argument that a key witness against all three was no longer available to testify against them on their appeals.

Lois pulled out her notepad and a pen. "I want your names and badge numbers."

"Out of our way, lady," he growled. "We have work to do."

Lois noted the odd looks the other two officers gave the tall man. The other two gave her their names and badge numbers and she noted them down. Wilcox and Andrews. The tall man was named Wald. Wald spotted the laptop and pressed the power button on it. As the machine started to boot he went through the CDs.

"What's the password on this thing?" Wald demanded when the opening screen came up.

"I don't know," Lois told him. "I'm not in the habit of logging into Mister Kent's personal computer."

Wald tried to open the CD drive on the computer, swearing when it failed to open for him.

"Problems?" Jimmy asked. He was snapping photos of the officers doing the search.

Wald glowered at Lois and Jimmy then picked an unlabeled disk off the table top, a DVD-R Lois was positive hadn't been there before. "Any idea what's on this?" he asked, holding up the disk.

"I have no idea," she told him.

"Sergeant, we're done here," Andrews said after a while. The apartment looked like a tornado had hit it.

"I don't suppose you guys would care to clean up after yourselves?" Lois asked.

"Don't be a smart-ass, Lane," Wald warned. "Your boyfriend's goin' down for this." He shut the laptop with a snap and tucked it under his arm.

"I want a receipt for that," Lois said. Wald simply walked out of the room. Andrews shook his head and filled out a receipt for the computer.

She watched as Andrews closed the door behind them then pulled out her cell phone. "Emmy? Lois Lane. Kent's apartment just got searched and they took away his laptop and a DVD-R."

"So?" Emily Douglass said over the tiny speaker.

"So, his computer doesn't have a DVD drive on it, and he doesn't own a TV."

"Interesting, if true," Douglass said. "And this is off the record, but this case has been kicked up to Special Investigations."

"Let's go over this from the top," Thrace began once again. He pointed to the gruesome photos of the crime scene, the knife that had apparently been used lying beside the body. Clark didn't remember seeing the knife there when he had knelt by the body. But then, very little

about this night was making much sense.

"Why did you do it?" The fatigue was telling in Thrace's voice.

"I have the right to remain silent," Clark reminded him. "My lawyer hasn't arrived."

"We found the murder weapon," Palmer stated. "Your fingerprints were all over it."

The murder weapon had his prints? That was impossible. There hadn't been a weapon there for him to touch.

He heard a pair of voices outside the steel door. Inspector Henderson and the guard outside. "*Thrace and Palmer are in there with Kent?*"

"Yes, sir," the guard was saying. "*They say he's the one who's been killing the kids...*"

"*Is that what they say?*"

"*Yeah. But I have to admit, I never figured Kent to be involved in that mess. I always figured he was a straight shooter. I mean, I've seen him around here enough, almost like he's one of ours.*"

"*Yeah*"

"Kent?"

Clark looked up in surprise, pulling his awareness back into the room. Palmer was staring at him. "Are you a spaz or what? Have you heard anything I've said? We've got you dead to rights... and it'll go a lot easier on you if cooperate."

"I have nothing to say to you. Except that I didn't do it."

The door opened and Bill Henderson walked in, carrying a slim file. Clark noted the surprise and annoyance in Palmer's expression. Thrace just looked resigned, almost as though he'd been expecting something like this.

"Kent, what the devil have you gotten yourself into now?" Henderson asked. His expression was more amused than annoyed.

"I was the first on the scene, got clipped on the back of the head as I was calling 9-1-1, lost my cell phone," Clark told him. "Officer Brown found me there, made some assumptions that Thrace and Palmer here accepted without question, and here we are. I'm still waiting for my lawyer, by the way."

"Uh, sir, is there something you need?" Thrace asked Henderson. Clark could understand the detectives' confusion - Henderson was an inspector, a 'super' detective in Special Investigations. He was usually handed the high profile cases that needed special handling - like cop killings and abductions. A girl dead in an alley shouldn't be the purview of Special Investigations, unless there was something else going on.

The older man sighed and rubbed his face. "What I need is a cup of strong coffee," Henderson stated. "The reason I need that is that I was called out of my nice warm bed by Police Commissioner Siegal to 'observe' this investigation. He called me right after getting off the phone with the D.A. who had gotten reamed by the mayor who had just gotten an earful from the editor of Metropolis's largest newspaper concerning reports of police brutality and stupidity. Do I need to go on?"

"We have an eye witness and positive I.D. on the prints on the murder weapon," Thrace said. "We think it may also be the weapon used in that murder six months ago. Same M.O."

Henderson raised one eyebrow at Thrace's report and placed the file on the table without opening it. "You do realize that Kent was living out of the country until about three months ago don't you?"

Thrace's eyes widened and he gave his partner a puzzled look.

"When you ran his prints, what did you get?" Henderson asked.

"Nothing, at least not in the city," Palmer said. "FBI hasn't gotten back to us yet."

"Anything else show up?" Henderson asked.

"Like what?" Thrace asked.

Henderson just shook his head and flipped open the file to reveal 8x10 photos of Clark being led to the panda car by Palmer. *Good ol' Jimmy and his camera.* One of the photos showed Clark's hands handcuffed behind his back as he bent to get into the back of the car.

"Do either of you see anything wrong with these pictures?" Henderson asked. Both Thrace and Palmer shook their heads. Then Thrace picked up two of the photos to look more closely.

"There's no blood on him," Thrace said.

"So, the photos have been touched up," Palmer stated. "Doesn't mean anything."

Thrace stared at his partner in open disbelief. Henderson simply frowned. "To be submitted for a Pulitzer, a photo has to be unedited except for cropping. Besides, I doubt the Metropolis Star would bother," Henderson stated. "Kent's not exactly one of their favorite people."

"So, he wore gloves and we just haven't found them yet," Palmer said.

"You're just not getting it, are you?" Thrace told his partner. "He was wearing a beige coat and a gray suit. There's no blood on him except on the hem of his coat and one knee of his slacks. And our eye witness said nothing about gloves. If there were any, where are they? The lab guys have been all over that alley with a fine tooth comb." Thrace sorted through the rest of the photos. He picked up one of the girl's body and compared it to the Polaroid taken of the scene by the police photographer.

"We got nothin'," Thrace said after a long moment. "The D.A. is going to look at those photos and the forensic report on the blood on Kent's clothes and he's going to laugh at us."

"And the murder weapon?" Palmer demanded. "You can't ignore the matching finger prints."

Thrace gave Clark a speculative look before turning back to Henderson. "When we ran the prints through our system, it came up empty and it shouldn't have, am I correct?"

Henderson nodded. "Kent's prints are in our system, along with Lane, Olsen, and some other reporters with bad habits. Yeah, the computer should have given you that, including a badge number."

Palmer actually paled at that. "He's a cop?"

"No, but he went through the accelerated course at the academy and passed," Henderson said. Palmer glared at him.

"But that was over eight years ago," Clark added quietly.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Palmer asked. Clark could hear the man's pulse racing. *There's something seriously off here.*

"I didn't think it made any difference," Clark said simply. "I'm not a cop. I don't pretend I am. But I did get a real MPD badge out of the deal." Clark frowned and looked up at Henderson. *Henderson says he's known about Superman ever since Nightfall.* "You set me up for that." Clark couldn't keep the surprise at his realization out of his voice.

Henderson set it up so Superman would go to the MPD police academy.

Henderson chuckled. "Took you long enough to figure that out. And, uh, you've *never* impersonated a police officer?"

Clark felt his cheeks warm. "Okay, but just once. And the statute of limitations has run

out on that and I did tell their rights."

Henderson turned to the two detectives. "Unless you're planning on holding him as a material witness, you two had better get to working on cutting him loose."

Thrace and Palmer hurried out of the room, leaving Henderson alone with Clark.

"How's your head?"

"Luckily I heal up fast," Clark told him. He rubbed his hand across his forehead. The headache that had started in the alley with the kryptonite exposure had mostly dissipated, but there was still a trace of ache around his temples.

"Want to tell me what happened?" Henderson asked, settling onto the corner of the table.

"Am I going to need a lawyer?"

"Despite the hash those two have made of this so far, *you* are still a key witness. So, what happened?"

"I was heading from the Planet over to Dooley's to meet Olsen and the rest of the gang for a drink. It's about two blocks. As I was about to cross the alley that goes behind Dooley's I heard something odd and went to check it out."

"And what time was this?"

"Maybe ten minutes after I left the Planet. You should be able to get the exact time I left the building from the security monitors in the lobby," Clark said.

Henderson nodded, noting the fact on the notepad he'd pulled from his pocket.

"What happened then?"

"I saw the girl on the ground and heard running footsteps heading away down towards Hamilton Avenue."

"Could you tell if the runner was a man or woman?"

Clark shook his head. "My initial impression was that it was a man. Young, tall..."

"Tall as you?"

"No, I don't think so. Maybe six-foot though."

"Go on," Henderson urged. "What happened then?"

"The girl was dying. I went down on one knee to get closer, to see if there was anything I could do. There wasn't. I pulled out my cell phone and hit 9-1-1. The operator had just come on the line when I got hit from behind and started feeling the effects of kryptonite. I dropped the phone and I think it must have gotten kicked because I heard plastic on the pavement."

"Is that when Brown grabbed you?"

Clark nodded. "The squad cars showed up, maybe five minutes after that."

"And how long until Tweedledum and Tweedledee showed up to take charge?"

Clark gave him a puzzled look. "They drove up with the squad cars."

"You're sure?"

"Positive." Clark leaned forward, elbows on the table. "Bill, what the devil is going on here? A school kid could pull the pieces together better than those two did. And in the meantime, there's a killer out there..."

"Don't you think I know that? Don't you think I know how much time those two bozos have wasted trying to pin this on you instead of looking for the real killer?"

Clark sat back in the metal chair. He watched Henderson worriedly. "I, uh, just wanted to make sure we were on the same page here."

Henderson sighed. "Well, we may not be on the same page, but I'm pretty sure we're in the same book. This is the third murder in this area in the past six months. All early teen girls involved in prostitution. All murdered in particularly gruesome ways."

Clark sighed as a feeling of dread settled into his belly. "Bill, the investigation I've been working on the last couple weeks is on child prostitution. In fact, I was in the middle of finishing it up when I decided to take a break and meet the gang over at Dooley's." He looked up to see Henderson watching him intently.

Clark went on. "One part of the puzzle has been bothering me. How? The MPD is considered the best police department in the U.S. Comes in consistently lowest in rank in regards to corruption, highest in general job satisfaction in the ranks. One of the highest arrest and conviction records in the country. So, how could there be an epidemic of children being used that way unless...?"

"Unless the people charged with protecting them are looking the other way?" Henderson filled in for him. "Who knows about your investigation?"

"Perry and Lois are the only ones with particulars. But I do have my sources. They've managed to lead me to other people who've been willing to talk," Clark told him. "But nobody's mentioned Intergang or having an in with the police."

"Care to give me their names?"

"You know I can't do that," Clark told him.

"Can't or won't?"

"Doesn't matter," Clark told him. "I'm a journalist. I have to protect my sources. If I give up that bit of integrity, I'm not any good to anybody. These particular sources have demanded anonymity for good reason."

"I could lock you up for interfering in a police investigation."

"Neither of us knew there was anything much *to* investigate until I got hauled in here," Clark reminded him. "Unless there're things you're not telling me about this."

The door opened and a frizzy haired woman stuck her head through. "Boss, everything's squared away to cut him loose."

"Thanks, Em," Henderson said.

"And Lane tagged another bad one for us," the woman said. "He was trying to plant evidence in a suspect's place."

"What sort of evidence?"

Clark watched her eyes flicker between him and Henderson. Then: "A homemade DVD. Bad stuff. Kiddy porn, including video of the three dead kids, with their names. Boss, we never released those names to the press."

"Has Lane made her statement?"

The woman nodded. "Yeah. She's waiting out in front for him."

"I'll have him out in a minute." Henderson told her. She closed the door on them.

Henderson sighed as if trying to compose his next words: "Clark, we're going to leave you on record as being a 'person of interest' in the case."

"You're putting me out as a tethered goat."

Henderson nodded. "I wouldn't even dream of doing it if I didn't think you could handle it. Hopefully it won't come to that."

"There was kryptonite in the alley. I think Brown may have had it."

"I figured that. There's blood in your hair and I know how hard it is to do that,"

Henderson said. Clark ran his hand through the hair at the back of his head. He looked down at the red-brown flecks of dried blood on his hand.

"My people are looking into it," Henderson said. "Before you go, is it possible there's another investigation you or Lane might be working on that might tie into this one? Intergang,

maybe?"

Clark shrugged. "Of course we're looking into Intergang. And other people."

"Anyone in particular?"

"Lois is still, uh, really frosted about Judge Westover letting Luthor, Church, and Edge out of prison," Clark told him with a sheepish smile.

Lois was waiting in the front lobby as Clark was ushered out by a uniformed officer. She looked him up and down critically, tapping her foot on the worn tile floor. "You look like hell."

"Nice to see you too, Lois."

"Let's get out of here before they change their minds," Lois ordered, leading him out of the building and into the adjacent parking lot. Her gun-metal gray Audi was parked in one of the visitor slots. The car chirped as she remotely unlocked the doors. "First order of business: my place. We can both get cleaned up before heading to the office. I brought some clothes over for you. Jason's over at my sister, so we don't have to worry about him asking questions."

"Why not just drop me off at my place?" Clark asked as she pulled the car into traffic.

"Perry's orders," Lois told him. "Either Jimmy or me, I? Well, one of us is to be with you at all times... except when, you know..."

Lois's heart rate was up. There were things she wasn't saying.

"What happened while I was in there?" he asked quietly.

"When Jimmy and I figured out how it was going down in the alley, we called Perry and filled him in then headed to your place. I still have keys, remember?"

"I know."

"Some detectives showed up with a search warrant and started tearing the place apart. Lucky for you, you don't own a TV or a DVD player. Your computer won't run DVDs either. Anybody else and they'd be dog meat."

"One of Henderson's people said you'd tagged another bad one and there was a DVD involved," Clark told her.

Lois nodded. "He was trying to insert it into your laptop. Got real pissed when he couldn't get your machine to start for him. How many passwords have you got on that thing?"

"It's just the STAR Labs protocols," Clark said. "I'm sure a serious hacker could get through, given enough time. Did they take the computer?"

She nodded. "I got hold of Detective Douglass. She intercepted the 'evidence'. Special Investigations is taking over the case. I assume you have backups."

"Yeah. Locked in my desk at work. And they're encrypted."

Lois chuckled humorlessly. "Clark... You encrypt your backups, have state-of-the-art encryption on your practically antique laptop, but you forget to lock your doors. What am I supposed to do with you?"

"Gee Lois, I don't know. I'm just a farm boy from Kansas, remember?" Despite the circumstances he couldn't keep the humor out his voice. It was good to be out of that interrogation room. He hadn't realized how much the confined space had bothered him until he was free of it.

Lois snorted. "I'd knock some sense into you with a two-by-four if I didn't know it'd hurt me more than it would you... Why the devil did you go into that alley without... you know?"

"Too many people around, for one," he answered. "And two, I didn't expect to get clipped like that."

"How's your head?"

"Not bad. I'm sure Tweedledum and Tweedledee'll be put on report for not having a doctor look at it."

"Serves 'em right."

"Henderson is keeping me on the books as a 'person of interest'," Clark told her. "I'm sure I'll hear from him pretty soon about the computer... Did Perry really get on the mayor's case about this?"

"Yep. He and Alice were having dinner with hizzoner at Taylor's when I got hold of him. Guess who else was having dinner at Taylor's?"

Clark shook his head.

"Our favorite judge."

"Westover?"

She nodded. "And guess who signed the search warrant for your place."

"Also Westover?"

She nodded again. "Perry saw it all. The cop, Brown, bringing the paper in from the back area of the restaurant. Westover signing it and handing it back to him. And, according to Perry, when Westover realized that he and the mayor were two tables over from him, he turned white as a sheet and lit out of there like the devil was after him."

"But signing a search warrant doesn't... I mean, what would he be thinking was suspicious about being seen signing a search warrant? Even if it is a little odd Brown sought him out to do it. A night court judge would have been easier."

"Exactly what I intend to ask him about when I talk to him this afternoon."

"Well?" Clark asked as soon as Lois walked into the newsroom later that afternoon. The expression on her face did not bode well for anyone getting in her way as she stalked over to her desk.

"According to the bailiff, Westover left his chambers a little before twelve and never returned," Lois told him.

"Maybe I should...?"

The stiffness went out of her shoulders. "I'll walk you out," she offered, grabbing her coat from where she had tossed it over the back of her chair.

"I asked research to look into Thrace and Palmer for me," Clark said.

"Don't leave me in suspense."

"Palmer was undercover narcotics until about four years ago, when internal affairs started looking into some problems in his unit," Clark said as the elevator doors closed behind them. They were heading up to the roof. "Apparently nothing could be proved but they moved him over to vice. The others got sent all over, too. When Palmer made detective about nine months ago, he was transferred to homicide and teamed up with Thrace."

"Not exactly a smoking gun," Lois noted.

"But, it's something to look at more closely. Brown and Wald were in narcotics at the same time as Palmer, so there is a link there."

"But that doesn't link them to prostitution or murder," Lois reminded him. "Although it does lead to some interesting questions."

"Oh?"

Lois nodded. "Like why Brown volunteered to do foot patrols in that part of town that night, even though he hadn't pulled one in months and didn't even like the guy he traded with,

and how those two detectives managed to get there even before the official report of a murder came through?" Lois asked. "I checked with one of my sources. Thrace and Palmer *weren't* first up on the wheel last night. The case wouldn't have been assigned to them except that they were first on the scene."

"They knew something was going down and when," Clark said. "Chances are, they chose Dooley's because that's where a lot of reporters hang out after work. It could have been any one of us that was first to the scene. Let's face it, I'm damn lucky I didn't pass out and fall over into that kid's body when I got clipped. I don't think Henderson would have been quite so understanding if I'd actually had her blood on my hands." The elevator doors opened onto the roof observation deck. They both stepped to the parapet and Clark peered out at the city over the top of his glasses.

It was bitterly cold on the rooftop and it had started snowing. "Aren't you...?" She made a circular motion with her gloved hand.

He smiled at her, warming her just a little with heat vision. "I will if I need to. But the roof is high enough I can see almost the entire city without any problem. Heck, the newsroom is high enough." He chuckled sadly. "The day you went missing, just before the crystalquake, I was standing not too far from your desk and asked Richard what kind of car you were driving and the license plate number and where Jason's school was. He asked me if I was planning on doing an aerial search. Funny thing was, I *was* doing an aerial search. From the newsroom. What I didn't know was that Luthor had a ship and it was already well out to sea, with you and Jason on it."

"Not one of my shining moments," Lois said.

"Not exactly shining moments for either of us," Clark said. "You wouldn't happen to know what kind of car Westover drives, and the license plate number, would you?"

"A gold colored Caddy about ten years old."

"License?"

She told him.

He kept looking out over the city then stopped, inspecting the dock area more carefully. There was something in the water that shouldn't have been there. "Call Henderson. There's a gold-colored older Cadillac in the water by pier 71. There's a body in it." With that, he dove off the roof, speeding into his Suit as he went.

Superman had the car out of the water and on the pier before the squad cars arrived. He didn't touch the body inside, but x-ray vision told him the man's trachea had been crushed and there was no water in his lungs. It also confirmed the man's identity: Thorgood Westover.

"Any idea what happened?" Henderson asked, beckoning Superman over to him as he approached the recovered car. He nodded to Detective Douglass who was taking charge of the situation.

"It was brought to my attention that Judge Westover missed his afternoon appointments and that it wasn't like him," Superman explained. "I was asked to... determine the cause."

"And?"

"He was dead before he went into the water. Crushed trachea."

"Any thing else?" Henderson had started taking notes.

Superman scanned the car and the surrounding area. "I'm not seeing any fingerprints besides Westover's on the car, but two people pushed the car over the side of the pier. There're two pairs of glove prints on the back end of the car. Calfskin, I think."

Henderson nodded and noted that fact down as well. "Just to let you know, the

preliminary forensics report on Kent's clothing and a more detailed look at the murder weapon puts Kent completely in the clear."

"He'll be pleased to hear that," Superman said. "But somehow, I don't think that brings us any closer to finding out who killed that girl, or why."

"You'd be surprised," Henderson said, dropping his voice to almost sub-vocal.

Another patrol car drove up and came to a stop. Superman looked past Henderson to see Officer Brown climbing out of his patrol car and hurrying over to the detective. Superman winced as he was suddenly hit with pain and nausea. He found Henderson's hand on his arm, supporting him.

"Kryptonite?"

Superman managed a nod as he looked around. "Brown."

Henderson gestured to Douglass who hurried over to intercept Brown. "MPD has strict regulations concerning arms and ammunition. And carrying kryptonite is about as far outside regs as you can get." He peered up at Superman. "You okay?"

"I will be."

"Good, 'cause I need you to locate Thrace and Palmer." Henderson handed him a small radio handset. "This is tuned to my group's frequency. Call in if you find them. Let us handle it from there."

"And hopefully they're not at the bottom of a river?"

"Hopefully."

Henderson handed him their photos, details on their cars, and where they lived. "I can't stress this enough," Henderson said firmly. "Do not approach them on your own. Let us handle it. It's what we get paid for."

Superman nodded and floated upwards a few moments before speeding to an over-look point high over the city. If he were searching for Lois or Jason, or even Perry or Jimmy, he would concentrate on their heartbeat. Every heart beat with a subtly different, individual, pattern. But he hadn't been paying a lot of attention to Thrace and Palmer's heartbeats while he was with them. He closed his eyes momentarily to sort through what he recalled sensing from them. Smells, sounds, temperature variations, impressions.

There...

He dropped lower in the atmosphere, keying the radio Henderson had given him. "They're traveling north on McCormick, and just passed Thirty-second."

He dropped even lower. Pedestrians on the sidewalks below spotted him and waved. He waved back. The car with Thrace and Palmer turned onto Thirty-fourth and pulled into a parking garage. Two other men in business suits were waiting for them and they had guns drawn. It was unlikely the two police officers saw them.

Superman settled onto the concrete behind one of the pillars. He knew the two men were too far away to hear him call in their location. A quick check with x-ray vision confirmed they were also armed with kryptonite.

He'd been hoping once SHADO was out of the way the kryptonite ammo would go away. He'd been hoping the cops could get a handle on it. No such luck.

Thrace and Palmer walked in. Their expressions, and heart rates, indicated they were surprised to see the guns in the hands of the other men. "Hey, what gives?" Palmer asked the taller of the men.

"The Boss doesn't want any loose ends. And the two of you are definitely loose ends."

Luckily, light travels faster than sound and much faster than the nerve impulses in a human body. The two exposed automatics almost instantly became too hot for a human to handle, but Superman didn't wait to see them drop the guns. A quick trip to the fishing docks garnered a heavy net. All four men were weighed down by the thrown net almost before the guns hit the concrete. But even at the distance he had tossed the net from, he could feel the kryptonite on them.

Henderson and his team appeared shortly, taking charge of the prisoners.

"I thought I told you to stay out of it," Henderson stated, arms folded in front of him in imitation of the man floating in the air on the other side of the parapet.

"I assumed you didn't want Palmer and Thrace dead," Superman responded. "The other two were waiting for them. And they all have kryptonite on them."

"Lovely. What did they say?"

"Palmer and Thrace were obviously surprised to see the guns out. The taller of the other two said: 'The Boss doesn't want any loose ends. And the two of you are definitely loose ends.'"

"The 'Boss', huh?" Henderson sighed and shook his head. "I was hoping..."

"Hoping what?"

The older man shook his head. "I'm just glad the average bad guy thinks the good guys are as stupid and corruptible as they are. Internal Investigations has had their eye on Palmer, Brown and a couple of techs for some time. That's all I can tell you right now."

"Maybe later?" Superman asked Henderson.

"I'll give Kent a call as soon as we have this sorted out," Henderson promised.

"Assuming it ever gets sorted out?"

"Assuming," Henderson admitted with a dry chuckle.

"So, let me get this straight," Lois said, back at her desk in the newsroom. "Thrace, Palmer, Brown, and at least two more, have been arrested for possession of kryptonite, but not for their probable involvement in that girl's murder, or trying to frame you for it?"

Clark nodded. "That's about it. Of course, that case is still open and so is Westover's murder and it looks like they may be related. It's almost certain Palmer and Brown were involved in the girl's death and tried to cloud the issue by planting evidence to implicate me. And we can't publish a darn thing about it until Internal Affairs wraps everything up. At least Henderson's promised to keep me posted on what's happening."

"How sweet of him," Lois said, sarcasm dripping. "Do you think we'll ever be able to print it?"

"I hope so. But I'm not holding my breath. In the meantime, I have a story on child prostitution to..." He stopped, eyes focusing on something Lois couldn't see. "...hand in. I'll be back," he said as he left his chair to head out to handle whatever it was he'd heard.

Lois looked around at her co-workers diligently toiling away in their cubicles. As usual, nobody seemed to notice Clark's disappearance except for Perry, who was standing at the door to his office.

Just another day in Metropolis.

"Clark mentioned something about 'the Boss'..."