

Spring Comes After Winter

by Deborah Rorabaugh (SHADO Librarian)

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Rating: M

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Pheromone My Lovely was written by Deborah Joy Levine, and directed by Bill D'Elia.

If we had no winter, the spring would not be so pleasant: if we did not sometimes taste of adversity, prosperity would not be so welcome.

Anne Bradstreet, *'Meditations Divine and Moral,' 1655*

American poet (1612 - 1672)

There is only one way to console a widow. But remember the risk.

Robert Heinlein, *'The Notebooks of Lazarus Long,' 1973*

American Author (1907 - 1988)

"Perry, you can't mean it," Lois Lane complained, loudly enough to be heard through the glass door and wall by the people sitting at the desks closest to the Perry White's office. She was glaring at the older man who simply looked back at her as though she were a particularly interesting bug. She turned her angry gaze on the other man in the room. Clark Kent gave her a wan smile. He wasn't enjoying this any more than she was.

"I do mean it," Perry White, editor in chief of the Daily Planet, told her. "You and Kent have an appointment on Wednesday to interview Miranda Miller on that new cosmetic line of hers, the one the FDA is up in arms about."

"But Perry, cosmetics?" Lois's voice had reached a new level of shriek even Clark hadn't known she had. He winced in pain and she glowered at him. If looks could kill he would have been mortally wounded despite the fact that he was Superman.

"But, sir, what about the Church trial?" Clark asked, trying to deflect Lois's glare. "That starts tomorrow and..."

"And I don't want either of you within a thousand miles of that courtroom," Perry ordered. "If the D.A. needs more than your depositions, we'll work something out. In the meantime, the both of you are out of here for at least the next week."

"But Perry, we've been following the Church investigation for the past six months," Clark protested again.

"And I have every faith that Gil and Roberta can handle the trial in your absence," Perry told him. "It's the D.A.'s problem now, not yours. And your investigation on Mrs. Church can certainly wait a week. I doubt she's going anywhere with her stepson on trial."

Lois tried one more time. "Perry, you know what happened the last time you sent the two of us off on something like this."

"Yes, I remember very clearly," Perry told them. "I sent you to Niagara Falls to look into

a scam and you *didn't* come back with the story I sent you on. But you *did* come back pregnant and then he took off for..." He turned to Clark. "Where was it again...?"

"Krypton," Clark murmured under his breath.

"For nearly six years," Perry finished. "You're going to California for the week. Those are your orders and that's final. Oh, and Clark?"

"Yes, sir?" He knew he was defeated.

"I've had word from the D.A.'s office that it might be good if Superman made himself scarce for the next week, too. At least until he's called to testify."

"Yes, sir," Clark agreed with a sigh. Perry handed him a manila envelope with their travel itineraries and waved the pair out of his office.

Lois grabbed the envelope and pulled out the papers inside. Clark already knew what was inside, one of the blessings of x-ray vision. Two plane tickets, reservations at a bed and breakfast in Napa, California, and reservations for a rental car. Lois stared at the plane tickets then turned around and walked back into Perry's office.

"Perry, you know how much Clark hates airplanes," she told him.

Perry looked up from the article he was busying himself with. "Then have Superman fly you there. I really don't care so long as you and Clark are both checked in at the B&B tonight. Good bye, Lois, and shut the door on your way out."

She shut the door hard enough to make the glass shimmer and stalked back to her desk. Clark was already standing by her chair, waiting for her. He noticed that the people in the neighboring desks were making themselves scarce. Lois in 'mad dog' mode was no one to be trifled with on a good day. This was *not* a good day.

"I think we're stuck," he told her.

"And what about Jason?" Lois asked, referring to her nearly six-year-old son. "I can't get a sitter for him at such short notice."

"Uh, Lois?" her brother-in-law, Ron Troupe, said tentatively as he walked up to her. There was worry written across his dark face, as though he thought she might actually bite. "I thought... uh, Lucy and I will be glad to take care of him while you and Clark are in California."

Lois glared at him. "How long has Perry been working on this?"

Ron shrugged, turning his palms out to her in a gesture of surrender. He gave Clark a pleading look but the other man just shook his head in sympathy.

"He talked to me just before you got in and I called Lucy to make sure it was okay," Ron explained. "I know the girls won't mind having Jason around."

Ron had married Lois's younger sister Lucy twelve years before, and they had two daughters, one eleven and the other nine. Clark knew that Lois liked her two nieces, although she had always made a show of disliking children. Having her own child seemed to have made her a little more tolerant of them.

Lois sighed loudly and flopped into her desk chair. Clark watched her pick up the framed photograph she still kept on her desk. Lois, her fiancé and her son, all smiling at the camera. Only the man in the picture, Richard White, had been murdered six months ago. The biological father of the boy in the photograph was standing patiently beside her desk, waiting for her to grab her purse and jacket.

"Okay, Ron," Lois said, biting her lower lip. "I'll call Jason's school and tell them you'll be picking him up this week."

"Sure, Lois," Ron said with a worried smile. "Jason'll be fine. You and Clark have fun on

your trip, okay? Oh, and here's the research Perry ordered on Miranda Miller." He placed the thick file on her desk and headed back to his own desk and assignments.

She pulled out her cell phone and called her son's school, letting them know that Jason White's uncle would be picking him up after school. Her son was still registered under his 'stepfather's' name.

"You haven't changed his name with the school yet," Clark observed.

"I'm still not sure if it should be Jason Lane or Jason Kent," she replied. "Besides, Richard was his daddy for over five years."

"I know," Clark told her. "I shouldn't have mentioned it... I don't want to go on this trip any more than you do, you know. But the D.A. is worried that Church's 'associates' might want to 'influence' the prosecution witnesses. I guess Perry agrees it would be better if we were scarce, and Superman along with us."

Lois got up from her chair and slipped on her suit jacket. "We'd better get packed if we're to make our flight."

Clark nodded. "Let me grab my briefcase and laptop and we can get going." He started toward his own desk when Lois laid her hand on his arm.

"It's too soon," she said. "You know that, don't you?"

"I know Lois," he replied, even though the touch of her hand sent thrills through his being. "I know it's still too soon for either of us. Richard was my friend too. I just wish there'd been a way I could have saved him."

"You almost didn't make it out yourself, remember?" she reminded him, keeping her hand on his arm.

"I'm not likely to forget," he told her. "I still have the scars."

"Really?"

He gave her a shy smile. "Not physically so much, but mentally."

"Oh."

"We'd better get a move on if we're going to make our flight."

A few desks away, one of the researchers leaned over Jimmy Olsen's shoulder. "What's up with them? A week on the company in Napa Valley and you'd think they're being sent to the gulag."

"They've been pretty wrapped up in the Church story, and they both want to follow it to the end. Plus they've got a bit of a history," Jimmy told her.

"Oh?"

"You're new here," Jimmy observed. "Lois and Clark were partners some time back. Broke a lot stories together, won awards. Perry sent them off on an assignment together, kinda' like this one. Things got a little out of hand, I guess. She ended up pregnant and he disappeared for nearly six years."

"You're joking, right? Jason's *his* kid?" she asked, surprised.

"Yeah, only he didn't know it until he came back. Then Clark and Richard, he was Lois's fiancé, got put together on an assignment. The investigation went bad. Real bad. Richard was killed. Clark's lucky he lived. They've had some tough times. I don't think this trip is going to make it any easier for them. I just hope the Chief knows what he's doing."

"I can't believe you're going along with this," Lois complained. She and Clark had boarded a commercial jet at Berkowitz International and were now in route to California. To Lois's surprise, Perry had opted to put them in first class, a fact she was sure Clark was

grateful for. His 6'4" frame wasn't about to fit into a standard airline seat. Even the first class seat seemed a little cramped for him

"There were watchers at the airport," Clark told her. "Somebody wanted to make sure we got on this plane. And I didn't think simply being spotted checking into a B&B was going to satisfy them."

"Who do you think it was?" Lois asked.

Clark shrugged. "Church's people, the D.A.'s people, you name 'em, they probably want us out of town."

"But the plane's okay?"

"I don't think we have to worry on that score."

Lois sat back in her seat. "You know, I can't believe Perry's doing it to us again."

"I suspect it's his way of making the best of a bad situation," Clark told her. "You know the paper was receiving threats over what we uncovered."

"Since when does Lois Lane or Clark Kent run from threats?" she asked him.

"Well, Lois Lane has a tendency to run *towards* threats," he reminded her with a grin.

"Clark Kent thinks discretion may be the better part of valor."

"Yeah, right," Lois commented with a snort. "Who was it again that got stabbed *and* shot by Lex Luthor?"

"Touché."

The airplane bucked in sudden turbulence and Clark clutched the arms of his seat, concern written across his face. One of the stewardesses noticed and stopped by their seats. "Is everything all right Mister Kent?" she asked.

"I don't like turbulence," he explained.

"Turbulence?" the stewardess asked. Lois understood her confusion. The plane's motion had hardly been noticeable to anyone else.

"You know, hot air rises, disturbs the normal air flow creating gusts and eddies... turbulence. I don't like it," Clark explained.

"Clark, relax," Lois ordered. "Aren't you the one who keeps saying that statistically, flying is the safest way to travel?"

He glowered at her. "You know, there is something profoundly unnatural about putting yourself into flying metal can to get around."

"Richard didn't like flying commercial, either. Didn't trust the guys up front."

"He had a point," Clark said. "By the way, Ron gave you some research on this Miranda woman we're supposed to be interviewing tomorrow?"

Lois nodded and pulled the file out of her briefcase. She handed it to him and he opened it, skimming the documents that the Daily Planet research department had collected for them.

"I really wish Perry had let us know about this before hand," Clark commented. "Doctor Miller worked for STAR Labs until she left under a cloud. I could probably have gotten something from Doctor Faulkner on her."

"*Doctor Miller?*"

"Ph.D. in biochemistry *and* neurobiology from M.I.T. Her research area was pheromones."

"Chemicals produced by living organisms that transmit messages to other members of the same species," Lois quoted, taking the sheet he handed to her. "There are people who claim that human sexual pheromones can act as an aphrodisiac, but so far no controlled study has been able to verify it."

"Well, it is known that women living together tend to synch up their cycles, and there is some evidence that pheromones *may* play a part in sexual arousal," Clark said. "But I suspect it has more to do with mate selection than anything else. There's some evidence that humans may be able to use scent to determine genetic relatedness to choose a mate that is genetically dissimilar."

"Oh, is that why... six years ago?" Lois asked with a sly grin.

"Well, you must admit, you can't get much more dissimilar than we are." He grinned back.

"So, how do you explain all those cousins who have kids together?"

"I didn't say the evidence was strong, or that there weren't over-riding factors."

"After we land, maybe you can call Doctor Faulkner and have her arrange an introduction for us to the local STAR Labs admin," Lois suggested. "Anything in there on why the FDA is interested in her?"

"It's their contention that she's been adulterating her cosmetics with modified human sexual pheromones."

"To turn them into aphrodisiacs?"

"Apparently."

"Maybe there's more here than we initially thought?" Lois suggested.

"Could well be."

The plane landed in Oakland in the early evening. The rental car, a new Toyota, was waiting as promised.

"If it wasn't that I know Perry's going to check up on us, I'd suggest we head into San Francisco for dinner, spend the night and head to Napa in the morning," Lois said as Clark unlocked the car for her.

"Napa's just a little more than an hour from here," Clark told her. "But we should get something to eat first. Oakland's not that far."

Lois had fond memories of nights working late on stories when he brought dinner into the bullpen for the two of them. It was always exquisitely authentic - Chinese, Thai, or Indian in bamboo steam baskets, Italian, Greek, French, German all in takeout boxes printed in the appropriate language. Before he'd disappeared, she had tried to find out where in Metropolis he was going for takeout. It wasn't until she realized that Clark was also Superman that she figured out where he'd been going - China, Thailand, India, Italy, Greece, France, Germany.

"Don't you know any quaint little hole-in-the-wall restaurants around here?" she asked with a grin.

Clark shook his head. "I haven't spent a lot of time in this area since Luthor pulled his stunt of trying to dump half the state into the Pacific Ocean with a nuke. But I'm sure we'll find something."

"We could..." She made a swoosh motion with her hand.

"Are you sure you want to? I mean...?"

They hadn't gone flying for fun since... since the night on the roof of the Daily Planet, before Luthor created his monstrous island that came too close to destroying all of Metropolis. *'Richard's a good man... and you've been gone a long time.'* How harsh those words sounded now even though she hadn't called Richard her fiancé, not to Superman at least. But she'd repeatedly pushed it in Clark's face, the fact that she was engaged to the assistant editor of the Daily Planet. *'He flies and he likes horror movies.'*

She was ashamed to admit that she simply hadn't paid her former work partner enough attention to realize the truth that had been staring her in the face ever since they met. He had loved her. She had ignored the pain in his eyes when she saw him watching her and Richard together. Despite the tension, Perry had assigned Clark and Richard to work together and they even became friends. But now Richard was dead and she wasn't sure what she felt about Clark. He was the father of her son and he was also Superman and so belonged to the world. She thought that she had loved Superman but now she wasn't sure if she ever really had. She wasn't sure if she hadn't been in love with the idea of loving a god.

But he was the father of her child and there were advantages to hanging out with a man who could fly.

"Why not?" she asked. "I haven't gone flying for fun since before Richard died. We're on a working holiday. Perry's footing the bill, so let's enjoy it a little."

His expression was still troubled.

"It's okay Clark. Going flying doesn't mean we're going to join the mile-high club," she told him.

"I just..."

"What is it, Clark?"

He shook his head. It was one of his annoying habits, shutting her out.

"Where would you like to go?" he asked.

"There's a vegetarian restaurant at Union Square that's very good."

"Very well, Miss Lane," he said, holding his arm out to her. "Let's go to dinner in San Francisco."

To Clark's pleasant surprise, the restaurant Lois had chosen had an open table. The food was as good as she had told him it would be, although California cuisine had frequently left him cold.

The conversation was low key and relatively innocuous. They had both chosen not to discuss the assignment they were on, or Perry's real motives for shipping them across the country.

"Jimmy and that new girl from research looked real cozy as we were leaving," Lois commented over her dessert, a whiskey-chocolate tiramisu.

"She asked him why we were acting like we'd just been condemned to the gulag," he told her with a chuckle.

"And his answer?" she asked. Over the past six months she had gotten used to working with 'Superman' as her partner, surreptitiously using his unique abilities to get a leg up on the competition. It wasn't something he could really complain about - he'd used his abilities more often than he cared to admit to get the story that no one else could.

"That we were upset being taken off a story we'd been following for six months and that we had a 'history'," he told her, using air quotes. "She sounded surprised when Jimmy told her. I gather she's about the only one in the building who didn't know."

"She must be very new. I thought most of the city knew," she remarked.

"Most of the city knows you may have had something going with Superman before he left," he observed quietly.

"Well, we've pretty well put the kibosh on that one," she remarked. "That exclusive interview with Linda King? It would be imprudent for me to have a relationship of that nature with anyone. I can't believe she actually asked Superman about his sex life. The woman has no

concept of decency."

"She's not as bad as some. Plus it *is* imprudent for him to get involved like that," Clark said. He wondered where she was going with this conversation. Or why he had brought up the subject of her relationship with his alter ego in the first place. They both knew painfully well that Superman belonged to the world, that he couldn't have any real relationships with individuals outside of 'business.' Superman didn't go to ball games or movies or hang out in bars or coffee shops with his friends. Clark could and did.

But Clark wasn't sure if 'Clark' was able to have a meaningful relationship, either. He and Lois had been orbiting one another ever since Richard's death, neither one of them willing or able to move on to the next step, whatever that was. She couldn't really cut him out of her life. He was Jason's father and even a Sunday father was better than none for a boy who had lost the only 'daddy' he had known. Plus Perry had partnered them again even though he knew how difficult it was for them.

"It's too soon," she said. "You know that, don't you?"

"I know."

He was the Man of Steel, but he was terrified she would never decide that enough time had passed. That she would never be his again, assuming she ever was, really. He had known even then, even when he had revealed himself to her so long ago that she was in love with the illusion that was Superman, not with the reality that was Clark.

"I love you," she told him on the roof of the Daily Planet.

"I know."

He hadn't told her the real reason he walked back to his Arctic fortress to try to get his powers back after having given them up to be with her. He'd seen the sorrow, the disappointment in her eyes while they lay in the bed in the cheap motel watching the news. Watching the reports of the disasters that Superman *wasn't* attending to - a killer tsunami in the Philippines, a jumbo jet running off the runway in Moscow, bursting into flames as it went while the pilot screamed that he had no controls, that he couldn't stop it.

Superman wasn't there. He was dead, killed so Clark Kent could have a life that didn't involve running off at a moment's notice to solve someone else's problems. He watched her watching him, grief, disappointment, regret, pity, playing across her finely sculpted face, her eyes dark as she watched him. And as much as she said she loved him, he knew she was lying to herself as well as to him. She didn't love Clark, not really. She hadn't protested when he told her he had to go back, that he had to try to bring Superman back to life. She hadn't asked him not to go.

"Clark," she said, intruding on his thoughts. "Is something wrong? You looked like you were a thousand miles away."

"Just thinking about Alaska," he admitted. "That broken down motel we ended up at."

"It was pretty bad, wasn't it? I was afraid Perry was going to shoot us both when we finally got back and didn't turn in the story he sent us out to get."

"The one I turned in on the pipeline was a better story, anyway," Clark said. "Even if there was a story at Niagara Falls we weren't going to get it. We weren't very convincing as gullible kids."

"You were more convincing that I was," Lois said with a chuckle. "But I knew going in it wasn't going to work. Even the bellman didn't believe we were newlyweds. I sometimes wonder how many on those kids actually made it work."

"I hope at least some of them made it," Clark said. "You weren't giving very good odds."

"Statistically, it's gotten a little better, but not by much."

"You're a cynic," Clark observed.

"I prefer to think of myself as a realist."

The white aproned waiter placed the leather folder with the bill on the table. Clark glanced at the total and pulled out his personal credit card. "I don't want to have to explain how we managed to pay for a dinner in San Francisco at the time when we should have been just arriving at the restaurant," he explained to her questioning look.

"You don't think the accountants will accept us hitching a ride on the Superman Express?"

"No, I don't think so."

"It's nice here," Clark told her as they walked the promenade overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge.

"I kind of thought you might like it," she told him. "I came out to a conference here a couple years ago with Richard. That's when I found the restaurant." She stopped and sat on one of the concrete walls that protected the beach. "We didn't have a chance to do much else that trip. We promised ourselves we'd talk Perry into letting us come back when Jason was older."

Clark didn't say anything as he sat on the concrete beside her. He'd been very quiet since they'd left the restaurant.

"I think if I had to leave Metropolis, I'd choose here," she added. "What about you?"

"I don't know. I like Paris and London's not bad. I guess it would depend on why I wanted to leave Metropolis. Why?"

"No reason," she told him. "So you wouldn't move to San Francisco?"

"I didn't say that," he said. "But the last time I was here, the whole California coast had been hit with a 7.5 earthquake thanks to Luthor and the aftershocks were getting worse. The city was lucky to be standing. I'm still amazed the bridge wasn't damaged more than it was."

Lois shivered, though it was less from the chill of the night air than memories of being near the San Andreas when Luthor triggered the earthquake. She hadn't known Clark was Superman then, but she'd seen the look on Superman's face when he flew down to check on her when her rented car ran out of gas on the side of highway 128. He'd looked like he'd just woken up from a nightmare and hadn't quite swept the cobwebs of terror from his mind. She had never asked him why he'd had that expression of fear then worried relief on his face when he landed in front of her that day. She'd been too enthralled with her own story of terror to pay much attention to what he had been trying to say.

"Maybe it's time to get going," Clark suggested. He'd noticed her shiver even if he hadn't realized why she was shivering. *I have to ask him about that day. I have to ask him what happened that worried him so much and why he wouldn't talk about it later.*

"It's still more than an hour's drive to Napa from where we left the car," he told her, bringing her back to the here and now.

She got up from the wall and followed him into the shadows. He took his glasses off and put them in his shirt pocket. Then he put his arms around her and they lifted smoothly into the sky. He was warm, warm enough to keep her from getting chilled even though he was wearing a suit jacket.

"What, no Suit this time?" she asked, amused.

"Superman shouldn't be seen in California unless it's an emergency," Clark said quietly. "And giving Lois Lane a ride on the Superman Express does *not* constitute an emergency."

Lois called the inn where Perry had made their reservations to let them know they were running late as Clark got behind the wheel to drive. To his surprise, Lois didn't object to him being in the driver's seat. She sat back as he started the engine and they got under way.

It took a little over an hour to get from the parking lot at the car rental company to Napa. Highway 880 North to Highway 80 East, the Napa cutoff in Vallejo to Highway 29 North to Napa. It was too dark to see any scenery and traffic wasn't heavy, probably since it was a weekday. The inn was only a couple blocks from downtown, a Tudor style mansion set among redwoods.

"This is a definite improvement over that place at Niagara Falls," she commented, looking the place over as Clark got their luggage out of the car trunk. The ground lights and the lights under the eaves gave the mansion a warm glow, highlighting the blackened timbers and white-washed plaster of the exterior. The front door was painted a cheery red.

"I seriously doubt we'll find any passionate pink bear rugs around here," Clark agreed, following her into the building.

The common room just beyond the entrance was cheery and comfortable looking. A middle-aged woman came out of one of the side rooms, a pleasant smile on her face. "You must be Ms. Lane and Mr. Kent," she said. "I'm Mary. Did you have a pleasant trip?"

"It was fine, thank you," Lois told her.

Mary nodded. "A Mister White called a little while ago, trying to reach you. I promised him you'd give him a call back as soon as you got here."

"I told you he was going to check on us," Lois told Clark with a chuckle.

"Yes, you did," he admitted cheerfully. He saw the perplexed look the woman was giving them. "Mister White is our editor and a while back he sent us to Niagara Falls to do some work. We ended up in Deadhorse, Alaska."

"That's an awfully long way from Niagara Falls," Mary observed.

"Yes, it is," Clark agreed.

"I'll show you to your room," Mary said, leading the way through the common room and down a hall. Her heels clicked against the hardwood floor as she led them to a flight of stairs to the second floor. At the top of the stairs she paused, then walked to the end of the upper hallway and opened the door for them.

She handed Lois the key. "Here you are. Breakfast is served in the morning in the breakfast room downstairs. If you'd like any snacks or drinks, just come downstairs or give us a ring. You'll find passes for COPIA on the table if you'd like to visit while you're here and you'll also find a listing of the other activities that are part of the package."

"Thank you," Clark said, setting down the suitcases. "I'm sure everything will be lovely."

"Have a good evening, then," she said, closing the door behind her and leaving them alone.

"Oh my," Lois commented, hazel eyes wide as she looked around the room. He followed her gaze, taking in the high vaulted ceiling and the king-sized four poster bed. There was a windowed nook with a stained glass chandelier and two red and white wing chairs. Between the chairs sat a small mahogany table holding a silver tray with two flutes of champagne. A silver ice bucket filled with ice held the champagne bottle and two foil-wrapped chocolates sat

next to it on a small crystal plate.

He shrugged off his jacket and found a jacket hanger in the closet. He draped his tie over the jacket and hung them up. "Not a passionate pink bear in sight," Clark told her with a chuckle.

"No pink hearts, no cherubs, and no vibrating bed," Lois added, checking out the bathroom. "But I love this tub, and there's a sauna in here, too. I am going to take a bath."

"I'll call Perry, let him know we made it," Clark told her, keying Perry's cell number on his phone. The phone went to the editor's voice mail. "Perry...? Clark. We made it to Napa. I'll give you a call after we've interviewed Doctor Miller. And the place you booked us into is... uh, wow. Thanks, Perry." *I think.*

Lois had closed the louvered doors that led to the bathroom, not that it afforded her much privacy against someone who could see through walls. Clark could hear her humming softly to herself over the running water as it splashed into the tub. He could smell the lavender scent of bath salts as she poured them into the water.

He heard the water being turned off and Lois stepping into the tub, settling into the water with a sigh.

"Lois, would you like some champagne?" he asked.

"So long as I'm not drinking alone," she answered.

He grabbed both flutes and opened the doors to the bath. Lois was lying back in the water, eyes closed as she let her body go limp. Her eyelashes were dark against her skin and tendrils of dark hair framed her face having escaped the bondage of the band she'd hastily tied her hair back with. She opened one eye at his entrance and held out her hand for the glass.

He froze. *She's still as beautiful as I remember. Why did I ever leave her? To find myself? That was a crock.*

"Clark?" she said, breaking him out of his trance.

"Sorry," he said, crossing the marble floor in two steps and handing her the glass. She patted the dark marble tile that surrounded the tub, inviting him to sit down. He sat, averting his eyes as he sipped the straw colored wine. The bubbles tickled his tongue and nose and he could smell the various scents that other people described as fruity and flowery. He wasn't sure how he would describe them, although he agreed that much wine smelled 'breadly' as a function of the yeast. Champagne was no different.

"It's very good," Lois said, sipping her drink. "You don't have to keep looking away, you know. There's nothing here you haven't seen before."

He finally turned and looked at her. "I just..."

"You know what your problem is, Clark?" she asked conversationally.

"Considering how long the list is, where did you want to start?"

"You're a gentleman," she answered her own question. "You never ask anything for yourself, you never make demands... you try so hard to make people feel safe around you that you don't ever push for what *you* want, what *you* need."

"Is that so bad?" he wondered aloud.

"I'm not sure," she told him. "It's annoying, sometimes. It's like, I don't know, you don't really understand the rules of the game."

"Maybe I don't," he admitted. *Was that the problem?* After spending most of his life on Earth living among humans, he didn't understand the 'rules of the game'? Were the rules hard-wired in some way that he just didn't fathom? Or was it that he was afraid. Afraid to ask for fear of being turned down - or worse, accommodated out of fear, fear of what he could do

if he was disappointed or angered. He was always on guard against exactly that, afraid of letting go, afraid of hurting someone. Afraid to ask.

He heard a radio somewhere near announcing an earthquake off the coast of Chile.

"Problem?" she asked.

He nodded, afraid to look into her face again. Was she disappointed he wanted to go or relieved?

"Go," she ordered. "You're needed."

"I'll be back as soon as I can," he promised, emptying his own glass and setting it on the marble before changing into the Suit at super speed. He was through the window and across the border heading south before she could even realize he'd moved.

Over the years Superman had developed a method of dealing with tsunamis. It worked best if the shockwave was still well out to sea, as the one off the south Chilean coast was. He set up a counter-wave to create interference, diffusing and redirecting the energy of the shock the earthquake had caused. At least this wave would not come to land.

That dealt with, he could aid the emergency workers in their rescue efforts. The quake itself was only a 7.0 by his estimates, but it would have triggered landslides in the mountains, possibly taking out hydroelectric facilities and dams. The fact that it was night would not help matters at all.

He surveyed the damage from high in the air, to scout out what needed to be done first. He sought out evidence of human movement in the area most affected and found little population, even in areas he knew had villages before he left for Krypton. Except for dealing with the tsunami, there was little for him to do. Punta Arenas, the one major city in the area, seemed unscathed.

He flew higher, into the stratosphere and looked down on the rest of the southern end of the continent. Still little to be done. A few volcanoes seemed to be preparing for eruption, no doubt triggered by the quake, but again no people appeared to be in danger.

Satisfied there was little more he could do, he patrolled the Northern Hemisphere for several hours - a bank robbery in Berlin, a multi-car accident in northern Italy. All things the local authorities could handle but were grateful they didn't have to. He rescued some campers from a flash flood in Arizona - apparently they hadn't listened when warned that the narrow canyons really could become raging rivers when it rained. Then again, the Southwest monsoon season wasn't expected for another three months or so.

It was nearly three in the morning when he got back to the inn, floating into the room through the still open window. He changed into a pair of sleep shorts and a light t-shirt, taking care not to disturb the room's other occupant.

Lois was curled up on one side of the king-sized bed, one arm flung out almost as if she was reaching for something on the other side. Her heart rate was slow and steady, her mouth curled up slightly at the corners. A pleasant dream? He hoped so. The past six months had been hard on her - losing her fiancé hadn't been easy and attempting to raise her son as a newly-made single mother had been even harder. Richard had been there for her and Jason when he, Clark, hadn't been.

He knew she frequently cried herself to sleep. It didn't seem that she'd done that this evening, but he did notice the champagne bottle was in the trash can and the two chocolates were gone, their gold foil wrappers also in the trash.

He looked around the room, contemplating his own sleeping arrangements. They hadn't discussed the fact that there was only one bed and he wasn't about to assume it was okay to climb into the bed beside her.

Her heart rate increased slightly. "Clark?" she murmured muzzily, voice thick with sleep.

"I'm here," he answered, keeping his voice low.

"Is everything okay?" She blinked several times and uncurled her body like a cat, stretching every muscle until he could almost hear them crack.

"Yeah, nothing catastrophic," he said softly. "Go back to sleep."

She eyed him, suspicion and more than a touch of amusement written across her face.

"It's a king bed. There's more than enough room for both of us."

His uncomfortable expression must have betrayed him.

"I don't bite, you know, and there is just one bed," she told him with a tiny laugh. "So come on. You need to sleep too, you know."

He swallowed hard, but went ahead and slid between the cotton sheets, taking care not to make any moves that she might misconstrue.

She scooted over and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. "Good night, Clark."

"Good night, Lois." He closed his eyes and tried to slow down his heart rate, afraid she could feel it pounding in his chest. *I really don't know the rules. Please God don't let me screw this up.*

Lois's circadian rhythm was still on Metropolis time, so she woke up early, well before dawn. Clark was still asleep as she climbed out of bed and grabbed her robe, not bothering to turn on a light. The small lamp on the nook table was more than enough. Clark must have turned it on when he came in, she reasoned. She spent a moment watching his chest move as he breathed, repressing the urge to brush his hair out of his face. He'd had a long night and she knew even Superman needed to sleep. His eyelids twitched and he rolled over, tangling himself in the sheets.

She smiled, grabbed her purse from where she'd left it on the dresser and crossed the room to the nook. She curled up in one of chairs, pulled out her cell phone and dialed her sister's house.

Lucy picked up on the fourth ring. "Lois, how's it goin'? Havin' fun?"

"Fine, Luce," Lois said. "Can I talk to Jason? I didn't have a chance to talk to him before Clark and I had to leave."

"He's right here," Lucy said.

"Mommy, Uncle Ron said Uncle Perry sent you and Clark all the way to California," Jason said breathlessly.

"Yes he did. Now, we'll be back in a week or so, so you mind Uncle Ron and Aunt Lucy, okay?"

"Okay... Uh, Mommy?" Jason's voice dropped to a whisper. "I have question and when I asked Aunt Lucy told me to ask you."

"What is it, munchkin?"

"What does 'friends with benefits' mean?"

"Uh, Jason, who did you hear that from?" Lois asked. She had a suspicion as to who would have used that phrase around her son, but she wanted confirmation before she decided to rip their spleens out.

"Gil and Ralph," Jason said, confirming her suspicions. "They said you and Clark used to

be friends with benefits and since Daddy's gone you and Clark are doing that again."

"They said that about me and Clark, did they?" She tried to keep her voice light.

"Uh huh," Jason said. "What did they mean?"

"I'll explain it when I get back, okay?" Lois told her son. "In the meantime, don't listen to Gil or Ralph, okay? And if they talk about things like that again, you tell Uncle Perry."

"Okay, Mommy."

"I'll call you tomorrow," she said. "Love ya, munchkin."

"Love ya, Mommy."

Lois folded up her phone and put it back in her purse. She looked over to the bed, expecting Clark to still be asleep. Instead, he was watching her, eyes unfathomable.

"Good morning," she greeted him. "What time did you get back?"

"About three, I think," Clark answered, grabbing his glasses off the night stand. "How's Jason doing?"

"Gil and Ralph are up to their old tricks, and I have some things to explain when we get back, but he's fine."

"Friends with benefits, huh?" The corners of Clark's mouth twitched in apparent amusement and he sat up in the bed, legs crossed under the tangled covers.

"Everybody in the bullpen knows by now that Perry booked us into a single room with one bed," she said with a chuckle.

"I guess our reputations are shot, then?"

"So long as I don't come back pregnant, we're still good," she said. "And that's not gonna' happen 'cause I still have an implant."

Clark stared at her, puzzlement drawing vertical lines between his dark eyebrows. She took a deep breath, blowing it out her nose. *God, I want a cigarette*, she thought to herself, despite the fact that she'd actually managed to quit smoking just after Richard died.

"Richard and I had decided to wait until we were married to have more kids," she explained, watching him carefully. "But I couldn't bring myself to set a date. And then, seeing as how fragile Jason was, I wasn't sure I wanted to go through with that again." She looked away from him, afraid of what she might see in his eyes - disappointment, regret, frustration?

"Okay." His voice was soft, understanding. There were times she just wished he would yell back at her, tell her what he was really thinking instead of being so preternaturally accepting and understanding. There were times she simply wanted to scream at him just to get a reaction. Then again, Richard had rarely raised his voice either. His choices of weapons had been the same as Clark's - the pointed question, the disappointed look, the stern expression. The difference was that people, including Lois, had taken Richard seriously and until recently, Clark had been someone ignorable.

"I guess it's still too early for breakfast," she commented, looking at the window at the lamp's reflection and the darkness beyond.

"I doubt even the local McDonald's is open this early," he said. "But I do hear some of the staff coming in downstairs, so there's a chance we might get coffee."

"I'll get dressed and see what I can rustle up," she offered, uncurling herself from the chair.

"In the meantime, I'll check and see if Doctor Faulkner can get us some better background on Doctor Miller," he said, getting himself untangled from the top sheet and blankets.

Chuckling to herself, Lois grabbed a blouse and slacks out of her suitcase and went into

the bathroom to get dressed.

Clark waited for Lois to leave before climbing out of the bed and grabbing both his phone and laptop computer. He folded his legs under him on the bed and turned on his computer. While the customized laptop booted up, he placed a call to STAR Labs Metropolis, to the administrator Kitty Faulkner. She answered his - Superman's - questions succinctly, but had little more initial information than he already had. As they spoke he went through the security protocols on his laptop that would connect him to STAR Labs main computer.

"Do you really think Miller's up to something?" Kitty finally asked.

"Perry White smells something fishy about her and the whole FDA thing and I trust his instincts," Clark admitted.

"You don't think it's just to get you and Lane out of town for a while?" she asked.

"Baja would have been a lot cheaper," Clark told her. "No, there's something else going on... and I think I've found it."

"Found what?" Lois asked as she entered the room carrying two mugs of coffee. She set one mug on the nightstand next to Clark.

"Kitty, I've got to go, but you might want to check San Francisco's military contracts for the last couple years," Clark said. "I'll keep you posted." He folded up his phone and set it aside before picking up the mug Lois had brought him. He took a sip. She had fixed it the way he liked it - light and very sweet.

"Found what?" Lois repeated.

"Miller's focus wasn't just on how human behavior was affected by pheromones. The branch of STAR Labs she was working out of had a contract to develop a way to use pheromone related compounds as a non-violent means to defuse highly charged situations, like riots," Clark explained.

"Make love not war?"

"The contract was cancelled when her research didn't pan out. The results of the compounds were too unpredictable and there wasn't an effective method of getting it to the target," Clark explained.

"So, why did she leave STAR labs?"

"She refused to accept that her line of inquiry had reached a dead end. She started making threats against the research committee that suggested she look for other uses for her initial research. Also, apparently, she was using her co-workers as guinea pigs in her experiments. Nothing could be proved, but she was blamed for a couple divorces among the staff - they claimed they'd lost all control of their inhibitions after being sprayed with her compounds. One thing lead to another at work and the spouses weren't very understanding about it. There was even a reported rape at the lab, although the charges were dropped later."

"So she quit and went into cosmetics?"

"So she quit and went into cosmetics. Specifically perfumes," Clark confirmed. "Her shop is about three blocks from here and she's done very well for herself in the past two years with her line of fragrances."

"At three hundred dollars an ounce, no doubt," Lois grumbled. "So, what's the FDA's beef with her?"

"Adulteration and use of 'pharmacologically active ingredients that have not been tested for use on humans,'" Clark read from his laptop. "They think she may be adding modified human sex pheromones to her fragrances."

"Modified?" Lois asked. She sat down on the bed beside him to read the text off the computer screen. "Modified how, I wonder?"

"That is the question," Clark agreed. "Given what was in STAR Lab's memos on her, I'd guess the FDA's a little worried she may have figured out a way to make people even more sex crazy than they already are."

"That's a scary thought," Lois agreed. "When are we supposed to be meeting her?"

"We're supposed to be at her shop at nine," Clark told her. "Perry had Joel over in Lifestyle make the appointment for us. We're supposed to be interviewing her for Lifestyle on her newest fragrance line 'Revenge,' which she is debuting this evening at a fashion show at the American Center for Wine, Food and the Arts."

"I hope Joel isn't actually expecting an article for Lifestyle out of us."

Clark chuckled. "That would be a new one for the Planet, a Lifestyle article from Lane and Kent, without a bit of murder or mayhem in sight. Perry might not survive the scandal."

It was just before nine AM when the pair of Metropolis reporters came to Miranda Miller's shop on Union. The gilt sign on the door proclaimed the shop to be 'Scents by Miranda.' Bells on the door handle chimed as the door opened and Lois and Clark walked in. The shop was in a standard glass and brick store-front, walls lined with glass display cabinets filled with antique perfume bottles and atomizers. Other displays showed off incense, soaps, candles, and oils. Behind the sales register, set against the back wall, was a stainless steel table with a microscope, several glass vials with stoppers and a box filled with ornate blue perfume bottles nestled in shredded paper. Above the table was a wall-mounted cabinet a lock on it. A curtain covered what appeared to be the door to the back room.

Lois and Clark looked around the shop for a few minutes, waiting for the proprietor to appear. The front door *had* been unlocked, even though the shop was scheduled to open in an hour. Finally a woman appeared through the curtain. She was blue-eyed with swept back blonde hair. It was hard to tell her age - she was slender and her face was flawlessly made up, almost like a Barbie doll. She wore a full skirt and a gypsy blouse with gold necklaces and large gold hoop earrings.

The woman smiled broadly at them, teeth even and white. "Looking for something in particular?" she asked.

"Uh, no. Not really," Lois responded. Behind her, Clark was looking at the bath oils and soaps, reading the ingredient labels, smelling the scents. He looked around the building using x-ray vision to check out the backroom and basement for anything unusual. The backroom was being used for storage. The basement had an ornate stainless steel and copper still. Clark guessed it was for distilling the ingredients Miller used in her business.

"A gift? Something for a friend whose love has soured?" the woman was asking Lois. She went to one of the locked cabinets and opened it with a key from her skirt pocket. "Try my Jungle Passion. Pure white petals, picked from a flower grown only in Micronesia." She took one of the ornate perfume bottles from the case and showed it to Lois. "I have a wide selection. A scent for every occasion."

Clark stepped over to the cardboard box and, using super speed slipped one of the bottles into his jacket pocket.

"You make all the perfumes?" Clark asked.

"Yes, of course. I was trained as a chemist," she said. "Many perfumers are. In fact the goal of a fine perfumer is to cause a 'chemical reaction,'" She gave him a puzzled look, drawing

her eyebrows together, the wrinkles marring the almost unnatural smoothness of her forehead. "Have we met before?"

"No, I don't think so. I'm Clark Kent. This is Lois Lane, from the Daily Planet," Clark told her. "We have an appointment to interview Doctor Miller on her new line of scents, Revenge?"

"Oh, yes. I'd quite forgotten you were coming," she told him, coyly batting her eyelashes at him. "I've been so busy getting ready for the unveiling tonight. So many details to worry about."

"I'm sure it must be very stressful for you," Lois said, sympathy in her voice. "Especially with the FDA looking into your ingredients list."

Doctor Miller's expression shifted from coy helpfulness to something far darker. "The Food and Drug Administration has nothing on me. The fact is that my competitors feel threatened by my success and my clients believe my scents are helpful in their love lives. That doesn't mean I'm breaking the law or endangering my clients by adding untested ingredients to any of my products."

"You mean you do animal testing on your products?" Clark asked, eyebrows pulled together in a frown.

She arched one perfectly formed eyebrow at him, eyes wide in apparent innocence. "I don't need to. I only use pure and natural ingredients in my products, ingredients that have already been certified safe. It's the proportions, the preparation, and the combinations that make my perfumes so powerful and provocative."

She put the bottle of 'Jungle Passion' back in the case then went to the cardboard box and removed one of the cobalt blue bottles. She pulled off the stopper and daubed a drop on the inside of her wrist before holding her wrist out for Clark to smell. He took a quick sniff and straightened up, backing away a step. She gave him a wide-eyed look of surprise.

"Interesting odor. Animal based?" he asked, blinking his eyes. The scent was making him tear, something he hadn't thought possible.

"You have a remarkable olfactory sense, Mr. Kent," she said. "Yes, this particular perfume promises to become a best seller." She put the stopper back on the bottle and placed it back in the box.

Lois was watching Clark worriedly. "Can you tell us the ingredients?"

"Come now, Ms. Lane. Surely you don't expect me to give away *all* my secrets?" Doctor Miller chided with a smile. "Now, if you don't mind, I have a debut to finish preparing for."

She ushered them to the door then with a flourish, locked the door behind them.

"She's lying," Lois announced as they headed down the street away from Miranda's shop.

"I know. Her pulse rate was over one-fifty, and I could smell the fear," Clark told her. "At least I could until she put on that whatever it was."

She stopped and stepped in front of him. "It really did affect you?"

He nodded, reaching a finger under his glasses to rub one eye.

Lois grabbed his hand. "You'll just make it worse," she warned. He blinked several times and finally his eyes started to clear. "That stuff must have been seriously potent if it did that to you. Did you feel anything else?"

"My nose is a little stuffy," he reported, sniffing experimentally. "And it knocked out my sense of smell."

"You're joking. You don't think those bottles are what she's planning to show tonight, do you?"

He shook his head. "I hope not. I think I'm allergic to it."

"So, we know she's up to something, but what?" Lois asked. Clark grinned at her and pulled the small blue bottle out of his pocket just far enough for her to see.

"I was thinking visiting Doctor Faulkner and seeing what her people have to say about this," Clark said. His eyes were still watering a little, but not nearly as badly as before.

"The D.A. doesn't want Superman, Lois Lane, or Clark Kent in Metropolis, member?"

"But nobody said anything about Kal Ellis and Laura Landers," Clark remarked.

A bemused Lois Lane shook her head at her companion - a tall, well-built man with black hair wearing aviator sunglasses, a biker jacket and worn jeans. Worn leather biker boots and a black t-shirt completed the ensemble. Frankly, she hadn't imagined he'd be able to pull it off.

Her own costume was similar - jeans and biker boots, a black cotton halter top and leather jacket with lots of chains. A frousy blonde wig and heavy makeup topped it off.

"I can't believe we're doing this," she murmured as Clark simply walked past the security guard standing at the entrance to STAR Labs Metropolis, flashing an ID card as he went, Lois close by his side.

Inside, 'Kal' went through the security protocols and they gained entry to the first, outer levels of the lab as Doctor Kitty Faulkner walked up to them. Her eyebrows threatened to reach her hairline as she looked them over.

"Do you often go out in public dressed like that?" she asked with a chuckle.

"Occasionally," Clark admitted. "Not often." He pulled the small perfume bottle from his pocket and showed it to her.

"Is this what Superman wants analyzed?"

"If you would please," he confirmed. "And just to let you know, Superman was exposed to it and had an allergic reaction."

"An allergic reaction?" Kitty repeated with a frown.

Lois nodded. "Just like the ads, watery itchy eyes, stuffy nose, loss of sense of smell. The symptoms lasted nearly an hour."

"I'll put a rush on the analysis," she promised. "You have your cell phone with you?"

"Of course," Clark told her.

"I'll give you a ring when we're done."

Lois and Clark sat in the coffee shop across the street from the lab and waited.

"It's been a while since I've done undercover work," Lois admitted. "It's hard when you have a kid at home."

"I don't figure Perry or Richard would have stood by while you did something like that anyway," Clark told her.

"You're right," Lois admitted. She sighed deeply. "I miss him, you know. I still wake up expecting he'll be there."

"Lois, it takes time to get through the death of a spouse," Clark told her, studying the steam as it came off his coffee. "And whether or not you got sanctioned by church and state, Richard was your husband in every way that mattered. That's not something you just get over."

"I wish Perry would realize that," Lois commented.

"I think he's just trying to get you, and me, to realize that it's time for you to start living for you."

"By booking us into a room with a single bed?"

He chuckled. "It's not the first time he's done that to us."

"Last time we were supposed to be newlyweds," she reminded him. "He doesn't have that as an excuse this time."

Clark's phone buzzed and he answered it. He listened for a moment then closed his phone and put it back in his jacket pocket. "The initial analysis is finished."

Doctor Friedman was a tall man, almost as tall as Clark but thin almost to the point of emaciation. He looked up at Doctor Faulkner's guests in surprise as they walked into his lab.

"Um, I have finished the initial analysis and the results are very interesting," he said. "It's basically a perfume. The organic compounds appear to have been extracted using various common means, alcohol, steam extraction, oil and are dissolved in a grain alcohol base. The uncommon ingredients I'm having a gas spectrometer and an electrophoresis analysis done. It substance also contains trace amounts of kryptonite."

"Well, now we know why Superman was affected," Lois commented.

"Any speculation on what the 'uncommon' ingredients are?" Clark asked.

"As a scientist I prefer not to speculate," Friedman told them. "However, I suspect it's a form of human sexual pheromone. I'm having one of my colleagues with an interest in endocrinology help with the analysis. We'll know more when he's finished, but I can say right now that the compound has been chemically modified."

"Doctor Friedman, are you familiar with Doctor Miranda Miller's research into human pheromones?" Lois asked.

"Doctor Faulkner gave me copies of Miller's research notes, at least the ones STAR Labs has," Friedman said. "At first analysis, the compounds do conform to her stated experimental concepts. If I am correct, then I would expect the effects of exposure would wear off in twenty-four to forty-eight hours, depending on the individual's metabolic rate. The overall effect would be to over-ride the individual's normal intellectual defense mechanisms, leaving it difficult for them to control their sexual urges. That is assuming there was already a sexual attraction between the exposed individuals."

"And if the pheromones have been modified?" asked Clark, his eyes dark with worry.

"I can't predict the results of the modified chemical," Friedman admitted. "It could render the effects permanent. It could render the urges impossible to control. It could render the compound inert. As I said, I'll know more once Doctor Jones finishes his analysis."

"Aside from the kryptonite, was there anything else in the perfume that would explain Superman having what appeared to be a histaminic reaction to it?" Kitty asked.

"I'm not familiar with Superman's physiology, but I would hazard a guess that he wouldn't normally react to human sexual pheromones, at least nowhere near on the level of a human male."

"So, instead of becoming aroused, his eyes start watering?" Lois asked.

Friedman nodded. "It could be that Kryptonian sexual pheromones are quite different chemically than human ones and so his body rejected them, or the modifications may have turned them into allergens for him, at least in the presence of kryptonite," Friedman explained.

"And when will Doctor Jones be finished with his analysis?" Kitty asked.

"Probably later this afternoon."

Kitty turned to 'Kal' and 'Laura.' "I'll call you when Jones is done."

"We'll be waiting," Clark promised.

"So, do human pheromones work on you?" Lois wondered aloud as they set down in the wooded area behind the inn in Napa and walked inside.

"I'm not sure. I can smell them, I know that," Clark told her. "I didn't smell anything like that in that perfume she waved under my nose. And I certainly wasn't aroused."

"So, what do you think she's up to?" Lois asked.

"Good question," Clark replied. "One thing Perry didn't include in the research he sent with us was her finances. As successful as her perfume business is, I doubt it's up to financing biochemical research at the level the STAR Labs was. I didn't see a lab of that nature in the basement of her shop, either."

"Let's see if research can come up with anything more on her," Lois suggested, picking up her own phone and calling the Daily Planet.

Clark opened the door to their room and Lois noticed that he looked tired. He'd spent the afternoon as Superman, looking for the lab they both suspected Miranda Miller had somewhere in the Napa Valley. Lois had concentrated on the financial reports the Daily Planet had emailed her.

Although Miller's perfumes were generally well received, financially they were not nearly the successes of such brands as Chanel or Givenchy. Miller was making enough to live comfortably, but there was no where near enough income to support the facilities she needed to do what they suspected her of. There were hints that she was getting funding from somewhere to continue her research, but there was nothing concrete as to who it might be.

"Find anything?" Lois asked.

"Nothing," Clark told her. "Or I should say, there are too many possibilities. Nearly every winery in the valley has a testing lab that has much of the same equipment that she'd need to do her work. But I didn't spot her either."

"Well, she'll be at the debut tonight, so hopefully we can catch up with her there," Lois said, calmly looking at her reflection in the mirror as she finished applying her makeup. "And if I understand Jones's report correctly, Miller's modification to the pheromone *may* have made its effects a little stronger, but the effects shouldn't last nearly as long."

Clark skimmed through the report on the screen of Lois's laptop. "But he doesn't say how much stronger it might be, or what effect dosage might have."

"I think that's on the last page," she said. "Something about not being able to make predictions without knowing the behavioral results of exposure to humans."

"That's not real helpful," Clark commented.

"Clark, the FDA is already investigating her, so I doubt she'll be pulling anything at the debut," Lois said thoughtfully, putting on her earrings. "I mean, it would be stupid to try anything when everything would point straight at her."

"You're probably right," Clark agreed, but Lois had been around him long enough to know he wasn't convinced. "But I have to wonder why she added kryptonite to her formulation. She can't know enough about Superman's physiology to expect him to succumb to the effects of the pheromones and she has to know there isn't enough kryptonite there to poison him."

"Unless the kryptonite is there because she knows it can affect humans?" Lois suggested.

"Or, she has enough of the stuff stashed somewhere that there *is* enough kryptonite to affect Superman," Clark suggested in return.

"In which case, we have to ask where the kryptonite came from," Lois pointed out. "It's

not exactly common and between STAR Labs and the U.S. military, there isn't a lot of it around for civilians to get hold of."

"A fact that I know Superman greatly appreciates." He watched her as she shook out the burgundy dress she'd chosen to wear to dinner and the fashion show that was to herald the debut of 'Revenge.'

"You'd better get ready or we'll be late," she warned.

While dinner was excellent, it was the fashion show Lois and Clark were both waiting for. And the appearance of Doctor Miranda Miller.

The gallery area of the art center had been transformed into a fashion show complete with a runway. Tall models moved in and out of the crowd, showing off the latest in summer fashions. There were photographers everywhere, snapping pictures, ducking around the guests with their wine glasses. Lois and Clark found themselves with several other people on the mezzanine, looking down on the spectacle. A waiter came by with wine and petit fours.

"I don't see sign of her," Lois observed, watching the scene below. She shook her head in disgust. "The beautiful people."

Clark glanced at her without comment, sipping his wine.

"It's such a sad comment on society," she continued. "Dress a certain way, smell a certain way, and the world will love you."

"Most people aren't quite that shallow, Lois," Clark reminded her.

"Really, Clark?" she asked without taking her attention off searching for her quarry. "Do you honestly think anyone down there gives a damn if their high fashion clothes are made by slave labor or the ingredients in the perfume endangers rare species, or themselves?"

"Lois, we're in California not Metropolis, remember?" Clark reminded her gently. "Besides, I see Miller down there."

He nodded to the runway and she saw the blonde woman from the shop dressed in royal blue chiffon trimmed in gold. Miller seemed to float down the runway, stopping at the end. She had a cordless microphone in her hand.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she announced. "Thank you for coming to Miranda's first annual summer fashion spree and the unveiling of my newest fragrance. They say living well is the best revenge and so I present 'Revenge.'"

The models in their swimsuits and cover-ups held cobalt blue atomizer bottles and started spraying the audience, walking through the crowd and smiling at the photographers. But the reaction to the perfume wasn't the expected one. Most of the guests frowned at the odor, waving it away from their faces. Several of the sprayed guests looked surprised, and a few actually looked angry, although they should have realized that by attending a perfume showing meant they were likely to end up smelling of the scent being debuted.

"Interesting scent," one of the men standing beside Clark commented. He was tall, well dressed and spoke with a cultured British accent. Lois gave him a curious look and he smiled at her. "I don't believe we've been introduced. I'm Nigel Smith. And you must be Lois Lane and Clark Kent."

"Have we met?" Clark asked.

"Oh no," Smith said. "But I am a fan. I was following your series in the Daily Planet on the fall of William Church and his empire with great interest. I was surprised to see your names on Miranda's guest list."

"We go where the story is," Lois explained. "Are you a friend of Miranda's?"

"A business associate of sorts," he told her. "My company is always on the lookout for new products and markets for investment."

"And your company...?" Lois asked.

"Lois," Clark murmured to get her attention. He was staring at the crowd below. Miranda had vanished as had the models, but the remaining crowd was behaving oddly. Many of the guests had started removing their clothes. A few of the women had started to move away from the group, heading further into the gallery. Several men followed them and the women started running.

Lois grabbed Clark's hand. He gave her a quick nod of understanding. "You call the cops," he instructed. "I'll see if there's something I can do." With that he ran to the stairwell at the end of the mezzanine and disappeared. Lois grabbed her cell phone and keyed in 9-1-1. A man's hand reached out and took her phone, folding it up.

"We don't need the police here quite yet," Smith told her.

"It's turning into a riot down there," Lois protested. "Somebody has to do something."

As she spoke, she heard the distinctive whoosh that was so familiar to citizens of Metropolis - Superman had arrived.

But Lois noticed he looked bewildered after trying to break up several of the fights that had broken out on the floor. Both the men who were fighting and the women watching them were shooing him off, even though the combatants were already bloody. It was as if the blood was getting them aroused. He stepped back then turned to go after the men who had followed the fleeing women.

Several of the women grabbed his cape, threatening to tear it off his back then they started fighting among themselves. He disappeared, only to come back within minutes, shaking his head in frustration. Lois watched him wipe tears from his eyes - she realized he must have gotten sprayed again.

Lois heard the faint hiss of an atomizer, the touch of cool vapor on the side of her face and looked over to see Smith holding one of the cobalt blue bottles in his hands. She smelled a stench that reminded her of a men's locker room and felt her face and neck grow warm.

"And what would you like to do now, Ms. Lane?" Smith asked with a smarmy grin on his thin face. He laid his hand on her arm and she shook it off with a glare.

"Nothing you'd be interested in," she told him pointedly holding out her hand. "My cell phone. Now."

Speechless, he handed over her phone and she pressed 9-1-1. She looked up again and he had vanished down the stairs. No matter. She reported the 'orgy' to the local cop shop then leaned over the balcony rail to watch Superman.

"The cops are on their way," she murmured. "Let's get out of here."

She saw him look up at her then back at the people around him. It had devolved into a full blown orgy, half-naked bodies writhing together. They ignored the blood, the bruises, even the broken bones.

With a shake of his head, Superman flew up to where Lois stood. Smith had already disappeared. Superman picked her up and flew off, heading in the direction of where they were staying.

"Are you okay?" she asked after they were away from the gallery.

"I could only get one woman away from them and she was hurt bad," he said softly. "The other two women wouldn't leave, wouldn't let me get them away even though they were bleeding. It was like they didn't understand or they didn't care."

"I care," Lois murmured, her voice husky. They landed in their room and Superman set Lois in one of the wing chairs. She grabbed his hand to keep him from leaving. "You don't have to go."

"Lois, are you okay?"

She could see the worry in his face and she ran her fingers down his cheek to his mouth. "I'm fine. I just don't want you to leave me."

"Lois, I have to," he said. "I have to let the police and the medical people know what's going on, what happened." He looked into her face and she felt her stomach go wobbly inside.

"Promise you'll be right back?" She lay back in the chair, a dreamy smile on her face as she watched him.

"I promise I'll be back as soon as I can." He went over and threw the deadbolt on the door. "Don't open the door for anyone, okay? Promise me?"

"Of course I won't open the door. But come back quick."

He took off through the window, but not before she made sure he saw her raise her skirt, put her hand on her thigh above her stockings and smile at him.

She can't have gotten sprayed with Miranda's poison, could she? Clark worried as he headed back to the gallery. She had been on the upper level, well away from where the models were spraying the people in the gallery. How could she have been exposed? Then it hit him - Nigel Smith. Clark had seen the man in Metropolis, although they had never spoken to one another. Nigel Smith was suspected of being one of Bill Church's lieutenants but nothing indictable had been found against him, only suspicion and innuendo.

The Napa police had arrived at the gallery and were standing on the sidelines staring at what was happening in front of them as Superman set down beside them. The sweaty near naked bodies were too involved in self-gratification to notice anyone or anything else.

"Superman?" One of the officers, a middle-aged man with graying hair, approached him. His nametag identified him as officer Ruis. "What's going on? The dispatcher said something about an orgy, but...?"

"They were sprayed with a psychotropic poison," Superman explained. "They're not responsible. But many of them are injured, even if they don't recognize it yet."

"So, what are we supposed to do?" Ruis asked, scratching his head.

"Call for back-up and warn the hospitals," Superman suggested. "Have you got face masks and gloves?"

"Of course." Ruis nodded to his partner, Adams, who hurried out of the building to call for help and bring back the protective devices they were going to need.

"How do you suggest we handle it?" Ruis asked, pitching his voice low.

"If I grab them, can you guys shackle them? I can take the uninjured to the police station, but we'll need EMTs and transportation for the injured."

Adams reappeared with masks, gloves and goggles, along with a box of quick-restraints. "Back up and ambulances are on their way," he said. He handed a pair of goggles to his partner along with a mask and a pair of blue nitrile gloves, then held out a mask and gloves to Superman.

"Sammy, this is Superman?" Ruis chided, embarrassed.

"No, I'll take them, thank you," Superman interjected, taking the mask and gloves and putting them on, ignoring Ruis's wide eyed stare. "There are things in that poison I'd rather not be exposed to either."

Backup arrived when they were about half through sorting through the mass of writhing, aroused bodies. Superman had been grabbing the uninjured first, transporting them to the county jail where he had given the personnel instructions to wash the victims off with detergent strong enough to get the chemicals off their skin and hold them overnight.

Now that the uninjured had been dealt with, taken away so they could no longer interfere with the rescue efforts, the injured could be looked to. Most of those were women, but a few of the men had suffered broken bones, and worse, as well.

"Uh, Superman," one of the EMTs spoke up. "I doubt Queen of the Valley can handle this many at once."

"We'll spread them around then," Superman told him. "Where are the next nearest facilities?"

"Saint Helena and Sonoma, then of course Oakland and San Francisco."

Superman stood still for a few seconds. "Queen of the Valley has the trauma center, right?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, send the most serious ones to Queen, and warn Saint Helena and Sonoma they have incoming. Once you have them packaged for transport, I can get them there."

"You got it."

Superman started triaging the injured, assessing the damage that had been done. Most of the injuries were fairly minor, if you could call rape in any form minor. A few had internal injuries. Four were dead, one by strangulation and another, a male, had died by suffocation. Of the other two, one had broken ribs that had pierced her lungs. She had bled to death and no one had noticed. The last one he really didn't want to think about. She had probably been pretty when she was alive, but in all the time he'd spent patrolling Metropolis, all the travel he'd done, he'd never seen internal injuries as horrific as the ones she'd sustained. He hadn't thought an unarmed human being could do that to another.

He wanted to be sick.

"Superman?" Ruis had come up to him. "According to the numbers on the guest list, we appear to be missing about ten people."

"I know that at least two of them, possibly three, weren't affected. They were on the mezzanine when everyone else was getting sprayed. I took the two Daily Planet reporters out of here before you arrived."

"So that leaves seven, maybe eight affected people out on the streets?" Ruis gave a long, noisy sigh sounding like he was in the beginnings of an asthma attack. "Things like this aren't supposed to happen in real life," he commented. "This is something that should only happen in a movie."

"I wouldn't want to see this in a movie," Superman responded. Then he disappeared along with one of the newly packaged victims.

Lois turned off the lights in the room, lit a jasmine scented pillar candle and placed it on the window nook table. She knew she had been affected by Miller's drug, but at the moment, she didn't care. She'd seen how he looked at her when he left. She knew she could have him if she wanted and right now she wanted.

She slipped off the dress, kicking it away. She considered removing her bra as well. *No, he can take me out of that. I want him to touch me.* Her panties, of course, had to go. She pulled them off, leaving the lace garter belt and silk stockings in place under her satin half-slip.

She left her pumps on. She liked how they made her legs look.

Richard had loved the feel of real silk stockings and one of their frequently played out games had been to go out to dinner with her in a dress and silk stockings and little more. His job was to determine whether or not she had chosen to wear panties, and whether she had or not, to get her turned on without anyone else being the wiser.

They'd ended up in his office at the Planet more than once, unable to make it home before their needs became too great. Now Richard was dead and buried, but Clark was around and she knew he wanted her. *Clark*. Who would have thought a farm boy could be so hot. Of course it helped that he was also Superman.

She sat back in one of the wingback chairs and closed her eyes, running her hand along the inside of her thigh as she remembered her first time with him.

His body was almost beyond imagination, perfection in human form. His shoulders were broad and straight, muscles so well defined you felt you were seeing beneath his skin. His chest was firm and smooth and the faint coloring of his nipples and aureoles highlighted the perfection of his pale skin. His butt was gorgeous and his legs, his flat belly, the curly dark thatch of his pubic hair, everything else - oh God, she'd wanted to take him on the floor of the crystal fortress right then, no matter how cold it was.

He ran his hands over her body, cupping her breasts in his hands then following the path of her ribs to her back, then down to her buttocks. Even his hands were warm as he pulled her to him, placing hands beneath her thighs and lifting her effortlessly, kissing the corner of her jaw just beneath her ear, nibbling on her earlobe until she was moaning in pleasure and anticipation.

He seemed to know exactly what she wanted, what she needed. All the clumsy pretense of 'office Clark' had vanished with his clothes. The man holding her in his arms, the man she was lusting after, who has lusting after her, wasn't clumsy or mild-mannered. The man who was exploring her body may have been inexperienced, but he was a fast learner.

The satin sheets were smooth and cool to the touch as he laid her down on the soft mattress then settled his body beside her. He propped his head up with one hand as he watched her, running light fingers over her flesh, teasing, tempting her with promises. He leaned closer, capturing her lips with his own as his hand explored more of her, the moistness that showed her readiness, long fingers exploring her inner secrets.

She wasn't a virgin, but he was the first man to actually take the time to find out her likes and needs, to watch her as he gave her pleasure. And he did watch her, eyes dark with hunger. She had no doubt that he wanted her. She reached up to the back of his neck, weaving her fingers into his hair, pulling him even closer. He kissed the soft skin of her throat, moving again to nip at the skin below her ear, his tongue playing at her earlobe. Again she moaned in anticipation, letting him know how she felt.

She was so close and yet he held off. She moved, shifting her naked body, making him move his hands as she rose to her knees then straddled him, taking his length into her. She was electrified, feeling how hard he was, how hard his desire had made him. She sat, back arching in pleasure, triumphant at the pulsing within her. He laid there, eyes wide in awe, breath coming in ragged gasps. She placed her hands on his chest and he caught her arms, pulling her down into another kiss that seemed to last forever.

She could taste the longing on his breath, on his tongue. His skin was damp from his inner heat as they danced within the whirl of mindless sensation.

She exploded into a million stars, body convulsing in sweet release. She felt him come as

well, felt him thrust into her with a shudder that encompassed his entire body. For a long moment, the world seemed to stop.

Then she opened her eyes. She was in the chair in the nook, one leg flung over the chair arm. Her fingers were slick from her own arousal, clitoris still engorged almost to the point of pain. Clark was nowhere to be seen.

She tried to slow her heartbeat, calm her breathing. She knew he would be back. She knew she had to wait, but her desire was almost too great. She wanted him. She wanted Clark here in front of her, inside of her.

Clark was tired. Not physically, but mentally. He had helped the local police and emergency services get the victims of Miranda Miller's poisoned perfume to medical help and safety at the local medical centers and he was mentally exhausted as he stood in the lobby in Queen of the Valley hospital.

The death toll was now up to six. One of the older men had a fatal heart attack and another woman had been killed by one of the men who had escaped the gallery before the police arrived. But finally all the people who were known to have been exposed were in the care of medical professionals, including those he had initially taken to the county jail for safe keeping. The police had rounded up the last eight victims - six men, two women. They'd gone to various nearby bars ostensibly to pick up partners for the night. The bartenders had all called the police on them then they became lewd and unruly.

Superman gave the emergency room doctors all the information he had on the contaminated perfume. He called Doctor Friedman in Metropolis, updated him on the affects of the compound and then had him talk to the local doctors who would be taking care of the poor souls 'Revenge' had sent straight into hell. For most of them the physical scars would heal soon enough, but the mental scars would be with them forever. He leaned back on the reception desk, head bowed, shoulders slumped in a posture far more reminiscent of Clark than Superman. At the moment he was beyond caring.

"Superman, are you okay?" He jerked his head around to see who had addressed him. Officer Ruis was standing beside him in, forehead creased with worry.

"I'll be fine," Superman told him, but he could tell that Ruis wasn't entirely convinced. He straightened up, taking a deep cleansing breath. "I have to admit, though, I hope I never see anything like that again."

"That makes two of us," Ruis told him. "We've got an APB out on Miranda Miller, so with any luck we'll catch her before she can do this to anyone else. What do you think made her make something as horrible as that stuff?"

"I have no idea, except..."

"Except what?" Ruis asked.

"Except that someone out there paid for her research, there's a major crime boss on trial in Metropolis and one of his people was spotted at the gallery just before all hell broke loose," Superman told him. "And I'm not a big believer in coincidence."

"How do we get in touch with you if we find out anything?" Ruis asked.

Superman tore a sheet off one of the notepads by the desk phone on the receptionist's counter. He wrote down two Metropolis phone numbers and handed the paper to the police officer. "Those numbers belong to the two Daily Planet reporters who were checking out Miller. They can usually get messages to me, if it's important enough."

Ruis nodded and tucked the paper in his uniform shirt pocket. "I'll give them a call as

soon as we know anything," he promised. "You will be in later this afternoon to make a statement?"

"Yes," he said. "And I'll let Lane and Kent know they need to come down as well. They may be your only competent witnesses as to how this horror started."

As Clark approached their room from the air he noted that the lights were off except for one candle burning by the window. He hoped Lois had simply gone to sleep instead of waiting up for him.

A quick check with x-ray vision showed that she was sitting in one of the chairs by the window. Her heartbeat was above normal, her breathing a touch erratic. She wasn't asleep, but he wasn't sure what else was going on. Was she angry that he'd taken so long to get back? He was almost afraid to find out.

He eased the casement open and floated in, settling noiselessly to the floor. "Lois?"

She looked up at him, the light of the candle reflecting in her eyes. Her face broke into a smile, although there was something a touch predatory in her look. "You're back," she observed, straightening her legs and standing up from the chair. She stepped closer to him, brushing her hand over the emblem on his chest. "I missed you," she murmured, looking into his eyes. She curled one hand around the back of his neck, pulling him closer.

He could smell her perfume, a floral scent with vanilla undertones. He also detected the faint scent of Miller's 'Revenge,' and the musky odor of sex.

"Lois?" he murmured as her lips brushed against his. "Lois, are you all right?" His words were lost in the urgency of her mouth on his, her tongue exploring his lips, forcing itself into his mouth, running over his teeth. Her kiss sang in his veins. Reluctantly, he forced himself to pull back, disentangling her hands from his hair.

He took a deep breath to calm himself, blowing the breath out his nose. "Lois, you've been affected by Miller's poison. You don't really want to do this."

"No, you're wrong," she told him breathlessly. "I've spent six months without a man, without feeling a man inside me. And if you won't take me, I'll find a man who will." She stepped away from him, her eyes raking over his body. He normally didn't feel overly exposed while wearing the Suit, but the hungry look on her face made him feel naked, all his secrets exposed.

"I know you want me," she purred, voice husky with desire. He could see the dark hunger in her eyes. "I know you want to be inside me, to feel me around you. You know I want you. All of you."

He wanted her and the scent of her was making him aroused. He didn't know if Miller's poison was affecting him or not and was frankly afraid of the results if he lost control. He needed to get the chemicals off of her, keep her calm, compliant. At the hospitals, they'd had to resort to strong sedatives and restraints, hoping the effects would wear off quickly.

He needed to stay in control of himself, of the situation.

"Lois, we've both had a hard day," he began, pausing as he saw her eyes narrow dangerously. "And I really need to get cleaned up, before we..."

"There's a nice big shower in there," she said. "And I can scrub your back..." She reached behind his cape at his shoulder and undid the clasp on his shirt, placing her hand between the fabric and his skin. He shivered at her touch, heat building within him. He unclipped the crimson, allowing it to drop to the floor. Then he pulled off his shirt, letting it join the cape.

She sidled closer to him, running her hands over his chest, playing her fingers over his

nipples before reaching down and unclasping his belt. She let the belt drop to join the pile on the floor then placed one hand on his belly, insinuating it between his skin and the tights beneath the red briefs. He grabbed her hand and pulled it away, kissing her palm instead.

"Why don't you get the shower started?" he suggested softly, nuzzling her hair. Her mouth pulled into a moue of disappointment as she turned and started toward the double doors to the bathroom. She stopped in the doorway and pulled her silk half-slip down over her hips, down to her ankles, peeking back at him as she did so. He hadn't realized she was only wearing a lace garter belt and stockings beneath the slip. He stared at the dimpled half-moons of her buttocks, breath catching in his throat.

She straightened up with a smirk, swaying her hips provocatively as she continued toward the bath. He closed his eyes to try and regain some control over himself. He heard the water start in the shower and pulled off his boots and tights, quickly putting the discarded uniform in the back corner of the closet. He turned the bed down before padding softly into the bathroom.

Lois was waiting for him, still in her bra and stockings. She held her arms away from her body, beckoning him closer. He slipped fingers under her bra straps, then reached around and unfastened her bra, letting the cups drop away from her breasts. She kicked off her shoes, put her foot on the edge of the tube and unclipped her stockings from her garter belt, rolling the silk down her leg. She was driving him insane as she slowly did her striptease, finally slipping the lace garter belt over her hips with a seductive wiggle.

"Come here," he ordered softly, taking her hand and leading her into the marble tiled shower. He shut the frosted glass door behind them and then squeezed a dollop of lavender scented shampoo into his palm. He lathered it in his hands then massaged the suds into her hair down to her scalp, painting the suds across her face to get rid of the poison. He ran his soapy hands down her body, pulling her against him, feeling her shiver despite the warm water running over them.

"No super speed shower?" she wondered aloud.

"Water only moves so fast," he explained. "Besides, who wants to hurry this?"

"I do," she told him, turning to face him as he helped her rinse the shampoo out of her hair. "I want you. I want you now." She looked down meaningfully at his erection.

He was being betrayed by his own body. He did want her, wanted to feel her moist velvet around him more than anything he had ever wanted in his life. And that was the one thing he didn't dare do. As much as she said otherwise right now, to go to that place would be tantamount to rape. She wasn't in command of herself, and he wasn't altogether sure if he was completely in command of himself. That thought scared him, but not enough to convince his body that taking her wasn't a good idea.

"Okay, okay..." he murmured. He grabbed two over-size bath towels, warming one with a quick burst of heat vision before wrapping it around her. He hoped that with the poison off her skin, she would start to come out of the spell it had laid on her. She wrapped a towel around her wet hair and stood back watching as he wrapped the other bath towel around his waist. Her smile had turned hungry again as she watched him and a shiver went down his spine.

He scooped her up in his arms and carried her to the bed. He pulled the towel away from her body as he laid her down, running the towel over her damp legs. She spread her legs, the languorous movement of a woman sure of herself, sure she was going to get what she wanted. She placed her hand on the inside of her thigh, running her fingers along the skin outside her labia before moving to separate the lips, caressing her vulva. She was teasing him and she was enjoying it.

"Uh, Lois, I've been thinking..." he began.

"You think too much," she told him. Her hand had moved to her clitoris, slowly massaging the little hard nub.

"I've been thinking," he began again, laying down beside her and watching her face as his hand joined hers in exploring her vulva, gently circling around her vagina. She pulled her own hand away, stretching her arms toward the headboard before folding both hands behind her head. She watched him watching her, eyes half-closed.

"It might be better if we waited for... that..."

He felt her body stiffen, saw her eyes go hard, menacing. "But there's no reason we can't do other things..." he added quickly. She relaxed, giving him another of her seductive smiles, her pink tongue running slowly over her reddened lips.

"What will it take for you to say yes?" she breathed. "I want you in me so bad."

"Let's talk when the poison is out of your system," he said.

"I don't want talk," she told him. "I want you."

"I'm right here," he said, capturing her mouth with his. He insinuated fingers inside her, thumb on her clitoris, softly exploring her as he had done once before. He bent one finger and found her G-spot. She arched her back, clamping down on the fingers inside her.

"More," she demanded breathlessly. He wasn't sure what she really meant. He moved his mouth to her neck, gently licking and nibbling on the delicate flesh, moving down to her breasts. Her nipples were hard as he explored the nearest one with his tongue. She pulled one hand out from behind her head and started to reach down. He grabbed her hand with his free hand, fingers locked around her slender wrist, forcing her arm back above her head.

"Uh uh, my job," he murmured. She squirmed beneath his lips, her hips forcing down on his hand. She threw her head back with a moan and shuddered. He pulled his hand back and she quivered. He could hear how fast her heart was beating, could feel her breath on his cheek as he pulled himself away from her, letting go of her hand. She grabbed his hand, the one had pleased her and brought it to her mouth, slowly, tantalizingly licking her moisture off his fingers. Her eyes were still dark with arousal.

He could hardly breathe, watching her nibble at his fingers, feeling her tongue on his hand, her mouth sucking the juices off. She was still turned on, ready for more.

The human body wasn't designed for such high levels of arousal. He had no idea how close she was to her limit, how long her body could maintain this level of tension. He berated himself for not realizing it sooner. He had simply fed the problem, raising her level of arousal to a higher plateau.

"Lois, I have to take care of something," he said, taking his hand back.

"But I don't want you to," she protested, hooded eyes still burning with desire.

"I'll be right back, I promise," he said, climbing off the bed. He grabbed the Suit out of the closet, put it on at super speed and was out the window before she could protest again.

Superman set down just outside the emergency room of Queen of the Valley hospital. He took a moment to compose himself before entering the building. He didn't want his worry to show, didn't want anyone to know how badly the whole pheromone poison incident was bothering him. How the pheromone poison was affecting him. It was bad enough that he was having to ask for help. Normally that didn't really bother him but for some reason it was bothering him now.

"Superman?" the admitting nurse called as soon as she caught sight of him. "Is everything

all right?"

"Not really," he admitted. "Is Doctor Langdon around? I need to ask him some questions."

"I'm right here," Doctor Langdon said, coming out of one of the examining rooms. He heaved a sigh of relief. "I was afraid you had another one for us," he admitted. "Doctor Friedman has been on the phone with us for the past hour. Now we're just waiting to see how they respond."

"Was he able to come up with a treatment?"

"Yes, and no," Langdon told him. "It's mostly symptomatic. Keep them calmed down and keep them from hurting themselves or anybody else. But I hope to God this crap never makes out on the street. It's vicious, pure and simple."

Superman sighed and shook his head.

"You said you had some questions," Langdon reminded him.

Superman took a moment to decide how to approach the problem he had. "I know of another victim, but the circumstances are such that it would be better if they weren't admitted to the hospital."

"Male or female?"

"Does it matter?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," Langdon told him. "The men may not have as easy a time recovering. One of the things we're keeping an eye out for is a condition called *priapism*. It's an erection that lasts too long. If left untreated it can do permanent damage. Friedman was worried that might be one of the side affects."

"But it won't affect the females?"

"Lucky ladies," Langdon said with a chuckle. "So, I assume your friend is female?"

Superman nodded. "She's not exactly a friend, more of an associate," he said. "So, what can I do?"

"What we're doing is using sedation to calm them, pseudoephedrine to take down the congestion, and restraints for when the sedation wears off," Langdon explained. "We've actually been able to take two of the women off sedation already, but we're keeping them over night for observation."

"Do they remember what happened?" Superman asked.

"Not really," Langdon told him. "More like a nightmare. It's possible they may remember more as time goes on, but from what I'm told happened, it might be better if they didn't remember any of it."

Superman nodded. Considering what he'd witnessed in the gallery, he found himself agreeing with Langdon. It would be better if none of them remembered what happened even in their nightmares.

"So, about your associate?" Langdon led the way into one of the examining rooms and used his key to open a locked wall cabinet. "She's not pregnant, is she?"

"No, she's not," Superman assured him.

"Okay, but I do need a name because I have to log the fact the drugs have left the cabinet," Langdon said, pulling a small notepad from his pocket.

"Laura Landers," Superman said, a little too quickly. Langdon gave him a speculative look then shrugged as he wrote the name down.

"Birth date?"

"January 4, 1974."

Langdon gave him another speculative look. "Okay, 'never lies' really means 'cannot tell a lie to save his life.'" He chuckled. "How much does Ms. Landers weigh?"

"One hundred fifteen pounds."

"Is she taking any other drugs, supplements, any other prescriptions?"

"She has a birth control implant."

Langdon noted that down as well. He searched through the cabinet and pulled out a small blister pack with two small white scored tablets and handed it to Superman. "Give her one of these as soon as you get back to her and then the other one in 6 hours or so," he instructed. He pulled out a second blister pack with yellow capsules. He tore off four of the blisters. "Give her one of these to start with, then another one if she's still symptomatic when she wakes up. It should knock her out for at least four hours, but we had one guy come out of it after only an hour and attack one of the nurses."

"Which is why you have them in restraints," Superman finished for himself.

"Yeah," Langdon said. "By the way, Friedman wanted to know if *you* were having any problems with that poison."

"Nothing that I'm aware of after the first exposure," Superman told him. "He's already aware of what those symptoms were."

"And what were those symptoms, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I had an allergic type reaction. Stuffy nose, watery, itchy eyes."

"But nothing else? No other itching, no swelling, anything like that?"

"No, but I wasn't directly exposed. Someone else was wearing it."

"And they didn't react to it?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Superman admitted.

"Now, that's very interesting," Langdon commented mostly to himself. "Uh, you'd better get back to Ms. Landers with that medication. And bring her here immediately if there are any other problems. Especially keep an eye on her breathing."

"I will. Thank you."

Langdon smiled and nodded as Superman turned and headed out the door.

Clark sped back to the inn, fearful that he'd left her alone too long. Talking to Langdon had taken far longer than he'd planned. He just hoped Lois was still waiting for him to come back.

She wasn't in the room when he landed. He quickly scanned the room - only her pumps and dress appeared to be missing. *At least she took her dress.* He scanned the building and the surrounding area on the off chance she'd just left or gotten delayed. No sign of her.

He changed out of the Suit into dark slacks and a dark shirt. He hid the pills Langdon gave him in his suitcase, in the compartment he usually hid the Suit while traveling. Then he went out the window again, using the tall trees as cover as he flew straight up, stopping to hover high above the inn, scanning the area around the inn again then letting his gaze spiral outwards.

He found her. Four blocks up Main Street, sauntering down the sidewalk, hips swaying as she walked as though she hadn't a care in the world - at least not a care that a well-known professional woman with a school age child would usually have at three in the morning in the strange city. He spotted a police car turning onto Main, slowing as the officers inside spotted her.

He landed in the shadows and walked out to join her, easily falling into step with her. "Lois, what do you think you're doing?" he asked quietly.

"I got tired of waiting for you," she said. "So I decided to look for somebody else. Somebody who isn't afraid to give me what I want."

"Well, I'm here now," he pointed out. "Now, shall we head back to our room?"

"Maybe I don't want to go back to our room," she said coyly, running one finger along the line of his jaw.

The police car slowed to pace them, the two officers watching them with open curiosity.

"Uh, Lois, I figure you have a choice," Clark told her, pitching his voice low and deep. "You can come back with me to the room, or I can have these nice officers take you to the hospital where you will be drugged senseless and tied to the bed. Which will destroy any credibility you have as a witness or as a journalist. Now, which will it be?"

She stopped and stared at him. *At least that got her attention.*

"Is everything okay here, folks?" one of the officers asked.

Clark watched Lois as a cascade of emotions crossed her face - disbelief, outrage, lust, anger. Outrage seemed to have won, at least temporarily. "You don't have the balls, Farm boy," she spat out finally.

He just looked down at her, straightening his shoulders, crossing his arms over his chest. In Metropolis the pose might have been recognized, even with his glasses on - Superman. Luckily, the officers had never met the super hero.

Lois took a deep breath then she reached out to toy with the buttons on his shirt. "You're mine, you know that, Farm boy?"

"Always and forever," he agreed. He moved a step away from her, closer to the car. He pulled his wallet out and showed his driver's license and Daily Planet press pass to the officers. "It's been a hard day and my partner's had too much to drink," he explained, putting his wallet back in his pocket. "We'll be heading back to our room now."

"Where are you staying?"

"At the B and B on Easum," Clark told them.

"Nice place," the officer said, nodding. He looked over at Lois who had come up behind Clark and was now running her hands along the back of his neck and through his hair. "Ma'am, you're sure everything's okay?"

She nodded, sidling even closer to Clark. "Everything's fine," she breathed. She'd started nibbling on his ear.

Clark felt his face grow warm and knew he had to be blushing furiously. The officer closest to him chuckled. "I think you'd better hurry back to your room before we have to haul you both in for indecent exposure."

"Yes, sir," Clark agreed sheepishly. He took Lois's hand and led her down the sidewalk away from the police car.

Once away from the eyes of the two officers, Clark put his glasses in his pocket. He scooped Lois into his arms and launched into the sky.

"Have you any idea what a turn on that is?" she asked as soon as they were back in their room. She was watching him again with that predatory look he was becoming so familiar with.

"Not everybody agrees with you," he commented, throwing the deadbolt on the door once again. He turned to see her shimmy out of her dress, letting it drop to the floor before picking it up and throwing it at him. He grabbed it in mid air.

She strolled over to him, wearing only her pumps, and started unbuttoning his shirt.

"You're wearing way too many clothes," she murmured. She ran her hand over his bare chest.

"No Suit?"

"I don't always wear it, you know," he told her. She moved behind him, slipping his shirt off his shoulders. She ran her hands down his back, sending shivers down his spine. She kissed his shoulder blades and started working her way down.

He found himself biting his lip to keep from crying out. "Uh, Lois..." he began.

She moved in front of him again, fingers lazily tracing over the skin of his belly. She unbuckled his belt and reached for the hook at his waistband. Again he pulled her hand away and kissed her palm. "Let's move this to the bed?" he suggested.

She smiled lazily at him before turning and heading to the four-poster bed, her hips swaying as she walked. She kicked off her shoes before climbing onto the mattress, shoving the covers to the foot of the bed with her feet. She watched him, eyes dark with desire as he came closer.

He closed his eyes a moment to block her image from his mind, at least temporarily. She wasn't in her right mind. Frankly, he wasn't sure if he was either.

Faster than she could see, he retrieved the medications from their hiding place and popped one of each out of their protective packs. He sat down on the bed beside her. She was stretched out, one leg bent, the opposite arm thrown over her head. Her other hand was massaging her clitoris as she waited for him.

His insides felt like they'd turned into roiling water. "I have something for you," he told her.

"Something long and hard and *super*, I hope," she murmured.

"We'll see," he told her. "Open your mouth."

She grinned at him and reached for his waistband again. "I thought you'd never ask."

He held up one of the pills. "Something to help you relax."

"But I don't need to relax. I need you. I need you inside me. Now."

"But if we're to track down Doctor Miller later, you need to relax now," he told her, hoping he sounded reasonable. He knew she was going to hate him when she figured it out what he'd done to her. He also knew it couldn't be helped. He didn't trust himself to be around her in this state and he most definitely didn't trust her. She knew exactly how to turn him on and she was using every trick in her book to do it.

"You can help me relax," she told him.

"But this will help too," he promised. She opened her mouth and he popped both pills in. "Want some water?" She nodded and he moved to go to the bathroom sink to get a glass for her. "By the way, I'll know if you spit them out," he warned.

She made a face at him, but with x-ray vision he saw the two pills enter her throat. In a few moments he was back with the water. She sat up in the bed, legs spread, teasing him as she sipped the water, running her tongue around the rim of the glass.

He watched the pills go down her esophagus and breathed a silent sigh of relief.

Hopefully when she wakes up, this will all be over except for the part where she decides to kill me.

"I've been a good girl," she murmured silkily. "Don't I get my reward?" She pulled him to her, her mouth covering his in a hunger that demanded more, demanded everything.

He returned her kiss, his heart like a lead weight in his chest. He was going to lose her. When she discovered what he had done, their already tentative relationship would shatter like ice. She would never trust him again.

Lois regained consciousness without opening her eyes. Her head was pounding, her

mouth felt like it had been home to something dead, and she hurt in places she'd forgotten she *could* hurt. But she wasn't nauseous and her headache felt more like a hangover than a head injury. That was the positive part.

She tested her muscles and discovered her hands were tethered. So were her feet. She was spread-eagled on a bed with only a sheet covering her. After a quick mental appraisal, she realized she was also completely naked beneath that sheet. She searched her memory for an explanation. What bits and pieces she found horrified her. Watching the deadly orgy at the art gallery and Superman trying to help the uncooperative victims. She remembered Nigel Smith spraying her with something and... *oh my God...*

She tried to swallow, but her throat and mouth were too dry. *Please don't let this be as bad as it seems. Dear God...*

She slowly opened her eyes - a high vaulted white ceiling. She turned her head slowly - as quietly as she could manage - to look around. She was in the room at the B&B. She breathed a sigh of relief.

Clark was slumped in one of the wing chairs in the window nook, one long leg thrown over the chair arm, his laptop computer open on the little table. He was wearing a t-shirt and he had a quilt over his lap and legs. His chin was resting on his chest, eyes closed, chest rising and falling gently. He looked positively haggard. Considering what her night had to have been like, his had to have been pure hell.

"Uh, Clark...?" Her voice sounded more like a croak. She saw his head come up as he tried to identify the sound. He blinked, owl-like, and finally focused on her.

"Lois? Uh, how are you feeling?"

"Like I'm naked and tied to the bed," she responded and promptly felt guilty at the pain she saw in his face. "And thirsty as hell. Clark, if I promise not to attack you, will you let me loose?"

He untangled himself from the chair and quilt and padded over to her. He untied one of her hands. "How much do you remember?" he asked.

"Enough to know you probably saved my life, if not my sanity. We didn't... you know... did we? Not that I would blame you, considering what I do remember. God, I can't believe how... how can you even look at me?"

He shook his head as he undid her other hand and helped her sit up. "We... we didn't go that far," he said. He went to the bathroom sink and filled a glass for her. He handed the glass to her and she guzzled it down greedily.

He sat down on the edge of the bed, but his eyes were dark with worry as he watched her. She had the feeling he was about ready to bolt. There were times he was so incredibly wise and knowing and other times, like now, he seemed like a boy trapped in a man's body trying to figure out how everything worked. He was Superman, the near god. He was Clark Kent, the farm boy overwhelmed by the enormity of the world. A study in contradictions.

She waited for him to gather the courage to speak again.

"I knew you weren't in control of yourself, not really," he said finally. "You're not angry?"

"With you? Why should I be?" she asked, untying her feet. "Aside from the fact that you used my good silk stockings to tie me up with and I wasn't awake when you did it."

He turned his face away from her and she was afraid he was embarrassed to see her naked, or maybe he was embarrassed at her comment about preferring to be awake when spread-eagled on a bed. *That is downright dumb after last night. I cannot believe what we did last night, assuming I wasn't imagining it.* She pulled the sheet up and wrapped it around

herself. "Like I said the night we got here, there's nothing here you haven't seen before..." she joked, trying to break through to him. She was reasonably certain the poison was out of her system, but she found herself studying his body underneath the t-shirt and shorts, remembering the sight of his naked body beside hers as they...

She forced herself to breathe slowly. Now wasn't the time to revisit those feelings, but her body wasn't listening to her brain. She needed a shower - a cold shower. She was completely sober and conscious and she wanted to jump him. He looked good. He smelled good. *Oh God, he looked good.*

He studied his hands, refusing to meet her eyes.

"Clark, what else happened? I didn't run off and start turning tricks, did I?" She was reasonably sure she hadn't, but there were holes in her memories of last night. She did recall leaving the B&B dressed only in her dress and shoes, intent on finding someone, anyone, who would be willing to 'scratch her itch'. She knew Clark had come to her rescue yet again.

He shook his head. "No, but I did tell a couple police officers you were drunk," he said.

"Was I so awful to you...?"

"No, it was kind of flattering, actually," he told her, finally meeting her eyes. "I should be used to people throwing themselves at Superman. I should be, but I'm not really. But I kinda' think maybe you were throwing yourself at Superman *and* Clark."

"I do recall trying to get somebody out of a red cape and blue tights, and I also remember trying to get my partner out of his pants," she admitted, studying his face. A blush had climbed into his cheeks and she had to force herself not to laugh. "Are you upset that you had to spend last night worrying about me instead of hunting Miller down or tending to a catastrophe somewhere?"

"I like worrying about you, Lois," he said simply. "It's just that I did something... to you."

She did a quick inventory - every thing appeared to be in its correct place and in proper working order. "So what did you do that you're afraid I'll be upset about? Considering what I do remember, I can't begin to imagine what it might be."

"I led you on, for one," he admitted.

"Under the circumstances, I think anything you may have said or done would fall under the category of self-preservation," she told him. "That was 'one'. What was 'two'?"

"I was afraid that if it went on any longer, I would lose control. I was afraid to risk that. I knew we'd end up doing things you wouldn't want. Plus I didn't know how healthy it was for you to stay like you were. How long... You were scaring me," he said. He had gone back to studying his hands again. "I talked the ER doctor into letting me have some of the drugs they were using to treat the other victims. I kind of tricked you into taking them."

She was silent for a long moment, trying to gauge what he meant, what he was feeling. He was good at keeping people at bay, hiding his feelings both as Clark and as Superman. "Clark, I promise you, I'm not angry. You did what you had to do."

"I should have taken you to the hospital when I realized you'd been affected," he said.

"Why didn't you?"

It was his turn to be silent. She watched his mouth pull thin as he considered his answer. Finally he took a deep breath, blowing it out his nose. "Lois, we are the only known witnesses as to what happened. We are the only ones who can positively state that Miranda Miller was orchestrating the perfume being sprayed on the people in the gallery. We're also the only ones who can positively identify Nigel Smith as having been there at the time. If I'd taken you to the hospital, nothing you said about what happened would be believed. Your statement would not

be accepted as evidence. In fact, it could be used against you if you were called in the Church trial."

"But you weren't affected," she reminded him. "And you were a witness too."

"But I would have been the only witness," he reminded her. "Well, me and Superman, and he wasn't there when it started. So it becomes my word against hers and maybe Smith's. Hardly good enough to base a court case on."

She moved closer to him, laying a hand on his shoulder. He was stiff, muscles like stone. She felt him relax beneath her hand, the muscles of his shoulder softening to a more normal suppleness.

"You want to get cleaned up first, or shall I?" she asked.

Lois and Clark were the only couple seated in a breakfast room. Not surprising considering the time. It was now brunch rather than breakfast. Sunlight streamed through the French doors, playing over the pastel flowered tablecloth and the dark tiles of the floor.

They'd missed breakfast the day before, but looking at the selection on the menu, that had been a definite mistake. Lois knew that the place served an exquisite cup of coffee. The coffee was in porcelain cups instead of mugs this time and the fresh orange juice was served in wine goblets. The first course was fresh strawberries with whipped cream, followed by French toast with fruit compote. Clark ordered the banana pancakes with cashews and caramel sauce.

They split each dish in half so they could share. It was something she and Richard had done frequently. It wasn't something she'd ever done with Clark. She found herself smiling at his bewilderment when she had suggested sharing the different dishes. He was so 'innocent' sometimes.

Her croissant French toast was simply unbelievable. "Do I taste Gran Marnier in here somewhere?" she asked.

"Yep," Clark answered. "And real maple syrup in the fruit."

"Do you think Perry would let us just move in here?"

"I doubt it," Clark told her. He'd finally relaxed enough to chuckle along with her. "But we can take home the recipes."

"Like that would help," Lois joked, spearing the last piece of her French toast. She made a show of savoring it, watching the color rise in Clark's face again. *He is so fun to tease.*

The third course arrived. The only offering that didn't have meat was the egg puff with artichokes and roasted red peppers served with thick cut 'home fries'. They both chose that.

"You know, Lois, you never have told me why you became a vegetarian," Clark began. She took a bite of her egg puff, savoring it.

"I did a series on the meat industry, and between that, the mad cow scare, and wanting to be a better example for Jason, it seemed the right thing to do," she said, waving her fork around. "You know more methane and greenhouse gases are produced by cows than by cars, and just raising the crops to feed sheep and cattle uses nearly a third of the arable land on the planet. Not to mention that more than a quarter of the Earth's land surface is used for grazing. What about you? Why don't you eat meat?"

Clark shrugged. "It's hard to turn around and eat something that was once living and feeling. It used to drive my grandfather crazy. A kid raised on a farm, raised around cattle, who refused to eat beef."

"Why do I think there's more to it than that?"

"Because there is. I can see the aura that surrounds living things," he explained softly. "It

was one of the first things that made me know I was really different. I could see things most other people couldn't. I don't have words to describe it, but it's beautiful, the way it changes, fluctuates. It's almost alive in itself. But when something dies, the aura disappears, sometimes fast, sometimes slow, and what's left is gray and dead and not beautiful at all. Just a mass of chemicals, all ugly and nasty."

He stopped talking and started playing with the food on his plate in much the same way Jason did when he was upset. She waited, knowing he would continue soon enough. She was right.

"When I was about ten, the school bus I was riding on hit a neighbor's dog," Clark continued. "It was nobody's fault. Tim was old, almost blind and nearly deaf. He'd wandered into the road and the bus driver just couldn't stop in time. The other kids just went 'poor thing', and went on to school. Me? I saw Tim trying to get away, trying to make his body work. I saw the light go out, literally, and it was the most frightening thing I'd ever seen. I was so freaked out the school called my parents to take me home for the rest of the day. Scared Mom and Dad half to death. They had no idea what was wrong and I couldn't really explain it."

"Do you think Jason will see these auras too?"

Clark nodded. "He already does. But being a city boy, I don't think he's made the connection yet between meat and things that are alive, yet. Plants have auras too, but they're not nearly as vibrant. I think it has something to do with having a nervous system."

"Oh, the joys of parenthood," Lois said, trying to make her tone light in an attempt to cheer her partner up. "Most parents just have to worry about explaining that the goldfish died and won't just wake up. We have to explain why the goldfish stopped glowing and turned into an ugly bag of chemicals. Clark, is that also why...?"

He nodded. "Power carries with it responsibilities. It doesn't make a lot of sense to cherish life and then take it away just because you can, just because the other person's made some seriously bad choices or has a mental problem."

"Even Luthor?"

He snorted. "I might have made an exception in his case," he admitted. "Except you got there first."

Lois checked her watch. "Maybe we should get going, make our statements then decide what we're going to do with the rest of our day."

Clark nodded. "I've already sent the first part of the story off to Perry. Did that while you were still asleep. He's holding off on anything that implicates Miller, though. No sign of her yet, but Nigel Smith was spotted at Metropolis International this morning."

"He tried to spray me deliberately, you know," she told him. "He seemed to think I'd just fall into his arms. He was surprised when I didn't, when I took back my cell phone and called 9-1-1."

"Unfortunately, we can't claim he tried to assault you, because if you weren't sprayed with the poison, you can't have been harmed," Clark reminded her.

"Oh, don't worry," Lois told him, finishing her coffee. "Lane and Kent will get him."

"I have no doubt of that," Clark agreed with a chuckle.

The Napa detectives were as efficient as those in Metropolis, although Detective Greer admitted that this was the largest crime they'd ever had to deal with. Napa normally dealt with an average of one murder a year (two in a bad one), twenty-five rapes and around three hundred assaults. Napa wasn't exactly a quiet little burg, but it certainly wasn't as busy as

Metropolis.

The murders in the gallery at American Center for Wine, Food and the Arts was going to take most of their resources for some time, even with the aid of the Napa County sheriff's department and the California State Police. And if terrorists were suspected of taking part, the FBI would be lording over all of them.

If Greer was impressed at the ease and professionalism with which the two Daily Planet reporters gave their statements, he didn't say it. He curtly dismissed them as soon as they had signed their reports. "Make sure we have a way to contact you," he ordered as they were leaving.

"Pleasant fellow," Lois commented as soon as they were out of the building.

"Our presence coincides with one of the worst crimes in the county's history," Clark reminded her. "One serious enough to get Superman's attention. Not to mention the load it's put on healthcare in the area. The detectives are going to be a little touchy."

"So, what do you want to do today?" she asked.

"Well, in the package Perry got for us, we can have a picnic lunch, a hot air balloon ride and there's horse back riding. And since we're in wine country, we can always tour a winery. I remember seeing some passes in our room for a couple of those. And then they do offer the spa special, aromatherapy massages in the room."

"After last night, I'm not sure those are a good idea," Lois commented. "Then again..." She grinned at him, marching her fingers up his chest.

"Uh, Lois, are you sure you're okay?" Clark asked. He was blushing again. "I mean, you're acting a little...?"

"I'm fine," she told him. "It's just that last night reminded me of something I haven't had in a long time."

"Oh?"

"Oh, don't worry so much Clark. What happens in Napa stays in Napa," she said with a little laugh. She watched him out of the corners of her eyes as they walked down the sidewalk side by side. She grabbed his hand, noticing how his body stiffened then relaxed at her touch. "I was wondering, though, what would it take to make you say 'yes'?"

He stopped and looked down at her, hesitation, worry, in his blue eyes. "You're teasing me again," he said flatly.

"No, I'm not," she assured him. "You're the most honorable man I know. So I want to know, what would it take?"

"Lois, it isn't a good idea," he stated. "I don't know if..."

"Earth women are a lot stronger than they look," she told him softly. "You won't hurt me. So what will it take?"

His dark eyelashes seemed frozen as he stared at her. "A wedding ring. My ring on your hand."

"Oh, I see," she murmured. She wasn't really surprised at his answer. Only surprised that he'd finally admitted it to her. He stopped walking and took his hand back. She looked back to see him staring at his shoes, hands in his pockets.

"I shouldn't have said that," he said, so quietly she almost didn't hear him. "Now I've ruined everything again. It's too soon. And..."

She wondered if he was talking to himself or to her. She wondered if *he* knew which one. Lois put one finger under his chin and raised his head, looking into his eyes. "Clark, you're babbling," she intoned, fighting to keep from smiling at him.

"I am?" His eyes went wide as he thought about it. "I am."

"Uh huh." She slipped her arm through his and urged him to start moving again. "You know, Reno's only about two hundred miles from here."

He stopped again. "Lois, please don't tease me like that."

"Who's teasing?" she asked. This time she couldn't hold back and started giggling as his mouth dropped open in complete astonishment.

"There's a jewelry store right there," she continued cheerily. "Reno's a hop, skip, and a jump away, and I will do *anything* to keep my mother from getting involved in my wedding plans, up to and including grabbing Superman's cute ass and making him fly me off to... someplace like this."

"I thought you hated small towns."

"Napa isn't exactly a small town. It has seven Starbucks," she told him. "So, are we going to Reno?"

"Lois, are you sure you want to do this?" he asked. His eyes were dark with worry again. "I mean, are you sure it's not the poison still talking? I can understand..."

"Clark, you've already left me once, and it hurt like hell 'cause I couldn't do anything about it," she told him, her eyes searching his face. "More than once I've come too close to losing you, even if I didn't know it was you at the time. I don't want to go through that again..." She felt him pull away and she grabbed his arm. "I don't want to go through that again," she repeated, "but I know that's a risk I have to take. It's a risk we both have to take. I want you. I need you. I'm not going to let you go this time."

"There's one thing you didn't say..." he said. There was an ineffable sadness in his voice.

A song came into her mind. *I want you. I need you. But there ain't no way I'm ever gonna' love you...* "I want you, I need you, and yes, I love you, Clark Kent."

"I love you, Lois Lane. Will you marry me?"

"I thought you'd never ask." She pulled him down into a sensual, devouring, soul-searing kiss, completely ignoring the fact that they were still standing in the middle of the sidewalk. "That meant 'yes', by the way."

"Uh, maybe we'd better get moving," he said. "Otherwise we're going to get arrested for indecent exposure."

The nearest jeweler had suitable rings - simple gold bands in sizes for each of them.

"Are you sure you don't want an engagement ring, too?" Clark asked.

"I had one of those. And I wore it far longer than I probably should have," she told him. "But the important one is this one. This is the one I intend to wear for the rest of my life."

Surprisingly, there wasn't much of a wait at the Reno Marriage Bureau office. They even took credit cards. Fifty-five dollars and five minutes for the paper work. The Civil Marriage office was all of four blocks away. \$50.00, first come first serve, no appointment necessary.

It was over almost before it began.

"If I'd known it was this easy, I would have made us come here before heading up to the ice palace last time," Lois chuckled, inspecting the gold band on her finger.

"But my dear Missus Kent, we hardly knew each other then," Clark joked back. He was having a hard time believing it was all real. He was afraid he would wake up and it would all be a dream.

"And did that stop us?" Lois shot back with a grin. "And I'm not changing my name."

"I didn't expect you would."

"And I'm still top banana."

"I do remember you like to be on top."

"You are incorrigible," she laughed.

"I've been taking lessons from the best," he laughed back. "And I think we'd better get back to our room before we get in trouble. They frown on people making out in the middle of the street."

"Pity we have to be back at work Monday," she said. "Maybe we can talk Perry into giving us another week?"

"I seriously doubt it."

"Then we'd better enjoy it while we can."

This time she was conscious and in control of herself - at least she was reasonably sure she was. She was married, to Clark. It was something she'd had tumbling around the back of her mind even before she realized that Clark Kent was Superman. Superman had been a fantasy - the perfect man, a god, someone to be adored but never bedded. To bring him to the level of mere mortals was to clip an angel's wings. Gods should not be forced to walk on earth.

Clark, on the other hand - she needed him and he needed her in ways no other man had. Despite a quiet reserve that some people mistook for timidity, he was one of the few men who had ever stood up to her professionally and personally, even though most of the time he needed a keeper. It didn't hurt that he was eminently beddable.

But was being married to Clark a good thing for Clark? Half an hour ago she would have said yes without any hesitation. Now? It wasn't exactly second thoughts, but had the poison clouded her thinking before? She had convinced herself that they both needed more time to grieve for Richard. Time to put their lives back together after everything that happened in the weeks after Superman returned to Metropolis after an absence of more than five years. Time for Jason to get used to the fact that Clark, rather than Richard, was his real father.

In an instant she had thrown all of her rationally thought out plans and concerns away. Was she going to clip an angel's wings in her desperation to have him with her?

They landed among the tall trees behind the inn and Superman changed back into Clark once again.

"A penny for your thoughts," Clark offered, pushing his glasses up his nose in that familiar way of his. He took her hand and led the way to the path out of the trees.

"I doubt they're worth that much," Lois admitted. "I'm just wondering what I did to deserve you."

"Lois, you are brilliant, domineering, uncompromising, pig-headed, and beautiful," he told her.

"You left out arrogant," she said. "Remember, you're talking to the woman who won a Pulitzer for telling Superman, loudly and publicly, that she didn't need him. That the world didn't need him."

"I haven't forgotten," Clark told her. "Never apologize for being right."

She stopped, placing a hand on his chest, studying his face again. He was so earnest, so innocent - not a child's inexperience, but the purity of spirit that insisted the world was a good place and that virtue really was something to be sought after, fought for. "Clark, I just want you to know that I'm still jealous of the world for having Superman at its beck and call," she said. His forehead creased in a frown once again.

"Luckily, I married you instead of him," she added and was gladdened when his expression cleared.

"Are you hungry?" he asked. He knew her too well. They'd managed to miss lunch in all the flurry.

"Yes," she said. "And I think there are a couple gift certificates upstairs for local restaurants."

Dinner at the *Ristorante Allegria* over on First and Main was excellent, even though they didn't have much in the way of vegetarian dishes. The zinfandel was nice as well, rich and lively with a slightly acidic finish.

The gift certificate didn't quite cover the entire meal. "My turn," Lois announced, handing over her credit card.

"Now what?" Clark asked as soon as they were out of the restaurant.

"Well, you did promise me something..." she reminded him with a smirk.

"Did I?" This was a game two could play, although he knew she had far more experience and flair at it.

"Yes, you did," she said, taking his elbow as they walked back to the B&B. "And I expect to hold you to it."

She hadn't been a virgin the first time she and Clark made love in the crystal fortress so many years before.

The 'honor' of her 'deflowering' had gone to a boy named Paul Bender. He was the editor of the student newspaper at Columbia. He was a senior, already accepted to the graduate school of his choice, while she was a sophomore - although she was on the president's list for the third time in a row and she knew she'd get it a fourth time as well. She did nothing by half measures.

She'd had such a school girl crush on him. He was tall and blond with Aryan good looks. When he offered to take her out drinking and dancing after putting the paper to bed late one Friday night, she had gladly accepted. She hadn't told him she was a virgin and doubted it would have made a difference if she had.

Neither of them had been exactly sober when they made it back to his apartment. His roommates were gone for the weekend, scoping out the campuses were they would attend school the next year.

She was nervous and tried not to show it. She'd read the books, more out of curiosity than anything else. She knew the biology. She at least had an idea of what to expect. Besides, having lived all over the world thanks to her father's transfers, there was little she hadn't heard or seen.

His mouth was hard and rough when he kissed her, parting her lips with his tongue, then sticking it in her mouth. She hadn't expected that, but went along with it anyway. It was interesting. She could taste alcohol on his breath. Paul was already hard when pushed her into his room and pulled his trousers down. She'd started giggling when she saw it pop out of his pants, more out of nervousness than anything else. Her reading hadn't really prepared her for the reality before her.

He hurriedly unzipped the back of her dress, pulling it down over her hips. She pushed her panties down and kicked them away, lying back on his bed, watching him. She was naked in his room, her nipples puckering up from the chill. Paul was wearing his shirt and hadn't taken

his socks off.

"Oh, shit. Where's the condom?" he was muttering to himself. He found it and she watched him roll the latex down the shaft of his penis. He pushed her legs apart then grabbed his shaft, forcing himself into her.

She'd read the first time might be painful, but it wasn't, really. She simply wondered where the pleasure was as he thrust into her, his balls bouncing against her buttocks. She could actually taste the latex of the condom on her breath. She felt him shudder, driving hard inside her one last time, his breath fast and hard, sweat glistening on his face. He pulled out of her without a word, the filled condom threatening to come off. He pulled it loose and padded to the bathroom in stocking feet.

She heard the toilet flush and he came back, picking up her clothes and handing them to her.

"I'd give you a ride home, but Joe's got my car," he told her.

"I'll be okay," she told him, pulling on her dress and panties. "I'll see you Monday at the paper?"

"Sure."

But that Monday, Paul had walked into the newspaper arm and arm with Lois's roommate, Linda King. She was devastated by it and swore to never be taken in by a man again.

Claude Roberge had fooled her. He was French but had come to the Daily Planet from a paper in Quebec. He was suave, sophisticated. He'd traveled the world and to a woman just beginning her career at a major newspaper, it was like meeting James Bond in the flesh. And he had said he loved her, loved her spark, her intelligence. And she had believed him, flattered by his attention.

He had wined and dined her, taking her to the theater, to concerts. They talked about life and work over dinner and wine. Lois was working on her first major story. She'd done her homework, had her sources, her evidence. She had finished the article and was just waiting for one additional confirmation of her facts before turning it in to Perry White. It would be her first published investigation.

Claude had taken her back to her apartment. She'd wanted to make love to him. He was older, more experienced, someone to learn from. He'd started by kissing her breasts, massaging them with his hands. His hands were surprisingly dainty for a man his size. He had explored her body, laid her gently on her bed, but she had the sense he wasn't really interested.

His lovemaking had been slow and languorous, teasing, tempting. But she felt very little as he thrust against her. It didn't hurt. It just didn't do anything for her. And he made no attempt to make it more interesting for her.

He seemed disappointed when he left her apartment. She fell asleep alone, crying. The next morning she discovered her article *and* her notes were missing. Claude had turned her story into Perry with his name on it and there was nothing she could do about it.

Then she found out what Claude had said about her, making sure every one in the newsroom knew that he'd 'taken' her the night before. He also made sure they knew she was frigid, unable to enjoy sex between a man and a woman. He told them in the most unflattering terms that he thought she was an emasculating dyke.

Claude was gone from the Planet the next day. Later she found out that while Perry had been unable to change the byline on the story Claude had stolen from her, he could fire him for sexual harassment, for telling tales about her. She hadn't been the first Claude had bedded then

stolen from. It didn't make her feel any better.

Her sister Lucy had told her once that she had interviews, not dates. The problem was that Lois couldn't tell the difference.

Then she met Superman, a god come to Earth from another planet. He was beautiful, unattainable, and he seemed to like her in a tantalizingly impersonal way.

That same day she had Clark Kent thrust into her life. He was tall, good-looking in a geeky sort of way, despite the fact that he was so shy and nervous that he tripped over his own feet. Perry had been impressed by his credentials as well by his talents. Lois had wondered what Perry saw that no one else did.

While Superman wowed and wooed the city, the world, Clark Kent had slowly, gently, inexorably wooed Lois Lane. Not with flowers or jewelry, but with cups of coffee when she was dragging, pizza, hot dogs and take-out from places Lois had never heard of. He listened to her, followed her lead, and protected her even though she hadn't known it at the time.

When she finally realized the sweet, self-effacing fellow sitting at the desk opposite hers was also Superman, she was elated, triumphant. He was terrified. Of her, of them.

He turned out to be the gentlest, kindest lover she had ever hoped to find. And, contrary to expectations, she had responded to his touch, finding ecstasy she had only read about, only imagined.

And now, here, he was hers.

He'd kicked off his shoes when they'd come into the room and stepped closer to her, nuzzling her hair. He brought his hand under her chin, lifting her face, preparing to capture her mouth with his own.

"Stand still," she ordered. He gave her a puzzled look and she smiled at him. She took his glasses off his face, folded them up and placed them on the night stand. His eyes were so blue. It was a shame to have them hidden by lenses.

She unbuttoned his shirt, gently pushing the fine cotton fabric off his shoulders. *One of these days I'll have to ask him how he hides the Suit.* He stood, quietly waiting for her, shivering a little as she kissed his chest, running the tip of her tongue over his nipples. He was warm. That was one of the first things she had noticed about him the very first time they met - at least the very first time she met him in the blue tights. He radiated heat.

She loosened his shirt from his waistband, reaching her arms around him as his shirt fell to the floor.

"Lois, what are you doing?" he wondered aloud. He started to turn to follow her as she moved behind him. She stopped him, placing her cheek against the smoothness of his back. She clasped her hands over his belly, moving them lower to unbuckle his belt, then the hook on his waistband. This time he made no move to stop her.

She unzipped his fly and hooked her thumbs over the waistbands of both his slacks and briefs, pushing them both down to his knees. She planted a delicate kiss just above the bony arch of his pelvis and ran her hands over the muscles of his thighs, moving up to his buttocks.

"Lois, have you any idea what you're doing to me?" he breathed. Somehow he'd managed to get his slacks, briefs and socks off - one of the advantages of super speed, no doubt. Or maybe she'd simply been too preoccupied. He was, simply put, gorgeous. The Suit left little to the imagination, but what it did leave - she stifled a self-satisfied chuckle.

"Oh, yes, I know," she told him, eyeing his erection.

She knew what her female co-workers speculated was beneath the red briefs Superman

sported. Some of the fantasies were beyond fantastic. He was an alien so he had more than one, or it was super-sized, or since there was no photographic evidence of erections showing through the tights and briefs he had no interest in human women, or men for that matter.

She knew better. He was perfect - everything proportioned properly to a man his size - neither too big nor too small, but just right. The chuckle finally managed to escape her lips as she took his hand and led him to the bed, indicating he should sit on the edge of the mattress.

He was watching her, eyes dark. "Is there something I should know?"

She shook her head. "You do know the speculation around the office about what you're hiding in those red briefs?"

"I try not to listen to the fantasies of overly imaginative and sexually frustrated co-workers," he replied.

"Good." She spread his knees further apart to give herself room to stand between his legs then bent down to kiss him on the mouth. His breath was hot against her face, and he tasted of wine.

"Aren't you a little over dressed?" he managed to murmur. She pulled back and undid her own belt, slapping his hand when he reached out to help. She slowly undid the waistband and zipper on her own trousers, swaying her hips teasingly as she pulled them down and off. Underneath she was wearing a thong in purple silk. She watched him through half-closed eyes as she swayed to music only she could hear, arms reaching for the ceiling in near abandon.

He reached out and grabbed her around the waist, pulling her to him. He ran his hands over her belly then up under her blouse, undoing her bra then caressing her breasts. She trembled at his touch so light against her skin. He drew his hands down her body again, pushing aside her thong to give himself access. One hand on her buttocks, he explored her secrets once again, running fingers over her labia, separating the lips to caress her vulva, exploring the moistness of her vagina, the hard nub of her clitoris. He planted soft kisses on her belly, working his way downward with his mouth.

"You keep that up and I won't be able to finish what I started," she moaned.

"And what was that?" he asked with seeming innocence, but she caught the devilish glint in his eyes.

"This," she announced as she moved first one leg, then the other to the outside of his thighs and moved closer. She grabbed his shaft with one hand, kneading it with her fingers, caressing the head, teasing his foreskin. She watched his face. His eyes were closed, his breathing ragged. A faint sheen of sweat covered his body.

"Scoot back," she ordered. He followed her instructions without opening his eyes. She climbed onto the bed, staying on her knees so she was still above him. He'd had to remove his hand from her pussy in order to move and that part of her body felt like it was crying in hunger. He was still hard and she settled over him eagerly, feeling him penetrate her to her innermost core. She felt the tickle of his pubic hair against the inside of her thighs and let out a long, shuddery sigh. *Oh God, I've missed this.*

She placed her hands to either side of his body, hands flattened against the softness of the mattress. His hands were on her hips as she lifted and lowered herself on him in a steady rhythm, losing herself in the delicious slide of her flesh over his. She could feel him beneath her, struggling to stay in control, to let her be the one in control, setting the rhythm. She gave herself to the sensations - his hard shaft inside her, his fingers pressing on her skin, the delicious paradoxes of hard cock and soft skin, of being the one in control when the man beneath her was the most powerful being on the planet.

She felt her orgasm building, ready to break loose. He had started to move his hips beneath her, staying in rhythm with her like a dancer. He lifted his head away from the mattress and captured her mouth. She could sense rather than taste the musky sweetness of his arousal on his tongue as he explored her mouth. Inside, she felt her inner muscles contract, grabbing him, squeezing down in rhythmic contractions as she convulsed in an explosion of pure pleasure.

He thrust harder as she stopped moving against him and she felt a pulsing against the inside of her flesh as he shuddered, moaning in an animal cry of release as he bit down on his lower lip.

She sat back on her heels with him still inside, watching him catch his breath, enjoying the slight movements of his cock inside her as his erection diminished.

"God woman, you are evil..." he managed to murmur, finally opening his eyes to look at her. She knew her expression was satisfied, triumphant, exultant. Richard had told her more than once that he could always tell when she was happy after their love-making. She looked like the cat that ate the canary - all she needed was feathers at the corners of her mouth.

"One nice thing about marrying a widow is," she told him conversationally, "chances are she already knows exactly what she wants and generally how to get it."

With a quick shimmy, she rolled off to lie beside him. She propped herself up on one arm, watching him. "You are so beautiful. You know that, don't you?"

"So are you," he replied. "Are you okay?"

"Of course. I told you Earth women are tough."

He rolled over to face her, propping himself up.

A cell phone chimed. "Yours or mine?" Lois asked.

"Mine," Clark answered, getting up and grabbing his phone from the bedside table. He sat back on the bed as he opened his phone, placing it to his ear. "Hello Chief," he greeted his caller. He glanced at the clock beside the bed, doing a quick calculation of the time zone difference. "Isn't it a little late for you?" As he spoke he pulled the sheet around himself.

"Very funny, Kent," Perry grouched. "I just got word that the prosecutor in the Church trial wants to call Superman tomorrow to testify."

"I'll let him know as soon as I see him," Clark promised. "What time should I tell him to be at the courthouse?"

"Nine AM. That's when the trial is scheduled to reconvene," Perry told him. Behind Clark, Lois had climbed closer, snuggling up against his back. Clark shivered as she ran her hands down his back.

"Lois..." he hissed, taking the phone away from his ear.

She ignored him. "Perry, do they want me or Clark there?" she said loudly enough to be heard over Clark's phone. Clark hit the speakerphone switch on the phone so they could both hear Perry.

"Not as far as I know," Perry answered. "If they need you they'll call you directly."

Lois grabbed her own phone and checked for messages - nothing. "I haven't gotten anything yet," she told him.

"Have you got anything more on the attack at the gallery?" Perry asked.

"Lois and I gave our statements to the local police this morning and we've been told that the county sheriff and the state police are involved, but nothing more. We're not exactly a known commodity around here, so we don't have any ins with the local cop shop. Heck, they don't even trust Superman enough to let him in on what's going on."

"Anything more on the lab she must have been using?"

"Lois and I were thinking of checking out some of the labs nearer town tomorrow. See if we come up with anything, but I think it's a real long shot. I think the attack at the gallery was a test run and they were ready to move as soon as they had an idea of the results."

"But a move where?" Perry asked.

"Chief, if we knew that, I think Superman would already be on top of it, don't you?" Lois said, pausing in her nuzzling of Clark's neck.

"I should hope so," Perry stated. "And you're sure Superman wasn't affected by the poison the same way everyone else was, and Lois wasn't exposed?"

"Yeah, we're real sure about both of those," Lois said.

"Glad to hear it," Perry said. "By the way, Joel is looking forward to your article on Napa."

"We'll do our best," Clark promised.

There was a pause as they waited for Perry to speak again. "How are you two doing?"

"Fine, Perry," Lois answered for them. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, just wondering," Perry said. "You weren't too thrilled with the whole thing when you left."

"No, we're just fine," Clark assured him.

"Good," Perry responded. "Glad to hear it. I'll talk to you tomorrow." He rang off and Clark closed his phone.

"He suspects."

"Are you kidding?" Lois asked "He knows. He planned this."

"So, what do we do now?"

"I vote we let him stew," Lois said. "However, we should probably tell your mom and my dad."

"What about Lucy and your mom?"

"If we tell Mom or Lucy, Lucy will tell Ron and Ron will tell everyone at work," Lois said. "We'll never live it down."

"We have to tell them eventually," he reminded her.

"Clark, you've met my mother," Lois said. "The first thing she's going to do is start planning a reception so she can show you off to her friends while wondering what the hell I see in you. Then she'll start speculating, loudly, as to why we even bothered."

"I see your point," Clark conceded. "Considering the time, we should do it in the morning. You call your dad, I'll call my mom."

"Sounds like a plan. In the meantime, how about dessert?" Lois asked.

"I doubt there's any place open around here," Clark pointed out.

"Who said anything about going out?"

Clark slipped out in the wee hours of the morning to do his patrol. Lois was asleep, sprawled across the bed in complete abandon. If he was quick, she wouldn't even realize he'd left.

He did feel guilty that he hadn't been able to patrol the previous night but monitoring Lois's condition had taken precedence.

'...temptations will come, my son, not only to the flesh but also to the spirit. Remember,

never put one above all. Rather, love all humanity... so, the virtuous spirit has no need for thanks or approval, only the certain conviction that what has been done is right...' Jor-El's words echoed in his mind.

You sent me to Earth knowing I would become one of them he told the ghost of his long dead father. You sent me to Earth to save my life, yet you would deny me a future? Lois is right. If you wanted me to be separate and above them, you should have told me to become a priest.

The world was relatively quiet. A flood in Bangladesh, not really serious but threatening to overtake the people carrying all their worldly goods to higher ground. Not much he could do about the rising water - the early rains weren't something he could stop, even if he wanted to. But he could help the evacuees get to higher ground.

It was still early when he got back to their room, but Lois was already awake. She was sitting up in the bed, the cotton sheet pulled around her waist. She seemed completely unconcerned that she was naked, her breasts sagging a just a little, her nipples rosy against the ivory of her skin.

"I woke up and you weren't here," she said, but there was no accusation in her voice. "I assume the world is still there."

"The rains came early in Bangladesh. There's some flooding already," he told her. She nodded.

"Think they've got coffee ready yet?" she asked. "I'm not talking to my dad without some fortification and it's much too early to start drinking."

He grinned at her and super sped into jeans, t-shirt and glasses. "I'll go see," he told her as he headed for the door.

Coffee was ready when he walked into the breakfast room. The breakfast crew didn't seem too surprised to see him walk in. No doubt they had enough East Coast visitors to be used to people maintaining early hours.

He grabbed two mugs, fixing the coffee for them both - hers with a packet of sweetener and his with his usual sugar and cream.

Lois was curled up in one of the wing chairs with her phone in her hand when he walked in with the coffee. She'd thrown on her robe, belting it loosely around her hips. He set her mug on the little nook table. She smiled at him, picking up the mug and taking a sip. She sighed in appreciation. "I needed that," she told him, keying a number into her phone.

"Dad? It's me," she said into the phone. "I've got some news, but you've got to promise not to tell Mom or Lucy yet, okay?"

"Okay, pumpkin," Clark overheard Lois's father say over the phone. He took a sip of his own coffee before grabbing his own cell phone. "What's going on?"

"Clark and I... well, we're on an assignment in California, and one thing led to another. We went to Reno yesterday and got married."

"I can see why you don't want me to tell your mother," General Lane said with a resigned sounding chuckle. "I'm not going to ask if you're sure about this. So, I'll just say 'congratulations.' Is Clark there with you?"

"Yes, he's right here," Lois told him then handed her phone to Clark.

"Yes, sir?"

"Don't you *ever* hurt my daughter, you hear me, boy?" Lane said.

"Yes, sir. I hear you," Clark told him. "And I have no intention of ever doing that."

"Good. We understand each other."

"Yes, sir." He handed the phone back to Lois. She spoke a few more words to her father before hanging up.

"I'm still not used to him not hating me," Clark commented. "I still haven't figured out how that happened."

"It happened right after you got shot," Lois told him. "I'm afraid to ask what Henderson or Hodgekiss told him about what happened, but he did a complete about-face about you."

"You don't think he's figured out...?"

Lois shook her head. "If he has he certainly hasn't dropped any hints about it."

Clark heaved a sigh of relief. He found his mother's number in his phone list and selected the number. "Mom...? Um, I've got some news for you."

"What is it, Clark?" Martha Kent asked.

"Uh, Lois and I are in California on assignment and things got a little complicated."

"How complicated?" There was a wary undertone in her voice.

He swallowed hard, taking a deep breath before continuing. "We went to Reno yesterday and got married."

"I thought the two of you had decided to wait," she told him.

"Uh, yeah, we did," he admitted. "But things got complicated and we changed our minds."

"Well, if you're sure..." the wariness was still there but not as strong as it had been.

"I'm sure, Mom," he assured her. "Something happened that made it pretty obvious that waiting wasn't as good an option as we thought it was."

She chuckled. "You know you're going to have to bring her and Jason to Smallville so I can show off my daughter-in-law and grandson."

"I'll check and see when we can get away," Clark promised.

"Shouldn't be that hard since you and Lois know Superman," she told him.

He glanced at the time. "Um, speaking of him, *he* needs to be in Metropolis in about ten minutes. Love ya, Mom." He rang off, gave Lois a quick kiss and sped into the blue and red uniform.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," he promised.

"Can I come with you?"

"Lois Lane isn't supposed to be within a thousand miles of Metropolis, remember?"

"But Laura Landers can visit Metropolis." She grinned at him as she got up and grabbed her 'Laura' costume. She headed to the bathroom.

"You have five minutes," he warned.

"I only need three," she said.

She was in the jeans, boots and halter top within two minutes. She came out of the bathroom tucking her hair under the blonde wig. She shrugged into the black leather jacket and grabbed her purse, dropping her cosmetic bag and cell phone inside. "I can put on the makeup when we get there," she told him.

It took them less than five minutes to cross the country. Again she wondered at how she could be breathing when they were traveling at such speeds. She reasoned that his aura protected her somehow.

They come to ground in an alley near the courthouse where Church's trial was being held. He set her gently on her feet.

"Try to stay out of trouble," he warned.

"Always," she came back.

He crossed his arms across his chest and tried to look stern as he stared down at her. "I should have left you tied to the bed again."

"Don't even think about it, Flyboy," she warned then shooed him away. "You're going to be late. I'll meet you outside the courthouse when you're done."

He nodded and launched himself into the sky, hoping she had the sense to stay out of trouble.

He landed again, this time in front of the courthouse, into the middle of a media circus. Linda King and WGBS cameras were waiting for him, along with reporters from all the major east coast papers. He spotted Gil Truman and Roberta Evans from the Daily Planet in the crowd but didn't acknowledge them. He recognized several others as well, having met them as Clark.

Superman strode through the crowd and started to climb the stairs to the main entrance where uniformed officers stood guarding the doors. Linda King ran to catch up with him, shoving her cordless mike into his face.

"Superman. Is it true that D.A. Griffin has requested you stay away from Metropolis until the Church trial is over?" she demanded.

He paused and looked down at her. "The District Attorney's office has not spoken to me about that, no." *Strictly true - the message had been passed to Perry White.*

"Then where have you been the past three days?"

"The Earth is a large place, Ms. King. And occasionally other people need my assistance, too."

"What happened in Napa?"

He gave her a stern look. "Ms. King. I'm sure you're aware that I cannot comment on an ongoing police investigation... Now if you've excuse me, I have an appointment, and I'm running late."

King stepped back and let him pass. He didn't let her see the sigh of relief that escaped him as he entered the main hall of the courthouse. Dealing with Linda King wasn't as bad as dealing with kryptonite, or an angry Lois Lane, but it was close.

"Trial's upstairs, big guy, room two-oh-four" one of the officers told him. He nodded to the officer and sped up the marble steps to the next floor.

The upper hallway wasn't quite as congested as the main floor or the entrance stairs. He spotted Amanda Church, the defendant's step-mother, standing with a woman with a wide hat. Mrs. Church was the very young widow of Bill Church's father. Lois was convinced that

Mindy was involved in Intergang, had probably arranged her husband's murder while he was in prison serving a conviction on racketeering. But nothing could be proven against her, so far. Clark had thought Lois was reaching, but now he wasn't so sure.

He saw Inspector Bill Henderson speaking with one of his officers. The detective gave Superman a polite nod when he caught sight of him. Perry White was waiting with Jimmy Olsen - Jimmy had won the lottery to be one of the two news photographers allowed to cover the trial. The WBGS video crew was not allowed on the upper floor.

"Mister White, I'm surprised to see you here," Superman said, coming over and shaking the older man's hand.

"That makes two of us," Perry responded. "I got a call from Griffin's office asking me to be here today, but nobody seems to know why."

"That's odd," Superman commented. He took a moment to look over the building. Nothing unusual as far as he could tell and he'd gotten pretty good at identifying such things as bombs while using his x-ray vision. However, the building was old enough that some rooms still had lead paint on the walls. "I don't see anything unusual in the areas I can see, and I assume the police have been keeping an eye out to prevent anything 'untoward' from happening."

"I would assume so," Perry agreed.

Superman leaned closer to the older man. "How's the trial going?" he asked, keeping his voice very quiet.

"Impossible to say," Perry admitted. "Griffin's just... it's not going as well as it should, considering the amount of evidence that ties Church to Intergang's recent resurgence. It may well depend on how convincing you and Henderson are."

"I see," Superman said, straightening up.

One of the courtroom doors opened and a bailiff came out, looking around. He stared at Superman for a moment. "Superman...?"

Superman nodded ever so slightly in Perry's direction then walked into the courtroom.

District Attorney Matthew Griffin smiled when he caught sight of Superman walking down the center aisle towards the prosecution's table.

Griffin stood. "Your honor, we call Superman to return to the stand."

Superman strode up to the witness stand then turned, facing the audience.

Judge Jane Page looked over at him. "Just a reminder that you're still under oath, Superman," she said.

"I understand, your honor," he said. He'd been warned on previous court appearances to not cross his arms and to keep his expression as neutral as possible. It was difficult. The crossed arm stance was second nature to him while wearing the Suit, as was staring down offenders. Instead he forced himself to keep his hands at his waist, hands folded. He was less intimidating that way.

She gestured for him to sit down. He arranged his cape, sat, and waited for the defense attorney to begin. The man's name was Cross and he'd represented crime bosses all up and down the east coast. He had a reputation for ruthlessness that was matched only by his clients.

Superman had given most of his testimony on the previous Friday, when he'd been sworn in, gave his name for the record as Kal-El of Krypton to the apparent amusement of both Cross and Church.

More questions covering the same material. How had he known to look for William Church? Why had he been looking for evidence against Church? What gave him the right to

look into Church's affairs? The defense didn't seem interested in what Superman had uncovered, only why Superman had been involved at all. He rubbed his temple absently, his elbow resting on the chair arm.

"Something wrong, Superman?" Cross asked. There was an unpleasant edge in his voice that hadn't been there earlier. "Feeling a little stressed?"

Superman froze. Then he straightened up in his seat. "Your honor, there's kryptonite in here."

The judge leaned closer to him. "You're sure?"

Superman nodded. "Yes, your honor."

Page's lips thinned. "Bailiff, I want this courtroom cleared and I want this place searched until the kryptonite is found. This court is adjourned until tomorrow morning pending assurances that this room is clear of poison."

"Your honor," Cross protested. "This is extremely irregular! How can you accept the word of this... *alien* who could well be trying to postpone this trial for his own purposes?"

A hush fell over the courtroom at Cross's words.

"Councilor, I suggest you rephrase that last statement," Judge Page warned. "I will not have people in my courtroom subjected to your blatant racism. Kal-El is a guest in this country, on this planet. And if he says there's a dangerous substance in this building, I, for one, am not about to say he's wrong."

She turned and Superman was gratified to see sympathy in her eyes. The kryptonite was giving him a headache as well as making him nauseous and he knew it wouldn't be long before he broke into a fever. He already wasn't sure about his powers.

"Clear this courtroom now!" Page ordered crisply as she got out of her own chair and headed out of the room herself.

The courtroom started to empty, the observers and witnesses congregating in the hallway outside. He noticed that Perry and Jimmy were waiting, letting others leave before them. He made his way toward the hallway, past the bailiffs and guards. The Daily Planet editor and photographer fell into step on either side of him.

"How are you feeling, son?" Perry asked.

"I've felt worse," Superman admitted. "But I'll be okay." Outside the courtroom doors he paused, taking a moment to recoup his strength.

"Why would anyone want to put kryptonite in the courtroom?" Jimmy asked. "You've already testified."

"I know," Superman said. "It doesn't make a lot of sense. Kryptonite isn't that dangerous to humans, at least not on the short term." He looked around at the crowd. Lois was there, wig in place, purse slung over her shoulder. She was scanning the crowd. Suddenly she stopped. Her body was still, eyes narrow as she sighted whatever she'd been looking for.

Superman followed the path of her gaze, catching sight of a slender woman wearing a large hat that hid her face. But it was what was in the woman's hands that made him cringe. She had an ornate cobalt blue bottle with an atomizer and she was heading towards him and Perry. *Miranda Miller. So that's what she's after. Get everyone outside so she can get to them.*

"Miller's here," Superman murmured to Perry then moved away from the older man, staying close to the wall. Miller followed him, instead of Perry. Then he spotted Nigel Smith, also holding a cobalt blue bottle. Smith was heading toward Lois and Bill Henderson. Lois was concentrating on Miller. He doubted she saw Smith moving toward her through the crowd and

no one else understood the danger.

"Bill, Smith is heading your way!" Superman said loudly enough to be heard over the crowd. He was gratified to see the uniformed officers, Henderson, and Lois all moving into action. Several uniformed officers moved closer to Henderson to protect him while Lois scanned the throng for Smith.

Superman was still watching the crowd. Smith seemed to falter, turning to head back into the mass to disappear. He lost sight of Miller, swinging his head around to look for Perry and Jimmy, making sure they were still safe. They were, for the moment. Then he felt spray on his face. Without thinking he turned to see who was beside him - and got a face full of the smelly aerosol. Miller was beside him and he hadn't heard her, hadn't seen her.

His eyes were stinging and started to water and he could feel his throat constrict, his breath being cut off. He blinked to clear his eyes and spotted Miller moving away from him, toward Perry. He could see the bottle in right hand, her left poised over the atomizer bulb. He hurriedly wiped his hand over his eyes to clear them. There was an annoying buzzing in his ears. Miller was getting closer to her target and he was finding it harder and harder to breathe.

Perry had spotted her and was herding Jimmy away from the woman.

"Miranda, you don't want to do this!" Superman managed to choke out.

She stopped and looked back at him, disdain and hatred written across her fine-features. "You have no idea what I want to do, you flying interfering *freak!*"

He narrowed his eyes and concentrated a beam of heat vision at the bottle in her hand. It exploded in her hands and she screamed as she was sprayed with scalding liquid and burning alcohol.

The buzzing in his ears grew louder and he realized he was wheezing, fighting for each breath, fighting to get any air into his lungs at all. He felt the wall against his back as the room started spinning. He started sliding down the wall, unable to hold himself up any longer. Then he felt a warm body beside him, a hand pulling his arm over a man's shoulders, keeping him from falling.

"Olsen, give me that inhaler." It was Perry's voice coming from very close to him. "Okay son, I need you to open your mouth." *Open my mouth?* He felt something plastic go between his teeth. "Breathe in as deep as you can..." An odd tasting spray entered his mouth. Oddly enough, the constriction in his chest began to ease.

"Again..." Perry's voice commanded. He obeyed, taking the mist into his lungs once more.

"Is it working?" Lois's voice said. He felt her arm go around his waist, moving him forward. He managed to open his eyes. Lois and Perry were on either side of him, guiding him through the crowd.

"I think so," Perry told her. "His color's better... Let's get him into the restroom."

"What happened?" Superman managed to croak out. Jimmy held the men's restroom door open for them. He then closed it behind them, staying outside.

"Henderson's people grabbed Smith before he could spray anybody," Lois explained. "But Miller got you right in the face."

He tried to straighten up, to get away from them. "I've got it on me... I could transfer it to you..." He was still wheezing, but not as bad as before.

"It's only effective in aerosol form," Lois said. "Once it hits skin it starts to break down, fast. Friedman thinks it's the skin's acidity that does it. You're not contagious, but you are allergic." She grabbed several paper towels, dampened them then hit the soap dispenser before handing the towels to him. "Wash your face," she ordered.

He used the soapy towels to get the poison off then splashed fresh water on his face to rinse the soap and poison down the drain. "That was why Miller wasn't affected when she demonstrated the scent in her shop," he realized. "It wasn't an aerosol."

"You told Doctor Langdon you'd had a reaction when exposed to someone who had it on their skin, but they weren't showing any symptoms. That got him thinking so he passed that information on to Friedman who did some more testing on the poison," Lois told him. "Doctor Faulkner called and let me know so I could pass it on to you and to the police." She paused, brushing his hair out of his face as he leaned over the sink.

He looked at his own reflection. He was still pale and there was a greenish cast to his cheeks.

"How are you feeling?" Lois asked.

"Better, thank you," he said. "What made you think an inhaler would work on me?"

"It works on Jason," Perry told him.

The restroom door opened and Bill Henderson walked in. "You've got quite a guard dog out there," he joked, pointing his thumb at the door. He looked hard at Superman. "Are you okay?"

Superman nodded. "I will be. Miller's poison is laced with kryptonite and I don't react very well to it."

"Well, she's screaming bloody murder that you attacked her without provocation," Henderson told them.

"No provocation? How does she explain the kryptonite that has to be all over her?" Lois asked. Her voice was harsh with anger. "And he just happens to go into bronchospasm after she sprays him in the face with the same crap she used to poison those people in Napa?"

Henderson raised his hands, palms out, as if in self-defense. "There happen to be photos of her spraying him and his reaction immediately after. We also know she got onto the floor because Cross's office put her name on the allowed list, although he denies it. And we don't have proof yet that it's the same stuff. But as soon as we do, Napa County, California, has first dibs on her and Smith, thanks to Lane and Kent."

"What about Smith?" Perry asked. "He was carrying another one of those bottles, wasn't he?"

"Uh huh. Same thing as Miller. Cross's office put him of the list, only Cross denies ever having met him. Either way, it's an interesting turn of events," Henderson reported. "By the way, you didn't hear any of this from me."

"Of course not," Lois replied. "Besides, Laura Landers, and Superman are *not* reporters for the Daily Planet."

There was a knock on the door and Jimmy stuck his head in. "Judge Page has officially postponed the trial until tomorrow," he reported. "She wants to make sure Superman is fully recovered from the attack and the building is clear of kryptonite and the pheromone poison. The bomb squad would like us out of the building and there're some EMTs out here in case Superman needs them."

Superman straightened up, squaring his shoulders, steeling himself for the ordeal to come - facing the press. It was something he always dreaded in spite of being a member of the press himself - as Clark Kent. He saw Lois run her eyes down his body and he felt naked again. This time he knew it was the poison in his system that was causing his erection. The Suit hid very little. Everyone was going to know that the poison affected him too.

"I can't go out there like this," he murmured. He felt his face growing warm. "I should

have more control than this."

"Do you normally?" Perry asked.

"Yes," Superman told him, not sure if the older man was being sarcastic or not.

Lois reached up to his shoulders and grabbed his cape, pulling it forward over his chest. "Hold it together," Lois instructed. He grabbed both edges of the cape in one hand, allowing the rest of the crimson fabric drape over his body, protecting what was left of his dignity.

"Henderson, can you get us out the back way?" Perry asked.

"Not a problem," he told them. "Follow me." He turned to look back at Lois. "By the way, nice ring. Is it new?"

"Uh, yes," she admitted with an uncharacteristic giggle.

Perry peered up at Superman, a wry smile on his face. "Congratulations?"

Lois beckoned for Jimmy to follow her, Perry, Bill Henderson, and Superman as they left the now nearly empty hallway outside the courtroom. The press had been shooed away by the MPD bomb squad. Members of the bomb search team nodded as the little group headed for the back stairway. Lois saw a few questioning looks aimed at Superman, but no one said anything to him, respecting his space. Superman was a hero to these people more than to most other MPD professionals - he was the one most often called to handle the unusual explosives. And they, more than most, knew the effect of kryptonite on him.

He was still looking unwell. He was still pale, head bowed, allowing Henderson and Perry to stay close to him. It was rare that he allowed people so close while in public, aside from those he was rescuing or transporting.

They made it through the back entrance, across the service alley into the adjacent parking garage without incident. Apparently no one thought to look for Superman heading to the parking garage. Perry's silver Passat sedan was parked on the second level, not far from Henderson's unmarked police car.

"I'll let you know if anything else comes up," Henderson promised as he headed off to his own car.

Lois was surprised at how quiet Jimmy had been as they walked. He seemed to be deep in thought as he trailed behind them.

Superman let go of the cape, letting the crimson fabric fall across his back again as it was designed to do. Lois noticed that his color was better, much closer to normal. He was standing straighter as well and it was obvious that the poison had worn off.

"How're you doing?" Perry asked.

"Better," Superman replied. "Thank you." He took a deep breath to clear his lungs, slowly blowing the air out through his nose. "I think I'll head off, get a shower, and get the last of the poison off of me."

"If you see Clark, let him know I'll meet him at his apartment in a little bit," Lois told him. "There're some things I want to check out at the office, first."

"Would you rather he met you there?" Superman asked.

She considered the offer, weighing the pros and cons in her mind. "Only if he feels up to facing the gauntlet." She showed him the back of her left hand and waggled her fingers. The garage lights glittered off the gold band she wore. Facing the office with the news of her and Clark's elopement was going to be almost as hard as dealing with her mother.

Superman nodded then disappeared, leaving only a gust of air behind him. But Lois was positive she'd seen a glimmer of a nervous smile on his face before he vanished.

Perry cleared his throat. "You're not supposed to be in Metropolis, much less the office, until next Monday," he reminded her as he unlocked his car.

"Perry, the FDA versus lil' ol' Doc' Miller and her cosmetics firm became something else entirely two nights ago," Lois reminded him, climbing into the passenger seat. "Six people are dead thanks to her..."

"Seven," Jimmy corrected, closing the back door behind him. "Another one died this morning."

"Seven dead," Lois amended. "And she openly attacked Superman. And don't tell me I'm over reacting or that it wasn't part of some sort of plan. We both know better. Superman and I were both specifically targeted that night. I'm positive the only reason Clark wasn't attacked was because of his remarkable ability to vanish."

Perry pulled the car out of the parking space and maneuvered the sedan out of the garage and onto the street outside. The WGBS van was still stationed outside the courthouse, the crew lying in wait to accost anyone interesting or famous as they left the building.

"They didn't see you when you came in, did they?" Perry asked.

"I came through the back after I was dropped off," Lois explained. "Nobody was watching the back. They were too interested in catching Superman."

There was silence as Perry concentrated on the midday traffic. Jimmy was still unusually quiet, not at all his normally bubbly self. Lois noticed he kept peeking at her out of the corner of his eyes.

"So, when were you and Clark going to let me, and personnel, know about your change in status?" Perry asked, turning the Passat into the parking garage next to the Daily Planet.

"We've only told my dad and his mom, so far," Lois admitted. "And don't you even think about invoking that blasted anti-fraternization rule. That one went by the boards a long time ago, especially since you keep making reservations for me and Clark for rooms with only one bed."

"I wouldn't dream of invoking it," Perry told her. "Besides, you were engaged to my nephew. If I was going to have a fit over something like that, I would have done it a long time ago. Would have saved me a whole lot of accusations of nepotism. Just don't let it get in the way of your jobs. But I know you both know that. And I trust you both not to do anything that would hurt the paper. I don't want a repeat of Norcross and Judd"

"Thanks, Chief," Lois said.

"Oh, and lose the wig," Perry ordered. "It doesn't do a thing for you."

Grinning, she pulled off the wig and ran her fingers through her hair to fluff it up. Perry parked the car, pocketed his keys then led the way into the Daily Planet building, past the security station at the garage entrance.

"I thought I looked pretty good as a biker chick," she said as they entered the elevator heading for the newsroom floor. Jimmy was still too quiet. "Jimmy, what's wrong?" she asked.

He hung his head. "I thought... I thought you'd at least have told me what you guys per planning. I thought I was your friend."

So that's it. "Uh, Jimmy," Lois began. "We didn't know what we were planning. It just seemed like the right thing to do, so we did. I haven't told my mom or my sister, yet. We haven't even told Jason. So please, keep it quiet."

The elevator doors opened onto the controlled chaos of the Daily Planet bullpen.

Lois strode across the floor to her desk, aware of the curious eyes that followed her. It had been a very long time since she'd walked into the newsroom after coming off an

undercover investigation. Most of the staff had never seen her wearing anything but tailored suits. 'The biker babe' outfit she was sporting had to be something of a shock to most of them.

She threw her jacket over the back of her chair and settled down to work. She made a list of what she needed from research - more on Miller's finances and connections. She added information on Nigel Smith, his links to Miller, to Church's attorney Cross, anything else that might link the pair together. Then she logged in to her computer and began outlining her story on the attack on Superman at the courthouse.

Her concentration was broken by an odd hush that fell over the room and a warm hand between her shoulder blades. She looked up and smiled at Clark, abruptly realizing what the hush had meant. The newsroom had never seen Clark in anything but ill-fitting three piece suits. But today he was wearing jeans, boots, and a knit fisherman's sweater. He settled into the chair next to hers.

"Are you okay?" she asked, keeping her voice low.

"Yeah, fine," Clark replied. "Jimmy seems a little upset though. What's going on?"

"He figures we should have at least told him what was going on with us," she explained. "I've asked him to keep it quiet. At least until we've told Jason, Mom, and Lucy. By the way, we're under orders not to do a repeat of Norcross and Judd."

"And they are?" Clark asked.

"You remember. Bill Norcross and Serena Judd?" she said. "One of Perry's favorite warning stories. They were partners when he first made editor. Got involved, got married, nasty divorce. She ended up teaching yoga in Alaska. He fell in a bottle. When he finally dried out he started some sort of cable TV ministry." She handed him her list for research. "What I think we need."

"Add connections to Mindy Church to the list," Clark instructed. "I saw her talking to Miller before I was called into the courtroom."

"You're sure it was Miller?"

"Absolutely. Question is: is Mindy trying to get Church acquitted or convicted?"

"We know he claims she's out to get him," Lois reminded him. "Only nobody was taking it seriously."

"Except you," Clark noted.

"We've both met her," Lois reminded him. "She's nowhere near as stupid as she acts. I just don't understand why people don't see it."

"Preconceptions and misdirection," Clark said with a smile. "Works like a charm. We also need to find out who it was that called Perry to be at the courthouse this morning. He thinks it was someone from Griffin's office."

"Which then begs the question of why the D.A. would want him there?"

"Exactly. And then there's the question of Church's attorney. He claims he knows nothing about Miller and Smith. Only it was his office that gave them permission to be there."

She made additional notes on her pad, drawing lines between the various names. "Want to run down to research and get them onto this? I know Perry wants this story on the attack ready for the next edition."

"Ooh, another Superman exclusive for Lois Lane?"

"Smartass," she muttered under her breath. He chuckled.

"Different look for you, isn't it Kent?" a smarmy voice said from behind them. They both looked up to see Ralph Gunderson smirking at them. Clark shrugged and pushed his glasses up his nose.

"Oh, um, hi Ralph," Clark greeted the other man.

"So, have fun in California?"

"If you consider watching people being raped and murdered as 'fun'," Lois responded. "We had loads of fun." Her voice dripped with sarcasm. She made no attempt to hide her dislike of Ralph. She turned back to Clark. "You get that going. I'll finish this. Oh, and if you hear Ralph screaming, don't bother to call Superman. It'll just be me stuffing Ralph's balls in his mouth." She gave him a toothy smile and Clark shuddered unconvincingly.

Ralph paled. "Hey, I was just starting a conversation here," he protested.

"Don't you have work to do?" Lois asked. Ralph backed away.

"Nice ring," he commented before turning to go back to his own desk.

Lois sighed. *Just great. Just more grist for the rumor mill.*

"Maybe we should just have Perry announce it?" Clark suggested quietly.

"I was hoping we could slip in under the radar," Lois admitted. "Not make a big deal about it."

A wistful, worried expression crossed Clark's face, clouding his blue eyes. "Lois, are you ashamed to admit that we...? I mean... I understand if you think I pushed you into this, what with the drug and all..."

Lois looked up at him, eyes wide with consternation. "Is that what...?" She firmed her expression, taking him by the hand and leading him to the conference room next to Perry's office. She shut the door behind them but didn't bother to lower the blinds.

"Clark, ever since Richard died, everyone's been telling us to wait, that it's too soon to start a relationship. That we have to move past his death first. Hell, even your mother's been saying that we should wait. She and Ben both told me to wait on getting rid of Richard's belongings, that I'd regret it if I moved too soon," Lois told him.

"I think Miller's poison gave us both a big push," Clark admitted. "But I'll understand if..."

"Clark Kent, if you think I'm going to let you go again, you are out of your tiny Kryptonian mind," she told him. She was gratified to see a smile quirking around the corners of his mouth. "I'm just worried about what the hyenas out there are going to say about us moving so quickly. We haven't given them any reason to think we've been working towards this, have we? Except for Perry, I mean. They're all going to think Mad Dog Lane is taking advantage of the poor innocent Kansas farm boy who's had a crush on her all these years."

At that he finally chuckled. "Well, they could think that I finally got around to making an honest woman of you."

"You really think they'll think that?"

"No. They're going to be imagining we're both sharing a bed with Superman and since I have ID and a credit card, my name went on the license."

"It's not my fault they have dirty minds," Lois said with a chuckle. "Would you share me with Superman?"

"Of course. Who am I to say 'no' to Superman?"

She glanced out the glass wall to the bullpen. A good number of their fellows had paused in their work and were now watching them with varying degrees of interest. "We seem to be the floorshow." She grinned up at him, wrapping her arms around his neck. "How's about we given them their money's worth?"

"You left the blinds up," he reminded her.

"Yup." She pulled him into a kiss and he reciprocated. He lifted her easily, setting her bottom on the conference room table. She wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him

closer to her. Their kiss deepened, sending her stomach into a wild swirl. "Pity we have to keep our clothes on," she murmured as she came up for air.

"Please do," Perry's voice said from the doorway. "I assume this is your plan on how to let the cat out of the bag?"

"Yup," Lois said, nuzzling Clark's ear.

"Go home," Perry ordered.

"We both have work to finish," Clark managed to say.

"Well, you're not doing it in here, are you?" Perry observed.

"Nope," Lois admitted. She looked into Clark's eyes, seeing a fierce longing there. "We will finish this later, I promise."

"Somewhere more private, I hope," Perry said, but Lois could hear the amusement in his gruff voice. She watched him as he walked back into the bullpen and put up his hands, asking for the attention of the staff.

"In case their little show hasn't clued you in," Perry announced. "Lois Lane and Clark Kent got married yesterday." Except for the muted voices on the overhead monitors and the various mechanical noises of computers and printers, the room had fallen silent. Lois could see the surprise in the faces of those closest to the conference room.

Ralph had actually gone pale. *Good.*

"Oh crud," Lois said aloud.

"What?" Clark asked as he disentangled himself from her. She reached into her jeans pocket and pulled out her cell phone.

"Ron's here and I bet he's already on the phone to Lucy," Lois explained as she opened her phone to dial her mother.

"I'll get started on that research," Clark announced.

She grabbed his arm. "No you don't. I need moral support here, Farm boy," she told him. She turned her attention back to her phone. "Uh, Mom, it's Lois... I just called to give you the good news. Clark and I went to Reno yesterday and got married... Yes, Mom, we'll have a reception in town and I'm sure you and Lucy can help plan it... No Mom, not Mark, Clark. The tall fellow with the glasses. You know, Jason's father...? Yes, I'm sure, Mom... Yes, Mom... Goodbye Mom, talk to you later." She folded up her phone to cut the connection.

"That went better than expected," Clark commented. "Now we just have to tell Jason."

Lois checked her watch. "He's still in school. How about we finish up here then pick him up at school?"

"Your car is still at the airport," he reminded her.

She just looked at him for a moment. "You are so weird sometimes, you know that? We can take a cab, you know. This is Metropolis."

"Mommy!" Jason yelled as he ran across the parking lot toward his mother. Clark smiled as he watched Lois crouch down to give the boy a hug. "Aunt Lucy said you weren't going to come back until next week," Jason continued excitedly.

"Well, we came back for the day to do some things," Lois explained, straightening up and taking his hand. "But we have to go back to California tonight to finish our work there."

"Can you take me with you?" Jason asked, bouncing on his toes and looking from one adult to the other.

"Not this time, kiddo," Clark answered. "But we do have some news that I hope you'll like."

Jason stopped and looked up at the two adults. Then his eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. "I'm gonna' have a baby brother or sister?"

"What gives you that idea, Jason?" Lois asked.

"Well, that's what Susie's parents told her before they told her that her mommy was going to have a new baby," he explained seriously.

"Well, you don't have to worry about that for a while, munchkin," Lois assured him. "We have different news."

He gave her a puzzled look. "Okay..."

"Clark and I got married yesterday," Lois told him, crouching down again so her eyes were level with his. She watched his face. "That means he's going to move in with us..." She glanced up at Clark. "I assume you're moving in, right?"

He nodded. "I don't have all that much," he assured her.

Jason's face lit up. "You're gonna live with us?"

"Uh huh," Clark agreed.

"But Jason," Lois said carefully. "It also means you'll have to go back to sleeping in your own bed, because Clark will be sleeping in Mommy's big bed."

"But where will you sleep?" Jason asked. His forehead creased in confusion.

"In Mommy's big bed, with Clark."

"Like Daddy did?"

"Yes," she answered simply. Richard's death had been hard on Jason. He still occasionally cried at night, when he thought his mother didn't hear. He cried because his daddy wasn't with them anymore, that bad men had sent his daddy up to God.

"Is Clark going to replace Daddy?"

Clark crouched down beside Lois. This was the hard part, he knew. How to explain to a kindergartener what was happening around him. That his mother was with someone else, someone who wasn't the father he'd know all of his short life.

"Jason, nobody can replace your daddy - Not me, not even Superman. Your daddy was a very special person and nobody can replace him, and we don't ever intend to forget him and we will always miss him. But your mommy and I love each other and we've decided we want to live together and make a family together like you and your mommy and daddy did."

Jason frowned as he studied Clark's face. "What should I call you?"

"What would you like to call me?"

"Not 'Daddy.' He's dead," Jason announced sadly.

"Well, there are other words you could use," Clark explained, straightening up. "We can talk about it later. You don't have to decide right now."

"Okay," Jason agreed. He looked up at Clark, craning his neck. "Does this mean that Grandma Martha is my *real* Grandma now?"

"Who told you that Grandma Martha wasn't your real grandma?" Lois asked.

"Grandma Ellen," Jason said. His eyes were wide with confusion.

"Jason, despite what Grandma Ellen says, Martha Kent was your real grandma even when we didn't know she was," Lois stated firmly. "So now, where should we go for dinner?"

"Burritos!" Jason yelled, bouncing up and down.

"Maria's Casa del Burrito it is then," Lois agreed.

"You're sure you don't want to take Jason home for the night?" Lucy asked. Lois shook her head.

"We're heading back to Napa tonight," Lois said. "Our laptops are there, and Clark and I still have work to do."

"But I thought the people involved in the attack at the courthouse were in jail?" Lucy said.

"The attackers may be in jail, but the people behind them still haven't been identified," Clark told her. He turned to Lois. "We'd better get going..."

"I'll call you in the morning," Lois promised her sister as she and Clark left the house.

"That all went better than I'd hoped," Lois commented when they arrived back at their room in Napa. "Did you see the look on Ralph's face when Perry announced it to the bullpen?"

"Oh, yes," Clark chuckled. "He looked like he was ready to have a heart attack."

"My mom and dad seem to be handling it pretty well," Lois added. "Although I do expect to be thoroughly embarrassed when she puts together the reception for us."

"Your dad hardly even threatened me," Clark told her. He helped Lois out of her jacket, tossing it on the chair. He kissed her neck just above her collarbone.

"I thought Jason was handling it pretty well, too" Lois said as he began to move up her neck to her jaw. "It's just going to take him a little while to get used to the idea... Keep that up and we won't be getting any work done tonight."

"You win," Clark sighed. "Let's see what research has sent us...Then we'll attend to other matters..."

He grimaced at her, betraying his disappointment as he pulled away from her and pulled his laptop out of its case. The room attendant had been in sometime earlier, made the bed, cleaned the bathroom and put in clean towels and fresh soap.

Lois grabbed her own computer and booted it up. She wasn't especially worried that someone might have accessed either of their machines. Both had top-of-the-line security, including fingerprint readers. Clark's was even more secure than hers - he had a STAR Labs security token for his machine.

Research had sent a mass of data. There was also an email note from Bill Henderson. The Metropolis FBI lab had tentatively confirmed that the poison in the bottles Smith and Miller carried was the same as what was used in Napa. He also noted that D.A. Griffin had spent over an hour with Smith - speculation was that Smith was working on a plea bargain.

"This is interesting," Clark murmured, looking up from his own screen. "The blue bottles are made of leaded glass. Dee Dee's looking into who manufactured them."

"How about this one? Church Industries owns a winery in Napa Valley. *La Inglesia*," Lois read.

"That is interesting," Clark confirmed. "I assume you'll be checking them out tomorrow?"

"I'm thinking we should do it together," she told him. "We have coupons for their wine-tasting. It would look better if we're doing the touristy thing." She looked over at him, catching the bemused look on his face. "One thing I've learned since Jason was born is when I need backup." He raised one eyebrow at her. "Okay, I admit I misjudged the situation when I took Jason with me when I went aboard the **Gertrude**, but frankly, I wasn't expecting to find Lex Luthor hiding in plain sight, either," she told him.

"Court reconvenes at nine tomorrow," Clark told her. "The bomb squad found more of the poison on the courthouse roof. It looks like someone was trying to feed the poison into the HVAC system."

"But yesterday was warm," Lois reminded him.

"Not only that, but the courthouse is on an energy saving plan that had the heating system turned off and it was still cool enough the AC didn't turn on," Clark told her. "We got lucky. The device the bomb squad found had been triggered, but the poison wasn't dispersed through the whole system."

"I thought the HVAC systems and roof vents on government buildings were supposed to be secured," Lois commented. "Anti-terrorist precautions after the Spires came down."

"Lois, we both know how easy it is to get around most of those 'security measures'," he reminded her. "Those are only there to keep honest people out."

Lois skimmed through the rest of the documents research had sent her. "No word on why Griffin's office wanted Perry at the courthouse?"

"I asked Gil and Bobby to look into it," Clark told her. "They're looking into Miller and Smith's connection to Cross as well, but I'm betting that Cross is telling the truth, that he didn't know anything about it. He was with Bill Church when Superman was attacked. He was at risk, too."

"Which means it was probably someone in his office," Lois observed. "And Cross, Caulder, and Associates isn't exactly a small law firm."

"Gil and Bobby are pretty good," Clark said. "They'll find something."

Lois shut down her computer then reached to the ceiling in a long stretch. She watched Clark's face as he watched her. "In the meantime, we have other things we can do," she murmured.

"Yes, we do," he agreed with a smile.

He had started kissing her collarbone again, working his way up to her earlobe, nipping it gently, and tweaking it with his tongue. His hands went behind her neck and she felt the top of her halter come loose, the fabric dropping below her breasts. He gently kneaded her breasts, his thumbs running over the soft, delicate skin of her areoles. Her nipples were growing hard.

"You are wearing too much," she announced silkily, pulling back just enough for him to pull his sweater off. She ran her hands over his soft skin, tweaking his nipples much the same way he had done to her before reaching down to his jeans and undoing the button on his waistband. He quickly shed his boots and jeans. "Clark?"

"Um hum?" He was kissing her hair and untying the back of her halter top.

"Promise me you'll never leave me."

He pulled back, gazing into her eyes. His eyes were so blue, so sincere. "Lois, I swear to you, the only way I will ever leave you is through death. And I don't plan on dying any time soon."

"Good."

He went back to kissing her neck, finally working his way up to capture her mouth. She returned his kiss with a ferocity that surprised even her, capturing his lower lip between her teeth. He was strong, invulnerable, yet his skin was soft and warm, his hands gentle on her flesh. He guided her to the bed, forcing her down on the mattress.

"Now you're the one wearing too much," he observed, pulling off her boots and socks then moving up to the waistband of her jeans. She lifted her hips off the mattress as he unzipped her jeans and slipped them down over her legs, finally dropping them with her halter and boots. He pulled her to the edge of the mattress so that her buttocks were on the edge of the bed. He knelt on the floor between her legs and placed her feet on his shoulders.

"How's this?" he asked, running a finger over her vulva, around her vagina as he blew

gently on her clitoris.

"Oh, God, where did you learn that?" she asked, letting herself float on the pleasure he was giving her. Her stomach was fluttering inside her, radiating out like heat from a flame.

"I read a lot," he admitted, adding another finger to his explorations. "Plus much more often than not, when a woman screams, it's *not* a mugging or a rape. I have to watch sometimes to see which it is."

She raised her head to see his face, supporting her upper body on her elbows. He gave her a shy, almost embarrassed smile as he continued his ministrations. *How much has he seen in his life? How much horror? How much pain? But he was here with her now. Pleasuring her as if that was the only concern he had in the world.* "You keep that up and I won't hold myself responsible for what happens next."

He smiled at her and leaned closer to her. She breathed in deeply, throwing back her head as she felt fingers exploring inside her, gently stretching, teasing, tantalizing her. She felt his warm breath on her clit, then the firm moistness of his tongue as he tasted her, his mouth seeking her innermost secrets. He sucked gently on the hard nub of her clit then allowed his tongue to explore more.

"You taste good, you know that?" he said, taking a moment to look at her face. She knew she was flushed with arousal as she watched his mouth disappear between her legs again. His tongue flicked against her like a cat lapping cream.

"Either take me or bring me, but stop teasing me," she said breathlessly. He lowered her feet and stood up then lifted her easily. She threw her arms around his neck, clasping his hips with her legs as he settled her onto his shaft. She gasped as he entered her, electricity jolting through her body as he kneaded her buttocks. She rode up and down on him, bracing her legs on his pelvis, feeling the deliciousness of his cock sliding up and down inside of her as she moved.

He leaned in, pressing his lips to hers, more of a caress than a kiss. She parted her lips, darting her tongue into his mouth in a sensual dance that merely echoed the passion that was building inside her. She consciously clamped down, her inner muscles pulsing, squeezing in rhythmic contractions. She could feel the tension building, a flood of wants and needs, overwhelming, demanding.

She rode him harder, feeling the urgency of his hands on her buttocks as he supported her weight. She felt him pulsing inside her, his lips searing a path down her neck. He thrust harder against her, arching his back in a paroxysm of orgasm. She moaned in pleasure, her own body convulsing in an eruption of ecstasy.

Sated, he laid her on the bed, stretching out beside her. He propped his head up on one hand, caressing her face with the back of his free hand. "You are so beautiful. I can't believe how lucky I am," he told her, voice still husky with passion.

"I can't believe how lucky *I* am," she told him. "I know it sounds heartless and selfish, but I'm glad you were the one who survived. Not just because of the fallout your death would have caused for everyone, but because you are the one I want to wake up next to every morning." She watched the emotions flicker across his face, confusion, concern, wonder, love. "Don't get me wrong. I loved Richard. And I probably would have married him eventually if you hadn't found your way back. But, in his own way, he was consoling a widow, too. He knew I could never give him my whole heart."

"Lois, I know you loved him. You wouldn't have stayed with him if you hadn't," Clark said solemnly. "And I do recognize the risks of consoling a widow. I know there will always be

a part of you that belongs to him, and nothing can change that. I don't want anything to change that. I am in love with a woman who cares passionately, whole-heartedly - who demands the very best from herself and everyone around her. A woman who has never been willing to settle for second best. A woman who told off Superman, loudly and publicly."

"Superman never lies," Lois said with a grin, "but I think Clark Kent kissed the Blarney Stone during his travels."

"Maybe," Clark said, lying back in the bed. "You'd like Ireland. Actually I think you'd like most of the islands. I did when I visited there. I even considered settling in London, but I decided I wanted to be closer to home. One time zone away instead of six."

"You'll have to tell me about your travels one of these days," Lois told him. "The real places you've seen, not llama races."

"I'd like to take you to see them," he said. "I've liked most of the places I've been to. But the place I really liked was Shetland. It was so different from Kansas, but the people were so much like the ones I grew up around. There was this one little old lady I used to visit who swore I was a blue-eyed selkie."

"That's a were-seal or something like that?"

"Yeah. They take on human form by shedding their seal skins," he told her. "Her name was Winnie and she lived right on the coast. She found me on her doorstep during one of the worst storms of the year, looking half-drowned. When she asked me how I got there I told her I'd gotten lost. In the storm I hadn't realized I'd landed on an island with only about five families living on it and the boat came with supplies only once a week." He chuckled.

"So she decided you'd swum to her island?"

"Yeah, pretty much." The familiar, far-away look came into his eyes.

"What is it?" she asked.

"A news bulletin," he said, listening. "A mine cave-in in Russia, over a hundred miners trapped."

"Go," she ordered. "I'll be right here when you get back."

He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, sped into the blue and red Suit and disappeared.

Unbridled capitalism has its faults, Superman was thinking as he surveyed the damaged mine and the causes of the cave-in. *But then so does rampant militarization and dictatorship*. The mine was an old one and had been producing coal for many years, both under the Soviet banner and now under the control of a private firm. Neither set of management teams had followed even the simplest form of basic maintenance and up keep. The timbers holding up the roof were old, the spikes rusty. And too rapid expansion of the mine into deeper veins had meant that safe engineering had not always been adhered to. It was one of the newer sections that had collapsed. The inadequate support structure simply hadn't been able to take the strain.

Superman had been able to quickly dig a side tunnel to gain access to the men trapped behind the collapsed section. He could tunnel more quickly and more safely than the heavy machinery humans needed to use, although even his tunnel wouldn't last if stressed by the vibration of machinery or an earthquake.

The miners and their families were grateful for his assistance and he had the opportunity to practice his Russian a little. It felt good to watch the joyful faces of reunited families as they hugged one another. Even the families of those miners he hadn't been able to save were grateful that he tried. The mothers and wives patted his back, murmuring their thanks through

their tears as he brought out the dead. "пасибо," and "спасибо" were phrases he heard over and over again. 'Thank you, thank you so much.' "Не за что," he found himself repeating. 'For nothing.'

The mine owners were unhappy that he hadn't simply cleared the cave-in so they could continue mining that section. He wasn't an engineer. He couldn't guarantee the safety of his own tunnel over the long term. He politely told them "No." They could fix their own problems and hopefully do it right this time.

As he sped back to the U.S. west coast, he considered the best way to get the story out to the public - not the Superman rescue part. If the mine owners and the Russian government had been doing what needed to have been done to keep their workers safe, Superman wouldn't have been needed. No, the part that needed to be told was that neither the government nor the owners were doing anything positive concerning mine safety. And nine men with families - mothers, wives, children - had died because of indifference and greed.

Eduardo Valdez was heading up the Daily Planet's International section now. Superman decided to drop Eduardo a note on what he'd observed in Russia. Maybe the power of the press would provoke some changes - if so, then that would save more lives than Superman ever could.

"GNN had a live feed from the mine accident," Lois told him when he came through the window and sped into his regular clothes - sleep shorts and a t-shirt. Lois had put on a satin nightgown and was watching the news from the bed. "It looked bad," she added.

"It wasn't good," he admitted, booting up his computer. "Nine dead, twenty injured. Most of the rest are going to end up with miner's lung if they don't have it already. I'm going to drop Eduardo a note on what Superman observed while he was there. Make a strong suggestion that the Planet do a series on mine safety internationally, maybe suggest that workplace safety is a human rights issue."

"You know he's just going to ask Perry to assign it for you to do," she told him. "Eduardo *so* wants you in International. I don't think a week goes by that he doesn't ask Perry to transfer you."

"I like City," he told her, typing away on his computer. "But Perry has been dropping hints about moving me to International anyway."

"As much as I'll miss you as my writing partner, I think it'd be a good move for you," Lois said. "A lot more freedom, a lot more time out of the office."

"We've been married a whole twenty-nine hours and you're trying to get rid of me already?"

"Hey, I've got to look out for my husband's best interests, even if he won't look out for himself," Lois told him with a smile. "Besides, Perry told me there was a pretty good raise attached to it. And since you now have a family to support..."

He smiled, tapping the 'enter' key on his keyboard to send off his note to Eduardo using one of his alternate e-mail accounts. It wouldn't do for Clark Kent to be sending Superman's observations to the Daily Planet.

"And here I thought you were going to turn me into a kept man," he told her, a broad grin splitting his face as he turned off his computer.

"Come here, boy toy," she ordered. "It's time to go to bed."

He slipped between the sheets beside her. "Isn't it a little early to go to sleep?" he asked, feigning innocence.

"Who said anything about sleeping?" she asked, slipping her hand beneath his shirt and kissing the corner of his jaw.

Morning came too soon. Lois groaned - it was still dark out. She reached over and found the other side of the bed was empty, cold. But there was a welcoming scent of coffee in the air.

"If you want to come along, you'd better get cleaned up," Clark told her. She could only see his outline as he stood in the bathroom door towel drying his hair.

"You don't trust me alone in Napa?" she chided.

"In Metropolis, yes," he said. "I'd pit you against any thug in the city. But here? Not a chance. Besides, I figure you can use the time to do some more digging into Miller's financials. Dee Dee sent along some interesting stuff this morning. So did Bobby."

"Such as?"

"A clerk in Griffin's office allegedly committed suicide last night," Clark told her. "She was found this morning sitting in her car in a locked garage. But according to Bobby, the family's pressing the police to do more digging. They don't buy that she was suicidal and she was too smart for it to be an accident. They think her new boyfriend did it."

"And her new boyfriend?"

"A tall, distinguished fellow with an English accent," Clark said.

"Nigel Smith?"

"I've asked Bobby to take a photo of Smith over to the family to see," Clark told her. "But I'd be willing to bet on it. And Smith? FBI has finally admitted he's really Nigel St. John and he was one of the key men in LuthorCorp before Luthor lost his mind and lost the company."

"What did you find in the financials?" she asked. She climbed out of the bed and followed her nose to the mug of coffee on the nook table.

"Financials are not my strong suit," he reminded her. "But, as near as I can tell, Miller's research was being funded by a company called ALC Biological. That company is a subsidiary of L&L Agrochem which is the North American division of Baykor which shares many, if not most of its board members with Dayton's, which is now the parent company of Church Industries, current owner of Price House, Costmart, and *La Inglesia* winery."

"And Price House and Costmart were known fronts for Intergang," Lois reminded him. "At least they were until Bill Church Senior went to prison. So that might be our link between Church and Miller."

"Maybe, but which Church?" Clark asked. "Bill Junior or Mindy? He was still in prison when Miller left STAR Labs. He supposedly lost control of both his business and criminal empires, and Dayton's acquired the Church companies after Bill Senior's death. So the link is there, but it's not exactly a direct one. Then there's the question of why ALC or L&L would support Miller's research without bringing her into one of their labs?"

"Let me get showered and dressed and I'm pretty sure I can find out," Lois told him.

Lois settled in at her desk, ignoring the odd looks she was getting from her co-workers.

"I thought you and Clark were on your honeymoon?" Jimmy finally asked her.

"Clark had a few things to take care of that he couldn't postpone," she told him, loudly enough to be overheard at the desks closest to hers. "I thought I'd put the time to good use." As she spoke she skimmed through the data research had sent her. There still didn't seem to be a strong connection between the companies associated with Church Industries and Miranda

Miller, then she spotted it: two press announcements. By themselves they were both innocuous. Together...

The first was an announcement that ALC Biochemical had been awarded a military contract, ostensibly to develop easily administered vaccines against those diseases deemed most likely to be used in bioterrorist attacks. That was a little odd in-and-of-itself since ALC Biochemical had never worked with vaccines before. ALCB also announced plans to move that part of their operation to California.

The second press piece concerned the success of Miranda Miller's cosmetics business and its association with Price House. In selected markets, Price House would be carrying Miranda's exclusive cosmetics and perfumes having been personally selected for inclusion by Mrs. Church. But it was the photograph that clinched it - Miranda Miller was standing next to Amanda Church, both of them beaming at the camera like fast friends.

Lois picked up her phone and called down to Dee Dee in research.

"Dee..? I've got a photo here of Miranda Miller and Amanda Church together. Can you find out when they met, mutual acquaintances, that sort of thing?"

"Already working on it," Dee Dee said. "And I'm sending what I have to you now."

"Can you give me a quick rundown?"

"Miranda Miller worked for LuthorCorp before moving to STAR Labs, but before she left, she was dating Luthor himself. There was a big stink because he cancelled her research project *and* broke up with her. She swore to get even with him. Then he went off his nut."

"Coincidence?"

"Who knows?" Dee Dee said. "But here's something else. Before Amanda Church got married she was Amanda Mariel Mosby. Amanda Mosby has a degree in biochemistry from UCLA and she also worked for LuthorCorp. She was Miller's assistant."

"You're joking," Lois told her. "Wasn't there a Mosby involved in organized crime in Chicago a while back?"

"David Mosby. Killed in 1995 in what was assumed to be a botched robbery but there were suspicions he was murdered in a territorial dispute with Intergang. He had a daughter named Amanda Mariel."

"And then she married the man who ordered her father's death?" Lois asked disbelief.

"That's what it looks like. I've sent copies of everything I found over to you."

"Uh, Dee Dee? Why didn't any of this show up when Clark and I asked for it five months ago?" Lois asked.

"Um, could be because I wasn't the one originally working on it," Dee Dee told her, but her tone indicated she was joking. "Actually, it's taken us nearly that long to get all this put together for you. Somebody really did not want Mindy Church to be found out."

The trial resumed at 9 AM on the dot. Superman was the first one called again.

District Attorney Griffin looked tired and worried as Superman walked down the center aisle towards the witness stand. Judge Page was in slightly better spirits. "Just a reminder again that you're still under oath," she said.

"Yes, your honor," he said. "Hopefully things will go more smoothly today than yesterday."

"I think we're all hoping that, Superman," Page said, motioning for him to take his seat.

He arranged his cape and sat, forcing himself to keep his hands at his waist, hands folded.

"How are you feeling?" Cross, the defense council, asked. Unlike the day before, he

seemed worried, eyes darting about as though expecting something to happen.

"Much better, thank you Mister Cross," Superman answered.

"Good... good," Cross said absently. He looked back at his client and Superman followed his gaze over to the defendant's table. William Church Junior looked like he'd aged ten years overnight. He was still as impeccably dressed as he had been all through his trial, but to today he seemed just slightly unkempt, as though he hadn't cared to make sure his tie was perfectly tied or that his suit had been properly brushed. There was a haunted look in his eyes.

He turned his attention back to Cross who had begun pacing in front on the witness stand.

"Kal-El," he began finally. "May I call you that? I mean Superman sounds so...?"

"Pretentious?" Superman suggested with a small smile. "That name was given to me by the press. Kal-El is fine."

"Kal-El," Cross started. "I'm still having a hard time understanding why you, the Daily Planet, as well as the police, began investigating my client in the first place. A judge in good standing heard his appeal on his first conviction and legally overturned it, albeit on a technicality. The D.A.'s office chose not to pursue the matter any further. Why were you so intent on pursuing my client?"

"As I testified earlier, Mister Church was seen at the scene of a fatal arson fire. Subsequent investigations proved that he was also either present at, or aware of other arson fires in the same area."

"Did you personally see him at that first fire?"

"He was seen by Clark Kent and Lois Lane of the Daily Planet at the third fire."

"The third fire, but not the first or second? And you trust their observations? You have no reason to believe that they were mistaken or had an ulterior motive for claiming my client was present?"

"I have no reason to disbelieve them," Superman stated calmly. Cross's line of questioning was not unexpected.

"Have you met Amanda Church?"

"I know of her, but I have not met her." *Superman hadn't met her, but Clark Kent was embarrassed to admit he may have been taken in by her.*

"Are you aware that my client believes that Missus Church is involved in trying to frame him for crimes he didn't commit?"

"I have heard that, yes."

"Have you considered looking into the possibility that William Church is not guilty to the crimes he's being accused of?"

Griffin stood up. "Objection, your honor. Asking Superman his intentions in regard to Mister Church is hardly appropriate at this time."

Judge Page took a deep breath. "Mister Griffin, although you may be technically correct, I admit to being curious about the witness's answer." She nodded to Superman. "Please answer the question."

"Until the events of the past few days, I had seen no evidence that would sustain Mister Church's belief that his step-mother was involved in any criminal activity."

"And what has happened in the past few days that may have changed your mind?"

"The attacks in Napa, California and here," Superman answered. "I have no reason to believe that Mister Church was *not* one of the intended victims."

"And you now believe Missus Church is involved?" Cross asked.

There was commotion at the back of the courtroom as the doors opened and Lois Lane

and William Henderson hurried up the center aisle to the prosecuting attorney's table. Griffin turned to Judge Page. "Your Honor, excuse us a moment."

Page nodded and Lois and Henderson spoke quickly to Griffin, showing him the papers Lois had pulled out of her briefcase. After several minutes of discussion, Griffin stepped over to Cross, handing him several sheets of paper. Cross scanned the documents, looking wide-eyed at Griffin, then Church.

"Your Honor," Cross began, walking toward the judge's bench. "New information has come forward that drastically changes this case."

Page looked over to Griffin. "Mister Griffin, do you wish to discuss this development in chambers?"

"Yes, your honor," Griffin said.

Page turned to Superman. "You're excused for the time being, Kal-El," she said. "This court is recessed for one hour," she announced.

"Uh, Lois, what did you find?" Clark asked, walking into the courtroom to join her and Henderson. He was in his standard three piece suit once again. She gave him a smile, took his arm and led him out into the hallway. Henderson followed them.

"We finally got a bead on Amanda Mariel Mosby Church. Daughter of David Mosby the racketeer - degree in biochemistry and Miranda Miller's assistant at LuthorCorp," Lois told him.

"And neither Griffin's people nor Cross's found this out?" Clark asked. Lois shrugged eloquently. Henderson just shook his head. "Wait. Wasn't David Mosby supposedly murdered by Intergang?"

"Yeah, but nothing could be proved," Henderson told them.

"And we have a more recent link between Amanda and Miller as well," Lois added. "Amanda personally chose Miller's cosmetics for Price House."

"But, uh, we still can't link Missus Church to Miller's poison research," Clark pointed out. "Or can we?"

"*La Inglesia* Winery," was Lois's response.

Judge Page dismissed the jury for the rest of the day. The information about Mindy Church's past associations was more than enough to force the D.A.'s office into completely rethinking the charges against William Church Junior. It was distinctly possible he'd been telling the truth - he'd been framed by his step-mother.

La Inglesia Winery was twenty miles outside of the city. They'd found tickets for a wine tasting and lunch there on their first night at the B&B.

"How considerate of them to give us a free pass into the building," Lois commented with a laugh. "Little do they know their folly."

Clark chuckled, keeping his eyes on the road as he looked for the turn-off to the main building.

"There it is," Lois said, catching sight of the sign. Clark turned the rental car onto the winding gravel driveway.

"I'm still surprised that Mindy has been able to pull the dumb blonde thing off for so long," Clark said. "I gather that even her husband didn't know about her being related to David Mosby."

"Preconception and misdirection," Lois reminded him. "Aside from the handful of people

in the know, who would think that Clark Kent was macho enough to pull off some of the stuff he does?"

"Granted," he admitted. "What have you got on the winery?"

Lois pulled out her notes. "Founded in 1969 by Paul Kirk, an engineer out of San Francisco."

"Please don't tell me he worked for LuthorCorp or STAR Labs," Clark commented.

"No, he worked for the city of San Francisco, took early retirement to make wine. Bought 25 acres of hillside and was up to 90 acres when he ran into financial trouble during the '90's. A phylloxera outbreak took out all his vines and they had to be replaced," Lois read off. "What is phylloxera?"

"It's a nasty little pest that attacks grapevine roots," Clark answered. "Did a major number to the French wine industry back in the 1880's. They ended up importing root stock from Missouri to save their vines. Then when the problem hit California, they ended up importing the Missouri rootstock from France."

"They make wine in Missouri?" Lois asked. "Next you're going to tell me Kansas has a wine industry."

"It does," Clark answered with a grin. "Before Prohibition Missouri and Kansas produced nearly ninety percent of the wine produced in the U.S."

"Why do I need to pester research when I have you around?" Lois asked.

"Because I'm still not completely up to speed on current events, remember?" Clark told her. "Plus Dee Dee and the other researchers are very good. How did Church Industries get hold of the winery anyway?"

"Apparently Bill Senior had started diversifying his personal investments at about that time and one of the companies he invested in happened to be this one," Lois went on. "Church bailed them out of trouble and when Kirk died five years ago, Church Industries bought out the rest of the family but retained Kirk's son, Luke, to run the company for them."

The car turned a corner and a large white stucco building that resembled a California mission came into sight. Clark parked the car in one of the spaces near the building. The parking lot was half full and several people were waiting outside the main doors, apparently waiting for the doors to open for the tour.

They joined the waiting group as the doors opened. Clark ushered Lois ahead of him, placing a hand on the small of her back, gently rubbing her back with his thumb. She didn't seem to object.

It was dim and cool inside the building. Clark's eyes adjusted immediately to the dim illumination and he looked around. A buffet was being set up along one wall. An old-west style bar stood along the adjacent wall with a barman standing behind it. Behind him were stacks of oak wine barrels.

A young woman in jeans walked into the room smiling at the little group. "I'm Gina Kirk and I'll be leading today's tour of *La Inglesia*. When we're finished, we'll end up back here for lunch and a tasting of our recent vintages."

The group assembled itself to follow the young woman into the inner sanctum of the winery. Lois and Clark stayed to the back of the group and Clark took the opportunity to scan the building with x-ray vision. He stopped walking as he concentrated on one near-by room.

"Anything?" Lois murmured.

"Yeah," Clark murmured back, taking her arm and moving around a corner, away from the group. "Their lab is a lot larger than the ones at the other wineries and they have a medical

grade incinerator in the basement."

"Why didn't you catch that before?" Lois wondered softly.

"Lead paint," he answered. "Several coats of it. But they didn't paint the doors, or the floors." He nodded to the door they'd passed in the hallway. It had a hotel-style keycard reader instead of a standard lock. Lois stood lookout as Clark stood in front of the door, one hand on the handle as if testing it. After careful consideration, he simply sheared off the bolts that held the door shut with laser vision, and ushered Lois through. Closing the door behind them, he sealed it with a single, nearly microscopic weld - the door would still appear locked to casual observers.

For an agricultural laboratory, it was remarkably well equipped - too well equipped. A university biochemistry lab would be well served with the equipment in this room. It was set up almost identically to Friedman's lab at STAR Labs in Metropolis.

"Clark, can you think of a reason why a small winery that is barely running at break even would own a mass spectrometer?" Lois asked. "Or electrophoresis equipment?"

Clark felt the twinges of a headache coming on and absently rubbed his temple. "Or kryptonite?"

She gave him a worried look. "Where?"

He nodded toward a large safe sitting in the corner. "It's lead-lined, but there are gaps. I doubt they've been taking proper care to minimize exposure."

"Maybe they don't believe it's dangerous to normal people," Lois suggested.

"Maybe."

"Are you okay?"

He nodded, stepping away from the safe. He began carefully walking between the steel-topped counters, stepping around the two white five gallon tubs that sat on the floor at the ends of the counters. He stopped when he spotted shards of blue glass under the toe-kick of one of the cabinets, where the rubber wall base met the linoleum floor. He crouched down to get a better look. Lois hurried over to join him. "Cobalt blue lead glass," he told her.

"Anything else?"

He sniffed the air experimentally. "I can smell traces of the poison. I can also smell traces of blood, and something else."

"Maybe somebody cut themselves?"

"Maybe," he responded. He looked around the area between the cabinets once again.

"Lois, how about you join the rest of the group and as soon as you get a chance, call Henderson and have him get the FBI out here."

"That's a round-about way to do it," she observed.

"But the most effective, I think," he replied.

"And what will you be doing?"

"Getting Superman to get the sheriff out here."

She gave him a quick kiss. "Be careful," she warned.

"Aren't I always?"

"Do you want an honest answer?"

"Uh, probably not," he admitted as he led the way out through the remaining door. He closed the door carefully behind them but he knew Lois hadn't missed the fact that both doors were now sealed with quick blasts of heat vision. The room was now sealed - no one would be able to get in without a welding torch, or his help. But he had the unsettling feeling that he'd

missed something. Something that had been right in front of him, yet he hadn't recognized it.

Lois rejoined the group as they were leaving the building to look at the grape vines in the fields nearest the winery. Clark had publicly begged off, claiming to be feeling ill.

The tour guide yammered on about the various theories concerning how the vines should be trellised and why they chose the one they were using. Clark may have been interested in the lecture, but she suspected he probably knew more about viticulture than Miss Kirk did.

It was something she'd noticed about Clark even before he'd left. He had an incredible breadth of knowledge - he could talk sports with the guys, farming with farmers, business with businessmen, museum science with curators. He would never monopolize the conversation, never show off what he knew. But his ability to get in under the radar to get people to talk to him, simply by his unassuming demeanor and his knowledge of their field, amazed her.

She dropped to the back of the group, pulling out her cell phone. She called Henderson and let him know that she and Clark had located Miller's lab. He in turn promised to notify the FBI for her.

He called her back five minutes later. "There should be someone out there shortly," Henderson told her. "Judge Page has postponed Church's trial for at least a week, so both sides can go over the new evidence concerning Mrs. Church. I suspect Griffin is looking of offer Church a deal if it means he can put Mindy away. By the way, the D.A. is wondering why you and Kent weren't covering the trial."

"Perry was told by Griffin's office that the D.A. wanted us out of town for safety reasons. That's why we gave our depositions instead," Lois told him. "Are you saying Griffin didn't want us safely tucked away somewhere?"

"Somebody wanted you out of town and as near as we can tell it wasn't the D.A.," Henderson told her. "Frankly, I'm astonished you even went along with it. Mad Dog Lane on a vacation?"

"Mad Dog Lane is in the middle of a conspiracy investigation while on her honeymoon," Lois reminded him.

Henderson laughed. "Tell Clark hi, and good luck."

"I'll do that," she promised as she heard the familiar whoosh that presaged Superman's appearance. She closed her phone and dropped in back in her pocket.

"Superman!" she called out. The others in the group turned to see what she was talking about. Their expressions were typical of people first seeing Superman in the 'flesh' - surprise, amazement, admiration. In spite of all the media coverage concerning him, most people still had a hard time believing a man could fly until they actually saw his red cape fluttering in the breeze while he came gently to earth.

But it was Miss Kirk's reaction that caught Lois's attention. The young woman's mouth had fallen open, but it wasn't pleased astonishment that was written on the woman's face. It was fear. She turned and ran for the door to the building only to find Superman was already standing in front of it, blocking her way, arms folded over his chest. He looked so self-assured, even intimidating.

"I believe the police would appreciate it if you remained outside until they were finished," Superman told her quietly.

There was the sound of tires on gravel and Lois looked back to the road to see several Napa sheriff's department cars drive up and stop. A black sedan stopped beside the marked cars, disgorging two men wearing jackets with FBI stenciled across the back.

"Ms. Lane?" one of the agents asked as he approached her. "I'm Agent Brown. This is agent Harrison."

"I'm Lois Lane," she identified herself, carefully pulling her press pass out of her purse. These men didn't know her and it was never smart to startle someone carrying a loaded gun.

"We had word that you think you found Miller's lab," Brown said quietly.

Lois nodded. "My partner and I got separated from the tour group," she told them.

"And where is your partner?" Brown asked.

"He's around here somewhere. He wasn't feeling well," Lois told him.

"How about you show us what you found," Harrison suggested, gesturing for her to lead the way into the building.

"You need a search warrant," Kirk yelled at them. "I want to see a search warrant!" As she spoke she pulled out her cell phone. She tapped in a number and waited impatiently until the other end picked up. One of the deputies handed Kirk a sheet of paper Lois watched her skim over it, speaking rapidly into her phone.

Superman's head came up, his eyes momentarily unfocused and Lois knew he'd heard something. "No one goes into the building!" he said. He didn't seem to speak loudly but Lois knew his voice had projected far enough for all the law enforcement people to have heard him. The ones closest to him seemed to freeze. One of the sergeants keyed his radio, ordering the men already heading inside to get out.

That's when they all heard it. The whoosh of air moving fast, the distant roar of fire like a gas furnace igniting. Superman moved, pushing everyone away from the building then grabbing the men who had gone in, bringing them out to safety. Several of the men were already badly burned. He looked at Lois. "It's HTA," he said before he disappeared again, this time straight up, over the building.

They were still too close. She could feel the searing heat coming off the concrete walls. Lois and the two FBI agents started moving further away from the building, herding the tour group ahead of them, away from the danger. Hopefully. "What did he mean, HTA?" Brown asked.

"High Temperature Accelerant," Lois told him, surprised that a man in his position didn't know that. "Let the fire department know it's not just arson."

"And how do you know that?" Harrison asked.

"I'm from Metropolis," she told them. "I've covered HTAs. They're bad, even when Superman gets there in time."

She turned to watch Superman hovering above the building. She knew there were only three ways of dealing with HTA fires. One was to simply let it burn out. The fire was so hot that even water simply fed it. Steel melted, concrete crumbled. The fire could be smothered by sand, but that destroyed the crime scene - the sand melted, coating everything in glass. And, if caught early enough, Superman could cool the air fast enough to put it out.

Lois knew that was what he was trying to do now as he hovered above the building. Cool the air without spreading the fire. From the look of concentration she could see on his face, she suspected he wasn't having much luck. Thick black smoke rose high in the air and orange flames seemed to be reaching for him. Explosions could be heard over the roar of the fire. The wine casks, Lois realized after a moment of thought. The casks were exploding, the hydrogen and oxygen from the water and alcohol adding fuel to the fire. Literally.

It seemed like an eternity before the fire crews appeared. By then, the flames had died down, finally succumbing to Superman's freezing breath. He landed near the deputies who had

been watching, waiting. His face was drawn, his cape smoldering, his shoulders slumped as he caught his breath.

"Superman, are you okay?" Lois asked.

He gave a quick nod, straightening up to address the sheriff and the two FBI men. "You shouldn't have a problem proving arson. I counted seven dead in the building. Four in the kitchen, two in the offices, one in the storage area behind the tasting room."

"The two in the office would be Luke and his wife. I know Johnnie, Gina's brother, liked doing the wine tasting parties. The Kirks were friends of mine. The other four I'm not sure of. I assume it was smoke inhalation?" the sheriff said.

Superman shook his head, lips pulled thin in an anguished expression Lois was all too familiar with. He couldn't save everyone, and each one he lost scarred his soul. "An HTA fire can reach better than three thousand degrees in a few minutes. There isn't time to die of smoke," he told the sheriff quietly.

Miss Kirk made a shuddery, choking sound. Then she collapsed, shaking her head. "No... they promised me... they said nobody would get hurt..." she was mumbling, eyes wide in horror.

Lois crouched down beside the woman. "Who said nobody would get hurt?" Lois asked softly, wishing it was Clark that was standing there instead of Superman. It was Clark's gentle touch that was needed here, not Superman's might or Lois Lane's forthrightness. "Gina, who told you that nobody would get hurt?" Lois pitched her voice low, calm, as though speaking to a child.

"Doctor Miller and her friend. I think his name was Smith," Gina Kirk told her. "I think he was English. They were using the lab, making perfumes. They said they liked how quiet it was here."

"Who did you call just before the fire started?" Superman asked, crouching down on the woman's other side.

"Doctor Miller gave me a number to call in case the police showed up with a search warrant," she told him.

"May I have your phone, please?" Superman asked.

Lois had been working beside him for six months, knowing who he was and yet he still surprised her. His voice was still in the deep tones he used as Superman, but it was Clark's gentleness that came through as he spoke to the woman. He gave Kirk a gentle smile when she handed him her phone. He handed it to the sheriff.

"Thank you," Superman told her. He looked up at the sheriff. "I doubt you'll get anything from the number, except that it was to Metropolis," he said.

Gina Kirk looked up at him, tears finally streaming down her face. "You couldn't save them?"

He sighed heavily as he shook his head. "There were accelerants planted all through the building, not just the lab. I'm fast, but even I can't be in two places at the same time. I'm sorry."

"Clark?" Lois asked, breaking into his reverie. He'd showered and changed into jeans and a t-shirt as soon as they got back to their room, and then he just sat. He knew Lois was worried about him. She'd gone out for a little while and had come back to discover he hadn't moved at all. He didn't want to move. He felt frozen in place, trapped in a miasma of failure.

The fact that he'd missed the clues bothered him more that he wanted to admit, even to her. He had failed the people in the winery. His and Lois's investigation had precipitated their

deaths.

"Clark?" she repeated. After a moment he looked at her. She looked almost as disheartened as he felt. Seven people were dead because he hadn't caught the signs soon enough.

"You saved the people you could. You're Superman, not God," Lois told him.

"I could accept that argument if I'd simply come on the scene and found the fire," he told her. "The problem is I didn't just come into the situation blind. I saw the accelerants in the building and didn't recognize them for what they were. Neither of us did."

"I saw them and didn't recognize them?"

He nodded slowly. "Remember the last HTA fire in Metropolis? The fire marshals found white plastic discs on the concrete floor."

"Yeah, I remember," Lois said. "The guy I was talking to couldn't understand how they got there or what they were. Then his boss told him to shut his trap."

"Those white discs were the bottoms of white, food-grade five gallon containers. The rest of the container was burned away when the accelerant was triggered. The container, the trigger, every shred of evidence self-destructed except for the bottom," Clark told her. "Fire rises and the hotter the flame, the faster it rises, if it can."

"And there were containers like that in the lab," Lois said.

Clark nodded again. "I scanned them to make sure there weren't bombs or anything like that in the tubs. Made sure they weren't filled with binary explosive. I didn't see anything that resembled an ignition source. I still have no idea how it was ignited. But I looked right at them and didn't see them for what they were."

"Clark, do you think a MFD fire marshal would have recognized them for what they were?"

"I don't know," he told her. "I kind of doubt it. Who'd look twice at those tubs in a restaurant?"

"In that case, why are you torturing yourself?" she asked, coming over to him. She settled onto his lap. "If a professional wouldn't recognize them for what they were, why should any of us expect you to?"

"I might have been able to stop it sooner," Clark said.

"And you might not have," she told him, kissing him gently. "All we can do is our best." She kissed him on the tip of his nose. It tickled and he finally laughed a little.

"What did I do to deserve you?"

"The way I figure it, you were a mass murderer in a previous life, and I'm your karmic punishment," she told him.

"I don't think that's how it works," Clark told her. He tried to keep his tone serious, but he knew there was a twitch in the corner of his mouth as he watched her.

"In that case, we probably deserve each other in some sort of perverse, cosmic way," she said chuckling. "It's Friday evening in Napa California. So what do you want to do? I assume you don't want to go see Chainsaw Massacre whatever number it is that's out now."

"Not really," Clark told her. "And it's not really the subject matter, although horror and slasher movies leave me cold. I see enough horrible things in real life that I don't find it entertaining. I have enough trouble suspending disbelief in the real world to do it in a theater. It's that I've never been able to enjoy movie films, even as a kid. Film is projected at twenty-four frames a second and I see faster than that. I don't see the movement on the screen. I see still pictures on the screen."

"You watch TV," she reminded him. "I mean, we have monitors all over the newsroom and you watch them all the time."

"But standard TV, even the LCD ones, runs at thirty frames per second and that's just at the limits of my persistence of vision. It still flickers and the motion is off, but it's tolerable. I can at least see what's going on on the screen."

"Maybe that's why Jason doesn't like going to movies unless they're at Cinetech in the digital theater," Lois said, as if realizing how much her son, their son, took after his father. "It's a little frustrating trying to explain things like that to the soccer moms who I know are thinking Jason's a spoiled little brat for having all the problems he has. Like it's all my fault he has asthma and allergies and..."

"Well, guess what. Now there are two of us who can explain these things to the dreaded soccer moms," Clark said.

"I'm liking this better all the time," she announced. "So what shall we do then, eh?"

"Order in pizza?" Clark suggested. "After what happened today... I still feel like I should have been able to do more." He couldn't shake the guilt - if he had only moved a little faster, even though that would have hurt the injured people he was trying to help. *There was nothing else I could have done.*

"Hopefully there won't be any emergencies big enough to need you tonight," Lois told him.

"That would be nice. It would be nice if the world would just stay fixed for a while."

Lois finished off the last piece of veggie pizza, washing it down with a bottle of cream soda. "Now what?" she asked.

"We could go swimming," he suggested. "There's a nice pool out back."

"Didn't bring my swimsuit," she told him. In fact she had, but swimming wasn't what she had in mind during their last few days of 'vacation.' Too soon they'd be returning to Metropolis, where Clark would pack up his books, art, and music - he didn't own much else - and move in with her and Jason, into the house she had shared for five years with Richard. At some point she knew they would no doubt sell the house and buy a different one. But that was for the future.

Too soon they'd be worrying about juggling home and work, worrying about Jason and school, worrying about the logistics of making love when there was a little boy sleeping across the hall. The logistics of making a life together.

Money wouldn't be a major issue, so long as they didn't go overboard on their spending. They both had reasonably good salaries and Richard had been a very fiscally cautious man, aside from his seaplane. He'd made sure both he and Lois carried adequate life insurance although she knew he had honestly expected her to die first due to her recklessness. On his death, the mortgage had been paid off and there was enough left over for a trust to handle Jason's education. Selling the seaplane to one of Richard's air force buddies had helped too.

Lois wriggled off of Clark's lap and took his hand, pulling him to his feet. "So, what are we going to do?" he asked.

"Take off your clothes and lie down, and I'll show you," she told him. "I went shopping at that cute little place next to the jewelers." She watched him try to make sense of her statement, his expression moving from confusion to wide-eyed shock. He remembered the place she was talking about. He tried so hard to be open-minded, and as Superman he invariably succeeded, but sometimes as Clark his Midwest upbringing simply got the better of him.

"Uh, Lois, that cute little place next to the jewelers was a..." He shifted to curiosity, apparently deciding the discretion really was the better part of valor. "What did you buy?" He looked around for the sack she'd brought in with her.

"Lie down and I'll show you," she told him.

"You like ordering me around, don't you." It was a statement, not a question. He watched her, a bemused half-smile on his face.

"Clark, you knew that the day we met," she reminded him. "As I recall, I was yelling at Perry. And then you had that soda bottle explode all over you."

"Which you deliberately shook up. Actually, that wasn't the first time I saw you, you know," he said. "But you were yelling at Perry then, too. You were refusing to do the story on the demolition of the Sarah Bernhardt Theater."

"And you brought it in the next day," she said. Perry had told her about it sometime later - once he had determined Lois wouldn't actually murder Clark for bringing in a story she hadn't been able to. "He would have hired you that day if you'd handed him your best instead of your most recent writing samples," she added. "Now, stop stalling."

He did as he was told, stripping down as she pulled the top covers off the bed. She stripped down as well, lit the candles she'd placed on the bedside tables and the dresser then beckoned him to lie down as she knelt on the mattress. She opened the drawer in the bedside table and pulled out a small plastic bottle with a pour cap. She poured a little of the contents in her palm then rubbed her hands together to warm the sandalwood scented oil before starting to massage his chest and belly.

"Where did...?" he started to ask.

"Shh... No talking, just lay back and relax," she said. "Not long after Jason was born, I went undercover at a massage parlor. It was part of a chain that was suspected of being a front for more than just prostitution. Internal affairs was afraid there was department involvement and so I went in instead. I had to learn at least a little massage therapy to be convincing."

He shivered beneath her hands. It wasn't cold in the room and she was sure he wasn't feeling cold if she wasn't. "I'm the first person who's ever touched you like this," she realized.

"I'm not in the habit of hanging around massage parlors."

"Touch is one of the most important senses, and one of the most ignored," she told him. "And don't worry if you fall asleep. I will consider it a complement." She was sliding her hands down the sides of his chest, past his waist then up the center in a circular motion. "I used to do this for Richard when he had a really bad day."

He was called the Man of Steel, but she noted that so long as her motions were slow and even his skin and muscles were as pliable as a normal man's. She wasn't trained to do deep massage but she suspected she would run up against his invulnerability if she pressed hard enough to cause pain in a normal person.

He reached up to caress her face and she gently kissed his palm. "I love you," he said.

"I love you. Now close your eyes and relax."

"What about you?"

"The night is still young," she promised.

He wasn't sure when he fell asleep, but he woke to find Lois snuggled up against him, one arm thrown around his chest, the sheets pulled up over both of them. The candles had burned down into sandalwood and patchouli scented puddles in the glass saucers that protected the furniture. She was warm and she smelled of orchids and vanilla and sandalwood.

He didn't know exactly what woke him. He listened to the noises outside. There was a cat somewhere under the trees hunting. He heard other animals outside, squirrels and mice, the nearly silent whirr of an owl in flight. He heard the rustle of people downstairs and in the adjoining rooms. Nearly everyone was asleep. He checked the clock on the bed stand. A little past midnight, local time.

He disentangled himself from Lois's embrace and sped into his Suit, giving Lois one more look. As much as he wanted to stay in her arms, he had other obligations too. He launched himself out the window, stopping to hover above the trees. He was still puzzled at what might have awoken him. If it had been a call for Superman, it hadn't been repeated.

He went higher, listening and looking for anything out of place. Nothing. Then he spotted it. A van heading down the street at high speed. He took a mental note of the license plate before looking back at the building one more time - there was a white unmarked tub sitting outside the kitchen door. It hadn't been there when he and Lois had come back to the B&B. That he was sure of.

The tabs on the lid had been cut, indicating the tub had been opened - at least someone had intended to open it. A quick scan with x-ray vision showed it was filled with some unidentifiable granular substance laced with viscous liquid. He opened the tub and his nose was assailed by the smell of diesel and other chemicals - something similar to fertilizer or rocket fuel. HTA? *Maybe.*

The trigger he hadn't caught before was more obvious now. The metal handle had been replaced with hollow metal tubing with electronics inside. A short section of copper came out of the handle, passed through the lid and was bent down to contact the chemicals in the tub. He scanned the area again and found a second tub hidden in the landscape on the opposite side of the building. He pulled the top off of that one as well, separating the chemicals from the trigger.

Then he reached to the small of his back under his cape, pulled out his cell phone and keyed in 9-1-1.

"This is Clark Kent, I'm at the B and B on Easum. Superman just found two tubs of what might be HTA near the building..." he paused as the lid on the ground by his boot sent off a spark. "And somebody just tried to detonate them."

Lois awoke to the flashing red and blue of police lights on the ceiling above the bed. Clark wasn't beside her and his side of the bed was cold. *Well, Mom always wanted me to marry a doctor. I've married the next best thing - a superhero.* She grabbed her satin robe off the chair and slipped it on before going to the nook window to see what was going on.

Clark was standing with several police officers. He was wearing his jeans, a t-shirt and his sneakers. He looked like he'd gotten dressed in a hurry. His hair was mussed, giving the impression he'd just been rousted out of bed.

Lois slipped on her own jeans and t-shirt, grabbed her purse and cell phone then ran out of the room and down the stairs.

"What's going on?" she demanded, running up to Clark. She recognized the two plainclothes men standing near him. "Agent Brown, what's going on?"

"Superman found two tubs of HTA, one by the kitchen door, one near the front," Clark explained simply. "He had to be someplace else, so he had me call it in. The officers are canvassing the area in case there are any more tubs around."

"Did he happen to see who left them here?" she asked.

Clark shook his head. "But he did see a van leaving the area. The police are looking for it now."

"Miss Lane, I seriously suggest you and Mister Kent here take the first flight out of here and head back to Metropolis," Brown told her.

"But we're reporters and this is a major story," Lois explained. "You can't make us drop this."

"No, Miss Lane," Brown stated firmly. "You're a witness. And even though normally the local cops would want you to stick around, I'm asking you to go home. They can take your statements at the bureau office in Metropolis. In fact Agent Quinn is looking forward to talking to the two of you about all this."

"Clark?" she asked.

He sighed heavily before looking at her. "I think we should do as Agent Brown asks. I doubt there's anything more we can find out here." He looked at her as if willing her to understand the subtext. There was something else going on that he didn't want to discuss with the police around.

"Let's get packed then," Lois agreed slowly. "We should be able to make Metropolis by lunch time."

"My thoughts exactly," Clark agreed. He nodded to the officers and the two FBI agents then took Lois's arm as they went back inside the building.

"Okay, Farm boy, what's going on?" Lois asked as soon as Clark had closed and bolted the door behind them.

"I overheard Brown talking to somebody on his phone," Clark said as he booted up his computer. "It sounded like he was being given orders to get us out of town and back to Metropolis ASAP and the locals weren't supposed to know why."

"Any idea why?" Lois asked while shoving her clothes into her suitcase.

"That's what I'm looking to find out," he told her, watching his monitor as his email program came on the screen. She came over to him and stood behind his chair, bending to read over his shoulder. New mail appeared in the list. Two from Perry, one from Bill Henderson, along with the usual junk. The two emails from Perry both had the subject line of 'Come Home.'

Clark opened the first one from Perry and Lois skimmed it. "He's kidding..." she said in disbelief. "Smith or St. John or whatever-his-name-is is giving state's evidence against Mindy Church in trade for lesser charges and Miller has been remanded to federal custody on charges of bioterrorism? What about the damage she caused here?"

Clark shrugged, opening Perry's second email. "If it plays out the way I think it will, the California courts will never have the chance to try Miller or St. John. St. John will turn state's evidence against Mindy, be given a slap on the wrist and put into witness protection. Miller will simply disappear."

The second email was Perry simply ordering them to take the first flight back to Metropolis. He even went so far as to suggest the Superman Express.

Henderson's email gave a few more details on the Miller situation. Miranda Miller had made a statement to MPD officers admitting she'd been paid by Mindy Church to create a weaponized version of her pheromone perfume and had been involved in the development of the HTA used in the arson fires in Metropolis. Federal agents then came and took her away. Henderson didn't know where they'd taken her.

"So what now?" Lois asked. She knew the answer, but she still wanted to hear it from

him.

"We go home and write up what we have, considering nearly all the physical evidence linking Miller to the winery and Missus Church was destroyed in the fire."

"But we both saw the glass in the lab and we know there was kryptonite in there," Lois reminded him.

"I know that, honey," Clark told her. "But I doubt just our word will be good enough."

She looked at him. It was the first time he'd called her that and she found that she liked it. He didn't seem to notice her look.

"I doubt they'll be able to tie the tubs found here with the ones at the fire. They're too common a type and I have a hunch the ones here will turn out to be designed to scare us, not kill us," he added. "They weren't the same chemical ingredients I smelled in the winery. Similar, but not the same."

"Clark? Let's just go home," Lois said. The events of past twelve hours were catching up with here and she simply felt exhausted, mentally and physically.

"Your place or mine?"

"Mine. I have a proper-sized bed," she told him. "You have a mattress on the floor in a loft."

"That happens to be a traditional futon," he protested mildly, closing down his computer and putting it into its case.

"It's a mattress."

"You know, I was kind of looking forward to a picnic lunch and horseback riding tomorrow, or is it today?" Lois said as she climbed into her own bed in her own room. As much as she had enjoyed the B & B, being home was so nice. She watched as Clark shed the Suit at normal speed, letting her see how the cape was attached to the back, how the clasp at the back of his shoulder worked.

"We can still do the picnic, just not in Napa," Clark said, sitting on the edge of the bed. "And I'm sure there's someplace in New Troy that offers horseback riding. In the meantime..." he leaned over and kissed her. "I have something else in mind, if you don't mind."

"Come here, lover," she said, pulling him to her.

He kissed her again, deeply, passionately. Lois reciprocated, molding herself to him. She wondered how she ever managed to get so lucky as his kisses moved to her neck and shoulder. *Dear God, if this is a dream, I don't want to wake up.*

A/N: Because there were naturally loose threads - The dead clerk from the DA's office was the one who called Perry to be at the courthouse and had also been the one to suggest Lois, Clark, and Superman get out of town for a while. She was killed by 'Smith', but it'll never be proven. Mindy really was framing Bill Junior for the arson fires.

HTA does exist - the first documented arson using it was in Seattle, 1984, and it took out a steel and concrete warehouse in 19 minutes. The most recent and well known HTA incidents were the Twin Towers - jet fuel is a High Temperature Accelerant.