

# Red Chief Protocol

by Marcus Rowland

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Rating: K+

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Harold Finch looked up from the computer screens as John Reese came into the old library. “We have a new number, Mister Reese.”

Reese helped himself to coffee. “Anyone we know?”

“I doubt it. Jason Kent, thirteen years old, no criminal record I can find, a native of Metropolis.”

“I hate it when it’s kids. You want me to go to Metropolis?”

“No need; he’s on his way to us, travelling from Kansas City on United Airlines flight 2318. It arrives at Newark at two-thirty this afternoon, that gives us three hours to prepare. He’s supposed to take one of the private buses from the airport direct to Grand Central Station, then the hourly commuter service to Metropolis.”

“Do you think he’s the victim or the killer?”

“It’s too early to tell, but there is no hint of any criminal tendencies that I can find. He’s in the top percentile of his year at school, a Boy Scout, and a member of the Glee Club and Debating Society.”

“What do we know about the parents?” asked Reese.

“Lois Lane and Clark Kent, both reporters for the Metropolis *Daily Planet*. Lane is widely credited as having named Superman, and obtained most of the *Planet’s* stories on him until he left Earth in 2000. She won the Pulitzer Prize in 2006, for an editorial entitled ‘Why the World Doesn’t Need Superman.’ He returned to Earth and saved her life at least twice in the period between her nomination and the award ceremony.”

“Ironic.” Reese finished his coffee and began to check his weapons. “What about Kent?”

“Clark Kent was born in Smallville, Kansas... correction, he was adopted by residents of Smallville, Kansas, his parents are unknown. He worked for the *Daily Planet* from the mid-nineties to 2000 then left the paper to travel and work on a trilogy of novels, *The Janus Contract* and two sequels, all well-received. Jason was born seven months after Kent left, at which time Lane was living with Richard White, an editor at the *Planet*, but was not married to him. Kent returned to the *Planet* in 2006. Lane and White separated a few months later, and she married Kent in 2007. They have one other child, Jonathan, aged eighteen months.”

“Is Kent the boy’s father?”

“It seems probable. White is shown as the father on his birth certificate, but blood groups prove otherwise. White has type A blood, Kent and the boy are both B, and Lane is O. The father may or may not be Kent, but it certainly isn’t White.”

“I wonder if White knows; where is he, anyway?”

“London. The *Planet’s* London bureau chief was implicated in their phone-tapping scandal last year; he’s acting chief while they clear house, pending a permanent appointment, and probably won’t be back in the US for several months. Incidentally, Metropolis school records still have him listed as a fallback emergency contact if neither Lane nor Kent is available, so it would appear that they are still on good terms.”

“That sounds reasonably amicable. Okay, why is the kid travelling alone?”

“He’s been visiting Kent’s mother in Smallville,” said Finch, “Now this is interesting, both parents are currently giving evidence in the RICO case against the Costmart chain; presumably they couldn’t travel with him.”

“Maybe someone plans to snatch the boy to pressure them into changing their testimony.”

“Plausible. The directors of Costmart seem to have their fingers in a lot of dirty pies. There are even rumours that Costmart is an Intergang front.”

“Why in hell didn’t his parents take better precautions? Letting him travel alone is stupid.”

“I’d imagine they thought it would go unnoticed.”

“I’ll get to the airport well before he arrives, then I can shadow him on the bus and train. But some backup would be good.”

“You’d better carry Sky Marshal ID, all the documents you’ll need are filed under the name Reed. That will explain the gun if you have to go through metal detectors. I’ll look for any other contacts or threats that might be relevant. Keep me informed.” Finch turned back to the monitors, and Reese checked and holstered his SIG-Sauer and selected appropriate documents. “I’ll try to get hold of Miss Shaw,” he added. “She can drive you to the airport and shadow you on the return journey.”

“If you can’t reach her I’ll head for the airport in about an hour,” said Reese, “might as well get there a little early and check things out.”

“The boy is just clearing security, Mister Reese; coming through the doors... now.”

Reese rubbed his finger against the tiny transceiver in his ear, and murmured “On it.” He was long past being surprised by Finch’s ability to access cameras on networks that should have been completely secure. A moment later he spotted Jason Kent, wearing a back-pack and carrying a small carry-on bag, talking to a flight attendant who was obviously escorting him to the bus pick-up point. He waited for them to pass, then began to trail them at a discreet distance. He wished that Finch had been able to locate Samantha Shaw; this was really a job for two people.

“Why Newark?” muttered Reese.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Aren’t there direct services to Metropolis from Kansas? Why come through New York?”

“Good question, Mister Reese. Let me see... There are direct flights from Wichita but not from Kansas City. The Kent farm is somewhat closer to Kansas City, but overall the journey would have been considerably faster and somewhat cheaper by the Wichita route. I’ll see if I can find out why he didn’t travel that way.”

“Okay. Meanwhile, is there anything odd about anyone waiting for the bus?” He looked around at a random selection of travellers, none of them especially odd-looking. There was a woman with a baby buggy and two toddlers, several college students who seemed to be travelling together, a young marine carrying a kit-bag, some conservatively dressed businessmen, two nuns, and five Asian-looking men wearing what appeared to be Japanese naval uniforms. A man in a cheap-looking plaid suit leaned against a pillar, reading a newspaper. Reese had an instinctive feeling that he was up to no good.

“I have five unknowns; the nuns, the man in the plaid suit with the paisley tie and tinted glasses, and two of the Japanese sailors.”

“My guess would be the man in the plaid suit. Let’s see... cheap suit, can’t see anything to indicate concealed weapons. He’s reading the Kansas City Star, probably came in on the same flight as the kid.”

“Try to get him to look toward the vehicle entrance, that’s the nearest camera. Oh, and force a pair with his phone if you can.”

“Okay.” Reese wandered over to look at a bus timetable on the wall, reached into a pocket, and “accidentally” fumbled the most innocuous item he was carrying, a pair of sunglasses, so that they catapulted from his hand and hit the stranger in the stomach, then pretended to look around for them, phone in hand.

The man in the plaid suit looked up from his paper, spat out something too small to be a cigarette, and said “Hey, what’s the big idea?” He had a Jersey accent and wore glasses with lightly-tinted brown lenses.

“Sorry, pal,” said Reese. “They slipped from my hand.”

“Asshole.” The stranger returned to his paper, leaving the sunglasses on the ground. Reese retrieved them, and spotted a matchstick on the ground where he had spat.

“Positive identification,” said Finch. “He’s Joseph ‘Matches’ Malone, a minor-league hoodlum from New Jersey, most recently active in Gotham City. Suspect in several cases of arson and insurance fraud, never convicted. He’s worked for several crime families, usually as a driver or gopher... hmm, interesting... he has a history of working for criminals who were subsequently arrested. It seems likely that he is a police informant, but there is nothing on record to confirm it.”

“There wouldn’t be if they wanted to keep him alive. Is there any association with Costmart or

Intergang?"

"Not that I can see."

"What about his phone?"

"It's a burn phone, purchased in Gotham City three weeks ago. The call log shows fourteen short calls to a phone sex line, and nothing else. Which is odd; it's a prepaid phone with no credit card on record, he would not be able to pay for the service. The last call was four hours ago."

"What about the others?"

"I've identified everyone now apart from the nuns; I can't see enough of their faces for a positive match. Are they doing anything odd?"

"Not so far. Which flight were they on?"

"They didn't arrive on any flight in the last three hours."

"Maybe they saw someone off. No, they've both got bags." Both nuns had large shoulder bags.

"I'm endeavouring to trace them back... hmm, that's odd, they came out of one of the washrooms, but... ah, they weren't dressed as nuns when they went in. And going back from that, they arrived at the airport in a van which is still in the parking lot."

The bus for Grand Central Station finally arrived, and passengers began to board. Reese murmured "Any ID on the van?" and followed Jason Kent aboard, seating himself where he could see the boy and the nuns. Malone boarded last, and sat across the aisle and a row back from Reese, near the back of the bus. It was about half-full.

"The van was reported stolen this morning," said Finch. "At the moment the police are unaware of its location."

"Okay. Could be coincidence, we'll see."

"I have positive identification. The shorter woman is one Michelle O'Hara, the taller her sister Erika. Both are known felons, allegedly guns for hire."

"I'll keep an eye on them."

"Definitely, but be ready for trouble from other sources, they may not be the only threat, and their presence might even be entirely coincidental. One moment... Mister Reese, there was just an attempt to force a pair with your phone."

"What did they get?"

"The usual cover contacts and call history. At the moment, for example, you are talking to your broker."

Out of the corner of his eye Reese saw Malone putting a battered suitcase into the overhead luggage rack. He was easily close enough to have paired the phone. Reese said "Don't give me a hard time about this, just sell the damn shares before the price tanks."

"Someone listening?"

"Well, that's the interesting question, isn't it?"

"It is, Mister Reese."

Malone sat again as the doors shut and the bus lurched into motion, circled around to the nearest exit, and onto the freeway, drove steadily for a couple of miles, then slowed to walking pace as it hit a long tailback of traffic. The driver spoke to someone on his radio, then switched on the PA system and said "Sorry, folks, there's a truck rolled over about half a mile ahead of us. Hancock's gonna move it, shouldn't be long before he gets here."

There was an excited murmur from out-of-town passengers who hadn't seen a superhero before, and a general move to get out cameras and phones. Maintaining the stockbroker cover, Reese said "It looks like I may be late for the meeting, there's a truck broken down ahead. Hancock's going to move it."

"Well, let's hope he doesn't drop it this time," said Finch. "Hmm... Just a moment.... There are no police reports of any incidents on that route."

"Odd."

The bus started moving again, and ahead Reese could see someone in a hard hat and fluorescent orange jacket waving the bus onto an off ramp.

"Mister Reese," said the earpiece, "that road will take the bus several miles off the optimum route. I'd imagine that it's a trap."

“I know.”

Out of the rear window Reese saw a large grey moving van turn onto the road behind the bus and stop. Men in orange jackets got out and moved sawhorse barriers to block the road. There were loud bangs, at the front of the bus then the rear, and Reese guessed it had just driven over a spike strip. It slewed from side to side as the driver hit the brakes then rolled to a halt.

“That’s interesting... Mister Reese, the boy arrived at the airport in a hired car driven by Malone. They are travelling together. I have not been able to ascertain why they travelled via Kansas City.”

“Later, I’m a little busy.”

The so-called nuns stood, and one of them produced a sawed-off shotgun from under her robe and fired into the ceiling, and pumped it for the next shot. The other held up a 9mm Glock and shouted “Nobody move! Stay in your seats and nobody gets hurt!” Someone screamed, and the toddlers and the baby started to cry. There was a flash as someone took a photo, followed by another shot into the roof of the bus. “Drop the cameras, assholes!”

“I’ve got a wife and kids,” said the driver.

“Shut up or they’ll be a widow and orphans!”

“You!” said the other nun, “Jason Kent! Yes you, kid. Keep your hands where I can see them and come here. Everyone else, stay in your seats.”

Reese put his hand to his gun and watched for an opportunity for a clear shot, realising that in the confined space there was no way to be sure nobody else would be hurt. Malone leaned forward and murmured “Stay cool. You wave that gun around, innocent people are gonna get killed. You a cop?”

“Sky Marshal.”

“Wait until they’re off the bus.”

Jason stood and the taller ‘nun,’ Erika O’Hara, put the Glock under his chin and dragged him towards the exit, shouting “Open the goddamned doors!” Outside the moving van screeched to a halt alongside the bus. “Open the doors!”

The driver nervously touched a switch and the doors opened. Erika dragged Jason out, Michelle backing out behind them, covering the passengers with her shotgun. As they got out she shouted “Shut the doors!” The driver did as he was told. Reese crouched and moved forward as fast as he could, gun in hand. Outside the ‘nuns’ dragged Jason to the back of the van. Someone pulled him in, and they climbed in after him, the doors slamming closed as the van roared off.

Reese reached over the driver’s shoulder and pulled the door switch, ran out, and fired at the van’s tyres. He thought he hit them, but it didn’t slow down. In moments it was out of sight.

“Situation, Mister Reese?” said the earphone.

“They got the kid.”

“Who took him? Malone or the nuns?”

“The nuns.”

“What about Malone?”

“I’ll check.” He got back aboard the bus, held up his fake badge and said “Anyone call for help?” He looked back towards the rear of the bus but didn’t see Malone.

“I called 911,” said the marine. “I should have tried to stop them. It happened so fast...”

“You armed?”

“No.”

“Getting yourself killed wouldn’t have helped.”

He turned to the driver, and said “Who told you Hancock was clearing the road?”

“My dispatcher.”

“Got a name?”

“Uh... No, didn’t recognise the voice.”

“Someone probably hacked your signal,” said Reese, mostly for Finch’s benefit.

He walked towards the back of the bus, pretending to look for clues, fending off questions from the anxious passengers. As he neared Malone’s seat he realised that he’d been sitting by one of the emergency exits, an extra-large window that could be popped out to let passengers out. Malone must have used it while

everyone else was watching Reese chase the van. He was gone.

“The police will be there in approximately five minutes,” said Finch. “I finally found Miss Shaw, fortunately on the right side of town, but it will take her at least fifteen minutes to reach you.”

Reese looked out, and realised that Malone’s seat had given him a good view of the area below the road. Beyond the crash barrier was a steep slope down to another road; if his guess was right, it was a continuation of the ramp they were on, which curved round and down to circle under the highway. He climbed out and walked to the railing for a closer look. There was a camera down there watching the underpass. He described the location to Finch.

“Let’s see... yes, I have it. The truck you describe drove under there three minutes ago... that’s interesting... someone appeared to be clinging on to its side.”

“Malone?”

“I can’t see his face, but the build and clothing seems correct.”

“I’m going after them.” He vaulted the crash barrier and slid down, noticing marks on the concrete where someone else had preceded him. “See if you can track his phone.”

“Not at the moment, it’s turned off. Miss Shaw is making good progress; she should be with you in ten minutes or so.”

Reese waved at the camera and ran down the road at a fast jog; he didn’t know how far he’d have to run, and a sprint would soon tire him out.

“Left at the first junction,” said Finch. “They appear to be headed for the industrial area west of the airport.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“There are lots of potential hiding places, but there’s good camera coverage of the area.” In the distance Reese could hear sirens. He glanced back, and saw flashing lights on the road where he’d left the bus, a few hundreds yards away. The police had arrived faster than expected.

“I need to get off this road fast, someone’s going to come looking for me or the van.”

“There should be a supermarket coming up on your side of the road; cut across the parking lot and take the far exit. Try to avoid attracting attention.”

Reese slowed to a brisk walking pace, and spotted an empty shopping cart near some parked cars. There didn’t seem to be anyone around so he wheeled it back towards the supermarket and pushed it into the nested trolleys, then walked on towards the exit.

“Now turn left, at the pedestrian crossing cross the road and take the first turn that comes up on the right.”

“Okay.” Reese followed instructions, keeping to a walking pace since there were more people around. The turn took him into a narrow street with blank walls to either side.

“Just keep walking, Miss Shaw is...”

“Never mind.” A black SUV screeched around the corner ahead of him and did a bootlegger turn, so that it was facing the way it had come. The door opened, and Samantha Shaw waved to him. He ran round to the passenger side and jumped in, saying “What kept you?” She drove off fast, burning rubber on the road.

“Take it easy,” he added, “we don’t know where to go yet, and we really don’t need to get stopped for speeding.”

“I like the sweaty rumpled look,” said Shaw, “makes a nice change.” She looked cool in black slacks and a t-shirt.

“You try sliding down an embankment then jogging a couple of miles in summer heat.”

“That’s a light workout for a Marine.”

“Not wearing a goddamned suit.”

“Full pack and battle dress,” Shaw said smugly.

“And I’ll bet you needed a shower afterwards.”

“I’ll grant you that.”

Finch directed them through several junctions, then said “Malone just called the same number.”

“The sex line?”

“Indeed. He said ‘Executing Red Chief Protocol’ and disconnected.”

“Red Chief Protocol?” said Shaw. “What the hell does that mean?”

“There is an O’Henry story called ‘The Ransom of Red Chief,’” said Finch. “A kidnapped child is so obnoxious that his kidnappers are forced to pay the child’s parents to take him back.”

“Did you get a location?” asked Reese.

“Yes; the van is entering a warehouse. Turn left then take the first right, it’s on the fourth block. Malone is lying on the van’s roof.”

“We’d better get in there fast. You’re armed?”

“Seriously?” Shaw sounded offended. “You’re asking ME that?”

“Never hurts to check. Got something that’ll get us through doors quickly?”

“SPAS-12 sound okay?”

“That’ll do, provided nobody’s standing too close on the other side.”

“Good. You take that, I’m going with the Kel-Tec carbine.”

“Christ, we’re going after kidnappers, not the Viet-Cong.”

“It’ll get the job done.”

“I’ve gained access to their security camera network,” said Finch, “and put the outside cameras on a loop.”

“What’s going on inside?” asked Reese.

“They’re climbing out of the van,” said Finch. “Five kidnappers and the boy. There appears to be something wrong with them; one of the sisters just vomited onto the warehouse floor. They all look distinctly unwell. I’m sending the layout and their locations to your phones.”

As he was talking Shaw took two successive corners on two wheels, braked to 30 or so, then let the car coast into the parking lot and next to the warehouse with a minimum of noise. “The vests are in the trunk.”

“Anyone else inside?” asked Reese, opening the trunk and putting on a Kevlar vest. Shaw took another, and opened an inner box that seemed to have weapons for a small army.

“Two others have just entered from the rear of the building, a man and a woman,” said Finch. “The woman is holding her nose. Nobody else appears to be present. One moment... Malone is now behind the truck, he appears to have knocked out one of the perpetrators. Please try not to shoot him or the boy. And if possible keep the others alive, you will need to question them, so will the police.”

“You know what Malone looks like?” asked Reese.

Shaw nodded and handed him the combat shotgun; he checked it was fully loaded, took a box of shells, and moved to the door. Shaw followed with the carbine, a laser fixed to it instead of her usual sniper telescope. They checked their phones, memorising the locations of the kidnappers, Jason, and Malone, and hoped nothing would change too much before they got inside.

“Okay,” whispered Reese. He aimed at the lock, and Shaw moved to a position where she wouldn’t be hit by any ricochets and switched on the laser. “On three. One... two... three!” He fired at the lock, and Shaw kicked the door open and fired at someone out of his line of sight, and ran in firing again.

Reese slung the shotgun and followed, SIG-Sauer in hand, rolled to get clear of the door, and fired at one of the fake workmen. Another went down to one of Shaw’s shots; a third was already on the ground. Jason Kent seemed to have rolled under the van. One of the fake nuns turned towards them, clumsily fumbling with the shotgun; Reese took a chance and fired at the gun. The stock splintered and she dropped it. The other fake nun was still vomiting, and Reese suddenly noticed the smell, a combination of skunk, rotten eggs, and rotting fish. He could suddenly understand why they looked so queasy.

Malone appeared around the van and threw something at the one man still standing, who’d been in the warehouse before the truck arrived. It hit his head and he went down hard. The last woman raised her hands and said “Don’t shoot! Please don’t shoot.”

“So let me get this straight,” said Reese. “You agreed to bodyguard Jason as a favour to the Kents, they were worried that Intergang might try to use him to stop them testifying?”

“That’s right,” said Malone, “but I’m pretty sure that these clowns aren’t Intergang. They’re bottom-feeders, and the Kents finished giving evidence while we were still in the air, it was on the news as we came in to Newark. I think this is something else, I’m just not quite sure what.”

“Okay,” said Reese. “There’s just one thing that’s puzzling me... who are you, anyway?”

“Joe Malone,” said Malone, “most people call me Matches.”

“I know who Matches Malone is,” said Reese, “and there’s no way a two-bit hoodlum like that could have made it onto the truck and fought like that. Who are you really? And why did you let a kid get in the line of fire?” He deliberately didn’t mention the other discrepancies, the phone call and ‘Red Chief Protocol.’

“It was my idea,” said Jason, sounding older than his years. “Intergang wouldn’t kill me; they’d want me alive to keep my parents quiet. I figured out that if we wanted to catch them we should let them have me, but have someone ready to rescue me fast. Professor Hamilton made the stink bombs, and an antidote that stops us from smelling them. And Mom called Matches.”

“Except that isn’t who you are, is it?” said Reese.

“It’s all the name you’re getting,” said Malone. “I figure we’re kinda in the same line of work, call it professional courtesy.”

“Okay,” said Reese. “My contacts say the police haven’t been called, so we’ve got a little time. We still don’t know what this is about.”

“I heard one of them say something about my dad,” said Jason.

“We already know it’s about your parents,” said Matches.

“Not them,” said Jason, “my *other* dad. Richard. When we got here there was a man, I think he was in charge. He said ‘get on the phone to London; tell White what he has to do.’ That was just before you came in.”

“Okay,” said Reese, “just a minute.” He pinched his nose and went outside to where Shaw had the prisoners, kneeling zip-tied with hoods over their heads. “How’s it coming?”

“None of them are going to bleed to death for a while.” She sounded disappointed; also muffled, since she had a large paper clip pinching her nostrils closed.

Reese found the man who’d been in the warehouse when the truck arrived and grabbed him by the collar, giving him no chance to get to his feet, and dragged him to the back room. He had to use both hands, and for a moment got the full impact of the smell. The truck was probably going to need to be steam cleaned to get rid of it.

He dragged him inside and zip-tied him to the chair and said “Tell me about London, and your plans for Richard White.”

There was no reply.

“Better talk, or I’ll put another one of those stink bombs inside that bag.”

He talked.

“I’ll be surprised if there’s a British newspaper industry left after this,” said Reese. “Not when White can prove that one of the biggest owners was involved in the phone-tap scandal, and we’ve got proof that he was prepared to kidnap Jason or kill White to cover it up. And using that old ‘Diana was assassinated’ story to divert attention, that was just stupid.”

“I’ve found ample evidence in their bank accounts and on line,” said Finch. “I’m sending a summary to the office printer in the warehouse; the police should be able to take it from there. And of course copies to Scotland Yard, various newspapers that aren’t involved, the FBI, and so forth.”

On cue the laser whirred and began to print out a long document. Malone looked a little startled; there was nobody near any of the computers.

“We’d better get out of here,” said Reese. “Can I leave you to take care of things?”

“No problem,” said Malone. “But you know I’m gonna have to describe you two, don’t want them thinking I did all this damage. But don’t sweat it; I’ll keep it pretty vague.”

“I’m not worried. We don’t exist. You ought to know what that feels like.”

Malone grinned but didn’t reply.

“When you’re quite ready,” said Finch.

“Okay,” said Reese. “Jason, I think you ought to call the police. Tell them what happened, make it clear that all of the bad guys are tied up, maybe both of you should be outside when they get here, that way there shouldn’t be any accidents.”

“Okay.”

“Anything else before we go?”

“One thing,” said Malone. He found a pad on one of the desks, ripped off a page, and wrote a familiar phone number. “If you ever need some help, maybe some info or a contact in Gotham, you call this number, ignore anything that you hear, and say ‘Matches sent me.’ Don’t say what it’s about, but give a contact number. Someone ought to get back to you pretty quickly. May not be me, but whoever it is will probably be able to help.”

Reese took the paper. “Okay, I’ll remember that. Time for us to go.”

“I’ll continue to monitor the situation,” said Finch, “but I think the threat is over. The kidnapping was certainly a threat to his life; they let him see their faces, they would have probably killed him eventually.”

As they drove back to Manhattan Shaw said “So... who was that masked man?”

“Masked man?”

“Malone. Pretty sure he was using some sort of prosthetic to change the shape of his face, and his vocabulary wasn’t quite right for the background we’ve got.”

“He said he was in the same line of work,” Finch said through their earphones. “I’d imagine that he meant a vigilante.”

“A vigilante from Gotham City?” said Shaw. “You don’t think...?”

“Oh come on,” said Reese, “that’s an urban myth.”

“So is the Man in the Suit,” said Finch. “And anyone who goes looking for trouble with Intergang must have some rather unusual qualities.”

“Maybe we could get you one of those spotlights,” said Shaw.

“Spotlight?” asked Reese.

“You’ve seen the pictures, with the bat painted on the glass. Only for you it’d have to be a picture of a suit.”

“Very funny.”

“Hey, it’d be easy, they could just use the sign off a men’s room...”

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**End.**

**Notes:** *The Janus Contract* is one of three novels written by the comics version of Superman. I’ve assumed that the Movieverse version wrote them to explain his absence from the *Daily Planet*. Costmart was a supermarket chain run as a cover for Intergang in *Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*. All weapons details come from the Internet Movie Firearms Database:

<http://www.imfdb.org>

John Reese has used a SIG-Sauer P239 as his preferred weapon through all series, Samantha Shaw has repeatedly used the shotgun and carbine mentioned above.

And because I couldn't resist it...

