

Degrees of Separation

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Rated: PG

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Summary: Following the author's "Middle School," Marta Kent's new friend has a secret. Her twin brother is missing, and Intergang is making a reappearance in Metropolis. What is the crime syndicate's interest in Allynda Myers and her brother? Part of the Dagger series.

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Disclaimer: The characters and familiar settings in this story are the property of DC Comics, Warner Bros., December 3rd Productions and whoever else can legally lay claim to them, but the story is mine.

The scene at the end is courtesy of a suggestion by Linda Rose Pierce, who graciously gave me permission to use it. I would also like to thank my beta reader, Don Rosenfield for his help and suggestions. His contributions helped improve the story tremendously.

Nan

"I'm supposed to walk home with my brother and our friends," Marta told Allynda Myers. The two girls had gone to their lockers before joining CJ and Wyatt for their walk home and were now heading for the rendezvous spot. "Maria will probably be with them by the time we get there. Her locker is over by the front of the school. We always walk together because we only live a few blocks from each other, and Dad says we're safer in a group."

"Your dad's probably right," Allynda said. "There's lots of weirdos running around these days. I live in an apartment building over on Michigan Boulevard with my mom. We just moved here three months ago so I don't know very many people yet."

"Well, we live in a townhouse on Hyperion Avenue," Marta said. "We're just a couple of blocks away from Michigan, and only a little farther than that from Centennial Park, only it's the other way. There's my brother." She pointed to where CJ waited not far from the flagpole. Maria was also waiting, as was Valerie Henderson and Wyatt Dillon.

CJ straightened up as Marta approached with Allynda. He looked questioningly at Marta.

"This is Allynda Myers," Marta said. "Allynda, these are Wyatt Dillon and Valerie Henderson, and this is my brother, CJ. That stands for Clark Jerome Junior. We call him CJ because Clark's my dad's name."

"Hi," CJ said. "Maria was telling us about what happened." He grinned at Allynda. "Thanks for helping out my baby sister."

"No problem," Allynda said. "I can't stand bullies. I used to get picked on a lot in first and second grade. That's why I went into Tae Kwon Do."

"Smart move," Valerie Henderson said. "Marta's mom is a black belt, and got her into it. My dad told my sister and brother and me that we should, too. My little sister is nine, and in the kids' class. My brother, Alex, is eleven. He's in the class behind Marta's."

"I haven't seen you over at the dojang," Allynda said.

"I decided to take judo instead," Valerie explained. "I go to judo classes over at the Y twice a week. It helps me concentrate and keep my temper under control. Dad thought that was a good idea. I used to have a really bad temper when I was little."

"Well, if it works, that's the point," Allynda said. She looked at Wyatt. "Didn't I see you in music class this morning?"

Wyatt nodded. "I play the trumpet in the school band."

"So do I," Allynda said. "Mom just couldn't get mine fixed for me before Friday. How come I haven't seen you in any of my other classes?"

"Wyatt's in eighth grade," Maria explained. "He got skipped ahead a year at Metro Elementary. He's twelve. CJ and Valerie are thirteen."

"So am I," Allynda said. "I missed almost a year of school three years ago so I'm a year behind my age group."

"A whole year?" Marta said, appalled. "Gosh! What happened?"

"That was when my mom and dad got divorced," Allynda explained. "Mom got custody, and my dad grabbed me, and we spent the next year moving all over the country, hiding from Mom and the police. It wasn't much fun."

"I guess not!" Marta said. She looked past her newest friend to see Linda Lennox approaching. She waved.

CJ saw her at the same moment. "Linda's coming home with us today, 'cause her mom is showing a house to a new client," he said. "Her mom's going to pick her up later." He beckoned to Linda. "Come on, Linda! Everybody's waiting!"

Linda joined the group, and Marta quickly introduced Allynda. Both girls regarded each other for a moment, and then Linda smiled. "Hi."

"Hi," Allynda said. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise," Linda said. "I already heard about what happened at lunch. Nice going."

"That sure got around fast," Allynda said.

"Things do around this place," Valerie remarked.

"Let's get going," CJ said. "Where do you live, Allynda?"

"Over on Michigan," Marta said, "but she and Maria are coming to our house. Our science teacher assigned us a research project."

"You must have Dr. Jenkins," CJ said. "I had him last year."

"So did I," Wyatt said. "CJ and I picked the same assignment so we could work on it together."

"That's what Maria, Allynda and I did," Marta said. "South American tree frogs. We got all the books we could find about them in the library, and I'm going to do an online search for more stuff when we get home. The project is due on Friday."

"Dr. Jenkins is pretty cool," Wyatt said. "He makes you work, but he's the best science teacher I've ever had. He really *teaches* instead of just assigning make-work. I liked his class a lot."

"So did I," CJ said.

Allynda glanced at Marta. "Maybe science class will be better than we thought," she said.

Wyatt nodded vigorously. "His class was fun," he said. "You get to do your own experiments and see why things work the way they do, instead of just reading about it. If you're lucky, he'll be able to take you to the Metro Aquarium, like he did last year for us. And at the end of the year, he gets some parents who are interested in astronomy and takes his classes out in the country where there's no lights and you can see the stars. You get to camp out overnight, and look at the stars and planets with telescopes. It's great."

Vaguely, Marta recalled that CJ and Wyatt had gone on such a trip the previous year. She hadn't paid much attention but, thinking about it now, it did kind of sound like fun.

The light turned green and they crossed the street with a crowd of other students. Marta easily spotted Susie, Darlene and Lynn in the crowd. They were walking close together, and Marta

thought they looked angry. Well, that was no surprise. They looked mad most of the time. Lynn Montgomery spotted their group and drew the attention of her companions to it. Darlene gave them an obscene gesture, which Marta and the others who saw it ignored.

"Some people never grow up," Wyatt remarked, very softly. Valerie snorted.

Valerie left them at Georgia Street, two blocks farther on, and the remaining children continued on toward Michigan Boulevard. They paused beside one of the apartment houses while Allynda ran up to inform her mother that she was going over to a friend's house to work on their science project. Somewhat to Marta's surprise, she emerged only a few minutes later with a short, pretty woman, whom Allynda introduced as her mother.

"These are Marta and CJ Kent," Allynda said. "And this is Wyatt Dillon, Linda Lennox and Maria Hernandez." She added, "This is my mom."

"Hi," Marta said. "Is it okay for Allynda to come over? Allynda, Maria and I are working on the same science project for Dr. Jenkins' science class. Our house is over on Hyperion Avenue, so we're only a few blocks away."

Allynda's mother looked them over critically. "What's your address?" she asked.

"We live at 348 Hyperion Avenue," CJ said, giving her his best smile. He extended a hand. "I'm CJ Kent."

Marta kept quiet, envying her brother his ability to turn on the charm. No wonder half the girls at the school had a crush on him!

It seemed to work with Allynda's mother as well. She smiled back and shook his hand. "All right," she said. "Give me a call when you get there," she told her daughter.

"Sure," Allynda said.

CJ reached into his pocket and withdrew a pencil and a scrap of paper. Quickly, he scribbled something on it and extended it to Ms. Myers. "Here's our phone number," he said. "Just in case you want to call our house. My mom and dad will be home in about half an hour, and you can talk to them if you like."

"All right," Allynda's mother said. "Try to be home at six, Ally."

"I will," Allynda said.

The group of children continued on toward the townhouse. CJ produced his key and let them into the Kents' home, and held the door for the others. "I smell cookies," he announced as he locked it behind them. "I think Dad must have left something out for us."

They traipsed into the kitchen, and, as predicted, discovered a covered plate of cookies sitting on the kitchen table. CJ took the cover off. "Help yourselves," he said.

Linda took one and moved back to let Marta's new friend choose. "If you need to call your mom, the phone's on the wall behind you, Allynda."

The other girl glanced around. "Thanks. And why don't you call me Ally? That's what Ben called me when we were little, and it kind of stuck."

"Who's Ben?" Maria asked.

"My twin brother." Allynda picked up the receiver.

Marta took a couple of cookies. "After Ally's through with her call, let's go up to the playroom where we can spread out our books," she suggested to Maria. "That way I can get on the computer before Jonny and Jimmy get home and do a search for anything on tree frogs."

"Good idea," Maria said, her mouth full of cookies. "Your dad sure can cook."

"Good thing, too," Marta said.

"Why?" Allynda put down the phone, glancing from one to the other.

Marta grinned. "Mom can heat things up as long as she has

instructions, but she doesn't cook very well," she explained.

"Dad does the cooking around here."

"Is he a chef or something?" Allynda asked.

"Nope; he's a reporter," Wyatt said. "But he can cook, too."

Allynda frowned for a moment, and then her eyes widened.

"You said your dad's name is Clark. Is he *Clark Kent*? The guy that works for the Daily Planet?"

"Yeah," Marta said. "Why?"

"I've read his stuff," Allynda said. She looked oddly at Marta, but didn't elaborate. "I guess we'd better get busy on our homework. I've only got 'til six. Mom doesn't like me to walk home in the dark."

"Neither does our mom," Marta said. "Grab some more cookies and we'll go up to the playroom and get started."

Clark Kent walked in the front door of the townhouse, aware that Marta and her friends were up in the attic playroom, with the CD player on and evidently working on some kind of project. His hearing picked up Marta's voice, as well as Maria Hernandez and a third person, who was unfamiliar. From the den, he could hear the voices of CJ, Wyatt Dillon and Linda Lennox, as well as the hum of the newer Kent computer. The three eighth graders were apparently working on their homework as well.

He ushered his two younger sons inside and then returned to the new Jeep Cherokee to take two of the triplets from their car seats while Lois managed the third one.

"We've got a houseful right now," he informed her.

"Wyatt and Linda are here?"

"Yeah. And Marta's got two friends as well — Maria Hernandez and somebody I don't recognize are up in the playroom with her. They seem to be working on some kind of report about frogs." He tilted his head, listening. "South American tree frogs."

"Sounds like Dr. Jenkins has struck again," Lois said. "I foresee another stargazing trip next spring."

"Yeah. That's not such a bad thing, though," Clark said. "At least he seems to be able to get kids interested in science." He let Lois open the door, since both of his hands were occupied by small, fat ones, and followed her inside. "If the older kids haven't eaten all of them, there should be some cookies in the kitchen," he added. "I put some away so there would be a few left when we got here. The triplets can have one each and then I think we should send them outside in back for half an hour or so, so they can run off some energy."

"Good idea," Lois said. "Why don't you take care of that while I get changed."

"Okay." Clark herded the trio into the kitchen and discovered that the reserved cookies were still where he had stored them. He distributed the largesse between the three smaller children as well as Jonny and Jimmy. "Okay, Lucy, you, Billy and Rach head outside and play for a bit. Jonny, I want you and Jimmy to keep an eye on them for a few minutes. I just need to change out of my work clothes. Then you can come in and get busy on your homework."

Jonny groaned faintly, but at a sharp look from Clark refrained from louder objections. The children departed through the kitchen door for the play set and sand box that Clark had installed in the small, fenced-in back yard.

"Dad." CJ was behind him when he turned, looking uncharacteristically serious. "I have something for you. Linda gave it to me. It's important."

"Sure. What is it?"

He extended a hand, and to Clark's surprise, he was holding a piece of ordinary notebook paper. He took the paper, and read the line of Linda Lennox's neat handwriting at the top of the page.

"Marta's new friend, Allynda, is one of us."

Clark knocked lightly on the door of the attic playroom before stepping inside. The three girls were sitting in front of the computer, their heads nearly touching as they scrutinized something on the monitor screen. It was obvious that none of the three had heard his knock.

Deliberately, he knocked a little more loudly.

The girls straightened up and turned their heads, and Clark could now see the picture on the computer monitor was that of a green frog with sucker-tipped toes. A tree frog, naturally. The creature's bright red eyes were almost shocking in the tiny, green face.

"Hi Dad," Marta said. "I didn't hear you come in."

"Oh, that's all right. CJ said you were studying tree frogs."

"Yeah," Maria Hernandez said. "We have a research project that's due Friday."

"I see Dr. Jenkins isn't wasting any time," Clark said. He unobtrusively took stock of the third girl. "You must be Allynda."

She nodded and smiled in a friendly way. "I guess you're Mr. Kent."

"That's right." Clark extended a hand. "Glad to meet you, Allynda. I hear you stood up for Marta this afternoon. Thank you."

Marta nodded vigorously.

"I gave the school a copy of the court papers, so if Susie gives you any more trouble, you're to report her," Clark told his daughter, but he studied Allynda as he spoke.

Allynda Myers was taller than both Marta and Maria. She was an attractive girl with chocolate brown skin and a flock of darker freckles across her nose. Her black hair was braided fashionably back from her face and gathered into an elaborate braided bun at the back of her neck, and she wore tiny pearl earrings in her ears. She was dressed in a pair of jeans and a blouse, and wore close-toed sandals on her feet. Superficially, there was nothing particularly remarkable about her at all, but, tuning his super-hearing, he could hear the telltale accelerated heartbeat of a Kryptonian. Still, something like that wasn't likely to be noticed even by another Kryptonian, unless he was listening specifically for it. Even Superman couldn't go around with his super-hearing wide open all the time. All the noises would have driven him insane in short order. Only something like Linda Lennox's extra abilities, whatever they were, was likely to detect Allynda's extra-terrestrial ancestry.

He smiled at her. "CJ said you're new in Metropolis,"

She shrugged. "Sort of, but not really. When I was little, we lived across town on the West Side. After my dad and mom got divorced, Mom moved to Florida for a while, and then we moved back here about three months ago."

"Oh; I see," Clark said. "Well, I'm glad to meet you. I guess I'd better leave you three alone so you can get your work done."

He retreated and descended the attic stairs to the second floor, thinking hard and listening with his special hearing to the conversation behind him.

"Your dad's nice," Allynda said. "Anyway, what do we want to use for the introduction —"

They were obviously concentrating on their research project. Clark paused in his descent and opened the door to the room that he and Lois shared. He could hear the shower going, and he glanced through the wall for a glimpse of his wife in the shower. That was always a pleasant exercise, he reflected. Lois would be the person to talk to after Allynda went home, when there was no longer much danger that she would overhear what they were talking about. The girl was undoubtedly beginning to notice that something was different about her from other teenagers, but whether she had realized the cause yet he didn't know. He was going to have to try to talk to her sooner or later, but that would have to be done in his other identity. Some of the changes that had taken place in his life when he had begun to gain his super

powers had been frightening. One of the things that he had undertaken was to help to ease the transition for the half-Kryptonian children left behind. If he could make things less traumatic for them, it couldn't hurt anything.

At normal speed, he changed into casual clothing. As he was tying his shoes, he heard the shower go off and knocked lightly on the bathroom door. "May I come in, honey?"

"Sure," Lois's voice said.

She was wrapped in a skimpy towel when he opened the door and rubbing her hair vigorously with another towel. Clark wolf-whistled softly and saw her smile. "I don't know how you can still think I'm worth whistling at," she remarked. "I'm nearly forty-three years old and the mother of triplets."

"Believe me," Clark said sincerely, "you're worth whistling at. If I didn't have to start dinner, we'd be having dessert within about half a minute." He X-rayed the towel and smiled more widely. "Maybe we'll have one later tonight."

"I'll take that as a promise," she said, obviously fully aware of what he had just done.

"In the meantime, though, I thought I'd better pass along something CJ gave me from Linda," he added, on a more serious note, and handed her the paper.

Lois read the line of script and her eyebrows went up. "She's sure?"

"CJ says yes. I just talked to the girls and double-checked. She's right."

"Sounds like something Superman should talk to her about."

"I think so, too. She must be noticing things by now. I sure was by this time. Anyway, I thought it was a good idea to tell you."

Lois nodded. "Yeah."

"I'll get dinner started," Clark added, "and let Jonny and Jimmy get busy on their homework. Billy and Rach were climbing on the swing set the last I looked, and Lucy is apparently trying to dig to China. Hopefully they'll tire themselves out in a little while."

"Hopefully," Lois agreed. "Maybe we can get them to bed by seven tonight — without too many requests for water and trips to the bathroom." She shook her head. "It's lucky we had them last," she said. "I could never have coped with three kids like them if they'd been first."

Clark grinned. "If they'd been first, they probably would also have been the last," he pointed out. "At least now we know what we're doing."

"True," she said. "If someone had told me thirteen years ago that I'd wind up the mother of seven, I'd have laughed in his face."

"So would I," Clark said. "I know we didn't plan these last ones, but I wouldn't give them up now for anything."

"Neither would I," Lois said. She exited the bathroom and opened her lingerie drawer, glanced sideways at him and deliberately dropped the towel before selecting a pair of ice-blue panties.

Clark blew out his breath. "If you don't want to take time for dessert now, I'd better get out of here," he said, a little raggedly. "Or you're going to be flat on your back in about ten seconds."

"Just keep that in mind for later," she said.

"Count on it." He left the room quickly and wiped his heated brow. Lois might be nearly forty-three, but, when it came to sheer sex appeal, she outclassed any other woman he'd ever seen. It was probably just good luck that they didn't have more than seven kids, considering the way she affected him. Whew!

Lois Lane smiled as the door closed behind her husband. Perhaps it was a little unfair, but it made her feel good to know that she still had that effect on the most powerful being on the face of the Earth. If the women of the world knew that she alone

was loved and desired by Superman, she would be the most envied woman on the planet, and even more so if they realized the kind of man he really was. Plenty of her acquaintances already envied her the relationship that she and Clark shared. How much more so if they knew the whole truth?

Of course, the inconveniences associated with that knowledge being openly disseminated wouldn't be worth it by a long shot but it was fun to picture the outrage of certain of their number should they learn the truth.

And, of course, someday her four sons would also be in a similar position to their father. With luck, they and their three sisters would be spoken for long before it became an issue. CJ and Marta were already taken. That left five to go.

But there were the other super-children who would face similar hurdles in the future, and one of them was upstairs in the playroom right now.

Lois fastened her jeans, tucked in her blouse and ran a comb through her hair. There. Now it was time to go upstairs and meet the mysterious Allynda.

First, though, she had better have a good excuse.

Well, what better excuse could there be than her wish to meet her daughter's new friend? She left the bedroom and went up the attic stairs.

All three girls were grouped in front of the computer screen, their heads nearly touching, but they turned when Lois knocked on the door.

"Hello, girls," Lois said with a smile. "Clark said you had a new friend with you today, Marta." She looked at Allynda. "I'm Marta's mother. I'm glad to meet you."

"Hi." The new girl smiled in a friendly way with no hint of shyness. "I'm Allynda Myers. It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Kent."

Lois nodded. "Where do you live, Allynda?"

"In an apartment on Michigan," Marta said. "Her mom has our phone number. She might call you later. Ally has to be home by six."

"In that case," Lois said, "I'd better let the three of you get on with your work." She smiled generally at the three girls and retreated.

The sounds of clinking utensils and the scent of cooking food drew her toward the kitchen when she reached the first floor. A glance at the dining room table showed her Jonny and Jimmy, perched on dining room chairs, working on pieces of paper spread out before them. Jonny appeared to be working (somewhat reluctantly) on a page of fractions, and Jimmy was practicing his letters. Jimmy was reading well above his grade level — a fact that his kindergarten teacher last year had mentioned to her with an air of surprise at their first student conference, although Lois had told her the same on the first day of school. Perhaps his progress had something to do with his Kryptonian ancestry, although Lois seemed to recall having taught herself to read at about the same age. It had frustrated her tremendously that, when she had demonstrated the ability for her father, Sam Lane had refused to believe it, and had insisted that she had been repeating the words by rote. She hadn't made that mistake with her own children.

Clark was busy putting together what looked like a tuna, rice and vegetable casserole when she entered. The aroma of cinnamon and baking apples emerging from the oven led her to suspect that apple pie was on the menu for dessert, tonight. A glance through the kitchen window showed her the triplets digging industriously in the sandbox.

"I'll be done here in a minute." Clark finished stirring his ingredients, scraped the casserole into a baking dish, added French-fried onions to the top and slipped the dish into the oven with the pie.

"Isn't that the wrong temperature for the casserole?" she

asked, out of the fullness of experience. The last time she had tried that, Clark had had to come home in a rush to put out the flames issuing from their oven.

"Only a little," he said, setting the time for the casserole on the microwave. "The pie bakes at a slightly higher temperature than the casserole, so I'll take the casserole out a little sooner than I would have if it were the only thing in the oven. They'll come out about ten minutes apart."

"How do you know how much time to take off?" she inquired. "I tried that last week and you ended up getting us all takeout from Hong K..." She caught herself and glanced guiltily ceilingward. "Sorry," she mouthed silently.

"It takes experience," Clark said, in a casual tone, but also with a glance upward. "And I keep an eye on it. As I recall, you got involved in some kind of research on your latest investigation."

"Well, it was important!"

"I'm sure it was," Clark said. "But if you don't want to burn the dinner, you have to check on it now and then."

Lois looked skeptically at the oven and shrugged. Every time she thought she'd figured something out, she found that there were exceptions. It was a good thing that she had more or less accepted the fact that, when it came to cooking, it was better for her to keep her hands off. It just didn't look good when Superman had to show up a couple of times a week to put out her kitchen fires. Besides, it tended to upset the other residents of the townhouse when they saw smoke billowing from her kitchen window.

"Did you meet Allynda?" Clark asked, diplomatically changing the subject.

She nodded. "She seems pretty nice."

"That's what I thought. Maybe we should invite her mother over to dinner sometime next week."

"Maybe," Lois said. "You know, Allynda reminds me of somebody, but I can't think who it is."

"I know. I thought so, too."

"It'll probably come to me, if I don't try to think of it," Lois said.

"Probably. Dinner will be ready in about an hour. I guess we'd better get the Terrible Trio in and give them baths unless we want them to be eating sand."

The three girls came down the steps a few minutes before six. Allynda slung her backpack over one shoulder. "We can probably finish tomorrow evening," she was saying. "Mom wants to get me a computer, but she's looking for a good used one, so it might be a while. Besides, we get things done faster when we work together."

"I noticed that," Marta agreed. "I'll see you guys tomorrow."

Clark stepped into the living room. "Ready to go home?"

"Yeah. Mom wants me home before it starts to get dark," Allynda said.

"I usually take Maria and Wyatt home," Clark said. "Would you like a lift?"

Allynda looked doubtful. "I'm not sure Mom would like it," she said.

"I'll be with you," Maria said. "So will Wyatt. Mr. Kent's okay."

Clark grinned. "If Allynda's mother doesn't want her accepting rides with strange men, I understand," he said.

Allynda looked a little embarrassed. "It's just — after what happened when Mom and Dad got divorced — she doesn't want it to happen again."

"In that case, why don't you call your mother and ask," Clark said. "Be sure to tell her that I'm dropping off Maria and Wyatt, too." He glanced toward the study, in time to see Wyatt Dillon emerge, his backpack in one hand.

"All right." Allynda appeared relieved and went to the living room phone.

Clark waited, while she spoke to her mother. She turned.
"Mom wants to talk to you."

"All right." Clark took the receiver. "This is Clark Kent."

"Hello," the woman's voice said. "I understand you offered to drive Allynda home?"

"I usually drive my children's friends home, as a safety measure," Clark said. "I understand if you don't want me to drive Allynda home, though. You don't know me at all. I'll be bringing two others at the same time, if that helps. My son's friend, Wyatt Dillon, and my daughter's friend, Maria Hernandez, live fairly close by. My son, CJ, told me they met you this afternoon."

"Yes, they did," Allynda's mother said. "All right; let me speak to my daughter, please."

Clark passed the phone to Allynda again and glanced at Wyatt. "Don't forget your trumpet."

"Oops," Wyatt said. "Be right back." He returned to the study for an instant and reappeared, carrying the instrument case.

Allynda listened to her mother for a moment and put down the phone. She smiled at Clark.

"Mom says it's all right, as long as the others are there. But she'd like to meet you."

"Sure," Clark said. "I'll drop you off first, take the others home, and then come back, if that's all right."

"That would be great," Allynda said. Her gaze rested on his face. "I've seen your picture, and Ms. Lane's on those advertising things in the Daily Planet, so I'm not worried."

"Good," Clark said. "All right," he added to all three of his passengers. "Last one to the car is a rotten egg."

"Dad!" Marta exclaimed. "That's for kids!"

"I know. Keep an eye on the casserole while I'm gone; would you, Marta? Unless you want it Cajun-style tonight. It should come out in about fifteen minutes."

"I will," Marta said. "Bye, guys. See you tomorrow."

Clark pulled the Cherokee up in front of the Michigan Dreams apartment complex. "Here you are. I'll be back in about fifteen minutes," he told Allynda.

"Thanks, Mr. Kent." Allynda opened the door and got out. Clark waited until she had entered the front door of the complex and then pulled away from the curb. Getting the other two home was only a matter of minutes. Wyatt lived only a block away, on Hibiscus Street, in the Silver Sky apartments, and Maria lived in a duplex two streets closer to the middle school. After dropping the two off, he turned the Jeep back toward the home of Allynda Myers and her mother.

The apartment was typical of such establishments in the area. The grounds seemed fairly well kept, and Clark noticed that there was a swimming pool and a tennis court at the opposite end of the compound from which he had entered.

The Myers apartment was on the second floor, not far from the gated entrance. He mounted the steps and found Apartment 2-B without difficulty. He had raised a hand to knock, when the door opened. Allynda stood there. "Hi, Mr. Kent. Come in."

Clark stepped into the room.

It was a small, sparsely furnished sitting room, considerably less affluent than the one he had occupied when he had still been a bachelor. A narrow counter separated it from a tiny cooking area and a short hallway opened in the rear wall, leading to a small bathroom and two tiny bedrooms.

A short, pretty black woman smiled at him from the kitchen and set a lid atop a skillet. She turned down the heat and came out from behind the narrow divider. "Mr. Kent? I'm Tanya Myers."

Clark extended a hand. "Clark Kent."

They shook hands. She gestured toward the armchair that

graced one wall. "Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you." Clark took a seat, and Tanya and Allynda sat opposite to him.

"I'm glad to meet you," Clark said. "Your daughter stood up for my daughter this afternoon at the middle school. There are three girls there that she's been having a problem with."

"Ally told me what happened," Tanya said. "I'm glad she was able to help. So, you're the Clark Kent that writes for the Daily Planet?"

"Yes, I am."

"Then I won't worry about Allynda when she goes to visit," Tanya said. "We had a very bad experience three years ago, with my ex-husband. I've had to be very careful ever since."

"Mom—" Allynda said.

"I understand," Clark said.

"No, I don't think you do." Tanya Myers frowned. "Three years ago, my husband and I divorced. I was granted custody of my twins, and Morris took it badly. He kidnapped both Ally and Ben, and fled with them to another state. According to Ally, they moved several times around the country, avoiding the police. After a year, Ally got away with her brother's help and went to the police, but Morris escaped again, with Ben. I haven't seen my son for three years. I don't want to lose Ally, too."

"Your son is still missing?" Clark said.

"Yes." Tanya's mouth tightened. "I've hired a detective to try to find him, but—" She gestured around at their living quarters. "As you can see, it hasn't been easy. I can't give up, but private detectives cost a great deal."

"I know." Clark bit his lip. "Mrs. Myers, you can believe that when Allynda is with us we'll make sure that she's safe."

"Thank you," Tanya said. "I don't normally pour out my heart to strangers, but I wanted you to know why—"

"I do understand," Clark said. He glanced at Allynda. "Your brother helped you escape?"

Allynda nodded. "Dad always locked us in when he had to leave. We managed to break out, but he came back just as we got out of the room. We rushed him, and knocked him down. He chased us, of course, but couldn't catch us both. Ben tripped him and yelled at me to run. He caught Ben, but I was able to get away. By the time I brought the police back, they were gone." She glanced at her mother and then at Clark. "I wanted to ask you if there was any way you could help us find Ben."

"Ally," Tanya said. "Mr. Kent is a reporter, not a detective."

Clark smiled. "I may be just a reporter, but I do have a wide range of contacts around the country. I can put out some inquiries. It can't hurt to try. Do you have pictures of your son and ex-husband?"

Tanya Myers opened her mouth, as if to speak and suddenly nodded. "Yes. If someone finds out anything, he won't alert Morris, will he?"

"Of course not," Clark said quietly. "If I could borrow the pictures, just long enough to make copies, I'll return them tomorrow."

"I'll get them." Tanya got quickly to her feet and hurried toward her bedroom.

Allynda was staring at her lap. She glanced cautiously up at Clark and then looked down again. She said nothing.

Tanya returned, clutching several photographs in one hand. "The pictures of Ben are over three years old."

"I can have a friend of mine do some age-progression with his computer, to see what Ben would look like now," Clark said. He glanced at his watch. "I have to go or I'll be late for dinner. Would it be all right if I drop by tomorrow evening to return these?"

Tanya nodded. "I don't expect much to come of it," she said, "but thanks for trying to help."

"You never know," Clark said. "Less likely things have

worked out. We'll do our best and see what happens."

Allynda accompanied him to the Cherokee. "Mr. Kent —"
"Yes, Allynda?"

She grimaced. "Call me Ally. Mom only calls me Allynda when I'm in trouble."

"All right."

"Anyway, thanks for trying to help. It's pretty important."

Clark looked closely at her. Allynda was staring at the ground again.

"What is it, Ally?" Clark asked finally.

She bit her lip. "I can't say anything about it out here," she said. "Can I talk to you tomorrow?"

"Sure."

"All right. Thanks." She turned and nearly ran back into the apartment complex.

Dinner was ready when Clark returned to the townhouse. Lois was setting the glasses by each plate and glanced around as he shut the door. "How did it go?"

"It was — different," Clark said. "I'll tell you about it after dinner, when a few little pitchers with long ears are asleep."

"I thought we'd be busy doing something else by that time."

"Oh, we will. You're not getting out of that," he said with a grin. "But I thought that maybe you'd like to take a short spin with me first. Somewhere that we can talk without being overheard. It looks to me like Lane and Kent are going to need to do some investigating."

"Sounds interesting." She put two fingers in her mouth and whistled. "All right, everybody. Dinner!"

"Hey, Jim," Clark said.

His colleague, James Olsen, Kerth-winning photo-journalist, computer expert and investigative reporter, turned at the call.

"Yeah?"

"You're the best computer guru I know. I wonder if you can help me."

"Maybe," Jim said. "What's up?"

"Let's go into the conference room," Clark said.

Obediently, Jim Olsen pushed open the door to Conference Room One. Clark preceded him through and when he closed the door, Clark locked it. "Linda found another of the New Kryptonian kids," he said.

"That's great," Jimmy said. "But what does that have to do with me?"

Clark produced the photos that Tanya Myers had given him the evening before. "There's a story behind these. This kid is Benjamin Myers. The pictures were taken a little over three years ago. His twin sister is a new friend of Marta's, and Linda says she's one of the special kids. I checked, and she is. Anyway —"

Clark summarized the story that Allynda's mother had told him the night before. Jim listened closely, while examining the photographs. "So you want me to do an age progression on these pictures of Ben Myers?"

"Can you?"

"Sure. Nothing to it. As for the rest, I can contact my dad. He's a department head at the NSA these days. I'll see what he can tell us, and I can ask some of my friends around the country to do some searches for anything about this Morris Myers character. Maybe he's gotten a traffic ticket, or committed some minor infraction or other over the years. It's a long shot, but we can see what turns up."

"Thanks," Clark said. "I knew I could count on you, and, of course, I'll work at it from my end."

"What can you do?" Jim asked.

"Well, it's more what Superman can do," Clark said. "This kid is telepathic, whether he knows it or not, and so is his sister. Maybe we can attack it from that direction. There's still the

mystery kid that Linda Lennox detected, three years ago that we never found. And the one that accidentally overheard me talking to Wyatt about the same time. Benjamin has got to be noticing things about himself by now. I certainly was by the time I was thirteen."

"Yeah," Jim said. "Okay, I'll scan these photos into my computer and give you back the originals. I should have some enhanced copies for you in a couple of hours."

"Thanks." Clark slapped him very lightly on the back. "It's nice to have friends in high places."

Jimmy snorted.

It was barely an hour later that Jimmy dropped an envelope on his desk. "All done. I had a little more time than I thought, so I used it to do what you asked. Here you go."

"Thanks." Clark picked up the envelope. "I owe you."

"Yeah, sure. Just be sure that we get to your mom's for dinner on Thanksgiving, as usual. Sandi's mom is giving her a hard time again."

"Mom would kill me if I didn't make sure you came," Clark pointed out.

Jimmy grinned. "It isn't exactly a chore, you know. Now that Perry is nearly four and Alicia is walking, it's a great place for kids to learn a little more about life than living in the city is likely to teach them. Sandi says your parents' place reminds her of her grandparents' farm when she was growing up."

"Good, because Mom and Dad like having them there," Clark said. He opened the envelope and took out the photos.

The picture of Morris Myers showed a man in his late thirties or early forties, whom Clark was sure he had never seen before, but the picture of Benjamin Myers caught his attention at once. There was, again, familiarity in the features of the boy in the photo. He studied the picture of the child thus displayed. The similarity to someone he had once known was much more marked, and a memory from his past raised a picture in his mind.

He set the paper down on the desk. "Jimmy, who does Ben Myers remind you of?"

Jimmy also studied the picture. "I was thinking about that when the computer showed me how he looks now. Take away the darker skin and hair, give him squinty little blue eyes instead of big brown ones, and he looks a lot like —" He paused and dropped his voice. "Nor."

"Yeah," Clark said. "That's what I think. Better looking, though. And a much pleasanter expression."

"That's for sure," Jimmy said.

"And judging from what his sister said about him, he's a much better person," Clark added.

"Yeah," Jim agreed.

"Well, he let his dad catch him to let her get away," Clark said. "That says a lot about him. But we still need to find him."

"I've already talked to my dad and sent him the pictures," Jimmy said. "He said he'd get back to me if he finds out anything. I didn't let on that there was anything other than a kidnapped kid, though."

"Thanks. The last thing we need is for the government to find out that Cash's story about the half-Kryptonian kids was real, even if they aren't part of any plan to conquer the Earth."

"Yeah," Jim agreed. "Cash is a loon. Why would the New Kryptonians need to infiltrate Earth, when they were powerful enough to take over all by themselves? It isn't as if there's a lot we could do to stop them. There's not that much Kryptonite around."

"True," Clark said. "But try telling that to a fanatic. They know what they know, and nothing you can say is going to change their minds." He slipped the photos back into their envelope. "Thanks for the help."

"You know," Jim said, "with the speed that you learn things, I

could teach you to do this stuff in no time.”

“Maybe,” Clark said, “but I don’t think I’d ever pick up your instinct with a computer. That’s something that can’t be taught.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Jim said. “But I know. You’ve got your hands full as it is.”

“Pretty much,” Clark said. “You could always take some time and teach CJ, you know. He’s already good with a computer.”

“Where do you think he learned it?” Jim asked, raising an eyebrow at Clark. “And, considering who he is, don’t tell me *you* can’t learn it.” That was said in a lowered voice. “That kid is going to succeed at anything he wants to do, and you could, too. I guess,” he added, “that’s why you’re such a good investigative journalist. Anyway, if you need anything else, just ask.” He glanced at his watch. “Oops. Gotta go. I’m almost late for an interview.”

He grabbed up his camera case and made a beeline for the elevator. The doors opened as he was mounting the steps and Lois emerged. “Going somewhere?”

“Interview. Excuse me.” Jim dodged past her into the car and punched the button. The doors closed.

“He was sure in a hurry,” she remarked to Clark, when she reached her desk.

“I almost made him late,” Clark said. “He did that stuff with the photos I asked. Take a look.” He handed her the envelope.

Lois sat down at her desk and spread out the photos on its surface. “I guess this is Allynda’s dad?”

“I’d say her stepdad. Take a look at the age-adjusted pictures of Ben.”

Lois picked up the first one. Her eyes narrowed as she studied it. “Does he look like who I think he looks like?”

“Yeah.”

“Nor was Allynda and Ben’s father.”

“I suspect so. Of course, it could just be a coincidence.”

“Not likely.”

They looked at each other for a moment.

“We have to find this kid,” Lois said. “The last thing we need is Nor’s son growing up with a twisted attitude or something.”

“Well, Ally told me last night how Ben helped her to get away. He sounds like a good kid.”

“Yeah, for now. But living too long the way he’s living might not be very good for him. You need to talk to Allynda again — teach her to use her telepathy. They’re twins. Maybe she’ll be able to help us, if she’s got any kind of connection with her brother at all.”

“That’s a big maybe, but it’s worth a shot,” Clark agreed. “I’ll talk to Perry about maybe getting these pictures out to some of our affiliates, and maybe we can see about getting them on milk cartons or something. Any kind of publicity to make it more difficult for Morris Myers to hide. First I should check with Tanya, though. Just to get her okay.”

“And maybe Superman should pay her a visit,” Lois said.

“Yeah, I’d say that’s a given,” Clark said.

Marta, Ally and Maria headed for Maria’s locker near the front of the school. CJ, Valerie, Linda and Wyatt would be waiting, but Dr. Jenkins had kept Marta’s class an extra couple of minutes, as he handed out permission slips for the trip to the Metro Aquarium scheduled for the first week of October.

“We got those this morning,” Allynda said. “It sounds like a lot of fun. I’ve always been interested in sharks. Did you know that sharks are really fragile creatures, and that a dolphin can kill a shark by ramming it? And that if a shark doesn’t keep moving all the time, it dies?”

Marta hadn’t. “Sharks are pretty dangerous, though,” Maria said.

“Not all sharks,” Ally contradicted. “Whale sharks eat plankton and stuff, and when you see them in movies — you

know, when people are all panicking because there’s a shark in the water, coming toward the victim — it’s usually a nurse shark. They’re completely harmless. Of course, there’s lots that are dangerous, too — great whites, and hammerheads and tiger sharks and things. I want to study sharks when I get to college, and maybe have a career studying ocean life.”

“You already know a lot about sharks,” Maria said, impressed.

“That’s just because I read some books from the library about them,” Ally said. “I want to really study sea animals. Ben and I used to go swimming over by Wilson’s Cove — you know: the place they set aside as a marine sanctuary. They let you snorkel there, so you can see all the stuff under the water. It was really interesting. Most people don’t have any idea how many kinds of fish live there. Ever since they cleaned the junk out, the water’s clear and there are all kinds of things — crabs, starfish, and once I even saw an octopus! Mom and Dad used to take us there a lot, every summer, until they got divorced.”

“It must have been fun,” Marta said.

“Yeah,” Maria agreed.

They rounded the corner of the cafeteria and stopped sharply. Susie, Lynn Montgomery and Darlene were standing there. Susie was holding a baseball bat, and the two other girls were similarly armed.

“Okay, Kent,” Susie said, “this is where you get yours.” She swung at Marta.

Marta shoved Maria backwards out of range of the weapon, automatically parrying the blow with her other hand. The bat, wielded by Susie, impacted the ground beside her hard enough to crack the wood.

The other two girls moved in, and Ally struck Darlene’s bat as it swung at her, deflecting it into Lynn’s.

‘CJ!’ Marta screamed in her mind, but at the same time she was moving. She kicked the bat that had hit the blacktop, and the two broken pieces flew apart, spinning away in two directions before again falling to the ground. She pivoted around to meet the bat swung by Lynn Montgomery, grabbed the item by both ends and twisted, wrenching the weapon away from the other girl. She threw it away as hard as she could and spun back to face their three assailants. Susie was lunging at her, and she stepped quickly to the side, thrusting out a foot and hoping that Ally would be able to deal with Darlene and her bat. Susie tripped over Marta’s foot and went face-first onto the asphalt.

To her left, there was a solid, sharp cracking noise and she turned quickly toward the sound.

Darlene’s bat was in two pieces. The head of the bat lay on the ground, and Darlene held the bottom half, staring at it as if she didn’t believe her eyes. Ally brushed a few splinters of wood off her right hand onto her jeans and crouched in a defensive stance, facing the other girl. Susie was on her hands and knees and, as Marta turned, Maria landed hard on Susie’s back, bearing her to the ground again. Susie struggled to get up, but Maria shoved her face into the blacktop with both hands and leaned forward, throwing all her weight on the larger girl’s head.

Susie cursed at her, but the words were muffled under Maria’s body, with her face pressed hard into the asphalt.

CJ, Valerie, Wyatt and Linda rounded the corner at a run, to stop in amazement at the sight before them. Darlene and Lynn took one look at the superior forces now confronting them, and ran.

From somewhere above, Marta heard a familiar whooshing noise, and then Superman landed beside them. He had a grip on each of the two other girls, and he set them firmly on the ground. “Don’t move,” he said sternly. “All right, Maria, you can get up now.”

Maria obeyed. Darlene and Lynn stood frozen as Susie staggered to her feet. The bigger girl’s face was scratched and

scraped in several places, and blood streamed from her nose. Her face was smeared with dirt, tears and blood. She pointed a shaking finger at Marta.

"She attacked me!" she shrieked. "Look what you did to me, you little —"

"I saw the whole thing," a voice behind them said. Marta turned to see Mrs. Elders, one of the women who worked in the cafeteria, standing some feet away. The woman was breathing hard as if she had been hurrying, and her round plump face was flushed. "You and those two girls Superman brought back attacked these three with baseball bats. All three of you should be ashamed of yourselves!"

"I think," Superman said, "that we'd all better go over to the Office."

"So," Clark said to Lois, "Principal Setter called the police, and everybody wound up at the police station. Superman told the guy that took the statement what he'd seen, and I went back after you took the kids home and filed a complaint against them for violating the court order. They're also being charged with assault with intent to cause grievous bodily harm. This time those three girls are in serious trouble."

They were sitting on a bench in Centennial Park, talking quietly. They had left CJ, Wyatt and Linda to watch the triplets while they found a quiet place to talk that was — hopefully — beyond the reach of Allynda's untrained super-hearing.

"I'll bet anything that Susie's helicopter mom is still defending her precious little angel," Lois said, cynically.

"Probably," Clark said. "But this time it's a criminal matter. It's going to have to be handled by Juvenile Court. And they have adult witnesses — Mrs. Elders and Superman. He saw it, too — or most of it, anyway. He arrived right after Marta 'called' CJ."

"Oh?" Lois said, cocking her head sideways, "I'd think Superman should have been able to move fast enough to stop the whole thing."

"Superman saw right away that Marta, Ally and Maria had the situation in hand, and he was pretty sure they wouldn't hurt the other three seriously," Clark said. "He knew he could stop it if things started to get out of control, but he also knew that Susie and her friends were going to keep coming unless they were given a real reason to stop. He let Marta, Ally and Maria give them the reason. The criminal justice system would never be able to teach them what they learned this afternoon." He gave a faint grin. "I wish you'd seen Marta and the others in action. You'd have been proud of them."

"That's for sure." Lois had been mounting the steps of the police station to retrieve the girls and drive them to the townhouse, and had seen Susie's face as her outraged mother had escorted her from the precinct to her Mercedes. None of the scratches and scrapes that she had received when she had hit the pavement looked very serious, and she doubted that there would be any permanent marks, but Susie was going to see the results of her stupidity every time she looked in the mirror for several weeks.

"Did you let Ally's mom know what happened?" she asked. "It would probably be better if she heard it from you than the school."

"They'd already called her," Clark said, "but I gave her Superman's version of it. She's working late this evening. I promised to have Ally home by seven when she gets home, herself. I also got hold of Maria's mom. The school had already talked to her, and she was worried, so I assured her that Maria was fine, and not in any trouble."

"I hope none of those girls realize Marta and Ally were using anything besides karate in that fight," Lois said.

"Actually, I don't think they were. Marta knows how to control her super strength, and I'm beginning to suspect that Ally

does, too. She hit that bat with the side of her hand the exact same way I've seen you break boards," Clark said. "Even if she did use super strength, I doubt anyone will suspect a thing."

Lois nodded. Why should anyone suspect anything, after all? Marta and Ally were both in Tae Kwon Do, and everyone involved knew it, especially now. Most people seemed to think martial arts were nearly magic anyway. Ally and Marta, and to a lesser extent, Maria, were going to have quite a reputation at their middle school, especially among those who knew Susie and her handmaidens personally. Maybe it would make Susie and her friends realize how stupid they were being. "What's the school going to do about it?" she asked. "Are they going to enforce the rule about fighting in this situation? This wasn't exactly your garden variety kid-fight."

"I don't think so," Clark said. "Not against Marta and the others, anyway. This was a clear case of self-defense. Marta's group could hardly stand by and let themselves be beaten with baseball bats. Any ordinary girls could have been killed, and the school administration knows it. You should have seen Principal Setter's face when he saw the condition of those bats."

"If they do cause trouble, I'm going to raise holy hell," Lois said. "I've had all I intend to take from hidebound school districts whose officials don't bother to exercise common sense."

Clark didn't answer, although he fully agreed with her. A little common sense exercised a few years ago, in the case of Susie Jones, might have prevented the events today.

Lois glanced at her watch. "We'd better get back," she said. "Ally wanted to talk to you alone. You know, I have a funny feeling about that."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know. Just a funny feeling."

When they ascended the steps of the townhouse, Clark lifted his glasses and looked through the house into the back yard. The triplets were playing happily in the sandbox while Linda Lennox, CJ and Wyatt were sitting at the picnic table under the maple tree, apparently working on math problems while keeping an eye on the smaller children. Jimmy and Jonny, as might have been predicted, were both lying on their stomachs on the carpet, watching the afternoon cartoons. Their homework lay neglected on the dining room table.

"We'd better take over in there," he said. "Jonny and Jimmy need a little prodding."

"TV again?" Lois asked.

"You must be psychic," he said. Lois snorted.

Entering the house, Clark closed and locked the door, glancing upward toward the playroom. The three girls were watching the computer on the table printing quantities of paper — evidently, they had finished their project and the computer was printing up the final product.

"Looks like the girls are finished with their report," he said, with a look at his watch. "Maybe I'd better start dinner. It's already five-thirty."

"Well, it's been a pretty busy afternoon," Lois said.

"Mr. Kent?" Ally's voice spoke from the stairs.

Clark turned, to see the girl descending the steps. "Yes, Ally?"

"Could I talk to you now?"

"Sure." Clark turned to Lois. "I have a casserole in the freezer. The directions for heating it up are taped to the dish."

"Okay," Lois said. "Why don't you and Ally go into the den? You can have some privacy if you close the door."

"Come on in here, Ally," Clark said. Allynda was nervous, he thought. He held the door for her while she preceded him into the room, and shut it quietly behind them. Without fuss, he pushed in the locking button. "Just so we don't get interrupted without warning," he said. "Have a seat."

Ally smiled briefly and sat down in one of the padded chairs that Lois had insisted on placing in the room. Clark took the desk chair and swiveled around to face her.

"What did you want to talk about?"

Ally clasped her hands in her lap. "I — wanted to ask you. You know Superman, right?"

"Yes."

"Did all the New Kryptonians go home after ... after Superman defeated Lord Nor?"

"As far as I know, they did," Clark said evenly. "Why do you ask?"

"Then —" She hesitated and drew in her breath. "Then, that means you're Superman, right?"

Clark's breath almost choked in his throat. He took a deliberate breath. Now was not the time to start stammering out all kinds of stupid excuses. "Why do you say that?"

"Because —" The girl was wringing her hands and Clark reached out instinctively to lay a hand over hers. Her fingers relaxed, but he could tell that she was still distressed.

"Ally, take a deep breath. Why do you think I'm Superman?"

She started to wring her hands again. "Because you're like Ben and me. And Marta and CJ are, too. And so are Linda and Valerie, and your littler kids. Marta and the younger ones can't have come from — from the New Kryptonians. That means you have to be Superman, because he's the only Kryptonian left on Earth."

Clark held up a hand. "But why do you think I — and they — are Kryptonian, Ally?"

"I can ... I can tell. You *feel* different from regular people to me. Just like Ben did."

Clark took a second to digest that. His brain was working furiously, stringing together what he knew or had guessed about Allynda and her brother. Allynda was most likely the daughter of a Kryptonian noble: Nor, and she must have the same mental sense as Linda Lennox. It was the only explanation.

The possible implications of that were something he didn't have time to consider right now. It was, however, obvious that a denial wasn't going to be believed. Besides, Superman didn't lie — especially to a half-Kryptonian child who badly needed his help.

He nodded slowly. "Yes, Ally. I'm Superman."

Clark mounted the steps toward the Myers apartment for the second time in two days. Ally glanced nervously at him and he gave her a reassuring smile.

Tanya Myers must have been watching for them, for the door opened as they reached it and Clark stood aside to let Ally enter first. He smiled at Ally's mother as he followed her into the sitting room.

"I needed to talk to you after what happened this afternoon," he said. "And I wanted to let you know what I've done since yesterday concerning your son."

Tanya nodded, but she turned to look at Ally. "The school called me. You were in a fight?"

"It wasn't Ally's fault," Clark said. "Like I told you on the phone, there are three girls who go to the school who have been constant troublemakers. They picked the fight. All Ally did was defend herself."

Tanya motioned him to a chair, while he went on to explain the circumstances that led up to the fight. "Ally had no choice but to fight back," he explained. "Those girls have pretty much terrorized the children at Metro Elementary for years, and now seem to think that they can carry on the same way at the middle school. They've been suspended from school for the time being after this attack on Marta, Ally and Maria, and they're facing criminal charges. This has been an ongoing problem, and it's taken a lot of effort to get the school district to even recognize

that the problem was serious. I think this incident was their first real clue that they can't afford to ignore it any longer. Ally stood up for Marta, and I'm grateful to her."

Tanya nodded slowly. "In that case, I guess I'm glad Ally was there. I'd like to meet your daughter."

"My wife wanted me to ask you and Ally to dinner on Friday," Clark said.

Tanya hesitated. "I don't want to impose —"

"You're not imposing," Clark said. "We like to get to know the families of our children's friends. Besides, we may be working more closely together in the near future. I'd like to update you on what I've managed to do, so far, in the search for your son."

He summarized briefly what he and Jim Olsen had accomplished that day. "Jim got hold of his father, who works for a government law enforcement agency, and we were also wondering if you'd mind if we started circulating the age-corrected picture of Ben, and of his father. Your ex-husband won't have any idea that there's a hunt specifically for him, and it might make it more difficult for him to hide. Someone might recognize him and call in a tip."

Tanya hesitated and then nodded. "Why not?" she said. "My private detective sure hasn't turned up any results."

"I wanted to ask about that," Clark said. "Could you give me the name of the detective you hired, and his business address?"

"I suppose so." Tanya got to her feet and went to her purse, where it sat on the kitchen counter. She rummaged for a moment and then returned to Clark, extending a small, white card to him.

"Thank you." Clark took the card and got to his feet. "So, can I tell Lois that you and Ally will be having dinner with us on Friday?"

"I suppose so," Tanya said.

"Good. We usually eat dinner about six, but if you're held up at work, having it a little later won't be a problem." He smiled at Allynda. "Lois and I like Ally very much," he said. "You should be proud of her."

"I am," Tanya said.

Clark said goodbye and departed. As soon as he was out of sight of the Myers apartment, he stepped into a secluded area sheltered by a row of scraggly bushes, and, an instant later, Superman touched down in front of the door to Ally's apartment. He knocked lightly and waited.

The conversation, earlier that afternoon in the Kent den, had gone a little differently than he had anticipated. After his admission that he was Superman, Ally nodded soberly. "I knew you had to be," she said. "Can you help me?"

"It depends on what you want me to do," Clark said.

Ally bit her lip. "I don't know exactly," she said. "But —"

"Why don't you start from the beginning?" Clark suggested gently. "You say you can tell if someone is Kryptonian."

She nodded again. "They *feel* different. It's hard to explain."

"How did you know that you were Kryptonian?"

She shrugged. "I figured it out after a while," she said. "I started hearing things. At first I thought I was going crazy. I could hear people talking that weren't anywhere nearby. And then I started seeing things — seeing through things, and then —"

"I guess it was kind of frightening," Clark said.

"Yeah, a lot." She clasped her hands in her lap. "It started right after Dad ran away with Ben and me. Then, just before I got away, it started to happen to Ben, too. We could hear all kinds of things I guess Dad didn't know we could. But after I got away, more things started happening to me."

"Hold up a minute," Clark said. "Let's take this a step at a time. You started to get super hearing before Ben. That's normal. The powers come in about the time you start into puberty, and that happens to girls before it does to boys. But how did you

figure out that they're Superman's powers?"

"I guess I know as much about Superman as most people," she said. "After I got away, and back with Mom, more things started happening to me. I could see through walls, and after a while I started to get faster than I'd ever been. I read as much about Superman as I could find — in your newspaper, and online. I found out I could do a lot of the things Superman could do, only not as much. And I read the stuff about the New Kryptonians, and Lord Nor: how they came here and tried to take over, and how Superman led some other New Kryptonians against them, and fought Lord Nor to make them leave. I do a lot of reading," she added. "Mom always took Ben and me to the library, and helped us learn to read, and stuff. I read lots of history and science —" She gulped. "I realized what must have happened to Mom. One of the New Kryptonians must have —"

Clark stopped the flood of words with an uplifted hand. "You were right," he said quietly. "And it didn't happen just to your mom."

She took a rather shaky breath. "I guess not. I knew Ben 'felt' different to me than other people. I thought for a while that we were the only ones. Then, I met Marta, and I knew she was like me. And Valerie Henderson, and CJ and the rest. When I met you it took me a little while, but it made sense that you must be Superman — especially after I met him today. I thought that maybe he could help me find Ben. That guy Mom hired isn't doing any good, and I don't trust him."

Again, Clark held up a hand. "I'll do my best," he said. "But you need to learn to control what you can do. Would you like some help?"

She nodded vigorously. "I figured out a lot," she said. "I know how not to hurt people, and I can keep from hearing all the sounds, all the time. Not much hurts me, either. But there's a lot I don't know how to do, and if I do something wrong I could cause a lot of damage. Like the time I set the garage on fire last year, at our old house. They put it out, but I don't want to do that again!"

"I don't blame you," Clark said. "I set a haystack on fire when I was about your age. It scared me so much I hid in my room for two days until my dad made me tell him what the matter was." He regarded her thoughtfully. Ally was obviously pretty intelligent if she had worked all this out on her own. Fortunately, she also seemed to be someone who could keep things to herself.

Speaking of which...

"I'm going to take you home at seven, and I'll let your mom know what I've done so far about Ben," he said. "I guess you haven't told her about me?"

Ally shook her head vigorously. "She doesn't even know I know about me."

"I'd appreciate it if you don't tell her. The more people who know Clark Kent is Superman, the more likely it is that the secret will become generally known, and then my family would be in danger."

"I know. I don't want people to know about me, either."

"Well, once you learn a few more things about yourself, you may be able to help me locate Ben," he said. "I can teach you what you need to know — or, rather, Superman can. But he'll have to get your mother's permission. Is that all right with you?"

Ally bit her lip. "I guess so. I guess it has to be okay, huh?"

"Well —" Clark smiled sympathetically. "You could keep on trying to learn on your own, but it'll take longer, and you'll make more mistakes."

She smiled back. "I guess I'll go with asking for help."

"Good choice. Superman will come by after I've talked to your mom, and we'll get down to business."

Tanya Myers opened the door and her eyes widened as she realized who her visitor was. Clark smiled at her, striving to look as unintimidating as possible. Superman's reputation was good,

of course, but this woman had been assaulted by a Kryptonian. He hoped the feelings she must have for Nor didn't carry over to him. "Mrs. Myers?"

"Yes," she said, a little warily.

"Allynda may have mentioned that I met her today."

Tanya nodded. "Yes, she did."

"May I come in?"

Tanya seemed to gather her wits. "Yes, please."

"Thank you." Clark entered the apartment, smiling at Allynda. "Hello, Ally."

"Hello, Superman," Ally said.

Tanya glanced at her daughter and back at Superman. "Is something wrong?"

"No, not wrong. I needed to speak with you about Ally."

Tanya looked down and then back at him. She swallowed and lifted her chin. "Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you." Clark took a seat.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"No, thank you." Clark leaned forward. "Mrs. Myers, I'd like to tell you and Ally a story."

"A story?"

"A true story." Clark leaned forward, trying to give the impression of seriousness, combined with respect. Tanya Myers was dealing with more adversity than any woman should be called upon to bear. The last thing he wanted to do was add to it. "Why don't you sit down, too. This is fairly important."

Tanya hesitated and then took a seat across from him. Clark began to speak.

"Three years ago, a government agency came to my attention. They were involved in what I would call a witch-hunt. They were searching for children who were born approximately nine months after the New Kryptonian invasion."

Tanya's brows rose. "Children?"

"Yes," Clark said. "Children. These people — who were, as far as I know, rogue agents that were not sanctioned by our government — believed that, as a result of the invasion, there were children being born that were half-Kryptonian. They believed that these children were intended to infiltrate the human population of Earth and prepare it for an alien takeover."

"That's ridiculous!" Tanya said.

"Well," Clark said, "I think so, but there are conspiracy theorists everywhere. Anyway, these agents had kidnapped one of the children in question with the intention of dissecting her, to learn how her body functioned. Fortunately, the situation came to the attention of a friend of mine and he alerted me. We rescued the child and exposed the organization. Apparently, Bureau 39 has been around for several decades, having been formed back during the Cold War. They were intended to protect the world from the possibility of alien invasion. Initially, they targeted me when I first announced my presence on Earth. After Lois Lane and Clark Kent of the Daily Planet exposed them, they vanished for some time only to resurface three years ago with this project. You may have read something about it in the Daily Planet, although there was a good deal that couldn't be published."

"What does this have to do with me?" Tanya Myers asked.

"The problem is," Clark said, "that Bureau 39 was right about one thing. There *are* a number of half-Kryptonian children on Earth. Apparently, Kryptonians are more closely related to humanity than many would like to think. There are Kryptonian-human hybrids that came into being because of the invasion, although there's no grand conspiracy among them to conquer the Earth. I've made it my business to find them in order to protect them from the xenophobes, and equally important, the criminal organizations that would like to get control of them for their own gain. I believe I've found most of them and I'm searching for the others. I doubt there are many, but I'm personally training the ones I've located to use their abilities so they don't become a

danger to those around them. I think you would agree that it's necessary for people with such power to know how to control it."

"But —"

"One fact that isn't generally known," he continued, "is that Kryptonians are telepathic among their species, and some of them have even greater extra-sensory powers. One of the children that I'm training is in that group. She can sense other Kryptonians. Now we've found a second one with the same power." He looked at Allynda.

Tanya Myers also looked at her daughter. "But Ally doesn't have any super powers," she said. Her voice had begun to shake. "I'm afraid she does," Clark said. "Ally is half-Kryptonian."

There was silence in the room for a long moment. Tanya had closed her eyes. At last, she spoke. "I hoped she wasn't," she whispered. "Morris and I were engaged to be married —"

"No one can blame you for what happened," Clark said as gently as possible. "No human could have prevented one of them from doing anything he wanted. You were smart enough, and lucky enough, to survive. That was what mattered."

Tanya looked at her daughter, and scrubbed a hand across her eyes. "I'm sorry, Ally. I should have told you. But I hoped —"

"It's okay," Ally said. "I figured it out a couple of years ago."

Clark waited, while Tanya Myers obviously took control of herself. At last, he spoke again. "What I need to ask you is for permission to teach Ally how to control her abilities. She's already learned some things on her own, but it will be much easier for her if she can have some instruction before she inadvertently causes an accident and hurts someone, or reveals to everyone that she's super-powered."

Tanya blew her nose on a tissue, wiped her eyes again, and drew a deep breath. "I guess there really isn't a choice, is there?" she said.

"Well, she could try to learn on her own, but it will be a lot easier, and safer for her, if I teach her what she needs to know," Clark said.

Tanya smiled shakily. "Teach her," she said. "I want my daughter to be safe."

"Thank you," Clark said. He paused. "Clark Kent told me about your son. I'm going to be involved in the search for him. Since he's Ally's twin, the chances of him being super-powered are pretty high. He has to be found."

"Do you think you can?"

"I think we have a fairly good chance," Clark said. "I'll do my best, anyhow. And we'll try to keep you updated on what we're doing."

"Thank you," Tanya said. She stood up. "Superman —"

Clark also rose. "Yes?"

"I'd like to thank you, just once, for what you did for us."

"Thank me? Why?"

"I know a lot of other people have already thanked you, but I'd like to say thank you, personally, for saving us from the New Kryptonians. I've wanted to, ever since it happened, but I didn't know how to — to contact you. They were terrifying. And Nor was a monster. You were nearly killed, but you fought him and defeated him. You don't know what it meant to me to see him brought down."

Clark thought he probably had some idea, but he didn't say so. "You don't have to thank me," he said. "Earth is my home, and the people of Earth are my people. I had to do everything I could to stop him."

"Helping people is what Superman does," Ally said. She looked very determined, suddenly.

Her mother looked at her and then back at Clark. "I guess it is," she said. "But thank you anyway."

"How did she take it?" Lois asked. She was hovering over the oven, where the roast that Clark had put on somewhat earlier was

sending off mouth-watering aromas.

"Pretty well," Clark said. "For one thing, she loves her kids no matter how they got started. I think she's a pretty strong person. She actually thanked me for defeating Nor."

"I completely understand that," Lois said. "So, what's next on the agenda?"

"Well," Clark said, "I want to find out about this guy." He produced the card that Tanya had given him. "This is the private detective that Tanya hired to find her ex-husband. He hasn't managed to find a trace of Morris Myers in two years."

Lois raised her eyebrows. "That seems kind of unlikely," she said. "I mean, Myers could just be really good at concealing his identity, but it looks sort of suspicious to me."

"That's what I thought," Clark said. "Not only that, but Ally doesn't like the guy, and she doesn't trust him. That makes me even more suspicious."

"That's for sure," Lois said.

"So," Clark said, "first, I'm going to look him up online. Then I'm going to do a little snooping. I don't suppose you'd like to go along, would you?"

Lois grinned. "Try and stop me!"

He grinned back. "That's what I thought."

"So, what have we got?" Lois asked. Dinner was over, the table cleared, and CJ, Marta and Jonny were in the kitchen, cleaning up the aftermath. Jonny had not been pleased when he had been told on the day following his ninth birthday that he had graduated to the exalted status of helping with the dinner dishes, but Lois hadn't blinked at his whines and protests. "Everybody helps in this house," she said to her unhappy second son. "Daddy cooked it and you ate it, so you get to help clean it up. Tonight is Marta's turn to be in charge. Don't let me hear that you gave her any trouble." And, after some initial rebellion over the matter, Jonny had become resigned to his fate. Tonight he was loading the dishwasher. Jimmy was (more or less) polishing the dining room table with the spray bottle of furniture polish and a piece of threadbare bath towel.

"Well," Clark said, "Graham Jersey is a private detective who offers his services for a monthly payment. His office is here in Metropolis."

"We knew that," Lois pointed out.

"As far as the information on his website goes, he's just an ordinary private detective, offering his services to track down information on cheating spouses and so forth. However, he isn't completely unacquainted with law enforcement agencies around the state of New Troy," Clark said. "I took a look at his police record. He's been investigated several times for some questionable activities, and nearly had his license revoked once for conflict of interest involving two of his clients."

"Sounds like Mr. Jersey could warrant a closer look," Lois said.

"That's what I think," Clark said. "If we asked Jim, he could probably find out a lot more than I can. He seems to have an instinct about it."

"I've noticed that," Lois said. "Maybe tomorrow we should ask him for some help."

"I'm going to," Clark said. "I wonder if there's a night staff at Jersey's office."

"I'd say probably not," Lois said. "It isn't as if his is one of the big name private detective firms in the city. It might be a good idea for Lane and Kent to take a look at his files on the Myers case."

"I was thinking the same thing," Clark said. "I'd like to see exactly what he's been doing in this particular investigation."

"You and me both! Maybe Superman should take a short flight over the office and do his hover-around-the-building-and-X-ray thing."

"Yeah," Clark said thoughtfully. "I'll do that while the kids finish clearing up the dishes."

"Uh — Dad?" It was CJ, who had entered the room quietly while they were talking.

"Yes, CJ?"

"I was wondering..."

"About what?" Lois asked.

CJ adjusted the glasses that he had started wearing in fifth grade. "I'm finished with my part of the kitchen and I overheard you talking. Could I go, too?"

Clark felt his eyebrows fly up. "Why do you want to go?"

"Well —" He shuffled his feet uncomfortably. "You know I said I want to do things like Superman does when I'm grown. I have mostly all your powers right now, except they're not as strong, yet. If this guy is somehow messing with Ally and her mom —" He shrugged. "I'd just like to go, that's all."

Clark thought he knew what his eldest son was trying to say. "You want to see how Superman does things like this."

"Yeah." CJ looked relieved. "I don't want to get in the way, but I want to help."

Clark looked at his wife. "What do you think?"

"Well —" Lois hesitated. "As long as no one sees him, and as long as all you do is look..."

"In that case," Clark said, "all right. Why don't you go put on some dark clothes, just in case."

CJ's expression brightened. "Thanks!" He was gone in a flash.

Lois blinked. "I didn't realize he was getting that good."

"Yeah," Clark said wryly. "He has all my powers. Like he said, they're not quite as strong as mine yet, but he has them. He's flying better all the time — just not as fast as I do."

"I guess," Lois said, "that if you'd had someone to teach you, you'd have learned most of these things earlier, too."

"Probably," Clark said. "Unfortunately, I was apparently the first one to ever do any of it."

"Yeah," Lois said. She glanced at the living room windows, where a ghostly crescent Moon was hanging low over the tops of the taller skyscrapers that dotted the skyline. Metropolis's light pollution hid even the light of the brightest stars, but the pale arc of the Moon was dimly visible even amid the haze of artificial illumination that cloaked the city. "Better go ahead and change. CJ will be waiting. Just no breaking and entering without me."

"Wouldn't think of it," Clark said.

CJ was waiting in the upstairs hall, dressed in black jeans and a dark blue, long-sleeved shirt. He wasn't wearing his glasses, and his hair was slicked back in an approximation of Clark's when in his Superman guise. Clark looked him over critically. "Looks good," he said. "Let's step into the bedroom where I can change, and we'll leave by the window."

CJ nodded, looking a little nervous. Clark opened the bedroom door and preceded his son, changing to Superman as CJ closed the door behind them. Clark didn't turn on the light. Instead, he stepped to the window and looked out, surveying the area carefully as he always did. "Looks clear." He extended a hand to CJ, who took it, and together they lifted off and made a fast ascent to fifteen hundred feet.

"Okay?" Clark asked.

CJ nodded and Clark cautiously released his hand. CJ wobbled a little and then righted himself. He stayed aloft, floating in the air beside Clark.

Clark observed him carefully. "Don't hold your breath," he reminded CJ. "You're not going to fall, even if you've never been this high on your own before."

Obediently, CJ released his breath. "Yeah," he said. "I really know that. It's just — different."

"I know. But you have every power I have. You're just using

them a little sooner than I did, mostly because I was trying so hard to be like everybody else. All right, the address for Mr. Jersey's office is on Knight Street. Do you know where that is from here?"

CJ looked carefully around and Clark saw him squint. His son was using one of his vision powers. At last he pointed. "That way. Northeast of here."

"Very good. Let's go."

Together, they soared toward the northeast. Clark let CJ lead, keeping his speed down to the boy's pace. At last they came to a stop, hovering in the air above one of the lesser streets in the business district. "Now where?" CJ asked.

"The number is 1456 C," Clark said.

CJ glanced around, this time with more certainty. "This way," he said, and started off again. Within a couple of minutes, they were floating over a generically nondescript shopping center-like complex, displaying numerous little businesses side by side, each opening on the large, nearly-empty parking lot. At the opposite end of the lot, one business was still lighted and Clark could see people coming and going, and smell the strong aroma of garlic, tomato sauce, cheese and a number of other ingredients that told him, as if it wasn't already obvious, that the place was a pizza parlor. Cars were parked close to the business, but where he and CJ hovered, the area was dark and he was quite sure that, from the lighted area, the two of them were invisible. He scanned the row of businesses, looking for any sign of life. There was nothing except someone's cat making its silent way around the corner of the complex, and somewhere he could hear the skitter of tiny mouse paws. In the field beyond the building, a cricket chirped, loud and clear in the warm night air. The plate glass window in front of each empty office showed darkened rooms beyond. CJ pointed. "1456C," he said. "G. H. Jersey, Private Investigator."

"Excellent," Clark said. "Now, we do the 'hover-around-the-building-and-X-ray thing.'"

"What are we looking for?" CJ inquired.

"Right now," Clark said, "we're just scoping out the lay of the land. Look around for security systems, guards, hidden cameras, maybe file cabinets or hidden wall safes. Your mom and I are coming back a little later to see what we can find with a little old fashioned snooping."

"Maybe I could just sit on top of the building and keep an eye out for police or something," CJ suggested. "That way you and Mom could have a few seconds extra warning if someone decided to check out the office."

Clark glanced sharply at his son, but CJ was apparently training his vision powers on the building below them. "I'll think about it," he said finally. "Your mother might not like it."

"Okay," CJ said. "I'm really not planning to do anything stupid. I just want to see how you and Mom work and help Ally, if I can. If I'm just sitting on top of the building, they can't really do anything if someone sees me, and if someone tries to come up after me, I can just fly away, you know."

He had a point, Clark had to admit privately, but it went against the grain to have his thirteen-year-old son acting as "lookout." On the other hand, it wasn't as if they intended to rob anyone. They were just trying to find out what, if anything, the PI knew about Morris Myers and Benjamin.

"I'll discuss it with your mom," he said finally. He scanned the office with his X-ray and telescopic vision, making note of the security features.

"There's a camera in the front of each office, and some on the light poles," CJ said. "There's a couple on the roof, but they're aimed at the parking lot. And there's a guy in a security guard's uniform coming this way." He indicated the man with a pointing finger. "He's yawning."

"I see him," Clark said. "See anyone else?"

CJ was peering around. "Not right now," he said. He pushed

back the sleeve of his shirt and checked the time. "It's almost nine. I figure anybody that works around here has probably gone home by now, except the security people. Oh yeah. There's another one. He's sitting over there in that little office with his feet up, watching —" He paused, and his eyebrows rose. "*Figure skating?*"

Clark grinned at the boy's obvious incredulity. "Takes all kinds to make a world," he said. As he watched, the man gave a cavernous yawn. "Doesn't look like they're expecting much trouble. Okay: I think I've found the security system for the office. Let's head back. We've seen pretty much everything we can for the moment."

CJ looked faintly disappointed, but he nodded and obediently turned in the air and headed home.

Lois was waiting in the bedroom when they dropped back through the window. She glanced once at CJ and smiled. "I guess everything went okay?"

CJ nodded. "We found the place and checked out the security," he said in a matter-of-fact way that made Clark want to grin. He sounded a lot like a younger Lois Lane: proud of what he had done and trying not to show it.

"He's flying faster and higher," Clark said. "And his vision powers seem to be getting stronger. If we don't watch out, Metropolis will have Superboy breaking up muggings and bringing in bad guys soon."

CJ shook his head. "I'm gonna wait for that 'til I'm a little older," he said. "But, Mom, I'd like to come along, tonight. Not to break in anywhere," he added hastily, when his mother opened her mouth to give a flat refusal. "I just want to kind of stand guard on the roof, in case someone starts to come in while you're busy looking around the place. If anyone starts to come up after me, I'll just fly off. I won't let anyone get a close look at me." He glanced at Clark. "Dad said it was up to you."

Clark saw his wife give him one of her patented Lane half-glares, but her lips twitched at the same time. "You promise you won't try to do anything but watch?" she asked their son.

"I promise," CJ said.

"All right, then. But that's all you do."

Lois double-checked her supplies one last time before giving Clark the okay to scoop her up in his arms. She was dressed in dark clothing, and a knitted ski mask covered her face and hair in the event she should encounter a camera good enough to pick up her features. Thin dark gloves covered her hands, and in her bag was the usual array of tools and equipment she used on what Jim Olsen had termed her "black bag" jobs.

Clark was similarly garbed in black, and his face was also covered. She knew he had never forgotten the time when he had been forced to rob a jewelry store and, in spite of Superman's powers, had made the rookie mistake of leaving his face exposed for the convenience of the store's video camera. If Lois hadn't毫不犹豫地 given him a completely believable alibi, she wasn't sure what would have happened, but it most likely wouldn't have been good.

CJ was also still dressed in dark clothing, which Lois thought should serve to camouflage him against the night sky. She still wasn't sure of this, but her oldest boy was going to have to learn about this stuff sometime, if he planned on continuing in the family tradition, and she would rather that he learned from Clark and her than trying to figure it out on his own.

"Ready?" Clark asked.

She nodded and allowed her husband to scoop her up. They floated out the bedroom window, and Lois suppressed the slight feeling of awe as she watched CJ float out after them. Her son might not yet have the adult powers of his father, but he was doing pretty well. He turned in the air and closed the window

behind them.

"Do you think Marta will be okay?" she whispered. Marta knew that her mother, father and brother were going out to do something, and was in charge of the younger children during their absence. Of course, since all of them were long since in bed, it wasn't a very arduous job, but Lois still worried, if only a little.

"She'll do fine," Clark said. "She can always call us if she has a problem."

"I suppose so." Briefly, Lois envied the children and Clark their special communication channel. She supposed that if she was determined enough, she might be able to manage the trick, since she, like Wyatt, had a soul mate of her own. She kept intending to ask Clark to make the effort to talk to her mentally, but somehow the idea was a little intimidating, and she had so far found excuses to put it off. Now she mentally kicked herself for her unaccustomed timidity. If her husband, her kids, and Wyatt, who was a perfectly ordinary human boy, could do this, why shouldn't she be able to as well? There had been a few times in the past when Clark had managed to make her hear him, so it couldn't be beyond her ability. 'No more procrastinating, Lane,' she told herself. 'Tonight, after we get back, you're going to ask him!'

Clark nodded to CJ and the two of them started to gain altitude. The lights beneath her began to move to the rear, and she knew they were flying high over the city. The flight wasn't as fast as she was used to, probably because Clark was accommodating himself to CJ's lesser speed, she thought. Still, within a very few minutes they were dropping toward the roof of a long building that seemed to house quite a few disparate businesses, their signs barely visible in the dim light of a few tall lamps theoretically illuminating the parking lot.

The long shopping structure was laid out in the shape of a huge L. At one end was Metro Food Mart, and Cheap Goods, the economy five and dime that always seemed to be located next door to the Food Mart. There was a pizza parlor, tastefully named the Pizza Pig Out, and then a row of little businesses, side by side, ranging from a studio of dance, and a clothing boutique to a dental clinic. And down near the opposite end was G.H. Jersey, Private Investigator, Ltd. Everything was quiet, even the pizza parlor, which must have closed some time before.

"There's a camera right at the front and the back entrances," Clark told her in a whisper, as he set her down on the roof. "CJ, you stay right up here and make sure no one can see you. I'm going to put the camera out of action."

From somewhere, he produced a paper bag and a rubber band and whisked out of sight. A moment later, he was back. "All done. There's a camera in the parking lot that sweeps this area, but that's not hard to beat. Ready?"

Lois nodded. Clark picked her up and they moved quickly from the roof to the ground. Clark glanced over his shoulder. "Okay; wait another ten seconds and then you've got forty-five to get the lock. Can you do it?"

Lois produced her lock pick and nodded.

"Okay...go!"

Lois stepped forward and slipped the pick into the lock. Quickly, she inserted the second part — a thin piece of metal, and began to jiggle the parts quickly up and down, aligning the shear points. By her reckoning, it took just under thirty-eight seconds. She and Clark slipped quietly through the entrance to the office and closed the door behind them with two seconds to spare.

"Nice work," Clark said.

"Thank you," Lois said. "Which way to his office?"

"Through that door in the back."

They moved quietly through the darkened office, and Lois quickly disposed of the lock to Graham Jersey's private office as well. Clark closed the door after them and moved to the computer. Lois addressed the file cabinet, as was their usual

method in such situations. His super speed made him the logical person to crack the computer password, since his technique was sheer brute force — the trying of every possible combination until he succeeded.

Lois, on the other hand, was more of an artist. She unlocked the file cabinet and began to sort through the M section.

There was a surprisingly thick file labeled 'Myers'. Lois pulled the folder out and began to flip through the contents. "He's got tons of stuff here on the Myers case."

"Copy it," Clark said. "Ah! Got it!" Lois heard the muttered exclamation as she pulled out her small camera and began to make copies of the most recently dated papers. Behind her the hum of the computer intensified and she heard the whirring sound of Clark's fingers across the keyboard. Then: "He's got stuff here, too. It looks like a detailed record of where they've been for the last three years. I'm going to copy the file onto a memory stick. So much for the claim that he hasn't been able to find any trace of Myers or Benjamin."

"Yeah," Lois agreed, busily snapping the digital camera. "I'd like to know for sure what we've found here. Do you suppose he's just a crooked PI or is there something else behind it?"

"Good question. And we're going to find out."

Sitting inconspicuously on the roof, CJ kept his ears tuned for any sounds nearby.

Beneath him, in the office of Graham Jersey, his mother and dad were going through the private investigator's records for information about his search for Ally's missing brother.

The area was quiet, but CJ stayed alert. He wasn't going to let his parents get caught by anybody. What they were doing might not be strictly legal, but they were trying to help Ally Myers and her mom — trying to find Ben, Ally's twin brother, and get him back to his family. If his dad was keeping him away from everyone, the way Ally had said he was before she escaped, CJ felt sorry for Ben. That would be a pretty lonely way to live, shut up in a room most of the time.

The air around him was warm. Occasionally a mosquito landed on him, only to take off again with a frustrated whine. September in Metropolis was almost always warm but CJ was as impervious to the humid night air as he was to frigid winter air, or the blasting heat of an August afternoon. From somewhere not far away, he could hear the chorus of frogs in a nearby drainage ditch. Across the parking lot, a cat was stalking some small rodent or lizard attracted to the bits of food scattered about from the pizza parlor.

From some distance away, he heard the voices coming from radios and the purr of two car motors approaching the little business center. Alert at once, he trained his super hearing on them and listened.

"...Can't get any reading from the camera," someone was saying. "But the motion sensor recorded something."

"Maybe it's a mouse again," someone else's voice said.

A cussword from the first voice. "If it is, we're gonna have to get another exterminator. But if somebody's there, it's trouble. He's not gonna be happy."

"Just drive. We'll be there in a minute."

That was enough for CJ. 'Dad!' he telepathed. 'You're about to have company! Get out of there!"

A brief acknowledgement from his father was followed almost instantly by the headlights of two cars, one after another, entering the parking lot at high speed. The vehicles screeched to a stop in front of the establishment.

There was no sign of his parents. CJ glanced quickly about. His dad would get his mom out, wouldn't he? But —

'CJ!' his father's voice whispered in his mind "Can you create a distraction?"

A distraction? CJ thought for a second and then he grinned.

He trained his X-ray vision on the lead car, a blue Ford sedan. The man behind the wheel was peering through the windshield at the dark window of the office. Three passengers, one in the passenger seat and two in the rear, sat stolidly in their places, apparently waiting for instructions.

CJ looked through the hood of the car. Ah, there it was. Just what he needed.

He trained a needle-thin burst of heat vision on his target.

With a blast of sound that shattered the silence of the parking lot, the car's horn went off. The gabble of voices from the men in the cars was instructive to his vocabulary, if not his grammar. Four men leaped from the other car, and someone shouted at the occupants of the blue car to shut that damned thing off!

"I can't!" The driver's voice sounded startled and angry. "It went off by itself!"

"Come on!" the first voice said angrily. "Let's move!"

The men started for the door of the office. After an instant, the occupants of the blue car also exited their vehicle and followed.

Clark and Lois appeared suddenly beside CJ. They looked down at the men rushing toward the front door of the private investigator's office. Clark clutched a crumpled paper bag in one hand. "Interesting," he said mildly.

"Very," Lois said. "Why all the muscle? Why not just call the police?"

Behind the small army of eight men now descending on the building, the car made an odd hiccuping noise, and smoke began to puff from beneath the hood. There was a sharp sizzling sound, at least to CJ's ears, and the smoke was joined by the lick of flames, succeeded by cusswords from the men.

"Let's get out of here," Clark said quietly.

Together, the three of them lifted quietly from the roof and glided away in the opposite direction until they were some distance from the vicinity of the office. Then they changed direction and headed for the townhouse.

Flying through the air next to his father and mother, CJ looked guiltily at Lois. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to set their car on fire. All I meant to do was set off the car horn."

To his surprise, his mother laughed. "Don't worry about it," she advised. "It's no worse than some of the things I've done while I was on a job. You gave us a second's distraction, and that was what mattered."

"What took you so long to get out?" CJ asked.

"We had to put everything back the way it was," his father said. "We didn't want to leave any traces that we were there."

"Oh," CJ said. "One of them was saying it might be a mouse or something on the motion sensor."

"A motion sensor?" his father said. "That explains how they caught on. If we have to go back for any reason, we'll have to be sure to take that out."

"Are you going to have to go back?" CJ asked.

"Don't know yet," Lois said. "It depends on what we find in the stuff we got. This whole thing stinks to high Heaven. Who do you suppose those guys were?"

Since CJ had no possible way of knowing, he stayed silent. His dad frowned.

"Good question. I'm starting to wonder if Jersey has some idea that there might be something important about Benjamin. And there's always the other question."

"What question?" CJ asked.

His father smiled at him. "Well, does Morris Myers suspect that Ben might be half-Kryptonian? Luthor and Arianna Carlin haven't been exactly reticent on the subject. The press hasn't given it much credibility, but the rumors are out there. And there's always the possibility that others besides Bureau 39 and the Luthors might be interested, you know."

"Yeah," CJ said, shaking off the chill that tried to run up his spine. What if that was what this was all about? Maybe Ben's father suspected that Ben might have super powers. And maybe someone else did, too. If that was what was going on, CJ hoped with everything he had that Ben Myers was smart enough to keep quiet about what was happening to him. If the wrong people found out, it could get really bad.

"Bureau 39?" he asked. "Didn't they get broken up?"

"Well, the group that we ran into did, but Bill Henderson is keeping an eye on them," Clark said. "If someone in the government was backing them, the arrest of some of their members might not necessarily stop them. On the other hand, it might be someone else completely."

"Who?"

"The list is pretty long," his mom said. "We're just going to have to find out."

"How?" CJ asked.

"Well," Clark said, "the first thing I'm going to do is drop you and your mom off, and then I'm going to go back and follow that remaining car, if those guys stay around long enough."

CJ looked away from his parents, to discover that they were hovering in front of the bedroom window. He hastened to shove it open and his dad set Lois on the floor inside. "I'll be back as soon as I can," he said, and vanished.

CJ glided through the window and settled to the floor. "He's still a lot faster than I am," he said.

"Well, he's older than you are," Lois said reasonably. "You're doing fine. By the time you're eighteen, you'll be able to do everything he does."

"I know. I just wish I could help more."

"Give it time," Lois said with a smile. "Right now, you need to head for bed, and I'm going to go copy the file on the flash drive onto the computer and see what we have."

"Will you tell me what you find?"

His mother nodded. "If there's anything worth telling, I will." She ruffled his hair. "You did good tonight, kiddo. I'm proud of you."

CJ found himself grinning at the unexpected praise. "Thanks, Mom."

"Tomorrow," she said, "have your dad show you how to set off a car horn without setting the car on fire. We can't have that happen too much."

"I'm sorry about that," CJ said, again.

"Don't be." Lois smiled at him, and winked. "I'm not worried about those guys and their car. Just be sure you don't do it again, unless you mean to. We don't want anyone getting suspicious."

"I get it," CJ said. "I'll ask Dad when I get home tomorrow night."

"Good," Lois said. "Scoot, now. It's time you were in bed."

CJ was just opening the door of his bedroom when he was alerted by a hiss that made him turn his head. Marta was peering through her partially opened door. "What happened?"

"Huh?"

"What did you and Mom and Dad do?"

"Oh," CJ said. "We flew over to the office of the PI who's supposed to be trying to find Ally's brother. Mom and Dad went in and made copies of his files on the case while I stayed on the roof and kept watch." He went on to describe what had happened, while Marta's eyes slowly widened. "Mom and Dad don't think the guy's on the up-and-up. We'd better not say anything to Ally, though, unless they tell us we can," he added. "We don't *know* anything yet, but Dad went back to try to follow the other car when the guys leave. Maybe he'll be able to find out who they are."

"I hope so," Marta said. "That's pretty rotten, keeping Ben away from his mom and sister, and maybe knowing where he is

all along."

"Well, we don't know that, either," CJ said. "Mom and Dad will find out, and they'll find Ben, too. You'll see. Dad's going to ask Uncle Jim to do some computer research for him, tomorrow."

"Oh, cool!" Marta said. "Uncle Jimmy can find out anything!"

"Well, maybe not anything, but a lot," CJ said. "I want to know who those guys were."

"Yeah," Marta agreed. She laughed. "I'd sure like to have seen their faces when their car started to smoke!"

"It *was* kinda funny," CJ admitted. "I just hope they don't figure out what really happened."

"I don't see how they could. Superman doesn't set cars on fire and they don't know about you."

"You're probably right," CJ said. "I hope so, anyway." He yawned. "I'm ready for bed, though. See you in the morning, sis."

Lois finished transferring the files from the flash drive and the pictures from her digital camera onto the Kent computer when there was a gust of air and Clark stepped into the room. "How did we do?"

"You startled me," she said. "I haven't had a chance to look at them yet. Did you find out anything?"

"The other car was gone by the time I got back but the burned up one was still there, along with a bunch of police and the fire department. The driver was still there, too, and he was explaining that they'd had an alarm that they think was caused by mice and he'd come over to check it out. He'd called a cab, and I followed it."

"And?"

"It dropped him off over by Cost Mart and he went there. There were several people there, including the driver from the *other* car."

"Oh? That's interesting."

"I thought so. They'd pretty much decided that the problem was mice, but I listened in for a bit. You know our investigation into Intergang, when we got the goods on Mindy Church and her pals?"

"Yes," Lois said. A prickle was running along the back of her neck.

"Well," Clark said, sounding, she thought, philosophical, "very few of these things really go away when you bring them down. Think back to Elliot Ness and the Untouchables during Prohibition. They cut down on the gang activity, but it never really went away. They just got a bit more discreet, changed tactics and carried on with business. Intergang was an international syndicate."

"Don't tell me. They're back."

"Got it in one. The group that 'bought' the Cost Mart chain is apparently just another arm of Intergang, trying to regain lost ground."

"What do you suppose the connection is with the Myers family?" Lois asked.

"Good question. Let's take a look at what we have here and see what's been going on. Maybe it's just a crooked PI making money on the side by scamming poor Tanya for as long as he can. Or maybe Intergang has been listening to the Luthors and decided to hunt down kids from the right area, born at the right time, and try to find out if there really are superkids around. If they could get a couple working for them, it would put them in a much better position than Mindy Church ever was."

"That," Lois said, "is what I was afraid you were going to say." She glanced at her watch. "I'm going to give Bobby a call."

Wednesday morning dawned clear and cool. It was a day out of October by mistake, Marta thought as she went out the door

with CJ. Maybe even November. The sky was cloudy and the dampness of the air promised rain.

They stopped to pick up Wyatt and again to collect Ally on the walk to school. Marta was quiet, thinking over what their parents had told them this morning at breakfast.

"Graham Jersey," their father had said, "is connected with a crime syndicate. Have either of you ever heard of Intergang?"

CJ nodded. "I read about them online while I was looking up stuff about Superman," he said.

Marta hadn't. "Who are they?" she asked.

"They're an international criminal organization," their mother told them. "Your Uncle Jim, your dad and I did them a lot of damage a few years ago, but they're apparently making a comeback. Now this is very important. We don't know if Jersey is just taking Tanya Myers for all the money he can get from her by stringing out this investigation, or if Intergang has decided to try to find out if the rumors about half-Kryptonian kids are true. You two be very careful. We've already called Bill Henderson with what we know, and he's going to warn Valerie and Alex. You warn Ally, Wyatt and Linda. We'll talk to Ally's mom this afternoon. And if our favorite trio of bullies makes any trouble, Marta, just make sure that anything you do can be explained by your martial arts training. Got it?"

CJ and Marta both nodded.

"Good. I think," Lois added, "that I'm going to make a point of teaching all your special students some basic moves so anything unusual that they do can be passed off as Tae Kwon Do training. It will give them a little more cover."

"I think that's a good idea," Clark said. "You'll find that they're fast learners."

"I don't doubt it a bit," Lois said. "I just hope Ben Myers is sharp enough to have hidden anything that he can do from everyone."

"So do I," Clark said. "And one other thing."

"What?" CJ asked.

"Be sure Ally and Wyatt come home with you today. She's going to get her first lesson in telepathy and using her super powers. She may need it, if things get any more complicated."

And so, when Ally joined them for the walk to school, CJ said, "Dad wanted me to tell you and Wyatt something."

"Oh?" Ally's expressive eyebrows went up.

"Yeah." He glanced at Wyatt. "Wyatt knows about us. He's helped us a few times with some stuff. Anyway, Dad and Mom did some investigation last night into your mom's private detective..."

He went on to give a description of what they had done, what had happened, and what his parents had passed along to them this morning. "So," he concluded, "be careful. Don't do *anything* that you can't explain with Tae Kwon Do, if Susie and her lapdogs show up and make any trouble. My dad is going to talk to your mom later, but he wants you and Wyatt to come over to our place this afternoon, too. He's going to teach you some stuff about telepathy. He says you might need it."

"Is that like what happened yesterday?" Ally inquired, looking interested.

"What do you mean?" Marta asked.

"During the fight, I heard you yell 'CJ' really loud, but you didn't say it out loud. And then CJ and the others showed up."

"Yeah," Marta said. "Kryptonians can talk to each other that way. Wyatt can, too. He learned from us. I think Dad wants for you to practice it, so you'll be able to call somebody for help if you get in trouble. He might be going to teach you some stuff besides that, too."

"Probably," CJ said. "Ally's old enough to fly, just like Linda, Valerie and I can, and she's probably got all the other powers, too. He wants to be sure she knows how to use all of them."

"Fly?" Ally said, obviously astonished. "You mean I can *fly*?"

"Probably," CJ said. "I started floating when I was about eleven, and I'm only a few months older than you are, so you probably can, too. Dad can show you how. He's a pretty good teacher. He's taught all the others."

"Can you fly?" Ally asked, looking at Marta.

"A little," Marta said. "I can float pretty well, and I can move forward in the air — just not very fast, yet."

"Don't worry," CJ said. "That won't last long." He looked at Wyatt. "I just wish Wyatt could learn that, too."

Wyatt shrugged. "Well, I can't," he said. "I'm not a super kid. But I can do the telepathy thing. That's pretty good, all by itself. Besides, when you and Marta get a little better at it, maybe you can take me places with you."

"You can bet on it," Marta said.

They dropped the conversation then, as they were approaching the school and the number of children on the sidewalk was increasing. Valerie Henderson, Linda Lennox and Maria were waiting in front of the school and Linda waved as they approached. "What kept you?" she asked. "The bell's going to ring in a minute."

CJ glanced at Marta. "You guys better head for class," he said. "I'll fill Linda in on stuff. Remember what Dad said."

"We will," Marta said.

After the children left, Lois gathered her nerve and spoke to Clark. "Do you think that when you give Ally her lesson, that you could include me?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"The telepathy," she said. "You've communicated with me a few times in the past, and Marta managed to teach Wyatt how to do it, so maybe I can learn, too. It would be a big advantage if I could call you for help when I needed to — and if I can reach the others, it would be that much better. Do you think you can?"

Clark should learn to control his expressions better, she thought as she saw his face light up. "I thought you weren't interested."

"No, I've been meaning to ask you ever since I found out that Wyatt could communicate with Marta," she said. "It just — well — seemed kind of intimidating. And don't you dare say anything about that! I decided last night that it was time I stopped being timid and actually made an effort to learn."

"Well, I can try," Clark said. "We don't have a lot of time right now, but we sure can give it a try this afternoon when the kids get home. Look; let's head for work. I want to catch Jim before he takes off to some interview or something. I want him to see what he can find out about this Jersey character, online, and you need to get hold of Bobby Bigmouth as soon as you can, and see what he's found out, if anything." He got to his feet, and the breakfast dishes simply vanished. "I've wanted to suggest we try to teach you, but I knew you'd let me know if you were interested, so —"

"It may not work," Lois said, some of her doubts surfacing. "I'd hate it if I tried and couldn't do it."

"There isn't much that Mad Dog Lane can't do," Clark said with a slight grin. "Cooking excepted, of course."

She smacked him on the arm. "Don't put down my Eggs a la Katie Banks," she said.

"Oh, I'm not," he said. "Or your dark chocolate fudge, either."

"Or," Lois continued, as they went out the door, "my macaroni salad."

"I think," Clark said, "we're going to run out of Lois Lane cuisine pretty fast." He glanced up doubtfully at the gray sky. "Do you think you should bring an umbrella?"

"The forecasters are always wrong," Lois said, dismissing the weather report.

"Even a stopped clock is right twice a day," Clark reminded her.

"Clocks don't predict the weather," Lois said. "Come on. It's been at least two weeks since we had our teeth into a really juicy investigation. I want to get started. It's interesting that Jersey didn't have an address for Morris Myers in those notes of his. I wonder why."

"Good question," Clark said. "But he's most likely in Metropolis, somewhere, so we've got a good shot at finding him. I don't want to get Tanya's hopes up prematurely, though."

Lois was writing up the latest article in her series about the inner workings of the Metropolis School District. It concerned corruption, as usual, and highlighted how the money raised through a taxpayer initiative had somehow gone to decorating the office of a school district official, one Allan Packard, instead of to the classrooms of one of the inner city schools. She finished the final sentence, recommending a full investigation and internal audit of the finances of the official in question, when the phone rang.

"Hi, Lois!" the familiar voice of Bobby Bigmouth said. The words were accompanied by the indefinable sound of Bobby chewing something, which was reasonable. It seemed to Lois that Bobby's appetite, far from decreasing when he had entered his fifties, had grown. And he still didn't gain an ounce, no matter how much food he managed to put away. In spite of this, however, he remained Lois's most reliable snitch — in a general sense, of course.

"Hi, Bobby," Lois responded. "What have you got?"

"I'm still in the process of gathering information," her snitch informed her primly. "And I need a little down payment. I got a tidbit here that might help, but a guy's gotta eat."

"I'll tell you what," Lois responded. "I'll trade you a burger and a coke for what you have, and depending on what else you bring me, we'll talk about Slippery Shrimp and Egg Foo Yung from the Sze Chuan Express — after you deliver."

A deep sigh. "You drive a hard bargain, Lois. All right, meet me behind the Twenty-Four Hour Diner on Winslow Boulevard in forty minutes, and bring the chow. Something from that gourmet burger place you brought stuff from last week."

"Forty minutes," Lois said. "I'll be there."

Bobby hung up. Lois sent her article to Perry and got to her feet, glancing at Clark's desk. Her husband had vanished half an hour ago and shortly the report had come in of Superman breaking up a hostage situation at the Merchants Bank of Metropolis. Clark should be back soon, she thought, but she couldn't wait for him.

Unlike the Lois Lane of thirteen years ago, who wouldn't have thought to let her husband know where she was going, or why, she took fifteen seconds to leave him a note, grabbed her bag and hurried out of the newsroom to buy Bobby Bigmouth some food.

Clark stepped out of the stairwell of the Daily Planet Building into the newsroom. Lois wasn't in sight, and he couldn't detect her heartbeat anywhere in the area, so she must be out on a task of some sort. Jim Olsen, however, hailed him and Clark lengthened his stride to hurry to his colleague's desk.

Jimmy — he still frequently thought of his coworker as Jimmy, even though Jimmy had graduated to Jim years ago — was a successful, Kerth-winning investigative reporter and photojournalist these days, but when Lois or Clark needed something important found via computer research, they still went to Jim Olsen. Now he raised a respectful eyebrow at Clark.

"Trust you and Lois to dig up the stuff that nobody else can," he said in a low voice. "Intergang! I thought Metropolis had seen the last of them!"

"So did I," Clark said with a wry grimace. "They're like LexCorp — more arms than an octopus. What have you got?"

"This Jersey character was a PI in Cleveland up until about three years ago," Jimmy said. "Used to do your standard stuff — snooping on possible cheating spouses, mostly. Now and then doing an occasional missing person, kidnapping victim, et cetera. Just after the thing with Cash and Bureau 39, he moved to Metropolis."

"Interesting timing," Clark said.

"Yeah; that's what I thought. He set up shop in that office over on Knight Street — and seemed to do pretty well for himself, even though he didn't get much business for the first few months. Actually, he still hasn't got that many clients, but he lives pretty large, from what I've managed to find out. Apparently he's fairly well known in some of the more — shall we say — 'borderline' businesses in town. He apparently runs up quite a tab at the — uh — 'massage parlors' and more exclusive 'clubs,' but pays them off in full at the end of the month."

"I gather that by 'exclusive' you don't mean the regular night clubs."

"No. Only the ones that are rumored to offer things like games of chance and 'exotic' entertainment not available in the others. As you pointed out, his investigations have led him pretty close to the legal line at times, and at least once he's dipped his toe in the water on the other side, but he always skated. I hunted up the records of his brushes with the law — they're sealed, by the by — and discovered that each time, his lawyer has been from the firm of Bancroft, Watts, Hilder and Lee. Sound familiar?"

"Bancroft?" Clark said slowly. "Not John Bancroft, by any chance."

"Yep."

"The John Bancroft that used to work for Intergang?" Clark said.

"Yeah, that John Bancroft," Jimmy said. "Not that we could ever prove it."

"Now that," Clark said, "is what I call verrry interesting, to quote Maxwell Smart."

"Who?"

"Never mind. Go on."

"Okay," Jim said. "Anyway, after he arrived, he started checking out Metropolis birth records — with a particular interest in the summer of 1997 — and a short time later was hired by Tanya Myers to find her ex-husband, Morris Myers. You need to find out how that happened, by the way. He's also apparently been tracking three women who had children within the particular time window we're talking about, and who have since moved away. I'm doing some checking into them, myself."

"What have you found?"

"Nothing much. All three of them left Metropolis within the last two or three years. One moved to the Midwest, remarried, and now works for the Indianapolis Observer. Her husband is apparently a doctor at Nowack Memorial Hospital in Indianapolis. One is an executive at an advertising firm in Milwaukee, and her son lives with her ex in Milpedas, and the third is in California, apparently working in law enforcement. I've found more information on them, if you want to look at it. Maybe Superman could fly someone out there to check on the kids and see if there's anything to worry about."

That, of course, was probably a very good idea, Clark thought, and about as direct as Jim would ever come to discussing the subject of the half-Kryptonian children in the newsroom. Give Linda Lennox a couple of minutes in the vicinity of the children in question and they would know at once whether they were part-Kryptonian or not. "I'll relay that to Superman," he said. "He'll probably take care of it right away."

Jim nodded. "As for the rest, it's pretty much what you

found. He's taken a number of trips to different states — The trips match up with the stuff in the files you gave me. Then, about six months ago, all the trips stopped, and he's stuck strictly to Metropolis. Either he knows where Myers and Benjamin are, or he knows they're in Metropolis, but it isn't in the files, and I can't find any other place to look. If you don't mind, though, I'm going to start working on the Cost Mart angle. If Intergang is trying to move back into its old territory, we need to get a jump start on the problem."

"Yeah," Clark said. "Go to it, but don't let them catch you."

"You can count on that. Here. This is everything I've found on Graham Jersey and his investigation. I hope it helps."

"Thanks," Clark said, taking the large manila envelope that Jim extended. "It certainly gives us a lot to chew on, anyway."

Jimmy snorted. "Good luck, and if you need any more help, just ask. I'll do my best."

"Yeah," Clark said. He turned his head. What was that? It was almost as if a voice had called his name, but his super hearing hadn't kicked in, and he was sure none of the kids had called him.

He wasn't usually given to imagining things, but he must have imagined this, he thought.

"Something wrong?" Jim asked.

"No, I don't—" He broke off. It was like a tickle in the back of his mind, a tickle that was almost a sound. For an instant, he thought of Lois, but a quick scan with his super-hearing told him that she wasn't in the vicinity.

Suddenly, he was aware that his heart was beginning to pound and he lifted his head, straining to hear something, though what it might be, he didn't know.

'Clark.'

He *wasn't* imagining it. But that wasn't one of the children; of that he was sure. Even Wyatt Dillon's mental voice was louder than this.

Wyatt Dillon!

The first time Wyatt had spoken to him mentally it had been hardly louder than this faint, barely-heard call. The boy's "voice" had grown louder and stronger since, with time and practice, but this was almost like the call of a telepathic beginner.

'Clark! Help!'

"CK, what's wrong?" Jim was looking really worried.

"Did Lois say where she was going?" he asked suddenly.

"No, but I think she may have left you a note," Jim said.

Clark hurried over to his desk, barely restraining the urge to move at more than human speed and found the hastily scribbled note.

"Gone to meet Bobby. 24-Hour diner Winslow Blvd. Back soon."

Lois."

He dropped the envelope on his desk, half-ran up the steps to the elevator and yanked open the door to the stairway.

Lois wrenched futilely at the cord that bound her wrists. Shoved into the trunk of a car wasn't the way she would have chosen to spend her afternoon, she thought, scraping her face along the littered surface of the trunk's floor. The gag was tight, but she succeeded in moving it a fraction of an inch. The blindfold was also slowly being dislodged as well.

The car swerved sharply around a corner and she fought to keep from being thrown heavily against one side of the cavity. A sharp object dug into her cheek.

Grimly, she again scraped her face against the floor, struggling to loosen the gag.

Bobby had slipped her a folded note, which she had shoved into her bra, which was just as well, for the first thing the hoods that accosted her on the way back to the Jeep did was to go through her purse. They hadn't found the note, but they had

informed her that someone wanted to talk to her, and that was how she had wound up here.

If only she and Clark had practiced the telepathic contact this morning instead of putting it off for this afternoon, she would have been able to call her husband for help, she thought. As it was, she was going to have to at least get the gag off before she could scream for help, and then it was an open question if he would hear her. For all she knew, some emergency in Timbuktu might have drawn his notice, and he could be halfway around the world. But maybe CJ or one of the other kids would hear her.

Again, she rubbed her face against the floor of the trunk. Whatever the sharp object that had scratched her face before was, it did so again, and managed to catch on the gag. She pulled, trying to drag the gag down.

'Lois!'

For a moment, she thought she had heard Clark's voice, but how could that be? There was no one in the trunk but her — there was no room for anyone but her.

'Lois!'

It was Clark's voice! But where was he?

"Ghgargh?" she mumbled, around the gag.

'Lois, think at me!'

How could this be happening? She had never had telepathic contact with Clark before, had she? Well, actually, there had been a few incidents that she had wondered about. Could that have been the "life bond" that the Kryptonians had spoken of in action? — the same bond that Marta shared with little Wyatt Dillon, and that CJ had with Linda. Why had they never thought to actually try it before? Well, she knew the answer to that. Clark had learned a long time ago not to pressure her. 'Clark?'

'Keep thinking!' Clark's voice was louder, now that she was paying attention. 'Do you know where you are?'

'I'm in the trunk of a car,' Lois replied, trying to visualize his face in her mind. 'It's a black and green Chevy Malibu, maybe about seven years old. I'm being taken to see somebody that wants to talk to me.'

'Keep talking,' his voice in her head told her. 'I'm getting direction from your mind. Did Bobby have anything to do with this?'

'I don't think so. I think they just seized the opportunity.'

'I see you,' Clark said. 'I'm following you. Don't do anything to upset those thugs, honey. Let's see where they take you.'

Lois relaxed as well as she could in the cramped space. It was amazing how quickly her fright had receded as soon as she knew that Clark was on the job. Whoever Mr. X was, he didn't know what he was getting himself into.

'You're headed into a warehouse,' Clark's voice told her.

'A warehouse?' Lois sounded resigned, even to herself.

'What is it with me and warehouses?'

Through the sense of concern that she could feel in his mind, there was the impression of a grin. 'Brace yourself. They're slowing down.'

'I can tell that,' she responded. 'What time is it?'

'Time?' Clark's mental voice sounded startled. 'It's about three. Why?'

'School will be out at three,' Lois responded. 'I hope the kids don't have any trouble with Susie and her buddies on the way home.'

'If they do, they'll handle it,' Clark responded. 'Okay; you're inside.'

The car was pulling to a stop. Lois lay still, waiting.

Clark hovered overhead, watching the scene with his X-ray vision and listening in with his enhanced hearing. The two thugs got out of the car and went around to the trunk to open it.

'They're coming to get you out,' he said. 'Don't give them any trouble. There's someone coming in the back door of the

place right now.’

‘Who is it?’ his wife’s mental voice asked. It amazed him somewhere under the surface of his attention to what was happening in the warehouse beneath him, that Lois was taking this whole mental communication thing so calmly. Maybe it was because she had seen it in CJ and Marta, and knew, on some level, that her link with him could allow her to do the same thing, once she overcame her nervousness about it. It was as if some barrier had been surmounted this morning when she had made up her mind to try to make their link function as it should.

‘I’m looking,’ he said. ‘There are two men with him...well, well, well. One of the gentlemen with this person that I assume to be Mr. Big is Allan Packard, himself.’

‘Who — *Allan Packard*? That guy I just wrote the article on?’

‘None other. I’ve seen Mr. Big before, too, somewhere.’ Clark narrowed his eyes, studying the face of the man who apparently had orchestrated this abduction of his wife. ‘Ah, I have it. Henry Carruthers, no less.’

‘*Henry Carruthers?*’

‘In the flesh.’

‘Oh, this is just too good,’ Lois’s mental voice said. ‘Another Intergang connection.’

‘Maybe,’ Clark said. ‘It’s an interesting coincidence, anyway. Is it just me, or does it seem that Intergang is getting awfully active, suddenly?’

Eight years ago, when their investigation had brought down Intergang, Henry Carruthers had been closely linked with Mindy Church, although he had denied any knowledge of her criminal activities and no proof to the contrary had ever emerged. He’d become a City Councilman over the next few years, and run for Mayor against William Henderson in the last election. He’d been soundly trounced, although the man had employed every dirty political trick in the book. Henderson, and they, had suspected for years that Carruthers was more than he let on, and now it looked as if their suspicions might be one step closer to being confirmed.

The two goons were hauling Lois out of the trunk now. Lois cooperated just enough that they didn’t need to get rough. Meekness was not in character for her, Clark knew, and silently applauded his wife for her acting skills.

Carruthers and his two sidekicks had arrived by this time and were standing quietly, watching the proceedings.

“Tighten the blindfold,” Carruthers directed tersely. “It’s loose.”

One of the pieces of muscle obeyed. Lois stood still, allowing the man to tighten the cloth. When the deed had been accomplished, he nodded. “Now you may remove the gag.”

The other thug removed the gag. Lois spit out the wad of cloth that had been in her mouth.

“Well, Ms. Lane,” Carruthers said, “I was hoping not to have to get involved, but your usual predilection for sticking your nose in where it doesn’t belong is becoming very annoying.”

“What do you want?” Lois interrupted. “I don’t do kidnapping very well.”

“I imagine not,” Carruthers said. “But you’ve become extremely inconvenient for me a number of times, and I’ve decided that a lesson is in order. Perhaps after you enjoy the hospitality of my bunker for a few days — without the benefit of food or water — I can persuade you to change your mind. I truly hope that it doesn’t go beyond that, but you must bear in mind that no one knows where this place is, and it can be locked from the outside — forever, if necessary. I have far too much invested to allow a nosy reporter to interfere any longer.”

“Superman knew where I was going,” Lois said.

“When you left the Daily Planet, Superman was occupied at the Twelfth Precinct, giving a statement about the bank robbery,” the man said with a faint smugness to his voice. “Don’t lie to me,

Ms. Lane. You’ll find that I plan things well ahead, and I know when someone is lying.” He nodded to the hired muscle. “Take her to the bunker.”

Clark watched as Lois was led toward the center of the huge structure. One man pulled up a trapdoor, and the other shoved Lois toward it.

Now, Clark decided, was the time to intervene. He dived downward.

Two seconds later, all five men were tied hand and foot with various pieces of packing material and Lois was free. Clark glanced coolly at the infuriated city councilman. “Are you all right, Lois?”

“Yes, thank you, Superman. Do you see my purse anywhere?”

“It’s in the car,” he said, nodding to the vehicle that had brought her to this location. “You probably shouldn’t touch it until all the formalities are dealt with. If you’ll stand guard here for a few minutes, I’ll bring a police officer to take care of the situation.”

Lois’s lips twitched. “I’m not going anywhere,” she said. ‘Don’t take too long,’ she added silently. ‘I want to get home and work on this with you and the kids. This is great!’

“I have to stop by the apartment to let Mom know I’m going over to your place,” Ally said. “She works this evening, starting at four, and won’t be home until after midnight.”

“That stinks,” Wyatt said. “I guess she’s been paying this private detective all her money to look for your brother, huh?”

“Pretty much,” Ally said. “If it turns out he knows where Ben is and hasn’t said so, I hope they throw him in jail for a thousand years.”

“We don’t know anything yet,” CJ said. “Dad said he was going to get my Uncle Jimmy to do some research on him today. Jimmy can find out anything about anybody.”

“I wish I had an aunt or an uncle,” Ally said. “My mom doesn’t have any brothers or sisters, and my dad’s brother got killed in a plane crash when I was a baby.”

“Uncle Jimmy isn’t our real uncle,” Marta explained. “Actually, he’s CJ’s godfather, and my brother, Jimmy’s, too. If you read the Daily Planet you’ve probably read his stuff. His name’s James Olsen.”

“Oh, sure,” Ally said. “I’ve seen his photographs, too. Is he really as cute as his picture?”

“Uncle Jimmy?” Marta giggled. “He’s *old!* He’s about thirty, and he’s married and has a couple of kids. His little boy is three, and his baby girl gets into everything whenever we go to my Grandma and Grandpa Kent’s for Christmas.”

Ally grinned. “I wish I had a baby brother or sister.”

Marta giggled. “I wish I didn’t have so many! Jonny and Jimmy can be real pains sometimes, and so are the triplets!”

“So were you when you were littler,” CJ said, raising his eyebrows exactly the way her dad did when he was amused at something. “You nearly put me off girls for life.”

Marta resisted the urge to kick him in the shins. “I guess so,” she said in an attempt to be fair. “But so were you.”

CJ shrugged and pursed his lips in a silent whistle. Marta glared at him for a moment and then decided it would probably be more dignified to ignore her brother’s teasing.

Maria giggled. “My mom says she and her brother and sister fought all the time,” she said. “But after a while she found out that they were her best friends. The only thing was, it was after she was married.”

Wyatt and CJ grinned at each other and Marta again had to resist the urge to kick her brother, as well as Wyatt. She knew better, of course. Super-powered people didn’t do that kind of thing to non-super people. Her father’s face rose warningly in her mind. The only time she was supposed to use force was when she

had to, but it was still tempting.

They reached Georgia Street and Valerie waved as she turned left toward her home. "See you later," she said, before heading away down the block. Marta knew that Valerie's mother would drop both her and her brother, Alex, off about five. Most of their "Super School" sessions were on Saturday morning, but now and then they had special ones, like today. Ally was about to learn a lot more about what she and the others could do.

After another block, Maria left them at her apartment, and then they stopped at the gate of Ally's complex, while Ally hurried in to tell her mother that she needed to go to the Kents' place again today.

She emerged a few moments later. "Mom left me a note," she said. "She had to go in early. I'll call her once we get to your place."

"Okay," Marta agreed. "I sure hope Mom and Dad can find your brother. Maybe your mom will be able to get a better job if she doesn't have to spend all her money on a detective."

"I hope so," Ally said.

"What does your mom do?" Wyatt asked curiously.

"She's a bartender over at the Silver Spoon nightclub," Ally said. "She hates the hours, but the pay is better than it was when she was a librarian. When guys have a few beers they tip higher, especially if the bartender is pretty, and Mom needs every penny she can get." She bit her lip and then seemed to shake off the mood. "Oh well, maybe she can get back her job over at the Metro City Library if we can find Ben."

The little group continued on toward the Kent townhouse. Marta was frowning at the sidewalk as they proceeded. The thought of Ally's mom having to work at a job she hated just so she could afford to pay a crooked detective made her really hope that her mom and dad could find a way to make this Graham Jersey guy sorry he was ever born, but she didn't say so. After all, as CJ said, they didn't really *know* anything yet. Still, it made Marta wish she could do something. She was going to be Supergirl some day, wasn't she? And eventually Superwoman. Or maybe Ultra Woman, like her mother had been, a long time ago. Maybe it was time she gave the choice of a name for her super hero self some thought.

CJ's head came up in a way that Marta had learned to recognize. Her brother was hearing something that had caught his attention. Marta strained with her enhanced hearing, but other than the normal sounds of a big, busy city, she heard nothing.

"What are you hearing?" she asked.

"Dad," he said. "He's 'talking' to somebody. I think it might be Mom."

"Oh," Marta said. "What's happening? Are they 'discussing' something?"

"They're not arguing," CJ said, instantly recognizing her euphemism. "And he's not talking out loud. He's *thinking* at her. I can 'hear' him, but not her." He frowned, obviously listening to the one-sided conversation. "I think she's in some kind of trouble."

"Thinking at her? But Mom can't hear —" Marta broke off at CJ's gesture.

"Dad says 'They're coming to get you out.' That must mean she can hear him."

"Is she okay?"

"I think so. Besides, Dad knows where she is," CJ said. "He won't let anybody hurt Mom for anything."

"How did she get into trouble?" Ally asked.

"My mom is Lois Lane," Marta said in a matter-of-fact way. "These things happen to her sometimes." She strained her mental ears, trying to hear her father's telepathic voice. CJ had always found it much easier to hear their dad when he was 'talking' to someone besides one of them, she knew. She couldn't hear anything. "What's he saying?"

"Nothing right now. Listen for him. You'll hear him when he says something else."

Marta did, and was gratified a moment later by hearing her father's mental voice. "Who's Henry Carruthers?" she asked.

"That was the guy that ran against Mr. Henderson for Mayor," CJ said.

Marta grimaced, striving to recall. "Yeah, I remember Mom and Dad talking about him, a little."

"Yeah, well it looks like they were right," CJ said. "He had Mom kidnapped for something or other."

Wyatt was frowning. "What does this Carruthers guy have to do with Intergang?"

Ally's eyes widened. "Can *you* hear him, too?"

"Sure," Wyatt said, with a hint of a grin. "I learned how three years ago."

"He could hear me," Marta said proudly. "Even though he couldn't hear any of the others. After that, he learned how to hear the others, too."

She saw CJ and Linda glance at each other, but neither of them said anything.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing," CJ said. "We'd better get home. Dad will be here pretty soon, as soon as he finishes talking to the cops. I guess Mom will probably be at the police station for a while."

"Is your mom all right?" Ally asked.

"Yeah," CJ said. "Superman came in and tied up the bad guys. Maybe Dad'll tell us about it when he gets home, if we ask him."

They speeded up a little, and within twenty minutes the townhouse came into sight. Jim Olsen's car was drawn up in front of it, and he was shepherding Jonny and Jimmy toward the steps.

"Uncle Jimmy!" Marta called.

He glanced around, and his face broke into a grin. "Hi, kids. Your dad told me to tell you he'd be a little late, and you should start your homework right away. He's going to want to start working with you as soon as he gets here." He looked straight at Ally and held out a hand. "You must be Ally. I'm Jim Olsen."

Ally took the hand. "I'm Allynda Myers."

"I know. I did the computer age-progression on your brother's picture. You look a little like him, but not much."

Ally nodded. "I know. I look like my mom."

Jim nodded. "Your mother must be very attractive," he said. "While you guys get your work done, I'm supposed to keep an eye on these two wild men, and see that they do their homework," he added to CJ, waving at Jonny and Jimmy.

"Good luck," CJ said a little dryly.

"Yeah." He unlocked the front door. "Get busy. I don't know how long I'll survive this."

Marta giggled. Her Uncle Jimmy's kids were a lot younger than Jonny and Jimmy, but she was pretty sure he was joking. He'd baby sat her and CJ a lot when they were smaller, and he hadn't seemed to have any trouble.

Jim looked sternly at the two younger boys. "You two go get a snack from the kitchen. I think your dad left something for you. Then get your homework out and start in on it. After you're all done, you can watch cartoons."

Jonny and Jimmy took off like stampeding cattle. Jim watched them go and then looked back at the older children. "Your mom and dad will be home with the others pretty soon," he said, "but they might be a little later than usual. Your mom's headed over to the police station right now. Somebody tried to kidnap her again."

"Yeah, we know," Wyatt said. "We heard part of it. What happened?"

"I'm not really sure," Jim said. "Your dad called me by cell phone and told me a little, and asked me to make sure Jimmy and Jonny got here and did their work until he could get home."

Superman has to go give his statement to the police as well.”

“Henry Carruthers was there,” CJ said. “He ordered it.”

Jim’s eyebrows rose. “Henry Carruthers? The city councilman? That Henry Carruthers?”

“I think so,” CJ said. “Dad recognized him.”

Jim pursed his lips. “The Intergang connection again.”

“Intergang?” Linda asked. “What does he have to do with Intergang?”

Jim glanced at her. “What do you know about Intergang, Linda?”

“After CJ told me about it this morning, I did some research on one of the computers in the school library at lunchtime to find out what I could,” Linda said. “After Bureau 39, I wanted to know about anybody that might make trouble for us. It was a worldwide crime syndicate. There were a bunch of Lane and Kent articles about it, and I read most of them. Intergang was big. It was started by Bill Church. He ran it, with the help of his son, Bill Jr. Then he married Mindy Church, and a little while later he and his son went to jail. Anyway, Intergang killed world leaders and put its puppets in their place, and blackmailed and bribed lots more. It was even here in Metropolis, and replaced one of our mayors with a duplicate, but CJ’s mom and dad figured it out and exposed her. It turned out that Mrs. Church took over, after her husband and his son went to jail, and she was the actual head of Intergang for years afterwards. Lane and Kent, and you and Mayor Henderson — only he was a policeman, then — exposed her and broke them up. It was a huge deal. Hundreds of people got arrested in different countries, and there are still trials and investigations going on everywhere about it.”

Jim looked impressed. “That’s a pretty good summary,” he said. “Well, back when Mindy Church was arrested, she had a boyfriend named Henry Carruthers. He claimed he didn’t know anything about her Intergang connections, and nobody could prove any differently. Lois and Clark, and Henderson and I were always suspicious, though — and now maybe we’ll be able to prove something. Kidnapping Lois is always a risky thing to do. You’d think the criminal community would have figured that out by now.”

“I guess,” CJ said, “that Intergang is trying to come back?”

“It looks like it,” Jim said. “And it looks to your dad and me like they’re looking for their own Superman. That’s why we’ve got to find Ben before they get their hands on him, outside of the fact that he needs to be brought back home. And you guys are going to have to teach him how to control his powers, so he doesn’t give himself away — assuming that he hasn’t already done it.”

“When I — and later, Ben — started to be able to hear things a long way off,” Ally said softly, “we decided between us that we weren’t ever going to let Dad, or anyone else, know what we could do. We didn’t know what was going on, but we thought it might not be a good idea to tell him. So maybe he’s still keeping it secret. I hope he is, anyway.”

“So do I,” Jim said. Marta thought he looked worried.

“Anyway, you kids go and get your homework done. You’ve got a lot of things to do this evening.”

CJ looked up at the sound of the front door opening and looked through the wall with his X-ray vision. His father was holding it for Lois and the triplets, and as CJ watched, turned to lock the panel behind him.

Wyatt slipped a paper into his notebook and closed it. “I’m done,” he announced. “I’m glad I’ve got a smart friend when it comes to writing essays.”

“That’s okay,” CJ said absently. “You’re probably the reason I do as well as I do in math.” He glanced over at Linda. “I’m finished. How much more do you have?”

Her hand moved across the paper with commendable super

speed. “All done.”

“How are you kids doing?” Lois asked, sticking her head into the den.

“We just finished,” CJ said. “Are you okay, Mom?”

“Fine,” she said briskly. “I’ve got a headline article for the paper, Henry Carruthers is in jail for kidnapping, and Allan Packard is right there with him as an accomplice. The diversion of those funds to decorate Packard’s office that were meant for the inner city schools is going to be very thoroughly looked into by the city — with the Daily Planet looking over their shoulders every step of the way. And I got a tip from Bobby Bigmouth. He says there’s some kind of power struggle going on in the ranks — two Intergang big shots each trying to become the new leader. I’m betting one of them is Carruthers. This investigation is going to be fun.”

Maybe that would let Intergang know that they weren’t going to get back into Metropolis without Lane and Kent getting on their case, CJ thought. His mom’s idea of fun tended to make the hair rise on his head, but he had to give her credit. What was it with these crooks, anyway? Lane and Kent cleaned their clocks for them once, so they came right back to the place where they’d run into trouble before and started it up again.

Lois pulled off her high heels. “I’m going to go change. My feet are killing me. This being kidnapped thing is getting harder than it used to be. And after we’re done this evening, I want to do a little more research into Carruthers. There has to be more behind the kidnapping than just the stuff about the school money. I wonder what else he’s up to.” She wiggled her toes. “Ah! That feels better!” Turning, she ascended the stairs briskly enough to make CJ blink.

“How about that private investigator?” he inquired after a moment. “Did anyone find out anything about him?”

“As a matter of fact, your Uncle Jim did,” Clark said. “And I need to talk to Linda about that.”

Linda sat up straight, a look of immediate interest on her pretty features. CJ didn’t know what it was, but she looked even prettier this year than she had before. She might be wearing a little makeup, he thought, not that he could see any of it, and he sure liked the cologne or whatever it was that she was using. CJ didn’t like heavy perfume. It tended to make him sneeze. Even his mom used just a little scent that had a faint, flowery smell to it — probably so it didn’t overwhelm Dad’s nose, he thought. Linda was using something that smelled different, but it was really nice, and light, and it made her smell more like herself than ever.

He realized that his father was speaking. He’d let himself get distracted by Linda again, which happened a lot, and he dragged his attention back to the conversation.

“...Need to visit three kids that were born about the same time you were,” his father was saying. “Jersey was investigating them, so we have to be sure about them one way or another. With your ability to spot Kryptonians, all you’ll need to do is get somewhere close to them, and we’ll know if we need to worry.”

Linda nodded. “When?”

“Right now, if you’re done with your work,” Clark said.

“Okay,” Linda said. She slid out of the chair. “I guess we’re going to fly?”

Clark nodded. “CJ, I’d like you to take over teaching Ally the basics of telepathy. You and the kids figured it out in the first place, so I think I can trust you to get her started. If we’re not back by the time Valerie and Alex get here, you start the class with the regular exercises. Your mother will help you if you need it. We’ll be back as soon as we can. We’ve got another student this afternoon, too,” he added.

“Mom?”

Clark looked surprised. “How did you know?”

“I heard you ‘talking’ to her while she was being kidnapped. I

couldn't hear her, though."

"Well, work with Ally and do the best you can with your mom. Try whatever it was that you did to help Wyatt learn, and see if it works. We'll be back as fast as we can."

CJ and Wyatt climbed the stairs to the attic playroom. Marta and Ally were parked in front of the videogame, and Marta was showing Ally the moves to the latest battle game — at which, as usual, she excelled. They looked around as CJ and Wyatt opened the door.

"Hi," Marta said. "Where's Linda?"

"She went with Dad. They've found three other kids that the PI was checking out. Dad wants to be sure they're not Kryptonians."

"You mean Linda can tell?" Ally asked.

"Yeah," CJ said. "Dad said that the Lady Zara — the Kryptonian woman that he was supposed to marry — told him that sometimes the noble Kryptonian families had someone who could do more than the usual telepathic stuff. You and Linda must both be from the noble families. Dad was, too, but he can't do it, and neither can I. Marta, either."

"Neither can Valerie," Marta said. "I asked her, and her father was a noble, too."

"Oh," Ally said. She looked at her shoes. "My mom told me that my father —" She broke off for a moment, and then lifted her chin. "My father was Lord Nor," she said. "I asked her. I'm glad your dad beat him in that fight. He deserved everything he got."

CJ shrugged. "Nobody can help what happened before they were born," he said. "Linda doesn't know who her dad was, either, but there was only one other Lord who chose Nor's side. That was Jen Mai. He was Valerie's father. I think Lord Nor was probably Linda's father, too. So does my dad, cause he was sort of a redhead, and all the others that came with him were his and Jen Mai's flunkies."

"Nor was a loser," Wyatt said. "Who cares about him, anyway? Mr. Kent said CJ and Marta — and me, too — are supposed to teach you about telepathy, since we figured out how to do it, ourselves. And we're supposed to try to teach Mrs. Kent how, if we can. She's gonna be here in a few minutes."

Marta scrambled up off the floor. "Great! Ally already heard me yell for you during the fight, yesterday, so she can hear thoughts. We'll just have to think really quietly, so Jonny and Jimmy don't hear us."

CJ nodded, feeling somewhat self-conscious. He'd helped his dad teach some of his classes lately, but he'd never done it on his own before. He took off his glasses and laid them on the computer desk. "Let's all sit down at the table," he said, pointing to the small table that had been up here ever since their dad and Uncle Jim had converted this part of the attic into a playroom. The table was more suited for someone of Jonny or Jimmy's size, but it would work.

When the four of them were seated around the table, CJ said, "First close your eyes, Ally. It helps you to concentrate. I'm going to think at you. Listen for my voice in your head. It'll sound just like me, except you're hearing it with your brain instead of your ears."

"Okay," Ally said. Obediently, she closed her eyes. CJ aimed the stream of thoughts directly at her, almost able to see the bright swarm of thoughts targeting the girl. 'Do you hear me?'

Ally's eyes popped open. "Oh!"

"Don't talk," Marta said. "Think back."

At once Ally closed her eyes and CJ listened intently. Inside his head, a soft, hesitant voice said, 'I can hear you. Do you hear me?'

Just as it had been with Linda and Marta in the beginning, Ally's voice wasn't very loud, but it was clear enough. 'I hear

you,' he said.

"So do I!" Marta's voice chimed in. 'How about you, Wyatt?'

'I can hear her, too,' Wyatt's voice said, not as loud as Marta's, but definitely clear and distinct. 'Can you hear me, Ally?'

Ally's eyes flew open again, but this time she didn't speak aloud. 'I really *can* hear you! Oh, wow! This is amazing!'

"It sure is," Marta said. "Try to aim your thoughts directly at us, though. You don't want anybody else to hear — like Jonny and Jimmy. They don't get to find out about this stuff until they're ten."

"Okay — sorry," Ally said. Her mental voice was quickly becoming firmer and more confident. 'Is this better?'

"Some," CJ said. "Try to look at what I'm doing. You try to send your thoughts directly to one person. Don't let them scatter. There's at least one other kid in Metropolis that Dad hasn't found yet, who can hear us, if we're not careful. Or there was, three years ago. I don't want to take chances."

Someone knocked at the door, and CJ turned his head as his mother stepped inside. "Are you ready for me, yet?"

"Sure," CJ said. "Come on in."

Lois stepped into the attic playroom. She had originally expected Clark to run this session, but on the way home he had explained to her what Jim had found and she had agreed that it was more important for him to find out if they had anything to worry about with the three children that Graham Jersey was investigating. So here she was, attending a class taught by her thirteen-year-old son — and the most galling part of it was that he knew more about the subject than she did.

She should definitely have done this before, she thought.

CJ was looking a little unsure of himself, and that made her feel better. It wasn't a case of her super powered son taking a superior position to her after all. The day would come when he would be a superman just like Clark. He was pretty super right now, actually — but he was still human, or close enough. She should have realized that CJ would never consider himself superior to her or anyone else, any more than Clark did. 'Come on, Lane, there's no reason to get defensive about this. It's not CJ's fault that you were too chicken to try this before!'

She looked around and then pulled up one of the chairs that sat against the wall. "Okay," she said. "What do I do?"

"Well —" CJ hesitated. "First, I'd like you to try thinking *at* us. Back when Wyatt first learned, Marta could hear what he was saying, but the rest of us could sort of hear his voice — just not his words."

"I get it," Lois said. "You want to see if you can 'sort of' hear me, too."

"Yeah." CJ looked relieved at her quick understanding.

"Okay." Lois fixed her eyes on him and concentrated as hard as she could. 'CJ?'

CJ had closed his eyes and his face scrunched up into a frown.

'CJ?' Lois thought again.

Ally turned her head to look at Lois. "Did you say 'CJ'?"

Everyone looked at her in surprise. "Did you hear her?" CJ asked.

Ally nodded. "Yeah. Like she was calling from a long way off."

CJ looked at Lois again. "Try it again, Mom," he said. "I'm not sure, but I think I'm feeling something — sort of like a tickle in my mind. Try to think real loud."

Lois closed her eyes and pictured her son's face in her mind. 'CJ?' she thought again, as loudly as she could.

"I can hear you," Marta said. "I just can't hear what you're saying."

"Me, too," Wyatt said.

"Mom?" Jimmy's voice said from behind them, "why are you yelling for CJ? He's right there next to you."

Lois opened her eyes and turned her head to see her six-and-a-half-year-old son poking his head through the attic door. Jim Olsen appeared behind him.

"Sorry," he panted, obviously slightly out of breath from hurrying up the stairs behind the boy. "Jimmy, I told you your Mom and the others are doing a science experiment. You head back downstairs. Milton the Monster is just coming on."

"Your Uncle Jimmy is right," Lois said quickly. "We're doing a science experiment with —"

"Sound vibrations," CJ said at once. "Scram, kiddo. We want to finish this before dinner."

"Okay," Jimmy said. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Lois said. "Go on down and watch the cartoons, honey. I'll be there as soon as I finish helping your brother."

When the door had closed behind him, Lois looked questioningly at her oldest son. "What just happened?"

"I'm not sure." CJ was squinting at the door, and Lois suspected that he was tracking his younger brother's progress down the stairs. "Ally could hear what you were saying, and she's like Linda — she's got something more than just the regular telepathy. But Jimmy heard you, too. Do you think that means he might be like Ally and Linda?"

"Maybe," Lois said. "I guess it's possible." She cleared her throat. "Look, let's get on with this. How did Wyatt manage to tune in on your special band?"

"Touch CJ and think at him," Wyatt said. "It sort of helps you to get it right."

CJ extended a hand and Lois grasped it. She closed her eyes, visualizing her son's face. 'CJ?'

'I can hear you,' CJ's voice said suddenly in her mind. 'You're not as loud as the others, but I can hear you. Now, touch Marta and try it.'

Lois obeyed. 'Marta?'

'Hey!' Wyatt's voice said in her mind, so suddenly that she nearly jumped. His "voice" was softer than CJ's, but she could hear him clearly. 'Nice going! I can hear you, too!'

'So can I,' Marta said. 'Mom's really good at this!'

'It's sort of like a whisper,' Wyatt said. 'That's how I started out, but if you practice hard at really projecting, you'll get louder, just like I did.'

Someone knocked on the doorframe, and Lois opened her eyes to see Valerie and Alex Henderson peeking through the partially opened door. She beckoned to them.

"Come on in, kids. CJ's teaching the class today."

"Where's Mr. Kent?" Valerie asked, giving Alex a light push. The two children entered the room, and Valerie shut the door behind them.

"He and Linda went to check out three other kids that might be like us," CJ said. "I hope they'll be back pretty soon, but in the meantime I'm supposed to put everybody through their exercises. Mom's going to tell you what we've found out in the meantime."

"Okay," Valerie said.

Lois smiled at Alex. "How are you doing these days, Alex?"

The boy, whose appearance was such a surprising mix of Lex Luthor and Clark, grinned at her. Alex had just turned eleven, and he was a far cry from the scared kid that CJ and Wyatt had rescued from Arianna Luthor's basement, a little less than two and a half years ago. The child had been Arianna's special project: a clone made of a mixture of the DNA from both Clark and Luthor, and had been scheduled for death because he hadn't developed any super powers by the time he was nearly nine. Of course, most of the super powers didn't kick in until about the age of ten, when the first early stirrings of puberty were apparently beginning in Kryptonians, but Arianna hadn't known that. Alex's DNA was 48 percent Luthor's and 52 percent Clark's,

and Lois had always thanked providence that her son and Wyatt had been able to prevent him from being one more innocent victim of the Luthors' insane drive for power.

"I'm great, Mrs. Kent. I floated in my sleep last night! When I woke up I fell onto the floor, all the way across the room!"

"Hey, that's great!" Marta said.

"Yeah," CJ said. "I started floating when I was almost eleven, so you're right on schedule. Come on, let's get started." He waved at Ally. "Alex, this is Allynda Myers. Everybody calls her Ally. She's just learned how to use her telepathy, and Mom just learned, too. We're gonna wait on the heat vision stuff for now. We don't want to set the house on fire by accident, but everybody line up. We're going to practice floating just a little bit off the floor, and teach Ally how."

Lois got to her feet. "Do you need me anymore, CJ?"

"Not unless you want to practice your telepathy more," CJ said.

"I'll work on it a little later," she said, smiling at the group of super-powered children. "When you finish, come down and I'll fill you in on what your dad and Uncle Jimmy found out. I think I need to go downstairs and let him go home. Sandi is going to be getting impatient. Besides, I need to start dinner." She almost laughed at the look on both Marta's and CJ's faces. "I'm just going to heat up one of your dad's casseroles!"

"Oh," Marta said, imperfectly concealing her relief. "We'll be done in about an hour, I guess. You don't have to rush."

Lois sternly smothered the urge to giggle as she left the playroom, closing the door behind her.

"Okay," CJ said. "Ally, the kids here have all practiced floating. Most of us have floated by accident at least once, while we were younger. Have you ever floated?"

Ally shook her head. "I don't think so."

"Do you ever have dreams where you're flying?"

Ally frowned. "Yeah — sometimes."

"How about when you wake up? Do you ever feel like you just dropped suddenly, sort of like when your car goes over a dip in the road a little fast?"

"Well..." Ally frowned, obviously trying to recollect something. "Yeah, once in a while it's happened like that, but I figured it was just cause I was waking up suddenly."

"Maybe you were," CJ said with a grin. "Okay; Dad did this the first time he started teaching me to float on purpose. He'd seen me float a few times, but when I realized what I was doing, I'd lose it and land on the floor. Watch."

The trick was, of course, that his body would defy gravity when he wanted it to, just like his hand reached out to pick up a pencil when he commanded it to do so. The signal was almost unconscious, but initiated by his wish to float, just like the order that went out for his hand to move, but trying to explain that to Ally was a little difficult. Instead he fixed his eyes on her face and rose slowly and gradually from the floor, until he hovered a good four feet in the air.

Ally's eyes widened just a little as she silently watched the feat, but although she swallowed once, she didn't say anything.

"Okay," CJ said to his classmates. "Everybody line up like I said before and do the same thing. Alex, if you have any trouble, grab onto Valerie."

The other children sorted themselves out and then, one by one, copied him. Soon, all of them hovered, more or less gracefully, on a level with CJ. Alex wobbled a little at first, and he could tell that the boy was working to stay steady, but he didn't grab onto his sister. Instead, his face contorted in a frown of concentration as he fought to keep himself suspended in the air.

"You're doing great, Alex," CJ said.

The boy grinned tightly. "Yeah. Some day I'm gonna do this

where Arianna Luthor can hear about it on the news. I'm gonna make her eat her words."

"Just don't let her know who you are in real life," Marta said.
"Not a chance," Alex said.

Which, CJ thought, was true. No one could know where Alex had gone after they pulled him out of that basement and took him home. The Hendersons had quietly adopted him and had the records sealed on the grounds that Alex's parents were abusive, and it was in the best interests of the child that they not be able to locate him. CJ wasn't sure how Mayor Henderson had managed that, but he was glad of it.

But back to business. CJ dropped lightly to the floor and held out a hand to Ally. "Here; grab on."

Ally took his proffered hand, holding it rather tightly. CJ grinned. "Relax. All I'm going to do is help you do what you probably already can. It isn't hard. I want you to imagine your body getting light as air, and think about moving *up*. Ready?"

Ally nodded and CJ squeezed her hand reassuringly. "Okay; here we go." He mentally told his aura to extend itself around Ally and began to rise slowly and steadily from the floor, bringing her along.

For Allynda Myers, the feeling was uncannily familiar. All of a sudden, without any warning, the pull of gravity dropped away and she felt lighter than a feather. CJ held her hand, tugging her gently upward and she went with him easily, with nothing to pull her down. CJ was grinning at her, and she grinned back, delighting in the amazing sensation of freedom.

She *had* done this before, she thought. This was something her body knew how to do, except for the fact that she had not realized it consciously. Maybe, as CJ had suggested, some of those times she had awakened with a jolt and the feeling of falling she had actually been floating.

'Float, Ally,' CJ's voice said in her mind. 'You don't need me for this. Just do what I do. *Want* yourself to float. It's the same as when you make your arm move, or when you walk. You don't think about it. You just *do* it.'

Oh, she wanted to be able to do this by herself, that was for sure. She never wanted to stop. She *wanted* to be able to stay floating free like this, after CJ let go of her hand.

She began to rise slowly, unsure whether it was CJ that was providing the motive power, or her. And all at once, she realized that he was no longer holding her hand.

She dropped several inches and then caught herself, concentrating on remaining aloft and weightless in the air.

"You're doing great," Marta's voice said. The other girl was floating inches away, and grinning from ear to ear. "I knew you could."

"Okay," CJ said aloud. "Now try to lower yourself back to the floor, slowly, so you don't come down too hard."

That part was a little harder, and she landed with a thump, but the amazing thing she had done remained with her. She could actually fly — or at least float, and if she could float, she could fly, if not now, then soon.

"Wow!" she said.

Down in the kitchen, Lois removed one of Clark's frozen casseroles from the freezer and examined his handwritten directions.

"Preheat oven to 375 degrees," she read aloud. Okay, that was simple enough.

She set the oven temperature and turned on the heat, feeling slightly smug. As recently as last week, she had preheated the oven for half an hour without it getting warm, before Marta timidly pointed out that she hadn't actually turned on the heat. That wasn't a mistake she was willing to make again. What was it with her and cooking, anyway? She could pick a lock, hotwire a

car, crack a safe and scale a building like a cat burglar — and it was all she could do to heat up a frozen dinner without burning it to a crisp. Why on Earth couldn't she figure out how to cook up a simple bowl of oatmeal without turning it into some kind of ghastly soup or setting off the smoke detector?

It really didn't make sense, she thought. At least when you cooked, the directions were right there in black and white, on the page, often with illustrations of how the final product was supposed to look, but somehow hers never did. Like the attempt a few weeks ago to make a tuna casserole. Tuna casserole wasn't very complicated, except, apparently, for her. Fortunately, a few swipes of the paintbrush had covered the signs of her handiwork before Clark came rushing home to put out her latest attempt to burn the townhouse to the ground.

Lois sighed. She knew better, but once in a while she had the ambition to make something besides her chocolate desserts or macaroni casserole, and it usually resulted in an embarrassing situation where either Superman had to deal with it, or one of the neighbors called the fire department. It just wasn't fair.

She glanced out into the living room. Jonny and Jimmy lay on their stomachs, watching the television. Outside in the back yard, the triplets were involved in some kind of game that involved a great deal of yelling and squealing and running back and forth. At least it was easy to keep track of them by the noise. Again, she glanced into the living room at the two boys.

Jimmy had 'heard' her talking mentally to CJ. Ally had also managed to hear her before she actually "tuned in" to the Kryptonian telepathic channel, but Ally sure wasn't her soul mate any more than Jimmy was. Did that mean that Jimmy had somehow inherited from Clark whatever it was that gave some Kryptonians superior telepathic powers? It seemed possible. Once he got back, she would ask Clark, although the chances were that he didn't know. The darned New Kryptonians hadn't really told him much. Of course, considering the situation with Nor and all the rest that had happened, it wasn't really surprising.

"Mommy!" Jimmy's voice rose in distress. "Something's wrong with the TV!"

It was at that moment that she realized that the red light on the stove, which told her that the oven was heating, had gone out. A quick glance in the refrigerator told her that the light was out there as well.

Lois cussed softly under her breath and stepped into the living room. The digital clock on the wall was also blank.

"Mommy!" Jimmy protested, "fix it!"

"I think we blew the circuit breaker," she said. "I'll go downstairs and reset it."

"Mom!" CJ's voice said in her head, 'the lights just went out up here.'

That was odd. The lights weren't on the same circuit as the stove. Come to think of it, neither was the television. It still felt strange, but she visualized her son's face and thought at him, trying to direct her thoughts directly at him. 'Just a minute. I think the power is out.'

Lois went back into the kitchen and unplugged the radio, thereby switching it to backup battery power, and turned it on.

Static. Lois turned the dial, searching for a station. More static. What the dickens was going on?

From somewhere, Lois heard a whoosh, and an instant later, Clark walked in the front door, accompanied by Linda Lennox. "Everything all right here?"

"Except for the power," Lois said. "What's going on?"

"Apparently," Clark said, "a transformer failed somewhere in New Hampshire. There was a cascading overload that blew out the whole system. The power is out all over the whole Eastern Seaboard."

"Great," Lois said. "How am I going to cook the casserole?"

"I'll heat it up for you before I take off," Clark said.

"Metropolis's streets are already jammed up because none of the traffic lights are working."

"I should have figured that," Lois said. "Be sure to take good notes."

"I will," Clark said. He glanced at Linda. "Better go on upstairs and join the session. CJ probably can use the help."

"Okay," Linda said. She ran up the stairs. Clark followed Lois into the kitchen.

"By the way, what happened with the three kids?" Lois asked.

"They're clear," Clark said. "Just as well. I don't think we could handle any more complications for a while." He lowered his glasses and stared at the casserole, which began to emit delicious aromas within seconds. "There. That should do it. I suggest you have a salad with it." He added, "How did the telepathy session go?"

"Fine," Lois said. "A couple of things happened that no one expected, but we can talk about it later. You'd better get busy."

"Yeah." He leaned forward and kissed her thoroughly. "Take care of yourself until I'm back." He glanced toward the back yard. "The kids are covered with sand again."

"Terrific," Lois muttered. "Be careful."

"I will."

"I think CJ should walk you home," Lois said.

"I'll be okay," Ally said. "I walk by myself all the time."

Lois shook her head and pointed to the line of bumper to bumper traffic on the street. "Not with that going on. I'm not sure you shouldn't stay here, but since you want to go home, I'm providing you with an escort. It's going to be dark soon. I'll feel better if CJ goes with you."

"Me, too," CJ said. He was frowning out at the mass of traffic. "Linda and I will both go; okay? Dad promised your mom you'd be safe when you were with us, and that means making sure you get home all right."

Ally shrugged and nodded. "I guess you're right. Did Mr. Kent have any idea when the power would be back on?"

"No." Lois waved to the battery-powered radio that was muttering in the corner. "The news reports aren't saying, either. I'm not even sure it's safe for you to be there alone."

"I'll lock the doors," Ally assured her. "I've stayed alone before. Mom has to work evenings and nights a lot. I'll be fine."

"Well — all right." Lois gave in reluctantly, but she really couldn't keep the girl here against her will. "You guys be careful, all right?"

"We'll be okay," CJ assured her with a small smile. "If we run into trouble, we can always fly away."

"Yeah, but I don't want anyone to see you do that, either," Lois said.

"Don't worry," Linda said. "We know."

The three children left a few moments later. Lois watched them walking briskly down the sidewalk until they disappeared from her view and then set about putting plates and silverware on the table.

Barely fifteen minutes later, the doorbell rang. Clark had installed a battery powered bell years ago, since the knocker often couldn't be heard from the second floor, and the old brownstone hadn't had a doorbell when they purchased it. Lois went to the door and peeked through the spy hole. The sight of the person standing there made her hurry to unlock the door and pull it open. "Lucy? What are you doing here?"

Lucy Lane Rockwell entered and gave a sigh. "Hi, Lois. There's an accident over on Melon and the traffic's backed up for miles. Every traffic light is out and the streets are jammed. I finally gave up and parked the car. I figured I can wait here until the traffic clears, at least."

"Come on in and sit down," Lois said. "We don't have any

power, either, though."

"Thanks." Lucy sank onto the couch and promptly removed her high-heeled shoes. "My feet have been killing me for about ten blocks."

"That's what being a high-powered executive assistant gets you," Lois said.

"You should talk!" Lucy gave a sudden laugh. "I suppose you're not a high powered investigative journalist! Not to mention getting run off your feet by seven kids!"

"They don't run me off my feet," Lois said. "The older ones help take care of the smaller ones, and Clark is wonderful with them. I wouldn't want to do without any of them. Besides," she added, "I wear flat shoes these days, except at the office. It keeps me from getting corns."

"Well," Lucy said in a fair-minded spirit, "they're great nieces and nephews, but I'm glad I only have the two. Jay keeps telling me he wants one more, before it's too late, but I'm not sure I'm ready to start the whole diaper duty thing again. Where is everybody, by the way?"

"The Terrible Trio are in the tub and Marta and Wyatt are keeping an eye on them," Lois said. "Jimmy and Jonny are up in their room probably playing on their Game Boys, since the television won't work."

"Who's Wyatt?"

"Oh. Wyatt is CJ's best friend. CJ and his girlfriend are walking another friend of theirs home. They should be back in about twenty minutes or so. Bill Henderson left with his two kids just a few minutes before you got here. I guess they're walking, too. I just hope the casserole stays warm until CJ and Linda get back." If it didn't, she thought, she could ask one of the kids to warm it up again. CJ probably. He had the best control of his heat vision.

"Bill Henderson — you mean, the Mayor?"

"Sure," Lois said. "Why not?"

"No reason," Lucy said. "Except I thought you and Henderson barely got along."

"Oh, that," Lois said. "That was different. His kids are friends with our kids. They're over here a lot. Besides, Bill's not so bad when you get to know him."

Lucy shook her head. "Every time I come over here you have one or two neighbor kids hanging around, but I didn't expect the Mayor's, too. Is that what's in store for me in a few years?"

"I think you live too far away for the Mayor's kids to come over," Lois said. She went back to the townhouse's dining room to finish setting the table. "Clark's out covering the city crisis, so he'll probably grab a sandwich when he gets in."

"What happened, anyway?" Lucy asked. "Do you know? I couldn't find a station that was still on the air."

"I finally got one that's out of the blackout area," Lois said. "The reception is kind of crackly, but they said some transformer failed in New Hampshire and it basically blew out the power grid. The power is out all up and down the East Coast."

"Yikes," Lucy said. "No wonder my cell phone won't work. Do they have any idea when they'll have the power back on?"

"Not the last I heard," Lois said. "Isn't Jay going to wonder where you are?"

"Probably," Lucy said. "He'll probably figure I'm stuck in traffic, but I didn't know what else to do. Nothing was moving while I was walking from where I parked. If I were in the car, all I'd be doing would be sitting in one place burning up gas. Maybe when it clears a bit, I'll be able to get home."

"Let's just hope it doesn't take too long," Lois said. "It's going to start getting dark in another hour. Would you like to eat dinner here?"

"Did you cook it?" her sister asked cautiously.

"No," Lois said. "Clark always has some dishes that he makes and freezes so there'll be something for everyone to eat

when he's not here. All I have to do is heat them up."

"Oh," Lucy said. "In that case, all right."

"Hmmph! Just for that, you can make the salad!"

"Man, look at that traffic jam," CJ said. He jerked a thumb at the lines of unmoving cars. "I guess people don't realize how important little things like stoplights are, until they don't work."

"I'll say," Ally agreed. "I hope it clears up before Mom gets off work."

"Me too," Linda said. "My mom sells houses, and she's not going to be able to take her clients around in this. I hope she can get through it to pick me up, this evening."

"If she can't, you can sleep in Marta's room," CJ said. "Or I guess Dad can fly home with you after dark. I just hope your mom doesn't get stuck in her car half the night. Not even the cell phones work, so she can't even call us."

"If that happens, maybe Superman could pick her up — if he can find her," Linda said.

"I think it's the finding her that's the problem," CJ said. "I hope they get this thing fixed pretty soon. Dad might have to fly anywhere on the East Coast if there's a bad problem. Even the cops and the fire department are going to have trouble getting places, and it's going on everywhere from Florida to Maine."

"That's for sure," Linda said. "I wish he'd let us help. We're not as fast or as strong as he is, but we're still pretty super. I'll bet you could rescue people from accidents and things, at least. You're sure strong enough."

CJ shrugged. "Dad says no super powers except if it's a real emergency. If somebody were in big trouble, he wouldn't stop us from helping, you know. He always says nothing is as important as someone's life."

"Your dad is a real hero," Ally said wistfully. "I'd like to be able to do what he does."

"You will, someday," CJ said.

"Are you sure?" Ally looked sideways at him. "We're only half-Kryptonian."

"Dad's doctor says we will," CJ said. "He's one of the smartest guys around, so he's probably right."

They stepped from the sidewalk and threaded their way through stopped cars to the other side.

"I hope he is," Ally said. "I want to help people like Superman does, someday. There's lots of people who need help, and if we're like your dad, we'll be able to do all sorts of things that most people can't do."

"If you want to, you'll be able to," Linda said. "But Superman says we have to wait until we're eighteen. Unless," she added, with careful accuracy, "it's an emergency."

"I get it," Ally said. "We have to be legal adults to do something like that." She regarded CJ's glasses. "I guess you're already working on a secret identity. You don't really need those glasses, do you?"

"No," CJ admitted. He removed them and held them out. "They're plain glass. See?"

Ally looked through them and handed them back. "That's not a bad idea." She regarded his face. "Wow. You know, you really look like Superman without your glasses."

"I know." CJ replaced the spectacles. "That's why I decided to start wearing them."

"I don't think I can get away with glasses," Ally said doubtfully. "Besides, if I tried and people figured it out, they might start looking for other people who were using them for the same reason."

"I'm going to wear a mask," Linda said matter-of-factly. "Mom's been teaching me to sew, and I've been looking at patterns that I could turn into a costume. By the time I'm ready, my costume will be, too."

"That's a good idea," Ally said, thoughtfully. "Maybe you

could help me."

"Sure," Linda said.

They crossed another street, and Michigan Boulevard came into sight. Ally hesitated. "You don't have to come all the way if you don't want to," she said. "My place is just over there."

"We'll come with you," CJ said. "Dad promised your mom. Besides, that PI guy knows where you live. If he's really working for Intergang, and they're trying to find superkids, he knows you're Ben's sister. If he grabbed you, they'd find out pretty fast that you're one of us."

"I hadn't thought of that," Ally said. "You're right. Especially with that mess —" She nodded at the line of unmoving cars. "The police would have a hard time trying to find me."

"That's what I was thinking," Linda said. They wove their way between the vehicles to the opposite side of the street. "Once you're inside, lock your door and windows, and make sure you don't open it for anyone; okay? I've got a kind of bad feeling about all this."

"I will," Ally said. "Besides, if something does happen, I can call you guys for help."

"Yeah," CJ said. "Make sure you do. Dad says Intergang was a pretty nasty bunch. One of their people almost killed *him*. If it hadn't been for Mom, he'd be dead now."

Ally nodded vigorously. "I will. I promise."

They approached the gate. The normally locked gate stood slightly ajar, and the three children entered the complex. Ally led the way to the building in which the apartment where she and her mother lived was located. Linda and CJ followed her up the flight of steps to the second floor and waited while she took out her key.

CJ lifted his glasses and x-rayed the inside of the apartment.

"Looks like it's clear," he said.

Ally glanced at him in surprise. "What did you do?"

"He x-rayed it," Linda said. "Try it, like he showed you before. It's a good way to be sure there's nobody waiting for you before you go into a room."

"I didn't think of that," Ally said. She squinted at the door. "Wow! I can see everything!"

"Yeah," Linda said. "It's cool, isn't it? If somebody knocks, make sure you do that before you open the door. I've got a kind of creepy feeling about you staying here alone."

"I've done it lots of times," Ally said. She hesitated, as though she was about to say something, but apparently changed her mind. "If I get scared, I promise I'll call you."

"Okay," CJ said. He was aware of an odd reluctance to leave, probably, he thought, because Linda was nervous. She seemed to have a funny way of being right about stuff like this. "If you get even a little nervous, call us right away. Don't wait. Like my Dad always says, I'd rather get called for a false alarm than not be there when something is really wrong, and I can get here pretty fast if I need to."

"Okay," Ally said. "I promise I will." She smiled. "I'm not used to people worrying about me, except for my mom. Thanks for caring, guys. I really appreciate it." She opened the door and stepped inside. "I'll see you tomorrow — and I'll be all right. Really."

It took a few more minutes, but Linda and CJ finally descended the flight of steps and started back toward the Kent townhouse. The immense traffic jam hadn't decreased in the slightest and they crossed the street, weaving their way through stationary traffic. The scent of exhaust fumes made Linda wrinkle her nose and CJ had to admit that it smelled pretty bad. Why didn't people just turn off their motors since it was obvious that no one was going anywhere very soon?

The sun was setting behind the buildings and dusk was creeping over the city by the time they climbed the steps to the Hyperion Avenue townhouse. CJ glanced at his watch. It was past

seven, and the sunlight was definitely fading fast. None of the streetlights had come on, of course, and what little light illuminated the street and sidewalks came mostly from the headlights of the unmoving vehicles in the streets. Every now and then they would inch forward a little and then stop again, and CJ could hear the sounds of voices near and far as people shouted at each other, argued and cursed the circumstances and other drivers. The babble was punctuated frequently by the blasts from car horns under the hands of angry and frustrated men and women trapped in the citywide jam.

CJ opened the door for Linda, followed her inside, and unlocked the inner door. "Mom; we're back!"

"In here, CJ!" his mother's voice called. "Come on in and help put the food on the table! Your Aunt Lucy is here, and is having dinner with us."

Linda and CJ looked at each other and headed for the kitchen. The triplets were in the living room, and toys of all kinds lay around on the carpet. Wyatt and Marta were evidently attempting to entertain the three with only partial success. Two coloring books and several broken crayons lay abandoned on the floor and Linda and CJ picked their careful way through the debris, their eyes unhampered by the fact that the living room was only dimly lit via the fading sunset, the glow of headlights through the living room window, and a single flashlight in Wyatt's hands. From behind them came a loud metallic banging noise and CJ winced, hastily tuning out the sound, even as he glanced over his shoulder. Billy had somehow acquired an aluminum pan lid and a large metal cooking spoon, and was banging them vigorously together as he marched around the living room to the endangerment of the furniture. Fortunately, his mother had long ago learned the wisdom of putting breakable things out of reach, but it was amazing, CJ thought, how much damage little kids could cause, even when it seemed like there was nothing within reach that they could wreck. Linda pushed through the kitchen door and CJ followed, letting it swing shut quickly and muffling the noise somewhat, to his vast relief.

"What's going on out there?" his mother demanded. A pair of flashlights illuminated the kitchen to some degree, and by the dim light he could see that she and CJ's Aunt Lucy were to all appearances putting together a salad. His aunt was a considerably better cook than Lois, but the fact that Lois was involved in the process put CJ instantly on his guard. Nevertheless, he kept his inevitable misgivings to himself, choosing instead to answer his mother's question. "Billy's marching around with a pan lid and spoon."

"Well, get their high chairs set up so we can get them under control," Lois said. "I can't take that for long."

"Okay," CJ said. "Come on, Linda. You get the plates and cups. I'll get the spoons."

"CJ, why don't you get a couple more flashlights so we don't have to eat in the dark?" his mother said. "Linda can take care of the high chairs. That battery-powered lantern your dad bought for emergencies is on one of the shelves in the basement. Do you think you can find it?"

"Sure," CJ said. He opened the door to the basement stairs. "Be right back."

By the time he returned, holding the lighted lantern as well as three flashlights that he had tucked under his arm, Linda had finished putting out the plates, cups and utensils for the triplets. His Aunt Lucy had finished the salad and turned to take it into the dining room. "Hold a flashlight for me, so I can see where I'm going, would you, CJ? I can hardly see my hands in front of my face in there."

"Sure." CJ set the lantern down on the sink board, handed two of the flashlights to Linda and switched on the remaining one.

In the living room, something crashed, accompanied by the

sound of breakage. CJ lifted his glasses and looked through the wall. One of the tall lamps had tipped over and the glass front of the display case, which held his parents' journalism awards, now had a large, star-shaped hole in it. Great. Just great.

"Mom!" Marta shouted. "Billy broke the Kerth case!"

"Oh, wonderful," his mother said, sounding resigned. "Is he all right?"

"He's fine but there's glass all over the rug!"

"Bring the kids in here so nobody gets cut," Lois said. "I'll take care of it in a minute."

"I'll get it," CJ said. "I can sweep up the worst of it and use the Dust Buster to get the little pieces." He pushed open the swinging door for his aunt, followed her through, set the flashlight on the table and went to the hall closet for the cleaning tools. Lucy went to pick up Rachel, while Wyatt and Marta shepherded the two other children away from the broken glass and into the kitchen.

It was while he was sucking up the tiny fragments of glass with the battery-powered vacuum and checking with his super vision to be sure he'd gotten it all that he heard Ally's voice in his head. 'CJ? Marta? Linda? Can anyone hear me?'

When Linda and CJ finally left, Ally closed the apartment door and fastened the lock. She started toward the kitchen and paused. Linda and CJ were certainly worrying too much, but a fragment of doubt remained. After a moment, she went back to the door, slid the chain lock into place and pushed the sliding bolt closed as well. That should do it, she thought. Unless someone rammed his shoulder against the door, no one was coming through it.

CJ had said to lock the windows as well. Well, he was the senior superkid, she guessed: sort of his dad's second in command, if you didn't count Mrs. Kent, so she probably should do what he said about the windows. The situation out there wasn't ordinary, and CJ was right. If the bad guys suspected that Ben might be one of the superkids, then they knew she might be, too, and if they were looking for their own Superman, they wouldn't leave her alone just because she was a girl.

Ally grinned a little to herself. She'd reasoned CJ was second in command if you didn't count Mrs. Kent, but there was no way you couldn't count her. Somehow Ally had the feeling that Lois Lane Kent was probably tougher than her husband. She gave you that impression just by walking into the room. Marta, too. Her new friend from school was a lot like her mom. Ally had developed a liking and healthy respect for both of them pretty quickly.

She went through the apartment, carefully locking every window, and pulled the shades as well. Only one of them opened on a fire escape, but that meant that somebody who was really determined could make it to her window, and get in. Glass wasn't going to stop someone who didn't care what kind of damage he did.

Finished, she walked slowly back into the living room and picked her backpack up from the floor. At least all her homework was done. She couldn't watch TV with the blackout, and it was dark inside with all the shades pulled. Besides, the sun was close to setting, and it was going to get dark outside pretty quickly. Still, she didn't have much trouble seeing in the dark, unless it was pitch black. She wondered if that was part of her burgeoning super powers — the ability to see so well in near blackness. Most other people couldn't see anywhere near as well at night as she could, so it probably was.

Well, she should probably get herself something to eat. She couldn't cook anything, since the electricity for the stove was out, too, but she could make sandwiches, and if she ate something, maybe the slightly nervous feeling in the pit of her stomach would go away. Usually, she didn't get nervous over nothing, but

CJ and Linda had been worried about her, and now that she was alone, and had had time to think, some of their misgivings seemed to be playing around in her mind as well.

Slowly and deliberately, Ally found bread in the breadbox and hunted around in the refrigerator for the mayo and sliced turkey, tomatoes and lettuce, and proceeded to assemble two sandwiches. She poured herself a glass of milk and sat down at the counter, trying to reason herself out of the completely baseless nervousness that seemed to have taken possession of her.

If Mom's PI, Graham Jersey, really was working for Intergang... The thought seemed to pop up suddenly as she chewed and swallowed. That meant he had known for two years exactly where she was. Maybe, she considered, he had been using his position to keep an eye on her, too. What if Intergang was watching her to see if she developed Superman's powers? Could that be why he had introduced himself to Tanya Myers that afternoon, not long after Ally had been returned to her?

Mom hadn't found him. He had contacted her, and suggested that he might be able to find Ben. Why hadn't she thought of that before? With what Superman, CJ, Lois and James Olsen had found, it now seemed awfully suspicious.

Suddenly, the back of her neck was prickling. There was danger in the air, and this time she knew it wasn't her imagination. What was it that Superman had said? Sometimes the noble families of Krypton produced someone with mental talents that were better than the regular ones. Linda Lennox, whose father was probably also Lord Nor, was one such person, and she, Ally, was another. Linda had been worried, and the sense of threat in the air was making Ally's hair want to rise on her head. What if this strange telepathic ability was somehow warning her that she was in real danger? What if Intergang had decided that, since they couldn't find Ben, now was the time to grab her, when the city was practically paralyzed, everyone was distracted and the chances of reaching the police for help was close to zero?

She set the second sandwich carefully back on its plate and went to the door. Cautiously, she activated her x-ray vision, sweeping the area beyond the door, looking for anything or anyone that might be a danger to her. Nothing.

But the sense of danger was growing every second. Quickly, she turned and x-rayed the fire escape.

There wasn't anyone there, either, but something was definitely wrong. She went to the window that opened out on the main part of the apartment complex, peeked around the shade and scanned the area below her.

There was someone down there, all right, moving quietly across the compound. It could, of course, be simply a resident of the apartment complex, but something in her seemed to zero in on him as the source of the danger.

Her new knowledge of her super powers made her clumsy, but after some mental fumbling, she managed to focus in on his face with her telescopic vision.

Graham Jersey. She had seen him several times over the last couple of years, and she would know him anywhere. Quickly, she scanned his person with her x-ray vision. He was carrying a handgun, and in his pocket was a pair of handcuffs.

Did private investigators carry handcuffs? They didn't make arrests, did they? Still, they might carry them, and it was possible that he was carrying them for a legitimate purpose, but she didn't like it.

Ally made up her mind. 'CJ?' she called mentally, praying that she was doing this right. 'Marta? Linda? Can anyone hear me?'

The acknowledgement was instantaneous, and from three different minds at once. 'Ally?' 'What's wrong?' 'What's the matter?'

'Graham Jersey is climbing the steps to my apartment. He's got a pair of handcuffs in his pocket, and —'

'I'll be right there,' CJ's voice said. 'Open the fire escape window. Quick.'

'Who's there?' CJ's voice sounded like a younger version of his father's, but the young male voice that almost overlapped CJ's startled Ally. It was familiar, although she had never heard it quite this way before. It was the voice of her brother, Ben. And she hadn't heard it with her ears.

'Ben?' she whispered, aiming her thoughts directly at the 'voice,' just as CJ had told her to do earlier during the practice session.

'Ally?'

The scuff of footsteps on the steps outside brought her abruptly back to the present. 'Yeah. Someone's coming. I'll call you back. Listen for me!' The faintest of thumps on the fire escape outside her bedroom window sent her hurrying into the room to unlock the window and push the pane of glass upward. With a faint gust of air, CJ whisked through the opening and turned to shut and lock it behind him.

CJ thrust the Dust Buster unceremoniously back into the hall closet and went up the stairs in a rush. He'd been thinking about this kind of scenario for some time. What would he do if he had to actually make an appearance before he was ready? What if he had to be Superboy, and what if someone saw him in spite of his attempt to remain unseen? — and he had come to some conclusions.

Marta's voice echoed in his head as he went through the door into his room and yanked out his "preparations" — a pair of blue jeans and a Superman T-shirt.

'What are you going to do?'

Quickly, he ran a comb through his hair, forcing it into the same style worn by his father with a dab of hair gel, and dropped his glasses onto his dresser.

He was out the window ten seconds after he had run up the stairs and streaking as fast as he could fly toward Ally's apartment. In three terse sentences, he told Marta what to say to their mother.

'CJ!' It was his mom's voice. Evidently Marta didn't need to relay the message. 'Be careful; you hear me?'

'I will,' he told her. 'I promise!'

It took less than a minute to reach the apartment complex where Ally lived, and his mind was whirling with speculation and conjecture as he landed on the fire escape platform outside her window. Someone else, another half-Kryptonian, had picked up on their long distance conversation. Who had that voice belonged to? Could it possibly be Ally's missing brother? But the question would have to wait. Ally slid the window open and he whisked through it, to land silently on the cheap shag carpet of the bedroom.

Ally's eyes were wide as he touched down. CJ looked quickly through the bedroom wall and the door, in time to see the PI raise his hand to knock.

"Is that him?" he whispered.

Ally nodded silently.

CJ scanned the man from head to toe, just as his dad had taught him to, making sure that the only weapon he carried was the handgun. No glowing green rocks could be seen, and he nodded to her. "Go ask him who it is," he said softly. "Remember, you're just a regular girl. Nothing special, except for your Tae Kwon Do training. He's going to want to come in, but since your mom isn't here, you don't want to let him in. Let's see what he does. I'll be right here, okay?"

"Okay," Ally whispered. She left the room and crossed to the front door. CJ watched through the wall.

She stopped at the door. "Who is it?"

"It's me — your mom's PI. Graham Jersey."

"What do you want?"

"Can you open the door, Allynda?"

"I'm not allowed to let people in when my mom isn't here."

"This is important," the man said. "I need to talk to you."

"We are talking," Ally said. "What do you want to tell me?"

"I've found your brother. I know where he is. Now open the door!"

"I can't," Ally said. "I'll get in trouble."

"I need to hurry, before your dad moves him again."

"Then call the police and tell them!" Ally said. "What do you expect me to do?"

Silence. Then the man turned and ran down the steps. CJ followed him with his enhanced vision, until it became obvious that the PI was rounding the building and heading for the fire escape.

"Where is he?" Ally spoke behind him and he almost jumped.

"He's climbing the fire escape," CJ said. "Come on."

Together, they moved to the living room, and CJ unlocked the door. "Go out there and lock the door. Let's watch what he does when he finds out you aren't here."

"Where's your dad?" Ally asked.

"I don't know. I can sort of feel his mind, but it's just a sort of 'ghost' feeling. I think he's somewhere south of us, a long way off, and doing something important. There must be a lot of accidents tonight."

"Yeah." Ally opened the outer door and stepped out, CJ beside her, and she turned to lock it behind them. From the bedroom, CJ heard the unmistakable sound of breaking glass.

"He's breaking in!" Ally said.

"Well," CJ said, "I guess that settles it."

"It sure does!" Ally clenched her jaw. "What now?"

CJ bit his lip. "I'm not sure." "Mom!" he said, mentally, "that Jersey guy is breaking into Ally's apartment. What should we do?"

'Bring Ally here,' his mother's voice directed at once. 'Then you go back and watch him. He'll probably search the apartment and that will take a few minutes. When he leaves, follow him and see where he goes.'

"Did you hear that?" CJ asked.

Ally nodded.

"Okay, remember how I showed you. We're going to float straight up and then we're going to fly. Just do what I do." CJ reached out a hand and grasped Ally's. Together, they rose silently into the dark night sky.

CJ set a quick pace toward the townhouse, and Ally kept up with him. During the short flight, he asked, "Did you hear that other voice when you called me?"

"That was Ben," Ally said.

"Ben? Your brother?"

"Yes," Ally said. "He's here, in Metropolis. He's somewhere that way." She pointed north and east with her free hand. "I need to find him!"

CJ thought that over. He couldn't do two things at once, but they had to deal with that, too. "Tell my mom," he said. "She'll know what to do, but be careful. My Aunt Lucy is there, and she doesn't know about Dad and us kids."

Ally nodded. They began to drop, and CJ brought them down to a gentle landing in the small back yard of the Kent townhouse. "You're getting better all the time," he said. "Go on in. Mom's waiting for you at the back door. I need to get back and see where Mr. Jersey goes."

"Lois, are you coming in to eat?" Lucy asked, pushing open the swinging door to the kitchen. "I'm not sure, but I think the casserole is about room temperature."

"Just a minute," Lois said. "I'll be right there." She waited until Lucy closed the door and opened the back door to allow Ally into the house. "Are you all right, Ally?"

The black girl nodded. "CJ's on his way back to my place."

"I know," Lois said. "He'll find out where the guy goes. Come on in. We're having dinner in a few minutes."

"I already had a sandwich," Ally told her. "Are you sure you don't mind if I stay here?"

"Of course not!" Lois was slightly outraged at the idea. "Your safety is a lot more important than anything else! Come on into the other room. We've got a bit more light in there." She turned her head. 'Linda, as soon as Lucy isn't looking, warm up the casserole, would you? Not too much, but at least so it isn't cold!'

'I just did,' Linda's mental voice said. 'Is Ally all right?'

"I think so. Try to keep track of CJ, would you? I'm getting a headache with all this telepathic stuff!"

Ally giggled, sounding a little nervous. "I know what you mean. It's like exercising a muscle I've never used before."

"You know, I think you're right," Lois said. She pushed open the swinging door and gestured Ally through. "Come on in, honey. You can stay here as long as you need to."

"CJ told me to tell you," Ally said, "when I called him for help a little while ago, Ben overheard. He's somewhere not very far away." She pointed. "That way, I'm pretty sure."

"He's here? In Metropolis? You're sure?"

Ally nodded.

Lois bit her lip. "How far away do you think he is?"

Ally shrugged nervously. "I'm not sure. Not very far, I think. Maybe a few miles."

"Can you talk to him?"

"I can try," Ally said. She swallowed. "I can hardly believe all this."

"Me, either," Lois said. "Try to talk to him a little. See if he knows where he is." She glanced around as Lucy, accompanied by Jonny and Jimmy, came down the stairs. "Go on in the living room where you won't be disturbed; all right?"

Ally nodded and obeyed. Lois turned to her sister. "Ally's a neighbor. Her mom is working tonight, and she came over here because she was nervous, all by herself with the power out."

"I don't blame her a bit," Lucy said. "Should we offer her some dinner?"

"She says she already ate." Lois sat down in her usual spot. The triplets were spaced out with Rachel between her and Linda, baby Lucy between Linda and Marta, and Billy between Marta and Lois's sister. Fortunately, at nearly two-and-a-half, the trio were fairly adept at handling their own food, albeit a little messy.

"Wow," Lucy said, "you've really turned this stuff into a science."

"You learn," Lois said. "It's a good thing Clark babysat a lot when he was a teenager, though. At least in the beginning."

Her sister laughed.

Lois concentrated on serving the meal to everyone. The casserole was warm, and she saw Lucy raise her eyebrows when she took her first bite. "I need to get some of these casserole dishes if they keep food warm this well. Where did you get them?"

"I think we picked them up at a garage sale," Lois said mendaciously. Faintly, in the back of her mind, she could feel a barely discernable tickle, which she thought might be Ally's voice, but she couldn't hear the words.

"That's too bad," Lucy said. "This is a pretty good casserole. I'd like the recipe."

"I'll ask Clark for it," Lois said. "I sure hope the power comes back pretty soon. This is a real mess."

"So do I," Lucy said. "I'd like to call Jay, but we got rid of the land line phones a couple of months ago. We just use our cell phones, and they're not working."

"I guess that's one advantage the old fashioned phones have," Lois said. "But how often do you get a power outage this widespread?"

"True," Lucy said. She glanced around as if just noticing. "Where's CJ?"

"He's supposed to watch the Watson family's house while they're on vacation," Marta said. "He went to check on it and feed their dogs. He'll be back after while."

"He should have done it before dinner," Lucy said.

"He forgot 'til a few minutes ago," Marta said. "They've got two dogs and a cat, and two birds. He promised to take care of them."

Lois reflected that Marta's excuse was a lot better than Clark's excuses used to be, back in the beginning. She supposed that was probably a good thing, although teaching her kids to fib wasn't high on her priorities. Still, it was in a good cause. She took her seat without commenting and began to work on the salad. It was a pretty good salad, she thought. Lucy somehow had managed to learn the art of cooking, and she briefly envied her sister. Still, if it came down to a choice of cooking or hot-wiring a car, she would choose the latter. There was more use for that particular skill in her profession, and her husband could cook better than just about anyone else she knew, with the possible exception of his mother.

She resisted the urge to peek into the living room. There was nothing to see, after all. If Ally was talking to her brother, she wouldn't be able to tell by looking, and trying to eavesdrop would be rude.

Jimmy looked over his shoulder, toward the living room. "Who's Ally talking to?" he inquired.

"Never mind," Lois said, hastily. "Finish your dinner. I want to serve the ice cream in the freezer before it melts."

Leaving Ally in the back yard of the townhouse, CJ leaped into the air and set a swift pace back to the apartment complex.

It had been bare minutes, and Graham Jersey had not finished searching the apartment, he saw when he arrived. CJ remained stationary in the air, hovering invisibly as the man finished checking the coat closet and under Tanya Myers' bed with his flashlight. He could hear the private investigator swearing softly under his breath.

Finally Jersey appeared to give up. He opened the front door, shining his light here and there, covering the landscaped area below him, and then hurried down the steps to the ground floor. He stood indecisively for a moment, flashing his light around, paying particular attention to the dense bushes that grew close to the building, as if expecting Ally to be hiding there, but, of course, he found nothing. At last he gave up, with a muffled cussword, and strode toward the gate. CJ followed, floating two hundred feet above his head, secure in the knowledge that even if the private investigator looked up he wouldn't see anything. The darkness was intense. The layer of clouds that had covered the sky since this morning obscured even the stars, which would have been visible without the city's normal light pollution. Jersey didn't look up, however. He stepped out of the apartment grounds onto the sidewalk and turned left, moving at a businesslike pace, never glancing at the rows of stopped vehicles that still jammed the street.

CJ wondered how he planned on getting anywhere in the massed traffic, but the mystery was soon solved. A golf cart was parked in a nearby lot and he headed for it without hesitation. For an instant, CJ wondered why he hadn't chosen a motorcycle, but it only took a second to figure out the reason. Assuming that he had captured Ally and managed to handcuff her — or even if he had just persuaded her to come with him — transporting her on the back seat of a motorcycle would have been pretty impractical, to say the least. A golf cart could travel in places that the larger automobiles couldn't, too. This one trundled along at about fifteen miles an hour on the sidewalk. The occasional pedestrian got quickly out of his way, some of them with less than kind

remarks, but no one disputed his right to be on the sidewalk. CJ figured the guy felt pretty safe. Even the police would have difficulty getting around very fast in the jammed traffic. The vehicles were still inching forward a little bit at a time, and as he flew, CJ noted that many cars had been parked along the street and in roadside parking lots, alleys and anywhere else that offered a clear spot, legal or not, and simply left. He could hardly blame the drivers. Sitting in a car for hours, burning up gas to no purpose, would have to be pretty exasperating.

After perhaps twenty-five minutes or so, Graham Jersey turned down an alleyway, maneuvering past parked cars along one side, and still CJ followed. The private investigator was obviously heading somewhere specific. Maybe he would be able to find out more about the mysterious Graham Jersey and who he really worked for, CJ thought. If the man were indeed working for Intergang, CJ's mom and dad would know what to do.

The cart emerged onto the neighboring street and headed south. In a very few minutes they entered a section of town where CJ had never been.

It looked like a pretty upscale part of the business section of town, he thought, taking in the businesses that lined the street. He spotted two jewelry stores with mannequins wearing a small fortune in gems around their necks. The doors of the establishments, and the windows in which they were displayed, were protected by heavy metal bars, and, CJ suspected, equally heavy duty alarm systems.

There was a very snooty-looking clothing store as well, and one of the biggest drugstores he'd ever seen. There was a theater, and a fancy-looking restaurant, as well as an establishment that had to be a nightclub. Oddly enough, it seemed to still have customers, and as CJ got closer, he saw that pale light illuminated the windows, and the strains of music from what must be a live band floated on the night air, along with the laughter and conversation of quite a few people. Across the street, about half a block further on, a police car was parked at the curb and two police officers were sitting in the front seat, watching the line of slowly creeping traffic. From the conversation that CJ overheard, it appeared that the men were keeping an eye on the high-end establishments in the general area in the eventuality that some of Metropolis's less upstanding citizens might attempt to take advantage of the current situation. CJ figured that it was a pretty good bet that someone would try.

The music from the nightclub became louder as two persons pushed their way through the front doors. The place was definitely open, CJ thought. Maybe they hadn't needed to close. With music and dancing and live entertainment, even if their sound equipment wouldn't work, it was probably a pretty good idea for the place to stay open. With nowhere else to go, people were bound to hang around and spend money.

Graham Jersey piloted his little cart through the space between the nightclub and the building beside it. CJ followed, letting the man put a little more distance between them. Jersey came to a stop in the narrow alley and turned off the engine. CJ moved a little closer, watching him.

Jersey got out of the cart, walked around it and continued on another fifteen feet before he stopped by a door that broke the solid, featureless side of the building. Without hesitation, he knocked once and then twice more in quick succession.

The door opened and a voice said, "Where's the girl?"

"She wouldn't let me in," Jersey said.

"Why didn't you break in, you idiot?"

"I did. While I was coming in the back, she must have gone out the front."

"Didn't you look for her?"

"Sure, I looked! She must have taken off like a rabbit!"

"Well, then, I guess we're going to have to ask her mommy where she'd go," the voice said. CJ pricked up his ears.

Ally's mother? Could this possibly be the nightclub where Ally's mom worked? CJ settled onto the roof and peered down through the ceiling at the two men as they walked deeper into the building.

A quick sweep of the building with his x-ray vision told him that his analysis of the situation of the nightclub had been fairly accurate. The overhead lights were pretty dim, but they were glowing. They must, CJ thought, have some kind of emergency generator or something, and reddish candles flickered in the center of every table. The room was crowded with well-dressed men and women. A band played in one corner and women in abbreviated costumes that made him open his eyes a little circulated about the room, carrying drinks and snacks to the customers. A counter in one corner walled off an area where stemmed glasses were stacked in a precarious fashion, to his youthful eyes, and many bottles displaying labels that he guessed were of various alcoholic beverages, were stored against the wall and beneath the counter. Tanya Myers, dressed in black slacks and a white shirt, and sporting a tie, was behind the counter, preparing drinks for the customers.

Well, that made sense. Ally had said that her mom was a bartender. The fact that she was a bartender here, in this particular club, was a pretty interesting coincidence.

Not that he believed for a moment that it was any such thing.

As CJ watched, a man clad in a tuxedo, just like the one wrapped in a clear plastic storage bag in his dad's closet, approached Tanya, leaned close to her ear and whispered something. CJ couldn't hear what it was amid all the chatter in the room, but Tanya nodded and beckoned to someone — a young man in an outfit similar to her own — to take her place. Then she followed the tuxedo-clad man from the room.

CJ followed them with his x-ray vision, trying to tune out the music and chatter of voices from the cocktail lounge. As they moved farther from the loudest source of the noise, CJ found that he could more effectively filter out the extraneous sounds.

Tanya followed her guide down a short hallway and into a room that looked like a very fancy office to CJ. There was a desk that was a lot bigger than the one in his dad's den at home, and even he could tell that the paintings on the wall, and the various decorations, were expensive. Graham Jersey was there, as well as another man who was sitting at the desk. Tanya's guide shut the door behind him, locked it and stood with his back to it.

The one sitting behind the broad desk spoke. "Tanya, I think you know Graham Jersey. You hired him to find your son, two years ago. Mr. Jersey went to your apartment a little while ago. He talked to your daughter, who was very inhospitable to him."

Tanya looked back and forth between the men, frowning slightly. "Why would you want to talk to Ally, Mr. Jersey? She isn't allowed to let anyone into the apartment when I'm not there."

"So she told Mr. Jersey." The man behind the desk put his hands together and steepled his fingers. "Since she wouldn't open the door, he found it necessary to come in by the back way, but your daughter was gone. Where would she go?"

"Why do you want to know?" Tanya asked, and CJ thought she sounded slightly suspicious.

The man standing in front of the door spoke up. "Answer the question, Tanya. It isn't healthy to upset Mr. Church."

The name sounded familiar. CJ focused his x-ray vision on the man identified as "Mr. Church," looking him over carefully. Where had he seen that narrow, handsome face before?

Then he had it. This was Bill Church Junior, the son of the man who had once been the head of Intergang, before he had been sent to prison, along with his son. The older Bill Church had died in prison several years ago, according to the information CJ had found on the internet, but his son was still alive and out of jail, and CJ was willing to bet his rock collection that the guy

wasn't up to anything good.

Bill Church held up his hand, with a faint smile. "Johnny, Tanya is a loyal employee. I'm sure she'll be willing to help us. She'd want her little girl to have all the advantages that she's never been able to give her since her divorce. Think of that, Tanya. If you help us, you'll never have to worry about money again, for the rest of your life, and neither will your daughter."

"What do you want?" Tanya Myers didn't sound particularly happy about the offer.

"Let me tell you a story," Bill Church said. "Why don't you sit down? I'm sure you're tired after an evening standing behind that bar in those heels. Sit down and rest your feet."

"I'll stand, thank you."

"Sit down," the man at the door said in uncompromising tones.

Mr. Church shook his head. "If you want to stand, you may. I just wanted you to be comfortable. Anyway, the story. You remember what happened in Metropolis, fourteen years ago, Tanya. The New Kryptonians invaded us and when they left, they left behind a legacy. They left children."

"That's ridiculous," Tanya said.

"No, I don't think it is. The government searched for them for a while, until Superman stopped the search — but those children have, or will have, Superman's powers. Your son and daughter were born nine months after the New Kryptonian invasion. If Allynda is one of them, she'll have a brilliant future as my employee. I'm sure you want to help my company, considering what that will mean for you. And what it will mean for you if you don't." The last sentence was spoken in a far different tone than the preceding ones. Bill Church leaned forward. "Where would your daughter go, Tanya?"

"I don't know," Tanya said. "But your story's crazy. Ally isn't some strange super-human. She's just an ordinary girl."

"Tanya, Tanya, this isn't the time to be stubborn," Mr. Church said. "We'll make that determination, and even if you don't tell us, we'll find her. It would be a lot easier if you just told us the truth, however. Where would she go?"

"How many times do I have to tell you, I don't know!" Tanya said, angrily. CJ could hear her heartbeat, loud and fast to his ears. The noise in the cocktail lounge had faded completely from his awareness as he focused in on the drama in the office. He could tell that Tanya Myers was afraid, but she wasn't going to betray Ally to these men. CJ bit his lip, wondering what to do.

"Well," Mr. Church said, "I guess we'll have to convince you, won't we? Johnny doesn't like to hurt people, but he's very good at it. Johnny, why don't you show Tanya why refusing to answer my questions is so foolish?"

Johnny's lips spread in a cheerful grin. "I thought you'd never ask, Mr. Church." He stepped forward and grasped Tanya's wrist with one hand. Ally's mother tried to jerk her arm free and then gave a startled scream as Johnny seized her first finger with the other hand and bent it sharply backward. "Shall I break it, Mr. Church?"

"Only if she won't answer my question," Bill Church said mildly. "Where would your daughter go, Tanya?"

"I don't know!" Tanya Myers said. CJ could see her grit her teeth, knowing what was coming next.

"That isn't the answer I want," Bill Church said, shaking his head mournfully. "Go ahead, Johnny."

Tanya screamed as Johnny bent her finger relentlessly backward, but CJ didn't wait. He wasn't as fast or as strong as his father, but the difference didn't really matter in any significant way. Linda had said that he was strong enough to perform rescues like Superman, and she had been right.

CJ whisked from the roof and an instant later the window of the office smashed inward as he entered through it. A decisive shove sent Johnny back against the wall hard enough to knock

the air out of him. Graham Jersey jumped forward, and met a punch that sent him to the floor.

Bill Church had half-risen from his chair, but CJ turned to glare at him. "Sit down!" He was astonished at how threatening his voice sounded. He wasn't normally either aggressive or intimidating but his anger at what these men had tried to do to Tanya, and what they intended for Ally, made up for that.

Bill Church sat down.

CJ turned to Tanya Myers, who was staring at him and clutching her hand. "Are you all right, Miss?"

It was obvious that she didn't recognize him. She nodded and closed her mouth.

"They were hurting you," CJ said. He turned to Bill Church. "I saw and heard everything that was going on in here. I think the police might be very interested in all of this."

Bill Church stared at him. "Who the hell are you?"

CJ folded his arms in an imitation of his father's classic Superman pose. "I'm Superman's son."

"One of the half-Kryptonians," Bill Church said. "So it is true!"

CJ laughed. "Don't kid yourself, Mr. Church; I'm not half anything. Superman is my father and Ultra Woman is my mother. Kryptonians aren't human, in case you hadn't noticed." He smiled his father's smile at the astonished crime lord. "Now, there are a couple of police officers just about a block away who might want to see all this, so why don't I make sure that you stick around while I go get one of them?"

Tying the three men with their own belts was the matter of only a few seconds. The belts probably wouldn't hold them for too long, but CJ didn't plan on taking more than a few minutes. Leaving Tanya to watch the trio, CJ vanished out the window and headed straight for the place where he had seen the police car and its occupants.

It was still there. CJ had been considering how best to get their cooperation with minimal skepticism, and it seemed to him that the best way would be to make sure that there was no doubt in their minds as to who he was.

Accordingly, he dropped out of the sky to a landing in front of the car, making sure they saw him. Once his feet were firmly on the pavement, he stepped around to the driver's side and knocked politely on the glass of the window.

After a startled second, the officer behind the wheel rolled it down. "Yeah?"

"I hate to bother you, Officers," CJ said mildly, "but I need your help."

The man was staring at him. "You aren't Superman," he said after a pause. "Who are you?"

"I'm Superman's son," CJ said. "I just stopped a man from breaking a woman's fingers, over at the Silver Spoon. Can you help me?"

The two officers looked at each other, and then the older man nodded. "Sure. Come on, Al." He opened the door and got out, followed by his partner.

As CJ led them across the jammed street toward the club, the younger man asked, "What do we call you, kid?"

"I guess Superboy is probably all right," CJ said. "This way. I went in through a window, since the side door is locked, and I can't go into the cocktail lounge."

Al, the younger cop, laughed. "I guess not. Okay, Superboy, lead on."

It was nearly an hour later before CJ was able to leave.

While the two police officers were taking Tanya's statement and dealing with the arrest of Bill Church Junior and his henchmen, he stood with his arms folded, trying to look unruffled and businesslike. He figured that his dad and mom would expect

it of him. When Tanya finished her statement, Al glanced at Bill Church, who was still sitting in his chair, now confined with a rather more professional set of handcuffs, and grinned. "Bill Church, no less." He'd said that before, with considerable satisfaction. "I'd say that parole violation is going to be the least of his worries after tonight. I guess Superman's kid isn't likely to start small. Nice work, Superboy."

"Thank you, sir," CJ said.

"I didn't know Superman was married," the man added.

"Who's your mom?"

"Ultra Woman is my mother," CJ said.

"Yeah, I guess that would follow," Al said. "We're just about done here. Our backup should be here in a few minutes, if they can make it through that crush outside. Do you need a lift home?"

CJ shook his head. "I have my own transportation," he said.

"Do you need me anymore?"

The older cop looked up from the low-voiced conversation that he was having with Tanya Myers. "I think that will be all. After you sign your statement, you're free to go. How can we get in contact with you, if we need you?"

"Just tell my father," CJ said. "You can probably get in touch with him through Mayor Henderson, or through the Daily Planet."

"Of course." The man looked him over. "You look like your dad," he said after a pause. "You act like him, too. I'm glad you were nearby, tonight."

"So am I," CJ said. "I'm not really supposed to do this stuff until I'm older, but it was an emergency. I couldn't do anything else."

Al laughed. "Yeah," he said. "You do act like your dad. Sign this, and I guess that's all."

CJ took the pen the man held out to him and signed his new alias in the space provided. He carefully wiped the pen with the hem of his shirt to remove his fingerprints from the plastic and handed it and the paper back to the officer.

Al folded the paper and tucked the pen into his pocket.
"Thanks, kid."

He looked around as someone knocked on the door. A voice said, "Mike? Al?"

Al went to open the door and two more uniformed police entered. The older cop, who was evidently Mike, waved at the prisoners. "Here they are, all done up in a package. Superboy, I'd like you to meet Tim Grant and Harry Poole. Guys, this is Superman's son. I get the feeling we're going to be seeing more of him in the future. I guess you can go, now, kid. Are you sure you don't need a ride?"

CJ grinned and lifted from the floor. "I'm sure," he said. "Bye." With that, he whisked out the window.

Behind him, he heard a low whistle from one of the cops. Al's voice spoke, sounding almost awed. "Just like his old man." "Yeah," Mike said.

CJ paused a hundred feet in the air and took a deep, relieved breath. So far, so good. He was going to have to tell his mother what had happened. She and Dad probably wouldn't be too happy that he'd had to show himself, but he was sure they would agree that he couldn't have done anything else. He couldn't have allowed that goon to break Tanya's fingers when he was in a position to help. He really hadn't had a choice, and he'd known it. He guessed he was just lucky that the media hadn't been able to get here in time, or he'd be facing a horde of rapacious newsmen with microphones and videocameras. Speaking of which, he'd better get out of here, just in case.

With a last glance at the Silver Spoon, CJ headed home.

Ally Myers sat down on the sofa in the Kents' living room and closed her eyes so that she could concentrate more easily. 'Ben?' she broadcast. 'Ben, are you there?'

The answer was immediate. ‘Ally?’

‘Yes. Where are you?’

‘I’m not sure,’ her brother’s voice said. ‘We’re somewhere in Metropolis.’

‘We?’

‘Dad and me.’ The impression of anger colored his words. ‘He locked me in, like always.’

‘Are you all right?’ Ally asked. ‘Did he hurt you, after I got away?’

‘Not much,’ Ben’s voice said. ‘He didn’t have enough time. He was scared you’d bring the police.’

‘I did, but you were already gone.’

‘I figured.’ Ben sounded resigned. ‘He’s never going to let me go.’

‘Ben, you can break out. You’re strong enough. We’re —’

‘I can’t. Dad won’t let me go. He says no one will want me if they know my father was Nor.’

So, their dad knew. Once Ben’s powers started to come in, he must have figured it out. ‘He’s lying! I have friends that know about me, and they don’t care. I can fly, Ben! Superman’s son taught me to fly!’

‘Dad has something that makes me weak. He says he’ll use it to keep me weak if I try to get away.’

‘What does it look like?’ she asked.

‘It’s a rock. That green stuff that can hurt Superman. It hurts when he gets it near me.’

‘Where is he now?’

‘I don’t know. He went out a while ago. I don’t know when he’ll be back.’

‘Mom has been hunting for you for two years,’ Ally said. ‘She hired a private detective to find you, but he’s been cheating Mom. Do you still want to get away?’

A surge of hope, swiftly followed by despair. ‘Of course I do! But I can’t!’

‘Yes you can. Keep talking to me. Or sing in your head. I can tell which way to go if you do that. I’m coming to get you out, Ben! Do you hear me? I’ll get you out if it’s the last thing I do!’

‘He’ll catch you again!’

‘No he won’t,’ Ally said. ‘I know some people who can help me. They’ve been trying to find you, too, and they’ll help. You know that rhyme out of Alice in Wonderland that Mom taught us when we were little? Start saying it over and over so I can hear you. Don’t stop; okay?’ “Twas brillig and the slithy toves...” Say it, Ben!

... “Did gyre and gimble in the wabe,” Ben took up the lyrics after a moment. “All mimsy were the borogroves...”

Ally got to her feet and went to the Kent dining room, where the family was having dinner, while Ben’s voice, repeating Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky,” echoed in the back of her mind. “Mrs. Kent?”

Lois Kent was sitting at one end of the table, just finishing her salad. She looked up when Ally spoke. ‘Did you —’

“I know where Ben is,” Ally said. She glanced at Lucy. ‘Could I talk to you somewhere?’

Lois got up quickly, almost knocking her chair over. ‘Come on into the kitchen,’ she said. ‘Excuse me, Luce. This is important.’

As the door closed behind them, Ally spoke quickly. ‘I talked to him. Dad’s still keeping him locked up, and Dad knows about Ben. He’s got a piece of Kryptonite, and —’ She repeated the conversation she had had with her brother. ‘What should I do?’

‘How far away is he?’ Lois didn’t waste time asking unimportant questions.

‘I’m not sure. Not very far — maybe about three or four miles,’ Ally said.

‘Well, we’re not going to get there in the Jeep,’ Lois said. ‘I wonder...’ Ally could almost see the wheels turning in her head

as she paused. ‘Marta?’ she called, ‘are your bicycle tires okay?’

‘My bicycle?’ Marta sounded a little surprised. ‘Sure. It’s fine. Why?’

‘I need to go out for a little while, and I’m going to need it. Lucy, can you watch Jonny and Jimmy, and the Terrible Trio, if Marta helps you?’

Lucy’s voice sounded slightly alarmed. ‘Watch the triplets? I guess so, but what’s going on?’

‘There’s no time right now,’ Lois said. ‘It’s important. Ally and I need to go somewhere right away. I’ll be back as soon as I can.’

‘Well — okay.’ Lucy still sounded doubtful.

‘Marta, you and Wyatt help your Aunt Lucy; all right?’

‘Sure,’ Marta said. ‘Is it about Ben?’

‘Yeah,’ Lois said, pushing through the kitchen door. ‘Come on, Ally. I’ve got to get Marta’s bicycle out of the garage.’

Linda Lennox stepped through the door, after Ally. ‘I’m going too.’

‘Linda, it’s dangerous. Ally’s dad has Kryptonite,’ Lois said in a low voice.

‘Yeah, I heard. I’m still going.’

‘Yeah,’ Wyatt Dillon stepped through after her. ‘So am I. Kryptonite can’t hurt me.’

‘No, kids.’ Lois found herself facing two determined children. ‘You can’t. It’s dangerous.’

Linda Lennox looked her straight in the eye. ‘If you don’t take us, we’ll follow you. I can carry Wyatt. We’re not going to let you and Ally do this alone, and we’re not going to let Mr. Myers get away with Ben again. Let’s hurry. We’re wasting time.’

Now she knew why CJ had bonded with Linda, she thought, looking into the redhead girl’s determined face. Linda was more like her than she had realized at first. And Wyatt was almost glaring at her. Marta’s soul mate was a lot more assertive than she had expected. She met his stare eye to eye, but he didn’t flinch.

‘All right,’ she said finally, ‘you can go. But you do what I tell you. Got it?’

Linda and Wyatt nodded.

It had been a long time since Lois had ridden a bicycle, but the old skill came back quickly.

She took a few minutes to change into a pair of jeans, jogging shoes and a sweatshirt, and to grab the bag that she generally took with her on black bag jobs. It looked like an ordinary purse, and wouldn’t cause suspicion in anyone who saw it, but it had everything in it that she needed for the job.

Linda took charge of the other two. She grasped Wyatt around the waist and rose into the air. Ally followed her, and Lois, looking up, could barely make their shapes out against the dark sky. They moved ahead of her and Ally waved, beckoning her on.

She wove her way through massed traffic until she reached Centennial Park, and from there she was able to cut directly through the park on the walking paths. It was dark enough that she might have become turned around, or lost her guide if Linda hadn’t produced a small penlight, which looked like a tiny star that guided Lois through the darkness.

Emerging on the other side of the park, she walked her bicycle across the street and then rode it down a narrow alley. On the other side, they turned right and, a moment later left, down another, equally narrow, street. The traffic wasn’t particularly dense here, since it wasn’t one of the city’s main arteries, although a number of cars had been pulled to the side of the street and abandoned by their drivers. Occasionally a car crept past, moving slowly on the cracked pavement. Except for her, no pedestrians seemed to be nearby.

Lois stopped. The children, it seemed, had vanished.

Just as she was starting to think that maybe they had left her here to go on the rescue mission by themselves, three dark figures dropped silently out of the sky.

'He's in that apartment house, over there,' Ally's mental whisper informed her, and the girl pointed silently toward a somewhat dilapidated apartment building, a short distance away. 'He says Dad locked him in.'

"Is —" Lois broke off and formed the words in her mind. 'Is he alone, or is your father there?'

Linda turned and looked in the direction of the apartment house. 'He's alone.'

'Good. Let's go. Ally and I are going in. I want you and Wyatt to stay out here and keep watch. Maybe one of you should keep an eye on the front and the other on the back.'

Wyatt and Linda looked at each other, and then nodded. 'We'll go up to the roof,' Linda said. 'That way we can see anyone coming in time to warn you.'

Lois nodded. 'If you see anyone coming, let us know but don't try to stop him by yourselves. Is that clear? If he's got Kryptonite, it could get bad real fast. Especially for you, Linda.'

'I understand,' Linda said. Wyatt nodded.

'All right, then. Go.'

Linda put an arm around Wyatt and lifted off. Lois looked at Ally. 'Are you ready? Does he know we're coming?'

'Yeah. He's locked in a bedroom. It's an inside one, with no windows.'

Lois and Ally crossed the street. Lois stashed Marta's bicycle in the deeper shadow next to the flight of steps leading up to the building's main door and went up the short stairway. The door, understandably at this hour, was locked.

'Can you take a look with your x-ray vision and see if there's any alarm attached to this?' she asked. 'Look for any wires attached to the lock. Anything that doesn't look like part of the lock, itself.'

Ally swallowed and bent over the lock. 'I don't think there is,' she said finally. 'I don't see anything but the lock.'

Well, there probably wasn't anything, Lois thought, hopefully. The section of town was better than Suicide Slum, but it wasn't particularly affluent. She reached in her pocket and took out her trusty lock pick.

The lock was easy to pick. Lois got it open within less than a moment and she eased the door open.

Marta Kent wiped food from the face of the youngest triplet. Rachel was taller than the other two, and wiry, and she squirmed as Marta applied the washcloth to her mouth, forehead and neck.

"How do you get so much goo on you?" Marta asked, more to herself than to Rachel.

Her Aunt Lucy laughed. "I remember you when you were three," she remarked. "I used to wonder the same thing. Then I got married and had your cousins and realized it's a talent all little kids have." She finished washing Billy's face and set him on the floor. "I think it's time we got these three into bed. What do you think?"

Marta glanced at her watch. "It's almost eight, so it's bedtime for them, and Jonny and Jimmy, too." She pinned her younger brothers with a determined glare. "Tomorrow's Friday, so you guys need to go to bed right now. Go on and brush your teeth."

Jimmy stuck out his tongue. "You're not the boss of us," he said.

"She is, right now," Lucy said. "Do what Marta says."

Jonny galloped for the stairs. "Come on, Jimmy! I'll race you!"

Lucy shook her head as the two boys thundered up the stairs, but turned back to Marta. "How about these guys? Do they get a bath before they go to bed?"

"Usually," Marta said, "but they got a bath before dinner, 'cause they were all covered with sand, so I don't think they need another one. We should just get them into their PJs and brush their teeth. Come on, guys, let's go get your night clothes on."

Fortunately, the triplets were cooperative. Marta recalled something her mom had said about three being a very sweet age. That was good, because Marta didn't want to have to chase them down and carry them up the steps. She often cheated a little and used her super powers when she was watching the triplets, even though she was careful that they didn't see what she was doing, but she couldn't do that while her Aunt Lucy was here. As it was, it took both Marta and Lucy almost forty-five minutes to get the three into their pajamas, their teeth brushed and into their beds. Then they had to deal with the requests for water from all three, plus Jimmy's inevitable trip to the bathroom several times before her Aunt Lucy finally laid down the law. Marta was just breathing a sigh of relief when she heard Wyatt's voice in her head.

'Marta!'

'What?'

'I need some help!'

'What's wrong?'

'That Morris Myers guy is here, and he's got all of them!'

'What?'

'I'm the only one he doesn't have! I tried to call your dad, but he can't hear me. He's too far away or something. I need you right now!'

'I'll be right there!'

'Be careful! He's got Kryptonite!'

Marta gulped. 'Okay! Hold on!'

"Marta?" Her Aunt Lucy was watching her. "Is something wrong?"

'Uh —'

"They're in trouble, aren't they?"

'What?'

Lucy shook her head. "You and the kids and Lois have some kind of communication going, haven't you?"

Marta opened her mouth. Lucy smiled a little. "I know about your dad," she said. "I've known for a long time, but I figured if your mom and dad wanted me to know, they'd tell me. Are they in trouble?"

'Yeah. I need to go.'

"Can you call your dad?" Lucy asked.

"Wyatt already tried. He's too far away."

Lucy hesitated. "All right; go. But be careful!"

"I will." Marta headed for the front door, leaving a gust of wind behind her.

Lois eased the door open.

The door opened onto a hallway, from which several doors opened at intervals on both sides. Ally entered at once and went directly to the second door on the left, numbered 103, and looked over her shoulder at Lois. "This is the apartment."

"All right. Keep an eye out for anyone coming." Lois bent quickly over the lock and again employed her lock pick.

The lock snapped open.

"Wow; you're good with that," Ally said.

Lois didn't answer. She eased the door open.

The door opened into a small sitting room. It was dark, except for a tiny light opposite the entrance door, glowing with a green tinge. Ally stopped and took a step back. "I feel funny."

Lois glanced quickly at her. "Go back outside," she said at once. "That's Kryptonite. Find a place to hide and I'll go let Ben out."

Ally backed out the door. Lois pulled it shut behind her and extracted her penlight from the outer pouch of her bag. She flicked it on, shading it with her hand and flashed it around.

The room was probably thirty feet by twenty, and carpeted

with a cheap shag carpet. There was an opening to her left that showed a small, shabby kitchen and a short hallway opening to her right, with a door on each side — probably a bathroom and a closet, she thought, and another door at the end. But from the opposite side of the sitting room was another door, from which the glow of Kryptonite came. Getting closer, Lois realized that the stuff was affixed to the wooden surface by cellophane tape — evidently a crude lock established by Morris Myers to keep his super powered son inside.

Lois strode to the door and ripped the stuff down. She turned at once and began opening the closed doors in the hallway until she located the bathroom. Opening her bag, she found one of the tools she used for safe-cracking, laid the piece of Kryptonite in the sink and proceeded to grind it into tiny pieces of crystalline dust. Kryptonite shattered easily, and Lois had taken to doing this with any she encountered. It had been a long time since she had seen any of the dangerous mineral, but the thought of leaving it around to potentially ambush her husband or children in the future went against the grain. She did her best to make sure that it couldn't.

It took only a moment, and she washed the deadly green dust down the sink. Once dispersed into the sewer system, it would never again pose a threat to anyone.

Finished, she returned to the door that opened from the living room. "Ben?" she called softly.

Silence. Then a young male voice said, "Who's there?"

"My name is Lois Lane," Lois said. "I'm a friend of Ally's. We're here to get you out."

"Where's Ally?"

"I sent her back outside. There was a piece of Kryptonite stuck to your door. I got rid of it." She consciously shifted to telepathic speech. "Ally?"

"Yes?"

"The Kryptonite is gone. Tell Ben who we are."

She sensed Ally's quick comprehension. "These are my friends, Ben. You know who Lois Lane is, don't you? She works for the Daily Planet and is a friend of Superman's. She's been helping to try to find you."

Lois set to work on the lock. There was no key and the door was fastened, but it took less than a minute for the lock to click back. She shoved the door open. "Come out, Ben. Let's get out of here before your dad gets back."

Ally's brother was lying on a cot on the opposite side of the room. A flashlight, lying on the floor, glowed dimly, its batteries obviously almost exhausted, illuminating the nearly bare room. A single, straight-backed chair sat askew in one corner, and there were no windows or other doors. Ben had been literally a prisoner.

Ben sat up and got to his feet, grasping at the bedpost for support. Even in the dimness, Lois could see how thin he was, and she suppressed a surge of anger. Morris Myers must have decided that his son had to be restrained by any means necessary, once he had started to develop his super powers. How could anyone treat his child like this? The boy had grown up as Myers' son — didn't the man have any feeling for him at all? Was it some sick game with a child's life and happiness, simply to spite his former wife and deny her the son she loved, or was there something more sinister behind it? Her investigation into Morris Myers didn't end here, she told herself. The man didn't have any idea what was about to happen to him.

Lois crossed the room, and an instant later Ally was there. Together, they helped Ben to stand.

"Oh, Ben!" Ally's expressive features revealed horror at the appearance of her twin. Lois could understand, but they didn't have the luxury of time at the moment. Morris Myers could return at any moment.

"Come on, kids," she urged. "Let's get out of here. Once

we're safe, you can talk all you want."

Together, Lois and Ally guided Ben from the room. Ben hesitated as they approached the door, obviously afraid of the Kryptonite that had kept him prisoner, but Ally urged him on. "Ms. Lane got rid of it," she said. "Hurry!"

They traversed the outer hallway in a few seconds and stepped out into the warm night air. "Can you carry Ben?" Lois asked. "Or should Linda help you? I can give Wyatt a ride home on Marta's bicycle."

"I'm not sure." Ally hesitated. "I've never done it before. I might drop him."

"Linda," Lois called. "Come help Ally get Ben out of here. Wyatt and I will follow on the bicycle."

With a swoosh of air, Linda Lennox landed beside them. Ben flinched at the sudden arrival, and Lois gripped him around the body a little more firmly. "It's all right. This is Linda. She's like you and Ally."

A car turned the corner, and came sedately toward them down the street. Its headlights washed over them and Lois stood still. Any attempt to help Ben walk down the steps was likely to draw attention.

It came to a stop in front of the apartment house. A short man got out and shut the door of the vehicle behind him. Whistling softly, he came up the steps of the apartment building and stepped past the small group in front of the door. He paused.

"Is something wrong?" he inquired.

"No," Lois said. "I'm just walking some neighborhood kids home."

"Oh." He turned back toward the door. "Don't move," he added.

Lois looked down to see a snub nosed revolver pointed directly at her middle.

"Run, kids!" she commanded.

No one moved. The man's face was an indistinct blur in the darkness, but she could see his teeth as he smiled. "If any of you moves, I'll kill her," he said. "I don't need her."

The passenger door of the car opened and another man got out. His tall figure was an indistinct blur for Lois in the darkness, but Ally gave a shrill gasp. "Daddy!"

Morris Myers came quickly up the steps. He didn't speak. Instead, he reached into his pocket and withdrew something that looked to Lois like a cigar box.

He opened it.

Around her, Ben, Ally and Linda collapsed to the ground, almost before the green glow that emanated from the box was visible.

"That was stupid," The man who held the gun on Lois sounded annoyed. "Now you're going to have to carry them."

"You don't know how dangerous they are," Morris Myers said. "They're superkids. Those two are Nor's kids."

"Get the door open and get 'em inside before anybody sees us." The other man's voice sounded impatient. "We don't have all night."

Morris Myers turned to unlock the door. "It's already unlocked."

"Good. Open it."

Morris Myers did so. Lois's captor gestured with the pistol. "Grab one of 'em and drag 'em inside."

Moving slowly, Lois obeyed. She lifted Linda under the arms and dragged her through the door. 'Stall,' she thought. 'Maybe someone will see us.'

"Get in there!" A sharp shove between her shoulder blades pushed her farther into the vestibule, and she slipped, falling to one knee.

In her mind, she 'heard' Wyatt calling for Superman, and the realization flooded her that she could call her husband for help. 'Cl —'

A sharp blow to the back of her head made stars explode behind her eyes. Then there was nothing.

Marta Kent arrived at the apartment building from which Wyatt's mental touch had called her and she paused in the street, looking around.

Her flying skills were, as yet, not particularly reliable. She could float, but propelling herself through the air was a fairly slow and clumsy process, so she had simply run. She might not be as fast as her father, or CJ, but she was respectably fast, and it had taken only about five minutes for her to traverse the miles between her home and here.

'I'm up here,' Wyatt's mental voice said softly.

She looked up and instantly saw him waving from the top of the building, five stories above. Marta concentrated and felt her feet leave the ground. She floated with commendable speed up to the roof and touched down. "Where are they?"

"Two guys took your mom, Linda, Ally and Ben into the apartment house." Wyatt gestured to the building on which they stood. "I heard Ally call one of them Daddy. I couldn't see much, but he had something that made all three of them collapse, so it must have been Kryptonite."

"Yeah." Marta didn't waste time discussing that. "Just a minute. I'm going to look and see where they are."

Wyatt was silent as she focused her x-ray vision on the building under their feet. It didn't take long. Using her super-hearing as well as her enhanced vision capabilities, she quickly located her mother, Linda and the other two.

They were in one of the apartments and Lois and Marta's friends were sprawled on the floor, unmoving. She might have thought they were dead if she hadn't been able to hear their hearts beating. Two men were also there, she saw, and one of them, who must be Morris Myers, was holding an open box that had to be made of lead, since her x-ray vision couldn't see through it. Inside it was a chunk of green, glowing rock that could only be one thing. Marta had never actually seen Kryptonite, but this stuff fit the descriptions she had heard of it, and she had no doubt that Wyatt was right. The second man was holding a revolver negligently in one hand, and as she watched, he stuffed it into his pocket.

"Now's the time to get these kids out of here, while the power's still out. Go get the car and bring it around to the back of the building. This place has a back door, doesn't it?"

"No, but there's a window in the bedroom, down the hall. There's an alley back there. We can load 'em through there."

"Good. Bring the car around there."

"When do I get my money?"

"After we've got the kids safe. Hurry up!"

Myers hesitated, and opened the door. "All right, I'll be right there."

'He's going to get the car,' she told Wyatt.

'What do you think we should do?'

'I don't know. Maybe we should follow the car and see where it goes.'

'How am I supposed to do that? I can't run as fast as you can,' Wyatt pointed out practically. 'Besides, we need to get them away from the Kryptonite.'

'Yeah,' Marta said. 'Come on. Let's get down in the alley before the car gets there.'

'Can you lift me down?'

Marta considered the question and nodded. 'Yeah. Just hang on tight; okay?'

Getting down into the alley behind the apartment house wasn't nearly as hard as Marta expected. Even though she wasn't as good a flyer as Linda, carrying Wyatt wasn't hard at all. They floated down as softly as a feather and landed on the broken concrete surface of the alley bare seconds later. Together, they

crouched behind a dumpster, out of sight as the headlights of a car illuminated the alley. A moment later the car that Marta had seen parked in the street eased to a stop by the back window of the old apartment building. Morris Myers killed the engine and got out. He reached up to knock on the window.

The glass slid aside. "Turn off the lights, you idiot!"

Myers leaned back in the car and the lights went off. "Pass them to me one at a time."

Marta watched, holding her breath, as the figure inside the darkened bedroom lowered the limp form of Ally through the opening. One by one, the two men transferred the three children from the window to the car. Then Myers' companion lowered himself through the window as well.

"What about the woman?" Myers asked. "She's a witness."

"She can't identify us."

"She has to know about me if she and the others found the place!"

"Fine. You take care of it. I've got a delivery to make."

"Where's my reward?"

"You know," the other man said, "you're some piece of work. That kid is your son, and all you want is money?"

"He's not my son. He's an alien halfbreed. Intergang's welcome to him. Both of them. I'll take the bounty on them. Where is it?"

"You'll get what's coming to you," the other man said. He withdrew his hand from his pocket and pointed the revolver in it straight at Morris Myers. "But I get the money."

Myers stared at him as if he couldn't believe his eyes. "What—"

"I said Intergang had offered a bounty for superkids. I didn't say I was part of Intergang. 'Bye, sucker.' He fired.

Marta clapped her hands over her ears and squeezed her eyes shut at the report of the revolver. She heard Morris Myers give a kind of a groan, and then the sound of something striking the concrete with a soft smacking sound.

'Marta!' Wyatt's mental voice jolted her back to the present. 'He's gonna get away!'

That took her attention away from what she had just witnessed. Her eyes popped open, and she saw Morris Myers' former partner opening the driver's door of the car. If he got away with Linda, Ally and Ben, they would be in the hands of Intergang within a couple of hours.

But he was going to have a bit of trouble driving with a flat tire. Marta adjusted her laser vision to a pinpoint beam and aimed it at the right rear wheel.

It took only a second. Marta shifted her aim to the other wheel.

'Great!' Wyatt's "voice" sounded impressed. 'I can *see* your heat vision in the dark! It's like a laser beam!'

'Yeah. I know. Let him try to drive on three flat tires!' Marta said. Again she took aim, this time at the right front tire.

He was trying, though. The engine revved and the car lunged forward on the rims and one wheel. Marta and Wyatt ran after it as it lurched unsteadily forward. Sparks flew from beneath the car as the undercarriage scraped on the concrete.

And suddenly the motor died. The door opened and the driver jumped out. He glanced once at the ruined tires and then slewed around to scan the darkness.

"I know you're there," he said. "Come out right now, or I open the box of Kryptonite again. That wouldn't be good for your friends." He held up the box.

'Don't do it!' Wyatt's voice said in her mind. 'He just wants to get his hands on you, too!'

'I know.' Marta hesitated, thinking. 'If I knock him down, can you grab the Kryptonite?'

In the darkness, Wyatt frowned, and then nodded. 'Okay. Say

when.'

'I'm going to run at him and knock him down. When I start running, you run, too. You'll have time, but not much. Okay?'

'Okay.'

'Okay, now!'

Marta ran at the driver, accelerating as she did so. She wasn't as fast or strong as CJ, Wyatt Dillon knew, but she was fast. Fast enough to run nearly four miles in less than five minutes, and strong enough to lift Wyatt in her arms. Her body was nearly as dense as CJ's, and if she wasn't invulnerable to everything but Kryptonite, she was the next best thing.

The driver had no time to do more than gape at the streak rushing toward him, before she collided with him, knocking him a good ten feet away to crash against the scarred side of the old apartment house. The box containing the Kryptonite flew from his hands to land on the street. The lid came open and the green rock, perhaps half the size of a golf ball, tumbled out onto the pavement to lie glowing malevolently.

Marta staggered back as the first Kryptonite radiation that she had ever felt struck her, but the rock was nearly six feet away from her and Wyatt didn't waste time.

As she rammed the driver, Wyatt was already running toward him. He swerved slightly toward the Kryptonite, scooped it up, and with the skill gained as the only catcher who could handle CJ Kent's pitches on the Jason C. Hunter Jaguars, spun and hurled the Kryptonite in the opposite direction, straight into the dumpster. Instantly, he twisted around and seized the lead box from the ground, evaded the groping hand of the driver and dodged around the car, racing back toward the dumpster. With a grunt, he heaved the lead box after the rock. He could retrieve it later, after they had dealt with this character.

Spinning around, he saw the driver of the car getting painfully to his feet, facing Marta, who now stood between him and his vehicle. Marta's fists were clenched, and she was glaring at him with an expression that made Wyatt very glad that it wasn't focused on him.

"Get out of here," she said. "You're not taking my friends."

The driver rubbed his shoulder, staring back at her. Then he grinned. It wasn't a very good grin, and Wyatt saw him wipe his hand over a streak of something dark at the corner of his mouth, but it told Wyatt that their enemy wasn't out of the game yet. "Come on, honey," he said. "There's no way you're going to get away. Get in the car."

"No way!" Marta's childish voice was as challenging as Wyatt had ever heard it, and looking at her from this far away, illuminated by the reflection of the car's headlights, he suddenly realized just how much she resembled her mother.

The driver started toward her, and Wyatt saw him wipe away the trickle of blood again. "You're not as strong as Superman, or I'd already be finished. You're just a kid, and you've already had a dose of Kryptonite. I don't think you can stop me, baby."

Was it possible? Wyatt didn't know but he was suddenly afraid for Marta. She hadn't gotten enough of the deadly radiation to knock her out, the way it had done the others, but it might have weakened her.

Marta's body language didn't change. Wyatt saw her bend her knees very slightly and shift her weight onto the balls of her feet, and knew that his girl — somehow, he thought of her that way, although neither of them had ever talked about it — his girl was going to tackle a guy twice her size to protect Ally, Ben and Linda. He felt a rush of pride. She was Superman's daughter, through and through.

Well, she wasn't going to do it without him.

Out on the street, he saw a flicker of light, and realized that the streetlights were starting to come on. The power outage must have finally been repaired.

It didn't matter. Wyatt hurried forward, stepping over the body of Morris Myers almost without thinking about it, and stopped a few feet away from Marta so as not to interfere with any of her Tae Kwon Do moves. "You're going to have to get through me, too," he said. "Are you sure you can handle both of us?"

Lois Lane came slowly to consciousness, aware of a throbbing headache. Outside, she heard the voices of two men, and then the sharp report of a gunshot.

It made her try to sit up and the resulting burst of pain in her head made her see stars.

She lay still, letting the pain subside to a dull throbbing, fighting back the nausea that tried to climb in her throat. Outside, she heard the slam of a car door, and the roar of an engine starting up. Slowly, she raised her head again at the squeal of a tire and the distinctive grate of metal on concrete.

And then the engine cut off and an instant later she heard a man's voice again.

It sounded familiar. Slowly, Lois got to her hands and knees, gripped the arm of a wooden chair and pulled herself painfully to her feet.

The window to her right was open, she realized through the throbbing in her skull, and it was from there that the sounds came. Moving carefully, she made it to the opening and peered out.

Outside was a narrow alley, with a broken, concrete surface. Several feet to her left, a car sat askew, and the two rear tires appeared to be completely flat and somewhat shredded. The short man who had pulled the gun on her was standing beside it, dimly illuminated by the reflected beams of the car's headlights, holding the lead box that had contained the Kryptonite and looking past the car into the darkness to her right. The red taillights were completely inadequate to show her what lay back there, but an instant later, she saw what he was looking at as a streak emerged from the darkness to collide with him hard enough to hurl him backwards. The box flew from his hand, hit the concrete, and flopped open. A chunk of green glowing crystal bounced out and lay on the ground. At the same instant, the streak resolved itself into Marta, who staggered back from the thing.

Wyatt appeared from nowhere, scooped up the Kryptonite and, never stopping, threw it hard in the opposite direction. He grabbed up the lead box and disappeared around the front of the car.

Marta straightened up and positioned herself between the car and the man.

"Get out of here," she said. "You're not taking my friends."

Lois wanted to scream in protest at the sight of her twelve-year-old daughter taking on a man twice her size to protect Ally, Ben and Linda, who must be inside that crippled car. Marta had to have used her heat vision to destroy the tires and prevent the gunman's escape, and she and Wyatt had removed the Kryptonite that was the main weapon against Marta and the others.

"Come on, honey, there's no way you're going to get away." The driver sounded very sure of himself. "Come on. Get in the car."

"No way!" Marta replied. Lois saw her bend her knees slightly and recognized the way she held herself as a defensive stance designed not to alarm her opponent.

"You're not as strong as Superman, or I'd already be finished. You're just a kid, and you've already had a dose of Kryptonite. I don't think you can stop me, baby."

Marta crouched a little more, balancing on the balls of her feet, positioning herself for defense against an anticipated attack by a larger adversary.

Wyatt stepped into the small puddle of reflected light. The boy didn't look very big from Lois's angle, but she was surprised

at the pugnacious look on his face. He ranged himself beside Marta, several feet from her, and Lois realized that he was being careful not to get in her way.

"You're going to have to get through me, too," he said. "Are you sure you can handle both of us?"

"If I have to." The driver launched himself at Marta.

Marta dodged sideways with the agility of a cat, avoiding his charge, spun and pushed him hard from behind, sending him crashing into the car. It was a trick Lois had learned years ago when she had attended a workshop in multiple forms of martial arts. She had shown it to Marta, after her promotion to the highest level of junior rank, and Marta had learned it quickly and well. Her daughter was definitely able to put up a good fight, but Lois didn't wait to see any more. Her head was throbbing enough to make her slightly sick, but she turned and slithered backwards out the window, hung by her hands and dropped several inches to the alley.

She went to one knee and had to wait for her head to stop spinning. Maybe this was a mistake, but she couldn't let Marta and Wyatt handle this criminal alone.

With a supreme effort, she staggered to her feet. No one had seen her yet. Marta's opponent pushed himself painfully away from the car and turned around to face her.

"Superkid!" he snarled.

"Yeah," Marta said. "I am. I'm Superman's kid. And I'm gonna kick your butt!"

Out by the street the lights were flickering on, Lois saw. The blackout was over, and as she watched a car went by, and then another. Traffic was beginning to pick up; perhaps soon the citywide jam would begin to clear. She tried to push away from the wall and had to fall back against it again as the headache and dizziness increased. Marta moved unexpectedly as the car's driver again lunged at her. She danced aside and punched him in the ribs. He tried to dodge and nearly fell. Wyatt charged in from the other side like a guard sacking the quarterback and struck him just below the ribs with his shoulder. It was enough to overbalance him, and he went to the ground on his face.

Lois's legs gave under her and she dropped to her knees. Wyatt was staring at her, having apparently just noticed her. She was in no condition to fight and Marta and her soul mate seemed to be doing pretty well.

"CJ?" Wyatt's mental voice spoke loudly in her head. 'Can you hear me? We need help!'

"Coming!" her oldest son's voice said clearly.

The car's driver staggered to his feet again. Marta took a step toward him and his nerve broke. Perhaps the knowledge that he was facing Superman's daughter and that she was indeed kicking his butt was the deciding factor, but he turned and fled toward the street, just as the whoosh of CJ's arrival sounded in Lois's ears. She turned in bewilderment at a shout from Marta.

"Look out! Stop!"

There was the blast of a horn and a deafening squeal of brakes, followed by a loud, sickening thump.

CJ went past her in a rush of air, and she caught a glimpse of a Superman-blue shirt emblazoned with the famous "S."

Lois leaned her head back against the building's rough brick wall and closed her eyes. She only opened them again at the sound of Marta's voice, saying, "He ran right in front of the car. I couldn't stop him."

The traffic jam collecting in the street forty feet from their position in the alley wasn't a good thing, Wyatt thought. There was the car with Ally, Ben and Linda inside, Morris Myers, lying dead a few feet farther back, and Mrs. Kent looking like she felt pretty bad. Somehow they had to get out of here before the police arrived.

"CJ!" he called. "We need some help over here!"

In a gust of air, CJ was back. "I need to get back out there," he said. "The guy's dead. I couldn't do anything, but people saw me, and the police will be here in a few minutes."

"Can you help here a minute, too?" Wyatt asked. "The guy had Kryptonite and tried to kidnap Ally and Ben and Linda. They're in the back of the car, out cold. And your mom got hit on the head. She should get to a doctor or something. We don't want the police to find us."

"Great." CJ apparently checked the car with his x-ray vision. "They look like they're coming to. Stay here while I take Mom back to the townhouse. I'll be right back for the others. Can you guys get home by yourselves?"

"Yeah. Marta's bicycle's out by the front steps, if nobody stole it," Wyatt said. "Go on. You probably need to get back out there pretty quick. That guy that got hit killed Ally's dad, too. He's back there behind us." Wyatt pointed at the body of Morris Myers. "You better tell the cops."

"Yeah, right," CJ said after a minute pause. "But you better explain this while you're headed home, so I'll have some idea what to tell 'em."

"Okay," Wyatt said. "First I've got to go get the Kryptonite and the lead box. I don't want some homeless guy to find it."

"That's for sure," Marta said. "Better hurry."

Wyatt got to his feet and ran to the dumpster, while behind him he heard the whoosh of CJ's takeoff. In a matter of seconds, while Wyatt was putting the green rock back into its box, he heard CJ's arrival again, and then another whoosh. He climbed out of the dumpster in time to see CJ arrive again, pick up Linda in one arm and Ally in the other and take off once more.

"Come on," he said quietly to Marta. "Let's get out of here."

As Marta was closing the door on the garage, her acute hearing picked up the whoosh that signaled the arrival of either her father or her brother. Since CJ was still at the scene of the accident, five miles away, the process of elimination told her that Superman had managed to find time from dealing with what was no doubt hundreds of emergencies this evening to return home to check on his family. Her deduction was confirmed a moment later when her father's voice said, "Marta? What are you and Wyatt doing out here?"

"Putting away my bike," Marta said matter-of-factly, clicking the padlock that fastened the door. She turned to find her father, in civilian clothing, standing behind her. "Some things happened while you were gone. Wyatt has a piece of Kryptonite for you to get rid of, and you'd better check on Mom. She got hit on the head by a bad guy a while ago."

"What?" Clark turned and almost ran toward the house, Marta and Wyatt on his heels.

In the living room, the scene would have definitely surprised anyone who was not aware of what had happened earlier this evening. Her mother lay on the sofa, a bag of ice held on the back of her head, Linda, Ally and Ben were sitting, rather limply, in chairs, and Lucy was hovering over her sister in a way that indicated that she wasn't sure what to do. Clark stopped in the doorway, taking in the situation.

"Oh thank heavens," Lucy said, catching sight of him. "Clark, Lois got hit on the head. I think she should go to the emergency room, but she won't."

Marta tugged on her father's jacket. "Aunt Lucy knows about you-know-who," she said.

"Oh." Clark glanced thoughtfully at his sister-in-law, and then at Ben. "I think I need to know what happened," he said, confirming in Marta's mind that her dad, as Mom always said, was really good at understatement. "Where were you hit, Lois?"

"On the back of the head." Lois pushed herself slowly to a sitting position. "I'm really feeling much better now, though."

"Hm. Let me take a look." He went to sit beside her and Lois

helpfully lowered the ice bag. Marta saw him lift his glasses, and realized her dad was x-raying her mom's injury. Well, that was probably a good thing. Dad wasn't a doctor, but he knew a lot about how the human body worked, and Uncle Bernie had once said that he trusted her dad to know if an injury needed to be seen by a doctor or not.

"Looks all right," he said at last. "You might have a slight concussion. If you start feeling worse, tell me right away and we'll go over to Bernie's. Now, what happened?"

"Uh —" Marta glanced quickly at Wyatt. Their conversation with CJ on the way home had informed her that CJ would be better off if their dad was there to help him, or at least give him moral support. "Daddy?"

"What, honey?"

"I think you'd better go over to Honeysuckle Street, over on the seven hundred block. It's important. Um —" she hesitated at her dad's frown. "That was where we found Ben. And a couple of guys got killed. Uh...Superboy's over there, talking to the police, and there's a lot of reporters, and some TV news vans, and a bunch of photographers taking pictures of him."

Clark cast her a sharp look and got to his feet. "All right. But I'm going to want to know what happened, later."

"Don't worry," Lois said. "We'll explain after you get back. Marta, can you give Ally's mom a call and see if she's home yet?"

"Sure." Marta went to the phone, aware that her father had just hurried out the door. An instant later, her super-hearing picked up the sound of Superman's departure.

The phone rang, and on the third ring someone picked it up. "Hello?"

"Mrs. Myers?" Marta asked.

"Yes. Who's this?"

"This is Marta Kent. I wanted to let you know that Ally's here, so you wouldn't worry."

"Thank heavens." Tanya Myers gave a sigh. "I hoped she'd go over there. I just walked in the door. Is she all right?"

"Yeah," Marta told her. "She's okay. But..." She hesitated, looking toward her mother. "My mom should explain the rest," she said finally.

Lois reached out to take the hand set from Marta. "Mrs. Myers? This is Lois Lane. Lois Kent. Are you sitting down?"

Across the room, Ben Myers looked up and met Marta's eyes. "It was you," he said in a low voice. "I heard your voice while we were in the car. You saved us."

"Well," Marta said, "Wyatt and I did." She glanced at Wyatt with a smile. He smiled back at her.

Ally looked at Marta as well, and then at Wyatt. "Yeah," she said. "That figures. I'm awfully glad you came to help."

"Wyatt called me," Marta said. "We did it together."

"Yeah," Ally said again. She turned to look at her brother. "This is Marta Kent," she said to him. "She's my best friend."

CJ was wondering if he could get away before the massed reporters started asking questions, when Superman came in to a landing beside him. He had never been so glad to see his father before in his life. "Dad!"

"Son." Clark nodded to him and then looked around. The driver of the car involved in the accident was standing by the door of his vehicle, waiting, although CJ was pretty sure he wouldn't get in trouble over what had happened. It wasn't his fault that a guy had come running out of an alley and dashed right in front of him, was it?

A paramedic van was pulling up to the scene, and CJ fidgeted, wishing he could just leave. Those darned reporters over there looked like they wanted to jump the barrier that the police had put up and mob him. CJ counted eight guys with videocameras all aimed at him and a bunch of regular

photographers. No one seemed to be a bit concerned with the dead guy. He wasn't comfortable being the center of attention like this, although he guessed his dad was probably used to it. Maybe he would get used to it too, someday, but for right now he hoped Superman would be able to get him out of this.

One of the police officers ended his low-voiced conversation with another officer and stepped past the sheet-covered form on the street to approach CJ and his father.

"Hi, Superman. We're just finishing up here. Your son filled us in on what happened." He glanced respectfully at CJ.

"What did happen?" Clark asked.

"There's a man in the alley over there," CJ said, sticking rigidly to the story he'd told the police. Marta and Wyatt had given him enough details that he could be sure that what he said was consistent with the facts, while not being particularly helpful. After all, he couldn't be expected to answer questions about the details of things he hadn't seen, could he? "He's been shot and killed, and this man had the gun that killed him in his pocket. It might have been a holdup, I guess. Anyway, this guy ran into traffic and was hit. I wasn't able to get to him in time."

His dad controlled his expression, although CJ saw the corners of his eyes crinkle slightly. "All right." He spoke to the officer in charge. "Do you need him for anything else?"

"No, I think that will be all. If we need anything more, can we contact you, Superman?"

"Of course," Clark said. "You can get hold of me by the usual channels." He glanced at the crowd of media and then at CJ. "Do you want to face them now? They're not going to leave this alone until they have a tidbit, you know."

CJ sighed. "I guess. What should I say?"

"As little as possible. I'll answer most of the questions, if you like."

"I would!"

"All right. Are you ready?"

CJ gulped and stiffened his back. "Yeah."

The cop chuckled. "It isn't that bad, son. Just let your dad do most of the talking."

Together, CJ and Clark walked past the police barricade and stopped. The crowd of reporters surged forward. Clark held up his hand. "First, I'd like to introduce you to my son."

A low murmur arose and died away almost at once. One of the reporters held out his microphone. "What's your name, kid?"

CJ glanced nervously at Clark. "I'm Superboy. At least for now."

"Why did you suddenly show up now?" someone else asked.

"There's been lots of emergencies tonight," CJ said.

Unexpectedly, he began to feel calm and more in control of the situation. He didn't have to tell these people anything, so he'd just stick to the bare bones of the truth. A light flashed in his face, followed by half a dozen more, but he didn't blink. "My father was helping people away from Metropolis. I'm not really supposed to be doing this until I'm a little older, but I couldn't ignore people in trouble."

"Who's your mother?" someone shouted.

"My mother is Ultra Woman," CJ said, as if the answer were obvious.

"Then those rumors about half-Kryptonians aren't true?" someone in the back asked. "Everybody's heard them. Are they true or not?"

CJ looked at his father and back again. "I'm a full-Kryptonian," he said firmly. "I'm not half-anything. Kryptonians aren't even from Earth, for Pete's sake!"

"You got any sisters or brothers?" That was Ralph, from the Planet, and CJ was grateful that he had thought to copy his dad's disguise. It was obvious the man didn't recognize him, and it bolstered his confidence a little more.

"That," CJ said, "is none of your business."

A murmur of laughter rippled through the crowd. Ralph sulked.

"How old are you, Superboy?" a female reporter asked.

"I'm thirteen," CJ said.

"Will we see you again soon?"

"That's up to my mom and dad," CJ said.

"Any comment, Superman?" she asked.

"My son is a little young for this," Clark said. "He helped tonight because of the magnitude of the emergency, and I'm very proud of him for stepping in when he was needed, but my wife and I don't anticipate our son doing this kind of work regularly until he's of age. If there's a real emergency, however, and I can't be there, he may take my place if he's able to."

"Where's Ultra Woman?" someone asked.

"Around," Clark said. "She decided, after her one venture into the public eye, that she works better behind the scenes. Thank you everyone. Good night." He glanced at CJ and rose into the air. CJ followed him, aware of the 'oohs' and 'ahhs' of the crowd below him as they flew away.

Epilogue

Three weeks later

It was amazing, Marta Kent thought, as she and Ally Myers waited behind the curtains of the school auditorium, how things could change so much in less than a month.

The excitement about the debut of Superboy had consumed the news services for days and had been just about the only topic discussed by the students of Jason C. Hunter Middle School for somewhat longer. His role in the arrest of Bill Church Jr. had been splashed across the front page of every newspaper in Metropolis, and the short interview replayed on the television so often that most people could have repeated it by heart. Already posters of him in his Superman T-shirt were appearing on the inside doors of girls' lockers. His picture was even displayed on the front covers of magazines and Superman comic books, and a toy company was making action figures of him, with the permission of the Superman Foundation, of course.

Ally's mom had a new job at the Metro Library, and Ally and her family were moving out of their apartment complex next weekend, into another one with better security. Ben was taking remedial classes to bring him up to his grade level in school, and seeing a councilor once a week. The effects of his captivity by Morris Myers was something that, they said, would take a while for him to overcome, but the psychologist who had taken his case believed strongly that he would recover, given time, determination and the security of his family. Benjamin Myers, he said, had a surprisingly well-adjusted psyche that had helped him endure the three nightmare years. Ben said it was because he always believed that somehow his sister and mom would find him. It had taken time, but his belief had been justified.

And, in the meantime, Superman had started teaching him how to control and conceal his super powers. That was something that couldn't be put off. Even though it looked as though Intergang had backed off for now, they had no way of knowing if the criminal organization had really suspended the attempt to locate its own Superman. Although Superboy's statement to the media had done a good deal to defuse the rumors, Marta's father had warned both Ally and Ben, as well as their mother, to be alert, even with Bill Church Junior back in prison and serving the remainder of his original sentence (plus the new charges). Ben, Superman had pointed out, needed to be able to appear harmless and fully human, as well as defend himself if necessary.

Amazingly, in spite of the fact that Ally had known almost at once that Marta's father was Superman, Ben didn't appear to have realized the fact. The only thing Marta could figure out was that, even though Ally was like Linda Lennox, and could feel the difference between Kryptonians and humans, for some reason

Ben couldn't. Marta's dad had said they would have to tell him eventually, but for the moment they would keep it secret.

And then, two days ago, Susie and her friends had returned to school, fresh from their court appearance. All three of them, it seemed, were on probation, subject to their good behavior. To no one's surprise, it had taken less than a day before Susie was threatening Marta again. That was when Maria Hernandez had come up with an idea.

It had required the backing of Marta's mother and father, as well as her Tae Kwon Do instructor, of course, but Marta's mom had pointed out to the principal that this looked like the only thing that might convince Susie that continuing her feud with Marta Kent was not only stupid but potentially dangerous. Rather than have his administration find it necessary to deal with Susie and her friends again, not to mention the potential lawsuit against the school for failing to protect a student while that student was under its jurisdiction, Principal Setter had listened to the idea and, after due consideration, agreed. He had scheduled their demonstration as part of the student entertainment for the monthly school assembly.

So here were Marta and Ally, awaiting their turn for their presentation — a demonstration of a Tae Kwon Do sparring match, and an illustration of its use in self-defense — in full gear, of course. The two girls had choreographed it out to the last tiny move under Lois's instruction. It was going to look good, and if it didn't convince Susie Jones of the wisdom of leaving Marta strictly alone, then nothing would.

"And now," the voice of the announcer boomed over the audio system, "we have a demonstration of the arts taught at the —" He stumbled over the name of the martial arts school, mispronouncing it badly, "— School of Tae Kwon Do, presented by Marta Kent and Allynda Myers!"

Marta and Ally strode out onto the stage, bowed, and stepped onto the mat that the students in the roles of stagehands had dragged into position after the last act. The two girls faced each other and bowed. Maria, standing off to the side, gave the signal and the demonstration was on.

It was a good thing they had practiced this so thoroughly, Marta thought. The "combat" was to them a smooth dance, each move choreographed to the last fraction of an inch. In front of nearly a thousand students, and intent on impressing Susie Jones with the unwisdom of continuing to goad Marta and her friends, they couldn't afford a mistake.

To make it even more impressive, Lois had instructed them to use just the slightest bit of super-speed, so the moves, blows, and sound-effects looked and sounded exactly like those in a martial arts movie. Her dad had taken video of it when they practiced so they could refine their moves and make it look even better than it did initially, and yesterday they had stayed after class to demonstrate the routine for Marta and Ally's instructor. She had given them a few tips as well.

The only sounds in the auditorium were the ones Marta and Ally made as they kicked, punched, blocked and parried and otherwise you could have heard a pin drop, even without super hearing. At the end of the ten-minute match, Maria called the time. Both girls backed away from the other, bowed, and turned to face the audience. Again they bowed, to the sound of thunderous applause, and a sudden babble of voices, as the curtains slid shut.

"If that doesn't work," Ally said, as they removed their gear backstage, "then Susie is a complete moron and deserves whatever happens to her."

"That's for sure," Maria said as she helped pull off Ally's padded helmet. "Do you think if I joined your school that I could ever get as good as you?"

"Sure," Marta said. "You have to work at it, and make sure to attend all the classes, though. Lots of people start and then drop

out after a few weeks.”

“I’m going to ask my mom,” Maria said. “It looks like fun.”

“It is,” Ally said. She took off the jacket and wiggled out of the rest of her outfit. “If you like, I can introduce you to our instructor at the Dojang. She’s this sweet, tiny little Korean lady, about sixty years old, and she’s sudden death in both hands. You’ll like her.”

“Kinda like you and Marta,” Maria said.

“Uh uh,” Marta said. “We’re nowhere near as good as her. Not even my mom is, and she has a black belt in it.”

Someone knocked on the partition before poking her head around the edge. “Are you three almost finished?” Ms. Cricket inquired. She was the seventh grade art teacher, and her name was a running joke at the school. Marta liked her. She took all the teasing with good humor and never seemed to resent it.

“Yes ma’am,” Ally said. She glanced into the mirror and re-fastened her hair clip.

“Good. You need to come on and get ready for the final bow.” She regarded both girls with a little smile. “That was very impressive. I’ve overheard a number of students planning a visit to your school. I imagine that martial arts training is excellent for physical fitness.”

“Yes ma’am,” Marta said. “And for discipline, too. It helps me with my schoolwork.”

“Me too,” Ally said.

“That’s probably why you make A’s in nearly everything,” Marta said wistfully. “Maybe my grades will improve if I start a class there.”

“Maybe,” Marta said. She finished storing her gear into its bag and fastened the catch. “I’m ready.”

Together, the three girls walked out to join the other performers on stage. As they bowed to the auditorium full of students, and whistles, cheers and applause washed over them from the exuberant middle schoolers, Marta scanned the crowd. There were Susie, Darlene and Lynn, hunched sullenly in chairs near the back of the room. Marta allowed herself a little smile. The three girls were looking sourer than ever.

Well, whether they took the warning or not didn’t really matter. She knew who she was, and she knew what they were. She was the daughter of Lois Lane and Clark Kent, and three weeks ago, when she and Wyatt Dillon had faced down a much older bully to save their friends, she had realized something.

Like her father had always said, he believed he had been given his fantastic powers for a reason and so did Marta. She would never be able to stand by and let evil win because she was afraid to act.

The bullies and thugs of Metropolis and the world had better look out, because in just a few years, she and Wyatt would be coming for them.

THE END