

Too Soon for Love?

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Rated: PG

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Summary: In the aftermath of the Wedding Fiasco, Lois is beleaguered by the press, the authorities, and her colleagues. How does she handle the pressure? What does she do when she turns up pregnant?

Story Size: 58,855 words (319Kb as text)

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Authors notes:

I recently re-read a story that put this idea in my mind. I hope that I will do the idea justice.

I'd like to thank my beta reader, LynnSM. Without her help, I'd have never gotten this story to the point it is today.

There were a number of stories that I drew upon as inspiration *and* as examples of Lois's behavior under stress. Specifically, I'd like to cite 'Divinities Ends' by Gerry Anklewicz, 'The Healing Time' by Wendy Richards, 'A Matter of Confidence' by Tank Wilson, and 'Coming of Age' by StopQuitDont. If you haven't read any of those stories I recommend them highly.

This story deals with Lois at the end of first season and her reactions after Luthor jumps off LexCorp tower. It also assumes that in this incarnation of New Troy when a couple signs the marriage license they are considered married and the ceremony is just that, a ceremony. I believe that is the case in Minnesota but I have been unable to confirm that.

I have been asked by my beta reader to include a WHAM warning. This story is not all sweetness and light. There are NO character deaths involved but there is no happily ever after either.

Also, there is a test of Superman's speed mentioned in this story. My estimate comes from the Pilot episode where Clark flies to Shanghai for Chinese food. According to Google the distance from Metropolis (I used Washington, DC as a substitute) to Shanghai is 7,462 miles and he covers that distance in about 11 seconds which ultimately works out to over MACH 2900! I may be boosting his speed here but it's the only measurement I have.

Chapter One

Clark pulled his key to Lois's apartment from his pocket and opened the five locks on her door awkwardly, having only one arm available, his other arm wrapped tightly around Lois's shoulder. Her face was tucked tightly into the crook of his arm, the same place it had been the whole ride over. As the last of the locks opened he sighed and pushed against the door, relieved to finally reach a place where Lois would be safe.

He glanced around to see that most of her belongings were gone, obviously packed up and moved to Luthor's penthouse. He made a mental note to talk to Henderson about getting her belongings moved back. It was the least he could do to take some

of the pressure off her. He guided her through the silent apartment directly to her bedroom. Quickly turning down the bed he directed Lois to lie down.

"Don't leave, Clark!" she wailed when she felt his arms loosen.

"Shh, I'm not going anywhere, I'm just going to lock the door," he said disentangled himself from her. She lay back on the pillow, her body collapsing in exhaustion. He removed her shoes then he pulled the sheet over her, thinking that sleep was what she needed now; she could get out of her wedding dress later. After a quick trip to set the locks he glanced down at her, half expecting her to be out of bed, and was surprised to see her eyes closed, her features relaxed with sleep. He heard the slow, steady beating of her heart and smiled sadly. He sat down in the chair next to the bed, his eyes locked on her sleeping form.

'Well, Lois, we did it,' he thought wearily, his body exhausted from its ordeal with the Kryptonite cage. 'We found the evidence and brought down the monster in time. I was so scared when I heard the music start, scared that Henderson and Perry wouldn't make it, but thank God they did. I'm so glad that they were able to stop the wedding... stop you from being bound to the devil!' He leaned his head back, closing his eyes, sleep claiming him within seconds.

A loud banging was the first thing Lois became aware of as she slowly climbed out of her deep slumber. Confusion claimed her when she realized she was still wearing her wedding dress but she was in her own bed! Her eyes scanned the room coming to rest on the form of her sleeping... partner? ... best friend? ... unsure of how to categorize him she gave up. Clark was here and that's all that mattered. After everything they'd been through these past few weeks, all the disagreements, all the fights, all the missteps, he was here! She smiled wryly at the thought that Clark was the *one* thing in her life that she could count on. The banging that had awoken her grew in volume, obviously coming from the front door. She dragged herself carefully out of bed, making her way over to the chair where Clark slept.

"Clark?" she whispered as she gently shook his shoulder, "Wake up. Somebody's about to break down my door."

Clark was instantly awake, his eyes focusing on the doorway to the living room.

"Let me answer it," he said jumping out of the chair and stalking to the door. "I'm coming! I'm coming!" he hollered out hoping to stop the incessant banging. Clark fiddled with the locks then threw open the door, an angry look on his face.

"Can I help you?" he ground out, taking in the sight of a uniformed policeman and what were obviously two plainclothes detectives all trying to enter the apartment. He held his ground, barring the way.

"I need to talk to Lois Luthor," the taller of the two detectives said belligerently.

"This is the apartment of Lois *Lane*," Clark growled, his body blocking the doorway despite the insistence of the intruders. "May I see some ID?"

The first detective reached into his pocket and withdrew his shield, shoving it in his face. Clark held the badge steady, absorbing the information it contained.

"Detective Rehberg, may I ask *why* you need to talk to Lois?" Clark said releasing the badge. Rehberg stuffed his badge into his pocket, an impatient look on his face.

"And who are you, if I may ask?" Rehberg said sneering.

"I'm Clark Kent, Ms. Lane's... partner," he said not yielding a step.

"Well, Mr. Kent, since you're not her husband and the *Daily Planet* isn't around, I'd suggest you get out of our way so we can talk to Mrs. Luthor." Rehberg pushed forward again and Clark, reluctantly, let them in, closing the door behind them. Lois, who

had been watching the confrontation from the relative safety of her bedroom doorway, walked into the room as all eyes were drawn to her.

“Can I help you?” she said carefully stopping a few feet from the crowd near her door.

“Yes, Mrs. Luthor, we’d like you to come with us, we have some questions we’d like to ask relating to your late husband—”

“I’m *not* Mrs. Luthor!” Lois said angrily. “I called off the wedding... I said no...” She glanced from Clark to the officers hoping for some clarification.

“I’m sorry, *Mrs.* Luthor, but you’re obviously ignorant of the laws regarding marriage in New Troy. The ceremony is just that, a ceremony. You were legally married when you and your husband signed the marriage license,” the second detective, Adam Swiderski, as she’d later learn, said smugly. Lois staggered back, her hand coming in contact with the arm of her couch. She collapsed onto the couch, her head in her hands, her body shaking with emotion.

“It can’t be... it can’t be...” she repeated over and over. She felt a strong arm go around her shoulders, gently enveloping her in a loving embrace.

“It’s alright, it’s alright, Lois. We’ll work it out, don’t worry,” Clark whispered holding her, trying to protect her from the cruel world around her. He glared at the two detectives when they settled themselves on the couch opposite them. Their expressions told Clark that they were not impressed by Lois’s actions, their impatience obvious.

“Look, can we get down to business, here?” Detective Swiderski asked pulling out a notepad and pencil. “Mrs. Luthor, we’d like to ask you some questions regarding your husband’s finances—”

“I don’t *know* anything!” she cried piteously. She turned her head to face the detectives, tears streaming down her face. “He never told me *anything!*”

“You expect us to believe that?!” Detective Rehberg said incredulously. “You’re marrying the third richest man in the world and he doesn’t tell you anything about his finances? What about the \$250 million dollars in *your* private account? I suppose you want us to believe you don’t know anything about that too!” he said sarcastically.

“*What!*” Lois exclaimed, her eyes searching the detectives, praying for some clue as to what they were talking about. “I don’t have that kind of money!”

Detective Swiderski pulled what looked like a bank statement out of his pocket and slammed it down onto the coffee table. He glared at Lois and pointed to the document.

“You mean to tell me that you deny knowing that one day after your engagement to Lex Luthor he deposited \$250 million dollars into your personal account?! Come on, Mrs. Luthor, surely you can’t think we’re that stupid, or that you are!” His eyes bore into her, daring her to deny their assertion.

Lois glanced at Clark frantically, her eyes begging him to believe her. “But I didn’t! I didn’t know he’d done that! I had no idea!” Her hands shook as she turned to face Clark again. “You believe me, don’t you, Clark?” Her voice cracked as more tears ran down her cheeks.

“Of course I believe you, Lois!” he said his hands stroked her arm supportively. “He was a crook Lois, he was probably trying to implicate you!”

“Yeah, and he’s done a damn good job too!” Rehberg chuckled with Swiderski joining in. “Look, we’ve only begun our investigation, Mrs. Luthor, we started with your personal account. How many other accounts do you think we’ll find once we’ve had time to do some digging? Why don’t you save us all a lot of time and effort and come clean now.”

“I don’t know! I didn’t even know about that!” Lois said, pointing at the bank statement as if it were a poisonous serpent. “I

can’t come clean because I don’t know anything! Oh, why won’t you believe me?!” She buried her head in Clark’s shoulder, crying piteously, sobs wracking her body.

Clark glared over the top of Lois’s head watching the two officers. This was getting them nowhere. Maybe a cooler head could diffuse the situation.

“Look, detectives, it’s obvious that Ms. Lane is in no shape to answer your questions right now. How about I give you my word that I’ll bring her down to the precinct this afternoon? She needs some time to compose herself. She’s still wearing her wedding dress, that must tell you something. Please, let her gather her composure, it’ll be best for all concerned.”

Swiderski glanced at Rehberg, silent communication passing between them. Swiderski nodded.

“Alright, Kent, we’ll try it your way. Have her at our offices, 7th Precinct, at 1 PM, no later! Got that!” The two detectives rose as one and Swiderski leaned down, his eyes boring into Clark’s. “She’d better be more cooperative this afternoon, tell her that! Come on, guys.” The three policemen tromped out of the apartment, slamming the door behind them.

Chapter Two

Clark held Lois as she cried, whispering soft words of encouragement to her, his hands rubbing up and down her back, offering his silent support. Long minutes later her sobs had at last diminished to intermittent hiccoughs.

“Lois?” Clark asked softly. “How about some breakfast?”

“Breakfast?” Lois asked shakily, her head still buried in his shoulder.

“Yeah, I think all of this will seem a little easier to deal with once you’ve had some food. You haven’t eaten since yesterday morning I’ll bet.”

“Day before yesterday. I couldn’t eat yesterday, too nervous.” She raised her head, her eyes red and swollen with tears. Clark rubbed the tears from her cheeks with the pad of his thumb and she closed her eyes, secretly enjoying the contact. She drew back, releasing the stranglehold she’d been holding him with and his arms relaxed, letting her sit up. “I... I guess I should take a shower.” She rose from the couch, her legs unsteady, as she gazed down at her friend. “Thanks for being here, Clark, I don’t know what I’d do without you.” Her voice choked up again as she held back tears.

“I wouldn’t be anywhere else,” Clark said with a supportive smile. “Go on now, take your shower, I’ll get started on breakfast.”

Lois made her way to the bedroom slowly, her mind in a fog of emotions. She crossed to her closet and thankfully found that not *all* of her clothes had been packed and moved. She took out a plain white blouse and a pair of black slacks, setting them on the bed. She found clean underwear in the bureau and a towel in the linen closet. She closed the bathroom door and sighed. She glanced down, remembering that she was still wearing her wedding dress. The dress that was so beautiful but now only looked cheap, a reminder of the monster who had chosen it. *WHY* had she not protested? God! How many men pick out their fiancée’s wedding gown?! Lois shook her head ruefully, coming to the understanding that this was only the first of an infinite number of questions she’d ask herself and most likely not have the answer to.

When her hands went behind her back to begin undoing the buttons Lois was struck by the realization that she’d need help. There were too many small buttons and she’d never be able to reach them all. For probably the first time in her adult life, she wished her mother were here. At least then she could help her out of this damn dress! Her only other option was in the kitchen making breakfast but that didn’t mean she’d take it. Inspiration struck as she rushed to her bedside table. She rooted around,

finally seeing the object of her search, her fingernail scissors! Grasping the means for her salvation tightly she hurried back to the bathroom, locking the door behind her.

Taking the scissors in her hand she began the slow, laborious process of cutting the bodice of the dress. By the time she had barely an inch cut her fingers were cramping but she wasn't about to give up. Thread by thread, inch by inch she cut. Her concentration on her task was broken by a tentative knock on the door.

"Lois?" Clark called through the door nervously.

"Yes?" she ground out while she kept cutting.

"Are you okay in there? I don't hear any water."

"I'm fine! Just... taking... off... my... dress...!" she replied with a grunt.

"O-okay, I'll leave you to it then..." Clark said backing away from the door. "Coffee's ready when you are!"

She didn't reply, she was too busy destroying a one of a kind designer wedding gown that had to cost more than her Jeep. Ten minutes later she had enough of the front open where she could push it down to her hips. Once she had it there she wiggled and grunted and tore until, with great relief, it slid with a whisper of silk to the tile floor. She had to use her left hand to remove the scissors from her right, the muscles of that hand protesting the abuse they'd had to suffer. She was shocked at how the scissors had dug into her skin leaving ugly red marks around her thumb and forefinger. She set them on the sink but her hand was so shaky that she knocked them to the floor where they fell behind the toilet. Ignoring them she turned on the water and, at last, stepped under the hot, soothing flow.

Lois lathered her hair and her body mechanically, performing the task with no conscious thought. Her thoughts remained blessedly numb; reality had not intruded as of yet. She stood there, the hot water flowing over her until it began to cool. Then and only then did she shut the water off and climb out, drying herself woodenly. She made her way back to the bedroom, dressed carefully, then she brushed her hair. She glanced at her makeup but decided against it as not being worth the effort. She slipped on a pair of black flats then, with trepidation, she walked into the living room. She was met with the sight of Clark busily setting the table and the welcome smell of coffee.

"Hey, there you are!" Clark said, his megawatt smile warming her. "Here, just the way you like it." Clark handed her a mug of steaming coffee fixed perfectly. She sipped it gratefully, the liquid warming her as it slid down her throat. "I'm sorry I couldn't make much, but you only had bread and coffee. I made toast and there's butter or jelly. We can go out later and get some real food if you want." Clark stood by the table nervously, unsure of what to do next.

"Toast is fine, I don't eat much for breakfast normally anyway," she said as she made her way to the table. Clark rushed to her side to pull out her chair, his smile a reassuring sign to her as he pushed the chair in for her. "Aren't you eating?" she asked as she noticed Clark still standing.

"OH! Sure!" he said awkwardly, sitting down opposite her, picking up a piece of toast. He slathered it with jelly then he took a big crunching bite. "Good, huh?"

"Yeah," Lois said shyly. The atmosphere between them was strained, neither of them knowing what to do or say so they ate silently, their eyes focused on the table.

"More coffee?" Clark asked, holding the pot out to her.

"Thanks," she said, extending her nearly empty cup. He filled it then he pushed the cream and sweetener closer to her. Lois fixed her cup, took a sip, then set the mug down with a clunk.

"Clark...?"

"Yes, Lois..."

"I-I... I want to thank you... for everything..." she said softly.

"Oh, Lois, you don't need to thank me, that's what friends are

for. We *are* friends, aren't we?" Clark asked sounding slightly unsure.

"Of course! Of course, we are... if you want to be..." Lois said, equally unsure. Clark jumped out of his chair to kneel by her side. He took her hand, his eyes meeting hers.

"I wouldn't want anything else, Lois. These last few weeks, when we were... upset with each other... well, they were the worst weeks of my life! I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to fix things, to make things like they were, and it was killing me, Lois." Clark's eyes were bright with unshed tears but his message got through. Lois sobbed once then she threw her arms around his neck, squeezing him fiercely.

"Oh, Clark! I thought I'd lost you forever! I felt the same way! I was lost without you! I didn't know how to fix things, to say I was sorry, and it only got worse as it got closer to... you know. I knew what I had to do to make things right when all I could think of when I walked down the aisle was *you!*" Lois wailed as more tears coursed down her cheeks.

"You... you... were thinking of... me?" Clark said stunned by her admission.

"Yes, Clark, you! Not Lex, not Superman, *you!*" She drew back so that their eyes met. She saw disbelief reflected in his face but also hope, hope that maybe his dreams might be coming true. "Yes, Clark," she replied to his unspoken question. "I was thinking of you. You're the person I've realized I want in my life, if you'll have me?"

Clark's face lit up, his smile so wide it threatened to overwhelm them both. "Oh, Lois! I can't believe this! Of course, I want you in my life! That's all I've ever wanted!" He drew her into a tender embrace, one that told her more than words ever could how he felt. He kissed her cheek before he drew back, a slightly concerned look on his face.

"Lois, isn't this a little too soon? I mean you were getting *married* yesterday. Are you sure? I know what I want but I need to be sure that this isn't some kind of rebound reaction, you know?" Clark said softly, his eyes begging her to understand.

"I'm sure, Clark," she said, a little angrily. "I *know* I was getting married yesterday, you don't have to remind me! I just cut myself out of my damn wedding gown, for God's sake!" Clark's eyes widened when he heard this, drawing back slightly though he didn't release his hold on her.

"You cut yourself out of your dress?" he said incredulously. "Why didn't you call me?"

"Oh sure, like I'm going to call you. What was I going to say? 'Hey Clark, can you help me get out of Lex's wedding gown?' I couldn't do that, Clark! Don't you understand!" she cried, glaring at him, her chin thrust out defiantly.

Clark drew back, even more, her anger obvious though the object of that anger might be in question. "I'm sorry, Lois, I didn't realize..."

"No, you wouldn't," she said, her anger ebbing away. "I needed to do it myself. To take some control back. I've been going with the flow for so long and look where that got me! I need you to understand, Clark. I need to get my life back!"

"I'll try, Lois, I'll try to understand. I want you to know that I'm here, for you, any way you want me."

"Thanks, Clark. That's what I want, support. I need to do this for myself, and your support will help." She cupped his cheek with her palm and she smiled tremulously at him. He leaned into her palm, kissing it. He stretched out his hand in a similar caress, his fingers stroking her cheek lightly. They stayed like that for a few seconds then Clark leaned in, kissing her lightly on the lips. It was the kiss of one friend for another, a kiss of love and support, just what she needed right now.

Clark stood, their hands reluctantly falling away, and he returned to his seat. They finished their food in silence, but the air of uncertainty was now gone. After fixing one more mug of coffee

they adjourned to the living room. Lois's eyes were drawn to the bank statement the detective had left. She picked it up carefully, as if it were something she'd rather not touch, and sat down. Lois gazed at it, disbelievingly. \$250 million dollars! In her personal account! How dare he?!

"I can't believe he did this!" she hissed, shaking the paper in the air. "He obviously had information about me that *I* never gave him. How dare he deposit money in *my* account and not even *tell* me about it!" Anger radiated off her in waves, indignation fueling it. "What am I going to do, Clark? How am I going to convince those detectives that I knew nothing about this? And how do I know that he *didn't* open up multiple bank accounts in my name all over the city to hide his dirty money?! God, I'm so angry I could spit!"

"Try to calm down, Lois. Anger isn't going to help right now ___"

"Calm down?! Calm down! Clark, I'm under investigation by the police! And I have *no* idea what the heck is going on!" She threw the statement on the table and cradled her head in her hands. "I'm so screwed!"

Clark wrapped his arm around Lois's shoulder but she was so stiff she resisted at first then she relaxed into his embrace. "I know it seems overwhelming right now. What with everything that's happened over the last day and a half *anyone* would be overwhelmed. What we need to do is decide on a course of action. I think your best bet is to stick to the truth. You knew nothing of Luthor's finances. You knew nothing of this deposit into your personal account and you're willing to cooperate in their investigation to the best of your ability. We go down there, answer their questions honestly, to the best of your knowledge, and cooperate fully. That should prove to them that you're being honest with them."

"But what if they don't believe me?" she asked piteously.

"They might not, not at first, but sooner or later they are going to have to. You have the truth on your side, Lois! They can't prove that you had anything to do with Luthor's dirty dealings because you didn't! Your story won't change because you're not trying to tell a story, you're telling the truth! Remember that at all times, you're telling the truth and they'll come to believe you!" Clark's enthusiasm and positive attitude were infectious, bolstering Lois's confidence, at least a little.

"Thanks, Clark, I needed that. I needed someone with a clear head to point out what I should have known from the beginning. And you're right, I'm telling the truth and I have to remember that. No matter what they say, what they insinuate, I'm telling the truth!"

"That's the spirit, Lois. This isn't going to be easy, especially as new information comes out due to the investigation, but I'm here for you. I'll support you in every way I can. I'm sure Perry and Jimmy will too."

"You think they will? After everything I've done? I abandoned everyone, Clark!"

"Who do you think was working with me day and night to find the evidence against Luthor? Don't worry, Perry and Jimmy understand. You have good friends, Lois, friends who will support you. We'll call them tonight."

For the first time since she'd woken up that morning, Lois felt confident. They had a plan and the truth on their side, what could go wrong?

Chapter Three

One PM found Lois and Clark seated in the waiting area of the 7th Precinct nervously holding hands. When a uniformed policeman stepped up to them Lois glanced at Clark nervously. He squeezed her hand and smiled supportively.

"Mrs. Luthor, if you'll follow me, please?" the officer said.

Lois stood, her body shaking with rage. "My *name* is Lois

Lane and I'd like you to remember that!"

"I was told your name was Mrs. Lex Luthor," he grinned sarcastically. "Trying to distance yourself from the scumbag already, huh?"

"I'll—"

"Lois!" Clark said grasping her elbow gently. "He's only trying to rattle you, ignore him." Clark glared at the still smirking officer then turned his attention back to Lois. "You want me to come with you?"

"I'm sorry, Sir, but if you're not the lady's lawyer, or her *husband*, you can't come with her." The officer extended his hand in the direction of the interrogation rooms. "If you'll follow me, please?"

Lois glanced nervously at Clark, her confidence wavering. She'd planned on Clark being there to support her! "Clark?!" she said questioningly.

"Don't worry, Lois. You'll do fine. Just remember, you have the truth on your side." He squeezed her hand once more in support then sat back down to wait.

Lois was escorted to a dingy interrogation room at the end of the corridor. When the officer opened the door she saw the two detectives from that morning seated at a beat-up metal table with a single chair opposite them. The harsh lighting made them look like they hadn't seen the sun since they graduated high school.

"Sit down, Mrs. Luthor," Detective Rehberg said, extending his arm towards the empty chair. Lois walked confidently to the chair but she didn't sit down.

"As I told your officer, my *name* is Lois *Lane* and you'd better remember that. I may have married that monster due to a legal technicality but I *never* changed my name legally! If you persist in calling me Mrs. Luthor this interview will be over before it starts!"

Detective Rehberg smiled knowingly, glancing across at his partner. He shook his head ruefully, his hands extended in apology. "My mistake, Ms. *Lane*. Please, take a seat." Lois complied, taking her time to get comfortable, or at least as much as she could given the hard metal of the chair. "Comfy are we?"

"Yes, thank you," Lois replied, coolly, her eyes flicking back and forth between the two detectives.

Detective Swiderski turned on the tape recorder, documenting the time and the people in the room.

"Now, Ms. Lane, we'd like to ask you some questions about your husband's finances. We'd like your cooperation as it will make things much easier for you." Detective Rehberg said calmly.

"I'll tell you whatever I can, but as I stated this morning Lex didn't confide in me very much, especially about his finances," Lois said calmly.

"Why do I find that hard to believe? I'm very familiar with your reputation Ms. Lane. You're a legend with the MPD and not in a good way. About the only guy who has any use for you is Henderson and he's not exactly complimentary when it comes to you." Swiderski said.

"I'll admit I've been critical of the MPD at times, but only with good reason. Good cops had nothing to fear from me, and that reminds me, that officer who brought me in here needs an attitude adjustment!" Lois snapped. She crossed her arms over her chest and she sat back in the chair.

"Yeah, and you don't exactly have problems 'bending' the law to get your stories either from what I've heard," Rehberg added. "So it won't surprise you to find out that my partner and I have a hard time believing that *you* didn't know something! You sniff out corruption from the most obscure clues, long before most law enforcement agencies have any idea by the way, and you had *no* idea your husband was the Boss?"

Lois's breath caught in her throat and her heart beat faster. *Lex* was the Boss? It couldn't be, could it? She'd heard murmurings

about the Boss for more than a year; she and Clark had done some investigating but had come up with nothing, less than nothing! Every lead they'd found went dead, sometimes literally, and no one would talk, not even Bobby Bigmouth. Now this detective was telling her that **Lex** was the Boss?

"I... it can't... I never..." She was brought out of her bout of denial by the sharp slap of a hand on the table. She jumped, startled by the sound which echoed off the concrete block walls.

"You never what, Ms. Lane? You never guessed your husband was a murderer? You never guessed that he stole billions from the companies he destroyed and then bought for pennies on the dollar? You never knew he controlled just about **all** the crime in our fair city?! Is that what you're trying to make us believe, **Ms. Lane?!?**" Detective Swiderski bellowed.

"**YES!**" Lois cried wrapping her arms around herself in a protective gesture. "Yes, that's what I'm saying! Clark and I investigated the Boss and **nothing** ever led back to Lex! We turned over every rock, investigated every lead and found **nothing!** How was I supposed to know?!" Her body shook with anger, anger that these men could even think that she'd agree to marry a man who she knew or even suspected was the Boss. She shook with anger at Lex for fooling her into believing he was simply an astute businessman and not the worst criminal of the 20th century! But mostly she shook with anger at herself. Once more she'd been fooled by a man! A smooth-talking, urbane, charismatic man who'd swept her off her feet and played her like a Stradivarius! No wonder these men didn't believe her, she didn't believe she could have been so stupid! After all the promises to herself, after all the agony she'd gone through after Claude, she'd allowed herself to be used once again!

For the next four hours the interview continued in the same vein. One or the other of the detectives would question her knowledge of events that had taken place during her relationship with Lex and each time she replied, truthfully, that she'd had absolutely no knowledge of anything. She was asked again and again about the money in her account. Had she given Lex her account number? Had she even checked her statement? She told them that she'd been too busy, what with the problems at the **Planet**, then its demise, and finally wedding preparations, to bother. As Clark had suggested she told the truth and that was probably what convinced the detectives in the end but her self-esteem and her pride were the ultimate casualties. She could see it in their faces, they were laughing at her. Oh not overtly, no they were more professional than that, but it was there for anyone to see. They thought she was a fool, a blind idiot who didn't even keep an eye on her own bank account and one who certainly didn't deserve the reputation she'd had as a hard-nosed news reporter.

"Well, I guess that's all for now, Ms. Lane," Detective Rehberg said rising from his chair. "We'll be in touch if we have more questions. I suspect that after we've had more time to examine Luthor's records we'll need to see you again. I'm sure you know this but I'll remind you anyway, don't leave town without contacting us first." Rehberg and Swiderski left the room leaving Lois sitting in the chair staring into space.

"It was awful, Clark!" Lois said when he drove them away from the police station. "They thought I was involved in every fraud Lex perpetrated since I'd met him! They questioned me as if I were a criminal! It was humiliating!" Lois hung her head, huge sobs wracking her body.

"But they must have believed you, they did let you go," Clark said softly as he maneuvered the Jeep through the late day traffic.

"Oh yeah, they believed me alright!" she said glaring at him. "Once they realized I wasn't the mobster's **moll** but was really an innocent dupe they believed me! You should have seen them, Clark, they were laughing at me. Lois Lane, the top reporter in Metropolis, winner of three Kerths and a Meriwether, had **no** idea

her boyfriend—slash—fiancé was the **Boss!** Lex Luthor was the Boss and we had **no** idea!" She saw Clark's jaw muscle twitch and his hands tighten on the steering wheel, his eyes focused on the road ahead. Then it hit her, **he'd** had an idea. **He'd** tried to tell her, more than once, that Lex wasn't what he'd seemed. He'd even confessed his love for her in the park in the vain hope that she'd change her mind and **not** accept Lex's proposal.

"You knew," she said softly as she hung her head.

"No, Lois, I didn't know," Clark said neutrally.

"But you certainly suspected, didn't you!" she said as she pinned him with her gaze. "You've suspected for a long time. You tried to tell me and I wouldn't listen! I actually thought you were jealous!"

"I was!" Clark hissed, his eyes met hers for a second before he turned back to watch the road. "I **was** jealous and that's why you didn't believe me. I handled the whole situation wrong. I was angry and petulant and, I'll repeat myself, jealous! I'd suspected Luthor wasn't on the up and up almost from the moment I met him. You know how sometimes you just don't like somebody the first time you meet them?" When Lois nodded her head he continued. "Well, it was that way with me and Luthor. From the moment he stuck that sword in my face the night of the White Orchid Ball I could tell he was bad news. It was something in his eyes. He had this cold, reptilian look that he hid from everyone. It slipped then and I saw it.

"When I saw the hologram of Space Station Luthor I was even more convinced. The Messenger had been sabotaged and the program was in jeopardy and Luthor already had plans for his own personal station? I'm sorry but I just couldn't buy it."

"I did, everyone did," Lois said forlornly.

"That's right, Lois, **everyone** did. You can't think that you're the only one he fooled because that's just not right." Clark said reaching across to squeeze her hand.

"Maybe, but..."

"No, Lois, no buts. You didn't see what he was because he hid it so well. You can beat yourself up over it or you can accept it and move forward. There's going to be a lot of people questioning themselves over Luthor, Lois, not only you."

"You're right, Clark, I know you are, logically. But I'm going to be questioning my judgment with regards to Lex. I'm going to be thinking of what was happening while we were at the opera, how many people he ordered maimed or killed! Was he plotting his next takeover? Planning on who he could blackmail or ruin to get what he wanted?" Lois paused when something she'd forgotten jumped into her consciousness.

"He was behind the **Planet's** troubles, wasn't he?" she asked cautiously.

"Lois..."

"Wasn't he?! Clark don't lie to me, not now!"

Clark sighed, his shoulders sagging. "Yes, he was."

Lois voiced her next question so softly she wasn't sure he'd even hear it. "He destroyed the **Planet**, didn't he?"

"Yes."

The enormity of the betrayal she felt crashed upon her then and she broke out in tears, hugging her knees to her chest, her face buried in her arms. The next thing she knew Clark's arms were around her, comforting her, rocking her while she wailed in her despair. She felt the weight of Lex's betrayal on her soul and she feared she'd never recover. The man she'd agreed to marry, **had** married, had callously destroyed the **Daily Planet!** He'd killed three people with that bomb and destroyed the livelihood of hundreds of others, and for what? Why had he done it? She thought back and realized that it was the destruction of the **Planet** that had removed the final objection she'd had for going to work at LNN. Lex had been after her to come to work for him for a while, even before he bought the **Planet**, telling her she was wasting her talents at the newspaper when television news was the

future. He'd praised her work and cajoled her when she'd demurred. His pressure had increased after he'd bought the paper but she'd responded that now that *he* owned the paper he needed the best working for him. It was less than a week later that the *Planet* was gone and it was all due to her.

"He destroyed my life, everyone's lives, so he could control me, didn't he?" Lois said through her tears.

"I'm so sorry, Lois, but it looks that way," Clark said regretfully. Lois began to cry even harder, if that was possible, mourning the lives lost, the lives destroyed, by one megalomaniac's desire to control her life. She felt Clark recline her seat, telling her to try to rest while he drove them to her apartment. Lois huddled in the fetal position, her sobs echoing throughout the vehicle as it sped through the now lighter traffic. She felt herself being cradled in Clark's strong arms lifting her from her seat. The next thing she knew she was lying on her bed with Clark removing her shoes and covering her with a comforter.

"I'm going to call Perry, let him know we won't be meeting him and Jimmy. I'll be right back, okay?" She nodded her head, unable to form the words to reply. She fell once more into a deep sleep before Clark had time to pick up the phone.

Chapter Four

She woke the next day to the sun shining through the crack in the drapes as it fell across her bed. She glanced down to see that she had slept in her clothes once again. Lois shook her head ruefully, this was becoming a bad habit! She climbed out of bed, running her fingers through her hair, as she made her way into the living room. She saw Clark watching TV, the sound turned down so low she was sure even he couldn't hear it. He turned when she entered the room and quickly shut off the set.

"Morning!" he said brightly, maybe too brightly she thought.

"Morning, what's on the news?" she asked offhandedly.

"Usual stuff, bad news everywhere you look. I've got coffee ready." He got off the couch and headed to the kitchen. She followed him, accepting the offered cup gratefully.

"Thanks," she said sipping the life-giving beverage. She watched him over the rim of her mug as she drank, finishing the cup. He was nervous, fidgeting with things on her counter, and wiping the already clean table, his back to her. "What's wrong, Clark? I know something is so don't try to tell me differently. We've worked together too long for me not to know when you're hiding something." Clark sighed heavily, shaking his head ruefully as he turned around to face her.

"It's the news, Lois," he said softly, offering no more.

"What's on the news?"

"Luthor... and you."

"Me?" she squeaked.

"Yeah," he said sadly. "They're speculating because they lack facts and it's not pretty, Lois. I'm sorry but they're saying some pretty mean things."

She shuddered and closed her eyes. If Clark thought what they were saying was mean it meant that they were crucifying her! She had hoped to have more time before the media got around to her but she wasn't surprised. After all, it wasn't every day that the third richest man in the world jumped off his own building on his wedding day after the police had raided the ceremony! When you add in the sweetener that one of their own, a 'respected journalist', was in it up to her eyeballs, well, the conclusion was obvious. She chuckled to herself ruefully, she'd probably be one of the leaders of the mob if she were not the story herself! Lois glanced at the phone, surprised that it had not been ringing off the hook.

"I turned the ringer off when I saw the first report," Clark said anticipating her. "I also turned off the volume for the answering machine."

The machine showed a flashing number 50, the maximum number of messages the machine would record.

"I assume they're camped out front?" she asked emotionlessly. She knew they were there, but it seemed like the thing to ask.

"Yeah," Clark said softly, his eyes focused over her shoulder.

She walked to the window and peeked out, the curtain hiding her body from any prying eyes. The street was full of news vans with their portable satellite dishes reaching for the sky as if they were metallic flowers. The sidewalk was covered with reporters with some spilling into the street. Last, but certainly not least, the police were there, trying to keep traffic moving and maintain some semblance of order and failing miserably due to overwhelming numbers. She let the curtain slip back into place then returned to the couch. She sat down, her head falling back, her eyes closed.

"You want some more coffee?" Clark said, sounding far away for some reason.

"Thanks, got something to put in it?" she asked wryly.

"Cream and sugar?" Clark said teasingly.

"I was thinking along the lines of arsenic but I guess that'll have to do." Seconds later a hot cup of coffee was set in front of her, the smell rousing her from her stupor. "Thanks." She drank the beverage slowly, savoring the taste and the warmth it imparted to her body. She tried to ignore the crowd outside but the noise from that many people still filtered in. She speculated on what they were going to ask. Her mind played the scenario over and over, the shouted questions, so many she couldn't make out any one question, the crush of their bodies bearing down on her, her struggles to avoid being trampled, and the fear. Above all was the fear. The feeling that she was the hunted, a poor frightened animal hounded everywhere she went by the rabid pack. A whimper escaped her throat as the enormity of the situation washed over her.

"Lois...?" Clark asked from the seat beside her.

"Just thinking, Clark," she said forlornly. "What am I going to do? I don't have the answers they want, Clark! I'm probably the *least* knowledgeable person in this city right about now but that pack of wolves will never believe that!" She set the now empty cup on the table, her hand shaking slightly as she did so. She hung her head, her hair falling down to cover her face. "Thank God I don't have to go out there today," she said with a sad laugh, "maybe they'll get tired and go home, huh?"

"Lois, I know you've got a lot on your mind, and you probably don't think you need one, but maybe you should get a lawyer, to protect your interests," Clark said carefully.

"I've done *nothing* wrong!" she hissed at him, her eyes flashing. "If I get a lawyer it's going to make me look *guilty*, Clark, can't you see that? How many times have we said innocent people don't need lawyers?" She looked at him, imploring him to understand. She didn't trust lawyers, she'd seen too many go bad and the rest were, shall we say, less than honorable in her opinion.

"I know what we've said but this time I think you should.

Please, think about it, okay?" he asked, his eyes pleading with her.

"I'll *think* about it, but I'm not promising anything," she said grudgingly.

"You feel like some breakfast? I went shopping after I put you to bed last night. Pancakes sound good?" Clark asked hopefully.

"Yeah, they do. Let me get a shower and I'll be right back." She stopped in the doorway, as something popped into her mind. "I need to get my stuff back. I'm going to run out of clothes soon if I don't."

"Want me to call Henderson and see if he can release your belongings? I tried yesterday but I couldn't reach him."

"Would you?" Clark nodded, a pleased smile on his face.

"Thanks!" She hurried into the bedroom, her shower awaited.

"I was able to talk to Henderson. He said he could probably release your stuff today but he needs you to sign some release paperwork."

Lois dropped her fork clattering to the plate, her half-eaten

pancake impaled on the tines. Her eyes flicked to the window, frowning.

“He’s going to come here,” Clark said, extending his hand to cover hers. “He wants to ask you some questions too.”

“Henderson?” she squeaked. “What does he want to talk to me about?”

“No idea. But you had to expect he’d want to talk to you sometime.”

She sighed heavily. “Yeah, I guess. I just don’t know what to say. I didn’t know! I had *no* idea! I didn’t even *suspect!* Do you realize how that sounds, especially how it’ll sound to Henderson? Even if he does believe me, he’ll never respect me, not after this!” She clenched her fists, jamming them into her eyes, fighting the tears she felt forming. It was the loss of respect that she feared the most as the fallout from this fiasco settled around her. No one who knew her would ever respect her again! They wouldn’t say anything in her presence, of that she was sure, but it would be the pitying glances that they’d try to hide that would betray how they really felt. She tried to suppress the feeling of despair as she imagined that look on Perry’s face. That look would kill her, so she’d have to do everything she could so that she’d never see it. But how to do that?

“I have some news too, and I think it’s good,” Clark said drawing her attention to him again.

“I could use some good news right about now.”

“Perry called while you were in the shower—”

“I didn’t think you were answering the phone,” she said interrupting him.

“I talked to Perry and we worked out a signal. He calls, lets it ring twice and hangs up, then he lets it ring once and hangs up. The next time I pick up. It’s worked okay so far,” he said with a shy grin. She grinned too, that sounded just like something Clark would do.

“Anyway, he’s going to be talking to Franklin Stern today.”

“Franklin Stern? What’s good about that?”

“Well, during the time we were investigating Luthor Perry had talked to Mr. Stern about reopening the *Planet* but he didn’t get too far. Perry thinks that Mr. Stern might have changed his mind, what with current circumstances, so he set up another appointment for today.”

“So, it’s possible that the *Planet might* reopen?” Lois said hopefully.

“It’s possible. Personally, I think it’s more than possible. Mr. Stern wouldn’t meet with Perry a second time to tell him no, would he?” The grin on Clark’s face was infectious and she felt the corners of her mouth turning up as well.

“No, he wouldn’t...” Just the thought of the *Planet* reopening was a balm to her soul. The possibility that her friends and coworkers might get their jobs back made her very happy. Her happiness was tempered when she remembered the loss of life but even so, the news was definitely good. “Well, let’s hope for the best then! If I know Perry he’ll pull it off if he has to get on his knees and beg!” She laughed at the image but she was genuinely pleased. If the *Planet* reopened it would be the first step in rebuilding her reputation in the news business. She’d work harder than she ever had, dig under every rock she could, take down more scumbags until she’d regained her position as the top reporter in the city!

The knock on the door startled them. They’d been reading quietly, waiting for Henderson to arrive.

“I’ll get it,” Clark said, he hurrying to open the door. “Good afternoon, Inspector, come on in!”

“Afternoon, Kent,” Henderson said as he walked into the room. He handed over his jacket on his way to the couch opposite Lois. He sat down, taking a notepad and pencil from one pocket and another packet from his inside pocket. He handed the packet

of papers to Lois.

“You need to read and sign those so I can release your belongings. You’re lucky that no one had unpacked them, it made it easier to get the brass to release them as irrelevant to the investigation.” Henderson sat back, watching as Lois read then signed all the papers. She handed them back and he tucked them into his breast pocket. “I’ll have your stuff delivered tomorrow, Lois.”

“Thanks, I was running out of clean clothes!” she said with a nervous chuckle.

“Now that the pleasantries are out of the way I have some questions for you.”

Lois stiffened, preparing for the ordeal she knew was coming. She felt Clark sit down next to her, his presence bolstering her confidence, at least a little.

“I heard from the boys at the 7th Precinct that you were completely unaware of Luthor’s financial situation, is that right?”

“Yes,” she said softly, hanging her head in shame. “Lex was very secretive, about everything as I now know, but he never shared his financial dealings with me. I tried to ask but he was very good at deflecting my inquiries and, I’m sorry to say, that I never bothered to follow up.”

“I see,” Henderson said noncommittally as he wrote something on his pad. “And what about his ‘other’ dealings? Did you have any idea about those?” He looked at her, his face giving nothing away.

“I... well... no, no I had no idea,” she said, hanging her head in shame.

“None?” Henderson asked, his normally neutral mein cracking with surprise.

This was it, the first of the people who used to respect her losing that respect as she was forced to admit to her stupidity!

“No, Henderson, I didn’t know! The great Lois Lane had *no* idea that the man she’d agreed to marry was the Boss! Does that make you happy?” She yelled crossing her arms over her chest and glaring at the inspector.

“Lois!” Clark cried, shocked by her outburst.

“What, Clark? It’s what he asked! It’s what everyone is going to ask! ‘How could you not know, Lois?’ ‘How did he fool you, Lois?’ ‘You don’t expect us to believe that do you, Lois?’ I was stupid! I fell for his line of crap hook line and sinker and never *once* questioned *anything!* I went along with everything he wanted like a good little puppet while he destroyed my life and livelihood, right up to the time I was to say ‘I do’. Even that little bit of independence was futile because I was already *married* to the bastard!” Wrung out from her outburst Lois jumped off the couch and ran to her bedroom. She slammed the door behind her, throwing herself onto the bed, sobbing tears of shame and humiliation.

Clark and Henderson looked at the closed bedroom door with similar expressions of shock and surprise. Clark was the first to recover. He rose from the couch but was halted by Henderson.

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” Henderson said the neutral expression back on his face.

“But...”

“She needs some time alone, Clark. She won’t appreciate your concern right now, no matter how well-intended.”

“I had no idea...” Clark said slumping back down to the couch. “I knew she was upset but she seemed to be dealing with everything, better than I expected really.”

“Shock probably,” Henderson said as he absentmindedly put his notepad away. “It’s been less than two days since Luthor died right in front of her and she was under a lot of pressure from the fraud guys. I heard about that ‘interview’, it wasn’t gentle by any means.”

“She told me a little but she doesn’t seem to want to talk about

it.”

“Maybe...” Henderson hesitated, a frown on his face, “maybe she should talk to a professional.”

“Maybe you’re right, you want to tell her?” Clark said hopefully.

“Not on your life!” Henderson chuckled in commiseration. “Well, I have enough, for now, Clark. I’ll try to kill this part of the investigation as best I can but I’m not promising anything. I’ll give you a heads up if another interview is needed so you can warn her.”

Clark stood, extending his hand. “Thanks, Bill. I appreciate your help, and I’m sure Lois does too.”

Henderson shook Clark’s hand and picked up his coat. “No problem, Clark. Take care of her, huh, but don’t tell her I said so, I’ve got a reputation to maintain!”

Clark closed the door behind Henderson then returned to the couch. Lois’s outburst had really scared him. He’d had no idea she thought of herself as stupid. Sure, her confidence had to be shaken by all the revelations of Luthor’s evil but to think of herself as stupid, that was just wrong! He’d fooled so many people, people who he respected, who should have seen through Luthor’s veneer of respectability. It had even taken Perry a long time to come around and that wasn’t until after Lois was engaged, so how could she feel that it was only her who was blind.

He thought back to their conversation in the car last night. She’d changed when she’d realized that he’d been suspicious of Luthor, almost from the beginning, despite his lack of evidence. Even his declaration that he’d been, at least partially, motivated by jealousy hadn’t seemed to matter to her. Lois was a proud woman, but also very unsure of herself in personal relationships. She’d given her heart to men who didn’t deserve her, trusted when she probably shouldn’t have, and she’d been burned, badly. He’d always thought that her greatest regret was her relationship with Claude but her involvement with Luthor now overshadowed that and all her other failed relationships combined. Not only had he betrayed her, he’d successfully fooled her into believing he loved her, but also that his public persona was the *real* Lex Luthor. Her vaunted reporter’s instincts had failed her and her heart had betrayed her, it was no wonder she saw herself as a complete failure. She was wrong of course, but it would take a miracle to convince her of that.

Chapter Five

“Perry called, he wants to meet us outside the *Planet*. He sounded happy,” Clark said when Lois came out of the bedroom several hours later. Her face had been washed to remove the tear stains, her hair had been freshly brushed and her makeup had been reapplied. She straightened her shoulders and marched into the living room.

“That’s great, Clark. Um, look, about earlier... I’m sorry—”

“Don’t worry about it, Lois. You’ve been under a lot of stress and you haven’t been sleeping well, so it’s no big deal.”

“But Henderson...”

“Henderson understands. He said he had enough for his report and he told me he was going to do everything he could to kill this part of the investigation, no promises though.” Lois smiled a little, pleased that at least something was going her way.

“So, when are we supposed to meet Perry?”

“In an hour. I was just about to knock on your door to tell you. We should get going soon, traffic will be horrendous this time of day.”

Lois nodded in agreement then her face went stiff with fear as she remembered the wolf pack on her front stoop. “How are we going to get by that mob outside?” she asked fearfully.

“I moved your Jeep to the alley in back. We can sneak down the back stairs and be out before they even suspect. Henderson directed the uniforms to keep the crowd out front.” Clark said,

smiling supportively.

Lois relaxed slightly, her anxiety relieved to some extent, but she knew she couldn’t avoid the rabid mob forever and she dreaded the thought of confronting them. She grabbed her purse while Clark grabbed the keys and they hurried down the stairs. They reached the Jeep without being seen and had escaped into traffic from the opposite end of the alley in less than two minutes. They traveled in silence, each lost in their own thoughts. Lois sincerely hoped that the *Planet* would reopen soon, though she was realistic too. It would take time to rebuild, there was quite a bit of damage to the presses area and that would take time to fix. Maybe she could suggest that they farm out the actual printing to some other shop temporarily. They could rent some offices too so that they could get back into print well before the actual building was ready. The *Daily Planet* was more than just a physical building, it was the people who made her great and they could do their work almost anywhere. They parked a block from the *Planet* building and walked to the entrance.

“Looks like we’re the first to get here,” Clark observed, scanning the area for a familiar face. Lois paced the sidewalk, keeping her head down. So far no one had recognized her but she wasn’t taking any chances. Maybe she should have worn a disguise! “Oh look, there’s Jimmy!”

“CK! Lois! It’s so good to see you! The Chief not here yet?” Jimmy asked as he hugged first Clark then Lois.

“Not yet, Jim,” Clark said, “Where’s Jack?”

“With his brother. He’s working with that couple you set him up with to take care of Denny. That was real nice of you CK.” Jimmy said sincerely.

“They’re both good kids, they just had some bad luck. I hope it works out,” Clark responded.

“Jack says he wants to go back to school too. He’s thinking he’d like to get into law enforcement.”

“Jack? Law enforcement?” Lois said incredulously. “He’s the last person I’d have ever thought would want to be a cop!”

“He’s changed his mind about the police since our investigation,” Jimmy replied. “He’s seen that there *are* good cops out there. Henderson really came through for us and that impressed Jack. He even turned a blind eye to the fact that Jack was an escapee from jail!”

“Henderson came through for *all* of us,” Clark said glancing at Lois. “We couldn’t have succeeded without him.” Lois returned Clark’s gaze with a slight grin. She got the message, Henderson wasn’t judging her, despite her outburst.

“Hey look! That’s the Chief!” Jimmy cried as a flatbed truck pulled up to the curb with a huge tarp covered object. Perry hopped out of the cab looking younger than he’d looked in weeks. The smile on his face was so wide it was hard not to smile in return.

“Come here, kids, I’ve got somethin’ to show ya!” Perry had hopped onto the bed of the truck and was singlehandedly pulling off the tarp to reveal the *Daily Planet* globe! “Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?” he asked the assembled crowd.

“Never,” Clark said. Lois turned at the wistful tone in Clark’s voice to see that he was looking, not at the globe, but at her. For a second she felt her heart responding to his sentiment but she tamped that down quickly. Now was not the time to be thinking about romance! She’d just come off the federal disaster of federal disasters of a relationship and she wasn’t about to go there again, not for a *long* time, if ever. Her single overriding need right now was the restoration of her reputation! *Nothing* was going to deter her from that goal; not Lex Luthor, not rabid mobs of reporters, and as much as she loved him, not even Clark Kent.

Franklin Stern climbed ponderously from the back seat of the limousine that had pulled up behind the flatbed and made his way over to Perry. He helped Perry down from the bed of the truck and together they walked over to the little group.

“Franklin, this is Lois Lane, Clark Kent and Jim Olsen, the three most important members of my team,” Perry said by way of introduction. “Franklin has some great ideas for the *Planet* that we still need to discuss but the main thing is we’re going to be opening temporary offices in his building next week, sooner if I can arrange to lease printing capacity before then!”

“Oh Perry, that’s great!” Lois said, hugging him so tightly that he let out a gasp of discomfort.

“Wow, Lois, I knew this was good news but take it easy on an old man, huh?” he said with a grin, his eyes shone as he looked at her lovingly.

“Sorry, Perry,” Lois said, she blushed with embarrassment but her smile never wavered. “I can’t wait to get back on the beat. I *need* to get back to work!”

“That’s my girl!” Perry said proudly, “Watch out Metropolis, Lois Lane is back on the beat!”

They walked across the street while the work crew reinstalled the globe above the door to the *Daily Planet*, taking seats at the café to discuss the temporary office details. Jimmy volunteered to contact the employees, tallying those who would return and those who wouldn’t as well as passing along schedules of when to report. Reporting and editorial staffs first with the various support groups being phased in as the rebuilding progressed. Mr. Stern wanted the IT people intimately involved in the modernization of the *Planet’s* systems and computers, something Jimmy took great interest in as well. Two hours later the meeting broke up but as they were getting ready to leave Mr. Stern caught Lois by the elbow.

“Ms. Lane, could I speak to you in private, please?” Mr. Stern said in his low, rumbling voice.

“Certainly,” she said. “Clark I’ll be right along, okay?” Clark nodded but his eyes reflected his concern. Lois shrugged her shoulders in response then she took a seat next to Stern.

“Thank you, Ms. Lane. I’ll get right to the point. I’m glad to see you’re enthusiastic about returning to work but I’m not sure I want you, in spite of all the praise Perry heaps on you. I have to sincerely question your reporting skills—”

“My *skills!* My reputation should tell you all you need to know!” Lois said interrupting angrily.

“Your reputation is in tatters, Ms. Lane, haven’t you been watching the news?” Stern asked staring her down, angry at her interruption.

“No, actually, I haven’t,” she said, chastised.

“Well, you should. The various news organizations are speculating wildly about you. Half of them are sure you were in it with Luthor up to your eyeballs and the other half are sure you were totally clueless and therefore a willing dupe! Either way, I don’t think your reputation is going to be good for the *Daily Planet*,” Stern said with finality.

Lois, not for the first time, felt the weight of her actions descend upon her. She needed to work! She needed the *Planet* to vindicate her reputation! Frantically she tried to come up with something to save her job.

“Mr. Stern, I realize your position,” she said nervously, “but please, I beg you, I’m still the reporter Perry told you about. Granted I’ve made mistakes, especially when it comes to Lex Luthor, but you can’t discount my track record for scoops and my journalism awards totally because of one error in judgment. Please, give me a chance! I know I can be on top again! How about this, give me a six-month trial. If I’m not pulling my weight by then I’ll leave, you won’t have to fire me. Please, Mr. Stern, what do you say?” Stern’s eyes narrowed, weighing her proposal. He pondered, his brow wrinkled in thought. He looked her in the eye, to gauge her sincerity she guessed, which she returned unflinchingly.

“Alright, Ms. Lane, you have a deal. Six months and no more. If you’re not pulling your weight I’ll expect your resignation on

my desk, fair enough?” Stern said, standing up, signaling that the conversation was over. Lois stood as well, pleased that she’d managed to persuade the sharp businessman.

“Fair enough, Mr. Stern. You won’t be sorry, Sir.”

“See that I’m not. You used to be a very respected journalist in this city and I wish you the best.” Stern walked away without another word, leaving Lois standing there in stunned silence. She turned shakily, joining Clark on the sidewalk. He was alone now, Perry and Jimmy had gone sometime before.

“What did Stern want?” Clark asked curiously.

“He wanted to tell me he didn’t want me back,” Lois said.

“*What?!*” Clark cried, drawing looks from the pedestrians around him. “He actually said that?”

“He said that and a lot more. I’ve got six months to prove myself to him or I’m gone, though he did wish me luck,” she said sarcastically.

“Perry won’t let him get away with it, Lois, don’t worry.”

“No, Clark. *I* made the deal. If I’m not pulling my weight in six months I’ll submit my resignation. If nothing else I’m a woman of my word!”

“That doesn’t matter, Lois. I have faith in you. It won’t take six months. You’ll be back on top in no time!” Clark said supportively.

“You bet your butt I will. Come on, Kent, let’s get some food, I’m hungry!”

Chapter Six

Lois and Clark snuck back into her apartment after their meal unseen by the mob outside. Now that it was evening the crowd of news organizations had thinned out some, leaving skeleton crews in place, just in case. Rather than watch TV and chance coming across the news they decided to watch a video. They’d just turned it on and settled down with a bowl of popcorn when there was a knock on the door. Clark rose to get it, looking through the peephole. He opened the door partway, his foot blocking the door. The man who stood there looked to be a messenger of some sort.

“Ms. Lois Lane please?” he asked politely.

“May I ask what this is about?” Clark said.

“I have a letter for Ms. Lane that she has to sign for, Sir.” Lois got off the couch and walked to the door.

“I’m Lois Lane.” The messenger shoved his clipboard at her.

“Sign there, please.” Lois signed and she took the proffered envelope. The messenger turned and left without another word. Clark closed and locked the door while Lois returned to the couch. She sat down, looking at the envelope but not opening it.

“You gonna look at that all night?” Clark said teasingly.

“I haven’t decided.” Lois turned the envelope over and over distractedly. “Who would send me a letter by messenger, Clark? It sure can’t be good news,” she said, nervously twirling the envelope over once more.

“There’s only one way to find out.”

Lois tore open the envelope and pulled out the single sheet of paper it contained. She scanned the words but after the first few her mind refused to function. FBI, the letterhead proclaimed. Her name was at the top, along with her address. Some of the other words she saw were ‘Lex Luthor’ and ‘meeting’. Her hand shook making the paper rattle loudly before it fell from her slack fingers. She had no idea how long she’d sat like that, oblivious to the world around her, but when she came around she was being cradled on Clark’s lap, his hands stroking her arms.

“Clark?” she said hoarsely. “What happened?”

“You kind of zoned out there for a while after reading that letter.”

“The letter!” She climbed out of Clark’s arms searching frantically for the offending article. “Here it is!” She picked it up, handing it to Clark. “Read it and tell me what it says.”

Clark took the letter and began reading. His lips moved

slightly and his brow furrowed in concentration. It looked to Lois as if he'd read it twice, just to be sure.

"It says that Supervisory Special Agent Colleen Novak of the FBI wants to see you in her office at the federal building tomorrow at 2 PM to discuss their investigation of the late Lex Luthor," Clark said, setting the letter down on the table.

Lois looked at the letter, then at Clark, then back to the letter seemingly unable to assimilate what Clark had just told her. The FBI wanted to talk to her now? God, could it get any worse? First, it was the Metropolis Police and now the FBI, who would be next, the CIA? She scolded herself for that thought, no need to invite trouble! She jumped up and began to pace nervously.

"Lois, sit down, you're driving me crazy with your pacing," Clark said, capturing her hand in his. Once she was settled beside him he smiled supportively. "Don't worry too much, Lois. This letter is just a formality. They are investigating Luthor and you're obviously a person they'd want to talk to. They are inviting you to their offices, not subpoenaing you. Just do like you have been, answer their questions truthfully and to the best of your ability."

"You're right, Clark, I know you're right, but I can't help being scared. They must know by now I don't know anything!" she said, a whine creeping into her voice.

"I know that, Lois. So do they, probably. It's more of a formality, I'm sure they're just covering all the bases. How would it look if they *didn't* talk to you?"

Lois digested Clark's reasoning and came to the conclusion that he was right. The tightness in her belly that had been there since she'd received the letter lessened, but it was replaced by lassitude. She needed some sleep.

"Clark, do you mind if we don't watch the movie? I'm suddenly beat."

"Of course not, Lois. Do you want me to stay awhile and help you clean up?" he asked, grabbing the now cold popcorn bowl, taking it to the kitchen.

"No, I'll do it tomorrow. Goodnight, Clark," she said as she kissed him on the cheek. "I'll see you tomorrow, lock up for me, will you?"

"Sure thing, goodnight!"

As they had done previously Lois and Clark snuck out the back door of her apartment and into her Jeep unmolested. Lois breathed a sigh of relief but as she did she wondered how long her luck would hold out. She found out as soon as they drew near the federal building. If she thought there was a mob camped out at her building the crowd in front of the main doors put the other to shame. Clark pulled down a side street, nearly cutting off a minivan in the process.

"I'm going to try around back," he said as he concentrated on traffic. His effort was in vain because a smaller though still rabid contingent was camped out there as well. "No luck here either, what should I do?"

Lois closed her eyes and sighed resignedly. "Pull around to the front, Clark. I can't keep putting this off."

"You sure?" At her nod, he continued around the block to the front entrance of the building. As they rounded the corner someone caught sight of them and within seconds the Jeep was surrounded. Shouted questions were muffled by the rolled-up windows but the gist was obvious: what do you know Lois? She felt scared by the press of humanity crowded around the vehicle but Clark's steadying grip on her hand eased her fears slightly. He let go, climbing out of the vehicle. He tossed the keys to a cop telling him to park it safely once the crowd left and forced his way to her door. She heard the door latch click and the cacophony that assaulted her nearly deafened her. She felt Clark's hand grasp her elbow as he helped her to her feet.

She forced her eyes to stay straight ahead as she and Clark slowly, almost painfully, walked towards the steps leading to the

federal building. His arm tightened around her shoulders as the crowd pressed in and she was glad for his reassuring bulk. If he hadn't been there she was sure she'd have been trampled or worse by the crowd. Questions were shouted from every direction, one on top of the other, blending into an angry growl.

"No comment!" she cried every few seconds. "NO COMMENT!" She repeated the phrase so many times the words began to lose their meaning, her throat growing scratchy from the abuse. She was sure she'd be bruised tomorrow from bouncing off the bodies of her 'colleagues'. An eternity later they entered the enormous bronze doors of the federal building and the sudden silence made Lois think she'd gone deaf. She turned her head to see faces plastered to the door but the guards refused to allow the press to enter, to her immense relief. Clark led her over to the restroom so she could freshen up from her ordeal. She entered the room and rushed to a stall, her legs suddenly feeling weak. She slammed the door behind her and plopped down on the seat, breathing heavily.

Lois glanced at her hands and was not surprised to see them shaking wildly. She wrung her hands together to stop the shaking but she could do nothing about the weakness in her legs or the rapidity of her breathing. She was sure her heart was going to burst from her chest if she didn't have a stroke first! Lois sat silently, the only sound in the room her labored breathing when the door opened. From the sound, it appeared that two women had entered.

"Wow, can you believe that crowd? I haven't seen that many members of the press since the last time the President was in town."

"Yeah, I know but she's more newsworthy than the President right now."

"She?"

"You haven't heard? Lois Luthor is here for a 'visit' with the FBI on 14."

"You're kidding! I thought she was out of the country?"

"I'd heard that she was holed up in a secret bunker at LexCorp headquarters but Sally, Novak's secretary, told me that she was in her apartment the whole time!"

"I can't believe it! Every news organization in the world was looking for her and she was here all along?"

"Yeah, she was rushed into her old apartment by her partner from the *Planet* before anyone knew what was going on and then they laid low. Personally, I think that MPD inspector, Henderson I think, was covering for her. He was seen visiting her building the next day you know."

"No! So what is she here for?"

"Sally says they want to talk to her about what she knows or doesn't know about Luthor's activities related to national security. It seems some forensic accountant found a link to international terrorists!"

"Terrorists! Oh, God, I wouldn't want to be her! If they think she knows anything they'll have her locked up before she knows what's going on."

"Yeah, but as Luthor's widow I suppose she has an army of lawyers so maybe that'll help her."

"I don't know about that. I've been following the news and with all the scum coming out of the woodwork I wonder if there are any lawyers on LexCorp's payroll that won't be under indictment by the end of the week! Rumor has it the whole bunch are dirty. We've had feelers from some of the most prestigious law firms in the city looking to cut deals. It's gotten so bad that I want to give out numbers!" The women giggled at the thought.

"Yeah, I can see it now. The attorney general's office adds a sign saying 'now serving 1,000!'" The two women broke down in a fit of laughter at that as they washed their hands. "Well, hopefully, that mob outside will be gone by 5 o'clock, I don't want to have to deal with that mess when I get off work." The two

women left the room leaving Lois in blessed silence. Terrorists? Lex was involved with terrorists? What else would she discover about that man? Was there nothing he *wasn't* involved in? She unlocked the door and washed her hands. Lois looked at her image in the mirror and was shocked at the sight. She was as pale as a ghost with huge dark circles under her eyes. Her hair hung limply and she wasn't sure but it looked like she had a lot of new wrinkles around her eyes. She turned away from the mirror and exited the restroom.

"Lois! Are you okay? You were in there a long time," Clark asked sounding worried.

"I'm alright, I guess. It took me a while to calm down after running that gauntlet. Then I was regaled on the various rumors surrounding me by two women. You should hear what they're saying, Clark! One of them said Lex was involved with terrorists!" she hissed, keeping her voice low so as to avoid attention.

"That's something I hadn't heard, actually," Clark said though he didn't sound surprised. "The directory is over there, I wonder what floor the FBI is on?"

"Fourteen," she said with certainty, turning him towards the elevator.

"And how do you know that?"

"One of the women said so, in between tearing me up with her gossip!" Lois growled. Clark had no response so he remained silent as they rode the elevator to the fourteenth floor. When the doors opened they were face to face with a set of double glass doors emblazoned with the FBI shield. Clark opened the door for her as they stepped up to the desk.

"Lois Lane to see Special Agent Novak," Lois said to the receptionist.

The woman looked up and motioned to Lois to sign in. "And you are, Sir?"

"Clark Kent, *Daily Planet*. I'm Lois's partner."

"Sign in please, Mr. Kent. I didn't know the *Daily Planet* was back in business," she said, gathering up two visitors badges.

"I don't know if there's been an official announcement yet, but thanks to Franklin Stern it will be very soon," Lois said pleasantly.

"I'm glad to hear it. The city hasn't been the same since it stopped publishing. Here you go." She handed them their badges and directed them to the conference room to their right.

Lois and Clark entered the room to see three agents, two women and one man, seated on one side of a large conference table. The woman closest to the door stood up.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Lane. I'm Supervisory Special Agent Novak. This is Special Agent Stupen and Special Agent Cody." Agent Novak said, pointing out the man and then the woman who had remained seated. "And who is this with you?"

"I'm Clark Kent, Lois's friend and partner." Clark said as he stood by Lois's side.

"Do you wish Mr. Kent to be a part of this meeting, Ms. Lane?" SSA Novak asked.

"If he could," Lois said.

"Certainly, please be seated."

Unlike the 'interview' she'd had with the fraud division of the MPD the federal agents didn't automatically assume Lois was involved with Lex's dirty dealings. They had hoped that, due to her reputation for rooting out corruption she might have information that would aid their investigation but when it became evident that Lois was ignorant of any of her husband's dealings they called the meeting to a close rather quickly. They did ask her to keep them in mind if she did come across anything, which Lois said she would. Unlike the two women in the restroom the FBI agents were not forthcoming about Lex's activities, terrorist related or otherwise.

As they rode down the elevator alone Clark grasped her hand, smiling supportively. "See, that wasn't so bad," he said.

"No, it was relatively painless actually. The thing I dread now

is getting out of here."

"I think we can do better this time. Let me find Officer Hopp, he's the cop I gave the keys to. He'll help us get out of the building with as little fuss as possible."

"Thanks, Clark." She remained silent for a few seconds then, her decision made, she voiced her desire. "I think I should hold a press conference."

"Wow, what brought that on?"

"The mob today. It's only going to get worse you know. If I talk to them at least I'll get my side of the story out there. Maybe that'll slow down some of the speculation."

"I agree, you want me to help set it up?"

"Would you? It's going to be stressful enough just standing up there answering questions. I don't have the patience for dealing with the whole mess right now."

"I'll call Perry as soon as we get back to your place."

Chapter Seven

Two days later the time for the press conference was upon her but Lois was nowhere near ready for it. She'd worked on a statement, revising and revising it until it was as good as it could be, mostly thanks to Clark, but she was nowhere near pleased with it. When she tried to see it from the point of view of her audience she realized that no matter what she said she'd come off looking like an idiot! Even if these people didn't know her personally she was known to them by reputation. This statement said, in no uncertain terms, that Lois 'Mad Dog' Lane had been fooled for almost a year by the greatest criminal of the late twentieth century. If they believed her, and she wasn't sure they would, her reputation was shot, probably forever, and if they didn't, they'd think she was a liar hoping to avoid prosecution for her involvement in her husband's crimes. She'd been sorely tempted to say that she'd been conducting her own covert investigation and had been beaten to the punch by the MPD but, on second thought, lying now would only undo all the effort she'd gone through to convince the authorities she *wasn't* involved.

No, she had to resign herself to the fact that, after giving this statement and answering questions, she'd be back to square one, reputation-wise. She wondered if she'd ever be able to hold her head high in this town again though she was determined to do everything in her power to make it possible. She'd have to be 'Mad Dog' squared now, and an award-winning actress to boot! She'd have to let the slams and slanders of her 'colleagues' in the media slough off her, in public at least, and only give in to the hurt in private. Lois shuddered violently, despair overwhelming her, tears rolling unbidden down her cheeks. She flopped onto the bed, her sobs muffled by her pillow. How could she do this? How could she work even harder than she had been? Lois had always given 110 percent to her job and now she knew that wasn't going to be enough and the realization scared her. One thing she did know was that she had to do this by herself. As much as she loved working with Clark, for the next six months, until she'd proven herself, she *had* to work alone.

Her first order of business then, once the *Planet* was officially back in business, was to convince Perry that the Lane and Kent partnership was on hiatus for at least six months. Of course he'd try to pull rank on her, telling her that *he* gave the assignments and she, as a reporter, followed them. She'd have to convince him of the error of his ways though. She'd accept any assignment he had for her, the harder the better, but only if she could work alone. If she had to she'd play her ace in the hole, she'd offer her resignation now. She didn't want to do that but she was sure Perry would cave because of his feelings for her, and she wasn't above playing on those feelings to get what she wanted.

With a partial plan in place Lois rose from the bed, making her way to the bathroom where she repaired her makeup and put on her game face. She had a rabid crowd of reporters to tame!

Lois had to give the mob *some* credit at least, they'd remained silent during her prepared remarks. Now however, the gloves were definitely off.

"Who are you trying to kid, Lane?!"

"Do you think we're idiots?!"

"How could you have been fooled like that?!"

"Come on Lane, you're in this up to your eyeballs and we all know it!"

Those comments and worse were hurled from the assembled journalists as she stood in front of the under-construction façade of the *Daily Planet* building. Still cameras clicked wildly, the noise so loud it could be heard above the dissonance of voices.

Television cameras from the three major networks plus all of the 24-hour cable news outlets, LNN included, were focused on her, their lights blinding her, adding to her stress.

"Please!" she shouted, trying to be heard, "Please, I can't answer your questions when you shout them all at once!" She waited, her body ramrod straight while she waited for the crowd to come to order. When the shouting had settled to a dull roar Lois scanned the crowd looking for a somewhat friendly face. She noticed Eduardo Friaz, her colleague at the *Daily Planet*, so she called on him. "Mr. Friaz? You have a question?"

"Yes, Ms. Lane. Can you tell me, if you are not involved with Lex Luthor's illegal dealings, what you are going to be doing with the money that has been deposited to your personal account?"

"I haven't worked out all the details yet but pending advice from counsel I'll be donating it all to charity. I did not ask for, nor do I want, anything from my marriage to my late husband." Lois answered firmly and honestly.

"Does that desire also include anything you might inherit from Mr. Luthor's estate?" Eduardo asked as a follow-up.

"It does. If there are any tax liabilities due I will be taking that amount out of any gains otherwise I will be donating everything to charity, most likely the Superman Foundation. I feel that, given the nature of how my late husband made a large portion of his fortune, by donating it to the Superman Foundation some good will finally be done."

"Robbie Roberts, LNN! Mr. Luthor gave a lot to charity every year, are you saying everything he did was evil?"

"Mr. Roberts, I realize you work for my late husband's media organization but surely you can't seriously ask that question? I've been watching your broadcasts. Your organization has been covering all of the investigations as they've exposed more and more of Lex Luthor's illegal dealings. Why there have even been some hints that there will be changes in LNN management soon due to some of these investigations! Lex Luthor never did anything that didn't benefit him personally, his charitable donations were no exception."

Lois answered more questions until they began to be repetitive. She thanked the assembled journalists and walked off the podium. Perry was there waiting for her.

"You did great, Darlin'," Perry said, wrapping his arm around her shoulder, directing her into the building.

"I think 'great' is a bit of an exaggeration but I did what I needed to do," Lois said, shaking her head ruefully. "Every news outlet in the city now knows Lois Lane was duped by a sociopath!"

"Now, Darlin', you're being too hard on yourself. He fooled everybody for years. He had layer upon layer of his organization devoted solely to insulating him from his criminal dealings. Heck, if he hadn't attacked the *Planet* I don't think we'd have *ever* found the evidence to bring him down."

"Yeah, and where was *I* during all that? Working for LNN and telling everyone what a wonderful man my fiancé was!" It still galled Lois that she'd gone to work for LNN when every one of her friends had refused to do so. At the time she'd considered them

to be idiots or, like Clark, jealous. It was only now, once the depth of Lex's perfidy had been revealed, that their reasons had become obvious. How could she have not realized something was wrong when Perry chose retirement, *retirement*, over a position at LNN? Even Jimmy, who she'd found out had lost his apartment and had been scrounging money handing out flyers for strip joints, even *he* had refused a job at LNN! And let's not forget Clark! He'd been the most vocal in his opposition to her offer. Despite his assertion that he wanted to work with her, to continue to be her partner, he'd turned her down flat and derided her choice. If all of that evidence hadn't convinced her of the folly of her choice, then nothing would have. She'd drank the Kool-Aid, pure and simple.

"That's all in the past, Lois. You need to focus on the future."

"Yes, I do. Can we talk?" Lois said smiling tremulously. She wasn't looking forward to this talk either but it was time to strike while the iron was hot. Perry directed her to one of the small offices off the lobby that belonged to Human Resources, but was now used to store construction supplies. It did have a small table and two chairs and a working door though so it would serve her purpose. She followed Perry inside, closing the door behind her.

"This looks serious," Perry said with a chuckle, though he seemed uneasy as he settled into his seat.

"It is serious, Chief. I know you're not going to like this but... I can't work with Clark, at least for a while." Lois let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

"And may I ask why?" he said, his eyes boring into hers.

"It's nothing to do with Clark, you have to know that. I have to rebuild my reputation in this city and I can't do that as one half of Lane and Kent."

"That's not true, Lois. Once people see your stories in print again they'll see the quality is there. No one can argue with results."

"I beg to differ! You heard the comments out there today! That bunch is going to think I've been riding on Clark's coattails all this time, and the public is too. You know people have short memories!"

"Yes, they do. They'll forget all of this business too, once the next big crisis hits and pushes you off the front page."

"And how long is that going to be? Lex has been the biggest story there is on every network, in every paper for the last few weeks. Every time a new crime is exposed the whole thing is dredged up. May I remind you that the FBI hasn't even finished the investigations into government corruption! What do you think is going to happen when city councilmen, state and federal representatives and senators start falling like bowling pins on Saturday night! It could take *years* before everything shakes out. And don't forget the trials!"

"Alright, alright, I give. I'll admit that the fallout is going to be bad but you and Clark are the best team I've ever seen and I know you can bring in the big stories, together." Perry said conclusively staring Lois down, daring her to contradict him.

"That may be true but for the next six months I've *got* to work alone." Lois glared back, her determination radiating from her.

"Why six months?" he asked his face neutral.

"Don't play games with me, Perry. You know exactly why. Heck you probably knew two seconds after I made the deal!" Perry's grin told her that he did, in fact, know.

"I don't know why you had to make such a bonehead deal anyway," Perry said, shaking his head. "I'd have smoothed things over with Franklin if you'd come to me first."

"He didn't want you 'smoothing things over'. He wanted me to convince him I was worth taking a chance on and I did! I'm going to prove that I'm still the best in this city and all I want is your support. Well, Perry, do I have it?"

Perry sighed, and Lois knew she'd won, though the victory didn't really please her.

"Alright, for the next six months you work alone. But *you* tell

Clark why you don't want to work with him, ya hear!"

"I will, Perry, and thanks," Lois said, grasping Perry's hand in a friendly gesture.

"Don't thank me, you're the best I've got, you just need to remember that. I don't think it'll be six months before Mr. Stern sees it too. You know, maybe I'll partner Jimmy and Clark. Jimmy's wanted a chance to be a reporter so this can be his trial period too." Perry's smile showed that he hoped Jimmy would prove his mettle as well.

Lois and Clark were seated on his couch that evening after having finished off another of Clark's wonderful meals. Lois dreaded the conversation to come but what had to be done had to be done.

"Clark, I need to talk to you."

"I'm not gonna like this am I?" he asked, concern evident in his eyes.

"No, you're not but I need you to understand. For the next six months, while I'm on my trial period with Mr. Stern, I'm going to be working alone." She reached out to grasp Clark's hand, needing the contact right now.

"Alone?" Clark's face reflected his surprise and shock though he did not pull away from her. "Why, Lois?"

"I need to, I've *got to*, restore my reputation, Clark. I need to show Mr. Stern, this city, that Lois Lane is a top-flight journalist who made a mistake and not an idiot who is being carried by her partner—"

"I never carried you!" Clark exclaimed, "If anything you carried *me* during the early days of our partnership!"

"I know that, you know that and Perry knows that, but the city and Mr. Stern don't know that. Mr. Stern is watching me and my output closely and I have to produce, Clark. Please, please understand?" Clark glanced down at their clasped hands, his gaze turning tender.

"If that's what you want, okay, but I'll miss my partner," Clark said wistfully.

"Oh, about that, Perry suggested partnering you with Jimmy today. He said six months with you ought to give Jimmy a chance to prove he can be a reporter or not."

"Jimmy huh? Well it could be worse, he could have partnered me with that new guy, Ralph!" They both cringed then broke into hysterical laughter.

Chapter Eight

Lois threw herself into her job with even more single-mindedness than she'd exhibited before, even after the Claude debacle. She came in early, stayed late and in general worked herself to the bone. Perry and Clark tried to tell her that dying of overwork wouldn't help her reputation but neither of them were able to dissuade her from her goal.

"I've told you before, Clark, I don't *care!* I've brought in three front page headlines in the last two weeks and I'm going to beat that next week if a few things fall into place for me. Now, please, drop it!" Lois growled, turning back to her computer.

"But Lois, we haven't had one night to just kick back and relax in weeks! All you do is work and sleep and that's not natural, even for you. And look at you, you've lost ten pounds, your clothes hang on you, and frankly, I'm worried about your health... your mental health." Clark said softly though there was no one in the news room this late.

Lois turned to face Clark, her eyes blazing, and Clark drew back, fear, actual fear evident in his look and posture.

"You're worried about my *mental health?!?*" she hissed her eyes blazing fire. If she'd had Superman's heat vision Clark would have been a charcoal briquette about then. She glanced around the room to ascertain that they were still alone before she continued.

"I'm going to say this one more time and see if it sinks into

that thick skull of yours! I am going to prove myself to be the *best* reporter in this city, in this state, in this world if it kills me and nothing you can do or say will change my mind. You don't hear Perry complaining, do you?"

"Well no, but—"

"There *are* no buts, Clark. As long as Perry is pleased with my work I don't want to hear word one from you! Do I make myself clear?!" She glared at him, nose to nose, so close had she gotten to him during her tirade.

"Clear, Lois, clear," Clark said raising his hands in a surrender-like gesture.

"Good, see that you remember it this time because you *don't* want me to have to remind you of this conversation again!" She returned to her desk taking out her anger on her defenseless keyboard. It was a few minutes later that she heard Clark leaving, without his usual cheery goodnight.

Chapter Nine

Lois was in trouble, deep, deep trouble. She'd followed a lead on a new criminal organization rumored to be moving into Metropolis to fill the void left by the fall of her late unlamented husband. Her contact, a smooth sounding man whose voice she hadn't recognized, had requested she come to the roof of the second tallest building in the city at midnight where he would give her the information he'd claimed to have. Getting into the building had been a piece of cake. She'd hidden in a janitor's closet just before closing time then she'd slowly made her way, floor by floor, avoiding the sweeps of building security. When she'd reached the top floor it was still too early so she picked the lock on a posh looking office and settled down for a little snooze on a couch. At precisely midnight she silently made her way up the stairs to the roof. She'd opened the door, propping it open because it locked from the outside, and stepped through onto the gravel roof.

"Hello?" she'd called out softly as she crept forward, her eyes sweeping the roof area constantly. Despite all of this caution someone had snuck up behind her and conked her on the head, which led to her current precarious situation. Her mouth was covered with tape, her hands and feet were taped as well, and she was seated upright against the parapet wall. She was also soaking wet as her captor had thrown water in her face to wake her up.

"So nice of you to come, Ms. Lane," Nigel St. John said, stepping from the shadows. Lois grunted and screamed through her gag eliciting a sickening smile from the man.

"Now, now Ms. Lane, such language from a lady. Oh, I forgot, you're *not* a lady. If you had been you'd have been the wife of a billionaire instead of his widow and I wouldn't be looking for work!" Nigel leaned into her face, so close his breath caused her hair to move in response.

"I have your information for you, Ms. Lane though I doubt you'll be able to use it. There is a new organization moving into town. It's called Intergang. They'd always avoided Metropolis due to the stranglehold the Boss had on the city but with his untimely demise they've decided it's time to expand their operations. Fortunately for me they have openings in this area.

"You know I'd warned Mr. Luthor about you but he refused to listen. I'd tell him you were trouble, that you were beneath him but he thought you had *potential!*" The word dripped from his mouth as if it were a curse. His eyes shone in the darkness and she had to wonder if he was completely sane, like his former employer.

"He said he wanted you by his side as he ruled his empire, can you believe that? I told him you'd never accept his 'other' activities but he told me that a little well placed coercion, a threat to your lovely sister or your *friend* Mr. Kent would bring you in line. His eyes lit up when he thought of taming you, do you know that? Of all the things I regret I regret seeing you tamed, broken by Lex

Luthor!” Nigel picked her up off the roof quite easily for a man in his late sixties, as she guessed Nigel was, and set her on the parapet wall. Lois struggled as best she could but Nigel held her in his vice-like grip.

“I’d thought about luring you to LexCorp tower but even I didn’t think you’d be stupid enough to go there so I chose the second tallest building in Metropolis for your demise. I think it’s quite poetic that you and your husband die in the same manner, though admittedly your death is a bit less of a choice!” The grin on St. John’s face was enough to scare her if the situation itself hadn’t. This was it, she was going to die. The next thing she knew she was in free fall, tumbling through the dark sky towards the sidewalk below. Whether it was through conscious thought or self-preservation she began to scream through her gag. Her one and only hope was that Superman would hear her struggles and save her. The sidewalk grew closer and closer, taking up most of her field of vision until, with mere seconds left to live, she closed her eyes.

Instead of the sickening feeling of her body contacting the unyielding concrete a pair of strong arms encircled her and she began to rise in the air. Her heart was pounding fiercely, her eyes wild as she slowly came to the realization that, once again, a miracle had happened. Superman had, somehow, heard her and saved her! His hand carefully tore off the tape covering her mouth allowing her the chance to speak.

“OhGodohGodohGod! I thought I was gonna die! Thank you, Superman! Thankyouthankyouthankyou!” She trembled in his arms as he flew, swift and sure through the sky. The next thing she knew she was standing on the floor in her apartment with Superman tearing at the bindings on her hands and feet. She was then pulled into Superman’s arms, crushing her to his strong body. She threw her arms around him, kissing him fiercely. Superman responded with equal ferocity. Two pair of hands explored, fevered lips quested and claimed and passion flared in two pair of deep, chocolate brown eyes. The urge to celebrate life, his from the saving, she to prove her own, overwhelmed them. Hands, which had been locked in each other’s hair only seconds earlier, were now tearing at the clothes that covered them, baring flesh at near super speed. They fell to the floor, their urgency claiming them, where they joined in the age-old dance of renewal right there on Lois’s living room floor.

After the frenzy of their coupling had subsided Lois lay breathing heavily next to her half-clad lover. In their haste they had only removed enough clothes to facilitate the act of joining. Lois’s slacks and panties were bunched at her ankle, her blouse and bra tucked under her armpits. She still felt the tingle of her body from their fierce joining and her nether region still twitched with remembered pleasure. Her arm was over her eyes as the realization of what they’d done descended on her.

She’d had sex with Superman! Good sex, admittedly, but only sex. They hadn’t made love, they’d taken and received reassurance that, once again, Lois Lane had cheated death, and that’s all it was. God, could her life get any worse?! Here she was, working her tail off to restore her reputation and now she was going to have Superman looking for a relationship! She’d have to nip this in the bud. Lois removed her arm so she could peek to her right, so she could see her lover.

If the situation weren’t so serious she’d have busted out laughing. Superman lay next to her, his chest heaving as wildly as hers with his red briefs and blue leggings bunched up at his knees! His... nakedness was highlighted by the moonlight that shone through her window reminding her of a spotlight on a performer in a show. She giggled silently, drawing her eyes away from him, pulling down her bra. Superman, roused from his stupor by her movements, began to dress as well. He turned away from her, though to preserve her modesty or his she didn’t know. When they

were dressed Superman turned towards her, his eyes focused on the floor, embarrassment radiating from his every movement.

“Lois—”

“I think you should leave, Superman.

“Lois?” he asked, confusion evident on his face.

“Superman, this was a mistake. We let the stress of your saving my life once again, thanks by the way, overtake us. I don’t love you and you don’t love me, so why don’t we just try to forget this ever happened, okay?” She stood there, watching him with her arms crossed below her breasts. She hoped that she was giving him the strongest signals she could that she didn’t want to discuss this any further.

He took one step closer, hesitantly, then he stopped and heaved a great sigh. “You’re right Lois. It shouldn’t have happened and I’m sorry it did. I’ll be going now.” He stepped onto the windowsill then paused. “Oh, who threw you off that building?”

“Nigel St. John. It was a trap, obviously, but he did tell me that there’s a new organization moving into Metropolis called Intergang. It seems that they want to take over Lex’s old empire. Keep an eye out for them, okay?”

“I will, and you be careful, please?” Superman’s eyes begged her to agree, at least for now.

“I will, no more falling off buildings, at least for tonight.” She gave him a wry smile as he lifted off, disappearing into the night.

Chapter Ten

Lois woke up feeling lousy again, like she had for the past two days. She’d been listless, nauseous and too down right out of it for her to ignore it any longer. She must have picked up that darn flu bug that had been making the rounds of the *Planet* lately. Lois was glad that she’d made an appointment with her doctor for 9 o’clock this morning. She dragged her tired body out of bed and headed to the shower. Finishing her morning routine Lois brushed her hair, forgoing make-up, and dressed in jeans and a sweater. Since she was sure she had the flu she planned on coming straight home and going to bed so there was no need to dress for the newsroom. Since her stomach rebelled at the thought of breakfast she left her apartment without eating.

Traffic was heavier than normal, thanks to the light rain that was falling, and it made her five minutes late for her appointment.

“I’m sorry, I’m late. Traffic was horrendous,” Lois said as she filled in the sign-in sheet.

“Don’t worry Lois, the doctor got here late too because of the traffic so you’re actually right on time. Why don’t you follow me to exam room 4?”

Lois accompanied the nurse to the assigned room where she was weighed, and where her blood pressure and temperature were taken. The nurse noted the results in her file and told her the doctor would be with her in a moment; then she left, closing the door behind her.

Five minutes later Dr. Green strode into the room. “Hello Lois. Feeling poorly are you?”

“Yeah Doc, I think I’ve picked up the flu bug that’s been running around at work.”

“There’s a lot of that going around.” He glanced at the chart, frowning. “Hmm, you don’t seem to be running a fever. Here let me double check.”

Dr. Green pulled the thermometer out of the dispenser, put on a new plastic tip and stuck it under Lois’s tongue. The machine beeped and he removed the probe, looking at the results. “Nope, no fever. If you had the flu, you should be running some kind of fever.”

“Well, I’ve got all the other symptoms, I’m tired all the time, I’m nauseous and my body hurts,” she said frustrated.

“Why don’t I take a blood sample and we’ll see if anything turns up?” The doctor withdrew a vial of blood and sent it to the

in-house lab for analysis. Lois waited impatiently for 30 minutes before the doctor returned.

“Well, you’re not sick, Lois,” Dr. Green said with a smile.

“What do you mean, I’m not sick. I feel like something the cat dragged in!” she said sharply.

“I can give you something that will help that, don’t worry. Lois, you’re pregnant.”

The silence in the room was deafening. She couldn’t have heard him correctly, could she? Pregnant? How could she be pregnant? She’d been on the pill for years to regulate her cycle. He had to be wrong.

“I can’t be pregnant, your results are wrong,” she said stubbornly. “You probably got my test mixed up with someone else’s.”

“No, Lois, we didn’t make a mistake. I had a second tech verify the results and it was your sample they used, I verified that myself.”

“I’m on the PILL!” she said loudly. “How could I be pregnant when I’m on the Pill?”

“I know the chances are small but the Pill *is* only 99% effective, Lois. It’s rare, but not unheard of.”

Lois sat silently, lost in thought. Pregnant. She was PREGNANT! Oh God, what was she going to do? Superman! It’s was all his fault, him and his darn super-sperm! ‘He’s going to pay for this,’ she vowed.

“Lois? Are you OK?” the doctor asked gently.

“No, I’m not OK, I’m in shock, frankly,” Lois said agitatedly.

“I can understand that, you obviously weren’t expecting to be pregnant.” The doctor pulled out a prescription pad and wrote out an order for prenatal vitamins. “Here, Lois, have this filled and take one each day with food. Your fatigue should lessen soon. We can give you something for the nausea if it becomes too bothersome; but if you can get by without it, you’d be better off. Do you have an OB/GYN or would you like me to recommend one?”

“Huh?” Lois said as her attention returned to the doctor.

“An OB/GYN, Lois. Do you have one or would you like me to recommend one?” the doctor said gently.

“No, no need for that, I have one, thank you.”

“OK then, Lois, you can go now, unless there’s something else?”

“No, nothing else,” Lois said listlessly. “Thanks, I guess.”

“You take care, Lois.”

Lois was standing in front of her apartment door two hours later, though she had no idea how she’d gotten there or where she’d been in the interim. After unlocking her locks she pushed the door closed behind her and flopped onto her couch. She glanced at the answering machine and saw that there was one message waiting for her. She didn’t have to guess who the message was from. Pressing the button the voice she expected emerged from the machine.

“Hello, Darlin’? Since you’re not here and you’re not there I guess you haven’t gotten back from the doctor’s yet. Give me a call if I don’t see you first.”

She picked up the phone and called Perry, telling him she had the flu and she’d be taking the rest of the day off. He told her to take the next day as well but she wasn’t sure she’d need it. She reassured him she’d be fine as she ended the call. Lois looked around the room but it didn’t seem any different than it did this morning. Shouldn’t there be some difference? After all, this morning she thought she was sick and now she was pregnant! She was feeling so very tired that her bed sounded like her best option. Lois dragged herself off the couch and stumbled to her bedroom. She pulled off her jeans and sweater and climbed into the unmade bed. She was asleep in seconds.

Lois awoke the next morning feeling slightly better than she’d been feeling the last few days, so she chanced a little toast with jelly for breakfast. Just when she thought she’d made it, her stomach rebelled and her breakfast ended up in the toilet along with half her intestines, or at least it felt that way. She stood shakily, resting her hands on the sink as she tried to quell the feeling of nausea that was threatening to drive her to her knees once again; but a few deep breaths managed to settle her rebellious stomach, at least for now.

Seating herself at her table, she stared off into space, pondering her situation. Pregnant! She was pregnant!!! One lousy time with Superman and she gets knocked up! God, her luck with men was certainly running true to form! The last time she’d seen Superman, before last week that is, was the night she’d humiliated herself in front of him when she’d declared her feelings and he’d rejected her out of hand. That smart-aleck comment about a lead-lined robe still stung and now she was pregnant with the man’s baby!

There was only one option, of course: termination. She’d always been on the side of a woman’s right to choose and this situation called for it if any situation did. She didn’t love Superman, not any more. He *obviously* didn’t love her. He’d turned her down as cruelly as any man could, and then he’d made himself scarce while she married the man he probably knew was a master criminal. Lois certainly wasn’t ready to become a mother right now, maybe not ever. She’d been making great progress in the rebuilding of her reputation as the best reporter in the city and she wasn’t going to let a baby which neither of them wanted derail that process. So, the only other decision to make was whether to tell the father or just terminate the pregnancy and leave him none the wiser.

Lois was really leaning towards not telling him. Telling Superman was going to be one of the most difficult things she’d ever done given the circumstances of the conception. She’d thought herself safe at the time, having been on the Pill for years, but that was not the case. The 1% chance of pregnancy with the Pill had caught them and now they had to deal with the aftermath. But the more she thought about it, the more she felt terminating the pregnancy without telling Superman was wrong. He deserved to know, at the very least. He was an alien and even though they’d never talked about it he’d probably wondered if he was able to have a baby with a woman of Earth. Someday he might find a woman to love and it would ease his mind to know that compatibility wasn’t an issue.

Her decision made, she rejected the idea of leaning out the window and hollering ‘Help Superman!’ She would talk to Clark. For some weird reason he’d always been able to pass messages along to the superhero, so that’s what she’d ask him to do.

Lois walked into the newsroom late, though she didn’t worry about it since Perry had told her to take the day off anyway. She glanced around, her gaze falling on the object of her search. He was at his desk going over an article with Jimmy. Jimmy was typing with Clark leaning over his shoulder editing his copy. A familiar feeling came over her then as she remembered how, in happier times, he’d done the same with her. Who knew, once the six-month trial was over and she was once again top dog they could partner up once more, on big stories only of course. She walked purposefully over to them, coming to a stop at the side of Clark’s desk.

“Clark, could I talk to you for a second?” She glanced down at Jimmy pointedly. “In private please?”

Jimmy was quick on the uptake and grabbed the two coffee mugs off the desk. “I’ll be back in a few, CK,” he said, scurrying away.

“What can I do for you, Lois?” Clark asked coolly. He’d taken her last dressing down seriously and had only talked to her when

specifically addressed or when business required it.

“I need to talk to Superman. Since you’re the only one who can reliably get messages to him I’d like you to ask him if he could come by my apartment tonight. I’ll keep an eye on the news in case he’s busy, but I really need to talk to him. It’s important.” Lois held Clark’s gaze, giving nothing away as to the subject of her request.

Clark seemed to ponder her request for a few seconds before he nodded. “I’ll pass along the message as soon as I can, Lois, but I can’t guarantee he’ll make it tonight.”

“That’s fine, Clark, just do your best. I appreciate it.” She turned and walked back to her desk to begin her work day.

Lois was seated on her couch, the TV playing softly in the background tuned to LNN. She was reading through her notes on her latest story, making a list of facts she’d need to present when she finally wrote the article. She was deep into her work when she was startled by a rap on her window. Lois put down her notes and made her way to the window, opening it wide.

“Thanks for coming, Superman, I know how busy you are.”

“It sounded urgent, at least that’s the way Clark relayed it to me.” He floated into the apartment, touching down on the floor. Lois led him to the couch where they sat down opposite each other.

“It’s not that urgent but I did want to talk to you before too much time elapsed.” She wrung her hands, looking over at Superman. He was on the edge of the seat looking as uncomfortable as she felt.

“There’s no easy way to say this, Superman, so I’m just going to come out and say it... I’m pregnant and I thought you should know.” She watched as a myriad of emotions played out on his face. Confusion. Surprise. Disbelief. And at last, Joy.

“I... I... I don’t know what to say, Lois,” Superman said, a smile splitting his face. “We’ve made a *baby!*” he said happily. “It proves that I’m not as different as I’ve always thought. When I realized how different I was I lost just about all hope of ever fathering a child. You’ve given me a gift I never thought I’d have; a child of my own.”

“Congratulations, Superman, but I have some bad news for you. I plan to terminate this pregnancy. I wanted you to know before I did it though. I thought it was only fair to you.” Superman’s jaw fell.

“T-t-terminate?” he said his face taking on a painful expression.

“Yes, Superman, terminate. I’m not ready to be a mother now, I may never be, and you certainly can’t be a father! Can you see the headlines now, ‘Superman Brings Baby on Rescue?’” Lois said sarcastically.

“But...”

“No buts, Superman. I’m telling you this as a courtesy, so if you ever find a woman to love, you’ll know you are compatible with an Earth woman.” She stood up, the conversation now at an end. Superman, however, did not rise with her. He was still sitting on the couch, his head in his hands.

“That’s all I had to say, Superman...” Lois said hoping he’d take the hint but it was as if he hadn’t heard a word she’d said. Suddenly he stood up, his eyes boring into hers.

“Lois, you can’t terminate this pregnancy—” Before he could say any more Lois went on the attack.

“*I can’t!* How dare you?! This is *my* body, Superman and I’ll do what I damn well please. I *don’t* need your permission and if you don’t leave right now I’m going to regret not going with my original decision and terminating this pregnancy and not telling you at all!” Her hands were fisted at her sides in frustration, glaring at him, daring him to say another word.

“Lois, please, you don’t understand—”

“No, I don’t and I *don’t* want to! I asked you to leave,

Superman,” she said, pointing towards the window. But Superman wasn’t ready to give up just yet. His invulnerability must have given him some idea that he could withstand her onslaught.

“Lois! I need you to understand,” he begged, his eyes pleading with her.

“Alright, you’ve got five minutes, then you leave!” she said. She stood where she was, her arms crossed over her chest, mimicking Superman’s famous stance.

“Lois, I love you and I want to marry you and raise our baby together, I’ve traveled around the world and I never found another woman like you and I know I never will. This pregnancy, this *child*, is my only opportunity to be a father. I’ve never met another Kryptonian, Lois. This child will be a bridge between Krypton and Earth, so that I won’t be the last of my kind. Please, I beg you, don’t take that chance away from me,” Superman said his eyes pleading with her. She glared at him as if he’d grown another head.

“You *love* me? You want to *marry* me? Where was this when I threw myself at you and you humiliated me?! Besides, we can’t get married, *Superman*. You belong to the world, what kind of life would that be for a child!”

Superman took a deep breath as if coming to a decision. He began to spin in place, a blue, red and yellow blur that slowly coalesced into the form of Clark Kent.

“*We* can get married, Lois. I’m sorry for not telling you before now, and you probably hate me, but I love you and I *want* this baby! Please, can’t you see that, Lois?”

It all made sense now. All the lies, the lousy excuses for running out on her at the most inopportune moments, and most importantly it explained Superman’s actions and comments that horrible night. Oh yes, she understood it all now.

“I can’t believe you, Clark! All this time, all the things you said to me, in both your guises, and you’re one and the same person! No wonder you were so cruel to me that night! You were getting back at me for turning you down earlier that day!”

“NO!” Clark exclaimed, “It wasn’t like that!” At her glare he backed off apologetically. “Well, not totally like that. I *was* upset but I had planned to tell you dispassionately that we couldn’t be together then, when I saw you in that negligee I assumed you were trying to seduce me and I got angry. I should never have said what I did—”

“No, you shouldn’t!”

“And I regretted it from the moment the words left my mouth. But at the time what I said after was true. You didn’t know me, the Superman me, and there were things you might never know. You were dating Lex Luthor, Lois, the one man in this city, in this world, that I could honestly say I hated, and he’d proposed to you! You turn down Clark then ask him to find Superman, what was I supposed to think? It seemed to me that Clark was third on the list and if Superman wasn’t going to declare his love you were going to accept Luthor’s proposal. I felt like I was being blackmailed.”

“Blackmailed?!”

“In a way, though I realized not long after that I was wrong. Look, we both made a lot of mistakes then, Lois. Me more than anyone I suppose, as Clark and as Superman. But I don’t want to make any more mistakes, especially with my baby’s life. Please, Lois, marry me.”

His eyes were begging her to acquiesce to his request but all she could see was a man who had lied to her almost from the day they’d met and who, when he could have admitted the truth and saved her from accepting the proposal of the biggest monster on the planet, kept his mouth shut and let her humiliate herself. He’d been at least partially responsible for the ruination of her reputation and that she could *not* forgive.

“You *scum!*” she cried as she walked up to him and slapped his face. She was surprised that her hand wasn’t broken but that thought only occupied her mind for a fraction of a second.

“You could have stopped all of this then, Clark, and you didn’t! You could have told me your precious secret then and saved me from making the biggest mistake of my life; but did you? Oh, no! You told me to put on a lead-lined robe and flew away! You know I can’t abide liars, Clark, and what you did was *the* worst thing you could have done. We were *friends* Clark, or at least I thought we were! You knew, Clark! You knew he was evil and you still let me marry him! You could have stopped me, told me the truth, but *no!* Your precious secret was more important than me! You don’t love me, Clark! You couldn’t love me and still let me do what I did— not when you, and *only you*, had the power to stop it!” She turned her back to him then, her chest heaving, tears filling her eyes but she refused to let them fall. He was scum and she wasn’t going to shed a tear for him, not for *him!*

“You’re right, Lois,” Clark said with a sigh. “I did let my secret come between us. I’ve always thought of myself as Clark. I grew up as Clark and only became Superman so I could stay in Metropolis. When you fell for Superman and ignored me it hurt, Lois, and that hurt clouded my judgment. I wanted you to love the ordinary man under the suit but my disguise was too good, you never *saw* the ordinary man under the suit. Then I compounded the error by not confiding in you when you needed me most and for that I’m guilty. I can never tell you how sorry I am that I didn’t tell you about myself and to hell with wanting you to love Clark! You were my best friend as Clark and you loved Superman, what was so bad about that?”

“Yeah, what would have been so bad about that, Clark? You did a bang-up job of convincing me you were two people and when I needed my friend, Clark *and* my friend, Superman, he let me down. He let me go off and marry a man he knew was evil, though he had no ‘proof,’” she said sarcastically. “If you’d come clean I’d have believed you, but you couldn’t do that, could you? Your pride wouldn’t let you admit that maybe I respected Superman’s word over my jealous friend! Your damn pride doomed me to the living hell I’m in now, Clark and I will *never* forgive you for that! Now, please *leave!*”

“I’ll leave, Lois, but I have one request. Please hold off on terminating the pregnancy. In spite of everything you’re the only woman I’ll ever love and this is my only chance to be a father. I beg you, Lois, please reconsider. I’ll take the baby once it’s born but I beg you, please let my baby live!” Lois felt the breeze of his changing then she heard the whoosh as he left. She ran to the window, slammed it shut, locking it securely. This was the last time this window would be open for Superman; of that she was sure.

Chapter Eleven

Clark flew high into the stratosphere, his heart pounding with fear. Lois was pregnant with his child and she wanted to terminate the pregnancy! He’d always wondered if he could be a father and now that he had his answer, his child might be taken from him! Lois was furious with him; and understandably so, he admitted. Every word she’d said had been true. He’d let his pride and his secret come between them. He’d let her marry a man he knew to be evil incarnate rather than tell her the truth. She said he couldn’t have really loved her if he could let her do what she did and not stop her when he had the power— and she had a point. How could he claim to love her when he hadn’t done everything in his power to change her mind? She’d given him a perfect opportunity to have everything he’d ever wanted in life, if he’d only been willing to give her the benefit of the doubt. She was right, Clark was her best friend and she loved Superman, what would have been so bad about taking what she was offering and telling her the truth? In the cold light of Lois’s anger he realized the truth: it wouldn’t have been bad. It would have been wonderful. And he’d thrown it all away.

He needed to talk; and since talking to Lois was definitely out,

he decided to go to the only other place he felt safe, so he turned and took off towards Smallville. Seconds later the lights of the farmhouse came into view. It was still early, thank goodness, as he had a feeling this was going to be a long night. Landing in the side yard, Clark spun into his regular clothes and opened the door. He saw his mom and dad just coming into the kitchen as he entered.

“Hi Mom, Dad.”

“Hello, Sweetie.”

“Hi, Son, what brings you by?” Jonathan asked.

“I have something I need to get off my chest, I hope you don’t mind?” he said carefully.

“Of course we don’t mind,” Martha said soothingly. “Why would you even think we would? Come on and sit down, let me get you some milk and pie, then we can talk this all over.”

Martha carved out three pieces of blueberry pie while Jonathan got the milk. They sat at the table, eating silently, each lost in their own thoughts. Clark picked up the last bite of pie with his fork, put it in his mouth and followed it up with the last sip of milk. He’d drawn this out as long as he could and now it was crunch time.

“I got some news from Lois tonight,” he said neutrally.

“Oh,” his mother said, “what news was that?”

“Lois is pregnant,” he said emotionlessly.

“That’s good news... isn’t it?” Jonathan said.

“Normally I’d say yes, but in this case, no. . . . Lois wants to terminate the pregnancy.” There, he’d got it out. Those words were the hardest he’d ever had to say.

“Oh my,” Martha said, her hand flying to her chest to press against her heart. “Oh honey, I don’t know what to say.”

Jonathan sat stunned, staring at Clark, no words coming from his mouth even though his lips were moving.

“When she told me what she wanted to do I got upset and told her she couldn’t. You can imagine how well *that* went over...”

Martha reached out and held Clark’s hand. “I can imagine,” she said with a slight smile.

“Yeah well after the explosion I apologized and I begged her to change her mind. I don’t know if she’s going to listen or not, I can only hope...” Clark’s voice broke at this point and he paused to gather himself before continuing, “I told her I’m Superman and that I, Clark, wanted to marry her. She didn’t take the revelation well either. She called me every name in the book; and when I told her I loved her, she called me a liar, which I guess I am. I know there’s no chance of ever getting together now, I just hope that she’ll change her mind and give my baby a chance.”

“Oh, Clark, I’m so sorry,” Martha said, squeezing his hand a little tighter.

“So am I, Mom. I thought if I told her my secret, she’d realize we could be together; but that just made things worse,” he said, his heart breaking. “Anyway, I made her a proposition. If she would carry the child to term I’d take all responsibility for it after that. All I want from her is my child.”

“And what did she say to that, Clark?” Jonathan said gently.

“She didn’t say anything, not yet. I think she’ll make the right decision once she has a chance to think things through; but I’m scared. I’m scared to death that she’s going to kill my child,” Clark said with tears pouring down his face.

Martha jumped up and wrapped her arms around her son, rocking him and trying to soothe him as sobs wracked his body. He felt his father’s arms wrap around him as well; and while it offered comfort, it caused him to sob even harder. Silence reigned in the kitchen for a long time before Clark regained his voice.

“Thanks, Mom, Dad. I knew coming here tonight was the right thing to do. I feel a little better now.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how did this happen? I mean I didn’t think you and Lois were getting along all that well lately,” Martha asked gently. Clark’s ears turned bright red as he hung his head.

"It was unplanned, Mom. I found Lois plummeting to the street after someone had thrown her off a building."

"Oh, my God!" Martha said, her fingers going to her mouth shakily.

"I barely saved her, Mom, it was that close. She'd been bound and gagged and it was a miracle that I happened to be flying near that area at the time. I heard muffled screaming and when I saw who it was I flew faster than I ever have, I think. I took her home, released her and after that it was all a blur. One minute we were holding on to each other for dear life and the next we were getting dressed and she was asking me to leave. I never even thought about the consequences; we were never sure I could be a father, so I didn't give it a second thought. Lois said it was a mistake brought on by strong emotions and she wanted to put the whole thing behind her. I agreed, not knowing what to say, until tonight."

Martha and Jonathan returned to their chairs, wiping their own tears from their faces.

"You know, growing up in the 60's I was all for a woman's right to choose," Martha said ironically. "It's amazing how your viewpoint changes when *your* grandchild is that 'choice'. I guess you never know how you'll react to a particular situation until you're forced to live it. ... I think you're right, Clark. Lois is a good person and she knows how special this child is to you. I think she'll do the right thing."

"I sure hope so, Mom. I don't know what I'll do if she says no," he said, his voice threatening to break again.

"Now don't go borrowing trouble, Clark. We'll deal with that *if* the time comes," Martha said.

"Thanks, Mom," he said as he stood up from the table. "Well I'd better get home, it's getting late. I'll call you as soon as I know something definite."

Martha and Jonathan rose with their son and the family shared a hug.

"Take care, Son. Keep thinking good thoughts and don't you hesitate to call or stop by if the pressure gets to you," Jonathan said.

Clark clapped his hand on his Dad's shoulder. "Thanks, Dad, I will. Good night."

Clark exited the kitchen, spun into the suit and took off towards Metropolis.

The next morning Clark was waiting for Lois when she got off the elevator. He handed her a cup of coffee from the shop in the lobby along with her favorite croissants from the bakery in France. He gestured towards the conference room, silently asking her to precede him. He smiled gratefully as she acquiesced. He opened the door for her then closed and locked it behind him. He closed the blinds then he sat across from her and waited while she pulled a croissant from the bag and took a sip of her coffee.

"I hope you don't mind Lois but I wanted to talk to you, about... the baby."

"Go on," she said, sipping her coffee but giving nothing away as to her feelings.

"I just wanted to plead with you to at least consider not terminating the baby. I know it will be difficult for you, carrying it to term, and it's not something you ever wanted, but I beg you, please don't do this thing."

"I've been thinking since you left last night. I can see your point of view, sort of at least. I *certainly* don't believe that baloney you tried to feed me about loving only me but you were sincere last night and now today. I believe you really do want this baby—"

"I *do* Lois! I want it more than anything in the world! I'll do *anything* you want, Lois, but please don't kill my baby!" Tears filled Clark's eyes as he begged the only woman he'd ever love for the life of his child.

"I need some time to consider all the consequences, Clark. I just found out two days ago that I was pregnant and I just found

out last night that you want the baby. There are a lot of things to consider so I ask you to give me until this time next week to come to a decision."

Clark's shoulders sagged visibly; Lois hadn't agreed to let the baby live. But at least he had a chance. Lois wasn't dismissing his request out of hand. He felt reasonably certain now that she'd come to agree with him; but, knowing Lois, he couldn't be completely sure. Even so, his heart was filled with hope.

"I agree, Lois. I want to say that you're being more than fair and probably giving me more consideration than I deserve, but I'm grateful to you for it. I accept your proposal and I look forward to your decision next week.

Clark was on pins and needles all week, but he lived up to his word. He hadn't pressured Lois one time. He continued to treat her as he had been treating her lately: in a coolly professional manner. Despite his best efforts to maintain an air of normalcy, his coworkers knew something was wrong with the usually happy reporter. Clark noticed the sympathetic looks he got from many of them and, while he appreciated the sentiment, he hoped Lois hadn't noticed. He didn't want her to think he'd said anything to anyone. He didn't want anything to wreck his chances of keeping his baby.

Jimmy Olsen walked up to Clark's desk, dropping a stack of files on the corner.

"Thanks, Jim. I appreciate you turning this around so quickly. You're really doing well and I'm glad you're my partner."

"No problem, CK. I'd do anything for you, you know that."

"Yeah, I do. You're a good friend, Jim."

"Speaking of that, what's wrong, CK? Something's bothering you; I can tell."

"I'm sorry, Jim, but it's nothing I can discuss. Please don't ask any more questions, OK? I'd love to tell you but I just can't."

"Sure, CK, sure. Hang in there. Whatever it is, I hope things work out for you," Jimmy said as he walked away to meet a source for their story.

'I hope so Jim, I really hope so,' Clark thought sadly.

Lois woke up late that Saturday because she'd gotten to bed so late the night before. She'd been on a stake-out of a suspected Intergang warehouse; but, last night at least, nothing out of the ordinary happened—the whole evening had been a bust, so all through the evening she'd pondered Clark's request instead; but she still hadn't come to a definite decision.

She'd spent every waking moment outside of work deep in thought. She'd promised Clark she'd give due consideration to his request and out of respect for him and their former friendship, she had. Lois had weighed the pros and cons very carefully. While it would be so much easier on her to just terminate the pregnancy, the hurt she'd seen in Clark's eyes when she'd first told him of her plans tore at her heart still. Her ruminations were interrupted by bouts of morning sickness. She'd rush to her bathroom, losing what little remained in her stomach. She'd wiped her mouth with some tissue, rinse, then brush her teeth, trying to get the awful taste out of her mouth.

'You're going to pay for this, Clark,' she'd thought ruefully after this most recent bout. No matter how awful she felt now she knew she couldn't live with herself if she made Clark's worst fears come true. She looked down and rubbed her belly. "Let's get this over with, huh, baby. Let's call your daddy and give him the news."

Clark woke early, despite having gotten to bed less than two hours ago. Sleep just wouldn't come. He was too keyed up to sleep, so he gave up the pretense. Climbing out of bed, he decided to take a shower and make an early patrol. At least that would occupy his mind, he hoped.

He returned to his apartment three hours later, exhausted mentally, if not physically. When was Lois going to call? Would she call today? Would she make him wait until the week was up? The longer it took for her to give him her answer the more his heart sank because he feared that only bad news would cause her to put it off. He sat down on his couch only to jump right back up. He couldn't even relax enough to sit down! Tea. He'd make a pot of tea, at least that would give him something to do. Clark was filling the teapot when the phone rang. Dropping the pot he picked up the phone before the pot had a chance to hit the bottom of the sink.

"He—hello?" he said nervously.

"Hi, Clark," Lois said shyly.

"Hi, Lois, how are you this morning?" he asked, trying to sound calm when he was anything but.

"Not too bad, Clark, except for a bout of morning sickness..."

"I'm sorry, Lois," Clark said sincerely.

"Yeah, well, it's over now. ... Are you doing anything right now? Could you come over?"

"Sure, I'll be right over, Lois," Clark said softly.

"I'll leave the window open."

Lois had barely set the phone back in its cradle when there was a knock on her window. "It's open!" she called.

Superman swung the window open and floated through, closing it behind him. He spun in place and Clark appeared out of the vortex.

"Sit down, Clark. Would you like some coffee? It's already made," she said.

"Since it's already made, yes, thank you," he said, seating himself on one of her couches.

Lois filled a tray with the pot, cups, cream and sugar and carried it to her living room. She set the tray on the coffee table, seated herself opposite him, and fixed her cup while he fixed his. She took a sip to allow her time to form her thoughts.

"I'm not going to drag this out, Clark. I'm keeping the baby." The expression on his face made the decision and all the coming difficulty worth it. He graced her with his megawatt smile all the while tears were streaming down his cheeks. It looked like he wanted to speak a number of times but each time he opened his mouth, nothing came out. Finally, he cleared his throat enough to allow him to speak.

"Thank you, Lois. You don't know how much this means to me," he said reverently.

"I think I do, Clark. I'm glad you're pleased. You were my best friend and I know you'll make a great dad, you deserve the chance."

"I won't disappoint you, Lois, I'll be the best dad I can be, you'll see."

"No, I won't actually, Clark. There's something else I need to tell you."

"I don't understand, Lois. What are you talking about?"

"There's a condition to my decision. I don't think I'm being unreasonable and I hope you'll agree. ... After the baby is born I want you to leave the *Daily Planet* and Metropolis. I couldn't stand to see you and the baby every day; it would hurt too much. As much as I don't want to be a mother, I don't want it thrown in my face either. Will you do this, Clark? Will you give up the *Daily Planet* for your child?" Lois asked.

"There's no decision to make, Lois," Clark said resolutely. "I'd give up my life for this child. I accept your conditions. I think you're making a mistake though. I think you'd be a wonderful mother if you'd only give yourself a chance." Before Lois could go on the attack Clark cut her off. "I know, I know, you're convinced you'll be a lousy mother and a lousy wife, and you have plans for yourself, and there we disagree. However I respect your decision and I'll say no more."

It took them another few hours to nail down all the details of how and when they would tell Perry and the staff. Lois had worked out most of her story during the previous week so Clark only had minor suggestions to help improve believability. They knew they'd have to consult with a lawyer, since they were not married. Lois would have to relinquish her parental rights and allow Clark to adopt his child.

With their plans finalized, Clark left Lois's apartment with mixed emotions. He was ecstatic that Lois had agreed to keep the baby, but he was deeply saddened that as soon as it was born he'd be leaving Lois, the *Daily Planet* and Metropolis.

Now that Lois had decided to carry the baby to term she realized that, however she might not want to, she had to tell her parents and her sister of her decision as there was no way she was going to be able to hide a pregnancy from them.

Picking up her phone she dialed her mother's number. "Hello? Hello, Mother, it's Lois."

"Hello, dear, it's good to hear from you, though it's not often enough I must say." Lois rolled her eyes, thinking that this was going to be harder than she thought.

"I know, Mother and I'm sorry but work keeps me so busy. Anyway, the reason I called is I need you to come to my apartment tonight, say 7 o'clock?"

"There's nothing wrong, is there dear?" Ellen asked sounding worried.

"No, Mother, there's nothing wrong. I just need to tell you something and I can't do it over the phone. Oh, by the way, daddy will be here too." Lois shrank back, waiting for the explosion she was sure was coming.

"WHAT! You know I can't be in the same room as that man, Lois. What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that you and daddy could put your differences aside for a few minutes for you daughter. I need you to come, Mother. I promise I won't keep you any longer than necessary." Ellen was quiet for a few moments then Lois heard a sigh.

"All right, I'll be there but don't expect me to be cordial."

"As long as there's no fighting, that's all I ask. Goodbye, Mother, I'll see you tonight."

"All right, goodbye. I'll see you tonight." Lois hung up the phone, heaving a relieved sigh. Taking a deep breath, she dialed Sam Lane's number.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Daddy."

"Princess! It's good to hear your voice."

"You too, Daddy. I need you to come to my place tonight at 7 o'clock, I uh... have something to tell you, actually you and Mother."

"Your mother is going to be there?"

"Yes, I made her promise not to fight and she agreed. I need you here, Daddy, please?" Sam Lane paused and Lois could hear him take a deep breath.

"All right, Princess, I'll be there. 7 o'clock?"

"Yes, thanks, Daddy. I have to get back to work, I'll see you tonight."

"Bye, Princess, see you then."

Lois looked at the clock on her kitchen wall, noting the time as 6:30. Getting up from her couch she walked into the kitchen to put on a pot of coffee. She figured if she offered them some refreshments *maybe* they'd be civil. Even so, she dreaded the conversation to come.

At ten minutes to seven there was a knock on her door. Lois unlocked all five locks and opened the door to find her mother on the landing.

"Mother! Come in, please sit down. Would you like some coffee?"

“He’s not here yet, is he?” Ellen glanced around the room with a pinched look on her face.

“No, Mother, he’s not. He’s not due for another ten minutes. Can I get you some coffee?” Lois offered again, following her mother into the living room. Ellen sat down on the couch to the right of the coffee table, setting her handbag on the floor.

“Coffee sounds good, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“No trouble at all. It’s all made, I’ll be right back.” Lois put cups, saucers, sugar and milk on the tray along with a small plate of cookies. Walking back into the living room she placed the tray on the coffee table and poured a cup for herself and Ellen. Just then a knock sounded on the door.

“That’ll be Daddy, be right back.” Lois opened the door to her father. “Daddy, come in, please.” Sam Lane entered the apartment and Lois closed the door behind him. Sam extended his arms, enveloping Lois in a hug.

“It’s good to see you, Princess. So, what is this all about?” Lois returned the hug then stepped away.

“It’s good to see you too, Daddy. Please, sit down. Would you like some coffee?” Sam seated himself at the opposite end of the same couch Ellen was already seated on, both of them as far away from each other as they could and still be on the same piece of furniture.

“Yes, thank you,” Sam said extending his hand to take the coffee that Lois had poured. Lois sat opposite them on the other couch, picking up her cup of coffee. After taking a quick sip, Lois took a deep cleansing breath and began her story.

“Thank you both for coming tonight. I have something important to tell you and I didn’t want to have to say this twice.”

“You’re not sick, are you?” Ellen asked concernedly.

“No, Mother, I’m fine. It’s nothing like that. I’m... pregnant.” Lois blurted that last part out, watching her parent’s faces for how they would react. Ellen looked to be shocked and, it seemed, disappointed while Sam’s face reflected understanding and, she hoped, support.

“How did this happen?” Ellen asked accusingly. Lois looked at her mother with a look that said ‘you *know* how this happened’. “Sorry, I meant the circumstances, not the mechanics!” Ellen said, exasperated.

“Yes, Princess, can you explain?” Sam added more calmly.

“It was a couple of months ago, I was walking by the Lexor when I saw an old boyfriend from college, Steven—”

“I don’t remember you ever talking about anyone named Steven,” Ellen interrupted.

“We didn’t date very long and it was my freshman year. He transferred to another school that year and I never saw him again. I’d heard that he’d moved to Switzerland for his job a few years later. Anyway, he recognized me and invited me to dinner. We had a wonderful meal and a few drinks then he invited me up to his room for a nightcap. We had a wonderful evening and, since he was leaving to go back to Switzerland since the conference he was in town for ended the next day, I didn’t think any more about it. That is until a week ago, I thought I’d caught the bug that was making the rounds at work so I went to my doctor and that’s when I found out I was pregnant.” Lois took a deep breath then a sip of her coffee.

“Didn’t you use protection?” Ellen asked judgmentally.

“Of course, Mother, but you, as a nurse, surely know that no method of birth control is 100% effective,” Lois replied, not a little upset at having been treated like a child.

“So, what are you going to do now, Princess?” Sam asked gently.

“I’m going to carry the baby to term then give it up for adoption. I figure if this little one went to all this trouble the least I could do is to give him or her a chance at a good life. That’s the real reason I wanted to tell you, I know I couldn’t hide being pregnant so this was the best way to let you know what happened

and what my plans are for the future.” Lois took a sip of coffee but, finding it had gone cool, she set the cup down on the table.

“I’m proud of you, Princess. I know pregnancy is not easy on a woman but it’s nice to see you’re handling this responsibly.” Sam said pride evident in his expression.

“Yes, Dear, it’s very commendable for you to carry this child to term.” Ellen agreed.

“Thank you both, you know I’ve always believed in a woman’s right to choose and in this case I choose life for this baby.” Lois and her parents chatted for a while longer then Sam and Ellen left together with Lois closing and locking her door behind them. Lois returned to her couch to dial one more number.

“Hello?”

“Hey Luce, it’s me,” Lois said softly.

“Lois! How are you? What’s up?”

“I’m well and what’s up is the reason I called.”

“Hmm, sounds important, so please tell me.”

“Lucy, I’m pregnant,” Lois said quietly.

“Did you say ‘pregnant’?!” Lucy asked surprised.

“Yep, that’s what I said.”

“Who’s the father?”

“Clark...”

“Clark! So, when are you getting married and can I be Maid of Honor?”

“We’re not getting married. I’m giving the baby to him to raise. I’m *certainly* not ready to be a mother and I don’t know if I will ever be. I was going to have an abortion but Clark begged me to let him raise the baby and I agreed, with one condition, that he take the baby and leave Metropolis forever.” Lois sat back relieved to have gotten her speech completed without interruption.

“And he agreed?” Lucy asked, sounding shocked.

“Oh yes, he agreed even before I told him what the condition was. He really wants this baby, Luce and I just couldn’t disappoint him, no matter how mad at him I am.”

“Would you tell me how this all happened?” Lucy asked curiously.

“You know how I told you that Mr. Stern gave me six months to prove myself worthy to keep around?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’ve been working really hard, taking every investigation I could get my hands on. Perry and Clark both nagged me to death about it being too dangerous, that I was neglecting my health, but I made it crystal clear that I didn’t care what happened to me, I was going to prove I was still the best reporter in this city.”

“So, what does that have to do with your... situation?”

“I’m coming to that. A person who I thought was a source made an appointment with me and I left without telling anyone where I was going. It turned out that Clark followed me, sticking to the shadows, just in case I guess. Anyway, it was a trap and this person was ready to kill me when Clark intervened. The guy ran off and Clark hustled me to my apartment. I guess we were both pretty shaken up because as soon as the door was closed I attacked him and he didn’t resist. The next thing I knew we were half-naked on the floor having had sex just inside the door.”

“You didn’t!” Lucy exclaimed. “So, what happened then?”

“We both instantly regretted what we’d done and we agreed never to speak of it again. I pushed him out the door and life went on as before. A couple of months later I thought I had a bug that was making the rounds of the newsroom and that’s when I found out I was pregnant. Clark, of course, offered to marry me and I went off on him. I told him I wasn’t going to be a mother and I planned to abort the baby but I thought, as the father, he had the right to know. He was horrified and begged me to keep the baby, telling me he loved me and wouldn’t ever find anyone else to love and this was his only chance to be a father.

“That’s when I told him I’d think about it and let him know. I

went back and forth for a week then I came to the decision to carry the baby to term but in return he had to take the baby and leave Metropolis forever. I know Clark, he'd bring that baby in to work and he'd try to wear me down and I wasn't going to have that. As I said, he agreed so that's where we are now."

"Wow, that's some story. Have you told mom and dad?"

"Yes, I had them over here tonight, just before I called you as a matter of fact."

"That must have been fun!"

"It went about as you'd expect. Mother was judgmental and upset but Daddy was actually supportive."

"What did they say when you told them Clark was the father?"

"I didn't. I told them that it was an old boyfriend from college and we'd had a one-night stand. I don't *ever* want them to know who the real father is, you got that?" Lois said pointedly.

"Got it, loud and clear. I promise I won't tell a soul."

"Thanks, Luce, I'm counting on you. Also, when it comes time to deliver this baby I'm going to need some help, so can you stay with me for a couple of weeks?"

"Of course, you can count on me."

"Thanks, Lucy, look, I'm kind of tired so I'm going to let you go, okay?"

"Sure thing. Take it easy, okay and if you need anyone to talk to, I'm here." Lucy said sincerely.

"Thanks, good night." Lois hung up the phone, carried the tray back into the kitchen, then she made her way into her bedroom. Sleep sounded really good right about then.

Chapter Twelve

The knock on the door surprised Martha Kent out of her funk. She'd been distracted all day, as had her husband, worrying about the decision Lois Lane was going to make. It had frustrated her to no end when she thought that her grandchild might not get to live! As much as she'd chided Clark about not borrowing trouble, she was finding it difficult to follow her own advice. She looked up from the coffee that had gone cold long ago to see her son coming through the door. As much as she wanted to ask the question foremost in her mind, her mouth refused to cooperate, so instead she launched herself into her son's arms and held him tight.

"It's OK, Mom, it's OK," Clark said hugging his mother as tight as he dared.

Martha looked into her son's tear streaked face. "Is she...?"

"Yes, Mom, she is," he said with a smile.

It was a good thing Clark was still holding her or she would have collapsed right there on the floor. "Oh, thank God, Clark, thank God!"

Hearing the commotion Jonathan entered the kitchen. "Martha... Clark?"

"She's keeping the baby, Dad," Clark said, smiling happily.

Jonathan rushed to his wife and son, wrapping them in his strong arms. Nothing was said for many minutes— verbal communication was not needed; they said everything they wanted to with their eyes and with their arms wrapped around each other.

Breaking the combined hug, Clark directed his parents to their chairs while he sat opposite them at the table. Martha, unable to contain her happiness, asked the next question that was plaguing her.

"So are you and Lois going to get married?" she asked carefully.

Clark looked sad but resolute. "No, Mom, we're not. As a matter of fact there are some details to our agreement that I need to discuss with you and dad."

The confused look on Jonathan's face mirrored her own, she was sure. "Details? Agreement? What are you talking about, Clark?" Martha asked.

Clark filled his parents in on the agreement he and Lois had reached over the next few minutes. He finished with a sigh. "So,

Mom, Dad, would it be OK if I came home to live, with my child?"

"Of course, Son!" Jonathan said, "We wouldn't have it any other way. We'll have to expand the house a bit, but with some super help it shouldn't be difficult."

"We wouldn't have you and our grandchild living anywhere else, Clark, so don't even think about any other arrangements," Martha said vehemently.

"Thanks, Mom, Dad. I knew I could count on you."

"Have you given any thoughts to what you're going to do after the baby is born? For work, I mean?" Martha asked.

"Actually I have. I'm going to look around town for whatever I can do long before the birth so I'll have everything in place. I'm also planning to write up my world travels. I've been toying with the idea for a long time and this is the best opportunity I'll have. If they take off like I hope they will, I should be able to do all right. Of course I'll be contributing to household expenses, and that's non-negotiable," Clark said resolutely.

"Of course, Son. It's important for a man to provide for his family. I understand completely," Jonathan said.

"Thanks, Dad."

The remainder of the evening was spent in pleasant conversation and in making plans for the upcoming addition to the farm house.

Perry White looked up to see Lois hovering outside his door. "Come in, Lois, what can I do for you?"

Lois entered, nervously it seemed, closed the door behind her, and sat down opposite him. She wrung her hands and fidgeted for a few seconds but still she didn't speak.

"Lois, honey, did you have something you wanted to say?" he asked gently.

"Um, yeah Perry, I do, but I don't quite know how to begin."

"Well why don't you start at the beginning and go from there. Take your time, I've got all day."

"Well it's nothing that's going to affect things around here for a while but knowing you you'll find out before long, so I figured I'd tell you now and ask for your help."

"I'm sorry, but I didn't understand a word of that."

"I know, and I'm sorry but I'm a little upset and still in shock. Remember when I was out last week? I thought I'd had the flu?"

"Yeah, but what's that got to do with this, whatever this is?"

"Well it wasn't the flu... I'm pregnant." Perry's face was almost a mirror image of Clark's when she'd told him. His jaw dropped and he was at a loss for words.

"Umm... uh... congratulations?" he offered ineffectually.

"Not really, Perry. It was a complete surprise to me. A few weeks ago I met up with an old college boyfriend and one thing led to another and... well we were intimate."

"You don't have to..."

"I know, I want you to know so you can help quash the rumors that are sure to start. Anyway, I've been on the Pill for medical reasons for years, so I didn't think twice about protection. It was a one-time thing and he's gone back to Europe where he lives now."

"Are you gonna tell him?"

"No, he's a confirmed bachelor and you know *my* thoughts on motherhood so I see no advantage in telling him."

"So, about the baby?" Perry asked, expectantly.

"While I've always supported a woman's right to choose, I can't terminate this pregnancy. We did everything we could to avoid pregnancy and it still happened, so I think fate is involved somehow and this baby needs to be born. ... I'm going to give it up for adoption."

"I think that's wonderful, Lois," Perry said with a fatherly smile. "There are a lot of young couples dying to have a baby. I'm sure this baby will find a wonderful home."

"I know it will, Perry, I know it will," she said. She knew

Clark's parents; and while their son was a liar, she knew this baby would be loved.

"Thanks for telling me, Honey, and I'll support you in every way I can. I think if you're honest with people, they'll respect you for what you're doing."

"Even Ralph?" she asked sarcastically.

"Well, maybe not him, but you leave him to me, Darlin'. If he gets out of line once I'll be on him like a hound dog on a rabbit!"

Lois chuckled then left the office smiling, pleased that her cover story had gone over so well.

Perry sat back in his chair pondering the story Lois had just told. He had to admit, it was good, real good, and if he hadn't known her as well as he did, he'd have fallen for it, hook, line and sinker. He believed she'd gotten pregnant by a friend alright, but it wasn't an old college friend; he'd stake his Elvis record collection on that. He was surprised though. He'd have sworn that Lois and Clark weren't that close, especially lately. She'd been working her stories, building her reputation, and proving to Mr. Stern that he'd made the right decision in keeping her on staff. As a matter of fact, things had been decidedly frosty between them over the last few weeks. No matter, he was sure that Clark Kent was the father of this baby. Perry resolved to keep an eye on that boy a little closer. Lois might be able to hide her feelings under that rough exterior of hers, but Clark was an open book. If he had to guess, he'd have his answer in a couple of days.

Two days later Perry called Clark into his office.

"Sit down, Son," Perry said, extending his arm towards one of the two chairs in front of his desk.

"What's up, Chief?" Clark asked, curiously.

"I've been keeping an eye on you and Jimmy. I want to make your partnership permanent."

"Permanent? But Lois and I..."

"Aren't getting along any better than you have been since we reopened, Clark. In fact, if anything, I'd say things have deteriorated in the last few weeks. Any idea why that is?" Perry watched as Clark squirmed and fidgeted and he had his answer. Clark was the father of Lois's baby, but neither of them would ever admit it.

"Not really, Chief," Clark said nervously. "I might have mentioned her burning the candle at both ends one too many times, I guess. She read me the riot act a few weeks ago, maybe that's it."

"Yeah, maybe. As much as you two were a heck of a team I just don't see a thaw in relations on the horizon. Do you?"

"No, Chief," Clark said reluctantly, "No, I don't."

"Okay then. You and Jimmy are permanent partners. He's really blossomed under your tutelage. I want you to keep up the good work. Who knows? Maybe you two will be nominated for a Kerth this year!"

Clark stood, gazing at Perry with a wistful expression. "Thanks, Chief, we'll give it our best shot." He left the office, closing the door behind him. Perry smiled to himself wistfully as well. Kent and Olsen made a decent team but no team could ever beat Lane and Kent.

Clark found that working with Jimmy, while interesting, was no longer fulfilling to him. He had hoped that once Lois's six-month self-imposed exile was over, they could resume their partnership. Now, however, that option was no longer on the table. Lois had never forgiven him for his deceit and had made it plain that, even without the baby, she'd never work with him again. Jimmy had learned just about everything he could from Clark; in another month or so he'd be a good solid journalist, so Clark decided to start his job search in Kansas a little early. Given the situation in the newsroom, he was sure Lois would not complain.

She'd made it more than plain that she wanted nothing to do with him. Clark had started off bringing her coffee and donuts, trying to smooth over their differences but she, once again, let him know his attentions were not wanted.

It was killing him now to work near her every day, knowing she was carrying his child and also knowing that she wanted nothing to do with him. He contacted his old boss at the *Smallville Post* to see if he knew of anyone looking for a reporter/editor. As it turned out, the man had been toying with the idea of retiring but had been not been seriously looking. If Clark were interested, he'd firm up his plans immediately. Clark confirmed that he'd love to take over for him, once he'd served out his notice to the *Daily Planet*, of course. They talked for another hour, banging out the details of the transfer, finally coming to an agreement on Clark giving two months' notice to the *Planet* and then working a month together before Clark would take over permanently. Plans made, Clark hung up, feeling better than he had in a while. Soon the torture of working with Lois every day would be over.

With his plans in Smallville set, Clark knew that it was time to tell Perry of his plan to leave the *Daily Planet*. While the work at the *Post* would keep him busy, he also had plans to write a series of travel books based on his adventures after college. Since he didn't need as much sleep as humans, he planned to work on his first book in his 'spare' time, though there would be precious little of that for the first few months. The addition to the farm house had been done for months, thanks to super-speed. Once the shell was up and shingled, at normal speed, the inside was finished in a couple of weekends. They'd added two bedrooms upstairs, incorporating his old bedroom as another bathroom, and a large den / office downstairs for his writing and for farm business.

He walked slowly to Perry's office, almost as if he was walking the last mile, which in a way he was. His career at the *Daily Planet* was going to die in a few months and he mourned the loss. The only thing that made it palatable was the anticipation he felt at the impending birth of his child. Clark still didn't know if it was going to be a boy or a girl. Lois didn't want to know and she'd made him promise not to peek either. He knocked on his boss's door. "Got a minute, Chief?" Clark said, closing the door behind him.

Perry put down the article he was editing and leaned back in his chair. With a gesture, he directed Clark to take a seat, and then waited for Clark to speak.

"Chief... I want you to know how much I've enjoyed working for you. It's been a privilege and a pleasure seeing my by-line in the *Daily Planet*."

"It's been my pleasure as well, Clark. You sound awfully serious here, is somethin' wrong?"

Clark swallowed, trying to clear the lump forming in his throat and failing miserably. "Yeah, Chief, there is. I'm very sorry, but I have to give you notice. I'm leaving the *Daily Planet*. I wanted you to know as soon as possible. I won't be leaving for a couple of months though. Hopefully you'll be able to replace me in that time."

"I may be able to hire another reporter, Clark, but I'll never be able to replace you," Perry replied sincerely.

"Thanks, Perry, you don't know how much that means to me."

"I've been afraid of this for a long time, but I knew this day was coming," Perry said sadly.

Clark was surprised at Perry's remark; he couldn't have known Clark was planning to leave. "I'm sorry, Perry, but I'm not following you."

"Clark, I thought you knew me better than this but I guess I'll have to spell it out. I know... everything."

"Everything? ... You know... everything? How... how could you?"

"Lois may be a great actress, but you're a horrible one, Son. I

was suspicious of her story when she first told me, but I didn't want to call her on it. She'd obviously gone to a lot of trouble to come up with a believable lie so she must have had a good reason. Since that time, I've been watching the two of you. Lois, as I said, is a great actress. Nobody would ever know from watching her that she wasn't her usual work obsessed self and that she was trying to do the best she could for an innocent baby. You, on the other hand, wear your heart on your sleeve. I could tell about a week after she started showing that the child Lois is carrying is yours."

"Does everybody know?" Clark asked nervously.

"No, Son, nobody else knows because they don't know you like I do."

"Oh... good. I was afraid that if everybody knew Lois might find out and she'd hate that."

"No, your secret is safe, Clark. Which brings me to why I knew you were going to resign."

"Enlighten me, Perry, I still can't figure out that part."

"Well if you assume that if any part of Lois's story was true it had to be the part about giving up the baby for adoption. If that was true, *and* if you are the father, then it makes sense that you'd have to have help with the baby. That would mean you'd have to move back home so your parents could help you raise the child. Add in the coincidence that you plan to leave before Lois gives birth, well, it didn't take a genius to put the whole thing together."

"Wow, no wonder you're the boss and I only work here.

You've got it completely correct. I couldn't take care of the baby properly here in Metropolis, especially since it would affect my job so much."

"Both your jobs, Son," Perry said softly.

"Both my...? I'm sorry, but you've lost me again."

"Now don't worry, nobody else knows this either, except Lois I assume, but I know about your *other* job as well."

Clark couldn't respond immediately. His heart was racing, and his pulse thundered in his ears. Perry knew!

"How... how long...?"

"How long have I known?" Clark nodded his head.

"Oh about a year I guess. Why did you think I never jumped on your unexplained disappearances? Did you think I was senile? No, I cut you slack because this city needs what you do, Clark. I don't know what is going to happen around here when you leave."

"I've got plans for that, Chief. I'll be around, just not as often."

"I know you'll do your best, but your family comes first. You take good care of that baby and let the world take care of itself, ya hear?"

"Yes, Sir, I hear."

"I have an ulterior motive for tellin' you all this, Son. I want you to feel free to stop by and bring pictures once in a while. Lois may not be interested in seeing her child, but I am. I want you to feel free to stop by any time you're in the city. I'll leave the window unlocked for ya," Perry said, smiling.

Clark smiled for the first time since he'd entered the office. Even though Perry knew his secret, he couldn't feel bad about it. "I promise, Chief. I'll probably bring so many baby pictures you'll get sick of them. You know how new fathers can be."

"I know, Clark, and I'm countin' on it." Perry stood up and extended his hand. "I'm gonna miss ya, Son. If you ever need anythin', you just ask."

Clark rose and clasped his friend's hand. "I will, Perry, I will. Thanks for everything."

"Go on, now, get back to work before I start bawlin'; it wouldn't be good for everybody to see their boss cryin'."

Chapter Thirteen

The newsroom was decorated with balloons and signs wishing Clark good luck in his new life. It was Clark's last day on the job

and his coworkers were throwing him a going away party. The crowd milled about waiting for the guest of honor to arrive.

In the meantime, Clark was going through his exit interview, thereby putting the final stamp on his career at the *Daily Planet*. When he'd first arrived in Metropolis, the sight of the *Daily Planet* building and the big globe out front had given him a feeling of coming home. He was going to miss the place, but when he had the time, he'd stop by, as Superman at least, to see Perry, but it wouldn't be the same.

Clark was in conflict over another situation as well. Lois. Their agreement had put an even greater strain on them, especially these last few months. As Lois grew more and more uncomfortable she became angrier and angrier with Clark. She'd conveniently ignored the fact that she'd agreed to carry the child. She hadn't let an opportunity pass to remind him that it was his fault she was in the predicament she was in. She constantly complained about her back and feet aching but she'd steadfastly refused his offers of a back or foot rub. He couldn't be sure, but he got the impression, at times, that Lois actually hated the child she was carrying, or maybe she just hated him.

After signing the last form, Clark sighed. It was over. He was no longer an employee of the *Daily Planet*. He shook hands with the clerk, smiled and left. He had one more thing to do tonight; the party. Clark hoped it wouldn't last too long because he really wasn't in a celebratory mood.

The ride up the elevator seemed longer than it had ever been, but soon he could hear the murmur of the crowd. The doors opened and he stepped out to the applause of his friends. He smiled at them, but he really didn't feel happy. Walking down the ramp, he shook hands with the men and kissed the cheeks of the women, all of them offering their well-wishes for his future. Clark thanked them and told them he'd miss them, and he really meant it. He'd miss everyone here. The people of the *Daily Planet* were his extended family; a family that had taken him into their bosom and made him feel at home in the big city.

Finally he reached the table where there was a large cake with "Good Luck Clark" written on it. To the right side of the cake presents bearing his name were stacked, and to the left side the coffee service was set up. He turned to face his friends and smiled.

"Thank you all for coming tonight," Clark said, his voice cracking. "I've enjoyed working here so very much. I'm overwhelmed but very grateful for all the love you've shown for a Kansas farm boy trying to make it in the big city." He paused as the crowd chuckled at his statement. "I'm going to miss you all, but at this point in my life I'm needed elsewhere; but please rest assured, my heart will always hold a special place for all of you and for the *Daily Planet*."

The applause was long and sincere as Clark basked in the regard his colleagues held for him. He scanned the faces, memorizing every one of them. He'd miss them all very much, some more than others, but he'd miss them all. Off to his left he saw Lois, sitting in a chair, smiling genuinely at him. He returned her smile with the one he'd always saved for her and her alone. He was pleased to see that she blushed in response. He was going to miss her the most, but to his great regret, he'd probably never see her again. It would be too difficult for him to see her moving on with her life, maybe finding the love he couldn't have. It was probably for the best, but he'd mourn the loss of their friendship for the rest of his life.

The cake was cut, the drinks consumed, and the presents opened. Clark sincerely thanked everyone again and packed his gifts into boxes, making sure the cards were with the gifts so he could send personal notes to the givers. As he was finishing, he felt a hand on his shoulder. Turning, he came face to face with Lois.

"I'm sorry, Clark," she said sincerely. "I haven't been much fun to work with lately, and I've been pretty mean to you, big

surprise there,” she chuckled ruefully. “You didn’t deserve everything I’ve said to you. I agreed to do this and I shouldn’t complain now that the tough part is here.”

“Don’t worry about it, Lois,” Clark said, holding her hand. “I never took what you said seriously, it was only the hormones talking. I’ll never be able to thank you enough for the gift you’re giving me. Only a true friend would do what you’re doing and I love you all the more for it.”

Lois gazed into his eyes and he could see tears welling up but she refused to shed them. “That’s beautiful, Clark. You’re going to be a great dad and you deserve the chance. It’s been my pleasure to carry your child.”

Clark kissed her on the cheek, waved to his colleagues, then walked to the elevator. His last view of the newsroom was of his friends waving to him, wishing him good luck.

Clark settled into his new position with ease. After all, the *Smallville Post* was no *Daily Planet*. He did his best to improve the paper and to serve his community, resulting in increased sales. He had also had some time to work on his first book and felt that was going well, too and he hoped to have a complete manuscript ready in a few weeks. In an effort to keep up with his Superman duties in Metropolis, he’d patrol in the morning before starting work, during his lunch hour and a couple of times in the evening as well. Clark tried to vary his patrols so that people wouldn’t detect a pattern to his visits. Unfortunately, the criminal element soon figured out that Superman just wasn’t around as much as before, and crime rose slightly, as Lois pointed out in her editorials. What surprised him was that she was not critical of his perceived absences. She chided the MPD for falling into complacency and relying on Superman to do their work for them. Clark had winced when he’d read that, sure that the MPD would not be pleased by Lois’s opinion, though he was not surprised that she’d voiced it. Now in the late stages of her pregnancy, Lois had been writing the paper’s editorials most of the time, along with other work that could be done from a desk. He suspected that he was lucky that he’d moved to Smallville early, as he couldn’t see her being *happy* about desk duty. She’d surely have let him know at every opportunity, in private of course, that it was all his fault. Clark locked up the office, hopped in his car, and headed home for the day. When he walked in, his mom turned from her work at the stove.

“Oh, Clark! Lucy Lane called a few minutes ago.”

“Lucy? Is Lois okay?”

“She called to say that Lois’s water broke and she was bringing her to the hospital. She thought you should know. She said she’d call when the baby was born!”

“That’s great, Mom! Maybe I’ll peek in during my patrol and see how she’s doing,” Clark said with a smile.

“You do that and let us know too, okay? Oh, I’d turn off those super ears of yours, though. I suspect Lois might be a little uncomplimentary to the man who got her in the situation she is in now. You might not want to hear that!” Martha said with a laugh.

Clark chuckled along with her but he planned to take her advice to heart. He certainly *didn’t* want to know what Lois might say during labor!

Clark Kent stood in front of the nursery window staring at the little bassinet with ‘Kent’ written on the name tag. The little body wrapped in the pink blanket looked so small. Had he been that small as a baby, he wondered. She was beautiful, like her mother. Her mother. His joy was tempered by the fact that his daughter wouldn’t get to know her mother. Lois had been adamant. She hadn’t wanted to even see the child. They’d discussed this eventuality many times and, while Clark still did not agree with her decision, he’d promised to respect it. He’d promised never to tell his daughter who her mother was. He could tell her whatever

he wanted about why she wasn’t in their life but he was not to tell her who she was. When Lois had signed the birth certificate she’d signed it “L.J. Kent”, preferring to use only her initials rather than her full name, going so far as to use the name Kent, even though they had never married.

The hospital was going to release his baby into his custody today, in a matter of minutes, once the final paperwork was completed. Clark turned from the window and made his way to Lois’s room. It was time to bid his friend goodbye.

Clark stopped at the door and knocked before entering. “Hi, Lois, how are you feeling?”

“Sore, but otherwise pretty good. They’re going to let me out of here today, but Perry won’t let me return to the newsroom for another two weeks!” she said, crossing her arms over her chest in disgust.

Clark laughed: That was Lois! She didn’t want to have to take any time off even though she’d just given birth. Maybe she saw herself as being like a pioneer woman who was expected to give birth and then finish the plowing before making supper.

“Don’t worry, Lois, you’ll be back to work in no time. But your body needs time to heal. You don’t want to have any complications, do you?”

“No, I guess not,” she said reluctantly. “I am glad I can get out of here though, this place drives me nuts. I can’t see how they can expect me to get any rest when they wake me up every four hours! If nothing else, it’ll be nice to sleep one night without a thermometer shoved in my mouth!”

“Well, they’re only doing their job, Lois, but I can sympathize with you. It can’t be very pleasant for you. . . .Lois, I want to say thank you, again. I still can’t get over the fact that we have a daughter. . . .”

“Clark, please don’t start!” she exclaimed, annoyed with him. “You know I don’t want to discuss the baby. As much as I don’t want to be a mother this is hard on me, too. But the only way I’m going to deal with it is if I put this behind me as quickly as possible. Please, Clark, if you ever loved me, let me do this my way.”

“Of course I loved you, Lois; I still do. I’m sorry. I know what we agreed to, and I forgot how stressful this is for you, too. . . . They’ll be releasing her in a few minutes, so I can’t stay too long, but I wanted to say thank you again and to tell you that I hope you get everything you want in life because you deserve it.”

Clark leaned down and laid a light kiss on Lois’s lips. She returned the kiss reluctantly but soon she pulled back, closing her eyes as she lay against her pillow.

“Thanks, Clark. Take care and good luck,” she said as the tears she’d been holding back rolled down her cheeks.

“Bye, Lois,” Clark said, turning and hurrying from the room.

Having signed the last form, Clark waited for the nurse to bring his daughter out to him. He paced the lobby nervously, the baby carrier clasped in his hand.

“Mr. Kent?” the nurse asked.

“Yes, I’m Mr. Kent,” Clark said, smiling at the woman and the small bundle resting in her arms.

“Here’s your daughter, Mr. Kent. She’s a wonderful baby, hardly cries at all, and I think she’s the prettiest girl in the nursery; and I’ve seen a lot of babies,” she said smiling as she handed Clark his daughter.

Clark received the little girl from the nurse and kissed her on her little forehead. “Hi, Pumpkin, I’m your daddy.” Clark looked back to the nurse. “Thanks for taking such good care of my daughter.”

“It was our pleasure Mr. Kent. You take care now,” she said as she turned and left through the doors behind her.

“Well, little one, let’s take you home. Your grandma and grandpa are dying to meet you.” Clark put his daughter into the

baby carrier, wrapped the extra blanket around her then buckled her in. He picked up the carrier and headed out into the bright sunshine. Clark turned at the first corner, heading towards the back of the hospital. He scanned the area, set the carrier down and spun into the suit. Picking up his little girl, he lifted off slowly, gaining speed as he flew higher into the sky. Holding the carrier close to his chest, he peeked through the blanket with his x-ray vision, and saw that his daughter was already fast asleep. He smiled and headed west, toward Smallville.

Clark flew slower than he usually did when carrying a passenger, since he wasn't sure how fast he should go with a newborn. He found himself looking through the blanket more than he was watching where he was going and, as such, he almost overshot the farm. Clark scanned the area and, seeing no one watching, slowly descended to the ground. He set the carrier down and spun back into his regular clothes, unbuckling the baby and took her into his arms. He left the carrier on the porch and opened the door.

"Mom, Dad, we're home!" he called.

Martha and Jonathan ran into the kitchen and crowded around their son and new grandchild. Clark pulled the blanket down, cradled her in his arm and turned so his parents could get a good look at her.

"Mom, Dad, I'd like you to meet your granddaughter, Lara Lois Kent."

Chapter Fourteen

Lois strode into the lobby of the *Daily Planet*, past the newsstand, and up to the elevator. She pressed the button to call the car, then waited impatiently. It was her first day back after her leave and she couldn't wait to get her teeth into a nice juicy story. She hoped Perry had something for her so she wouldn't have time to think; she'd had plenty of time to do that over the last two weeks, thank you very much. The elevator car arrived and she stepped in, surprised that no one else was getting on; but she was earlier than usual, so maybe that accounted for it.

The ride to the newsroom seemed longer than she remembered, but she was sure that was only because she'd been away for a while and she was anxious to get to work. The doors opened and she strode down the ramp. Lois's eyes drifted to the desk next to hers, and she paused slightly, then continued to her own desk. She seated herself quickly but she couldn't ignore the empty desk where her partner once sat. She straightened her back and shook her head, clearing the thoughts from her mind. She didn't need this right now, she needed to get to work. Lois hoped Perry would hire a new reporter to fill the desk next to her so she wouldn't have to see it empty day after day.

Catching up on her emails took an hour, then it was time for the morning meeting during which she was welcomed back warmly by her colleagues. Perry hadn't given her an assignment at that time, telling her instead that he'd like to see her privately. After the meeting broke up, she took a seat in the chair across from Perry, folded her hands in her lap and waited.

"It's good to have you back, Darlin'."

"It's good to be back. What do you have for me?"

"Anxious to get back into the harness, eh? That's my Lois! I want you to get with your sources and see if they know anything about shipments of drugs being routed through CostMart warehouses. My sources say that Intergang might be branching out."

"Intergang and drugs? Wow, that's a new line for them; but maybe business has been bad lately," Lois said sarcastically.

"Yeah, Superman put a big dent in their last operation, so they probably need to recoup their losses. Anyway, see what you can dig up but do it quietly. I don't want to tip them off. Oh, and you be careful too, Superman hasn't been around as much lately, as

you well know."

Lois's hackles rose at the insinuation that she needed Superman, that she couldn't take care of herself. "What do you mean by that, Chief? I was bringing in stories like this long before Superman got here and I can do it again now that he's gone!"

"Hold on, Lois, hold on," Perry said placating her. "I didn't mean to question your ability to do the job. I know you can do it; otherwise I wouldn't have given you this assignment. I just meant that you've been rescued by Superman a lot— more than any of my other reporters, I might add—and you might forget that he's not around until it's too late. I've lost one reporter to personal issues and I don't want to lose you, too. Do I make myself clear?" Perry said sternly.

While she'd liked to have responded further, the look in Perry's eyes told her that would not be a good idea. In a mood like this, he was likely to take her off the Intergang story and put her on dog shows for the next month. Sighing deeply, she said, "Alright, Chief. I promise I'll be careful, but I wish you wouldn't worry so much. I'm a big girl you know." She started to get up, then sat back down. "By the way, are there any prospects for filling the empty spot on the roster?"

"As a matter of fact there is. Personnel sent me a résumé just the other day. She's coming in later today for an interview."

"She? Anybody I know?" Lois knew a lot of female journalists from her membership in the National Women in Journalism organization.

"I doubt it, she's been working in England for the last few years; she went there right after college. She's recently moved back to Metropolis to help in the care of her dad who had a stroke. She's got some good solid credentials but not a lot of investigative experience. If I hire her I want you to break her in."

"Not another rookie, Perry! Geez, why do I always get the rookies?" she said disgustedly.

"She's *not* a rookie. She's been working at the Mirror for the last five years. She just doesn't have a lot of investigative experience; and since you're my best investigator, I want her to work with you. Got a problem with that?" Perry said, leaning forward in his chair, staring at her pointedly.

"Well when you put it like that, no, Chief, I have no problems with it," Lois said diplomatically.

"Good, now git outta here. You've got work to do and so do I."

Perry pulled out an article and started editing it, effectively dismissing her. She rose and silently left the office.

It was 2 o'clock and she'd gotten absolutely nowhere. Neither Bobby Bigmouth nor any of her other sources knew anything, but all promised to keep an ear out and let her know as soon as possible. Lois flopped onto her chair and was just going over her messages when Perry called out to her.

"Lois, could you come here please?" Perry said before returning to his desk.

'What does he want *now*?' she thought. 'I haven't even had time for lunch!' Lois hauled herself out of her chair feeling more tired than she'd like to admit; maybe two weeks off after giving birth *wasn't* enough. Having reached Perry's office she stuck her head in the doorway. "Yeah, Chief?"

"Come in, Lois, I'd like you to meet our newest reporter."

Lois glanced to her left as a woman rose from the chair. She looked to be in her mid-20's, and about 5' 6" tall. She had shoulder-length sandy brown hair and a wide, pleasant smile. The woman extended her hand in a friendly gesture.

"Hi, I'm Erin Jensen. I'm very pleased to meet you."

"Lois Lane, pleased to meet you too, Erin," she said with a smile.

"Lois, I'd like you to show Erin around the newsroom this afternoon. She'll be using the desk next to yours so please help her

get settled. When you finish with that you can leave for the day, alright?”

“Thanks, Perry. Come on, Erin, I’ll give you the nickel tour.”

Clark Kent set the bottle down on the arm of the couch and lifted his daughter over his shoulder, patting her back. Very soon he heard the little exhale of air he’d been expecting.

“That’s daddy’s girl! You’re getting so big!” He shifted Lara to his lap where he played with her tummy making her wiggle and squeal.

“Clark, she just ate, you’re going to end up with formula all over you if you’re not careful!” Martha scolded him teasingly.

“It won’t be the first time, or the last, Mom. Besides, she loves it, see?” His super-senses were assaulted by an odor he’d become very familiar with, his baby’s full diaper. “Whew, somebody needs to be changed, don’t they?”

Lara wiggled and kicked her legs, seemingly enjoying the whole situation. Clark picked her up, carried her to their bathroom and laid her on the bassinet. He grabbed a fresh diaper and some baby wipes then proceeded to remove the offending item. Soon they were back in the living room where Martha took Lara from Clark’s arms.

“Come here, little one,” Martha said. “Grandma is going to read you a story.”

Clark sat on the couch gazing at his mother and daughter as the story was read. In spite of himself he couldn’t help but picture Lois in the place of his mother, holding their child, reading her stories, feeding and changing her, doing all the things a mother does for her child. No matter what Lois thought, he was sure she’d have been a good mother. It didn’t matter what kind of role model she’d had; Lois was a good, kind, loving person and that love would have been enough to help her succeed, if she’d only given herself a chance. Sighing heavily he picked up his laptop. He needed to get another chapter done tonight since he didn’t have to work. Clark needed to do a patrol of Metropolis later on as well. With the sounds of his mother reading and his daughter’s heartbeat soothing him, he settled down to write.

Perry White was still sitting at his desk when Clark flew by the *Daily Planet* so he decided to take his former boss up on his offer. Swooping down, he hovered next to the window and knocked.

Perry turned around and his eyes went wide as he took in the blue and red clad figure just outside the window. “Superman! Come in, the window’s unlocked, just like I told you it would be!”

Perry closed the door and the blinds as Superman floated in, closing the window behind him. He walked over to Clark and enveloped him in a big hug.

“It’s good to see you, Son,” Perry said softly as he patted Clark’s back then pulled away.

“It’s good to see you too, Chief, I’ve missed you and... everybody.”

“Yeah, Son, I know what you mean. ... So what brings you by tonight? I hope you have pictures?”

“I do, Chief, here,” Clark said, pulling a small packet out of the pocket of his cape.

Perry flipped through the photos slowly, his eyes misting up as he looked at them. “She’s beautiful, just beautiful. She looks a little like... well, you know,” he said embarrassed.

“Yeah, she does,” Clark said quietly. “She has her mother’s chin I think.”

Perry scanned the photos again carefully. “I think you’re right. One thing’s for sure she’s gonna be a real beauty when she grows up. You’ll have to beat the boys off with a stick!” he chuckled.

“I’m hoping that won’t be necessary. I hope she’ll take after me in at least that one area; I hope she’ll have all my powers, but we won’t know for a few years yet.”

“I guess you’re flying kinda blind that way, huh. You’re in completely unexplored territory.”

“We sure are, Chief. Up until a year ago I didn’t even think it was possible for me to father a child; but that turned out well so I’m going to hope that passing along my powers is possible too.”

“Would it be OK if I kept one of these? I won’t leave it here at the office, of course, but I’d really love to show Alice your little girl.”

“Does she know about me, you know...?” Clark said making the flying motion with his hand.

“No, she doesn’t know. I did tell her the truth about the baby but I swore her to secrecy, so she won’t let on to Lois. She knew something was fishy with Lois’s story too, and she was pressuring me about it. She thinks Lois is making a big mistake but it’s her life and we have to let her live it,” Perry said regretfully.

“Sure Perry, anyway, those are duplicates I keep to bore my friends with in town so pick a few.”

“Thanks, Son,” Perry said, picking out three of his favorites, slipping them into the pocket of his jacket.

Clark heard a siren in the distance and listened carefully. There was a break-in at a jewelry store a few blocks away. “I need to get going, Chief, jewelry store robbery.” He picked up the pictures, slipped them into his cape and zipped out the window.

Lois walked into Perry White’s office, smiling broadly. She’d been told late yesterday that she’d been nominated for her fourth Kerth award; and she felt prouder of this nomination than of her previous three combined. This one had come about due to her hard work, as had the others, but this one was a vindication of her ability. With this nomination she’d finally shed the stigma she’d carried since the Luthor fiasco. Her perceived failure in uncovering Lex’s misdeeds was finally behind her, eclipsed by her hard work and tenacity. Her career was back on track and Lois couldn’t be happier, at least until they proclaimed her the winner at the ceremony, of course!

“Morning Chief, it’s a wonderful day, isn’t it?” Lois said cheerfully, as she settled in the chair opposite her boss.

Perry White looked up from the book he was reading and smiled at her. “You’re awfully full of yourself. I hope this nomination isn’t goin’ to go to your head. You haven’t won yet, ya know!”

“It’s only a matter of time, Chief.” Lois said with a smug smile. “The competition doesn’t stand a chance!”

“Pride goeth before a fall; remember that, Darlin’.” Perry scolded gently. “You stand a real good chance though, and I’m pullin’ for ya.”

The book in Perry’s hands piqued Lois’s curiosity. Perry didn’t usually have time to read books at work. “What’s so interesting there, Perry? It’s not like you to take time to read books in the office.”

Perry picked up the book he’d been reading, showing it to her. Lois looked at the cover and her breath caught in her throat. The book was written by Clark. It appeared to be about his world travels before coming to Metropolis, if the title was any indication.

“I just got it today and I was flipping through it. Clark was kind enough to send me a signed first edition,” Perry said proudly. “Do you want to borrow it when I finish?” he asked with a knowing smile on his face.

“That... that would be nice...” Lois said softly. Clark had sent Perry a signed book but not her and, in spite of everything she’d told Clark, it hurt that he hadn’t. Once again she questioned her actions with respect to her old partner. Did he hate her for making him leave? Did he not want to open up old wounds? She really couldn’t blame Clark, though, as much as she wanted to. She had nobody to blame but herself. How many nights had she lain awake thinking about Clark *and* the daughter she’d given up.

Even now, a year after Clark had moved to Smallville, she

wondered if she hadn't made the biggest mistake of her life by driving him away. She'd loved Clark at one time, and she still thought of him as a friend of sorts. Lois sighed and shook her head metaphorically. Regrets weren't going to help. She'd made the best decision she could, for Clark and for their baby. She just couldn't get over his duplicity and the fact that he'd allowed her to ruin her life rather than swallow his pride. When you added in the damage she'd have done to that poor innocent child, she knew she'd made the correct decision.

Her ebullient mood gone, Lois felt she'd better get to work. After all you were only as good as your next story in this business, Kerth nomination or not. "I'd better get back to my desk, Chief," she said more subdued than when she came in. "Let me know when you're done with that book, OK?"

Perry smiled, a pleased look on his face. "Sure thing, Darlin', sure thing."

Chapter Fifteen

Clark Kent sat at his desk in his home office working on his next manuscript. His last three books had been best sellers, and his new one was eagerly anticipated by his publisher who assured him that a place on the best seller list was just waiting for it. He was proud of all of his books but he felt that this one was going to be his best yet. Clark sat back in his chair, sipped his cup of oolong tea, and read over the last few pages. His reading was interrupted by the slamming of the kitchen's screen door and the running feet of his daughter as she screeched to a halt in the doorway.

"Hey there, Pumpkin, what's the hurry?" Clark said, smiling broadly at his six-year-old daughter.

"I hate her, Daddy! I hate her, I hate her, *I hate her!*" Lara yelled, stomping into the room.

"Whoa, hold up, Lara, you hate who?" Clark said, gesturing for his daughter to come sit in his lap.

Lara climbed up and settled against his chest, but refused to be comforted. She crossed her arms in front of her little chest, her lower lip pushed out in a pout. "Lindsay Ross, Daddy. I hate her!"

Clark sighed heavily. Lindsay was the daughter of his friends, Pete Ross and Lana Lang. Lana and Pete had gotten married not long after he'd gone to Metropolis and Lindsay had been born a month before Lara, a fact the young girl trumpeted to Lara at every opportunity. It seemed as if the two of them were destined to be at each other's throats, unlike the relationship Clark shared with her parents. Clark kissed his little tornado on the top of her head and hugged her tighter. He was pleased to feel her relaxing in his arms. He'd always been able to comfort his daughter, no matter what was bothering her. "What has she done now, Pumpkin?" Clark asked gently.

"The kids at school were all bragging about their mommies; you know: how pretty they are, how good they cook, and when it got to my turn, Lindsay jumped right in and told them not to bother asking me because I didn't have a mommy!" Lara said as she broke down in tears, sobbing hysterically.

'My poor baby,' Clark thought angrily. 'She doesn't deserve this! She shouldn't have to suffer for my decision.' Clark rocked Lara while she cried, whispering soothing words to her, until she calmed down enough to listen to him.

"You do have a mommy, Lara. She just doesn't live with us. I know for a fact that there are other kids in your class who don't have mommies at home. Lindsay is just being mean again. For some reason she likes to pick on you; and as long as she knows she's going to get a reaction from you, she'll keep it up," Clark kissed her head again and wiped her tears with his handkerchief. "I know it's difficult, Pumpkin, but you have to ignore Lindsay when she gets like this. She'll grow out of it, I'm sure."

"I hope she grows out of it quick, Daddy, or I'm going to let her have it!" Lara said seriously.

"Lara! How many times have I told you violence solves

nothing?" Clark said with a grin to remove some of the sting in his words. "I don't want you fighting, Lara, I'm serious about this. I don't want you getting suspended from the first grade."

Lara flushed at her daddy's stern words. She hated it when he scolded her, especially when it was Lindsay's fault she was being scolded. "I'm sorry, Daddy," she said contritely. "I won't fight with her, but she makes me so angry some times."

"I understand, Pumpkin, I really do, but you have to be a big girl and overcome your anger. When Lindsay picks on you, just walk away; don't let her have the satisfaction of seeing you upset," he said gently. "Besides, your grandma is a better cook than Lindsay's mommy could ever be!"

Lara giggled when Clark tickled her tummy with his finger. She always felt better after talking to her daddy, no matter how upset she was. Even if she didn't have a mommy she knew her daddy was the best daddy in the whole world, and that was all that mattered.

Clark hugged Lara, kissing her on the cheek. "Alright, Pumpkin, why don't you go upstairs and wash up before supper? Do you have any homework?"

"No, Daddy, not today."

"Good. After you wash up, you can watch some television if you want. Oh! Wait a minute. Grandpa said something about a surprise for you earlier; you might want to see what he's got for you!"

"A surprise! What is it, Daddy?" Lara asked jumping up and down excitedly.

"You'll have to ask grandpa; he didn't tell me what it was."

"I'll see you later, Daddy! I'm going to find grandpa!"

Clark chuckled happily as Lara ran from the room in search of her grandfather. 'Another crisis averted,' Clark thought. He was again saddened by the thought that the love of his life hadn't wanted to share her life with him and their daughter. Clark returned to proofreading his manuscript with thoughts of Lois playing through his mind.

Clark, Martha and Jonathan sat at the kitchen table discussing the options for their coming vacation. Clark's latest book had hit number one on the New York Times bestseller list for non-fiction and he wanted to celebrate. Their options included a Caribbean cruise, Disney World, or Hawaii. Clark had gotten pamphlets for each destination and had them spread out on the kitchen table. Martha had just mentioned the guided tour of the lava fields in Hawaii as something she'd be interested in when Lara called to them from her room.

"I wanna go to Disney World, Daddy! I can't wait to see Cinderella's castle!" Lara said loudly.

Clark looked at his parents, a stunned expression on his face. Martha smiled tremulously at Clark, grasping his hand. "Well, Clark, it looks like your wish has come true. It's time for that talk, I guess," Martha said remembering back to when Clark was little. "You were about nine when your super-hearing started to develop, weren't you?"

"Yeah, about nine, just like Lara..."

Jonathan smiled broadly, puffing up his chest like the proud grandpa he was. "Our little girl is growing up, Son. How about we put these away and you go talk to her?"

Clark agreed, and while his mother gathered up the pamphlets that were spread across the table, he rose and headed up to his daughter's room. He knocked lightly on her door.

"Hey, Pumpkin, can I come in?"

"Of course, Daddy. Are we going to Disney World?" she asked excitedly.

"We haven't decided yet, Pumpkin," he said, pulling a chair up next to her bed, sitting down. He sat quietly for a bit too long, allowing Lara to become concerned.

"Is something wrong, Daddy? Am I in trouble?" she asked

quietly.

“No, Sweetie, you’re not in trouble,” Clark said raking his hand through his hair. “I have something I need to tell you and I don’t quite know how to say it.”

“Is it something bad, Daddy?”

“No, it’s nothing bad,” he said softly. “A few minutes ago grandma, grandpa and I were discussing our vacation down in the kitchen. Honey, you heard us when you really shouldn’t have been able to. There’s a reason for that, and I want to explain.” Clark gazed at the floor, then looked up to the ceiling, before meeting his daughter’s eyes again.

“Honey, I have a secret that I haven’t told you. I was going to wait until you were a bit older; but when you heard us in the kitchen, I knew I had to tell you now.” Clark motioned for Lara to sit on his lap, then he continued as she settled against his chest. “You know I was adopted, right?”

“Sure, Daddy, you told me when I was little,” Lara said, clearly confused.

“What I haven’t told you is how I came to be adopted by grandma and grandpa. . . . One night they were out driving and what looked like a meteor passed overhead very close to them. They saw the object come down in Shuster’s field and went to investigate. When they got there they didn’t find a meteor, they found a small rocket with a baby inside. That baby was me. They didn’t know where I had come from; but, since they wanted a baby very badly, they took me home and adopted me.

“When I grew up I found that I could do things that other people couldn’t. I knew that I had to use these abilities to help people; but at first I didn’t know how to do that and still have a normal life. One day an idea came to me and I knew how I could use my abilities to help. Pumpkin, I’m Superman,” Clark said softly.

Lara’s eyes grew wide and she stared at her father, not saying a word. Seconds later a wide smile split her face. “That is so *cool*, Daddy! My daddy is Superman! Do grandma and grandpa know? Of course they do, they raised you! Is that why I was able to hear you? Oh boy! Can I fly too, Daddy? Show me how to fly!”

Clark relaxed, the tension flowing from his body. He’d been so afraid that Lara would react badly to the news. Of course, knowing her mother, he shouldn’t have been surprised that she’d react the way she did. Lara even babbled like Lois. Looking at the bundle of energy still seated on his knee, he could see Lois in her more than he ever had. He smiled the smile he used to reserve only for Lois, and set his little girl on her feet.

“Calm down, Pumpkin! I’m glad you’re excited and all, but I still have a few things to tell you. Why don’t you sit down and let me explain?”

Lara sat on her bed and Clark explained about his powers and how they had developed as he grew up. He told her that his super-hearing was the first power he’d developed. Now that she was showing evidence of super-hearing, he expected her other powers could probably develop on a similar timeline though he did caution her she might not get all of his powers due to her mixed heritage.

“You mean I have to wait until I’m 18 to fly?” Lara said completely ignoring Clark’s warning. “Man, that sucks!”

“Lara! I will *not* have you talking like that!” Clark scolded.

“I’m sorry, Daddy,” Lara said contritely, “but flying sounds so cool!” Clark saw an expression cross his daughter’s face and he was pretty sure he knew what was coming next. “Daddy? Can you take me flying? Please?” she said, looking at him innocently, her chocolate brown eyes pleading with him.

“Yep, she’s got a lot of her mother in her, that’s for sure!” Clark thought, not for the first time that night. He stood and pushed the chair back to the wall. “Sure, Pumpkin. Watch this,” Clark said with a wink and a grin. He stepped back and started spinning and when he stopped, Superman gathered Lara into his arms and

opened the window. Father and daughter lifted off into the night sky.

“Daddy, how did you change your clothes?” Lara asked, her mouth hanging slightly open.

“Oh, that,” Clark said. “I spin really quickly as I take off my regular clothes then I slip on the suit. I don’t always have a place where I can change in an emergency so changing this way saves a lot of time.”

“Where do you keep the suit, Daddy?” Lara asked curiously.

“I’ll tell you when you get older,” Clark said mysteriously, “For now why don’t you just settle back and enjoy the ride.”

Clark flew slowly over the town, high enough not to be seen but low enough so Lara could see familiar sights. He could hear her little heart beating wildly, her excitement evident in the smile plastered on her face.

“Oh Daddy! This is sooo much fun! Can we go flying every day?” Lara asked hopefully.

“Not every day. I have work to do, I have to do my patrols you know. But we’ll go as often as possible, okay?”

“Okay, I guess,” she said, a bit disappointed. “You look for bad guys when you patrol, right Daddy?”

“That’s right. I capture bad guys and bring them to the police, but I assist people who are in need of help, too. I also do what I can at accidents and fires and natural disasters,” Clark said, pleased with his daughter’s interest in his work.

“Like tornadoes? Like that one over in Wichita last year?”

“That’s right, Pumpkin. I helped at that one, if you remember, though you didn’t realize it was your daddy at the time, huh?”

“No, I didn’t. But I was happy to see Superman helping all those poor people who lost their homes in the storm,” Lara said, thinking for a minute. “Daddy, when I have powers like yours can I help you help people too?”

“If that’s what you want to do, sure you can. But remember, just because I help people as Superman doesn’t mean that I expect you to put on a costume and help if you don’t really want to. You need to do what is best for you. I’m confident that you’ll make the correct decision when the time comes.”

“But I want to, Daddy! I want to help you!” Lara said earnestly.

“Alright, Lara, alright, you can help; but not until you grow up, okay? You’ve got grade school and high school and college to finish first, young lady,” Clark said sternly though his grin told Lara he was teasing her.

They made a slow circle around the town with Lara pointing out the homes of her friends as they passed.

“There’s Lindsay’s house, Daddy!” she cried excitedly. “Boy, I wish she could see me now! I bet she’d be speechless!”

“Pumpkin, you know you can’t ever tell any of your friends about us, right?” Clark said softly.

“I know Daddy, it’s a secret. I’m good at keeping secrets!”

“That’s right, it’s a secret. While most people like Superman there are bad guys out there who would do mean things to us if they knew I was Superman. While I can’t be hurt, you, Grandma and Grandpa can be. You need to be very careful from now on, okay?”

“I understand, Daddy,” Lara said seriously. “I’ve seen mean people on the news and I wouldn’t ever want them to hurt grandpa and grandma. They’re scary!”

“Yes, they are. I’m glad you understand. Now that you know, I want you to be sure to tell me when you start to notice things, changes like tonight when you heard us all the way in the kitchen. Developing super powers can be scary; it was for me because I didn’t know what was happening to me at the time. I’m here to help *you*, though, so you don’t need to be afraid. We’ll practice and practice so that you’ll be in control of each new ability as it develops. I hope that you’ll get all the powers I have, but I just don’t know right now.”

"I will, Daddy," Lara said as she hugged Clark's neck harder. "I love you, Daddy!"

"And I love you, Pumpkin. Let's go home and see Grandma and Grandpa, huh?"

"Yeah!" Clark sped up, doing loop-the-loops and barrel rolls the whole way home. They flew back in Lara's window; and after Clark spun out of the suit, Lara rushed downstairs.

"Grandma, Grandma, daddy took me flying!" she cried, hopping onto her grandma's lap.

"He did?! I didn't know your daddy could fly! Did you know that, Jonathan?" Martha said with a grin and a sparkle in her eyes.

"Nope, didn't know that!" Jonathan said. Seeing Clark entering the room he winked at his son so he'd play along. "Clark, your daughter tells me you can fly! Is that right, Son? You been holding out on your old dad?"

"Grandma! Grandpa! Stop fooling around!" Lara said laughing as her grandmother tickled her ribs.

"So, how did you enjoy your first flight?" Jonathan asked, his eyes dancing as he beheld his granddaughter.

"It was soooo cool, Grandpa! Daddy said we can go a lot!" Lara said excitedly.

"Yes, it is fun, though I haven't flown with your daddy in years," Jonathan said, remembering his flights with his son fondly.

"Alright you," Clark said, picking up his daughter, "it's time for bed. Go upstairs now and brush your teeth."

"Aw, Daddy, do I have to?" Lara asked, her lower lip pouted out piteously.

"Yes, you have to. Tell you what, this weekend we'll fly anywhere you want and we'll see how good your hearing is. How does that sound?"

"Really, Daddy?" Lara exclaimed, squirming out of his arms. She kissed her grandma, then her grandpa before she hurried up the stairs.

"I'll be up to kiss you goodnight in a few minutes, Lara." Clark called up after her.

"You probably won't have to do that too much longer, Clark, she's growing up so fast," Martha said as she returned to her book.

"No, I suppose not, Mom. One thing I'm going to have to stress this weekend is to maintain control and not to eavesdrop! If she takes after her mother in any way it's her curiosity. That little girl is going to be tempted, I have no doubt," Clark said, concerned.

"She'll probably have to learn the hard way, Son," Jonathan said seriously, "just like her mother."

"In the meantime, we need to be more careful of what we say when she's around, at least until she gets a bit more control," Martha said.

"You know, I'm *not* looking forward to having a daughter with super powers. How did you guys do it?"

"Patience and love, Son. Patience and love. They work every time they're tried," Jonathan said.

That weekend Lara woke early on Saturday morning excited at the prospect of flying with her daddy anywhere in the world so she could practice her superhearing. All week she'd been looking through the encyclopedia at school for places to go and she had finally decided. Hurrying to the bathroom she took a shower and then put on her most comfortable jeans and her favorite t-shirt. When she finished dressing she bounced down the stairs and into the kitchen.

"Good morning, Sweetie." Martha greeted Lara with a loving hug that the little girl returned enthusiastically. Just then Clark and Jonathan entered the kitchen fresh from doing the morning chores. The two men hugged Lara then they all sat down to a big country breakfast of scrambled eggs, pancakes, bacon and fresh blueberry muffins. Everyone dug into the food enthusiastically chatting amiably about the week just past.

"So, Pumpkin, have you decided where you want to go today?" Clark asked, taking a sip of his coffee.

"Yes, Daddy, I want to go to the North Pole to see the polar bears!" Lara replied excitedly.

"Polar bears! Aren't they scary?" Martha said, winking at Jonathan.

"No, Grandma, they're cute! Besides, I have Daddy there to protect me," Lara said logically. "No polar bear would dare mess with Superman."

"I suppose you're right, Lara. Polar bears are smart creatures, that's for sure," Jonathan said smiling at his granddaughter.

"Okay, the North Pole it is. Finish your breakfast then go get your winter coat. It's cold up there and you're not invulnerable yet," Clark said pouring himself a half cup of coffee. Lara hurried through her breakfast, guzzled down the remainder of her milk, putting the glass down on the table.

"I'm ready, Daddy!" Lara said, screeching to a halt wearing her winter coat, a scarf and her stocking cap. Clark grinned at his excited daughter then he rose from the table.

"We'll be back for lunch, Mom," Clark said, stepping back so he could spin into his suit. "Bye, Dad, we can work on that fence when I get back."

"Have a good time you two," Jonathan said, grabbing the last slice of bacon from the plate. Lara went around the table, kissing Martha and Jonathan goodbye. Taking her father's hand father and daughter walked out onto the porch where he gathered Lara in his arms.

"Ready, Pumpkin!" Clark said, hugging her tightly to his chest.

"Ready, Daddy!" Clark lifted off slowly, gathering speed until they were high in the sky, a mere dot against the clear blue sky. Clark turned north flying slower than usual so that Lara could see the sights.

"Look, Daddy, that's Lake Michigan!" Lara said pointing at the huge body of water below them.

"That's right! That's Chicago below us and Milwaukee coming up. In a few minutes we'll be over the Door Peninsula, it looks like a thumb sticking into the lake." Clark pointed out many sights along their flight path, Lake Superior, the province of Ontario and Hudson Bay. Clark scanned the area when the neared the Pole looking for polar bears. With a smile he landed softly behind a snow bank a few yards away, setting Lara down.

"Okay, Lara. I want you to concentrate and tell me what you hear." Lara closed her eyes and relaxed, letting her hearing extend to the area around her. At first she didn't hear anything but the wind as it blew over the snowy landscape but after a few moments she heard growling.

"Daddy!" she whispered, "I think I hear a polar bear! He's growling!" Lara said excitedly.

"Very good, but is that all you hear?" Lara closed her eyes again listening harder. At last she picked up the sound of little grunts and snuffles.

"Daddy, are there baby bears? I think I hear them!" Lara said, looking into her father's smiling face.

"Come with me, but be quiet, we don't want to scare them." Clark led Lara up the snow drift to where they could see a mother bear with her two cubs.

Lara stared, wide eyed, watching the mother bear feeding her cubs. The cubs looked to be very young, mostly cute little balls of fur about the size of a baby pig, but a lot cuter. Father and daughter watched the bear family for a while until the mother bear got up, heading off to the west with her cubs ambling along behind.

"That was *so* cool! They're really cute," Lara exclaimed, bouncing on her toes.

"Yes, they sure are. How about we look for some other animals." Clark scooped Lara into his arms rising slowly into the

sky. Scanning the area with his telescopic vision he found what he was looking for, a group of seals splashing in and out of a hole in the ice. Landing a half mile away Clark set Lara down again.

“How are you doing, Pumpkin? You’re not too cold are you?”

“No, Daddy, maybe I’m more invulnerable than we thought,” Lara said hopefully.

“Could be. Okay, this one is a little harder, we’re a lot farther away than before so really concentrate and tell me what you hear.” Lara nodded solemnly.

Relaxing she extended her hearing, at first the only thing she heard was her father’s heartbeat but she ignored that, extending her hearing farther and farther. Just when she was about to give up she heard splashing and the grunts and barks of some animals. Thinking back to her studies in school she remembered that, besides polar bears, there should be seals too.

“I can hear splashing and seals! I can hear them barking at each other!” Lara said excitedly.

“That’s right! Very good! Your hearing is very sensitive, those seals are about a half mile away,” Clark said proudly. “Can you try to hear the bears again?” Lara nodded confidently, listening for the sounds of the bear family. It took her a moment to find them but soon she smiled happily.

“The bears are over there,” she said pointing east from their position, “and the seals are behind us.” Lara grinned confidently, the smile on her father’s face confirming her deductions. “Can we go see them now, Daddy?”

Clark nodded, gathering Lara into his arms. He flew slowly until the seals appeared then he moved closer until then were about 100 feet from the frolicking group of seals. Clark sat down in the snow, drawing Lara onto his lap. They watched the seals play, watching them dive for food and generally having a good time, but soon it was time to move on.

“Lara, we should be going now but I want to stop on the way back so you can try your hearing in a noisier environment. I want to see if you can block out some sounds while listening for others.” Lara nodded, climbing off her father’s lap a little reluctantly. She was having too much fun watching the seals playing.

“Can we come back sometime, Daddy? I like to watch the seals.”

“Sure we can, but it’s time to go now.” Clark picked her up hugging her close to his chest. They flew south and were soon flying over forest as far as the eye could see on the shores of Hudson Bay. Clark landed in a clearing, pulling a log into the clearing so they could sit down.

“Okay, there are a lot more animals here but I want you to try to find the caribou. They make a kind of grunting noise that changes to a high-pitched howl. See if you can hear them, okay?” Lara nodded confidently then closed her eyes. Unlike the arctic there was a lot more noise here, the forest was teeming with animals and birds. Listening carefully she heard polar bears again along with another type of bear she couldn’t identify. Ignoring those sounds she concentrated, listening for the noise her father had described. It took her a lot longer to find her quarry this time due to all the other noises of the forest and the animals in the bay area but, at last, she found the sound she sought.

“There, Daddy, they’re over there but I can’t tell how far away,” Lara said sadly.

“That’s right! They are maybe 300 yards away but it’s not important that you know how far away a sound is. I want you to learn to control your hearing and discerning different sounds will help with that. Are there any other animals you heard?”

“Yes, I heard polar bears, I remember that sound from earlier but I think there was at least one more bear but I’m not sure.”

“Very good. This area has polar bears, black bears and even grizzly bears,” Clark said proudly. Looking at the position of the sun he knew it was time to head for home.

“Come on, Pumpkin, it’s time to head back. How about we look for those bears on the way?” Lara nodded happily. Clark scooped her up, floating into the sky. He flew slowly until he spied two large grizzlies wading in the bay. Lara grinned excitedly, watching the majestic animals for a few moments. At last Clark rose higher into the sky towards Smallville.

“We’re home!” Clark called out, setting Lara down on the kitchen floor. Martha and Jonathan hurried into the room spying their granddaughter’s excited face as she took off her coat, hanging it on the back of a chair.

“Grandma! Grandpa! We saw polar bears and seals and I saw grizzly bears and I heard caribou too!” she exclaimed hugging her grandparents lovingly.

“That sounds so exciting! You sure are doing well, isn’t she, Clark?”

“Yes she is. She heard the polar bears from a hundred yards away and the seals from half a mile away too!” Clark said proudly. “Then we stopped in the woods near Hudson Bay where she heard the grizzlies and the caribou. There was a lot more distractions there so she did very well.”

“I’m so proud of you, Sweetheart,” Jonathan said, hugging Lara lovingly.

“Thanks, Grandpa!” Lara took a big sniff of the delicious smells of lunch cooking. “When’s lunch, Grandma, I’m starved!” Everyone laughed.

“I guess superhearing works up an appetite, huh?” Martha said. “Go get washed up, lunch will be ready soon.” Lara grabbed her coat and rushed up the stairs.

After lunch Clark, Jonathan and Lara headed to the far end of the Kent property where the fence needed some repair.

“Lara, while Grandpa and I work on the fence I want you to practice some more. I want you to try to identify as many different animals and birds as you can and write them down in your notebook. If you hear one you can’t identify write down the noise it makes and we’ll identify them together later. Also, do not eavesdrop on our neighbors, it’s not polite and you might hear things you shouldn’t hear.”

“What kinds of things, Daddy?” Lara asked curiously.

“People say things in the privacy of their own home that are not meant for the public. Also, you might hear people having ‘relations’.”

“Oh, like when the Irigs have family over for a party?” Lara asked innocently.

“Umm, no, I mean like when animals get together to make babies? Well people do that too and you should absolutely *not* listen to that.”

“Oh! That’s icky!” Lara replied, making a disgusted face. “I won’t listen to our neighbors, only animals.”

“Good girl, now you practice while Grandpa and I get this fence fixed.”

Chapter Sixteen

Lara entered the house as quietly as she could; but nevertheless, she drew her grandmother’s attention. If she didn’t know better Lara would have thought her grandmother had super hearing too!

“Hi Sweetie!” Martha said while she dried her hands from washing dishes. “Would you like a snack?”

“Not really, Grandma, I’ve got a lot of homework.”

“Is everything alright, Lara?”

“Sure Grandma,” Lara said as she slowly climbed the stairs.

When Clark came home from work that night Martha cornered him as soon as he walked in the door.

“I’m not sure what’s going on, but Lara came home from school and turned down a snack,” Martha said softly.

"I see," Clark replied, "I'll go up and see how she's doing."

"Supper will be ready in half an hour, okay?"

"Sure, Mom," Clark said climbing the stairs slowly. He noticed his daughter's door was shut, a sure sign she was upset about something. He knocked softly on the door.

"Lara, can I come in?"

"Yes, Daddy," Lara replied. Clark opened the door to see his daughter, face down on the bed and it was obvious she'd been crying.

"Wanna talk about it?" he asked, sitting on her bed, rubbing her back soothingly.

"Oh, Daddy, it was awful!" she wailed as more tears erupted.

"What was, Pumpkin?"

"What they said, about me!" It was a good thing Clark had super hearing because her words were muffled by her pillow.

"What did you hear?" Clark asked, knowing *how* she'd heard the hurtful things she'd heard.

"Lindsay said I was ugly! She said I wear stupid clothes! Sally never said anything, Daddy. I thought she was my *friend*!" Lara wailed piteously.

"You're a beautiful girl, Lara, and you have lovely clothes. You realize those girls are probably just jealous, don't you? It makes some people feel better about themselves to say mean things about others, no matter how wrong those things may be." Clark's heart broke for his daughter, his mind wandering back to his own childhood. It was tough enough being a kid but being able to hear things you were never meant to hear made it even tougher. "I thought we'd discussed what happens when you eavesdrop, Pumpkin?"

"But I wasn't, Daddy! I was walking with Ashley and we were talking when all of a sudden my hearing turned on! Then I heard those horrible, horrible things! Lindsay was talking to Sally around the corner but for some reason I heard everything! I hate her, Daddy!" Lara cried, pummeling her pillow in frustration.

Clark gathered his daughter into his arms, planting soothing kisses on the crown of her head. Her little body, wracked with sobs, shook in his arms. He hugged her, telling her with his embrace alone that she was loved; at last, she settled into his arms, hiccupping periodically.

"I understand, Pumpkin. Sometimes my hearing kicks in spontaneously. Usually it's when someone's in danger and they're calling for me, but when I was your age the same thing would happen to me. It's painful, I know that, but you have to understand that you were never meant to hear what Lindsay said. We've talked about this before. Lindsay is, for whatever reason, an very insecure little girl. She makes herself feel better by talking badly about others. That's wrong but that's also how the world is sometimes."

"Does it ever get better, Daddy?" Lara asked, her tear-filled eyes peering up at him, looking for reassurance.

"Yes, as you get older and gain more control over your hearing, you'll pick up stuff like this less and less. The best advice I can give you now is to concentrate on something else as soon as you can. That way, you won't overhear more than a few seconds of something you shouldn't." Clark kissed his daughter's forehead and dried her tears with his handkerchief. He could hear his mother setting the table, so it had to be close to dinner time.

"Why don't you wash your face and I'll meet you downstairs? Grandma has supper almost on the table."

Lara climbed off her dad's lap, kissing his cheek as she did so.

"Thank you, Daddy," she said, smiling at him through tear-filled eyes.

"You're welcome, Pumpkin. I love you, very, very much!"

"I love you too, Daddy," Lara said, disappearing into the bathroom.

Lois walked down the ramp towards her desk with a skip in

her step. She'd picked up her new dress, her new shoes were waiting by her bed and her hair appointment was scheduled for this afternoon. She was as ready for this evening as she could be. Tonight she would accept the Pulitzer Prize for Journalism for her series on the breakup of Intergang in which she'd played a pivotal role. She spied Ralph coming towards her and she realized that even he could not ruin her good mood.

"Congrats, Lois! You really deserve this award," Ralph said enthusiastically.

Surprised at the sentiment Lois didn't respond immediately but she soon found her voice. "Why thank you, Ralph, thank you very much," she said humbly.

"Who are the posies from, Lois?" Ralph smirked, killing any goodwill he'd gained with her. "New boyfriend?"

"No, Ralph, I don't have a new boyfriend. I have no idea who the flowers are from. I just got here, remember?" Lois said snippily. "I have to get to work, as, I'm sure, do you." Lois walked to her desk, seeing a bouquet of yellow roses on her desk.

'Now who would be sending me roses?' she thought, searching for the card. She sniffed the flowers, reveling in their wonderful scent. Opening the card she read the inscription. When she saw who had sent them the color drained from her face and she sat down quickly, feeling her legs were not going to support her.

'Congratulations on your Pulitzer win, you deserve it!'

'Love, Clark'

Clark had sent the roses! She hadn't heard anything from him in almost 10 years and now he sends her a bouquet of flowers! Something tickled the back of her mind about the color of the roses. Yellow roses stood for something, didn't they? What was it? She wracked her brain until it came to her. Friendship! Yellow was for friendship, that was it! A sad smile crossed Lois's lips. 'Good old, Clark,' she thought. 'It's just like him to send flowers of friendship on an occasion like this.' She leaned forward and smelled the roses again, a genuine smile gracing her face. Setting the vase on the corner of her desk, she turned on her computer to start her day.

Jonathan and Clark came in from the barn after having finished the repair of the combine in preparation for the fall harvest. Not for the first time, Clark was glad that he was able to help his mom and dad with the work of the farm. As much as they tried not to show it, the workload was getting to them, though Clark would never say anything about it. He'd overheard them discussing leasing the land in a few years and going into semi-retirement, which pleased him greatly. His parents deserved to enjoy their retirement and he planned to help them do just that.

Clark poured two cups of coffee, set one in front of Jonathan then took his seat. After fixing his coffee the way he liked it, he took the first sip. The coffee was great, as it always was when his mom made it.

"Boy that really hits the spot, huh, Son?"

"It sure does, Dad. No matter how hard I try I can't get mine to taste like this," Clark said admiringly.

"And you won't either," Martha said with a smile as she walked into the kitchen. "I'm not sharing all my secrets. A woman has to maintain some mystery!"

"You're mysterious enough for me, Martha," Jonathan said lovingly.

Clark smiled happily, it pleased him no end that his parents were still so much in love after all these years. He sobered a bit, his thoughts drifted to the love he had lost. It was at times like these that Clark's thoughts turned to Lois. He still loved her as much he ever had, even though he hadn't seen her in years. If she called him asking to be forgiven he'd do so in a heartbeat, though he felt she'd done nothing he'd need to forgive. He'd understood her motivation; and, while he didn't agree— had never agreed—

he still respected and loved her. He was pulled back to the conversation when he realized his mother was talking to him.

“I’m sorry, Mom, what did you say?”

“I said that there was a letter in the mail for you,” Martha said with a smile he couldn’t quite interpret.

“I get letters all the time, Mom. What’s so special about this one?”

“It has a Metropolis postmark, Sweetie,” Martha said teasingly.

“Metropolis, huh?” Jonathan said conspiratorially.

“Dad! I’m sure it’s not what you think,” Clark said nervously.

Pulling the letter out of the pocket of her apron Martha handed it to Clark. “Why don’t you open it and see?”

Clark took the envelope from his mother, surprised to see that his hand was shaking a bit. He looked at the writing on the envelope, it was Lois’s handwriting; there was no mistaking it. Clark took a deep breath, hoping to calm down. His heart was beating faster and his hands were sweating. He didn’t sweat! He opened the letter, reading it carefully.

His excitement fled as quickly as it came. Lois had received his flowers and had sent a thank you note. He had hoped that his gesture of friendship might open the lines of communication between them. He had hoped that she might have changed her mind and they might be able to resume their friendship; and in a few years, maybe more. The note from Lois was polite and expressed her gratitude for his thoughtfulness but it hinted at nothing more. She’d ended the note with a noncommittal ‘Lois’. After all this time he’d thought he was over her, but this response hurt. Oh, there was absolutely nothing hurtful in the note, she was effusive in her gratitude, but neither was there any expression or desire for more communication. He put the note back in its envelope, put it in his pocket, and rose from the table.

“I’m going for a walk, I’ll be back in time for lunch,” Clark said sadly. He walked out of the kitchen and headed for his old tree house.

Lara Kent exited Smallville Elementary School for the last time. She’d be going to the middle school next year and she was looking forward to it; but she was sad as well. She’d miss her favorite teachers, especially Miss Jameson, who had become a mentor to her.

Miss Jameson had become very important to Lara over the last four years. She was almost like a mother in some ways, being closer in age to the mothers of her friends. Lara wasn’t sure, but rumor had it that Miss Jameson’s mother had walked out on her when she was little and maybe that explained the affinity between them. No matter how close they were there was no way Miss Jameson could substitute for the mother she didn’t have. Her grandma did her best to fill the gap too. She loved her grandma with all her heart but, no matter how hard she tried, she just wasn’t her mother.

Lara sniffed back the tears she felt forming and climbed onto the school bus for the ride home. She was dreading the coming weekend, though she really shouldn’t. This weekend was the big Girl Scout Mother/Daughter campout. She and her friends had talked about nothing else the whole day. They were looking forward to hiking in the forest, swimming in the lake, and roasting hot dogs over an open fire. Lara’s grandma would be going with her, of course. Grandma was great, every event the Girl Scouts held, grandma was right there, volunteering, pitching in, and supporting her in every way.

No matter how hard she tried, though, grandma didn’t fit in with the other moms. She was at least 25 years older than the oldest mom and of a different generation. Grandma tried to join in the conversations but the other ladies didn’t really welcome her input, even though grandma knew more about the subject under discussion than half the women there most of the time! Lara felt

bad for her grandma, she felt sure that grandma was going to these events only for her and didn’t really want to be there. The bus slowed, coming to her stop, so she gathered her backpack and other things, said goodbye to her friends, and exited the bus.

The walk up the driveway seemed longer today, though that was probably because she was dragging her feet the entire way. She looked over at the barn but didn’t see her dad or grandpa, so she headed to the house. As much as she wanted to go on this camping trip, she was going to tell her grandma that she’d changed her mind. She just couldn’t put grandma through another of these events. Maybe she’d drop out of Girl Scouts too; which would put an end to the whole sorry mess.

Lara walked through the door, dropped her backpack on the floor, and started toward the stairs and her room.

“Hi Sweetie! I’ve got a fresh batch of cookies. Do you want one?” Martha asked.

“No thanks, Grandma, I think I’ll just go to my room,” Lara said listlessly.

“Lara, please come here.”

Lara turned and walked back to the kitchen. “What’s up, Grandma?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing, Lara. It’s not like you to pass up fresh cookies,” Martha said gently. “How about you tell me what’s bothering you.”

Lara hung her head, not wanting to look at her grandma. “I don’t wanna go on the campout this weekend.”

“Lara, I’ve heard nothing but how excited you were about the campout for weeks! What happened? Is that Lindsay Ross bothering you again?” Martha asked angrily.

“No Grandma, Lindsay’s not bothering me. She doesn’t do that anymore. I stopped reacting to her and she quit it, just like daddy said. It doesn’t hurt that I’m bigger than she is, either; all I have to do is give her ‘that look’ and she backs off real quick.” Lara chuckled a bit at that; daddy had always said that her ‘look’ would scare Superman.

“OK, if it’s not Lindsay, then what is the problem?” Martha asked carefully.

“I’ve changed my mind, that’s all. Can’t I change my mind?” Lara said, clearly upset.

“Of course you can but I have the feeling that there’s something you’re not telling me.” Martha got two glasses out of the cupboard, poured milk into both, and set them on the table. “Why don’t you sit down and have a cookie, Sweetie?”

Lara allowed her grandma to guide her to a chair and seated herself. A plate with two cookies appeared in front of her and she picked one up, biting into it but not really tasting it.

“Lara, are you ashamed of me?” Martha asked softly.

“NO!” Lara said, emphatically, her eyes meeting those of her grandmother. “I love you, Grandma! You are the best grandma in the whole world. How could you think that?”

“I just thought that since you’ve been so excited about the weekend that maybe you didn’t want me to come along and you were too embarrassed to tell me,” Martha said, cupping Lara’s cheek. “It’s OK, Sweetie, I don’t mind.”

Lara couldn’t let her grandma think it was her fault or that she was ashamed of her, she had to tell her the truth.

“I’m sorry, Grandma,” Lara said with tears in her eyes. “It’s not you, it’s me. I don’t want to drag you to any more of these outings. I know you do it for me but you can’t really enjoy them. I hear things, Grandma, you know I do, the other mothers don’t treat you right. You know so much, but they ignore you or they shut you out of their conversations. They’re mean and I can’t do that to you anymore!”

Lara broke down and cried, laying her head on her arms. Martha gathered her up, hugging her tightly. They stayed that way for a while as Lara cried herself out.

“Oh my poor, Lara, I’m so sorry for you,” Martha said sadly.

"I can't imagine how tough this is for you, Sweetie." Martha slipped her fingers under Lara's chin, causing her to meet her grandma's eyes.

"I swore to myself the day your father brought you home that I'd do everything I could to make your life as normal as possible. I know I'm not your mother, nobody could take her place, but I've done everything I know how to compensate for her absence." Martha smiled and kissed Lara's nose, eliciting a smile. "I don't care about those other women, Lara. I do things with you because I *want* to do them with you. You're not forcing me. I'd go and be perfectly happy if nobody but you said one word to me. Please believe me, Sweetie." Martha's voice cracked and her eyes grew bright with tears.

"Oh Grandma!" Lara cried. Seeing Martha so emotional was sobering. Lara hugged her and kissed her cheek fiercely. "I thought you were only going because of me and you didn't really want to be there! I'm sorry I made you cry, Grandma. Forgive me?"

Martha's eyes lit up. She hugged and kissed Lara again. "You didn't make me cry, Sweetie. I get emotional sometimes and the tears come. It's nothing to be concerned about. . . . Why don't you go upstairs, wash your face and then come back here, OK? Your dad and grandpa should be home soon and we need to get supper started."

Lara smiled brightly, kissed her grandma on the cheek and raced up the stairs. This weekend was going to be so much fun!

Chapter Seventeen

A few weeks after the campout Lara had been playing in the barn when she noticed something.

"Daddy, Daddy!" Lara cried, hurrying into the house.

"What is it, Pumpkin?"

"I'm having some problems with my eyes, Daddy. I can't seem to focus on things."

"Hmm, it could be your x-ray vision coming on, Lara. What do you say we test it out?" Clark said, rising from the sofa where he'd been reading the paper.

"Can we? Do you really think it could be that, Daddy?" she asked as they walked hand in hand down to the pond.

"It's certainly possible. I was about your age when my x-ray vision started to manifest itself." They walked in companionable silence until they reached the pond. Clark glanced around the pond with his own x-ray vision looking for something for Lara to focus on. He spotted a small perch hiding under a rock a few feet from where they were standing.

"Okay, Lara, I want you to look at that rock," Clark said pointing to the object in question. "I want to you concentrate on it, try to imagine what could be on the other side, and let your mind do the rest."

Lara stared at the rock but nothing seemed to be happening. "It's not working, Daddy!" Lara exclaimed, frustrated.

"Calm down, Pumpkin, you're doing just fine. It takes a while to get the hang of it. Try again but don't concentrate quite so hard."

Lara gazed at the rock again, trying to stay relaxed as her dad had directed. Before long the rock began to look different to her. It seemed to look like a fogged mirror and then, suddenly her vision cleared and she saw the fish that was hiding under the rock.

"It's a fish, Daddy!" Lara exclaimed proudly.

"What kind of fish?"

"It's a . . . perch, right, Daddy?"

"That's right, Lara. Very good! You're getting the hang of it."

Lara frowned as the rock turned foggy once again then turned solid. "I lost it, Daddy. I can't see through it now." She tried again, but the rock remained solid as before.

"Don't worry about it, Pumpkin. Your x-ray vision may be spotty at first as it develops. It may take a week or two before you

can consistently see through objects. Also, I don't think I've mentioned this before, but we can't see through lead." Clark said, gazing proudly at his daughter.

"We can't? Why's that?"

"Not sure. I think it has to do with blocking the 'x-rays' we use. Hospitals use lead to shield patients and workers from x-rays, and I guess it works the same with us, though we don't produce real x-rays."

Lara tried to see through the rock again but it remained stubbornly solid. She heaved a sigh, frustrated with this small taste of her new power.

"How about we go help grandma make supper? Grandpa should be home from the auction soon."

"Okay, Daddy." Lara grasped her dad's hand as they walked, pleased that she'd developed another power. She was sure she'd get them all now and she couldn't wait!

"You know, it may be time to think about getting you some glasses like mine," Clark said airily.

"Daddy! I don't want glasses!" Lara whined. "I'll look like a geek!"

"You would not. I bet you'd look very pretty with a nice pair of flattering frames. I wore them when my vision powers started to show up to remind me not to use them when I shouldn't. They could help you the same way, you know."

"But I *don't* want glasses, Daddy! Please don't make me," Lara pleaded.

"I was only suggesting them, Lara. If you don't want them you don't have to wear them. You'll just have to be careful, that's all. When your powers are new, you're not fully in control of them. X-ray vision is one thing but the heat vision can be dangerous if you're not careful."

"I hadn't thought of that, but I still want to try *not* wearing glasses," Lara said firmly.

"Okay by me; but you have to promise not to peek into the boy's locker room!" Clark said with a grin.

"**DADDY!**"

About a week after Lara's first experience with her x-ray vision she was, again, playing in the barn when she felt a weird sensation in her eyes. She felt her vision change, losing focus for a moment, then it cleared up but, instead of her normal view, she saw the hay on the floor as if it was viewed through a microscope! She closed her eyes, squeezing them tightly together, taking a few deep breaths to calm down then she opened her eyes. Thankfully the world was back to normal but she knew that another of her powers had shown itself and she needed to tell her father.

"Daddy! Daddy!" she exclaimed, rushing into the kitchen.

"What's up, Pumpkin?" Clark asked, walking in from the living room.

"I was in the barn and my eyes went weird and then I saw the hay in the barn like I was looking at it through a microscope!"

"Hmm, that's to be expected, I guess. Your x-ray vision shows up and now it looks like microscopic vision is showing itself. I bet your other vision powers are there too so maybe we should try them all." Clark took Lara's hand and the two of them walked to the barn where Clark grabbed two pieces of scrap metal left over from his mother's welding projects. They then walked down by the pond to a cleared area where Lara could do little damage if her heat vision got out of control.

"Okay, I think since you experienced microscopic vision by yourself why don't you try that again? I want you focus on this pebble." Clark pointed to a very small pebble that lay between Lara's feet. "Try to see if you can see any minerals on its surface."

Lara relaxed, taking a deep calming breath, then she looked down, focusing on the pebble. At first nothing happened then, as when she'd first tried her x-ray vision, the pebble filled her field of view, the focus getting closer and closer until she could see bits of

quartz mixed in with the gray of the rest of the pebble. She looked even closer, focusing on the quartz until she could see the crystalline structure.

"I did it, Daddy! I can see the quartz crystal structure!" Lara said excitedly.

"Excellent! Okay, now let's try the opposite. You should also have telescopic vision. Turn to you left and concentrate on the horizon. You should be able to see the steeple of the church in town."

Lara turned and gazed at the horizon relaxing her eyes, focusing on the object she wanted to see. Slowly her vision cleared and the steeple of the church with its black shingle roof with the cross on top came into view.

"I see it, I see it!" Lara exclaimed, hopping up and down clapping happily.

"That's wonderful! Okay, there's one more power to test. Heat vision. This one is potentially very dangerous if you don't know how to control it. I remember when dad was trying to help me I set a small corner of the barn on fire. Luckily, dad had a bucket of water handy."

"Can you show me?" Lara said with a giggle.

"After you try yourself. Now let's start with something easy. That pebble you looked at earlier, try to heat it up, slowly."

Lara nodded her assent then she turned, finding the little pebble once more. Looking at the pebble she thought of it getting warm and, after a few moments, the pebble slowly began to glow a dull red. Once she got the hang of that she concentrated even more until it was glowing bright orange and finally bright white and it began to flatten out as the minerals began to melt.

"Perfect! That's just perfect. You're a natural, Pumpkin!" Clark exclaimed. Lara was so excited she turned to look at her father without turning off her heat vision.

"Oh, Daddy! I'm so sorry! Are you hurt?" Lara exclaimed seeing her father's shirt catching fire. Clark quickly beat out the little flame then he knelt down to reassure his daughter.

"I'm fine, Pumpkin. No harm done. But you see what I mean, if you don't have control of your heat vision you could accidentally hurt someone." Clark drew Lara into his arms, soothing the little girl with kisses to the crown of her head.

Lara nodded her understanding, hugging her father tightly in silent apology.

"Ready to continue?" Lara nodded though she was still a little shaky from her previous experience. "Good, now I want you to heat up this metal until it glows red."

Clark placed one of the pieces of metal on the ground then he stepped back. Since Lara had already done something similar to the pebble it was only a few moments later before the metal was glowing a dull red.

"Good, now keep it at that temperature for a minute." Lara carefully modulated the temperature, keeping the piece of metal glowing red.

"Okay, now I want you to burn a hole through the metal on the left side." Lara tightened her focus until a small area the size of a quarter began to glow hotter and hotter until a hole appeared, the rest of the metal cooling to normal black.

Clark picked up the piece with the hole and handed it and the other piece to Lara.

"Now I want you to weld the two pieces together. Hold one piece at 90 degrees to the other and weld that junction. You need to melt where they join without letting them get too hot so the metal warps. Ready?" Lara nodded holding the pieces as directed. Lara focused her heat vision on the junction of the two pieces until the intersection began to glow red, then orange and finally white. She limited the heat to the immediate area until she could see the metal begin to flow slightly then she turned it off, allowing the two pieces to cool. Clark reached out, taking the metal from her so he could examine the weld. Nodding his head in approval he bent

the two pieces to test the weld, which held up perfectly.

"Perfect! You are a natural, Pumpkin! It took me a long time until I could weld as good as this. I'm going to have you help grandpa the next time he needs the tractor fixed!" Clark smiled at his daughter proudly, tossing the metal to the ground, gathering her up in his arms.

"Thanks, Daddy, you're a good teacher." Lara said happily, hugging and kissing her father lovingly.

"Okay, now here's a test of how well you can control the intensity of the beam." Clark set Lara down then led her over to a tree on the edge of the pond. "I want you to burn a circle into the bark then write your initials, but I don't want you to go too deep and hurt the tree. Ready to give it a shot?"

"You bet, Daddy. I got this!" Lara, fresh from her welding success looked at the tree concentrating on burning the bark of the tree without going too deep. First she made the circle, going slowly so as not to go too deep. It took a few tries to get the intensity right but once she got the hang of it she completed the circle with ease. The next part, burning her initials was a matter of a few seconds with LLK burned into the center.

"Perfect, Pumpkin, just perfect. You sure have gotten control very quickly but even so I want you to keep practicing until you can do it without even thinking."

"I will, Daddy, now how about you show me where you burned the barn!"

Chapter Eighteen

Perry White was seated at his editor's desk at the *Daily Planet*, the desk he'd been working at for the past 20 years. He'd come to a decision, and now it was time to get the ball rolling. He stood, walked to his doorway, and gazed out over his newsroom. 'I'm going to miss all this, but it's time I started training a replacement. I probably should have done this a while ago but I'm a stubborn ol' goat.' Seeing the person he was seeking exiting the elevator, Perry called out. "Lois, please come to my office once you get settled, alright?"

"Sure thing, Chief!" Lois called back.

Perry sat back in his chair while he waited for his protégé to arrive. Lois had reached the height of her professional career. She'd garnered eight Kerth awards and two Pulitzers. The next big step was to move into management. He was pretty sure she'd be interested in his proposal, he certainly hoped so, because he couldn't think of anyone else he could trust with his beloved *Daily Planet* except... but he wasn't available. His musings were interrupted by Lois entering the office.

"What's up Chief? You got a hot lead for me?" Lois asked excitedly.

"No, Honey. I've got a proposition for ya," he met her eyes and could see the question in them. "I'm well over the age of retirement, Lois. It's past time that I gave someone else the reins. I want you to take over for me. What do you say?"

Lois sat in the plaid chair, stunned. He watched various emotions play over her face: shock, confusion, and finally pride. "I'm honored, Chief, but why me?"

"You're my best reporter, you know that; but you're also the best person for the job. You've got the talent and the personality to run this paper the way it needs to be run. I couldn't retire in good conscience with anybody but you at the helm. I plan to start training you immediately, if you agree of course. Then, when I feel you've got a handle on things, I'm going to start cutting back, maybe half days, until you're able to stand on your own." Perry smiled proudly at Lois, seeing the excitement in her eyes. "Alice has been through a lot over the years and I need to treat her right, too. I figure in about a year, probably less, I'll be able to retire completely and I'm going to surprise her with the trip to Europe she's always wanted to take. ... So, do we have a deal, Lois?"

Lois stood up and extended her hand. "We have a deal, Perry!"

I can't thank you enough for the confidence you've shown in me over the years. I won't let you down. I promise."

Perry shook her hand and smiled widely. "I know you won't. There's no way you could." Perry moved from behind his desk and hugged this woman who was like a daughter to him. "Come on, let's give the troops the good news!"

Lara had now developed all the powers her father had except the ability to fly. She was approaching her eighteenth birthday and her high school graduation; but except for a little floating in her sleep, nothing. She was getting frustrated. She had loved flying with her dad ever since she'd been nine and had been told of her dad's other identity. Yet even now, nine years and hundreds of flights later, she still had a hard time seeing her dad as the world famous superhero. She'd watched him on television even before she'd been told, but she watched him more closely afterward; but the near perfect being she watched saving lives all over the world was not her father, or at least not who he really was. Her dad was the kindest, most loving man in the world who'd supported and loved her unconditionally for as long as she could remember. Lara talked to her grandfather a lot about the difference between her father and Superman, and he'd given her a better understanding of what Superman stood for and why her father acted the way he did in the suit. He did it to protect them; that was the bottom line. He had to help people and fight crime, but he didn't want those activities to bring unwanted attention to his family.

Grandpa had told her the story of Jason Trask which had really scared her, even though the man was long dead before she'd ever been born. It scared her to think that there could be people in the world who feared her father so much that they'd tried to kill him, even though he'd never given anyone cause to fear him. Lara wondered if, when she decided to join her father in his work, her appearance would elicit fears of alien invasion once again. She hoped not, but she was sure she and her dad would deal with that eventuality if necessary. She really hoped she'd develop her ability to fly soon, though. Lara couldn't wait to get into the sky and help her dad as she'd promised him all those years ago.

As she'd done for the last two years, she was going to work over the summer break at the *Post* with her dad, learning the craft of journalism. She'd been fascinated by the written word since she was little, writing stories about the farm and the animals to start, then progressing to other works of fiction as she grew. She'd incorporated scenes from her travels with her father into some of her stories, always being careful to write so that the descriptions wouldn't seem to be from actual experience. Her teachers had commented more than once on her vivid imagination!

She remembered her first 'assignment' for the *Post*, covering the 4H awards when she was 16. She took notes, interviewed the winners and the runners-up, and had woven a story that was more than just facts; it had told of the trials and triumphs of the participants. Her dad had been very proud of her, putting her article on the front page, though it was below the fold! She had that article on her wall, framed of course. She'd done so well in her studies, maintaining a 4.0 average throughout high school, that she'd been awarded an academic scholarship to Kansas State University where she planned to study journalism. Her ultimate goal was to become an investigative reporter in Chicago, for the *Tribune* or the *Sun-Times*.

Since it was a beautiful day she decided to take a walk in the fields. Her dad and grandpa were away looking at a used tractor and grandma was holed up in the barn working on another of her metal sculptures, so she was kind of at loose ends. The sun beat down on her bare shoulders energizing her. She'd always loved the sun and how it felt on her body; and now that she knew her body actually processed the sun into the energy she needed for her powers, she spent as much time out in it as she could. In her tank top and shorts, her dark brown hair blowing in the wind, she felt

like she could do anything. Lara skipped down the path, deeper into the fields, until she came to the fence between her grandpa's land and Shuster's field. She hopped the fence and headed to a place she'd been to many times.

It didn't look like much now; there were no remnants of the world changing event that had happened there over forty years earlier. Her dad had shown her where his ship had landed not long after he'd told her about his powers. She'd thought she'd see the little ship and she was disappointed to find out it wasn't there. She was even more disappointed when she found out that the little ship had been stolen from where her grandpa had buried it. Her father had explained that some bad men had come looking for him when he was a baby and had taken the ship with them. Lara had put two and two together after grandpa had told her about Jason Trask. She assumed he, or rather his group, still had the ship and she vowed to find it someday and return it to her dad.

Still, even though there was no ship, not even any sign that it had ever been there, Lara felt close to this place somehow. She settled down against a tree, listening to the sounds of a Kansas summer. She opened her hearing, stretching out with it like her dad had taught her. She heard the dragonflies and the bees as they flitted back and forth across the meadow. She heard the fluttering of wings as birds passed overhead. The sound of a tractor on the next farm over caught her attention. The motor needed a tune-up, it had a skip that grandpa would have fixed long ago.

Something that she didn't expect to hear made her leap up and begin to walk deeper into the field. It was the sound of a young child, crying piteously for his mother. She followed the sound until she came to a huge elm tree. She glanced up and saw a boy of about three or four high up in the branches of the tree.

"Hey there, don't cry. I'll be right up to get you!" Lara called to the frightened child. The child looked down, sobbing piteously at her, clinging to a thin branch for dear life. "How did a little boy like that get all the way out here and into that tree?! Wasn't his mother watching him?" Lara thought as she began to climb. It was a slow climb since there wasn't much room for a woman her size. She had taken after her father and at eighteen stood at almost five feet ten inches. Slowly she climbed, calling out reassurances to the boy as she did so, hoping to calm him down. Lara finally reached him, but he was too traumatized to come to her, so she was going to have to go to him. She eased out, carefully placing her feet on the strongest branches she could, though there were no really strong branches this high up. She'd just reached the boy when she heard a sharp crack and she leaped, scooping the boy into her arms, just as the branch he was on fell away.

Lara wrapped the boy tightly in her arms as they plunged towards the ground. Logically she knew she wouldn't be hurt; she'd been invulnerable since she was ten, but she'd never fallen like this, and so she panicked, her mind screaming out to halt the fall. About the time she expected to crash into the ground, she realized she wasn't falling! Lara glanced around to find herself hovering on her back just below the bottom branches of the tree! It took a few seconds before she realized what was happening—she was flying!

The boy squirming in her arms reminded her that she needed to get them down so she relaxed, allowing her body to descend slowly to the grass. Lara released the boy and the two of them stood up, brushing grass from their clothes.

"Are you okay?" Lara asked the boy kneeling down next to him.

"Uh-huh," he said, nodding his head vigorously.

"What's your name, honey?"

"Billy," he said his eyes filled with tears still.

"Oh yes, you're Betsy Hawkins' little boy. Will you let me help you get back home?" Lara asked soothingly.

"Uh-huh," Billy said as he took her hand and led her to a path. They walked in silence for about five minutes until they came to a

small farm house. There Lara saw a harried woman frantically searching the yard and calling Billy's name. Billy let go of Lara's hand and ran to his mother. Lara followed at a more leisurely pace, joining mother and son a minute later.

"Where have you been, Billy?! I've been looking all over for you!" she cried, hugging her missing son.

"Hi, Betsy. I found Billy in a tree back there in the woods."

Betsy extended her hand to her neighbor. "Thank you so much for bringing Billy back. He's a real handful. I just turned my back for a minute and he was gone!"

"He's an active little boy, that's for sure. He'd climbed to the top of the old elm back there," Lara said, pointing over her shoulders. "I don't know how he did it, but he got scared and couldn't get down. I had to climb up and get him."

"We fell, Mommy!"

"What?" Betsy cried.

"Oh, it was nothing really. A branch broke when I got to him and we fell a few feet; that's all. Nothing really happened," Lara said nervously.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Betsy asked, concern for her son's rescuer evident. "Why don't you come in? I've got lemonade!"

Lara smiled, pleased her story was believed. "Thanks. That would be nice."

Lara stayed for a glass of lemonade, then excused herself. She hurried away from the house, down the path to the woods again. She was so excited. She'd flown, at least for a little while, and she couldn't wait to practice! She reached the elm tree and stood beneath it. She gazed up into the branches, her eyes seeking the broken branch from earlier. When she found it, she cleared her mind and relaxed. She thought to herself that she wanted to get nearer to the branch. She felt herself rising slowly into the air. A giddy smile pasted itself on her face as she rose higher and higher into the tree. She had to push branches out of the way, but her progress to the branch she wanted continued unabated. At last she hovered next to the broken branch high in the foliage of the old elm.

She turned slowly in the air, happily surveying the world from this unique perspective. She glanced around with her telescopic vision; and, not seeing anyone around, she rose higher, breaking free of the leaves and into the open air. Higher and higher she rose, the fields below her becoming blocks of green and brown divided by roads, paved and dirt, spreading out to the horizon. As much as she'd always loved flying with her dad, this experience was like nothing she'd ever had. Defying gravity under her own power was a heady experience. It was freedom unlike any she'd known before. She could go anywhere in the world now, whenever she wanted to, once she learned to navigate, of course. She'd have to ask her dad how he did it. After all, it wouldn't do to get lost. How embarrassing would it be to have to call her dad so he could come get her!

Lara turned towards home and, willing her body to go there, she slowly flew in that direction. She soon learned how to speed up and slow down, but the fancy things her dad had done eluded her, at least for now. Tonight, after supper, she'd have him give her lessons—navigation first, especially at night, then some of the fancy maneuvers. As she'd seen her dad do, she scanned the area in preparation for landing, and, seeing no one, she landed softly next to the porch. Lara glanced toward the barn with her x-ray vision and saw her grandmother still hard at work. With a smile she entered the kitchen, pulling vegetables from the refrigerator so she could peel them for supper.

Lara was on pins and needles throughout the meal. She wanted to blurt out her news but she also wanted to surprise her dad. Her family could tell something was up.

"What's going on, Pumpkin? You're squirming like you have

an eel in your pants," Clark said, smiling at his daughter.

"Nothing Dad, I'm just excited, what with graduation and summer coming and all," Lara said, taking another mouthful of mashed potatoes.

"I'm sorry you didn't get to be Valedictorian, Lara. I thought you had it nailed," Jonathan said.

"It's alright, Grandpa. Joey's essay was better than mine. I tried my best but I really wasn't inspired by the subject."

"As long as you did your best that's all anyone can ask," Martha said, squeezing Lara's hand in support.

"That's right, Grandma. I tried my best and it's okay that I didn't win."

When supper was finished, Lara helped Martha with the dishes, then she went up to her room while the rest of the family went into the living room to relax. Lara sat on her bed wracking her brain for a way to surprise her family with her newfound ability. At last an idea came to her. She hopped off the bed and skipped down the stairs, coming to stand in front of her father.

"Dad, do I look any different to you?" she asked shyly.

Clark gazed at his daughter from head to toe but he couldn't see anything different.

"No, Pumpkin, why?" he said, confused by her request. Lara then rose from the floor hovering halfway between the floor and the ceiling.

"How about now?!" she squealed as her dad's face broke into a smile.

"You can fly?! When did this happen?" he asked, popping out of his chair to float up next to his daughter. Martha and Jonathan crowded around them, unshed tears glistening in their eyes.

"This afternoon," she said, and then told them the story of Billy's rescue.

"My little girl's first rescue," Clark said proudly.

"It was, wasn't it?" Lara said amazed; she hadn't thought about it that way at the time. "Dad, could we go flying tonight? I need you to teach me about navigating. I'd be *really* embarrassed if I got lost."

"Sure thing, Lara. Why don't you change into your black outfit and join me outside?" Clark said. He spun into a black t-shirt and black jeans while his daughter floated up to her room.

"So, do you think you have the hang of it?" Clark asked after they'd finished a lesson in celestial navigation.

"I think so, Dad. Can we go somewhere and let me get us home?"

"Okay, how about this. You hold my hand and close your eyes. I'll take us somewhere and you get us home." Clark extended his hand, grasping hers; and once her eyes were closed, he headed due west. When he reached the Pacific he turned slightly southwest until they were miles from any islands.

"Okay Pumpkin, if you can get us home from here you'll be okay from anywhere." Clark floated on his back, his arms behind his head, smiling as Lara looked around.

"Boy, you don't fool around, do you?" Lara said, amazed at the expanse of water that surrounded them.

"Nope, wouldn't want my baby calling from Bora Bora asking daddy to come pick her up, would I?" Clark's smirk and wink told Lara that he was really enjoying teasing her.

"Alright, let's see..." Lara gazed at the sky, orienting herself by the stars as Clark had taught her. She checked the stars once more to confirm where she was and where she needed to go.

"We're in the South Pacific, right Dad?"

"That's right." Clark smiled his approval.

"Good, then we need to go that way." Lara pointed vaguely northeast and she smiled impishly. "Race ya!" She took off at her top speed racing for Smallville. She glanced around to see her father trailing her by several miles and her smile grew wider. When they passed over New Mexico she was stunned when her

father passed her as if she were standing still! Two minutes later she touched down just off the front porch; her father sat on the swing, his feet resting on a cushion of air, ankles crossed, sipping lemonade.

“That was mean!” Lara huffed, flopping down next to him.

“Yeah, I guess it was,” Clark said smugly.

“I guess I’ve got some learning to do, huh, Dad?” Lara said, nudging him with her shoulder.

“A little, Pumpkin, a just a little.”

The next morning at breakfast Lara sat eating some cereal and pondering Clark’s demonstration of speed the previous night. When Clark entered the kitchen he poured himself a cup of coffee then he set about making the batter for Lara’s favorite breakfast, waffles!

“You couldn’t wait for me to make waffles?” Clark asked, grinning at his daughter.

“I was a little hungry, don’t worry I have plenty of room for waffles.” Lara took butter out of the refrigerator and Vermont maple syrup from the cupboard, setting them on the table. Going back to the cupboard she took out plates and coffee mugs along with silverware, setting the table for breakfast.

“Dad, I’ve been thinking,” Lara said, grabbing a mug and filling it with hot dark coffee. “How fast can you fly? You sure went past me last night like I was standing still.”

“I’ve never really thought about it. I do know that to reach top speed I have to fly up to the exosphere, where the air is so thin there’s almost no air at all. At normal flying heights maybe half that speed. And with a passenger I have to go even slower. Why do you ask?”

“Just curious. Since I just learned to fly I was wondering just how fast I can go. Umm, can we do a test after breakfast?”

“Sure, why not? It’ll be fun.” The family sat down to breakfast with Lara eating quickly. She gathered up all the dirty dishes and had them done in seconds.

Lara and her father walked out of the kitchen, stopping in the driveway. She looked up the distance between Wichita and Shanghai where the restaurant Clark got Chinese takeout was located. The distance was 7,071 miles one way as the crow flies. Lara opened the stopwatch app on her phone, ready to time her father’s flight.

“Ready, Dad?” When Clark spun into his suit and nodded she hit the timer. “Go!” Clark disappeared making a sonic boom as he disappeared from sight. Seconds ticked away while Lara searched the sky with her telescopic vision. When she saw him come into view she got ready, hitting the stop button as soon as Clark landed.

“22 seconds! Dad, you covered over 14,000 miles in 22 seconds!” Lara switched over to her calculator app determining that Clark had averaged over 2,000,000 miles per hour!

Clark did some quick mental calculations determining that he had hit MACH 2900. He was actually surprised; he’d never thought he could move so quickly.

“So, Dad I guess I have something to shoot for now,” Lara said, jokingly.

“I guess but this was just a test of absolute top speed and really doesn’t mean all that much. We can’t hit near those speeds because of friction with the atmosphere. And, as I’ve said with a passenger we have to go even slower.”

“Yeah, but I bet we can hit MACH 10 even then. I know it didn’t take long to get places when you used to fly with me and that was before I was invulnerable.”

“I guess that’s right,” Clark said, “now how about we hit the chores.”

Chapter Nineteen

Lara Kent woke early, her excitement not allowing her to sleep in this morning. She had graduated from college the day before,

her degree in journalism was, like her dad’s, now complete. Also like her dad, she planned to take at least a year off and tour the world. She’d enjoyed the tales of his travels, those that he wrote about in his books, but even more the ones he’d related to her directly. She especially liked those times not only because she cherished the time they spent together, but also because he was able to include details he couldn’t write about, like seeing the sun rising over the Nile while floating atop the Great Pyramid at Giza.

What excited her today, though, were the plans she and her grandmother had for the design and creation of her suit. Her dad had been very strict with her about the use of her powers. He hadn’t wanted her performing rescues to the detriment of her education. He also felt she shouldn’t be exposed to the kinds of things Superman saw with regularity until she was mature enough to be able to put them into perspective. Lara knew from experience that some rescues were very difficult for her dad to deal with and he’d always been adversely affected when there had been a large loss of life, no matter how many people he’d been able to save.

As a teen she’d felt he’d been very unfair. Lara had developed most of her powers slightly earlier than he had, she’d been able to fly at 17, a few weeks before her 18th birthday, and she’d wanted to help her father from that time forward, but he’d forbidden it. Now, at 22, she realized the wisdom he’d shown by making her wait. Lara had seen the devastation a tornado could do first hand when one tore through their county last year. Thankfully there had been no damage done to their farm, but she’d volunteered with the Red Cross to help the survivors, and she’d gotten some practical experience in dealing with disasters. Even now, a year later, she still had nightmares about what she’d seen; so she silently thanked her father for not giving in to his headstrong daughter back then.

Clark had promised her that after she graduated from college she could use her powers in public, if she chose to do so. He’d been very adamant with her when he told her that just because he’d chosen to use his powers publicly, she was under no pressure to join the family business. A person didn’t need super powers to make a difference in the world, he’d always told her; but she’d wanted to join her father in helping people ever since she’d learned that her dad was Superman. That day had finally arrived and she couldn’t wait to show her grandmother some of the ideas she had for a suit.

Lara listened to the sounds coming from the kitchen and she was pleased to hear her grandmother pattering around, despite the early hour. A few years ago her grandparents had stopped active farming, choosing to lease their land instead, but a lifetime of early rising was a hard habit to break; thus, her grandparents still rose with the chickens. Lara climbed out of bed, showered, dressed, and headed downstairs for breakfast.

“Morning, Grandma, Grandpa, it’s a beautiful day!” she said happily.

“Morning, Sweetie!” Martha said. “You’re sounding awfully chipper, is there any particular reason?” she asked innocently.

“Grandma! You know what today is, please don’t tease!” Lara said with a smile.

“What’s today?” Jonathan asked, confused.

“Grandpa, today grandma and I are going to work on my suit! Dad said I could start helping him once I graduated college. Since that was yesterday, that means that today is ‘Suit Design Day’ in Smallville!” she said giving her grandfather an excited hug.

“You know, I’d almost forgotten about that promise you made to your father. I’m proud of you, Lara. It must have been difficult to ignore cries for help, I’m sure.”

“It was, at times, Grandpa, but after that tornado last year I’m glad dad insisted. I wasn’t ready to handle that kind of devastation when I was in high school. It’s amazing how smart my father has gotten as I’ve grown older,” she said sassily.

“Your father said the same thing about your grandfather when

he was your age. I guess that all young people feel that way at one time or another,” Martha said thoughtfully. “We’re all so very proud of you, dear. You’re going to make a great superhero; your dad is a wonderful teacher.”

“Have you come up with a name for your new identity?” Jonathan asked.

“Not yet, Grandpa. I’m open to suggestions. After the suit is finished I hope something will come to me.”

“You’re probably right,” Martha said. “Your father didn’t even consider a name when we decided he needed a suit. Of course we didn’t have much of a chance to discuss one, what with the Messenger incident happening about 10 minutes after I finished sewing the crest on his suit!”

“I remember that day like it was yesterday,” Jonathan said with a sigh. “Clark had just come down stairs in his new suit. He was so proud of it and he wanted to get my impression. I have to say I was stunned, I didn’t think it was such a good idea at first, but when I saw him in that suit I knew he’d made the right decision. It wasn’t Clark Kent standing there, he looked so different that I felt sure no one would recognize him.”

“Yeah, he sure looked dashing in that suit, almost like Zorro,” Martha said, thinking back to that day. “He looked so heroic when he removed his glasses and straightened up to his full height. The transformation was amazing.”

“It sure was; then the news of a problem with the Messenger came over the TV and he was out of here in a flash. That was his first rescue and he stunned the world that day,” Jonathan said with a smile on his face. “I hope you’re ready for the reaction you’re going to get, Lara.”

“What do you mean, Grandpa?”

“Lara, you can’t think you’re going to show up in your suit the first time and no one is going to notice,” Jonathan said incredulously. “If nothing else, your presence will confirm all the speculation over the years about whether Superman could father a child! The press are going to have a field day with that one!” he chuckled.

“Gee, I hadn’t thought about that in a long time,” Lara said, stunned that she could be so naïve. “I’d better get some advice from dad about how to handle the press.”

“That’s a good idea, Lara,” Martha said. “Your father has had years of practice dealing with reporters, he can also provide you with insight into the pitfalls of being a new hero; after all, he wrote the book. Why don’t you sit down now and I’ll get your breakfast?”

“I’m too excited to eat, Grandma. Can’t we get started now?”

“Not yet, Dear, I have to do the dishes and clean...”

Lara disappeared in a blur from where she’d been standing and a second later the dishes were washed and the kitchen cleaned.

“...the kitchen.” Martha said. “Oh, my, you’ve got to stop doing that Sweetie. My old heart can’t take it!”

“Sorry, Grandma,” Lara said contritely. “Can we start now, please?”

“You’d better get going, Martha, I don’t think she can wait much longer,” Jonathan said with a chuckle. “I’m going into town for a bit. I’ll see you girls for lunch. Clark should be back from his book signing tour this afternoon, shouldn’t he?”

“Yeah, Grandpa,” Lara said. “His last signing ends at 4 o’clock so he should be home in time for supper, barring trouble of course.”

“We need to get going if you want to have a completed suit by the time he gets home,” Martha said. “Why don’t you get your designs and meet me in the sewing room?”

Jonathan kissed his wife and granddaughter on the cheek and walked out the door as Martha and Lara headed for the stairway.

“So, Dear, what ideas do you have? I’ve got a lot of different colors of spandex we can use.”

“I’ve been thinking about black. It’s very slimming you know, and I look really good in black.”

“The slimming part you don’t have to worry about, you have your father’s metabolism. But you’re right about looking good in black. How about an accent color— any ideas about that?”

“I like the color of dad’s suit, that electric blue. What do you think, Grandma?”

“Oh, Honey, that’s going to look real sharp! Are you going to want a cape? It looks great when you fly, you know.”

“I’m not sure. Why don’t we see how the suit looks without one, and then decide? Do you need to know anything else? Can we get started now?”

“Patience, Dear, I need to get some measurements. Why don’t you put on your bathing suit and I’ll get my tape measure.” Martha reached into her sewing basket and rooted around for her tape measure. Finding it, she turned to see her granddaughter standing in front of her in a very, very brief bikini. “Lara! Has your father seen that?”

Lara blushed prettily. “No Grandma, he hasn’t. I bought it on a dare but I haven’t had the courage to actually wear it in public. I figured since it’s just us girls it wouldn’t matter and you could get better measurements this way.”

“Well, do me a favor and don’t wear it around your father. I don’t want to have to pick him up off the floor. I’m way too old for that!” Martha laughed conspiratorially.

“I promise, Grandma. I’ll save it for my travels this summer. I’ll fit right in on the beaches of the French Riviera!” Lara giggled.

“From what I’ve heard about the beaches there you may be over dressed— but not by much!”

“Grandma! I can’t believe you said that!”

“I may be older, but I keep up, I’ll have you know!”

“You’re wonderful, Grandma, I couldn’t have asked for a better role model,” Lara said seriously, hugging the older woman.

“Thank you, Dear, I’m so proud of you. You’ve grown into a wonderful woman,” Martha said tearing up. She wiped her eyes and picked up the tape measure. “That’s enough of that. We’ll never get this suit done if we keep this up.”

Martha took the measurements she needed, then pulled out the bolt of black spandex and started to transfer them to the cloth. Martha marked the pieces while Lara did the cutting. While Martha was occupied with sewing the pieces together, Lara was assigned the task of using the embroidery machine to make the “S” crest for the suit. Two hours later Lara stepped out of the bathroom clad in her new black suit with a large blue “S” surrounded by an electric blue shield displayed proudly on her chest, blue boots and briefs completing the outfit. Lara stepped up to the mirror and looked at herself, turning this way and that to get a complete picture.

“Well, what do you think, Grandma?” Lara asked nervously.

“Honey, you look wonderful! That suit is awesome. Black really is your color, but you might want to think about a cape.”

Lara looked at herself one more time with a critical eye. The suit was, by design, skin tight. Even the briefs she wore failed to hide the distinctly feminine shape of her bottom. While the crest covered her breasts, it did nothing to hide the voluptuous shape of them. In fact, the crest may have even accentuated her bosom since it wasn’t as large as the one her dad wore. Though she was fully clothed she felt more exposed than when she was wearing the bikini!

“I don’t know, Grandma, I kinda like it like this,” she said with an innocent smile.

“I don’t think your father is going to let you out of the house that way though, Dear. It’s like I told your father that day: Nobody’s going to be looking at your face!”

“You didn’t!” Lara shrieked.

“I did, and he about died of embarrassment; but I was right.

That suit draws a lot of attention, so people don't look at the person in it as closely," Martha said with a smile. "However, you have a problem your father didn't. You don't wear glasses, so you're going to need some kind of mask to hide your real identity. And don't forget, your Dad is a lot more old-fashioned than I am when it comes to clothing. This suit does nothing to preserve your modesty so a mask will help ease his mind when men start ogling his daughter."

"You're right. You mentioned dad reminded you of Zorro, so a mask like that might work."

"Zorro wore a cloth tied behind his head with eye holes cut out. Is that something you might like?"

"Can we try it and see?" Lara asked.

Martha took a scrap of spandex that was about the right size, trimmed it into shape and tied it over Lara's head, marking the location of the eyes. After cutting the holes she again tied it behind Lara's head. Lara walked over to the mirror and studied her new look.

"I like it, Grandma. I think this will work!"

"I agree. How about we work on that cape now?"

Lara removed the mask and grabbed the bolt of blue cloth, handing it to her grandmother. Adapting the measurements from Clark's cape, Martha had one ready in no time. She attached the cape to Lara's shoulders and stepped back.

"I think it makes the suit, Honey. It also covers you a bit so your father shouldn't have a heart attack!" she chuckled.

Lara looked at herself in the mirror and saw that her grandmother was right. The cape added something to the suit that had been missing before. She really looked like a hero. Smiling, she put on the mask again to get the full effect. She stood up straight, crossed her arms over her chest and looked seriously into the mirror. Though all she could see were her eyes and lower face she looked serious, and maybe, even a bit foreboding.

"What do you think, Grandma?"

"I love it. You look like a female version of your dad. You exude confidence and control. You're every bit Superman's daughter."

"I think I've come up with a name. ... What do you say to Superwoman?"

Martha wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. "I think it's perfect. I'm pleased to meet you, Superwoman."

Lara liked the sound of her new name very much. She put her hands on her hips and lowered her voice slightly. "Pleased to meet you too, Mrs. Kent."

Jonathan Kent returned home a few minutes after noon. He stepped into the kitchen, hung up his coat, and then went looking for his wife and granddaughter. Walking into the living room he called to them from the bottom of the stairs. "Martha, Lara, I'm home! Are you girls done sewing yet?"

Martha hurried out of the sewing room to the landing. "Hello, Dear. We finished a few minutes ago. Why don't you sit down on the couch, close your eyes and I'll bring Lara down?"

Jonathan moved to the couch, sat down and closed his eyes. "I'm ready," he called. Jonathan heard footsteps coming down the stairs and stop in front of him.

"Jonathan, I'd like to introduce you to... Superwoman," Martha said reverently.

Opening his eyes, Jonathan was struck dumb when his granddaughter flew down the stairs to materialize in front of him. The spandex clung to every curve of her body, leaving little to the imagination. The black suit was set off by electric-blue accents, but the effect was one that screamed superhero, especially given the heroic pose she'd affected. The cape flowed down her shoulders and ended a couple of inches below the tops of her boots. The mask she wore covered most of her face and hair, lending her a mysterious appearance.

"Wow," he said softly. "You look nothing like my little granddaughter, that's for sure. I love the black suit, it really suits you, Lara, uh sorry, Superwoman."

Lara bent down and hugged the older man. "Thank you, Grandpa, you say the sweetest things!"

"You've done it again, Martha. I think I like this suit even better than Clark's."

"It was Lara's idea, all I did was translate it into spandex. The mask was my doing though, what do you think? It's not too much, is it?"

"No, I really like it. It hides her face and hair so it will make it harder for anyone to recognize her, not that I think anyone would. No one would look at Superwoman and see Lara Kent, that's for sure."

"I want to practice my spin change now. I need to get the hang of tying the mask and everything, so I think I'll go up to my room."

"I don't think that's such a good idea, Lara," Martha said. "There really isn't enough room and you don't want to break anything. Why don't you use the basement? You'll have plenty of room and there's nothing there to damage."

"That's a great idea, Grandma!" Lara said, hugging her grandmother. "Call me when dad gets home, I can't wait to show him my suit!"

Chapter Twenty

Lara walked down the stairs and turned on the basement light. After scanning the room Lara decided that practicing here was probably the best choice. She really had no idea how her dad did that spin change thing, so she'd need to experiment, a lot! Walking to the center of the room Lara thought of the many times she'd seen her father do it, though for the life of her she couldn't figure out how to start. Needing to take a few minutes to ponder the situation a little more, she walked over to a crate and sat down.

Her thinking was interrupted by a low humming sound coming from behind her. Lara glanced around, looking for the source of the noise but found nothing obvious. Using her enhanced hearing, she was drawn to a steamer trunk buried underneath a bunch of boxes in the far corner. She removed the boxes and picked up the trunk, setting it in the middle of the floor. Lara opened the top of the unlocked trunk slowly, unsure of what she would find.

Lara could tell from its contents that it belonged to her dad. She'd never seen this trunk before; but she'd never had any reason to look for it, either. On top was a scrap book. She looked at the first page and saw it was an article in the *Daily Planet* written by her father. 'I didn't know dad had worked for the *Daily Planet!*' she thought. Flipping through the book she found more articles, most written by her dad and some written by him and a woman named Lois Lane. Since the scrapbook wasn't emitting the humming noise, she put it aside, planning to look at it later.

Lara pulled other items from the trunk until, at the very bottom, she found a small wooden box that was the source of the hum. She picked up the box, set it in her lap, and opened it. Inside was a round object, about the size of a 12" softball or a large grapefruit, with the continents of Earth in green, glowing with a soft white light and humming louder now that it was out of its prison. She picked it up, expecting it to be cold, but it was not. It was warm to the touch, which surprised her. She hefted it and tried to look into it with her x-ray vision.

Lara was surprised when her x-ray's failed to penetrate the surface. The only thing, up to now, that she couldn't see through was lead, so this object intrigued her greatly. Where had her father gotten it and what purpose did it serve? As she continued to study it, the glow and the volume of the humming both increased. Suddenly, the glow coalesced into a beam of light and a figure started to form a few feet in front of her. Lara was so surprised that she dropped the globe; but, instead of falling to the floor, it hung

suspended in mid-air.

The figure solidified into the shape of a woman. She wore a white robe-like garment with Superman's crest on the shoulder. She looked to be in her early thirties, though it was impossible to really discern her age. She had strawberry-blonde hair reaching to her shoulders. The woman smiled directly at her.

"Good tidings, I am Lara, of Krypton," the image said.

"Lara! She said her name is Lara. That's my name!" Lara thought, stunned.

"You have reached your majority and the message I recorded long ago has now been triggered."

"She recorded a message for *me*? How could she know me?" Lara remained silent as the figure continued to speak.

"My husband, Jor-El, and I recorded messages contained in this globe which we put in the ship along with our only child, our son, Kal-El. Jor-El recorded messages detailing the end of our days and why we had to send our son away.

"My area of expertise is biology. It was therefore my responsibility to determine if the inhabitants of Earth would be compatible with the people of Krypton so that our son would be able to blend in with the native population. While it was impossible to determine full compatibility without biological samples, of course, I had high confidence in my findings. Since the people of Earth were physically identical to the people of Krypton, I was more than 80% sure that they would also be compatible for procreation. It was with the hope that Kal-El could conceive a child with an Earth female that I recorded this message.

"You are the offspring of Kal-El and that female of Earth. You are my granddaughter."

"She's my *grandmother!* My Kryptonian grandmother!"

"Our advanced science, via the globe, has determined that you are female thus allowing me to address you as granddaughter. Though I cannot know your name, nor will I ever meet you since we have been dead many, many of your years, be assured of my love for you. I am so very pleased that my little Kal-El has found a mate and that their love has combined to give you life."

"This message is being shown to you now because you have reached your maturity and your aura has activated it. The messages recorded by your grandfather are attuned to your father and he can show them to you should you wish to know more about us. I am sorry to say that these messages are pitifully few since we are pressed for time.

"Be well, my granddaughter. You are the bridge between the peoples of Krypton and Earth. You will allow the proud people of Krypton to continue to exist through your progeny. The task your grandfather and I began is now complete. I love you."

The figure faded away and the humming stopped. The globe slowly dropped until it rested in her hand.

"Oh my God," Lara whispered. The young woman sat in shock, for how long she never knew. She knew her father was from Krypton but she'd never thought much about his birth parents. Her curiosity was piqued now that she'd listened to Lara's message. What messages had her grandfather— Jor-El wasn't it? — recorded for her father? She was going to corner her father as soon as he got home; that was for sure!

Lara laid the globe back into its box and closed the lid. It was getting late, and her dad should be getting home soon. She noticed the other items in the trunk and on the floor, where she'd put them in her quest for the globe. Lara started to straighten out the things in the trunk in preparation for putting the other items back. In doing so her hand touched what felt like a picture frame. She reached under the papers covering it and pulled it out. It was a picture of her father, obviously from a number of years ago, dressed in a tuxedo. 'He sure looks handsome in a tux,' she thought. He was holding a woman in his arms, gazing down at her as they danced. The woman dancing with him, a very pretty woman, seemed to be none too happy to be with her companion.

Looking closer at the woman, Lara froze, stunned by the face that looked back at her. If she didn't know better, she'd have thought it was she who was standing next to her father! Who could this woman be?

Clark landed in the side yard, spun into his regular clothes, and walked into the house. "Hi everybody, I'm home!" he called.

Martha hurried into the kitchen and hugged him enthusiastically. "Honey! I'm glad you're back!" his mother said, kissing him on the cheek.

"Hi, Mom. Why the big welcome? I haven't been gone *that* long."

"I'm just excited; that's all. Lara and I finished her suit today. I can't wait for you to see it. You're going to be so proud of her," Martha said in a rush.

Clark was surprised to hear that they'd decided to complete her suit so quickly. Lara had just graduated yesterday. What was the hurry?

"Where is she, Mom?"

"She's in the basement practicing her spin change. I haven't heard anything breaking, so maybe she's got the hang of it," Martha said with a smile. "Why don't you go down and see how she's doing? I'm going to start supper, so you have time to give her some pointers if she needs them."

"That's a good idea, Mom," Clark said. He walked over to the basement door and started down the stairs quietly since he didn't want to scare Lara if she were in the middle of a move. Reaching the bottom of the stairs he saw his daughter, clad in skin-tight black spandex with an electric blue cape. She was kneeling on the floor looking at something. "Lara?" he said, but she didn't seem to hear him. He walked closer and saw his old trunk in front of her and she was holding a picture frame. He knew exactly what picture she was looking at.

"She's very pretty, isn't she," he said, catching her attention.

"Is she...?" Lara asked nervously.

"Your mother? Yes, she is," Clark said sadly. "Her name is Lois Lane."

"Lois Lane. ... You worked with her at the *Daily Planet*, didn't you, Dad? I saw some articles you both wrote in your scrap book."

"Yes, I worked with her, a long time ago. She was brilliant and I enjoyed every second we worked together."

"Did you... did you love her?" Lara asked softly.

"Yes, I did. I still do. I've always loved her," Clark said sadly.

"Is that why you never remarried, Dad?"

"We weren't married, Honey."

"But I've seen my birth certificate. It says my mother's name is L.J. Kent so I assumed..."

"Lois thought it would be easier if she used my last name on the birth certificate, so that's what she did."

"Did she love me at all, Dad?" Lara said, tears shining in her eyes behind the mask she still wore.

"Of course! Lara, don't ever think your mother didn't love you. She loved you so much she gave you to me to raise because she didn't want to hurt you!"

"How could she hurt me, Dad? I'm so confused right now. You're not making any sense!" Lara said angrily.

"I know you are but we don't have time to discuss it now, your grandmother will have supper ready very soon. Why don't you go upstairs and change, alright? I promise, I'll answer all your questions later, OK?"

"But, Dad—"

"Lara, please, both of us are rather emotional right now. I'm sure can you understand that we'll have a more productive conversation if we're both a little calmer?" Clark asked hopefully. Besides, he needed some time to come up with some decent answers!

“Alright,” Lara said reluctantly. She really wanted to grill her father *now* but waiting made sense, too.

Clark gathered his daughter in his arms, laying a kiss on her head. He helped her stand up, looked her over, and smiled. “I love the suit, Pumpkin. You’re beautiful.”

Lara smiled tremulously, “Thanks, Daddy. I think I’ll go change now.”

Clark watched his daughter ascend the stairs slowly. He sighed, raising his eyes to the ceiling. He wasn’t looking forward to the conversation they were going to have.

Supper was a very subdued affair. Lara and Clark were both preoccupied, being deep in thought. Martha and Jonathan knew something had happened in the cellar between father and daughter when they’d seen Lara exiting the basement earlier, and decided to remain quiet to see how things played out. Martha volunteered her husband for dishes duty and shooed her son and granddaughter outside to talk.

Walking around the side of the house, Lara and Clark ended up on the front porch. Clark sat on the swing with Lara facing him, leaning against the railing.

“I know you must have so many questions, Pumpkin, and I will answer them all, I promise.” Not knowing how to start, Clark felt an apology would be a good place to begin. “I’m so sorry you found out the way you did. I’ve been thinking about telling you, now that you’re an adult.”

“Why, Dad, why didn’t Lois Lane… want me?”

Clark was shocked by his daughter’s words. “Lara, please don’t think that! Lois wanted you; but… it’s complicated,” he said sadly.

“Why don’t you try to un-complicate it, Dad!” Lara said sharply, her eyes flashing with anger.

“Pumpkin, please calm down. I understand you’re upset, but you’re not going to understand what I have to say if you’re angry.” Clark reached out, grasped Lara’s hand, and gently drew her over to sit next to him. He guided her into the crook of his arm like he’d done when she was a little girl. When she was settled in, he hugged her to his side.

“Your mother was a very loving person, but she’d been greatly disillusioned while growing up. Your grandfather, Sam Lane, was unfaithful and the marriage ended in divorce, but not until many years had passed. Your mother saw all of this and it affected her view of marriage negatively, as you can imagine. Her mother couldn’t deal with her husband’s infidelity so she drowned her sorrows in a bottle. Lois was left to care for her mother, her younger sister, and herself from the time she was twelve. Obviously this affected her view of motherhood as well.”

Lara listened as her father explained more and more of what had happened to Lois Lane while growing up and how, when he had worked with her, he’d felt he’d broken through that shell—until Lois had gotten pregnant.

“So you see, Lois felt that she’d be such a horrible mother that she’d decided she never wanted to have children. I think I might have been able to change her mind, given enough time, but when we found out she was pregnant, my time had run out. She wanted to give me the baby, you, to raise because she believed I could do a better job alone than with her around. She felt that she’d pass all her hang-ups and problems along to you, and she didn’t want that for her daughter. I’d offered to marry her, of course, but that was the wrong thing to do as well, since she’d just gone through a broken engagement a few months earlier. I think she was afraid. Lois was afraid of marriage, afraid of being a mother, afraid of what having a child would do to her career. Everything was happening too fast for her, so she reacted the way she always did when she was afraid. She lost herself in her work and shut out everything else until she could get her feelings under control.”

“But why didn’t she even want to see me, Dad?” Lara said

with tears in her eyes.

“It was me she didn’t want to see, Pumpkin. I loved her so much and she knew I’d keep trying to get her to change her mind. I wanted to have a real family and she couldn’t give me that. I’d tried to convince her she was wrong so many times while she was pregnant that our friendship suffered and we hardly spoke the last two months. I think that maybe she thought that I’d finally wear her down and convince her to do something she felt was wrong for her, so she cut off all ties to me; and, therefore, to you. I believe that’s why she made me promise not to tell you about her.”

Lara sighed heavily, “I don’t know how I feel about all this, Dad. I suppose I can see how Lois might have felt like she did, but a lot of women have broken home lives and bad relationships and they still go on to have loving families.” Lara paused, dragged the toe of her shoe in circles over the boards of the porch then turned to look her dad in the eyes. “I grew up not knowing anything about my mother because she made you promise not to tell me who she was. … I forgive you for that because I know how you are when you make a promise. She might not have wanted to be my mother, but that doesn’t explain why she wanted *no* contact with me, Dad! I’m sorry, but I can’t help but feel that Lois Lane didn’t want a baby and the only reason I’m here is because you convinced her that you wanted me. … Am I right, Dad?”

Clark’s head turned swiftly, shock registering on his face. “No, Pumpkin… no, that’s not it…”

Lara put her fingers on her dad’s lips and pressed gently. “You’re a lousy liar, Dad, so please don’t try. It’s OK. I’m glad you wanted me so badly that you convinced Lois to give me life,” she smiled sadly. “I just wish things had turned out differently. … Don’t get me wrong, Dad—I wouldn’t trade my life with all of you for anything. I have two of the greatest grandparents and *the* best dad in the world and I loved growing up here on the farm; but I can’t help but wonder how my life might have been different if my mother had been here with us, that’s all.”

“I know, Pumpkin. I’ve wondered the same thing myself many times over the years. I really believe Lois would have made a wonderful mother, after all she knew all the mistakes *not* to make!” Clark chuckled softly, hugging Lara’s shoulder.

Lara smiled and relaxed into her father’s embrace. Father and daughter enjoyed each other’s company for many minutes in comfortable silence. Something that had slipped Lara’s mind in all the turmoil of learning her mother’s identity returned to her. “Dad, will you show me Jor-El’s messages from the globe?”

“You know about those messages? How?”

“My grandmother, Lara, told me,” she said quietly.

“Your grandmother…?”

“Lara, yes. When I was downstairs the globe somehow called to me. I found it in the trunk and when I pulled it out, it played the message from Lara for me. She’d recorded a special message that would play when your child reached maturity. She also mentioned that I should ask you to show me the messages from Jor-El. So, how about it, Dad?” Lara smiled happily.

Clark rose from the swing and extended his hand to Lara. “Sure thing, Pumpkin. Maybe you can show me Lara’s message too. I’d love to see it.”

Father and daughter walked, arm in arm, to the basement.

Chapter Twenty-one

Clark picked up the globe from where it lay in the box and held it in his extended hand. As before, it started to glow, faintly at first then more brightly. At last the glow coalesced into a beam of light that projected the image of a man. He had gray hair and a kind face, at least Lara thought so. Like his wife Lara, he, too, wore her father’s crest on his robes.

“Is that…?”

“Jor-El, yes, that’s my father, your grandfather.”

The messages played, one after the other, until they reached

their climax. The tiny ship sped away from the doomed planet which then exploded into a fiery cataclysm. When the globe once again went dark and silent, father and daughter had tears in their eyes.

“That’s so sad, Dad. I wish they could have saved themselves...”

“I do too, Pumpkin, sometimes. But all things considered, I’m a very lucky man. I was found by the two best people in the world. People who gave me unconditional love and support. Grandma and grandpa may not be my parents by blood, but they *are* my parents, and I’m thankful for them every day.”

“Me, too, Dad. I couldn’t have asked for better grandparents. And you’re pretty special too, and I *don’t* mean the flying!” Lara said, smiling through the tears in her eyes.

Clark drew his daughter into his arms, hugging her tightly. Father and daughter stood there, sharing their love in complete silence, each drawing strength and love from the other. Clark leaned down and kissed Lara’s forehead.

“Hey, how about you show me your message. As you saw, there wasn’t much of my mother in those messages. I’d like to hear her voice.”

Lara grasped the globe as she had that afternoon and again the message played. Clark smiled through his tears watching his mother telling his daughter about her efforts to determine biological compatibility between Krypton and Earth. Her obvious pleasure at being right, even though she’d never know it, was palpable and it pleased him greatly.

“Thanks for showing me that, Pumpkin,” Clark said wiping his eyes. “I’m glad you found that globe today. Seeing that message is something I’ll always cherish.”

Lara placed the globe back in the box and was about to put it in the trunk when Clark stopped her.

“How about we bring that upstairs? I think I’d like to put it with my other keepsakes in the den.” Clark took the box and tucked it under his arm. They walked upstairs and into the den where Clark placed the box on the shelf with his other treasures from around the world.

“It looks good there, Dad,” Lara said, hugging Clark around the waist.

“Yeah, it does. Hey, I didn’t really get a good look at your suit earlier. When can I see it again?” Clark’s eyes were twinkling as he gazed at his daughter.

“No time like the present!” Lara said speeding up to her room. She was back at her father’s side, dazzling in her Superwoman regalia. “So, what do you think of Superwoman?”

Clark’s throat grew tight, tears once again welling up in his eyes. He tried to speak, but failed. He swallowed to clear his dry throat then tried again.

“You’re beautiful, Pumpkin! You’re every inch a superhero. I’m so proud of you, Superwoman!” Clark gathered her into his arms, hugging her as if his life depended on it.

“Thanks, Dad. So, when do I make my debut?” Lara asked excitedly.

“How about you go on patrol with me tonight? If something comes up, Superwoman can make her debut. I think we should work together, for a while anyway. I may have had to learn how to be a superhero the hard way but there’s no reason you should have to, too.”

“I *want* you to teach me, Dad. You’ve been my teacher my whole life. I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

Father and daughter took off into the night sky on Lara’s first ever patrol and Clark couldn’t have been prouder.

The next morning, Clark was sitting at the table, drinking his coffee and reading the paper. His concentration was broken by the sound of high heels coming down the stairs. He turned and saw Lara enter the kitchen. She was dressed in a figure-hugging,

charcoal-grey business suit, with a skirt that ended just above her knees. With her high heels on she stood at just under six feet tall.

“Wow, Pumpkin, you look beautiful! What’s the occasion? Job interview?”

“No, Dad, I’m taking a year off, remember?” Lara said stepping over to the coffee maker and pouring herself a cup.

“That’s what I thought you were doing; so I ask again, what’s the occasion?”

“I’m taking a short trip today... to Metropolis,” she said softly.

“Metropolis, huh? Need I ask who you might be visiting?”

“You know who I’m visiting, Dad, so let’s not beat around the bush. If you’ve got something to say, say it,” she said sharply.

“You might not want to hear this but... you sounded just like your mother then.”

“Oh... I didn’t know... she...” Lara shook her head slightly. Determinedly she said, “It doesn’t matter, I’m still going.”

“I’m not trying to talk you out of it, Pumpkin. I just want to make sure you want to do this. What do you hope to gain by seeing her?”

“I plan to thank her, Dad,” Lara said smugly.

“Um-hmm, thank her, huh? Why don’t I believe that?”

“I don’t know, Daddy,” she said innocently. “I plan to thank her for staying out of my life. If she’s as bad a mother as she thinks she is, I owe her a debt of gratitude.” Lara crossed her arms over her chest and smiled sweetly at Clark.

“Sarcasm doesn’t suit you, Pumpkin,” Clark said sadly. “I’m sorry. I should have told you years ago. This is all my fault.”

“No, Dad, it is *not* your fault,” Lara said fiercely. “It’s hers. She’s the one who didn’t want me in the first place. She’s the one who made you promise you wouldn’t tell me who she was. She’s the one who, after all these years, never made any effort to contact us if she’d changed her mind. It’s not your fault, Dad, it’s hers. I just want her to know I’ve grown up and I didn’t need her,” she said softly, with a sniffle.

“You know that’s not true, Pumpkin. It was nobody’s fault, it was the circumstances, that’s all,” Clark said sadly. He sat and sipped his coffee, glancing at Lara as she finished hers. Lara stood up, took her cup to the sink, and rinsed it out.

“I’ll be going now, Dad. I shouldn’t be too long. I expect to be back before lunch.”

“Alright, Pumpkin,” Clark took a deep breath and caught Lara’s eyes with his. “Be careful, Lara. Hey, do me a favor, would you?”

“Sure, Dad, what is it?”

“Tell Lois I said, ‘Hello’,” he said, a faint smile on his face.

Lara looked at him, surprised. “I will,” she said sincerely.

Lara walked out the door and the next thing Clark heard was the whoosh of her departure.

Lara scanned the area around the famous *Daily Planet* building, looking for a place to land. Though she’d never been to Metropolis before she’d looked up some city maps the night before and memorized the location of the building she planned to visit. It didn’t hurt that it was the only building in the city with a huge globe on the top! She’d also done some research on the Internet on Lois Lane. She’d discovered that Lois was no longer a reporter but was now the Editor-in-Chief of the paper. Her biography was enlightening; it portrayed a driven personality who valued her professional status above all. She’d been married, though immediately widowed; never linked romantically with anyone after that. It seemed that her work **was** her life.

Seeing no one in an alley behind the building she shot down to land softly behind a dumpster that would also block the view of her arrival. Spinning out of her Suit and back into her civilian clothes, she walked down the alley to the sidewalk, turned right, and entered the revolving doors of the building. A large directory

was posted listing the various departments of the newspaper immediately to her left as she entered. The newsroom was listed as being on the fourth floor. Lara pressed the call button for the elevator, then she stepped in.

Jim Olsen sat at his desk scanning his notes, putting the finishing touches on his latest story. He had a good feeling about this one; it had Kerth written all over it. Before his hands could return to his keyboard, the ding of the elevator arriving at the newsroom floor captured his attention.

He glanced up, intending to give whoever got off the once-over before he returned to his work. His intentions fell by the wayside when his eyes were drawn to the person who was now stepping out of the elevator. She was a statuesque brunette, beautiful in the extreme, early 20's, wearing a crisp charcoal-grey business suit. She paused for a second, scanning the newsroom, before she turned, walking in his direction at a brisk pace. He felt the urge to talk to this strange visitor so he rose from his desk to intercept her.

"Good morning, Miss, I'm Jim Olsen. May I help you?"

The woman stopped as she got closer and Jim noticed the resemblance immediately; the only difference being a slight Asian cast around her eyes.

"No, thank you, Mr. Olsen, I know the way," the woman said, continuing quickly toward the editor-in-chief's office.

"Hey, wait! You can't go in there!" he called to her retreating back.

The woman stopped, turned slightly, giving him a steel-hard glare that dared him to stop her. Getting no reaction from him she continued her journey and stepped into the office, closing the door behind her. If he hadn't been sure before, he was now. The glare he'd just received was an exact copy of one he'd received earlier that morning from his boss, Lois Lane. He hurried back to his desk, intending to keep his head low and to stay out of sight. He didn't want to be too close when the explosion happened.

Lois Lane was heavily into the latest Profit and Loss statement for the *Daily Planet* when someone stepped into her office, closing the door behind them. Without looking up she spoke sharply, "I'm busy, come back later!"

The person, instead of turning tail and saving their backside, stepped up to her desk, daring Lois to ignore them. She dragged her gaze from the report in front of her, intending to flay the interloper for their arrogance. Lois raised her eyes, taking in the stranger standing in front of her desk for the first time. The crisp, charcoal-grey suit covered the body of a model, but it was the face of the stranger that caused Lois to stare at her, open mouthed. It was almost like looking in a mirror, except the mirror had removed 20 plus years from her face. As she continued to study the woman in front of her, she noticed the differences as well, especially around the eyes.

"Who...?" Lois said, her mouth not wanting to cooperate.

"Good morning Miss Lane, my name is Kent. Lara *Lois* Kent," the woman said calmly.

Kent. OH MY GOD! This woman couldn't be... her daughter? Lara she'd said her name was, Lara Lois Kent. Clark had given their daughter her name? It was just like him to do something as sappy as that, even after the way she'd treated him. As Lois studied the stranger, no, her *daughter*, Lara was studying Lois's office and its contents.

"It's nice to see you've gotten what you always wanted, Miss Lane," Lara said.

"I'm sorry," Lois said confused. "I'm not following you."

"Success, Miss Lane. Success in a male dominated profession. Success in the eyes of your peers. I've read your bio. Eight Kerths and two Pulitzers are a testament to your success. You didn't need anyone to get where you are—not a husband, and certainly not a

daughter to slow you down," Lara said, her eyes boring into Lois's.

The comment cut Lois like a knife; but, holding true to form, she went immediately on the attack. "How dare you...?!"

"How dare I?" Lara's eyes flashed, interrupting the coming tirade as she leaned forward making Lois lean back reflexively, "I'm complimenting you, Miss Lane, you should be pleased. I know I am. I grew up with three of the most wonderful people in the world loving me and providing the best example a girl could ever ask for. While I was playing with dolls in Smallville you were garnering journalism awards. While I was getting an education you were investigating stories and exposing crime. While I was the only girl at the Mother-Daughter campout with my *grandmother* you were becoming editor-in-chief of a great metropolitan newspaper. You've done very well for yourself, Miss Lane. I hope those Pulitzers keep you very warm at night." Lara's voice fairly dripped with resentment.

Not giving Lois time to respond Lara turned and walked to the door, pulling it open. "I've said my piece, Miss Lane, I'll be leaving now," Lara said, stepping through the door. Just before it closed behind her, she gave a smile, one that didn't reach her eyes, and threw one last comment over her shoulder. "Oh, by the way," Lara said, "my father says, 'Hello.'" The woman closed the door behind her, leaving only silence in the room, a silence that was broken by the muted sound of a sonic boom moments later.

The door clicked shut behind her as Lois entered the dark, quiet apartment. She turned on the lamp and saw her home in a new light. It looked the same as it had that morning when she'd left; but now it felt 'empty' somehow. Actually if she were to be completely honest, 'emptier' would be the right word. She had a beautiful apartment with a great view of Centennial Park and Hobs Bay beyond, due to the fact that she was fifty stories up. She'd done well for herself financially; she'd invested well and her fame had made her *very* valuable to the *Daily Planet* board, even before she'd taken over for Perry.

Making her way through the apartment to her bedroom, her gaze fell upon her display cabinet. Her most prized possessions, the physical manifestations of her journalistic prowess, her eight Kerth awards and her two Pulitzer prizes, seemed to mock her. The smooth glass of the Kerths seemed to shine with a cold light, not the warm glow they usually had. The Pulitzer Prize certificates, in their silver frames, reminded her more of her high school diploma than the pinnacle of investigative journalism they represented.

Lois closed her eyes, hoping to shut out the sight of her awards, awards that had, up until today, given her so much pride in her accomplishments. Shaking her head, she continued to her bedroom where she divested herself of her work suit. She dropped the suit and blouse in the hamper then she turned, catching her image in the large cheval mirror in the corner. Her eyes roamed over her body with a critical eye. She still looked good, her stomach was mostly flat, her breasts maintained their shape and position, the years and gravity had been good to her. Her bottom was still taut, a testament to her Tae Kwon Do regimen over the years. Her hair had only a few strands of grey, not enough to even think about coloring it; at least, not yet. All in all, she had to admit she looked good for a woman of any age, let alone one of her age.

Lois noticed once again how much the woman in the mirror reminded her of the woman that had come to her office today. Though that woman was taller, by quite a few inches, she was proportionally very similar. The woman's hair had been of the same shade as hers, as were her eyes. Her eyes—they too reminded Lois of the woman in the mirror, especially the fire that had been in them. The woman in the mirror had lost that fire now, but the memory of it was still there. That fire had been in them all those years ago, the last time she'd seen the person who would

become the woman who she'd met today.

The woman's face, her chin and the high cheek bones, had been near carbon copies of those of the woman in the mirror. Lois's fingers stroked her cheek, feeling the soft skin as the woman in the mirror did the same. The mirror woman's hand shook slightly, though she was sure hers did not, not in the least. The mirror woman's eyes were shiny with unshed tears, so Lois turned from her; she did not want to see that woman, who reminded her of her visitor, cry. She lay on her bed and gazed at the ceiling, the reality of her meeting today weighing heavily upon her. The ceiling blurred as the tears she hadn't acknowledged slid down her cheeks.

'How could he have done it all these years?' she thought, her chest heaving with huge, wracking sobs. 'How could he look at that face, those eyes, and not be reminded every day of what I'd done to him?' As she pondered that, she realized that it wasn't only Clark she'd hurt; she'd hurt the little girl that woman had been. In spite of how she'd praised the people who'd raised her, and they'd done an excellent job as she knew they would, the absence of her mother was an open sore that had never truly healed, no matter how much her father and grandparents had tried. What had she said? Her grandmother had taken her to the Mother-Daughter campout? That incident had to be very important for her to have mentioned it after all these years. She knew that Martha had been a better companion for a campout, no doubt about that; but she suspected it wasn't camping prowess that Lara had been referring to. No, it was the fact that she'd been different; the only little girl without a mommy. She knew how it felt to be different, and she'd hated it as a child—and now she'd done the same thing to her child. God! How difficult that must have been for her! A new wave of tears came over Lois, her heart breaking for the little girl she'd given up all those years ago. How many other events had she gone to and wished her mommy was at her side? How many of her friends had a mom *and* a dad at those events, watching their little girls with pride?

A smile caused her lips to curl slightly as she thought about Clark. He'd have been there, of that there was no doubt. So would Martha and Jonathan as well, proud grandparents supporting their pride and joy. Lois was sure that Lara had never lacked for love and support, and for that she was grateful. No, it was the presence of a mother in her life that Lara had missed. Sure, there were millions of girls who lacked a mother, but very few who had a mother who had chosen a life without her for the sake of a career. A mother who had given her over to the care of her father and then promptly forgot she'd ever existed.

No, that wasn't true, either. Lois had known the little girl had existed, but she'd chosen not to deal with it. She'd had periodic reminders over the years; when she'd burst into Perry's office to find him mooning over a picture of a little brunette girl before he'd quickly hid it in his desk, she was reminded. His eyes, when they met hers, told her everything. She could see the regret he felt that the woman he thought of as his daughter had chosen not to be involved in *her* daughter's life. Oh, he never made her feel that he was judging her, not once, but she knew he wished things could be different. As the years passed those instances became rarer and rarer as Perry became resigned to the situation. Lois had made up her mind and 'Mad Dog' Lane wasn't going to change it.

Once Perry had retired and she'd taken over, even those infrequent reminders disappeared. She did hear Clark's name mentioned by the *Planet's* book reviewer; but since she was not interested in the subject matter of his books, she'd never pursued any more information. She wondered in passing how her daughter was doing, but it was never for more than a few seconds before some pressing matter for the paper intruded, driving out even that small amount of concern. For the last few years she hadn't thought of her at all; she'd have grown into a woman by now and would have no more need for a mother who had never been in her life

anyway.

The last thought that passed through Lois's mind before she fell into a restless, tear filled sleep was that Lara was surely her daughter and had taken after her in at least one important way. Lara had her fiery temper and those that had wronged her would never be trusted nor allowed into her life. Lois realized, for the first time, what she had given up all those years ago and that realization would haunt her the rest of her days.

THE END

To be concluded in "Love Realized".