

Nothing is Impossible

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Summary: Alt-Clark has not only given up on finding Lois, he no longer wants to find her. What will happen when he returns to his world following the events of "Lois and Clarks" to find that everything has changed?

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Disclaimer: This story was written for fun and not for profit. No copyright infringement intended.

Acknowledgements: The germ for this story began years and years ago when I first read C_A's beautiful short story, "And So It Is." Her unique take on Alt-Clark's frame of mind following the events in the episode, "Lois and Clarks" so captured my imagination, that I knew that someday, somehow, I wanted to find a way for *that* Clark to meet his Lois. The possibilities were too tantalizing to pass up. My thanks go to C_A, who generously gave me permission to reference her work. If you haven't read, "And So It Is", I strongly suggest reading it immediately.

I'd also like to give my thanks to Kathy Brown and Sue S., both of whom read drafts of this story and gave me invaluable feedback. Thank you, ladies!

Alt-Clark: If my Lois had lived, my world would probably be a better place. Especially for me.

Wells: I've been meaning to ask you... She was lost in the Congo, before you two even met?

Alt-Clark: Yeah. It's so strange, missing someone you never even met. And now finding her is impossible.

Wells: My boy... I never say 'impossible.'

Part 1

Alt-Metropolis – March 9, 1997

Prologue

Lois shivered as she fiddled with the thermostat. She'd already turned the heat up twice. Shifting the heavy window drapes aside, she expected to see a late winter storm brewing. Instead, a lone piece of trash skittered across the alley on a gust of dying wind. She squinted into the shadows cast by a waning moon looking for signs of life among the surrounding buildings, but saw nothing. A moment later, she let the drapes fall and stepped back, wrapping her arms around herself to banish the frosty emptiness that had taken residence inside of her.

Her eyes stared unseeing as she tried to feel the warmth from the vent behind her. The shabby motel room was just like a dozen other dumps she'd stayed in since her ill-fated trip to the Congo; much better than the rickety shanty in Brazzaville, but no worse than the mission where she'd regained her memory. The image of a dank, windowless prison in a Congolese manor house flashed through her mind and she shuddered.

At least this room was safe. Her near-death in the Congo had taught her caution and the fact that she hadn't been discovered yet confirmed that her watchfulness and patience were paying off. It had taken a long time to make her way back to Metropolis and reestablish her contacts and twice as long to gather the evidence – Luthor was so very good at hiding his tracks.

Then there was the complication of the woman claiming to be 'Lois Lane' appearing in Metropolis a year ago. It had come as a shock to find out that a woman had shown up at the Daily Planet, claiming to be her just days before Lois had regained her memory. Lois had researched the woman as much as she could during the past year and although no one knew whom she really was, where the woman had come from, or where she'd gone, Lois had her suspicions. At first, Lois expected that Lex Luthor had a hand in her disappearance, but from every report, Luthor had frantically searched for the woman for months after Superman's debut. The rumor was that Luthor had ruthlessly punished several of his lieutenants before finally giving up the chase. The woman had apparently vanished into thin air.

Ironically, it was Luthor's obsession with finding the woman claiming to be Lois Lane that had finally ensured her own success. Respect and fear within 'The Boss's' organization had turned to hatred. It was amazing how evidence had started to surface. Lois had pushed, pulled, and enticed just the right people and now she just needed one more link to wrap Luthor in chains for the rest of his life.

Her eyes landed on the telephone and she willed it to ring.

She knew the call would come. Lois knew far more than most people realized. Highly sensitive, empathic, clairsentient, psychic, telepathic – it didn't matter what the label. From the time she was a little girl, she'd known things she shouldn't, and couldn't, have known. There was no such thing as a secret from the young Lois Lane.

Thankfully, age and experience had dulled her reception from vivid images and voices to mutable emotions. She'd learned to block them all as a teenager and yet if she focused and made physical contact, she could still tell things about people by concentrating. On rare occasion, she could sense the truth about someone's strong feelings from a distance, especially if they were *his*.

Try as she might, there was no defense against Clark. His feelings always snuck inside her carefully constructed defenses to pull at her heart. It'd been this way as long as she could remember, but now that he was Superman and she was in Metropolis – his grief, anger, joy, and loneliness – she felt them all acutely.

She'd never known why. Maybe she never would. All she knew was that ever since she was a child, she'd been emotionally linked to a man she'd never met, had never even physically laid eyes on. Until this past year, she'd never even known his last name, yet she felt like she knew him more intimately than anyone else.

Lois leaned up against the wall and released a heavy sigh. Clark's feelings had spiked tonight, almost as strongly as that cold, winter night when she was nine years old. His desolation when his parents had died had reached across the distance and touched her soul like nothing else.

Since she had learned about Superman, she had considered contacting him. As with everything else, in her quest to bring Lex Luthor to justice, she considered how to make contact with Superman carefully and was glad for her caution. Luthor watched Clark's movements closely, probably more so than even he realized. Then there were the paparazzi, fans, neighbors, and coworkers. Oh, Lois knew there were ways, but was the risk worth it? So many times she had planned how to safely get a message to him, but had chickened out in the end.

There had been periods in her life when Lois had wanted to be rid of their strange connection, but she'd been glad of the bond since her return to Metropolis. She'd worn his inexhaustible optimism like a warm blanket during a winter storm. She found herself unconsciously reaching out to him, craving his essence. She could hardly wait to *finally* meet him in person once her life was hers again.

A few hours ago, Lois had felt his sharp surprise and worry. A

few minutes later, the connection had gone dead and its nonexistence was almost debilitating. She felt his absence keenly, almost like a knife had cut out a piece of her soul. It scared her. Unless Clark had somehow learned to shield his thoughts, she feared the worst.

It took every ounce of determination she had to stay in the dilapidated motel room and not run to Clinton Street. She was dead in the world and dead she must stay until they could put Luthor away. She was close now – so very close to cracking the investigation wide-open and exposing Lex Luthor’s darkness to the light.

Lois breathed a sigh of relief at the shrill ring of the phone. She dashed to the bedside table and picked up the handset.

“Did you get it?” she asked.

“I got it.”

“Yes,” she whispered, pumping her fist into the air. “I’ll be right there to pick it up.”

“Don’t get sloppy, sweetheart. It ain’t over yet.”

“I know. I’ll be careful, Louie.”

She lowered the handset to the cradle and breathed a silent thank you heavenward before kneeling down to dig files from under the mattress. This was it; the final piece to the investigation that would win her the Pulitzer and allow her the chance to return to her former life and her job at the Daily Planet. No more skulking around, staying in rat holes, or living out of her backpack.

Four years – four long years – to break this story.

As she piled her evidence next to the bed, her mind wandered back to the Congo. She’d been sloppy in Brazzaville and the gunrunners had caught her. They’d held her in a basement storage room for several weeks before she’d escaped, but she still hadn’t been careful enough. She’d been caught again, this time by Luthor himself.

Lois paused in her packing to tremble, remembering the first time she’d seen him. All people kept secrets and Lois knew more dark deeds than she wanted to, but nothing compared to the depravity and black malevolence oozing from Lex Luthor.

Luthor had pulled the trigger himself, but he’d been overly confident in his aim. Left for dead in a dirty shanty at the edge of the jungle, Lois had only survived because a local boy saw Luthor’s execution attempt and brought help. Eventually, her body had healed, but her mind – her mind had been lost. She could function, even sense the emotions of others, but her amnesia was total. For three years, she hadn’t remembered her own name.

Lois knelt down to un-tape several papers from the underside of the bedside table drawer and smiled as she remembered hearing Clark’s voice in her mind a year ago. He must have been close, flying overhead. The anguished sound of him calling her name had pierced both her heart and the barrier in her mind and her memories had come flooding back.

Almost immediately, Lois Lane had slipped away from the mission and then slowly, carefully, had made her way home. She’d been in Metropolis for months, dodging Luthor’s men and quietly gathering evidence. Even with her advantages, it’d taken far longer than she expected to gather the proof she needed to bring him down.

She finished stuffing the last papers into her pack and picked up the phone, dialing a number she had memorized years ago.

“Inspector Henderson, please.”

She pulled on a dark, hooded sweatshirt while she waited for her call to be transferred. She knew she could trust Henderson and had already met with him twice since she’d returned. Henderson hated Luthor almost as much as she did and would be thrilled to get her call.

“Henderson.”

“It’s me. Are we clean?”

Lois waited until she heard the click and hum of Henderson’s

scanner. “We’re good.”

“Bill, I’ve got it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Have I ever let you down before?”

“Well, if we disregard the three plus years you were ‘dead,’ I guess not.”

“Ha, ha. Listen, meet me in the usual place in thirty minutes and I’ll hand over everything I’ve got.”

“You’re just going to give it to me?”

Lois chuckled at his surprise as she slung the pack on her back. “Not a chance. You know me better than that. I want the exclusive... and I want to be there.”

Henderson’s silence spoke as loudly as any words he could utter. She didn’t need to read his thoughts to understand his worries. Her smile dropped away as she reassured her old friend.

“It’s enough, Bill. Trust me. I’ve worked too hard to let him weasel out of this. Luthor is going to jail for a long, long time.”

Part 2

Alt-Metropolis – 1971

“Freak”

“Mommy, what does ‘freak’ mean?”

Ellen Lane looked up to see her four-year old daughter leaning over the large lexicon, her brow knitted in concentration. That Lois was looking through the dictionary wasn’t odd; Ellen had become accustomed to Lois’s unusual aptitude for language over the past two years. No, what surprised her was the sadness in her daughter’s voice. Ellen set her magazine aside and rose to her feet.

“Why do you ask, sweetheart?” she asked cautiously, placing a gentle hand on her daughter’s back.

Lois looked up from the book with tears in her eyes. “I asked Daddy about Miss Belcanto and he thought it at me, but it didn’t feel good like when he calls me ‘Princess.’ What did he mean?”

Ellen had discovered that Lois had strong psychic abilities years ago and Lois’s knowledge of Sam’s affair caused her to click her tongue in disgust. Out of habit, Ellen immediately shoved any angry and resentful thoughts to the back of her mind, hiding them from her empathic daughter. She’d deal with Sam Lane later.

Encircling Lois in a warm hug, she focused on the love she felt for her daughter. “It means that you’re special, unique. Knowing what other people think and feel is a gift; it’s something no one else can do.”

“I don’t like it. It’s noisy all the time and the pictures make me feel yucky.”

Ellen shut her eyes against the sorrow in her daughter’s words and rocked her back and forth. “I know, honey,” she whispered, “but someday, you’ll figure out how to control your special gift. People are mostly good, but we all make mistakes. You will see people as they really are, Lois – both the good and the bad – but if you try to focus on the good, you can learn to help people be their best. You are going to make the world a better place.”

Ellen wasn’t oblivious; she knew that Lois would encounter many unpleasant things in her life, things that made her heart ache, but for now, she would give her amazing child a refuge in her inevitably turbulent life. She concentrated on her feelings of love and acceptance and confidence, willing her daughter to feel them, and was rewarded when Lois’s smile of unconditional love and gratitude beamed back at her.

“I love you, Mommy,” Lois smiled.

“I know, honey. I love you, too. Now, let’s go have some chocolate ice-cream.”

Alt-Metropolis – June 1997

The congratulatory banner that surrounded the bullpen knocked Lois’s party hat askew as she brushed past it. She glanced at the headlines on the newspapers hanging around her desk like bunting at the Fourth of July Parade and raised her hands in

acknowledgement of her coworker's applause. She smiled, clearly pleased with both the results of her hard work and the accolades from her peers.

Perry White clapped along with the rest of the Daily Planet staffers, while James Olson handed out flutes of champagne. As Lois turned to accept a glass from the young owner of the Planet, Perry raised his glass in salute. When the room quieted down he bellowed, "To Lois Lane. On behalf of the good citizens of Metropolis, and from your old Editor-in-Chief, let me be the first to say congratulations and thank you for a job well done. City Hall and the streets of Metropolis are a safer place now that Harrison and his computer virus have been put out of commission."

Lois raised her own glass and blushed at the chorus of "hear, hear!" and other well wishes that followed Perry's little speech. This was the third time they'd broken out the bubbly since she'd returned to the Daily Planet and it felt wonderful. She sipped her drink and basked in the attention; it was so good to have her life back.

Catherine Grant leaned against a pillar and raised her glass to indicate the various front-page headlines strewn about the office. "Well, Lois. In the couple of months since you returned, you've exposed the second-richest man in the world as a crime lord and brought his organization down single-handedly."

"Not to mention exposing half a dozen highly illegal scientific projects sponsored by Luthor," Eduardo piped in.

James Olson nodded and lifted his glass in salute. "You've also exposed Congressman Harrington as being on the take."

"Saved the 'smart-kids' *and* caught a crazed hypnotist murderess," completed Cat. "What is tomorrow's shocking headline going to read?"

The room's excited chatter stilled as all attention focused on Lois. She smiled and sipped her drink again before answering. "Well, I've heard some allegations of corruption in the Mayor's office, so..."

Perry White stood up abruptly, choking on his champagne as Lois smirked. James pounded on his back as Perry coughed and started to protest. When Lois started giggling, Perry pointed an accusatory finger in her direction.

"Are you trying to do your old Mayor in?"

"Just kidding, Perry. I actually hear that the Mayor wouldn't stand for those kinds of shenanigans in his office. He's apparently a man of impeccable integrity and moral standing."

"You're darn tootin'"

One of her colleagues – she thought his name was Samuel – wasn't satisfied with her response and called out, "Come on, Lane. Give us a hint."

"Well, I can tell you that ... you can read all about it in the morning edition of the Daily Planet."

The Daily Planet staffers groaned and started to drift back to their desks. Cat and James said goodbye to Perry and then disappeared into the editor's office before Perry set his almost full glass on the table. He reached out to tweak her cheek. "I know I've said it before, but it's real good to have you back at the Planet, Honey."

"Well, I'd say it would be better if you were the editor, but with how often you stop by, it's almost like you're still here."

Perry opened his mouth and then closed it, opting instead to point at her again and give her a glare for her impertinence. "I'd better git on down to City Hall before I say something that lands me in the gossip rags."

Lois reached up and hugged the man she considered a father before patting his arm in conciliation. "You know I'd never let that happen, Perry. You're my best source inside the Mayor's office. Besides, you're doing a great job. They couldn't have elected a better man for the position."

"Well, I like the way you're helping to clean up Metropolis. Keep up the good work, Darlin'."

Lois watched as Perry headed toward the elevator before swiping the confetti off of her chair. She sat down at her desk and pulled her notebook out of her bag, ready to type up an exposé on Barbara Trevino's plot to mine the protected rainforests of Brazil, the murder of Dr. Winninger, and Trevino and Finn's subsequent arrests.

She settled in at her keyboard and paused to look around the newsroom. Most of her coworkers had already returned to their daily activities. She overheard Eduardo praising her 'freakish ability' to break stories and catch bad guys to the new intern before they both drained the last of their glasses. Lois smiled. She had come to terms with her 'gift' long ago and was proud of how she was using it to make the world a better place.

News reporters and staffers swirled around her and she suddenly felt isolated, a deserted island in the middle of swift currents that didn't touch her. Her good mood wavered a little. Receiving accolades from her peers was thrilling, but she still didn't feel like she fit in. It was a sadly familiar feeling, and it made her miss Clark all the more.

She surreptitiously pulled open her desk drawer and pushed aside her stash of chocolate bars to look at a newspaper clipping lying on the top of her special research file. It was a thick file, filled with every article either written by, or about, Clark Kent. In one sense, she'd known Clark her whole life, but until she'd regained her memory and returned to Metropolis, she'd realized how much she didn't know. It'd been years since she'd learned how to shield herself and Lois felt that she only knew part of him anyway. Her research had helped her round out her image of the man Clark Kent had become.

The picture included with the article was a close up of Clark helping out at a freeway accident the day before he'd disappeared. Not only did it show off his good looks, but some of his compassion as well. Of course, she knew the official story of his disappearance now. After Henderson had arrested Lex Luthor, she'd run straight to Clinton Street. There had been no sign of Clark, so she'd gone to Perry White. The next morning, Perry had held a press conference to inform the world that he'd received a call informing him that Superman had gone to help another world for an indeterminate amount of time.

Lois's relief that Clark was safe had been brief. After she'd officially come back from the dead, Lois had investigated her doppelganger in every way she could. Then she had confronted Perry about the woman. That's when she had confirmed her theory of alternate dimensions and another Lois Lane. Clark hadn't traveled to another planet, as Perry's formal announcement was meant to convey. Instead, Clark had gone to the other dimension. *Her* dimension.

Lois looked again at Clark's picture in her drawer and bit her lip, unable to suppress the now-familiar jealousy. She'd seen the Mayoral Debate news clips, witnessed the loving way the other Lois had touched Clark. The persistent emptiness gnawed at her insides as she worried that Clark might never want to come back.

Lois thought she understood what his life had been like since Superman's debut. Clark had fought hard for acceptance and had given up so much in order to serve the people with his unique abilities. Until he'd disappeared, his loneliness had called to her. She only hoped that he would return soon and that they'd finally be able to meet face-to-face. She closed her eyes and sent a plea outward to him, wherever he might be, asking him to come back.

"Thinking about Superman again, Lois?"

Lois jumped and slammed her drawer shut at a familiar voice just behind her. She sat up straight and then spun her chair around, pretending not to hear her old friend's comments.

"Star! How's the gossip business?"

Star plopped down in the visitor chair next to Lois desk. She put on Lois's party hat and smiled smugly. "The gossip business is hopping, as always – so many juicy secrets to uncover. Now, don't

change the subject. Still no word from Big Blue, huh?"

Lois brushed a piece of confetti from her skirt and sniffed primly. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Star laughed. "You can't fool me, Lois." She leaned in conspiratorially and tapped her temple. "I always know."

Lois held her stony expression for a second and then giggled, embarrassed at being caught. "Well, I might have been thinking about him a little."

Star placed the party hat back on Lois's head and set a consoling hand on her shoulder. "Everyone knows that he looked for you for a long time, Lois. He'll be back soon and when he does, I'm sure he'll be thrilled to see you."

Star stood up. "So, are we still on for movie night?"

"Sure. I'll come by at eight o'clock."

"Actually, let's meet at your place."

"Why, because my couches are so comfy?" Lois joked.

"No, because your assortment of chocolate ice cream is better than mine."

Part 3

Alt-Metropolis – February 1977

"Imaginary Friend"

"Well? What the hell is wrong with her?"

General Sam Lane cut an imposing figure as he stood on the other side of Dr. Marina Cooke's desk. He was wearing his military fatigues and looked very intimidating to the five-foot-two, one hundred pound psychologist seated on the other side.

"For god's sake, Sam. Sit down and shut up so she can tell us what she's found."

Dr. Cooke gave Ellen Lane a grateful look as Sam Lane huffed and sat down. For a man who spent so little time at home, he seemed to be extraordinarily exasperated by his nine-year old daughter's emotional trauma. She took a deep breath before folding her hands over Lois Lane's file on the desk in front of her.

"We haven't found anything clinically wrong with Lois..."

"Nothing wrong?!" Sam exclaimed, rising to his feet again.

"For the love of... She's been crying nonstop for a month!"

Ellen reached over and tugged on Sam's hand, pulling him back into his seat with a sigh of disapproval. Sam grumbled, but acquiesced. It seemed that Ellen Lane was the only one that could affect the gruff army general and Dr. Cooke was grateful she was there. Marina took another deep breath and tried again to explain.

"As I said, there is nothing *clinically* wrong with Lois. As a highly sensitive and empathic person, Lois feels the emotions of others quite keenly and right now, she is experiencing the classic steps of grief. The almost catatonic numbness Lois was in for the first week was her initial reaction to the tragic event. Once the shock wore off, the crying was her response to her best friend's intense pain. In our visit today, I was actually encouraged to see her express anger at the injustice at such a tragic loss of life, which indicates that she's moving into the next stage of grief. I do have to warn you, the pain isn't over yet. Once the anger spends itself, people typically experience depression, when the magnitude of the loss settles into a permanent reality. This is something that I would encourage you to understand and not push Lois to 'get over' too soon. She may even isolate herself further before she starts to accept the deaths of her friend's loved ones."

Dr. Cooke was encouraged to see Ellen Lane nodding thoughtfully throughout her explanation. Based on her experience of the woman, she would do everything that she could to help her daughter through this ordeal, providing the support and safety that was so important to children this age, but especially essential to someone as empathic as Lois. Unfortunately, she could see that her experience of Lois's father was also consistent. He stared back at her incredulously, thunderheads gathering on his brow as he waited impatiently for her to finish speaking.

"What the hell are you talking about? Lois hasn't experienced

the death of a loved one. What kind of psychobabble gibberish is this?"

"I'm talking about the deaths of her best friend's parents, of course. As I said, Lois feels the emotions of others to quite an unprecedented level and her reaction is consistent with what any child would feel after the tragic and untimely death of her own parents."

Sam Lane looked at Ellen and saw that she was also confused. "I thought Lois's best friend was that Molly girl that lives down the street. Her parents aren't dead. I saw the whole family drive by in their car this morning."

"No, no," Dr. Cooke interjected, "I'm talking about Clark's parents. She relies heavily on his friendship and Clark's parents died in a car accident four weeks ago."

If she thought that this revelation would quell Sam Lane's anger at the situation, she was mistaken. The man before her seemed to swell up and turn bright red before he exploded.

"Clark? All these behavior issues are because 'Clark's' parents died in a car accident?"

At Dr. Cooke's nod, Sam rounded on Ellen. "I thought she ended that 'Clark' garbage years ago."

"Well, apparently not, Sam."

"Did you know anything about this?" he accused.

Ellen grimaced at her husband. "Of course not, Sam. I'm not the one in this marriage that keeps secrets. I would have told Dr. Cooke had I known."

Marina became more concerned as she listened to them speak. "Ellen, what didn't you tell me?"

"Clark' is Lois's imaginary friend. She made up a best friend when she was four years old, but she hasn't mentioned him in years."

"An imaginary friend?"

"Yes, Doctor." Sam emphasized her title with as much scorn as he could. "'Clark' doesn't exist. She's either been playing you or she needs serious, medical help. Well, I'm done coddling her. It's time for action."

"No, Sam."

"She's not right in the head, Ellen. We need to admit her to the hospital for more testing. Doctor Mensa has some very promising data. It's in her best interest."

Ellen stood up and pointed an angry finger at her husband. "We've talked about this and my answer hasn't changed. It's in the best interest of *your* research, not our daughter. I won't let you treat Lois like some test monkey in that laboratory of yours."

"I'll do it with or without your approval."

"If you try, I'll see you in court."

They stared frostily at each other having a silent battle of wills. The tense spell was broken by Lois's forceful entrance into the room. The office door rebounded as she took several steps into the office, tears sliding down her cheeks as she asked, "You're getting a divorce? Because of me?"

Ellen Lane looked daggers at Sam and then grabbed her coat and purse. She paused long enough to kneel down and wipe away Lois's tears. "Not because of you, sweetheart. Because of us."

She took Lois by the hand and without looking back, led her silently out of the room.

Alt-Metropolis – July 3, 1997

No one in the newsroom paid any attention when the stairwell door opened. Clark paused on the threshold to soak up the atmosphere. A small smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. He had missed this – the hustle and energy, the sound of chatter, of ringing phones, and keyboards clacking. Every story didn't turn out to be a 42-point, front-page headline, but the reporters for the Daily Planet always worked like it did.

Today the energy in the newsroom, like in the city surrounding it, had a new intensity. Something must be brewing – or had

happened while he'd been in the other dimension – to explain the change. He'd arrived home last night, but only one siren had garnered his attention. After following an ambulance to the hospital, he spent the evening patrolling an unusually quiet Metropolis. He figured people would resume calling for him once they knew he was back in town. Clark smiled in anticipation; he looked forward to finding out what had been happening as soon as he'd written up his piece about Superman's return and his assistance at the attempted robbery this morning.

As he slipped into the currents of rushing people, Clark smiled at his colleagues in greeting and made his way to his desk. He felt a little guilty for staying away so long, for being egocentric enough to leave his world unprotected in order to spend additional time in Lois's universe, but he quickly squashed the feeling. He wouldn't trade his extra time on the farm in Smallville with the Kents for anything. He'd talked and laughed and cried with them. Being held by Martha and Jonathan Kent had been something he would cherish for the rest of his life. After all he'd gone through in his life, no one could begrudge him that small bit of selfishness.

Wells had tried to bring him back sooner, reminding him that time seemed to pass quicker in his home dimension than in the other Metropolis, but after Wells confirmed that he hadn't missed any major disasters, he had decided against it. He had no interest in backtracking to live the lost time again. Clark also had to admit to a certain amount of petty curiosity about how Metropolis fared without him. The city had been steadily improving during the year he'd been Superman, but she still had a long way to go.

Metropolis still needed a hero – the kind of hero that Lois knew he could be. Clark walked a little taller as he thought of Lois. Although he would never have her love, he knew he could strive to live up to her belief in him.

As Clark made his way into the center of the bullpen, he noticed a hush fall in a circle surrounding him, followed immediately by the hiss of whispers. His eyebrows lifted in concern. Scattered throughout the newsroom, he noticed movement still as his coworkers stopped working to stare, slack-jawed at his arrival. Their stunned looks reminded him of the morning after he'd been exposed as a strange visitor from another planet. He glanced down quickly to make sure he'd changed out of the suit and then altered course and headed straight for the Editor-in-Chief. Something big had happened and whatever it was, it would be better to hear it straight from his boss.

Clark knocked sharply on the Chief's office door and hardly waited for her perfunctory reply before stepping inside. Catherine Grant sat exactly where he expected her to be – behind the heavy oak desk with a blue pencil holding her hair in a loose bun. His editor looked up from the afternoon edition mock-up spread out in front of her and smiled in greeting.

After a year in the position, it no longer shocked anyone that the former gossip-columnist had taken the helm of the world's greatest newspaper. When Perry White had taken the job of Mayor, his tagging of the auburn-haired sex kitten as his replacement had caused almost as big a stir as Clark's debut as Superman. However, Clark hadn't been the only one hiding special abilities and it had taken only a few weeks for the rest of the news community to see what Perry White had apparently known all along. Cat's reputation as an adept newspaper editor had only grown since then.

Although the gaudy jewelry and scanty clothing had been replaced with more subtle varieties, Cat still exuded a certain predatory aura. Where Perry had ruled the newsroom by fear, she led using persuasion, allure and, on occasion, seductive tactics. She never crossed the line into impropriety, though, and while her personal style resulted in a somewhat more colorful work environment, the Daily Planet continued to maintain its high standards and reputation.

Cat hadn't done it alone, however. Perry still managed to pop

in for fairly regular visits to his beloved paper. And the Planet's young owner, James Olson, had developed an almost daily habit of discussing improvements with the new editor as well, so Clark was unsurprised to see James Olson seated on the corner of Cat's desk.

Some members of the staff reveled in the rumors of romantic interest, but those that knew both Cat and James scoffed at the titillating stories. They had an unlikely friendship, but it was solid, peppered only with occasional lively arguments audible even through the closed office door. They made a good team for the Planet and had both been very supportive of Clark this past year.

"Well, well. The Prodigal returns," Cat purred.

"Hi, Cat."

"Clark! It's good to see you, man." James Olson stretched forward from his perch to offer Clark his hand. "We heard you got back last night."

Clark accepted James' enthusiastic handshake as his smile faltered. A glance at Cat confirmed her lack of surprise as well. "You heard? How? I didn't really do anything newsworthy until about ten minutes ago."

Cat smirked knowingly. "Sources, my friend. Aren't you going to ask us how we survived without you while you were off playing hero to another world?"

Clark laughed, but then his expression grew worried. "Something big happened, didn't it – some disaster that I could have prevented? It must have; everyone out there looked at me like I'd grown another head."

"Nothing we Metropolitans couldn't handle. However, a *lot* has happened since you left, Clark. So much, in fact, I'd like to partner you up with someone until you've caught up with current events."

"A partner? Cat, you know that'll never work. I can barely keep up with Superman's schedule myself, let alone trying to coordinate my investigations with someone else."

Cat and James shared a knowing smile before James replied. "Oh, I think there's one reporter that could give you a run for your money, Kent."

"Who?"

Cat laughed as she stood and took him by the shoulders. "I think you were gone too long, Clark. Those keen powers of observation failed you this time," Cat teased as she turned him around.

"Clark Kent, meet Lois Lane."

Clark's mouth opened in surprise as he spun to face the third person in the room, someone he had completely overlooked; someone he was entirely unprepared to see. Lois was already rising to her feet, an expectant, wide-eyed, almost shy look on her face.

"H...hi, Clark."

Her hoarse greeting was so full of longing that his heart leapt. For a fraction of a second, Clark thought it was the Lois from the other dimension and that somehow his fantasy had come true. Lois had returned to be with him.

The emotional surge at seeing her broke out of him in a dazzling smile, but in the heartbeat that followed, he took in her longer hairstyle, the different make-up and the dark, boxy, business suit that draped her slender figure and he knew. This was not the Lois that had convinced him to become Superman, not the woman he had almost kissed mere weeks ago, not the woman he loved.

This was his world's Lois.

Clark could almost feel her nervous anticipation at meeting him. He took in her look of dewy-eyed amazement and his smile vanished. His disappointment was palpable and even though he tried to hide it, he watched as her expression changed and he knew she had sensed it, too. No, this was not the Lois he knew, not if his expression could crush her enthusiasm. Although this Lois didn't

act like the hundreds of excited groupies that mooned over Superman, he could still tell she had been expecting something more from him.

When did she return? Was she the reason for the new buzz that affected not only the newsroom, but also the entire city? Who was he kidding? She was Lois Lane. She had probably shaken the entire world with her return.

Did she already know about his attempts to find her? Maybe she expected him to fall instantly in love with her.

He almost laughed bitterly at the irony. Why would he meet *this* Lois only after he'd realized that he could never love her the way she deserved? Talk about bad timing. He'd searched for her for an entire year. Maybe if he'd met her before going into the other dimension, he might have been able to love her for herself.

Clark heard Lois clear her throat and forced himself to focus on the present. He watched her swallow her disappointment and could practically feel her close herself off. Lois offered her hand in greeting.

"Mr. Kent. I've been looking forward to meeting you for a long time."

Clark hesitantly took her outstretched hand and flinched at the charge of warmth that slid up his arm at the contact. "Hello, Lo... uh, Ms. Lane," he stammered, "It's ... nice to meet you." Clark glanced at Cat and James. "I'm surprised. I ... um, we looked for you for a long time. Can I ask where you have been?"

Lois blushed and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "Would you believe I was recovering from injuries at a mission in the Congo?"

Clark inwardly flinched at the similarities between the two Lois's stories. Could it really be true? He thought that he'd looked everywhere, but somehow he'd missed her. He released her hand and quickly looked down, unable to bear the look on this Lois's face. She looked so much like the woman he loved, and her expression reminded him of the other Lois's sadness while her Clark had been lost in time.

Lois looked at him intently, searching for a speck of recognition. "You really don't know me, do you?"

"I know of your reputation, but ... you've been gone a long time, Ms. Lane."

"I'd heard you were trying to find me and I thought you wanted ... Apparently, I was mistaken."

"I did look for you ..."

"But?"

"It wasn't ..."

Clark grimaced and squirmed under her intense gaze, but didn't finish his sentence. How could he explain his feelings for the other Lois? His feelings were raw and ... sacred. Sharing those precious thoughts, that he would always love the other Lois, wouldn't change anything.

And Cat wanted him to partner up with this Lois. How could he work closely with this woman now? How could he stand the daily reminders of the woman he could never have? It would be torture. Clark cleared his throat and turned back to face Cat and James.

"I really don't think a partner is necessary, Chief. It'll only take me a few minutes in the archives to get current and I'm sure Ms. Lane still has a lot to catch up on before she's completely up to speed."

Cat shared an unreadable look with James, whose cough sounded like a stifled snicker. "Clark, Lois was just nominated for the Pulitzer for her exposure of Lex Luthor's criminal organization. I think maybe you'd better spend that time in the archives before you jump to any more conclusions," Cat offered sagely.

Clark started at the announcement. He had known that Luthor was dirty, had been tested, mocked, and challenged by him directly, but he'd not been able to bring any evidence to print. He

turned to congratulate Lois and was taken aback at her stormy expression. At the same time, he inexplicably felt a cuffing, similar to those his mom used to give him for impertinence, but he couldn't understand why.

He felt completely off balance, just like when he'd met the other Lois.

Lois contemplated the man standing before her and tried to block out the confusing array of feelings crashing over her. Clark – the person she considered as her best friend in the world – exuded sadness and disappointment at meeting her. It didn't make any sense. She knew he had looked for her. Cat, James, and Perry ... they had all mentioned how earnestly Clark had scoured the Congo for her. Why would he do that if he didn't feel the connection between them? Why search for her if didn't want to find her?

Lois couldn't have imagined a worse first meeting. The force of his emotions and words nearly staggered her. To be in the same room with a telepath as strong as Clark was completely overwhelming. She had managed to calm her racing heart and take a shaky breath until he had turned and smiled. The accompanying feelings of joy had threatened to buckle her knees.

Lois knew her stammered greeting hadn't been the most sophisticated, but there was no way she could have prepared herself for the rollercoaster ride from joyous heights through his swirl of confusion to plummet to this incomprehensible disappointment. She felt it as a physical blow and had to lean against the wall to keep upright.

How many times had she imagined meeting him? Had she really fantasized that he would sweep her into his arms? That he would know her as intimately as she knew him and that he would love her for it? Was he really that disappointed in her? Lois realized that the image she had built up of her childhood playmate, Clark, wasn't even remotely accurate and she had to swallow her own disappointment.

Lois remembered the loving looks Clark had given her doppelganger in the news clips and her heart sank. Clark really was in love with her. The *other* her.

It must be mutual, too. Lois remembered the way *she* had looked at Clark, the way *she* had saved him from the Kryptonite, and the way *she* had tenderly touched him after he'd swallowed the bomb and saved a building full of people. Lois had hoped that Clark would recognize her as his lifelong friend, but he obviously didn't. Or worse, maybe he did and he still preferred the other Lois. Her disillusionment couldn't have been more painful.

Clark's rejection in favor of her doppelganger hit her squarely in the chest, burning its way into the pit of her stomach. If Clark, the only constant companion she'd had through life, viewed her as a cheap imitation, then she really must be the freak her father had always claimed. If someone like Clark Kent couldn't accept her, then it proved that she would never fit in.

Like so many other times in her life, she buried her pain and disappointment under a layer of anger and girded it like armor. When he had questioned her reporting capability, she'd crossed her arms tightly and mentally knocked him upside the head. Lois Lane was, and always would be, the best reporter in Metropolis. She felt his astonishment at the news that she had exposed Luthor and she fumed. He may believe her to be inferior, but she knew who she was. This was her world and it was paramount that Clark understood it.

"I am Lois Lane, Mr. Kent. And if you believe that I'm not up to reporting the news, then you really don't know who I am."

Cat looked over at James again and then stepped into the awkward silence that followed Lois's pronouncement. "Lois returned the day after you left, Clark. She's done an amazing job for Metropolis and for this paper. We've hardly had a day go by without her headlines gracing the front pages."

Lois swung her heated gaze to Cat and then dropped her defensive stance. She didn't know whether to feel grateful or annoyed at Cat's mediation. Annoyed won – Lois's reporting record spoke for itself.

"I've never needed a partner and I never will. My offer was a favor to Cat. When it comes to reporting the city news, I run circles around anyone, anytime, any place."

Clark crossed his arms in defense. He hadn't meant to insult Lo ... Ms. Lane's abilities, but he was certain that keeping his distance from this Lois was essential to his sanity. He had naively assumed that he could just waltz back into his position at the paper after an extended leave of absence, but Cat's comments worried him. Maybe partnering wasn't optional.

"Is working with Ms. Lane the only way to keep reporting on the city news for the Planet?"

Cat sighed. "Of course not, Clark. You're a great reporter, even without having your eyewitness accounts at every Superman rescue."

Clark nodded in relief and heard Lois chuff under her breath.

"Even better – he is the news; I report the news," Lois pronounced. "That sounds like my kind of partnership." She glanced at her watch. "Not that this hasn't been fun, but I have work to do."

Without another word, Lois threw the door open and stalked to her desk. She grabbed her bag on her way to the elevator without a backward glance.

James released a breath and raised his eyebrows at Cat. "What just happened?"

Cat shook her head sadly. "*That* was Mad Dog Lane."

"Not the typical Superman groupie, then, huh?"

James' attempt at humor died as Clark cast him a pained look. Feeling that he'd foolishly held the proverbial lightning rod into the brewing storm, James nodded to Cat and pulled on his suit coat before ducking out of the room after Lois.

Clark sighed and his shoulders lost some of their rigidity as he turned to his boss. He was taken aback by the disappointed look on her face.

"Chief?"

"While I think I understand what just happened, I'm not going to delve," she explained. "You were gone a long time, we needed help, and Lois is the best. I *am* disappointed that you won't be working together. Your styles complement each other and as a team you'd be dynamite." She sighed. "I suppose having you compete for stories will still be good for the paper. I hope," she added under her breath.

Clark didn't have anything to say to that. It was the best he could hope for, unless he was willing to leave the Daily Planet. He'd still need to see Lois, but he wouldn't have the same kind of close reminders of what it was like to work with Lois every day. Despite getting exactly the outcome he wanted, he felt terrible. Not knowing what else to say, he nodded curtly and turned for the door.

"Oh, and Clark?"

Clark paused on the threshold of Cat's office and glanced back. "Yes?"

"Perry is giving a press conference down at city hall in twenty minutes – I want you there. I expect that report, in addition to the story on your return, on my desk by deadline."

Part 4

Alt-Metropolis – November 1979

"Control"

"It's okay, Clark. You can do it. Focus on one thing at a time."

Lois willed her thoughts toward Clark, but she was starting to despair. All her life, his emotions had been so clear to her. She had always thought he could sense her, too, sometimes he even

responded to her. It happened infrequently now. Recently, she had had some success at blocking the thoughts of others by concentrating on a favorite song. The practice had brought her so much relief and she thought it might help Clark, too.

Why couldn't he hear her? Maybe she wasn't doing it right. Her heart clenched again when she felt him whimper.

"Not again. Not again. Please, not again."

For the past ten minutes, Clark had been curled tightly in a ball, his fists pressed into his eyes. She could feel his fear at this new development and wished again there was something she could do to help him. His surprise and dread when his eyes started to spontaneously see through objects was palpable.

After the initial spike of emotion, Lois had focused and mentally linked up with Clark. It was harder to do these days, since her own reception had started to dull as she grew older. Lois also suspected that it was harder to sense Clark since he had withdrawn emotionally when his parents had died. Now that she was nearly a teenager, Lois understood how wrong it was to invade another person's privacy and tried hard to ignore or block the feelings of those around her. But when she felt Clark's terror, she couldn't help herself.

Clark had been doing his homework when his eyes had seen through the paper, the table, and the floor to a rat in the crawl space below the house. After yelling and falling over, he'd stumbled around the overturned chair as his vision shot past the wall to a tomcat sharpening his claws on one of the big oak tree roots outside. At that point, he'd clenched his eyes shut and lurched through the house to his bed, grateful that his foster family wasn't at home.

It wasn't the first new ability to appear. She remembered vividly when his heat vision had started last year. He still had some trouble with that one. It usually kicked in when he got angry, but he'd found that by keeping his eyes shut and taking deep breaths, he could cool off without burning anything. There must be a way to control this one, too, but how?

Her heart ached and her own tears started to fall when Clark started to cry, calling for his mama. Lois missed Clark's parents almost as much as he did, since many of the lessons they had taught and the love they'd shown had been inadvertently shared with Lois.

Thinking of Clark's parents sparked a memory in her mind. She saw again how his mom had wrapped ten-year-old Clark in a warm hug when he was first overwhelmed by his super-hearing. His father had covered Clark's ears and made eye contact with him, repeating over and over to concentrate on just his voice. Eventually, Clark had been able to shut off everything but his dad's voice and over time had mastered the technique that was now second nature to him.

Excited, Lois concentrated on the memory, focusing on Clark's feelings when his mother wrapped him in a hug. She saw his father's face in her mind and tried to feel again the peace and safety his image generated. Immediately, she felt Clark relax as his thoughts turned to his dad's advice. Carefully he sat up, raised his hand to eye level, and took a deep breath before slowly opening his eyes. It took him a couple of tries, but he was able to refocus his gaze on his hand. He let out a breath of relief.

"Thank you," he whispered.

Lois smiled and knew he'd be all right.

Alt-Metropolis – July 3, 1997

Clark slowed to a float above City Hall and his heart dropped as he watched Lois push her way to the front of the press corps. She stood directly in front of the erected podium and dug her notebook and a pencil from her bag. He watched as she surreptitiously looked around for someone and sighed, worry lines on her forehead. Clark shook his head and contemplated skipping

the conference or just attending at the outskirts of the crowd, but he rejected the thoughts almost immediately. He would not run away from his responsibilities just because they had become more complicated.

Clark took a fortifying breath and descended, landing behind a pillar at the top of the steps of City Hall just as the Police and Fire Chiefs arrived at the podium. He spun into his regular clothes, steeled himself for what was to come, and jogged down the steps. Half a second later, he noticed Lois's gaze and her clenched jaw as he came, still adjusting his tie.

Clark wondered what kind of reception he would receive from the other reporters. He saw Lois glance around at their fellow reporters as they instinctively pressed back, giving him a space in the front. Clark was pleasantly surprised when several colleagues greeted him warmly. Lois, on the other hand, looked flabbergasted when no one but Kurt Burns from the *Whisperer* called out a question about his long absence. He reached the edge of the temporary stage and hesitated to give Lois the option of moving over, but she either didn't understand or refused. Clark slipped into the space next to her.

Clark glanced quickly around and grimaced when he noticed Lois staring at him. He wasn't sure if she looked more angry or sad, but he decided to ignore her speculative looks and sighs as the press corps milled about waiting for the conference to start. Her gaze was almost a physical thing, though, and her attention was so disconcerting that he finally edged a little further away.

Her response was to clear her throat and tap him on the shoulder. "Excuse me, Superman?" she asked him politely.

Clark felt the sharpened attention of the reporters immediately around them. It was a well-known rule in the press corps that Clark should only be addressed as Superman when wearing the suit, but apparently they also knew Lois Lane's indifference for rules and were electrified to see what would happen next. If this Lois was as good as everyone said, she should already know about Superman's tacit agreement with the press. Clark decided that the best way to reinforce the rule was not to respond until she called him by his name.

Apparently, Lois either didn't know or had decided to flagrantly disregard the rule. She tapped his shoulder again. "I wonder if I might have a word, Superman."

Clark clenched his jaw as the whispers around him started to spread. He heard the *Star's* Caroline Frost's stage whisper that Lois should call him 'Clark' when he's not wearing the suit, but Lois didn't respond.

Okay, so ignoring Lois wasn't going to work. Maybe he should just educate her on the protocol. "Ms. Lane, when I'm dressed like this, it means I'm here as Clark Kent – a reporter for the *Daily Planet*. I would appreciate it if you would please address me appropriately."

"Alright, *Mr. Kent*. I wanted a quote from the guy in the red and blue suit. How can I get in contact with the personality known as Superman?"

Clark's mouth twisted at her peevish question as a couple of reporters behind them snickered. "I'll let him know you were looking for him."

Lois crossed her arms and tilted her head, clearly waiting. She was obviously not going to let this go.

He sighed and lowered his voice. "Did you want something, Ms. Lane?"

"As a matter of fact, I would love a statement. I would have expected Superman to be up there with the Police and Fire Chiefs, but since you're here, will you go on record regarding the purpose of today's conference? Speaking as one of the city's rescue services, that is?"

Clark sighed at her blatant lack of respect and disregard for his privacy and turned forward again. "No comment," he murmured.

"The spike in both petty and violent crime has been handled

brilliantly by the city's emergency services, but I expect Mayor White, and Chiefs Sorenson and Phipps are coming to explain the revised emergency action plan, as well as the financial impact the plan will have on the citizens on Metropolis. Would you like to express your opinion?"

Clark's frown deepened as he cast an annoyed glance toward Lois. "No comment," he said again.

Lois hummed thoughtfully and scribbled something in her notebook. "The Police Chief was frustrated during your absence by a series of bank robberies a couple of months ago, and Henderson was griping just the other day about the rise in the homicide rate last month. Sounded like he thought they would have caught the perps quicker if you'd been around. Oh and then I heard..."

Clark turned and glared at Lois, his arms crossing defensively. "Is there a point to this, Ms. Lane?"

"Well, it just seems that the law-abiding citizens of Metropolis had a lot more trouble when every lowlife in the city realized you were away indeterminately." She eyed him thoughtfully. "You probably didn't know the reason for the press conference today."

"I did just get back."

"You missed a lot while you were gone. Do you think that the professional emergency workers might resent your vacation?"

Vacation? Is that how everyone saw his time away? He'd thought that they understood, that he needed time out of the suit every once in a while. Of course, maybe it was just Lois that saw him that way. "Let me get this straight – I'm considered to be one of the city's rescue services, but I'm not allowed to take time off like any normal guy?"

"Well, of course you are. But four months?"

"I hadn't intended to be gone that long, but someone else needed my help."

"Right," Lois replied flatly. "You were helping the other ... world. So, what is important enough to draw you away from this world? Natural disaster? Civil unrest? Kittens stuck in trees?"

Clark pinched his lips together as the listening reporters focused to hear his answer to her glib question. "It was personal," he responded. "...and none of your business."

"But, surely someone with your speed and strength could have accomplished whatever it was a little more quickly..."

Clark huffed in anger. Who was this woman to question his dedication? "That's quite a double standard you've got going there, Ms. Lane. Weren't you gone for a lot longer than four months?"

Her eyes widened slightly before she pursed her lips and waved his question off as if shooing a bothersome fly.

"Unavoidable. Don't try to evade the issue, Mr. Kent. You've said that Metropolis is your home, but how often will you leave? And for how long next time?"

Her pushiness and accusatory tone pushed him into anger. How dare she question his commitment? He gave more of himself to the city in a day than most people did in a month. "You may want to verify your sources, Ms. Lane. I attend rescues as a volunteer, a *fact* that an investigative reporter for the *Daily Planet* should already know."

"You're questioning *my* ability as a reporter? That's quite bold for someone that hasn't even been in the city since March."

He couldn't believe her criticism. "And I think that's a little hypocritical from someone that played dead for over four years. Where were you? Sun tanning on a beach in Tahiti?"

"Well, if you'd taken the time to actually read a newspaper, you'd know I was injured on a story. Some of us actually put our lives on the line in the pursuit of truth and justice."

"And some of us conduct ourselves professionally. Whatever happened to journalistic integrity and objectivity, Ms. Lane?"

"Don't worry, I've got my facts straight. The people whom you claim to serve have a right to know what you've been doing."

“People also have a right to private lives. Who’s next on your list of targets, Red Cross volunteers? Candy strippers? Who are you to judge what I do in my private time?”

Lois scoffed. “Now I know you’re in the wrong business. It’s our *job* to rip away the veil of secrecy and reveal the naked truth.”

Clark shook his head. “You sound like a tabloid hound, wanting to know what brand of toothpaste I use. Fine. Stick to gossip and let me do my job writing the news, then.”

“Ha! You think you can get the story first? Think again, Superman. You’re going to need every one of those super powers to even attempt to keep up with me.”

Their argument was disrupted by the sound of a bullhorn, magnified a hundredfold by the temporary microphone and speaker system set up on the platform. Clark and Lois both placed their hands over their ears and looked up to see Perry White glaring down at them. Perry handed the bullhorn back to the Chief of Police and asked softly, “Are you two finished?”

Clark glanced around and was horrified to realize that they were the focus of every journalist and city official present. There was even a camera rolling. Even worse was how carried away they’d gotten, the attacks on each other ever more vicious. She had started it, but he’d given back to her and her expression practically shouted that she was as mortified as he was that they had argued in public.

“That’s better,” Perry said, satisfied. “Now that the mud wrestling is over, we’d like to get this shindig started. You two,” he said, leaning around his microphone to point at Lois and Clark, “I want to see you in my office right after you call in your stories. Comprehend?”

Part 5

Alt-Metropolis – August 1982

“Lab Rats”

The door to the room opened, but Lois had no intention of moving from her place on her bed. She was lying on her back, her head hanging over the edge, her feet crossed at the ankle and resting against the wall. She bounced a racquetball against the wall in time to ‘Tainted Love’ and blew another large, pink bubble. She knew without looking that it was her father in the doorway, and she made a point of ignoring the intrusion by turning up the volume of her Walkman.

Uncharacteristically, Sam Lane didn’t try to speak with her, yell at her for insubordination, or drag her off for more testing. Instead, after a short pause, her door shut again and she felt his presence recede back down the sterile hallway. Lois closed her eyes in relief before tossing the ball against the cinderblock wall again.

It had been several years since her mother and sister had died in a car accident and her father had come to claim her. Since then, the pain of losing her family had dimmed to a persistent, but manageable ache behind the horror of living as a human lab rat in her father’s unit.

She preferred isolation, actually. She shuddered. *Anything* was better than spending time with Mensa. And alone, she could focus on loving memories of her mother, her sister, or share silent strength with Clark. Even at a distance, her connection to Clark made the burden of her life bearable.

It wasn’t until she saw movement from the corner of her eye that she turned her head to look toward the door. There was a girl standing there clutching a knapsack and holding a small potted plant. Her brown eyes were watching her stonily, the dark skin of her cheeks stained with tears. Astonished, Lois scrambled up from her bed and pulled the headphones off.

To say she was surprised was an understatement. No one had ever been able to sneak up on her. She always sensed them long before she could see them, but this girl wasn’t ‘sending’ anything.

Lois took in the girl’s off-the-shoulder t-shirt and bright skirt before focusing on her unusual hairdo. The girl’s head was covered in tinfoil, except where two frizzy piggy tails poked through on the sides of her head. She gaped at her visitor for another long moment until the girl sniffled. Although she couldn’t sense what she was feeling, the look on her face was familiar. Lois took a hesitant step forward and held out her hand.

“Um, hi. I’m Lois.”

The girl looked down at Lois’s hand and then back at her face, scowling. Lois lifted her eyebrows and then glanced at the empty bunk. “Are you supposed to stay here?”

The girl shrugged and Lois’s eyes gravitated back to her unusual helmet. “Um...”

The girl grimaced and pushed past Lois to set her plant on the desk next to the empty bed. She threw her pack down on the mattress and then turned to face Lois with her arms crossed defensively. “Fine. Let’s lay it all out right now. I’m Star. I’m almost fourteen and an orphan since last Thursday. I don’t want to be here and I don’t trust anyone. People are dishonest pigs that only want something from me. Get used to the tinfoil, honey, because I’m not going to take it off. I’m not a freak, I’m psychic.”

Star sat down and glared at Lois whose mouth dropped open at her diatribe.

“That is so ... cool! It really works, too, because I can’t sense you at all. That’s never happened before. How long have you been hearing people? Can you receive thoughts or just feelings? And how did you figure out how to block it with foil? Does it only block thoughts going out or does it keep things from coming in? Do you need to use a certain material or will any type of foil work?”

Star’s eyes widened as Lois ran out of breath. Lois realized she was hyper, but she couldn’t help herself. Star was like her – alone, bitter, and psychic. Well, maybe not the bitter part, but she could see that they were going to get along fine. Star’s ‘I-knew-it-look’ prompted Lois to explain things a little better.

Lois pulled the desk chair in front of Star’s bed and straddled the back of it. “Okay, let me back up a little. My name is Lois Lane and I’m practically an orphan, too. I’ll be fifteen soon, have been here, like forever, and I actually know a few people who aren’t self-centered pigs.” She smiled at the warm feeling she got from the memory of her mother, sister, Clark, and his parents.

Star tipped her head slightly as if to say, ‘so what’ and Lois smirked. “I’m also a psychic, but you’re good. I’ve never been able to figure out how to block people before.”

That got Star’s attention. “Really?”

“Yeah. Drove me crazy as a kid, but that was when I got all the vivid details. I’ve outgrown the ‘hearing voices’ and TV-like images, though. Now I sense people’s emotions, but can block everything except really strong feelings and a few random images and thoughts.”

Star’s face finally lost some of her defiance at that. “Wow, you’re serious.” Star bit her lip. “That must have been bad. I have to think hard to make any sense of the stuff I get. Mostly, they are just random ideas about people. Sometimes it makes me want to puke.”

Lois laughed at the image of Star throwing up on her father’s shiny dress shoes.

Star smiled at her response and then frowned. “So, what am I doing here?”

That stopped Lois’s laughter at once. She grimaced and put a consoling hand on Star’s arm. “I’m sorry to tell you this, but you’ve been recruited into the U.S. Army’s division of Mental Espionage and Psychic Warfare, or MEPWar.”

“They’re going to study me?”

“I won’t lie, the tests are a pain in the butt. They’re usually strange, most are boring, and some are little scary, but none have been too painful. Besides, there are some advantages to living on

base.”

“What advantages?”

“Black-ops Squad K. Ten of the best looking men in the U.S. Army.”

Star’s giggle matched Lois’s own as she hauled her new friend to her feet. “Come on, they exercise in the yard in about ten minutes. We have just enough time to grab some foil from the mess hall before the show begins.”

Alt-Metropolis – July 3, 1997

Lois stood fidgeting next to Perry White’s large, mahogany desk. It had been a long time since Lois Lane had cared about what members of the press thought of her, but standing here in awkward silence next to Clark while waiting for Perry to arrive, every one of her jealous peers’ clichéd jibes kept repeating in her mind. Well, she certainly felt like she’d been ‘taken down a peg’, ‘called on the carpet’, and ‘sent to the principals’ office’ all at once. And while she could care less what her actual father thought of her, Perry was different. Perry was one of the few people that saw her for herself and loved her no matter what.

Other than Clark, it had been Perry that she’d longed most to see while in hiding. So many times she had picked up the phone to call him, or staked out his office just to get a glimpse, but in his new role as Mayor, Perry’s personnel had surrounded him practically around the clock and there was no way she could contact him without risking a leak to Luthor. Tears sprang to her eyes as she remembered arriving at Perry’s office after Lex’s arrest. After assuring himself that she was the real Lois Lane, Perry had held her and cried for a solid five minutes before he’d demanded to hear the whole story. That was when she felt like she’d come home. Perry was the last person she wanted to disappoint.

Lois snuck a glance at Clark and felt even worse. What had gotten into her? It’s like his presence turned her upside down. She hadn’t been able to control her ability at their first meeting and then she hadn’t been able to control her mouth later. One minute she felt like a dewy-eyed groupie and the next she felt so angry she wanted to rip out his spleen. She recalled some of her nastier comments and wanted to crawl into a hole.

When Clark had arrived at the press conference, Lois had still been smarting from their meeting at the Daily Planet. She’d been feeling a complicated, yet familiar cocktail of emotions; humiliation, anger and sadness rolled into one. It was something she’d felt many times from her father, a man who had kept her and others as human lab rats. However, it was a feeling she never expected to come from someone she considered a cherished friend. Lois’s impulse before the press conference had been to start over and try again in hopes that he would somehow recognize her, but her ire had returned full-force when he had edged away, pretending that she wasn’t there.

It was obvious that Clark didn’t feel a special connection with her, but that was no reason to attack him, especially not in front of their peers. Not only had she questioned his motives, which she believed were pure, she’d damaged his relationship with the press and the public, people he desperately needed to trust and support him in order to be Superman. A wave of shame rolled over her as she realized she had a lot of work to do to make up for her lack of decorum and professionalism.

Lois had goaded him into an argument, one that Clark had steadfastly tried to avoid. She watched him shift nervously and adjust his glasses, but even to a moderately observant person, the pinched line of worry between his eyebrows would give his feelings away. Lois suspected that Clark felt the same way about Perry that she did. Perry had been one constant in Clark’s life since his debut. Even if she hadn’t investigated his life, she would know that those who could see Clark for himself were few and far between. She knew better than most what that meant.

Clark glanced at Lois briefly to find her looking at him with such understanding that it made his heart ache. He schooled his features into his grim-faced Superman façade and tried to bury his anxiety. Yes, he and Lois had behaved childishly in front of Perry, leading members of the city, the Metropolis news corps and, he swallowed, millions of TV viewers, but when she had provoked him and blatantly disregarded his request to call him Clark, he hadn’t been able to control his emotions. He shook his head in frustration. No one had ever gotten to him like that, not Lana, not even the other Lois.

Still, he’d said some pretty insensitive things to her. She had told him that she’d been recovering from injuries at a mission in the Congo. The fact that she’d been missing for four years indicated that it had been serious. There had been no excuse for his job at her human frailties. He squared his shoulders and turned to face her. He owed her an apology.

“Ms. Lane, I want to apologize for my behavior earlier. It was insensitive to make light of your injuries.”

“Oh, my god! It’s *not* you that should apologize. You were right. I acted unprofessionally. I attacked you, pushed you to defend your actions and give an account of your time, but I had no right.” Lois swallowed the ache in her throat and blinked away tears that sprang to her eyes. “I know that you don’t know me, but I am very sorry. I’m not sure how I can make it up to you, but I promise I will.”

Clark was surprised and strangely touched at her apology. His research into her life over the past year had given him the image of an unyielding person that never apologized. It didn’t change what had happened, but it made all the difference that she felt sorry for her actions. Still, it takes two to tango and their argument wouldn’t have spiraled out of control had he chosen not to participate.

Clark opened his mouth, but his response was cut off by the arrival of Perry White and his entourage. The Mayor’s press secretary, a short, squirrely man wearing a bow tie and suspenders, spared them a curious glance, but the two of them were otherwise ignored as Perry began barking out orders to the members of his group. It was a scene so reminiscent of Perry in the newsroom that Clark watched wistfully as individuals hastily scurried out of the room to complete their assigned tasks.

As Perry’s personal aide finally took her leave, she closed the door behind her and left the two reporters alone with their friend and former boss. Clark watched as Perry finished perusing the file in his hand. An endless moment later, Perry closed the file, set it on the corner of his desk, and then shed both his suit coat and tie. He turned and carefully rolled up his shirtsleeves, all the while not looking at either of them.

Lois shook back her hair and stiffened her back against whatever would come next. From the corner of her eye, Lois saw Clark shift and raise his hand to adjust his glasses again. When she saw Perry stand near his desk with his arms folded across his chest, she cleared her throat and started to explain.

“Chief, I just want to say...”

Lois’s slightly desperate apology cut off abruptly at one stern look and an upraised finger. Next to her, she saw Clark glance at her, but he remained silent and still as Perry shifted the steely look to him. Perry left them to stew under his reproachful gaze for another minute, and then nodded.

“That’s better,” Perry said. “Now, I don’t know what could have possibly gotten you madder than two wet cats in a burlap sack, but I don’t ever want that kind of ruckus at a press conference again, you hear?”

At their twin nods, he focused his attention on Lois. “From now on, I expect that you’ll defer to Clark’s request to be addressed appropriately and respect his right to a private life. You of all people should know the importance of being acknowledged

for who you are, not what you can do.”

Lois felt the heat of shame creep up her neck and stain her cheeks at the reprimand. Yes, she knew how essential it was to Clark to be seen for himself; she'd felt the same way most of her life. She knew how hard Clark had to fight for acceptance and legitimacy as a journalist after his exposure and her remarks were an unforgivable reminder of his differences. She had treated him hostilely as a dubious subject, not as a person worthy of trust and admiration.

Lois could feel Clark's speculation at Perry's words and she tried to will her heartbeat to normal. It would be due payment for Clark to find out about her special abilities this way, but she wanted desperately to keep them a secret now. Hardly two hours ago, she'd been eager for Clark to know everything about her, now she could think of nothing worse. Perry turned to address Clark.

“Clark. I'm going to assume that your part in this was a one-off. I've never heard you make light of someone else's suffering,” Perry glanced at Lois and shook his head, “but even the angels in heaven above have limits.”

Clark mumbled a “yes, sir,” and Lois saw his mouth twitch into an almost-smile at Perry's addendum. Lois grimaced at Perry, but she held her tongue.

Satisfied that they both understood, Perry unfolded his arms and gestured for them to sit in the two chairs opposite his desk. He watched them with an unreadable expression as they carefully avoided each other to settle uncomfortably into their seats.

“Well, now. You bury whatever happened between you two since Clark's return this morning because we need your help. *Both* of you,” he emphasized when Lois opened her mouth. “I know you can be professional, even in extremely difficult circumstances, and I'm expecting your best behavior from now on. Got it?”

Perry nodded in satisfaction at the chorus of affirmative responses and then leaned against the corner of his desk. He turned again to Clark.

“It's good to see you back, Clark. Your adventure in that other place took a mite longer than you anticipated. Everything turn out okay?”

“Yes, sir. After I found ...” he glanced askance at Lois, “uh, completed my mission, I stayed a while with family. I hope things weren't too bad in my absence.”

“Nothin' we couldn't handle, son.”

Lois sniffed audibly, but before Perry could do more than raise and eyebrow in her direction, there was a sharp rap at the door and Police Chief Sorenson entered the room, followed closely by Inspector Henderson.

“Ah, good. They're here,” Sorenson pronounced as he strode across the room. “Do they know why they're here yet, Mr. Mayor?”

Perry indicated the two armchairs across a coffee table from Lois and Clark and motioned for the two men to sit. “Not yet, Clifford. We were just, uh, taking care of some other business first.”

Lois scowled at Chief Sorenson's thinly disguised smirk and Henderson's snort. “Don't talk about me as if I'm not sitting right here, Chief. If you've got something for me, then let's get to it.”

Sorenson made a permissive gesture toward Henderson, who immediately felt the file in his hand disappear when Lois reached across the coffee table to snatch it out of his hands. Of the four men in the room, only Clark seemed bemused by Lois's audacious behavior. Lois ignored them all and settled back into her chair, already engrossed in the contents of the file. Clark raised his eyebrows in question, but before he could ask for an explanation, Lois tossed the file onto the table toward him and scowled at Henderson again.

“That's the file I gave you yesterday. Does this mean that you've decided not to follow-up on my lead?”

Perry chuckled with fatherly affection and then looked to Sorenson to answer the question.

“As I mentioned to Perry before the press conference, Bill brought me your file yesterday regarding the bride's disappearance and filled me in on your theory.”

“Ms. Lolita Dolcheck, the fashion model?” Clark asked, holding up a picture from the file. “Wasn't she engaged to be married to the Metropolis Metros' running back, Brian Costello?” Clark asked.

“They married a week ago. Unfortunately, Mr. Costello died in a car accident the day after the wedding and Ms. Dolcheck has disappeared.”

“That's strange. Didn't something similar happen to that TV host and his new bride in February?”

“Except for the manner of death for the groom, yes. He was a chef and the case cited carbon monoxide poisoning from a faulty grill in their home. Based on Lois's file, it also bears similarities to a musician newly married to his agent from the South Side in May. The only difference was the manner of death; in that case the groom died falling down a flight of stairs at their honeymoon retreat.”

“You found something,” Lois stated confidently.

Henderson nodded. “Based on your theory, the forensic team reexamined the possibility of forced entry and found gouges on both the pins and the face of the plugs at each location. Someone picked the locks.”

“I knew they weren't accidental.” Lois pounded her fist on the arm of her chair. “They're connected.”

Henderson ceded the possibility with a nod and tapped the file on the table between them. “They also found an incision in Mr. Costello's brake line and unusual blockage and abnormal wiring in Mr. Paget's stove. It seems we have a serial killer targeting famous, newly married couples.”

“Any leads on the missing spouses?” Clark asked.

Henderson shook his head. “Nothing. No ransom notes have been received by any family members, no trace of travel by plane, bus, train, or car rental. By all accounts, they've vanished into thin air.”

“So you agree with my plan?” Lois asked eagerly.

Sorenson grimaced. “I'd rather it be trained officers from my force to pose as newlyweds, but I doubt we have anyone with the star-power to attract our killer. Henderson vouched for you, so you're on, Lane.”

Clark looked up from the file in alarm. “Wait a minute. Are you seriously considering letting Lois go undercover to catch a serial killer? Are you nuts?”

“Hey! No one is *letting* me do anything. This is my story.”

“Perry?”

“That was her condition for sharing the information, Clark. Plus, I know that Lois can handle it, especially with her famous fiancé looking out for her.”

Lois scowled. “I told you I'd pick my partner myself. I can't have some amateur around to mess this up.”

Sorenson and the Mayor shared a look before Perry answered. “Don't worry, Lois,” he assured her. “The man we have in mind is capable and is a perfectly believable cover.”

Clark tried to protest twice more as Lois started to negotiate with Henderson about her 'alleged' fiancé. His apprehension grew as his protests were countered or, in Lois's case, ignored completely. Didn't they see how dangerous this could be? Lois was going undercover to participate in a sham wedding in order to attract a killer. The scenario bothered him tremendously, but the idea of her playacting an engagement with some rich or famous man twisted Clark's insides. How could anyone possibly protect her? And which half of the team would be targeted? Would the murderer try to kidnap Lois or kill her? Worse yet, there was no

trace of the other three women. Where were they taken? Would the murderer kidnap, torture, and then kill Lois? All in all, he couldn't see the merit in this plan.

And what was his role in this? Was he supposed to be her bodyguard? What if he was called away on an emergency? Maybe they wanted him to research and find the killer before her supposed 'wedding' was to take place. His spirits lifted at the thought that he might be able to track down this serial killer on his own before Lois put herself in harm's way.

"Excuse me, Chief. If Lois and her mystery fiancé are acting as bait, then what is it you want me to do?"

"Well, this would have been easier before press conference today, but we could always leak the 'lover's spat' angle to the tabloids..."

Sorenson tilted his head toward the reporters and Henderson pulled a couple of objects from his pocket. He placed them in Clark's open hand and Lois leaned over to see two golden rings glitter in his palm.

"Congratulations, Lois and Clark. You're getting married."

Part 6

Alt-Metropolis – September 16, 1983

"Intimacy"

"Give it up, Lois. He's never going to notice you. At least not in the way you want."

Lois finished touching up her mascara and leaned back from the mirror, taking in her entire reflection. She looked good. She smoothed the red satin over her hip and twisted to see how the material looked draped across her backside and smiled. She looked really good. Staff Sergeant Browning wasn't going to know what hit him.

"I don't know what you see in him anyway."

"Are you kidding?" Lois chuckled as she adjusted her straps. "I'm not sure what you look at when we watch K Squad drill, but his biceps are one of the highlights of my day."

"He's conceited and rude. Biceps can't make up for being a jerk."

Lois picked up her clutch and turned around. She sauntered toward Star and winked. "Maybe not, but I'm willing to risk it for a nice..."

Star squeaked as Lois pinched her bottom on her way out the door. Star opened her mouth to warn her again and then closed it. It wouldn't do any good, not when Lois had already made up her mind. Lois's abilities were ten times more powerful than her own, but for some reason she hadn't learned how to see the truth, that people, especially men, were self-centered, greedy pigs.

Star shook her head. She already knew how Sgt. Browning would act tonight when Lois threw herself at him in that red dress. It was not going to be pretty.

Star jumped and dropped her book when the dorm room door slammed shut. Star set her book aside and watched Lois turn the lock and then slam her hand against the wall before leaning her back against the door and sliding to the ground. Star slid off her bed and ran to Lois. She wrapped her arms around her and hugged Lois's trembling form to her own. Star reached out psychically to Lois the way she'd been practicing but still couldn't tell if Lois was furious, scared, or hurt.

"Lois? Are you okay?"

It took Lois a minute to respond to Star's question. "You were right about Staff Sgt. Browning. Star. He is definitely a pig."

"I knew it," Star exclaimed. She grimaced and then asked, "What did he do?"

"Nothing ... really, but he tried. We met near the gatehouse like he'd suggested and we hopped into the MP's jeep. He told me he was going to take me to dinner, but he only drove a short distance before pulling off the road. I decided to find out what he

was thinking before he actually tried anything." Lois chuckled low and shook her head. "I knew he'd seen me around. He'd talked with me and expressed interest and I thought ... It didn't matter what I thought. He didn't even want to get to know me, Star, just saw me as an easy lay, an innocent and naïve little sixteen-year-old girl." Lois shook her head again. "You know, he was planning on 'sharing' me with the squad, too."

"I'm sorry, Lois. Men stink." Star shook her head in disgust.

"Not all men. After hearing about your mom's boyfriends, I understand why you think that, but they aren't all bad."

Star shrugged and shook her head. "I wish you would have listened to me."

Lois hugged her friend back and then a devilish smile crept across her face. "Oh, I did. I took one of Mensa's experimental Tasers with me, just in case. Sgt. Browning came on pretty strong and as soon as he went for his pants, I just ..." Lois made a sizzling sound and swung one hand upward to demonstrate.

Star burst out laughing. "You didn't!"

Lois smiled in return. "I did. I left him unconscious on the hill behind some bushes and drove back to base. There will be no sex – or walking for that matter – for Staff Sergeant Browning tonight."

Alt-Metropolis – July, 3, 1997

Lois paced her apartment as she waited. Clark would be arriving any minute and she still had no idea how this meeting would go. Unable to focus on her work earlier, she had done some serious soul searching trying to reconcile her expectations and the reality. She couldn't shake the feeling that Clark was her best friend, but after this morning, she knew that her perspective wasn't universal. He obviously didn't feel the connection with her that Lois had felt her whole life.

No matter how close Lois felt to Clark, she was a stranger to him. She had come to the realization that it wasn't fair to expect Clark to love her without having a chance to get to know her. It still hurt, but she was determined to start again as strangers and get to know one another like regular people. Maybe, just maybe, they still had a chance to become friends.

Lois mentally went over her list again. She'd placed all of her story notes regarding the murder/abductions on the coffee table and after a moment of indecision, set her 'Clark' file next to it. She glanced around her apartment, noting that it was spotless, she'd made a fresh pot of coffee, put a plate of cheese and crackers she'd picked up at the corner deli store on the counter, and she'd changed her clothes three times already.

She looked down at the low cut blouse and tight skirt she'd put on and huffed in annoyance at herself. What was she, sixteen? This was a work assignment, not a clumsy, teenage attempt at attracting a guy. She ran into her bedroom and began changing into a simple t-shirt and jeans while she continued to fret about her interactions with Clark earlier.

Lois hated the taste of crow, but she'd kept her promise. The op-ed piece she had crafted didn't dance around the fact that she was to blame for the spectacle they'd made at the press conference. She'd officially apologized and pledged that she would accept any consequences for her 'paparazzi-style' harassment of Superman out of uniform. Most importantly, though, was that she'd taken the opportunity to express her admiration for a man that lived the life he chose. Whether inspiring change through investigative journalism in a suit and tie or performing altruistic superhuman feats in a suit and cape, Clark Kent was truly a hero and something to which they all could aspire.

Lois dropped her head into her hands. If there were any way to undo the past twelve hours, she would do it in a Metropolis minute. Today's roller coaster ride had taken her from the joy and nervous anticipation of Clark's return and their first meeting to the

overwhelming disappointment and heartache of his rejection. If that wasn't enough, she'd thrown public and shameful accusations at the one man she desperately wanted to love her, only to discover that she now faced the terrifying prospect of going undercover as his fiancé.

How in the world were they going to create a believable cover when he was so obviously uncomfortable in her presence? Lois dropped onto her sofa and sighed. Actually, she already knew what to do; the question was whether she had the courage to do it. Could she make herself vulnerable to Clark by telling him everything? And if she did share every intimate detail about herself, then how was she going to maintain her distance when she was so obviously attracted to him? Lois shook her head as she remembered what had happened just before leaving the newsroom today.

After submitting the day's stories to Cat, Lois had started packing up for the day. As she had shut down her computer, she had found her gaze drifting, unbidden, past her monitor to linger on Clark as he also finished up his stories before deadline. She had studied his face for a moment and then her eyes had traveled down his broad shoulders to pause at his upper arms. She had a thing for strong biceps and, my god, she hadn't ever seen a pair more defined.

"Mmm, mmmh," Star had whispered in her ear, "Now those biceps puts Staff Sgt. Trevor L. Browning's to wimpy shame!"

"Star!"

"Oh, please. Tell me you weren't just thinking the same thing."

Lois had studied Clark's figure again as he reached across his desk. "I think any of his features would put Sgt. Browning to shame," Lois had whispered, "some more than others..."

They had watched as Clark stood up from his chair and then bent over to pick up a loose paper that had slipped to the floor. Her sigh had caught Clark's attention and both women had looked away immediately in different directions. Lois's cheeks had still been burning brightly when Clark had approached her desk and cleared his throat.

"Excuse me, Ms. Lane? I wonder if we could talk about that joint assignment we received earlier?"

Star had caught her eye, winked knowingly, and said goodbye. After Star was out of earshot, Lois had swallowed nervously and suggested she come to Clark's place later to work out the details, but he had immediately countered that it would be more inconspicuous if he met her at her place.

The encounter had been businesslike, awkward, and stiff. She knew they needed to meet somewhere in the middle, somewhere he didn't resent her for not being the woman he loved and where she didn't become the irrational woman scorned. If not, then they were doomed.

A knock at the door startled her from her musings. Lois nervously wiped her hands on her pant legs and after a moment's hesitation, put on a foil-lined headscarf. She did *not* want to be distracted by wayward thoughts or emotions tonight. It was going to be hard enough to expose her motives, her past, and her abilities in an attempt to establish rapport with Clark after the rough start they'd had. After praying silently for help, she opened the door.

Lois's heart thumped a staccato beat as she took in Clark's figure in her doorway. For the briefest moment, she fantasized that he was here to share a romantic evening together, but she viciously shut those thoughts down. They could only lead to heartache.

Clark was still dressed in his work clothes, but he had shed his jacket and rolled his sleeves up to his elbow. Lois noted absently that he carried a manila folder, presumably with his own notes on the case, but it was his stiff body language and grim expression that garnered her attention. Another pang of sad regret shot through her. This was not going to be easy.

Just meet him where he is, Lois, she told herself. Right.

Businesslike. She'd start this evening like a regular work assignment or interview. After that, it was up to her to be brave. Lois swung the door open wide and motioned for him to enter. "Mr. Kent. Thank you for coming. Won't you please come in?"

Clark hesitated for a fraction of a second and then moved gracefully into the room. He took a quick look around and then sat on her sofa. Settling on the edge of the seat, Clark set his folder down and picked up the serial celebrity murder file to flip through it. Lois sat down opposite him in an armchair.

"Would you like some coffee?"

"No, thank you, Ms. Lane. Shall we begin?"

She nodded and pointed to the file in his hand. "I added a few details to the file from this morning. I already had interviews scheduled today with Ms. Dolcheck's boss and Karina Barnhold's family. I added my notes to the file, but other than the fact that they both used wedding planners – not the same one – I couldn't find a connection between them.

Clark nodded and after skimming the mentioned documents, he pulled two sheets of paper from his own file and handed them to her. "I flew to Europe today and talked with Mr. Paget's mother in Provence and Ms. Dolcheck's sister in Prague. My notes are there, but neither had anything to add to the case. I offered our condolences to Madam Paget."

Lois's eyes widened at his casual mention of flying to Europe and wished for the thousandth time today that things were different between them. "I reviewed all of my notes on each of the abductees and victims. Other than their celebrity status, I still can't find a link between them, but my instincts are screaming that there's something else."

"I did some research in the morgue today and cross-checked our references on the deceased men. They had different careers in sports, food, and music. They came from France, Minnesota, and Metropolis. No similarities in race, religion, education, or hobbies. The Planet features in the Society section gave basic information about the couples and their engagements, but the articles didn't show any other connections.

Lois nodded and a strained silence settled between them. She glanced at her 'Clark' file and taking a deep breath, decided to talk about the elephant in the room. She picked up the file and pulled a single sheet from it. She handed it to Clark.

"Mr. Kent," she snorted and looked at the ceiling. "Gosh, calling you that sounds so formal and distant. Clark. May I call you Clark?" She didn't wait for a response. "Given the circumstances of our assignment, I'm going to *have* to call you by your first name." She chuckled nervously at her babble and then stood up and started to pace.

"First of all, I wanted show you the Op-Ed article that I wrote for tomorrow's paper. Cat assured me that she'd run it alongside any follow-up articles on the press-conference debacle that we ... that *I* caused this morning. I ... I know it won't erase what happened, but I hope it alleviates some of the damage I caused today."

Lois paused at the window while Clark read the editorial she'd written.

Clark skimmed the article quickly and then started again, reading more slowly. He finished reading it and looked up at her. His expression had softened and he seemed mollified.

"It's ... not your usual style."

Lois chuckled nervously and turned to face him. "You can say that again. But it's the truth. All of it."

"Thank you, Ms. Lane. Lois. I appreciate what you've written."

Lois released a relieved breath and went back to the sofa. She held out the rest of the thick file to him. He opened it and flipped through a couple of pages before looking up in question.

"The rest of this file is my investigation of you," Lois answered. "After my return to Metropolis and after we finally put

Luthor behind bars, I did my best to find out everything about you. I've read every piece you've ever written," she smirked a little. "Even the article on the mating rituals of the knobbed-tailed gecko. You're a great writer; a little touchy-feely for my taste, but it's clear to see why Perry, Cat, and James hold you in such high regard as a journalist.

"I also spoke to as many people as I could about you; people in your neighborhood, at the Daily Planet, from your hometown and college. Most people were very complimentary and open with any information they had. Talking with Lana Lang, for your information, was a less than pleasant experience."

Clark continued to look through the file and didn't look up at her reference to Lana, but Lois did see the corner of his mouth turn up slightly. She continued. "So that's what I've done. Now I'd like to explain my motivation for doing it. After learning that you'd spent a considerable amount of time looking for me, I was curious about you and about the woman claiming to be Lois Lane."

Clark's eyes snapped up from the file then, but his expression was inscrutable. Lois decided to press on. "Of course, I watched the Mayoral Debate tapes and read the accounts of your 'debut', as James called it. I am aware of the story that you and Perry put out about this woman, that it was a doppelganger playing a part in order to expose Tempus."

Lois sat down again across from him and leaned forward earnestly. "I want to make it perfectly clear that I know this woman *was* Lois Lane. Another Lois Lane from a different dimension. How could she not be? Her appearance, her mannerisms, they were too exact for an actress, especially since I'd been missing for three years. Memory fades and before my trip to the Congo, I had worked very hard to keep myself away from cameras. As far-fetched as the idea was, an alternate dimension was the only explanation that made sense. Crazy? Yes. Impossible? I've experienced the improbable and you're living proof that nothing is impossible."

"I suspected that Perry knew the truth, so I went to him with my wild theory of an alternate dimension. Perry tried to keep your confidence, but when I told him that I already knew that this woman was 'me' from another dimension, his response was the confirmation I needed."

Lois took another deep breath. "I also know that your recent absence wasn't to another world, as the press releases made it sound. I know that you crossed over into another dimension, *her* dimension, to help her find her husband, another version of you."

She watched Clark's reaction. He stared back at her and she saw a myriad of emotions flash across his face. He did a very good job at schooling his features, though, so she didn't know what he was feeling. Lois was tempted to pull off her scarf, but resisted the impulse to spy on him. Clark finally responded with a careful question in return.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I wanted you to know how much I have studied your life and how I learned the things I know. Given the fact that we are partners in this investigation and that a certain amount of intimacy will be necessary in order to be believable as an engaged couple, you needed to know."

Lois saw Clark flinch at her use of the word 'intimacy' and felt a pang of sadness twist her heart. She swallowed a lump in her throat. "I'm not her, Clark, but I'm here. This *is* my place, my world, and my investigation. Before today, I honestly felt like I knew you, but I also know that without hearing the little details that make up your life, I can't really. Please know that I hold you in the highest regard, not just for what you do, but also for who you are."

She took another deep breath and swallowed her fear. "I find it incredibly surreal that alternate dimensions exist and that another me is married to another you, that under different circumstances,

we might have been ..." Lois swallowed the thought and shook her head. "However, our circumstances aren't the same. We are different people. If we're to work together, you and I, we need to figure out a way to be believable when we go undercover. I'm hoping that you'll find me to be a good colleague and that someday we might even be friends."

Clark stared at Lois for what seemed like a long time. He wasn't particularly shocked by this Lois's thorough investigation of him and his life, but to say that he was simply surprised by her candor was a gross understatement. He'd been monitoring her vitals while she'd been speaking and he knew she was telling him the truth. He had listened as her heart beat raced and had felt her temperature rise. What she had said wasn't easy for her, but for some reason he didn't have a sense for what she was actually feeling. It was something he took for granted, that he had a good sense about people. This woman was an intriguing enigma.

Clark had to admit to feeling genuinely touched by the Op-Ed piece she had written. He didn't think he had ever seen someone capture his motives as closely as she had in this article. There were a few things that she had expressed so eloquently that it was almost like she'd experienced the emotions that he felt, both the joy at his ability to help and the sorrow at his inability to do more.

He looked into Lois's eyes and lost himself in the memory of working with Lois, the other Lois, in the other dimension. The two women didn't just look alike; he saw the same expressions, mannerisms, and vocal inflections. Love, sadness, longing, determination, loyalty; the similarities took his breath away.

Now he sat face to face with his world's Lois. Could he ever see her without being reminded of the love he'd lost? The other Lois held a piece of his soul and he still doubted that he would ever recover from its loss. This Lois was truly an amazing person – he could see that already. She'd been honest about her motives, her actions, and had hinted at feelings that he couldn't return. She deserved the same honesty from him.

"I fell in love with her."

"I know," she said.

"I will probably always love her." He saw tears spring to her eyes and felt a pang of guilt.

"I know that, too."

Clark hung his head. Was he strong enough to set aside the pain of losing his love to work closely with a daily reminder of that loss? Last night he had vowed that nothing compared to Lois's eyes, that his strength might not be enough to stay away if the other Lois called. He looked again at the Lois in front of him. The acceptance and faith he saw there wasn't reminiscent of the other Lois, it was somehow ... more. And it didn't hurt the way he thought it would. In time, he could even see them becoming friends as she hoped.

Clark reached down and slid his file folder across the coffee table to her. "This file is my investigation of you. Why don't you look through it while I get us some coffee, then we can start filling in the blanks with those little details you mentioned. Then we can really get to know one another."

Part 7

Alt-Metropolis – September 1982

"Friends"

Lois sped around the corner of her hallway dorm room at top speed. She threw the door open and tossed her bag onto her own bed as she slid to a stop next to Star's bed. Lois had felt Star's fear spike and a searing pain earlier while she'd been with her Chemistry tutor. Lois had feigned a headache to end her 'class' early and then had sprinted across the base to their shared dorm room.

Lois sat next to her friend and placed a hand on Star's back while she sobbed violently. Lois was hit with an image of Mensa's

menacing face as he'd turned up the voltage and shocked Star again. Lois grimaced and leaned over to gingerly pick up Star's hand. Noting the red mark where the equipment had been strapped, Lois stood up and crossed the room to their shared bathroom to get some burn cream and a bandage. Lois knew that Star's cries weren't about the burn, but administering to her physically was something she could do for her friend.

Star's weeping quieted as Lois took care of her burn and wrapped her hand. When she was done, Lois stroked her hair until Star quieted to a shuddering breath and a last hiccup.

"Bad?" Lois asked.

Star nodded and then scrunched her eyes closed against new tears. "I hate him, Lois. He's the vilest person I've ever met. What gives him the right to treat us like this?"

Lois stroked her hair again. "I don't know, Star. I tell you what, though. I'm not going to let him do this to you. Tomorrow I'm going to find out what we can do to end this. Tonight, though, it's my job to figure out a way to cheer you up."

Star gave her a disdainful look and Lois laughed. "Come on. I have some ideas."

Lois led Star first to her father's office, where she broke in and stole a six-pack of beer and some cash. After placing a phone call, they snuck into one of the barrack rec rooms and gathered a variety of items out of a closet. By the time they picked up their delivered pizza beyond the gatehouse, Lois had a stack of cards and games secreted away under her dorm room bed.

It was after midnight when Lois stretched below Star's leg to reach a green circle. Overbalanced, Lois lost to gravity and both girls collapsed into a drunken heap on the Twister mat. They lay there, giggling uncontrollably, until Star turned her head to look at Lois.

"Thanks, Lois."

Lois smiled back. "You're welcome." She noted the glassy look to Star's eyes and shook her head. "We are going to be hung over tomorrow."

Star giggled. "Yeah. Do you think I can call in sick for school and testing tomorrow?"

"Absolutely! But only if you can barf all over my dad's dress shoes."

Star dissolved into another fit of drunken giggles as Lois staggered to her feet. Lois offered her hand to Star and she helped her into bed before shutting off the light and passing out on her own.

Alt-Metropolis – July 5, 1997

Lois set a bowl of freshly popped popcorn on the coffee table next to a stack of card and board games. That first night Clark had come to her apartment had gone better than she could have hoped for given the rough beginning they had had. Now, Clark was coming over tonight to work on the murder investigation by fleshing out their backstory. They had agreed to share more information about themselves, both to make their cover believable and also in an effort to get to know one another.

Lois knew they both had traumatic events in their respective pasts and conversations could get heavy, so she had devised a plan to lighten the evening by playing games. Winner would get to ask the question and the loser would have to answer with the unvarnished truth.

It had been a couple of days since Lois and Clark had gone back to the Planet after the disastrous press conference to tell Cat Grant that they would like to be partners after all. Since Cat already knew about her serial murder investigation, Cat's only response to Lois's recital of their meeting with Perry, Sorenson, and Henderson had been to silently raise an eyebrow and tilt her head to look at Clark until he cleared his throat.

"I'm in, Chief."

"How? What's your role, Clark?"

"I'll be Lois's fiancé."

Cat's look of disbelief would have been comical if things hadn't been so tense between them. Eventually, though, Cat had squinted her eyes and pointed a pencil in their direction. "I have my concerns, but I'm going to play along. I'll give you joint assignments as part of your cover, but I'll only do this on two conditions: your individual investigations don't suffer and no one gets hurt."

Lois had glanced at Clark only to see that he had done the same with her. They both looked away quickly. It was clear that Cat's conditions were multi-layered, but they agreed to them anyway. Lois only hoped that she could deliver on the promise.

Lois turned to go back into her kitchen to grab a cream soda when a knock directly behind her on her third-story, living room window caused her to shriek and jump in fright. She turned, a hand over her chest, to see Clark hovering just outside the glass in full Superman glory, a smirk of amusement on his face.

Lois bent down to unlock the window and then lifted the pane up. Her intended scolding froze in her throat as she got a close-up look at Clark in his Superman outfit. Lois swallowed to try to moisten her suddenly dry mouth as her gaze drifted down Clark's body suspended a few feet away. He had the most amazing physique and the spandex showed off every muscled contour to perfection. When she just continued to stare at him, Clark cleared his throat.

"May I come in?"

Blushing to the tips of her ears at getting caught gawking at him, Lois stepped back to let him into the room. He stepped down through her window and slid it closed before turning around again. Lois's eyes snapped back up to his face from where they had been ogling one of his finer physical attributes and walked directly to the kitchen to open the fridge door.

"Can I get you a ... drink?" Lois's voice trailed off as she saw Clark spin, turning from a bright vortex to a dark one as he changed into his regular clothes, which today consisted of a black t-shirt and jeans. Her awe at his spin-change was lost as her eyes started to make the same meandering trip they'd just taken when he was in the Superman suit. Okay, so maybe the Superman suit wasn't the most enticing outfit he owned. Lois licked her lips as her eyes got stuck on his biceps when he slipped his glasses onto his face.

When Clark looked at her, Lois immediately turned back to the fridge and grabbed a couple of cream sodas. Lois pressed one against her cheek and sucked in a breath as the bottle touched her heated skin. "Get a grip, Lane!" she scolded herself, but she knew it wouldn't work. She was already having racy dreams of Clark and tonight her infatuated brain had two more images to add into the mix. Lois took a deep breath and then tried to walk nonchalantly into the living room.

Clark took the soda that Lois offered and then gestured to the stack of games. "What's all this?"

Lois shrugged. "Incentive. I've always felt that games are great for get-to-know-you gatherings. I thought it might take the heat off a little. A little competition doesn't hurt, either. How about winner gets to ask the questions, loser has to answer. No hedging, only truth."

"Interesting. Feeling like losing a few games to a master, huh?"

"Pff! As if!" Lois bumped his arm with her shoulder. "You never said that super-slaming was one of your powers. You have no idea who you're talking to here."

"Lois, I grew up in Kansas. Card games were our version of clubbing."

Lois picked up a deck of cards and slid them from the box. She cut the deck with one hand and then bridge shuffled them. "Let's start with a game of Speed. No superpowers!"

Lois set up the deck and they started. The longer they played,

the more they laughed. Lois's giggles became more frequent the more she fell behind. When Clark played his last card, Lois groaned.

"Yes!" Clark crowed. "I get the first question. Let's see. Based on my research, I suspect that you speak several languages. How many do you know? And how did you learn them?"

"I'll answer both if you answer both."

"Deal."

"I can speak about ten languages. I can hold a conversation in a few others. My mom always said I had an unusual aptitude for languages. I could read by age three and had read through the dictionary by age four. How about you?"

"I can order dinner in more than three hundred languages, but I'm only fluent in about a hundred of them."

Astonished, Lois closed her mouth with an audible click. "Get out of here! How?"

"Eidetic memory. I didn't need to study. Also, once I learned the grammar patterns for the first dozen or so, it was easy to pick up the rest."

"Wow!"

Clark picked up the deck of cards. "Want to try your hand at Blackjack?"

"Hit me, baby. Best two out of three gets the next question."

Clark removed the Jokers, shuffled, and then dealt. It wasn't long before Clark was gloating again about his victory when Lois asked for one card too many and went over.

"Alright, Lois. As soon as we announce this 'engagement', details about your life that even you didn't know will be news. My first question is ... how many serious relationships have you had?"

"Serious, you mean like when I agreed to meet Joe Bob's parents before he gave me a hickey in the vacant lot behind the Dairy Freeze? That kind of serious relationship?"

Clark rubbed the back of his neck, a little embarrassed at asking a 'kissing' question right off the bat. "Not exactly. The tabloids are going to be brutal and the other media isn't going to go lightly, either. I want to hear the true stories from you before they start asking me about them."

Lois snickered and gave his arm a nudge. "It's a good question. Well, where should I start? First of all, you know I didn't attend a normal high school – that was in your research – so there wasn't much opportunity for dating back then. I did try once with a soldier on base, but he was more interested in my body than me, so we didn't even finish our first date. Once I was in college and started my internship at the Daily Planet, I didn't have a lot of time, but there were a couple of crushes. One was a guy in my advanced writing class. Nathan had a silver tongue and the soul of a poet. We dated casually a couple of times, but I caught him betting a friend how quickly he could bed me and that was the end of that. The other crush, Paul, was the editor of the school paper. In the end, he was more interested in my stories than in me so that didn't go anywhere either."

"What about after college?"

"Well, you've probably heard the rumors about Claude. He was a foreign correspondent at the Planet. He was French and had this accent. Mmm! Anyway, he kind of took me under his wing and started to mentor me. I loved the attention and I learned some things from him, but it ended the night he tried to seduce me for my story notes." Lois chuckled morosely. "I probably should have let him have them. They were my notes on the Congolese gunrunning story."

When Lois paused, Clark leaned forward a little, rotating his hand to ask for more. "That's it? I thought you had to give the unvarnished truth!"

"That is the truth."

"So you've never had a long-term relationship?"

"Clark Kent! Are you trying to ask me how many men I've slept with?"

"No! I mean, maybe. It's just that ... the tabloids are going to print all kinds of things ..."

Lois laughed nervously and then blushed and ducking her head, tucked her hair behind her ear. "Whew! Unvarnished. Okay, so that intimacy threshold, the big threshold, I haven't actually crossed it. I got close with Paul and with Claude, but I backed out."

"Wow. So you're a v ... very patient woman."

"I guess you could say that. It's just that I take sex seriously and the first time ... when I do cross the intimacy threshold, I don't want to just do it, I want to make love."

"That's beautiful, Lois. Just so you know, I wanted to be sure, too. I waited for a long time, but ..."

"Lana."

When Clark didn't respond, Lois cleared her throat and grabbed the cards. She knew her face was red, but she didn't want Clark to know how much more of that was due to jealousy than to embarrassment. She started shuffling the deck again. "How about some poker. Five Card Stud or Texas Hold'em? The stakes can be how many questions the winner gets to ask."

Not waiting for his answer, Lois slid down to the floor and pulled the popcorn with her. She avoided Clark's gaze and started dealing until he lifted the coffee table and moved it aside. He sat down across from her and picked up his cards. She looked up at Clark to see a small pinch between his eyebrows. She watched as his eyes darted to her and then he requested two cards. Lois looked at hers as well and almost smiled. This was going to be her game.

Lois dealt Clark the new cards and then took one herself. She looked again at Clark and wondered at this new aspect to his personality. She knew she was high strung and competitive, but she was a little surprised at how competitive Clark was given that he spent his spare time as a Mr.-Goody-Two-Shoes Superman. He'd been almost lording his wins over Lois and now she was really motivated. She watched the corners of his mouth droop ever so slightly.

Lois was pretty sure she had Clark figured out. She narrowed her eyes at him. His eyes flickered to her again and he tried to arrange his face into a bland, unemotional mask, but even without her ability, his tells were plain to anyone observant to see and she thought she could use that information to win.

"The bet is at one question. I'll raise it to two," Clark said.

"I'll see your bet," Lois said. She glanced at her cards again; two pair. Lois knew that Clark probably had a better hand, so she smiled and then smothered it. She watched his eyes flick toward her and then his mouth dropped open ever so slightly.

"Tick tock, Clark."

"Give me a second. Sheesh!"

The line reappeared between Clark's eyebrows and she knew she had him. "So what's it going to be, Clark? Are you going to raise, check, or fold? The stake is two questions."

After looking at him again and lifting an eyebrow, Clark sighed and tossed his cards down. "Fold."

Lois squealed. "Ha! I knew it."

"How did you know?"

Lois grinned. "I told you, Clark. I'm psychic."

"And I have x-ray vision; trust has to start somewhere, Lois. I don't think you cheated. Tell me, how did you know?"

"No way am I going to give away your tells! It took me three games to learn them."

"I have tells?"

"Yes, now don't distract me." Lois started scooping up the cards. "Okay, Clark. My first question for you is ... have you ever lived with someone, full-time?"

"Full-time as in cohabitate? No, not full time. The whole truth is not ever."

"Not even with Lana?"

Clark chuckled. "No. Lana was very specific about how our

relationship should be and cohabitating before we got married was not in her plan.”

“You don’t sound particularly upset by it.”

“I’m not. It was actually nice to have a place of retreat when I was engaged to Lana. Growing up, not all of my foster families had enough space to give me a whole bedroom to myself, so I learned to be creative. At one place, I used to sit on the roof to be alone. Once I graduated from high school, I cherished having a place of my own.”

Clark seemed very factual about his answer, but Lois could feel his vulnerability at sharing such a private detail. “I know what you mean. After my mom died and I went to live with my dad, I had a space, but no privacy. When I moved out and got my own place, I loved living alone.”

“So you’ve never lived with someone full-time?”

Lois’s eye twinkled. “It’s still my turn, but yes, I have, actually. I had a roommate in college. It was a really busy time; I was studying at Met U., interning at the Daily Planet, and I was on staff with the university paper. It was nice to have a friend at home. She and I would play games sometimes, watch movies, or just go out for ice cream.”

“That was Star, right?”

“Yeah. She followed me into the news business, but didn’t really like investigative reporting.” Lois eyed Clark’s biceps again as he picked up the cards and started to shuffle them. “Okay, Clark. My second question is... do you work out?”

“No. I’ve never needed a ‘go-to-the-gym’ kind of work out. By junior high I was pressing farm combines and racing trains and after high school, not at all. About the same time, I realized that I didn’t really need to eat and I only needed a few hours of sleep. I suspect that I only need that because it gets dark at night.” Clark chuckled at Lois’s confused expression. “I think my super energy comes from the sun.”

“That is both cool and so unfair.”

Clark smiled smugly and started to deal. “How about Crazy Eights?”

“Bring it on.”

It wasn’t long before Clark discarded his last card and smiled triumphantly. “My turn to ask. All right, Lois. What is the most dangerous situation you’ve been in and how did you get away?”

“That’s two questions,” Lois accused. “No cheating.”

“Fine. How did you get out of the most dangerous situation you’ve ever encountered?”

“Clark, me trying to pick just one dangerous situation would be like you picking just one rescue.”

“Alright, I’ll pick one. How did you escape during the Luthor gunrunning story?”

Lois’s smile melted away and she instantly closed off, her memories of that time still so painful that it was hard to think of it. Clark held up his hands in apology when he saw the change in her demeanor.

“I’m sorry, Lois. I didn’t mean to bring up a sensitive subject. Forget it.”

“No, it’s okay, Clark. You won and I owe you the unvarnished truth, right?”

“You don’t owe me anything, Lois.”

Lois smiled at him. “Thanks, but I can do this. Just give me a minute. The truth is... that I had help, and I didn’t really get away, did I?”

“Lois...”

Lois ignored Clark’s effort to let her off the hook. She needed to tell him. “I was so confident. Everything was going to plan. I had tracked the gunrunners to a dockside warehouse in Brazzaville. I had already cased the building, I knew where the guards were, the cameras, and alarms. I jimmed the lock and broke into the office without incident. Finding the evidence was easy and quick; I had copies of everything that I needed – shipping

manifests, invoices, memos – that showed that Luthor was “The Boss” and that he was orchestrating everything from Metropolis. I made my way out of the building already writing the story in my head.”

“What happened?”

“I didn’t account for the dogs. I was just about to slip through the gap I’d made in the chain-link fence when a mastiff darted out of the shadows and grabbed my pant leg, pulling me down. The other dog joined him not long after barking up a storm that brought the human guards. They knocked me unconscious and tossed me into a dirty, basement storage room that I think doubled as a bomb shelter below a manor house. I was there for a couple of weeks, no windows, no facilities, only enough bread and water to keep me from starving...”

Lois stopped to swallow and Clark reached across to touch her hand. Lois turned her hand over and grabbed his hand tightly. She appreciated his offer of support as she remembered how she had desperately tried to connect with Clark over and over. Finally, she had given up, admitting what she’d known from the beginning, that there was a substance in the building that blocked their psychic connection. She had been completely alone.

“How did you get out?” Clark asked.

“I listened and tried to get inside my captor’s heads. The guards rotated frequently, but there was one man, Joseph Nagi, who ended up guarding me several days in a row. He was an older man who had already lost his wife and children to the civil war. He was angry and I was a good listener. He... he said that I reminded him of his daughter. It was due to him that I wasn’t tortured, beaten, or molested. One night, he started reminiscing, telling me of happier times before the war. He wept bitterly when he told me how he’d lost his family. He wanted those responsible to pay for what they’d done and I... I promised him that I would bring them to justice. In the end, he decided to help me, even though he knew it would cost him his life. He let me out, gave me my things, and showed me the way to get out of the compound.”

“Lois?”

Tears had found their way down Lois’s cheeks as she had recited her story. She wiped them away fiercely. She felt Clark’s thumb rubbing circles on the back of her hand and it encouraged her to continue. “Joseph told me his life was over if he helped me and I let him, Clark! I was scared and I wanted to escape so badly that I let him.”

Clark scooted closer to her and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. She fell into them willingly and had to struggle to keep her grief in check. “I only made it as far as the airport before a security detail detained the ‘thief’ that Luthor had paid them to catch. They took me to a small shack on the edge of the jungle where Luthor was waiting. Luthor... he took great pleasure in telling me that he had personally tortured and killed Joseph and that killing me would give him almost as much pleasure.”

“I’m sorry, Lois.”

“I’ve never met a more despicable person than Lex Luthor. I made a vow that Joseph’s life wouldn’t be spent in vain.”

“It wasn’t. You did it, Lois. You brought Luthor to justice. Joseph didn’t die in vain.”

Lois lifted her head and smiled at Clark to thank him for his support. “No, he didn’t.”

They sat together in silence for a moment until Lois left his embrace to get a tissue from the coffee table. When she turned back toward Clark, he held up another game. “Gin Rummi?”

Lois hiccupped a laugh.

Part 8

Alt-Metropolis – December 22, 1983

“Investigative Partners”

Lois tucked her tongue between her teeth and leaned closer to the lock. She adjusted her hold on the tool and then felt the pins

align with a satisfying ‘click’.

“Ha!” she said

“Shh! You want to get caught?”

Lois pushed the door open and felt Star place a hand on her shoulder as she leaned forward to look into the darkened room. Lois took another look down the hallway before she crept into Dr. Klaus Mensa’s office and then motioned for her friend to follow. After shutting the door, Lois stuffed a towel into the gap between the door and floor before switching on her flashlight. She handed another flashlight to Star.

“You look in the desk drawers and I’ll take the file cabinet over there.”

Star nodded and then hugged herself to Lois’s arm as Lois started to move.

“Star!?”

“I’m too scared of getting caught to be by myself. I’m coming with you.”

Lois rolled her eyes and then hobbled to the desk, Star gripping her arm in a vice. As fast as she could, Lois quickly searched through the drawers and then moved on to the file cabinet against the wall. She scanned the file labels in several drawers before pausing. “Dynomonics. Where have I heard that before?”

“It’s Mensa’s telekinesis project.”

Surprised, Lois turned her flashlight on Star, who shrugged. “I was bored during the testing session today, so I swiped one of his notebooks and read it. ‘Dynomonics seeks to train the underutilized portions of the human mind to control their surroundings’. It sounds to me like ‘Doctor Mental’ wants super powers.”

“Huh.” She handed the file to Star. “Let’s take it with us.”

Lois continued to look through the files. “This looks interesting; a list of project donors. Angelica Draden of Draden Enterprises. Who is that? Oh, wait! What’s this about drug testing?”

Lois pulled out several files and started leafing through the pages. Her decision to snoop in Dr. Mensa’s office had sprung from an overheard conversation between the creepy doctor and her father, one in which they were debating something ‘unethical’ that Sam Lane was “unwilling” to participate in. Lois knew how far her father was willing to go for his research. He’d treated his own daughter like a lab rat for almost four years, for goodness sake! Whatever it was that Mensa had in mind must be really bad if her father refused to take part in it.

And she was right. The file in her hand proved that Dr. Mensa wasn’t just trying to use the psychic abilities she and Star had to spy on others, he was trying to figure out how to control them and their abilities using drugs.

“Star, look at this. Mensa has been looking into another Army project called Valhalla. They are using a drug on babies. This says that the drug opens the minds of the subject, leaving them in a subdued, lethargic state. Highly subject to suggestions. When combined with trigger words, this can be used to embed the subject with subconscious directives that can be carried out unknown to the host subject. He’s looking at an adaptation for psychics called ‘Oracle’. This is it, Star. It has to be. Star?”

Lois turned to look at her friend who was staring at another file, a look of disbelief on her face. Lois glanced at the label and saw her name before grabbing the file from Star and skimming the contents. Lois swallowed the bile that rose to her throat before reading out loud.

“Set to proceed with plans to perform open-brain surgery to see how the subject’s amygdala differs in structure. Will first strip membranes to see if total reception is restored before we begin experimentation to reproduce in other subjects. Project deadline: EOY 1983.”

Lois closed the file. “Well, that settles it.” She looked at Star.

“Grab your file, too. It’s time to shut this place down.”

“How do we do that?”

Lois closed her file and took Star’s files before shoving all of them into her pack. “I don’t know yet, but I’ll think of something.”

Lois had just turned off her flashlight and removed her towel from the floor when she sensed Mensa coming toward his office. Quickly, Lois tapped her lip with her finger and then scanned the room for an escape. Lois motioned for Star to step back behind the desk and thanking her lucky stars that she’d taken “Mission Impossible” to heart, she pulled a Philips screwdriver from her pack and set to work opening the air conditioning vent cover. She and Star had just settled into a huddled mass in the duct and closed the cover when Mensa inserted his key into the lock.

Lois leaned forward just far enough to see through the vent. Mensa entered the room and walked straight to his desk. He opened his drawer and removed a medical kit and then paused. Lois felt Star silently press into her back and she held her breath. Mensa tilted his head to the side and then carefully turned a circle, looking around the room. Seeing nothing out of place, he shrugged, picked up his case, and then left the room.

Neither girl moved for a full minute after they heard the click of the door lock. After another brief pause, Lois said, “Are you ready to go?”

“No,” Star squeaked. “I’m too scared to move.”

“It’ll be alright, Star. He’s already leaving the building. I won’t let him do it. Not to me. Not to you. Not to anyone. I won’t give up. I will end this, but I don’t think I can do it alone. I think we need back up and I just had an idea about who to call.”

Alt-Metropolis – July 7, 1997

Clark leaned back on his sofa and stretched. Lois had gone to the kitchen to get a second helping of the shrimp dumplings they’d brought from Shanghai and he took the opportunity to reflect on the progress he and Lois had made over the past week.

True to his word, ‘someone’ from the Mayor’s office had leaked a story to the Planet’s gossip columnist that their argument had been a lover’s spat, that Lois had been upset and worried about the time he had been gone and that ‘Mad Dog Lane’, as her colleagues had called her, had lost her temper. Lois’s Op-Ed piece that ran alongside the Daily Planet’s article about the press conference had gone a long way toward convincing the public that they were already an item. Clark felt a little uneasy about how it had been portrayed as all Lois’s fault, but she had dismissed his objections with a wave of her hand.

“Superman has to be above all those petty human emotions, Clark. We need to maintain his untarnished image.”

“Lois, you are aware that everyone knows I’m Superman. Why are you talking in the third person?”

“You’re not dressed in the suit now.”

“True, but he is me. I am him. There really isn’t any difference.”

“Is that true, Clark? Is he the real you? You changed into the Superman suit to fly us to Shanghai. You’re careful never to perform superhuman feats while in your regular clothes. I suspect that you don’t really let that many people see the real you,” she had told him solemnly.

No one saw him as clearly as Lois did. She even understood him better than he did sometimes. He and Lois had spent as much time together as they could over the past few days and she kept surprising him like that, saying things that made him reevaluate and reassess both his own life and what he thought he knew about her.

There were so many similarities between her and the other Lois, that it was hard to keep the two women straight in his mind. This Lois was just as high-strung as the other, just as talented, smart, and loyal as the other.

This Lois was fiercely independent, competitive, opinionated

and pig-headed. Just yesterday, a disagreement over what information to print in their investigation of an alleged invisible man had gotten so loud and heated, that Cat had whistled and sent them to opposite corners of the newsroom. The newsroom gossip had only fed into their cover story and Clark had heard various theories sprout to explain their tempestuous relationship.

The arguments notwithstanding, Lois was also fun loving and brilliant. She had more courage in her little finger than most people had in their whole bodies. Their game night had really whetted both of their appetites to know more about each other and tonight they'd finally gotten the chance to ask more questions. She intrigued him and the insights he'd gained from their earlier conversation about journalism helped him understand who she really was.

"How did you decide to study journalism, Clark?" she had asked. "I know you were the editor of your high school paper. Was there something that drew you to the field?"

"It was my mom. For as long as I could remember, she devoured the newspaper every day. She also wrote frequent letters to the editor of the Smallville Post." Clark had smiled. "My dad used to call her a 'free spirit'. Anyway, one day, a reporter showed up at the door to interview my mom about her blue-ribbon apple pie, but his real motive was to meet that 'rabble-rouser Kent lady' his editor was always griping about. How about you?"

"I knew I wanted to be an investigative journalist since I was ten years old. I used to read out loud to my sister, Lucy. One day I was reading a biography of Nellie Bly and when I read the chapter about her going undercover in an insane asylum, Lucy had burst out laughing. I asked her what was so funny and she said, 'She's you, Lois! You would totally do that.' After thinking about it for a while, I realized that Lucy was right. After that, Investigative Journalism was the only option for me."

And she was amazingly good at it, too. They had talked about old cases, but whenever Clark tried to dig for details about how she had broken her stories over the years, she dredged up the same 'psychic ability' line. He couldn't find fault in her for deflecting his questions to protect her sources, though. It was one of the things that made her the best in the business.

Clark gave Lois a smile as she handed him a plate of food, the rice and dumplings arranged in a strange, geometric pattern on the plate. She smirked at his quizzical look and sat down on the couch beside him. That was one of the new things he had learned about this Lois, she had a quirky sense of humor. She also liked TV soap operas and had a secret desire to write a romance novel.

Clark had also discovered how tactile this Lois was. Where the other Lois had always carefully avoided touching him unless they were deliberately playacting, this Lois touched him all the time. Whether it was a backhanded slap to the arm for a tease, a sideways bump while laughing, or a consoling hand when he felt sad, Lois always seemed to be touching him. A little awkward at first, he now found himself craving it and doing the same with her; offering his arm while they walked together or touching the small of her back as they walked through a doorway.

They had become much closer these past few days, too. It didn't hurt him to spend time with her, not the way that he'd feared. The hug he had offered when she had told him about the Congo and the one he had accepted after talking about the death of his parents earlier had banished the loneliness he hadn't known was his companion. Lois had expressed such love and admiration for his parents, that he knew her experience of losing her own mother and sister had affected her similarly.

Tonight was the first night that he'd offered to fly her somewhere for dinner and she'd practically leapt into his arms. The excuse, he told himself, was to get into character and let the public see them together out of work hours, but Clark had been curious as to whether he could hold this Lois in his arms without feeling the sorrow he associated with losing the other Lois.

He hadn't.

Clark had taken Lois to Shanghai and after a momentary feeling of doubt, he had relaxed and enjoyed the flight. Lois had been enthralled. She had laughed, looked at everything, exclaimed over each new natural beauty, and had even dared to fly with him side by side instead of cradled in his arms. He'd never flown with anyone that way before, but he knew he loved it.

He looked at her, now seated at the other end of the sofa. She placed a dumpling into her mouth and closed her eyes as she bit down. Her moan of pleasure caused Clark to look away, embarrassed that his thoughts turned carnal at her little sound of ecstasy. To distract himself, he dug into his own plate of food and tried not to hear Lois enjoying hers.

When she was finished with dinner, Lois set her plate on the coffee table and then sighed. "I talked to Star today. She mentioned that you and she talked about her features on our three celebrity couples."

"Yeah. I was hoping that she had information about them that she didn't put in her articles, something that might provide another link between them."

"Did she?"

Clark shook his head. "Not that I could tell. Most of what she could remember we already knew. She did mention that Mr. Paget had been engaged before, but his fiancé had called it off. She also mentioned that Mary had a very strained relationship with her stepfather due to his penchant for solving arguments with his fists. Nothing that seemed relevant to all three, though."

Lois nodded and reached down to rub her ankle.

"Is it still hurting?" Clark asked.

"It's nothing. I've had worse sprains. An ice pack and a good soak tonight and I'll be fine tomorrow."

Clark hesitated and then offered his hand. "Give me your foot."

Lois narrowed her eyes at him. "What for?"

Clark chuckled. "Nothing nefarious. I was just going to help take the swelling down."

Lois gave him an assessing look and then turned on the couch and lifted her sprained ankle. Clark held it tenderly and pulled off her shoe and unwrapped the bandage. Gently, he softly blew an icy mist around the swollen areas. Lois gasped and then closed her eyes and moaned again.

"You're hired," she stated.

Pleased, Clark smiled. "There. You'll be chasing bad guys in no time. Now if we could just keep them from chasing you..."

Lois tossed a pillow at him.

Alt-Metropolis – July 8, 1997

As muffled sounds of shouting came from the rising elevator, a few Daily Planet staffers rolled their eyes and did their best to ignore the commotion. All the rest paused in their work to enjoy the show. Lois-and-Clark-watching had become a company-wide spectator sport since Superman's return to the skies last week. No one bothered to wonder about the topic of these frequent arguments – that would soon be clear. There were at least three different office pools going about how they would end: one would kill the other, one would quit, or they would finally put everyone out of their misery and have sex.

Cat Grant sighed as the elevator doors slid open and the reporters in question spilled into the bullpen. She had already threatened everyone in the newsroom with a pink slip, including Lois and Clark, if the Planet's quality suffered due to these fights, but that hadn't reduced their frequency.

Cat walked to her office door and winced as she heard the tone and the decibel of Lois's words. She wondered again why she had ever thought those two working together would be a good idea. She silently cursed Lois, Perry, and Henderson for partnering them up anyway. For her sanity, she hoped they would announce their

‘engagement’ soon and catch this serial killer. Otherwise, Henderson might have another couple of homicides in his docket.

Lois pushed past Clark and headed for her desk, limping slightly as she strode resolutely down the ramp. “I don’t know why we’re even talking about this Clark. My personal investigations have nothing to do with you.”

“Nothing to do with me? Lois, I’ve rescued you four times this week.”

“So?”

“So, it’s only Tuesday!”

Lois smiled tightly at her fuming partner and set her bag down. “Look, Clark. I’m sure that all the other women you rescue fall down at your feet and promise everlasting devotion, among other things, but I’m not like that. I can take care of myself.”

“Really? Since we’ve met, you’ve gotten a concussion, five stitches, sprained your ankle, and received who-knows how many scrapes and bruises. That limp of yours is proof that you’re not even waiting to heal before tumbling headlong into another dangerous situation. Is that what you call taking care of yourself?”

Lois pulled several singed notebooks out of her bag and slapped them on her desk. “So nice to see you’re paying attention. I don’t know why you’re so bent out of shape. I’m still breathing.”

Clark threw his hands into the air. “Only because I swooped in at the last minute.”

“I would have been fine.”

“Fine? Lois, he had you strapped to an overheating boiler. It was so close that my cape was smoking from the explosion.”

“Look, I’m sorry if saving my life is such an inconvenience. I didn’t ask for your help.”

“It’s not an inconvenience, Lois, but you’ve got to stop taking so many risks.”

“Listen Farm-Boy. No one tells me how to do my job.”

“Of course not. You’re Lois Lane.”

Clark’s voice contained such conviction that Lois paused. It thrilled her that he saw her clearly now, but then she reminded herself that she couldn’t back down from this argument. She knew how much danger he was in from the Kryptonite that was still out there and she had to protect him from danger. Her expression darkened.

“And what is *that* supposed to mean?”

“Just that you wouldn’t be you if you weren’t constantly dangling over the jaws of death. Has it ever occurred to you to call for back-up?”

Lois growled in frustration. “Of course it’s occurred to me, I’m not a rookie. But I’m not going to call for *you*.”

“Why not? Is rescue by Superman not good enough for the ‘Great Lois Lane?’”

“Haven’t you figured it out yet? These guys are ruthless and some of them have Kryptonite! Why in the world would I call for your help?”

Clark paused in shock. Lois’s admission that she was protecting him by taking these risks distressed him slightly less than the fact that criminals around Metropolis were kidnapping and hurting Lois to get at him, a thought that caused a dreadful sinking feeling in his gut.

They hadn’t even announced their supposed engagement yet, but half of Metropolis already believed they were an item based on the footage from the mayoral debate with Tempus. The other half believed that his search for her was proof that his love for her was so strong, that he couldn’t bear to let her go. Then there was last week’s rumor of a love affair in the tabloids that Clark was sure had its source in the Mayor’s office. Now that he had agreed to work undercover as her fiancé to catch this serial killer, there would be no way anyone would be convinced otherwise.

Clark crossed his arms in determination. This had to stop.

He’d tell Perry and Henderson that they needed to find someone else to playact as Lois’s groom-to-be, someone that wouldn’t put her in more danger than she was already in doing her job as an investigative reporter. He opened his mouth to tell her so, when she hissed a warning.

“Don’t you dare try to weasel out of this partnership, Clark Kent. You promised and you are *not* backing out. I don’t care if it makes me a target for every criminal in Metropolis. We are in this together.”

“Lois,” Clark lowered his voice and pleaded with her. “I can’t allow people to use you to get to me.”

“We knew that was a possibility when we agreed to get married. I understand you’re worried, but if this marriage is going to work, you have to trust me.”

Clark held himself still and fumed. How did she do that? How did she know that he was about to pull out of their agreement? But she definitely knew and she had usurped his decision. Peripherally, Clark noticed a hush settle over the newsroom. Those that had tried to ignore their argument now stared in stunned amazement. It wasn’t long before an excited buzz filled the room as people started to debate Lois’s words about marriage.

“No way would Clark marry Lois.”

“If I hadn’t heard it from Mad Dog’s lips, I’d say it was a joke.”

“It makes their relationship make more sense.”

“Are you kidding? It’s gotta be a hoax.”

“It’ll never last.”

“They’re going undercover, right? This is just some assignment for the Planet?”

This last question was directed to Cat, who along with Star, had approached them quietly and now stood beside Lois.

Cat looked at the two irate reporters and shook her head. “This isn’t any assignment that I’ve given them.”

Cat’s pronouncement halted the speculative talk. Clark glanced gratefully at Cat, but got a stern glare in return. Cat’s comments gave their cover legitimacy without her uttering a single falsehood. Clark acknowledged the much-needed reminder. The two reporters had to get their act together if they wanted to pull this off.

“Fifty bucks says that they break off the engagement in the next week.”

“Hey, we’re not two thoroughbreds at the Sunday afternoon track. Mind your own business, Packer.”

“Well, if the horseshoe fits...”

Clark grabbed Lois around the middle as she lunged toward Ralph’s desk. She struggled against Clark’s grip for a moment until he pulled her tight against his body and leaned to whisper in her ear. “Lois, stop. If you want to make this at all believable, we have to get in character. Now.”

“Just ... let me at him.”

Clark tried not to smile at her fierce struggle to reach their foolhardy coworker. Ralph stepped back in fear as Lois made another lunge in his direction and Clark tightened his grip around her middle. He had thought that the other Lois was passionate, but this Lois made her seem like a cute little kitten next to the tiger in his arms.

Lois didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. As they had discussed her recent injuries and kidnappings, Lois could feel Clark’s genuine concern for her and it rekindled her hope of being loved by Clark. She mercilessly squashed it. She didn’t know if she would survive risking her heart further during this assignment. Clark had agreed to pretend as her fiancé in order to catch a killer, but for now, an assignment is all it could be. All the planning and preparations would be wasted if he backed out now, so she put the plan in motion.

It was clear now that their arguments had hurt their cover.

Ralph was the most vocal in his doubts, but he wasn't alone. Still, Lois was furious and she struggled against Clark's arms, reaching out to wrap her hands around Ralph's blotchy neck. When it was clear that Clark wasn't going to let her throttle Ralph, she laid her hands over Clark's, trying to pry his fingers open. It was no use; he may as well have been made from the wrought-iron lampposts he favored to tie up muggers.

The same electrical charge she always felt when Clark touched her slammed through her body. She felt her heart pounding against her chest as if it was trying to break out. Lois closed her eyes against the sudden realization that despite her best efforts and her denials, she hadn't been able to keep her traitorous heart from falling head over heels in love with Clark Kent.

With increasing regularity, daydreams and thoughts of Clark had been infiltrating her waking moments. She hadn't admitted it to anyone, but her sloppiness this week had been in large part due to her being increasingly distracted by him. Dreams of Clark had also been invading her sleep at night. Her dreams were becoming ever more sensual, her physical desire for him increasing in conjunction with each moment they spent together.

She couldn't take this. Why she thought that she would be able to fake an engagement with Clark was beyond comprehension. She couldn't even be in the same room with him without her treacherous mind and body turning into a moony-eyed cheerleader. And with her back pressed firmly against his chest, it was all too easy to imagine that he was really holding her in an affectionate embrace. The thought caused a soft whimper to slip out.

Clark must have heard the tiny, distressful sound and, mindful of their audience, turned his head to whisper in her ear.

"Are you okay?"

Her fingers scrabbled against his hands again, trying to pull them away from her body before she gave up completely. Her body relaxed against his and an image popped into her head – of Clark holding her in a loving holding embrace. She could almost feel the gentle caresses as she imagined Clark lavishing kisses down her neck. She heard Clark's breath catch and she forcefully shoved the image away.

"Let go, Clark."

"Are you going to strangle Ralph if I do?"

Unexpected tears sprang to her eyes at Clark's teasing words. Tender teasing from Clark proved to be too much to maintain her tenuous hold on her emotional barriers. She dropped her guard and saw an image of herself facing Tempus and she squeezed her eyes shut against it. The other Lois – why did Clark always think of the other Lois when she was close to him?

"Please, Clark," she whispered. "Please let me go."

He must have heard the pain in her voice because he released her immediately. She stepped away from him and after glaring at a cowering Ralph, she stalked into the conference room and slammed the door.

Clark watched her go along with everyone else in the newsroom. Her mercurial moods were becoming more familiar, but Clark still felt dizzy from this encounter with Lois. What could have moved her from white-hot anger to the vulnerability he'd heard in her voice? He stood wondering about what to do next when Cat answered his dilemma for him.

"Go after her." She patted his shoulder. "Star will come to interview you in about five minutes. It's time to kiss and make up ... for all our sakes."

The last she said under her breath for Clark's benefit. He looked at Cat, who arched her eyebrow. He took a deep breath and let it out through puffed cheeks; message received. If they wanted to catch the killer and keep their jobs at the planet, then it was time to go undercover. They needed figure out how to get it together and they needed to do it fast. Next to him, Star nodded as well, and stepped back to her desk to gather her things.

Cat smiled and then clapped her hands loudly. "Alright, people. We have a deadline to meet. The last one to submit their assignments takes tonight's school board meeting assignment."

A flurry of activity followed Cat's statement and Clark turned resolutely to the conference room. He took a quick, fortifying breath and opened the door. He slipped inside and closed it quietly behind him. Lois was standing, silent and unmoving, next to the window facing Metropolis' financial district.

Lois heard Clark enter the room and closed her eyes. She cursed herself for the hundredth time, wondering why she had let Perry and Henderson talk her into this. Ha! Who was she kidding? She never let go of an investigation. Everyone knew that Mad Dog Lane was tenacious to a fault.

Lois knew how to succeed in this assignment, to make their cover believable, but she was terrified of what it would cost her personally to catch this killer. She decided to stop fighting herself and love Clark Kent openly. Heartache be damned! Lois inhaled deeply and turned to face him.

"Okay, it's time, Clark," she instructed. "You and I are undercover as an engaged couple. As of this moment, we are deeply in love. Whatever you do, you have to believe that you really love me and that our cover story is real."

"You make it sound like we'll have to convince the killer in person," he joked.

"We might. All the murders and disappearances – they were celebrities, well-known and recognizable public figures. If we can't convince the media that this is real, then the killer is never going to buy it."

"That we haven't exactly been getting along isn't a well-kept secret, Lois. How are we going to convince everyone that we love each other?"

"We've been going over the cover-story details for a days. Just... stick to the plan and we'll be fine."

Clark nodded and dropped his gaze. He studied his shoes for a minute before he cleared his throat. "And public displays of affection?"

Lois stopped pacing to smile wistfully. "I'm pretty sure I can make it look real. You, well, you can just imagine I'm the other Lois." Clark's head snapped up at that and Lois chuckled sadly. "I mean, we look alike, right? I'm sure it can't be that hard."

Clark smiled at her deprecating comment and Lois thought her heart would burst at the beauty of it. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes again. She was going to forget that Clark resented her presence and loved the other Lois. She imagined that Clark knew her as intimately as she knew him, that he had longed for her, and that he had swept her into his arms the first time they had met. Just like she'd imagined he would over the years, especially during those dark days imprisoned by Luthor and during all of those long, lonely months of hiding.

She opened her eyes to see Clark open his mouth to respond before cocking his head to the side, listening to something outside of the room. He answered her unspoken question with a quirk of his lips. "Star is coming now. And you're right, our coworkers are still arguing about whether we are really engaged, in love, or even on speaking terms."

"Well then," Lois said as she stepped next to him, "Let's give 'em a reason to really talk."

Without looking to ensure their curious colleagues were watching through the conference room windows, Lois grabbed his head with both hands and pulled him into a determined kiss.

Clark's arms flailed briefly in shock before she felt him wrap his arms tightly around her back. She practically melted against him when Clark ran his hand up her back. Lois slid her fingers through his hair and then wrapped her arms tightly around his shoulders as he pulled her against him and deepened the kiss. A pleasurable little moan escaped as she lost herself to their kiss.

Lois's feet left the floor as Clark pulled her body closer for another kiss. She had thought to put on a good show, to practice in the semi-privacy of the conference room before having to perform in front of their co-workers, but she hadn't expected the rush of emotions as their lips had touched. Every barrier she had ever erected came crashing down at his touch. She'd felt the joy of coming home, the excitement of falling desperately in love, and an almost uncontrollable desire to touch bare skin.

Clark's stumbled in shock before wrapping his arms tightly around Lois's back. He certainly hadn't expected her to just dive into a deeply passionate kiss in the conference room, but he probably should have. If he had learned anything about this Lois over the past week, it was that once she decided something, it was full-speed ahead. He had thought that the other Lois was passionate, but now she seemed tame compared to the spitfire in his arms.

As Clark recovered from Lois's surprise kiss-attack, he decided to make it a good one. He ran one hand up her back to hold Lois's head while the other wrapped tightly around her waist in an attempt to pull her closer. He found himself gasping for air at the contact. Clark felt Lois pulled away just far enough to drop her mouth to his jaw and then inch sensually around to nibble his ear. He took advantage of the angle to taste the crook of her neck and his knees almost buckled when she gently moaned in his ear. He thought he had felt desire when he'd almost kissed the other Lois in her brownstone, but that was nothing compared to the four-alarm blaze that was now burning in his chest.

He watched raptly as her lips parted and felt her heavy breath against his mouth, which sent a pulse of heat straight through his body. He dove back in for another kiss and Lois shifted to accept him. When he felt her tongue touch his lip, all rational thoughts ceased.

There was a soft rap at the door and their kiss finally came to a hesitant end. Clark set her down and pulled away from Lois just far enough to see her face, eyes still closed, lips gently parted. He placed a hand against her cheek and watched, mesmerized, as she tucked her bottom lip under her teeth and opened her eyes, gazing directly into his. Her eyes were dilated, almost black and luminous. He felt another spark in his chest that spread rapidly to his extremities and he leaned back in for another kiss. He was about to lose himself to the sweet taste of her when a more insistent knock reminded him of where they were.

Lois couldn't believe how incredible it was to kiss Clark. Letting go of him now was the last thing she wanted to do. Reluctantly, she untangled her arms from around Clark's neck and stepped back so Star could come through the door. She straightened her jacket and smoothed her skirt as Star slipped through the door, smirking at her friend as she entered. Lois pushed the door closed while Star fanned herself with her notepad.

"That was either the sexiest argument I've ever seen you two have, or you really are romantically involved. Boy, I could have sworn that the animosity between you was real, but after that kiss... Whew! Enough said. I can admit it when I'm wrong."

Lois peeked at Clark and saw that he was staring at her, a dazed expression on his face. He shook his head and then motioned for Lois to follow Star to the conference room table.

Lois cleared her throat and took a step after Star, but when Clark placed his hand on her lower back, she halted at the feeling that coursed through her and they shared another heated gaze. Lois started when Star cleared her throat loudly and then saw a tape recorder and pad of paper on the table. Lois took the seat next to Star and Clark sat on the other side of Lois.

Lois felt Clark start with surprise when Lois reached for his hand. He raised his eyebrows in question and she shrugged.

"Secret's out now, Clark. There's no reason to hide it

anymore."

Lois watched warily as Star squinted her eyes at her and then at Clark. Lois didn't like lying to her long-time friend, but until the killer was behind bars, the fewer people that knew the truth the better. She would apologize to Star after the investigation was over, but until then, they had a story to sell. Given Star's psychic training and that searching look, Lois knew it was time to put her plans in motion.

Lois focused on her true feelings for Clark and consciously lowered her barriers, opening herself up just in case Star was looking beyond the exterior for the real scoop. She felt Clark shift in his seat next to her and she wondered why he didn't seem to receive from her the way she read his feelings. As always, his feelings were as clear as a summer's day. She sensed his interest and admiration, mixed with a little confusion and curiosity. But everything else was practically eclipsed by his palpable desire to kiss her again.

Clark returned Star's searching gaze and tightened his grip on Lois's hand. He didn't really understand why she was so adamant about playacting in front of Star, but even in the short time he'd known her, he'd learned enough to trust Lois Lane's judgment when it came to a story. He tried doing as she suggested, focusing his thoughts on the other Lois, about the way he had felt when they had worked together to save the other Clark from John Doe, but he couldn't. His mind kept returning to this Lois, to the things he'd learned that made her unique, to the kiss they'd just shared, and the feelings it had evoked in him.

He had been so resolute in his love of the other Lois. Last year, she had come into his life, seen him as no one else ever had, and had helped him to realize his potential. The other Lois had been high strung and exciting and his time with her had been an exquisite torture. However, everything he thought he'd known had been turned on its head after meeting his own world's Lois Lane. This Lois made him feel confused and confident, exasperated and encouraged, scared and exhilarated.

All of the sudden, he felt a wave of warmth crash over him and Clark shifted in his seat. It was an amazing sensation as images flashed through his mind along with a jumble of emotions: he felt the peace and safety of the Kent home, the excitement of a daring and successful rescue, mixed with the exhilaration of flying for the first time. Along with it came the uncontrollable desire he'd felt while kissing Lois. He heard Lois's heart speed up and felt his jump to keep pace.

Clark turned to look at Lois with wonder when he realized what was happening to him. Contrary to everything he'd believed a week ago, Clark was falling in love with *this* Lois Lane.

Lois could feel Clark gazing at her, but couldn't look at him. She continued to watch Star's reaction until her friend smiled and shook her head.

"Wow," Star said finally, breaking the silence. "I never would have guessed it. Clark certainly didn't give me any clues." Star turned to Lois. "I'm not sure why you kept this a secret from me, but at least I get the exclusive."

Lois reached over and touched Star's hand. "You know we would never tell anyone else first."

Star stared at her for another minute, her expression inscrutable before she finally smiled. "You're not alone anymore. That's what counts." She chuckled. "Hey, if Superman can't accept a psycho-freak from Club Weirdo, no one can."

Lois's relief at having fooled Star was palpable. She smiled at Star's reference to her psychic abilities and glanced quickly at her 'fiance'. Lois saw Clark's eyebrows dip at Star's cryptic and not-so-flattering comment and she squeezed his hand. She knew Clark had misunderstood her fumbled attempts at sharing her own secret and she knew that she had to come clean soon about her abilities,

but she definitely didn't want to do it with a witness. She decided to keep this conversation moving in the right direction.

"Well, we both felt something significant the very first time we met. I think we're perfect for each other."

Star acknowledged her comment with a salute and picked up her pencil. She turned on the tape recorder, pulling their attention back to her. "So, let's start with the most important question; when's the wedding? Have you picked a date yet?"

Lois looked at Clark and he smiled encouragingly. "July 18th."

Star's eyes widened comically before she sputtered a response. "Of *this* year? That's only a little more than a week away. Are you nuts?"

"Maybe," Clark admitted. "But we knew what kind of media circus would surround us at the announcement. There's enough of that in my life as it is. I didn't want to subject Lois to that kind of publicity any more than necessary."

"You know us, Star. We lead pretty intense lives. A long engagement doesn't appeal to either of us."

"But how can you possibly get it arranged so quickly?"

"Superspeed?" Clark joked.

Lois smiled and rolled her eyes. "Neither of us wants a fancy wedding. All we want is a simple ceremony with a Justice of the Peace and a few close friends, including you, if you'll come. This isn't how I wanted to ask you, but I'd love it if you would be my maid of honor."

Star looked a little dazed. "I ... I, um... I'd love to, Lois, but it ... it's so soon. I need to check my calendar."

"You're free," Lois said with a grin. "Remember when we talked a last week? You penciled me in for dinner and movie night."

Star's mouth twisted as she mock-glared at Lois. "You are a conniving sneak." She turned her attention to Clark. "And you? The public isn't going to be happy that their hero isn't going to let them have a huge celebration. People will be clamoring for all the pomp and circumstance."

"That's exactly what we don't want," Clark answered. "Given what we both do for a living, we knew that there'd be no way to do this privately, but we don't want a spectacle."

"I may have to share Superman with the world," Lois added, "but I'm marrying Clark Kent. We want to get married as quickly and quietly as possible like any normal couple."

"You guys are anything but a normal couple. What's the rush?" Star gasped as a new thought occurred to her and her eyes dropped to Lois's midriff. "Are you pregnant?"

"What?"

"No!"

Lois vehemently denied the possibility at the same time that Clark half-rose from his chair. She held tight to his hand and encouraged him to sit back down with a pat on the hand before answering Star's question as calmly as she could.

"No, Star, it's nothing like that," Lois started.

"It's just ... as people suspected," Clark continued. "I found Lois in the Congo a year ago and we fell in love before Lois went into hiding to expose Lex Luthor. I continued to search for her in the Congo to help maintain her cover."

"Now that Lex is in prison and Clark is back, we didn't see any reason to wait."

Lois felt the tension ease as Clark relaxed. Lois kissing him had really thrown him for a loop and she could tell that Star's piercing gaze and comments had been unnerving to him. Now, though, their planning was bearing fruit. She and Clark traded off the practiced answers with the kind of ease someone would expect from a couple that knew each other well.

"Okay," Star replied. "Whew! Boy, would that have been the scoop of the year! Okay, so what kind of details can you tell me? Where you will honeymoon?"

"The honeymoon will be an undisclosed location reachable

only to those that can fly under their own power. After the wedding ceremony, we will be inaccessible for a week until we return home." Lois had insisted that they announce that they would be unreachable after the wedding. She hoped that it would force the murderer to rush and try to strike beforehand. She hoped it would make him sloppy.

"And where will home be?"

"Clark's place," Lois answered. "People are used to him living there already, so it will cause the least disturbance to his neighbors for me to move in with him after we return from our honeymoon."

Star opened her mouth to ask another question, but Clark was distracted when the police scanner in the newsroom crackled to life. He sprang to his feet, startling both women. "Oil fire at the refinery. I'm sorry, ladies. I've got to go."

Clark hesitated for just a fraction of a second and then leaned down to plant a good-bye kiss on Lois's lips. He may have meant it to be a quick peck, but the moment his lips touched hers, that same magnetic pull drew him back for more. Lois finally ended the kiss when she laid both hands on his neck and pulled her head back.

"Fire," she whispered.

Clark looked abashed at getting sidetracked. He nodded and then sped through the newsroom leaving a flurry of scattered papers in his wake.

Part 9

Alt-Metropolis – November 1984

"Freedom"

General Sam Lane scowled at the heavy pounding of fists on his door. Grumbling at the interruption, he closed Mensa's report before stomping to the door and throwing it open. Surprise caught the angry words about to fly from his lips. His commanding officer was standing there, surrounded by a cadre of people; two MPs, a couple of men in gray civilian suits, a police officer, a man holding a camera, and a former Marine – his brother Mike.

"General Holcomb. How can I help you, sir?" Sam Lane was never one for small talk. Might as well find out what his CO and these civvies wanted.

"General Lane," began Holcomb, "I'm here to inform you that the office of MEPWar has been disbanded in its current form."

"What?! Why?" Sam Lane scowled at his brother. "Is this supposed to be some kind of practical joke?"

General Holcomb shook his head. "Far from it."

"But, Sir! We've made some very important breakthroughs. If we could just discuss this..."

"General Lane," one of the business suits interrupted.

"Who the hell are you?" Lane demanded.

"Donald Riggs of the United States Department of Labor. It's come to our attention that you've been recruiting minors into your department by force and without adequate compensation."

"That's preposterous!"

Holcomb handed him one of the papers he'd been holding. "I've been informed by the Metropolis PD and the State of New Troy that the enlistment of underage minors is not just unconscionable, it's illegal under the auspices of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938.

"We have a special dispensation for recruiting into the MEPWar division. What kind of proof is there of wrongdoing?"

"Actually, General Lane, the evidence we have is conclusive," Riggs answered. "Your isolation and use of teenagers in experiments skirts the edge of human trafficking and torture, which are both federal offenses. We're not only in our rights to take any minors in your unit into protective custody, but we're considering pressing charges against all members of the MEPWar division."

"Who's been telling you ...?" Sam Lane stopped speaking when he saw his daughter slip out from behind his brother's back.

His face darkened in anger as he growled her name. “Lois.”

General Holcomb looked back and grimaced as the young lady smiled unrepentantly at her father. “I’m sorry, Sam. Evidence has also been given showing false statements on recruiting paperwork, which is both a federal and military offense under Article 83 of the UCMJ. MEPWar may also be in contempt under Articles 15, 139, and 85. There’ll be a formal inquest, of course, but your unit is disbanded as of now and all mental espionage research shall cease until the conclusion of the inquest.”

Sam shook his head silently. This couldn’t be happening. Mensa’s latest report showed positive results in the use of psychics in the new battery of tests. They couldn’t shut them down now. A bright flash from the photographer’s camera brought Sam Lane out of his stupor and he suddenly saw red. He lunged for the cameraman and found his arms being tugged behind his back by the MPs present. He made one ineffectual move to get away and then slumped in defeat. He bowed his head and turned away from the flashing bulb of the camera.

General Holcomb turned as Lois Lane approached him and handed him a completed form. “General Holcomb, Sir, I’ve almost completed my four-year enlistment period,” she said. “Here is my term discharge. It’s a little early, but I’m within ninety-days of my normal separation date for educational purposes. I believe that I qualify for an honorable discharge.”

Holcomb glanced over the paperwork before signing his name to her discharge papers. “I can’t say that I approve of the way you bypassed the normal military channels and went straight to the Feds, the Metropolis Police, and the press. I would appreciate it if we could complete our inquest before I read all about it in a newspaper.”

“Oh, we’re not just any paper, sir,” the cameraman piped up. “I’m from the Daily Planet. We’ll be sure to get all the facts before going to print, but this little lady has already done most of the work for us.”

Lois smiled and turned to the other suited civilian man present. “I won’t be going with you, Mr. Turner. As requested, I’ve completed the judge’s petition for emancipation,” she said as she handed him another stack of papers. “I just received my high school diploma and I think the back-pay due by the MEPWar division should cover the financial requirements. Besides, I’ve secured a paid internship with the Daily Planet. As for living arrangements, my Uncle Mike has agreed to let me stay with him until winter semester begins at Met U.”

As the MPs escorted her father away, Lois crossed her arms both as a defiant gesture and to keep her trembling hands under control.

She was free.

It was an amazing feeling. For so long the loneliness and isolation of being a freak and a test subject in her father’s laboratory had weighted her down. But two months ago, she’d felt the most amazing feeling in the world. Clark had discovered that the bonds of gravity no longer tied him to the ground. He’d flown and she’d felt the exhilaration and freedom he’d felt as he swooped through the air.

Lois hadn’t mentioned Clark Kent to anyone since she was nine years old, but he was still a big part of her life, especially when his emotions were strong. He kept her company. She encouraged him when he was feeling down, comforted him when he was scared or lonely, and she drew strength from him in the same way. Life had knocked them both around hard – they both had lost loved ones at a young age and had to learn how to live with unusual abilities by themselves. Even though they’d never met in person, he was her best friend in the world.

Clark inspired her. He’d been able to accomplish so much on his own, retaining his good and gentle nature while he experienced one disappointment after another in the foster care system. He’d

made it, somehow, and if he could do it, then so could she. If he could escape the natural laws of the universe, then surely Lois Lane could escape her imprisonment.

And escape she did. Using every scrap of ability she had, as well as her burgeoning skills in investigative journalism, she had researched federal laws and military regulations until she’d understood her rights. She’d passed her GED and studied what it meant to be an emancipated minor. Then, she’d found the evidence she needed to break free.

Lois turned away from the reporter that was still grilling Mr. Riggs about his role and picked up her knapsack. Mike Lane picked up her other suitcase and they walked away, hand-in-hand toward his jeep.

She didn’t notice the figure staring at their departing backs from the shadows of the gatehouse.

Alt-Metropolis – July 10, 1997

Lois’s eyebrows drew down as the TV screen replayed the foiled bank heist. Lois bit her lip as the newscaster explained how the robbers had shot into a crowd of people after a teller tripped the alarm. Superman had arrived before the shots rang out, but had hesitated, only running in after the Metropolis Police unit had entered the building. Clark helped to capture the thieves, but he’d not arrived quickly enough either to save the teller or prevent injuries to four other bystanders. One was now in critical condition at Metropolis General.

Many news agencies knew he’d been helping with a huge traffic accident, but the reporters present hadn’t understood his hesitation outside the bank. Lois had. He had tried to hide it, but the camera had caught his expression when’d he’d landed a little harder than usual. The thieves had had kryptonite. That’s why he hadn’t flown in at super speed, but had run through the front door.

The press had not been kind.

As the news shifted to market reports, Lois turned to face the stairwell door in anticipation of Clark’s arrival. A moment later, the door opened and Clark entered, pausing briefly as the other reporters turned from the monitors to stare at him. Ducking his head, he made a beeline for his desk trying to ignore the commentary from his coworkers. Even Lois could overhear their uncaring remarks and she glared fiercely at Ralph’s not-so-quiet remark that Superman was “not really faster than a speeding bullet, then.”

She returned to her own desk and sat down behind her terminal, but kept her attention on Clark. He sat stoically typing up his account of the robbery until the Bullpen returned to its’ normal hustle and bustle. When he’d apparently sent his story to Cat, Clark sat back in his chair and after a surreptitious scan of the newsroom, released a heavy sigh and removed his glasses to rub at his eyes.

Clark wiped at the prickle in his eyes before replacing his glasses. What good were these powers if innocent people still got hurt? Why couldn’t he be faster? He hunched over his notepad, pretending to review his notes and rubbed at the tightness in his chest.

Suddenly, he felt the warmth of an embrace wrap around him and he took a shuddering breath. He closed his eyes tightly and let the familiar feelings of support flow through him, unconditional acceptance stealing over him and filling him with love and reassurance. Although his parents had been gone for twenty years, it seemed like they still managed to comfort him in times of need. His father’s strength and his mother’s consoling words had been with him through every challenge.

<It’s going to be okay, Clark. You give so much to others. Trust in yourself and believe that your goodness makes a difference. You can’t be everywhere. What you can do is enough.>
<Oh, mama,” Clark thought, “I miss you.>

<Mama?!>

That wasn't his mother's voice. That was Lois!

Clark's eyes snapped open and he was stunned to see Lois looking straight at him, compassion and understanding shifting abruptly to astonishment. When she saw him looking at her, the connection broke and the warmth vanished. Clark blinked in surprise. How?

Lois was the source of the comfort? He'd been having these feelings since his parent's death. How could Lois be speaking directly to his mind?

Could he really hear Lois's thoughts? And if he could hear her, could she hear him, too? Clark closed his eyes tightly and thought her name.

<Lois?!>

<Clark, there's no need to shout. I hear you.>

He opened his eyes to see her walking toward him, a twinkle in her eye. <If you think it *that* loudly, I can hear you from Shanghai.>

Clark gawked at her as her smile widened. <How? I thought you were joking about being psychic.>

<I think telepathic is more appropriate, actually. I don't know if all Kryptonians are telepathic or if it's one of your super powers, but you're the strongest telepath I've ever met.>

<But ... you're not Kryptonian.>

<No. I'm the strongest *human* telepath I've ever met.>

<You can read people's minds...> Clark suddenly felt violated. <Do you use this ability to spy on people? How often have you read *my* mind?>

<No!> she rushed to assure him. <It's not like that. Look, I know that it's wrong to invade someone's privacy and I've learned control over the years. It's like ... when you use your x-ray vision. You don't purposely use it to spy on innocent people without their consent. That's the same for me. I try to only use my ability to help people in my investigations.>

<Sometimes I make mistakes or learn things inadvertently, but being able to sense emotions or receive someone else's thoughts, it's more like ... when you use your super hearing to listen to someone's heartbeat. You can tell when someone is lying to you. For me, I can interpret strong emotions as a kind of instinct; I can tell if someone is telling the truth or if they're really scared.>

Clark felt mollified by this. Yes, he also had learned control over the years and once he'd learned how wrong it was to invade someone's privacy, he used his powers only to help in a rescue or in his investigations. He also couldn't fault her for 'hearing' things unintentionally. His super hearing still kicked in sometimes without his conscious decision.

His mind swirled with this new information. Telepathic? Even for him this was hard to accept, but here he was *thinking* a conversation with Lois. The warmth he'd felt a few moments before was back and the connection with her practically sizzled with energy when he looked into her eyes.

<How long ...?>

<I've been able to receive people's thoughts and emotions my whole life. As for you, I first started playing with my 'imaginary' friend, Clark, when I was four years old.>

<Imaginary friend...I had an imaginary friend when I was little. A little girl...Lolo?>

<Lolo was what Lucy called me when she was little.>

Lois propped her hip on his desk while he gaped at that thought. Clark started remembering instances over the years when he'd felt this particular feeling, this connection. Yes, they were there for as long as he could remember. Wait. He'd noticed a muted difference in college and while he'd been traveling the world, but then it'd all but disappeared four years ago...

Clark mentally slapped himself in the forehead. Four years ago, exactly when Lois had disappeared in the Congo. The feelings had returned this past year. That must have been after

she'd returned from Africa.

Was that really what happened? Everything fit. With a start, Clark realized that his return to Smallville and his subsequent engagement to Lana were a direct result of Lois's disappearance to the Congo. He'd been desperate to find a place to fit in, to feel part of humanity, so he'd sought friendship and support by turning to the only other person who knew his secret.

Unbidden, his midnight conversation with the other Lois came to mind. *"Look, about that 'chemistry thing' you mentioned... Just like it's easy to confuse you and Clark... I think *you* have me confused with *her*. Your Lois. And those feelings are meant for her."*

Clark realized that the other Lois had been right. He had wondered how he could have feelings for someone he'd never met, but she was right. Maybe he had never even loved the other Lois, maybe his infatuation had just been his true feelings for his Lois, misplaced.

He'd been missing this Lois, *his* Lois, and he hadn't even known it.

Lois was the driving force behind every episode of comfort when a rescue didn't work out, of courage to act, of shared joy at his accomplishments. She had been his constant companion, his friend – his best friend – for his entire life. With a sinking feeling, her animosity the day they'd met made sense now. She had expected to meet a lifelong friend and he had cast her aside in favor of her double.

<I'm sorry, Lois. I ... didn't realize. I didn't understand. I always thought it was somehow my parents that were helping me, encouraging me. Memories of them or feelings ... I had no idea that it was you.>

Her forgiveness was immediate. Lois leaned over to rub his shoulder and he felt the connection treble and flow through him from the contact. Clark caught her hand in his and pressed a kiss to her knuckles in gratitude. When she threaded her fingers through his, he could feel her joy at his recognition and acceptance.

She leaned over to touch her forehead against his and Clark closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he found himself staring directly at Lois's chest. He shut his eyes and willed his mind to blankness, but it didn't work. A glimpse of cleavage and heat suffused his face as some altogether inappropriate images flitted through his mind.

<Lois, can you hear *all* my thoughts?>

<No. Not your thoughts. Unless I want to read someone and I'm touching them, I block everything out to give people their privacy. I can usually sense your presence.> She gave him a wry look. <Strong emotions and a few images do sneak through sometimes.>

The implications of Lois being privy to his feelings sent a rush of mortification through him. He let go of her hand and covered his eyes as he audibly groaned.

<Oh my god. I'm so embarrassed...>

She retrieved his hand and threaded her fingers through his again. <There's no need to be. My connection with you started as a child with images and thoughts, but it dulled over the years to just the strong feelings. As a teenager, if I sensed something from you, like fear or joy, it took a tremendous effort to 'connect' with you and share my thoughts or feelings. To keep myself sane I learned to shield myself from regular people and for the most part, learned to block you out, too. And I've *never* had a conversation like this before with anyone.>

<Why haven't you done it before? Talked with me mind to mind?>

Lois shrugged. <Maybe we had to spend enough time together to 'sync-up'. Maybe this type of communication is a wavelength and we both had to be tuned to the same channel.>

Clark was soothed by this, not just because of her words, but

because he could sense the truth from her. He'd never understood why he could do that, but he realized now that maybe he could read people because of his telepathic abilities, too. If Lois's experience was anything like his, then he didn't have to worry about her invading his private thoughts. He trusted her.

Lois sat up and looked around the newsroom. She realized that their mute conversation hadn't gone unnoticed. There were several people watching their silent exchange with quizzical expressions. She looked back at Clark and tipped her head toward the elevator.

<Why don't we meet at my place and I can teach you to shield your thoughts.>

At his nod, she made her way back to her desk. As she bent over to pick up her purse, she heard Clark mentally wolf whistle at her. She laughed and quickly gathered her notes and briefcase before turning to give him a wink.

<Or we could explore just how much fun we could have combining telepathy and superpowers.>

Part 10

Alt-Metropolis – May 1987

"Secrets"

"Thank you, Detective."

Lois looked around the quad. After assuring herself that she'd interviewed everyone that she needed to, she tucked her notepad into her purse and started to walk toward the university newspaper office. Suddenly, a sense of unease swept over her and her instincts prickled. After working for the Met-U Press and the Daily Planet for three years, she knew to trust her instincts for a story. Lois stopped walking abruptly, causing another young woman to bump into her. The woman grabbed her arm reflexively to keep her balance and Lois was hit with a torrent of emotions and images.

Lois was so shocked by what she had received, that it took her a moment to recover. Okay, so Debbie hadn't leapt from her dorm room window to commit suicide then, but how to prove it without giving away her secret?

The young woman walked toward a group of nearby students, her backpack slung over one shoulder. How could Lois expose her crime while remaining safely anonymous? *'This is how Clark feels,'* Lois thought to herself. Lois knew that he occasionally used his abilities to help without exposing his secret. But Lois had already spoken with the police and most of the eyewitnesses, so she wasn't sure that an excuse of 'overhearing something' would work.

Lois looked at the perpetrator and felt an urgency to act as the woman pulled a lighter from her pocket. She must be thinking of destroying the evidence. Lois weighed her options. She could follow the woman, befriend her, or sneak into her room, but Lois didn't think the evidence would last that long. As the ambulance pulled away and the police started packing up, she realized that unless she wanted to let a murderess walk, she needed to act now.

But, whom could she trust? Her eyes rested on the dour-faced Detective Henderson. She'd dealt with him before and she knew he was a good man. Could she do this without revealing herself? Was her secret worth it?

As the culprit started edging away toward a dark grove of trees, Lois threaded her way through the packs of grieving college students toward Henderson and his partner. She almost turned around as memories of military experiments rose in her minds' eye. The ever-present phrase, "dissect you like a frog" reverberated in her head, but she steeled her resolve and tapped Henderson on the shoulder.

"Detective, can I have a word?"

"Lane. I thought I answered all of your questions already."

Henderson's partner, Kowalsky, gave her arm a back-handed tap and chimed in. "Suicide jumper, note found, case closed. Now beat it, Lane. I want to get home to catch the last of the game."

Lois ignored Kowalsky and grabbed Henderson's coat as he turned to leave. "What if I said I have evidence that this wasn't a suicide?"

Kowalsky snorted. "Yeah? Well, I searched that room and the only evidence I found was a suicide note that said I get to go home now."

Lois ignored him again. "Come on, Detective. It won't take long."

Henderson's pursed his lips and then nodded. His partner groaned, but Henderson shut him down. "Can it, Kowalsky, or I'll insist on finishing the Barrows casework before we leave tonight."

Henderson followed Lois until they were out of earshot. Lois tipped her head in the direction of one of the groups of students. "See the brunette in the blue sweater with the Met-U backpack, the one walking past Joe Malloy? She pushed Deb from the window and murdered her."

Henderson shook his head. "I already talked with her." Henderson flipped open his notebook. "Annette Westman. She was in the library at the time of death."

"She lied. She has a draft of the suicide note and Deb's engagement ring – a princess cut diamond lined with sapphires – in her pack. There's also a spare key to Deb's room in the front pocket of her jeans, the little coin one on the right."

Henderson's eyebrows lifted. "Motive?"

"Jealousy and revenge. I don't have the specifics."

"And you came by this information, how?"

Lois's mind raced. "One of Deb's sorority sisters saw Annette put the items in her pack and told me."

"Which one?"

Lois pointed and Henderson shook his head. "I already interviewed that girl. Try again."

"I overheard Annette talking to herself." Lois kept her expression passive, but her heart raced.

"That one was definitely a better story. Now, how about the truth?"

Lois stared at him for a moment. "I just know. What will it hurt to check it out?"

"It's starting to sound like you're involved, Lane. How about this for a story: You and Ms. Westman are friends and wanted the engagement ring for yourselves. You wrote the note together, pushed Ms. Shumaker from her dorm room, and now you've had a change of heart. I've seen criminals turn on their partners before. Did you plant the evidence on your partner?"

The quirk in the Detective's lips made Lois hope he didn't really believe she was involved, that he was just giving her a hard time for wasting his, but it was clear that he wasn't going to bend if she didn't give him something. Lois turned to look at the perpetrator; Annette was almost to the edge of the quad. All right, she'd give him the truth. "Would you believe I'm psychic?"

Henderson's eyebrows lifted minutely. "Uh-huh. And how did you come across this information? Are you a mind reader from a distance?"

"Earlier, Annette and I accidentally collided and she grabbed my hand to keep her balance. That's when I saw and felt the things I told you."

"I've been working homicide for too long to believe it, but I'll play along, Lane. Okay, what do you get when you read me?"

Lois stared at him for a moment and then offered her hand. Henderson looked at her askance. "Without touch, I only get random strong emotions," she explained. Henderson took her hand.

"Besides the amusement you feel at me losing my mind, you are worried about someone you love and some part of your body is giving you a twinge of pain right now."

"Huh. My dad is sick. I pulled my back a few days ago helping him." Henderson narrowed his eyes at her. "Just emotions from a distance?"

“Strong emotions. Sometimes I get random thoughts by accident.” Lois pointed at his partner. “Like earlier when Kowalsky’s tapped my arm I felt that he’s cheating at something, cards maybe, and is nervous you’ll realize it. As a side note, it doesn’t take psychic abilities to see that Kowalsky wouldn’t recognize evidence if it appeared by magic in the form of a jelly doughnut.”

Henderson stared at her, his lips quirking up at the jab at his partner. “Well. That sounds eerily accurate. Okay, Lane. You’ve been a pretty straight shooter until now and I’ve had sketchier tips.” He tilted his head toward the milling crowd. “Let’s go check it out.”

They walked back to the police cruiser and Henderson nodded to his partner to follow. Kowalsky grumbled, but accompanied Henderson while Lois trailed behind. Annette fumbled her lighter, dropping it into the grass when Henderson called her name.

“Ms. Westman, I’ve been informed that you may have evidence regarding the death of Debbie Shumaker in your pack. Will you consent to a search?”

Annette turned around and clutched her pack to her, her eyes wide. “That’s ridiculous. What evidence?”

“A copy of the suicide note, Ms. Shumaker’s engagement ring, and a key to her dorm room. Do you consent?”

Annette froze, a half-smile on her lips, and then suddenly she bolted. Kowalsky shouted, “stop!” and awkwardly sprang after her, but ended up sprawled face-first in the grass as Annette leapt past him. Lois was ready with an outstretched leg and Annette stumbled and went down. After a brief struggle, Kowalsky pinned her and Henderson pulled three drafts of the suicide note and an engagement ring from her pack.

Henderson stared at the items and then glanced back at Lois in speculation. “Kowalsky, please search her for a key. Front coin pocket of her jeans on the right.”

Kowalsky pulled a small, silver key from Annette’s right front pocket. “Room 306. It’s the room of the deceased, all right. Annette Westman, you have the right to remain silent...”

Henderson met Lois’s eyes and offered his hand in thanks.

Lois took it and stared at the detective for a moment and then smiled as relief poured into her. Henderson was going to keep her secret. She had never believed that she would be able to entrust her secret with anyone, but here was a police detective whom she could trust. Although he could destroy her career by blabbing her secret, she knew he would not. Pleased, Lois pulled her notepad from her bag to get some additional quotes. She couldn’t wait to write up her story.

Alt-Metropolis – July 10, 1997

Clark stood like stone at the door, staring as if the wood could calm his racing heart. But the undulations in the wood grain remained silent and refused to give him courage. He finally shook his head at his own foolish thoughts and raised his fist to knock. Lois opened the door first, a bemused, knowing smile tugged at her mouth as she stepped back and invited him inside.

He took a few hesitant steps into her apartment and then stood there feeling lost as to what to do next. A frantic, internal battle raged in his mind. Clark kept willing his thoughts to stillness, imagining a blank wall, but each time he succeeded, another thought or memory, one he did not want Lois to know, would pop into his awareness.

Before he could get his thoughts off the internal hamster wheel, Lois shoved a roll of aluminum foil under his nose. The randomness of the act shattered his circular thoughts enough for him to look a question at her. Lois laughed.

“Trust me. It’s weird, but it’ll help. Make a helmet out of foil. It will block our thoughts from each other and give you some privacy until you have learned some control.”

Clark took the foil and within a heartbeat, fashioned a football

helmet. He set it on his head.

“How’s that?”

Lois grinned. “Elaborate, but effective.”

She set her own foil skullcap on her head and Clark saw her shoulders relax.

“How does it work?” he asked.

“Somehow, the foil blocks the sending and receiving. Once you’ve gotten the hang of it, just imagining it there will protect you from wayward thoughts coming in or going out. Eventually, it’ll become second nature, like controlling your super hearing or strength.”

He trusted her and as soon as he stopped trying to control his thoughts, they calmed down. She gestured toward the couch and they both took a seat next to one another.

“Well, I’m sure you’ve got a lot of questions,” Lois offered.

“That’s putting it mildly,” Clark grinned.

“Ask. I’ll answer if I can.”

Since their connection had been revealed, he hadn’t been able to stop reviewing his life in view of this new information. Time and again, whenever he’d felt overwhelmed with loneliness or fear, the feeling of reassurance, companionship, or support would wash over him. To know that it was a living, breathing person, *this* woman, made him feel connected in a way he hadn’t since his parents had died. Clark searched his mind for a place to start and his first major rescue popped into his head.

“The train derailment when I was sixteen, you helped me know how to lever the car out of the water, didn’t you?”

Surprised at his question, she nodded.

“How did you know what to do?”

“I, uh, spent a lot of time in the army snooping. I often watched the special ops training sessions, especially those they didn’t want anyone to see. I learned some useful skills.”

The silence deepened once more before Clark spoke again. “Thank you, Lois. I don’t know what I did to deserve your help, but thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Clark.”

“How... do you know how this works?”

“Well, there’s my theory and then there’s the science. My personal theory is that Kryptonians are telepathic. It’s the only explanation that makes sense to me. A lot of people with so-called psychic abilities were tested against me, but I haven’t experienced anything with anyone that compares to you.”

“Tested?”

Lois hesitated briefly. Keeping her past a secret was an ingrained habit and she was loath to tell him the most painful aspects of her life. However, she’d also been waiting years to share everything with Clark. There really was no reason to hold back now.

“When I was eleven, my mother and sister died in a car accident. I told you that before. What I didn’t tell you was that my father... he hadn’t been living with us for a couple of years, but he came for me. He knew of my abilities and wanted to study the feasibility of using psychics in the military, so he enlisted me into a special army division. They called it Mental Espionage and Psychic Warfare, or MEPWar.” At Clark’s sympathetic look, she grimaced. “No. The lab rat years were not pleasant.”

“Oh, Lois. I’m sorry.”

She smiled sadly and looked away. “So, the science. People feel and think constantly. What the scientists in MEPWar discovered was that human thoughts generate a measurable, high frequency energy wave. These thought waves are around us all the time, but most people learn to filter them as babies when the synapses and neural pathways become more defined.”

“So that’s the ‘sending’. As for the mechanism of ‘receiving’, that was still a matter of debate. My father thought that it was a function of the mind as a separate, spiritual ability; Mensa thought

it a physical function of my Amygdala where emotions, especially fear, are housed. Brain scans showed that the shape of my amygdala differs slightly from other people, so he assumed that was the source of my ability.”

“My experience is that I not only intercepted the thought waves of the people around me, I learned to interpret them. My mother called it a gift, my father a defect. Mensa thought it an evolutionary genetic mutation. He wanted to experiment, to...to operate, so he could figure out how to replicate the change in others. When I realized they wanted to cut me open, that my father wasn’t going to protect me, that’s when I knew I had to get out.”

“You must have been terrified. My dad was so afraid that the government would come and get me if they knew what I could do. He told me that they would dissect me ...”

“... like a frog,” Lois finished.

The old fear of dissection hung between them. Her luminous gaze connected to his horrified stare and she felt a shiver run up her spine. “Without knowing it, you helped me. When I felt your joy at learning to fly, I knew I could escape. I started investigating laws and regulations. I snuck into Mensa’s office and began gathering the evidence I needed before taking it to the authorities. After exposing them, the army didn’t have any option but to shut the program down.”

The expression on Clark’s face was filled with awe. She knew that learning to adapt to his burgeoning powers had been a lot to deal with, but he’d had the supportive memories of his parents and, unknown to him, her help.

“Learning to deal with super hearing and x-ray vision as a kid was difficult enough. I don’t think I could have handled knowing everyone’s thoughts.”

“Being a child in Metropolis was hard. There are so many people and before I started to filter, I heard and saw everything from everyone that I met. Once my mother realized what was wrong, she did her best to shield me until I started to grow out of it. My sister helped, too. Lucy was so innocent that her thoughts were like a breath of fresh air, so I spent as much time with her as I could. If not for my mother and Lucy, I think I would have gone crazy.”

Lois chuckled. “My sister Lucy always said I knew things simply from sheer force of will.”

Clark tipped his head back and laughed at that. “That I can believe.”

“My childhood wasn’t all bad. I had you when things got rough. Through you, I could escape to the quiet countryside when things were overwhelming at home. I rode the tractor with you and your dad. Or helped you and your mom weed the vegetable garden. I’m as glad as you are that they found you. I learned from their love and acceptance that people weren’t all bad. Without that, I think I would have given up on humanity.”

“You’ve been alone since your mother and sister died, haven’t you?” he asked. She could hear the empathy and curiosity in his voice.

“Yes, and no. Not completely. I had a friend.”

“Star. I knew that you two had been roommates for a few years. I interviewed her when I decided to look for you. It sounds like she was the last person you talked with before leaving for the Congo.”

“She knew about my abilities. It was good to have a girlfriend that understood.” Lois decided not to tell Clark when or where she had met Star. Deciding to tell Clark everything about herself did not extend to sharing Star’s secrets. Lois would ask her for permission when this was all over.

“Everyone else I kept at arms length.” Lois refocused on Clark “Although I tried, I could never completely shut you out.”

Clark squirmed under her intense gaze. He wondered again what she knew about him. Did she know every mistake he’d ever made? Every torrid teenage fantasy, every thought he’d had about

not just the other Lois, but her as well? He was relieved when she continued her explanation and cut through his swirling, panicky thoughts.

“I was glad you stayed with me, though. The control you learned as each new ability appeared helped me, too. By the time I got out of the military, I had learned to shield myself from the thoughts of others. For a while, I closed myself off to everyone just because I could, but I’ve always had an insatiable curiosity. Also, I had a strong sense of justice. As time went on, I began to hate closed doors, especially those put in place by the powerful and greedy, so I started to use my abilities in my investigations.”

“I know there is a privacy line I shouldn’t cross. Sometimes I walk really close to that line and I still make mistakes. I tried to be selective about reading people during my gunrunning investigation and I missed things I should have seen coming. After I got caught by Lex Luthor,” she paused and shuddered, “I learned what depravity really looked like.” She chuckled morosely. “After Luthor, the rest of humanity started to look almost angelic in their imperfections.”

The atmosphere was heavy with her revelation. He’d read her articles about Lex Luthor in the Daily Planet archives. He’d also had a chance to ask questions of Perry, Cat, and James. Lois had removed one of the single biggest threats to Clark’s life by bringing him down.

“Thank you, Lois.”

“You’re welcome,” she smiled. “For what?”

“For putting Luthor in jail. You very likely saved my life.”

“Luthor had the Kryptonite. I knew that, but didn’t know how to get it away from him without tipping him off.”

Clark nodded. “After the mayoral debates between Perry and Tempus, it was common knowledge that Kryptonite could hurt me. Just a few weeks after my ‘debut’ as Superman, I figured out that Luthor was orchestrating a series of tests for me. I had figured that Luthor was dirty, then, but I didn’t know just how dirty.”

Clark chuckled. “I naively confronted Luthor and started a yearlong attempt to gather evidence while doing my best to outwit him, all the while trying to keep myself safe. That all ended a few days before I left for the other dimension when Luthor tried to kill me using Kryptonite bullets.”

His investigation, hampered by fear, had gone nowhere. He’d been a coward, but Lois? Lois had put everything on the line and brought him down. He’d be forever grateful that Luthor had failed to kill Lois as well.

“I didn’t know it was you, but when you went missing in the Congo, I felt it. I was in Malaysia on the trail of some human traffickers and I suddenly felt cut adrift. Lost. It took me twice as long as it should have to wrap up that investigation and then I went back to Smallville.”

“Back to Lana.”

Clark didn’t miss the flat tone in her voice. He shook his head and smiled wryly at himself. “Stupid, huh? I felt so lost that even Lana’s brand of love was better than the emptiness I felt. I craved that connection with you and when I couldn’t find it...” he trailed off. “Why didn’t you ever contact me?”

“I never knew your last name. I also figured that if you wanted to meet me you would have just flown to Metropolis. Besides, by the time I got out of the military and had learned control, I craved isolation.”

“That sounds lonely.”

“Yes, and no. The emotional distance felt ... safe, especially with you. By the time I had the know-how to find you, I decided not to try. I think I was afraid...”

“Afraid? Of me?”

“Not of you specifically, but of letting someone get inside my barriers.” Lois chuckled and rolled her eyes. “I saw enough psychologists growing up to know how conflicted I was, how

strange it felt to want an emotional intimacy with someone and at the same time want to keep everyone out. I read a lot of books trying to figure out if I was psychotic or just a coward.”

“Lois, you are the most emotionally mature person I’ve ever met. My whole life I’ve guarded myself, never letting anyone get close for fear of being discovered. Sometimes I don’t even know what I’m feeling. You? You are so articulate and self-aware. It’s hard for me to believe you’d be afraid of anything.”

Lois shrugged. “Remember how violated you felt when you thought I’d been reading your mind? As a child, I felt invaded constantly. Once I knew how to keep others out, the solitude was blissful and I wore my independence like armor.”

“What about professionally? Did you ever tell anyone?”

“No one at the Planet. I had a couple of senior partners when I first started interning, but I kept colleagues at a professional distance. I never told Perry, but he knew about me. I’m not sure when he realized it, but it was unstated between us for a long time. He knew unofficially and I knew he knew. It worked really well for us. The only person that I’ve ever told purposely was Inspector Henderson. That was terrifying, but necessary in order to catch Annette Westman.”

“And personally?”

“Personally, I had Star and for a long time, that was enough. I never told anyone else. Every once in a while, the desire for ... companionship would entice me, but after a few failed attempts at dating, I gave up. After Claude tried to steal my work, I refused to work with anyone else, either. Perry understood, but the other staffers didn’t. That’s how Mad Dog Lane got christened.”

Clark heard the bitterness in her voice. She had already told him that the lurid rumors he’d heard about Mad Dog Lane and a French correspondent weren’t true, but she hadn’t tried to correct them. Clark knew he shouldn’t ask, but he couldn’t stop himself. “No other boyfriends?”

She barked out a wry laugh. “Come on, Clark! I told you the whole truth during our game night. Let me put it this way, if you could read your date’s intentions like a bad novel, would you still go out? I did try, but like I said before, the men I met were more interested in an easy physical encounter or in obtaining my story notes than in me, so it never went anywhere.”

“As a child I’d learned more than I ever wanted to know about romantic relationships. My parents provided a terrible model.” She looked at him with tenderness. “The only kind of marriage that ever interested me was what your parents had; trusting, respectful, unconditional, but I figured I’d never find someone that could accept me. You need all three for a real friendship and without friendship, a relationship really can’t last, can it?”

Clark’s parents had been best friends, they had respected each other, and their acceptance of him and each other had been unconditional. A relationship like his parents’ was exactly what Clark wanted, too. And he knew in the deepest part of his heart that *this* Lois was his best friend. Despite knowing everything about him, despite his shabby treatment of her since his return, she was still helping him, comforting him, protecting him.

With a clarity that would never fade, Clark knew that he loved her. Had loved her all along. Until they had kissed in the conference room yesterday, he had thought his love for the other Lois would never fade, but now he knew that wasn’t true. Oh, he’d acknowledged the intense attraction, and it’d taken only a couple of days to see how truly remarkable his Lois was in her profession, but he had written off anything deeper as an echo.

He’d had it backwards.

Would Lois believe him if he told her? Could she trust him? Maybe not if he tried to explain with words, but if he bared his thoughts and feelings to her, maybe she could believe that what he felt was sincere.

Tentatively, Clark reached up and took off his foil helmet. He set it on her coffee table and then leaned forward to remove Lois’s

cap as well. Her eyes were wide and shining, but she didn’t shy away. He heard her heartbeat trip and settle into a gallop as he took her hand. Clark closed his eyes and focused on his feelings for her, of friendship, respect, acceptance, and love.

A heartbeat later, he heard her gasp and then the feelings rebounded tenfold back to him. When he felt her love for him flow through him, he thought he might burst. He opened his eyes in time to see Lois lurch forward to throw her arms around him. He pulled her close, closed his eyes, and let the feelings fill him up.

They stayed locked in an embrace for an endless moment before her tremulous voice answered his unspoken declaration. “I love you, too, Clark.”

He pulled back and placed a hand against her cheek. She met his gaze and he heard her heartbeat accelerate as the emotions between them shifted. He licked his lips and glanced down at her lips even as she leaned forward to receive him. It was a soft kiss, tender and hopeful and full of longing. Nothing like the heated exchange in the conference room, but infinitely better for its honesty. When it ended their eyes locked again as a pulse of energy sizzled between them.

Clark slid his arm up her back to frame her face with both hands as her skin flushed and her pupils dilated. He caught an image of them intimately entwined, their clothing rapidly disappearing and he smiled wickedly. Lois grinned back, but didn’t break eye contact. He leaned in to kiss her again when the phone rang.

“Ignore it,” she groaned as Clark’s lips whispered across her cheek and over a closed eyelid.

The phone stopped ringing abruptly after two rings and then after a brief pause, it rang again, twice.

Lois stilled and pulled away from Clark then, her mind shifting to serious thought.

“Ignore it?” Clark asked.

Lois shook her head. “That’s one of my sources and there’s some kind of trouble. I’m sorry, Clark. I need to go.”

Part 11

Alt-Metropolis – December 1992

“Truth and Justice”

Lois checked her watch again. Her source was twelve minutes late and Bobby had been very clear about the timing of the meet. If she made him wait even five minutes, Bobby had warned, then Gino wouldn’t talk. Lois shivered and pulled her coat collar up around her ears. She glanced beyond the entrance to the darkened alley and knew something bad had happened to her source.

What should she do? She knew where Gino lived, knew where he worked, but she didn’t want to jeopardize him by linking him to the Metro Club’s leak to the press.

“Okay, Lane. Don’t panic,” she whispered out loud. “Focus on Gino and we can figure out what to do next.”

Her feeling of unease grew until Lois couldn’t remain still any longer. She ducked out of the alley and hailed a cab. She instructed the cabbie to head south and sat back in her seat. After only three minutes, Lois felt her distress building. When she felt Gino’s painful presence, she stopped the cabbie, paid him, and got out. As the cab sped away, she took stock of her location and realized she was in the south side, about a block away from the warehouse district. She hauled in a shaky breath.

Just then, Lois heard the rumble of a car. She ducked into a shadowed alcove as headlights turned the corner and a car stopped obliquely at an alley across the street. Her breath caught in her throat as she saw the leader of the Metro gang and his son, Johnny, get out of the car.

She watched in dismay as Johnny hauled Gino from the trunk and dumped him into the alley. The gangsters then dropped several pieces of paper on top of his prone form and got back into their car. Lois waited until the car had sped away before dashing across

the street.

The anguish she'd felt doubled until Lois could hardly breathe. She recoiled as soon as she realized what they'd done to him, but kept moving. She was his only hope for survival. Lois found Gino lying on the ground, panting and whimpering as he cradled both arms against his chest. The smell of blood, along with the gruesome images of his torture and amputations, made her dry heave once, but she forced herself to lift him into a seated position against the alley wall. Somehow the Metro's had figured out Gino had squealed, and they'd taken his hands and tongue in retribution.

Lois reached around him to undo his gag, tearing it into two pieces so that she could apply a tourniquet to his wrists. Gino tried to speak, but all she heard was a series of animalistic grunts and a gurgle of blood. Looking around, Lois understood that the papers were pictures of Gino's family. Using the pictures on his lap, she figured out what he was trying to say, but she had to get him to think the information she needed to know. Lois picked up a picture of his wife and held it in front of his face.

"Gino. Do the Metros already have your family?"

He shook his head frantically and groaned again. Lois shook his shoulders and forced him to look at her. "Are they at home?" No. "Do the Metros know where they are?" He gave her a moan of misery and a nod. "Give me the address."

Gino grunted and gargled angrily and Lois had to turn his face back to hers. "I know you can't speak, but I still need to know. Blink the street number at me and then try to say the street name as slowly as possible." He confirmed the information Lois needed and she pulled an image of the house from his head. She repeated it back to him and his eyes widened with hope. "221 Fullerton? In the Hobbs Bay district, right." Lois looked around and then placed a hand on Gino's shoulder. "I'll be right back."

Lois dashed back across the street to a pay phone and dialed Henderson.

"Henderson, the Metros are going after Maria Petrelli and her two sons." Gino gurgled into the silence as Lois listened to Henderson's reply. "No, they're not at home. Gino says they're hiding out at 221 Fullerton Court. Yes, that's the Hobbs Bay district. It's a yellow house with a tall spruce in front."

"Hurry. The Metros know where they are and I figure they've only got about ten minutes." Gino whimpered again. "No, I need to get Gino to a hospital or he's going to bleed to death. Send an ambulance to 5th Street at Accordia Avenue. I'll take care of him. The number here is 555-4092."

She slammed the receiver down and ran back to Gino. Lois stuffed the pictures into her purse before helping Gino to his feet. He groaned again. "Don't worry, Henderson's got a guy only a few minutes away. He'll get them out."

Lois grunted as she shouldered Gino's weight and started toward the corner. By the time they'd shuffled the hundred feet to the street sign, they could hear the ambulance in the distance. The pay phone rang once and then subsided.

Her hunched shoulders relaxed at the sound of Henderson's all-clear signal. She passed the information to Gino and he sagged with relief, almost taking them to the ground. Gino grunted a garbled thank you at her and she shook her head in admiration. He'd been tortured, lost his ability to communicate, almost died, and lost his family in an unthinkable manner, but Gino actually felt lucky.

Score one for humanity.

Alt-Metropolis – July 10, 1997

Lois and Clark climbed out of the cab in front of the Fudge Castle and then they made their way around the outdoor tables to an inconspicuous alley behind the building next door. She turned to scan the street and then opened herself up to what might be hidden in the shadows. She sensed two people, one calm the other scared. Clark held up two fingers and Lois nodded. They walked

into the alley together.

Lois called Gino's name softly and she heard a younger female voice whimper. Lois could see the two people now, Gino and a teenage girl. She didn't know what kind of trouble the girl was in, but she didn't want to scare her away. An empty bottle skittered away as the girl started to bolt, but Gino made a soothing gesture and the girl stayed.

Lois and Clark stopped a few feet away from Gino. "Gino, this is Clark Kent. I'm sure you've heard of him. He is my work partner and a friend."

Gino offered his right hand to Clark and Clark shook his prosthetic limb without giving it a second glance. She regarded Gino in the dimness and was glad to see he was looking fit and happy. Ever since she'd helped save him and his family from the Metros, he'd been one of her best sources. Gino had recovered and instead of leaving Metropolis for a witness protection program somewhere, he and his family had decided to stay. He had worked odd jobs over the years, whatever he could manage with his clumsy prosthetics, but he'd found his calling working with a shelter and rehab center, especially the runaways. Most people generally regarded him as harmless and as such, they opened up to him, telling him of things they were too scared or ashamed to tell anyone else.

Lois placed her hand on Gino's arm and Gino started to talk, then. Although he had learned to announce what sounds he could, his words were still garbled. Lois had always found if she touched Gino, she could understand him easily. Gino was concerned for the girl – a runaway he'd helped through his work at the rehab center – who hadn't been hooked on a drug when they'd met, but given her story, was in danger of using. The girl looked on nervously as he related her tale. Gino told Lois about the reason that he'd called Lois to help. Lois nodded and asked a few follow-up questions before turning to the girl.

To make sure that the girl agreed with Gino's version, Lois repeated Gino's words to ensure she had received the correct message. "Hello, Trisha. My name is Lois Lane. I'm a reporter for the Daily Planet. Gino and I have known each other for many years. I know you have no reason to trust me, but I'm here to help you in any way I can. Gino tells me that you were part of a group, young ladies with an interest in the supernatural, which seems to have been targeted. Can you tell me about it?"

Trisha had watched the interaction between them and Lois could tell that she was impressed that Lois understood so much of what Gino had said. But she still hesitated. Lois knew it was easy to talk to a man no one could understand, tell him her problems, but she didn't know anything about Lois. To the girl, she was an unknown woman.

Gino nodded in Lois's direction. "Go on," he encouraged.

"It was nothing, just a bunch of girls getting together with an old carnie to play Ouija, learn how to palm read, and use tarot cards. One of the girls was a couple of years older than me. Bev disappeared and then we heard that her dad had died of a stroke. A week later, Sharon didn't show up and when I found out that her mom and step-dad had died in a gang-shoot out. I knew something was wrong. I tried to explain it to my mom..." Trisha swallowed hard and angrily swiped away tears, "but she wouldn't listen."

Lois looked at the girl with understanding. "I'm sorry to hear that your mother died in a car accident and that your brother is missing. I'm going to help you find him, if I can. Can you tell me about the men that came to your house before you ran away?"

Trisha took a deep breath. "My mom and I had argued again and I was angry. I was going to run away, so I filled my backpack and climbed from my bedroom window onto the branches of the tree outside. That's when I saw an old, dark sedan pull up to the house. I decided to hide, so I climbed up onto the roof and sat in the shadowed space next to my dormer window."

"Did you see them? Who got out of the car, Trisha?"

“Two white men in suits, both of them older. One had a short haircut and a mustache; the other was wearing a suit and this weird sort of turban. They came to the door and talked with my mom for a minute. She let them into the house. I heard my brother yell once, and then nothing, no sounds, until our car pulled out of the garage.”

“So your mom and brother left in your car. What about the men.”

“No. I mean, yes, they did leave, but not like you think. My mom was in the passenger seat with her eyes closed and my brother was laying down in the back seat. The old guy with the mustache was driving the car.”

“And where was the man in the turban?”

“In the house. He was looking for me. When he came into my room, he searched it for a while and I could hear him muttering to himself.”

“Did he say anything that gave you clues to who he was or where they took your family?”

“He swore a lot and then just mumbled, “She’s gone. Dammit, I hate intuitives.” A few minutes later, he left. As soon as I could, I ran away. Two days later, I found out mom had d...died in a car wreck. No one has seen David since. What? What do you know?”

Lois’s spine stiffened and her heart skipped a beat when Trisha had said the word ‘intuitives’. She had only heard one person describe psychics that way – Klaus Mensa. Lois ignored Trisha’s question and opened her purse to retrieve her wallet. She pulled out an old photograph and her penlight. She held the picture out and clicked on her light.

“This is a really old photograph, but did the man with the mustache look like this?”

Lois held her breath while Trisha squinted at the picture.

Please, Lois thought, please say no.

Slowly, Trisha nodded. “Yeah, I think so. He had the same grim expression, same haircut and mustache. Do you know him?”

Lois took the photo back and stood staring at it, trembling. She felt Clark place a supportive hand on her back. After a moment, she nodded. “Yes, I know him. Gino, will you take Trisha back to the shelter until we can sort this out? Clark and I are going to the twelfth precinct. Contact Inspector Henderson, if you need us.”

Trisha grabbed Lois’s hand. “I don’t know if I’m psychic or not, but I can tell that you know something. Tell me! Who were those men? Who killed my mom?”

Lois smiled sadly. “The same men who killed my mom and sister. I think I can find your brother, but I need some time to track them down.”

Clark glanced at Lois as he hailed a cab. She had declined to fly with him to the police station, stating that she needed a little time to think. So Clark had done his best to wait, giving her the space she needed.

When they had first left Gino and Trisha, Lois had turned silently to him and she had fallen into his outstretched arms. He was inexperienced with interpreting her emotions, but he definitely knew that she had felt shocked and dismayed, and then she’d been overcome with grief. As she had pulled away from him, he’d felt her anger, a spike of fury that made him glad that it wasn’t directed at him. After that, he had felt nothing. She had shut him out.

The twelfth precinct was just a few blocks away when Clark felt Lois squeeze his hand. He lifted their clasped hands to his lips.

<I’m here if you want to talk,> he offered.

Lois smiled. <Thank you. I needed to sort things through first.>

<You think your father is involved, don’t you? That was a picture of your family that you showed to Trisha.>

Again, he felt a spike of anger. <Yes. I do. I hope not, but the pieces fit.>

She shifted to spoken language then. “When MEPWar was first started, most of the other people were tested offsite under the guise of a university study. That way, he or she could participate without a security clearance and if the individual tested out, go back to their normal lives without having debriefings. Those that joined MEPWar were few and far between. Most were young and I already knew that none of us had any other immediate family. What I hadn’t put together is that most of our family members had died just before our enlistment.”

“I remembered hearing something about an uptick in missing teenagers whose parents had died when Trisha mentioned Bev’s and Sharon’s caretakers dying.”

Lois nodded. “The police went at the problem from the wrong direction. The girls weren’t running away because their families had died. Their families were dying because someone wanted those teenagers to disappear.”

“I bears an eerie resemblance to our celebrity murder victims, too, don’t you think.”

The cab pulled up in front of the police station and after paying the cabbie, Lois and Clark got out. Clark motioned for Lois to go ahead of him and placed his hand on the small of her back and ushered her through the front door. Lois smiled at him.

“And the man in the turban?”

Lois stopped at the front desk and her expression darkened. “Klaus Mensa, or as his colleagues started to call him, Fat Head. Inspector Henderson, please,” Lois requested from the desk clerk.

At Clark’s quizzical look, Lois smiled. “I’ve kept my eye on Mensa since his dishonorable discharge from the U.S. Army. He later started a movement called Dynomics, where intellectuals could meet. The goal was to train their minds, trying to access the underutilized potential of the human brain. Most of the group gave it up when the police got an anonymous tip that Mensa was planning something illegal. Most members had claimed that they had been ‘under his spell’ and denied knowing about his criminal plans. It didn’t stop them from dividing up the groups’ money and holdings, though. Mensa got out of prison in May.”

“Anonymous tip, huh? Does that mean you know where to find him?”

“I do. My father, too, if they’re not together. My father had a private practice for a while and then later concentrated on sports medicine. His research turned to robotics, but his project got shut down and his funding dried up a few months ago. Something to do with a division of Lex Corp and some rather unorthodox enhancements to a group of boxers.”

Clark shook his head. “Have I told you how glad I am that I’m not on your bad side?”

“I’ll second that sentiment,” Henderson said from behind them. “How can I help you two tonight?”

“Henderson. With luck, we might be able to close more than one investigation tonight. How fast can you get a warrant for Fat Head? We have a witness that connects him to the disappearance of several children and multiple murders. This may make our celebrity murder case plan obsolete, too.”

“Best news I’ve heard all night. Give me fifteen.”

Part 12

Alt-Metropolis – June 1990

“The News Business”

“So I told him that I couldn’t keep working for a sleazebag with a reputation for third-rate editing at a fourth-rate paper. Then I kneed him in the groin and walked out.”

“Oh, Star! You didn’t! The South Side Gazette isn’t a bad paper for one of the small weeklies. I’m not sure your boss is as bad as you say. You have a tendency to see the worst in men.”

“You weren’t there, Lois. He definitely had it coming. He didn’t just make a pass, he was crude.”

Lois shook her head. This was the third time Star had quit

because of sexual harassment issues. Lois didn't blame her for distrusting men. After Lois had shut down MEPWar, Mr. Turner had placed Star with a foster family. It hadn't worked out well. Nor had the next placement, or the next. In the foster care system, Star's opinion of people, especially men, had continued to deteriorate.

When Star turned eighteen, Lois had rented an apartment off-campus and offered to be roommates. Star had moved in and Lois had helped her finally graduate from high school, start college, and get her first real job. It hadn't been easy, Lois was fiercely independent, but they understood each other in a way no one else could. Star had called them the founding members of Club Weirdo.

"What will you do now? Have you decided to give up on your major? I thought you wanted to work in the news business."

"I do. What you've done over the years, and your friendship, has really inspired me, Lois. I'd love to work with you, but there's no opening at the Daily Planet in what I really want to do."

"What's that?"

"Gossip. I want to work the society pages."

Star laughed at Lois's sour expression. "It's still the news business, Lois. I just don't have what it takes to claw my way into the good ol' boys club of investigative journalism."

"Gossip? Oh, Star. It'd be better to work in Sports or Travel and Leisure. Wouldn't you rather travel?"

"No way! I love the glitz, the parties, the fake tans, and insincerity. My new friend, Angie Cox, works as a personal assistant for Lex Luthor and she has access to the best gossip about the celebrities and politicians attending some of Luthor's social events. It sounds like a psychic's playground."

Lois gave her friend a stern look. "Star, it's not right to spy."

"Are you kidding? It's totally our job to spy. You do it all the time! You expose the bad guy secrets and I'll expose juicy tidbits about bad boys."

Lois rolled her eyes.

"I just applied for a position at the Metropolis Star. Their gossip columnist is getting ready to retire and I'm hoping that my connections here will get me an interview there."

Star gave her a knowing look and offered her pinky. Lois smiled and they hooked their pinkies together. "Well, I suppose if you can't work at the Planet, it had better be the Star. I'll talk to Cat Grant. She and the Star's gossip columnist have a good report. Psycho Freak Promise."

Star hugged her friend. "Thanks, Lois. I knew I could count on you."

Alt-Metropolis – July 10, 1997

The taxi driver pulled up at the address Lois had given him. When the driver saw six police cruisers surrounding the perimeter and a circling helicopter, he glanced back at them. "Is this the right place, lady?"

Lois quickly paid him and got out of the cab, Clark close behind. She took in the scene before her. Most police officers were crouching behind their cars, guns drawn. One officer lay unconscious or dead just outside the front door of the laboratory and another was being treated by a medic for a gunshot wound in his foot.

Lois and Clark shared a glance. "I'll be right back," Clark said. "I need to change my clothes."

Lois nodded and ignoring a junior officer's warning to stay back, she ducked under the police tape and walked up to Henderson as Superman joined them. "What happened?" she demanded.

"Lane. Superman, I'm glad you're here. Mensa's inside, but we can't get close enough to get inside without endangering the hostages. We think that Detective Monahan is out cold – the door opened in a blur and slammed into him and then mysteriously

closed just as fast. Higgins over there swears his gun turned on him and fired by itself. I watched. It was all he could do to force the muzzle away from any vital targets."

Lois looked at Clark, who said, "Dynamomics?"

Lois nodded and asked, "Can you wrap up his head before he can think to stop you?"

In response, Superman disappeared and reappeared carrying a long roll of heavy-duty foil. He accepted a pair of handcuffs from a bemused Inspector Henderson. "Be right back."

Two seconds later, Superman opened the front door and ushered a struggling Mensa through. Mensa continued to tussle with Superman, swearing at the top of his lungs while his misshapen head reflected the helicopter searchlight and the flashing blue and red lights like a disco ball. After handing Mensa off to a group of police officers, Superman disappeared back into the building and a team of officers ran in after him. A few minutes later, Superman exited the building again leading a young boy and two teenage girls. An older man followed.

Sam Lane walked up to another police officer and held out his hands. He morosely took in the scene as he allowed himself to be cuffed and when he saw Lois staring at him, dropped his gaze to the ground.

Superman stepped up next to Lois. "He was tied to a chair and gagged in a back room. Apparently, he tried to rescue the children after he learned how Trisha's mother died."

Lois nodded and threaded her way through police and paramedics toward her father. She stopped a few feet from him and waited for him to look up. Sam Lane avoided her gaze and Lois steeled herself for the worst. She had to ask; she needed to know.

"Did you kill them? Did you kill mom and Lucy?"

General Sam Lane's bloodshot eyes snapped up to meet hers. "No!" he exclaimed. "No. That was Mensa. I had no idea it wasn't an accident until now."

Lois regarded him and then held out her hand. She knew her father understood her unspoken request. She wanted the truth, but she wouldn't take it from him by force. Sam didn't hesitate. He placed his cuffed hands on top of hers and met her gaze. Lois closed her eyes and then nodded.

"What about the celebrity brides? Where are Lolita Dolcheck, Karina Barnhold, and Mary LeBraun?"

"There were no others involved. I don't know these women. Who are they?"

"Another case I'm working on. I thought they were connected." Lois released his hands, stepped back, and nodded to the arresting officer before looking at her father again.

"I'm sorry, Princess."

"I know, Daddy."

Lois wrapped her arms around herself as the officer closed the door. Sam Lane's eyes never left his daughter's until the police car pulled away and turned the corner.

"Are you okay, Lois?"

Lois turned and threw her arms around Clark's shoulders. She held him, shaking for a moment before she could respond. "Yes. He didn't do it. He was a terrible husband and an even worse father, but he didn't kill them. He had a horrific way of showing it, but he actually did love us."

Lois released Clark and looked over at the rescued hostages. "Only the three kids."

Clark shook his head. "I looked. There were no signs that anyone else had been there. I even speed read through Mensa's files," he added in a whisper.

Lois's eyes widened with interest. "Have I told you how much I love your powers? I wish I could have read through them myself. Can you share anything with me that jumped out at you?"

"A few things. There were copies of his research from MEPWar, files on the members of Dynamomics, files on the girls,

Trisha included. He also had a financial file that listed ‘Draden Enterprises’ as his main sponsor, and a file that contained a chemical formula with a one word heading in Greek, ‘Oracle’. Does any of that mean anything to you?”

“Draden Enterprises was Mensa’s original sponsor for MEPWar. It came up again during my Lex Luthor investigation. It turned out to be a shell company associated with several scientific projects, but I never found anyone else associated with it.”

“And ‘Oracle’?”

“‘Oracle’ was a drug that Mensa was working on when I first started investigating him. The drug would allow him to implant instructions along with a trigger word in the subconscious of a psychic’s brain. With it, Mensa could use someone like me to do whatever he wanted and all the while, I would be unaware. My guess is that he wanted to continue with his criminal aspirations using these girls as his pawns.”

“There were no files on the celebrities, either the murder victims or the missing spouses.”

Lois smiled and shook her head. “No, my father didn’t know anything about the celebrity murders or the missing brides. My instincts have never failed me before and I was so sure that these disappearances were connected somehow. It looks like our engagement is still on.”

Inspector Henderson approached. “You might want to hold off on that engagement, Lane.”

“Why?”

Henderson ignored her question and turned to Clark instead. “Thanks for your help. I’ve been working with the commissioner on starting a unit that would be specially trained to deal with some of this supernatural stuff that Lane attracts, but I haven’t gotten very far yet.”

“Hey!”

“Also, I wanted to give you a heads-up. The Kryptonite from today’s bank robbery has gone missing.”

“What!”

Henderson nodded. “Those little green stones are the greasiest items we’ve ever held.”

Lois placed a hand on Clark’s arm. “I’ll find it,” she vowed. “And when I do, we’re going to wrap it up and send it straight into the sun. Do you have any leads, Bill?”

“Not yet, but it’s an awful coincidence that it’s the same piece of Kryptonite that keeps showing up. We’ve already suspended three officers from Evidence and Property on corruption charges. Lieutenant Cox discovered it was missing, this time from my office.”

“Luthor’s bullet?” Clark asked weakly.

Henderson nodded. “We’ve got a dirty cop in deep.”

Lois’s eyes glazed over at this information and she started threading things together. <Deep at the precinct. That’s Luthor’s M.O. Did we miss one of Luthor’s lieutenants? How does Luthor still have access to the police and Luthor’s funds? Through Draden Enterprises? How is Luthor orchestrating it? Draden. Kryptonite. Draden Enterprises. Draden... Wait, it was *Angelica* Draden. Angelica. Just like Angelica Cox. Lieutenant Cox... No, it couldn’t be.>

<What, Lois? What is it?>

Lois came out of her ruminations and turned to Henderson. “Watch Lieutenant Cox. He has a connection to Luthor through his wife. Also, we need Warden Myers to move Lex Luthor to solitary and deny him any visitors for the next few days. No mail, either. Check the prison registers to see who’s been visiting Luthor, specifically a tall, dark-complexioned woman. If so, then I think we can catch more than one criminal with this Kryptonite bullet.”

Part 13

Alt-Metropolis – January 1993

“World Travels”

Lois was just setting the telephone receiver down when she heard a frantic knocking at her door.

“Lois?” Star called. “Lois, open up!”

Lois unlocked her door and opened it to see her friend rush through and grab her arm. Star’s eyes scanned over Lois’s body and then pulled her into a tight hug.

“Oh, my gosh! I was so worried. I was sitting in my apartment planning ways to get Mel Gibson to answer my calls for an interview while he’s in Metropolis. He’s been dodging my attempts to contact him in person, by phone, by letter, by telegram... Anyway, I was sitting there and I suddenly heard you cry out. It was a frightening sound. Are you okay?”

“Star, slow down. I’m fine.”

Lois accepted another tight hug from her and then extricated her arms from Star’s grip and led her to the sofa. They sat down and Lois patted Star’s hand. “I’m fine. Nothing has happened. I haven’t even been in a dangerous situation for a week.” Lois sighed. “It’s actually been a little boring.”

Star breathed a sigh of relief and lay back on the sofa cushions. She tapped her left temple. “I’ve got to get this thing fixed. I could have sworn you yelled out a name. You sounded terrified and in pain.”

“A name?” Lois asked. “What name?”

“Luthor.”

Lois’s back stiffened and she blinked in surprise before standing up and walking toward the window. Star sat back up, her eyes narrowing. “What just happened? I know that look. Saying Luthor’s name means something more to you than just getting an invitation to the White Orchid Ball.”

Lois turned around, her bottom lip between her teeth. She looked at Star, assessing, and then crossed the room again to sit down beside her. She couldn’t share all the information; that would put her friend in danger, but it would be so nice to share this secret.

“Late last night I got a pretty solid tip about a shadowy criminal organization run by someone called ‘the Boss’. The tipped linked the Boss to gun running in the Congo and numerous other criminal activities in Metropolis – murder, extortion, drugs, and prostitution. I just booked my ticket to Brazzaville to follow the gun running lead.”

“What does that have to do with Luthor?”

“My source linked the Boss with someone high up at LexCorp.”

“Are you sure about this, Lois?”

“As sure as I can be. The tip came from one of my most reliable sources and I don’t have any reason to doubt his intel.”

“But I’ve been to Lex Tower and to various LexCorp parties, Lois. You know my friend, Angie. She has given me dozens of tips about the executives at LexCorp, but I’ve never gotten even a hint of anything illegal. She’s also married to a cop, so I would think she would know if something criminal was going on. It’s so improbable that the third richest man in the world wouldn’t know if one of his trusted people was like some gangster in a godfather movie.”

“Star, you and I are living, breathing proof that nothing is impossible. What better cover than hiding behind a businessman and philanthropist? Angie probably doesn’t know. No, this is the best lead I’ve had on ‘the Boss’ since I first heard the name. If this tip pans out, the Boss would make Al Capone look like a middle school bully. And my instincts are telling me that this tip is the key to busting my investigation wide open.”

“Well, if it is true, then isn’t it better to stay here to find evidence? Why go all the way to Africa?”

“Because my information on the Boss isn’t conclusive. If someone is running guns to the Congo, then gathering evidence at the source will lead me back to the person in charge. I want to make sure that I’ve got everything I need to break the story. Think

about it! If I can prove this, I'll expose one of history's biggest criminals of all time. We're talking Pulitzer, for sure."

Star closed her eyes for a second, shook her head and then opened them again, her face brightening. "I can ask Angie to keep her eyes open for suspicious behavior at Lex Corp. Maybe she could find the evidence for you! Oh, I'd love to snoop around Lex Corp's executive offices and boardroom. Lex Luthor lives above them, you know? I've only heard about his gorgeous, neoclassical penthouse apartment, but I'd love to get a full tour someday. Did you know he has an antiques collection that put's the Metropolitan Museum of Fine Art to shame?"

Lois took Star's hand and shook it gently to get her friend's attention back to the present. "No! Absolutely not, Star. I don't want anyone at all to know anything about my trip to the Congo or my suspicions about the Boss."

"But, Lois, if she could help..."

Lois shook her head. "No, Star. Not a word. I'll only be gone for a few days. I need you to keep this to yourself." She held out her hand, her pinky extended. "Promise me?"

Star's forehead crinkled with worry and then she sighed resignedly. "Psycho Freak promise."

Alt-Metropolis – Thursday, July 17, 1997

"Everything seems to be in place." Lois checked off a list of last minute preparations. "Star's column caused the huge media furor as we had hoped. There's no way that the murderer isn't aware of the time and place of our wedding tomorrow."

"Lois and I have tried to be very conspicuous this week as a couple, dining out, shopping for clothes and flowers, and renting my tux," Clark added. "The paparazzi have been around every corner and the tabloids have been printing their usual 'stories' speculating on everything from Lois's mental health to our secret alien baby. It looks suspiciously like Jake, the Alligator Man from Long Beach, Washington, if anyone was wondering."

Perry grumbled about 'those yellow journalism rags' and Lois smiled. The media attention this week had been a pain in the butt, but what really annoyed her was that the murderer hadn't tried to attack either her or Clark yet. Given that they had announced that they would honeymoon at an 'undisclosed and inaccessible location,' she was sure that their engagement would flush him out. She mentally crossed her fingers; they still had another shot at it tomorrow.

"We've got the county courthouse set up for tomorrow with surveillance equipment," Sorenson said. "Are you sure you don't want a couple of undercover cops to attend the ceremony? I still think we should have more uniformed officers patrolling the outside for crowd control."

"No," Lois answered. "If there are too many police, it might scare him off. The idea is to entice the murderer by keeping it low-key. Inspector Henderson will be there. Along with our own preparations and special advantages, that should be enough."

"I hear congratulations are in order, Bill," Perry said. "Lois tells me that you were able to nab another of Luthor's henchmen yesterday."

"Angelica Cox. She was Lex Luthor's personal assistant. She was cleared of wrongdoing during our original investigation because no one could prove that she was personally involved with any of Luthor's illegal operations. Her husband, Lieutenant Douglass Cox, has been a distinguished member of my force for a number of years, which gave her claims of innocence legitimacy. We were wrong, though. He hoodwinked us. Cox has been one of Luthor's best sources in my department."

"It wasn't until I connected Angelica Draden of Draden Enterprises to the Angie Cox that worked for Luthor that the pieces slid into place," Lois said. "Lieutenant Cox took the Kryptonite bullet from Henderson's office and Mrs. Cox has been communicating with Luthor since he went to prison."

"We isolated Luthor as Lois suggested and then set up a sting for Mrs. Cox at the prison. She showed up and we arrested her, but unfortunately, she didn't have the Kryptonite on her."

"What happened to it?"

Henderson shook his head. "We couldn't find it. We searched, but Mrs. Cox said that it disappeared from a locked drawer two nights ago. As far as we can tell, she was telling the truth."

"Unless it was in a lead-lined container, it wasn't in her office, home, or in any buildings belonging to Draden Enterprises. I checked," Clark added.

"It'll show up sooner or later. If our murderer didn't get his hands on it, then some other criminal will try to use it against you."

Lois and Clark shared a look. "Clark and I suspect that it may find it's way into the courthouse tomorrow. We've taken precautions."

"Well," Sorenson said, "You three have had a very productive week already. First you helped us arrest Klaus Mensa and rescue three young hostages and then added another nail to Lex Luthor's coffin. Are you sure you want to try to flush out a serial killer tomorrow?"

Lois looked incredulously at Chief Sorenson. "Of course." She sighed in annoyance. "I still feel like the Kryptonite is tied to Mensa and the celebrity murderer somehow."

"We found the financial link between Luthor and Mensa, but there doesn't seem to be anything connecting them with the celebrity murders."

Lois grimaced in frustration. "Not with Luthor, no. The murders and disappearances have the same pattern with Mensa's 'recruiting' method, though. And then there's 'Oracle.' I understand why Fat Head wanted the drug, but where was his supply? I don't think he would have started to collect his victims without having some on hand."

"It seems like a stretch, Lois."

"I know, but there's something..."

No one seemed to have anything to add to Lois's query. After a brief silence, Perry stood and clapped his hands together. "Well, if the murderer takes the bait tomorrow, I suppose we'll find out if there's a link. Okay, folks, that's it. I need to pick up my monkey suit from the shop before it closes. I'll see you two," he pointed to Lois and Clark, "tomorrow at five o'clock sharp. I get to give the bride away."

Lois hugged Perry and then she and Clark left his office. As they stepped out of the room, Lois stopped as the camera flash bulbs started to flicker. A group of fans, tabloid journalists, and photographers were gathered on the street just outside the front door. Clark touched Lois's elbow to get her attention. He tipped his head toward a side hallway. She eagerly followed him away from the mob outside, hoping that he had another way to leave the building.

Clark stopped mid-hallway and looked both ways before turning the knob on an unmarked door. Lois heard the crunch of the lock and crooked an eyebrow at Clark. He smiled sheepishly and then ushered her into an empty office. He walked straight to the only window and bent the blinds aside to look outside. He smiled at Lois and extended his hand.

<Fly with me?>

<Anywhere.>

Clark scooped her into her arms.

"You're not going to change into the Superman suit?"

"No. I want you to fly with me – the real me. Stay close. I'm going to go fast."

Lois blinked a sudden tear from her eye and wrapped her arms around Clark's neck. She laid her head on his chest and then gasped as she felt her stomach drop. Almost instantly, they slowed to a stop above the clouds. She opened her eyes to see the setting sun casting an orange-tinged glow all around them.

Lois sighed. “It’s beautiful, Clark, and so peaceful.” She reached up and brushed a light kiss on his cheek. “I needed this. Thank you.”

Clark kissed the top of her head and held her close with one arm. With the other hand, he reached into his pants pocket and fiddled with the little box again. It had been burning a hole there all day and although he knew what he wanted to say, he was still nervous. He’d known for a week that Lois was his best friend, his soul mate, and he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. He wanted to make the ceremony tomorrow real. He wanted Lois to be his wife.

“Lois?”

“Hmm?”

“I’ve been thinking about tomorrow’s ceremony and there’s one change that I’d like to make to our plans.”

Lois looked at him. “What is it?”

Clark pulled away from Lois and knelt down in mid air, giving her a place to sit on one knee. Lois sat down and hooked her foot around Clark’s leg while he pulled the box from his pocket. He showed her the ring box and flipped it open. It was a modest diamond ring, brilliant cut and flawless. It was dazzling and untarnished in the light, but showed signs of age in the worn band of gold.

“It was my great-grandmother’s ring,” he said. “My mother always wanted my wife to wear it.”

“Oh, Clark. It’s beautiful. I would be honored. I’ll take good care of it for you.”

Clark smiled and placed his hand on Lois’s cheek. “You misunderstand me, Lois. I want my *wife* to wear it.”

Lois’s eyes snapped up to his and his smile softened. “I know it seems sudden, but it would be *my* honor if you would agree to marry me tomorrow, not to catch a killer, but for love.”

Lois opened her mouth and then closed it. She tried again. “I ... I know you love me. How could I not? But marriage, Clark... Are you sure?”

“You’re the one person that supports me, encourages me, and comforts me. You love me unconditionally. You are my best friend. It’s the only kind of relationship that I ever wanted, the kind that my parents had.”

Clark stared into Lois’s eyes. There was no doubt that Lois knew he meant what he said. Even so, Clark wasn’t completely surprised to hear her little voice of doubt whispering from her mind to his. *<The other Lois...>*

Clark immediately shook his head. “No, not the other Lois. You. The other Lois was simply a reminder of what I had lost. You and I share a connection that I will never have with another person in *any* universe. You are my Lois.”

Lois smiled tremulously and nodded. “Yes, Clark. I will marry you.”

The brilliance of Clark’s smile eclipsed the setting sun. He took the ring from the box and held it steady as Lois offered her left hand to him. He slipped it on her finger and then lifted her hand to kiss it quickly before wrapping Lois in his arms. Lois laughed out loud and the joy that he felt from her made him spin through the air and whoop with delight. After they finished several barrel rolls, they gently drifted into a slow rotation, their feet skimming the tops of the clouds.

Clark looked at Lois again, her eyes shining, tear tracks trailing down her cheeks. He held her face with both hands and wiped them away before kissing her gently to seal the deal. He started to pull away, but Lois had other plans. She grabbed the lapels of his jacket and hauled him into an insistent kiss that let him know exactly how she felt about him.

They didn’t return to earth for a very long time.

Lois’s mind was still in the clouds; her body humming as she

absently turned the corner of her street. Clark had dropped her off in the alley next to her building. She hadn’t wanted to say goodnight and only the lure of a weeklong honeymoon persuaded her to finally let him go. She absently noted the lack of paparazzi and her smile widened as she saw Star sitting on her stoop, a videocassette and paper bag in her hands.

“Did I forget something? Did we talk about having a movie night?”

“Nope. Bachelorette party. I got your message.”

“Star, I didn’t send you a message about a bachelorette party.”

Star stood and tapped her temple with a finger as she showed her the cassette and a quart of ice cream. “Sure you did. You told me to pick up “Mission: Impossible” and some rocky road ice cream and meet you at your place at seven.” Star looked at her watch. “You’re a bit late.”

Lois’s grin spread. “I was with Clark. I must have lost track of time.”

“Of course you were. I should have known.”

“Yes. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but the next twenty-one hours and forty-two minutes is going to be the worst torture I’ve ever had to endure.”

“Even with Mensa and Luthor in your past? That is saying something. Girl, you have got it bad.”

“I know.” Lois sighed. “How about you? Are you ready for tomorrow?”

Star stood and handed the bag containing the ice cream to Lois. “Just about. There are only a couple of things to take care of tonight and then on to ‘happily ever after.’”

Part 14

Alt-Smallville – June 1972

“From the Beginning”

“Clark?”

Martha Kent shaded her eyes and looked out past the barn and the wheat field toward the grove of trees that lined the creek bordering their property. When she didn’t see any movement, she called again.

“Clark!”

It was unusual for Clark to disappear so near to dinnertime, but it was the early days of summer. Clark was an exceptional boy who had loved kindergarten, but he’d been spending more and more time alone as the summer went on. She knew that she shouldn’t be worried; their farm and the surrounding countryside held endless fascination for a six year-old boy. However, Clark wasn’t exactly a typical six year-old boy, either and she couldn’t stop her heart from beating just a little faster whenever he stayed out just a little longer than usual.

Deciding not to let her worries carry her away, Martha jogged across the farmyard toward the barn. It was clear from the clang, clanging behind the door that Jonathan was working on trying to fix his old tractor again. She pushed open the door to see her husband’s legs sticking out from under the tractor, a Johnny Cash song blaring on the radio. She turned the sound down and then stepped next to her husband’s legs. She laughed when she heard Jonathan whistle.

“Wow. Now there’s a sight for sore eyes. I’ll trade “Ring of Fire” for those legs anytime.”

“Oh, Jonathan. You’re such a flirt. Are you trying to butter me up for something?”

Jonathan slid out from under the tractor and sat up, a big grin on his face. “Maybe. Is it workin’?”

Martha squatted down and gave him a lingering kiss. Jonathan hummed in appreciation before grabbing a rag to wipe his hands. “Did you come out just to kiss me or is dinner ready?”

Martha laughed. “Dinner is almost ready. I called Clark, but he hasn’t come back to the house yet.”

“Martha, he’s a boy on summer vacation. I saw him heading

toward the creek about an hour ago. His stomach will drive him home soon.”

“I know, Jonathan. I just can’t help worrying.”

Jonathan stood up and walked to the door of the barn. He reached up high and grabbed a short rope attached to a big, brass bell. He rang it several times before he let it fall silent. “That’ll bring him.”

Martha and Jonathan walked out into the farmyard and turned toward the grove of trees again. After another moment, they saw a small figure drop from one of the big oak branches. Jonathan chuckled and patted his wife on the shoulder before going back into the barn to clean up.

Martha continued to watch the wheat grasses ripple as her young son made his way through the crop toward the house. She smiled when she heard his young, sweet voice carry across the farmyard.

Clark approached the house at a quick walk, pausing occasionally to swing a long stick at dandelion fuzz in the early evening sun. Martha’s smile broadened when she heard him laugh and then faded a little when she heard him talking to himself.

“If you liked climbing those trees, wait until we go to the big willow tree that grows by the pond. We can swing on the branches into the middle and then drop in. The water is still cold from the spring melt. It’s the best!”

Martha waited until he’d passed the vegetable patch before interrupting what seemed to be a very interesting conversation with ... no one.

“Clark? Whom are you talking to?”

Clark looked up and smiled at his mother. “My friend.”

Martha looked toward the wheat field. “Your friend? Where did he go?”

“No, mama. Not *he*. She! It’s my invisible friend, Lolo! She lives in the city and has never climbed a big oak tree before. I took her up the one we chose for the tree house. She thinks it’s perfect.”

“Oh.” Martha thought for a minute wondering if she should be worried about her son’s invisible friend. “How long have you been friends with Lolo?”

Clark shrugged. “A while. She’s the best. She plays with me and is very smart. Someday, she is going to make the world a better place. I want to be just like her.”

“She sounds wonderful, Clark.”

“Uh huh. And when we grow up, I’m going to marry her.”

“Marry? Aren’t you a little young to be thinking about marriage, Clark?”

Clark shrugged. “She’s my best friend.”

“Well, I can’t argue with you wanting to marry your best friend.” Martha decided to play along. She knelt down next to Clark and showed him her left hand. Her diamond engagement ring sparkled in the afternoon sunlight as she pulled it from her finger and handed it to Clark. He took it reverently and held it up to inspect it.

“It’s beautiful.”

Martha nodded. “It was my grandmother’s ring. When you get married, I’ll give it to you, if you want, so that you can give it to ...”

“Lolo,” Clark finished softly. “Thank you, Mama.”

“Yes, Lolo. Best say goodbye now. It’s time to wash up for dinner.”

“Okay. Bye Lolo.”

Clark handed the ring back to his mother before giving the air next to him a little wave. Then, he skipped up the stairs to the farmhouse. Martha shook her head and decided not to worry. Lots of children had imaginary friends. She was sure that he’d grow out of it and be just fine.

Alt-Metropolis – Friday, July 18, 1997

“What in the blazes could be keeping him?” Perry turned to

James Olson. “Where did Clark say he was going?”

James shrugged. “Just that Lois had a question for him and that he’d be right back.”

“Maybe he’s responding to a call for help,” Cat offered. “Star is with Lois and no one else is in the building.”

A few more minutes passed and Perry checked his watch again. It was now five minutes past their planned start time. He looked at Henderson. “How long are we going to wait before we decide that something has gone wrong?”

“I don’t think that both Clark and Lois would be a ‘no show’ for the ceremony unless something has gone wrong. I’d say we’ve waited long enough. I’ll have my men check the building.” Henderson pulled out his walkie-talkie and issued commands to have the building searched for intruders.

“I’ll go check the ladies’ restroom,” Cat offered. “Lois and Star went in there to get changed.”

“I’ll check the men’s room,” James offered.

Perry looked at Alice. “Let’s go check my offices. I’ll be darned if I’m going to let Lois’s plan to catch this murderer turn inside out now.”

Perry and the others had only taken a step when they saw the door to the clerk’s office fly open as Clark staggered in. It was clear that something had gone wrong. His face had a sickly hue and perspiration beaded his forehead.

“Clark!”

Clark stumbled to his knees and gasped his name. “Perry. Kryptonite.”

Perry ran to Clark, Alice and Henderson close behind him.

James and Cat shared a look before sprinting out the other door to look for Lois and Star.

Perry reached Clark and took him by the shoulders. “Where is it Clark?”

Clark tipped his head back and tried to reach behind him. “My back. Lois... She taped it to my back.”

“Lois did this?” Perry shook his head and decided to get the story after the poison was away from Clark. He tried to pull Clark’s jacket away, but it was stiff and heavy. “Clark, I can’t get your jacket off.”

Clark nodded and struggled back to his feet. “Step back,” he said.

Clark dropped his arms back and shrugged his shoulders until the jacket slid to the floor with a ‘thunk’. Perry reached forward and ripped Clark’s dress shirt buttons apart and yanked the fabric down to his waist. Henderson already had a small, lead-lined box ready and Alice moved around Clark to peel the glowing, bullet-shaped rock from his skin. Alice dropped the Kryptonite into the box and Henderson closed it.

Clark sank back to his knees visibly relieved just as James and Cat ran back into the room. Perry turned to ask, “Did you find them?”

“They’re not there,” Cat informed everyone. “Lois’s dress and bag are in the restroom, but there’s no sign of either of them.”

“James,” Alice said. “We need a first aid kit. Perry keeps one in his office bathroom under the sink. Please get it for me. Clark’s back is badly burned.”

James nodded and rushed out of the room.

Henderson kicked at Clark’s tuxedo jacket and caught Perry’s eye. “Lead lined. I guess we know what kind of ‘precautions’ they took against this bullet showing up today.”

Perry shook his head and turned back to Clark, who was struggling to stand up. “Hold on there, son. Let’s get the story and a plan together before we go off, half cocked. You said Lois did this?”

“She wasn’t herself, Perry. It was Lois, but it was like she was in some kind of trance. Her heartbeat was slow and steady, like she was sleeping and her pupils were dilated. I think she might have been drugged.”

Henderson's walkie-talkie crackled to life and he stepped aside to listen and ask questions. When it fell silent, he turned toward the waiting group.

"My guys finished searching the building. They aren't here. One of my undercover officers saw an old, homeless woman leave the back alley pushing a shopping cart, but swears it wasn't them."

"Either of them could have been wearing a disguise."

Henderson nodded. "I'll see if he can find the woman and have him check the cart." Henderson lifted his walkie-talkie again and issued the order as James rushed back into the room, a white box tucked under his arm.

James slid to a stop beside Alice and he opened the box up. Alice took out a burn cream and a bandage while Perry kept asking questions.

"Is there any other reason that Lois might have left with Star, Clark?"

Clark shook his head vehemently.

Henderson returned to the group and knelt down next to Perry. "There's no sign of the homeless woman now."

Clark started to moan. "No. No. I can't. She's not there."

"We'll find her, Clark. They've been missing less than half an hour."

Clark shook his head and rubbed at his head. "You don't understand, Perry. I can sense her here," he said, pointing to his heart, "but I can't hear her. It's like there's a huge hole right here," he said, pointing to his head. "I tried to call for her. Our connection is there, but I can't hear her answer."

Perry's breath caught in his throat at Clark's revelation. He'd known for years that Lois was psychic, but Clark's ability to communicate with her that way was news to him. It was clear by the confusion on Cat and James' faces that they didn't understand what Clark was saying at all, but the lack of surprise on the police inspector's face told Perry everything he needed to know.

Perry caught Henderson's eye. "She's not dead," he surmised, relieved.

"And whoever took her knew," Henderson responded.

Perry lowered his voice and leaned closer to Clark. "Is there any way to mask it?"

"Foil. Aluminum foil," Henderson murmured back. "The way Superman wrapped up Fat Head, right?"

Clark lifted his head, a hopeful look on his face. "Yes."

"But who else would know that? The only ones that know about Lois are right here in this room."

... *a psycho-freak from Club Weirdo*... "Star," Clark gasped. "Star knows."

"Knows what?" Cat asked. "You think Star might be involved with the murderer?"

"Maybe they were both drugged?" James suggested.

Perry didn't know. It didn't make sense. Star was Lois's friend. Could Star have taken her? Or did the murderer take them both? And did Clark's inability to connect with Lois mean the worst? Perry swallowed his fear and said a prayer that they would find them both soon.

Lois came back to consciousness and groaned at the throbbing pain at the base of her skull. She tried to shift her body, but it only took a second to realize that she was bound hand to foot, a gag firmly wrapped around her mouth.

She blinked her eyes and turned her head as far as she could to take in her surroundings. She lay facing the room's windows, a heavy, metal desk between her and the wall. Lois wondered if the dusky light she saw out the window meant that she hadn't been unconscious for long or if a day or more had passed. The room was a moderately sized office space with gray, cinderblock walls and a threadbare indoor-outdoor carpet. Lois groaned and tipped her head back in recognition. She was in her father's old office on the base where she had grown up. Why the hell would she be

here?

Turning her head the other direction, Lois was surprised to see three other figures also bound in the room with her. She recognized the women from their photos – the missing brides. Her relief that they were alive was tempered by their demoralized looks. One woman was asleep on another mattress, one was weeping softly next to her, and the last one, Lolita Dolcheck, sat on the floor looking blankly toward Lois, hopelessness on her face.

Fear settled in when Lois realized that she couldn't sense anyone else in the room. She reached out to Clark and realized with a start that she couldn't hear him, either. She shook her head and felt some sort of cap around her hair, a strap under her chin. No matter how she moved, it didn't come off. Foil? Well, that would explain the block on her abilities. It also limited the list of suspects drastically.

Just then Star entered the room through the only door. "Oh, good. You're awake."

Lois's eyes popped in disbelief before she started grunting at her friend and struggling to get free.

"No. I don't think I will untie you. I can't trust you, yet."

Lois continued to struggle against the ropes binding her hands and feet. She felt the rope holding her hands slip a little, but then the knot tightened and stopped giving. Lois growled at Star, but the woman she thought had been her friend seemed nonplussed by her struggles. Lois watched as Star calmly moved a chair to place it in front of Lois. Star sat down and placed a small wooden box on her lap before looking into Lois's eyes. Lois's eyeballs rolled up and around, trying to see how the cap was attached.

"Yes. I've shielded you, just in case. I noticed last week how you and Clark seemed to have started communicating without words. I never sensed anything from him, but then again, I don't have your power." Star watched Lois continue to struggle, nodding as if answering a question. "I know you, Lois, and I bet you have a ton of questions. The first thing you need to understand is I did this because you were in danger. That's why I took action."

If Lois hadn't been so unnerved by learning that her best girlfriend was a serial murderess, she would have rolled her eyes at the monologue that always seemed to come from the criminals that kidnapped her. She kept her eyes on Star, but she continued to work on loosening her hands from the knotted rope.

"I'm sure you're probably working your way through denial and disbelief," Star continued. "Soon, I'm sure you'll feel betrayed and angry. Until then, I can satisfy your insatiable curiosity. You're my best friend, Lois. I want you to understand why I did this."

Star leaned over to pick up a notebook from the desk. She held it up to Lois. "Do you recognize it? It's Mensa's notebook on 'Dynamomics', the same one that I read all those years ago. Mensa succeeded in learning telekinesis, but did you ever wonder how the study of 'Dynamomics' would affect a psychic? I didn't either, not until I started having prescient visions."

Lois snorted and Star laughed. "It's true! At first, I couldn't make sense of them. I thought it was just my imagination. I didn't start to take them seriously until you didn't come back from the Congo. Remember? I heard you cry out Luthor's name in fear and pain. It was prophecy, the first of many."

Star tossed the notebook back onto the desk. "It took me a couple years after you disappeared to begin understanding the visions I received. Like you, I wanted to use my abilities to help people. I let the premonitions guide me."

Star turned to look at the three women "My visions led me to save these women from their abusive relationships. They each foolishly married a man like the ones that abused my mom; one a mean drunk, another a womanizer who had no intention of keeping his vows, and the last had already been convicted of beating his ex-wife and daughter bloody. My visions showed me

what to do. None of these women deserved to be shackled to men that were going to mistreat them. They won't be missed."

The weeping woman sobbed a little louder at Star's words and Lois stared. Her friend, Star, was a serial killer? How had she not known? Lois shook her head in disbelief, but couldn't help but listen, fascinated by Star's twisted logic.

"If you had seen what I have, Lois, you would agree. I started having visions about you the day you announced your engagement to Clark. One vision showed me your death from a terrible, gruesome illness if you married Clark. In another, you were heartbroken when Clark left you for a woman on a distant planet. I knew I had to do something to save you. After that, I received the visions that showed me what to do to rescue you."

Lois struggled again and lifted her head to look out the window hoping to see Superman coming to her rescue. When Star turned her head to look out of the window, too, Lois was finally able to wriggle a few fingers free from her bindings. She curled into a tighter ball to hide her work to free her hands.

"He's not coming Lois. I made sure of that earlier. The drugs and hypnosis keep you from remembering, but I had you tape Kryptonite to Clark's body before we tied him up in Perry's office."

Lois shook her head as her eyes filled with tears at the thought of Clark dying. It couldn't be. She would never hurt Clark.

Star tilted her head and opened the box on her lap. She removed a hypodermic needle filled with an opaque liquid. She held it up and flicked it to remove the air bubbles. "I knew you wouldn't believe me, so I brought this to show you. This is 'Oracle.' Mensa wasn't very careful with his supply. One small dose and some post-hypnotic suggestions last night was all it took to get you to help me."

Star stood up and set the box down on the desk. She knelt down next to Lois. "I know how much you love Clark. I saw it last week. I know losing him will be hard and I'm so sorry for hurting you. The world still needs you, Lois. It will need you even more now that Superman is dead. I can help you forget him so that you can continue with your life without the pain."

Star leaned forward to administer the drug and Lois was finally able to pull a hand free. She knocked the needle aside and then slammed her open palm into Star's chin. Star cried out and fell backwards, a wig flying off of her head to reveal a tight, foil cap on her head. In the short moment that Star was off balance, Lois reached up with her free hand and removed her own foil cap.

<Clark!>

<Lois! Where are you?>

Lois almost cried with relief that Clark was alive. She sent him a flurry of images, of Star, her location, and her situation. <Hurry...> she barely managed before Star drove a knee into Lois's stomach, pinning her free hand and knocking the wind out of her.

Star pulled the foil cap back on Lois's head and then picked up the needle again. "I know this is difficult to accept, Lois, but it is for the best."

Lois struggled with all her strength, but Star was able to maintain her grip. Lois closed her eyes and turned her head away as Star lowered the needle, but a second later, the pressure lifted and a strong wind fanned the pages of the notebook on the desk. Lois opened her eyes to see a blue and red blur resolve into Superman. Lois watched as Clark tied Star to the chair before removing Lois's restraints and scooping her into his arms.

Clark rested his forehead against Lois's and then held her close, both of them shaking at the close call.

<Are you alright?> he asked.

Lois nodded and hugged him tighter. <I am now. Are you? Star said I put Kryptonite on you. I'm sorry...>

Clark shook his head. <Shh! I know you were drugged. I'm fine. I'm not sure how I recovered from the Kryptonite exposure

so quickly, but I'm sure it had something to do with you.>

Part 15

Alt Metropolis – July 18, 1997

"Until the End"

Lois and Clark were sitting side-by-side on the sofa in Cat's office, their fingers laced together. Lois looked around at her friends and colleagues as they rushed to revamp tomorrow morning's edition of the Daily Planet. Cat was behind her desk editing the article she and Clark had just finished writing, while James helped her reformat the layout. She glanced through the window and saw Perry White talking on the phone at her own desk in the bullpen, assuring his wife that everything had turned out fine and that he'd be home soon.

"I remembered something yesterday."

Lois looked up at Clark. "What was it?"

Clark's eyes sparkled. "A memory from my childhood. I was climbing trees with my invisible friend when my mother called me home for dinner. That was the first time I mentioned you to her, I think. I told her I was going to marry my best friend, Lolo. That's when she told me she wanted me to have great-grandma's ring."

"I don't remember that, but it sounds like a wonderful memory."

Clark leaned toward her and Lois accepted his kiss. She sighed and rested her head against Clark's shoulder. A moment later, she saw movement at the top of the ramp and Lois nudged Clark as Bill Henderson exited the elevator and headed toward them. Perry joined them in the office just as Henderson arrived.

"The three women have been admitted to Metropolis General for medical treatment and psychiatric evaluation. The doctors think that they'll quickly recover physically, but the emotional healing will probably take a long time."

"And Star Adams?" Cat asked.

"She's in the twelfth precinct lockup until her arraignment. Soon after her trial, I expect she'll be remanded to the women's penitentiary for a very long time."

"Well, Lois," Perry said. "You were right about a connection between Mensa, the Kryptonite, the drug, and the serial murders. Star was the link between them."

"I still can't believe it was her. Star's been my friend since we were teenagers. I knew she had had it rough, abused by several men in her life, but she was my roommate for years. I don't understand how I could have missed something like this."

"She hid her obsessions from all of us," Cat admitted.

"I think she changed after you left for the Congo, Lois," Clark added. "Maybe losing you was one hurt too many."

Lois nodded. It made sense. How many times had she relied on Clark to keep herself sane? How much anger and bitterness would she have felt without Clark's optimism and goodness to lean on over the years? Star hadn't had Ellen or Lucy Lane, nor had she known anyone like the Kents. Lois realized how lucky she had been.

"I'm still not sure why she killed those men," James said.

"She decided they were too violent to be in relationships,"

Lois explained. "She wanted to save those women from a future of abuse."

"Then why did she target you and Clark?" Cat asked. "He's got to be the least violent man on the planet."

Lois shared a look with Clark and then shrugged.

"Judge, jury, and executioner," Henderson said.

"Lois, you never did explain in your article what she was wearing on her head," James said. "What was it?"

Lois, Clark, and Henderson shared another look. "Aluminum foil," Henderson answered. "Star fancied herself a psychic and there's a superstition that the foil blocks others from invading her mind. She wore a wig to hide it."

"Weird," James muttered. "I, for one, am glad psychic powers

aren't real. Just the thought of someone reading my mind gives me the heebie-jeebies."

"Amen to that," Cat replied.

Perry clapped his hands together. "Well, kids. You've done it again. Except for the tiny detail of the murderess being your maid-of-honor, everything worked out just like you intended."

"Almost everything, Perry."

"What do you mean, Darlin'?"

Lois held out her left hand to show the engagement ring Clark had given her to Perry and the others. "Clark asked me to marry him yesterday, not as a ploy, but for real."

"We signed the wedding certificate earlier," Clark added, "and wanted to complete the ceremony today. We just wish we would have been able to actually go through with it."

"W... well now. That's wonderful you two."

Perry shook Clark's hand and then hugged Lois, while Cat, James, and Bill Henderson rounded the desk to add their congratulations.

"All you need is a Justice of the Peace," Henderson offered. "I'm sure Judge Diggs would come ..."

"Actually," Perry interrupted. "That won't be necessary. Even if I wasn't the Mayor of the great city of Metropolis, I am an ordained minister of the First Church of Blue Suede Deliverance. If you don't mind me serving double duty, I'd be honored to give you away and then I can perform the ceremony."

"Really?"

"Yep. So, what do you say? Do you still want to get hitched tonight?"

"Yes," Lois answered.

"We'd be honored," Clark said.

"Thank goodness!" Cat exclaimed. "I'm not sure the paper would survive another day without you two being together."

Lois and Clark laughed and then looked at each other. "I can't think of a better place to get married than the Daily Planet. Let's do it."

Cat directed Clark and Inspector Henderson to move several desks out of the way while Lois ran to the restroom to change into her wedding gown. James disappeared upstairs, returning a few minutes later with a bouquet of flowers in one hand and a camera in the other, several other Planet staffers trailing him with bottles of champagne and glass flutes. Eduardo dug up an accordion from somewhere, and even Willy, the night watchman, joined them, rose petals in hand.

A few minutes later, everything was set. A breathless Alice rushed down the ramp into the bullpen, a handkerchief already clutched in her hand. She took the camera from James and started snapping pictures. Clark and James stood at the end of their makeshift aisle and when everyone was seated in a haphazard pew of office chairs, Cat signaled Eduardo to start playing.

Cat held a flower in her hand and strolled up the aisle to a slightly wheezy version of "Pachabel's Canon". When Lois joined Perry at the other end of the room, the music morphed into "Here Comes the Bride."

Clark rose several inches into the air when Lois stepped into view. He heard James chuckle and felt him tug on his elbow, pulling him back to earth by his jacket sleeve, but Clark only had eyes for Lois. Her simple gown was both understated and elegant, cleaving to her figure in all the right places, but Clark couldn't take his eyes off of her face. She was practically shining. There were no barriers between them now and he could feel everything, her joy, nervousness, happiness, anticipation, desire, and peace.

Perry offered Lois his arm, which she took with a smile and a kiss on the cheek. Perry beamed with pride as he slowly walked Lois toward his old office, Clark, James, and Cat waiting for them next to the coffee maker. Perry stopped in front of Clark and turned to Lois. "You know, for a day with so many twists, this has

turned out to be one of the best of my life. Being able to give away my 'almost daughter' to my 'almost son' has to be just about the best feeling in the world."

Lois wrapped her arms around Perry's neck and pulled him into a tight embrace. He kissed her cheek and then stepped away so that Clark could take his place. He stepped around them both and beamed at the motley crew assembled there.

"Dearly beloved, coworkers, and friends. We gather here tonight in this hallowed room to join together two of the most amazing people it's been my pleasure to meet, Lois Lane and Clark Kent. You two are proof that love survives. Survives any challenge, any loss; all the rescues, all the arguments; even death. Now, you've finally found your way to each other. Lois?"

Lois reached across and took Clark's hands. "Clark, I have loved you for so long. I love your enduring goodness and eternal optimism. You're selflessness has inspired me and the purity of your intent has pushed me to always look for the goodness in people. There is no distance that can separate us now. I can't wait to share my heart, my mind, and my life with you. Forever."

Lois took the ring from Cat and slid it onto Clark's finger.

Perry cleared his throat. "Clark?"

"Lois, you are my best friend. That means everything to me. You see beyond the things I can do and know me for the man that I really am. Sometimes you see me even more clearly than I see myself. Falling in love with you was so easy; I don't know why I ever fought it. I love your humor, your passion for truth and justice, and the way you jump in without checking the water level. The world is a better place with you in it and I can't wait to share that world with you. There isn't a doubt in my mind that you are my one love. So today, I give you my heart, my strength, and our future. Forever."

Clark turned to accept Lois's wedding band from James and then slid it onto her finger next to his mother's ring. He lifted her hands and kissed her knuckle gently.

"Lois and Clark," Perry announced, "I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Clark hardly waited for the words to leave Perry's mouth when he leaned toward Lois. She did the same and the two newlyweds came together, their lips joining in solemn promise. One gentle kiss merged into another, deeper kiss as Clark pulled Lois closer to him. He lingered there long enough that James whistled and the other witnesses began to clap and cheer. Embarrassed, Clark finally ended their kiss, a broad, ecstatic smile on his face. He left his forehead connected to hers.

Lois looked into Clark's eyes. "I have loved you from the beginning," she whispered.

"And I will love you until the end," Clark promised in return.

Part 16 – Epilogue

Alt-Metropolis – July 18, 1997

Herb lifted his pocket watch to check the time and peeked around the hall corner of the Daily Planet newsroom. Any moment now, the Lois Lane and Clark Kent of this universe would be married, the culmination of a destiny in yet another lifetime where they met, fell in love, wedded, and lived happily ever after. Their future had been in jeopardy and life had taken them on a twisting path to get them here, but as Herb had told Clark nearly five months before, he never said impossible.

Next to him Herb heard the 'click' of the stairwell door as it cracked open next to him. He turned to see an eyeball peeping through only to disappear a second later. The door opened wider and Herb saw two men carrying a large and awkward box wrapped in light blue paper, a silver bow arranged attractively on top.

"You sure it's happening here?" the slender man whispered.

The other man grunted in the affirmative and shifted his grip. Herb rushed through the gap and into the stairwell to help them steady the box when it started to slip from the larger man's

prosthetic hand.

“Hey, thanks, buddy,” the slender man said. He did a double take when he saw Herb’s suit. “I know you,” he said softly. “I saw you come down to the restaurant earlier today.”

“I did indeed. It seems you got my message.”

“Yeah, we did.” Bobby looked over at the group gathered by the editor’s office. Lois and Clark were holding hands, exchanging vows, and the rest of the staff had their eyes fixed on the couple. He nodded his respect toward the older man. “Even I couldn’t have snitched about their wedding before they knew it would happen. Maybe you’ll share your secret with me someday.”

“And well I might. I’ve heard how you both help Lois with her investigations. It would be my pleasure to help you continue to help her with any future endeavors. Now, if you wouldn’t mind bearing a note to Ms. Lane and Mr. Kent along with your gift?”

“Nah. Go ahead.”

Herbert Wells reached into his suit coat pocket and pulled out an envelope addressed with an elaborate script to Lois Lane and Clark Kent. He slid the envelope under the ribbon.

Mr. Wells winked and tipped his hat at them. “Mr. Bigmouth. Mr. Petrelli.”

The two men crept inside the bullpen and seeing that everyone was distracted by Lois and Clark’s kiss, clapping and whistling their approval, they snuck past the coffeemaker and a table to leave the box in a conspicuous place next to Lois’s nameplate on her desk. Although both men loved helping Lois, they treasured their anonymity more. With a head tip toward the stairs, Bobby Bigmouth and Gino Petrelli snuck back out the side exit and down the stairs of the Daily Planet without anyone the wiser.

Perry raised his glass to the happy couple. “To Mr. Clark Kent and Ms. Lois Lane . . .”

“Kent. Lois Lane-Kent,” Lois finished for him.

“May every story be a front page headline, may you always catch the criminals, and may peace and happiness always find you for the rest of your days.”

A chorus of “here, here” followed Perry’s toast and then the group simultaneously tipped their glasses back to drink some bubbly.

Clark turned to extend his glass toward Lois, who accepted by linking her arm over his before they both took a sip. Clark couldn’t seem to take his eyes off of Lois. Her eyes never left his either as she sipped her drink. Suddenly, an image of her naked form wrapped in Superman’s cape popped into his head and he choked on his champagne.

Lois giggled. <So, how long before we can leave without seeming rude?>

<Who cares?>

Clark set his flute down on his desk and then took Lois’s from her as well. He wrapped her hand in his and kissed the back of it. He turned to address his friends and coworkers when he saw a wrapped box on Lois’s desk.

“What’s this?” he asked.

A chorus of surprised sounds came from those around them. It was quickly apparent that no one in attendance had brought the box and no one had seen it delivered. Clark stepped forward toward the box, pulling Lois by the hand until they stood next to her desk.

<Careful, Lois. >

<Pff. It’s a wedding gift.>

<Have you met you? Let me peek inside first.>

Clark tipped his head to look over the rim of his glasses. He narrowed his eyes and his grip on her hand tightened. <Most of it looks alright, but there are several lead-lined boxes and one lumpy, lead-lined package inside.>

A fiercely protective expression darkened Lois’s face. Lois stepped up next to her desk and quickly, but carefully, snatched the

two envelopes off of the top of the box. She handed the larger one to Clark and opened the smaller envelope. Her shoulders relaxed immediately and Lois laughed at the card’s contents before showing it to Clark.

‘With Love and Admiration: Bigmouth, No Mouth, and A Guy Who Knows Guys’.

“It’s okay. It’s from three of my best sources,” Lois explained. “Whatever is in the lead-lined items, they didn’t put them there to hurt you. What does the other card say, Clark?”

In response, Clark read the note and then looked up, surprised, and scanned the newsroom. Lois saw Clark smile toward the elevator and she turned to catch a glimpse of an older gentleman with a bowler hat. The man tipped his hat to them and smiled enigmatically as the elevator doors closed.

“Was that who I think it was?”

“Wells. Yes. He came to congratulate us.” Clark handed the note to Lois.

‘Dear Mr. Kent and Ms. Lane,

It’s my great pleasure to congratulate you on your marriage. Please rest assured that I see a bright future ahead for you and your world. Know that the curse placed on your souls that endangered Lois’s life has already been lifted and that the New Kryptonians that came for the other Clark do not exist in your universe.

May you live long and happy lives,

Herbert George Wells’

Lois smiled, “Just another day in the life of Lois and Clark, huh? Let’s see what’s inside.”

Lois untied the bow and lifted the lid to reveal two smaller boxes inside, each labeled with their individual names. Clark reached into the box and pulled out the box for Lois. He lifted the items out one-by-one and everyone laughed at the box’s contents: a Kevlar vest, a large first aid kit, and a new lock pick set for Lois.

“I’m going to pretend that I didn’t see that last one,” Bill Henderson quipped.

Lois smiled benignly and furtively slipped the lock pick set into her desk drawer while everyone laughed. Once the forbidden tools were hidden away, Lois reached into the larger box for Clark’s gift. After grunting at its weight, Clark reached inside to help her and easily lifted the box out. Lois removed the lid and leaned over to look inside. There were several empty, lead-lined boxes, a miniature Geiger counter, and a large, misshapen lead-foil wrapped bundle for Clark. Tied to the bundle was a Polaroid picture of a big pile of red and green glowing rocks. The photo was labeled with a bold *‘Do Not Open – Ever!’*.

“Great Shades of Elvis!” Perry exclaimed. “I had no idea that there was still so much of it out there.”

“Where did it come from?” Cat asked.

“I’ve never seen the red before,” James said.

“I wonder if it affects me the same way . . .”

“We are never going to find out,” Lois declared. Lois and Clark shared a long look, Lois’s expression becoming more and more determined until Clark nodded.

Clark turned to the crowd. “If you’ll excuse me, it appears that there is one thing I need to do today that is more important than our honeymoon.”

Clark stepped quickly into Cat’s office and immediately returned dressed as Superman. “I’ll need a breathing apparatus,” he announced.

James reached into his pocket and tossed Clark his house keys. “My scuba gear is in the storage closet under the entry hall stairs. It’s charged and ready to go.”

Clark vanished through the stairwell to return almost as quickly with a scuba tank strapped to his back. As Clark handed James his keys back, Lois stretched her open hand toward Henderson and they also shared a long look. Henderson finally sighed and reached into his pocket for the small, lead-lined box

that housed a green, bullet-shaped piece of meteorite. Henderson slapped the box into Lois's open hand and she smiled triumphantly. Lois turned to place the box and the bundle into Clark's hand and then stood on her tiptoes to whisper in Clark's ear. A simmering grin spread across Clark's face before he gathered her into his empty arm and kissed her until they were both breathless.

Clark disappeared in a gust of wind as Lois and all of their guests stared after him.

"Wow!" Lois whispered.

After a wobbly moment, Lois turned to pick up her glass of champagne from the desk. She took a long draw and then fanned her face before turning to the expectant crowd. "Clark will return in approximately an hour."

"Is he doing what I think he's doing?" Perry asked.

Lois nodded. "Clark is going to throw the bundle and the box into the sun."

"But shouldn't he keep some for study?" Eduardo asked. Lois could forgive him the question. As the science correspondent, she was sure that he was curious about the meteorite. She also knew that the scientists he worked with would love to test the unusual properties of the rock.

"We are not going to take any chances."

As the impromptu guests started to mill around and talk, Lois turned to look out the large windows. Although Clark had only been gone less than a minute, she missed him already. She reached out to him mentally and the warmth of his love caressed her back. He was making good time; he was past the moon and on his way to Venus.

Lois sighed and leaned against the edge of Clark's desk as the events of the day started to catch up with her. Married. She and Clark were married. A slow smile spread across her lips as she examined how she felt and she came to the conclusion that she felt completely different and also utterly the same. It was a strange combination.

Lois's thoughts turned to Star and she felt the all-too-familiar aches of grief and sadness. It was still surreal that Star had made the choices that she had. How had Lois not seen it? Whenever she and Star had gotten together for movies or games or had gone out for drinks, Star had seemed happy, happier than she'd ever been before. Star had good friends, she loved her apartment, and she had been thrilled with her job at the Daily Planet working for Cat.

Lois shook her head as she realized that she had taken her relationship with Star for granted, just like she had with Clark when they had first met. She and Star had built a solid friendship as girls and young adults, but when Lois had returned from the Congo, she had assumed that everything had remained the same between them, like time had stood still and that neither she nor Star had changed at all in almost four years.

Nevertheless, Star had changed. Her repeated abuse by the men in her life had warped her attitudes. Her study of Dynamomics had changed her abilities. Lois's disappearance and her imagined dreams had warped her mind, convincing her that she needed to save those women and that she needed to kill to accomplish it.

One thing remained the same, though. Lois missed her best girlfriend.

Lois set her glass down on the desk and noticed the gift cards resting there. She smiled at the one from her sources and picked up the one from H.G. Wells. She opened it and read the contents again.

'Know that the curse placed on your souls that endangered Lois's life has already been lifted and that the New Kryptonians that came for the other Clark do not exist in your universe.'

Lois tapped the card against her lips as she stared off into the middle distance. A few nights ago while she and Clark had been talking, he had finally told her about his recent trip into the other

dimension. He'd admitted that he had playacted as the other Lois's husband, a fact that still made her insides roil with jealousy. Clark had used his Superman persona both to keep the other Clark's dual-identity a secret and to help find his doppelganger. While it had been gratifying to succeed, Clark had said, he also had admitted to harboring a wish that he could just take the other Clark's place.

Her negative feelings toward the other Lois notwithstanding, Lois was glad Clark had received the gift of time with the Kents. Being able to feel once again the love and acceptance that he'd had when his own parents had been alive was something that Lois would never begrudge him. Martha and Jonathan had held Clark through his grief and anger as he had relived his lonely and terrifying childhood. They'd soothed him and encouraged him in his lonely attempts to be Superman and Clark Kent in the public eye. Martha had even made him some extra suits. It had been cathartic for Clark to talk with them and he had found some closure before the bittersweet moment he'd realized it was time to come home.

The Kents had also told Clark about their son's life, about their run-ins with Lex Luthor and some of their more bizarre cases. Strangely, it made Lois feel better that the other couple didn't have 'easy' lives. She and her Clark had tragedies in their pasts that the other couple would never have to face – the early death of their parents, her forced participation in MEPWar, and her near-death in the Congo – but it also sounded like the Lois and Clark in the other dimension had had some challenges that she and her Clark wouldn't have to face.

There were a few things that Lois wanted to follow up on, specifically looking into the possibility that the Church's were running Intergang through CostMart in this dimension. Most interestingly, though, were the Kents' stories about the other Lois and Clark's travel through time using the soul-tracker. Also, they'd told him about the New Kryptonians arrival, their plea to Clark to save their society from civil war, and the subsequent attack on Smallville. Lois was glad to know that she would never have to face this unknown danger from a curse on her soul and her Clark would never have to choose between a remnant of his own people and her.

Star's voice rose in her mind, then, telling Lois of her supposed motivation for attacking Clark and trying to drug and brainwash Lois.

'One vision showed me your death from a terrible, gruesome illness if you married Clark. In another, you were heartbroken when Clark left you for a woman on a distant planet...'

Could Star's visions have been true? If she somehow had seen the result of a curse placed on the other Lois's soul or the other Clark choosing these 'New Kryptonians' over his Lois, then what Star saw could have been genuine. Knowing that Star had had a true vision didn't change the fact that she'd done some pretty horrific things that she would have to pay for, but it did confirm that Star hadn't gone completely crazy.

"How you doin', Darlin'?"

Lois's pensive frown shifted into a wistful smile at Perry's approach. "Good. Amazing, actually."

"I'm sure Clark will be back soon."

Lois closed her eyes and reached out in an attempt to connect with Clark. She was surprised when she received his response almost immediately, a warmth that suffused her whole being.

<Half way there. I can't wait to hold you in my arms again.>

<I can't wait!> Lois responded and almost giggled when she imagined them in an intimate embrace and his groan of desire spurred him to fly faster.

She opened her eyes and smiled at Perry, a twinkle lingering in her eye as she openly confirmed her abilities. "He's just passing Venus."

Perry opened and closed his mouth, unable to respond until he

tried again. “I always knew you were extraordinary, but this connection you have with Clark, that’s really somethin’.”

Lois smiled in response and then glanced down at the letter still in her hand and her smile slid as her eyebrows drew down in thought.

“What Clark and I have, what we’ve always had, is amazing, especially now that we’ve really gotten to know one another, but I can’t help but feel a little sad. I miss Star.”

“She was the only one I saw stick with you through the years. I remember how happy Star was when you returned. I wonder what could have possibly driven her off her rocker enough to murder.”

Lois hesitated and then decided that Perry needed to know. “Other than Clark, Star was the one person that had abilities that even resembled my own. Her ability to read people wasn’t intense or reliable, but there were moments when she had these flashes of insight. Mensa’s torture damaged her. The foster system hardened her. Her study of Dynonomics changed her. She wasn’t crazy, Perry, at least not in that way. She really had the visions she claimed.”

“How do you know?”

“The night before I left for the Congo, she arrived at my door frantic because she’d heard me call out Luthor’s name in pain and fear. And on base tonight, she told me she’d had other visions about my death or pain if I married Clark.” Lois hesitated for a moment and then handed Perry the card from H.G. Wells. After he finished reading it, he handed it back and looked at her.

“Clark told me about H.G. Wells, time travel, and alternate dimensions, but that,” he said pointing at the letter in her hand, “has to be the darnedest thing I’ve ever seen. Someone put a curse on your souls?”

“Apparently. And the New Kryptonians came to the alternate earth and the other Clark left with them in order to stop a civil war.” At Perry’s questioning look, she added, “The other Clark was their leader’s birth-husband.”

Perry shook his head again in amazement. “So Star had visions of the other Lois?”

Lois nodded. “It doesn’t change the fact that she killed those men, but she was telling the truth when she said she did it to protect us. To protect me.”

Perry looked at her and his mouth twitched up in a charming, supportive way. “Maybe you should go see her. It would probably do both of you some good.”

Lois smiled and then turned to glance at the clock. “I think I have just enough time.” Lois reached up to hug Perry before turning away and walking over to Bill Henderson. She placed a hand on his arm to get his attention.

“Bill? I have another favor to ask.”

A uniformed guard took up position just behind Lois as she waited for Star to appear through the door on the other side of the room. Henderson had arranged a short meeting between them at the twelfth precinct in a room designed for the accused to meet with their attorney’s. Lois tapped the card from H.G. Wells on the table in front of her as she waited and hoped that her presence here would help her and her friend.

A moment after sensing her approach, the door opposite her opened and another guard led Star through it, hands cuffed in front of her. Star’s steps faltered when she saw Lois sitting at the table, but her face also softened and a smile appeared as she moved to sit in the empty chair. The guard fixed Star’s handcuffs to a ring in the table and then gave Lois a warning look.

“You’ve got five minutes. No physical contact.”

Lois nodded and pulled her hands back into her lap to resist placing her hand on top of Star’s.

“Lois? What are you doing here?”

“You’re my best friend. I missed you.”

Star scowled. “You weren’t my best friend a few hours ago. I was only trying to protect you and the others. I’m not crazy, Lois. I really did see your pain and death.”

“I know you still. I understand now. That’s why I’m here.”

“Does this mean that you decided not to go through with it? Did I save you after all?”

In answer, Lois slid the note from H.G. Wells across the table to Star, who picked it up and read through the contents a couple of times before sliding it back to her, confusion on her face.

“I don’t understand. What does a ‘curse on your souls’ and ‘the other Clark’ mean?”

“Do you remember a year ago when a woman appeared at the Daily Planet claiming to be me? That really was Lois Lane, but she was from an alternate dimension.”

Over the next few minutes, Lois explained to Star about the other Lois, her husband and some of the trials that they had overcome, including ending a curse on their souls that resulted in Lois’s death and a visit from the New Kryptonians.

“So you’re saying that my visions were only about this other Lois?”

Lois nodded. “Only one of them actually happened, her Clark really did leave with his ‘birth-wife’ to settle a civil upheaval. The illness and death after marrying Clark was only a possible future. That one never happened.”

Stars face cleared with relief for a moment and then crumpled as the implications of her misinterpretation sank in. “If yours wasn’t true, then maybe the others weren’t. Maybe those other women...” She shook her head and a tear fell from her eye. “Oh, Lois. What am I going to do?”

Lois stretched her hand halfway across the table before pulling it back. Instead, Lois reached out psychically, trying to comfort her friend, but was unsure whether she could feel it. “We’ll explain the circumstances to the judge in the hopes of leniency. You’ll do your time. I’m not going to lie to you, with a triple homicide, there’s not much chance of parole, but you could do some good on the inside. I’ll visit you when I can.”

The guard opened the door and entered the room then, notifying them that their time was up. He unlocked Star’s cuffs from the table and held her elbow as they stood.

“Thanks for coming, Lois. I’m glad that you’re going to be all right.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll see you soon.”

Neither of them said the words they really wanted to say, but Star looked back at Lois as she left the room and Lois knew that Star knew she loved her and would be there for her.

A few minutes later, Lois stepped outside the precinct doors and looked at her watch. She probably had about five minutes before Clark was supposed to return, but just as she looked up to hail a cab, she felt his presence. She turned to wrap her arms around him as his hands snaked around her waist and pulled her close.

“Hello, Wife.”

She reached up to kiss him languorously. “Hello, Husband.”

Clark tightened his grip on her and leaned in again. “Next stop, a week long honeymoon at an undisclosed and remote location.”

“Clothing, optional,” she purred.

Clark growled again and kissed her like his life depended on it. Somewhere in the depth of her thoughts, she realized that he had floated them into the air away from the police station and Star, but the warmth that suffused her body as Clark kissed her enveloped her soul and banished any lingering sadness.

H.G. Wells had confirmed a bright future for them, but he hadn’t really needed to tell them anything. They were going to live happily ever after.

Lois already knew it.

THE END