

# Love Realized ©

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Summary: An Elseworlds tale, sequel to the author's "Too Soon for Love," that tracks Lara's journey to find love.

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This story is the sequel to "Too Soon for Love." [Get it here](#). It is the story of Lara Lois Kent, daughter of Clark Kent and Lois Lane. The story picks up immediately after events in the previous story and will follow her through her journey to find a love of her own.

While there will be appearances by Clark, and to a lesser extent, Lois, this is Lara's story and as such will focus on events, for the most part, from her point of view. I hope you enjoy it.

I would like to thank my beta readers, Morgana and Terry Leatherwood. Morgana provided great support and chose the dresses the characters wear later in the story. She also provided some great food descriptions, as you'll see. Terry performed above and beyond while trying to teach this old dog some new tricks. His suggestions resulted in several additional scenes that I feel add flavor to what would have been an otherwise bland story. I would also like to thank my general editor, Goo Boo for her efforts to make sure all those commas were in the right place. Thanks to all of you!

Please see the notes at the end of the story for links.

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From "Too Soon For Love":

*Lois Lane was heavily into the latest Profit and Loss statement for the **Daily Planet** when someone stepped into her office, closing the door behind them. Without looking up she spoke sharply, "I'm busy, come back later!"*

*The person, instead of turning tail and saving their backside, stepped up to her desk, daring Lois to ignore them. She dragged her gaze from the report in front of her, intending to flay the interloper for their arrogance. Lois raised her eyes, taking in the stranger standing in front of her desk for the first time. The crisp, charcoal-grey suit covered the body of a model, but it was the face of the stranger that caused Lois to stare at her, open-mouthed. It was almost like looking in a mirror, except the mirror had removed 20 plus years from her face. Continuing to study the woman in front of her, Lois noticed the differences as well, especially around the eyes.*

*"Who...?" Lois said, her mouth not wanting to cooperate.*

*"Good morning Miss Lane, my name is Kent. Lara Lois Kent," the woman said calmly.*

*Kent. OH MY GOD! This woman couldn't be... her daughter? Lara, she'd said her name was Lara Lois Kent. Clark had given their daughter her name? It was just like him to do something as sappy as that, even after the way she'd treated him.*

*As Lois studied the stranger, no, her **daughter**, Lara was studying Lois's office and its contents.*

*"It's nice to see you've gotten what you've always wanted, Miss Lane," Lara said with contempt.*

*"I'm sorry," Lois said confused. "I'm not following you."*

*"Success, Miss Lane. Success in a male-dominated profession. Success in the eyes of your peers. I've read your bio. Eight Kerths and two Pulitzers are a testament to your success. You didn't need anyone to get where you are—not a husband, and **certainly** not a daughter to slow you down," Lara said, her eyes boring into Lois's.*

*The comment cut Lois like a knife; but, holding true to form, she went immediately on the attack. "How dare you...?!"*

*"How dare I?" Lara's eyes flashed, interrupting the coming tirade, leaning forward making Lois lean back reflexively, "I'm complimenting you, Miss Lane, you should be pleased. I know I am. I grew up with three of the most wonderful people in the world loving me and providing the best example a girl could ever ask for. While I was playing with dolls in Smallville you were garnering journalism awards. While I was getting an education you were investigating stories and exposing crime. While I was the only girl at the Mother-Daughter campout with my **grandmother** you were becoming editor-in-chief of a great metropolitan newspaper. You've done very well for yourself, Miss Lane. I hope those Pulitzers keep you very warm at night." Lara's voice fairly dripped with sarcasm and resentment.*

*Not giving Lois time to respond Lara turned and walked to the door, pulling it open. "I've said my piece, Miss Lane, I'll be leaving now," Lara said, stepping through the door. Just before it closed behind her, she gave a smile, one that didn't reach her eyes, and threw one last comment over her shoulder. "Oh, by the way," Lara said, "my father says, 'Hello'." The woman closed the door behind her, leaving only silence in the room, a silence that was broken by the muted sound of a sonic boom seconds later.*

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## Chapter One—Superwoman!

Lara closed the door behind her, turned left towards the elevator and shook her head. There was no way she was going to wait for that elevator, it would be intolerable and she had to get out of this place *now*! She turned right instead and headed for the stairs she'd noticed on her way in. Her high heels clicked loudly on the floor as she stalked to the stairs. As she did so she passed the desk of the man who'd tried to stop her from entering Lois Lane's office earlier. This time his head was down and he seemed to be studiously ignoring her. Good, she thought, he certainly didn't want to mess with her right now!

Upon entering the stairwell Lara checked with her x-ray vision and superhearing for anyone else who might be on the stairs. Finding no one, Lara spun into her suit and flew up, exiting through the roof access door, creating a sonic boom that she was sure everyone in the building would hear, but she didn't care. Up she flew until the atmosphere was very thin where she could pour on the speed, flying at her maximum velocity, so that two seconds later she was over Kansas where she slowed down in preparation for landing.

Lara Kent touched down on the warm Kansas ground just outside the farmhouse where she'd grown up. She spun out of her brand-new Superwoman suit and into the charcoal gray business suit and heels she'd worn that morning. She sighed, unsure of what to do now. She'd been all fired up to let Lois Lane have it right between the eyes for all the perceived hurt she'd experienced growing up. And she had. She'd let Lois Lane know, in no uncertain terms, that she hadn't needed a mother like her. Hadn't needed a woman who had wanted to abort her when she'd found out she was pregnant. Hadn't needed a woman who could give up her child for a **career**! Lara had told her how she'd grown up with three of the best, most loving people in the world and hadn't

needed *her!* Now that she'd done it, though, she felt strangely empty, or at least unfulfilled. She'd done what she set out to do, so why didn't she feel better? Lois Lane now knew exactly how her actions had affected the child she'd borne but did that knowledge really change anything? The whole thing seemed anticlimactic somehow.

Her super-hearing picked up the sound of her father turning the pages of the paper he'd been reading when she'd left. Lara sighed. She knew she couldn't put it off any longer so she stepped onto the porch, her high heels clicking on the wooden boards. She glanced down and noticed the worn patch near the door. The porch floor would need painting before she left for her trip. She opened the screen door and stepped inside the kitchen.

Lara walked over to the coffee pot, poured herself a cup, then sat down at the table. She picked up the creamer and poured a healthy dollop into her cup, and followed it up with four sugars. Lara stirred the sugar and mixed it thoroughly, the clinking of the spoon the only sound in the silent kitchen. Lara knew her dad was watching her. She'd felt his eyes on her from the moment she'd walked into the room. Listening with her superhearing she confirmed that her grandparents were not around.

Lara glanced at her father through lowered lashes. "Well?" she sighed. "Don't you have anything to say?"

"Nope," Clark said, sipping his coffee, his nose deep in his paper, the *Daily Planet* she noticed, the irony not lost on her at all.

Lara exploded, angry at her father's seeming disinterest. "Baloney, Dad!" Jumping up, she began pacing back and forth on her side of the table, her coffee forgotten for the moment. "You're dying to know what happened so why don't you just ask?" Lara crossed her arms over her chest, her eyes flashing with fire.

Clark glanced up and his eyes met hers. She could see that he was upset, but not with her. Why, she couldn't say, but she knew he wasn't angry with her. There was something in his chocolate brown eyes that she rarely saw there. Lara thought back over the years, searching for the times she had seen her father look like that when it hit her like a ton of bricks. The only times she'd ever seen her dad looking sad and upset like this was when she'd asked about her mother.

He'd always gotten that look, like thinking about her tore his heart out. He'd tried to hide it from her, of course, but she'd been a very observant little girl and had noticed the change in her usually happy father every time. Lara's posture relaxed and her arms dropped to her sides. Seating herself, she took a sip of her coffee, then she smiled tremulously at her dad.

"Please, Dad? Please talk to me?" Lara didn't want to fight with her father—she loved him too much for that, but they needed to clear the air now that she'd confronted Lois. Lara couldn't call the woman her mother—she just couldn't, not even in her thoughts. Lois might have been the person who had given birth to her twenty-two years ago, but she was *not* her mother. If anyone deserved that title it was her grandmother, the woman who'd been there for her for as long as she could remember, but that didn't matter now. What mattered was the man in front of her and his obvious pain.

"Did you accomplish what you set out to do?" Clark asked, neutrally.

"If you mean, did I lay into her, yes. I let her know, in no uncertain terms, that she was a selfish person and I had no use for her in my life."

"I see. And how did she react?" Lara tried to detect any hint of disappointment in his tone but found none.

Lara took a moment to reflect. "She was pretty speechless."

"Lois? Speechless?" The surprise in Clark's tone was evident.

"Yeah, well, I didn't give her much chance to talk. I said my piece and I was out of there. I wasn't going to get into a shouting match, not in her office, that's for sure."

"Did you...?"

"Did I mention that you said 'Hello'?" At Clark's nod, she continued. "Yes, I did."

"Did she...?"

Lara's eyes focused on her father, his expression conveying anticipation. "I don't know, Dad," she sighed as his shoulders slumped slightly. "I told her as I was closing the door... but I didn't *hear* anything if you know what I mean."

"Well, it's not as if I expected much anyway," Clark said thoughtfully. "I just wanted her to know that the lines of communication are open..." he sighed, seemingly disappointed that she'd rejected his olive branch once more.

Lara reached out to grasp her father's hand. He smiled lovingly at her, the same smile he'd given her every day of her life. It warmed her as nothing else could.

Clark gave Lara's hand a little squeeze. "So when are you leaving?"

Lara sighed and lowered her eyes. "Oh, not for a while. I noticed the porch floor needs painting..."

Clark smiled knowingly. "Pumpkin, I can paint the floor you know."

"Well, since last night didn't work out as Superwoman's debut, I figured I'd hang around a bit so we could work together and you could help me with my first press conference."

Lara immediately noticed the change in her father's attitude. His head turned, his eyes focused in the middle distance—Lara extended her hearing to catch the last few words of a news bulletin on Wayne Irig's radio.

"It looks like Superwoman is going to make her debut now," Clark said. He rose from his seat and spun into the suit. Lara rose as well, spinning into the black and blue uniform of Superwoman. The sound of their twin whooshes and the slamming of the screen door echoed through the now empty kitchen.

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Lara scanned the area long before they arrived at the scene, trying to get a handle on what she needed to do first. Her first emergency wasn't going to be an easy one. An oil tanker truck and two semis had collided, shutting down all three lanes of traffic on the northbound main artery highway, I-35, through Kansas City, MO. Besides the three main vehicles involved, dozens of cars couldn't stop in time and had crashed into the trucks, triggering a chain reaction accident. Nothing was moving, not even the emergency services. Before she had a chance to think of what she should be doing, her dad pointed to the tanker truck.

"I'll take care of that fire, you bring the ambulances to the front of the accident," Clark said before he zipped away, leaving her slightly stunned. As her father was dousing the flames with his freezing breath, she took off towards the rear of the traffic jam where ambulances were trying in vain to get to the injured.

Lara landed in front of the closest ambulance and smiled her most reassuring smile. "Hang on, I'll get you there." She hoisted the huge ambulance over her head and carefully flew it to the area her father pointed out as being safe. Back and forth she flew until all five ambulances were in the safe area. The crews were now ready to perform their lifesaving duties.

"Superwoman," Superman called out, "You work from the back. Try to separate the vehicles that are the easiest to get to. If there are injured people inside, leave those until the medics can get there to assess them. If they need super help then provide it, okay?" Her father's smile boosted her confidence.

"Yes, sir!" Lara said, and with a grin, she streaked away.

Starting with the fender benders Lara separated the vehicles that were at the very end of the pileup. She returned them to their lanes as much as possible, so that she had some room to work. At first, it was easy, but as she worked closer and closer to the main part of the accident, the vehicles were more severely damaged and the injuries more serious as well. Before she had a chance to think, she heard more ambulances approaching the scene. Lara zipped to

the back of the accident so she could bring the newest arrivals to the staging area. As she was setting the last of the emergency vehicles down, she heard someone shouting for help.

“Help! I need some help here!” A paramedic was shouting and waving his arms trying to get someone’s attention. Lara took off, landing next to the man.

Superwoman tried to portray confidence she didn’t feel before she replied. “How can I help?”

“I need to get this door open!”

Lara grasped the door and pulled carefully so that she didn’t jar the injured people inside. The paramedic leaned in to examine the driver first.

“Do you have x-ray vision like Superman?” The paramedic asked.

“Yes, what do you need me to do?”

“I need you to x-ray this man to see if it’s okay to move him. Start with his legs; is anything broken or fractured?”

Lara scanned the man’s legs. “No breaks or fractures.”

“Hips next, please.”

Another quick scan. “All good.”

“Okay, how about his chest? Any ribs broken or intruding on major organs, heart or lungs?”

“No, nothing there,” Lara said.

“Last thing, how about his neck. Any vertebrae out of alignment or broken?”

Lara did a quick scan of the paramedic’s neck to get an idea of what normal should look like then compared that with the man in question. “It doesn’t look like it. I compared his scan to yours.”

“Okay. Let me immobilize his arm and get this collar around his neck just in case.” The paramedic worked quickly then nodded to Superwoman. “He’s okay to move. Can you take him to the triage area?” Lara nodded and gathered the man in her arms and flew him to the staging area. She set him down and returned within seconds. Lara worked tirelessly, supporting the emergency workers as they performed their work.

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Meanwhile at WDAF TV, Fox 4:

Nancy Quinn sat at her desk preparing her report for the evening broadcast when her phone rang.

“Nancy, I just received notice that there’s been a huge accident on I-35 north and Superman’s there, but that’s not all! There’s a female superhero working with him!” Denny Richard said.

“Okay, we’ll get right on it. I’ll call Matt and get him in the helicopter,” Nancy replied. Picking up her phone she called Matt Pepitone. “Matt, get on the copter and find the accident on I-35! There’s a new superhero with Superman and it’s a woman!”

Matt hung up the phone and raced to the helipad where the pilot was just getting the machine started. “Get this bird in the air! We’ve got the scoop of the decade if we can get there first! There’s a woman superhero working with Superman!” The pilot nodded and in moments the helicopter was in the air, speeding to the accident scene.

“Nancy, I’m ready to report from the scene,” Matt hollered into the headset.

“Go, you’re on the air!”

“This is Matt Pepitone, Fox 4 News. We’re hovering over the scene of a huge accident on I-35 north near the University of Kansas Hospital where a brand-new superhero is working with Superman to clear the accident and rescue the injured.”

The camera focused in on a black clad figure zipping back and forth between the area where ambulances had set up and damaged cars as she brought injured motorists to be treated.

“As you can see this new superhero seems to have all the powers of Superman. She even wears the same ‘S’ symbol and we have to wonder what her relationship is to Superman. One thing’s for sure, she hasn’t gone for the bright primary colors of

Superman’s suit, favoring black with electric blue accents the color of Superman’s uniform!”

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Hours later, after the emergency services transported the injured, came the grunt work of clearing the highway for travel once more. Lara and Clark moved the most seriously damaged vehicles to the side of the road so that others could continue their journey. When traffic was flowing once again, Superman and Superwoman hovered over the site. Superman noticed the news helicopter hovering near them and waved.

“It looks like you’re big news.” Clark said nodding toward the helicopter. “That was a real debut, Lara,” Clark said with a smile. “I’m so proud of you. You know it would have taken me twice as long without your help, right?”

Lara grinned, though she blushed at her father’s praise. “I don’t know about that, Dad. I’m glad I was able to help, though. This is what I’ve dreamed of ever since you told me you were Superman.”

“Me too, sweetheart,” Clark said. “Well, are you ready to meet your public?” Lara glanced down to see television cameras and reporters lined up along the shoulder, their lenses focused on the two of them. She’d been so busy working she hadn’t even noticed their arrival.

“Ummm...” Lara stammered. “I guess, but could you do most of the talking?”

Clark said, confidently “Sure, leave everything to me.”

Superman landed in front of the gaggle of news people gathered at the side of the highway with Superwoman a step behind to his right. A cacophony of shouts from the crowd rose as soon as the duo landed. Superman waited a few seconds for the crowd to calm down, but when they did not, he raised his hands and called for quiet.

“Please, please!” Superman called out, to get the attention of the gathered reporters. “We can’t answer any questions if you keep shouting.” It took a few more moments for the crowd to react, but finally, relative silence reigned.

“I will give you a statement based on our observations. The official statement will be coming from the state police. If you still have questions, we’ll answer as many as we can.

“The accident was caused when an oil tanker truck blew a tire which caused it to veer into another lane of traffic where it contacted two other semi-trailer trucks, effectively blocking all lanes of traffic. The ensuing chain reaction crash involved over 50 vehicles. While there were numerous injuries, we are thankful that none of these were life-threatening and all the injured are on their way to local hospitals. As you can see all lanes of traffic are now open though at reduced speed due to damaged vehicles at the side of the road.

“I want to thank Superwoman for her help today. Without her efforts, things could have been much worse—”

“Superman! Superman!” a female reporter in the front row interrupted, waving her arms to get Superman’s attention. Superman sighed knowingly, glancing at Lara with a wry smile.

“Yes, Miss?” Superman replied politely.

“Darlene Jenkins, *Wichita Star*. Who *is* Superwoman? Where does she come from?” The other reporters on the scene echoed her statement. Superman raised his hands again until some semblance of quiet took over.

“Superwoman is my daughter. She grew up on my home planet and has recently decided to assist me with emergencies like today, and at natural disasters where some super help is very welcome. Superwoman, would you like to say a few words?” Superman smiled reassuringly to Lara who then stepped up to speak.

“Thank you, Superman. I want to say that I am happy to be helping my father, and I look forward to assisting him with emergencies and natural disasters the world over. It is my pleasure

to serve the people of Earth with my powers in any way that I can. Thank you.” Before the reporters could shout any more questions, Superman and Superwoman floated up and, with a wave shot into the sky.

The two superheroes flew away to the west and landed behind the barn of the Smallville farm where they spun into their civilian clothes and walked back into the kitchen.

“You did great, Pumpkin!” Clark said proudly, “Your statement was short and to the point and it covered everything they needed to know.”

Lara smiled a small smile, her cheeks pink with embarrassment. “Thanks, Dad. I sure hope no one noticed my knees shaking the whole time!” she replied self-consciously.

“I didn’t notice a thing, so I’m sure no one else did,” Clark said, gathering Lara into a hug. “I’m so proud of you, honey!”

“Thanks,” Lara said looking up at her dad, a wry smile on her face. “So I grew up on your home planet, huh?”

“Well, it’s a better explanation than telling them you grew up in Smallville! Imagine the questions we would have gotten if I’d said that!” Clark kissed her on the forehead, holding her hands in his. “Besides, it’s not a lie. I may have been born on Krypton but I consider Earth my home.”

“Thanks again, Dad. I don’t know what I’d have said otherwise. I hadn’t prepared an answer to that question, for sure.” Lara leaned in and kissed Clark on the cheek. “Well, I’m going to paint the porch now so I’m going to get changed.” Clark released her hands and sat back down at the table. Clark picked up his now cold coffee, shot a burst of heat vision into the cup, and opened his newspaper once more.

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## Chapter Two—Training and Preparation

An hour after her unexpected visitor had left Lois was editing a story that was already slathered with red pencil corrections when Jim Olsen’s voice rang out from the bullpen.

“Chief! Chief, come out here, you gotta see this!”

Lois rose from her chair and muttered, “This had better be good or else—”

Her tirade was halted as soon as her eyes swung to the TV screens hanging from the ceiling. There, on every screen, was a scene of chaos. Trucks and cars were piled together along a highway, some more damaged than others. As expected, Superman was in the background busily moving the most damaged vehicles to a safer area. However it wasn’t Superman that was the focus of the news organizations covering the accident. No, every camera was focused on another figure, dressed in black with an electric blue cape and accents, including a black mask that covered her face, who was hoisting an ambulance above her head and was flying it towards a triage area where it joined many others at the front of the accident.

Everyone watched as the duo streaked back and forth, assisting emergency services personnel as they assessed and treated the injured. Lois estimated that it looked like most of the work was complete and all that remained was clean up.

“All right everyone,” Lois called out, “Back to work. I want everything you can get on this new hero on my desk in one hour or I’ll know the reason why!” With a backward glance at the screen Lois walked into her office. She tossed the article she’d been working on to the side and began preparing for the changes she’d need to make to the evening edition.

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Lois Lane sat at her desk and scanned the front page of the evening edition of the *Daily Planet*. The forty-point headline screamed at her.

**NEW SUPERHERO—SUPERWOMAN!!!!**

Underneath the headline was a news service photo of a tall young woman in a black and electric blue uniform standing next to Superman. The mask that covered her face hid her features and

most of her hair, but Lois knew who this woman was. This was the same young woman who’d been in her office earlier that day. If she’d had any doubts that her daughter had inherited her father’s powers those doubts were now put to rest. Lois smiled a sad smile while at the same time a small amount of pride swelled within her breast.

While Lois may not have been part of this woman’s life, she was still her daughter, and as such, Lois felt some pride at her accomplishments. The grinning man who was now in her doorway drew her attention away from the paper.

“So when do I leave?” Jim Olsen asked, plopping himself in the chair in front of his editor’s desk.

“Leave? For where?” Lois asked, clearly not following.

“Kansas City!” Jim exclaimed. “Surely you want *the* story for the *Planet*, right?”

“Jim, think about it,” Lois said with a glare. “How are you going to find her? She said she’s going to be working with her father on emergencies and natural disasters the world over, she’s not going to be floating around Kansas City waiting for you to interview her!”

“But I thought—”

“I know, Jim, but I can’t have my best reporter running around the country on a wild superhero chase. *If* she comes to Metropolis then I expect you to bust your buns to get the exclusive for the *Planet*, but in the meantime, we run what the wire services send us. Is that clear?”

The look on his boss’s face told him that agreement was his best option, so he nodded his head. “Yeah.”

Lois called out to Jim’s retreating form. “I expect that piece on the new ‘revitalization’ project from the city planners on my desk in thirty minutes!”

Lois settled back in her chair and picked up the paper once more. She scanned the accompanying article and sighed. She could have done *so* much better! Just then her phone rang, so she stuck the paper into her briefcase. This article, as lacking as it was, and the picture, would be the first entry in her new scrapbook.

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It was well past sunset when Lois Lane entered her condo on the 51<sup>st</sup> floor. She flipped on the lights and dropped her purse, briefcase, and coat on the coat rack in the foyer. She glanced around the room, so different from her old place on Carter Avenue. This one was sleek and modern, white and chrome accents in the kitchen proclaimed the style she’d come to love. Plopping down on the couch she grabbed the remote and turned on the TV. LNN flared to life and the scene that had dominated every cable news outlet since Superwoman’s debut this afternoon was playing. By now she was familiar with the black and blue clad superhero as she flashed back and forth, working with her father like a well-oiled team as they efficiently cleared the crash and restored the highway to near normal. She studied the interviews by Superman and Superwoman and smiled. Clark was just as handsome and confident as ever but, even with the mask, Lois could see the nervousness in Lara’s body language. As she watched she guessed, though she couldn’t tell for sure, that Lara’s legs looked slightly shaky! When the next segment came on, a bunch of talking heads speculating on Superwoman’s origins and her motives, Lois turned the TV off.

Walking to her kitchen she took her dinner out of the freezer and popped it into the microwave. While it was cooking, she grabbed her briefcase from the coat rack and pulled out the articles she’d cut out earlier that day. She walked into her bedroom and pulled her Superman scrap book, one she hadn’t added to in years, from under the bed and she set it on the counter just as the microwave beeped. The smell of chicken curry wafted to her nostrils as she pulled the plastic wrap away. In between bites of her dinner Lois turned to a blank page and began placing the articles on the page to be glued in later.

As she ate her dinner, hardly tasting it, her thoughts drifted back to earlier in the day when she'd seen her daughter for the first time in twenty-two years. She was secretly pleased to know that her daughter looked so much like her though she also wondered how Clark had dealt with his feelings as his daughter matured, looking more and more like the woman who'd broken his heart. She imagined that he had to have had mixed feelings. She knew he loved the girl, she'd known that from the moment he'd begged her not to abort his baby, there was never any doubt about that. What made her pause was the thought that he'd seen Lois's face every time he looked at her.

Clark had to have been of two minds, anger, probably as well as disappointment when he saw Lara and realized that the girl's mother was not in her life and how it affected the person he loved with all his heart. Lois knew, without a doubt, that Lara had been negatively affected by the absence of her mother in her life. Her speech earlier today showed the depths of that hurt in stark clarity. It had to have been years since the Mother-Daughter campout Lara had referenced but it still rankled, obviously. Though Lois knew that Martha was vastly more competent in the great outdoors than Lois would ever be it was not competence that Lara had wanted. It was the chance to bond with her mother and to interact with her friends on an equal footing. As Lois pondered this, she felt tears she hadn't realized were there as they ran down her cheeks. She swiped them away with the palms of her hands but others took their place until she was sobbing uncontrollably.

How could she have been so callous! Clark had, many times, reached out to her, offering an olive branch and a way for her to become involved in her daughter's life, as well as his, but she'd rebuffed every one of them. She'd convinced herself that Clark was better off without her and she was better off as well. With the example of her parent's marriage, and their continued animosity after the divorce, Lois was sure that marriage was *not* for her and that Clark was better off without her. It was only now, after seeing her daughter and how angry she was, that she regretted that decision of so long ago. With a deep sigh Lois closed the scrapbook and tossed the now cold remnants of her meal in the trash and headed for bed.

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Martha and Jonathan Kent drove up to the old farmhouse and exited the truck excitedly. On the ride home, they'd heard the news of the crash on I-35 and of the debut of the new superhero. As soon as they entered, Martha rushed up to Lara and engulfed her in a fierce hug.

"Oh sweetie, I'm so proud of you!" Martha said as she kissed her granddaughter's cheek.

"We both are," Jonathan said. He pulled his granddaughter into a bear hug as soon as she'd escaped from Martha's arms. His eyes were gleaming with unshed tears, pride swelling his chest.

"Thanks, Grandma, Grandpa! It was sooo exciting! I was so nervous, but Dad calmed me down. I tried to focus on doing what the emergency services people wanted me to do and it seemed so natural that I forgot I was even nervous, at least until the press conference," Lara said with a chuckle.

"You did just fine, Pumpkin," Clark said, proudly. "You handled them like a real pro!"

"Now, Dad, you know that's not true!" Lara laughed as she bumped shoulders with her dad. "I'm surprised they didn't hear my knees knocking! If it wasn't for you being there, I'm sure I would have been tongue-tied."

"You'll get better, don't worry. You should have seen my first few press conferences. I almost lost it when a pack of reporters first descended on me." Clark's expression grew wistful.

Martha shooed her family to the table. It was time to celebrate! "Why don't we sit down and have some hot apple pie and milk? I want to hear all about your day."

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Late that night, while her father was out on patrol, Lara lay in her bed staring at and through the ceiling to the stars above. The events of the day played through her mind over and over. Her first real rescue! Her debut as the world's newest superhero had gone very well, considering. At first, she'd felt overwhelmed when she'd scanned the scene as they'd arrived. Once her father had given her direction, she'd snapped out of her contemplation and instinct took over.

Periodically she'd glanced at her dad as he worked. Seeing him smile reassuringly gave her the confidence she needed to perform her duties. The faces of the first responders gave her confidence as well. They looked at her as if she, like her father, was eminently qualified to assist them, even though she felt less than sure herself.

Lara was also very grateful that there had been no fatalities, at least this time. Her mind went back to an incident a few years ago when she'd helped, as a volunteer, as part of a tornado cleanup effort. She'd had nightmares for days after from the devastation she'd seen so she was very glad that, this time, she didn't have to deal with death, up close and personal.

Lara wondered how her dad handled it. She knew, over the years, he'd dealt with people dying, but he'd never shown that it affected him negatively. She knew her father had hidden his agony from her, because he wouldn't want to worry his little girl unnecessarily. But even so, she wondered how he dealt with the evils Superman saw on a regular basis and if she could learn to cope as well as he seemed to do. Lara took a deep breath and resolved to have a conversation with him, as difficult as it may be.

Her thoughts now turned to the other momentous event of this day. It had started well enough, considering. When she'd walked into the kitchen and saw her father there, reading the paper, she'd almost changed her plans. She knew, after talking with him last night, that he didn't want her to confront Lois Lane and, normally, that would have been enough to deter her from her chosen path. Her father had always been her rock and she'd learned from him that people like them couldn't let their emotions rule their actions. She knew that one misplaced bit of strength could have devastating consequences.

Her father had impressed the need for control of her emotions but sometimes it was hard not to get angry. Ever since the time she'd kicked a rock because she was mad at what Lindsay had done and had made a huge hole in the barn wall, she'd never acted out physically again. As punishment her father had made her fix the hole even though, at the time, she didn't know the first thing about repairing the hole. He supervised her, helping her repair the damage and, at the same time, reiterated the need for her to be extremely careful because of her powers. That was a lesson she never forgot, but sometimes her emotions got the best of her despite her best efforts. She wondered, idly, if her temper might have been inherited from her mother. Seeing Lois Lane today seemed to confirm that hypothesis. Lois had been stunned to see her at first but, as things grew more tense, she'd gone on offense, for a moment at least, and Lara saw some of herself in the woman behind the desk. It seemed that it wasn't only her features she'd inherited from Lois Lane, and she knew she'd have to be even more careful in future.

All in all, Lara, was pleased with her first rescue and how her meeting with Lois had gone. With a sigh she closed her eyes and turned onto her side. She fell asleep with the sounds of the night caressing her.

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Throughout that summer, Lara grew more confident, with rescues and with the press. At Clark's suggestion, she took first aid and other lifesaving courses offered by the Red Cross, which helped her confidence greatly. At his insistence she also studied every book on the human body she could so that she could learn to assess injuries at the scene. In this way she would know when not

to move a person and when it was safe to do so. She was also better able to pass along her findings to emergency personnel at the scene.

She also studied her father's technique at accidents and natural disasters. Lara devoured internet videos of Superman's rescues, current, and past, as well as her own. She critiqued herself, determined to improve, so she could live up to her father's legacy. Father and daughter worked like a well-oiled machine and became a real team. More than one reporter commented on the obvious rapport between father and daughter.

As summer ended, Lara grew more and more restless and more conflicted. She loved working with her father, but she also felt the need to explore the world as she had planned. As she had done ever since she was little, she knew that it was time to talk to her dad.

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Lara walked in and settled on the couch in the den. "Hi, Dad. Can we talk?" Her father had been working on his new manuscript, but he stopped as soon as Lara sat down, his attention fully on her.

"What's up, Lara?"

"I don't know what to do, Dad. I love working with you but..." she trailed off.

"It's getting time for you to leave on your trip, right?"

Her gaze focused on the pattern of the wood floor. "Yeah," she said.

"So, what's the problem? I love working with you but I *have* worked alone before. I think I remember how that goes." Clark grinned at her, his eyes alight and teasing.

"Da-ad, you know what I mean. It's not that simple. Now that I've committed, I feel like I'm letting people down if I go off exploring the world." There, she'd said it, and it felt good to get it off her chest.

"Tell me this, are you going to ignore emergencies while you're away?"

Lara's eyes met her father's her face showing surprise. "No! Of course not."

"And if you hear of something really big, you'll be there to help, won't you?"

"Yes, you know I will."

"Then I don't see a problem," Clark said calmly. "You can be anywhere in the world in a matter of seconds, so you don't need to be here to help. You've already established that Superwoman assists at major events, accidents, natural disasters, and such. Unlike Superman, who actively tries to suppress crime, that's not your thing and I respect that. Like I told you when you were a little girl, there's no pressure to do more than you're comfortable with. We both serve our fellow man, just in different ways."

"But I'm planning to visit some pretty remote areas. I won't be aware of stuff that I could assist with—"

"How many times have I told you that we can't be everywhere or do everything? We help when and how we can. We're not God, nor are we gods like the ancient Romans, Greeks, or Vikings. We don't control what men do, all we can do is react when something happens. No matter how fast we are we can't be everywhere at once. Once you accept those limitations you'll see that what we *can* do is enough. Pumpkin, you have the right to live your life. Don't let your desire to help control how you live that life, okay?"

Lara smiled happily. Her dad always knew the right thing to say to calm her fears and bring perspective back into her life.

"Dad, I know you explored the world after college. You've written all about your adventures, but you've never said *why* you did it. Were you looking for something specific?"

Clark sat back in his seat, his hands clasped behind his head. He seemed to be thinking, ordering his thoughts before he responded.

"There were a lot of reasons. I'd grown up on the farm, but I knew I didn't want to be a farmer. Mom and Dad knew that too, and they supported me completely. At the time I didn't know much about myself—this was years before I found the globe, you know. I knew I had all these amazing abilities, but I had no idea why. We'd discussed all kinds of theories; was I a Russian or U.S. experiment, some weird mutation, or was I even from Earth, but we weren't sure? I'd hoped that there might be others out there like me and I might be able to find them.

"I also wanted to help, to use my powers to save lives. I'd done a few things locally, but Dad was always worried that someone we knew would see me and—"

"—They'd dissect you like a frog. I know, Dad. I can't believe Grandpa told you stuff like that!"

"Well, don't fault your grandpa too much. He was just concerned for my safety. While it may have seemed extreme, he did make an impression on me. It made me think before I acted and I'm sure it saved me from exposure later in life. Also, I was searching for something, someone, though I didn't know it at the time. I'd always felt different from my friends, and it wasn't just the powers.

"My friends were developing relationships, falling in love, even getting married, and I just didn't feel the same way. I wondered if I'd ever find someone I wanted to share my life with. I'd had relationships, of course, Lana, during high school and a couple of others during college, but there was never anyone special, you know? When I traveled, I met a lot of beautiful women, some of whom were very interested in me, but the connection was never there. I also moved around a lot because I'd do something that no normal person could do, and I'd have to leave because I didn't want to draw attention to myself which made it difficult to have a serious relationship with a woman. Of course, you won't have that problem."

"No. Having a secret identity will make it easier for me, that's for sure."

"Right. So that's the reason for my travels. I found that people, no matter where they live, are very similar. They want to live their lives in safety and provide for their children. Governments have agendas that conflict with those goals, but the people are pretty much the same the world over."

Lara stood up and walked over to kiss her father on the cheek. "Thanks, Dad. I love you. Goodnight."

Clark turned back to his computer and went back to work. "Goodnight, Pumpkin."

Lara walked to her bedroom, pondering what her father had said. She understood him a little better now. He'd been so lonely and confused as a young man. Lara thought back to how she'd had his love and support as her body changed and her powers had developed. She could hardly fathom what that must have been like for him. It had to be frightening for him and for Grandma and Grandpa as well. Lara realized just how lucky she was that she'd been spared the uncertainty and fear her father had experienced growing up. She'd known she had to hide her differences, but knowing what they were and how to control them had made her life so much easier.

Now that she was about to go on her trip to explore the world, the reasons for doing so were so much different from her father's. While he'd been looking for others like him, she was not. She knew her heritage, thanks to her father and the globe, and did not need to search for beings like herself. She planned to help, to use her powers to alleviate suffering, but with her secret identity, she'd have no fear of discovery when she did so unless she got *very* careless.

As for the search for someone to complete her, that wasn't what she was looking for, not at this point in her life. She'd had casual relationships in high school and college, but she'd never felt the connection that her father had experienced with Lois Lane.

Lara didn't feel the need for a man to complete her. She enjoyed the company of men, enjoyed dating and meeting interesting people, but she made sure that any man she dated knew from the start that she wasn't looking for a lover—and if they didn't like it then that was too bad. After a while, Lara found that it became easier if she did group activities. That way there would be less opportunity for misunderstanding. Lara had lots of friends, both guys, and girls, and she liked it that way.

Now that she'd graduated, most of her friends were going to be job hunting, something she was postponing for a year. Her friends were jealous that she could travel while they could not, but she also knew they were happy for her and wished her well. Lara planned to keep in touch with everyone anyway. Her laptop would be her constant companion for writing freelance stories about her adventures, for the *Post* and local papers as well. She'd be building a portfolio while having the adventure of her life. How lucky could one girl get?

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### Chapter Three—South America, Africa, and Australia

Lara's first port of call was Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. She was amazed at the vibrancy of the city and Corcovado peak, with its colossal statue of Jesus that dominated the skyline. Though she spoke no Portuguese she picked up the language quickly. Luckily, she'd inherited her father's affinity for languages as well as his eidetic memory, and the translator app on her phone didn't hurt either.

The city, as she explored it, impressed upon her the stark contrast between rich and poor. People in the major cities lived in what she would consider 'modern' conditions but there were way too many who lived subsistence types of lives and lived in what she'd describe as hovels. She'd seen poverty in the United States, Appalachia for example, but nothing there could have prepared her for the poverty she saw here, in this very prosperous city.

That first week Lara fairly attacked her laptop. The story of what she'd seen flowed from her fingers to the screen. She didn't find fault, she had no intention of angering local authorities, but she did know that she wanted to make people aware of the situation. Her article would appear in the *Smallville Post*, and she'd ask her father to submit it to other papers, potentially giving it a wider readership.

The next morning she took her article to the largest local newspaper, *The Globe*, and to her great surprise, she sold her article on the first try.

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"How long have you been in our fair city, Ms. Kent?" Manuel Peña, the city editor asked. He was a middle-aged man of portly build, shorter than she, with black salt and pepper hair and a pencil mustache.

"Not long, I'm afraid. I just got here a week or so ago."

"I'm impressed. You've captured the plight of our poor without resorting to melodrama better than some of our native writers."

Lara appreciated that someone that she didn't know recognized her work. "Thank you, Senhor Peña. I appreciate your kind words." Her family and her professors had praised her work but coming from a stranger this kind of validation meant a lot to her.

"I'd like to run this for our weekend section. I assume standard freelance rates are acceptable to you?"

"Oh, yes, I'm sure that will be more than fair."

"Good. I hope that if you write any more articles, you'll give us the first right of refusal?"

"I will, Senhor Peña, though I don't know how long I'll be in the city. I'm spending a year abroad, expanding my horizons, so I plan to keep moving. There's a lot of the world to see and not a lot of time."

"That's too bad for me, Ms. Kent. I could use a writer like

you on my paper." Manuel Peña stood and extended his hand, which Lara shook. "It's been a pleasure meeting you, and good luck on your journey."

Lara smiled brightly, pleased that this man wanted her to work for him. "It's been my pleasure, Senhor Peña. Thanks for printing my article. I'll look for it on Sunday."

Lara made her way to the accounting department to get her check. While it wasn't a lot of money, it was her first real sale. Lara made a photocopy of her check so she could add it to her scrapbook at home before she cashed it. As she left the bank, Lara was so happy she had to be doubly sure her feet were still on the ground. She could hardly wait to tell her dad about her first big sale!

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A few weeks later Lara left Brazil and made her way to the Andes Mountains. For the next few months, she followed the chain through Ecuador and Peru, through Bolivia and into Chile and Argentina. She stopped in large cities and small villages, spending nights in small hostels or individual homes, or sometimes she camped out under the stars. When she found areas that provided internet access, Lara emailed her friends and family, extolling the beauty of the countries and peoples she'd seen.

She submitted articles about the conditions of the native peoples she met, urging her readers to contribute to the various charities that served them. And here Lara learned that her father was right. People were very similar no matter where they lived. They wanted to live in peace and safety and to provide for their families. In places where Lara saw injustice, she exposed it, though never in a way that would reflect badly on the native population.

For the most part, there were no emergencies for Superwoman. Natural disasters were blissfully absent, though she did find times where she witnessed people in need. Once when she was hiking through Nahuel Huapi Park in Argentina a situation arose that required Superwoman. She'd just finished her breakfast and had hoisted her pack to her shoulder when she heard a scream.

"My baby! He fell into the river! Oh please, someone, help!"

Lara glanced around with her x-ray vision and saw a young native woman standing beside the fast-moving water pointing to a toddler being swept away by the current. Lara hurried behind a copse of trees and spun into her suit. Seconds later, she handed the crying, soaking wet little boy back to his mother.

"Here you go, ma'am. He's all right, just scared," Lara said in Spanish as she touched down, the boy cradled in her arms. The woman looked on in awe at the flying woman who stood in front of her, holding her son.

The woman wept with joy once her child was safely in her arms. "Oh thank you! Thank you! Thank you!"

"You're very welcome, ma'am. Keep an eye on that little one. I bet he's a handful."

Lara smiled, floated a few feet away then disappeared in a flash. She listened as she returned to where she'd left her pack, as the woman told her friends how an angel in black had rescued her little boy.

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Lara touched down behind the barn and spun into jeans and a t-shirt. She entered and saw her grandfather just finishing up his evening chores.

"Grandpa!" Lara shouted hugging him fiercely. It felt so good to be home after three months away.

"Lara! God, it's good to see you girl! We've missed you around here," Jonathan said as his arms enveloped her.

"I've missed all of you too, Grandpa. Email is nice but it's better to be here."

"I remember when your dad was traveling. We didn't have email then, so he'd send postcards and called some. Boy those phone bills were killers!" Jonathan laughed, thinking back over

the years.

Lara was confused. “Didn’t Dad come home? I mean he could be here in minutes...”

“Sure he did, but he was searching for things he couldn’t find on the farm and we knew that, so we weren’t surprised when he didn’t visit too often.”

Lara studied Jonathan’s face. “That must have been hard on you and Grandma, huh?” Her grandfather had never been one to talk about his feelings, but his expressions always gave her clues as to how he felt.

“It was, but he was a grown man and needed to find his way, kinda like you!” Jonathan pulled her into another bear hug and he kissed her cheek.

Lara chuckled. “Yeah, well, I know my way. I’m just having fun and learning about the world. I’ll be back so often you’ll be asking me to leave!”

“No chance of that, sweetie, no chance of that. Come on, let’s go see if your Dad is home yet.”

Lara walked hand in hand with her grandfather as she’d done since she was young, the peaceful atmosphere of the farm warmed her heart. They entered the kitchen to see her father and grandmother working together to put the evening meal on the table.

“Look who dropped in, literally!” Jonathan said as he hung up his jacket.

Clark swung his daughter around in his arms and hugged her tightly. “Lara!”

“I missed you too, Dad!” Lara said as she kissed her father’s cheek and hugged him tightly. “Now put me down so I can hug Grandma!” Clark set her down slowly as if he were reluctant to let her go.

“Traveling suits you, sweetie.” Martha hugged her granddaughter tightly. “You look great, though I think you haven’t been eating regularly, have you?”

Lara laughed happily. “Grandma, you know I don’t need to eat!”

“Pish-posh, a growing girl needs to eat! Now sit down and tell us all about your travels.”

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Lara regaled them with tales of her adventures in the wilds of South America, filling them in on things she’d emailed them about and extolling the beauty of the continent.

“South America is one continent I never really visited, especially during my travels,” Clark said wistfully. “I don’t know why and now I’m sorry I missed it.”

Lara exclaimed. “I know, Dad. It’s funny that there’s this whole continent to our south and people just ignore it!”

Clark said proudly. “Well, they aren’t going to be ignoring it much longer. Your articles have been very popular on the circuit. Most of the large papers in the country have picked up your articles.

“I didn’t know that, Dad. You never mentioned it in your emails.”

“You asked me to submit some of your articles around and that’s what I did. I didn’t say anything because I wanted to surprise you.”

“Thanks, Dad. I’m very grateful. The people down there are so wonderful, but they could use some help. If my stories help them improve their lives, then I’m very happy.”

“I know how you feel. Even though I have all these powers, some of my greatest accomplishments have come from articles I’ve written that have helped people.”

“Yeah, no superpower can make you a better writer, that’s for sure.”

“Nope, that’s hard work and talent,” Clark said, lovingly.

Lara nudged her dad’s shoulder and quipped, “That and some heredity, huh, Dad?”

“More than you know, Pumpkin, more than you know.”

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Lois Lane glanced at the guest editorial in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* on her laptop. It was another in a series about poverty in South America, something she’d not normally have the least bit of interest in. It wasn’t that Lois wasn’t interested in the fight against poverty, but she preferred to focus closer to home. She’d written many articles and editorials herself over the years on the need to provide a helping hand, not a handout, to the poor and disadvantaged of Metropolis and by extension, throughout the country. However, it wasn’t the subject, per se, but the author she was interested in.

It was funny how the author had come to her attention.

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Lois needed some filler for the Sunday supplement and had asked Jim Olsen to come up with something. He’d come back an hour or so later with an article that was making the rounds freelance to various papers and had made it to the *Planet*. It was an article on poverty in Rio de Janeiro, and he had noticed the author’s name, Lara Kent.

“Hey, Lois, about the Sunday supplement article...?”

“Yeah, what have you got?”

“I came across this in the freelance pile and noticed the author.” Jim handed the article to Lois and pointed out the name. Lois gasped and her heart skipped a beat. “Do you think she’s Clark’s daughter?”

Jim still missed Clark, even after all these years. They talked on the phone a few times a year but while they avoided talking about their private lives Jim knew Clark had a daughter. Clark had said as much soon after he’d left the *Planet* and it would make sense that Clark’s daughter would be a writer, at least to him. Heck, she even wrote a little like Clark, touchy-feely stuff, though there was some bite to it as well.

“I don’t know, Jim. Could be, I guess.” Lois tried to maintain her calm as she scanned the article, her head down so she could avoid Jim’s gaze. It was at times like this that her heart was troubled. She’d missed so much of her daughter’s life, and now that she’d met her, she regretted her decision of so long ago even if that meeting *was* less than cordial. When she felt she was in control again she looked back up at him. “Yeah, this will do. Thanks, Jim.”

Jim Olsen returned to his desk none the wiser but Lois, however, was still in shock. Her daughter was a writer! Who would have thought? Although, given who her parents were, why did that fact surprise her? Clark loved to write and was damn good at it, even if his writing wasn’t very hard-hitting. He’d made his living lately writing travel books based on his early adventures before he’d come to the *Planet*, and only recently had branched out into adventure stories. Neither of those was her cup of tea, but she’d noticed that they consistently hit the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list year after year.

Lois read the article through once more with a critical eye and found very little to complain about. Lara’s style favored Clark more than herself, but there were flashes of brilliance that reminded her of some things she’d written at that age. Lois sent a copy of the article to the Sunday supplement editor for her concurrence, then stuffed the original into her briefcase, soon to join the Superwoman articles she had in her scrapbook.

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Lois’s thoughts returned to the present where she focused on the editorial on her screen. It was the latest in the series that had started with that article on Rio. Lara had continued to provide commentary about the plight of the poor in South American countries, championing the need to provide help to assist them in their desire to rise above their situation and gain a better life for themselves and their families. While Lara’s style was still not hard-hitting enough for her liking, the style did fit the subject

matter. Lois saved a copy to the folder she kept for Lara's articles, and she also sent one to her printer for addition to her scrapbook. As the laser printer hummed away in the background Lois couldn't help but feel a sense of pride at the accomplishments of the child to whom she'd given birth.

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Lara reluctantly left South America but she'd accomplished everything she'd set out to do there. She'd developed a love for the peoples of the continent, and she hoped that her words would move people and governments to act to help them achieve what she knew was possible.

Her next stop was Africa. If she'd thought poverty in South America was bad, Africa was worse. South America had, for the most part, decent governments that were mostly shortsighted when it came to their people. But it seemed that several African countries were having a contest as to which one would have the most corrupt, violent government—and almost every one of them were vying for first place. There were some bright spots, of course. South Africa and Egypt and some others had stable governments, but they were the minority.

Lara wrote to her father many times about the horrors she'd seen and had bemoaned the impotence she felt when she saw the crushing poverty there. While he sympathized with her and provided some suggestions on how to make a difference in the lives of the common people, he also let her know that a super-powered person, or two, could only do so much. Human beings had free will, and as much as he'd love to have peace break out on the African continent, that just wasn't in the cards, at least not now.

After many weeks in continent Lara experienced frustration on an unprecedented level. She'd spent weeks working with a local Christian charity group to provide clean drinking water to the natives of a remote Rwandan village when a roaming band of rebels raided the village. She briefly pondered showing up as Superwoman but realized that since she was the only white woman around for hundreds of miles, Superwoman showing up would not be a good idea.

Lara had to stand by impotently while the rebels stole the equipment and poisoned the well. Luckily, the villagers had run for the hills while the destruction was happening, or things could have been much worse. Lara had to spend twice as long helping the villagers dig a new well, and Lara left Africa soon thereafter, frustrated, and humbled, something that her writing reflected.

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In two different homes, in two far distant states, a man and a woman were reading an article by their child with tears in their eyes.

Clark Kent had been aware of the situation in Rwanda because of the emails he'd exchanged with Lara. He'd tried to be there for her — as much as he could considering the distance that separated them, but nothing she'd written had prepared him for the depths of despair she'd experienced in that tiny African village. Her writing touched his heart and reminded him of some of the things he'd seen on that same continent thirty years earlier. Clark felt her frustration because it seemed that nothing had changed, nor would it.

One of the hardest things he'd had to learn when he became Superman was that he was not omnipotent. He could not, nor would he have wanted to, bend people to his will, no matter how benign that will might be. Now his daughter had learned the same hard lesson very pointedly and it pained him greatly.

He could imagine Lara asking herself what good were her powers if she couldn't use them to stop the suffering she'd seen? While Clark knew that she'd had to learn these lessons on her own, he wished that he'd been able to spare her, to protect her from the bad things in life, like he'd done when she was a child. Clark sighed, wishing for all the world that the biggest problem

his little girl faced now was her childhood rival — Lindsay.

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Lois Lane had no idea that Lara had been in Africa until her article had shown up in the online version of the *Kansas City Star*. Lois had her search engine set up so that it flagged anything written by Lara Kent, so when the chime sounded alerting her to a new article she eagerly clicked on the link.

Lois lay in bed, reading the article, as tears formed in her eyes and rolled unheeded down her cheeks. Lois cried for the person beaten down by the evils of the world but she also cried for the woman she felt she'd come to know through her writing.

Lois remembered her own trip to the African continent, long before she'd met Clark Kent. She'd gone to the Congo on a gunrunning story that had fallen apart soon after she'd arrived. While Lois hadn't been there long, she'd seen how desperate that country was at that time, and now through Lara's writing, Lois realized that nothing had changed, just the location of the suffering. Lois closed her laptop and turned off the light. She'd add this article to her scrapbook later. Right now, though, she couldn't bear to think about the pain her daughter had experienced and had brought to life so starkly through her words.

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After the crushing poverty of Rwanda, the Outback of Australia fit Lara's mood. There was no one around for hundreds of miles, no one was there to see her tears, to hear her rage against the world, or to hold her and tell her that she'd done the best she could. Lara briefly contemplated going home. She could sure use one of Grandma's hugs but she wasn't quite ready to face anyone yet. She'd poured her heart and soul into her article about Rwanda and she was feeling a bit raw. Lara wanted to take some time to gain some perspective before she returned home, and Australia seemed to be the place to do it. Besides, she was a grown woman now and she shouldn't be running home to Daddy at the first sign of trouble.

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Lara touched down a few hundred miles southwest of the Gibson Desert Nature Reserve in Western Australia about halfway between Perth and Alice Springs. She closed her eyes and took a deep relaxing breath. Extending her hearing to its limits she listened for sounds of people and found none. Her arms outstretched, she stood silently, her face turned towards the sun, its rays absorbed by her body, invigorated her. Before she'd left Rwanda, she'd filled her pack with food and water, enough to last for weeks. Though she could easily find both in a city if she needed to, she was unwilling to go anywhere near civilization. What she needed now was to heal her injured heart after her experiences in Rwanda.

Though it was quite hot Lara was not uncomfortable but still, she preferred to sit in the shade. She scanned the area for trees and found some about a mile away so she picked up her pack and set out at a leisurely pace. While she walked, she heard a sound she couldn't identify so Lara scanned the area and found a herd of dromedary camels in the distance.

"Hey there," Lara whispered as she drew closer to the herd. They seemed skittish so she slowed down so that she wouldn't scare them. Reaching into her bag she pulled out an apple as she got closer. A large male saw her and walked over, his eyes locked on the fruit in her hand.

"That's it. I won't hurt you," Lara said in a soft, soothing voice. The camel stopped and sniffed the air. He seemed to sense that Lara was friendly so he stood his ground. Lara extended her hand, palm up like she did with the horse on the farm, and stopped. The camel walked slowly closer until it stood right in front of her.

"Here you go, boy. This is for you." The camel extended its neck and opened its mouth so he could grasp the tasty treat with his teeth. With one loud crunch, the apple disappeared, juice

sliding out between his lips.

When the camel nudged Lara's hand looking for more, she laughed. "Sorry boy, that's all you're getting." The camel seemed to know there would be no more treats so he returned to the herd without even a backward glance.

"Well, you could have at least said thank you!"

Lara continued her trek to the group of trees until, fifteen minutes later, she was sitting beneath a large tree with her head resting against the trunk. Though she didn't need much sleep Lara found her eyes were heavy so she closed them and drifted off to sleep.

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Lara must have been more tired than she expected because by the time she woke up the sun was close to setting. Standing up she brushed the dirt off her shorts then she rubbed her hands together to clean them. Since it would be dark soon, she decided to build a fire. A quick search found several rocks that she placed in a circle then she gathered sticks and dead branches from the nearby trees. One quick blast of heat vision and Lara had a roaring fire going.

The smell of burning wood along with the crackle of the flames made her smile. She remembered happy times she'd spent around campfires with her dad and grandfather and at the infamous Mother-Daughter camp out with her grandmother when she was twelve. Lara leaned back against the tree once more, the silence of the night lulling her. When the fire finally died down Lara scooped dirt over the embers. It was a beautiful night with no hint of rain so she hung her pack from a rope in the upper branches of the tree. She then floated above the tree and onto her back where she put her hands behind her head, closed her eyes, and drifted into a dreamless sleep.

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#### Chapter Four—Healing and Exploring

Lara spent the rest of that week exploring. The solitude was absolute and it gave her plenty of time to reflect on her place in the world. She had started on this journey around the world with the goal of gaining experience of other cultures, which she had. The months she'd spent in South America had exposed her to cultures that most people never experienced. She thought back, remembering how excited she'd been to begin her African journey.

Her trip through Africa had started out so well, she thought ironically. A Christian missionary group, whose task was to provide vaccinations to children, was looking for volunteers. While Lara had no medical training, she'd taken multiple Red Cross courses so they assigned her to assist the nurses who were giving the shots.

Lara loved working with the mothers and their children. She felt a sense of accomplishment as she helped calm the little ones before and after their shots. She would give smiles and cuddles when a crying boy or girl would wrap their little arms around her, seeking comfort. A side benefit of working with the nurses was that she learned the local language prevalent in that area. Some of the people she met spoke French or English, but she also learned Swahili well enough to converse with the natives.

When she heard of another local group who was going to be working in Rwanda to bring fresh water to remote villages, she jumped at the chance to join them. Lara was looking forward to using her hands, digging wells, and setting up equipment.

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"Hey, Lara," Mr. Sanders, a tall black man with a French accent said. "You sure put in a good day's work today!" He sat down on a chair in the mess tent and gestured for Lara to join him.

"Thanks, Mr. Sanders. I grew up on a farm so I'm not afraid of a little hard work."

"I believe you. You're a better worker than some of the men."

Lara blushed at the compliment. "Thank you, Mr. Sanders. You're too kind."

"No, I mean it. You seem to have amazing stamina." Mr.

Sanders laughed self-deprecatingly. "You worked rings around me!"

Lara's brow furrowed, maybe she'd done *too* much. Even though she thought she'd been careful it was obvious that at least one person had noticed something out of the ordinary. "If you don't mind, Mr. Sanders, I think I'll go to my cot. I think all that work is finally catching up with me."

"Of course, you take it easy. I don't want you miss work tomorrow, we have a big day ahead of us."

Lara walked out of the mess tent and made her way over to the tent that she shared with five other women. She flopped onto her cot and took a deep breath. 'I need to watch myself. I *know* I didn't do anything super but I need to be sure to take more breaks so as not to draw undue attention.'

A week later the new well was producing clean, healthy water. Native women lined up waiting their turn to fill their water jugs while their children played around their feet. Lara watched with a sense of pride at a job well done. All was well in the village and Lara's group was packing up to move along to another village the next day when a young man named Jamir came running into the center of the village.

"Run!" he cried at the top of his lungs. "Rebels are coming! Run! *RUN!*"

Lara grabbed Jamir by the arm, halting him. "Jamir, what do you mean? How do you know?"

"I see the dust clouds from their trucks, Miss Lara! I know it is them. We need to leave, *now!*"

Women gathered their children and the men grabbed food and what water they had and began to stream out of the village running frantically for the nearby hills.

"Mr. Sanders, what can we do?" Lara asked, panic evident in her voice.

"Nothing I'm afraid. We have no way to defend ourselves or these people. The best thing we can do is pick up as many as we can on the way and help them evacuate." The members of her group jumped in the trucks that they used to bring supplies and that were now used for evacuation.

Lara briefly contemplated showing up as Superwoman to protect the village but she rejected that idea. She was the only white woman for hundreds of miles and if Superwoman made an appearance it would lead back to her. With a growl of frustration she hopped in the back of the last truck as it roared out towards the hills.

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The next day the village elders assigned Jamil to see if it was safe for their people to return. Lara had volunteered but Mr. Sanders would have none of it. Jamil returned an hour later with news that the rebels had left. Everyone packed up their belongings and the women, children and the elderly piled into the trucks while the men followed along behind.

When the trucks came to a stop Lara hopped out, stunned by the devastation she saw in the once picturesque village. They'd ransacked the new well, stolen the pumps and thrown sand and rocks down it. Not only that but every hut had sustained damage from the rebels plundering them, looking for anything of value. Lara cried along with the women and even some of the men at the devastation.

Mr. Sanders called a meeting with his volunteers and assigned them tasks. Some would be going back to the depot for more equipment while he assigned the rest to help repair homes to make them habitable, at least until the new equipment arrived, then they would all be working to get a new well up and running.

Every day for the next two weeks Lara worked tirelessly at every task but at night she would cry herself to sleep as silently as she could.

Akinyi and Amara, two of her tent mates, heard Lara crying one night.

“Lara, why do you cry?” Akinyi asked softly.

Lara sat up and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “I’m sorry to have awakened you,” Lara said apologetically. “I’ve never experienced cruelty like this before. I knew there was evil in the world, of course, but I guess I’ve led a very sheltered life. How do you deal with this?”

“In Rwanda we have experienced this and much worse during the genocide,” Amara said sympathetically. “It is hard to accept and even harder to live with but what else can we do? We mourn our dead and try to live our lives as best we can.”

Lara smiled sadly, her admiration for these strong women nearly overwhelmed her. “I can’t believe how strong you and your people are.” Lara sighed with despair. “Let’s all get some sleep, it’s going to be another long day.”

Turning over, Lara closed her eyes and tried to relax but sleep would not come. The words of her friends played over and over in her mind. How could these people continue after the devastating things they’d experienced? She’d read of the genocide in her journalism classes but reading about it was nothing to meeting people who’d actually experienced it. She saw, first hand, the people who’d been attacked and mutilated just because they were from a different tribe. None of it made sense and it probably never would. All she could do was learn from these people, the survivors, and how they lived their lives after devastating loss. Hours later Lara fell into a restless sleep and awoke unrefreshed to face another day.

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One day, with repairs to the village and the well completed, Lara took Mr. Sanders aside.

“Mr. Sanders, I want you to know that I won’t be going with you to the next village,” Lara said sadly.

“Why, Lara?”

“I just can’t stay,” Lara said, her head down, her shoulders slumped. “I’m sorry but I can’t say anymore.”

“I suspected as much but I had hoped that I was wrong.”

Lara looked up into Mr. Sanders sad brown eyes. “What do you mean, sir?”

“I saw that your heart was not in your work ever since the raid.” When Lara made to argue he continued quickly. “I don’t mean that you didn’t work just as hard, Lara, you did even more than before. But I could see the sadness in your eyes. The other girls noticed too.” With a deep sigh Mr. Sanders extended his hand to her.

“Good luck, Lara, we’re going to miss you. I hope that wherever you go next you can find some peace.”

Lara packed her things, said goodbye to her tent mates and hopped the next truck into town.

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Shaking herself out of her reverie Lara wiped the tears from her face with the back of her hand. She’d been alone in the desolation of the Outback for weeks and she was still brought to tears just thinking about Rwanda though she was dealing with her feelings better every day. She knew that she’d never forget her experiences there and it had nothing to do with her eidetic memory. The people and the evil they’d suffered would stay in her heart. Her heart would heal but she’d never be the innocent woman she’d been only a few weeks prior.

The next morning Lara decided that she needed to take some sort of bath. While she didn’t sweat, she did feel dirty. Sand and dust coated her body and her hair was a mess. Lara wondered what her family would say if they could see her now. She knew there was supposed to be a waterfall somewhere nearby so she floated high into the air to scan the horizon until she saw the falls about fifty miles away. Lara scooped up her pack then flew leisurely to the falls where a river tumbled over a precipice that looked to be one-hundred feet high and dumped into a deep blue pond. She landed at the top of the falls and set her pack on the ground.

Scanning the area she listened carefully for any sign of people, then with a smile, she stripped off her clothes and executed a perfect swan dive into the pond. Lara pulled up at the bottom and paddled around watching the schools of small fish that she found. Floating to the surface Lara swept her hair back with her hands, the water cascading down her face. She swam over to the falls and climbed out onto the rocks with the water pounding down on her. After a few minutes she dove back into the water swimming laps back and forth across the small pond.

‘I haven’t skinny dipped in years,’ she thought and she smiled. ‘The last time was when Sally, Ashley and I did it that summer before junior high.’

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Lara, Sally, and Ashley had been playing in the fields behind the Kent farmhouse for hours when Sally suggested that they take a break because it was getting hot. The three girls walked over to the big oak tree near the pond and sat down in the shade.

After a few minutes Lara said wistfully, “You know, I could really go for a swim right now. That water looks cool and inviting.”

Ashley nodded her head in agreement. “Yeah, that does sound good. Too bad we don’t have our bathing suits.”

Lara grinned mischievously. “Who says we need suits! It’s only the three of us.” She stood up and headed to the pond, pulling her t-shirt off as she went.

“Come on you two. What are you waiting for?” Lara tossed her t-shirt to the ground, followed by her sneakers, shorts and underwear. With a splash she was in the cool water.

“Guys! Come on. The water’s great!” Ashley and Sally looked at each other, then grinned conspiratorially. They took off at a run, and soon they joined Lara in the cool clear water. The three of them had been swimming and splashing each other for quite a while when they were rudely interrupted.

“Girls! What’s going on here?” Clark Kent asked. Immediately the three of them ducked below the water until only their heads remained visible. Lara knew her father was *not* happy.

“N-n-nothing, Daddy. We’re just swimming,” Lara said nervously.

“I can see you’re swimming. Where are your bathing suits?”

Lara, as the default spokesperson, replied. “We were really hot, Daddy and it would have been too late to swim if Ashley and Sally had to go home to get their suits. We were all alone so we decided to go... you know... like this.” Lara felt her face burn with embarrassment, and a quick glance told her that her companions felt the same way.

“I came down here to get Ashley because her mother needs her at home. I’m going to turn around now and you three get dressed!” Clark turned around and the three girls exited the water and hastily dressed. They threw on their clothes which became soaked through as the water ran down their bodies.

“All right now. Ashley, you, and Sally get in my car and I’ll take you home. Lara, you get inside and get changed, then help grandma with supper.”

Sally looked hopefully at Clark before they got in the car. “Mr. Kent? You won’t tell our parents about this, will you?”

Clark leaned down and looked each of them in the eye. “No, I won’t tell your parents,” he growled. “As long as this is the last time you girls do something like this.”

Ashley replied enthusiastically. “We won’t, sir! We promise, right, Sally?” Sally nodded her enthusiastic agreement.

“Good. You know, maybe you girls should leave a spare bathing suit at our house. This way you’ll be properly attired when you want to go swimming again.”

“We will, Mr. Kent.” Ashley promised.

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Lara sat at the kitchen table waiting for her father to return. She was sure she was in deep trouble and she worried what her

punishment would be.

When Clark got back, he sat Lara down in the living room to talk.

Lara hung her head and whispered. "I'm sorry, Daddy."

"Lara, I'm not mad at you," he said softly.

Surprised, Lara said, "You're not?"

"No. I understand how it is to be young. Pete Ross and a few of my friends went skinny dipping at the quarry when we were about your age."

Lara said incredulously. "You and Mr. Ross? Lindsay's dad?"

"Yes, and when your grandfather found us, he was not pleased. But I want you to understand that you need to be careful. Even though we live in a remote area, you wouldn't want someone to see you, right?"

Lara hung her head. "No, Daddy."

"Good, girl. From now on you wear your bathing suit, okay?"

"Okay."

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Lara swam around for another hour, the cool water so refreshing that she hated to leave.

Now that she felt clean, she floated up to the top of the cliff and washed her clothes in the river. It was a beautiful day so she spread her clothes out on some rocks to dry then she sat on the bank of the river with her feet in the water. The sun was hot and her hair and clothes dried quickly but she didn't dress quite yet, the rays felt too good. The sun's rays did more than dry her body and clothes however. The more sunshine she absorbed the better she felt, about everything. It may have been her imagination but she even felt better mentally. The sun made her entire body sing with power, infusing her with a calm she hadn't felt since she left Africa. She now felt that she could put her experiences in perspective and could, at last, rejoin civilization.

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### Chapter Five—Making New Friends

Lara began her trek across the country at Kalgoorlie, the nearest city to her landing spot. She walked or hitchhiked, choosing not to fly, as she wanted to experience the people and places, and she couldn't do that from the air. Flying was nice when you wanted to get from point A to point B, but it was not a good way to experience people and culture.

For weeks Lara stayed in hostels, hung out with other young people her age, and played the role of an American tourist. She wasn't a typical American tourist, however, as the people who met her soon came to know.

As she got more comfortable with her new companions, Lara spun tales of her travels through South America and Africa when they gathered around the fire pit at the end of the day. Most young people of Australia had never given much thought to South America. Lara's tales inspired them such that some of them expressed a desire to visit those countries themselves.

Her next port of call was Melbourne, the nearest big city to where she'd been staying. After the poverty of Africa and the desolation of the Outback, Lara decided that taking in the sights and sounds of civilization was just what she needed. She checked in to a youth hostel for the evening, then set out to explore the bustling metropolis using some of the tourist informational pamphlets she found at the hostel. The local botanic garden intrigued her, so Lara caught a bus to the Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria.

Many years ago, when she was twelve, she'd seen the Chicago Botanic Gardens when her family had visited Chicago during the summer. Lara had enjoyed seeing all the plant varieties and the various sections set up as an English Walled Garden and a Japanese Garden with three separate islands. Her grandmother had especially loved the Rose Garden, the beauty of which inspired her to add some of the varieties to her little garden. While Lara had enjoyed this experience, it was nothing like what she was seeing

now.

The plants and habitat here were like nothing she'd ever seen. The plants and such she'd seen in Chicago were familiar, of course, some of them were even native to Kansas. Here almost none of them were familiar, seeing that Australia had developed a mostly unique ecosystem. Lara marveled at the variety and diversity of the plants on display.

She strolled through the park and stopped to watch the programs 'Grasshopper Ecology in Australia: Past and Present' and 'The Bush Food Experience: International Days of World Indigenous Peoples,' which she found fascinating. Having spent the day at the park, Lara left at closing for the bus ride back to her hostel.

After Lara made a quick bite to eat in the communal kitchen, she took her laptop outside to write an article about her experiences. She chuckled wryly as she thought that travel articles were the purview of her father and here she was, again, writing one. With that finished, she wrote some emails to her dad and friends to keep them apprised of her trip and her future itinerary. Lara planned to spend the next few weeks on the Melbourne-to-Perth tour she had found pamphlets for at the hostel. The pamphlets were advertisements for guided tours, but Lara planned to walk or hitchhike the route to enjoy the slower pace and avoid tourist crowds.

After breakfast the next morning Lara set off on the first leg, the journey along the Great Ocean Road, and up to the Grampians where she experienced some of Victoria's most spectacular terrain. She set out along the Great Ocean Road at Torquay, trotting along at thirty miles per hour in deserted areas. The relaxed speed allowed her plenty of time to stop and absorb the sights and sounds of one of the most beautiful sections of the country. The road was built between 1919 and 1932 and was dedicated to soldiers killed in World War I. It was the world's largest war memorial.

Lara slowed down to human pace through Aireys Inlet and Fairhaven which allowed her time to explore those towns leisurely, but when required she was able to get rides which helped her keep to her planned schedule. Once out of Fairhaven, she ran once more until she reached the town of Lorne at the end of her first month. Lara found a youth hostel a few blocks away from the Road and checked in, then she made her way to the common room where the residents hung out.

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Lara saw a group of two guys and two girls all about her age. As she drew closer, she guessed that they sounded like native Aussies due to their accents. "Hi, I'm Lara. Is it okay if I join you?"

"Sure, sit down. I'm Jake and this is my girlfriend, Joan." Jake was blond with a slim, athletic build. His girlfriend, Joan, was also fair-haired, on the shorter side, with a fuller figure.

"I'm Max and this is my girlfriend, Tammy." Max was dark-haired like Lara with a build like Jake. Tammy appeared to be tall and thin with striking red hair.

Lara smiled, and then pulled up a chair and sat down. "Max, is your name short for Maxwell?"

"No. Maximilian. My mother is a university professor who specializes in Central and South American history. She fell in love with the name Maximilian, so I got stuck with it." His grin belied his words, which made Lara laugh.

"I think it's a very nice name. Very masculine."

"So Lara," Tammy asked, "what brings you to Australia?"

"Australia is my last stop on my travels. I grew up on a farm in Kansas so I wanted to see the world after college. I've visited most of South America, a few countries in Africa, specifically Rwanda, and now I'm exploring southern Australia. It's been a very eye-opening experience."

Tammy exclaimed, "That must have been fun, but weren't

you concerned about traveling alone like that?”

“Not really. I took self-defense classes in college and I was very careful not to go into obviously dangerous areas. The people I’ve met were very friendly and helpful so I wasn’t worried.”

“Still,” Joan said skeptically, “I don’t think I’d have the courage to do something like that.”

Lara turned to Max and said, “Max you mentioned your mom studies Central and South American history. I think it would be amazing to hear her stories of Maximilian, Bolivar, and Pizzaro.”

“I bet she’d love to meet you. She travels as often as she can but it’s so expensive, you know. How did you do it?”

Lara had expected this question and responded with the story she’d used when anyone asked. “I flew into Rio, and from there I caught rides a lot of the time, took trains whenever I could, and just walked. I worked as a waitress on a cruise ship to get across the Atlantic to Africa, then to get to Australia I caught a break. I was able to get a job as a crew member on a private yacht. It took a few weeks but I finally landed in Port Douglas. From there I caught rides to Torquay and here I am!”

“So where are you headed now?” Joan asked.

“I found pamphlets for the Great Ocean Road in Torquay and I stopped here. I’m going to be heading out in the morning.”

Jake glanced at his companions who nodded their heads. “We’re doing the same trip. Would you like to ride with us?”

“I don’t want to intrude—”

“You wouldn’t be intruding!” Tammy said. “We have a van and there’s room for one more. What do you say?”

Lara smiled. She’d enjoyed her time with these people and having some company sounded good. “I say yes! What time are you leaving?” Tammy turned and hugged Lara excitedly.

“Early, around 7:00.”

“Perfect.” Lara rose glancing at the group. “I’m heading off to bed now. See you then.

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The next morning, Lara tossed her pack into the back of the van and squeezed between Joan and Tammy for the first leg of the journey. While Lara had enjoyed the solitude of her first month, she found the company of people her age enhanced her appreciation of the sights. After making numerous stops for sightseeing, food, gas, and other necessities, the company arrived at the park after sunset, where the group cooked out over an open fire. Then they all bedded down in their tents under the starry sky.

All through her time in Australia, there were no emergencies for Superwoman which suited Lara’s mood perfectly. While she would never ignore an emergency, the lack of drama soothed her even more after the tumultuous incidents of her Africa trip.

The first stop the next day was at The Twelve Apostles, a collection of limestone stacks off the shore of Port Campbell National Park.

“It’s so beautiful here, isn’t it, Lara?” Tammy asked.

Lara gazed at the tall limestone stacks in awe of the majesty of Nature. “It sure is. We don’t have anything like this in Kansas, that’s for sure.”

Joan looked at Lara inquisitively, “Speaking of America, have you ever met Superman?”

Lara smiled enigmatically before she responded. “No. He doesn’t get to Kansas very often. The last time I saw him was a few years ago after some tornadoes touched down near Wichita.”

Max jumped in then. “I saw him last year when he helped with the wildfires in New South Wales. But even he couldn’t put all of them out.”

Lara shook her head sadly. “No. As powerful as he and his daughter are, they have nothing on the power of Nature.”

The group spent most of the day among The Twelve Apostles, Loch Ard Gorge, which were about three miles to the west, The Grotto, and London Arch. As darkness approached, they pulled in to Port Campbell National Park around sundown and set up camp

quickly where the five of them shared cooking duties over an open fire.

After dinner, Max pulled out his guitar, which ignited a group singalong that lasted late into the night. When Max said he couldn’t play any more everyone crawled into their tents for the evening.

For some reason Lara was restless, unable to fall asleep, so she crawled out of her tent and scanned the group to make sure everyone was asleep, then she silently floated up into the sky. She hovered at about 10,000 feet, then turned onto her back and closed her eyes. The silence soothed her soul, relaxing her even further.

She heard the crash of waves along the shore, the rustle of birds in their nests, and other small animals crawling through the forest floor in search of food. She opened her eyes and saw a sky littered with stars, the unfamiliar constellations easily visible due to the near-absolute darkness. She closed her eyes again and drifted into a calm restful sleep.

Lara woke with a start a couple of hours later to find herself floating over the dark ocean waters, completely out of sight of land. She took a moment to acclimate herself and chuckled, embarrassed that she’d fallen asleep and allowed herself to drift with the wind currents. Luckily it was still full dark, so Lara turned and slowly flew back to her encampment. After she checked to make sure everyone was still asleep, she landed in the woods near the restrooms and made her way back to her tent. She crawled into her sleeping bag then closed her eyes, patiently waiting for the rest of her party to awaken.

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The last leg of the trip, from Port Campbell to Allansford, being the shortest section took half a day, even with stops for views of the sheer cliffs on either side of the road. Thankfully there were no rockfalls when they passed through, though they saw signs warning of them. They arrived in Allansford in the early afternoon.

Since it was about time for lunch Jake pulled the van into a parking spot near the center of town. “So where should we eat?”

“I found this place in this tourist magazine,” Tammy said. “The Flying Horse Bar & Brewery sounds good. It has craft beer and the food’s rated good too. What do you say?” Everyone nodded their agreement, so Jake put the address into his phone’s GPS app and they drove over. Once they were seated the waitress came to take their orders.

“I’ll have Salt and Pepper Calamari and Chips,” Lara said.

Tammy said, “Bangers and Mash for me.”

Joan passed her menu to Max. “Inva’s Mixed Grill, please.”

“And I’ll have Hawaiian Pizza and Chips,” Max said as he set his menu down on top of the others.

“Chicken, Bacon, and Cream Pasta for me.” Jake handed the menus to the waitress.

“And what would you like to drink?”

“How about a jug of Dirty Angel and five glasses for a start?” Max said.

“Great, be right back.”

The beer was so good that they ordered a second pitcher while they waited. Twenty minutes later their meals arrived, and they took turns tasting each other’s meals. Everyone had a great time.

Lara, sadly, said goodbye to her traveling companions that afternoon after lunch, the trip now complete. Everyone hugged Lara and wished her good luck for the rest of her journey.

After the meal, Lara found an internet café in the city center where she plugged in her laptop. With a hot cup of coffee in front of her, she completed the article she’d started back in Torquay, extolling the beauty of the area and the friendliness of the people she’d encountered. After a few edits to tighten up the narrative, Lara sent the article off to her father for publication in the *Smallville Post*, wondering how many reprints she’d get on this

one.

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Lois Lane reviewed the Sunday Supplement for the second time. She had a big hole in the middle of page two that needed something that she didn't have. As if in response to her need, Jim Olsen knocked on the doorjamb.

"Chief, a new article just came over the wire from Lara Kent. Do you still need something for the supplement?"

"Yes!" Lois replied excitedly and pulled the article up on her screen. She quickly scanned it and her eyes grew wide with appreciation. "This'll work, thanks, Jim!"

"No problem, Chief," Jim replied with a grin and left for his desk.

Lois quickly fit Lara's article into the hole on page two and sent the completed supplement to Printing. With a sigh of relief, Lois also sent an email to Accounts Payable with instructions to send the standard freelance payment to Lara's bank contact information. After the desolation and discouragement of Lara's Africa articles, this one had a distinctly positive tone, a tone that made Lois feel that her daughter had been able to gain some perspective.

Lois printed a copy of the article and slipped it into her briefcase. It would join Lara's other work in her scrapbook at home.

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### Chapter Six—Home and a Job!

Lara glanced at the time on her computer and saw that it was still early, Smallville time, so she grabbed another coffee and did some web surfing until she was sure that her grandparents would be up and about their chores. She slid her laptop into her pack, hoisted it over her shoulder and headed east. There was an industrial area where she could take off unobserved so she walked about a mile, ducking behind a building she scanned the area, then spun into her suit. Lara grabbed her pack then shot into the sky faster than the human eye could follow. The closer she got to Smallville, the more excited she became. While she had enjoyed her year of traveling, she missed home, so when the lights of the farmhouse came into view, Lara sped up and landed behind the barn. Spinning into her regular clothes she walked around the barn where her grandfather was milking the cow.

Lara dropped her pack, hoisted him off the stool and into her arms. "Grandpa!"

Jonathan exclaimed with surprise, "Lara! Honey, oh it's so good to see you!" He held her by the shoulders and gazed lovingly at his granddaughter. "You look good, honey, but we sure missed you."

"Me too, Grandpa. I'm done traveling, at least for a while. Now it's time to get a job." Lara kissed Jonathan on the cheek and hugged him tightly as she reveled in the feel of him in her arms. He smelled familiar, a mixture of his aftershave and fresh hay, a smell that would always say "Grandpa."

"Let me finish my chores and we'll go see your grandma," Jonathan said, but before he had a chance to move Lara disappeared, only to reappear seconds later with all chores complete.

"Ready?" Lara said with a cheeky grin, grasping Jonathan's hand. The two walked to the porch where Jonathan opened the door for her.

"You're done with your chores already?" Martha asked incredulously, as she bent over the oven to pull out a tray of blueberry muffins.

"I had a little help," Jonathan replied. Martha set down the muffins and turned to see Lara and Jonathan standing there, both with big grins on their faces.

"Lara! Oh, you're here!" Lara hugged Martha, kissed her cheek, and buried her face into the older woman's shoulder. The two women embraced for a long time it seemed and when they let

go both had unshed tears in their eyes.

Just then Clark entered the kitchen. "What's all the noise—" was all he got out before Lara threw herself into her father's arms and hugged him fiercely.

Clark's smile lit up the room as he hugged his daughter so tightly, she actually felt the pressure. "Pumpkin! You're home!"

Lara gazed at her father lovingly. "Yes, Dad, I'm home. How about you let me loose?"

"Oh, sorry, I got carried away," Clark replied, embarrassed. He loosened his arms though he didn't fully release her, his arm loosely wrapped around her shoulders. Lara, in turn, wrapped her arm around her father's waist and tugged him into her side, reluctant to lose all contact as well.

"Come on, sit down, everybody! I've got coffee and fresh blueberry muffins!" Martha poured everyone a hot steaming cup of her special brew then set a plate with the muffins in the center, alongside a big tub of butter. Over coffee and muffins, Lara regaled them with stories of her Australia trip. She filled in details that hadn't made it into her article and shared the pictures she'd taken as well. When she'd finished and the muffins were gone, Clark asked the question everyone wanted to ask.

"So, Pumpkin, are you home for good?"

"Yes, Dad, my wanderlust has been satisfied and it's time to settle down and get a job." Clark, Martha, and Jonathan all smiled with delight.

"Dad, will you help me put together my résumé and choose articles for my portfolio?"

"Of course."

Jonathan grinned, knowingly. "As long as he doesn't throw that Knob Tailed Gecko article in there you should be all right."

Clark groaned and looked at his dad. "I'm never gonna live that one down, am I?"

"Nope," Martha chimed in.

Confused, Lara asked. "Knob Tailed Gecko? I didn't write anything about that."

"No, it's one of mine," Clark said, his ears tinged with pink. "I'll tell you about it later, I've got to get to work." Clark kissed his daughter and his parents on the cheek. "How about you get your articles arranged by date, and we'll go over them when I get home? We can work on your résumé then, too."

Martha smiled happily. "Lara, why don't you unpack first, then we can go to town later. I need to get groceries, and besides, everyone will want to see you, and that will take some time."

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Later that afternoon, Lara sat down at her laptop to go through her articles. She sorted them by date and put them in a separate folder, then she reviewed them and sorted them by importance. When Clark returned a few hours later, he and Lara sat down in the office to go over them.

"So, Dad, what's this Knob Tailed Gecko article?" Lara asked curiously.

"I'd hoped you'd forgotten about that," Clark replied, his cheeks turning pink.

Lara looked at him pointedly. "Hello? Eidetic memory?"

"Yeah, well, this was back when I'd returned from my world travels and I had an appointment with Perry White. My old college professor had put in a good word for me to get an interview. I'd put an article titled 'Mating Rituals of the Knob Tailed Gecko' in there to show my versatility."

"I'd guess it didn't help."

"No. Mr. White saw that and told me that he was sorry and wished me luck."

"But you did get the job later, right?"

"Yes, but that's part of the story. Before I had a chance to leave, a brunette whirlwind barged into the office, completely ignored me, and went off on Mr. White about some article she didn't want to write. I stood there, stunned, looking at her with my

mouth hanging open.”

“That was Lois Lane?” Lara asked softly.

“Yes. Mr. White introduced us, and when we shook hands, I felt something I’d *never* felt before and I knew this was the woman for me. Before I had a chance to say anything, she’d left the office as quickly as she’d entered. I thanked Mr. White, then I left his office, discouraged. But I saw an opportunity to write the article Lois had declined, and that got me the job.”

“Wow, I never knew that. Thanks for telling me that story.”

“You’re welcome, Pumpkin. Now how about we hit these articles?”

An hour later they’d put together an impressive portfolio of articles. Then, after dinner, they spent a few hours writing and tweaking her résumé. By the end of the night, Lara had everything she needed ready for her job search.

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After she did the dinner dishes Lara headed up to her bedroom. Now that she was home, she was anxious to talk to her two best friends, Sally Barrett, and Ashley Barnum. She’d known Sally the longest, having met her in kindergarten, while she’d first met Ashley the summer before junior high. So after being gone so long, she looked forward to talking to her friends.

Lara dialed Sally’s number first. “Lara! Are you home?” Sally asked excitedly.

“Yes, I just got in today. Can you hold on while I conference in Ashley?” Lara pressed the appropriate buttons on her phone, and moments later Ashley joined the conversation. Lara spent the next three hours talking to her friends. She told them the highs and lows of her experiences and caught up on what had happened in their lives while she’d been away. All the while she basked in the love and friendship of the two women who were almost as close as family.

“So now that your gallivanting is done, are you *finally* going to get a job?” Sally teased.

“Yes. Dad helped me put together my portfolio and résumé today and I’m going to the printer tomorrow to get copies made.”

“Where are you applying?” Ashley asked.

“I’m starting with the *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *Minneapolis Star Tribune* and the *Detroit Free Press* for now. If one of those doesn’t pan out then I’ll have to cast a wider net.”

“Your articles have been published in the *Daily Planet*, you know.” Sally chimed in. “Why don’t you apply there? I bet they’d love to have you.”

Lara’s mouth turned down in a frown at the mention of the *Daily Planet*. “I’d rather stick closer to home. I don’t think I could stand being a thousand miles from my family.”

“You always were a ‘daddy’s girl,’ Lara,” Ashley said with a chuckle. “But I understand. I wouldn’t want to be that far away from my mom and dad either.”

“As much fun as this has been, it’s getting late. I’ll call you both when I hear back from one of those papers, hopefully soon.” Lara said goodbye to her friends, ended the call, and got ready for bed.

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The next morning, Lara took her résumé to the only small job printer in town. Lara requested twenty-five copies of the résumé and cover letter with matching envelopes which she would pick up the next afternoon. She then flew to Wichita to the office supply store where she picked up a brand-new leather portfolio for her articles.

The next afternoon, with her finished résumés in hand, along with her cover letter, she addressed the envelopes to the editors of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, and the *Detroit Free Press*. Even though she could fly, she felt that working closer to Smallville would allow her to come home more often, ostensibly

using regular transportation, thereby limiting suspicion. Besides, there was no way that she was going to apply to the *Daily Planet* even if they begged her, though she could probably get a job there easily.

Once the letters were addressed, she hopped into the truck and took them directly to the post office where she dropped them off. Now all she could do was sit back and wait.

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A week later, Lara received a call from the Personnel Department of the *Chicago Tribune* for an initial phone interview.

“I’m very pleased with your interview, Ms. Kent.” Ms. Richards of Human Relations said. “Would you be available for an in-person interview on Thursday?”

Lara replied excitedly, “Yes, I would.”

“Wonderful. Your appointment is for 10 o’clock Thursday with our Editor in Chief, Ms. Pamela Blake.”

“I’ll be there!”

Lara hung up the phone and pumped her fist, then she rushed to her laptop. She pulled up the *Tribune* website and studied everything she could find about the paper and Ms. Blake.

Pamela Blake had recently been promoted to Editor-in-Chief, having worked as an assistant under John Barron, the previous editor, for several years. She also read several editorials to get a feel for the direction of the paper.

When Clark returned from work, Lara met him at the door with an excited expression on her face.

“You got a response?” he asked.

“Yes! The *Tribune* called today and I went through the phone interview, which I aced by the way. I have an appointment with the editor day after tomorrow at 10:00 a.m.!”

Clark hugged Lara. “Congratulations, Pumpkin! I knew it wouldn’t take long before someone wanted you!” He kissed her on the cheek, then took her hand and led her into the living room.

“Now, tell me all about it.”

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Thursday at 9:30 a.m. Lara flew over the city of Chicago to get her bearings. She was looking for N. Stetson Avenue, the location of the *Tribune* Building. She’d studied the map of the city the night before, so she found the street easily. Scanning the area for a safe place to land she spied a street with buildings that had no windows facing either side. Upon landing she spun into her grey wool suit and black high heels, then walked the two blocks to 160 N. Stetson Avenue. Once in the lobby she consulted the directory then she rode the elevator to the sixth floor. Lara glanced around the room, taking in the atmosphere of the bustling newsroom. Once she found Ms. Blake’s office, Lara walked over and stopped in front of the secretary’s desk.

“Good morning. My name is Lara Kent. I have a 10 o’clock appointment with Ms. Blake.”

“Good morning. I’m Julie, Ms. Blake’s assistant. Please sit down and I’ll let her know you’re here.” Julie smiled pleasantly, then she stood up and knocked on her boss’s door. “Pam, Lara Kent is here. Can I send her in?”

“Yes please, thanks, Julie.”

“Ms. Kent? You can go in now. Can I get you anything to drink? Coffee, tea, water?”

“No, thank you. I’m fine.” Lara picked up her portfolio and entered Pamela Blake’s office. The room had dark oak paneling with the only window to the left of the desk. A thick burgundy carpet covered the floor. The wall to her left contained a floor to ceiling bookcase, loaded with a variety of books on all sorts of subjects, her father’s travel books among them. Photographs of nature scenes by prominent artists decorated the remaining walls. There were a few small personal photographs that showed Pam with another couple and a baby. The family resemblance suggested her brother and his wife. Others seemed to be of friends and possibly her parents, directly behind her on the credenza.

“Good morning, Ms. Blake. I’m Lara Kent.” Lara shook Pam’s hand, then passed over her portfolio and sat down in the high-backed leather chair.

Pam smiled, “Good morning, Ms. Kent. May I call you Lara?”

“Certainly, Ms. Blake.”

“Thanks, Lara. Please call me Pam.”

Lara waited patiently while Pam opened the portfolio and scanned the résumé and articles it contained. Pamela Blake looked to be in her early forties, with sandy blonde hair that showed a few streaks of grey. She was an attractive woman, athletic-looking but probably not married as she wore no rings nor were there any pictures of her and a partner. Lara got the impression that Pam Blake was a mature, capable woman who knew her job and did it well.

Pamela’s eyes met Lara’s once more. “Your résumé and these articles are quite impressive. I see you’ve done quite a bit of traveling. I’m particularly impressed by your Rwanda coverage.”

“Thank you. I grew up on a small farm in Kansas, so once I graduated, I knew that I needed to expand my experiences. My dad traveled the world after he finished college and I wanted to do the same. He said it was invaluable to his world-view, and I agree.”

Pam’s eyebrows rose. “Your father traveled? He wouldn’t be Clark Kent, would he?”

Lara smiled proudly. “Yes, that’s him. I see that you have some of his books on your shelf.”

“I met him once at a book signing. He was great. He seemed to appreciate everyone who came, not like some authors I’ve met.”

Lara replied, a genuine smile on her face. “He *is* great. He’s been my greatest supporter and role model. Along with my grandparents, of course. I’ll be sure to tell him you enjoy his books.”

“So you want to work the City Desk. Given your experiences, wouldn’t you rather work in Travel?”

“No,” Lara replied passionately. “While I loved traveling, it was seeing the people in those countries and the suffering they endured that inspired me. I want to write stories that change lives. I want to expose corruption, fight crime, and make my readers’ lives better.”

Pam stood up and extended her hand. “That’s what I wanted to hear. Welcome to the *Tribune!*”

Lara stood and shook the offered hand. “Thanks, Pam, I appreciate your confidence in me.”

“When can you start?”

“How about Monday? I’d like to take the next few days to find a place to live.”

“Do you need an advance on your salary? Landlords usually want first and last months’ rent in advance. Apartments in the city aren’t cheap.”

“No, thank you. I’ve saved my freelance money and I lived pretty frugally, so I’m good.”

“Well, I’m impressed. You certainly have your priorities straight. Okay, please report to Human Resources at 8:00 a.m. Monday to fill out paperwork and for orientation. When you finish, come see me. I want you to partner with George Jones for a few months while you get the lay of the land.” Pam shook hands with Lara again and handed the portfolio back then Pam escorted Lara to the door.

“Julie, Lara will be starting Monday. Please have I.T. get her set up near George’s desk. She’ll be working with him for a while.” Julie nodded and made a note. “Welcome, again, Lara. I look forward to seeing you Monday. And good luck apartment hunting!”

Lara shook Pam’s hand again, then walked to the elevator. When she reached the lobby, she picked up a paper and turned immediately to the ‘For Rent’ section. She scanned the apartments

on offer and found a few that were reasonably close to work and the “L”, so her commute wouldn’t be too bad.

Lara spent the rest of the day in Chicago looking at apartments. She wanted a place with a balcony, if possible, for easy exits, preferably a balcony protected from the view of other buildings. She narrowed the choices to two that fit her requirements, and her budget so, after checking them out, she made appointments to see them that afternoon.

The first one had a very disjointed floor plan and didn’t feel right, so she held off on a commitment and went to see the other one. The second apartment had an open floor plan and one big bedroom. It also had a private balcony off the bedroom that opened onto the back of another building that had no windows on that side. Since most people wanted a view, the landlord had more trouble renting apartments on this side, so he gave Lara a break on the rent because it had not been rented in a long time.

Lara signed the lease immediately and decided to move in over the weekend. After making a withdrawal from the local branch of her bank, Lara traded a certified check for the keys to her new home. Now that her lodging situation was set, she decided to test out her new balcony so she spun into her suit and shot into the sky.

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Landing lightly behind the barn she spun into her civilian clothes then walked briskly across the yard and opened the back door.

“Grandma, Grandpa, I’m home!” Jonathan and Martha hurried out of the living room a moment later.

Lara gathered her grandparents in a group hug and kissed them each on the cheek. “I got the job!” she said excitedly.

“Of course you did, I never had a doubt!” Jonathan said, “They’d be fools not to have hired you.”

Martha smiled. “That’s wonderful, dear. When do you start?”

Lara leaned back against the counter. “Monday morning. I need to be there at 8 o’clock for orientation. I was even able to find an apartment right on the “L” line, about fifteen minutes by train.”

“Wow, you don’t let any grass grow under your feet, do you?” Jonathan nodded looking impressed.

“I found something I liked so I jumped at it. Why stay at a hotel or even fly home if I don’t have to? I want to get settled as soon as possible.”

“So what is this place like?” Martha asked.

“It’s a studio type apartment, small kitchen, open living room, and a decent size bedroom and bath. The best part is it has a balcony that faces the back of the building next door, and there are no windows on that side so it’s completely private for takeoffs and landings. I left from there just now. It’s perfect.”

Jonathan rubbed his chin in thought. “You know, your father still has the furniture from his Metropolis apartment stored upstairs in the barn. You should see if there is anything you could use. It should be okay for your first place.”

“Thanks for the suggestion, Grandpa, I’ll go check it out.”

Lara went up to her room, changed into a t-shirt, jeans, and sneakers, then she headed out to the barn.

In the storeroom in the far corner of the barn, she found a bed frame, a dining table with two chairs, a coffee table, a couch, and other items she’d need. A tarp covered the couch to protect it from dust.

She lifted it above her head to check for any signs of rodent damage but found none so she set it down and clapped her hands together to shake off the dust. This furniture would be a good start for her little apartment.

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### Chapter Seven—Furnishing the Apartment

When Clark got home from work that evening, Lara told him all about getting the job and the new apartment. While Clark was

happy for his daughter, it saddened him that Lara would be moving out on her own.

When she'd finished her story, she asked, "So Dad, can you help me move?"

"Of course, Pumpkin, you know I will. Did you find anything you liked when you looked at my old furniture?"

"Yes, I like it all. It just needs a little cleaning and airing out, but it's in good shape and not too far out of style. Of course, I'll need a new mattress, but the rest will work nicely."

"That's great. Why don't we move that stuff tonight, then tomorrow you and I can shop for a new mattress and other stuff you'll need. How does that sound?"

"That's great, Dad. I appreciate all your help."

"No, problem, Pumpkin. You know I'll do anything for you."

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Early the next morning, around 3:00 a.m., Superman and Superwoman flew Clark's old furniture to Lara's new apartment. It took a few trips because most of the items were bulky, but when they finished, the apartment was nearly complete. All that was needed was a mattress and box spring for the bed.

When everything was set up Clark sat on the couch and looked around. "You know, this place reminds me a lot of my old place in Metropolis. It was laid out a lot like this, but I had a small loft storage space upstairs."

Lara grinned cheekily. "Huh, that's wild. Maybe I'm channeling a young Clark Kent?"

"Maybe so. How about we head home then come back in the morning and get the rest of the stuff you need?"

"Sounds good, Dad. Let's go."

The next day, Friday, Lara, and Clark hit the mattress store a few blocks from her apartment, and after her purchase, she scheduled delivery for Saturday morning. They also hit a national chain store that sold towels, sheets, pillowcases, and all sorts of home supplies. They returned to the apartment, each laden with shopping bags, then they went out again, this time purchasing kitchen items, silverware, pots and pans, and other sundries. By noon the apartment was nearly complete, the mattress being the only missing item.

"So, Pumpkin, are you hungry? I noticed there's a little family restaurant a few blocks away."

"Yeah, Dad, that sounds good."

Lara took her father's arm and the two walked down the street to a small family run place that served a variety of American and Italian fare. Since it was later in the day, the place was nearly empty so they had their choice of tables. They chose one near the window and placed their orders.

"You know, I had a closet a lot like yours that I converted to store my suits," Clark said softly once the waitress had gone.

"Want me to build you one?"

"That would be great, Dad," Lara replied. "I was wondering how I was going to store them securely."

"Tomorrow I'll pick up the supplies and we can build it after they deliver your mattress." Clark looked sad. "I guess once that's done, all that's left is your clothes and stuff."

Lara clasped his hand in hers. "It's okay, Dad. I may be moving out but I'll visit a lot, don't worry."

"I know, Pumpkin. I knew this day was coming, but it's still hard," Clark said with a wry chuckle. "Now I know how *my* parents felt when I moved to Metropolis!" Just then their meals arrived, so they switched to happier topics while they ate.

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Saturday morning the delivery van dropped off her mattress then Lara and Clark installed the sliding door to the secret section of her closet. He put the button that opened the door high on the front wall so that you had to know it was there to find it. Lara put her spare suits and boots in the closet and tried out the mechanism. The last thing to do was to put her clothes away in the front

portion of the closet and the armoire.

Lara stood back, scanned her bedroom, and smiled. While there were still a few things she wanted to do with her place, she was completely moved in.

Grabbing two colas from the refrigerator, Lara passed one to her father. She sat at the opposite end of the couch facing him and took a sip of her drink.

Clark gazed at his daughter seriously. "Lara, honey, I hope you don't think I'm butting in, but I have some advice I'd like to pass along."

"Of course, Dad. Any words of wisdom you can give would be greatly appreciated."

"Okay. First, you should cut back or avoid altogether Superwoman duties during the day while you're at work. I was put on probation once because I was out being Superman when I should have been working."

Lara's mouth formed an O, surprised by her father's admission.

"I know you usually only help at natural disasters and such, but you're living in a big city now and you'll hear a lot more things than you did back home, especially once people know that you're around. The emergency services can handle things, so don't put your job in jeopardy because of Superwoman. If you want to patrol after work hours, that's fine, but it's up to you. You don't have to do what I do."

Lara smiled. "I know, Dad and thanks. Is there anything else?"

"Yes. If you do answer a call at work, try to do so without being obvious. Lois used to call me out all the time when I heard a call for help because I ignored everything around me while I listened. Also, when dealing with the press, try not to show favoritism. I made the mistake of giving almost all my interviews to the *Daily Planet*, either writing them myself or giving them to Lois. It soon became known that the *Daily Planet* and Lane and Kent were 'special' to Superman, which caused all kinds of problems," Clark said ruefully.

"I never thought about that, but it makes a lot of sense. Thanks again, Dad, I really appreciate your advice." Lara sat back as she contemplated her father's advice. No matter how much she thought she knew about being a superhero, there was always more to learn.

Lara now gazed into her lap to avoid her father's eyes. Since he'd brought up his early days in Metropolis, she felt emboldened. There was something that she just had to know.

"Ummm, Dad, do you mind if I ask you a personal question? I'll understand if you don't want to answer."

"What do you want to know?"

Lara looked intently at her father. "I... I'd like to know how I came about. You told me Lois gave me up but I know there's more to the story."

Clark swallowed resignedly, hung his head, and sighed. "Are you sure you want to know? It's not an easy thing to talk about."

"I do, Dad. Please tell me. I *want* to know."

"Okay, sit back. This is going to be a long one. I won't go into detail, but at one time Lois was engaged to Lex Luthor—"

"Lex Luthor!" Lara's mouth dropped open with surprise. "I read about him in journalism school! And she was *engaged* to him?"

"Yes. Long story short, Perry White, Jim Olsen, Jack Brown, and I finally gathered enough evidence to give to the police so they could arrest him. Instead of accepting arrest, he committed suicide. He was behind the bombing of the *Planet* so Perry convinced Franklin Stern of *Stern Media* to buy it and reopen. Mr. Stern wanted to rehire as many people as he could, but he didn't want to rehire Lois. He told her he doubted her reporter's instincts because she'd missed the biggest story in Metropolis history."

Lara recalled her initial contact with Lois Lane. "That must

have hurt her pride.”

“It did. Anyway, she made a deal with Stern. If he’d give her a six-month contract, she’d *prove* she was the best or she’d quit.”

“Sounds like her,” Lara snorted sarcastically.

“Yeah, well, Lois was always a driven person, but now she was on a mission. She told Perry she wouldn’t work with a partner until she’d proven herself. She took every difficult and dangerous story that came along. She slept only minimally, ate even less, so after a month you can guess what she looked like. I tried to talk to her, to get her to slow down, but she shut me down every time, sometimes quite nastily. Eventually, I had to give up. One day she got a tip that led her to meet a source at midnight on top of the second tallest building in the city.”

Lara crossed her arms and leaned back in her seat. “I can see *this* is not going to end well,” she mumbled.

“The tip was a trap, as you guessed. Nigel St. John, one of Luthor’s henchmen, lured her up there... then he — he threw her off the roof!” Clark’s voice broke then.

Lara leaned in and grasped his hand. “Oh, Dad.”

After a short pause to collect himself, Clark continued. “Lois was falling and screaming through her gag, but I’d been out of town and didn’t hear her until it was almost too late. I caught her a few feet off the ground, two seconds later and Lois would have been dead! I flew directly to her apartment and we were both shaking from the emotional stress. We held each other tightly but soon we were kissing and the next thing I knew we’d done... *it*, right there on her living room floor!”

“Dad!” Lara exclaimed, shocked at this revelation.

“I know!” Clark said, embarrassment radiating off him. “It was wrong. We both realized it never should have happened and we agreed never to discuss it again. I flew away feeling very ashamed of my behavior and I vowed never to do something so irresponsible as that ever again. Six weeks later, Lois asked me to have Superman stop by. I didn’t want to go, but she seemed desperate so I decided to make an appearance.

“Lois told me that night that she was pregnant. She wanted me to know, because I’m an alien, that I was compatible with humans for reproduction. The globe said Kryptonians were compatible with the people of Earth, but mom and dad and I never thought that meant I’d be able to father a child. I made my first mistake when I told her that she couldn’t kill my child.”

“Wow. She must have hated that!”

Clark shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “She did. She reamed me up one side then down the other. I was desperate, so I told her I’d marry her, forgetting I was still in the Suit. When she told me Superman couldn’t get married, that’s when I made my *second* mistake. I spun into my regular clothes and told her that Clark could. Lois hit the ceiling, yelling over and over that I’d lied to her for over a year. She called me pond scum, less than pond scum, and other choice insults. I stood there and took her abuse, which I felt I deserved, until she calmed down.

“I begged her not to abort my child. I told her I’d never find someone I loved as much as she. She finally agreed to consider keeping you, but I had to give her a week to decide. That was the longest week in the world, I’ll tell you. She agreed, obviously, but she had one condition. I agreed to it before she’d even told me what it was because I wanted you more than anything in the world. Lois wanted me to leave the *Planet* forever and take you with me, so I began looking for work elsewhere. The *Post* job came open just then, so I took it. I left Metropolis about a month before you were born. Lois’s sister, Lucy, called the house—”

Lara’s mouth opened wide with surprise. “Lois has a *sister*?! I have an aunt?!”

“Yes. I mentioned it in passing that day you found Lois’s picture but you must have forgotten.”

“I think I was so focused on Lois being my mother that I missed that.”

“I suppose. I never told you about her because I never told you about Lois. From what I understand she’s married and was living in San Diego, but that’s all I know. Anyway, the next day I picked you up at the hospital and brought you home, the rest you know.”

Clark hung his head again, looking worn out from this revelation. Lara crawled across the couch and wrapped her arms around her father’s shoulders, hugging him tightly.

Lara broke down in tears and her shoulders shook with her sobs. “Thanks, Dad. Thanks for telling me and thanks for fighting for me. I love you!”

Clark drew her onto his lap and wrapped her securely in his loving arms. “There’s nothing to thank me for,” he replied fiercely. “You’re my daughter and I’d do *anything* for you!” Father and daughter spent a long time in each other’s arms drawing support and love from the other.

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That evening, after her father left, Lara went out for a quick bite to eat. When she returned to her apartment, she called her friends.

“Hi, Lara! Did you get a job?” Sally asked when she answered the phone.

“Yes! Let me get Ashley on the line then I’ll tell you all about it.” Lara conferenced Ashley into the conversation then she filled her friends in on the specifics of her job and her new apartment, and how close it was to restaurants and other attractions.

“You two will have to come up some weekend. We can hit the shops on Michigan Avenue and Water Tower Place and the museums! We’ll have so much fun!”

“You bet,” Ashley replied. “We haven’t had a girl’s weekend since college. I can hardly wait!”

“Me, too,” Sally said. “I’ve missed getting together with you two and all the mischief we can get into! I hear they have some really cute guys in that town.”

“Don’t you have a steady boyfriend, Sally?” Lara asked knowingly.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean I can’t *look*, right?” Sally laughed, and the others joined in.

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Lara wore a crisp navy-blue blouse with a dark grey skirt and low-heeled black shoes when she reported to Human Resources Monday morning for orientation. She filled out the myriad forms for taxes, insurance, and the like. Then, around 10 o’clock, Lara stopped in front of Pam Blake’s office once orientation was complete.

Lara smiled happily. “Good morning, Pam. I finally finished everything, so I’m official.”

“Great. Be right with you.” Pam rounded her desk then escorted Lara across the newsroom floor where she stopped in front of George Jones’s desk. George looked to be in his mid-fifties, salt and pepper hair, and a face that one would say had “character.” When he stood, Lara could see that he stood around five foot ten or so and carried a few extra pounds around his middle.

“George, this is Lara Kent, our new hire. She’s going to be joining the City Desk. I want her to work with you for a few months until she gets her bearings.”

George extended his hand, which Lara shook enthusiastically. “Good morning, Lara. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Same here, George. I look forward to working with you.”

Pam looked to George and asked, “Don’t you have a City Council meeting this afternoon?”

“Yeah.” George chuckled. “Lara can get her feet wet in a hurry.”

“Okay, then, I’ll leave you to it!” Pam walked away and left George and Lara to get acquainted.

George pointed to a desk across the aisle and down one from

his and said, “Lara, your desk is over there. Why don’t you sign on and get familiar with the system, maybe look at the archives from the past month? I’m sure you need some time to relax after dealing with HR. Once you’re settled, then we’ll go out for lunch at noon at a little place right near City Hall. Sound good?”

“Perfect. Give me a holler when you’re ready.” Lara walked over to her desk and put her purse in the lower left drawer. Her computer was already on, and someone had set her up with office supplies. The lower right drawer contained green file folders. She logged onto the computer with her temporary password, then she put in a new password and began to familiarize herself with the system and the archives. At ten minutes to twelve, George stopped at her desk.

“Ready to go?”

“Ready!” Lara replied. She took her purse out of the drawer and slid a pen, pencil, and notebook inside then she fell into place at George’s side as the two walked to the elevator. When they reached the lobby, they headed west for the five-block walk to Petterino’s, a block away from City Hall. The hostess seated them quickly and their waitress took their orders. George ordered the Black Angus Cheeseburger and Lara ordered the Grilled Chicken Club.

“So, Lara, tell me a little about yourself,” George said, between bites of his cheeseburger.

“I’m an only child. I grew up in a little town in Kansas called Smallville on a farm with my dad and grandparents. I’ve just returned from a trip through South America, Africa, and Australia. My dad told me so many stories of his travels after college that I knew I wanted to do that too. I graduated from Midwestern State with a degree in journalism, magna cum laude, and now I hope to expose corruption and crime and help the people of this city.”

George swallowed and chuckled. “Impressive. I’ve always wanted to travel but it was never the right time. Maybe after I retire!”

“Could you tell me a bit about what we’re going to see today?” Lara said as she took a bite of her sandwich and chewed quietly.

“It’ll probably be pretty boring. The aldermen seem to be a rubber stamp for whatever the mayor wants to do lately. Speaking of the mayor, what have you heard about her?”

“Lonnie Lighthand, the first African-American female mayor in the history of Chicago. A former lawyer and former president of the Chicago Police Board. Currently, she seems to be in a feud with the Fraternal Order of Police, which is probably not a good thing for the city.”

George seemed impressed. “I see you put your time in the archives to good use. Yeah, she’s only been in office since late May, but she’s certainly made an impression.”

They chatted back and forth for the duration of their meal, and at 12:45 they left the restaurant and walked west to City Hall. Once seated in the gallery, Lara watched and listened to the meeting. As it progressed, George’s assessment of the aldermen being rubber stamps for the mayor seemed correct.

After the meeting, they walked back to the *Tribune* building where they wrote up the story at George’s desk. George then went over his list of assignments and solicited Lara’s input on each one. He also showed her his folder of investigations in various stages of completion. By that time it was six o’clock, so each of them shut down their systems and headed home.

When they reached the sidewalk George said, “Good night, Lara. See you in the morning.”

“You too, George. Thanks so much for all your help today.” Lara walked to the nearest “L” station for the fifteen-minute ride to her new apartment. She put together a quick stir-fry and washed it down with ice water. After dinner, she turned the television to the various news channels to see if her father was in the news, but she found nothing. Then she watched some mindless show until it

got dark. Lara wanted to do a quick patrol of the city even though she wasn’t ready to announce her presence just yet, but if something arose, she’d jump in. She also had another ‘errand’ she wanted to run after the patrol.

Lara turned the TV off then flew out of her balcony doors and into the sky. Unlike her dad, Lara’s patrols looked for accidents or fires rather than street crime. Unless something big happened, street crime was the responsibility of the Chicago Police Department, so she would leave them to it. Satisfied that the city was quiet, Lara headed east, towards Metropolis.

As she flew closer to the city Lara used her telescopic vision and found the *Daily Planet* building then the window she was interested in. The occupant was hard at work alone in the newsroom so she flew down and knocked on the window.

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### Chapter Eight—An Aunt and Anguish

Lois Lane jumped, startled by a knock on her window, a window that was six stories above the ground. She saw a shadowy black figure floating outside her window, arms folded across her chest. Lois stood, opened the window wide and stepped back to allow her visitor to enter. Superwoman floated in through the window to land silently opposite Lois’s desk.

Lois sat down, immediately going on offense. Her eyes were steely, her body language gave no hint of fear. “So Lara, to what do I owe the honor of your visit?”

Superwoman tilted her head and paused, seeming to contemplate her response then she sighed. “I was talking to my father and he told me you have a sister. Is that correct?”

Lois eyed her daughter skeptically, unsure why she would want to know about Lucy. Her response gave nothing away. “I do. Is that all you need to know?”

“Does she... know about me?” Superwoman asked quietly. She sounded uncertain, nothing like the superhero she portrayed.

Lois replied calmly, “She does, in an abstract way. She was with me during delivery and she called your father after your birth so he could pick you up. She doesn’t *know* about you or your father, though. I’ve never told *anyone* about that.”

Superwoman said nervously, “I’d... I’d like to visit her. I have no aunts or uncles on dad’s side, so besides you, she’s the only other family I have.”

“You do have another set of grandparents, but you may not want to meet them. I don’t get along with them at all. However, you also have two cousins. Lucy has two boys. The older one, Joel, is twenty and the younger, Eric, is eighteen. Would you like her address?” Lois asked helpfully.

“Yes, please.”

Lois wrote Lucy’s address on a Post-It note, then handed it to her daughter. Superwoman looked over the address, tucked the paper into the waistband of her Suit then she floated up and moved to the window, then she turned.

“Thank you.” Superwoman nodded, then she disappeared with a whoosh.

Lois closed the window and sat down at her desk once more. Compared to their first meeting this one was much more civil. Maybe it *was* possible that, someday, mother and daughter could have some sort of relationship. As she sat there, the regret she’d felt ever since she’d read Lara’s first article came to the fore once more. Over the last year she felt as if she’d gotten to know her daughter through her writing and now, she had hopes that she’d get to know her personally.

Lois felt that Lara asking about her aunt might be a good thing. While she knew Lucy had never agreed with Lois’s decision not to be part of her child’s life, she also knew that Lucy had always held out hope that Lois would, someday, change her mind. With that thought in mind Lois returned to work, hopeful that Lucy would put in a good word for her.

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Lara flew west as fast as she could to San Diego. Since it was three hours earlier than it was in Metropolis, she felt it wasn't too late to make an unannounced visit. It took her a few minutes to find Lucy's address because she was unfamiliar with the city, then Lara looked for a safe place to land and found a park nearby. She flew down and landed behind some trees where she spun into her work clothes, a crisp white blouse and black, knee-length skirt. As she made her way to her aunt's home, she saw well-maintained houses with lush green lawns. The address she was looking for was a ranch house with modern styling. Lara walked up the stone path to the front door and rang the bell. A woman of about forty with short dark hair answered.

"Hello. Can I help you?" Lucy said as she looked at the stranger on her doorstep.

"Hello. You don't know me, but I'm Lara Kent, Clark Kent's daughter." Lara watched as Lucy's expression changed from curiosity to surprise.

"You're Clark's daughter?" Lara nodded in the affirmative. "I should have known! You look just like Lois when she was your age. Come in, come in!" Lara passed through the door into an open plan living area containing a living room, dining room, and kitchen that flowed smoothly, one to the other. The room was light and airy and the late afternoon sun came in through large French doors that took up most of one wall and gave a great view of the back yard.

Lucy gestured to the couch. "Please, sit down." Lara sat, her hands folded in her lap.

"So did your father tell you about... your mother?" Lucy asked carefully. "Is that what brought you here?"

"No, he didn't. About a year ago, I was cleaning out the cellar and I came across an old trunk. Curious person that I am, I opened it and found several scrapbooks with newspaper articles from the *Daily Planet* that dad had written." Lara paused before continuing. "I never knew he'd even worked for the *Daily Planet* so I was quite surprised. I continued looking through it and found articles written by him and his partner, Lois Lane.

"When I found a photograph of the two of them it didn't take an investigative reporter to know that the woman with my face was my mother. When he got home that night Dad only confirmed what I already knew. I went traveling around the world soon after, so it wasn't until recently that I decided to investigate Lois Lane a bit more. Once I knew who she was, I searched for anything I could find about her. When I found that Lois had a sister, I looked you up. I'm here on business so I thought I'd stop by and introduce myself."

"I'm so glad you did! I never agreed with Lois that Clark was not to tell you who your mother is but it was her decision. Now that you know, I hope we can get to know each other."

While holding back tears, Lara said, "I'm so pleased to hear that. Dad has no siblings, so I had no idea I had any relatives other than him and my grandparents. I want to get to know you and your family too."

"Our boys are already at school, but I know they'd love to meet you. Where are you living now?"

"I just took a job at the *Chicago Tribune*. I have a small apartment near there."

"Oh, so far away?" Lucy said sadly. "Maybe we can all get together for Thanksgiving? I'd love to see Clark and your grandparents."

"I'd love that too. I'm sure Dad and my grandparents would love to come. Ummm, if you don't mind my asking, are you and your parents close?"

"You don't know, do you?" Lucy sighed. "No, we're not close. There's a lot of baggage there."

"Oh, that's too bad," Lara said, disappointed. "Well, at least I've found you and your family." Lucy and Lara chatted for a while as they got to know each other over a few cups of coffee

then Lara stood up and prepared to leave.

"I really should get going. Thank you so much for everything, Aunt Lucy. I had a really good time."

"Me too, Lara. I'm sorry you couldn't meet my husband, Ben, but he's out of town this week."

"That's okay. You've invited us for Thanksgiving so I'll meet him and my cousins then." The two women walked to the door where they embraced.

Lucy said, "You have my number and I have yours. Let's not be strangers, okay?"

"No way. I'm going to call Dad when I get back and then I'll let you know about Thanksgiving." Lara waved and headed down the stone path. She walked back to the park, spun into her suit, then took off for Chicago.

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On the way home Lara thought over her meeting with both Lois and Lucy. At first Lois had seemed hostile, but given how their first meeting had gone she wasn't surprised. What had surprised her, for a moment at least, was when Lois had called her Lara. After a moment Lara had realized that Lois, who was *not* a stupid person, had logically put the new superhero and her daughter together as one in the same person. After all, she knew Dad's secret so it would make sense that she might have inherited his powers. She also couldn't blame Lois for being confrontational, again based on that first meeting. From what she'd figured out, and what her father had told her, Lois wasn't used to being on defense. Once she'd accepted that Lois knew her identity the atmosphere in the office seemed to change. Lara knew she needed Lois's help and decided that asking for it nicely was the way to go. While she still felt a lot of animosity toward Lois, she also knew that being confrontational was not going to get her the information she needed.

The meeting with her aunt had been the exact opposite of her experiences with Lois so far. Aunt Lucy had been very pleased to see her and had welcomed her with open arms. While she was somewhat disappointed not to have met her uncle or her cousins she was really looking forward to Thanksgiving!

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"Hi, Dad!" Lara said excitedly.

"Hi, Pumpkin, how was your first day?"

"Good, Dad. I'm working with George Jones, the *Trib's* best investigator. He's very nice and I had fun working with him."

"That's wonderful. I'm glad you're happy there."

Lara said carefully, "I am, Dad, but... uh, that's not why I called. I saw Aunt Lucy tonight."

There was silence on the other end of the line for a few moments then Clark spoke. "That's wonderful, honey. Ummm, how did you find her?"

Lara replied neutrally, "I flew to Metropolis and asked Lois for her sister's address."

"How did that go?"

Lara grinned then and replied, "Okay. We didn't try to kill each other if that's what you're asking."

"I'm glad to hear that," Clark said wryly. "Getting arrested for murder could negatively affect your new job. So how did your visit go?"

"Great, Dad. Aunt Lucy's very nice. We had coffee and talked for over an hour and she invited all of us to her place for Thanksgiving. If that's okay?"

"That sounds like fun. I haven't seen Lucy since you were born. I look forward to it and I'm sure your grandparents would love to go too. I'll mention it when they get home."

"That's great! I can hardly wait!"

"Ummm... I hate to put a damper on things, Pumpkin but what if Lois is going to be there? She *is* Lucy's sister, after all. Do you think you can handle her being there?"

Lara grew quiet while she considered the possibility. Would

she be able to be in the same room as Lois Lane for hours and be civil? Would there be a chance that her feelings towards Lois would ruin the holiday for *both* families? If so, she knew that she didn't want that and, as such, her previous enthusiasm waned.

"Lara? Honey? Are you still there?"

"Yeah, Dad, I'm here... I don't know!" Lara exclaimed. "I want to go, to meet Aunt Lucy's family, and have them meet you, but Lois possibly being there... I just don't know."

"Why don't you take some time and think about it? I won't say anything until I hear from you, okay?"

"Okay. Thanks, Dad," Lara replied, her previous enthusiasm now gone. "Ummm... I'm going to go now, good night."

"Good night, Pumpkin. Talk to you later."

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After she hung up with her father, Lara spun into her Suit and took off into the sky. She needed to think and, like her father, she did her best thinking high in the air, away from all earthbound distractions.

Lara flew higher and higher until she was at the edge of space where no sound penetrated from below. She turned onto her back, put her hands behind her head, and closed her eyes. Lara let the silence soothe her, every muscle in her body relaxing until all tension left her.

Now calm, she pondered whether she could be in Lois Lane's presence for an extended period. Their meeting tonight had gone well, considering. Lois had, at first, seemed antagonistic, but given their first meeting, Lara couldn't blame her for being on the defensive. Lara thought back to later in their meeting, when she sensed an easing of tension between them and Lois had seemed pleased when she had asked for Lucy's address. The big question, the one that she needed to answer and be completely sure of, was could she forgive Lois Lane for not being her mother?

Her father seemed to have accepted Lois's reasons and had forgiven her. He'd told her as much when Lara had questioned him about who her mother was. He knew Lois better than she did. After all, he'd worked with her for more than a year and understood all her baggage. What her father told her of her conception reinforced the notion that Lois was, above all, scared of losing her position as the best reporter in the city. A lot of people defined themselves by their work, and it seemed that Lois was an extreme example of that type of person.

Lara was also able to guess that Lois was not the type of person who admitted to being wrong very often. She guessed that if Lois was conflicted about her decision to give her baby up, she'd discount that conflict and throw herself into her work. The more time passed, the easier it would become to push those concerns away rather than admit her error.

As a young girl, Lara couldn't understand why her mother didn't want to be with her. She'd even gone as far as to wonder if *she'd* done something to make Lois not want to be her mother. Many nights she'd cried herself to sleep wondering how she could be a better little girl. Then, maybe, her mother would come home.

When Lara had reached adulthood, she was mature enough to know that wasn't the case, but at the time it affected her badly. All that anger had come out the day after the revelation of who her mother was when Lara had let Lois have it with both barrels. Her father had been disappointed in her, though he hadn't stopped her. He showed her by his actions that forgiveness was preferable to anger.

When Lara considered that unloading on Lois had not given her any peace, she thought that maybe her father might be right. Holding on to her anger was only hurting her. Anger would eat away at her making her, ultimately, unhappy. While Lara would probably never call Lois "mom," maybe she could forgive Lois for her choices all those years ago. Lara was still confused and after hours of reflection, she was still no closer to a decision. She turned over and sighed, she needed to talk to her dad.

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The next day, George and Lara met with some of the movers and shakers in the city, and when George introduced her as his partner, Lara was pleased no end. Lara absorbed everything George taught her like a sponge, learning things she'd never learned in journalism school. The day passed so quickly that she was surprised when six o'clock came around.

Lara grinned. "Wow, six o'clock already? It seems like we just got started."

George packed up his briefcase and said, "Some days are like that, and others drag like they'll never end." Lara grabbed her purse and the two rode the elevator together. Lara walked to the "L" station, then on to her stop, walking the short distance to her apartment. Lara decided that, rather than cook for herself, she'd fly to Smallville and eat with her family. She locked the balcony doors behind her, then took off into the sky. Moments later Lara landed behind the barn, spun back into her work clothes, and hurried to the farmhouse.

Lara walked in just as Martha set the roast on the counter and exclaimed, "Hi, Grandma!"

"Lara! It's so good to see you!" Martha cried. Grandmother and granddaughter hugged as if they hadn't seen each other in months.

Lara noticed the table needed to be set and had it done in record time. "Table's all set, Grandma."

"Thanks, dear," Martha replied, then she picked up a knife to carve the roast.

"Where's Grandpa?" Lara asked.

"He went up to Wichita for a seminar. He should be back any minute." Just then Clark pulled into the driveway.

Lara exclaimed, "Dad!" and threw herself into his arms the moment he walked in the door.

Clark hugged Lara tightly. "Wow, now that's the kind of welcome a father could get used to." He kissed her on the cheek. A moment later, Jonathan pulled the truck into his spot, then he joined his family in the kitchen. Lara helped Martha put the food on the table and they all sat down to eat.

With dinner finished, they sat around the table with coffee and slices of fresh hot apple pie a la mode. Clark asked casually, "So Lara, have you given any thought to what we talked about last night?"

Lara sighed with frustration. "That's all I've thought about, Dad. Can we talk?"

Clark stood and pushed his chair under the table. "Walk with me?"

Lara rose and followed her father into the yard.

"What would you like to talk about?"

"Not here, okay?" Lara and Clark spun into their suits then the two of them took off, headed west.

Lara flew towards the Rocky Mountains to a beautiful mountain meadow with a babbling stream where they'd had many private discussions when she was growing up. Lara landed in the middle of the meadow, took off her cape, and she set it on the grass. She sat down and waited while her father did the same. Lara took off her mask and shook out her long brown hair. "You know, I hate this mask sometimes."

Clark chuckled. "I told you that you should wear glasses, remember?"

Lara blushed. She certainly remembered *that* conversation. "I didn't want glasses, Dad. I know, I know," she said when Clark looked at her knowingly. "I can't have it both ways."

Lara gazed at her father. She had procrastinated long enough and he seemed to be waiting for her to begin.

Lara sighed, unsure of how to start this difficult discussion. "Dad, you told me about my conception and some of the circumstances concerning Lois giving me up." She paused before she continued. "I need to know more about Lois before I can make

a decision.”

Clark’s expression grew thoughtful. “Maybe if I tell you about Lois’s background, you’ll understand her better. Lois’s decision not to be actively involved in your life goes back to her childhood.

“Her parents were professionals. Her father, Sam Lane, is a brilliant doctor who specializes in prosthetics. He’s made great strides in the field and has helped a lot of people. Her mother, Ellen, was a nurse, and from what I know was quite accomplished in her own right. However, both had issues that they were unable to control. Sam was, and probably still is, a workaholic. He was gone a lot, and that didn’t change once they had children. Ellen gave up her career to care for her children, and with Sam gone so much, she probably felt neglected.

Lara listened intently as Clark continued.

“Before I get too far, I should tell you that Sam had always wanted a son. From what Lois told me, I believe that fact colored how he interacted with his daughters. Lois told me that she felt as if she was a disappointment from the day she was born.”

Lara reacted immediately. “That’s awful!”

“It is. She told me of one time, when she was ten or so, that she’d gotten the highest score in her class, a 98, on a math test. She was very proud of her accomplishment and couldn’t wait to show her father her paper. When he got home, she rushed over to show him her grade. He looked at the paper and told her that she had two points for improvement. Of course, Lois was devastated.”

Lara felt angry, though she couldn’t say why. “I’m sure she was. Is that all, Dad?”

“No, Pumpkin. Sam was also unfaithful. He had a lot of girlfriends, including a neighbor. Ellen was angry, of course, but her anger turned to self-pity. She began to drink, which, according to Lois, drove her father from the home. With Sam gone, Ellen’s drinking got worse, which left twelve-year-old Lois to pick up the slack. Lois would come home from school to find her mother passed out on the couch with a vodka bottle at her side. She’d have to make dinner for herself and Lucy more nights than not. She had to take over as the parent and nurse. She did this until she turned seventeen when she’d finally had enough and moved out.

“Her father wanted her to follow him into medicine, but Lois wasn’t interested in being a doctor. She loved writing and working on the school paper, and she told her father she was going to pursue a career in journalism. Sam refused to pay for her degree at first but later relented. I’m not sure why, but father and daughter were estranged from then on.”

Lara had listened intently throughout his recitation. “What about her mother?”

“Ellen had to do something once Lois moved out. From what I understand she went into rehab and had been sober for years last I knew. According to Lois, Ellen was a tough person to love. She was down on all men because of her experiences and made sure her daughters knew that all men were untrustworthy. Her attitude affected Lois’s relationship with her mother so that over the years they rarely spoke.

“I hope you can understand now why Lois thought that, with parents like hers, she would not be a good mother and would not want to inflict her baggage on you.”

Lara nodded her head, but she still didn’t understand. “I see that, Dad. But she’s *not* her mother! Why didn’t she want me?” Lara’s dejected tone hurt Clark deeply.

Clark sighed again, his shoulders slumped.

“It’s not that she didn’t want you, Lara. I firmly believe that. It was just that everything hit all at once. Like I told you, Lois had been dealing with the fallout from her marriage to Lex Luthor—”

Lara jumped on that statement. “I thought you said she didn’t marry him!”

“She told Luthor at the altar that she couldn’t marry him but unfortunately, the laws of New Troy consider the marriage valid

when the license is signed, which they’d done earlier that morning, and not after the ceremony. The press, the police, and the FBI hounded her for weeks. She was ultimately cleared of any suspicion that she was involved in Luthor’s illegal activities, but it was at the expense of her reputation.”

Lara looked at her father incredulously. “She *really* didn’t see that he was a crook?”

“No. Luthor was very, very good at hiding his crimes. Some of the smartest people I knew thought he was exactly what he appeared to be, a smart businessman and philanthropist.”

Lara looked Clark in the eye. “You knew though, didn’t you?”

“I did. From the moment I met him I didn’t trust him. You know how, sometimes, you just don’t like a person?”

Lara nodded.

“It was like that with me and Luthor. He set up several tests to determine the extent of Superman’s powers. When I confronted him, all he said was, ‘Let the games begin.’ The problem was, I never had any proof. I tried to tell Lois my suspicions more than once but she thought I was jealous, which I was, but not for the reason she thought. After the *Daily Planet* bombing, a bunch of us were able to gather enough evidence to prove Luthor’s involvement in a host of crimes, and that led to his suicide. I told you how Mr. Stern bought the paper and reopened it, right?”

“Yeah, Dad.”

“Okay. I’m going to skip over your conception because we’ve already talked about that. I’m also going to skip over our agreement and get right to your birth.

“Lucy was with Lois in the delivery room. She tried to convince Lois to hold you but she refused. I think it was because she knew she’d fall in love with you once you were in her arms and she wouldn’t take that chance. She’d set up an elaborate cover story, so keeping you would not fit the plan. She told me, very specifically, not to keep in touch with Lucy—”

Lara interrupted, shocked. “Why, Dad?”

“Lois knew her sister would keep pressuring her if Lucy had pictures and such. I believe she felt she’d eventually relent, and she couldn’t allow that. By then I’d moved to Smallville, and we had already filed the papers for me to get official custody. For her to keep you would mean she’d have to leave Metropolis too, something she was *never* going to do. When you add that I had lied to her about Superman, there was no way she was going to marry a liar. She’d been there, done that with other men even before Luthor. I begged her to change her mind, to at least hold you, but she refused. I could tell she struggled, but true to form Lois wasn’t going to change her mind.”

Clark looked at Lara with finality. “That about covers it. Do you have any questions?”

Lara swallowed noisily then, she shook her head. “Not right now, Dad, but I’m sure I will. You’ve given me a lot to think about.” She looked into his eyes as another idea came to her. “Oh, there is one more thing... Do you still love her?”

Clark’s expression softened immediately. “Yes. I loved her then and I love her now. I’ve never met another woman like her and I’d forgive her everything if she asked.”

Lara stood up and fastened her cape around her shoulders. Clark stood and put his cape back on as well. Then Lara floated off the ground. “Let’s head back, huh?”

The flight back was silent until they reached Smallville.

“Please tell Grandma and Grandpa thanks for dinner, will you?”

Clark nodded. “Sure thing, Pumpkin. Good night.”

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### Chapter Nine—Agonizing and a Decision

Lara flew onto her balcony and opened the door. Once inside, she spun out of her suit then she padded into the bathroom where she washed her face to remove her makeup. Back in her bedroom,

she pulled out her softest sleep set and dressed at a normal pace. It was too early for bed, so she went to her kitchen and made some Lapsang souchong tea, and settled on her couch with her legs tucked under her.

In between sips of the hot sweet beverage, Lara thought about what her father had said. She now felt as if she knew Lois a little better, though that knowledge wasn't helping her decide, at least not yet.

'How can I forgive her?' Lara thought. 'She refused to be my mother!' Over and over she returned to the last thing her father said. He still loved Lois Lane!

'How can he love her?' Lara shook her head with disgust. 'She almost aborted his child! She treated him shabbily. She's snubbed every opportunity he gave her to open communication between them, but when I asked him, he said he'd forgive her if she would only ask.'

After going in circles with her thoughts for over two hours Lara realized she wasn't getting anywhere, so she went to bed though her sleep was a restless one.

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The next night after work, Lara was still no closer to a decision than she had been the night before. She'd listened to her father and had learned a lot about the woman who had given her life. Now she needed a woman's perspective on the situation.

Lara picked up her phone. "Grandma? Can I come over? I need to talk to you."

"Of course. Can you stay for dinner?"

"Sure. See you in a bit."

Lara changed into her suit and was in the air in seconds. After changing back to her casual clothes, Lara entered the kitchen.

Martha's face lit up when Lara entered the room. "Sit down, dear. Everything's ready."

Dinner with her family was a silent affair for Lara. Her thoughts occupied her mind such that she barely contributed to the conversation. After the meal, Lara looked over at her dad.

"Dad, I need to talk to Grandma. Could you clean up?"

Clark nodded his head. "Of course, Pumpkin."

"Come on, Grandma."

As they exited the kitchen Lara led Martha outside, but when Martha headed for the front porch Lara stopped her.

"Not here, Grandma. I want to talk to you in private." Lara spun into her suit, then slid her arm around Martha's shoulders. "Hang on."

At first, Lara rose slowly into the air then she sped up. Minutes later she landed in the same meadow as the night before and pulled off her cape. After she spread it on the grass and sat down, Martha joined her.

Lara gazed out over the sylvan setting of the meadow and sighed. "You know, Grandma, this was where Dad told me about the birds and the bees."

"I knew he'd had the talk with you but I never knew where he did it. He was so nervous. I heard him practicing night after night in his bedroom after you went to bed."

Lara smiled as she remembered just how nervous her father was. "He was so cute I didn't have the heart to stop him. The tops of his ears and his cheeks were bright pink and I think his hands were shaking."

Martha chuckled, "Sounds like your father."

"Of course I knew about human reproduction. We'd had classes on it ever since fifth grade, but once he got past the mechanics, he gave me a lot of good advice." Lara's thoughts turned to that evening so long ago.

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"I know you're a very responsible girl, Pumpkin, but you need to understand the seriousness of the situation."

Lara sighed with frustration. "I know, Dad."

"I don't think you do. I was young once. I know that's hard to

believe but I was," Clark said with a self-deprecating grin. "I saw the consequences of having casual sex first hand. A good friend of mine, Jody, had a boyfriend. -They thought they were in love and, according to her, things went a little too far one night and they had unprotected sex. It was only the one time but she fell pregnant."

"That's awful," Lara said sympathetically.

"That's not the awful part. When Jody told her boyfriend that she was pregnant he told her he didn't love her and wasn't going to be saddled with a kid at seventeen."

Lara swallowed nervously, "What did she do?"

"She agonized over what to do for a while. She talked and I listened, mostly. I wanted to support her but, ultimately it was her decision. She... decided on an abortion," Clark said as he hung his head.

"That's so sad."

"It was. I know a lot of women choose abortion but I, personally, feel it's not a good choice. I suggested adoption since I was adopted and I know there are a lot of families who can't conceive and would love her child but she couldn't face going to school pregnant. Of course she and her boyfriend never spoke to one another again."

"Is she okay now, Dad?"

"Yes. Jody is married now and they live in Olathe. They have three healthy children. I'm telling you this because as a girl *you* are the one who will bear the brunt of an unplanned pregnancy. I understand how, in the heat of the moment, things can get out of hand, but you need to be aware and not let that happen. I knew guys who would tell their girlfriends that, if they loved him, they would do it. Don't fall for that. Anyone who tells you that doesn't love you. If they really loved you, they wouldn't put that kind of pressure on you. Any boy or man worthy of you should never use emotional blackmail against you."

Lara gazed into her father's eyes and saw the love and concern displayed there. "Thanks Dad. I appreciate you telling me this. They never covered anything like this in Sex-Ed class at school."

"I'm glad you understand. If something happened, we'd love you and support you, of course, but it's better not to get into trouble if you can."

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"I knew Dad was right then and now that I know about him and Lois, I can see why he feels the way he does about abortion." Lara sighed and turned to face Martha.

"So what's the problem, sweetie?"

"I've learned that Lois has a sister named Lucy."

Martha's eyes grew wide but she said nothing.

"I went to see Lucy a few days ago."

Martha nodded. "Did you have a good time?"

"She invited us for Thanksgiving."

Martha smiled. "That sounds like fun. Are you going to accept?"

Lara returned a shy smile of her own. "I was until Dad mentioned that Lois might be there too."

Martha grasped Lara's hand. "I see. How do you feel about that?"

Lara's eyes teared up with frustration. "That's the problem, Grandma. I don't know *how* I feel about it! I want us to go. I want to meet Lucy's husband and her two sons. I think we'd have fun and it would allow me to get to know relatives I've never met."

Martha seemed sympathetic. "But you're worried that if Lois is there you might not react well?"

"That's it in a nutshell, Grandma. I've met Lois twice—"

Martha gasped. "I didn't know that."

"The first time was the day after we completed my suit, before Superwoman's debut. I'd found a picture of her and Dad in the cellar. I confronted him, and he finally told me my mother's name. You know how angry I'd been because of her absence, so I

flew to Metropolis and let her have it!”

Martha’s hand rose to her chest. “Oh, dear!”

“Yeah, oh dear is right,” Lara said sarcastically. “I told her that I hoped she was happy and that I hadn’t needed her in my life.”

“How did she take it?”

“She tried to object but I leaned in and glared at her. That sure shut her up! I left soon after because I’d said my piece and I wasn’t going to get in a shouting match.”

“That’s was smart, sweetie. When was the second time?”

“It was after Dad helped me move into my apartment. We got to talking Dad didn’t know where Lucy lived so I put aside my anger for the moment and went to Lois’s office and asked for Lucy’s address. Lois was cool to me at first, and I can’t blame her. She probably thought I was back for round two because this time I came dressed as Superwoman, so the intimidation factor had to be high. You could have knocked me over with a feather when she called me Lara.”

Martha’s jaw dropped in surprise. “She knew who you are?”

“Oh yeah. But it makes sense. From what I’ve been able to glean from talking to Dad, Lois is very sharp. When I left her office that first time I had to get out of there quickly and I made a sonic boom. She knew Dad’s secret so she wouldn’t be the person he knew if she didn’t put Lara Kent and superpowers together after that.”

Martha nodded in agreement. “I can only imagine.”

“I asked Lois what Lucy knew about me. She said that all Lucy knew was that she’d had a child and Dad was the father. She gave me Lucy’s address and I left.”

Lara fidgeted, picking at a nonexistent speck of lint on her cape. “When I told Dad about the offer, he seemed pleased and so was I, right up until he mentioned that *Lois* might be there!”

Martha gave Lara’s hand a supportive squeeze. “So how can I help?”

“I need another opinion, Grandma. Dad told me a lot last night and I’ve done nothing but think over what he said. What do you think?”

Martha paused for a long time and stared off into the distance.

“How did you feel after you unloaded on Lois?”

“Unsatisfied. I thought that once I’d gotten my anger out, I’d feel good, you know? I’d finally got all the anger I’d harbored off my chest but the problem was, I didn’t. I felt empty somehow. All the anger I’d had since I was old enough to know my mother didn’t want to be with me came out, but it didn’t settle anything. I’m not as angry at Lois now. Dad told me a lot, both when he helped me move and again last night. I can see how Lois’s experiences affected the choices she made. I don’t agree with them, obviously, but objectively I think I can see why she made them.”

“How does your dad feel about Lois?”

“That’s the weirdest part, Grandma. I asked him point-blank if he still loved Lois. Without the slightest hesitation, he said that he loved her then and he loves her now. He said he’d forgive her everything if she’d just ask.”

The tears Lara had been holding back now ran slowly down her cheeks. She wiped them away frantically with the back of her hand. “How can he feel that way, Grandma?” she wailed plaintively. “She hurt him as badly as she hurt me, in some ways even worse. I just can’t understand it!”

Martha leaned over and drew Lara into a one-armed hug and rubbed her back while she cried. “Love is a funny thing, sweetie. I knew Clark was in love with Lois from the moment he first started at the *Planet*. He told us about this stubborn, pigheaded, infuriating woman he’d been partnered with, but he was smiling the whole time. You haven’t met the man for you yet, but maybe when you do, you’ll understand. I only met Lois one time, but even then, I could see that she was the woman for him. It’s a

shame how things worked out the way they did, though. I think they’d have made a wonderful couple.”

“So what should I do?”

“Only you can decide that dear. If you want my opinion, I think you should seriously consider forgiving Lois. I know she hurt you. I heard you crying at night, and I didn’t need super hearing. Hearing you cry tore my heart out, and I resolved to do everything I could to take that hurt away.”

“You did, Grandma!” Lara exclaimed. She raised her head until their eyes met. “You made me feel loved, all of you did. Your love was and is special to me. I can’t thank you enough for everything you did.”

“Thanks aren’t needed, sweetie. It’s what family does, love each other!”

“What about you, Grandma?”

Martha looked confused. “What about me, dear?”

“Can *you* forgive Lois?”

Martha once again stared off into the distance. “Jonathan and I have talked a lot about this. At first, we were furious with her, the way she’d treated our boy. She kept your father in agony while she decided if she was going to keep his child and then she made him take you and leave the job he loved, forever!”

Martha looked at her hands and sighed. “When we heard you crying, we knew how hurt you were and it hurt us too. Over the years we didn’t talk as much about it because there was no way to change the situation. Lois rebuffed all of Clark’s efforts to reconnect so, while we felt bad for him, there was nothing we could do.”

Martha turned and reached over to grasp Lara’s hand. “Now though, there *is* the possibility of Lois reentering our lives. When Clark came home last night, he told us what you wanted to talk to him about. Jonathan and I discussed it well into the night, and we came to the decision that, if Lois is truly sorry, then we think she deserves a second chance. As Christians, we believe in forgiveness so yes, we can forgive her.”

Lara wiped her tears again and dried her face with a corner of her cape. “You think I should forgive her?”

“Yes, I do. But you need to decide on your own. I’ll support whatever decision you make.”

Lara hugged Martha once more, then she stood up and offered her hand. “Thanks for the advice. We should be heading back.”

Lara put her cape back on and grasped Martha around the shoulders. In seconds, they were in the air on the way back to Smallville.

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Back in Chicago Lara spent the next two days considering everything her father and grandmother had said. On the one hand were her own feelings about Lois. Throughout her school years she’d felt keenly the lack of her mother in her life. She’d had mother figures, her grandmother, and her favorite teacher among others, but none of them could take the place of the woman who gave her life. As she grew older, she came to realize that adults sometimes did things that were at odds with the needs of their children, something Lara still couldn’t understand. She vowed to herself that she’d never do to her own children, should she ever have any, what her mother had done to her.

On the other hand were the opinions of two people who she loved and respected. Her father, who had been her rock and had given her all the love she could have wanted, had given her insight into Lois that she had not had before. Now, as a mature woman, she thought she could understand why Lois made the choices she’d made, not that she agreed with them, of course. Looking at Lois as a person and not the hated missing mother of her youth, Lara saw a woman who was, in some cases, a victim of her upbringing. The love she should have gotten from her parents was absent and she’d been forced to grow up way too soon. Added to

that were various men she'd trusted her heart to who had used her badly.

So, when her father, the kindest, gentlest man she'd ever known, had revealed his secret to her she'd reacted true to form. She'd seen his dual identities as the worst kind of betrayal to her, he'd lied! Even though Lois had always aspired to having Superman love her, now she saw the man as just one more liar and, after the Luthor fiasco, that was one betrayal too far. Luckily for her Lois Lane had agreed to carry their baby rather than abort her, then she'd driven her father away and, seemingly, without a second thought for her daughter. What had surprised her more than anything was when her father had said he still loved Lois Lane and would welcome her back if she would only ask. Lara found that hard to believe but she could see the veracity of his statement. He still loved her, even after all these years, after driving him away from the job he loved, and forcing him to take their daughter and to never darken her door again!

The next night she'd asked her grandmother's opinion and had received a lesson in forgiveness. While her grandparents had keenly felt the anguish Lara had grown up with, and they had done everything to make up for not having her mother in her life, they had decided that now, with the possibility of Lois Lane reentering their lives they had decided that they could forgive her for the good of their son and their granddaughter. With this information bouncing around in her head Lara pondered her options. Gradually, after much soul searching, she came to a decision.

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The next night after work, Lara was in the air headed to the white farmhouse that had been her home for so many years. Scanning the area she saw that it was clear, so she landed just off the porch, spun into her casual clothes, and entered the kitchen.

"Hi, everybody!" Lara exclaimed as she sat down. "I've made a decision." Lara looked around the table and saw everyone looking at her expectantly.

Martha asked the question on everyone's mind. "And what did you decide, dear?"

Lara paused for a moment, then she replied, "I'm going to forgive Lois."

There was a collective sigh of relief and everyone smiled.

"I'm proud of you, Pumpkin," Clark said. He drew Lara into a one-armed hug and gave her a peck on the cheek.

"Me too, sweetie," Martha said. "If you don't mind my asking, was there one thing that led to your decision?"

Lara gazed lovingly at her father. "Dad and Grandma gave me wonderful advice, but it was when Dad said that he still loves Lois and would forgive her, that cinched it for me. If my father, whom I love and respect, can forgive Lois, then she must not be the evil witch I'd made her out to be. She's a flawed person, like all of us, who made some bad decisions, and I believe she deserves a second chance."

"That's my girl!" Jonathan exclaimed. "So when are you going to tell Lucy that we'd love to have Thanksgiving with her family?"

Lara grinned, pulled her phone out of her pocket and dialed. "Hi, Aunt Lucy... Yes, we were just talking about that. We'd love to come for Thanksgiving! ... Great, I'll call you later to finalize the details. By the way, will Lois be there? ... Yes. We'd love to see her. Okay, we'll talk again. Bye." Lara disconnected the call and slipped the phone into her pocket.

"We're all set!" Lara smiled. "What are we going to do tonight?"

Jonathan rubbed his hands together eagerly, "So who's up for some Texas Hold 'em?"

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### Chapter Ten—Serendipity

Lois Lane's cell phone rang. The caller ID showed the caller was her sister, Lucy Lane-Whyte. "Hey, Luce, what's up?" Lois

said.

"Oh, not much. I just wanted to make sure you're coming to Thanksgiving Dinner this year."

"I don't know, Lucy," Lois replied, exasperated. "You know I've always got so much to do that time of year." Her sister always asked and she always said no. Why couldn't Lucy take the hint?

"Oh, come on Lois, you're the boss. You've got good people that can run the place for a few days. Besides, we've got new people coming who want to see you."

Lois, her curiosity piqued asked, "Oh? And who might that be?"

"Lara Kent and her family," Lucy said softly.

"Lara Kent? And her *family!*" Lois exclaimed. She was glad she was sitting down—otherwise, she'd surely have fallen.

"Yes, Lois. Lara came for a visit while she was out here on a business trip, so I invited her and her family for the holiday. Lara just called and said they'd love to come, and she asked if you were going to be here too."

'Lara was on a *business* trip, all right.' Lois thought knowingly. 'She must have flown out there as soon as she left me.'

"So, are you going to come? Please?"

Lois sighed, she knew when she was beaten. "All right, I'll come. I just hope I don't live to regret it."

Lois ended the call and sat back in her chair, pondering what she'd just learned. 'Lara asked if I was going to Thanksgiving Dinner? I wonder what caused this change in her attitude?' She tapped her red pencil on her bottom lip and decided that whatever caused Lara to change her feelings, it probably had something to do with Clark. He'd always been so forgiving, extending an olive branch over and over, even sending a message to her that first time she'd met their daughter. Lois sent an email to her secretary asking her to set up a flight, car, and lodging for her for two days at Thanksgiving. Her plans now made, Lois returned to editing the article in front of her.

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Lara was flying home from her visit to Smallville when, as she got closer to Chicago, she saw a bright yellow-red glow. Extending her hearing she picked up the fire services broadcast of a five-alarm fire on the South Side. Lara sped up and arrived at the scene in moments, hovering over the area. There was one warehouse almost fully consumed and others were in serious danger. Lara spied the Fire Commander and flew down to land beside him.

"Superwoman! Boy, am I glad to see you!"

"What do you need, sir?" Superwoman asked, getting down to business.

"We're having trouble getting to the back of the building. Can you get some water on that section?" he replied.

"Yes, sir!" Lara took off to a nearby railroad yard where she found an empty coal transport car. She picked it up, flew to Lake Michigan and filled it with water. Lara flew back quickly, found the hottest part of the fire, and slowly poured the water over the area to avoid causing any more damage to the structure. Again and again, Superwoman flew back and forth, pouring water on the fire then returning for more, until at last, the fire was out. When she finished Superwoman landed back beside the Fire Commander.

"I think that's got it, sir. Do you need me for anything else?" Superwoman asked.

Before he could answer a call came in over his earpiece. "Hold on a minute... What? Say that again...? Got it!" He returned his attention to Superwoman. "I've got a man missing in there. Could you look for him?"

"Of course!" Superwoman took off, hovering over the smoking mess that had once been a warehouse, carefully scanning the area in a grid pattern to make sure she didn't miss anything. There, under a collapsed portion of the roof, she saw the firefighter trapped under trusses that had once held up the roof.

She landed near the man pinned under a huge wooden beam, his legs trapped. Her X-ray vision found a small fracture of his lower left leg, but, thankfully no more serious injuries. She scanned the debris and determined that she could lift the beam off him without causing any more damage.

Lara smiled at the man. “You’ve got a fractured left leg but it’s not too bad. I’m going to move this beam then we can get you out of here, okay?” The firefighter nodded his understanding and prepared himself. Superwoman carefully lifted the beam, making sure that nothing else shifted, and set it out of the way.

She lifted him into her arms, then she slowly took off, flying out of the building and over to a waiting ambulance.

Superwoman handed the firefighter off to the EMT and said, “He’s got a fractured left lower leg but I didn’t see any other obvious injuries.”

“Thanks, Superwoman, we’ve got it from here.” They loaded the gurney into the ambulance, closed the doors, and took off speeding towards the hospital.

Commander Johnson walked up to her just as the ambulance drove away. “Thanks, Superwoman.”

“My pleasure, sir,” she replied. “If there’s nothing else?”

“No, I think we can handle it from here,” he replied. “Thanks again!”

“Great, then I’ll be off.” Superwoman rose into the air slowly, then with a whoosh, she disappeared in a streak of blue and black. Lara landed a block away and spun back into her work clothes and headed towards the scene. Arriving back at the scene she pulled out her press pass and a cop waved her through the police line until she came to the command center. Lara walked up to Commander Johnson and went to work.

“Lara Kent, *Chicago Tribune*. What can you tell me about the fire?”

“Not much yet, I’m afraid. We don’t have an obvious cause, but whatever it was the fire spread very quickly. Superwoman was here and helped put it out or the damage to surrounding structures would have been much worse.”

“I’m sorry I missed her,” Lara said sounding disappointed. “I saw an ambulance leaving a moment ago. Were there injuries to any of your men?”

“Yes, but again, thanks to Superwoman, the injury was relatively minor. She found him under some debris and brought him to the ambulance.”

“Do you know where he was taken? I’d like to interview him if I could.”

“Stroger Hospital is closest, so he’d probably be taken there.”

Lara asked about damage to neighboring structures and when the final report would be ready. “Thanks for your time, Commander Johnson.” She ducked behind a building and, moments later, Superwoman was in the air.

After changing back into her work clothes Lara walked into the emergency room of Stroger Hospital and asked at the desk where the firefighter was. They directed her to treatment bay number eight, where a doctor had just finished up putting a cast on a man’s leg.

She knocked on the door jamb and introduced herself. “Hi, I’m Lara Kent, *Chicago Tribune*. Would you be able to talk to me for a few moments?” The doctor finished up with the cast and handed the firefighter a list of instructions. “Make an appointment with your GP in a few days to have that cast looked at,” he said on his way out. Once the doctor left, Lara sat down next to the man in the bed. She saw at a glance that the man was tall, at least six feet two inches, and weighed about 195 well-proportioned pounds. He had dark curly hair, piercing blue eyes, a strong chin, and a very handsome face, the most handsome face she’d ever seen.

“Hi, Miss Kent. Pleased to meet you, I’m Ken McCarthy.” Ken extended his hand to her. As soon as their hands touched, each of them felt a spark, and their eyes locked. Moments later

their hands parted, and Lara immediately felt the loss of contact profoundly. Neither of them said a word for several moments, their eyes hooded behind their lashes, their cheeks pink, glancing at each other shyly.

When the silence between them became oppressive, Lara asked, “Ummm, how are you feeling?”

“Good, I’m good, except for this broken leg of course,” Ken chuckled, rapping his knuckles on the cast.

“Of course. What can you tell me of the fire and how you got injured?”

“The fire was a big one. I mean, really big. It was as hot a fire as I’ve ever experienced. Luckily Superwoman showed up and helped us put it out.” Ken paused, his gaze focused on the middle distance. “Anyway, once the fire was out, we went in to make sure there were no hot spots and to check for anyone who might have been trapped. I thought I saw something so I headed over to it when part of the roof collapsed on me. I was able to protect myself somewhat by ducking under a beam but something hit my leg anyway. When I tried my radio, it didn’t work so, I’ll be honest with you, I thought I was in serious trouble. I assume my buddies noticed I was missing and sent Superwoman after me. She was so confident and supportive. She explained what she was going to do then she lifted this pile of debris off me.” Ken laughed softly. “Flying with her was amazing. It’s too bad I was in so much pain that I didn’t get to enjoy it!”

“I’m so glad she was able to rescue you. Look, I don’t want to take up any more of your time. I’m sure you need your rest.” Lara took her business card out of her purse and wrote something on the back. “Here’s my card, my personal number is on the back. Give me a call,” Lara said sincerely, handing the card to Ken.

Ken’s eyes lit up and his smile seemed to light up the room. After a glance at the card, Ken’s eyes met and held hers.

“Ummm, may I call you Lara?” he asked.

“I’d like that. Now you get some rest, okay?” Lara walked out of the treatment room and out of the hospital. She was so ecstatic that more than once she had to make sure her feet touched the ground. In all her travels, of all the men she’d met, all over the world, *none* of them had affected her the way Ken McCarthy had.

Lara spun into her suit in a darkened area of the hospital then she flew to the *Tribune* to write up the story. She told her readers how the firefighters and Superwoman had worked tirelessly to gain control over the fire and to limit damage to the surrounding structures. Fortunately, there was only one minor injury to a Chicago firefighter. She took her father’s advice and did not include a made-up quote from Superwoman. After she submitted her story, the first under her byline, Lara walked over to the stairway and ran at super speed up to the roof where she spun into the suit and flew to her apartment, entering through the sliding doors on her balcony. Once out of her Suit, she tossed it into the hamper in her secret closet, then took a five-second shower to remove any telltale signs of her firefighting adventure. She hopped into bed in her blue satin short set with a matching sleeveless top. Lara pulled the covers up to her chest, closed her eyes, and dreamt of a dark-haired, sexy firefighter.

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Lara picked up a copy of the *Tribune* when she arrived at work the next morning, searching for her article. She found her article on the bottom of page four. While she wished it had made page one, she was not too disappointed, her first byline in a major paper was very exciting. With the paper under her arm, she rode the elevator to the newsroom floor. When she got to her desk, she put her purse in her bottom left drawer and set to work. Pam Blake poked her head out of her office and called to her.

“Lara, can I see you for a moment, please?”

Lara hurried to the office and closed the door, then sat in the high-back leather chair.

Pam smiled at Lara with pride. “That was a good article on

the fire last night,” Pam said. “So how does it feel to see your byline in print?”

“Great! It’s going into my portfolio for sure.”

“Too bad you couldn’t have gotten a quote from Superwoman. It would have really made your copy sing.”

“Yeah, but she was already gone by the time I got there. What did you think of my interview with the injured firefighter?”

“It added a nice human-interest angle. I’m glad he wasn’t injured more seriously.” ‘Me too.’ Lara thought. “Well, you’d better get back to work. You’re only as good as your next story!” Pam said.

“Yes, Ma’am!” Lara had barely seated herself when George walked over.

“Good get, rookie!” George said, smiling proudly. “You sure surprised everyone here.”

“I was in the right place, that’s all, George,” Lara said. “I’m just sorry I missed Superwoman. I wonder if she’s going to be around more?”

“Who knows? But it couldn’t hurt to have her around, that’s for sure.”

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Lois Lane awoke to the sound of sirens, first in the distance, then closer, apparently headed towards Metropolis harbor. Lois sat up and grabbed her phone. Once the night editor was on the line, she barked, “What’s going down, Charlie and who do we have on it?”

“Explosion and fire in the warehouse district,” he replied succinctly. “I’ve got Simpkins on it.”

“Good, good, she’ll do a good job. Anything else?”

“Just that Superman showed up moments after the first alarm went out.”

“Superman? He hasn’t been around much lately. He must have been in the area. Okay, thanks. Keep me posted if anything goes south.”

Lois ended the call and thought for a moment then she hopped out of bed, threw on some clothes, and left her apartment.

When she arrived at the site Lois watched as firefighters and Superman battled the blaze. The explosion had caused numerous injuries and a triage area had been set up at the perimeter. An hour later most of the fire was out and Superman began to ferry the less seriously injured to Metropolis General. On his last trip back, Lois called out to him.

“Superman! Superman!” Lois hollered to catch his attention. “Do you have time for an interview?”

Superman glanced at her and gave her a knowing smile.

“When I’m done, Ms. Lane.” Superman picked up the last of the injured and flew off into the sky. Moments later he returned and landed near the command post. After talking to the fire chief on the scene for a few minutes, he walked over slowly, his cape fluttering majestically, to where Lois stood.

Superman nodded. “Hello, Ms. Lane. I’ve already given a statement to your reporter Ms. Simpkins.”

“Thank you, I appreciate your consideration. But... I didn’t want to talk about the fire,” Lois replied.

“Maybe we shouldn’t talk here then,” Superman said. When Lois nodded her assent they walked behind a warehouse and he picked her up and vaulted into the sky.

Lois whispered, her head nestled against his shoulder. “Ummm, I’d forgotten how wonderful flying with you is.” Superman drew her closer and a pleasant rumble emanated from within his chest. All too soon Superman landed, set Lois on her feet, and stepped back a couple of paces. Lois glanced around and saw that they had landed atop the former LexCorp building, the irony not lost on her at all.

“So, what can I do for you, Lois?”

“I got a call from Lucy the other day. She invited me to Thanksgiving Dinner. Now, she does that every year and I turn her

down every year. But this time she said that Lara Kent and her family would be attending *and* that Lara had asked if I’d be there. What changed after her first visit?” Lois said slightly out of breath.

Superman smiled. “I see the famous Lane babble is still alive and well.”

“Yeah, well, some things never change and don’t change the subject! What’s up?”

Superman sighed and relaxed slightly. “Lara was very happy to have met Lucy and to know that she had a family. When Lucy invited us for Thanksgiving Dinner she was over the moon. I felt I should bring some reality back to the situation, so I mentioned that you might be there and I asked her if she could handle it if you were.”

Lois, unsure that she wanted to hear the answer, asked, “And what did she say?”

“She couldn’t give me an answer, not right then. I told her to think about it and let me know her decision. Lara’s a good person, and I hoped that she’d make the right decision, but she had a lot of anger—”

Lois crossed her arms over her chest and exclaimed, “Don’t I know that!”

“I’m sorry about that. I tried to talk her out of going to see you that day, but she has a lot of her mother in her.” Lois glared at him, her eyes narrowed. “Anyway, she thought about it for a long time. She talked to me and her grandmother and decided that holding on to all that anger was hurting only her. I don’t think she’ll ever call you ‘mom,’ but I do know she wants to get to know you and her new relatives.”

Lois’s eyes grew moist, her lower lip trembled as she fought back tears. Head bowed, her shoulders sagged. “I’m glad. She sounds like a wonderful person, better than me.”

Superman took a step closer and touched her forearm briefly. “Please don’t say that. You’re a good person too. You can change and this may be just the opportunity you need.”

Lois replied as a couple of tears escaped running down her cheeks. “Yeah, maybe.” She straightened and wiped her tears away, a tremulous smile on her face. “Thanks for taking the time to talk to me. Considering how rotten I was to you—”

“No, Lois! I understood. You had a lot of pressure on you back then, getting over the Luthor thing, getting your reputation back. If I know anything, it’s your reputation is everything to you. It was a perfect storm, and the circumstances were against us. Maybe if the timing had been different...” Superman trailed off.

“Maybe,” Lois replied. “But we’ll never know. All we can do is accept what is and resolve to be better in the future.” She glanced at her watch. “It’s getting late. Could you take me back to my car?”

Superman nodded, picked her up, and vaulted up into the sky. When Lois pointed out her car, a brand-new Jeep Grand Cherokee Trackhawk, Superman landed next to it and set her on her feet.

Superman looked at the imposing black SUV and said, “Wow, that’s some car.”

Lois smiled and stepped away from the Man of Steel. “Yeah. It’s not exactly practical but it sure is fun!” She walked around to the driver’s door and paused. “Goodnight. Thanks for taking the time to talk to me. I guess I’ll see you at Lucy’s?”

“Yes, we’ll be there,” Superman said looking hopeful. “If... if you need anything, please let me know. You still have the number, right?”

“Yes, I do. Goodnight again.” Lois opened the driver’s door, climbed in, and with a roar of the powerful engine, drove away.

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### Chapter Eleven—First Meeting

A couple of days after the big fire, Lara Kent received a call from a number she did not recognize while she was lounging at home after work. “Hello?”

“Hi, um, it’s Ken. Ken McCarthy. I hope you remember me?”

Lara’s heart beat faster, of course, she remembered him! “Hi! Yes, I remember you. I’m glad you called. How are you? How’s your leg?”

Ken’s deep voice flowed over Lara and made her tingle. “I’m good. The leg is good too. The doc says I’ll be able to go back to work in six weeks. Right now I’m just taking it easy.” After a short pause, Ken continued, “Would you like to meet me for coffee sometime?”

“Coffee sounds wonderful. Are you able to get around? Aren’t you on crutches?”

“I’ve got a walking cast now. It allows me to get around pretty well.” Ken asked, “Ummm, it’s not too late. Could we maybe... meet tonight?”

“Yes!” Lara exclaimed then she forced herself to calm down and said, “Ummm, sure. I’d love to meet up with you. Where do you live?”

“I live near the intersection of Carroll and Aberdeen.”

“I live near Washington and Carpenter so you’re very near me. Why don’t we meet at BomboBar on Randolph?”

“Perfect, I’ll meet you there in say... twenty minutes?”

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Lara walked into BomboBar exactly twenty minutes after she’d hung up. In preparation, she’d changed her clothes twelve times, finally deciding on a dark blue silk blouse with black twill pants. She wanted to look casual but classy, and she hoped this outfit projected that image. She saw Ken as soon as she entered the café at a table halfway down the main aisle and she made her way confidently to the table where Ken rose from his chair to greet her.

He hurried around the table and pulled out the chair for her. “Hi, Lara. I’m glad you could make it. You look *great*, by the way.” Lara sat down and allowed Ken to push her chair in, then he seated himself.

Lara perused the menu on the wall. “So Ken, what’s good here?”

“The hot chocolate is amazing according to reviews. You should try the bomboloni Italian donuts, they’re the best!”

“Sounds good. I think I’ll go with the hot chocolate and a strawberry-filled bomboloni.”

Ken signaled to the waitress and when she arrived, they gave her their food orders.

“I’m so glad you could meet me, Lara. Ever since we met at the hospital, I’ve wanted to talk to you, to get to know you. I hope you don’t think it’s weird, but there was something about you that I’ve never experienced before.”

Lara smiled back at him. “I know what you mean. I felt like there was something different about you when we met in the hospital too. I’ve never felt like that the first time I’ve met a guy before. It’s strange, but it’s something I want to explore.”

Just then their orders arrived. “Ummm, this is amazing!” Lara exclaimed after she’d taken a sip of her drink. “I’ve always thought my grandmother made the best hot chocolate, but this has hers beat. Sorry, Grandma!” Lara took another sip and licked her lips.

“Lara, the way you talk about your grandmother suggests that she’s a very important person in your life. Would you tell me about her?” Ken said. He gazed into her eyes; his smile warmed her.

“My grandmother is the most important woman in my life,” she said proudly.

Ken’s eyes grew wide. “Not your mother?”

“I never knew my mother growing up. Long story,” Lara replied and hurried on. “I grew up in Kansas, on a farm in the town of Smallville.”

“Smallville? Never heard of it.”

“It was founded by Josiah Small in the early 1800s and is the

county seat. It’s about an hour west from Wichita by car. I grew up on my grandparent’s farm when my dad moved there from Metropolis after I was born. He runs the local paper and the three of them raised me. They’re wonderful people, salt of the earth. My dad is the best dad anyone could ask for. But as I said, it was Grandma who was my female role model growing up. I owe her a lot.”

“She sounds like a wonderful woman. Maybe I can meet her someday.”

Lara smiled shyly. “Maybe. She may be a farmer’s wife, but she doesn’t fit that stereotype at all,” Lara said proudly. “She loves art and technology and is a big proponent of civil rights. She told me she and grandpa participated in some of the 60’s civil rights marches. She’s also a wonderful cook. She taught me everything I know and can still run rings around women half her age.”

“Tell me a little about your dad, if you would?”

“Dad’s a great guy. Besides running the local paper, he’s written several best-selling travel books about places he visited after college.”

Ken’s jaw dropped. “Kent? You don’t mean Clark Kent? He’s your dad?”

“Yep, that’s him. Have you read his books?”

Ken smiled and nodded. “I love them. I don’t get to travel much, but I feel like I’ve been there when I read one of his books.”

“I’ll be sure to let him know you enjoyed them,” Lara said proudly. “I’ve told you enough about me. Now, what about you?”

“I grew up here in Illinois. My dad was a police officer. He worked for the Lake County Sheriff’s office for thirty years, and he retired a couple of years ago. He and my mom moved to Florida last year. My mom’s siblings live there so that’s why they moved there. The weather is also better for his health and the taxes are a lot less than Illinois!”

“And what did your mom do?” Lara asked.

Ken’s face showed his pride for his family. “She was a stay-at-home mom. It’s not an easy job raising three rambunctious boys. My brother Dave is two years older than me. My brother Ted is two years younger. Dave’s married to Amy and they live in Milwaukee and Ted is married as well, to Audrey and they live in Davenport, Iowa. Do you have any siblings?”

“Nope, I’m an only child. I wish I’d had a brother or sister growing up, but dad never found a woman to love after my mom. I do have an aunt and two cousins on my mom’s side, but I only recently found them so I didn’t know them growing up.”

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Over the next hour, they had another hot chocolate and shared experiences from their childhoods. Ken told of summers spent at camp where he learned to swim, ride horses, and where he developed a love of nature. Lara told him of her life on the farm, her Girl Scout trips, and learning to cook with her grandmother. They were having so much fun that neither of them seemed to want the evening to end. When there was a pause in the conversation Lara glanced at her watch and said, “I’m sorry, Ken but I really should be getting home because it’s getting late. I’ve had a nice time.”

“Me too.” Lara and Ken walked slowly to the door and out onto the sidewalk.

Ken smiled shyly and said, “Uh, would you like to see a movie with me this weekend?”

“Sure! What day and time?”

“How about Friday night, seven o’clock? We can grab a bite to eat then hit the movie after.”

“Perfect.” Lara reached into her purse and pulled out her business card, then wrote her address on the back. Ken took it and put it in his breast pocket.

“Okay, I’ll pick you up at 7:00.” He leaned in and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

Lara smiled shyly. “See you Friday.” Then she turned south towards the “L” station.

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When she arrived home, Lara changed into her pajamas then walked into her kitchen. She took a mug down from her cabinet, took a tea bag from the canister, placed it into the cup, then filled it with water. A quick blast of heat vision had it boiling in no time then she took her tea into the living room, and set the cup on the coffee table to steep. While she waited, she sat and pondered her date with Ken.

Their casual date tonight proved that the feelings she’d experienced at the hospital were not a fluke. Every time their hands touched it was like electricity flowed through her. Every smile, every touch, every gesture affected her as no man had ever done before. Lara knew, without a doubt, that Ken McCarthy was someone special, though she didn’t yet know why.

She remembered how her dad had talked about his first meeting with Lois Lane. Her experience with Ken seemed to mirror that experience almost to a T. Over the years she’d met and dated some nice guys, but none of them had ever affected her the way Ken did. She took a sip of her tea and contemplated how things might progress. One thing was for sure, she knew that she wanted to see more of him. A lot more. She could hardly wait for Friday night!

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Lara flew to Smallville after work the next day, eager to share her news with her grandmother. Lara burst through the back door where the two women embraced enthusiastically.

“Grandma!”

“It’s so good to see you, sweetie,” Martha said as she studied Lara’s face. “Okay, out with it. You’ve got something on your mind.”

“There’s no fooling you, huh?” Lara said, her eyes sparkled with delight. “I’ve met a man, Grandma.”

“Oh, honey! That’s wonderful! What’s he like?”

“He’s a firefighter and he has two brothers.” Lara enthused. “His dad was a cop and his mom’s a homemaker. They live in Florida now. He’s 24, six feet two inches tall with dark curly hair and the most gorgeous blue eyes.”

Martha sat down and invited Lara to join her. “How did you meet?”

“I was helping out at a fire and one of the firemen went missing. When I searched the debris, I found him under some rubble. He had a broken leg, so I went to the hospital to interview him for the paper.”

“That was the fire you wrote about? *He’s* the firefighter you interviewed?”

“Yep. I’ve never met anyone like him, Grandma. I’ve never felt like this before.”

“That’s wonderful, dear but you’ve dated a lot of guys so what’s different about him?”

“It’s hard to explain. When I walked into the Emergency Room and I saw him for the first time it felt like I knew he was the man for me. My legs got weak and I could hardly breathe. When we shook hands, it was as if I’d been struck by lightning.”

“You didn’t feel that way when you rescued him?”

“No. He was all decked out in his firefighting gear. I couldn’t even see his face very well. Besides, he was in pain and my only thought was to get him to the ambulance.”

“That makes sense. Do you think he feels the same way?”

“Oh yes. We met at a little place for hot chocolate and Italian donuts and we talked for a couple of hours. He kissed me on the cheek and asked me out for this Friday.”

“He sounds like a very nice man. Why don’t you help me get supper ready? Your dad should be here soon and we can talk some more.”

Martha and Lara set the table and had the food waiting when

Jonathan and Clark walked into the kitchen ten minutes later.

“Lara! It’s good to see you, Pumpkin.” Clark said. He hugged his daughter then sat down. “I didn’t know you were stopping by tonight, not that we don’t love having you here.”

“I just decided to drop in, Dad. I’ve got some news.”

Martha said, “Why don’t we sit down and eat, then Lara can tell us her news.”

While everyone filled their plates, Clark looked over to his daughter. Between bites of meatloaf, Clark asked, “So, Pumpkin, what’s your big news?”

“I’ve met a man, Dad,” Lara said with a smile.

Clark put down his fork and sighed inwardly. “That’s wonderful, Pumpkin!” Clark said —though his smile didn’t seem to reach his eyes. “Tell us all about him.”

Lara repeated what she’d told her grandmother earlier. She grew more and more excited with the retelling so when she finished, she looked at her father. Lara said carefully, “Dad, I’ve met and dated some great guys, but I’ve never felt like this about anyone before. Is that how you felt about Lois?”

“Sounds like it, honey. I knew when she walked into my interview that she was the woman for me. Maybe it’s a Kryptonian thing. I don’t know, but it could be. I wish I knew for sure.”

“Do you think the globe might know?”

“Maybe. I’ve never thought to ask it a question before, I always thought it played only prerecorded messages. I wouldn’t even know how to start but it couldn’t hurt to try. How about we give it a shot after dinner?” Lara nodded her assent and returned to her meal.

After dinner, they went into the den and Clark took the globe off the shelf and out of its box.

“How do you think we should do this, Dad?”

“Well, it played separate messages when we touched it individually. Why don’t we both hold it and see what happens?”

They sat on the couch and laid their hands on the globe. Clark put his hands on top and bottom and Lara put hers on each side and the globe slowly began to glow. It grew brighter and brighter until a hologram of Jor-El and Lara appeared in front of them. Clark and Lara grinned at each other, pleased that their experiment worked.

“What is your wish, my son?” Jor-El and Lara stood in front of them and smiled benevolently.

“Can you tell us how Kryptonians choose a mate?” Clark asked.

‘Jor-El’ replied, “Birth marriages are the norm for the noble houses. The reasons are many. To strengthen a smaller house by allying with a larger one. For business relationships, and, of course, to strengthen their power base. You Kal-El, as the future First Lord, were bound at birth to the House of Ra.”

Lara looked at the hologram of her grandmother and asked tremulously, “Don’t Kryptonians marry for love?”

“Yes, granddaughter, they do.” Grandmother Lara replied. “A birth marriage can be rendered null when one or both of the participants has found his or her soulmate. Kryptonians bind for life, so when someone finds a soulmate, it is a rare and wonderful thing.”

Lara asked, “How do you know when you’ve found your soulmate?”

Grandmother Lara smiled benignly. “When a person finds their soulmate, the couple feels attraction stronger to each other than to any other. It is as if you have met the person who is the other half of your being.”

Lara asked, “Do soulmates *always* get together?”

“No.” Grandmother Lara replied sadly. “Unfortunately, the soulmate bond only means that the path to happiness is smoother if the couple accepts it. Numerous factors can affect the bond. It can be resisted if other goals are more important to that person or if soulmates never meet.”

“Ummm, were you and Jor-El soulmates?”

“Yes, granddaughter, we were.” Grandmother Lara replied. “Our binding was a glorious joining that we treasured our whole life.”

Clark and Lara grinned happily at that news.

Lara thought of something else that she wondered about.

“What is the extent of the knowledge the globe contains?”

Jor-El turned to face Lara and replied, “This globe contains the majority of the Kryptonian knowledge base limited only by the amount of storage available. It contains information on Science, Law, Philosophy, Literature, Music, Medicine, and many other subjects. These subjects we felt would be useful on Kal-El’s new planet and would give him information on his Kryptonian heritage.”

Clark asked, “How do we access the knowledge base?”

“When you hold the globe as you are now it activates query mode. If Kal-El holds the globe, my hologram will appear. If you, granddaughter hold the globe then my wife’s hologram will appear. Is this satisfactory?”

“Yes, thank you,” Lara replied.

“You are most welcome.”

Lara and Clark removed their hands from the globe and the hologram disappeared, then the globe slowly went dark. Clark placed it in the velvet-lined wooden box and put it on the shelf. Father and daughter went back to the living room where Martha and Jonathan awaited them.

Martha asked, “Were you able to get your questions answered?”

“Yes, we did,” Lara replied. “The globe said that Kryptonians mate for life, and they know when they meet their soulmate.”

“I always wondered why I felt the way I did about Lois, and now I know. It’s part of my Kryptonian heritage. The globe also told me that I have a birth wife from the House of Ra.” Clark chuckled. “It’s a good thing there are no other Kryptonians around! I’m not ready to get married.”

Lara said sadly, “What’s amazing is that you had to travel across the galaxy to a different planet to find your soulmate. It saddens me to think that if Krypton hadn’t exploded, you’d be married to a woman you most likely wouldn’t love.”

“I don’t think that’s the way to look at it, Lara,” Clark said sincerely. “As the globe said, the soulmates’ bond is very rare. I don’t know how many people lived on Krypton, but I would guess at least millions if not billions. There had to be millions of married couples, so do you think that all of those marriages were unhappy?”

Lara thought for a moment. “When you put it that way, no.”

“I’d like to think that being part of a birth marriage, I probably would have grown up with this woman, and over time I would have come to love her. While that love would be nothing compared with the way I feel about Lois, I must believe that our love could have been satisfying.

“What if Earth’s yellow sun didn’t affect Kryptonians the way it does?” Clark continued. “What if I’d grown up without powers? I know when I was a teen my lack of relationships was due to my differences. I had to hide parts of myself which made it difficult to have a serious relationship. If those differences hadn’t existed, I believe that I might have been receptive to some of the girls’ advances back then.

“I took Rachel Harris to the prom and I liked her very much. It’s possible, if my powers weren’t a factor, I might have fallen in love with her. Or maybe a woman I met at college or on my world travels someone could have caught my eye. Come to think of it, would I have even *gone* on my world travels? The reason for going wouldn’t have existed. I wouldn’t have been looking for others like me, that’s for sure.

“Your grandparents aren’t rich, and even though I worked, would I have had enough money to travel? If I did travel, I

wouldn’t have made people suspicious of me by performing rescues so maybe I’d have stayed in one place longer. I might have gotten to know some of the women I met better and maybe fallen in love with one of them.

“I’d hate to think that if I hadn’t met Lois, I’d be alone, never falling in love. Of course, now that I have met her, no other woman measures up. It’s the same for you, Lara. I’d hate to think that if you’d never met Ken, you’d never meet a nice man and get to know him and slowly, over time, fall in love with him. Do you see what I mean?” Clark said.

“Yeah. Thanks, Dad, I never thought about it that way,” Lara said. “It makes me feel even luckier for having met Ken.”

“You certainly are, dear,” Martha said. “So did you learn anything else?”

“Yes.” Clark replied, “The globe contains a huge amount of Kryptonian knowledge, things my birth parents thought would be useful to me here on Earth. I don’t know if I’ll ever need it but it’s nice to know it’s there.”

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Lara flew home later that evening and landed silently on her balcony. She entered her bedroom, spun into her pajamas, then padded barefoot into her kitchen. She grabbed two cookies and poured herself a large glass of milk where she plopped herself on the couch to ponder the information she’d garnered from the globe that evening.

She chewed on her cookie without really tasting it. ‘Kryptonians mated for life! What a wonderful concept,’ she thought. It seemed that even half-Kryptonians knew when they met their soulmate, which pleased Lara greatly. Every time she thought of Ken McCarthy, a warm feeling descended over her and her body reacted excitedly. With the knowledge she’d gained, she could hardly wait for their date Friday night.

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## Chapter Twelve—First Date

A knock sounded on Lara’s door at exactly 6:59 p.m. She glanced through the door and saw Ken standing there with a bouquet in his hand. Lara was wearing a new pair of jeans with a bright yellow cotton blouse. She wore her hair away from her face, exposing her long graceful neck. A necklace of silver links with matching earrings completed her look.

When the door opened Ken handed her the flowers. “Wow, you look amazing!”

Lara replied, blushing, “Thank you. I’ll just put these in some water. They’re beautiful! Make yourself at home.”

While Lara headed into her kitchen Ken sat down to wait.

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Lara’s home was an eclectic mix. Items that he could tell came from around the world were on her shelves amid pictures of her family and the farm where she grew up. Ken got up and walked over to the shelves, perusing the family photos. The ones that intrigued him the most were the ones of Lara as a child with her grandparents at various venues. Her father was in only a few of them, probably because he had been taking the pictures rather than being the subject of them.

Ken thought that they seemed like a very loving family. The love they had for each other shone through every picture, their smiles were honest and open. Except for the lack of siblings, Lara’s family reminded him of his own. Just then, Lara returned to the living room and Ken turned to greet her.

“Your family is lovely, Lara. I can see why you spoke so glowingly about them.”

“Thank you, Ken. Like I told you before, they’re the best people in the world and I love them with all my heart.” Lara took his hand and led him to the door. “So, where are we going to eat?”

Ken smiled. “You’ll see.” After locking the door behind them Lara grasped Ken’s hand again and they rode the elevator to the ground floor. Once out on the sidewalk, he directed her to a car

parked at the curb.

“Normally on a nice night like this we could walk, but with this cast, I can’t walk too far. Luckily, I broke my left leg!” he chuckled. He held the door of his Accord open for her and she climbed in. After taking his seat, he started the car and pulled smoothly into traffic.

Ken navigated through the light evening traffic and asked, “Do you like Italian?”

“Love it! Where did you have in mind?”

“Viaggio, over on Madison, I’ve heard it’s great.”

Ken drove skillfully and pulled in for valet parking. He handed his keys to the attendant, then offered his arm to escort Lara into the lobby.

Ken walked up to the podium and said to the hostess, “Reservation for two for McCarthy.”

The hostess smiled in welcome and escorted them to their table. “Right this way.”

They followed the hostess to a booth about halfway down. Lara and Ken slid into the booth and the hostess handed them their menus and left.

Moments later Julie, their waitress, took their drinks order and left a basket of breadsticks. When she returned with the drinks, she took their orders.

Lara folded the menu and lay it on the table. “I’ll have the salmon oreganato.”

Ken handed both menus to their waitress. “And I’ll have the lasagna.”

Lara took a bite of a breadstick and asked, “So what theater are we going to?”

“I was thinking of the AMC Theater at Navy Pier. They even have IMAX movies.”

“I’ve never been there, Navy Pier that is. Of course, being new here, I haven’t had a lot of time to see the sights.”

Ken gazed deeply into her eyes. “I’d love to show you around if you’ll let me.”

Lara replied softly, her eyes boring into his. “I think I’d like that.”

While they waited for their meals, they chatted as if they’d known each other forever. Their dinners arrived and they ate in companionable silence through most of it, their enjoyment came from being in each other’s company. After dinner, they ordered dessert. Lara had Spumoni Bomba and Ken had Tiramisu with coffee for both.

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On the drive to Navy Pier Lara exclaimed, “That was amazing! I loved that dessert, it was absolutely sinful!”

Ken glanced at her. “I’m glad you enjoyed it. Well, here we are!” Ken parked in the West Garage, close to the pier itself then they walked the pier to the movie theater where they perused the offerings.

“You know, it’s such a beautiful night. Would you mind if we just explored the pier?” Lara asked. “It won’t be too much walking for you, will it?”

“I’d love to.” Ken smiled. “If we go slow and sit down to rest once in a while, I should be just fine.”

Ken took Lara’s hand and the two set out to explore the pier. They walked slowly along the south side of the pier where they took in the sights of the city. They passed by the Tall Ship Windy, moored at the pier. They also saw several dinner cruise ships and made plans to come back another time to enjoy what they had to offer. They slowly made their way to the very end and sat on the benches. As they took in the view of Lake Michigan, the light breeze teased their hair.

While they rested Lara took pictures of the city and her companion with her phone. On the return trip on the north side, they passed the Atrium, finally coming to the Ferris Wheel and the Carousel.

Ken’s eyes were alight with joy. “Which one do you want to go on first?”

“Ferris Wheel,” Lara said confidently. “The ride moves slowly so it’ll give your leg a rest.” They got in line, and in moments they were inside a car being lifted into the air. Higher and higher the wheel raised them until the skyline of Chicago lay before them.

Lara gazed out over the city. “It’s beautiful up here.”

Ken whispered, “Yes, it is.” His mouth was so close to her ear it made her shiver. Lara turned to find their faces mere inches apart. She leaned in and offered her lips to his kiss. Ken wrapped his arms around her, his mouth descended on hers and both moaned deeply in their throats at first contact.

Ken’s tongue tickled her lips, requesting entry which she gladly gave. His tongue slid into her mouth, lightly touching hers, dancing back and forth as the passion rose between them.

When Ken broke the kiss, he pressed his forehead against hers, their chests heaving from the effort needed to breathe. He tightened his arms around her and placed butterfly kisses on her forehead, cheeks, and the tip of her nose. Lara laid her head on his chest and sighed.

Between breaths, Ken said, “That was…”

“I know…” Lara replied. She lifted her head off his chest and their eyes met. His eyes darkened until they were like obsidian points and his head lowered to claim her lips once more. Despite the break, their passions soon flared again. They kissed fiercely until once more Ken drew back.

Ken chuckled ruefully. “We need to be careful or we’re going to fog up the windows!”

“I don’t know what’s come over me!” Lara said. “I’ve never felt like this before.”

“Me neither. Lara, I’ve never felt like this about someone I’ve only known for a few days! Kissing you is like nothing I’ve ever experienced!”

Ken drew her into his arms again and Lara rested her head on his chest. By the time the ride was over, they had calmed down enough to be able to act almost normally. Hand in hand they headed to the carousel, where they saw the red, yellow, and blue canopy covering the horses as it rotated around and around.

They hopped on to adjacent horses and rode while holding hands. The music, the lights, and the sounds of the crowd enveloped them as they rode. Round and round they went, their faces split into wide grins, their hair blown by the breeze. At the end of the ride, they walked over to Fruitalia Italian Ice for a quick snack, then, because it was almost closing time, they headed back to the parking garage.

On the drive back to Lara’s place they held hands and reveled in the closeness and magic of their date. At Lara’s apartment building Ken pulled in to the curb and parked just outside the front door, then he escorted Lara through the lobby and up to her door.

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When they arrived at her door Lara asked, “Would you like to come in for coffee? It’s still early.”

“I’d love to,” Ken replied with a smile. Lara unlocked the door and directed Ken to the couch.

While she made coffee Lara thought back over their date so far.

‘Wow, I can’t believe how I behaved tonight! I’m so attracted to him and, luckily, he seems to feel the same. It’s a good thing he had the presence of mind to slow things down on the Ferris Wheel because I sure couldn’t.’ Lara shook herself metaphorically when the coffee maker bubbled signaling that their drinks were ready. She poured the hot black liquid into two cups and set them on the tray, then she added sugar, cream, and spoons and carried it into the living room.

“Here we go.” Lara set the tray on the glass and brass coffee table then she handed Ken a cup. She joined him on the couch and

added cream and four sugars to her drink. After she took a sip, she leaned back against the arm of the couch.

Ken took a sip of his drink and said, “Umm, this is good! Do you do something special with it?”

Lara smiled enigmatically and replied, “It’s my grandmother’s secret recipe.”

“I can respect that.” Ken took another sip of his coffee while they sat gazing at each other quietly, in silent communication.

“I had a lovely time tonight, Ken,” Lara said at last.

She set her cup down on the table and slid over closer to him. Ken set his cup down as well and moved over until they were almost touching. He opened his arms in invitation, so Lara moved in and lay her head on his chest. When Ken’s arms tightened around her, they both sighed contentedly with Lara’s arms wrapped tightly around his waist. They sat like that, holding each other, their breathing the only sound in the quiet room.

Ken stroked her cheek with his finger. “Lara,” he whispered. “I hope you don’t think I’m rushing things, but I’ve never met a woman like you. I’ve never felt like this about anyone! It’s so many things —exciting, overwhelming, soothing, comforting, supportive, so many things I can’t list them all. Lara Kent... it makes no sense at all but I think I’m falling in love with you.”

Lara lifted her head from his chest. Her smile grew as their eyes met. “No, Ken, I don’t feel you’re rushing things. I feel the same way you do. I’ve never met a man who makes me feel the way I do when I’m in your arms. I feel so many things that I’m overwhelmed too, but in a good way, and I know I want to feel this way forever. I love you too, Ken McCarthy!” They fell into each other’s arms, their lips joined as they silently proclaimed their love.

As before, their passions soon rose to a heated pitch, so when Lara’s hands began tugging at the buttons on his shirt Ken pulled away gently and guided her head back to his chest. They both lay there breathing heavily, his arms tightly wrapped around her. Once they had regained their composure, Ken laid light, loving kisses on top of her head.

“As much as I was enjoying kissing you, I think we were getting a little ahead of ourselves, especially for our first date.” Ken hugged her tighter and kissed her forehead. “I respect you too much to let us do something like that. In the heat of the moment, I know it would be amazing, but that might jeopardize what we have for a moment of pleasure.”

Lara burrowed into the curve of his arm. “Thank you,” Lara said softly. “Thank you for being so considerate and for having the presence of mind to stop. I... I’ve never been with a man, so I appreciate your restraint more than you’ll ever know.”

“I’m honored that you would share that with me,” Ken said with awe. “I’m even happier now that I put the brakes on things. When you give yourself it should be special, not the result of some heavy-duty kissing on your couch.”

Ken tightened his hold on her and kissed the top of her head several times. Reluctantly he released her and helped her to sit up as he glanced at the clock in the kitchen.

“It’s getting late, Lara. I should be going.”

They stood and walked hand in hand to her door. She opened it and he stepped into the hall. Lara leaned up and gave him a quick kiss on the lips, then backed away, her eyes shone with mischief.

“Good night, Ken,” she whispered. “Call me tomorrow?”

He nodded, then walked away. Lara closed the door and ran to her bedroom and spun into her Suit. She was in the air before Ken had even reached the sidewalk. Higher and higher she flew until she reached that point where Earth ended and space began, all sounds from below now gone. Lara floated on her back, replaying the evening in her mind.

She could never have predicted how quickly their relationship had progressed. At the beginning of the night they’d planned to go

out for dinner and a movie, but by the end, they’d been making out like teenagers on her couch. Then, unexpectedly Ken had declared his love for her! Lara smiled as she remembered the feel of his lips on hers, his arms around her, their bodies pressed so close she couldn’t tell where she ended and he began.

The globe sure was right, the soulmate’s connection was a wonderful thing! Lara thanked God that she had found her soulmate, but now came the hard part. How should she tell Ken about her heritage?

Lara had never given much thought to sharing her secret with anyone as there hadn’t been anyone she’d wanted to share herself with. Given that there was only one other super-powered person on Earth, she resolved to talk to her father soon. Surely, he’d be able to give her some advice. Her decision made, she flew back down to her apartment, spun into her pajamas, and hopped into bed with thoughts of Ken running through her mind.

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Since her family were early risers, Lara was in the air by 5:00 a.m. and she landed behind the barn moments later. After spinning back into her regular clothes, she x-rayed the barn to find her father and grandfather doing the chores.

When she turned the corner Lara exclaimed. “Morning, Dad, Grandpa! It’s a wonderful day, isn’t it?”

“Lara, Honey! It’s good to see you, but isn’t it a little early?” Clark asked as he kissed his daughter on the cheek. Lara walked over to her grandfather and kissed him enthusiastically.

Jonathan grinned knowingly at Clark and said, “Somebody’s in a good mood.”

Positively bursting with excitement Lara exclaimed, “I sure am Grandpa. I’m in love!”

“I’m happy for you, Pumpkin,” Clark said then he shooed his daughter out of the barn. “We’re about done here. Why don’t you go see grandma and we’ll join you in a bit?”

Once Lara left, Clark’s voice choked up. “My little girl is in love, Dad.”

“Yep, your mother and I felt the same way when you first came home talking about Lois. It’s part of life, part of her growing up.” Jonathan wrapped his arm around his son’s shoulders. “Let’s go inside, I’m getting hungry.”

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Lara walked into the familiar kitchen, the smell of corn muffins and coffee tantalized her. She took a deep breath and let the familiar scents wash over her.

“Good morning, Grandma!” She hugged the older woman and kissed her on the cheek.

“Oh, honey, it’s good to see you! What brings you out so early on a Saturday morning?”

Lara, her face alight enthused, “I’m in love, Grandma, and I couldn’t wait to tell everyone!”

“That’s so exciting, dear. I’m so happy for you! Here’s your dad and grandpa now. Why don’t we eat and you can tell us all about it?”

Martha placed the plate of hot muffins on the table with a big tub of butter and poured coffee for everyone. Lara just drank coffee, being too excited to eat.

“You remember Ken, the firefighter I rescued and interviewed for the paper?” Everyone nodded. “Well, he asked me out last night and we went for dinner, then over to Navy Pier. The more time we spent together, the more I felt that he was different from any man I’d dated before. We were on the Ferris Wheel when we kissed for the first time and I knew. I knew that I loved him, that he was the soulmate the globe told us about. When he took me home, I invited him in for coffee and we kissed again and that’s when he told me that he loves me! I know this seems so fast, but as the globe said, the soulmate bond is a rare and wonderful thing, and now I know what it was talking about!”

Martha squeezed Lara’s hand. “We’re so happy for you,

sweetie. So... when do we meet this wonderful man?"

"That's kind of why I came over," Lara said uncertainly. She looked at her family for help. "I need some advice. How do I tell him about... Superwoman?"

"I think you need to talk to your dad about that," Jonathan said sagely.

Lara nodded and faced her father. "So Dad, can you give me any advice?"

Clark took the last sip of his coffee and stood up. "Walk with me?"

Clark held his hand out. Lara grasped it and the two of them headed out. Side by side they made their way to the pond where they sat down on a rock and gazed out over the water.

"Remember when you were just getting your powers, we came down here to practice your x-ray vision?"

"Of course. You were so loving and supportive. While you warned me that I might get some or all your powers, I was still afraid. You not only helped me to learn to control my powers but how to not be afraid."

Clark nodded. "I'm probably not the best person to advise you about how to tell someone our secret. Remember I told you I messed up with Lois?" Lara nodded. "All I can say is if you're absolutely sure this is the man you love and he truly loves you, then trust him to understand. A man who loves you will love *you*, all of you, powers or not. Just don't wait too long. I waited over a year, and if she hadn't been pregnant, I probably wouldn't have told her even then. I regret that decision every day."

Lara looked at her father and saw his love for her reflected there.

"Thanks, Dad. That's just the kind of advice I knew you'd give. I love you!"

Lara wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him fiercely on the cheek. She stood up and spun into her suit.

"Please tell Grandma and Grandpa thanks for breakfast. I'll talk to you later."

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### Chapter Thirteen—Revelation!

High in the sky Lara pondered her dad's advice. He'd said that if she was absolutely sure that he was the one she should tell him about herself sooner rather than later. That begged the question, when? They'd only had one date, admittedly a great date, and against all rational thought, they had each expressed their love! Just thinking about when she first heard those whispered words made her tingle all over. She was sure that when her father had advised that she should tell Ken about herself he probably thought she'd wait a few weeks to see how their relationship progressed. Just thinking about keeping this secret for weeks made her sad. She knew until Ken knew everything, they couldn't really move forward with their relationship.

Another thought ran through her mind, why hadn't Dad told Lois about himself earlier? She was sure it was because of Lois's reluctance to get involved with a colleague as well as her father's own insecurities. She was reasonably sure her grandfather's admonition against telling anyone what he could do, especially a reporter, would have played into his reluctance to be honest with Lois. Unlike her father she had no such hang-ups. While she'd known her heritage made her different from her peers, she'd never been afraid of people finding out her secret. She was always careful to behave according to human norms and, as such, she'd had a normal childhood with close friends and dates with guys she was attracted to, though none of them held a candle to what she felt the moment she'd met Ken.

As she neared home Lara came to a decision. She would tell Ken about herself, today. She was so confident in the soulmates' bond that she felt no trepidation about doing so. He would be surprised, surely, but she was certain that once he got used to the idea, he would accept her, all of her, and their relationship could

move forward with no secrets between them. When she returned home, Lara waited until 8 o'clock before she dialed Ken's number. "Good morning! Have you had breakfast yet?"

"No, as a matter of fact, I just got out of bed."

"Do you want to have breakfast with me? I need to talk to you."

"Of course. I'd love to have breakfast with you." Ken sounded concerned. "It's nothing serious, is it?"

"There's something I want to tell you in person. How soon can you get here?"

"I need to shower, shave, and dress... how about 45 minutes?"

"Great. See you then!"

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Lara opened the door at eight-forty-two when Ken knocked. "Hi! I'm glad you could make it so quickly."

He stepped in and hung up his windbreaker. "You sounded serious, so yeah, I got here quick."

"Come on. Breakfast is almost ready."

She led him into her kitchen where she put two plates of scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast on the table and poured two cups of coffee.

Between mouthfuls, Ken said, "Ummm... these eggs are really good."

"I'm glad you like them. Grandma taught me almost everything I know about cooking."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Dad's a pretty good cook too so between them I learned a lot. I think I'm a pretty good cook if I say so myself."

"If these eggs are an example of your talents, I think you're a great cook!"

"Why thank you, kind sir."

"You know you've told me quite a bit about your grandmother," Ken said in between bites of his eggs. "When am I going to meet this wonderful woman and the rest of your family?"

"Soon, probably," Lara replied enigmatically.

Ken caught her eyes with his and held them for a long moment. "Now you have my curiosity piqued."

"Don't worry. It's nothing bad."

"Okay. So what's on the agenda for today? I was thinking we could drive out to the Botanic Gardens then hit P.F. Chang's for dinner."

"Sounds like fun," Lara said.

After they finished their meal a few minutes later Lara took the empty plates and utensils and put them in her dishwasher. Then she took Ken by the hand and led him into her living room where she took a seat on the couch next to him and grasped his hand.

"Ken, I love you, but there is something you need to know about me before we can move forward in this relationship." Lara took a deep cleansing breath. "Our family has a secret. A secret very few people outside my immediate family know and that's what I want to share with you."

Ken looked at her in disbelief. "A secret? What kind of secret could a farm girl from Kansas have?"

Calmly, with her eyes locked on his, Lara said, "I'm Superwoman."

Ken was quiet for a moment. His jaw dropped and his eyes grew wide.

"Superwoman?! You're kidding, right?"

Lara's only response was a slight shake of her head.

"You're *not* kidding?" Ken's voice rose, his emotions were high. "You can't be Superwoman. She rescued me. I'd know!"

Lara smiled, released his hand, and walked to the middle of the room. One moment Lara Kent stood there, then, with a quick spin, Superwoman stood there in all her superhero glory, with the bright blue S on her chest. With another spin, Lara Kent

reappeared and seated herself beside her boyfriend and she grasped his hand once more.

“So what do you think?”

“What do I think? What do I think!” Ken stood up and began to pace frantically. “I don’t know what to think, Lara. I saw what you did and I still can’t believe it! How did you do that anyway?” Before Lara could reply Ken continued, his arms waving along with his pacing. “Never mind, I don’t want to know. The fact that you *could* do it is unbelievable. You seem so... normal, Lara.”

Lara stood up and stepped in front of him to halt his pacing, her eyes flashing. “I *am* normal, Ken! I’m as normal as you are. I just have a few extras, that’s all.”

“A few extras? Is that what you call being able to fly, a few extras?” Ken’s eyes met hers, his expression was hard to read.

“Yes,” she said. She grabbed his hands and held them tight. “That’s *exactly* what I mean. I’m the same woman you met and fell in love with. I’m a daughter, a reporter, and I hope... your girlfriend. You do want me to be your girlfriend, right?” Lara looked into his eyes, her expression hopeful.

Ken paused, his eyes bore into hers and he smiled. “Yes. I do want you to be my girlfriend.” He raised their joined hands to his lips and kissed her knuckles. “I’m sorry, Lara. I never meant to make you think I don’t love you, all of you. But you have to admit, telling me that you’re Superwoman was the farthest thing from my mind when you invited me over for breakfast.”

“I guess. It was important to tell you everything about me before we go much further in our relationship. If you couldn’t deal with me being Superwoman I would be devastated. Using my abilities to help is a huge part of who I am. Ever since I was nine and I found out Dad was Superman I’ve wanted to be like him. Since I’ve become Superwoman, I’ve helped so many people and I plan to keep on doing that. You understand, don’t you?”

“Yes, of course,” Ken replied. He wrapped his arms around her and drew her into his embrace. “Being able to help is why I became a firefighter. How could I not understand when you’re doing the same thing I do but on a much larger scale.”

“So we’re, okay?”

“Yes. We’re more than okay. I love you, Lara Kent. I think it’s great and I’m honored that you shared this with me.”

Ken lifted his right hand and cupped Lara’s cheek, then he drew her in for a kiss. They melted into the kiss so that when it ended Lara found herself wrapped snugly in Ken’s strong arms.

Ken placed kisses on top of her head. “I love you, Lara, so very much.”

Lara lifted her head so that they were face to face. “Ken, how do you feel about meeting my family today?”

“I’d love to. Was that why you said I might be meeting them soon?”

“Yes. Now that you know about me there’s no time like the present to introduce you to my family!”

Ken’s mouth opened with surprise as if he’d just remembered something. “Your father... he’s *Superman!*”

Lara giggled. “Well, yeah. I thought that was kind of obvious.”

“What if he doesn’t like me? I could be a pile of ash on the floor!”

Lara looked shocked. “Ken,” she admonished, “you know Superman doesn’t kill.”

Ken relaxed a bit. “Whew, that’s a relief.”

Lara smiled back and winked. “However, with Superwoman, you can never be sure.”

Ken smiled in return. “I’ll try to remember that.”

Lara stood up, grabbed Ken’s hand, and led him to her balcony. She spun into her Suit and smiled at him expectantly.

Ken stood next to her. “So how do we do this?”

“Why don’t you wrap your arm around my shoulders and I’ll hold you around the waist?”

Ken did as she directed and smiled. “Ready!”

“Hold on tight, I’m gonna take off pretty fast so we won’t be seen.”

Lara shot straight up until they were at about 20,000 feet. “I’m going to hover here for a bit so you can get your bearings. That wasn’t too fast for you, was it?”

“No... ummm, no, I’m just surprised. How can you fly that fast and not hurt me?”

“My aura protects you. It’s like a field of energy that protects anything I touch.”

“That is *so* cool!” Ken said as he looked around. “It’s beautiful up here. It looks like I can see forever.”

With an excited grin, Lara asked, “Are you ready?”

Ken returned the smile. “Ready!”

Lara turned southwest toward Smallville. She flew a little slower than she usually would to allow Ken to enjoy the view.

“This is amazing! I can tell we’re flying at a terrific speed but, not only am I comfortable, we can talk to each other. That aura of yours is something else!”

“And I’m flying slow so you can see the sights. Even with a passenger I usually fly much faster than this.”

Less than five minutes from the time they took off, they slowed down to land on the Kent property. When they touched down softly behind the barn Lara spun back into her civilian clothes and they made their way to the house. With a quick knock on the back door, Lara opened it and ushered Ken into the cozy kitchen where Lara called out, “Dad? Grandma? Grandpa? Anybody home?”

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Clark entered the kitchen followed by his parents. He rushed over to Lara and drew her in for a hug. “Hey, Pumpkin, back so soon?”

Lara stepped away from her father and extended her hand towards the nervous-looking man behind her.

“Dad, this is my boyfriend, Ken McCarthy.” Ken stepped forward, his hand extended.

Clark grasped his hand and said, “Hi Ken, I’m Clark Kent.”

“It’s a real pleasure to meet you, sir,” Ken replied.

Clark smiled in welcome. “I’m pleased to meet you as well, Ken.”

Jonathan and Martha stepped forward looking pleased.

“Grandpa, Grandma, this is Ken, my boyfriend.”

“Welcome to our home, Ken,” Martha said. When Ken went to shake her hand, she embraced him quickly instead. “I hope you don’t mind but we like to hug.”

Ken’s face lit up. “No. I don’t mind, Mrs. Kent.”

“Call me Martha, please. And this is my husband, Jonathan.” Jonathan shook Ken’s hand in greeting.

“I’m pleased to meet you too, Jonathan,” Ken said. Lara leaned into Ken’s side and grasped his hand.

Martha then gestured towards the living room and said, “Why don’t we all go sit down and get better acquainted.”

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When everyone was seated Martha looked at the young couple and smiled. “So how are you doing, Ken? I’m sure learning the secret was quite a surprise?” Martha asked. “You must have questions?”

“I’m doing pretty well, considering. It’s not every day you find out that your girlfriend is Superwoman and get to fly with her too!” Ken exclaimed and shook his head. “I do have questions but those can wait. Lara has told me so much about you that I feel like I already know all of you. Especially you, Martha!”

Lara blushed when Ken glanced her way and kissed her on the cheek. “What can I say? I’m proud of my family!”

“That’s our girl!” Jonathan said.

“So Ken, can you tell us a little about yourself?” Clark asked.

“As you probably know I’m a firefighter. Been one for two

years now and I love it. I have two brothers, Dave, and Ted. Dave is two years older and lives with his wife Amy in Milwaukee. Ted is two years younger and lives in Davenport, Iowa with his wife Audrey. Neither of them have kids yet but they both want them.

“My dad, Charles, and my mom, Lydia live in Ft. Meyers, Florida now but for the past thirty years, he was a Lake County Sheriff’s deputy. Mom was a homemaker but with three rambunctious boys, that was a tough job, I’ll tell you.

“My grandparents on my dad’s side retired to Arizona so we don’t get to see them often. Mom’s parents died when I was little in some kind of accident.”

“That’s so sad,” Martha said. “I’m sorry you didn’t get to know them, Ken.”

“Thanks, Martha. Mom told us about them a lot when we were growing up but I still miss them. Dad is an only child but Mom has a brother and a sister. They live in Ft. Meyers too so she sees them a lot. That’s about all I can think of for now.”

“It sounds like you have a wonderful family,” Martha said. “Hopefully, we can get together some time.”

While everyone talked Martha watched the interplay between the young couple. It was obvious to her that there was real love between them.

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“Lara, do you think Ken would like to see the globe?” Clark asked during a lull in the conversation.

“That’s a great idea, Dad,” Lara exclaimed. “Can we do it now?”

Clark stood up and led the way to the den.

Ken leaned down and whispered in Lara’s ear. “What is this globe?”

“It’s something that came with my father’s ship. It’s amazing, you just wait.”

Clark took the globe out of its box and held it in his hand. The globe floated up and began to glow, then the hologram of Jor-El appeared. The five messages that played showed the fear Jor-El and Lara felt when they realized their planet was doomed and their desperation as they worked to send Kal-El to Earth. The hologram ended with the explosion of the planet then it returned to Clark’s hand and went dark.

“My God, that was amazing!” Ken said. “It’s so sad that they couldn’t save themselves. Thank you so much for sharing that with me.”

Lara took the globe from her father’s hand. “You haven’t seen anything yet.”

Once again, the globe began to glow. This time the hologram was of Lara, the message from Grandmother Lara explained her hopes for her son and how pleased she was that he had found a mate played then the globe returned to Lara’s hand and went dark.

“I can hardly believe it! The technology is so far beyond anything here on Earth!” Ken asked, “Can it do anything else?”

Clark returned the globe to its box and said, “It contains the navigational computer that got my ship to Earth and it is also a repository for a portion of the Kryptonian knowledge base, but we haven’t explored it very much. Lara and I just figured out how to access it yesterday.”

Clark led the couple back into the living room and took a seat in a chair across from the couch where Lara and Ken sat.

Lara glanced around at her family then asked no one in particular, “Would anyone mind if I showed Ken around the farm?”

“Sure, go ahead,” Martha said, “Take your time. Lunch won’t be ready for a few hours yet.”

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#### Chapter Fourteen—Exploring

Lara took Ken’s hand and they walked through the kitchen and out into the yard. She led him down past the barn to a large oak tree that contained a weathered treehouse.

“This is my dad’s treehouse,” she said pointing up. “He spent a lot of time here as a child when his powers were developing.” Ken looked up, following Lara’s direction then he grasped her other hand.

“His body was changing and he found he could do things no one else could. Dad said that his parents were great, they supported him, loved him, and helped him learn to control his powers.” Lara’s eyes met his and she smiled. “I’m so blessed that I didn’t have to go through that. He was there for me, he taught me how to control my powers. Even so, I was scared. I can’t even comprehend how scary it was for him.”

“I’m glad he was there for you. I never thought Superman would have problems like that. He seems so confident and in control, it makes me respect him, even more now, knowing what he’s overcome.”

Lara led him farther along the path. “Come on.”

Soon they arrived at the pond on the property. They sat on the rocks at the edge and gazed out over the water. Lara picked up a flat rock and skipped it across the smooth surface.

“Dad and I spent a lot of time here when I was young. This is where I first practiced my X-ray vision looking for fish behind the rocks. It’s where I learned to control my other vision powers too. We talked a lot here over the years. It’s so serene. It helps calm me like no other place can.”

Ken wrapped his arm around her shoulders and drew her into the crook of his arm. “Honey, I hope I’m not bringing up a sore subject but... you never talk about your mom. Has she passed?”

“No, she’s alive.” Lara sighed. She took a calming breath and told Ken the story her dad had told her, about her conception and how Lois hadn’t wanted to deal with a child. How Clark had brought her home to Smallville and raised her as a single parent, with the help of his parents of course.

“Recently I found that Lois has a sister who has two children of her own. I met her and we talked about Lois and how Aunt Lucy regretted her part in supporting her.”

Lara sighed. “At the end of our visit, she invited all of us to Thanksgiving dinner, so of course, I wanted to go. Dad mentioned that Lois might be there and would I still want to go if she was. I didn’t know what to do.”

Lara looked at her feet for a moment before she continued. “All these years I’ve harbored anger at the woman who didn’t want to be my mother. I wondered what I’d done to drive her away, you know how children can be?”

Ken reached out and took Lara’s hand in support.

“I thought long and hard and after I talked to Dad and Grandma, I realized that my anger was only harming me so I decided that I needed to forgive Lois. I can see how she came to the decision she did. While I’ll never forget not having a mother in my life, I can accept it and forgive.”

“That must have been so hard for you.” Ken kissed the top of her head and hugged her. “I’m proud of you for being so forgiving. It makes me love you even more.”

They sat silently for a while longer then Lara rose. She took Ken’s hand to continue their journey, but before they got too far Ken stopped in front of a tree, his fingers tracing something on the trunk.

“Hey, Lara, what’s this?”

“Oh, that.” Lara grinned. “I did that when Dad was teaching me to control my heat vision. He told me to burn my initials inside a circle and not to go beneath the bark. It took me a couple of tries to get the intensity right, but as you can see, it turned out pretty good.”

“That’s amazing.” Ken ran his fingers over the LLK initials burned into the tree.

“Come on, there’s still more to see.”

They walked farther into the property until they came to a fence that divided the Kent property from their neighbor.

“This is Shuster’s field,” Lara said as she leaned on the fence. Ken put his arms over the top rail and looked out over the grassy field.

“Right over there is where my dad’s ship landed.” Lara pointed to a small group of trees about fifty yards away. “Grandma and Grandpa were driving home one night, the road is close to here. Anyway, they saw what looked like a meteor shoot across the sky and crash into the field.” Ken turned to face her his eyes wide.

“Grandma is a curious person so she made Grandpa stop and they got out to look for the meteor. Can you imagine their surprise when, instead of finding a rock in a crater, they found a small spaceship!” Ken’s jaw dropped in surprise.

“When they touched it the top popped open and inside it was a baby boy! Grandma and Grandpa couldn’t have children so they took him home and, through the help of a friendly doctor, got them paperwork allowing them to keep him. Grandpa buried the ship and that was that, or so they thought.”

Ken interrupted with a question. “Oh? What happened?”

Lara was angry now. “Some government types were nosing around then asking questions. Nobody in town would tell outsiders anything but just before I was born Dad found that the ship had been stolen.”

Ken’s expression showed surprise and anger. “Stolen? Do you know where it was taken?”

Lara replied, frustrated. “Dad said he found it in a warehouse in Metropolis but when he had a chance to go back it was gone. Someday I’m gonna get it back for him.”

Ken reached up and cupped Lara’s cheek. “If anyone can find it, you can.”

Lara leaned into the caress and smiled. “Thanks, Ken. I appreciate the support.”

Ken said, “I can see why you love your family as you do and I’m humbled that you’ve shared all this with me.”

“I want you to know everything about us. If you’re going to be part of this family you need to know everything.”

“I *want* to be part of this family, Lara. I can’t imagine my life without you.” Ken drew her into his chest. His head lowered, his lips descended on hers and they kissed. Their tongues explored, their arms wrapped tightly around each other as they expressed their love and commitment. When the kiss ended their chests were heaving.

“Ummm, honey, have you ever encountered Kryptonite?”

Lara shuddered at the mere mention of the hated meteorite. “No, thank God! Dad took care of that years ago.”

“Oh, how did he do that?”

“After he brought me home from the hospital, he searched for any Kryptonite that might be around. He didn’t want to take any chances that I might encounter it accidentally. He didn’t know if I would inherit his powers but since I’m half Kryptonian he figured Kryptonite might harm me and he wanted to be sure I didn’t encounter any. Every night he scanned the area starting where the ship landed. He went in concentric circles and, when he found a piece, he marked it with his heat vision.

“The next night he’d take Grandpa to dig it up and put it in a lead-lined box. He even found some red meteorites that glowed like the green stuff so they took them too. Dad didn’t know how they would affect us but he wasn’t taking any chances.

“He covered an area of five miles in every direction and when no more was found Grandpa filled the box with cement. Dad sealed the box with his heat vision then he flew to the Marianas Trench. He buried the box where no one will ever find it.”

“So there’s no more around?”

“Well, there is. According to Dad, before I was born, a piece was sent to a university lab for analysis and it went missing. It resurfaced and is now in a vault at a laboratory in Metropolis. But that’s the only piece as far as I know.”

“Good! I don’t want you anywhere near that stuff.” Ken drew

her in for a kiss that soon flared into passion. When Ken reluctantly pulled his lips away their foreheads touched.

“We should get back,” Lara said between breaths. “Lunch should be ready by now.”

“Okay, let’s go.”

When they returned to the farmhouse Lara saw Martha in mid-preparation for the noon meal. Pots were simmering away on the stove and it looked like her grandmother could use some help.

“Let me give you a hand, Grandma,” Lara said. She put on an apron and dug in. “Why don’t you go sit down, Ken? We’ll call you when we’re ready.” Ken gave Lara a quick kiss on his way to the living room.

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Ken saw Clark alone reading the paper. “Hi Clark, where’s Jonathan?”

Clark put down his paper. “He had something to pick up in town. He should be back in a bit. Why don’t you sit down? Did you and Lara have a nice walk?”

Ken settled himself on the chair next to Clark. “We did, thanks.” Ken paused and took a breath to calm himself. “Clark, I just want you to know that I love Lara with all my heart. I know this all seems so quick, we’ve only had one date after all, but I’ve never felt like this about anyone! I can’t imagine my life without her. And it has nothing to do with her powers. I felt like this before she told me about herself. I won’t lie, the powers are a nice addition but I’d love her if she didn’t have them. I hope you believe me.” Ken sat back in the chair and waited.

“I believe you, Ken. I know how you feel to a certain extent. I felt that way about Lara’s mother, still do. I don’t know if she told you but I messed up with her, not telling her about myself, so I’m glad Lara didn’t make the same mistake.”

“She told me a little but that’s all. I’m glad she forgave her mother though. That kind of anger can turn a person bitter and Lara is too positive a person for that.” Just then they heard Jonathan’s truck pull in and Martha called them in to lunch. After lunch, Lara and Ken said their goodbyes and flew back to Chicago.

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When they landed on her balcony Lara spun back into her regular clothes then she grasped Ken’s hand and led him into the living room.

“I had a great time, honey,” Ken said. “Your family is just as you described them and I feel like I’ve known them my whole life.”

“I’m so glad. I love them so much and it means a lot to me that you love them too.”

“Thanks for showing me all the special places of your childhood too. I can see how much they mean to you.”

“You know, now that you’ve seen my childhood home and met my family, I’d like to meet your family. Do you think we could meet them sometime?”

“Of course! I’d love to show off my beautiful girlfriend. Since my family is kind of scattered, we’d have to do it over a few weekends but I think we can make that happen. I’ll call my parents this week and make sure they’ll be home. I can tell them we’ll fly down after work Friday and meet up with them on Saturday, how does that sound?”

“Great! I’m sorry we can’t just fly to meet them any time we want—”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about! I understand completely. Besides if you weren’t Superwoman, we’d have to spread our visits out anyway, so it’s no big deal.”

“Even so, I appreciate your understanding. The fewer people who know the secret the better. Superman hasn’t actively fought crime in years but there are still evil people who would love to be able to control dad and me by hurting our loved ones.”

“Yeah, that’s a scary thought. I would never do anything to

jeopardize you or your family.”

“I know. So what are we going to do for the rest of the afternoon?”

“What do you say we drive out to the Botanic Gardens like we’d planned? It’s a beautiful day for a walk.”

“Great! Let’s go.”

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Ken McCarthy walked into his apartment later that evening after he’d left Lara’s place. Today had certainly been a momentous day, that’s for sure. When Lara called early that morning and invited him over for breakfast, he’d expected to spend the day enjoying Lara’s company, and, probably, enjoying some of her wonderful kisses. But that was not what happened, not in the least!

Ken walked into his kitchen and opened his refrigerator to grab a bottle of his favorite beer. He twisted the top off and threw it into the trash. Then he plopped down on the couch and took a sip, the cold amber liquid sliding down his throat. Staring off into the distance he pondered what he’d learned today.

His girlfriend, Lara Kent, was Superwoman! When she’d told him her secret, he hadn’t believed her at first, I mean who would? They’d known each other for barely a week and had had only one official date. They were still getting to know each other. Granted they shared a connection that he’d never, ever experienced with any other woman, and they had said those three scary words to each other but still... When he’d expressed his disbelief, she’d stood up, walked to the middle of her living room, and begun to spin! He’d almost fainted when instead of seeing Lara Superwoman stood there dressed in a black spandex suit with a large electric blue S on her chest! Before he’d had a chance to absorb what he’d seen she spun again and Lara reappeared. After that, they had flown to Smallville to meet her family.

They’d showed him an amazing piece of technology and places that were important to Lara growing up. They’d welcomed him into this amazing family with open arms. But he still had problems believing it was all real, despite having flown with her and having met her father, who was *Superman*.

Lara was so down to earth and so darn *normal*! She grew up on a farm in Kansas for God’s sake! She had a normal childhood, went to college, and now had a job, an apartment, and bills. Superwoman didn’t have bills to pay! She protected life and property, assisted the emergency services when necessary, and was an all-around superhero and role model for everyone but especially for women and girls everywhere. But now he knew that Superwoman didn’t really exist. Sure she was real enough, especially to the people she rescued, but to him and her family she was Lara Kent, daughter, granddaughter, and his girlfriend who wore a costume to protect her identity and her family from the evils of the world.

When they’d returned from the Botanic Gardens Lara made dinner, a delicious chicken stir-fry, and they had talked about everything. She’d told him that she had discovered why they had fallen so hard for each other so quickly.

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“Ken, have you ever heard of soulmates?” Lara had asked as she’d gazed into his eyes as they sat on the sofa.

“Sure. That’s the concept of love at first sight that’s touted by all those bodice ripper love stories some women like to read. Why do you ask?”

“Haven’t you wondered why we both felt something we’ve never felt before when we first met and how we fell in love so fast?”

“Yeah, sure, but I thought it was because you’re so beautiful.” Ken grinned, his eyes twinkling.

Lara thwapped him on the shoulder and replied, “Oh, you! I’m serious. I’ve never felt like this about anyone in my life before you so, being ‘different,’ I asked my dad if he’d felt like this when he met my mother.”

Ken wondered where Lara was going with this line of thought. “And did he?”

“He did. He told me that he felt things for her unlike any other woman he’d ever met, and he’d met a lot in his travels.”

Lara took Ken’s hand and squeezed it gently.

Ken returned the gesture. “Why do you think that is?”

“When I asked him, I wondered if it was a Kryptonian thing but he didn’t know so I suggested we consult the globe.”

“The globe you showed me today? Doesn’t it only show those holograms?”

“No. It can do a whole lot more. Dad and I held it in our hands instead of letting it float and that turned on a query mode neither of us knew existed.”

“That’s amazing, so what did it say?”

“It seems that Kryptonians can sense when they meet their soulmate. The globe said that the soulmate bond was a rare and wonderful thing and it also said that Kryptonians mate for life!” Lara’s eyes gleamed and her smile warmed his heart.

“For life, I like the sound of that.” Ken gazed deeply into Lara’s eyes.

“I do too. I’ve been thinking, though, there were so many things that had to happen to make it possible for us to meet and fall in love, you know.”

“Oh, like what?”

“It started with my father. If Krypton hadn’t exploded, they wouldn’t have sent him to Earth. If he hadn’t studied journalism, he’d never have applied to the *Daily Planet*. If Lois hadn’t walked into his interview, they’d have never met because Mr. White wasn’t going to hire him and it was the story that Lois didn’t want to write that got him the job.

“If he hadn’t created Superman, he probably would have done something to make him move to a different city, he’d done it before. If Lois wasn’t thrown off that building Dad wouldn’t have saved her and they wouldn’t have had sex which resulted in my conception. If you hadn’t been born, if you hadn’t become a firefighter, we’d have never met. If I hadn’t studied journalism, I wouldn’t have interviewed you. When you think about it it’s amazing we met at all!” Lara finished with an exclamation.

“I never thought of it that way, but you’re right. You know what that says about us?” Ken raised his hand to cup her face.

“No, what.” Lara leaned into his caress.

“It means that we were meant to be together and that I’m the luckiest man in the world to have met you.” Ken leaned down to claim Lara’s lips in a soul-searing kiss.

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### Chapter Fifteen—Meeting Ken’s Parents

Clark sat on the front porch, relaxing in the shade. Now that Lara and Ken had gone the farm seemed strangely quiet.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Jonathan asked as he sat on the porch swing. He handed Clark a big glass of cold lemonade and sat back to sip his drink.

“I don’t know if they’re worth that much, Dad. I’m of two minds. I’m glad Lara has found someone who loves her but I’m sad that someone else will be taking care of my little girl.” Clark sighed, his elbows on his knees, his head hanging down.

“I understand, son,” Jonathan said, rubbing Clark’s shoulder. “You’ve taken care of that girl since the day she was born. You’ve kissed her scraped knees and held her when her friends disappointed her. You taught her how to control her powers and become the wonderful woman and superhero she is. We’re all so proud of you and her but it’s hard to let go. I think it’s even harder with a girl. You want to protect them from all the bad things in life but you can’t, not forever. She’s a grown woman and has fallen in love. You’ll always be her dad but it’ll be someone else’s job to take care of her now.”

Clark turned his head so that he could see his dad’s face. “Thanks, Dad, I guess I just needed to hear it again. I know you’re

right. And I *am* happy for her. You know, I think I'll do a patrol over Metropolis tonight. I haven't done that in a while."

"You do that, son, don't want those criminals to get too cozy, right?" Jonathan chuckled, a knowing expression on his face. "The photograph albums are on the shelf in the den, if you might want them that is." Jonathan stood, clapped his son on the shoulder then walked into the house.

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That evening around 11 o'clock, Clark flew over Metropolis looking for a particular building. He saw that the occupant was home so he swooped down quickly and knocked on the sliding glass doors. Lois Lane turned at the knock and her face lit up with a big smile.

Lois stepped back so that her guest could enter. "Superman! Please, come in." Superman walked in, glancing around the room.

"Nice place. I see you got new furniture."

"The place came furnished. All I had to do was move in. Why don't you sit down? You can 'change' if you want, that suit can't be all that comfortable." Superman smiled then, and with a quick spin, Clark Kent sat on the couch.

"So what's in the bag?" Lois asked as she joined him on the couch.

"Later. I came over to tell you that Lara has fallen in love with a very nice man. She brought him to see us today and I thought you would want to know."

Lois's jaw dropped with surprise. "She brought *him* to see *you*? He... knows?"

Clark sighed sadly, unable to meet her eyes. "Yes. Lara didn't want to make the same mistake I did. She told him about herself today."

"Good for her!" Lois's grin showed her pride. "She's a smart young woman. Takes after her mother I suspect!"

Clark shook his head ruefully. "More than you know, Lois, more than you know."

Silence fell between them and just as the silence became oppressive Lois pointed to the bag.

"So what's in the bag?" Lois asked again.

"Oh, yeah, I forgot."

Clark took the albums out and set them on the coffee table. He picked up the first one and set it on his lap.

"I thought since Lara wants to get to know you better that you might like to see some pictures of her growing up. I gave Perry pictures over the years but I don't know if he ever shared them with you."

Lois looked over at him, her eyes damp. "He tried, but I didn't want to see them, not then at least. As the years passed, I felt that she was better off without me and if I saw them, I might have wanted to stick my nose in where it wasn't wanted."

"I wish you had, Lois. God, I wish you had. Lara asked about her mother all the time right up to the day she figured it out. I told her the story we agreed on but I know you would have been accepted with open arms if you had wanted to be part of her life."

"I can see why she was so angry with me that day. I didn't know she felt like that. I figured I'd be an awful mother and she was better off without me. I'm so sorry, Clark." The tears she'd been holding back now flowed down her cheeks. Clark passed her his handkerchief which she took, dabbing at her eyes.

"Don't cry, Lois, please. Lara forgives you. She's looking forward to Thanksgiving, you know." Clark handed her the album and smiled. "How about we look at these pictures?"

Lois nodded in agreement and opened the album. The first group of pictures was of Lara and the Kents that first day Clark brought her home.

"She's adorable! I never saw her, you know? They took her away as soon as she was born. It's what I wanted then but... I regret it now." She shook her head and smiled a watery smile. She flipped page after page, while Clark narrated each picture, sharing

her daughter's childhood through those pictures. She chuckled at the obligatory picture of a naked Lara, on her belly laying on a towel. When they'd gone through all four albums Lois set the last one on the table and turned to face Clark.

"Thanks for bringing them, Clark. I appreciate your thoughtfulness. Would you like some coffee?" Lois exclaimed. "Oh God, I'm a horrible hostess. I should have offered hours ago!" She jumped off the couch and was halfway to the kitchen when Clark stopped her.

"Thanks, Lois, but no thanks. I really should be going, it's getting late."

Clark stood up then and walked to an open area and he spun into the Suit. Superman picked up the albums and put them back in the bag. Then he walked over to the balcony and opened the door.

"Good night, Lois, take care of yourself. I'll see you at Lucy's?" he asked.

"I'll be there. Good night and thanks again for coming."

Superman smiled and shot into the sky as Lois closed the sliding glass door behind him.

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Lois Lane watched as Superman disappeared off the horizon then she returned to her couch. Her daughter was in love! The thought warmed her heart but saddened her at the same time. She'd missed so much of her daughter's life through her own stubbornness and fears. Even though her own childhood was less than ideal at least her mother had been present during her formative years. As with all memories, the memory of her mother had mellowed and she was now able to remember some of the good times, before Ellen had retreated into the bottle and had developed animosity against all men, especially her philandering husband. She wished that she'd been stronger and not succumbed to her fears regarding men.

When Superman came over that night and then had revealed himself as Clark she'd felt as if she'd been duped one time too many and her heart had hardened against the man, the men, she thought she'd once loved. The only positive thing that had come out of the whole sorry mess was her decision not to abort their child. Even though she'd made Clark's life pretty miserable those last few months she never regretted giving birth. She heaved a sigh as she rose from the couch and headed for bed as it was now well after midnight. As she undressed for bed, she had a small grin on her face. She had a second chance, to become a friend to her daughter and, maybe, to become friendly with Clark again as well.

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Clark landed near the back porch and spun into his regular clothes. When he entered the living room, he saw his mother looking through a catalog of welding supplies.

"So did Lois like the pictures?" Martha asked with a grin.

"Yes, Mom, she did." Clark sat down opposite her. "She appreciated seeing them."

"I'm glad. Is she going to Lucy's for Thanksgiving?"

"Yes, she is. She seemed excited about it and I hope it goes well. I hope Lara will be friendly and not just tolerate her. Even though she said she forgives Lois I'm not sure if she understands what that means," Clark said, concerned.

"I don't think you'll have to worry about that. Lara's a smart woman, she's forgiven her and I think she wants to get to know Lois better."

"I hope you're right, Mom. I want them to, bond, I guess. She'll probably never call Lois 'mom' but I hope they can at least become friends."

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Lara and Ken took off for Florida from her balcony early Saturday morning. Since it was light out Ken wore a black shirt and pants to make him less visible. Lara also flew high, about 20,000 feet to avoid most air traffic.

Lara covered the 1,000 miles in about five minutes then she landed in a wooded park a few blocks from Ken's parent's home in Fort Meyers. After she changed into a summer dress, she took Ken by the hand and minutes later Ken knocked on his parent's door.

Lydia McCarthy opened the door and ushered the couple into her home. "Ken! And you must be Lara, come in!"

"It's good to see you, Mom," Ken said. He hugged his mother and looked around for his father. "Where's Dad?"

Just then Ken's father, Charles, entered the living room.

"Hi, Dad! Mom, Dad this is my girlfriend, Lara. Lara this is my mom and dad, Lydia and Charles."

Lara smiled warmly. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. McCarthy."

"Please call us Lydia and Charles." Lydia opened her arms and the two women kissed each other's cheek. Charles also hugged Lara, welcoming her into their home.

"Let's all sit down and get to know each other," Charles said, gesturing the couple to the living room.

Lara and Ken sat on the couch and held hands. "You have a lovely home, Lydia, I love how you've decorated it," Lara said.

"Thank you, it's still a work in progress, we've only been here a couple of years," Lydia said.

"If you don't think we're being too nosy, would you tell us a bit about yourself, Lara?" Charles asked.

"Of course, no problem," Lara said. "I grew up on a farm in a small Kansas town. I'm an only child but I had a lot of friends growing up so I was never lonely. My dad, grandfather, and grandmother brought me up and were my teachers and role models —"

"Was your mom... not around?" Lydia asked.

Lara looked at Lydia with a sad smile. "No, she wasn't, her choice."

Lydia apologized. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

"It's okay, it's a logical question. I'll be seeing her on Thanksgiving and I hope we can become friends."

"I'm sure you will, dear."

"Where was I? Oh yes. I went to Midwestern State University where I got my degree in journalism. I'd always wanted to travel, to broaden my horizons, so after college, I took a year off and wandered through South America, parts of Africa, and southern Australia. That trip was amazing and I learned a lot about other cultures and customs.

"Once I got back to the U.S. I got a job at the *Chicago Tribune*. I've been there for a few months and I love it. I met Ken when I was covering a fire that he was working on. When I learned that a firefighter was injured, I went to the hospital to interview him. I was looking for a human-interest angle to the story and we just clicked. It was love at first sight, wasn't it, honey?"

Ken wrapped his arm around Lara's shoulders and hugged her. He leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. "Oh yeah. I fell head over heels for her the minute I saw her."

"That's so romantic." Lydia sighed.

"Thank you, Lara. You've led a very interesting life. I've always wanted to travel but with marriage and children we never had the time," Charles said.

"Maybe now that you're retired, you can. I found it educational, seeing how the rest of the world lives," Lara said.

"Would you like to see some pictures of our family?" Lydia asked, a hopeful expression on her face.

"Mom! Not the baby pictures!" Ken groaned.

"Shush you. You were a lovely baby!" Lydia hopped up and grabbed the albums from the shelf in the hall closet. She sat down between Ken and Lara as she narrated picture after picture.

"Oh, Ken. You had such a cute tooshie on that towel." Lara said, her eyes sparkled with mischief.

"You just wait." Ken grinned. "I'm gonna ask Clark to see *your* baby pictures. I bet there are a couple you don't want me to see."

"I don't know what you mean?" Lara said innocently.

Lara looked over at Lydia and smiled. "You were right, Lydia, Ken was a cute baby! I wonder what happened?" Lara said cheekily as she gazed at her boyfriend.

"He grew into a handsome, sexy firefighter if you must know," Ken replied, his eyes sparkled with mischief.

"He sure has," Lara sighed, looking at him behind his mother's back.

Now that all the albums had been gone through it was time for lunch.

"So who's hungry? It's almost noon and Charles and I want to take you to our favorite restaurant." Everyone raised their hand so the two couples climbed into Charles's black Acura MDX. They drove about 15 minutes and pulled into the parking lot of Café Brazil Restaurant.

"Oooh, Brazilian! I love Brazilian food. I enjoyed it a lot when I was down there," Lara said as they climbed out of the car. She took Ken's hand and followed his parents into the restaurant.

"You told us earlier that you traveled after college so where, besides Brazil, did you visit?" Charles asked once they had their meals.

"I hit just about every country in South America then I went to Africa where I worked with charity organizations bringing fresh drinking water to various villages, especially in Rwanda. Those poor people have nothing. While I was there the village was raided and the well poisoned!" Lara exclaimed; her frustration was still fresh in her mind even after all this time.

"Oh, those poor people!" Lydia said sympathetically.

"I stayed and helped them dig another well but after that, I had to leave. The crushing poverty I found was just too much! I wrote several stories about the conditions there but I doubt they were of much help," Lara said as she fought back tears.

"You wrote those articles?" Charles said. "I remember reading them in the *Daily Planet* but I never associated that Lara Kent with you. Your writing touched our hearts such that we sent a contribution for African relief that very day."

"I'm so glad my article prompted you to help. After that, I needed a complete change so I moved on to Australia. The Outback was beautiful, desolate, and just what I needed. Once I gained some perspective, I traveled southern Australia with some people I met, and, by then, I had been gone a year and it was time to come home and get a job!" Lara said with a grin. "And that was how I met Ken. Superwoman had taken him to the hospital so I interviewed him there and here we are," Lara said.

"So son, what was it like, flying with Superwoman?" Charles asked.

"I don't remember much about it, Dad. I was in quite a lot of pain and the flight didn't take that long. Who knows, maybe I'll have an opportunity to fly with her again someday!" Ken said. He took a bite of his meal and glanced surreptitiously at Lara.

"Not if it takes getting injured to do so!" Lydia said. "Tell him, Lara."

"There's no way I want you getting injured just so you can fly with her. I need you healthy!" Lara exclaimed.

Ken struggled to hold back his grin. "Yes, dear."

After lunch, Charles and Lydia took them on Lagerhead Cycleboats for a tour of the bay. For dinner, Charles and Ken manned the grill where they cooked steaks, hamburgers, and hot dogs. Lydia and Lara made potato salad, macaroni salad, and a fresh green salad.

"So Lara, do you like to cook?" Lydia asked as they worked.

Lara put the final touches on the potato salad and said, "I love to cook, my grandmother and my dad taught me a lot."

"I remember cooking with my grandmother, those were some

of my happiest times with her.” Lydia sighed.

“Ken told me his grandparents live in Arizona, do you see them often?”

“Not as often as I’d like. They live in a community where they have assisted living if they need it. It makes me feel better, but I’d love it if they moved here,” Lydia said.

“I know what you mean. I’m glad my dad lives with my grandparents. The farm work might be getting to be too much. I think someday they’ll lease the land and just have a few animals and their small vegetable garden.” Lara put the completed salad on her tray while Lydia put the remaining items on another tray and the two of them headed outside.

After dinner, Lydia and Lara put the dishes into the dishwasher then joined the men on the deck where the sun was just beginning to set. Lara sat on Ken’s lap and snuggled into his arms, her head on his shoulder. Ken kissed the top of her head and sighed contentedly.

Lara nuzzled Ken’s neck and hugged her boyfriend a little tighter. “What a beautiful sunset.”

“It’s not as beautiful as you,” Ken whispered. He tilted her head up with his finger and kissed her lovingly. Lydia nudged her husband directing his attention to the young lovers. Charles smiled at his wife and leaned down to kiss her in response.

Ken helped Lara off his lap and said, “Mom, Dad, do you mind if Lara and I go for a walk?”

“No, go ahead, honey,” Lydia smiled. “We’re going to sit here and enjoy the evening. Take your time.”

Ken took Lara by the hand and led her through the house and out onto the sidewalk. They turned left and walked down towards the park where they had landed earlier in the day. They walked past the park and continued through the neighborhood where they passed well-kept homes where they waved at the families they saw. At the end of the street, they walked back to the park and sat on a bench.

Lara broke the silence, mischief in her eyes. “So you want to fly with Superwoman, huh?”

Ken played along; his blue eyes darkened as he gazed into her own chocolate brown ones. “Well, yeah, I don’t remember much of that first flight so I’d like the chance to fly with her again.”

Lara whispered, low and sexy, “Mmmm, all you have to do is ask.”

Ken’s arms wrapped around her and drew her close, but before things got too heated Ken drew back his chest heaving.

“Ummm, that was wonderful.” Lara gazed into his eyes, still dark with desire. “Hey, would you like to go for a flight now?”

“Sure! I’m never going to turn down flying with you.”

Lara smiled and got up from the bench. She took his hand and led him deeper into the park where there was a copse of trees. A moment later Superwoman stood there in her blue and black uniform. She waited until he’d wrapped his arm around her shoulders, then, with a glance around, she shot into the sky.

They floated above the Florida coastline at about 10,000 feet then Lara turned Ken so that they were facing each other. She reached up with her right hand and removed her mask where she became a wonderful amalgam of Lara and Superwoman.

“You are so beautiful,” Ken whispered. “It’s too bad you have to wear that mask, having to hide your beauty is a travesty.”

“You know, when my vision powers started to develop Dad suggested I wear glasses like he does,” Lara said.

“Why *does* he wear glasses anyway? He obviously doesn’t need them.”

“Grandpa had a pair of glasses made with lead crystal lenses so he wouldn’t use his vision powers accidentally. They worked so well that he still wears them. I don’t know if he’s done it around you but he has to pull them down to use his vision powers.”

“No, I hadn’t noticed.” Ken gazed deeply into her eyes and cupped her cheek. “I’m glad you decided not to wear glasses. You

have such beautiful eyes it would be a travesty to hide them.”

“You say the most wonderful things.” Lara leaned in to kiss his neck, then up further to his earlobe which she nipped with her teeth. Ken growled deep in his throat and held her body a little tighter to his own. Ken lowered his head and claimed her lips in a soul-searing kiss. Their hands roamed over each other’s back as their passions rose. Lara turned so that Ken was on his back so she could lie atop him with her head on his chest.

Ken, amazed at their new position, asked, “How do you do that?”

“My aura allows me to do a lot of things. You’re weightless while we touch so I can lay on you even though I’m technically supporting you.” Lara raised her head, her eyes twinkled. “Is talking what you want to do up here?”

“No. I suppose not.” Ken replied. “We *could* look at the stars.”

“Oh, you!” She smacked him lightly on the shoulder. They floated in silence with Lara’s head on Ken’s chest, his arms around her tightly. They drifted where the air currents moved them with the silent, starry night around them.

Sometime later Ken glanced at his watch. “Uh, Lara? It’s getting late. We should probably be heading back.” Lara reluctantly resumed their upright position, his arm around her shoulders and hers around his waist. She saw that they had floated a few miles out over the Gulf of Mexico so she turned back towards Ft. Meyers. She flew slowly until they reached the park then she zipped down to land behind the trees. Once back in her regular clothes and they joined hands and walked back towards the house.

Ken called out as they entered the living room. “Hi, Mom, Dad, we’re back!”

“You were gone quite a while; did you have a good time?” Charles set his newspaper down.

Ken looked at Lara with a grin. “Yes. We walked around the block then we sat at the park and looked at the stars.”

“So that’s what they call it now, we used to call it necking,” Lydia said with a grin.

“There was some of that, but we *did* look at the stars,” Ken said. “We just did it at 10,000 feet!”

“I’ve got Lara set up in the bedroom next to ours and you can have the other one across the hall unless you’re...” Lydia looked at her son with an impish grin.

“No! No, we’re not,” Ken replied nervously. “The room assignments are just fine, Mom.”

“So is anyone up for a game of Trivial Pursuit?” Charles asked.

Around midnight the game broke up. The team of Lara and Ken won three matches and Lydia and Charles won two.

“Here you go, Lara,” Lydia said. “There are extra blankets and pillows in the closet and the bathroom is right down there.”

“Thanks, Lydia but I’ll be fine.”

Lydia walked to her room which left Ken and Lara alone in the hallway.

“Well, I guess I’ll say goodnight,” Ken whispered as he cupped Lara’s cheek.

“Goodnight.” Lara leaned into his hand and wrapped her arms around his neck and their lips met. They reluctantly broke the kiss and turned to their rooms and closed the doors.

Lara opened her overnight bag and took out her sleep set of shorts and a sleeveless cotton top. She went to the bathroom where she washed her face. Back in her room she put on her pajamas and climbed into bed. She found Ken’s heartbeat and the sound soothed her so that she fell into a deep sleep.

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The next morning Lara pulled on her red satin bathrobe. She listened and determined the bathroom was open so she got clean underwear from her bag and took a quick, at a human pace,

shower. After she dried her hair, she returned to her bedroom and put on a light blue sleeveless cotton blouse with a pair of dark blue cotton shorts. Her sneakers completed the outfit then she walked to the kitchen where she found Lydia making breakfast preparations.

“Good morning, Lydia.” Lara smiled. She took a mug from the counter and filled it with the hot, dark brew from the coffee maker. Lara took a sip and sighed contentedly.

“Good morning, dear, did you sleep well?”

“Like a baby. It’s so peaceful here, not like Chicago.” Lara said and took another sip. Just then Ken wandered in wearing just his sleep pants, his broad, muscular chest on display.

Lara’s eyes devouring her boyfriend. “Oooh, doesn’t someone look sexy this morning!”

“Good morning to you too, honey,” Ken replied with a yawn as he gave Lara an appraising glance. He gave Lara a quick kiss then it was on to the coffee pot.

“Well!” Lara said mock insulted, “Now I know where I stand.”

“I never thought you’d be jealous of a cup of coffee,” Ken chuckled after he took his first sip of the hot, steamy brew.

“I’m not jealous, it’s just that now I know where your priorities lie.”

Lara sauntered over to him and ran her finger down his chest. He shivered in reaction to her touch.

“I’ll give you a month to stop that,” Ken hissed. He set his mug down and drew Lara into his arms and kissed her thoroughly.

Lydia coughed into her hand to get their attention. “All right you two.”

Ken blushed. “Sorry, Mom.”

“Yes, Lydia, I’m sorry too.” Lara stepped out of Ken’s embrace but she looked anything but sorry.

Charles walked into the kitchen and immediately picked up on the tension in the room.

Charles grabbed some coffee for himself and asked, “What did I miss?”

“Nothing, dear, just young love on display.” Lydia grinned conspiratorially. “So who’s hungry!”

Lara and Lydia made eggs, bacon, pancakes, and hash browns while Ken left to shower and dress. By the time the food was ready Ken had returned. He now wore a bright yellow polo shirt and jeans. Everyone ate the delicious meal chatting amiably. After breakfast, they went to the Edison and Ford Winter Estates where they saw the winter residences of famous inventors Thomas Edison and Henry Ford. Besides the residences, there were historical buildings, award-winning gardens, the Edison Botanic Research Lab, and the Inventions Museum containing hundreds of inventions, artifacts, and special exhibits.

They ate a late lunch at a small café near the museum and, by then, it was time for Lara and Ken to return to Chicago.

“Are you sure we can’t give you a ride?” Charles asked.

“No, thanks, Dad we’ve got it covered.” Ken hugged his mom and dad as did Lara. He picked up their bags and they walked down the sidewalk.

“Hmm, I wonder why they didn’t have the cab pick them up here?” Lydia mused as she watched the couple walk away.

“There’s no figuring kids these days,” Charles said sagely. “Why don’t we sit outside and enjoy this beautiful weather?”

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Lara and Ken walked down to the park where they planned to take off. Luckily there no one was around so they ducked into the trees. Ken picked up their bags with one hand and wrapped his other arm around her shoulder. With an excited grin, Lara shot into the sky. At 20,000 feet she leveled off, headed for Chicago. When her apartment came into view she sped up and landed on the balcony where she unlocked the door. Lara spun back into her blouse and shorts then she took her bag from Ken’s hand and

tossed it on her bed. They plopped themselves on her couch and Lara drew one leg under her so she could sit facing him.

“I like your parents; they are so friendly and welcoming.”

“I’m glad. I love them a lot and it’s nice to know you do too.”

“I’d love to meet your brothers sometime.”

“How about Christmas? We were all planning on getting together at Mom and Dad’s this year.”

“I think I’d like that. We can spend a few days there and then go to Smallville for the weekend, sound good?”

“Yeah, it does. Hey, what are you doing Thanksgiving?”

“My Aunt Lucy invited us to her house in San Diego... Lois is going to be there,” Lara said the last part softly.

“That sounds... good?” Ken replied, unsure of how to respond.

“It will be... I hope. It will be the first time I’ll spend more than a few minutes with her but I want it to work,” Lara said sincerely.

“I can’t see how it wouldn’t. You’re a wonderful person and I know you’ll do whatever it takes to make her like you.”

“There’s a lot of baggage there. I know I’ve forgiven her for not being there for me growing up but... I don’t know. I guess I’m just nervous that’s all.”

“That’s understandable, but I know you’ll do great.” Ken smiled and stretched out his hand. Lara took it and the tingle she always felt when they touched flowed through her. She crawled across the couch then she sat on his lap, wrapped her arms around his waist, and laid her head on his chest. Ken held her tightly and neither of them said a word. They were so comfortable they dozed off to awaken a few hours later.

Ken stretching his arms out and yawned. “Wow, I guess I was more tired than I thought. I should be going. It’s getting late.” Lara walked Ken to the door where he picked up his bag and kissed her.

“I love you, Lara. Thanks for everything. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

Lara kissed him again hugging him tightly.

“Yes, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

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### Chapter Sixteen—Reconciliation

Lara and Lucy called each other a few times over the next few weeks to finalize plans for the visit. Lara made reservations for Thanksgiving Day at a nearby hotel for her family. When Lucy confirmed that Lois would attend Lara was very pleased.

Early Thanksgiving Day Lara and Clark flew the luggage to the hotel and checked in, then they returned for Martha and Jonathan.

Clark picked up Martha and Jonathan wrapped his arm around Lara and squeezed her shoulder.

“Ready?” Jonathan said.

“Yep, let’s go!”

They flew at a leisurely pace, pointing out various places of interest on the way.

“Look, Grandpa, there’s the Grand Canyon,” Lara said as they approached the natural formation.

“Wow, you can see the whole thing from up here. It sure is magnificent!” Jonathan enthused.

“That it is. It’s amazing what something as simple as water can do given enough time.”

When they got to San Diego Lara gestured to the park she’d landed in before and headed down quickly with Clark right behind, then they spun out of their suits and into their regular clothes. Clark wore a navy sport coat with black slacks, a light blue shirt, and a painted tie Martha had made. Lara wore a cobalt blue scuba crepe sheath dress with black slingback heels that she’d picked up at Nordstrom’s, especially for the occasion. Lara led the way with the rest of the family following behind then she rang the bell and waited patiently for the door to open.

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When the doorbell rang Lucy Lane-Whyte opened the door wide. “Lara! Clark! It’s so good to see you all, please come in!”

When the Kent’s were inside Lucy closed the door and ushered them into the living room.

“Everyone, this is my husband, Ben, and our boys, Joel and Eric.” Lucy turned to her family. “And this is my niece Lara, her father Clark and his parents, Jonathan and Martha.”

Everyone said hello with hugs and handshakes. Lara looked at her aunt once they were ensconced in the living room.

“Is Lois here?”

“Not yet but she should be here any minute.” Just then the doorbell rang. “That’ll be her!” Lucy rushed to the door and ushered her sister into her home.

Lucy pulled Lois into a fierce hug. “Lois! I’m so glad you’re here!”

“It’s good to see you too, Luce, is everybody here?” Lois glanced into the room.

“Yes, come on, let me introduce you!” When Lucy and Lois entered the room, the men stood to welcome her.

“Lois, you know most everyone but this is Jonathan and Martha, Lara’s grandparents.”

“Thanks, but I met Martha and Jonathan years ago when Clark and I were on assignment in Smallville.” Lois gave Jonathan and Martha a quick hug and kissed Martha on the cheek as well. Lois saw Lara behind her father. She looked nervous so Lois walked confidently over and she leaned in to kiss Clark on the cheek.

“It’s good to see you, Clark,” Lois said sincerely.

“You too, Lois. You look as beautiful as ever,” Clark said.

Lois noticed that Lara still looked nervous so, with a quick grasp of Clark’s hand, she stepped past him and opened her arms to her daughter.

Lois’s eyes shone with unshed tears. “It’s good to see you, Lara.”

Lara looked at Lois for a moment before she stepped into her arms and hugged her warmly.

“It’s good to see you too, Lois,” Lara said, her voice shaking with emotion. Now that she was in Lois’s arms a feeling of calm came over her. Any feelings of nervousness fled leaving her sure that she’d made the right decision to forgive Lois. The two women hugged for perhaps a moment too long but no one begrudged them the extra time. Lara stepped out of Lois’s embrace looking awkward but relaxed. Lois sensed the tension in the room ease as she turned to greet her nephews and brother-in-law.

“Now that everyone’s here, I need to check on dinner,” Lucy said to no one in particular.

“Can I help, Aunt Lucy?” Lara asked.

“Yes, do you need any help?” Martha also stood up in preparation.

“No! You’re our guests, you don’t need to help,” Lucy replied.

“Many hands make light work,” Martha said. “Come on Lara.”

Lara started to join her grandmother but stopped.

“Lois? Would you like to join us? I’m sure the men can find something on TV to keep them busy.”

“Um, I don’t know...” Lois said uncertainly.

“Come on Lois,” Lucy said, imploring her sister with her eyes. “If nothing else it’ll give us time to catch up.”

Lois followed them into the kitchen with a resigned expression on her face. “Okay, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

When the four women were firmly ensconced in the kitchen Lucy, Lara and Martha began to bustle around the large open kitchen checking on the turkey and various other dishes while Lois hung back, seated at the island, looking uncomfortable.

“Lois, would you like to help me with the dressing?” Lara offered.

Lois looked at Lara, unsure of what to do. “No, not really. If you don’t want everyone to get sick, I’d better stay well away from food preparation.”

“You don’t cook?” Martha said as she peeled the potatoes.

Lois chuckled wryly. “There are four things I know how to cook and only one doesn’t involve chocolate.”

Lucy grinned putting a positive spin on Lois’s statement. “Well then, you can help with the desert!”

Everyone laughed then and they all settled to the tasks at hand.

Lara watched Lois as they worked. She saw the woman who she’d built up into an uncaring, unfeeling, cold woman working hand in hand with everyone just like a regular person. Lois smiled and joked. She shared her anecdotes of Thanksgivings past, and was generally ‘one of the girls.’ The longer they worked together the more relaxed Lara became. While she had forgiven Lois in her mind the reality of the situation was much different. Now she saw Lois as a person, not a monster, a person with faults and foibles like everyone else, and she felt sure she’d made the right decision.

When everything was prepared as much as could be, they all walked back to the living room where the men were watching the Dallas Cowboys play the Miami Dolphins. Lucy and Martha joined their husbands but Lois caught Lara’s arm.

“Walk with me, please?” Lois implored.

“Sure,” Lara said nervously.

“We’re going to take a little walk, see you all later,” Lois said to no one in particular. Lois saw Clark smile in response and nodded his head in approval. Lois headed for the front door with Lara by her side. Since it was a beautiful day in San Diego neither needed a jacket. When they got to the sidewalk, they turned south, walking aimlessly. The two women walked along in silence until Lois spoke.

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“I’m *so* sorry, Lara—”

“There’s nothing to be sorry for,” Lara interrupted.

“No, there is. I owe you that much at least,” Lois said sincerely. “I owe you the reasons why I wasn’t there for you. I want you to understand, I *need* you to understand the choices I made.” Lois looked into Lara’s eyes to convey her need to unburden herself.

Lara nodded. “There’s a park just down the street, why don’t we go there and sit down?”

Lois and Lara walked to the little park to a bench in the sun and sat down.

“Dad told me what happened and, while I didn’t understand when I was a child, I think I do now,” Lara looked Lois in the eye steadily.

Lois replied with surprise. “Clark told you... everything?”

“Well, not the gory details. But the circumstances of my conception and the decisions each of you made afterward, yes, he told me,” Lara replied honestly. “I was really surprised that my calm, steady dad had behaved so uncharacteristically.”

“Yeah, well, I wasn’t exactly innocent then either,” Lois chuckled nervously. “We were both coming off an adrenalin rush and the need to prove that we were safe and alive overwhelmed us. Of course, we immediately knew what we’d done was wrong and, embarrassed, we resolved never to speak of it again. When I found out I was pregnant I was going to... well you know, without telling Superman. I was too young to be a mother. I was in the process of saving my job and I had to prove that I hadn’t lost my edge—”

“About that, you were to married Lex Luthor?” Lara interrupted, shock and disbelief evident in her expression.

“Not my finest moment,” Lois said, obviously embarrassed. “But to be fair he had most of Metropolis fooled. But not your father.” Lois hung her head, regret almost radiated from her.

“Clark tried to tell me Lex was bad news and much, much

more but I refused to believe him. I thought he was jealous, which he was. He told me so himself, but still I should have believed him or at least given him the benefit of the doubt, but I didn't. I couldn't believe that I had misjudged Lex that badly so when the police showed up at the ceremony and Lex jumped off the building rather than go to jail, I knew Clark was right.

"Clark was very supportive after that. He did his best to be the friend I needed. When Mr. Stern bought the *Planet* from Lex's estate and was getting the staff together, I assumed that Clark and I would go back to our old partnership. It was something I was looking forward to. And then Mr. Stern told me he wasn't sure he wanted me back!"

"That had to hurt." Lara reached out to grasp Lois's hand.

Lois glanced at Lara's hand on hers and smiled. "It did, but it angered me too. I rashly told him if I hadn't proved that I was the best in six months I'd quit."

"Dad told me about that. He said you were very single-minded after that."

"I was more than that, I was like a woman possessed. I took every dangerous story I could get. I didn't eat, didn't sleep. I lost so much weight my clothes hung off me but I didn't care. Perry and Clark tried to get me to slow down but I bit their heads off every time so, after a while, they gave up. Then came the fateful meeting with a source where I was thrown off the second-highest building in the city..."

Lara squeezed Lois's hand in support. "That had to be so scary."

"It was. I'd been tossed off buildings before but it never gets any easier," Lois said with a self-deprecating chuckle. Lara's eyes opened wide with disbelief but she stayed silent.

"Anyway, I was screaming at the top of my lungs but I was gagged and the ground was getting closer and closer. I'd resigned myself to the fact that this time Superman wasn't going to get there in time. Just as I'd closed my eyes and reconciled myself to becoming street pizza, Superman's arms wrapped around me and we were soaring into the sky." Lois took a deep breath to calm herself before she could continue.

"The rest you know, but what you don't know is how mad I was at Superman and Clark. For over a year I thought they were two men, one who I thought I loved and one who was my best friend, or so I thought. When I found out that Superman and Clark were the same man, I saw red. If I'd had heat vision he would have been a pile of ash on my carpet about then. I don't know if Clark told you but I had trust issues. The situation with Lex didn't help either. I lost all faith in him when Superman turned into Clark and wanted to marry me!"

"He told me some but, please, continue. I want to hear your side," Lara replied.

"Before I do that, I want you to know some background. Maybe it will help you understand my choices if I gave you some insight into my state of mind at the time." Lois closed her eyes and took a deep breath then she turned, facing Lara.

"When I was a child, things were pretty good at home. Mom and Dad seemed to be in love and our family life seemed good, at least as good as those of my friends. That all changed when I overheard Daddy talking to a friend. He told the man that, while he loved his children, he really wished he'd had a son. You know how children are, I was very hurt that my dad wasn't happy with the children he had, with me specifically, since I was the oldest. I was probably five at the time and Lucy was two so she wasn't as affected as I was. It was then that I realized that my father, while he claimed to love me, would have loved me more if I'd been a boy."

"That's awful," Lara said.

"As I grew up, I saw our family slowly fall apart. Daddy was working all the time and Mother felt neglected. She was never one to suffer in silence so she let him know that she wasn't happy at

every opportunity. They would get into fights and he'd storm off, leaving her alone for days at a time. She later found that he was unfaithful, more than once, which led to the divorce. After the divorce, Mother crawled into a bottle and spent the time when she wasn't drunk railing against men in general and my father in particular.

"I was twelve when he left and that's when I realized that love wasn't enough. I believed that my parents had loved each other when they got married but that love wasn't enough to sustain them over the years. During high school I didn't date very much. I was focused on getting into Metropolis University as they had the best journalism school around. I finally had enough of taking care of my mother and baby sister when I was seventeen and I moved in with a friend. I graduated at the top of my class but Daddy didn't want to pay for college because he wanted me to be a doctor. I was never interested in medicine. I loved writing and when I got on the school paper, I knew what I wanted to do. Ultimately, I was able to convince him I'd never be a doctor and he relented, grudgingly. I set out to prove to him that he wasn't wasting his money and I did. In my junior year I was able to join the college paper and I was in my element.

"The editor was a really handsome guy and I fell hard for him. I made sure he knew I was interested and we started dating. Even though I was inexperienced, I hadn't dated anyone seriously before this, I tried to act mature. When he suggested we have sex I agreed but I was a virgin so I had no idea what I was doing. Afterwards I wondered what the big deal about sex was. It wasn't fun, it hurt and neither of us seemed satisfied. We dated for a few weeks after and the sex never got better so you can imagine how hurt I was when I overheard him telling his friends how bad I was in bed!"

"He didn't!" Lara exclaimed, shocked.

"Oh yes, he did. We broke up after my best friend from high school stole a story I'd worked so hard on and submitted it under her name, then she and the editor began dating! I thought he loved me but that was obviously not the case. As I'd done before, I buried myself in my school work and I graduated top of my class, but I never dated anyone else in college.

"After graduation I got a full-time position at the *Daily Planet*. The top reporter was a tall, handsome French guy with a sexy accent and I fell hard for him but he wouldn't give me the time of day because I was a rookie. That all changed when I asked him to look over a story idea I had. Suddenly, he was *very* interested in me. He'd take me out for lunch and call me *Cherie*, and I fell for it. I was finally ready to bring the story to Perry but before I did, I asked him to help me tighten it up, you know? He gave me a few suggestions then we had dinner. Afterwards we were making out in the living room and after a while we moved things to the bedroom. The sex wasn't all that good, but it was okay and we fell asleep. When I woke up in the morning he was gone, the bed was stone cold, and I was hurt, why would he leave like that? However I was excited because I was going to present my story to Perry that morning.

"You can imagine my surprise and anger when I walked into the lobby and saw *my* story on the front page with *his* byline! He'd used me, stolen my story and, later he won an award for it!"

"I can't imagine how hurt you must have been," Lara sympathetically. "What did you do?"

"I knew nobody would believe me, I mean who would? I was the newsroom rookie and he was the established top dog. He left soon after, moving on to bigger and better things on the strength of my story but not before he told everybody who would listen how bad I was in bed!"

"How could you stand that?"

"I was ready to quit, honestly, I was so embarrassed. My 'colleagues' were talking about me behind my back and some did it right to my face! Luckily, Perry sat me down and told me that he

knew I was a good reporter and I shouldn't let newsroom gossip get to me. I held my head high and went about my work. Over time my colleagues learned not to mess with me. They even started calling me Mad Dog Lane, behind my back of course, but I proved I was the best when I won my first Kerth award that same year. I'd won two more Kerth awards the next two years in a row and was the acknowledged top dog in the newsroom when your father showed up.

"I could see he was a handsome guy even with his long hair and ill-fitting suits, but there was no way I was going to fall into *that* trap again. When he started following me around with those puppy dog eyes, I told him in no uncertain terms that I had no interest in a relationship. At first, I treated him pretty badly. I thought he was just another man looking to steal my work and I wasn't going to allow that. After a while he proved that he was a good reporter and he became a good friend, but I was not interested in a relationship, at all.

"All this time I'd been working hard to get *the* exclusive interview with Lex Luthor and I think he saw me as a challenge. He turned my interviews into dinners at his place but I thought I could handle him. Little did I know he was handling me. Soon dinners turned into dates and I never got my interview. Oh he'd answer a few questions, enough to keep me on the hook, but he was more interested in me than I was in him. You can imagine my surprise when, one day, he proposed!

"I was stunned and I didn't know what to say. I told him I needed time and he agreed. At the same time the *Planet* was experiencing financial difficulties and Lex swooped in and bought the place. I was happy, the business was saved and I thought things were going to be great. Clark wasn't pleased at all and he tried to tell me Lex was no good but I wouldn't listen. When Perry retired and Jimmy and Jack were transferred, I had second thoughts but I still thought Lex would be good for the business.

"Then there was a bomb attack and the *Planet* was closed. We all lost our jobs so when Lex offered me a job at LNN I jumped at it but Clark turned it down. Ultimately, I decided to accept Lex's proposal and we began to plan our lives together. While I was listening to Lex go on and on about whether we should have a six or seven car garage at our new house Perry, Clark, Jimmy, and Jack were digging into the difficulty the paper had experienced before the explosion. They knew something was up and, because everything had happened so quickly, they felt that there was an opportunity to find out what that was.

"On the day of the wedding I was having very serious second thoughts. All I could think about was how much I missed having Clark as a friend. I knew there was no way Lex would let me hang out with Clark because he and Clark never got along but I never understood why. I know now that Clark, as Superman, knew a lot more about Lex than I ever did but he kept that to himself. Anyway, I was listening to the Archbishop ask if I would take Lex as my husband and I said "I can't." Just then the police, led by Inspector Henderson, along with Perry stormed into the room to arrest Lex. He escaped to his penthouse where he was cornered. Rather than face arrest he jumped to his death! Perry bundled me out of the room and out of the building."

"Once I was on the sidewalk I looked around for Clark. He came over to me and held me in his arms. I heard the crowd gasp and I looked up to see what everyone was pointing at. The building was so tall that I couldn't see much, but soon I could see a figure falling. Clark wrapped me in his arms so I couldn't see Lex's body smash into the sidewalk."

Lara's hand shook as she made to reach out to Lois. "That had to be horrible!"

"It was but I didn't know at the time that things were about to get much, much worse. Clark took me to my apartment and put me to bed. The next morning we were awakened by someone banging on my door. Two detectives and a uniformed officer wanted to ask

me some questions but I was in no shape to answer any questions, not then. Clark convinced them that I'd meet with them later that day. Before they left, they showed me a copy of my bank statement that showed Lex had deposited \$250 million dollars in *my* account!

"I hadn't given him permission to do that and I certainly never gave him my account number so the bas... scumbag had deposited his dirty money in my account to make me look like an accomplice! Once Clark calmed me down, he told me that I had to tell the truth, no matter how bad it made me look. When I met with the detectives later that day, they grilled me fiercely for over six hours. There was a lot of screaming on both sides, but my story never wavered and, finally, they let me go.

"When we got back to my apartment, my 'colleagues' were camped out in front of my building so we went up the back, but I knew, even then, that I couldn't avoid them forever. When I got a request to meet with the FBI, I thought I was really in for it, but it turned out to be a formality. I think they'd heard from the MPD about my story so they were basically ticking off the box called 'talk to the widow.' It was after that when I decided to give a press conference to explain my side. I made my statement, answered some questions and, at the end of it all, my reputation was shot. For the longest time people were divided into two camps, those that thought I was lying and in it up to my eyeballs, and those that thought I was an idiot who didn't deserve the accolades I'd gotten over the years."

"Dad never said anything about this. Please, go on."

"That was when Mr. Stern, the new owner of the *Daily Planet*, told me he didn't want me back because he doubted my reporter's instincts! I was livid and I told him that if he'd give me a six-month contract, I'd prove myself or I'd quit."

"Dad told me about that. I can't imagine how difficult that was for you."

"It was. I'd always given 110 percent to my job and now I was being told that wasn't enough." Lois paused, taking a deep breath to gather herself.

"You told me you knew the circumstances of your conception so I'm going to skip over that and go right to the night I told Superman that I was pregnant. When he arrived, I planned to tell him I was going to terminate the pregnancy then tell him to leave. As soon as I told him he... changed. It was as if I'd given him the best news in the world."

"You did. Dad never thought he could father a child. Grandma and I talked a lot about that once I was old enough to understand."

"That's when he told me I *couldn't* kill his child and I lost it. No one, not even Superman, was going to tell me what to do and I told him in no uncertain terms to leave but he didn't take the hint. I think he was hoping his invulnerability would protect him," Lois chuckled.

"When he asked me to marry him, I laughed in his face and told him Superman couldn't get married. That's when he spun into Clark and he said that we *could* get married. I think if I'd had heat vision, he'd have been a pile of ash on my floor. How could he do this to me! He, as Superman, knew Lex was evil but he never said a word to me. He *allowed* me to accept Lex's proposal rather than reveal his precious secret! I let him know that I blamed him for everything that happened to me. The hours spent trying to convince skeptical detectives that I knew nothing of Lex's crooked dealings, the destruction of my reputation, all of it was *his* fault. If he'd just told me Lex was evil, I'd have believed Superman even without evidence. Maybe I was being hypocritical. After all, Clark had been saying the same thing for weeks but he never had any evidence and I put his warnings down to jealousy.

"Clark admitted that he *was* jealous but he was still right, though I wouldn't believe him. Now it was very clear that Clark valued his secret more than he valued *me* and that hurt, a lot. Years

later I figured that Clark must have had it drilled into him never to tell anyone, especially a reporter, about his abilities and that explained why he never told me, at least partially.

“That’s right,” Lara said, warming to the task. “Grandpa told him over and over if anyone found out what he could do they’d lock him in a laboratory and dissect him like a frog! I was mad at Grandpa for a long time when I found that out. Can you imagine what that did to him, psychologically, as a teen when his powers were first developing?”

“I can’t imagine. Given that knowledge, it’s amazing Clark even created Superman!” Lois said with wonder.

“Dad always felt the need to help. Even with Grandpa’s warnings, he did help people in secret. I’m proud of him for that.”

“You have every right to be,” said Lois, her sincerity evident. “Anyway, back to my story. When Clark begged me not to abort, I saw his sincerity. He also said that this baby would be his only chance to have a child but I didn’t believe that for one minute. I knew that a handsome man like Clark would have women falling all over him. I remember that sheriff, Rachael, was *very* interested in him. He’d also mentioned an old girlfriend, Lana, so I was sure he would find a nice woman and settle down.”

“Rachael Harris and Lana Lang both got married about a year before I was born so they weren’t available. I don’t know if there were any others, Dad never talked about anyone and neither did my grandparents.”

“I didn’t know that but what I did know was that Clark was sincere about wanting the baby. When he begged me to keep the baby, I knew I had to make a hard decision. I felt sorry for Clark but did I want to carry a baby to term and all that went with it? I went back and forth for a week before I came to a decision. I would carry the baby for Clark.”

Lara’s tears gathered at the corners of her eyes. “I’m glad you did.”

Lois nearly broke down then, tears shone in her eyes as well. After a couple of deep breaths and swallowing noisily, Lois calmed herself so she could continue.

“Me too. You must believe me. I *never* regretted giving birth, I was mad at him, not the child I carried. It was everything that came afterward that scared the heck out of me. I knew Clark would be a wonderful father but I also knew he’d try to get me to marry him and raise our child together. I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t trust him so I gave him a condition. He accepted without even asking what the condition was. When I told him he had to leave Metropolis forever he never flinched, though working at the *Daily Planet* was his dream job. He wanted you more than anything in the world and, though I was very angry with him, I admired him for his devotion.”

Lara smiled tremulously. “That’s my dad, he’s devoted himself to me ever since I was born. He gave me the best male role-model a girl could want.”

“Clark’s a good man. Once he was gone, I went back to being the top reporter for the *Planet* and I tried to forget, but I couldn’t. Perry would look at Clark’s empty desk and sigh. Jimmy Olsen was very subdued for a long time. He and Clark were very close, like brothers almost. Jimmy looked up to Clark and missed him terribly. Of course, all this sentiment made me angry. Clark made his decision and everyone needed to accept it and move on.

“The more time passed things finally got back to normal. They even hired someone for the City Desk, but I could tell Perry was still in contact with Clark. I’d see him thumbing through photos which he would hide when I’d go into his office. I could guess who the pictures were of but Perry never said anything, though the look on his face told me how he felt.

“Perry’s reaction made me angry. It convinced me that I’d made the right decision and, as the years passed, every time your birthday came around, I convinced myself that I’d done the best thing for you. I was convinced I’d be a horrible mother. My

mother was a failure, and I was sure that example would taint me too. I comforted myself with the thought that Martha, Jonathan, Clark, and hopefully, a new woman in his life were the best people in the world to bring up my child and I was thoroughly convinced of that until the day you walked into my office.”

“Dad tried to talk me out of that, you know, but I was too much of a hothead. I needed you to know how angry I was. How I hadn’t needed you, and how much you’d missed because you were so selfish,” Lara said, sadly as she thought back to that day.

“If you don’t mind, how *did* you find out? Clark didn’t tell you, did he?”

“No. He didn’t. He’d promised you never to tell and he didn’t. I was very angry with him over that but I realized Dad would never break a promise. After I graduated from college Dad told me that I could become a superhero if I wanted. I’d wanted to work with him from the time I was nine and he told me he was Superman. Grandma made my costume and I went to the cellar to practice my spin change. While I was down there, I heard this strange humming. I dug around until I found this old trunk. It had a bunch of scrapbooks but at the very bottom was a small wooden box with a glassy ball in it. It was this ball that was making the noise.”

“Superman’s globe...” Lois said, remembering.

“Yes, when I picked it up it began to glow. It floated out of my hand and a hologram appeared of a beautiful woman with strawberry blonde hair.”

“It wasn’t a man? I thought it was Superman’s father he saw?” Lois asked, confused.

“I didn’t know that at the time. The woman told me her name was Lara and she was my grandmother.”

Lois, shocked, asked, “How is that possible?”

“Grandmother Lara told me that the globe read my DNA and determined that I was a female so she called me granddaughter. She said her specialty was biology and that, due to humans and Kryptonians being so alike physically, she was 80% sure that humans and Kryptonians could procreate. She said that she was pleased to have been proven correct and that I would be the bridge between Krypton and Earth and that the people of Krypton would live on through me and my children.” Sadness welled up within her each time she thought of the sacrifice Jor-El and Lara had made.

“I wish I could see that,” Lois said.

“Maybe someday. I’ll have to ask Dad, it’s his globe,” Lara said. She would not commit to anything without permission.

“Of course,” Lois replied. “Thank you for sharing that with me, I appreciate it.”

“After the globe went dark, I dug through the trunk and I found Dad’s scrapbooks. I was surprised because I never knew he’d worked for the *Daily Planet*. To me, he’d always worked at the *Post*, so it was a shock when I saw articles with his byline. I was more shocked when I saw the shared byline Lane and Kent. Digging through more stuff I found a picture of him holding a trophy—”

“His Kerth Award.”

“Yes, that was in the trunk as well, but it was the woman with him that confused me. At first, I thought it was me in the picture. I knew that was impossible so I looked closer. It didn’t take an investigative reporter to figure out that woman was Lois Lane. I confronted him when he got home from work and he finally broke down and confirmed everything. I was so angry with him, and you, I could hardly think straight. The next morning I flew to Metropolis and confronted you. I regret that now. I realize that the situation was a lot more complicated than I’d thought but all the anger I’d carried since I was a child boiled over and I acted badly.”

“We both have regrets but I hope we can get past them and we can be friends.” Lois looked at Lara hopefully.

“Me too, I would like it if we could become friends. Would you like my home number and address?” Lara asked.

“I’d love it!” Lois said. “And I’ll give you mine.”

Lois was about to get up when Lara stopped her.

“You said earlier that you’d met my grandparents when you were on an assignment with my dad. Would you tell me about it?” Lara looked at Lois hopefully.

Lois smiled indulgently. “Sure. Clark had told Perry about a situation with your grandparent’s neighbor, Mr....I-something?”

“Mr. Irig,” Lara responded helpfully.

“That’s it, Irig! Anyway, Perry thought we, your dad and I, should go to Smallville to check things out. Allegedly there was an EPA crew digging his place up looking into pesticides that were leaking into the groundwater. Clark knew Mr. Irig never used pesticides, he was an organic farmer, so he knew something wasn’t kosher and wanted to check it out. Of course, I was against the whole thing from the get-go. There was no way anything that happened in Smallville could even be *close* to newsworthy and I told Perry that.”

“I take it he didn’t agree?” Lara said, grinning knowingly.

“Yeah. He pulled the “I’m the boss and I hand out the assignments” card and it was either go to Smallville or hit the dog show circuit for the next month!”

“I hear you,” Lara commiserated.

“So, after an over two-hour flight and another hour in the car we were sitting at a crossing waiting for the *longest* train I have ever seen in my life! When I asked Clark how much longer it was going to be, he teased me about needing to decompress and that the train would be done when it was done.

“I didn’t know farmers were into Zen,” I told him and he just laughed. After another ten minutes, we were finally on the road into town when Clark suggested we check out the Corn Festival because a lot of people who knew Mr. Irig would be there. I had no idea what a Corn Festival was so I asked him what it was all about. He waxed eloquently about popcorn, cream corn, corn on the cob, something called a husk off, and of course the highlight of the festival, the Corn Queen.”

“I was the Corn Queen in my junior year of high school! Dad was so proud, he smiled for a week after I won. I was the youngest Corn Queen ever!” Lara said proudly.

“I don’t doubt it! You’re a beautiful woman, Lara and Clark had every right to be the proud papa.” Lois’s voice choked up for a moment but after a quick swallow, she continued her story.

“Anyway, we were wandering around the fair but I wasn’t interested in it, at all. I wanted to find out about Mr. Irig. I decided to give Clark a little education in the seedy underbelly of a small town so I scanned the area and found a perfect example of what I felt would wake him up as to secrets his bucolic neighbors could be harboring. I pointed to a big burly man who was flipping burgers and said that I bet that man was a crossdresser. Clark saw who I was pointing at and smiled innocently but he didn’t say much. Just then a petite woman with glasses came up and hugged Clark. After Clark introduced me to his mother, he told her that I thought the man at the grill was a crossdresser!

“I about died then but that wasn’t the worst of it. His mother grinned and started laughing and once she stopped, she told me that the man was Clark’s father and he wouldn’t buy *her* a dress never mind one for himself!”

“Oh my God! That had to be *so* embarrassing!” Lara exclaimed though she had to work to stifle a laugh.

“It was. I just about died but Martha was very nice about it. Of course, that wasn’t my *only* faux pas that day.”

“Go on, you can’t leave me hanging like that!” Lara said.

“Well once we got back to the house, I mentioned that Jimmy, he worked with us, was going to send us a fax. Martha looked confused so I went on this long, detailed explanation of what a fax machine was. She shook her head and said “I know that dear. I

was just trying to remember if we had any paper in the machine. So here I was, a guest in their home, and I’d insulted both Martha and Jonathan in the same afternoon! It’s a wonder they didn’t throw me out of the house.”

Lara did laugh out loud then. “Boy you really stepped in it, didn’t you?”

“I certainly did Your grandparents were great though, they never mentioned it again and they really treated me like family.”

“What happened with that EPA thing? How did that work out?”

“You don’t want to hear about that. It was a long time ago.” Lois started to get up, but stopped when Lara laid her hand on her arm.

“I do! We have time, dinner won’t be ready for hours. Please?” Lara begged.

“All right, I’ll give you the Reader’s Digest version. The EPA thing was a cover story for Bureau 39 led by Colonel Jason Trask. He was a UFO nut who thought that there was something on Irig’s property that could kill Superman.”

“Kryptonite!” Lara growled.

“Yes, I didn’t think it was real at the time, but it was. Your father had somehow gotten exposed and lost his powers, but I didn’t know that either. Trask tortured Mr. Irig but he wouldn’t break. Trask decided to let him go and follow him to see where he’d go. Of course, he went straight to your grandparent’s place where Trask captured them. Clark found them and got into a fight with Trask who would have killed him if the sheriff hadn’t killed him first. Once we were interviewed by the police, we went home the next day and wrote the story. It wasn’t until much later that I put everything together. You see, your dad got a paper cut and he seemed shocked so I told him to suck on it and the bleeding would stop. Little did I know that was his first exposure to Kryptonite but it was.”

“Wow. I’m glad we’ve been able to talk. Dad doesn’t talk about the time before I was born so thank you for filling me in.”

“You’re welcome, now how about we head back. I bet Clark’s wondering where we are.”

Lois and Lara stood up and walked slowly back to Lucy’s house.

When Lois and Lara entered the living room Clark said, “Hey there you two are, you’ve been gone a while.”

“Yes, we had a lovely talk, and Lara and I came to an understanding,” Lois said with a smile.

“I’m glad,” Clark said. He gestured for Lara to join him on the couch where she sat beside him and took his hand. “I’m proud of you, Pumpkin.” Lara’s eyes misted over and she smiled tremulously.

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### Chapter Seventeen—Bad News

The delicious smell of roast turkey filled the air. Lucy checked the turkey a final time then she called everyone to dinner. Lara and Martha jumped in to help put the various dishes on the table while the men brought out the beverages. Once everyone was seated, Ben carved the turkey while Lucy passed the plates around the table so that everyone had full plates in no time. Ben also said Grace, thanking God for the wonderful meal and for having the family together.

“You know, Mom,” Joel said in between bites of turkey.

“Lara and Aunt Lois could almost be twins, except Lara is a little taller.”

“Thank you, Joel,” Lois said with a grin. “You make me feel good being compared to a twenty-two-year-old.”

“It’s true, Aunt Lois,” Eric chimed in. “I know Lara is your daughter but the resemblance is amazing.”

“Enough you two,” Lucy chided. “You’ll embarrass your aunt.”

“Quiet you,” Lois replied with a smile. “It feels good being

told I look good.”

To change the subject Lois asked Clark what the subject of his next book would be.

“I’m branching out,” Clark said as he set his fork on his plate. “My next book is going to be an adventure story. It’s about a reporter who investigates a crime lord and how she brings down the organization.” Soon everyone was talking about Clark’s travel books and his new foray into the world of the novelist.

“So Lara, do you have a boyfriend?” Ben asked when there was a lull in the conversation, “A beautiful girl like you must have to beat guys off with a stick.”

“I do. He’s a Chicago firefighter named Ken McCarthy,” Lara replied. “We met at the hospital where I’d gone to interview him. He’d broken his leg and was taken there by Superwoman.”

“Superwoman, wow! She’s something else, isn’t she?” Eric exclaimed. “I think it’s wonderful that she left her home planet to help Superman keep us safe.”

Lois glanced towards Clark with a hint of a smile on her lips.

“Even so, they can’t be everywhere and do everything,” Lois said. “We all have a responsibility to do what we can, every day, to make the world a better place.”

“Speaking of Superman,” Joel interjected. “Even though Superwoman wears a mask, did anyone notice how young they both look? If I didn’t know they were father and daughter I’d think they were siblings. Kryptonians sure hide their age, don’t they? I wonder if it’s a side effect of their invulnerability? We were discussing that topic in biology just the other day.”

Everyone around the table had a theory and the discussion was very lively but Lara began to wonder if what Joel said might be true. Now that she had time to think about it, her father didn’t look very much older than his picture at the Kerth ceremony. The only difference being he wore his hair differently and he had different glasses now. She resolved to talk to him as soon as she could.

After dinner everyone pitched in, loading the dishwasher, and putting leftovers into the refrigerator until the kitchen and dining room were spotless. Rather than turn on the second football game they divided themselves into teams for a few games of Trivial Pursuit. Clark and Lara made sure they were on different teams and, due to their eidetic memory, refrained from answering too many questions so as not to raise suspicion.

When midnight rolled around the party broke up. As everyone was saying their goodbyes for the evening Lois went over to Clark with a purpose.

“Clark? Do you folks need a ride to your hotel?”

“That’s very nice of you, Lois,” Clark said, “We’re staying at the Pendry.”

“What a coincidence, that’s where I’m staying,” Lois said.

They all walked down the sidewalk to the cardinal red Cadillac XT5 SUV parked at the curb. Lois pressed the key fob which unlocked all the doors. Clark climbed in the front while Martha, Jonathan, and Lara climbed in the back.

It was a short ten-minute drive to the hotel where Lois parked her vehicle and they all walked into the lobby. Once in the elevator, Lois pressed the button for the second floor while Clark pressed the button for the fourth. When the doors opened on the second floor Lois exited and turned around.

“I’ll meet you all in the lobby at 8:00 a.m. for breakfast at Lucy’s?” Lois asked with a smile.

“Sounds good, goodnight, Lois,” Clark said. The doors closed and the car continued its journey to the fourth floor. Martha and Jonathan bid Lara and Clark goodnight leaving Lara and her father in the hallway.

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“Dad, do you have a minute?” Lara asked.

“For you, always. What’s up?” Clark opened his door and ushered her into the room. He sat on his bed and gestured for Lara

to take the chair but she began pacing back and forth instead.

“Dad, I’ve been thinking. When Eric mentioned that if he didn’t know Superman was Superwoman’s father, he’d have thought they were siblings. It got me thinking and I remember seeing that picture of you at the Kerth ceremony with Lois—”

Clark interrupted, “Okay, so where are you going with this?”

“Dad, that picture was taken before I was born and you haven’t aged a bit!” Lara said with anguish. “Lois looks like twenty-three years have passed. She’s a beautiful woman for her age but no one would believe that she’s twenty-five, that’s for sure.”

“Hmm, I see what you mean,” Clark said, comprehension dawning. “I’ve never noticed it but now that you point it out, I see that you’re right.”

“Do you think Kryptonians have a longer lifespan than humans?” Lara asked, her brow creased with worry.

“It’s possible. The evidence seems to support that theory.”

“Do you think the globe would know? The Kryptonian knowledge base could have the answer.”

“I’ll bet it could. Why don’t we check that out when we get back?”

“I don’t want to wait that long Dad! Can I go ask it now?”

Lara asked, anguish evident in the tone.

“If that’s what you want, go ahead. Just make sure you’re back in time for breakfast. You need to get some sleep too you know,” Clark said his concern evident for his child.

“Thanks, Dad!” Lara said. She kissed her father on the cheek then she hurried out of the room to the elevator where she exited on the ground floor. At the rear of the building that opened on a parking lot she ducked behind some tall bushes, scanned the area then spun into her suit, headed east to Smallville where she landed seconds later. Unlocking the door, she entered the dark, silent kitchen. With her special vision, she did not need to turn on the lights.

Lara made her way confidently to the den where she took the box off the shelf and set it on the coffee table. She sat on the couch and took the globe from the box and grasped it firmly, it began to glow and moments later the hologram of Lara of Krypton appeared.

“What do you wish to ask, Granddaughter?”

“Could you tell me the average lifespan of an adult Kryptonian?”

“There are many factors that affect lifespan, but, assuming a normal, healthy adult the average lifespan is 150 sol-rots.”

Lara was confused, she’d never heard of the measurement sol-rots.

“Could you translate that to Earth years?” Lara asked.

“A Kryptonian sol-rot, or solar rotation is approximately 669 Earth days which would translate to 1.8 Earth years. Therefore, the average lifespan of a male Kryptonian on Earth would be approximately 270 of your years.” Lara’s mouth dropped open, her father could live to be 270 years old on average but it could be longer!

“Umm, could you estimate the lifespan of a female human-Kryptonian hybrid?” Lara asked with some trepidation.

“I have accessed the network you call the Internet and have determined that Earth females currently have an average lifespan of 89.1 of your years, therefore, a conservative estimate would be 181 Earth years though other factors could increase this estimate.”

181 years! Or maybe even longer! Lara’s heart sank, she wasn’t even married to Ken yet and she’d have to tell him she’d probably outlive him by at least 100 years! Tears began to flow down her face as the enormity of the situation weighed her down. How long Lara sat there in stunned silence she didn’t know. The hologram hovered, waiting silently for the next inquiry.

“Do these estimates take into account superpowers and their effect on lifespan?” Lara finally asked.

“Please define the term ‘superpowers.’”

“According to my father, Kal-El, the yellow sun of this planet gives Kryptonians special abilities that Earth humans do not have. They include vision powers; telescopic, microscopic, and x-ray vision. We are also strong, we’ve not yet found anything we cannot lift. We also possess super-speed and the ability to fly at tremendous speeds and lastly we are invulnerable to harm due to an aura our bodies produce that protects us and anyone or anything we touch.”

Grandmother Lara replied, “The effects of a yellow sun on a Kryptonian were a concern when the planet was chosen but these abilities were outside the parameters that were considered. I will integrate this information and revise the estimate.” The hologram went silent and the lights within the globe flashed for a few moments. “I have recalculated and a very conservative estimate would increase the previous results by at least 25%. The new values are 338 years for a full Kryptonian and 226 years for a female human-Kryptonian hybrid.”

“Umm, thank you, I guess.” Lara wiped the tears that were running down her face with the sleeve of her suit.

“You are welcome, Granddaughter.”

The hologram faded away when Lara released the globe where she returned it to the box and replaced it on the shelf. After locking the back door, she took off towards San Diego.

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Frantic knocking woke Clark from a sound sleep and he glanced at the clock. 3:00 a.m.! He looked through the door to see Lara standing there and it was obvious that she’d been crying. Putting on his robe he hurried over and opened the door. “Lara? Honey, what’s wrong?”

“Can I come in, Daddy?” Lara asked with a sniffle.

Clark knew something was very wrong. Lara hadn’t called him Daddy in years. “Of course, come in! Why don’t you sit down and tell me what’s bothering you?”

“I... I asked the globe to estimate how long we might live,” Lara said as she entered the room. She spoke so softly that without his superhearing he might not have heard her.

“I take it the news isn’t what you expected.”

“The globe told me that you could live to be 338 years old on average, but it could be longer. What bothers me is that it estimated *my* lifespan at 226 years and that’s a conservative estimate! Daddy, I’m going to outlive Ken by over a hundred and fifty years or more!” Lara broke down again, crying piteously.

Clark moved over quickly and drew her onto his lap. He hugged her fiercely while she cried and cried. The enormity of this information hit him as well. He’d always known, in an abstract way, that he’d outlive his parents but now it looked like he’d outlive his daughter as well! While this information saddened him greatly, he was not about to borrow trouble by worrying about something he had no control over.

Finally, Lara’s crying slowed then stopped, leaving her with a case of the hiccoughs and red swollen eyes. She raised her face to his, the tear streaks were drying on her face and her nose was running. Clark hadn’t seen her look like this pitiful since she was nine and she’d had another fight with Lindsay Ross. Clark grabbed some tissues from the dispenser on the nightstand and handed them to her. Lara wiped her face and eyes then she blew her nose noisily.

“Feeling a little better now, Pumpkin?” Clark asked. He hugged her tightly and kissed the top of her head.

“Sort of, but not really. Nothing has changed,” Lara said dejectedly.

“Lara, none of us knows how long we’ll live. The globe could be wrong you know,” Clark said.

“Yeah, right!” Lara exclaimed sarcastically. “Like a Kryptonian supercomputer is going to be wrong!”

“Yeah, I suppose the chances of that *are* pretty small.” Clark

took a deep breath to consider what he should say. “You need to talk to Ken. Tell him what you’ve found out and then you’ll decide how to deal with it, together. I don’t think it’ll matter to him. He loves you. I know that for sure, and no matter what he’ll want to be with you.”

“You think so, Daddy?” Lara said still sounding unsure.

“I *know* so. I see how he looks at you when you’re not looking. He’s just as caught up in the soulmate’s connection as you are. Trust him, Lara.”

“Thanks, Dad, I knew I could count on you to put this in perspective,” Lara said. “I’m going back to my room now. See you downstairs at 8:00.”

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The next morning Lara was the last one down for the trip to Lucy’s.

“I’m sorry I’m late. I didn’t sleep very well last night,” Lara said.

Clark smiled as if to let her know he understood. Lara helped Clark load their luggage into the back of Lois’s rental after they checked out.

“Well, shall we?” Lois said. Everyone piled into Lois’s car for the ten-minute drive to Lucy’s house. Lois rang the bell and Eric opened the door.

“Good morning. Everyone’s in the kitchen.” Eric led the way then he sat down next to his brother.

“Lucy, would it be all right if Lara and I did the cooking this morning?” Clark asked. With a glance at Lara, he saw her nod her head in agreement.

“You don’t have to ask me twice! The kitchen is all yours. Pots and pans are in the lower cabinets near the stove. Eggs and such are in the fridge, and flour and sugar are in the canisters on the counter. Anything else you need, just ask.”

Lara took orders, then she and Clark started to cook. The two of them worked like the efficient team they were and in less than half an hour everyone was eating. Lara poured coffee for everyone then she started a second pot before she sat down to eat. After breakfast, everyone went out onto the patio to enjoy the beautiful weather before the visitors had to leave for their flights.

“I had a wonderful time, Luce,” Lois said and gave her sister a big hug. “Thanks for inviting me.”

“I’m glad you came. Maybe now you’ll come every year?” Lucy said.

“We’ll see,” Lois said but she smiled widely.

“Thanks for inviting us, Aunt Lucy. It was so nice to meet you, Uncle Ben and my cousins.” Lara hugged Lucy goodbye.

“You’re very welcome dear, we loved having you. You and your family have a standing invitation for Thanksgiving so I expect to see you next year.”

“You’ve got a deal, Aunt Lucy. Maybe next year I’ll bring Ken, I’m sure he’d love to meet you all,” Lara said. After everyone said goodbye Lois and the Kents climbed back into her car.

“Can you drop us at the park down here, Lois?” Clark said once they were on the road. Lois nodded and pulled in, then she drove as far back as she could. Clark and Lara climbed out and opened the hatch. After a quick scan, they spun into their suits and were in the air with the luggage before anyone could even blink.

“Wow, that’s amazing,” Lois said as she glanced over at Martha.

“I know, now they do it in stereo,” Martha laughed.

Just then Clark and Lara landed. “What did we miss?” Clark asked.

“Nothing, dear,” Martha replied trying to hide a giggle behind her hand.

“It was nice seeing you, Lois,” Clark said sincerely.

“You too, Clark. I’m glad I came. And Lara, it was nice to get to know you better. I want you to know you’re welcome to visit

me anytime you want,” Lois said.

Lara walked up to Lois and hugged her and kissed her cheek. “Thanks,” Lara replied. “I’m glad we had our talk. I just might drop in occasionally so leave your balcony door unlocked!”

“Well, we should get going,” Clark said. He scooped up his mother and Lara wrapped her arm around Jonathan’s waist and they rose slowly, then they were gone in blue and black blurs.

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### Chapter Eighteen—Lois Comes Clean

Lara returned to her apartment just after noon so she called Ken to see if he was available.

“Hi, Honey!” Ken responded when he answered his phone. “Did you have a good time at your aunt’s?”

“Yes, it was great. Uncle Ben is a great guy and my cousins are as well, though knowing Aunt Lucy I didn’t expect any less. Umm... are you able to come over?”

“Yes... this sounds serious, is anything wrong?” Ken asked cautiously.

“No, not really, I just need to see you,” Lara said hoping she didn’t sound too needy.

“I’ll be right over, see you in fifteen.” Lara ended the call and nervously began to pace. When Ken rang the bell exactly fifteen minutes later, she opened the door immediately and escorted Ken to her couch.

“So honey, you seem awfully upset, what’s bothering you?”

“Umm... you remember my dad’s globe?”

“Sure, it’s an amazing piece of technology,” Ken said, clearly not following her train of thought.

“Well, something happened at Aunt Lucy’s. My cousin, Eric, commented that Superman and Superwoman looked more like siblings than father and daughter. I began to think about what he said and I remembered a picture of Dad and Lois that was taken before I was born.”

“Okay, but I still don’t see why that would concern you so much,” Ken said carefully, not wanting to upset her.

“Dad hasn’t aged a bit between when that picture was taken and now,” she said, stating the obvious from her point of view. “I wanted to know why so last night I consulted the globe. The reason he hasn’t aged is that his natural lifespan is a lot longer than humans,” Lara said softly, hanging her head.

“So, this means that you...?” Ken said, putting two and two together.

“Yes, my expected lifespan is much longer too, not as long as Dad’s, of course, because I’m only half Kryptonian, but it’s a lot longer than I thought.”

“Is that what’s bothering you, baby? That you’re going to outlive me?” Ken extended his hand. Lara grasped it and allowed him to draw her into his arms. Once she settled her head on his chest, he continued.

“Honey, women typically live longer than men so you’d probably outlive me even if you weren’t Kryptonian. Besides, I have a dangerous job and, though I don’t like to think about it, I could die much earlier than you.” He lifted Lara’s chin with his fingers until their eyes met and he smiled at her lovingly.

“Lara, I *love* you and I want to be with you forever. It doesn’t matter how many years we have together, what matters is how we live each day of the years we have.”

“I love you too, and I plan to make every day we have the best they can be, but I’ll still be young-looking when you’re... not,” Lara said cautiously.

“So? The guys at the nursing home will think I robbed the cradle! I’ll be the envy of every man there having a babe like you pushing my wheelchair!” Ken replied, his eyes alight with mischief.

“Oh, you!” Lara said, smacking him lightly on the shoulder. She laughed at the picture he painted.

“Seriously, Lara. It doesn’t matter what you look like when I

get older. If it becomes a problem we can always move where people won’t know us and let people think what they want to think.”

“Dad said you’d understand, but I was so worried. I’m glad you understand.”

“By the way, you said your lifespan is a lot longer than a human. Exactly how long are we talking?” Ken asked curiously.

“The globe couldn’t be sure because the superpowers are an unknown factor but it gave me a conservative estimate of two hundred twenty-six years,” Lara replied, her eyes now focused on her lap.

“That’s... amazing. I was thinking a hundred twenty-five or a hundred fifty tops!” Ken paused, thinking carefully about what he would say next.

“I know you don’t want to hear this but I’m serious... I want you to be open to love someone else when I’m gone.” Lara’s eyes grew wide, her face expressed her shock.

“I couldn’t...!” Lara whispered.

“Yes, you can. Not right away, of course, but you’ll still be a young woman and I don’t want you living alone all that time. You have a lot of love to give and I’d be very disappointed in you if you hid away, waiting to die.”

“But I’ll have our children, grandchildren, and maybe great-grandchildren, hopefully, to keep me busy.”

“But they are not the same as having a husband who will love you, support you, and hold you at night.”

“All right, I’ll... consider it.” Lara relented. “When the time comes.”

“That’s my girl, now tell me all about your trip.”

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Ken McCarthy lay in bed that night staring up at the ceiling unable to sleep. His mind was racing, going over and over what Lara had told him. Lara had a *conservative* theoretical lifespan of over two hundred years! When she’d told him he didn’t know what to say at first but he thought he’d hidden it well. He knew how much this knowledge bothered her. They’d discussed her fears and he’d been able to alleviate most of them though he was sure she would still worry even though there was nothing she could do to change anything.

As he’d told her, statistically, women lived longer than men anyway so, even if she weren’t Kryptonian, she would probably live longer than him. When you factored in that he had a dangerous job the odds went up from there. Lara had promised to watch over him whenever she could and he loved her for it but, despite her best efforts, the day might come when he wouldn’t come home.

When he’d told her that he wanted her to find someone else when he was gone, he had shocked her but he was adamant. He knew that Lara, no matter what happened, would be a relatively young woman, and knowing her tender heart he did not want her to be alone until the end of her very long life. She’d mentioned having their children, grandchildren, and hopefully great-grandchildren to keep her busy and occupied and he certainly hoped that would be true.

But still, he knew that Lara needed the support of an equal, not a child, but someone who loved her as much as he did. Lara had protested that she could never do that but, ultimately, he got her to agree, reluctantly, and he hoped she would take his words to heart. Maybe he needed to talk to his, yet unborn, children to enlist them in getting their mother back into the dating scene. Ken chuckled to himself at the incongruity of setting up Lara for dates when he hadn’t even proposed yet! He hoped he’d been able to calm her and show her that he understood her fears. Ken closed his eyes settling into a restless sleep.

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Lara, too, found it difficult to fall asleep that night. Unlike Ken, who was staring at his ceiling, Lara was floating on her back

at 70,000 feet over the city but the usual calm this area gave her was absent. Her mind was awirl with thoughts of Ken as an old man while she was still a relatively young, vibrant woman. Her imagination had her looking like Lois does now, a woman in her forties when her actual age would be in her eighties! How *would* she explain why she looked so young? Makeup would help though even that could only do so much. Surely, she'd have to move to a different city, maybe live the life of a hermit, away from civilization while she waited for her extremely long life to come to an end.

The thought of being without Ken for so many years had tears running down her cheeks and sobs wracked her body. Ken had been very understanding, reminding her that even if she were human, she'd still have a very good chance of outliving him and with his job, it was even more of a possibility. Lara had sworn to him then that she'd do everything in her power to watch over him, to keep him safe, which he appreciated, but he'd told her that might not be enough.

When she had said that their family would be her support, he'd told her that he wanted her to find someone else! Just thinking about that had her insides in knots. How could she do that? She knew now that, once she'd experienced the soulmates bond, no other man would ever match up. While she had, reluctantly, agreed to try, Lara had no intention of following through. So, as she and Ken had agreed, she'd savor every minute they had together for as long as they had but she had no intention of finding another man. It was with a somewhat heavy heart that Lara turned over, flying slowly back to her apartment.

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Lois arrived the Monday after the Thanksgiving weekend at the *Planet* earlier than usual. She hung up her coat, grabbed her coffee mug, and headed to the break room for a cup of newsroom java. As she scanned the newsroom her eyes took in the scene of barely controlled chaos and she smiled. After she poured the hot, black brew into her cup she poured a dollop of low-fat milk and a packet of sugar substitute into it and stirred it with a wooden stick. On her way back to her office she stopped at Jim Olsen's desk.

"Jim, grab yourself a coffee and come into my office, please?"

"Be right there, boss!" Jim grabbed his cup, filled it then he hurried over to Lois's office.

Lois acknowledged him as he entered. "Close the door and take a seat."

After he closed the door Jim sat in the high-backed chair and crossed his legs. "What's up Chief? Got a hot lead for me?"

Lois took a deep breath to calm herself. "No, nothing like that. I have something to tell you... something I should have told you a long time ago."

Lois studied his face but she couldn't tell what he was thinking.

"What's is it, Lois?" Jim said sympathetically.

"I have a daughter." There, her secret was out and Lois relaxed slightly as if a weight had lifted from her shoulders.

Jim nodded. "I know."

"You... know?"

"I didn't know, officially, until now but, yes, I know."

"H-h-how?"

"It was about a year and a half ago I guess when a young woman got off the elevator. She seemed to be looking for something so I got up to see if I could help. When I got closer my jaw about hit the floor. She looked almost exactly like you did when I first started here except her hair was longer. Before I had a chance to say much she took off, headed for your office. I tried to stop her when she gave me 'the look'—"

Lois interrupted curiously. "'The look'?"

"Yeah, the look that says 'Don't mess with me, I'm not in the mood.' I knew right then that she was your daughter because

you'd given me that same look earlier that day."

"Oh."

"So, Lois, who is she?"

"Her name is Lara Kent and she's my daughter."

Jim stared at her for a moment. "Care to explain?"

"You know the 'official' story, right?"

"Sure, we all did. You got pregnant by an old boyfriend and gave the baby up for adoption. We thought that was very brave of you. So, what's the real story, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Back then I was under a lot of pressure with that whole Lex mess—"

"You're telling me! I remember you chewing Clark out so bad one time that I avoided you so as not to incur your wrath!"

"I know and I'm sorry. Anyway, I'd got a hot tip about Intergang moving in to Metropolis to fill the void left by Lex. Clark, somehow, sensed something was off about the tip and decided to follow me. The tipster turned out to be Nigel St. John and he was going to kill me."

"Oh, God, Lois. That must have been horrible!"

"It was. Nigel had a knife to my throat and I was seconds away from death when Clark stepped in. He chased Nigel away then he took me back to my apartment. We were both overwhelmed. We'd cheated death once more and before we knew it, we were kissing.

"Those kisses burst into flame so quickly and before we knew it... we'd had sex on the floor of my living room." Lois's face was hot with embarrassment, her eyes damp with unshed tears, focused on her desk, unable to meet Jim's eyes.

After a few moments, Lois continued. "We both agreed that what we'd done was a mistake and we resolved never to talk about it again. I thought no more about it until a few weeks later when I thought I'd got the bug that was making the rounds. When I went to the doctor, he told me I wasn't sick, I was pregnant!"

"That had to be a surprise."

"It sure was. I was on the pill but, as my doctor told me, it's only 99% effective. I was trying to prove to Mr. Stern and my "colleagues" that I was still the best reporter in the city so I planned to terminate the pregnancy."

Lois looked at her friend and saw sympathy and support in his expression so she continued. "I felt that Clark, as the father, should know before I did anything. I invited him to my place and told him about the pregnancy and my decision to terminate."

"What did Clark say?"

"He told me I couldn't do it and then he told me he loved me and he proposed!" Lois's eyes flashed, after all these years Clark's audacity still rankled.

Jim chuckled knowingly. "I take it you said no?"

"It was more like hell no!" Lois chuckled as well. "However once I calmed down Clark begged me not to terminate his baby. He told me that he'd never find another woman he'd love as much as me and that this was his only chance to be a father. You know Clark, he's big on family so I believed him. After a lot of wrangling, he convinced me to carry the child to term then he'd bring it up."

"So that's why Clark was so worried and nervous that week."

"Yeah. I made him wait for a decision but he didn't pressure me, which I appreciated. Once I agreed, I told Clark that I had one condition. He had to take the baby and leave Metropolis forever and never tell the baby who its mother was."

"Oh, Lois! I'm so sorry," Jim said, sympathetically.

"Thanks, Jim. Clark agreed of course. That's why he resigned and went to Smallville."

"But why, Lois?"

"You know Clark. He'd have brought that baby to work and everyone would have fawned over it and, I'm certain, people would put two and two together and speculate that Clark's baby and the baby I gave up for adoption were one and the same. I also

knew that Clark would keep pressuring me to marry him and I... I couldn't have that.

"At the time I found out I was pregnant I was still only four months into my trial period so there was no way I was going to allow Clark to interfere in my life as I knew he would."

"But why didn't you want her to know who her mother was?"

"You've met my parents, Jim. At the time I felt, and still feel to a certain extent, that I'd be a horrible mother and I wouldn't inflict that upon my child. I knew, even as a single father, Clark would be a better parent than I could ever be. You met Clark's parents during that Trask fiasco so you know that between Martha, Jonathan, and Clark that baby would be so loved she wouldn't miss me not being there for her. I also thought that Clark would meet and marry a nice woman and then my baby would have a mother figure in her life too."

"I can see your point though I don't agree. I take it that Lara didn't see it the same way you did?" Jim's grin said it all.

"No. She didn't. She let me have it that day. She told me, in no uncertain terms, that she didn't need a mother who would give her up for a career—"

Jim chuckled. "That must have gone over well!"

"About as you'd expect. She never raised her voice. She said her piece and she left before I could even respond."

Jim asked the question that had been on mind for a while. "So what's changed? Why are you telling me now?"

Lois replied softly, her eyes locked with his. "I met her at Lucy's."

"You... met her... at Lucy's?"

"Let me explain. After she found out who I was she went on her travels, as you know. When she got back, she investigated me and found Lucy. Lara contacted her and they hit it off. Lucy never agreed with my decision not to tell her who her mother was so when Lucy invited her and her family to Thanksgiving Dinner, she loved the idea. I found out later that Clark had asked Lara if she would still go if I was going to be there."

"I take it she forgave you?"

"Yes, she did," Lois said as tears ran down her cheeks. "She's a much better person than me, Jim. We talked a lot. I apologized and she seemed to understand. The best part is she forgave me and we've decided to be friends."

"That's great, Lois. I'm so happy for you!" Jim exclaimed. "And thanks for confiding in me."

"As I said before, I should have told you the truth a long time ago. You're a great friend and you deserved to know the truth." Lois took a sip of her long-forgotten coffee and grimaced. She poured the coffee into the potted plant on her desk then she stood up.

"Thanks for listening, Jim, I appreciate it. By the way, how is that story on the corruption allegation against the governor's aid coming?"

Jim stood up in preparation. "I'll have it on your desk before lunch."

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Jim Olsen sat at his desk and pulled up the corruption article he'd been working on. While the document loaded, his thoughts drifted back to the conversation he'd just had.

"Hmmm, now things are making sense! I knew that story Lois fed everyone was a bunch of bull. An old boyfriend and a one-night stand? No way, not Lois. There had to be more to the story but since Perry seemed to back her up, I never said anything. Once Lois was showing, I watched Clark and her more carefully. The whole newsroom knew Clark was in love with Lois so it made sense that Clark was the father. What didn't make sense was why she had to come up with that story? If Clark was the father there was no way he wouldn't have done the right thing.

"Considering what Lois just told me her need to prove herself drove Clark away. I could see how he was devastated at leaving

the *Planet* but knowing him, the welfare of his child was uppermost in his mind. It's too bad Lois felt the way she did. And I know why too! It was what that scumbag Claude did to her. That and her experience with Luthor! It must have been so hard on that little girl, not having her mother there for her. No wonder she was so angry that day she confronted Lois! I guess the only good thing that's come of this whole mess is that Lois and Lara have made peace and are working towards being friends. Even so, there's still something that doesn't quite make sense. There's a piece to this puzzle I don't have.' Just then Jim noticed his article had loaded and was ready. 'Well, back to the grind.'

### Chapter Nineteen—A Little Breaking and Entering

After Thanksgiving, and her conversation with Lois, Lara decided to do something about getting her father's ship back. Ever since her dad had told her about the ship he came to Earth in and how it had disappeared, Lara had promised herself that, someday, she'd get it back for him. To that end, Lara picked up her phone and called Lois's number.

"Hello?" Lois said.

"Hi, Lois, it's me, Lara."

"Lara! It's so nice to hear your voice, how are you?"

"I'm well, and you?"

"I'm well, thanks. So what's up?" Lois asked as she sat down on her couch and tucked her legs underneath her.

"I hope you can help me. I know you have contacts all over and I need someone who can dig up information that might not be easy to get."

Lois was intrigued, "Sounds interesting, what do you need?"

"I don't want to talk about this over the phone," Lara said, pausing, "Could I come to see you sometime?"

"No time like the present, can you come over now?" Lois said, excitedly, "I'm at home."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, when can you get here?" Lois replied, eager to help her daughter.

"I'll be there in less than a minute!" Lara ended the call, spun into her suit, and flew out her balcony window towards Metropolis.

Before Lois could get off the couch there was a knock on her balcony door. Lois hurried over and opened it so that Superwoman could enter.

"Boy, you weren't kidding!" Lois said. She closed the door as Superwoman became a blue and black blur that coalesced into Lara Kent, dressed in a cotton t-shirt and jeans.

"This must be very important. Sit down, please," Lois said, and she joined Lara on her couch. "Do you want anything to drink? I have coffee, tea, or cream soda."

"Umm, cream soda sounds good, if you don't mind?" Lara said.

"No problem, be right back." Lois hurried to her kitchen and returned with two ice-cold cans of A&W cream soda, passing one of them to Lara.

"That's good," Lara said popping open the can and taking a sip, "I haven't had cream soda in a while."

"It's my favorite drink, I always have some in the fridge." Lois took a sip then she turned to Lara. "So how can I help you?"

"I don't know if you know any of this but when Dad showed me his globe—"

"Yes, we talked about that at Lucy's," Lois said interrupting Lara's tale.

"Do you know how Dad found it; he's never said?" Lara said curiously.

"Clark and I got a tip about Bureau 39, a quasi-legitimate government group that was into tracking aliens. We snuck into their warehouse and nosed around. Clark found the globe there and took it but by the time we were able to come back with a warrant to search the warehouse, it had been cleaned out, not even

a speck of dust remained.”

“That must have been when the ship disappeared,” Lara said, gaining a new understanding of the circumstances. “Anyway, Dad told me about the ship and I want to find it and surprise him. I hope you can help me. I know you have contacts, contacts that I don’t have. I hope one of them can give me a clue as to where it might be. I know it’s a long shot, it’s been twenty-plus years after all, but I *have* to try.”

“Hmm, there may be someone who can help. He works for the government and he seems to have his fingers in every pie there is,” Lois said, warming to the task ahead.

“Oh, Lois, that would be great. I have no idea where to start looking so your contact would be a godsend. How soon can you contact him?”

“I’ll put out a message tomorrow that I need to speak to him as soon as possible.”

“You can’t contact him directly?” Lara asked, incredulous.

“No, he’s a very secret source, someone who guards his privacy very closely. He’s a friend of Perry’s super-secret source, a man I only knew as Sore Throat. When Sore Throat retired a few months after Perry did, he introduced me to his replacement. I call him Sore Throat Two, keeps things simpler.”

“Thanks! I appreciate this Lois,” Lara said, gratefully.

“It’s no trouble at all. I can’t promise he’ll have any information but if he doesn’t, no one else will, that’s for sure.” Lois sat back, taking a sip of her soda. “As soon as I hear something, I’ll let you know.”

“Great! Well, I’ve taken up enough of your time, so I’ll be going,” Lara said as she took the last sip of soda, set the empty can on the table, then rose from the couch. Spinning into the Suit Lara walked to the balcony and opened the door. “See you soon, Lois and thanks again.” Lara opened the door and stepped out. She closed the door behind her then she disappeared.

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Lara had about given up hope when a week passed with no word from Lois and her secret source when her cell phone rang.

“Lois! Do you have anything?” Lara asked excitedly after seeing the caller ID.

“Well, hello to you too!” Lois said with a chuckle.

“Oh, sorry, hello. Do you have anything?” Lara responded, not chastised one bit.

“Yes, I have something. Can you meet me tonight, about midnight?” Lois said conspiratorially.

“Sure, I’ll be there. Umm, would you like me to bring dinner first?”

“Dinner sounds wonderful! Do you know the Chinese place your dad went to?” Lois replied, hoping that she did.

“Oh yes, Mrs. Kwan’s restaurant! I love that place,” Lara said, excitedly. “What do you like?”

“Bring an assortment, I loved everything your dad brought that time,” Lois replied.

“Okay, I’ll see you about 9 o’clock then we can eat and discuss plans for tonight,” Lara said, “Bye!”

“Bye, see you tonight!”

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At 7:30 p.m. Central time Lara spun into her suit for a leisurely flight to Shanghai. Touching down in a deserted alley Lara spun into her casual clothes then she made her way to Mrs. Kwan’s restaurant, The Dream Palace. As she made her way Lara took in the sights, sounds, and smells of this vibrant city as the people went about their daily tasks.

“Miss Kent! How are you?” Mrs. Kwan exclaimed running over to hug Lara.

“I’m fine, Mrs. Kwan, how are you?” Lara replied in perfect Mandarin returning the hug enthusiastically.

“Oh, you know, the usual aches and pains but nothing to worry about. So, what can I get you today?”

“I want the dinner assortment for two, please,” Lara said.

“For you and your new man?” Mrs. Kwan said with a grin.

“No, not this time. I’m having dinner with a friend. I promise to bring Ken with me soon though,” Lara said.

“I’ll be right back.” Mrs. Kwan disappeared into the back of the restaurant, so Lara sat down to wait. Spying a newspaper she picked it up, anxious to see if her efforts at reading Mandarin Chinese were proving fruitful. Like her father, Lara had an affinity for learning languages but that usually extended only to speaking them, so she had to try to be able to read and write them. So far, she was able to read Spanish, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, and now Mandarin Chinese. Lara perused the news of the day when Mrs. Kwan reappeared carrying five bamboo containers filled with steaming, wonderful smelling food.

“Here you go, Miss Kent, I hope you and your friend enjoy it.”

“We certainly will. My friend hasn’t had your food in years and she’s looking forward to it. Take care!” Lara paid for the food and headed out of the restaurant. Once in the alley, Lara quickly scanned the area then spun into her suit and took off, heading for Metropolis.

When Lara entered Metropolis airspace, she sought out Lois’s apartment to make sure she was home. Lois was bustling around the kitchen so Lara landed on the balcony and knocked.

“It’s open!” Lois called out upon hearing the knock. Sliding the door open she entered the living room, set the food down on the coffee table then closed the door. After changing into her casual clothes she picked up the food and proceeded to the kitchen.

“Hi, Lois,” Lara said as she set the containers on the kitchen table.

“Hi to you too. Boy that smells good! Did you get dumplings?” Lois asked as she leaned into the refrigerator and took out two cans of cream soda.

“Of, course! Here let me heat this a bit more then we can eat.” Lara quickly gave the containers a shot of heat vision and soon fragrant steam was rising from them. Lois and Lara dug in, placing heaping portions on their plates.

“Ummm, it’s just like I remember it.” Lois sighed contentedly.

“If you don’t mind my asking, when did Dad get you food from Mrs. Kwan’s?”

“It was very early in our partnership, even before he invented Superman. Perry assigned me a story to investigate sabotage of the Messenger shuttle and I needed help. Everyone I wanted to work with was either out of town or on another assignment so he gave me the rookie, your dad, and I was *not* best pleased. We’d been trying to figure out Dr. Platt’s report for hours and getting nowhere and we were getting hungry. Clark volunteered to get Chinese food and was halfway out the door before I had a chance to tell him what I wanted. He said he’d get an assortment and he was gone! It didn’t seem like he was gone all that long when he returned with a bunch of bamboo containers like these.”

“Wow, thanks for telling me. Dad never talks about his past, especially his time at the *Daily Planet*.” Lara pushed her plate away having eaten more than her share of the delicious food. When Lois picked up a fortune cookie and opened it, she chuckled.

“I see some things never change, the fortunes are still in Chinese,” Lois said with a grin.

“Let me see,” Lara said taking the small piece of paper from Lois and turning it vertically. ““ You will have success in your next endeavor.””

“Now, that’s a fortune! Not like the one I got that first time,” Lois exclaimed.

“Oh, what did you get then?” Lara asked, curious now.

““A good horse is like a member of the family.”” Lois quoted

disgustedly.

“That’s not a fortune!” Lara said.

“I know! That’s what I said to Clark!” Both women cracked up laughing companionably. With their meal over Lara helped Lois pack up the few leftovers and put them in the refrigerator, then they retired to the living room. Both women sat on the couch and Lois pulled out a folder from her briefcase and set it on the coffee table in front of them.

“Okay, my source gave me this just today. The only thing he found that could be what we’re interested in is a warehouse, ostensibly rented by the Air Force. It’s been unused for at least fifteen years as far as he could tell. Since Bureau 39 was an offshoot of Project Blue Book, the Air Force’s program to investigate UFOs, it looks promising. Sore Throat Two gave me this blueprint of the warehouse but that’s about it. He had no information on security measures if any, but I’d be surprised if there weren’t some,” Lois said seriously.

“Where is this warehouse anyway?” Lara asked, studying the blueprint as she committed it to memory.

“Gotham City. From what I was able to determine it’s on the riverfront in a not nice neighborhood,” Lois replied.

“Okay, what do you recommend?” Lara looked to Lois for suggestions.

“I think we should fly over the warehouse to see what kind of security measures they have. After that, we determine the easiest way in then, if the ship is there, we get in quickly, grab the ship and get out of Dodge,” Lois said confidently.

“I agree.” Lara glanced at the clock and saw that it was now almost midnight. “We should probably get going then.” Lois nodded her agreement.

“I’ll just change into more appropriate clothes.” Lois got off the couch and returned a few minutes later clad in a black turtleneck, black slacks and shoes, and a black stocking cap.

“Ready for a little B and E?” Lois said excitedly as she reentered the living room.

“B and E?”

“Breaking and Entering! God, I haven’t done this in years, this is going to be so much fun!” Lara nodded her understanding then she spun into her suit.

“Can you ditch the cape? It’s not exactly inconspicuous.” Lois asked.

“Sure thing,” Lara said. She detached her cape from her shoulders and draped it over the couch. She also took off the blue briefs she wore with her uniform and placed them on top of the cape, leaving her clad only in her black bodysuit with the big blue S on her chest, the boots, and the black mask.

“No wonder you wear the cape and briefs. I doubt your father would let you out of the house looking like that!” Lois said eyeing the younger woman, admiring her shapely form.

“Grandma said something similar when we were designing my suit. She said she was too old to pick Dad up when he fainted!” Lara said with a grin. Lois returned the grin then she gestured for Lara to precede her out the door.

“How do we do this? Your dad carries me in his arms,” Lois said.

“I only carry people like that during rescues. Normally I have my passenger wrap their arm around my shoulder or waist then I hold them the same way, it seems more dignified somehow,” Lara replied.

“Okay then.” Lois, being shorter than Lara, wrapped her left arm around her daughter’s waist and Lara grabbed Lois by her shoulders and they lifted off the balcony into the night. Lara rose above the city lights, higher and higher until they could see the stars shining brightly.

“The view being carried this way is sure different,” Lois said glancing at Lara. “I can see a lot more this way, though being held in Superman’s arms does have its appeal... but don’t tell your

father that,” Lois said with a grin.

“Your secret is safe with me Lois.” Lara flew through the silent sky north toward Gotham City. The closer she got, the more a feeling of unease settled over her. The city seemed darker somehow and it had nothing to do with a lack of lighting. Lara wondered, idly, if they’d get a glimpse of the elusive Batman. Lara headed towards the riverfront and slowed down until they were hovering silently above the warehouse.

“What do you see?” Lois whispered, though why she did, she had no idea.

“No one is near the warehouse itself but I can’t see inside. It’s either slathered in lead paint or they lined the building with the stuff,” Lara replied in a normal tone of voice.

“That’s good and bad. Good, in that someone has something in there they don’t want Superman to see, but bad in that we’re going in blind.”

“Yeah, looks like we don’t have much choice. Hang on, we’re going down.” Lara zipped down to land outside the only door. She released Lois so she could examine it.

“I don’t see any obvious security measures aside from this keypad.” Lara glanced around, scanning the area with her x-ray vision and her superhearing, but found nothing suspicious. She stepped over to the keypad and punched in combinations of four numbers over and over, the screen on top of the pad flashing the digits, at super speed. Moments later the red light turned green and the door opened a crack.

“Let me check things out. Stay behind me,” Lara whispered. Lois nodded and crept along behind. Lara scanned the building for any security cameras and shorted out all that she found. “I disabled the security cameras but I don’t think they were active anyway. I don’t hear anyone in the building but they may have sensors in the floor so I’m going to float us, just in case.”

Lois quickly wrapped her arm around Lara’s waist and held on tightly as Lara rose slowly up to the ceiling. She scanned the shelves in a grid pattern shelf by shelf so as not to miss anything. It wasn’t until she reached the very last shelving unit that she saw the object she was looking for.

“There it is!” Lara whispered, her face alight with excitement. “Hang on.” Lara descended to within a few inches above the floor, next to a long, cylindrical shape covered by a dusty tarp. She pulled back the tarp with her left hand and drew it away.

“It’s so small,” Lois whispered upon seeing the little craft.

“Yeah, you wouldn’t think a baby could fit in that. Look there’s Dad’s crest!” There on the pointed nose of the little ship was the red and yellow crest of the House of El rising from the otherwise sleek metal.

“We can examine this later, we need to get going,” Lois said anxiously. Lara nodded her agreement and wrapped her left arm around the ship and tucked it into her side. She rose slowly to the ceiling then over to the door. Lara and Lois strode through until they were both standing outside the darkened warehouse. Once Lois had wrapped her arm around Lara’s waist again, she took off. The trip back to Metropolis passed by in silence, both women absorbed in their thoughts.

When Lara saw Lois’s apartment building on the horizon, she released the breath that she hadn’t known she was holding. They’d made it! Lara had retrieved her father’s ship and she couldn’t have done it without Lois’s help. Lara landed silently on Lois’s balcony and Lois opened the door. They hurried inside where Lara set the ship on the living room floor.

Now that they had time to look at the ship more closely, they realized just how compact it was. Near the middle was the passenger compartment which opened at the touch of Lara’s hand with a barely audible swish. There was a round depression at the front where the globe had sat and a hammock-like leather cradle where her father had lain while he traveled many light-years from the doomed planet Krypton to Earth. The remainder of the craft

contained the little engine with some winged projections used by the guidance system.

“Clark’s parents sent him to Earth in this?” Lois said skeptically.

“The messages for Dad said that Krypton was quickly becoming unstable. This ship was a prototype of a ship they had hoped to build to be able to save their population but they ran out of time. Jor-El and Lara weren’t even sure it would work for their son but they had no choice. They could send him to Earth and hope they succeeded, or keep him on Krypton where he would surely die.” Lara’s voice cracked and a silent tear trickled down her cheek.

“Your Kryptonian grandparents were brave people,” Lois said reverently.

“That they were.” Lara took a deep breath to calm herself. “It’s late. I really should be going.” Lara turned to Lois and enveloped her in a fierce hug. “Thank you seems so inadequate but I mean it from the bottom of my heart. Without your help, I’d have never found this ship. I owe you a debt of gratitude I can never repay.”

“You don’t owe me anything. It was my honor to be able to help you and your dad. After all, we’re family, that’s what family does for each other.” Lois returned the hug just as fiercely then she stepped back, wiping her tears that had gathered there. Lara slipped on her briefs and cape then she picked up the ship and walked out to the balcony.

“Thanks again, Lois. I’ll talk to you soon.” With a quick wave, Lara took off towards Chicago.

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### Chapter Twenty—Surprise!

The next night after work Lara called the farmhouse.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Grandma, is Dad there?”

“Lara! Hold on, he’s right here,” Martha said and handed Clark the phone.

“Hey, Pumpkin, what’s up?” Clark said, his voice reflected the pleasure talking to his daughter gave him.

“Not much, Dad. Are you going to be home for a while?”

“Yeah, I don’t plan to do my patrol until about midnight, why?”

“I have a surprise for you and I want to make sure you’ll be home.”

“A surprise? I can hardly wait!” Clark said, curiosity evident in his voice.

“I’ll be over in a bit, see you.” Lara ended the call then spun into her suit. She grabbed the ship from the floor of her bedroom and took off for Smallville. Moments later she flew directly into the barn and closed the door behind her where she set the ship down, then she spun into her casual clothes. She found a tarp in the corner and draped it over the ship then she left the barn and walked into the kitchen.

“Hi, everyone!” Lara said, making the rounds of hugs and kisses from her family. Lara sighed happily to herself thinking of how much the love of her family meant to her.

“So Lara, you have a surprise for me?” Clark said, looking at his daughter expectantly.

“Yes, I have. It’s in the barn.” Lara grasped Clark’s hand and led him to the barn with her grandparents following along. “Now no peeking!”

The four Kents entered the barn where they saw a cylindrical object covered by a tarp. Lara walked over to the object, grabbed the tarp, and with a flourish she pulled it off.

“TADA!” Lara exclaimed. She watched the faces of her family as they gazed on with wonder.

“Is that... my ship?” Clark asked hardly able to believe his eyes.

“Yes, Dad, it is. Are you surprised?” Lara said.

“How... how did you find it?” Clark asked still not believing his eyes.

“I asked Lois if she could ask her sources for any information I could use to find it and a super-secret source of hers came through. We checked out the location last night and we found it, but since it was late by the time we got back, I kept it at my place,” Lara said.

Clark, Martha, and Jonathan walked over to the ship to check it out. The three of them walked around it marveling at the sight of the ship no one ever thought they’d see again.

Clark knelt and touched the passenger compartment which opened at his touch. “It’s so small,” Clark said reverently, looking up at his parents who had tears in their eyes. Clark stood up, extended his arms to his daughter, and enveloped her in a fierce hug.

“Thank you. I never thought I’d see it again after it disappeared from that warehouse in Metropolis and now it’s here, in our barn! It’s a miracle and I owe it all to you, and Lois.” Clark hugged his daughter, placing kisses on her forehead and cheeks.

“I’m glad I could do this for you, Dad. After you told me how the ship disappeared, I made a promise to myself that I’d try to find it for you.” Lara gazed into the face of her father, absorbing the love he had for her. “So where are you going to keep it?”

“I’m going to move it to the cellar tonight, then tomorrow I’m going to make a vault down there to keep it in. I’m not going to let it get away from me again!” Clark walked over, picked up the little ship and carried it reverently to the house with the rest of his family following behind. Once in the cellar Clark set the ship down in the middle of the floor then he stepped back to gaze at it.

“Clark, sweetie, it’s safe now, why don’t you come upstairs,” Martha said gently, laying a hand on her son’s shoulder to get his attention.

“I know, Mom, I know it’s not going anywhere but it’s still so hard to believe it’s here.” Clark took a deep breath then he turned to escort his mother up to the kitchen.

“How about dessert? I’ve got a blueberry pie and vanilla ice cream just begging to be eaten,” Martha said on her way to the refrigerator. Lara got plates, silverware, and glasses while Clark took the pie, milk, and ice cream from his mother.

“Lara, where did you find the ship?” Clark asked in between bites of pie.

“Lois’s source found a warehouse in Gotham City that the Air Force rented which, according to him, hadn’t been used in years.”

“Gotham City! I’d never have thought to look there,” Clark said shaking his head.

“Even if you had, you wouldn’t have seen anything; the building was lined with lead. When I told Lois that, we knew we had to check it out.” Lara said.

“That sounds dangerous, Pumpkin. You should have called me,” Clark said.

“We weren’t sure it was even there, Dad,” Lara explained. “I didn’t want to get your hopes up. We were very careful. I made sure to look for any security measures outside but the only thing we found was a keypad. I tried combinations at superspeed until it opened. I made Lois stand behind me while I disabled the cameras inside but it appeared that they weren’t working anyway. I couldn’t find any sensors in the floor but just in case I floated above it. We found the ship on the last group of shelves so I grabbed it and we hightailed it out of there. We were in that warehouse maybe five minutes.”

“I’m glad you were careful, Pumpkin. In the old days, Lois would have barged in without worrying about security.” Clark chuckled.

“She must have mellowed over the years, Dad. When I told her to stay behind me while I checked things out, she did it without question,” Lara replied.

“Maybe she has. I’m just glad things went well and I’m very

glad you found the ship.” Clark smiled appreciatively.

Lara pushed back from the table and stood up. “The pie was delicious, Grandma, as always, but I should be heading back. I’ve got some research to do for a story I’m working on.” Clark stood up and walked Lara out.

“Thanks again, Pumpkin,” Clark said sincerely. “That was the best surprise I’ve had in years.”

“You’re welcome, Dad. It was my pleasure.” Lara spun into her suit and was about to take off when Clark stopped her.

“Say, would you like some company?”

“Sure, but I do know the way,” Lara said cheekily.

“I know but I’m going that way myself,” Clark said, nonchalantly.

“Would you be going to Metropolis by any chance?”

“I might be,” Clark said with a grin.

“Well come on then, we don’t want to keep Lois waiting.”

Lara waited while her father spun into his suit and the two superheroes took off, headed east. When they reached Chicago, Clark waved to his daughter then he continued to Metropolis. When he got there Clark scanned Lois’s building, landed softly on the balcony, and knocked on the door.

Lois rose from the couch and hurried over to open the door. “Wow, visits from two superheroes in two days, what have I done to deserve this kind of attention?” Lois said with a knowing smile as Superman entered her living room. Spinning out of his suit Clark walked over to Lois, grasped her hands in his and he gazed into her eyes.

“Thank you, Lois. Lara told me how helpful you were in finding my ship. I still can’t believe you were able to find it,” Clark said sincerely.

“You’re very welcome, Clark. Like I told Lara, it was my pleasure to play a small part in retrieving your ship for you.” Lois smiled a watery smile then she led Clark to the couch. “Sit down and we can talk. Oh, would you like something to drink?”

“You have any coffee made? If not, soda is good too.” Lois walked to her kitchen and returned moments later with two cans of A&W cream soda.

“Thanks,” Clark said, accepting the can and taking a sip. “Ummm, I haven’t had this in a long time. Nobody at home drinks it.”

“Maybe someone will now, I gave some to Lara and she liked it,” Lois replied as she joined Clark on her couch.

“Lara mentioned your super-secret source came through? Don’t tell me Sore Throat is still around? I thought he’d be retired by now.”

“Oh, he is. When Perry retired, Sore Throat retired soon after but before he did, he introduced me to his “replacement”, so to speak. I call him Sore Throat Two,” Lois said with a laugh.

“Next time you see him, please tell him thanks from me,” Clark said.

“I will. I’m sure he’ll appreciate it. I doubt he gets much appreciation in his line of work.”

“Lara told me she had to break in. Lois that’s dangerous!” Clark exclaimed worry evident in his expression.

“Clark, obviously it wasn’t. We’re fine. Lara was very careful, she didn’t rush in like a 500-pound gorilla,” Lois said with a knowing grin.

“Guilty as charged,” Clark said suitably chastised.

“You’ve trained her well, Clark. I was quite proud of how she handled herself.”

“Thanks again. I didn’t want her making the same mistakes I did. She’s very mature for her age and she’s certainly a lot more confident in herself than I was at that age,” Clark replied with a sigh.

“You didn’t have Superman to mentor you. You had to figure all that out on your own so don’t be too hard on yourself. I think you did great and the world owes you a lot, especially now that

Superwoman is on the job as well.”

“I don’t know about that but thanks for saying it. I’m so proud of Lara for using her powers to help. She’s looked forward to helping me ever since she was nine.”

“Is that when you told her you were Superman?” she asked though she already knew the answer.

“Yes, that’s the first time I knew that she’d inherited at least some of my powers. Her superhearing kicked in and she heard us talking about going on vacation. We were in the kitchen and she was upstairs in her room and she hollered out that she wanted to go to Disney World.”

“That must have been a surprise!” Lois said with a chuckle.

“It sure was. Of course, I always hoped she’d inherit my powers but, as you know, we didn’t know if that was even possible. Once I told her about Superman, do you know the first thing she asked me?”

“To take her flying?” Lois said, knowingly.

“Yep, she’s her mother’s daughter that’s for sure.” Clark looked at Lois and smiled a shy smile. “Of course when I told her that she probably wouldn’t be able to fly herself until she was 18, she was very disappointed. The phrase ‘That sucks’ comes to mind.”

“She didn’t!” Lois chuckled and took another sip of her soda.

“Yes, she did. To soften the blow, I took her flying and you should have seen her eyes light up. That’s when she told me she wanted to join me when she got older. I told her if that’s what she wanted to do that would be great but she was under no obligation to use her powers as I did. As you know, Lara isn’t into fighting crime but she does love helping at fires, accidents, and natural disasters and she’s darn good at it.”

“That she is. I keep a scrapbook of her exploits as Superwoman, you know. She’s done some great work and I know that she’s saved countless lives.” Lois paused, looking down at her hands, “I’m very proud of her.”

When it seemed that the conversation had stalled Clark decided to leave rather than cause Lois any further pain.

“Well, I should be going, it’s my night to patrol Metropolis,” Clark said after he spun into his suit. Lois nodded and escorted Clark to the door.

“Thanks again, Lois,” Clark said genuinely. “Have a good night.” Clark turned and zipped out of the door with the curtains moving slightly from the breeze. Lois gazed out at Superman as he went about his patrol, then she drew the curtains closed.

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### Chapter Twenty-One—Support

The Monday after Thanksgiving found Lara in her boss’s office.

“Pam, I’d like to put in for a week’s vacation for Christmas. My boyfriend invited me to his parent’s house for the holiday,” Lara said excitedly.

“I’m sorry, Lara, but I can’t approve that,” Pam said, looking up from her work. “You had Thanksgiving off and, being the new kid you have to cover at least one holiday and Christmas is yours.”

“Oh, okay,” she said disappointedly. “I understand, maybe next year?” Lara’s excited mood fell away as she turned and walked back to her desk. She pulled up the article she’d been working on before Thanksgiving and began to read it through.

George turned around in his chair and called over to Lara. “Hey, kid, I couldn’t help noticing that you went into the boss’s office all excited and now you look like someone has stolen your dog. What’s up?”

“It’s nothing, George. I wanted to take some vacation around Christmas so I could go with my boyfriend to be with his parents. Pam told me that she needed me here because it was my turn to work the holiday. It’s disappointing but I should have expected it, being the rookie and all. I guess I was lucky I got Thanksgiving,” Lara replied with a frown.

“Oh, well, that happens to all of us. Don’t worry about it, kid,” George said. A few moments later he walked into Pam’s office. He was in there for about ten minutes before he returned to his desk. With coffee in hand, he walked over to Lara’s desk and sat down in the chair next to her desk.

“Got a minute?” George said.

Lara looked up to give George her full attention. “Sure, George, what’s up?”

“I was just talking to Pam, going over story ideas, you know? Anyway, we got talking about holiday coverage and I told her I’d cover Christmas if she didn’t mind.” George smiled.

Lara sat, stunned, for a moment then her face lit up with a wide smile.

“George! You mean it?” Lara hopped out of her chair and leaned over to hug him fiercely and she kissed him on the cheek.

“Enough of that, this is a business you know,” George chided, sternly though his eyes were alight with mischief. Lara returned to her chair, though the smile never left her face.

“She said for you to submit your vacation request and she’d approve it, but *you’re* working New Year’s Day, got that!” he said mock seriously though his grin showed how he felt.

“You bet! You’re the best, George, and I won’t forget this!”

George got up and returned to his desk while Lara quickly filled out the vacation request. She sent it to Pam before anyone changed their mind!

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Ken McCarthy picked up his cell phone and dialed a familiar number.

“Hi, Mom!”

“Ken! It’s good to hear from you dear. What’s up?” Lydia said.

“Does something have to be up for me to call my mother?” Ken asked innocently.

“No, of course not. But you don’t usually call during the week, so I repeat, what’s up?” Ken chuckled. There was no fooling his mother when his call was about something important.

“Mom, is Dad there?”

“Yes, he’s right here.”

“Could you put this on speaker? I’d like to talk to you both.”

“Okay, I’m on,” Charles said.

“Mom, Dad, I’m going to ask Lara to marry me when we come down for Christmas!”

“Oh, Ken! That’s wonderful!” Lydia exclaimed.

“Congratulations, Son. Lara’s a wonderful girl!” Charles said.

“Thanks. I’m a lucky guy to have found a woman like her,” Ken replied. “I figured Christmas would be a perfect time, what with the whole family getting together.”

“That’s so thoughtful. I’m sure Grandma and Grandpa will be over the moon,” Lydia said.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Of course, Dave and Ted are going to give me a hard time,” Ken said with a chuckle.

Lydia replied, “Don’t you worry about them. If they start in on you, I’ll turn their wives on them.” The McCarthy’s all laughed at that.

“Have you picked out a ring?” Lydia asked.

“No, not yet.”

“You know... great-grandma Charlene’s ring is available,” Lydia offered. “I know Ted and Dave didn’t want it but it’s a beautiful ring.”

“Hmm, that’s an idea. I haven’t thought about that ring in a long time.”

“I’ve had it ever since she passed and I know she’d be proud to have you give it to your bride,” Lydia said.

“Lara’s very family oriented so I’m sure she’d love it. Could you take a picture of it so I can see what it looks like? I’m concerned the setting might be out of date.”

“Of course, dear, but I don’t think that’ll be the case. It’s a

diamond solitaire in a very simple setting. I’ll send you the picture then you can let me know, okay?”

“Will do, Mom, thanks. Look, I need to get going. I need to call Clark. I want to do this right so I’m going to ask for his blessing.”

“That’s fine, son, we love you!” Charles said, ending the call.

Ken opened his contacts to the entry for Clark Kent.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Clark.”

“Hi, Ken. What’s up?”

“Clark, if it’s not too much trouble could you come over to my place tonight?”

“Sure, is anything wrong?” Clark asked with concern.

“No, nothing like that. I want to talk to you about something.”

“Oh okay, how about I drop by your place in half an hour? I need to finish something here first.”

“That’s fine, Clark, see you in a half-hour.” Ken ended the call then headed into his kitchen. In the refrigerator, he had a full six-pack of his favorite Chicago craft beer, Half Acre Daisy Cutter. Then he put two beer mugs in his freezer to get them cold before Clark arrived. Thirty minutes later there was a knock on the door and Ken opened it to find a smiling Clark Kent standing there.

“Clark! Thanks for coming,” Ken said as he shook Clark’s hand. “I’ve got some of my favorite craft beer in the fridge, you want to try one?” Ken gestured Clark towards the couch.

“Sure, thanks,” Clark replied and made himself comfortable. Ken returned moments later with two frosty mugs filled with golden frothy beer. He handed one to Clark then he sat at the other end of the couch and took a sip to calm his nerves.

“Umm, this is good!” Clark said and licked his lips.

“Thanks. It’s from Revolution Brewing, one of the more popular craft breweries in the city,” Ken replied. The two men sat there, sipping their beer for a moment when Clark spoke up.

“Ken, as much as I enjoy having a beer with you it seemed as if you had something on your mind when you called. So what can I do for you?”

Ken set his mug on the coffee table then turned to face his future father-in-law, he hoped. “Clark, I love Lara and I know we haven’t been dating that long, but I know she’s the woman for me.” He paused to take a deep breath, then plunged in. “Clark, I want to ask Lara to marry me and I’d like your blessing.” Ken looked at Clark who was, at first, caught off guard then he smiled and the tension Ken felt eased immediately.

“Wow. That’s not what I expected when you called, not at all, but I appreciate you asking me. Yes. I’m honored to give you my blessing.”

Ken’s face lit up in a smile that was almost as radiant as Clark’s megawatt smile and he shook Clark’s hand enthusiastically.

“Thanks, Clark. Thanks very much. I’ll take good care of her, I promise!” Ken sat back against the couch, more relaxed than he’d been since Clark had entered the apartment.

“I know you will. I can tell you love her very much, as she does you. Lara may be invulnerable on the outside but she’s a very sensitive woman. She’ll need your support when a rescue goes badly. She tends to obsess, like me, I’ll admit, and she’s going to need you to remind her that what she can do is enough. We can’t save everyone, no matter how much we wish it were so.”

Ken listened to Clark’s advice and took it to heart. While Lara would always be the physically superior being in their marriage, he would play an equally important part. It would be his job to protect her fragile heart and support her in all she did.

“Thanks, Clark, I never realized how a rescue could affect her. She always seems so strong, emotionally I mean. Of course, since we’ve been dating there haven’t been that many rescues for her, at least as far as the news has reported. I’m glad you told me

so that I can give her the support she'll need."

Ken and Clark chatted for a while longer and they had another beer in the process. Clark even used his super-breath to cool the mugs.

"I should be going, Ken. I need to do a patrol," Clark said as he rose from the couch a half-hour later. "Thanks for the beer." They shook hands then Clark headed out. Moments later Ken heard a whoosh as his future father-in-law took off.

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Clark Kent walked down the sidewalk from Ken's apartment to the darkened alley where he'd landed earlier. In the darkness, he scanned the area then he spun into the suit and leaped into the sky. Once above the city lights, he headed east, towards Metropolis. Mere moments later Superman landed on Lois Lane's balcony and tapped lightly on her door.

"Superman! Please come in," Lois said. She seemed pleased at his unexpected arrival.

"Thanks, Lois." Clark spun out of his suit then joined Lois on the couch.

"Would you like some coffee? Do you have time?" Lois said. She was halfway to the kitchen before he had a chance to answer.

"Coffee would be lovely, Lois, thanks." Clark relaxed on the couch while Lois rattled around her kitchen. She returned with a carafe of coffee, mugs, cream, and sugar on a tray. She set the tray on the table and before she could even sit Clark was handing her a cup made exactly the way she liked it.

"You remembered how I like my coffee after all these years," she said after she took a sip of the hot, dark brew.

"I remember a lot of things about you, Lois, that's just one of them," Clark replied seriously. Their eyes locked for a moment before Lois lowered hers with a sigh.

"Clark, I'm not complaining, quite the contrary. I'm glad you dropped by but I get the feeling this is not a just social call," Lois said with her mug in her lap.

"There's no fooling you is there?" Clark said. He gazed at her, thinking how beautiful and smart she was.

"Nope, now spill."

"You remember Lara talking about her boyfriend, Ken?"

"Yes, from her description he's a very nice man. Are you here to tell me he's not?" Lois asked, skeptically.

"No! Nothing like that. Ken called me tonight and asked me to drop by his place." Clark paused and took another sip of his coffee.

"Sounds interesting," Lois said.

"He told me he wants to ask Lara to marry him and he asked for my blessing," Clark said, softly his eyes meeting hers. "I thought you should know and I wanted to tell you myself." Lois sat back, her eyes grew moist and her lower lip trembled.

"Our baby is getting married," she said tremulously. Clark reached out and grasped her hand. Lois gazed into his eyes and swallowed to clear her throat. "Thanks for telling me."

"He's a good man and I know he loves her. If I had to pick a man for her to marry, I couldn't have picked a better one. Though if I'm honest I wish she were still my little girl," Clark said, choking up as well.

They sat there in silence for a few minutes, both lost in thought. Lois squared her shoulders and withdrew her hand from his and settled back into the couch.

"Ugh, my coffee's gone cold, would you warm it up for me?" Clark smiled and pulled his glasses down his nose. Moments later, steam was rising from Lois's mug and she smiled.

"You know, now that I think of it, I never questioned how my cold coffee was suddenly hot. I wonder if I suspected something, subconsciously, but didn't want to question it."

"I can't argue with that. You were always so perceptive but I wondered why you never called me on all the subconscious clues I gave you."

"I guess it doesn't matter now, anyway." Lois sighed then changed the subject. "Do you know when Ken is going to pop the question?"

"Nope, he didn't say but if I were a betting man, I'd say it would be over Christmas. Lara told me they were going to spend a few days at Christmas with his parents and they're having the whole family over. His grandparents are coming in from Arizona as well. I think that would be the perfect time to ask her to marry him."

"It sounds so romantic. I wish I could be there to see it," she said wistfully.

"Maybe they'll have a video going. I'll have to ask Ken about it," Clark said as he made a mental note to speak to Ken at his first opportunity.

Clark finished his coffee then he stood up in preparation to leave.

"Well, I should be going, I have to finish my patrol. I'll let you know more about the wedding when I find out, that is if Lara doesn't tell you first." Clark spun into the suit and walked to the sliding doors.

"Thanks for stopping by, have a good patrol." Lois joined him at the door. Clark glanced around to see that no one was watching then he leaned in and kissed Lois lightly on the cheek.

"Bye, Lois." Superman rose slowly off the balcony then, in a blue and red streak, disappeared into the night.

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Soon after Lara and Ken had declared their love, she'd found a website that allowed her to hear Cook County police and fire department calls. She had an old laptop of her dad's set up to run in the background with the volume so low she needed her superhearing to hear it. Lara had vowed to protect Ken as much as she could so having this option worked well for her. It also made it easier for her to react to local emergencies as well.

One evening when Ken was out with his brother, Dave, Lara was lounging around after work. She was just about to head to bed when a call came in on the fire department frequency. There was a house fire in the Back of the Yards neighborhood that was already fully engulfed. Lara spun into her suit and was in the air headed for the location in moments. She saw the telltale glow and heard the sirens as they made their way to the site. She arrived to find a single-story home ablaze with flames licking out of all the windows. Lara landed beside the fire chief.

"What can I do to help, sir?"

"Superwoman! There may be a child still in the building. Can you check, please?" Lara nodded and rose into the sky over the home, scanning carefully for any sign of a child. The flames were so intense that they interfered with her x-ray vision to such a degree that she had to move closer to the building as the flames licked all around her. Just when she was about to start her third scan, she saw the child. Lara flew into the window closest to the child who turned out to be a boy between ten and twelve years old. The boy was hiding in a closet near, from what she could determine, the source of the fire. The remains of a mattress with a cigarette lighter near it was on the floor. Lara scooped him up in her arms as carefully as she could since she could see that he had burns to his right hand, chest, and both legs. She wrapped him in her cape, zipped out the window then she landed next to a Chicago Fire Department ambulance that was standing at the ready.

"He has burns to his right hand, chest, and both legs." Superwoman said to the EMT's as she laid him on the gurney. The EMT's sprang into action, put an oxygen mask on the boy, and got fluids started. The doors closed and the ambulance roared away, leaving Superwoman standing alone. Now that the boy was on the way to the hospital, Lara turned to assist the firefighters in their efforts. She used her freezing breath to extinguish the flames although the home itself was a total loss, so Lara and the firefighters worked tirelessly to protect the homes on either side of

the building they were working on.

Even with Superwoman's help, there was damage to both homes on either side and the subject home was a total loss. Everyone was exhausted and dismayed that the outcome hadn't been more positive.

With a heavy heart, Lara said, "Excuse me, Chief? Could you tell me what hospital that little boy is in? I'd like to check up on him."

"He was taken to Children's Hospital, at least that's what I was told."

"Thanks. If there's nothing else?"

"Nope, you've been a great help, Superwoman." He clapped her on the shoulder in support. "Take care, huh, you did your best you know." With a nod of her head, she lifted off and turned east. The hospital was near the site of the fire so Lara landed at the entrance seconds later. The Emergency Room doors opened and she walked over to the admitting desk. People in the room looked agog at the famous superhero in their hospital.

"Hello, Superwoman, how may I help you?" Cathy, the nurse at the front desk asked politely.

"I'm looking for a young boy who was brought here for burn treatment. I... I found him in the fire and I was wondering how he's doing?" Lara asked, her voice trembling. She looked and sounded more like Lara Kent than a superhero.

"Ummm, I'm sorry, Superwoman, unless you are family, I can't release any information," Cathy replied kindly but regretfully.

"Please? I just want to know how he's doing. I don't want any personal information. I just need to know if he's okay," Lara begged, her eyes pleading. Her body language screamed despair and concern for the little boy she'd saved.

"All right. I'm sure the hospital can make an exception for you. The boy is resting comfortably but his condition is listed as critical," she said. Lara's face fell and tears slipped from the edge of her mask.

"Oh, that poor boy," Lara gasped. She shook her head to regain some composure and swallowed noisily. "Thank you, Cathy, thank you very much." Lara turned and walked out of the Emergency Room with her shoulders slumped. She took off toward her apartment, landing on her balcony. The empty apartment offered no comfort so she knew that she'd have to seek comfort elsewhere. Flannel pajamas and some clean underwear were all she'd need so she stuffed them into a gym bag. She exited the bedroom and locked the door behind her. In moments she landed next to Ken's apartment building, spun into her regular clothes, and walked slowly into the building to knock on his door.

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"Lara? Honey, what's the matter?" Ken asked as he took in the dejected body language of his girlfriend. He ushered her into the living room and drew her into his arms.

"Oh, Ken, it's so sad. That poor little boy!" Lara cried. She dropped her bag on the floor and buried her face in his strong, welcoming chest.

"What little boy? What happened, honey?" Ken said softly as he hugged her tightly.

"There... there was a fire, in a house... everyone got out except for a little boy about ten or so. I... I found him... hiding in a closet... it looked like he may have been playing with a lighter and accidentally set the house on fire. His right hand, both legs, and his chest were burned and... and... he's in critical condition!" Lara cried, sobbing uncontrollably.

Ken led her to his couch where he drew her onto his lap and guided her head into the crook of his neck. He lay supportive kisses on top of her head and held her while she cried and cried, for the little boy and for her inability to save him. Clark's words from a few weeks ago came to him as he held her tightly. Lara's body may be invulnerable but her heart certainly was not.

"Honey, I know you want to save everyone but you can't. You're just one person, a very strong, very fast person, but even so, you can only do so much. I love that you care about people and that you care when they get hurt but I'm sure you did everything you could, right?"

"Y-y-yes," she sobbed, "but it wasn't enough! I wasn't enough!" Lara wailed, setting off another round of sobbing. Ken held her tightly, kissed the top of her head, and rubbed her back supportively. This experience had affected her very deeply, probably because the injured person was an innocent child. Ken's heart ached for her and her fragile heart. While he couldn't take away her pain, he could provide the love and support she needed to deal with this and future incidents where she considered herself a failure.

"Lara, baby, you are the best person I know. Your caring heart is what makes me love you even more. But, honey, you can't take the blame for this child's injuries. Your efforts probably saved his life! If not for you that child might have died tonight. Yes, he's going to have a long road back to health but I'm very sure that his parents are grateful to you for saving their boy." Ken hoped his words would get through to her but he knew that his sensitive girlfriend would always take the weight of the world onto her shoulders.

They held each other for untold minutes until Lara's sobs finally abated. She raised her face to his, her eyes red from crying, her nose running as well. Ken reached into his pocket and handed her his handkerchief. Lara wiped her eyes and blew her nose then she looked into his eyes.

"Can I stay here tonight?" Lara asked pitifully.

"Of course! You know you're welcome any time. Let me get some bedding and you can take my bed and I'll sleep here," Ken said. He was pleased to see that she seemed to be feeling better.

"Umm, would it be okay if I slept with you? I... ummm want you to hold me," Lara said softly, her eyes locked with his.

"If that's what you need, sure, come on. It's late and both of us could use some sleep." Lara climbed off Ken's lap and grabbed her bag. He led her into his bedroom and directed her to his bathroom.

"Why don't you get changed?"

Lara took her bag and entered the bathroom. Ken pulled the covers down then grabbed some pajama bottoms from his drawer. He usually slept in his underwear but tonight he'd wear pajama bottoms. The door opened and Lara entered the room. She wore a pair of flannel pajamas and looked for all the world like a little girl who had just woken up from a nightmare.

"You climb into bed and I'll be right back." Ken quickly washed his face, brushed his teeth, and threw on his pajama bottoms. He opened the door to find Lara already in bed with the covers pulled up to her chin. He drew back the covers and slid into bed next to her.

Ken drew her into his arms and snuggled up to her spoon fashion. Lara made one loud sigh and almost immediately fell asleep. Ken listened to her soft steady breathing while she slept. He sighed to himself, pleased that, even under the circumstances, he was able to fall asleep with the woman he loved in his arms.

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### Chapter Twenty-Two—Christmas Preparations

Lara woke to the sun shining in through a strange window. For a moment she didn't know where she was then she felt a pair of strong arms encircling her, holding her to a broad, muscular chest. She smiled happily, then she remembered why she was here and she grew sad once more. Lara pondered the events of the night before. She'd felt devastated for the injured little boy and had needed the support of her boyfriend. Ken had held her while she cried and he told her that, even though there were injuries she'd done her best and no one could have done better. She knew he was right, but at the time she'd felt like such a failure. Lara

remembered her father feeling the same way when a rescue went bad and he, unlike her, had no one to hold him and tell him he'd done his best. Lara felt bad for her father, the most wonderful, caring man in the world, who had no one to love him.

"Good morning, Lara, did you sleep well?" Ken whispered in her ear and hugged her tightly once he realized she was awake.

"Good morning. Yes, considering, I slept very well. I know being with you helped immensely. When I was in college, I helped Dad with tornado clean up before I went public. I had nightmares for weeks after. Last night I didn't have any and I owe it all to you. Thank you for being there for me," Lara said sincerely.

"I'll always be here for you and I'll remind you that you did your best and what you can do is enough every time you need it."

"What time is it?" Lara asked.

"About 6:30, it's early yet. Can you stay for breakfast?"

"Yeah, I'd like that," Lara said as she turned over to face him. Ken gazed at her lovingly then he leaned in, closed his eyes and their lips met. Before their kiss could get out of hand Ken drew back with a very pleased smile on his face.

"Now, that's the way I want to wake up!" he exclaimed.

"Why don't you take a shower and I'll start the coffee?" Ken hopped out of bed and Lara surreptitiously admired Ken's body as he headed towards the kitchen. She picked up her bag and padded to the bathroom where she hopped into the steamy shower and let the water rinse the last of her fears down the drain. Showering at human pace, Lara luxuriated in the steamy shower until Ken called out that the coffee was ready.

"Be right out!" she replied. She dried off at super speed then dressed. Her hair was still damp but it would dry soon enough. When she opened the door Ken was there with a mug of coffee fixed just the way she liked it.

"It's not as good as yours, of course, but it is hot. I'll meet you in the kitchen when I'm done." Ken passed Lara on his way into the bathroom and placed a quick kiss on her cheek. Lara smiled happily and made her way into the kitchen. As she sat at the table sipping her coffee, she mused on how domestic this situation was. She imagined herself waking up in her husband's arms, making breakfast with him then coming home to him in the evening. He'd be there for her when she needed it after a tough rescue, like last night. Ken interrupted Lara's thoughts when he walked into the kitchen, dressed in jeans, his shirt partially unbuttoned as he dried his hair with the towel.

"Hey you, what are you thinking about?" he asked as he made his way to the refrigerator.

"Oh just how much I love you," Lara said as she gazed into his eyes. Ken's smile grew wider with pleasure.

"And I love you too, Lara, so very much," he said and cupped her cheek. "I was thinking omelets, okay?"

"Omelets sound good but I can make them." Lara started to get up but he stopped her.

"Nope, my place, I cook. What do you want in yours? I have ham, onion, red pepper, spinach, and a couple of kinds of cheese as well."

"A Denver omelet sounds good. You sure you don't want me to help?"

"Nope, I got it. You just sit there and relax." Ken pulled out a bowl, some eggs, and the fixings for a Denver omelet. "You want cheese in yours?"

"Yes, please, cheddar if you have it."

"Cheddar it is." Ken returned to cooking which allowed Lara to watch him work. He may not be a gourmet chef but he knew his way around a kitchen, which was nice. She found herself dreaming about mornings like this after they were married. Lara stopped, realizing that while they both had pledged their love neither of them had discussed marriage. She felt confident enough that someday Ken would ask her to marry him so she felt comfortable asking her next question.

"Ken, how do you feel about having children?" she asked nonchalantly.

"I love children and I want to have at least a couple when I get married. Why do you ask?" Ken replied, his back to her.

"No reason. I love children too and having a couple of them sounds nice. Being an only child I always missed having a sibling to share childhood with."

"Having siblings isn't all it's cracked up to be. My brothers and I had some real battles when we were young but, through all that, there's nothing we wouldn't do for each other, within reason of course," he finished with a laugh. While the eggs were cooking, he'd put toast in the toaster and set the table. When everything was ready, he plated their omelets and put the toast on a plate next to the butter and jelly. After he topped up their coffee he sat down to eat.

"Umm, this is good! I never knew you could cook," Lara said in between bites.

"I'm a man of many talents," he said enigmatically, grinning at her.

"I'm beginning to realize that. Thanks for being there for me last night. I know I'd have been up all night or have nightmares if it wasn't for you."

"Like I said last night, I'm here for you, Lara, whenever you need me. I love you and being there to support you is part of how I express that love." Lara reached out to grasp his hand and squeezed his fingers lovingly. They ate the remainder of their breakfast in companionable silence then Lara helped clean up the kitchen and got the dishwasher going. She walked into the bedroom and grabbed her overnight bag.

"I need to go home and change before work but I'll see you tonight, right?"

"Yes, I'll be over around six-thirty." Ken drew Lara into his arms and kissed her goodbye. "Have a good day at work and try not to think too much about last night, okay?" Lara nodded, kissing him again quickly before she headed out.

Since it was still early, she decided to walk home, arriving there fifteen minutes later. In her bedroom, Lara changed into her work clothes, ran a brush through her hair then she headed out to catch the "L" for the ride to work.

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Before leaving for work, Ken pulled up his email and found a message from his mother. Attached to the email was a JPG file which he opened. The picture was of his great-grandmother's ring. It was beautiful, elegant, and classic. The stone looked to be one karat in a four-prong, white gold setting. It looked perfect! He picked up his phone and dialed his mother.

"Hi, Mom, I got the picture."

"Oh, good, did you like it? I took the ring to a jeweler to have it cleaned and inspected. He was very impressed with the stone. He said it was nearly flawless and one karat in size. It's a beautiful ring. Do you think Lara will like it?"

"I think she'll love it, especially when she finds out it's great-grandma's ring. She's very close to her family and I'm sure the connection will mean a lot. Could you do me a favor? Could you find a nice box and wrap it for me?"

"Already done!" Lydia said. "I had a feeling you'd want it so I had the jeweler wrap it for me before I left the shop."

"Thanks, Mom, you're the best! I've got to get to work so I'll talk to you later. Thanks again, Mom, love you!"

"Love you too, honey. Have a good day at work."

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When Lara entered the bullpen that morning, she immediately fired up her computer to write up the story of the house fire from the night before from her unique perspective. She even went so far as to add a Superwoman quote, something she rarely did. She also mentioned to her readers that they could contribute to a GoFundMe page that had been set up for the family to help defray

the medical bills for the little boy. With a satisfied sigh Lara sent her story to her editor then she began her normal day.

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Christmas was fast approaching. In preparation for the trip Ken had purchased the tickets to Florida right after Thanksgiving. They would be flying out of Milwaukee Mitchell International Airport to avoid the crowds at O'Hare. They planned to drive to Milwaukee, leaving on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and returning on the 27<sup>th</sup>, again to avoid busy times at both airports as much as possible.

"I don't see why I can't fly us down like I did before," Lara grouched one evening a few days before they were to leave.

"We've discussed this, honey. Last time we stayed for a day and a half, this time we're going to be there for five full days. We're going to have a lot more luggage and Christmas presents besides. Also, my mom and dad noticed that we didn't have a cab pick us up at the house. We don't want to draw too much attention to ourselves, right?" Ken replied, frustrated. They'd had the same 'discussion' at least twice in the last couple of days.

"I know, but I *really* hate flying," Lara said with a pout.

Ken laughed out loud at that. "*You* hate flying?"

"Yes, when I'm trapping in a metal tube 30,000 feet in the air for over two hours with someone else in control! You *know* I can get us there in five minutes, tops!" Lara replied with a growl.

"I'm sorry, Lara but this time we're going to fly the way 'normal' people do."

"I never said I wanted to be normal, that's Dad's hang-up," Lara said with a grin, surrendering to the inevitable.

"You know I love flying with you, but for this trip, we need to do this the old-fashioned way." Ken drew Lara into his arms and held her lovingly. His lips claimed hers and, for the time being, at least, the discussion of travel plans ended.

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Early on December 23<sup>rd</sup> Ken pulled up in front of Lara's apartment. He almost ran up the stairs and knocked on her door moments later.

"Good morning!" Lara said, kissing Ken quickly as she pulled him into the apartment. "I'm all ready." Ken glanced behind her seeing two large suitcases on the floor.

"Do you think you left anything in the apartment?" Ken said sarcastically, glancing at the luggage behind her.

"Don't you start. You told me we were going to be there for five days so I packed for that. Besides, there are presents in there too," Lara said mock hurt. Ken grabbed the bags while Lara put on her coat and locked her door. He piled Lara's bags into the back of his Honda beside his suitcase and they headed out.

The drive to Milwaukee was an easy hour drive north on I-94. They pulled into long term parking then hopped on the shuttle to the terminal. The security lines at the TSA check-in weren't too bad and they were soon at their gate.

The flight, though too long for Lara, was uneventful. They arrived at Southwest Florida International Airport on time, got their rental car, and were soon on their way to their hotel, the Travelodge, which was close to Charles and Lydia's home. Ken had reserved separate rooms next door to each other with a connecting door. They unpacked quickly then grabbed the presents and they were out the door again. When they arrived at the McCarthy home, Lydia opened the door.

"Ken, Lara, it's so good to see you! Merry Christmas! Come in, come in," Lydia said ushering them into the house.

"Merry Christmas, Mom," Ken said and he kissed his mother on the cheek.

"Merry Christmas, Lydia," Lara said, hugging the older woman, "Your house looks so festive!"

"Thank you, dear. I don't know if I'll ever get used to decorating palm trees but it sure beats shoveling snow!" Lydia said with a chuckle.

"Where's Dad?" Ken asked.

"He's at the airport. He's picking up your grandparents," Lydia said.

"You should have said something, Mom. We were just there, we could have picked Grandma and Grandpa up," Ken replied.

"We didn't want to take a chance that the weather up north would delay you so Dad planned to pick them up," Lydia said.

"Yeah, makes sense, I guess. So is everyone in yet?"

"Not yet. Dave and Amy arrive early this afternoon and Ted and Audrey early tonight. Why don't we sit down and relax after your long flight?"

Ken and Lara settled into the living room and had refreshments while they waited for the rest of the family to arrive. Lara was slightly nervous. This would be her first time meeting Ken's extended family but she soon relaxed and enjoyed the family atmosphere as more of the McCarthy clan arrived.

When Charles returned with his parents, Ken introduced Lara to the eldest members of the family.

"Lara, these are my grandparents, Michael and Mary. Grandpa, Grandma, this is my girlfriend, Lara," Ken said proudly, his arm around Lara's shoulders.

"I'm so pleased to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. McCarthy," Lara said politely, her version of the megawatt smile lighting up her face.

"Please, call us Michael and Mary if you would, dear," Mary said opening her arms to gather Lara into a hug. Lara hugged Mary then did the same with Michael.

"Kenny told us you were pretty but he didn't say how beautiful you are. You holding out on us, Kenny?" Michael said with a chuckle. Ken had the grace to blush though his chest puffed out a little more.

"Thanks a lot, Grandpa," Ken said, embarrassed. Lara also blushed prettily and she wrapped her arm around Ken's waist, smiling at the compliment.

"Since everyone isn't due until later why don't we have some lunch while we wait?" Charles said.

Lara, Mary, and Lydia headed to the kitchen to put together sandwiches while the guys headed out to the back yard and set up the table in preparation for the meal. A few moments later, the ladies joined them with trays of meats, bread, condiments, and drinks. After the meal everyone sat outside, enjoying the warm pleasant weather. Around 3:00 p.m. Dave and Amy arrived and Lara met the new arrivals.

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"You've done very well for yourself, Bro," Dave said to Ken later that day. "How did an ugly SOB like you land a beautiful woman like Lara?" Dave chided his little brother.

"Clean living and getting my leg broken on the job," Ken said with a smirk.

"Huh?"

"I met Lara when I broke my leg and she interviewed me for her article. It was love at first sight," Ken sighed, remembering their first meeting.

"Well however it happened, you're a lucky guy. Lara seems to be as beautiful a person on the inside as she is on the outside."

"Thanks, she is. By the way, did Mom tell you about my 'surprise'?"

"Yeah, mums the word. I can't wait to see her face," Dave said conspiratorially.

"Me too, Dave, me too. Oh by the way, would you record the proposal? Lara's dad asked if we could do that for him."

"Sure thing, leave it to me."

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### Chapter Twenty-Three—Christmas!

Ted and Audrey arrived late that evening, having run into a delay at their airport. They called to let everyone know they had arrived but would not be stopping over that evening. The family planned to meet at Bennett's Fresh Roast, the most popular

breakfast spot in the city, the next morning. Upon their arrival at the restaurant, Lara finally got to meet Ken's younger brother, Ted, and his wife Audrey. Lara took an immediate liking to Audrey who was her age, 23 and had been married to Ted for just over a year. Amy, Audrey, and Lara grew very close over the next few days as they enjoyed each other's company immensely.

Christmas Day dawned clear and sunny, with temperatures in the low 70s. The family met at Charles and Lydia's for breakfast, buffet style. Lydia had set up the various dishes on the large dining room table where everyone dug in and talked while they ate. After breakfast, everyone moved to the living room where they sat around the tree.

Lydia handed out gifts and over the next hour and everyone expressed delight with their presents. The last present Lydia pulled out was a small square box wrapped in expensive-looking paper topped with an extravagant bow.

"Lara, this one's for you," Lydia said with a knowing smile.

"Hmm, what a pretty bow, I wonder what could be inside?" Lara mused. She removed the bow carefully and pulled at the corners of the paper to reveal a burgundy velvet box. With shaking hands, she opened it to find a beautiful diamond solitaire ring!

Ken, who had been sitting beside her, dropped to one knee in front of her and grasped her shaking hand.

"Lara, I've loved you ever since we met and I can't imagine not having you in my life. Will you marry me?" Ken said, his eyes locked onto hers.

Lara's eyes welled up with tears and her lips widened into a smile that outshone that of her father.

"Yes! Oh, Ken, yes, I'll marry you!" Lara exclaimed to the applause of the assembled McCarthy family. Ken drew the ring out of the box and slid it slowly up the third finger of her left hand. It fit perfectly. Ken drew his fiancée into his arms and kissed her deeply. When the wolf whistles and catcalls grew too enthusiastic Ken broke the kiss looking at his family proudly.

"Ken, honey, where did you find this ring? It's perfect!" Lara exclaimed proudly showing off her ring to everyone.

"I didn't buy it. It's my great-grandmother Charlene's ring. Mom has been saving it all these years and when I saw it, I knew you would love it."

"Your great-grandmother's ring? I love it and I love you for giving it to me. Thank you, everyone, for sharing this family heirloom with me," Lara said humbly.

"I'm so glad you like it, dear. Grandma Charlene would be proud to know that you love it too," Lydia said. She drew her future daughter-in-law into her arms for a fierce hug. Everyone congratulated the young couple with hugs for Lara and hearty, backslapping hugs for Ken by the guys and kisses from the ladies. More than once Lara had to make sure her feet were still on the floor throughout the day, so proud and happy was she.

Later that day Mary drew Lara aside. "I'm so glad you like my mother's ring, dear. When Mom passed, she told me to give it to Lydia for one of her sons to give to his bride. Seeing it on your finger and seeing how happy it makes you, I'm sure my mother would be proud that you're wearing her ring."

"Thank you, Mary. It's beautiful and just my style. Ken and I used to check out the jewelry stores on Michigan Avenue and I always gravitated to the diamond solitaires. They look so elegant and classic compared to the newer styles that, to me, look too gaudy."

"I agree, dear. I can tell that you and Kenny are made for each other, the way you look at each other across the room warms my heart."

"You know, I wasn't looking for someone when we met, but now I can't imagine myself without him in my life," Lara replied dreamily. "I can't wait until we're married and thanks again for letting me have your mother's ring." Mary kissed Lara on the

cheek and gave her a big hug and the two of them rejoined the group.

After dinner, they chose teams chosen for a Pictionary tournament with the winning distributed evenly between the teams. It was after midnight when the party broke up and they decided to meet at Bennett's again for breakfast at 9:00 a.m.

Lara and Ken returned to their hotel holding hands on the way to Ken's room. When the door closed Ken drew Lara into his arms and kissed her deeply. Lara responded to his kiss with passion such that when the kiss ended, both were gasping for breath.

"God, Lara, what you do to me," Ken said as his chest heaved.

"The same as you do to me, I suspect," Lara replied, her body alive with desire.

"Honey, as much as I might want to go further, I know we're not ready, so we need to slow this down, okay?" Lara nodded, reluctantly.

"Ken, honey, would you mind if we flew to Smallville in the morning to tell my family about us?"

"Hey, that's a great idea! Your folks are early risers so we can see them before breakfast." Ken yawned just then which showed just how tired he was.

"You get to bed and I'll see you at 6 o'clock, okay?" Lara gave Ken a quick but passionate kiss then headed down the hall to her room. Lara undressed quickly and hopped in bed but she couldn't sleep so she dressed again and walked out the back door to the parking lot. After a glance around she shot into the sky, a silent black blur. Higher and higher she rose until no sounds from below penetrated then she turned onto her back to gaze at the stars as she floated aimlessly where the winds moved her, lost in her thoughts.

She'd been so surprised when Ken had proposed! Granted, she knew, as soulmates, that someday he would ask to marry her but she wasn't expecting a proposal so soon as they had only been dating three months. Now they could start their married life that much sooner. Lara planned to ask Ken to set a date, then she'd enlist her new in-laws and her family to assist. With so many hands she was sure the wedding would come together quickly.

Lara looked at the ring on her finger for about the hundredth time. The setting was beautiful and it looked wonderful on her hand. Lara planned to ask her grandmother for ideas on where she could put her ring during future rescues as it would not do to have the press and the public speculate on Superwoman's engagement. It pleased Lara greatly that Ken had thought so much of her to give her his great-grandmother's ring. It was such a humbling act, giving her something that had so much sentimental value for Ken and his family. If she hadn't been sure they accepted her, she certainly was now.

After a couple of hours, Lara felt more relaxed and able to sleep. It was a good thing she didn't need more than three hours of sleep a night as it was almost three a.m. now. Lara slowly flew back to the hotel to zip down where she landed behind some bushes. Once in her room, she extended her hearing next door so she could hear Ken's deep even breathing. She spun into her pajamas and was asleep in moments.

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Lara knocked on the connecting door precisely at 6:00 a.m. Her fiancé opened the door wearing a crisp blue dress shirt with dark blue Dockers, freshly shaved, and smelling wonderful.

"Good morning, beautiful," Ken said as he drew Lara in for a quick kiss. Lara returned the kiss enthusiastically but she withdrew quickly since they needed to get going.

"Are you ready?" Lara asked.

"Yep, just let me get my coat, it's cold in Kansas this morning. The weather channel said the high for today was going to be minus 10 degrees!"

Ken grabbed his coat from the closet and draped it over his shoulder. The couple walked to the rear parking lot where Lara did a quick scan, spun into her suit and they took off. Lara flew as fast as she dared while carrying a passenger, so it was less than five minutes later that the white farmhouse came into view. She hovered for a moment, then she zipped down to land on the back porch. With a quick knock on the door, she opened it to find her family at the table ready to start their day.

“Lara! Ken! It’s good to see you! Merry Christmas!” Clark said when the couple entered the kitchen. “What brings you here so early?”

Lara broke into a wide grin and her smile lit up the room. She raised her left hand and wiggled her fingers.

“We’re getting married!” Lara exclaimed. The Kents swarmed the couple with hugs, kisses, and congratulations, along with a few happy tears. Martha herded everyone to the table where she poured coffee along with fresh cinnamon rolls, frosted with vanilla icing, already on the table.

“That’s a beautiful ring, Ken, where did you get it?” Martha asked as she held Lara’s hand.

“It’s my great-grandmother’s ring. When mom showed it to me, I knew it was perfect for Lara. It even fits perfectly, it’s as if it was made for her.”

Lara blushed and gazed into Ken’s eyes. He leaned in to give her a quick kiss.

“When did you propose, Ken, and have you guys set a date?” Clark asked.

“I proposed Christmas morning, in front of my whole family but we haven’t talked about a date yet. Oh, that reminds me, my brother recorded a video of the proposal. He’ll send it to you once he gets back home, Clark.” Ken turned to his fiancée. “Do you have any preferences, honey?”

“I’ve given it some thought and I was thinking mid-June. Does that sound good?”

“Yeah, a June wedding would be great,” Ken replied.

“Grandma, would you help me plan the wedding? I’m going to ask Ken’s family for help too, of course.”

“I’d love to help!” Martha exclaimed. “This is going to be so much fun!”

“Oh, Grandma, I’d also like to discuss what we can do to modify my suits so I have a place to put my ring,” Lara said.

“Let me think about it and I can have some ideas for you next week,” Martha replied.

“Thanks, Grandma. That’s perfect.”

They discussed wedding details for another hour then it was time for Lara and Ken to meet his family at the restaurant.

“Bye, Dad, Grandma, Grandpa,” Lara said. She kissed her family goodbye and Ken hugged everyone too, then they all stepped out onto the porch. Lara stepped back, spun into her suit, then they rose slowly off the porch and with a wave, disappeared into the cold morning sky.

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Lara landed behind the trash dumpster enclosure, then the two of them hopped into their car for the drive to the restaurant. They arrived a few minutes after 9 o’clock and made their way to a large table.

“Good morning everyone,” Lara said as she and Ken sat down just as the waitress was taking drinks orders. Ted and Audrey arrived a few minutes later completing the family group. The main topic of conversation that morning was the engagement and the setting of a date for the wedding, June 15<sup>th</sup>. Since both Lara and Ken lived in Illinois and his brothers lived in neighboring states, they decided to have the wedding in Illinois.

Lara asked her future in-laws for their help so that by the time breakfast ended, Lara felt excited and calm at the same time. She knew with all the help on offer, everything would be great.

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The day after Christmas was a slow news day so Lois was able to go home earlier than usual. She had just placed an order for Thai takeout when there was a knock on her balcony door. She opened it and ushered her visitor into the kitchen.

“Good evening, Superman, it’s good to see you,” Lois said as she closed the door behind the superhero.

“Good evening to you too, Lois. I wasn’t sure you’d be home this early but when I flew by the *Planet* and I didn’t see you there so I came here.”

“Yeah, slow news day, I’m sure you remember those,” Lois replied and she sat on the couch. As had been his custom, Clark spun out of the suit and joined Lois on the couch.

“I just ordered dinner. If you’re hungry I can call and add to it,” Lois said hopefully.

“I could eat if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Great!” Lois grabbed her phone and called the restaurant, adding another helping of Panang curry and cashew chicken for them to share. The order would arrive within 45 minutes which would give them time to talk.

“You stopping by is getting to be a regular thing. Is there something you need to tell me?” Lois said with certainty. She gazed at Clark who had a similar grin on his face.

“I can’t fool you, can I? Yes, I do have something to tell you. Our daughter is getting married, Ken proposed Christmas Day.”

“So your prediction turned out to be spot on, huh? Too bad we didn’t bet on that, you could have made a couple of bucks.”

“It’s not fair to take advantage of a sure thing, Lois. I’d have been more surprised if he hadn’t asked her then,” Clark replied with a grin.

“So, did she call you to tell you?”

“No. They flew over early this morning before they were to meet Ken’s family for breakfast.”

“Those superpowers sure come in handy. A visit beats the heck out of a phone call, that’s for sure.”

“Yes, it gave Lara a chance to show off her ring. It was Ken’s great-grandmother’s ring. It’s elegant and it fit without any adjustment and, of course, she loves it.”

“That’s so wonderful. Ken’s family must love her to give her an heirloom like that.”

“They do. From what Lara told me she feels like she’s known them forever.”

“I’m glad. It makes marriage much easier when the family accepts the new member enthusiastically. I’m kind of glad I never got married. My parents would have been the in-laws from hell!” Lois laughed but there was a tinge of sadness there too.

Clark laughed along with her though inside he was thinking that he wished he’d had the opportunity to find out.

“I hope you don’t think I’m interfering, but did you ever tell your parents about Lara?” Clark asked carefully.

“Yes and no. I told them I was pregnant, of course, but I told them the father was an old boyfriend who was only in town for a conference. I told them I was not keeping the baby but was giving it up for adoption. That’s all they know. Why do you ask?”

“You saw how happy she was at Thanksgiving, being with Lucy and her family and you, of course. I think she might like to at least meet her other grandparents, that’s all. It’s completely up to you though.” Clark added quickly. “I’m sure this will cause issues with them, your mother for sure, I bet.”

“Yeah, probably. You think she’d like to meet them?” Lois asked skeptically. “They haven’t changed much in twenty years. They can barely be in the same room together for more than an hour without fighting.”

“Please think about it. I’m pretty sure Lara would like to meet them, at least once. Then she can make up her mind about having a relationship.”

“I’ll think about it, but no promises!” Just then the doorbell rang signaling their meal had arrived. Lois rose from the couch

and paid the delivery boy while Clark grabbed plates, silverware, and drinks and brought them to the coffee table.

“How did you...? Oh, right, x-ray vision,” Lois said upon seeing the plates on the table.

“I hope you don’t mind...?”

“No! Not at all, let’s eat.” Lois pulled the hot containers out of the bag and set them on the table. They dug in, and delicious smells filled the room.

“Hey, this is good. Is this a new place?” Clark asked between bites of Panang curry.

“Yes, it just opened at the beginning of the year, it’s called Jimmy Thai. It’s my new go-to Thai place.” They ate with minimal breaks for conversation in between bites of the delicious food. When all the cartons were empty Clark grabbed everything and crushed it down, then he dumped it in the trash.

“I’ve had a wonderful time, Lois, thanks for sharing your dinner with me,” Clark said as he rose and spun into the suit.

“Thanks for keeping me informed about Lara. Dinner was fun, we should do it again sometime.” Lois smiled when Clark nodded in agreement. She slid the patio door open to allow Superman to exit. Clark leaned down and kissed her cheek quickly, he was gone, faster than the eye could follow.

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#### Chapter Twenty-Four— A Problem and Solution

Christmas with Ken’s family passed way too quickly for all concerned. It was with some sadness and with plans for further collaboration on wedding plans that everyone said goodbye before they returned to their respective homes. The flight back to Milwaukee was more crowded than on the way down but, thankfully, there were no problems due to weather. Once they had their luggage, Ken and Lara walked to the shuttle that took them to their car. With their bags in the trunk moments later, they were on the highway headed back to Chicago. Once they were safely on the road, Lara took Ken’s hand and interlaced their fingers. She turned the radio on softly which added to the cozy atmosphere in the car. They were driving along in companionable silence when the song *When You Love Someone* came on.

“Oh, Ken, I love this song!” Lara said and laid her head on Ken’s shoulder. The words of the song flowed over them and touched their hearts. When the song was over Ken turned to Lara and his eyes shone with love.

“You’re right, it is beautiful and it does seem to describe how we feel about each other. I especially like the flying part, though I doubt Mr. Adams was thinking about you when he wrote it!” Ken chuckled.

“Honey, I want that song to be used for our first dance, what do you think?”

“It’s perfect! Well, that’s one thing to check off the wedding preparations list!” Lara leaned up to kiss Ken’s cheek then she settled against his shoulder for the rest of the trip.

It was late in the evening of the 27<sup>th</sup> that Ken dropped Lara off at her apartment.

“Good night, Lara, I’m so glad that you could come for Christmas. Be sure to thank George for me, he really did us a favor.”

“I will, he’s a great friend.” Lara leaned in and wrapped her arms around Ken’s neck to claim his lips. She tickled Ken’s lips with her tongue and he granted her entrance. After a quick swipe with his tongue, she pulled back, breathing heavily. Her eyes were dark with a mischievous grin on her face.

“Wow, that kiss is going to keep me warm all the way home!” Ken said, his hands still on her hips as he held her tight.

“Good night, Ken, I love you,” Lara said before she gave him another quick kiss.

“Good night, Lara, I love you too. See you tomorrow?”

“You bet. Night!” Lara watched as Ken walked down the hallway where she followed him with her x-ray vision until he got

into his car.

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Even though it was after 10 o’clock Lara knew her friend Sally would be up.

“Lara! It’s good to hear from you. How was your visit with Ken’s family?” Sally asked when she answered Lara’s call.

“It was wonderful. They’re all so nice, they make me feel as if I’ve known them forever. Audrey and Amy are so friendly and we got along great. But that’s not why I called.”

“Oh, do tell?” Sally replied, curiously.

“Ken proposed on Christmas Day,” Lara said excitedly, “and I want you to be my Maid of Honor. You’re my oldest and dearest friend and I can’t think of anyone else I would want more than you.”

“Of course. It would be my honor! Oh, that’s so romantic! He proposed in front of his whole family?”

“Yes. Lydia, Ken’s mom, handed me a small box that was beautifully wrapped. When I opened it, I found Ken on his knee in front of me and he asked me to marry him. Of course, I said yes! The ring is beautiful, a perfect diamond solitaire in a white gold setting. He slid it on my finger then he kissed me. I found out afterward that the ring belonged to his great-grandmother!”

“That’s so beautiful! Ken’s family must love you to give you an heirloom like that. You have to be so proud!”

“I am, and I’m humbled too, Ken’s grandmother told me that she knew her mother would be proud that I was wearing her ring.”

Sally and Lara talked well into the night after which it was too late to call Ashley, so the next night after work Lara called Ashley asking her to be her bridesmaid, which she gratefully accepted.

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Superwoman was very busy the first few weeks of January. It seemed that there was at least one house fire every night and some nights more than one. Lara was out fighting fires so much that month that she and Ken were unable to get much alone time together. The only time he saw her was when she became overwhelmed with guilt for not saving everyone and she spent those nights in his bed.

Lara much preferred sleeping in Ken’s arms even if their sharing of the bed was purely platonic. The situation made Lara think about their coming wedding and the honeymoon night when she could, at last, be intimate with her new husband.

Being intimate brought with it another potential issue though. Lara, being a female Kryptonian and a virgin, had no idea if there might be problems that first night. She pondered asking her father, he being the only other Kryptonian on Earth, but she discarded that idea quickly. It would be too embarrassing to talk to her father about her situation. It was bad enough when he’d given her ‘the talk’ when she was twelve! She also considered the globe, but again she rejected that idea as being too impersonal and probably not very helpful anyway. Lara was about to ask her grandmother when she thought about Lois. Lois was, as much as anyone, an impartial observer who might have some ideas that could prove useful. With that in mind Lara opened her contacts to the entry for Lois and pressed her work number. After three rings Lois picked up.

“Lois Lane.”

“Hi, Lois, it’s me, Lara.”

“Lara! How nice to hear from you. How are you?”

“I’m well, thanks. I know you’re busy so I’ll get right to the point. Can I stop by tonight? I need some advice.”

“Of course! I should be home by 9 o’clock.”

“I can pick up some food if you want and we can eat together.”

“Hmm, sounds good. I have a craving for some good Italian.”

“Great! I know just the place,” Lara said.

“Okay, see you tonight!”

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Lara took off from her balcony headed east to Rome a little after 8:30 p.m., Metropolis time. Lara walked into the little restaurant her dad had taken her to many times over the years.

“Signorina Kent! So good to see you! Table for two?” Mrs. Rosati asked when Lara entered.

Lara hugged the older lady and replied in perfect Italian, “Not tonight, Mrs. Rosati, I need the dinner for two, to go, please.”

“Right away!” Mrs. Rosati disappeared into the kitchen and returned ten minutes later with six takeout containers filled with steaming, wonderful smelling food. “Here you go, Signorina Kent. Papa is going to be so upset that he missed you.”

Lara thanked her, paid and gave Mrs. Rosati a generous tip and then she left. Walking to a nearby alley she spun into her suit and headed back to Metropolis.

Lois’s building appeared as she entered Metropolis airspace. Her telescopic vision showed that Lois was there so she sped up. She also gave the containers a quick shot of heat vision so the food would be piping hot, then she landed softly on the balcony and knocked on the window.

“Superwoman! Please, come in.” Lois smiled warmly at her daughter. Lara stepped inside and spun into her casual clothes.

“Please set those down on the table, I’ve got everything set up.” Lois directed Lara to the kitchen where she set the cardboard containers on the table.

“My God, this smells delicious!” Lois said as she opened the containers. “And it’s still hot!”

“I gave it a quick shot of heat vision before I got here, just in case.” Lara and Lois sat down and dug into the delicious food.

“Ummm, I’ve missed this, getting food from around the world. As you know from your last visit, your father brought me food from Shanghai during our first investigation. That was before he created Superman.”

“Oh? I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah. I always pestered him to tell me where he got the food he brought but he never would and I couldn’t find any place like it in the city. Of course, once I knew his secret I knew why; the sneak had brought it from Shanghai!” They broke into companionable laughter. Lois told Lara more about the early relationship between her and Clark, which Lara found extremely interesting.

“You mean to tell me that when you first met him in costume he hadn’t decided on a name?” Lara said incredulously.

“That’s right. When I asked, he called himself, ‘a friend’,” Lois said with a chuckle. “It was *me* who named him Superman.”

“Would you mind telling me how that came about?” Lara asked expectantly between bites.

“Of course! We’d been working on the destruction of the Messenger story and once it all came together, EPRAD fixed the problem and the colonist’s shuttle was scheduled to launch in a few days. I petitioned to be allowed to go onboard and interview the colonists but that was shot down. I wasn’t about to let that stop me so I got onto the grounds at EPRAD, stole coveralls like the colonists wore and a boarding pass and I joined the colonists as they were getting on board. While they continued to the command module, I noticed there was a utility room off to the right and I went in there.

“There was a jump seat there so I sat down and just as I was buckling myself in, I heard the engines start. When I looked around the room, I saw something on the wall. Looking closer it was a digital display that was counting down resting atop a black plastic mass. I knew immediately it was a bomb and I had to do something!”

Lara’s expression showed her shock. Lois had certainly been reckless!

“I searched for something and I saw a pair of wire cutters in a tool kit and I grabbed them and began cutting wires. I guess

EPRAD noticed something was wrong with the rocket and shut down the engines, but that did nothing to stop the bomb from counting down. I was sure we were all going to die when, suddenly, this man pulled the exterior door open and ran into the room.

“I saw immediately that he was very handsome but he was dressed so weirdly. He wore what looked like an electric blue ski suit with bright red briefs on the outside and a matching cape! I stammered, “It’s a bomb!” expecting him to turn around and leave but he didn’t. He walked over to the bomb, studied it for a moment then he grabbed the explosive. I said “What are you doing?” It was then that he put the explosive in his mouth and swallowed it!”

“He did *what?!?*” Lara exclaimed, shocked. What had her father been thinking!

“He swallowed it! I thought for sure I was going to be covered in this idiot’s innards but that’s not what happened. I heard a muffled rumble then he burped and said “Excuse me.” I almost fainted with disbelief, but then we heard the colonists in the vestibule. This man walked in and I told the colonists that there had been a bomb and that he’d eaten it but I don’t think they believed me.

“There was a little girl, Amy Platt, on board. Her father was Dr. Platt who was murdered for his efforts to expose what happened to the Messenger. She and her mother were part of the crew. Anyway she saw the man and she told him that she liked his suit. He said that his mother made it and I was thinking this weirdo has a mother? Then she asked him what his name was and he said “a friend.” The leader of the mission told the colonists to begin to disembark when the man asked why. The leader said that once the engines were shut down, they had to be replaced and they would lose their launch window. We were all shocked when the man told them that he would give them a lift!

“For some reason the colonists believed him and they returned to their places. EPRAD security took me away but the man told me he’d be back and to wait for him. When we got to the observation deck, we saw this huge rocket that weighed over six million pounds slowly rise off the ground with this tiny figure beneath it. In moments it was out of sight and I had to explain to security why I was on the rocket in the first place. Twenty minutes later, I’d calmed security down enough to where they let me go. I was waiting outside when the man landed lightly in front of me. I looked him over and I couldn’t see any sign that he’d even been into space.

“Would you like a lift?” he asked, with a grin. I told him to take me to the *Daily Planet* so I could write up my story. During the flight I was so overwhelmed with the sensations of flying that I couldn’t think of a single thing to say and soon he was opening the windows into the newsroom. He floated in and set me down by my desk. I thought, at the time, that he saw my nameplate but now I know Clark knew exactly where my desk was!

“When he set me down, I finally found my voice and I told him he owed me an interview. He gave me that grin of his and said “Is that the rule?” If I’d had any working brain cells, I’d have picked up on that right away because not a day or two before I’d told Clark that I lived by three rules and that I’d broken every one of them! That sneak was flirting with me and giving me a clue as to who he really was and I totally missed it!” Lois’s expression showed her obvious chagrin.

“He turned and was about to leave when I asked him how I could find him and he said he’d be around, then he disappeared out the window. The whole newsroom stood there stunned when Cat Grant, she was the gossip columnist at the time, asked me what his name was. I was so overwhelmed I hadn’t even asked but I knew I had to come up with something. I thought for a second and remembered the S symbol on his chest and mumbled super... Superman! and Perry ran with it. The other news organizations picked it up and Superman was born!” Lois said with a flourish.

“That’s amazing!” Lara said once the story was complete. “It’s a good thing you named him. I would hate to be called Friendwoman or, God forbid, Daughter of Friend!”

Lois and Lara cracked up, laughing hysterically.

“I shudder to think of what *he* might have come up with,” Lois said. “Can you imagine? The Streak? or maybe Resplendent Man? Or, sticking with the S theme from his crest maybe Stupendous Man or, even better Sexy Man!”

“Sexy Man?!” Lara exclaimed.

“Yes! Couldn’t you just see it now?” Lois’s voice changed to an exaggerated falsetto, “Help Sexy Man, help!” Then your father would show up and the willowy blonde bimbo would rush up to him and throw her arms around him and cry “Oh thank you, Sexy Man, thank you!”

“I don’t think that one would work. Knowing my father he’d be blushing to the tops of his ears every time he made an appearance!”

The two women broke down in riotous laughter that seemed to go on and on. Finally they calmed down enough to catch their breath.

“It’s a good thing Superman stuck. I don’t think Ken would like it if I was called Sexy Woman.”

“I don’t know, I’m sure he thinks you’re a sexy woman, right?”

“Yes,” she blushed, “but only in private.”

“That’s as it should be.”

“Why do you think Dad hadn’t picked a name before that rescue?” Lara was curious to know more.

“My best guess is that he hadn’t had his suit long. I think that Martha had either just finished it, or only a day before, and he hadn’t had time to think things through, but I’m leaning towards she’d just made it.”

“Why do you say that?”

“People said later that they saw him fly in from the west. If he’d been in Metropolis, he’d have flown in from the north.”

“Oh, makes sense.”

“So do you have any more questions?”

“Not right now. Thank you so much. I’ve never heard any of those stories, Dad’s never said much about himself before I was born and I’ve never thought to ask. To me, he was always Dad, who worked at the *Post* and was the best dad a girl could want.”

“That’s why I gave you up.” Lois smiled sadly. “I knew I’d be a horrible mother with the example I had. Even as a single parent I knew Clark would be a better parent for you than I could ever be.”

“Lois, the woman I see beside me would, I feel, make a wonderful mother. After all, you know what not to do. I don’t want to reopen old wounds but I do wish you’d given being a parent a shot.” Neither woman spoke then as each of them pondered what Lara had said. Her words made Lois think about her decision once again.

Lois’s voice choked up with emotion. “Thank you, Lara, it’s very nice of you to say that. I do regret the decision I made all those years ago but I can’t change it. All I can do now is try to be the best friend I can be to you and I want that, more than anything.”

“Me, too, Lois. I want us to develop the best friendship possible and I know we can.” Lara and Lois finished the last of the food in silence, but it was a companionable silence.

When the last piece of garlic bread was gone Lois exclaimed, “I can’t believe that we ate it all!”

“I know, we must have been really hungry. How about I help clean up then we can talk?” Lois nodded and they placed the dishes into the dishwasher. With a fresh cup of coffee each, they moved to the living room.

Now that their dinner was over Lois said, “So what can I help you with?”

“My boyfriend, Ken, asked me to marry him.”

“I know, your dad stopped by to tell me. Congratulations!” Lois clasped Lara’s hand so she could examine her ring. “That’s a beautiful ring

“Thanks. I’m over the moon but there might be a minor bump in the road and that’s what I want to talk about.” Lara blushed.

“I... I’ve never been with a man.”

“That shouldn’t be an issue,” Lois said cautiously. “A lot of women are virgins on their wedding night.”

“True, but none of them have my particular... challenges.” Lara pleaded. “I’m worried that my invulnerability will be a problem. Do you see what I mean?”

“Ah, yes, I can see how that could be a concern. What did your dad say?”

“I can’t talk about this with Dad!” Lara blushed a light pink. “It was embarrassing enough when he told me about the birds and the bees when I was twelve!”

“He was probably more embarrassed than you,” Lois said with a chuckle. “Okay, what about Martha? I know she’d be very supportive and would give you excellent advice.”

“Yeah, she would but I don’t think she’d have much insight into this particular problem.”

“Hmm, yeah, I can see that. So how do you think *I* can help? While I’m familiar with superpowers this is kind of out of my wheelhouse.”

“You’re the only woman I can think of who has some experience with superpowers *and* might have the connections to provide a solution.”

“I see,” Lois said as she thought for a moment. “I know a scientist who’s also a medical doctor and we’ve become friends over the years. If there’s anyone in Metropolis who *might* have an answer it would be him. How about I give him a call?”

“Now? It’s kind of late, isn’t it?”

“No. Bernie is a night owl. He’s probably still at his lab.” Lois pulled out her cell phone and dialed.

“Bernie, Lois... yeah it’s good to hear your voice as well. ... Listen, I have a friend who needs a specialized opinion on a problem she has and I can’t think of anyone better than you. ... I know Bernie, but it’s *very important*. ... Okay, tomorrow night, 7:00 p.m. ... Thanks, Bernie! See you then.” Lois ended the call and turned to Lara with a satisfied smile.

“We’re all set. Meet me at S.T.A.R. Labs tomorrow night at 7 o’clock. I’m pretty sure Bernie will be able to advise you.”

“Is he discreet? I’m going to have to tell him I’m marrying a human man.”

“He’s a clam. He has more security clearances than anyone and I know he’s very trustworthy. He may not actively practice, but doctor-patient confidentiality is something he prides himself on.”

“Thank you, Lois, I appreciate your help. It’s getting late and I should probably be getting back.” Lara spun into her suit and Lois walked her to the door then hugged Lara lovingly.

“See you tomorrow.” Lara nodded then she floated off the balcony and disappeared with a whoosh.

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Lara paced her apartment nervously the next day while she waited for the time to leave. While she had a lot of faith in Lois, she was still unsure how a scientist, even if he was a medical doctor, could help her. With a glance at the clock in her kitchen, Lara spun into her suit and headed towards Metropolis. As Lara approached S.T.A.R. Labs she saw Lois waiting near the entrance and landed lightly next to her.

“Hi, Superwoman, are you ready?” Lois asked.

“As I’ll ever be,” Lara replied with trepidation.

Lois opened the door and walked up to the reception desk. The guard on duty barely noticed them until Lois cleared her throat.

“Hello, Lois Lane and friend to see Dr. Klein.” Lois looked at

the guard with barely concealed impatience.

“Uh, right, and your friend is...?”

“Superwoman, pleased to meet you,” Lara said using her authoritative tone of voice.

“Su-Su-Superwoman? Umm, do you know where Dr. Klein’s lab is?”

“I know the way,” Lois said as she headed towards the door. The guard handed them visitor’s badges then hit the buzzer. Lois led the way down a long corridor to the lab of Bernie Klein. As they passed open doors on their way Lara heard gasps of surprise and speculation as to why the superhero was in their facility. Lois stopped at a nondescript office and knocked on the door.

“Come in!” Bernie called out without looking up.

“Hi Bernie,” Lois said as she came to a stop next to the scientist.

Bernie still did not look up from his microscope. “Hi, Lois, what’s so important that we couldn’t meet during business hours?”

“Bernie, you’re being rude to my friend. Your microscope can wait.”

Bernie reluctantly raised his eyes from the device and turned to face his guests then he blushed to the top of his bald head when he saw the statuesque brunette superhero standing next to Lois.

“Su-Su-Superwoman?” Bernie stammered.

“Do you get that reaction a lot?” Lois asked.

“Not really, only here it seems,” Lara said dryly.

Bernie shook himself metaphorically and made his apologies. “I’m sorry, Lois, when you said you had a friend that needed my advice, I *never* expected it to be Superwoman!”

“That’s okay, Bernie, she’s very nice and she could use your advice. Superwoman, why don’t you tell Dr. Klein why we’re here.”

Lara cleared her throat and looked the doctor straight in the eye. “Dr. Klein, I’m engaged to be married soon and I have some questions—”

“Congratulations! But how can I help you?”

“This is a little embarrassing for me. I’ve never been with a man and I’m concerned that... there may be problems on my wedding night because of my invulnerability.” Lara said, her heart beating nervously.

“Hmmm, I see.” Bernie’s eyes lost focus as he pondered Superwoman’s predicament. Time seemed to pass slowly as Lois and Lara waited patiently for Bernie to return his attention to them. “I think I have something that might help but I need to do an examination.”

“Examination?” Lara squeaked.

“Oh, sorry, not *that* kind of examination,” Dr. Klein blushed again. “I’d like to examine your aura. If I remember correctly Superman once said that his invulnerability derived from his aura.”

“That’s my understanding as well, Doctor. That and our dense molecular structure.”

“Oh? Could you explain?” Dr. Klein asked.

“We weigh approximately twenty-five percent more than a human of similar height and build though my father is not sure why that is the case.”

“How interesting!” he said excitedly. “Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“Please step over here.” Bernie directed them to a machine with a large screen, somewhat resembling a fluoroscope. “I’ve been doing some experimentation to see what kinds of auras different living things give off. I’ve found that all living things have an aura of some kind. For most animals, it’s very small, barely noticeable. For humans, it’s a little stronger though still weak. I’ve always wanted to test this on Superman but I’ve never had the opportunity, so your visit here is *perfect* for my research.”

“How does it work, Bernie?” Lois asked curiously.

“All you need to do is step behind the screen, the machine

does the rest. There is no radiation or anything like that, the machine just measures the aura and returns a color value. Red to orange are weak auras, small animals, and such. Humans are in the yellow to green range while large animals like elephants are green to blue. I’ve never found one higher, but the machine can register well into the blue to violet range. Lois, why don’t you step behind the screen so I can show Superwoman how it works?”

“Why not?” Lois bravely stepped behind the screen. Lara and Bernie watched while the machine warmed up then an outline of a human figure showed on the screen with a yellow-green glow surrounding it.

Curious, Lois asked, “So how does it look?”

“It’s just as the doctor said. Your aura glows yellow-green and surrounds your body,” Lara said in amazement. Bernie hit a button and the image froze.

“You can come out now, Lois, take a look.” Lois stepped out from behind the screen and looked at it, amazed.

“That’s so cool,” Lois said, suitably impressed.

“Okay, Superwoman, please step behind the screen.” Lara nodded and stepped into place. Lara watched the faces of Lois and Dr. Klein change from interested to amazed.

“What? What is it?” Lara asked, nervously. What were they seeing? Dr. Klein hit a button on his control panel to better focus on the image.

“You can come out now, Superwoman,” Bernie said, awestruck. Lara stepped from behind the screen to stand beside Lois. The image on the screen was not what she expected to see. What she saw was a dark violet, almost black aura that extended nearly an inch from her body. Lara was amazed, mute, as she stared at the image.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” Bernie said in a hushed whisper. “Your aura is the strongest I’ve ever measured. It extends out from your body even more than I might have predicted.” Bernie fiddled with his control panel and adjusted knobs until the image sharpened even more then he pressed another set of buttons and the machine began to whirl softly.

“What are you doing, Dr. Klein?” Lara asked.

“Oh, I’m fine-tuning the output for later study. This is going to help me immensely in my research!” Bernie said over his shoulder, lost in the excitement of his discovery.

“Okay, Bernie, you can play with that later. What can you offer Superwoman regarding her issue?” Lois asked, bringing Bernie back to the task at hand.

“Oh! Yes, yes, sorry about that. Can you give me a moment to analyze this data?”

Lois and Lara took a seat on the couch while Bernie fiddled with his computer. He brought up various screens and made notes on a pad next to him, all the while making all kinds of satisfied noises. Five minutes later Dr. Klein turned to face them with a smile on his face.

“My preliminary findings lead me to believe that your aura projects a certain amount of temporary invulnerability to any human you encounter. By this, I mean that you can interact with humans at superspeed without causing catastrophic harm. For example, when you rescue a person from a collision with a truck or a falling object you snatch them off the ground with such G-force that, if not for your aura, they would receive catastrophic if not fatal injuries. It’s also what allows you to fly with a passenger at the tremendous speeds that you do without causing them harm. It is my opinion that, as long as you are in intimate contact with your husband, your invulnerability will be extended to him and there should be no problems with your first time.” Dr. Klein smiled a pleased smile. Lara jumped off the couch to envelop Dr. Klein in a very enthusiastic hug.

“Thank you, Dr. Klein, thank you *so* much!” Lara said as she whirled the doctor around and around.

“Oof, you’re very welcome, Superwoman, very welcome!”

Bernie gasped.

“Yes, thanks, Bernie. I knew if anyone could come up with a solution it would be you,” Lois said proudly. When Lara set Dr. Klein back on his feet, he straightened his lab coat, smoothed back what little hair he had, and took a deep breath to calm himself further.

“Umm, Superwoman? Could I ask you a question?” Bernie asked.

“Of course, what is it?” Lara replied.

“I know this is an imposition but would you be open to coming in for a physical examination? I’d love to see how your physiology differs from humans, especially if you might want to have children with your husband someday,” Bernie said. Lara pondered his request and she came to a decision.

“Dr. Klein, what I am about to tell you *must* remain a secret. No one outside this room can ever know. Do you promise?”

“Yes, absolutely,” Bernie replied seriously.

“The story my father told at my debut was not quite truthful. I *am* Superman’s daughter but I was born and grew up here on Earth, not Krypton, my mother is human.” Dr. Klein’s face registered confusion then excitement.

“That’s, that’s amazing! You’re living proof that humans and Kryptonians are compatible for procreation! I never even considered the possibility,” Bernie said, lost in the enormity of this revelation.

“Remember, Bernie, *no one* can know about this,” Lois said sternly. “People might not take kindly knowing that Superman had a human wife. She and Superwoman’s family would be in grave danger.”

“Sorry, Lois, I got carried away. I do understand the need for absolute secrecy here. I’ll make sure I take every precaution with any data I gather. Superwoman’s secrets are safe with me.” Bernie looked at both women in the eye conveying his absolute commitment to them.

“Oh, there is one more thing,” Bernie said as they made to leave.

“What is it, Bernie?” Lois asked. Lara looked on curiously as well.

“I’m just speculating based on what I’ve seen so far...”

Lois grew impatient. “Out with it, Bernie!”

“Yes, sorry. I think being in close contact with Superwoman’s aura over a lifetime could have potential health benefits for your fiancé.”

Lara’s mouth dropped. “Say that again, please?”

“I think your aura could be beneficial to your fiancé. We’d have to do tests over years to determine the exact benefits but there is a distinct possibility.”

Lois and Lara looked at each other then they hugged.

“Bernie! That’s great news!”

“Yes, Doctor Klein, it is great news! I’ll have to talk with him but I think my fiancé and I will be more than willing to participate.”

Lois and Lara shook hands with Dr. Klein and left the lab with the promise that Superwoman would return for future appointments.

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### Chapter Twenty-Five—The Kryptonian Database

Lois and Superwoman walked out to Lois’s car. “Do you want to stop by my place and talk some more?”

“I’d love to, why don’t I fly you there? I can bring your car back later.”

“I’m not going to turn down a chance to fly, let’s do this!”

Lara wrapped her arm around Lois’s shoulder and Lois wrapped her arm around Lara’s waist. Lois once again evaluated flying in this new position. While it gave her a much better view of the landscape, she still preferred the closeness she felt wrapped in Superman’s arms. Lara landed them on the balcony and made

sure Lois was steady.

“I’ll be right back.” Lara took off and returned moments later. Lois idly wondered what her neighbors would think when they saw her Jeep flying across the sky. Moments later Lara landed on the balcony and closed the door behind her.

“Please, sit, I’ve got some coffee made.” Lois brought a tray over to the coffee table. When Lara had changed and both women prepared their beverages, they sat facing each other and sipped their coffee.

“I want to thank you again, Lois. You were right about Dr. Klein, he’s amazing,” Lara said happily.

“I hoped he’d have a solution but he really came through. It was very nice of you to agree to meet with him again, you know.”

“Well, I got to thinking, I may be invulnerable but, in the future, when we want to have children, it might be good to have a doctor on my side. Even if he’s not an OB/GYN he can certainly recommend a trustworthy one.”

“You’re right, it never hurts to have a good doctor.”

“You know, I might be able to help him more concretely,” Lara mused.

“Oh, how so?”

“Dad and I found out that the globe is a lot more than just a hologram projector and navigation device. It contains a large portion of the Kryptonian knowledge base. It has a section on medicine that might be of interest to him.”

“If I know Bernie, he’ll think he’s died and gone to heaven!” Lois replied with a chuckle.

“I bet he will. Please don’t tell Dr. Klein about this yet. I have to ask Dad, it *is* his globe.”

“Of course. I won’t say anything, that’ll be up to you, and your dad.” Lois paused to ponder her next question. “Ummm, I hope you don’t think I’m being too nosy but have you and Ken talked about birth control?”

“To be honest, Lois, we haven’t discussed it. However, given my invulnerability and the fact that medications don’t affect me I assume that birth control pills will be similarly ineffective. Ken’s going to have to use something, I guess.” Lara blushed, she hadn’t expected to be discussing intimate subjects like this, but, who else could she talk to?

“I’m sure he’ll understand. Oh, now that we have a chance to talk, I assume your dad told you about Kryptonite?”

Lara shuddered at the memory. “Oh, yes! He told me when I first got my powers and about his experience with it. I *never* want to encounter that stuff!”

“I doubt you will, from what I understand the only known specimens are in a super-secret vault at S.T.A.R. Labs.”

“Dad told me some bits and pieces but how do *you* know that?” Lara asked, curiously.

“You mentioned that Clark never talked about his experiences before you were born so I don’t know if I should tell you.” Lois was now sorry that she’d brought up the subject.

“Oh no you don’t, you can’t leave me hanging like this,” Lara said heatedly.

“Okay, okay but don’t ever tell Clark I told you this. You have to promise me!”

“I promise. Dad won’t hear it from me. Now please, go on.”

“I know Clark told you about my engagement to Lex, but what he didn’t tell you is that Superman and Lex were bitter enemies and Lex was jealous of him. Somehow, I don’t know how because Clark never told me, Lex lured Superman to his basement where he had constructed a cage powered by Kryptonite.”

“Oh my God! Poor Dad!” Lara said, stricken.

“Lex kept him in that cage for over a day. He taunted him that he’d been defeated and that his prize, me, was going to be his wife.”

“That bastard!” Lara’s eyes glowed red, so angry was she. It was good that Lex Luthor was dead or she wasn’t sure what she’d

have done.

“Somehow, Clark escaped but he was very weak. I think he was close to death but he never said. Clark found me on the sidewalk after the police had come to arrest Lex. When Clark saw Lex fall, he tried to fly but his powers were gone. I didn’t know that at the time either of course. It was only later when I learned the secret that I put it all together.”

“What happened to the Kryptonite cage?”

“Inspector Henderson, he’s police chief now, is a friend of mine and Clark. He found the cage and saw the strange green glow. When he traced the connection, he found two pieces of Kryptonite and turned them over to Dr. Klein for safekeeping. To my knowledge, those were the only pieces ever found.” Lois took a deep breath now that her tale was over, she felt better, Lara deserved to know that the Kryptonite was safe.

“That’s some story. Boy, Dad has sure been holding out on me.” Lara said ruefully. “You don’t know this but Dad and Grandpa found other pieces. They didn’t want me to encounter them as I grew up so they collected every piece they could find then Dad buried them in the Marianas Trench.”

“That’s great. You know, if you want to read about your dad’s exploits at the *Planet*, I can give you a password to the archives. There you can read all our old articles. Maybe you’ll find something interesting. If you do though, please talk to me first, okay? I don’t want Clark to think I’m going behind his back, though I guess I am,” Lois said with an embarrassed chuckle.

“Your secret is safe with me. I don’t like to think I’m sneaking behind Dad’s back either but your articles *are* public knowledge. I’m sure I could find them some other way too, the Metropolis Library comes to mind. Thanks, I’m sure I’ll find some really interesting articles.”

“We wrote about some really weird stuff, that’s for sure, but I think you’ll find my articles about Superman quite interesting,” Lois grinned.

“I’m sure. Thanks again for your offer, Lois.” Lara glanced at the clock and saw it was now well after midnight. “Oh, look at the time. I need to get going.” Lara spun into her suit and headed to the balcony with Lois following. Lara hugged Lois and kissed her on the cheek.

“Thanks for everything, Lois. See you soon.” Lara slid the door open and was gone with a gust of wind.

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Later that week, Lara flew to Smallville with a bag containing her spare suits. She spun into jeans and a t-shirt and headed to the old farmhouse.

“Hi, Grandma!” Lara exclaimed when she entered the cozy kitchen.

“Hi, sweetie! Oh, good, I see you brought your suits.” Martha hugged Lara. “Why don’t we go into my sewing room and we can talk?” In the sewing room, Martha brought out the notes she’d made.

“The easiest solution is to use a chain to keep your ring on.”

“I was thinking of that too but if I start wearing a chain when I never have before some journalist is going to ask me why and I think I’d like to avoid that type of question altogether.”

“Okay, that makes sense. I can make a secret compartment in your belts, something you can unzip, put your ring in, and then zip shut. Being in such close contact with your body, your aura will protect it from any damage,” Martha suggested.

Lara’s eyes lit up. “That’s perfect! Can you make it big enough for my wedding band too?”

“Of course, dear. Give me your belts and we can get started right away.” Lara pulled the belts out of her bag and handed them to Martha. The two women chatted while Martha quickly made the adjustments. When she finished, Lara tried one on and slipped her ring inside.

“This is perfect, Grandma. The belt is thick enough not to

show the ring.” With costume adjustments complete, Lara and Martha went out to the living room where Jonathan and Clark were watching the news.

Lara looked at her father nervously, “Ummm, Dad, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure, Pumpkin, what’s up?” Clark turned to give her his full attention.

“I’ve had the opportunity to get to know a scientist/medical doctor at S.T.A.R. Labs in Metropolis through Lois and I had an idea. Would you be open to the idea of letting him have access to the medical portion of the Kryptonian database? I think he could use that information for the benefit of everyone.”

Clark was curious now. “How did you meet this man?”

“I ran across something that I needed a scientist’s opinion on. Since I don’t know anyone in Chicago, I asked Lois. She’s known this man, Dr. Bernard Klein, for years and she convinced him to meet with me and he was able to help me with my question. He might be the kind of person who could put the information in the globe to good use.”

“Have you said anything to him?” Clark asked cautiously.

“No, Dad. I did mention it to Lois but I told her I had to get your permission first and not to say anything to the doctor.”

“I appreciate your discretion, honey. I don’t know if it would be proper to give anyone access to advanced technology like this. I know it sounds corny but I’m thinking of the Star Trek shows and their prime directive. We wouldn’t want to influence Earth’s technological, scientific, and cultural development. While your idea is very honorable, we don’t know what unintended consequences might arise. I’ll tell you what, let me think about it for a while and I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks, Dad, that sounds good. I know you’ll make the right decision, no matter what decision you make.”

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The next evening Clark called Lois at the *Planet* after he got home from work.

“Lois Lane.”

“Hi, Lois, can you talk for a minute?”

“Clark, hi! Sure, what’s up?”

“Would your mind if I stopped by tonight? I need your opinion on something.”

“Of course, can you give me a hint?”

“I’d rather not. Hey, have you eaten yet?”

“Nope, what did you have in mind?”

“I was thinking of Italian from that little place in Rome, what do you say?”

“I say, yum! I’ve got another hour of work. How about I meet you at the apartment at 8 o’clock?”

“8 o’clock it is, see you then.”

“Clark? Dinner’s ready!” Martha called from the kitchen.

“Ummm, I’m going to meet Lois for dinner, Mom, if you don’t mind.”

“Dinner with Lois, huh?” Martha said with a twinkle in her eye. “Of course, dear. We can have this as leftovers tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Mom. See you later, Dad,” Clark said as he hurried out the door.

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Clark flew lazily over the east coast of the U.S. towards Rome. He saw Lois working as she hurried through the items on her desk. With a smile, he flew out over the Atlantic and the west coast of Italy to his ultimate destination, Rosati’s Ristorante. Clark landed a few blocks away and spun into his work clothes then he strolled through the city, taking in the sights and sounds.

“Signore Kent! It’s so good to see you!” Mr. Rosati exclaimed. “Mama! Come here, Signore Kent is here!” Mrs. Rosati hurried out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron.

“Signore Kent, it’s so good to see you! How have you been?” she asked, as she gave Clark an enthusiastic hug. “How is the

lovely Signorina Kent?”

“I’m well, and Lara is well too. She just got engaged!” Clark said proudly.

“Congratulations! He’s a good man, no?” Mr. Rosati asked.

“He’s a great guy and Lara loves him. I’m sure she’ll bring him here sometime. You know how much she loves your cooking!”

“We look forward to meeting him. Please tell her congratulations from us. Now, what can I get you? Your favorite table is open,” Mr. Rosati said as he gestured to a table near the window.

“Not tonight. I’m eating with a friend,” Clark smiled. “I’d like your dinner for two, please, to go.”

“Right away, please sit down, we can chat while you wait.” Mrs. Rosati hurried off to the kitchen while Clark and Mr. Rosati walked over to the bar. Time passed quickly and soon Mrs. Rosati returned with a large paper bag filled with delicious smelling Italian delicacies. After paying for the meal, Clark left the restaurant with a promise to bring his friend back for another meal very soon.

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Clark hurried back towards Metropolis, landing on Lois’s balcony at 7:59 p.m. Lois opened the door wearing a wide, happy smile.

“Come in, put that on the table, please. I’m all set up.”

Clark pulled containers out of the bag and set them on the table while Lois grabbed the open bottle of red wine and poured glasses for both. Lois scooped a large slice of lasagna from the container, tasted it and moaned with delight.

“Umm, this is just like I remembered it, Clark! You know, I drove all over town looking for the places you brought food from. That was before I knew your secret, of course.”

Embarrassed Clark said, “Yeah, sorry about that.”

“You’re forgiven, especially when you bring food like this!” Conversation flowed smoothly, mostly centering around Lara and her upcoming wedding. When the food was gone Lois poured coffee and invited Clark to sit on the couch.

“So you said you need my help?” Lois asked as she sat down.

Clark nodded. “Lara told me you put her in contact with a Dr. Klein?”

“Yes. Did she mention why?”

“Just that she had run into something that she needed a scientist’s opinion on.”

“That’s right. So again, why do you need *my* help?”

“She mentioned that she talked to you about giving him access to the globe.”

“She said she needed to talk to you before she said anything to him and I promised I wouldn’t either.”

“I know, Lara told me that too. I’d like to ask for your opinion. Should I do it?”

Lois paused to consider Clark’s request. She was quiet for the longest time while they sipped their coffee in complete silence.

Lois looked Clark in the eye. “If I know you, you’ve weighed the pros and cons to death and I don’t know what my opinion could do to change that. That said, I think you should do it.”

“Thanks, Lois, I appreciate your honesty. If you don’t mind, could you tell me why you think this would be a good thing?”

“There’s a lot of suffering in this world, and if your globe and the knowledge it contains can help alleviate even a small portion of that, I feel it would be a wonderful thing. I also think your Kryptonian parents wouldn’t have sent all that information for it not to be used.”

Clark pondered Lois’s response with the gravity it deserved. “Thanks again, Lois. I knew you’d see this from a different perspective and you have. I think you’re right. Jor-El and Lara wouldn’t have filled the globe’s memory if they didn’t plan for me to use it. I’m just concerned about giving the data to one group,

like S.T.A.R. Labs say, no matter how prominent and ethical they are. The knowledge could enrich that organization to the detriment of everyone else. The medical breakthroughs alone could be worth billions!”

“I understand your concern but I think I have an idea. You’ve kept in touch with Jim, right?” Lois said, knowing it was true.

“Yes of course, what about it?”

“He’s my go-to guy for anything computer related, even though I pay for a complete IT department! I bet he’d have some ideas on how to disseminate the data so that anyone who wants to use it for research can do so.” Clark’s face lit up with that megawatt smile Lois missed so much.

“Lois! You’re a genius!”

“You say that like it’s a surprise!” Lois said, gloating a bit.

“No, just stating a fact. Can you set up a meeting with Jim for 5 o’clock tomorrow? I’ll leave work early and fly over to meet with you both.”

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The next afternoon Lois and Jim waited in the conference room with the blinds drawn when there was a knock on the window. Lois opened it and Superman floated in, carrying a small wooden box.

“Hi, Superman!” Jim said, shaking hands with the superhero.

“Hi, Jim. Did Lois fill you in?”

“A little, what you want sounds doable, at least as far as I can see.”

“That’s good. Why don’t I show you what we’re dealing with?” Superman opened the box and pulled out a small sphere that showed the continents of Earth. Superman held it tightly until it began to glow, finally projecting a hologram that hovered over the table.

“What can I do for you, Kal-El?” Jor-El said.

“I would like to download the medical database for use by the people of Earth. Can that be done?”

“Yes, the database can be downloaded in many formats that your systems can access.”

“How large is this database? Jim asked.

The hologram of Jor-El turned to face Jim before speaking. “The medical database is approximately 1,000 exabytes in size.”

“1,000... exabytes! Holy mackerel!” Jim said, flabbergasted.

“I take it that’s big?” Lois interjected.

“Big! It’s huge! It’s more than huge! We’re going to need a server farm all to ourselves to hold it. And this is only a portion of the data contained in this globe?!”

“Yes,” Jor-El replied. “Each database is approximately equal in size.”

“Do you think you have enough information to get started, Jim?” Superman asked then he released the globe and put it back in its box.

“Yeah, Superman. We’re going to need to work with some heavy hitters to get the space we need but I’m sure, once the players find out what we want to do, they’ll get on board. Maybe the Superman Foundation can facilitate.”

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Jim Olsen worked through the Superman Foundation to set up an open-source server for the Kryptonian medical database for the free use of scientists and researchers around the world. People far and wide hailed this as the greatest benefit to mankind in the history of the world.

The headlines of the *Daily Planet* and the *Chicago Tribune* reflected the sentiment of newspapers around the world for the release of the Kryptonian database.

Medical Database Tremendous Boon to Mankind!

Potential Cures for Many Diseases

By James Olsen

A Cure for Alzheimer’s?

Researchers Excited for Potential Disease Cures

By George Jones and Lara Kent

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### Chapter Twenty-Six—Sam and Ellen

A few days after Clark had talked to Lois about introducing Lara to her maternal grandparents Lois decided that she should speak with them. She agreed with Clark that Lara deserved to meet her other grandparents, at least once. Lois hoped that, after all these years, her parents would put aside their animosity, at least temporarily, for the good of their granddaughter. So it was with some trepidation that she dialed her mother's number.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Mother, how are you?"

"Lois! It's good to hear from you. I'm glad you called, when are we going to have lunch? You've missed our last two lunch dates," Ellen scolded.

"I'm sorry, Mother, but you know how the newspaper business is. I can't predict when news will break. But that's not why I called. Ummm... could you come over to my place tomorrow night? I have something to tell you and Daddy." Lois asked.

"You're not pregnant again, are you?" Ellen accused.

"*Pregnant!* Wherever would you get that idea?" Lois replied, shocked.

"It may have been over twenty years ago but the last time you wanted your father and me to be at your place you told us you were pregnant. Lois, I thought a woman of your age would know better," Ellen continued with disdain.

"Mother! I am *not* pregnant! God, I haven't even had a date in five years!" Lois replied heatedly. After a deep cleansing breath, Lois continued. "Mother, can you please come over tomorrow night? I really do have something important to discuss with you both."

Ellen seemed to be contemplating Lois's request for a moment before she replied.

"All right, what time should I be there?"

"7 o'clock, if that works for you?" Lois said hopefully.

"Yes, that's fine. I'll see you then."

"Thank you, Mother. I've got to go now. I'm going to call Daddy."

"Bye, dear, see you tomorrow night." Lois sighed when she hung up the phone. She hoped the conversation with her father would go easier.

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Lois prepared a carafe with coffee and placed cream and sugar on a tray with cups and some pastries she had purchased from her favorite bakery in preparation for the meeting with her parents. The doorbell rang at 6:55 p.m. and Lois opened the door to find both of her parents standing there.

"Mother, Daddy, thanks for coming," Lois said excitedly, pleased that they had arrived, seemingly together, and that they were showing no signs of having been arguing.

Ellen walked in, kissed Lois on the cheek as they hugged. Sam drew Lois in for a hug.

"Hello, Princess, thanks for inviting me tonight."

"Please, sit down, I've got coffee made, be right back." Lois poured coffee into three cups, placed the carafe on the tray then she walked back into the living room. Lois was pleased to see Ellen and Sam sitting on the same couch within touching distance of each other. She sat down opposite them and passed cups to her parents. When everyone was relaxed Lois began.

"Thank you both for coming. I have something to tell you and it's easier for me to be able to say this once."

"Sounds important, Princess, what's up?" Sam asked. He took a sip of his coffee and seemed to be looking at Lois for clues.

"Mother, when we talked yesterday you asked if I was pregnant. I'm not, of course, but I did want to talk to you both about the baby that I gave up."

Ellen, thoroughly confused, asked, "What about it?"

"The story I told you about who the father is wasn't the truth," Lois said.

"Why would you do that?" Sam asked, seemingly as confused as Ellen.

"At the time I thought it would be easier for me. I was trying to avoid awkward questions." Lois sighed then continued. "Let me explain."

Lois recounted the facts of how, after the Luthor fiasco, Mr. Stern had given her six months to prove herself and how she had nearly worked herself to death and how she took every dangerous story available.

"Sorry to interrupt, Princess, but how does this situation lead to you getting pregnant?" Sam asked.

"I'm getting there, please be patient, this is hard enough as it is. One night I was to meet with a "source" who was supposed to give me the evidence I needed for my latest story. It turned out that it was a trap. I thought I was going to die," Lois paused. She took a deep breath as she fought the memories of so long ago.

"Clark, who had been worried about me for a long time, followed me without my knowledge. He rescued me at the last moment. He saved my life. He took me home and, well, one thing led to another, and before we knew it, we were having sex."

"I see, but why lie to us? We'd have understood." Sam looked at Ellen for confirmation as she nodded her agreement.

"I'm sorry but I didn't think you would. Mother, you always warned me about having relationships with people I work with. So when I turned up pregnant, well, I thought that if I told you the story I did it would be the easiest way to go. I know it was wrong and I'm sorry." Lois looked down, embarrassed even after all these years. It wasn't easy telling your parents that you'd lied to them.

"So, if you knew the father, even worked with him, why did you give the baby up for adoption? Didn't he want to do the right thing?" Ellen asked accusingly.

"Oh, he did. He offered to marry me as soon as he knew I was pregnant. You must understand. I wasn't ready to get married back then and I certainly didn't want to have a ready-made family. I never was a house in the suburbs, white picket fence, 2.5 kids type of person." Lois took a sip of her coffee and found it lukewarm so she set the cup on the table before she continued.

"I told Clark I was going to abort the baby but he begged me not to, he wanted to raise his child. I knew he was sincere but I wasn't convinced. I knew that he would pester me to get married and make me feel guilty for not doing so."

"We know you gave up the baby but what happened to make you need to tell us now?" Ellen interrupted. Her expression showed her evident confusion.

"I'll get to that in a minute, Mother. To avoid all that guilt, I told Clark I would deliver the baby and give it to him but he had to agree to a condition, which he did without even asking what it was."

"What was the condition?" Sam asked, gently.

"He had to take the baby and leave Metropolis forever," Lois said softly.

"And he agreed to that?" Ellen asked, aghast.

"Oh yes, even though working at the *Planet* was his dream job, he wanted that baby even more."

"So, again, 'why now'?" Sam asked softly.

"She found me," Lois replied, her eyes tearing up.

"She found you? What do you mean, she found you?" Ellen asked.

"Another part of the condition was that he would never tell the child who her mother is. I felt she'd be better off without my influence in her life. Clark tried to talk me out of it but I was adamant, so he agreed. I found out recently that she was in the basement of her home one day and found Clark's old trunk. Being

curious like her mother, she dug around and she found Clark's scrapbook with articles he'd written and others by both of us. She also found a picture of Clark and me at the Kerth award ceremony. It didn't take an investigative reporter to guess who her mother was, especially as she looks a lot like me when I was her age. She confronted Clark and he, finally, confirmed her suspicions.

"A few days later she walked into my office and I saw myself twenty years younger, standing in front of my desk. She told me, in no uncertain terms, how she felt about me not being in her life, and how she was the only little girl at the Mother-Daughter campout with her grandmother. I saw how deeply my actions had hurt this woman and I immediately regretted my decision, however, before I had a chance to apologize, she left, slamming the door behind her.

"I thought that was the end of it but once she found out who I was she investigated me and found Lucy and her family. She went to California to meet them and Lucy welcomed her with open arms. She also invited her and her family to Thanksgiving dinner and that's where I had a chance to talk to her and to apologize. We came to an understanding. We've agreed to try to be friends and that's why you're here tonight."

"What do you want from us, Lois?" Ellen looked Lois in the eye suspiciously.

"She, her name is Lara by the way, wants to meet her maternal grandparents."

"Is that *all* she wants?" Ellen asked suspiciously. "What kind of person is she?"

"Mother! I can't believe you said that," Lois exclaimed indignantly. "She doesn't even know about this conversation. It was Clark who asked if I thought you might like to meet her. Neither of us has mentioned a thing to Lara."

"I'm sorry, Lois, that was uncalled for," Ellen said apologetically.

"Thank you, Mother. So, what do you say? Would you like to meet your granddaughter?"

"I don't know... it's been over twenty years," Ellen hedged.

"You really think she wants to meet us?" Sam asked.

"I do. She grew up with the idea that Clark and his parents were the only family she had. Now she knows she has an aunt and uncle and two cousins. She asked me about you but I hesitated. I told her that you didn't know about her and I would need to prepare you first. She understood but I could tell she wants to meet you. She's a lovely person, hard-working, loyal to her friends, a good writer, she takes after me," Lois said with a chuckle. "She's engaged to a firefighter in Chicago and they plan to marry this June."

"She does sound delightful," Sam said. He turned to Ellen to see how she was feeling. "What do you think, Ellen?"

"I think I'd like to meet her," Ellen said with certainty.

"That's wonderful! I'm so glad. Let me check with her as to when she'll be in Metropolis next and we can set a date."

"How often does she get to Metropolis?" Sam asked, curiously.

"Not often but I remember that she mentioned that she has a conference in the city coming up soon. I thought that we could plan it for when she's here. Would that work?" Lois asked.

"Yes, that sounds perfect. I'm looking forward to meeting our granddaughter," Sam said. "Where do you think we should meet?"

"I was thinking we'd do it right here. We can have a nice meal and get to know each other," Lois said. She was relieved that the hard part was now over.

"Do you want me to help make dinner?" Ellen asked.

"No, Mother, I was planning to order takeout from Café Americana. You know my cooking skills haven't improved one bit in the last twenty years!" Lois said and everyone laughed.

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That evening, after Sam and Ellen had left, Lois picked up

her phone and called Lara.

"Hi, Lara!" Lois exclaimed once Lara answered.

"Hi, Lois, how are you?"

"I'm fine, thanks for asking. I was wondering, are you available the day after tomorrow?"

"Sure, as long as there are no emergencies, I have no plans, Ken is working nights this week."

"I talked with my mom and dad and I told them about you," Lois said happily. "They want to meet you."

"They do? That's wonderful! When and where?" Lara asked excitedly.

"6 o'clock at my place. I plan to order takeout and we can all get to know each other."

"Do you want me to pick something up? What do they like?"

"No, I'm ordering in," Lois said conspiratorially. "Oh, by the way, you need to come up by the elevator if you know what I mean."

"Ah, no problem."

"Also, I told them you were coming to town for a conference so be ready to back me up."

"You don't think I should tell them, about me I mean?"

"No, there's no need. Lucy and her family don't know and my parents don't need to either. A few little white lies are the price we have to pay to keep you and your family safe."

"Okay, then. I'll see you the day after tomorrow!"

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Lara flew slowly towards Metropolis after leaving work early that evening, anxious to meet her new grandparents. While they were her relations, they were virtual strangers. From what Lois and Lucy had told her previously, her grandparents didn't get along well with each other. Lara hoped that tonight would not devolve into arguments as she wasn't ready for that, at all. The darkened alley near Lois's building suited her needs so she shot out of the sky and she spun into her business suit, her purse in her left hand, and headed for Lois's building. The ride up the elevator seemed long and she had to clasp her hands behind her back to stop them from shaking. When the elevator doors opened, she knocked on the door of apartment 5105 where she heard Lois's footsteps.

"Lara! Come in, come in," Lois exclaimed, smiling widely.

Lara stepped into the living room and saw the other two people in the room. Her grandfather was a tall, thin man, bald on top with white hair and a mustache. Her grandmother was more petite, with a body type like Lois. She had dyed dark blonde hair, cut straight at her shoulders. They both looked to be in their early-70s and appeared to be healthy. When she entered the room, they both stood up, smiling with welcome.

"Lara, this is my father, Dr. Sam Lane, and my mother, Ellen Lane. Mother, Daddy, this is my daughter, Lara Kent."

Lara broke into a wide smile, happy to have, at last, met her maternal grandparents.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Dr. and Mrs. Lane," Lara replied as she extended her hand.

"Call me, Sam, please. Is it okay if I hug you?" Sam asked as he opened his arms.

"I'd like that, Sam," Lara said and she stepped into his embrace. They hugged each other tightly for a moment then Sam stepped back so Ellen could greet her granddaughter.

"Please call me, Ellen." She also hugged Lara tightly. Lara's eyes were damp as were everyone else's.

"Come on, let's eat before the food gets cold." Lois escorted everyone to the dining room where the food was already set out in covered dishes. The hearty sausage and broccoli frittata gave off a light, fragrant aroma of oregano and garlic that perfumed the air. It paired nicely with caprese salad, a mixture of heirloom tomatoes, shreds of buffalo mozzarella, freshly cracked black pepper, and tiny leaves of basil. Lara surreptitiously hit the containers with a

quick blast of heat vision while everyone was getting seated so that the food was piping hot.

Lara got to know her grandparents quite well over the next hour and a half. She told them all about herself and she learned about them as well. After dinner, they adjourned to the living room for dessert where they each had a large cannolo, delicate shells stuffed with a ricotta mixture of sugar, cinnamon, allspice, and semi-sweet chocolate chips along with strong cups of espresso. Each bite held a tiny bright hint of lemon zest which danced over the tongue. After dessert Lara showed everyone pictures of her family, her fiancé, and her trip around the world.

“My goodness, you certainly have traveled,” Ellen exclaimed with amazement.

“Yes, after college I wanted to experience life outside the U.S. to get an idea of how others in the world live. I found that, as my dad told me, people are much the same the world over. They want to take care of their family and live the best life they can. It’s too bad governments around the world get in the way instead of helping their people. I loved my year of traveling and I think that experience helps me with my writing.”

“Since Lois told us about you we’ve read some of your articles,” Ellen said as she grasped Lara’s hand. “Your writing is very powerful. I can see why you love it so much.”

“Thank you, Ellen. It’s nice to see that my writing is making a difference,” Lara said proudly.

“I’m surprised you aren’t working for the *Planet*?” Sam asked, “I’m sure Lois could use a reporter like you.”

“I wanted to work closer to my home. I’d miss my family terribly if I lived so far away,” Lara replied as she looked at her watch. “Oh, look at the time!” It was now nearly midnight and they’d been talking for almost six hours!

“Oh, do you have to leave so soon? It seems like you just got here,” Ellen said, disappointed.

“I’m very sorry but if I’m going to make my flight tomorrow, I need to get going. Those red-eye flights are murder. You know, maybe Ken and I can come in for a weekend visit, after the wedding of course.” Lara looked at her new grandparents hopefully. “Speaking of which, I’d love for you both to come to my wedding.”

“We would love to come, dear.” Ellen smiled happily.

“Thank you, Lara, it’s very nice of you to invite us,” Sam added.

“Great! We should be getting invitations out to all of you soon once we determine the guest list,” Lara said. After another round of hugs and kisses, Lara headed out the door. She ducked between the buildings then spun into her suit and floated into the sky. She peeked into Lois’s apartment for one last glimpse of her new family members. When Lois saw Lara floating there, she smiled. Lara returned it with a wave after which she sped away.

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### Chapter Twenty-Seven—Rescue and Shanghai

Due to the widespread locations of everyone involved with wedding preparations, Lara put together directions so that everyone could collaborate via computer. At exactly 7:00 p.m. Central Time Lara fired up her computer. Moments later all participants signed on for their first online meeting.

Lara watched as each window opened to show a different family member. “All right, is everyone ready?” Lara asked once everyone was online. A chorus of agreement confirmed their readiness.

Lara, being the moderator, introduced Martha and her friends, Sally and Ashley, to the members of the McCarthy family. After the introductions, Lara gave out assignments from the list that she’d made earlier. Lara, being local, took the initiative to secure the church, the venue for the reception, and the photographer. Lydia, with input from Martha, would put together the guest list. Amy volunteered to secure the entertainment and Audrey took the

design and printing of the invitations. Sally and Ashley volunteered to address and send the invitations. They decided that they should meet weekly for status updates and to discuss other items that might come up. Once the business at hand wrapped up, they spent the remainder of the evening getting to know each other, which turned out to be the most enjoyable part of the call.

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Two weeks later, all preparations for the wedding were complete. The church, ballroom for the reception, the DJ, and photographer were set and the invitations were in the mail.

The only thing left was who Ken would have to stand up with him.

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Lara and Ken were on his couch snuggled together the next evening ostensibly watching television, though there was more kissing than watching going on.

“Ken, the wedding preparations are going well but we haven’t talked about who you want to stand up with you,” Lara said when she sat up after a particularly pleasant kissing session.

“Oh, didn’t I tell you? I’ve asked my brothers to stand up with me. Dave, being the oldest, is going to be Best Man and Ted is the Groomsman. Do you think your friends can put up with a couple of old married men for partners?” Ken asked with a grin. “They may be hoping for a couple of handsome single men to dance with.”

“There are going to be several single guys coming. A lot of your firefighter friends are coming, correct?”

“Oh, yeah, they can’t wait.”

“Well then, they’ll be just fine. Sally’s boyfriend is coming with her so it’s only Ashley that might be on the prowl.” Lara grinned. “Do you think we should warn your friends?”

“Nah, let ‘em be surprised.” Ken looked at Lara seriously now, and he gazed into her eyes. “You know there are a couple of things we *should* talk about.”

“Oh, sure, go ahead.”

“We’re not interested in having children quite yet, so, um, we should discuss birth control.”

“I’ve thought about that too. I don’t know if I ever told you, but medicines don’t work on me due to my invulnerability, so... that means we’re going to have to use an alternative method.” Lara blushed and lowered her head.

Ken, with a mock horrified expression, asked, “You don’t mean abstinence, do you?!”

Lara’s eyes grew wide and she whapped him on the shoulder. “No! *You’re* going to have to use something!”

“Oh, good. I was worried there for a minute!” They looked into each other’s eyes then they broke down in a fit of giggles.

When they calmed down again Ken grew serious once more. “That does bring up another question. I know that you’re a virgin,” Ken said, his expression full of concern, “How is your invulnerability going to affect our honeymoon night? We’re not going to have to bring Kryptonite with us, are we?”

Lara smiled at her fiancé and cupped his cheek with her hand. “I’m way ahead of you, my love. I too wondered how my heritage might affect things so I asked Lois for help.”

“Lois? What could she do?” Ken asked, incredulous.

“She put me in touch with a scientist from S.T.A.R. Labs. He has this device that measures the auras of living things. Anyway, he measured mine and, after some data analysis, he determined that if I’m in *intimate* contact with my husband, there shouldn’t be a problem. Do you think you can handle that?” Lara wiggled her eyebrows and her eyes lit up with mischief.

“Intimate contact, huh? Yeah, I think I can do that!”

“As a side note Dr. Klein, the scientist I mentioned, said that there is a possibility that my aura could have beneficial effects for you.”

“Oh, he did? How would that work?”

“He told me that my aura is what allows me to interact with people at superspeed without causing catastrophic injury. My aura gives them a kind of temporary invulnerability.”

“Hmmm, that makes sense. It must be the same kind of thing that allows me to fly with you and not get hurt.”

“That’s right. He theorizes that prolonged contact with my aura could be good for you. There is one thing though. He wants us both to come in for tests periodically.”

Ken grew concerned. “Tests? What kind of tests?”

“I’m not sure, exactly. He promised that they wouldn’t be invasive. He just wants to see if he can validate his assumptions.”

“Wouldn’t you have to tell him who you are? I don’t know if I’m comfortable with that.”

“No. I don’t think so. If it becomes necessary you can wear a mask like mine.”

Ken paused for a moment to consider his reply. “Okay. If we can do that, I think it’s something we can accommodate.”

“Good. The next time I see Dr. Klein I’ll let him know.”

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With wedding preparations well in hand, life for Lara and Ken progressed smoothly. They spent as much time as possible with each other, enjoying being young and in love. Lara’s career also progressed nicely. Her partnership with George over, she now worked independently. She developed her sources and overall, became a valued member of the *Tribune* staff.

One morning, around the middle of April, an unseasonable snowstorm hit the Chicago area. It caused traffic problems across the city with one of the worst being I-94 inbound.

Lara was getting ready for work when she heard the call for ambulances and other first responders to go to a massive pileup near the North Avenue exit. Lara put her work plans on hold, then spun into her suit. After a quick flight to the site, she hovered over it to assess the situation, then she pulled out her cell phone and called George Jones’s desk.

“Jones!”

“George, it’s Lara. Can you cover for me? Something just came up and I’m going to be in late.”

“Sure thing, kid. You’re lucky you caught me. I was just headed out to a pileup on the highway.”

“Yeah, I heard about that on the radio. Thanks again George, I gotta go.”

“Bye!”

Lara saw that the road surface was icy with a light coating of snow. This wouldn’t have been as much of a problem except that this was an elevated section of the highway. As such, it froze over before the rest of the road surface, which caused a massive chain reaction pileup. A glance told Lara that there were over fifty vehicles involved. The situation reminded her of her first official rescue so she set about clearing the accident as quickly as possible. Every few minutes she had to stop what she was doing to bring arriving ambulances to the front of the crash where a triage area had been set up. The number of ambulances ultimately topped off at twelve!

She helped first responders free trapped motorists, in between moving damaged vehicles from the roadway so traffic could begin to move once more. After two hours, traffic was flowing again, though only one lane was currently open. I-DOT trucks slowly moved severely damaged vehicles off the roadway and all the injured had been either transported to local hospitals or treated at the scene and released. When Lara finished, she noticed two news helicopters overhead and a large crowd of local journalists crowded near the roadway.

“Superwoman! Superwoman!” the crowd called out to get her attention. Lara sighed. It looked like she wasn’t going to be able to get to work quite yet. She thrust her shoulders back and floated over to land a few feet from the crowd.

Lara raised her hands for attention then waited until relative

silence reigned. She saw George in the front row so she called on him first.

Lara pointed and said, “You, sir.”

“George Jones, *Chicago Tribune*. What can you tell us about the accident?”

“The late snowstorm caused icy conditions across the city, but this section of elevated highway allowed the surface to freeze well before the other sections. The speed of the vehicles was too fast for conditions and when this happens the smallest mistake can result in tragedy.”

A blonde woman a few rows back called out. “Jamie Jacobs, *WIND AM 560*. How many cars were involved?”

“I was told by the Chicago Fire Department that almost sixty cars were involved, most of them sustained minor damage though there were some injuries.”

“Amy Sweeny, *Chicago Sun-Times*. Can you tell us how many were injured?”

“Fourteen people were transported to local hospitals with another thirty-two treated at the scene and released. Thankfully there were no fatalities, I don’t know any more than that.” Before another reporter could raise a question, Lara floated off the ground, “I’m sorry but I’m needed elsewhere.” whereupon she zoomed out of sight. After a quick flight home to finish dressing Lara flew directly to work only an hour late.

“I’m sorry for being late, Pam,” Lara said as she knocked on her boss’s door. “I’ll be staying late to make it up.”

“That’s fine, Lara, everything okay? George told me you had a problem?” Pam looked at Lara with concern.

“It wasn’t too bad, and I got it sorted, thanks for asking.”

“All right then, I still need that story and sidebar for mockup in an hour.”

“Sure thing, boss, I’m on it!” Lara had just seated herself at her desk when George walked into the newsroom.

“Thanks again for covering for me George,” Lara said once he settled into his desk.

“No problem, kid.” George pulled his keyboard towards him and began to type at a furious pace.

“What’s the hot story, George?” Lara asked. Though she guessed it was probably about the crash this morning.

“Big pileup on I-94 near North Avenue. Almost sixty cars and Superwoman was there. She even called on me!” George replied with a big smile on his face.

“You’re going to be full of yourself all day, aren’t you?” Lara chided.

“Well, you know me. I’m popular with the ladies, especially those super ones!” George’s grin widened even more before he returned to his story. Lara smiled a satisfied smile, pleased that she’d been able to make her coworker’s day.

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It had been a very busy time for both Lara and Ken. Between a spate of fires, they were out every night for over a week. While most of the fires were minor, some required Lara to rescue people from burning buildings. Luckily there were no deaths for which Lara was very thankful. So it was that on their first quiet morning in a while they were walking along the lakefront hand in hand so they could enjoy the warm spring weather.

“Hey I’m getting hungry, we didn’t have that much for breakfast, you know,” Lara said as she turned to face her fiancé.

“Yeah, me too, what do you feel like?”

“Ummm, how about Chinese?”

“Sounds good. Let’s turn around and head to Chinatown,” Ken said, turning back the way they had come.

“I wasn’t thinking Chinatown,” Lara said mischievously. “I was thinking more along the lines of Shanghai.”

Ken’s mouth dropped open with surprise. “Shanghai... as in Shanghai, China?!”

“Yes, I’ve been meaning to take you to my favorite Chinese

restaurant for a while and today is the perfect day for it. What do you say?"

"I say lead on!" Since they were on the lakefront and there were no sheltered places to take off from, they drove quickly to Lara's apartment. As they had done many times, Ken wrapped his arm around Lara's shoulder and she grasped him around the waist. "Ready?" Ken nodded and they took off.

"How did you find this place?" Ken asked once they were in the air.

"Dad found it when he was in China on his world travels. He'd been working day labor on the docks and one of the workers took him there for dinner. He loved the food and he got to talking with the owner, Mrs. Kwan. She'd lost her husband a few years earlier and she took over the restaurant. Dad spoke Mandarin so well that she offered him a job as a waiter. The job paid less than the dock job but he loves working with people so he went for it. He worked there for a few months before he moved on."

"When did you first go there?"

"I was ten. I'd finished my homework and when I came downstairs Dad and my grandparents were sitting at the table, talking. The weird part was that there was nothing cooking so I asked them what we were having for dinner. Dad said that he was treating for Chinese and he wanted me to go with him. The only Chinese place in Smallville was a hole in the wall called Joe's Pagoda. The food there was terrible and I told him so.

"I want to take you to a friend's restaurant, the Dream Palace," he said.

"Is that in Wichita, Daddy?"

"No, Pumpkin. It's in Shanghai."

"Shanghai... China?" My mouth hung open and Dad grinned.

"Yep, so do you want to go?"

I bounced on my toes and clapped excitedly. "Yes! Let's go!"

"I was mostly invulnerable by then so Dad was able to fly much faster than I can with you so we made it there in about a minute. We landed in a deserted alley, then we walked a block or so to the restaurant. I'd never been to China before so I was trying to look at everything at once. We entered the restaurant and a woman who looked to be late 30's or early 40's ran up to Dad and hugged him. They spoke Mandarin for a bit then Dad switched to English.

"Mrs. Kwan, this is my daughter, Lara. She's ten."

Mrs. Kwan turned to me and bowed. "I'm pleased to meet you, Miss Kent," she said. I returned the bow and said, "I'm pleased to meet you too, Mrs. Kwan."

Dad gave her our order and while we waited, he told me how he'd first met her. Before long she returned with half a dozen woven baskets filled with delicious smelling food. We made our way back to the alley and Dad flew us home. He brought me back a lot until I graduated from high school. I could fly by then so I came by myself during college."

"Did your dad ever bring Lois there?" Ken asked.

"No, but he did bring her takeout. One night, not long after he started at the paper, they were working late and Lois got hungry. Dad said he'd get Chinese and he got up. When she tried to tell him what she wanted he told her he'd bring an assortment. He wasn't gone very long and they dug in. Lois loved the dumplings. Later she drove herself crazy trying to find the place he'd brought the food from but she never could. After she found out the secret, she understood why."

While Lara could make the trip in seconds flying at top speed this trip took a bit longer. Even so, she flew faster than she usually did.

"You okay? I'm flying a bit faster than usual," Lara said.

"Fine, no problems at all. How long do you think it'll take to get there?"

"Ummm, half an hour, maybe?"

"That's amazing! I knew you were going faster than usual but

I would never have guessed..." Ken trailed off as he watched the land below him pass by at tremendous speed. Once they were over the Pacific Ocean there wasn't much to look at except water as far as the eye could see. Lara hugged Ken into her side reveling in the closeness that flying together always gave her. They got to China after the sunset as Shanghai was thirteen hours ahead of Chicago. Since they had left at 10 o'clock, it would be about 11:30 p.m. when they landed. Luckily, Mrs. Kwan stayed open late on weekends.

It seemed like it was no time at all before they could see the lights of the city on the horizon. Lara scanned for a safe place to land and when she found one, she zipped down to land in Changfeng Park. There was a subway station there which had a stop one block from the restaurant. Lara led Ken to the subway and paid the fare.

"You have Chinese money?" Ken whispered once they took their seats.

"Yes. Dad and I keep local currency for places we go to a lot. Otherwise, most places take U.S. dollars." They got out at the next stop then walked one block to the Dream Palace, Mrs. Kwan's restaurant.

"Miss Kent! It is so good to see you," Mrs. Kwan said when the couple entered. "And who is this handsome man with you?" Mrs. Kwan's eyes twinkled with mischief.

"This is Ken McCarthy, my fiancé," Lara said speaking perfect Mandarin. "He doesn't speak Mandarin."

Mrs. Kwan nodded sagely and turned to Ken. "Pleased to meet you," she said in heavily accented English as she bowed to him.

"I'm pleased to meet you too," Ken replied, returning the bow.

"Come, sit down," Mrs. Kwan said, switching back to Mandarin. She escorted them to a table for two near the window and handed them two menus. "I'll be back in a bit. I'll send Mei Ling over with tea."

Ken picked up the menu and flipped through it but he quickly set it back down. "It's in Chinese," he said with frustration.

"They don't get a lot of English-speaking people here. What do you want?"

"Do they have shrimp fried rice?"

"Yep, they sure do. Do you care what appetizers we get?"

"No. Whatever you like is fine with me." Just then Mei Ling arrived with a pot of tea which she poured before she left.

"So, Miss Kent, what will you have?" Mrs. Kwan said when she got back to the table.

"You don't have to wait on us," Lara said.

"Hush, I don't get to see you as often now so I want to. What would you like?"

"I'd like Moo Goo Gai Pan and Ken would like shrimp fried rice and we'd also like crab Rangoon and pot stickers and dumplings as appetizers. Thank you." Lara handed Mrs. Kwan the menus.

"I'll get that going right away."

Now that they were alone Ken took a sip of his tea, the hot liquid warming him.

"So, how many languages *do* you know?" Ken asked curiously. "We've never talked about that before."

"I speak about a dozen languages fluently and another dozen that I can get by in. Dad and I always joke that we can order breakfast in 347 languages!" Lara grinned.

"Wow! Though considering what you do, it must come in very handy to speak the local language."

"It does. When I get to a disaster it saves a lot of time when I can talk directly to the officials on-site without having to look for a translator. I think it also helps to be able to speak to people I rescue, it gives them comfort and hope."

"Can you read and write all those languages too?"

“No. I’ve been able to learn Spanish, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, and Mandarin Chinese so far, but I want to learn more.”

“Do you find it difficult? I took French in high school but not a lot stuck,” Ken said as he sipped his tea.

Before Lara could answer the appetizers arrived. “You have to try the dumplings, Ken, they’re amazing.”

Ken grabbed his fork, taking two dumplings, two pot stickers, and two crab Rangoon and put them on his plate. He picked up a dumpling with his fork and took a bite.

“Ummm, this is delicious! If the rest of our meal is as good as this you’ve spoiled me for our usual place!” Ken grinned, popping the rest of the dumpling into his mouth.

“I know! Mrs. Kwan’s is the best Chinese food I’ve ever found anywhere in the world.”

“You were about to tell me if it was difficult learning all those languages,” Ken said reminding her of their interrupted conversation.

“Not really, no. I think it has to do with our eidetic memory but that might be a Kryptonian trait too, who knows.” Lara finished the last pot sticker just as Mrs. Kwan headed their way with their meals.

“Moo Goo Gai Pan, for you Miss Kent and shrimp fried rice for you Mr. Ken,” she said speaking English for Ken’s benefit.

“Thank you, Mrs. Kwan, the appetizers were delicious.” Ken smiled appreciatively. Mrs. Kwan’s eyes lit up with pride, then she left them to their meals.

Ken picked up the cover and released the tantalizing smell of steaming shrimp fried rice. After the delicious appetizers, he was looking forward to his meal. He scooped out a large portion onto his plate, picked up a forkful, and took a bite.

“My God, this is good!” Ken said in between bites.

“I told you, this is the best in the world, as far as I know,” Lara said as she took a bite of her meal. Talking took a back seat for a while as both ate, savoring the delicious food.

“You know, I’ve been thinking. We haven’t discussed where we want to go on our honeymoon,” Ken said while he spooned out a second helping.

“We’ve been so busy I haven’t had time to think about it. Do you have any suggestions?”

“I do. I hope you won’t get upset but... I think I’d like to go to Africa,” Ken said carefully.

“Africa?!” Lara asked, stunned, with an agonized expression on her face.

“Hear me out, please?” When Lara nodded her head he continued. “After we met, I read the articles you wrote on your world tour. Your experiences in Africa touched me and I saw how they affected you. After I proposed I thought that I’d like to go to Africa. We could make new, happier memories to, hopefully, bring some balance to those negative ones.

“I was thinking we could start in Egypt. We could see the pyramids, the sphinx, and the Cairo Museum and maybe Luxor and the Valley of the Kings then later we could take a safari. I looked on the internet and found Kenya Wildlife Safari tours. I think it might be fun,” Ken said hopefully. When Lara didn’t reply for a few moments Ken got worried, were they about to have their first fight?

“Lara? Honey? Please say something. I’m sorry if I overstepped.” Ken’s expression grew troubled when he noticed tears forming in the corners of her eyes. His heart soared when, despite the tears, he saw her smile a tremulous smile.

“That’s the most wonderful thing you could have suggested and I love you for it. I’d love to make new memories with you. Africa is not just pain and despair and, with you there, I can learn to see the beauty of the continent.” Lara wiped her eyes with her napkin then she leaned over the table to meet him halfway for a kiss.

“Whew, I was worried there for a minute.” Ken took a breath. “I thought we were going to have our first fight right here and then what would Mrs. Kwan think of me?!” Ken chuckled, relieved.

“She’d think you were the most wonderful man in the world just like I do!” Lara said. They spent the rest of the meal talking about the trip and planning their itinerary. When the bill came Lara paid, leaving Mrs. Kwan a generous tip.

“You two come back soon, okay?” Mrs. Kwan said with a smile.

“We will, Mrs. Kwan, thanks again!” Lara said.

“The meal was delicious, Mrs. Kwan, the best I’ve ever had,” Ken said, appreciatively.

“Thank you, Mr. Ken,” she said with a bow.

Lara and Ken walked back to the subway station then on to their stop. Hand in hand they walked deeper into the park to where they had landed. Lara quickly scanned the area then she spun into her suit and they took off. They talked more about the details of their honeymoon trip on the way back to Chicago, landing on her balcony half an hour later.

“Ken, why don’t you fire up my laptop while I get us drinks?” Lara said. She walked into her kitchen and grabbed two soft drinks, then she joined Ken on the sofa.

“I figured we’d look at safari tours first.” Ken turned the laptop so they could both see the screen. “I filtered for seven-day tours.” The couple scanned through the list, clicking on the various listings until they found one that fit their needs. They settled on Wildlife Wonders Group Departure and then clicked the link to book their trip.

“Okay, now let’s look at Egyptian tours,” Lara said, excitedly. She grabbed the mouse from Ken’s hand and scrolled down for tours that fit their itinerary. They found one that had good customer reviews so they booked the Golden Egypt trip.

“This is just what we’ve been looking for,” Ken said, “we hit the Pyramids at Giza and the temples of Luxor & Karnak, the bazaars, and the museum of Cairo. It’s perfect!”

“It is, I can hardly wait!” Lara grinned then she drew Ken in for a sensuous kiss. The kiss turned passionate but before it could flare out of control Ken drew back reluctantly. Their chests heaved, their eyes hooded with desire.

“Whoa... sweetheart... we gotta take it easy or we won’t make it to the honeymoon!” Ken said, hugging Lara close.

“I know, it’s just that kissing you is so... amazing, I get carried away,” Lara whispered. She lay her head on Ken’s chest and he bent his head to place kisses on her head.

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### Chapter Twenty-Eight—Earthquake!

About a month after the highway crash cleanup Lara had handled back in April, she woke up suddenly with no idea, at first, of what might have pulled her out of a deep sleep at... 2:00 a.m.! She listened carefully until she finally heard a broadcast on one of the 24-hour news networks that were playing on a TV in the building next to hers.

*Northwestern Albania experienced a strong 6.4-magnitude earthquake with an epicenter 16 kilometers west-southwest of Mamurras, at 6:54 a.m. local time...*

In moments Lara was out of bed and on the way to Albania. Just as she reached Mamurras, she saw her father was already there speaking to local officials.

“Superwoman, I’m glad you’re here,” Superman said when she landed next to him, smiling at her supportively. “Mr. Shehu of the local disaster response group was just filling me in on where we need to start.”

Once the briefing was over, the two superheroes took to the air. Their first job was to find and free the living. With over 14,000 buildings damaged or destroyed it was a very long and difficult task, a task Lara and her father performed with grim determination. For hours and hours, they worked, listening for

heartbeats, or the banging of trapped people as they removed tons of debris to get to them.

The work was slow due to the need to be very careful not to cause more damage, damage that would cause injury to those still waiting for rescue. After ten hours of rescue, the effort turned to the recovery of the dead. Thankfully, due to the diligent work of the two superheroes, the death toll was, mercifully, light but still, fifty-one souls had lost their lives; however, on a positive note, Superman and Superwoman had rescued over 3,000 of the injured.

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Ken McCarthy was watching LNN at seven o'clock that morning while he dressed for work. Nothing on the news caught Ken's attention until the international news segment came on.

*"Again, in international news, there was a 6.4 magnitude earthquake near the Albanian city of Mamurras that struck just before 7:00 a.m. local time, just as residents of the city were getting ready for work or school. Within minutes of the announcement by various news organizations of the disaster Superman and his daughter, Superwoman, were on the scene. After consulting with local authorities, the two superheroes have been busily working to free the trapped and injured. It is estimated that, even with super help, it will be many hours before the grim work of recovering the dead will be complete..."*

Ken's mouth dropped open, his heart in his throat. Lara, his beautiful, soft-hearted fiancée, was knee-deep in the most stressful rescue she'd attended since he'd known her. He watched for a few minutes as the two superheroes zipped back and forth, moving debris, bringing wounded to treatment areas, and then returning for more. Ken got to thinking that Lara was going to be busy for quite a while and she was going to miss work. He checked his phone for the time zone of Albania and he realized that Lara must have left around 2:00 a.m. Chicago time so there was no way she'd have thought to call the paper. Ken immediately dialed the number for Lara's boss, he just hoped that she'd be in this early.

*"Chicago Tribune, this is Julie, how may I help you?"*

"Hello, my name is Ken McCarthy, I'm Lara Kent's fiancé, is Ms. Blake in please?"

"Yes, she is, hold on please." Ken sighed with relief.

"Hello, this is Pam Blake."

"Hi Ms. Blake, I'm Ken McCarthy, Lara's fiancé. I'm calling to let you know she's been sick all night and won't be in today. I'm going to be taking her to the doctor later, as soon as I can get an appointment, but she wanted you to know."

"Lara's sick? What's wrong?" Pam asked with concern.

"I think she's got food poisoning but it could be a twenty-four-hour bug. She has a fever and she's been up and down all night with an upset stomach. She says she's sorry she can't make it to work today."

"You tell her not to worry and to get better soon. If she needs tomorrow off too, just let me know, okay? And thanks for calling Ken."

"Thank you, Ms. Blake, I'll be sure to tell her. Bye." Ken disconnected the call, pleased with himself for his foresight. Lara would not have to deal with explaining to her boss why she wasn't at work on top of having to deal with the aftermath of the earthquake. He finished his morning routine then he left, headed over to Lara's apartment. He left her a note which explained what he'd done so she wouldn't worry and so she'd be able to play along in case anyone from work called her.

On the drive to the station house, Ken's thoughts returned again and again to his fiancée. While he knew that she'd be okay, physically, he worried for her tender heart and her state of mind. Throughout the day he listened to the reports coming out of Albania. The destruction the earthquake had caused sickened him. At the latest count, there were over 14,000 structures damaged or destroyed at an estimated cost of \$844 million dollars. The death toll was still unknown but it would certainly have been much

higher than the approximately 40 souls reported thus far if it were not for the efforts of Superman and Superwoman.

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Twelve hours after she'd landed in Albania, Superwoman stood beside her father at the Red Cross temporary hospital for the injured that had been set up near the disaster area. Their uniforms, covered in dust, dirt, and blood, their capes torn and frayed showed how hard the superheroes had worked. Both showed stress on their faces from the grim work they had recently completed. A total of 51 people had lost their lives along with over 3,000 injured. The field hospital was now nearly empty as most patients were at hospitals as far away as Albania's capital, Tirana.

"Mr. Shehu," Superman said, his body language screaming fatigue, "what's next?"

"Nothing, Superman. You and your daughter have done all that we require of you. There is nothing left to do now but mourn our dead and begin to clean up and rebuild, neither of which you can help with. We are very grateful to you for everything the two of you have done for our people."

"We're just glad we were able to help." Superman shook Mr. Shehu's hand. "Let's go home, Superwoman."

With that, they took off headed west. When they got to the Atlantic Ocean, they both dove in to clean their suits as best as possible, though it would take a good laundering before all evidence of their efforts was gone.

"You know, Dad, Grandma is going to be pretty upset with us," Lara said out of the blue.

"Why's that?" Clark replied, confused by the non sequitur.

"We've ruined two more capes. I hope she has enough material." Lara glanced at her father's torn and tattered cape.

"I think your grandmother will understand that the capes were sacrificed for a good cause. Besides it was her idea that we wear one so it's partly her fault." Clark thought that would have gotten a smile from his daughter but none was forthcoming.

"Are you okay, Pumpkin?" Clark asked his daughter as they flew slowly home.

"No, Dad. But I will be, as soon as I get home to Ken," Lara said with a slightly shaky voice.

"You did wonderful, sweetheart. I am so proud of you. I'm also glad you have Ken to support you, he loves you very much."

"I know, Dad, and I love him so much too. But I feel bad sometimes when I drop all my baggage on him..."

"Don't feel that way, Pumpkin, he *wants* to be there for you. It's how he shows how much he loves you. It makes him feel proud that he can provide love and support for you when he can't be there with you. He knows that you know he's there when you get home."

"What about you, Dad? You don't have anyone. How do you handle it?"

"I've had a lot more experience at this so I've learned coping mechanisms. Even before I left the *Planet*, I had to learn to deal with disasters on my own since Lois didn't know the secret. It's something I've become used to. Don't worry about your old man, I'll be fine," Clark said, but his smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

"There's Smallville, Dad, I'll give you a call tomorrow, okay?" Lara said.

"Take care, sweetheart, I'll talk to you later."

\*\*\*

It was after 8:00 p.m. when Lara landed, exhausted, on her balcony. She took off her suit at human speed, stripped off the skin-tight spandex, and tossed it into her laundry hamper. The cape was a total loss so she just tossed it to the back of her secret closet. The need to get clean was paramount so she walked into her bathroom and turned the water as hot as it would go. She climbed under the scalding water and let it wash over her from head to toe, rinsing off the last traces of the earthquake. She stood there for five minutes as the water cascaded over her body then

she grabbed her bath sponge and soaped her body, though it took two thorough soaping's before the stench of death left her. She washed her hair, then just as the water got cold, she shut it off and dried herself with a towel. She dried her hair then she walked back into the bedroom, naked, the towel wrapped around her body. For the first time since she got home, she saw the note on her bed.

*'Sweetheart,*

*I called your boss and told her you had food poisoning and wouldn't be in. She said that if you need tomorrow off it was fine with her.*

*All my love,*

*Ken'*

Lara's eyes misted up and tears flowed unbidden down her cheeks. Ken had called and given her an excuse for her absence! 'God, I love that man,' she thought, the words on the paper blurring from her tears. She swiped the tears from her face with her hand then she grabbed a new suit from the closet. With her tote bag containing a t-shirt, jeans, fresh underwear, and her pajamas in hand she took off through her balcony door.

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Moments later the knock Ken had been expecting all night told him that Lara had arrived. He opened the door, his arms spread wide in invitation.

"C'mere, sweetheart." Ken drew Lara into his chest and she gratefully complied. He closed the door and led her to the couch where he drew Lara onto his lap, enveloping her in a supportive hug.

"Oh, Ken, it was awful," she said in a whisper. She told him of all the things she'd seen, the sights, the smells, and the sounds of the injured and the dead. How tired she'd been and how she'd had to keep going when all she wanted to do was fly home as fast as she could. She cried and shook with rage at the loss of life and her inability to save everyone.

"I know, honey, I know. I saw you on TV," he said soothingly. "You were great, you and your dad. No one could have done any more than you two. I know you're fast but even you couldn't have gotten there any faster. There are thousands of people who are safe and in hospitals because of what you and he did. You need to remember that, Lara. You did everything you could and I'm very proud of you!" Ken said fiercely as he placed kisses on top of her head.

"I know you're right but, right now I feel like such a failure," Lara whispered, snuggling deeper into Ken's chest.

"You're *not* a failure!" Ken said fiercely but lovingly. "You've done everything you could and more. You and your dad are powerful, but you're not God, you can't save every life, as much as you want to. You have to accept that what you *can* do is enough."

Ken held Lara tightly, caressing her until he felt the tension leach out of her.

"How about we hit the hay? I'm sure you're tired and so am I." Lara nodded so Ken grasped her behind her knees and picked her up, holding her to his chest. He set her down beside the bed then he hurried back to the living room for her bag and handed it to her.

"Why don't you get changed and I'll lock up?" He cupped her cheek lovingly as Lara nodded then she took her bag into the bathroom. While she changed, Ken locked his doors then he turned out all the lights. He returned to the bedroom just as Lara was climbing under the covers.

"Be right back." Ken grabbed his pajama bottoms from the drawer and headed into the bathroom. He changed quickly then he climbed into bed next to Lara who snuggled into his body, spoon fashion. "Good night, Lara, I love you," Ken whispered into her ear.

"Love you too," Lara replied sleepily. Ken closed his eyes and listened to the soft even breathing of his fiancée as she slept.

He thought about how lucky he was that this wonderful, powerful woman needed a mere human like him.

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The light of the early morning sun was peeking around the window shade throwing a soft, diffused glow around the room. Ken felt Lara's body snuggled tightly to his chest, his arms wrapped around her, just as they'd fallen asleep the night before. Opening his eyes a bit he looked over to the nightstand to see what time it was but something was wrong, the clock wasn't there! His eyes now open completely, he saw the reason why his clock was not in its expected position. They were floating three feet above the bed!

'This has never happened before!' Ken thought, marveling at the fact that, even in her sleep, Lara's aura could keep him afloat on a cushion of air.

"Honey?" Ken whispered, "It's time to get up."

"Don' wanna, too early," Lara mumbled sleepily.

"Sweetheart, can you get us down?" Ken whispered again, kissing her lightly on the neck.

"Wha? Huh? Down?" Lara replied, confused. Lara opened her eyes completely and she started, surprised, and they fell with a bounce!

Ken chuckled and looked lovingly at Lara. "I was hoping for something a bit gentler but this works!"

"Oh, God, I'm so sorry! That hasn't happened in a long time," Lara exclaimed.

"It's okay honey, I was just surprised that's all. As you said, that's never happened before."

"I sometimes float in my sleep when I'm overtired, like last night. You're not hurt, are you?" Lara asked, concerned.

"I'm fine," Ken said with a grin. "It was only three feet and the bed broke my fall! Hey, I'm hungry. Why don't you take a shower while I get the coffee going?" Lara nodded her assent and headed toward the bathroom. Ken hopped out of bed, admiring Lara as she walked away. Even though she was wearing the least sexy pajamas possible, he still found her irresistible. In no time at all, coffee was brewing and Ken had two place settings on the table.

"I'm done," Lara said as she walked into the kitchen dressed in the casual clothes she'd brought. "Shower's yours."

Ken kissed her cheek on the way by to the shower. Lara opened the refrigerator, taking out eggs, bacon, and English muffins for their breakfast. Ken returned, clean smelling, his hair still damp from his shower just as Lara was putting their food on their plates.

"Ummm, breakfast smells good." Ken grabbed a cup of coffee, taking a sip. "I still haven't figured out how you can make coffee taste so good."

"I told you, it's Grandma's secret. If you're a good boy *maybe* someday I'll tell you what it is." Lara said cheekily. "Now sit down, breakfast is ready."

They ate breakfast chatting amiably about the day ahead when Lara remembered the note.

"I want to thank you for calling Pam yesterday and giving me an excuse. I never thought about what I'd tell her about my absence."

"Yeah, I figured. Since you probably left around 2:00 a.m. you wouldn't have thought about calling in sick. I'm sure you were only thinking about the earthquake."

"I was. I heard the news and I was on the way in less than two seconds. What made you think about calling in?"

"I love you. I didn't want you to get in trouble with your boss. I told her I thought you had food poisoning and that I was taking you to the doctor so be ready when you see her today."

"I will, and thank you again. I love you." Lara leaned across the table for a kiss.

When the kiss ended Ken replied, "You're welcome, you

know I'll do anything for you. I love you too."

"You know, I've been thinking—"

"That sounds dangerous," Ken interrupted, grinning wickedly.

"Quiet you! Anyway, I was thinking that you should meet Lois before the wedding, what do you say?"

"I'd love to! When do you think we can meet her?"

"I'll give her a call when I get to the office, is there any day that's bad?"

"Not that I can think of. I'm on days this week so any evening is good with me."

"Great! I'll call you when I know more."

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### Chapter Twenty-Nine—Getting to Know You

Lara Kent exited the elevator, headed for her desk when her boss called out to her.

"Lara, my office, please?"

Lara changed direction then she settled into the leather chair in front of the desk.

"What's up, Boss?"

"I'm glad to see you in today, how are you feeling?"

"I'm much better, thank you. It turns out that I had food poisoning and nothing worse. Ken took me to the doctor and he gave me something to help with nausea, but I just needed bed rest."

"Good, glad to hear you're feeling better. Oh, by the way, I got the invitation to your wedding. I'm looking forward to it!"

"Will you be bringing anyone?" Lara asked curiously.

"Yes. He loves to dance so he's looking forward to it as well."

"Great! If there's nothing else...?"

"No, make sure the recycling plant explosion story you're working on is ready by noon."

"Will do." Lara got up and hurried to her desk but several of her colleagues inquired about her health as she went by so it was at least five minutes before she was able to reach her desk. Once there she pulled out her phone to call Lois.

"Lois Lane."

"Hi Lois, it's me, Lara."

"Oh, hi! How are you? I saw the coverage of the earthquake so I'm glad you called."

"I'm okay. I went over to Ken's when I got back and we talked. He helps me deal with things, you know?"

"I'm so glad, he sounds like a wonderful man."

"Speaking of Ken, he's why I called. Would you like to meet him?"

"Yes! Of course, you have to ask?" Lois said excitedly.

"When can you bring him?"

"What's a good night for you? He's working days this week so any night is good for us."

"How about tonight, no time like the present, right?" Lois suggested.

"Tonight works, what time?"

"8 o'clock work for you? I can order food if you want. How do you feel about Thai?"

"8 o'clock is perfect and we both love Thai. Can I bring anything?"

"Nope, just that handsome fiancé of yours. See you tonight!"

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At 7:55 p.m. two black shapes landed on Lois Lane's balcony.

"Come in, come in!" Lois exclaimed as her two guests entered. Lara spun out of her suit to stand beside her fiancé.

"Lois, this is my fiancé, Ken McCarthy. Ken, this is my mother, Lois Lane." Lara said. Ken smiled warmly and extended his hand.

"Ms. Lane, I'm pleased to meet you," Ken said as Lois took his hand.

"Please, call me Lois. May I call you Ken?" Lois said

returning the welcoming smile.

"Of course, Lois." Ken looked around the apartment with interest. "You have a lovely home."

"Thanks. Are you two hungry? I've got everything set up in the kitchen." Lois gestured towards the kitchen and followed the young couple.

"Lara, would you mind warming up the food?" Lois said.

"What do you two want to drink? I have coffee, tea, or soda."

"Soda is good for us, thanks," Lara said as she bathed the food with a low-level blast of heat vision. Everyone dug in, piling portions of food onto their plates.

"Ummm, this is good. It's almost as good as that Thai place you took me to last month," Ken said in between forkfuls of Panang curry.

"Considering that we went to Thailand for it, that's high praise," Lara replied with a giggle. "Where did you get this, Lois?"

"It's a relatively new place in the city. Clark enjoyed it as well the last time he was here," Lois said. She glanced at Lara with a grin.

"Oh, when was that?" Lara asked.

"Soon after we found his ship. He came over to thank me for my part in finding it."

When the food was gone Lois invited them into the living room. "Anyone for coffee?"

"Yes, please," Ken said, "Can I do anything to help?"

"No, thanks Ken, I've got it." Lois put the carafe of coffee along with cream, sugar, and some cookies onto the tray and she followed Lara and Ken into the living room. Once there, she poured coffee and everyone sat back, relaxed.

"So Ken, if you don't mind, would you tell me how you met Lara? I've heard the story from her point of view but I'd love to hear yours," Lois said, sipping her coffee.

Ken, too, took a sip of coffee while he gathered his thoughts.

"We were fighting a big warehouse fire on the South Side and we were having a real hard time of it. The hottest part of the fire was at the rear and we were having trouble getting our hoses into the area. We got a message from our lieutenant telling us to pull back as Superwoman was going to help. When we heard that, we hightailed it back towards the front of the building to concentrate on dousing those flames. I found out afterward that Superwoman had used a railroad car to get water from Lake Michigan and used it to put out the fire. Once the fire was out the lieutenant told us to check for hot spots that might flare up again and to make sure there was no one left in the building. Sometimes homeless people camp in buildings like that so, if there were any, we were looking for bodies.

"We were checking out the area when I thought I saw movement off to my right so I took off thinking that, as unlikely as it would be, that there might be someone alive. When I got there, I didn't see anything but I did hear a cracking sound. I looked up and saw a section of the roof giving way so I dove under a huge wooden beam that had fallen as there was an open space beneath it. I got under it just in time but a portion of the truss hit my left leg. The pain told me I'd broken my leg but I didn't know how badly. When I tried my radio, I found that it wasn't working, it must have broken when I dived under the beam. So I was lying there in excruciating pain with no way to call my buddies. I knew they'd find me sooner or later so all I could do was lay back and wait.

"Not long after I heard a female voice telling me everything was okay and she'd have me out of there in no time. Superwoman was so calm and reassuring, she told me what she was going to do, then she lifted the truss off me and picked me up as easily as you would pick up a baby. She cradled me carefully so as not to hurt my leg then she flew me to the ambulance, laying me on the gurney. I was in a lot of pain when they closed the doors and

they'd driven off before I had a chance to say thank you to her.

"At the hospital the doctor had almost finished putting my leg in a cast when this beautiful brunette poked her head into the emergency bay. The painkillers had kicked in so I was feeling much better but when I saw this woman, she took my breath away. I told myself right then that I was going to marry this woman somehow. I'd never felt like that before and I knew she was someone special. She interviewed me about the fire and my injury then she gave me her card with her cell number on the back. When our hands touched, I felt a tingle that surprised me and it looked like she felt something too. Before she left, she told me to give her a call, which I did a few days later, and here we are." Ken said, finishing his tale.

"Thanks for telling me your story, Ken. I find it interesting how two people view the same event and your story, while it mirrors Lara's in many respects, has insights she couldn't know," Lois said.

"Lois is right. I find it fascinating to hear it from your point of view. I'm glad that you thought I was calm and reassuring that night. I try to make people I rescue feel safe but it's always nice to know I succeed." Lara leaned over to give Ken a quick peck on the lips.

"So Lara, how are the wedding plans going?" Lois asked pouring herself another cup of coffee.

"Great. Everything is under control, with the help of Grandma, Ken's family, and my friends, of course. The only thing left is for Ken and me to show up!"

"That's wonderful. It must be a great relief to have such support. Oh, by the way, I talked to my mother the other day, she and my father are looking forward to the wedding."

"That's wonderful, I'm so glad." Lois, Lara, and Ken talked about their honeymoon plans and where they planned to live afterward.

"... of course we'll be looking for a bigger place later on but it has to meet Lara's criteria," Ken said glancing over at her.

"Oh, what criteria is that?" Lois asked, curiously.

"A balcony with minimal sightlines for Superwoman takeoffs and landings!" Lara replied with a chuckle.

"I suppose that *is* important to you. I know what you mean though, I've had a lot of super visitors on my balcony of late. Speaking of which, I'll be right back." Lois rose from her chair and returned a few moments later.

"There's a rooftop garden for the residents of this building so I was thinking it might allow for more... discrete visits in the future." Lois handed Lara two keys.

"Two keys?" Lara asked.

"One for you and one for... Clark," Lois said with a grin.

"I'll make sure he gets it, Lois," Lara replied with a wink and a smile.

"You know, Honey, it's getting late. Maybe we should try that roof garden out." Ken stood, extending his hand to Lara.

"It was very nice meeting you, Ken," Lois said rising as well. "I'm so glad we had this time together before the wedding. It allowed us to get to know each other better."

"Me too, Lois. Thanks for inviting me." Ken walked over to Lois and enveloped her in a hug which Lois returned enthusiastically.

"You're very welcome. I hope you two will come to visit more often now that we know each other better." Lois said, hugging Lara as well.

"We will, Lois you can be assured of that." Lara grabbed Ken's hand, interlacing her fingers with his. "You ready, honey?"

"Yep, let's go." Lois saw the couple to the door, telling them that they could take the elevator to the roof garden. The ride up was quick and they stepped out onto the deserted garden.

"This is very nice, private too." Ken stood back while Lara spun into her suit then they took off, headed back to Chicago.

\*\*\*

Lara and Ken were watching the History Channel series on George Washington one evening when an advertisement came on for a special documentary called *Nightfall: 25 Years Later*. The ad touted interviews with EPRAD and other scientists involved at the time, world leaders, including former President Garner, and a completely new interview with the Man of Steel himself! This information piqued Lara's interest because her father hadn't said a word about it.

"Dad, why didn't you tell me about the *Nightfall* special?" Lara asked when her father answered the phone a few minutes later.

"Well, hello to you too, Pumpkin," Clark teased.

"Hello, Dad. Now, why didn't you tell me?" Lara replied doggedly.

"It's not that big a deal. The interview only took 15 minutes and I forgot all about it afterward." Clark replied nonchalantly.

"We have eidetic memories, Dad, we don't forget things."

"Honestly, sweetheart, it's no big deal. I don't know why they even wanted to do it," Clark's response told Lara that he felt the whole thing was making a lot out of nothing.

"It's history, Dad. You saved the world. That's important," Lara said seriously.

"Yes, it was, but it's behind me and, I prefer it to stay that way."

"Okay, Dad, if that's the way you feel about it, I'll respect your opinion but I'm gonna watch! Goodnight, Dad." Lara ended the call, returning to the documentary they were watching but she made a mental note to set her DVR.

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The day after the special ran, Lara skimmed through the program for the interview with her father. When she found that part of the program, she stopped scanning.

"First I'd like to say thank you for agreeing to this interview, Superman," the female interviewer said.

"You're welcome, I'm glad to do it."

"Superman, we've been showing the video of you from that day and you looked very confident. I have to ask, weren't you nervous?"

"Yes, I was. *Nightfall* was the biggest asteroid ever to be on a collision course with Earth since the extinction of the dinosaurs and I wasn't sure I would be up to the task."

"Had you been briefed by scientists on what to expect?"

"Oh, yes. EPRAD's scientists gave me a full briefing before I left and they were also in contact with me during the flight. I knew that, even with the nuclear backup plan, I needed to destroy it to give the mission the best chance of success."

"After you impacted *Nightfall*, you disappeared from EPRAD tracking, what happened?"

"I flew into the asteroid at full speed but it destroyed my communications device and it severely weakened me. I needed time to recover. I couldn't fly for a while, but, thankfully, I recovered in time to deflect that remaining chunk before it could cause any damage."

"When you were hurt, where did you go?"

"I'd rather not discuss that," Superman said shutting that line of questioning down.

"While there have been no other near-Earth objects found, it must be comforting to know that you have your daughter to help if the need arises, correct?"

"Yes, it is. Superwoman has been a great help to me and, if the need ever arose, I know she'd be right there with me. I'm very proud of her."

"Thank you, Superman."

"You're welcome. I hope your program is a success."

Lara skipped the rest of the program knowing that it was going to be a bunch of boring interviews and she'd seen

everything she'd wanted to see. Lara picked up her phone and called Lois.

"Lois Lane."

"Hi Lois, it's me. Do you have some time to chat tonight?"

"Sure, 8 o'clock?"

"See you then." Lara glanced at the clock and saw she had an hour before she had to leave so she rewound the recording to watch the Superman interview again.

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Lara landed on the rooftop garden and spun into jeans and a dark blue cotton blouse. She pulled the key out of her pocket and unlocked the door, then she took the elevator down and got off at the 51<sup>st</sup> floor to apartment 5105.

"Lara, please, come in," Lois said. She gestured for Lara to join her in the living room. "Do you want anything to drink?"

"Sure, one of those cold cream sodas sounds good right about now." Lois opened her refrigerator and withdrew two cans of the requested beverage.

"So what brings you here tonight?" Lois said, popping the top of the can and taking a sip as she sat down on the couch.

"Have you seen that special on the History Channel, *Nightfall: 25 Years Later*?"

"Actually, no. I didn't watch it. They asked me to participate but I turned them down. Frankly, I'm kind of surprised Clark participated."

"That's kind of why I wanted to talk to you. I asked Dad about that time but he didn't want to tell me much."

"That was a hard time for your dad. He hadn't been Superman very long when along comes the military and EPRAD asking him to fly millions of miles into space and ram into an asteroid the size of Metropolis. I always felt that they used Superman because they had no other viable options and if he didn't succeed, their backup plan, nuclear weapons, was only a last resort. I think they were also scared of Superman and if he died in the process of breaking up the asteroid it was a win-win for them!" Lois said angrily.

"Those bastards!" Lara exclaimed, her eyes glowing red. "How could they justify using him like that?"

"They, the military especially, saw Superman as a potential threat, I'm sure. I'd written several articles praising him and all the good works he'd done, but that didn't seem to matter to them. He was an unknown and they didn't have any way to neutralize him. That was before Kryptonite was discovered you know."

"No, I didn't. I saw during Dad's interview that he had disappeared for a few days. Do you know what happened?"

"Oh yes. At the time I didn't know I was dealing with Superman but I got a call from Inspector Henderson, I told you about him. He asked me to come down to the station to pick up my partner, Clark. They told me that a homeless man found him wandering the streets. A beat cop recognized him and called Henderson who told me that he'd lost his memory. Clark had an 'accident' earlier in the week so I attributed his memory loss to that."

"An accident?"

"I don't know exactly what happened, but I think he stopped a car from hitting him when *Nightfall* caused a mini-eclipse and he faked being hit. Anyway, I took Clark back to his place because the police psychiatrist said being in familiar settings would help his memory. Once I got him home, he and I were talking and he asked me if we were friends, and I told him yes. Then he asked if we were *more* than friends and I got nervous and told him that we weren't that close. He seemed very sad when he heard that. I know now that, even without his memory, he had real feelings for me but I wouldn't acknowledge them. It seemed no matter what I did, Clark's memory wouldn't come back. Martha and Jonathan even came out, to try to jog his memory. He'd destroyed a large portion of the asteroid but there was still a really big piece coming straight

for the planet."

"So what finally worked? How did Dad get his memory back?"

"We were talking about Superman. Clark wanted to hear about him from my point of view. Again, I didn't know this at the time, but Martha and Jonathan had told him *he* was Superman but he didn't believe them at first, and even when he did, he couldn't remember how to fly. Something I said triggered his memory and Superman returned and took care of that remaining piece, pushing it out of the way this time instead of ramming it with his head!"

"That's amazing. I read some of your articles from that time but I could tell that you'd left out a lot. I'm glad you were able to fill in the blanks."

"I'm glad I could give you some insight into your dad back then. They treated him badly even though he put his life on the line for the whole world. Clark would never say it, but I will. Every person on this planet owes him for their very lives. That's why I declined the offer to interview me. I couldn't hold back how I feel and I didn't want to give that 'documentary' any legitimacy." Lois's body language told Lara that, even after 25 years, she was still very upset.

"I never knew..." Lara said, stunned at how people had treated her gentle father just because he was different. If Superman had never existed, life on Earth would have been vastly different, if it had survived at all. Shaking herself out of her reverie she now had a whole new level of respect for her father.

"Well, that's enough of that," Lois said, changing the subject to lighten the mood. "What have you and Ken been up to lately?"

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### Chapter Thirty—Wedding Jitters

June 15<sup>th</sup> dawned sunny and warm with the high predicted for the upper 70's. It was a beautiful day for a wedding. Lara and her attendants were ensconced in their suite on the fourth floor while Ken and his brothers had a suite on the third floor. Most of the out-of-town attendees had rooms in the same hotel, where the reception would also be held.

At 9:00 a.m. the female members of both families met in Lara's suite to get ready for the ceremony at a local Catholic church near the hotel. But Lara noticed one family member was missing when she scanned the room.

"Grandma, isn't Lois coming?" Lara asked, leaning to whisper in Martha's ear.

"I left her a message last night after the rehearsal dinner, so maybe she's just running late," Martha said reassuringly. "It's too bad she ran into bad weather and her flight got in too late to make the dinner."

"I know. I think I'll give her a call anyway." Lara stood up and walked into her bedroom. "Lois? It's Lara, are you coming up?" Lara asked when Lois picked up the phone.

"Good morning, Lara. I'm sorry, I'm running a bit behind that's all. I didn't get a lot of sleep getting in as late as I did," Lois replied apologetically. She hadn't planned on meeting the other women this morning because she was nervous about the reception she'd get from the others. It would be bad enough at the reception when everyone except Lucy and Martha would be wondering who she was.

"Okay, as long as you're coming. Everyone is here already and they're looking forward to meeting you. By the way, I've already explained to everyone about our 'situation' so no one should be asking awkward questions, in case you're worried." Lara hoped to calm any fears Lois may have had.

"Thanks, Lara, I appreciate your kindness. I'll be up in 15 minutes, room 412, right?" Lois replied, relieved that she wouldn't have to spend all morning answering uncomfortable questions.

"See you soon!" Lara hung up the phone and returned to the living room to find everyone chatting away. Lara had performed introductions when everyone had first arrived so now her friends

and family had broken up into little groups to get to know each other better. When the knock on the door sounded Lara opened it.

“Lois! I’m so glad you’re here. Please, come in.” Again Lara performed the introductions, pointing out Ken’s mother and grandmother as well as her friends, Sally, the Maid of Honor, and Ashley, the Bridesmaid.

“My, Lara, you certainly resemble Lois, don’t you?” Mary, Ken’s grandmother observed. “You two could almost be twins!”

“That’s very kind of you, Mary, especially given my age,” Lois replied humbly.

“I saw a picture of Lois when she was my age and you’re right, we *could* have been twins. I just hope I look as good when I’m her age,” Lara said smiling proudly.

Lois got a cup of coffee and was just stirring in the creamer when Lydia, Ken’s mom, stepped up beside her.

“I’m glad you made it, Lois, we were all so disappointed when we heard that your plane was getting in too late to come to the rehearsal dinner,” she said sadly.

“Yeah, just my luck. There was a big thunderstorm over Metropolis that delayed my plane for over three hours! Then we had to circle O’Hare because of weather there too. I didn’t get in until after midnight,” Lois said frustrated. “I wanted to say thank you too, it was very nice of your family to let Ken give Lara that beautiful ring from your grandmother.”

“It was our pleasure! Lara’s such a wonderful girl, so well brought up and polite and she sure loves my Ken, a mother can always tell.”

“I know what you mean, Lydia. The first time I met Ken I knew he was the perfect man for her. You and Charles must be very proud of him.”

“Oh we are, Lois, we are. We have three wonderful boys and their wives are just like daughters to us. We were wondering if Ken would ever find someone, then, out of the blue he met Lara and that was it. By the way, how long are you staying?”

“Through the weekend. I haven’t seen the Kents since Thanksgiving and it’ll be fun to catch up.”

“That’s good, maybe we can get together as well. You know Clark sure is a handsome man, isn’t he?” Lydia said conspiratorially, “I bet his dance card will be full today!” she said with a chuckle.

“I’m sure it will, but they’ll have to get in line if you know what I mean,” Lois said ominously though her smile took some of the threat out of her statement.

Lydia smiled conspiratorially. “Come on, I want you to meet my mother, she loves the *Daily Planet* and she’s looking forward to meeting you.”

While Lois and the other family members chatted, Sally and Ashley helped Lara into her gown. When Lara reentered the living room, all conversation stopped. She wore a long white gown with a pleated waistline and beaded back, her hair was in gentle curls that framed her face and fell to her shoulders.

Martha, Lois, and Lydia stared at the beautiful bride before them with tears in their eyes. Martha walked over to her, followed by Lois and Lydia, and took her hand, kissing her on the cheek.

“You’re so beautiful, Lara. I’m so proud of you!” Martha said, her eyes sparkled as memories of the baby that she held in her arms overwhelmed her.

“Thank you, Grandma, I owe it all to you. You’ve been my role model since I was little. You taught me what it meant to be a good person and a good woman. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

Lois and Lydia, who had been hanging back, stepped in to give Lara hugs.

“My Ken is a lucky man to have a woman like you marry him,” Lydia said and she kissed Lara on the cheek.

“I’m the lucky one, Lydia. He’s the man I never thought I’d meet and I love him so much!” Lara said as she kissed her new

mother-in-law.

Turning to Lois, Lara gave her a fierce hug. “And thank you, Lois. I owe you a lot too.”

“Me? You don’t owe me anything,” Lois said softly her voice choked with emotion. “I abandoned you because I thought I’d be a horrible mother. If anything I owe you an apology. I wish I’d dared to be your mother.”

“You’ve already apologized and I accepted. There’s no need to go over that again. I *am* glad you’re here now, and that’s all that matters.”

“Lara, honey, the photographer should be here soon,” Martha said, “Do you have your something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue?”

“My engagement ring is my something old and I bought new earrings for today but I don’t have anything borrowed or blue,” Lara said.

Martha handed Lara a handkerchief made from a very familiar blue material. “Here, this is made from the same material as your cape,” Martha whispered in her ear.

Lois reached into her purse and pulled out a beautiful diamond solitaire necklace which she fastened around Lara’s neck. “This is your grandmother’s necklace. She wanted you to wear it as your something old or something borrowed so you’re all set!”

Just then a knock sounded announcing the arrival of the photographer.

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Down in suite 312, Ken and his brothers were also getting ready.

Ken was dressed with his tuxedo shirt open halfway, tucked into his tuxedo pants as he walked out of the bedroom. His two brothers, his dad, and grandfather stood around the coffee service, chatting amiably. When there was a knock on the door Ken opened it to find Clark and Jonathan standing there.

“Clark, Jonathan, come in, the guys are here already. There’s coffee and croissants if you want them.” Ken led them over to the gathering.

“Guys?” Ken called out. “You remember Clark and Jonathan Kent, Lara’s dad and grandfather?” After handshakes all around Clark and Jonathan grabbed a cup of coffee and set about mingling.

“Charles, we didn’t have a lot of time to talk last night and I want to congratulate you on having such a wonderful man for a son,” Clark said. “Lara’s an only child, as you know, and I’m probably overprotective of her, but when I met Ken, I knew he loved her as much as she did him and I couldn’t have been happier. I couldn’t have picked a better man to marry my little girl.”

“Thanks, Clark, that’s very kind of you. We all love Lara, she’s a wonderful woman. She’s told us many times it was you and her grandparents who were her role models growing up so you should be proud as well. It’s just too bad that we’re all so spread out, geographically. Maybe this year you and your family can come for Christmas?!” Charles asked hopefully.

“Sounds good, Charles, we’ll certainly try. It looks like my dad and yours are getting along well,” Clark said, nodding to the corner of the room where Jonathan and Michael seemed to be deep in conversation.

“Yeah, they hit it off at dinner last night. It’s nice to see Dad so involved. I think he’s been a bit lonely since he moved to Arizona.”

“If I know my dad, he’ll be on the phone to Michael a lot now that they know each other. I know Lara has been teaching him about internet video calls so they will probably connect that way now,” Clark said.

Over the next hour, the conversations turned to sports teams with everyone extolling the merits of their respective home teams until the photographer arrived. After a few moments to straighten

ties and put on jackets, he took picture after picture of the wedding party then it was time to head over to the church for the ceremony.

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The priest, Father Philip O'Malley, was standing at the front of the church as friends and family of the happy couple streamed into the pews. While most of the younger attendees seated themselves, a few of the more traditional women waited for Ken's brother to escort them to their seats. Last month, he'd met Ken and Lara in person for the mandatory counseling session and was very pleased to see the obvious love and affection they had for each other. Over the years he'd counseled a lot of couples and he'd developed a sense of which couples were a good match and which were not. Lara and Ken most certainly fit into the first category, as he'd rarely seen two people so in tune with each other so he had cut the session short, seeing no need to drag it out any longer than necessary.

Now he was waiting for Ken and Dave to enter, the signal that festivities would soon commence. Looking over the bride's side, he saw a thin brunette woman seated next to Lara's grandparents. This person had to be Lara's mother who had been unable to make the rehearsal dinner due to bad weather. Looking closer he noticed the obvious resemblance between mother and daughter. Both were strikingly beautiful women, with similar builds. Returning his attention to the crowd he saw that the flow of people had dried up and were waiting expectantly.

When Ken and Dave walked out to stand beside him the excited chatter grew louder in anticipation of the arrival of the bride.

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Clark, Lara, and her attendants were waiting in a room off to the right of the vestibule for their cue.

"You about ready, Pumpkin?" Clark asked with a slight catch in his voice.

"Come on, Dad, no crying, you'll get me started and I don't want my makeup to run," she replied, her eyes shining brightly. "I may be getting married but you'll always be my Daddy, you know. I couldn't have asked for a better man to be my father."

"I know sweetheart, and I am so very happy for you. Ken's a wonderful man and I know that he loves you... almost as much as me," Clark said with a grin.

"Did you talk to Lois about giving me away?" Lara asked, changing the subject.

"Yes, she was surprised but very pleased. You've come a long way from that woman who walked into the *Daily Planet* and chewed out the Editor in Chief!" Clark said with a grin. "I'm so proud of you, Pumpkin." Just then, Clark heard the opening strains of the Wedding March. "It's time."

Offering Lara his arm, they followed Ashley and Sally through the door where they picked up their flowers as they exited.

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### Chapter Thirty-One—Wedding Bells

As the first strains of the Wedding March floated over the congregation, Ashley Barnum began the procession. She walked purposefully down the aisle, followed by Sally Barrett, the Maid of Honor. They wore maroon ruffle spaghetti strap chiffon dresses and carried a small bouquet of spring flowers. When Ashley reached the front Lara and Clark appeared and all eyes turned to face them. Lara wore a pure white gown with a pleated waistline and beaded back, she carried a bouquet of pure white roses. The crowd murmured appreciatively and many of them remarked that they'd never seen a more beautiful bride.

"They're right you know. You are the most beautiful bride I've ever seen," Clark whispered as they slowly made their way down the aisle. When they reached the front, Clark passed Lara over to Ken who gently took her hand in his trembling one. Clark stepped over to the front pew to wait for the next part.

Father O'Malley cleared his throat, "Ladies and gentlemen we are gathered here today for the marriage of Kenneth and Lara. Who gives this woman to be married?"

Four people stood, Clark, Jonathan, Martha, and Lois who responded in unison "We do." then they sat down to enjoy the ceremony.

"The bride and groom would like to say a few words before we recite the traditional vows. Kenneth, you may begin."

"Lara, I can hardly believe that a wonderful person like you chose me to be your husband. I am and will always be honored to wear the title of your husband. When we met it was as if lightning struck and I was never the same. I promise I will work to be worthy of your love every day of my life," Ken said solemnly.

"Ken, I wasn't looking for love when we met but I could do nothing else but fall for you that day. Your kind heart and loving nature make you easy to love but it is your support of me in all that I do that confirms that love. I too promise to be worthy of your love every day of my life," Lara replied.

Father O'Malley smiled at the couple before him and turned to face Ken.

"Kenneth, please take Lara's hand and repeat after me."

"I, Kenneth James, take you, Lara Lois, for my lawful wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health, until death do us part."

"Lara, please repeat after me."

"I, Lara Lois, take you, Kenneth James, to be my husband. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love and honor you all the days of my life."

"The rings please?" Dave handed the priest the two white gold bands which he blessed then he handed the smaller ring to Ken.

"With this ring, I thee wed," Ken said as he slipped the ring onto Lara's finger.

Father O'Malley then passed the larger ring to Lara.

"With this ring, I thee wed," Lara said, her eyes shining as she slipped the ring onto Ken's finger.

"Now, by the power vested in me by the Church and the great state of Illinois I pronounce you, Husband and Wife! You may kiss your bride."

Ken and Lara moved into each other's arms and their lips met in a kiss that professed their love and commitment. When they drew back, they turned to face the congregation, their faces split into wide smiles.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is my distinct pleasure to introduce Mr. and Mrs. Ken McCarthy!" The congregation all stood and applauded as the happy couple walked back down the aisle. When they reached the steps the crowd that had gathered began throwing birdseed at the happy couple. The wedding party then climbed into the limo for the short ride to a local park for more pictures while the Kents and the McCarthys headed over to the hotel to make sure everything was ready for the reception.

An hour later the wedding party arrived at the hotel and they, along with their parents and grandparents, formed a receiving line. For the next few minutes family and friends congratulated the happy couple.

"Lara, Ken, this is Jim Olsen and his wife, Penny," Clark said introducing his friend.

"Oh yes, Mr. Olsen, I remember you," Lara said, "We spoke briefly that day I stopped by to see Lois," Lara said. She remembered exactly *how* brief their conversation was.

"I'm surprised you remember me," Jim said with a chuckle. "You were focused like a laser on seeing Lois, if I remember correctly."

Lara blushed a little at how angry she was that day. "I have a good memory for faces, Mr. Olsen. It's very nice that you and your wife are able to attend."

"We wouldn't have missed it, right Penny?"

“Oh, yes. Jim and I have been following your career for a while so it’s great to finally meet you. If you have some time later, we’d love to talk to you about your world travels,” Penny Olsen exclaimed.

“I’ll do my best, again, thanks for coming.” A while later another couple made their way near the front of the line.

“Hi, Mr. Kent, you look very handsome today,” Lindsay Ross-Pierce said leaning in to kiss Clark’s cheek.

“It’s good to see you too, Lindsay. Ben, how are you doing?” Clark asked, shaking hands with Benjamin Pierce, Lindsay’s husband.

“We’re well, Mr. Kent, we’re going to be buying a house soon!” Ben said proudly.

“That’s great! Oh, where are my manners,” Clark said, “This is Lois Lane, Lara’s mother.”

Just as Lois was about to extend her hand in greeting Lindsay spoke first.

“So *you’re* the prodigal mother,” Lindsay said with a sneer. Immediately Ben grasped his wife’s elbow fairly dragged her along the line to where Lara and Ken were waiting.

“What was *that* all about?” Lois whispered before the next couple could introduce themselves.

“Tell you later, long story,” Clark whispered as he extended his hand to the next couple in line. Later, when the wait, staff was pouring champagne for the toast, Lois reminded Clark of his promise.

“Clark, I’m familiar with the reference but what’s up with that woman?” Lois said her anger from earlier had returned.

“Lindsay and her husband, Ben, were all part of a group of kids Lara grew up with. Lindsay’s mom and dad, Lana and Pete Ross, that’s them over there.” Clark pointed to a couple at a nearby table. “They were friends of mine growing up so it naturally followed that we’d get together, at their house or ours, when I moved back home. When the kids came along Lara and Lindsay played together. For some reason, when they were around six, Lindsay began to pick on Lara for no reason. Lindsay’s parents loved her and she had a wonderful childhood but I think she was jealous and insecure, though I could never figure out why.

“Lindsay was especially mean to Lara about not having her mother at home, even though other children were living in single-parent homes. I remember one incident when Lara came home from school as angry as a wet hen. When I asked her what happened she told me that Lindsay had been picking on her about her mother again and she shook her little fist and said that if Lindsay didn’t stop, she was going to let her have it!” Clark chuckled.

“She didn’t!” Lois exclaimed, “Though I can certainly sympathize with the sentiment.”

“I almost laughed, she looked so angry but I couldn’t. Anyway, once I got myself under control, I told her that violence never solved anything and I certainly didn’t want her expelled from first grade! I also explained that, for whatever reason, Lindsay was jealous and insecure, and she needed to ignore her. That worked, for the most part, but there was another incident when Lara was learning to control her hearing.”

“Oh, what was that about?” Lois said curious about this aspect of her daughter’s life.

“You know that, if conditions are right, I can hear people calling for me no matter what else is happening?”

“Yes, I remember times like that.”

“Well, Lara heard Lindsay talking badly about her to Lara’s friend, Sally even though she wasn’t trying to listen. Lara was very upset but what bothered her was that Sally didn’t defend her.”

“Oh, that poor girl,” Lois said, her heart went out to her child and her troubles of so long ago.

“Lara got over it, obviously, but she was disillusioned for a while when her friend didn’t come to her defense. She also

became more diligent about controlling her superhearing.”

“You know, Clark, I’m getting a better idea of why Lara was so angry at me that day. If I’d had to put up with people picking on me for my absentee mother all my life, I’d be really angry at her too!” Lois said as tears formed in the corners of her eyes. “I’m so glad that Lara forgave me. I don’t know if I’d be that forgiving.”

“Of course you would, Lois. You’re a wonderful person and our daughter is too. I was very proud of her when she forgave you.”

Just then the Dave, Best Man, began to clink his champagne glass to call for everyone’s attention which brought Lois and Clark’s conversation to a halt.

“For those of you who don’t know me, I’m Dave, Ken’s older brother, and the Best Man. It is my honor and pleasure to say a few words about the happy couple. Ken is the last of us brothers to get married and I’m sure my mom despaired of him ever finding the love of his life.” The crowd laughed at that, many of them looked at Lydia who was nodding her head in agreement.

“When Ken told us that he’d met a reporter when he was in the hospital and that he was going to marry this woman we were all surprised. He’d never talked about any woman he’d dated like that, especially as they hadn’t even dated at that point. He talked about this woman as if she were near perfect and we all assumed it was a case of love being blind. Well, when Ken brought Lara to our Christmas gathering, I saw that he’d been very accurate in his description.

“When I first met Lara, I thought that Ken should go out and buy some lottery tickets because he had to be the luckiest guy on earth to have a wonderful person like Lara fall in love with him!” Again the audience laughed and Ken blushed and gave his brother a nudge in the side. “Lara, as you all know *is* a beautiful woman but it’s not her physical beauty I speak of. She’s the kindest, gentlest person and very down to earth to which I credit her Kansas upbringing.” Lara blushed prettily as Dave extolled her virtues.

“Ken is a great person, a great brother and, I know, he will be a great husband. So, it is with great pleasure that I propose this toast. May Lara and Ken be as happy in fifty years as they are today! To Lara and Ken!”

“To Lara and Ken!” Everyone echoed to great applause. As the crowd fell to eating, the DJ played soft mood music in the background. When dinner finished, the wait staff cleared the dishes and the DJ called Lara and Ken to the dance floor.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Lara and Ken have requested for their first dance the song “*When You Love Someone*” sung by Bryan Adams.” As Lara stepped into Ken’s arms the first strains of the song floated over the gathering.

*When you love someone  
You’ll do anything  
You’ll do all the crazy things that you can’t explain  
You’ll shoot the moon*

*Put out the sun  
When you love someone  
You’ll deny the truth*

*Believe a lie  
There’ll be times that you’ll believe you can really fly  
But your lonely nights have just begun  
When you love someone*

Ken guided Lara around the dance floor as they gazed deeply into each other’s eyes. “I’m so glad you picked this song, honey, it’s beautiful and it reflects how we feel about each other,” Ken whispered in Lara’s ear which made her shiver deliciously.

“This isn’t dancing you know.” Lara looked into Ken’s eyes mischievously a moment later.

“It isn’t?” Ken replied confused.

“Nope, *real* dancing is floating around the room three feet off the floor.” Lara leaned in and kissed him quickly. “Dad used to

dance that way with me when I was little.”

“Maybe we should save that for when we’re alone, huh. We don’t want to give away the secret in front of all these people!” Ken hugged his wife close the feel of her in his arms soothed his soul. When the second verse began other couples, including Lois and Clark, joined them on the floor.

*When you love someone*

*You feel it deep inside*

*And nothin’ else could ever change your mind*

When you want someone

When you need someone

When you love someone

*When you love someone*

*You’ll sacrifice*

*You’d give it everything you got*

*And you won’t think twice*

*You’d risk it all*

*No matter what may come*

*When you love someone*

*You’ll shoot the moon*

*Put out the sun*

*When you love someone*

Dancing continued for some time then, after they cut the cake, it was time to toss the garter. A chair was set in the middle of the dance floor and Lara sat down. The couple had previously discussed how they would handle this tradition as neither one of them wanted to make Lara uncomfortable but they still wanted to have some fun.

Ken knelt in front of Lara who drew her dress up just past her knees where a white lace garter rested on her right leg. As “*Another One Bites the Dust*,” by Queen played in the background Ken trailed his hand sensuously up her leg. He grasped the garter with his fingers and slowly drew it back down to her foot and off, their eyes locked the whole time.

When the cheering stopped the call came for all bachelors to gather on the dance floor but Clark held back.

“Why aren’t you getting in there, Clark?” Lois asked, “You’re an eligible bachelor.”

“I’m the bride’s father Lois, it wouldn’t be right.” Clark’s embarrassed expression said it all.

“Oh go on, it’s all in fun anyway,” Lois said with a playful grin as she pushed him onto the floor. Clark walked to the back of the crowd sure that this position would not be conducive to catching the garter. However, when Ken turned his back to the assembled bachelors, he tossed the garter so far it sailed over everyone’s heads to land right in Clark’s hands!

Clark looked over to Lois as she valiantly tried to suppress a laugh, her eyes twinkling. He put the garter in his pocket and rejoined Lois with a disgruntled look on his face.

“It’s gonna be fun, Clark,” he mimicked, “Yeah right!”

“Hey, how did I know Ken had such a strong arm?” Lois said innocently. “Tradition says that you’re the next one to marry, got any hot prospects, Kent?”

While Lois may have been teasing Clark was extremely serious when he replied. “I can think of one,” he said, his eyes locked onto hers for a moment. The mood was broken when the call came for all single women to go to the dance floor for the bouquet toss. Before she even had a chance to demure Clark pushed Lois, gently, onto the floor.

“I’m gonna remember this, Kent,” Lois whispered, sure that Clark would hear her. Lois’s luck was not nearly as good as Clark’s because she was nowhere near the bouquet as it flew into the crowd.

For the next few hours, Lara and Ken circulated the room talking to friends and family, people they hadn’t seen in quite some time.

“Pam, you know my husband, Ken, right?” Lara said when

she and Ken walked over to her boss’s table.

“Oh yes, we met when you brought him to the newsroom open house. It’s nice to see you again, Ken,” Pam said. “This is my friend, Gary Burns.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Burns,” Ken said, shaking hands. Gary Burns was about six-foot-tall, in his early forties, of average build with dark brown hair that was greying at the temples.

“Gary, please. Your DJ plays great music, not like a lot of weddings I’ve attended.”

“Yes, he does. Pam told me you loved to dance. I see that you two have taken advantage of the music,” Lara said with a smile.

Gary smiled at Pam. “Pam’s a wonderful dancer. It makes dancing a pleasure with such an accomplished partner.”

“I’m sorry we can’t stay and chat longer but we have a lot of people to see,” Lara said reluctantly.

“You two go ahead. Come on Gary, I love this song!” Pam grabbed Gary’s hand and led him back to the dance floor.

“Gary seems like a nice guy,” Ken said.

“Yes, he does and Pam seems to like him a lot. She told me he’s an architect and she met him at a charity function. I think she’s been dating him for a while.”

“Do you think they’re serious?”

“I hope so, Pam’s a great person and she deserves to be happy.”

As they were heading over to talk to Ken’s grandparents Ben Pierce caught them.

“Lara, I want to apologize to you and Ken for what Lindsay said. I don’t know what possessed her to talk to your mother like that,” Ben said embarrassed.

“Don’t worry about it, Ben. I’m used to Lindsay by now. I just ignore her, though maybe you should apologize to Lois.”

“I’m planning to but I saw you first. Anyway, I’m sorry she made a scene, I’ll see you later.” Ben turned away to head in Lois’s direction.

“I don’t envy him,” Lara said. “I heard Lois talking to Dad earlier and she was quite upset.”

“I wondered why you seemed distracted, eavesdropping were you?” Ken chuckled.

“No! I just heard Dad mention Lindsay’s name and I tuned in for a moment.” Lara’s blush told him that she’d done more than listen for a moment.

“Whatever you say, dear,” Ken said innocently as they continued to make their rounds.

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### Chapter Thirty-Two—Love Realized

Two hours later Lara and Ken had visited with everyone at the reception and it was time for them to change out of their wedding finery in preparation for the honeymoon.

Lara and Ken headed over to where her grandparents, Clark and Lois stood. “We’re going upstairs to get changed now. Grandma, you’re going to bring my dress to my apartment, right?”

“Yes, dear. Lois and I are going to drop it off. She wants to see your place while she’s here.”

“Ken, who’s returning your tux?” Clark asked.

“Dave’s taking care of that for me. Thanks for asking, Clark.” Ken squeezed Lara’s hand. “Well honey, shall we?”

Lara and Ken exited the hall and climbed into the elevator where they stopped at Ken’s third-floor suite. He opened the door, grasped Lara in his arms, and carried her over the threshold.

“Ken! We’re only going into your room.” Lara said when he set her down.

“I know but I wanted to get some practice in for when we get to Egypt. I’ll be right back.” Ken walked into his bedroom and began to change.

“That was some party, huh, sweetheart?” Ken said from inside the room.

“It sure was. I don’t know if you noticed but Sam and Ellen

were dancing together!”

“I did. I hope that means that they’re working towards a reconciliation. Maybe seeing us so much in love has rubbed off on them!” Ken said with a laugh.

“I hope so. It would be a shame to have them go back to their old ways once they get home.” Ken stepped out of the bedroom dressed in black dress slacks, a light blue shirt, and an electric blue tie.

“Ready?” Ken took Lara’s hand and took the elevator to her fourth-floor room. When Lara opened the door Ken scooped her up again.

“You’re getting quite good at that you know,” Lara said. She planted a lingering kiss on his lips then turned around. “Unbutton me, please?”

Ken’s hands shook a little as he undid the buttons on the back of her dress. As more of the dress parted Ken leaned in to kiss her back then he wrapped his arms around her waist.

“Ummm, Lara,” Ken whispered, his breath on her skin made her shiver with delight. “Your skin is so soft.” When his hands began to slide up her sides, she gently stopped him.

“As much as I love your hands on me, we have to wait, okay?” Lara said regretfully.

“Sorry. I got carried away by your beauty.” Ken released his bride chastened, but only slightly. “Go get changed. I promise to be a good boy.”

Lara’s eyes twinkled as she glanced at him over her shoulder. “Not too good I hope!” Two seconds later Lara returned wearing the dress she’d worn to Thanksgiving at Lucy’s, a cobalt blue scuba crepe sheath dress with black slingback heels. Lara took Ken’s hand and they returned to the reception.

“Ellen, I want to return your necklace,” Lara said as she handed the diamond solitaire back. “It was perfect for something borrowed. Thank you very much.”

“I’m glad you liked it, dear. It looked very beautiful on you.”

Sam leaned in and kissed Lara’s cheek. “When do you think you’ll make it to Metropolis again? Ellen and I would love to take you two out for dinner.”

“I don’t know, Sam. I’ve used up most of my vacation.” Lara noticed the disappointed looks on both their faces. “But we’ll try, okay?” Sam and Ellen both smiled happily.

Lara and Ken made one last circuit around the room then they headed to the lobby. Ken’s car waited for them, parked under the portico.

“Daddy, I love you, so much!” Lara hugged her father tightly and kissed his cheek.”

“I love you too, Pumpkin.” Clark’s eyes misted up as he hugged his daughter. “Have a good time on your honeymoon. Be sure to take lots of pictures!”

“I will, Dad.” Lara drew back and smiled tremulously.

“Lois, I love you.” Lara wrapped Lois in a fierce hug.

“I love you too, Lara. Thanks so much for letting me into your life!” Lois returned the hug with equal ferocity and kissed Lara’s cheek. “I wish you nothing but happiness in your married life.” With a whisper, she continued. “Be sure to bring Ken and your pictures when you get back, okay?”

“I will.”

The scene repeated with his family and her grandparents and when they drew back everyone had tears shining in their eyes.

While Lara had been saying goodbye to her folks Ken had done the same and now, they were ready to leave.

“Bye everybody!” Lara exclaimed as Ken opened the door for her.

“See you in two weeks!” Ken said happily as he climbed into the car. Ken tooted his horn and they both waved as they drove away.

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Lois and Clark stood with other family members at the

entrance to the hotel where the reception was still going on watching Lara and Ken drive away.

“There goes our baby, off on the next phase of her life,” Clark said, wistfully.

Lois moved closer to him and their arms touched. She grasped his hand and interlaced her fingers with his, and leaned her head onto his shoulder.

“You know, Clark... maybe we could try again?”

The End

This completes the story of Lara Kent and, if that is all you’re interested in you can stop reading now. However, if you’d like to see how Clark responds to Lois’s olive branch, please, read on!

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### Epilogue (The Lois and Clark Epilogue)

Lois and Clark stood with other family members at the entrance to the hotel where the reception was still going on watching Lara and Ken drive away.

“There goes our baby, off on the next phase of her life,” Clark said, wistfully.

Lois moved closer to him, their arms touching. She grasped his hand and interlaced her fingers with his, and leaned her head onto his shoulder.

“You know, Clark... maybe we could try again?”

Clark Kent’s breathing stopped, had he heard correctly? Had Lois suggested that *they* could be together?

“Do you mean that, Lois?” he asked hopefully. He loosened their grip so he could turn to face her and took both of her hands in his while the rest of the family returned to the reception.

“Yes, Clark, I do. We’ve wasted too much time already.” Lois’s eyes met his, her gaze steady. “But I do have three conditions.”

“Three? Last time it was only one,” Clark replied, as his eyes met hers steadily. “But it doesn’t matter. I agree to any conditions you want.”

“How can you agree? You don’t even know what they are,” Lois said her eyes twinkling.

“I don’t care what the conditions are. I know what I want and what I want is *you*, Lois Lane.”

Lois’s eyes darkened to obsidian points, her heart rate and respiration sped up though outwardly she looked as calm as ever.

“Be that as it may, you need to know what the conditions are so you don’t violate them,” she replied, her voice soft and sexy.

“I agree, please continue.”

“First, you have to leave the *Smallville Post* and return to the *Daily Planet* to work for me. Your byline has been missing from the paper for *way* too long.”

“Won’t your other reporters feel you’re playing favorites?” Clark asked with a grin.

“Oh, don’t worry about that, there’ll be no favoritism from me. I treat all my reporters the same.”

“Ouch! I’ve heard you’re pretty tough but, okay, I agree.”

“Next, you’re going to move out of your parent’s home and move into my condo. I have plenty of room, two bedrooms, but only one is going to be used so there is plenty of room for you.” Lois stepped closer, their bodies almost touching.

“Do you have a secret closet?”

“Secret closet?” Lois asked, confused.

“Yes, for the Suits,” Clark said as if it should have been obvious.

“There’s a big closet in that unused bedroom. I’m sure you could build one in there, right, Superman?” she whispered.

“Yes, I can. Okay, I agree to that one as well.”

“Lastly, since you asked me to marry you and I turned you down, sometime in the future, probably the near future, I will ask you to marry me and you’ll accept.” Lois’s expression was serious but her eyes glinted with mischief.

“You’re awfully sure of yourself, Lois Lane.”

“Of course. I *am* Lois Lane. You know I always get what I want.” Lois moved in until their bodies touched, her eyes bore into his, her hands resting on his chest. “and what I *want* is you, Clark Kent. Do you agree?”

“I do,” Clark said, his arms wrapped around her waist as he tugged her into his body.

“Remember those words, Kent, you’re gonna need them.”

“God, Lois, please don’t talk like that, you’re gonna kill me.”

Clark groaned though his body responded to her closeness, as her fingers traced the buttons of his shirt.

“What’s stopping you? I’ve got a room upstairs with our name on it,” Lois grinned teasingly.

“How long do we have to stay at the reception?” Clark asked, his willpower weakening.

“Too long!” Lois said as she dragged him into the hotel.

They got to the elevators and pushed the button, waiting impatiently. Lois glanced at the stairs and grinned. Clark scooped her into his arms and into the stairwell. He checked that they were alone then Clark sped up the stairs, to the third floor where he stopped in front of her room. Lois pulled the keycard from his pocket where she’d deposited it earlier and unlocked the door. Clark pushed it open, carried Lois across the threshold, and kicked the door closed.

If anyone had been within hearing distance, they would have heard a low moaning female voice cry out.

“Ohhh, Clark!”

THE END

(Really)

Story Notes:

Lara’s wedding gown: Fit and Flare Gown with Pleated Waistline and Beaded Back

<https://www.justinalexander.com/justin-alexander/collection/wedding-dresses/88108/>

Lois’s dress for the wedding: Katie May Madison Dress

<https://www.bhldn.com/products/madison-dress-black?color=Navy&via=Z2lkOi8vdXJibi9Xb3JrYXJlYTo6Q2F0YWxvZzo6Q2F0ZWdvcnkzM0E2RTA5NDA>

Maid of Honor and Bridesmaid dress: Ruffle Spaghetti Strap Chiffon Bridesmaid Dress

[https://www.davidsbridal.com/Product\\_ruffle-spaghetti-strap-chiffon-bridesmaid-dress-w11885\\_long-bridesmaid-dresses](https://www.davidsbridal.com/Product_ruffle-spaghetti-strap-chiffon-bridesmaid-dress-w11885_long-bridesmaid-dresses)

First Dance Song: *When You Love Someone*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X9XYfUsp4Ro>

Sung by Bryan Adams

Written by Bryan Adams, Michael Kamen, and Gretchen Peters

“Another One Bites the Dust” is a song by the British rock band Queen. Written by bassist John Deacon.

Note: The calculation of Lara’s life expectancy is 270 years for a full-blooded Kryptonian less the average lifespan of a human female of 89 equals 181 years, before considering superpowers.

Some of you may question my take on the capacity of the globe. I think that a society that could produce interstellar probes could also store a ton of information on a device the size of the globe. Here is a link to the lunar library, something we have already done.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/mach/science/30-million-page-library-heading-moon-help-preserve-human-civilization-ncna977786>

One small component of the archive is the time capsule Beresheet’s creators alluded to: a collection of songs, children’s drawings and writings about Israeli culture and history. But the rest is truly encyclopedic. Included in the Lunar Library’s more than 200 gigabytes of data are the entire English-language version of Wikipedia; tens of thousands of fiction and nonfiction books; a

collection of textbooks; and a guide to 5,000 languages along with 1.5 billion sample translations between them.

All that information is etched onto 25 stacked nickel disks, each just 40 microns (about 1/600th of an inch) thick.

For those of you not familiar with computer storage measurements here is what I found: A kilobyte (KB) is 1,024 bytes, not one thousand bytes as might be expected, because computers use binary (base two) math, instead of a decimal (base ten) system. Computer storage and memory is often measured in megabytes (MB) and gigabytes (GB). A medium-sized novel contains about 1 MB of information. 1 MB is 1,024 kilobytes, or 1,048,576 (1024x1024) bytes, not one million bytes.

Similarly, one 1 GB is 1,024 MB, or 1,073,741,824 (1024x1024x1024) bytes. A terabyte (TB) is 1,024 GB; 1 TB is about the same amount of information as all of the books in a large library, or roughly 1,610 CDs worth of data. A petabyte (PB) is 1,024 TB. 1 PB of data, if written on DVDs, would create roughly 223,100 DVDs, i.e., a stack about 878 feet tall, or a stack of CDs a mile high. Indiana University is now building storage systems capable of holding petabytes of data. An exabyte (EB) is 1,024 PB. A zettabyte (ZB) is 1,024 EB. Finally, a yottabyte (YB) is 1,024 ZB.