

Garden of Memories

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Rated: G

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Summary: Fifty-nine years have passed since Lois and Clark exchanged wedding vows at the end of “Stranger In our Midst.” Now alone, but still determined to live out the rest of her years productively and surrounded by her family, Lois contemplates life without Clark. But as is usual with this couple, nothing is ever as it seems...

This is another story which takes place in the Stranger Universe and it occurs on the occasion of Lois and Clark’s 60th wedding anniversary. Unfortunately, Clark is gone, leaving a bereaved, but still determined Lois alone to carry on as the indomitable matriarch of the vast Kent clan.

Yet despite all that, this is *not* a deathfic.

There are a lot of people I need to thank; Anti-Kryptonite, Bob, Ray, KenJ and HappyGirl. The idea for the last letter came from Pam Jernigan. But most of all I want to give credit where it is due: to Deborah Joy Levine for breathing new life into comic book characters and to Teri Hatcher and Dean Cain for making it all look so easy.

Disclaimer: Most of the characters in this story belong to DC comics and December 3rd Productions. I receive no monetary reward for this work. This is just my way of saying thank you for providing so much enjoyment to so many people over the past twenty years.

A once beautiful, but now elderly woman sat alone under the protective shelter of a newly restored cedar gazebo in a spacious, lovely garden carefully looking through her wedding album. The sharp scent of fresh cedar merged seamlessly with freshly brewed amaretto flavored coffee and spring flowers. She wore a blue dress, and to ward off any chill, was securely wrapped in an ancient burgundy shawl, lovingly knitted decades ago by her Aunt Grace.

This was a unique day, unlike any other in the calendar year. On this date exactly sixty years ago, she wed her best friend and partner, Clark Kent.

The wedding album’s binding had cracked, and in many spots the pages had begun to fade and yellow. Yet still the love and sheer bliss of that unforgettable evening came shining like some luminous beacon through all the years and decades that followed.

Despite her husband’s death nearly six months ago, she still clung desperately to her love for him, much as she clung to the warmth and memories of the old shawl.

Had it truly been sixty years since the night they exchanged rings and wedding vows?

Her body told her so, moving from the townhouse to the gazebo had been something of a chore. Every muscle and joint creaked in protest. Yet somehow she’d managed the walk down the flagstone path, worn smooth by generations of Kent feet.

Jonathan Kent would have been immensely pleased knowing his loving craftsmanship had survived long after his gentle blue eyes had closed for the final time.

Despite the fact that her body was fading away, her mind remained as sharp as the day she and Clark had met. She often wondered if that had been a final gift from him. Perhaps his aura had somehow allowed her brain’s functions to remain firm while

her body gradually weakened from age.

As she looked over the pictures, it occurred to her that she was the last living attendee of the event.

What a depressing thought.

No, that wasn’t exactly correct, Olivia Amundsen, Cat’s daughter, was still very much alive. Although she had been safe inside her mother’s womb that lovely evening. She was just as vibrant, unpredictable and auburn haired as her mother, yet every now and then George’s cautious bent peeked out — sometimes holding her back from doing something imprudent.

Dear Olivia. Her parents would have been pleased to see that their daughter grew up to be the leading scientist at S.T.A.R Labs.

She and a team of highly trained geneticists had discovered a rejuvenation process that slowed and reversed the effects of aging. Olivia had been so certain of its results that she volunteered as the first human guinea pig. Thankfully, her father’s careful behavior had not come to the forefront on that particular occasion.

The results — that was too bland a word — were nothing short of spectacular.

Within three months the fifty-nine-year old scientist had regained the youth and vigor of a thirty-year-old. Such a fantastic discovery could not be kept under wraps indefinitely. Overnight, S.T.A.R Labs had become the wealthiest and most financially stable company on the planet.

Regrettably, at this point, the process did not work for anyone over the age of sixty-five.

Lois shook her head at the thought. It figured she was too old for the treatment. Imagine a chance to live her life over again. Being the matriarch of the Kent family for *another* sixty amazing years. Her descendants were spread across the planet and the solar system. Taking her time to visit each one would forever satisfy her wanderlust and love of adventure. Who knows, maybe another Pulitzer Prize awaited her?

But no, it was not to be. The days of late night stake-outs and long boring hours spent in researching a story were gone. Still, despite being in her mid-eighties, Lois’ life was far from isolated and sedentary. Twice weekly, she conducted an on-line writing course for high-school students. It kept her connected with the younger generation outside of her family.

Her children, grands and great grandchildren flew in to visit her frequently; not a week went by when a gentle whooshing sound wasn’t heard in the garden heralding the arrival of another Kent descendent. Some weeks the garden seemed more like a take-off and landing strip than a place of peace and quiet reflection.

She sighed. Her mind had gone a wandering again. What was she doing? Oh yes, looking over the album, her annual pleasure.

Memories appeared unbidden, fast and flickering, like fireflies on a summer evening as she gingerly turned over page after fragile page of old style photos.

On the end sheets were notes from the guests — some wishing a long and happy marriage, some with funny remarks and some with loving, sage marital advice. Elderly eyes looked over the words. In some spots the ink had vanished. But all the notes were sealed with care in her memory.

- *A perfect wedding ceremony to start a perfect marriage for a perfect couple — Jack*
- *Hey CK! It took a long time, but you two are a smooth couple! Maybe Lucy? — Jimmy*
- *Lois, remember, Clark is a catch, hold onto him with both arms... and legs! — Cat*
- *Marriage is like a perfect Elvis song: Lois, love him tender. Clark, love her deep and everything will turn out fine — Perry and Alice*
- *Thanks for the eats! — Bobby*

She always chuckled after reading the missives and mentally

seeing all those dear departed faces. Snatches of songs came to mind. How she and her handsome groom danced in the garden under glistening starlight. The delightful way Uncle Mike's food tasted. The air had been lightly scented with lavender, jasmine, tulips and freshly cut grass that evening.

Years later, whenever those particular scents wafted by her nose, memories and a feeling of genuine contentment came over her. Marriage to Clark Jerome Kent had its challenges, but the tiny joys and significant triumphs outweighed them all. Theirs had been a happy marriage, but even the best of friends occasionally have minor disagreements. Suddenly, words escaped unbidden from her throat.

"Oh, Love! How I wish you were here!"

Also unbidden, the most painful memory of the garden beat through all the happy ones like the angry flapping wings of a hunting bird of prey.

It had been early November, and Metropolis was deep in the grip of blizzard. Lois had awoken around two in the morning to discover Clark's side of the bed cold and without any sign of it having been slept in. That in itself was not unusual, but Clark always left a note on her nightstand if he was going on a short patrol, working on an article or just flying to clear his mind. She remembered thinking, <Come on old girl, the kids do most of the serious superhero chores these days. Maybe a cat needed rescuing from a high tree branch?>

Yet when she turned her lamp on the nightstand held nothing. "Cl...Clark?" She called out. Oh, how she hated how feeble and timorous her once-vibrant voice sounded in her ears!

There was no response.

It took five minutes to convince stubborn ancient limbs to get into her robe and negotiate the stairs, all the while muttering dark curses at her errant husband. If he took a late night flight and forgot to leave a note ...

But her thoughts took a decidedly bleak turn when she failed to smell coffee brewing and his computer terminal was dormant. If he were researching a story, both machines would be working, and since Clark was so neat and careful about such matters, Lois immediately became concerned. Where was he? Why was the air downstairs stiff and freezing cold? Her eyes shifted to the French doors leading to the garden. They were wide open. The last vestiges of annoyance vanished and were replaced with her heart pounding with sheer panic.

Her mind immediately began to race, none of their former enemies were still alive, and Clark's secret identity had remained intact all these years. This was completely out of character for him.

"Clark!" she shouted.

A mindless all-consuming fear cascaded over her, colder than any mere winter night's white frigid blast. With each halting, terribly painful step, the fear grew deeper, chilling her bones and tightly clenching her belly. Leaning heavily against the French doors, she struggled to make her stiff, icy fingers, turn on the outside floodlights. When the bright illumination split open the darkness, she looked down upon the most improbable sight imaginable; her husband of fifty-nine years lay face down in the snow. Gentle snowflakes were still falling as they softened the outline of Clark's body. His left hand was under his chest while his right hand, now blue with cold, reached out and had scrawled three words:

Lois, I love...

Her memory of what occurred immediately after she found Clark's body was as blank as a freshly whitewashed wall. She did not remember calling CJ, yet her son arrived with his wife, Mira, in his arms. Ever practical and calm, Mira settled a hysterical Lois down by taking her upstairs and then making a very strong

cup of Oolong tea. Sadly, she had to leave her husband the very painful task of bringing his father's body, inside the relative warmth of the townhouse. He listened for any sign of a heartbeat. With his vision blurred by tears, Clark Jerome Kent, Jr. tenderly carried his father's body to S.T.A.R Labs.

Subsequently, using state-of-the-art diagnostic equipment, Dr. Ignatius Klein, Bernie Klein's great-nephew and S.T.A.R Labs' Superman specialist, concluded that Clark's heart had simply given out. No other feasible justification could be found.

Such a simple explanation was cold comfort to his wife. That terrible winter night, Lois Lane-Kent had lost her partner, husband, and lover. From every corner of the planet and from three different moons and Mars Base Alpha, the Kent family swiftly gathered to mourn the loss of its patriarch. CJ had informed the media that in accord with his parents wishes, Clark Kent would be buried at the family plot in Smallville.

There had been a seventy-two hour delay before the funeral home was allowed to receive Clark's remains ... from S.T.A.R Labs. Despite being overwhelmed with grief, Lois could not contemplate why Iggy did not release his body to Metro Gen immediately as per the family emergency plan. Reporter instincts on the alert, she intensely questioned the doctor about the delay when he came to the townhouse. Her suspicions were compounded by the guilty look on Dr. Klein's face while expressing his condolences. Those suspicions pressed on her mind, but emotionally and mentally she too worn out to give them any deep consideration.

The following morning after Clark's remains were released to the funeral home, an announcement was made by LNN that the famous journalist and writer Clark Jerome Kent had died of a heart attack. Condolences had poured in from news agencies all over the solar system. Clark and his wife, although retired for a number of years, were still well-known journalists and writers.

Clark Kent's family, friends and colleagues quietly mourned the passing of a singular person and legendary journalist.

Two months later, the foundation bearing the name of Superman — who had retired long ago from *any* public appearances — announced that the hero had drawn his final breath."

The citizens of a grateful planet celebrated the superhero's life and achievements on a scale like none before. Many heads of state delivered eloquent speeches about the Man of Steel and hundreds of remembrance ceremonies were held in his honor. Perhaps the most fitting was in Metropolis, his adopted city. On the former site of the Daily Planet building, there were plans to erect a twenty foot high statue in his memory.

Lois of course had been asked to attend and speak at the memorial service in Centennial Park. The Kent family spokesperson issued a simple statement: "Lois Lane-Kent regrets that she will not be able to attend due to poor health."

That statement was not untruthful. Lois was still heartsick over Clark's sudden death. She remained in bed for days on end, refusing to listen to any of the memorial services for her husband's alter ego. She even neglected to work on her family project: a glorified scrapbook that she and Clark had begun to commemorate their many years as friends and partners.

This lethargy alarmed CJ to such an extent that he hired a nurse, Alva Lemay, a strong, if perhaps a little overbearing, middle-aged woman to care for his mother. For another two months Lois' health was indifferent at best. But as the weather grew warmer and her 60th wedding anniversary drew nearer, she gradually rallied and recovered.

Finally, Lois emerged from her sickbed. Instead of going for a brief walk around the block, she wanted to tour the garden.

Her body had not completely recovered from its weakened state when she stepped through the French doors and looked out upon the garden. Her disappointment at seeing the once lush and

verdant outdoor room overgrown, the gazebo covered with weeds, the flagstone path swathed in sickly green moss and the Italian Cypress trees untrimmed, was almost more than even Lois could endure. Suddenly she felt long forgotten anger rise and she turned to her nurse.

“This is a disgrace!” she said aloud. “How could the family have allowed this to happen?”

“Now, take it easy, Mrs. Kent,” Alva said in a patronizing tone Lois could barely tolerate. “I told Mr. Kent it was best. No one should trouble your recuperation with gardeners and landscapers making a lot of fuss and noise. It might have gotten you upset.”

Lois looked at the stocky, grey haired nurse, shook her head in exasperation and rolled her eyes. Years of being a reporter trained her to listen for the sound of deception and condescension in the human voice. The nurse spoke to her as if she was a doddering old woman with one foot in the grave. It was true, her body *was* fragile. But her mind was still as keen as a razor.

Unfortunately, Alva steadfastly refused to see beyond the physical. In her single minded way, Lois was still the bedridden, grieving widow. The nurse even had the nerve to tell CJ what was best for his mother! What was worse, the dear lunkhead listened to her! From somewhere in the past, a scrap of a conversation she had had with Clark come to mind. She heard Clark’s voice whisper, “Lois Lane... my little tornado.”

That was all it took.

“You *told* my son not to bother me with the sound of people working on the garden? Obviously you were never raised anywhere near a farm!”

The nurse sniffed and said, “I should say not! I was born and raised in Metropolis!”

Lois rolled her eyes and shot back. “It shows. Alva, contact my children *and* my grandchildren. Tell them I’m calling a family meeting. If they are not involved in any outstanding work or family issues, I expect them to attend via hologram or in person.”

“B...But Mrs. Kent! They’re scattered all over the world and the solar system. They can’t possibly arrive here on such short notice!”

“Pardon me, but this *is* the 21st century. Tell them to contact me tonight at seven o’clock sharp! Oh, and Alva, I will be in my study working on plans for the garden. Also, while this project is in swing, call me Lois Lane!” The elderly woman drew herself up tall, pulled the burgundy shawl tightly around her shoulders, and with as determined a stride as her ancient body could muster, walked back towards the house.

Her nurse ran after her, shouting, “You’re eighty-eight years old! What are you planning to do?” She touched a fragile arm to gain Lois’ attention.

With surprisingly little effort, Lois pulled away from the nurse’s touch, her brown eyes exploding with a fire that for too long had remained dormant. She could literally feel the adrenaline running through her limbs like a herd of wild stallions set free.

“What can I do at eighty-eight? Why, turn this mausoleum of a backyard into a proper garden any resident of Metropolis would be proud to own!” She took deliberate but surprisingly firm steps towards the shocked nurse. “I’m going to redecorate this town house from top to bottom and renovate the kitchen as well! This is *my* home and it needs a proper spring airing. Don’t just stand there woman gaping like a freshly caught fish... make the calls!”

She had spent the rest of the day digging Jonathan’s original garden designs out of Clark’s old files and carefully reworking them to reach mid-21st century standards. The mere action of working again in the study on a new and different project had filled her heart and she seemed to be aglow with a fiery light of intensity.

That evening Lois held a meeting with her children, they were all a little surprised. At first, during the conversation established via crystal link-up, the youngest members of the Kent Clan were deeply concerned that Grandma Lois was losing her grip on reality. Her arms gestured in short stunted movements and babbled about large blue plant containers, amber tea lights and new stone stairs leading from the French doors.

CJ happily recognized his mother’s strength of mind from the past and zeal to get the job completed before spring of 2057. Being the oldest child, he had the most experience with his mother’s moods. He calmed his family members’ fears and concerns. Secretly, he applauded this renewed interest in living; he was deeply concerned grief would completely engulf his normally active mother.

Lara Kent-Gunderson had joined her brother in reassuring the family that they should comply with their Mother’s wishes. But she did mention one thing. “We cannot include my youngest son Jon and his wife Marta who are in the midst of working on the new launch platform for EPRAD.”

“Gram, this is going to take a considerable amount of schedule coordination. After all, we are spread pretty thin across the solar system.” Her youngest granddaughter, Polara Kent stated.

“True. But among thirty-seven people, it should be easy to trade off “super” duties and help in this project. Using your great-grandfather’s original landscape designs as a basis, there’s no doubt in my mind we can all breathe life back into this space and make the garden a thing of beauty. Remember, in addition to the Kent farm in Smallville, this is our family home.”

“Just like Mom to jump into the deep end of the pool without thinking how it will affect the rest of us,” Jason mumbled to his wife.

Lois turned to the holographic image of her youngest son and spoke sharply, “My hearing is as acute as ever, despite my age. Just because you’re living millions of miles away on Mars Base Alpha doesn’t mean I can’t hear you. When I am gone, this townhouse with *all* its family history will still be here, serving as the Metropolis residence for the Kent family. If that’s to be the case, this house needs updating. Your Father had mentioned doing it himself before he died. So with him gone I’m asking everyone to contribute their time and talents.”

Jason bowed his head slightly and responded. “I’m sorry Mom ...”

She smiled at the holographic images before her and continued. “We should consider this an extended family reunion! After all, do we really want strangers to have total access to this building? Who knows what family secrets some contractor might stumble across? It’s bad enough that nurse is here all day. The *only* reason she’s still around is because I need a little help.”

Everyone agreed that the townhouse on Hyperion was their home away from home and it did need routine maintenance and extensive upgrades. Lois’ children were delighted to see their mother take an active interest in *anything* since their Father’s death. The younger ones were also pleased, if a little surprised. They figured she might try to investigate something or someone. This was the family matriarch they knew and loved; Lois Lane Kent; pushy, outspoken, ready to roll up her sleeves and get the job done, water level be hanged.

The frail, tiny woman wore a simple light green pantsuit, which was a welcome change from the dreary, shapeless black clothes she had taken to wearing. She had once been incredibly beautiful and wore smart, sexy outfits in her youth. Then simpler but very sophisticated suits as she grew older, age notwithstanding, she could still dress with style. Lois Lane’s intelligence and manifold attractions had caught the attention of a fabulously wealthy, but notorious man, a government agent, and an unscrupulous doctor. Her children were grateful that none of

those men were their father.

None of them could miss how her brown eyes light up in anticipation of the numerous home and garden projects that lay ahead. They could fully comprehend why crooked judges, wayward captains of industry and white collar criminals were fearful when she caustically pointed an old-fashioned, freshly sharpened yellow No. 2 pencil in their direction. This was a woman to be reckoned with. If she wanted one last great project, who were they to say no?

“No worries, Mom,” CJ stated in a firm voice. “Jase was just letting off a little steam. Repairing that crack in Mars Base Alpha’s protective dome was an unexpected challenge. He didn’t mean anything by it. Did you, little brother?” CJ cast a sharp eye on his brother’s holographic image. Of all of her children, CJ’s face resembled his father the most, but his strong personality was pure Lois.

Jason Kent raised his hands in defeat. “OK! OK! I’m in! I’m in! When do we start?”

“As soon as you can get here,” his mother replied.

The renewal of the townhouse and its accompanying garden was swift and sure. With so many super powered beings working on a number of projects, the entire renovation took only a month. She remembered how surprised her family had been when she insisted on them working at normal human speed.

“No reason to make Alva and the neighbors suspicious,” she had said when CJ brought the new refrigerator in through the garden late one night with only one hand.

Each day, a new change took place, such as two large square cobalt and white planters placed on either side of the French doors. Lois chose the mixture of ivy, coleus and brightly hued flowers which added a much needed punch of color and texture to the garden entrance. She also wanted the worn and neglected path cleared of moss and to have any cracked flagstones removed. Small, but powerful lights were fit into the risers of the steps leading down from the stone landing to the flagstone path.

Jason himself replaced aging wood from the gazebo with fresh lumber and then painted it with a protective coat of varnish. He also purchased as a gift, a classic set of teak table and chairs that fit perfectly under the gazebo’s sheltering roof. Here his mother and visitors could enjoy al fresco relaxing reading and dining

Granddaughter Polara, with much tender care, had managed to prune dead leaves and fertilize most of the Italian cypress. Sadly, others had to be uprooted and replaced with young trees. The city setting was not the best location for the plants, but Jonathan Kent had thought its unique shape was the best possible choice since it would hide his son’s aerial comings and goings

Installing the amber tea lights had been one of the highlights of the garden restoration. They added yet another accent to an area filled with whimsical private spaces to rest and contemplate the beauty of life. Wandering through the enchanted outdoor room, Lois forgot she was living in the heart of Metropolis, only a twenty minute walk to the former location of the Daily Planet, now home to the statue honoring her departed husband’s alter ego.

In the midst of all the renovations, Lois enjoyed animated discussions during meals and breaks with her children about their lives and super rescues. She was particularly interested in Jason’s life on Mars, specifically the incident of the Mars Alpha Base dome developing a gigantic fracture. She asked him to go over everything in painstaking detail from beginning to end. After several weeks of meticulous planning, the dome’s designers and builders had restored structural integrity and strong measures were being taken to assure such a thing would never happen again. Terra forming was still a new science and the city beneath the dome was a daring prototype for other space colonies to

follow.

In the back of her mind, something did not sit quite right with her, and she intended to have Jason send back detailed holograms of the site. It might be restrictive working Earthside only and not be able to visit the site but perhaps she and Polara, a journalist on the Daily Luna, could work together and write a story on the entire incident.

Lois smiled to herself, and thought <The most senior family member and most junior grandchild in the family investigating a case!> She could just imagine the brilliant grin that would appear on his face as her husband contemplated the thought.

Part Two

Now two weeks after the last bit of shrubbery had been planted, the work tools perfectly cleaned and neatly placed in the storage shed, a satisfied Lois surveyed the results with immense pleasure. She closed the wedding album and once again looked out over the freshly painted house and its renewed garden. A sense of peace washed over her like the tide crashing against a distant shore. There was contentment to be sure, but a small, stiff knot of sadness rested heavily in her heart. She spoke aloud, “Clark! How I wish with all my heart you could have been here! Our home looks almost as good as it did when you first moved in. Of course that’s impossible because *you’re* not here.”

Her mind wandered again to key events that had taken place in the lush space:

Clark’s totally unexpected proposal after Cat and George’s wedding.

Their own wedding intimate magical as it was under the evening stars.

Watching *her* parents exchange marriage vows.

The celebration after they had won Pulitzer Prize.

Bringing Clark to the gazebo one clear starry night and telling him the joyous news that after three years of marriage, she was *finally* carrying their first child.

The very private and joyful Kryptonian naming ceremony for CJ, attended only by her parents and Clark’s.

CJ’s first steps on the old flagstones with anxious parents Lois and Clark watching each clumsy, tentative step.

A number of happy Kent family gatherings over the decades; both great and small.

CJ’s evening wedding to Mira. Attended by a crowd of friends much larger than the intimate few who attended his own parent’s wedding ceremony so many years before.

The terrible winter day she found her best friend and lover lying dead in newly fallen snow.

That last memory with all its cruelty came upon her with a clarity as sharp and brilliant as a freshly cut diamond.

Perhaps that was why she wanted to do the renovations and upgrades to give a final thank-you for all the happy years Clark had bestowed upon her.

Overwhelmed by the myriad of memories, Lois allowed quiet, but oddly satisfied tears to slowly roll down withered cheeks. She remembered, shortly after they were married, writing a letter to Clark and placing it in the care of their lawyer, Constance Hunter. It was to be given to Clark six months after her death. She meant for it to be her last letter of good-bye to him, knowing full well that barring kryptonite poisoning, he would most definitely outlive her.

Within the letter she expressed in detail her concerns about raising a family, him remaining young, but her growing older. The actual childbearing itself did not frighten her, but training another human being to be an active useful member of society, now *that* was scary. She wanted their family environment to be a happy and secure one; like what Clark experienced growing up in Smallville, not what she endured as a child. The final point and most important of all ... she wanted him to remarry when the time was right.

Not an easy ‘last’ letter to write, but one which at the time seemed prudent. Now ironically, here she sat mourning Clark rather than the other way around.

A gentle, but clear, voice reached her ears, one she had not heard in quite some time. Aged eyes glazed upon Cat Grant standing before her in the person of Cat’s daughter Olivia Amundsen.

“Aunt Lois? Are you busy? Alva said you were out here, looking over some papers. Should I come back later?”

Lois grasped her chest. “Good grief! What a scare! As for being busy, not since all the kids finished the work on the house and garden.” Her alert brown eyes took in Olivia’s auburn locks and trim athletic figure. The younger woman wore a garishly colored jumpsuit and a pair of red spiked heels. “You look exactly as your Mother did when I first met her. Unfortunately, Olivia, sometimes, your mother’s brash fashion sense takes a hold of you. Still, you look radiant; those Restoration drugs are a marvel. I only wish...” She stopped, took a breath and ran her gnarled hands over the wedding album.

Olivia’s gentle tones spoke aloud what they were both thinking. “That the Restoration drugs could have saved Uncle Clark?”

“I would be a terrible liar if I said no.” Lois answered stiffly, a splinter of Mad Dog Lane coming to the fore after being in retirement.

The younger woman mounted the wide steps to the gazebo, pulled over a wooden chair and gracefully sat down, her easy, supple movements belied her true age.

Olivia’s mouth quirked into a half-smile. Her aunt may have mellowed in the latter half of her ninth decade, but she refused to bend to old age. It did Olivia good in more ways than a few to see her mother’s former nemesis and old friend vital and active. Especially after losing Uncle Clark.

Their conversation turned to many subjects: the extensive renovation work done on the garden and house by the family, Olivia’s own duties at S.T.A.R. Labs, and the considerable expansion of her laboratories and staff. Lois needed her that since her youth had been restored it was high time to find a new husband and settle down again.

Olivia laughed good-naturedly. “Not until I find someone to make me as happy as my late husband did! Until then, I’m enjoying my second youth, and this time, no stupid mistakes.”

Her voice trailed off and then she spoke again, cautiously. “Aunt Lois...if you had to do it all over again, would you?”

The elderly woman thought back to her youth. There were many things she would change. Two of them would be to *never* get involved with either Claude or Lex Luthor. But she wouldn’t alter a single minute with Clark.

“Naturally we all make mistakes. Everyone has a few regrets here and there. But what’s done is done.” Lois’ eyes bored into Olivia’s. “Why does this nagging feeling tell me Cat’s daughter is not here for a social call?”

A subtle creaking of wooden slats filled the air as Olivia shifted uncomfortably in her seat. She had known this remarkable woman all her life. She was too young to have seen Aunt Lois operate as part of Lane and Kent, The Hottest Team in Town. Now a glimpse of what Lois Lane-Kent, ace investigative reporter, was like during an interview came to the forefront. Even the older woman’s body language had altered significantly, ready to do battle.

“So beating around the bush won’t help?” Olivia asked her lips quirked into a teasing smile that reached her green eyes.

“It’s never worked in the past. What’s on your mind?” Lois’ voice sounded young and strong.

Olivia took a moment to think and then spoke very slowly, measuring each word. “For the past six years my colleagues and I

have been working on making the Restoration drug available to a wider range of patients. Including people in their eighties. The final trials are complete, and the results are simply astounding.”

Silence fell down upon the gazebo like a blanket of freshly fallen snow.

“A...are you asking me to participate in an experiment, or is the drug safe?”

“Would I come here making such an offer it were not completely safe? No way do I want to face CJ and the rest of the family if it were not!”

Lois permitted herself an easy smile. “You’ll have to deal with them in either case...especially CJ. In some ways that boy is more Lane than Kent.”

<Perhaps, but not where it counts if truth be told> Olivia thought. She was well aware of the Kent family secret, having discovered it on her own thirty years before. Yet in all that time, she had never breathed a word of it to anyone ... not even to her late husband.

After another interval of silence, Lois spoke again. This time her voice did sound like an old woman’s. “Why me? There are so many others who are more worthy. Doctors, scientists and engineers who have and *should* continue to contribute to mankind’s overall betterment. I’m just a former reporter.”

Olivia snorted derisively. “Right, like Jane Austen was *just another writer!* The journalist team of Lane and Kent uncovered some of the most important stories in the late 20th century and a good deal more in the 21st. Even in retirement, the books you and Uncle Clark wrote both together and apart are *still* required reading in most high school and college level writing courses. Hey, even your trashy Wanda Detroit novel is still in print! Do I need to touch on all those charitable endeavors for the Superman Foundation? We won’t even mention the numerous achievements of that far flung family of yours.”

“Everything is true, but perhaps...” Lois’ voice faltered and cracked.

“Uncle Clark?” Olivia asked in a whisper.

Lois nodded, the silver hair shaking slightly. “To live another lifetime without him? It just doesn’t seem fair...”

Olivia grasped the older woman’s small hands. The flesh was paper thin, veins crisscrossing just below the skin standing out like gnarled branches of an old tree. Still the heartbeat she felt was steady and resilient, not ready to fade away.

It was not an easy decision for Lois to make. If the drug failed, she would die within days, robbing her and her family of whatever precious years remained.

It was a decision Olivia had had to make as well and one she never regretted. Her choice had changed human society as a whole, but the drug was still expensive — and dangerous. But so *many* people were enjoying a second lifetime. They were building on their past achievements and in the process benefiting mankind. Now Olivia wanted to help the last of her mother’s friends to live her life anew. There was still plenty of corruption in the world for Lois Lane-Kent to uncover. She explained the entire process from beginning to end. She chose each word with care; it was imperative to proceed cautiously. When the explanation was done, Olivia ended with these words:

“Uncle Clark would have considered it unfair if his partner did not continue the work they started.” She swung her arms out to encompass the outdoor space. “Look around — this garden abounds with memories and the happy ones far outweigh the unhappy. He would have wanted you to experience decades more here in Metropolis or wherever you wish to go.

Again, a poignant silence fell between the two women, but not for long.

Lois bowed her head; she did not want the younger woman to see her tears. “I will give you my decision in the morning.”

Olivia Amundsen sensed this was the conclusion of the

conversation as well as a dismissal. She stood, bent over, and kissed Lois on her cheek. The elderly woman took her hand and squeezed it gently. No words were exchanged, indeed, none had to be.

Lois heard the young woman's pumps make light clicking sounds on the stairs and over the paving stones. She listened intently as the familiar squeak of the French doors reached her ears and finally all was quiet once more.

One incredible thought thundered through her mind like a raging storm. <To be young again!>

The enthusiasm waned as quickly as it waxed. <Could she embrace a full life with her best friend and work partner absent from her side?>

But wasn't that what she was doing now? Truth be told, while all the noise and chaos was going on during the renovations on the house and garden, she had felt alive as she had not since the days of working with Clark, Jimmy, Cat, Perry and all the other fantastic people at the Daily Planet. Now all was still... the happy confusion of facing something new and unknown was gone.

There were still so many things to do — so many stories to write.

Life without Clark? Oh God, it hurt! Sadly the deep ache like a wound that refused to heal would be there regardless. There would be no more lovely late night flights to exotic locations for quiet romantic dinners. But at least she could continue their work.

"Oh, Love, what should I do?" She whispered.

Suddenly the voice of her nurse Alva rudely disrupted her contemplation. "Hello, Mrs. Kent! It's time to come in and have a nice bowl of oatmeal and a cup of Oolong tea with a dash of honey." The thoughtless woman banged open the French doors and stomped her short legs over the paving stones and up the gazebo's wooden stairs. Her noisy bearing was a sharp contrast to Dr. Amundsen's dignified presence.

"Now come with me. I'll help you down these dangerous steps. Really, must you spend so much time out here? It isn't good! The damp morning air isn't helping that nasty old arthritis!"

Lois' stomach turned listening to the condescending manner of this silly woman. Most of the time the nurse spoke to her as if she were ten years old! She was about to say as much when Alva reached over and removed the fragile photo album from Lois' grasp. <Why on Earth did CJ hire this chumpy woman, and why did I keep her on after the renovations were complete? I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself! She's more annoying than The Prankster!>

"Give that back!" Lois snapped. "I can carry it myself, and I don't need a nursemaid to help me walk down the stairs."

"There, there. This happens every time Dr. Amundsen shows up. Since she regained her youth, her visits have always made you a little cranky. It must be painful to be reminded of bygone days. Well, you and I have had our turn. Now it's up to the next generation."

While Alva spoke, Lois took the album away from the thoughtless woman. Lois sat down on her wooden chair and spoke. "I'll have *my* turn again, thank you very much! Alva, go home and *don't* come back. I'll make sure you're paid for an additional two weeks. Get out!"

Angry and not a little hurt, the nurse opened her mouth to speak, looked into Lois' burning brown eyes, thought better of it, and stomped away, slamming the French doors.

Lois leaned back in the chair and took a cleansing deep breath. She opened the photo album again to a cherished page — their wedding portrait taken in this very gazebo. So much youth, energy and zest for life!

If the treatment was successful, she could possibly enjoy an additional sixty years of life. She missed Clark with every fiber

of her being, but she was not ready to join him in that final sleep. <<Be patient my love>> she thought, I'm coming, but not yet... not yet.

Part Three

She continued going through the photo album and sighed with a little sadness. If the restoration process succeeded she would create a book detailing this new chapter in her life. The argument with Alva had drained more of her energy than she imagined possible. Yet it was very satisfying to send the annoying nurse away.

Unexpectedly, she heard a familiar whooshing sound and thought one of her grandchildren had stopped by for a visit. The recognizable sound of flight once again opened up a floodgate of memories. The air around the garden felt peculiarly still, suddenly she heard — or perhaps sensed — a presence, one that had been absent from her life. There was a sense of vibrant movement in the garden. She was not frightened, more fascinated than anything.

Suddenly she heard a twig loudly snap. The sound cracked open the silence and she turned towards it as quickly as her ancient limbs would allow. A very fine-looking young man stepped out from behind the shed. He was tall, rakishly handsome and wearing a sleek black leather jumpsuit. The color was perfect against his swarthy complexion; she'd always thought he looked utterly delicious in black.

An aperture of memory unlocked in her mind. She remembered the adventure with Vera Doodson. It was shortly after they were married and Bernie had informed her that Superman/Clark's aging process would eventually slow and stabilize. Lois and the rest of the human race would continue to age and he would remain youthful for untold years. She remembered the vision she had of a young and vital Clark visiting her at a nursing home. All of a sudden she realized that memory had crystallized into an uncomfortably painful reality. The thought shocked her to the very marrow of her ancient bones.

"No, this is too much. My Clark is dead!" she shouted at the young man as he approached. The rasping, weak voice of an old woman rang in her ears and she detested the sound.

A rush of cool spring air washed over her like a lover's kiss and suddenly she felt a warm, well-known flesh-and-blood hand caress her withered cheek. "Shh, it's me, honey. I'm alive. I...I couldn't stay away any longer, Lois. It was killing me. Dr. Klein said I shouldn't see you, th... that the shock would be too much for your heart to handle."

Hearing the sweet, rumbling voice she cherished so much and thought to never hear again, made her heart skip a beat with something beyond joy. Still Lois wanted to fight him, wanted to be angry, but the sheer relief of being held by the man she loved was more precious and far stronger than anger. She was ready to accept his return, to feel the happiness and protection of Clark's arms once more. Then her intuition and familiar old habits leaped like wildfire to the front of her brain and she began to tremble with fury and she pushed him away.

"Where have you *been* for six months? Of course Iggy would be worried about my reaction! I'm an old lady! You're perfect! You look *exactly* the way you did when we first met! Clark, what happened? I knew it! That cockamamie explanation Iggy told CJ had something to do with this, right?" She demanded.

"Let me start from the beginning, that terrible night in the garden. I...I just..."

Clark's voice cracked and the heartbreak of their situation struck each of them like a hail of bullets. All the stress, anxiety and grief of the past six months crashed down upon him. He knelt by her and began to weep. The anger Lois felt evaporated and she wrapped her arms around him. He held her close until the shock and distress of their meeting eased away. Clark wiped his tears, stood up and pulled the other chair close to her.

Pleased to be together yes, yet kept apart by a chasm greater than the distance between Earth and New Krypton they clung to each other, sharing a quiet, bittersweet interlude between husband and wife, crying tears of relief and sadness in each other's arms. Human imperfection and fragility formed a greater barrier than either of them would have imagined. Eventually Lois lifted her head from Clark's shoulder. She noticed how long strands of her gray hair lay against the blackness of his clothing. Fresh tears prickled at her eyes. He was once again young. There was a fantastic anecdote to be told and she wanted to hear every word of it.

"Go ahead sweetheart," she whispered shakily, "I'm ready to hear the whole story."

"That cold winter night, I suddenly began feeling a little light headed and nauseous. I went outside for a breath of chilly night air, thinking it would help. However, the symptoms only increased and there was only scant seconds to write a few words in the snow..."

Hot tears skated down Lois cheeks and she nodded, whispering, "I read them. Thank you."

"Up to the very last, my only thoughts were of you. But you need to understand that I didn't die, my body went into hibernation."

"Hibernation? Since when is that part of your powers?" she asked with not a little bit of incredulity.

Clark shook his head and smiled weakly, "Well apparently I aged, but my Kryptonian DNA decided it was time to rest up."

"Rest up? What was I supposed to do while your Kryptonian body took a six month siesta? The entire family was in an uproar. Can you imagine how the great grandchildren took your sudden death? We cried. We *grieved!* CJ and I had to pick out a casket for crying out loud!"

Clark took Lois very gently by the shoulders. He'd been very much aware that she would be angry, even angrier than when Pepper, his long deceased cat, had opened his secret closet and she found the suit. But it felt so good — oh so good — to hear her voice again. So good to know she was alive. However, he still needed to finish his story. So he calmed her down as gently as he could and then continued.

"When CJ brought my 'corpse' to S.T.A.R. Labs, Dr. Klein suspected something was wrong; although my body was stiff from cold it did not go into rigor mortis like a human's. His suspicions were confirmed when he detected a very faint pulse shortly after you and the rest of the family departed for home.

Lois' eyes grew wide with amazement, she wanted to speak, but held her tongue.

"He placed me in an isolation chamber and monitored my body functions for a number of hours. My heartbeat had slowed down to one beat every ten minutes, which was why CJ didn't hear it. He created a synthetic body to look like me and told the doctors at Metro Gen he had performed the autopsy. No one was going to question his authority, especially since our families have been friends for decades. My 'remains' were then turned over to the funeral home with strict instructions not to use any embalming fluids."

"So that's why Iggy insisted on a closed casket? How did he get the funeral home to avoid embalming your... uh the synthetic remains?"

"He wouldn't say how he managed to keep the people at the funeral home quiet. But what he did to you and the family was cruel and I was extremely angry with him when he told me. His reasoning was painfully simple. What if I was in a coma and could never be revived? He knew how much we loved each other. The pain of watching me in that isolation chamber hanging between life and death would have been dreadful for you."

"He has a lot of nerve! I am your wife, and as such I have the authority to make medical decisions for you. That officious

snake! I'll come down on him so hard he'll think its raining hammers!" Lois took in a sharp breath to start another babble string, but stopped shook her head when she realized it didn't matter, Clark was here beside her.

"I was in hibernation mode for five months. Each day my body was repairing itself, getting younger. Dr. Klein made sure I had exposure to sunshine at least three hours every day. It probably would have gone faster if I was outside much longer. But he could not take the risk of a staff member discovering me. The de-aging process slowed and eventually stopped, and shortly afterwards I regained consciousness."

"Waking up in that stark, white chamber was one of the most frightening experiences of my life. All my old nightmares as a child came screaming to the front of my mind. Dad's voice popped into my brain, about me being 'dissected like a laboratory rat'. After Dr. Klein explained what happened, I wanted to come home and be with you. But with Clark Kent declared legally dead, how would I live?"

"What did you do? Create another secret identity?"

He rubbed her hands reassuringly and then spoke. "No. I had to stay in the isolation chamber for several more weeks. My muscles had atrophied due to disuse. It took time, but once I regained my mobility I desperately had to see you. Dr. Klein thought it was a bad idea, but I insisted and came as soon as I could. I waited outside while you were talking to that woman. Who was she? Your nurse?"

"Yeah, but not anymore, she thought she was my keeper. I guess you heard our conversation. It was CJ's idea to hire her." His wife sighed gently, "At the time it was necessary."

Clark rubbed his chin and smiled. "I'm going to have a very serious conversation with that young man when I see him."

His wife couldn't help but chuckle at the thought of a thirty-year-old Clark scolding his fifty-something son. It promised to be a curious and even humorous tête-à-tête.

"Did you hear the entire exchange? Olivia Amundsen came by this afternoon, to offer me the chance to undergo the rejuvenation process. She provided a non-technical, explanation, so I would be aware of what my body would be experiencing. After a week of testing to make sure I can tolerate the stresses, the treatments can begin. It will be conducted over a three week period, each stage would restore about twenty years of vitality. After the final stage I should look and feel like a thirty-year-old."

Clark gazed over at the tiny white-haired elderly woman sitting in front of him. He wanted to spend more time with her, but despite this hope of crashing the age barrier which separated them, he was deeply worried. What if something went wrong? How ironic would it be for him to come back to her from the dead and now she would die?

He determined to push the nagging doubts aside. If this is what his wife wanted to do, he could not stand in her way. All the treatments for the process were to be conducted at S.T.A.R. Labs under Dr. Amundsen's cautious supervision. They both had to trust that the process would succeed.

Lois sensed her husband's apprehension; she smiled and said, "Olivia believes it's safe for people my age. Oh Clark, I'm going to take the process. No way can you be married to a wrinkled old lady!"

He looked at her with deep brown eyes full of love and warmth. "Lois, honey, are you sure?"

"Of course, you lunkhead! A hot young guy like you needs a proper looking woman to partner with, and with Olivia's help I intend to fit the bill! The big problem now is explaining your return. The whole planet knows Clark Kent is dead."

Running his slender fingers through once again jet-black hair, he gave his wife a crooked smile. "We'll think of something. Now that we're back together, nothing's going to stop us!"

Lois smiled in turn, the first truly genuine smile she had

experienced in quite a long time. “You’re darn right! Let’s go in the house and have a cup of hot oolong tea. And you know the first . . . ah, the second thing I’m going to do once my body has completely healed from the rejuvenation process?” she said with a wicked little grin and an arched gray eyebrow.

“Oh, what’s that?” Clark asked, clearly puzzled.

“*We* have a story to investigate a case, the kind that can only be cracked with the combined talents and skills of Lane and Kent. So, while your muscles were rebuilding themselves, did that egghead Iggy keep you up-to-date about current events?”

“Yes, he did tell me what the kids were doing, such as Jon and Marta’s work on the launch platform, especially the crack in the Mars Base Alpha dome. I was very proud of Jason’s skillfulness in handling that particular crisis.”

Lois’ mouth curved in a mother’s prideful smile. “It *was* a very intricate situation for him alone, but he did extremely well. Still, the entire circumstances of the dome’s structural integrity failing was very suspicious. Jason explained in detail about it during the house and garden renovation and some of the things we discussed just don’t quite add up. Now after I’m back to my youthful self, maybe we could fly to Mars and do a little investigating, who knows what we might find.”

Clark listened to Lois talk as he helped her up out of the chair and down the gazebo stairs. Slowly, they walked arm in arm over the flagstone path towards the stone steps leading to the French doors. He was happy to be with his best friend once more and soon, very soon, the Hottest Team in Town would be on the prowl again.

THE END