

Love Will Find a Way

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Rating: PG-13, for violence.

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Summary: Clark has lost the love of his life. Can he find and destroy the evil organization who took her from him and can he find a new life partner? An alternate universe story.

Story Size: 48,253 words (259Kb as text)

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Introduction: As with my previous story, "It Might Have Been," this story will not be very popular with the majority of readers in our fandom. I'm not writing to win a popularity contest, I'm writing what I feel I need to write. I don't know how this will turn out, unlike last time, but I hope the readers who give this story a chance will enjoy it. I also want to thank my beta reader, Morgana, for all her help and suggestions. She provided the description and picture of Erica's dress as well as their rings. This story would not be what it is today without her help.

I do not subscribe to the soulmates theory as espoused on the show. Rather than seeing one person as a soul mate for another as romantic I see it as making for a lot of unhappy people. The chances of finding that one perfect person in the world under this scenario are one in over six BILLION. You have better odds of winning the lottery, twice! My view is there are many people with whom one could be fulfilled and live a very happy life. Could one person fulfill us better than another? Yes, but to limit true happiness in life and in marriage to one perfect person is unrealistic, at least it seems so to me. My story explores that theory.

There is a major WHAM in this story, the death of a major character, though it is told through flashback. I don't want *anyone* to read my story without giving adequate warning. Also, please see the link at the end of this story. It is a link that gave me inspiration for my new female character.

I'd like to thank my beta reader, Morgana, for all her efforts. It was her idea for Nancy and for adding the interactions between them. The story would have been much dryer without her input. I'd also like to thank my GE, GooBoo. I never knew there were that many places for commas! Thanks!

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Chapter 1

Clark Kent plopped into his chair, exhausted. It had been the week from Hell and today had been the topper. It had started with an earthquake in Japan, followed by a typhoon in the Philippines; all topped off by yet another forest fire in California. Between disasters he'd had two stories due, both of which were late, and he'd missed his son's first grade play. Clark ran a hand through his hair, frustrated and angry.

Clark scanned the newsroom seeing only a few of the night crew and Perry, of course. 'Sitting here feeling sorry for myself isn't getting this story written,' Clark thought. He tapped his keyboard, bringing the machine to life, and began typing.

Twenty minutes later Clark sent his story to Perry after having proofread it for the second time. He stood, heading to his boss's office. Knocking on the door casing, he walked in, closing the door behind him.

"I'm sorry the story was late, Perry, it's been a long day. I'll be in early tomorrow to make up for it."

Perry White leaned back in his chair, studying the man in front of him. He looked as bad as he probably felt, which was pretty bad. His shoulders were slumped, his face was drawn, and it looked like there were bags under his eyes. Considering who this man was, Perry was shocked to see how bad he looked.

"Clark, son, don't worry about it," Perry said sympathetically. "I know this has been a bad week for you. I'm surprised you've been able to turn in as much as you have, given the circumstances."

"I appreciate the sentiment, Perry, but you pay me to turn in stories and I haven't exactly been doing that."

"Clark, we both know that this week has been out of the ordinary. You turn in your share of work and more and you know it!" Perry said emphatically. "Besides, what other paper had the kind of coverage we had of the earthquake, typhoon and fire?"

Clark met Perry's eyes and emitted a chuckle that contained no humor. "Well considering how much slack you cut me it's the least I could do."

"Son, you're too hard on yourself. You work harder than any two reporters I have. Besides, you have your 'other job' that keeps you more than busy, and on top of that you're a great father—"

"I'm a great father all right," Clark said sarcastically "I missed Jon's school play this week. God, I'm surprised he even recognizes me sometimes!"

Perry rose from behind his desk and moved to the side of the chair Clark sat in. He reached down and squeezed Clark's shoulder, hoping to impart some support to his friend.

Clark turned, looking his boss and friend in the eye. "Thanks, Perry, I needed that. It's times like these, when I feel so overwhelmed, that I miss her the most."

Perry squeezed Clark's shoulder again and paused, to gather himself before he continued. "Me too, Son," he said tightly "me too."

Clark hung his head, cradling it in his hands, his fingers fisting his hair. He'd promised himself he wasn't going to do this anymore. He needed to be strong, for Jon, for his parents, for his friends. And, most of the time, he was. Most of the time he was able to put aside his grief and be the kind of father his son deserved. Most of the time he was able to be the kind of son who he thought made his parents proud. Most of the time he was the kind of reporter he knew he could be, who she would have wanted him to be. Most of the time.

Today was not one of those times.

Clark was pulled out of his funk by Perry speaking.

"Go home, Clark. Play with your boy, read him a bedtime story. Kiss him goodnight and then go to bed yourself. You're dead tired. You need to rest, and that's an order!" Perry said with a grin.

"You're right, Chief, that's the best thing I've heard all week." Clark stood, heading towards the door.

"Oh, Clark?"

"Yeah, Chief?"

"I don't want to see you here before noon, ya hear me?"

Clark smiled, a smile that mostly reached his eyes. "Yeah, Chief, I hear you, and thanks."

Heading to his desk Clark thought, not for the first time, that he was glad Perry knew about his 'other job'. It was weeks like

this that made him really appreciate having a friend in the newsroom who was in the know. Being gone from the newsroom for extended periods had always been a problem for him. In his early days at the Planet he'd been on probation a few times until he'd gotten better at his excuses. Shaking his head he remembered how many times he'd called in from exotic locales with the excuse that Superman had taken him along to this or that disaster. Perry wasn't stupid, he probably knew back then but hadn't let on.

Clark shut down his computer and straightened his desk then grabbed his coat from the back of his chair. He pressed the button to call the elevator so he could finally get home to his family.

"Daddy!"

Clark dropped his coat just in time to gather the speeding 6-year-old into his arms. He drew his son to his chest, reveling in the unconditional love of his son. Kissing the boy he hugged him just a bit tighter, reluctant to release him just yet. Clark pulled back and smiled, the first real smile of the day.

"Hey, Buddy! How was your day?" Clark said setting his son down while he hung up his coat.

"Great, Daddy," Jon said excitedly "we went to City Hall today, did you forget?"

"Yeah, I guess I did. You were going to get a tour and meet the mayor, right?"

"Yeah, it was cool! Our teacher got us into the room where they make laws and everything! The mayor shook my hand!" Jon said proudly.

"That's very nice, Jon." Clark wondered if the mayor would have shaken Jon's hand if he'd known who Jon's father was. "I'm glad you had such a good time. By the way, where's grandma and grandpa?"

Just as Jon was about to answer Martha Kent walked out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a small towel.

"Clark! I thought I heard your voice," Martha said hugging and kissing her boy. "Your father went to play checkers with Paul next door. I've got your supper ready, come on and sit down."

Clark allowed his mother to guide him to the kitchen where he seated himself at the table while she pulled his plate out of the stove and poured him a large glass of milk. She seated herself across from her son, pulling Jon into her lap.

"I hope you're not going out again tonight, Clark. You've been working way too hard. Jon has hardly seen you this week, you know," Martha said softly, her concern for her son showing in her voice.

"No, Mom, I'm not going anywhere tonight if I can help it," Clark said in between bites of his meal. "Perry said the same thing, as a matter of fact. He told me to go to bed early and he didn't want to see me before noon tomorrow."

"Perry's a smart man, you should listen to him," Martha said laying a hand on Clark's arm.

"Daddy, will you be putting me to bed tonight?" Jon asked softly.

Clark looked at the hopeful brown eyes that were looking at him. Jon's eyes were so like Lois's it was scary sometimes. He exhaled a shuddering breath. "Yes, Son, I am. After I finish supper we're going to play whatever game you want, then I'm going to give you your bath and read you a bedtime story. How does that sound?"

Jon's eyes lit up like it was Christmas. While he understood that his daddy had to work odd hours and even though he loved his grandmother and grandfather, having his daddy to himself was the best.

"Can we play Parcheesi?" Jon asked excitedly.

"Sure, if that's what you want to play," Clark said smiling.

"An' will you read me 'Thomas the Tank Engine'?"

"Again? You must know that one by heart now," Clark said laughing.

"Yes, again, Daddy. You said any book I want," Jon said pleadingly.

"Okay, 'Thomas the Tank Engine' it is then," Clark said finishing the last bite of his supper. He rose from the table and put his plate and glass in the sink. "How about you get the Parcheesi game set up while I do these dishes?"

"You leave those dishes to me, Clark," Martha said sternly, though there was a smile on her face. "I'll have them done in no time, you go play with Jon."

Clark walked back to the table, leaning down to kiss his mom, drawing his son into his arms. "Thanks, Mom." Clark straightened and kissed his son's cheek as they made their way to the living room.

Clark closed the book he had been reading and set it on the night table beside his son's bed. He pulled the covers up, tucking his son in. Leaning down further he kissed the top of his head and turned out the light, the only light left in the room coming from the nightlight.

Standing there, watching his son sleep for the longest time, Clark enjoyed the sound of his breathing and the beating of his heart. It was the sound of Jon's heartbeat that calmed him now. It was the sound of his heartbeat that drove him to get out of bed every morning, even when that was the last thing he wanted to do. Not for the first time since that horrible day he thanked God for his son. He hated to even contemplate the kind of person he might have turned into if he'd not had this little man to protect and love. Clark was so lost in thought he didn't hear his mother behind him.

"He's beautiful, isn't he," Martha said reverently.

"Just like his mother," Clark said his voice choking.

"Oh, Honey..." Martha said enveloping her son in her loving arms.

Clark hugged his mother, resting his head on her shoulder. Tears were close to falling but he held them back, barely. Mother and son shared their grief for the wife and daughter-in-law they both loved. Moments later, Clark pulled back from his mother.

"Thanks, Mom, I needed a good hug today."

"We all need a hug sometimes, Honey," Martha said squeezing her son's hands "we're family, we support each other, that's what we do."

Clark smiled sadly. He was tired, bone weary to tell the truth, and what he needed most was sleep. "I'm going to bed now, Mom, good night"

"Night, Honey, I'll lock up once your father gets home."

Clark closed the bedroom door behind him, the weight of the week's activities heavy on his shoulders. He flopped onto the bed, exhausted, struggling to remove his shoes and socks, finally accomplishing the task after the second try. He barely got his shirt off before his eyes closed of their own volition. Awakening with a start sometime later, he realized that he'd fallen asleep sitting up, his shirt still tangled around his waist and wrists. Shaking his head he finished removing his shirt, then his pants, dropping them by the side of the bed. Flopping on his back and, without even turning off the light, sleep claimed him.

Jonathan Kent walked into the brownstone at Hyperion Avenue shortly after 10 PM. Entering the living room, he found his wife reading a book.

"Everybody in bed?" he asked.

"Yes. Clark put Jon down about 8 and he went to bed about 8:30."

"Clark went to bed at 8:30?" Jonathan asked incredulous.

"You should have seen him, Jonathan. He was playing a game with Jon and he nodded off twice! That boy was asleep on his feet most of the night. If he hadn't told me he was going to bed I was going to drag him there myself!"

“He’s sure burned the candle at both ends this week, hasn’t he?” Jonathan said knowingly. “Maybe he should call in sick tomorrow.”

“Perry told him not to come in before noon, so I think he’ll be okay. I’m going to get Jon off to school as quietly as I can so he can sleep. I don’t plan to wake him before 11:00 at the earliest.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Jonathan said around a yawn “How about we hit the hay too?”

“I’m going to check the doors, why don’t you head upstairs, and I’ll be there in a minute.”

Jonathan walked up the stairs but when he reached the top landing he noticed light shining from the bottom of Clark’s door. ‘Hmm, I thought she said he went to bed early?’ Jonathan thought. Walking up to the door he put his ear next to it. Not hearing anything he carefully opened it.

“Son?” he whispered.

Peeking his head into the room he saw Clark sound asleep on top of the covers, snoring softly. Jonathan crept into the room careful not to wake his sleeping son, grabbed the afghan off the rocking chair and draped it over him. Turning out the light and closing the door Jonathan shook his head, worry for his son evident on his face.

Jonathan was just settling in bed when Martha walked into their room.

“I just found Clark sleeping on top of the bed with the light on,” Jonathan said.

“Oh no, is he all right?”

“He’s fine, exhausted but fine. I covered him with the afghan and turned out the light. He should be fine for the rest of the night, barring any emergencies, of course.”

“You didn’t see him tonight, Jonathan. Unless the house fell down around him I doubt anything would wake him up,” Martha said climbing into bed.

Jonathan leaned over, kissed his wife goodnight then shut off the light. Sleep sounded real good right about then.

Clark woke groggily from his slumber, light streaming in the window. He rubbed his eyes trying to get them to focus. Turning his head slightly he looked at the clock on the bedside table. 10:45! He was late for work! He was halfway to the bathroom before he remembered that Perry had told him not to come in before noon. Continuing to the bathroom, Clark showered and shaved at normal speed. Returning to the bedroom he saw his clothes strewn around the bed where he’d dropped them the night before. He picked everything up, dropping it in the hamper, then proceeded to his closet, picking out a white shirt, a gray suit, and a somber blue tie. Dressing at regular speed Clark exited his bedroom at 11:15.

Clark entered the kitchen to find his mother making pancakes. Walking to the coffee pot he poured himself a cup and sat down, heavily, at the table. Before he’d taken three sips of his coffee, a plate of steaming blueberry pancakes was set before him.

“Good morning, Sweetie,” Martha said kissing his cheek. “Did you sleep well?”

“Considering I slept for fifteen hours and I didn’t hear a peep all night I’d have to answer yes to that question,” Clark said around a mouthful of pancake.

“You were exhausted, Clark. You needed the rest and your body finally made you take it. By the way, I was watching the news and it was very quiet last night. Nobody missed Superman,” Martha said gently.

“Thanks, Mom, but I’m not worried. The emergency services are very capable of handling things in my absence. After all, I haven’t been around much this week anyway.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that, Honey. You need to take time for your son. We all understand there are times when you need to be away, like this past week, but the world can deal with its own

problems too. Superman can’t do everything or be everywhere.”

“I know, Mom, and I plan to spend more time at home. Unless it’s a real emergency, my family comes first.”

Martha poured herself a cup of coffee and joined her son at the table. Mother and son sat quietly, enjoying each other’s company. When Clark had cleaned his plate of the stack of pancakes Martha had placed there, he picked his plate up and placed it and his cup in the sink.

“I’ll be off now, Mom, and unless Perry has me on something special I should be home by 5:30.” Clark was almost to the kitchen door when he paused, turning back to his mother. “Mom, how about we all go out to dinner tonight? Can you make us reservations for 6:00 at Lombardi’s?”

“That sounds great, Sweetie! I’ll take care of everything, see you tonight.”

Life was kind to Clark Kent for the next two weeks. His alter-ego was not needed very much allowing him to return to his normal work and home life patterns. Stories came and went with no major investigations coming his way. All of that was about to change.

“Clark! My office, now!” Perry bellowed from his office door.

Crossing the newsroom in seconds, Clark entered Perry White’s office. “Yeah, Chief?”

“Close the door, Son,” Perry said, leaning back in his chair.

After shutting the door Clark took the chair in front of Perry’s desk and waited. He didn’t have to wait long.

“Clark, I’ve been given a tip by one of my contacts.

Something big is going on,” Perry paused to gather his strength for what he knew was going to be a shock to the man sitting in front of him. “Intergang is making a resurgence, at least that’s what my source says.”

Clark felt as if he’d been kicked in the chest. He found he was having trouble breathing and his vision seemed to narrow. If he didn’t know he was invulnerable he would have sworn he was having a heart attack.

“In... Int... Intergang?” he said weakly. “But Perry, we put them out of business years ago!”

Perry had known that his news was going to be a shock to Clark but he couldn’t let it overwhelm them now. “You did, Son, you did. But it looks like someone is trying to resurrect it.”

“Who?” Clark said shakily.

“That’s the problem, we don’t know. All we have right now is rumors of a gang from Central America that has been trying to recruit known Intergang operatives to join them. They’ve been very careful not to arouse attention, but my source was tipped off by an undercover operative who was contacted himself.”

Clark sat there, stunned. Intergang. He’d hoped never to hear that name again. Shaking his head slightly he asked Perry the question that needed asking, no matter how much it pained him.

“Why me, Chief?”

“You’re my best reporter, Clark. If anyone can find out what is going on it’s you. I know I don’t have much to give you because there is precious little to give. I want you to start putting out feelers to your sources as well. Now that we know something is going on, I want you to do everything you can to stop this before they can take over.

“Also, I know this is personal with you. I wanted to let you know as soon as I found out. I didn’t want you to hear this from anyone else.”

Perry noticed the change in Clark’s demeanor immediately. Gone was the devastated man who had been sitting in front of him at the start of this conversation. The man who took his place was every bit a super man, determined to destroy the evil that had stolen his most precious love from him five years ago.

Clark met Perry’s gaze with his own determined one. “Thanks for the information, Chief. I’ll get on this right away.”

“Remember, Clark, it’s still very early, there may not be much to find. I don’t want your regular work to suffer because of this, or your family life, if you get my drift. That boy of yours isn’t going to understand why his dad is gone all the time. No matter how much you want to devote all your time to shutting these bastards down you need to be smart about this.”

Clark sighed, knowing Perry was right. He couldn’t spend every waking minute hunting these animals, as much as he wanted to. He had a job and a family who needed him. “Thanks, Perry. I’ll be careful not to go off the deep end. I hope that you’ll give me a kick in the backside if I start.”

Perry smiled, knowing Clark would be all right. “I sure will, Son. I have that little boy to watch out for you know. Now git and let me get back to this story Ralph submitted. If he wasn’t a board member’s son he’d be out on his ear, I swear!”

Clark chuckled, feeling sorry for Perry, and headed back to his desk.

On the way to his desk, Clark saw Jim Olsen coming out of the storeroom. “Jim, can I see you a minute?”

“Sure thing, CK, what do you need?”

“Come into the conference room with me, I don’t want to talk about this in the newsroom.”

Jim knew something had to be up because of the serious look on his friend’s face. Whatever Clark wanted he’d get it.

“Jim, I need you to do some very discreet searches for me. Nobody but Perry or I can know what you are doing.”

“Of course, CK, what is this all about?”

“Perry just told me that there are credible rumors that someone is trying to reconstitute Intergang,” Clark said keeping his voice low.

“Intergang?!” Jim whispered. No wonder CK was being so secretive about this. If Intergang was on the rise, nobody was above suspicion.

“Perry got a tip from one of his deep cover sources who told him some Central American gang was contacting former Intergang members to recruit them. I want you to start researching every Intergang member we know about. I want to know their current whereabouts, occupations, bank accounts, anything you can get.”

“That’s a lot of data, CK. It’s going to take time, especially if you want to keep this between you, me and Perry.”

“I know that Jim. Only work on it in your spare time. Never leave anything out where someone else can see it. If you can’t find me when you have something, give it to Perry or lock it up. I’m going to be putting out feelers to my sources as well. I think we’ll meet weekly at a restaurant to go over our progress. To anyone else it will look like three friends having a good time, in case anyone is watching, which I don’t think they will be, at least not right away.”

“Sure thing, CK. I’ll get right on it,” Jim said determinedly. “We’ll get ‘em, CK, you’ll see!”

“You bet we will, Jim, you bet we will!”

Clark headed to his desk to get back to the story he’d been working on when Perry had interrupted him. His eyes fell on the picture of Lois that graced the corner of his desk. Picking up the picture he felt tears pricking at the corners of his eyes.

“I’ll shut these people down if it takes the rest of my life, Lois, I promise!”

Clark Kent picked up his phone and dialed the number of his favorite snitch.

“Bobby here!” Clark heard Bobby answer chewing his food all the while.

“Bobby, it’s Clark. I need to see you right away.” Sensing the urgency in Clark’s voice, Bobby put down his sandwich and swallowed noisily.

“Centennial Park, by the fountain, one hour?” Bobby said.

“See you then.”

An hour later Clark entered the park, immediately heading towards the fountain at its center. Spying Bobby Bigmouth sitting on a bench Clark hurried over.

“Walk with me, Bobby,” Clark said, strolling down the path with Bobby following a few steps behind. Clark turned off the path and onto a grassy hill.

“Bobby, I need your help. I was just told that Intergang is being reconstituted. Have you heard anything, anything at all?”

“Intergang!” Bobby whispered. “I thought they were done for.”

“So did I, Bobby. Those monsters killed my Lois and I want them, *bad!*”

“I haven’t heard anything, Clark, but I’ll keep my ears open, no charge. What they did to Lois was unconscionable so anything I can do to help you is my pleasure.” Bobby said sincerely, his face reflecting his anger.

“I appreciate that, Bobby. But be careful, okay? These people are dangerous and I don’t want anyone else getting hurt.”

“Will do, Clark. If I have something I contact you the usual way?”

“Yeah, that’ll be good, thanks again, Bobby, I really appreciate this.” Clark shook Bobby’s hand and walked away, heading out of the park.

Clark’s next stop was Louie’s Bar and Pool Hall. Stepping into the smoky bar Clark looked around for the proprietor, Louie. Seeing him in the back, shooting pool with a very large tattooed man, Clark made his way over to them.

“Clark, what can I do for ya?” Louie said, setting his cue on the table.

“I need to talk to you, privately,” Clark said, a serious look on his face.

“Can ya give us a minute?” Louie said to the man he’d been playing with. Once they were alone, Louie took Clark aside.

“What’s up?”

“I know you hear things. You know guys who know guys. I heard that someone was trying to put Intergang back together and I want them!” Clark growled, his hands clenching into fists.

“I haven’t heard anything like that but I’ll look into it. Anything you need to get them bastards after what they did to my girl Lois!” Louie exclaimed, chomping on his cigar emphatically.

“Thanks, Louie, I knew I could count on you. Be careful though, these are ruthless people and I don’t want anyone else to be hurt.”

“I’ll be careful, Clark don’t you worry. If I hear *anything* I’ll let you know.” Clark shook Louie’s hand and left.

A few weeks later a call came in to Clark’s desk at the *Daily Planet*.

“Clark Kent, *Daily Planet*,” Clark answered absentmindedly.

“Clark, Louie—”

“Louie! You got anything?” Clark asked excitedly.

“Sorry, kid I got nothin’ so far.” Louie said dejectedly. “None of my usual contacts have heard anything. I don’t know if it’s because there’s nothin’ or if they’re scared, but I’ll keep on ‘em!”

“Thanks, Louie, I know you will. We haven’t had any luck either but I’d hoped...” Clark said, rubbing his hand over his face in frustration.

“I wish I had somethin’ for ya, I really do. You take care, Clark and when I hear something you’ll be the first to know.”

“Bye, Louie,” Clark said, hanging up the phone. Since it was after 5:00 he packed up his briefcase, shut down his computer and headed for the elevator. The ride down ended, the bell signaling the elevator had reached its destination. The doors opened and Clark walked slowly over to the old Jeep. Clark climbed in and was about to start the car when Bobby Bigmouth popped up in the back seat.

“Bobby! Geez, you scared me. How do you do that?” Clark said, his heart rate slowly returning to normal.

“Trade secret,” Bobby grinned then his face turned somber. “I’ve had my ear to the ground ever since we talked and, I’m embarrassed to say, I’ve got nothing! It’s like trying to get the lowdown on the Kennedy assassination, for Pete’s sake. No one knows anything, there’s no rumors at all, and that’s not normal. I’m sorry, Clark. I’ll keep on this but right now there’s nothing to find.” Bobby hung his head, his failure weighing heavily on him.

“Thanks, Bobby, I know you’re doing everything you can and I appreciate your efforts. You sure I can’t get you something from that little Italian place you like so much?”

“Nah, but thanks for offering. I told you this was a freebie and I wouldn’t feel right taking payment, though it *is* tempting.” Clapping Clark on the shoulder Bobby exited the car as silently as he’d entered it. Clark heaved a big sigh, turned the key and drove the Jeep towards home.

Chapter 2

Five Years Earlier

Lois Lane rose from her desk and walked over to her partner, her husband, the love of her life.

“I’m going to head out to the Mayor’s press conference now, Clark,” Lois said when she reached Clark’s side. “I’m going to stop by the grocery store on the way home, so you and Jon eat and I’ll get something while I’m out.”

“Gee, is it that time already?” Clark asked noting that it was 4:00.

“Yes, if I don’t leave now I’ll never make it, not with rush hour traffic. I don’t know why the Mayor had to call a press conference at 5:00! It’s not as if he’s going to say anything worthwhile either. I think he’s just doing this to ruin my night!”

“I’m sure that’s the case, Lois. I can see the Mayor and his press secretary plotting to do everything they can to ruin Lois Lane’s day,” Clark chuckled.

“I’ll just be they do!” she laughed, finding the idea humorous. She leaned down and kissed her husband, slipping her tongue between his lips quickly before she pulled back with a sexy smile. “There’ll be more of that when I get home, so I’d advise you to get Jon to bed early.”

The heat in Clark’s eyes made Lois think twice about leaving until she heard Perry reminding her that she needed to get going. “I love you,” she said.

“Love you too. See you later,” Clark said.

Riding the elevator to the parking garage Lois was mentally writing her grocery list. She could do the mayor’s press conference standing on her head and besides, grocery shopping was more fun, and she hated grocery shopping! ‘Correct that,’ she thought ‘I hate grocery shopping *alone*. I love grocery shopping with Clark. He’s so much fun in the frozen food aisle!’

The doors opened and Lois walked quickly to her Jeep. She’d unlocked the door and was about to climb in when she felt a prick in her neck and the world went black.

Lois woke up with a massive headache. Taking a quick inventory of her body she determined two things. First, nothing was broken and second, she was bound hand and foot to a metal chair. She was also blindfolded.

‘Oh sure, I should have known I’d be kidnapped on a day when I wanted to get home early!’ she thought angrily. “Where are you? Why am I here? Come on, I’ve got places to go, things to do!”

“I’d heard you were foolhardy Ms. Lane but I didn’t believe it until just now. Surely you understand the precarious nature of your current predicament?” a low gravelly voice said.

“It’s not as if I haven’t been kidnapped before you know!”

Lois said frustratedly. “All right, why don’t you tell me what you want so we can get this show on the road?”

“I don’t *want* anything, Ms. Lane. You must be confusing me with those psychotic megalomaniacs who have to brag how brilliant they are before they screw up and allow you to escape. I’m not like that. I was hired to kill you,” the man said coldly.

Lois’s heart rate sped up. Somebody hired someone to kill her? She needed to remain calm until she could figure out where she was and hope Clark would come and rescue her. She froze with fear. They hadn’t gagged her but surely they would know she’d call for Superman. Did they have Kryptonite? She needed more information, for sure now.

“Why would anyone want to kill me?”

“Do you really need me to answer that? From what I’ve heard, the list of people who *don’t* want to kill you is the shorter one.” The laugh she heard was one which carried no humor.

“Okay, *who* would actually go to all the trouble of hiring someone to kill me? I’m a pretty high-profile reporter. It can’t be good for business to anger the press, or Superman.” Lois said hoping to find out if this guy had Kryptonite.

“Ah yes, that’s something else that I’d heard. You and Superman are pretty tight, doesn’t your husband mind?”

“That’s old news, Superman and I are *friends*! My husband is Superman’s friend too, you know. Aren’t you concerned I’ll call for Superman?”

“Not really. My employer has provided me with facilities that are sufficiently Superman resistant for my purposes.”

That probably meant she was deep underground and probably in a soundproof facility that was lined with lead. This wasn’t looking good.

“Just who is your employer? You never answered that question.”

“I don’t know. I’m what you would call a contract killer. I get a request through channels that people who need my services know about and I decide if I want to do the job. If I take the job, money is transferred directly to my account in Switzerland and then I do the job. I never see or speak to the people who hire me.”

“Surely there must be an electronic trail for the money?” Lois asked curiously.

“Not with the people who hire me. They don’t want to be traced.”

“May I ask how much you were paid? Maybe I can get you more money.”

“I don’t work that way. Once I take a job I do the job. Besides I doubt you could, Ms. Lane. One million dollars is a lot of money for a reporter to come up with.”

“ONE MILLION DOLLARS!” Lois was shocked. Somebody wanted her dead and wasn’t afraid to spend the money to make sure of it. For the first time in a long time Lois was scared, damn scared.

“You should be proud, Ms. Lane. I’m the best and I don’t work for just anybody.”

“You’ll pardon me if I’m not impressed, given the circumstances,” Lois said sarcastically.

“If I was in your position I’m sure I’d feel the same way. You seem like a nice person, Ms. Lane. I’m going to miss reading your articles in the paper, but business is business.”

‘Ohgodohgodohgod! Clark! Jonny! I love you!’ she thought.

The last thing she was aware of was the cold metal of the gun barrel as it touched the back of her head.

Clark looked at the clock again for the fourth time in the last ten minutes. Where was she? She should have been home an hour ago. She wasn’t answering her cell phone either, but knowing Lois she’d probably forgot to charge the battery again. About the only thing keeping him sane was that he hadn’t heard a peep from her, no cries for help. There had been nothing on the news to cause

him concern, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right. Just as he was going to try her cell again the doorbell rang.

Clark opened the door to find Inspector Bill Henderson standing on his doorstep.

"Bill? What are you doing here?" Clark asked the feeling of dismay he'd been fighting growing exponentially.

"Can I come in, Clark?" Henderson asked neutrally.

"Huh? Oh sure! I'm sorry Bill, please come in. I'm a little flustered because Lois isn't home yet," Clark said in a rush.

"Can we sit down, Clark?" Bill asked not waiting for Clark to offer.

"Sure, Bill. What brings you by?"

"Clark, there's no good way to say this..." Henderson paused to gather his courage. He hated this part of the job anyway but how could he do this to his friend. "Lois is dead."

Clark couldn't believe the words that his friend said. Dead? Lois? Those two words couldn't ever be in the same sentence!

"Bill! This isn't funny! Please, tell me you're kidding!"

"I'm sorry, Clark. Believe me, I wish this weren't true. I'm so very sorry," Henderson said his voice cracking.

"NO!!!!!" Clark screamed. "It can't be true! She was just going to the Mayor's press conference and then grocery shopping! She can't be dead, she just can't be!" Clark cried as he broke down in tears.

Henderson laid his hand on his friend's shoulder, hoping to impart some of the sympathy he was feeling at his friend's loss. As much as he played the part of sparring partner to Lois Lane, he loved her as a very good friend. Henderson had gained grudging respect, then love, for the feisty reporter who always challenged him but who worked with him to bring down some of the worst criminals the city had ever seen. Henderson let Clark cry, God knew he'd be doing enough of that over the next days, weeks and years, but he needed to get it out now.

Sometime later Clark was cried out. "When..." he croaked, "when did it happen? How did she die?"

Bill sighed, he didn't have much information but he'd tell him all he could. "We're not sure exactly when. We do know she never made it to the press conference. She was found about an hour ago, a young couple walking through Centennial Park found her. They were looking for a place for some privacy and they snuck into some bushes. They saw her lying there and they thought at first she'd been mugged and was unconscious but it soon became obvious that wasn't the case. They called 911 and as soon as I heard the description of the victim I headed there myself.

"She wasn't robbed. Her purse, with her wallet inside, was lying beside her, completely untouched. The M.E. found a small caliber gunshot wound in the back of her head but we'll know more after the au—"

"Autopsy? Bill, you can't cut her up!" Clark said anguished.

"Clark, I know how you feel but it's not up to me. This was a murder. We have to do an autopsy. You do want us to find out who did this don't you?" Bill said softly. "Let us do our job, Clark, please."

"Bill, they killed her! Some SOB killed my Lois!" Clark cried out angrily. His anger passed as fast as it came as the enormity of events descended on him. "God, what am I going to do without her?" he said sounding lost and forlorn.

Clark's tears came again burying his head in his hands. It was many minutes before Clark was able to continue.

"Clark, do you have someone to stay with tonight? I don't think you should be alone," he said carefully.

"Stay? I can stay with my parents... Oh God, I've got to tell my parents! How can I tell them Lois is gone? How can I tell Sam and Ellen their daughter is dead?"

"He can stay with his parents? Boy he really has gone off the deep end," Henderson thought. "Clark, why don't I call Perry

White and have him come over?" Henderson rose off the couch, not waiting for an answer, and dialed the number he had in his notebook.

"Perry White."

"Perry, this is Bill Henderson."

"What can I do for you Bill?"

"I need you to get over to Clark's house right away."

"Is he okay? What's going on Henderson?"

"I'll tell you as soon as you get here Perry, trust me. Just get here as soon as you can, but drive safely. Clark needs you."

"I'll be right there!"

Twenty minutes later Perry White rang the doorbell of the Kent home. The door was opened by Inspector Henderson. "Bill? What's going on?"

Henderson directed Perry to the couch where the two men sat, looking at each other uneasily.

"Where's Clark?" Perry asked.

"He's upstairs, sleeping I hope, but I doubt it."

"All right Bill, I'm here, what was so all fired important that I drop everything and get right over here?"

For the second time in an hour Henderson had to break the news that he knew was going to devastate a friend.

"Perry, it's about Lois. She was murdered," he said softly.

The blood drained from Perry's face as he digested the news he'd been given. He'd always feared this day. Ever since Lois had come to work for him she'd been tempting fate. He'd felt that the odds had been reduced when she'd been partnered with Clark. Perry knew he'd watch over her, protect her, even if she didn't want him to. Once they'd started dating Lois had changed, love for Clark had changed her. She'd stopped taking outrageous chances with her life because she had something, someone, she wanted more than the story. When they'd gotten married he'd relaxed even more, she'd become a different person, not better or worse, just different and he didn't worry as much about her.

Ironically, it was the birth of their son, Jon, eleven months ago, that had really lulled him into a false sense of security. Lois had virtually stopped taking life threatening chances to get a story. She and Clark still brought in the big ones, but they did it together. Now his worst fears had come true when he had least expected it. Even though he was overcome with grief he steeled himself so that he could help the man who he loved like a son.

"What happened, Bill? Don't sugar coat it. I need to know so I can help Clark."

"She was found in Centennial Park by a young couple, dumped in some bushes. According the M.E. she was killed execution style with a single gunshot to the back of the head from a small caliber weapon. From what the doctor told me she'd been dead less than two hours when she was found. ... What I didn't tell Clark, I didn't think he could take it right now, there was a note pinned to her chest."

"A note? What did it say?" Perry asked not sure he really wanted to know the answer.

"This is strictly off the record, Perry. Nobody outside of the police department knows the contents of this note. ... Intergang claimed responsibility."

"Intergang," Perry said flatly. Anger flared within his chest. The Church family had fooled him before and now the organization they'd founded had killed Lois, the woman who was like a daughter to him. He vowed to her memory that he'd do everything in his power to bring her killer or killers to justice and dismantle Intergang. Perry sighed, getting himself under some semblance of control.

"Anything else you can tell me, Bill?"

"Not right now, Perry. I'm really sorry for your loss. I promise you this, I won't rest until the person who did this is behind bars!" Bill said fiercely.

"I know you will, Bill. If you need anything from me, or the

Daily Planet, you just ask. These bastards are going to regret this day for the rest of their lives!”

Henderson rose from the couch with Perry following. “I’ve got to get back to the station now that you’re here. I don’t think Clark should be alone tonight.”

“I agree. Keep me posted, Bill. I’ll be running interference for Clark.”

“I will. Good night, Perry.”

Climbing the stairs slowly Perry White made his way to Clark’s bedroom. Perry moved quietly, not wanting to wake Clark if he happened to be asleep. Perry’s hopes were dashed as soon as he poked his head in the doorway. Clark lay on the bed, tear streaks running down his cheeks, staring at the ceiling.

“Hey, Son.”

“She’s gone, Perry. She’s gone! What am I going to do without her?” Clark said with a sob.

Perry walked to the bed and sat down next to his surrogate son. He knew that nothing he could say would change anything. They’d both lost someone who was vital to them, but they’d go on. They had to, if only to avenge Lois. Besides, there was little Jon to consider as well. As if he had heard his uncle thinking his name Jon Kent’s cry was heard coming from the nursery.

“Jonny! I forgot all about Jonny! What is he going to do without his mother?” Clark started to get out of bed but Perry rested his hand on Clark’s chest, stopping him.

“I’ll take this one, Clark. I’m a little out of practice but I think I can handle one little boy.”

“Thanks, Perry,” Clark said sinking back to the bed, staring at the ceiling.

“Hey big guy,” Perry said softly entering the nursery. “What’s wrong?”

One sniff told Perry exactly what was wrong. Glancing around the room Perry found the items he’d need on the bassinet. He gently picked up the child and laid him on the bassinet. After removing his pajamas and the offending diaper, Perry cleaned and powdered the little boy, put on a clean diaper and pajamas, and sat down in the rocking chair.

“I know you don’t understand a word I’m saying,” Perry said softly rubbing the baby’s back. “I’m gonna miss your momma an awful lot, ya know that? She’s like a daughter to me, ya know. I was as proud as a peacock when she gave birth to you. I feel like I’m your third grandfather though Uncle Perry will do fine once you start talkin’. I remember how green she was when she first came to work for me but that gal had what it took, I could see that right away. She knew investigatin’ didn’t mean sittin’ at her desk waitin’ for stories to come to her, no sir, she was out there digging when she was supposed to be coverin’ that dog show I’d assigned her!”

Perry sniffed a bit and shifted Jon a little higher on his shoulder. “Darn, that girl! Sorry for the language, son, but you’ll cut ol’ Uncle Perry a little slack this one time, wontcha?”

As if in answer Jon yawned widely and gurgled happily. Perry smiled at the boy in his arms.

“I knew ya wouldn’t hold it against me,” Perry said with a sad smile. “If I’ve told that girl once I’ve told her a million times, ‘be careful, honey’ I said. The irony of the whole situation is she’s been doin’ that. She’s been careful. She told me recently that she would do everything she could to make sure she was there for you growin’ up. I believed her too. She wasn’t bein’ reckless today! She wasn’t! She was bein’ careful, just like she promised...”

Perry’s voice trailed off and he broke down in tears. How long he cried silently he wasn’t sure but by the time he’d pulled himself together Jon was sound asleep again. Standing slowly Perry laid the baby in his crib, covered him with his blanket and walked slowly out of the room.

Taking a quick peek into Clark’s room Perry could see the

steady rise and fall of Clark’s chest. ‘Good, that boy is gonna need his rest,’ Perry thought. He headed downstairs to the kitchen where he found a pot of coffee. It hadn’t been sitting too long, and it was certainly better quality than was found in the newsroom, so he poured himself a cup. ‘I wonder if Clark called his and Lois’s parents?’ Knowing how distraught Clark was Perry doubted it. Walking into the living room Perry searched near the phone finding the address book he’d hoped was there. Finding the number he needed Perry dialed.

“Hello?”

“Hi Martha, this is Perry White.”

“Hello, Perry, it’s nice to hear from you, how have you been?”

“I’ve been better Martha. Look, is Jonathan there?”

“He’s in the living room. Jonathan, pick up the phone, Perry’s on the line!”

“Hi, Perry,” Jonathan said warily. “What’s all this about?”

Perry sighed, running his hand through his thinning hair. “I’m sorry to have to tell you this over the phone but I don’t have a choice. ...It’s about Lois. ...She was murdered tonight.”

“NO! It can’t be! Oh my poor boy!” Martha cried.

“Perry, where’s Clark, is he okay?” Jonathan asked tears obvious in his voice.

“He’s upstairs sleepin’ though I don’t know for how long. I knew he hadn’t called you so I decided to do it for him.”

“Thank you, Perry,” Jonathan said. “We appreciate your concern. We’ll be there as soon as we can. Could you tell Clark that, please?”

“Sure, I’ll tell him. I’m sure he’ll be glad to hear it. You fly out of Wichita, Kansas right?”

“That’s right, we should be there in an hour or so.” Martha said.

“Good, the Planet has an arrangement with American Airlines. There will be two tickets waiting at the desk for ya.”

“You don’t have to do that Perry, we can pay for our own flight,” Jonathan said.

“I know that, Jonathan. We’re all family here. Clark is like a son to me and I want to do this, so no arguin’, okay?”

“Okay, and thanks, Perry. We’ll see you soon,” Martha said sniffing.

“I’ll be stayin’ here tonight. Clark shouldn’t be alone. I’ll be sleepin’ on the couch so when you get in just knock on the door when ya get in.”

“Bye, Perry. See you soon,” Jonathan said as the call ended.

His next call was to Sam Lane’s home. A few years earlier the Lanes had reconciled and had even remarried. When Jon was born, Sam Lane was as proud as a peacock and really became the family man he’d aspired to be.

“Hello, Lane residence,” Sam said picking up the phone.

“Sam, it’s Perry White, is Ellen there with you?”

“Yes, she’s here, what’s up?” Sam asked, the tension in Perry’s voice was cause for concern.

“I... I don’t know how to say this... it’s Lois, she’s gone,” Perry said, the tears he’d been holding back now running down his cheeks.

“Gone... you don’t mean...?” Sam said, plopping down on the couch next to his wife.

“Yeah, Sam, she was found in Centennial Park, murdered.”

“Murdered? How, when?”

“Why don’t you come over to Clark’s place? I’m here now and I can fill you in on what I know. See you soon.” Perry hung up, his heart heavy.

Perry’s next call was to the Planet to arrange for the tickets and then he called Alice. It was going to be a long night.

Alice arrived thirty minutes later, knocking lightly on the door.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Perry said, hugging Alice tightly.

“How is he?” she asked glancing around the room.

“He’s asleep upstairs. I’ve called Jonathan and Martha, they

should be here in a few hours. Sam and Ellen should be here soon too.” Perry led her to the couch where they sat holding hands. “I’ve changed Jon’s diaper and he was asleep last I knew but can you take care of him when he wakes up?”

Of course, he’ll probably need feeding soon. Do you know if they have formula?”

“Not sure, but I think they do. I overheard Lois tell Clark that they should eat and not wait for her.”

“I’ll check, is there anything else I can do?” Alice asked.

“Not right now, darlin’,” Perry replied. Alice left for the kitchen to track down some formula for Jon.

Four hours later, around midnight, Jonathan and Martha arrived at the brownstone. Knocking on the door a disheveled Perry White answered.

“How’s Clark,” Martha asked, even before she’d set a foot in the door.

“Asleep, thank God. He’s devastated, all he did was cry and rage at Intergang,” Perry said softly so as not to wake anyone.

“Intergang!” Jonathan exclaimed, shocked to hear the news.

“Yes, they claimed responsibility, pinned a note on her chest for God’s sake!” Perry replied, shaking with anger.

“Those animals!” Martha exclaimed, anger rising in her chest.

“We’re gonna get ‘em Martha, Jonathan, if it’s the last thing I do! Henderson promised to keep us informed regarding the investigation too.”

“Are you here alone?” Martha asked.

“No, Sam and Ellen are here and Alice is upstairs too. She has another guest room set up for you. Give me that suitcase, Martha, I’m sure you’re as ready for bed as I am.” Taking Martha’s suitcase he led the way to their room, then closed the door as he left. Going into the other room he quietly took his clothes off and climbed into bed.

“Did Jonathan and Martha make it okay?”

“Yeah, darlin’ they’re getting settled now,” Perry drew his wife into his arms, kissed her lightly, then closed his eyes, finally falling into a restless sleep.

Clark Kent sat at the gravesite with his son on his lap. The sun was shining, and the birds were singing, and it just didn’t seem right. The light of his life had been snuffed out and it just didn’t seem appropriate for the sun to be shining. He sat there, lost in his memories, while the minister droned on and on. Clark felt conflicted. He wanted nothing more than for this whole spectacle to be over, but he dreaded it as well because he didn’t want to leave his beloved wife here, in the cold ground. He wanted her in his home, in his bed, in his life! How was he going to go on without her?

Clark’s musings were interrupted by the squirming of his son. Looking down he saw the little boy wanted to be put down, he was tired of sitting. Jon had only learned to walk a week ago and he hated to be held anymore, always wanting to be on the go, like his mother. As devastated as he was, Clark couldn’t ignore his son. Lois would kill him, for one thing. He was going to have to be father and mother now. ‘I won’t let him forget you, Lois. I’ll tell him about you every day. I’ll bring him to visit too...’ Clark thought, tears falling from his eyes.

Clark must not have been holding Jon tightly for the next thing he knew the little boy was tottering toward the casket. Clark stood to pick up his son, but Jon was faster than he thought. Jon reached the casket looking confused. He scanned the crowd. “Ma-ma?” he said sounding lost. “Ma-ma?”

Just then Clark reached his son and the plaintive sound of his son calling for his mother broke his heart. He grabbed Jon up and squeezed him to his chest. “Mama’s in heaven Jonny. Mama’s in heaven,” Clark cried, the tears falling faster and faster. Clark felt strong hands surrounding him, the arms around him belonged to

his father.

“Sit down, Son, sit down. We’re here for you, boy. We’re here for you!” Jonathan said fiercely.

Thankfully, the service was over not long after. Clark allowed himself to be directed away from the gravesite and back to the car, though he wasn’t really paying attention. Clark clutched his son, who seemed to know that he needed to be quiet for his daddy, Clark whispering soothing words to him.

The next thing he remembered was finding himself in the living room of his house, sitting on the couch. The house was filled with friends from the Planet and family members. Ellen Lane was unusually quiet. Clark suspected that Sam had given her something to calm her nerves. He idly hoped that Ellen wouldn’t fall off the wagon again. She’d been doing so well but you could never tell with Ellen.

Ellen stood up then, coming over to sit next to him, taking his hand in hers.

“Clark, I’m so sorry. I know you loved her and would have been there if you could.” Gazing into his eyes her face grew stern. “I want you to find the bastards who hurt my baby, you understand! She deserves justice and so do we. Remember, if you need anything, help with Jonny, or just someone to talk to Sam and I are here for you!”

“Thanks, Ellen, I appreciate your support. You can be sure I will do *everything* I can to hunt these monsters down!” Clark ground out between clenched teeth. Patting Clark on the hand Ellen rejoined her husband.

Clark saw his mother, playing hostess, bustling around the room making sure everyone had enough to eat and drink. He’d never understood why there was always a buffet after a burial. It seemed so out of place, especially now. He could hear snatches of conversation, people were telling stories of Lois and how much they loved or admired her. It *was* nice to see how many friends she had and to hear their memories of her, but it was too bad somebody had to die before anybody said these kinds of things!

Clark stared into the middle distance, not really seeing anything or anyone when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up to see his boss, his friend, Perry, standing in front of him.

“How you holdin’ up, Son?” Perry asked softly.

“About as well as can be expected, Chief,” Clark said sadly. “If it wasn’t for Jonny, I don’t know what I’d do.”

“Children are a wonderful gift, Son. Devote yourself to him and you’ll pull through. It won’t be easy, of course, but we’re all here for ya.”

“Thanks, Chief. I really appreciate everything you and Alice have done for me this week. I don’t know if I could have handled all the details without your help.”

“It was nothin’, Son. Family takes care of each other,” Perry said, the love he had for his surrogate son shining from his eyes. “Walk with me a minute, please?”

Clark stood, a bit unsteadily, following Perry out through the kitchen and into the back yard. No one was out there but Perry still led him to the far corner of the yard.

“Clark, I’d hoped I’d never have to tell you this, but circumstances have changed,” Perry said seriously.

“Huh? Perry, I’m sorry, but I’m not following you,” Clark said obviously confused.

“I know, Son, I know,” Perry said sadly, running his hand through his thinning hair. “I want to help you, Son—”

“You have, so much, Perry,” Clark interrupted. “I’m very grateful for everything you’ve done for me.”

“I’m talking about the future, Clark. You’re going to need someone to cover for ya around the office now,” Perry said carefully.

“Cover for me?” Clark said warily. ‘Could Perry mean what it sounded like he meant?’

“Oh, heck, Son, let’s stop dancin’ around. I know about your

‘other job’ and I’m offerin’ my help.”

Clark looked at Perry and saw the truth in his eyes. Perry knew! Perry knew he was Superman! Clark started to get nervous, his natural instinct to run away very much in evidence.

“Calm, down, Son,” Perry said, extending a hand to Clark’s shoulder. “I’ll never tell anyone. I would never have told you if things had been different. I knew that if you and Lois had wanted me to know you would have told me. Since you didn’t, I knew you wanted to limit the circle of people who knew about you. I respect that, Clark, and I understand. But things are different now. Lois isn’t gonna be around to cover for your absences. Besides, you’ll need someone in the city you can come to if your other duties get to be too much for ya. What I’m sayin’ is, I’m here for you *and* Superman, however you need me.”

Clark stood there, stunned, for several seconds. On top of everything else Perry knew his secret. He couldn’t really process all the implications of that right now but Perry knowing would probably be a good thing, in the long run. “Thanks, Perry. I seem to be saying that a lot lately, don’t I? I know you’d never tell. When did you figure it out?”

“A while ago, well before you and Lois got married, but I won’t say exactly when,” Perry said with a wink. “Don’t worry, Jim doesn’t know, and the rest of the staff is clueless as well. I’ll leave it up to you if you want to let him know now. He’s a good kid and I think he could be a real help, but that’s up to you.”

“I’ll have to think about that, Perry, but not right now. I’ve got too much on my mind.”

“I know, Clark. How about we head back inside now, people are probably wonderin’ where we are.”

When Clark returned, he seated himself on the couch again, still in shock, processing the fact that Perry knew about Superman. He was so lost in thought he didn’t notice when someone sat down next to him.

“Clark, I’m so sorry,” Lana Lang said, holding her childhood friend’s hand. “I still can’t believe she’s gone.”

“Thanks Lana, neither can I. I still expect to see her walk into the newsroom with a Pulitzer class story any minute.” The friends sat there in silence, holding hands, Clark absorbing the support his friend was offering.

“I know you’ve got too much on your mind right now but if you ever need anything, I’m here for you,” Lana smiled sadly hoping to convey the seriousness of the offer.

“I really appreciate that Lana, thanks,” Clark said gratefully.

Later on Clark wandered into the kitchen for a cup of coffee. He looked at the plates of food spread out over the counter, but his stomach rebelled at the thought of eating. Just then his sister-in-law, Lucy, entered the kitchen with Jon in her arms.

“Clark, could you warm up a bottle for me? Jonny is getting hungry.” Clark pulled a bottle out of the refrigerator setting it in the bottle warmer.

“Thanks for watching him, Lucy, I’m kind of out of it right now,” Clark said gratefully.

“It’s no problem, he’s a wonderful little boy,” Lucy gazed at her nephew with tears in her eyes. “She’s never gonna see him grow up!” Lucy exclaimed overcome with grief herself.

“No... no she’s not,” Clark replied, the tears now running down his cheeks as well. The timer on the bottle warmer beeped so he removed the bottle, handing it to Lucy. Lucy sat at the table, the little boy in her arms with Clark seated opposite her, watching Jonny, both of them thinking of all the things in his life his mother would now miss.

Clark Kent sat in the law offices of Jensen and Jensen. He’d received a call from Mr. Joel Jensen informing him of his wife’s will and requesting his presence at the reading. Clark hadn’t known she’d even made a will and had voiced that to Mr. Jensen at the time. He’d been informed that Ms. Lane had been a client

for years, soon after she’d started working at the *Daily Planet*. Given Lois’s penchant for getting into trouble it made sense to him. He was upset that Lois had never mentioned it though. He thought she’d trusted him.

“Mr. Kent, Mr. Jensen will see you now,” the secretary said gently.

Clark walked into the room the secretary indicated. He was greeted by an older gentleman, probably the senior Mr. Jensen, Clark thought. Clark shook the hand that the man offered him.

“Mr. Kent, I’m very sorry for your loss. I’ve known Lois for years, she was a wonderful person.”

“Thank you Mr. Jensen. She sure was.”

“Please, call me Paul. May I call you Clark?”

“Yes, please.”

“Well, Clark, everything is in order. All of Ms. Lane’s property goes to you as the surviving spouse, of course, but having a will makes things easier, legally at least. The reason for this meeting was really to give you this.” Paul handed him an envelope with his name written on it in Lois’s handwriting.

Clark sank down in a chair and stared at the letter lying on the table in front of him. His musings were interrupted by Paul speaking.

“Why don’t I give you some privacy? Take as long as you need, but please let my secretary know you are leaving as I need your signature on some papers, okay?”

“Thanks, Paul. I’ll do that.”

Clark looked at the letter. This letter was his last communication from his wife. What would she say? He wasn’t going to find out by just looking at the envelope. Picking up the letter, he carefully opened the flap. Sliding the paper out of the envelope he unfolded it and laid it on the table.

My Dearest Clark,

I had hoped you’d never have to read these words, but it seems that fate has conspired against us one last time. When we got married I started putting a letter similar to this in my file, updating it periodically as necessary. I wanted this to be as relevant to our lives together as possible if it ever became necessary for you to see it. I had hoped that you’d be reading a letter from me telling you how much I’ve loved my life and going on and on about our children, grandchildren or maybe even great-grandchildren. That’s not possible now.

Whatever the circumstances of my death I hope you don’t think I was reckless with my life, at least not lately. Ever since we were married, and especially since Jon was born, I’ve been very careful, well as careful as I can be given our jobs. I wanted to live, to share the years ahead with you, to watch my son grow to manhood and maybe have a few more children as well. Who would have thought that Lois Lane wanted a brood of children but I did, as long as they were made with you.

I love you so much, Clark, and I know this has to be horrendous for you, but I need you to be strong, for Jonny. He’s going to need you even more now. He’s going to need his daddy, as am I. Make sure he knows how much I love him, Clark. I know you will, but I had to say it. I’m so sorry I’m going to miss all the milestones in his life, but I’ll be there in spirit if it’s at all possible. You know me; a little thing like being dead isn’t going to keep me down!

Clark laughed sadly, the sound catching in his throat. That was just like Lois, making jokes about being dead!

‘Since I don’t know the exact circumstances I need to say this as well. In case you didn’t arrive in time to save me, DO NOT think this was your fault! It was probably the fault of some criminal who had a grudge against me. This person or persons are to blame, not you. You’ve saved me in more ways than I can say, and not just from dangling over the jaws of death. You’ve saved me from being a bitter old woman by destroying the wall I’d built around my heart and I’ll be forever grateful for that. No

matter how I died I wouldn't trade my life with you for anything. I don't want you wallowing over things you couldn't or didn't do. I know that if you could have saved me you would have, but fate just didn't allow it this time.

Lastly, and I know you don't want to hear this, nor do you think it will ever happen, I want you to be happy again someday, Clark. You're a wonderful man who has a lot of love to give. I want you to be open to love again, Clark. Please, you have to promise me! I couldn't bear the thought that because I died you shut yourself off from the possibility of ever finding love again.

What we had was special, beyond special, but that doesn't mean you can't find someone who can make you happy again. I know you won't ever forget me, at least you'd better not, Kent, but I do know you have room in your heart for me and another love. I want you to try to find that love, or at least be open to the possibility if it happens to find you. I'm going to be pretty angry if you deny my son a mother figure in his life since I can't be there for him. I know the woman who finally captures your heart will understand and not try to take my place with my son but will nurture him as I would have. That's all I want, someone to nurture my son as I would have. So, please, Clark, be open to another love. I know it seems impossible now, I'd feel the same if the situations were reversed, but someday I hope you'll find someone who can love you, and you her.

Remember our pledge? 'I have loved you from the beginning' you said and I said 'I'll love you til the end'. Well, my love, this is the end, at least for now. I know I will see you again in the future. Always know that I love you and I will be watching over you and our son.

All my love, forever and ever,

Lois'

Clark's eyes were filled with tears, tears that dropped onto the letter in front of him. Luckily none of them blurred any of the words on the paper. He dabbed the paper with his handkerchief, then dried the tears on his face as well. Putting the letter back in the envelope, he inserted it in his pocket, knowing he'd cherish this letter for the rest of his life.

"How did things go at the lawyer's office, Clark?" Martha asked. She and Jonathan had been staying with Clark ever since that horrible phone call from Perry White. During that time, she and Jonathan had been talking about what to do now. They'd come to a decision and all that was left was to tell their son about it.

"It went all right, Mom. They just needed me to sign some papers for the most part," Clark said softly. He sighed and his voice shook as he continued. "She left me a letter, Mom."

"That doesn't surprise me," Martha said. It was just like Lois to make sure she was able to say what she wanted even if she died suddenly. "She loved you very much, Clark and I'm sure her words will be a great comfort to you, if you take them to heart."

"She wants me to find someone else, Mom! How can I do that? There'll never be another woman like Lois, never!"

"You're right. There never *will* be another Lois. But I can see that she also doesn't want you to waste the love you have by shutting yourself away either. You have a lot of love to give a woman, Clark. Lois knew that. She doesn't want to see it go to waste by you mourning her to the exclusion of all else. Lois wouldn't like that and you know it."

"That's what the letter said, Mom, but I don't know if I can do it. I can't even think about any woman but Lois right now! I miss her so much!"

"I know, and that's perfectly normal. Lois didn't mean for you to start dating tomorrow. She knows you're going to mourn for her, as you should. She just doesn't want you to continue to mourn for the rest of your life."

"I know you're right, Mom, but it seems impossible that I could ever find a woman who I could feel something about again.

I traveled the world, remember, and in all those years I never found anyone who interested me, not until I met Lois. I just can't see how I could ever find someone to love again."

"You never know what will happen in life, Sweetie. All I ask is that you don't close yourself off to the possibility. Now, why don't you sit down, and I'll get you some lunch?"

Clark sat at the table while his mother bustled around the kitchen, making tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches for them both. Clark got two glasses and poured the milk while Martha set out the food.

"Thanks, Mom," Clark said as he took a bite of his sandwich.

"Clark, your dad and I have been talking. We're getting older and the farm work has been getting to be a bit much for us. We were thinking about leasing the farm and moving to Metropolis, what do you think?"

Clark stopped eating and set his sandwich on the plate. His parents wanted to move to Metropolis? "I thought dad hated the city?"

"That was before we had a grandson. We want to be closer to you and Jonny. We've been talking about this for a long time, it's not because of what happened to Lois if that's what you're thinking. We've wanted to be closer to our family, and moving here was the way to do it."

"So, you're going to lease the farm then?"

"Yes, we've got a realtor working with us to find a nice young couple who want to farm. We'd thought about leasing to a big farm commune, but we didn't like that idea, too impersonal. So... what do you think?"

"I think it's a great idea, as long as it's what you and dad want. I know I'll love having you closer and Jonny needs his family close, especially now," Clark said smiling sadly. "Where are you going to live?"

"We haven't made any plans in that area yet. We didn't want to do too much without talking to you first. We'll probably rent a place near here. There are some really cute places a few blocks away."

Clark sat quietly, his mind working. "How would you feel about moving in here, with us?"

"Oh, Honey, are you sure? We'd love it, of course, but do you want us living with you?"

"Mom, of course I do! I've got plenty of room and it would be a big help to me too. You could help me with Jonny. Sam and Ellen have offered their help, but I'm still pretty new at this father business and I'm going to need someone to go to for advice."

"Honey, you're a great father! You just have to have confidence in yourself. You know right from wrong and you love your son more than anything. Everything else you learn on the job anyway."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Mom. Please, I'd love for you and dad to move in with us. He could even set up a small garden in the back corner of the yard. Do you want me to ask dad?"

"No, I'll talk with him tonight. I don't think there will be any convincing needed. He wants what's best for you and Jon. If living here helps make that possible then that's what he'll want."

Chapter 3

* The Present *

The next week Clark discreetly investigated the information Jim had been able to dig up so far. It wasn't much, the sheer amount of material and the need for secrecy limited how much Jim was able to gather at any one time. So far Clark had found nothing out of the ordinary, but he wasn't disheartened. He knew it was going to take time. All it would take would be one lead to start the process. Clark put the notes Jim had given him in his pocket, just as his email program alerted him to a new message.

At first Clark was going to ignore it but he noticed the sender

was the secretary of Franklin Stern, the owner of the *Daily Planet*. Opening the message Clark skimmed the contents. The Planet's annual picnic was going to be held in four weeks at Centennial Park. He made sure he transferred the information to his calendar program so he wouldn't forget. Jon loved the company picnic, and if he were honest, so did he. It was nice to see his colleagues away from the newsroom, doing all the goofy things people did at these kinds of affairs. Jon should be big enough to join him in the three-legged race this year. They probably wouldn't win, but winning wasn't the point, competing was. He'd be sure to tell Jon tonight when he got home.

Clark parked the old Jeep in the space designated by the person directing traffic for the Planet party. Before he could shut off the engine Jon was out of his seat and opening the door.

"Hold on there, Pal," Jonathan said grabbing his grandson. "I know you're excited, but you have to hold my hand. There are a lot of cars around you know." Clark, Jonathan and Jon headed toward the pavilion with Martha trailing behind.

"Hurry up, Daddy!" Jon said dragging his father toward the sign-in table.

"Slow down, Jon. They aren't going to close the picnic until 5:00 you know!" Clark chuckled.

"Yeah, but you said we could enter the three-legged race and I want to sign up before all the places are gone!" Jon pleaded.

"That's not a problem, Jon. There's plenty of openings! Uncle Perry promised me that we could get in. He's got pull you know!" Clark winked as they neared the table where Perry was standing.

"That's right, Jonny," Perry said happily picking up the boy and hugging him. "I made sure there is a place saved for you and your dad. I am the boss you know!"

"Excuse me, Perry?" Franklin Stern's bass voice rumbled behind him. "I thought that was my job!" Passing Perry, Franklin walked up to Clark, extending his hand. "Clark, it's good to see you and your family again!"

"Thanks, Mr. Stern," Clark said returning the handshake enthusiastically.

"Franklin, please. We're at a party, save that Mr. Stern stuff for the Planet!"

"Franklin. I don't know if you remember my mom and dad?"

"Of course I do. Jonathan, Martha, how have you been?"

"Fine, thanks, Franklin," Jonathan said with a smile. "It looks like everyone is having a good time! It's nice to see an employer who thinks so much of their employees as you do."

"I expect my people to work hard but I also believe in playing hard too. The men and women of the *Daily Planet* are great people and they deserve to have a little fun! Please, excuse me, but I have to mingle. I'll see you later," Franklin said walking away.

"He's such a nice man," Martha said.

"Yes, he is. So, who wants to get some food?" Jonathan asked.

"I want a hot dog!" Jonny said, still in his Uncle Perry's arms.

"Well then, a hot dog it is!" Perry said putting the boy down, leading the little group to the food tent.

Clark and Jon didn't win the three-legged race, but they had the most fun of any of the participants. They also participated in the balloon toss, which got both father and son soaked. Clark even used his super-breath to help his son dunk the clown.

Late in the afternoon the Kents were sitting at a picnic table resting when Franklin Stern approached them. At his side was a woman Clark had never met before. She was quite tall, about 5'9". She had long black hair that curled under at the ends. She had striking brown eyes, and a lithe athletic body, her complexion was dark, hinting at a Mediterranean origin. A sleeveless yellow blouse with blue jeans and sandals completed her outfit. Clark stood as the two neared their table.

"Clark, I'd like to introduce you to Erica Atkins. She's our

new Financial Pages editor. She just got into town from Denver and I thought the picnic would be a perfect time for her to meet everyone."

Clark extended his hand and smiled. "Pleased to meet you Erica," Clark said. As soon as he touched her hand he felt a tingle, something he hadn't felt in years. It surprised him so much that he held her hand for a second or two longer than normal. Realizing his mistake he pulled his hand back rather quickly, looking embarrassed. Recovering his poise, he remembered his manners. "Erica, I'd like to introduce my mother, Martha, my father, Jonathan, and my son, Jon."

Erica smiled shyly though she didn't seem to be bothered by the extended handshake. "I'm pleased to meet you and your family, Clark," she said quietly.

"Clark is our top investigative reporter!" Stern said proudly. "He's broken some of the biggest stories this city has ever seen. Well, come on Erica, there's a lot more people I want you to meet. See you later Clark!"

"It was nice meeting you Clark, everyone. I'm sure I'll see more of you at work." Erica said as she was led away.

Clark sat back down, a confused look on his face. What was that tingle he'd felt when he'd shaken Erica's hand? He hadn't felt anything remotely like that since... No, it couldn't be! It was *nothing* like that!

"She seems like a very nice girl, doesn't she, Jonathan?" Martha said with a knowing smile.

Jonathan, who had also seen the reaction of his son to Erica, knew exactly where his wife was going with this. Maybe it was time. "Yes, she does, Martha. She seems like a very nice girl, pretty too."

"She's a pretty lady, Daddy. Are you gonna be working with her?" Jon asked.

Clark was brought out of his reverie by his son's question. "Not exactly, Son. She's going to be working in Finance and I work the City Desk. We'll probably see each other around the office but I won't be working directly with her."

"Oh, okay," Jon said, his curiosity satisfied. "Can I ride the ponies now, Daddy? The line isn't too long."

Clark saw that his son was right; the line for pony rides was pretty small. Grabbing his son around his waist he settled Jon on his shoulder. "All right, Cowboy, let's go ride them ponies!" Clark said using his best western accent.

Sitting in her hotel room later that evening Erica Atkins reviewed the events of the day. She must have met, literally, hundreds of people. Franklin Stern had introduced her to everyone, from the mailroom staff to the members of the board of directors. It was amazing that a man in his position remembered every one of their names, too. The information she'd heard about him being a very hands-on manager had certainly been right. She'd felt so welcomed today by everyone she met, that she knew she'd be happy in her new job. She needed the change, needing to leave Colorado and some of the memories behind. Not all the memories were bad ones, of course, but after two years alone she'd felt she needed some new surroundings.

When the opportunity to interview for the financial editor of the *Daily Planet* came up she jumped on it, sending her résumé immediately, following up with a call to Mr. Stern personally two days later. Mr. Stern had been impressed with her résumé and her initiative such that he scheduled an interview right there on the phone. The flight to Metropolis, the interview, and the flight home all went well, in her opinion, so that she felt very sure she'd get the job. Two days later her good feelings proved to be true as Mr. Stern had called personally to offer her the position.

So, here she was, about to start her new job on Monday after having attended the company picnic. While she still needed to find a place to live, in all she felt pretty good about her decision. As

she got ready for bed, Erica's mind drifted to one particular person she'd met today. He was a very handsome man, of course, but that wasn't what impressed her. The moment his hand had touched hers she'd felt something she'd been sure she'd never feel again, attraction. She was attracted to Clark Kent.

Her problem was Clark Kent was married; she'd seen his ring after all. She'd recently taken off her own rings; the skin that had been under the rings still lighter than the rest. The telephone on the nightstand called to her so she picked it up, dialing a familiar number.

"Hello?"

"Hi Nancy!"

"Erica! It's good to hear from you. How are you doing in Metropolis?"

"Good so far. Mr. Stern, the owner of the Planet, took me to the company picnic today." Erica told Nancy about all the people she'd met and how she was anxious to get to work the next day.

"Did you meet any handsome men?" Nancy asked hopefully.

"Yes and no," Erica said uncertainly.

"Yes and no? What does that mean?" Nancy asked, obviously confused.

"There was this one guy, he works the City Desk, his name is Clark Kent. He was there with his mom, dad and son who looked to be about five or so. Anyway, when we shook hands I... felt something and I think he did too because he held my hand longer than is strictly polite and he seemed embarrassed when he let my hand go too."

"So, you seemed interested in him and he in you, what's the problem?"

"The problem is he's married, though his wife wasn't at the picnic from what I could tell." Erica said sadly.

"Too bad but you certainly don't want to get involved in that kind of situation."

"No, I'm no homewrecker and I'll never be 'the other woman' I've got too much pride for that."

"You've only been in town one day, I'm sure there's a nice guy out there for you. You deserve to be happy."

"Thanks, well I should get going. I want to be fully rested for my first day tomorrow."

"Goodnight and good luck," Nancy said.

"Night," Erica said hanging up the phone.

Sighing she turned out the light; it was just her luck that the one man who she was interested in, after two years of being a widow, was married.

Erica finally made it to her office at 11:00 AM having attended mandatory employee orientation. Her hand was sore from filling out all the forms, health insurance and the like. She'd been given a user ID and a temporary password for the computer system, an employee handbook and a hearty good luck from the Human Resources person. She was now officially an employee of the *Daily Planet*. Glancing around her office, she saw it was a typical 'manager' office. Wooden desk with the computer and a credenza behind, ergonomic chair and two visitor chairs in front. Off to the right side was a bookcase and, to the left, two four drawer filing cabinets. Because the office was on an outside wall there was even a small window, high in the wall, that let in some natural light.

Stowing her briefcase under her desk and her purse in a drawer, she flipped on the computer. She got signed on easily and was soon rooting around the system. The software the Planet used was very similar to what she'd used before which helped her comfort level. Mr. Stern, Franklin, had told her that Perry would be scheduling a meeting tomorrow to introduce her to her new staff. Looking forward to her new duties she opened her email program and saw that the meeting was scheduled for 10:00 AM which was good, she hated to waste time. She replied to the invitation so that the appointment would show up in her calendar.

Erica spent the next two hours reading the archives for her department. She wanted to get to know the names of the people who worked for her, their style of writing and their level of expertise, she'd put the names with faces tomorrow. Erica had her nose buried in the computer screen, metaphorically speaking, when she heard someone clearing their throat. Looking up she saw Perry White standing in her doorway.

"I hope I'm not interrupting, but I wondered if you've had lunch yet?"

"Actually I haven't," Erica said. "Are you leaving right now?"

"If I don't go now, I won't get lunch. I've got to meet the suits upstairs at 3:00."

Erica pulled her purse out of her drawer and hurried around her desk. "Let's go then, before they catch us!" she said with a smile.

"Thanks for inviting me, Perry. I was so busy I'd lost track of time," Erica said smiling after they got settled at the table. Perry had taken her to a new place that had recently opened up. The chain had a few locations in California and Texas and now, here in Metropolis. Called the Lazy Dog, the menu featured American cuisine and was pet friendly to boot in their outside seating area.

"It's my pleasure, Erica. We need to eat, and we didn't get to talk much at the picnic."

"I know. Franklin must have introduced me to everyone and their brother yesterday, and he knew their names, too!"

"I don't know how he does that," Perry chuckled. "The man must have a photographic memory!"

The server appeared to take their drink order then left to fill it.

"What's good here, Perry?"

"I like the Cajun fish, myself. Gotta watch my cholesterol."

"I think I'll just have a Caesar salad."

The server returned with their drinks and, after taking the food order, left again.

"So what were you readin' when I walked in?"

"I was going through the archives, reading some of the recent articles in the financial section, trying to get a feel for the talent."

"You've got some good people, Erica. Corrigan, your predecessor, always talked highly of his people. I'm sure you'll get along well together."

"Now that you've given me the party line that all my people are wonderful, I know not everyone walks on water. Who should I watch out for?" Erica said conspiratorially.

"You didn't hear this from me," Perry chuckled, "but Messel is kind of a gold brick. I believe he's a relative of a board member."

"Oh, one of those!" Erica laughed. "I had to work for a guy like that when I first started out. It was awful!"

Their meals arrived about then so conversation trailed off while they ate.

"Oh, I meant to tell you that I was impressed by the lede this morning. That was a great story!" Erica said.

"Yeah, Clark's been workin' on that for weeks. It all came together yesterday. I still don't know how that boy does it."

"Clark?"

"Clark Kent, one of the best investigative reporters I've ever worked with."

"Oh, yes, I met him and his family. His little boy is so cute."

"He sure is," Perry smiled proudly. "He's like a grandson to me."

"What does Clark's wife do? She wasn't at the picnic, was she?"

Perry grew silent and didn't answer right away. "Clark's a widower. His wife passed away five years ago."

"I'm so sorry, Perry. I didn't know..."

"You couldn't know. It's all right. Lois was like a daughter to me and I miss her every day."

"I'm so sorry, Perry," Erica said apologetically. "Look, why don't we head back to the Planet?" she said seeing as they were done eating.

"Yeah, that sounds like a good idea." Perry escorted her out of the restaurant and back to the office.

Erica decided that she'd hit the ladies' room before going back to her office. She'd just gotten settled when two women entered.

"Who's the hunk in the bullpen, Sally?"

"Who are you talking about, Joan?"

"Tall, dark and handsome. Wears glasses. You must know who I mean!"

"You *are* new here aren't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"That's Clark Kent. He's a widower with a six-year-old son. His wife was a reporter too, she was murdered about five years ago."

"So, doesn't he date? It's been five years after all."

"No, he hasn't looked at a woman since his wife died and it isn't because women haven't tried. The man still wears his wedding ring! All I know is you'd be wasting your time with him."

"I don't know, maybe I'll be the one to bring him out of his shell," Joan said confidently.

"Don't say I didn't warn you!"

Sally and Joan walked out leaving Erica in a state of confusion, feeling conflicted. She was pleased to find out that Clark wasn't married, despite still wearing his ring, but she was saddened that he still pined for his wife as he obviously did.

Exiting the stall she washed her hands and headed back to her office. She still had some articles to get through before the staff meeting tomorrow.

Erica was seated on her bed in her hotel room with her laptop, looking at the *Daily Planet* website. The Planet had quite an extensive archive of information available online. With her employee credentials she was able to access just about every article for the last ten years. As much as she'd been tempted to find out more about what had happened to Clark's wife she had waited until now, on her own time. She had started her search for older articles by Clark Kent. Since his wife was his partner she'd probably find some articles they'd written together. What she'd found was just about every article he'd written that fit her search criteria were written with his partner, Lois Lane.

Now that she had a last name she'd searched for articles containing Lois's name anywhere in the text. To limit hits she further set the search to the years 1993 to 1999. One of the very last links was the most informative.

The front page told the story of how a crusading investigative reporter was gunned down brutally by a criminal enterprise called Intergang. The picture accompanying the article showed a beautiful woman with dark hair and eyes and a smile that lit up her face. As she read further she was impressed by the career of Lois Lane. Multiple Kerth and Merriwether award winner, Lois had broken many of the most important stories the city had ever seen, the first appearance of Superman being the most important.

Being so far from Metropolis Erica hadn't really followed news about Superman after the initial furor over his appearance had died down. She wasn't the groupie type and, as she'd been married to the love of her life, she didn't need to fantasize. When news of Superman's feats made it to her paper she read them, of course, but that was as far as it went. Now that she was in Metropolis, and working at the Planet, maybe she'd get a glimpse of the great man himself. She spent another hour reading about Lois Lane and came to the conclusion that she'd have liked to meet the woman. Lois sounded like the kind of person she'd have liked to know.

Erica shut down her browser and then the laptop itself. She had a lot more information now, but it didn't really change anything. She was still very interested in Clark Kent but he was still unavailable. Even if he wasn't married he was still very much in love with his dead wife and, unlike Joan, she wasn't going to throw herself at Clark Kent only to be turned down politely. She had more pride than that.

Chapter 4

Over the next few weeks Clark spent every free moment digging into the information Jim had been gathering, but he was still no closer to finding the one piece of information that would help him to unravel Intergang's web once and for all. He'd checked out over twenty former, and alleged former, members of Intergang and had found nothing that would lead him to the new management of the gang.

Jim Olsen sat down at Clark's desk and leaned in so he wouldn't be overheard. "Any luck, CK?" he asked hopefully.

"No, nothing, Jim," Clark sighed frustrated.

"Don't worry, CK, I still have a lot of places and people to check yet. I've found some new names who are linked to some of the ones we already knew about."

"That's good, Jim. Every lead brings us one step closer to getting these guys."

"Yeah. Well, I just wanted to check in. I'll bring you that other research in about an hour."

"That's fine, Jim..." Clark's voice trailed off. "Jim, I gotta go, I'm late for an appointment."

Clark stood up and rushed to the stairwell, tugging at his tie.

'I wonder how he knew he was late? He didn't even look at his watch,' Jim thought continuing on his way.

Two hours and one Superman story later Clark Kent was back at his desk. This latest rescue had turned into more, but now things were settled down again. He glanced at the clock, if he hurried, he'd have some time to play with Jonny before supper. Shutting down his computer he headed for the elevator.

Just as the car was reaching the news floor Clark heard a female voice call. "Hold the elevator, please!"

Clark stepped in and blocked the door with his hand. Seconds later a woman stepped into the car and slumped against the wall.

"You didn't have to rush, you know," Clark said, smiling pleasantly.

"I didn't want to keep you waiting, Clark," Erica said.

Clark looked at the woman, trying to remember her name. "Erica, right?" he said.

"That's right. I'm surprised you remembered. We only met for a few minutes at the picnic and that was weeks ago."

"You remembered my name."

"Yes, but you're famous. Your name is on the front page almost every day it seems. Your reputation precedes you around the office, you know. Even financial weenies like me know who you are," Erica said with a smile.

"Thanks, I think." Clark chuckled. "So how are you getting on now that you've been here a while?"

"I love it," Erica said with a smile. "I was concerned about moving to a city the size of Metropolis from Denver, but I love the city and I love my job."

"That's nice," Clark said with a smile. "It's always better when you love your job. I couldn't do what I do if I didn't love it."

The car reached the lobby and the doors opened.

"This is my stop," Erica said smiling. "It was nice talking with you Clark."

"Yes, it was," Clark said as the doors were closing. "Good night!"

The car continued to the parking garage level where it stopped with a shudder. Clark stepped out and walked to his vehicle,

smiling as he approached it. He still drove the old Jeep but it was showing its age. He hated to get rid of it but it had a lot of miles on it and it spent more and more time in the shop. It was a good thing his mother had a reliable car or he'd have been forced to trade the Jeep in long ago.

"Come on old Jeep," Clark said patting the dashboard, "let's go home."

Clark walked into the living room and sat down on the couch next to his mother who was knitting a new winter sweater for Jon.

"So how many stories did you read him, Clark," Martha said with a knowing look.

"Only three, Mom," Clark smiled. "He must have been tired because he fell asleep during the third one."

"We went to the park this afternoon and burned some of his energy off," Martha chuckled. "He reminds me so much of you at that age, always on the go."

"It has to be hard for kids in the city though," Clark said thoughtfully.

"Why do you say that?"

"I had acres of farmland to play in and all kinds of chores to help out with. It kept me busy and active. City kids have a park, if they live close enough. And they certainly don't have any cows to milk!" Clark smiled.

"No, they don't," Martha laughed. "Children have different activities in the city, that's all. They can find opportunities for exercise, but they have to be creative."

"I know, Mom, but childhood obesity *is* a big problem, for city kids especially."

"I remember the article you wrote about that," Martha said thoughtfully. "Maybe it's time for a follow-up?"

"Maybe, Mom. I think I'll mention it to Perry tomorrow."

"How is that new editor, Clark? Erica, wasn't that her name? She's been here for a few weeks, right?"

"Yes, that's right. It's a coincidence that you'd mention her. I haven't seen her since the picnic and tonight she rode the elevator down with me."

"I don't know why I thought about her but that is a coincidence. Is she settled in now?"

"As far as I know. She told me she loves her job and she loves living in the city."

"She's a very pretty woman, isn't she?" Martha said innocently.

"Mom, please," Clark said sounding frustrated. "She's a nice woman but I'm not interested. Can't we just drop this conversation once and for all?"

"Clark, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. You may not want to hear this, but I saw how you reacted when she shook your hand at the picnic, your father did too," she said softly.

"And how did I react, Mom," Clark said upset with the direction this conversation was taking. "I sure didn't act like I did the first time I saw Lois, I know that!" Clark fisted his hands in frustration.

Martha laid her hand on her son's arm, feeling the tension in him, she ran her hand up and down, hoping to soothe him. She didn't want to anger him, but she had a feeling that something could happen between him and Erica, if he'd let it.

"I know, Sweetie, I know. But if you're honest with yourself you did feel *something*, didn't you?" she asked gently.

"I don't know, Mom, I just don't know," Clark sighed. "The contact was so fleeting it could have been nothing. It could have been surprise. The grapevine said the new financial editor was supposed to be a much older man from the west coast."

"Well, that should teach you not to listen to rumors, Clark," Martha said, mock serious.

"I know, the grapevine is usually wrong anyway." Clark chuckled and shook his head. "Mom, I'm going to do a quick

patrol, I shouldn't be more than an hour, I hope."

"Take care, Sweetie." Martha let the subject drop, for now, but she was determined to bring it up again sometime in the future.

Clark knocked on the door frame to his boss's office. "Got a second, Chief?"

"Sure thing, Clark."

After closing the door behind him Clark sat down in the chair in front of the desk. "I'd like to ask for a favor. I've got some pretty heavy-duty financial data to go through for this Intergang investigation and I'm just not knowledgeable enough. I was wondering if you could suggest someone who might be able to help."

Perry sat back in his chair, staring at the ceiling for a few seconds before he spoke. "Erica Atkins might fit the bill. From what I remember of her résumé she has a master's degree in Finance and was working on her PhD. She's new in town so she should be pretty clean, connections-wise, at least here in the city. You want me to ask her?"

It was Clark's turn to think now. Did he want to work that closely with Erica? He was feeling conflicted if nothing else. His mother had been right; he had felt *something* when they'd met at the picnic, but he'd felt *nothing* the other day in the elevator. He was obviously confused but not so much that he'd turn down help if it were available.

"If you would, Chief, I'd appreciate it."

Perry White knocked on the open door of Erica's office.

"Can I bother you for a minute?" Perry asked.

"Sure, come in, Perry," Erica said.

Closing the door behind him Perry sat down, facing her.

"I have something to ask you, but it's not completely work related," Perry said.

"Now you have my curiosity piqued. Why don't you tell me all about it?" Erica asked curiously.

"Clark Kent is working on an undercover investigation for me. One that, by necessity, must be kept completely secret. Right now only three people know about this investigation, me, Jim Olsen, and Clark. They've come across a lot of financial data that is, frankly, outside their area of expertise. I remember reading on your résumé that you have an advanced degree in finance. I'd like to ask for your help, if you have the time, of course."

"Why is this investigation so secret, if you don't mind my asking?"

"No, not at all. There is a criminal organization that we had thought was out of business, but I have been given intelligence that says this organization is in the process of reconstituting. We, Clark and I, don't want that to happen, so we're doing everything we can to stop it before it gets going again."

"Why are you and Clark so interested in this organization, past the usual desire to expose crime, of course?"

"Clark and I have personal reasons."

"Personal reasons, hmm." Erica thought, intrigued. "Can you tell me what name of this organization is?"

"Intergang," Perry said seriously.

"That's the group that was linked to the killing of Clark's wife!"

"And you know about this how?" Perry asked suspiciously.

Erica knew she looked embarrassed. "It was after our lunch. When I saw how affected you were, I got curious. I searched the archives and read all the articles. I didn't want to hurt anyone else by asking questions that might upset them. I'm sorry."

Perry's expression relaxed with Erica's explanation. "No, it's okay. I think you did the right thing. You went to the source, the archives, rather than the grapevine. I'm sure you would have heard a lot from that source but 99% of it would have been wrong. I appreciate your discretion, and I'm sure Clark does as well. Do

you have any other questions?”

“No, I don’t. I’d be pleased to help. Do you have anything for me to look at?”

“Not with me. I’ll have Clark drop something off. Remember, this is free time stuff only. Our regular work comes first. Also, the information has to be kept under lock and key. I don’t know if Intergang has spies here but they used to, and I wouldn’t put it past them to do it again.”

“I’ll be careful. I have a locked drawer I keep personnel files in. I’ll put my working papers in there.”

“Nothing is to be left here overnight. When you leave, take the work with you. If somebody *is* looking there won’t be anything to find. We all take work home with us so there’s nothing out of the ordinary there. I doubt anyone will show their hand by breaking into our homes, at least not yet.”

Perry rose from his seat and turned with his hand on the doorknob. “I’ll talk to you later, Erica. And thanks.”

Perry walked up to Clark’s desk checking the area before he stopped; no one was in hearing distance. “I talked to Erica. She’s onboard so you can drop something off to her whenever.”

“I was thinking about that, Perry. I think you should give her anything we want her to work on.”

“Why?”

“We want to maintain normal operations, so we don’t call attention to ourselves, right?”

“Yeah, but I’m not followin’.”

“How often have Jim or I gone into Erica’s office since she’s been here?”

“I don’t know, now that you mention it.”

“Never, at least I haven’t, and I doubt Jim has either. If we start going in there with paperwork and someone *is* watching they’re going to strongly suspect something. On the other hand you go in there all the time with paperwork or just to talk so you should raise no suspicions.”

Perry pondered Clark’s proposal. “You may be right, Son. Just in case, we’ll do it your way.”

“Please tell Erica why though. I don’t want her to think I don’t want to work with her, but the sensitivity of this operation is my biggest concern,” Clark said seriously. “I want these bastards, Perry.”

“We both do, Son. We both do.”

“She can fill us in on her progress when we meet at O’Malley’s bar. Nobody should question the new editor joining us.”

“Have Jim bring me what you’ve got, and I’ll see Erica gets it.”

Erica Atkins opened the door of her apartment, locked it behind her and dropped her briefcase on her couch. Her new apartment was smaller than the one she’d had in Denver, rents being *much* higher in Metropolis despite the raise in pay she got. It was a one bedroom, one bath unit with a small kitchen. The kitchen was well appointed, which was a selling point for her as she loved to cook. The living room held her old furniture, reflecting the southwest style she and her husband loved. There were pictures of them in happier times on the walls as well as her parents and grandparents. Every time she looked at her parents picture she felt sad; they had been killed in a car accident when she was small. Her beloved maternal grandfather and grandmother had raised her, something she was grateful for every day.

She quickly warmed up the meal she’d prepared the night before and settled down to eat. Her thoughts turned back to earlier, she’d hoped she’d be able to talk to Clark Kent now that she was helping on their investigation but a few hours later, Perry White had dropped off the data for her to examine. Perry had explained that he’d be passing along anything they had for her to maintain

appearances, and she couldn’t argue with that logic. In all the weeks she’d worked at the Planet she’d talked to Clark a grand total of twice, once at the picnic and once in the elevator and this missed opportunity bothered her.

Just because she understood the reason didn’t mean she had to like it, however. Perry had mentioned that when a member of the team had something to report they would meet at O’Malley’s, the local watering hole Planet employees frequented when they wanted to blow off steam. There was usually a good crowd there on Thursday nights, so they had chosen that night to meet. So far, it had worked well for them. Though it wasn’t ideal, some contact was better than none.

Finishing her meal she settled down to go through the data. Maybe she’d have something to report this week!

Just before bed, Erica decided to call her friend Nancy as she hadn’t talked to her in a few weeks and she needed a friendly ear too.

“Hello?”

“Hi Nancy, how are you?”

“Good thanks. How’s the job going? We haven’t talked in a while.”

“I know and I’m sorry. I’ve been pretty busy with a new assignment.”

“Oh? Anything you can tell me about?” Nancy asked curiously.

“I’ve been working with a small team trying to track financial transactions back to an international criminal gang. We haven’t had much progress yet but, it’s early days.”

“Sounds interesting, who are you working with?”

“Perry White, my boss. Jim Olsen, he’s a jack of all trades it seems, photographer, researcher, computer whiz. He and I have been working closely on tracking those transactions. The last member is Clark Kent—”

“Isn’t he the guy you mentioned from the picnic?”

“Yes, he is. Remember I told you he was married?”

“Yes, what about it?”

“He’s not, married I mean.”

“That’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

“Not really, Clark isn’t married, he’s a widower; he lost his wife five years ago. She was murdered by some crime syndicate.”

“That poor man,” Nancy said sympathetically.

“The reason I’d thought he was married is he still wears his ring. I also found out he hasn’t even looked at another woman in five years.”

“That’s so sad.”

“It is, especially since he’s such a wonderful man. We all meet regularly outside work to bring everyone up to speed on what we’ve found. After we give our updates, Clark and I have had some great conversations, he’s so knowledgeable, it’s really fun talking with him. But he seems... skittish I guess is the best way to describe it.”

“Any idea why that would be?” Nancy asked curiously.

“I think he’s conflicted, personally. I know he likes talking with me, he smiles so beautifully and his eyes light up, but then something happens, I don’t know what, and he shuts down. He usually leaves right after and he seems preoccupied at work the next day. It’s frustrating, he’s hot and cold and I don’t know what to do about it.”

“What do you want? Is he someone you think you’d like to be with someday?” Nancy asked probing.

“Yes, I really like him. He’s an amazing man and a wonderful person, caring, handsome, a family man who loves his parents and his son. He’s certainly one of a kind.”

“Then I guess you need to wait for him to resolve whatever is making him conflicted. Can you do that? If not, you need to move on.”

“I can wait. I’ve never met anyone I want to get to know like

this since I met Gary.” Erica said honestly.

“Then you have your answer, be patient and supportive. I bet, sooner or later, he’ll see you as someone he’ll want to be with too.”

“Thanks, Nancy. I always feel better after talking to you. Say hi to Doug for me. Good night!”

“Good night and good luck!”

Chapter 5

The investigation had been at a standstill for months. Clark was concerned that there was nothing to find, but he wouldn’t allow himself to fall into despair. He felt sure that if Intergang was being reformed, sooner or later something would show up. Clark’s plan to bring down Intergang this time involved bringing in the Feds. He and Lois had been able to bring down Intergang because the Church’s had been based in Metropolis, but that tactic had left a lot of the international parts of the organization relatively intact. By bringing in the Feds and prosecuting under the RICO statutes, he felt confident that foreign countries would prosecute their members as well, thereby dismantling the organization completely, he hoped.

Clark had been disappointed that so many promising leads had turned out to be nothing once Erica had examined their information. As hard as she’d tried, and she *had* tried, she just couldn’t find anything out of the ordinary, never mind criminal.

The few times they’d met he’d found her to be a very thorough person, very detail oriented, and very knowledgeable. She’d been able to explain complex transactions so that a layperson could understand them easily. He’d appreciated her help and had told her so, more than once.

Clark also found her to be a sparkling conversationalist. Once they’d completed their business they usually stayed and talked, to maintain their cover of being colleagues out for a few drinks and conversation. It was during these times he found himself joining in and actually enjoying himself. He enjoyed talking about current events, seeing them from a different perspective, and arguing his points with alacrity.

It was only later, in the silence of his bedroom, that Clark felt confused about his interaction with Erica. He’d see Lois’s picture on the nightstand and feel guilty that he’d enjoyed being with a woman in a social setting. No matter how often he told himself that he’d done nothing wrong, that he was only being friendly, he felt as if he were betraying Lois’s memory. It bothered him, a lot. It was on nights like this that he’d leave to patrol the city soon after he’d returned home and he’d stay out longer than usual, not wanting to see the disappointed look he perceived in Lois’s picture as she looked back at him, smiling.

This happened often enough that Perry noticed Clark acting differently after their nights out and he called him on it.

Perry stuck his head out of his door. “Clark, my office, now!”

Perry settled into his chair and seconds later Clark walked in. “Yeah, Chief?”

“Close the door, Son.”

Clark closed the door and sat down, waiting for Perry to continue.

“I’ve noticed somethin’, Son, and I have to call ya on it.”

“What’s that, Perry?” Clark asked, confused.

“Every time we meet at O’Malley’s to discuss the status of the investigation you come in the next day lookin’ like someone stole your blue suede shoes. Now I hate to stick my nose in your private life, but I’m concerned.” Perry leaned forward and looked Clark in the eye. “What’s botherin’ ya, Son?”

“I... I don’t know, Perry,” Clark said but he knew his boss and friend wasn’t convinced. “Well... it’s hard to talk about.”

“If it were easy I wouldn’t have had to call ya in here,” Perry said citing the obvious.

“I know. You’re gonna think I’m an idiot. That I’m reading too

much into nothing, and I probably am...”

“Clark, you’re not makin’ sense.”

“I know,” Clark said running his hand through his hair nervously. He sat there in silence for many seconds, trying to collect his thoughts. “Last night, and the other nights we’ve met, I’ve enjoyed myself, especially when Erica and I get into our discussions...” Clark trailed off.

“And...?” Perry asked looking for clarification.

“And I feel like I’m being disloyal to Lois...” Clark said softly.

“Aw, Son. You know that’s not true,” Perry said sadly, his heart going out to the younger man. “Lois loved you and she wouldn’t want you to feel this way. Besides, you’re only talkin’, it’s not as if you’re *datin’* the woman!”

“I understand that, Perry, but I still feel that I’m letting Lois down in some way. It’s enjoyable talking to talk to Erica. She has a great mind and personality and she’s fun to be with. I think I feel this way because when I’m there I don’t think about Lois, not once! I can’t forget her, Perry, I just can’t!” Clark said plaintively hanging his head, trying to get his emotions under control.

Perry felt sorry for his friend. The man felt guilty for enjoying himself! It amazed him that Clark still felt so guilty about Lois’s death, even five years removed. No matter how much he denied it Perry was sure that Clark blamed himself for not being there for Lois that last time. After five years Perry hadn’t made much headway on that front, but he could try to reassure Clark about this problem, at least he hoped so.

“Clark, son, ya can’t blame yourself for havin’ a good time.”

Perry stressed. “Lois would kick your butt from here to Krypton if she heard ya talkin’ like that. Just because ya don’t think about Lois every second of every day doesn’t mean you’re forgettin’ her. You’ll never forget her because she lives in your heart, like she does in mine. Ya can’t live in a constant state of mourning, no one can. You love Lois and you’ll miss her every day for the rest of your life, but that doesn’t mean you are dishonoring her memory by not thinking about her all the time. You need to find some enjoyment in your life. Ya can’t just live for Jon. Ya have to live for Clark too.”

Clark heaved a great sigh and looked at his boss, conflicting emotions playing over his face. It pained Perry to see Clark like this. He hoped he’d gotten through, but he was pretty sure they’d be having this conversation again.

“I know you’re right, Perry. Lois *would* be angry with me, but it’s hard. It’s hard to be happy when the love of my life is gone. ... I’m sorry about my behavior, Chief. I’ll try to do better.” Clark rose from his seat and headed toward the door.

“That’s all anyone can ask, Son, that ya try.”

Erica Atkins glanced over the bullpen as she made her way to the coffee machine. She saw Clark, sitting at his desk, looking very depressed. ‘I wonder what’s bothering him?’ she thought. ‘He was having a good time last night. I wonder what could have happened since then?’

She had heard Perry calling Clark to his office. Maybe Clark had some bad news about the investigation that he’d come across since their meeting. ‘That has to be it,’ she thought, ‘Clark must have had another setback in the investigation.’ She filled her mug and returned to her desk, planning to ask Perry about what Clark might have found out later.

She sat down at her desk to start her day. The first article she pulled up captured her attention fully and all thoughts of Clark Kent and their investigation were pushed aside.

Jonathan Kent sat down on the couch next to his son. Clark was reading the paper, having put Jon to bed a few minutes earlier.

“Hey, Son. How are you doing? You seemed kinda down tonight.”

“It’s been a long day, Dad. The investigation isn’t going nearly as well as I’d hoped either. We seem to be taking two steps back and none forward,” Clark said frustrated.

Jonathan looked closer at his son and knew it wasn’t just the lack of progress in the investigation that was bothering him.

“But there’s something else, isn’t there,” Jonathan said gently. “You seemed to be in a good mood when you came home last night. Then I heard you leave right after that, so I assumed there was some emergency. I also noticed you weren’t home when I got up at 5:00 so I looked in the paper and on TV, but Superman wasn’t involved in anything major. If I had to guess I’d say you had something on your mind. You always did go flying when you were bothered. Wanna talk about it?”

“Feel like taking a walk, Dad?” Clark said, standing up.

Jonathan and Clark walked down the street, neither saying a word, enjoying each other’s company. Finally Clark spoke.

“I’m confused, Dad,” Clark started with a sigh. “I told you that Perry and I added Erica Atkins to our team, right?”

“You did.”

“Well she’s been a big help. She hasn’t found anything, because there hasn’t been anything *to* find, but she’s very good.”

“Sounds like you made the right decision then,” Jonathan said hoping to move the conversation closer to the real issue. “If she’s a big help what’s the problem?”

“I’m the problem, Dad,” Clark said sadly. “I know I’m being foolish, but it’s how I feel.”

“If it’s how you feel then it’s not foolish, but it might help if I knew what you were talking about?”

“I know, I’m rambling too. Our meetings aren’t strictly business. We socialize too, to maintain our cover...”

“And...”

“Erica is smart and funny and holds her own in any discussion.”

“And...”

“I like talking to her, Dad,” Clark said sadly.

“That’s it? You enjoy talking to a woman in a social situation?” Jonathan asked, very confused.

“See, you think I’m being foolish too,” Clark said embarrassed.

“No, I don’t think you’re foolish. Who else have you talked to about this?”

“Perry. He said I was making a mountain out of a mole hill.”

“Why do you feel badly just from talking to Erica? She seemed like a nice woman from what I remember.”

“She is, Dad. The problem for me is I find myself forgetting about Lois when we get together. I can’t lose her, Dad! I just can’t!”

Now that Clark had finally got his problem out in the open Jonathan’s heart broke for his son.

“You won’t lose her Son. You’ll never forget her, you know that. But enjoying yourself with a group of friends isn’t dishonoring her memory, even if one of them *is* an attractive woman.”

“I know you’re right, logically, but when I got home last night and saw Lois’s picture on the nightstand I remembered that I hadn’t thought about her *once* in that whole time. I guess I panicked, and guilt took over. You’re right about Superman, too. I was out all night, trying to think and getting nowhere. I felt like I’d been disloyal to her memory or something, Dad. I know it doesn’t make sense, but it’s how I feel.”

“Son, I think you’re putting too much pressure on yourself,” Jonathan said patting Clark on the shoulder. “I know you miss Lois, we all do, but you can’t live in mourning all your life.”

“Perry said that too, Dad.”

“He’s a smart man, you should listen to him.” Jonathan decided that now might be the time to give Clark some advice he might not want to hear. “Clark, I feel reasonably certain Lois

wouldn’t want you to feel this way. She wouldn’t want you to shut yourself away from people and enjoying life just because she’s not here to share it with you. ... She’d probably want you to find love again.” Jonathan said softly.

“She did, Dad.”

“She did?” Jonathan asked confused once more.

“She wrote me a letter, to be opened when she died. She told me she loved me, and she wanted me to tell Jonny all about her and she told me she wanted me to be open to love again,” Clark said sadly. “Dad, I don’t know if I can do it! I loved Lois with all my heart. I’ll never find a woman I’d love like her!”

“Of course you won’t. Every woman is an individual. If you do fall in love again you’ll love her for herself, not like you loved Lois. You may not think it possible but if you’re lucky enough to find another woman who loves you and who you love, you won’t love Lois any less. Instead of thinking about Lois and remembering losing her you’ll remember the good times you had. You’ll probably always run across situations where you’ll say you wished Lois were there to share this or that with you, but it won’t be such a heartbreaking memory. And if I know Lois she’s looking down at you right now looking to knock some sense into that thick skull of yours!” Jonathan chuckled.

“Yeah, she probably would.” Clark smiled slightly, feeling better than he had all day. “I don’t know if I’ll ever find anyone to love but I’ll try not to freak out if I have a good time with Perry and the gang.”

“That’s a good start, Son.”

Chapter 6

The Intergang investigation stalled. No matter where they looked, no new information was forthcoming. Perry and Clark speculated that the major principals were being extra careful not to tip their hand before they were ready make their move. Perry had been contacted by his super-secret source, Sore Throat, with some new information, so to that end, the team members found themselves at a table in the bar, sipping their beers and munching snacks.

Clark signaled to Perry that he’d checked the room and it was safe to talk.

“Here’s the scoop, kids. My source says the new headquarters is somewhere in Central America, most probably Costa Rica. The only other thing he had for me was a name. Iglesia.”

“Iglesia!” Clark said, shocked. “That’s church in Spanish.”

“It’s probably a code name,” Jim said. “Bill Church Senior and Junior are dead, Senior with a heart attack and Junior shived in jail. Mindy is still in jail too.”

“I know that, Jim, but why would they pick that name?” Clark asked. “It was the Churches who caused their organization to go down last time.”

“There’s no accounting for the criminal mind, Clark,” Perry said. “Maybe they have a sense of humor.”

“Or maybe a cigar is just a cigar,” Erica said, “and it doesn’t have *any* meaning. I think we should expand our data mining into Costa Rica, maybe even all of Central America.”

Jim whistled softly. “That’s a lot of data, Erica. I’m swamped now.”

“I’ve been working on that too, Jim. I’ve got an algorithm that you can apply to your data that should weed out a lot of innocent transactions and help us focus on the patterns in the data.” Erica smiled, she was in her element now. “An organization this large has to be moving a lot of money around. We’re reasonably sure that a great portion of that money is coming to the U.S. I think we should start matching transactions from Costa Rican banks with those of U.S. banks, even if there is no seeming connection.

“They’re probably sending the money through the Cayman Islands or some other country, but the amounts probably won’t change or, if they do, they’ll total the same amount on each end. If

we can find that kind of pattern then we should be able to track the money at the origin back to some person or persons. The algorithm I have should make that kind of analysis much easier. It will take more processor power but that should be all.”

“Wow, can I see the code? It sounds so cool!” Jim said enthusiastically.

“Sure, Jim,” Erica chuckled, “maybe you’ll be able to help me optimize it, so it runs faster.”

“Yeah, I’d like that. Email it to my personal address, just in case.” Jim said.

“All right you two hackers, calm down,” Perry chuckled.

Perry turned to Clark. “Do you have anything new, Clark?”

“No, Chief. None of my sources has heard anything. I don’t know if there’s nothing to hear or they are scared to talk. Of course, if Bobby Bigmouth doesn’t know there’s nothing to know.”

Erica laughed, “Bobby Bigmouth? That’s an interesting name for a snitch.”

“It is, but it’s not for the reason you think. The man eats constantly and is as thin as a rail. I don’t know where he puts it. He gets paid in food, only the best, of course!” Clark smiled, sipping his beer.

“Maybe we need to offer him more of an incentive, Clark,” Erica said laying a hand on his arm. “Maybe we could offer him a home cooked meal! I’m a pretty good cook if I say so myself.”

Perry noticed Clark’s reaction immediately. Clark’s eyes were wide open, and he was struggling not to pull his arm away. Clark stood up and grabbed his empty bottle.

“I’m empty, anyone else need a refill?” Clark asked nervously.

“I’d like a Coke, Clark, thank you,” Erica said with a smile.

“Anyone else?” Clark asked, looking around the table. Not getting any takers, Clark about ran to the bar.

“That poor boy,” Perry thought, ‘he’s gonna be flyin’ around all night feelin’ guilty and it was only an innocent touch. I wish he’d relax and not think every touch or conversation with another woman is an assault on Lois’s memory.’

Clark came back with the drinks, setting Erica’s in front of her. He surreptitiously moved his stool a little farther away from Erica and sat down.

Conversation moved to benign subjects and an hour later, the four friends left the bar. Before Clark could take off, literally as well as figuratively, Perry caught him by the arm.

“Walk me to my car, Son,” Perry said seriously.

Clark sighed but walked with Perry. They both leaned against the car, thinking.

“I saw what you did, Clark.” Clark looked scared, so Perry sought to reassure him. “Nobody else noticed, don’t worry. I only noticed because I happened to be watchin’ ya. It was only a casual touch, Clark. Something that passes between friends. We *have* become friends with Erica, you know. It wasn’t an attack on Lois’s memory. I’m sure if you asked Erica about it she wouldn’t even remember doin’ it.”

Clark sighed heavily. He’d done it again. He’d turned a perfectly innocent gesture into a seduction. “I’ve done it again, haven’t I Chief? I’ve totally overreacted to something Erica did. I don’t know why I do it. It’s not as if she was rubbing my arm or putting moves on me or something. ... I’m an idiot!”

“Well I won’t argue with ya there, Son. But don’t beat yourself up over it. She didn’t notice so ya didn’t offend her. You do have to watch it though. You could hurt her feelings if she were ever to notice. She doesn’t have leprosy ya know,” Perry said with a laugh.

Clark laughed along with his boss and friend. “Thanks, Perry, I needed that. I’d probably be brooding all night over this.”

“That’s why I wanted to talk to ya. You need to relax, Son.” Perry glanced down before continuing. “You know I loved Lois like a daughter and I think about her every day, but I think she’d

be damned upset with the way you’re actin’. I’m pretty sure she’d be disappointed that you haven’t even thought about datin’ again.”

“Not you too, Perry. My dad said something similar just the other day.”

“Well he’s a smart man, you should listen to him.”

“He said the same thing about you.” Clark chuckled.

“See, great minds think alike!” Perry clapped Clark on the shoulder. “You’re like a son to me, Clark, and you’ve honored Lois’s memory and your marriage. But I think it’s time to see to Clark’s needs now. You need companionship, Son. I know you have your mom and dad and your son but none of those people can provide the companionship a life partner can. Jonny is a well-adjusted little boy, but he needs a mama, not a mother, he has one of those, but he needs someone who can kiss his scrapes better and who he can bring a bouquet of dandelions to.”

“He has his grandmothers for that,” Clark said firmly.

“And I’m sure they’re great at it, but they’re his grandmothers. They should be spoilin’ that boy with candy and sending him home to his parents all sugared up and bouncin’ off the walls.” Perry chuckled at the thought then heaved himself off the car, turning to his friend. “Think about it, Clark. Erica may not be the person for you, but if you don’t take a chance you’ll never know.”

“You’ve given me a lot to think about, Perry.” Clark said shaking Perry’s hand. “Have a good night, Chief. I think I’ll ‘take off’ now, see you in the morning.”

Perry climbed into his car as Clark turned the corner, tugging at his tie.

On the way home Clark thought about what Perry had told him and he couldn’t argue with a thing the man had said. What was bothering him still was something he hadn’t mentioned to Perry. The touch may have been innocent on Erica’s part but his reaction to it was not. He’d felt the spark he’d gotten at the picnic but much stronger this time. Oh it wasn’t nearly the kind of reaction he’d got from the most minor touch by Lois, but it was unmistakable.

Could he be attracted to Erica? He didn’t know and he was, honestly, scared to find out.

Jim checked his email that very evening and, seeing the message from Erica, opened it, examining the code it contained. Jim was impressed, it was a really sophisticated piece of code, but he could also see where some optimization would make it run a lot faster. Settling down with an energy drink, he prepared for a long night.

The next day Jim started gathering all the financial transactions he could from Central America, focusing specifically on those originating from Costa Rica. With the task running in the background he began a new search for Clark, one that would support his latest investigation. A couple of hours later, papers in hand, he strode over to Clark’s desk.

“Here you go, CK, that information you asked for yesterday.”

“Wow, that was quick, Jim, thanks a lot!” Clark said taking the sheaf of papers from his friend.

Glancing around the newsroom Jim checked to see if anyone was around.

“By the way, I got that code from Erica, it’s very sophisticated. Anyway, it’s running now, I optimized it and, hopefully, I’ll have some results later today,” Jim said quietly.

“Thanks, keep me posted.” Jim walked away while Clark perused the information in front of him.

The link Jim had hoped for didn’t come that day or for many days after, they all began to despair of ever getting that first clue when, at last, the algorithm produced a result.

“Chief!” Jim exclaimed, rushing into Perry’s office a week

later. Closing the door he came to a halt in front of Perry's desk. "I've got something!"

"What is it, Son?" Perry asked, tamping down his enthusiasm for a moment.

"A series of transfers from Iglesia Partners in Costa Rica to Eglise Associates here in Metropolis."

"And this is important how?"

"Eglise is French for Church!"

"Well I'll be darned, we finally got something!" Perry said allowing his enthusiasm to return. "Let me give this to Erica, maybe she can dig a little deeper before tonight. Keep on this too, if they've made one transfer I bet they've made others." Jim returned to his desk, buoyed by his success, vowing to find more connections no matter how deeply they may be hidden.

Perry knocked on Erica's door, closing the door behind him, then seated himself.

"Jim found something," Perry stated calmly, passing the paper he held to her.

"Finally! I knew there had to be *something*," she said scanning the page.

"I want you to dig into this one, find out everything you can about these two 'companies', officers, locations, financials, everything. Now that we actually have a lead, we need to be even more careful, understand?"

"Of course, leave everything to me." Erica's attention on the document in front of her was so complete that she didn't even notice Perry leave.

"Clark, can you come to my office?" Perry asked as he passed Clark's desk. Clark rose, following his boss into the office. Closing the door, Clark seated himself and waited.

"Jim found something," Perry said softly.

Clark wondered if he'd heard correctly, it had been so long, with so many disappointments that it was hard for him to believe his ears.

"Really, Chief?"

"Yep, I just handed it off to Erica to investigate deeper. Jim's going to keep looking for other links as well. We're going to go over what they've found tonight."

"That's great, Chief, thanks for keeping me posted." Clark rose, returning to his desk. Sitting down he pondered this new information, at last, a potential lead! His vow to destroy Intergang had a foothold now. He could hardly wait for tonight!

"So, I was able to get a lot of information on Iglesia Partners and Eglise Associates. Iglesia was harder, being outside the U.S., but what I got shows there is a distinct link there. They have multiple people on both boards, again most of those people here in Metropolis." Erica went on to outline how the funds were coming from various European sources, through Costa Rica and then on to Metropolis. She went on to outline the main officers of both companies showing them that the CEO, President and Treasurer were the same for both companies.

"The CEO is Melissa Navé, but I haven't found anything about her."

"Let me look into her," Jim replied, making a mental note of the name. "Give Perry the rest of those names tomorrow and I'll see what I can find out."

"Thanks, Jim," Erica replied. "The funds I've been able to trace so far have totaled \$50 million, not a lot for an organization like this, but I'm sure there's a lot more buried somewhere."

"That's great, Erica, real fine work. Now that we actually have something we need to be extra careful. I want to remind you to make sure you cover your tracks. Absolutely nothing left on Planet computers, take home any hard copies, and *no* discussion of this with *anyone* outside this group. Intergang will stop at nothing if

they get wind of our investigation." Everyone around the table nodded solemnly, acknowledging the veracity of that statement.

To keep up their cover story after the important discussions were done they stayed to socialize. Given the stress of this investigation the socializing time was very necessary allowing for them to wind down. Varied topics were discussed from local politics to how they thought the Monarchs would do this year. During the conversation Erica noticed Clark seemed to be uncomfortable around her. He avoided her gaze and seemed to be sitting farther away from her than usual. After another hour the drinks were empty, and Clark asked if anyone wanted another round. Jim and Perry declined but Erica wanted a soft drink. Clark gathered up the empties, said good night to his friends and headed to the bar. When he returned he set her drink down, taking a sip of his own, a soda as well, so as to keep up appearances.

"Clark, I hope you don't think I'm being too forward, but have I offended you? You seem uncomfortable around me and I can't think of what I've done. Do you want me off the team?" Erica said finally winding down.

"No! Not in the least. You're a very valuable member of the team and I'm not sure we'd be as far along as we are without you." Clark ran his hand through his hair, unsure of how to explain what was bothering him as he really didn't understand it himself, no matter what he'd said to Perry or his dad.

"It's really hard to explain, Erica. It's me, I have these hang-ups and I can't seem to shake them." Clark hung his head so as to avoid her gaze.

"We haven't known each other that long, Clark, but I think you know I can keep a secret. I won't tell anyone about anything you tell me." She laid her hand on his arm as she'd done numerous times, a gesture of casual support. The tingle that went through her at the contact reminded her that this had happened numerous times, the first being when she'd met Clark at the company picnic.

"I miss her so much," Clark whispered, his head hung low.

"Your wife?" she asked, sure that's who he meant but wanting him to tell her himself.

"Yeah, Lois. She's been gone five years and some days it feels like yesterday. What worries me is I think I'm losing her all over again when I go out and have fun." Raising his head he looked at her, their eyes meeting. "I know, I know, I have to live my life but it's really hard. It took forever, it seems, to win Lois over and then, as things were going so well, some *bastard* has to go and kill her!" Clark's breathing was rapid and shallow, his face red with rage. Erica watched as he slowly gained control of himself.

"I'm sorry, you don't need to hear all that."

"No need to be sorry. I feel like that a lot of days myself. I don't know if you've heard but I lost my husband to criminal violence too." Erica's face grew wistful, remembering back. "Gary was a Crime Scene Investigator, I thought that since he wasn't a beat cop he'd be safe. All it took was one stray bullet from a gang shooting near the crime scene he was working to snuff out his life. One minute he was working the scene and the next he's gone."

"I'm so sorry, Erica, I didn't know."

"No reason you should. I don't talk about it much. His death was why I moved to Metropolis, too many memories, good and bad."

"Thanks for trusting me, I'll never tell anyone." Clark said sincerely.

"I know you won't. I wanted you to know so that if you feel the need to talk, I'm available. I'm sure Perry and your friends and parents are great but sometimes talking to someone who's been through the same thing is what you need. Your friends and family can sympathize but they can't know the aching hole losing a spouse to criminal violence leaves."

"Thanks, Erica, I don't know if I'll take you up on your offer but it's nice to know you're there. Say, it's getting late, I need to get home. Jon is waiting for me to read him a story."

“You’re a lucky man Clark. My husband and I weren’t blessed with children. I’m sure he’s been a great help to you.”

“He sure has, I don’t know what I would have done without him; probably I would have crawled into a hole and pulled it in over me.” They stood up and walked out the door. Clark waited until a cab picked her up then, walking around to the back of the bar, took off for home.

Clark came downstairs after reading his son a bedtime story. Sitting on the couch he put his feet up, leaned against the back and closed his eyes.

“Rough day, Son?” Jonathan asked, putting down his magazine.

“Kind of, we actually got a lead on Intergang. That’s what we were discussing tonight.”

“That’s great, hopefully it will pan out. That’s not all though, right?”

“No, it’s not. Erica called me on my behavior towards her. I broke down and told her what was bothering me. She understands, I think, because she’s lost her husband to crime too.”

“That poor woman,” Jonathan said, feeling sorry for his son’s friend.

“She offered to listen to me, one victim to another.”

“I don’t think of you as a victim, and she probably doesn’t either, you’re both survivors. Though I’m sure she has a unique perspective, having experienced similar things as you.” Jonathan paused, crafting his next question carefully. “Are you going to take her up on her offer?”

“I don’t know, Dad. I don’t know if I want to relive all this with her, nor do I want it to turn into a pity party.”

“Give it some thought, Son. I think you could both provide support to each other.”

“I will, Dad, thanks.”

As she had done when she needed someone to talk to Erica called her best friend, Nancy Gordon.

“Hello?” Nancy said.

“Hi Nancy, do you have time to talk?”

“For you, always. What’s up?”

“You know how I mentioned how Clark seemed conflicted when we meet at the bar?”

“Yes, did something happen?”

“It did. Tonight we were talking after our usual update meeting and I casually touched Clark’s arm. You’d think I assaulted him for God’s sake! He went stiff then he asked if anyone wanted another drink, so I told him I wanted a soda. Perry and Jim left then so I was alone with him. When he came back with the soda I called him on it.”

“Good for you! You need to stand up for yourself.”

“You’re right. I asked him what I’d done wrong and did he want me off the team. He broke down then and finally told me what was bothering him. I knew that his wife had been murdered, as I told you the last time we talked. Well he finally told me that he has hang-ups with respect to his wife. Even though he didn’t come right out and say it I think he feels he’s cheating on their marriage if he even looks at another woman. I... I told him about Gary, how I’d lost him and I offered him a willing ear from someone who knew what he’s going through.”

“What did he say to that?”

“He said he’d think about it. I sense that he’s not used to confiding in anyone, not since his wife died, at least. If nothing else, everything is now out in the open. I hope he takes me up on my offer, but we’ll see.” Erica and Nancy talked for another hour after which Erica went to bed.

Chapter 7

Perry gave Jim the list of names Erica had provided, and he’d

just input them when Ralph Simms stopped in front of his desk.

“What ya working on, Jimbo?” Ralph asked trying to look at the screen. Luckily Jim had a filter over his monitor that blacked out the screen to anyone who wasn’t sitting directly in front of it.

“Nothing special, Ralph, something for Clark, like always,” he said nonchalantly.

“You’re always doing stuff for him, why don’t you do stuff for me?”

“One, you never ask. Two, I don’t do background checks on sleazy politicians. I have too much to do already.”

“Gee, you don’t have to be so snippy,” Ralph said, walking away. “I have stuff to do too.”

“Yeah, right.” Jim said under his breath.

Throughout the week Jim fed Perry information on the names from Erica’s list. He found that most of these people didn’t exist before five years ago, which was suspicious in itself. The only one he found that had any prior history was Melissa Navé. She had a boring background, no priors, lived in various cities, held low level jobs in multiple companies, she didn’t even have a savings account! The only thing that was suspicious were her visits to Metropolis Women’s Prison. While the log of visits was online, who she saw was not. It was going to take a visit to the prison to suss that out. Perry told him that Clark would check out that lead and report back at the next meeting.

Clark hadn’t been able to make the time to visit the prison until Thursday morning, his ‘other job’ had kept him far too busy. Walking into the reception area he found a prison officer he knew and had worked with in the past.

“Hi, Jerry, how are you? How’s your wife and the kids?”

“They’re great, Clark, thanks for asking. So, what brings you here today?”

“I need to see your visitor’s log. I’m looking for who Melissa Navé has been visiting.” Clark said. The guard pulled out the log, handing it to Clark. “Thanks, Jerry.” Flipping through the log Clark quickly scanned the last six months of visits, at last finding the information he was looking for. There in front of him was proof that Melissa Navé was connected to Intergang. Grinding his teeth, he worked to get control of the rage he was feeling. Handing the log back Clark thanked the officer then headed back to Metropolis.

That evening the four friends met at their usual hangout. Everyone was in high spirits, buoyed by the progress each of them had made. After the first round of drinks arrived Jim spoke first.

“I found at least a dozen more transactions, now that I know what to look for it’s gotten easier. The latest transactions have totaled over \$200 million. They seem to be coming weekly, but not always from Costa Rica. It seems our gang is using banks in a number of Central American countries to further hide their tracks.”

“That’s great, Jim,” Perry said, proudly. “What do you have for us, Erica?”

“I found new shell companies involved, Kirche Corp and Chiesa LLC, both of which have links directly to Melissa Navé.”

“Kirche is church in German and Chiesa is church in Italian,” Clark interjected. “At least they’re consistent in their pseudonyms.”

“All of them funnel money from one tax shelter country to another and then, ultimately, to Metropolis National Bank under Iglesia Partners. I don’t know what they’re up to for sure, but they are certainly building up a ‘war chest’ of sorts.” Erica said, frustrated.

“Well, keep on them, we need to know where that money goes and comes from. If there’s any irregularities the Feds can use them when they prosecute, if we can dig up enough evidence.” Perry took a sip of his beer then turned to the last member of the team.

“What have you found, Clark?”

“I went to Metropolis Women’s Prison today to look at their visitor’s log. Our ‘friend’ Melissa has been a consistent visitor, weekly for the last six months at least without fail. What is interesting is *who* she’s been seeing.”

“Don’t keep us in suspense, Son, who’s she seein’?”

“Mindy Church!” Clark said, gritting his teeth in anger. “I knew that woman was still involved even though she’s in prison. She’s running Intergang through Melissa Navé.” Clark paused a moment, pondering, his eyes losing focus. “You know, now that I think about it Navé without the accent is the same as nave, a part of a church!”

“I’ll be darned! The Churches are poppin’ up all over this investigation. I want to know more about this Melissa Navé, Jim. Do a deep dive on her, I want to know what she eats, drinks and wears! Also, see if you can’t find out who the other officers of Iglesia Partners were before they changed their identities. But be careful, they obviously don’t want people to know their real identities.”

“On it, Chief!” Jim replied, making a mental note.

“All right, seems like we’ve made some progress, let’s keep it going,” Perry said, calling an end to the official part of their evening. The four friends chatted for another hour, as they usually did, before calling it a night. As they were walking out of the bar, Clark drew Erica aside.

“Erica, I was wondering if you might be able to trace transactions back a number of years?” Clark asked curiously.

“Possibly, how far back do you want to go?”

“Five years. I’m thinking there may be a financial trail to the person who murdered my wife,” Clark replied hopefully.

“I’ll look, but I can’t promise anything, Clark. If there was a hired assassin, there may not be anything *to* find.” Erica said trying to not give Clark false hope.

“I know it’s a long shot, but I had to ask,” Clark replied dejectedly.

“I’ll do my best, Clark, I know how important this is to you,” she replied, laying her hand on his arm, the familiar tingle once more present. Clark nodded his understanding, flagging down a cab for Erica, he waved goodbye then headed for home.

When Clark got home he picked his son up, hugging him tightly to his chest.

“How was your day, Son,” Clark asked, kissing Jon’s cheek.

“It was great, Daddy! We went on a field trip and got to see dinosaurs! Then I went over to Jamie’s house after school and his mom made cookies. They were good, but they’re not as good as grandma’s.”

“I’m glad you had a good time. How about I help you with your bath then read you a story?” Clark said, hoisting Jon onto his shoulder, making his way up the stairs to the bathroom. After the bath, Clark settled Jon into bed then chose a book from the shelf.

“How about ‘Horton Hears a Who!’?” Clark asked. Jon nodded his assent, snuggling down in his bed. Clark read the story of the elephant that learned a person’s a person, no matter how small, to the great enjoyment of his son. No matter how many times Jon had heard this story he always enjoyed it.

“Daddy, I wish mommy was here,” Jon said softly, sniffing. Clark stiffened, his son’s wish cutting him like a knife.

“Your mommy would be here if she could, but she’s in heaven. She’s watching over all of us, I know she is,” Clark whispered kneeling down to kiss the top of his son’s head.

“I know she is Daddy, I can feel her sometimes, but I still miss having her here, with us.” Jon yawned, closing his eyes. Clark stayed kneeling until Jon fell into the sleep of an innocent child.

Clark went downstairs, finding his parents in the living room, his mother was knitting Jon’s sweater and his dad was reading a

farming magazine. Though Jonathan had been living in the city for five years now, he still subscribed to a couple of farming magazines, maybe they gave him ideas for the small vegetable garden they had in the back yard.

“So, is Jon asleep?” Martha asked, concentrating on her knitting.

“Yeah, Mom, he’s asleep. He wished his mommy was here,” Clark said sadly.

“Oh, honey,” Martha said, forgetting the sweater for the moment. “You are a great dad, he couldn’t ask for more love than we give him.”

“I know that Mom, it’s just a boy needs a mother. You and Ellen are wonderful substitutes but you’re his grandmothers. You should be filling him with cookies and sending him home bouncing off the walls,” Clark said with a rueful chuckle repeating Perry’s words.

“He has friends for that,” Martha replied. “He came home today so full of cookies he didn’t want to eat his dinner.”

“I heard, he mentioned that Jamie’s mom had baked cookies. He said they were good but not as good as yours.” Clark chuckled sadly. “If Lois were here, he wouldn’t be comparing her cookies to Jamie’s mom’s favorably, that’s for sure.” Both of them remembering Lois’s lack of expertise in the kitchen fondly.

“Goodnight, Mom, Dad, I’m going to make a quick patrol then hit the hay.”

“Goodnight, sweetie,” Martha replied, kissing Clark’s cheek as he passed by. Seconds later she heard the soft whoosh of her son as he flew away.

Climbing into bed after an uneventful patrol Clark lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling. Stretching out his hearing, he heard his son and his parents sleeping soundly. Listening to the soothing sound of Jon’s heartbeat relaxed him even further. His thoughts returned to Jon’s wish earlier in the evening and tears began to flow down his cheeks.

“Oh, Lois, I miss you *so* much!” Clark said, swiping at his eyes with his hand. “Jonny misses you too, you should be here with me, taking care of our boy. I promise you, Lois, I *will* find who did this to you, I will bring him or her to justice!” Sometime later Clark fell into a restless sleep.

“Clark, honey, listen to me. This wasn’t your fault. I took risks all the time, you know, I always did. You allowed me the responsibility for my own life and the rewards were most definitely worth it. I too wish I could be there with you and Jonny but that’s just not possible. My issue with you is you’ve ignored my last letter to you. Did you think I wrote that for my health?” ‘Lois’ smiled lovingly, taking some of the sting from her rebuke. “Seriously, Clark, you’ve grieved long enough. I know you love me, as I do you, but you can’t keep mourning all your life, it’s not good for you. What is going to happen when Jon grows up and moves out? I don’t want you to be alone, Clark. Our parents aren’t going to be around forever; you *need* someone to share your life and all the love you have to give. Of course I wish it were me, but it can’t be. Please, my love, open your heart, allow someone in. You won’t be dishonoring me or our marriage, not at all; you’ll be honoring my final wishes, Clark. Please, if you ever loved me, allow yourself to fall in love again, for yourself and for Jon.”

When Clark woke the next morning he felt better than he had in a long time. He tried, but failed, to remember what his dream had been about though the substance had stuck with him.

“Good morning, Honey, how did you sleep? You seem more rested than usual,” Martha said when Clark walked into the kitchen. Pouring himself a cup of coffee Clark sat down, across from his mother.

“Morning, Mom. I guess I slept well, there were no calls in the night at least. I had a dream, but I can’t seem to remember it, but I

do feel better somehow.” Clark said contemplating. “Where’s dad?”

“He’s outside, weeding the garden. We should be getting some fresh tomatoes in a few days.” Martha said, sitting across from her son. “How’s your investigation going? Making any progress?”

“Some, but it’s really slow going. They are covering their tracks in such a way that it’s hard to unravel all the clues. Erica has been a god send. Without her, I don’t think we’d be half as close as we are.”

“I’m glad she’s been able to help. She struck me as a lovely person too,” Martha said offhandedly.

“Mom, don’t read more into this, we’re work colleagues, nothing more.”

“Someone else was just a work colleague if I remember correctly, look how that turned out.” Martha said with a wry smile.

“This is different, Mom,” Clark said exasperated, rising from the table. “See you this evening. If nothing comes up I’ll be home on time for a change.” Clark kissed his mom on the cheek and headed out to work.

Chapter 8

Weeks passed with minimal progress being made in the Intergang investigation and the team were becoming discouraged. Jim had found some more information on Melissa Navé, actually tracing her history back to her adoption. Her adoptive mother turned out to be Mindy Church’s sister who had died seven years ago. At that time Melissa had moved to Metropolis and had begun her weekly visits to her aunt. Though it couldn’t be proven conclusively, they theorized that was when Melissa had taken over the helm of the vastly reduced Intergang. Slowly, over the years, Intergang had been reconstituted, taking over virtually all criminal activity in Costa Rica then branching out into the rest of Central America. Metropolis had only recently become the target of Intergang, but they were still lying low, a situation that made for conjecture of a massive offensive in the future.

One evening during the weekly offsite meeting, Erica took Clark aside at the end of the night.

“Clark, you remember that situation you asked me to look into?” she whispered when they stood outside the bar.

“Yes, do you have something?” Clark asked excitedly.

“I found something that *could* be what you’re looking for. Around the time in question there was a transfer of one million dollars from Iglesia Partners to a numbered account in Switzerland.”

“One million dollars!” Clark exclaimed, leaning back against the wall, his legs weak. “I know Lois was an integral part of bringing Intergang down but so was I.”

“I’ve read the archives from back then and Lois seemed to be more associated with their demise than anyone else. It’s possible they decided to take her out hoping you’d fall apart too, leaving them free to rebuild.” Erica theorized, talking softly so as not to be overheard.

“It almost worked. I was in really bad shape, as you know. If it hadn’t been for our parents and Jon, I would have gone to a very dark place, probably never to return.” Clark replied, remembering how he’d felt all those years ago.

“I’m glad it didn’t,” Erica said, squeezing Clark’s forearm in support.

“So, is there any chance of finding the owner of the account?” Clark asked, pulling himself together, though he was aware of her closeness and her hand on his arm.

“I don’t think so. You know how notoriously secretive Swiss banks are about their clients.”

“Say, instead of finding out who the account belongs to, can we track any other deposits to that account? If, as we suspect, this person is a hired assassin then maybe we can work backwards, see what murders or assassinations took place around those times.”

Clark suggested.

“Maybe but I don’t have that kind of expertise. I bet Jim could collate that if I give him the account number to look for. Here it is,” Erica said, handing Clark a small piece of paper with the number on it.

“I’ll get Jim on this first thing!” Clark replied, excited at the prospect of associating similar deposits with particular incidents. Waving down a cab, Clark assisted Erica in then, finding a deserted alley, he took off into the night.

Erica Atkins was sitting at her little table, eating her dinner when her cell phone rang. The caller ID announced that Nancy Gordon was on the line.

“Hi Nancy, I’m glad you called, I was just going to call you!”

“I was calling to say hi since it’s been a couple of weeks since we last talked, but it looks like you have news. So what’s up?”

“You know I’ve been tracking down financial transactions for the team, right?”

“Yes, have you made any progress?”

“Yes, actually, but that’s not what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“So, what did you want to say? Don’t keep me in suspense.”

“A few weeks ago Clark asked me to do him a favor. He wanted to know if I could see if there were any transactions from known gang accounts to anyone during the time of his wife’s murder. It was known that this gang had taken credit for Lois’s murder. I told him I’d take a look but I didn’t have a lot of hope and I told him so.”

“I take it you found something?” Nancy said hopefully.

“Yes! This gang paid one million dollars into a numbered Swiss account a day after Lois’s murder!” Erica exclaimed.

“Great work! You always were the best, those criminals didn’t stand a chance!”

“Thank you! Anyway, Clark and I discussed how to track down the assassin and, since getting information on account holders of Swiss accounts is next to impossible, Clark is going to have Jim look for other deposits to this account and collate them with murders or assassinations on or near those dates.”

“That’s brilliant! You two do work well together, don’t you?”

“I like to think so, we seem to complement each other anyway. I hope this line of inquiry pans out, Clark deserves some kind of closure and I think finding his wife’s killer would go a long way towards giving him that. Well, enough of that, tell me about what’s going on with you.”

“Jim, I have something I need you to look into,” Clark said. “Conference room.” Clark nodded then walked away. Jim entered a moment later, closed the door, standing next to his friend.

“Erica gave me a Swiss bank account number that she feels could be related to Lois’s murder. I need you to see if there are any other deposits from anywhere into this account, then see if you can match them with murders or assassinations of prominent people near those dates. Can you do it?”

“Sure thing, CK but it’s going to take time. Even with the account number there’s a lot of data to sort through.” Clark handed Jim the number then excitedly walked towards his desk. Jim walked over, sitting down at his desk. Pulling up his search program, Jim punched in the number, set the various parameters and, hitting ENTER, letting the machine do its job. While the machine crunched through gigabytes of data, he prayed that he’d have a result soon.

Two days later, Jim’s computer popped up a message, the query was complete! Scanning through the result Jim saw deposits going back ten years, each deposit for one million dollars. Next to each deposit were names of prominent people, government and business leaders, who had died within days of the corresponding

deposit. Printing out the list Jim walked over to Clark's desk and handed him the papers.

"Here's that research you asked for CK," Jim said normally, his voice not giving any indication of the importance of the result.

Clark scanned the printout, his eyes widening momentarily before he schooled his features and replied; "Thanks Jim, now I can finish that article on city council corruption. Great work!"

Jim acknowledged the praise with a satisfied smile then returned to his desk. Clark folded the printout and put it in the inside pocket of his jacket. Standing up he walked over to Perry's office, knocking on the door frame.

"Come in, Clark, close the door will ya?" Perry said. "What have ya got?"

"Jim came through," he said, handing Perry the pages, waiting patiently while Perry perused them.

"This is good stuff. It shows a connection between this account and at least fifty deaths of prominent people the world over. Now comes the hard part, finding out *who* this account belongs to."

"I've been thinking about that, Chief. If he or she has been doing this for years, then someone must have heard something. Could you put out feelers to your contacts for any likely candidates? I'm going to do the same with my contacts in the NSA. You know, maybe Jim's dad would know something?"

"That's a great idea, Clark. I'll talk to my contacts and I'll ask Jack myself, I'd rather ask for a favor than have Jim do it."

"Thanks, Chief," Clark replied, returning to his desk. Though he had given Perry his only copy of the information, due to his eidetic memory, Clark was able to recreate it perfectly later that night at home. They were convinced there was a mole for Intergang in the newsroom and Clark wasn't taking any chances.

Days went by with no hits from their contacts. This assassin seemed to be a ghost, though a rich ghost for sure, so it was a pleasant surprise when Jack Olsen called Perry asking for a meeting in Centennial Park.

Perry was seated on a bench overlooking the lake. It was a beautiful day with many people out and about. Twenty minutes later a man sat down, gazing out over the lake as well.

"Long time no see," the man said softly. "How's Jim?"

"He's well. What have you got for me?"

"Seamus Deckard. I don't have much on him, but he seems to fit the bill."

"Thanks Jack," Perry said, getting up and walking away.

Perry called Jim Olsen into his office on his return to the Planet.

"Jim! My office! NOW!" Perry bellowed, seating himself behind his desk. Jim rushed in, closing the door behind him. Seating himself, he waited for Perry to continue.

"Now this is *top secret*, beyond top secret. I want everything you can find on a Seamus Deckard." Perry said, seriously.

"Is he...?"

"It's very possible. That's why this has to be hush hush. I know you want Lois's killer as much as any of us, but we have to be sure, or as sure as we can be given the information we have."

"Are you going to tell CK?"

"Yes, but after you get something, I don't want him to have false hope only to have it dashed if we find nothing."

"Okay, Chief, I'll get right on this. I'll make sure everything is encrypted every step of the way, just to be extra careful."

"Thanks, Son, now git!"

A week later Jim walked into Perry's office, closing the door quietly behind him.

"I think I've got him, Chief. I've crosschecked passport records for Seamus Deckard against murders and the correlation is

amazing. This guy looks to have been involved in almost every major assassination the world over for at least ten years."

"Do I wanna know how you got his passport records?" Perry asked knowingly.

"Probably not." Jim replied with a self-satisfied grin.

"Okay, now we know who, we need to know where. I doubt we're gonna find him listed in the telephone book—"

"Actually, Chief, he *is* in the phone book. His *real* job is international financier. He travels under his own passport doing business around the world."

"Okay, maybe we can come at this another way. Watch for activity on his account and passport. If we find anything, look for any likely targets. Hopefully we'll be able to stop him before he completes his contract. Can you get me his passport photo? He'll probably disguise himself when he does the job, but it's a start. When something hits I'll let Superman know so he can keep an eye on the target."

"Shouldn't we be notifying the authorities too?" Jim asked.

"Yep, but I'm going to let Superman work that, they'll take him more seriously I bet."

"Yeah, sounds good, Chief. I'll get right on that." Jim left, returning to his desk, again setting up his search to watch for any activity on Deckard or his account.

Weeks went by with no activity that met the criteria for a possible assassination. In the meantime the investigation into Intergang proceeded steadily. Erica had been using information provided by Jim to find further links to Intergang companies and individuals. One evening, on her way to the subway, she was accosted by a man, hiding in the shadows of an alley.

"Come here!" the man growled, holding a gun on her, yanking her into the darkened alley. Erica made to cry out, but the barrel of the gun pressed against her ribs silenced her.

"You've been looking into stuff you shouldn't be, lady," the thug hissed in her ear. "If you don't want to end up like the Lane dame you better drop it!" At that instant a man, noticing something odd, poked his head into the alley.

"Hey, what are you doing there?" he hollered out. The thug pushed Erica to the ground where she cried out, scraping her hands and knees. The good Samaritan helped Erica to her feet.

"Are you all right, Miss?" he asked checking her over for any obvious injury.

"I'm okay, just a little shaken up, I guess. Thank you so much for checking on me, not everyone would do that."

"Superman does so much to protect the innocent in this city it's the least I can do to help when I can. Can I call a cab for you? Or would you like to go to a hospital?"

"If you'd help me flag down a cab that would be wonderful," Erica said, walking gingerly due to her sore knees. Flagging down a cab, Erica climbed in, thanking her rescuer again for his kindness. She gave the driver her address then settled back into the seat, reflecting on her recent experience, she was shivering now that the adrenalin was leaving her body. So, not only was Intergang aware of her activities they had also, at least indirectly, confirmed that they had been responsible for Lois Lane's death. Upon arriving home she took a long hot bath, soaking her aching muscles, her hands still shaking when she poured bubble bath into the tub. While there, she formed a plan. She was not one to be scared away by a little threat.

When the water in her bath had gone cold, she climbed out of the tub gingerly. Her hands and knees still red with scrapes from the dirty alley. Toweling off, she wrapped the towel around herself and dried her hair. Seeing her phone on the bedside table she picked it up; she needed a friendly voice right about now. While she had a plan and she really wasn't afraid, she was still in need of a sympathetic ear.

"Hello?"

Hi, Nancy, it's me," Erica said softly.

"Erica, honey, what's wrong?" Nancy said, worriedly.

"I was attacked tonight..."

"Oh God, are you all right?"

"Yeah, a little shaken up, some scrapes on my hands and knees but I'm all right. A good Samaritan chased the guy off."

"You poor dear, where did this happen?"

"I was on my way to the subway when he accosted me, pulling me into the alley.... Um, he told me to drop the investigation."

"He what?! He knew you were investigating that gang? Erica, you've got to stop, it's too dangerous!" Nancy exclaimed, worried for her friend.

"I can't do that Nancy, you know I can't! I'm not going to let a gang of criminals scare me away from doing what needs to be done."

"Yeah, you always were stubborn that way. Look, you have to promise me you'll be more careful. I don't want to lose you!" Nancy said her voice choking up with fear.

"I will, believe me. I'm going to have someone walk me to the subway from now on. You know, we've always suspected that there was a spy in the newsroom and this incident proves it."

"Maybe you should tell the police? You were attacked after all."

"I wasn't harmed, they just wanted to scare me—"

"I think they did a darn good job! You need to be careful, Erica, please?"

"I will, now let's talk about something else."

The next morning Erica stopped by Perry's office, knocking on the door then closing it behind her. She told him about her attack the previous evening, quickly reassuring him that she was basically unharmed.

"Great Shades of Elvis!" Perry fumed, "How'd they find out? We've been so careful. I'll get Jim on this right away, maybe someone bugged your computer."

"That has to be it, Perry, I've been very careful with my inquiries. I don't see how anyone would know otherwise."

"Don't do anything else until Jim has a chance to check out your system, okay?"

"Will do, thanks, Perry." Erica left the office, returning to her own. At the end of the day Jim Olsen showed up to check out her system.

"Why don't you go home? I'm gonna be here for a while. I'm so sorry you were hurt," Jim said apologetically.

"It wasn't your fault, Jim. This makes me so mad I'm not going to back down now. I want those bastards more than ever!"

"We'll get them, you can be sure of that. It may take a while, but we'll get them!" Jim began a full system check of Erica's computer and the network. Seeing as this would take some time, she gathered up her briefcase and purse then headed towards the elevator. While she waited for the elevator car to arrive Clark stopped beside her.

"Erica, I'm so sorry you were attacked! Are you okay?" he asked solicitously.

"I'm fine, Clark, just a few scrapes and bruises. Thank goodness that kind man intervened. Even though that thug had a gun, I don't think he meant to harm me, scare me, yes, but truly harm me, I don't think so."

"Well no matter, I'm going to ask Superman to keep an eye on you, just in case." Clark said firmly, brooking no disagreement.

"Superman? Doesn't he have enough to do without having to watch out for me?" she asked, curiously.

"Superman is a friend of mine and, as I'm sure you've read, of Lois's as well. He wants Intergang as much as any of us. If any one of us is threatened, he'll drop everything to protect us. Please, Erica, if you run into *any* trouble, call 'Help, Superman!' and he'll be there."

"All right, Clark, I will." She thanked him for his concern then she stepped into the elevator, headed for home.

The next morning Jim reported his findings to Perry. "I found a few things last night, a key logger and multiple instances of spyware. They got Erica's password with the key logger, then they were sending the data to their servers. I've removed everything and have installed an encryption program on her computer. I've also increased network security so we shouldn't have a repeat of this particular attack. Even so, I'm going to run a full system check on all our computers and the network every morning. We'll also need to change our passwords. I recommend changing them periodically, maybe monthly, just to be sure."

"Thanks, Jim, any idea how this happened?" Jim frowned, obviously upset.

"Someone inside the building had to load the key logger. Once that was done, with Erica's password, they could have loaded the rest. As we suspected, we have an Intergang spy!" Jim ground out between his teeth. "I should have seen this possibility! If I had been smarter Erica might not have been hurt."

"Nonsense, Jim. It's not your fault, it's the fault of those Intergang thugs. Now, I don't want to hear any more about that," Perry said sternly, his eyes alight with indignation.

"Even so, they won't get into our systems or the network again, that's for sure. You know, maybe I can trace who planted the keylogger. It could lead us to the spy!" Jim left, heading back to work.

Chapter 9

There were no more incidents for the next few weeks. Erica was unmolested, though she felt, rather than saw, Superman watching over her. It gave her a comforting feeling, even if she felt she didn't need watching over. The team was slowly gathering evidence that Intergang, specifically the top leadership, were involved in numerous crimes across multiple countries: money laundering, assassinations, intimidation as well as a multitude of other crimes. Given the spy in their midst, they were extra careful with their conversations while at work. Perry went so far as to have all offices swept for bugs daily and had installed a white noise generator in his office to thwart eavesdropping. They were also more circumspect when at their offsite bar meetings. Rather than meet at the same place as they had been doing, they rotated amongst four different places within walking distance to the Planet. Clark also kept watch for anyone following or listening in, surreptitiously of course.

Intergang was not to be denied for too long, however. Their spy had been effectively locked out of the Planet's computer systems which, in effect, suggested something was still going on that Intergang didn't want taking place. Since their first point of attack had been Erica Atkins, due to her financial expertise, she was again on Intergang's radar. This time, however, it was determined that a more 'permanent' warning was required.

When Erica left the Planet that evening for the short walk to Humm and Rattle, one of their local pubs, she was grabbed by the upper arm, a knife pressed against her back, and dragged into the dark space between skyscrapers. Before she was even aware of her situation she was slammed against a wall, a very sharp switchblade pressed to her throat.

"You were warned to leave things alone!" the thug hissed, his fetid breath almost making her vomit. "I didn't think a pretty woman like you was stupid, but there we are. I'm gonna cut you from stem to stern, honey, by the time they find you, they're gonna think Jack the Ripper was here!" Fearing for her life, Erica slammed her heel into her attacker's instep then, when the knife drew away from her throat she screamed for her life.

"HELP, SUPERMAN!!!!!"

Before the echo had even subsided a whoosh announced the

arrival of the superhero, her attacker now held high over Superman's head.

"Are you all right, Miss Atkins?" Superman asked, his voice shaky with concern.

"Yes, Superman, thanks to you," she said gratefully, her knees weak now that the adrenalin was leaving her system.

"Please wait for me, I'll be right back." Superman took off and was gone but a few minutes, having dropped his charge off at the police station. "The police want to get your statement, but I was able to convince them that tomorrow morning was okay."

"That's fine, Superman, I'll go first thing in the morning."

"Would it be okay if I took you home? I'd feel better if you would allow me to," Superman asked, concern on his face.

"But I'm supposed to meet Perry, Jim and Clark," she said shakily.

"Call them, I'm sure they'll understand."

Dialing her cell phone, she called Perry White.

"Yes, Perry, I'm all right, just a little shaken up. Listen, Superman is here waiting to take me home. I'll see you after I give my statement to the police tomorrow.... Yes, goodbye." Ending the call, Erica turned to Superman.

"I guess I'm ready," she said expectantly. Superman scooped her into his arms as if she were light as a feather then rose slowly into the air. Erica wrapped her arms around his neck, awed by the sense of weightlessness as the ground fell away. They rose above the skyscrapers until she could see all of Metropolis laid out before her. "It's so beautiful," she whispered, leaning her head against Superman's shoulder. His arms drew her tighter against his chest, holding her lovingly, or so it seemed to her. Superman also seemed to be flying very slowly, though she wasn't about to complain. Being held in his arms felt amazing, the tingle she'd felt when touching Clark was present now, amplified tenfold. Gazing up into his face she noticed a serene expression there, he too seemed to be enjoying the flight. She studied him closer an idea forming in her brain, the longer she looked at him the surer she became.

"Clark? Is that you?" she whispered, knowing he could hear her perfectly well. Superman stopped abruptly, hovering in midair, his body stiff, his face showing fear and something else she couldn't decipher.

"Uh, what do you mean, Miss Atkins, I'm Superman," he said nervously. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Please, don't worry, Clark, I'll never say anything. I know how dangerous this knowledge is." Erica calmly caressed his cheek, her eyes boring into his, hopefully conveying the genuineness of her plea. "Please, Clark, trust me."

Superman seemed to deflate then, his body sagging, lowering his head he shook it in amazement.

"You know, all the times I flew with her, she never figured it out. Now the first time *you* fly with me you knew exactly who I am."

"You mean, Lois?" she replied softly. She sensed that this situation was something he'd feared for a long time.

"Yeah, I guess she was so impressed with the superhero she couldn't see the man inside the suit. Thankfully she came to love me anyway," he chuckled wryly. "How about I finish taking you home and we can talk. I'm sure you have a lot of questions."

Superman flew a little faster, finally arriving at Erica's apartment. Landing in the shadows between two buildings, Superman scanned the area. Setting Erica on her feet he stepped back and began to spin. Seconds later Clark Kent stood beside her, looking nervous and embarrassed. Erica's face registered awe and surprise, but she said nothing. Escorting Erica to her apartment, Clark noticed the living room was furnished in a comfortable southwestern style. The cream-colored sectional couch had colorful throw pillows scattered about. The thick red area rug was inspired by Navajo Indian graphic design. Along the walls were

bookshelves crammed with financial books and contemporary novels, as well as a lot of family photos. He could easily see Erica reading on the couch during a lazy Sunday afternoon.

"I need to call home, to let them know I'm going to be late," he said, pulling out his cell phone.

"Of course, I'll start some coffee, please make yourself at home." Clark sat down on the couch when his call was complete, his hands clasped nervously in his lap.

Erica entered her kitchen, mechanically putting coffee and water in the machine then turning it on. Gathering milk and sugar she set them and cups on a tray. She also put a few cookies on a plate, adding them to the tray. While waiting for the coffee to finish she pondered her discovery. Even now she had no answer as to why she felt so positive that Clark was Superman. Sure, that excited tingle she got whenever she touched Clark was there, magnified by the close contact of flying in Superman's arms. Even so, how could she ever think that a man who could fly was also the man she knew at work; a widower, father, son and the best investigative reporter on the Planet staff? The sputtering of the coffee maker pulled her out of her contemplation, bringing her attention back to the man waiting in her living room. Pouring two cups, she put the pot on the tray and, exiting the kitchen and entered the living room. She found Clark sitting on her couch, hands folded before him, looking nervously around the room.

"Here we are," she said brightly, placing the tray on the coffee table. Handing Clark a cup, she fixed her own while he fixed his. Sitting back against the couch she turned to face him.

"So," she said, giving him an open invitation to begin. Clark paused, glancing her way for a moment then his head drooped, his shoulders slumped.

"So," he said nervously. Taking a few sips of his coffee he set his cup down and began to speak. An hour later Clark had finished his tale, telling her about his arrival on Earth, his youth, coming to Metropolis, falling in love and ultimately losing the love of his life.

"I've mentioned before, if it hadn't been for Jon, I don't know what would have happened. I was in a very dark place for days after her murder, but Jon and his needs got me through. I hope you know that while I trust you completely I can't help but worry that someone or some organization will do to you what they did to Lois," Clark said, sadly, quietly.

"I think I understand, Clark, but this situation is very different. No one associates me with Superman, certainly not like they did with Lois. Before tonight I'd never even met Superman. Tonight was just another routine Superman rescue, nothing more. Please, don't worry needlessly, I can take care of myself."

"That's what she always said," he replied, shaking his head ruefully. "What's truly ironic is she'd stopped taking chances once Jon was born. She was just going to the mayor's press conference when she was killed! God, I still can't believe it happened." Clark hung his head, saddened once more from thinking about how Lois was taken from him.

Erica spoke soothingly, "Even so, Clark, I work in finance, not the City Desk. Granted we've been working to take down Intergang but that's an unusual case. Nothing I do is remotely dangerous. Please, Clark, try not to make any parallels where none exist."

Clark reluctantly agreed though not fully convinced, nodding his head in response. Picking up his coffee cup, he took a sip and, finding it was now cold, he lifted his glasses, shooting a blast of heat vision into it. Taking another sip he sat back, trying to relax. Erica's face reflected awe at what she'd just seen, Clark casually using his powers in front of her.

"I hope you don't mind but I'm wiped out. It's been a stressful evening." Clark put his cup on the wooden coffee table then stood up. Erica walked him to her door, grasping his hand.

“Thank you for telling me everything about yourself. I will never break your trust, Clark. Also, now that I know about you, please feel free to drop by when you need a friend. Clark is welcome any time.”

“Good night, Erica,” Clark said, squeezing her hand gently. Opening the door he left her watching his retreating form.

Arriving home, Clark saw that his mother and father were waiting for him. He sighed quietly, knowing his bed would be waiting empty for a while longer.

“What happened, honey?” Martha asked. “You seemed upset when you called.”

“I was, Mom. Erica was attacked by an Intergang thug.”

“Oh, my God, is she all right?” his father asked, leaning forward on the couch.

“Yes, she’s fine, a little shaken up of course, but she’s okay. There is something else... she knows,” Clark said, his voice tired.

“She knows... about...?” Martha said making a flying motion with her hand.

“Yeah, Mom, she knows about Superman.” Clark told his parents everything that had occurred leading up to her discovery. “I don’t know how she did it, but she saw right through me once she was in my arms.”

“Maybe it was how you held her. Did you enjoy it?” Martha asked quietly, hopefully.

“I did, Mom, God help me, I did!” he replied anguish in his voice. “It felt so good having a woman in my arms once more, she fit against me almost perfectly, not like Lois, but it felt really good nonetheless.”

“It’s okay, Clark, it’s okay to enjoy the feel of a woman in your arms. You are a young handsome man, you need someone, someone to support you and love you and for you to love them. You’re not dishonoring your marriage and your love for Lois. She didn’t want you to be lonely. Give it a chance, Clark that’s all we ask.” Jonathan held Martha’s hand, both of them looking at Clark lovingly.

“Thanks for the support, Mom, Dad, but I don’t think I’m ready yet. Good night.” Clark took the stairs slowly, the stress of the evening weighing him down. After taking a quick look at Jon as he slept Clark continued to his room, closing the door behind him. Undressing slowly, Clark tossed his shirt into the hamper and put his suit coat and pants into the bag for the dry cleaner. Sitting on the edge of the bed his eyes gravitated to the photo of Lois that sat on his nightstand. Picking up the picture he gazed into the dark brown eyes and smiling face of the only woman he’d ever loved.

“God, I miss you, Lois,” Clark whispered with tears in his eyes. “I don’t know how to say this... Erica knows. One measly flight and she figured out I’m Superman!” Clark closed his eyes, a sad, rueful expression on his face. “If only *you* had seen through that disguise as easily as she did, but you were bowled over by Superman and I was just the green rookie partner who’d been foisted on you. It’s scary, Lois, another person knows about me. She was attacked tonight, you know? She tells me she can take care of herself but all I can think about is how fragile human life is.” Bringing the picture to his lips he kissed the cold glass and set it down. Pulling back the covers he lay down, shut off the light and stared at the ceiling.

Erica gave her statement at the station then, taking a cab, arrived at the *Daily Planet*. Riding the ancient elevator to the newsroom floor, she scanned the bullpen looking for Clark. Somehow he sensed her attention and smiled at her, though it didn’t quite reach his eyes. When Clark was happy his smile lit up the room and everyone around him knew it, but today was not one of those times. She gave him a quick wave, grabbed a cup of coffee then went to see Perry. When she finished she noticed Clark was not in the newsroom. Before last night she might have

speculated about what story he was chasing or if his absence was related to their Intergang investigation. Now, she had to wonder if he was out on a rescue, and, if he was okay. Erica had read about Kryptonite when she’d gone through the archives and Clark had mentioned it last night as well. So it was with some trepidation that she made her way to her office to start her day.

Over the next few weeks Clark and Erica grew more friendly, though Clark was still reluctant to deepen their friendship as she would have liked. To that end, Martha had suggested that Clark invite her to a family gathering now that she was in on the ‘secret’.

“Mom, Dad, you remember Erica Atkins?” Clark said entering the living room with Erica at his side.

“Of course, it’s lovely to see you again, dear,” Martha said, drawing her into a hug. Erica returned the hug enthusiastically, giving Martha a light kiss on the cheek.

“Thank you for coming, Erica, any friend of Clark’s is a friend of ours,” Jonathan said extending his hand; taking it, Erica smiled genuinely, beaming happily.

“Thank you both for inviting me, where’s Jon?” she said curious as to where the youngest member of the family was.

“Oh, he’s outside playing on the swing, you know boys, can’t keep them inside on a beautiful day,” Martha replied.

“Can we go see him, Clark?” Erica asked imploring him.

“Sure, let’s go.” Clark grasped her hand leading her through the kitchen and out to the back yard. “Jon, come here a second, will you?”

“What do you want, Daddy?” Jon asked, running from his swing, coming to a stop in front of the couple.

“Jon, this is Miss Atkins, do you remember her from the company picnic?” Clark said.

“Oh, yeah, I remember, pleased to meet you Miss Atkins,” Jon said, extending his little hand.

“I’m pleased to meet you too, Jon,” Erica said shaking his hand. “Please call me Erica, okay?” Jon looked to his father who nodded his assent.

“Thank you, Miss Erica,” Jon said politely. “Can I go play now Daddy?” Jon was now bouncing on his toes, eager to go back to playing.

“Okay, go ahead,” Clark chuckled. Jon took off a run, hopping on his swing once more.

“Clark, he’s darling, such a polite little boy; you’ve done a wonderful job raising him.” Erica said, gazing into his eyes.

“Thank you, but I didn’t do it all by myself. His grandparents, both of them, are a big influence in his life,” Clark replied, a sad expression coming over him for a moment, though it passed quickly. They returned to the kitchen where Martha and Jonathan were preparing food and drinks for the cookout.

“Can I help with anything, Martha?” Erica asked, hopefully.

“Yes, dear, could you cut those vegetables for the salad?”

Martha replied, pointing to a pile of tomatoes and cucumbers fresh from their little garden next to the cutting board. Erica immediately picked up the knife and started on the tomatoes.

“Jonathan, why don’t you and Clark take the meat and get the table set up, then you can start the grill; we shouldn’t be too long.”

“Come on, Clark,” Jonathan said picking up the tray with the hot dogs and hamburgers. Clark grabbed the tray with plates, glasses and napkins, following his father outside.

“She’s wants to talk to Erica alone, right?” Clark said knowingly.

“Yep, you know your mother all right. And don’t be listening in either,” Jonathan said with a grin putting his tray on the table.

“I wouldn’t dare, she’d box my ears if she found me doing that.”

“I hope you don’t mind, but I wanted to talk to you alone,” Martha said walking over to where Erica was working on the

vegetables. She leaned against the counter watching the younger woman work.

“Not at all, Martha, I’m pleased to have the opportunity to talk to you as well.” Martha nodded in agreement.

“If you don’t think I’m being too forward, how did you figure it out?” Martha asked, curiously.

“I don’t really know for sure. One minute Superman was rescuing me from that thug, then we were in the air and he was holding me in his arms, he seemed to be cradling me to his chest and was flying so slowly. All of a sudden I realized I felt the same tingling sensation I’d felt the few times I’d touched Clark, but it was magnified ten-fold, I looked into his eyes and... I just knew,” she said, softly, concentrating on cutting the vegetables.

“That’s amazing,” Martha replied contemplatively. “Did Clark tell you about his wife at all?”

“Some, but not a lot. I can see his feelings are still very raw when he speaks of her.”

“Lois was awed by Superman and less than impressed with Clark Kent. To be fair she had issues with handsome colleagues, one having stolen a story from her. When Superman showed up and rescued her from that bomb on Prometheus, she was blown away. It took two years for Clark to break through her barriers and come to see Clark as someone she could love. The ironic part is she’d flown with Superman from the day of his debut and multiple times afterwards, but she never put the two men together. From what I know it was a different incident that clued her in, but Clark will have to tell you the exact details.”

“I don’t need to know, that’s in the past and it’s not important, really.”

“So... how do you feel about Clark?” Martha asked, keeping her voice neutral.

“I think he’s a wonderful man. I admire him so much, his work at the Planet and his ‘other job’, It’s a privilege knowing him,” she said neutrally as well.

“That’s nice dear... but how do you feel about *him*?” Martha replied a little more forcefully.

Erica sighed, setting down the knife and turning to face the older woman. “I like him, a lot. He’s the first man who I’ve felt this way about since my husband passed. Would I like more? Yes, but Clark obviously isn’t ready.”

“Thank you for being honest, Erica. I agree, he’s not quite ready, but he will be. I only hope you can be patient enough to wait for him. He likes you, I can tell, but he also feels like he’s cheating on Lois if he expresses those feelings.”

“That’s the way I see it as well, Martha. I’m willing to wait, Clark’s worth it.”

Chapter 10

Months went by with the team working diligently, gathering evidence of Intergang’s and its leadership’s crimes and documenting everything for eventual prosecution. Weeks before they were ready to call in the FBI and present their evidence there was a hit on Seamus Deckard’s account. Jim immediately began crosschecking his travel plans with high value targets and his efforts turned up a likely match, the president of Nicaragua, Jose Daniel Ortega. Mr. Ortega was to travel around the country stumping for his reelection and his itinerary and Deckard’s intersected at numerous cities. Jim took this information to his boss who called Clark in as well.

“Jim, tell Clark what you found,” Perry said, once Clark had sat down.

“Deckard and the president of Nicaragua, Ortega, have multiple cities in common when Ortega goes on his reelection tour. I’m sorry I can’t narrow it down better than that,” Jim said frustrated.

“You did the best you could, Jim. At least we have a very likely target and an itinerary. Superman can use that to work with

the Nicaraguan government to form a plan. Give me everything you’ve got so I can give it to Superman, okay?” Clark said.

“Sure thing, CK, you’ll have it before noon,” Jim left the office, closing the door behind him.

“Do you want to take some ‘vacation’ time so you can go with Superman and follow this story?” Perry asked knowingly.

“Yeah, Chief, bringing down an international assassin like Deckard will be front page news for sure!” Clark replied, a determined look on his face.

Superman took the evidence Jim had collected to the Nicaraguan equivalent of the Secret Service, explaining everything to them and forming a plan to capture Deckard in the act. Superman had suggested he join the president’s protection detail in disguise, ready to intercept any assassination attempt. They agreed, finalizing plans for the president’s trip and informing him of the assassination plan and Superman’s role in preventing it. All was in place in a few hours, now all they had to do was wait.

The day before Clark’s ‘vacation’, he and Erica were having dinner at her apartment. While neither would call them dates, exactly, they had been enjoying meals at each other’s homes quite often. Erica especially enjoyed eating at Clark’s place, seeing his parents and Jon was a real joy for her and the feeling was mutual. Jon had even gone as far as asking her to read him a story periodically, something the boy and Erica enjoyed immensely.

“Please be careful, Clark. Deckard is a dangerous man.”

“Believe me, I know,” he replied angrily. “I’m going to catch him and he’s going to jail for the rest of his life but before that, he’s going to tell me that *he* killed Lois. I owe her that!”

“I know, Clark, but you still need to be careful. It wouldn’t surprise me if the man had Kryptonite, just in case!” Erica pleaded.

“I’ll be careful. It’s been a long time since I’ve run into a situation blindly and been surprised by Kryptonite. Since I know his itinerary, I plan to thoroughly scan his rooms and his person. If I find *anything* resembling a lead box I’ll have it removed by security long before it can get near me, I promise,” Clark said, grasping her hands to convey his understanding of her concern.

“That’s all I ask, that you be as careful as possible, I... I want you to come home to me,” she said softly, her eyes tearing up, gazing into his.

“I will, I promise.”

The presidential party began their journey in the capital, Managua. The security service chief didn’t think the attempt would be made there, but security was tight nonetheless. Superman was assigned to the president’s immediate detail, taking a position at his side at all times. He wore the same black suit, white shirt, black tie and dark glasses as every other person on the detail, so he’d blend in perfectly. The first three stops in Managua passed without incident so it was on to the next stop, the city of Leon. Superman was on high alert, scanning constantly for anything out of the ordinary during the trip between cities. It wouldn’t be beyond possibility that a roadside bomb could take out the presidential convoy. As had been the case before, there were no attempts on the president’s life while in Leon, so it was on to Chinandega.

In between events, Superman had been checking out Deckard’s person and lodgings, looking for anything that would signal the presence of Kryptonite. He found nothing in his luggage, on his body or in his room any time he looked, but he did find a sniper rifle secreted amongst his luggage in false bottoms. Seeing this, he was reasonably sure that the attempt would be made at a distance during an outside event. Passing along this information to security, plans were made to stake out every potential sniper site, ready to descend upon receiving the

prearranged signal.

The last event of the day was a huge outside rally in the main square of Chinandega. Superman scanned the area constantly, every sense on high alert, looking for Deckard but not seeing him. What did catch his attention however was a faint sound, the click of a rifle being cocked. His eyes immediately focused on the spot the sound had emanated from, finding a man who was similar in stature to Deckard but looked nothing like him. Superman inched closer to President Ortega as Deckard lined him up through the scope on his rifle. When he pulled the trigger Superman sprang into action, stepping in front of the president, catching the bullet in midair. Handing it to another guard he spun into his suit and a second later he landed behind Deckard after having scanned one more time for Kryptonite.

“Put the rifle down, Deckard. Your days of being a paid assassin are over. I have the bullet you shot and we’re going to match it to your rifle. Security is on its way here right now, but before they get here you and I are going to have a little chat.” Superman grabbed Deckard by the collar and immediately shot into the sky. He flew just below the speed where a human would suffer injury, hovering about 8,000 feet above the ground.

“I want to know, did you kill Lois Lane?” Superman ground out in anger.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Superman,” Deckard said, unfazed.

“Oh you do, Deckard, I know you do. I just want you to admit it,” Superman said, his eyes beginning to glow red.

“You don’t scare me, Superman, everyone knows you don’t kill,” he said cockily. The smile on Superman’s face would have scared anyone who saw it, but Deckard didn’t react.

“You’re right, I don’t kill, *usually*. However in this case I just might make an exception. I’m sure you know Clark Kent is a very good friend of mine, as was his wife. I promised him I’d find her killer, so I’m going to ask again, *did... you... kill... Lois... Lane!*” Superman roared, shaking him violently. Superman brought Deckard close, nose to nose. “I’m waiting!”

“I don’t know what you mean, Superman,” he replied, disheveled from the shaking.

“Wrong answer!” Superman released his grip watching as Deckard, screaming, fell towards the ground. Superman hovered, watching as Deckard got closer and closer to the ground. When he was at about 500 feet Superman dived down, plucking him out of the air and shooting straight up to 10,000 feet this time.

“Did you kill Lois Lane!” Deckard hesitated a second too long, so Superman let go once more. Deckard screamed over and over as he fell, the ground getting closer and closer. When he was at about 250 feet Superman dived down, grabbing him by his leg and shooting to a height of 15,000 feet. Coming to a stop, he flipped Deckard around, catching him by the front of his jacket.

“I can do this all day you know. Each time you don’t tell me what I want to know we’re going to go higher and higher, at 30,000 feet it will feel like you’re at the top of Mount Everest. Breathing will be difficult if not impossible, so, are you going to tell me what I want to know or are we going to continue?”

“No...”

“*Wrong answer!*” Superman let go again watching as Deckard fell. At 150 feet Superman caught him again, shooting up to 20,000 feet.

“I’ll tell you what, since we don’t seem to be getting anywhere this way, though I’m having fun, I’ll make you a deal. You’re going to prison for attempted assassination. The Nicaraguan government is not nearly as generous as I am, they will try you, rather quickly I suspect, and once you are found guilty, and you will be, you will be executed at sunrise the very next day. If you tell me what I want to know I’ll put in a good word, so they won’t execute you. Granted, Nicaraguan prisons are no cakewalk, but it beats a bullet at sunrise. So, how about it? Did you kill Lois

Lane!” Deckard knew when he was beaten.

“Yes, I killed her. I was paid to do it,” he said, defeated. “But I don’t know who hired me, you have to believe me!”

“I *know* who hired you, I just needed to be sure it was you. Everything I’ve been able to gather pointed to you, but I needed a confession from you.” Superman flew down, handing Deckard off to the security service where he was immediately handcuffed and put in the back of a black armored car.

“Thank you, Superman,” President Ortega said, shaking Superman’s hand. “If there is anything I or my country can do for you, you only have to ask.”

“You’re very welcome, Mr. President. It was my honor to serve you.” Superman lifted off the ground and, with a wave, shot into the sky.

The next day the *Daily Planet* ran the story of Deckard’s capture with a 40-point headline.

‘The Ghost, International Assassin, Captured!’

By Clark Kent with contributions by E. Atkins and J. Olsen
Seamus Deckard, the international financier, exposed as the infamous assassin “The Ghost”, was captured by Superman yesterday during a failed attempt on the life of Nicaraguan President Ortega. Mr. Deckard has been linked to over fifty assassinations over a ten-year period including the murder of Lois Lane, star reporter for this newspaper. Ms. Atkins and Mr. Olsen provided invaluable information that enabled authorities to link Mr. Deckard to his crimes and helped predict where he would be when he was captured.

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Clark Kent entered the silent cemetery, making his way to a particular grave, decorated with flowers and plants.

“We got him, Lois,” he said softly, tears choking him. “It took a team to do it, I couldn’t do it by myself, but we got him!” Gazing up to the sky he sighed, his shoulders sagging.

“I’m so sorry I wasn’t able to protect you, that’s something I’ll always regret. Jonny is doing well, he misses you terribly. I make sure to tell him about you every chance I get. He’ll never forget you, darling, I won’t let him, and I won’t forget you either.” Clark vowed, kissing his fingertips then touching the cold granite. “I love you.” Clark sighed, tears gathering at the corners of his eyes. “Remember that letter you left for me? The one where you asked me to be open to love again? It’s time... I’ve found someone who I want to be with. She’s part of the team who helped capture your murderer. You know, I think you’d like her. She’s intelligent and hardworking, and she loves Jon, I can tell. He’s asked her to read him a bedtime story many times and her eyes light up every time he asks. And before you ask, yes, she’s pretty.” Clark smiled through his tears. “I’ll always love you, Lois, and I’ll never forget you.” He turned reluctantly, heading home to his family.

A week after the capture of Seamus Deckard, everything fell into place. Superman set up a meeting with the FBI, the Metropolis PD, and the security services of Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala. Perry, Jim, Clark and Erica laid out their evidence, taking a full day to explain it in painstaking detail. A plan was made to simultaneously raid every member of Intergang’s leadership in every country, so as not to allow anyone to tip off the other leaders. It was determined to keep the number of people in the know to strictly trusted people, again to avoid word of the raids getting back to those involved.

Superman assisted the FBI and Metropolis police with the raid on Melissa Navé’s organization, capturing them all in an underground bunker six stories below a CostMart store on the outskirts of the city.

“Melissa Navé you are under arrest for crimes too numerous to mention, though specifically for the murder of Lois Lane,”

Inspector Henderson said, slapping the cuffs on her.

“You have nothing on me!” she cried, struggling against her bonds. “I’ll have your badge, I’ll have *all* your badges!”

“Don’t worry, Ms. Navé we have more than enough evidence against you and your men. Just so you know, we’ve conducted raids on *all* of your ‘associates’. Intergang is done for.”

A week later:

Inspector William Henderson got off the elevator at the newsroom of the *Daily Planet*. Walking up to Perry White’s office, he knocked on the open door.

“Bill! Come in, what can I do for you?” Perry asked.

Henderson entered, sitting down in a chair in front of Perry’s desk.

“I’m here to do something for you. Could you call Clark, Jim and Erica in here?”

Getting up from his desk he walked to the door and hollered, “Kent! Olsen! Come in here!” Sitting back down, Perry picked up the phone. “Erica, come to my office please?”

Moments later Clark, Jim and Erica were seated on the plaid couch waiting for someone to enlighten them as to why they’d been summoned.

“Okay, Bill, it’s your show,” Perry said, gesturing for Henderson to proceed.

“I’ve got good news, we’ve found your mole,” Henderson said in his usual laconic style. Four voices were raised immediately requesting how this wonderful result had been reached.

“Going over the mountain of evidence we got from the Intergang raid, we came across some audio tapes. The tapes were conversations between Melissa Navé and Joan Ingraham. Turns out Joan was very angry that Clark here had rejected her advances,” Henderson grinned knowingly. “Anyway, it wasn’t too hard for Navé to turn her into their spy. We’ve charged her with being an accessory to the attacks on Erica, and we’re still working on more charges. At the very least she’ll get five years.”

Clark looked at Perry, Jim and Erica with a confused look on his face.

“Joan Ingraham? Doesn’t she work in Classifieds?” Clark said.

“Yeah, she’s been here about a year I guess,” Perry replied.

“And she sold us out because Clark wouldn’t date her?” Jim said thoroughly confused.

“It would seem so,” Henderson said, “Well I’ve got to get back to the precinct. I’ll see you all later.”

“Great Shades of Elvis!” Perry said once Henderson had left. “I’d have never even suspected her. Clark, did you sense anything ‘off’ about her?”

“No, Chief. I remember her asking me out and I know I told her as gently as I could that I was not interested in dating anyone at that time. She didn’t seem upset, at least not to me,” Clark said, baffled.

“I remember overhearing her and another woman talking about Clark. Joan was told that Clark didn’t date by the other woman, Sally, if I remember correctly. Joan seemed awfully sure of herself that she could bring Clark out of mourning for his wife. It’s a pretty lousy excuse to spy on your coworkers for an evil organization like Intergang, but that’s the only thing I can think of.” Erica said, as confused as anyone.

“Well, at least we know who the spy is and that they are getting what they deserve,” Perry said clapping his hands together. “Back to work everyone, we still have a paper to put out!”

Chapter 11

One month later...

Clark stood outside Erica’s door gathering himself before knocking.

“Come in, Clark,” Erica said, opening the door to her boyfriend. With the capture and conviction of Seamus Deckard

Clark had, at last, come to the realization the he needed someone in his life and that someone was Erica Atkins.

“Would you like anything to drink before we leave?” she asked, escorting him to the couch.

“No, nothing, thank you.”

“Is there something wrong, Clark? You seem awfully nervous.”

“I’m fine,” he said, sliding off the couch to one knee. Drawing a small purple box from his pocket he grasped her hand.

“Erica, over the last year I’ve come to know you as a wonderful, caring person, a person I’ve fallen in love with.” Releasing her hand he opened the box. “Erica, will you marry me?” Clark smiled, waiting for her reply.

“Yes! Oh yes! I love you too, so very much!” She leaned down, laying her hand on his cheek, kissing him deeply. Their arms encircled each other, holding tightly and reveling in the closeness of their bodies. Their tongues danced back and forth, first in her mouth then in his, passion rising quickly. Clark, with great restraint, drew back, his chest heaving, his eyes gleaming, a match to hers. Taking the ring out of the box he slipped it on her finger, kissing her hand lovingly.

“I love you so much, Erica, I can hardly believe this day has come. When I lost Lois I never thought I’d ever find someone to love, but I have and I’m so grateful for your love. I promise to always love you with all my heart.”

“I too, never thought I’d find someone after I lost Gary. My heart was so broken I never thought anyone could help me heal but you did. We found each other and I’m grateful every day for that.” Clark stood, assisting her off the couch; taking her hand they left her apartment for their date at Ruth’s Chris Steakhouse, a very high-end restaurant.

After they were seated and had ordered drinks and their meals, Clark took her hand in his.

“So, I know this is a bit early, and we haven’t even set a date, but do you have any preferences for our honeymoon?” Clark asked. “We can go anywhere in the world.”

“Hmm, I hadn’t thought about it but I’ve always wanted to visit southern Spain and Morocco. My maternal grandparents were from there. Grandma was Moroccan and Grandpa was from southern Spain. As a child they would tell me all about where they grew up, where they met and I’ve always wanted to go there but I’ve never had the opportunity. Would that be all right?”

“It’s perfect. I loved that area when I was on my world travels. My Spanish is pretty good and in Morocco they speak Arabic and French so I’m sure we’ll muddle through!” Leaning over he kissed her gently then drew back. “I’d love to show you all the places you’ve dreamed of, it would be my pleasure.”

“That’s perfect, Clark, we’ll have such a good time.” Their meals arrived then so all talk of marriage and honeymoons was put on hold.

After dinner Clark wanted to tell his parents and his son about the impending nuptials, so they walked down the sidewalk until they reached a darkened parking lot. Walking to the back, they hid behind a building where Clark scanned the area and, finding no one, he spun into the suit, gathering his fiancée in his arms. Rising quickly so they were above the city lights, Superman flew off towards the house on Hyperion Avenue. Again checking his surroundings, they landed softly in the back yard where he spun back into his suit and tie. Taking her hand he led her up the stairs and into the kitchen.

“Hi Mom, Dad,” Clark called when they entered the living room.

“Clark, Erica, how nice to see you dear. I didn’t know you were going to stop by tonight, how was your date?”

“It was wonderful, Martha,” Erica said, hugging the older woman lovingly. Stepping back she raised her left hand, wiggling

her fingers.

“Oh, my God!” Martha exclaimed hugging Erica once more, “Congratulations you two!”

Jonathan rose from the couch, drawing his son into a tight hug.

“Congratulations, Son, I knew you had it in you!”

“Thanks Mom, Dad, I’m a very lucky man, I found two wonderful women to love, something I’d never thought possible.” Glancing around and not seeing his son, Clark listened, finding Jon in his room.

“Jon, can you come down here?” Clark called out.

“Yes, Daddy,” he replied bouncing down the stairs. “What’s up?”

“Son, I proposed tonight. Erica and I are getting married,” Clark said happily.

“It’s about time, Daddy, I’ve been waiting for the longest time for you to get married,” he said, his hands on his hips, annoyed at his father’s lack of initiative. Everyone laughed, knowing the veracity of that statement though no one would have said it out loud. Jon turned towards Erica, taking her hand in his.

“Miss Erica, now that you’re marrying my daddy would it be okay if I called you mum? My real mommy is in heaven, but I’d love to call you mum if you don’t mind?” he asked his dark brown eyes pleading his case.

“I would love it if you called me mum,” Erica said, tears in her eyes. “I know I’m not your mom and I can never replace her, but I hope you’ll let me take care of you in her place.” She knelt down, pulling the little boy into her arms, hugging him fiercely. The three adults watching broke into happy tears.

When Clark flew Erica home she invited him in, not wanting this magical evening to end. Clark grasped Erica’s hand drawing her onto his lap, his arms wrapped around her. Cupping her cheek, he drew closer, his lips touching hers in a feather-light kiss. Erica responded in kind at first, then, as their passions rose, the kisses became more heated. Reluctantly, Clark drew back, his eyes dark, his chest heaving.

“Maybe we should slow things down, honey,” Clark whispered, his forehead resting against hers. Erica nodded in agreement, her own chest rising and falling in time with his. Leaning her head on his chest she sighed contentedly.

“God, I haven’t felt like that in a long time,” Erica whispered, leaning up to kiss Clark’s neck. “Thanks for slowing things down,” Erica chuckled slightly embarrassed.

“I understand, honey, and I feel the same way, but I want our first time to be special,” Clark said, kissing the top of her head.

“That’s so romantic, my love, I agree. How about we make a pact, we wait until the honeymoon?” Erica suggested, hugging Clark tightly.

“That’s a wonderful idea,” Clark said, “speaking of the honeymoon we need to set a date for the wedding or there won’t be a honeymoon.”

“Since this is the second marriage for each of us I don’t feel the need for a big fancy wedding, do you?” Erica asked, climbing off Clark’s lap and seating herself beside him.

“No, I don’t need that either. I was thinking a casual affair, maybe in our backyard, with just a few friends and family, maybe 50 people?”

“That sounds perfect, honey, that way we don’t have to find a venue and deal with their schedule.” Erica got up, grabbed her purse and pulled out her appointment book, scanning it for a date. “I was thinking the second Saturday of June, how does that sound?”

“That’s perfect. Umm, do you have any preferences for who officiates?”

“No, a Justice of the Peace works for me, I think that fits with the casual theme of the wedding.”

“Great, I’ll call City Hall tomorrow. I was thinking, I want to

ask Jim to be my best man, he’s as close to me as a brother and I couldn’t think of anyone I’d rather have,” Clark said, “how about you, do you have someone?”

“Nancy Gordon, an old friend from Denver. She was my maid of honor when I got married to Gary and I’d love to have her with me now.”

“Well that’s settled then, who would you like to give you away?”

“Do you think Perry would do it?” Erica asked hopefully.

“I think he’d be proud to do it,” Clark replied sincerely.

“Great, I’ll ask him tomorrow! Wow, we’ve got this all planned out in less than half an hour. What can we do for the rest of the evening?”

Clark grasped her hand, drawing her onto his lap again, his arms wrapping her securely. “I can think of something,” Clark said with a wicked grin.

When Erica stepped off the elevator the next morning she immediately headed to Perry White’s office.

“You got a minute Chief?” Erica asked, tapping on the door frame.

“Sure thing, come on in.” Erica entered, closing the door behind her, taking a seat in front of her boss.

“So, what’s up?” Perry asked, folding his hands in front of him.

“I have a favor to ask,” she paused, taking a calming breath, “Clark asked me to marry him last night—”

“Great Shades of Elvis! Congratulations!” Perry exclaimed.

“Thanks, but that’s not why I came in here. I wanted to ask, would you give me away?” Perry’s face lit up, his smile lighting up the room.

“I’d be honored, Erica,” he replied, walking around his desk to envelop her in a hug.

“Thanks, Perry,” she replied returning the hug enthusiastically. When the hug ended she took her seat once more.

“So, have you set a date?” he asked, now leaning against his desk.

“Yes, June 15th. We’re going to hold everything in Clark’s backyard.”

“That sounds wonderful. Have you decided on a honeymoon destination yet?”

“Actually we’d decided on that before we had a date. I’ve always wanted to see where my maternal grandparents grew up so we’re going to the south of Spain and Morocco.”

“That sounds like a great trip. When you get your arrangements made, submit your vacation requests so I can approve them, okay?”

“Certainly, and thanks again,” Erica hugged Perry quickly then headed off to start her day.

Clark Kent walked over to Jim’s desk, sitting down on the corner. “Hey, Jim, do you have a minute?”

“Sure, CK, what do you need?”

“Can we go to the conference room? I’d rather not talk out here,” Clark got off the desk, walking to the conference room with Jim following close behind.

“What’s up, CK?” Jim asked, closing the door, his curiosity piqued.

“Jim, I asked Erica to marry me and I’d love for you to be my best man,” Clark said, proudly.

“Wow, CK! Congratulations!” Jim enveloped Clark in a fierce hug. “Of course! I’m honored to be your best man. When’s the wedding?”

“June 15th, it’s going to be a small ceremony with just friends and family.”

“What does Jonny think about this?” Jim asked.

“He told me it was about time!” Clark said with a laugh. “He also asked Erica if he could call her mum,” Clark said softly.

“Wow, he’s a very astute kid, I bet Erica loved that.”
 “She really did, there wasn’t a dry eye in the house when he said that.”
 “Congratulations, again, Clark. I’m really happy for you,” Jim said sincerely, shaking his hand. Both men exited the room, going back to work.
 When Clark returned to his desk he picked up his phone and dialed a familiar number.
 “Hello?”
 “Hi, Ellen, this is Clark.”
 “Clark! It’s good to hear from you, how are you, dear?”
 “I’m well, Ellen, thanks for asking. Umm, are you and Sam going to be home around 6:00 tonight?”
 “Yes, we have no plans for this evening. Is something wrong?” Ellen asked, cautiously.
 “No, no, there’s nothing wrong. I just need to talk to you both.” Clark said casually.
 “Okay, dear, we’ll see you then.”

Clark got out of the taxi in front of Sam and Ellen’s condo on the Upper East Side at 6:00. Climbing the steps, he rang the bell.
 “Hi Clark!” Sam said, opening the door. “Come on in!”
 Clark walked into the familiar living room. It was furnished in the Swedish Modern style, white walls and ceilings, light color wood floors and simple furniture with colorful throw pillows. Colorful artwork decorated the walls. Seating himself he looked at his in-laws, taking a calming breath.
 “Sam, Ellen, you know I’ve been dating Erica for a while now... well I proposed last night. I want you to know that I’ll never forget Lois; she was my soul mate, but I feel it’s time. Lois left me a letter telling me to be open to love and, thank God, I’ve found it.” Clark said softly, looking at his in-laws hopefully.
 “Oh, Clark! That’s wonderful!” Ellen said, happily.
 “Yes, Clark, we’re very happy for you,” Sam said, smiling at his son-in-law. “You’ve been a wonderful father, making sure Jon knows who his mother was, and we appreciate that. It’s time for you to think of yourself too. We want you to be happy and we know Erica is the person who can do that.”
 “Yes, Clark, we’ve both seen how good she is with Jon as well; we know she loves him as much as you do. We couldn’t ask for a better person to care for our grandson.”
 “Thanks, Ellen, Sam, I appreciate your support. Erica is the woman I never thought I’d find when we lost Lois, but I’m so grateful that I have.”
 Clark spent a half hour visiting then, with hugs all around, Clark left for home.

That evening Clark, Erica, Martha and Jonathan sat down at Clark’s dining table to discuss and finalize plans for the wedding two months hence.
 “I called City Hall and scheduled a Justice of the Peace, Brian Hopp, for the 15th. I’ll also take care of the invitations once we determine the guest list,” Clark said, checking off two items from their checklist.
 “And I reserved a canopy, it will be delivered and set up on the 14th,” Jonathan said. “I also made reservations for tables and chairs to be delivered and set up the same day.”
 “And I called around to caterers. I’m getting three quotes for the menus we discussed, and I should have them tomorrow. You just need to pick out a cake from these suggestions,” Martha added, giving Erica some brochures.
 “And I’ve been compiling a list of places to see in both Spain and Morocco. Once we determine our itinerary I’ll be making reservations for places to stay,” Erica said with a smile. The wedding preparations were coming together splendidly and everyone around the table sighed with relief.

That night, after Clark had dropped Erica off at her apartment she picked up her cell and called a well-known number. She was cheered to hear a familiar soprano voice answer.
 “Hello, Erica, how are you?”
 “I’m great, Nancy, how’s things?”
 “Oh, same old, same old, you know how it goes. My boss has been working me like a dog. Hopefully, things will settle down soon,” Nancy replied sounding frustrated.
 “Well, I hope I’ve got some news that will cheer you up.”
 “Oh? I’m intrigued, what’s up?”
 “Nancy, you’re my best friend and you’ve helped me through some tough times.” Erica paused, choking up a bit. “Anyway, Clark asked me to marry him and I’d like you to be my matron of honor.”
 “Oh my God! Congratulations! I’d love to! When is it?”
 “June 15th, you and Doug can make it then, right?” Erica asked hopefully.

“You bet. Wild horses couldn’t keep me away. I’m putting in for vacation first thing tomorrow!” Erica and Nancy talked for another forty-five minutes, catching up on each other’s lives and going over details of the wedding. When the call ended Erica smiled happily to herself, heading off to bed.

After dropping Erica off at her apartment Clark walked down the sidewalk to an area behind her building where it was dark enough for him to change. Spinning into his suit he flew straight up, then turned south towards S.T.A.R. Labs. Using his X-ray vision he saw the person he was looking for in his office. Landing on the roof, Superman opened the special door that had been coded to his DNA allowing him direct access to Bernard Klein’s lab.
 “Superman!” Bernie called out when he heard the Man of Steel land.
 “Hi Bernie! Is it safe to talk?” Bernie walked over to a machine that stood against the wall and flipped a switch.
 “We’re good, Clark, what’s up?”
 “I wanted to tell you that I’m getting married again.”
 “That’s wonderful, Clark, congratulations!” Bernie said shaking Clark’s hand enthusiastically.
 “Thank you, since you’re the family doctor and my friend I wanted you to know as soon as possible. You’ll be getting a formal invitation later of course.”
 “Thanks for thinking of me like this, certainly I’ll be there, when’s the wedding?”

“June 15th, it’s going to be a small affair, friends and family so you need to work on your plus one!” Clark said grinning happily.
 “I will,” Bernie chuckled along with Clark. “I have an idea just who to ask, there’s a lady I’ve been dying to ask out and this will be a perfect opportunity to do so.”

“Great. Well, I need to get going. I want to do a quick patrol before I go home.” Clark shook hands with Bernie then floated up to the special door. “Goodnight!”

Chapter 12

Saturday June 15th dawned to a bright sunny day, with temperatures in the mid 70’s, a perfect day for a wedding.
 Erica Atkins arrived at the Kent household with her matron of honor, Nancy Gordon, their dresses in tow. Martha ushered them upstairs to the spare bedroom that they would use to change later. After hanging up the dresses, the three women joined the rest of the clan in the huge kitchen. Clark’s face lit up when Erica entered the room, that megawatt smile lighting up the room.
 “Good morning, sweetheart,” Clark said, drawing her into his arms for a quick kiss.
 “Good morning, honey,” Erica replied, smiling at her husband-to-be.
 “Good morning, Nancy, where’s Doug?” Clark asked after

kissing her on the cheek.

“He’s at the hotel because he wanted to get his workout in, but he’ll be here in plenty of time for the ceremony.” Nancy replied, “That coffee smells wonderful!” Clark grabbed two mugs, filling them with hot, black coffee, handing one to each of the ladies. “Thanks, Clark.”

Erica and Nancy fixed their coffees, then joined in the conversation. Moments later the doorbell rang so Clark set his coffee on the counter and, walking through the living room, answered the door.

“Hi Chief, Alice, good morning,” Clark said, kissing Alice on the cheek and shaking Perry’s hand.

“Good morning, Son, how’re you holding up?” Perry replied, stepping into the living room. Clark closed the door behind them then escorted the couple to the kitchen.

“I’m a little nervous but otherwise okay,” Clark said, pouring coffee for Perry and Alice.

“Thanks,” Perry said, accepting the mug. “That’s to be expected, a little nervousness at a time like this is a good thing.” Taking a sip Perry smiled. “I can tell Martha made this; there’s nothing like her coffee. If you don’t mind, I’m gonna mingle a bit.” Perry clapped Clark on the shoulder then headed off.

The door bell rang again moments later. “I’ll get it!” Clark called out, hurrying to the door. Opening it, Clark saw his in-laws, Sam and Ellen Lane, standing in the vestibule.

“Sam! Ellen! Good morning,” Clark said in welcome, leaning in, he kissed Ellen on the cheek then shook Sam’s hand.

“Everyone is in the kitchen, would you like some coffee?” Clark said, escorting them to the kitchen where he poured each of them a cup of the hot steamy brew.

“Thanks, Clark,” Ellen said, taking a sip of her drink then setting it on the counter. “Can I speak to you in private?” Clark nodded his assent, escorting her into the den, closing the door behind him.

“Clark, I know I’ve said this before, but thanks for finding the murderer of my little girl,” Ellen said, her eyes gleaming with unshed tears.

“Oh, Ellen, I did that for all of us. Lois deserved justice and I’m glad we were finally able to get that for her.” Clark took Ellen into his arms, each drawing support from the other.

“Enough of that,” Ellen said when the embrace ended. “I really wanted to tell you that I’m so glad you found Erica. She’s a lovely woman and I know she loves my grandson! I was so worried that he wouldn’t have a mother figure in his life, a boy his age needs that. “We, his grandparents, have done everything we could to support him, but that’s nothing like having a mother. I know you love and miss Lois every day, and I wish to God that she was still with us, but since she can’t be, I feel you couldn’t have chosen anyone better.”

“Thanks, Ellen, you don’t know how much that means to me. You’re right, I’ll *never* forget Lois, she was my soulmate and I miss her every day, but she didn’t want me to be alone; she wanted Jonny to have a mother figure in his life, and she wanted us all to be happy. I know I will see her someday, but until then it’s up to us, all of us, to make Lois proud of how we live our lives.” Clark once again took Ellen into a supportive hug, expressing his thanks and support.

“Why don’t we join the others?” Ellen asked giving Clark a kiss on the cheek.

“Yes, lets.” Clark escorted his mother-in-law back to the kitchen where she joined her husband.

Clark stood back, watching the assemblage, looking at his wife-to-be interact with his family and friends. Her face wore a permanent smile that reflected the genuine pleasure she was deriving from the conversations. Her eyes met his and her smile grew even wider, her eyes gleaming. He returned her smile with one of his own, his heart warming from the love that passed

between them. Walking slowly across the kitchen, Clark joined his fiancée, wrapping his arm around her waist, and, with a quick kiss to her cheek he joined in the conversation.

Just before 11:00 everyone was seated, waiting patiently for the festivities to begin. Clark, Jim and the Justice of the Peace, Brian, stood at the front, all eyes focused on the back door of the Kent home. Clark and Jim both wore black suits with different ties. Jim’s tie was emerald green and Clark’s was one of his signature colorful ties. Jon sat in the front row between both sets of his grandparents, wearing a brand-new white shirt and a blue tie. The new shirt had him tugging at the collar every few seconds because the stiff collar aggravated his skin. Catching his father’s eye Jon smiled happily, a smile which Clark returned, his love for his son evident to all.

At that moment the strains of the Wedding March floated on the air and all eyes turned to see the door opening. First through the door was Nancy Gordon, the matron of honor, wearing a coral-colored dress, matching shoes and a beautiful smile. Her blond hair caught the sunlight making it look as if she wore a golden halo. When Nancy had gone about ten feet down the aisle, Erica and Perry exited the door. Perry, like Clark and Jim, wore a black suit but his tie was cardinal red. All eyes focused on the bride who wore a tea length white dress featuring a delicate lace pattern and a flattering bateau neckline with matching white strappy pumps. Her dark brown hair was done up, gathered on top of her head in an elegant twist. Her eyes were bright and shining, focused on the man who awaited her at the end of the aisle. After what seemed like forever, the bride arrived at the side of her husband.

“Who gives this woman to be wed?” Brian asked.

“I do,” Perry replied proudly. His part of the proceedings now over, he took his seat next to his wife.

Erica handed her bouquet of white roses to Nancy, then took Clark’s outstretched hand.

“Dearly beloved we are gathered today in the presence of this company for the wedding of Clark and Erica. The bride and groom have written their own vows, so Clark, you may begin.”

“Erica, I love you with all my heart. I never expected to fall in love again but with you I have. Your intelligence and grace drew me to you, but it is your kindness and fierce support for those you love that made me fall in love with you, and I am honored to be your husband.”

“Clark, I too never expected to find love but loving you was so easy I could do nothing else. Your desire to make the world a better place is something I love and support and it is my honor to join you in doing just that and I am honored to be your wife.”

“Eric and Clark will now exchange rings.” Jim Olsen took two rings from his pocket and handed them to the Brian. Clark’s ring was 22 carat gold with a delicate filigree on the concave outer surface. Erica’s ring was a rose gold shared prong diamond eternity band with fifteen diamonds around the edge.

Taking her ring, Clark faced Erica, his eyes locked with hers. “With this ring I thee wed,” Clark said, sliding the ring onto her left hand.

Erica took Clark’s ring and, sliding it onto his left hand said “With this ring I thee wed.”

“By the power vested in me by the city of Metropolis and the state of New Troy I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride”

Clark and Erica leaned into each other, their arms holding each other, and kissed. The kiss was one of love, acceptance and commitment to each other. When they drew back both of their eyes were glistening.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you Mr. and Mrs. Clark Kent!”

Erica took her bouquet from Nancy then took Clark’s arm and proceeded slowly back down the aisle. The next few minutes were

a beehive of activity as everyone grabbed the chair they had been seated in and moved them around the tables already set up. With everyone looking for their names on the table cards it took a bit longer than it might have with some confusion unavoidable. When everyone was seated, the wedding party sat down at the head table and Jim Olsen stood up, tapping his champagne flute with his spoon.

“Everyone, please stand and take up your glasses. Erica, it has been my distinct pleasure to get to know you over the past year and a half. When we first met I could tell that you were a wonderful person and your help with our investigation was invaluable. Over that time I also saw my two friends slowly fall in love, despite their own personal tragedies. Your love gives everyone a shining example of how love conquers all. I wish you a long and happy marriage. To Erica and Clark!” Jim raised his glass to Clark and Erica who smiled happily at him. “To Erica and Clark!” everyone echoed, sipping their champagne.

The food was set up buffet style so while everyone lined up Jim and Nancy hurried to the front of the line, getting plates for the happy couple.

Clark turned to his bride, his eyes gleaming. “I am so happy, I never thought I’d find someone like you. I love you, Erica.” Clark leaned in cupping Erica’s cheek, kissing her lovingly. Erica returned the kiss, teasing his lips with a quick swipe of her tongue then drew back, her eyes alight with mischief.

“I love you too, Clark, so very much. I’m so glad we met and fell in love and I thank God every day for sending you to me.” Jim and Nancy placed plates of food down and everyone fell to eating. Every few moments someone would clink their glass until the happy couple kissed. While it did cut into their eating, they enjoyed kissing even more.

In between the first dance and the cutting of the cake, Martha drew her son aside.

“I’m so happy for you and Erica,” she said, her eyes shining.

“Thanks, Mom. You told me I’d find someone someday, but I didn’t really believe it. A love like ours doesn’t come along every day. Lois was my soulmate and I miss her every day. The difference now is I remember the good times, and cherish them. I’m also ready to make new memories with Erica.”

“That’s as it should be, honey. You’ll never forget Lois, no one wants you to, least of all Erica, but you need the love of a good woman and Erica is the perfect person for the job.”

“She certainly is. I thank God every day for her. Her love for me and Jon is a gift, one I intend to cherish.”

“It looks like they’re ready to cut the cake, why don’t you get out there, your bride is waiting.”

The party lasted the rest of the afternoon and into the evening. Everyone was having such a wonderful time that no one wanted to leave. Finally, at around 10:00 PM, the last guest left the wedding party, leaving Martha, Jonathan, and Nancy’s husband alone at last.

“It’s getting late and we should be going too,” Nancy said, giving Erica one last hug. “It was a beautiful wedding, thanks again for inviting us.”

“No, thank you. You’ve made my wedding even more special. You have a safe flight home!”

“We will, good night everyone.” Doug and Nancy called, walking out to their car.

“CK, when does your flight leave?” Jim asked.

“We’re catching the red eye that leaves at 3:00 AM, we’ll probably just stay up, then sleep on the plane.”

“Do you need a ride?”

“No Jim, we have a limo coming for us, thanks for offering.”

“No problem,” he said stepping over to Erica he kissed her on the cheek. “You were a beautiful bride, Erica. You and Clark have a great time.”

“Thanks, Jim, we will.” With a last handshake with Clark, Jim left, leaving the Kent family alone.

“Wow, what a great day,” Jonathan said happily though he did sound a bit tired.

“I know, I can’t think of when I’ve had a better time in years,” Martha said, smiling at her husband.

“I’m going to clean up, then we can get going, honey,” Clark said. Disappearing with a gust of wind, Clark cleaned everything up, even stacking the chairs against the deck and was back in less than ten seconds.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of seeing that,” Erica said with awe. Clark sped upstairs to get their luggage setting them down at his feet.

“I’m going to take these to the hotel, why don’t you change while I’m gone?” Clark kissed his wife on the cheek, spun into the suit then he disappeared in a blur of red and blue.

Erica hurried upstairs and was waiting for Clark when he returned. She wore a white blouse, black slacks and low-heeled shoes. “Are you ready?” Clark asked. Erica kissed Martha and then Jonathan goodbye. Then Clark also said his goodbyes. Picking up his bride, Clark walked through the living room, out of the kitchen and onto the deck. After a quick glance around Clark lifted off quickly, getting above the houses and, turning east, headed towards Spain.

The journey across the Atlantic took less than an hour, though due to the seven-hour time difference between Metropolis and Spain, they arrived very early, around 5:00 AM local Seville time. Their hotel, the Hotel Becquer, was situated in the historic district five minutes from the Guadalquivir River. Despite the early hour, the concierge was wide awake and ready to serve.

“I see you arrived safely, Señora Kent,” Fernando, the concierge, said, smiling broadly.

“Yes, thank you,” Erica replied, playing along with the story Clark had given the young man.

“Here is your key, Señor Kent, I hope you enjoy your stay,” Fernando said, handing Clark the key.

“Thanks, Fernando, I’m sure we will.” Clark offered Erica his arm and the couple entered the elevator. Stopping in front of room 320, Clark picked Erica up, opened the door and carried her over the threshold. Setting her down, they embraced, their arms holding each other tightly, their lips enmeshed in a kiss that spoke of escalating passion.

“Are you tired? It’s getting late, Metropolis time.” Clark asked, his eyes dark with desire, his breathing rapid.

“Not too tired,” Erica replied sexily. Clark’s eyes lit up, kissing her deeply once more.

“Why don’t you change in the bathroom and I’ll change out here?” Clark asked, reluctantly breaking the kiss. Erica gave Clark one more quick, hard kiss, her eyes sparkling with mischief. Grabbing her suitcase she hurried to the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

“No peeking!” Clark heard through the closed door the sound of her clothes hitting the floor which made him swoon with desire. With a whoosh, Clark spun out of his clothes, coming to a stop wearing only a pair of navy-blue silk boxers and a smile. He pulled the covers down, then he hopped into bed waiting for his bride.

The bathroom door opened and Erica stepped out. When Clark saw her, his breathing stopped. She wore a see-through white peignoir, her athletic body highlighted from behind by the light coming from the bathroom. Her hair was down and flowed over her shoulders obscuring her chest. She crossed the room slowly allowing her husband to absorb her beauty. Crawling onto the bed she lay down, her hands caressing his muscular chest. Clark’s arms wrapped around her, drawing her body next to his.

“My God, you are so beautiful,” he whispered reverently, his

right hand caressing her from her shoulder down to her hip. Erica's eyes closed, her breathing becoming ragged all from the feel of his hand on her body.

"Make love to me, Clark," Erica sighed, her eyes meeting his, desire fairly sparking off them. Clark released her, leaning over to open the drawer of the nightstand. Before he had the chance to open the drawer Erica's hand stopped him.

"No, Clark, we don't need that," she said snuggling her body into his.

"We don't?" he exclaimed, his surprise evident.

"No, my love. I don't want to wait to have a child. I want Jon to have a brother or sister before he gets too much older. I want him to have a real relationship with his sibling. Please, sweetheart, I want our baby." Clark drew his wife into his arms and made passionate love to her.

About 1:00 PM Erica woke to the feel of her husband spooned behind her, his strong arms encircling her. She sighed happily, her mind going back to their earlier lovemaking. It had been marvelous, almost unbelievable. It seemed as if Clark knew her body better than she did herself and he was able to excite her to completion over and over again. However, as much as she was enjoying their closeness, the call of nature needed to be answered. Sliding out of Clark's arms, she got as far as the end of the bed before his hand grasped her arm, guiding her back.

"Mmm, good morning," he whispered, his eyes barely open.

"Good morning, sweetheart, I'd love to stay here but I need to use the bathroom," Erica replied, kissing his chin.

"Oh, all right," Clark said, reluctantly releasing her. Erica hopped off the bed, heading into the bathroom. Turning her head she called over her shoulder.

"You *could* join me you know," she said, her naked bottom wiggling enticingly. Clark waited a few moments until he heard the shower turn on, then he joined his wife. The water had started to go cold by the time they finished their shower so they reluctantly climbed out and started to dry off, Clark finishing first.

"What would you like for breakfast?" Clark asked, brushing his teeth.

"I'm really hungry for some reason, how about what your mom makes on Saturday mornings?" Erica replied, drying her long brown hair.

"Eggs, bacon, pancakes, toast, juice and coffee it is!" Clark walked into the bedroom, a towel wrapped around his waist and called room service. "They said twenty minutes," he called out. Grabbing his clothes from the closet he pulled them on, returning to the bathroom.

"Clark, how do you shave?" Erica asked curiously. Clark's face broke into a wide grin his eyes meeting hers.

"Watch." Clark stared into the mirror, a low-level blast of heat vision bouncing off, hitting his face. Erica watched in awe as the stubble disappeared, leaving clean, smooth skin behind.

"That's amazing, is that how you cut your hair too?"

"Yes, but I need another mirror for that," Clark smiled turning around, drawing his wife into his arms. Clark toyed with the towel that was tucked in just above her breasts. Erica's eyes fluttered closed her head thrown back. Clark's lips were drawn to her long graceful neck, laying butterfly kisses along its length. Erica's moans of pleasure excited Clark so much that he released her, spinning out of his clothes. Using his index finger he loosened the towel where it fell to the floor joining his own clothes. Moments later they were making love right there in the bathroom.

"What brought that on?" Erica whispered once her breathing had returned to normal.

"What can I say, you bring out the animal in me!" Clark's voice reflected the smile on his face. Just then the doorbell rang, announcing that their breakfast had arrived. Clark floated them to a standing position, spun into his clothes and, after closing the

door, let the bellboy in.

"My God, I've created a monster!" Erica said to her reflection, a self-satisfied smile on her face.

Chapter 13

After breakfast, Erica and Clark left the hotel to explore the area. They wandered the narrow streets looking in the shops and having snacks at sidewalk cafés. Since they had slept in, they planned to see if they could find any members of her grandfather's family the next day, as Seville was where he'd grown up. His stories of the city and his neighborhood had fascinated her as a child, and Erica was anxious to see those places first hand.

The next morning they rented a car and drove to the neighborhood where Erica said her grandfather had lived. The neighborhood seemed to have changed a lot from the days of her grandfather. It was more modern, with high end stores lining the main thoroughfare and trendy café's interspersed throughout. Erica and Clark saw a few older men and women strolling the streets, but no one they asked knew anything about any relatives that might still be in the area. While Erica enjoyed exploring the neighborhoods, she was disappointed that it had changed so much and her search for relatives proved fruitless.

They had planned two weeks in Spain and another two in Morocco, so over the balance of their time in Spain they explored the Andalusia region, stopping at Jerez de la Frontera, Donana National Park, Marbella, Cadiz and other beautiful spots.

The next two weeks were spent in Morocco visiting Meknes, Volubilis, Chefchaouen, and Essaouira. As they had done in Spain, they spent extra time in Fes where her grandmother had grown up.

Erica and Clark wandered the streets of Fes absorbing the sights and sounds of this vibrant city. Their travels led them to one of the many squares scattered throughout the area. Since they were near where her grandmother had grown up, they decided to ask if anyone remembered her grandmother or knew of any family that might be residing there still.

"Excuse me, Ma'am," Clark said, speaking Arabic to an older woman who was seated in a chair watching the passersby. "My wife's grandmother grew up around here, do you know if any of the Mediouri family still live here?"

"Mediouri? Hmm, let me see. I think there was a family by that name a few streets that way," she said, pointing east.

"Thank you, Ma'am, we appreciate the help." Clark grasped Erica's hand and headed east.

"So, what did she say?"

"She said that there might be a family by that name a few streets this way," Clark replied leading her along the cobblestone street.

"That's wonderful!" Erica exclaimed, speeding up so that she was almost dragging Clark along. As they got closer they asked another older woman about the Mediouri family but she didn't know any family by that name. Erica was becoming discouraged when a younger woman who looked to be in her mid-forties walked up to them.

"I hope you don't think me forward but I heard you asking about the Mediouri family?" she said, speaking Arabic.

"Yes," Clark replied, "my wife's grandmother grew up near here, her family name was Mediouri. Do you know them?"

"Yes, I do. My great-aunt's maiden name is Mediouri. What was your grandmother's name?"

"Her name was Aliyah," Clark replied.

"Praise Allah, my great aunt's sister was named Aliyah! Please, you must come home with me! Oh, my name is Adilah, I am so glad I met you!" As Adilah led them through the sparsely populated streets, Clark explained what Adilah had said and that they were going to meet the woman who was most likely her great-aunt. Erica's face lit up with happiness at the prospect of meeting members of her family, no matter how far removed.

Climbing a flight of narrow stairs, the three entered a small apartment with a very old woman seated in a chair, gazing out the window.

“Auntie, Auntie, I have some people you have to meet!” Adilah exclaimed, rushing to her great-aunt’s side. The woman had to be in her nineties at least and, while it was obvious that she didn’t see as well as she used to you could tell she was still mentally sharp. Adilah gestured Erica and Clark closer so that they were standing right next to the old woman.

“Auntie, this woman is the granddaughter of Aliyah! They’ve come all the way from America!” The woman, whose name was Jamila, reached out her hand to Erica who took it gently, kneeling down so that their eyes were on the same level.

“You are Aliyah’s granddaughter?” Clark translated and Erica nodded smiling happily. “You have her eyes! I can’t believe it. I haven’t seen my sister since she married and moved to America. Is she well?” Clark told her that her sister had passed many years ago which saddened the old woman.

“I’m sorry to hear that but I am so pleased to meet my grand-niece! Come here child, give me a hug!” Erica seemed to know what was said without need for translation, so she leaned forward and wrapped her arms gently around her great-aunt. Both women cried and laughed, enjoying the moment and each other.

“Adilah, we must have a party in honor of Aliyah’s granddaughter! Gather the family, tell them to bring food and drink,” Jamila said, still holding Erica’s hand. While Adilah called their family together Jamila, through Clark, talked and talked. Erica told Jamila of her grandmother’s life and how much of a role model she was to Erica growing up.

The party was a tremendous success, Erica met many relatives, some of whom spoke English, allowing Erica to have more detailed conversations without the need for Clark to translate. The party lasted late into the night and it was with regret and sadness that the party had to end.

“Erica, you must keep in touch,” Jamila said, her eyes alight with life but her body was showing her age, tiredness evident.

“Of course, Aunt Jamila,” Erica replied, “I will write to you as often as I can. Thank you so much for everything you and your family have done for us.” Erica hugged Jamila gently, kissing her lightly on the cheek. With tears in her eyes, she and Clark left, going back to their hotel, the Palais Faraj Suites & Spa.

“That was some party,” Erica exclaimed, heading into the bathroom to remove her makeup and get ready for bed.

“It sure was,” Clark replied, “I’m so glad we were able to find your family, I had a great time talking to everyone, and the food was excellent. I haven’t had food like that since my world travels after college.” All of a sudden the sound of sirens burst through the evening quiet. Clark tuned in to the police radios, learning that there was a massive fire at a warehouse in the industrial district.

“Clark, what is it?” Erica asked, seeing her husband was concentrating on something she couldn’t hear.

“Fire in a warehouse, sounds like a big one,” Clark replied, anxiousness in his voice.

“Well, go!” she said.

“Are you sure? We’re on our honeymoon,” Clark replied, conflicted.

“Of course, now get going, Superman!” Erica said, kissing him quickly on the lips. Clark spun into the suit and came to a stop smiling.

“I’ll be back soon.”

“I’ll be waiting. Now go!” Clark flew out the window in a flash of red and blue. Erica smiled proudly as she watched her husband fly over the city to do what only he could do. Returning to the bathroom, she finished getting ready for bed. Pulling the covers down, she slid beneath them to wait for Clark to return.

Over the next two weeks Erica and Clark spent in their time in

Morocco visiting Meknes, Volubilis, Chefchaouen, and Essaouira, some of the most beautiful and popular places to visit in that country. On their last day they stopped by Aunt Jamila’s house to say goodbye and to assure her that they would remain in contact.

Erica and Clark entered the lobby with their luggage, ready to check out.

“I’ll take our bags home while you check out, okay?” Clark said, kissing her on the cheek.

“Sure, thing, see you soon.” Erica headed to the front desk where the concierge presented her with the bill. She reviewed it, then handed the young woman her credit card. When the transaction was complete, the concierge handed her the receipt.

“I hope you enjoyed your stay with us, Mrs. Kent.”

“Oh, yes, we had a wonderful time. The service was top notch.”

“Thank you so much, have a good trip!”

Erica turned around to find Clark standing there waiting for her. Grasping her hand, they walked outside, heading around the back of the hotel. Finding a deserted spot, Clark scanned the area then spun into the suit. Picking his wife up, cradling her against his chest securely, he vaulted into the sky faster than the human eye could follow. An hour later they touched down in the backyard of their home. Spinning back into his casual clothes, Clark grasped her hand and the two walked into the house.

“Mom, Dad, Jon? We’re home!” Clark called out. The sound of little feet pounding the stairs was followed by two heavier sets coming down the stairs at a more sedate pace.

“Daddy, Mum!” Jon exclaimed running into his father’s outstretched arms. Clark hugged his son tightly. Erica joined in hugging and kissing the little boy, enjoying the reunion with her new family.

“Erica, Clark, it’s so good to see you!” Martha exclaimed pulling the younger woman into a welcoming hug. Jonathan joined in the group hug, kissing his new daughter-in-law and his son. When the group broke up, they all sat down listening to Erica and Clark regale them with stories and pictures of their travels.

On their first day back to work, Erica found a registered letter from a law firm, Jensen and Jensen, waiting for her. Opening it, she found a request for her to make an appointment to come to their office as they had something for her. Since Erica had no idea what could be waiting for her at a law firm she’d never dealt with she immediately called their office.

“Hello, Jensen and Jensen attorneys at law, how may I help you?”

“My name is Erica Kent, I received a letter from your office. It says you have something for me?”

“Please hold Ms. Kent, while I transfer you to Mr. Paul Jensen.” After a short pause an older sounding gentleman came on the line.

“Mrs. Kent, thank you for calling. A client of ours left something for you. When could you come to our offices?”

“Umm, how about 1:00 PM? Would that be all right?”

“That would be fine, Mrs. Kent. Oh, our client made a minor request, could you come alone?”

“Now you have my curiosity piqued. Why would I need to come alone?”

“It’s nothing sinister, I assure you. The item we have for you is personal, that’s all.”

“All right, Mr. Jensen, I’ll see you at 1:00.” Erica hung up the phone, wondering what kind of personal item was waiting for her at the lawyer’s office.

At 12:55 PM Erica Kent entered the offices of Jensen and Jensen.

“Hello, I’m Erica Kent, I have an appointment,” she said to the receptionist.

“I’ll get Mr. Jensen for you, please have a seat.” Erica had barely seated herself on the couch when an older man came out of the door to her right.

“Mrs. Kent? I’m Paul Jensen, please follow me,” he said, escorting Erica into a conference room. “Take a seat, Mrs. Kent.” Jensen gestured towards the chairs. Once she was seated, Mr. Jensen drew an envelope out of his pocket, laying it on the table in front of Erica, face down.

“Please feel free to take your time, Mrs. Kent. Good day.” Jensen left the room, closing the door softly behind him.

Erica looked at the envelope in front of her, then turned it over. It was addressed to ‘Mrs. Clark Kent’. With shaking hands Erica opened it, drawing a single sheet of paper from the envelope.

‘To Clark’s new wife,

Congratulations on your marriage! I hope you had a wonderful honeymoon but, knowing Clark, it would be absolutely amazing. I’m writing to thank you for taking care of Clark and our son, Jon, since I am not able to. I know that you love them as much as I do. I know this because there is no way Clark would marry a woman who didn’t love our son. I’m glad there will be a mother figure in his life, someone who will dry his tears, kiss his bumps and scrapes and support him in everything he does. I truly regret not being able to be there for my family, but I am comforted knowing that a wonderful person like you will be there for them. I wish you all the happiness in the world and for you to have many happy years together.

Lois Lane-Kent’

Erica read the letter over and over, savoring every word. She was filled with awe that Lois had planned for this even though it had to be the hardest thing she would ever do, knowing that if the letter was read she’d be gone, leaving her husband and son alone. It was so thoughtful too, assuring Clark’s new wife that she appreciated the job she had taken on, helping to raise her son, and loving the husband she’d left behind. Erica wiped tears from her cheeks, put the letter in her purse, then left the office. She stopped by her bank on the way home, putting the letter in her safety deposit box.

Epilogue

One month later...

Erica Kent opened the door to the home on Hyperion Avenue, setting her purse on the table next to the door. Walking through the living room, she entered the kitchen where Jon was seated at the table doing his homework.

“Mum!” he cried, running over to her. Erica leaned over, gathering him in her arms, kissing his cheek.

“There’s my big boy!” she said, setting him on the floor. “How was school?”

“It was great, Mum. We did math today, we learned multiplication and division. Will you check my homework later?” he said, sitting down again, concentrating on his paper.

“Of course, sweetheart,” Erica said, kissing the little boy on top of his head. Turning to her mother-in-law she smiled, hugging the older woman lovingly.

“Thanks again, Martha, I don’t know what we’d do without you.”

“It’s my pleasure, dear, Jon is such a good boy it’s no trouble at all. I’ve got dinner started so, if it’s okay, I’m going to head home to feed my husband.”

“Of course, Martha. Tell Jonathan I said hello. By the way, if it’s no trouble, could you and Jonathan come over later? Around 7:00 would be good.”

“I don’t see any problem with that. Want to give me a hint?” she asked, a twinkle in her eye.

“Nope,” she said smiling happily. Once Martha left, Erica dialed Sam and Ellen’s number.

“Hello?”

“Hi Ellen, it’s Erica.”

“Hello dear, how are you?”

“I’m fine, umm, would you and Sam be able to come over this evening at 7:00?”

“I don’t see why not. There’s nothing wrong, is there?”

“Oh, no! There’s nothing wrong. Martha and Jonathan are coming over and we want you there too.”

“Okay dear, we’ll see you then.” Ellen hung up the phone, her curiosity now in high gear.

After dinner was over, Clark, Erica and Jon were watching television when the doorbell rang. Clark opened the door, finding his parents and his in-laws in the vestibule. Once everyone was seated, Erica leaned forward, catching everyone’s attention.

“I had a doctor’s appointment today—”

“Are you okay, honey?” Clark interrupted worriedly.

“I’m fine, sweetheart, actually, I’m wonderful... I’m pregnant!” Erica exclaimed. There was a chorus of shouts of happiness and congratulations from everyone.

“Mum, I’m gonna have a brother or sister?” Jon asked, climbing onto her lap.

“Yes, Jon, are you happy?” she asked.

“Yes, Mum, I’ve always wanted a brother or sister, I can hardly wait! When will they get here?”

“It’ll be a few months yet,” she chuckled, hugging Jon to her breast. “He or she will need you to take care of them, they’ll need a big brother. Are you up for the job?” she asked lovingly.

“I sure am, Mum! I can hardly wait!” Jon hugged Erica tightly then got off her lap. “Can I go play?” Nodding her assent Jon raced up the stairs, leaving the adults alone.

“I can hardly believe it,” Clark said, gazing into Erica’s eyes lovingly. “We’re going to have a baby!” Clark drew Erica into his arms, kissing her, resting his forehead against hers. Releasing him, Erica stood up, accepting the loving hugs of her in-laws. The rest of the evening was spent talking and planning for the newest member of the Kent family.

That night Clark had another dream: a smiling Lois, surrounded by a heavenly glow, stood at the foot of the bed.

“Congratulations Clark, you have a wonderful wife and now you have a baby on the way. I’m so happy for you, sweetheart. I can’t tell you how grateful I am that you found a new love. If I can’t be there for you I know you have a partner to support you and share the good times and the bad. I wish you and your wife all the best. We’ll see each other again someday but until then, be well. I love you!”

The next evening after work, Clark and Erica flew over to S.T.A.R. Labs to see Bernie Klein.

“Clark! Erica! It’s good to see you. I want to tell you again how much fun Jessica and I had at the wedding.” Gesturing them into his office he sat in his desk chair while they sat on the couch. “So, what can I do for you?”

“Bernie, since you’re our *family* doctor we wanted you to know that we’re expecting!” Clark said proudly, holding Erica’s hand.

“That’s wonderful! Congratulations!” Bernie exclaimed, smiling broadly.

“I know last time Lois’s pregnancy was ‘normal’ but since this child is a potential super baby, we thought you should know too, just in case.” Clark said.

“That’s a good idea. I don’t anticipate any problems but it’s better to play it safe. Erica, do you have an OB/GYN?”

“Yes, Dr. Sally Chamberlain, do you know her?”

“Yes, she’s very good. Would it be okay if I gave you a preliminary examination?” Bernie asked.

“Of course,” Erica said, a little nervously.

“You’ll find a gown in the bathroom over there. You get changed and I’ll get things set out here.” Erica squeezed Clark’s hand giving him a tremulous smile. Clark nodded to her, mouthing ‘I love you’.

Erica returned a few minutes later barefoot, wearing the gown. She climbed up onto the exam table smiling nervously. Bernie listened to her heart and lungs, checked her blood pressure and took a blood sample. He also listened to the baby’s heartbeat, declaring everything to be perfectly normal.

“If this baby is anything like Jon then your pregnancy should be normal. The only thing different is Kryptonian gestation is about a month longer, but that shouldn’t be an issue as determining the date of fertilization is rather inaccurate, and with you being a first-time mother, the baby is usually late. You can get dressed now.” Bernie helped Erica off the table then he sat down to await her return.

“Thanks, Bernie,” Clark said once Erica had returned. “We feel better knowing everything is normal.”

“Yes, thanks, Bernie,” Erica said, kissing him on the cheek. “We’ll be sure to invite you and Jessica to the baby shower!” With that Erica and Clark left S.T.A.R. Labs hand in hand.

Seven and a half months later...

Erica Kent lay on the table in the delivery room, Dr. Sally Chamberlain seated between her legs, Clark at her side, holding her hand.

“You’re doing great honey,” Clark said supportively.

“Okay, Erica, one more big push,” the doctor said.

“UGHHHHH!” she screamed her body convulsing, squeezing Clark’s hand fiercely.

“Here we go!” Sally said, holding the newborn, supporting it as it exited Erica’s body. Patting the baby on the back the infant screamed, taking in that first breath. Handing the baby to the nurse she turned to Erica and Clark. “You have a healthy baby girl! Congratulations!”

“A girl,” Erica said, happily in between breaths. “We have a little girl!”

“I know, and she’s beautiful, like her mother,” Clark said, kissing his wife gently on the lips. The nurse, having cleaned and swaddled the baby in a blanket, handed the girl to her mother.

“Hi, sweetheart, I love you so much,” Erica said, laying loving kisses on top of the girl’s head. Clark raised his hand, stroking her chin with his finger.

“Hey little one, I’m your daddy, God you are so beautiful.” The nurse took the baby in her arms to begin the post birth procedure, weighing, measuring her and other post birth tests.

“We’ll bring her to your room as soon as you get settled,” the nurse said. “Are you going to breast feed?”

“Oh, yes, I can hardly wait,” Erica said excitedly. Another nurse led Clark out of the delivery room while they saw to Erica.

“We’ll bring her back to her room in a few minutes, Mr. Kent. You can wait for your wife in there.” Clark left, returning to their room, taking off the scrubs he’d been wearing for the birth.

Twenty minutes later, Erica was wheeled into the room. Once she was settled in bed, Clark sat beside her, holding her hand.

“I’m so proud of you,” Clark said, kissing her hand. “I still can’t believe we have a beautiful daughter.” Right then the nurse wheeled the bassinet into the room. Picking the baby up, she settled her into her mother’s arms. Erica opened her gown, placing the little girl at her breast. The baby immediately latched on and began to suckle hungrily.

“She sure is hungry!” Erica said in amazement, holding her securely while she fed. Clark looked on lovingly as mother and daughter bonded, taking in the sight before him.

“So,” Clark said once the baby had fallen asleep, her hunger satisfied. “We’ve talked about names, what have you chosen?”

“I want to name her after my mom. She would have been so

proud to be a grandmother.”

“Abigail it is, what about a middle name?”

“Lois, her middle name is Lois,” Erica said gazing lovingly into Clark’s eyes.

“Are you sure?” Clark asked, surprised.

“Yes, I want to honor the woman who loved you as much as I do,” she replied with certainty. Clark kissed his wife lovingly, his eyes bright with unshed tears. Gazing down at the baby sleeping in her mother’s arms, Clark caressed her little head.

“Welcome to the family, Abigail Lois Kent.”

THE END

Link to Sophia Pernas, the inspiration for Erica:
https://www.imdb.com/name/nm2822103/?ref_=nmbio_bio_nm